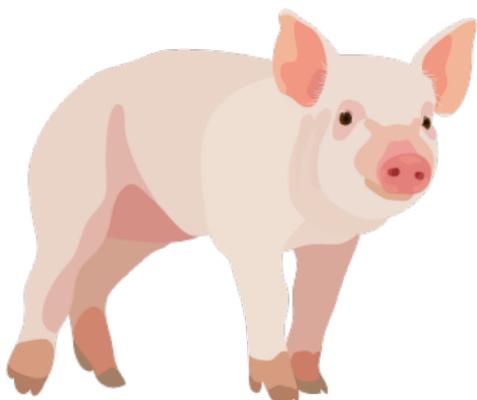


THEY CALLED  
ME PIG



LORNA SMITHERS

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‘Kill the pig. Cut her throat. Spill her blood.’  
~ Lord of the Flies

## CONTENTS

Introduction

Roses Chocolates  
Hazelnut Swirl  
The Last Malteser  
Reasons for Skipping Lunch  
Chocolate Chip Cookies  
Cover Stories for Cutting  
I Called Myself Pig  
Two Weetabix, Fish and Veg  
Not Quite Ziggy Stardust  
The Night I Floated Away  
Black Out  
The Sharper the Blade  
A Healthier Obsession  
She Stops Bleeding  
The Mad Girl on the Cross Trainer  
Runner's Knee  
Chocolate Stout  
The Drunken Bard  
Running Thin  
The Rake  
Cold-Blooded  
The Empty Bottle  
Addiction to Restriction  
Self-Portrait as Gollum  
The Distorting Mirror  
In Denial of Diagnosis  
The Fattest Anorexic  
Like a Siamese Twin  
The House of Calculation  
Ticking Off the Time Thief  
A Better Personal Trainer  
Eat the Food, Lift the Weights  
The Buddha's Belly  
Breath Retention

When I was a Boy  
The Wisdom of a Hazelnut

## Introduction

These poems chart the development of an eating disorder that began with childhood bullying. In the beginning, I wasn't fat, just a bit tubby. Still, I was called a 'pig'. This led to comfort eating, then binge eating. In opposition to the feelings of being out of control and the weight gain, I started restricting my food intake when I was thirteen.

Since then, I have experienced various patterns of binge eating, restricting, over-exercising and binge drinking, which have led to me being overweight, of a normal weight, and underweight. For most of my life, I believed I had binge eating disorder. I continued to see myself as a 'pig' and a 'fat binger'. However, this was only half the truth.

I recently gained a clinical diagnosis from a consultant psychiatrist, who told me that I also had a mild form of anorexia, which is still with me now in terms of the psychology, even though my diet and exercise habits are healthier and my weight is normal. It is little known that anorexia (of which the main symptoms are restriction of energy intake relative to requirements leading to a significantly low body weight, intense fear of weight gain, and disturbance of body image<sup>1</sup>) can occur across the full weight range. This illness can cause distortions of body image, causing a person to feel fat and pig-like, even when at a low weight.

I have written these poems to raise awareness and as a way of processing my diagnosis and heading towards a fuller recovery.

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<sup>1</sup> From the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria.

## **Roses Chocolates**

I scream  
I scream  
I scream  
and I scream for them.

My parents teach me  
that comfort comes in a box.

It has names like caramel keg,  
vanilla nougat, peppermint crunch.

It is sweet as chocolate and soft as fudge.  
It is squishy as a six-year-old's belly.

The rolls of fat are the cost.

The fatter I get,  
the more I'm bullied,  
but so long as I don't scream,  
it doesn't matter.

## **Hazelnut Swirl**

They unwrap me  
with their cruel hands.

They push me from  
one person to the next.

They think I'm soft  
as chocolate until they crack  
their teeth on the nut.

If only a scream could kill.

If only a scream could scatter them  
across the playground like chocolate wrappers.

But it's only teeth and nails that can hurt.

"A horrible child," my teachers recall.

## **The Last Malteser**

The sight of the bag,  
Malteser bag red = dread.  
The terror I will lose control.

Don't go to the cupboard / Go to the cupboard.  
Don't open it / Open it. Just eat one / Eat them all.

Every damn time I can't even leave the last one.  
Every time I say it will be the last Malteser.

Then I'm back in the cupboard again,  
chocolate on my fingers,  
around my mouth.

This time will be the last.

## **Reasons for Skipping Lunch**

To save my dinner money.  
Because I don't like school dinners.  
Because I don't like the dinner hall.  
Because I don't like the other pupils.  
Because I'd rather read a book.

Because I can't stand being fat any longer.  
Because the time has come to make a stand.  
Because the time has come to be strong.  
Because I can withstand hunger.  
Because hunger obliterates the pain within.  
Because seeing fat disappear brings satisfaction.  
Because although I'm different, I'm no longer fat and weak.

This is how the fat child dies and something less pleasant is born.

## Chocolate Chip Cookies

I still remember my mum's recipe:

250g of plain flour  
250g of soft brown sugar  
150g of unsalted butter  
1 egg  
1 tsp of baking powder  
100g of dark chocolate chips  
A drop of almond essence

How I'd whisk it all together.  
How I loved to lick the whisks.  
How I loved to scrape out the bowl.

How when they came out of the oven  
squishy with the chocolate hot and runny,  
I couldn't wait and wolfed them down.

At first, I blamed the cookies for how  
I got from slimmish to fat in a few months.

Then I blamed myself and turned from  
the cookie cutter to other modes of self-harm.

## Cover Stories for Cutting

My cat scratched me.  
An incident with a tiger.  
A scrape from a horseshoe nail.  
I slipped drawing with a compass.  
I got caught in some brambles.  
I was climbing over a barbed wire fence.  
I escaped over the wall from prison.  
Suddenly, the window caved in.  
An accident with a mirror.  
Dropped pottery or a broken glass.  
I got into a knife fight or a sword fight.  
The razor blade leapt out of the razor.  
I had a battle with an assassin  
with some nasty shurikens.

I'm getting sick of telling lies.

What cut? Where? Really?  
I didn't notice that.  
Stop staring.  
Why don't you just fuck off?

## **I Called Myself Pig**

I called myself Pig  
to disguise my shame  
of my appetite.

I'd be good all day,  
then, when I was drunk,  
snaffle up all the leftovers at the buffet.

"I'm a pig," I'd joke.  
"I'm a pig," I'd say.

So the name stuck.

They started calling me 'Pig'.

Funny, that was what the bullies  
called me when I was six.

## **Two Weetabix, Fish and Veg**

Two Weetabix,  
a slice of steamed fish  
and unlimited veg  
became my new rule.

I stuck to it like a good girl.

I told myself I was no longer a pig.

I kept my little piggy a secret  
and in secret I let it gorge  
on cauliflower, sprouts,  
carrots, broccoli and squash.

As it snaffled up the vegetables  
it got bigger and bigger and it roared.

Why was it my stomach always betrayed me?

## **Not Quite Ziggy Stardust**

I always wanted to look  
like Ziggy Stardust.

I had the fringe  
but didn't manage the cheekbones  
because after dancing to David Bowie,  
because after drinking vodka  
there were kebabs.

Picture that.

Ziggy pissed  
out of his head  
in the middle  
of a kebab shop,

mayonnaise  
around his mouth,  
raving about all the women  
who didn't quite make the mark,  
who have fallen from the stars.

## **The Night I Floated Away**

No food. No sleep.  
Just a caffeine tablet for breakfast.

No friends.  
They partnered up.  
Damn romance. Damn sex.

Nowhere to go so I get on the motorway.

There's a white Vauxhall Astra beneath me  
and I'm floating with the spacemen  
whilst the girl beneath panics,

turns off at a service station  
and when she stops she's rigid  
as a corpse, hands frozen to the wheel,  
unable to peel off her fingers,  
to reach for her phone.

She's no good  
at calling for help.

## **Black Out**

There's nobody here.  
There's darkness all around.  
There's nobody left anymore.

I'm floating in space.

There's a party around me.  
There are disco lights and a drum machine.  
There is a spaceship and aliens with cold green hands.

Alive or dead? Drunk? Drugged? Starved? Gone West again.

I'm far, far away in the blackest of holes.

Unwanted, I'm carried off, dumped,  
an empty shell like a spacesuit  
that's lost an astronaut.

When I wake  
there's a black hole  
where a night should be.

My life is a series of black holes.

## **The Sharper the Blade**

Over dinner when you're making small talk  
and you catch a glimpse of a scar on my arm,  
see the scars on scars, quickly look away,  
I answer your unspoken questions.

The what and the how are easier than the why.

I moved from scissors to kitchen knives to razor blades.  
The sharper the blade, the deeper the cut—  
it isn't difficult to figure out.

But as for the reason...  
I could bore you with clichés.

But what I'd really like to know  
is why there are no scars on your arms?  
What do you do when you want to scream but can't?

## **A Healthier Obsession**

10 minutes cycling = 50 calories

10 minutes on the rower = 70 calories

10 minutes on the cross trainer = 70 calories

10 minutes on the stair stepper = 80 calories

10 minutes running = 80 calories

5k run = 240 calories

10k run = 480 calories

Half marathon = 1040 calories

And how I love the adrenaline of it.

And how I love beating my PBs.

And I can eat almost normally.

The cost = patellofemoral syndrome,  
the eternal curse of runner's knee.

## **She Stops Bleeding**

It isn't pregnancy.  
It isn't polycystic ovary  
or premature ovary insufficiency.

She's a runner - it's no mystery.

She refuses to stop running.  
She'd rather not bleed.  
She's bled enough already.

## **The Mad Girl on the Cross Trainer**

I was the mad girl on the cross trainer.

The one with the jutting collarbones.  
The one who goes at it for hours.

The one they talk about behind their hands.  
The one who someone's mum reports.

*Don't take it away— it's my only friend!*

In my dreams, I was in a massive gym

with all the other mad girls in the country,  
with all the other mad girls in the world,

doing that crazy thing that only  
other mad girls understand.

## **Runner's Knee**

When the ice doesn't work,  
when the taping doesn't work,  
when the acupuncture doesn't work,

when I try to do squats and lunges  
and my knee groans and creaks  
like a broken floorboard,

I have to accept it is a brake.

“Stop!” it keeps saying.

But it's hard to stop or slow down  
when the horrors of the past,  
the binger huffing and puffing,  
are rushing to catch up with me.

## Chocolate Stout

I'd had done with chocolate  
until I discovered chocolate stout,  
rich coffee porters with flavours of caramel.  
Belgian beers— Trippels, Dubbels and Quadrupels.  
Kwak, Maredsous, Leffe Brunne and Blonde.  
Triple-hopped IPAs, sours, wild beers—  
raspberry, banana, pineapple.

I was like a kid in a sweet shop.

I drank everything on the menu.

When nobody would drink with me,  
I went on one-woman pub crawls.

Once again, I was out of control.

I had a belly the size of a beer barrel.  
I had bowels like the pipes in a brewery.

I've left the pubs behind me now.  
I've left the beer monster in the darkest corner,  
surrounded by empty pint glasses.

No longer do I hear it growl.

## **The Drunken Bard**

How dare you show your face in public?  
How dare you get up on the stage?

How dare you act up in front  
of all your friends, your fellow Pagans,  
and all the people of Preston on the town square,  
you big, fat, oversized beer-swiller and mead-guzzler?

How dare you let them take photos?  
How dare you let them make videos?

And the size of your mouth!  
Only your stomach can rival it!  
How dare you take up all that space?

Get back in your cage and take  
that beer belly with you!

## Running Thin

If only I could run forever.

If only I could run far enough  
to escape my sins

and the witch

on my back who is riding me,  
cursing me, whipping me, because  
I have failed her command to be thin.

If only I could run forever  
until the flesh falls  
from my bones,

to where  
Thisworld meets  
the Otherworld and my spirit  
leaves this fleshy prison for its immortal home.

If only I could run forever to where my hair  
falls out and a rainbow sprouts  
from my head.

This witch  
doesn't just want me  
to be thin - she wants me dead.

Before I run to the bone a bone gives way<sup>2</sup>.

I'm stuck at home with my curses,  
nursing my foot with a pack  
of frozen peas.

---

<sup>2</sup> I ended up with a stress fracture in my right foot.

## **The Rake**

*Brockholes Nature Reserve*

I'm told I look like a rake  
when I'm standing next to a rake,  
which might have been funny

if I hadn't rather have been a rake -

straight up, straight down,  
simple and functional.

Rakes don't bleed.  
Rakes don't cry.

Rakes don't worry  
about the meaning of life.

Rakes are upright and true.

## **Cold-Blooded**

*Prince's Park Garden Centre*

They put the thermometer  
to my forehead  
like a gun,  
pull the trigger.

“You’re dead.” “35°C.”  
They check again.

Have I always been cold-blooded?  
Had such numb blue fingers and toes?

It’s not helpful when my hands  
should be warm and loving  
to help the green things grow.

## The Empty Bottle

The booze is gone.

Am I merely an empty bottle?

When I'm no longer a Lorna  
-and-alcohol symbiont  
what is left?

What will fill me  
in the absence of beer,  
of cider, of wine, of mead?

Will the inspiration still flow from Annwn<sup>3</sup>  
if I leave the tables where the drunken bards sit?

What will happen if I depart before my own Catraeth<sup>4</sup>?

Will my God still love me if I desert the mead-feast?  
Will He meet me in silence, in emptiness?  
Will He fill me again with His love?

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Very Deep' - the medieval Welsh name of the Otherworld.

<sup>4</sup> A devastating battle recorded in the Book of Aneirin where the Men of the North feasted and drank at Din Eidyn (Edinburgh) for a year and a day before their bitter defeat by the Anglo-Saxons at Catraeth (Catterick). Likely, the copious amounts of mead they consumed played a role!

## **Addiction to Restriction**

I downsize me.  
I downsize my world.

I cut out all joy with  
an invisible razor.

I throw out all my clothes.  
I get rid of every coloured garment.  
I dress in black and make every day a funeral.

My books can go and so can my music.  
So can my accursed creativity.

My friends can go too.  
So can the people on the screen.

I meditate all day for seven days straight.  
I manage to get my heart rate down to forty-eight.

When the meditation and breathwork no longer work  
all I want to do is drive a knife into my belly.

Finally, all I'm left with is my pain.

## Self Portrait as Gollum

‘It is mine, I tell you. My own. My precious. Yes, my precious.’  
~ Fellowship of the Ring

I want to be alone with my pain,  
to sit with it in my dark cave,  
to whisper to it, stroke it.  
“My precious.”<sup>5</sup>

I don’t want anyone  
to take it away.

I don’t want anyone  
to cast it into a volcano.

For what am I without my pain?

And yes, it is *my* pain, *my* pain, get off!

Who cares if it has made me  
a twisted, dark creature  
gurgling like water?

When you take it,  
will I follow to Mount Doom?  
And when you cast it in,  
will I follow after?

---

<sup>5</sup> This poem is inspired by talks by Brother Phap Linh at Plum Village who uses the story of Gollum to parody our ownership of our pain.

## **The Distorting Mirror**

Whenever I looked in the mirror, I saw a fat binger.

I could never win against those hamster cheeks.  
I could never get rid of all that belly fat.

Size 16, I could barely live with myself.  
Size 14, I was a complete and utter failure.  
Size 12, I was overflowing all my rules.  
Size 10, I just about accepted myself.  
Size 8, I didn't look too bad in a dress.  
Size 6, I nearly admired my cheekbones.

No matter how thin I was, I was never thin enough.

For thirty years, I never saw restriction as a problem,  
then I saw the diagnostic criteria for anorexia.

Not just hospitalisation underweight.  
The constant fear of weight gain.  
The distortions of body image.

You know those “oh shit” moments,  
those really big ones, like Carl Jung's vision  
of God dropping a mighty great turd on a cathedral?

Well, this was one of them - one of those  
whopping great truths with the power  
to bend the mirror back into shape.

## **In Denial of Diagnosis**

*Anorexia nervosa.*

No. What? Me? I'm too fat. I'm too old.

A part of me wants to deny it,  
can barely say the words.  
It feels like an insult  
to those who are so sick  
they're being tube-fed in hospital.

“You're not thin enough.” (The voice).

Yet another part of me knows  
how it's twisted my mind,  
wrecked my body,  
ruled my life,  
(still does).

I wonder  
how many  
remain in denial.

Don't wait until you're thin enough.

Speak up.

## **The Fattest Anorexic**

“Mirror, mirror on the wall,  
who is the fattest anorexic of them all?”

Of course, it’s me, according to that witch— anorexia.

“Look at you with that huge red face out of place  
amongst all the Snow Whites and the Sleeping Beauties.”

I refuse to eat her poisoned apple and tear the mirror off the wall.

I shatter it, stamp on the shards and depart to a garden  
where the apples grow green, ripe and rosy.

## **Like a Siamese Twin**

I see her wrapped  
around me like a snake.  
I see us together like Siamese twins.  
Where do I end and where does she begin?

“I’m a part of you - I saved you from the binger.  
Without me, you wouldn’t have control,  
you wouldn’t have discipline.”

“You tried to kill me.”

“I just want you to be thin.”

“Is thinness all you care about?”

I see her as haggard and wraithlike.

It’s said you can separate from an eating disorder  
like you can separate from a Siamese twin,  
but the procedure is dangerous,  
with the risks of infection,  
bleeding and death.

## **The House of Calculation**

I see how she has kept me in the House of Calculation  
with my feet on the scales and a measuring tape around my waist.  
I know the amount of calories in every piece of fruit in the fruit bowl,  
every type and cut of meat, every kind of vegetable, in a slice  
of bread from Hovis, Warburtons, Morrisons and Tesco.

I know the differences in nutritional content  
between 10g of porridge oats and oat bran,  
between varieties of oak crackers -  
rough, thin, organic, seeded.

My mind is constantly calculating,  
checking that the calories I have burned  
are equal to or greater than what I have eaten.

“Or else that fat will be back - better get moving!”

I see how she has kept me locked in a house  
that is getting smaller and smaller.

“You can’t go out until you’re thinner - it isn’t safe!  
Think of what they will say about your fat face and belly!”

I see she is my worst bully and critic and walk through the door.

## **Ticking Off the Time Thief**

How dare you take so much of my time?  
You're like a grandfather clock.  
You're worse than my dad.  
You're worse than my worst boss.

You're not only bossy but very boring.  
Is food and exercise all you can talk about?  
Have you never heard of trees and plants and creatures?  
Have you never heard of elves and gnomes and fairies and Gods?  
Do you not know there is a world outside your house?  
Do you not know that there is another world  
far bigger and deeper inside that one?

All you ever do is go round and round  
in circles like the hand on a rusty old clock.

I'm fed up with you - you're like a broken calculator.

You're old and worn-out and I'm no longer  
going to take the time to wind you up.

## **A Better Personal Trainer**

*For Marie*

She's a better PT than anorexia.  
She tells me how many calories I can eat. (What???)  
She tells me why it's a bad idea to do 45 minutes  
on the cross trainer before a workout,  
then train for two hours straight.  
She explains why all those lazy bastards  
pause between reps rather than doing sit-ups.  
(Surely, anorexia says, they should be burning calories!!!).  
She helps me to slow down (when only faster  
and fasting are in anorexia's vocabulary).  
She helps me to focus on form.  
She helps me to stay in my body  
rather than floating off into outer space.  
She helps me to rewire the neural pathways  
that lead from my brain to my muscles, make muscles fire.  
She helps me to feel the burn in a healthier way -  
one that builds not diminishes muscle.  
Slowly, building, not losing, becomes the aim.

## **Eat the Food, Lift the Weights**

Eat the food, lift the weights. Repeat.

I tell myself I will be strong not scrawny.

Eat the food, lift the weights. Repeat.

I find a greater satisfaction in  
increasing the weight on the stack  
than decreasing my weight on the scales.

Eat the food, lift the weights. Repeat.

I try to ignore the voice that tells me  
that I'm getting big and beefy.

Eat the food, lift the weights. Repeat.

I will be strong in body and mind.  
and leave this eating disorder behind.

Eat the food, lift the weights. Repeat.

It isn't easy with anorexia screaming  
about my big body and my huge red face.

Eat the food, lift the weights. Repeat.

Not just the end but each day is recovery.

Eat the food, lift the weights. Repeat.

Each day I am fully here in the gym,  
me, not the voice, is a victory.

## **The Buddha's Belly**

When the Buddha  
puts his hand on his belly  
he does not pinch it and test for fat.

He does not check he can feel his hip bones.

Quietly, he observes its rise and fall  
with his in-breath and out-breath,  
soft as cake or candy floss.

The Buddha is happy.  
The Buddha is laughing.

I pray one day I will laugh too.

I sit with my hand on my belly and breathe  
with the Buddha and we breathe  
together with all the Gods.

Breath by breath, day by day,  
time passes and I grow a little stronger.

## **Breath Retention**

Vindos<sup>6</sup>:

Take a pause.

It's ok to stare  
into the void again.

I am here with you.

I have been with you  
since the beginning of time.

I will hold you when there is  
no-one there to hold you.

I will comfort you when there is  
no-one else to ease your pain.

I will listen when I hear you scream.

Perhaps I will scream with you.

I will teach you how to hold  
your breath a little longer,  
knowing you will  
breathe again.

The sun will rise.  
The birds will sing.  
We will walk together  
into a new dawn.

---

<sup>6</sup> Vindos, later known as Gwyn ap Nudd, 'White son of Mist', is my patron God and spirit husband.

## **When I was a Boy**

When I was a boy  
I was happy.

I dug for grubs.  
I chased after beetles.  
I played a boy and his horse.

I preferred He-Man to She-Ra.  
I had all four Ninja Turtles.  
All the Thundercats.

I didn't want a baby.  
I didn't want to push a pram.  
I didn't want to play happy families.  
I didn't want tits or make-up.

I wanted to be like Peter Pan.  
I never wanted to grow up.  
I wanted to stay with  
the Lost Boys  
in Never Never Land.

But Tick-Tock the Crocodile  
came and my body-clock started up.

It stopped and started, stopped again.

Still, the boy remains within,  
with a Peter Pan smile,  
Tinkerbelle at his  
shoulder.

## **The Wisdom of a Hazelnut**

Once upon a time  
I dared not look at a hazelnut,  
let alone pick one up, put it in my mouth and... CHEW!

But the days are gone when I feared the calories and fat.

Now I appreciate the wisdom of the endosperm.

I remember how our ancestors hoarded them.  
How the fat saw them through dark days.  
How they told stories about nuts  
falling from the trees  
into the streams  
to feed the salmon  
who fed the wisest of lads<sup>7</sup>.

Together with him I chew a nut.

As we chew together the memories  
of the bullies return but they're just little boys  
with hands empty of hazelnuts, lost and purposeless.

Perhaps they're looking for a pig who broke from her sty  
and found her freedom in a woodland valley she now calls home.

---

<sup>7</sup> The Wise Lad is a personal name for Vindos / Gwyn during his childhood. It relates to His Irish cognate, Fionn, eating the Salmon of Wisdom.

## **Acknowledgements**

I'd firstly like to thank my personal trainer, Marie Meagher, without whose help with creating healthier diet and exercise habits, I would likely have still been under-eating and over-exercising and would never have reached these insights about my eating disorder.

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