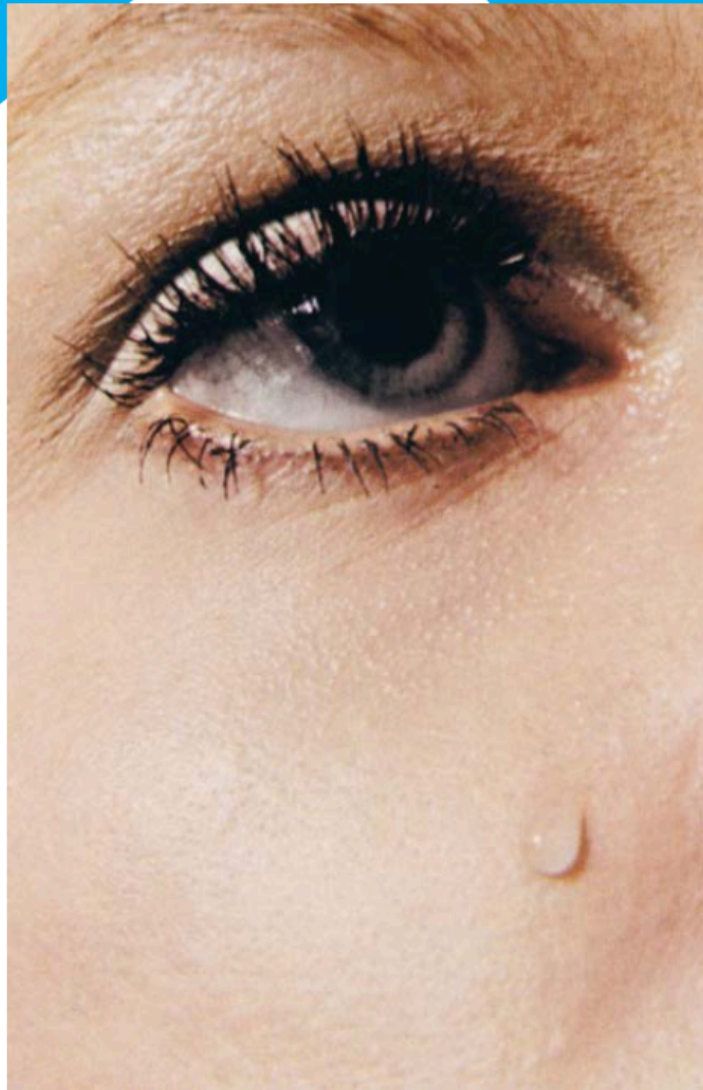


HOTSHOE



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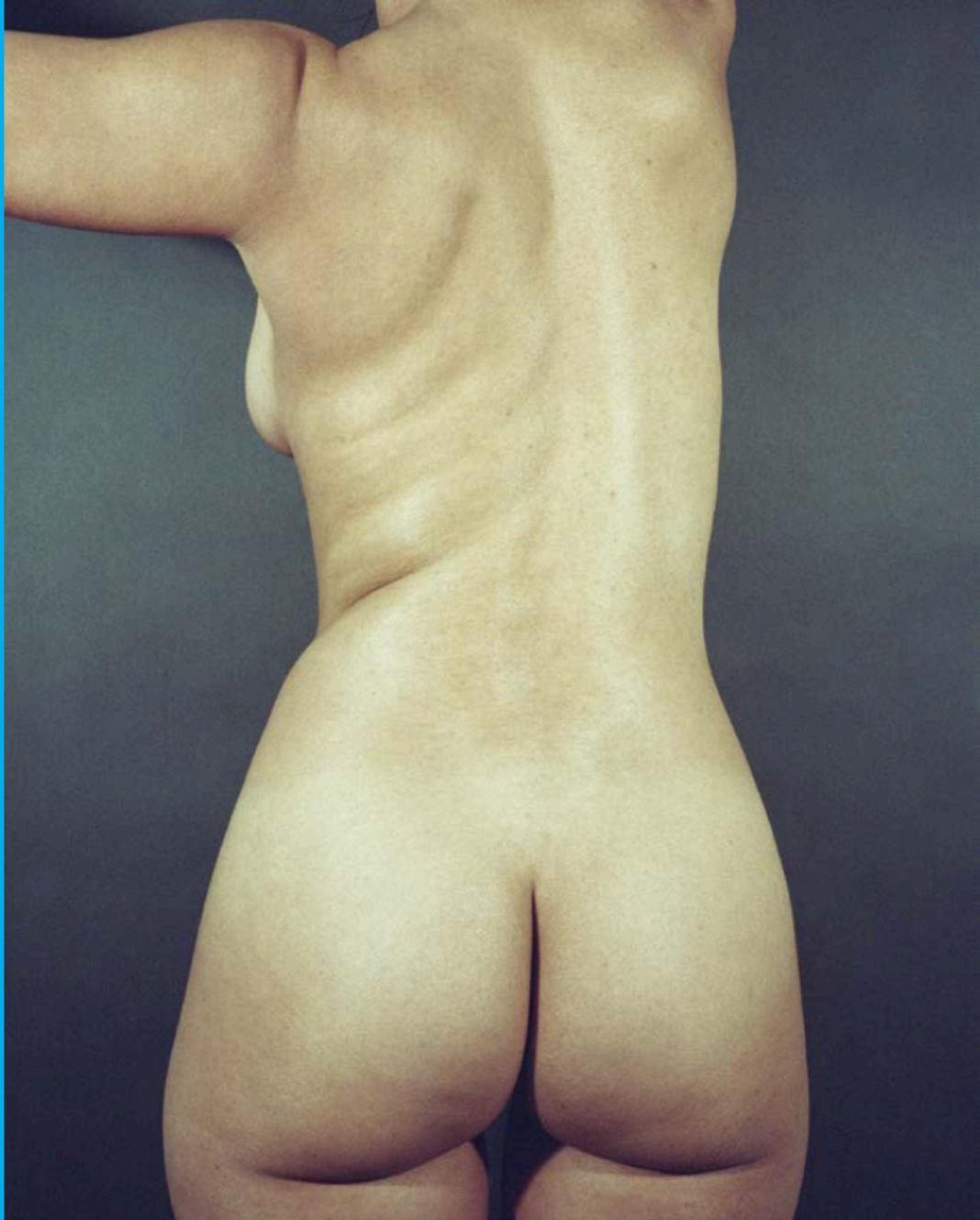
BODY BODY DOUBLES

PICTURES
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They meet at a book launch. She is a junior editor at an established publishing house; he is a general surgeon in a university hospital. The event marks the publication of a colleague's memoir. She has nothing to do with the project; he loathes the author.

He is happy to accommodate her other lovers, of whom she keeps a consistent number. She is happy to work around his wife, of whom she assumes there is a normal number, and whose existence she infers from the obvious. The first time he arrives at her door he brings a bottle of wine, acquired in haste from the local store. She indicates she has no need for such a gesture. He never repeats it.

After a month he lingers at the door a fraction too long. She asks him why. He closes his eyes, and she notices his knuckles whiten on the strap of his rucksack. It's nothing, he says. But he doesn't move, so she asks again.

He asks if she can cover her chin. She thinks for a moment.

"With what?"

"Anything."

She takes another moment and then heads down the corridor into the kitchen. She returns holding a square of kitchen paper over her chin.

"Ok?" she asks.

Feet still planted on the threshold, he inspects the sheet.

"Can you attach it?"

"Why?" she says, her index finger on her chin.

"So it doesn't fall off."

She goes back to the kitchen. Finding purchase against her jawbone, she fixes two corners of the paper to her cheek with sellotape. As she walks, the bottom edge of the paper ripples and tickles her throat.

There is nothing different from usual about what happens afterwards. The paper is a little awkward and at one point the tape almost comes unstuck from her cheek. Fortunately he is in a position to reattach the immaculate square before it can fall away. The accoutrement appears to her to have no effect beside the aesthetic. He is neither more urgent nor more adventurous. She doesn't ask for a reason.

The next time he visits he asks if she will cover her stomach. She keeps a single bedsheet in the top left corner of her wardrobe for situations quite unlike this one. She wraps it around her waist and returns to the door.

"No."

"That's what you said," she replies, letting the sheet hang at her side.

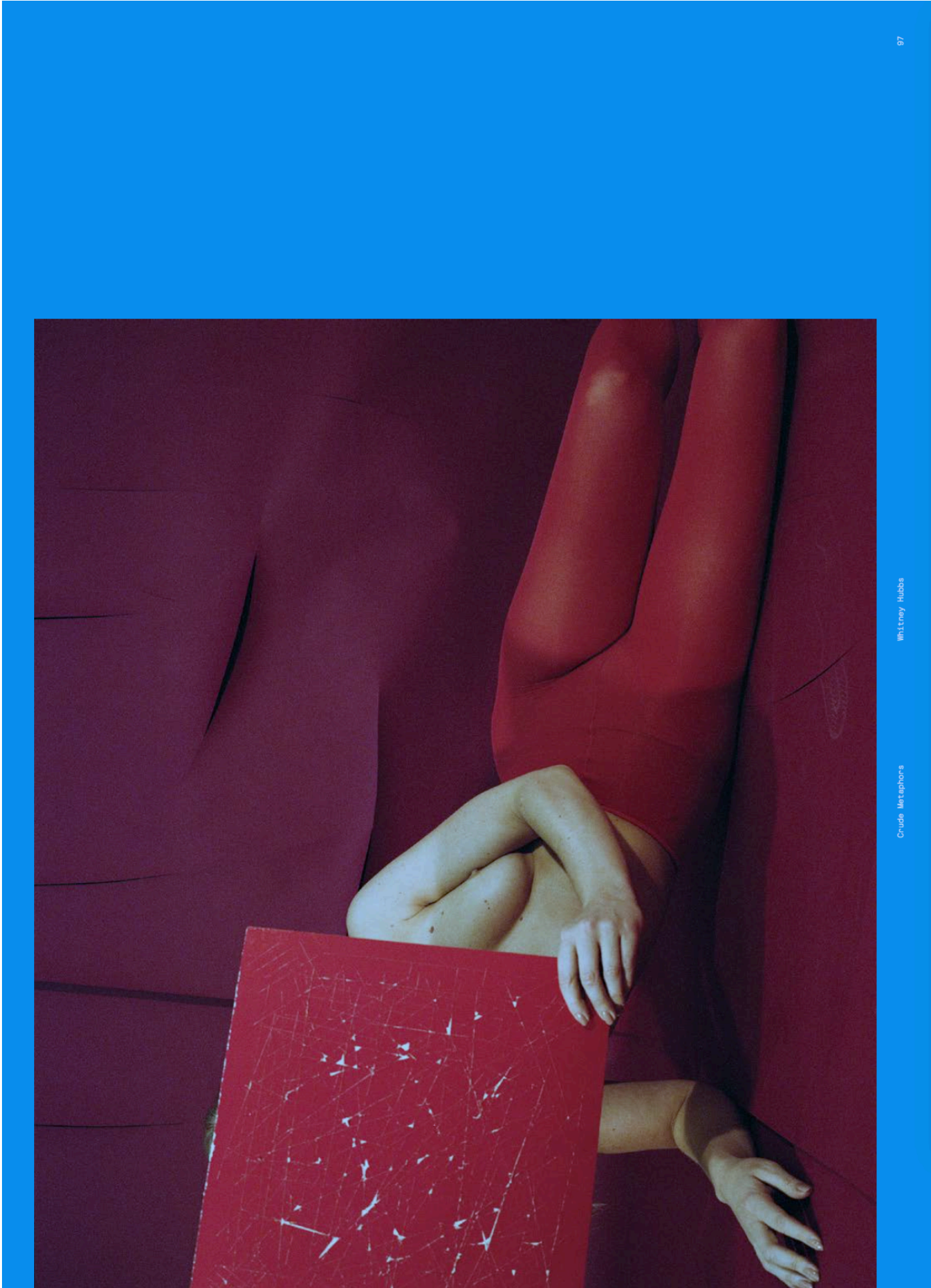
He averts his eyes, settling on the threshold of the hallway.

"Just your stomach," he says.

She carries the sheet into the kitchen, finds a large pair of scissors and cuts a piece of the fabric measured from her pubis to her sternum. She fixes it with tape, as she has before. Then she goes into the bedroom. The tape never wavers.

While the light is still on she asks him if this will be a thing. He asks what she means by thing, and she understands that it will be.

It continues. One night she suggests, for the sake of convenience, that he might let her know in advance which



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area he'd like covered. In the silence, she feels his eyes bore into the towel wrapped around her thigh as she checks her emails.

In the following weeks he doesn't knock after she buzzes him into the building, but slides a folded piece of memo paper under her door naming one or other part of her anatomy. Only when the appropriate area has been occluded does she open the door.

The system works, her materials suffice. It is only when he asks her to cover her lips that things become challenging. The available domestic materials are clumsy, inconvenient, too degradable. On his next appearance he brings gauze and surgical glue. They try again.

One day the words "left eye" are jotted on the sheet. As she studies his curlicued "y," a fleshy eyepatch squirms its way under the door. Hospital regulation. One size fits all.

Later, when he puts his cell down and says he has been summoned to the hospital, she doesn't remove the eyepatch. As he is gathering his clothes she keeps it on, running a finger around its border. When he tells her she can take it off, she replies that she knows she can. And after he is gone she goes to the full-length mirror, leaving the patch in place. When she lifts it, darkness swarms her reflection. So she keeps it on.

The use of medical supplies becomes habitual. Certain activities which had been precluded or painful are now largely performable, even elegant. Blue latex gloves, anti-thrombosis stockings, surgical masks maximise concealment yet minimise clumsiness. It is a logical solution.

She wears such elements with no-one else, but she begins to wear the stockings while she sleeps, and in the daytime she notices that her legs feel less heavy. She thinks it might be because of the stockings, but she isn't certain.

Sometime afterwards, she opens the door with her pelvis wrapped in a strip of plastic she can only assume is used for physiotherapy. But he doesn't move. She thinks for a moment he might be affronted by the obstruction, but recalls that they have circumvented that particular issue before.

"I was thinking about last time," he says.

In her bedroom she still has the cryocuff in which she wrapped her left foot the week before. After she covers the appendage with significantly improved technique (she has found a way to ensure that the velcro doesn't make contact with her skin) she returns to the door. He steps inside.

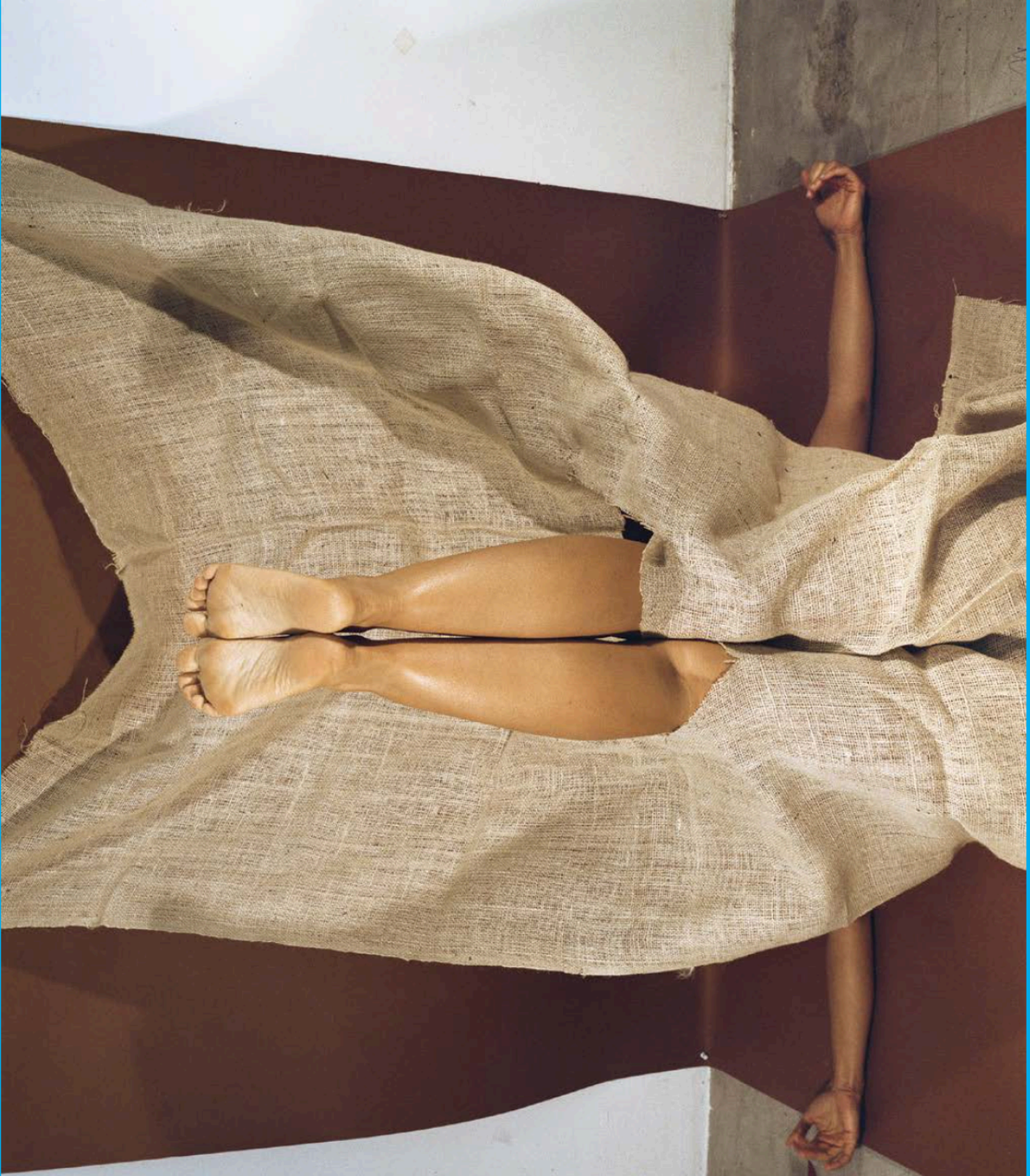
From this time she shields the part of her anatomy prescribed on any particular visit along with those covered previously. It is a gradual occlusion, like the creeping shadow of a sundial. He never strays into the demarcated areas which now encompass, in percentage terms, almost half her body.

No memo precedes his final knock at the door. When she opens it, he is waiting with a hospital curtain folded in his arms. Together, they fix it to the ceiling in her bedroom and let it hang at the foot of her bed. She remains standing on the mattress as he steps down onto the carpet, towards the small wooden chair behind the curtain.

She watches his body crumple through the semi-translucent material used to shield the unwell from witnesses in moments of distress or diminution. There is a single sob.

Behind the veil, shrouded in gauze bandages, she waits. Neither of them move for a long time. In the early morning she slowly unwraps her right hand, unspooling the fabric in silence, and holds her palm up to the drape. The curtain is cool against her skin. She thinks he might have closed his eyes.







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