

**Disabling Poetics:
Bodily Otherness and the Saying of Poetry**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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December 2018

VOLUME 1 – MAJOR CREATIVE WORK

Table of Contents

Thesis Abstract	iv
Declaration of Originality	vi
Acknowledgements	vii

Volume 1. Major Creative Work

Defecting: Poems

Table of Contents	2
1. These people	5
2. Unruly bodies	33
3. Absent touch	59
4. Blood and bone	86
Endnotes	109
Works Cited for Major Creative Work	111

Volume 2. Exegesis

Disabling Poetics: Bodily Otherness and the Saying of Poetry

Thesis Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
1. The Defecting Body of the Other-in-the-Same: Levinas through Disability Theory	4
2. The Saying and the Said: Levinas on Poetic Form and Deformity	14
3. Staring at the Other: Seeing Defects in Recent Australian Poems	23
4. Caesura and the Deforming Poem: Rupture as a Space for the Other	34
Conclusion: Introduction to <i>Defecting: Poems</i>	46
Endnotes	51
Works Cited for Exegesis	52
Works Consulted for Exegesis	56

Abstract

This thesis – entitled, “Disabling Poetics: Bodily Otherness and the Saying of Poetry” – consists of a four-chapter exegesis and a major creative work consisting of eighty poems. Together, they examine the intimate connections between bodily otherness and poetry, both forms of encounter and disruption.

The exegesis begins by establishing a philosophical framework on otherness and on poetry. It elaborates on Emmanuel Levinas's writings on the Other, and brings them into conversation with critical disability theory. I argue that the Other can only be known through their disfigured embodiment, but also that this disfiguring arises from within the encounter as much as the body itself. I then adapt Levinas's distinction between 'the saying' and 'the said', in order to position poetry as a form of writing which is able to amplify this saying. While Levinas has certain suspicions regarding poetry, I argue that these are disabled by the voice of the Other within his own writing, and that poetry is premised on interruption and deformity.

The exegesis goes on to discuss a series of recent poems, most of them by Australian poets – both in terms of the dynamic of their encounters with the Other and the detail of their poetic techniques. Chapter three examines poems that depict public encounters with disabled people. These poems uncomfortably acknowledge our impulse to stare, while to varying degrees turning that gaze back upon the reader, thus emphasising the defects in our ability to genuinely see the Other. Chapter four examines how caesurae can open up a space for the Other to appear. By defining the caesura expansively, I show how the ruptures or silences of these poems are not empty, but are in fact reflections and amplifications of the disruptiveness of our encounter with the Other.

The poems written for the thesis, titled *Defecting*, engage with bodily otherness in a variety of ways, both in terms of content, voice and formal approach. While some poems engage with aspects of bodily otherness from various eras and religious traditions, others explore the contemporary milieu – including medical technology, online media and increased financial precarity. There are a number of poems that deal with unsettling extremes of embodiment and with violence against disabled people. However, many poems also emerge out of quotidian experience – illness, social encounters, ageing and love. Finally, there are many ekphrastic poems, which reflect on how bodily otherness has been treated in the visual

arts, photography, theatre, the internet, as well as in other poems.

These poems are arranged into four sections, which correlate with the focus of the four exegetical chapters. Broadly speaking, the poems are direct and lyrical, yet with an overt attentiveness towards the disturbances of language. The order of the poems is more associative than thematic, adding another layer of subtle disruption to the reading experience. In this way, they generate a sense of both intimacy and distance – a disabling poetics.

Thesis Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

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Signature:

Date: 13 December, 2018.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to my supervisor Jill Jones, for her support, encouragement and insight, which was sustained, engaged and always respectful and honest. Thanks also to my secondary supervisor Brian Castro, whose feedback helped me refine certain aspects of the exegesis at a critical stage in the process.

I am grateful also to the scholarly and writerly communities of the conferences at which I presented early drafts of exegetical chapters and poems – “Why Do Things Break?”, the 2016 Double Dialogues & J. M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice Symposium; the 2016 Annual Conference of the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy; the 2017 University of Adelaide School of Humanities Postgraduate Conference; “Climates of Change”, the 2017 Australasian Association of Writing Programs 2017 Annual Conference; and “The Literary Interface”, the 2018 Literary Studies Convention.

An expanded version of chapter 3 of the exegesis, “Staring at the Other: Seeing Defects in Recent Australian Poems”, is forthcoming in the journal *Critical Disability Discourses*, volume 9, 2019.

Many of the poems which comprise the Major Creative Work were workshopped with colleagues, and I am indebted to them for their generous feedback – Rachael Guy, Maurice McNamara, Anna Fern, Emilie Collyer, Joe DeIacovo, Ross Donlon, Rob Wallis, Ann De Hugard, Annie Hunter, Allis Hamilton, Tegan Gigante, Samantha Bews, Tru Dowling, Cath James, Tash Adams, Mike Tittensor, Amanda Spooner and Henry Briffa.

Some of the poems (in draft or final version) have been published in the following journals and anthologies: *Abstractions* (edited by Paul Munden and Shane Strange, Recent Work Press, 2018), *The Australian* (newspaper), *Australian Poetry Journal*, *The Best Australian Poems 2016* and *2017* (both edited by Sarah Holland-Batt, Black Inc), *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Deaf Poets Society*, *Double Dialogues*, *foam:e*, *Foglifter*, *Island*, *Meniscus*, *A Poetry Congeries*, *Rabbit: A Journal for Nonfiction Poetry*, *Softblow*, *StylusLit*, *Time* (edited by Cassandra Atherton, Spineless Wonders, 2018), *To End All Wars* (edited by Dael Allison et al., Puncher and Wattmann, 2018), *Transnational Literature*, *Verity La*, and *Wordgathering*.

A recording of “Cave” was included in the podcast version of the radio documentary “To End All Wars”, Earshot, Radio National, ABC.

An edited version of “Separation” was adapted by Rachael Guy and Leonie Van Eyk into a stop-motion animation film “Secessionist”, which screened as part of a theatre performance “Each Map of Scars” at the 2017 Castlemaine State Festival.

“No relief maps” was commissioned by the journal *Going Down Swinging*, as part of their “Return Flight” series, which paired Australian and New Zealand artists and writers, to produce an exhibition and a book. I responded to Cameron May's artwork, “Silent Treatment”.

“There was no consolation” was awarded third prize in the 2016 University of Canberra Health Poetry Prize, and subsequently published in *Meniscus* (Vol. 4, Iss. 2). “Distance” was shortlisted in the 2017 University of Canberra Health Poetry Prize. “Hephaestus” was longlisted in the 2017 University of Canberra Vice Chancellor's International Poetry Prize (judged by Billy Collins), and published in the subsequent anthology *Irides*. “Operations” was shortlisted in the 2018 Newcastle Poetry Prize (judged by Sarah Day and Nathan Curnow), and was published in the subsequent anthology *Buying Online*. “Human looking” was shortlisted in the 2018 ACU Poetry Prize (judged by Chris Wallace-Crabbe), and was published in the subsequent anthology *Empathy*. “Aesthetic surgery” was commended in the 2018 Melbourne Poets Union International Poetry Competition (judged by Joel Deane).

I am immensely grateful to the editors and judges of the above publications and prizes.

Finally, deep thanks to Rachael Guy, for her patience and understanding, which kept me as grounded as possible through this research.

Defecting

Poems

Table of Contents

1. These people

Opening	6
Hephaestus	7
Mutual obligation	9
Blemished	10
Warm and dark	12
Blue Mountains line	13
Lines from an ECG	14
Best boy grip	15
Reading deformity	16
Failures	17
There was no consolation	19
Second Life, disabled	20
Mobile	22
This house	23
Unrecognised	24
Toll of disorder	25
Inflection, across the seas	26
Exposure	27
To name what we feel	28
Burdens	29

2. Unruly bodies

After empathy	34
One might enter into your body	35
Dispersed	36
In your language	37
Prescriptions	38
There are many pleasures	39
Survival	40
That photo	41
Operations	42
Complications	45
Predicaments	46
The illness of 'the spiritual causes of illness'	46
Breathing	48
Becoming	49

Impression	50
Daytime, there are shadows	51
In itself	52
Instructions for client restraint	54
Internalised	55
Three ways of responding	56

3. Absent touch

Song not for you	60
Beauty, from the other side	61
Human looking	63
No lament	65
Out of focus	66
Formity	68
Visible	69
The way of uselessness	70
I can't help the way I feel	71
Light, which acts as a mask	72
Ugliness in the spotlight	73
The change room	74
Cave	75
Not a performance	77
When a line of determined ants carries away my nail clippings	79
We accept everyone	80
Aesthetic surgery	81
The Hunchback in the Park watching Dylan Thomas	82
Unhomely	84
A short while after the poetry reading	85

4. Blood and bone

Dedication	87
Pillow angel	88
Microbiome	89
Borne away by distance	90
Distance	92
Home	93
Responsibility towards a lizard	94
Separation	95
Stalag XIB	97

Clear air	98
Venus with BIID	99
After being examined again	100
Crucifixion	101
Disfigured fame	102
No relief maps	103
Fault lines	104
After reading another poet declare their commitment to the 'inhuman', I think of a friend, disabled and precarious	105
Another theatre	106
Under the study	107
The only way out is through	108

Endnotes	110
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1.

These people

Opening

The incision – mine anyway –
begins below the back of the neck

and ends just above the coccyx.
Surgical stitches quietly dissolve,

leave a thick scar – a blurred, insistent line.
As each layer of skin dies, it whispers to the next

the form and story of the wound.
This is how I continue, intact.

Yet now, as I strain to lift this
too-heavy object, the long suture ruptures

in my head – the scar tearing open.
You might think this visceral confession

only an image of mine. But you are becoming
this unstitching, this sudden opening.

Hephaestus¹

My first memory is falling,
the look of disgust on my father's face.

Even the air I hurtled through was desperate
to be relieved of me. My body, broken

as I broke through the surface of the ocean
that accepted me. I had to stay within

its cold depths to learn anything.
They know me as the lame, pitiful one.

But here I am standing among the other
gods with a hammer in my soft hand, never

quite knowing what to do with this
strange material, this avalanche of fire falling

endlessly within me. Now and then,
an Olympian subcontractor comes unannounced

to break my legs again, or to add a deforming
trace of arsenic to the metal.

They need to keep me at the forge,
shaping their breastplates and their helmets

from something formless. They need me
continually in some stage of recovery.

My callipers are made of gold and fractured,
repurposed lines. I'm not the god of poetry,

but of sculpture and volcanoes. I've tried
to disappear into the sudden closing sunset,

the glistening carapace of the beetle, the dark
red warmth of the earth. But I know

where I belong, and that walking –
getting anywhere – is a kind of falling.

Mutual obligation

the institutions hollowed out, you're cornered by an idea of independence

rent-stress and diagnosis

work, the only rope thrown into the hole

some of those employed do well, seem intact, while others are rushed to emergency

missing a limb or a mind

left with the therapy of paperwork

your body employs you in the labour of bone-pain and flesh-hurt, the small steps

through the pharmaceutical minefield

the work of falling to earth

the tenure of trying to do no harm to yourself, the painstaking translations of

the body's murmurs and sparks

the work of being human

on call to climb precarious impairment tables, to prove just how incapable you are

and yet how able and willing

you do want to work don't you?

still this hacking through forests of symptoms and prescriptions, desperate

to lie down in a sunlit clearing, to rest

to be heard and to be held

in the mutual obligation of shared air, where the work consists of listening

to each other's troubled breathing

with no solution to offer but this

Blemished

from the Rabbinic scriptures and a BuzzFeed article²

A hunched back could be a misshapen eyebrow.
Withered could also be dwarf.
Some of our problems are to do with translation.

Here, perfection and human weakness touch.
You wouldn't want to distract the people from YHWH.
Without eyebrows. Missing teeth. Nose too big.
The people will stare at you. There is nothing wrong with them.

A priest is like an X-ray physician – at far more risk
than the patient. Inspiration is too much for your body to lift.
Breasts like those of a woman. Bowlegged. Epileptic.

You're shaped into a question that confounds them.
Unmatching eyes. Crushed testicles. Blind. Lame.
You can still sweep the courtyard, and eat the holy food,
but you can never offer the sacrifices.

A rare sight at Fashion Week – you walk down the runway
and the audience cheers. This is not frightening.
All you can do is love every single part

of the body you will have for the rest of your life.
You get made up, pose, look beautiful.
Pockets of the industry are ticking your box and feeling good
about themselves. Your gait reminds some of a marionette.

Today, you are the most inspirational, viral thing.
Your face, with patches of pigment missing.
How the wheels turn beneath your hands.

People who thought they were alone
send you desperate, ecstatic messages. You know
even the fit models wear padded bras and butt pads.
Has anyone even noticed the clothes?

Then the lame will leap like deer,
the tongues of the speechless sing for joy.

Warm and dark

What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream. – Franz Kafka, “The Metamorphosis”

You wake to the sensation of
something solid and barely alive
inside you. Tiny, pointed
feet upon your tongue,
thread-antennae brushing your palate,
it has made its way over
the soft threshold of lips for a place
to rest or die. Half-asleep, you

reach in, grasp and toss
the slick, leathery presence across
the bedroom, switch the light on,
needing but not wanting to know
what you already suspect.

You gargle, twice, but it persists
as a ghost in your mouth.

The next day, one secretes itself

into a nook under the toaster,
spreading an uncanny electric smell
through the house as it dies. Another
hides between the wall and that pile
of anthologies, scuttling away as you reach
for the stillness of words. At night,
you remember reading how
the cockroach can't walk backwards –

so in a confined space, such as the ear canal,
they can only burrow further in
with their mouthparts, finding
escape and sustenance at once.

And you can't find sleep – only
the thought of them moving through
shadows, searching for somewhere
warm and dark.

Blue Mountains line

The inside of the carriage is the colour
of tendon and bone. Outside, the mist

has lifted and left behind the shudder
and billow of mountains, small gatherings

of brick veneers. We cruise past a fallen
shopping trolley, unsurprised. My attention

flits between greenness and ochre, belonging
and its shadow, and a warm corner of my head

where she is waiting for me with her restless
tender hands. Deep in my right hip socket,

a dark knife. There is (I know now) only
so much time for suffering, confusion, love.

The line flattens out, the buildings close in.
But that knocking is only an empty wheelchair,

wobbling with the motion of the train.

Lines from an ECG

for Norman Jackson (1926–1973)

the heart is not a precision instrument –
 listen, now, it seems to stop and
start and stop and start, as if ambivalent –
 no metronome but a poem of muscle

with an iambic limping – I am, I am
 almost the age you were when yours
failed and you fell from a hospital bed
 into the unsaid – *diastole* and *systole*,

how these chambers fill with blood and
 love, then urgently send them back out –
the heart's door, always swinging on
 its hinges – surely the aorta must tire

of this back and forth, contract, relax, old
 unsolvable argument of flesh – between
each beat, a tiny pause, spark that will
 one day expand to fill the whole

body – the problem, not any imperfection
 in its rhythm, but how too much pressure
can open a tear in the wall – yes, I must
 get checked, each year, each year –

now as the ECG turns my insistent meter
 into sound, I hear whale song sped-up,
then the slow-motion crack of a whip –
 the cold silence underneath –

Best Boy Grip

after the video for "November Spawned a Monster", Morrissey

the cameras were 1980s heavy – we were
dropped off at some god-forsaken spot
Death Valley Nevada
grit menacing the lens
that song playing over and over
a monster
you in your black transparent shirt

crooning torch-like and loose-limbed
with a swooning affect
sticking plaster over one nipple
your thin torso soft yet hard
the sun was vile I swear I felt
it swelling under my skin a refrain
ugly so ugly through the white afternoon

no shade in sight the whole scene a blur
christ not another take
we'd woken up inside the mirage
collapsed on the hard desert floor
like models effete and splendidly ugly
no that was you
I only held the camera

back home threw
my sweat-logged clothes on the floor
a long cold shower ruined
ugly so ugly and back
then I thought it a stupid song
but I've been ashamed my whole life
what happens to a splinter you can't dig out?

Reading deformity³

Khujjuttarā was hunchbacked.
In a previous life she saw a holy man,
one who was enlightened only for himself.

He walked across her path, his back slightly stooped.
She threw a blanket over her shoulder,
bent over and imitated his way of moving.

The translation somehow made me think this
was an act of solidarity. Becoming-
crippled. Much like bone, my thoughts

shape themselves, even after re-reading that
in fact she had mocked him, was made deformed
to turn her from wrong thinking, wrong behaviour.

Empathy began in the early twentieth century,
adapted from the German for *feeling into*.
An expectant mother is frightened at the sight

of an elephant, or thinks too intensely
about strawberries, a burning house
or an execution. In the womb, we make ourselves

deformed through empathy. Involuntary contractions
of certain muscles in the mind. You read this
and who knows what shape your body takes on.

Failures

*Tis true, my form is something odd
But blaming me is blaming God
Could I create myself anew
I would not fail in pleasing you
If I could reach from pole to pole
Or grasp the ocean with my span
I would be measured by the soul
The mind's the standard of the man*

– Joseph Merrick's expansion of a verse of “False Greatness”, Isaac Watts ⁴

Look over here, my intelligence said,
to distract you, as if this stareable body
could escape, be taken as normal. But
'tis true – my form *is* something odd.

It's only taken thirty years to admit,
scratching lines on the inside wall
of my torso. I was my own jailer.
But blaming me is blaming God,

who was still building brain cells
for me when I was twenty-five –
or blaming you, with your staring.
Could I create myself a new

self-image with a bright new hall
of mirrors? Is there something
about poetry that would mean
I would not fail in pleasing you?

No, *human* translates as *failure*,
which doesn't stop me wanting
to be straight. Ordinary mirage –
if I could reach! From pole to pole,

we cough and bleed and think
ourselves immune or quite alone
in our pain. I may as well try to fly
or grasp the ocean with my span.

Joseph, as you laboured under
all those growths, I saw myself.
This failure to see you – that's what
I would be measured by. The soul

wants to hide in other bodies, but
can it breathe outside its own skin?
And what do we lose by repeating,
the mind's the standard of the man?

There was no consolation

nothing that could be held
in the mind or the hand.

The shallow

leaf-washed creek flowed on.

The steep gorge-side

held thin eucalypts and fallen

boulders. The sun
was everywhere. Around us,
blue wrens hopped, almost

into our open hands.

You brushed my arm, casually,
tenderly. A strong wind

picked up and did not
take any of this away.

Still, the pain

dug further in, muttering
in a language I could
not comprehend –

And the birds, the birds
kept feasting on insects
too small to see.

Second Life, disabled ⁵

After a while, friends stop visiting
and certain muscles atrophy. Others become
stronger. I lift myself out of my chair,
breathe in, squeeze my shoulders through
the frame of the monitor into another life.

I slip into it like a glove that's not quite
the right size. The tech's still early 21st century,
so we walk awkwardly, fly like fledglings
into a headwind – though here, consequences
are soft and virtual. The brain barely knows

the difference between visualising walking
and walking itself, between flight and the ache
of limbs that can't move like that. So much
strangeness, so many experiments in living.
A huge grey bird lands nearby, typing

rather than speaking. And that small metal ball
in a woollen hat is the avatar of an autistic woman.
I see my body from the outside now, finally
as I've always seen it. Pressure ulcers bloom
slow as dreams. An electric thread of pain

along my thigh is both there and not-there.
I am more able now to walk in the real-world.
The precipitous and scenic path runs
across the mountain of pine and birch I built
from nothing. Disability does not exist

in the usual way here. I would read
the medical and political displays, but I'm tired
of diagnoses, and my eyes are dry.
Things are flickering more than usual.
I tell myself a glitch could always become

part of the program. But, fumbling
for the edges of the monitor, I grasp only
two dimensions, pixels. Can't find my way back.
I can wait for the next update.
These clouds hold no rain.

Mobile

Head at a tilt, absorbed pedestrian,
your gait slows and stiffens as if
some kind of minor neurological tic
or ill-fitted ballast pulled you slightly off course.

Image may contain one person, outdoors, text.

Each year this sensual device made of
conflict minerals and plastic becomes smaller,

seems to contain more and more potential.

A hand-held door to anywhere else,
kaleidoscopic pocket mirror, or
a needy undomesticated pet, who can say?

Disable for this site only.

You've half an eye on the periphery of vision,
the other one-and-a-half watching the mechanical

swiping of your opposable thumbs. Enabled
and impaired, your head's in the cloud,
body here and adrift. *See more.*

See less. So the edge of the road
arrives before you realise where you are –
in the path of an oncoming

This house

The steadily disappearing thatch,
the lack of decent insulation – these are the least
of my worries. Ever since
the structure was raised into position,

it's never looked quite right.

In a row of so many conventional buildings,
this leaning, rickety tower – walls askew,
nothing plumb, that weird extension at the back –

how can it stand at all?

Strangers pause outside, unsettled.

Are they cursing the builders for their incompetence
or the architect for his cruel pretensions?

A few hurl pointed objects at the windows.

As a teenager, I dreamt of a painless renovation.

Why has it taken me so long
to realise? It makes no sense to hate –

or love – this house. I am
no juvenile cicada or hermit crab,
able to shuck off its shell
to scuttle into another, become inconspicuous.

The lease is for life. I'm stuck with it.

This is the only place
pleasure and distress settle in
and disperse – my body shelters what it can.

Unrecognised

National Portrait Gallery, Canberra

At five, the doors click shut. Security
walks a final circuit and clocks off. The eyes
of the prominent are lost in the middle-distance

beyond office, sports-field or studio. Hair and skin
of oil, watercolour, polymer, the reassurance
of names everyone should know. Not ours –

we are without shelter, without conservation.
But they cannot keep us out. At dusk,
white walls become grey, darken.

When it's safe, someone gives the signal.
From the coal-black cloakroom chiming
with empty hangers, through a broken

shutter at the gift shop, from underneath
the doors of an out-of-service toilet, we emerge,
move through the gallery as smoke

or pheromones. In the dim cool,
minute cracks in the canvas, paper, plaster,
open like pores to breathe us in.

Morning, the first visitor examines
each portrait, as if trying to remember
or forget. Something about that black scar

of paint, the dishevelled bed in the background,
soft fold of belly-flesh, or the polished glass
from which his own face gazes back.

He turns away, to read the informative labels.

Toll of disorder ⁶

Whether you smother your daughter,
set her on fire, take to her with a hammer,

or push a fistful of pills into her mouth,
you will receive a reduced sentence.

Reading, we will understand
your exhaustion, cornered and bereft,

having already lost the child you'd hoped for.
You gave up pleading with the department,

the doctors, the school, your partner, your god.
The weight of her, larger every day

on your shoulders. You just want sleep,
some respite, the one you dreamed would come.

A child who'd learn to dress and clean herself,
say *I love you* in some kind of language,

something, anything, behind her eyes.
When they found her, it wasn't her.

You were there too – the curtains drawn,
the television on, the room full of static.

They couldn't get a word out of you.

Inflection, across the seas

*after Jane Hirshfield's "Inflection finally ungraspable by grammar"
for J.G. and O.*

Each lap of the pool is much the same.
The repetition, for me, is calming.
Showering, I find a terribly long, thin hair

has knotted itself around my right hand.

It's not that difficult to remove,
though sense-memories cling.
You, elsewhere, have woken again

under so much water, inside your own vast heart,

weighed down with the drenched clothes
of others' interrupted stories,
their indefinite grief –

and you're not sure which way the surface is,

or what difference your words make.
He has been refusing to eat for weeks.
To ebb away, the only asylum he can imagine.

Somehow, together, you reach the shore.

Without thinking, we each open our mouth
and taste whatever rushes in –
fresh bread, fathomless depths, a feeding tube.

And you, with all this in your head, what can you do?

They have excised every island,
turned back every boat,
buried their hands in the water of themselves.

Exposure

we are huddled on a rope bridge
around a fire for warmth and light

a few have already approached
to whisper the same phrase into me
what happened to you?

you can be safe and not feel safe

someone is missing in the morning
a frail one who lost her voice

mouths closed allergic to smoke
the pleas of wood seem pitiful
there are limits to empathy

someone looks at me as if I am all surface

but how do I overcome myself
other than to cease to exist?

around the fire it's hard to see much
listening for twigsnap you can trip
stumble into embers

you can feel safe and not be safe

To name what we feel

They get threats, so the building has no signage.
In the help-line training course, how little I know,
a rough circle of stackable plastic chairs
supporting us. That, and the fact of being men together,
picking sleep from our eyes, beginning to smell
ourselves, to name what we feel before it's too late.

Between procedures and role-plays, most of us admit
what we did. *I'd check her phone, emails, pockets.*
A lot of these men look like the sort who'd stare at me,
or worse. *I had control over the money,*
over her body. Suddenly, my hands feel oddly
soft, as if that could make me exempt.

I was furious if she looked at another man. Remember,
always, to breathe. *I shouted, threw things, lost control.*
Nothing is *lost*, the facilitator reminds us, only
slowly eroded or built back up. Yes, listening hurts,
but words are hailstones you'll survive.
The men who call will be familiar.

Some are given the number by their partners,
don't know who we are. Others, tense and formal,
are referred by the courts. A few are opening their arms
to being wrong. But all men want you to help them
excuse themselves. By my side, the instant
coffee cools, bitter, undrunk. And when it comes

to my first, supervised shift, the headset weighs a ton.
I listen, absorbent, in a warm, anonymous office.
You know what they're like. Anyway, I didn't mean it,
I'm not one of those men. My slight pause
hands him the chance to change the subject –
quiet, as if keeping some shared secret.

Burdens⁷

Forgetting the extermination is part of the extermination itself – Jean Baudrillard

Great care must be taken to record the cause
as consistent with the patient's prior condition.
Family members still love these creatures. Therefore
the smallest mistake is likely to arouse suspicion.

“Pneumonia” is an ideal cause of death for our action,
since it is widely considered such a critical illness.
Simply calculate a longer decline for the young.
Relatives like to believe in an end that is painless,

therefore “a stroke” is ideal for the older patients.
Write to them advising that in this time of war
incineration of their remains was essential
and their possessions were distributed to the poor.

What we are engaged in is irreproachable.
Though we must ensure it is as secret as possible.

/

the only explanation I can give is that I didn't have enough time to think
about it all the nurses were put under a lot of stress

please believe me I didn't do it readily I really detested it in fact I can't
say why I didn't refuse

at that time there wasn't anybody to pour out one's heart to nobody
would have helped us if we refused to do the work

you don't have the level of education of a physician you can't evaluate
if the order is right one's own thinking is switched off

at the time I thought I wouldn't be guilty if I didn't do the actual killings
I tried to cope with it as far as possible to forget everything

you ask me if I would also have committed a theft on order I say that I
wouldn't have done it however I saw the act of giving medicine
even in order to kill as an obligation

my attitude was if it was me I would consider it a release

/

beer, wine and cocktails

a local polka band

all the hospital staff

crammed into the basement

one of the doctors

gives an inspiring, sober speech on the importance of our work

more beer, laughter

the administrator dressed as a priest

delivers a mock eulogy

applause as the ten-thousandth patient

is pushed into the furnace

more wine, dancing

you and I

stagger through the Hadamar facility gardens, singing

/

Our institution, and many others, obtained
wonderful research material. I gave the officers
the jars, the fixatives and instructions,
that's all. The advancement of science

requires a constant supply. I know now
that some of the younger physicians – aware
of the various bonuses, research grants
and university appointments on offer –

took it on themselves to “take up a collection”
from the smaller hospitals and clinics – those with
harelips, stutters, cerebral palsy, feeblemindedness,

any noticeable deformities at all.

They are still teaching us about ourselves –
ironic, given their abnormality.

/

Q1.

The construction of a lunatic asylum costs 6 million marks. How many houses at 15,000 marks each could have been built for that amount?

Q2.

A handicapped person costs the public 5 reichsmark per day. If within the boundaries of the reich 300,000 of these people are being cared for in institutions, how many marriage loans at 1,000 reichsmark per couple could be financed annually from the funds allocated to institutions?

Q3.

This person suffering from hereditary defects costs the people 60,000 reichmarks during his lifetime. If a loaf of bread costs 0.63 reichmark, how many loaves could be supplied for that amount?

/

First, let me be
clear, everything in medicine and ethics is relative.
Each part of the body serves the whole. The people,
the nation. Wherever there exists a terrible burden, it is right
to remove it. Let's be honest now. Human
husks. Disgusting travesties. Useless eaters.
Where there is no suffering, there can be no pity.
Any normal person would be appalled to imagine
themselves in such a state. The economy,
the state. Burdens. What will happen to us

if we do not act to disinfect? The body, the society,
the diagnosis. These people, these –

/

why write this now?

at the time (of course)

one knew

smoke over the town

ash in the river

one found oneself unsettled

distracted un- dis-

the children would taunt each other

with the name of the hospital

day after day they arrived

grey buses with darkened windows

I wrote a number of strongly-worded letters

why write this now?

who does it benefit?

2.

Unruly bodies

After empathy

a double acrostic

clambering out of my bones into your skin, this optimistic *what if*, this bodily dressing-up with no harm meant, I don't expect the entry to be so jarring – rattled and adrift in the loose fit of you, every attempt to grasp something solid fails, until confidence dissolves in the acid of your gut, and this is what I'm left with – the visceral trouble of undoing what I've assumed – drenched in you, a road slowly opening in the human dark, at last I emerge, dumbstruck, my entire body an ear, still

One might enter into your body⁸

Then, while you are out hunting with a few of the tribesmen you've been living with, they stop, in a posture that unnerves you, like fear or awe, but something else. They stare at the opposite bank of the river. Unsure, you look intently, across the infinite greens of the forest, the textures and shapes formed by biology, by sunlight and wind. Nothing. Your body betrays your confusion, failure to see. But the figure of the spirit, trudging silently through the undergrowth, is obvious to the men. They point, whispering to you, there! –

It's said the world appears first upended on the retina, a deformed image your brain corrects. Arrangements of features become faces, a mouth opening below two eyes, alive with light. Movement and disorder, the way a figure walks upright, legs scissoring with a slight asymmetry. Some say it's evolution that causes strange bodies to emerge out of the background, as your eyes detect a fracture in the smooth angles of a human shape, and fixate on –

Spirits isn't quite the right word. They are like humans, but speak in a high voice, and they make their home at the edge of our world. Sometimes, one might enter into your body. Possession is close, but also imprecise. You'll talk with a different voice, and in the morning, of course, deny it was you, unable to conceive just how –

A body that appears can also disappear. A furrowed scar across a reconstructed face blurs into the background. A stump moving through air is embraced by a surge of leaves, by the river, by clouds. A crumpled torso becomes yours.

Dispersed

*Rock of Ages, Maldon*⁹

above the sharp lines of the paddocks
smoke in the blue distance

eagle-height and catching
my breath in the winter light

I rest on this hill of drought-stressed
trees, boulders and huddled stones

a meeting place? (*wayaparri*)
or somewhere no-one went? (*ngalanya*)

dry mosses and wind – the land
seems to have been broken

off from itself
only a shadow, there,

intangible, just over my shoulder –
dark pocket of air

or a murmur, unheard, stuck
between leaf rustle and crow call

as if waiting for a human
throat to inhabit

the old name of the place
hidden under rubble

a car drones across the land
cows bellow to each other

their clouds of breath
disperse

In your language

for Mel (Amanda) Baggs

*weeeeee aaaaarrrrrreeeee
wheeeeerrrrrrreeeeeeee
weeeeeeee aaarrrrrreeeee
weeeee hhhheeeeaarrrr
aaaaaiiiiiirrrrrrrrrrrrr
weeerrreeeee aaawwwe
weeeee eeeeeaaaarrrrrr
weeee aarrrrre herrrrrre*

*scra scru sski scra sckri
scra scru ssek sscra scri
scru ssek scru sck scraa
shuup tek sshhhhupp tek
shhhhhuuupp tek tek tck
shhp prrressss prrressss
prresss prrressss prresss*

*rrrrraaacckkkkeetttttt
rrraacckkkkeett racket
butitsstruckbutitsstruck
butitsstruckbutitsstruck*

*weeee aarrrrre herrrrrre
weeee aarrrrre aaaiiirrr*

you're standing at the window, back
to camera, as the droning song of things
flows through you and out of your mouth
your arms, rhythmic, insistent, without translation
and these tree limbs – bare as my ignorance –
shiver just slightly, in response

what qualifies as language or as being here?
to brush, shake, stroke or rub unlocks
the speech of objects, your every
surface and cavity resonates – pushing
your face into an open book, you sense
the meaning of paper is not just in the ink

you sniff, caress and take into your mouth
each tactile form, yet they say you're imprisoned
in yourself – what does it matter
if some think you're too rehearsed or capable
for the diagnosis, or if all this is a performance,
sound poetry as a way of living, when

there are these wordless speaking things?
touched, they ring like instruments and enter us
heeeerrree whheerree wee are

Prescriptions

Are words like these stimulants or anaesthetics?
Where there is no struggle, there is no strength.

You can't feel that from the stale cell of your bed.
I don't, as another load is thrown onto my back.

Where is there *no struggle*? Is there no strength
in succumbing, in the collapse? Do we have to fight?

I don't – as another load is thrown onto my back,
whether insult or pity – welcome that weight.

In succumbing, in the collapse, do we have to fight
the impulse to fight? Being different is exhausting.

Whether insult or pity, welcome that weight,
I keep telling myself, as if repeating makes it true.

The impulse to fight being different is exhausting.
Be feeble. Be ignorant. Lose. This is what

I keep telling myself. As if repeating makes it true,
experts prescribe affirmations, courage. Instead, I'll

be feeble. Be ignorant. Lose. This is what
flesh and bone want – to hold, to dissolve. Still,

experts prescribe affirmations, courage. Instead, I'll
think, *where is bird song, where is human touch?*

Flesh and bone want to hold, to dissolve. Still,
you can't feel that. From the stale cell of your bed,

think – *here is bird song, here is human touch.*
Are words like these stimulants or anaesthetics?

There are many pleasures

the first has your mouth flush with milk taste of clear
blue sky sounds of soft fur sweet smell of sun and shadow
in a blur of senses gently vexing everything rushing in
was that how it was back then before you could hold
words or make memory these pleasures (making you)

others you soon realise are built from detritus and thin air
your first bike and a vacant lot of roller-coaster dirt paths
pocket-money shrapnel swapped for a bag of mixed sugars
blue bruises twisted ankles accidental scars compelling
as they're absorbed slowly into the flesh (alchemical)

but what version of it makes you the only one not laughing
your marrow registering that acid attention before you do
a joke a shove a name to become punchline and exile but
pinned there and kept as someone else's strange pleasure
the little needles of that sound still inside you (as ballast)

this one is timid and hides when you take out your pen
but unwatched it'll sneak into the ink or disguise itself
as the seeds of tears or kisses the soft percussion of rain
your breath fizzing feather-soft through mirror-neurons
as thought grows tired and unclenches (a hinge creaks)

then there's her wise palm tender on your cheek
that crack in your frost would be pleasure enough
but to see something pure welling up from the centre
of her chest to know she has surfaced through fathomless
pain into herself this frail and fierce light (

Survival

A landscape of exposed bone, taut muscle. Sky –
as white as it is blue. Hard light
pushing through shadows of lace.

Each morning, whether in drought or frost,
the town wakes to the sound
of something shifting under the surface.

The fields are pocked with hand-dug shafts.
Miners with no lamplight or luck
walked and fell into their graves.

Most of the topsoil, washed away in the hungry rush.
Now, whatever grows here, grows strong
and broken.

In a cafe, a stranger walks you through the ruins of her life.
Memories stir beneath her voice,
tremors along her arm.

These muted boulders and fallen leaves,
these cockatoos scratching the dry air,
aren't interested in healing you.

Kangaroo paws touch the rough edge of the road,
a pink X over his still warm body.
The ground absorbs all he knew.

Today, you surface in the middle of the reservoir,
face to face with the dark, inscrutable calm
of a musk duck.

Tiny heads of pink or yellow float on fine stalks. To see
these wildflowers, you have to stop,
crouch down and wait.

You still don't know a word of the language of this place.
Syllables drift on the wind,
dust-motes catch in the throat.

That photo

I open the envelope, arrange all the pages of my adolescent medical file across the desk, the bed, the floor. If I could see each and every recorded note and image at once – the mapping of heart function, blood pressure, bowel movements, how I described my pain back then – I might find some way to reconcile that time with this. The nurses' handwriting is cryptic, ambiguous. *Light sleeper. Somewhat stooped. Co-operative. Responds to encouragement.* And there I am, twelve, barely flinching in the flash of the camera. Its clinical lens. This poorly photocopied image, all exposure and shadow. A singular person, blurred, nakedly soft. He stands there, unmoving, as I circle him, looking back in time. I catch a foot on the curve of his rib and fall. Chest-deep in this, struggling, I'm sinking, as if awake under anaesthetic, powerless. I can only watch, from within that photo, as a thin and startled boy wanders around the house.

Operations

GP referral to specialist (24.5.1976)

this 5 year old boy

I have been able to re-assure his mother about the former, but the latter is worrying her, particularly as the father as a result of severe

could you please outline his future

letter from professor of paediatrics (17.9.1982)

we like to

feel quite certain

abnormality

the very characteristic

opinion

disorder of the connective

I think

suspect

mild or even serious

really serious problems

a little

bit of nuisance

this process should be repeated

allowed to progress to a severe stage

to give a very simple

and factual description

just a name

just what he feels

an error

cropping up

operation sheet (7.1.1987)

complicating through the old
incision down into
 the possible
to expose the sacral
 the fusion mass
wires sublaminar wires double wires
contoured rods into the wings
 of the ilium
 moderate correction but remarkable
 how rigid the spine
stripped and decorticated and bone
 graft laid out on the concave
wounds were all
 closed this lad
 has lost
 a lot of blood
1590 mls he can be
mobilised when into a low
sort of brace satis
factory

nurse's progress sheet (8-15.1.1987)

tolerating	quiet	drain continues
as ordered	tolerating this	reasonably
unsettled	gauze	found at 8am
leaking	dressing	reinforced
some relief	light diet	not very
interested	bile-stained	fluid no visitors
pressure care	morphine	a small bleed
quite settled	co-operative	from mid-back
sitting	on edge	unsupported
tends to lose	balance	looks pale still
slight	down	unsettled early in the

evening found half out of bed at 11.25pm with his feet on the floor

awaiting signature dis or iented needs
encouragement quiet and in tact
obs stable hair washed brace re al
igned and he stood up and walked

a few steps for discharge tomorrow home

letter from mother (23.1.1987)

dear
we hardly know
but
the extra
regular
trauma of a hospital stay
the whole person
in isolation
wonderful
operation
anxiety of the days
we couldn't have chosen
see you when we come back

Predicaments

When we first put a collar on the cat –
a ragged stray with green, intelligent eyes –
she panicked,
shuffled backwards, as if reversing
out of a dark, narrow tunnel,
somehow sure she could creep out of her predicament.
We both felt that bitter surge
of shame, laughing at her absurd
attempt to be free. It's not unfamiliar. I turn
to you – *Why can't you see how beautiful you are?*
But here I am thrashing like Houdini
in my own shape.
And there's no trick, no escape.
The straitjacket around me is me.

The illness of 'the spiritual causes of illness'

a found poem (with defects) ¹⁰

allergies:	denying your own power	<i>denying</i>
nose bleeds:	a need for recognition	<i>a need</i>
ringworm:	not feeling good enough	<i>to bark</i>
dry eyes:	would rather die than forgive	<i>at desire</i>
coughs:	a desire to bark at the world, <i>listen to me!</i>	
nausea:	fear	<i>fear</i>
hay fever:	a belief in persecution	<i>a belief</i>
genital herpes:	a belief in a punishing god	<i>in</i>
grey hair:	a belief in pressure	<i>a punishing</i>
influenza:	a belief in statistics	<i>nature</i>
malaria:	out of balance with nature	
asthma:	suppressed crying	<i>suppressed</i>
fainting:	fear	<i>fear</i>
arthritis:	feeling victimised	
laryngitis:	so mad you can't speak	<i>feeling</i>
haemorrhoids:	fear of deadlines	<i>you</i>
frigidity:	fear of father	<i>can't</i>
impotence:	fear of mother	<i>fear</i>
scoliosis:	trying to please both parents	
baldness:	fear	<i>trying</i>
heartburn:	fear, fear, clutching fear	
diabetes:	longing for what might have been	<i>what might</i>
cerebral palsy:	a need to unite the family in love	<i>need</i>
cystic fibrosis:	a belief that life won't work for you	<i>grief</i>
alzheimer's:	refusing to live in your own shoes	<i>giving up</i>
heart attack:	focusing on material aspects in life	
cancer:	deep grief	<i>fear of</i>
stroke:	giving up	<i>your</i>
coma:	fear	<i>own shoes</i>
death:	being embodied	

Breathing

The contemplation of such wonderful objects as the Möbius strip should be encouraged to help us think more imaginatively and less dogmatically about connectivity and inside/outside-ness... If the (apparently) two sides of a surface can in fact sometimes be just one side and if the regions of inside and outside are unable to be cleanly distinguished, then perhaps the apparent Cartesian dualism split might turn out not to be so hopelessly clear-cut, with tendrils of each realm ambiguously and inextricably embracing the other – Norman Carson

How do I carry this air? Your
body – pale and thin, forbearing,

its wisdom hidden in blog posts
and silence, carried away,
prepared – here in this blunt

wooden box that they now
make revolve and disappear

behind a heavy curtain. From
now on, we'll share nothing.
Theatre in reverse, decomposing you

into these vague and pressing
sensations in my head and chest.

You wrote that mind cannot be
located anywhere, the Möbius
strip a model for ontology. How

do I carry you? The well-meaning
minister makes a complete hash

of the Rilke, and you are not here
to tell me it doesn't matter.
Breathe out, breathe in –

Becoming

*from memory and a Hocqak tale*¹¹

some futile thing that can't be secured
(attention or a plastic toy – does it matter?)
he slams his bedroom door
stands for a long moment before
the goldfish bowl
and knocks (a part of him,
split off, will call it an accident, knowing it isn't)
the food container
into the water – their small happy mouths
open and open
(greedily we fill ourselves with regret)
the fish float on the surface
suddenly he finds it hard to breathe

two men go out hunting
their quarry (a racoon, or a spirit in disguise)
disappears into the hollow
of an immense tree and they find there
a fish
one plucks it out and cooks it
offers morsels to the other, who isn't sure
but wanting what his friend has, he takes and eats
immediately becoming
unbearably thirsty
he drinks but no water is enough
frantic, he wades out into the river
scales cover his skin, gills open in his neck

Impression

Each night, when I'm prone, the
ceiling watches me. By
day, the walls, or clouds and
you. I'm wrapped in sober
clothes, in skin, in words that
come from others' mouths.
Misshapen, I can't lie
straight in bed. Upright, I'm
not. Up close, of course, the
surface blurs and whispers.
There's neck-pulse, wrist-pulse, a
soft knocking at my ribs
from the inside. I'm not
empty. There are sparks and
ashes, microplastics
and trace metals, pollen,
stone, unfinished love. Some
of that spills out. I pace
the grey corridors of
my head. But you might know
me from the footpaths and
gardens of the real world.
When I walk, I'm part-
giraffe, part-heron, all
this, whoever this is.
I can't sit still. Chairs tend
to cripple, repel. At
least this means I'm leaning
forward, towards you. A
curious parenthesis
of bone and open pores.
But yes, ordinary,
moving, I displace air
much like you do. And in
the bed, the couch, I can
see the imprint of my
shape. I am held here.

Daytime, there are shadows

Each evening, as if for the first time, I
step out into the dusk air, the dense

stars appear and begin to blink, and a chill
rises up out of the ground and into my

bones, the flesh shuddering against
what it tries to forget, what the night will

not cease declaring, how even this shadow,
this shape of deep shame, this merciless

mobile sinkhole, dissolves its tether so
as to merge again with everything, and yes

this terrifies you as well, not the night per se
but what the night takes away –

the hope that we can distinguish ourself
from anything, anyone at all.

In itself

*for Javier Botet*¹²

not anything you can quite put your finger on
but the abandoned mansion has you
cold and transfixed

then, the long, cobwebbed corridor
flickering candlelight, unbearable
tension in the soundtrack

there is someone in the corner of the dark room

faceless, coming towards you
limbs jerking and contorted – this isn't
computer generated

*taking the special effects workshop was strategic
he says, I wanted to show them my body
was very special, very peculiar*

or, in the sickly green glow of a night-vision camera,
a form, staggering –
skin like tattered rags over long bones,
hand clutching a hammer

in another scene it crawls
out of the floor towards you, crab-like,
with a moan you hear as predatory
but is more like desperate maternal grief

no human form is frightening in itself

his childhood in and out of hospitals
trouble breathing, still
a life built out of thin air

next, from the playground, you might glimpse
this slim figure at the forest's edge –

a very tall man in a dark suit – you don't want
to go with him, but his silence
and long, outstretched arms horrify and comfort

*hours under heavy make-up, sometimes
I think, I've got to stop
but then, I see the monster appearing –
it's beautiful – yes! I am
that creature
smiling from the back row as they scream*

Instructions for client restraint ¹³

bruises can't say what happened restraint marks on the wrists and ankles for their own good strapped into a chair or bed or toilet seat unable to consent or speak who would believe her anyway the work may attract a few bad apples access to vulnerable non-verbal or immobile people either way how to make a complaint against the person who cleans you clothes you is there while you sleep

to minimise disruption for others and in order for us to get anything done around here sometimes it has to be cobbled together with wooden planks and chicken wire you can't call it a cage it's more a withdrawal space with padlocks on the outside and a warning this report contains

unreliable testimony difficult behaviours moaning complex needs no other options codes of practice expert care these burdens are tragic this construction a space where he might quieten down or scream into exhaustion or maybe try extra medication adrenal fatigue low pay high turnover lack of training thrown in the deep no doubt it can be distressing for family members to hear about every single incident

a pacified body is a pacified mind a space of restraint creates a strange peacefulness at the centre as if there is no-one there as the funding evaporates or is siphoned off disability always is other people the oversight challenged a report is made and filed again it won't be accessible

Internalised

in the bolt-hole of your mind –
tripping hazards and the smell
of old thoughts, windows smeared on
the outside with curious
fingers and breath – no wonder,
that stubborn wish there really
was nothing to see here, as
a coldness huddles in those
corners – the air, mostly smoke,
burning trees and words – a crowd,
in awe, drawn to this hiding
place, bent and unhomely – how,
you ask, can you be entered
and abandoned at the same
time? – the only answer is
no answer – this thing can't be
filed away or overcome –
skin, marrow and thought, you're steeped
in it – surely, you think, you
can't take much more of this, but
you will, oh, you will – this gift,
dark flower, still opening –

Three ways of responding

1. Interrupting, as editor

Simon Dickie's essay "Deformity Poems and Other Nasties" in Eighteenth-Century Life (2017)

a matter-of-factness about deformity brings its own ~~comfort~~

the vicious pamphlet attacks on Alexander Pope, a routine form of ~~humour~~

mock aubades with dawn revealing the ~~hideous~~ sight of the lover

always ~~appropriate~~ to laugh at a deformed person who was trying to hide the fact

one soon finds much that is worse

routine to make ~~fun~~ of unfortunates

the ancient idea that God had imprinted ~~signs~~ on human bodies

~~delighting~~ in the thought of him limping to exile

words of great significance collapse in on themselves

an ugly ~~woman with a~~ beautiful singing ~~voice~~

perverse to read these poems

without considering the world

2. Conflict resolution, using “I” statements

John Dryden's poem “Absalom and Achitophel” (1681), line 172

to be clear
I do appreciate that comparisons are bracing
in both senses
invigorating and constricting
(like a medical device)
so I don't hold anything against you
it's just that when you say
born a shapeless lump like anarchy
I feel like
you're accusing me of being unpatriotic
or repulsive
or both (I get confused
within the rhythm of your heroic couplets)
so I wonder
if there's another simile you could use
that would help me focus on what you're trying to say
I would really appreciate that
(unless of course
that is in fact
what you are saying)

3. Deconstructing (anagrams and erasures)

William Wycherley's poem "To a Little Crooked Woman, with a Good Face and Eyes, Tho with a Bunch Before and Behind" (1706)

Is Art to host sly theories on the other,
a chorus of hurt or a crude weapon?

This bespoke venom, a mockery of fuel
whose sadly amateur eyes see obvious sorry –

eugenic exhibit to woo low kind.
Here, you stain our syndromes, reckon this a pose,

because you block desire or hook disgrace.
To re-verse idiom may tilt able mobs.

Consider our archive power, hobbled, defying.
Unruly bodies cede dead libel and swerve.

3.

Absent touch

Song not for you

after "Das Lied des Zwerges" (The song of the dwarf), Rainer Maria Rilke

Crooked blood, stunted hands, cripple,
out of place – uncanny how small
thoughts can be, while I'm incomparable,
only a dwarf because the so-called average
person is taller. You ought
to just walk on by, but don't. Ever thought
how inflated you must look from this

height? When I walk or shop, I'm inspiring,
it seems. *Fantastic to see you getting
out*, you say, imagining waking
up in my body, the courage
you'd need not to kill yourself, stat.
How do you live with that?
That's me wondering back,
distractedly eating (wow!) a sandwich.

In my home, I've made it so I come
face to face with the cupboards and oven, belonging
as we all want it. I sleep in my bed (some-
times alone). At work, my cubicle's longer
and wider than yours. True,
this isn't much of a song –
but then it never was meant for you.

Beauty, from the other side

Aged twelve, before surgery to fix the scoliosis, I formed an idea a certain girl might like me. I found her beautiful. Or was it just that I knew others did? I can't be sure. I don't think we ever spoke. What I do remember are the insults I absorbed like splinters, how my body held and resisted them. Like nested dolls, each identity

contains within itself another, contrary identity.

Who am I, apart from what others assume? A deformed person appears banished from sex by their own body, into the solitude of knowing that being beautiful can be studied like a distant, dying star. Remember those soft-porn images of lace and curves? I was sure

such skin would touch this skin, but never sure exactly how. That was a time unaware of identity – awash in the thrill and vertigo, I became a member of that boy's club I couldn't belong to (I was deformed). I held in my flesh a pre-used sense of what beautiful meant, some detached assessment of another body.

What else to do but accept, like death, this body? So far from desirable, I might surface on the other shore where the soft fall of light on skin is what's beautiful – a way of seeing, not what's seen. A stigmatised identity can fuel anyone's resentment. Why say *deformed* or *crippled*, when there's *striking* or even *sexy*? Remember

who keeps slamming doors in your face, remember the nauseating, clinical chill of those rooms – each body shaved, veiled with cosmetics, or cut and deformed by surgeons, for *beauty*. Can anyone be sure breaking their way in will change anything? An identity like this might make me a fetish, but not *beautiful*.

I've only heard it spoken in whispers – *beautiful* –
by other exiles. Such tenderness is harder to remember
than cruelty, feels more frail than any given identity.
Both words and electricity surge through the body –
concepts and their fractures – so even you're unsure
what might spill out. That's why this poem is formed

around words like *beautiful* – they're more deformed
than any of us, whatever we remember. All that's sure
is they lose their identity in the depths of every body.

Human looking

Mütter Museum Historic Medical Photographs, 1860-1940 ¹⁴

So much can go wrong. Ulcers or lesions.
An infestation of worms. Measles, pneumonia, gangrene.
Some unidentifiable congenital flaw.

Notice how the cursive of this young man's spine
echoes the photographer's signature. This specimen
was acquired in 1877 at a cost of fifty dollars,
on condition that *no questions were to be asked that might
lead to its identification*. I think about the word *its*.
Through this contract, he became the world's
second-tallest skeleton on display.
We are curious. So much can go wrong.

Sudden, multiple sarcomas. *Hysterical
inability to stand or walk. Vestigial tail.*
A body can be monstrous, shy, mercurial.

This child's head is cradled by adult hands.
It is difficult to discern whether this is for a sense
of scale, the grip tender and subtle,
or if he had to be held down for the image
to be clear enough. I also need
the inscription – *Supernumerary auricle. Idiot.*
Incontinence of urine – to believe there's anything wrong
with him. So, I look again. So much

can go wrong. Unstable
and fatigued, I am liable to fall
into the belief that I'm not inside these photographs.

R 's hair is slick and neatly combed,
crutches resting against the wall behind him.
He is dressed only in a shirt and vest, pinstripe trousers
folded so as to modestly cover his groin.
I am meant to pay attention to the stump
of his amputated right leg – the pinched flesh
where the stitches were, hand resting in the vacated space.
It's ok, he's looking into the distance, not the camera.

How are we meant to look
at all these injuries sustained from war, from motor vehicles,
or from carrying wealthy men around on sedan chairs?

And A 's body is still here –
naked and uncannily thin, bones loosely arranged
on an unmade bed. The hard facts
of his ribs and collarbone press up against his skin,
against my eyes. Surely he must be
sleeping, nestled in oblivion. Yet why
is his bed-sheet pulled back to expose him
to the flinches and caresses of my gaze? So

much can go wrong. Sometimes I might think
I recognise myself in a patient,
as if their dignity or torment was mine.

In this photo of a nameless man
with an unspecified disorder of the jaw,
he looks like he may be singing.
Dressed in a tailored three-piece suit and tie,
his expression is composed, almost bored,
yet his mouth is an ecstatic, crooked *O*.
No matter how hard I strain,
I can't hear him.

No lament

after "Quasimodo's Lament" by Judith Beveridge (a departure, using each line's first word)

Crazed? – only the mob in us deserves that word.

Your self, your body, calm and attentive at the rope,
will always draw out those strong and slanted notes
running across every imperfect surface. Heard

as harsh racket or pure silence, your curved and heavy
bell is as perfect as kyphosis – deformed, composed.

Your torso's an ornate cathedral, a vast sanctuary.

Outside, the cobblestones echo with myths convinced

your modest and erotic heart will always be alone.

The one who desires you, though, enters with care
into the charged field around your shape. What is this

love but a deep ringing? These bodies but their secrets?

Be quiet, then, as the deft poets approach, let
them dream of capturing you. You'll be elsewhere.

Out of focus

after a New York Times photo-essay, "The Hunted", Daniel Rodrigues

People with albinism are being attacked—usually with machetes and knives—for the purpose of obtaining their body parts (an arm can fetch as much as US\$2,000) – Ikponwosa Ero, UN Independent Expert on Albinism¹⁵

At a distance, my body leaps to think of him as kin –
both of us white in a Mozambique village.

But he is my subject, a victim, child.

I have my list of questions, my camera,

and these reckless mirror neurons.

He leans in, whispers into the microphone.

His father left them, thought the absence
of melanin a curse, proof his mother had slept
with a European. *I'm not a white animal*, he says,
looking away. I nod, make notes.

Some believe his white hair, thrown onto the lake,
will make fish leap into the net. Others think
a limb hacked off and held over the land
could lead them to seams of precious metal.

Money!, they call him, laughing when he walks past.
I finger the keys to my four-wheel drive.

The more he tells me, the quieter he gets,
until our only language is breath, and I become
acutely aware of every sound outside. Now
he wants to be left alone with his textbooks,

those maps to elsewhere. He wants to be known
for his intellect. I am thinking – as you are –
of skin pigment and what can't be seen,
as I squint and shoot, and fail to capture him.

At play with his siblings, or alone against a crumbling wall –
however I frame him, it looks staged. Mistakes

might be more beautiful and true. Home,
in the safety of my own skin, there is one photo
I keep returning to. He is perfectly out of focus –
the sun is turning his face into a blur of light.

Formity

alternating lines with William Hay's "Deformity: An Essay" (1754)

imagine a print of me in the frontispiece
or a proliferating meme in the aether
I am indeed a perfect riddle
the disfigured can't be figured
cannot look with proper confidence in the face of another

you don't quite know what it's like
out of tenderness they taught me to be ashamed
what else might explain this
awkwardness of my outward get-up and behaviour
this dream of entering the body of another

ever conscious what an untoward subject
does to the atmosphere in a room or a poem
I feel a reluctance in opening my mouth
who knows what might come out or in
a deformed person should not assume borrowed feathers

or that language can speak louder than flesh
contempt attends him like his shadow reminding him of his ill figure
as if *to figure* was not also *to think*
when I die I care not what becomes of this carcass
while I live let me care what becomes of you

I desire my body may be opened
as these words are opened and never fixed
and I am a good subject of speculation for all in me is nature
an image blurred against the retina
the pleasure of one escaped

Visible

There's power in the corridors of the ugly club. It arises from knowing the defining characteristic that grants you entry – recognising the truth of it and realising hope can spring from that knowing –
Robert Hoge, *Ugly*

Most of all, I enjoyed reading *Ugly* on the train,
your book held up like a membership badge, an answer
to those staring from the other side (though, no, a twisted frame

isn't a missing limb or a disfigured face). Page 180, on work
experience at the local Catholic primary, you listened
as the Principal said – *it would have been appropriate*
that we were warned before you came. Slowly, you

realised she was talking about how you looked – your head,
a collection of jigsaw pieces pressed
surgically into place – somehow, it's you who said *sorry*

(this one last time). Those who are too visible
learn to compensate for others. Close up, any life's a mess
of fragments, stitched together into a shape that's human
enough. Back on page 69, as the smashed parts

of *Skylab* made their inevitable plunge to earth,
you imagined they'd land on the school, trapping everyone
under rubble. With only one chance of escape,

you removed your prosthetic leg to use as a battering ram.

All the other kids streamed out behind you,
covered in debris, coughing and squinting into the light.
But just because it never happened, doesn't mean it isn't true.

The way of uselessness ¹⁶

The source of all things made a mess
of Crippled Tree – crooked back,
organs bunched up, chin at his belly.
I'm at peace, he said, with the violence
of the seasons. If my right arm
becomes a rooster, I can keep watch.
If my arse becomes wheels,
I'll never need a carriage.

Crippled No-Lips and Swollen-Neck
both spoke eloquently to the Duke
and soon enough he found the bodies
of normal people repulsive.
Knowledge is a curse.
Form, without form.

A chestnut tree observed
how the hawthorne, pear and orange
were cruelly treated for being useful.
So it made its wood brittle, seeped sap
from its side, disguised itself as a shrine.
It grew old and huge,
became shade for thousands of oxen.

Young Horse-Face had no official position,
didn't know anything,
not even his own ugliness.
Yet all men wanted to learn from him,
women to be his concubines.
He was given the reins of government
and immediately he left
to go rambling through the forest
unknown.

Zhuang Zhou, Taoist sage, 4th century BCE

The Cultural Revolution broke my spine.
Students took me to a secret room.
For months, they show me their fists,
distort my body with hunger, demand
I confess. But there is nothing to confess.
When one of them turns away,
I push myself out a window,
plunge three stories into uselessness.

This was the era when the doorsteps
of the orphanages were crowded.
No boys – only girls and the useless ones.
Each week they decide who can be fed
and who will be placed, without a name,
into the other rooms.

Years later, my sister finds me
alone in the shelter, the walls, my arms,
stained with dried shit –
I want to follow her tears back to our home
but what will happen
to the others? The source of all things
rests heavily on my shoulders.

Twenty-five years later, I can say –
too many problems but big achievements.
The road ahead is very long –
unstable, with many potholes –
so it is not a question of character
but of surfaces. Through my window, I see
a woman, burnt in an industrial accident,
turned away again. This is just
an administrative centre, not a service facility.

*Deng Pufang, one of the founders of the Chinese Disabled
Persons' Federation, b.1944*

I can't help the way I feel

after John Isaacs (2003)

pale pink and swollen
cluster of mushroomed lumps
monstrously recognisable all fat but
not porcine or childlike must make you think
skin stretched and pocked self made flesh it's
 pornographic irony of the inside turned into surface
 visceral blunt soft tangible fact I throw cold shadows
 on these bare walls dominate this space ask when is your body
not your body? my heart and bones surely can't handle the mass
of me feet redden with the strain of holding upright the thought
of the grotesque if you'd let me move I'd stagger graceless slow
gasp sweating here I'm stood up to weightlift my bulky question
 what do I mean to be displayed? in this white space for imagined
 effect parts of me hidden under folds bulges this deforming look a
medical nakedness they approach aroused ashamed I am way too close
always you are repulsed by your desire to touch me just don't what form
qualifies as liveable? where are my genitals hands head? you suspect deep
beneath these bowlfulls of excess flesh tragic accident or failure of will
a small and timid self trapped in hiding for your benefit but why
would I show you my face when all you can see is this weight
wait no not I but you made me this shape so that no words
or gaze can ever reach around me
please close this gallery
let me collapse
slump into the
relief of alone

Light, which acts as a mask

for the model in Joel Peter Witkin's "Art Deco Lamp, New Mexico" (1986)

Alone and safe, you spread the newspaper across the table. Before you realise you've read them, certain words in an advertisement enter and possess. *Pinheads, dwarfs, giants, hunchbacks, hermaphrodites, bearded women, people with tails, horns, wings, reversed hands or feet, anyone born without arms, legs, eyes, ears, nose, lips. All people with unusually large genitals. All manner of extreme visual perversion.* You have tried to not think of yourself as perverted, monstrous or holy. Not a symbol, a weapon, raw material. But it seems the photographer needs you, or your form, if there is a difference. His work is his pilgrimage to become more loving, unselfish. The idea becomes you.

With your good hand, you have already dialled the number. The days before your appointment curve in on themselves, blur out of focus. You rehearse your own voice. One version is self-possessed, with a sarcastic wit. Another, tremulous and conflicted. A third, cool, almost oblivious. They distort around each other. Home loses the sense of itself. The windows are filmed with the city's mechanical air. An animal turns clumsily in the ceiling. Somehow you sleep and dreams clamber through your head, a fist of images, oddly comforting.

Only when you arrive and the equipment is laid out before you, do you realise that there was never any mention of what these sessions would precisely entail. On the table, a tangle of ropes and chains, rusted callipers, rotting fruit, a human skull, barbed wire, a broken clock. He prods and strokes your body with his eyes – especially the soft folds of flesh, the curved arc of your protruding spine. The mask is his suggestion. Your nakedness is yours.

Having a little difficulty breathing, he disappears behind the camera. You're not sure if he's struggling with this, or aroused. He orders you into myriad, difficult positions. It takes a long time for him to be satisfied. In the end, you've hardly said a word, and he has contorted your body into the shape of an ampersand, but connecting with what?

There is only the sound now of something being slid under your door – your sole payment, a print of the photograph. In the scoured image, your face is covered with a white globe – light, which acts as a mask, through which you cannot look back at the viewer. You return it to the dark envelope, take up again your quiet life, which is and is not the negative.

Ugliness in the spotlight

A 42-year-old unemployed man was crowned Zimbabwe's ugliest man at a pub pageant in Harare – but the contest turned ugly when the runner-up accused judges of bias.

– Nehanda Radio, 22/11/2015¹⁷

The first head's a crumpled bungle of dough and sweat.
He ascends the small staircase to the stage, without
expression, and the club roars, repelled, aroused.
The second man's a half-baked Cubist forgery,
all unrealistic angles, yet compelling. He stalks
the catwalk, stilted and unnaturally proud.

Laughter comes from a dark, intestinal place.
Red, green, yellow lights throb and pulse, euphoric
auto-tuned music makes the flesh of the crowd vibrate.
A third man's head seems to have been spat out
of a broken machine in an abandoned Harare factory.
He stares the crowd down with a grimace, a leer.

His skin, his eyes glow. He's extraordinary,
a lithe and shining animal. The club writhes,
a raucous sauna. A fourth and awkward competitor
smiles and exposes the gaps in his mouth –
at that, some cavernous absence swells
inside each man, a hunger for a way out of themselves.

They erupt, shouting and drinking. Tiny, dark jewels
of broken glass lie scattered across the floor.
The judges consult their stomachs to decide
who has repulsed them most beautifully.
It's announced, and the reigning favourite explodes –
Outrageous! A few missing front teeth and he wins?!

Seeing his broad nostrils flare in righteous anger,
his head a clenched fist atop a thigh-thick neck,
you'd think this sudden encore might force a recount.
*I am naturally ugly – he is a cheat, only ugly when
he opens his mouth. I am still number one! Sure,*
the winner's grin is a broken piano, but he won

because he worked the room, made ugliness appear
to be nowhere, except in that spotlight.

The change room

This morning, walking almost naked
from the change room toward the outdoor heated pool,
I become *that man* again, unsettling

shape to be explained.

Such questions aren't asked to my face. Children
don't mean anything by it, supposedly, so I

shouldn't feel as I do,
as my bones crouch into an old shame I thought
I'd left behind. Chlorine prickling

my nostrils, a stranger
compliments me on my tattoos and shows me hers –
a dove in flight over a green peace sign –

as if the canvas was unremarkable.
She turns and limps away,
and something makes a moment of sense.

I lower myself into our element
and swim, naturally
asymmetrical and buoyant. Quite some time

later, showering, the man beside me
is keen to chat – how many laps we've each done,
how long I've lived in this town, the deep

need for movement.

Speaking, our bodies become solid.

Cave

When the wound healed, and the patient was going about with his wrecked face uncovered, I was sometimes sensible of the embarrassment to which allusion has been made. I feared, when talking to him, to meet his eye, that inadvertently I might let the poor victim perceive what I had perceived: namely, that he was hideous – Ward Muir, Orderly at Third London General Hospital, 1918¹⁸

The park benches outside the hospital
were painted blue – code to the locals
to move along, in case a patient arrived.

The one I can't forget had been coaxed back into town
from a cave he was living in. *The woman I love
finds me repugnant. She has a right to.*

Our clinic walls were lined with prosthetic faces,
flags and posters. Not a single mirror.
He told me, *it was a sound like someone smashing*

*a bottle in a bathtub, only my own skull
was the porcelain and the glass.* What could I
possibly say to such a story? Three times a day,

I pushed a rubber tube down his throat
and poured in beef-tea or milk. Too often
it went in wrong – he'd choke and cough,

then nod, as if saying, *all ready again.*
And still you want to know what he looked like.
His surgeons worked from the inside out,

each layer – bone, flesh, skin – building up
the semblance of a face. They learnt much
through their many failures. As I did

when I looked into his eyes too deliberately.
The air between us, a frozen river.
I carry a shard of it in my stomach.

Some of the patients formed a football team.
*We're guaranteed a win – the other team
take one look at us and run the opposite direction.*

You might imagine he joined them on that field,
his brokenness becoming only one among many,
and that after the fifteen operations

he filled out the pension forms as suggested,
writing *repulsive*, eventually marrying
a beautiful, gentle woman. But I was not surprised

to see him, as he left the hospital, walking
toward the limits of the town, back to the ragged,
open mouth of that cave, the peace of it.

Not a performance

Mike Parr, 'Foreign Looking' (National Gallery of Australia, 2016)

I push through a thick black curtain, watch
his body opened and hurt on three walls
in films which loop and bleed into each other
unsure if it's right to call this *performance*
as his left thigh is encircled with a scalpel
a garter of blood smeared across his face
his belly flinches as lit matches land on skin
white paint poured into the mouth, vomited out
then an old wound is opened and stitched back up
that's the point I turn away to read the list of films –
no, there's no indication how long this will last

I want to believe a body suffering alone
is an impossibility, this flickering in the bowels
another deep empathic contraction, so that
even here, in the adjoining forest of bronze heads
which glance at a wall of thoughtful self-portraits –
smudged charcoal, scribbled skin, frail canvas –
my inner ears prickle with sound from the other rooms
anthemic song, foreboding static, wincing and groans
finally the awkward applause recorded in the gallery
audience wrenching themselves back to the safety of art
afraid the unspeakable cannot be contained

in 1950s Lismore, the other kids would ask
what happened to his arm, nothing below the elbow
casually, he'd blow a hole in reality, say *oh it
got caught in the chaff cutter and fed to the cows*
language begins and ends here in that empty space
where his hand would be, each wound
an exclamation mark in search of a sentence
after trauma, he says, *I can think*
but there is another kind of pain – enclosed
in a sweltering room, the future amputated,
even a thought becomes torture

in *Close the Concentration Camps*, the word
alien branded on his thigh, on a hardback chair
in the centre of the gallery, he has his lips,
ears, face sewn into a web of bloodied thread
mostly, we stand at a distance, backs to the wall
no way to look at him without seeing ourselves
reflected back in a mirror – distressing
the smell of burnt flesh and antiseptic
what could this mean? what is happening
here and in those failing places, which
fourteen years on are even further away?

* * *

removed from ██████████ themselves
these are bodies ██████████
██████████ not ██████████
██████████ safe ██████████
██████████ what is human ██████████
██████████ food, ██████████ detergent, ██████████
██████████ a blade ██████████ an anchor point
██████████ silences leak ██████████
██████████ distance ██████████
██████████ empty ██████████
██████████ shivers, ██████████ pain

When a line of determined ants carries away my nail clippings

I remember this pale skin will be taken by the sky
my knees are already dedicated to the cracked earth

lungs, possessed by the ghost gums along the railway line
my inner-ear, by shivers and nothingness

these feet belong to some restless, prayerful abstraction
language waits to inherit my expressive fingers

shares in my larynx are held by everyone I love
my blood, though, is anyone's

cloud-drift, mould-bloom, worm-hole, the waxing moon,
the cat's sensitive chin – all hold interests in this flesh

my leaning tower of vertebrae can go to the highest bidder
these tear ducts, to the lowest

sometimes it seems lost property holds my tongue
but who owns these elbows? this nose? these lymph nodes?

my chest cavity has given itself to the song of shy birds
and these eyes, to the claim of your eyes

some valves and tissues will be given to people waiting patiently in a line
I'll leave the rest to your imagination

We accept everyone

seems the subtext of the fixed glance
the waiter gives me, half-smiling
straining not to look at my disobedient spine

only at what must hide underneath –
someone in need of healing or acceptance
his posture is dutiful, beard bedraggled

it's not a cult or a sect, but a community of love
and victory over death, the pamphlets proclaim
I've only come back for the green drink
and the soup that tastes like a 1995 sharehouse

he leads me past the kitchen into a room
I didn't realise was there
manoeuvring past his hospitality
I sit on a reclaimed wooden bench

alert for the appearance of signs –
frayed threads from the gingham curtains
little twitches breaking the pleasant
expressions of the women with their absence

of makeup, long hair and carefulness –
facing inward, the windows closed,
we all sense, outside, the cold distances

of the valley, and how the mountains
teem with animals that are frightened of us –
clouds close in over the steep main street

wide-eyed, the waiter tells me he used to feel
on the outside of everything, dreaming
of the resurrection of the body
I can only nod, stare into the white bowl

until he moves on to the next table

Aesthetic surgery

Gloved and masked, he goes in through an incision at my navel,
so the scarring is minimal. The natural look is hard work.

He knows these decisions are emotional,
is first in the search results, so I trust him.

Sculpting a photo's not enough – flesh must be improved.

He knows scarring is emotional,
as a better shape is torn out of this deteriorating body.

We're all self-conscious about changes.

Sculpting a photo's not enough – flesh must be improved,
so I accept the loss of sensation, risk of complications, necrosis.

We're all self-conscious, being torn out of shape.

After the infection, I go to him again, hoping for different results.

*Side-effects include an increased risk of self-harm,
loss of sensation, complications, necrosis.* I accept
a discount for agreeing to the before and after shots.

He goes in again, hoping for different results,
more followers, more likes. Soon, I can move on –
my spirit lifted, watching from above.

A discount for agreeing to the before and after shots
is one way to help me forget the mortality rates, dream

of more followers, more likes, my spirit lifted.

He's first in the search results, so I trust him.

It's not insecurity beneath these stitches, but love,
a way to help me forget the mortality rates.

Gloved and masked, he goes in through an incision at my navel.

The Hunchback in the Park watching Dylan Thomas

With his heavy brown coat,
a solitary thread
caught on the edge of the bench,
he drinks from a dark bottle
pulled from an inside pocket and sits
through the cold afternoon, watching me

(as if I wouldn't notice or mind).
How the pond takes the sky in,
the wonder and shuffle of ordinary
pigeons, even the way the keeper nods
a discreet tolerance my way –
our mister hasn't noticed.

With the elms, he plants himself down.
With the leaves, he sinks into the ground.
A solitary mister, he seems to mutter
into the wind, hunched over
his ragged notebook, alone in his watching,
looking away when I catch his eye.

He has the eyes of a thinker
and a drinker – and I'd know
(though he doesn't know me).
I read the philosophies of the dead
leaves, slow snails, young ducks,
old water, and their insights I keep

to myself. Many figures come
here and go – the dark-suited
and stiff men, wet dogs snuffling
in their honesty, children with hand-me-down
cruelties and language games, nurses
on lunchbreaks with tender eyes –

none of them without fault. I
hesitate to say how mister appears,
but I imagine his lines are straight
on the left-hand side, crooked on the right.
When the day begins to fade
and his bottle is as light

as the glass of it, he straightens up,
brushes some fragile, natural thing
from his coat, and I watch him shrink
back into the city. Towards a warm
and safe place he must walk,
followed by his own shadow.

Unhomely

alternating lines with Randolph Bourne's essay "The Handicapped" (1911)

he knows the atmosphere better than you do, so
the doors of the deformed man are always locked
though from his lounge of shadows, a surprising view
who has not all his treasures in the front window
whose facade deflects the usual questions

extraordinarily sensitive to others' first impressions
a little distant, yet very much here
inherited platitudes vanish at the first touch
of medical specialists or curious strangers
if he can stand the first shock, he will want to burrow in

to cobble together some semblance of finesse
he does not cry for the moon
only our detached aesthetics – he dreams of saying
I solved my difficulties by evading them, the desperate step
out of the crawlspace of wounded knowledge towards

a profound sympathy for all the ugly, queer and crotchety
this luminous splinter buried deep in the chest
a lively interest in watching how people behave
his reticent mouth opening towards
those few who by some secret sympathy will respond

their bodies, the shape of skeleton keys
one only exists, so to speak, with friends
once all those useful tools are downed
one's self-respect can begin to grow like a weed
something unwanted that won't disappear

A short while after the poetry reading

still feeling perhaps it matters now
holding the memory of it
like a breath, because each one
must give way to the next
be allowed to carry blood as far as it will go

and it isn't difficult to be
the oldest person in the microbrewery
the sort of voice whose order
might disappear in the affable racket
slim volume on an obscure shelf

now if a handshake is simple human complicity
what's a thrust out business card?
a random chiropractor offers me free treatment
for the severe pain I must have
presumably from the look of me

all words are swallowed by the wind
some words deserve it
I am probably a little too polite
poetry is a better place to hold things together
the door keeps opening

dead leaves rush in without purpose
there is no memory, only remembering
no poem without someone else, outside, so
I text the one I love on a dysfunctional phone
savouring her absent touch

order another small beer
wonder why the architecture here assumes
we all want to see how things are made
distressed wood and exposed pipes
but if everything was transparent, well...

4.

Blood and bone

Dedication

Narrative of the Life of James Allen, the Highwayman, Being His Death-bed Confession, 1837

You hold what remains of his life
in your white-gloved hands. The solid heft

of the book leaves an imprint on your palms.
Such thin, fragile leaves –

hard to believe the weight of them.
Or how they have been held together.

A solid, tender thing, bound with a familiar
material. *Aristocratic leather*

was one euphemism. The body, flayed.
The skin, dried and tanned. Beside

a creeping realisation, you find yourself
admiring the aesthetic rigour –

how the raw materials of a book
can amplify its content. This flawed,

hardened skin once held an entire life.
Inside, a highwayman lays bare the intimate

details of his career of violence. His final wish –
that it be made into the bindings

of this book you now hold. The dedication
seems sincere – *to the only man*

who bravely refused to surrender up his possessions,
please accept this final gift – as if this cover,

when touched, could touch back.

Pillow angel¹⁹

Love signs the consent forms
in the presence of the specialists, who assure us
she will always have the mind of a toddler.

A black stork lands outside the kitchen window.

She can't talk, keep her head up, grip a toy or change
her sleeping position. She is fed with a tube.
We're careful who we tell about the treatment.

Some become flooded with silence and turn away.

Of all the procedures, what unsettles you most
is the oestrogen therapy to limit her growth.
Don't worry, none of this will happen to you.

In the bible, an angel will appear in human form.

Metal and pulleys are nothing compared to human touch,
a parent lifting their own forever-small angel.
After the surgeries, it seemed her pain was minimal.

I look into her eyes and try my best to imagine.

She startles easily, loves classical music
and will never understand 'autonomy'.
If only we could live forever to care for her.

The black stork flies off. We can't be sure

she recognises us, but where we place her,
usually on a large pillow, she stays,
surrounded by soft toys.

Microbiome

While we live, we ourselves are inhabited – William Bryant Logan, Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth

In the earth, prepared and silent, what will I
be offering you? It's said the menu opens

with the liver and the brain, for their wealth
of enzymes and water, the heart
before the bones. But so many of you

are already here at this soft table, always hungry,
unfussy. I've been feeding you protein,

fibre, starch, sugar, paper and ink,
self-consciousness, the crimson jolt of the rosella
in the leafless tree, my own dying cells,

hesitation in the face of violence, more water,
the scent of the skin of the one I love,

confusion with almost everything else.
And what will you make of all this
turning? Warm compost, what remains.

Borne away by distance

from the final chapter of Frankenstein by Mary Shelley

You may give up your purpose
but mine is assigned to me

I often thought
breathed

composing that burning of my own species
the task of my returning
fainter
exhausted

I, this wonderful catastrophe
the remains of words

gigantic in stature yet uncouth
distorted in proportions

this pause
turning toward
tremendous being

I attempt to speak but the words die away on my lips
at length I gather resolution

groans

of love and sympathy

throw a torch into a pile of buildings
and sit among the ruins

I hope to meet with

unfolding

believe the creature

sublime and transcendent

I am alone you

hate me

but cannot

equal the series of my being

that which must be

ice raft

extremity

ashes

this frame

the rustling of leaves and the warbling of the birds

but I shall feel the light

torn by extinction

the winds

borne away by distance

Distance

McCraith House, Dromana

we drive past a fake hotel, the freeway's public art
but the distance and this posture I'm in finds me a long way
from post-modern – something in my hip ratchets up
beyond distracting into pain, thickening a fog in my head
so that you, right beside me, seem further away – yet when

we arrive and climb the steep steps to the first floor
these wall-high windows let me breathe in the entire sky –

swathes of light the clouds concede drift across the bay
and from the perspective of canopy, this glimpse of a way
of seeing beyond human time or decay, blue-green calm
broken by the merest whiteness of wave-peaks, the familiar
city on the horizon obscured in mist – and suddenly

a brilliant intelligence lands there in the bird bath – so close –
wet feathers turning his form into a personhood of wings,

delicate feet, thirst and pleasure, head a-swivel, cautiously joyful
then gone – and we're here, your eyes reflected in mine,
a reminder of what can disappear into the undergrowth
of bodies under stress, but is still there, deep in the molecules,
warm and dormant – I carry it, ignorant, and it carries me, out

through the huge window into this precious, frightening distance –
we grow older together and love, this love, burrows further in –

Home

Unnoticed, something in the cartilage
of the house begins to deteriorate.

Years of drought crumble the earth,
shift the bones. Home is an ageing body

that seems to cause no trouble. Each night
I sleep through it. A fine mist of plaster

dusts the bed-head, tiny grey-white pebbles
halo the furniture. A crack slowly opens

along the ceiling edge – one night, filament-thin,
the next, finger-width. Cold, dark air breathes

down towards me. 3 am. The long bulk
of the cornice stirs, begins to detach. From above,

a rasping, tearing – something gives way,
low rumble becoming thunder, crashing

through oblivion into muscle and core –
like prey, the body moves before thought.

The collapse, waiting, patient in the roof-space,
has plunged the room into a cloud

of debris, plaster shards, dust, the remains of insects.
And I am standing in the doorway, white-faced,

looking back at the bed, the fallen broken
cornice, where my body is not.

Responsibility towards a lizard

mild autumn sun spilling through the window
and I remember you out there

dropped on the loose gravel of the driveway
who did this purring on the couch

you don't move when I approach
but when I try to lift your body

tiny fingers flinch a minutely slow eye-blink

the slick bright skin at your neck pulses
with breath I thought might have ended by now

body the length of my hand width of a thumb
self infinite if felt from within

your side pierced a long gash
the universe of what you knew collapsing upon itself

how to track and catch the feast of insects
absorb an entire sky of warmth and light
disappear and still be completely present

I raise the brick above your head
forgive me young blue-tongue as if you

Separation²⁰

A fly in the operating theatre
bothers the cameras.
Our two hearts beat in one sac,
against each other. I feel

you, on the other trolley,
being pulled away from me.
A burning coldness at my side –
the space there, beating, boneless.

When I wake, a nurse
and my father place a mirror
along the length of the bed.
You are just you now – you are one,

said like a chant or a mass.
But I know it is they who have made me.
And you're gone – collapsed
lung, too many infections, the trauma

of separation. You are the price
of my existence from now on.
One has to do harm to do good.
There are many more surgeries ahead.

~

I feel a breath at my neck
and expect you there –
but it's a hard wind, your absence

pushing at my bones
through an open window. Where
are you now? And that small voice

is only the radio I left on last night.
You are my wound, my pain.
I won't say *phantom*. I miss

the tenderness with which you'd
stroke and explore this skin
as if we were two. You

put words in my mouth and
calmed me with that voice.
Hold me again and forgive me

for letting them kill you,
those philosophers with scalpels.
They make a life *normal*

by breaking it in two.
In my passport, only one name.
I can almost see your head on my shoulder,

cut roughly out of the frame.
I'm still learning how to walk straight,
how to carry my weight without you.

Is that why they still stare?
Can they sense the vacuum at my side?
The wound is weeping. I'm afraid

it may be infected. Now,
all I want is sleep, where you will
slide back into this warm home

of flesh, our shared dream.
I lie awake with my shadow
and it doesn't – or can't – move.

Stalag XIB

*After the war, the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas is shown a pencil sketch map of the camp where he was held, and is asked "Is this the face of evil?"*²¹

god does not exist god *passes*

cold nights, tired beyond thought
each man patches his threadbare gloves

the shadows of deportees
moving deeper into the forest

rows of wooden barracks with holes for the wind
on each wall, an eagle or a swastika

I read Hegel, Proust, by candlelight
in a notepad, cross out, then write again
the horror of being

this place, it's not unique
I will speak of the other always
before whose face I am found wanting

he survives in some wild patch of the camp, appearing at morning assembly, waiting each evening for us as we return from the work, jumping up and down and barking in delight – for him, in his animal faith, there is no doubt we are men

rumours of the crematoria
so when dinner is served – soup, bread, one sausage
this time with a small cube of fat
we make terrible jokes

(no,
evil has no face)

Clear air

*for the residents of Tsukui Lily Garden, Sagamihara, Japan*²²

breaking a window I bring clear air
into the wards

thinking of my tired country
the economy weighed down

night shift only six workers
to tie up I apologise to them

new moon the sound
of my footsteps as I move from room to

the neck a more merciful
place than the chest to open

eight homes in the facility –
dream flower rainbow the pleiades breath harvest

something stops me entering *wings hope*
where I used to work with these people

one of the knife handles
hurts a little after a while I must use another

security cameras blink
I walk across the screen no-one watching

tweet I hope for world peace
beautiful Japan! many likes comments retweets

I turn myself in the officers seem unsurprised
but the blood

I plead not guilty by reason of insanity I will be *taken care of* each
night I watch the news the tv in a cage on the wall shows a photo of my face then soon
enough gone no honour or dishonour as if nothing has happened

each new moon the sound
of footsteps outside my room that never arrive

Venus with BIID ²³

the surgeon gives me a story so
the nurses won't be suspicious
bandages the leg gives crutches
an accident happened while I
was overseas on my holiday is
what I'll tell them back home

I remember as a boy I watched
you pass in callipers stiff-gait
clicking acutely focused private
you transfixed me I recognised
myself in your complete beauty
everyone else seemed ashamed

I've limped from room to room
in my home that stinks of tears
outside I hide this limb they
call healthy or tuck it under
my body for the cold relief of
numbness but feeling returns

so I'm here because pills god
meditation they're all useless
I learnt precisely where to aim
the gun to ensure the least pain
how to immerse a limb in dry
ice but I've never had quite
enough courage or painkillers
caught myself staring at train-
tracks but I don't want to die

soon while I'm anaesthetised
he'll make a precise and deep
incision cauterise saw suture
I don't care what happens to it
now the leg has gone I'm whole

I don't expect you to
understand most think
a broken body is un

liveable my only dis-
ability is that I don't
have the one I need

look closely at a mirror (even yours)
smashed any shard

can become a scalpel a key
to set your body map free

when we lifted the venus de-
milo out of her niche we
gaspd at her beauty

After being examined again

that's enough now
I've had if there is
standing in front of mirrors only here there is
breathing in and holding the way skin breathes
lift that leg thoughtless
wait here and read this I would
questionless bury my head in air
(dare I say it) for us
everyone (else) an expert there's no need
for signs
that's enough thought
seriously weighs on us from the inside
forty five years
medicalised shame
wrong each appearance another layer
I can't tell you heart a fist
what pushes me seed or ceding
onto the ceiling decay
to watch and mulch
if I if there is
could be unre mar kable anything but being
something burnt on
tested the memory
under machines let me be
not yet enough enough
not quite here
brought this territory six feet high
to a small point and infinitely
a meeting of axes defect ive
in the cavity of the chest
I would bury
pleas these feet in earth
know I'm unkn own
these ruins to be
failures tenderly sketched or
what gift held
so me one

Crucifixion

after Francis Bacon's 1965 triptych

recognise the image	beneath	d isfiguremen t sculpted
before it registers –	the tree	from brushstroke
me	small bundle	
reduced to meat	of innards and	a red not of blood
and spectacle	slick feathers	but the passions
the hook tucked inside	– the half-	twitching, mortal
this body	digested	black stuffed into cavities
	thrown-up	white skull, white bandages
genetic experiment	fledgling	tenderness of pinks
di s played	the cat found	floor of dirt, of bread, of dust
unnatural curve of muscle	and couldn't	
organs merged	keep down	it is not finished
through an		here you are still
order or disorder		raised surgically
	light catches	nailed to an image
something you'll	in the wet	the officers have seen enough
in terro gate	flesh	for now
or get used to	sparks	
	in my gut	(human most human
the others, already taken out		when barely recognisable)
<i>we don't know but it appears</i>		the third day
<i>they're so aware of what is</i>	that night	will never come
<i>going to happen to them</i>	scrupulous	you're stuck
<i>they do everything to escape</i>	she licks	with this bulk
	the back	fixed
(sometimes we don't)	of my hand	with a look

Disfigured fame

a disguise would only make you more conspicuous
everyone knows you (or thinks they do) it's never particular
features – wheels, absent limb, pattern of skin – but the whole
picture suffused with elephantine euphemism you know that guy
he's really (pause) tall stooped, am I crouching to duck under

the unsaid? attention creates the body (breaks it in two)
so in a recurring dream passenger in a familiar and enigmatic vehicle
I'm too clumsily elongated to limbo the loping curve of power lines
crossing the road my head makes it through but my back
gets stuck every time course I shrug off each line

only to awake surface into the double-taking public, always
before a thought or pause shoehorned into excess and defect (too human
and not enough) a word or a stare is a kind of foot-binding
still we long to burrow into our own private () knowing

a mirror can be an undisturbed surface
slow caress of mist on water a body
can be a closed parenthesis) or open (

No relief maps

after "Silent Treatment" (digital print), Cameron May

what do I know about weather | these storms | that
pummel and erode | only we're all brought closer |
to collapse | already inching through | our own
unhomely terrains | daydream | flesh | so close
our tremors | overlap | walls crack | where do I
end and you begin | we are each in the body |
of the other | but think ourselves alone | or are
wrenched there by pain | sometimes I'm afraid
I've lost you | that you may have lost your self
| what good are these hands | against the un
known | surgeons offer | cold white theatre
lights | divide us into | exact fragments for
ease of access | specialists make us motion
less and quiet | who knew | our insides |
could be so much like landscapes | no relief
maps | oceanic | just an idea of order in the
background | we're spilling over | and out |
one symptom | crashes into another | wait
ing room and examination | everything un
settled | tests come back | inconclusive |
my love | adrift | speechless | this tidal
rip | where's that one useful word | who
can say | what's ruined | what survives
| even a diagnosis only | comes from
outside | how to cope here | now?

Fault lines

Our brave words and faces can both be opaque, but this
glass wall is the harder problem – how to break this?

We chant *Nothing about us, without us*, then fight
over what *us* or *about* mean. What to make of this?

Unsubscribe or shut down? There's still a filament
from your prison to this empty space of mine, this ache.

From the photo, the archive or the poem, a hand
reaches for mine. What will I do when I wake from this?

I, too, smell the fumes, so I know you can't cope.
What I don't know right now is how to take this.

And the old river's left me parched, afraid. I'm drilling
further under the surface for what might slake this.

Your distant weeping becomes a tremor in my bones
that rhymes with my anger. But I shouldn't mistake this

for a solution. Like my actual heart, each thought
worth thinking is built on a fault
line, this quake.

After reading another poet declare their commitment to the 'inhuman', I think of a friend, disabled and precarious²⁴

texts calculated to minimise the intentionality of the poet
privileging formal experimentation over human preservation
these words bring on little spasms of anger like stopped coughs
in my sternum the manifesto disabling itself written as if

we were all there together in the warm human room
plotting an excursion to the outside world for a while
as if you my friend hadn't spent your life defending
your every breath certain expert figures leaning over you

in your chair or talking about you as if you weren't there
your speech always already made an erasure under constraints
technology and calculations of who is left wanting
to be human the other day the support worker didn't

turn up problems with the roster so now you can't be
helped to the bed or the toilet before morning is this the moment
you are made aware of your body or of the system as the agency
like a poet phrases an apology for this glitch

Another theatre²⁵

no choice now but to step again into visibility,
surrounded by an expanse of darkness and cold air –
what also lurks in the cavities of us – places we neglect
or spend too much energy on

the work is in parts – a puppet moving through the fraught
vacuum of my father's death, the surgical separation
of conjoined twins, then a sequence of naked portraits
collapsing into a disabled sense of humanity
when the house lights come up

at the post-show q&a, one man apologises,
says when I first walked onto the stage,
he thought I was wearing a costume – my hump,
here, seemed to stop him seeing a person
who might live in the actual world

under the spotlight, I have my own myopia –
for the first few rows, there's only the vague outlines
of faces, exposed and shifting in their seats –
further back, they begin to lose their features,
become a collective silence

as usual, a few people linger, curious to touch
the puppet version of me slumped in an open suitcase –
though we all have to leave these props behind,
push through a door into another theatre

Under the study

slowly realising
it's not a broken pipe

the wincing smell
 too familiar

your house on a gradual hill
something

has crawled into the vertex
 out of reach

what rises from underneath
 ghostly

 if a ghost were flesh
 deconstructing itself

more microbial cells in you than human

it's only a matter of time
 the plumber says

you keep the door shut
but the phone rings
 from inside the room

there are poems to print
and each day curiosity
 itching at the cavities of you

body without identity
 dispersing into

The only way out is through

whatever is I plan on accepting
is understandable this body
but not on my death bed
in the way the earth
you might think may sense
I something
as thin slight
as membrane knocking in the distance
things tend to knit together the work of worms
or not quite a troubling
a fluttering faltering
rhythm epigenetics
this static of being
in the mouth and the ears pelted with
warmth names and empties
of the impersonal I am
body no stone or waterfall
a question of waking into the air
the cold drop how the magpie lark
before rain unsettlingly
smudges the world trusts
pale who can say
words I overuse what he knows
still I climb
your voice you make
my rope some broken
frayed as landscape
each valve and chamber of cells in me fall
turning into here
the soil of paper which is
laying myself not
down here this page
blood and bone

-
- ¹ See Graves.
 - ² See Dadds, Spencer, Warren and J. Wilson.
 - ³ See “Khujjuttarā” and P. Wilson.
 - ⁴ See Howell.
 - ⁵ See Barry and Hudson.
 - ⁶ See Solomon.
 - ⁷ See Evans.
 - ⁸ See Everett.
 - ⁹ See Blake and Cahir.
 - ¹⁰ See Galea and Hadley.
 - ¹¹ See Dieterle.
 - ¹² See Ford and Loughrey.
 - ¹³ See Commonwealth of Australia.
 - ¹⁴ See Worden.
 - ¹⁵ See Atuhaire, “New Independent Expert on Albinism Takes Up Post”, Rodrigues and Venema.
 - ¹⁶ See Hamill, Kohrman and Palmer.
 - ¹⁷ See Samukange and “Uproar as Zimbabwe's Mister Ugly Deemed 'Too Handsome'.”
 - ¹⁸ See Daley, Muir and Neale.
 - ¹⁹ See Kittay and *Pillow Angel*.
 - ²⁰ See Dreger.
 - ²¹ See Malka.
 - ²² See Brasor, Findlay and Warnock.
 - ²³ See Ananthaswamy, Bayne, Stevens and *The Wheelchair Zone*.
 - ²⁴ See Ireland.
 - ²⁵ See “Each Map of Scars”.

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