In “On the Body and Its Boundaries,” the occasion of a nurse drawing blood from her arm prompts Lauren Muchnok to consider where her body ends and other matter begins, and what that distinction between “body” and “world” might mean. Framed in sections that monitor the passing of minutes as her blood leaves her body, Muchnok begins by wondering “if everything surrounding [her] body may, in fact, be part of it” (2). As she considers how bodies are comprised of cells, molecules, and atoms, she eventually muses that, “the closer you study something, the more it starts to look like everything else. So, there really might not be a difference between [her] hands and everything around them” (3). Ultimately, though, she finds this answer unsatisfying, deftly observing that taking such a view might function both to equalize (we are all the same) and distress (we are all the same).

The subtlety and power of this short essay is in its control, in the way that Muchnok uses her observations as an impetus to ponder and suggest, rather than argue or explicate. “Do these ponderings about my body and its environment have significance at all?” she asks (4). There are no easy answers here, and Muchnok does not stop when she does come to something that others could perceive as “answers.” Included in three sections of the essay are diagrams of the heart, the arm, and the neck, and while never referenced, they serve to ground the abstractions of the essay in the reality of the world. And picking up on what these images and their proximity to her ruminations suggest, Muchnok reminds us that this kind of abstract thought about what our bodies are and do often gives way to practical concerns. “Even the most skeptical philosopher,” she writes, “sees a bus hurling towards him, [and] he doesn’t think ‘This bus isn’t real,’ but [rather] he quickly steps out of the way” (4). So, what are we to make of our questions and answers? Muchnok isn’t sure, and her willingness to sit with her uncertainty and then move on to examine other facets of her topic is admirable. When you finish the essay contemplating with Muchnok what happens when a body dies and blood stops flowing, you realize that she has encouraged your thinking about the bounds of not just her body, but your own, and that the open, lingering questions she has posed and explored allow for her readers’ thinking to continue well beyond the bounds of her essay itself.