

Adam Dickinson

By All Means, Sure, Certainly, Absolutely
Arsenic (blood): 11 nmol/L

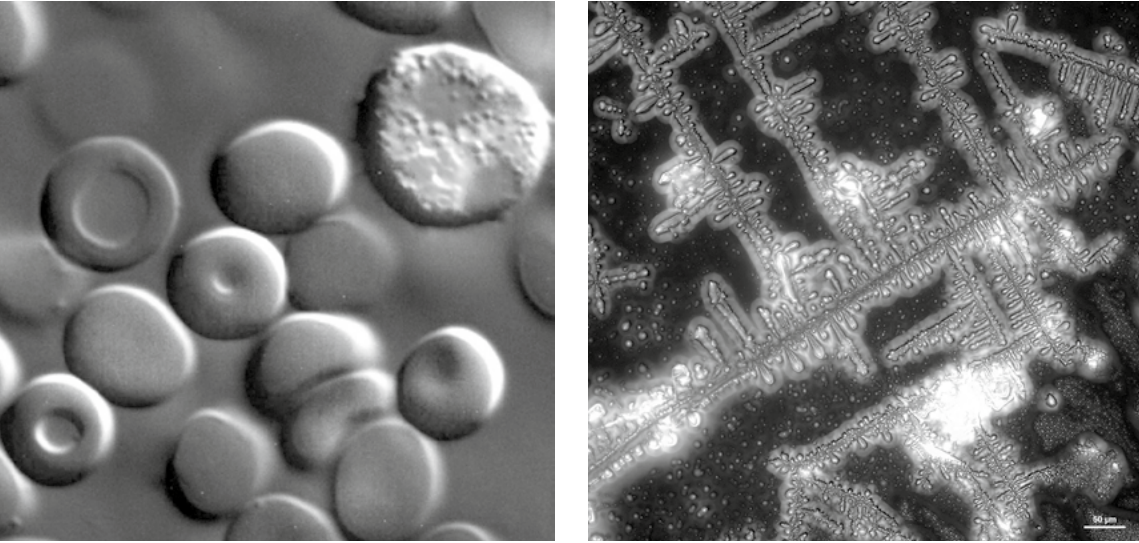
The actor who played the gravedigger was my friend’s father. After his parents split, we’d cut class to deal stud in his mother’s basement. My first time voting was in the Charlottetown referendum, a constitutional bed skirt hung out to dry like poorly laundered regionalism. When my friend’s father showed up at the polling station without ID, I vouched for him, though I wondered why he’d driven there without a licence. During the summer, I piled wood at the mill, filled orders, and hid behind the hemlock lifts by the river smoking menthols. He would show up occasionally in a small dented pickup looking for plywood and strapping. The community theatre was building one last set before the festival went underwater. Deficit hawks were dive-bombing the new vanishing points of civil expediency and I started to believe that the pits of Ontario peaches had arsenic in them. As it turns out, 100 g of peach seed contains 88 mg of cyanide. The arsenic was in the pressure-treated lumber I cut and stacked every day. The sawdust smelled of a fresh deck of cards. It hung in the air near the radial arm saw like a biography unable to hold narrative coherence, like a dream protecting sleep by making everything familiar.

Hormone

When I put food
in my mouth,
I am taking dictation.
I am reading
as I lick the glue
on the envelope
that holds the letter
I have written
about how you taste
to me. Small
nipples carpet
tongues and soft
palates, the cheek
and upper esophagus.
Receptors line
creases in the lungs
sensitive to the tripwire
taste of infection.
An enzyme
appears on sour-
sensing cells
for the exclusive
purpose
of deciphering
bubbles in a glass
of beer.
In Mexico,
as an act
of humble devotion,
a sect of Capuchin
nuns wore a groove
into the floor
by licking the length
of a courtyard
with their tongues.
There is a region
of the cortex
dedicated to the flavour
of water warmed
by the sun.

You Might Not Think That You Do This, But You Do
Propionibacterium

A young Bill Clinton waited in line until the very last minute before lifting his hand. Forced to take a step forward, President Kennedy faced him squarely through the crowd of American Legion boys. Alexey Leonov used his strong grip to bleed air from a distended spacesuit. Having crash-landed soon after in Siberian snow, he hid from wolves in the broken capsule for two nights, emerging to greet his rescuers with hands warmed in his crotch. Jean Chrétien practiced the Shawinigan Handshake on the throats of hecklers. The night of the second Québec referendum, I was pushed against him on Parliament Hill. His gloved hand made my eyes water with its vinegar stink. When Kim Jong-il shook your hand, you knew you were loved. He practiced strenuously, injecting members of his staff with painkillers. All available photographic evidence suggests Margaret Thatcher offered Nelson Mandela a boiled sparrow shortly after his release from prison. When it’s cold, I wipe blood on other people. A jackknife folded into my thumb years ago camping. I was carving a whistle. Cleaning myself in the lake, leeches arrived as lips jawlessly pursing in the digital weeds. Winters, the wound opens its fly, dry skin splitting along the scar seam, blood spotting my grip like electoral ink. The unfinished whistle appears with its primitive signal, the unconscious urge among people who shake hands to bring those shaken hands to their noses and mouths to smell them.



Microscope images of my sweat and blood were produced with the assistance of Lucas Maddalena and Jeff Stuart in Jeff Stuart’s laboratory at Brock University.

Anatomic (Coach House Books, 2018) incorporates the results of chemical and microbial testing on my body. I looked into my blood, urine, and feces, and saw the Anthropocene staring back in the form of persistent organic pollutants and microbial species reflective of a modern, industrialized diet and lifestyle. I wrote about and with what I found. “By All Means...” responds to the presence of arsenic in my blood. “You Might Not Think...” responds to a genus of bacteria I found on my hands that commonly lives in and around sweat glands. “Hormone” is one part of a long poem in sections (called “Hormone”) that runs throughout the book and forms the current in which the chemical and microbial poems are suspended.