

Chloe Shang

Writing as an Architectural Medium

P o e m s

from the

*Patient Patient*

*'Nobody conceives of cancer the way TB was thought of – as a decorative, often lyrical death. Cancer is a rare and still scandalous subject for poetry.'*<sup>1</sup>

- Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), p.20.

## HEALER

*After Carol Ann Duffy 'Work'*

To heal one, she worked from home.  
A knock on the door; a jar from a drawer.  
Life was a dream.<sup>1</sup>

To heal ten, she donned a habit  
and oiled, broiled, kept stones for their magic.  
Slathered wounds, bashed herbs in a bowl,  
knelt in a pew to bless their souls.

Healing a hundred was a bigger battle.  
She moved to a tent, mixed beer with blood  
and tears, for the ones who fell to the mud.  
A Nightingale passed with a Lamp.

The gunfire ceased, but her queue only grew.  
She built a pavilion where all could pass through.  
Clad in light and cantilevered by air, she was  
healer to thousands and more in her care.

A million emerged. She built taller, taller,  
deeper, denser, tighter, smaller. Skeletons  
of steel wrapped in thick concrete flesh  
crawled through the city: their infantine creche.

In haste, she dressed them in vinyl frocks,  
turned their veins to wires, their hearts to cogs,  
their lungs to gears that whirred deep into night,  
their teeth and eyes to winking white lights.

Still, the sick flocked en-masse to their jaws,  
their labyrinth of pores and deep corridors.  
How long in this corpse of concrete and steel  
must she still toil to mend, cure and heal?

<sup>1</sup> Carol Ann Duffy, *Feminine Gospels*, New Edit/Cover edition (London: Picador, 2017)

## SCANXIETY

No wonder the scanner looks so futuristic. It seems to hold the fate of our futures within it.

## SHIELDER

*'Your condition means you are at high risk of severe illness if you catch Coronavirus. Please remain at home unless a healthcare professional tells you to leave. You can open a window but do not go outside your property.'*

(Text from the NHS Coronavirus Service, April 2020)

From my open window,  
my eyes trace the steps my feet have stepped  
a million times, morning and night,  
to a thousand days at school

along terraced houses,  
by great red buses, a Tesco Express;  
it's hard to express how I miss their  
messy front lawns and bright painted doors.

A long path meets the train  
that whisked me each day  
to meetings and parties, dinners and plays.  
They seem a hundred years away

yet so near;  
just beyond the grey slate tiles,  
the smoking chimneys and pockets of wild.  
Life just a few miles out of reach.

Spring melts into summer.  
I watch as the murmur in town grows louder.  
Brothers and sisters on bikes and scooters,  
friends at the corner. The air rings with laughter,

then cools.  
Dark days are harder. As nights descend faster,  
emptiness grows, isolation is louder.  
I long to see farther

to step out the door.  
The wide world sprawls  
just beyond it. I teeter towards it, yearn to explore it,  
to live a bit more...

From my open window, I tour.

SOMEDAY, THIS WILL FEEL SAFE AGAIN

of the roof, the blank white of the bowl, the blank white  
of the lights. Someday, you will walk in to the room you grew up in, and you will not  
finch. Someday, these walls will no longer remind you of pain.  
You will not sense the creep of insanity, or the void of so many hours blinking into the blank white

## WRITING AS MEDIUM

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry describes that physical pain ‘does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language.’<sup>1</sup> Scarry is referring here to the sounds a baby makes before words are learned: when pain causes a reversion to cries and groans, language is destroyed. By contrast, to progress from that ‘pre-language’ into speech or writing may be seen as an antidote to the experience of subjectivity being taken apart by pain.

In the spring of 2020, as the fortunate among us retreated to our homes and watched scenes of horror unfurl in hospitals around the world, I received a diagnosis which would see me become very well acquainted with the antiseptic and apathetic architecture of the hospital. As I recovered, time and resolution allowed me to assimilate my feelings, and I began to write poetry in reaction to the experiences and spaces of my time in treatment.

The aims of my poetry are twofold: firstly, the process of writing has helped me to emerge from pain, and become the holder of the pen in my story. It has allowed me to progress from the mindset of the powerless patient to the able, *powerful* architect.

Secondly, it aims to rewrite the characters of patient and hospital in the eyes of my profession. Architects are so often reluctant to engage with healthcare because we don’t want to battle the complexity of its regulations, but also because we are a utopian profession, unwilling to entertain any *present reality* of illness and death. Alongside much of society, we view illness through a clouding lens of pity or fear.

I hope that my writing may be a doorway into the patient’s mind during a time so little understood and desperately avoided that we simply call it ‘unthinkable’. I hope that the process of reading it will urge you – the reader – the architect – to become a little more impassioned about the architecture of healing, and a little less afraid of it.

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<sup>1</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Reprint edition (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 1987), pp.4–8.



*Escaping the Hospital interior:  
my isolation room at Guy’s Hospital,  
May 2020.*

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