

IT WAS Earth Hour and our household was ablaze until a reminder call came in. The computers and TV were shut down, the lights went off, candles were lit and a hush descended.

Out of the soft darkness in which the household was gathered, the 19-year-old asked if we'd like to hear a poem. Her voice was low and measured, the quiet beauty of rhythmic words settled on us. We were content, expanded into the quietness of the evening. There was a new gentleness between us, our collective breathing eased. We asked ourselves why we didn't have Earth Hour every week.

One of Michael Leunig's cartoons says: "The part of the mind that once held poems is now used for storing passwords." It is a lament for the slow way that is sometimes just the thing we need. Words you know by heart can stay available to you, unfolding their mystery to you.

I like to begin by writing out poetry and prayers I admire in longhand. It is a nice practice for late evening. I might then prop a copy beside my desk or in the kitchen, where I can



meet the words in the rhythm of daily life. There might be a chance to turn over their meanings in the midst of things, to say them out loud, to see if the words ring true.

Author and radio presenter Garrison Keillor says in the introduction to *Good Poems* (2002): "You could, without much trouble, commit these poems to memory and have them by heart, like a cello in your head, a portable beauty to steady you and

ward off despair." I love this invitation. It makes me smile that the collection was put together on the basis that the poems were suitable for public radio at breakfast time — poetry to eat your porridge by.

This "portable beauty" may be available to us when other forms of communication are beyond our reach. People who have been immobilised for long periods will often say that they were sustained by things they knew by heart.

There is a shadow side to this. There's an unspoken contract in casual conversation that can be contravened if you suddenly spout a rehearsed text. There are rituals in the exchange of telling and listening. It can come out awkwardly, you need to choose your moment.

But sometimes words by heart will come back to you, their beauty stored and waiting. They might come in quiet darkness, in daily routines, or you might tell them by candlelight. Poetry and prayers by heart might offer you their companionship "to steady you and ward off despair".

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