

Westerly

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Western Australia
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Essay

Westerly

booth and was standing waiting for her with his arms crossed over his chest. He raised his hand and made a motion that said it was time to go. She watched a family still holding their toffee apples climb up onto some nearby horses and the tune changed so that she couldn't tell anymore whether she was at the end or at the beginning. The world kept moving. She stayed on the ride.

The Weeping Hands Melanie Pryor

Melanie Pryor is a writer living on Kaurna land. She writes about bodies, landscapes and belonging. Her nonfiction has been published in *The New York Times*, *Meanjin*, *Southerly*, *Overland* and *Lip*, and on wine bottles as part of the 2017 *Overland/Story Wine Prize*. She holds a PhD in creative writing.

This essay contains mention of the following: eating disorders, self-harm, mental illness, physical injury and illness, parental trauma, hospital and suicidal ideation.

Around the time my father got sick, I developed a habit of pushing a drawing pin into small itchy blisters on my palm. When I was ill as a child my parents would treat me with vitamin C and stories in bed, but I was far from home now and this was not a sickness they would recognise.

These are some words for lungs: fibrous, spongy, permeable. I don't like these words. They are wet and full of air. Too alive. In my mind, there is a damp tree inside me, broccoli-green or maybe grey and pink. An alveoli tree, a thing of sacs and ducts, blood and gas and oxygen. This tree-sac breathes. There are approximately 700 million alveoli in a pair of human lungs, and I think I am uneasy at this thriving colony, the stretchy-mesh system of me. But alveoli dispel carbon dioxide-rich air that I cannot use, and remembering this, the pulsing spongy lung-tree inside no longer makes me squeamish but is a thing of blood and flesh and wonder.

When he became sick, I imagined my father's lungs. I imagined the gluey silver mucous of pneumonia. I took a breath and coughed into a tissue, and in its folds stretched a wet web, almost green, and I couldn't tell disgust from fascination at this thing, clinging together, no longer in my body.

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There is a sting of fear every time I press the pinhead in. A shock of pain when it pushes through—I mean right through. There's a pop. The metal tip punches through the first layers of skin, which feel delicate but are really a stratum of subdermal tissue, an ecosystem of tissue and blood. And then the pin is in the blister, in the bed of ichor that itches, itches.

I withdraw the pin and press with my fingernail and then comes the glint of liquid and relief.

I become obsessed with squeezing this itchy glint from my body. This blister-pus that makes tight hot bumpy sausages of my fingers. Sometimes I feel like I could burst my fingers when I wake in the morning: it is always worst in the morning. These fingers that I cannot bend because the skin has become so hot and swollen. These weeping hands.

I imagine my father's drowning chest as the doctors looked down at his puzzle body. I imagine that my father was grey. I don't know how long he had been unable to breathe properly; he would have told the doctors it was a week, but I would have told them it was months. My sister would have said it had almost been a year. We told him to go see someone about the deep, hacking cough that would not leave and in words that sounded ominous even then he would say, 'Oh, it's just a cough.'

I have learned to trace wounds and their openings and closings through my family. I have come to see what fear looks like on each of us and I try to wrap myself around the shape of their wounds. I try to make myself a bandage. It will be a long time yet until I understand what happens to bandages: they wear too thin to be anything at all. They self-cannibalise.

When I find out my father is sick, I am living in the redwoods of California, sleeping in a wooden hut hung through with spiders, scritch-scratched by chooks, haunted by mountain lions and coyotes I hear in the evenings. Mornings are cut glass mist and the sun is long heat. I milk goats, resting my weight against their musky flanks, breathing them in. I learn to recognise the lurch of a restless hoof before it finds the milk bucket. I wear clothes with pockets large enough to gather eggs and ripe tomatoes. I shave half my head and my bare feet turn brown faster than it takes to learn the names of nearby roads.

I am happier than I have ever been but then my nose grows pink and raw. I sleep with tissues in my nostrils—so much liquid runs runs runs from me. At first the summer heat makes me slow and luxurious but then, as my virus grows, it feels like my bones will drag me to the ground. I eat oranges by the handful. *Fix me*, I beg them. I get sicker, bones heavier. One morning I wake and down the sides of my fingers, across my palms, there runs a rash of tiny, clear blisters.

In a text message from home, I read *hospital* and *Dad* and *emergency* and *pneumonia*. The words are terrible little aliens on the glass screen in my hand, shocking in their unexpectedness. They are a clatter of unwelcome; a shock of frigid water. I think, stupidly: my world is the

one that is supposed to be changing, not yours, Dad. I want to un-read, to un-wind, to un-do whatever has happened on the other side of the world.

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Alveoli are gatekeepers: they are the point at which oxygen is dispersed into the body. In a single alveolus—of which there are about 170 per one cubic millimetre of lung tissue in the body—oxygen and carbon dioxide undergo a permutation. The oxygen moves into the bloodstream via blood vessels called capillaries, and the carbon dioxide remains in the alveolus to be flushed from the body with the next breath. Imagine. Seven hundred million air sacs exchanging the detrimental for the useful in that half second between the inhale and exhale. After each breath, your blood will be different. The air around you changes in a millisecond. A sorting has occurred.

We do this mostly without thinking. But if, like for my father, some or all of those 700 million air sacs, those precious alveolus gems at the furthest reaches of your lung tree, begin to fill with pus, then you start to think about them. Your lungs. And how much you depend on them.

Before I left for California, my body did not menstruate for three months. There was a week in those months when I woke in the middle of each night to throw up. Stress retched out of me, sour, tired. There were stretches of days when I knew that deep bone ache, that parched throat, when the body teeters on the edge of sickness and calls your name and you stop everything and lie in bed and eat oranges and weep with fear of falling ill—and yet I held sickness off. I was finishing a PhD and stress swirled around with the oats I ate for breakfast every morning. It is very easy to mistake mania for productivity, obsession for motivation, and the tingling of a hyper-activated nervous system for the buzz of accomplishment, right up until the body starts to ruthlessly empty itself. When cortisol is firing at a steady constant there is no room for anything that might pause the body on its headlong careen to some kind of cliff. This is the point where we should realise something is quite wrong. But we usually don't, and I didn't, and I soared through the world, increasingly untethered, thinking I was flying.

Whatever is inside my father's body mystifies me. There are cities in there. Small grey rail carts, lines of them, pulsing bumping chuntering along veins and down chutes, depositing hoards of precious red ore throughout

him. Beneath the browned surface, beneath the tired scars on his knees and his knuckles and his palm and other places I have not seen. Where are the other scars? I need to know this. Suddenly, it feels almost unbearable, the urgency: I need to know. That there is something of you beyond me? No. I do not accept this. Not when you know what I am made from, you know what is inside of me, what is strung and fleshed in me, through and through, you know the spiderweb of me hung between trees in the first light-up of dawn—those droplets of dawn-water-flesh that is me? You made them. You *know* me, Dad. I want to know you.

I started to write about my father's unwell body and I started to open my palms to expel what was painful inside.

I think sometimes I have been looking for ways to escape my skin for as long as I've been here. But not in a dying way. I'm not seeking death. I'm seeking another way of having a form.

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As I write my fingers itch. A dry fingernail-scrape itch. I type with hands too stiff to curl so I lay them flat and tap my outstretched fingers downwards, cormorants belly-flopping into a still lake.

I wonder if this will turn into an obsession, this pin pricking. If I will always need to have something with a sharp tip in my pocket. I notice now in the objects that surround me what is good for tapping against skin and piercing it and what you really have to press in to get underneath.

I wonder if my mother would think this is self-harm again.

It is not, I would tell her. It is a relief.

But it was when I was young, too. Control and release. Control and relief.

I begin to look forward to mornings when there will be a new harvest to siphon from my hands. It is another way to be empty. To shed, to carve down, to make disappear. It is such a relief to make myself less, like in making, I strip myself to the foundational bones of me. The iron structure. I try to make the bones of me show and it is an illness but also a becoming. I am making myself visible to the world.

When I try to write about my wounds the stuff in my father's body seeps out. I have always written about the women in my family. But now with these jagged shocks—my father in hospital, my brother in hospital too after breaking his nose and front teeth in an accident—there is liquid and bone on the page and bodies mean differently. I cry on the phone to my

sister, the phone cutting in and out, the reception where she lives in Costa Rica intermittent.

My body is a web with five blood points.

The points are strung across the world.

We shake together when we are touched. When we are strung like this I am scared at the fragility of the thread. I feel each minute tremble as a seismic shake that threatens my knees and makes the ground feel close.

I think sometimes that I am missing something other people have. Some vital piece of armour required to be in this world. Sometimes I think that, in loving me so much, in letting me love this much, my parents opened holes in me and these breaches with tender edges will be my vulnerability for as long as I live.

I have been afraid for a long time that this might be a catastrophic weakness. Afraid of the blame I might lay for it at my parents' feet: that they have loved me too well.

Soon we'll all be back in the nest, I text Dad. My sister and brother and I are all planning to return home to Australia for Christmas. Minus a few teeth and fingers, I joke, looking down at the scabs and scars on my hands. The papery skin.

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Sometimes writing is a wound for me. I never thought it would be. Writing was meant to be a way to knit edges together—not the words that end up on the page, but the actual act of writing itself. And yet I have found that writing is a bladed love, something that lifts into me and raises my edges. With exquisiteness, it shows me things I do not want to know that might be real.

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I leave my cabin in the Californian woods, leave my goats and my hens and the gentle tap of branches on my roof at night, and head to San Francisco. Fires have been raging all summer and the city is heavy with smoke. As my father recovers from pneumonia, I find myself coughing.

I keep tracing the lung-tree. Circling around these spongy alveoli. I start reading online, looking at pictures of lungs, trying to understand what his sickness means.

I know that pneumonia is a flooding of the lungs. Water rising. Or age? For just over sixty, apparently he is in good shape.

Perhaps what rose and threatened to choke him is whatever happens when you leave your home and something in your bones dissolves. As I

left for California, he left his life in the desert, came back to our family home in the bush, and didn't know if he had two homes or none at all.

I think this is what happened to my father. His homes rose like a tide and he stopped being able to breathe.

What I also know is that pneumonia means trauma. It means that something wells up and over a family's head, it means that when you get a text message saying your father is in hospital after driving seventeen delirious hours home, you try and slow down time to understand but you also do not want to understand. Not at all.

You are afraid that this event is the first crack. You are afraid of the splinters that will shoot out from this rupture.

Rupture and rapture being so close to each other could just be a linguistic coincidence, a strange etymological chance that humans persist in reading as symbol. But also, because I am human, I cannot help but see the astonishing cruelty in the gulch between these words. I know which side of the canyon I want to be on, which side most of us want to be on. But the death drive is the cloud belly of every breath I exhale—I lean in toward rupture as much as I long to dwell in rapture. Not wanting to be alive is not, to me, the same thing as wanting to die. Sometimes people speak about self-sabotage or suicidal ideation or melancholia, but as soon as I heard it described as the death drive, I understood that this is just another part of what it means to be alive. The longing for not being alive; the other side of the mirror.

I can't remember what it was that first made me understand this. There was a moment, so fleeting I can't recall when. But I remember thinking, in a way that felt like being trampled by something like a bull, that this is what philosophers meant when they wrote that we know the light only through the presence of the dark.

For such a long time I have fought this. Resisted with fear or perhaps anger—some things I do not want to look too closely at. I have thought: but why can we not just *know* what light and pleasure is, without needing to go through the process of knowing? What if we were just *gifted* this knowing by whatever entity it was that we came from?

These weeping hands would hold you, Dad. I would like to say, Dad, let me love you. I become convinced that saying these words to him will alleviate this dreadful weight I have come to carry.

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In San Francisco, in the pauses between writing, I run my fingernails repeatedly across my palms. The itch is still there. After weeks and weeks it is still there. Every morning, immediately after I wake, the scrutiny in the early sun: hawk eyes searching for traces, my claw hungering to rip open and dispel this thing from my body.

I am flying back to Australia soon. Today my hands are tight and sore and for the first time it does not feel good when I prick them with the pin. There is the pop and there is pain but nothing really comes out. What I tried to release is hot and angry.

This marks the beginning of what the psychotherapist I will soon begin to see calls the perfect storm; that is to say, my coping mechanisms have begun to fail. When rules wrap themselves to a point where they can draw no tighter, they are no longer the protection but the harm itself. Then, implosion.

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His body is healed, his chest is strong. I am wrapped in a doona, sobbing, terrified at what is happening in my mind. He bundles me to him and we sit in the dark of the porch, the faint trace of frangipani hanging in the night air.

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A week in and out of the emergency department, then weeks of care—I am showered, kept company at night, taken to appointments, cared for by a roster of friends tracking medication and support. Months happen—blind, tender, terrifying—and I learn what it is to live after a collapse of self, and my father gives me one of the greatest gifts of my life.

He sits with me in my therapist's room and I tell him I need him to let me love him. I say, I need you to take my love so I stop throwing myself into the swirling place between us. I explain to him how I have been standing on the edge of me and taking myself in handfuls, throwing them into the black suck, yelling: fix me.

I say, I don't want you to be so nice to me all the time. The words are ridiculous, those of a child. But: the relief at them. What I am really saying: I need permission to not be the perfect daughter I am flagellating myself into being. If you are not perfect, then I can be imperfect too.

There is a great pause in the room and in the silence something emerges. A question I have never thought to ask before. Who asked me to be a perfect daughter in the first place?

I sit in the quiet, reverberating, astonished.

I cry as we speak, but he doesn't. I am grateful for this. He watches me unflinchingly, his depthless love and empathy steady and true in eyes that are precisely the same blue as mine, and I let go of a twenty-year-old debt no one asked me to carry.

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Lately I've been thinking about when it is that a child's small body learns the concept of her own weight. There was a time in my life when I ran and climbed and bounced and reached fearlessly. When I smacked into the ground it was a shock, but I never remembered the shock until I felt it the next time I fell. I don't know when I learned to recognise gravity, or balance, or mass. I have no way of knowing when, or why, I took on love as a burden, a debt.

There is an idea I had a while ago that has been rattling around inside, with bells and something that feels very bright: perhaps I don't need to *do* anything about the love that someone has for me. Don't need to justify it or pay it back or be grateful for it.

Even now I can feel a laugh of surprise at the back of my throat.

It is exhilarating, turns the world on its axis, a thought like this.

Do other people know this, that maybe you can just be soaked in love for no reason other than existing?

A few weeks after our therapist session Dad and I are at my house finishing a cup of tea and I look at him. I notice that, for the first time in a long time, there is no longer a gaping airless space between us. The knowing has crept into me without my noticing—quietly, wondrously, groundwater up through moss. It was not him but me who needed to absolve this terrible need, this debt. I creaked toward this delicate logic: I simply needed to accept that my father loved me without condition. I didn't have to work to justify his love, which meant there was nothing I needed to pay back. Love not as duty or obligation. It felt strange and new in my mouth.

He brings me a tomato plant and a small bucket with rich humus and worms from his compost. He's poked holes in the covering across the bucket, says he wanted to make sure the worms could breathe. I empty the new soil in my garden and he watches on, showing me how to pinch off the tomato suckers, the small leaf growth, so that the plant can concentrate on nothing but its surge upward. Afterwards, my hands are covered with wet dirt, fingernails filled with it, and I don't wash them. I like my hands like this. They get dry easily now, the skin healed but still papery, a strange kind of scarring where the blisters used to be.

The blisters come back occasionally and briefly when I'm stressed and rundown, and sometimes for no reason at all. On the mornings when I wake and feel my fingers are stiff, and know what I will see before I look at them, I no longer feel that desperate need to scourge my skin. A doctor told me after California that bursting the blisters had caused my hands to become infected; that although I thought it was helping the itching and bringing me relief, it wouldn't have been, really. I didn't contradict her, but she was wrong. For me, relief is a complex thing, and I imagine it will take years to untangle the ways it constricts me.

I see so much of myself in my dad. In trying to protect his tenderness, I think I try to protect my own. I am living now in a new season of being my father's daughter, a gentler season: he feels love deeply, feels everything expansively, but is not soft or weak or vulnerable to hurt. And it is not my responsibility to make him okay. I have never managed to believe this before, and knowing it now is nothing but peaceful. Whatever is at the core of him is the same stuff found at the centre of the earth; immensely strong, adaptable, finite. There are crooked little tics too, small irritabilities, little instances of disagreements which I welcome with a private smile, relishing the bursts of recognition that I am allowed to be different to him; that he might not always be right. I haven't thought of his lungs in a long time. He gets a cough intermittently, and tells me, without my asking, that he had a cold a while ago so this is just left over from that. I'm not sure, though, that I'll ever stop listening to the timbre of his chest. I'm not sure if my hands will ever heal. But I'm trying not to stumble blindly in the dark feeling for the outlines of what I fear the future might hold. And I don't think about grief-trees as much now. Not in the way I used to.