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Poem

To Sir William Gull

Nicola Healey

'In a work of psychiatry, only the patients' remarks interest me'
(E. M. Cioran, *The Trouble with Being Born*, 1973)

We're often monitored. 'Watch and wait'.
This is like playing *Titanic* on repeat
and expecting the berg to move.

They need proof of impact, so they wait,
even though death's slide, like a sheet
of black ice, is often not seen.

It's deranged – measuring the mind
by our vital signs. Some scrawl S O S,
in bone or ash, but only numbers carry.

We were left to drown. And this jagged label,
hung like a necklace of teeth,
snags in my brain.

Take 'without appetite', from the Greek,
string with 'nervous' (Latin), seal
with the sure shellac of authority

and you ossify a distraction.
Return to origins: hunger strikes
in the threatened spirit.

Tell me the Greek for 'loss of agency',
the Latin for 'a starved soul'.
A term should touch the truth.

Consumption was recast as TB,
not left in the nineteenth century
to gather bone-webs of myth.

If more men had been dissolved by
this force, would doctors care
more about precision?

The name fits like a corset.
Miss A, Miss B and the unnamed case
would have coined it from the inside,

though I know this captor gags.
And even when aired,
the patient's word is rarely heard.

Note: The term *anorexia nervosa*, a misnomer, was coined by Sir William Gull in 1873. Miss A, Miss B and the unnamed case were his first recorded case studies.

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