

Being a Patient



by the Cancer Patients' Writing Group

Cancer Centre, Queen Elizabeth Hospital,
University Hospital Birmingham
NHS Foundation Trust

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Photograph on front cover by Jonjo Rooney



During her treatment for breast cancer, Julia Darling wrote,

'I believe that poetry can help to make you better. Poetry is essential, not a frill or a nicety. It comes to all of us when we most need it. As soon as we are in any kind of crisis, or anguish, that is when we reach out for poetry, or find ourselves writing a poem for the first time.'

Inspired by Julia Darling and others who have written about illness, the Cancer Patients' Writing Group met monthly from Oct 07-July 08, led by Mandy Ross, a writer and cancer patient. The group was part of the arts programme of the Cancer Centre at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, UHB.

Our aim was to write about cancer – to speak the unspeakable – and to try to make sense of the experience of illness and treatment. We have attempted to harness the intensity of emotions around cancer in our writing; we have not made the work pretty or polite. Some of it tackles uncomfortable material (sometimes using strong language), voicing the taboos, rage and vulnerability that can accompany serious illness.

However, it is not all gloomy. In our experience of illness we have found plenty of dark humour – 'tumour humour'.

'Read at your own risk,' advises one contributor. 'No doctors have been harmed in the making of this booklet.'

'Not for want of trying,' adds another.

Dennis Potter said about his diagnosis with cancer:

'We're the one animal that knows that we're going to die, and yet we carry on paying our mortgages, doing our jobs, behaving as though there's eternity in a sense... And we tend to forget that life can only be defined in the present tense; it is, and it is now only... The only thing you know for sure is the present tense, and that nowness becomes so vivid...'

Below my window in Ross, for example, at this season, the blossom is out in full now... Last week looking at it through the window when I'm writing, I see it is the whitest, frothiest, blossomest blossom that there ever could be, and I can see it...'

w

Illness can sharpen our senses; writing allows us to explore and celebrate the vividness of now.

Cancer Patients' Writing Group 2009

When I got cancer

Eddie Smith

When I got cancer I thought it would be great.
I thought I would change into a better person.
I thought I would run marathons and write books.
I thought I would climb mountains and swim channels for charity.
But all I do is watch daytime television with the curtains closed.

Halloween

Rhapsody Weatherall

They scoured us, scraped us clean.
Removing every rotten seed,
each scrap of fibrous flesh scooped out.

Discarded shells remain. Our hollow eyes
burn red, our hot tears
sizzle and spit.

Empty heads, the unpossessed.
Bad spirits fled
through little chiselled holes they made -

fled screaming
while we slept.

Our perfume, rich and sweet,
seeps into the cold night air.

Our little lids lift in and out and fit
so neatly,
we look intact,

in fact
we look so much the same,
no-one can tell the difference.

Diagnosis:
Saturday December 16th 2006

Jonjo Rooney

Villa 0 – 1 Bolton.

Fuck. From 3pm to 5pm, my prime concern was the Villa beating Bolton. Little did I know hours later my life would be flipped upside down.

It doesn't seem real that I'm even writing these words. How the hell can I have leukaemia? I'm not even sure how to spell it – so how the fuck do I beat it?

I arrived home from the football with immense back pain. It felt like the whole of my lower back was being stabbed a hundred times at once. This pain then turned to a severe throbbing sensation which gradually made its way up to my entire back. A recurrence of the pain and discomfort I'd felt a couple of weeks earlier. I took the tablets I'd been given (by the same doctor, who seemed to get less and less appreciative of my jokes as my appointment went on). Where's Mum? I texted my sister Anna who was with Laura, my girlfriend. At Darren's, come over! she replied. But I was in too much pain. I'm in agony! I texted back.

Anna and Laura came over and ran me a bath. They informed Mum about my pain and after I admitted to a discharge of blood on the front of my boxer shorts this morning, it was time to take me to A&E.

Mum was (as expected) in a panic – although by now I felt ok; the painkillers had started to work and the pain was subsiding. Laura and Anna came with me and sat in the waiting room. I was soon called in to see the doctor. They took a blood test, something that wasn't done 3 weeks ago when I first went to A&E complaining about my back and chest pain. Fuckers. Anyway, I was in the best place now and felt pretty relaxed. After a chest x-ray and a second blood test, I waited for ages in a ward room surrounded by a curtain. My family were moved back into the waiting room. When they were eventually allowed back in, we were chatting and joking, telling family stories. I remember feeling in the mood for a burger and fries from McDonalds on the way home.

However, moments later my appetite vanished. A specialist doctor approached and told me that I had contracted a disease in my blood. There was no sense of emotion, compassion or sadness from the doctor – he just looked at me straight in the eyes and dropped his bombshell.

This is very serious," he said again and again.

Transfixed by his serious brown eyes, I just kept saying "yep" to everything he said. My heart beat faster and I felt very hot. I remember saying, "Am I going to die?" What the fuck was I asking? The doctor declined to answer and I didn't ask again. I was too scared. I felt strangely like I was in the limelight. I asked the doctor if there was treatment. I was so scared that I'd hear, "You've only got three months to live." My whole world was flipped on its arse. Just like that.

The doctor gently laid his hand on my forearm and left. All I wanted at this point was my big brother Darren. He is my rock, my idol, who I've always looked up to. In what seemed like no time Darren arrived with his arm around Anna. He hurried to my side and embraced me – then I completely broke down into tears.

I was admitted upstairs to a ward at Redditch overnight. I was being hugged and comforted by my family and girlfriend when a young nurse with blonde hair said, "You're going to be all right". Then, rambling on, she spurted out the word "leukaemia". Stunned, my sister and I said simultaneously, "What! The doctor didn't mention leukaemia!" "Yeah, that's what he's got," she said.

Well, thanks a fucking bunch. Another bombshell. My world was crashing down. This couldn't be happening!

At around 2am I was taken to my curtain ward, just like Casualty. I'd chosen Laura to stop over with me that night. I wanted to be with the love of my life. I didn't want her to be alone after hearing all this. She didn't sleep a wink, curled up on the solid, uncomfortable tiled floor with a blanket over her. I nodded off somehow a few times. I remember looking at Laura as she sat on the chair in the early hours, she thinking I was asleep. She was crying, sobbing, tears streaming down her cheeks. My heart melted.

Shit night's sleep. A million thoughts running through my head.

Lord help... please.

Being a patient**Eddie Smith**

Sitting on top of a freshly-made hospital bed. It feels great. The nurses who change the sheets remind me of bakers making a freshly baked loaf for me to sit on and view the ward. Newspapers, crisps, sweets, puzzle magazines, boxes of tissues. I am the king of all this stuff.

The lunch arrives in metal cupboards on wheels. The nurses search for my food in the cupboard, and when they find it, they present it to me on a tray. Soup to start, then it's cheese and potato pie with beans, and last but not least a pudding. A gentleman in the next bed complains to the nurse that they have got his hospital feast wrong; his pudding is missing. The nurses fuss around trying to locate his pudding. The man, in his 50s, is shouting at the nurses, 'I want my pudding, I ticked jelly, everyone else has got a pudding. It's not fair!'

They can't find his pudding. He has to have an apple. He takes it begrudgingly and bangs it down on his bedside table. After a while the apple rolls off the table, under his bed and settles behind a life-support machine. I think it is still there.

Rage and fear**Ann Gallagher**

Cranky, crabby, cruel,
Sniping, snapping, sneering,
Shouting, crying, howling,
Wailing, weeping, wallowing,
Where can I put this rage?

I want to channel it – to use it – to stop it using me.
I dislike feeling out of control, consumed by it all.
I hate others to see this side of me, dark and full of hate,
Not the image I want to project.

I am afraid of my rage – it reminds me of the rage of others – murderous rage.
I am afraid I might hurt myself.
I am afraid I might hurt those I love.
I am afraid I might harm those I don't even know....

Overkill**Rhapsody Weatherall**

Warning: this poem contains bile, venom (no known antidote) and an overdose of bitter resentment.

You told me to *live with my lump*.
Diagnosis: You clot, you great chump!
I'd like to garrotte you –
That's after I've shot you
And rammed pointed sticks in your rump.

I heard *You can live with your lump*,
Saw you plummet from grace with a bump.
Though I'd gladly castrate you
Don't think that I hate you:
Be happy! Go live with your stump.

That phrase: *You can like it or lump it* –
If your face was this pillow I'd punch it.
Put that instrument down.
I am sick of the sound
Of you blowing your own bloody trumpet.

To us, then: *lump it and like it*.
Raise your glass, quick, before I can spike it.
You'd like to retire?
Don't bother – expire!
Go test out this 'Great Ways to Die' kit.

I don't *like it* and no, I won't *lump it*.
You've given me poison, I've drunk it.
Now it's all flooding back,
Shades of grey, brown and black –
This boat was afloat; now you've sunk it.

I remember it: *Live With Your Lump!*
It reverberates still, after months.
There's no answer, I know,
How I'd love to let go –
But I want you to listen. Just once.

PS Rhapsody is feeling much better now.

The deal**Eddie Smith**

Your photographs
 are rubbish,
 your gas fire
 is condemned,
 your huge cabinet
 stands in the corner
 like a murderer
 who fully intends
 to stab and defy
 your attempts to break free
 from the nightmare of knickknacks
 that you never agreed
 would be part of the deal,
 the deal of a life
 that you'll never understand
 whilst you sit in your chair
 with your head in your hands.

Pattern poem: Leukaemia**Jonjo Rooney**

What, leukaemia!
 What causes leukaemia?
 Does it hurt?
 Can be treated!
 Can it be treated?
 I will get better!
 Will I get better?
 Where I go
 Where do I go now?
 Why is negative
 A positive?
 What is my blood group?
 B positive?!

You ask
 Too many
 Questions.

How've you been?**Ann Gallagher***After Julia Darling's 'Turkish Bath'*

Been poked been stroked
 Been cursed been cured
 Been called been sent
 Been busy been still
 Been happy been sad
 Been sane been mad

Been cursed with cancer
 Been cured with chemotherapy
 Been poked in my private parts
 Been stroked by kind hearts
 Been called for appointments
 Been sent for tests
 Been busy fretting worrying
 Been still exhausted afraid
 Been happy relieved
 Been sad about life lost
 Been sane with doctors
 Been mad with self.

Old bag*Rhapsody Weatherall*

Unzip me now
please do
undo
my buckles and my clasps.
Unzip me
shake me up
and down
and out –
that's right,
just so.

Now rummage me,
immoderately
through all my dirty
pockets
tightened corners
dusty linings
flappy openings
rusty fastenings
crummy
crannies
if you can

keep going
till you find me.

**Talking about breasts in the
breast cancer group***Mandy Ross*

Breasts come in sizes large, medium and small;
They usually fit the person.
Icon of womanhood, motherhood and pride;
Two's a pair.

My breasts were never big.
Mine were so small
But when I discovered I needed to lose one,
Then I was determined to keep them both.

One breast or two?
It's the person inside that matters.
(But I've never felt the same.)
Not quite the feature they may have been before.

(I loved to shop for pretty bras...)
We all had two.
Now some of us have only one
And we thank God for that.

Rage II*Ann Gallagher*

Putting rage on the page...
How do I gauge rage?

At my age, at any age,
It seems we are not supposed to rage.

It starts small – in minor irritations
all around, with everybody,
doesn't anyone know what to do?
how to do it RIGHT?

Really, raging is so aging,
so ugly, vile, full of bile.

I ache and feel sore,
gritty eyes, sour breath.

I rage at being betrayed by my body.
Why didn't I spot it sooner?

I rage at being betrayed by the medical profession.
Why didn't they spot it sooner?

I rage at the legacy going on through the ages,
Why my brother, sisters, daughters?
I rage at the loss of my profession, my status.
Why am I at the bottom of the pile again?
I rage at the loss of my libido.
Why didn't I know it would be so?

Exhausted, spent.
I wish I knew where it all went.

How I balance my home and work life*Eddie Smith*

Hurricane madman
fist full of anger,
face like a slapped arse
when I get in from work.

Bang down work bag,
wife and kids on eggshells,
locked in violent silence
when I get in from work.

Had a nice day, love?
Are you taking the piss, love?
Eat my tea like torture
when I get in from work.

Fuck this, I am desperate.
Can't stand no more shit.
Crying like a baby
when I get in from work.

Buy a big machine gun,
force my boss to grovel
so I can be a hero
when I get in from work.

Two-ness*After breast cancer***Mandy Ross**

I

Oh, the two-ness of hands clapping, eyes
 Glancing, ears in stereo, legs walking,
 Arms folding, thumbs twiddling, feet skipping,
 Two lungs breathing through two nostrils;
 The two-ness of eyebrows, shoulders, breasts, buttocks,
 Ankles crossing, the sigh of thighs and knees,
 Pairs of socks, shoes, gloves, sleeves.

Two-ness, mirror-matching, mutually complete,
 Belonging, each restores the other's half,
 Not space but cleft between them, shape transformed.
 We are surprisingly symmetrical.

But one breast only, now. No mirror-matching;
 Incomplete. One gone, the pair is lost,
 No cleft, no cleavage: I grieve for wholeness,
 Symmetry, beauty, youth, insouciance.
 Tears fall on my breast and its absent mirror.

II

I grieve, I grieve, and sometimes I forget.
 Grieving, I grow used to one breast only,
 Like one eye winking. I can balance on
 One leg, raise one eyebrow, I can hop,
 I link an arm, I sometimes wear odd socks.

Our lives are written on the body.
 Childbearing, cancer, accidents, love lost, time
 And gravity lead us beyond youth, symmetry,
 Wholeness. We live, alive, if we survive.

Nightmare (The Yowl of a Pussycat)**Di Abolical**

The Nurses and Doctors were all at sea
 In a rickety pee-green boat,
 They looked at my tummy, and rubbed it with honey;
 They fed me on curried goat.
 I raised my eyes to the starry skies,
 And prayed like hell for release,
 'Oh Nurse, nice Nurse! Please let me out,
 If you don't I'll call the police,
 The police,
 The police,
 If you don't I'll call the police.'

She sat on the fence: 'You're terribly tense,
 And I'm tired of your weeping and wails.
 You need strong drugs, not cuddles and hugs;
 You've flipped right off the rails.'
 I had to stay for a year and a day
 In the land where a Pong-tree grows,
 I lay in my bed with a bag on my head
 And a peg on the end of my nose,
 My nose,
 My nose,
 And a peg on the end of my nose.

'Nice Nurse, are you willing to sell for one shilling
 Your soul?' said the Doctor, 'I will.'
 So they wheeled me away and the very next day,
 While I slept, they went in for the kill.
 They dined on my heart, and a strawberry tart
 Which they ate like a pair of baboons,
 Then hand in glove, good heavens above,
 They danced by the light of the moon,
 The moon,
 The moon,
 They danced by the light of the moon.

Baby hunger*Rhapsody Weatherall*

Other people's children.
 Skin like sweet vanilla.
 hands and fingers silky dough
 with raisin eyes,
 each sweetheart mouth a strawberry split
 pink icing on the cake.

Angelhair, fine sugar strands
 the colour of rich toffee –
 and underneath their chins, along their cheeks
 the smoothest custard, cream.

For comfort,
 small and brittle scrap,
 act now, the oven's on.

Electric heat
 and sticky dark
 molasses, silver spoons to measure

cinnamon, dusty cloves and ginger,
 crumbled yeast the spark.

Cutters, stainless steel edges
 shape us, stitch us –
 time soon up.

A silent clutch.
 A perfect batch.

You're mine, at least, you flat-limbed faceless brood.
 With each crisp snap –
 all mine.

*** Relief * – a sperm story***Jonjo Rooney*

Right, so I've been diagnosed with leukaemia a day or two earlier, and treatment has to start straight away. At one of our many chats, the haematology specialist had made it clear that the intensity of my treatment will mean I can't have kids naturally. So I have to produce a 'sample' to be stored. This just couldn't be happening to me, two days ago I'd been told I had a disease which I couldn't even spell and now I'm expected to masturbate into a cup in order to salvage my only hope of having children in the future.

After the initial bombshell of the diagnosis, I must admit I'm more concerned to get myself better than think about being a dad. Anyway, I am told that I need to produce this sample ASAP and at 10am the next morning there will be a medical taxi man waiting to collect it. So I'll have to get up early in hospital and well... you know, start... trying. That night I struggle to get any sleep; all that's on my mind is what I'll need to do the following morning.

Morning comes (excuse the pun). I wake up distressed and far from confident. Becky, the specialist nurse, assures me that no one will enter my room whilst I'm trying to produce the sample. So I begin... trying. But I just can't get any progress (I won't be graphic but u get the jist). Usually, under other circumstances this would not be a problem, but being told that this was my only chance of having a child is making me edgy to say the least.

To help me out, Becky has given me some magazines of her ex-boyfriend's. So instead of cereal first thing in the morning, I'm holding a magazine called 'Pirate' with my pyjama trousers round my ankles.

I am having no luck whatsoever when a nurse called Charity bursts through my isolation room door. She catches me in the act. 'Get the hell out,' I yell. 'You're not supposed to be in here.' But as I look up, I see that my buzzer light is on. I'd rolled over onto my hospital bed button and pressed for assistance. I'm not embarrassed, just pissed off. She's unperturbed and leaves the room (I hope she didn't think I was having a casual play and that in fact it was 'prescribed').

So I try again, and get into the swing of things I'm having the smallest amount of progress, when my door crashes open again. This time it's John, the cleaner with Down's syndrome. He marches in with his f---ing mop in hand, looks at me, sees what I'm doing, (well, trying to do, I should say), and shrugs his shoulders. 'Oh, don't worry about that, I don't mind,' he says.

I yell at him to get out. I'm sitting in the buff trying to get my stroke on and I keep getting interruptions. I hear a nurse shout to the cleaner to get out – then she apologises and puts up a sign on my door.

I'm gutted, really upset. I'm not getting anywhere. I know that time is ticking and I can imagine the taxi man sucking on a fag waiting for my stuff in a tub to be picked up and sent to Birmingham. And I can't get the cleaner's face out of my head.

So about an hour and half later I try again, and very, very gradually, feel like progress is being made. At last I'm getting somewhere, little by little, I'm edging nearer to the point of no return, to sanctuary...then...*splash* (not what u think). Crashing against my window is a burst of soapy water followed by the window cleaner's shammy and squeegee motioning up and down the window. The timing was unbelievable. Luckily I'm up on the 4th floor so I don't see the window cleaner himself, just his extended shammy. At that point I give up. I just know it isn't happening.

Eventually I tell the nurse of my troubles. Bearing in mind the urgency of this situation, she says, 'What if we rang your girlfriend to come in to help?' Alas, a phone call is made to Laura. Ten minutes later, mission accomplished.

So the taxi man did eventually get his cup, and I was told the next day that my sample was "good stuff" – by that I can only presume that they meant its fertility was active and that there was still hope for me to one day have children.

relief

NHS

Ann Gallagher

National Health Service / National Happy Service / National Honey Service
Nurturing Health Service / Natural Health Service / Nice Health Service
National Hope Service / Neutral Health Service / National Hopeful State
Never-ending Helpful Service / Nonsense Hateful Streak / Nasty Hurting Service

Lady in blue

Jonjo Rooney

Staying after your shift hours
To listen to me cry,
This is unfair.
Will I get better? And why?
It's the little things that count
And your time is priceless.
You became my family and
Actually made it a happy Christmas.

A view from the clean side

Jonjo Rooney

She sorted me out tip-tops.
She was the voice of truth,
True salt-of-the-earth Brummie,
Who probably feels inadequate to those of the hierarchy.
Little did she know that I listened
to every word she said,
and I would look forward to seeing her each day
with her mop in her hand
and a smile on her face.

Gutted*Rhapsody Weatherall*

Little man
you want to cut me.
Wielding your knives,
parting the flesh
with dainty, little hands,
slitting me open
like a fish.

It's no use talking to you
about 'gut feelings'.

All you see are my spooled intestines, glistening meat
and the enemies:
fresh blood,
old tumour.

You sit on my bed,
deliver a little speech.
You like things clear.
You like things cut.

Little man
in a smart grey suit,
pushing my heart away
with clever surgeon's hands.

You want me caught,
reeled in
and gasping,
put to silent sleep.

Inside your smart grey jacket
the lining shines. Pink silk,
beautifully cut.

If I slit you
from top to tail
shreds of silk would spill and spin,
filling the air,
catching the light.
No blood.
No love lost.

Crush*Jonjo Rooney*

What a cliché to become infatuated with the attractive nurse or doctor.
 This crush blossomed through admiration,
 A true sense of awe.
 I trusted,
 I adored.
 Perhaps it was because he drew first blood,
 Or because he talked about me, my family, my pictures on my wall.

Each day he entered with his team, silent.
 I would sit upright immediately in my bed,
 Telly off, book down.
 His face displayed no worry.
 He had told my father, "I'll get this lad into a remission in 4 weeks."
 I was unaware. Perhaps that was best.
 His words made me proud for my hero,
 An idolisation to which no sportsman, singer or Hollywood actor can compare.
 No autographs needed; I get the most precious of gifts: his time.

None of this is like a lover*Mandy Ross*

The corridor is full of waiting women.
 At his word, one by one we undress
 beneath the strip lights, on the couch
 offer our bodies, await his touch.

We are his raw material.
 He parts the curtains, betrays no shock, disgust,
 appreciation. I rest in this blank.
 It is the watching nurse who smiles.

He touches me;
 his fingers read my flesh
 and we are careful to ensure
 that none of this is like a lover.

Breathless, I await his nod. No sightless monster
 seethes beneath his fingers, beneath my skin.
 He exits through the curtain. I dress and follow him.
 And none of this is like a lover.

Power*Rhapsody Weatherall*

Today I'm seeing Dr X –
 O happy, happy day.
 It won't be quite as he expects:
 We're doing things MY way.

I'll keep him waiting hours and hours,
 And when I'm good and ready,
 I'll call him in and sit him down,
 My voice quite calm and steady.

I'll say 'So how are you today?'
 Then shuffle through his file.
 The minutes tick in silence;
 Oh yes, I like my style.

I don't encourage questions.
 Well, not from the likes of him.
 I follow my own agenda;
 Indulge the occasional whim.

And when it's time for curtains up
 I don my rubber gloves.
 He lies quite still, his gaze transfixed
 By something up above.

I have a good old rummage.
 He's trying not to cry.
 I carry on regardless,
 But sometimes wonder why

I chose to do this fucking job –
 Of course, the money's good –
 But how they let me do it
 I've never understood.

Drugs and drips*Ann Gallagher*

We grasp gratefully at their drugs and drips,
 We experience the confident competence of their blades.
 We are fragmented, frail and fragile,
 We are dependent, trapped and sapped of energy,
 We are reliant, compliant and vulnerable.
 We yearn to be well again,
 To leave the doctors far behind.
 Yes of course,
 We do mind!

Gifts*Ann Gallagher*

The gift of my husband's love and care,
 The terrible beauty of his tears – so rare.
 The gift of my daughters' grief,
 All that we have had – funny, precious and sometimes sad.
 The gift of my grandchild's frank questions:
 What will happen when you die?
 The gift of my sisters growing up,
 It's our turn to take care of you now.
 The gift of my aunt coming out of depression,
 Deciding to show her lively, flirty self again.

The gift of life – seeing the old year out and the new year in.
 The gift of new experiences and knowledge,
 The gift of new friendships, close and mutually supportive.
 The gift of my new improved life – of which I must make the best I can.

A cancer song*Eddie Smith*

This belongs to me now.
 There is no other way.
 A room full of people
 Who don't know what to say.
 I'm walking with a drip stand,
 I haven't got a face,
 I've got limbs missing
 And my breasts are replaced.

The lumps are malignant.
 The people stare.
 I've got three months,
 I've got no hair.
 Everything is frightening,
 The darkness is grim,
 But that's nowt compared
 To the power within,

The power that spits
 In the cancer's face
 And says I'll decide
 The time and the place
 When I shall die
 And live and be free –
 Because I've got cancer
 But it hasn't got me.

**Looking at life through
cancer-coloured glasses**

Ann Gallagher

Suddenly it is all so intense.
 The grass is really green,
 The sky is really blue,
 I can really see me,
 I can really see you.
 So many irrelevant and unimportant things fall away
 Leaving the bare essentials:
 Me, you, our families, friends, colleagues and neighbours.
 As I tell the man on the benefit advice line
 When I feel ill, I feel really ill – nothing seems to matter,
 I don't care, I can't do anything.
 When I feel well, really well – nothing seems to matter either.
 I don't care to dwell on the mundane.
 Everything is so intense –
 The taste of food,
 The smell of perfume,
 The touch of clean bedding and fluffy towels,
 The warmth of a bath,
 The touch of a hand,
 The sadness in a glance.
 It is so true for me now –
 Now is all that matters.
 Now is all there is,
 Ever was and ever will be.

'Vagifem'

Rhapsody Weatherall

It's not for putting on your face.
 It doesn't come in a fancy box,
 elaborately packaged,
 with pseudo-scientific words like
peptide microelasticity proretinol
 embossed on it in gold.

You wouldn't put it on your list of
 Wished-for birthday treats.
 It doesn't smell of roses.

You can't pour it in
 the bath, relax in it
 by candlelight and soothing music,
 feel its silken bubbles on your skin.

It doesn't specialise in
 multi-tasking miracles:
 massaging roughened feet, dispensing
 gin and tonic, gently smoothing
 tired hair.

That's not the way it works.

Nor can it see
 your anxious efforts
 to dress up and look cheerful
 nor feel you
 tensing up, and cursing
 as you try to apply it correctly.

You can curse to your heart's content. There's no response.
 It's like screaming at a pre-recorded, disembodied voice
 that tells you, oh-so-blandly,
 to select an option, press a button, *have a lovely day...*

So say it again:
*shut up, fuck off, get on with it, just sort my problem out
 right now, don't make me wait and go over it all again and again and again.*

Feel free to yell. It can't reply
 and at least you know where you are with it.

The thin, hard, cold, blue
 plastic is always the same.

You have to love it for what it is.
 You must have been made for each other.

Visits and visitors

Ann Gallagher

How are you?
 (Do you really want to know?)
 Not too bad – all right – quite well, all things considered
 (Bloody dying, bloody terminal I'm told – destined not to grow old, just cold.)
 Never mind about me, how are you? How is life out there in the real world?
 (I envy you the very air – if only I could return there.)
 So that's what's going on.
 (Totally irrelevant to me now I've gone.)
 What shall we talk about now?
 (I'm knackered. I need you to go.)
 Small talk, gossip about others and patients.
 (I never knew there was a parallel universe
 – no one asked me if I wanted to come here.)
 Goodbye – see you soon!
 (I feel like I'm on another planet, or the moon)

The kindest visitor

Ann Gallagher

She just sits there
 She holds my hand
 She strokes my hair
 She gives me comfort
 She knows I know she cares
 She gives me space and time
 She accepts my sad silent weeping
 We do not need to speak
 And I drift away to a dreamless sleep.

The family face

Ann Gallagher

After Thomas Hardy

The family face is to know your place
 Don't argue, don't answer back.

The family face is to stay in the race
 At all costs, don't lose face.

The family face is to insist on buying the round
 Until someone falls to the ground!

The family face is full of grace – tall or small,
 Always proud and often loud.

The family face is to welcome all, to tell all,
 To feel for all, to laugh with all, to cry for all.

The family face is to press ahead, trying to out do each other.
 The family face is kind and giving, working hard for a living,

The family face is tall and dark.
 The family face is short and fair.

What do they share?
 The family face is to show that we care.

Chicken***Rhapsody Weatherall***

Catch it, truss it.
Wring its bloody neck.

Slap it down, bamboozle it.
Interrogate and stun it.

Stare it out –
see that stab
at clumsy kindness kill it.

Now pluck it. Fuck it. Feel its flabby skin.
With expert, tightly-covered hands begin

to butter up, to keep it nice and sweet.

Butter fingers on its helpless breast.
The cool flesh dimples, smiles.

And as its softly kissing thighs
fall open (knees up, please)
be careful not to crush its bloody heart
so inconvenient
its wincing guts, the tender workings:

all that life, unlived
wound up for good,
for always lying, scared

stiff in a shrink-wrapped shroud.

Claret & blue army***Jonjo Rooney***

Those men were out there for me
As thousands of eyes monitored their work
Working together in our uniform.
Behind the goal I was in my isolated room.
Through the glass I observed.

Not able to sit with the witnesses.
I was still in full support
Although my seat lay empty.
They waited for me to take my place
Before achieving victory for the first time since my diagnosis.

They worked tirelessly
Whilst I was far away.
They were playing for me, I felt,
A constant fixture in my schedule,
Occupying my thoughts and passion.

Emergency my arse***Dee V. Tee***

Emergency admission.
Fearing for my life.
Terrified in case I didn't
Make it through the night.

Amazing, at such moments,
How healing is the sight
Of educated buttocks
Under trousers, nice and tight.

The Silence of God*Eddie Smith*

It is patient.
It is kind.
It never denies,
and it's called
the Silence of God.

You can pray,
you can swear,
you can break down and cry
when embraced
by the Silence of God.

The world always turns
and love will return
to the people who are spellbound
by the Silence of God.

The kindest of the kind
are made kinder
when they find
they are surrounded
by the beauty
of the Silence of God.

B Positive*Jonjo Rooney*

I shouldn't look past today.
Can I allow myself that?
I've got to focus on my treatment
But I've got plans,
Plans to carve in stone for years
To be read by many
After my wall of tears.

I'm not going to be solemn forever.
God didn't make me that way.
I've got to B Positive
Cos I'm here to stay.

With the wind in my sails
And the sun shining bright,
I can get to where I want to go.
With God's willing, I just might.

Ann Gallagher was 49 when she was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive type of ovarian cancer. She is now 51 – very grateful for her immediate access to surgery and chemotherapy. She is now a retired teacher and enjoys being a volunteer as well as spending more time with her family and friends. She has really enjoyed the opportunity to be part of the writing group and would recommend it to others.

Jonjo Rooney is a 25-year-old who was born in Birmingham and spent most of his life just outside the city in Bromsgrove.

Jonjo's life was thrown into turmoil when he was diagnosed with adult Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia in December 2006. He had very intense chemotherapy and radiotherapy to prepare him for a bone marrow transplant, which he underwent in July 2007.

Since the transplant and throughout his recovery, Jonjo joined the Cancer Patients' Writing Group to pursue his passion for creativity by writing poems and prose work based on his experiences of cancer and treatment.

Mandy Ross has written over 40 children's books, mainly for children. She was shortlisted for the Birmingham Poet Laureate in 2006 and 2007.

Following her treatment for breast cancer in 2005, Mandy undertook a writing residency at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital Cancer Centre, where she had been treated. The Cancer Patients' Writing Group grew out of this work.

Mandy wrote and edited *Cradle to Grave*, a performance piece to mark the NHS 60th anniversary in 2008. A few of the pieces included here were first published in *Cradle to Grave*.

Eddie Smith is 52 years old. He has had a bone marrow transplant. His interests include sitting in front of a mirror and laughing.

Rhapsody Weatherall (just one of her noms de plume) lives in South Birmingham and likes sitting in her garden drinking tea, preferably when it is sunny.

She also likes singing, and finds writing both fun and therapeutic.

She has had many different jobs, but her all-time favourite was cinema usherette (free popcorn and ice-cream).

Now that she has suddenly become middle-aged, she intends to do a lot more of her favourite things and a lot less of everything else.

Turning Waiting into Writing: at the Cancer Centre

Mandy Ross wrote these very short poems during a writing residency at the QEH Cancer Centre. There were displayed on the electronic signboard in the Chemotherapy and Radiotherapy outpatients waiting area, where patients routinely wait for 2-3 hours. The signboard displays a maximum of 80 characters in four lines. The aim was to encourage patients to 'turn waiting into writing' – and some did.

One letter turns
waiting into writing.
So while you wait...?

Could u write a
v v short poem?
Watch this space.

Cancer Centre soap
smells of illness, fear,
magazines, waiting
and hope.

They read
your blood
– just a tsp – to tell
if you're well.

Well...
Well?
Well!
Wish you well.

'This drug might
make your bottom
tingle.' Wait with
teeth clenched.

Overworked nurses
hurry, scurry.
Patients wait
(im)patiently.

These drugs
to take home –
like a party bag,
but less fun.

Cliff edge of fear
is steepest in the
small hours.
Keep comfort near.

Needles will be
for sewing again,
one day.

I would lay down my life
for the NHS,
which saved it.

The Patrick Information Library at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham, holds various books of poetry.
Useful poetry websites include www.poetryarchive.org and www.poets.org

Here are some examples of poetry about health:

Anthologies:

The Poetry Cure, edited by Julia Darling and Cynthia Fuller, **Bloodaxe Articulations: The Body and Illness in Poetry**, edited by Jon Mukand, University of Iowa Press

Poems:

The Panic Bird by Robert Phillips
How to Behave with the Ill by Julia Darling
Urban Lyric by Elaine Feinstein
Doctors by Anne Sexton
A Litany in Time of Plague by Thomas Nashe
In Memory of WB Yeats by WH Auden
Visit to St Elizabeth's by Elizabeth Bishop
Faustina, or Rock Roses by Elizabeth Bishop
Dearest M by Hayden Carruth
An Anatomy of Migraine by Amy Clampitt
Mastectomy by Wanda Coleman
This Summer by Liam Rector
Hymn to God, My God, in my Sickness by John Donne
As One does Sickness over (957) by Emily Dickinson
Her Long Illness by Donald Hall.
Atlantis by Mark Doty
How Some of It Happened by Marie Howe
The Subalterns by Thomas Hardy
A Story About the Body by Robert Hass
Try Anyway by Noelle Kocot
When I Consider How my Light is Spent by John Milton

Being a Patient

by the Cancer Patients' Writing Group

The Cancer Patients' Writing Group met from Oct 07-July 08 as part of the arts programme of the Cancer Centre at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Birmingham.

This booklet presents a selection of writing exploring the experience of illness and treatment. Our aim was to write about cancer, to speak the unspeakable. We wanted to voice the taboos, rage and vulnerability – as well as the dark humour, and the gifts – that can accompany serious illness.

*You wouldn't put it on your list of
Wished-for birthday treats.*

It doesn't smell of roses...

You can curse to your heart's content. There's no response.

