

PAIN AND GAIN IN POETRY



Katherine Gallagher



Sarah James/Leavesley



Maggie Sawkins



Ruth Sharman

We asked 4 poets to reflect on how difficult life-events interact with their ability to continue to write and to deal with trauma in their poetry. The resulting focus is wide and personal, including on relocation, the death of parents, difficult relationships, long-term illness and seriously reduced mobility. However, the will to continue writing and re-shaping experience comes out on top in all the accounts below. [Eds.]

Katherine Gallagher:

“A tree grew inside my head” – *A Tree Within*, Octavio Paz

Rising to the challenge of fighting off illness and overcoming it, is somewhat like growing a tree, something substantial, as in Paz’s poem, despite the obstacles. Your mind needs to be centred on the goal, recovery. How often from childhood onwards, have we heard the admonition, ‘No pain, no gain.’ *There, within, inside my head, / the tree speaks.*

In 2020, I experienced increasingly serious age-related arthritic pain in my knees. After two very difficult years, I was glad to be scheduled for my first knee replacement. All was going fine until a fall five days later caused a hairline-fracture in my (other) left knee. Unfortunately, this break wasn’t detected on X-ray but was discovered on a CT scan a month later. The surgeon said he couldn’t operate on my other knee until the hairline fracture was healed. It hurt to move, and for a time, I wasn’t allowed to walk on my left leg, despite having aggravated it by exercising on it for a month since the first operation and wondering why I’d had so much pain when the X-ray had said nothing was broken.

I felt desperate. *When would I be well again?* I was given crutches, wore a brace on my left leg, tried to keep off it, my husband, in particular, passed into sainthood. My son, family in Australia and various friends helped incredibly. They, along with poetry, kept me going. I was able to write and publish eight new poems, but crucially, used the extra time I had to fine-tune my 52-poem MSS which Arc Publications will publish early in the New Year. That tree inside my head, wouldn’t let me give up. The mantra – no pain, no gain. I did my exercises. It’s still ongoing. And the wonderful NHS staff, the nurse who said last visit, ‘We’ll have you running yet’. Finally, I feel I’m making progress. The mantra again...

Maggie Sawkins:

When *Ever After*, a poem from my collection *The Zig Zag Woman*, was broadcast on Poetry Please, Roger McGough remarked on how intriguing it was to write yourself a happy ending. The poem

imagines a future in which I invite my warring parents to tea, but instead of fighting (as was the norm) the poem ends with the uplifting image of ‘laughter filling the sky’.

My later collection, *Zones of Avoidance*, contains poetry, letters and monologues written over a period of fifteen years in response to my daughter’s dual diagnosis of schizophrenia and drug addiction. In the process of transforming much painful material into a live literature production the imperative was always how to juggle honesty – how to tell an important story truthfully – and ‘avoidance’ – how to make bitter truths more bearable. Honing the piece over the course of two years, in an intentionally non-judgemental way, enabled me to reach a place of compassion and acceptance. Although the production achieved the accolade of winning a Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry, the hope of a fairytale ending for the real-life story has long since faded.

I’ve come to believe that eking out the terrible beauty from our bundle of troubles and reimagining them into fully formed poems is ultimately a positive act. If the writing can speak to others in similar situations, without causing undue discomfort to those involved, then that surely is a gain.

Ruth Sharman:

I have tended to write poetry not so much despite as because of the difficult times in my life, as a means of coping with the unsettling experience of change and loss.

The shock of leaving South India (where I was born) and coming to England at the age of not quite six undoubtedly sensitised me to feelings of disconnectedness; but it was not until my mother died of ovarian cancer when I was in my mid-twenties that I first started writing what might loosely be described as poetry. Her early death shaped my preoccupations and I found myself anticipating my father’s death too in poetry, in a sense trying to prepare myself for it years before the event.

The first section of my second collection, *Scarlet Tiger*, is made up of poems addressed to my father towards the end of his life and when he lay dying in hospital; but well before that I was endeavouring to store up his memory – and something of his knowledge of the natural world – while also forging a connection with him that seemed to prove elusive in our day-to-day lives. Not long before he died, he asked me rather shyly, and as if a little amazed, “All these poems about butterflies, are they really about me?” The answer of course was yes.

My poetry in a sense plays back to me the story of my life. It’s a balancing act between light and dark, celebration and loss, but the focus has changed – lightened – since the murderous fantasies of my first book (*Birth of the Owl Butterflies*) which helped me survive a marriage turned sour... and eventually break through to an unforeseen friendship.

Early in the Covid pandemic, I became a “long hauler” and have been topping up long-term symptoms with repeated reinfections. Not marriage breakup. Not bereavement. But a new kind of loss: I feel physically limited, am often in pain, and forced to think small, take pleasure in tiny things. But I can still write poetry, which is like living a life alongside illness, one where the blank page has become more than ever an opportunity to lose myself, and to play.

Sarah James/Leavesley:

Mostly, living with type one diabetes from the age of six isn’t about physical pain, more the time, energy and emotionally draining effects of having to manage it 24-7. The first part of resilience for me therefore is accepting that there are times when it is difficult to write and using this to motivate me to get on with it when I can.

Some of my other coping and motivational strategies are ones that help with life and health generally. I start each day with a short (10 min) meditation, with another (or a brief pause to connect in turn with each of my five senses) at times when I'm particularly stressed or unfocussed. This centres me, while creating distance from, and a wider perspective on, life, so that I'm able to write.

I also try to exercise outdoors most days, usually walking. The endorphins make me happier, and I often find that inspiration comes to me unbidden or my subconscious will come up with edits to lines I've been struggling over, helped perhaps by the pace of my walk.

Because my time and energy are in short supply, I try to ensure things can serve multiple purposes or outcomes. For example, the novel I've been working on uses the novel-in-flash form, so that even if it's hard to get a publisher for the whole novel, individual flashes still can and have been published individually.

Having enough energy is a key part of writing for me. I sometimes need to remind myself of what I love about writing (what gives me energy), which is the writing itself. If I then concentrate on this for a while, that balances out the parts which tend to take energy (submissions, dealing with the inevitable rejections, marketing...)

Once I'm really inspired, I usually work intensely and the writing is my energy. At other times, I set personal goals to keep me writing. Themed submissions or competitions are often good for this too, as they give an external focus and deadline to aim for.

When life is really tough, I also remind myself that emotions, especially painful ones, are full of energy that can be motivational. They can give me something to write about, something to escape from through writing, or, in the case of rejections, a challenge to improve a piece and find a home for it.