

NELLE

issue nine | 2026

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NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE

ONE: Talking of Michelangelo

My mother is on the phone. She is eager to talk about Michelangelo.

The long-dead artist is the only way she can articulate what life has been like inside her chronically obese body these past 83 years. This is the body I love, with the soft folds that will always say “Mother” to me, the body I’ve tried and failed to protect from snide remarks and the endless indignities of everyday life as a big woman with big opinions. More than once, my mother has been dismissed as a “Fat Bitch.”

While living abroad studying Italian renaissance art history three decades ago, I took my parents to see Michelangelo’s David, because that’s what you do with tourists in Florence: fill up on gelato, then traipse to the Accademia to pay homage to David, a biblical figure famous for bringing down the giant with just a sling and a rock.

But the Michelangelo sculptures tugging at my mother’s imagination all these years later are four smaller male nudes that are easy to miss, given their placement in a hallway leading up to a 17-foot-tall Carrara marble rock star like the David. Known variously as “The Prisoners,” “The Captives,” or “The Slaves,” the men’s bodies appear to writhe as they struggle for liberation from the coarse stone that cleaves to them.

“That’s me,” Mom confides. “I’m trapped in the stone.”

The sculptures are considered *non finito*, unfinished, by some; others insist that the raw marble represents a different aesthetic choice—Michelangelo’s version of the messy bun. Certain portions of the larger-than-life forms are rough-hewn, while other areas are meticulously defined.

Finished or unfinished, we are bearing witness to a transition. And like so many of the body’s transitions—birth, adolescence, surgery, death—the process suggests agony. These people want out.

My mother is saying: *My body is not a temple; it’s a prison.* But I cannot release her.

TWO: A Kind of Sweetness

All the pink in my mother’s kitchen as I was growing up: the pastel Sweet’N Low packets stacked beside the sugar bowl, the plastic cups of low-fat yogurt, and the glossy aluminum cans of Tab cola standing at attention in the fridge, proffering zero-calorie refreshment.

Even now, saccharine is the sweetness her body recognizes, even prefers—a coal tar derivative accidentally discovered in a 19th-century lab: not sweetness itself, but a guilt-free approximation of sweetness. Saccharine promises a bite of the apple without issuing a one-way ticket from Eden.

What is it like to fear—to deny yourself—a certain kind of sweetness? Deny: from the Latin *negāre* “to deny, say no.” My mother has said no to herself for nearly eight decades, all as the world has scolded her for doing it poorly.

THREE: The Weight

She blames the tonsils.

Before her tonsillectomy at age 5, scallop-edged photographs of my mother in 1940s West Philadelphia show a skinny girl with blond braids—a scrappy beauty, knobby knees, eyes squinting into the sun; then, ever after, fighting to keep the weight off, tall for her age, big-boned, big smile, and yes—a beauty. Tonsils, though unlikely culprits, are integral to the legend that is My Mother’s Weight Problem.

Sometime in the early 1950s, Grandma and Mom boarded a city bus to visit a doctor who administered shots intended to control her weight. My mother’s size presented a problem for my perpetually insecure grandmother to solve, my grandmother, the oldest in a sprawling immigrant family of short people; my “What will the neighbors say?” grandmother; my deeply generous and sweet—not saccharine—grandmother, making a science project of her daughter’s body.

Another kind of needling came from certain women in the family, the aunts who smoked cigarettes dangling like a sixth finger from their hands, beat porch cushions, scrubbed stoops, and prepared food for the men, who were generally butchers and locksmiths, tailors, cooks, and maître d’s from The Old Country, who never failed to eat their fill.

And on the morning of my parents’ June wedding, Grandma greeted her luminous 20-year-old daughter at the foot of the stairs with this question: *Dear, don’t you think that gown is a little tight?*

Fifty-nine Junes later, at my own wedding reception, Mom glanced down at my feet and, as if talking to herself, observed: *Your ankles are holding water.*

FOUR: The Wait

Now, numbers are everything. My mother's orthopedist refuses to recommend her for knee surgery that could alleviate her pain and expand her mobility until she meets a certain Body Mass Index (BMI). In other words: Her independence depends on this surgery. She's dieting but can't appreciably decrease her BMI—an early-19th-century mathematician's invention meant to determine obesity, but which has been problematically employed as a diagnostic tool, as well—unless she has access to GLP-1 weight-loss injectable medications. These are the medications that Mom can no longer afford now that the Trump administration has refused to finalize the Biden administration's initiative to force Medicare and Medicaid to cover anti-obesity drugs.

She watches as Oprah exits Weight Watchers, a now-bankrupt corporation that for decades offered what amounted to a second church service for my mother. Each week, she lined up and weighed in, then gathered with other women—mostly, they were women—to listen to the Gospel According to WW Founder Jean Nidetch, disseminated by group leaders in community centers, synagogues, and church halls across the globe.

Oprah, winnowing down her waist, while Rosie O'Donnell's sweet, slack face appears in Instagram reels from Ireland: As their bodies shrink, their heads appear to blossom. With the help of injectables, they carve themselves down like bars of soap. And why shouldn't they? It's not enough that these women are smart and talented—trailblazers, even: They've been pilloried over so many decades for failing to cut themselves down to size. The media seemed to be saying: If you won't do it, we will.

But my mother remains here, in her 400-square-foot assisted living apartment, parsing out her food and her compounded generic GLP-1; the latter is set to run out by the end of the summer. If she opts to renew the prescription, the price will jump to more than \$1,000 a month. She does not suffer from Type II diabetes, and her blood pressure is 126/60. Her echocardiogram? Perfect—no threat of heart disease. This should not be a sorrow. And still: My mother's healthier indicators serve as roadblocks as she seeks, one last time, to mitigate the unhealthy ones. The body, a puzzle, the body, an unsolvable problem.

"This is my last chance," she tells me.

I want my mother to play bridge, to finally read one of her book club selections, maybe even drop by movie night at the assisted-living complex's cinema. But she worries she'll have problems getting up from her seat, worries she'll make a scene. I can feel those long-dead aunts smoking and judging her.

So, instead of watching classic films, she sits in her room and writes to her congressman. He responds a few weeks later with a carefully researched memo that fails to tell her anything she doesn't already know.

It's becoming clear that the body positivity movement arrived too late. My mother seems doomed to live inside a disobedient body. I am weary of this ancient struggle of the weight we fail to lift.

After viewing a news segment on GLP-1 injectables, she emails the local CBS-TV affiliate about her predicament: "I am a victim of the situation he describes in his piece," she writes. "There is a lot more I would like to share. . . . I would be willing

to share my story and be able to encourage the drug companies . . . to rethink their pricing.”

She posts on Threads. She’s on *Threads*?

“I am between a rock and a hard place, and Congress and [the] President have the ability to change [this],” she writes. “I am in great pain and desperately need the surgery. I do not have any risk factors to get the meds for \$22 per month.”

Between a rock and a hard place. Her soft body, captive to the stone.

Mom’s post yields a heart reaction and two comments—one from a woman hawking “anti-aging peptide therapies,” another from a bot who coos: “Hello beautiful, would you want to be friends?”

FIVE: Shapeshifting

She labels herself “a victim of the situation.” I admit, I chafe at Mom’s use of the word victim, maybe because a small part of me continues to cling to the notion that if she just buckled down, she’d shed the necessary weight.

I urge her to write about it. I dust off my reportorial skills and draft a list of questions to get her started, including, “When do you last recall feeling pleased with your appearance?” I wrap up a pretty blue journal for Mother’s Day.

The message: *Be more like me; write to understand how you feel.* Journal writing—expository without exposure.

My mother thanks me for sending the questions, but she neglects to answer a single one. When I visit her next, I notice the journal on her kitchen table, and I can bet she hasn’t written a word. Mom is set on doing things her way, even as I warn that the internet is a cesspool.

The CBS reporter sends an email seeking additional information. If she's forced to show herself in a TV news segment, will the world unload on her? My anxiety ramps up. Will the bots deploy to devour an old woman before they turn back to feast on Oprah, Rosie, Hillary, Kamala, the Sarahs (Palin and Huckabee Sanders), and Michelle? I am here on my couch, Rumination Central, sipping tea, scrolling, trying to figure out how to curb my mother's obsession without shutting her down altogether.

But the truth is, my mom isn't interested in laying out her story in a pretty blue journal or even on an Op-Ed page, distilling a lifetime of frustration into neat paragraphs. Rather, she seems bent on unpacking the conundrum with anyone who will listen—me, my husband, my best friend, her doctor, politicians, reporters, and yes, the perpetually snarled World Wide Web.

For my mother, alchemy lies in the throat, in the telling, and she seems heedless as she loosens her tongue and unfurls the story like a flag, plunging forward into the scrum. She is emboldened, daring to embody that old Kris Kristofferson line: *Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose.*

And, really, what *does* she have to lose? It's late, and she wants to be free. Mom is determined to shed the weight of her despair. She's not gonna play it sweet 'n low, shrinking from a fight with a Goliath like Big Pharma. Perhaps telling anyone who will listen is her way of grabbing her slingshot and declaring, "I'm going in. Hold my Tab."

Because she's a woman who for 78 years has been told, in one way or another, that her body is lazy and wrong, that she is simultaneously too much and not enough. Now, in my mother's final act, a plausible resolution from the world of

science enters like a *deus ex machina*: It's likely that she has been walking around all this time with a condition, and now that this condition could be remedied, she wants in. While GLP-1's may not offer a panacea, her essential wrongness has been disproved.

Who knows? Perhaps my mother has the Michelangelo analogy just right: She's deep in transition, emerging from the stone, summoning the new shape of things to come.

She has lost 55 pounds and must lose 20 more; *non finito*. She believes nothing is set in stone.