

Miracle on St David's Day

They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude

The Daffodils, William Wordsworth

An afternoon yellow and open-mouthed
with daffodils. The sun treads the path
among cedars and enormous oaks.
It might be a country house, guests strolling,
the rumps of gardeners between nursery shrubs.

I am reading poetry to the insane.
An old woman, interrupting, offers
as many buckets of coals as I need.
A beautiful chestnut-haired boy listens
entirely absorbed. A schizophrenic

on a good day, they tell me later.
In a cage of first March sun a woman
sits not listening, not seeing, not feeling.
In her neat clothes the woman is absent.
A big mild man is tenderly led

to his chair. He has never spoken.
His labourer's hands on his knees, he rocks
gently to the rhythms of the poems.
I read to their presences, absences,
to the big, dumb labouring man as he rocks.

He is suddenly standing, silently,
huge and mild, but I feel afraid. Like slow
movement of spring water or the first bird
of the year in the breaking darkness,
the labourer's voice recites *The Daffodils*'.

The nurses are frozen, alert; the patients
seem to listen. He is hoarse but word-perfect.
Outside the daffodils are still as wax,
a thousand, ten thousand, their syllables
unspoken, their creams and yellows still.

Forty years ago, in a Valleys school,
the class recited poetry by rote.
Since the dumbness of misery fell
he has remembered there was a music
of speech and that once he had something to say.

When he's done, before the applause, we observe
the flowers' silence. A thrush sings
and the daffodils are aflame.

Gillian Clarke

This poem by Gillian Clarke demonstrates how there are ways other than professional encounters to communicate with patients, even or especially the 'insane'. I heard the poem by chance. It was indeed St David's Day and the poem was part of a radio broadcast to mark the event. I too was frozen, like the nurses, as I heard the description of the labourer dumbed by misery suddenly connecting with 'a music of speech' in the poetry of his childhood. We do not know whether this was a temporary or permanent reprieve, but we do know that an emotional connection was made through the power of poetry. I also wondered about why the man had been silenced for so long and, because it was Wales, I thought it might have been because of the dual deaths of his livelihood as a miner, and of his community.

Pam Smith

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