

# Fragments on the Failures of Bodies

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There is a little secret about normal: most people aren't. Most people break the rules, most people deviate from the script, most people fail at most things. I've been failing at jump rope for the better part of four decades. Just relax and keep at it, my coach encourages me, and one day you'll get three double-unders in a row. Someday. Most people are not average. Not *above* average, mind you, or *below*, but spinning their wheels in some muddy rut in the middle of a downpour in the middle of nowhere, desperately trying to gain traction. You may come to a "rolling stop" at the stop sign on your way to the movies, or you may practice what Laura Kipnis calls "surplus monogamy" on your conveniently frequent business trips. You bend the rules just to get some elbow room, or you make a big push in order to break on through to some other side of living, only to discover when you get there that the looking-glass world has new rules that prove as bewildering and debilitating as the old rules you thought you had abandoned. Of course, the fire is equally warm here; no, it is *warmer*, because here there is no one to prevent you from spending as much time as you like next to it. Intrepid Alice that you are, however, this freedom to linger eventually turns into an impulse—and then an imperative—to flee. There is a danger in this safety, there is dread in this refuge, and you can't quite shake the lingering fear that if you stay and get used to this cozy hearth you will eventually be caught out, called to account, or brought suddenly before a jury of your peers, and what will you have to say for yourself then? And so you keep moving.

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You are on a crowded A train after a day in Philadelphia. You are having a bizarrely tense conversation with your housemate and would prefer to stare at your phone. The man next to you is moving strangely, you notice out of the corner of your eye, and you turn to see that he is silently vomit-

ing into a plastic grocery bag. You hop up without indicating what you're doing to your housemate. Someone rushes to fill your seat, then abruptly hops up himself. The vomiting guy looks terrible. Now when you breathe, the sweet odor of the vomit is there. And you rush through the drunk Saturday midnight crowd and step on someone's foot, which extends far into the aisle, and you are suddenly in a yelling match on the train, a yelling match that also seems to carry with it the history of your neighborhood: a gentrification that you are a part of.

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You just finished teaching, and your stomach feels upset. You go to the bathroom and try to vomit but nothing happens. You walk for a bit outside and decide to risk it and get on the subway. You start to feel worse as the N train crests the Manhattan Bridge on the way to Brooklyn. All the telltale signs: cold sweat, watering mouth. It's going to happen. As the train snakes through the DeKalb station, you desperately wish you were on the Q train, which stops there, so you could jump out. But you are stuck on this train until Atlantic-Pacific. You hoped you could make it, but it is rush hour and the train is moving slowly, and you feel your body escaping your control. You leap up as you vomit, hunched over, holding your hands to your face in a pathetic attempt to hide your shame, or to hold it in until you get to the station. But there is way too much, and it flows over your hands, into your beard and onto the floor. The other passengers rush away from you; one person (there's always that one kind person) hands you a stack of napkins as you stumble out of the train; why did he have so many napkins? Thank god he had so many napkins. Dazed, you shuffle through the station to catch your transfer. You have never vomited with a beard before and are repulsed that, no matter how many napkins you use, you can't wipe the stench away.

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You want to vote for Obama (the first time), but you are deep in treatment for cancer and your body rebels every chance it can get. You arrive at the polling place, and the line to vote stretches around one short block and all the way down a long avenue block. You have voted here in three or four elections and have never had to wait for more than five people. There must be five hundred people in line. As you walk down the line, thinking about how long this is going to take, and whether you are physically able to do it, your body explodes into a full dysesthesia attack: your skin is on fire, you are overheating, all your nerve endings are sending pain triggers, causing you to convulse in agony. This happens all the time to you these days. To try to cool yourself you strip off all the clothes you can remove while still remaining decent. You scratch. You sit down and try to meditate. In the end, after huddling in a fetal position for five minutes,

you give in and go to the front of the line and play the cancer card. You usually get static when you do this, which is one of the reasons you hate doing it. (Another is that it usually makes the symptoms worse.) But you must look so broken that the person monitoring the door doesn't question you or give you a hard time, just tells you which line to stand on. You barely hold it together long enough to vote, then you walk home as fast as you can, taking off more clothes on the way. It is November and the air is cool. You are walking down the street shirtless. Two women out walking their child in an expensive stroller give you dirty looks. You spend the rest of the day in bed.

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As you make your way over soggy, squishy ground, inevitably you stumble. Each new increase of your power or your territory comes with another set of snares. Welcome to the crisis ordinary, as Lauren Berlant might call it. Your nervous joke turns out to be aggressively sexist; you stare in horror at the mouth that has just uttered those words, but it is your own mouth, and it is the appalled *audience* that is horrified. You give a BDSM 101 workshop at your college that is transparently unsafe and gets you called out on social media; you have somehow found yourself teaching erotic asphyxiation and advanced race play before explaining what a safe word is. And even when things are going well for you onstage, a calamity is quietly percolating somewhere, ready to boil over: Your mother falls through the safety railings that you personally built around the seating at your student play, and she suffers a concussion. Your nephew leaps into your arms at his birthday party and injures your back, and you are forced to sue, not because you are litigious but simply in order to get your health insurance to pay.

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All these things, by the way, really happened.