

Three Poems

by Hannah Sullivan

(Faber & Faber)



Hannah Sullivan was born in 1979 and grew up in Ealing, in West London. She studied Classics at Cambridge, received her PhD in English from Harvard in 2008, and taught as an Assistant Professor at Stanford. Her study *The Work of Revision*, which examined how modernist approaches to rewriting shaped literary style, was published in 2013 and awarded the Rose Mary Crawshay Prize by the British Academy. *Three Poems* (Faber, 2018) is her first poetry collection. She is an Associate Professor of English at New College, Oxford and lives in London with her husband and two sons.

Reviews

‘Hannah Sullivan is an ambidextrous writer. An associate professor of English at New College, Oxford, she recently published a book called *The Work of Revision*, in which she argued that the idea of revising as a necessary part of the creative process only began with early 20th-century modernism. Her alluring debut collection *Three Poems* (who knows how extensively reworked?) travels light, illuminated yet never shackled by scholarship, and investigates the way life does – and does not – revise itself. It is as though she were holding this Polish proverb up to the light: “Everything changes and nothing changes.” She writes freshly about everything, including sameness. She is a sensual conjurer of atmospheres – writing almost as a poet-restaurantier. On a single page: cloves, rainstorm, peanut oil, ozone, brandy, frost, freezing blood and peaches “sitting with their bruises” – each with its own tang. New York resembles a delicatessen – the food more precise than the people eating. Sullivan’s poems are as intense as Edward Hopper’s paintings (although more crowded).’ (*The Guardian*)

'The second poem in the collection, "Repeat Until Time," is subtitled "The Heraclitus Poem" (Sullivan's first degree was in classics) and it operates as an extended riff on the philosopher's much debated idea that it is impossible to step into the same river twice. For much of the poem, however, rather than perpetual novelty the focus is on repetition and the frustrating sameness of things. Sullivan boils down the life cycle of an oak tree (wonderfully) to "that eternal kernel rigmarole", and writes later of "repetition's sense of comedy". The early line "It is hard to say if there is progress in history" is echoed in the final stanzas of the poem, which recall the atom bomb test of July 1945, during which Oppenheimer famously reached for a line from the ancient Hindu text the Bhagavad Gita, "I am become Shiva, death, the shatterer of worlds.'" (*The Scotsman*)

from Three Poems (p6-7)

The consciousness of the finite, the menaced, the essentially invented state twins ever, to my perception, in the thousand glassy eyes of these giants of the mere market.

Evening comes without seeing light again. Between you and a window:
The beige Lego-maze of offices, people whose names you don't know.

You should be addressing inefficiencies in online processes,
Mastering multichannel, getting serious about small business,

You have created a spreadsheet with thirteen tabs,
The manager is giving you hell, ordering sushi, cancelling cabs.

The senior partner calls from Newark, 'Thanks team,' (his thin
Voice purrs, he is sipping something), 'let's make it a win-win.'

But in the morning, brushing his new teeth, looking out into the snow's
Huge act of world-effacement, its lethargy, he knows:

Things are illiquid, freezing up. Light is abortive
On the greyscale Park. It's time to short the fucking market.

In Chennai, meanwhile, a man is waiting for your analysis,
Eating his breakfast of microwaved dal and mini-idlis,

Checking the cricket scores on his computer, reading Thoreau,
Wondering what New York looks like at night, in snow.

He is applying to Columbia, NYU Stern, and Stanford GSB.
He thinks of going abroad as an attempt to live deliberately,

Imagining the well-stacked fires in iron-fenced Victorians,
The senior partner's grace under pressure, his Emersonian

Turn of phrase, the summers spent sailing, the long reaches
Of sand threaded with grass on Cape Cod beaches.

2.2

Yes, the hipsters crumble their kouign-amann in San Francisco,
Fog lifts away like garage doors, MacBooks get going.
A girl with drug sores rocks by a steamed-up Bikram studio.

Women pour milk on Kashi for the men from Tinder in the Mission,
Wondering if they didn't come because of the Last Words or the sertraline.
Or maybe it is just what happens when you get older or heartbroken.

And the flammers in the Castro from last night order oat pancakes,
Bacon crisp in a cross, white lozenge of butter, dispelling headaches,
While the pastry chef folds cinnamon into tres leches cakes.

Su-Yen pauses lordly before he crosses, reproving his owner
With a shake of his standard-size poodle head at each corner,
His jaw primitive and cautious (*cave!*) as the mosaic dog in Pompeii.

And you ease out behind huge Ray-Bans, counting the avenues
Of rubbery ficus trees, past ox-tongue taquerias,
Into the tangle of collapsible concrete freeways.

Grey coaches carry hooded children south to the Valley,
A coder who grew up in a car in Hawaii is drinking a Snapple,
A quant checks the calories on a granola puck and checks Facebook.

So no one sees the sparrowhawk stall in the outside lane.
And he is himself surprised by the deer in the windscreen,
The plump bunny rump, the hooves in child's pose. Balasana.

It took the car out in the early hours. On the seat
The bored drool of its jaw, the crushed pearlescent teeth
Turned to the side, like someone whimpering at sleep.

4.3

Tears and liver spots on the back of the hand,
The comfort again and again of writing something fictional down.

All cancers were once benign,
Then the DNA forgets its prosody

And cells divide interminably:
The raddled beauty of doggerel.

Stained under a microscope,
An ovary is Venice at sunset,
'Too beautiful to be painted' said Monet.
Midas-touched sperm, bulging and fanning.

Discussion Ideas

- What does the first extract suggest to you about the poet's attitude to work – in this particular office, or in general? Does it chime with your attitude? Who is the 'you' in the extract?
- Whose is the quote which introduces the extract? How do Emerson's and Thoreau's writings relate to the poem? Do you know, and does it matter if you do or don't?
- What might the poetry-readers of 2068 make of extract 2.2? What about those of 1968? In what era is the deer most at home?
- Look at extract 4.3 alongside Fiona Moore's 'Unknown'. Does an 'In the midst of life we are in death' philosophy prove helpful to you or not? What other works of art or literature prompt you to reflect in this way?
- For those of you who have read the three poems which constitute the whole collection: what does a verse memoir do that a straightforward autobiography doesn't?

Other books by Hannah Sullivan

- [Academic works rather than collections](#) – *Three Poems* is Hannah Sullivan's debut

If you liked Hannah Sullivan, try ...

- Clare Pollard
- Helen Mort
- Karen McCarthy Woolf

Hannah Sullivan online

[Faber & Faber](#)