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'4st 7lbs': Eating disorders, between horror and survival

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'It always amazes me about eating disorders, how they destroy your life and save your life simultaneously'.

There is a critical time ('a very narrow seam line'), she said, when you have to recognize that this eating disorder you've held onto, the disorder you felt has been keeping you alive, will kill you if you don't let go. It was August 2011, nearly six years after our first meeting, and Hadas* and I were discussing the enduring recovery she had made, after a decade of anorexia and bulimia. At the height of her eating disorder, she reflected, starvation, bingeing, and purging meant literal survival: 'It saves you from dying; it saves you from losing your mind'. And there was no attempted letting go, not even an acknowledging of the problem ('the brain doesn't let you know one moment before it can live without') – only the paradoxical practice of self-destruction for survival's sake.

Months later, listening to the Manic Street Preachers' '4st 7lbs' – Richey James Edwards' poetic rendering of anorexic decline – I thought of Hadas' words, in their minimalist commentary: destruction; dying; losing your mind; saving your life.

'4st 7lbs' is sung in body parts and numbers. Its protagonist, a nameless adolescent girl, perpetually looks downward, fixing her gaze on her breasts, her ribs, her feet, the scale. She counts herself down, lying in wait for the non-launch, for the imminent stillness. Six, five two, four seven. 'May I bud, but never flower'.

What first intrigued me about the song was the physical detail with which Edwards mapped the girl's deterioration. In years of working with people with eating disorders, I rarely heard such detailed accounts: narratives often glossed over years in single sentences, the days and weeks melting into one another, the subtleties of bodily change going unnoticed, until crisis, seemingly slipping out of nowhere, struck. So while '4st 7lbs', released on *The Holy Bible* in 1994, has been interpreted as Edwards' reflection on his own anorexia,¹ I found it significant that the song unequivocally portrayed the anorexic world of a teenage girl. It seemed to me that through invoking a 'template anorectic', Edwards' insights had assumed the additional dimension of an observer's commentary, his lyrics grappling with the anorexic experience on a broader scale.

And '4st 7lbs' subverts our expectations about anorexia – how it feels, what it really is 'about'. As the song begins, we are immediately drawn in, the teenage girl serving as a compelling, taken-for-granted, anorexic subject, comforting in her familiar figure. But Edwards touches on the 'commonsense' of eating disorders, of why an adolescent girl would starve herself, only to pull the rug from under our feet. There is the oppressive family meal, the girl force-fed meat and criticism, as she silently fantasizes a chrysalis-like transformation – a release from her parents' misconceptions of her body and destiny. There are the images that speak to her in their skinny glory: the song is anchored in references to women known for their thinness – Kate Moss, Emma Balfour, Kristin McMenamy, Karen Krizanovich.² But they are only anchors, images calling out from her bedroom wall, until she no longer listens. Then, as the song winds toward its conclusion, James Dean Bradfield singing the girl's growing apathy, the protagonist utters: 'legs bent, stockinged, I am Twiggy / and I don't mind the horror that surrounds me'. *Becoming Twiggy* – striking a momentary pose, feeling that gamine skinniness in her own emaciated legs – she embodies that imagined other, completely. And there is no more horror in her world.

We never learn what horror haunts the girl – we never even learn *of* this horror, until it is dropped, a single word, not to be followed up. We never learn of this horror precisely because it is shut out, because it must be kept at bay. The single-minded journey through decreasing numbers and protruding bones leads the narrator inward and away. That unspeakable horror – that horror neither to be seen nor felt –

remains suspended, strangely opaque against the horrors the listeners might feel they had witnessed by then: skin 'stretching taut, cling-film on bone'; hands reduced to 'trembling stalks'; a young girl declaring, 'I want to be so skinny that I rot from view'. But it becomes clear: we know nothing of the horror *she* experiences. For her, anorexia is not the horror from which she must be freed.

Horror, for the people who took part in my research, took many forms. It wound through senses and thoughts, remembrance and practice. It was often unspeakable, due to shame, or fear, or pain, or the simple lack of words to capture its very ambiguity. It inhered in the traumatic memories of abuse, of neglect, of sexual assault; in scathing experiences of vulnerability and need; in the exigencies of a sometimes-overwhelming world; and in the body itself, in its fragility and porosity, its unpredictable, material threats.³ Eating disorders, as one participant, Angie,* said, were 'medication' to counter this horror. And although Angie's eating disorder led to life-threatening complications – in her words, the disorder was killing her – she explained: 'it guards me, somehow, from the world... it gives me some strength to continue surviving'.

How can this '*I am Twiggy*' sensation provide such a powerful antidote to horror? The idea of eating disorders as a means of coping is accepted in psychology and psychiatry literatures, with eating disordered practice seen as a comforting, even sedating, response to adverse feelings and thoughts. But in '*4st 7lbs*', this idea stretched beyond the realm of coping mechanisms. Eating disorder, as the participants in my study described it, was not merely as a 'tool', but a form of 'being-in-the-world'. In Edwards' lyrics, it isn't the mere thought of thinness, the mirrored reflection of one's emaciated self, that provides comfort: rather, it is that all-encompassing sensation of *becoming*, of transforming ('my cocoon shedding') into Twiggy – of coming into a bearable existence. The girl's journey to her target weight of 4st 7lbs is embodied, felt in blurred vision, tremor, and hunger pangs. As she immerses herself in her intensely changing body, consumed in sensing and observing her 'only remaining home', she detaches from the world, allowing herself to live within, but *not with*, it: 'I want to walk in the snow / and not leave a footprint'.

'*4st 7lbs*' is bookended by death – its preamble sampled from a televised interview with Caraline Neville-Lister (who died of anorexia in 1994),⁴ its end marked by the protagonist's resignation to indefinite starvation. Edwards himself disappeared in 1995, and has been presumed dead since 2008.⁵ The imminent risk of dying is an inescapable reality of eating disorders, making that central paradox – destroying oneself to save one's own life – all the more acute. Yet I still find that the song's profoundest insight is about survival. Edwards eloquently captured eating disorder as an immersive, lived process. Anorexic existence, as he described it, may have been anesthetized – a drawing inward to counter all horror – but was also, amid active destruction and detachment, fiercely sensed and experienced, enabling a tolerable form of 'being-in-the-world'. Could this be a central driver of enduring eating disordered practice? The stories of Hadas, Angie, and other participants who recovered from or continued to experience long-term eating disorders suggest that it is.

Note

* This is a pseudonym, used to maintain confidentiality.

References

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