

THE BODY IS A TOWN WITHOUT A GATE

*A poem in prose, for anyone who has been told
they are the bottom of something*

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PROLOGUE

The heart is the mayor. It is a vital organ made up of muscles and sphincters that pump the necessities of life by way of oxygen and nutrients, which are carried in the transport system that we call the blood, while also retrieving waste products and moving them out of the community. This major organ supports the governance structure responsible for moving everything in and out of the body through four important chambers. Without it, all is lost. The heart receives various hormones manufactured by its neighbour, the thyroid, and its block-over neighbour, the adrenal gland, and it is often activated by the gossip-chain and propaganda generated by various bias media-trains called nerve receptors; the myelinated varieties circulate moral dogma the fastest. This media outlet can be found throughout the community, but the brain's right-hand goons stand watch out back, and the next intrigue or course of action is designed by the heart's twin cousins, the eyes, and its second cousin once removed, the brain. That part of the family is made up of the various elites, which make up the upper 3%, or rather, 2.02% of the entire human body's weight. Whatever stimulus is received via pleasure, fear, or pain is passed on through the gossip mill, which affects the stability and function of the entire communal circuit.

I. THE MAYOR EATS LAST

But watch the mayor closely, and you will learn the first secret of this town.

Between each beat there is a pause. The anatomy books call it *diastole*; the rest, the slack, the breath between the drumbeats, and it is only in that pause that the heart's own vessels fill. The muscle that feeds the whole municipality cannot feed itself while it is working. It eats in the quiet. It drinks in the dark. Squeeze the beats closer together, drive the pace up, keep the mayor at the podium through the night, and the arteries that feed the mayor go thirsty first.

Any city that forgets this will find its mayor grey-lipped and still smiling, still pumping, dying of the very labour it was praised for.

Rest is not a reward here. Rest is infrastructure.

And that 2.02% (the pale, folded, celebrated few who live behind the bone of the forehead and take the credit in every speech), they burn a fifth of everything the town brings in. Two percent of the weight, twenty percent of the oxygen, twenty percent of the sugar. Every loaf that arrives in this town, one in five goes up the hill.

Nobody voted on that. It was simply always how it was done.

II. THE NIGHT SHIFT

Go down past the ribs, into the district that appears on no letterhead.

The liver works there. It has no slogan. It runs five hundred separate processes with the lights off and the door shut and takes in, without complaint, everything the town swallowed without asking: the solvent, the sugar, the pill, the third drink, the ammonia the body makes simply by being alive. It breaks poison into salt. It stores the iron. It builds the proteins that keep the blood from leaking out of every vessel it passes. It is the only organ in the whole municipality that can rebuild itself after losing most of its own body, and it does this quietly, the way certain families rebuild after a fire, without a fundraiser.

Beside it, two water commissioners the size of fists. A hundred and eighty litres of the town's water crosses their desks every day, and they hand nearly all of it back — clean, salted correctly, warm. They keep a jug. Nobody in the history of this body has ever thanked them.

And at every door of every district: the sphincters. The doorkeepers. Rings of muscle that decide, thousands of times a day, what may pass and when. They are named in no speech. They appear in no photograph of the council. Let a single one of them fail — one small ring, one tired gatekeeper — and the whole town knows about it by morning, and calls it an emergency, and still does not learn their names.

III. THE MARKET DISTRICT

Here is the fact the gate was built to keep out.

Roughly half the citizens of this town are not, technically, you. In the long warm corridor of the gut live trillions of residents who arrived from somewhere else — from a mother's body, from soil, from bread, from another person's hands. They are foreign by every definition the gate would use. They carry a hundred times more genes into this town than the town was born with.

And they make the vitamins you cannot make. They break down the food you cannot break down. They teach your young immune cells, the way elders teach a volunteer fire brigade, which smoke is dinner, and which smoke is danger. Starve them, poison them, wall them off, sterilize the district in the name of safety, and the mood on the hill changes within days. The mayor's rhythm falters. The 2.02% goes foggy and mean.

Because here is what they never put in the brochure: the road between the market and the mayor's office runs mostly *uphill*. Four fifths of the traffic on the great wandering nerve is the body reporting to the brain, not the brain issuing orders to the body.

The elite are not, in fact, governing. They are listening. They have simply learned to describe listening as leadership.

IV. THE FOUNDATION

Now go all the way down. Past the muscle. Into the dark inside the bone.

There is no window down here. There is no title. There is only the marrow, the lowest and least visible layer of the whole structure, and it is making two million red blood cells every second (right now, while you read this), every one of them destined for the mayor's chambers, every one of them the actual substance of the life the mayor is congratulated for moving.

Understand what this means.

The mayor does not make the blood. The mayor moves it.

Every triangle ever drawn by an empire has this at its base and calls it the bottom. The bottom is the factory. The bottom is the source. The top is a pump with a good publicist.

And the bone itself is not even a monument. Two crews work it around the clock — one tearing down, one laying up, arguing every day of your life about the shape of the street. The skeleton you are sitting on is not a fixed thing you inherited. It is a negotiation you are currently having.

V. THE GATE

A gated community tells itself the gate is what keeps it alive.

So ask the skin. The largest organ in the body, the whole border of this town, two square metres of it, and it is perforated with two million doors, and every single one of them is open. It sweats. It breathes. It lets the world touch it and reports back what it found. It is not a wall. It is a membrane — a border whose entire job is *exchange*.

Seal it. Really seal it, gild it shut, let nothing in and nothing out, and the town dies of its own heat before the day is finished. Not from invasion. From its own contained furnace, with the gate proudly closed.

And when the border is cut, watch what actually heals it. No one arrives from the capital. The cells at the two edges of the wound simply agree to move toward one another. That is the whole mechanism. That is all it has ever been.

VI. THE SIREN

The adrenal glands sit on top of the kidneys like two small caps, and they hold the alarm.

The alarm is a gift. It was built for the ninety seconds when something with teeth comes over the ridge: pupils wide, blood pulled from the gut and thrown into the legs, the mayor hammering, sugar dumped into the streets for the sprint. Ninety seconds. Then quiet. Then the town goes back to bread and repair.

But in some districts, the siren has been sounding since before the grandmothers were born.

Watch what that does. The bone crews stop building and only tear down. The market district sours and leaks. Sleep breaks into pieces that don't fit back together. The

peacekeepers go from vigilant to paranoid. The mayor's pressure climbs and stays climbed. The 2.02% shrinks in the very region where memory lives.

This is the cost of keeping one district afraid. Not metaphorically. *In bone*. In sleep. In years.

You cannot frighten one neighbourhood and bill only that neighbourhood. The invoice comes to the whole town, and it is paid in the currency of everyone's lifespan.

VII. THE CIVIL WAR

And this is where the harm turns all the way around.

Tell the peacekeepers, long enough and loudly enough, that the danger is *inside* — that it wears a familiar face, that it lives in the next district, that it speaks with an accent the gate does not like — and eventually they will believe you. They are loyal. That was always the problem.

Then the immune system turns and goes to work on the joints. On the lining of the gut. On the sheaths around the nerves, stripping the insulation off the very gossip lines the town runs on. On the thyroid. The neighbour who sets the pace for everyone, until the whole municipality runs cold and slow and cannot say why.

Medicine has one name for this. History has another. They are describing the same event: a body that has been taught to fear itself, dismantling itself with great discipline and a clear conscience, convinced the whole time that it is defending something.

There is no version of this where the attacking side wins. There is only a town with fewer working parts.

VIII. WHAT HAS NO PUMP

Now here is the part of the anatomy no empire has ever known what to do with.

The lymph has no pump. No mayor, no chamber, no muscle of its own, no budget line. It is a whole second circulatory system (the one that carries away the swelling, the debris, the aftermath, the grief of the tissues), and it moves for one reason only:

because you move.

It travels on the squeeze of a walking calf. On the rise of a rib. On the small motions of ordinary bodies doing ordinary things beside each other. It is mutual aid rendered in fluid. It is the neighbour with the truck. It is the casserole on the step. It has no authority whatsoever, and the town cannot survive three days of its absence.

Stand perfectly still, obey perfectly, move for no one, and you will swell with your own unmoved water.

IX. THE WEB

And all of it. Every district, every doorkeeper, the night shift and the market and the marrow and the mayor, is wrapped and threaded and held in one continuous white sheet. Fascia. It has no beginning. You cannot find the place where the fascia of the heart ends and the fascia of the hand begins, because there is no such place; it was cut into named pieces by scalpels, on tables, by people who needed the picture to be tidy.

Pull one corner of it and the entire cloth answers. Tighten a hip, and the jaw learns about it. Guard one shoulder for a year and the opposite foot will change how it meets the ground.

Western hands drew this body as a chart with a top and a bottom, boxes stacked in tidy hierarchy, the head at the summit and the bowels in the basement. It is a filing system, and it is a farce. The teaching carried by the First Nations of this land — that the world is a web held inside a circle, each strand a relative, each one necessary — is not a lovely alternative metaphor.

It is simply the more accurate anatomy.

X. THE BROKEN HEART

So, what happens to the mayor when the town stops belonging to itself?

There is a real condition, first named by fishermen's doctors, in which a person receives unbearable news — a death, a betrayal, an eviction, a leaving — and the heart *changes shape*. The left chamber balloons out and stops squeezing properly.

On the screen it takes the form of a *takotsubo*: the round clay pot the fishermen sank to catch octopus.

A grieving heart looks like a trap. It arrives in emergency rooms looking exactly like a heart attack. And there is nothing wrong with the arteries at all. Nothing is blocked. The town simply received the news, and the mayor could not hold the shape.

Loneliness does the slower version. Wounds close more slowly on a person no one is expecting home. Inflammation rises in a body that has learned it is surplus. Sleep goes shallow and vigilant, because a nervous system that believes it is alone never fully assigns anyone else the watch.

Being unwanted is not a mood. It is a measurable event inside the tissue.

XI. THE HEART THAT IS HELD

And then the other one.

A hand on the back. A name said correctly by someone who bothered to learn it. A door held open with no calculation behind it. The old gossip lines carry that too; pleasure travels the same wires as fear and travels them faster.

Watch what the town does. The mayor's pace drops. The great wandering nerve opens the road, and the market unclenches. Blood returns to the fingers, and they warm. The breath drops out of the chest and into the belly. The bone crews start building again. The peacekeepers stand down from the doors of their own neighbours.

The body cannot tell the difference between *being loved* and *being safe*, because there is no difference. It never was a feeling. Belonging is a nutrient. It is delivered in the blood like iron, and a body deprived of it shows deficiency in every district at once.

XII. THE CIRCLE

So, take the triangle down.

It only ever stood because the base agreed to hold it, and the base was never the bottom. The base was the marrow making two million lives a second in the dark, the doorkeeper nobody named, the foreign citizens of the market who make the vitamins, the water commissioners, the night shift, the lymph that moves only when we move. Remove the summit and the body grieves and adapts. Remove the base, and there is no body at all. That is not a moral position. That is load-bearing.

The circle knows what the chart forgot: there is no organ in this town that is merely served, and none that merely serves. The mayor eats last. The elite are mostly listening. The wound closes because two edges agreed to come toward each other. Every district is a relative. Every system is a brother. Balance is not a nicety here; it is the only condition under which any of it continues.

And if you want to know where the smallest citizen sits in all of this...

The smallest bone in the human body is three millimetres long. It lives deep in the ear, and it is called the stirrup, and it does one thing: it passes the trembling of the air into the inner room where the trembling becomes sound. Take it out — the smallest, most overlookable, most easily dismissed piece of this entire municipality — and the town goes silent forever.

The smallest one among us is the one who lets us hear each other.

If we hurt one, we hurt us all.

Not as a slogan.

As anatomy.