

'Disarticulation' and 'What we call depression'Nicola Healey 

'Disarticulation' explores both the limits of language in communicating distress and how anorexia nervosa is often, paradoxically, a survival mechanism – a (futile) striving for a personal integrity, in the senses of both wholeness and honesty, which is under threat. The poem also contrasts the complexity of the disorder with how wellness is commonly judged on appearance.

'What we call depression' delineates many of the often overlooked facets of depression – what William Styron called 'a true wimp of a word' for such a destructive condition. The poem illustrates how, for many sufferers, depression is experienced as a wholesale elimination of self and being-in-the-world, rather than a state of lowness.

Diagnostic labels can be reductive, limiting and even misleading, masking the wider and deeper human picture. For the patient, this can lead to feelings of invalidation, alienation and even dehumanisation, compounding suffering. A more nuanced, less predetermined, awareness of what afflicts an individual can help them to feel heard and understood. By giving voice to the subjective experience of a condition, these poems aim to remind us of the personhood which lies beyond a label.

Disarticulation

The articulation of bones is a last-ditch language.
Words clamber up to boundless gulfs, and then fall.
And the jangling incoherence of being still cries
to be signified.

That sharp wrist, narrow as a razor-clam shell, is,
for instance, adulthood;

that collar bone's ledge, absent friends;

that corrugated side, the swamp of mediocrity;

that staccato spine, the unlistening;

that shadowy face, the void's indifference.

You'll have seen wandering souls
bearing these hieroglyphs of sorrow.

But who can read a submerged litany?
You look well, we say, though she may be further away
than ever. Her testament, just and absolute,
has been made mute,

bribed to conform to the mechanics of living.
Call it anorexia if it's easier. I'd call it telling the truth.

What we call depression

When the moon stops being a daily wonder
and is just a colourless shape up there

When music lands in your ear like dust
and does not stir or soar

When a clock face takes on a menace, hands get stuck;
an army of minutes line up

When diaphanous smells don't shine, so the true
air of a rose cannot reach you

When salivary glands dry up as tear ducts do,
food becomes a question, and chokes

When words spin and lose their marrow,
so books are desiccated bone

When limbs and mind feel tar-lined

When all inanimate things lose their charming identities

When everything holds a memory of what it could be,
and you must accept this, indefinitely

When loved ones are alien bodies, ergo
you have no loved ones

When even animals loosen their ties
that bind you to the earth

When – with each sense cling-filmed –
you can neither become nor escape yourself

When you are full of thought but empty as a vacuum,
spiritless and porous as limestone

When you feel like a piece of space in human form,
yet there's a heartbeat, and breath, and skin

When you have no autopilot – every act must stagger
under the interrogative glare of consciousness

When Self is a hard drive wiped nightly
that must be recreated daily, but you can't create

When people tire of your non-entity, and lack sympathy
and still expect

When a bolt of fear is lodged in your throat
and stuns your veins

When sleep abandons you to an arid plain,
pock-marked and soundless

When, on waking, you know that all of this
will unfold with the day again

And everything you conjured yesterday to stay alive,
you must conjure again, and again, until it ends

'Disarticulation' and 'What we call depression' were previously published in *The Hippocrates Prize 2019: The Winning and Commended Poems*, selected by Kate Adie, Jennifer Clement, Jane Dacre and Elizabeth Smither, eds MW Hulse and DRJ Singer. The Hippocrates Press, 2019.

© The Author, 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Royal College of Psychiatrists.

The British Journal of Psychiatry (2021)
219, 570–571. doi: 10.1192/bjp.2021.26