

# Downturn

Now it begins -  
The slow withdrawal into ourselves,  
The shutting down of care and connection,  
The thoughtless slights and petty cruelties  
That mark the arrival of another recession.

Finally the word itself is spoken:  
Held back for the winter, denied all spring,  
Quarter after quarter of increasing pressure;  
Forming itself in the mouths of executives,  
Blurted by managers too young to remember.

At first, like a subtle shift in the weather,  
It shows itself in a drizzle of language,  
In dull and dreary, mean-spirited euphemisms;  
In downsizing, outplacement, and rationalisation.  
Then, as the cold front of scarcity develops,  
The shorter, more brutal words appear:  
Words like shut, stop, sale and strike;  
Cut-back, crisis, closure, and the sack.

Only later does the damage become visible:  
The red-rimmed eyes of a foreman, forsaken  
By the figures and the harsh realities of value;  
Fifty-year-old managers, dressing like teenagers,  
Proving themselves by betraying old friends;  
The casual woundings of direct reports,  
The hard word, delivered as an act of revenge.

I remember the faces of colleagues  
Haunted by their failure to house the family,  
Women pinched or blowsy with despair,  
Waiting in line for the cold slap of charity,  
Children like ghosts from leather-bound novels  
Re-learning the hatreds of privilege and caste;  
Their eyes accusing, even as they begged  
For attention, or the price of a bottle of cider.

I want us to think where we are going,  
To consider our choices in whatever comes.  
To hide behind the numbers is merely a cop-out.  
We are kindred, gathered at the edge of a storm.

**William Ayot**