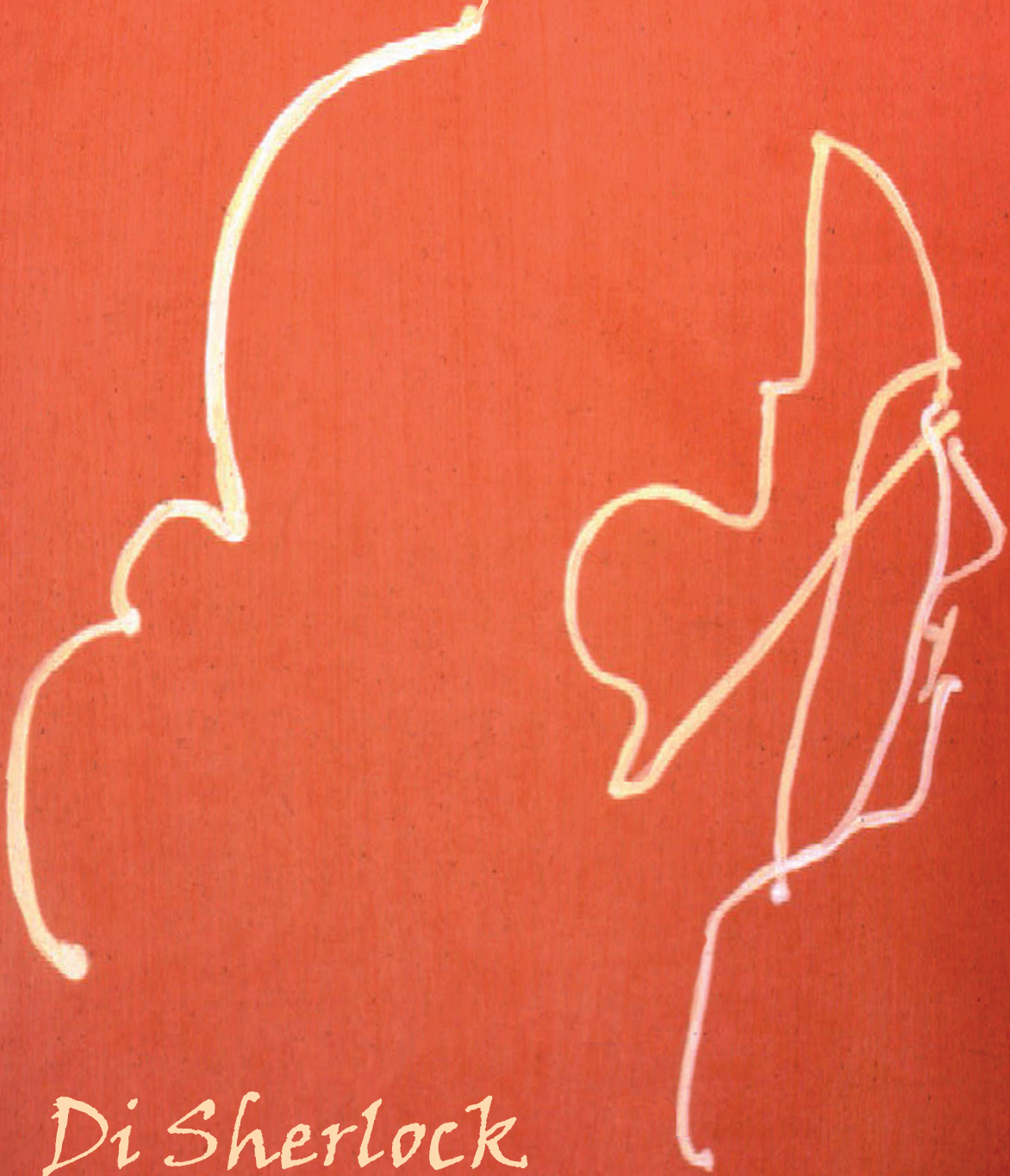
written portraits



Di Sherlock

written portraits

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inspired by conversations with
visitors to Maggie's West London
and staff working in cancer care
at Charing Cross Hospital

Di Sherlock

Thanks to

Sinead Cope and her team and all the volunteers who keep the kettle boiling at Maggie's, Kelly Gleason, Imperial CRUK Nurse and Professor Sophie Day for keeping me on track, everyone at Goldsmiths, Imperial College and Warwick University involved in 'People Like You' who made the work possible in the first place – and furthered my education.

written portraits is dedicated to all those who gave their precious time and stories round the kitchen table at Maggie's and in hospital corners at Charing Cross and Hammersmith and to my late father who taught me what living with cancer means.

First published 2020
Second edition published 2020

Cover design by Andie Scott

Typeset and designed by Louise Millar

Original photography by Anne Heslop © Anne Heslop

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ISBN 978-1-5272-5953-9

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Printed in Poland by Totem

Contents

Round the Kitchen Table

single portraits

group portraits

Hospital Corners

single portraits

group portraits

Foreword

by Professor Sophie Day

In conversation with Di Sherlock people affected by and working with cancer reflected on what mattered to them. They met individually and in small groups at Maggie's West London, Charing Cross Hospital and elsewhere. Di then wrote and gave back 'portraits', which those depicted have agreed to share. Her practice is part of our research in personalised cancer care: we also held six open Science Cafés to discuss developments that scientists, clinicians, patients and others presented; and followed practices of research and care within Charing Cross Hospital and Imperial College London that are characterising cancers more precisely so as to improve treatment. All three strands of our work reflect on the requirement to participate in order to personalise, and all three reflect on the variable categories that emerge. People drew attention to non-biological aspects of personalisation and the recognition crafted through writing and returning poems as a form of 'honouring.' We hope that healthcare staff and visitors to Maggie's West London who are included in this collection will be able to compare experiences of participating in personalisation.

written portraits is part of our project **People Like You: Contemporary Figures of Personalisation**, supported by the Wellcome Trust from 2018-2022 (grant, 205456/Z/16/Z).

Introduction

When I was invited to bring my 'Written Portraits' practice to visitors at Maggie's West and staff working in cancer care at Charing Cross Hospital I was inspired and terrified in equal measure.

I'd developed the work in the Memory Cafés of Westminster, Kensington & Chelsea and Fulham and Hammersmith working with people living with Alzheimer's. In the Memory Cafés people sat with carers and team members who'd been briefed beforehand. Here I was encouraged to introduce myself – round the kitchen table at Maggie's or in someone's office or at a staff meeting at the hospital. It felt horribly like cold calling. Moreover I'd never set foot in a Maggie's Centre and since my late father's battle with Non Hodgkin's Lymphoma hadn't been back to a hospital.

I could never have imagined just how enjoyable this was going to be! The warmth and generosity of all my 'sitters' and the unstinting support and encouragement of Sinead Cope and her team at Maggie's and Kelly Gleason at Charing Cross meant inspiration trumped terror every time. No contest.

Making a 'written portrait' happens in three stages – there's the conversation, then the writing and finally the giving back of the 'portrait' to the 'sitter'. Conversations with Hospital Staff usually lasted around 30 mins.

There was one 'sitting' – either with an individual or a group. At Maggie's time was more flexible but unpredictable – one conversation lasted three-and-a-half hours, another was reduced to 20 mins because of an oncology appointment overrunning. A group portrait typically extended over several weeks.

The giving back is a critical part of the process. I need to know I've got the facts right (I don't record I take notes) and that there's nothing the sitter is uncomfortable with. Negotiation is part of the deal – the sitter needs to like how they are depicted, voiced, for the portrait to work as an honouring. Of course it also needs to work for me. Occasionally there was substantial dialogue! As I prepared the poems for publishing it occurred to me to invite people to send an image to accompany their portrait – whatever they liked. With few exceptions they did.

Writing of course happens in time. As John Berger so succinctly put it: *All portraits speak in a past tense. All sitters have walked on.* Since talking to me, some of the hospital staff have moved to a different floor or even changed hospitals and for one sitter at Maggie's walking on was literally the case – after our conversation she had a hip op and when I next saw her she'd *walked on* a different person.

I offer the portraits in gratitude and the belief that honouring ourselves and our unique stories is vital to our well-being. The stories here tell of supreme kindness, courage, insight, honesty, laughter and pain. Everyday and jaw-dropping.

There is no such thing as an ordinary life.

Round the Kitchen Table

On First Visiting Maggie's West

In the precinct of the Hospital
outside its jurisdiction
an Orange Box –
tangerine puzzle between worlds
roof in flight
entrance hidden
like something from the pages of Ruiz Zafon
or Harry Potter –
visible
when you know where to look.

The visible and the invisible,
the in and the out,
is at the heart of this place.
We come and we go.

Lost on the outside
I am lost on the inside.
A moment of suspension
rush of anonymity
I could be anyone
feel the need to identify myself
despite the open door
look for a gatekeeper.
A woman volunteers a smile.

The Box unfolds
an origami of light.
The fickle Spring sky is everywhere.

Rainbows glimmer on wood
as the busy kettle serves
the Kitchen Table -
the hub, nub, agora
where keen minds and long memories
dissect the latest bulletins
from the ruinous body politic.

Away from the Table
quiet spaces offer themselves
or hide round corners,
hearth and book
flower and stone
home and not home.

A stairway points skyward
self-evident
as a ladder in a children's game
or Jacob's dream.
Up here, the Team
keep the architectural starship
live on the radar.

The roof beckons -
sun and shade in equal measure,
tree and bird
reaching, curling, swooping,
the leafing of the vine
a promise in the making.

In the Picture

He sits
a modern Maharajah
with Bollywood smile
four-square to camera
pitch perfect
in black and white.

At the book launch
he takes the podium at Christies,
speaks of his years at Maggie's
'Life' the book
and the human condition.

On tour
he goes to the Scottish Parliament,
his image hangs in The Lowry.
He's travelled to Australia, Rio,
but he's never been to Manchester.
He notes with satisfaction
the average buildings are not more
than two stories high.

Turbo charged
the story continues
as Maurice gets the tea.

He's an old BOAC man,
worked in sales in a luxury office
where celebrities dropped by.
For twenty years he works for BA
then joins Gulf Air.
From Toronto to Palolem Beach
people and places fly across time and space
captured on his phone.

He used to put things on the back burner
he says,
now he's the opposite –
What? When? Where? –
doesn't let the grass grow under his feet.

He hits seventy,
happens on a copy of The Sun:
Seventy inspirational people wanted
to celebrate their Seventieth with HRH.

And there he is
smiling to camera
on the spiral staircase at Spencer House,
one of the Celebratory Seventy
framing the septuagenarian Prince.

Round the Table anything goes
but his casuals are selective,
dashingly accessorised.

At twenty-one he had a suit with pocket handkerchief.
His Dad was always smartly dressed.

You can picture him at the Taj taking tea
but he's no toff.
He knows hardship.
At the age of twelve his mother dies –
he and his sister come home to Dad
and an empty house.
"You dust yourself off."

He talks fondly of India
where people may be dirt poor
but will gladly share an orange with you,
conjures a crescent beach with quiet palms
in South Goa
where he has an apartment.

The ring of black onyx catches the eye
as he indicates Carol's home-made cake,
helps me to a slice.
Then, with consummate gentility,
he turns to a lady – hovering, uncertain,
her first day at Maggie's –
and easing her to the Table,
explains how things work.

His gaze returns to 'Life' -
"When I'm gone it'll be here, this book" –
checks his phone and stands.
Life calls.

Per Ardua ad Astra

"I'm a Christian,"
she says with a smile
that suggests more
than meets the eye.

The dark amethyst of the jacket
has something of the bishop's purple
but she doesn't look like a Minister –
though she could have been once.
But she does preach
six times a year
at a community church in Fitzrovia.
Then I notice the cross –
unusual.
A gift from Ethiopian friends
she thinks.

Beneath the pacific surface
a confluence of blood –
British, Danish, French.

Her father, an Englishman,
meets her mother in a café,
recounts events
in his signature rhyming couplets:

I saw sitting on a chair
a Viking maiden blonde and fair..
..Betty was the maiden's name
and so into my life she came.

The lines, part of a longer ode,
are penned neatly but freely
on stationery of the time,
though, she says wryly,
the back of an envelope would do.

When war comes
he shaves a few years off his age
to get into the RAF.
Years later
when she takes him back
to the Canada of his youth
to celebrate his 85th
he's turning 88.

George
is an incorrigible free spirit,
writes:
I like to have the feeling,
I can go where, when and how I like.

But when her mother becomes ill
he must stay put. And so
to stay his Wanderlust
he picks up the pen abandoned
after the War
he never talked about
and writes *The Spirit of Adventure* –
a song of himself
in metre and rhyme
joyous
as Walt Whitman.

From an early age he's raring to go.
Australia, New Zealand, beckon,
but an assisted passage is not for him.
The money he's saved in secret
will get him to Canada though.

Leaving his family open-mouthed
he steams out of Waterloo
bound for Quebec
to try his luck as a farmer's hand
in Winnipeg
'Queen of the Prairies'.

Later
he crosses the border
without a passport
to find English pals in New York,
goes with one to Chicago
where Al Capone's in town.
Heading back
on the roof of a freight train,
they wind up in jail –
murder suspects
in a case of mistaken identity
worthy of Mark Twain.

It's a rollicking tale
of a young man's quest for adventure
in the America of the late 1920s,
a lust for life that sees him
up and down the West Coast –
from Charleston to Los Angeles,
Frisco to Seattle,
passing through the Panama Canal
eight times
as ship's fireman.

He's caught in a hurricane
in the Caribbean
and the dry land equivalent –
The Wall Street Crash.

But the youthful gaze
sees not risk, only adventure,
inspired by a mother who had
circled the globe a few times
and to whom travelling was almost life itself.

With a wry smile she observes
his mother, a Frenchwoman,
was a companion most like –
not an adventurer like him.

He dies at the age of ninety-nine –
"one year short of a helicopter ride."

She reflects for a moment.

"Sometimes people say the expression
on my face is my mother" –
a woman who considered herself
absent too long from her Danish homeland
to collect the pension due.
"There was a lot of sorrow in my mother."

As she talks
the glasses poised between finger and thumb
turn this way and that, a pendulum
of motion and emotion.

A writer herself
her voice is silent
till following the father's cue,
she begins her own journey
into the labyrinth.
It's life and death
but not as he knew it.

She comes back from the hairdresser
to find not the thin envelope
she usually got after a mammogram
but a fat one.

It was a swift call to arms –
surgery, chemo, radiotherapy,
over ten months.

"The day of the biopsy was for me
one of the darkest hours of this journey –
I wished my mother was alive."

Still in shock
she begins treatment,
choosing Charing Cross over UCH
because she had a good nurse.
From her hospital room
the sister who took care of her
looked out at her old school.

As she begins chemotherapy
she has a dream –
she's standing before a dark tunnel
she knows she must enter.
It speaks with Jungian prescience.

Her mind goes back to Ghana,
her VSO years
teaching physics and chemistry
where "the thorns were sharp and the roses beautiful."

She gets malaria and hepatitis,
ravaged by sickness
walks between worlds.
But at the end of the night
the Morning Star
always brought
the return of the Light.

'Stars...
all dying, changing matter
into energy...
take me to a place
where the stars will shine...

And let the morning star shine
in my present darkness,
telling me dawn will rise.'

Since the biopsy
she has not cried.
Nine months later
on the radiotherapy table
the unshed tears break free.

'So let the tears cascade down
like torrential rain.
One day all my tears
will be wiped away.'

The conversation winds,
pools, surges forwards,
backwards,
each piece of the story
diving into itself
fractal-like,
patterns emerging
like rock pools that vanish
at the turn of the tide.

Before the cancer
she did a lot of etching –
donned the white gloves
in the British Museum
to leaf through Da Vinci and Rembrandt
then sit behind perspex
translating the Masters
to her own page.

She still sketches, admits
to once having a drawing on show
in Tate Modern's Community Room.

I mention Van Gogh.
The eyes smile.
“My grandmother’s name may be Flemish.”

At home she has a Danish flag,
cooks a traditional beef dish with prunes
and celebrates Christmas on Christmas Eve.
She wears a ring of Danish silver.

“It’s very much to do with my heart.”
Then adds with a grin,
“But if England were playing Denmark at football
I’d support England.”

The conversation takes an unexpected turn
and I’m doing the talking,
recalling my journey through
my mother’s dementia and the cancers
that took my father and brother.
The pastoral gaze is clear, penetrant,
the eyes infinitely kind.

I begin this poem in Regent’s Park.
A butterfly lands bright on the page
and for a moment the sun breaks through.
The obscuring wind blows
and it’s away.
And it occurs to me
our conversation was like this -
a meditation
in and out of darkness and light,
feet planted firmly as they can be,
eyes to the stars.

An Occasional Inconvenience

"I don't let cancer run my life,"
he says,
a sanguine presence,
Jovial,
heart stopped and rewired
half a dozen times or more.

With "three life-threatening conditions
on his dance card," he is
"slightly less concerned about cancer."

Born into six generations
of monumental masons
he's familiar with death
from an early age.

As a teenager
he's tasked with exhuming nuns
in a Sussex nunnery destined for a housing estate.
The bodies lie in the erstwhile kitchen garden.
"Great vegetables!" he grins.

His bone-shifting comrade
is a Scots lad bristling with bravado.
Next morning he wakes
to find his pal's done a runner
and taken his mattress with him.

His father hewed the first stone
for Churchill's grave,
but he's not fated to be
a chip off the old block.
The world and his mother
have other plans.

He laughs.
"I'm no Michelangelo.
I don't have a delicate enough touch
not to smash the rock."
Though it's delicate enough
to turn elegant pieces out of wood.

Instead
he becomes a mechanical engineer,
PR man in the music business,
seller of "interesting things,"
player in the property game,
promoter of motor sport.
"I've had a varied life,"
he says devilishly.

He's also been a carer.
For fifteen years he shared
both mother's and father's journeys
through cancer.

"We're afraid of death,"
he reflects,
attributes the modern condition
to living "risk-free" –

not the case in wartime.
“Insurance companies have a hard time of it.”

When he’s diagnosed himself
in his middle years
he’s wryly philosophical.
“Having a limp dick I can live with.”

For him illness is part of living.
But not everyone shares his view.
To some round the Table
he appears frivolous.
It sets him apart.
His own suffering, he feels,
is incommensurate.
There is a sense of guilt.
He smiles.
“We’re all different here.”

There is something of Balzac or Dickens
in the sweep of the gaze,
the playful badinage.
His features are more in line
with his ancestry on his father’s side –
a Hanoverian connection
not proven but probable.

He’s read Kafka, Goethe and Nietzsche –
though does not purport to understand
the creator of the *Übermensch*.
He read him because
“he had to mentally.”

He also *has to do* crosswords –
though not The Times –
and writes a good letter of complaint.
Keeping the brain agile
is a common theme round the Table.

Brunel and Stephenson are his heroes,
steam trains a passion.
"I've done the whole nine yards
of standing at the edge of Kings Cross Station,"
he fesses with broad-gauge grin.

He cooks for himself – a sound diet
with fresh fruit and veg.
And yet.
"I don't know what I'm doing wrong!"
he wails bleakly, surveying the girth
magnified by the acute angle
of the gaze.
It troubles him constantly.

Cancer
on the other hand
is "an occasional inconvenience."

Howling Wolf

She sweeps in –
an aria of black and purple
back-laced coat winging behind
like one of Poe's Gothic beauties
or a sweet faced assassin
from Kill Bill.

"Oncology,"
she says
telegraphically.

Consulting her watch
she informs me
how many minutes I have
of her time.
I'm struck by the turn of phrase
at once entirely practical
and an adroit reminder
Time is a commodity
apportioned to each
not to be wasted.

Saturn,
chronic time-keeper,
governs her stars,
but had she been born a month before
as expected
she'd be a Sagittarian.

Now her Sun, almost in Aquarius,
touches the rod of the stern god
with a wand of air.

"I like a bit of structure,
but at the same time I like to go
with intuition, gut instinct."

Her Chinese horoscope,
aligned with her ancestry
on her mother's side,
shows the element
Water –
intuitive shape-shifter.

Her mother is a Water Dragon.
The oldest of eight children,
she soon learned to be
"a think on your feet kind of person."
Looking after her seven siblings,
cooking and cleaning,
sewing and handcrafting,
whilst going to school,
the Dragon gathered her forces.

Later, as a chef with her spouse
in a Chinese restaurant,
she keeps a lid on the pressure.
"There's no messing with her,"
says the daughter, turns now
to her own story.

She wanted to be a computer programmer,
even a chef –
though this she admits was a long shot –
trained as a nurse.

Technically she's retired -
hasn't worked for three years.
Being a nurse is a disadvantage
she says,
"because you want to know more.
You want to know the terminologies and everything."

Tempus fugit.
She cuts to the chase.
Coordinates of time and place
she delivers with the exactitude
of an atomic clock.

8pm
11th April 2014.
It begins.

She's on the phone
to her soon-to- be- ex partner
randomly checking
when she feels something
in the right breast.

1st July 2014.
She has a mastectomy reconstruction.
There are platelet problems.
Two days later she undergoes
haematoma correction
and a blood transfusion.

19th August 2014.
A fateful date.
First chemo begins.

"Six cycles every week
split into two cycles of three:
the first three cycles
only chemo,
the second three
chemo alongside eighteen cycles
of targeted therapy."

Like Ada Lovelace
at her Engine
she dissects the years
that follow, computes the sum
of the telling,
proofing my notes
as I make them –
the unstructured nature
of the jottings
may lead to inaccuracies.

Over the next five to six years
she has seven different diagnoses
including a brain tumour -
"a ticking time bomb" -
ovarian cysts
and migrainus headaches,
not to mention
anxiety, depression
and two falls.

18th June 2019.
They find an 8 cm cancer
in her small left breast.

19th August 2019.
Five years to the day
of the first chemo
second chemo begins.

Six cycles are scheduled
every three weeks
"but ended up being five cycles
whilst on targeted therapy
for full eighteen cycles.
Chemo stops two days before surgery."

Satisfied I am now
properly in the picture,
she closes her diary.

The raven's wing of hair is gone,
reveals the beauty of the bones,
the calligraphy of the eyes.
But this is not what she sees.
"Tin-Tin with less hair."

She rises,
a dark hellebore,
an echo of the goal-scorer
on the netball court,
the ballet lessons,
in the lengthening spine.

“I don’t know when I’ll see you again,”
she says with a lupine smile
and
in a flick of a coat tail
she’s gone.

I’m fortunate to catch her again -
nimble fingers playing on her phone
as she chomps on a burger.
Still
it’s like netting phosphorescence
or a flying fish.

She gets up to hug a woman
she hasn’t seen for a while.
Ever alert to the comings and goings
of the pack,
she’s quick to show affection,
kinship.

Sleep hijacked by chemo,
she was up all night
crocheting a blanket -
a multiverse
of hexagonal shapes
barely begun
she may yet abandon.

In the darkness
her mother hears her
working the wool,
howling
with her Spirit Animal.

Holding the Sky

He parks his scooter –
the hipster variety –
ready to ride the rodeo
in the Fulham Palace Road.

As an architect
the Park and Ride in Seattle
was his first big project –
a multi-storey design
with staircases and a bridge
to catch the bendy buses.
Parking for 1,200 cars.
Gargantuan.

He was a carpenter first,
trained with Bovis at the Trocadero
then worked as an exhibition builder –
the NEC, Olympia, Le Bourget –
ends up in Virginia
inside the Philip Morris building.

The eyes that view the world
of strange
with equanimity
widen.
“I had one of the weirdest experiences of my life.”

Inside the building
smoking is strictly forbidden –
even in the car park –
though at the time
you could smoke in airports
and hospitals in the US
and this is after all
the Headquarters
of Marlboro Cigarettes.
The corporate fear
of passive smoking
does not pass him by.
“Bit sinister,”
he says with a grin.
“Put me right off smoking.”

He gets his professional wake-up call
building luxury yachts.
He’s making curved staircases –
notoriously tricky -
with marked success.
The Chief Naval Architect observes
if he wants to design
he should study architecture.
So he does.
Graduates from the University of Washington.

Back in the UK
he designs the Ballroom Wing
of the Heythrop Park Hotel Golf and Spa.
Once a Jesuit college
the ecumenical is gone

but the house
retains its earthly glory.

The human imagination
hewn in brick or stone
commands respect,
has him seeking strategies
to fight the *value engineering*
that "strips the architecture out of the design."

Acts of demolition
are ruinous reality.
I love these old buildings
is the standard joke in architects' circles
he says with a bleak smile.

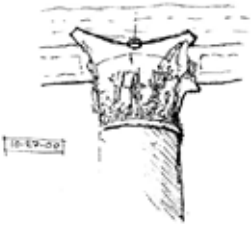
Humour – wry, playful –
is his default setting.
Eschewing small talk,
he prefers to argue the politics
of Modernism, quoting
the fin de siècle mantra
of Klimt and company:
Der Zeit ihre Kunst
Der Kunst ihre Freiheit.

The British Museum
with its Grand Orders and Great Court,
Lloyds of London,
have his admiration.
The National Gallery
prized by HRH
does not.

Next to St Martin in the Fields
it's "a mish-mash,"
the portico of the church,
an artful nod to the Pantheon,
exposing the muddle
of the monument to art.

Dismissing the Royal champion –
"an anachronism" –
he references Pevsner and Summerson,
Heritage luminaries
and critics of the building.

"It has all the finest ingredients
but lacks a good chef,"
he says, twinkling.
Then, suddenly serious,
"Architecture is frozen politics.
It's colossally important."



He deplores emotional attachment to ideas.
Liking or not liking
have nothing to do with aesthetic values
he argues.
But when it comes to a personal favourite
the Venetian Gothic of the Ca D' Oro
has him waxing like a gibbous moon
over the Grand Canal.

Conjuring the image on his phone
he explains the lightness,
the play of the facades,
the quatrefoils that turn like trigonometrical keys,
the virtuoso counterpoint of symmetry and asymmetry.
As with all design, he looks for
"the way the building holds the sky."

He shows a second image –
seductive lingerie that cleverly echoes
the inside out of the Lloyds Building
designed by his daughter
clearly schooled in seeing.

His aunt Mary
knew Seamus Heaney.
In Ulster
the naming of place
is a baring of bones.

The teacher of Gaelic,
the poet,
travail the tongue,
in the cavern
of mouth and sky
words re-sound.

Heaney,
working on *The Spirit Level*
in Harvard,
pens a dedication
to her nephew
he barely knows
working on the yachts
in Seattle.

They meet
finally
in Wicklow
at Mary's funeral.

The eye of the Poet
once saw him
at work on the boats
keeping the spirit at sea-level.

Now the Architect
works the Table
questioning the spirit
that would hold the sky.

Fragments and Curve Balls

Bluebird
in the dog rose
inked on skin
jacket of coral
rucksack
Beanstalk green
boots brown as paths
through summer woods
or muddy beelines
on the allotment.

People are rarely
how you imagine them.
She is.
“Emmas are Emmas,”
she laughs.

This Emma
has a Masters in Fine Art.
Disenchanted
with the insider narratives
of the art world
she takes a job in an electronics lab.
Soon she’s running it from scratch.
“I’m quite quick,”
she grins.

The mobile features morph
like clay on a potter's wheel.
A steal of something French –
though she's a Londoner
growing up in Devon –
a flash of Louise Brooks,
a swirl of Arthur Rackham.

Rose madder
O
pulses on grey jumper
pulls the listening I
down the rabbit hole
into her story.

First
Fragment.

Trading land
for water
she suggests "a moving house"
to accommodate
the wandering spirit of her husband –
a trained violinist
who resists
the lunatic fiddling of devils,
the harmonics of poets,
to gig with the band.

Inside the boat
space is tight.
Spiders in the bed,
earwigs in the wooden spoons
schauerlich
but a successful year on the road
will mean they can upsize.

O

She discovers a lump
in her right breast,
has "a full dance card of cancer treatments."
While it goes swimmingly with the band
she pukes her guts up on the sofa.

Mum and sister
fish her off the boat
land her in a flat in Peckham
where Mum can stay.
Younger sister
who she says
"wants to be older than me"
exerts an authority she does not have.

Second
Fragment.

Two years later
a 70 foot narrowboat
is home.

"A hat-trick of mets" –
liver, lungs and bones –
she's hobbling around like an old lady.
But she's taking her meds, making it work,
"one foot in front of the other."

She shrugs off the memory
like a scratchy sweater
or an old skin,
says cancer is one more curve ball
Life's thrown her way.

As we speak
the pink pen wefts
scraps of conversation to the page,
ruffles and arrowheads.

She mines words,
understands performance,
has "loads of sketchbooks."
She's worked for The Arts Council,
The British Council,
The Whitechapel Gallery,
The Poetry Café.
But in the holograph she calls
herself
she sees a crazy cartoon character
swerving this way and that
knocked off her bike.

She is
however
resilient
as the girl
in the fairy tale,
indefatigable
as the child
in the ring o' roses.

Third Fragment.

She hasn't worked since 2016.
Before then
jobs went wide of the mark
or never found purchase.
But in not working
it seems
she's now on target.

o

Metastatic cancer is deemed
treatable not curable.
Access to drugs is critical.
She badgers her oncologist for a drug
available in the US
but not here,
gets put on a trial.

After
she campaigns for Pfizer
to drop its price, make the medication available.
Success.
But not entirely.
The drug's approved as a first line therapy only
which means
at the time she was diagnosed
she wouldn't have been able to take it.

She talks at The Crick:
How I hadn't been cured
and why that might have been.
Barriers to cancer care,
accessibility of data outcomes,
she weighs in.

The arrows are starting to prick
the body politic,
bringing, she says,
a sense of ownership.

Near their mooring
they keep seven chickens in a run.
The chickens are not free
to do as they please
because there's a fox
who lives next to the door of the run.

In this Morality Tale
she is the Fox –
a philosophical one.
The protected Pharma-fowl
gobble up the returns
but she's unwilling to demonise,
reasons
"It's human nature to take a bit more."

As if sprung from the pages
of the fairy tales that fascinate,
she can knit, embroider,
whittle spoons out of wood.
I picture her
in the heart of the Forest
Red Riding Hood
busy with her to-do list,
Grandmother
rewinding the curve balls,
The Woodcutter
whittling the block to her will.

The Story continues.

The Three Musketeers

"The Three Musketeers,"
they say,
but only two are in service
round the Table.

Diagnosed at the same time,
they're old sparring partners
since Dave jumped the biopsy queue.
"I didn't only say Oi!" says Ray.
"Now I can't get rid of him."

He gives Dave an almighty squeeze
on the kneecap
that prompts a yelp worthy of Beaky,
Dave's greyhound, an old racer –
called Beaky 'cause of his big beak
says Dave
tracing the muzzle in the air.
Always tells it like it is.

With tattoos and grins piratical
they're like a couple of old-time comedians
always quick off the mark
with ready wit and repartee.
Weren't always.

"Ray was a bag of nerves when he came in,"
says Dave.
"This place lifts you."
Ray, snaffling Dave's cake, nods.
One thing they can agree on.

Outside
the Nordic Walkers limber up.
The leader checks in.
Some are sore, some ache,
one says she's always under the weather.
The naming round the circle falls apart.
"Never works," the leader laughs.

Ray joins them,
but Dave's grounded with a broken rib
since Beaky pulled him over.
"The sod. Would have to be the side I lie on."

A cloud of histamine descends
from the sweaty London sky,
swallows the walkers.
Dave remains in the chair
that's got his name on it.

His grandad was a miner from Matlock
then the family moved to Shepherds Bush.
All rank QPR supporters now
save one brother, a Spurs fan.
"An outcast," he snorts.

The family took him down
since he was five.
On match days
he gets fish and chips on the way,
pie and mash with gravy after.
Beaky gets his share.
He's not a fussy eater,
even likes a bit of curry,

Chinese as well.
But you won't get him on a bus.
"Goes in a taxi though.
A luxury breed."

He talks of greyhounds
past their use-by date
dumped like garbage.

The eyes that like a bit of fun
grow luminous.
Behind the banter
the chiaroscuro of the soul.

The conversation turns to abseiling.
Several have signed up.
Not him.
Not since he took a nasty tumble
from the top of a ladder
he didn't tie off.

Dismissing the Spidermen,
he talks of music back in the day –
Marty Wilde, Joe Brown,
and, a glint in his eye,
Marianne Faithful.

"Be very careful, dear,"
says 'Saint' Peter, leaning in,
"he's trouble."

There's a diamond wink
from the earring he's worn
since he was a Rocker.
"You are what you are,"
he says with an impish grin,
"inn't you?"

Ray was a Mod,
"suited and booted."
Wore a Parka not a leather jacket
like Dave
who once bought a Parka by mistake.

Listened to The Who,
local to where he grew up
in Shepherds Bush –
though there's some debate
whether they were Mods.
And what about The Stones?
Mods or Rockers?
The Moody Blues –
no question there.

He was the youngest of five,
remembers his Mum,
the jobs she had to take
to keep them
when his Dad passed at fifty-one.
"We were poor,
but we had good dinners."

On a Sunday
the Winkle Man'd come round
with his barrow or his van,
they'd go down the road
to the neighbours'
to watch telly.
"They were good days."

But not without their ups and downs.
Ray gets in a bit of trouble.
His Dad has a word
and the boy goes down
the Goldhawk Social,
puts on the gloves.

For three years he trains,
loves it, but "was never no good" –
not like his brother
who showed promise
and could kick a ball too.
He tried for QPR and got in,
but when their Dad passed,
a Brentford supporter,

he changed his strip.
He could have been a contender
Ray muses,
but “he discovered women”.

A memento of his old sparring days
gleams on a chain round his neck,
given to him by his son.
He’s got memorabilia from Nigel Benn,
Chris Eubank – also presents from his son,
who he doubts knows what else to get him.

The ghost of the young pugilist
darts across the solid features
softened by life and time,
the jab
a friendly handshake now,
the hook
a good natured jibe.

You can take the dog out of the fight
but you can't take the fight out of the dog.

He got his diagnosis the day he retired.
Went for a test
cos he happened to be watching telly
and saw Bob Monkhouse in a Macmillan ad.
Like Dave
who went in with a sore throat
to find the problem was
"with the lower works"
it's a bolt out of the blue.

It was the gym that got him to Maggie's,
wasn't interested to begin with.
It's getting on five years now.
"The people who work here are diamond."

When he lost his second sister
he took it really bad.
He looks at Dave
working on his art,
it being Friday,
reflective.
"He livened me up."

The busy colouring pencil stops.
Quickly he redresses the balance.
Tells how Dave phoned him up
beside himself
when his dog died.

He went round
and carried the beloved lurcher
who'd died on Dave's bed
down the stairs.

An act of camaraderie
to be expected
from an *Inseparable*.

The missing Musketeer
Andreas
is known for his *paella*
and mean *patatas bravas*.
But he's not eating.

"He's not all that clever,"
says Dave.

Time passes.
Andreas is not mentioned.

When I ask
fearing the worst
Ray lights up.
"He's sounding perky.
Bright as anything."
He hadn't seen him, just talked.
"Andreas says the food's not bad at all
in the Care Home."

Then it's all changed.
Andreas wasn't eating after all,
just said so
to please his sister.

Ray goes to visit,
sees him take three spoons of soup
and wave the dinner away.
He's brought diet coke
but there's no fridge in the room
so Andreas drinks half, leaves the rest.
Won't drink it warm.

He hates it there
but they won't move him now.

"He's dying," says Ray.
The words settle on the air
nowhere to go.

In Margravine Cemetery
long fingers of elder
bow to the earth
beckon the silence.

The Third Musketeer
passes
on a full moon
in partial eclipse.

The Art Class

She moves through the room
an East Wind
arranges tables, materials,
to a familiar pattern.

A single table for the group
would be her choice,
but a crafted piece of furniture
landed from on high
means partition.

And so two tables,
laid with paint and brush
immaculate as a royal garden party –
"lots of bits" to tempt the palette.

We wait.

"It can ebb and flow," she advises.
Today, thanks to the murderous rain
that's already claimed a victim
by the Hammersmith flyover,
it's a still pond.

Not quite.

A lone figure clips the surface
deft as a dragonfly,
settles at the end of a table.
The stern gaze fixes on the piece
in front of her.
A collage.

Loved to Bits

Rewilding the Self

This is no simple collage.
The cut-up is a snapshot in time –
the cards of well-wishers, friends and family –
some no longer here.
She has no plan, no outcome in mind,
is just going to see where it ends up.
In this she echoes certain contemporary artists.

I fall into the fast flow of conversation.
The Celtic features morph –
Vermeer, Dürer, Modigliani.

She documents her diagnosis and treatment.
Dates, procedures, fly like arrows
fletched with social and political thinking
born of experience not spreadsheets.

The cancer was self- diagnosed.
She knew nothing of *the silent killer*,
knew only that despite the healthy life-style
and appetite with which her family is blessed,
she couldn't eat so much.

Lucky for her
she has a GP who can read the symptoms
and acts.

She details the dark history of women's healthcare
in the hands of male practitioners.
"Women don't understand this,"
she explains.
She's for education, empowerment.

Again she enters the room
where she received her diagnosis.
The male Consultant
and female Clinical Nurse Specialist
are there,
but her chair is positioned
so her back is to the Nurse.
She turns the chair round.
Now both are present.
"You have to speak up."

Censure turns to gratitude,
remembrance that extends
beyond our conversation.

In diagnosis, treatment and recovery
she feels "part of a super-organism
of love, care, kindness, thoughts and prayers –
friends and family, friends of friends
and family of friends. In fact there were
a lot of people I didn't know praying for me!"

There are gifts of time and conversation,
a wealth of things –
flowers,
toiletries,
biscuits,
chocolates,
a homemade crocheted blanket,
a Nutribullet,
slippers.

She recalls the brother who's there
post diagnosis
when her "brain cuts out" in Liverpool Street Station,
the gracious support of work colleagues
and the NHS,
which gave her, she says,
phenomenal care.
She gives thanks to the surgeon
who gives her his mobile number
and speaks to her Dad
and the hospital staff from across the globe
who give kindness
and professionalism
and persist
in a thankless world of Neo-Liberal values.

And throughout
with a front row seat
her remarkable parents
whose duty of care is sublime,
surrender unconditional.

"It was the best and the worst of times,"
she says
without irony.

She's turned fifty but doesn't look it.
"Good genes," she laughs.
But the birthday was a trigger.
"There's nothing there now."

The conversation eddies, turns.
The moss green ankle boots insinuate
woods, earth.

She knows the ways of flowers,
the needs of bees,
a tree's quest for light and air,
ecosystems
and the cost of human meddling.
"We just need to step back.
We don't need to over-engineer things."

The commitment of young people to the planet,
our urge to re-wild ourselves,
bring hope.

As a Community Gardener,
she teaches a reluctant walker on sticks
plant identification.
Now she walks more, noticing
what's around her.
"It's changed the way I look at the world,"
the old lady says.
She's chuffed.

Her favourite tree is the apple.
Pruning the family trees wth her Dad
is a ritual.
Why the apple?
"It's beautiful and useful"
is the reply.
She knows how to be both.

Despite the meteorological mayhem
others have joined the class.
Julie, who runs a balanced ship,
invites me to another table
where aphid green tipped with fuchsia
makes petals on black,
the trunk of a tree is shaded
and tubes of watercolour
never properly put back,
are being restored to order.

I have barely begun my introduction
when a well-modulated voice
with perfect projection
asks me to speak up.
Clearly I am in the presence
of a professional.

True North

She presides leonine
over the Trevi Fountain
photographed in black and white,
preferring, she says,
to work with a limited palette.

Whilst eschewing glorious technicolour
however
she's not exactly what you'd call
two-tone.
The blue-handled brush,
echoing the various blue of her ensemble
with painterly insouciance,
hangs like a hiatus in the air.

"Acting is written on my heart,"
she says.
The eyes, piercing azure
behind the specs,
tell me she knows
I know
what that means.

And so
with the complicity of old thesps,
we open her particular volume of The Actor's Life,
delivered with a jovial humour
and the brutal precision of a Steppe eagle.

Her pedigree is impressive.
Her father, born in Tsarist Russia,
an artist, worked in film,
her mother, a writer of children's stories.

She trains in Bristol.
With a voice made for the airwaves
she's in regular work –
radio, TV, audio books.

Then everything changes.
Home life splinters.
"I felt as though I'd had a cannon ball
blown through my middle."

A drowning woman,
she's "thrown a life-raft" –
an eighteen month contract in Radio Rep
with The World Service
will surely open other doors.

She moves from Bristol to London
to reinvent herself,
become buoyant once more.

But Bush House is a lone Colossus.
And the timing couldn't be worse.
The acting profession –
precarious at the best of times –
is hijacked by the Reality Show.
The RP voice and actors doing accents
are old-school.

She talks with a robust vigour
sorely at odds
with the arthritis in her hip.
“Cancer was a breeze compared to this.”

For the first time
cancer gets a mention
where osteoarthritis
now hogs the limelight.
“I could play a gender-blind Long John Silver,”
she offers dryly.
But she’s not about to quit.
“I love my work!”
The deco earrings,
delicate aspens,
quake.

Instead
she's turned the kitchen cupboard
into a sound booth,
embracing the digital future
if not warmly.

She has a Masters in Playwriting,
can tick the Aristotelian boxes,
but, she wails,
"I can't write plot!"
Forum Theatre now offers
an alternative script.

Actor, writer, poet,
the class is her oasis.
"When I had the cancer
I cleared the table and put out my art stuff."

Mulling over a possible theatre job
she returns the Trevi Fountain
to the bookshelf.

I watch her walk away
down the bendy path,
the skewed lower torso
the trunk of an embattled oak,
the bone forcing the compass
in a new direction.
It is not True North
and awaits correction,
but she has found the light she needs
to push forward
indomitable and splendid
as Sarah Bernhard.

Inside Out

When she began
to do teaching
people would talk to her
about things
as they made work
as if taken to a place
where
inside
would out.

And it struck her
Art
was a vehicle.

And so
with an MA in Art Psychotherapy
she gets a placement at The Royal Marsden
and for the next ten years
works at Charing Cross
bringing trolley and board to the bedside.
Now she brings art to the group.

"Being there," she says,
"can be the very start of recovery."
But making it through the door
isn't always easy.
"Sometimes this is the first group they've joined
after treatment. Very often they've had a year
of people making decisions for them."

Now they're making the choices.
Do I use pastels? tinsel? tissue paper? foil?
watercolours? gouache? clay?

She tells of a lady who came
and went after twenty minutes.
Gradually over time
her anxiety abates,
she stays longer, makes more.
Observing her artwork,
she introduces a new material –
“materials are the backbone of everything.”
Now she comes early.

“When you give people power back,
it’s the start of getting back to where you were
before the diagnosis,” she says –
smile the homespun sweetness
of primrose, bluebell, lily of the valley;
passion adamantine.

The measured gaze
follows the swim of the group
otter-like
trusting the group, allowing it to work,
yet vigilant, ready to dive in
and give support.

"It's a great place to tackle the question
Who am I now?" she reflects.
Equally it's just a great escape.
"I just work with what comes through the door."

The words suggest
a levity that is effortless.
But holding the space,
being fluid,
demands total presence.
"Sometimes you leave feeling like you've been thumped."

The turquoise earrings
dance
to the blue of the eyes.

She's a painter,
still paints.
In the room
her work
is nowhere to be seen.
A pity
say the class.
I agree.

It would be an inspiration
and
a privilege
to see
her elusive
inside
out.

Knights of The Oblong Table

When I call them
Knights of The Round Table
it's a spur to the collective wit.
The nomenclature derided,
others are proffered, dismissed,
until, all things considered,
someone comes up with
Knights of The Oblong Table.
There we have it.

The confederacy shifts
dune-like,
presence, absence
configure, reconfigure
in the uncertain wind.
The Table a stout ship,
the Crew vociferous –
riffing, roaring,
cursing, complaining,
joking, jibing,
expleting, explaining,
sparing, sparring,
fooling, finagling,
loquacious, voracious,
complicit, explicit,
hopeful, doubtful

always
respectful
always
remembrance.

No captains
stowaways
hostages
tourists.

Passengers
by invitation only.

The Man from Cavan

"I'm not boasting or anything,
but since I got diagnosed with cancer
I've become a better person."
Is he joking?
He assures us he is not –
though he could be.

At the blood test,
he continues,
the nurse told him to stop drinking.
He hadn't drunk for thirty years.
The gaze is sober
not without compassion.
Nobody laughs.

He cracks up like a schoolboy.
"You know I'm joking, don't you?"

Now I have the measure of him
I ask where he's from.
"Cavan," he says.

The silence of brains racked
to no effect
till the owner of an ancient Nokia –
itself a cause for merriment –
asks the topographical question.

A man present by chance
his wife having an appointment
at The Hospital,
seizes the moment.
An Irishman himself
he locates the unknown county
passed over by tourists and literati
with firm tones
and foggy coordinates.

The Man from Cavan
parts the stubborn Irish mist.
"It's an Ulster county
but in the Republic."
A perfect riddle- me – ree
which the Table digests with effort.

The conversation lurches
over Irish history, global warming
and moon exploration
like a Beckettian bicycle.

"They're taking the mystery out of the moon!"
laments the man from Cavan,
preserving his own air of mystery
till we get our marching orders,
concedes his name
when bags and jackets are got.

He's miserable on his own
he says,
hates winter,
likes the bright summer evenings
when home can be put off
with a good walk.
More could be said
but a member of staff
all out of patience
indicates the door
with a hand like a flaming sword.

"This is a very joyous place to be,"
he reflects,
the blue eyes
under the bushwhacker hat
wide as the open sky.

No Joke

He could start
a whole new genre –
Medical Stand-Up.

Caveat auditor!

What begins as a twinkle
may end in cold fission
light years away
from the jocular.

Confronted with *the Bag*
and a clueless Catheter Nurse,
he suffers the indignity
of a clueless Patient.
His unlikely saviour –
the Night Nurse.

"It's assumed
it's *common knowledge*
what to do with them.
A user's guide is needed."

The Bag
slaps between his legs –
metaphorically speaking –
as he holds the Table captive
with a signature mix
of humour and outrage.

He turns his attention
to the matter
of his operation.

He does not meet the Surgeon before
does not expect to meet him after.
To this day
he has no way of knowing
how it went.

The Registrar addresses him –
"zonked out" –
in heavily accented English
hard to decipher at the best of times.
When he emerges from
the post op fog
the man is gone
and with him all hope
of a narrative of proceedings.

Professional ineptitude,
the casual lack of thought,
of respect,
is laid bare
exact and unsparing
as a Gillray cartoon.

A provocation to laughter
that packs a very human
punch.

Detectives

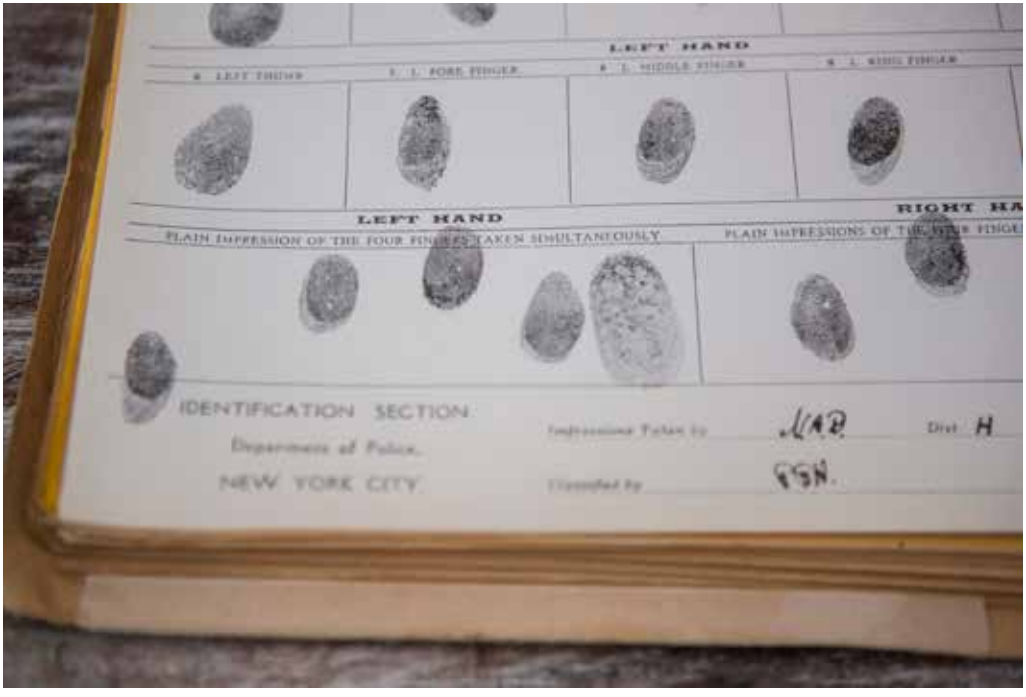
Because the cancer was caught
in time
there's extra time.

Time
for a glass of wine and a sandwich by the river,
Time
to ignore the demon that hisses
Get off your arse,
Time
for the farm in Norfolk.

Round the Table
his absences are noted.
The Knights are quick to speculate,
like wind that sings through
certain rocks in Africa
opinions gong.

The Table detectives
map fragments of conversation,
words dropped, hearsay,
onto possible coordinates,
tailing the professional sleuth
of pilfered artworks.

Like a figure from the pages of Dan Brown
or Derren Brown
he ghosts at the Table.



Occasional Women

From time to time
a woman
lands in their midst.

One sits,
tousled blonde hair
against grey sky,
damson sweater
flirty and fun as Jane Avril.

“When you walk up you’ve got
the world on your shoulders.
Then you forget. Sometimes
I just sit here and watch
and get lost in it.”

Nails of plum
tap a brisk kathakali
on the mobile,
chasing the digital world
she says she can’t keep up with.

To her side
in heron-like stillness
another woman.

"She's a writer!"
the Knights chorus.
She contests it
with the folded smile
and watchful eye
of Jane Austen.

Another settles,
momentarily displacing
the thrum.
Knits of indigo, cobalt, lapiz,
crystals of blue chalcedony,
conjure the magic of Egypt,
Persia, the Tigris and Euphrates
of her homeland.
Beneath the liquid softness
of the eyes
a gravitational pull.

Her family story,
the narrative of her cancer,
is dark matter
yet
in her smile
light
impossibly shines.

Often she brings food to share,
home cooked for optimum health,
seasoned with spices and flavours
of the Levant.

Some of the Knights partake
with gusto,
the rest continue snacking
on biscuits and cake.

Whatever the uptake
she smiles.
They are obdurate now
but she is a river
that carves stone.

Hospital Corners

The Hospital Tree

The Christmas Tree
caged for Health and Safety
casts a spectral blue
over the souls that huddle and smoke
under the Hospital clock
that's always out of time -
low watt Christmas cheer
in the face of austerity,
though none of the faces here
show the meekness of Tiny Tim.

The dim beacon
stands before a bridge
barely perceptible
which staff, patients, relatives,
cross as those in limbo
heading for crisis
or opportunity.

Under their feet
koi fish
barely perceptible
turn a slow pavan
to Fortune's pipe
amidst occasional litter.

Ambulances back out of the bay
like horses from a livery yard,
the lower level of the building extending
like the wings of a grounded plane,
the inconsequent clock
driven perhaps by a higher power
that likes a joke
as once in a while
time lost or time gained
turns out to be
time present.

The multi-storey tower
jigsaws the sky,
untrodden balconies
grey on grey
bracket themselves against the cloud
that bulks and drips and bulks again –
a roof for gyring hawks
that screech their own alarms
above the arrow of A and E.

Once through the revolving door
light is electric,
unsparing of shadow
or moody contemplation.

No country for the aimless,
Reception's purgatorial post
propels the lost to purpose –
a rapid-fire of wheels and feet
past the artwork
there's no time to look at
and the consolation of Costa
to the infernal lifts
that never wait on the ground floor.

Forced to a standstill though you are,
the place is alive as the forest floor.
The comings and goings
of those who serve the nation's health
behind trolleys, clipboards, hospital beds,
in uniform or out
a constant traffic
unremarked.

Like the roots we do not see
they hold the thriving crown,
agents of exchange
they are the ground-force
of our air.

Magic Words

Bright as the berry
that gladdens the heart in winter
she appears as if by magic –
Holly.

Magic is in the family.
Her father, a retired broadcast journalist,
has taken up the art
beloved by Dickens.
The voice that once was heard
on BBC radio
now charms the listeners
with the Magician's patter.
Her brother, a writer,
works the magic of theatre.

Holly's magic
performed on the ward, in the corridor
or on the end of the phone –
catching the women where she can –
serves a higher office.

As a metastatic breast specialist nurse
most of what she does is talk, she says.
"I want them to feel they can pick up the phone to me
and there's someone to give them answers."

Sounds straightforward
but of course it isn't.
Especially when the question is
How long have I got?
uttered courageously
in dread of the answer.

In her first two months
she talked to one hundred and twenty patients.
If she gets a smile
at the end of the conversation
it's a success.

She tells of a woman in her late forties
diagnosed with secondary breast cancer.
She'd been well for years.
Fearful for her family and herself,
she is enraged
it was not detected earlier.
When she and Holly have finished talking
the woman gives her a big hug.
"A little win," says Holly,
eyes like sapphires.

In her
the father's, the brother's, gift
is a tool for healing –
words that lift the spirit, charge the soul.
"There's no point giving people treatment
if they're not going to go away and live life."

She looks young
but "feels much older."
Beneath the youthful gaze
a well of loss.
At fifteen her friend dies,
at twenty-eight her husband,
the love of her life.

He had Hodgkins Lymphoma –
a curable cancer.
It took him anyway.
Now she wants to give back.

"It's an exciting time
to be working in the field.
Advances are being made all the time."

Reassuring to those who ask
the unanswerable
How long?

She does yoga, loves to bake,
is a gargantuan traveller –
counts forty-seven countries already.
"I find people fascinating,"
she laughs,
though watching her new partner,
a Scouser with a Scouser's brass,
being interrogated by Israeli Security
was one of the scariest experiences of her life.

Panama and Palestine score high
but Cuba is her favourite
for “the liveliness of the people.”
And perhaps because
in their openness
she feels an affinity.
“I’m basically an answer yes person!”

Each day
she and her partner are together
is cause for celebration.
“Life is short.
You need to grab it with both hands.”

Time likewise.
She flicks me a smile
and heads off to the ward
indefatigable
as the legendary brownie.

In Scandinavian lore
Holly is planted near homes
to prevent lightning strikes.
Though she cannot stop them
like her Nordic namesake,
to those struck
she is a force.

Vital Conversation

He's a Registrar
Oncology Registrar
used to people not understanding
or misunderstanding
what that is.

"People don't realise
Registrars are doctors.
Often they may be the one
who does the op
with the Consultant standing by."

He talks with an ease
others have to work at –
a love of Life
wanting conversation.

As an Oxford Undergrad
studying plant biology,
he soon realises loving plants
is very different
from researching them.
"They don't talk back to you!"

And so
dismissing a life in the lab,
he considers his options –
teaching or medicine.

He knows he'd make "a rubbish GP"
but chooses medicine –
looking to "stretch his brain"
with cellular genetics.

"The medical profession
teaches you life is fragile,"
he observes.

But he's not one to pass up a challenge –
swims with manta rays in Fiji,
escapes near death on a dodgy bike in Bolivia
and does a three hundred mile bike ride
from Leicester to the Peak District
to fundraise for his PhD benefactors --
four days "in perfect weather and lycra!"

But perhaps his biggest challenge comes
when his Dad is diagnosed with kidney cancer –
a Birmingham man
with a rare Masters in Soldering and Management
who turns around the failing Lucas Factory.

The father's admitted to the Q E –
one of three hospitals
where his son's doing his medical training.

Mercifully
the son
at Wolverhampton
is spared
the father's journey.

“If you can’t do the on /off switch
with the emotions you do pathology,”
he asserts.

But later,
when a woman with kidney cancer
is treated with Immunotherapy
and gets the all clear,
his father’s ghost rises up
to meet him.

For a moment
the bright notes
glad as a Vivaldi *Gloria*
are muted.

Before he died
his father made him promise
to travel once he’d finished,
know the late-flowering
Wanderlust
that took him
in early retirement
to Kilimanjaro
and the Inca Trail.

Brightness returns
as he tells me
what happened next.

Six months later
he slips on the ice
carrying lumbar puncture fluid.
Holding the precious cargo aloft
he goes down and thinks
there's more to life than this!

He swaps Brum for Taronga
and relocates
to the north coast of the North Island –
"as close to the Riviera as New Zealand gets."

He has friends and colleagues,
loves the food, the Pacific quiet,
but when his sister has a baby
he comes home,
drops anchor.

Anchors are important.
"I like having family and friends,"
he says,
keeps up with old school pals
from Camp Hill days.

True to his promise
he's travelled, loves it –
Peru and Bolivia, Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya,
Australia, Fiji, South East Asia, Europe,
are charted territory.
But sooner or later he returns to port –
Birmingham and London
twin immutables
by which he sets his compass.

In his Dad's factory
he stripped down faulty units
for South American travels.
Now Oncology is the goal.
"I have a plan," he says,
the gaze sure.

Once
on an allotment in Birmingham
a mother
a father
and a son
build a hive
together
enjoy Birmingham honey.

Now
the swarm
the father
are gone
but the mother remains
active
in her care for the environment

while in the hive
of cancer genetics
the son engages
in a conversation
vital to life
as bees
and
buzzing.

Everyday Heroines

"You get hit,"
she says.
"When you ask *how are you*?
and they've had bad news
sometimes they cry in front of you."

She's been working in Clinic 8
for two years now,
taking patients' bloods, urine,
calling them to the Consultant.
"The stories you hear..
Makes you think *what would I do*?"

She holds me in her strong gaze,
warm, generous,
rooted in earth.
Says simply:
"You cannot be working
and cry every day.
You'll cry forever."

She's learned resilience –
in Palliative Care at St Charles
and, pregnant with her son,
caring for her mother
when she's diagnosed with cancer.
"If you are not strong enough inside
you will break down,"
she says firmly.

But still.
Those who face their mortality
with no family round them
pierce the vital armour.
“Sometimes we cry,”
she says,
the blunt truth
a blow
I don’t see coming.

It is her mother
who encourages her to do nursing,
tells her she has the power
to intercede on the patient’s behalf,
give voice to the voiceless.
“There’s nothing you can’t do,”
she insists.
“You can do it!”
echoes her Dad.

But she wanted to wait
till the children were older
and chooses to do
Health and Social Care Level 5
over two years
because she has a job
and a house to run.
She’s almost finished.

‘It’s all to do with management,”
she smiles,
prepares her children in advance
so they can prepare themselves.
They wash the dishes, hoover,
but meal times are golden.
“It’s important I cook for them.”

Jollof Rice is a favourite –
even her veggie-hating boy can be tricked
into munching plant life
when it’s hidden in the dish.
Frying is out, but she understands
their palate is different and will change.
“Once in a while they can have McDonalds,”
she grins.

Every year she takes them
to Paris
where her father,
a high ranking army officer,
once made the family home.
In his retirement he’s gone back
to Ghana,
does his best to lure them over.
She speaks English, French,
and thanks to him
bits of dialects from all over Ghana.
“I’ve been places.”

The Asante ancestry
shines in the fine bones,
the elegant weave sculpting the head
in the likeness of a goddess.
I am in awe.
“I have a good hairdresser,”
she laughs.

They are a team of six
with two nurses and a manager.
One of the team
Marcia
whose picture looms large
in the corridor
brought in a banana cake
to share with staff and patients.

Unwittingly
I met Marcia,
looking for Florence
who was on lunch break.
She asked me my business
and satisfied I had good cause,
instructed me to sit and wait.
Not wanting to cut short a lunch break,
I protested –
then did as I was told.

She laughs when I tell her this.
Marcia, she says,
cannot tolerate nonsense.
If you offend her you deal with it
straightaway.
“Patients need to see us working together,”
she affirms,
“free spirits moving around.”

Nursing is in the blood.
She was named after her Dad’s auntie –
a nurse in Ghana –
their namesake an icon
of the Nursing Profession.
Her elder sister is a Community Nurse.

They do not share the status
of *The Lady with the Lamp*
yet follow her dictate of hard work,
their acts of compassion unsung.
They are like many others
who answer the call
everyday heroines.

More Than One Life

"I've had three lives already,"
he says
fixing me a *macchiato freddo*.

Coming from "a long tradition of baristas"
he makes a professional brew
despite the modest machine –
a far cry from the bar in Rimini
where his first life began
twirling the baton bestowed
by his Great Grandmother
amongst the fashionistas of the day.
"My hobby was Uni in Bologna."

He'd have preferred to study architecture
but his mother vetoes the choice,
declaring for medicine –
a nurse herself.
Sadly for her it's the year
of Dolly the Sheep
and he opts for genetic engineering.
Riding the wave of R&D
provoked by the EU ban on antibiotics,
he writes his thesis on pig nutrition.

His second life is spent
in the realm of Animal Science
and cowboy hats –

Purdue University, Indiana,
where the crew of Apollo 11
chewed the cud later digested
in Zero G.

Its the back of beyond.
But once he'd left
he decides
"it was not a bad place to be"
and returns.
Come mai?
He flashes a Mastroianni grin.

And so
he sashays back to Purdue
and four years of Epigenetics
with a sideline teaching tango
to students and seniors –
milonga not *Strictly*.

He does a post doc in Michigan –
"scientifically a waste of time" –
as subprime mortgages
leave Lehman Brothers *bancarotta*.

His third life begins in New Hampshire –
"a bubble of rich hippies."
He meets his half Sicilian
but "very British" wife
in the Dartmouth Medical School Building

by the ice machine
getting ice for their experiments.
Ten years later, back for a seminar,
he photographs the iconic machine.
"Life histories start always from
the weirdest of places."

She's an exchange student
in need of a room,
he has a house.
Ecco fatto!
"First she lodged in my house
then in my life," he laughs.

Well, not entirely –
first he had to convince her
he wasn't gay.

He relates this in full lycra –
a sporty invitation to camp.
"It's the look!" he protests.
"Perception and reality are not the same thing."
He's in training for the London Marathon
never run before
though kicks a football.

Beneath the lycra
tattoos lurk.

A lizard-like creature mounts a forearm.
Inked in Indiana
it's a "doodle" of his own design.
It echoes the aboriginal art of Australia –
a place he might have lived
if it weren't for arachnophobia
and the offer of London.

On his other forearm
the daughter of Alphonse Mucha gazes
sybil-like.

Draping his left shoulder
Klimt's *Hygeia*.

On his back Hokusai's *Wave*,
The Fighting Temeraire on his chest.
Terror from behind,
the final port of call ahead –
the body speaks prophetic
to the first time Marathon runner.

In the cramped office
a supersize computer screen surfaces
like a giant turtle,
in back a sticker:

I am a DAD.

His son's photo is on the wall
under the fauve swirls
from his niece's paintbrush.
He's a happy boy,
who can strum *Wimoweh* on his ukulele –
a mini-me version of Dad's guitar.
Together they watch Ted cartoons –
Schrödinger's Cat no challenge
for the quantum world of a two year old.

"It doesn't matter what he does
as long as he thinks critically,"
he declares.
Then, hearing himself, grimaces
as if *Il Dottore* had appeared on the scene.

Behind the elegant horn rims
the eyes dance.
The professorial beard
is "the lazy man's answer to shaving."
But without the beard,
he reflects,
he'd "feel like a bartender again."

After six years at Hammersmith Hospital
his fourth life –
Research Professor -
is upon him.
Best not shave.

White Rose

"Yorkshire is God's Country!"
There's no trace of Yorkshire now –
except for the echo
of a white rose
in the immaculate complexion,
the quiet loveliness.

As a girl
she scoops up the petals
in the grandmother's garden
outside Hull,
adds water for scent.

Laughing, she dabs behind her ears
once more in the moment
walking the familiar terrain –
the old shed, the bird bath, the fruit trees –
where she and her brother would hide.
"It was like having an outdoor house."

The family cross the Pennines
and the White Rose turns to Red.
In Manchester in the 60's and 70's
she's sent to convent school.
"I just rebelled!"

Now home is London
where she walks her dog in the local park –
a Standard Schnauzer
"who thinks she's human."

Like all animals
when her owner becomes unwell
she knows.

After three years working as a volunteer
she is herself diagnosed.
The stealth-tumour finally shows up
in a colonoscopy.
There'd been no signs,
nothing in the blood,
she just felt tired.

The time she'd spent
working in the Hospital
helped her cope, she says,
prepared her for her own journey.
But still.
The year the cancer takes
brings lostness.

After,
she wants "to be normal" again,
returns to the tea stand,
a subtle and knowing presence
where lone souls find succour.

Seeing a woman on her own
emerge from her consultation,
she's prompted to ask
Do you want a hug?
The woman, who's just got the all clear,
doesn't hesitate for a moment.
"More than anything I want a hug!"

"Cancer can give you that sense of being brave,"
she observes,
"I don't want to be sterile."

Post chemo
the head of hair's still there,
but the blonde has morphed.
She sees it as an opportunity
to say who she is –
and also save money.
The new tones of silver and grey
are beguiling as moonlight,
give a touch of Versailles
to the blue-green eyes,
mermaid pools.

She has a flair for colour and texture,
partnered prints and colours for Mothercare.
The designer's gaze now falls on gardens,
advising on flower and shrub,
probing the full spectrum of possibility.
"I'm not a minimalist," she laughs.

Except when it comes to shopping.
Cancer taught her to question every purchase –
a lesson not forgotten.
The new kitchen houses a legion
of recycling bins.
"We've become so throw-away."

She's always worked on Clinic 8,
a non medical presence
who will listen.
"You build up associations with people."
But even after six years
it's hard not to be affected.
Seeing women in their twenties and thirties,
some with newborns,
makes her sad.
When she's finished
she has to take
"a deep intake of breath."

Beneath the pulse of Clinic 8
loss and lostness are constant,
an elegiac strain that underscores
the rapid announcements to rooms.
She fetches her coat.

Abandoned
the tea trolley
fades into the wall.

The Art of Medicine

The effluvium
of the common cold
is about him.

"Dealing with dying people
makes you weary,"
he says
with disarming frankness.
"I try to look for ways of amalgamating
the science I do with painting."

A life-long practice of painting
and a passion for research
restore the senses and spirit
dulled by forty years as a cancer doctor –
a synthesis of the Apollonian
and Dionysian
at odds with the modern view
of Art and Science
as polar opposites.

Like the double-edged arrows
of Apollo,
drugs have the power to heal
or bring devastation
on the houses of his patients.
Etched on memory
are "horrific scenarios."

Yet the pictures on his phone –
belying the breadth of the canvas –
are not medieval graphics from Hell.
Figures dance a red roundelay,
rest in a symphony of quiet curves.
The "useful" vanishes
in a world of magical realism.

To allow for this,
make time
for family and friends
and the final tranche
of the *camino* from Seville to Santiago,
he goes from five to three days a week,
obeying what is "spiritually good."

In the Science Café at Maggie's
waiting his turn
lip on knuckle
he is Rodin's *Thinker*.

Then
with a performer's nous
"gets in there" with his audience –
explainer, explorer, examiner,
humanising data,
telling of mischievous drugs
dancing a pharmaceutical jig,
the need to empty friendly pockets
to raid the genetic arc.

"In Science you have an idea
and spend the next fifteen years
finding out if it's right,"
he sighs,
envies friends who are
actors, writers.
But the oncologist's zeal
persists.

Once
he offered to set up
a self-help group for doctors
wanting
"the armour to deal with suffering."
The response was dismal.

He has four children
he says
and none of them
are taking up medicine.

A boyish grin
breaks the composure
of the gaze
like an escaped photon.

French Connection

She comes
bringing the light
with her.
Hair
tang of orange
pulled back from the pale brow
that puckers softly
in reflection.

Patients remind her
she shares the name
of Churchill's wife,
but she has more in common
with the heroines of Celtic myth.

Away from East 6
the bright gaze settles.
She leans back,
unfolding her story
like a map of legend.
Clementine.

Her Mum is from Normandy,
her Dad is Breton.
They married in the house
of an aunt in Brittany.
"The smell of that house is my childhood,"
she says, recalls

the morning bakes of the *boulangerie*,
summers of *boules*.
Despite "rubbish weather"
the sea-shaken land has her in its thrall.
"I love winding the window down
and taking it all in."

The family tree
leans westward -
Gallic meets Gaelic
in an Irish grandmother.

A branch reaches North Africa
where her mother is born
and lives for seven years.
"Morocco has a place in her heart,"
says the daughter, yet to know
the mother's heart-land.

But in her name
the ghost of a connection –
North Africa is where
Frère Clément,
monastic gardener *extraordinaire*,
creates the fruit that bears his name –
clémentine.

She "kind of fell" into Nursing.
First she wanted to be a Paramedic,
live the dramas of *Casualty*,
but it didn't work out.
Then she didn't get into the Uni
her friend was going to.
Gutted
she goes to Oxford Brookes.
Turns out
the Nursing training's "amazing."
So is Oxford.

There's more.
She joins a History Society
and makes a new best friend
who introduces her to a male friend
from Solihull.
Les jeux sont faits.
She marries the Midlander.
"Definitely fate," she grins.

Another twist of fate
returns her to the hospital
where she was born
to work in elderly care.
She's punched, bit, kicked and sworn at
but remains true to her name
which means in French
mild and merciful.

"I loved looking after people with dementia well,"
she says,
emphasising *well*.

Her rite of passage
however
comes not with the Elders of St George's
but in the Acute Medical Unit –
mental health, physical illness,
End of Life, Type One Diabetes –
a world of patients in crisis.
"That's where I really became a nurse."

She's been at Charing Cross
three and a half years now.
Soon she'll be leaving East 6
to go one floor down
to Oncology Research –
"a different kind of patient contact."

It's been hard saying goodbye,
though she won't miss Magic FM's
tragic tunes.
Some patients have been coming to the Unit
as long as she has.
"You build up this relationship,
chat about each other's lives."

After Nursing
History is her passion.
She's fascinated by the stories of places,
the old photographs, the human narrative
from the local perspective.

In the future,
when she's been to Australia
to see her brother a few more times,
speaks the fluent French she knew as a child,
has a garden
and a cat,
she won't be history.

The patients and staff whose lives
she touched
will remember her –
compassionate, present,
her smile irresistible
as Father Clement's beloved
easy peelers.

Woman of Heart

The heart of the face
tells the heart within –
generous, grateful,
open to Grace.

There's a touch
of Bette Davis glam –
brunette curls
frame eyes
sea-blue,
rose mouth
pink beatitude.

In the corridor
they come thick and fast –
the queries, the questions, the asks.

She parries with aplomb,
seeking to turn the situation
not to advantage
but win-win.

"We'll lock the door,"
she says
finally
returning with the tea.

Time with her is a definite win.
This is a woman for whom
talking about herself
is a guilty pleasure.

Born in Oxford,
at the age of twelve
the family return to Ireland
and the family farm –
three summers spent
in Galway's boggy beauty
where hard graft permeates
soil and soul.

"Eaten alive" by midges in the bog,
she lifts the peat, piles it to dry,
stacks hay, milks the cow.
"The hardest thing!" she declares
tugging on the stubborn udder
in the hospital corridor.

She comes to healthcare
through her mother,
an Auxiliary in St John's Ambulance,
at eighteen begins at Charing Cross.
She's worked in Cancer Services
for thirty-three years now.

The badge says *Unit Manager*
but *Senior Sister* she agrees
has a truer ring to it –
"rolls off the tongue."

Chemotherapy
is "a physically and mentally demanding place to work,"
she says.
"We are the last pit stop. We end up picking up the pieces here."

To her this is predictable.
The unpredictable
however
also happens.

When I came to introduce myself
there was a sudden power outage.
All hands on deck. The ship held fast.

She's full of praise for her hardworking crew –
"It's bang on from 9 am till the last patient leaves."
Warns novices
"You have to want to be here. It's not for the fainthearted."
Then, with a smile inviting as a peat fire, adds
"You'll always remember your chemotherapy buddies."

Seeing her team
"develop and grow on their journey as cancer nurses"
is a gift that needs to be nurtured.
"It's important to keep their spirits up, inject positivity."
She thanks them daily, includes the admin staff.

The practice of gratitude
goes beyond hospital walls.
She's moved to thank all those
whose contribution is often ignored –
like street sweepers.
"That little thank you makes all the difference,"
she reflects,
then, laughing, confesses to being
a fully paid up member of the litter squad.

One thing she regrets
is not having time to talk to patients.
“The demands outweigh the resources.”

But for the pre-treatment consultancy
she’s there.
“Whoever we look after here,
I don’t launch into *this and this*,
I ask their name, say *tell me about yourself*,
build up that rapport.”

The bright gaze is still,
mindful.
Nobody wants to be there.

At home in Middlesex,
she has a rescue dog, three cats,
and a bedroom with over a hundred trophies.
The trophies belong to her daughter,
an Irish dancer who leapt and tapped her way to the top
from the age of four.

Mother and daughter
"shared Premier Inn rooms round the world."
In 2014 she danced Figure, Cèilidh and Solo
in the World Irish Dancing Championship in London.
Her brother it seems had no desire to step into
Michael Flatley's shoes.

The days of rushing from ward to feis
she recalls with an energy
that powers her still.
She loves cinema, theatre,
and in her middle years
has discovered "the cruising life."
The islands of the Caribbean, fjords of Norway,
are just for starters.

Son and daughter have their own lives now,
but maternal duties are not done.
A host of "adopted daughters"
are in her care –
witness the lively huddle
in East 6.

They are drawn to her
because she understands –
cats, dogs, hair, hormones
and hard work,
patients, nurses, families
and fellow travellers –
because
she is a woman of heart.

At the Bottom of the Pyramid

On the walls of the workspace
four images:
a white bird sits atop a hippo
sharks patrol the deep
a chameleon waits
a female walrus.

Three – a legacy of Lottie's crew –
speak of teamwork
vigilance
the need to adapt.
The walrus is Molly's choice.
"She spends 30 percent of her time with her girlie friends,"
she explains.
Intrusive males beware.

A quartet minus one,
the women indicate the desk
where absent Lottie sits
threatening veganism.
She started when the team was in its infancy,
has a Masters in Science Communication,
sporty, a climber.

The absent one brings movement to the room
prompts the three to stories
of travel, relocation, escape.

"I'm from a nomadic family,"
says Molly,
discretely barefoot in the office.
"My biggest challenge is itchy feet."

In sea-nymph green she speaks
with eye and hand,
the open gaze fresh and bright
as the Dorset air she misses,
framed by intelligent specs.

The family roots twist and knot
in a land of forests and bears
she does not know.
Wanderlust is in her DNA –
she's sailed the Galapagos,
backpacked the East Coast of Africa,
blissed out in Sri Lanka.
Kilimanjaro calls,
the unknown Canada
of her ancestors,
a house in wild Scotland.
London was not the plan.

"I was always the gypsy of the family,"
says Sanela.
She leaves Croatia
lands in London
thinks *oh my god*
and twenty years are past.

Her youthful looks are not to be trusted.
“She gets nice facials,” says Molly, incredulous.
Sanela laughs,
but beneath the radiant surface
the trauma of War,
the injustice, the missed opportunities.
Home is bitter-sweet.

Business-like, she critiques
her responses,
analyses the inner demons.
“I probably ran off from all that.
I made that step. It was friggin’ tough.”

Like Athena from the head of
war-like Zeus
resilience has sprung.
But it’s a “life-long project.”

A shot of sunlight hits her profile,
shows a forest sprite
or Kodak blonde.
“I miss the food!”
she exclaims, brightening.

“I just miss the sun!”
says Jess,
half a world away.

In the Philippines
where everyone knows how to swim
and all the books are in English,
Jess gets her education.
But she’s the youngest of four
in a Chinese family
where the boy is the star.

And so
by the age of sixteen
she’s gone,

leaving the brother to his cleaning company,
the sisters to work for Dad,
gone
to Bristol Uni, London,
and "the healthiest office ever"
where no one's eating crisps
all the chocolate's dark
and there's even a juicer.
Oh my god she thinks.

But the athletic cut of her pants,
the black ballerina pumps,
talk fitness.
Straight as a larch,
she's a Taiwanese Joan Hunter-Dunn
swishing the shuttlecock with aplomb
in Middlesex.

In vain she attempts to play down her skill.
"I just speak Mandarin, Filipino and English."
The room explodes.
"Just?!"

In Taiwan
she studies life after cervical cancer,
confronts the myths
of her mother's generation –
If you have surgery sex means death.
But no surgery
more often than not
means a cheating husband.

“The Chinese community is not very open.
The younger generation’s got Google.”

London taught her loneliness.
She’s married now,
but seeing her older patients suffer
wants to engage.

“People like us play a big social role,”
says Sanela.
She treasures the time spent with older men
living with prostate cancer
and the shame of asking for pads.
Embracing their gaucheness
was a privilege, she says.

Molly,
who’s worked in breast cancer
more than the others,
echoes their mind.
“I have a good amount of time to connect,”
she says
not looking at her watch.

“At the bottom of the pyramid”
four journey-women
bridge the gap between clinic and lab
with learning and heart.
In the office adjacent is Kelly,
more sister than boss.
“A five person team!”
they chorus.

The Possibility of Joy

Snappy blue frames
give her the air of an agony aunt
or custodian of some rare collection -
arguably both
within the remit of the daily round.

She holds me in her gaze,
terrier-like, true,
then disappears
caught up in “some bureaucratic nonsense.”
I wait
along with a mug of brew
over which clamber and coil
the wildlife of Chessington.

She reappears –
“You get stuck” –
and strides off again
with the efficiency and grit
of the seasoned walker.

Finally
retrieving the brew
she says
“Ok we’re ready.”
I fall in.

In the office
cycling apparel
un-matronly stowed.
Grey marl of sky
backlights
the sprung presence.

She's up at 6.15
for a swim before work
plays badminton after –
energy creates energy
her mantra.

She's walked the Douro and the Rhône Valley,
Piedmont, Bordeaux, Alsace,
with Russia and Finnish Lapland to come
on ski and sled,
Cuba, Calabria, Canada, New Zealand
on the horizon.

As she speaks
the hands move
hair to neck, chin to cheek,
mapping coordinates.
"Every year I plan to travel to somewhere
I haven't been."

At the age of fourteen
a friend with leukemia
brings her to healthcare.
She's a natural.
She comes to Charing Cross in 1986.

We're joined by the Ward Sister
I observed at the desk
like a switchboard operator
with crossed lines.

Her voice chimes in soft harmonic
with the other
whose firmer notes tell the turning of the soil.
Matron and Sister
Earth and Water
in perfect alliance.

She began as a nurse in Manila
looking after the rich and famous
including the President
but for all that
didn't get paid much.

Exchanging a "posh hospital"
for the NHS,
she worked at Sandwell General
and Pembridge Hospice
in Palliative Care.
She's worked with Sarah
four years now.

"She's an exceptional nurse,"
says Sarah,
"kind, extremely hard-working,
very very supportive of all the staff –
and clever. In another lifetime
she could have been a doctor!"

Eirene,
the clicking of her pen
a modest tut,
gives as good as she gets.
“Sarah gets out and does things
other managers don’t do.
She even unblocks toilets and moves beds!”

“We have quite a laugh at work,”
grins Sarah.
Eirene concurs,
“There’s a lot of laughter!”

To the outsider
this may seem strange.
Death is a constant here –
“We had ten deaths a week
all through the summer.”

Laughter
rooted in mutual care
brings resilience.

“The only thing that upsets me
is when the relatives thank me,”
says Eirene.
“I nearly cry.”

Sarah nods.
“Life can be incredibly short
so staff look after themselves.”

For Eirene
a feel-good movie and dinner with friends
does the job.
She's a cook herself,
Filipino food a speciality.

For Sarah
the promise of good food and wine
comes after a strong walk.

She plans to retire to Derbyshire
– ideally in striking distance
of Hathersage's outdoor pool.
Everyone will be welcome
to walk, eat and partake of the fine wines
in her cellar –
she has 150 bottles laid down.

Eirene's keeping her options open.
She may go home to the Philippines
but first there's travelling to do –
Canada, Japan, maybe Mexico?
"I don't know where I'm going yet,"
she smiles beguilingly,
"I'm still single."

In New Zealand
there is a lake
where Earth and Water
hold together
in a stillness
so perfect
it is joy.

In the busyness of Ward 6
Matron and Sister
hold together
so patients, nurses,
apprentice nursing associates,
healthcare assistants,
domestic and kitchen staff
have the possibility
of joy.

About the author

Di started out as an actor in theatre and television. She now mainly writes and directs. As writer-director shows include *Miss Havisham's Expectations* and *The World's Wife* which ran at The Trafalgar Studios London and several works for the BBC Philharmonic – including *Salford Tales* and *Services No Longer Required* which was broadcast live as part of the BBC's World War I commemorations. Poems from her book *Come Into The Garden* chronicling the family journey through her late mother's dementia were recorded for BBC North with a specially commissioned cello accompaniment. Other published work includes *The Memory Poems* for Westminster Arts and *Face à Face* for the Dièp-Haven Festival. Her chamber opera about 'Bloody' Mary Tudor – *Mary's Hand* – has played festivals, churches and theatres around the UK. Due to be performed at The Tower of London as part of the 2020 celebrations marking 500 years, performances have been rescheduled to 2021. She is currently developing a choral work about climate change – *Five Beacons of Light*.

ISBN 978-1-5272-5953-9