

ATLAS OF THE BODY

Nicole Cuffy



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I. Metatarsus

On pillowy summer afternoons Maya runs to Zaire's house, watercolor sky above her scarred from passing planes. Her body is light, easy for the world to hold. She digs her toes into the hot, red earth and imagines leaping up and never coming down, but going up and up and up, burning in the white sun. Zaire waits for her on his front lawn, and he looks like a child to her, even though she is a child too. Their feet are small and hard and brown. They barely feel the ground's heat on the soles of their feet.

Damp, homey smell of the woods, dancing leaves green membranes against the sun, a private world of crystallized light and the music of birds and the small movements of unseen things. Zaire climbs a tree and Maya scrapes her knees and the insides of her thighs trying to follow him. He comes down to help her, tries to push her up, but neither of them is strong enough. They fall down, young limbs awkward and careless. Maya catches his elbow in her ribs. It does not hurt. She can smell his sweat, sour but somehow still nice, a summery smell.

Maya can dance on her toes. The uneven ground with its hidden obstacles makes it hard, but she does not mind stumbling. Zaire rises up onto his toes too, and they laugh, dancing with each other, as a part of each other. They are two wild animals. Everything in the world is their mother. They make their own

music, compete with the birds. Zaire stumbles and falls, disturbs a mound of fire ants. They cover his bare feet, his bare legs, him rolling around and hollering, making Maya laugh as she screams, and him laughing and hollering, and the ants stinging. Fierce as their namesake.

...

Maya examines her hands. They are small, calloused. The backs of her hands are dry and brown, but the insides are pink, lined with brown-tinged creases. If she looks very closely, she can see her fingerprints. If she flexes all her fingers as hard as she can, she can see the green veins under her skin, the knobs of her bones. She likes the little web of skin between her thumb and her pointer finger. She likes that, no matter how hard she pinches there, it doesn't really hurt.

Maya walks to church with Zaire and his older brother. Their mothers have given them tithe money, and it jangles in their pockets, though Maya is wearing a dress with no pockets, and so her money jangles in Zaire's. 'Hey,' says Zaire's brother. 'What do you say we take this money and head to the gas station? We can get candy bars and soda.' She and Zaire look at each other. 'We're supposed to put it in the basket,' says Zaire.

Zaire's brother rolls his eyes. 'Don't be such a pussy.' She and Zaire look at each other again. They do not shrug, but the shrug is implied. What can they do? There are two of them, but still, Zaire's brother is in charge. The other day when Zaire's mom made gumbo for dinner—Maya stayed over and ate with

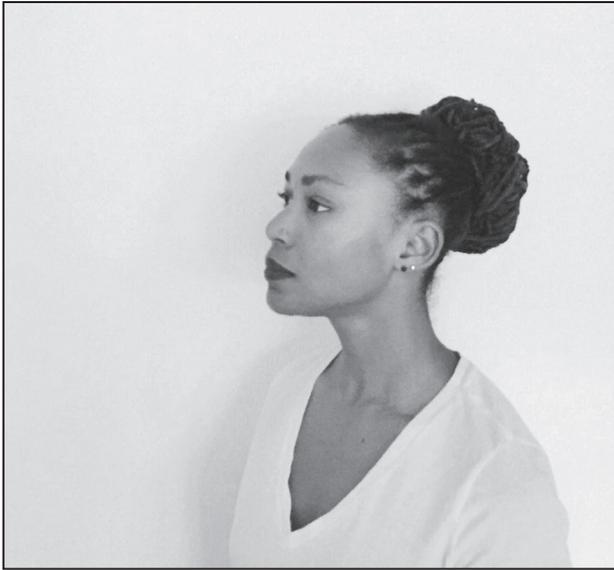
them—Zaire’s brother picked out all the chicken for himself, scooping it right off the bones and leaving only gristle and bone behind, and no one said anything to him, not even Zaire’s mother.

They go to the gas station. Zaire’s brother does not get soda or candy but a pack of cigarettes, and she and Zaire get a bag of extra hot Cheetos each and a Sierra Mist and a Pepsi, respectively. Among the three of them, there’s eight cents left to put in the basket. They never go to church, anyway. They can’t bring the food in, or else people will know where their tithing money went. They go around to the back of the gas station, where the churchgoers driving by won’t see them, and she and Zaire eat their chips and drink their soda, and Zaire’s brother smokes one cigarette after the other, until half the pack is gone.

II. Ascending Colon

She has only just now realized that she lives in poverty. A collection of one-eyed houses, patched with plywood, their roofs brittle and broken open in places, wounded old men. The woods she and Zaire once found so majestic are only a patch of trees that separates the houses from the weed-strangled railroad tracks. This has been her home.

She opens the refrigerator and finds a small gathering of things, none of which make a meal—pickles, a carton containing only one egg, expired milk, a half-empty jar of jelly. Zaire’s refrig-



Nicole Cuffy is a proud Brooklyn emigrant who enjoys yoga, ballet, and writing literary fiction. Her work can be found in *Mason's Road* and *The Masters Review Volume VI*. Nicole holds a BA in Writing from Columbia University and an MFA in Fiction from the New School. She does her best writing when she's writing by hand, and she is a high-functioning book addict. When she isn't reading, writing, or yogaing, she is most likely dancing. She can be found muddling her way through Twitter and life in general @nicolethecuffy.