

Waiting (Six Poems)

Late Caller
Unframed Picture
Artiste
Night Watch
Waiting
In this space

Alison Michell

Waiting

These poems visit some of the places which will be familiar to anyone who lives with, or close to, cancer. They travel from the moment of diagnosis, through loss of hair, uncertainty, sleepless nights, the possibility of remission, and of course waiting.

The waiting never stops: for test results, for a scan, wondering if there will be another birthday, whether to plan a holiday. Sometimes we find ourselves in clinics or hospitals surrounded by other people and all the usual paraphernalia of waiting rooms. At other times, the waiting seems to take place in an interior psychological space where we wait alone because, once cancer comes into our lives, that is what we do.

April 2006

Late caller

He called on me one evening, unannounced.
I didn't recognise the smart pin-stripes,
the polished shoes. He said he had some news,
recited words which sounded Greek to me,
or maybe Latin, till he reached the bottom line
which is the same in any language.

He looked me in the eye, above his rimless glasses -
I knew him then, the skull beneath his well-groomed hair.
He left quickly as he had come, a brisk handshake:
Take care, he said, I'll be in touch.

My stalker writes sometimes – I don't reply –
sends photographs of blurred grey sharks circling a mass
which might be solid rock. When I wake at three
or half-past four, his shadow waits behind the bedroom door.

Unframed Picture

No sudden loss this but a slow winnowing,
each morning a harvest from the pillow,
a sink swirling with fronds of seaweed.

One cold Saturday
she has it clipped, cropped
down to the bare bone.

The shape of her head surprises,
not round as she had expected
but an oval, elongated Nefertiti.

Without their dark arches her unlashd eyes
confront the new face in the mirror;
at night she wears a woolly hat, on waking
rubs her hand across the stubble.

Artiste

She waits for her cue
through the last moments
of unknowing,
shelters
in the eye of the storm
where no bird will fly.

Clowns stop their noise,
look up as she swings high,
hands outstretched
to the catcher,
no safety net
above the ring.

Night Watch

Night goes unnoticed
by careless sleepers.
Only the watcher
keeping vigil knows
these are not the small hours
but the heart of darkness
when men who dream of power
plot to overthrow dictators,
when bodies fuse, when cells divide
to begin life - or to end it.

Waiting

This room does not appear
on any plans of the house. I enter
through an unmarked door,
find blank walls of bleached calico
around a space stripped of distraction.

A single chair without a cushion,
no artificial flowers or dog-eared
magazines. No scum of congealed
milky coffee. The floor smells of teak
faintly seasoned with salt, like the deck
on a cross-channel ferry. Bare feet explore
cracks between the grainy boards, aware
of lurking splinters. There's no dust,
no noise. The syncopation of my pulse
keeps silent time. The clock has stopped.

It is cool, not quite dark, outside.
The uncurtained window looks beyond
what might be water or bone-hard sand
under a four o'clock sky. Nothing disturbs
that opal interlude before the birds
begin their morning roll-call. Is it my turn
to go? I listen but do not hear my name.

In this space

People ask me what I do.

I am waiting, I reply,

in that pause between

fact and uncertainty.

We see the past, inspect

its weights and measurements;

and some think they can

foresee the future.

I used to think so too,

before the random division

of cells intervened.

So I wait, in this space

which is my place;

that is what I do.

ABOUT THE WRITER



ALISON MICHELL lives in South London with her two sons: one is working in London and the other is in his final year at Leeds University. She decided to spend more time on writing after bowel cancer was diagnosed four years ago and enjoys it so much that she is currently half way through an MA course in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths College in London. Surgery and chemotherapy brought a long period of remission but she is now having another course of treatment to deal with some new problems. In August she celebrated her 60th birthday at a wonderful party with family and friends.