

Hospital

Richard Taylor

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HOSPITAL 1

‘Since only children have the power to grip the lightning.’
The above sentence read, in Baxter’s Collected Poems, in Mid-
dlemore Hospital, Otahuhu, 8.45, the 15th of January 2004.
The air con, the drip machines, the click clacks of comings and
goings...
Someone calls.

Here are three men: we share nights.

Third Man (also known as Spider Man) is a Maori who crushed his
foot in a hydraulic lifter while shifting a house. He tells everyone
how he was 17 years in Paremoro: ‘Hospital is exactly like
prison...you have to adapt, and fight for yourself: and learn...’ I
call him Third Man as initially there were three of us in the Ward:
Spider Man and me shared with a South African businessman who
accidentally hit his tibia with a gimpy (no break, but bad enough
for the doctors to be concerned). He gets on his cell phone in the
morning telling everyone (at his office, whoever, wherever) it’s no
big matter. He speaks in English, then a language I can’t make
out – Afrikaans, German, Polish, Russian?

Now Third Man returns on the wheelchair he has rigged for
himself. He’s been here since December.

My grandson (grumpy cute) has come, his father and my son Victor
have brought my Baxter book, Aptekar’s ‘Chess Wisdom’ (for tactics
training), and ‘The Curative’ by Charlotte Randall. These, other
things, and, things I think I need: things I must have.

Before I came here I was reading Rilke's 'Duino Elegies' (German/English edition) and the phrase 'Jeder Engel es schrecklick' ('Every angel is terrible') keeps running in my mind. I had also been reading a poem a day of Smithyman's. Baxter's job is to illuminate Smithyman by providing a contrast.

Here comes Third Man, tattooed from head to foot: he's like a map, a multi-dimensional coloured moving map, one huge moko. He has returned, having 'done the rounds' in his wheelchair – he goes all night, touring the hospital, seeing, thinking, talking. He's no fool – he wouldn't waste his time saying 'Jeder Engel es schrecklick' over and over to himself. He passes my bed. 'Out like a light eh?'... I mutter 'Morpheus', drowsily. He counters: 'Word rapping now eh?'

It has been established that the electrically controlled bed is mine, as it is for old women. I am a man, but dignity allows. If I had to I would survive 30 years in Paremuremo. Dignity allows, we reach; we are, here, somewhere. Third Man wheels up to my bed again, tells me 'The party's just begun'. I rise, I write: I am not an angel or a super being. Voices: the air conditioning.

Tomorrow they may cut, cure or kill. Mein Tochter has not (yet) come. Tomorrow perhaps. We live, we live in, hope. Words.

Later I rouse – I took some Tramadol and something else – and talk on and on – about God, fear, love, and nations, and rugby. The drugs make me talk. I decide to avoid painkillers as much as possible. My foot and ankle area of the lower leg, where the bones snapped at the Panmure Basin (I dropped, ridiculously, from some monkey bars), swells and swells. An operation is impossible.

When Gerhardt was here he was interested in how Zulu is spread... talk of languages and cultures. I think (now, here, typing, this up) of how I was bashed in the face in the 1981 protests against the Springbok tour. The cops were trying to smash my teeth in.

Sebastian (about 7 months) listens a little: cannot understand he might be reason, light to me. Victor grips my shoulder. In 1990 the cops knocked his eye out with a baton.

Later the nurse helps get me out, we change the bed, I piss in a bottle, wash with a basin and flannel, the bed is made, I get back in, leg up: I am re-established. Morning will bring.

HOSPITAL 2

Waiting to be happened to can be terrible:
but, it happens: you imagine that they will
cut – one seems sacrifice – but Third Man
has had many ops, knows the land, the lie,
the lies: is about at night, being.
Paracetamol only - this morning. The air conditioner sings.

Today, the sun: the master machine. Third Man reports
of a man who has lost a leg, who 'has the right attitude'.
True. I read a book, forgetting what might or might not be true, is.

Everywhere they are moving, waking, dying, arising, and here,
and there: recording, relaying, collating; notes are made, records.
(One is perhaps information, hopefully registering, remembered.)

The sun winks – it knows – Te Ra knows – somehow things work.
Systems. There is always doubt, error, annoyance....
Remember falling and then the click, the snap: definite, clear.

16/1/04

HOSPITAL 3

I am now demoted! A man of eighty or so is in the bed opposite. My operation is over if not out. One accustoms. Each minute is to be resurrected into a bank of jewels, or violets, the music stealing (as is the usual case with these things).

Know that layers on layers hereby lie: note this: note that as I am now writing this after the time it took place, or as I recall it took place (I think I had come out of an operation, and my recollections are still uncertain as to time and exact place) reality is impossible, though a bus is undoubtedly still a bus.

Stealth – how time throats us. An old man with my name, Richard, is here now. It is very hot, as they don't open the side windows: I am sweating and swelling: I turn the fan on...

how to say things? I evaded

the claw of the Wahi Ngaro

I watch the boxing, a little ill from some tramadol I think I took and one (the only one) inject of morphine from the machine. Mundine defeats a Jap boxer – with courage the Japanese man comforts his daughter. Mundine was fast. But the Japanese man – the man, the father, he falls but falls with courage.

Suddenly I fear death.

The old man has come from another hospital, is very old, perhaps his is some terrible struggle. I hope he recovers. I too have reason

to live. To struggle. Third Man calls people whanau – wants to know about everyone’s whanau. He has ‘F U C K Y O U’ tattooed on his forehead.

Are we are all whanau?

the pen, the tongue, the idea, aroha, being here...

‘I was 17 years in Paremoremo – I did all sorts of things, hospital is just like jail, you have to learn the system to survive: I did all sorts of things, I raped a woman, but all women get raped.’ I’ve worked with men like him...his angle is to belittle me – the Pakeha: somehow I want to like the guy, but am preoccupied with surviving. In some things he’s right, or is he? Fuck the black hori, fuck whatever women he might or might not have raped: I only want to not feel sick.

HOSPITAL 4

Third Man teaches me the word wharepaki which at first I mistake for parepake. That's what I'm worrying about – how can I have a shower and later a shit with dignity? Eventually I get to the toilet and it is easier than I feared.

But wharepaki is better than toilet or shithouse or 'how do I go about getting to the toilet for a shit with a cast on my leg on a wheel chair?' Bog is ok. Bog rather than dunny...

How did we get here? By what windings, derivations, tricks, trials, travails, accidents, slips, deaths, births, misdirections? The ships set forth – in my parents' case, for New Zealand, Aotearoa. My father and his brother, from London, to work on farms – to maybe keep a farm. The depression met them. My father soon gave up his hobby of painting. My uncle arrived owing 20 pounds for a tooth op, but later became an agricultural scientist and the head of a chemical company. He died of bone cancer aged about 85. My mother came from England to Melbourne then New Zealand in 1939. 'It looked like a village.'

HOSPITAL 5

Waiting for the operation. I feel calm – whether because of the valium, or because I am getting used – used to this place....

People. People in the corridors. Third Man is out again. There is a Samoan girl with a broken leg in the next bed – she is to go to the women's ward when beds are free. One hears of shortages, crises, invasions, the destruction of social services, doctors worked near to death – terrible terrible terrible - how true? One cannot know. The three terribles were ironic but I meant it (insofar as one can mean)...do you see what I mean? I spy with my little eye.

The complex, the nexus of things like a body: head and brain, the thousands of nerves, neurons, blood, fibres, blood pulsing, heart pumping, electrons, sugar, mitochondria and ribosomes, transmitters, synapses: all of it like Sebastian's Busytown. A neuronc New York, a Megalopolis. A megalomaniacal metropolis...

One is private partly. Shut up mind, stop thinking. Pissing in a bottle is absurd. Why do I seem to float? Their job is their job. The cat was fed – house shut up. I chucked my spare set of keys to some fulla from the ambulance: please drive my car home, lock it, throw the keys inside and lock the door – I have spare set.

I read – intermittently – Baxter's Jerusalem sonnets. I am surprised; they are better than I remember. Everything is surprise.

HOSPITAL 6

Wahi Ngaro

the rocks emerging into men –
the process is terrible, tyrannical

HOSPITAL 7

Put the Walkman on and played something – cantata. In slipped dream I was King and They had come, were ghostish (various) (suited, some were) gathered in room some by piano...I was their centre till it faded, failed.

The short dream shifts. Am I now awake? The night nurse talks to an arthritic young man called Garth about his infected leg. Spider Man, Third Man, is asleep, I think. The old man was coughing. I say (in a loudish voice, as if rallying): ‘How are we team!’ I can’t move far with my leg cast so I can’t hold the bugger’s hand. Night is the time of fear. We are visited. The nurse takes my piss bottle. Moves on, returns. My toes wiggle more – more feeling...

HOSPITAL 8

The terrible constriction of constipation – I had to dig the shit out with my hands. Each time it was a struggle – what say I could never shit again? Was it related to the problem I had had – which now I think was my too fatty diet – or the time when I wasn't having fruit etc every day? Then the lactulose started working, and I was starting to get around on crutches.

Since entering Hospital I haven't used much pain relief but now I avoid it altogether. Pain is at least an indicator that one is alive. Of course I am aware there are some people who suffer terrible pain.

Maybe I should train myself to die – I mean practice the process in my mind, enact it. After all, should we not at least die with courage? The first man to be hung in New Zealand, a Maori Chief, hung in Auckland, died with impressive bravery. Douglas Bader lost both his legs, but by sheer will power, and despite the pain and the doctors saying it was impossible, eventually walked on two artificial legs and went back into the air and shot down a lot of Nazi pilots. The doctors who saved his life were German...

I was 5 hours waiting for the operation in the recovery room! That was interesting. I saw a birth, talked to an Indian woman about the ethics of her translating without some sort of official stamp, so to speak, and joked with a Theatre Nurse and the anaesthetists, who are terrified you will die on them, always asking if you are allergic to this and that, whether you have false teeth, have caps etc. I know that although the op is fairly common there is always a possibility of dying. So it's like practice for the 'last big adventure', as they call it...

HOSPITAL 9

Back home – Gerhardt and Victor (with Sebastian) got me home. Beautiful hot weather. I settle in and let the cat in – it's been 8 days, but Gerhardt and Victor fed her. They put three flea bombs in and the fleas are gone.

HOSPITAL 10

It is good to be able to shit, make dinner, move about: be home.
(The crutches: be careful of wet floor, place them flat down.)
Be home. Strange, sometimes like a controlled shriek.

25 /1/ 04

HOSPITAL 13

I read a long essay by George Steiner on 'Aaron und Moses', an opera by Schoenberg which is playing now.

Smithyman – via Rilke he connected with Heidegger?

He loved the dark gutteration of the utterances: the German (seeming) strangeness. Thus he would talk (tutorials 1968) passionately of some Heideggerian term: the very German word held the 'meaning' – totally untranslatable...the nightmare of meaning. Wrestle, intolerable, nearly. What can we translate?

What was he talking about? We knew, in a way, even then. I never talked to anyone that year. Scott said that in his essays Smithyman would try to write about everything. Thus he 'failed', as an academic.

'If we live we stand in language.'

What did he mean? I love words. Now it comes: the cacophony, the strikes of sound, clashes and the junga junga....

With Moses (the boss) away, the characters catorge in ecstasy: naked copulate naked and savagely they sacrifice: then come The Tablets. Ho!

Schoenberg must have been getting old. Pillars of Fire – Burning Bushes – better the bad old gods!

I should ring for a hooker, throw away the tablets, get the orgy on, but I'm broke, as usual.

HOSPITAL 15

Checkup at the Superclinic – a huge structure in Manukau, suburb where I once lived, and which has changed so much. About to cut off my first cast (plaster), the nurse told me that ‘this is an *osciating saw*’...she meant oscillating. ‘Osciating’ makes one think of bone eating! But I had no fear of the saw, having a fair idea of how it works, knowing that it would be relatively blunt, not particularly hard, and respond to some sort of magnetic fluctuations, crumbling the plaster by its movement rather than any tensile pressure or direct force: hence the ‘tickling feeling’ on contact with my leg.

The nurse found my foot to be swollen. Was I thus Oedipus – swollen foot? Born to kill my father? My father died of lung cancer in 1987. He died bravely, saying that he had had a ‘good life’ – but I know, or think I know that his agony, his torment, was the early death of his mother and my grandfather’s quick remarriage: I don’t think the terrifying loneliness ever left him or that, as now it has entered me, will ever leave my own soul.... Hamlet was a play he put great store by – I prefer Macbeth, Coriolanus, Cleopatra, Othello and Lear.

Today I looked at my father’s self-portrait: I can’t look him in the eyes too long – do they look down at me? Do he and my dear mother watch me?

I was told by the nurse to elevate my leg more. She was quite or nearly angry: she has seen so many diastasis screws broken by legs trying to do too much. I said I had been just been sent home (with no instructions as to what to do – but, of course, there is no instruction

book for life – barring Perec’s, which I am only half way through) and assumed I could do everything (washing, cooking, washing myself) on crutches. I was only meant to move from the bed to the toilet. The doctor showed me my x-rays – I knew that I was looking at the tibia and fibula. I could see the diastasis screw holding them. Dia I knew - I looked the word up when Michelle Leggott made it the title of her book.

HOSPITAL 17

we beat strange
we beat strange
we beat strange

the sky is above us

25/ 1/ 04

HOSPITAL 23

It's incredible how bone 'melds together' in the way perhaps metals meld when welded: bone is to some extent calcium phosphate and calcium carbonate deposited in the collagen and united and compacted and moved and connected into the Haversian structures. The body like a great machine – a metropolis – rebuilds itself, as those bombed or bulldozed rebuild, as the people gain heart and grit and strike back: the Palestinians strike to the Israelis' very heart, the Iraqis counterattack against the imperialist invaders: the Vietnamese fought, the French, the Greeks.

No one knows why John Mulgan committed suicide just after the war, in a hotel, in Cairo, alone, with poison. Man is indeed alone: perhaps not always. But I am alive and not in a romantic or terrible war, my real war is with myself and my hate is, if I have any, abstract. I am alive but 'laid up'. My repair or my recovery is almost some sort of statement...but then who am I?

Once I told Leicester Kyle how I couldn't relax at poetry readings unless I was drunk and he said 'Why can't you just BE?' Point taken. Leicester is me mate! The Old Man of the Woods, now the old discoverer of a new snail! A giant snail! What if your giant snail starts to eat New Zealand, Leicester? What if it is molecularly transformed by those green bastards and eats everything in the world up! Leicester Kyle, the writer of many books of poetry, one dedicated to me. Shut up head!

Where was I? Oh, here is the entry: at 11 am today, after reading an encyclopaedia entry on bones, I told my helper (who is a medical student, and concurred) how marvellously complex, how mysterious the body is. But then everybody knows that.

HOSPITAL 25

Tomorrow is my birthday. Today I read some Tom Raworth and some of Dr Wayne Dyer's 'Your Erroneous Zones'.

Of course, people should want to be together, not feel obligated.

Felt terrible waking – but on 'getting about', getting breakfast, knocking out a poem: talking to Jim the Ant (his mother is in hospital – heart problem), some coffee and cereal – feel better.

The 'dark' moments interlace with the 'light' moments.

- To create, to intuit.

- To live.

Do I 'live these words'? (Rhetoric?) Who knows...

Who knows what the words are busy doing?

1/2/04

HOSPITAL 29

I think of my mother today.

I use a lot of the same things she needed when she had her stroke and was homebound.

I use the 'grabbernometer' (the picker-upper thing), the wooden trolley on wheels for making lunches etc.

I have the shower stool in the ensuite (used once so far – wash by the bath in the front bathroom).

She needed a walker. I have crutches.

She was frightened.

She finally had a major stroke.

Eight months she was basically on life support – a tube and a drip fed her.

No words, and she couldn't move.

I – we – don't know what she was thinking and feeling and dreaming all those months.

HOSPITAL 30

Greg lent me a tape of Anne Sexton reading her poetry.
The voice of a machine – a dark, dry machine.

She sounds so terribly tired.

Did she ever laugh? What happened to her daughters?

6 /2/2004

HOSPITAL 31

In Ice

What a marvellous stroke!
Satan embedded in Ice!
L'Inferno/ Il Purgatorio/ Il Paradiso!

And evil shall be released
from ice –

The complete madness of it
– the inescapability –
if they are released

Or Sargeson – it is our job –
your job – to release, to reinsert:

HOSPITAL 32

One day, years ago, 1969 or 1970, I was in Queen Street, I think there'd been an anti-war demonstration, and I met this old fellow of 70 or 80 or so. I was young then, but I liked talking to old people about the old days. We sat together at Coffee Time, a place I loved, in Wellesley Street I think it was. I loved having a coffee (filter), and sausages, eggs and toast, and maybe tomatoes. (I would very often sit there alone – I love to sit alone in coffee bars). He talked of why he had become a communist – as I suppose I might have been a communist too, in those days, or something close to a communist.

He told me of the First World War, the horror of it, and the effect on his mind of seeing the cemeteries in Belgium or wherever the dead are laid. 'The dead', he said. 'The rows and rows of the dead. And the crosses. The endless crosses. The crosses in endless rows or diagonals, like white bones. The dead, the unending dead, the rows and rows and rows of all those dead. All that life. All that once life. The dead. I couldn't bear it. The dead, the dead, the dead, the dead. The waste, the absolute waste: the total futility, the loss.' He had some coffee. I was glad he could speak this immensity to me, I was young, and it was what I wanted to hear. Yes, there had to have been some better way.

He leaned closer. Perhaps there wasn't much hope in him.

'The crosses, the rows and rows, the ordered dead: the endlessly dead; the white, the crosses, the dead, the dazzling, the white rows.'

HOSPITAL 37

The essentials – the deep things. Who wants to know? I ate fish tonight. If I say, or had said: ‘Fish tonight,’ that would be interesting in the right place. But what is ‘the right place’? Sometimes we need our fears – but when do we need them? We can at least be human. Clichés. Words.

Kelvin my brother-in-law was Christian. He died. I can’t get to the funeral – it’s too risky, I’m still on crutches at this stage, waiting for the diastasis screw to be removed. If I fall getting to the toilet, or trip somewhere, or have a panic attack, I may re-break my leg, snap the screw.

But I would like to go: Kelvin has been, through my sister, his sons, and my association with him at various times over the years, a considerable signification in my life. I liked the man and respected him, but we were not close – in fact he could be irritating and tedious at times.

I suddenly thought: I like art but hate art galleries (or I think I do just think that now, as I type this?).

We live, we die, and other cliches. Emily Dickinson’s war was with God (presumably the inflictor of death). So many cruel deaths of people in Amherst: many young, so many young, so many.

Am I religious? ‘God is distant, difficult.’ (Geoffrey Hill).

19/2/04

HOSPITAL 38

Yes, Death. Death is immense – and yet - it is also - as I see it just now - at least – a project – a project to be worked on piece by piece.

20/2/04

HOSPITAL 39

I sit here. The clock ticks. What is a clock? What is 'ticks'?

The cat is there. It purrs. It is near me. What is a cat? I am. What
am I?

Each plan is doomed, and you are well aware of this, Guido.

There is silence beyond hearts I cannot besiege.

the possibility of

never

having been

HOSPITAL 46

(Dick Grist's Wife)

an old knurl by a window box
a glass dragon on the windowsill –

and the clock by the kitchen on the wall
I remember the feel, the child's pre-know, of Death,
the unseen thing, urging –

I remember his red-haired wife/ always asked us again and again
not to fiddle with the ornaments on the sill/ I always did,
and always broke one.

Dad said one day he came looking for Dick and found her
hiding in a cupboard/ one day/ terror in that brick house

she got TB and something else – she died
whatever might cure the TB would make worse the something else

I remember Dick Grist my father's friend with his wine cask
voice and blue eyes
and the day he came and had so much fun with the fireworks

the jumping jacks

HOSPITAL 47

The average time a leg bone break takes to heal completely is 12 months. Some people never heal completely.

Get a ride at 7am to the Clinic, to have the diastasis screw removed. I refuse a general anaesthetic, and the operation is interesting. I feel a slight pressure release as the screw – 52 mms long and about 4 mms in diameter – is removed. The screw held the fibula to the tibia and thus, assisted by the plate parallel to my shin, and accompanied by two smaller screws screwed upwards into my ankle / tibia, it helped give me strength as the bone regrew. A special indent or cavity on the screw head stops the young Chinese surgeon from slipping. The screw is made of titanium, which is used for its strength and non-corrosive properties in aircraft and spaceships.

After the operation the surgeon gives me the screw in a small jar, as a parting gift. On the jar's label someone has written SPECIMEN - DO NOT REINSERT.



EBK 7

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