Hospice Poetry – Andy Edmeads

Association of Hospice and Palliative Care Chaplains 2013

Poetry Workshops

### Hospice Language

Twenty six letters in the alphabet

Mixed together to make up words

That explain everything

So why is it so hard to find the right words?

This poem is a contradiction

Words trying to express the inexpressible

Words count for so little

In the face of this enormity

This full stop marking the end of a sentence

Which is life

Words dry up and leaving them behind

Another language is rediscovered

The forgotten language of tears, a smile,

Touch - a hand

On the shoulder, a hug, perhaps even silence

If I dare

No more words.

What is needed now is that

The Words become flesh.

And the Word became flesh

and dwelt among us

### Stay here with me

'Stay here with me

Remain here with me

Watch and pray'

Looking out over the altar

at those dear faithful faces

preparing to receive

I was overwhelmed by the privilege

of accompanying them on their

last journey

And the words from the chant

'My heart is broken'

Is God's heart broken also

in this place?

I claim too much

Yet feel His presence

More clearly

With whom do I stay?

It seems accompanying them

I accompany You

### The Sunday after Ascension

'It is for your sake that I go away.'

Let us not rush to Pentecost

God's presence everywhere

But wait as He instructed

No glorifying hymns

to a Gone Away God

But stay in this place

of patients struggling for meaning

Clinging desperately to life

their visitors, wait...

Into the absence

he arrives, that frightened

frightening Chaplain

Sits, listens

Presence as Evangelism

God's own way

Prays for them,

waits with them

And leaves

And leaves them to their tears and thoughts

of a larger world

where everything is held

Absence after a visit

is very different

from mere absence

Wait

### Self-starter

The buzzer doesn't call me

The call is for a Nurse, a Doctor

Someone who can do something

I send no invitations to counselling

or bereavement evenings

I am a self-starter

and that drains me

I have to make the first contact

some patients make a request

but they are few and far between

So, like an aged car battery

on a cold winter's morning

I have to start again

Draw on courage, face fears of rejection

anger, pain

afraid of my own shadow

And ashamed that my fears

get in the way of my faith

Eventually I gird up my loins

Cross myself in prayer

and step over the threshold

Only to be welcomed, time and again

with open arms

open hearts willing me to come close

Next morning it is cold again

Yesterday already forgotten

and I must start again

Having to learn again and again

That the patient is God's answer

to all my fears.

### Out of the ordinary

It was a day like any other,

Patients tell me.

On holiday, a birthday

Visiting a friend

Putting out the cat,

scraping ice from the windscreen

when they first felt dizzy, the pain sharper

than usual,

the words to the crossword clue made no sense

when they realised something was wrong,

something out of the ordinary

It was a day like no other

When the consultant broke the news

Their worst fears realised

And the news became a blur

And they needed the steadying hand of another

Needed others to say more clearly

what the Doctor had told them

Those days like every other day

And none

Out of the ordinary

When the world changes

Everything now needing reframing

And they can’t find a frame to fit

Nothing off the shelf will do

Out of the Ordinary

### Inadequate tools

Who are you kidding?

This isn't poetry

It is a child's fishing net

full of holes

trying to catch golden ribbons

on the surface of the stream

It is a cheap camera

blurring the vision

of the autumn mists

over Whitchurch

It is a fear that if I don't catch in words

I shall forget

Joseph's first skip or Henry's eyes

when he is shy

Words, art, poetry

and their mechanics

cannot do justice

to what has been seen, heard, felt

So, I grapple with inadequate tools

and fail again

but am reassured that poetry

is never finished

but simply abandoned

### Keeping Company

Analyse, rationalise

Medicalise and measure

The need to be in control

To understand, to heal and cure

In this place we come to an end

Of these things

At times we deny this

But death will out

In the end all efforts

To control and manage fail

Deep down the patients know this

We too

And at last we learn

To accompany them

on their painful journey

Painful too, because it reminds us

Of the journey we also have to make

### Beginning again

Tuesday morning after three days

Rest

Patients handed over

and we are plunged

back into the depths and the deaths

Three days of a kind

of forgetting

that this is the human condition

To suffer and to die

Universal amnesia

even in this place

Surprisingly surprised

That patients are anxious, fearful

Terrified

So we choose to forget

and wonder why re entry

into this place

feels like a physical blow

Beginning again

To regret our mortality

### A thin veil

Not to some other place

A pilgrimage to the famous

The Recognised

Places where the veil is said to be thin

But to the home of the dying

where guests live out their last days

A resting place on life's journey

Watching, waiting, crying, dying

Praying always for the grace to let go

Hand over, give up control

Allows others in

The veil here is thin indeed

The known and the unknown

Breathing changes

Slows down

Almost imperceptible now

The final letting go

This is the pilgrimage

Each one of us must make

Journeying to the edge of the unknown

Praying that we may be kept firm

in the hope that is set before us.

### Bearing too much reality

Eliot was right

Human beings cannot bear too much reality

Choosing to tune out

Change the station

or stay to the end

of the news

Glad to hear of some long lost cat

reunited with its owner

Soldiers dying

Hospitals full to breaking point

Famine, wars

and rumours of wars

are too much to bear

Too much reality

In this place

Surfaces scratched away

Revealing depths

Too overwhelming to plumb

Climbing our way back

To the surface we are surprised

when people are scared

We offer sniff sticks, relaxation tapes

a shot in the arm

for them for us

Drinking away our evenings

Not bearing too much reality