

# Stroked Poet: Thirteen is a ~~Lucky~~ Number

13 Poems Written in the First Four Months Starting Thirteen Days After a Stroke

By Barbara Huntington

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*These were written directly after the stroke. My poetry doesn't have as many holes in it now, but my brain still does. I hear the last poem as a song, somewhat like Oom pah pay in the Sound of Music, or an old song called beans in our nose (50s or 60s?)*

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## STROKE OF

luck or loss?

shift that

changes everything      alters

nothing

names

dates

disappear

dusty words dive

resurface

lumbering whales, yet precise

fragile as fairy shrimp

numbness that

feels      touches

doesn't

I float

uncertain

question each sensation

transient twitch?

or

precursor to

nothingness?

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## THINGS ARE DIFFERENT NOW

The bird that danced  
in my head, tweeted and  
said, "tomorrow, tomorrow", coughs  
and hacks up a seed,  
neck feathers gone, eyes wild

You're gonna die, you're gonna die  
crowing in desperation

No time

No time

Warning, warning,  
He bobs around, reaches  
out his neck, over dramatic  
I measured time left to 100  
Now  
hearing dies, eyesight

Will I drive to Colorado again?  
Wasting time, all the sand  
in my hourglass  
dissolves into air

Write tonight  
You are not guaranteed tomorrow

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**NO HERE, NO WHEN, NO TOUCH GROUNDS ME,**

no limbs, no heart, no sound but then

solid! there!

glaring white page seen not by my eyes,

mind's eye?

Yet Consciousness knows in unknown way, if  
it, if I let go,  
then forever nothing

and the page

glares white,

painful to look upon, though my no-eyes see sentences  
at top, at bottom courier? dated? tiny, unreadable.

Glaring white page between beginning and end  
makes unknowable demands: words and words and  
words

Did I forget them all? Does earth's duty require I fill that void?

And

what is it that wants to be between,  
imprinted on terrifying white?

will words ever again fit together the same way—in logical sequence as  
they once flowed on and on?

How do I know if I now live in memory or if  
memory still shapes my now?

what happens if I unclasp? what holds? If clasp breaks, if I just  
let  
go?

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### (A MONTH AFTER THE STROKE)

This

the year I  
will not plant daffodil bulbs  
I  
greedily glance at blossoms in catalogs allow  
one more longing  
then hard throw  
into trash

This

the year when  
I glance at  
old photos:  
children as children  
grandchildren  
parents grandparents

What do photos do?  
mark time  
time gone

time passing  
dead images on a wall

children scroll past images on their phones  
run past images in the hall

Will anyone want photos?

Above the fireplace, kachinas, carvings, statues, memories  
dining room depository--old pottery, old art, old dishes  
library shelves  
more shelves  
books read books cherished books unread  
bulky books  
not sleek electrons  
seen released

No children want these now, and I—

as mind's fist closes on another  
thing  
No things

Let go

Sit by the Buddha  
cup-of-coffee-warmed hands  
sit

Birds prattle  
not bound, like you, by place  
sit

serene Buddha

sit

warm dog curled

sit

nothing assured

except night nothing the darkness of

what is

## THERE ARE TIMES

the tattered, overworked, metaphoric veil  
is thinner

this morning

awake before alarm, scroll phone to *Vox Populi*, read a favorite writer/poet,  
Paul Christensen.

Echoes read the words “Rock Island” and mind goes to grandfather, his notorious brother gangster, John Patrick Looney, the godfather in Rock Island.

Echoes grandfather Tim's escape to New Mexico

New Mexico mother, grandmother, family

stories of rattlesnakes.

Paul's piece Of course, they do. When I first read  
Paul Christensen, I thought of another Paul,

Paul Weeks, my father. Mind bled them together. But  
Paul Christensen, somewhere back east

cannot be my father because we are most likely close in age

He writes of snow. My father wrote of  
snow in North Dakota, his childhood before  
New Mexico

But then mind slides, as it often does during meditation,  
turns over time-space continuum and the haziness of when  
before, after, during finite brain's attempt to make sense of being

Mind slips again questions finite,  
Infinite time slides, coils, turns  
cool, smooth, dry Sagacious reptile  
sage

I can't hold on to this moment find  
brief scribbles—reminder that thoughts were  
thought, sense shields briefly penetrated. As I try to capture them  
on keyboard,  
shields reestablish

but they were briefly there and with each breach, a sense

of I can more easily go there again.

madness? death? so matter, call it what it is

Stroke, and in it,

my brief death provided, not a dark tunnel, but an indeterminate  
page to be filled

white, empty and like the tiny print at the beginning, more, unable to be read,  
print at the end makes its demand:

in hours, days, years, this  
page must be filled

and maybe it is all delusion, and the universe laughs and glides  
through a dry wash  
scent of sage  
morning's warm sand.

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### (TO MARK)

#### **Struck again, Not Remembering My Friend's Published Poem**

(No memories were formed in the making of this poem)

Memories:

riding on my father's shoulders as we march across  
an avocado green rug, between rattan chairs.

He booms, "Booth led boldly with the big bass drum,"      I giggle,  
Repeat

Seventy years ago. I remember.....yet

Some-

time before today, my friend said I read  
his poem in *Ploughshares*, and commented

"Wow!"

But                      now

It's a new poem and

“Wow”

reverberates as if the first time,

not

a

word

remembered

and I

wonder how many times I will read it again for the first time, admire  
the art of my poet friend

then, wax lyrical when once more I learn

That Naomi

admired it, too?

To-

day the speech pathologist suggests I make  
a picture book of friends

to nudge neurons, make new memories of names

Besides photos, perhaps I'll add

their poems, their art

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## AND I WONDER WHAT LIFE

will be after me but I  
don't have to wonder, I simply  
won't be and things  
I have collected for years  
will be gotten rid of  
after the tears

And I won't keep thinking  
about what I've missed  
what joys didn't happen  
what folks unkissed

No blanks in the page, more  
like holes in the sand  
filling back in  
as though they never have been

A photo, a book, perhaps a  
few poems

so soon forgot,

so much

for leaving

my mark

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### **ERASURE (BUT NOT AN ERASURE POEM)**

My eyes don't see and then they do  
but it is only my wounded brain  
teasing, filling in the blanks  
Except there. Look!  
On the computer, of course,  
that is my new portrait, brain scan  
technological wonder  
picture inside my skull  
Do you see where the dark photo

is distorted by light,  
like the rubber end of a pencil  
smudged through an old photograph?  
Perhaps that is my grandchild's name  
and over there, yours

How will I find you? Search on-line address books?  
Facebook? Old emails?

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### **“HOW ARE YOUR FRIENDS FILED?”**

Neuronic roads to information formerly in  
plain sight, blocked with rubble of an explosion  
on what I thought was just another day

I see faces in mind's eye. No labels for  
easy identification  
Search: friend, relative, neighbor, professor  
politician, old student, child

Mind pleads, please?  
A name, please?  
Can you just return the names?

And some emerge, but even they sink again  
ancient ruins into unforgiving sand

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### **IT JUST TAKES THAT ONE THING...**

the fall  
the heart attack  
the stroke  
and thoughts of  
ends  
change

Always there before, but  
defused by      later  
always there before, mind touched death, war  
disease  
guns

but there was an otherness  
even when “I can’t stand anymore, I could do this  
before,”  
seeped in

But somewhere, in the refusal of age  
the heart stops  
the brain fails  
you fall  
catch yourself, or are caught  
this time

wander in the fog of  
but next time?  
closer?  
as in

harbinger?  
is it now?  
what if?

Pleas for what was  
not answered

Only your own words  
echo  
Is it now?

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## FOUND IN TRANSLATION

**(Poem translated into other languages and back through an app—like my brain)**

*Original*

No names, hidden words

Erasures in the brain

Gone

What I horded, treasured

Starved for oxygen

Brain gives up

*Arabic*

A names, hidden words

What is in the brain?

gold

What did you gather?

thirsty for oxygen

The brain gives up

*Spanish*

No names, hidden words

erased in the brain

Missing

What I treasured, I treasured

starved for oxygen

the brain gives up

*Ukrainian*

No names, no hidden words

Erasing in the brain

Went

I appreciated what I kept

They starved for oxygen

The brain surrenders

*Persian*

No names, hidden words  
Cleansing in the brain  
Gone  
What I saved was valuable to me  
Oxygen thirsty  
The brain surrenders

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**BUT I REMEMBER OPHELIA'S NAME...LA. LA, LA (IN THREE QUARTERS TIME). CODA?**

The doc showed me x-rays  
of holes in my head  
It's better he said  
You could have been dead  
But the holes are the mem'ries  
of the life I have led and  
now I'm not sure who I am

And the holes include names of  
old friends and kin  
and it feels like a sin  
to forget friends and kin  
and now I must start all over again  
to figure out who you are

And the holes are the places  
I stored my brain wealth  
I was proud of myself  
to have all that brain wealth  
Imagine if someone with infinite stealth  
sneaked in and stole half of your brain

I remember the old stuff but not so much new  
Hell, who are you? And what do you do?

And who are the folks in the rest of your crew  
Do they question if I am insane?

Well, I question it too, so it isn't just you  
and I wish that I knew  
if I'll ever pull through  
and remember the things that I just planned to do  
before I had holes in my brain

My brain's writing poems  
    In three quarters time  
And damn they all rhyme  
    In three quarters time  
For a poet that almost equates to a crime  
And I'd like to write slant but I can't  
(that's my rant)

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## AFTER THE STROKE

A poem arose      overflowed

    until

I deigned to leave slumber

    to find notebook and pen

so many pieces,

    but      now      only

droplets

    remain      evaporate

before I can capture them

Same house

but different

Same brain

but broken

## *About the Author*



Twelve years ago, Barbara Huntington retired from her job of twenty years as the premedical advisor at San Diego State University, healthy and eager to travel and explore her joy of writing. Stories and poems followed in local and international publications, but then a stroke, COVID, breast cancer, and heart issues arrived in rapid succession just as she was starting her MFA in poetry. She has had poetry published in the *Chachalaca Review*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Serving House Journal*, and poems and an essay online at *Vox Populi*, among others. She has recently completed the first of a two-part memoir that includes essays and poems which she plans to send it out soon. (She has progressed slowly, but is still working on that MFA.)