

MY BODY IS A LANGUAGE THAT I CANNOT SPEAK

1. I have begun to suspect that this world is not my own. Or perhaps, more accurately, this body I possess is somehow otherworldly. It is a spectacle unto itself, able to draw an audience without a promise of performance. Passing strangers stare as it walks by. Some take photos to prove what they have seen. I suddenly find myself on display before a crowd of gawking anthropologists. No one tells them to stop tapping on the glass.
2. And yet there is no other world I can claim to be from. I was born in American suburbia, raised among humans who look nothing like me. To them, I have a genetic mutation, a typo in my DNA, a body in an alternate spelling. This renders me disabled by one-sided comparison. My arms and legs are disproportionate to my torso. My height is far below average. But what if *they* are the disproportionate ones, towering two feet over my head? What if everyone who thinks I am a dwarf is really a giant? What if I wasn't always the oddity?
3. A young boy sits next to me on the Metro. He cannot be older than seven but no one seems to be watching him. The child is perplexed by me, by the fact that we are the same height yet I am clearly an adult. He glances down at my legs, noticing how they bow like a pair of crescent moons. *What happened to you?* he asks. I am not sure how to respond. I, too, am searching for the answer.

4. How can I explain life inside a paradox? I have achondroplasia, a rare condition that can be found in every corner of the world. There are people with bodies like mine across every ethnicity, country, and social class. We all share a mutant gene yet we are not related by blood. If not for that one bit of DNA, we would look like a random sample of the human race. There is no family tree to connect us, no shared point of origin. Each of us is an ordinary alien. Together, we are without a home planet.

5. What is it like to live in a world where every body is like your own? Any world filled with bodies like mine is an entirely fictional realm. Think about the Munchkins, the Oompa Loompas, and the Seven Dwarves. Imagine watching a film, seeing a country full of caricatures, people with bright green hair, garish make-up, bodies that are comical because they are too ridiculous to exist. Now imagine your body looks more like those than almost any in the real world. Would you begin to wonder if you, too, are fantastical?

6. I must remind myself that, somehow, we are everywhere. There are 30,000 little people in the United States and 650,000 across the globe. But those are merely numbers. All I can prove is that there are two: me and my mother.

7. I imagine her as an ignorant child, sitting inches away from the television set, transfixed by *The Wizard of Oz*. As Dorothy wakes up in a technicolor world, I picture my mother's eyes growing wide. Did she realize her world would soon change just as drastically? Did a flicker of recognition pass across her face as the Munchkins led Dorothy down the

yellow brick road? Then I remember: she grew up with a black-and-white TV, in a town where the roads were not yellow, only varying shades of gray.

8. Before me, my mother was the only little person on the family tree. For most of her childhood, she was unaware of this. No one told her that she was any different, that she acquired a spontaneous mutation, or that she wouldn't grow up in the same way most everyone else does. Her body was both a rarity and an open secret. She must have spent her childhood looking up at the ceilings and believing she'd one day touch them. She must have waited patiently for her growth spurt to hit and noticed that everyone else was growing faster than she could keep up with, that the ceilings continued to be out of reach. She must have woken up one day with a startling revelation: she was unlike anyone she had ever met.
9. I think about how my grandparents hid my mother's disability for a decade and I wonder: Is there something about our bodies we should be ashamed of? Does the truth of our skeletal fate bar us from a happy, peaceful life, or at least a normal one? Or would it be easier if we did not know we were always the exceptionally small elephants in the room?
10. My mother was born an emperor, convinced that she wore beautiful clothes. I was born completely aware of the fact that I was naked.
11. How can I explain being raised inside a paradox? My mother never hid the truth about my body yet she was unknowingly telling a different sort of lie. She believed my body

was a perfect replica of her own. *I assumed whatever I'd have, you'd have*, she tells me.

We both thought we were a world of two, when really we still floated in our own separate orbits.

12. At sixteen, I discovered that the world found me deformed. My body was its own open secret. My mother was the first to realize that we were no longer mirror images. While she was slim and as straight as a stunted body could be, I was heavy and meandering, curvy because of both my weight and my bones. My mother chose not to tell me what was happening. She found someone else to break the news.

13. That afternoon in the orthopedic surgeon's office comes back to me like a dream: a stranger and my mother in the same room, no one acting as they should. When we arrived, the surgeon asked me to take off my pants. My mother did not object. I begrudgingly stripped down to my faded yellow underwear and walked back and forth for the man I had just met. I stared at the tile floor so I did not have to see him study my naked legs. He wanted an X-ray of them too and asked me to stand against a wall. It felt like he was taking my mug shot. I wondered what I had done wrong.

14. It was then I realized my mother and I were entirely different creatures. She was a human who just happened to be short. I was an alien who couldn't resemble anything but a freak.

15. In the X-ray, my legs glowed with blue moonlight, bending like a set of parentheses around an empty afterthought. (For a moment, I allowed myself to find them beautiful.)

The doctor pointed at my bones with his pen, emphasizing their curvature as if it wasn't already obvious. *There is the option of cosmetic surgery*, he said. This is what I heard: *Under your skin, there is an ugliness that does not belong in this world*. My bones were whole but, just then, I felt entirely broken.

16. *What happened to you?*

17. Nothing, in the end. We backed out of the surgery when we realized it would not be worth the price, the pain, or the physical therapy. I simply had to live with the fact that I couldn't be fixed.

18. Or maybe, there wasn't anything that I needed to change. I kept walking, in my lilting way, slowly realizing that I am no more strange than my onlookers. *What if I am not the oddity?*

19. Perhaps our beauty is the open secret. People see our alien forms and believe they have made a rare discovery. Once, a man approached my mother at a bar: *Has anyone ever told you that you're beautiful?* She laughs when she tells me this story: my mother is well aware that she is a glorious, technicolor spectacle.

20. Since leaving suburbia, I have discovered my own body's beauty for myself. I moved to Washington and left behind the need to conform. Now, I am a creature in a vibrant city. Strangers often come up to me, stare deeply into my eyes, and tell me that I am beautiful.

I know that they mean this as a revelation but I still take it as a compliment. I have shown them another world– no, an entire universe of possibility.