

The Petrification of Clay

Most people have heard of the victims of the gorgons- people turning to stone in an instant, hard and implacable, vulnerable to shattering with the wrong blow. That is not my kind of petrification. I was born with a body of clay. Soft, pliable- enough at least, if kept warm, if constantly worked. Long before I could remember, doctors kneaded my limbs like dough to give them the right shape, the right length. They tried their best to achieve symmetry in living, imperfect flesh.

I was told I was lucky- luckier than some, at least. Clay is not stone, or metal. Clay doesn't have to get harder. As long as I work at it (constantly). As long as I keep moving (constantly). As long as I remember always to stretch and to hold and to knead and to rub and to work then I need not be brittle.

Am I a shark, to keep swimming, or drown?

In winter I cover myself in layers and I can feel the cold seep into my flesh and make it stiff. I walk in little, shuffling penguin steps that don't stretch my legs enough, but if I slip on the ice I might shatter completely. In summer, standing at the bus stop for fifteen minutes because it's late again, I can feel myself baking in the heat of the sun. I bend my knee and there's a pop, a crackle, the fall of a few dried flakes of clay where the joint had begun to lock. I shift from hip to hip, knowing that the moment my attention isn't on it for five seconds, my knee will dry out and stiffen again.

Someone touches me and they are surprised at the firmness under their fingers. *I thought clay was supposed to be soft.* Or, in the more disappointed tone of a parent, a doctor, a therapist- *you know better than to let it harden like this. You're all grown up now, you need to be able to manage it yourself without being told.*

I'm trying never seems like a good enough answer.

That I've hired masseuses to roll me out with hands like hammers, that I've poured my body into molds in hopes of giving it a better shape, that I've woken up in the middle of the night to rub at my aching legs and cried at how difficult it was to leave an indent.

Because of course I haven't done *only* that, have I? I've spent mornings finishing school papers instead of going on a run, I hung out with the board game nerds instead of joining an athletic club or a gym, I've dared to have movie nights with friends and lazy Sundays. Molding my body is a full-time job and it's not always the one I've chosen.

Does that make it my fault?

Am I allowed to spend time on things besides self-maintenance?

If I become a sculpture, will I be blamed for having lived?