

Poetry and Blindness



This is not something I write about often, but blindness does affect my experience of poetry, both how I write and how I read the work of other poets.

As a writer I actually find other people's disabilities and struggles far more interesting to write about, perhaps because with a background studying chemistry, I relish the task of finding out the nitty-gritty behind-the-scenes mechanics of different diseases. I am the first person to say that no two people experience disabilities the same way, and the things that I find affecting my writing as a blind poet are things that other blind poets find no trouble at all, and things I find easy and manageable might cause somebody else a lot of stress.

Talking of blind poets, I asked my friend Google to tell me all about the contemporary blind poets it knew about. When I say 'contemporary' I tend to assume that they will preferably be still living. Google helpfully responded with two answers – Homer and Milton. A little more rummaging round revealed a few very much alive poets, but only five have emerged so far, some from books I've bought and others from poetry friends who know them. Within the umbrella of blindness I include any significant visual impairment that affects how a poet "sees" the world or interacts with it.

My barriers start with how I'm going to read a book. Amazon's Kindle has varying levels of accessibility, from none to not very much. I use a computer screen reader, which reads out any text such as emails, Word documents, Facebook posts, Twitter Tweets and so on. Some publishers do produce PDF eBook versions of their poetry books and that is my preferred medium. My screen reader (I use the free Open Source program NVDA) can read from top to bottom of a page, or line by line, word by word and character by character, depending on what you are focusing on when you are reading.

Have your writing tutors, colleagues and mentors urged you to read your work aloud? Mine have. I'm a blind guy with a lousy memory! I don't find it easy to write or edit on the hoof, leaving me tied to the laptop (notebooks and pens are not a lot of help in the blind world). As I finish typing each word the screen reader reads it out so I can hear if I've mistyped something. So the one voice I hear reading my poems, 99 percent of the time, is my screen reader. Think of Stephen Hawking reading your poems for you ... I admire Stephen Hawking tremendously on all counts, but I think his electronic voice would drive me nuts before long! The voices on my screen reader are quite a

lot more human sounding, with responsive male and female voices to choose from. Most of my electronic devices talk to me, but the one thing I have yet to find is a talking dictionary/thesaurus.

Do you often find yourself writing about things that you have caught out of the corner of your eye? I used to. The biggest concern I have now that I am a blind poet is that the things I become aware of are generally things that somebody else has already seen – maybe a friend has spotted something they think I'd like to be told about, or maybe it is something that a local or national newspaper has decided merits attention. For me that is why I continue to read books from all genres of writing, and why I pay close attention to the developments in technology and science, particularly the things I am not going to visually see for myself.

In 2014 the Welsh organisation Disability Arts Cymru held a competition for disabled artists; in 2015 they held a competition for poems inspired by the artworks. Other health reasons prevented me from entering that competition, but I have since written poems inspired by the titles of two of the artworks – *Blue Ballet Slippers* by Rosie Moriarty-Simmonds became my poem *Tomorrow's Dancers* and *Study in Red* by Lucy Chaplin became my poem of the same name, which relates my history of diabetes and blindness and kidney failure.

Study in Red

After the painting 'Study in Red' by profoundly deaf painter Lucy Chaplin

(image detail courtesy of Disability Arts Cymru).

I dress in scarlet
daring
don't walk on me like Axminster
hallway carpets.

Smile at me at night
dear shepherd.

Circulating and mingling
into every corner
cut me and I bleed.

Stab me and I know
four times daily
how many millimoles
are blindly running
through my veins
before tapping their way
out through the replacement kidney.

I blush
ashamed of a lack of resolve
that wouldn't let go
of the red velvet cake.

though I had long ago seen
the shepherd's warning.

1 Blood sugar levels, measured from daily finger prick blood tests, are measured in units of millimoles per litre. The hormone insulin keeps a blood sugar level in the range 4.0 to 8.0, with levels increasing after the consumption of sugary foods, and decreasing with exercise.

***Giles L. Turnbull** is a blind poet living in South Wales. With a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry, and a career that has included national and local Government policy and transportation planning, and a love of music that includes playing the piano and trumpet, he finds every angle of life to be fascinating and beautiful, finding a home for it in his poetry.*

*Profoundly deaf artist **Lucy Chaplin**'s degree focused on woods, metals, and plastics product designs. Lucy said, "There are no barriers with visual art, in comparison to the real world with communication barriers which make it very hard for a deaf individual in a hearing world. It is so easy to express emotions and moods on a canvas through colour, accuracy, shapes and lines. it gives me a sense of freedom."*