



## Short story collection: 'Fragments'

Abbie Leeson

### 'My Body, in Ten Pieces'

1. Twenty minutes prior, I had been asked to strip naked so he could weigh me on the scales. Across the office, my unbuttoned school blouse hung limply like a ghost on the metal hook. It was autumn then, and the wind filtered in softly, bringing it to life at the hem. He folded my lilac cardigan over my lap and typed my measurements into the system. My skin peered shyly through the holes.

The clinician, now sitting, asked me to list ten things I knew about my body. One for every year of my age. I told him everything I knew about hearts - their deep, velvet chambers, their incessant club-music thumping. I told him stories of hot blood and veins that twist like underground tube stations in the underbellies of our wrists. He asked me if I knew about muscles. I told him I did. He asked me if I knew about aerobic exercise methods. I told him I didn't.

2. After dinner as a child, my mum would send me to my bedroom. Thirty-five sit-ups for every ten calories I'd over-consumed. Doctor's order. At night-time, she'd smoke with the neighbours. I'd lie on the yoga mat, stomach fizzing, eyeing the orange slit of the door. Out on the landing, ropes of blue smoke climbed the stairs. Shadows of strangers stretched long and lean across the carpets.
3. I was nine when I met the woman in my grandfather's garage. She'd been pinned to the wall, breasts spilling forward, black ringlets climbing the curve of her chest. Beneath her, white thighs jutted out from dainty cotton shorts. She was wearing heels and a tight, pink mechanic's outfit. Her eyebrows, lightly pencilled, arched high into her face, leaving her permanently shocked.
4. My grandmother, like my grandfather, had a penchant for the beautiful. She liked it brightly coloured - and dead, if at all possible. She liked freshly butchered flowers and dried butterflies, pinned to walls. She liked potpourri in wooden bowls. She liked stuffed cats and dogs and squirrels, arranged in charming poses by the fire. In the Spring, she'd lean over the kitchen sink and sever leaves from their joints. Petals drifted like pink, felt tongues from gaping mouths. In the gardens, tulips sunned like red-cheeked children in the furrows. Soon, they too would die.
5. We were all growing a little too quickly. We could feel it. We passed it silently amongst ourselves through gentle, wounded looks. It was a shared, secret ache. A communal growing pain. By fifteen, we had starved ourselves so frequently that most of us had never gotten our periods. We remained unbothered. We smoked out back behind the changing rooms, like our mothers had before us. We shared birth control and weight

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loss secrets. We shimmied out of cotton t-shirts and pink, polka-dot training bras. Our ribs rippled in the overhead light, our stomachs concave, eating away at themselves. On the benches, our knees clunked together, too much bone and not enough skin to cover it. We compared thigh gaps and calf thickness. We smuggled contraband chewing gum and vitamin gummies. We hunched over a tattered Teen Vogue copy, rubbing the perfume samples into our wrists.

6. My mum calls me 'unladylike' when I spread my legs. The man on the tram thinks otherwise. I watch his hand crawl my thigh. A threat. A crime, delivered in daylight. He was unmasked. A sea of red hair. A toothy grin. Yellow teeth. He was in his thirties. Maybe forties, at a push. He smiles at me, almost shyly. I can smell his breath. His fingers crawl my leg. Tiny, spider steps. I focus instead on his red trainers. Tattered. Scuffed with mud. A girl in a tweed blazer boards at the next stop, untangling her headphones from her pocket. An old woman fishes a flip phone out of her bag, bangles slinking down her wrists. His hand climbs higher. Past us, pine trees crawl up hillsides. The sky, white and powdered, seems to dim suddenly, as though someone's killed the light. Intermittently, a voice chirps over the speakers, announcing the coming stops. City centre. Train station. High school. The tram grinds to a halt. I stand and adjust my skirt around my thighs. Right now, I am not myself. Not me. Not me. Not me.
7. On the day of my seventeenth birthday, I was referred to a student counsellor. I found myself slumped over in a college waiting room, a bead of blood forming at my nail bed. In my hands: a student pamphlet on eating disorders. They'd decorated the place in soft, calming colours. Notice boards. Posters from the NHS. Large, potted house plants. Along each wall, strips of white light fell through tall, Victorian arches - each one barricaded by bars. On either side of me sat an IKEA oak side table, adorned with boxes of tissues, should I burst into tears. Above me: a round, orange chandelier. Low down, I thought - should I need to hang myself. In the corner, the radiator pumped heat through the room in slow, lethargic waves.

Fifty-five minutes into the session (I'd been counting on a nearby clock), Angela slid a piece of A4 paper across the desk.

"I'd like you to draw a monster", she'd told me. "It'll have all your bad qualities in it. Everything you dislike about yourself. I want you to imagine how it looks, how it speaks, how it moves — talks, walks, what it thinks about."

I drew a blob and coloured it pink.

8. Bystanders, when they saw me, screamed in fear for their lives. I was huge then. I was mountainous. I was eye-to-eye with satellites and chimneys and stars. I was drinking all the air in the room. I was forcing myself through corridors. My stomach, swelling, pressed against the constraints of a hallway and peeled posters and notices off the walls. I was a ball, expanding. I was a planet, at the moment of its birth. My flesh was rippling, curling away from me. My back and chest bulged out and shattered a dress into a million fabric fragments. Rumour has it I ate a child. Then a toddler. Then another. Rumour has it I sucked the flesh clean off a man and spat back out his bones.

**Abbie Leeson**

9. Sometimes still, I dream about the woman on the wall. I watch you. You, Evelyn Nesbitt. You, Marilyn Monroe. You, late-night celeb actress. You, billboard beauty. You are pinned up, strung out. You are a woman behind glass. You are a woman behind a screen. You are a butterfly, dried out, pressed flat. You are deity. You are Goddess. You are sacrificial emblem. You are shiny, sticky, pixellated. Your veins burst from your neck, blue and fresh as bruises. You are thigh and calf and décolletage. You are encouraging morale on the front line. You are milky breasts and legs. You are splayed in polka dot red. You are the Gibson Girl - eyebrows arched, mouth opening, legs accepting. Your womb expands and retracts within you. You are the elasticated woman. You are silent and well-mannered and naughty. You are a schoolgirl. You are headmistress, blouse bursting open. You are mother and child and wife and whore. You are a throat that accepts and swallows. You are a chest to feed and suck and mutilate. You are luxury and necessity. You are a woman in a jar. You are a pin-up. You are a peep show.
10. On my tenth session with Angela, she asks me why I care so much about my weight. I tell her that there is something small and pink and primal inside of me. I feel it squirming at my core, this thin, fleshy thing. A heart, perhaps. An organ. A muscle. A creature. Something that knows. Something that carries the memory, even when I have forgotten it. Sometimes, I lie in bed at night and feel it crawling through the sheets to meet me. Hot and pink and screaming, like a child. I tell her that my body is, and will probably always be, the most important thing about me. She asks me to elaborate. I begin to make a list.

**'Never Time'**

As always, it goes too quickly. You cry. You suckle. The sun lurches into the sky and drains out again. Your mum orbits the living room, rinsing the house free of dirt. You follow her, dirtying it. Every month, you mark a new height on the wall. And so it goes on. The clock watches expectantly. Seconds fall to the floor in a thick, clunky ticking. The seasons are circling. Life is a spool, unravelling. At one point, you are a daughter. Then a lover. Then a mother. Then alone. In the night, you hear time breathing, dicing life into careful, rhythmic clicks.

Tonight, you wake to the church bells tolling. Down the street, the blinds shut like lids on sleep. For a moment, you catch yourself in the window opposite. Your face, made watery by rain, hangs like some odd caricature before you. A child feeds mindlessly from your chest. Behind you, the streets peter out into estates - hospitals, funeral homes, bungalows for the elderly. The chatter of the TV lulls into a wordless hum. Sirens streak past the living room. Somewhere, a paramedic is pushing their palm to a heart, willing it to pump again. Somewhere, a mother is sucking at the air. Short, rhythmic puffs. *Push! Push! Push!* You turn to the kitchen. Time falls from the tap in slow, steady drips.

Tonight, you find yourself at the mantelpiece. You return here often. It was your mother's clock once, and your grandmother's before her. You've passed it carefully, soundlessly, between one another. You packed her things in August, and by November you'd found the courage to unpack them again. You found it swaddled in a white cotton tablecloth, still breathing.

Tonight, moments are muttered like prayers. The sirens howl out in the distance. The chatter of the TV turns tedious. In the clock, you find the kind, round face of your mother. You find the ever-moving hands of your grandmother, trapped in their shaky repetitions. On the contours of the wood, dust has settled, thick as moss. The cogs choke out the seconds, their voices gravelly with rust. *One. Now two. Now three.* The face blinks back knowingly. *We all die, it says. But not Time. Never Time.* You pry the batteries out the back and still it ticks. Shakes its finger. Tuts at you.

**'Morning Meditations'**

**Alarm!!!**

Daytime

**Alarm!!! Screaming**

A flash of sunlight

Green blinking

The day peers in like an  
intruder, white and awake

Beeping

The cat shrieks and pads  
onto the bed

Feed her in a sec. First-

Lifting

A push, a roll

Fur

13:10

Now 13:11

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Eight texts. Six new emails.

Josh?

No. Dad.

New voicemail. Six hours ago.

Shit. Dad.

Cat climbing

**Congr@ts!!! You've been specially selected as our most valued customer! Click the link below to win your own £3,000 prize**

Don't click. Never click.

Cat rubbing head on hand

**BREAKING: Dozens killed in School Shooting. Three Children MISSING.**

Shit

Cat screaming

**We've now passed our BREAKING POINT, climate experts say. The world is DYING and WE caused it.**

Shit

Okay. Okay. Feeding cat.

Lifting

Cold linoleum

**New text.**

DAD: Call me back please.

Wet cat food

(ew)

Tap running

Breathe. God. No time. No  
Time. Think-

Phone **buzzing** on counter

Phone **buzzing** again

Shit. Work. Shit. Dishes  
from last night. Rinse the  
bowl. Rinsing is good  
enough.

Bowl filling

Car **alarm** blaring outside

## Short story collection: 'Fragments'

Feels weird though.  
Maybe I should– no. Rinse. Jus  
rinse.

DAD: *Hello? Are you awake  
yet?*

DAD: ??

DAD: *Hello?? Reply asap*

Phone in hand. Phone cold.  
Sleeves damp.

Cat pushing at ankles

Cat pawing bowl

Cat eating

DAD: *I called Josh. He  
hasn't picked up either. Is  
something wrong?*

Shit. He called Josh.

**NEW EMAIL. THREE  
MINUTES AGO:**

**Just a heads up! Your  
6-month FREE TRIAL with  
us is coming to a close.**

My meditation app is  
breaking up with me.

You've been with us for:  
 162 days  
 You've meditated for:  
 54 hours  
 You've completed:  
 6 goals

That's a lot of  
 meditation! We'd hate to  
 see you go! Continue  
 your progress now by  
 selecting one of our  
**PREMIUM PLANS.**

I use it every morning  
 before work. The guy's  
 name is Ahmed – generic,  
 American accent. Firm  
 enough to make me listen.  
 Lifting enough to soothe.

Cat **scratching** at door

Website link.

New PREMIUM options:

**ONLY £19.99 a month, or  
 ONE payment of £89.99 a  
 year for our Unlimited  
 Premium Plan!**

Bank Balance: £35.49

Wasted money on shoes last  
 night.

**Unlock new singles like:  
 Shower Meditation,  
 Walking Meditation, and  
 SO many more! Pay with  
 card, Klarna or Apple Pay  
 now for a ONE-YEAR  
 subscription!**

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Shit! No shower  
meditations.

The others are patronising.  
The sessions are punctuated  
by ads.

Okay. Food. Shower.

Check texts one more time.

No Josh.

Hurts to see his name. Make  
a conscious effort to stop.

Car alarm **screams** outside.

Cupboard.

Bowl.

No milk left.

Shop tomorrow.

**THREE NEW EMAILS****LOOKING TO LOSE 10lb  
BEFORE CHRISTMAS?**

God. Christmas soon.

LOOKING TO SHED THAT  
TRICKY FAT?

Squish stomach in hand.

Skip breakfast.

ROUND FACE? WE HAVE  
THE SOLUTION

Cat **scratching** at legs.

Outside, **horns** honking.

Phone **buzzing** in hand

Car **screeching**

**Dad**

**Dad calling**

**Dad mobile**

Small photo of his face –  
grinning, gripping a  
freshly-caught fish.

My thumb hangs over the  
screen

**Short story collection: 'Fragments'**

*Hello? Hi Dad– no I'm just–  
I guess I'm–*

Voice rough and wounded

*Oh no! Why is that?*

*Yeah*

**Shit**

*Yeah*

Mum's back in the ward.

He's been crying.

God

*No, yeah, I will, I promise.  
I'll nip over.*

*Actually, I have something I  
need to do tonight. I'll come  
tomorrow.*

Shit daughter. Always have  
been.

*Yeah, I know. I know.*

*I have been.*

Weeks since I visited. She's lost  
her hair.

*Yeah.*

*No– yeah. Josh sends his  
love.*

Selfishly, I can't face her  
alone.

**Abbie Leeson**

*He won't be coming this time.*

*Nothing to worry about.*

Haven't told them yet.

*Okay.*

*Okay, see you then.*

Say you love him. Say you're sorry. Send your love to Mum.

*Okay, bye.*

Texts opening

Hands trembling around the phone

Josh. Please. Josh.

**Stop it**

Acid claws at the confines of my throat

No replies.

Profile photo: Valentine's Day.

I'm grinning. Josh offers a polite smile.

Fingers begin typing

I can feel my pulse in my  
mouth.

Small, delicate, **throbbing**

I'm being selfish.

Slowly, I delete.

Bathroom. Air jolts through  
in heavy waves

Need Ahmed. Now, I have  
no one.

Fumbling. Hands find the  
meditation app.

Newly downgraded

Abbie Leeson

**FANCY FEELING CALM IN  
THE SUDS?**

**TRY PREMIUM TODAY  
AND BROWSE OUR  
SHOWER  
SELECTION!**

The shower meditations sit  
behind glossy, inaccessible  
bars

Fingers find 'ANXIETY'  
meditation instead

Tap turned. Water  
streaming.

**Dripping**

**Scalding**

Water **running.**

A woman's voice rings out

Steam **erupting**

Not Ahmed

Drain **rattling**

Involuntarily, I sigh.

*Welcome.*

*I'm Susan, and I will be  
leading your session today.*

Hi, Susan.

*And thank you for taking  
such an enormous step  
today.*

You're welcome, Susan.

*Get yourself settled and  
we'll get started.*

Shower curtain. Hands  
prying at the bottles. Can  
never see which is which

*Begin by closing your eyes.*

I blink in the white light. At  
every turn, the tiles reflect  
my body back at me.

## Abbie Leeson

On mornings like this, Josh  
and I would have coffee on  
the balcony. He'd comb out  
my hair with a brush and  
we'd turn the radio on.

Stop

Stop

*Notice how you are feeling  
in the present moment.*

Like shit, to be honest,  
Susan.

Winter. Window cracked.

I taste rain and soil on my  
tongue

*Now, draw your attention to  
the surface beneath you.  
Feel your body being fully  
supported by it.*

Beneath me, the bathmat  
squelches and vomits out a  
sticky, black residue.

I keep re-sealing the edges,  
but the water still slips  
through them.

## Short story collection: 'Fragments'

Ring landlord again  
tomorrow

*How does it feel beneath  
you?*

The floorboards are rotting,  
dappling the downstairs  
ceilings in mould. It will be  
dripping now.

I watch a streak of black  
gunk swirl into the drain

*Notice that it holds all of  
your weight with ease.*

One day, the wood will fully  
cave in – maybe while I'm  
on it.

Imagine the paramedics  
finding you like that. Who  
would call them? Imagine  
being carried out. I wonder  
if they'd wrap you up.

*You are fully supported.*

I'd hate to die naked. I  
better not die naked.

*You are stable and secure.*

I imagine myself breaking  
through the floor, landing  
like a large, dead fish, pink  
and drenched in suds.

*Now, slowly, take a big  
breath in* In.

*Through the nose.*

Shit. I did it through the  
mouth. Does that make a  
difference?

*Hold that breath.*

Hold

Hold

Hold

*When you release in a  
moment, I want you to  
imagine all your troubles  
leaving your body with the  
exhale.*

Hold

Hold

How big does she think my  
lungs are?

*Keep holding.*

We haven't all got lungs of  
steel, Susan.

*Almost there.*

The paramedics will find me  
naked and oxygen-starved

*Ready?*

Ready as I'll ever be, Sue.

*And release.*

Out

*Let's go again.*

Still recovering from the last  
one

*In through the nose.*

In

Nose this time. Do it properly.

*Hold for six seconds.*

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6

*And out through the mouth.*

Out

*You're doing wonderfully.*

Cheers, Susan.

Cat **pawing** at door

Josh's cat

He'd stroke my face and turn the radio all the way up.

## Short story collection: 'Fragments'

Stop it

*You may now take your attention away from your breath.*

I imagine Ahmed here instead, whispering sweet, American affirmations into my ear.

For £20 a month, I could have him.

*Now, draw your attention to the way your body feels in this moment. Do you notice any particular tension? Any stiffness?*

I scan downwards.

We did this song in school.

Head– throbbing.

*Heads, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.*

Shoulders– sore.

Chest– tightening.

*Heads, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes.*

Stomach– churning.

Legs—

Need to shave my legs.

*If you'd like to, you can begin to gently massage any areas of tension or move your body in a way that feels comfortable to you.*

I scrub at them with a sponge. The hair gathers in the suds and stands to attention.

Razor. Cheap kind. Bleed every time.

*If any anxious thoughts or feelings come along, simply label them as: 'thoughts'.*

Josh—

Thinking his name hurts. No more names. Delete his name from your head.

[ ] used to say I had hairier legs than he did.

*Like pebbles in the stream, thoughts will come and go.*

[ ]'s cat is pawing at the door with **increased urgency**.

**Short story collection: 'Fragments'**

It always made me laugh.

It hurt a little too.

He doesn't know Mum's sick  
again

*Some will stick around for  
longer than others, and  
that's okay.*

His shampoo watches me  
from the shelf

It smells like him.

I don't use it.

*Your thoughts may come in  
clusters.*

**Phone buzzes.** Three texts.  
I don't check them.

Whenever I was upset, [ ]  
would play Bohemian  
Rhapsody on the landing  
radio.

Easy come, easy go.  
Will you let me go?

Abbie Leeson

*Or there may be only a  
couple, washing up on the  
sand at the same moment  
and washing away at  
different times.*

We'd sing the different parts  
as loudly as possible.

***Bismillah!***

*You are not in control of  
these thoughts, and you do  
not need to be.*

It's Mum's favourite.

*Mama, life had just begun,  
And now I've gone and  
thrown it all away.*

*Let them come easily and  
leave easily.*

He joked about making a  
cover album for her. For  
when the chemo's over.

*Caught in a landslide,  
No escape from reality.*

*It may take more time for  
some, and less time for  
others.*

**Short story collection: 'Fragments'**

He's better at the voices  
than I am.

*Anyone can see.  
Nothing really matters.  
Nothing really matters to  
me.*

*Eventually, they will wash  
away.*

