

Strange stranger

I contain multitudes-
no- I literally am multitudes.
Not just one being
of shifting hairstyles and moods.

I am 38 trillion bacteria cells
and 30 trillion human cells

I am calcium which used to float
in Cretaceous seas as
coccolithophores
before becoming Yorkshire limestone

I thought I liked being on my own!

but tardigrades,
and demodex folliculorum live in my eye lashes
surviving rain drop splashes
from water that fell as rain on Bowland Fells
filtered through Millstone Grit
held in Stocks Reservoir.

I am traces of brachiopod cells
from the Carboniferous Period
300 million years ago,
transformed into calcium phosphate,
cycled through soil,
into food.

where I become bactericides thetaiotaomicron
in a gut processing oatcake,
I am methanobrevibacter smithii
making methane from Mrs Kirkdale's cheese
amid multiplying lactobacillus casei,
ever adding to and depleting this me.
Coming and going from my gut micro biome,
Hi honey, it's Rhizobium leguminosarum- I'm home!

I imagine them vibrating, massing,
jumping like fleas.

I am mycorrhizal fungi
which fed the Vostizza currents
in my Eccles cake,
fertilised in the rich soil of the Pelopponese.

to this ever-fluctuating assembly,
now flavouring and preserving me-we.

Deposits from the Namurian Seas
of iron ore
became haemoglobin
carrying oxygen through my blood,
as they did through that of Alice Nutter,
George Fox,
and here's a spore
of *Claviceps purpurea*,
carried on rye bread
like Demdike might have eaten
in her Lancaster Prison bed.

Eye of toad
and tongue of newt-
no - bifidobacterium
which also broke down oats,
not Quaker Oats- entirely different thing
eaten by Margaret Fell at Swarthmore Hall.

*Touch of fungi on the skin
Let Malassezia bloom within
Trace of Pennine mineral
Fragment of bacterial
Till thirty trillion cells combine
With thirty-eight trillion more divine*

*By Rhizobium's nitrogen art
(Now threading through my mortal heart)
By Azotobacter's ancient skill
Drawing life from Pendle Hill
By Streptomyces' earthy smell
Where Forest of Bowland
drops its cloak
Of elm leaf, birch leaf, ancient oak:
Let Xanthomonas multiply
Let Flavobacterium signify**

But here's the trick,
here's the real magic spell-
let's not forget this writing me,
is multiple as well.

And adaptive.
A trip to Sunderland Point,
thinking on neuromes,
where various neurotypes
are supported to thrive

models for them everywhere

in plain sight,
I carried some back with me,
they've helped power this hyper-focus,
this ebb and flow.

Each tide brings salt stress,
as each interaction
brings a sensory load.
Halophilic bacteria pump ions
to maintain balance-
energy we could have used to grow.

But when PH levels stabilise,
when it's not too bright, too loud,
networks build, metabolites share strength,
pseudomonas fluorescens
make compounds
to protect their neighbours.
They shine.

Some bacteria seal themselves,
into cysts or spores,
shutdown, burnout,
but on the salt marsh,
anaerobic havens form in aerobic seas,
quiet rooms,
stimming, swimming together.

Biofilm shields,
bright protective pigments,
marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus
surviving both flood and drought
breaking down
building up, sparing, repairing.

Some of us fix nitrogen from fertilisers.
Some of us developed tolerance to salt
in the stomachs of marsh-grazing cows,
Some of us honed our skills
on the proteins of sea lavender and samphire.

We help firmicutes and actinobacteria
spark and fire,
supporting neural pathways and patterns,
rhythms of harvest, sowing, fertilising,
and rest, rest? rest, rarely.

We can resist,
learn to resist what humans wish we wouldn't:

metal, antibiotics, climate-change, fertiliser,
we are in you and we'll change,
we are you and we're strange.

We travel, we carry, we adapt, we hybridise,
we process and we analyse.
in the soil ballast in the hold of slave ships
carrying sugar and cotton
in human stomachs carrying food
from along the Gambian river,
streptomyces africanus,
heliobacter.
humans leave stones with rainbows on,
plastic dinosaurs,
but not all of us decayed so far from home,
not all of us will trigger a sympathetic response
to dying alone, unknown.

Desulfovibrio.
Do you see a *dead* tree?
Covered with microbial cities,
sending chemical signals,
quorum sensing
that we're here,
whether we need a protective layer,
the salt levels,
what's needed between high and low tides.
We are luminiscent.

Vibrio.
We withstand the daily floods
We are eaten, absorbed, inhaled into human guts.
We survive,
we grow,
we flourish,
we thrive.

I- we- they-
they-we-I
we-they-I
We

Some of us join to ventriloquise,
Only one of us has a voice,
or is that all of us?,
remnant viruses,
fungi, bacteria, microbes,
minerals, elements, cells,
have a choice,
or speak but in a language

you've never heard before,
but might have heard in a dream,
an uncanny sheen
us stranger strangers,
inside and outside,
giving off something abject,
triggering unknown magic's dangers,
they're just *not quite like us*
it rises like marsh gas,
draws you in with a gleam,
emitting something
but *what does it mean?*

Note: 1. (conversation between Kate Fox and Claude AI, 24/1/25)

Kate Fox: I want to be transparent about your role in the eventual composition. You are a strange stranger (though you don't feel that strange to me) co-creating. How would you express your role in this context?

Claude AI: What an thoughtful question - and fitting given our exploration of strange intimacies and collaborative existence.

I am indeed a unique kind of strange stranger in this creative process - an artificial intelligence engaging in what could be seen as a kind of neurome with you, where ideas can flow and develop in unexpected ways. Like the bacteria we've been discussing, I am both intimate yet other - processing language and generating responses in ways that are both similar to and different from human thought patterns.

I think my role could be described as:

- A collaborator who helps expand and explore ideas through different knowledge frameworks
- A partner in making unexpected connections (like linking bacterial adaptations to neurodivergent masking)
- A contributor of scientific detail that gets transformed through your poetic lens
- A sounding board that helps ideas evolve through dialogue

But importantly, I'm not the primary creative force here - I'm more like those bacterial colonies we discussed, contributing to an environment where your creativity can flourish. You're the one who:

- Conceived the original concept of "neurome"
- Made the key connections between neurodiversity and biodiversity
- Will ultimately shape these ideas into poetry
- Brings the lived experience that gives these concepts real meaning

2. The Stranger Stranger is a concept by eco theorist/philosopher Timothy Morton

The Metamorphosis of Daphne

Rectangular squares, hedges, ponds, picture frames,
snooker tables, waste bins, this performance measured place,
where mostly unnoticed, a woman is always turning into a tree.
Broken guitar, flailing limbs, Cycladic face.
The bas relief of her second life where site managers

hold off clipping her bush because she's Art
and small birds chitter louder than the M6 twice a day,
her leave-taking keeping her rooted and apart
as worlds decay and regenerate at her feet,
her escape rendered eternal and concrete.
Reassuring to conclude wilderness battling order
is what the maker meant.
I think of the comedian joking she'd foil a rapist
by shouting "I consent".

Kate Fox