



A Light Summer Dying

by Rogan Wolf

Comments on “A Light Summer Dying”

“It’s extremely moving – all the more so for being completely unsentimental and continually sharp-eyed. It doesn’t flinch and it manages to combine the anger of grief with a sense of something more stoical – accepting the inevitable I suppose.....I think it would work very powerfully in performance..

Andrew Motion, UK Poet Laureate 1999-2009

“ ‘A Light Summer Dying’ is a masterpiece of empathy, delicate imagination, love and insight. The title is wonderful.... Such a heartbreaking, yet also uplifting poem.....it would be wonderful if this were printed in a pamphlet. I think it would give a sad joy and courage to many people.

It was an honour to be sent this poem.”

Moniza Alvi, poet

"Reading this poem, I became an invisible watcher at the bedside of a woman I did not know, and yet in the space of a few words I knew her and her suffering and her strength better than I knew myself."

Caroline Carver, poet, National Poetry Competition winner

“Deeply moving.....The idea of birth as an image of this death is remarkable and very striking.”

Rashida Islam, poet

“ 'Light Summer Dying' is beautiful and exquisitely moving...Everyone who reads it will get to know the young mother whose life and death it celebrates, and most will also relive - as I did - our own griefs for loved ones lost...I wept each time I read it. It's a lovely poem.....”

Debjani Chatterjee, poet

“...I found it incredibly moving. I also found I couldn't stop reading it - it was compulsive. ...It is a lovely, cruel, ecstatic poem which deserves to be heard.”

Miriam Obrey, poet

“I think this is good, strong and unflinching, like the woman it celebrates, and should be published.”

Roger Garfitt, poet

Introduction

“A Light Summer Dying” describes how a family and their community lived through the losing of one of their number. The person concerned was a young woman, the mother of two small boys and she died of cancer of the womb over a period of a few months. The poem is non-fictional and much of it was written as a kind of diary at the time and on a daily basis. As its author, I was a near-neighbour of the family concerned. Having heard the first part of the poem, the woman requested I continue, seeing it as a record to which the children could return when they grew older. So, essentially the poem was a commission.

Much later, after the woman had died, we agreed the poem could be made available beyond the family circle. Since then, it has been read to trainee social workers and nurses. In 2003 it was published by an online poetry magazine specialising in longer poems, called “Echoes of Gilgamesh” and based in Glasgow.

Rogan Wolf

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Hilary, Nick, Aidan and Rowan.

Sincere thanks are also due to the poets Caroline Carver and Moniza Alvi who valued "A Light Summer Dying" enough to help me tighten it for publication.

I also want to thank the late Mary Young for helping me believe in the poem in the first place. She said she imagined a minstrel singing it in the hall at night, to inspire the warriors to heroism on the morrow.

The Story in Prose

Suddenly in the Spring of 1999, after she'd cooked a Sunday meal for the in-laws, her belly stood out from her, as if in the space of an hour or two she'd become three months pregnant. It was a large malignant cyst in her womb. Five days later she had a hysterectomy and extensive chemotherapy was prescribed. She was discharged home but soon a plan to drive to the woods to see the blue-bells had to be scrapped due to a sudden deterioration in her condition. She returned to hospital and the family was told her cancer was worse than originally thought. It was a rare form of the disease, especially aggressive. Later, during a Summer full of chemotherapy, she began to feel intense pain in her abdomen. Nothing afforded her relief and the decision was made to operate again. It was found that the cancer, still rampant, had spread into her bowel. So the surgeons conducted a colostomy. Another hour or two and her bowel would have burst, they said. Henceforward all defecation would be beyond her control and almost public. Soon everyone agreed that no treatment now to hand could save her. At the end of August she came home to die in the care and company of her young family.

She herself was thirty five. A Graduate in Theology she had become a manager in a Housing Trust specialising in mental health. She was an organiser of high ability and was vividly alert to people and gave herself to human contact with brilliant intensity. She was obsessive and could not live in a house unless it reflected the perfect order she required. She laughed a great deal and engaged her friends in extravagant word-play when she was happy. As her death approached, some of her soft covers began to fall away and she revealed herself as a powerful thinker and leader.

At her funeral, which she planned with care, she seemed as vivid and inspirational as if she were still alive. In his funeral address, her priest, himself grief-stricken and in tears, issued a formal complaint to God, at her request, on the hurt her death had caused her family, especially her young children. He echoed her protest with his own.

Part One

Song of a Christian Woman without a Womb

*We cooked fish for her - she loved it - high-protein, healing food.
I read her this poem in her hospital room.*

The woods draw me
with their dim and ancient song
and that misty blue descant
now, this April.

So feed me fish, fish
and I'll marshall myself
for the going there.

For I gave shelter the other day
to buds of wild fecundity.
All my own making
they bloomed in hours to devour me.

Fish, fish -
wriggling from old church walls
and across car fenders -
plain outline of ecstatic hope
age-old endurance
comfortable fellowship.

I have lived a long night of knives
and shouted on waking
"Didn't I do well !
I am going to live !
I am risen !"

I am certain now
of the benefits of living
and sitting cross-legged on my sofa
think much of blue-bells
misty in the quiet of the woods
agonising in their tenderness.

April 1999

August 1

“She keeps stroking her belly,” he says.
“She’s trying to feel tenderness
for the killer in there.”
He and I can only experience

this thing
as deadly enemy.
It keeps after her.
All defences seem paltry

before its ferocity.
Her body shrinks
and fresh skin wrinkles.
The womb went weeks ago -

the bowel may go today.
A tube through her nose draws bile
direct from her belly.
It is green and her boys can see it

but they seem not to notice,
having eyes only for her.
Each one clamours to be held by her.
And all of her yearns

to hold
each of them.
But she cannot.
The tubes prevent it.

They don’t understand.
Yesterday the one-year-old
turned his back on her.
How can we not

feel hatred
for this thing
and dread
of its operations ?

Her eyes gaze out,
wider and wider.
She insists
on living this through

in careful detail. As her body reduces
her spirit seems to grow -
“What dresses can I wear
with a colostomy ?”

“Shall I stay with you tonight,”
he asks, “so that in the morning
I can cuddle you
before you go to Theatre ?”

“Tomorrow morning,” she says,
“before they wheel me into Theatre
I’ll want to know that you’re at home
as usual with our sons.”

She resists all sense of this as war.
“This is *me*,” she says.
“Am *I* the enemy ?
We have to come to terms.

And anyway,” she argues him down,
“if I’m at war,
I run the risk
of losing.

My love
my *love*
I must not think
in terms of *fight*.

I have to be reconciled.
Whatever is to happen
I have to centre myself
on a point of light.”

Aug 2

*Nights of knives
are now my history.
They enshroud me.
My days shrink to a pin-hole.*

She draws away from us.
None of us have visited
where she now tip-toes.
There are no flights to her country.

*I am infested with instruments of healing.
They abuse me.
Their cruelty grows
in pace with my sorrows.*

“I shall not give up,”
she says, at new evidence
that this disease is irrepressible.
There is less and less of her.

The machine beside her bed
speaks her agony.
When it bleeps
she is shrieking.

Aug 5

“Go and see her,”
a friend advised.
“It makes it easier to bear
to sit with her where she is.”

Her eyes are still bright blue.
They reach out. They take in.
And she’s still complaining
of the bland bare walls

that face her
through the hours of wakefulness.

She’s planning to put poems there.
She talks enthusiastically
then turns and frowns
her eyes fade

she seems to look inwards
as a welling of green bile
gushes down the transparent tube
to a bag hanging beside her feet.

“I hate feeling nauseous,”
she says, after a moment.

Walls should live, she believes,
not stare blankly back at her
through all these hours.
She wants them to speak

with words that inspire her,
words turned to a “t”.
She wants each wall
to sing.

She wants to be the centre
of choirs
of loving
celebratory words.

She plans it
step by step
and in careful detail
lying in her hospital bed

among the tubes
the wires.

Aug 8

This evening at home
his eyes are staring and fixed
ringed with dark
and the one-year-old is yelling.

It's bedtime
the essential blanket
still in the wash.
He gets too little sleep

and now is shrill and can't settle
darting here and there on the edge
of one clenched thought after another
none of them central or complete.

Today the doctors have given him
a sick note for three weeks
but his quota for sickness on full pay
is nearly exhausted.

A gladioli from the garden has been snapped off.
"I'll take that for her !" he exclaims

and leaps for a newspaper to wrap it up.
"She's leaving me," he says.
For the past few days she's been too tired
to take him in,

to help him carry the weight,
contain the pressure,
to attend to his accounts
of the day's doings and concerns

his feelings and experience.
She hasn't been able to hold him anymore.
No connection. She isn't there.
Her blue eyes keep wandering

to a picture on the wall
of a massive rock the sun bombards all day
a domed church just visible on the top
tiny on a scorched cliff-edge.

“I realise now how much more
support she’s given me
than ever I gave her,” he says.
“And how does that

leave you feeling ?”
I ask, expecting guilt.

“I dread losing her,” he says.

Once the children are in bed
he goes as usual
to spend the last hours of the day
alone with her

in the hospital.
Upstairs,
two small boys
sleeping through their trouble.

Downstairs, a forgotten gladioli stem
wrapped in the day’s dead news.

Aug 9

“This must be so hard for her”
he says tonight.
“She does, we know,
like to keep a hold on things.

She used to joke, didn't she,
about being just a little bit anal.”
Every sock had its place
in that house and at all moments

she knew exactly its whereabouts.
Every birthday for miles around was remembered -
she recorded them in her little book.
She wrote minute instructions

for each helper at her children's parties -
the children's shoes to be set out in lines
along the grass, their laces tied together,
each pair with its own label...

She did insist on good order.

But this is beyond all managing.
She must feel so desperate
having no option but to surrender
everything she thought was in place

and week by week be overwhelmed.

“Will I be able to forgive myself
for failing to do things
exactly as she did them ?

Really, she's doing so well, isn't she ?”

Aug 11

The four year old knows
the illness that's at work.
"I hate this cancer,"
he shouts this evening.

He wants to dive
on her attacker
and annihilate it.
He wants to win her back.

Aug 12

Today, after we hear
the chemo - her last hope -
has failed to shield her
and nothing now can be done,

the family has a picnic in the hospital
(Her idea -
she's still creating
points of light).

Aug 15

Perhaps her greatest grief
is that her youngest
will not remember her.
Today, though, he keeps saying

“Mimmy, Mimmy” -
his first clear word.
His older brother knows much more.
Sometimes it seems he knows everything.

Today he’s cried all day
and at bedtime he’s still wailing -
“Mummy ! Mummy !”
“I know it’s not fair

what’s happening to Mummy !”
shouts his father, struggling
with pyjamas, the toothbrush, the disorderly room.
“I agree with you ! It’s not fair !”

“Life’s not fair !”
wails the small boy.

Aug 15

“We need to make a place
of quiet spirit
in all this,”
he says on the phone.

Aug 22

Tonight is happier.
The boys' aunt
over from the States
took them for the day

to the Natural History Museum
and bought them a plastic dinosaur each.
During a calmer bedtime,
the four-year-old says to his dinosaur,

“you're about to die.”

Then he says to his father,
“I'm about to die.
I shall keep talking.
You'll still see me.

But I'll die.”

His father, thoroughly in hand tonight,
says, “I'll be sad if you die.”
Then he asks,
“when do people die ?”

“When they're old,” says the boy.
“And when else ?”
“When they get cancer
or have an accident,”

says the boy
without hesitating.

Aug 25

We should not forget the parish in this story.

The family's disaster has the parish in ferment.
Its response affirms what parishes are for.
This is the realising of Community.
Sometimes the family house

is like party headquarters
in the middle of an election,
door-bell and telephone constantly ringing.
All possibilities for help are covered :

the clothes ironed, the bathroom cleaned
and a cooked meal left on the doorstep
every night for the family dinner.
At one stage they calculate

over 100 people
are involved in the support network.
Often he seems less
like someone dealing

with his and his family's grief
than the co-ordinator of a grand
and quite exciting logistical exercise.
He is excellent in this role, a true leader.

There are times, admittedly, when I wish
the house had a quiet place in it,
but perhaps all this organising is antidote
to the horror he knows in each new moment.

Aug 27

A further task
required of them these days
is to deliver to friends
the news of their catastrophe.

In a single half hour
this evening on the phone
he's made the same explosive speech
three or four times -

"I have some bad news to give you..."
"Are you sitting down...?"

Sometimes they act
almost as counsellors,
helping people deal with the dismay
to which they themselves

are now acclimatised.

They've become expert too
at knowing who can deal with this news
unselfishly, whole and to the hilt,
and who in contrast will somehow prey on them

through failure to navigate
their own distress.

Aug 30

She wants this recorded :

“I am reconciled to the fact I am soon to die.
I feel God is close to me.
I feel comfortable in His hands.
Although I do not understand His purpose

I know it accords with His loving plan for me
and one day this plan will be revealed.

But I must also record my conviction
that I am being separated prematurely
from my family.
This I cannot accept.

I cannot feel the hand of love in an act
that causes so much pain.
I cannot be reconciled to the pain
this separation is causing us.

I want my protest voiced
at my funeral
and have asked my priest
to voice that complaint
on my behalf.”

Part Two

The First Day at School

1

Stage by stage the Summer claimed
her body's secret parts - the womb, the bowel...

By Autumn her waist was surrounded
with small plastic bags,
each displaying to the world
her most intimate processes –

the green bile, the brown shit.
Her four-year-old
asked her what they were. She told him.
Her husband changed them for her every night.

Each surgical intervention
each bodily intrusion and exposure
meant the breaking of one more line of defence.
Though she herself was still entire,

her being unbroken
like a delicate steel yacht
in a hurricane,
her life in the future

shrank from week to week.
By mid-Summer
she knew she would not live
into the Millennium.

“Unreal, isn’t it ?” she said to me
on the morning of bad news
across her hospital room
where the family had gathered

for their picnic together.
Later she said, “I am living now
for the day my son starts school.
I am going to see him to the door.”

The day took place in early September.
It was sunny. She wore her floppy hat
and looked like death. The blue eyes flamed
from the wasted face, yellow and gaunt.

Everyone saw
that here was someone dying of cancer.
Perhaps in consequence,
certainly with justice,

the occasion was unmistakably royal.
Her dying made her an empress.

We carried her downstairs and into the wheelchair,
professionals on hand in case of accident.
Boy in his new tie, she in her flamboyant hat,
we trundled over the road

and into the crowded playground.
Greetings here, greetings there -
Stop, please, for a photograph, so he won’t forget
his mummy shared these moments with him -

and then their progress
continued towards the classroom.

After a while, the point was reached
when her son let go of his Daddy
waved goodbye and turned away -
and she was free to unravel.

The painkiller hung beside her in a plastic bottle
and because of this long-planned occasion
the morning changeover had been delayed.
But something had gone wrong.

The replacement bottle was still on its way
and this one was almost empty.
The tension rose and suddenly
mobile phones were operating.

She began to pull back
into the wheelchair.
It was time to get home.
I pushed her but lacked her husband's skill

nudged the wheels against the pavement curb.
Instantly she called for him to take over. No time
for archaic niceties. Then upstairs,
three men carrying her, and the dress

must come off, desperate now, all modesty
beside the point, only let her have relief ;
so the dress came off at the stair head,
she still upright, and then at last she could be lowered

back to her soft familiar place of rest
having lived so hard for this moment
and only just made it.
A few minutes later the medication arrived

and two nurses were busy with her
for the rest of the morning.
They believed at one stage she was dying.
She said, "I think I've done enough now,

I really feel I'm ready to go."
Someone said, "please God she doesn't die today.
If she does and he returns from school to find
she couldn't survive his absence, he'll refuse
ever to go to school again."

She rallied strongly by evening.
The news of her triumph
had flown around the world by e-mail.
Congratulations came flashing back.

Something troubled her and she wanted to talk to me.
She was delighted by these kind messages
from so far away, she said,
and her face smiled with deep lines

I'd never seen before. But what was the news
these people had received ? (Now she was fretful
her brows and body all tensed up).
Did it contain the whole truth ? The paradox ?

Not just the achievement, the glad tidings,
but the pain, the cost ? She needed people
to know and share the whole truth,
not just the light they yearned for,

but the shadow she lived with.
Let them participate in the completeness of this story
without shirking, without shrinking.
Then, as usual, she wondered, was she being fair,

and checked herself
and tried to see it from all sides.
She worked out for herself what had happened
then, reasonably satisfied, let me go.

Where have I got to on my way ?

After the day of her royal progress
she weakened without pause. Everyone knew
her time was near. Moments weighed
heavier and heavier and

as she insisted
on sharing with us
her whole truth and experience
at each new turn and development,

so she demanded
that we too speak
only the absolute bare truth to her -
to keep her straight,

to help her place herself on her road.

Always the height of courtesy
she nevertheless became terrifying
and words exchanged with her
were electric shocks.

One evening, for instance, she said to the nurse,
“My vision’s getting more and more blurred -
what do you think’s happening ?”
The nurse answered,

“it’s not surprising, dear -
all that medication you’re getting
and at this stage of the illness,
you have to expect that some of your functions.....”

The nurse was tired and unprepared
for so direct a question.
Her head on the pillow
she pounced like a hawk,

her eyes wide open :
“What do you mean *at this stage* ?”
The nurse held firm.
She said it was not uncommon that

as the illness progressed,
people found their vision blurred.
The nurse fretted for hours afterwards,
She decided her answer had been wrong,

it was altogether too blunt,
it left the patient without hope.
I felt, on the contrary,
she'd been brave and helpful.

I congratulated her
for keeping faith with this formidable patient
by helping her check her progress
along an unmarked road.

The Last Day

She took all Saturday to leave us.
Her sight now gone,
her eyes were staring huge and empty
their whites a thick cream colour.

Her lips drawn back behind her teeth
she looked more like a corpse now
than like herself - a scrawny cadaver
gaping under the tomb.

Sometimes she tried to speak
but had strength
only to whisper.
Sometimes a child came in

and then she smiled
her sharp face radiant
her blind eyes blazing.
Mostly she lay flat

face to the ceiling, breathing rapidly,
a faint click at the top of each intake
her head almost bald
her face just beak and bone

her feet arched and angled
beautiful and forgotten.

I was away that morning
running beside a canal in Warwickshire.
There was an Autumn haziness
in the sunlight above the water

and a deep calm everywhere.
Towards the end of the run,
the path ascended to the road
through a long tunnel rising sharply

through the rock, perfectly round,
its floor ribbed for the foot's purchase.
There can be no sound here
except your own uneasy footfall
and suddenly
it is absolutely dark.

I remembered how, always meticulous,
they had bought a children's book about death
to help their sons to understand
the loss they were facing.

Two nights before
she had read this book to the eldest
and found her sight beginning to blur
and her exhaustion almost overwhelmed her.

She had read that Badger ran all alone at last
down a long dark tunnel.
I think I'm ready for that tunnel now,
she said in her exhaustion,

turning to her pillow.
As I climbed my tunnel

up from the canal
I wished death away from me.
I slapped my legs hard -

Not ready yet ! Not ready yet !

I looked at my watch.
Half eleven in the morning.
I played with the idea

that a hundred miles away,
she, like Badger, had started her journey

down her tunnel to the dark.

The Last Night

She died lightly, Saturday night.

At last the children had gone to bed
and her husband returned to her
for the last time.

She was largely unconscious
and could not hear him.
Only the sound of her breathing
now connected them.

Towards midnight
he heard a slight whimper.

Then a long pause.

A single faint intake
brushed the air
like a finger-tip.

Then nothing.

She'd made it.

She was gone.

Once she was dead
he was able to see her again.
Not corpse not cadaver
but her, dead,

peaceful
her lips pursed
in a slight smile,
her features her own again.

At his home some miles away
her father, sleepless,
did not feel her die
until the early hours of the morning.

Then she separated from him
as if fading into a mist.

It was late and she was dead
lying quietly there in the marital bed
and her husband asked himself,
Where now am I to sleep ?

Our son will search for her
in the early hours before I wake.
He mustn't find her alone.
So he slept beside his wife

through the last hours of darkness
and was there in the morning
to help their son greet her
and say goodbye...

We talked one morning, her husband and I,
and I said how wonderfully I thought
they both had lived her dying and death,
he just as wonderfully as she.

I tried to explain by saying they lived it
delicately yet firmly there,
dignified and passionate
refusing at all times

to approach this thing as nightmare
but making it
almost a time of grace,
meeting its features

as these came forth,
always full in the face,
transcendent
through being somehow

lovingly down to earth...
I recalled a theory of childbirth
which teaches the mother
to breathe *above* her contractions,

like a surfer riding *with*
that unanswerable progress,
lightly on the crest,
a dancer, assenting...

not holding back
or turning away,
setting self *against* this force
of loss and transformation,

not fighting for breath
in dread, at odds -
making what's difficult only worse...
"Yes," he said, "that's how she did it.

She saw what was required of her
and just got down to work.
She died like a woman lightly
and expertly giving birth."

Epilogue

read at the scattering of her ashes into the sea, in a bay she had loved

You who were held as a child
and as a lover
you we held in friendship in fellowship

you who were sister
and mother
you -

you should
be with us here
on this edge.

It is unbelievable
it is unbearable
it is unacceptable

that you are not.

The outrageous shards
that fire has made of you

you wanted merged
with these grey coast-waters
full of your love and laughter.

It is only your love
we are left with now
as your ashes merge with the sea.

We shall never recover from the loss of you
but the absence we grieve for
is all love.

We are without you.
We are made of you

RoganWolf
February 2000