

**Anh Hua. “Body Memoir: Remembering Familial Past with Storytelling.”**  
*Storytelling and the Body: An Inclusive Interdisciplinary Project. Verona, Italy. July 15-16, 2019.*

For four months or so I have been experiencing vertigo. As if the world has lost its balance and I have to keep my eyes shut to ease the wobbles. Be still. Be quiet. Be gentle. The world spins and rocks out of control; perspectives do not align. It's as if I am caught in an experimental avant-garde film or documentary, and my vision is filtered through a hand-held camera, shaken by the jolted journey of the filmmaker. At times it feels like an invisible disability. I am left adrift, as if on a boat alone, cast by an inexplicable mystery. This is a lonely place. It tires me and I must rest more, recline to rid of the seasickness that is caused by a cold virus that left my ear affected. The hairs in my left ear are out of whack, unable to aid me to balance in this world. The crystals in my ear cascade, like harp music, only I want this song to stop. I am challenged to accept that displaced crystals can throw our lives off on a detour. Make the spinning, the terrible spinning, stop!! The doctor said: there is no meds, just rest, drink lots of H<sub>2</sub>O, do the exercise to make the crystals fall back into place in your ears. No coffee or tea, no caffeine, no alcohol. And avoid salty foods and drinks. It forces me to be humble; my ego is deflated. And I am asked to slow down a notch, to understand spiritually what this lesson has for me, perhaps to rest more in order to listen within, to find my inner god, to stop the madness and chasing, and allow life to greet me with more gentleness. I had to learn to be gentler with my embodiment, my mindbodyspirit wholeness. The warrior in me resting and I must look elsewhere, outside of myself, for comfort, for guidance, for

coping and survival. It is a common illness; 40% of all Americans over 40 experience this at least once in their lifetime, so they say.

The human body estranged, subject-object  
Malleable changing succinctly refused to be faithful to us  
The human body a laborious body  
Years of invisible labor of love to keep it afloat  
Body holy succumbs to aging, illness, wounds  
Forces outside our controls, warring  
We flex our muscles and egos  
To prove to the world we are strong  
Then we attend yoga retreats  
To quell our sorrows

For many years, I felt my body was mine. I am its author and creator, although Ah-ma gave birth to me, Ah-pa had a small part in my creation, and God(desses) laid the blueprints and carved my embodiment and space for my earthly co-existence. I was born with a thin long body, as if over-stretched from the birthing process, my head swooshed into oval, and my torso lagging behind, undecided if it wanted to enter the world or not. As a result, I became the tallest girl in my classes in my elementary school in Windsor, an affect of an early puberty.

I felt my body was mine, as a young girl, as a young woman. I spent much energy cultivating it, keeping it trim, tight, tone, healthy, vital, by swimming every single

day for one hour since I was 19, for 39 years. I made an effort to eat healthy, consuming a 90% vegetarian diet, organic if possible. Although a bookworm, I have an excess energy that needs to be expended in order to stay balanced. So I swim, walk, run, hike, bike, and dance a lot. I even dabbled into athletic activities such as canoeing, kayaking, whitewater rafting, and spelunking or cave exploration. I have a hard time staying put in one place, which is counter-intuitive to a scholarly life. I prided myself for weighing 110 lb. since I was 14.

Asian, female, 5 feet 4 inches, 110 lb., educated, gifted, and not seeking anyone, quite content with her own company, eccentric but shy, quiet with strangers but ‘hum hum talk-stories’ with those she loves. Today she is pressured to declare: she/her/hers, but even that pronoun does not laid suit, too restrictive. She needs other moonly, a world succinct with imagination and flights.

The Filipina nurse weighed my sexed body

The scale malfunctioned to 117 lb.

7 lb. higher than usual

Must be my heavy knee-high black leather boots

The incline in number post heart surgery

Makes me less sexy in a world of women

Thin as mint gum-sticks, at least in South Cal

We sexed women feel in a world

Where there is little control for us

We must maintain law and order onto our bodies

So that the world makes sense

So that the world stays balanced

My Asian feminine body surveiled in PB SD

An envious blond Russian Pilate instructor slyly said:

‘She swims everyday and still she has a belly’

She drinks a martini on a balcony and watched

My un-flat belly with scorn by the marine pool

I wondered why she is unhappy

Discontent in her woman-to-woman violence

I comforted myself with a bowl of phó with meatballs

Spring rolls on the side, dipped in creamy peanut sauce

I licked my decadent fingers and longed for Asia

Where folks eat five meals a day

And still feel hungry

December 27, 2017, I fainted twice in Ah-ma’s petite Black and white checkered bathroom in Welland Canada, while Ah-ma and Vanessa were asleep. They didn’t know what happened to me. I had come home to visit Ah-ma for the Christmas holiday for two weeks, leaving South Cal where I teach to immerse myself in the Canadian wintery landscapes, in order to spend quality time with Ah-ma and my little sister. I always enjoy

my visits home, since I am still a Canadian at heart. A few months before I fainted twice, I was having chest pain when I walked or climbed stairs, and when I was lecturing. I brushed it off as stress, for during that time Dave, Ah-ma's second husband and my stepfather, was diagnosed with lung cancer, and the doctor said he didn't have a chance to live very long. Six months max. He was a commercial painter. In his early 20s, he had worked at a job in Northern Canada that exposed him to asbestos. He never went to a doctor his whole life. Only after he fell from trimming a tree in his son's backyard and hurt his back did he see a doctor, and discovered both of his lungs were black. Like tar. He was diagnosed with fourth stage of lung cancer. He lived a few more months than anticipated, but eventually ascended to heaven. His frail pale body in the last six months of his life still stuck with me. He could barely eat sicken by the smell of salmon which he used to love. Sometimes he could eat steak and cherry pie, and that famous dish Ah-ma had just learned from her friend Gloria, ribs slow-cooked in a pineapple sweet broth. I still remember that large cancerous growth the size of a golf ball protruding from his head; they said the cancer had travelled from his lungs to his spine to his brain. They injected morphine in him, first in small dosage and later more so, to ease the pain. Pain was written on his embodiment, in his expression, in his movement, in his breath, in his storytelling. That day Ah-ma was shaken by life. When Dave's son and daughter came to our side door to deliver the sad news, they seem peaceful, accepting. But Ah-ma's body shook with tears, mourning with loss. Vanessa and I each held her up, by her armpits on each side; to help her stand up right, to stand strong, as most living must, in times of sorrows.

A few days after I fainted twice, Ah-ma received the news that her thyroid cancer came back the third time. Perhaps her cancer returned because of stress, from worrying about Dave's lung cancer and his quick decline in health. Eventually she would need neck surgery to remove the thyroid cancerous cells and five weeks of radiation. Up until now, none of us have had radiation before, so we were all nervous about its side effects: dry mouth, gradual loss of voice, burning of skin like a bad sunburnt, inability to eat, fatigue, lost of energy, inability to care for oneself, possible change of voice. I had thought my fainting was due to stress of worrying about two of my elders having cancer at the same time, one the doctor had prescribed the inevitability of death, and the other might have a chance to conquer cancer the third time. Thyroid cancer is less invasive than lung cancer; I comforted myself. I live to make Ah-ma live longer. Ah-ma already has too many illnesses in her later years: open heart surgery in early 1980s to close the hole in her heart that she was born with, diabetes, thyroid cancer, fibromyalgia, cholesterol, high blood pressure, glaucoma, flat feet that makes her feet hurt when she walks from years of wearing high heels, and so on. It comes with old age; old people in North America take more pills than ever before, but we also live longer than previous generations. Ah-ma took early retirement when she turned 50, to nurture her bodymindspirit, so she may live longer. She swims everyday for one hour with her Olympic-sized legs, splashing like a dolphin, towards good health. As long as the cancer cells go away, as long as we can conquer them, make them laid dormant, make them vanish, then our lives will be okay.

I remembered going to the bathroom in the middle of night. As I was about to leave the bathroom, the room began to spin, my body slid onto the ground, and suddenly

I find myself lying on the tile floor, sweating and confused. I fainted. Because I landed on my tailbone it hurt for a month; I also had a bruise on my left forehead, for I had bang my head on the sink corner during the fall. I quickly got up and crawled back to my guestroom. I fainted the second time in the bedroom, this time, onto the soft coffee-colored carpet.

My body in a seizure

Is it a heart attack?

Blood clot artery

Artillery arrowhead in soft tissue

I am watching my unfaithful body from a distance

I want to love myself; I want to save myself

Is there a doctor in the house?

No, there is no one to help me

To his each, or her own, I am hewn alone in this darkness

Moss mountain green, light spinning and blackout

I realized I no longer have control over what my body wants to do

It is a convulsion dance, as if channeling a spirit

Have I gone to heaven and back and this is the last breath

But it is a breath of struggle...breathe, breathe...exhale, exhale

You must come back and leave that convulsing body

Because Ah-ma and Dave need you now more than ever

They need you to live so they may live

I quickly climbed on my hands and knees, pushed myself up. Lying on the tall Victorian bed in a room of antique furniture, I tried to close my eyes, in hopes this was all but a dream that happened to someone else. Nightfall is a surreal mishap. The next morning I was perfectly fine, chirpy with storytelling. I told the story to Ah-ma, my sisters and my friend Steve, and they were all in shock. My sexed body failed me.

When the holiday was over, I had to return to San Diego to teach. By March, after having various blood tests, the cardiac echo stress test, and an MRI, my doctor and cardiologist found I was born with a hole in my heart, like Ah-ma. We were both born as blue babies. Actually I received the diagnosis sometime in August. Events blur from one to another, as I had to cope with Dave's lung cancer and death, Ah-ma's thyroid cancer returning the third time, and my heart problems, all within one year. In April, I took five weeks of medical leave to return home to care for Ah-ma along with my sister Vanessa while she had her thyroid surgery. She survived the surgery, but this time it was harder, two lines much deeper and longer, like two lines of pearls with heavy meaning, and hauntings of the last two surgeries. Ah-ma healed quickly like in the past, but it took a toll on her body, for this time she was closer to 70. It's harder for our elders to heal from such intrusions onto our bodies. Once Ah-ma healed from her surgery, she pushed me to return to San Diego so I may take care of my heart problems. Vanessa remained with her through the five weeks of radiation. I felt tremendous guilt. I should have been there for her then, also. But she wanted me to heal myself.

My SD cardiologist wanted me to have a heart surgery, by way of Cardiac Catheterization, with another LA cardiologist, Dr. Morris Salem, who had performed



almost 900 successful surgeries with no negative results. I had to trust faith that it was time, it was an emergency, and I needed to act fast and trust Dr. Salem. If I wanted to live longer. If I wanted to live a healthy lifestyle. They punctured a small hole in my large vein in my groin area, and operated by bringing the small device through my vein up into my heart to block the 1 cm hole that I was born with as a 'blue baby.' The device would open like a nickel blossom and filled up the hole, waiting for my heart tissue to grow around it, to seal. They placed a small camera down my throat into the heart so they could see the operation. It's a less intrusive surgery or procedure, with a cut of 3 mm hole in my groin area. Steve drove me to LA and we booked a hotel in Little Korea. The hospital was in Hollywood. He stayed with me for two days and one night in the LA Kaiser hospital in a cot resting in one corner. The surgery was a success! Within 24 hours, they released me from the hospital the next day and the cardiologist told me to keep moving, walking a bit if I could to get the blood moving. With Steve by my side, 24 hours after my glamorous heart surgery in Hollywood, I walked seven blocks from our hotel in Little Korea to a restaurant to have Korean steam buns and dumplings. I remember joking with Steve about how the four steamed buns look like female breasts, such protruding nipples. We laughed the entire time before, during and after the heart surgery, making light of the situation although we were both rather nervous. I made many doctors and nurses laugh, telling jokes to ease their days and worries, thanking them for their kind care for my wellbeing. I wanted to prove to myself I wasn't frail, that I was strong, that I could keep my loved ones alive and I could thrive and healed within 24 hours post-surgery. I limped with pain and stiffness, but I was able to walk to a restaurant the next day. Some moments are more heroic than others. When I tell folks

this story, their eyebrows always raise with disbelief. Within six months, my heart healed completely and I am in perfect health!! I learned that one cannot survive alone in this world, even for someone as independent as I am.

Ah-ma also survived thyroid cancer the third time. With the recent check up at her doctor, he said the cancer is gone. Now she can move on and enjoy life more. I encouraged her to travel. She made two trips to San Diego to visit me and my sisters and her granddaughter Ellie, attended a wedding of my cousin in LA, and now she is here in Italy at this conference to tour with me in Italy and Greece. We plan to visit Venice, Verona, Rome and the Greek island Santorini for over two weeks.

Ah-ma and I are both blue babies

The one percent of the world

Babies born with a hole in the wall of their hearts

Turn blue when they arrive on earth, lacking oxygen

Ah-ma and I, kindred spirits bound more than by blood

We share the same histories, sometimes even the same memories

We share the same embodiment, bodies that mourn, heal, and thrive

Joyous of so many second chances

Life is breath, Ah-ma. Life is miracle.

You are a miracle on earth

And because so often you have almost lost yours

You know its blessings

You take nothing for granted

You taught me to strive forward

That nothing can bring us down

Nothing can crush us

As long as we have love

As long as we have family and kin

As long as we come together when one of us should fall

Fallen angels leave their feathers still

In my home and in my office

Sometimes I think Dave is leaving a bit of him to let us know

He is thriving and he is watching over us

To nurture us back to health and wellbeing

He keeps us in his heaven prayers and gaze

Our guardian angel, perhaps he painted the sky blue today

Ah-ma, I give you this feather here to remember flight

You gave me a diamond necklace for my healing heart

Through the holes in our hearts we were born more sensitive

To the world's suffering and emotive  
We see windows and pathways where there wasn't any  
We see beauty beyond dreams

Ah-ma, your presence add beauty to this world  
Your life and life stories an inspiration for us all  
Your courage, like a lioness whose mane  
Shelters us from further harm

Ah-ma, you taught me to hold a pen and a paintbrush  
I am a scholar-artist-healer-activist today  
Because of your examples  
You vogue with fashion, passion and compassion

When you remind us all to simply create on a daily basis  
And so I leave you with partial stories  
Of the tales you have lived  
Of the tales you have invented

This Body Memoir is dedicated to you, Ah-ma, and your wise and nurturing mothering...