A Marxist Exegesis of ALS

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I am a Canadian writer, ex-international columnist/journalist, and what you might call a red-diaper granny, diagnosed with late-onset ALS in June 2022.

At first, I berated my upstart ungrateful body:

Yo, moo-moo: Haven’t I always given you anything and everything you wanted? Let you do whatever you wanted? Whenever, however, wherever, with whomever? Eat, drink, marry, divorce, mess with, buy, return, come, go—totally at will? Put you and your slightest whim absolutely first? Forever copiously clothed, coiffed, primped, pampered, adorned, and adored you? Admired you in every reflecting surface? Never demanded too much work, boring follow-through, or that projects ever be completed? Kept guilt and self-recrimination scrupulously at bay?

And this is the way you repay me?

Bitch. Don’t anybody try to tell ME to listen to YOU.

...But then my political roots kicked in—my parents were translators of Bertolt Brecht, and my late brother Peter Kastner and I busked the Pete Seeger canon in the streets of Toronto, NYC, and Paris.

It was suggested that Neurology® might be interested in this (somewhat) tongue-in-cheek (thick tongue, droopy cheek) view from the inside of the ALS body as brave class-warring revolutionary.

Although I have taken refuge in humor and satire—my coping mechanisms of choice—the truth of this small slice of daily ALS life can be attested to by any similarly afflicted reader. And may prove enlightening for those fortunate enough to be spared.

MAYDAY! TALKING BODY DISUNION

Or: A working body rewrites history.
(No apologies to Brecht or Seeger)

Seen from a clear-eyed historical perspective, this medical bodily-work-to-rule condition proves to have been misunderstood, misdiagnosed, and unjustly maligned.

It is in fact the oppressed Worker Body finally, heroically, kicking back against the Capitalist straw-boss Brain.

Against lifetimes, eons, of exploitation and distorted history.

As Brecht might have written, in an update of his renowned poem A Worker Reads History:

A WORKER BODY READS HISTORY

Who made history happen?
The books record the names of Brains.
Brain alone?
Did Brain haul the food to the lips?
Pull down the pants,
Wipe the bottom?
Write the columns and jokes?
Was there not even a typing finger in its armamentarium? …

Take this excerpt from the trenchant undersung Workers’ Circle drama, BODY DISUNION. This is the famous climactic Cookie Scene.

BODY DISUNION: THE COOKIE SCENE

BRAIN: Hand! pick up that cookie and get it to the mouth.
HAND: Too big. boss. It says here in my job description nothing bigger than …
BRAIN: Then break up the damn thing.
HAND: Not in my job description…and the fingers are working to rule.
BRAIN: Bolshie bastards! –Heads up, teeth and lips! I want that chocolate chunk.
MOUTH: Lips are on break. Anyway: That needs a specialist.
FINGERS: Try the feet. Toes still got a good grip.
BRAIN: Watch it, pinko troublemaker, don’t want to have to cite you for disrespect again.
YO! Tongue! Get that cookie piece over between the teeth.
TONGUE: That’s what I’m doin’, bossh. Not my fault it fallsh off down the gumsh.

GUMS: Not your fault, ya floppy fuzzy useless piece of…

TONGUE (sotto voce, urgently) Sharrup, cantcha, I need thish job, who elsh gonna take me?

CHEEK (whines): Boss, them teeth are chomping on me again.

TEETH: Hell, I can’t help it if you’re too flabby to stay out of the way. I’m trying my best to get you your nice chocolate chunk, boss.

CHEEK: Effen sold-out management scum...

BRAIN: Yo, Epiglottis, cookie coming.

EPIGLOTTIS: This is still my liquids-only shift… it says right here in my job description, never mix the two. Gonna have to file a grievance.

STOMACH (rumbling & gurgling) And how am I supposed to take in that cookie sh*t after 12 hours of your effen gastric feed formula—I’ve been working all night!

–Liver! Lights! Poopers! Slowdown!! Brothers! Sisters! Strike! Striiiiiike…!!

ALL JOIN IN:

**TALKING BODY DISUNION**

If you want more body power, let me tell you what to do
Got to talk to the parts in the body shop with you
Got to build body disunion, got to make it weak
If you all stick together till the brain can’t speak

You’ll get shorter hours
Better working conditions
Freedom to dribble
Freedom to let things fall
Freedom to take your time
Fall off your feet
Lie down on the job,
Show the Brain who’s boss!

MUSCLES: YAAAAH!!! Send in the twitchies! 2, 4, 6, 8, time to mass-fasciculate!

GUT: And this one’s for you, capitalist-contagion brain! my SUPER-special ALS EVFM…ExtraVileFartMissile…. the nuclear fart to end all farts…!

The theatre rocks with exploding green flares.
A noxious miasma permeates all: like rotting limburger crossed with mustard gas and week-old teen hockey socks.
House lights come up to reveal the first two rows of spectators slumped lifeless in their seats; the rest stampeding to the exits, frantically clutching coats to faces.
The stage is bare.
Brave Body has taken out Boss Brain, but in doing so, has sacrificed itself on the rebarbative ramparts of revolution.
The EVFM has vaporized them both.

As the house lights dim, a tinkly DISEMBODIED VOICE chants:

Hearken, medics, to our thesis,
Peace in the corpus
Or the corpus in pieces...

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