

SAMPLER

*The Release*

Also by Jeremy Hooker

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Jeremy Hooker

*The Release*

SAMPLE

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*For the nurses and doctors of  
Prince Charles Hospital, Merthyr Tydfil  
and of the Renal Unit at The Heath in Cardiff*

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## Foreword

Since *Welsh Journal* (2001), I have periodically adopted a form of writing that juxtaposes prose and poetry. *The Release* is a work of this kind, in which diary entries and poems are combined and interact. Roughly speaking, the diary records experience that generates the poems, or, to use another metaphor, the poems disclose their roots in the prose.

Between June 2019 and August 2020, I spent four long periods in hospital, initially in Prince Charles Hospital in Merthyr Tydfil, and latterly in the Renal Unit at The Heath in Cardiff. The diary records my experience as a patient and reflects aspects of the life of the hospital; the poems respond to what I felt and saw in the ward, but also go beyond being a record of everyday reality. Like my *Diary of a Stroke* and other journals, *The Release* is a poet's journal. In ways that the book describes, the periods of hospitalization proved to be intensely creative. This was partly due to having so much time to write and read and think, together with the ever-present sense of mortality. Long days and some sleepless nights in bed were conducive to memory, and stimulated me to write, as well as the poems, rough drafts of two books: *Addiction: a love story*, and a memoir of my life in Wales. These are, as it were, backgrounds to the material of which *The Release* is composed.

In editing the material, I have focused mainly on two things: the reality of days and nights confined to a hospital bed, and the life of the mind, intellectual and spiritual, which finds expression in poetry. At times, in the process of writing poems, or drafts of poems, I was acutely aware of the workings of the imagination, and of feeling my way to a better understanding of poetry as a magnetic 'field of force'. As I wrote in the diary, I realized that: 'A stream of thinking and feeling, a lyrical stream, has been released in my mind'. This is partly what *The Release* is about, and I have edited the diary with this theme in mind. But this is not only a book concerned with poetry, or with self-reflection. It is also a tribute to the modern hospital as a place of care and healing. In Prince Charles Hospital and at The Heath, I experienced 'the reality of democracy' that characterises our National Health Service. This was all the more impressive in contrast to the noise of the outer, political world, and in view of the pressures on staff due to the Covid virus.



# 1.

19–20 June 2019

Unable to get out of bed this morning, and after a night when I thought I might die, two young ambulance women arrived to bump me down the stairs, hazardously, on a stretcher and take me into hospital, where I was placed in an observation room. I was alert enough to know we were going to Prince Charles Hospital in Merthyr, and not the hospital in which Mieke died. Initial opinion seems to be that I have an infection due to under functioning kidneys. Coincidentally, after at first being too weak to take any interest in my post, I opened a packet from Shearsman to find the first copy of *Word and Stone* inside.

## Summer Solstice

Of course, I've read my new book over & over. Several doctors & nurses have been impressed by having a poet under observation. More importantly, I've laid in bed working on what may become a long poem. I had started reading Robert Duncan's *The H.D. Book* before coming into hospital. Duncan's treatment of images (and The Image) impressed me very much. Thereafter, I began to lose patience. There's something about Duncan's treatment of the imagination, and virtual deification of poetry, that makes me feel queasy. I know Duncan was a true poet, probably a great one, but for me his myth of Reality is ultimately vacuous, unlike David Jones'.

I've never been happy with the idea of Poetry as a religion – religions may be poetic, and sources of great poetry, but Poetry tends to gather awe to itself, instead of being in awe of what is beyond it – Being, Reality, God, however understood. Pride in our minds leads to a kind of soft-headed egotism. We must never lose sight of what is beyond us, and what has made us, instead of exalting our own makings.

Evening of the longest day. From the window I can see a line of cloud along the hill outside Merthyr, houses, and two wind turbines, arms moving. Unable to walk, I especially observe movements – traffic, small figures walking, turbines. Meanwhile, I'm missing news of the great

Brexit circus, and the clown show that threatens to impose Boris Johnson on us as our 'Leader'. What a dangerous farce. How has Democracy failed as to put the world in the hands of men such as Trump & Johnson?

Trump and his mindless acolytes make big noises about making America GREAT again. Greatness is the last thing we need. Humility and common sense would be wonderful. And how many would vote for that?

*Two squibs*, written to cheer myself up and for the amusement of friends.

## Wise Words

'What matters,' she said,  
is not how long we live,  
but how well.'

Which was fine in a woman of 97  
who'd once burst naked  
out of a birthday cake  
at a party of business suits.

And fallen on her feet,  
and married an archduke,  
and after, one by one  
(for she was no bigamist)  
three earls, all dying young  
of exhaustion, at the peak of wealth.

## GREAT

### WE ARE GREAT

proclaims a mighty voice,  
a trumpet blast  
that shakes the globe.

**FORGET** the masses huddled  
on the grimy streets  
the unschooled children  
and the sick without a dollar  
or a friend  
**FORGET** the lesser breeds  
beyond the wall.

**DON'T THINK** of them:  
the white bear floating  
on a warming sea,  
the albatross  
entangled in the plastic tide.

**FOR WE ARE GREAT**  
and will be **GREATER** yet

**FORGET** this piece of dirt  
this particle, this blue spot  
floating in a waste of space  
as we look down

This is the voyage of your lives, my friends.  
So, beam me up  
and on our spacecraft  
probing gaps between the stars  
inscribe in words of steel  
your **GREATNESS & MY NAME**

## Sunday 23 June

I have rather lost a sense of time since being brought into hospital. I'd become hazy about time when unwell at home. Just now, after breakfast, a team of physiotherapists got me into a chair and helped me to wash. They'll come again later to help me to walk a little. 20 years ago, my stroke was a wake-up call that I answered only intermittently. Lying in

bed, or sitting in this chair, I feel quite well in myself, but the disease has made me literally legless, and I haven't touched a drop of strong drink! After immersion in *The H.D. Book* it's a relief to turn back to Barry Lopez's *Horizon*. Lopez's focus on real things – people, places, history, ideas – reminds me of my excitement, years ago, at reading J. M. Synge's book about the Aran Islands. Realism should be a starting point, not a terminus. Instead of an end in itself, it should be a stimulus for imagination, for going beyond.

## Afternoon

Began writing *Addiction: A Love Story*

Earlier, I walked a little, supported by Lauren (physio) & a zimmer. I remembered a similar experience following my stroke, and M. telling me that when she saw me walking with the zimmer, I had looked such an old man, she had wept. Now, I felt her absence keenly.

I'm in a ward with three other old men. I don't listen to their conversations, which aren't loud, and what I have overheard was mainly personal. I may have missed some political talk, which is a relief in this time of Brexit/Johnson/Trump opinion. I read Barry Lopez, re-read *Word and Stone*, do quick crosswords, WRITE. In this situation, I've been writing with surprising fluency, words pouring out, ideas always ahead of me.

Looking back over the rush of poems of the other night, I think there are possibilities of shaping a few worthwhile things. This gives me a sense of being able to go on from *Word and Stone*.

## 24 June

Visit from Adele in the afternoon. She is a wise, loving woman, this old friend. She let me talk, become emotional, and talked sense to me.

It seems I'm not going to be out of here as soon as I hoped. While I feel quite well (apart from the inability to walk) doctors tell me my kidneys 'have taken a battering'. I remain outwardly cheerful, but have night-time (and daytime) fears.

I spent several hours working on the 'Addiction' story today, writing with fluency. I must never forget how much *escapes*. How could I give a full account of my life with M., or an accurate portrait of her? Yes, I write fluently, and honestly, but *life escapes*.

## 25 June

With a drip in my right arm, I was unable to write today. Long talk with Chris Meredith on the phone in the morning. *Resurgence*, with Peter Abbs's piece on *Ditch Vision*, arrived today. Peter's reading of the book goes deep. His response is a form of conversation.

## 26 June

Showered by an older nurse & a younger nurse. How I have lost my inhibitions! It's the nurses' naturalness that sets me free. And the shower was wonderful!

Visit from Byron & Eirlys, who bring me a notebook to write in, & two new books on Llewelyn Powys. Ceri Thomas visits too.

Emily & Joe come in in the evening. Elwin, who is 92, and once sang in the Treharris Male Voice Choir, sings quaveringly, in the bed opposite. I can barely understand him when he speaks to me. Elwin, with his white hair, and the remains of his singing voice, reminds me of my father. I remember Dad's 'I'm 90, Jerry, it's terrible'.

## 27 June

Bright, breezy morning. A memory of waking Jonathan Raban, before dawn, in the caravan in the vicarage garden, and going to Walhampton to fish for tench & carp. Bird voices & mist rising: sublime.

Pushed by physiotherapists through labyrinthine corridors to try some stairs (steps up to a platform). On the way we passed areas that I used to visit with M. for blood tests.

## 28 June

It was very touching this morning, when Elwin crossed the ward to apologize for keeping us awake with his noises in the night.

What one sees in a great hospital like this is the reality of democracy, with people caring, practically & with affection, for the old & the sick, and caring for them equally, intent on helping. At the same time, politicians jostle for position in the 'great world' outside (but affecting

what happens here), *talking big*, making promises: a spectacle of, mostly, public schoolboys ‘destined’ from birth to lead.

## Evening

Continued writing compulsion. Visit from Emily & Joe, who are busily re-arranging the house against my return, perhaps next week.

## 29 June

Another sleepless night, mind overworking. After breakfast (porridge & banana) Lauren gave me a bath, talking together all the while. I sing the praises of Prince Charles Hospital and tell the story, again, of our neglect in the other hospital when M. died.

*Déjà vu.* As in Frome, walking with a zimmer, lying in bed, sitting in a chair, receiving excellent care. But, here, I look out on an enormous yellow crane and men working on what I’m told are portacabins, close outside the ward, and, beyond, part of Merthyr rising to a hill ridge.

How different without M. And without those Wiltshire Downs Emily likes to think of me striding over, as I longed to do. No longer Old Schoolhouse to return to, or our morning walks. M. loved that house, its spaciousness & age. I loved it too, but it rarely haunts me, in spite of our life together there, and Mother’s last weeks, and death. One of my happiest experiences was going home from hospital – *our* home – with paintings & sculptures & books.

‘All great art tends to draw us out of ourselves.’

Barry Lopez, *Horizon*

## 30 June

Call from Lee Grandjean in the afternoon. Very encouraging. All my loved ones are on my case. No neglecting my health again. I quoted the Lopez to Lee: it speaks my mind entirely, and is what I see in Lee’s work. Of course, one would have to add that the artist has a self, and it’s through the self that one draws energies, from nature, from the history of human life in relation to our surroundings, from the God-spark. David Jones distinguishes between the art of man-the-artist and the building of birds and bees. I think we are closer to non-human beings with our creativity.

3.

**Night in June**

With curtains open  
I lie in bed watching  
the night come in.

Eyes of light flicker  
where wind shakes leaves  
on birches at the edge  
of the quarry woods.

Dark presses in. I am heavy  
wondering whether  
this is the night  
that I will die, and whether,

in death, you will greet me  
or I too will be gathered in  
and never see or think  
of anything again.

I push back the bed clothes  
and lie naked, feeling  
the wind play over my skin.

I know that the air  
which touches me  
is moving among the leaves  
that flicker in the dark

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## Under observation

I lie alone in a separate room.

It is night, but still the hospital  
is busy with voices  
and footsteps in the corridor  
as nurses talk to each other  
and go about their work.

Unable to move, I listen  
to sounds that rarely become  
distinct words – fragments  
that are human, and comforting.

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## Old men in Ward 7

An illusion of effigies  
broken when one groans  
or another cries out.

One talks to himself,  
mazed among faces and times,  
once and always the child  
calling his parents  
who have moved out of reach.

I listen unwillingly, visualising  
each in his bed, as I am,  
not a statue, but a man  
of spirit and living flesh,  
who longs for sleep, and hopes,  
when dawn comes, to wake.

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## Elwin

Old man with white hair  
singing to himself  
who might be my father  
towards the end.

Elwin – his voice soft  
and sweet, but faltering,  
a resonance of other times  
with his male voice choir,  
a memory of communal song.

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## Clouds at Evening

Slow moving  
                    shape shifting  
bringing colour to a grey day  
as they drift along the ridge

wanderers  
wayfarers

clouds that are dreams  
on the mind's ocean

figures on a journey  
whose destination  
we should know  
            but cannot guess

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