

A little Anthology
of Poetry
For the Delectation
and Instruction
of
My Lord Gowrie

My Lord,

I have assembled this little anthology in the hope that it may help you to understand a little more of what is happening among disabled people at the moment. In particular, I hope it may elucidate why we feel it important that there be a distinct Disability Unit representing our interests in the Arts Council.

Disabled people have a long history as producers of art. In trying to create a historical context, I could have referred you to such figures as Beethoven, van Gogh or Frida Kahlo. But I have chosen to confine myself to a single art form: poetry.

We have a particularly dignified history as poets, stretching back at least to Homer. But what I have selected for your attention here are poets who wrote about the experience of being disabled.

The first poem, Milton's 'Sonnet on his Blindness', is an acknowledged masterpiece. As a statement about living with disability, however, its conclusion that 'They also serve who only stand and waite' is not one that would appeal to many disabled people these days.

Alexander Pope, a man who was not afraid to attack folly where he saw it, excited the dislike of many a lesser man. Attacks on him frequently focused on his disability. But those who tried to reassure him falsely met with little sympathy; as this passage shows, Pope was too intelligent for that.

These are great poems, but they are both poems which treat disability as something contained in the individual, a cross the poet has to bear. That is not an adequate response to disability these days. Some of us are actively searching for ways of making art about disability that approaches disability in ways that reflect how we see it. We call that search: Disability Art.

A surprising precursor of modern attitudes is to be found in Edward Lear's 'The Pobble who has no toes', generally thought of simply as a 'nonsense' poem. Read as a poem about disability written by a disabled man, it yields a surprisingly modern meaning: for disabled people, a disabled identity is much more fulfilling than a fruitless attempt to be second-rate able-bodied people.

I do not think I am merely imposing this meaning on the poem. It's not even a difficult message to see - at least for a disabled person. Why is this usually treated as a nonsense verse, a children's poem? I think, and I am sure everybody taking part in the demonstration outside the Arts Council would agree, that positive messages about disability are so unfamiliar in our culture that they just don't get recognised. That's what we're afraid of if responsibility for disability passes to the art-form departments: that the future of disability arts will depend on well-meaning people who don't quite understand what we're on about.

(Why, if I am wrong, has Graeae Theatre, a ground-breaking organisation for the last decade, with an international reputation, still not received revenue funding? The Arts Council has repeatedly applied criteria which fail to take into account the special nature of Graeae's project. We fear that the same will happen to disability arts as a whole.)

Simon Brisenden's poems, 'Scars', differs from the Milton and Pope pieces in one crucial respect: it does not see disability as purely a personal tragedy. It is that difference in thinking which has enabled us to start creating Disability Art - art which is informed by the experience of disability, and of being a disabled person in the society - and, indeed, the world - in which we live.

The final poem, my own 'Bite the Hand that Feeds You' is not, to my mind, my best poem. It is my most popular in performance. It evidently embodies a sentiment which is felt very widely among disabled people at the moment. I hope you will think carefully about the implications of that. Disabled people these days want to have a say in anything that claims to provide for them.

With its current proposals, the Arts Council is disregarding the voice of disabled people. we have indicated very clearly that we want the Disability Unit kept. But it is also telling us, in effect, 'Trust us. We'll look after your needs.' We have a long history of people looking after our needs for us, and we have not benefited from it. Read Simon Brisenden's poem if you want a sample of how we feel about that sort of sentiment.

So the Arts Council's proposal is not only tactless and ill-considered, but entirely fails to recognise the spirit of the times among disabled people. If it can miss the point so spectacularly when given as clear information as has been the case here, what on earth makes anyone think that we

should let more complex decisions about Disability art be made by a similar process?

The abolition of the Unit also gives a message to RAB's, Local Authorities and the Arts Council's own departments that the future of Disability Arts can safely be put in the hands of able-bodied people with no particular experience of disability. We do not consider that to be true.

It's for reasons of that sort that we don't feel that the future of Disability Arts is entirely safe without a Disability Unit to protect our interests.

I would welcome your comments on these issues, my Lord.

Allan Sutherland

July 1994

SONNET XVI 'ON HIS BLINDNESS'

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide,
Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
Doth God exact day-labour, light deny'd
I fondly ask; but patience to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
Either man's work or his own gifts, who best
Bear his milde yoaik, they serve him best, his State
Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o'er Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and waite.

John Milton

FROM THE 'PROLOGUE TO THE SATIRES'

There are who to my person pay their court:
I cough like Horace, and, though lean, am short
Ammon's great son one shoulder had too high -
Such Ovid's nose - and 'Sir, you have an eye'.
Go on, obliging creatures, make me see
All that disgraced my betters met in me.
Say, for my comfort, languishing in bed,
'Just so immortal Maro held his head;'
And, when I die, be sure and let me know
Great Homer died three thousand years ago.
Why did I write? What sin to me unknown
Dipp'd me in ink? my parents', or my own?
As yet a child, nor yet a fool to fame,
I lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came.
I left no calling for this idle trade,
No duty broke, no father disobeyed:
The Muse but served to ease some friend, not wife,
To help me through this long disease, my life.

Alexander Pope

THE POBBLE WHO HAS NO TOES

I

The Pobble who has no toes
Had once as many as we;
When they said 'Some day you may lose them all';
He replied, '-Fish fiddle de-dee!'
And his Aunt Jobiska made him drink
Lavender water tinged with pink
For she said, 'The World in general knows
There's nothing so good for a Pobble's toes!'

II

The Pobble who has no toes
Swam across the Bristol Channel
But before he set out he wrapped his nose
In a piece of scarlet flannel
For his Aunt Jobiska said 'No harm
'Can come to his toes if his nose is warm;
'And it's perfectly known that a Pobble's toes
'Are safe,-provided he minds his nose.'

III

The Pobble swan fast and well
And when boats or ships came near him
He tinkledy-binkledy-winkled a bell,
So that all the world could hear him.
And all the Sailors and Admirals cried
When they saw him nearing the further side,-
'He has gone to fish, for his Aunt Jobiska's
'Runcible Cat with crimson whiskers!'

IV

But before he touched the shore,
The shore of the Bristol Channel,
A sea-green Porpoise carried away
His wrapper of scarlet flannel.
And when he came to observe his feet,
Formerly garnished with toes so neat,
His face at once became forlorn
On perceiving that all his toes were gone!

V

And nobody ever knew
From that dark day to the present
Whoso had taken the Pobble's toes
In a manner so far from pleasant.
Whether the shrimps or crawfish gray,
Or crafty mermaids stole them away-
Nobody knew; and nobody knows
How the Pobble was robbed of his twice five toes!

VI

The Pobble who has no toes
Was placed in a friendly Bark
And they rowed him back, and carried him up,
To his Aunt Jobiska's Park
And she made him a feast at his earnest wish
Of eggs and buttercups fried with fish;-
And she said, '-It's a fact the whole world knows,
That Pobbles are happier without their toes.'

Edward Lear

SCARS

The man who cut your skin
and delved within
has he got any scars?

the man whose sterile slice
left mind and body in a vice
has he got any scars?

the man who bent your bones
and organised your personal zones
has he got any scars?

the man who laid you flat
and said I'm in charge of that
has he got any scars?

you do not cry alone
in rage

his blood is on this page

Simon Brisenden

BITE THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOU

Frank is a nice boy
He never makes a fuss
Frank spends all his time at home
He can't get on the bus

Bite the hand that feeds you
Make the bugger bleed
Then maybe they'll notice you
And ask you what you need.

Terry can't stand cripples
They fill him full of fear
But raising money on their behalf
Is good for his career

Bite the hand that feeds you
Make the bugger bleed
He doesn't care a toss for you
He does it out of greed

If tugging at your forelock
Is making no impression

Don't think that Lady Bountiful
Will counter your oppression

Bite the hand that feeds you
Make the bugger bleed
You don't get rights without a fight
So fight for what you need

Allan Sutherland