

A Cicada Shell/It Sang Itself/Utterly Away
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My feet are hideous.

At least, when compared to the smooth, pink extremities that most people have within their shoes, the contrast is striking. Mine are rough, callused and oddly-colored, with bulging tendons and misshapen toes. The pinkies stick out at odd angles from being broken and re-broken, and my insteps are covered in minor cuts and rug burns. Where most people have skin on their soles, mine are like elephant hide. The balls of my feet are dark and hard, like scorched earth, like the site of some mighty volcanic force. Further up, my shinbones roll like sand dunes, a geography of lumps of scar tissue and calcified bone. My kneecaps are scraped raw, discolored and hard. All over, I am worn and weathered. The beauty has long been battered out of me.

Yagyu Renya, famous swordsman of Japan's middle ages, wrote in his *Seven Principles of Swordsmanship* that "It is not good to be overly conscious of one's physical condition, especially aches and pains." Last week I woke up and found that it hurt to straighten my fingers. A lump of bone had been pulled off and re-fused inside my knuckle, and I could feel it sticking out sideways when I tested with my finger. The toe on my right foot had swelled and turned an off-purple during the night, broken the prior evening when it caught against someone's *do-gi*. I flexed my fingers to warm up the joints, and taped my broken toe to the ones beside it. These are the weekly wounds. Only by chipping away at a rock did Michelangelo create his *David*.

It is Autumn in Boulder, Colorado, and the sidewalks and streets are littered with dead leaves and seed pods like the beaches clogged with samurai corpses at Ichi-no-Tani. Slowly, the trees are becoming more withered and barren. Everywhere you go, the world dies around you and sheds itself to decompose in the grass and on the rooftops. Off in Colorado's prairies, old forgotten houses mold and dilapidate with time. Over centuries, rivers carve deep paths into the mountains.

Doing pushups on your bare knuckles hurts at first, but then the skin toughens over and you stop

feeling it. After that, you roll your wrists in and balance on the callus, and the pain comes back as you rip them off and re-grow them over and over until they come back so thick that you can't tear them on carpet or gravel or ice. When that's done, you do pushups on the sides of your hands so that your wrists seize up and it hurts to type. Eventually the tendons strengthen, and you can start clapping between each repetition, slamming the blades of your hands against the ground like guillotines. When that stops hurting you do pushups on your fingertips, digits stretched far out, so that your finger joints strain and shake, threatening to give and splinter. When they've strengthened, you move to four fingers, and when that stops hurting you move to three. Ancient masters used to shove their hands into bowls of rice a thousand times a day, until their digits were like railroad spikes.

It is written in the *Kokoro no Maki* that “When the heart is full of things, the body feels constrained; when it is empty, the body feels expansive.” I've always liked walking on snow-covered leaves, brushing away a layer of Winter, like uncovering the past; like traveling back in time. If you walk everywhere barefoot, it hurts for the first day. You form blisters the size of half-dollars, and leave bloody footprints on the sidewalks. The second day is worse. On the eighth day, you feel nothing but the pressure of pavement, gravel, pine needles. The world's hardness becomes softer.

When I was eight, I buried my mother, and then when I was thirteen I buried my best friend. My cats, my grandmother, my grandfather – after a while I became good at burying things. It was only after three funerals that I realized that they weren't like pushups. I liked to watch heartbreaking movies, *Titanic* or *Pay It Forward*, trying to build up a resistance. When you can watch Jack sink below the waves and feel nothing, you rent a copy of *Old Yeller*. When you can do pushups on your fingertips, you do them on the backs of your wrists, hands cupped like crane's beaks solemnly bowed.

If you take beer bottles and roll them along your shins and ulnae a hundred times a day, it makes the bone calcify and strengthen. If you don't have beer bottles, you can roll up the Sunday edition of the newspaper and use that. This week I woke up and noticed that my nose was slightly crooked from being punched the night before. I spent that day blowing blood into a tissue and groaning whenever I breathed in too rapidly and aggravated the bruises on my ribcage. Batter away at the ribs for long enough, and

eventually you'll reach the heart. What was in Minamoto Yorimasa's mind when he sliced through his chest at the battle of Uji? What words did Benkei whisper when he died on his feet at Koromogawa castle?

You don't feel your injuries when they happen. They are buried under adrenaline until they can resurface. When samurai were preparing to ride into a battle they couldn't possibly win, they used to burn their houses and kill their families so that they could fight with complete abandon. Their honor compromised, women of class would tie their knees together with cloth before they committed suicide, so that their bodies would be found in a modest position. After a forest fire, the soil is rich and fertile, and flowers spring up and bud with tenacity. At the pond outside my window, I like to watch the ducks vanish underwater for seven, eight seconds, before appearing once more, shaking the water in droplets from their feathers.

Venerated sword-saint *Miyamoto Musashi* wrote, "Do not grieve when you have to separate yourself from someone or something." I remember raising monarch butterflies with my mother, watching them form hard chrysalises and then burst forth to flutter around in the summer sunlight, alighting on cabinets and bookshelves and our bodies, until they found the windows and escaped. We have a picture of her lying on her back on a Mexican beach, arms and legs spread, her bald head pressed against the sand. A wave might have come in and carried her far out to sea forever, like emperor Antoku. She looked so peaceful. The first time I went camping, I found cicada exoskeletons in piles underneath the pine trees, like tiny suits of antique armor. I crushed them to dust in my hands and scattered them to the wind.

While she was going through chemotherapy, my mother started losing her toenails and fingernails. Her body abandoned the excess as it tore itself apart. I remember her sitting barefoot on the bed, raw pink toes curled and hideous, as she cradled me in her lap and whispered to me in hushed tones about nothing in particular, as if she were sharing all her most important secrets with me. After a while, she started wearing an eyepatch to account for double-vision, and she used to make pirate jokes while she wore it, oeing and arring from where she sat, exhausted, in the living room. I would stare with my two eyes into her one eye, loving her bald head and her bare toes. She was falling apart until only the persistent parts of her were left. Ancient masters used to shove their hands into bowls of rice a thousand times a day, until their digits were

like railroad spikes. When they turned sixty, their hands were withered treebranches that shook and trembled and were as clay. After you've been hit enough, your body loses that initial shock reflex, and you stop being ticklish. After you've been hit enough, you learn to anticipate and tighten, so that it just feels like dull impact. Harry Houdini died when a stranger sucker-punched him in the chest and ruptured his appendix. This summer, the girl I love lost her father to a senseless, sudden act of violence, and for two days I cried and shook with emotion. I remember her looking at me with hollow empty moon-eyes, enduring it. That look drove straight through my chest, and when I woke up the next morning, I felt it resounding like church bells.

If you walk everywhere barefoot, you learn about decay. You learn about snow-covered leaves and rotting piles of pine needles. You learn how things go in soft and come out hard, how they go in hard and come out beautiful. Old trees are struck by lightning and burned to ash and the great masters could still hold their grandchildren in their brittle hands. When you are done pounding your fists into the floorboards, when you are done wearing your knees and elbows into battering rams and your shins into cudgels, beneath it all, your heart will not have hardened. Musashi killed men and created beautiful calligraphy. The warrior Tesshomaru shed his armor for rags, his sword for a walking stick, and traveled the world. If you scrape away at yourself, eventually you uncover something that exists more deeply. If you walk barefoot everywhere, you get worn down and exposed and your feet become hideous. My mother painted pictures of her cancer in bright pastels and hung them in the room where she would eventually die. During his final days in Osaka, as he lay sick among his disciples, the poet Matsuo Bashō wrote,

*falling sick on a journey
my dream goes wandering
over a field of dried grass*