

Phantoms  
By Jocelyn Brett

“For the rest of my life I will love with hands outstretched for things that are no longer there.”

Notes on Grief by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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My Great Aunt Elisabeth lost her right arm in a car crash in 1990. From that point on she lived with a phantom arm. The brain never fully comprehends that the limb is missing. Most people who have lost limbs have this phenomenon. Auntie grieved her loss for the next 33 years of her life. Her arm would itch, it'd reach out to catch things, it'd go to shake people's hands. When she closed her eyes, she was convinced it was there, only to be disappointed when she saw the empty space in which her arm waved. She'd also make it swear at people who annoyed her. It was Auntie's little secret.

She died last year; now both her and her arms are phantom.

I think grieverers have the same phenomenon but in reverse. We have phantom limbs, phantom touch. In our minds-body, we can feel the touch of the ones that have left us / dumped us / died. We feel them, real and fake all at once, the way my Auntie felt her arm. The mind might know they're gone, but when does the body catch on?

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My Granny had Alzheimer's and forgot everything before she died, including how to swallow. That last time I saw her, my lovely Granny had withered and turned into a living corpse in my absence. I slipped my hand in hers and held it, as I had done every week from when I was born to the age of 18. She turned her head slowly and looked at me, her finger jolted out towards me and lunged for my mouth. I let her finger run along my teeth, up and down, into my mouth probing my fleshy cheek. And for an instant in her blank eyes, I saw the tiniest glimmer of herself, the sides of her crusted lips twitched. I'd like to say when all else was gone she remembered the feel of her loved ones' hands but really, for some reason, it was my teeth that brought her back, if only for an instant.

I remember both versions of her hands now, the firm comfort when I was young, her thumb rubbing along the back of my hand or how she'd sandwich my smaller hand with both of hers, comparing them, and saying how wrinkly her hands had gotten. How she hardly recognised them. I didn't recognise the feel of those same hands the last time I saw her. Her warm, plump hands had shrivelled to claws, but by all rights, claws should be strong, these unfamiliar hands couldn't even hold on to mine. They were wilted, cold like she was already dead.

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Do you remember the feeling of a loose tooth? Using your tongue to rock it in your gum? Pressing it up to feel the harsh ridge at the tooth bottom. Delving beneath to the underbelly. So soft and raw. It was a sensual feeling, you and your tooth. The satisfaction when it was finally dislodged. Leaving that vulnerable crevice. Your tongue checking up on it. Repeatedly slivering in.

Obsessively.

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My best friend Molly was never the most comfortable with hugs (or any touch she didn't initiate). She used to stiffen up, every joint in her body glueing, preparing to be engulfed physically. It always shocked me that someone so flexible could become so stiff. Over the years of our friendship, I think she became more comfortable with being hugged, or maybe just used to it.

Because of this it always felt like a privilege when Molly did hug you, touch you. Her hands were like paws, long, pianists' paws (she'd always chewed her nails to stubs). So soft. Everything about her was soft. An honour when her shoulder brushed against mine. When she picked an eyelash from my cheek; the slight graze of her finger, brushing so gentle I could barely feel it. The unconscious, **normality** of touch.

I remember Mol holding my hand, only a handful of times. Always cold and slightly clammy. Such a precious weight. I can't remember the occasions or anything else, but I remember exactly how her fingers locked around mine.

I was always the front holder (I don't know what that means about our dynamic). Whenever I had her hand in mine I squeezed. *I wanted you to feel the love I have for you.* I wanted her to feel held. Treasured.

She wouldn't often hug tight, but when she did, she gave the best hugs. *But even then, it always seemed like you were counting the seconds until it should end.*

I'm usually pretty tactile with my close friends. *It felt odd that I never was with you, maybe in a certain way I was never really sure you were solid. Maybe that's why I treasured your touch, even when you were alive. It was a reminder that you were real. You were physical not some mystical being.* I refuse to see Molly, my physical, my very real best friend, as a mythical, angelic, spirit creature. *But it is hard because I feel you holding my hand more now you're dead.*

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We were there when she burned. We saw the smoke. Her body combusted and the particles danced into the wind, the last dance. We tasted the air, and we sobbed her in. Into the lungs, into the blood. She was the oxygen, the hydrogen, the nitrogen, the carbon and the calcium we breathed into, and through, our system.

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Maybe our cells remember.. .

I don't remember much science; Molly was the scientist. When people touch, skin on skin, are their cells touching? Are the atoms inside their cells touching? I remember something about covalent bonds holding hands, or do the electrons hold hands? Do our atoms bond if we hold tight enough? Dissolving the boundaries between bodies. People say when someone dies a piece of them lives in you forever, is this what they mean?

Aren't they researching cellular memory? If our bodies remember the trauma, then they must remember the touch of our phantoms. Whether it's through hormones, particles, bacteria, or some kind of spiritual force; our bodies, our cells, our atoms, broken down to the smallest level, surely they must remember.

Maybe one day my body won't remember. All the cells in your body die and regenerate, every seven years all your cells are new. Every cell. Gone. Regenerated. How many of your cells make up your skin? And how many are in your hands? I remember being told the fastest regenerating cells were in your intestine or something... but it would make sense if these skin cells regenerated faster, as they're on the outside and could get rubbed off...? Does this mean that most of my cells that held their hands have already gone? Forgotten?

All the cells my phantoms touched; those cells could already be gone. How would I know? How do I keep them? When the cells go will I forget the feel my phantoms then? Do I truly remember the feel of them now?