

shaping
the
fractured
self

POETRY OF CHRONIC
ILLNESS AND PAIN

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EDITED BY
HEATHER TAYLOR JOHNSON

To Dwight Johnson

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FOREWORD

‘Sometimes pus, sometimes a poem...but always pain,’ the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote, a near-perfect poetic distillation of the costs of creativity, at least ‘sometimes’.

Of course not all great art has its genesis in pain, and not all pain – not even a fraction – leads to the partial consolations of art. But if lancing an abscess is the surest way to healing, can poetry offer that same cleansing of emotional wounds?

At least – again – ‘sometimes’.

The Ancient Greeks thought so. *Katharsis* – ‘cleansing’ – is a concept central to Aristotle’s view of tragedy. Aeschylus, eldest of the three great Athenian tragedians whose work has survived, put it best. His masterpiece *Agamemnon*, first of the ‘boxed-set’ of dramas that make up the Oresteian trilogy, offers another near-perfect poetic distillation: this time of the costs of wisdom, of ‘learning through suffering’.

Aeschylus knew a bit about physical and emotional suffering: he fought against the Persians in the Battle of Marathon; his brother was killed in that battle. Like all writing that matters, at least emotionally, his plays were hard-won.

Were they also therapeutic – either for him or his audiences?

In the modern era (if we can regard Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud as modern) ‘catharsis’ has become a psychoanalytic term, which again emphasises the connection between art and healing.

There are plenty of cathartic moments, and much hard-earned wisdom and hard-wrung poetry in the pages that follow – and also much beautiful and consolatory writing. Since the writers can speak for themselves more eloquently – and more expansively – than I can on their behalf, I might finish with a quote from a writer who isn’t represented, Inga Clendinnen, but who happened to die today, while I was writing this piece and thinking about suffering.

Clendinnen’s book, *Tiger’s Eye*, is one of the great memoirs of illness; its words surely speak to, and for, most of the fine writers Heather Taylor Johnson has gathered here.

Illness granted me a set of experiences otherwise unobtainable. It liberated me from the routines which would have delivered me, unchallenged and unchanged, to discreet death. Illness casts you out, but it also cuts you free. I will never take conventional expectations seriously again, and the clear prospect of death only makes living more engaging.¹

Peter Goldsworthy

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1 I. Clendinnen, *Tiger's Eye: a Memoir*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2010, p. 288.

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

When I first tried to write poetry about my illness, it was clumsy and maddening. I questioned why that might be and began researching my addiction and adversity to it. What I gathered is that I wasn't alone; it's difficult to transcribe bodily trauma and maybe that's why there's not much literature – poetry, especially – about chronic illness or pain to be found. I did, however, discover an enormous and outstanding anthology from the United States called *Articulations: the Body and Illness in Poetry* edited by Jon Mukand. Totalling more than 400 pages, it's like a Bible for people living with illness, particularly those who love poetry – people exactly like me. It frightened me that a book so important might one day fall out of circulation, and I wondered if I could do something similar to it in Australia and add to the canon of illness narrative in poetry. I wondered if I could gather together twenty or so poets (it turned out to be twenty-eight) who might offer solace to one another and to their nameless readers who, like me, might read poetry in the bath after the body's been through a particularly draining day, or before turning off their light at night, wanting comfort to be their last feeling before facing total darkness.

I imagined big things and told my friend Andy Jackson about all of them: poetry, chosen anonymously, but three poems by each poet because as our conditions shift from day to day, as our *emotions* shift from day to day, so should the way we present them; and a contextualising statement, so that the poetry itself needn't be bogged down by explanation – besides, a contextualising statement would be another way to narrate an illness, which was exciting and opened up possibilities. Did I want to include carers and medical practitioners? Definitely. These people need a voice, too, and chronicity needs their perspective. Did I want to include cancer patients? There seemed to be a lot of this poetry out there already, almost a genre in and of itself, and as the submissions began trickling in, I quickly realised cancer has every right to be represented in this anthology and I'm sorry there isn't more of this poetry, as with AIDS and so many other diseases and conditions that go unmentioned. Did I want to include disability? This seemed to be a unique topic and one I wasn't sure I had the right to foster. Andy asked

me if I'd read *Beauty is a Verb: the New Poetry of Disability*, which I hadn't, and I ordered it immediately and loved it. Sheila Black, Jennifer Bartlett and Michael Northen, as editors, had the same concept I was developing in terms of a work of prose contextualising the accompanying poems, and they pulled it off beautifully (the cover is absolutely stunning, I might add).

I am thrilled – *unequivocally* thrilled – that *Shaping the Fractured Self: Poetry of Chronic Illness and Pain* sits beside *Beauty is a Verb* as well as Mukand's *Articulations*. I hope it's one of many poetry books in a long line to come out of illness and pain, disability and mental health, cancer, postnatal depression, and ageing and dementia narratives because rhythm, spacing, enjambment and choice of or lack of punctuation, every metaphor and indentation and every move toward experimentation carries great weight when representing the fracturing of the body and the de(con)struction of the self. I applaud poetry as pathography and I congratulate every poet who is brave enough to go there. Please, enjoy.

Heather Taylor Johnson

‘UNDISCOVERED COUNTRIES’:
AN INTRODUCTION TO
SHAPING THE FRACTURED SELF

RACHEL ROBERTSON

What does it mean to be ill?

This seemingly simple question is, in fact, a complex conundrum, both for the individual and society. It is a question not answerable solely through medical language. Medicine rarely helps us understand pain and suffering, or learn to live with uncertainty and fragility. We may understand *illness* through a medical lens but the *illness experience* must be understood using other tools including, and especially, literature.

In 1926, Virginia Woolf lamented the lack of literature about illness.

Considering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disclosed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to light, what precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers a little rise of temperature reveals, what ancient and obdurate oaks are uprooted in us in the act of sickness...when we think of this and infinitely more, as we are so frequently forced to think of it, it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature. Novels, one would have thought, would have been devoted to influenza; epic poems to typhoid; odes to pneumonia, lyrics to toothache.²

Although Woolf ignored the presence of illness in the works of writers such as the Brontës as well as the Romantics’ linkage of madness with creativity,

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2 V. Woolf, ‘On Being Ill’, *New Criterion*, January 1926, p. 32.

she was right to identify a strange lack of writing about illness, particularly given she was producing this essay less than a decade after the flu pandemic of 1918.

It was not until the middle of the twentieth century that illness narratives began to be published in larger numbers and accounts of Woolf's 'undiscovered countries' began to reach the reading public. According to Anne Hunsaker Hawkins, the 1950s saw the emergence of biographical pieces about the 'last illnesses' of famous people and autobiographical works by illness survivors, particularly those with polio.³ The biggest growth of autobiographical writing about illness, however, occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, with works about HIV/AIDS and breast cancer kickstarting the trend towards non-famous individuals publishing their own illness stories. Since then, there have been numerous narratives published in the English language, covering many different illnesses, chronic conditions and disabilities. This century, the growth of social media has also enabled people to self-publish using blogs, Facebook and other social media. These works, I would argue, are primarily ways for individuals to try to understand and communicate their own illness experiences. And these illness narratives have readers and, now, academics examining and theorising the field.

Writing is pattern-making. We find words and sentences and paragraphs to order our experiences, make sense of them, and assemble some sort of meaning for ourselves (and others). The onset of an illness, disability or chronic condition creates the need for a new pattern because the individual's previous life is shattered.⁴ As Lisa Diedrich suggests, 'Illness enacts a transformation, a crisis of the subject, a crisis of subjectification itself.'⁵ The individual no longer feels the same; she is not at home in her own life any longer. Kristen Lang in this book describes being diagnosed with anorexia at thirteen as 'a loss-of-identity moment that would haunt me for the next decade. And beyond.'⁶ Her poem demonstrates this in phrases such as:

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3 A. H. Hawkins, *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography*, West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1999.

4 I include illness and disability here not to conflate the two or suggest that disability is the same as illness at all. But, while distinct in concept, disability and illness may coexist in an individual and very often do.

5 L. Diedrich, 'Treatments: Negotiating Bodies, Language and Death in Illness Narratives', PhD Thesis, 2001, p. 16.

6 Kristen Lang, 'My Own Other Self', p. 147.

‘In the small house of her body, / under the flooring, the crossbeams / have buckled.’⁷

If we recognise that our body is our home and deeply interwoven with our sense of self or identity, we can begin to understand the profound nature of the change to our sense of self that occurs when the body undergoes a major shift. Illness is very often an experience of fracture or disordering. Language can help to reassemble and reorder our experience. The telling, even more the writing, of an illness experience allows the individual the opportunity to reassert some agency and control over his own life.

When illness disrupts, we may imagine healthcare as a repairing mechanism. This is not always the case: in many instances, medical treatments are as difficult to endure as the illness itself and the controlling technologies of medicine can seem to steal the individual’s autonomy as much as the illness. Once again, we see an oscillation between order and chaos, coherence and incoherence. Medical treatment may also be experienced as lonely and depersonalised: what Andy Jackson describes as ‘that strange distancing intimacy of medical treatment’.⁸ This is not to suggest that healthcare workers create that distance (though this sometimes happens), but rather the process of treatment is often one of estrangement from one’s self and others, in a hospital or alone at home, sometimes without others to share the experience. To re-personalise the depersonalising illness experience may be another reason to write about an illness.

The drive to write about illness, then, appears to come from a changed sense of self and the desire to create a form of personal order out of complex and confusing experiences. But this order can never be the old version of life; serious or chronic illness rarely allows for what Thomas Couser calls a ‘rhetoric of triumph’ or what Arthur Frank describes as a ‘restitution narrative’.⁹ One of the challenges of writing about illness is the difficulty of narrating indeterminacy, of connecting past, present and future when the past no longer seems relevant and the present has highlighted the

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7 Kristen Lang, ‘The small house of her body’, p. 151.

8 Andy Jackson, ‘World in a Grain of Flesh’, p. 33

9 G. Thomas Couser, ‘Conflicting Paradigms: the Rhetorics of Disability Memoir’, in J. C. Wilson and C. Lewiecki-Wilson (eds), *Embodied Rhetorics: Disability in Language and Culture*, Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001, pp. 78–91; A. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness and Ethics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

contingency and unknowability of the future. As David Carr says, ‘The present is only possible for us if it is framed and set off against a retained past and a potentially envisaged future.’¹⁰

A further challenge of writing about illness is that the experience of illness and pain seems alien to words. Woolf talks about ‘the poverty of the language’ and Elaine Scarry asserts that ‘physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it.’¹¹ Although Scarry is primarily talking about acute pain (as experienced in torture, for example), it is often contended that pain is impossible to convey in language. For those without a clear medical diagnosis, finding language is challenging for other reasons. Not having words or a framework for what is happening to you is deeply troubling. In this anthology, Fiona Wright notes, ‘[M]y body was betraying me, and I dragged it around from clinic to consulting room,’ while struggling to find a diagnosis.¹²

The difficulty of expressing pain and the discontinuity of illness mitigate against representation – in prose at any rate. In 2002, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan found very few published ‘fragmented’ illness narratives and asked, ‘Wouldn’t narrative fragmentation be the most suitable form for the experience of disrupted narrative identity?’¹³ It is perhaps no surprise, then, that recent writing about illness has involved forms such as the lyric essay, various hybrid forms and poetry, as in this volume. Where prose narratives work with time, continuity, and cause and effect, poetry and lyric forms can work with fragments and space, and processes of reiteration and accretion. Poetry, with its use of metaphor and metonymy, creates meaning through suggestion and evocation. It tolerates, even creates, uncertainty and ambiguity. Poetry, then, may be the perfect form to reflect the complexity of the individual illness experience. In his book *Poetry as Survival*, Gregory Orr writes:

Human culture ‘invented’ or evolved the personal lyric as a means of helping individuals survive the existential crises represented by

.....
10 D. Carr, *Time, Narrative and History*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, p. 60.

11 V. Woolf, ‘On Being Ill’, p. 34; E. Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 4.

12 Fiona Wright, ‘From Clinic to Consulting Room’, p.104

13 S. Rimmon-Kenan, ‘The Story of “I”: Illness and Narrative Identity’, *Narrative*, 10.1, 2002: 9–27, p. 19.

extremities of subjectivity and also by such outer circumstances as poverty, suffering, pain, illness, violence, or loss of a loved one. This survival begins when we ‘translate’ our crisis into language – where we give it symbolic expression as an unfolding drama of self and the forces that assail it.¹⁴

Taking this idea further, Stephen Kuusisto argues that the ‘lyric poem or essay is brief...and both nearly always arise from a crisis in the writer’s life.’¹⁵ He suggests that the ‘lyric mode is concerned with momentum rather than certainty’, arguing that ‘the gnomon of lyric consciousness’ is that ‘darkness can be navigated.’¹⁶ The idea of momentum here is important, as it allows for the agency of the writer, and suggests how the writer reworks the crisis of subjectivity that illness calls forth. As Rachael Guy puts it: “Through poetry I am finding the *particular* language for my “atypical” body...I give voice to the discord, ambivalence, inconvenience, fear and beauty of this corporeal existence.”¹⁷

The short personal statements (some of them like lyric essays) and the poems in this volume attest to the ability of the lyric mode to traverse darkness and give it symbolic expression. Here, personal illness experiences are transmuted into forms that reflect the damaged, suffering and resilient body. What Frank calls the ‘chaos narrative’ – ‘an anti-narrative of time without sequence, telling without mediation, and speaking about oneself without being fully able to reflect on oneself’¹⁸ – is not disavowed here but rather given a voice through the lyric mode in a way that both represents and transcends chaos. In the oscillation between order and disorder, the poets here represent both devastation and survival, and display ‘both rupture and beauty’ to our view.¹⁹

And what are we, as readers, to do with such a view? How do we navigate the darkness and light we read in this collection of deeply personal and

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14 G. Orr, *Poetry as Survival*, Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2002, p. 4.

15 S. Kuusisto, ‘Walt Whitman’s “Specimen Days” and the Discovery of the Disability Memoir’, *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism*, 27:1–2, 2005: 155–62, p. 155.

16 S. Kuusisto, ‘Walt Whitman’s “Specimen Days”’, p. 161.

17 Rachael Guy, ‘The Condition’ p.188.

18 A. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, p. 98.

19 A. Jurecic, *Illness as Narrative*, Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012, p. 109.

yet universal works? What response is called forth from us when we read this collection of ‘things more / beautiful for having been broken,’ as Anne M Carson’s poem puts it?²⁰

First, I think, we are asked to experience pleasure when reading this book. Like Woolf’s ‘precipices and lawns sprinkled with bright flowers,’ there is much to enjoy in these poems. They sing on the page, inviting us into a place of sharp observation, potent language and delicate sensibility. Who wouldn’t feel joy at reading lines such as ‘You said melancholy, I said Chopin,’ or ‘He offers to feed you / spoonfuls of himself,’ or ‘descent into / the dark thighs of your cave?’²¹ This book can be relished in the way all good poetry is enjoyed.

We can also experience the particular pleasure of reading the authors’ introductory statements alongside their poetry. These statements provide a context for the poetry but also act as a kind of personalising mechanism. Their overtly autobiographical tone and direct disclosure of personal experiences bind the reader to the writers, creating, I suggest, an unwritten contract or agreement between reader and writer. The authors’ disclosures focus our attention, encourage us to read with care and thoughtfulness. Reading, especially reading poetry, slows us down. We have time to contemplate what we read, to experience vicariously what the writer has shown us. On reading this volume, illness no longer ‘falls outside the thinkable’ (as Michel de Certeau says of the dying).²² This is surely good because it encourages empathy and prepares us for our own and our loved ones’ future experiences of illness.

In her work on narrative medicine, Rita Charon describes how attention and representation lead to a sense of affiliation.²³ By reading, with attention, the representation of illness in these poems and author statements, we can recognise our affiliation with each other, our shared lives as human beings, and, perhaps, our shared responsibilities. We may find ourselves developing a more empathetic and creative response to our own and other people’s illnesses.

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20 Anne M Carson, ‘Axiology’, p. 20.

21 Anne M Carson, ‘: meditations on melancholy’ p. 21; Heather Taylor Johnson, ‘The Sick Room’, p. 102; Susan Hawthorne, ‘descent’, p. 73.

22 Michel de Certeau says, ‘the dying man *falls* outside the *thinkable*’ (emphasis in original) in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (S. Rendall, Trans.), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, p. 90.

23 See for example, R. Charon, ‘Narrative Medicine: Attention, Representation, Affiliation’, *Narrative*, 13.1, 2005, pp. 261–70.

Illness and caring for the ill are often viewed as intimate matters that occur in the private or domestic sphere or within a liminal institution such as a hospital. We recognise healthcare planning as a matter of public policy but in practice tend to leave individuals to manage their own health within a family setting. As Sid Larwill notes in his author statement, ‘Illness pushed us out of the mainstream.’²⁴ Perhaps these poems question our assumptions about the proper relationship of the public and private? We are invited into private spaces of suffering and of hope and asked to take that knowledge out into the world.

The paradox at the heart of an illness experience is that it is both highly intimate and profoundly estranging. *Shaping the Fractured Self* shows us how to create meaning in the face of life’s loneliness, uncertainty and fragility. It demonstrates that the sick body is also, as Quinn Eades here claims, ‘the strong body, the fighting body, the body brave enough to dis-organise, to be in excess. The sick body is the body that knows it is dying, and turns towards that moment, and insists on being seen.’²⁵ The writers here have particular knowledge and are sharing this with us. As Arthur Frank says, ‘illness is privileged in the fullness of its participation in life—although, most people have to be sick to realize that.’²⁶ The reader of this book doesn’t need to be ill to enjoy this fullness; we can experience it vicariously, poetically. This book commands our attention and offers us a gift – works of art that express a deep engagement with life, and all of Woolf’s ‘undiscovered countries’ therein.

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24 Sid Larwill, ‘Creeping up on the Things that Matter’, p. 162.

25 Quinn Eades, ‘Fragment: the Body Writing in Excess’ p. 139.

26 A. Frank, ‘Five Dramas of Illness’, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 50:3, summer 2007, p. 380.

‘EVEN AFTER BREAKING’

ANNE M CARSON

*‘Art does not see us but we see it, and can know that it has seen,
if not us, our condition. The likes of us. Maybe enough.’*
– Marion Halligan, *The Fog Garden*

Poems are packed full of consciousness. Flannery O’Connor said she doesn’t know what she thinks until she has read what she has written. We are never quite in control of the creative process – if it is any good there is always something mysterious in its making. But for me, poems often grow out of an engagement with specific ideas or images. Chronic illness and dis-ease have provided such stimulus, having been interwoven with much of my adult life, mostly through being a carer for others, but also through my own encounters with chronic dis-ease. Chronic illness, however we meet it, is profoundly challenging, and my encounters have forced me into a deep, life-giving inquiry, partly undertaken through writing poems.

I have a sensitive nervous system. On the one hand, this allows for the kind of intimations which often turn into poetry; on the other, it has also led to some prolonged episodes of anxiety – the last prompted by the events leading to the death of my husband in 2012.

One generative idea has been pivotal in my experience of chronic pain and illness, both in myself and in my role as carer. It is the Winnicottian idea of being *held* and *holding*. Donald Winnicott, an English paediatrician and psychoanalyst, uses it to refer first to the holding a mother does of her foetus in utero; then holding in arms by the mother or mother substitute; then in ever-widening circles of holding through intimacy and friendship to adult self-holding of our own needs and self, particularly when we are in distress or pain.

Mindfulness meditation has provided an active way of implementing this idea of holding. It helps me deal with the powerlessness engendered both by my chronic conditions (including daily pain from premature arthritis)

as well as when witnessing a loved one's suffering, both in accepting powerlessness and in using whatever power is available to me.

In meditation I learn to discern what attitude I hold towards whatever I am experiencing. Whilst perfectly normal to tighten in resistance to pain or discomfort – one's own or others' – I have found that tightening exacerbates difficulties. This style of meditation develops the capacity for acceptance: just sitting (or lying) with the experience, and the in-and-out breath, and finding if, in that moment, it can be consented to with compassion, softening and acceptance. It is often challenging and sometimes all I can do is accept that, for now, I am in resistance. But on many occasions, it is supremely liberating and I have found that both psychic and even physical pain have melted. Sometimes our attitude is the only thing over which we can exert any control.

But it is not always appropriate to consent and not resist. In caring for others it has been essential to learn how to continue to hold myself whilst I have been caring for the other. I have found that resentment is an excellent teacher. When I see suffering or distress, particularly in loved ones, it is very hard not to dive in to try to help. But sometimes help is not wanted, nor do I always have the wherewithal to offer effective assistance. Learning my limits has helped me hold inner boundaries, be more truly myself, not to overreach and, when I care, be more confident my caring comes from a place of genuine generosity.

Writing offers another receptacle for the holding of psychic energy. This is useful for the writer who can pour herself – her flawed, in-the-process-of-coming-to-grips-with self – into her work. But when synergy happens, and the magic of alchemy infuses one's work, writing becomes a piece of art, perhaps of use to a reader too.

When I discovered the Japanese ceramic technique *kintsukuroi* (which forms the basis of my poem 'Axiology'), I immediately translated it into psychological terms, marvelling at what a superbly redemptive image it is. The gold restores to the vessel its capacity to hold once again, not in denial of it having been fractured but even made beautiful because of it. The image partners so well with the Leonard Cohen quote and together they hold (as the poem's title suggests) a concept of great and poignant beauty for me.

.....
Axiology

*'There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.'*
– Leonard Cohen

If I was ceramic I'd be *kintsukuroi*,
pottery which has been knocked,
dropped, broken into shards then
mended with gold or silver lacquer,
a delicate meander of liquid gold
flowing into the breach. *Kintsukuroi* –
the word a whole world, evoking
the kind of place where mending
is valued more than the break,
where old is treasured more than
new, where putting things back
together is an art form, things more
beautiful for having been broken.

.....

: meditations on melancholy

You said melancholy, I said Chopin; a poultice
you could put on pain. Dark notes held by beauty

in a soft hand. Not cry-your-eyes-out, slumped
in blurs of despond. But clear-eyed chords;

elegiac philosophy carried on rivers of soul.
Comfort for the bloody business of loss,

the carnage of having what is as close to you
as your own limb, lopped. The nocturnes lasso

darkness with light; ever-widening stories to which
your tale belongs. The simple peace when pain

is consented to. Silos of silence to sink in.

.....
Splosh

You are out of your
element. When I pick

up your fish body
limbs dangle limp

in my arms. In water
just a twitch makes

you supple. Your bent
body floats free.

Exposed to air you
cramp, spasm, recoil

when touched.
Except by her – she

is your water – you
swam in her first.

‘CHILDHOOD POLIO AND BEYOND: MY EXPERIENCE OF ILLNESS AND POETRY’

PETER BOYLE

It was 15 August 1954, the Feast of the Assumption, a little less than a month before my third birthday, when I woke up in an extreme fever, unable to walk. A doctor who was called to the house gave me an injection in my right buttock but the fever got worse. Soon polio was diagnosed and I was placed in solitary confinement in hospital.

The polio originally affected most of my body and I was still in an iron frame, able to move little more than my neck and arms, when I was released from hospital just before Christmas. My first real memory of life is perhaps ten months after this when we moved house. I remember the green station wagon, the leaves overhead, the Melbourne sun and later my father carrying me around the backyard of the new house. As in the poem I wrote many years later, ‘Paralysis’, it is a happy memory of great safety and wonder.

Within a few years muscle control returned to all of my body except my right leg, which remained withered and paralysed. I learned to walk, and continue to walk, using a caliper. Of course I was left out of sport and looked, and felt, different from other children my age. Then there was the impact of the time in hospital – not just the initial four or five months in an isolation ward at age three, but numerous operations to try to improve my stability and muscle control. The last of these was in Sydney when I was eleven, my first year of high school. I was in hospital for eight weeks and recuperating at home for a further eight weeks. I remember the nightmares and the terror of the dark from my time in hospital, but there was also an immense determination to learn, to explore the world, to achieve something special that would make up for my illness. I taught myself Latin while in hospital and, though a year younger than my classmates, excelled in my studies, especially languages, history and English, winding up dux of my high school, Riverview, in 1968. I also began writing poetry.

The self I had constructed to overcome my sense of disability was above all a bookish, academic self; however, over the course of my years at university,

this began to unravel. In 1972 I broke up with my girlfriend, dropped out of university and slid rapidly into depression. I returned the following year to complete English Honours, then did a Diploma of Education the year after and began teaching. High school teaching, overseas travel and depression alternated through my twenties and early thirties, but throughout it all was the dream of becoming a writer – a poet, a novelist or both. There were many factors in my depression but undoubtedly my sense of inferiority as a male, linked to my caliper and my long time of apartness, contributed to it. There was also the restlessness prompted by my desire to write, my failure to write and my fantasy of discovering the right place that would transform me. In part, my restlessness was the product of a sense that I had to achieve something really big to make up for my disability, that there must be a flipside, a remarkable destiny that would be the compensation for all of my own – and my parents' – suffering.

By my late thirties, with marriage, children and a fulfilling job as a TAFE teacher, I had largely got beyond the depression, and within a year of marriage, from 1988 onwards, the poems started to come. Many of them used images and phrases stored up in me over the previous thirty to forty years. Some of them, like 'Separation', 'Kinderszeit', 'For my father' and 'Paralysis', from my first three books, drew on my childhood experiences, especially my time in hospitals.

In 2006 I learned that I had prostate cancer and a serious, life-threatening form of it. The turmoil of those times and the grim encounter with my own mortality are present in some of the poems in *Apocrypha* (2009) and in the long poem 'In the sleep of the riverbed' from *Towns in the Great Desert* (2013). The last poem from the 'Towns in the Great Desert' sequence describes a dream I had after the prostatectomy, coming to terms with the damage to my virility – a vision of the immense beauty there is in life regardless of how much is taken away.

Late in 2014 we learned that my partner had multiple myeloma, a particularly virulent form of cancer affecting the blood and the bones. It was already at a fairly advanced stage, and the chemotherapy needed was drastic. Instead of growing old together as we had imagined, serious chronic illness became our reality. This is not my illness to write about but it is a hammerblow. For months a sense of numbness overwhelmed me. I'm a writer and a poet and writing is what keeps me strong. Yet, what to write? In these circumstances, how to write at all?

For the past three years I had been working on a project called

Ghostspeaking, a book of imaginary poets from Latin America and France, where I invented poets, gave them biographies and wrote their poems. I invented a character, Ernesto Ray, a poet from Puerto Rico, who starts life as a New York singer and rapper but gives it all away, first to be a Buddhist, then later to write a thin book of poems as magic spells of blessing for his wife Pauline who is dying of cancer. A very late uncollected poem of Ray's is 'Hammerblows'. While the other poems of Ray's were attempts to project blessings, this one, I think, lets out the emotions of grief, anger and bewilderment.

In *Ghostspeaking* there is also a collection of prose poems attributed to 'the Montaigne poet', an anonymous man or woman who has a rather philosophic bent and writes in a mix of prose poetry and essay. Through him or her I sometimes transform dreams I have had. 'On the eternal nature of fresh beginnings' is a poem I wrote rapidly in the middle of one night. It was a voice speaking out of me and I simply had to listen carefully as it spoke. It felt like part of the psyche breaking through the numbness, offering consolation but more than consolation, a clear seeing into the goodness and beauty at the core of life. One of poetry's great tasks is to give voice to that 'clear seeing'. Insofar as we can be in touch with that reality, then illness, suffering, disease, are not the whole of the story.

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Paralysis

Laid out flat
in the back of the station wagon my father borrowed
I look up:
the leaves are immense,
green and golden with clear summer light
breaking through –
though I turn only my neck
I can see all of them
along this avenue that has no limits.

What does it matter
that I am only eyes
if I am to be carried
so lightly
under the trees of the world?
From beyond the numbness of my strange body
the wealth of the leaves
falls forever
into my small still watching.

.....

Hammerblows

'Hay golpes en la vida, tan fuertes. . . Yo no sé!'
– César Vallejo

In subway cars
on a path below high mountains
storm coming down
in the 10 a.m. sun moving step by step
along a row of chairs lined up on a sidewalk
in the name on an envelope
under a thick smear of jam
in the suicide of buttons in a drawer of waiting knives
There are blows

In what you know hear want can't say
fecund snowflake razors
there are blows

In the breeze that rises
when someone's gone
In airports and the chill eternal
failure to set out
In the rewiring of memories
so every landscape every half-arsed jerking of
an ill-timed word
floods all the avenues
rains like ripe tomatoes
on the most umbilical umbrellas
there are blows

Like the sleek geek who won't speak
rancid skies dripping death
like petrified vultures oozing lard
in the forecourts of the Four Winds Stock Exchange
or a banker on hard times sniffing glue that oozes
from a pothole of pock-marked
preferences to trade in the dark

Unarguably
there are blows
A tree to the knees
A quick slit to the left of the breath
A brief stab to the right trapezoid
and it flows
like rum of the Rialto
gone sodden gone
drenched fire
hung from heaven on a wire
like a dream going forward
or a tack stuck in a throat
that won't pass
there are blows

Under benches
in safe cubicles
in a scrambled letter left behind on a train
in paper cups soiled plates
a fridge crammed with wedges of stale bread
or a road that twists its cracked spine under rain
there are blows
and in the imperceptible
accumulation of seconds
as a roof snaps
as a day drifts into darkness

in the flip of a card
in solitaire
in conversations morsed by the time-bleep of machines
in the crisp voice flooding like treacle
over the floor of an office
or the practised spiel rehearsing
the trajectory of endings
in our endings

Set upon by minions gagged by gargoyles
on the roof, feet kicking

drained of air like a deflated owl
crowd-surfed down corridors
dressed by ghost-fingers in
some tight-fitting cloak of lost arms
in the steady breath of midnight stillness
or the scratch-scratchings of pain rocking
on a makeshift trestle by the window under stars
my love
in every moan replayed
there are blows

In the trickle of the chicken that's rotting
in the shoulder-bag of the boy of the third strap
of the last carriage that wavers above the
 all blasted
 their hands nailed to iron rafters
and yet the light is there

In the land of far away last night
where an old tart flicks her foxtail bathrobe in your face
in the pissoirs of seventh heaven
where red pustules sprout from boys' flies
and a certain stench
clenches your nails on the zipper that won't budge
when you feel like a foetus growing old in a waterhole for ratsack
as the gaunt attorney
slips your fingerprints into the
state-owned deposition on the inventory
of purloined combs
that nails you there, right there
among tender ostriches
hanging by a thread

And there are blows
immaculate interceptions
disconnected calls to Mars
music that turns one last time at the threshold
turns back to gaze at us

once-only short-term spinners
left behind in the room for lost jars

like a wave going out
along the edge of the world
like some bleary-eyed bard of the doorway
who wears our face
and has no language

all the hammerblows it takes
to make a hammerklavier
the nails nailed into it
and when it soars
the still attentive fingers numbering death

and how
on the lowest edges of the heavenly choir
among the counsellors consolors
where the jackboots just now begin to reach
there are blows

How say it
beloved
now my face is
three swift kicks of death
on the night-patrol of nowhere
two hands round a thick jug gathering light
and yet and yet. . .

There are blows

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On the eternal nature of fresh beginnings

This body next to you, said the German expert on design, is your ideal self – what you climbed out of once and have since forgotten about. Like gills and dialogues with rainbows, like your life as a ruminant quadruped, it has been erased from your waking story. When the time is right you will step inside it and it will transport you. Do not look at the claws that dangle from its withered right arm – consider only its wings. Say to yourself the word ‘Perfection’. Be confident. All the stars of the universe were placed millennia ago far inside you.