



DR JONATHAN KNIGHT

POETRY AS A REFLECTION OF THE WORK OF A GP

Writing poems as reflection upon my work as a General Medical Practitioner (GP) not only benefits my own practice, but also helps me to communicate with readers. Below are five of my poems and, to begin with, my reflection upon their writing.

The following five poems span three decades of my life as a doctor. In 1985 I was a first-year medical student, learning the bedrock of the medical sciences; physiology, biochemistry, genetics and, of course, anatomy. 'Ten Zombies Borrowed My Car' recalls that strange rite of passage that all medical students experience in the Anatomy Dissection room.

Jump a decade to my work as a doctor in a refugee camp in Tanzania near the Rwandan border; wards overflowing with patients suffering from malaria, dysentery, TB and HIV/AIDS. 'Catching our Breath' captures the often unspoken connection between doctor and patient during our contact with each other. Sometimes there is a moment when our very separate lives chime together. Although these moments are fleeting, they are to be valued.

'Sometimes it's Jigs and Reels' also explores the idea of seeking out the moment of calm, the 'grace note', in the midst of the hurly-burly of a clinic — any clinic, any hospital, any GP surgery.

'Hospital Corners' is a personal reflection on my mother's final illness. Even in the midst of all the nursing and medical care of terminal illness, there is comfort to be found in a neatly folded sheet.

Unlike the other four poems, which were written as reflections on a particular place or incident, 'Scalpel' is a poem about poetry and medicine. Written within the specific form of a villanelle, it was initially a challenge to the title of a popular

anthology, but concludes that, perhaps, the work of the surgeon and the poet are not so distant from each other.

Ten Zombies Borrowed My Car

Six of us — huddled, caffeine fortified,
an extra layer for the room, a *Guide*
To Dissection propped open on the chest —
jostling to not make the first incision.

This, our first day of Head and Neck: peeling
the skin, defining the muscles, tracing
the filigree of Cranial Nerve VII;
a spider's web across the face. Without

warning, the Demonstrator's voice unnerves:
'The Facial Nerve. It's branches, if you please.'

We frown, grimace, puff out cheeks, purse lips, look
perplexed. Impassive, he intones: 'Temporal —

Zygomatic — Buccal — Mandibular —
Cervical. Remember.' And we do;
we find a way.

Thirty years later my daughter texts me —
semi-colon — closed bracket.

Jonathan Knight

Catching our Breath

'He [Aeolus] gave me a sack...
binding inside the winds that howl from every quarter,
for Zeus had made that king the master of all the winds,
with power to calm them down or rouse them as he pleased.'

(Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book X, translated by Robert Fagles)

So — in the refugee camp hospital;
tin roofs, plastic sheeting, two or three to
a bed — the ward round comes to another.

Admitted during the night: coughing for
months. Wary eyes watch me as I uncoil
the stethoscope and place its diaphragm
against damp skin, between ribs. We have no
shared language so I mime for him to breathe
and with my free hand conduct the rise and
fall, rise and fall, of his chest. Then, turning
from the chatter and drumming rain on the
roof, follow the breeze down through the pipework,

down, through and into the alveoli —
listening for the change of creak or pitch:
seeking out tell-tales of the shifting winds.

I direct his breathing, and, for a time,
slip into step with the ebb and flow. Breaths
twinned: we share a rhythm. My hand stops at
an up-beat — our lungs, full, stay a moment,
and quiet to the point of discomfort —

I bring my hand down. The wind escapes and
we move on.

Jonathan Knight

Sometimes it's Jigs and Reels

There are days when the Clinic stretches away
lost. Everything out of step from the start,

always behind the beat.

Tripping over introductions,

missing notes, late results,

phone calls, bleeps, interruptions —

Who takes the lead here anyway?

If there is a theme it is this:
choreographed, holy chaos.
The trick is to listen
for the grace note, the accidental pause,
the place in which to breathe.
And then sometimes, sometimes
it's jigs and reels all the way.

Jonathan Knight

Hospital Corners

It was my mother who showed me this —
How the sheet — a smoothed, clean, communion cloth —
Lifted at the corner, then
Pulled, tucked and folded under
To make a neat envelope. 'This is
How the nurses do it in hospital' she said. I always
Then imagined their simple daily office;
Lifting the soiled and crumpled sheets imprinted
With the night's traumas, laying out
Fresh linen, swaddling the plastic covered mattress.
Each day the same ceremony:
Lifting, smoothing, folding under.
And then a full life time later —
In the living room where we have moved
Your bed — a nurse helps me prepare the new sheet
Under you, turning this way,
Then the other; arranging bedclothes
Around you; fitted sheets and pillows,
And your slippers outside on the bottom step.

Jonathan Knight

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Scalpel

A poem cannot save a life,
Resuscitate a heart that's still,
Cannot replace the surgeon's knife,

Administer the kiss of life,
Rejuvenate the heart with pills:
A poem cannot save a life.

It cannot give the kiss of life?
Cannot renew the heart that's ill?
Let poets wield the surgeon's knife!

Let scalpel-words kiss, whisper life,
Sing healing to the heart until
The song has stirred the heart to life.

Where medicines fail, a poem might
Defibrillate the heart that's still.
Let poets wield the surgeon's knife,

Excise the scar, dissect, debride
The wounded, ailing heart. But still
A poem cannot save a life
Though may cut deep: a surgeon's knife.

Jonathan Knight