

Courtney Fuller

## The Center of the Map

Smooth, pale skin marked heavily by freckles and moles,  
my mother calls them “beauty marks.”

Well, I must be beautiful because  
you can play connect the dots for miles  
across the landscape of my body.

A particular one, right next to my belly button,  
sits as a plot point on the map of my life.

It stands out in bold font, like the capital city—  
the dot that marks the spot where my journey begins.

As a child, belly baby soft, ballet pink,  
belly cradled in warmth,  
my insides supple and open,  
my body pushing the boundaries as all children do.

I heed my mother’s advice to “pull in my belly.”  
I practice making the shapes of hills and valleys,  
concave and convex shapes in the mirror,  
shapes controlling how my insides tuck neatly into my ribcage  
or burst out into space.

As others feed me compliments on my sleek torso,  
I fill it with diet pills—supplementing

an emptiness that extends to points beyond my middle.  
but I am lean, embracing this journey to thin,  
and I hold it all in tight.  
I even add another landmark  
that punctures the terrain of my abdomen,  
a silver rounded piercing,  
a beacon that shimmers May through August,  
signaling days of half-shirts and a lemon yellow string bikini.  
The landscape of my body glows with a luster—hot and exposed  
and like a cheap roadside attraction, it draws him in.  
My eyes watching his eyes travel from north to south along the route of my  
torso.

My eyes waiting for his eyes to return north.  
His eyes bound only southward, past my middle.

Without notice, my topography changes—  
I feel the stretching of boundaries as  
my hands float over the vast expanse of this once familiar region.  
My fingertips pressing in to feel a shift in direction.  
The flat and solid transforms into the curves of hills so foreign to me,  
of swollen breasts and thighs  
of an ever-bloated, ever-rounded center.  
This space, which was once only mine, I now share.  
We grow; we expand together

and I simply give up holding and flexing.  
I let go.

Exhale.

Belly soft and sagging like a deflated balloon,  
transforming into the perfect landing place to cradle her.  
This flat-tire, pillow-like suppleness becomes only a momentary side trip  
as I cover that old, familiar territory that was once sucked in,  
once tightly held together.  
The roadmap of my torso shrinks back,  
but the landscape is forever changed.  
I carry these stretch marks both east and west of the middle,  
like ripples in barren sand,  
but my marriage,  
my marriage I leave behind.

Hands full, baggage heavy, but  
faintly, in the distance plays a familiar song from my childhood  
each strum of his guitar vibrates across the country—  
carrying me over miles of scars,  
over decades of this wilderness of flesh and bone,  
over recognizable points on my map  
that I once thought were beyond reach  
And this man, this song, touches me across borders and bridges—

an intersection of voice and memories  
he navigates his way back to me.

We still see each other as children  
covered now in a vast network of scars and wrinkles.

He embraces my flawed torso  
and whispers that he's loved me since I was a child,  
asks if I will have his children  
But en route to create our own  
our passage is blocked by cancer.

Here lies a tear in the map of our world  
A melted, ridge of a scar  
inhabits the space between  
stretch marks east and west of the middle.

We cannot repair or rewrite this map  
or move highways so that our bodies  
can intersect sooner.

All that is left  
is to simply embrace the peaks and valleys  
of this place and each other.

The baggage is heavy  
but we carry on without looking back.