

Me and Not Me

by John Olson

My skin is not my skin. It is me and not me. I did not invent skin. I did not create skin. I grew into this skin. This skin which developed like all skin from the processes of cell division. I am borrowing this skin. Until it wears out and gets wrinkles and sags.

The bones inside my skin are not my bones. They are me and not me. I did not create bones. I did not invent bones. I am borrowing these bones until they decay and crack and no longer support me.

My muscles are not my muscles. My eyes, my ears, my fingers, my thumbs, my legs and arms are not my eyes or ears or fingers or thumbs or legs and arms. Ears are marvelous eyes are miracles of jelly and nerve thumbs are fat and opposable fingers are thin and flexible legs are limousines of muscle and bone that take me anywhere I want to go and I am armed with arms that lift and punch and hug and type and bring food to my mouth. I wish I could take credit for these marvelous things but I cannot. They were here before I got here. On other people. Other human beings. All part of the primate family. I am fundamentally a primate. I swing from word to word like a chimpanzee swings from vine to vine.

My hair, stomach, bladder, kidneys, intestines, and other assorted organs inside and out are not my organs. I did not invent the stomach and its digestive actions. I did not create kidneys. I'm not even entirely sure what kidneys do.

So who or what is 'me'? Who or what is the feeling of me, the coherence of me, the consistencies and contradictions of me, the me that is like other me's and unlike other me's?

Why do I like coffee and dislike broccoli? Why do noises bother me that do not bother other people? Why do I like rock and dislike rap? Why do I like root beer and feel tepid about sprite? Is there a soul? Do I have a soul? What is a soul? Can it be described?

Is there a homunculus in my brain guiding everything like the pilot of an airliner?

I began my life in 1947 in a country called the United States on a planet called Earth. Much of my identity stems from these facts. If I had been born in 4 AD in a little village outside Rome I would not be me I would be someone else. I would be Roman. My name might be Marcus Valerius Messalla Messallinus, and I might be having oysters and pomegranates for dinner.

Is there anything I can take credit for? A cell? A fold of skin? The color of my hair? No. Nothing. But I can say this: these words are not my words but the way I have put these words together, that I can take credit for. This word and this word and this word. Me. Or at least some of me. The rest of me is elsewhere, as usual, dreaming of a life as an ibex on the side of a mountain.

