
**THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS
OF ENGLAND**

'The Bone Ship'

Poetry Commission 2013-2014

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Commission for Mario Petrucci at *The Royal College of Surgeons of England*.

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The Bone Ship

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Bullets

Palpate for a thrill.
With stethoscope hear the bruit.
Exert your will. Cope with the wide-open fruit.

All clothing – removed. Once they would tidy each
wound unwisely as if its inside-out pastry
were there to be trimmed.

Excise what is purply
or black. Is your victim slack or stable?
Resist any unfresh scalpel. A full-thickness puncture must

mesh in layers – imagine stitching ragged lasagne. I insist
holes in the face be closed loosely. Brace
yourself for TV shows

that slice it out
crudely when blink or cough can kill.
There's every chance it will be walled off – shunned

by the cunning body. Or it will toil to the surface
slowly: as with fleshless smile the fallen
have done

in the fertile soils of France.

Surgical love

They had to enucleate both
my eyes. Yet your shape snakes
bright in that cinema sightlessness makes.

My wasted belly – opened exploratorily
to a stewful of eels. They writhe
still for a taste of you.

As tinned copper wire
snipped from its sheath: calves stripped
of inflammatory nerve. But toe-tips remember

your tight-woven wreath. Thumbs. Fingers. Elbow
and wrist. All gangrenous – gone. Slow
ghost-hands reach for your waist.

This breast dissected
to beached ribs. My bone ship.
Heart bails alone for you its last salt heat.

Lip and palate. Tongue and chin. Sigh and whisper
uninstilled. Yet the will immaterial
slips within.

Hip and thigh.
That softer flesh. To cinerator.
Crematorium. Dust and ash. And oh

in their jars these parts so prolonged. But
the sum shall throng in you
wherever you are.

Methods

We relieve now with lasers:
those potent beams never to look at
except side-on. But have we ever believed

whatever can be seen can't cut?
Or vaporize. Malign cells that fraternize
to dominance in cervix, larynx, skin. Photoablation

blasts in to dissolve all bonds:
resolves tumoured windpipes, plasma
-plumes eyes without sensation, reminds of glows shed

ripe-hot from noses of re-
entrant craft. Liquid nitrogen fumes.
Feel that firming shiver and kill: frostbite's wolf rebred

to steaming husky for
liver and penis – pulling death's
bright sled south through teeming obfusc. In mouth

or epidermis: high
frequency current. Eyes
warrant see-through shavings, sliver by sliver.

Laparoscopy
for hernia, gall bladder, cyst. No
need to lift the bonnet for cancerous colon, prostate,

uterus: soon the risk
-reducing robot will drive. Save that
CyberKnife for loaf - neck - spine. Wait till *ultra* or

nano bloom wrong cells to
micro-carnations. Kneel or recline
for tests that long to bless – what in moderation

we tolerate must heal in excess.

10 5 '41

Royal College of Surgeons Hunterian Museum

night's trap
door flung down – loosing
lung & liver slack in jars & Hunter's animal

catch caught up in preservation now finds itself
in War dropping unressembling jaws
at the roof-

entering photo
-flash that disinters femur from its
human frame to rashly reassemble it with elk: a mixed &

mixing Last Trump as all through London Lucifer's black-
winged angel hails its Germanic stac-
-cato load to

make this
Golem of many heads & tails
from pickled or desiccated flesh whose wrecking swelling

boil of flame bursts dead fauna forward under fire in red
-white sheets to resurrect through
the galleries

down the streets
Blighty's Old dead & her
Fresh whose digits touch their fleshless tips mid-

air – who clutch at flight curling lips in
hissing heat too brief to
kiss

18th century surgeon John Hunter transplanted a human tooth into the comb of a cockerel (item P 56, Hunterian Museum). He later attempted tooth transplants between humans. Young female donors were preferred.

P 56

In flesh borders he gardens
knowledge. Sinks it there as if a tulip bulb

jaundiced in bloody turf. In the tiny heat of this
flushed terrain what will grow its

one ice flower? For weeks cockerel
wakes dentine & pulp with gargling yells of yellow-

toothed migraine. Outside queue the sick unfed to sell
live canine & incisor. In young skulls

each small resistance to his pliers grips
bonily a bloody instant – then slides. Did those jelly-blood

teeth in their leather-red comb dryly pliantly rough to touch
wobble with undervalued pain as much as

the congealed curls of these girls unhealed?
In Hunter's Museum in forensic section I gawp at how close

is cockerel crop to pickled-walnut brain. His upright fang
whiffs modernity's note of raised brow:

Bizarre. Unusual. Is this in faint that
same tainted track thought would take to Auschwitz

in crammed trucks of curiosity – a world where
even innocent dentures piled versus

toothlessness betray blind mind grinding
to its ruthless point?

Gillies

Plastic surgeon (1882 – 1960)

I advance flaps – loop tubes of skin
: tunnels
to transport cellular troops to required fronts

A blunt nose might begin near the collar – a brow
above the ear
– a palate reach up from neck – so each may attempt

the smile for the wife : as with that luckless gunner from
HMS *Warspite*
now wearing goggles of his own chest as though at dinner

he had lifted to the blenched & boggling face a tucked-in
napkin of himself
Ah – they have said how my knife this sculpting scalpel

is war's angel that accosts flesh to make bridgeheads
of itself : but I
never ask whether those features remember their

once-entrenched strips of body : the man bled
of expression
waking to such lost manoeuvres of lips –

feeling all across that leathered mask
every
where a woman's hand touched

*Chief sources: 'Plastic Surgery of the Face' (H.D. Gillies: London, 1920)
+ Gillies British patient files [RCSEng Archives catalogue ref. MS0513/1/1].*

Resurrection Man

Joseph Naples: body snatcher

Saturday –
At night went out & got 3.
Sold to Mr. Cline St. Thomas's.

Sunday –
Looked to see what funerals were about.
At Home all night.

Monday –
Got paid for the 3 adults & settled.
Met & settled with Mordecei. At Home all night.
Miss Naples.

Tuesday –
Brought the Shovils from Bartholomew. The dogs
flew at us. Could not succeed. Met early
at Mr. Vickers. Came Home
intoxicated.

Wednesday –
At night went out & got 10 whole. Opened another
whole though bad with the small pox. Found
a watch planted.

Thursday –
Went to Pancrass. Got 2. 1 adult 1 small.
Went to Bunhill Row got 6. 1 with the throat cut.
Sold the extremities.

Friday –
The moon at the full.
Could not go got Drunk. Slept a sleep
of the unburied. I did not do
Anything.

*Chief sources: Joseph Naples [RCSEng Archives catalogue ref. MS0024]
+ 'The Diary of a Resurrectionist, 1811-1812' (James Blake Bailey: London, 1896).*

Wound

(1914 – 1918)

Exposed at a brow
that humming bonnet of bone

Inflammation as lipsticked mouths
pouting through colon

How the bullet before it
comes to rest can random-walk anatomy

Lung as a scarlet deep-sea
squid curling its fork of new-found tongue

Alive and liverish through
its chest – that layered slot private as a girl's

The shot-through organs in their necrotic nest
rounded to misshapen eggs

Wrist or leg as clotted wood shrapnel-knobbed
A tin helmet that couldn't

save studded with fist-sized cloves: those pot
-holing caves in brain-

flecked skull – Neck
parted to second grin – Face squirmed

too big too open
to a coal-black lily – A single

wormhole
tidily through its blue

& fig
-slack heart

Chief source: A. Kirkpatrick Maxwell [RCSEng Archives catalogue ref. MS0023/1].

Lords

(House of Lords Speech: 17 May 1897)

There is no more difficult thing for a surgeon
than to give advice to a man when it is
safe for him to enter when he has
contracted syphilis.

In the early stages there is no general effect upon
the system. The mere fact of prostitution
affords reasonable probability.

If any woman chooses a position a magistrate must
be satisfied. One matter which I
did not like: the woman

pronounced clear received a certificate. Chaplains
attend the women. On all hands that
savours pretty strongly –

I have been informed on credible testimony it was
not a rare thing for them to be restored.
How wholesome

a moral influence hospital exerts upon the lower
classes. A severe accident might be
a blessing.

Objection? The women are humbled while nothing
is done to deal with the men? I confess
that seems a sentimental one.

Periodic inspection? Let it be done not in a sort of
parade – but let every soldier be introduced
solemnly.

Failure. I trust that this House will give distinct
encouragement to India in the good
and Christian course.
Cheers.

Sole source: 'British Troops In India (Health). Speech by Lord Lister on Monday, 17th May 1897.'
[RCSEng Archives catalogue ref. MS0021/7/26, Joseph Lister Papers].

Pathological Haiku

testis – blushed
plump apple thrush started
but could not finish

*

womb – become
blue-veined skull eyelessly
bowed in study

*

curl of colon –
broken-off coral curved
with polyps

*

ulcerated kidney :
encrusted caverns linked greyly
through pink karst

*

halved stomach : smooth with
black sheen as though
avocado stone had been

*

martian
liver – becoined
with lichen

*

woman – from under
one breast : mottled garland
of rust carnations

*

tongue
hung wordless in swill –
empurpled eel

*

eye –
grey olive
pupil-pitted

*

skull –
bleached oak of bone
grown from one socket

*

farthing hole in
heart's rare gourd – that
single round of love

*Sole source: Astley Paston Cooper, 'Pathological Drawings'
[RCSEng Archives catalogue ref. MS0008/4/5].*

Archive

for The Royal College of Surgeons of England

how
many tomes how
many

times
must eye & hand caress
flesh on

paper
unzipping undressing in ink
or water

-colour
before they are satisfied? – those
early surgeons

in love with
anatomy before the body became this
marriage for the sake

of the children
where eyes meet across the table & hands
reach then fingers stretch

only to pass that
scalpel – though there is something vital here
some future unbreakable

written & drawn in
cut & suture on these old pages put immaculately
to bed – this care to hold

open a door to let
sight maybe a life walk cleanly intimately through
: thus shall body with

surgeon stutter *I*
do rightfully shakingly nuptial forever husband
with wife unless

that mistress
or master – the patient – so achingly kept
anaesthetised

& too long
under the knife nevertheless
wakes up