

A heart-shadow fell at our feet: writing a sequence of love sonnets

I have no idea how the idea first occurred to me. I'd recently finished one love sonnet to my partner Keith, called *Walking Together*, written after we saw a traffic light shining ahead at night:

It glowed at the crest of an avenue of trees
still young and green, while a heart-shadow fell
at our feet from a streetlamp through leaves.

Another sonnet began a couple of weeks after that: *Two Men Together*, this time about us chatting as we prepared for bed one night. Its undercurrent was whether we would or wouldn't out ourselves to the neighbours as two gay men living together, although I now imagine our neighbours knew exactly what we were.

The idea clicked of trying to write a diary of love sonnets, perhaps ten or so, once these poems were drafted. I thought I'd try to include all the excitement, pleasures, history and routines of any love affair between any couple, whatever their sexuality. An erotic sonnet *Each Other's Skin* was started soon afterwards, and the sequence began to find its own shape.

I have always written autobiographical poems, and use the writing process to explain my experience to myself. If they make any sense to, or connect with, other readers, that's an unexpected bonus. During the drafting process (and by reading back to myself the product of juggling rhymes, rhythms and images) I begin to understand what I feel about an experience. It's often a surprising recognition.

Then life intervened. Six weeks after the first sonnet threw its heart-shadow image, Keith was unexpectedly admitted to hospital with heart problems. Sub-

acute bacterial endocarditis, which I read in the medical dictionary had a 10-30% mortality rate.

So the routines of this particular couple changed dramatically. What choice did I have but to reflect those changes in my diary of love sonnets?

I now believe that those first sonnets, written before Keith's illness interrupted us, involved not only a premonition of the months ahead, but came at a perfect time to protect me, to say *Here is this sonnet form that has helped to give you a structure in previous difficult times. Here, now, is the subject you didn't choose, but which you must write about, to help you through this experience.*

For the five weeks when Keith was having intravenous antibiotics and discussions about heart surgery, there's no doubt that writing kept me company. My journal was full of fear and love, alongside new routines of balancing daily hospital visits, my job and regular contact with my children 140 miles away. I was able to channel this chaos into the reliable order of sonnets, which still included fear and hospitals, but also a voice talking to itself as honestly as possible.

Diagnosis was written immediately after Keith's hospital admission:

From the foot of your hospital bed the doctor
described your heart: its infection, its leaky valve,
surgery in a few months to solve
the problem. We needed some air
and discovered a garden with a slow fan of water
drowning geraniums. You said "How instructive
this is!" We kept quiet a while to give
ourselves a breather, next year
already mapped out for us: a line
of stitches down your chest, taking it easy,
a slow recovery. Is this the heart's infection,
this need to keep less than a beat away
from each other whatever might happen?
I watched wet leaves. You watched the water sway.

That poem correctly predicted the year ahead: the wait before surgery; meeting the surgeon; before the operation; Keith's time in intensive care; his return home. The diary of our love continued taking shape, until eighteen months later twenty-one love sonnets had been completed. I then re-shuffled them to make narrative sense to readers, give them a 'story' about this unknown couple. That re-ordering led to *Walking Together* (the first poem to be written) ending the sequence in the published version, as if the heart-shadow had become a conclusion rather than a starting-point.

I have a history of enjoying writing sonnets and sequences, although all the sequences I've previously written had either been free-verse or alternated free-verse with sonnets. After deciding that I would set myself the deliberate challenge of writing a sonnet sequence, I knew I would learn from the masters and mistresses, and attempt to mould that wonderful tradition to fit my voice (see Don Paterson's *101 Sonnets*, Faber, 1999). Although many of Shakespeare's sonnets are addressed to a man, part of my experiment was to subvert that tradition for an explicitly queer context: to explore issues of safety and danger relevant to any queer couple, alongside the obvious celebration of our relationship.

How did writing these poems help me? Playing with words, shaping lines into end-rhymes in a sonnet's pattern twenty one times, served both as a distraction from what was happening to Keith and an opportunity to focus on what was happening to *me* during his illness. It became a chance to play, in a serious fashion, and to use that play-time as a prism to focus as closely, almost as clinically, as possible on the range and contradictions of my reactions.

One aim was to explore whether I might find a thread of meaning through the incoherent mess of my feelings: take a line through the labyrinth and see if I could feel my way back. If I could make sense of it, there was a possibility (a hope, through the writing process) that I might even end up with lines that created some beauty from the mess: my version of the truth about my experience of Keith's illness (since I could only guess at his experience.) All

love poems trumpet the poet's feelings, using the loved one as notes to play those feelings. *This is how I write when I'm in love. These are the words I find when I might lose the man I love.*

The sonnet's pre-ordained template lends reassurance during writing: I *will* find a shape for my experience and it will become a sonnet's shape. So any therapeutic benefit is both via absorption in the process (a way of hearing myself) and delight in finding a path through each sonnet's maze of fourteen lines: achieved; making sense; trying yet again – with whatever words come to hand - to discover my self.

First published in *Writing Routes: A Resource Handbook of Therapeutic Writing* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011) Edited by Gillie Bolton, Victoria Field and Kate Thompson

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