



Poems for... Self at Sea

Poems in witness of mental health disturbance

A “Poems for....the wall” collection

“Poems for...the wall” is a project run by the charity Hyphen-21

Director Rogan Wolf

Thanks are due to the Central London NHS Clinical Commissioning Group and United Response, the former of which supplied funding for this collection of thirty poems and the second helped to select and launch it. Most of the poems that can be found here derive from and reflect the forty odd years Rogan Wolf spent in community mental health social work, mostly in London.

<https://poemsforthewall.org>

<https://hyphen-21.org>



from Bell-Ringing

...The attainment of perfect rest
is when chaos is held on a point ;
and poised, just so,
the moment cups you.

Here in the waiting room I am cupped.
I am held aloft.
My poise is perfect here.
I am almost flying.

Rogan Wolf



Blood Trapped in my Veins

And me,
Trapped behind bars

One of us has to escape
The boiling rage
Rage with myself,
And him,
Abusing me
Year after year
Cutting myself gives relief

At least I have a choice
Of how deep I let it go
At least my boiling blood
Has freedom to go and flow

'Ruby', HMP EWP.

This poem was written from prison. It has been reprinted here by permission of the author.

from **The Centre for Mental Health**



...They begin to congregate past midday
like ragged butterflies
around the buddlia.
A park bench out front
offers some dignity
but most prefer the door-step
and way before time
start leaning on the door-bell,
having nothing to be
here for but here.

From the hostels the bed-sits the bare flats
from lives lived in shadow
and on the edge of everything
it is here they congregate
to establish meaning.
Here is their centre.
They say this :

“ I am someone here
I am heard
I am not alone.”

“ Here I have substance
I matter
I mean something.”

“ I feel more at home
here in this place
than I ever feel at home.”

“ I have a share in the world.”

“ I am not odd
I am even here.”

“ I am not assailed.”

Rogan Wolf

When this poem was written, the community centre it described was being “put out to tender.” Twenty years later its future is again in question.

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Cliff

Cliff visits once a week
just for the Art Group.
He's touching base
between far-flung voyages
at a place of calm waters.

His eyes hold so much light
they frighten us - as if drops
of the Aegean have been translated there
lit by their own wild skies.

And his paintings hold a frightening power.
Some have been exhibited. His figures
are Saints calm-faced
their bodies knotted

like martyrs in agony,
their sexual convolutions
a nightmare of unfulfillment, a climactic
frenzy of the celibate crayon.

He is the despair of his poor mother.
Night after night she twists
between the sheets
at each new thought and turmoil of him.

Her love is nails.
He slouches into the Art Room
like a frightened bear
escaping into the hills.

Rogan Wolf



Crashes

Do you know what it feels like
When everything you look at makes a sign

When you are doubly in time
So that you are lost
Like two cars going at different speeds
One going forward
One in reverse ?

Jesse Ferguson 1974 - 1997

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Fate

The will to life is remorselessly exploding
all eternity
There is no death
We must acquiesce
There is now and then the yes
yes we want it so
we can't chose the absolute nothing.

Ivan Blatný (1919-1990)

In 1948, soon after he left his native Czechoslovakia, Ivan Blatný was declared dead by the Communist authorities and forgotten as a poet. He lived the last forty years of his life in the UK, the majority as a psychiatric in-patient. It is only since his real death in 1991 that his work is being read and his stature recognised. He composed the poem above wholly in English. His use of "chose" was deliberate. From "Modern Poetry in Translation", number 17, edited by Daniel Weissbort and Stephen Watts, publ. by King's College London 2001. Reprinted by permission.

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from I Am

The Asylum, Northampton

I am; yet what I am none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost;
I am the self-consumer of my woes:
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
Like shades in love and death's oblivion lost;
And yet I am, and live with shadows tost
Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life nor joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems ...

John Clare (1793-1864)

John Clare was the son of a farm labourer, He spent much of the last part of his life in psychiatric hospital.

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Going Custardy

Let me say how
everything goes
custardy when I get low,
thickens and clogs
and dogs my way.
A trip to the shops
becomes hike to the Pole
and whole world
becomes steep hill
and beckoning edge.
Just to rise from my bed
I must lift weights
from my chest and force
grey draperies
from my eyes
my stone face.

Rogan Wolf

This poem was written following a conversation with someone with a bipolar diagnosis, who had just entered the dark side of the bipolar cycle. Not "I begin to feel depressed" but "Everything around me goes custardy."

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Haiku

I'm a Samurai
so conversation has to
be clear. No bad say.

APJ

The Haiku is a traditional Japanese verse form, consisting of 17 syllables. The English haiku reproduced here was written in a poetry workshop for psychiatric in-patients.

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Hotel Gordon

An Irishman with holes in his boots,
fresh from the soup kitchen and Victoria station,
a South African, sleeping in night buses,

visitors, not even speaking the language
of the country, let alone the sense of sanity,
women with histories of sad adoptions,

a man from Eton, addicted to drink and crack,
a black man, knifed, and abused as a child,
yet gentle as the father he became at sixteen,

an Italian who lost her mother aged four:
all these I mean, people lost in the in between
of life, as some make good and others fall back.

Sarah Wardle (b. 1969)

from "A Knowable World" publ. by Bloodaxe Books 2009. "Hotel Gordon" refers to an NHS psychiatric unit in South London, called the Gordon Hospital. Sarah Wardle has been a patient there. Reprinted by permission.

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In Solitary

To lift up my voice in song
in this world?
Sick with the pain of compliance,
cross-legged, head bowed,
unheard.
In hell I would sing on my own.
Beautifully,
and terribly, technically right,
cacophony with other songs,
all solo.
There would be harmony, concord
in heaven,
the music surrounding us all,
sending shivers of joy
down my spine.
Can I sing here? I don't know.
Barred windows,
fragmented and far from the light.
Slowly, softly, sadly,
alone?

Janey Antoniou (1957-2010)

Poems for...the wall is a Hyphen project. "Hyphen-21" is a company registered in Cardiff no.2925831. Registered Charity no.1040077.



Meeting the Humming bird

I found myself the other night
descending a bottomless pit
without foothold in the world
and endless my falling.
Then a humming bird
placed itself in the air
opposite my face
and I said, Lord,
Help me, I'm going nowhere
at savage speed
and cannot stop
and the tiny bird said
learn my lightness
so you may pause and see
that falling is just clumsy.
No need.
Just ride these waves I made.
Ride me.

Rogan Wolf

Morgan



When I hear the church clock strike
I know at that moment
Morgan, somewhere in torment,
has just begun to inhale.

For this is Morgan's parish.
St Mary's sounds the quarters
around Morgan's soul.

Time hangs heavy on him.
It forces flesh on him.
Beneath the haggard white line
of that anchorite cheek-bone
four old clocks
on blackened lengths of string
ride him everywhere he travels.
Should one get stolen, or just plain stop,
he reasons, three ought to do
to fly him like a wounded Jumbo
home for a crash landing.

Home is all *oeuvre*, a live sculpture
formed from within.
For years the parish has supplied him
with his materials
and as the supply
has continued unchecked,
so Morgan's room to breathe
has slowly diminished. Meticulous
and fragile collections of litter
now fill each room like library shelves.

Only his narrow bed
remains clear for him.
In the dense darkness
radios hang like bats from the ceiling
each tuned to a different world station
each turned full on.
All night and from all quarters
the world engages him.
Babel-Lord
Morgan gathers round his bed
whatever is waste
whatever discord.

The sweetness in his smile
is incomprehensible.
But that melodious voice,
those fastidious
semantic games we engage in,
do sometimes seem to carry pleasure.
The bruised eyes sparkle,
harbouring gaiety.
We make much of him.
We sit with him,
tolerating the smell,
the innumerable tatters,
the festooning plastic bags,
those brutal clocks.
Perhaps after all it is permissible
to clear pain away
from an instant or two of each day
here in Morgan's parish.

Rogan Wolf

Morgan attended a community centre for people with long term mental health problems. His name has been changed.

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“Much Madness is Divinest Sense”

Much Madness is divinest Sense –
To a discerning Eye –
Much Sense – the starkest Madness –
‘Tis the Majority
In this, as all, prevail –
Assent – and you are sane –
Demur – you’re straightaway dangerous –
And handled with a Chain –

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886)

from “The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson” edited by T.H Johnson. Copyright held by the President and Fellows of Harvard College 1951, 1955, 1979, 1983. Reprinted by permission of Harvard University Press and the Trustees of Amherst College.

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Nineteen Lines

Nineteen times you shouted, Lunch time !
Nineteen people queueing to eat
Nineteen peas on my plate
Nineteen minutes before I go back.

Nineteen times you shouted, Medication !
Nineteen people queuing to medicate
Nineteen tablets passed over the counter
Nineteen minutes before I go back.

Nineteen times you shouted, Smoking !
Nineteen people run to the door
Nineteen cigarettes lighted up
Nineteen minutes before they go back.

Nineteen times I wished I was there
Nineteen times I wished I wasn't
Nineteen times it's been a second
Nineteen times it's been an hour

Nineteen times I thought I could cope
Nineteen times I realised I couldn't

Because I'm only nineteen.

anon

Written in a poetry workshop for psychiatric in-patients in Brent, London. Reproduced here by permission.

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Off my Tree

I'm off my tree
Save me
Save my tree
Save my old buildings
save my
police station
save me
save my
old library.
Books
are trees.
I in my tree
I'm off my tree
I'm out of my tree
I'm in my tree
I'm nuts
in a squirrel tree
I scream.

R.

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On the Edge

The edge entices,
draws me...

Below, waves crash
over the rocks.
Their majesty summons me.

In the presence of Old Harry
my craven self struggles
with a braver soul who would risk

this precarious high-wire path
to reach the very pinnacle ...
the seagulls shriek their challenge ...

I pause to savour
the exquisite trepidation
knowing I am in control.

Stepping back from danger
I retrace my steps to firmer ground
still wondering

how it would have felt
to take to the skies and fly ...

Hilary Porter

"Old Harry" is a rock formation off the coast of Dorset. This poem has been reproduced by permission of the author.

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On the Ward

Trapped like a bird in the snare
lost in a sea of sorrow
I have dreams of what I can do
but see no end to this night.
The outside world is worlds away
but who am I to question
a system that has existed so long ?
I am one man, almost a child,
too small to pit myself
against these forces, these encampments.
Where is my God that he can rescue me ?
I lift up my eyes
to a heaven now empty.
Where is my God
and why is he so silent ?

Andrew

*The author of this poem was a patient of the Park Royal mental health in-patient unit, Brent, London.
He wrote it during a creative writing group held there. It has been reproduced by permission.*

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Paranoia

Hello Diary,
Is it my imagination
or am I being watched
by social security spies
out to strip me of my welfare benefits?
Desperately seeking to cut
benefit fraud
and save the tax-payer's money
with the justification that
the saved public funds
can employ more nurses
and build more hospitals.
More nurses to tell me
that I am suffering from paranoia
and I'm insane to believe
that the government
would be spying on me.

Liam T Kirk

from "The Spirit of Keith Moon," an unpublished novel. Reproduced here by permission of the author.

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Poem for the Psychiatrist

I've come to your door,
I have schizophrenia?
I want to be cured.
Please make it all right –
now... now.
You are the great consultant, miracle-worker,
pharmacist's friend, demi-God, doctor.
But in truth a human with knowledge
of affect and cause and effect.
You can go home and forget,
but I live with this
mist, mire, madness, mockery of life.
I've danced on the rails in the path of a train,
I've wandered the streets at night in the rain,
I've jumped in the Thames when I've been insane.
I get confused.
But remember when reality returns
the direction of my actions.
The nightmare continues into the light of day
as I desperately try to reverse
arrest or robbery.
Get me right.
I don't want to be in the grey existence
between waking and sleeping
with only the thought of others fed into me –
a medicated mannequin.
I want to be well
and I want to be alive.
Can we do this
you and me?
Or is this forever?

Janey Antoniou (1957-2010)

Janey Antoniou lived with Schizophrenia. She passed me this poem before her death. It is reproduced here with the permission of her widower.

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Refusing to Walk

When it was all pain
My feet stayed cool

When I was possessed
My feet refused to walk

I touched you with my toe
It was the truest touch

Corin Levick

from "My Mouse has gone on holiday" published by Portugal Prints, Westminster. Reproduced here by permission of the author.

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Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia
is like looking at the sun.
It is beautiful
but it makes you blind.

Simon Partridge

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Schizophrenia day

Light Day

Light of the day
same for your chances
as long as you may
for we need you to stay.

Can I live

Poem Day

Poems are for sharing,
freeing, mending,
thought-free chances.
Please stay.

Can I live

Black Day

For complex thought
always give us
the right to come back
and say, never try to deflect him
for he is one (black) ness

Can I live

Life Day

Life is an art
that cannot be erased.

Can I live

Schizophrenia Day

It is the wanting
of stability with the universe life
when you see
a rainbow.

Can I live

A P J

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Something Happens...

Something happens
something wrong happens
though you may not know
it's wrong at the time.
The wrong that has happened
comes again
and never leaves.
It comes again and again.

*Karsan
July 2012*

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Speak to Me

I'm going to stop.
I'm going to start again.
I'm going to make strategic little piles
of things like cigarettes and sugar-cubes,
and bantams' eggs, and cubes of cattle-cake,
and range them, along your route,

until you notice them;
and then I'm going to balance
slightly larger things,
like fish, or fruit, or tulips, on my head,
whispering as I walk: *Speak to me*,
whispering *Speak to me please*.

Selima Hill b 1945

from *Beyond Bedlam*, Anvil Press, 1997, ed. Sweeney and Smith. Also *Gloria: New & Selected Poems*, Bloodaxe Books, 2007.
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The Carers' June Berry

Caring is the ground of human being

Trees begin
with only ground.
Shyly they cling to it,
desperate for its riches
and continuity.

May the ground
of our June Berry
be rich
and continuous -

so that in years ahead,
past our knowledge,
today's quiet planting in a small park
of this vast, north-western city
will make a song of praise
each time the wind blows.

May the song
be rich
and the tree vivid
in the June sunshine.
May the weary ground
find voice
in the light-hearted song
of this tree.

*Rogan Wolf
June 13th 2003*

This poem was commissioned by Carers Network Westminster for a tree-planting in Queen's Park, London NW6, to celebrate the work of carers of people with mental health problems. Karen Buck MP did the spadework. The "June Berry" is a kind of tree.

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The Meal

Something of grace about the meal
something electric forging the dull elements
into a new and hushed
and human vibrancy -
a making.

The food is fresh-made, just here,
each choice of menu a matter of urgency
personal risk and heated debate
resolved in meetings weeks in advance.

The tables are round
of plain deal
but five years on
still surprisingly smart.

They like the tables.
They remember earlier times :
“We used to eat on trays
all around the two rooms
and we had to queue quietly
in a long line.
No-one questioned it.
Who were *we* to complain ?”

The two cooks get a tenner
and a free meal.
There is a stringent job description
so the money's hard earned.

They sit apart
once the meal is served
eating with their morning's worker.
The morning's sweat
drying on three foreheads
seals their fellowship.

And they come, the people,
from all their far edges
from all their fastnesses
to sit here at the plain deal
eight per table
forming the circle.

They come with their famishment
no food can satisfy
with their lostness
no finding here can heal.

The limitation of the event
with its essentialness ;
the simplicity of the being together
in these plain circles
with the distance each has travelled
to get here ;
simply the eating
makes a new sense here
a true valuing.

No-one would dare
say grace here
but grace is present
in all the racket of the business
of eating, the clatter, the voices'
rise and fall ;
in every movement
of fork to lips, of eye to eye ;
in every word that is spoken ;
in every moment the circles
remain unbroken.

From what forsaken places
are we gathered here, today.

Rogan Wolf

The meal described here once took place in a community centre for people with long term mental health problems.

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The In-patient Meal

A hungry man
a tired soul
a new world.
A plan
unfolds
to eat to live
to have this meal
I know is mine
and do not steal.
What can I eat
and how much
at a time ?
When can I speak,
what worlds
may I claim ?
I know today
that I am not free
but I shall eat this food
with dignity.

Andrew

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WE Don

WE Don mentally ill
Nah ! We Simply suffer'ed Stress
An stress means Rest
And not arrest'ED !

WE not Anti-social
We Chords them keep us Focus
We Roots an Tings
We Music an Hymns...

We no Hopeless
Though we Loves to Dress
Putting on D ! Ritz's
Pop, Waltzing, Rock an Tings

Ma'son Natty Jeow

from "My Mouse has gone on holiday" published by Portugal Prints, Westminster. Reproduced here by permission of the author.

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