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Landmarks: “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality” and *A Room of One’s Own Applied*

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I've always relied on landmarks for direction, never able to trust my internal compass. The mountains are to the west, the river is to the east, school is to the north, home is to the south. My landmarks tell me which direction to walk if I'm lost on a hike, or how to accurately sketch a map. My landmarks show me what is right and what is wrong.

In “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality,” Iris Marion Young discusses the role of the body. Girls exist in limited space. When a boy throws a ball, he will swing his arm back and forth, taking advantage of his full range of motion.⁷¹ A girl will freeze above the elbow.⁷² When a boy swings a bat he will approach the ball where it is, fighting its existence with his own; a girl will react to the ball's position, allowing its existence to dictate her own.⁷³ When the boys and I goof off in class they laugh freely with no regard for potential punishment or harm; I keep an eye on the teacher and other students, trying to gauge when their tolerance will run out. My uncertainty in direction has never been limited to the map. I stumble on my words and look to my neighbor for reassurance. I wear a new shirt and look to the stranger on the street for approval. New landmarks develop. The girl is embarrassed when we are playing catch with the older boy and I can't catch his throw—I stop trying to join the game. My math teacher tells me I look sad, I should smile more—I practice turning the corners of my mouth up as I walk down the hallway. At first I did not know many things; I knew what it meant to be lost, but not what it took to recenter. My landmarks helped me learn.

Lesson: I exist primarily as an object; my existence is determined by my objectification.

⁷¹ Erwin Straus quoted in Young, “Throwing like a Girl,” 137.

⁷² Erwin Straus quoted in Young, “Throwing like a Girl,” 137.

⁷³ Erwin Straus quoted in Young, “Throwing like a Girl,” 137.

My landmarks taught me my body was a case I must stay within if I hoped to succeed. I exist as subject and object. I stand at the whim of the men around me. The boys around me gain an inordinate amount of power over my choices without their knowing. I base my decisions on how I think the boys around me will feel, what they will think of me. Life inside my body is one of separation. My body is a chair and I sit atop it waiting for someone to come ask me to move, to get out of their spot. I live my body as a thing separate from myself; I live my body as a worldly object—like my kitchen table or a loaf of bread.⁷⁴

I run up a hill with hundreds of other pairs of shoes. My pink feet spray mud on the legs next to me and they retaliate in kind. My body hurts and cannot keep up with the people around me, but I tell myself to keep running. I don't care much about finishing the race quickly, but I cannot let these people see me fail. My perception is more important than my comfort. I lose my footing, and I feel eyes turn towards me as I fall; I feel myself being seen in my failure, but no one stops. I am left alone with my worst enemy in the dirt. I go shopping and think I would like that shirt, but my body will not. I try on a dress and am overpowered. Like oil and water my body rejects the fall of the fabric as I watch from the corner. Eventually I grow tired of being eaten alive, of losing this war, and I walk to the mirror. The dress stops fighting my body and starts fighting me. The tension in my existence begins to soften, but instead of extending wholly into subject, I sink further into object. I know what I want, but I am still lost on how to get there. I am stuck three feet off the ground on a climb, but I want to keep trying; I think I can get past it. My friend takes more slack from the rope and with it pulls me up the wall, out of the sticky section. I decide that must be what I really want, and I stay with my body. I begin apologizing to my belayers for taking up their time, taking up their strength. My body is an object for me to exist around, exist within.

*Lesson: my existence is determined by how I am perceived; I am controlled by my position in space.*⁷⁵

Iris Marion Young writes that women's lived space is enclosed, confined.⁷⁶ Virginia Woolf writes that a woman needs a room of her own.⁷⁷ Both writers agree that women experience their lives based on how they are positioned in the world. Girls learn not to use the whole physical space available to them, to shrink themselves.⁷⁸ Women learn that if they write, they must write only letters, because they can write letters in the company of men, because letters will not interfere with

⁷⁴ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 148

⁷⁵ Young, "Throwing like a Girl."

⁷⁶ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 149.

⁷⁷ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*.

⁷⁸ Young, "Throwing like a Girl."

their responsibilities.⁷⁹ The space a woman occupies revolves around those nearby and her position to them.

When I write an essay, I sit in a coffee shop. People walk in and out; people talk loudly; people occupy then vacate the seats next to me. If I sit at the bar, my elbows make a box, and my papers don't cross its borders. If I'm alone at a table, I keep an eye over my shoulder in case someone can't get past. I need to be sat near others, need ambient noise to distract me from my task. I need my existence to be dictated by my position in a collective, so that my work can remain separate from myself. If I'm not alone while doing my work, I can't take it too seriously, people can't think that I do. If I am not alone while doing my work, my existence cannot be threatened by a change in my position.

Virginia Woolf says a book adapts to the author's body.⁸⁰ Men's writing evokes freedom of the mind, freedom of the author—it is direct and free of interruptions, a luxury women writers can never afford. Someone's writing, someone's work, the output of someone's efforts are manifestations of their existence. Someone's writing, someone's work, the output of someone's efforts are manifestations of their body. If a woman's existence is determined by her position, so too is her work. A woman's work can only go so far when she, and it, is trapped within how she is positioned, how she is perceived.

In music class as a kid, we played the statue game. One person would stand in the middle of the room and the other students would instruct them on how to move their limbs. The boys would tell us to jump, to throw our arms over our heads, to stand on one leg with the other kicked out in front of us. The girls would tell us to tilt our head to the left, to the right, to curl in a ball on the floor. Our permitted space depended on what the boys told us it was, and we couldn't think beyond their boundaries. Later, in English class we were given the option to read our work aloud. The boys would read confidently and laugh at their mistakes; the girls would apologize before they had even begun speaking. I sat quietly and watched the boys whisper and joke around while the girls spoke, then sit attentively and cheer for their friend when he had finished. I wrote quickly but stayed silent when the teacher asked for volunteers. I learned whatever I wrote would always be trapped within how the boys perceived me, within the positions they prescribed to me. I learned the boundaries for my existence as I learned the boundaries for my body. I was forced into positions I didn't want to occupy but didn't know how to break out of, afraid of what might happen if I did. A woman needs a room of her own to escape her family, to escape her responsibilities. A woman needs a room of her own to escape her interruptions.⁸¹ When a man writes, there is a sense of physical freedom and well-being communicated by his writing; he is, and always has been,

⁷⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 40.

⁸⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 59.

⁸¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 59.

able to stretch himself whichever way he should like.⁸² He needs no room of his own because he has never been without one. His existence is not determined by his experiences as positioned in space.⁸³ He does not need to concern himself with how he is perceived. For a woman to have a room of her own, she must be able to experience her existence outside of how she is positioned and perceived.

Lesson: my body is my enemy.

When we were seven years old Rachel took the apple I was eating from my hand and threw it in the open dumpster. Jesse wouldn't jump in—he needed incentive. But it was my apple, and I wasn't done with it, so I jumped in after him. Later that month, I backflipped off Jesse's broken trampoline but didn't stop jumping until it collapsed a year later. When I was five, I fought the boys at recess with invisible lightsabers and chased them down until I won. The summer I turned ten, my friend told me the creek had piranhas in it, maybe alligators too. I knew this was a lie but pulled back from the edge and have stayed out of the water since. The boys encouraged me to squirt water at our deskmate, but the teacher sat me between them to bring order to their chaos, and I didn't want to fail at my one job. By twelve, my recess was occupied with sitting with my knees closed at the picnic table and avoiding the kids playing foursquare. The boys I used to be friends with abandoned me in my small responsibility for their own freedom and space. My landmarks were telling me to stay put, stay quiet, stay small, and I didn't want to get lost.

At lunch I ate pistachios, not wanting to wait in line for a meal and make other people's wait longer with my presence. I took the stairs one at a time so people could pass me easily, so I wouldn't slip and bruise my shin. I watched the rambunctious boys around me grow into over-confident but self-assured men and the confident girls shrink into cautious and soft-spoken women. I began mimicking those around me. I raised my voice and tried to take big steps with the boys but could never quite match their volume or the freedom of their limbs. Around the girls, talk flowed freely, but we were aware of being overheard or disturbing; the couches were full of girls sitting in their designated spot, not crossing into anyone else's space, or blocking any space from someone who might need it more. Where men move through the world taking up space with ease and assurance, women hesitate to put themselves wholly into movement out of fear that their bodies will fail them.⁸⁴ My comportment revolved around self-consciousness and timidity of the body.

⁸² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 75.

⁸³ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 149.

⁸⁴ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 144.

My landmarks tell me not to throw my entire self into something, to move through the world silently.⁸⁵ I learn my body can be used against me if I don't keep it contained. I wear a tank top and my friends warn me people will look at my chest; I wear shorts and yank at their hem when I sit down to contain my thighs as much as I can. The girl and I chat in class, but she is only friends with pretty people. The boy watches me climb and tells me I move well, then turns the music up when I try to start conversation on the way home. My body and myself cannot coexist. My body will always be my greatest threat.

Lesson: women love men, men love women; I am a woman which means I love men.

Growing up I did not know the difference between platonic and romantic love. Someone said my best friend had a crush on me, and I figured that must be how I feel too. I did not want to leave him alone in his feelings—even if I did not know what they really meant. As I got older, the difference became clearer. My friend excitedly left me alone at the dance when the boy asked her to. My classmates were caught beneath the bleachers. Still I felt uncertain, lost in the presumptive gazes when the boy and I spoke in the cafeteria. My friend gave her crush a ride home from school and told me every detail the next day. I decided it was in my best interest to match her energy and selected a family friend I saw once a year for whom I could feign feelings. If I couldn't escape the pressure of my friendships with men, I could at least control it. I began to position myself in terms of men as much as my peers were. When I first learned men were not my only option, the lessons I had learned began to crumble around me.

Lesson: I am a woman which means I love men. Truth: my life is not dictated by my relation to men.

When I first learned what it meant to be queer, I had already learned to be cautious around men. I had already learned the position I was meant to fulfill in the world. I had already learned my body was my enemy. The first girl I fell for did not know my name. She was the year above me in school and did not make herself smaller when she took books from her locker. I interviewed her for the yearbook and was embarrassed by how much more space she occupied, by the extent to which I had let myself shrink. My crush develops into a comparison, and I decide I must grow to where she is. I hate that I am still only allowed space by my romantic prospects, but I practice getting larger anyways. She graduates and I forget about her for months at a time. By then, occupying all the space I have access to has become a habit. I stop shrinking myself around the boys because I do not need them anymore. I dictate my own space.

⁸⁵ Young, “Throwing like a Girl,” 146.

Lesson: I exist primarily as an object. Truth: I am a subject more than anything else.

The war between myself and my body lessens, and I start to experience my existence outside of how I was positioned in space.⁸⁶ I start to experience my existence outside of men, outside of anyone but me. The separation between myself and my body gives way to connection and solitude. I stand from the corner and re-enter my body. When I decide to finish a climb, I finish; when I decide to stop climbing, I stop. The space I occupy expands to fit my body, and my comportment transitions into one of comfort and ease.

Lesson: I am controlled by my position in space.⁸⁷ Truth: I exist outside of my perception.⁸⁸

This newfound wholeness cannot protect me completely from the reality of my position. I eat dinner at a friend's house and don't remove my coat because I can feel the eyes on me even with everything covered. His roommate makes a joke about me liking anal sex and later, when I say it made me uncomfortable, he thanks me for not saying anything at the time because his ex always did—that's part of the reason they broke up. I start laughing in public and get side-eyed. I start talking in class and get called loud; I have my points repeated back to me like new ideas. I find a room of my own but am unable to escape the knocks on the door. I wear a short skirt one day and a baggy sweater the next. I am not consumed by either choice. I stop considering the impact of how I am perceived and instead consider what I desire. The knocks on the door do not stop, but they do not cross the threshold. The room is not totally private, but it is my own.

Lesson: my body is my enemy. Truth: I am my body, my body is me; I am not a threat.

When I was eight years old, I fell off my bicycle and ripped a layer of skin from my arm. I cried for hours, not out of pain but out of surprise that I could be taken apart. My body was outside of my control. I avoided my bike for months. At 13, I took a five-day bike trip and fell off at least twice a day. When I came down a hill too quickly and flipped over my handlebars, the teacher complimented me on my ability to fall—she said I took it well despite the resulting bruises. My body was still being dismantled, but at least I was good at it. I started treating my body as a competitor. I fell off the rock and hit the wall. My body was hurt but my mind was

⁸⁶ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 149.

⁸⁷ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 149.

⁸⁸ Young, "Throwing like a Girl," 149.

not. I skipped a meal. My body was hungry, but my mind felt fine. Eventually I fall enough times my ego bruises as well as my hip. Eventually I'm hungry enough that my mind starts to lag as much as my body. My competition with my body is a competition with myself, and I've bested nobody but my own potential. The space I occupy is the space occupied by my body and vice versa.

I start to boulder. I abandon ropes with belayers attached and begin relying solely on myself. Now when I fall, I hit the ground, but I am the one falling. My bruises are not separate from one another but affect all parts of my being. I start to eat. A meal skipped is no longer a battle won but an opportunity lost. I spill coffee on my shirt. No one sees my mistake, but it is still a mistake made. I touch my stomach, and it belongs to me. My body is not a threat.

I discover a room of my own, and my landmarks begin to change again. The river is to the north, school is to the west. I walk down the street, and I focus on where I am stepping, not on what the people I pass might be thinking. I let my mouth sit where it falls, even when the store clerk asks if I am okay. I still don't join the sport, but I allow myself to watch from the sidelines. Where I once looked to those around me as guideposts, resigning my life to that lived by them, I now live it on my own. My existence is not determined by how I am positioned by others and instead by how I position myself.

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