

CROCOITE

Justy Phillips

The conditions that obtained when life had not yet emerged from the oceans have not subsequently changed a great deal for the cells of the human body, bathed by the primordial wave which continues to flow in the arteries. Our blood in fact has a chemical composition analogous to that of the sea of our origins, from which the first living cells and the first multicellular beings derived the oxygen and the other elements necessary to life. With the evolution of more complex organisms, the problem of maintaining a maximum number of cells in contact with the liquid environment could not be solved simply by the expansion of the exterior surface: those organisms endowed with hollow structures, into which the sea water could flow, found themselves at an advantage. But it was only with the ramification of these cavities into a system of blood circulation that distribution of oxygen was guaranteed to the complex of cells, thus making terrestrial life possible. The sea where living creatures were at one time immersed is now enclosed within their bodies.

Italo Calvino, *Blood, Sea*. Excerpt, 1967.

In weaving forward these fragments of history and confession I do not claim to speak for the hole in my heart, but rather to speak-with the shared experience of our telling.

I. Let me tell you a story.

Inside this body there is a heart. Not like yours.
A pulsing orb of spectral colour and flow. It's a
waterfall. Now a rainbow. Now a snow storm.
Splitting shards of light into mist and colour.
With every beat of this body. I want things.
Regret things. Diminish. Forgive things. Inside
this body there is a heart. Just like yours.

02. We are all born with a hole in our hearts.

In the womb of our mothers, before we are breathing air, this hole acts as a kind of trapdoor that allows blood to bypass the lungs. In most cases this trapdoor closes itself during the first few days after birth. In rare cases, its hole remains open. This hole, you might come to know, as an 'organism that persons'. A seam that grows-with. This is what happened to me.

Medically, a hole in the heart or 'patent foramen ovale' can present in either the upper (atrial) or lower (ventricular) chambers of the heart, causing what is known as atrial and ventricular septal defects. These congenital heart 'defects' or rupturing malformations, enable blood to travel abnormally between the chambers of the heart. This diversion allows oxygenated and de-oxygenated blood to mix in the heart itself. Consequently, a person with a hole in the heart may suffer shortness of breath, increased heart rate, abnormal heart rhythms or 'arrhythmia', structural changes to the heart and increased risk of stroke, heart failure and unexpected death. For some unfathomable reason, it also makes this particular organism an exceptional swimmer. In some small basins of attraction,¹

71. she remains a Yorkshire champion.

At the Carnegie Gallery (2008) in Hobart, I draw lines between a father and child. I name the work, *fifteen years*. I make giant boxes of light and move row after row of crisp black letters to illuminate my grief. I make a greetings card with all the words in one easy-to-find-again-place and wrap it in cellophane for visitors to take away. But nobody comes. Not many anyway. Maybe it's the abundance of light or the crushing weight of such incomprehensible breakings-of-faith that keeps these five boxes of illuminated writing away from this city's inhabitants, but when only two people show up for my artist's talk I feel at its most acute, the loss of my making. At first I am deflated but as these two tentative bodies sit and read I begin to feel the space transforming. As they attend to the work, these people who are not strangers to me, I feel that I am sharing too much, too private, these words that will forever remain too difficult to tell. But when I see their rupturing pour out of their bodies and across the gallery floor, it is their presence that begins to move my lines of writing. Now we are three, floundering in the shadows of parquet flooring and reflected fluorescent tubing. *This* is the work. *Fifteen years*, my desperate plea for a father to choose my family over the one he

cannot bring himself to leave, etches itself deeper
and deeper into the crystal white glow of this,
our temporary re-unification.

18. To enter the life of a hole,

one must first engage with the event of its
making. Its activity. Its history. I can tell you
that my hole was created through congenital
abnormality. You may have found yours in the
street, in the brickwork of your home. In the
words of a lover. In shadow. These are the holes
we consume through breathing and eating and
moving and speaking. And sometimes these holes
begin to consume us. They grow inside us. With
us. Through us. This is what happened to me.

03. A practice of rupture.

In *Tides Apart* (2006) at Inflight ARI in Hobart, I make *letters for dad*, a text-work that spans three walls of the gallery. *So many fathers*. I make some writing and bind it in the form of a small book. On the front cover is a short letter to my dad that I will never send nor speak. Printed in fluorescent orange ink that both illuminates and deafens our silence, it reads:

And then I see it.

There is a single plate on the kitchen table. In its centre, sits a large piece of cake, which has been cut into two perfect halves by my father. I will never forget that image; two halves separated by a bone handled knife on a plate, which is older than I am.

As the minutes pass in that kitchen, I can't help but see the layers of dust and dirt and cat hair, which have collected in the awkward places of this room. The used coffee grains placed in empty cat tins; the dead plants, the fossils, the single sheep horn.

Basking in your soft northern light, we sit together and pick the fancy icing from our

independent cakes. You look so proud. And then it hits me. You do not see anything in this room anymore, only your daughter and your cake, and in this, the briefest of moments, we are alone in this heaven and it is wonderful.

11. Dad, your eyes are filling up again.

19. It started as a tiny hole.

From the day I was born to the day I was thirty. It grew as I grew. It was one of the largest holes they had ever seen, they said. And so quiet compared to all the others they had ever heard. They stood in turn with their heads to my chest and no one was allowed to breathe. Except me. And no one could hear its unusual shape. Except me. I was sitting in one of those fake velvet club chairs when I first heard the news. When a hole was still a whole. Listening to the words fall from his body into mine I was immediately oppressed by two violent forces. One: The thought of my chest wall cracking into two as they reached inside to extract my punctured heart. Two: The repulsive touch of that fake velour skin pressing into my heart from the outside. Too much flapping. Too much breathing. Not enough air for everyone.

113. In a Montréal hospital I lie awake.

A new body forms. Is you is me is the starched cotton sheet that is our life. Raft. I am connected to tubes and needles and voices and liquids and tentative hands. You are connected to me. We are connected to tubes and needles and voices and liquids and tentative hands of inexperience and puncturing that stings and stings. And stings until the right amount of crimson blood flows in the right direction for the last time in its life. For the first time in its life.

You lie along the length of me. Make me twice as long. A circumference without line. Just an amoebic something that can only be the middle of unknowing. This line that opens and opens and opens. Desperate for traction in anything. Your iPad. Your long warm hair. In a sea of fluorescent tubes and plastic chairs and a sign that laminates 'only one visitor per patient'. As if a lighthouse could organise the waves.

When you inadvertently contaminate the ECG machine by holding my cold feet in your hands you are scolded for creating the joint echo of our heart. From now on the cardiac machine monitors us closely. All cables and crocodile clips. All tentacles pinching skin. Now we are octopi.

Now we are sponge. Now we are dull ache. Now we are hospital air.