

an excerpt from

this is who I am
our beauty in all shapes and sizes

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Emily, 22

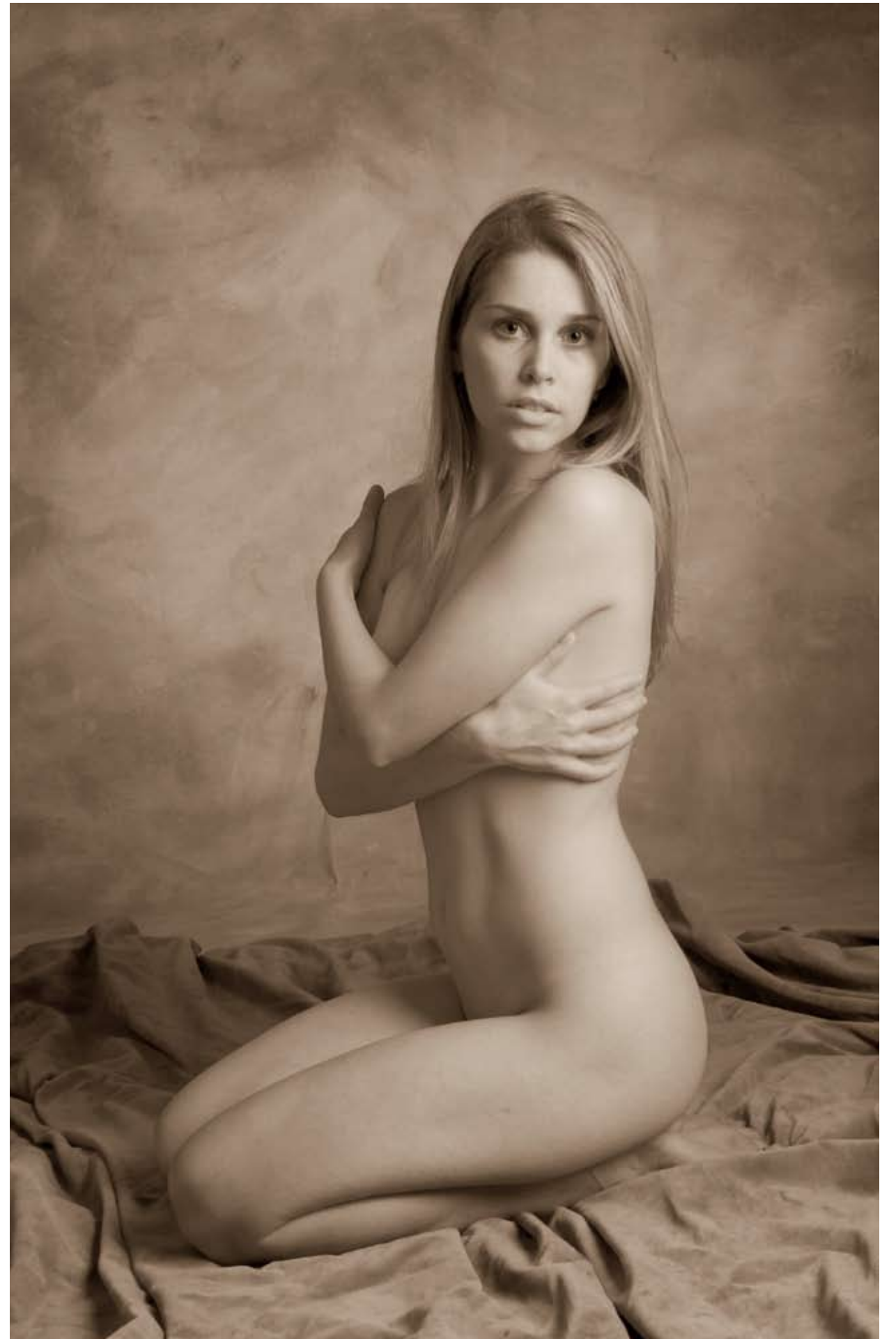
When people look at me, they see a healthy-looking twenty-two-year-old. What they can't see is that my body is a war zone inside. Even with all the doctor's visits, medications, time missed from school, canceled vacations, time in hospitals, procedures, X-rays, and surgeries, the hardest thing is when people say, "You look so normal."

Three weeks ago I had the upper lobe of my right lung removed due to complications from cystic fibrosis, a chronic and incurable disease. I'm still getting used to the idea of not being whole anymore; it's weird to think I'm missing a part of my body.

I have to remind myself that it is not my body's fault that I have to go through all this. Having an incurable disease and being chronically ill isn't easy. But this body of mine seems to keep chugging along and pulls through every time.

Looks can be deceiving in many ways. It's important to look deeper than the skin to get the whole picture before you decide what you see.

"When people look at me, they see a healthy-looking twenty-two-year-old."



Michelle, 58

When you're heavy, you become a nonperson. People look at you and think, "She's out of control" or "She doesn't have any willpower." Too much weight makes them uncomfortable. People believe that overweight people don't deserve love, either toward themselves or from someone else. A man once walked up to me and asked, "When's the baby due?" I've had people say, "Why would you have a boyfriend?"

I try to present a nice appearance, but the choice of clothes for larger women is terrifying. It's either the fat lady at the mall with sequins and pictures of kittens and puppies all over her chest or else a large copy of a skinny person's fashion (with hideous results).

In 2005 I was diagnosed with stage one breast cancer—which, by the way, I consider a blessing. In order to minimize the risk of recurrence, I decided to embrace health in every possible way. I lost seventy pounds, started dancing six times a week, and began to meditate.

Soon after finishing radiation, my hair fell out from stress. Now I was finally a normal size, but I was completely bald! I have no hair, no eyebrows, no eyelashes, and breasts that are two very different sizes. I look like a seal—a cute seal. Once again, I've become a nonperson. When I go out without my wig, all people see is my bald head, and it scares them. Their eyes quickly dart away. Luckily, I've found that the more I open my heart to other people, the easier maintaining my weight and adapting to being bald becomes. We all have something. Mine's just more obvious.



Nancy, 60

For a long time I took the Cartesian view that there was a mind-body separation. My body was sort of a taxicab that got my mind around. Perhaps this explains why I was capable of starving myself almost to death. When I was fifteen, I was five foot three and weighed sixty-four pounds.

Today I see myself as an integration of body, mind, and spirit. Feeling spiritually whole erases that old mind-body dichotomy and makes you feel pretty damn fine to boot! And marrying a man who totally, without condition, loves me has made me feel like my body is wonderful. My regret is that it took me into my fifties to feel this way and achieve a healthy body size. Gravity has, alas, taken its toll. But this is who I am at sixty, and I'm happy with myself.



Constance, 80

In a restroom on the university campus, a handwritten sign on the mirror reminds the user that “Everyone Is Beautiful,” as if trying to counteract the negative feedback most of us feel on viewing our own image.

Though I tend to avoid mirrors, I like catching a glimpse of my shadow in action when I’m walking or riding my bike. Most of the time I’m pleased that my body works pretty well, bore healthy children, and is relatively slow to break down as it ages. I try to give it what it needs: water, food, exercise, sleep. Since I retired, I can take a nap whenever I want, and I’ve had fewer long-lasting colds. I’d say menopause is God’s gift to women. I rejoice in freedom from the responsibility of reproduction.

It’s clear to me that I would have had more professional opportunities as an astronomer if I were a man. I like to imagine a system where everyone is reincarnated, switching gender at each reincarnation but retaining some memory of what it’s like to be the opposite sex. When I tried to deal with an egotistical colleague or a pompous administrator—almost invariably male in my day—I found it entertaining and soothing to visualize his next incarnation, maybe in the ninth month of his fifth pregnancy.



Jennifer, 33

We learn very early in life that beauty has a mysterious power. For years I thought I wanted others to find me beautiful, but what I really wanted all along was to find myself beautiful. What I didn't realize is that there isn't one kind of beauty. There isn't one person or group of people that possesses the monopoly on beauty. There isn't one face, body, hair, eye, or skin color that is the definition of beauty. Now I know there's an infinite amount of beauty—it can be found in the way a person moves, a well-sculpted arm, a graceful neck, lustrous hair, compassionate eyes, hardworking hands, a soothing voice, an enthusiastic heart. It's a powerful homecoming when we can hold our own gaze in the mirror, like what we see, and don't flick our eyes away from what is reflected back to us. I finally have found that.

For years I never gave my body much thought except for the things that I hated about it. Pregnancy pulled me back into my body, and for that I will always be grateful: for my full breasts, my soft belly marked with that mysterious *linea negra* running crookedly from my belly button in both directions. I even love the stretch mark that is a deep rose color, a crescent moon stemming from my belly button.

I don't know anyone who totally feels at home in her body except for my toddler daughter, who is too young to feel ashamed of anything. She likes to take off her clothes as soon as she comes home, and there she stands, plays, sits, climbs, and runs throughout the house, gloriously naked except for her diaper (and sometimes not even that). A sublime, beautiful body. She is totally unselfconscious. The idea of her turning against herself gives me pain. I want her to feel confident, to revel, to find herself beautiful in her own eyes.



Stephanie, 41

My body looks more like my mother's every day. Does everyone say that? Regular workouts don't seem to budge the steady coating of fat. I'd like to lose a lot of weight and gain a lot of muscle. I do triathlons; I would like to look like a triathlete. If you asked me ten years ago—when I was at least fifty pounds lighter—what I like about my body, I would have said absolutely nothing. Now I could care less what I look like when I'm competing.

What people don't realize when they look at me is that I am a lawyer and have two advanced degrees and am working on my third. People are always shocked. I'm not sure if I look dumb or if they just don't expect this from a black woman.



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every day. Does everyone say that?

STEPHANIE, 41

