

# Stroke

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Many poets have been inspired by the suddenness of strokes, the damage they inflict, and the long road to recovery afterwards.

The Nobel Prizewinner Seamus Heaney wrote his 2010 poetry collection *'The Human Chain'* after he had a stroke. The collection won the prestigious Forward Prize. Its central poem, 'Miracle', was directly inspired by his illness. It recalls how he had to be lifted up and down the stairs to his bedroom, and Heaney eulogised the biblical characters who carried a paralysed man to Jesus to be healed.

'Their shoulders numb, the ache and stoop deeplocked  
In their backs, the stretcher handles  
Slippery with sweat. And no let up.'

## Stroke

All it takes is nineteen muscles.  
First comes a pencil and four lumbricals,

getting her hand in the right position.  
She knows it so well, it's like a reflex action.

She remembers a desk, carving her name on it.  
Trying to hide it. A slap when the teacher found out.

There was an inkwell she used to fill each Monday.  
A pen for getting into Med School. Seven interossei

and now various flexors, extensors, rotators.  
A pile of books on a table, elaborate pictures.

She remembers spilling coffee once, the shock  
of his cool hand on the back of her neck,

the way he slid it inside her bra. Flexor carpi radialis.  
The muscle bends and turns the hand at the wrist.

Their graduation, the way their gowns flapped  
in the wind. Blossom. Then confetti, nappies,

first steps, first shoes, working in the early hours,  
clamping and stitching, knotting, cutting. Extensors –

indicis, digitorum and pollicis. Chart notes  
for a team of unseen transcriptionists.

Writing articles. All it takes. Nineteen muscles.  
A well sharpened pencil and four lumbricals.

If she could just find the word for the area.  
Broca's. The picture is so clear.

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(from *Unpredictable Geometry* – Templar Poetry, 2008)

## SAYINGS QUESTIONS LOVE

*Three strikes and you're out*  
*Three strokes and you're dead*

We four beside your hospital bed  
your three offspring at the foot  
me by your side  
*"she relies on you" one says*

when my mother died  
you became my surrogate  
faithful all my years on earth.

you have not spoken for days  
you turn your head to the left  
focus on me  
willing me to do something  
I remember you once said  
*"I cannot talk to anyone*  
*like I can talk to you."*

I know, locked inside your flooded brain,  
some memories remain – but which?  
funny what comes to mind:  
a childhood poem  
you tested me for school

your pale blue eyes are  
willing me to do something

*"Abou Ben Adhem" I say*  
looking directly into your eyes  
waiting  
the corners of your mind connect  
you find your voice  
*"may your tribe increase" you say*  
*"awoke one night" I say*  
*"from a deep dream of peace" you say*  
the acute stroke ward gasped

next day feeding you Honeydew  
one I had made earlier at home  
consultant on his rounds questioned  
*"What is she eating?"*  
*"Pureed melon" I said, "she likes it"*  
then when we were alone again  
the doctor with the manic hair  
appeared from nowhere by my side  
*"I believe you had your aunt reciting poetry yesterday.*  
*How did you do that?"*

*"We have a history" I said*  
*"and I love her."*



Owl Feathers  
(MRI Scan)

Your head, shaven beyond the velvet.

What now?

Fingers tracing the ivy of your veins  
in a single span.  
Feeling the heat of a million movie  
memories through your blueing skin.

What will the scanner reveal?

Will *he* methodically flick through  
your barky black sugar-paper pages.  
And crease the corners of their ears?

Or

Will *she* softly tease apart your leaves?  
(Where you stumbled) and silently  
place an owl's feather as a bookmark.

And what then?

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## STROKING THE BRAIN

A stroke in the brain starts with an absence  
Like a lightning strike, a withdrawal of work.  
Something is blocked – an artery, bulging,  
Or the blood is escaping somewhere unseen,

Starving some brain cells, whose sugar rush stops.  
Each neurone is flagging, depolarising,  
Its busy pumping is faltering now.  
Potassium is building, instead of leaving,  
The cell becomes sick with it, saltier far  
Than the sea that surrounds it – water floods in,  
In a dangerous swell, a change in the tide.

Until it bursts open, digests itself dying,  
Triggering others to fall in their turn,  
In radiating rings like dominos falling,  
Like silver birches when the meteorite hit Russia,  
In forests so dense, it took decades to find.

So, like oars stroking, the ripples are spreading,  
A tiny tsunami leaving pale, soggy cell skins.  
The arteries shut down, til the onslaught is over,  
Then pour in hot blood, saving some, failing more.

How to smile, lift a fork, or a foot, how to breathe,  
Gone for now, gone forever, high and dry on the shore.

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## Stroke

*So gentle a word -  
the action of my hand  
caressing the cat, or  
a clock chiming the hour.*

*But for you, it has  
taken away all words.  
And just as once  
you would, laughing,  
pretend to understand  
my childish chirps,  
I now smile over  
your straining sound.*

*I trust to doctor's hands  
to fix and repair,  
as you once plastered  
together my broken dolls.*

*My hands can only  
writhe and wait,  
watching the clock,  
dreading the final stroke.*

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