

Sarah Wardle

11th April, 2011

Dear Family,

Anniversaries are a time to take stock. This Easter it will be twenty years since I left Oxford in a whirlwind of mental ill health, having thought I was Jesus in order to explain both the extraordinary calm that had come over me and the fearful sense that I was being targeted to be killed. This was all the more odd because I have always been an atheist, but they say that *in extremis* those who have faith lose it, while those who do not, believe. I wrote about these thoughts and feelings in my first book, *Fields Away*, in poems such as 'Cosmic Confusion' and 'Rhapsody in B Flat': "Christ, take flight".

Like many writers who are susceptible to bipolar illness, since the spring of 1991 I have been forced, through periods of mental ill health, to sample psychiatric inpatient care, and I can say that it is the poor relation of the Health Service. Governments on both sides of the political divide clearly think that here is a group of people whose vote they can afford to lose, who by virtue of disability cannot mobilise themselves to be heard. Lack of purposive activities and access to fresh air and an outdoor area, understaffing and bullying, are rife on mental health wards. When patients argue and try to leave, the rapid tranquillisation that follows causes smirks of pleasure on the faces of some of the nurses involved in the procedure: some get a kick out of knocking a person when they are already down. Other young women, as well as myself, say of R.T. that they thought they were going to be raped. I expressed this belief in poems in *Fields Away* such as 'Flight', and detailed a year spent as a psychiatric inpatient in my third collection, in which I aimed to make *A Knowable World* of the helplessness and panic involved in bipolar disorder.

I have witnessed some "care"-users make bids for suicide and succeed, whether accidentally or intentionally I shall never know, though I have no doubt that the system drove them to their deaths. These young women – and I describe one in 'For Michelle Farrell': "The ward is still filled with your Irish spirit, / like the time you called the doctor a 'Fuckwit'" – get pushed under the rug by Coroners' Reports, which attribute their deaths to long-term addiction, or describe a jump from a building as a characteristically "impulsive act of self-harm". On one occasion nurses were sacked, but management and psychiatrist jobs stay intact – although a young psychiatrist who worked in the intensive care unit of a hospital I have written about committed suicide himself.

While I faced adversity both from within, in the form of misfiring synapses, and from an environment in which other patients kicked off while the television blared all day (I now do not possess one), family provided a steady stream of visitors. On one occasion, when I was resisting medication because of its association with force, Grandmother brought me the gift of a bottle of perfume called 'Poison' to brace me up! Family, with your unflinching support and care, which has helped me overcome my fear of medication – not least because you, Mother, are now a year clear of cancer with the help of medical treatment – I can lead a normal life.

But for many trapped in the system this is not so, and I pay tribute to them in 'Hotel Gordon': "all these I mean, people lost in the in between / of life, as some make good and others fall back". Father, I voted for you once I was old enough, and since you left Parliament have voted left-of-centre, but successive governments have failed mental health patients, and politicians on both sides must address this iniquity. With more Government cuts looming, I fear for inpatients, who deserve a better standard of care, tolerance and understanding, and for those who receive treatment in the community but who are not sustained by the unstinting personal support you have given. An underfunded mental health service means many whose families have washed their hands of them get little care: meanwhile, the determination in the face of bewilderment, the pain

and the sacrifice of families like you, who keep on caring, helps those like me to pull through.
Thank you.

In hospital I wrote about you both in 'After Ralph Vaughan Williams', and I would like to end on that note:

The Lark Ascending is my parents' lives,
running the currents of the skies,
buffeted by each downward blow,
riding the eddies of air below,

as if each upturn and turbulence
is caused by me and is my fault,
but the music's pity is that the flight
ends in their spirit rising out of sight.

With all my love –

