

Your Diabetes: a life's sentence



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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, 100,000,000⁹ 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 specialising 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.

India is one of 6 countries of the IDF SEA region. 425 million people have diabetes in the world and 82 million people in the SEA Region; by 2045 this will rise to 151 million. There were over 72.946.400 cases of diabetes in India in 2017.



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