

## 'The Beauty We See'

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In this section of poems, I wanted to celebrate the beauty we see – as patients, carers, clinicians and researchers – in the human body in all its myriad forms and with all the *'thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to'*, as Shakespeare so neatly put it.

## Heberden's Nodes

*'Pretend that you're drawing your arms through water, and you're leaving a soft, rippling trail from your wrists to your fingertips'* – How to Place Hands in Ballet

These are the corals my bones have made,  
their skeletal sea-changes.

Under my fingers' skin,

on the distal interphalangeal joints  
of my toes,  
the spiny reefs are forming,

knuckled fastnesses  
for angel fish  
and the static ballet of anemones.

My wrists do not dance  
that Balanchine way they used to,  
the air pooling round them

and the thumb supple  
as a frond;  
small shoals of sharp-finned

pains swim between eroded bone salt  
and cartilage.

Lifting my bare foot, the doctor

puts it on his knee, the warmth  
of his palms  
a thoughtful poultice,

his diagnosis a close watch kept  
at centuries of bedsides  
while I am turning to sculpture

in the good physician's name  
– calcareous, spurred,  
like flowers of iron.

## Autopsy

Less than 24 hours after, you're wheeled out  
in a plastic pouch. You're undressed except  
for a sock and sneaker on the left foot.

In the pouch are a cut away dark blue sports bra,  
a sock and a cut away pair of black short pants.  
They don't say what happened to the other sneaker.

I can spread my hand behind and above my left ear.  
We were the same hat size. So, here's where you gaped,  
here's the fractured skull. And here, and here.

The hair is blond, straight and about 6 inches.  
They don't mention the humid days, how it used to  
go into kinks when I rolled the window down, which

annoyed you, though you never said, or how I'd find  
strands of it long after your plane had left, how I liked  
to hold them up and turn them in the sunlight on my hand.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> through 7<sup>th</sup> ribs bilaterally show fractures.  
There are also fractures of the pubic symphysis  
and left wing of the ilium. Someone must have pictures

of you dancing. I still have that video we made.  
Partial separation of the right sacroiliac joint is noticed.  
Before the Gulf War. 1991. All summer-long we partied.

There are fractures of the proximal right tibia and fibula.  
The distal left forearm is fractured. And now I remember  
all those minor breaks you had when we were at school.

In and out of hospital, me phoning up, taking you home.  
Big sister, little sister. Not anymore. The body is that of  
a well developed, well nourished, middle-aged white woman.

It's 63 inches and weighs 117 pounds. There are tattoos.  
The pubic hair's been shaved. Copper-coloured nail polish

is present on the fingernails. The irides are blue.

I can go further than blue. They were dazzling and heroic, trusting. The news report, of course, is show-biz – that photo your neighbour took is iconic.

The posterior body surfaces show no significant scars and the anus is unremarkable. Now I miss your humour, your email sign-offs. Sister Mary Fibrocystic Hyperplasia,

Sister Mary Circle of Willis. Your brain comes in at a round figure of 1,350 grams, which says nothing of what you were thinking when the vehicle hit.

Your heart weighs in at 270 grams, which says nothing about the weight of grief or the width of my loss or the depth or the height or the shape of anything anymore.

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## CYCLOPS BABY

*(foetal specimen)*

We are divided creatures, reflecting  
Ourselves in a midline mirror; right  
And left define us. Antagonistic,  
Adversarial, always taking sides.  
And so the brain must split  
Into hemispheres, the face forming  
Like chrysanthemum petals curling  
To touch, to merge, to place  
Two eyes, nose, mouth,  
Universal emoticon.

Not this time. This hefty infant is not  
In two minds. Her brain is one,  
The mirror of her face distorted,  
And so she's Cyclops, this strapping  
Baby girl with perfect limbs,  
With one big central eye a navel  
In her face, the pupil transverse  
Like a squid's, and above it,  
A tiny trunk, a proboscis  
Of wrinkled skin hanging.

Her undivided brain did not survive  
Once born, but was there some  
Awareness, did she feel light,  
Briefly, perhaps as a plant does?  
Lambs, kids, born with Cyclops  
Eye, were the model for the myth:  
False Hellebore eaten in pregnancy,  
Or muddled genes, that's all it takes  
To make a single mind and eye, blight  
The petals of the flowering face.

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## Odyssey

*Poem for my grandson – after the first scan at twelve weeks' gestation*

An image full of seas  
and shadows, blurred and wintry,

has travelled here with  
its tiny-faced time capsule  
from some lunar space,

a first photograph  
of the afterlife  
and its love-borne enigmas,

the dull grey eeriness  
belying the frenzy  
of frantic elfin-organs forming

in the womb-crib. Not yet  
named or sexed, waxing  
from a bitten thumbnail of moon,

this is lymph and marrow  
making elbow-room  
for blue-sky futures, tracing

the just-seen rim  
of a green-gold country  
(where, when we lived, we used to walk)

orbiting,  
finding a place to land.

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## **I am really a marsupial**

*for June*

... a strange beast  
with a third kidney, sewn  
into a pouch at the front  
of my body, while my own  
lie scuttled.

I carry this lobe of flesh  
like a baby. Half-expect  
it to kick. Wonder  
where its twin  
is living.

But *just watch me*  
eat a banana, then another  
– the whole bunch! –  
without muddling all the salts  
in my blood.

Then watch me drink  
and not swell: for water  
into wine is nothing,  
given the miracle  
of urine.

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## **SIRENOMELIA BABY**

*(foetal specimen, pathology museum)*

This little mermaid is jarred; feels the moon tug  
At the kernel of fluid she floats in. Sealed  
So far from the sea, stranded in a tiny glass pool  
Beyond the highest tide, she holds hands spread  
Like seahorse fins up to her face, as if to scan  
A horizon she'll never see. Her eyes are wide,  
Avid for distance, for the swell of the ocean's  
Breathing, for cold depths to swim in, her sky  
A silver skin above. She gasps for salt water.

'Syreniform.' A myth brought to brief life  
For a place in seaside freak shows, she floats  
As if poured from a genie's lamp. She tapers  
From the waist; legs, feet, fused into this blade  
Of a tail, no genitals, kidneys, no way out  
For the milk she cried for. Born ephemeral  
As a damsel fly, this tiddler's a throwback  
To a time when we all swam; stranded  
By evolution, cut off from our true home.

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# Huddersfield Royal Hospital

A doctor with latex gloves  
sawed me in two  
like a magician's assistant,  
rummaged and pulled something  
out by its silken flaps,  
whispered reverentially  
*Gall bladder... five times its normal size.*

I think of it floating  
in formaldehyde  
in Caligari's Cabinet.  
My wound puckers.  
I'm zipped together,  
staples zig-zagging  
like a train track across  
the lowlands of my diaphragm.

I press a button for intravenous  
morphine. The polystyrene ceiling  
fills with balloons: red, yellow,  
sky-blue bags of breath.  
Patients start to pirouette,  
cardigans spangled with sequins.

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## Mapping Renewal

2-3 weeks for the lungs.

About a year for the alveoli to regenerate.

Nothing on the surface; forever, deeper.

24 hours for the cornea. Which explains

why I can see you so clearly now.

20 years for the heart. Perhaps four times

in a lifetime. Three if repairs are slow. Scars

can't muscle. Intestines; 2 or 3 days. Fighting to rid;

stomach acid sears through. Gargle, spit:

taste buds; every ten days. I am not

so enthused by your wanderlust now.

6-8 weeks for an eyelash. Mine

are doe like, defined by black; don't bat for you.

3-6 years for hair and your indecision.

I bleached mine; I am getting it cut.

The skeleton takes ten years. Osteoclasts.

Osteoblasts. Break down. Build up. I am cast

as beauty. My closet is empty.

Fingernails twice as fast as toenails.

Keratin, circulation, tissue supply.

New skin every two weeks.

Less elastic. Still waterproof.

We won't touch again. The liver, flushing

away cruel toxins; just five months a round.

The brain ages alone, coughing notes in the dark

through dreams and organs; imagines its own future:

conjures decision; the belief that it can thrive.

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## FROM FIN TO FINGERS

*(programmed cell death, or apoptosis, in foetal hand formation)*

Our embryo limb buds flower  
Into fans, paddles of flesh, as if  
Expecting to swim into a tidal rush  
Of ocean surging and sighing  
Outside the womb's tranquil pool.  
But those tides ebbed long ago.  
The star-fish rays of bone  
That span each human fin  
Will need to move in air, grasping,  
Waving, fiddling like a lobster's mouth.

And so, the webs between them dissolve  
Like a tadpole's tail, as the many cells  
Which have held them firm, let go,  
Commit cell suicide, no longer hearing  
The siren-signal, 'Live!' Nipped in the bud,  
Like falling leaves whose end was sealed  
By the tree, they slip through our fingers,  
Popping like beached sea foam, freeing  
Our hands to grow, shaped by the spaces  
Carved out in utero, from fin to fingers.

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## **Physics, Poetry and Multiple Sclerosis**

"He's such a clever man too," they say,  
as if understanding Fermat's Last Theorem  
makes it worse.

He reads books by Stephen Hawking  
and Brian Greene for relaxation,  
though physics isn't his speciality.  
I wonder if the densely-packed words,  
complex equations, contain the answer  
to our problem.

His space and time is shrinking, you see,  
though he'd say I was confusing poetic  
and empirical truth.

It's easier not to remember our climb  
to the summit of Skiddaw,  
the view across the sea  
to the Mountains of Mourne,  
when bed to chair is a hazardous journey  
of ten minutes or more.

So we edge forward together  
while life speeds past,  
glimpsing shadows of truth  
in the expansion of the universe  
and hidden dimensions,  
or in Blake's grain of sand,  
each of us making sense of the world  
in our own way.

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## Requiem

My parents gave it to me  
in all its whitebone strength,  
cemented into love.

It carried me up mountains, forded streams,  
steadied me through babies,  
their good weight in my womb.

How can I give this up?  
My right hip;  
collapsed, inflamed,

scheduled for removal  
in a storm of blood and tissue.  
Will a theatre nurse efficient in blue

snap open a plastic carrier,  
Royal Free stamped on the side  
drop in the remains,

red with my exertion  
steeped in a mother's tears  
and knot tight the gaping mouth?

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## Bingo Wings

If I were rich would you ...

let me swathe you in an acre of black velvet  
half-drowned in eau-de-cologne  
two for the price of one (but stocks limited)?

In my dreams ...

we could frolic in a field of golden corn  
wearing vests or short sleeved tops  
in a seamless symphony of sun-kissed epidermal ecstasy

Perhaps it was a New Year's resolution ...

to share you with the world in the swimming baths  
(when everyone was at work)  
my ballasted breakwater beauties

And it was only a rumour ...

that I took you to the gym last Thursday  
triceptual torture for the tired of a challenge  
and who has time for mirrors when you are as busy as me anyway?

Much later, when we were alone ...

I dribbled you in cut-price moisturiser  
my featherless wings of motherhood  
pitted, larded, pastry punching appendages

To me ...

you will always remain my flightless wings of fancy  
caged in this bay-fronted palace of a body  
two symmetrical droopings wobbling loosely in the face of gravity

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