

Kelley Swain

Three Poems

Introduction

In January this year (2019) I had the opportunity to visit Edinburgh’s Surgeons’ Hall Museums. Walking through the beautiful architecture of the Wohl Pathology Museum—high ceilings, clean white walls and spotless glass jars and cases—I was particularly struck by the frail architecture of the human body. At one point, working my way along the sections of pathology (osteology, neurology, oncology...) I turned around, and was overwhelmed to see two skeletons hanging in glass display cases, on either side of a doorway I’d just passed through. Both had legs twisted as if seated in meditation; both were hoisted to hang from the skull, and loomed there like grotesque piñatas: once full of soul, now empty. Both were female. One had rickets, whilst the other suffered osteomalacia, adult rickets, both caused by Vitamin D deficiency. The dour grey skies of Edinburgh, the Gothic cobbled streets, and the stories of these women—both had died in childbirth—stayed with me. I was moved to give them each a voice, and the poem “A topography of souls” is an imaginative fiction about their lives, sparked by their skeletons and the brief captions alongside.

Likewise, reading last year about Helen Duncan, a Scottish woman who made her living as a Medium, a voice came out in a poem. Duncan was imprisoned for six months in 1944, the last person to be convicted under the English Witchcraft Act of 1735, which made it a crime to “falsely claim to procure spirits”. Her trial as a “modern witch” caused a media explosion. I was particularly moved by the idea of what she, and her prosecutors, considered *true*—Duncan did choke down cloth to pull out as “ectoplasm”; but I think she truly believed she could communicate with the dead. I spent a bit more time researching Duncan than I did the Surgeons’ Hall women, and while both poems—and the three voices therein—are from my own imagi-

nation, I find it important to seriously consider what is *plausible* regarding any of the historical figures about whom I write. With Duncan, I responded to her story; with the Surgeons' Hall women, I responded to their bones.

Whilst these poems are new and enjoying publication for the first time in this special issue, their themes surely stem from my verse drama, *Opera di Cera* (Valley Press, 2014). It is about the Anatomical Venus, the Renaissance wax model in Florence's La Specola, the Museum of Physics and Natural History. The Venus is a life-sized figure which disassembles to reveal a foetus in the womb, and was used as a medical teaching tool; the Venus and the surrounding collection, made by wax-modeller Clemente Susini, is one of the most celebrated wax figure collections in the world. Susini, the Venus, and two more historical figures from the Museum—Director Fontana, and assistant Cintio—are characters in *Opera di Cera*, which has been described by The Poetry Society as “a kind of ‘Milk Wood’ from hell—beautifully horrible and horribly beautiful”. Much of it is fiction: I drew inspiration from *Pygmalion*, *Frankenstein*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. I also drew from academic material—namely that of historian Anna Maerker—and hands-on experience from sculptor Eleanor Crook. In the drama, I am very interested in form, bodies, shaping, and the moulding, suppression, and ultimate freedom of ‘voice’ of the one woman involved in—indeed central to—the story.

I see *Opera di Cera* as a natural balance to my first poetry collection, *Darwin's Microscope* (Flambard Press, 2009), which is being reprinted in a 10th anniversary edition this year (Valley Press, 2019) in concert with the debut of a song cycle based on some of the poems. *Darwin's Microscope* signalled my debut as a poet, specifically, one writing about science and museum specimens; I've often referred to myself as a “science poet”, though this is loosening up as my poetry moults, sheds, and develops. My poetry has, over time, ebbed and flowed between natural history, with a focus on animals, nature, and the environment, and the history of medicine, with a focus on the human body and its vulnerability. In 2016, I was brought happily back to my poetic origins through a residency at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, whilst my work in Medical Humanities over the past five years has inspired a novel (forthcoming), *Ophelia Swam*, which blends the history of herbal and anatomical medicines. Thus, the ebb and flow continues, and, ideally, my exploration of human animals with, and within, the natural world.

A Topography of Souls

Surgeons' Hall Museums, Edinburgh

I

One woman's bones, hanging in space.
Mystic yogi, folded, legs bowed
and crossed, crossbow-shot
with pain. Past tense. Rickets.
A spiralling spine, no line of beauty,
no snake or sinuosity. Tight-twisted,
crippled, she would have dragged,
they say, useless legs, dead weight.
But, they say, she had a fine fair face.

So this is why she died, failing
to push the child out, the collapsed
uterus, the coiled spine. But the pain
was there all along. She carried
the weight all her short life, had known,
as her eyes skidded over rain-slick
cobblestones, (so close,) with that bend
in her back; had known gravity.

And does it seem likely the child,
that added weight—a small presence
pressing her pelvis—could have arrived
any way that was kind, or good? (The fair face,
the smile at the door. 'Some alms, sir?
For the poor?') She would not have screamed,
the pain little difference from walking
these rain-slick streets.

But to unfold her was cruel, for brief
pleasure, perhaps, or mere relief—
the soft places, soft bones. Coiled spine.
A curiosity. (May he have been struck
with awe, the wonder and horror. The

innocence.) Her fine fair face. Spiralling,
 where they should not be; her limbs straight
 and strong: what might have been. That
 impossible birth, through impossible means.

II

One woman's bones, hanging in space.
 The other woman. An other. Herself.
 Who cannot walk or stand. But, onetime,
 danced. Now can watch, and sing, and read
 the stars. Her living lies in telling others
 what they want. In reading eyes.

Her fabric of belief is quite smooth,
 quite straight. Thus she endures, praying
 thrice daily on the cold stone floor.
 She carries the city's blessing
 with its curse. ('Some alms, sir?
 For the poor?') Relief will come
 in Heaven. What's one small burden more?

Their coin, their gifts, distractions
 from the pain—once, an exotic thing, bright,
 soft, round, burnt her tongue. She spat,
 the bitterness lingering. The rot inside. Once,
 an egg-rock, split asunder. Araby's caverns,
 jewelled, caught rare motes of light. Quartz:
 a foreign, worthless architecture.

He enters not with a walk, but a stride—
 'Tell me, then, Sybil, what do you see?'
 She shakes out long hair. His look, in the gloom,
 of surprise. (Scent of jasmine, coal-fires.) *I will take
 from you all your kind's taken from me.* She bares
 small white teeth, tilts her head, meets his eyes.

The Truth

They call it butter muslin but it tastes nothing like butter.
I choke it down in hics.
It nests in my stomach, a scratchy ghost, waiting
for its moment. I light the candles,
dim the lights. People come – the grief-riddled,
the lost, the hungry-eyed. If this helps
soften their loss, what harm? Some say
it is false, but I feel the voices crying
on the other side. The veil is thin as butter muslin.

After contact—lost babies or great-uncles, those
chatty ones, are most common—I roll my gut,
gag out the cloth, so it pours from my tongue,
the smell reminiscent of the dead. It ties up
the evening nicely, leaves people something
to wonder at beyond the grief resting
in their own stomachs.

Now, I am at the Old Bailey, the Press
howling with glee. They do not know how voices
scratch within my gut, nesting beside the muslin.
They do not know that most people prefer
any answer in the face of the unanswerable.

I saw that ship sink in my dream.

They parade my cloth like a dirty ghost.
They call me *fraud*.
I would rather be called *witch*.

