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The dyspeptic person—the barfer if not The Barf—is supposed to be “consequently irritable or depressed,” constantly. A burning heart—❤️—is a very bad thing to have, enraging, a real bummer, apparently. If you vomit you’re vomitous. I imagine this is partly owing to some vestigial etymological linkage with the four humors, black bile, yellow bile (also known as ‘choler’, from which we get the word melancholia). In practice, I wouldn’t say a bilious episode has much to do with bilious moods, though of course a gorge rising in the throat is galling, annoying, obnoxious. In my experience, indigestion and the involuntary vomit that can come with it at its worst, makes you a little whiny and pathetic, but the bodily experience of trying to keep your stomach in your stomach (sitting up straighter, standing up, swallowing saliva (it suddenly seems to be gushing, the spigot wide-open), drinking tepid tap water from the dirty glass next to the sink, hunting around the bathroom cupboards for Tums) is too involved, too pressing, too obsessive to allow for much intense emotion.

I heard on a podcast that emoji are a way of putting the body back into language. On the internet. People are always trying to do that with metaphor and vivid description, with onomatopoeia and rhythm and meter, but an emoji seems pretty direct and effective. As good or better than any other method. So: 🤮

Not a language in itself but an excellent attachment to language, a handy somatic accessory. One of my teachers is always talking about wanting to *press their body into language*, something like that, asking us to think about how we can *press our bodies into language*, and I never know how to answer that question, what I’m supposed to do, which I think is kind of the point, but emoji were right there the whole time. Bodies translated into bits, bytes, little standardized cartoons. Incidentally, that teacher is a really excellent emoji user. I feel like I say “I heard on a podcast” a lot, I feel like my brain is more or less a thin tissue of podcast-based hearsay—not just podcast-based, but just hearsay, mostly, very little actual experience. I refuse to turn the essay into a fun fact delivery

machine—did you know the Romans stuck feathers in their ears at feasts to make themselves barf so they could keep eating, classical bulimia, shit like that. And is that even true? It's something my mother used to like to share with unsuspecting strangers for a time, and that sort of hearsay is probably even less reliable than podcasts, which maybe makes it more interesting. If I can listen to podcasts while playing a silly little game on my phone all day, I'm happy—not happy, more low-key than that—not *unhappy*. I'm not quite an introvert, not quite an extrovert, and guiltlessly listening in on other people's conversations without having to contribute anything, without being able to contribute anything, fits that confusing middle ground pretty perfectly. I once described it to my sister, also a compulsive podcast listener, as "social dialysis." Dodie Bellamy writes, in her essay "Barf Manifesto," that Eileen Myles says, "If you write while you're moving it's good," which makes me feel bad about how badly I always want to be sitting still. Letting my mind wander, maybe, while lying down. Partly it's that I've lived too long in a small college town without a ton of novelty, where there can be no reason to go out for days at a time, plus I'm too broke to travel. The sedentary seeps in, the banal, the everyday. Barf.

I have to write today and I don't want to. The deadline is sitting on my chest, being a real asshole, getting in my throat like stomach acid, acid reflux, heartburn—🔥. I've taken to my bed, borrowed, in the guest room, taken to my borrowed bed like a sick bed, that's sort of how it feels, when you have to step away from everyone, my niece and nephew playing with their new stuff in the living room, the whole family looking on with warm big love. My mother took to her sick bed yesterday, nauseous, just across the hall, after Thanksgiving dinner, after eating too much Thanksgiving dinner, after weeks of being nauseous after eating anything at all, barfing after eating anything at all. Bad diabetes medication—Trulicity—terrible side effects. My sister is talking about organizing the kitchen, has been talking about organizing the kitchen all morning. "Where's Cameron?" my nephew says. "He's in his room reading," my step-dad says. I'm reading Dodie Bellamy's "Barf Manifesto," from her book *When the Sick Rule the World*, because I was planning to write an essay about barf, so I've gotta know my shit (barf), the shit (barf) that precedes me. Do all animals barf? Google says: I

don't know yet; first I'm taken, tangented, by all the other auto-completes: Do all animals...go to heaven;...have souls;...have periods;...have brains;...dream;...yawn;...like music;...have consciousness;...cry;...sweat;...fart. The answer is no, not quite, just most mammals, not horses, not rats, not mice, not rabbits or other rodents. People though—barfable animals.



It surprises me while reading “Barf Manifesto,” which I’ve been meaning to read for years, that the essay isn’t really all that about barf. Mostly it’s about Eileen Myles’ essay-poem “Everyday Barf;” Bellamy’s longstanding and briefly vexed relationship with Myles, the role of form in experimental writing, word vomit, contrast, “The Barf” as cultural figure. There’s a significant scene centered on shit, Bellamy pumping a plunger, her breasts flopping around, pumping and pumping away on Myles’ clogged toilet, clogged by Bellamy’s shit, but not really—Myles was out of toilet paper, had had Bellamy use paper towel instead. In the essay, both Bellamy and Myles express surprise, surprise and delight, at having reached “this place of tenderness” with their mothers, and same. “Everyday Barf” is partially written out of a feeling of regret that Myles had that they couldn’t convince their mother to come with them to their cushy rental in Provincetown. Myles describes the poem as “the puking I do. This. Dear Mom. Blah. My whole life shooting all over the windows of the boat. Dear Mom Blah.” My mother is reading the essay to me. She’s still got morning crud (though really it’s more like all-day crud, post-nasal drip, intransigent mucus) and she’s clearing her throat, taking drinks from her coffee mug when her mouth gets dry. I had to bully her a little bit to read to me at all, but just a little bit. Otherwise, she’s feeling better than she’s felt in weeks, off the Trulicity, not wanting to barf. I needed to read “Barf Manifesto,” to finish reading it before writing my own essay about barf, and it seemed more fun and perverse to have my mother, a septuagenarian who relishes reading books set during Christmas, books set in bookstores, and most especially books set in bookstores during Christmas, read this essay about barf and shit that so frequently says bitch and shit and fuck and barf. (I had her read some of a novella-length short story by Lynne Tillman called “Weird Fucks,” recommended to me

by a teacher of mine who was a student of Tillman's, when she and her husband visited me last summer. She liked it.) At one point, near the end of the essay, she reads the phrase "demure stripper's outfit," stops—"Isn't that an oxymoron, a demure stripper?" Yeah, I say, I guess so. "I like that," she says. She keeps reading, a little more about strippers and sex work, about "The Barf" as artistic figure, The Barf as unruly, cheerfully monstrous, feminist, an upheaval, reflective ("each delivery calls forth a framing"), expansive as the blob ("swallowing and recontextualizing, spreading out and engorging"), proceeding by associative logic, "by chords rather than a single note." "That was an interesting essay," my mother says when she reaches the end. "I like her."

About a year ago, at the tail end of my own prolonged period of almost daily barfing caused by out-of-control acid reflux, I wrote my own essay-poem thing:

Reflux Redux

Everyday, every night, every morning: barf. Or, the threat of it. An acidic gorge sneaking, snaking, inching up the throat. Now. Sometimes it can be swallowed back down, a desperate last-ditch act of suppression. But barf will win out in the end, almost always. That's how it's always been for my mother, running to the bathroom, suddenly seized by the need to heave, realizing only barely soon enough to make it to the toilet. "Three gags followed by a tour de force rambling gush that twists and turns so violently, it's hard to hold on to it," writes Dodie Bellamy, in "Barf Manifesto," of Eileen Myles "Everyday Barf." A friendship, a rivalry, rising energetically from the mouth. Once, I drank two large mugs of beer, got swept up in togetherness and cheer, ended up too drunk to walk or drive. I begged a friend to take me home, but also, first, to Taco Bell. Ordered a Crunchwrap Supreme with potatoes, a fistful of hot sauce packets, which I like to mix with ketchup, make a slurry of heat and sweet. I went to bed full and drunk and happy. I woke up in the middle of the night, burning, almost bursting,

more than usual. This was, for me, the first time. Like this. “Things are getting kind of gross,” Tori Amos sings. Would cornflakes belong on the BRAT diet? Raisins wouldn’t. I stood up beside my bed, in front of my dresser, a bookcase, in denial—then starchy, bright orange barf, spraying past my hand, clamped over my mouth, useless as a finger over a faucet, only increasing the velocity. Everywhere: the books, the walls, my face, the carpet, the clothes heaped on top of it. Streaming, oozing, coating. Ugh, blech, ack, oof. I still find flaky dried-out patches here and there throughout the bedroom, on the things that were there, a year later. I tried to tell this story to two friends the other night, but they fled around this part. Things got too gross. Eventually, I made my shirt a little bowl, caught the last of what my body gave back. The first but not the last or only time like this, how my mother’s been managing for years. It happened again just the other night, slightly less dramatically, after the sun was up, having made it to the hallway, the puke brown carpet bare, staining another shirt: bilious bright green streaks on blue. Often, not always, I make it to the toilet, sometimes the sink. Always I groan, brush my teeth, wipe up whatever’s dirty. Forget again for a while that I am someone who barfs.

It’s okay. I say “my own,” but I was way too deeply indebted to “Everyday Barf.” I was trying to riff on Myles by riffing in a way only Myles really can. My need to please people, even people who are writers I admire who I’ll maybe never meet, probably never meet, makes me feel a little sick. I’ve read a poem, I’ve read an essay—so what? I barf—so what? Riffing, showing off, trying to word vomit like someone I’m not (though I word vomit in my own way), distracted me from saying what I needed to. For a while I’ve been telling people I’m gonna write an essay about barf. You can imagine their faces, scrunched up in confusion and disgust. Mild, polite forms of both, but still. A woman who runs a bookstore, a friend of my mother’s, asks me if I’m reading anything right now, and I tell her about Bellamy’s “Barf Manifesto,” about my own essay about barf, and she says “Oh,” cocks her head, changes the

subject. There's a moment in Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* where she writes about the long buildup to her writing that book, how for years she'd tell people at job talks that she was writing a book about the color blue, how this left them nonplussed, saying "Huh," seemingly incredulous that there could be any there there. I think of this when I tell people about my barf essay, watching their faces, feeling a little queasy in the face of their self-evident disinterest mixed with disgust, but also feeling a little excited by it, at the perverse pleasure of making something beautiful out of unappealing materials. And here's the nasty stuff I needed to get out, partially digested, what I should've said all along: how I puked in the sink once in childhood, in the middle of the night, clogging it, and had to listen to my mother yell at me for not making it to the toilet, didn't I know better? How, when I hated my body most intensely, as a teenager, when all I wanted in the world was to be simply thin and beautiful, after having gorged myself on pasta, I stuck my fingers down my throat and made myself puke. I remember, staring at the pinkish starchy jumble floating in the toilet bowl, being surprised and annoyed at how difficult it was, too difficult to do it again, and I never did. How, many years later, getting my dick sucked by someone I'd been seeing for a little while, they gagged and threw up a little, apologized, and I wanted to tell them they had nothing to apologize for, it's fine, it happens, and I thought I might say that by kissing them despite the barf, by not minding it, but they recoiled, grossed out by their own barf but also by me, my bad instincts, and I don't think we hooked up again after that. How, years before that, as a freshman in college, I brought a friend home for a weekend when my mother was out of town, and we got drunk on two-thirds of a bottle of vodka from Costco, though really he got drunk, did most of the drinking. How we both slept in my bed, though before we slept he ended up naked and hard and on top of me, pressing himself into my mouth, which at first I didn't object to but neither enjoyed nor asked for, until finally I did, I think, ask him to stop, or maybe he just passed out, too drunk to be awake any longer, I can't really remember. How, in the morning, I woke up to see his puke running down a blanket and onto the floor, which I think he maybe apologized for, which he didn't need to. Not for that. I remember feeling grateful that he'd slept on his side, that he didn't choke on his puke in the night, that I didn't have to wake up to

him like that. How I threw the blanket straight into the washer, not thinking to rinse the chunks off first, and had to pick them out from all the little drain holes in the washer's basket.



I'd be happy if I never barfed again.

There's nothing worse than barfing, nothing better than having barfed.

That's only sort of true. Taking a really big shit feels even better. And vomit is not an aspect of choice, however hard you try to keep things in and down. There's no stopping it. Acid builds and builds. It does a body good to get it out. Onto the carpet, the dirty clothes, into the toilet bowl—🚽🧻🧴 Onto a page, into some friend or therapist's ear. And I don't mean for this to sound like a mere refiguring of the confessional mode. There's no need to apologize or forgive, nothing to forgive or apologize for. It will happen without regard for appropriateness or desire. My heart burns, my mouth opens, it all comes up. My heart is full of burning, full of burning love—💥—it's such a burden, such a burning burden. It needs an outlet. An efflux. There's nowhere to go but up.