BODY/MIND BRAID

ESINAM BEDIAKO

One night, I couldn't get close enough to the earth. Spinning, I left my bed and pressed the length of my body to the rug, the shell of my ear to the ground.

The cat roused from her own bed and sauntered in my direction, only stopping when she stood so close that her fuzzy black paws were all that I could see.

I had a sense I'd never had before, a sense I've never had since. *Vibration* is one way to say it, *flutter* is another, but now I'm just throwing words at something for which I have no words. In my ear I heard a thrumming that I could feel in my bones, my body a conduit for some unnamed thing.

The next morning, I woke from the living room floor, bursting with knowledge. "I'm pregnant," I told my husband, and his eyes crinkled the way they do when he doesn't believe me, when he thinks I'm being unreasonable but doesn't want to say it. He asked how I knew, but I didn't have the language. I sputtered something about the middle of the night, dizziness, a strange feeling. "Even the cat could tell," I said, "and you know animals have a sixth sense." As if I'm not an animal myself, as if I shouldn't trust my own instincts.

The truth is, I typically don't. I'm not intuitive, especially not about things like this. I've never felt at home in my body.

Growing up, I avoided looking in mirrors for too long. Sometimes people said I looked like my regal mom or like my pretty sister, but I felt the weight of the word *like*. Somehow the arrangement of their similar features on my face created an effect that was diluted, rendering me average at best, though my thoughts tended to trend toward the worst. Most people who had known him said I looked like my father, who was elsewhere, living some other life. They said I had his smile.

In elementary school, some kids chased me down in the playground, calling me ugly and worse. I remember their names and their words, but I won't speak or write them, except to point out that one of the things they called me was an ugly African. They themselves were African American, too, but more American than me, they figured, since their parents had been born in the US unlike mine. I said some know-it-all thing like, "You know you're African, too, right?" This was an error. Don't try to reason when bullies are driving you into the ground. Just run: that's one thing, at least, for which your body is good.

In a few days, I had proof: a positive pregnancy test. I brandished the indicator stick at my husband, watching his face turn from disbelief to joy. It was New Year's Eve, so we bought a bottle of non-alcoholic champagne to celebrate.

For weeks, I didn't tell anyone, not even my mother or sister. I didn't want to jinx it. Some people think you can speak something into existence, but I tend to worry that I can speak things out of existence. Say what you want, and you certainly won't get it. I would wait a few weeks until the first ultrasound, I decided, then I would tell my friends and family.

"You're going to need a C-section," my OB-GYN said, glancing up from scans of my uterus. "That other doctor who did your fibroid surgery last year really butchered you down there."

He described how my uterus could rupture if I tried to give birth naturally. He even mimed an explosion with his hands, fingers splayed in the air. That's the kind of doctor he was. I liked him.

"There's nothing wrong with having a Cesarean," he said, misreading my silence. "It's just as legitimate as labor." I hadn't been thinking about that stigma, though I would later. I gesticulated, trying to ask without opening my mouth for permission to vomit. I grabbed the metal waste bin next to his desk and threw up water and toast, the only type of food I'd been able to eat for days.

"Morning sickness is good," my doctor said. "You've got a lot of the right hormones in there. This pregnancy will stick."

But the problem with my morning sickness, aside from the fact that it lasted all day and night, was that once I started vomiting, I couldn't stop. I spent several minutes gagging bile into the doctor's waste bin.

Angie Hall Anderson

"Take deep breaths," the doctor instructed me as he sent his nurse to bring me a damp cloth to wipe my face. "Keep breathing as deep as you can. It might sound like some hippy dippy stuff, but the breath–"

"I know, I know," I said. The breath can help you disengage. I knew because I'd been doing it my whole life.

In middle school, some boy barked at me while his friends laughed. To clarify his intention, he said, "You're a dog." The boy was white, his friends white and various shades of brown, so my rejection felt complete, my face the object of equal opportunity disgust. Days later, one of the friends approached me by my locker after school, the hallway eerily bereft of people. "You have big boobs," he said. This was an observable fact, though no one had said it aloud to me, certainly no boy. I'd assumed my doglike appearance negated any of the positives associated with being a girl with a woman's body. Then he continued, "You're gonna be a slut one day."

Before anything else happened, a teacher appeared, encouraging us to either go home or go to the school library for supervision. I headed to the library, my eyes too watery to notice where the boy had gone. I already wore my clothes too baggy; the next day, I wore a shirt large enough to lose myself in.

It was too confusing, my body and other people's thoughts about it. But, I told myself, it was also irrelevant. My soul was what really mattered. As a teenager, I liked song lyrics about this idea, poems too. According to a book of inspirational quotations I found in the library, Rumi had written, "Know then that the body is merely a garment. Go seek the wearer, not the cloak." Words like these fortified me when boys barked at me, when girls said, "You'd be so pretty if…," when my body grew or changed in some way I didn't want to bother to understand. I would read these words, take a deep breath, and detach.

But you can't detach during a pregnancy. Your body becomes a home for the love of your life. You have to take care of it, even when it's rebelling against you. Even as I passed the twelve-week mark, which I'd read would be the magical point where morning sickness would subside, nausea and vomiting battered me.

To make matters worse, I learned I'm a carrier for the Tay-Sachs gene. My doctor's surprise verged toward fascination. The pairing of a woman of African descent and a man of Ashkenazi Jewish descent should have been optimal, he explained. My chances of having this recessive gene were low while my husband's were high. We defied the odds, just not in a desirable way.

As we waited for the results of my husband's genetic test, I yearned for a sign, a certain sense like the knowledge that had rumbled through me as I sprawled on the living room floor all those months ago. I could picture her, my exact baby: curly-haired, brown-skinned, a big smile like her dad's, not my closed-mouth, tentative one. Like her dad, she'd have a face shaped like a heart. I imagined myself falling in love with that face, with the feel of her body in my arms, just to lose her to some genetic anomaly. I was waiting for my body to say, *yes, this baby is safe*, but all it was doing was vomiting and shaking and sweating, an inhospitable fortress.

When I was younger, before I was anywhere near having a child, I'd imagine you. I'd think of the things I'd teach you, things I wish someone had taught me. A poem, a prayer:

> One day your boss will say you need makeup; the next your professor will gaze upon your braids with disdain and deem them fake. A man will tell you he loves you, then he'll press his finger against your flesh and call it foul.
>
> Steel yourself against this. Look yourself in the mirror. Appreciate the whole: where muscles tense, flesh slacks, lips curve, soles flake; the kinks in the kitchen, the black pigment pooled on your knuckles and elbows and knees, all yours to carry and care for. Pay yourself all the attention you are worth

–but I could never really finish the verse. *How dare you*, I scolded myself, *give advice you still do not take?*

The odds did favor us, we learned in a couple of weeks. Our baby was OK, at least in terms of genetic diseases; my husband is not a Tay-Sachs carrier. We also learned that our baby was a boy. Part of me felt relieved; I wouldn't have to endure my child coming home to tell me that a boy called her a slut because of the shape of her body. But then I felt a pang of fear; while I knew pain, I didn't know the particular kind of pain my boy might face. What do boys and men say to each other? What words and looks might break my boy's heart in a specific sort of way I can't fathom? I knew the burden and the beauty of moving through the world in a Black body, but not as a brown boy, a Black man. I took tiny careful steps and held every railing; I cradled my belly, shielding my boy while I still could.

In a handful of minutes, I will feel my heart beating in a way it shouldn't, wild gallop to muddy wallow to gallop again.

Maybe my body was too vigilant. It continued to reject most food, except peanut butter and apples, and on good days, ramen. I did everything the pregnancy books and websites suggested—eating small bland meals throughout the day, sucking on ginger candies, wearing acupuncture bracelets, and yes, breathing deeply. Nothing helped.

One of my co-workers joked, "Oh, you think you're the Duchess of Cambridge now?" One of my nurses said that Black women don't get hyperemesis gravidarum, so I just needed to keep trying home remedies and keep eating.

"That's BS," my doctor said when I relayed that message. He wrote me a prescription for anti-nausea medication and promised to set his staff straight.

The medication helped a lot, but I still struggled. Some days I vomited so much I felt too weak to move. I lost rather than gained weight. I worried my body was failing my baby, but every scan said he was doing okay, small but mighty.

Just before the delivery, my doctor came to talk to me, saying hello around a mouthful of chocolate. He apologized for eating in front of me. It had been a busy day, he said, and he wished he could offer me a snack, but I was already in a paper gown, waiting for my turn for surgery, hours past the point where I'd have been allowed to eat food.

"No need to apologize," I told him. "I wouldn't have been able to keep that chocolate down anyway." Moments later, I was throwing up water, my breath shallow and fast.

And then he told me, once again, to take a deep breath. "It might sound like some new age stuff, but the breath—"

"Yes, I know, I know," I said, shaking from the coldness in the room, from frustration, from the exhaustion of all the months of fighting sickness away, "breathing helps you detach from pain and other distractions. Supposedly."

"No," he said, "that's not it at all." He then explained how the vagus nerve wanders from the brain through the face to the neck and down to the torso, the longest and most complex cranial nerve. "Some scientists theorize it's like the mediator between your mind and your body. When you breathe deeply enough, you stimulate the vagus nerve and tell that fight-or-flight reflex to slow down. It's not about detaching from your body. It's actually the opposite. It's the most present you can be."

My soppy heart couldn't take it. Tears filled my eyes, threatening to roll down my cheeks.

"Blew your mind, right?" And then, because that's the kind of doctor he is, he mimed an explosion above his head. Instead of crying, I laughed.

In the delivery room, as I hold your body against mine, your howling cry a psalm to me, I find my whole self. In a handful of minutes, I will feel my heart beating in a way it shouldn't, wild gallop to muddy wallow to gallop again. I will be fortunate to have a medical team pay attention to my exact body and the specific way it falters, to supplant the blood I lost while welcoming you to the world.

But first, before this crisis crests and abates, you arrive. You are here, and I am. I breathe in and out as deeply as I can. I call into the room my body, my mind, whatever soul I have, to bear witness to you as you take your place on this earth. ●