



DO NOTHING UNLESS IT FEEDS YOU

by Emily O'Neill

MY boyfriend and I are going to a James Bond-themed birthday party and I want to wear the dress I wore the biggest night of my book tour when I read poems standing on the middle of a coffee table in a hotel lobby to a packed room and made everyone clap for every poem by demanding it because I was feeling petulant and proud and like I could do anything in this dress one of my tourmates said made me look like a punk rock Elvira. But I've gained weight. More than I would like, which is any at all. So almost exactly a year after feeling perfectly myself in it, the dress won't even begin to zip. I planned another outfit in case. It isn't the end of the world. Not the end of me.

But it's been happening more and more. The clothes I love—the ones that used to make me feel like I could do anything or be anyone—won't close around me.



I'm trying to remember what it felt like to live in my body back when that wasn't what I wanted. The moments were very specifically painful. I was angry. A ballerina. I didn't eat. A recognizable problem, unrecognized. I see it now in pictures: thin enough that people praised me, not so sick that anyone would notice just by looking.

But even if you couldn't see the sick, it was everywhere. I had migraines needling my eye sockets, slanting my empty stomach until it was impossible to even keep water down. I never slept. I chain-smoked, my hands shaking, the nicotine dizzying me until I could barely stand; I drank to excess as an excuse to throw up. I was depressed and went untreated. All of it, invisible. There were other, more important things to worry about. Me never needing new clothes year over year was not a problem; it was a gift. It made me a less expensive child.

I saved my babysitting money and bought men's jeans in the smallest available waist size from the sale rack. They hung off of my hips in a way that made me look even skinnier than I was, which felt similar to happiness. It was important to be on the verge of disappearing at all times. I could snap my fingers and cease to exist and wouldn't everyone be sorry. Running away without having to move.

There are no documents. No doctors. No quantifiable proof. Only pictures of me from that time, and pictures are a kind of lying. I had always been thin. I had always had sunken, sad eyes. I had always cried at the drop of a hat. I had always pushed my food around the plate until they let me leave the table.



I'm telling a story to a co-worker during dinner service about one of the many sources of my anxiety:

My sisters would tease me almost every night at the dinner table until I got upset & once I was worked up enough one of them would say oh no Emily are you

going to cry & the other would say I think she's going to & that would continue until I did cry at which point my parents would tell me not to be so sensitive & I would stop eating dinner as a kind of protest & sit at the table long after everyone left & eventually my plate got wrapped in tin foil & I'd have to eat the dried out pot roast or whatever it was for breakfast which might be why I hate breakfast so much—

Another co-worker who had been listening bursts out laughing and says, "I'm sorry, but that's horrible," at which point I try to explain that yes, it is horrible, but horror really isn't the point.

For me, food is a kind of anxiety. There is no table where I can sit without being afraid of what might happen. I talk too much when I go out for dinner, a kind of avoidance. I order more than I can take, a kind of insurance. It will be okay to stop before the plate is empty. It's not a sign of relapse to not finish every bite. No one will make me eat the mistake, reheated, for breakfast. I will not cry.



The uncle who noticed I was queer before I told anyone (including myself) messages me in the middle of the day to tell me my former drawing teacher has died of cancer. It is noon. Death does not belong at lunch. I realize I'm sobbing after it's already too late to stop, the kind of cry where your face leaks from every available place. I had been trying to find this woman again since the last time I saw her, in the summer of 2007, the year I left for college.

Things had become especially urgent in my search for her after my first book was released. I wanted to send her a copy. A thank you for teaching me how to look at the world.

The same uncle who noticed I was queer also noticed how desperately I needed to make things with my hands. I taught myself to sew. Knit dresses without patterns. Carried around graph-ruled marble notebooks dense with collage and handwritten stories. I wanted to finish a novel draft before I turned eighteen. I wanted to dance professionally, no matter the risk. I wanted my art displayed in the museums I visited constantly, MoMA just across the river from where we lived. He would tease me gently about making things in every direction, call me "Renaissance Woman." I wanted to do everything, be good at all of it. The news that my former teacher was

dead before I could find her again and give her my book, could make her understand I was still drawing, had to come from him.

People are rarely surprised when they find out I was primarily a visual artist before I wrote poetry seriously. Any way you've been trained to approach the world finds its way into the writing.

The kind of looking you do when you want to paint or draw is maybe a different kind of looking than any other. Drawing means describing something in its own language. Articulating what you see as you see it is important, maybe even more important than what conclusions can come from sight. Our eyes trick us. They're more clever than we give them credit for. Forced perspective. Complementary colors. A shift in light can carve something in half, make it disappear entirely.

This woman who taught me how to look at the world had taken my rage and folded it back on itself. This woman who demanded more of me than anyone had kept me alive by always asking me what I couldn't yet accomplish. And now this woman was gone without a goodbye. I'd never speak to her again. Instead, I wrote her a letter.

Meredith,

when I was a skinny graphite baby / when I chewed gum loudly & cut my hair too close to the scalp / when I would go eight days without food & cringe away from looking at nude models because they were alive & I didn't want to be / when I met you you were mean to me how I needed / you told me I couldn't see without measuring / Meredith you my wild mother / I knew how to draw until you smacked me with your voice & told me nobody knows what they're looking at until somebody tells them / there is no translation for tears boiling out of my face the instant my Strega tells me you're dead now / my Strega who is mean to me how you were / when I snapped the charcoal sticks in half & drew only my feet / you would smack me with your voice / you would smack me coughing / tell me to measure what I saw against the end of my thumb / that to draw something perfect is the goal of an idiot / you have to tell a story / when you make a thing you have to tell a story / you have to be smarter than what success appears to be / you have to do the work / you rot to rebuild / think of the interior / think of what you're holding / Meredith I always ate dinner before your classes so I wouldn't cry / so my shakes would stop for three hours of sight / I ate for you / you kept me living / when I was still too sick to climb into my old clothes / you told me thinking is a drawing & the maps we make between looking are what carries / I still wear that coat from the 7th grade / I'm still too thin to know what I'm seeing / Meredith I look & everything is made of sand / there are stupid floating

*lights in front of me & nothing stops shimmering / people tell me this is what acid
makes your brain but I never dropped anything / no you made me say what I was
seeing / I'm seeing little pixels shorting / world snug against my finger / Meredith
everything is gasoline / Meredith my hands shine as they burn / you said if ever I
quit drawing you'd find me & kill me / Meredith you have to find me & kill me
because I can eat dinner almost every time I try but I can't draw you anymore*



C is my best friend by accident. We arrive at college to an accidental double room. She takes photos, wants to make films. I am a painter. I draw every day, on everything. Carry a box of rainbow pens and sketch instead of making eye contact. Fill in the gaps of the drawings with what people say. What I say. What I should be studying, memorizing.

We are both very thin (an accident) and very serious about art until our respective arts abandon us and we become poets (another accident). There is an open mic and then another, each Tuesday stacked on the shoulders of the last until we are competing in slams and workshopping in all our spare hours. We drive to Cambridge every Wednesday in Sean's aged white

Mercedes with the broken rear windows, ashing our cigarettes out the sun roof or into empty packs. Sean talks constantly about the straight boys who refuse to love him and about how thin he wants to be. His jealousy over my cheekbones. What work it takes him to narrow himself.

We all drink High Life in his room, everything gold. The string lights are each hand-colored yellow with permanent marker. It's here I meet all kinds of truths about what people are willing to say about how they harm their bodies. Blades, baggies, Pepsi Max, burn scars, boys who won't be honest about fucking boys, boys who won't be honest about cheating, self-denial as prayer, self-denial as church, self-denial as vocation.

My migraines rear up to their greatest possible height. I am a vegetarian, an understandable excuse for not eating, and for that excuse my body is attacking itself, shutting down. I sit at the reference desk in the library, helping frantic students start overdue papers or find books they could've looked up in the online card catalog. During my shift I lose a huge chunk of my laptop screen to a circular fog. I panic, try restarting, but it's my vision. My eye doctor wants to prescribe Topamax, a drug regularly abused for appetite suppression. I decline, afraid of how easy it would be to disappear. Instead, she gives me glasses. The migraines do not subside.



The boy I date for most of college threatens me constantly. Tells me I am crazy. Uses my body against me. Gets me drunk, then uses that as an excuse. I need my teeth pulled so the school clinic prescribes Vicodin and I hoard it, suffering through my infected mouth. I have the pills for months and then they take the teeth and give me more pills and I start snorting them and living in an even deeper fog. It feels good to live outside of my body this way, to get away from where my boyfriend can hurt me. I step outside myself and that means I am away from everything that hurts. The sex I do not want. The bones wearing against my cheap jeans. The way my hand shakes if I raise it in class. I stop raising it.

Another boy in my World Lit seminar decides he likes me. Acts incredulous when I say I've never eaten pie before. I get a tattoo of a quote from Woolf's *Orlando*, a book about transcending the body, about the ways women will never be their own. *If we survive the teeth we succumb to the waves.* When asked, I say it's about writing, because in the passage it's from, that's what the narrator is referring to. That to write the life of someone else,

there are too many hazards to not succumb to one of them. I put this quote in my skin because it is also about my body. There are too many hazards to not succumb to them. There are too many hazards for me to eat. For me not to be eaten.

The pie boy starts baking for me. One pie a week for an entire month. We make them together. I still have the card he wrote his mother's crust recipe on. At first, the butter makes me cringe—so much fat—but then I like how my fingers sink into it as the dough forms. The boy doesn't notice the lack of food with my name on it in the pantry. I live with so many other people that the cabinets look full. The pie is the only thing I eat. He comes over every night to eat pie and talk about books. Takes care of me when I get too drunk and then terrifyingly sick after running into my ex: takes me to breakfast the next day at the Lone Wolf, buys me eggs.

The weeks of pies broke open a long period of fasting where every morning meant a canteen of French press coffee spiked with a pint or more of bourbon and no breakfast followed by no lunch followed by maybe a baked potato for dinner if I remembered, then homework punctuated by tiny juice glasses of gin because gin looked like viscous water and no one would ask enough questions to prove I wasn't just thirsty. If I did eat too much of anything, this amount of alcohol gave me an

excuse to throw it up. But when the pies came, I had to take them. I didn't tell Peter—that was his name, Peter—that his insistence on dessert saved me from an ulcer or worse. I wanted desperately to love him but couldn't because of the food.



C and I are still in college, living in our second double room since we became friends. We have bunk beds until it stops being novel. We smoke weed six times a day every day and after the pies stop this is how I get myself back to weight. To avoid food takes a kind of silent work, the same way undoing the bad habit of avoidance takes work. The munchies help undo the work of undoing myself.

I binge on potato chips dragged through bricks of cream cheese we buy with our IDs at the school store. I become convinced the only reason the school store stocks cream cheese is because we eat such a desperate amount of it. I tell C that if she sees me not eating for more than a day to say something. To babysit my being better. She only has to do it once. Once is enough. It had been days since I fed myself and instead of

worrying how many more days I could manage, I cook something. Probably just toast, but it's food. I swell past the edges of all my old clothes, shoplift new ones. Shave my head every time I want to disappear instead of disappearing.



Even though the migraines are infrequent and far less intense, they creep up now attached to stress, the only thing that keeps me from food. I will be at work, convinced waiting to eat until the end of the shift is normal, when suddenly it feels like there's a spike driven through my right eye. Tightness at my temples. Stomach unsteady. The pain of light, of sound, of ice rattling next to my head in a drink shaker. Something blurs or moves too much. A person looks either very close or very far away when I know we are next to each other, on a bus or couch, talking normally, though my brain would have me believe differently. This shimmering. Thin layer of water between me and the rest of the world.



Sam calls me on the phone to ask what clothes to wear to a punk show now that he's nearly done with seminary and his entire closet is full of cardigans. He's the friend who always ends our conversations asking, "Where's your joy today, Emily?" in a therapist kind of voice because he knows it both annoys me and makes me take the question seriously. He is almost a minister now, so to him, joy is Biblically important. I tell him *food* and am embarrassed. Read him parts of the new manuscript, all of them circling a meal or a bottle of something. All of them love letters to someone who does not treat me as a body to invade or own. He seems surprised but proud.

I tell him I'm writing something about not eating, even though I have been eating. He hasn't seen me in months. When we were roommates he waited for my abusive then-boyfriend to go out of town for the weekend before slinking into my room and sitting down in my desk chair to try to talk to me about getting help. The pill-head me, malnourished, still in the throes of years-long migraine season. "Are you okay, honey?" he asked, and I hated him for it. I hated him for seeing me like that, for questioning the one thing I could control.

If I stopped eating, my body became mine again, no matter who had taken it, taken from it, taken me from myself. I would not eat to take it back. My body, shrinking because I willed it. The parts they praise, vanishing. Not the property of the person who took and took and took from it no matter my answer. Cheap wine, whatever cigarettes were on sale at the Hess, one slice of pizza a weekend.

On the phone, Sam says he's happy that I'm finally happy. In love, employed, quitting smoking. Living in my body. He and I agree the mantra *do nothing unless it feeds you* is the way to proceed.

I wake up early to write the day after our phone call and do so without stopping for hours until I get hungry long past lunch, timed almost exactly with when I need to leave the house for work, so I do not eat.



I have done many things to my body besides starving that marks it as mine. Tattooed it with more than just Virginia's narrator lamenting the ways writing never feels done or right. Ring finger tooth for the dentist I will never marry. Horseshoe with the luck run out, another engagement. Spider

for the first and last Samhain I spent with a ghost. Armadillo everyone mistakes for a pineapple. Marking my skin to mark time. Hours on a table telling the same stories. My father used to hit me so all pain feels like a kind of loving. If I inflict something on myself it means I have already decided on my own survival. Every day I have to wake up and decide on my own survival.



I work in restaurants because it makes it impossible to avoid food. Seeing the food over and over, passed through a window into my hands and then from my hands to the people who've asked for it, makes eating so normal. So important. I feel needed because of the food. Guests ask what I like, what my favorite is, what it tastes like, and I have to convince them. Making a sale depends not only on a relationship but on the leverage of knowledge in that relationship. I have to know how much fennel is too much, the texture of the pasta, the level of spice, how hot or cold they can expect the dish to land. If I don't eat what's on the menu, I become unimportant. Useless. In a restaurant, to eat is to be powerful.

Outside of work, the work of eating is harder. I cook as a way of shaming myself into meals. Buy all the ingredients and lay them out in judgment of myself. Pick a recipe that will generate hunger, something meticulous and difficult. Risotto with poached eggs. Hand-rolled gnocchi. Roux and breadcrumbs pulverized with a rolling pin. Diced shallots so fine they read as sharp purple sand. If a meal takes a long time to prepare, how can I let that effort rot in the fridge without ever touching it again? How can I stand over a stove for an entire day and not eat?



I interview for a new job at a new restaurant that isn't even built yet and listen as the people across the table describe the menu, what the cocktail program will be like, how I might fit into this new and evolving machine. Handmade pasta and daily crudos, spritzes and a menu with an Italian backbone but so many arms reaching elsewhere. It sounds like the kind of place I'd want to eat and eat forever.

For the past three months we've eaten Italian almost every Monday night, and every time it tastes like home. My boyfriend chooses wine and

we try to find a story in the bottle. What meal the grapes aspire to be. If they beg fat or sugar from the plate. When I mourn the way my body's grown in certain places my boyfriend says my clothes are wrong. That we can eat something besides cheese all the time if it makes me feel better. But it doesn't make me feel better to stop reaching towards home.

At my most sick, I would go up to two weeks without any food. Watch my eyes playing tricks. The breaking point always arrived at my ballet school between teaching class and taking my own classes. I would help wrangle elementary school kids for an hour or two, then have a break before my evening workshop started. In that in-between time, my stomach would rear up at me—angry, betrayed, demanding something to keep us both going—so I would walk down the block to the Italian deli. Buy a pound of fresh mozzarella, an Orange Crush. There will never be anything more decadent than that wet fat and sugar after starving for weeks.

The interviewers ask what makes me excited about this new possible job and I tell them that I want to learn. I talk about everything I don't know about wine, about seafood, about Italy. I do not tell them about how the cheese they'll make fresh by hand every day before service as a simple beginning is the one thing I would willingly allow myself when I wanted to

disappear. How I'm trying to mark time using some tool beyond my body. I need something I can measure against my hands to keep me fed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily O'Neill teaches writing and tends bar in Boston, MA. Her debut poetry collection, *Pelican*, is the inaugural winner of YesYes Books' Pamet River Prize for women and nonbinary writers and the winner of the 2016 Devil's Kitchen Reading Series. Her second collection, *a falling knife has no handle*, is forthcoming from YesYes in the fall of 2018. She is the author of three chapbooks and her recent work has appeared in *Cutbank*, *Entropy*, *Hypertrophic Literary*, *Jellyfish*, and *Redivider*.

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