

# The Underlook



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smith|doorstop

# the poetry business

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*Although the body was that of a dog, Possum's head was made of wax and shaped like a human's, and I could not have wished for a more convincing likeness.*

– Matthew Holness, *Possum*



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## *Child Development Centre 1996*

Helen is starting to break her falls by putting out her arms. She's had three episodes in which she has cried because of her hands; she says that they don't hurt but is obviously uncomfortable. Helen is very shy in the clinic, and I hear very little speech. I understand that the content of her speech is normal but strangers have some difficulty understanding her.

## *Crack*

She got drenched in blue staccato  
at four in the morning.  
Bit on the mouthpiece and sucked,  
chucked up beige in the back of the sick bus,  
ambulance yellow and green paramedics –  
it's all nausea to me.

Surgery was white dust and blood,  
she was all they talked about over taps and the nail brush:  
a girl had tried to plaster cast her heart  
and by the looks of what they pulled out  
it only half-worked.

'She'll be disappointed'  
one of them said.  
Six hours later her bed was empty.  
She was found wandering round the fracture clinic,  
falling in love with broken people.

Pumped up with morphine, back into bed,  
by nightfall they found her  
making chains with her intestines.  
The sheets were blood and brown and black,  
the moon was a cut  
and her stitches were embedded, deep.

Next to each other by the sinks again,  
turned the tap down to make sure he was heard:  
'Told you she'd be gutted.'  
The other one laughed and had to wash his hands,  
this time, because of the spit.

## *Beep*

The anaesthetist I've been dating is really starting to annoy me, not once has he told me that I've still got some of the general anaesthetic left in me and it's very rare but it *can* stay in you for this long, but as a special treat tonight, he'll take me to the hospital, beep us into an empty room, I'll lie down and he'll put suction cups over each part of my face and drain it from me, it will be black and thick, he'll pour it into a see-through plastic bag, clip the top and put it in the medical waste bin, clean my face with a cold wet wipe, and tell me, soon, I'll be awake.

## *Heaving*

Every time I see you, I vomit,  
and you see it, the beige-but-not-  
boring gloop of tea and saliva and  
yeast and satsuma. You never  
mention it, not anymore, you just  
look away while I take the kitchen  
roll and wipes I carry around with me  
and do my best to clean it up, clean  
it off me. Try and save the train  
ticket I bought just to see you.  
We carry on walking, whether  
it be over a bridge in London  
or from your hallway to your lounge.  
If you leave the room and come  
back into it I'm sick again,  
all over myself. I think back  
to the time you didn't ignore it –  
the first time it happened –  
when you helped take off my  
clothes. The gentleness  
of your hands, slowly sliding the cotton  
above me. All I wanted to do was  
run your cotton above you  
and breathe in the smell of your neck  
but of course, it wasn't that.  
Not at all. I knew that it had never  
crossed your mind, as though, to you,  
I wasn't even a woman, but some animal  
you were fond of. The first day  
I threw up in front of you, you looked  
at me like I was trapped in a snare,  
whispering, 'hey there lil' bunny,'

as you dabbed me softly  
with white wool, 'let's get you  
cleaned up and on your way home.'

## *Acknowledgements and Notes*

The quotation at the beginning of this book is from a short story by Matthew Holness called 'Possum', published in *Dead Funny: Horror Stories by Comedians* edited by Robin Ince and Johnny Mains (Salt, 2014).

In 'What I Actually Want to Do', the quoted song lyric about 'the world being wide' is from 'Adam's Song' by Blink-182 (1999).

In case of any doubt, the three articles used for the 'Rearranging' poems are genuine. Excluding names and one instance of a derogatory term for a cleft lip, I rearranged all the words to create the poems. The original articles can be found here:

'Case Dismissed in Slaying of Deformed Baby', *LA Times* Archives, July 14th, 1990, from Associated Press

'Is it OK to Dump Him Because of His Medical Condition?'; The Ethicist Column by Kwame Anthony Appiah, *New York Times Magazine*, June 9th 2020

'Parents Complain that Disabled TV Presenter is Scaring Their Children', Ellen Widdup, *Evening Standard*, 13th April 2012

Thank you to [disability-memorial.org](http://disability-memorial.org), an archive of remembrance for disabled people who have been murdered by their families. This is where I found the story of a father who walked free after being charged with the murder of his newborn son. After seeing that his baby had syndactyly, cleft lip and cleft palate, he threw him on the floor of the delivery room. I could find no record of the newborn's first name but please know this whole book is for you. Rest in Peace, in Power, and beyond the hands that didn't know your worth.

Thank you to the disability activists on Instagram who first made me aware of the response from 'The Ethicist' (Kwame Anthony Appiah, a 'moral agony aunt' for the *NY Times*) to the question 'Is it OK to Dump Him Because of His Medical Condition?'. In short, The Ethicist indicated that dating someone with Crohn's

disease could be a burden and so it's OK to end the relationship. After heavy criticism, an addendum was added after the original response, expressing regret. Equal thanks to the criticism levelled at those complaining that Cerrie Burnell, a CBBC presenter with limb difference, was 'scaring their children.' All solidarity to Cerrie.

Thanks to Channel 4 for *24 Hours in A&E* and *How to Steal Pigs and Influence People*, two documentary programmes that provided inspiration for some of these poems.

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Thank you to the night nurse who sat with me during one of the worst nights of my life after spinal surgery, gently telling me a story about a new camera he was bidding for on Ebay. I wanted to write you a poem but none of them were good enough for you. I've never forgotten your kindness, patience and empathy.

I am getting palpitations at the idea of listing friends and family in case I accidentally leave someone out. Special mention to my mum, though, because she is the strongest, most amazing person I know. Everybody else, all I can say is: know who you are, how much I love you, and that if I forgot you, the guilt would ruin this whole book for me. And finally, thanks to my little, twisted rogue of a duplicated bit of a chromosome for refusing to follow the rules.