

## A Quickened Thing

When Jane Todd Crawford's belly first started growing and growing, her family thought she was pregnant with twins. She was in her late forties. She was getting so big. It was possible. It had to be. But nine months came and went, and there were no babies.

The physicians didn't know why the babies wouldn't  
emerge the contractions start            just a shock sometimes no spilt waters a  
pink face crying                            another pink hand

By the time they consulted Ephraim McDowell, a physician-turned surgeon  
without qualification  
sent from Kentucky to Edinburgh to train  
after he was caught robbing the grave of  
a recently deceased  
enslaved man

now back home and well in business  
the tumour was so                            big she could hardly                            breathe.

McDowell examined her body / scrutinised it very meticulously / and said he thought it was a  
growth — what word was that I didn't catch it — growing and growing and cutting off

her air

gasping in a whitewashed

months ago washed last —

walls with mud on where the dog

first thought: this is what kills me

has been slowly killing

the way my hair grows

three white slivers on the pillowcase.

Second thought came from outside the body

the man is speaking:

nobody has ever been cut open like this and

survived

somewhere inside, a candle

wrapped in apple peel

it doesn't have to end like this  
make it quick or maybe.

Please. Please, don't let me die slowly don't let this be what kills me I can't take more of this  
pain. All those long nights whooping for air. The scratchy bedclothes against my face. Wheezing  
bent over in the half-light stitching cutting opening up my dress. Tie it on me. Looser. A tender  
part of me that I have wanted to cut. Open up like a daisy. More give every week. Nothing fits.  
Bloodstains like a     butcher     barber     midwife.

Don't let me die like this.

these babies gave me night sicknesses and weaknesses  
and didn't ever speak a sound

everything hurts when it touches me there

if he can cut me     open and remove the cyst tumour growth, I can survive the cutting  
open I will take  
my mind  
somewhere else

and God will hold me in his hands  
and I will live if he wills it

me

McDowell said to her it should be possible. Like Caesar's mother giving birth. Just no baby to cry and suckle, afterward. Do you understand. It has not been done before.

Here she is, begging. For this chance.

Dreaming of what more it could be.

He called it The Experiment.

Jane rode sixty miles to McDowell's house on horseback, her tumour a separate entity. It sat upon the saddle and rode with her. Winter sun on her face and drops of sweat inside her dress. Cooling the swelling down.

McDowell in his own house. He had not been chopping up dead bodies before tending to Jane. No more graverobbing now he was so respectable. A willing white lady patient. The Experiment. No students here. The secrets of the abdominal cavity opened up. Nobody else. Just these two.

No that's not right. How many other doctors holding his tools.  
Looking inside. Liquid drained from the wound in her side, dirty, foul-smelling. A burst sac  
attached to the cyst. And in front of this McDowell was so clean. In writing. A statue. A pioneer.  
His own papers. There was no blood on his clothes. What was that abominable stink. His  
faded apron mangled in the wash until it was almost white.  
A pail of warm water.

And so Jane lay on his kitchen table she recited psalms as he cut her open and removed  
her ovary and a cyst that weighed more than 10 kilograms and then sewed her  
back up. It took 25 minutes. She lived for another 32 years  
the first person ~~to have an ovary removed~~  
no  
to survive the removal.

The example to be followed

McDowell's brutal experiments to come on those  
local enslaved women  
who could not consent  
"I was pleasantly surprised at the number of cysts and tumours," he  
said.

Jane whispered under her breath “have mercy upon me O LORD for I  
am weak O LORD heal me for my bones are  
vexed.”

She thought, she couldn’t stop thinking like as a lion that is greedy of his prey  
and as it were a young lion lurking in secret places.

Jane closed her eyes, and opened them, and looked up at the ceiling. Her eyes were unfocused  
and all she could see was the rough shape of wooden beams, a fading shade of brown. She could  
not reach out and touch them. She closed her eyes again.

A tender hand. Something to keep the insides of her warm. A movement very far away. Has  
anything ever been so intimate. Is this wrong. How he moved. The smell of blood called bunches  
of spring flowers into the air, a vision of her father carving up some long ago game, is that a dead  
bear, there was so much of it, the meat made her sick once, she could still taste it in the back of  
her throat, her mother was in the corner darning a hole in her best dress.

The table was cool under her back.

There was frost on the window.

The surgery coincided with the Christmas Day church service, at 11am, in an attempt to stop  
locals protesting, or gawking at the surgery. Jane could hear bells, and the angry voices of men  
she didn’t know, men who would rather have her die slowly in agony at home than on this



What does that look like.

Submission forced or otherwise. When can you choose. Oh but there's a lot different. In the manner of your lack of choice, your lack of space, of sky. A man looms over with dirty tools. Or did he wash his hands first. Did he let you say yes.

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I come round from the general anaesthetic and lie in the recovery room, I don't know anything about myself and the body I am. Where I live. What I have left. I can't go to the ward to rest because they can't get my pulse lower. The blood pressure cuff inflates, then exhales. I can't breathe out long enough. Shallow chest. Trying to relax on my back in a strange room. Other patients come into recovery and leave. I am reciting John Donne to myself. I have known this poem by heart since I was a teenager and a boy read it aloud to me and I can't remember which order the stanzas go in. Why can't I remember. A patient opposite is in pain and crying out and I lie on one side and think is there anything I can do to help. They have given me painkillers can they give them to her too why aren't they doing more can I say something can I help. I do not say anything. I think *And now good-morrow to our waking souls* and I think *Whatever dies, was not mix'd equally*; why do I not know which goes where. Why is everything in the wrong place why is there no right place and the more I think the more the poem unravels until it is just clusters of



lines and not stanzas and not a poem. It is unending rhyming scrolling through my  
brain a news ticker a message from TFL apologising we're sorry but due  
to a signal error at Warren Street there are severe delays on the Victoria line and all  
tickets are valid on local buses instead. It is birds descending in Leicester Square a  
clueless boyfriend drops part of his burger and his girlfriend starts shrieking and there  
are whole clouds of them and they won't stop coming all of the food is already  
gone but they can still smell it, and they mean nothing, and there are so many  
of them. It is a rhyme breaking. My chest less good at breathing than  
the machine. Pain in my throat. Don't remember when they  
put a tube down there. To help me keep breathing. Under.

The woman in distress opposite calms and is moved on. I am still not right. I do not  
know where they take her, she is a vanishing point. The blood pressure cuff around my upper  
arm hurts and hurts and hurts in a rhythm as it tightens and exhales again  
and I am not sure what the problem is. Is it my pulse or my blood pressure I am  
not sure how they differ and the nurses tell me to relax and try and laugh with me while I lie  
here and it feels like they're laughing at me and I don't say the poem out loud but  
it is recitation even if it's just me to me, it's so loud. It won't stop. Is there  
something else I can do. I know one poem and now it has been shredded down to nothing more  
than then, den, be, childishly, souls, controls, appears,  
hemispheres, west, rest, equally, I, die. Usually after a hospital appointment I walk to  
Leicester Square and buy something nice to eat a cinnamon bun and look at the  
birds from a safe distance and observe other people and read a book and look at the sky

and sit by myself and think about nothing very much and then I go home before  
rush hour. It is February and I left the house before 6am it was dark outside and cold and  
the streets were empty as I've ever seen them. The poem means nothing. There is no  
reason for it to come to me now, or for me to destroy it like this. *And now*  
*good-morrow to our waking souls.*

I ask for my phone. The nurses say, *Oh of course. Where is it. Let's find that for you.*

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The restaurant bathroom has a giant mirror behind the toilet and it ruins my evening. I am still  
here, I still live in this place, that face is still me. My belly is still me. My fingernails.

It is raining little pellets of ice outside in August and my scar tissue is blue.

My stretch marks are blue. Violet.

The colour of somebody else's eyes.