



Pasquale S. Toscano //

*Dat sparso capiti vivacis cornus cervi,
Dat spatium collo summasque cacuminat aures
Cum pedibusque manus, cum longis bracchia mutat
Cruribus et velat maculoso vellere corpus;
Additus et pavor est. ...*

*... ut vero vultus et cornua vidit in unda,
'me miserum!' dicturus erat: vox nulla secuta est;
Ingemuit: vox illa fuit, lacrimaeque per ora
Non sua fluxerunt; mens tantum pristina mansit.*

*The brow which [the goddess Diana] has sprinkled jets the horns
Of a lively stag; she elongates his neck,
Narrows his eartips down to tiny points,
Converts his hands to hooves, his arms to legs,
And clothes his body in a spotted pelt.
Lastly, the goddess endows him with trembling fear. ...*

*But when he stopped and looked into a pool
at the reflection of his horns and muzzle—
“Poor me!” he tried to say, but no words came,
Only a groaning sound, by which he learned
That groaning was now speech; tears streamed down cheeks
That were no longer his; only his mind
Was left unaltered by Diana’s wrath.*

Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.194-203, tr. Martin, 3.244-58.

I.

I have owed Chris Christie an apology for nearly ten years. Not for what I’ve said about his politics but for something I once declaimed in AP Government, “If Christie can’t be *responsible* enough to take care of his own body, how would he *take care* of the country?” Mine was a rhetorical question, but nods of assent were answer enough, approval from all quarters of the room.

II.

Two years later, a truck hurtled into me. I relearned to walk with a cane and brace.

We needn’t delve into my subsequent weight gain—only that work-outs are for certain kinds of bodies. I transgressed 200 lbs., 220, 250. I was *obese*: doctors whispered the word during examinations. Friends gazed upon me with pity swelling in their eyes.

Governor Christie, if only I could have offered you my contrite heart!

But things change. Or so the poet Ovid reminds us in his *Metamorphoses* (ca. 8 CE), with tales of bodies morphing into vertiginous, new forms—that singular text forever on the mind as I navigate my Ph.D. and mutable body.

Oh, how things change! Amidst COVID-19, my figure has transmuted again. Those fifty pounds have vanished over seven, long months. My work here is done (or it would be, if this were *People*). Huzzah!

III.

But let me tell you another story embedded within mine. There once roamed a hunter (with his hounds) named Actaeon, who caught a glance of the bathing goddess Diana. No crime; only an error. But she turned him into a stag as punishment. Ovid captures the moment’s awesome intensity: the irony of Diana’s ostensible largesse, the defamiliarizing diction of these transformations, the deft synthesis of psycho-somatic change, and Actaeon’s terrifying awareness of it all.

Novum corpus, pristina mens: new body, same mind. I know the feeling.

Granted, I have never been dismembered by canine companions who mistake me for any old deer. (Won't their master be proud!) But *mutatis mutandis*, in these dizzyingly vibrant passages, Ovid is one of those rare writers who can convey the drama, shock, stupefaction of weight loss (and gain, and of acquired disability), of a body evolving in ways beyond one's control (as most things having to do with weight gain/loss are)—

IV.

—Of marveling one morning at the faint crease of a jawline pushing through double-chins like the first sprouts of spring. Of stretch marks receding into pinkish nihility. Of ankles becoming sinewy and clothes slipping off with the fanfare of a statue's uncovering.

How did you lose the weight? Was it hard? What's your new routine?

Feigned humility tinges my answers: "During the pandemic, I started walking every day, 2.5 miles. Eat breakfast (avocado toast, plain yogurt, blueberries), skip lunch, avoid carbs, no seconds. Use my hand-cycle at night. Less than 100 calories for dessert. Bananas for a snack! Though over the weekends, I eat whatever the hell I want to maintain my will to live."

Cue a few tepid chuckles.

I live for these discussions and even send pictures to close confidants. They try disabusing me of the notion that this is the first time I've been handsome for years, that I can at last feel confident, that it was humiliating to be the fattest person in every room, class, picture. (Yet it *was* humiliating—precisely because many [often fit] progressives are great on diversity until it comes to body size—or on fat positivity until discussing figures whom they, like me, find problematic.

Representations of President Donald Trump and Christie himself provide ample evidence to start.)

V.

But *why now*? Because I have the chance to be *truly* responsible as Christie never has been—so the story goes. To show the world that I can *take care* of my body, and thus society too, in this epic struggle against COVID-19 which casts all of us as either heroes or antagonists.

Reenter my old pal, who this month nearly died from the virus. Commentators rightly pointed out that he was maskless in a swarm of celebratory Republicans. But they also stressed his obesity, that he was doomed from the start, (doubly) a victim of his own carelessness.

Indeed, studies have shown that COVID-19 takes a heavier toll on the overweight. If you try to calculate your BMI via the CDC, you might well confront a bright banner with the words "COVID-19: *Obesity May Increase Risk for Severe Illness.*" Some observers have even located the fatphobic

discourses within Orwellian calls that we all do our part to combat the virus. (Some just have more of a part to play!)

But we needn't dwell on the long history of how those with aberrant bodies have been blamed for their aberrance, of linking these differences to deficient morals and flagging wills. Only on the refrains of "Congratulations!" that help me sleep sounder at night.

VI.

Yet weight loss is still a *loss*, the loss of part of yourself. You gain nothing but Tinder likes, shallow admirers, perhaps more money in a bank account. Your clothes inevitably shrink, just like the contents of your fridge. With hunger, too, comes the forfeit of paradise. I'm haunted by a *novum corpus* and *pristina mens*, a mind still sure that ableism is a real danger in our world.

VII.

My only *real* conclusion is that Ovid's long overdue for a reassessment *via* disability theory. Otherwise, I'm at a loss. *Cave crissum*: beware the fat man. We can't even take care to finish an essay properly!

True, I am falling into the files of my peers, but like Actaeon, may be losing my humanity. (Just last week I frowned at one hapless soul in a drive-through line. "*If only he could be more like me!*" Never mind that during quarantine, my parents cooked, my schedule was bendable like the spine of a beloved book, I got lucky—the list continues. Forces like Diana always remain beyond our control.)

And though Actaeon's dogs—fatphobic culture, let's say, for those allegorically-prone readers—once tore me apart, I can't help but run with them now.

Because these days I keep pondering my looks, even if what appears in that pool of water above the sink shocks me. I don't recognize *them*—only, perhaps, the person once in AP Gov.

So Chris, let me apologize at last, before censure comes stumbling out yet again. Next decade, if my metamorphoses go as planned, you might not be so lucky.

Cover image: *The Death of Actaeon* (Titian, c. 1559-76). Wikimedia Commons.

Works Cited

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