

The Trash Heap Has Spoken

The power and danger of women who take up space.

By Carmen Maria Machado

My grandmother was a mountain. When I was a girl, I'd stand next to her vanity and watch as she strung herself with what I thought of as her "jewels"—jangling, glittering bangles and jade-green Lucite earrings and roped gold necklaces and Swarovski crystal brooches shaped like elephants and tigers. She wore leopard-print nightgowns and smelled like White Diamonds and overflowed from the bones of her chair.

Her body was a marvel to me, a form unbound and soothing as a Buddha. Sometimes, I would sit in her lap and peek down her shirt, to see her mysteries. She was the biggest woman I knew.

I was a skinny kid, coltish and freakishly fast. My anxiety seemed to burn calories; I was always upset about something that had happened or would happen or could happen. And when I wasn't ascending the sticky torsos of pine trees in our backyard or mainlining Nancy Drew/Hardy Boys crossover novels or leaving sporadic, melodramatic entries in my diary or researching the symptoms of leukemia on the public library's computer, I watched *Fraggle Rock*. I adored the industrious Doozers and the way the Fraggles rapaciously devoured their architecture. I was fascinated by the metafictional quirk of Doc and Sprocket acting out analogues of the Fraggles' dramas in their own lives. But there was no one I loved more than Marjory the Trash Heap.

Marjory was a voluminous mound of sentient garbage and compost and leaves, who had a cherry-red cat-eye lorgnette and a banana-peel fascinators set at a jaunty angle. From the tippy-top of her head, she only spread outward as you went down. She didn't spill from anything because there was nothing to spill from: she was boundless.

When they were feeling lost, the Fraggles braved the Gorgs' backyard to seek Marjory's wisdom. She was an all-knowing oracle who gave out dadaist advice; judicious even as she moldered. She had large, floppy trash-breasts that moved if she sang emphatically enough. And sing she did: mournful, wry, bluesy songs.

She, Marjory, was attended by two ambiguously specied, Muppetish rodents, Philo and Gunge. "My boys," she called them in her raspy Slavic accent. When the scenes with her came to a close, these supplicants howled, "The Trash Heap has spoken, *nyahhh*," a signal that the audience with Marjory was over. "Gunge" is a gummy, unpleasant substance, like what you might find at the bottom of an outdoor garbage can. "Philo," of course, means love.

The Little Mermaid, too, was in constant rotation when I was a child. The tape was in the VCR more often than it wasn't, and I could—and can, still—recite whole scenes from memory. I thought Ursula was magnificent: the best and most terrifying of all the Disney villains. She lured traditionally beautiful, predictably rebellious princesses into Faustian bargains and thumbed her nose at the polite mermaid society from which she had been banished. She lived in a palace made from the skeleton of an ancient leviathan and ate living, trembling shrimp from a seashell dish. She was crowned with a shock of white hair, heavy-lidded with blue eye shadow, adorned with red lips and a beauty spot. Her breasts were pushed up and spilled out and moved every time she did. Often, she came toward the viewer, quick and filling the frame—shimmying her bosom, splaying her tentacles obscenely, showing off her elbow dimples and double chin and large teeth.

She was lascivious and vulgar, ambitious and arrogant. When Ariel first met her, Ursula sat at her vanity performing an ostentatious act: making herself beautiful, running mousse through her hair, pinching pigment from a pod and painting her mouth orange-red as the surface of Mars.

Ursula the sea witch, like Marjory the Trash Heap, was also attended by two creatures, in this case eels: Flotsam and Jetsam (a pun I only understood as an adult). Here she was: a fallen, magical noble with flamboyant taste, served by the detritus of the ocean.

* * *

Puberty roiled up on me like a thunderstorm, and when it passed it left behind breasts and hips and other junk besides. Here is what the mirrors saw after that:

Two halves of a formal dress closing up around my teenaged body like a Venus flytrap, and then stopping because of a too-large chest. My mother cursing, yanking, muttering. The sounds of other girls trying on dresses with their mothers—rustling, zipping, crying. A row of dioramas, each playing out its own miniature tragedy. Black t-shirts and jeans that never fit quite right, sweatshirts designed to conceal. Me, gripping with a kind of rage the parts of my body that didn't hug to my bones.

Was I actually fat, back then? I certainly thought so, but looking at photos years later—when I am actually, clinically obese, the kind that makes you bad at doctor's appointments and great at online shopping—I look ordinary. Busty—my grandmother's inheritance—but otherwise average. A little slumpy and curved inward, but that's just what it's like to be a teenage girl, isn't it? Embarrassed for existing.

In any case, I kept getting bigger. I didn't absorb Marjory and Ursula's object lessons on existing audaciously, but instead landed squarely where culture wanted me: hating my body, participating in my own oppression in grotesque ways. I clipped out advertisements for weight-loss products—despite the fact that my cousin was hospitalized with heart problems after taking the prescription diet pill Fen-Phen—and watched infomercials for

electrical muscle stimulation machines; all that kept me from joining these late-nineties/early-aughts weight-loss crazes was my lack of a credit card. I became convinced that I could break down my fatness with violence, punching my abdomen with my fists like I was trying to induce an abortion. I drank so much water my pee was nearly clear. I tried to stop eating, but the hunger was so terrible I broke my fast by eating all I could find in my parents' kitchen: half a bag of jumbo marshmallows. Unable to change, I became Centralia, settling into a low-grade loathing that smoldered for years.

I didn't yet see that, at least in fiction, some fat women chose power. Whether they were villains or oracles, whether it came in the form of ambition or beauty or brilliance or sexual prowess or raw, uncut strength, these women were tremendous. Maybe I didn't notice because they were discrete examples amid a deluge of terrible ones: bumbling fat cops and embarrassing fat sidekicks and desexualized fat mothers and nasty fat bullies and lazy fat punch lines.

Once, in a store, my mother and I saw a very fat woman buying peppers. My mother turned to me and said, "If I ever look like that, kill me." She said it like a spy giving a subordinate spy a direct order, in the event of capture over enemy lines.

Many years later, she, my mother, had bariatric surgery and melted away. She will never look like that woman did, or the way that I do. There is no risk that I will need to follow her instructions.

The first time I saw the Venus of Willendorf—in an art-history class my senior year of high school—I could not believe what I was seeing. Because she wasn't just plump or curvy or any of the other euphemisms I was quickly adopting; she was really, properly *fat*. She had voluminous breasts and a round, spilling belly and dimpled knees and tiny feet and a nearly blank face.

(There are other Venuses, too. My favorite might be the Venus of Hohle Fels, made of mammoth ivory: she has a tiny head, massive breasts held up by her bear-paw hands, and an exaggerated vulva, so large it separates her legs to the width of her torso.)

There are many theories about the purpose of the Venus figurines. Some people theorize that they were the prehistoric equivalent of pornography. Others notice that their feet were often pointed, so perhaps they were meant to be stuck in the ground like pegs, for some sort of ceremony. Still another theory accounts for the blankness of their faces: that they were self-portraits, created by ancient women who had neither cameras nor mirrors.

Every day, I look for myself in other women's bodies. This is what happens when you never see yourself in television shows or catalogues or movies—you get hungry. In passersby, I seek out a faithful replica of my own full chest: my plastic-bag stomach pooched over jeans,

my milk-carton hips, and my face with its peach-pit cheekbones set in coffee grounds. In this way, I see myself in pieces, mostly, and have to assemble my body in my mind.

It isn't like my mother and the woman buying the peppers; I'm not disgusted or afraid. I just want to know what I look like to other people. And every so often, I get to see all of those pieces together, and it feels like the reverberations after an orgasm—a low, deep satisfaction.

The beautiful fat woman is across from me on the subway platform, chewing on her nail. She's trying on really nice shoes in the same store where I am trying on really nice shoes. She's catching her reflection in a window in the hatched streets of our shared city, and I can't stop looking at her. Does she resemble me, or do I just hope that because she's so beautiful? Does that make me vain, or stupid? Why does seeing a woman who might actually look like me make me want to sit down on the pavement and cry?

It isn't that I don't look in the mirror, or see myself in photographs. It's just that looking at myself in the mirror or seeing myself in photographs is like listening to a recording of my voice; with my attention turned fully to consumption, everything seems different. "I don't remember looking like that," I said once when I saw a picture of myself at a party—double-chinned and sack-shaped as Friar Tuck—as if I could remember looking like anything at all.

* * *

In *Mad Max: Fury Road*, the only fat women are seen in passing with milk pumps attached to their giant breasts, like cows in a barn. In *Now and Then*, the only fat girl, Chrissy, is also the only one who doesn't get her own backstory. In the first episode of *Jessica Jones*, a nameless fat woman who looks a lot like me gets off a treadmill to shove a burger in her face, and Jessica says, wryly: "Two minutes on the treadmill, twenty minutes on a quarter pounder."

Sometimes, I imagine movies and shows I love with a fat actress instead of a thin one, but identical in every other way. I think about *Fried Green Tomatoes* with a voluptuous Ruth or a stout Idgie next to each other in the pond; *Jane the Virgin* with a fat, brilliant, neurotic Jane with two men madly in love with her; *Death Proof* with a chubby Zoe riding that car's hood; *Lucky Number Slevin* with a plump Lindsey smiling and full of secrets; *Secretary* with a fat Lee bent over that desk, bathed in the copper tub, sprawled out next to James Spader as he tenderly kisses every inch of her.

Fat women and girls are matrons, cronies, jokes. They're never romantic leads, or heroes. They never get to just *be*. It's like writers can't imagine fat women having sex or agency or complex lives. They're just bodies for thin people to bounce off of; funny and unserious as a whoopee cushion or unconsidered as a chair. If they're even there at all.

Almost every person I've dated or slept with, man or woman, has observed unprompted that I am the fattest woman they've ever been with. I never know what that means. Are they marveling? Struggling for answers? After a series of these confessions I found myself watching lovers more closely, not because they have reminded me that I am fat, but because they have pointed out that it is unusual for them to be in such intimate, pleasurable proximity to a fat body. I think about it as I unhook my bra, straddle my boyfriend, kiss a date in her car.

Once, I thought I saw a woman who looked like me in an amateur porn video. Her breasts hung low, and her stomach folded where mine did, and I couldn't stop watching her. She bit her lip and sucked her boyfriend's cock and rode him and bent over him and laughed and made the most delicious noises. She was beautiful. He looked at her with such reverence. They were, I think, actually in love.

The guy I was sleeping with came over for dinner. I sat him down and played the video and asked him if she looked like me.

He watched it for a few minutes, his eyes softening perceptively. Then he gently pried my hands off my laptop and folded down the screen. "Not really?" he said. "I mean, a little. But not really." His expression was inscrutable. He was a nice, kind person, and I could tell he was trying to find a nice, kind response. The problem was he didn't know what I was looking for.

"It wouldn't be bad if you said she did," I clarified. "I just want to know what I look like."

We started to kiss and lay down on my bed, but then he stopped and just held me, like I was going somewhere.

Once during sex, a man pulled me on top of him. I resisted, worried I'd crush him. "I want to look up at you," he said. On the verge of coming, I covered my mouth, and he pulled it away and told me, "I want to hear you."

Another time, I took a guy home after a date and made him beg me to take my clothes off, just to see if I could do it. I could.

* * *

We love to talk about fatness in the past. That is, about how it was desirable once. It proved you were wealthy or healthy or fertile, which is to say valuable, to someone.

But now, fatness is framed with deserving. Do you deserve to be treated like a person? Do you deserve respect? Do you deserve good healthcare? Do you deserve love? Clothes that

fit? *Stylish* clothes that fit? Do you deserve to see yourself on a screen, on the page, in a photo, in a way that is not dehumanizing? Do you deserve to love yourself?

The world is getting fatter. We have never been bigger, or so obsessed with not being so. We compulsively talk about food in terms of shame and guilt; we structure entire industries around the way we think bodies ought to be. We respond to this trend—to ourselves—with denial and rage and hatred. But despite the onslaught of punishment, fatness always finds a way.

What is the value of the fat body, now? The question echoes everywhere. If you won't date it or flirt with it or dress it or fuck it or feed it or show it off or show it anywhere, then what? What are we supposed to do with all these fat people?

In 2014, the painter Fernando Botero, who has spent a career committing fat women's bodies to the canvas, told a Spanish newspaper, "I don't paint fat women. Nobody believes me but it is true. What I paint are volumes. When I paint a still life I also paint with volume, if I paint an animal it is volumetric, a landscape as well.... I am interested in volume, the sensuality of form."

What is the difference between a fat woman and a voluminous one? Botero was being defensive, but he also accidentally gave us a new way to consider the body. *Fat* is an artifact of internal bodily processes, the result of a breakdown of chemicals that eventually push us outward. *Volume* is about taking up space in the world, displacing what is around us. Or, alternately, a level of loudness. Maybe the new body has nowhere to go but up.

I have an intermittent daydream in which I'm a queen straight out of an epic fantasy novel. I am draped in red silk and sit in a large baroque throne, crowned with a grandiose headdress dripping gemstones that *tick tick tick* like Yahtzee dice when I turn my head. My feet rest on snoozing bears. I am so fat I can only leave the throne on a palanquin borne aloft by twenty men. I am so fat it takes the air out of the room. I am so fat no advisor tells me no. I am so fat would-be conquerors flee the room in fear. I am so fat the members of the court do their best to look like me by eating onions cooked in lard, but none can match my sweeping vista, my strength, my power. I am so fat I can take as many lovers as I please.

I am so fat that fatness becomes culturally inextricable from a firm, wise, no-nonsense attitude. I am so fat the citizens who come before me for advice or assistance feel safe in proximity to my orbit, and afterwards they go home to their families and tell their children that I am even larger and more exquisite in person. I am so fat their daughters shove pillows under their clothes during play and say, "I'm the queen!" and then argue over how many monarchs are allowed during their game.

Ursula's final act was to become even bigger. She took up even more of the ocean, swelling larger than a skyscraper. She made the ocean rise. She brought sunken ships up from the

floor, careened their wrecks around a whirlpool. She spoke of the waves obeying her whim, while the film's normies flopped around helplessly in the ocean.

She was sorceress, queen, goddess. The beginning and the end. For a few minutes, she was everything.

But then, driven by his love for a woman he'd spent most of the film not knowing or forgetting about, Eric steered the scalpel of a broken ship's bow into the fattest roll of Ursula's torso. She died, dissolved into the ocean. Small, she was no longer a threat.

The unapologetic fat body is dangerous because, like so many other dangerous things, it suggests that there's another way—and that there has always been another way. *I know what's happening*, the unapologetic fat body says, taking your hand and pulling you away from the crowd. *Come with me and I'll show you.*

Apart from their fat bodies and dedicated attendants, what Ursula and Marjory have in common are their minds. One is calculating, ruthless, scheming; the other is irreverent, playful, wise. But they both earn devotion, respect, fear.

So the fat mind, too, is dangerous. It, too, suggests another path.

The writer Shirley Jackson had a great mind, and was also fat. She loved the pleasures of food, and “long flowing dresses in bright colors,” wrote her biographer Ruth Franklin, dresses that “emphasized her bulk.” A friend of Jackson's once said that she “took up literally half the sofa, but when she opened her mouth, everything changed.... She was witty, brilliant, and she knew it and used it.”

“But.” That horrible little conjunction. A tiny, three-letter word that reduces Shirley Jackson to a contradiction—a fat woman who was also, *strangely*, witty and brilliant—instead of what she simply was: a brilliant, witty fat woman. All of her qualities aligned.

Unapologetic fat women embrace the philosophy of displacement. They manifest the audacity of space-taking. They cleave the very air. This is not just fatness of the body, it is fatness of the mind. If you have a fat body, you take up room by default. If you have a fat mind, you choose to take up room.

Whenever I see a fat woman with a fat mind who is excellent in that fat way that I love, I want to be her handmaiden. I want to kiss her feet and the hem of her dress. To rub her aching shoulders. To follow after her on my knees with a dish of milk in my unworthy hands.

I take second helpings, thirds. I order appetizers and desserts. I get excited about homemade pasta and pork belly and chocolate cake and dirty martinis and bowls of pickled things. Sometimes when I talk about food, people around me laugh with surprise. Subconsciously, I think, they're not expecting it; they're expecting restraint, apology. I refuse to give it to them.

For years, societal judgments about femme-style beauty hid my grandmother's lesson from me. Makeup is necessary as concealment but too much is deceptive, we are told. Jewelry and clothing exist to distract from our flaws. Our outsides must reflect our insides: ashamed. My grandmother's gaudy style drew attention to what it should have been hiding.

But now, when I paint my lips poison-red, or noose myself in pearls and rhinestones, or hook a heavy earring into the punctum of my pierced ear, I think about her. When I walk outside in sequins or faux fur, or dab perfume below my ear, I think about her. She did what she was told she did not deserve to do, and I love her for that: she sat at a vanity and looked at herself and defiantly made herself *more*.

It is true that when Ursula had to seduce Eric, she became young, dark-haired, slender Vanessa. Even she had to make perfunctory concessions to the world's deep-seated cultural norms. But when she sang in her boat-bedroom and skewered a wooden cherub with a hairpin and looked into her mirror, she was still Ursula—mouth open wide, laughing. And even though she had the power to be thin—literal magical power, the sort the weight-loss industry would sell its soul to her to obtain—her fat mind chose her fat body.

So when sun set on the heralded third day, she let the spell break. Not just the one that gave Ariel legs and Ursula a slender waistline, but also the one that everyone had been drifting under. She cackled and showed a boat full of aristocrats what they'd been missing. Her body split through her wedding gown, unmoored; a dam that could no longer contain the river of her.

Carmen Maria Machado

Carmen Maria Machado's debut collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*, is forthcoming from Graywolf Press. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, NPR, *Electric Literature*, *Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy*, *Best Horror of the Year*, and *Year's Best Weird Fiction*. Her short story "The Husband Stitch" was nominated for the Shirley Jackson and Nebula Awards, awarded a Pushcart Prize Special Mention, and longlisted for the Tiptree Award. She holds an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and has been awarded fellowships and residencies from the Elizabeth George Foundation, the CINTAS Foundation, and the Yaddo Corporation. She is the Artist in Residence at the University of Pennsylvania and lives in Philadelphia with her partner.

<http://www.carmenmariamachado.com>