To Sir William Gull

Nicola Healey

"In a work of psychiatry, only the patients’ remarks interest me”
(E. M. Cioran, The Trouble with Being Born, 1973)

We’re often monitored. ‘Watch and wait’.
This is like playing Titanic on repeat
and expecting the berg to move.

They need proof of impact, so they wait,
even though death’s slide, like a sheet
of black ice, is often not seen.

It’s deranged – measuring the mind
by our vital signs. Some scrawl S O S,
in bone or ash, but only numbers carry.

We were left to drown. And this jagged label,
hung like a necklace of teeth,
snags in my brain.

Take ‘without appetite’, from the Greek,
string with ‘nervous’ (Latin), seal
with the sure shellac of authority

and you ossify a distraction.
Return to origins: hunger strikes
in the threatened spirit.

Tell me the Greek for ‘loss of agency’,
the Latin for ‘a starved soul’.
A term should touch the truth.

Consumption was recast as TB,
not left in the nineteenth century
to gather bone-webs of myth.

If more men had been dissolved by
this force, would doctors care
more about precision?

The name fits like a corset.
Miss A, Miss B and the unnamed case
would have coined it from the inside,

though I know this captor gags.
And even when aired,
the patient’s word is rarely heard.

Note: The term anorexia nervosa, a misnomer, was coined by Sir William Gull in 1873. Miss A, Miss B and the unnamed case were his first recorded case studies.

This poem was commended in the Troubadour International Poetry Prize 2022.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Royal College of Psychiatrists

https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.2022.200 Published online by Cambridge University Press