

CARVE

HONEST FICTION



2020 RAYMOND CARVER CONTEST
GUEST JUDGE: PAM HOUSTON

Fall 2020 / \$12 US / \$16 CN



FICTION

Lindsay Kennedy
C. Adán Cabrera
Ella Martinsen Gorham
Anna Prawdzik Hull
L. Vocem

POETRY

Beth Spencer
Sean Cho A.
Anthony Aguero
Andrew Navarro
Esther Sun

NONFICTION

Sarah Yeazel
Clinton Crockett Peters

PLUS

Illustrations
Story Statshot
One to Watch
Decline/Accept

CARVE

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FALL 2020

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ONE TO WATCH

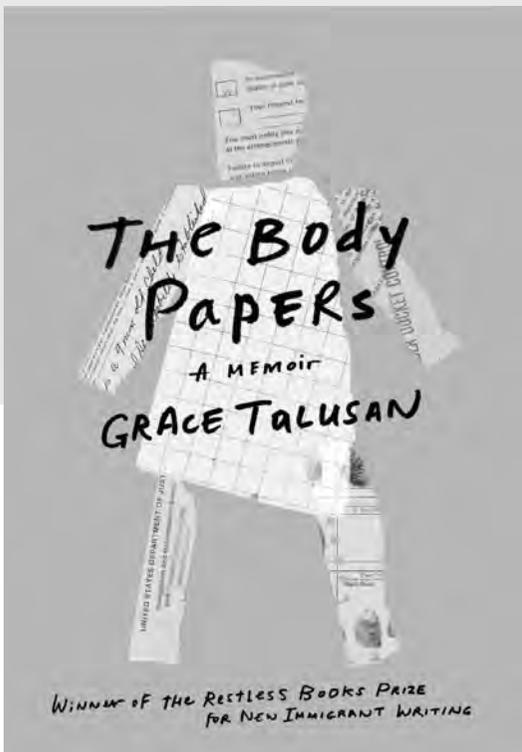
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ONE TO WATCH

What we're watching: literary events for writers, books by former contributors, and interviews with the authors of debut works the *Carve* community is excited to read.

The Body Papers by Grace Talusan

SEJAL H. PATEL



JUST AFTER I APPROACHED GRACE TALUSAN TO DO THIS INTERVIEW, I LEARNED THAT MY FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER'S English teacher included a chapter of Talusan's book as required reading in the class. I felt a sudden appreciation for the difference between my high school years and my daughter's. My Texas high school English teacher would never have selected readings by an immigrant woman of color—not even Amy Tan, who was the only Asian writer I knew about in high school. We certainly would not have discussed the immigrant identity, sexual abuse, and biology of the female body. There are moments in life when we know that the world has changed for the better. For me, the coincidence of my teenage daughter reading this memoir while I was preparing to interview Grace about it was one of them.

The Body Papers by Grace Talusan won the Restless Prize for New Immigrant Writing and is, at its heart, a survival story. Talusan writes about how she endured childhood sexual abuse at the hands of a family member, depression, cancer, and the confusion around her identity as a Filipino immigrant. While so much of Talusan's story is about her silence, her voice as an author is raw, honest, and poetic. It is a voice that is stirring and inspirational—to the forty-four-year-old mother who wishes she had read stories like this in her youth so that she could have found her own voice sooner, and to her fifteen-year-old daughter who reads them at the very time that she is finding her way in the world.

It is a great honor to talk to you about your memoir, Grace. The book starts with a description of making yogurt in Manila. You write what reads like a beautiful love letter to your niece, saying that you want her to believe in “...wonder and magic, in alchemy, in something invisible and alive that can transform liquid into solid.” You also say that she did not know then that you, her beloved aunt, had been sexually abused. Why did you choose the process of making yogurt, that ritual really, to begin this story?

At first, I was unsure if this was the right starting place for the book. I feared that my obsession with yogurt-making would not be interesting enough to a reader and they would put my book down. So I played around with other openings, shuffling chapters around, until eventually the yogurt chapter seemed like the best choice. Once it was in place, I couldn't imagine any other beginning. The narrator thinks about, hints at, or touches on almost every topic and theme expanded upon in the memoir. If you've ever studied writing with me, you know that I care deeply about process, and by writing about making yogurt, I had the opportunity to write about process, trial and error, and being open to failure, as well as magic. The other fun thing about the yogurt chapter is that several people have told me that they started making homemade yogurt. One gentleman

even brought his homemade yogurt to a book party. It was his first time making it and he was so proud. I love that my chapter can inspire a reader to try something new.

The narrative here covers many facets of your identity—as an immigrant, a woman, a survivor of sexual abuse by a family member, a patient, and a writer. When taking a collective view of these threads, how would you say that the act of writing relates to trauma?

Writing has been an incredibly important process (there's that word again) for me in reconfiguring my relationship with the traumatic events of my life. I write (or avoid writing) about the difficult parts of my life in order to make sense of myself, to vent, complain, grieve, and express the complexity and nuance of being alive. This is not writing that anyone will see. It is for me. There is writing about trauma that I develop and revise towards publication with an audience in mind. This is an act of writing that feels empowering. I am sharing what happened to me in the hope that someone else will respond to what I've tried to communicate. Maybe they will understand or relate or feel compassion or even outrage. Maybe they will do something because of what I wrote. Even though I published a memoir containing my most private

moments and thoughts, I am generally a private person. Some may even describe me as secretive or even withholding, someone who keeps her cards close to her chest. I think that is a direct result of the trauma I experienced and I have to work hard to connect with others and feel trust and safety in relationships. Writing is a way for me to reach out to other people and be a part of this world despite my post-trauma difficulties.

You write of how assimilation can lead to erasure. Upon moving to the United States, you used your American name and not your Filipino one, your first country “disappeared as a place,” and you lost command of Tagalog, your first language. This is something that I think many immigrants and children of immigrants can relate to—feeling like an outsider in two places. After having lived in the Philippines as an adult and then returning to America, would you say that you still feel like an outsider in both or have you found a sense of belonging? Or put differently, can the feeling of being erased be undone later in life?

Publishing this book is an act against erasure. However, even though the book has been circulating for several months now, I am still adjusting. Feeling invisible and marginalized is such a persistent experience for me that despite all the evidence, that old feeling still lingers. I’ve coped with feeling like an outsider by turning it into something, telling myself that I’m an observer and this practice was probably good for my writing. My experience of belonging is that it is enveloping and wonderful, but fleeting. There were moments when I felt this sense of belonging over there in the Philippines and also back here in the U.S. There were also moments when I felt like an outsider in both places. Things can change in a moment. A kind warm word or gesture from a stranger can make me feel like I belong, and a racial micro-aggression can remind me that some people don’t see me as American.

Of the many things I loved about your book, I especially admired the research you conducted to place your story in greater history. For example, you cite the joke comedians made about Filipinos eating dogs, saying that you “felt shame of this practice tied to [your body].” You also cited the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis where there were human zoos in

support of the U.S. colonization of the Philippines. Both of these episodes relate to Americans “othering” Filipino culture, as has happened with other cultures, too, at different points in time. In your view and in writing this memoir, how do we take back control over our own narratives—or can we?

We need to tell our own stories. I don’t mean that we have to write memoirs and autobiographies, but it’s important for our voices, perspectives, sensibilities, and visions to be represented in stories of all genres and mediums. I want to watch more movies and TV series by us and with actors we don’t usually see on screen. I want to read more novels and short stories by our writers. By “our,” I mean the voices that are not dominant in our culture. People are all too happy to tell a story about you that serves them in some way. The story about Filipinos at the World’s Fair was constructed as a way to persuade people that U.S. colonization of the Philippines was a good idea. But good for who?

I write about sexual assault in my memoir. There’s so much pressure to pretend it didn’t happen or that it wasn’t that bad. But it was that bad. And it happens so much to so many people, especially those who are less powerful in some way than the person assaulting them. By writing about what happened to me, I’m insisting on my narrative, which is one that centers me.

Your father says to his beloved dog, “I love you,” something he had not said to you or to his parents. My parents also had not said “I love you” to me, until about a year ago, when my mom did, then my dad followed suit. I did not know how to react and might have said before I heard it that I didn’t need them to say it because I always felt their love. Do you think that sentiment can be just felt, or is there a power to hearing the words?

This may be contradictory, but I believe there is powerful communication in both. Hearing the words is important, but if one is not able to express themselves in that way, there are other ways to show love. I know people communicate and express love in many ways and this is often informed by cultural norms. I thought there was something wrong with the ways that my family expressed love because it didn’t resemble what was on American TV and movies. But then again, what about real life looks

like the movies? I had to realize that every day my parents showed me they loved me, even if they didn't say it. My mother says it now, almost every time I talk to her. My father has a different way of expressing his love and I've come to understand it. In the end, what is most important is expressing love and appreciation, in big and small ways, in whatever way you can. It makes life better.

For the record, I am glad that you did not have "brown hair, hazel eyes or blonde hair, blue eyes" because I think you are stunning—as a child and as an adult. Now in adulthood, did your measure of your own beauty change, or did you stop caring about it altogether? You must know that writing about this longing is, in itself, a generous act because it gathers so many of us who felt the same way. Could that collective energy, inspired by sharing a personal story, change the way future generations of girls will view their own beauty?

I read teen magazines religiously as an adolescent and soon realized that I was not beautiful in the ways that this culture defined beauty at that time. As an adult, yes, my notions of beauty are very different and have less to do with the physical. I know that sounds so idealistic, beauty is more of a feeling to me now. It's hard for me to feel someone is beautiful if they act in ways that are hateful and ungenerous, even if their features are conventionally beautiful. I'm glad to hear that the writing in my memoir about my struggles with physical appearance resonates. I remember reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in high school or college and feeling less alone. It was my dream to do this with my book, make someone feel less alone. I hope future generations of girls view their own beauty with the most accepting and compassionate lens. There are so many ways we are taught to despise ourselves. What would the world be like if girls in this world felt loved and valued in our society?

I want to turn now to the sexual abuse you endured in your childhood but begin by saying that I am so sorry that this happened to you. I admire your courage and generosity in sharing this in writing. Your father had told you to stay away from a young parish priest, and when you later told your parents what your grandfather had done to you, they responded by protecting you and removing your grandfather from all of your lives.

How did it feel to you that your parents supported you after you had held this secret by yourself for so many years? How did you respond to the idea that your family knew that he had done this before?

It was incredibly important that my parents acted the way that they did in the immediate aftermath of my telling them what happened. That they believed me and tried to protect me once they knew was the beginning of my healing. Even now, both of them are rabid defenders of me. I only recently, with the writing of this book, found out that people (who are dead now) knew who my grandfather was. What can I say? It's still devastating to think about.

You kept the abuse a secret for years, worried about what would happen to your grandfather if you confided in anyone. And then one day, you decided that it had to stop. One of the hardest parts of memoir-writing is reliving our past and trying to reconstruct those moments in granular detail. One would think that this process would be re-traumatizing. But I believe, as I think you do, that it is healing. Can you tell us why?

I felt powerful as I wrote those parts of the book. If what happened to me was an erasure of my humanity, I was re-claiming my right to exist. It was very important for me to write that story and for many years, I tried to write it. I think it's important to listen to yourself and what you need. If you feel like telling or writing a story of trauma at this time does not feel productive or helpful, then don't do it. I was working on a story recently about a different traumatic moment, one in which I was sure I was going to die, and it was really difficult. It's not a story I ever tell. I could not convey the story in a way that people understood because my ability to tell a coherent story was fractured. I still had a lot of unprocessed feelings about what had happened and I didn't realize it until I tried to tell it. I had to let myself feel, which included a lot of crying, and really take in what had happened as opposed to distracting myself from the memory by writing. I still don't like telling that story, and I have to respect my boundaries and not tell it or work on it again until I'm ready. I think listening to what I need is a way of healing, too.

You speak beautifully about how people remember you as “smart, confident, talented, and happy.” And you said that was true. But then you also say that they did not know that you were depressed and sometimes suicidal. How has writing this memoir helped you reconcile how you project yourself outwards with how you sometimes feel inside?

Writing and publishing this memoir has forced me to reconcile both private and public selves. I wrote the memoir thinking no one would ever read it. I had given up on the idea that my writing would get published so I felt free to write whatever I wanted. My private thoughts are in the memoir in a public way and I’ve realized that my fears about sharing who I really am are unfounded. I don’t have to work so hard to hide my secrets and the things I’m ashamed about because they are in my book. By publishing this memoir, I’ve felt more comfortable being myself instead of performing or pretending so much.

I have so many favorite passages of this book, but here is one—so elegant and yet so painful to read:

This is what happened and happened and happened.

I was seven and he was seventy.

I was eight and he was seventy-one.

I was nine and he was seventy-two.

I was ten and he was seventy-three.

I was eleven and he was seventy-four.

I was twelve and he was seventy-five.

I was thirteen and he was seventy-six.

There is no paper trail to document what happened to my body, and I don’t remember all of what happened. The sexual assaults spanned seven years with such consistency and frequency that I was not present for all of it. I doubt I’d still be alive if I hadn’t found a way to escape.

As you were writing this, I almost read it as if you were speaking to the young girl described and offering her your compassion and support. You said that you were not present for all of it. Does writing about this abuse make you feel closer to that young girl in this passage or more distant?

This part of my life is a part that I am always trying to forget and run away from, even as I wrote about it

in this memoir. I don’t want to look and I don’t want to remember. But of course, I must. I wrote this passage after looking at slides of myself as a girl. I never understood the gravity of what had happened to me until I looked at those images. I had to see her face, my face, and not look away. I wanted to write what that experience was like of encountering myself, the part of myself that I am always trying to get away from. I realized that I needed to sit with that part of myself so that I could be with her. I felt closer to her and I felt compassion for her, but it’s not a place I want to be or remember for very long. I can’t tolerate it. Which is probably why I distilled hundreds of nights into a few lines.

Upon deciding to undergo a double mastectomy, you said that you felt oddly relieved because the part of your body that your grandfather had most admired had been “severed” from you. You go on to talk about your clothes, of needing a “layer of padding between [you] and the world.” “I am my own transitional object,” you say. Can you tell us how these ideas and others relate to the title of your memoir— *The Body Papers*?

The title was a gift from a poet friend so I can’t take any credit for that, but given your question, I do believe, on a deeply unconscious level that I’ve only recently become aware of, that part of me thought that putting these stories into a book could turn them into something else. I could excise these stories from my body, turn them into paper, and place them into an object, into the pages of a book. As if all those things now lived in the book and my life could be free from trauma. But that’s magical thinking. We all have bodies that carry all kinds of stories and I wonder what people would write if they made their own version of *The Body Papers*.

You discover that your uncle, Tito Freddie, was a prominent writer in the Philippines. You learn from him that, “...a writer sets words down, one after the other, which offer new, expansive possibilities.” What are those possibilities for you?

This is so cliché, but words can change the world. One word can change a law from just to unjust. A kind word or words of forgiveness can shift an interaction and a relationship. Words are full of possibilities to transform a moment. Words can keep us from killing each other.

You began writing some of these stories as fiction, then decided to write them as essays, and eventually, as a memoir. Can you share with us what helped you move from fiction to nonfiction?

The material all comes from the same place—my life—and in order for me to write this material in nonfiction, I had to become the person who could be both the author and the narrator. In my fiction, I was doing a lot of disguising. I had to shut out all the potential criticisms in order to have the privacy to write. I had to not care what other people thought and said about my writing. Eventually, I felt braver and less afraid of what others would think of me if I wrote these stories. I didn't need to disguise what I really wanted to write and nonfiction seemed the best form for me to tell these stories. What I'm trying to say is that the fiction I wrote from this material didn't feel alive and true, but once I started writing nonfiction, the writing clicked in a way that it had not before.

If you had to offer advice to a new writer about something you did right or something you wish you had done differently when drafting your book, what would it be?

During the many years that I did not have a published book, I sometimes despaired that I would ever publish. A friend who had published several books already told me that she had written many failed novels before she successfully published her first book. She kept herself going writing these practice novels by telling herself that she was one book closer to the book that would be published. I wish I had this friend's conviction. I tried to tell myself that by working regularly on my writing, I was getting closer to the writing that would get published. I wish I had not suffered so much worrying that I would never publish a book. I wish I had the patience and certainty that others had for me when they confidently told me that it would happen for me someday.

First love: Can you tell us about the first piece you published and what that meant to you?

The very first piece I published was an op-ed in my town newspaper when I was in high school. My eight-year-old brother had been hit by a van while

he was riding his bicycle—this was before everyone wore helmets—and he was probably still in the hospital when it was published. He survived the crash, but I was overwhelmed with the fear of what might have happened, and I turned to writing as a way to cope. I pleaded with drivers to slow down and watch out for children. Writing that piece gave me an outlet, a way to do something with my grief and try to make positive change. It was the first time I realized how powerful the act of writing could be for both myself and potentially, others. 📖

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

FICTION

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NONFICTION

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DECLINE/ACCEPT

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ONE TO WATCH

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