

# **The Year of Drinking Water**

**Anthony Wilson**

**Exeter Leukaemia Fund**

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### **Acknowledgements**

*The Rialto, Seam, Smiths Knoll, Third Way, The Use of English.*

'Chemotherapy' takes its inspiration from a photograph by Annie Leibovitz of Susan Sontag; 'Spooning Couple' takes its title from a sculpture of the same name by Ron Mueck.

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This collection was shortlisted in the Poetry Business Pamphlet Competition, 2006.

**Anthony Wilson** was born in 1964. He has published three collections of poetry, *How Far From Here Is Home?* (Stride, 1996), *Nowhere Better Than This* (Worple Press, 2002), *Full Stretch: Poems 1996-2006* (Worple Press, 2006), and a pamphlet, *The Difference* (Aldeburgh Poetry Trust, 1999). He has held a number of poetry residencies, including Tate Britain, The Poetry Society, The Poetry Trust and Apples and Snakes Poets. He lives and works in Exeter.

## CONTENTS

5	Introduction
7	Tumour
8	How to Pray for the Dying
9	The Room With No Windows
10	Lost
11	Men Who Sit in Waiting Rooms
12	When You Woke Up This Morning
13	Wart
14	Words
15	Homeshopping
16	What Not To Say
17	I am Fighting
18	Heads
19	The Year of Drinking Water
20	I am Becoming My Grandmother
21	Man in a Fleece
22	Blood
23	The Young
24	Chemotherapy
25	More Chelsea Than Sunderland
26	Spooning Couple
27	The End of the Affair
28	Jesus Heals Ten Lepers
29	Poem Beginning With a Line by Milosz
30	Prayer

In memory of Emily Riall

The smallest things are gifts

- Julia Darling

## INTRODUCTION

I was formally diagnosed with a variant of Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, a cancer of the white blood cells, on Valentine's Day, 2006.

Despite my friends' protestations that it was 'probably nothing', the diagnosis, when it finally came, was not a surprise. A shock, yes; a surprise, no. Just as the treatment for cancer changes your tastebuds, it also heightens your need for the truth.

I looked for the truth about cancer in many different places. Like a good patient I scoured the internet, read up on my disease, and invested in various books. Oddly, none of this really satisfied my craving. The truth about cancer is often found in more unexpected places: a nurse's joke as she begins to inject you; a tin of brownies left on the doorstep by a friend; the offer of a lift by a neighbour. None of these things seemed to appear in the accounts of cancer I was reading.

Not that I was reading very much any more. Along with (most of) my immune system, chemotherapy also removed my concentration. If I made it through the sports pages, it was a good morning.

I became desperate for models of writing which offered a way of handling cancer without being defeated by it. Some of the best of these were Julia Darling's two books of poetry, *Sudden Collapses in Public Places* (2003), and *Apology for Absence* (2004) (both published by Arc). Here at last was a voice I could trust, speaking directly to me with warmth, wit and a wry mordant humour. Here were poems –yes– about waiting rooms and treatment tables, but also about the joys of listening to Joni Mitchell and sitting in cafés. (Cancer can include these things too). I was especially struck by her use of metaphor, the way her body becomes a house with a temporary extension, sleep is described as a friend she has fallen out with, the hospital a puzzled goddess. As she says in an essay to introduce an anthology of poems about health, poetry, through metaphor, can help us 'step out of the difficult present ...[and] establish a sense of control over the body'. That is one of the aims here.

Quietly but never less than powerfully she challenges the status quo. 'We know cancer is terrible,' she seems to be saying, 'but not enough to stop us talking.' Thus, in a poem about chemotherapy, she is able to say 'the smallest things are gifts'. This was a revelation to me, in that it opened up the possibility of positive thinking on the subject, of change, even. It became a touchstone, and is the epigraph to this collection.

In searching for metaphors to describe difficult and painful experience the key is that you end up exploring physical and emotional spaces which were previously unknown to you. Some, the (to me, unhelpful) idea of cancer as a battle ('I am Fighting'), I had heard about before I was ill. Others, like the idea of winning and losing ('More Chelsea Than Sunderland'), seemed to come serendipitously as it were, in the stories of friends. Other aspects of cancer are explored in the metaphors of transmutation ('Heads', 'Man in a Fleece'); a doomed relationship ('The End of the Affair'); and reincarnation ('I am Becoming My Grandmother'). Sometimes, as a writer, you need another agency or stimulus to help shape the

material. You look at a photograph ('Chemotherapy'), or a sculpture ('Spooning Couple'); or find, in a story outside of your own, resonances you had missed before ('Jesus Heals Ten Lepers'). Sometimes it is enough to try to talk directly to your experience as if it were a person, there in the room with you ('Tumour', 'Wart', 'Blood').

The poems collected here are, therefore, a way of trying to be true to, and come to terms with, my experience of living with cancer. On another level, I hope, they are what poet Stephen Dunn calls a 'corrective', an effort of concentration which refuses to be overwhelmed by circumstances, where one looks for the 'gift' in everything.

I want to thank Malcolm Roker and the Exeter Leukaemia Fund for their generous support and enthusiasm for this project; Doctors Marilyn Pocock and Jörn Cann, and all the staff on the Day Case ward; and to Louise Page, Haematology Support Counsellor, for suggesting the idea of making these poems available on the ward. I do hope they help. At the very least I hope they are able, in their own way, to begin and even sustain a conversation about what it is we go through when our lives are touched by cancer. Finally, I hope they help to refresh what we know –or think we do– when we talk about such things, reliant as we are on saying how it was for us, beginning with what happened.

**Anthony Wilson**  
**Exeter, May 2007**

## Tumour

You gave me time to notice –  
apple blossom, hand movements,  
the light taking leave of rooms.  
I would like to claim  
new attention to my children  
but the truth is they grew up  
whether I watched them or not.  
Mostly I slept.  
You began in midsummer.  
It took till February to find you.  
By then all I knew were symptoms:  
insomnia, night sweats, a cough I could not shake off.  
Because of you I revisited old Lps –  
I did not want to die  
not having fried onions to Grover,  
made bubbles to This Mortal Coil.  
The script writers of *Frasier*  
helped me recover from you,  
plus condensed milk and broccoli –  
though not at the same time.  
Eventually I drank coffee again.  
You reacquainted me with my guilt –  
the way I glared at S  
after she'd poured out her heart  
in the autumn of endless nights  
with nothing but the wind for company.  
I chose songs, having you,  
and invented ceremonies by rivers.  
(But I found no poetry in you.)  
You are about to leave me, perhaps.  
You saved me from talking about house prices.  
You obliterated my craving for alcohol.  
I would say I am grateful  
but am not ready for that, just yet.

## How to Pray for the Dying

Do not say: 'Lord, this is not of you,'  
rebuking our tumours  
as though we were not in the room with them.

Say instead 'We are afraid,'  
and 'We do not understand.'

Think of it as a window  
misted with sighs,  
not an arm wrestle with God  
who sees your thoughts from afar.

Pray in tongues by all means,  
but also remember our kids.  
Pray that we sleep.

Pray for the obvious.  
Pray we live to see Christmas.

Don't you dare  
say 'It's not fair.'  
Spare me your weeping.  
Try saying 'Shit happens.'

## **The Room With No Windows**

was all doors.  
Outside, the ring road,  
a playground.

Beyond, a field,  
one calf  
suckling its mother,

Atlantic rain  
shrouding everything,  
even the radio

in the corner,  
Grade 1 piano  
to an old man's singing.

## **Lost**

Lost my hair  
Lost my appetite  
Lost my energy  
Lost my nails

Lost my nerve  
Lost my eyebrows  
Lost my patience  
Lost my pubes

Lost my cool  
Lost my taste  
Lost my lashes  
Lost my faith

Lost my blood  
Lost my colour  
Lost my temper  
Lost my hair

## Men Who Sit in Waiting Rooms

alone or with their wives  
tutting at old copies of *Ok!*

who ignore the wig catalogues  
and study the ceiling tiles

their shoes the microscopic dust  
on their fingernails

who fidget with zip-pulls  
on outdoor jackets

who are called  
through doors down corridors

who stride without looking backwards  
past the pot plants

handed a gown  
told to wait

who curse that list  
by the telly

those jobs  
the weeds or the guttering

one perhaps for a pro  
if they could lay their hands

on the number  
if they could remember that name

## **When You Woke Up This Morning**

You probably did not think  
you would end up here, at this poem,  
unless you have read it before,  
returning to be entertained again  
at the way I describe it as a raft  
the two of us set sail on

without map or knowledge of the stars,  
the way it suddenly becomes  
an empty bedroom with a note  
on the pillow saying 'Have gone out  
for a walk. Back after lunch.  
Have left behind phone so no point calling.'

## Wart

You're not much fun,  
Are you, wart?  
You sit there  
On my finger-hinge, proudly.

Announcements  
aren't your style.  
Rather, you insinuate,  
fattening stealthily.

Little Uluru, time-bomb,  
capsule from another planet:  
you glare up at me,  
a word made flesh.

**Words**

Large cell

high grade

growth

Persistent

active

disease

Confirmed

bulky

mass

Percentage

treatable

tough

## Homeshopping

Today I am homeshopping,  
getting one-click fixes  
from albums and fleece-lined robes.

I shall float in linen trousers,  
shirts with no collars,  
suede loafers.

You can keep your *Eat to Beat Cancer*,  
Your *Recipes for a Longer Remission*.  
I deserve

a digital radio,  
a subscription to *Woman and Home* –  
but I'll need the *Chemotherapy for Dummies*.

## What Not to Say

Enough of your *lovely shaped head*,  
your *meaning to ring*.

Tell it me like it is:  
I look like a waxwork.

Spare me your *positive mindset*,  
your *fight it, you know you're a fighter*.

I couldn't care which website you visited  
*explaining it really clearly*.

And you could try not calling me brave.  
Invite me to dinner. Offer me water.

## **I am Fighting**

I am fighting  
we are talking  
in a room  
across a table

You are waiting  
I am fighting  
down a corridor  
in an armchair

You are reading  
in a ward  
across the bed  
where I am fighting

I am sleeping  
imagining dreaming  
flying running  
I am fighting

I am waking  
stretching yawning  
on the sofa  
you are crying

We are walking  
through a doorway  
I am sitting  
now I'm lying

I am sleeping  
you are sitting  
we are waiting  
I am fighting

## Heads

Toss me a black woollen polo-neck  
and I become a poor man's Blofeld  
developing a world-threatening virus.

Hand me those retro headphones  
and I'm thoughtful Brian Eno  
finishing off a new mix.

I'm Kojak without his lollipop,  
a paunchy Duncan Goodhew and haggard  
Syd Barret on his bike. Bike. Give me my bike.

## **The Year of Drinking Water**

At first I didn't mind.  
All those gallons had a point;  
even if I peed all night  
I felt I was doing my bit.

I gulp towards my future,  
drunk with hope. I raise it to the light  
and see myself staring back  
bent double, inside out.

## **I am Becoming My Grandmother**

The way I dine on bread,  
could live on nothing else.

The way I call *à table*  
and tut to no one, shrugging,  
when they don't appear  
for minutes.

The way I pull at this bread,  
sip coffee, and live  
on nothing else.

How I stay in one room,  
quite happy.  
How I nod during grace  
and mean it.

How I stoop.

## **Man in a Fleece**

I disappear into grey folds,  
its soft creases of flesh  
which match my own.

I turn up the collar  
and shuffle to the shops  
for milk, the paper I will not read.

Next to you in the queue  
I could be anyone,  
someone fit, a jogger.

I stroke my second skin.  
It catches the light in beads  
which ripple up then down my arms.

## **Blood**

for Jörn Cann

The nurse announces the canula.  
One *Sharp scratch* and you're there,

vial after ochre vial,  
unstoppable.

Cousin to tawny port  
your sheen's a glossy russet.

You do not gush, you seep,  
but would soak

the world  
if you could.

You're not much to look at:  
but, spun, you separate –

lymph, plasma  
and marrow, the very core

of us, telling everything.  
Famously salty

to the taste, you seem stable as mercury.  
If only.

## The Young

They're beautiful, aren't they, the young?  
They are loyal and walk with their heads up.

They shout their gossip in the street  
and think we can't hear or are interested.

They eat and drink on the move  
discarding the wrappers in the breeze.

They arrange to meet at the weekend  
in at least three different formats.

They are great at sex, slamming doors,  
and impulsively boarding trains.

May they discover Keats, busk in Paris.  
May they look at photos exclaiming 'My God!'

I wish them a future without corridors.  
I wish them cake.

## **Chemotherapy**

*after Annie Leibovitz*

The world is a hillock of pillows,  
a New York skyline of cards.

\*

You sip at something hot  
reminding yourself of its taste  
by reading, rereading the label.

\*

You gorge on banana sandwiches  
with sugar, cream cheese and smarties.

\*

There is a play about you  
on the radio. It is everything you can do  
not to pick up the phone.

\*

On bad days you long to be dead.  
On good days you think that you are.

\*

Eventually you give in to it.  
You think *Yes, I could do that*  
and add it to your wish list.

**More Chelsea Than Sunderland**  
*for Humphrey Potts*

Your doctor's line predicting  
your survival  
tickled me

watching Terry lift the trophy  
before the World Cup  
debacle

inevitable as May following April  
thinking *I should be happy*  
imagining

that champagne moment

**Spooning Couple**  
*after Ron Mueck*

The night

of the news

we lay  
not touching

or talking

your arms

folded  
across you

mine

bent in

wordless  
prayer      imagining

being dead

without you

the bed  
now twice

as big

stranded

in all  
that space

## The End of the Affair

When you finally left me  
I didn't know what to do.  
As in all the best clichés  
you had become my identity.

We said goodbye  
– let's hope it's not *au revoir* –  
as we said hello  
in a room with a desk and tissues.

I thought I wouldn't miss you  
but I do.  
Not you personally, but the attention  
was nice.

My days grow fat without you.  
There are rumours of gales.  
No, I don't think we can be friends.  
I would rather you didn't write.

## Jesus Heals Ten Lepers

for Michael Symmons Roberts

We miss just about everything.  
An AIDs ward doesn't come close;

or even an oncology unit  
with its scarf-headed goitred women

and men with purple necks.  
Think of a family tree:

there's a blank where your name resided;  
the no-go area of town: that's home.

You despise those you live with,  
the stumpy whitening flesh,

the stink of rot they can't feel.  
Don't even think of 'community'.

This was evidence of sin –  
yours or the mother who disowned you

who in any case was known as a whore.  
Even the healing command

– *show yourselves to the priest* –  
is cruel, a joke, surely, pre-Python.

You can imagine how the returner felt.  
He must have gripped

Jesus' ankles till they bled.  
You would think he couldn't wait to leave.

## Poem Beginning With a Line by Milosz

A day so happy.  
I made coffee and wrote for two hours.  
There were no emails to answer,  
the children had cycled to town.  
Two books arrived through the letterbox;  
the pleasure pulsed thorough my veins.  
I ate a sandwich then slept.

I dreamed of grass,  
that X had finally forgiven me.

Waking, I watched apples drop  
in the breeze. Wasps  
gathered round the cracks  
in their skins, swollen now like lips.

## Prayer

*Let the healing start.*  
May it begin in the blood  
and flood every cell with light.  
May it infect the heart.

(Let the healing start.)  
May it come as one comforts  
a newborn at midnight  
the wild shocking eye closing.

(Let it come.) Let it start  
now as we sit here waiting  
and talking through days  
of colour and rain.

May it infect the heart  
and save it. May it lead us  
into light. (We are open.)  
*Let the healing start.*