



# TEXT

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## **Gutted: Three Poems on Irregular Stomachs**

### Abstract:

Poetry already exists that broaches taboo or extreme topics for women such as abortion, rape or domestic abuse (Petit, 2001, 2010; Moore, 2015, 2021). Chronic illness and/or disability are being explored too (Sluman-Brenchi, 2015, 2021; Atkin, 2021), with cancer being arguably the most common illness addressed (Darling, 2003). But whilst the extremes of surgery, hospitals and blood are now shown, bodily functions *of the guts* are rarely depicted. Matthew Seigel does end his collection *Blood Work*, sitting on a toilet – but he is passing blood. Poo and vomit still appear taboo.

My PhD supervisor once asked why I didn't write about my childhood. I said I'd had a happy childhood and did not feel compelled to explore it. Yet, I found primary school difficult because other children sometimes found me...disgusting. For the longest time I had no proper name for my affliction. Heartburn or reflux are milder versions; regurgitation or vomiting come closer. Poets such as Kathleen Jamie (2000) have said that a poet needs to give themselves "permission" to approach difficult subjects, whilst Eavan Boland has spoken of needing to de-centre herself and write from a position of defeat, from the margins rather than from authority (2006). Regurgitation is not readily poetic, and I had to overcome my own embarrassment/defeat and find a 'way in' that worked. I found that locating an additional subject axis (the Tin Woodman story, the science of vultures, a family photo album) illuminated my physical experiences in ways that made the poems feel permissible rather than gratuitous.

### Biographical note:

Cath has a Creative Writing PhD and has taught Creative Writing at the University of Leeds for 12 years. She's been chronically ill (CFS) since 2017 and is autistic and queer. She now freelances in order to work from home. Cath contributed a chapter to *Disability, Avoidance and the Academy* (Routledge, 2015). *Mslexia*, *Bitch* and *Poetry Wales* have published her on writing/ disability (2015, 2016). *The Journal for Literary Disability Studies* published 'Fishlegs' Journey: Acknowledged and Unacknowledged Stigma in the *How to Train Your Dragon* Book Series' (2019). Her second collection is *This is Not a Stunt* (Valley Press, 2017).

Keywords:

Poetry, disability, vomit, regurgitation, memoir.

## Tin Woodman/ Iron Girl

The Tin Man was once a regular man, a woodcutter  
by trade, skilled at making things, and he fell in love  
with a girl whose mother demanded ‘proof’.

He cut off an arm, gave it to the mother;  
replaced it with a metal version of itself.

When I was three, I went to a party and came back

proud-bellied and stiff. My mother thought I would vomit  
but I defied her expectations. The family myth grew  
that Cath had an iron stomach. I believed it, too.

Later, I heard them say with envy, ‘she can eat  
anything and not put on weight!’

This wasn’t enough. The Woodman cut off his leg,

replaced it with a metal leg. (I’m not sure why his trade  
was ‘woodman’, but perhaps so he had access to  
a *large sharp axe*? For narrative purposes. A friend  
made the metal prostheses.) *Still not enough!*  
said the mother.

‘Wait till you’re as old as me,’ said my mother.

I did. Nothing changed. My weight stayed itself,  
my breath stank like witches’ breath, cream  
curdled on me, I was ‘sick’, but still remained  
the Iron Girl, tough as nails. In a love-sick torment,  
the Woodman cut off more limbs – even his head! –  
until he was almost entirely tin. NOT ENOUGH!

Finally, the Tin Woodman cut out his heart  
for this maiden, but before he could reach her door,  
it rained, and he rusted to a standstill in the garden.  
The mother, a witch, was pleased.  
(Of course, *tin* does not rust, but let’s pretend  
he had joints made of iron and they could).

A dentist once said my enamel was thinning, asked me  
if I had bulimia. I was embarrassed, a life spent  
hiding my affliction (sicking up unprompted),  
now uncovered. Doctors fobbed me off  
with reflux medicine. Wrong disease...  
so much wrong. I was clad in iron but my guts

were soft and tender like slowworms or roses.  
This is a sad, dark fairy-tale. Its moral is: 'never  
cut off your limbs for the one you love.'  
In the film, the Tin Man has forgotten his love  
when he meets Dorothy, but he knows he lacks  
a fleshy heart. This troubles him, he misses

its tick. I know all this has something to do with me,  
but right now, I can't say what.

## Vultures

Generally maligned whilst minding their own business  
(collective noun *kettle*, from the German for chain)  
they discreetly loop above the dying. Is it their fault  
their wings are wide, their heads bald? Remember,  
they didn't kill their meal, merely perform the  
clean-up operation (a *wake*). Sitting as a *committee*  
they preen stray barbules back in place. Consider  
the miracle of their stomachs' acid: dissolving *bone*  
yet not their own flesh.  
What I would give for their epithelial cells!

## **You remember the boy who smelt of wee?**

Always one at infant school, Peter was ours.  
I hated how some of the kids made a thing of it/  
of him. It was obvious he couldn't help it,  
and, well, what help was it to pull faces, hold  
noses? I've realised now, thinking about this, that

I was the child at primary school who smelt of sick.  
Obvious I couldn't help it. Food came back up  
regardless of effort. In fact, the fact I  
swallowed it down demonstrated self-control,  
but my breath stank suddenly from time to time -

how disgusting. Why am I telling you this?  
Point of view, I think: one child I felt pity for,  
the other trapped me, so I offered her up  
as a dragon of vengeance, purporting agency;  
huffing out malignant fumes I'd chase my sister

round the room, strike fear in the nose of a bully  
at school, even took a kind of pleasure in this.  
My parents called it phlegm as if I was just  
clearing my throat. On holiday in Rimini,  
my Dad took a snap of me aged 10 or 11 stood

against a wall in red shorts. When the prints  
came back, I saw carved in stone behind me  
the letters F-L-E-M. Flem.  
I was confused, uncomfortable. Dad thought it funny.  
Some food, you know, say ice-cream, tasted

OK on its return. *I got to eat it twice!* I told myself,  
reasoning myself gifted not cursed. But  
what else could I do? *Be Peter?* Be pitied?  
I had such survival instincts, inventiveness,  
but I wished for something else.

Flem. I look up the Latin now, see it means  
WEEP. Even now my partner says, 'But if  
they'd done something, you'd have hated  
the trips to hospital, all the tests.' Maybe,  
maybe not. Today my back teeth have

fragile enamel; tea gentle-warm in the mouth  
stings lower down. I await an endoscopy.  
I am out of bravado.

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