

More poems

Manic depression

Spike Milligan

The pain is too much
A thousand grim winters
 grow in my head
In my ears
 the sound of the
 coming dead.
All Seasons
All Sane
All Living
All Pain.
No opiate to lock still
 my senses
Only left,
 the body locked tenses

Names

Wendy Cope

She was Eliza for a few weeks
When she was a baby –
Eliza Lily. Soon it changed to Lil.

Later she was Miss Steward in the baker's shop
And then "my love", "my darling", Mother.

Widowed at thirty, she went back to work
As Mrs Hand. Her daughter grew up,
Married and gave birth

Now she was Nanna. "Everybody
Calls me Nanna," she would say to visitors.
And so they did – friends, tradesman, the doctor.

In the geriatric ward
They used the patients' Christian names.
"Lil," we said, "or Nanna,"
But it wasn't in her file
And for those last bewildered weeks
She was Eliza once again.

Happiness

Meg Bateman

with thanks to Neil

Often have I seen them come together,
two old friends, two crofters,
who after a brief murmured greeting
will stand wordlessly together,
side by side, not facing each other,
and look out on the land whose
ways and memories unite them,
breathe in the air, and the scent of
tobacco and damp and lamb scour,
in the certain knowledge that talk
would hamper that expansive communion,
break in on their golden awareness
of all there is between them.

Silence

Venkata Manjeti

At first, there was absolute silence.

And at least, there was absolute silence.

In between, it's a(n)

Emotional silence, that'd kill with bare hands

Attentive silence, absorbed in the environment

Thoughtful silence, wallowing and preparing

Embezzled silence, bored in self indulgence

Quiet silence, uncomfortable and unwanted

Subdued silence, waiting in the wings

Meditative silence, which can move heaven and earth

Dogmatic silence, enough said about it

Comforting silence, no words could describe it

In this communicative silence,

Someone,

Say something

Or, not.

Dregs

Gillie Bolton

Mug of brown tea, big for cradling
hands and cheek. His tea always
bubbled swirling round and around.

Pull my dressing gown close
against the night which can't get in,
cuddled by the stove.

Listen. The creak of the stair. He's coming
with toothpaste and tobacco breath
to comfort, red dressing gown trailing.

The bubbles have gone
from tepid dregs

no need for a gypsy to read them.

Shiver in his cold crimson dressing gown
too big and too prickly, there's
only the smell of the dark of silence.

Pathology of Colours

Dannie Abse

I know the colour rose, and it is lovely,
but not when it ripens in a tumour;
and healing greens, leaves and grass, so springlike,
in limbs that fester are not springlike.

I have seen red-blue tinged with hirsute mauve
in the plum-skin face of a suicide.

I have seen white, china white almost, stare
from behind the smashed windscreen of a car.

And the criminal, multi-coloured flash
of an H-bomb is no more beautiful
than an autopsy when the belly's opened -
to show cathedral windows never opened.

So in the simple blessing of a rainbow,
in the bevelled edge of a sunlit mirror,
I have seen, visible, Death's artifact
like a soldier's ribbon on a tunic tacked.

The Stethoscope

Dannie Abse

Through it,
over young women's tense abdomens,
I have heard the sound of creation
and, in a dead man's chest, the silence
before creation began.

Should I
pray therefore? Hold this instrument in awe
and aloft a procession of banners?
Hang this thing in the interior
of a cold, mushroom-dark church?

Should I
kneel before it, chant an apophthegm
from a small text? Mimic priest or rabbi,
the swaying noises of religious men?
Never! Yet I could praise it.

I should
by doing so celebrate my own ears,
by praising them praise speech at midnight
when men become philosophers;
laughter of the sane and insane;

night cries
of injured creatures, wide-eyed or blind;
moonlight sonatas on a needle;
lovers with doves in their throats; the wind
travelling from where it began.

So many different lengths of time

Brian Patten

How long does a man live after all?
A thousand days or only one?
One week or a few centuries?
How long does a man spend living or dying
and what do we mean when we say gone forever?
Adrift in such preoccupations, we seek clarification.
We can go to the philosophers
but they will weary of our questions.
We can go to the priests and rabbis
but they might be busy with administrations.
So, how long does a man live after all?
And how much does he live while he lives?
We fret and ask so many questions -
then when it comes to us
the answer is so simple after all.
A man lives for as long as we carry him inside us,
for as long as we carry the harvest of his dreams,
for as long as we ourselves live,
holding memories in common, a man lives.
His lover will carry his man's scent, his touch:
his children will carry the weight of his love.
One friend will carry his arguments,
another will hum his favourite tunes,
another will still share his terrors.
And the days will pass with baffled faces,
then the weeks, then the months,
then there will be a day when no question is asked,
and the knots of grief will loosen in the stomach
and the puffed faces will calm.
And on that day he will not have ceased
but will have ceased to be separated by death.
How long does a man live after all?
A man lives so many different lengths of time.

Should the Occasion Arise

Hans Magnus Enzensberger

Choose among the errors
given to you

but choose right.

Might it not be wrong

to do the right thing

at the wrong moment

or right

to do the wrong

at the right moment?

One false step

never to be made good.

The right error

should you miss it

may never come again.

Warning**Jenny Joseph**

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat that doesn't go and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer gloves
And satin sandals and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit
You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only eat bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beer mats and things in boxes.
But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street
And set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers

But maybe I ought to practice a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and surprised
When suddenly I am old and start to wear purple.