

AIDS

Elizabeth Jennings

Never so much compassion needed for years,
Never so much courage, never so much
Trust, forbearance, the casting out of fears,
For now, like a leper's touch,

We are afraid of sickness in one another,
Mortal sickness. At our highest reach,
Love and its fulfilment in each other,
We may be tainted, must teach

Compassion to all for all of us are bound
And branded by terrible possibilities.
Some become Puritans, the thoughtless confound
Science and love. 'It is

Not to happen to us. We need not care.'
They mean in any sense and these are the ones
And only these whom we have a right to fear.
We must offer hands

Of bold and gentle feeling. We must watch
Over the unborn child and not be afraid
When the innocent is born with danger. Touch
Is the sense that must be made

Healing, helpful, never withdrawing. How can
We not gaze at each other with fear and dread?
Was it always so in the heart of man?
Isn't this new disease a purpose made
To teach us that we can

Confront this terrible illness now wherever
It signals? First we must look in our own heart.
AIDS in many places is starting to sever
Our loving duties but we are all a part
Of this killing behaviour,

Yours and mine, we started and spread the disease.
We thought we could do what we liked and so we did.
And for none of us now can there be total peace.
AIDS began in the tiniest loveless deed
And the fear of it shadows each face.