

# About My Guts

*Jesse Julian*

Split open, spilled over, and spelled out in more than six hundred poems, songs, and essays—I have a gut feeling that there is something wrong with my stomach.

I'm lactose intolerant.

I fainted once due to hunger.

The only time I called out sick from work was because of constipation.

I was on the jumbotron at a baseball game, sweating and smiling through the screen. The unknowing Phillies fans witnessed a severe IBS case unfold as I had been rushing back and forth to the bathroom every inning.

But my conflict pushes beyond just medical.

My stomach resists its job as a digestive organ, boldly asserting itself into a different role. My brain thinks thoughts, as any brain should, but my stomach drags these ideas, fears, and desires downward to my core. Here lies the true issue that bothers me daily: every feeling resides in my gut. I struggle to digest a single thing, as it all continuously comes up through grueling word vomit. I'd almost believe my stubborn stomach was conscious, adamantly fighting comfort or satisfaction by churning my spoiled thoughts and rotten emotions.

While writing this out, my stomach and mind wrestle with restlessness. Each thought braids itself into another tangle of tension. I can't hold it together, anything at all. My insides grumble with anticipation as you trace each word, hungrily awaiting your reaction like a drooling dog begging for praise. I nervously crave to see your face as you read this. To watch your brows furrow in confusion and your face contort with cringe. Or maybe, to see you giggle at my word choice, or grin at my figurative language. I wish I could know what you think without knowing what

you think. Do you love it? Or are you bored yet? Whatever your opinion is would probably upset me, and consequently my tummy. And then I'll remind myself, again and again, that there is something wrong with my stomach.

I've hopelessly dreamt of the day I decide to resolve it. I've considered every detail. Here's how my imagination decided it would go: I text my mom. I march to the ER with urgency and hesitancy. I'm laid out on an operating table, with the sterile white lights blinding me. The doctors in blue gowns and blue gloves and blue masks pitifully mutter as they approach the girl who just can't seem to hold it down. "Happy Halloween," one surgeon remarks, a joke I don't find as funny—they're ready to carve me out and ignite my belly, like a jack-o'-lantern.

But instead, they hand me a paper and pen, and I dissect myself. I push them off of me, imploring them to look away. I do most of the work for them. The words spill out, visceral and bloody, appalling and appealing. In conflicted horror and pleasure, I watch myself extract all which lives inside me with painful force.

Yes, this strange scene I envision feels horrifyingly nightmarish. But this captures what my writing career feels like: bulimic. A purging process, unethically pleasurable and equally miserable. I am constantly full of feelings and opinions, reaching the point where I've fried my hunger receptors. My stomach, unable to handle it all, pushes it out on paper with immense disgust—you'd almost mistake it for joyous passion. I write for the sake of the spill, releasing what I cannot stomach in a deeply disordered manner.

Opening myself up and trusting my gut is the challenge I succumb to, facing the process with vulnerable uncertainty. I am never sure of what comes out, but I force myself to watch it take shape. The abhorrent or depressing moments fuel my songwriting and poetry—but this writing rarely sees the light of day, because the perception of others burns straight through my flesh. My thoughts and dreams are

held neatly by the palm of my writing, which hands it out into a world destined to destroy them.

All which comes out of me reveals another new part of me. As if my intestines unraveled onto a bare, linoleum floor and spelled out my exact thoughts. And as it's all strung out, I fear that it'll get stepped on, exploding into pink mist through the marching army of a careless audience. It'll mush together into thick incoherency, or twist into unapproachable knots. It'll gather a gallery of eye rolls, exasperated sighs, and tiresome criticism. I cannot seem to bear the thought of my words leaving me, and I cannot seem to bear the thought of them staying in me—a gut-wrenching paradox.

It feels criminal to admit that this is something I do for pleasure. Could you imagine me smiling while I write this? *Because I am*—even after going on an extensive rant, associating my art with puking, and dissection, and disgust, and emptiness. Ironically, the relief after release fulfills me. After what feels like months of morning sickness, I awaken to find that the nausea disappeared. It is like the car has stopped after a long road trip; after endless speed bumps, cracks in need of cement, and twists and turns, my motion sickness rests. Writing is a rollercoaster.

The metaphor finally makes sense, and it feels like I can breathe again. The knot untangles in my stomach. When I identify what torments me through a single stanza, I am at ease. I know that if no one heard me, at least the paper did. When my conclusion reflects exactly what I mean, I step back in admiration. Once this piece—its own wild ride of intrapersonal reflection—finds its stopping point, I will know that I am immortalized. I live for the butterflies; the tumultuous tummy-ache from flapping wings that ache for freedom through words.

To be carved into and hollowed out is an act I do performatively, because I am awfully good at operating on my own self. A surgeon would envy the work I do

here. Although I may feel nervous and reserved, I allow my stomach to be bold. My writing stems from an intuitive sixth sense; my words know what they are before they land. What I purge onto paper packs a stronger punch than my immaterial speech ever will; black ink succeeds against thin sounds that vanish into air. What I produce stays present.

The purification of my core feels like a necessity rather than a choice. I envy those who pick up a pencil each morning with a peaceful, little smirk, journaling because they like it. I resonate and sympathize with those who feel a punch to the gut when urged to write, even by their own will. When I write, it is with drastic desire. If I do not get the feeling down, it will certainly explode in my stomach. I do not write to whisper—I write to scream. I write to release guttural expressions of feelings I can never express through speaking. I take on new roles and play with new forms in an effort to command my ravenous needs. I am an editor; a poet; a satirist; a tutor. Every piece I produce is another shard of a mirror, reflecting who I am. It is an X-ray; a biopsy; a transplant; a donation. What I write is who I am, and I cannot be me without it.

And perhaps my stomach isn't so wrong, because I'll admit—I feel a little better now.