

New Poetry Anthology

Beyond Now

By: Jean Clark

Self-Published, 2013, 40pp

Reviewed by: Brian Thorne, Norwich Centre for Personal, Professional and Spiritual Development

This is the latest (and probably the last) of several books of poetry which Jean Clark has published since her retirement as a veteran psychotherapist in 2004. Produced in her 87th year, it lacks nothing of the directness, the searing honesty and the sheer emotional power of its predecessors. The diagnosis of cancer is for many of us the confirmation of our worst fears, but when, just after her 86th birthday, Jean learned that she had myeloma, a cancer of the bone marrow, she determined that poetry – as always in the past – should be her means of understanding and integrating this unexpected and potentially devastating eruption into her life. *Beyond Now* is the resulting commentary on what it has meant for her to live under the shadow of an illness for which there is no cure and whose progress is distressingly unpredictable.

Jean's decision to name her experience 'a pilgrimage' is a measure of her courage and of the transformational power of language. A pilgrimage denotes not only a journey but also a spiritual quest. The terrain to be traversed, however, is, in this case, unknown, with many challenging places en route. The final destination is death, but even its seeming ultimacy is an aspect of the unknown that Jean courageously embraces in these strangely life-enhancing poems.

Beyond now
there is no certainty
only this moment
of chaotic intimacy
as I travel towards
my one day dying
I am a pilgrim

The poems are divided into four sections: Intimations – Diagnosis – Relinquishment – Pilgrimage. There are examples in each section of Jean's ability to write of her own experiences in such a way that readers will recognize themselves in her reflections, and will be richly supported and encouraged in their own suffering or that of others close to them. For the elderly and those with serious

illnesses there is particular comfort.

Shall I regain
the self I was?
or is this
the slow and gentle
journey
towards becoming
old –
often breathless
low energy,
dependent
seldom going out...

My body knows
and understands
her age, her cancer.

Time to let go of demands –
to live a slower pace;
allow space and peace
for others to write
and dance ...

This is poetry which is immediately accessible but never descends into the banal or the trivial. Its seeming simplicity conceals its profundity and its capacity to speak to the soul. It also constitutes a remarkable tribute to the sustaining power of friendship and loving intimacy at every stage of life, but most especially when 'the shadows lengthen and the busy world is hushed'. Perhaps it is not surprising that I find myself quoting the prayer of John Henry Newman as I conclude this review. *'Beyond Now'* is undoubtedly the work not only of a fine poet but also of a person whose life experiences have led to an exceptional spiritual resourcefulness.

Others are with me, behind my shoulder,
I am not alone.
they are the people of my journey,
the necessary people,
who formed the pattern
of my life.
Because they are there, I am here
on this knife-edge-rock road.
I can see where the road ends....
and the sky is infinite
in the near distance
at my land's end...

Copies of '*Beyond Now*' are available from:

Jean Clark, 8 The Plantation, Christchurch Road, Norwich, NR2 2BU

The book costs £6 (incl. p&p)