

Your Diabetes: a life's sentence



Sue Butler



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Yavanika Press

# **Your Diabetes: a life's sentence**

Cover photo: Phil Openshaw

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*If you have done, do, or ever have to live with Your Diabetes, these poems are for you. I wish you fortitude and a robust, sugar-free sense of humour.*

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## **I am not the food police**

You must decide  
how much you care. Some choices  
are bullets. I duck  
but mostly not fast or low enough.

I am glad this happened  
to you, not me. Yes,  
we are never more than  
a few metres from truth,

rats and sugar  
that will not sweeten what I am  
saying. I want sugar  
gone, not kissed in your car

or using our back door, your jacket  
hiding her face. I am afraid  
of her and the crumbs  
she leaves, flaky pastry, here, in our bed.

## On offer

For forty-nine pence I could buy  
enough to kill you then bake  
scones for your wake. Piled bag on bag,

one is split. I lick my finger, dab and taste living  
alone again, wiser  
for this detour; no more ensuring my smiles

reach my eyes; no more lies –  
well-meant but still lies - never again  
saying what a wife should, when,

forgive me, I do not and will never  
wish I had diabetes  
instead of you. (I wish it on my brother,

plus rabies  
with complications, but that is another poem  
I need a grant to buy time to write.)

The sweet-thrill of taste  
turbo-charging thought spins me  
past eggs then flour. I am bewitched, invincible,

so now I whirl deliberately, arms held out,  
having so much fun I can't stop  
being happy. And when someone shows you me

on their phone, you will see Time bent,  
his bum crack as he licks up spilled sugar,  
the shop manager shouting and spinning become flight.

## Sugar cube

She offers it on her flattened palm  
as if to a horse. She says  
she can afford to and has more  
now than ever before, wants  
to do good, share wealth  
she can't take with her; and she wants to  
spite her daughter. (The spite is unspoken,  
a look.) When I lean on  
this lever my strength increases.

It is a con and maybe it is not. She gets  
by giving; small change to wrong-foot  
her over-confident offspring and not miss  
this coalescence of karmas  
she does not believe in. She plaits the money  
into a bridle and rides me  
though the cheering forest, past me  
crouching at bends in the darkest places  
so I can shoot if she tries to turn back.

## The borough of Langerhans

Dumped, fly tipped. Sacks full of it are piled, cat-torn, rat-torn, like rubbish in Callaghan's Winter. It is blocking drains, hindering transport and communication, disrupting power.

Some Beta cells are burning old wardrobes in oil drums. Bed-sheet banners urge: *Honk your support*. Others are working without breaks, doing overtime, struggling to use, distribute, and store the dumped sugar as more keeps arriving.

Diabetes calls for unity. Now tools are downed; go-slows become walk-outs, all out. Shelves under counters are empty. No insulin falls off the backs of lorries.

## Refining

You are plucking  
yourself in the kitchen, threatening  
to leave  
your high-flyer's job, lay cracked, brass eggs  
or dented tin; eggs I will cut my hands on  
trying to open.

You have no idea  
who you are now you have diabetes and I suspect  
you never did. This is not  
my fault but saying would be  
savage – although the price of *foie gras*  
tempts me to.

I shrug. I have lived before  
on black bread and tea, stalked warmth's runt  
into churches and stupid liaisons, stolen  
a blind future's cane. I cut and crush  
again. You drink. You hiss. You are punctured  
by juice crystallising in your gizzard.

## Foray

I want to know how scared  
you are. Your voice  
could be a double agent, so I  
touch you, unable to  
say why that seems more  
reliable.



## Mysteries

You are watching Sunday afternoon  
TV: a Formula-One Grand Prix,  
sober. Only clichés will suffice. My heart  
is a bell's peel of thanksgiving. Your wife (i.e. me)  
could get used to this. I shake  
Diabetes's hand. Trembling

in awe and light-headed  
with the addictive, glorious-nausea of relief I kneel  
offering allegiance,  
my nose almost touching his  
ulcerated feet. I thank him for scaring you  
sober. And when I get up

the serial killer leans  
forehead to forehead, in tears I expect  
to taste salty but are sweet. Yes, I lick  
the thug's radiant face.  
The leader spins off the track. I can only show,  
not explain or solve.

## White

I yodel, let a tap drip,  
turn off the heating, boil cabbage, peel durian,  
dim lights and unzip my... *You're too skinny*,  
he says and is not tempted  
to leave in return for the rucksack packed  
with all the cash I can raise . He squats

amongst needles, sucks your moods and shits  
in your heart. I warned you Diabetes was  
in the café, throwing up in the pub, eating pie  
at 2.00 am in our kitchen. You rolled your eyes,  
that is my beef, served bleu. Yes,  
this vegan is tartare

angry. I watched you pant, pass out. I dragged you  
into the car, argued with myself  
about the way, turned left too soon through smoke  
coughed from my Rhur  
of resentment. *Help, help, help*, became, *Hatehatehate*  
without gaps. Minutes flared; tenses

charred. Toast is burning.  
I open the window and wave  
a tea towel. It is not, but it might as well be.

## No

booze for six days  
in intensive care. You think I am your mother  
who died when you were thirteen.  
You clutch my finger and I am glad  
for the first time ever, I never  
had the baby  
I begged and tried to bribe  
the universe for; I am glad God  
heard my madness and having answered  
did not waiver,

because I have had time, sitting  
here, to learn I was always  
too brittle for a child  
to trust, too in thrall  
of steep... sacred... desolate... and men  
before you who loved  
only big sky and kept their genes  
close to their chest, fearing I  
might trick or mug them  
in their beds. (One August,

in Cádiz, I considered the weight and shine  
of a knife.)

## Preservation

Today, with no breeze,  
this mountain sways and I believe  
one push, soft  
as the hiss of a flying-owl's wing,  
or the penultimate note of lark song, will move  
this mountain onto a slope, where  
the pavement cracks are just cracks  
that can be stepped over.

I can't untie  
Diabetes's knot or pull it out  
like Excalibur, but today I believe  
one push and this mountain will stop  
being so bloody  
incensed at a plight we can't neuter but can  
tame, crawl out of bed and be glad –  
enchanted even. And if the weight is too much,

forgive me for folding  
so much of myself into this poem.  
I will tuck under your scree  
before I start walking. The peninsula I am  
grateful to use and will inherit  
one day is not signposted. Here, I will hang myself  
on a rack, to be mistaken  
for cod or a worn-out sow.

## Shackled

at sea, one leg of three, stately  
homes full of Renoirs  
and Titians. Highs, sold at pocket-money prices.  
A political football, health  
in goal, taste taking penalties, obesity  
sumo wrestling the NHS, Diabetes  
laughing at more tax. That smell is shareholders'  
hunger. Here, through the sugar glass, I am

the Hatter at tea  
for all time, Wichita's line, chess  
you must play with food, trip-hazards labelled  
so you can't sue, a bureaucrat annexing  
blood and peripheral vision. See these ulcers  
on your shin – I tied plastic bags  
over nerves' heads. Spilled, you never throw me

in anyone's face, but I am a clue  
the Devil lives, as Mrs. Subrahmanyam's mango pickle  
stands on a soapbox for God.

## **Artefacts**

We have cut our cloth accordingly  
but stretched, the pieces  
still do not reach.

There is no hem to let out, no  
give in the weft. Words

are a pin, a stitch, useful things  
we have read about  
but can't remember  
how to use; stone tools  
in a museum, origin unknown.

## Millionaires

I stick gaffer tape over my mouth.

I don't want to say

what can't be unsaid. You rip it off  
and for an hour your world is my scream

made of tachyons, a wrecking ball swung  
between our defences – walls and watchtowers,

silos and Potemkin villages built piecemeal  
with whatever came to hand. I dissolve

and I am

reconstituted, 100,000,000<sup>9</sup> could-have-been's

until my scream sees the carnage  
and starts to cry (mostly for herself). Let us make a pact:

if one of us speaks, one of us listens  
and we will spend the information

wisely. When we get used to the coinage,  
we will be rich with nothing to steal.

## **There was no time to pack**

The A&E doctor says your nerves are coral  
dying in acidic sea; cathedral  
gargoyles robbed  
of ferocity by sugar, not centuries.  
This poem is my finger  
in your sores, squelching through anger to shinbone.

Your eyes are copper  
vats of molten sugar. Now they are  
cooling. If you blink  
they will shatter. Together, we must learn  
a new language: *Blood, blood, needle, needle*. You are  
holding my hand

too tightly. I eavesdrop on you listening  
then promise you nothing  
will snap. Your doubt  
is nail-varnish remover and I lean away from  
this synaesthesia, still wearing  
fear

beneath a smile too baggy  
for my face. I have nothing else  
to change into.



## **I savour you sober**

sweet as June, when, to borrow an idea  
from Gertrude Jekyll, summer seems  
invincible and I will never be  
shivering again. I credit the howl,

slipped from a collar I  
was sure was tight, slamming  
my skull against oak alter rail  
then the candle I lit – like a cigarette

after sex - in the estate church  
at Blickling Hall. (God volunteers  
in other places too.) I howled  
for change but never suggested Diabetes.

And if I hear you approach  
your beer-sodden past, wanting  
to try again, I will not be  
surprised. I will lean

on these weeks tied  
taut, like your grandfather slept  
with other men, leaning  
on a rope.

## Messages

God looks up  
from reading Camus. Diabetes was expecting an older man  
in bifocals, without soil under his nails, perhaps  
a paisley cravat. (But has no doubt this is God.) *She shook  
this hand.* Diabetes holds it out  
then seems embarrassed. God smiles, surreptitiously  
pressing a button under his desk. Harps are  
plucked, Diabetes's expectations met

until Sibelius brings bread,  
chips, and ketchup that ease Diabetes's shock  
to be thanked for scaring my husband  
so badly that while Diabetes eats  
a butty, my husband is shaking, demanding  
I darn holes he punched  
in his skin and harpoon narwhales, made of sugar, queuing  
to breathe and buy him

absinthe. He is flooding our kitchen, pouring away  
Laphroaig and vodka, cramming promises into  
empty bottles, filling, over  
spilling.

## Stained glass

My father's disease shakes  
up the Richter scale, rattles  
his mind and he stays inside,  
not wanting his body  
seen so loose, haphazard. In the same week

your panaceas breaks  
beyond repair, your father's lhasa apso weighs  
half what I do and I look like  
my grandmother the morning  
before she died. She wanted to eat

tinned peaches and kept asking for  
her wedding shoes. I sat on the floor, crayoning  
a map of veins in her legs, unaware  
it would lead to my own. Her left eye  
did not fool me. I

was already familiar with smooth surfaces  
not being what I thought and my nails  
squealing as I slid.

## I write myself back to before Diabetes

Said, *Veni, vidi, vici*, but time  
comes to collect me, like my father  
at the school gate.

I follow a schizophrenic coast  
north in search of us  
laughing: husband and wife, red and yellow, primary

sounds and sky. Now for fifty metres  
either the cliff is invisible  
or I must walk on air. The waves

have no alibi. Memories  
fund an unstable bridge. The bridge demands  
a toll. The toll

elopes with her brother, my bridge  
in his pocket. I steal  
and saw planks (myself) in half

but I am not a magician, I am all  
the king's horses  
and men, in one basket, Lemuel Benedict,

laid on a beach. These fat tortoises are hours,  
their Galapagos is A&E. My frustration  
bounces off their shells, cracking me.

Love leaks out, attracting  
wasps and Diabetes  
pulls off wings he pins in pairs with stings.

## Locked in

I rest  
my forehead against the bars  
of insulin you must now inject. Timing  
is everything. In a town this small  
it is exhausting hiding  
not knowing  
how I feel. People tell me.  
They are sure. Usually  
I just nod. The closest I can get

is an Atacama riverbed, dry  
for 120,000 years and all around  
great spaces breathing, wishing  
me no harm.

I breathe in time and forget  
it is you I miss and am forgetting.

## **I take off my shoes before I go in**

Everything is where I left it. Here  
I can choose the colour of walls; shift  
dimensions; fill the cellar with  
bullion or Emmental or porcelain I want  
to fire then change my mind  
and smash. I can fall unobserved

and make no noise wedging chairs  
against doors I lock and nail  
as Diabetes pulls slates off the roof  
and I am pleased I stockpiled teargas  
in the attic, even half-believe I can hide  
behind curtains and my feet not be seen.

This poem is an English-woman's  
castle, my father's hand, the jeweller's  
in Ipswich, where if aliens came  
to abduct me, I am sure Mr. Cohen's wife  
would serve me tea with apple cake  
while he resolved this little local difficulty. I crouch

behind de Beauvoir and Camus. This sentence is  
a flare I am  
trying to write... light... so someone courageous  
sees I need help.





**Sue Butler** is a copywriter specializing in health, especially diets and how to maintain a healthy weight, which is essential for the prevention and management of diabetes. She is Poetry Editor for *Writer's Forum* magazine and is available to teach creative-writing courses, workshops, and conference or festival seminars internationally. She currently lives on the East coast of England but recently spent time writing in Korea and India (and is keen to return). Sue's pancreas is fully functioning.

Sue Butler's *Your Diabetes: a life's sentence* is both stunning and disturbing at the same time. The poems in this chapbook are unusual in the way they use diabetes as the central metaphor for dysfunctional relationships, a mind-body imbalance, as well as an inability to utilize energy.



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