



Coming Apart/Becoming Whole: A Collection of Poems

Hannah May¹ · Leslie Williams² · Mark Fryburg³ · Cathryn Hankla⁴ · Jaimee Hills⁵ · Phoebe Reeves⁶ · Sarah N. Cross⁷ 

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All of life may be seen as a balance, a tension, a give and take between coming apart and becoming whole. In the dark corners of our bodies, our cells are undergoing mitosis; we are dividing so we can grow. In preparation for becoming something new, becoming whole, human oocytes are suspended in the midst of division, coming apart. From there, they mostly perish; it is the rare one which is given the chance to become something more, to make something new and whole. Birth is often viewed as a new beginning, a becoming whole for the new human, but also involves a severance, the umbilical cord is cut and we are divided from our origin. The person who has just given birth may feel less than whole physically and emotionally. As we grow and develop our identity, we strive towards feeling whole, but may endure events which tear us apart. In the end, we may reflect on the whole of our lives, the rich, full, whole person we have become. And then, we are returned to the earth for our final coming apart.

Hannah May's *Cesarean* is a visceral exploration of how birth can be a coming apart for the new mother; "They sliced me open to get you out./ I didn't think about it." But also explores a commonality in our collective experience: "I only knew—/I could feel a pain in my wound,/ and hers would hurt too" as so many of us have shared this same wound. This commonality can help make us whole.

Another reflection of the vulnerability of the surgical patient is *Under Warm Blanket, in Hospital Gown* by Leslie Williams. As patients in the operating room, we let surgeons

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take us apart in the hopes of making us whole. The surgeon holds an immense power with “her daily knowledge/ of the inner look of flesh” while patients are “naked underneath/ the eternities of your childhood.” In our own illnesses, we sometimes feel as if we have little agency over our own health or healing, in becoming whole: “everyone kept saying *good job*/ when there was nothing to do/ but hold still.”

Mark Fryburg’s *Nurse* shows us that it’s not only patients who might come apart, but also health care workers, such as nurses. The work of healing others, making them whole, can lead to the undoing of the healers: “With chapped hands and a ruined back I/ witness the reckless pursuit of misery.” Healthcare workers must face indescribable tasks to care for others while putting their on needs on hold: “I must clean the foulest smelling things on earth/then choke down dinner in the ten minutes free in this shift.” And in the end, they may not be able to prevent the undoing of their patient: “I must ease/ suffering I cannot control.”

In *The Livers* by Cathryn Hankla, we are reminded of the story of Prometheus, who is credited with creating human civilization by stealing fire from the Olympian gods: “Olympic fire/ blazing your heart, arm held/ high with the torch.” As a punishment his liver was eaten by an eagle each day only to grow back every night – coming apart and becoming whole: “But soon the eagle/ would make its cruel brunch.” Initially thought to be the origin of human emotion, we now know that the liver is responsible for, amongst other things, filtering toxins from the blood: “Part of you, of me/ filters what’s given us, / reclaiming some sense, / recycling toxins,/ spinning gold from grief,/ order from confusion.” What is truly amazing about this ancient story, and could not have been known at the time, is that the liver is unique amongst human organs in its ability to regenerate itself. About six months after donating part of a liver, a donor can expect to have their liver grown to approximately 90% of its original size. We can take the liver apart and it will make itself whole.

Jaimee Hills’ *On The Whimsy Of Lighthouses* is a reminder of the coming apart which can happen due to our genetics. Initially invisible, the genetic changes we harbor can cause seismic effects within our bodies and also our children’s bodies. In waiting for the results of a genetic test, the lighthouse serves as a symbol for safety or danger depending on the weather, or the results of the test: “I won’t begin to comprehend the thousand/ prisms, the refracting power that makes a beam.” In this poem, an individual receives good news that he will not develop a devastating genetic condition: the results/ of a coin toss that took place before you were born,/ the results of a blood test you took weeks ago.” These results have the power to take us apart, or preserve our wholeness: Isn’t it/ a miracle someone invented the smokeless flame?! The *wow* barely escaped you.”

In concluding our collection, *Aubade for the Body 67* by Phoebe Reeves brings us back to the wholeness of the body rising in the morning: “light comes for the body, leaking into air/ in all directions.” We see the history of the body: “The light comes and goes from the body/ a trembling an ancestor, the gene marking/ a journey across ice across isthmus/ across all the water light can compass”. Despite all the light in the morning, in the course of one’s lifetime, “as if one photon unwrapped itself” we are reminded that the end is a coming apart, in the end comes darkness, comes night: “that slows breath to a song that touches/ all the layers night laminated over the body/ and it is all undone”.

What better way than poetry to explore the duality of coming apart and becoming whole that we face in life? The words of these poets bring us through a multitude of human experiences which bring us together and take us apart.

Sarah N. Cross

Cesarean

Hannah May

They sliced me open to get you out.
I didn't think about it.

I only knew—
it hurt to stand, to laugh—
it could burst me open.

What do they call that?

A nurse helped me into the shower,
my naked body like a popped balloon.
I ached, I ached, I ached.

I walked sluggishly to Central Park,
ashamed of myself.
I had to sit on the bench,
somehow I got back.

I leaked and bled,
I cried on the couch at midnight,
I was awake at two.

The whole world felt like liquid.

I think it sealed shut.

A year later, I sliced open a woman.
I didn't think about it.

I only knew—
I could feel a pain in my wound,
and hers would hurt too.

Commentary on “Cesarean”

I had imagined the birth of my daughter as a beautiful, empowering moment. Instead, my water broke early — five weeks before my due date — and I was rushed to the operating room in what resembled a scene from a medical drama after, my daughter was found to be breech and had a terrifying episode of fetal bradycardia. I was strapped to an operating table, shaking uncontrollably, and literally coming apart as I was cut open and my daughter was pulled from me. I was frazzled by the unexpected turn of events, embarrassed I had needed a cesarean, and fumbling my way through the first few weeks of motherhood. Even as I become more confident as a mother, I continued to feel ashamed and disappointed that I had had a cesarean, my scar a daily reminder

of the event. I felt an intense jealousy of woman who had vaginal births. My body, I thought, had failed me and robbed me of that experience. Over time, this ache dulled. In medical school, I came to understand how common cesareans are, the medical indications for them, and how they are not caused by any “fault” of the mother. One day, on an anesthesiology rotation on the labor floor, I saw a young woman crying as she came into the operating room for a planned cesarean. In her tears, I saw myself: scared, vulnerable, unsure. But this time, I was on the other side. There was no blame in the room. I was able to comfort her and congratulate her when her baby arrived. I wanted her to celebrate that moment. I had become whole again, just completed with a different part.

Hannah May

Under Warm Blanket, in Hospital Gown

Leslie Williams

as the anesthesia boat
pushed to shore then rocked away

taking with it much of mortal
confidence

what you don't ask for you don't get
said the hospitalist

seasick patch behind the ear
a 4 oz. apple juice

how the surgeon said
let's wait and see till Monday
you did great

think of her in running shoes
pounding down dirty Francis St.
in her earbuds *Brick House* on repeat

her daily knowledge
of the inner look of flesh

and you are naked underneath
the eternities of your childhood

everyone kept saying *good job*
when there was nothing to do
but hold still.

Commentary on “Under Warm Blanket, in Hospital Gown”

“Coming apart” is one way to describe how I felt going in for day surgery. Maybe many of us feel like this, gradually stripped of our “outside” identity that’s capable and independent, especially as we are tended to by the super-competent professionals who (unlike us) know what is coming next. I remember sitting on the bed in my street clothes when the surgeon came in to discuss what she was about to do. There was a brief misunderstanding—she thought I was somehow resisting, or not compliant with the pre-operative procedures. Why wasn’t I ready and dressed in the hospital gown? The gown was sitting in a sterile package on the bed, but no one had instructed me to change into it. The word “gown” is itself evocative of other times of life when we are more whole—evening gown, nightgown—but hospital gowns are their own category, always “coming apart” in the back.

There was a “becoming whole” moment when the surgeon asked me what kind of music I liked, or if there was anything I’d like to hear as we got started. We laughed together when I blurted out “funk”! She said, “my playlist has just the thing.” It felt kind of joyful when they wheeled me in for surgery and the team was all grooving to “Brick House”—it was such a simple thing, but it set the tone for my recovery even before the anesthesia kicked in.

Leslie Williams

Nurse

Mark Fryburg

With chapped hands and a ruined back I
witness the reckless pursuit of misery.

To a desperate face I must ease
suffering I cannot control.

I must clean the foulest smelling things on earth
then choke down dinner in the ten minutes free in this shift.

I must say a cheerful farewell to someone
who will be back next week, and all future weeks.

I must hold hands with death and his mark until death wins
and save my tears for a dark locker room.

I will be back tomorrow, not quite as sick
as the occupant of the bed in front of me.

Because, because...there are just enough days
when I know I matter.

Commentary on “Nurse”

I'm grateful to Laura James Fryburg, RN. Our marriage covered most of her four-decade career. Even in retirement, she continues to provide new perspectives on hospital nursing.

One often reads about the physical strains of her profession: sleepless nights on-call, abandoned meal and bathroom breaks, back pain and even lumbar surgeries after lifting patients.

I wanted to go beyond that — to give Laura and other nurses voice to their emotional reactions and interactions with patients' misery. (I wish medical dictionaries had that word.) Rather than leave the poem as another laundry list of complaints, I focused on essential aspects often missed by outsiders, which could lead to a nurse "coming apart." Nurses bond, emotionally, with patients. Nurses suffer loss. (In retrospect, I could have added the pain of verbal abuse from patients, their families, and even some providers.)

On a few nights, I had the opportunity to observe Laura at work. Though very tired, she had a smile, emotional caring, and patience for every patient — cracking wise to keep spirits up while moving fast, saving just enough energy to drive home.

What kept Laura going back, with at least a shot at "becoming whole?" I finally learned she had "just enough days..."

Mark Fryburg

The Livers

Cathryn Hankla

Prometheus, you knew
 what would come for you.

Maybe not at the start,
 Olympic fire

blazing your heart, arm held
 high with the torch, bold

benevolence bursting.
 But soon the eagle

would make its cruel brunch.
 Part of you, of me.

filters what's given us,
 reclaiming some sense,

recycling toxins,
 spinning gold from grief,

order from confusion.
 Our daily quests—

recount syllables,
the raptor rends flesh.

Commentary on “The Livers”

In punishment for stealing fire from Olympus for humanity, Prometheus was bound to a rock and his liver eaten by an eagle. Fire symbolized intellect, science and the arts. Our hero’s immortal liver would grow back overnight only for his torment to repeat, day after day. The liver was believed by the ancients to be the seat of emotion. In my poem, “The Livers,” I combine that idea with what we now know of the liver’s properties of filtration. Emotions can also provide purification of the body, as when we shed tears for ourselves or others and release toxins.

Poetry can organize our emotions. In the end, this poem draws a parallel between the poet’s work and the raptor that shreds flesh. Why? As counterbalance to the brokenness of this world, it’s the poet’s job to recombine, to make something whole. This poem is composed in a strict syllabic form I made up for a series entitled “Brok-en”: Each broken or dropped line has eleven syllables, six followed by five, in only nine lines down the page. I wanted to work around the completion that ten brings, by using one syllable too many, one line too few. We living ones, “the livers,” bear the gift of life we’ve been given by finding our purpose. Some of us write poems.

Cathryn Hankla

On The Whimsy of Lighthouses

Jaimee Hills

The counselor was bathed in the fluorescence
of the long tubes that glowed from the ceiling
reflected upwards from the hospital floors—

her voice, too friendly, like a sudden lighthouse
that stands against the fog, the striped peppermint
barbershop trim of it charming a cut in the clouds.

And lighthouses get to live by the sea and watch
all day long, lighting the way for the lost. Oh,
does this mean we’ve been lost maritime pilots?

Here was our return, the news we’d waited for, the results
of a coin toss that took place before you were born,
the results of a blood test you took weeks ago

A lighthouse was once simply a fire on a hilltop,
then came the dovetail joints and marble dowels
to form a tower out of fairytale. What was once

a woman's voice became a ukulele, vocal chords,
plucked strings from a childhood of dancing
in the grass and a breeze that meets you,

a breeze that meets the lighthouse and the sail
of a ship. I won't begin to comprehend the thousand
prisms, the refracting power that makes a beam.

You're not a carrier of the mutant gene. She smiles. I watch
the crumbling of a fortress you built for thirty years,
that knew for certain you were marked. Isn't it

a miracle someone invented the smokeless flame?
The *wow* barely escaped you. Disbelief. An early
engineer modeled the lighthouse after an oak tree

You are not a carrier of the mutant gene. And now
what? Now what? Do we sit under an oak tree?

Commentary on "On The Whimsy of Lighthouses"

Huntington's disease is neurodegenerative genetic disorder. If a parent carries the mutant gene, their child has a 50% chance of inheriting the disease. After receiving news from a genetic counselor that my husband did not carry the mutant Huntington's gene, I worried we would get into a car crash on the ride home. The poem depicts a great karmic shift that occurred in our lives when we were considering starting a family, after we'd spent nearly a year planning for two alternate futures – one with the gene and one without.

Getting the news was a moment of fear, anxiety and then relief and the image of the lighthouse operates as a distraction from the unraveling of the present action of the poem in the hospital setting. The duality of the metaphor of the lighthouse was attractive as it signals the way home, marking areas of danger and safety—which matched the either/or nature of the moment.

In the poem's structure, I considered some "obsessive" traditional poetic forms that have repeating lines that cycle back, but instead chose to have the poem continually return to an image rather than a repeated phrase. The two threads of the narration come together and come apart continually. One together moment, the "beam," attempts to pull off a "serious" pun connecting the lighthouse beam to the counselor's expression. The genetic counselor had been so happy in that moment to deliver this news, and we couldn't quite share in that emotion – it was more the feeling of being suddenly unmoored.

Jaimee Hills

Aubade for the Body 67

Phoebe Reeves

light comes for the body, leaking into air
in all directions. This body. This morning

The light comes and goes from the body
a trembling an ancestor, the gene marking

a journey across ice across isthmus
across all the water light can compass

this is what it means to be this body, waking
in a pasture of light dove-grey unfaltering

as if one photon unwrapped itself and lay
its many dimensional skin down flat on the land

up against the body not just eyes but teeth and tongue
muscles viscera all lying in the light

that slows breath to a song that touches
all the layers night laminated over the body

and it is all undone

Commentary on “Aubade for the Body 67”

An Aubade is a morning song, a poem that takes place in the early moments of the dawn. Aubades are often poems from one lover to another, but my Aubade is part of a long series of poems, maybe love poems, taking the perspective of the body. In these poems, I’m trying to plumb the daily experiences of being a body—trying to privilege physical experience and not “the mind.” We like to think we can pull the mind away from the body, as if it were some other thing, but it isn’t—they’re in this together. We think of ourselves as discrete divisions, and our language likes to construct the world in binaries, but everything is connected. The world is more *both/and* than *either/or*. Light can be a photon or a wave, or both, depending on who is watching.

The body holds so much history—mitochondrial DNA, for example, or what we’re starting to learn about inherited epigenetics, trauma, and so on. What is the experience of the body and how does it coexist with consciousness? How does the moment-to-moment internal dialog of the waking mind intertwine, argue, learn from the histories of the body?

In this poem, I was trying to focus on the experience of coming up out of a deep sleep, still in touch with that old pre-symbolic part of being human that lives under language. A moment of peace and wholeness, before the complicated world of human culture reasserts itself.

Phoebe Reeves

Author Contribution Each poet wrote an original unpublished poem as well as a commentary on the poem. The corresponding author created the theme, selected the poems, edited the commentaries and wrote the introduction.

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