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POEM

'IV Hospital' by Elizabeth Jennings

Selected by Femi Oyebo

Elizabeth Jennings (1926–2001)

was born in Boston, Lincolnshire to a medical family. Her father was the Chief Medical Officer. She read English at St Anne's College, Oxford, and later worked as a librarian at Oxford City Library. She was awarded a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1992. She had a psychiatric hospital admission in the early 1960s and is reported to have attempted suicide. Two volumes of poetry describe her experience of being in a mental hospital, *Recoveries* (1964) and *The Mind has Mountains* (1966). 'IV Hospital' is reproduced from *Elizabeth Jennings: New Collected Poems* (ed. M. Schmidt), published by Carcanet. © 2002 Estate of Elizabeth Jennings.

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Observe the hours which seem to stand
Between these beds and pause until
A shriek breaks through the time to show
That humankind is suffering still.

Observe the tall and shrivelled flowers,
So brave a moment to the glance.
The fevered eyes stare through the hours
And petals fall with soft foot-prints.

A world where silence has no hold
Except a tentative small grip.
Limp hands upon the blankets fold,
Minds from their bodies slowly slip.

Though death is never talked of here,
It is more palpable and felt –
Touching the cheek or in a tear –
By being present by default.

The muffled cries, the curtains drawn,
The flowers pale before they fall –
The world itself is here brought down
To what is suffering and small.

The huge philosophies depart,
Large words slink off, like faith, like love,
The thumping of the human heart
Is reassurance here enough.

Only one dreamer going back
To how he felt when he was well,
Weeps under pillows at his lack
But cannot tell, but cannot tell.