

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

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

By Barbara Huntington

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?)

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?

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

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?

(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—
I cling I grasp I bargain and
the Buddha on the porch says let go

let go
as mind's fist closes on another
thing
No things

Let go

Don't grasp as if they are
 who I am, who we were
who I was
things that had meaning
have meaning no more

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.

 I continue reading New Mexico and
 rattlesnakes appear in

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.

(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

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

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?

“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

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?

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 hoarded, 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

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)

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.)