
POETRY | SPRING 2015

The Price of a Cure

By Wendy French

Occasionally after a laryngectomy some patients are unable to eat anything solid ever again

What makes betrayal a dream?
Sunrise: the beauty of red?
The dustcarts churning

food and garden waste,
remains of cake, Christmas crumbs,
challenges to keep cheerful.

In a dreary foodless kitchen
filled with remnants of brighter days
yellow colanders, cherry-ripe saucepans.

*red, prime colour,
the smell of newly picked tomatoes
purple-red blush of the bruise after chemo*

Pills are counted out for the day
and on Woman's Hour recipes
for left-over turkey

while the kettle boils,
hot chocolate an ever-only companion
to slip down my throat.

Advertisements are codes,
a secret language. Waitrose special offer.
People stare at my head, my hand basket.

The full whack's been paid.
Walking from Warren Street tube
to Huntley Street, certain signs

can't be avoided. The fruit barrel,
apples past their best, the appeal of an orange,
spit out the pips.

*Orange, Turner's turbulent skies
the December tangerine,
iodine rich on a skin*

My head moves in a robotic fashion
it turns like this so I can see
to cross the road.

Chin down on my neck, hearing aid in,
constant ache to look up.
See the street as it is.
The Grafton advertises 10oz steaks and whole lobsters.
Macdonald's, all so appealing, and the smell
of walnut sourdough bread.

In the stand, outside Capital newsagents
the Guardian soaked from the rain
with yesterday's massacre in Paris.

And the recipe for a special drink,
grated pure cacao chocolate. Life goes on.
Irish whiskey. One way or another.

Tesco Local, Five-a-day splashed across windows.
Yellow peppers add a tang to stir-frys.
Hot chilli and that pang for a once-sunset supper.

Even the halal restaurant jeers at me.
lunch-boxes, £3.50 for a biriyani.
Another code.

*yellow, the buttercup speaks under a chin,
sunflower seeds once good to eat,
bile in the bowl*

Indications of all that is lost.
My mother told me to live
is to learn about loss.

Sweet and Sour noodles from Wasabi amplify this.
Hanging geraniums from the Jeremy Bentham
are drowned in the outburst.

One more *Talisker* would put me right.
There's no choice when some things end.
Students drinking their Dumbar.

Something good slipping down.
Through the Centre's revolving doors
a blind man is led by his dog straight to the lift.

Someone asks him how he's feeling.
It's lunchtime so I buy hot chocolate.
The second of five. Daily intake.

*brown, the colour of Jersey cows
the earth after winter frost
dried blood from my wound*

Nostalgia in colour.
I can't eat so wear death and laughter.
A dragonfly with iridescent wings.

***Wendy French wrote "The Price of Cure" during a residency as Poet in Residence,
Macmillan Cancer Centre, University College London Hospital.***
