

## Death Row

(for Jay)

Snow and ice-covered windscreen –  
unexpected on this blue-sky morning,  
clean and scrape – needing clarity today  
to see through to the other side.  
*'Be of service when you're suffering*  
always a good motto to live by –  
foot on the gas and a heartfelt sigh,  
grateful for today's opportunity.

We arrive at the hospital on time,  
weaving our way through its arteries  
till we come to the Cranham Suite –  
sounding more akin to hotel rooms  
with ideas of a luxurious bath...  
You are whisked away by the smiling nurse  
as if a treat is in store –  
prepare to be infused.  
Led to the guest waiting area –  
a small corner of comfy chairs  
warmed by the brightening sun,  
glad to be alone with books, writing pad.

Not for long! Within minutes another couple -  
he is taken by the same smile  
but not taken in – he knows the treat's not  
sweet,  
it shows in his face.  
She plonks down next to me –  
*'Lovely morning'* – a Bristol dialect detected  
reminding of childhood days,  
'Yes', I reply, putting down my book,  
I've read one line.

What is it about me  
that within seconds of meeting  
they delve into their life story  
they know I'm just longing to hear?  
*'Be of service when you're suffering,'*  
so with today's lesson on listening  
comes understanding of his dis-ease,  
born of loyalty to this newly-wedded second  
wife  
and his jealous estranged daughter,  
a life not truly his own  
with all its storyline, padding, perspectives.

From time to time my mind escaping  
as more residents of Cranham Suite  
pass by, with enticing snippets –  
*'Tell me about your life in Africa'*  
the orderly asks an elderly man  
wheelchairing him through  
and I long to follow....  
*'I'm sorry to have to see you again'* –  
the consultant greets a grey-faced patient  
under no illusion to the meaning.  
Back to the beckoning Bristolian.

The smiley nurse again – I can 'pop in' and  
see you,  
glad to make my way to your shared room  
where you, dearest friend, are drip-fed and  
dozing –  
but eyes open now with a welcome smile  
as we sit for a few short minutes,

you showing me the book you're reading –  
a nun we both knew from poetry group,  
her calling to correspond with inmates on Death Row.  
The analogy doesn't escape me  
as I look to your hooked-up roommate –  
husband to my waiting-room comrade –  
such a kind and gentle countenance,  
a large oesophageal tumour –  
too much that's too difficult to swallow.  
But you, dear you  
have no bars on the window to your cell,  
no key in the lock of your door,  
you've your father's strong will,  
your mother's deep passion  
and always your own bright fire for Life.

Bidding Bristol goodbye and good luck  
we wind our way back like a phantom thread  
from Cranham Suite to fresh clean air.  
Avoiding potholes and drain covers  
to ease fragility and nausea  
I drive with deep care  
as you sip a much-needed coffee –  
tired, yet sharp enough to cast a shaft of light  
on the precise shadow  
of my immediate suffering.

We are all each other's Saviours –  
gold dust in the haze of our everyday lives.

***Polly Howell***  
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