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Note: Poetry, the corpus callosum, and visceral asymmetries

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Note: Poetry, the corpus callosum, and visceral asymmetries

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How could anyone resist the challenge thrown out by Stephen Christman, at the end of his lovely paper on the poetry of handedness (Christman, 2010 this issue, p. 657), where he says, “At the risk of falling into the same trap as McManus, this is the only poem about the corpus callosum of which the author is aware”? Of course the Internet has made the task easier, and here I just offer a few poems, not only about the corpus callosum but also other laterality-related topics—and make a further challenge.

CORPUS CALLOSUM

A good place to start is Corrina Cop Rain McFarlane’s *Ode to the Corpus Callosum*.¹ As she says,

if it weren’t for the corpus callosum
we couldn’t see eye to eye

For left is left and right is right
and ne’er the twain would meet ...

The paintings of Chuck Close influenced Barbara Southard’s poem *Corpus Callosum: after seeing an exhibit of Chuck Close’s prints & paintings*,² for, according to Southard, “Chuck Close said that his differently wired brain/led him to paint portraits in segments”. The paintings are reminiscent of the figures of Navon (1977), with their different levels of processing

¹ http://timetoshine.gaia.com/blog/2007/4/ode_to_the_corpus_callosum_and_the_wisdom_paradox

² http://www.poetryvlog.com/text%20of%20poems/bsouthard_corpus.html

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globally and locally, processes that may well take place separately in the right and left hemispheres so that, as Southard says of Close:

It was as if I was running around in his head,
leaping from left hemisphere to right . . .

Rani Turton's *A Wooden Door, A Metal Key*³ describes the separate private and public worlds inside and outside her Parisian apartment, separated by the plain wooden door with its metal key:

A wooden door like corpus callosum
Holds my two worlds together . . .

Matt Harrison's *Kiss Me in the Dark*⁴ contains some evocative lines describing the mental disintegration that might follow from the loss of the corpus callosum:

My corpus callosum eloped with the moon, leaving me hanging in equilibrium;
incongruous images divide my attention and collide
where two eyes typically become one.

Finally, there is Aaron Greenhouse's poem, *October 18, 1991*,⁵ which admittedly he describes on his website as being one of what "is basically a bunch of really silly and badly written poems",⁶ but is none the less thought provoking (and it is short enough to quote in its entirety):

If you cut your brain in half,

Along the corpus callosum,
There would be twice as many of you,
But each would be twice as dumb.

Perhaps what is so surprising about these four poems is the appearance in vernacular poetry of what was once an obscure neural structure with a strange Latin name. One possibility is that we are seeing one of the unexpected influences of the introductory Psych101 courses that are now taken by so many students.

³ <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/a-wooden-door-a-metal-key/>

⁴ <http://studentorg.richmond.edu/messenger/2004-2005/Poetry.html>

⁵ <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~aarong/from-andrew/POTD/poems/original.html>

⁶ <http://www.cs.cmu.edu/~aarong/from-andrew/aaron.html>

SITUS INVERSUS

Poems about situs inversus seem to be very rare, and an Internet search turned up nothing obvious. The only poem of which I am aware is the one in French cited by Sir Thomas Watson in his 1836 review of situs inversus (Watson, 1836). In 1689 Duhamel had described the case of a 72-year-old soldier from the Hôtel Royal des Invalides with situs inversus, which attracted much attention in Parisian intellectual circles. The result was that the mathematician Leibniz wrote the following lines, which Watson described as “doggerel verses”, and says they are a “strange medley of vile poetry and worse taste”:

La nature, peu sage, et sans doute en débauche,
 Plaça la foie au côté gauche;
 Et de même, vice-versa,
 Le cœur à la droite plaça.

[Nature, unwisely, and debauched without doubt,
 The liver it placed to the left;
 And likewise and also vice-versa,
 The heart it placed to the right.]

SCROTAL ASYMMETRY

The human body has many anatomical asymmetries, only a few of which have been described in poetry. My small contribution to this literature was a poem—also meeting the criteria of vile poetry and worse taste—that I wrote when receiving an Ig Nobel Prize in 2002 for my work on scrotal asymmetry (McManus, 1976; see also McManus, 2004). That poem began, “By the thigh tops, by the groin ends/Just in front the perineum/Lies the sac they call the scrotum/with the vasa deferentia, and the epididymes”. It continued for far longer, and is available in its entirety in the *Annals of Improbable Research* (McManus, 2003). However, even that eccentric journal did not publish the limerick, the clerihew, and the haiku that more pithily summarised the findings, so that this is their first public outing:

A *kouros* portrayed by a sculptor
 Said, “My scrotum is clearly in error,
 Though my right ball is higher
 It is also the larger,
 Next time, better check with a doctor”.

Kouroi

Aren't *hoi polloi*.

Plebs have the right testis larger,

But a sculpture has marbles *vice versa*.

Left testis larger.

Greek sculptors influenced by

Theory not data.

While acknowledging the risks of making such a claim, let me suggest (and perhaps even hope) that these may be the only poems ever written on scrotal asymmetry.

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