

a gift from somewhere, 2021
'To All the Things I Didn't Notice'
Billie McTernan

It's summer and I've started picking blackberries. In the area I'm in you can find them on brambles practically everywhere. They're tangled through and between fences along the small river nearby, which passes under bridges and beside railways. They're also in the hedges on the quiet side streets, and metal fences on the busier roads.

A few months ago, I stopped to look at the thorny bushes that push their way through and around one 'Danger Keep Clear' gate that I walk past every other day on my way to the supermarket. I don't why I felt compelled to stop and look, but I did. It was the first time I noticed that there were blackberries on the bushes. There was a whole stretch of them just there, all ripe and ready. When I tell you I was delighted! So I picked a few, ranging in shades from bright red to deep purple almost black, I wanted to taste them there and then but my sister convinced me that they needed rinsing first. But I don't think they do. I pricked my fingers on the stems while picking the fruits. But it was worth it. The fruits are delicate so shouldn't put too much pressure on them directly. You hold at the top, twist and gently pull. Et voila. As expected, the darkest are the sweetest and juiciest.

After my first forage I took a container with me to harvest a bigger batch of berries for morning porridge. As I went along I kept my eyes on the lookout for other sweet and/or interesting things I might have walked past over the years.

We are ugly, but we are here¹; we chanted in rhythmic unison, our stomachs burned with desire and purpose.

But you know what, it didn't really begin with blackberries. It started with something else. So let me go back a bit.

So when you have a physical condition you might go through different phases of coming to terms with or understanding it. In one of the earlier stages, after the initial shock and confusion (which by the way never really leaves) you start to think that your body has let you down. You were doing all you could to keep well and strong and so-called "able" but it betrayed you, and so you start to see the body as separate from you. There's you, and then your carrier.

Quick sidenote here, I know that this is something that comes up in all sorts of traumas that can lead to or are a result of mental health issues. And also for some people that came into the world this way. I'm sending love to anyone that sees themselves in this experience.

So yeah, in all this time that you see or feel the body as separate from you, you live in a sort of limbo. A vast, open-ended space where you and your body sometimes turn their backs on each other. Sometimes you collide. Sometimes you can't seem to find each other in the thick fog of uncertainty. And sometimes you can't breathe.

We are ugly, but we are here; we commanded from the crests of mountains.

I came across a series of watercolour paintings by the artist Chioma Ebinama called 'penumbra'. You can find the images on her website. The fourth in the series depicts a silhouetted figure, with sharp looking things sticking into it. Something like thorns, or knives, or nails. The figure holds one hand to its head, the other arm hangs by its side. It's the kind of shape your body takes when you're in despair. Next to it, another figure is on its knees, with, I think, its hands tied behind its back, unable to help its shadow twin, or companion. This painting reminds me of that body separation experience. Ebinama uses watercolour so the opaque-translucence, being able to almost see through the figures, gives it a sense of otherworldliness, surreal, adding to the feeling of being disconnected.

In English, the Latin word penumbra translates into: almost or partial shadow. Something like a there-but-not-quite-there-ness. And I'm reminded of the body disassociation and "broken" bodiedness (and I say broken with inverted commas) that Frida Kahlo captured so arrestingly throughout her career. We see it in 'La Columna Rota/The Broken Column', 'La Venadita/Little Deer' and 'Arbol de la Esperanza/Tree of Hope'. These portraits were made after a serious accident Kahlo had when she was young, the injuries from which she continued to live with for the rest of her life. In documenting her pain Kahlo holds our gaze resolutely. The surreal is there too, like in Ebinama's work. In life, there's something about pain, physical or mental, that takes you out of the body into the open-ended, otherworldly space.

The Spanish word penumbra means gloom. Gloom can be so heavy that sometimes the body has to separate from itself in order to spread the load. This might not always be a bad thing, sometimes it's necessary for survival.

We are ugly, but we are here; we cried over the bodies of our fallen ones.

Ok so, you're in these phases. You've gone through seeing or feeling as though your body is separate from you (which also doesn't really leave) and, if you're lucky you might head into a new experience. Reconciling and listening to your body. Noticing the subtle changes. The small flip in your stomach. The twinge in your throat. The prick in your underarm. What's it telling you? How do you translate this language? How do you reconnect the physical you, this living, breathing body that can be hugged and held, to the untethered you?

So I'm walking along, and seeing all these blackberries. I'm honestly so surprised that in all these years I unknowingly walked past this bounty of berries every other day. But now I'm looking, like really looking. The same way one might listen intently and feel the language of the body. And I wonder, what else have I been missing, and not experiencing? What else is out there for me to touch, taste, smell or feel? What else am I forgetting or not aware that I'm part of? And in exchange with?

We are ugly, but we are here; we cawed through the forests. We slipped into their ears, noses and mouths, filling their cavities with our voices.

I saw an apple tree too, on one of my walks a few days later. And of course like the blackberries it was there all along. There are a lot of apples still on the tree, though a

number of them have fallen to the ground, rotting amongst the clipped grass and soil. The tree is in a small square that belongs to a block of flats that stand along a main road, which is quite busy and I feel a little bit self conscious to just hop over the wall and pick them. I shouldn't but I do. Maybe I'll talk myself into it another time.

We are ugly, but we are here; we cackled as rain poured from the heavens and flooded from the seas.

It's autumn now, and the blackberries have mostly dried up. The sky is usually awash with a greyish white, the kind of dull white you get when you've left a black sock in the washing machine with a white quilt cover. But in the last weeks we've had some beautiful blue spells and splashes of sunlight that remind us of warmer climes and sweet times.

Some of us are still on that wave we picked up last year where we had nowhere of consequence to go, when we strolled and meandered and flaneured for hours, in the cold, in the warmth, through mud, in forests, in parks, around our local neighbourhoods and beyond. We slowed down. We exhaled [breathe]. We noticed things then too; parakeets, for example, in this neighbourhood at least in the colder months. And we saw the ways that people sought eye-contact and conversation after months of isolation.

It could be that since having the practice of looking and noticing during that time, more than previously anyway, that seeing blackberries anew is part of that. We had little choice last year, but this year there's been more to distract ourselves with. But we and the things in our spaces are still living through and around each other. The exchange is continuous.

There's still the delight of sweet fruit hanging on trees and bushes. There are birds that we might not know by name but can still recognise by sight or song, perched on the trees in our back gardens. There are still strangers and passers-by looking for eye contact and a chat. And these outer bodies that we inhabit are still communicating and sending signals to our untethered selves, in hopes of reconnection.

We are beautiful, and we are here.

Ends.

Notes

¹'We Are Ugly, But We Are Here' is the title of novelist Edwidge Danticat's essay about the resilience of Haitian women, translated from the Haitian creole saying, 'Nou Led, Nou La'. The essay was published in *The Caribbean Writer*, Volume 10 (1996).

'we are ugly but we are here' read by Anne Broni

Sound design by Okhiogbe Omonblanks Omonhinmin and Billie McTernan

Audio description

Amy Winehouse - Our Day Will Come: 00:00-00:48

Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown - Body and Soul: 00:52-02:33

Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown – Body and Soul: 02:51-04:11

Amy Winehouse - Love Is A Losing Game: 04:28-05:38

Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown - Body and Soul: 05:44-08:17

Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown - Body and Soul: 08:28-09:39

Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown - Body and Soul: 09:53-10:41

Angela Davis - Radical Self Care: 11:12-11:22

Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown - Body and Soul: 11:37-12:19

Sarah Vaughan with Clifford Brown - Body and Soul: 12:27-12:49

Ruby & The Romantics - Our Day Will Come: 13:48-14:27