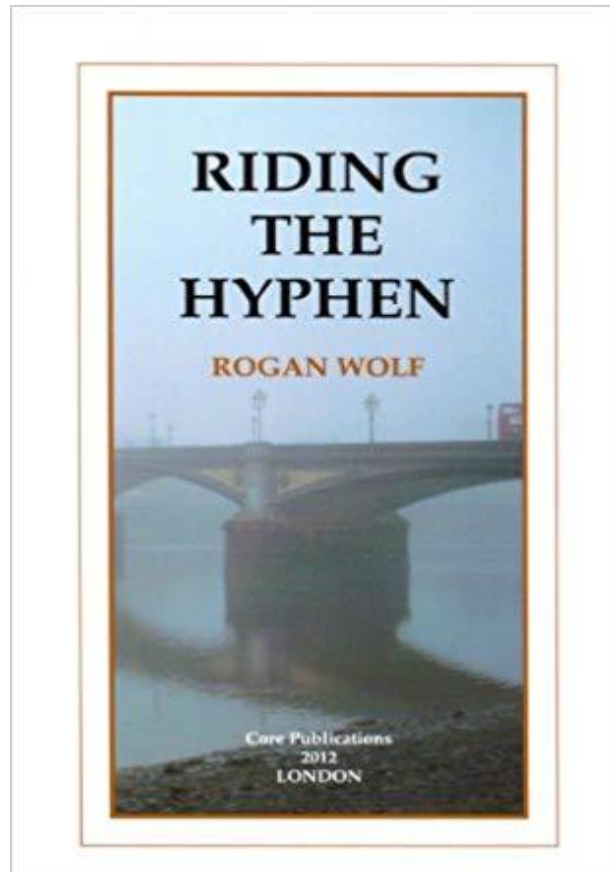




Riding the Hyphen



Rogan Wolf

Acknowledgements

In memory of Sophia, Kim and Mary
all of whom died in 2012.
Each informs and lives in this work.

With thanks too to Nicola and Mevlut
for pushing.

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Preface

The Title

The title “Riding the Hyphen” was suggested by the book “I and Thou” by Martin Buber.

Buber proposes and compares two primal modes of connecting with others and with Other, of relating. He calls them “I - It” and “I - Thou.”

As humans, we engage with the world in both modes, but must keep each in its own appropriate territory. Further, we must realise ourselves, we become most human and alive, in the I - Thou mode. Further still, the individual can too easily retreat into addressing others and the outside world merely as disconnected objects - in other words, in the “I - It” mode of operating - when the true, sane and necessary response is “I - Thou.”

In other words, under pressure, you close yourself off. You retreat from full awareness and empathic connection.

Each of the three sections of this book is faced with and explores I - Thou connection in an area of life where, at least on the surface, this connection might seem difficult. Each area in its own way is still often felt and treated as a “taboo” subject, even when Society decrees that, these days, it can or should be more openly addressed.

And what if the world has long ago lost its solidity, its familiarity, its firmness underfoot ? What if it is now just a blur of change, of novelty, of strangeness and of threat ? Do we head for the bunkers, the phantom walls and barricades ? Or do we climb onto the hyphen that connects Me to Thee, and seek to ride it, like surfers on a surf board ? Is the hyphen connecting Me to Thee now the only firm ground left to us ?

The Contents

Each of the three sections of this book constitute - in effect - a sequence of poems.

The first, called “Line Drawings,” is a collection of portraits of people with long-standing mental health problems, whom I knew and worked with in my years as manager of a mental health community centre. They were written soon after I left that work and community. They are songs of farewell, loss and praise, a celebration of a connection years long.

The second sequence, called “A Light Summer Dying,” records the death from cancer of a young woman who lived round the corner from me. In some ways it is a kind of diary, with many of its passages written just hours after the events being described took place. The woman knew I was writing it and was enthusiastic. It was a kind of commission on her part. She hoped the poem would help her two very young sons remember and acknowledge her, after she herself was dead and their own memories of their time with her had begun to fade.

Since her death, I have read the poem to hospice staff and student nurses and social workers. It has been commended by a number of respected poets (see page 31).

The third sequence, “The Going,” records the slow severance of the connection between my mother and me, due to her Alzheimer’s. As increasing numbers of people know, the death of someone who was no longer recognising you, actually brings that person back to you in some ways, putting the present distortion between you more into the background, just the last few brush-strokes of a much fuller picture. The series records an attempt on my part to stay imaginatively in touch with the person behind my mother’s eyes, until the point is reached when I can only observe her from the outside. The ability to use language is seen as central to staying human.

All these poems are in effect about lines, lines of division and connection, of frontier and hyphen. In addressing subjects often kept in shadow, cut off by fear, stigma, facile labelling, etc., they reach for wholeness.

Rogan Wolf
August



I

Line Drawings

Rogan Wolf

Lorretta

She does not expect us to take her in -
(you can't be too careful these days)
so she seats herself outside the ring
and looks absent and ill-treated there
like someone the whole world
has sticked and stoned
and shouldered into exile.

Crochet keeps her from idleness
and Church from death
by disassociation.

She sits in silence,
spinning out exquisite nothings.
She doesn't like them.
She stores them in careless piles
on the shelves and tables of her still flat
in its quiet and genteel street.
She lives in a dainty warehouse
of vacated cobwebs.

Illness surrounds her like a fog,
almost a skin. She is epileptic.
She is diabetic. Her ankles are
constantly swollen. She is diagnosed
Chronic Schizophrenic. But in church
she lets rip, she flies,
and her glad hands clap
and she sings smiling
among all those black faces -
all that safe and gentle energy.
Her world becomes clearer in church
and she devotes herself

to its calls upon her,
struggling over there
almost daily.

We went on holiday once
and towards the end,
at breakfast on a fine day
there in the perfect English garden
(before us the sea, sparkling ; behind us
the old Purbeck wall, the buddleia,
the hollyhocks) she let rip again
and for a clear hour or two in that far place
she praised and she celebrated,
she grieved and she reminisced....
For a clear hour or two
there we were, looking out.

Now as she sits each week
alone outside the ring,
I pause and touch her shoulder.
She turns.
The room dances with her smile.
The whole room
dances with her smile.

May 1994

Jeannie

Somewhere between here and Africa
Jeannie is prosperous.
She takes her ease.

She flits genteel
from chamber to chamber
checking performances -

the children quiet in their
prescribed arena,
the servants refining the light evening meal.

Satisfied, she retires for an hour
to scan some novel of rave reviews.
She will bring grace at dinner

to the task of hostess
with her gentle elegance
her trans-national dignity.

She likes to be *doing* -
to garden, for instance,
out there with the men.

Silence surrounds her
like a cell, a private
circle of the world's air.

She works enclosed out there
making the garden fit for visitors
somewhere between here and Africa.

There are whispers in the corridors
and unkind corners
which tell of a drink problem,

of teeth neglected and a faltering step,
of an eye once grossly swollen.
But no one speaks out. No one comes near.

Jeannie reclines at her ease
and keeps fast her secrets.
Somewhere between here and Africa

lies her true name.

May 11th 1994

Winston

He walks like a grenadier -
chest out and back straight -
a slender man of note
cruising the patch.

He's a sharp dresser
a waistcoat man
a dark umbrella in the sun man
a man who makes much of his hands
with a cacophony of worthless rings.

And sometimes he's a camera man,
smiling on the market crowds
through shrewd predatory eyes.
His camera's a dud, though,
a meaningless shell
and raises an old question
of where the true picture lies.

Some days ago
the neighbours managed it at last
and got him re-housed.
By appearing from time to time
at his front door
with nothing but frilly pink knickers on,
he frightened their small children ;

by cramming that miserable black hole
he rented from the Council
full to the brim
with old food,
trinkets and other street market refuse,

he constituted a serious
and genuine health hazard ;

and a few neighbours of course
having just bought their own
on extremely generous terms,
just his being there
threatened their profit margins
and lowered the new tone.

The iron discipline
of the market place
and all that....

“It’s all right
for you
fucking do-gooders,”
snarled one neighbour
who knew her rights
and how to secure them.
“You don’t have to *live* ‘ere.”

He’ll cruise a new patch now
our slender grenadier
our man of note.
Chest out, back straight,
he’ll be taking new pictures now.

Rogan Wolf
June 1994

The Meal

Something of power about the meal
something electric forging the dull elements
into a new and hushed
and human vibrancy -
a making.

The food here is actually of quality
each choice of menu a matter of passion
personal risk and urgent debate
resolved in meetings weeks in advance.

The tables are round
of plain deal
but five years on
still surprisingly smart.

They like the tables.
They remember earlier times :
“We used to eat on trays
all around the two rooms
and we had to queue
quietly
in a long line.
No-one questioned it.
Who were *we* to complain ?”

The two cooks get a tenner
and a free meal.
There is a stringent job description
so the money's hard earned.
They sit apart
once the meal is served
eating with their morning's worker.
The morning's sweat
drying on three foreheads
seals their fellowship.

And they come, the people,
from all their far edges
from all their fastnesses
to sit here at the plain deal
eight per table
forming the circle.

They come with their famishment
no food can satisfy
with their lostness
no finding here can heal.

The limitation of the event
with its essentialness ;
the simplicity of the being together
in these plain circles
with the distance each has travelled
to get here ;
simply the eating
makes a new sense here
a true valuing.

No-one would dare
say a grace here
but grace is present
in all the racket of the business
of eating, the clatter, the voices'
rise and fall ;

in every movement
of fork to lips of eye to eye ;
in every word that is spoken ;
in every moment the circles
remain unbroken.

From what forsaken places
are we gathered here
today.

May 1994

Nancy

Nancy died in flames. A holy death.
Months before, she asked to work
with wood and joined our workshop.

It was good having a female there
and not just some right-on kid with shaven head,
but an older presence, quiet, in a print dress,

perhaps just begining to state herself
in her own terms. She embarked upon a shoe rack
for her husband.

Now, when I handle the dowelling
that she so carefully sanded
week after week,

I wonder what do you do
when you're in flames ?
Do you look out ?

What does the world look like
through the wall of your own fire ?
Nancy lit herself in the family hallway.

She had three hairs on her upper lip
and she couldn't bear it. Her husband
had taken her to the Emergency

only that morning.
"Oh doctor, she's bad.
It's really bad this time."

But Nancy as usual could talk of nothing
but those three barely visible hairs
and they sent her home
with the usual flat few words
and small brown bottle.
For years she had watched herself
in the mirror and seen nothing

but a sprouting monster.
No words freed her.
No sedation.
Nothing but fire could make her whole.

And where had *we* been
when she came to us
her fire already flickering there

yearning to break loose ?
If we had seen it
would she have allowed us

to grab the extinguishers,
to call the fire brigade ?
Would any of us

have known what to do ?
I believe some dreadful joy was felt
at the heart of the fire she made herself

in the moments just before she died.
For just those moments she felt clean,
entirely, triumphantly, innocent.

June 2nd 1994

The Women's Workshop

The basement workshop
has a lovely new floor surface -
a metallic lino, moss green.
And the walls have been painted
sun yellow.

Our dark blue overalls are now
deep lakes
in a fragrant plain
and working down here
I'm a golden fish
in my element
laughing under the sun.

I make sense when I'm down here
no-one gets to me
I can mean something
I can just belong.
We laugh

at our new shapes
here in these blue overalls.
We just get on
down here.
We laugh
under the sun.

May 1994

Abraham

Abraham is so meagre thin
my thumb and finger, tip to tip,
can circle his wrist like a bracelet -
and all around leave air between.

And Abraham's mouth seems so
pinkly enormous that his great laugh
could bracelet my bracelet three times over -
and all around leave air between.

And each time we meet
I bracelet
his poor wrist and each time
Abraham laughs greatly.

"Hey, Abraham !" I say.
"I had some sweet today, Mr Rogan,
honest," says Abraham, laughing.
"But Abraham, look!" I say, braceletting.
"Ah well ! Ah well !" laughs Abraham,
limping away.

Abraham has had a stroke.
It was not his age nor living habits.
Abraham is still largely a boy
and his living expenses are not yet due.
It was a side-effect
rare but known
of his psychotropic medication.

In life he's always limped a little.
Now you can see it.

I keep pressing him to eat.

May 1994

Damon

Damon fears the plain
exchange of words
it's risky
you never know
what might
come sliding
out. So Damon
shouts.
Damon keeps
shouting.

He even
finds it hard
to smile. Any
softening
and the roof might fall in
or demon jump you.
He screws his face up
and roars at us : "Aaaah !"
We jump. Damon celebrates.

We had a moment
of quiet once
after a long interview of terror
when Damon in the rage of his helplessness
threatened us with death
and his partner looked on
her eyes glassy
and their beautiful small son
stood there
as still as death

and when the deadline had passed
and the others had all gone away
we paused together
we two on the doorstep
the evening sky
clear and vivid
a fat thrush declaiming
and Damon asked :

“Seriously now,
as a father yourself
what would *you* have done ?”

Damon knew exactly
why I was leaving.
He told me immediately.
It was to save on tax.
I’d got it all worked out.
My pension.....
And he knew this as well :
in the end I had let it all
get to me.
I was finished. Done.

On my final day, he brought
his farewell gift, a huge set
of Chinese porcelain
boxed and complete.
He shouted:

“This is my heart !
No ! No !
My *heart* !
From my *heart* !”

April 1994

Morgan

When I hear the church clock strike,
I know, at that moment,
Morgan, somewhere in torment,
has just begun to inhale.

For this is Morgan's parish.
St Mary's sounds the quarters
around Morgan's soul.

Time hangs heavy on him.
It forces flesh on him.
Beneath the haggard white line
of that anchorite cheek-bone
four old clocks
on blackened lengths of string
ride him everywhere he travels.
Should one get stolen, or just plain stop,
he reasons that three ought to do
to fly him like a wounded Jumbo
home for a crash landing.

Home is all *oeuvre*, a live sculpture
formed from within.
For years the parish has supplied him
with his materials
and as the supply
has continued unchecked,
so Morgan's room to breathe
has slowly diminished. Meticulous
and fragile collections of litter
now fill each room like library shelves.
Only his narrow bed
remains clear for him.
In the dense darkness
radios hang like bats from the ceiling
each tuned to a different world station
each turned full on.
All night and from all quarters
the world engages him.

Babel-Lord

Morgan gathers round his bed
whatever is waste
whatever discord.

The sweetness in his smile
is incomprehensible.
But that melodious voice,
those fastidious
semantic games we engage in,
do sometimes seem to carry pleasure.
The bruised eyes sparkle,
harbouring gaiety.
We make much of him.
We sit with him,
tolerating the smell,
the innumerable tatters,
the festooning plastic bags,
those brutal clocks...
Perhaps, after all, it is permissible
to clear pain away
from an instant or two of each day
here in Morgan's parish.

February 1994

Angela

Spasms of rage suffuse her face
until the freckles ride like tiny sand-bars
the wild red surge that beats and beats
in the steady blue burn of her tired eyes.

"It's me age
them hot flushes
and then again it's me illness
makes me say them things
I don't mean them
you must know that."

She was brought up in a Home.
Cast off before ever
her cradling, still she managed there.
In the cold, crowded water
she learned to swim not drown.
But you see it at the meal-table
that frantic grabbing
at all that tends her way.
Nothing escapes her.
She's an expert.
And her rage is insatiable
and her desolation
deeper than speech.

Up at five each morning
she heads straight for the pool
and covers eight lengths without fail.
She 's fighting furiously
to keep her weight down
to keep fit
to keep young
to keep *going*.

The few brave hearts
who join her that early
are strange birds. She's sure
they mean her harm.
They are vessels of hurt
she dare not spill.
She holds them at bay
by drilling them daily
with a handsome blue glare.
They'll not stop her
swimming where she may.

"Every year I try to get away.
You got to have something
to look forward to, for God's sake.
I save for months.
But Paris last Autumn
was, *oh*, so lonely,
so *hostile*, you know,
and I just felt too ill this year."

April 1994

Cliff

Cliff visits once a week
just for the Art Group.
He's touching base
between far-flung voyages
at a place of calm waters.

His eyes hold so much light
they frighten us - as if drops
of the Aegean have been translated there
lit by their own wild skies.

And his paintings hold a frightening power.
Some have been exhibited. His figures
are Saints calm-faced
their bodies knotted

like martyrs in agony,
their sexual convolutions
a nightmare of unfulfillment, a climactic
frenzy of the artist's clothing crayon.

He is the despair of his poor mother.
Night after night she twists
between the sheets
at each new thought and turmoil of him.

Her love is nails.
He slouches into the Art Room
like a frightened bear
escaping into the hills.

May 1994

To the Centre for Mental Health

The Centre was located at the end of a terrace full of bed-sits, in Maida Vale, London. At the time of writing, the centre was being “tendered out.” But how do you “tender out” a place which people call “our lifeline”? Isaac was the cleaner, a deeply religious man. This poem was written some years before the ban on smoking in public places became the norm.

1

Our elegant, cream coloured face
looks blank this late
somehow ill-fitting,
a cream-coloured question-mark
at the terrace end.

Where tiredly alive
silhouettes should be
tending their lone evening meal,
nothing but shadows
occupy these bare cavities,
hollow projections
upon some dangerous screen.

Only Isaac
now animates
our tired rooms,
bellowing hymns
of solitary ecstasy.
As his Hoover roars
today's shy ghosts
hover round the ash-trays
reluctant to separate.
Isaac smiles on them
he soothes
he comforts them
then tenderly tidies them away.

Tomorrow we'll try again.

They begin to congregate past midday
 like ragged butterflies
 around the buddleia.
 A park bench out front
 offers some dignity
 but most prefer the door-step
 and way before time
 start leaning on the door-bell
 having nothing to be
 here for but here.

From the hostels the bed-sits the bare flats
 from lives lived in shadow
 and on the edge of everything
 it is here they congregate
 to establish meaning.
 Here is their centre.

They say this :
 "I am someone here
 I am heard
 I am not alone."

"Here I have substance
 I matter
 I mean something."

"I feel more at home
 here in this place
 than I ever feel at home."

"I have a share in the world."

"I am not odd
 I am even here."

"I am not assailed."

And John the most “deluded” one
 says this :
 “If someone *erm*
er, y’know
 if someone came to *buy*
 if someone *erm* wanted to, y’know,
spoil this place
 surely that *erm er* y’know y’know
 that would be
er sacrilege, y’know.”

We may now be clear :
 if sacrilege holds meaning here
 then here is holy.

Hesitating, stricken,
 infinitely fragile,
 holy is real here.

We are riding the hyphen.
 We are sailing the Ark.

Tomorrow we’ll try again.

March 1994



2

A Light Summer Dying

Rogan Wolf

Acknowledgements

Thank you, Hilary, Nick, Aidan and Rowan.

Sincere thanks are also due to the poets Caroline Carver and Moniza Alvi who helped me tighten and sharpen “A Light Summer Dying.”

Thanks also to the poet Mevlut Ceylan - first, for helping me decide to prepare the poem for publication in a book and, second, for guiding me through the doing of it, from first to last.

Lastly, I want to express my gratitude to the late Mary Young who was the first to help me believe in this poem. She said it made her think of a minstrel chanted in the hall on the night before battle, to inspire the warriors to heroism on the morrow.

*Rogan Wolf
December 2009*

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*

“ '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, MBE, 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

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

Rashida Islam, poet

“Light Summer Dying” by Rogan Wolf packs an emotional punch unequalled by either the conventional short poem or indeed the long poems published in this magazine. Its subject matter is a young woman dying of cancer. Not only is it very moving but it is well crafted and manages to maintain its emotional intensity throughout. We highly recommend this poem to our readers.”

*Paul McDonagh, Editor, “Echoes of Gilgamesh,”
online poetry magazine based in Glasgow, now defunct.*

Introduction

“A Light Summer Dying” records how a young woman lived the last few months of her life, with her family and friends, following a diagnosis of cancer of the womb. There is no fiction in the poem. In some ways it is a simple piece of journalism, just setting down what happened, from the author’s point of view as friend and near-neighbour.

Early on, the young woman, her husband and I made the decision that I would keep a record of events as these unfolded, in verse form. The ill young woman, already knowing that she was going to die long before her time, saw the poem as a way of preserving her life and story over these last months, with words that might help her young sons to look back, when they were ready, and recall and make sense of what had happened to them during this very early stage of their lives.

So the poem originated as a kind of commission from a particular family for a particular defined purpose, a tool, rather than a public “work of art,” or individualist act of self-expression on the part of its creator. Of course I needed to write it for my own sake too, to help me ride the flood of events and the feelings they generated. But my own need was not the main drive, and all these years later, I still enjoy the fact that the poem is grounded in relationship and affection. In this sense, it is a plain and ordinary act of community, in much the same way as other neighbours took turns to leave suppers on the family’s doorstep all through the months of her dying, as their way of helping and sharing the load.

Only later did we realise that the poem might have a wider application. By now the woman herself was dead, but her widower and I made our decisions on further publication with careful reference to what we thought she would have felt and wanted – as well as thinking about the children and the effect on them of the poem being made more widely available.

So, over the years, the poem has been read to a poetry workshop group, to hospice nurses and a chaplain, to social work students and to students on a nursing course for palliative care. It reads powerfully and to good effect. Audiences are often upset by it, but no one has found it morbid and, in fact, many people report feeling uplifted by it. Between Parts One and Two, and at the end, I have sometimes played short pieces of music, partly to add to the words, but also as a break from them and a transition between the poem and ordinary social interchange. And I try to make sure that afterwards there is an opportunity for the audience and I to stay together for a while to talk about the poem and about experiences people have had, which the poem perhaps has brought back to mind and emotion. As many funerals wisely end with alcohol, so can the reading this poem.

Finally, I'll say here that, while of course I grieved when this woman died, along with her friends, parish and community, I did not write the poem as part of my bereavement. It was more my tribute to her. She died a classic "good death." She has helped me prepare for my own. I hope I die as well as she did.

For the record, her husband married again a few years after she died and since then has fathered more children, just as she would have wanted.

Rogan Wolf

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 even 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 a manager at home as well 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 most vividly present and as inspirational as ever. Part of her plan was for the priest to deliver a protest to God, on her behalf, at the hurt her death had caused her family. Her own death she could accept as part of His divine plan for her. But her two small boys? So she appointed her priest to act as a kind of shop steward, or advocate, or ambassador. In his funeral address, her priest complied with her wishes and - grief-stricken and in tears - echoed her protest with his own.

First rites

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 their misty blue descant
now, this April.

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

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

Part One

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 years

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,

help him carry the weight,
contain the pressure,
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 there's nothing more that 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 dread 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 speak on my behalf.”

Part Two

The First Day at School

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, there came the point
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

and 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
with precision 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 turned 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 advanced,
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 her 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 softness
in the sunlight above the water

and a deep calm everywhere.
Towards the end of the run,
the path ascended to the road
by 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 view 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, suddenly letting go

and 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 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 a long tunnel to the dark.

The Last Night

She died lightly, that Saturday night.

When the children had gone to bed
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."

Last Rites

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.
These outrageous flakes
which fire has made of you

you wanted merged
with 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.



The Going

(2002-2008)

Poems about Alzheimer's

Rogan Wolf

Preamble

The poems below record different incidents and encounters with my mother during the last few years of her life. These were dominated by Alzheimer's, which eventually took away most of her functioning and capacities.

While of course the poems are partly personal expressions of grief at loss, I believe they also explore a difficult and increasingly common human experience in ways which go beyond the merely personal.

The title of the last of this series of poems refers to a garden in the middle of Richmond Park in south west London. Fenced, to protect it from the deer, it is especially beautiful in the Spring, when the azalias are in bloom.



Turns at the mirror

She paused in the doorway,
a blurring silhouette.
All love derived from there,

all safety and measure.
She said, "Whenever I look
in the mirror these days

I get such a shock.
'Who's *this*?' I ask myself.
'What's been happening?'

Nothing *inside* has changed.
In here, where I live,
I'm still the *me* I always was.

But when I see
the way I *look*,
I'm a stranger to myself."

Her finger had been caressing
the space between my eye-brows -
the crowning joy of my day.

Forty years on, I can still feel it
soothing me, bedding me down,
as again she hovers

blurring in the doorway -
with *me* before the mirror now
and *both* of us in shock.

February 2002

Finding something to say

I've been wordless for weeks.
Having nothing to say
is life-threatening.

Calls out of nowhere,
calls not my own,
have flooded all my sanctuaries

driving me
over the top.
Too easily I've landed

at the receiving end -
the most dangerous place
in the universe.

Millions are trapped here
among the bones,
the refuse,

the frantic, wandering eyes.
Best break clear.
Best get moving

to music.
Best make my own
glorious noise.

July 2002

Skirmishes with the gods

She told me the winds
had scattered all her boundaries.
Events just tore through her
without noticing.

She yearned to act,
to impress herself
on the Furies, to take hold
of something,

but her nature, schooling,
the massed bodies of that time -
they stood against her
and she yielded.

A life in the shadow
of others' needs
leaves nothing to spare
for skirmishes with the gods.

So she didn't know
as she waited to die
if anyone
knew who she was.

October 2002

The going

The going's getting harder.
More often now, I'm losing hold
and have to keep dealing with the world
from ledges frighteningly deep.
Listen, world.
I'm hanging on, down here.
I can still get words out
but the going's so much harder.

It's all down to words.
Let them just be crystal clear.
Let me not mince any
nor flinch from the meanings they yield
as the going keeps getting harder.

December 2002

Visiting

You were silent most of the day.
She seems detached this time,
Do you think she's retreated
into some private cell
of her own imaginings ?
No. I caught you at it -
groping at all times for words.

And they fled from you
like scraps of waste paper
cavorting in the cruellest of storms.
Dry land has become a suggestion
made of mist, forever beyond you.
In panic you throw out your hands -
it's vapour they close on.

I realised towards the end
of our day together, you were making
one last effort to connect.
You plunged forward, but then
meeting the gulf yet again,
meeting again this slither

of meaning towards hazy shapelessness,
you gave up, exhausted.
A-a-agh, you said, in disgust,
without energy.

You meant (did you ?)
Ah God help me.
Save me from this place.

But then at last we talked.
I'm going now, I told you.

You'll come back, won't you.

Yes. I'll come back.

You will come back ?

You will come back ?

You will come back ?

December 20012

A dangerous house

It's almost gone now -
my power to hold,
to put things together.
I can't speak

can barely walk.
Even the ground's a stranger.
It keeps transforming beneath me.
I shuffle in case I fall.

And my knowledge, my memory store,
my life-time's horde, my subtle treasure -
I feel it daily
draining from me,

seeping out of my feet
like blood ;
it's unique, first-ever, unrepeatable -
I shuffle through a dangerous house
in search of my treasure.

Nothing holds good except another.
Not I, now. The words that speak for me
must now come forth from lips that blush
with younger blood than mine.

January 2003

Tracing a name

“Your date of birth, please sir,
and your mother’s maiden name”.

I wrote “Gladys Mary”
and pushed it under the screen.

She was about to pass out the money
when, reading the words, she paused.

“Her *maiden* name ?”
Oh God.

“Ah, of course, her *surname* !”
The word Williams

established my credentials.
It was good to have you with me,

young, naïve, wide-eyed.
It was good to spell out your name.

January 2003

Being together

I didn't know that sound
was in you –

that bass growling
past all words.

Your head never left the pillow.

You watched my spoon of water
approach your lips,
but never looked at me.

I didn't know such moments
were possible.

We learnt quickly.
We hardly spilled a drop.

I stroked your forehead
between your eyebrows
silently
silently.

Your eyes closed.

February 2003

You come awake you taste

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 finger nails
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.

January 2005

The night before her funeral

We're going north
to make an angel of you -
you whose clenched fingers
in those last hours of being human
stank like unwashed feet.

What phantom pursued you
hour after hour ?
What claws griped at you
from the borderless dark ?

All your life this ghoul
was lying in wait
for words to fail
guard to drop.

I have a picture of you
young as my sons are now.
How vivid you were. How easily hurt. A joy
to meet you, Ma'am - oh mother.

I would be worthy
of your dreams, I would
adequately succeed you.

I would
if I could
you had died easy.

February 24th 2005

The Isabella Plantation

is quiet in mid-winter but passing today
I heard two words you spoke still clear
among the trees.

I had brought you down for the week-end
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
were almost the last you'd ever speak and perhaps
therefore could have been kept for something else,
later.

Then I drove you home.

January 2008

About the Poet



Rogan Wolf worked for years in London in the mental health services. He founded and runs a charity called Hyphen-21, which aims to identify and support sound principle and creative practice in the charged and delicate space between I and Other, the helper and the helped. See <https://hyphen-21.org>

Hyphen-21 manages a project called “Poems for...the wall.” It has been running since 1998, funded by the Arts Council, the NHS and the John Lewis Partnership, among others. It offers small poem-posters, most of them bilingual, to schools, libraries and health and social care settings around the world. See <https://poemsforthe wall.org>

Rogan also runs a blog <https://roganwolf.com>

Believing that poetry is most vital and speaks most clearly in times or situations of uncertainty, Rogan Wolf offers poetry readings to mental health workers and managers, hospice and other palliative care workers, workers who support older people, carers of people who are disabled or otherwise in need, clients of care services, nursing and social work students, school-teachers, student teachers, drama school students, etc.