

Joseph Lister is My New Flatmate

by Marianne MacRae



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Marianne MacRae is a PhD candidate at the University of Edinburgh, researching animal otherness in poetry. Her research is kindly funded by the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities. Her work has appeared in *Magma*, *Gutter*, *The Edinburgh Review* and *Ambit*.

Miasma

Under the river's taffeta hush
decades of bodily outpourings
lurk and thicken, rising to form
rank ambushes of smog.

Windows flung wide in daytime
to dispel night air, riddled
with cunning spirits of sickness.
Vapours haunt the city,

traces of the dead hang
in clouds over every door —
don't breathe, or cholera's ghost
might slip in to plague your gut.

After dark, Death treads
through the fog,
his the only hand that holds
a lantern up to certainty.

Architectural Documentation

after Thomas Annan's Old Closes and Streets of Glasgow

Sunlight spikes between the tenements,
never enough to warm the bricks, cobbles
forever slick with tossed out wash pots
and clothes dripping from lines. Nothing ever dry,
whites turned to shades of smoke, grey
as mould on fruit. Endless stone blockades,
staircases tacked on to made-down mansions,
upper storeys bulging over, walls pregnant
with gospels of cholera, typhus, TB —
wretches preaching indistinctly from rooms
five shoe-lengths wide and not much taller.
Old closes and streets of Glasgow captured,
the blurred figures in the background
were neither asked for, nor dismissed.

Still Born

c. 1854

the smell of something darkening
stirs as she shifts her legs
the widening between them
stoppered, aching
unnaturally

someone looks
under the bedclothes
her skirt tenting her knees
intricacies exposed
and assessed

a new voice
touches the gloom:
nothing to be done
extract in three pieces
maybe she'll survive

it is a ruby
turned to onyx
a boulder
refusing to be rolled
from the tomb's mouth

Joseph Lister Presents his Urine

Observations after Boiling

In the open flask –
neck cut short and left vertical –
the liquid has turned
from pale straw to deep amber:
see how it differs from that
held in the bent-neck bottle,
this swan of glass that swims
with golden water.



Mould Growth

Nine days in the open vessel:
two woolly balls of fungus float
leisurely across the surface.

Straight, radiating filaments
of minute vegetation.
A feathery, delicate thing
branching up from the bottom,
perfectly colourless.

Small, dense, with a fleecy aspect;
the blueish-grey of a thistle.

Conclusions

It cannot be any of the gases –
our benign shroud of atmosphere cannot act alone.
But it may be – no, it *must* be, the particles nomadic within them.

Offspring of airborne organisms flourishing in this liquid,
this most favourable nidus, expelled from me, or you,
or someone like us.

Day Out at Surgeons' Hall Museum, Edinburgh

In the first room, a lamb's heart
the size of my fist and a human heart
the size of my head, both filled with wax
and varnished into works of art.
Everywhere bodies disassembled
into their smallest constituent parts.

The unending pathology walkway:
a humerus blown up like a balloon
by an aneurysmal bone cyst;
an intact foetus in a screw-top jar;
various human chunks turning
brown-pink with age.

Praise be vegetarianism,
for having seen a boy's leg, vertically
cross-sectioned from knee to ankle,
I can't dare think about pork
without an alkaline flood of saliva
readying my mouth for the boke.

Home but still haunted
by the collection of singular eyeballs,
suspended in cubes of formaldehyde,
unaware that they are no longer encased
in socket and skin, but held static,
staring long beyond their expiry date.

Wounds in Lister's Own Words

Your notes are very matter-of-fact,
laying out the details like a pack of cards,
inviting me to pick one.

But how to choose just one
when you describe wounds large enough
to admit the tip of a finger (implying you tried);
wounds *soaked with the acrid products of decomposition*;
aggregating like a Gruyère cheese
or *scraped at with the edge of a knife*?

And what of the man *close to dying*
owing to the amount of pus he swallowed
from his syphilitic jaw;
the blood beneath your nails,
the sinew and viscera you sluiced through
with your bare hands, squeezing
bubbles of air and infection
from the meaty thigh of a stone mason, for example.

In photographs, your lips are drawn downwards,
the line of your mouth a bird,
hovering above the milieu,
looking for an answer in the undergrowth.

Joseph Lister is My New Flatmate

Joseph in wood grain, Joseph
in curtain crease. A tiny Joseph waving
from the fronds of a spiny succulent
given as an engagement gift,
a symbol of longevity.

The kitchen light has started flickering;
I think Joseph is in the wires,
stuttering his hellos while I'm slicing
pickles, my fingers dripping with acid.

Joseph is getting under my skin,
a skelf burrowing through
dermis, muscle, fat,
carving a route to my bones.

Can he tell the two ribs
that buckled to pneumonia?
Simple fractures that healed
slightly wrong and now,
if I touch them too long or too deeply,
I feel I could throw up my soul,
or whatever it is in the middle of us
that hovers – I imagine it
a sort of wormhole, black and very absorbent,
a pinprick in time, entrance
to a slightly different dimension.

If Joseph was a Halloween decoration
he'd be one of the clean-cut
glow-in-the-dark bats we've left hanging
long past the spooky season;
a remnant, a translucence
existing at the periphery
of the present tense.

Agnes Lister (née Syme)

He's ever so impressive, my Joe.

It was not, I admit, love at first sight, for me at least.
My eye was not inclined to consider
the shape of a husband those years ago.

I was more captivated then by botanic tomes,
and the mystique of chemistry.
I loved most my father's stories
of what went on in the dissecting room.

How I longed to be one of those tight-collared boys
craning forward in my seat to see a limb whipped off
with barely a spatter of blood on the floor.

Evenings when father was working
I'd slip into his study, careful as a stitch,
and pore over his case notes.

How I longed for a scalpel in my hand,
a quill to write my name on history's body.

Oh
but I am not just a wife.

I am my husband's most valued assistant.
Lab partner, note-taker and confidante.
Silent chieftess.



It is the least I can do.
A few years ago, yes —
we thought
perhaps...
the softening around my belly,
the sickness,
but alas.

Joseph is so popular with the young students,
they keep him busy enough.

I am on hand to remind him to eat,
encourage him out the door with plenty of time.

Off he goes to the Infirmary, carrying out his investigations,
and I am alone again.

Compound Fracture

flesh is riven
by the yellow bone
spiked secret
of one's own
keeping
 it snaps
 sees light
for the first time
after years
in the dark hallway
of the limb's interior

Effective Treatment

I wash my hair in coal tar shampoo —
as close as I can get to carbolic acid.
It foams, yellow as a coffee-stained tooth.

They've tried their best to mask the smell
with *parfum*, but there's no disguise
for that medicinal hum, the undercurrent
of something caustic.

I think of you lifting the bandage
from James Greenlees' broken leg,
waiting to be hit squarely in the face
with the balled fist of purulent flesh —
an odour that inhabits the nose
long after leaving the hospital.

But it doesn't come this time.
Instead, the crisp thrill of carbolic
rises to your nostrils, fresh
as the soaring high notes
of a boys' choir proclaiming *Hallelujah*.

Rinsing my scalp, the scent is fixed
between each hair, a small reminder of you
every time I turn my head.

Charles F __, aged 7

Knocked down by a crowded omnibus, the boy's
bone was stripped of flesh. It peeped the air,
an arctic seal, nosing the surface.

*The violence had acted with full effect
upon the whole thickness of the limb.*
Skin split open from knee to ankle,

the muscle hung like bunting from his leg,
blood dripping in pomegranate beads,
the calf, a shiny summer fruit jelly.

A few pokes to assess what might be salvaged,
then *the acid was applied with great freedom;*
the bottle my aspergillum, carbolic my holy water.

*He passed a restless night, pulse rambling
on too high a path, almost indiscernible.*
The next night though, *he took a little milk,*

and his tongue, previously dry, was moist.
He woke in the night with only an occasional scream.
A small sore appeared in the second week,

a hole pecked in a tree, glistening with puriform sap.
He was placed under chloroform and the badness
was scraped away with a spoon.

Pieced back together, the boy was parcelled
in acid, lint and tinfoil, then baked back to health,
in the heat of the Infirmary's summer stink.

Case of Penetrating Wound of the Thorax and Abdomen

1st Oct 1867

The dirty pig bladder, an embolus dislodged, soared across the butcher's blood tank back room, where it struck the assailant slap on the cheek.

Too quick to retaliate, he hurled his knife in return: a keen-edged, nine-inch blade, *half of which buried itself in the patient's infra-axillary region.*

The boy yanked the paltry Excalibur, releasing *a fearful gush of venous blood; a spout of four-inches before the fall.*

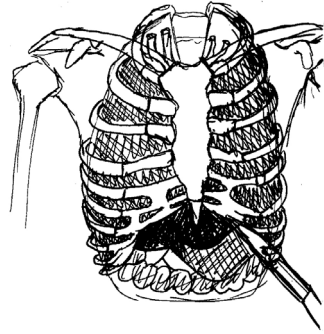
When he arrived at the Infirmary, his apron had more colour than he did. Five inches of omentum hung, a fat white tongue from the abdomen.

As though stuffing a goose for Christmas, my house-surgeon wasted no time, plugging the pleural cavity with lengths of lint, infused with carbolic acid and boiled linseed oil.

In the acid's blissful scourge, *the patient progressed admirably* — it wasn't long before he was up, trilling bawdy songs through his woodwind lung.

The thorax, that expanding bell of muscle, bone and cartilage, was so full of air and blood, that his heart migrated and was found beating below the right nipple.

A temporary shift, however, for just seven weeks after admission, the patient was back out on the streets, his heart herded back into position like one of the livestock of his craft.



Patient Presenting with Fishbone in Throat

c. 1868

Fish bones, those wily white needles, are bound
to stitch themselves into the soft tunnel of the pharynx.
The patient will be agitated, a butterfly still alive
as it is stuck through with a pin. You should remain calm.
Open the mouth – ask the patient to do this,
or do it yourself (hold the chin and move it gently downwards,
as if it were the handle of a water pump), and guide the forceps
down the rubbery posterior of the larynx.
If the forceps enter the gully of the trachea,
you may produce spasmodic coughing and cause death: so easy does it.
Open the forceps and grasp at the foreign body;
you are doing this blindly – be careful not to hook
the delicate mucous membrane, lest you should pull too hard
and drag the patient inside out.

Obdurate Methods

Joseph says *vegetables have their life
as well as animals – it is the same
essential thing, differing in degree.*

I take him to a tree,
we press our ears to trunk,
listening for its pulse.

We hold our palms
to the sky, feel
for the cyclic presence
and absence of breath.

He says *minerals have no organs
and cannot be considered organised.*

I take him to the beach,
we collect flat pebbles
and make birds of them,
winging them across the water.

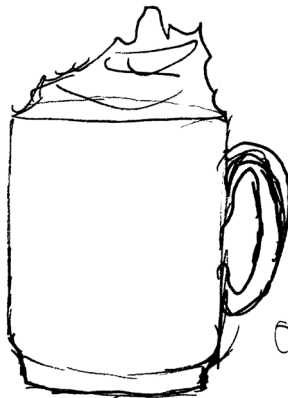
He says *no one can define life,
but can recognise life
in the possession of it.*

We ride the train from Edinburgh to Glasgow.
The heartline hills dip and rise
along the graph paper of the window;
the earth's electrocardiogram,
dead, but alive
in their own way.

me



Joe



our coffee

Coffee

He can't believe the foam of it, the audacious renaissance wig holding shape across the mouth of the cup. "This is a cappuccino, Joe," I tell him. "I drink these to feel alive."

Gingerly, he takes a sip, his Greek nose dipping the glacial mass of milk, so that when he reemerges the tip is that of a ghostly clown.

I can tell he feels like a foreign body in this clean-cut coffee shop. The cakes become malignancies under his eye, like something removed from a thorax or an armpit.

Can I say that we are friends now? Of course I can't. I can't claim to agree with his ideas on vivisection or women in the workplace, just as he cannot understand postmodernism.

But I'd like to think we have been charmed by one another. The years are like pus between us, the connection between living tissue and dead, multiplying faster than we care to admit.

And haven't we both tried, in our own ways, in our own centuries, to find some way of saying "this is what life is, and it's pretty good"?

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