

NAFISSA THOMPSON - SPIRES: HEADS OF
THE COLORED PEOPLE (2018)

THE BODY'S DEFENSES AGAINST ITSELF

The back of the woman's neck is already sweaty. Liquid pools in the dark creases behind her ears and around the collar of her oversize T-shirt. She is wearing loose sweatpants, the cotton kind, and thick white socks to class. She stands at the back of her mat, scratching one ankle with a big toe, turns around suddenly, and smiles. I avert my eyes, annoyed by her expectation of familiarity, and focus on aligning the front edges of my mat with one of the faint slats in the polished hardwood. I watch her face in the mirror. She could be a distant cousin, her nose not unlike mine, but she is fat.

The room always smells damp before class even starts, misty from the deep exhalations, drained lymph nodes, body odor, and steam that the previous students left behind. Bodies fold and unfold, adjusting themselves in quiet discourse in the heated space. The new woman struggles through Eagle Pose, even with one foot tucked around an ankle. Biniam steps behind her, places a hand gently on her back, and says, "You might do better if you remove your socks." I can't see her feet in any detail after she balls the socks and sets them down, but I imagine white cotton lint clings to the deep brown of her skin. I lift my foot higher and press

my heel into the space where my thigh meets pubic bone. I am wearing short briefs and a sports bra, the typical uniform for the women in this class. If the new black woman is self-conscious about the bagginess of her clothes and body, her face, pleasant, does not let on.

"Relax your face," Biniam says to me. I try to unclench my jaw, letting the sweat run down my forehead and bare arms. The woman is watching me in the mirror. I close my eyes.

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The summer I turned eleven, my body would not stop sweating. Before then, I welcomed the Inland Empire's dry heat, imagining myself a brown lizard, sunning myself on a flat rock in red sunlight, camouflaging, until my parents called me inside the house with lectures about heat stroke. It's the kind of heat I still miss in humid, foliated Nashville. Nashville is more like the Bikram studio I attend there, damp all year round. Upland, California, isn't really damp, except in the morning when the fog hovers. It can be cold in the winter, but a dry, quiet cold. In the valleys, there's no elevation to carry the heat, so the cold settles over everything like more dust.

My sixth-grade classmates, noticing my sudden hyperhidrosis, and led by Christinia, called me Sweatima. Fatima Sweatima. I seemed to be the only one who sweated through the cold as much as the heat. I sweated through daisy-print dresses and sunflower T-shirts. I sweated through jackets and coats that I kept on all day to hide the sweat. I sweated through a sweaty cycle that only made me sweatier and more ashamed of the sweat and sweatier still as I tried to hide it.

"It's anxiety," a doctor said, but neither my mother nor I would have agreed to a pill to quell my nerves back then. "Is there a history of trauma?"

My mother and I looked at each other and back at him and shook our heads in unison. Maybe it just had to do with being in that specific body, a body so different from everyone else's at school, one that wouldn't do the things that other people's did or that did too much of them. I would try harder to relax, my parents and I concluded.

"Be a thermostat, not a thermometer. Don't be reactive. Be a thermostat, not a thermometer. Thermostat. Thermostat. And hold on." Mom's voice merged with Wilson Phillips's, forming the soundtrack to our daily commute. The perspiration usually started each morning between Fairwood and Rio Road, as we turned the corner and traveled the block toward school. I had double anxiety, anticipating the trials of the day, and the unrelenting moisture that left all my shirts permanently marked with green-and-yellow stains. I would make a mental list of possible retorts, canned answers for the insults that would undoubtedly dart toward me at some point during the school day. The list never helped.

I wasn't good at coming up with retorts, even if I practiced them beforehand. I had my stock "whatever," which came with a head turn and an eye roll. And I had, "Hmm, maybe you're projecting," something I'd picked up from talk radio. And I had self-righteousness, loads of it: "One day you're going to be sorry that you didn't take the high road like I did." That never worked. The high road is too abstract; kids can't see it, and really neither could I. I could only hold on for one more day, grasping at the idea of retribution because there was little else

I could grasp. The best comebacks always came to me in my bedroom, hours later, when I sat watching reruns of *The New Mickey Mouse Club* or *Kids Incorporated* and brooding over the day. And wishing that when I lifted my arms, they were as dry as Stacy Ferguson's or Rhona Bennett's.

That year, I'd managed to get through the first months of school without any major incidents. But by the late fall in a seventh-period math class, I experienced the worst trial by far. Christinia had come around to sharpen her pencil, she'd claimed, but she'd bypassed the sharpener attached to the wall and stuck her nose near my coat with a look of self-satisfaction and disgust on her face. It was the kind of coat with fur around the hood and far too warm for me or for that day. My mom had insisted that I wear it because of the chill in the air, and once the sweat started, I kept it on despite the warm classroom.

I never understood how Christinia decided to choose her target each day. I wasn't the only one, but I was her favorite—the only other black girl, the one with the special name, the girl who sometimes insisted on wearing eighties clothes in the nineties. When I met her in second grade, I assumed that Christinia and I would be friends. We had skin color and intelligence in common, and our mothers were both doctors, and my mother wanted me to have a black friend, black friends plural if there had been more options. She said it would round out my experience, but really, I think it was one of the ways she could justify putting me in an otherwise white school. But Christinia and I were different. She was the kind of black girl who wore fake hair, something I could never do, and who bragged about having “Indian in my blood” to white listeners who seemed bored or amused but clearly unimpressed. Her stomach made her one of the heftier girls in the class, and when I got

up the courage to look down on her, I made a point of flaunting my thinness—the only desirable thing about my body—over her tendency toward chubby. People could make up their nicknames, but I made sure no one would ever call me Fati, Fatty.

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Biniam leads us through Garudasana (Eagle Pose) and Sputa, which sounds like a dirty word in Spanish, but which means Fixed-Firm Pose. Biniam is vaguely African—Eritrean, Ethiopian—with a thin nose and thick, shiny curls. He says, in that accent that women find attractive, “Fatima, relax the shoulders, soften the gaze.” With the new black woman, there are three of us in this class. She flops down flat on her soft stomach instead of taking a vinyasa on the way to Down Dog, collapses instead of hovering. Once, Biniam said, “Fatima,” dragging out the last syllable, “that name is honorable; you should look up its history.” I know its history.

“Turn your gaze inward,” he says, making his way toward me. I try, but I watch the woman. Her eye catches mine again. I look away.

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I don't know if it was the differences between our bodies or the one similarity that made Christinia hate me on first sight. But she expressed her disdain for me in the five years that followed in sporadic, disjointed ways that were interspersed with kindness. The unpredictability amounted to emotional abuse. One day she'd pull up my shirt in front of the entire class and reveal the pink under-shirt that should have been a bra, and the next day she'd give me a really expensive present, like the Hello Kitty pencil box from the Sanrio Store with all the compartments and the matching erasers.

"I wish I had some good tweezers to make this easier," she'd said once as she helped me remove the splinter from my clammy hand after an accident on the balance beam. I barely felt a prick when she pinched the skin around my palm and then held up the tiny wood between her index finger and thumb. "Got it."

"That wasn't bad," I said, examining the tiny pink hole Christinia had left in my palm.

She paused then and grabbed my hand again: "You have a lot of calluses," she said.

"Monkey bars. Remember in elementary? I used to play on them every day."

"My mom says calluses are the body's defenses against itself," Christinia said. Her mother wasn't that kind of doctor—she had a PhD, like my mother, and they both let everyone know it—but Christinia was a walking medical book. She paused, still holding my hand. "I can read your fortune," she said.

"I don't believe in that stuff." I backed up, taking my hand with me.

"Just real quick," she said.

Warmth passed between us and she ran her finger over my palm.

"You're going to die young," she said with seriousness in her face.

"Where does it say that?" I pulled my hand away again to search it myself.

She laughed. It was a throaty, almost phlegmy laugh with a shrill edge. *Hihihihhi*, like she used the wrong vowel. Who laughs with an *i* sound instead of an *a* or an *e*? "You're so gullible!" she yelled and ran off.

Later that school year, we wrestled, in a fight that almost got us both expelled—for the second time—over her accusation that I

thought I was better than she was. She made me feel confused and unstable. I avoided her; she sought me out.

The day she sniffed me, I heard her coming. As she approached the pencil sharpener, she made the kind of noises she always made when she set out to make fun of something. I heard her horse-whinny *hiihihi*, the same sound she'd made in second grade when she, on her way to sharpen a pencil, convinced Rhianne to stick the tack on Renee Potts's seat. She made the same whinny the next day when she found out that Renee had to get a tetanus shot.

I know I didn't smell like Teen Spirit. No deodorant can completely eliminate the odor produced by a combination of excessive sweating, excessive anxiety, an excessive coat, and the hormones an eleven-year-old body produced. But I was still surprised when, like ants, my classmates one by one made their way to the pencil sharpener and sniffed me on the way back to their seats, carrying over their heads the words "musty," "gross," and "so weird." I sat frozen in a cold sweat, imagining myself somewhere else. Mrs. Trebble never directly let on that she noticed, but she gave me a piece of candy, a half-melted Hershey's Kiss, after class.

The whole thing was more embarrassing than the time I had to leave the classroom because I was upset by the Holocaust movie. It was even more embarrassing than when I misread Jason's kindness and asked him to be my boyfriend and when he kindly said no offense, but no. It was worse than all those things because it said something about my inherent inability to be something normal, to be a girl, to be perfect all or even some of the time.

My whole body burned that day, but I didn't cry in front of them. I never cried in front of them. I pretended not to hear the whispers and snickers, and Emily pretended with me. We ate lunch

with our mouths quiet and our eyes tapping code. "Don't feel too bad," Emily blinked. "Everyone knows Christinia's a jerk."

"Easy for you to say, since she never bothers you," I blinked back.

With her mother's help, when Emily got home, she would wonder why her only friend was the sweaty black girl with the weird name. Tomorrow, we would pretend it had never happened. Christinia would utter the nickname Sweatima, which would spread like wildfire across the lockers and hallway, under the guise of saying hello. Then she'd move on to bothering Renee or someone else for a while.

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Biniam says to get into Pavanamuktasana, Wind-Removing Pose. He is attractive, maybe gay. Some of the white women in the class preen for his attention, showing off or pretending to need help. If he is interested in them, he never lets on. His facial expression, a vague smile, does not change. He treats the new woman perhaps a little more gingerly than the rest of us.

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The summer I turned fifteen my body would not stop bleeding. I had "accidents" at school even when I wasn't on my period, one of which culminated in a crimson stain on the back of my shorts and Christinia pointing and laughing as I walked—as naturally as I could—from our table in the cafeteria to the girls' bathroom with Emily's sweatshirt tied around my waist to hide the mess and Emily walking behind me to shield me from anyone else's view.

My mother asked gently, but with fear in her eyes, "Have you done anything with anyone? Anyone?"

In an algorithm that made sense only to my mother and grandmother, any physical contact with a boy was inherently sexual, and any sexual contact was fecund. Thus hand-holding led to penetration, which led to pregnancy, which sometimes resulted in miscarriages—the only explanations they could imagine for my abnormal bleeding—in the same way that a dream about fish meant someone in the family was pregnant.

"No," I repeated three times before her face softened, and two times to the female OB-GYN who asked me the same question, once with my mother in the room and once after she asked my mom to step out for a moment.

I was terrified of having a pap smear after reading about them in *Seventeen*. I couldn't imagine what investigating a pregnancy entailed.

"I haven't even held hands with anyone," I said to the doctor. She had smooth brown skin and long black hair. My visible shame seemed to settle the matter for her; with my virginity established, she could treat me like a person instead of just a body.

When she called my mother back into the room, she said, "Fatima's a good girl. I think this is related to her diet. It doesn't seem like the vegetarian thing is sustainable the way she's doing it. She needs more green leafy vegetables." Then to me, she said, "Are you eating enough?"

In high school, on a good day, when she decided we were friends, Christinia sat across from me in the cafeteria. Emily flicked her brown hair and exchanged an eye roll with me, but despite the blood incident, I wasn't anxious around Christinia anymore, though I was still anxious more generally. I had lengthened out into somewhat tall and something like pretty, but I still couldn't get a date at my school. Christinia had grown from baby fat to a

more mature obesity, but she seemed smaller in high school, in the bigger crowd. She sat with me and Emily and some of our friends sporadically; she had so few friends of her own that I almost felt sorry for her. I began to view her as a benign growth with the ability to flare up every now and then but with no real power.

I proceeded to eat my standard lunch of Funyuns and Diet Coke, making each little onion ring last for five bites. I wasn't exactly vegetarian for health reasons, and despite the gynecologist's advice, I don't think I ate a green vegetable until my twenties.

"They say people who become vegetarians young are just hiding eating disorders," Christinia said, taking a bite of something brown and wet that came on a Styrofoam plate.

"Who says that?" I asked, looking at Emily.

"Medical studies. My mom said." Christinia slopped a bite of the brown meat and sauce.

"You and your mom might try eating less meat, or just less," I said, and Emily and I dragged out our laughter, consciously, until it spread across the table to the other girls. I prepared for a confrontation with Christinia, a sequel to our previous fights, but it never came. I winced when I saw the quick flash of pain in her eyes and watched her walk away from the table.

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The new woman shows surprising balance when it's time to transition from Warrior Three to the standing split. She does it with an effortless lift of her right leg.

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The summer I turned nineteen, I no longer needed my fingers or a spoon to empty myself after eating. I could not retain big meals.

With the hyperhidrosis under control, my body found other ways to purge; it learned how to punish itself.

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"Forearm stand," Biniam says, "but only if it is part of your practice." He looks toward the new woman. "You can practice Three-Legged Dog or move to a wall so I can spot you." Some of the women in the class begin to spread their arms in front of them, like cats leaning back for a stretch. I have managed forearm stand once at home, without the aid of the wall, and a few times in Biniam's class with the wall and his support. I don't know what has gotten into me today, why I am more competitive than usual. I prep for the pose, pushing my weight into my forearms, tighten my core, lift one leg a foot or two off the ground until it hovers high above, bring the other to join it in the air.

I find the pose, clenching my stomach muscles to support me. I delight in my ability to lift myself up this way. I can't see the new woman, but I feel she is watching from the safety of Child's Pose.

I don't know how long I have held myself in Forearm Stand; it could be five seconds; it could be a minute. Sweat pours from my forehead onto my mat in the space between my two perched arms. I look forward to Savasana, where we will lie very still and focus our awareness on "being in this body." My arms give out, and I try to regain my balance by "activating my core." One leg flops to the side. I try to land in Wheel Pose, but the fall is so sudden that my body and brain disagree about their directions.

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Last summer, when I turned thirty-three, my body started bleeding again, and the stress from that has revived the sweat-

ing problem. Nothing traumatic precipitated this change, and the absence of that trauma is somehow traumatic in its own way. I have been eating fine, well even, so many green smoothies, so many salads, very few grains. I avoid all the glutens. My husband and I had decided I should try getting off the pill, which I convinced my mother to put me on after another accident in high school, so that we could prep for trying to conceive. The pill dried up the bleeding for sixteen years, but it dried up all my other juices as well. Now I'm supposed to be "detoxing," cleansing myself from synthetic hormones. I try to believe the bleeding is just part of the purgative process, the toxins pouring out to make me new inside, like the sweat is supposed to do in hot yoga, like a release after a large meal. If I stand up too fast, after an inversion, which I shouldn't do anyway because it worsens my "condition," I sometimes have a big bleed; I tell myself it's just blackberry jam, nothing to fear. The resulting anemia has made me prone to fainting.

I have heard that Christinia is an OB-GYN somewhere in the South, maybe here in Tennessee, an expert in hormonal imbalances. Funny that we both ended up so far from California in some shared ironic reverse migration. Funny that she fixes "feminine problems" now, when she was my problem then. Sometimes I wonder if a black woman I pass in the street is her, if I have unknowingly nodded acknowledgment to or feigned distraction to avoid eye contact with her. When I choose new doctors, I pore over the in-network lists, avoiding Chrissys, Christinias, Christinas. I wonder if I am taking the wrong approach, if somehow only she could tell me what is really wrong with me, could read my body better than a stranger.

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When my head hits the ground, I don't feel the pain at first, just the impact. There's a quick bite and wetness in my mouth, the taste of my own blood, a stranger and a friend at once.

I am struck by the clarity of all things. I see colors more brightly, briefly. I understand. Sometimes the enemy who looks like you is but a preparation for the enemy who is you. The violence directed inside mitigates the violence that comes from outside. It prepares you, creates calluses, fills holes.

The other black woman, the new one, does not have white lint on her feet. I see them up close when she comes—with Biniam and half the class—to see if I'm okay. There are only four black feet, besides mine, in the bunch, so it's easy to recognize hers. Her toenails are painted fuchsia. "I'm a nurse," she says, hovering above me. "Nobody touch her." She checks my airways, shifts my body to Recovery Pose.

The steam and the smell in the room are nauseating. I vomit without my permission. Everyone but her backs away. "Looks like a concussion," the black nurse says. Biniam's feet have disappeared from my line of vision. The woman touches my forehead, my hair, and does not squirm at my sweat on her hand. Moments later, or maybe minutes, I can't be sure, I am lifted by someone—not her, for I can still see her—onto a moving bed.

If the class goes on without me, I will miss Savasana, my favorite part. There is the smell of my own sweat and the bile on my breath and the blood where I bit my tongue. My body has failed me again. Though I have buffeted it, it will not conform. Six months later, after my first of many surgeries, a doctor will pronounce the word "endometriosis" as the cause of all my bleeding.

She will remove the patches and implants that have covered my organs; the chocolate cysts will grow back, again and again. Years later, I will wonder why I competed with that woman in the class, why Christinia competed so much with me. Years later, I will be more informed but no better.

My head and torso are locked in position, but I can still move my fingers and toes. As they carry me to the van, I spread my limbs on the gurney and take my own Savasana. I lie very still, making imperceptible movements in my mind, scanning my body, considering its parts, its defenses, being aware. I recall that I've been doing this yoga since I was a child. I wish I were more evolved.