A Scattering: two poets in conversation

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Christopher Reid's book of poems *A Scattering* was written in memory of his wife Lucinda, who died of cancer in 2005. The book won the Costa Book of the Year Award in 2009 – an unusual choice for an award that more usually goes to prose works. Here Christopher Reid discusses with fellow poet William Radice the poems and their resonance, both for their writer and their readers.

William Radice: Your wife Lucinda is a living presence in most of the poems in your book, but the title poem 'A Scattering' is about elephants finding 'the bones of one of their own kind / dropped by the wayside' and scattering them 'this way and that way'. Can you tell me about the relationship this poem has with the book as a whole? I love the last two lines – 'may their spirit guide me as I place / my own sad thoughts in new, hopeful arrangements'. Was that idea in your mind when you first conceived the book, or did it emerge from the writing of it?

Christopher Reid: I must have seen that documentary about the elephants years ago, and it stuck in my mind then – perhaps too anthropomorphically – as a moving image of grief. The book was written stage by stage, so the poem 'A Scattering' didn't come to me until more than half was written, and even then I didn't know it would give its title to the entire collection. That only happened when all four sections of the book were complete. It presumes a lot to claim that elephant grief is like the human variety, but then poetic metaphors are often presumptuous. What appealed to me in the footage to which I refer was the mixture of clumsiness and grace in the elephants' behaviour. My grief was clumsy, but I hoped that grace could come of it.

WR: There's grace in the sense of blessing in the very last line of the book, and at many other moments in it. Reading it carefully for

William Radice is a poet, translator and librettist, and a patron of Cruse Bereavement Care. Photo © Jonathan Steffen.

the second time, I was also struck by grace in its form and language – but it's never too formal. You speak of 'makeshift rhymes' at the beginning, and by and large there's a random, haphazard quality in your rhymes and half-rhymes. Some readers might not even notice them at first. How do you see the relationship between form and content in your book? Was a blend of the planned and the random, the arranged and the accidental, part of its conscious purpose?

CR: Yes, something like that. Certain formal decisions were made as I started each of the four sections of the book. For instance, in the second, which was the first writing I could do after my wife died and was my account of her last days in the hospice, I wanted to establish quite a formal tone, but not one that would draw attention

©2010 Cruse Bereavement Care DOI: 10.1080/02682621.2010.522370

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to the rules I had set myself. So, while there are some noticeable full rhymes, they are far outnumbered by the half-rhymes that serve to keep the language tightly buttoned. And instead of a strict metre, I kept the lines very short, even terse. I wasn't especially aware of it at the time, but I now feel that each section probably represents a different stage of grieving. There were long gaps between the writing of them, but once I knew what I should be doing they were fairly quick to write. They are like summaries of what I had learned in those periods of silence and confused contemplation.

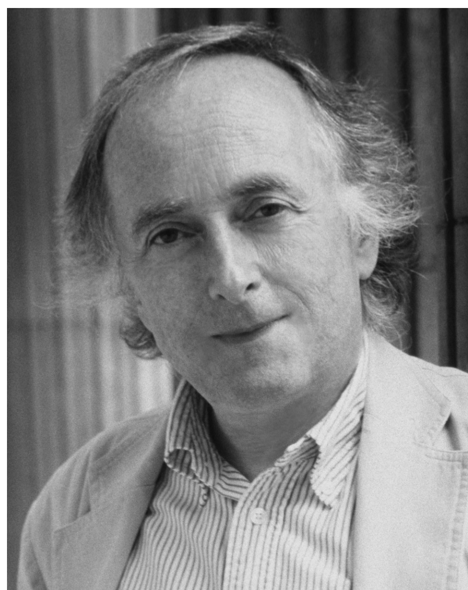
Arriving at acceptance

WR: The book's clearly marked phases – the holiday in Crete, with the sarcoma lurking like the Minotaur; the hospice poems; the 'Widower's Dozen', and the final long poem of tender recollection – give it a completeness. The phases will be familiar to many people who come to Cruse for help with their bereavements. Did you write the book partly because you thought your experience might help others? Many people today – like you – face bereavement without any of the consolations of religion. The poem where you pass the institution where Lucinda's body has been willed to medical science made a special impression on me, as my stepmother left her body for that purpose last year. One can do that, of course, whatever one's religious belief or lack of belief, but I still think it takes courage: it requires full acceptance of the total materiality of the body. Was the purpose of the poem to help others arrive at a similar acceptance?

CR: I have to confess it was never on my mind, as I wrote the book, that it might eventually be helpful to others. One of the big surprises of its success has been the number of people who have said to me, or written to tell me, that they, or people they know, have been helped to think about their own loss and grief through reading it. But that potentiality never occurred to me while I was writing. If I had a notional reader, it was Lucinda herself, who in the past had been the first inspector of all my poems and who was quite a stern judge of them: not easy to fob off with poor or dishonest work. So, even though I couldn't find the words to address her directly until the final section of the book, it was her shade that I wanted to please from beginning to end – so to speak.

Now that I know what effect the book can have on the reader who is totally unknown to me, but has undergone their own experience of bereavement, I understand the social function of what I was doing much more clearly. I also suspect that if I had thought of that distant reader too early, at a time when I should have been concentrating single-mindedly on the business in hand – getting the facts and feelings of my individual case absolutely right – then it wouldn't have had that beneficial effect. The temptation to generalise would have been too strong. And I think what readers respond to is the specific details in the poems; they're not reading about an idealised or symbolic figure, but about someone who, like their own dear departed, lived a unique life – before doing what we all eventually do, and dying.

WR: I can absolutely understand that. To write the book with some kind of mission or message would have been death to the poetry!



Christopher Reid. Photo © Jerry Bauer

I suppose that everyone in bereavement has to struggle with the paradox that the person is dead and gone, but is also still very much alive – in memories, influence, possessions etc. The stronger and more creative the personality, the more powerful that 'afterlife'. It seems to me that poetry, as an art-form, is particularly well suited to the expression of 'afterlife' in that sense, as it's so often made out of memories, of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' as Wordsworth famously said. What is it about poetry (as opposed to a prose memoir, or a photo or painting) that, for you, made it the right medium for capturing and honouring Lucinda's unique life?

CR: Quite simply, poetry is the thing I do. I can see that a prose book might have been possible; might yet be, if I could figure out how to do it eloquently, but poetry is my medium. I could easily have filled a 200 or 300-page book with prose reminiscences, but the discipline of verse is what commended it to me. Also, although for the most part I employ a freer form than the English poets of the 17th century would ever have considered, I had in mind such models as Ben Jonson's elegy to his dead son and Henry King's 'Exequy', about his late wife, in which verse effects, disruptive moments in the versification, are essential to the communication of feeling. Like composers of music, they knew how to put their grief down on the page in a form of notation that the reader with an attentive ear couldn't miss. I'm not saying I achieved anything like that, but that was what I had in mind as the supreme possibility.

A moment of stillness

WR: In many poems in the collection there is a perfect synchrony of language, form and feeling. The first poem in the 'hospice' section, for example: it deals with the actual moment of death, which along with the moment of birth is the profoundest thing that anyone can witness. The line spaces in the poem say as much as the lines themselves – particularly the spaces before and after 'Ultimate calm'.

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This is something that poetry can do so much better than prose: use silence. It can also exploit multiplicity of meaning in even a single word. 'Ultimate' means 'final' but also 'absolute' or 'supreme': all the meanings are there. In 'that embattled heart' I sensed not only the physical heart's struggle to keep beating but also the battle of a whole personality. The last two lines of the poem are: 'After six months, or more, / I observe it still.' Prose would never achieve this: a moment of stillness that you still observe.

In the fourth section of the book you mention Lucinda's ability to do 'Two or three things at the same time', and you ask: 'Can't you now somehow contrive / to be both dead and alive?' Are there lines or words that you yourself would pick out as examples of how poetry can do two or three things at the same time? Or which you especially like for some other reason?

CR: Difficult for me to pick out favourite moments, as it were, though I'm enlightened to hear yours. Whenever I've read 'The Unfinished' – the hospice poems – aloud to an audience, I've been pleased by the line break (in No. 2) between 'whole-hearted' and 'ambivalence', and then the immediate rhyme, or half-rhyme, with 'balance'. That's the sort of thing you're talking about, isn't it? Where the emotional effect comes not from what is stated but how it is stated. Effects of versification and wordplay. Not 'the poetry is in the pity', as Wilfred Owen had it, but 'the pity is in the poetry'.

WR: Pity in the poetry can be greatly enhanced by good recitation or acting, and 'pity' makes me think of occurrences of the word in Shakespeare – 'the pity of it, Iago!' in Othello and 'pity, like a naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast' in Macbeth. Your wife was an actress, and in the last section of the book, 'Lucinda's Way', you speak of being 'proud / to be married to one of the tribe'. Could you say a bit more about the theme of acting? When people are fatally ill they have to 'interpret / the role of patient', as you put it – and in bereavement many people feel they are having to act a part, put on a mask. Is the poetry of bereavement a way of shedding the mask and being oneself again?

Bravura performance

CR: In 'The Unfinished', I write about Lucinda's apparent insouciance in the face of death: 'It was inspired, / brave, funny and subtle / of her to interpret / the role of patient / so flat against type …' But of course she wasn't acting: in her fearlessness, she was being her true self. It was like a fine and moving performance, but it was the real thing. I suppose I put it that way because I felt myself to be in the role of spectator, powerless to alter the action, a dumbstruck fan. So I'm being ironical. But the irony is intended to register my surprise and awe at her ability to address her death without the least trace of self pity. It was like when an actor, whom you know to be very fine, as she was, suddenly produces the bravura performance that confirms her absolute greatness – that's what I wanted to convey.

WR: Her bravura performance is so at odds with what we might expect of someone close to death that it conveys a kind of hope. It's like Dylan Thomas's 'Do not go gentle into that good night'. I had a record of him reading it which I used to listen to over and over again when I was about 12. I don't think I thought of it as being about death. It had an energy and defiance – the poem and his reading of it – that made me want to dance round the room. Has the writing of your book, and the acclaim it's received, given you the hope that Lucinda wanted to encourage in you?

CR: I may have caught something of that. Possibly. But I think one of the things the book celebrates is her essential difference from me. When, for instance, I write, 'you lived in the present-future, / a tense of your own invention', I mean it to be clear that I live elsewhere, much more mundanely. So she's an example that I can't always follow. She's the life, while I'm the mere chronicler of that life.

WR: How English was she? You say in 'Lucinda's Way' that she came from South Africa to study at RADA. Her love of gardens and flowers is quite an English passion, yet she seems different from you in being rather flamboyantly un-English. You, by contrast – especially in the first section, 'The Flowers of Crete' – are 'the Englishman abroad, / with his panama hat and his hay-fever'. Is this contrast there partly to bring out something universal?

CR: That poem about 'the Englishman abroad' and his wife exaggerates the differences for comic effect. I had Edward Lear in mind when I wrote it. Lear visited Crete to paint the landscape, not to write nonsense verse, of course, but I used the ghost of his presence there as an excuse to write some comic stuff of my own. A lot of it is comic exaggeration: for a start, my father was Scottish, so I'm only half-English, or less than half; but the panama hat and the hay-fever are both true. So is my wife's zeal in hunting down wild flowers. You must have noticed how Lear, in a poem like 'The Owl and the Pussy Cat', is out to celebrate the love of unlike creatures. That was part of the impulse for me. As you say, Lucinda was from South Africa, but through her RADA training and her own wish to put the horrible politics of South Africa behind her she became as English-seeming as I am. More than that, because my parents moved around the world during my childhood, mainly in very hot places in the Middle East and Asia, I shared something of her sense of not fully belonging in the place where we both lived. But perhaps that's all slightly to the side of your question. Temperamentally, we were indeed a contrast. As the Owl and the Pussy Cat were a contrasting and yet somehow harmonious couple.

WR: Bereaved people might not only wish to read your book but also to write poems of their own about loss. Have you any tips?

CR: Be honest. Tell the truth. Find the metaphors that exactly fit the case. ■

This conversation was conducted by email in April and May 2010.
A Scattering *is published by Areté Books at £7.99.*
ISBN 978 0 95545 536 0

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