

Voices

from
Marie Curie Hospice Hampstead

*Kristina Howell, Poet-in-Residence
with illustrations by Christina Ayckbourn*



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Marie Curie Hospice Hampstead

A poetry project by
Kristina Howell
as Poet-in-Residence

with illustrations by
Christina Ayckbourn

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Introduction

Thank you for picking up this book. Before you start, I'd like to tell you a little about it, how it came into being and about the people and ideas that inspired it.

Marie Curie offers specialist care for people with cancer and other life-limiting illnesses and support for families, completely free of charge. The hospice in Hampstead has 34 beds. The people staying here often remark that it's like a top-class hotel with staff who go out of their way for them. The hospice also houses a Day Therapy Unit with a gym and a range of holistic therapies including Art Therapy.

So how did I come to be here? Since training as an actress, I have been increasingly adding creative strings to my bow. I've always had a love of poetry, literature and writing. I love to read aloud to people and had been working with poetry in a therapeutic capacity for four years (at the Royal Free Hospital in London and the Royal Sussex in Brighton). I regularly saw how people benefited from engaging with their imagination and how listening to poetry took them beyond the four walls of the hospital room. I was also performing a sing-along show in residential homes. I get considerable satisfaction from leaving behind a room full of people smiling and companionable after being uplifted by a short creative intervention – where perhaps 20 minutes earlier they had been individually dwelling in their own thoughts. This to me is the alchemy of the creative arts.

On relocating to London, I was looking for a local venue to engage with. I approached the Marie Curie Hospice with the idea of reading and singing. Somehow, over the course of my interview, the request for me not simply to read but to write poetry with patients came up. This was at the suggestion of Rabbi Markus Lange, the resident Chaplain, who has a developed interest in the healing potential of personal storytelling in palliative care. A little daunted, I took on the challenge of being the hospice's first Poet-in-Residence and set about writing a proposal for the project.

I visited on alternate Fridays, deciding to pick a theme for each bi-weekly session. The themes were chosen to 'break the ice' and stimulate memories, reflections and the creative juices. I specifically didn't want to talk about illness but rather to offer an alternative to the concerns of the here and now. I brought in materials to get us started. I gathered existing seasonal poems for the theme of 'Autumn', together with conkers, leaves and beechnuts. For 'Childhood' I brought pictures of memorable toys and games. I took in music to listen to on one occasion, and daffodils and scented narcissi as another starting point.

I would meet with Markus, the Chaplain, or ask nursing staff to recommend patients. I visited them in their rooms and introduced myself, sharing what I'd brought in and asking if they had any thoughts on the subject. I explained they didn't have to try to be 'poetic'.

I started out with the idea of getting just a line, phrase or image from each person and putting these together in a single poem on the week's theme. As time went by I got more engrossed in individuals and their stories. I had reactions such as "I can't remember much at the moment," from people who would go on to talk animatedly for 20 minutes, telling stories full of detail and feeling. Tales began to flow and I couldn't pull myself away. I wanted to know more about this person's life – what had they seen and felt. As a result, the poems became more personal as I found myself drawn in. I also engaged with family, friends, staff and volunteers along the way.

I scribbled notes as fast as I could, trying to capture each person's language and rhythm, even though I couldn't get every word down. I thought about audio recording but it felt too intrusive.

Later, I sifted through my notes, pulling out the key words and phrases and reassembled them. I tried to reproduce each speaker's voice and the essence of what was said. Often there would be a moment where I felt 'Yes! You're speaking poetry to me now.' The imagery and language had a richness, an immediacy, a drama which stood apart from the rest of our dialogue. This is not to say I haven't sometimes projected myself into people's shoes and added my own imaginings and flourishes.

Whenever possible, I liked to write the poems and share them on the same day. This couldn't always be done but I checked my notes with each person and whether they were happy with my crafting something from them and wanted their name included.

People's reactions were almost universally positive. "The days can be quite long here." said one patient, and "Thank you so much. I've been telling people about you, this lovely young person that came to see me and write about me. You did me so much good. Since I saw you I've been thinking about my childhood a lot. Before you came all I was thinking about was my illness." People were pleased with their poems and proud to be recognised for saying something of worth.

Another patient said she liked the creative input because "I am not just my illness. There is more than that. That is only a part of me." I think the poetry that follows reveals this.

For me the project was always a process of discovery. I have enjoyed meeting people and, in particular, seeing the pleasure they have gained from it, speaking about things they hadn't expected anyone to be interested in and having their words valued as the basis of a poem.

I hope in the poems that follow you will hear the voices of the people I visited at Marie Curie Hospice Hampstead. Many of the patients are now departed but will continue to have life in this book. I know at least one of these poems has been read at a funeral and I am delighted the family found in it a voice they recognised.

Finally, there are people I would like to thank. I brought the poems home and shared them with my partner, Philip and his mother, Christina. Inspired by what she read, Christina began returning them to me with accompanying illustrations. I am indebted to her for urging me to compile this book and for all her help in doing so and making it look delightful. My thanks go to Philip for being my sounding board and to Rabbi Markus Lange for his belief in me and getting me started on this path. Without these three, the book might not have happened. I hope it proves of worth to Marie Curie and brings much pleasure.

Autumn

*Inspired by Brenda Lush,
Elisa Nicholls and
Stephen Parkin.*

Autumn Signs

Autumn is
red
brown
orange

Autumn is squirrels gathering nuts

Autumn is conkers
pickled in vinegar
awaiting a conker fight!

Autumn is starting at school
September –
the smell of exercise books and pencils
approaching new lessons

Oh Autumn – so refreshing
the showers
falling on fragrant grass
cut in stripes

Hedgehogs hibernate
birds fly south, en masse
while my long-flowering clematis
continues trailing
trailing...

Yes, Autumn is golden corn
fields harvested
the food gathered in
and Tesco stocking up on mince pies
(only 107 days till Christmas...)

I hope it will be a good Autumn.



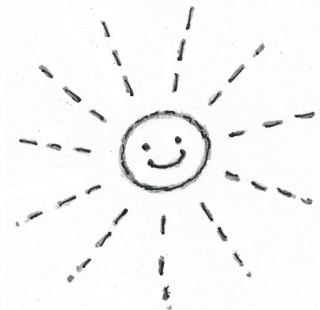
Dressing for Autumn

What to wear...
What to wear...
Will it be windy or warm?
Oh what to wear
(I do despair)
The sheep are shorn
But since this morn
It's changed from heat to thunderstorm
And weather forecasts scarce inform
There never seems to be a norm!
What is it I should wear?



September

My favourite month is September
And not just because it's my birthday
I like the change in the seasons
September –
Just when you've given up
The weather improves!



Crab Apple Memory

Crab apples:

I used to collect them when I was a kid
You know how kids climb up trees and go –
Scrumping is it?

Scrumping

It's a nice word

“Scrumping”

I like it

It sounds crispy

There's nothing squashy about it

It's crispy

“Scrumping”

Someone would hold you up while you got them down, the apples

And if you tore your trousers you were in trouble!

You couldn't go out and get any more because it was the war

You needed coupons

You needed coupons for everything during the war

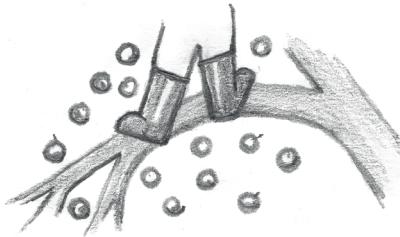
Our trousers had the utility mark on them, remember that?

Things were in short supply

But we didn't do anything with those crab apples –

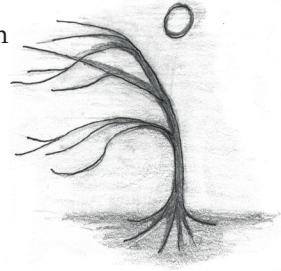
I was evacuated, see

And at that time I didn't have a mother there to take them to.



Every Season is There for a Reason

I always feel sad when Autumn starts
You know you are going into the bare season
When trees become bare structures
Going into a bleak period
Barren
Grey
And I think of 9/11 and what was left
A bare structure
Like the trees



I keep an evergreen bush around my home, I won't cut it down

Often I wish those trees would hold their leaves longer
It all seems to happen so quickly, too quickly
But what we get are the beautiful colours
I *love* colours...
Autumn reminds me of the firework displays I used to organise
We would end on a big crescendo where you let off *everything*
And everyone goes "Ahh!"
But you know it's the end

But it isn't the end
There will be another year
Another November
It will come again
The leaves will come again

And while other countries go barren and brown, in England we always
have green
It's what I love
And the wonderful smells
That clear, beautiful cleanliness you get
Fresh air
Apples
Wet leaves on the lawn
And the damp scent a little warmth releases, rising up

When you're young, the sun shines and you accept everything
Later Autumn and Winter test people:
Autumn brings temperament
You get wet leaves on the line and tempers fray
Winter brings courage in people
Be patient and let things run their course
It will come round again

It will come round again

Every season is there for a reason.



Reflections

*Inspired by Margaret Clowes
and Olive Lupkowski.*

At Marie Curie

It's like a womb here
It's so peaceful
And you're protected from the outside.
But you go outside and there're all these shops and people
shopping and rushing
Life goes on and you think "That's not right!"
It's like it shouldn't be happening, but it is.
It's like a womb
But not for rebirth
And you wouldn't call it a tomb because there's lots of love;
But it is very *enclosed*.

A Caring Home

Marie Curie is a caring home
Not just a curing home
A caring home, full of love to share
Helping others in their distress
Helping the burden to bear.



Sailing On and Flying By

I had my husband's ashes*

He was a sailor and always wanted to be out at sea

We took him to Chichester Harbour

Checked on the times of the tides

Waited

When the ashes hit the water we were shocked,

They turned red before they turned black

Suddenly three swans flew over...

We gazed, amazed

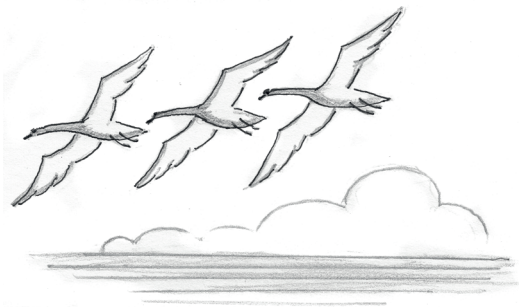
As the white-winged heralds headed

In the precise path of the drifting ashes

And I heard the cry:

"Bloody cheek,

He got a fly-by too!"



** Olive's husband had been in Marie Curie Hospice Hampstead nine years previously*

Glacier

Huge ice
Terrific power
But so still
Barely moving

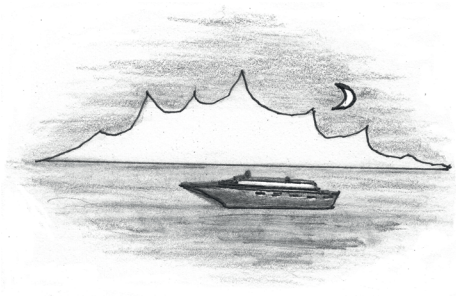
From the top deck, this blue-silver glacier just towered up

They switched off the engines
And we stood there
Rocking in the current

and
 slowly
 silently
 glided
 round

It restored me

It brought me back to a place where you could live
And laugh
And love again.



What a Faithful God Have I

A fourth course of chemo left me in tremendous pain
And, lying down, I ran through all the Psalms I could remember
Pleading comfort
Seeking courage
To bear this
To endure
When unexpectedly a hymn came into memory:

*What a faithful God have I
What a faithful God
What a faithful God have I
Faithful in every way*

I sang in silence, from the heart
And as the chorus gained its hold
The suffering lifted, suddenly
Tears sprang from one side of my face alone
The right, where the pain had been

It was gone
Washed away
Carried from me

He was listening
He's always listening
He waits until you're ready, then He'll help

It's the privilege I've had
Knowing someone's there.



Faith



What a **F**aithful God have I
 Faithful in every way
To feel **H**is love
And know His **s**trength
 I only **h**ave to pray.



Childhood

*Inspired by Josette Byrne,
June Swan (stage name June Charlier),
Patrick Flatley,
Lia Karagiorgou,
Tim Bailey,
Rosendra, Anya, Jemima,
Joyce and others.*

Snow White, Hither Green

I was born in London, near Blackheath –
It was Hither Green.
Started dancing and singing when I was three
Only ever wanted to go on stage
I'd have performed at the drop of a hat!
From three or four we used to perform at home, all the family
together, and I loved it...
They called me 'The Shirley Temple of Hither Green'
We were the same age
Shirley and I
'On the Good Ship Lollipop'.
Only ever wanted to go on stage
And I did:
I was in 'South Pacific'
'Snow White'
Birmingham Rep
The Arts Theatre
On tour...
It was a happy childhood
We were comfortably off
A garden and a swing and a sandpit
And the joy of making up stories in my head.
Still got a teddy and a doll that's about 60 years old, in my
daughter's bedroom
I say, "We've got to get rid of these."
She says, "No, you can't do that."
My mother wrapped them and kept them for my daughter.
I lived the life she'd like to have lived.



The Games We Played

Hopscotch...

Knock Down Ginger...

Leapfrog...

and Weasels...

Spinning Tops...

and Skipping...

I don't think they've got a childhood any more

Just computers, telly, the Internet

We could go out with jam sandwiches at nine in the morning
and play all day

We'd have a bottle of lemonade and we'd go to the park and we'd
go home for lunch and then out again

I'd like to see kids playing games like we used to

I want to go back to childhood

I'd do exactly what I did then

It was a lovely childhood...

But it wasn't the happiest time of my life

Having my own children was the happiest

When my babies were young.



Sing Songs and Sweeties

Daddy used to make sweets
when his father was alive
because they had a sweet factory

On birthdays we'd always have parties
and Daddy would make Toffee Apples
and the piano teacher would come round
and we'd have to sing to get our Toffee Apples!

Daddy would make:
Nut Brittle
and Coconut Ice
Fudge
and Little Fishes
Boiled Sweets
and Peppermint Bolsters with little pink stripes

But my favourite was Coconut Ice
(because I've got a sweet tooth!)



Shop

Childhood for me is play,
creating.

We used to create shops
it was all imaginary
we didn't have toys.

We would say
“Here's a pound of tomatoes.”
and

“This is my shop
you can buy them from me.”

or

“Don't walk over there
because there are the onions!”

It was all made up,
pretend.

We created a shop
and we believed in it.

We played in it
all day long.

And we don't do that now we're grown.



An Irish Childhood

I grew up in the West of Ireland
County Mayo
Swinford
The '40s and '50s, lovely years
Everything was so cheap

It's all gone now – more expensive everywhere

We didn't have all these toys
What did we do?

I remember going into people's houses and sitting in people's
houses and listening to them talking
They were having the paper read to them

Money? There was no such thing as money
As a child we used to play cards for buttons

Oh, it was lovely in Ireland
The people was lovely because they was all poor
The only rich one you could look at was the schoolteacher!



Every Child Should Have a Horse

I had two horses

I had one I'd bring him into the house

I brought him up to the fire and I'd give him bits of bread
And that horse there...

I woke up one morning and the house was very quiet
and the horse was gone

The horse was taken to the fair

The horse was sold by my mother and brother
and they never told me

I could never forgive them

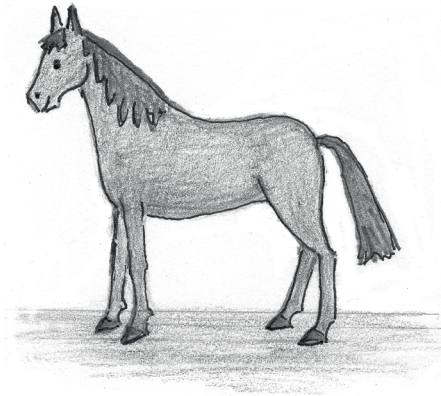
I cried for a month

They had to buy me another one

There's an awful lot of love you get from a horse

Oh, they're lovely things

I think every child should have a horse.



This Child Here

I am a child in Mauritius. I play in the deep, blue sea, swimming in it, and the golden sand, playing in the sea and sand.

I remember the summer holidays – long, long summer holidays. I go to the seaside and go to my grandparents and eat until I'm stuffed!

In Denmark these long summers seem to last forever. It's lovely, playing outside with the neighbourhood kids, getting bruises and bumps. We have a big, green area. We make huts in the bushes and climb trees.

And I walk along the roadside with my grandfather at his farm in Perthshire. He has a walking stick in his right hand. Just along the farm we go, past sheep, cattle, milk cows, farm horses – working horses.

To an army camp in Malaya. The kids have long bamboo poles, 12ft long. They put a net on the end and try to catch bats like this... No chance! The big kids say they have gone into the village – the village you can see in the distance. They say they've been there and I am in awe because I don't want to leave the security of the camp.

I play in Greece, Karditsa. I take my dolls' house out and my friends have dolls' houses too. We're together every single day – on our balconies when it's warm.

For me, childhood is being an 'only' – no brothers or sisters. I am with my parents most of the time. We go out to tea, just the three of us, to the Lyons Corner House. For one and six you can have a really nice tea. I have sandwiches and a large lemonade.

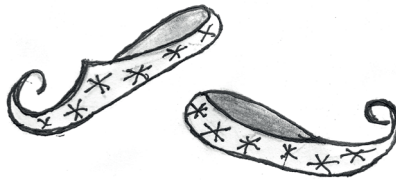
And I am a child in the village of Moreton Morrell. I go out to collect the milk and there are slugs climbing up the bottles. Black slugs against the white milk. I flick them off. Yuck! Our dog, a chow chow, bites the milk lady.

Shoes

*Inspired by Jack Bailey,
Albert Hakim Dowek ,
Harold Lundsten,
Mark Sydenham ,
Kate Bumby
and Susan Wise.*

Turkish Shoes

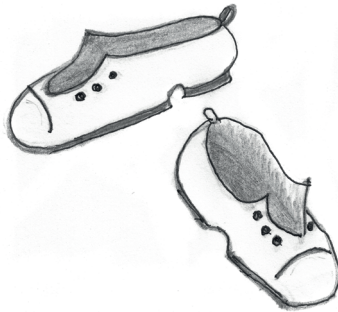
I had a pair once
Brought them home from Turkey
Wore them round the house
(Till the kids got hold of them for fancy dress).
Shoes from the days of the Ottoman Empire
When a prince might have a hundred wives and concubines
In his harem
In Istanbul
A hundred chattering, nattering wives, imagine...
And when the old boy died they'd burn the shoes
 and all the wives with him.
Shoes from an old empire
Brown leather, gold thread and a rolled-up toe
Bought in a market
Carried home from a business trip
To walk on a London carpet
Beneath a man
With just one
Good wife.



Barefoot

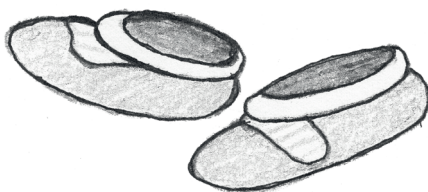
I am sitting in my socks
I came without my shoes
I will tell you why:
The ambulance people came because
I fell out of bed
And they said I had to come immediately
So I have no shoes here.
I like my shoes
They are black
Size 11
Without laces – just slip in and slip out
From Freeman, Hardy and Willis.

I want them
The socks keep my feet warm but I miss my shoes
My shoes are at home
Without me.



Slippers

Like Cinderella
I mainly wear slippers or bare feet.
Like her, I've been at home quite a lot.
Unlike Cinders
On my feet I wear the modern thing of the day
They're soft inside, with Velcro over the top
Just one pair, that's all the shoes I need.
I don't have a glass carriage
I've a scooter
An electric vehicle
So I tumble into that
In my slippers
And go and ride around Hampstead
Parliament Hill
Over to the ponds.
I go for a ride and I see in my mind the places
Mostly it's memories because I'm nearly blind
"Get out of my way!" I shout
As at 8 mph
I charge along
Wearing soft, blue slippers
On my way to the ball.



Steels

They're work shoes but
So comfortable I'd wear them seven days a week
Just out to the shops
Even clubbing once
I loved them: my steel toecaps.
They're normal boots
With a lump at the front
Like a little mound – and that's the steel
Then the back bit comes up with padding on it
And that's where you end up tying the very ends of the laces.
Black boots
Size 10's
Four holes and three clips on either side
And black laces
Paid for by my governor.
They get so comfy
So comfy and tatty
You just want them on.
Be nice if I could wear a pair now but
Chemo
One of the side effects – it makes your feet swell
I can't put anything on
Not even socks
It's a nice thought that I could wear those steels and walk again
some day.



Comfort and Little Luxuries

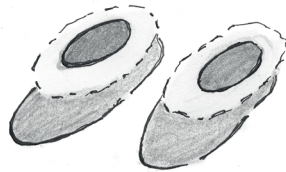
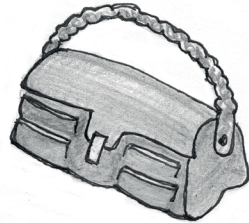
I can't talk to you about
Shoes
Or handbags
My time was during the war
There were no shoes for dancing
There was no dancing
I had a husband, I was married and I was busy
Busy working, in the war
We'd no time for frivolities
That's just how it was.

And all those years after it was rations
And we'd no money for fashion
So there's nothing ever fashionable I've worn.

I can't talk about
Handbags
Mine's a just a black bag with lots of pockets
I can't leave the house, so I don't need to carry one anywhere.

Don't ask me about shoes, dear
I always wear slippers
Those pink elasticated slippers there
They're very old but most comfortable
And the only things that will fit over
These thick bedsocks
Look
I've had cold feet lately.

Oh I do have what I call
A posher pair
Ones with fur around the tops
Bought last Christmas
From Marks and Spencer's
Yes
I might even put them on again
For Christmas this year.



A Love of Shoes

I.

I'm so glad you've come to talk to me about shoes
I love shoes
I've loved shoes ever since I was a little girl
when Granny used to buy heels for me
from jumble sales
and I would clip clop down the street
Clop
Clip clop
and I was in heaven.
Clip
Clop clip.



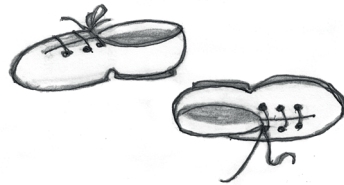
A lady lived next door to my granny who
belonged to a shoe-making family – Cox's
of Northampton, the shoemaking capital.
She'd a wardrobe filled with heels of every kind
and I would enter her bedroom
and peek inside
and wonder at them –
their smooth curves,
and polished leather uppers
inviting me.
And I would fantasize:
that someone would dress me,
carefully,
in a gown,
put make-up on me,
pin up my hair,
and I would slip on a pair of those shoes,
a pair in the softest suede,
and go
click click
click click
Somewhere.
Anywhere.
Out for the evening



(no idea where)
in shoes that announced:
“A lady is coming.
A lady!”
click click
click click.

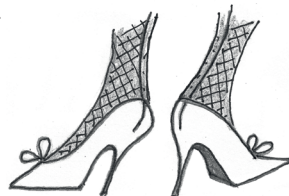


My friend's mum wore heels
and I was so excited by her.
I longed,
longed to go shoe shopping with my own mum,
like this friend.
But mine wore flats,
sensible shoes.
She wasn't that type.
I would have to wait.



II.

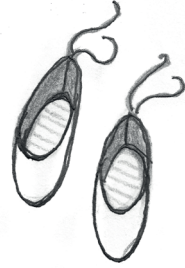
Shoes are my passion,
I've had so many.
Especially
vintage shoes
from the '30s, '40s and '50s.
Shoes that have walked through lives I'll never know
and into mine.
Well-made shoes
in crocodile and snakeskin and leather
that knew how to lindy hop and dance the boogie woogie,
that carried the secrets of seamed-stockinged ladies
on late-night lover's trysts.
Or shoes that knew
the anguish of war
but with stiff uppers shining
never failed to be beautifully turned out.
Footwear from a bygone era
sitting on a shelf
waiting to be loved again.
To be worn again.
“Here I am.”



Shoes I can turn over in my hands
and love and love and love.
If I give them away, who will wear them after me?

III.

I'm having to rethink my shoes.
I'm slightly wobbly
and I've been told to wear sensible ones.
I've got some somewhere –
flats.
You can get lovely designs in sensible now
but
there's always the sound of a heel, isn't there?
click
click click
And the way it raises you forwards and up,
bestowing its confidence on you.



If I could wear any shoe...
Right here.
Right now.
My ideal shoe...
click
It is red,
and in the softest nubuck rawhide suede.
I see a closed toe,
a criss-cross design,
buttons,
a little strap about my ankle
and a 1930s Louis heel
of perfect proportions
gently curving in
and out.
I'm not a red person, but that's what they are.
Yes, definitely red.
And beautifully made.
click
There's a band playing
outside a café.



I approach in my red shoes.
I walk down the street in my red shoes.
Confident
Sensual
Womanly
Click
Click
Click
I smile at the people
I smile at the band
I throw back my head
and I dance.



Christmas

*Inspired by Moira Jenkins
and Richard Smith.*

Christmas with Bronco Bill

We have a family Christmas, every year
We're always saying we shouldn't be giving presents
We should pool it and give it to charity
One feels guilty about being so privileged, in this day and age
What with food and warmth and living

Christmas has changed, for sure,
It's like the government telling you
"You go out and buy things and we'll get the economy going."
That's Christmas now

My father –
There were four of us children and he would gather us together
He would stamp down the stairs and say
"I'm Bronco Bill!"
With a roll of toilet paper strapped to his back
Us excited, clamouring behind him
Clonk, clonk, clonk
On artificial leg, an amputation courtesy of World War 1
Our Bronco Bill stamped down the stairs
Leading our laughter
High spirits
Anticipation for the fruits of Christmas.
All round the house he'd take us
In every room
"Not here"
Out into the garden
"Where? Where?"
And finally
Finally
Finally
Into the front room
Where all our presents
Lay lovingly wrapped
Under a splendid tree

Bronco Bill...
I think those days are gone.



Gratitude – The Gift of Giving

Christmas means to love people
Most of us are so willing to take
There's always this "Give me, give me, give me"
But to let someone do something for you
To appreciate what that means...
It's unbelievable what people can do for you
I mean –
How much must it cost to run this hospice?
Think about it
Every injection?
Every bit of medical or personal care?
They've given all that for nothing
They're marvelous
People have given me a lot
And I want to give a lot back
I'm entitled to give back
My family – we're not going to give presents this year
We're going to give our money to this place
Put flowers in all the rooms
To say thank you

All I want is to see people happy
It's good to show gratitude
You see I am pleased with life itself
I didn't believe in God but now I do
He's given me a new lease of life
And look what it's done for me
And I'm so happy because I'll be home for Christmas
I'm going to live with my daughter
They've got a bed there and she's going to take care of everything

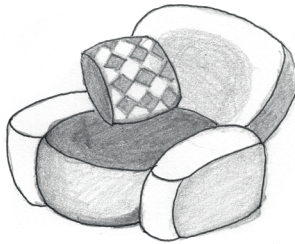
It will be a quiet Christmas
We'll have neighbours round
(Everybody knows me)
But not too many at once

And the grandchildren –
They're clowns they are
They make me laugh
They're always doing something

I do love people

A neighbour of mine gave me his chair
A £500 chair
£500 – and he just gave it to me
To enjoy!
I can't remember what I did for him
It was something, well...
It was nothing really

I do love people
After all they've done for me
So many things I just can't put it into words.



Music

*Inspired by Kirsty Banner,
Susan Wise and others.*

Café Culture:
from 'Minor Swing' by Django Reinhardt
Co-written with Kirsty Banner

A jolly baker
In white and wearing an apron
Racing down a street to a bistro –
Past candle-lit streetlamps
Balconies with metal bars
Washing out –
He thrives in the bustling scene.
Rushing down and the winds blowing
With his tray of patisserie.



Round tables
Big, bold characters laughing and moving forward and backward
Giggling and bustling and chatting.
All dressed up
Smart and chic
Living the café culture.



Mozart's 'Piano Concerto 21 Andante'

I see dancing in the air
Hands that sway and reach
Essences
Ethers in pastel colours
Weightless, they rise above an open garden
Drift purposefully
Float through
Hand in hand, connected



Everything is moveable
A free-flowing wind
I feel like I heard this yesterday but I don't think I have
It's like I'm climbing trees but with no effort at all.

Dissonance

And then through the tranquil, beautiful surface
Something creeps in
This is not all there is – panic
In ‘Apocalypse Now’ as choppers come
The villagers flee, run, running for their lives
But those screams and the strafing of machine gun fire
Get washed out, replaced with classical music
It’s fragmented, it’s disjointed, scary
You’re not being told
You don’t know what’s going on
It starts safe and gets more dangerous
It’s as though nothing’s happening
(Is this happening?)
And you can’t quite trust whether it’s going to hold out for you.

Dolly’s Crush

I remember Dolly Parton saying how, as a child,
she would watch this woman walk through her town
all dressed in red
striding down
and she thought, “That woman is so... wonderful!”
She later found this was the town prostitute
but it couldn’t change things for her.

Time to Remember

The lilt of a sad guitar carries me
to hillside vistas; morning sun,
long shadows and a quality of light that speaks of stillness.
Hands clasp on living warmth and tears rise easily to eyes
as, row on row, they obey no outward direction
seeking inward only, to memory.
Here music joins us, bonds us,
breaks the silence, kindly,
and heals the restless search for words that will not do;
can never quite do.

Journeys

*Inspired by Dora Earnestine
and Solomon Odeleye.*

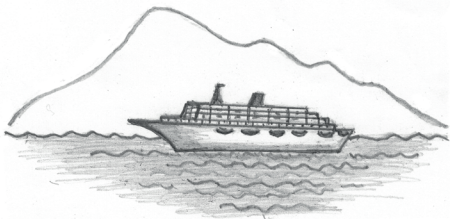
Travelling in Style

I grew up in Africa
I remember the journey to Britain the first time very well
At that time they didn't have planes and flights that take six hours
There was no 'Breakfast in Africa, dinner in Britain'
You had days on a boat
Big liners – the Queen Mary, Apapa, Aureol
Beautiful, beautiful boats

We didn't stroll on along a gangway, no
Beside the boat they have these ladders – Jacob's Ladder –
With rocks at the coast, the ship must stay far away
And you go out on a little boat, up alongside
And you pull yourself up
Climb up Jacob's Ladder to get on that ship
And then you're on –
And when you step on board it's like being in London
There's cricket and music and dancing!

You sailed for 14 days
Came through the Bay of Biscay
Where the water's so violent it rocks the boat like a box of matches
But you didn't mind
During that 14 days you did nothing
You danced and laughed
You danced, you talked, the nights and days through

I'd like to live in that era forever – the '40s and '50s
Everyone was nicely dressed
You had everything on those boats
You had your menu – anything you wanted
You were happy
And the music and dancing!



To Finsbury Park and Beyond

I used to look after children
I loved to look after children
To take them out to places like the park
We were a close group of neighbours
Some had two children, three, four
And we all took turns, say during the summer holidays
“This week it’s your turn and you can take five, six children”
So I would walk to Finsbury Park
With a half-dozen seven- or eight-year-olds
Them all abuzz, riding bicycles, a surge of young excitement
“Don’t go that way, come this way...
Don’t go too fast, wait for me!”
Watching one and all
Herding them safely
At the park they could free themselves
And run about
There was a little boat they could row, and ducks
I took sandwiches, little fruits, pre-prepared drinks

Most are now in their 30s and 40s and live as far as Enfield,
Canada, America
They’ve gone to university, have businesses
I still live in Finsbury Park
I get the odd phone call
Occasionally a visit: “Auntie Dora, how are you?”
Life’s a long journey, isn’t it?
It makes you so happy people remember.



The Local Flora

It was 6.30 in the morning
That 6.30 quiet
The moment before everything starts
Before tired-eyed workers
Would emerge through doorways
And traffic fill the streets
6.30
In that moment
I alone was walking, down a pavement
Tapping my way
A blind man, picking my way
Cautiously over uneven surfaces
Past houses with walls and bins and hedges
Passing, going, somewhere else
When suddenly
– unexpectedly –
Something called to me and made me
Stop

What was it that awakened me in that split second?
A scent –
The scent of what?

Before my mind had words
My hand reached out
To feel from where
That leafy perfume came

Shrubbery
I felt into shrubbery
Pricking wood and cold, moist leaves
I touched them
Aha!

Then –
What do you *really* feel like? I wondered
What do you *really* smell like?

Impulsively
I picked two leaves
 One
 Two
Crushed them
Squashed them
Rolled between thumb and fingers
And breathed deep their
Herbaceous notes
It was wonderful
To be so wholly, mindfully, there with those two leaves
Fused with them
I, a connoisseur of flora!

I wasn't expecting anyone to be looking
Watching me
Appraising
But I was caught
Green fingered, red-handed
"I saw you,
I saw you through my window,
I saw you,
Vandalising my hedge and smiling," she said
Her eight-year-old daughter coming, cantering down the path
All keenness for this un-before-known pleasure
Grabbing
Snapping
Crushing a handful of leaves
Sniffing enthusiastically, proclaiming:
"It's very, very nice Mum
It's very, very nice!"

Oh joy!
6.30 in the morning
Sampling the local flora
And smiling with strangers.



The Open Road

Lying on a bed in a room off a corridor, listening to the television and the sound of a Hoover passing back and forth beyond my door and you ask about journeys, favourite journeys, where I'd go if I could, right now and I realise, I realise the places I've wanted to visit have changed over the years.

I tell of a time when I was 14 or 15 when I really wanted to experience the States, the size and scale and atmosphere of all those places I'd read of in books, imagining opening myself up to that great vastness – landscapes and cityscapes full of such sky and space unknown to me here.

In 40 years I've become doubtful about the American government and I don't feel like going any more.

But one place I'd still like to experience is the Prairies. The Prairie States. Great grain growing areas: grass and cereals, corn and wheat. A place where the distance between the land and sky is wide and clear and open.

I've always imagined being on a motorbike. Riding noiselessly, pushing into a cool but not cold breeze. I've a light cap on my head that I can take off easily and a nice shirt. In out-of-the-way areas there's probably still places you can do that. The police put out signs and people pretend they haven't been warned before. "Hey, have I caught you again?" "Aw, shucks, Officer... Say, if you happen to come by my store some time, well... you can have yourself a real nice meal there!" And that policeman, he's having good meals all the time, getting looked after.

But I'm not local.

I offer cigarettes. "Why, they're still full, buddy!" It's true. My friends bid me pack them, saying: "After a few days of that scenery, you'll be reduced to smoking. And if that doesn't happen you can offer them to everyone." But I don't meet anyone. The road's empty. I see no-one. You know, I'd not even imagined a policeman until now – in 40 years.

His cigarette lit, I'm up and on my way again. Riding free. Just the sound of the wind passing through trees and crops alongside me. Riding and listening. And then sometimes to cut the engine; sometimes to stop and stand stock-still for 15, 20 minutes and breathe it all in – that swooshing breeze and the smell of the trees and grass and corn; and to hear the sounds of birds and the animals moving in the river; sensing all those natural presences.

And tonight I will be sleeping under the stars and listening to the noises of evening. The sky on my skin. Listening. Until the calls of early morning lure me to another day.

Love

*Inspired by Maria Modeste,
Joan, Nancy Donlon,
Denis Ramsey and others.*

What is Love?

I was thinking about my children
When they were very young –
That's love and tenderness and
EVERYTHING



What is Love?
I listened to a song
on the radio about a young
man called Nature Boy and he
said: "The greatest thing
you'll ever learn is
just to love
and be loved
in return."
There.

(Nature Boy, Nat King Cole)



"Enjoy the Joy of Love"
That would be my message
You could write it on a t-shirt

Love is...

Affection
Warmth

Fuzziness
Butterflies

I think love is very
large
and wide
when one is fortunate



When I think of love
I think of a happy family

Birds of a Feather

I love the birds, the wild birds
To look out of the window at them
I used to feed them on the balcony and it was wonderful
To get up in the morning and hear them singing
It was lovely. The birdies.

I love my birds – have studied them
Watched from windows
Taken time to know them, their behaviours.

In love, they're just like humans, goodness me –
How they prepare themselves with such concern,
Especially blackbirds.
There he goes, whistling his little tune and
“Here... here”, she'll answer back
Then he'll be walking in front of her
And they're trying
Trying everything to attract each other!
It's beautiful
A delight –
Their feelings for each other
And what I feel, looking on.



Squirrels

There's a notice in Kensington Gardens that says:
'Do Not Feed the Squirrels'
But everyone ignores it
Down by the Albert Memorial, that's where you'll find us
You can whistle, most people whistle
I make a click with my teeth and tongue
And they come running
For ordinary peanuts
Shortbreads, custard creams, digestives
Any form of biscuit

See, I really love them
They're the only creature I can come into contact with
Other people's dogs – I can't play with them
Other people's children – I can't play with them
All that leaves me is the grey squirrel
Mind you, if there are kids feeding them, I let them do it
It's a kid's pastime

I only took it up late in life –
When I worked, I'd go on Sundays
Then I retired and started seeing them every day
21 years ago

I visit the local parks in the week
I'm on the 9am with my bus pass
But Sundays –
Sundays are for the Royal Parks
When the bus has no restrictions
Then I'll leave at seven, stay four hours and not sit down once
Going out to Hyde Park
Kensington Gardens
Regents Park
St James' Park
Greenwich Park
Out to the only bit of countryside I see

I've not been since December
Towards the end –
Well, by the time I got back on the bus I was about dead

I must be in loads of tourist photos
People stop with their cameras at Kensington Gardens
And snap me
But I've never had a picture myself

One time this posh fella
Rode up on his bicycle and
Tried to make me stop
Gave me an earful
“Can't you read the signs?” he said
Probably picked me 'cos I'm a simple-looking geezer
He cycled off
And I ignored him
Went back to my biscuits and squirrels.



Spring & Daffodils

*Inspired by Margaret Clowes,
Doreen Buckland,
Andrew Mitchell,
Moirra Jenkins,
Joan and others.*

Green Light

I'm a green person, I think
I'm a green person
I love spring
after that dreaded, brown period
that dry, papery, brown period
winter.

Once the snowdrops come and the daffodils
and the green tips of the daffodils shoot up
and you get this great feeling of "Hey!"
it's a feeling of optimism.
Yes, green
I love green.



Flowers Can Inspire and Lift You Higher

Yes, that's the smell of spring
the first sign
the daffodil
yellow sunshine
green is growth
bobbing bright
sprouting hope
outer petals
inner flower
pollen stem
slender tower
winter over
hope is here
fresh appearing
sent to cheer.



Almost Haiku

Golden narcissi
allay my suffering.
Awake –
here's scent of Spring.

Daffodils

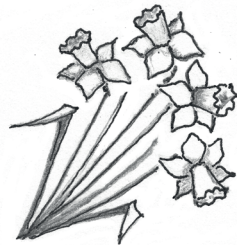
What do I see when I look at them?

Well, my first thought
is if I could draw them,
the sunshine petals, gilded trumpet, upright stem.

When I was 15
I was awarded a Credit
in an Art Matriculation
and I thought I was going to be a Great Artist,
the Next Big Thing!
But,
with the War and...
practical considerations,
college passed by
and I stepped into a small family business.

The swords of their leaves,
their yellow heads bobbing
against your purple sweater
in perfect complement.

Even now, I practice looking,
to see beauty in things:
like you
and the flowers.



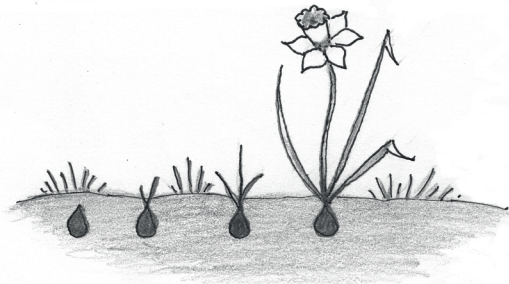
Musings on Daffodils

Spring
Life
Sun
The miracle of nature

I look at these daffodils and I wonder
how,
how they have evolved
to attract insects
to want to come and pollinate them
so they can go on living,
reproducing,
making copies of themselves.
I don't know how they do that.
How?
How does a daffodil
know what will attract a crowd of insects?
A couple of inches of extra height? A deeper blush of yellow? An
upward glance?

You see seeds that fall on the top of concrete buildings
and survive
and grow
and thrive
and still reach their potential.
How can a plant come through concrete
and remain whole?
It's extraordinary.

Spring
Life
Sun
The miracle of nature
How we have adapted
and survived.



Bloom

I love spring
I love spring flowers
They are the hope of the future
You have to plant them in September / October
and they won't be at their best until February / March –
So it's kind of a way of pitching for tomorrow.



Your Space

These last few pages have been left blank for you to write on. Perhaps something in the book has triggered off a memory for you? Maybe there's something you feel moved to express? This is your space to add your own mark.

Perhaps something will come to you quickly, or you could flick back through the book and look at the titles and chapters for ideas. Give yourself time and space and jot things down as they pop up – interesting words and phrases, images and recollections, feelings. Once you've got these down, you'll have the basis to craft something. Don't write to impress, just be true to the images, the sensations and the words that arise for you. It doesn't have to be long and it doesn't have to be 'Poetry' with a capital P.

Having said that, if you write something you like you could think about sharing it. Sometimes our poems are very much appreciated by our loved ones. That can come later though – for now, this is your space.

Happy writing!

Further Reading

The following book helped to inspire me with ideas, themes and approaches. Kenneth Koch tells of his experiences teaching poetry writing in an American nursing home. The techniques, though, are useful for all ages and the book includes a wonderful selection of his students poems:

Koch, Kenneth. *I Never Told Anybody: Teaching Poetry Writing to Old People*, New York: Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1997

The booklist below is recommended for readers wanting to learn more about using personal storytelling in the context of therapeutic care. It has been compiled by the Chaplain of Marie Curie Hospice Hampstead, Rabbi Markus Lange.

Paula Crimmens. *Creative Groupwork with Older People*, JKP, 1998

Alida Gersie. *Reflections on Therapeutic Storymaking: The Use of Stories in Groups*, JKP, 1997

Alida Gersie. *Storymaking in Bereavement: Dragons Fight in the Meadow*, JKP, 1991

Alida Gersie and Nancy King. *Storymaking in Education and Therapy*, JKP, 1990

Yasmin Gunaratnam and David Oliviere. *Narrative and Stories in Health Care: Illness, Dying, and Bereavement*, Oxford University Press, 2009

Lucinda Jarrett (ed.). *Creative Engagement in Palliative Care: New Perspectives on User Involvement*, Radcliffe Publishing, 2007

Doug Lipman. *Improving Your Storytelling: Beyond the Basics for All Who Tell Stories in Work or Play*, August House, 1999

Jack Maguire. *The Power of Personal Storytelling: Spinning Tales to Connect with Others*, Tarcher/Putnam, 1998

Annette Simmons. *The Story Factory: Inspiration, Influence and Persuasion Through the Art of Storytelling*, Basic Books, 2001/2006

Rachel Stanworth. *Recognizing Spiritual Needs in People Who are Dying*, Oxford University Press, 2004

How Marie Curie Hospices help people with terminal cancer and other illnesses

Marie Curie Hospices are vibrant, homely places offering a range of different activities and services to help people with terminal cancer and other life-limiting illnesses achieve the best possible quality of life. Care is free to patients and families.

Meeting individual needs

When first coming to the hospice patients and their carers have the opportunity to discuss their situation and our services with one of our doctors or a specialist nurse. We work in partnership with other professionals involved in your care, such as your GP, District Nurse, hospital consultant and palliative care nurse. This ensures that every individual programme of care is linked to every patient's personal goals and preferences.

Our professional team

We have a full team of professionals including specialist nurses and doctors, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, complementary therapists, social workers and chaplains. Social, practical, spiritual and emotional support is available for all of our patients, their families and carers.

Volunteering and Fundraising

Our volunteer roles are varied. They range from answering phones and greeting people in reception to leading an art therapy session for patients. Not only do volunteers help with running the hospice, but they also enhance our patients' experience by offering specialist and professional skills and help supporting our teams of fundraisers.

Contact the *Marie Curie Hospice Hampstead* on:
020 7853 3400
for more information.

Raising funds in aid of



During 2011 - 2012, I was privileged to spend several months visiting patients at Marie Curie Hospice Hampstead as Poet-in-Residence. Here is a selection of the stories I gathered - stories from disparate lives, set out as verse. These are the *Voices from Marie Curie Hospice Hampstead* - everyday tales from patients, visitors, volunteers and staff in this oasis of care.

About Marie Curie Hospice Hampstead

Set in a quiet corner of Hampstead, this purpose-built hospice offers specialist care for people with cancer and other life-limiting illnesses. Last year the dedicated team cared for more than 1,000 patients. The services Marie Curie provides are always free but it can only continue to do this through the generosity of supporters.

It costs over £5.3 million to run the hospice each year.

By purchasing this book you are helping to raise essential funds to enable the hospice to continue it's much relied upon work.

Cover illustration: Colourbox.com

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