The first picture I saw was of a man dressed in a Harvard sweatshirt lying on the ground. The Harvard caught my eye. Something about a white man wearing a Harvard sweatshirt—that could have been me. Power—white skin, high-class education—lying on the ground, rotting.

He still had his hair, that's what got me. He still had his hair and he still had skin on his face while his eyes were going gone, that's what got me—you could see him making his transition, he wasn't an impersonal skeleton yet, he was still whatever his name was, as maggots did their work on him.

What bothered me most was the hair though, it was blondish, it couldn't disguise the cracks. Even though he wore a Harvard sweatshirt he didn't have any pants on and I could see cracks developing in his legs. I was leafing through photographer Sally Mann's memoir Hold Still and as I gazed at its photos telling the story of her What Remains exhibition—including portraits of corpses at a forensics farm—her camera brought me closer and closer to the cracks.

My throat is cracking right now as I write this, in the apartment's dry heat. My life is cracking right now, teaching part-time and not making enough to squeeze out a living and if I miss one paycheck I'm sunk. I'm drinking out of mason jars, eating overripe bananas.

And I had never seen skin crack like that. How the skin was like desert, like Mono Lake when I once flew over it headed eastward from California—this stretch of land right after the Sierra Nevadas, brown and cracked, then the big oval of lake and then more cracks and flat expanse, a body decomposing.

Harvard Man didn't walk into the Tennessee body farm's woods on his own. Someone carried him there.

* 

I live alone. I last really touched someone years ago, just before I began an MFA-in-Writing degree. She was the last to see me with my pants on. I have friends. I hug people. But I've struggled to let them get any closer—I've been married, instead, to my manuscript. I have no car. Water touches my skin when I swim, air when I bike.

A year ago I carried the ashes of my book to a cemetery. It was a memoir about the body connecting and disconnecting with others, about eruptions under our skin when we're angry aroused surprised transformed. After a decade of revision I decided it was done, so I burned the old drafts in the cooker on my apartment's back patio and strange paper chemicals wafted up a horrible smell, upsetting my landlady into thinking my house was burning down. I scraped the ashes out of the cooker's blackened basin and rode my bike, up and down hills, to Riverview Memorial Park in Pittsburgh.

At the body farm, two guys drove up in a minivan to drop off the corpse of a man, their friend. Sally Mann grasped one of his legs, a female lab tech grasped the other, and together with his two buddies lifting him by each arm they carried him to his resting place. The men wept, one of them placing a baseball cap over his friend's flopping phallus, for decency. Behind the work and worry of teaching, hammering my head for a text or right student grade, behind my endless submissions to journals—empty space, lack of touch. I write here and now to bury my body in hopes that a new one will rise. The “root word for ‘life,’” Marv and Nancy Hiles note, means “that which is sticky” or ‘that which remains.’"

Riverview's graves themselves were buried level with the ground, so that scanning its mound from the road, all you saw was grass trees sky. I flicked the book's ashes into the air above the embedded stones. The only thing that hinted at what was really going on here was the yellow backhoe loader—sometimes, in my visits to Riverview, I saw it digging a hole in the ground, always far away, down a hill. At first, I didn't compute that it was grave-digging. I saw the backhoe's yellow cab and adjoining bulldozer blade and thought building, construction. I thought somebody was building something. I kept my distance.

The Cracks

Jonathan Callard
I first heard about the body farm, formally known as the Forensic Anthropology Center, years ago on a Greyhound bus. I sat next to a young woman with a forelock of black hair on her brow, like a raven, who told me she worked there, and when she said Tennessee, I imagined this wide patch of dirt in the country, far away from civilization to give these bodies privacy, this woman poking her way through scraps of humans half-covered in humus, stooping to take notes.

In one Mann photo, eyes two black caves, legs taut pinions, gallop-spread, feet hooves, skin gone. In another, the body like black plastic burned. Spine? Cords of the neck. Head? Tufts of hair. Two stems below it could be legs, so maybe pubic hair. Above the hair, a belly button, where doctor cut the cord and tied a knot, this baby crying.

The body farm’s mission is the “systematic study of human decomposition,” and I think of its opposite, the word “compose”—I’m “composed,” pulled together, or, I “compose a song, an essay.” So decomposition when words get tangled, come undone, placed outdoors, behind fences, to disintegrate. Decomposition when a book comes undone.

On the body farm’s web site, a sentence loses a serial comma. Someone composes the following facts:

The body farm recently expanded from one acre to two.

It needs two new (or slightly used) vehicles to do research and to transport bodies.

There are seventeen hundred bodies there now.

There are four thousand registered bodies to come.

No tours allowed.

They respect the dignity of the dead and their families.

Photo: Dead body as Darth Vader costume, stomach sunken into chocolate-shell filling, the liquid-like exposure smeared, smudged.

Photo: Bundle of rags, someone wrapped in a shroud face down. I see my own arm in the one outlined in leaves—like reading the stars, faint shapes in the sky.

The farm is in the big city of Knoxville, near a river, near many people. “If you are in Tennessee,” the web site says, “and within one hundred miles of Knoxville we can pick up your body at no charge.”

The farm gave Sally Mann a special tour—she slipped inside the barbed-wire fence, donned blue booties, packed up her camera, and followed a specialist down shaded paths to see the bodies. She said one of them—a boy, face down, brown hair licking his ears—was beautiful. In a film documentary of her work, we see her shooting the boy’s toes, jeans. I know some people might be upset, she says to the camera. I see myself in the boy—he has the longer brown hair I had when I was nine, when I wore a rope bracelet and Adidas soccer shorts and Lacoste alligator shirt. Then I cut the bracelet off, and the tender band of skin underneath burned easily in the sun, breaking into tiny craters. Sally Mann does not hesitate to touch the boy’s bare foot.

Sometimes I want to lie there, feel what it’s like to let go, no longer straining, like that Darth Vader body where the stomach’s falling in and what’s inside is finally emerging, murky, from its lifelong tomb.

For months, I cycle over a roadkill’s outline on Freeport Road that shrinks but never fully disappears. “Anima” means soul. Bones, bits of animal stuff frozen and melded into the cement like a collection of Popsicle sticks, I read their constellations.

* 

There’s a picture of my father at his college singing group reunion—the Princeton Nassoons—close-cropped white hair stuck up from his skull, his skeleton inside his skin leaning into the circle of seventy-something skeletons around him, still singing the same songs over a half a century later. My father says he doesn’t want to be around in twenty years, doesn’t want to grow old and infirm. I feel sad, it’s like he’s giving up. As if by saying it, speaking of death, he’s beginning to decay, donning a Princeton sweatshirt, taking off his pants, and lying down on the ground, waiting for nature to do its work.

The first corpse is a lump in a white bag in the distance on the grass, tied at one end like a Tootsie Roll, a bend where the torso folds, as if Sally Mann stumbled upon this field and looking up, saw a body surrounded by leaves and trees.

I have entered a dark wood, when just a few years before, the sun shone for me, I could see. Family caste and class gave me much—my father worked in

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private schools, which allowed me to attend them for free. At forty-three, I assumed I’d have something more to show for my life, if “show” means that stable teaching appointment or book contract or partner or steady income. But my work has not protected me from failure, nor has five generations of my father’s family at Princeton, where my father once served as admissions dean, where I was born. I comfort myself by regarding corpses—they’re even farther gone than me.

My father talks to me on the phone. He talks a little slower now, no longer the Princeton lineman lunging at the Harvard opponent on the gridiron, his stocky legs driving his body at other bodies at great speed, a drive he passed down to me. Now, his words make me think of Mann’s skeletons—helpless out of control, like I felt when my father drove me to the adolescent ward when I was sixteen, after I got lost in my skin at the prep school where FDR had gone, where its headmaster, my father’s friend and my brother’s godfather, had given me financial aid.

Harvard Man was more than the Harvard sweatshirt, more than his manhood, more than his arms and legs and head. He was that person who once took up space, whose presence affected others. I have already distorted him; later, reviewing Mann’s memoir again, I see that the cracks I ascribed to him belonged to other anonymous bodies—a thigh’s tear-shaped incision of raw muscle, a hairy hide of a man’s back with nicks like he’d been stabbed. And no, Harvard Man was not pants-less as I recalled—someone had actually dressed him in tight red sweatpants that ended at his ankles, the leggings’ bright red clashing with the Harvard sweatshirt’s darker burgundy, as if anything covering his legs and groin gave him more dignity. But in my mind I took his pants off and gave him cracks, just as a friend, after I shared a draft of this essay with her, said, “I want to see you with your pants off.” She meant, who are you underneath it all, what do you desire.

Mann challenges you to still see someone’s essence even when she cuts off pieces of their body with her camera—hole in the upper left latissimus dorsi, or ground growing out of abdomen—the rib cage has opened like a garden, like an abandoned dory planted in the ground, when nature takes hold with weeds and flowers, makes its home around the boat’s ribs. Did I tell you about the photo with the head on its side, maybe even Harvard Man in time, hair over brow, eyes gone, nothing but the skull in the frame? Thousands of bugs pour out in golden stream from the eye sockets, as if this face were dipped in a furnace, made new.

Bumped last-minute from teaching a course for the spring term, I seethe—I have been pushed off in favor of a full-timer who needs his full load. I used to be full-time too. I am decaying, I am furious. Can I seethe and still rot? Or is anger a spark of new life?

In Tennessee, big man naked, face down, right arm twisted at odd angle, exposure blurred, like he’s lifted up exalted bathed in light.

Back in Jesus’s day, they wrapped up dead bodies in linen cloths, they anointed them, and then laid them in crevices in a rock. Just folded the bodies up and placed them in the oven-sized slit, rolled a stone over it, and walked away.

I’ve begun to strip people away when I see them—in Trader Joe’s last winter, on a particularly lonely day, I saw a young woman, blond hair parted to one side, beautiful symmetrical face with jaw bones so sharp they could cut my skin. And I wanted to see her underneath, underneath that black puffy parka, under whatever she was wearing and under whatever persona she wore when she walked into Trader Joe’s and picked up pieces of fruit and put them in a bag, when she lifted up a carton of eggs and carefully placed it in her cart. In one Mann photo two skeletons lie over leaves, and the space around them is holy as if in the emptiness of that space, the lack of people of hands of skin in that space, they are given their special place, the light forming a halo over everything—the trees above them, the ground.

I think that we become something more when we are alone and when we are left alone, and so Sally Mann’s photos become illuminated icons where she is raising up, almost resurrecting (which literally means “to stand”) these body parts, Jesus unfolding himself, climbing from the crevice. She’s saying—see! See this arm, see it as part of a person yes, but something in itself—as if we were many selves: throat-centered, speaking forth; muted mouth-turned-down, shrinking
away under heavy wind; shaking twisting hips on the grass while they play guitars and smoke rises. One self lives in an arm, one in the pubis, one in the trunk, one in the skull, one in the withered fingers still sprouting nails several inches long. Maybe she’s asking if we take the time to be aware of our bodies when we are living, when we are walking around and thinking so much that we leave them and get lost in the tangle of thoughts.

I called the 1–800 number for twenty years before stopping. I stand now in the bathroom, cold tile under my feet, feel the urge to stop thinking, lose myself in the touching and listening again—totally present with my body, what she was doing over the phone, what I was doing, and the Mann photo of the torso, legs like tree trunks, phallus still encircled by grey pubic hair, defying the death, ready to fill with blood again and rise.

My book about connection and the body hits the hands of editors through hard-copy mail portals and electronic submissions, its proposal walks out my door and hits inboxes and desks of editors and presses and agents. It has not won anyone over—the manuscript’s Word document is a .doc corpse, I have saved it, I no longer change it.

When you’re living you’re always leaving—leaving your body to live in your thoughts, leaving your thoughts to live in your body, leaving lovers, leaving your book, leaving a layer of skin cells on the table. When you die you need others to keep bringing you to life, like Sally Mann snapping photos, grabbing your eyes as she grabs an arm in her camera’s eye and makes you see a lake in it, a lake in its desert cracks.

In a Christmas picture last year, my father stands three feet away from me as I’m riding a steel-spring toy on a playground, this green turtle swaying me back and forth as I look stage right while my father stands in his white Payless Shoe Source sneakers and white hair and winter hat with glasses staring straight at the camera with a confused smile, not sure what to do with his hands so he puts them in his frayed coat pockets. His feet splay out slightly, as if they were walking along and found his legs and frame and just stuck themselves onto him.

I read a book called *When Things Fall Apart*. I learn that when the ground gets too frozen in Tibet for people to bury bodies, they leave them out for vultures. Things get pretty awful. An eyeball here, an arm there, someone’s viscera strewn across the earth like spaghetti. The author, Pema Chödrön, says it teaches impermanence, but I’m just seeing my father’s limbs scattered. He says he doesn’t want to look old, and wear baggy pants several sizes too large. But in the charnel ground, his pants would be the last of his worries, or mine. His pants would be gone.

Natural burial makes death go green, an easy exchange of my body’s nutrients with the elements. I think of my father’s body—will it also be free? Will it be liberated from coffin and chemicals, wiped clean with loving hands and laid deep enough underground to protect it from vandals or vermin but close enough to tree and soil that he will release whatever he is holding in that Christmas picture and exhale, his pent-up breath dispersing in tiny grains on the wind?

I imagine my shadow selves as mummified bodies bundled up in white, awaiting a ship to come to shore and to load them on, for they too must be released. I am not a series of things to be accomplished or ticked off or hidden: I am flesh and blood, memory, tactile sensation. In her memoir, Sally Mann wrote that the body farm was surrounded by parking lots; the only way you know it’s there is the smell of carrion when you get close—some of them still in white bags, like my white bodies.Your life is not your own, it’s God’s, a monk once said. My body is not my own.

I rot in an open field, like that opening shot of Mann’s—plenty of grass to run in, that body bag an eggshell holding juices of birth, waiting to be cracked open.

*As part of her What Remains exhibition Mann shows pictures of her dog’s bones. Her beloved greyhound Eva died and she buried her in the backyard, after having her skinned. And then she dug her up again and photographed her parts—a single claw, a stack of ribs growing a crustacean–like substance, one of them branded to inky blackness, a stain. Kind of like saying goodbye to something, and then, to really make sure you were leaving—living—and it was not, taking it back and looking at it more closely. Taking apart its body. Maybe I do that as my father ages and hands out health-care-
proxy information to us and asks me to be the person who makes decisions for him when he can’t and when my mother cannot. Maybe I do that as I fumble through my fortieth job applications and online dates. I take my camera in my eyes and look at my life and see it strange.

Sally Mann says that “you’re not there after you’ve died,” that the body “is just a carapace.” But Harvard Man and his friends invite me to put my hand in their cracks, the way Jesus let doubting Thomas slip his hand in his pierced side. “In my Father’s house are many rooms,” Jesus said, and these visible dead shed pretense along with skin, welcoming what’s left of me home when I strip everything else away.

* 

Last spring I rode my bike back to that cemetery, the one where I dropped the ashes of the book. I liked to go there solo, reconnect with my cracks. I saw the yellow backhoe, parked down the grassy slope towards the Allegheny River. It was still, so I thought, I can go down there and see the grave it is digging. To my left, a big concrete container at the top of the slope, with bolts in it, thick wire looped through big triangular eyelets on either side—that’s what’s going to go in the hole, and then the body in its coffin. I saw, on the flattened grass, the backhoe’s tread marks. I saw the cab of the backhoe, empty. I took a step down the hill.

Suddenly a man rose out of the grave and waved at me. He must have gotten out of his backhoe cab and climbed down into the grave to get it ready or widen or smooth the sides and he waved at me and I stopped. I did not go any further. I waved at him, not wanting to be rude, then I mounted my bike and got out of there.