

Survival Songs

Word from the “Carer”

“Carer” is a term now used officially in the care services to describe a person who, in a non-professional capacity, looks after someone who is disabled in some way. Usually the Carer is a family member. Usually it’s a woman.

Nails

Written after a day for Carers which ended with massage and quiet music

I've no front door,
she said,
and no back door.
Repose is denied me.

And I've no windows
no points of view -
just spaces where
my grief is revealed.

When I go home
at the day's end
my shadow unwinds itself from the wall
and rushes to greet me.

I'm keeper I'm captive
of my love ;
my love is heart-burn
my love is nails.

Let me breathe free today
and my words carry ;
let me know that -
for this one day -
my home is quiet music
and shrewd relieving hands.

*Rogan Wolf
January 1998*

The Carer Loves as One who is Wounded

The Carer loves as one who is wounded.
Like blood the love flows. Like a wound it is agony.
There is no treatment for this wound. It is life-long.

The Carer guards a sacred cave.
Be cautious, functionary, before trampling here.
You are watched. You are suspected.

Caring is turmoil, a life in question
a body stretched by tensions that never let go
a loneliness bent under a shadow.

The Carer is guardian enslaved
a minister in the holiest of places.
It is here our hope lies.

Rogan Wolf
June 1999

Which Avenue to Travel

They call you “Carer.”
They mean you are free -

your days uncluttered
by the doubts and distractions

of the unattached. Choice is a demon
you’ve never known.

There’s never question
for you

of which avenue to travel,
which consequence to endure.

For you it is plain -
there’s one road here stretching before you :

the cruel road,
the essential road.

Rogan Wolf
June 1999

Steeled my heart

No one cares, she said.
Alone I carry
my world's whole weight.

I've had to *fight*, you see,
for all the entitlements due
from this Community you talk of.

I'm always on duty,
always on red alert
for some passing tit-bit

that might be thrown our way.
My burden
never leaves my shoulders.

I am knight-at-arms
commissioned for life.
Every day

I steel my heart
and every day my heart
is broken.

Rogan Wolf
July 1999

Gifts

Who will receive my gifts ?
Where can I offer them ?

A python is coiled tight among my entrails.
Who will accept it from me ?

An eagle is trapped inside my ribs -
its talons gripe me and wings batter me

as I walk the corridors
and queue in the supermarkets.

Who will thank me for my eagle
and carry it away ?

An ocean of sorrow
swings between my arms

and a mountain of capped rage
trembles under my heart

as day upon day
my heart keeps beating.

Who will hear my witness ?
Who will take my gifts in hand

and dance with me
as the storm breaks ?

To whom should I offer my gifts ?
Who will applaud my victory ?

*Rogan Wolf,
June 2000*

Flowers of Hurt

Written in celebration of a series of poetry workshops for carers of people with mental health problems. The poem gives voice to all participants in the workshop, all of whom were women. In most cases each is given a paragraph. The chorus is a direct quote.

All the good things
come to grief, she said,
and leave me under
my familiar stones.

*I have fallen
under a stone
where God cannot see me.*

It was the images of water and stone
that held our attention today.
The water rushes and beats on stone
and then comes weeping back
and so on and so forth
until at length
there is stillness.
Beaten down past despair
both reduced to perfect clarity.

*I have fallen
under a stone
where God cannot see me.*

We are learning to be naked together ;
we are learning the words for who we are ;
we are learning to be real -
said a kindly lost woman
the years have beaten into steel.

Continued on next page

Oh, I'm not keen on all that stuff,
she said. Why this clinging
to the positive
the whole time ?

*I have fallen
under a stone
where God cannot see me.*

I see now
that I live in the arms of my shadow
which sometimes seems so powerful
it obliterates me.
But is this shadow I know so well
really my enemy ? My nemesis ?
Might it not rather
be strength unclaimed,
something of good
that has escaped the potter's wheel ?
Not my terror after all
but my unshaped glory ?

Let us be precise,
the strong woman said,
in these difficult conditions.
Let us not use words of power
without being absolutely sure
of their application. I need to know
precisely what you mean
before I can allow you to transport me.

*I have fallen
under a stone
where God cannot see me.*

I weep for that time
outside a shop window
west of here
when I examined for hours
in the cold and rain
a doll I loved with all my heart.

Grieving and fretting
she wrote a haiku
counting the syllables on her fingers :
“The carer is lost
and calls to a passer-by
‘Which way to poetry ?’”

I think I’ve learned to sing.
Words of mine I could not find before
have been sufficient for disaster.
I sang to hurt souls beside a railway track
the words of a full heart.
Flowers came back.
Flowers came of hurt.

*Rogan Wolf
April 2000*

Bell Ringing

This poem is dedicated to Gill, who at the time of writing was spending much time in Intensive Care, sitting beside her daughter's sick-bed. Her husband had long-term problems of his own, which meant that, at home, she was never "off-duty". Gill looked to the hospital waiting room as a between-place of calm and comfort.

The English church bell
comes to rest in all its housings
mouth up -
poised on the point of its crown.

To negotiate it to that point of stasis -
weight upwards despite gravity -
the bell-ringer applies a force
to the dangling rope
just so -
exact and delicate -
not too much
not too little.

Get it wrong
and the great bell rolls over
and becomes something new -
a mass of stampeding pig metal,
as the rope streaks upwards
out of hand
and hell takes over,
flooding the quiet horizons.

Continued on next page

The attainment of perfect rest
is when chaos is held on a point ;
and poised
just so
the moment cups you.

Here in the waiting room I am cupped.
I am held aloft.
My poise is perfect here.
I am almost flying.

Rogan Wolf
April 2001