

Taking Note

Poetry in Moments

Poems for a hospital community
by Jo Shapcott, Eve Lacey,
Rebecca Watts & Kaddy Benyon



Contents

Kaddy Benyon

Look Up!

The Fox Doctor

Little One

Head to Head

Rebecca Watts

Notations for a Hospital

Just Visiting

When all this is over

Eve Lacey

Hospital

Memory Bone

A Ward Charm

Dorothy

Jo Shapcott

Drosophila Song

A View of Nine Wells

The Patient

Look Up!

Wednesday morning at the treatment centre
and I sit by the revolving door watching
hoops and loops of a ceiling sculpture move

through another clickety-clack rotation.
A small boy of no more than five arrives,
straggling behind his strident mother.

He trips on an untied shoelace, stops –
kneels, making some gesture toward a bow;
noticing (only after a moment) shadows

wheeling the floor around him. Slowly,
fearfully, he lifts his freckled face skyward
and gasps, eyes widening at a spectrum

of colour rolling over and over, overhead.
Mouth hung open, I watch as he windmills
his arms to get his flustered mother's attention.

She frowns, incurious, hissing hurry. HURRY!
Awestruck, he obeys and dogtrots after her,
language now lost, but one pudgy digit an arrow

on the cusp of pointing. I hold my breath
with him, wordlessly urging this harried
mother to look up, look up, please look up!

Kaddy Benyon



The Fox Doctor

(after 'Fox for an Old Apothecary' by Xanthe from the Carer's Trust)

Listen –

can you hear the fox doctor
slurping on her bowl of leeches?
Look at her there

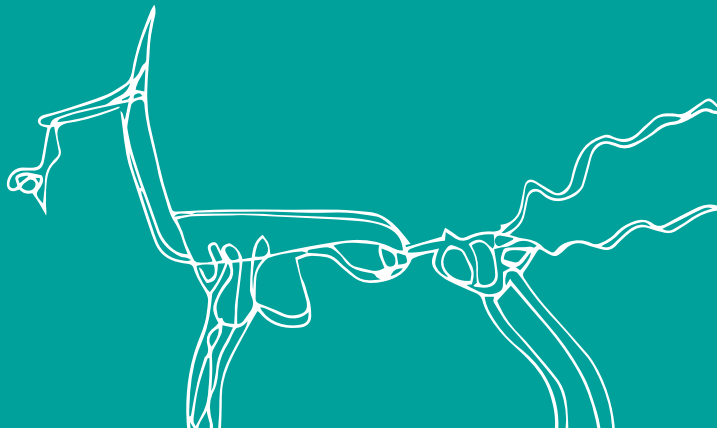
in her display case lair
wiping blood from her muzzle
on a pile of discarded surgical masks
and rubbing her metallic belly.

Watch how she pins that pill-
box hat between shiny triangle ears,
slings a slithering stethoscope
about her copper tail,

straps a battered brown
Gladstone bag to her back and sniffs
the hospital air before leaping
from between cracked

leather medical texts; green
and brown stoppered bottles;
her pestle and mortar
filled with chicken wire chickens.

Kaddy Benyon



Little One

(after 'The Earring' by Anita Klein)

Two women and a child.
An image of double mother
love so tender it arrests,

has me leaping free
of the corridor's human tide
to peer in close and study

this little one's world. Little
one in a printed yellow
duck-suit; little one held in arms,

in mind, in the sightline
of a gaze framed by the swish
and sway of lush bamboo stalks.

Little one whose whole wide world
is wanting; a wanting
undeterred by concerns

over not getting or possessing
the glitter at the heart
of that grasped-for earring.

Kaddy Benyon



Head to Head

(for Kate - after visiting Ward A3)

Kate had brain surgery yesterday.
Glancing down at her phone to Google

the title of a book she can't remember,
I see the V-shaped dressing stuck

to the top of her stubble head,
beneath it, a spill of dried iodine:

new island arising on an atlas.
She introduces me to her nurse,

Arsad from the Philippines,
who checks her oxygenation levels,

temperature, blood, and I watch
as he serenely peels layers of white

tape from her wrist to remove her
from a three-tapped cannula.

They lean in like that, tête-à-tête,
as if unpuzzling something together

and I think: How tenderly he holds her
hand in his in order to set her free.

Afterwards, she packs her bag – slowly,
slowly – eats a little fruit salad, chats

until Arsad comes back to give her
the discharge letter, pain relief, a hug.

Kaddy Benyon

Notations for a Hospital

Level 10: a crow
flirts with the guardrail. Blue sky,
inky flutterings.

*

Descend, walk headlong
into heath, all grass blazing;
fingertips brush gold.

*

A chair abandoned
in an unlit stairwell might
be art. Say something.

*

Laundry carts clatter
from a lift. The sea – oil-thick,
diamond studded – glints.

*

These corridors self-
refer. Rosemary for re-
membrance. Love's bluebells.

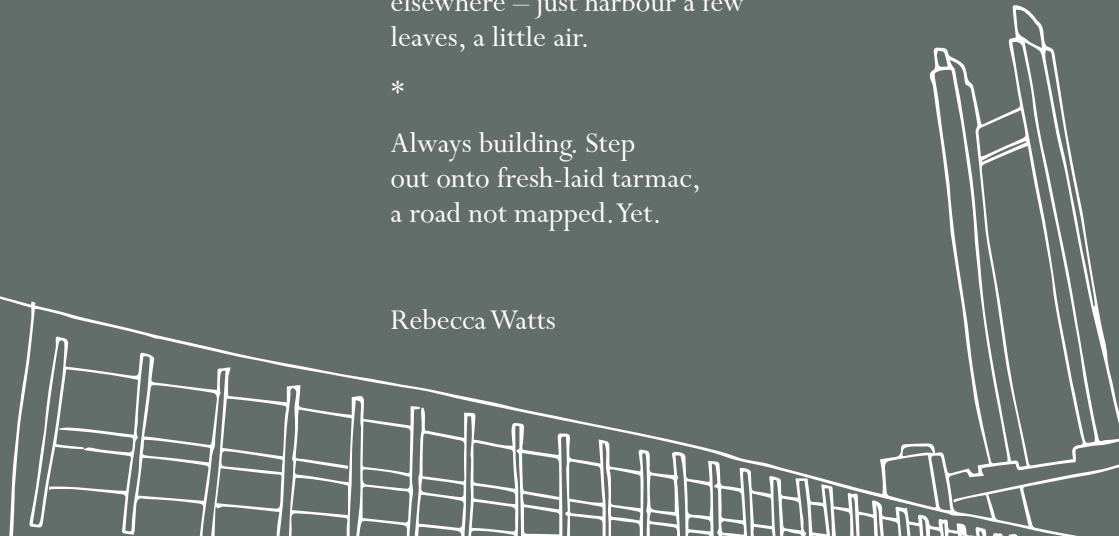
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A bridge needn't lead
elsewhere – just harbour a few
leaves, a little air.

*

Always building. Step
out onto fresh-laid tarmac,
a road not mapped. Yet.

Rebecca Watts



Just Visiting

Lookout

The view from inside the hospital
is the hospital. A city within a city:
pastiche of factories obtrude
where fields once bled into sky.

On the concourse, taxis and ambulances glide
and people, newly cautious, shuffle on pavements.
Industry is slowed; routines are gone.
Everybody has one thing in common.

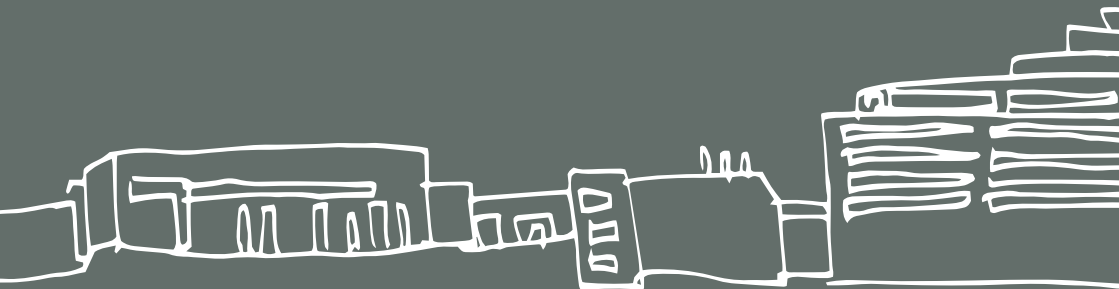
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Corridor

Archives bring us closer
to the nub
of the matter –

put flesh on
the past – cherish
those instruments designed

to mend us
which, hung in their display
case, look like torture.



*

Admission

What am I afraid of?
The breaching of skin.
Violation of laws that
separate outside from in.
Liquidation of the thing
I call me. Or perhaps
solidity; my body
no more special than
that vase in which roses,
little pink fists, bloom.

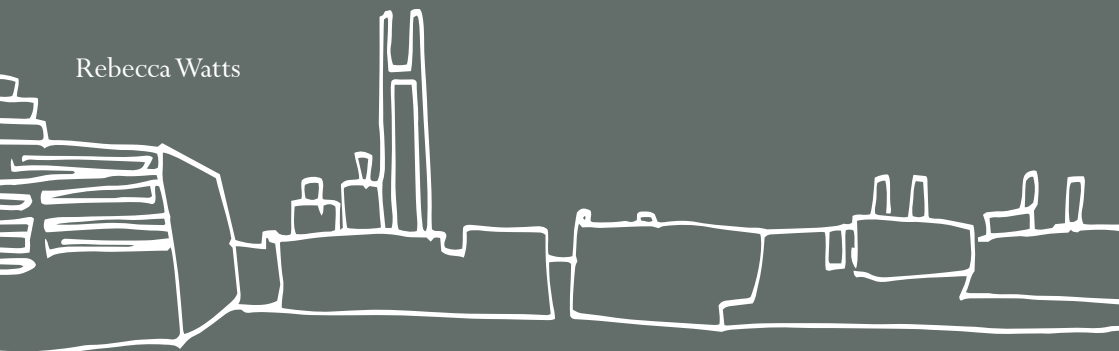
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Chapel

Where Tatra tiles
and the clamour from the cafe
preclude transcendence,
stained glass shines strong:

electric images of fire (that's spirit)
and dove (peace) and star (hope)
empower and equip us for living
in a world like this.

Rebecca Watts



‘I used to love coming to see this swirly thin

I get up at 5:30am and off I go walking my dog,
the sun rising and a new day beginning, the feeling
of sunshine on the skin. I love walking, blowing
dandelions and using my phone to capture moments
like how the cyclists have to stop to edge around
the cows on Midsummer Common. I have a photo

of my favourite view on my office wall: sunrise
on the hills. It helps me to remember
there is a world outside the hospital. As a nurse,
I go up and down to the 7th and 8th floors to look out
over the Gog Magog hills. I took a patient up there
to show her the yellow fields, she couldn't talk

but I think it was a view worth having. It is hard
to be in hospital, all the bewildering equipment:
catheters, cannulas, intravenous ghastriness.
In an open bay with 6 beds, sometimes patients talk:
the former ballet dancer who drank with Nureyev;
the man who worked as a water boy on a farm;

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This is a found poem, where phrases were taken from Taking Note interviews with Delia, Alasdair, Katt, Sophie, Matthew, Denise, Gilla, Sarah, Allan, Lucy, Russel, Rose, Maria, Alasdair, Rachel, Susan, John, Kevin, Patsy, Mel, Damian, Betty, Karen & Joanne

come

g when I came in for my operations' ~ Paris

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of us to
& come
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a centenarian's memory of Queen Victoria passing by.
All these come to light drawing, playing bingo,
painting or perhaps whilst in the gardens for qigong
exercises as a woodpecker delves busily in the cherry
tree. When physical escape isn't possible, some swim
back in memory to summer two years ago, the rain

and that lovely earthy smell, the little spot you climb
down to a riggety-raggety bridge like a troll bridge.
I love being in water, there's an unclutteredness to it,
that feeling of gliding through the greens and natural
light. I didn't know how wet I'd get, but it was gentle
and fun and made me feel things were still possible.

Happy, I think, is happening all the time; is a smile
on a young face, a laugh with a stranger, a 20-second hug,
a chuckle, being trusted, cuddles from staff. You don't
go home with a dry eye. Home is getting out of hospital
mode and becoming mum again; after a shift, my baby
on my lap – I just smell that baby smell from his hair.

bbie, Judy, Joanna, Phyllis, Diane, Hannah, Paris, Rachelle, Tom, Wendy, Monick, Ruth,
ice, Eesha, Mavis, David, Bernadette, Paul, Coorban, Esme, Debbie, Rosie, Maggs, Craig,
o. The phrases were then rearranged into a poem by Kaddy Benyon.

When all this is over

I mean to run fast

where the buzz of machines
and the humdrum of walls
and the flummox of words
are behind me

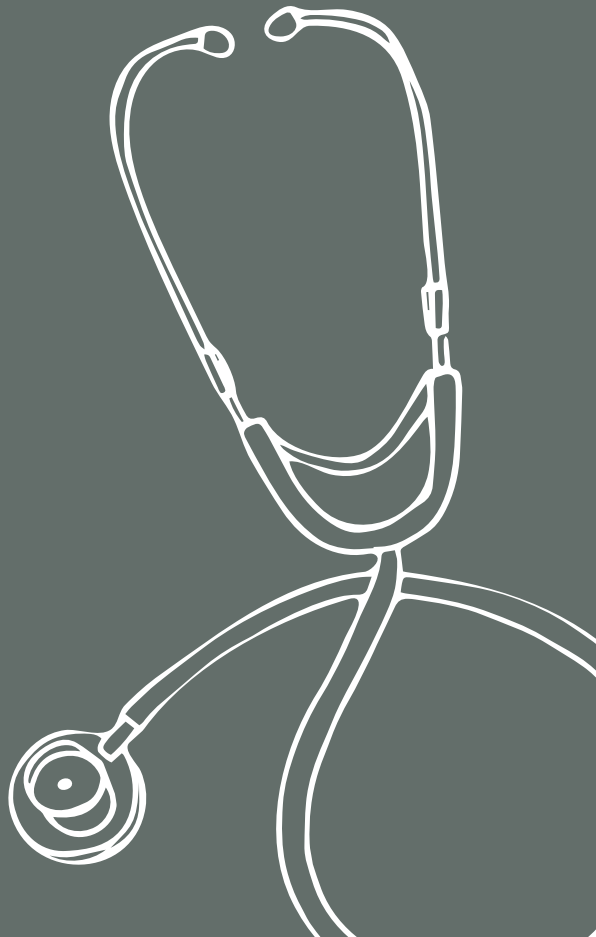
where no one not even
myself observes me

oh yes I intend to run
in the dark

where the thud of the feet eclipses
the thud of the heart

where a chill night bites me
and a slick sweat coats me
and streetlamps gild me
and church bells ring me

Rebecca Watts



Hospital

The good fortune to be here without cause or curse
to behold the nurse, to cherish the grace without bearing the hurt –
There's happiness in the hospital as a home of last resort,
and freedom in the knowledge that everyone would rather
be anywhere but here, and a certain calm in the coming undone
in the gentle leaden drum and alarm of a place that's committed to care.
Take note: to learn, against every cynical thought I've had,
that hardship might bring out more good than bad.

*

That's the heart, now the hurt –
no beds at all and – for Brexit – no nurse.
We want a hospital with many more beds,
with junior doctors, a limitless host.
A nation that's wholly hospital
where we all might be patient or staff
where growing old might be the aim and sickness just the start
where we'd fight for the bed of a patient who fell
– for the fourth or fifth time, in the carpark downstairs –
where the sick might lay long if they couldn't get well
where we'd fight for those beds like the bed that we'd want for ourselves.

Eve Lacey

Memory Bone

This is determination ward
where trainers have memory foam
and Filipa holds our knees in our hands
for the staying power of bone on bone
and Sheila and Alan and Eileen
find their leading foot and lung
and recollect their jukebox heads
and know that movement needn't be young
because a ward is just a living room
when you throw your arms apart
because a body's just a science kit
that's been too far from dance

And they work the part where the body's mechanic
and they work the part where its not
because broken spirits sometimes lift
and pain can be borrowed or learnt
and they move to the point that's entirely well
and stretch out the length of their gown
their hands fall down with gossamer skin
and their trainers reach for the ground
and limbs remember lots of things
that the brain and memory can't
because the body's just an outfit
until it starts to dance

Eve Lacey

A Ward Charm

We're on the ward where we all have giant hands and giant ears and lots of sleep
where the only clique is the ill and illness wants to talk
where the kindest parting words are I hope I don't see you next week.

On most visits it rains so much you can't see out the windows
for the running streaks and dropping sky and heaving wet
of stuff so serious that – for safekeeping – you have to sleep it off.

Take every burden, every body: we are all each other's wards.
We'll all grow old together and at least a lot of us will lose
our nouns and hardly anyone will keep their every organ,
not every bone will stay in tact. None of any body
is immune and – with any luck – the ward survives us all.

Eve Lacey



Dorothy

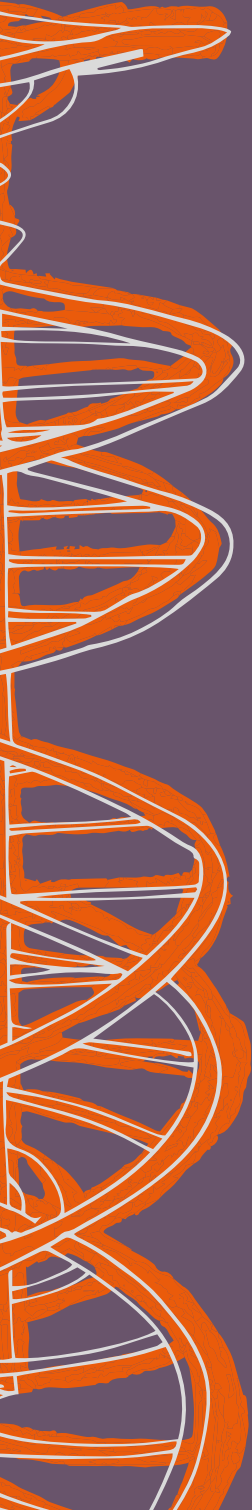
Dorothy cries not out of fear but because
she's so lucky - I have been so lucky -
she repeats through the tears

and when she's discharged she cries and she cries,
only because I've got so much water in me
she smiles through her lucky grey eyes.

She'll go home from the ward and still
she can cry and she doesn't know why
but at that prospect, she cheers.

Eve Lacey





Drosophila Song

for Mo

Little fruit fly, little
embryo of fruit fly

with your future behaviours
suggesting sadness

and friendship, the world in a jar
and a technological virtuosity

of genetic splicing,
a steady god-hand and

god-eye at the nano-level,
and a disease kinship

of up to 75%,
and sisterhood with my

own neurons, and
sacrifice, and health.

Jo Shapcott

A View of Nine Wells

I am level, inside and out, a spirit-level, flat enough
to be the levels; a great levelling there has been.
Turn a cheek to look through the window-pane
at a flat outside, flat rooftops in all the grubby colours,
boxed mechanisms, the innards of air conditioning
for the flat air I am breathing. Just one small hillock

bumps out of the horizon

and it's green and

with a sniff of water

clean water, a spring

or nine,

enough to start a gurgle, a teardrop, the first sweat for ages.

Jo Shapcott



The Patient

When I was a dweller
at the brook

When I was a stranger/guest/foreigner

When I was an official
sufferer

I looked for a place
to lie down

And there was

A small city
made of buildings which grew arms

An organism
on its own outskirts

And each arm
was another building

With its own limb-buds

I was embraced
I lay down

Folding my own limbs into sleep
in case the dream

Might suggest treatment

Might suggest prognosis

Or outcome

Or a way to cross water.

Jo Shapcott

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I wish I were well and strong, so that I could give these poems the concentrated attention that they are serious enough to deserve. But I suppose the whole point about being unwell is that one is not in one's best form as a critic. Nevertheless I can tell that these poems are serious, and they've certainly got a serious subject. The subject is life, and how it might be lost; and how it might be saved. There is brave and tender hope here; but, even deeper down, the thrill of being human.

Clive James

I had the pleasure of hearing some of these poems as spoken by their creators and remember thinking that good poetry is often of the particular and of the moment, not the general or the abstract. But also it needs to resonate with connections. Bit like good care really.

Dr Mike More, Chair of Cambridge University Hospitals

