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Title: Anguish of the body

Year: 1999

Version: Published version

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Please cite the original version:

Silvennoinen, M. (1999). Anguish of the body. In M. Silvennoinen, & A. C. Sparkes (Eds.), *Talking bodies* (pp. 93-96). Jyväskylän yliopisto. Sophi, 35. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-6485-6>

Martti Silvennoinen

ANGUISH OF THE BODY

This tale has been maturing slowly, over the course of a few years, among my many autobiographical tales. All my stories about childhood have had a more or less obvious shared warp thread: the experiential body of a boy. As a rule, my own memories have been linked with sporting experiences: being giddy with excitement, accomplishing daring feats, feeling joy, but also with the other side of corporeality: shame and fear.

What unites the rapidly shifting emotional states of the story is a transformation where the harmless body becomes a troublesome one, the focus of one's whole awareness. As a text worked up for publication, 'Anguish of the Body' may seem to amount to intimate voyeurism. But is this an accurate judgment after all? We have all our familiar everyday bodily experiences that have been made public by being told to other people, as well as those tabooed ones that took place 'behind the curtains' – but that are all the same familiar and shared.

December 1996

It is a Monday evening in early December. I am sitting alone in the living room watching the Seven O'Clock News. Sampo, my six-year son and his friend from the floor below who is a year younger, are busy in Sampo and his big brother's room. Sampo has asked me to go to the

storeroom to fetch a doll and a push-chair. I'm taken aback. What's the idea, two boys playing mummies and daddies?

The boys wanted to build their make-believe home in a confined square bounded by a bunk bed, a desk and two walls. To get in you had to climb into the top bed and drop down. I thought the idea dubious until I realised that it was just what I would myself have constructed as a little boy; a small and exciting lair.

The news are sparkling into my eyes and a torrent of words is filling my half-sleepy being as I hear running feet and Sampo's shrill cry: Daddy, my willy is bleeding!

He rushes before me, with the friend close at his heels. It is true! Drops of blood are gushing down to the floor. In my thoroughly alarmed state I am hit by the idea that something horrendous has happened; simultaneously, for an instant, there flashes before my eyes an image where it is myself who is standing there on the floor. A shared moment of fear!

At lightning speed, I drag the boy to the toilet and tell him to stand over the toilet bowl. I dash to the kitchen. As I tear the ice cubes from the fridge freezer out of their mould into my hand, I find that they are shaking like possessed. Utterly forgetting the hot-water trick I simply smash the mould against the sink edge. Finally I manage to grip an unbroken ice cube into my hand, pressing it against the tip of the willy. A shout of pain! The friend is standing mute at the door.

When the blood starts to congeal I carefully pull the foreskin back. Goodness bloody gracious! There is a deep pulpy wound under the glans. What on earth has happened?

Discreetly, I begin to question the boy and promise him a visit to the health centre as soon as there is a little less bleeding. Sampo's initial shock is beginning to abate and he tells, sobbing, that in the daytime he had fallen down in the courtyard of the day nursery and a small stone might have got into his pants then. I point out that in that case bleeding would have begun immediately, not only now. And a stone could not have penetrated his winter clothes.

When I have stuffed into the boy's pants a diaper of toilet paper, we go out and walk to the car. During the drive, Sampo never stops asking questions. What will they do to me at the health centre? Will they prick me? Must I stay there? Will they put me to sleep (an obvious memory from a few years' back when Sampo's torn tongue had to be stitched)?

I soothe the boy and begin to weave the plot of the story. Playing mummies and daddies?

When Sampo ran into the living room, his willy was still erect. Accordingly, the boys had compared their penises or just shown them to each other. As a symbol of daddyhood? The taboos of my own childhood pour into my mind. What would my mother have said in a similar situation: See how God punishes you! Let this be a lesson for the future!

At the health centre, when the nurse behind the reception desk asks about the reason for our arrival, Sampo turns so visibly pale that we are led to a consulting room where the boy can lie down.

It is a tight spot. You must pick your words with care. How to take up what I think happened? There on the bed lies an anxious boy, worried about the fate of his projection and undoubtedly also about the shame of being found out.

I say that I want to speak with him before the doctor comes to examine him. I tell a story of my own about playing mummies and daddies, drawing on my own experiences. Sampo may fill the tale in. Yes – willies had been shown around – and somehow, when the boys had been entering or was it leaving their nook of a home (with pants down), Sampo's willy had got caught between the side of the bed and his own body. A wound! Apparently caused by a thumbnail?

The doctor comes in, asks questions and examines Sampo. I say a few words about the plotline and Sampo, too, manages to make his contribution. The doctor takes a look at the willy and then looks the boy in the eye: It's home for you. It will be as good as before – then turns to me and adds: Sprinkle it with warm water two times a day. That's all. When we drive home we are already laughing over the matter.

Nevertheless, for a few days the willy becomes a 'centre of life'. Every time when it bleeds a little when it is washed with water, Sampo bursts into tears. It'll never get well! Pissing is full of drama. Will there be blood? The first thing the boy does in the morning is to take a peep at the paper diaper in his pants. When the day finally arrives when there is no blood and no hurting, you can actually see how the small body lets go.

October 1947

I remember the white washroom of the Kuopio County Hospital. I am crying inconsolably and clinging to my mother. I do not want to stay there. The washer lures me to take a shower. Just for a little moment. I go. But when I step back from behind the shower curtain, my mother has left. I realise that the grown-ups have succeeded in their plot. I have been betrayed. Abandoned!

I lie on the narrow table of the operating room, strapped down. I gaze at the high windows across the room. I have been told that my hernia will be operated and that they will put me to sleep. Suddenly someone behind me covers my face with an etheriser cap. The windows begin to whirl round. I feel that I am suffocating. I am unable to cry out or free myself. Is this death?

Next morning I am being sick into the washbasin of the toilet. I have taken a secret drink of water despite being very strictly forbidden to do any such thing. The stitches might open! Being put to sleep with ether makes you feel sick. I am told that with an empty stomach makes it a little better.

The boy standing before the washbasin next to mine is scrubbing the stumps of his fingers with a small stiff brush resembling the kind you use for washing clothes. His operation wounds have healed but I suppose brushing keeps bugs away. A home-made gun has blasted away four fingers from his other hand. There is just the thumb jutting out. I feel sorry for the boy.

As far as I can remember I stay at the hospital some two weeks and make friends with the 'fingerless'. He is the only one there who chats to me, at the same time relieving my longing for father and mother. During all that time my parents are not allowed to visit me in the children's ward. There is the danger of infection.

The day comes when the stitches are taken out with little pincers. They pinch a little, but a healed-up wound is a sign that I have got well and shall be allowed to return home; to my games with my friends. A foreign lump the size of an egg has been removed from the right side of my lower abdomen. There is a scar of some ten centimetres. It will be there until the end. As a memory of my body.