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Lily is Not Dead

by Lauren Holstein

This is a story of triumph. Of softening, opening, brightening. There are so many deaths in this story, but they are a handing-over, a movement, a gilded leaf turning over in the sun, whose familial seeds have just swept across wet, wet land.

This is a story with many characters and only one human body. There are thousands of lives in this story, but I may not get to each and every one. They are here, regardless, burgeoning through the punctuation, oxygen pushing through resistant cells. This story is a body.

This story is not about illness, though it features heavily. This story is not about redemption, though redemption hangs near, as it usually does, to wash itself over most stories written by or about a woman. I am the storm and the land washed fresh and soggy and spilling glorious dirt and sand.

I'd like to say this is not a story about a heroine, or a victim, or a princess, or a salvaged beast, although it may, in fact, be all of those things. It all depends on my (careful) positioning of my self with/next to/against/alongside my self.

My name is inconsequential. A sequence of sounds made by a human mouth, reflected on paper as arbitrary shapes, those shapes (these) formed, refined, articulated by socio- and geo-political histories that lay as unseen, heavy undercurrents below this page. I feel the tug and flow more than I'd like to. You can call me Lily. I am very little like the flower, I once thought. Now I see our likenesses, after witnessing so closely its annual passage and dance. But I'll return to that later – it warrants more attention that I can muster within this introduction.

Hello. I am Lily. I am here. Here I am.

This story spans a year, although it feels like several lifetimes to me. (It may also feel that long to you, reader, for which I won't apologise. I didn't have a choice in living it – you do have the option to stop reading whenever you'd like.) Pen to paper, then fingertips to keyboard – with eyes closed – because... it reminds me that I exist, still.

You, reader, are only consequential, you only matter, in that you are my witness. You confirm my existence. (So, perhaps, you are not merely consequential, but, in fact, the very crux of the thing.) What this story is, means, does for you, though, I'm not sure. But, thanks. Thank you.

This story takes place in England, in, almost, the middle of nowhere. Sometimes, too much, like when I remember what it feels like to sit at a dressed table, being served food cooked by a professional, the clinking of my many earrings matching the sounds of the wine glasses, one in my hand, warmth down my throat.

And then I remember I don't like wine anymore.

Sometimes, not enough, like when monstrous trucks carrying packages of packages, war-fuelled vehicles teeming with ocean-garbage created by tiny cheated Asian fingers, career around the unfitting lane, knocking cypress branches into my windowpanes. The never-ending hum and growl of engine, after engine, after engine. My skill might implode from the vibratory pressure any minute now. But it hasn't, yet. (I can't explain why.)

The neighbour's lawn mower. The other neighbour's pool heater. The wasps' nest between my ears. All reminders of the inescapability of both my privilege and my physical pain. Of the rush and swirling whirlpool of economic survival (as if that's the only kind.) Of life co-opted by doing, producing, consuming, activating, opting-in, counting (up), measuring, labelling, categorising, hierarchising, forcing, thrusting, reaping, raping, shouting, showing, displaying, revealing nothing, losing only weight and winning everything else.

I used to love accomplishing things.

Now I live in-between everything. Sleeping and waking. Dreams and 'real life'. The ground and the sky. The sun and the moon. Illness and health. Life and death. Right and left. Winter and summer. Winning and losing. Fighting and surrender. It is exhausting. But relatively quiet, sometimes. At times, it is like lying in soft mossy earth, dappled sunlight dancing through swaying birch branches, dragonflies spiralling with falling leaves, kestrels suspending amidst soft, sweeping, edible clouds. A delicious, gentle no-ness of matter, an overflowing yes-ness of quiet. Yes. In moments.

In other moments, it is like a pulsing animal caged behind my eyes is tearing its flesh to bits in order to get out. A tearing, ripping, arrhythmic thumping of torrents of blood through tiny vessels behind my ears. Heart slapping the pavement in uneven, drunken, terrified paces. A spinal column impelled into wild fits of shaking, pushing its fitful spasms into flailing limbs. Limbs so sick of life they refuse to move, lift, support. Dead witches weighted by stones to the bottom of the sea. I can't see much of anything here. Or perhaps I see everything so sharply, so shinningly, my brain cannot digest, refuses to make sense, my belly distends with all the undigested information. My fingers, toes, eyelids, hair, all itch with the remnant vibrations of this death-dance, this dance that refutes all rhythm, as it refutes all that is steady, clear, legible. These moments seem to exist outside of measurable time. They last much longer than others.

And yet, right now, I am watching a carp manoeuvre through lily pads with operationalised grace to retrieve pellets of fish food scattered across the wide, flat, out-of-reach leaves. This is where I am. Hello, Carp. Your lips make me laugh. Thanks. Your determination is so simple. Hello, Determination. Hello, Simplicity. Hello, Carp.

Your bumping through underwater forests and the occasional loud sucking of your lips on the surface almost make me un-hear the neighbour's cat-strangling laughter, which is making their own dogs bark. Maybe if I dunk my head into the pond with you, I might remember silence. Or feel the solitude my bones ache for. Or the throbbing might dissolve.

The breeze brushes through my hay-like hair and the pages on my lap. I remember, now, that I am writing.

This is a story about a carp.

And a neighbour.

And a cat-strangling dog-barking laughter.

Noisily swimming under my surface. In this noisy body.

This is a story about a body.

This story is a body.