



Poems in Time for Lent

by

Rogan Wolf

Introduction

The original motivation behind this poem collection was my need to respond to the deaths of three people close to me. Their deaths occurred in rapid succession through the early spring of 2012.

Putting words to trauma seems part of living through these things and perhaps is helpful. Most poems which result are not really for sharing - their task is just relief for the time. Yet, as the years have passed since then and the raw grief has faded, I find my need to return to the words and address the people they describe, is still present. And in the same season each year, I keep bringing out the poems that continue to have something to say to me. And each year, the selection is a bit different and I make small changes to the texts.

And the collection has extended to include more people and different dates, so that it is now a sort of portrait gallery in words, most of them of people from an earlier generation than my own, whose lives are now over, but who were close to me at earlier stages of my life, and played a formative part in who and how I am. And each Spring, the gallery lights up in my brain, so to speak, and somehow calls on me to visit again, wander round, and pay my respects.

But that is surely how it is for everyone, as time passes. Everyone will have a list similar to mine, if they live long enough. Everyone who has lived for any length of time always has. The deaths recorded here are unique to my life, but a sequence of deaths belongs in all lives, once they have extended for long enough. So there is something typical here.

Increasingly for me, these poems nowadays constitute at least as much an appreciation of the lives and personal qualities of the people described - their ways of living, their ways of ageing - as they are expressions of my sense of loss at their departure. As much about life as about death.

Quite *how* I air the poems each year remains an issue. Religions are much better poets than I am, even though some of their images and references no longer have currency for many of my generation. But I miss the holding structure, context, dignity, wise impersonality and also straight-talking of the religious ceremonial, the time-honoured “dramatic parts” and language adopted by priest and congregation. Without those elements, both the reader and the audience of these poems can feel a bit tongued-tied.

It's a work still in hand. How to address my lost loved ones, these shadowy companions still present on my road? A fitting sense of ceremony, due reverence, and yet intimacy; a need for witness; a need, as reader, to be comfortable in the moment and in my skin. I have known these people and shared moments with them. I need to say out loud that I still live in the gift of them.

Death Dates

Peter Wolf	died June 24 th 2001
Mary Wolf	died January 31 st 2005
Tina Parrot	died June 2008
John Boyden	died January 20 th 2011
Sophia Wolf	died February 3 rd 2012
Kim Wolf	died April 18 th 2012
Mary Young	died April 29 th 2012
Pixie Jenkins	died February 10 th 2013
Pat Boyden	died March 18 th 2017

Becoming

Peter Wolf May 1916 – June 2001

I tracked you down at last
to that elusive

“Chapel of Rest.”
The nurse escorting me

had never
stopped talking

but now she left.
Your mouth gaped.

Your nose was transparent.
There was no blood

moving there
to block the light.

I had failed, we knew,
to complete you.

I was bound to fail,
for both our sakes.

And I must go now,
I said,

and search deep
for my own spurs

to action
my own judges

to assuage.
You had beautiful

wide and grey-green eyes
which softened

for Johann Sebastian
and for “Vespers”

and for my mother.
Now the days

are made to pass
without your witness.

You are passed over.
Past.

Rogan Wolf
Autumn 2001

Lode-Star

Peter Wolf May 1916 – June 2001

You were my lodestar.

Whenever I drove
my children in your direction
my needle quivered and my spirits sank.
Right to the end I shrank in your proximity,
bewildered and raging at myself.
How could you steal so much light from me ?

You were my lodestar.

I paled before you
even while I knew you to be directionless
and desolate, a mere dust-cloud.
It was not authority in you
that so reduced me, but the frenzy
of your search for it. What would happen if
your cover was blown ? Would I blow too ?

You were my lodestar

I played you at squash,
already in my mid-teens
easily capable of wiping you away.
But could not.
Frightened ? Yes.
But not of winning,
not overtaking you,

but killing you
by leaving you behind.
Your fear, not mine,
paralysed me.
I was transfixed.
It consumed me.
I became it.
It mastered me.

You were my lode-star.

Rogan Wolf
November 2002

You Come Awake You Taste

Mary Wolf August 14th 1920 – January 31st 2005

Still you come awake. I am confident you taste.
But though it seems you also have sight

your eyes don't look any more.
I conclude you're beyond thinking.

You neither talk nor smile
but sort of bay sometimes

to expel a frog in your throat. You defecate
with no restraint

or sign of surprise
into your nappy.

I clip your fingernails
to stop them spearing

your palms, so clenched
your hands all day, the stink

of your fingers like bad feet,
my mother, it stays with me for hours

after I've fled from you. For I do not
last long. I bring flowers

in case you catch their fragrance
after I've gone,

I bring a chocolate mousse
for sweetness on your tongue,

I bring cream
to moisten your scaled

and haggard face. I bear to stay
just half an hour each month,

my mother -
then away.

Rogan Wolf
January 2005

The Isabella Plantation

(Mary Wolf August 14th 1920 – January 31st 2005)

is quiet in mid-winter but passing today I remembered
it holds perhaps our last exchange of words.

I had brought you down for the weekend and in my garden
you had apologised to my sons for your lengthening silences

due not, you said (struggling for lucidity), to anything they
had lightly said or done, but to corruption of your own
faculties within.

And then I brought you here, at a time in Spring when it is
all so glorious that words cannot describe the wonder of it.

We were lost for a while in the wonder of it, until you said,
“it’s lovely...”

almost choking, as if you knew that these two words might
be the last you’d ever speak and perhaps therefore

could have been kept for something else, later. Then I drove
you home.

*Rogan Wolf
January 2008*

My mother’s dementia eventually left her unable to recognise or even take note of anyone, let alone speak to them. But, earlier, she seems to have recognised what was coming, before we her children did, and to have begun to prepare for it.

Word from Tina, 93.

Tina Parrot 1915 - June 2008

I know my time is nearly up

I never knew there were so many
trees in Surrey !

In certain regions above the trees
the sky is pure mother-of-pearl

I have found this last part of my life
the most difficult of my human experience

I never knew there were so many
trees in Surrey !

Old age has made me realise
I'm not at all holy

I never knew there were so many
trees in Surrey !

And now you see perhaps
why I get lonely

*Rogan Wolf
January 2008*

These comments are all Tina's own, made at different times on our car trips. I would take her out each month, always round the same circuit through the Surrey woods. She made the same comment about the trees in Surrey, at least once each time. Her sight was almost gone, but she refused to wear glasses.

from Dorset Tutorials

John Boyden 1921 - January 2011

...And my Uncle John taught me
how to dig holes. High on the downs
a new dairy was on the way.
There, under the skylark
I spent a morning scooping chalk
and blistering both my hands
in the fashioning of a shaft
cone shaped. He kept his voice level
and reminded me the walls had to be sheer
not sloping
the area rectangular
not roundish
and the floor flat
not cone-shaped.
It took two days
at the end of which we hated each other
and the shaft was perfect...

*Rogan Wolf
October 2005*

John was a farmer in Dorset, also an archaeologist, a formidable intellect and presence. I lived and worked on his farm for a while. I felt truly at home there, though not necessarily at peace.

The Joy of My Uncle

John Boyden 1921 - January 2011

Nowadays, my uncle
wears white whiskers -
and seems actually benign.
His eyes twinkle in their new pouches
and he even makes jokes.
When we said goodbye last time
we hugged each other, we clung.
Love was at play. Love newly unashamed.

Perhaps it does get easier
once you're old. Twenty years ago,
aghast to be the age where I now flounder,
he was terrifying, hating
not being young anymore,
his fine mind slicing at everyone round him
like a flying razor blade.

He could never rest. Letting go
meant losing time. He was at odds
with this pouring away
of time, coiled against it.
He was coiled against
everything. All at war.

But somehow the war is over now
and my uncle at peace
is waiting to be de-mobbed.
I don't understand this joy
of resignation in him.

I can't believe some new philosophy
has dropped answers in his aged lap
like Christmas presents out of the cold blue.
He is far too clever for neat answers.

Something has simply given way.
He has been exhausted into joy.

Let the same exhaustion, please,
inflict itself, in time, on me.

Rogan Wolf
January 2001

I read this poem out to John and his wife Pat, as they sat together in their farmhouse. No comment from John except to say that perhaps he had just now begun to feel this "joy of my uncle" I was talking about creeping up from his ankle, but he couldn't be sure and suspected he was wrong

Body Parts

Sophia Wolf February 4th 1945 - February 3rd 2012

Her eyes had stayed open
on different lines of sight.
They had become just parts -
a function discontinued,
nothing directing them now,
no one to report to.
I looked at her, the mother
of my children. She
did not look back
those eyes I used to look to
fixed askew.

*Rogan Wolf,
February 2017*

Sophia died of breast cancer, she and her family having lived under its shadow for 20 years.

The Carrying Out

Sophia Wolf February 4th 1945 - February 3rd 2012

It had filled our house for years
like thick sludge, that dread
unanswerable, that dread-filled crusade.

“I’ve made it to another Christmas,”
you said, looking like death,
raw lipstick between sunk cheeks,
body shrivelled, tumours all abroad.

Go in peace. You bore three into the world -
four bore you out, covered in white flowers.
You made a house fit for living in
and now the fit young men we made
are learning living there.

*Rogan Wolf
12th March 2012*

Kim and the Nasty Woman

Kim Wolf August 1953 – April 2012

A “nasty woman”
waits for Kim in the hall.

Kim doesn’t know her
or what that shadowy

snarling means,
but her door stays open

conceding connection.
All evening Kim sits

in her room alone
staring out

at the Shapeless One.
Sometimes Kim

flinches and retreats
out of range

but soon returns -
in thrall.

I said goodnight
shorting their circuit

opening their circle.
“You’re beautiful”

Kim said to me
and I replied :

“It’s you who’s beautiful.”
She spurned my thought -

her mind gripped
by subject matter

far beyond
what love may reach.

Rogan Wolf
Summer, 2010

Kim my sister had Down’s Syndrome. In later life, she began having psychotic experiences and her last years were accompanied by Alzheimer’s.

Urns

Sophia Wolf, Kim Wolf

Two small boxes roughly made

wait in my sitting room

like sisters side by side.

I have spent hours

making them good, making them worthy.

I work tenderly

as if feathering two nests.

Already, one weighs heavy, grit full.

The other still gapes

vaster than the universe.

Rogan Wolf
September 2012

Some Things Mortal

Mary Young ? - April 2012

Bluebells in a beech wood
wave upon wave of them
raise the season to its height

fulfilling in these days
centuries of creation
undisturbed, underground.

It partly comforts me to know
that these high days here
will be cause for pilgrimage

years after my span
of witness -
year upon year upon year.

It's partly comforting to know
that some things mortal
will endure.

*Rogan Wolf
May 2006*

The above offers a paraphrase of Mary's own thoughts and words, as she walked among the bluebells that springtime in the Surrey woods, a few years before she died.

Mary Young of Cley

Mary Young ? - April 2012

Your spirit yearned and burned
and your mind wandered upland and outland
in the company of explorers.

But though your words still crackle
and flare in the minds
of your community who loved you

you have now turned
into ashes and we must carry you
and scatter you among the wetlands

and openlands where birds of the earth's edges
and openings and open sea
feel at home. You are welcome home,

Mary Young, now spirit
of the mists and anthems, here,
of Cley.

*Rogan Wolf
Autumn 2012*

At her request, we scattered Mary's ashes by the edge of the sea at Cley, Norfolk. I wrote this poem for that occasion and read it out there.

Near the End of a Year of Death

In memory of my late sister Kim, 1953 - 2012

All at once the wind
hurls thousands of fallen leaves
skyward from Hyde Park

The wind grabs hold of
a whole year's shed leaves and flings
them over Hyde Park

One moment sees the wind
sweep all this Autumn's dead
leaves across Hyde Park

as if all the fallen
leaves of London are dancing
above Hyde Park

This sudden gust and
all the red leaves of London
heave up from Hyde Park

*Rogan Wolf
November 2012*

Throughout my twenties, I found it impossible to write poetry that was not somehow imitating either Eliot or Yeats, or both. Aiming for the Last Word made it impossible for me to find the just. My eventual solution was to write as if to Kim, whom I simply loved and who didn't mess about. I think I might finally have succeeded with this poem, written at the end of 2012, the year in which Kim, Mary and Sophia all died. Kim always loved the wind, and a reading of these haiku invites their reader to put some energy into it.

To Pixie on her Ninetieth Birthday

Who else in the world
has carried the name Pixie ?
Pixie. Pix. And who else could -
besides you ? We never question it.
We just warm to the picture
it brings to mind
of grace, a certain glow,
laughter, a resilient softness ;
chauffering children all over the South West,
in a green Morris Minor, wood-framed ;
loyalty, tact, sobriety,
bridge with Pat and a giggle or two ;
“Pixie” conjures
the elegant kindness that flows
at all times from you.

You entered the world 25 years before I did.
Your line of memory, your avenue to the past
reaches so much further than mine.
May the rhododendrons
be flowering in their thousands along your avenue.
All your life has tended to this celebration.

There are stations of yours I cannot visit –
your coming of age, as war broke out,
to marry a man at risk, in uniform.
You posed together on the lawn
for the black and white photo
now curling in the family album.

My memories of you
and your family house
are the happiest of my childhood.
Even now they light up my life.

I hold a small pack of stills
banked in my mind :
your mashed banana ; boiled eggs with “soldiers” ;
peaches you brought to the beach hut,
the first I’d ever tasted ;
our expeditions through the woods
filled with the scent of pine ;
poetry in a chapel on a cliff ;
a profile as beautiful now at 90
as ever it was when that young man
plighted to you his troth, his life in question.

And now to the baking of cakes
in a neat flat with a view,
grandchildren, great grandchildren,
computer lessons and pin numbers...

Rogan Wolf
September 2011

Pat Presiding

Pat Boyden May 1920 – 18th March 2017

(i)

She held court in the kitchen
brandishing that Players cigarette
and she made the calf house
(converted from an egg-laying business)
elegant with her neat wellies
carelessly pressed on.
She was fiery and sharp-witted
and read book after book
and every morning reached
for a gin at 11.30 sharp,
pouring it each time
with the same wry joke,
and she feasted the chaffin
and fought the rook
and knew all the stories
of the neighbourhood.
She flamed and glittered
among that wonderful furniture
of dark, old wood.

(ii)

The tree's a harp, plucked
and pulled by the winds, a music
fierce and royal. The word "sough"
does not sing enough. The tree's true
voice is double bass, a thousand basses
in celebration ; it is ocean ramping
through gravel on the shore. Two
copper beech trees stand proud
in a Dorset valley I know. Often
when young I climbed into the saddle
of one and then higher, to sway
in its mane. We rode the valley together
this beech and I, shy squire
on lordly stallion.

But then, for years,
my noble lady, now almost blind,
would fret

that, one day,
some perfect storm
would fling the beeches

onto the farmhouse, cleaving
the roof wide open.
Of course that storm arrived

but she just climbed upon it
as if it were a springtime breeze
and they glided away

leaving the beeches rock
solid in their places,
grieving.

Rogan Wolf
April 2017

I read this poem at Pat's funeral and felt sure of my role here (for a change) – poetry can occasionally belong at the flow and mix and confusion of things, supplying timely and adequate words for a community in need and glad of them.

Resurrection

(i)

I must leave their names in this place
souls who once drew breath with me
and answered when I spoke to them.

Peter my father
Mary my mother
Tina, my aunt
Sophia my wife
Kim my sister
Mary my friend
John, my uncle
Pixie, my aunt
Pat, my aunt

Now
they do not hear
me even though I call,
and do not see my face
and do not speak, nor say "I,"
and did not see the sun rise
this morning -
even while still woven
and meshed in my flesh
my mind's mutter
and murmuring
the world of my wandering...

Let me scatter their names like seed
this new springtime.
And let them rest here.
Let them be written in the stones.
Let me leave them here
like petals spread among these old stones -
as again also they rise
and meet yet more
new time with me.

(ii)

I cast petals among old stones
and memories that chase

the rhythms of my blood
and activate my bones

and through my gathering shadow
guide me.

Are you reborn in me
or have I eaten you,

perforce, that I take your scent
with me through my days

and words I know are yours
to whisper like spells

along my lost ways
and against my locked doors ?

Rogan Wolf
March 10th 2014

(iii)

And when the doors open
and the sun plays

on a few words of mine
displayed on the grey

veined walls
of the great church of Clifton ;

and plays here
on the walls

of this quiet house
beside three trees

in sight of the Severn ;
so you will stand with me

still among the old stones.
And we'll pass together

I alive in the gift of you
from old stone to new stone

from old light
to new light.

Rogan Wolf
Frampton, 2020