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Evans: And you will be consumed

AND YOU WILL BE CONSUMED

Kelley Evans

My first quarter teaching freshman composition was punctuated by sharp pinches in my colon, parentheses of heartburn, and the bloated semicolon of my stomach between meager meals. I didn't have time to think about my gastrointestinal distress on the days I taught, all hours until four P.M. eaten up by preparation—thinking up exercises, perfecting handouts, and choosing homework. My stomach, acidic from the anticipation of standing before twenty students, would admit only the bare minimum of bland food. Afterwards, I replayed the class over in my head while eating a light supper, if I could tolerate it. The khaki straight-leg pants I had bought in a thrift store that summer—chosen to project an image of casual authority—sank to my hipbones. I spent the entire class period pulling them up, or I excused myself to run to the bathroom and to adjust the safety pins in the waist-band. As the quarter drew on and the silences during class discussion grew longer, my confidence ebbed with my weight, and I began to think I was constitutionally unfit for the work. How ironic, I thought—too fragile for life in the ivory tower.

Once in a while I'd catch myself feeling smug because my body shape was beginning to approach those of the svelte eighteen-year-olds in my class. But I knew it was a ruse, something I told myself to palliate the reality. Weight loss, when it's not needed and unintended, is poor compensation for the loss of control. I could not quell my fear.

I couldn't figure out how to be in a classroom, physically, as a teacher. As a student you can be more mind than body. Hidden behind a desk, you slump in your chair, tilt it backwards, relax or lean forward; these postures do not call attention to themselves. Your movement is limited to craning your neck to see the student speaking behind you, or you don't turn and just listen to the bodiless voice.

But the students' bodies point towards me. I cannot escape the attention, which is as much directed at my body as my mind. If I gesture, their heads follow my hand. If my shirt rides up, exposing a sliver of belly flesh, all eyes go to my midriff. If I burp, I must excuse myself in front of twenty people.

Perhaps that is why I couldn't eat—at some level refusing to accept that my body had to stand in front of a blackboard. The less of me that had to be there, the better. But why was I unnerved by freshmen, who were as clueless about college as I was about teaching? I would look out at their bodies, also being tested as they hadn't been before, eating dining hall food, surviving on little sleep, walking through rainstorms in flip-flops, ingesting new levels of alcohol. As their eyes fluttered closed mid-class, I wondered who would go under first, and if somehow, we exhausted each other.

While I prodded my stomach along with acid reducers and yogurt and watched my weight diminish, my husband Jamey's stayed the same. As the quarter ended and my weight returned over Christmas with shortbread cookies and sweet potato soufflé, his remained stable.

In addition to eating a normal diet, Jamey takes nine pills a day. In the morning he swallows three brown pills, an orange and yellow capsule, and two dingy gray ones in a diamond shape. When I come to bed a couple hours after him, he rolls over and sleepily asks if I'll grab him three more brown ones.

The pills keep his intestines from eating themselves. Not literally, but almost. His overactive immune system fights off the good bacteria in his digestive system. That was how the doctor explained Crohn's disease to us after Jamey had been hospitalized, as he showed us pictures from the colonoscopy. But "fighting"—the verb he used—seemed too tame a descriptor as I viewed the walls of Jamey's intestines. Illuminated by the unnatural light of the scope, uncomfortably asymmetrical and wet, his insides looked as if they had devoured themselves. Amorphous burnt-orange splotches contained red centers,

surrounded by browns and blacks. The delicate surface, like the underside of the tongue, looked too soft and too alive. Now, in retrospect, I contain the images in language, and the regular curves of the letters make them more distant, safe. At the time, the terror I felt while thumbing through the photographs was just as sinisterly shapeless as the sores themselves.

No one knows exactly what causes Crohn's disease. Some think you can inherit it, but there are many cases where none is detected in extended family. The doctor said that people in the developing world don't get Crohn's, by and large; they develop the appropriate amount of intestinal bacteria from reacting to parasites and pathogens. People in developed countries—nations who consume the majority of the world's resources—develop Crohn's.

The pills have been a part of our rhythm for more than two years now, more regular than my menstrual cycle. The clear amber bottles are depleted, and then there is a computerized voice on the voice mail saying his prescription is ready for pickup. Containers replace containers, the old ones go in the trash, and there is no proof of what he has taken, except for the absence of illness.

Back before the bottles, he was sick and we didn't know why. He had lost twenty pounds by the time he was admitted to the hospital. After weeks of irregular eating, it reached the point where he hardly ate anything; he vomited nearly everything he ingested, and the bit he could stomach came out in a bloody mess. Half lying, half sitting on the mattress on the floor of our dark bedroom, he sipped the Gatorade I forced on him whenever I could, and passed time by watching brainless movies and Comedy Central. Every hour or so, he would leap from his dormant position and run to the bathroom. (We later learned that an ulcer towards the end of his lower bowel caused the spasms.)

He would always flush, so I didn't see the extent of his illness until I viewed the colonoscopy photos, and even then they seemed

abstract and removed. More difficult to confront was the toilet and the soiled pair of teal-blue boxer briefs he left in the bathtub the night before he was admitted. Since I was accustomed to taking showers at the gym after swimming, I didn't touch the bathtub and its contents for a good week, just ignored the shit. But eventually, I donned rubber gloves, filled the tub with an inch of water, and attacked the briefs with detergent. Horrified by the fecal matter released and floating in the tub, I doused it all with toilet cleaner and scrubbed. My back soon hurt from hovering low enough to clean but remaining high enough that I wouldn't splash myself. Squinting, lips pursed, I concentrated on not gagging, because I was afraid that if I started I might not be able to finish cleaning. I feared my fear of not finishing. If Jamey's body was eating itself, mine was slowly succumbing to my anxiety—that he would have his colon removed at such a young age, that I wouldn't be able to keep up the regimen of his care and my job and schoolwork, that the stress would break us as a couple. I worked as hard and fast as I could, assaulting the toilet, scouring the caked-on layers, splatters of dirt-brown, black, and dark red. I hated them, the colors, and the ache in my arms, and the chemical sting in my nose—the evidence of his evisceration.

The day after cleaning, I sat with Jamey. I watched nurses check LED displays and the cooks take away uneaten food, a welcome distraction from his drawn face. You do a lot of sitting in hospitals, which isn't so different from the rest of life if you're an office worker, except that it's more uncomfortable. I worked as staff at a university, sitting at a computer for a good portion of the day, and late at night I typed at my computer at home, writing a paper for school. But my back ached most after coming home from the hospital. The chairs were either slippery plastic that didn't hold me, or old-style living room armchairs that were made to look comfortable but weren't. They never pointed in the right direction—couldn't with the limited amount of space in a hospital room—so I twisted my back and neck to attend to Jamey. Or I'd sit next to him on the bed, half falling off, giving awkward hugs.

Occasionally I would get into bed with him and watch TV, the bed tilted up into “recliner” position, becoming a mini love seat. But I disliked being in bed when the doctor or nurses came in. Being discovered in this position felt almost worse than being caught making out. Watching television together is more mundane, and its interruption was a painful reminder that normalcy (or at least its appearance) was beyond us. The fact that I fit into bed with him was also an uneasy reminder of how much weight he’d lost; he’s 6’4” and not skinny, or wasn’t before he became ill. Even so, the most pleasant times were when we sat, hip-to-hip.

I could touch him when we were in bed. His thigh against mine, our forearms pressed together. Touching someone in a hospital is more difficult than sitting. To hold a hand, fingers have to navigate around IVs and tubes. The nurses come between you and him to take his blood pressure, or he has to go to the bathroom again. And there’s the sheer unattractiveness of the beloved’s skin, sallow and pale pink when it should be ruddy tan, as if something has evaporated just below its surface. It feels moist, betraying ominous heat or sinister cold. Unprotected, its hue is visible through the nubby hospital gown. Skin slips out between flaps that won’t close, or is too obviously bare because the pants reach to just below his knees. Touch it to make sure it exists, but the doubt remains when you let go.

I can’t remember who was with us when I told him—doctor, nurse, relative—but someone else was present, so I had to say it obliquely. “I cleaned the bathroom. And the bathtub,” I blurted, apropos of nothing. I had planned on telling him. I wanted him to know that while his body wasted away, mine walked to work, made my dinner (something he did most nights before his illness), drove to visit him for a couple hours, came home and did homework, and then drank a glass of wine while it sat blankly in front of the Style Channel, trying to divorce itself from the images of the hospital. Though one might think that the act of forgetting is not the domain of the body, the mind must still have the body’s permission to erase. I remembered Jamey’s

disease in my body; I ate less and slept fitfully. And I wanted Jamey to know that, to feel my physical presence (even though I could not always be with him) as much as I wanted him to know the resentment I felt at being so joined to him.

I didn't even know if he would remember the soiled underwear, but as soon as I mentioned the bathtub, he turned sharply (or as quickly as someone very ill moves), looked straight at me, and said an almost inaudible, "Thank you." His eyes were watery, though it could have been the glassiness that had been there for weeks. The look he gave me, however, was unmistakably gratitude. And I felt wretched. My confession had leaked out of me under the pressure of his care, and I resented myself for it.

Almost two years later, during the winter break after my first quarter of teaching, I walked with Jamey through the Art Institute of Chicago. As we entered a contemporary art wing, a pile of candy in the corner caught my eye, instantly appealing on a number of levels: shiny, colorful, chaotic, unframed in an environment of frames, and—it was candy. A small group of people contemplated this controlled mess, and I let go of Jamey's hand to go join it.

The placard next to the installation read "Untitled (Portrait of Ross in LA) 1991/Multicolored candies, individually wrapped in cellophane. Felix Gonzalez-Torres, American, born Cuba, 1957–1996." I'm always drawn to these little informative blurbs when I'm in a museum, and often I read them before giving the art my full attention. Perhaps it's my constant urge to verbalize, contextualize the visual within familiar symbols, or at least make it more manageable. At least with sculpture, reading the descriptions allows me to retreat to two dimensions. One would think that, since my body has height, width, and depth, I would be able to negotiate all three, but I find myself displaced in depth. My shoulders run into door frames, and my thighs hit desk corners. I prefer the contained space of the printed page or canvas (though when I paint, my images appear flat and distorted).

The small square of text beside the candy continued (yes, I wrote it down, copied it into the notebook always at my side in museums): "This installation is an allegorical portrait of the artist's partner, Ross Laycock, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1991. The 175 pounds of candy correspond to an ideal body weight." The mixed blue, green, orange, silver, red, and pink wrapped sweets looked like the "wrong" end of a kaleidoscope, light reflected in thousands of sparkling angles. The pile reached its apex in the corner of the room at about two feet and spread out in a skirt between the walls. It didn't look any heavier than I was, even after I'd gained back some of the weight I'd lost while teaching. The word "ideal" jarred me, as if this silvery mountain could somehow be a more perfect substitution for a living being, a loved one and his body, however diseased.

The final portion of the placard read: "Please help yourself to one piece of candy. As the pile diminishes, candies will be replaced." As soon as I had read it, I acknowledged the urge to take one, suppressed since first seeing the installation in my peripheral vision. I salivated, and my face flushed with desire—the urge for the sweet, the compulsion to consume, and the impulse to transgress. But no one moved forward, and my feet would not budge. Had the other spectators not read? Was the imperative of the museum too heavy? Not 45 minutes ago I had seen a guard tell a young woman, "Don't touch the paintings please," the "please" increasing the severity of the admonition rather than softening it. Or perhaps it wasn't the museum, but Ross that held us back—Felix Gonzalez-Torres' longing for Ross, for his body, a body poured out before us: 175 pounds. I pictured Ross in a room similar to the one Jamey had at the hospital, with pine-green curtains and carpet and cream-colored walls. How often did Felix visit Ross? Every day after work? Maybe he moved his studio into the hospital so he could be with him. Maybe Felix took Ross home to die. Did he surround Ross with bright colors? Could you see them reflected in Ross's skin?

Maybe I would come back when others weren't around.

I moved on to Andy Warhol's giant portrait of Chairman

Mao, taking in the garish colors, but I only thought about eating them. Was it okay to eat art, ever? I thought of the butter sculptures at the Minnesota State Fair, which I attended in my teens. Every year a woman carves near life-sized busts of the Dairy Princesses out of huge slabs of butter. The royalty would sit bundled in the refrigerated, rotating “butter booth” while the carver worked her magic on the churned cream, the beaming smiles evoked in semi-solid state. Would I, could I bring myself to butter my toast from the likeness of Princess Kay of the Milky Way? Spreading the corner of a cheek or chin on whole wheat. Gouging the forehead or the clavicle. Would it be pleasurable?

Jamey caught up with me, and I told him I wanted a piece of candy.

He laughed. “Dare you.”

“No, you can, it says you can. Will you do it with me?” Not a courageous gesture, but at least I would get to do it. He agreed, and as soon as the last person left the corner, we returned to it. Although the edges of the installation were not defined, spectators had created a defacto border, and stepping into the “don’t touch” art space thrilled me. Jamey quickly took a candy—a green one—but I couldn’t decide which color I wanted. As I hovered over the pile, it occurred to me I shouldn’t rummage through it like a child over a Halloween candy bowl (I heard my Dad’s voice saying, “Just pick one”), so sooner than I would have liked, I took a blue one from the edge of the pile. A guard watched us with boredom.

As I twisted the wrapper and slowly peeled it off, a delicious crinkling of cellophane echoed on the high ceiling. This in itself felt enjoyably naughty, the same feeling I get when disrobing a particularly luscious piece of fruit. When else do we get to see under the skin? Or more to the point, when else is this desirable? The wrapper had two layers, a blue translucent one over a shiny silver one, a skin over the skin. The candy was purplish and large, larger than a Life Saver, with no hole in the middle to save you if you swallowed it whole. It stuck to my fingers as I placed it in my mouth, and on my tongue it melted bitingly sweet—the

corn-syrupy and slightly acidic taste of a grape lollipop.

As my mouth filled with liquefied candy and saliva, I had another urge, this time to camp out in the museum until I could see the pile replenished, as the installation placard promised. How many pounds had Ross lost today? How many had I eaten from his body? I wanted to ask the museum guard but was too intimidated by her vacant stare. When did they refill it, after the 175 pounds was gone, or every day? Or was it once a month, like communion at the Baptist church I grew up in?

We passed wide metal platters with round loaves of white bread baked at the local grocery store, and each of us pinched off a morsel. I took as little as possible so as not to appear as hungry as I usually was by that point in the service. Up and down the rows, we passed heavy, stainless steel trays with individual communion cups, smaller than shot glasses, held upright in sockets. It took my full concentration to hold my small vial of grape juice while passing the tray on, watching the levels of purple in the glasses tilt and jiggle. I knew that the sharing of the “cup” was symbolic, if a bit more germ-phobic and sober, of the one Jesus shared with the disciples. We waited until the trays were passed back up to the front, the pastors taking the last vials, and then we all drank at the same time. But I always thought it an intensely personal moment, one in which I dredged up all my worst offenses—most of which were known only to me—and laid them before God. He washed me clean and sweet down the back of my throat; I didn’t much care about my neighbor’s sins. Afterwards, I placed the cup in the small circle holder on the back of the pew in front of me. Pressing the glass down into the rubber ring next to the hymnals, I touched the last drop of juice, which I spread around my fingers until it dried. On the way to the car after the service, I touched my fingers together to feel them stick slightly as I pulled them apart, skin cleaving to skin. Perhaps it was superstition, the belief that the juice somehow protected me—at least until it washed off—from sinning again. Mostly, I think, it was a way to personalize the transaction. I had blood on my hands.

My act of communion, however sincere and familiar, did not prepare me in any way for the kind of intimacy I experienced with Jamey in the hospital, a communion wrought with real bodies. And it was a peculiar kind of intimacy we had, one that felt like it was ripping us apart as much as it forced us together. Finally, his illness consumed us, and we got through the shit together. We married a year and a half later—a public testimony to the bond we forged. But that makes it sound as if it were our efforts that carried us through the ordeal. If my love for Jamey had resilience, it was given to me, just as healing took over Jamey's body, though we don't really know why. I'm not sure what would have happened if Jamey hadn't recovered. I don't know that I would have created as sweet a memorial as Felix.

In the Gospel According to John, Jesus claims that “no one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” He has the right to claim it, I suppose, since he actually went through with it. But what about those who lay down their lives in front of their friends? Are they deprived of this greatest demonstration of love? And what of us who care for them, like Felix Gonzalez-Torres, who laid his lover's life out for us in art? He made their private communion public again; Ross provided the body, and Felix the medium of consumption—millions of candies to see, to feel, to taste. Is this not also love, one wrung out of us? As Ross' body disintegrated in my mouth, I waited for my throat to clench as it had the day I cleaned the shit-filled bathroom. But I swallowed, and saliva replenished itself just as easily. I reached for Jamey, put my arm around him, searching for a memory. I felt his love handles. He had weight, and Ross had dissolved.

I taught my tenth college course this past quarter. I still haven't gained back all the weight I lost my first year of teaching, though about half of it returned. My body seems to have found stasis at this new point—a recovery, but not without scars. Where did the fear go? Eased away by time, through practice teaching? Or did my body simply determine that teaching was ultimately not

worth the calories I was expending over it? I try simply to be grateful for my body's adaptation, for my sense of being more at ease in the three dimensions of the classroom. I've begun to bring snacks to class, as my students do. I take pumpkin muffins that I bake with whole-wheat flour and butter crumbles on top. After breaking a muffin into small pieces, I slip a bite in when I finish speaking. I tell them to let me know if I have any crumbs on my face.