

Between Two Deep Breaths: Paul Veitch (1957 - 2017)



This month, Suffolk Poetry Society lost one of its most dedicated poets, Paul Veitch. Although he had written poems off and on for many years, it was only when he received his diagnosis for cancer in 2013 that he wrote poetry with such urgency and intensity. He had been told that his cancer was already far advanced so he was brought face to face with the prospect of imminent death. Poetry, along with prayer and meditation, became his means of coming to terms with his incurable disease and perhaps the act of expressing his deepest experiences through poetry played a significant part in prolonging his life longer than was expected. Paul would have agreed with the words of one of the greatest of all writers, Franz Kafka that writing is itself a form of prayer. Before his diagnosis, writing poetry had been a mere pastime; afterwards, it became a compulsion and this is something which no poetry course or workshop can instil.

I had first met Paul some fifteen years ago at the Poetry-next-the-Sea festival in Wells and although we shared a great love of the Highlands and Islands, we rarely met for the next ten years, partly due to his busy life as a solicitor and as a Reader in the Church of England. It was only after his cancer diagnosis that we came to see more of each other and we would discuss poetry

and he would email me poems to comment on. I encouraged him to become a member of the Suffolk Poetry Society and although he wasn't able to attend any events or workshops, partly due to his illness and the fact that he lived in north Norfolk, he greatly valued being a member of a community of poets.

In the Foreword to his self-published collection of poems entitled *Sower Boy*, he writes that shortly after his diagnosis, he went to see a spiritual counsellor who advised him to read the writings of the great 17th century poet and Christian mystic, Thomas Traherne who expresses the most beautiful and exalted visions of Creation of any writer in English.

Due to the terrible pain he suffered some nights, Paul came to find sleep increasingly difficult to achieve and he would get up and work at a poem which seemed to offer him precious moments of release. He would email me the poem right away even though he knew he couldn't expect any response until the next morning. I encouraged him to attempt a traditional sonnet which I thought might help to contain and enhance the depth of thought and feeling he was trying to convey and to remind him that the aim of art should be to create something beautiful out of suffering. On first reading the following poem, I was astonished that someone who had rarely or never written a sonnet before could create something so powerful and moving. In fourteen ten syllable lines, the temporary fear and pain of undergoing chemotherapy is somehow transcended into something which will endure.

Translucent Rain Drops

*The poison hung from ripped out brown packets:
machine pumped fixes for months or years,
chucked into yellow clinical buckets;
the translucent rain drops, seeped in like tears.*

*'Give up work', he spoke, while facing the screen,
an arm round your back, you were led next door
where I found a crumpled you, fears foreseen.
Muted you drove, working a script less raw.*

*This psalmist now cries out, when, how, why,
called from waiting rooms to armchaired stations:
booths of private dramas we shyly spy,
acting homely, in our isolation.*

*This intravenous pump empties and bleeps;
hold back; hold back; the lifting of white sheets.*

Paul's acute sensitivity to glimpses of beauty amidst his increasing awareness of life's brevity reminded me a little of the

words spoken by the television dramatist, Dennis Potter in his final televised interview when he said that now when he

looked out of his window, in what was to be his final spring, he saw:

a plum tree, it looks like apple blossom but it's white, and looking at it, instead of saying "Oh that's nice blossom" ... last week looking at it through the window when I'm writing, I see it is the whitest, frothiest, blossmiest blossom that there ever could be, and I can see it . . . the nowness of everything is absolutely wondrous. There is no way of telling you; you have to experience it . . . the glory of it . . .

Paul's most vivid and powerful poem is called **Red Tulips** which reveals not only his compassion for his fellow sufferers but ends with his awareness of the transforming and dazzling beauty of flowers as if he was seeing them *unwrapped* for the first time.

Some three years ago, Paul was one of a group of Norfolk friends who came with Ann and I on holiday to Islay. He camped in the sand dunes above Loch Indaal and dipped his ailing body in the chilly Atlantic Ocean each morning. Although he had injured his knee and found it painful to walk, he insisted in coming with me for a long walk along the southern shore, beyond the island's most famous artefact, the 8th century Celtic cross which stands outside the roofless chapel at Kildalton. It was one of those rare spring days of unearthly light when the wind-blown, yellow flags of wild iris glowed as if lit from within. As we scrambled over rocks, sea birds swooped above our heads anxious to protect their nesting young. We had intended to reach the abandoned village of Proaig where the ruins of crofts lie around a bay necklaced with dazzling white shell sand. We reached a point where Paul could go on no longer and we sat on a rock and gazed across the coast to Proaig which looked so peaceful and inviting but was just beyond our reach. We sat and gazed and listened to the intensity of silence, interspersed only with the sea birds' cries. We shared silence like Communion bread and wine and those moments I shall never forget.

Paul vowed that he would return to Islay one day and he would set foot on that village bay. He had intended to come with me to the writing retreat at Barnhill on the neighbouring island of Jura the following spring and then cross the narrow strip of sea to Islay but he became too ill to do so. In a sense, he was always reaching out to some place which was just beyond his reach and that made his longing all the more intense. In the first stanza of his lovely poem, simply called **Islands**, he writes:

*Always carried
on deck looking out
across blue and green hues,
then slapping and sucking
on the vessel's side as we
stepped into silver light steps.*

from Red Tulips

*In the night they had always
come to touch and turn
from distant corridors of
ambient light,
pilgrims of relief following
bleeps and groans
to limp white flesh with name
tags,
green stockings and rusty
coloured crosses
drawn into pumped bellies.*

*By each bed side a still life of
half-empty water jugs,
torn packets of Rich Tea,
mobiles just in reach,
rearranged each day by
drifting
hands,
that in time took hold of bed
bars and door handles.*

*When disconnected it was time
to walk away
at a Buddhist monk's pace,
to lifts and wide corridors
send texts to the closest.*

*And in the kitchen you took
scissors
to the tightly cellophane
wrapped red tulips.*

coast, a relative said that although Paul was of course heartbroken to be leaving his wife, family and friends much sooner than he would have wished, part of him eagerly anticipated the next stage of his voyage into the unknown. Death for Paul was an adventure to an altered form of consciousness, another step closer to the heart of the mystery. He would have agreed with Emily Dickinson that *this world is not conclusion*. The great Dutch diarist and Jewish mystic, Etty Hillesum who died in Auschwitz wrote that *sometimes the most important thing in a whole day is the rest we take between two deep breaths*. The final poem in **Sower Boy** is called **Never Ending Prayer Poem**:

*inhale
peace*

*exhale
peace*

peace

peace

be

peace

At Paul's memorial service in the packed ancient church at Wiveton, near the Norfolk

Paul looked forward to the infinite possibilities after his last breath had been taken.