

3: CAUDA EQUINA

This installment of the somatics workshop veers in structure from the first two, which relied on audio guides to communicate the anatomical and analogical stuff. Now, the anatomical and analogical material is woven through.

We also add a layer of writing exercises to the storytelling/anatomical analogy prompt structure: an experiential tuning approach directed toward the physical experience of writing and the duration of writing rather than solely to the written artifact that emerges from it.

Orientation

We try to get a feeling for an anatomical fact.

We use getting a feeling for the anatomical fact to learn a structure that is part of us.

We use the structure by borrowing from it—what are its affordances (what kinds of growth or change does it make possible)? What patterns does it use that could scaffold how we tell a story? What intelligences does it offer? Think of zeroing in on an anatomical “intelligence” like discovering a new tuning on an old instrument, a restrung guitar. You’re still playing the guitar, but new intervals between notes emerge. All the chords change, and so does the sound of the song.

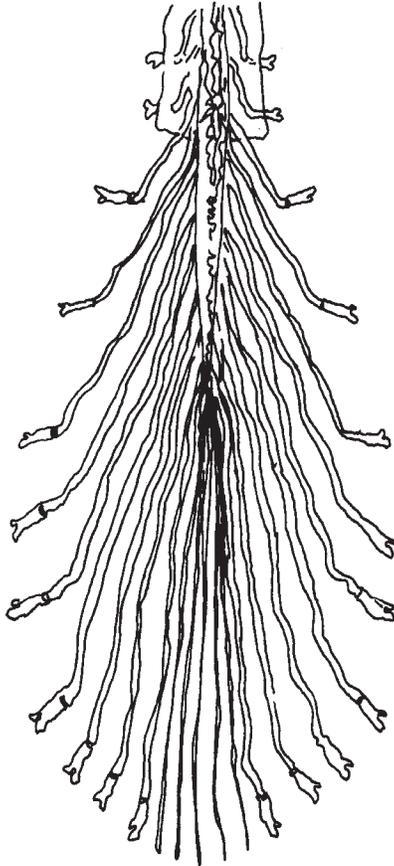
Anatomical Fact Of The Day I: The Cauda Equina

The nervous system is a vast interior transit system, passing signals to and from the brain. Running out of the brain, the nerves run parallel in a superhighway bundle. They run, sheathed together and covered by the casing of the spinal cord, down the hollow interior column that the spine stacks to create. At each vertebra, some nerves exit onto new paths toward organs or the periphery, and some continue. Imagine them in a tunnel, all together, descending from the brain. Around the second lumbar vertebra (you count them from highest to lowest, so L1 is above L5), there is a bulb, and beyond that the sheathing of the tunnel ends; nerves and nerve roots continue uncovered (though still contained by the hollow space of the vertebral column), fanning out to cut paths toward the lower half of the body, innervating the pelvic organs and the legs. This portion of the spinal nerve bundle that is un-tunneled is known as the cauda equina (the horse’s tail), because the 16th-century anatomist André du Laurens thought it resembled one.



Tactile Aid

Put your hand on your back. Use your knuckles to locate your sacrum, the flat, triangular bone at the back of your pelvis. Then allow your hand to rise up your back, back of the hand flat against your lower back, so that it rests in the lumbar curve. Fan your fingers out wide. Close your eyes and imagine your hand as a horse's tail. Then see it as a fan. To get a feeling for a fact, it helps to touch the place in your body where it is.



Getting A Feeling For The Fact 1: Attention Work

Take a walk and try to visualize your spinal cord and cauda equina. Imagine your whole body is greyscale except the spinal cord and cauda equina, which glow gold. Simply watch the structure in your mind's eye as you move. Once you can see it, allow your sense of its fanning to amplify—a super-positioned moving fictional image based on the real anatomy. In your mind's eye, grow an even more magnificent tail and take it for a walk. Maybe even go dancing.

Anatomical Fact Of The Day 2: Saltatory Nerve Conduction

Most of the nerves in the body are myelinated, which means that they are sheathed in a kind of beading of insulation, with periodic uninsulated nodes, like stepping stones or train stations along the nerve line. When an electrical signal travels along the myelinated nerve, it jumps from node to node. This kind of conduction is called saltatory conduction. It is much faster than the progressive, linear conduction of signal along an unmyelinated nerve (re-

served for body elements and signal types that do not need near-instant access to the brain). The nerves in the spinal column are myelinated, so when you imagine the traffic there, see it jumping.

Saltatory: (from Latin saltare, to hop or leap) proceeding by leaps rather than gradual transition. Archaic: related to dancing.

From my deep-time pal Ralph Waldo Emerson: “Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth the taking or keeping, if it were not. . . Nature hates calculators. Her methods are saltatory and impulsive. Man lives by pulses.”

Getting A Feeling For A Fact 2: Image Work

Visualize the cauda equina as the mouth of a train station. Visualize messengers emerging from it, fanning out according to their designated tasks. Visualize messengers simultaneously streaming back in. Send a messenger by touching yourself on your leg somewhere. Imagine it hopping lightly up the leg, across the concourse of the cauda equina, and into the tunnel that takes it straight to the brain train. Play yourself as a signal.

Writing Prompts I – Narratological

Two ideas for how to borrow this patterning by transplanting it to the pattern of events or the pattern of narration in a story:

Idea 1: Signals Activate Events

Retell a borrowed story, framing it as a series of messages or signals that fan out in order to activate the events in the story. Track the way messages are passed across the landscape (or area or crowd) within which the story takes place. Locate the transition between the center and the periphery. Narrate the activity that goes on there. Remember that in this analogy, the center is what funnels information to and away from a place of decision making, and the periphery is what actually moves. (Allow yourself to forget about the organs, to drop them from the analogy.) Allow the story to mutate as needed; new messages might change its course of action.

Idea 2: Fanning in the Telling

(Note: by “the telling” I mean the composite of voice, attention, and movement through time (whether “linear” or no) that comprise the narration.)

Retell a borrowed story. Choose some parameter of the telling that you can try to “fan.”

Perhaps this means separating out perspectives in the story, starting them all very near each other and allowing each one to reach a very different end point. (Or reversing that, starting at disparate points and converging on a consensus.)

Perhaps that means letting each paragraph somehow move from some shared tone or mood to its farthest possible mood, each “farthest possible” a different hue from the last.

Perhaps it means that you start telling the story with incredible economy and focus, and gradually allow a wider vision or a deeper timeframe to inflect it (or vice versa, start wide-visioned and deep-timed, and gradually bring it into a tight concentrated bundle of facts).

Writing Prompts 2 – Process-Oriented

Idea 1: Directive

Define your writing session somehow – by a page goal, by time, or some other parameter measuring pure quantity. Then define your writing session by task (I suggest retell a borrowed story, but you can also do things like make a short list of things to incorporate into a newly invented story. But pre-define the content task of your writing session.)

Then draw a simple directive from whatever is most vivid to you about the cauda equina as an anatomical structure. It should be a single sentence, either an imperative or an interrogative. i.e. notice any incoming signals, or what if something left its protective covering?, or notice how it fans out. Write it down and place it next to where you are writing, so that you can drop your eyes to it as you write.

Then begin your writing session, pre-defined by quantity and task, dropping your eyes to your directive in an easy, regular tempo, so that the directive, we could say, innervates the thing you write, and also influences what you are capable of thinking, influences how and where you direct your attention.

Pay particular attention to tempo. The directive should be like a little bell regularly rung (on the minute? on the paragraph? you find its speed).

Blur the distinction between the signals (or whatever your directive focuses on) in your imaginative environment and those in the environment in which you, the writer, are sitting. Let your own real-time physical experience merge with the story you are retelling.

(For those of you dance world adjacent, there is a kind of Deborah Hay–style procedure at work here.)

Idea 2: Typographic Fan

Retell your borrowed story, but use the page to make a concrete poem so that the words on the page and the spaces you leave blank make a stamp of the shape of the cauda equina. As you write, consider what choices you have to make to literally fit your story to this graphic container. Indulge in the experience of fanning.

As you navigate the work of fitting, blur the distinction between stuff in your imaginative environment and stuff in the environment in which you, the writer, are sitting. Let your own physical experience inflect the story you are retelling.