Hunger

A Memoir of (My) Body

Roxane Gay

2017 NY, NY
The story of my body is not a story of triumph. This is not a weight-loss memoir. There will be no picture of a thin version of me, my slender body emblazoned across this book’s cover, with me standing in one leg of my former, fatter self’s jeans. This is not a book that will offer motivation. I don’t have any powerful insight into what it takes to overcome an unruly body and unruly appetites. Mine is not a success story. Mine is, simply, a true story.

I wish, so very much, that I could write a book about triumphant weight loss and how I learned how to live more effectively with my demons. I wish I could write a book about being at peace and loving myself wholly, at any size. Instead, I have written this book, which has been the most difficult writing experience of my life, one far more challenging than I could have ever imagined. When I set out to write Hunger, I was certain the words would come easily, the way they usually do. And what could be easier to write about than the body I have lived in for more than forty years? But I soon realized I was not only writing a memoir of my body; I was forcing myself to look at what my body has endured, the weight I gained, and how hard it has been to both live with and lose that weight. I’ve been forced to look at my guiltiest secrets. I’ve cut myself wide open. I am exposed. That is not comfortable. That is not easy.

I wish I had the kind of strength and willpower to tell you a triumphant story. I am in search of that kind of strength and willpower. I am determined to be more than my body—what my body has endured, what my body has become. Determination, though, has not gotten me very far.

Writing this book is a confession. These are the ugliest, weakest, barest parts of me. This is my truth. This is a memoir of (my) body because, more often than not, stories of bodies like mine are ignored or dismissed or derided. People see bodies like mine and make their assumptions. They think they know the why of my body. They do not. This is not a story of triumph, but this is a story that demands to be told and deserves to be heard.

This is a book about my body, about my hunger, and ultimately, this is a book about disappearing and being lost and wanting so very much, wanting to be seen and understood. This is a book about learning, however slowly, to allow myself to be seen and understood.
This book, *Hunger*, is a book about living in the world when you are not a few or even forty pounds overweight. This is a book about living in the world when you are three or four hundred pounds overweight, when you are not obese or morbidly obese but super morbidly obese according to your body mass index, or BMI.

"BMI" is a term that sounds so technical and inhumane that I am always eager to disregard the measure. Nonetheless, it is a term, and a measure, that allows the medical establishment to try and bring a sense of discipline to undisciplined bodies.

One's BMI is one's weight, in kilograms, divided by the square of one's height in meters. Math is hard. There are various markers that then define the amount of unruliness a human body might carry. If your BMI is between 18.5 and 24.9, you are "normal." If your BMI is 25 or higher, you are overweight. If your BMI is 30 or higher, you are obese, and if your BMI is higher than 40, you are morbidly obese, and if the measure is
higher than 50, you are super morbidly obese. My BMI is higher than 50.

In truth, many medical designations are arbitrary. It is worth noting that in 1998, medical professionals, under the direction of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, lowered the BMI threshold for “normal” bodies to below 25 and, in doing so, doubled the number of obese Americans. One of their reasons for lowering the cutoff: “A round number like 25 would be easy for people to remember.”

These terms themselves are somewhat horrifying. “Obese” is an unpleasing word from the Latin *obesus*, meaning “having eaten until fat,” which is, in a literal sense, fair enough. But when people use the word “obese,” they aren’t merely being literal. They are offering forth an accusation. It is strange, and perhaps sad, that medical doctors came up with this terminology when they are charged with first doing no harm. The modifier “morbidly” makes the fat body a death sentence when such is not the case. The term “morbid obesity” frames fat people like we are the walking dead, and the medical establishment treats us accordingly.

The cultural measure for obesity often seems to be anyone who appears to be larger than a size 6, or anyone whose body doesn’t naturally cater to the male gaze, or anyone with cellulite on her thighs.

I do not weigh 577 pounds now. I am still very fat, but I weigh about 150 pounds less than that. With every new diet attempt I shave off a few pounds here, a few pounds there. This is all relative. I am not small. I will never be small. For one, I am tall. That is both a curse and a saving grace. I have presence, I am told. I take up space. I intimidate. I do not want to take up space. I want to go unnoticed. I want to hide. I want to disappear until I gain control of my body.

I don’t know how things got so out of control, or I do. This is my refrain. Losing control of my body was a matter of accretion. I began eating to change my body. I was willful in this. Some boys had destroyed me, and I barely survived it. I knew I wouldn’t be able to endure another such violation, and so I ate because I thought that if my body became repulsive, I could keep men away. Even at that young age, I understood that to be fat was to be undesirable to men, to be beneath their contempt, and I already knew too much about their contempt. This is what most girls are taught—that we should be slender and small. We should not take up space. We should be seen and not heard, and if we are seen, we should be pleasing to men, acceptable to society. And most women know this, that we are supposed to disappear, but it’s something that needs to be said, loudly, over and over again, so that we can resist surrendering to what is expected of us.
In writing about my body, maybe I should study this flesh, the abundance of it, as a crime scene. I should examine this corporeal effect to determine the cause.

I don’t want to think of my body as a crime scene. I don’t want to think of my body as something gone horribly wrong, something that should be cordoned off and investigated.

Is my body a crime scene when I already know I am the perpetrator, or at least one of the perpetrators?

Or should I see myself as the victim of the crime that took place in my body?

I am marked, in so many ways, by what I went through. I survived it, but that isn’t the whole of the story. Over the years, I have learned the importance of survival and claiming the label of “survivor,” but I don’t mind the label of “victim.” I also don’t think there’s any shame in saying that when I was raped, I became a victim, and to this day, while I am also many other things, I am still a victim.

It took me a long time, but I prefer “victim” to “survi-

| HUNGER |
likely that I can change before this culture and its attitudes toward fat people will change. In addition to fighting the "good fight" about body positivity, I also need to think about the quality of my life in the here and now.

I have been living in this unruly body for more than twenty years. I have tried to make peace with this body. I have tried to love or at least tolerate this body in a world that displays nothing but contempt for it. I have tried to move on from the trauma that compelled me to create this body. I have tried to love and be loved. I have been silent about my story in a world where people assume they know the why of my body, or any fat body. And now, I am choosing to no longer be silent. I am tracing the story of my body from when I was a carefree young girl who could trust her body and who felt safe in her body, to the moment when that safety was destroyed, to the aftermath that continues even as I try to undo so much of what was done to me.

I was broken, and to numb the pain of that brokenness, I ate and ate and ate, and then I was not just overweight or fat. Less than a decade later, I was morbidly obese and then I was super morbidly obese. I was trapped in my body, one I made but barely recognized or understood. I was miserable, but I was safe. Or at least I could tell myself I was safe.

My memories of the after are scattered, fragmentary, but I do clearly remember eating and eating and eating so I could forget, so my body could become so big it would never be broken again. I remember the quiet comfort of eating when I was lonely or sad or even happy.

Today, I am a fat woman. I don't think I am ugly. I don't hate myself in the way society would have me hate myself, but I do live in the world. I live in this body in this world, and I hate how the world all too often responds to this body. Intellectually, I recognize that I am not the problem. This world and its willingness to accept and accommodate me are the problem. But I suspect it is more
I appreciate that at least some of who I am rises out of the worst day of my life and I don't want to change who I am.

I no longer need the body fortress I built. I need to tear down some of the walls, and I need to tear down those walls for me and me alone, no matter what good may come of that demolition. I think of it as undestroying myself.

Writing this book is the most difficult thing I've ever done. To lay myself so vulnerable has not been an easy thing. To face myself and what living in my body has been like has not been an easy thing, but I wrote this book because it felt necessary. In writing this memoir of my body, in telling you these truths about my body, I am sharing my truth and mine alone. I understand if that truth is not something you want to hear. The truth makes me uncomfortable too. But I am also saying, here is my heart, what's left of it. Here I am showing you the ferocity of my hunger. Here I am, finally freeing myself to be vulnerable and terribly human. Here I am, reveling in that freedom. Here. See what I hunger for and what my truth has allowed me to create.
There is a before and an after. In the after I was broken, shattered and silent. I was numb. I was terrified. I carried this secret and knew, in my soul, that what those boys did to me had to stay secret. I couldn’t share the shame and humiliation of it. I was disgusting because I had allowed disgusting things to be done to me. I was not a girl. I was less than human. I was no longer a good girl and I was going to hell.

I was twelve, and suddenly, I was no longer a child. I no longer felt free or happy or safe. I became more and more withdrawn. If I had a saving grace, it was that we moved all the time for my father’s job, and the summer after I was raped we moved to a new state where I could have my name again and no one knew I was the girl in the woods. I still had no friends and I did not try to make friends, because how could we possibly have anything in common? I did not dare subject what I had become to the children around me. I read, obsessively. When I read on the school bus, my classmates teased me. Sometimes, they took my book from me and threw it back and forth as I flailed, helplessly, just trying to get that book back into my hands. When I read, I could forget. I could be anywhere in the world except in the eighth grade, lonely and holding tightly to my secret. I often say that reading and writing saved my life. I mean that quite literally.

At home, I tried to be the good girl my parents thought me to be, but it was exhausting. On so many occasions, I wanted to tell them something was wrong, that I was dying inside, but I couldn’t find the words. I couldn’t find a way to overcome my fear of what they might say and do and think of me. The longer I stayed silent, the more that fear grew until it dwarfed everything else.

I couldn’t let my parents see who or what I had become because they would be disgusted and they would discard me like the trash I knew myself to be, and then I would not only be nothing, I would have nothing. There was no room in my life for the truth.

I know, now, that I was wrong, that my parents would have supported me, helped me, and sought justice for me. They would have shown me that the shame was not mine to bear. Unfortunately, my fearful silence cannot be undone. I cannot tell that twelve-year-old girl who was so scared and alone just how much she was loved, how unconditionally, but oh, how I want to. How I want to comfort her. How I want to save her from so much of what would happen next.
I played the part of good girl, good daughter, good student. I went to church even though I had no faith. Guilt consumed me. I no longer believed in God because surely if there were a God, he would have saved me from Christopher and those boys in the woods. I no longer believed in God because I had sinned. I had sinned in a way I hadn’t even known was possible until I learned what was possible. It was lonely and terrifying to be unmoored from everything that had been so important in my life—my family, my faith, myself.

I was alone with my secret, pretending to be a different kind of girl. To survive, I tried to forget what had happened, those boys, the stink of their breath, their hands taking my body from me, killing me from the inside out.

I do not know why I turned to food. Or I do. I was lonely and scared and food offered an immediate satisfaction. Food offered comfort when I needed to be comforted and did not know how to ask for what I needed from those who loved me. Food tasted good and made me feel better. Food was the one thing within my reach.

Until I started gaining weight, I had a healthy attitude toward food. My mother is not a woman with a passion for cooking, but she harbors an intense passion for her family. Throughout my childhood, she prepared healthy, well-rounded meals for us, which we ate together at the dinner table. There were no rushed dinners sitting in front of the television or standing at the kitchen counter. We kids eagerly talked about our latest school projects, like a suspension bridge made out of balsa wood or a baking soda volcano. We shared our accomplishments, like a good report card—which was of course the expectation—or a goal scored in a soccer match. My brothers and I bickered toward the end of dinner, usually over who would do the dishes. My
parents, Haitian immigrants, talked about things we only half understood, like the American neighbors or my father's latest construction project. We talked about the goings-on of the world. We talked about what we wanted for ourselves. I took it for granted that this is what all families did—come together and become an island unto themselves, the kitchen table the sun around which we revolved.

The food my mother cooked for us was good, but it was secondary to the way we invested in being so connected to one another. My parents always made it seem like my brothers and I were terribly interesting, asking us thoughtful questions about our childish musings, urging us to be our best selves. If we were slighted, they were offended on our behalf. When we had some small moment of glory, they reveled in it. I fell asleep most nights flush with the joy of knowing I belonged to these people and they belonged to me.

Even as I became more and more withdrawn, my family remained strong, connected in these intimate, indelible ways. I have no doubt that my parents noticed the change in me. They would continue to notice, to worry over me, for the next twenty years and longer. But they didn't know how to talk to me and I didn't let them in. When they tried, I deflected, refusing to take the lifelines they offered me. The longer I kept my secret, the more attached I became to keeping my truth to myself, the more I nurtured my silence.

The only way I know of moving through the world is as a Haitian American, a Haitian daughter. A Haitian daughter is a good girl. She is respectful, studious, hardworking. She never forgets the importance of her heritage. We are part of the first free black nation in the Western Hemisphere, my brothers and I were often told. No matter how far we have fallen, when it matters most, we rise.

Haitians love the food from our island, but they judge gluttony. I suspect this rises out of the poverty for which Haiti is too often and too narrowly known. When you are overweight in a Haitian family, your body is a family concern. Everyone—siblings, parents, aunts, uncles, grandmothers, cousins—has an opinion, judgment, or piece of counsel. They mean well. We love hard and that love is inescapable. My family has been inordinately preoccupied with my body since I was thirteen years old.

My mother, who stayed home to raise my brothers and me, did not teach me how to cook, and I had little interest in being taught. I just enjoyed watching her prepare our
meals from the periphery of the kitchen—the efficiency with which she pursued the task always impressed me. Her brow furrowed in concentration. She could hold a conversation, but when something demanded her attention, she hushed and it was like the whole world fell away from her. She did not enjoy sharing the kitchen space and did not want help. She always wore latex gloves, like a doctor—to avoid contamination, she said. She was known to add a drop of Clorox to the water when washing meat or fruit or vegetables. She washed a dish or cutting board or bowl immediately after it had been used. Save for the aromas wafting from the gas stove, you would never know my mother was cooking.

Throughout my childhood, my mother prepared a bewildering combination of foods—American dishes from the Betty Crocker Cookbook or The Joy of Cooking one night, and a Haitian meal the next. The dishes I remember, the ones I love most, are Haitian—legumes, fried plantains, red rice, black rice; griyo, or pork marinated in blood orange and roasted with shallots; Haitian macaroni and cheese—everything served with sauce (a tomato-based sauce with thyme, peppers, and onions) and spicy pickled vegetables, everything made from scratch. This was how my mother demonstrated her affection.

My mother didn’t believe in processed foods or fast food, so I have never eaten many foods people take for granted—TV dinners, Chef Boyardee, Kraft Mac &
To tell the story of my body is to tell you about shame—being ashamed of how I look, ashamed of my weakness, the shame of knowing it is in my power to change my body and yet, year after year, not changing it. Or I try, I do. I eat right. I work out. My body becomes smaller and starts to feel more like mine and not a cage of flesh I carry with me. That’s when I feel a new kind of panic because I am seen in a different way. My body becomes a different source of discussion. I have more wardrobe options and there is that intoxicating moment when a much smaller pair of pants slips over my body and a shirt drapes easily over my shoulders. The vanity nestled in the cave of my chest swells.

In such moments, I see myself in the mirror, narrower, more angular. I recognize the me I could have, should have, would have been and want to be. That version of myself is terrifying and maybe even beautiful, so I panic, and within days or weeks, I undo all the progress I’ve made. I stop going to the gym. I stop eating right. I do this until I feel safe again.
Most of us have these versions of ourselves that terrify us. We have these imperfect bodies we don't quite know how to cope with. We have these shames we keep to ourselves because to show ourselves as we are, no more and no less, would be too much.

Shame is a difficult thing. People certainly try to shame me for being fat. When I am walking down the street, men lean out of their car windows and shout vulgar things at me about my body, how they see it, and how it upsets them that I am not catering to their gaze and their preferences and desires. I try not to take these men seriously because what they are really saying is, "I am not attracted to you. I do not want to fuck you, and this confuses my understanding of my masculinity, entitlement, and place in this world." It is not my job to please them with my body.

It is, however, difficult to hold on to what I know in the face of what I feel when I am reminded so publicly, so violently, of how certain people see me. It is difficult to not feel like I am the problem, and like I should do whatever it takes to make sure I don't compel such men to taunt me in the future.

Fat shaming is real, constant, and rather pointed. There are a shocking number of people who believe they can simply torment fat people into weight loss and disciplining their bodies or disappearing their bodies from the public sphere. They believe they are medical experts, listing a litany of health problems associated with fatness as personal affronts. These tormentors bind themselves in righteousness when they point out the obvious—that our bodies are unruly, defiant, fat. It's a strange civic-minded cruelty. When people try to shame me for being fat, I feel rage. I get stubborn. I want to make myself fatter to spite the shamers, even though the only person I would really be spiting is myself.
I am taking small steps toward the life I want. For the past twelve years, I have lived, rather unhappily, in rural America. As a black woman, this has been trying, at best. If I'm being honest with myself, other than graduate school, where I didn't have a choice in where I lived, I have been hiding. I'm afraid to live in a city where, at least in my mind, everyone is thin, athletic, beautiful, and I am an abominable woman.

I spent five years in Michigan's Upper Peninsula—a place I didn't even know existed until I moved there to attend graduate school. I lived in a town of four thousand people. The next town over, over the portage bridge, had seven thousand people. In my town, the street signs were in both English and Finnish because the town had the highest concentration of Finns outside of Finland. We were so far north that my blackness was more a curiosity than a threat. I was a woman out of place, but I did not always feel unsafe. There were the abandoned copper mines and the vast majesty of Lake Superior and so much forest cloaking everything.
During fall, deer hunting, so much venison. The winters were endless, snow in unfathomable quantities, the aching whine of snowmobiles. There was loneliness. There were my friends, who made the isolation bearable. There was a man who made everything beautiful.

In rural Illinois, I lived in a town surrounded by cornfields, in an apartment complex next to an open meadow, the site of ambition thwarted when the developer who built the complex ran out of money. The meadow was wide and green, bordered by trees. In the fall, I often saw a family of deer galloping across the field. They reminded me of Michigan. Especially early on, they made me think, \textit{I want to go home}, and I would stare, that my heart, my body, considered such an unexpected place home. The man didn't follow. The man didn't understand why I would not, could not, raise brown children in the only place he had ever called home. There was more to it, but there was also that. At the end of every summer, a farmer threshed the meadow and hauled the hay away. I stood on my balcony and watched as he worked, methodically, making the land useful. I had a job, I kept telling myself. At least I had a job. This town was bigger. I nurtured a very small dream—to live in a place where I could get my hair done—without knowing if that dream would ever come true. There was a Starbucks, though not much else. There was loneliness. There were a few very, very unsuitable men who made everything ugly. We were three hours from Chicago, so my blackness was less of a curiosity, more of a threat. And there were the black students on campus, the nerve of them, daring to pursue higher education. In the local newspaper, residents wrote angry letters about a new criminal element—the scourge of youthful black ambition, black joy. In my more generous moments, I tried to believe the locals were using anger to mask their fear of living in a dying town in a changing world.

Four years later, I moved to central Indiana, a much bigger town, a small city really. In the first weeks, I was racially profiled in an electronics store. Living here never got better. When I lamented how uncomfortable I was and am here, local acquaintances often tried to tell me, in different ways, \textit{Not all Hoosiers,} much in the same way men on social media would say, \textit{Not all men,} to detail discussions about misogyny. There is loneliness. The confederacy is alive and well here though we are hundreds of miles from the Old South. There is a man who drives around in an imposing black pickup truck with white-supremacist flags flying from the rear. My dental hygienist tells me I live in a bad part of town. There are no bad parts of town here, not really. In the local newspaper, residents write angry letters about a new criminal element in town. “People from Chicago,” they say, which is code for black people. On campus, pro-life students chalk messages on sidewalks like “Planned Parenthood #1 Killer of Black Lives” and “Hands up, don’t abort.” My blackness is, again, a threat.
I don't feel safe, but I know how lucky I am, which leaves me wondering how unsafe black people leading more precarious lives must feel.

Friends in cities have long asked me how I do it—spending year after year in these small towns that are so inhospitable to blackness. I say I'm from the Midwest, which I am, and that I have never lived in a big city, which is also true. I say that the Midwest is home even if this home does not always embrace me, and that the Midwest is a vibrant, necessary place. I say I can be a writer anywhere, and as an academic, I go where the work takes me. Or, I said these things. Now, I am simply weary. I say, "I hate it here," and a rush of pleasure fills me. I worry that I can't be happy or feel safe anywhere. But then I travel to places where my blackness is unremarkable, where I don't feel like I have to constantly defend my right to breathe, to be. I am nurturing a new dream of a place I already think of as home—bright sky, big ocean. I'm learning to make a home for myself based on what I want and need, in my heart of hearts. I've decided that I will not allow my body to dictate my existence, at least, not entirely. I will not hide from the world.
I often wonder who I would have been if this terrible thing had not happened to me, if I hadn’t spent so much of my life hungering so much. I wonder what Other Roxane’s life would be like, and when I imagine this woman who somehow made it to adulthood unscarred, she is everything I am not. She is thin and attractive, popular, successful, married with a child or two. She has a good job and an amazing wardrobe. She runs and plays tennis. She is confident. She is sexy and desired. She walks down the street with her head held high. She isn’t always scared and anxious. Her life isn’t perfect, but she is at peace. She is at ease.

Or put another way, I’ve been thinking a lot about feeling comfortable in one’s body and what a luxury that must be. Does anyone feel comfortable in their bodies? Glossy magazines lead me to believe that this is a rare experience, indeed. The way my friends talk about their bodies also leads me to that same conclusion. Every woman I know is on a perpetual diet. I know I don’t feel comfortable in my body, but I want to and that’s what I am working toward. I am working toward abandoning the damaging cultural messages that tell me my worth is strictly tied up in my body. I am trying to undo all the hateful things I tell myself. I am trying to find ways to hold my head high when I walk into a room, and to stare right back when people stare at me.

I know that it isn’t merely weight loss that will help me feel comfortable in my body. Intellectually, I do not equate thinness with happiness. I could wake up thin tomorrow and I would still carry the same baggage I have been hauling around for almost thirty years. I would still bear the scar tissue of many of those years as a fat person in a cruel world.

One of my biggest fears is that I will never cut away all that scar tissue. One of my biggest hopes is that one day, I will have cut away most of that scar tissue.