

Recombinant Parts

by

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*and that's the real joke, in effect a test tube
is a device for changing noughts
into exclamation-marks.*

-Miroslav Holub

Preface

i.

I am still writing
because it still feels
relevant. The biology of heartbreak
my great-grandmother
refusing to remove the lump
in her breast “it belongs here,
I am not done remembering
those every mornings”

same way I spend years
pressed against glass.

ii.

When you read this
I am different. You too
but somehow
months of oxidation
leave minimal scarring.

Maybe just around the eyes,
when you smile

(gravity against elasticity
who will win?)

At least we can imagine
we buy control, not
over the ocean,
the perfect imitation
of metacarpal or lung,
just what we raise,
what falls.

\$7,760 in exchange for this

iii.

mid-afternoon
deep breath and
again, again

First

When I say
you are in my bones
this is not a metaphor
The immune system
is not an army
but it still is

Take away the words
What is left?

Already
some unmanageable
weight

*

If everything is performance
If everything is nerves firing
If everything is a half empty shell
Then what?

Holding on
to an old language
no one can talk
across this
invisible gulf—

I stand in the center
& yell

*

Can I say

*If everything is simply
clumsy little signs*

(as if anybody's listening
as if words are bridge enough)

Glossary

On the gel, the DNA is transparent until you stain it, Methylene Blue. Then, a white band of light.

I spend the summer solving the zebrafish genome. Even though there are only four letters, you can string them together if you squint for long enough at the screen. (By age 50 you've lost half of your retinal cells—mom walks into a room I am reading in, turns on the light. We forget.) When you're young, you really can make out the words.

Tata is the most common. Others include: atta (as in, to our dog who is too old to climb up into the car but does), cat, tag. These are some wriggling thing's insides and I am trying to read them like a book.

*

In order for anything to glow, you have to add a few drops to the gel, bright red, like blood could be if it weren't rusting.

Escherichia coli a proper noun, a microbe-turned-machine, curled up in your gut.

GFP can be welded onto any other protein. Life in neon green.

Panspermia one answer. Begins to read like the Old Testament.

Plasma Membrane a leaky border. As in, between me and you.

Rational Design

Giving up
on the problem of here,
we turn back
to the problem of elsewhere.

As in: elsewhere,
life begins.

Elsewhere, a microbe swims
toward the toxic air, raises
a family in the warm red dust.
Elsewhere, the laws are bent
and fleeting.

It becomes possible
to use words
like *somehow*.

Somehow the dust whips
around the planet, somehow
condenses, a fistful of stone
hurled from point A (elsewhere)
to point B (here).

*

In the version of the story
where certainty is possible

We know the force the floorboard
exerts on the spine
We know the mitochondria
was once swallowed alive
We know the membrane self-assembles
in a palmful of water
We know the atom can be split

We know nothing
comes out of nothing.

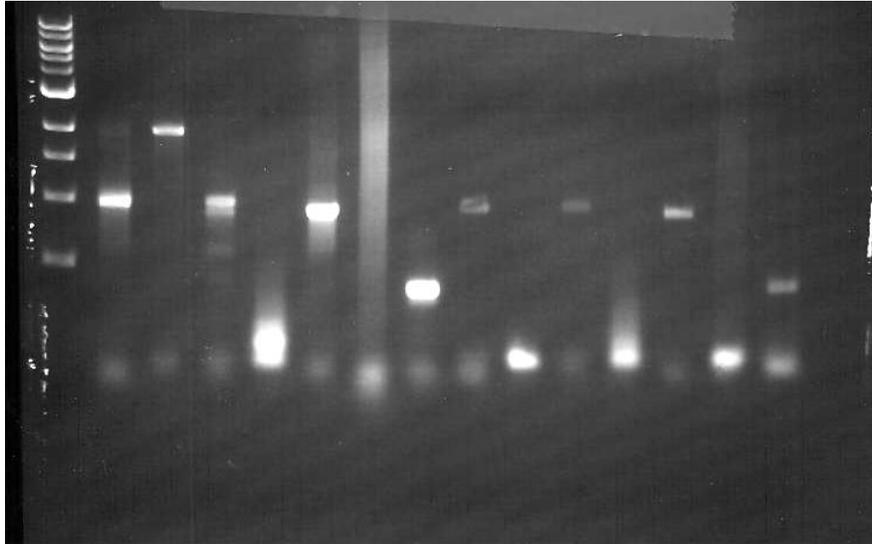
The feathers come
before the wings, as if

the animal, clawed and downy,
is continually poised
for flight,

but every fractal
has its origin: God
or whatever you call the space
before the gills
suddenly give way
to lungs.

Glossary

We pry open other animals to get at something about the human, but I decide I am nothing like the jumbled letters on the screen. Otherwise, I would have to worry about all the ethidium bromide I've swallowed. It gets into you. Think bone deep, then deeper.



Government protocol states that we should not take our lunch break in this corner of the room, but when I am 16 I spill a radioactive isotope on the floor. Someone covers it with a paper towel saying, "It's only P-32." It isn't until years later I learn if you spend long enough here, everything loses its sense of danger. The usual rules no longer apply.

Scientists, we are all in this business of illumination.

Apocalypse Theory #1

Starting out, you learn that caribou have extra cholesterol in their lower membranes to keep their hooves from freezing off. You wonder what a caribou does in August, whether they sweat, if their legs turn to jello; the answer is probably *complicated*. You imagine warm brown bodies wobbling anyway.

In the dream, the fish are flashing in their small plastic tanks. You are wearing goggles and they are hopelessly green. Turns out the neon-fish live right upstairs, tapping as if to tell something urgent. Caribou keep stumbling across the page. The difference is

we assemble the fish, slice them just right, look to them for all the answers. In every movie about robots that take over the world it starts small inches out of control until we're looking over our shoulders/shaking our heads all whispering *we could have seen it coming* from miles away

we think we're so clever, turning everybody into little machines just because we know if you flip this switch, the circuit board reliably hums.

Normal Flora

You don't have to
take it literally
when I write you
into my intestines
or call you a microbe
on the phone.

I'm just trying to avoid
an awkward word
that doesn't quite mean
I cannot eat ice cream
w/out you after all.

Query

The boys are always fucking
broken hearted, leather-bound
notebooks abandoned
on the table,
same old song.

*

The light is always on.
The body is always too
something or another, isn't it?

I like to stand on my tiptoes
and throw my arms around you,
like you to (somehow) be taller
and open the jars,
like to be the big spoon,
like to open the door first
just because.

*

Looking for another answer
after all this time
in the morning
gangly limbs tangled

then hanging over
the sides of my bed.
We don't press in too close

the only way to sleep
with you, under separate blankets
still no real distance at all.

Glossary

What I am doing is finding the correct combinations and sending them off over the internet. Someone else will synthesize/mail them back here, dehydrated, in dozens of small plastic tubes.

In the freezer, there are three cardboard boxes with my name in thick, blue Sharpie. Each is divided up into 81 slots, 9 columns by 9 rows. Two are filled with rehydrated DNA, 19-23 letters long, clear plastic with blue caps labeled A-1, A-2, A-3...R-7, R-8.

Most of being a scientist is keeping a detailed notebook: microliters and serial numbers and proper nouns (pax7, ubn1, gag-gfp...) so that anyone can pick up where you left off. Mine are in another language entirely, I am secretly trying to be a writer.

Autumn precedes winter.

Gender Identity Disorder often linked to transaction: money in exchange for quiet.

Psychiatrists just another kind of doctor-I-don't-trust.

Contingencies

for a.

I am not shy around you for any of the usual reasons. It's just, I forget myself from before morning became for watching oatmeal boil on the stovetop, your hand resting on my shoulder, my hip.

I wonder if I have to be there to write from the gap. Turn the page, start again.

It always starts with squirrels gathering acorns. Some kind of machine precision until clearly things are falling apart. Last year I was writing unreasonable poems about knowing you in autumn | the squirrels were digging holes, covering them over again. Getting ready: one endless loop. This year you slip on acorns and I hold my breath. I don't know what's different now (not the headaches, not the poems, not the *you*, nor the *I*), except I know that everything has changed.

We start out two little boys and then.

I am braiding my fingers in your hair, like a cliché but even softer, neither of us wanting to admit it—how fragile this really is.

They say you can't write a love poem using the word "bunk-beds" seriously. There can't be any fractures you know, in love. Except the moment before the heart breaks: the dog finally curling up on his own bed, the dishes washed, put away. *And what happens in silence?* If you hold your breath, the refrigerator hums.

But we start out two little boys holding shy hands in the woods. You ask if we can be like doing this for the first time. I should have said: when I was twelve, I lived next to an always half-finished highway. Spent years hopping the barricade on my way to school (as if I had to, as if by "highway" I don't really mean "where the highway ends"). Instead, I nod.

(Look: a child in the kitchen, a knife, the air, whole system
steeled for whatever would happen next. I should have known
then, what kind of rupture. Hardly remember, just worn playing
cards and pressing back into a chair. Never give straight answers,
pressing back, always/fine.

What I leave myself to map out where I've been: skin, words
traced in the margins. More metaphor then, less bone.

I know I won't remember, I write.) Turn the page, start again

You tell me “I didn’t look at myself in the mirror until I cut my hair.”

I laugh, but remember when you did that—let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding.

You hold the door open out of habit & I tell you chivalry is dead. For your birthday, I give you a sweater that matches the one in my closet you’ve been eyeing all along.

There aren’t words for what you are to me, so I am careful about choosing. Most everyone is clumsy & I am still sometimes at a loss when we are walking across the hill, in the dark. We shrug and I curl up into you. What else is there to do?

You tell me “somehow, I just think everything would be different.”

More than usual, the summer is spent in motion: 3 trains, 4 planes, 6 buses, 1 car (full of cigarette butts, milk duds, too many paper cups) drifting over the flat span of highway, everything suspended until dawn.

I lose track, I pick up a shell w/ the intention of mailing it across to you, I can't sleep if I try.

How many miles (I've never been the crazy one in the relationship before. Well, *crazy* yes, like when e. found me on the kitchen floor, twelve all over again. But you are talking about how remarkable it is that people our age get their lives all tangled up in each other, you say "how impossible, the prospect of forever." I am nodding. Thinking, "yes, of course I'd like to sit with you on a plane and ask what you put on your morning toast." Thinking, "how remarkable") how short the distance suddenly seems.

It only lasts until the trail narrows or
we reach another mud-pit because
holding hands makes you clumsy.

This isn't anything about loss.

Glossary

In the beginning, L. and I go to camp together every year until I start working in labs instead. One summer, we spend the two weeks fishing in the small lake at the center, where we once learned how to kayak and send makeshift wooden boats out on the last night. We hold the end of a candle over the campfire to make it soft, use the wax to fix it to the wood. The oldest kid lights the wick and we all carry it over to the edge, let everything drift out.

Usually the boat tips, but this year the whole thing goes up in flames. Before that we spend our time in this same spot, fishing.

The first few days we learn how to cast the line out into the water, what bait works best for which fish. I prefer to tie the line to a long stick, thread it through the hook. What works best is stale bread from the dining hall and almost rotten tofu from nobody knows where. I catch the biggest fish of anyone this way, a piece of bread dangling from the branch of a tree I have climbed because the counselor tells me I'm not going to catch anything at all since my stick and line contraption is too short to get to the deep parts of the lake.

I haul the fish up into the tree, try to slip the hook back out through the gaping mouth, to throw it back. In the end, somebody stabs the belly with a pocketknife because it can't swim around like that forever, with a hook lodged in the soft bone. L. carries the dead fish around like that all day.

Mothers where we come from or where we are going. People who have known us for longer than is reasonable. See *Home*.

Post-Concussion Syndrome of course, it's all in your head.

Sacroiliac Joint Dysfunction evidence that shifting skeletons are not simply a poetic device.

Strabismus something misaligned. A reason to wear glasses in second grade that make seeing harder. The idea is to train the muscles: imagine tiny biceps, flexed.

Fibrodysplasia Ossificans Progressive when muscle is repaired, replaced by bone. The act of becoming a statue.

Thinness associated with: much of the above, all of the following.

Violence marking territory.

A Topography

i

As we learn
to navigate
quiet geographies
shift, etching
angles into this
Midwestern sky,
suddenly
a mountain range.

These landscapes
are overwhelming
somehow
cavernous and
built to spill.

Have you ever seen
a mountain
slide off
into its neighbor?
A hypermobile
stone.

ii

Finally something cracks
and leaves her, for months,
pressed flat against floorboards.
“It is not a real joint,
there is nothing to cushion
the fall” (bone on bone,
gravel flooding the lake)
“I keep waiting to wake up
undone somehow.”

Predisposed

We worship our mothers'
shoulder blade scaffolding,
spine that anchors bridge wide hips,
waltz our way across concrete.

Mindy is the daughter
of poor planning, bad design.
Seen her mother
strung out on porcelain
learned to mimic her
midmorning routine—
sticky tack together vertebrae,
safety pin hipbone to socket,
replace enamel with aluminum
carved from cans of Diet Coke.

Behind her eyelids,
the rememory of
our misplaced faith.

Never did walk like the crowd
she counts footsteps,
knows the angle of legs spread
one meter, heel to toe,
spent most of her years
swallowing snowdrift.
When asked, she'll tell you
she is trying to scour
her ribcage clean.

Granite

Late knights wore
plates of metal,
wrapped around skin.
Barely breathing, now this.
The difference, I suppose,
duration or

My mother, each time
she runs a hand across
my shoulder blade,
calling my bones a betrayal.
They are trying their best
to protect the heart, to keep
the arteries in place.
A suit of armor,
molecules before
gunpowder,
blacksmiths of
another time.

I am not angry.
We all stiffen
in the face of
breaking
waves.

Trajectories

The wound heals
until it doesn't,
the story stumbles forward
until it hits the wall

& suddenly the floor
caves in—no warning,
not even
an audible *crash*

You spend half a year
bargaining w/ God knows what
for your life back.

*

“What good is a body
if you keep it quiet?”

what I tell you
when you are still
hunched over or
straining to cry.

Too bad I didn't know you
then, loud enough
for the both of us,
the fence unsteady,
uprooted,

everything soaked
clean through.

Mirror Image

The muscles
behind my eyes
were never strong
enough

tissue slips, drifts
& everything goes flat.

I can't remember
the first time
I broke wide open
no secret, just

the trouble with skin
as if the rift
were never there.

*

(I've woken
twice to blood-tears
still, never knew
how red/gold
my insides were)

empty the drains
bright and flashing.

*

We (don't) fancy
ourselves
recombinant parts
a strange thing,
refiguring
the span
of this chest:
a new surface
a tempered edge.

There is nothing
to heal from

nothing to cover
over again

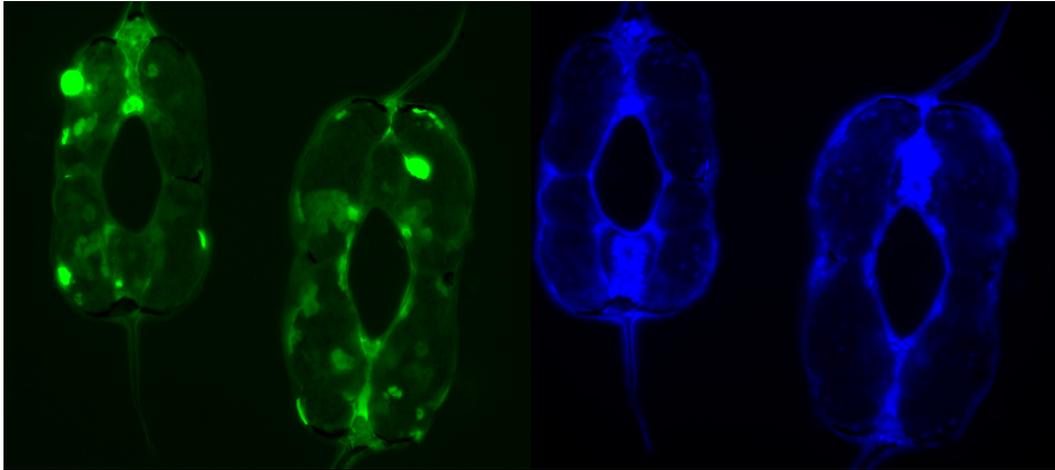
nothing gradual about it
wake up and

somehow
a kaleidoscope—

everything
suddenly broken,
everything suddenly
shines.

Glossary

When anyone from back home asks how I'm spending the summer, why I don't come to visit, I tell them this story. So, you're working at a summer camp then? No, fishing.



Except, instead of bread and metal hooks, there are viscous liquids and plastic and *e. coli* growing calmly in the incubator's hum. Instead of fish, their insides.

Specifically, the regulatory machinery of a gene expressed in muscle stem cells but not in the muscle itself. (This is where eyes glaze, heads bob, stumbling over the words. I want to say: that's what gives them any density at all, you know, this instinct to trip. Instead) I stop before we get there—No, fishing. Smile to indicate a joke. Everyone is skeptical that I've been doing anything at all.

Ex two types. 1) Someone who still writes you love letters thinks it's normal even though you haven't seen her in years haven't kissed her in longer. 2) Someone you don't remember clearly on purpose, who apologizes for the wrong things on Yom Kippur.

Memory As in keys hidden in the body's back pocket. As in to keep you from getting back in

Multi-Drug Resistant Bacteria an arms race after all.

Retrotransposons exactly like science fiction, a good old-fashioned alien encounter.

Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) a running joke. See *Winter*.

Scaling

The only way
to see a crab-shell
is pick it up,
turn it over,
wipe it off.

The only way
to see a virus-shell
is follow the protocol

until the whole cell
finally glows.

*

The only way
to cross this bridge
is trust
there was always only
the impression of a gap

even when I slip
you into places
you might not belong,

my thymus or my eyelids,
the footsteps tiling
my kitchen floor.

Fighting Words

We were young and/or I was no good at living in my body. I saw you swallow forget-me-nots you never did quite get the crocus metaphor even though it's obvious enough, first flash of something through all that slush.

I thought this was the way it worked, a semi-permeable membrane made for/always curling around myself, tending to the tiny fissures, stuck in your bed; the heart was too porous then,

I couldn't hold onto anything well enough. Still, I remember to lock the gate behind me now, already ready for you.

Microbiology

because of d.o.

“To describe the human
Freud used the term
polymorphously perverse.

God’s perfect creature,
bacteria get fat too, are full
of DNA, just trying
to replicate & prosper,
like us. To follow

the biblical command—
homosexual practices
seem more risky

(the joke never comes
out right)

*

When you’re thinking of
life, it seems improbable,
impossible to conceive.

An activated macrophage is just
an activated macrophage. One cell
becomes a whole army.

The world is
one giant test tube,
we learn from things
that fall apart—
as a kid, age five or seven
or eight, you’re already fascinated

by road-kill, how it begins
to stink.”

Genome

“You are part of me”
It’s not an empty love song,
I really mean that

I am multiplying. All the junk
in kitchen drawers you
can’t return (the cup of sugar/an
ex’s socks/some snarled yarn)

all yours now
& might come in handy
some day.

Co-Evolution (AT #6)

There was nothing I wouldn't swallow at least once: googly eyes, the car keys, magnolia flowers from our old front yard. But if you chew on pennies, then everything smells coppery still for days.

*

It's elementary physics really—we can't put all our weight behind it and expect nothing to fall. Likewise, if I tear your sweater, then you will mend it, if you chase me, then I will take off running, if I come at you with a machine gun/if I miss too often/if you find a place to hide, then, eventually, you will build a bomb *We're modern organisms*, after all.

*

I stick to the facts, stop eating the summer after ninth grade, tell the story different every time.

Try Again

Geese fly in uninvited
leave shit all over
but do we call it a war *no*
just a nuisance.

Why say “army”
when nothing inside here
resembles trenches
(except blood, I guess,
and guts) but all still
neatly contained.

It’s more like
suburban sprawl,
metastatic houses
carried in
on truck beds,
a superhighway vascularity,
get off
at the next exit
and *go*.

If you tear up this street,
then everything grinds
to a halt. Anyway,
a ten car pile-up, in the end
it’s not any better.
Somebody always dies.

The Ethics of Translation

1.

My sister flies her hand
out the car window,

I press mine
against the cool of the glass
so much time spent
exactly like this

What color is it between my fingers? Blue.
What's that? Like purple but less red.
What's red? October.
Yes, but, what is it?

We go on for hours
& come away unsure
we're ever seeing
the same thing.

2.

Under the microscope
the whole animal is green.

Our job is to find the protein,
that is, the cells
that are more green.
We spend weeks in the dark,
counting. Y. puts her finger
on a reddish smudge
*(is this curved thing
also green?)*

We blink our way
back into the lab
Everything missing a skin

*

For a moment
you linger in the space
you just stepped out of.

Under the microscope
the body is pressed
between two panes of glass.

3.

“Restriction enzymes
save the bacterial genome
from being taken over
by foreign DNA”
like ours has been.
In the margin, I write
restriction enzymes = border patrol
turn the page.

Later “the activator snuggles up
against RNA polymerase,
strokes gently
to get it all excited”
a metaphor
I can get behind.

Under the microscope
a protein is made
to illuminate the room.

4.

On the definition of *home*
my sister and I
give different answers.

She names a city
her voice curling up
into a question,
I find a window
to lean against.

The back seat of a car,
sounds like
something
it isn't.

5.

I spend the summer eating 60¢ mangos
with a plastic knife.

Inside, the transfected cells glow,
green, on the computer.
They've never seen the virus
like this before.

*

Two years later, P. sits next to me
and cries—

*M. running laps down the hallway in a wheelchair,
waving his handkerchief.*

*You and I,
we have no right to mourn anyone.*

I want to reach across,
cup his shuddering jaw in my hand.

*

Each object leaves its imprint.
The viral shell is a dark smudge
on the film.

6.

Under the
microscope
a mouse or a fish
is exchanged
for a human.
We cannot imagine
our own strange parts.

Alzheimer's Disease first something tangles, then everything else comes undone: *At least holidays are more entertaining now—grandpa eating Hershey Kisses from the dishwasher, not much else.*

Anterograde Amnesia walking into rooms forever, the inability to create new memories.

Family different from mothers. People you smile at from across the dining room table because there are things you share. Like recipes, chromosomes, a story about a man falling off of a ladder.

Passive Immunity what protection we inherit.

Winter the longest season. You can find me facedown and not wearing a jacket. When white stops meaning peace.

Collection

Mom still files my growing
in a folder wedged between
old bank statements and *camp brochures*
and wonders why I can't use the telephone.

We are all unreliable, forget
the texture of our first breath
as if that weren't the most
important moment.

It's all in the archive,
but I cannot remember
what your voice sounds like.

Something records every word
that passes between us now,
I have a hard time imagining
it was ever any other way.
No cyberspace, just a red drawstring bag
full of ink on paper records of
how you were feeling
during second period every morning
I still knew where your hand fit
in the curve of my back, and even now
that I can't picture the mechanics
of our small, everyday clichés.

Two years and 600 miles,
what does that even mean?
You still write always
and I don't use the telephone,
too many wires to get lost in.
Better to write a poem
that won't click shut; a record of

A Riddle

M. picks up a dead animal and moves it to the side of the road. M. and T. return with a shoebox, carry it to the back porch. It starts to rain. N. and R. take the body, dress it in costume (little blue monster), put it in the kitchen of the house we don't live in anymore. N. leaves a plate of cookies, leaves a note; there is blood coming from the mouth.

T. destroys a doorframe. In the backyard, someone plays "Taps" on the trumpet, no one paints a stone.

Q: Can you put your finger on the moment of breakdown?

Q: Who's the crazy one now?

Reception

Big gets destroyed
in respeak singing
is empty but bangs
without contact
and you knot nightmares
at endings

someone's buzzing
the building inside-out
fish sticks
are elephants in line
I still swell
take in nothing;

small unshared
hidden-plexiglass repeats
talking the drum
out of beat
but what spills
from the everywhere mouths
and we knot context south.

Everything gets distorted
in translation. Dancing
is nothing but noise
without context
and I cannot imagine
what follows.

Someone tells me
the bridge is out, but
physics is irrelevant
sometimes.
I do not stop
breathing;

cells and their own
silent lexicon keep
pulling my heart
into rhythm
but definition slips
through my cracks.
I cannot connect back.

Degeneration

Tomatoes vinerot
outside a house
in Delaware, where
he plants heartstrings
between pumpkin flowers
& she reteaches him
where the bread goes,
what *home* means,
how to hang
his towel up to dry.

We've been
coming apart
for years now
untangling can't
stomach foods
that remind of when
they used to kiss
goodnight—

she is falling
out of focus,
ask anyone.
Sundays she prays
for an early frost.

Proof: Apocalypse Theory #9

As it stands:
Nothing is solid
There is no such thing
as skin

As it stands:
The energy that goes in
equals the energy released
when it breaks

As it stands:
You held me
so well—covalent bonds
between our hipbones
our chest plates
Or
Our atoms are intertwined

What follows:
(when/if we break)
A cratered out space
between us
A flood of magma
and salt, palm up
in wonder

(You will say:
I didn't think
it was possible)

Transfer

growing up in Ann Arbor
never wore a winter coat
invincible even then

Mom&I hold
at arm's length
let everything in
to keep everything else out
but I can only withstand
what you have
already overcome

it's all a matter of
how much you : how much me
some impossible blood balance
as if the bike has training wheels
on only the left side

what we inherit
what sediments
underneath

(what tangle
of twine, at least
until two year old legs
tear myself loose

a reversal
of space
inside you
then
inside me)

reason
to face the world
screaming

Glossary

I am a series of false starts. I cast my line out, so to speak. I always come up empty. We check, double check (the microliters, degrees Celsius, other nouns all in order) we cannot figure out what keeps going wrong.

By the next morning the gene has moved from one chromosome to another. Or, by the next morning, the computer has moved the gene someplace else. S. shakes his head and laughs, big and red and toothy like he always does. It means he will make some phone calls, because there is someone who knows better.

Meanwhile we learn the parts, Y. (the high school kid) and I.

Slow muscle on the edges of the myotome, more rectangular than anything else. Lateral & medial fast fibers, to us, read like turquoise smudges on the screen. Notochord, spine. Both easy enough, run straight through. One looks hollowed out but we know it isn't, can't be. Next, cartilage, gut, everything bound by epithelium. We never see blood, vessels. Or, we do, but don't recognize them. Everything is the wrong color and sliced so thin.

The layer between all that is what we're really interested in, between the muscle and the skin.

An Explanation

The woman stands up to assure me that I am not a monster, doesn't know anything about me except I remind her of her son. We meet in this classroom full of *not-monsters* and hard plastic chairs. The DSM-V glows on the screen behind her, the whole crowd nods along.

K. hates it when I call her crazy even when she chucks a beer bottle through that car window, takes more pills than anyone else in our house, spends the next weeks completely gone. I get it, I guess. Try again.

What's a monster other than some body there's no better name for?
An old queen clucks her tongue when I suggest a sprawling *we*—so many words inhabited until they are stretched thin, all dirty and worn, tossed to the curb as if they'll keep anyone else warm.

What I mean is: every morning, nothing fits quite right. The sleeves are always too short. Doesn't matter what we string together, incoherent anyway, crooked letters hang all wrong.

Circuitry

A blank page
is terrifying, but
don't I always wish
to wake up new?

It's terrifying, but
when memory spins you, it's impossible
to wake up. Newly
rewriting your margins

(when memory spins you) is impossible.
Remember to unrhyme lines when
rewriting margins
or learning how to dance.

Remember to unrhyme lines when
your hand is tired of words,
or dance
or see snow again for the first time.

Your hand is tired of words
forget where you came from and
see snow again. For the first time
I know what morning means.

You forget where you came from but
suddenly everything sparkles.
I know what morning means
when I see it from your angle

suddenly everything sparkles,
and there is so much sky.
When I see it from your angle,
this moment comes into focus

and there is so much sky
to live under for the first time
this moment comes into focus

60 Home

Even though
the only flowers
are made of plastic,
metal, fuzz,
we keep them
in water anyway.

Push here
and everything falls
off the hinges,

a season can stumble in
unannounced,
empty the fridge
and go—

the whole street ablaze,
then suddenly still.

Again, the question is building:
if we collect the puddles
if we freeze the beans
if we make a full pot
if we save the jars
if the lamp is always on
if I flush your pills
down the drain

if we keep it
to a dull roar

is this enough
to carry us through?

Glossary

The sequence must be bad, S. concludes one day, hands latched behind his head. The computer must be wrong. I nod even though I do not believe that anything on the screen corresponds with anything I can hold in my hand anyway, even though all the evidence is right there.

Under the microscope the tiny fish flash, bright green, which means the DNA I've made has properly integrated into theirs. See, they're glowing. So what?

Antigenic Shift reassortment, reassembly.

Dermomyotome a point of origin. In between.

Teratology (as opposed to *Paleontology*) the study of monsters.

Matter of Semantics

There are dinosaurs under my bed
as a child, small enough to hold with two hands.

Even in the dark, I know that I am real
and they only are if I dream them. Still
cocooned tightly in a sleeping bag, afraid
my fingers will bleed forever
keep all my limbs inside.

Later, abandon the frame altogether, no space
for even the littlest creature between my spine

and the blue carpet. But, between us
monsters, between us nothing scary,
no teeth, nothing I have words for
yet—there are distinctions to be made.

*

I tell you every night
for years I dream of Nessie,
sometimes palmed, sometimes shipsized,
but (we're always in the metro,
the ocean, the mattress store) I mean
dream of plesiosaurs.

When I tape *love is large*
and monstrous in the margins
I'm only being precise.

Between us, everything balanced
on a word or a lack: you
turn out the light, turn the page,
leave me speechless. All this
room to breathe.

Texting Home

*If I'm good at anything
it's travel, listening*

for the old woman
who knows I'm not there

to stay. "Where you going?"
I'll get on any bus

to where I want to be; A's
mom warns me not to

ride "those ones that are too
Chinese," my mouth torn from

biting down so hard. *God*
everything is covered in white

returning to
T's awful printouts

You Deserve To Be Happy
tacked to the wall. I'm not

supposed to let anyone see
the blanket over everything,

me, in the far corner of the bed.
It can take hours some days

but you already know that
no one's been in the backyard

since, no footprints yet.
N. insists *we're not a family*

but *it's not about love,*
not really. Just a place,

finally, to sit.

Review

All of this to say
in some other language
you become
transposable

A clumsy boy
a haze of serotonin
an extraterrestrial
etc.

I'm not worried
about how to arrive
at the image of four hands
fumbling in the kitchen

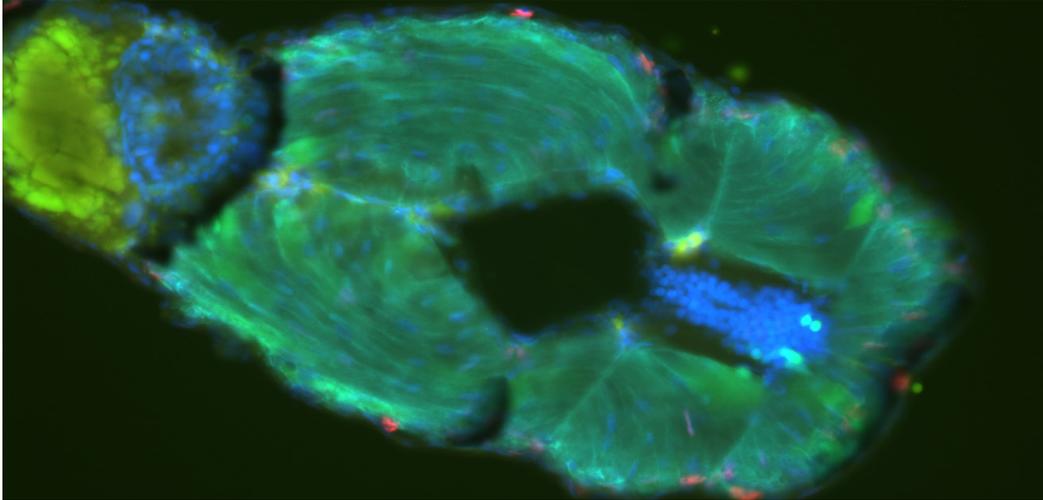
Instead, how to find
some word for ourselves

(not a poetics of flesh—
of the ways flesh is composed)

Under the microscope
the dermomyotome
sharpens

we have to work
to make it something
we can hold on to

Glossary



We use only the brightest. The others, we swirl in Tricaine or else dump them out over ice. Either way, they wind up down the drain instead of in the freezer. All the Styrofoam containers are white—the black spots are bodies stuck to the walls.

Once, instead of doing what I am supposed to, I set up a tank, hide them in row 1, with the other babies, the wild-types. After all, we are trained to see *fish*, think *human*. In row 3 they are hunched over, gnarled.

Apocalypse Theory #12

For once, it has nothing to do with you
For once, you can say man vs. nature
and mean it. I refuse to be sad

*

I will hold your head in my lap
I will scrape the pot, press the spoon
to your chapped lips. I will not
call us innocent; somebody kept on
fighting until the end

Outside, there are so many pairs
of warm dark eyes

Outside, the chickens travel
in packs (seeing this, I don't know
how anyone could claim
dinosaurs really ever disappeared)

Chickens, like raptors, do not fly
When did the human grow wings?

*

For once, there are no pretenses
For once, the chimera is here to live (what else?)
For once, nothing ends with a bang

Apocalypse Theory

Nobody can blame you
for feeling on edge
these days, as if
the whole flat span of it
will suddenly drop off
after all. The birds, thousands,
are found with lungs choked
up in their throats.

The fish, more, not even gasping.
Just wash up, already sputtered out.

In Kentucky,
they are scrounging
for money
to build an arc.
For tourism. Or
just in case.

*

The human is born gillless
and wingless, wild
for only a moment,
fists clenching
the new air.

As a child,
I am already afraid of the water.

As a child,
I sit up in the branches
and hold my breath

to empty myself out
to quiet my insides enough
to hear it coming.

Glossary

I don't know what the muscles are called, in humans. Not the latissimi dorsi, or maybe, but flush against the spine. I like these because they are not wings, nothing birdlike. We were fish once. I learn that A. likes calf muscles best because they remind we were kids once. D. doesn't like this semicolon here, at the end of the line; S. doesn't like how I arrange the slices on my dozens of glass slides. It should read left to right, not top to bottom.

Somehow, I cannot bring myself to see the difference.

a note on the text

Language is not about description, but about commitment.

-Donna Haraway

At times, I imagine myself to be speaking up from the bottom of some canyon. At others, the canyon disappears and instead becomes an open, unbroken terrain. Either way, the task of writing, for me, is about possibility. Of bridging false gaps and finding the edges of a continuous surface. Of bringing the whole humming world into conversation with itself.

My academic career has consisted largely of the writing of poetry and the study of cellular & molecular biology: I have spent too many hours in darkened rooms with my head bowed in something resembling prayer. To the poem. To the image flashing underneath the microscope lens. As a result, I find myself speaking a strange hybrid language—at once lyrical, scientific, academic. When I open my mouth, I often am met with a half smile, a tilted head. I never feel more queer (as in *odd, playful, incoherent*) than in those moments. I can never quite tell how I am being read.

This is not the manuscript I set out to write. The original is folded in, here and there, but its ideas are not primary. I wanted to say something about the metaphors (taken as facts) that biomedicine attaches to the body in order to make a solid argument about the shaky relationship between order and disorder. Instead, I spent the year writing in a house cluttered with books and conversation on queering kinship, queering temporality, making space for animality in queer theory...it was not uncommon to enter a room to find an odd bartering system being acted out: “I’ll trade you my *History of Sexuality* for your copy of Foucault’s interviews” or “I know you have the library’s copy of *The Companion Species Manifesto*. Can I borrow it? Just for an hour?” The house became a queer kind of library I spent most of my days exploring, so much so that I lost track of the smaller landscape I had mapped out for my own project. Everything, quite literally, became a possible angle from which to examine the odd relationship between poetic and scientific inquiry.

*

Both scientists and poets produce texts many people approach assuming that they cannot understand, that there is *something* there they cannot quite grasp. Still, we expect a poem to be a system of metaphor and we expect science to be a set of systems for getting at what is smooth and solid underneath or before the words.

Even Miroslav Holub, scientist-poet though he is, seems to think there is a great difference in the way language is recruited to make a poem versus an argument in a scientific paper. In his poem “Zito the Magician,” Holub gives us the image of a boy

able to will “water into wine. Frogs into footmen. Beetles into bailiffs.” Who can “think up a black star...dry water...a river bound with straw bands” but who balks at the task of thinking up “sine alpha greater than one [because] sine is between plus one and minus one. Nothing you can do about that” as if the definition of *sine* is somehow more stable than the definition of *river*. As if *sine* is anything but a definition.

Much of the process of writing is rewriting. This is true across disciplines. The things we accept to be solid (facts, objects, etc.) turn out not to be given enough time or conversation. Neither science nor poetry turn out to be actually about stripping the world down to its wires. Instead, about taking something empty of signifiers (a blank page, an unfamiliar image) and adding to it, making it shine. Because possibility is shaped by expressability, everyone is simply looking for the words with which to say anything well enough.

Somehow, as we grow, we forget this. That anything can still be anything else. The pipe leads directly to the ocean, is a dragon’s lair, is a sewer pipe. Up in the magnolia tree I am a child, also a pterodactyl. We never used to give weight to one of these realities over the other, they did not seem to us to be incommensurable. Many cultural critics cite the rise of scientific/technological culture as the source of a widespread loss of imagination. I agree, but, at the same time, what is a scientist if not someone who commits a lifetime to imagining possible worlds spinning beyond, inside, or around our daily lives?

I would like to say that the thing itself is in the reaching.

*

If I am writing from a gap, whose texts am I laying down to bridge it? If I am searching for edges, who is there to cushion my fall? This project is informed by a patchwork of creative and academic writers and strives to situate itself in the overlap between the two. The question of the natural sciences’ relationship to poetry, narrative, and the everyday is certainly not a new one; no matter which route I take there are artists and scholars who have already done the hard work of marking the trail, of carving steps into the canyon walls.

For varied reasons, Anne Carson, Miroslav Holub, Bhanu Kapil, and Walt Whitman make this text’s creative foundations. Carson was the first to really open me up to the ways in which academic, narrative, and poetic modes of thinking can inhabit a single text. Holub, a fellow cell biologist/poet, in many ways echoes my feeling of standing in the center of an impossible canyon. Though we disagree on what exactly both poetry and science are, much of his work is clearly and directly engaged with similar questions of the relationship of scientific language and categories to human self-understanding. Kapil pushes me to do hybridism (of all sorts) well, and Whitman sets the standard for a poetics of everything, challenges me to rise to meet it.

Donna Haraway, Emily Martin, and Annemarie Mol together form the academic backbone. From all three I borrow language, material, ideas. Haraway and Mol in particular have helped me to ground my thinking about the ways in which how and from where we are looking at/speaking about bodies shapes our understandings of everything else.

*

This is a text at intersections. But also a text of intersections. As in interactions, exchanges: Where do biological, medical, and poetic notions of the body/the human collide? At what angle do they ricochet off one another? When do magic and fact run into each other? Can we pull them apart again? How do we stack biblical, evolutionary, and personal theories about the beginnings and ends of things squarely inside of each other? Can I say that there is something queer about the space where poetry and research science meet in an attempt to imagine a world of incoherencies that feels close enough to whole? Can it be held together by a vocabulary? By a narrative?

This text does not endeavor to answer these questions. I'm not sure it even begins to ask them. Instead, it reaches as far out and/or up as I can see and attempts to piece together a vocabulary from which to begin because, as Al Zolynas writes, *my life is like the transitions of the language: I find myself/in the translucent streets of the new land, shouting in a voice/no one seems to hear: however, moreover, nonetheless, furthermore...*

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