

No Shore Too Far

JONATHAN STEDALL



Hawthorn Press

*for Jackie,
as promised.*



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Hawthorn Press

Published by Hawthorn Press, Hawthorn House,
1 Lansdown Lane, Stroud, Gloucestershire, GL5 1BJ, UK
Tel: (01453) 757040
E-mail: info@hawthornpress.com
Website: www.hawthornpress.com

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Cover image © Saied Dai
Wood engraving © Miriam Macgregor
Design by Lucy Guenot
Printed by Henry Ling Ltd, The Dorset Press, Dorchester

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The views expressed in this book are not necessarily those of the publisher.

Printed on environmentally friendly chlorine-free paper sourced from renewable forest stock.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data applied for.

ISBN 978-1-907359-81-1

Contents

Preface viii

Beauty 1

A Bigger Picture 2

That Robin 4

In Touch 4

Marmalade 5

Wings 6

A Bad Day 7

A True Friend? 8

Vision 9

Immortal Life 10

Lenses 13

Trust 14

Insight 16

Alive 18

Letting Go 19

News 20

Not Worth Repairing 21

Icy Winds 22

One World 24

The Angel 26

The Night 27

Time Heals 28

Ideas 30

Time and Space 31

A Helping Hand 32

Morning 34

Day to Day 36

Friends with Now 38

Thy Will Be Done 41

The Gift of Forgetfulness 42
Enlightenment 44
God 46
Duration 49
What I Do Is Me 50
Awakeners 52
Probes 54
Promises 56
Bugs 60
Message 61
Crisis 62
Devilish Clever 64
The River Wye 68
The Stork 70
A Double Life? 73
Behind The Scenes 74
Imagination 75
A New Heaven 76
Underway 80
A Selfless Self 82
Another Day 84
Back Again 86
Between the Lines 87
As Above, So Below 88
Baggage 90
An Inner Voice 93
Black Holes 96
The Big Bang 98
Science 101
Sleeping Beauty 104
The Bat 107

Freedom	110
Herod	112
Nirvana	114
Bluebells	117
Becoming Human	118
Headlines	119
Waiting	120
Moving On	122
Water	124
War in Heaven	126
Here and There	130
Microcosm of the Macrocosm	132
Words	134
The Little Death	136
To Be	138
Outside of Time	140
Horizons	142
No Shore Too Far	144
Exploration	145
Farewell	146
Acknowledgements	148
Bibliography	149

Preface

My wife Jackie, to whom these poems are dedicated, died in September 2014 at the age of 64. About a year later I wrote a poem for her that I called 'A Bigger Picture'. Since then others have followed, all prompted by my attempt to come to terms with my grief and by my long held belief that death is a transition rather than an end.

Jackie didn't like the word 'battle' in relation to her illness. For two years she 'lived' with cancer. She spoke to our son, Tom, about 'the extraordinary quality of these days, the precious intensity of it all', and about her deep sense of wellbeing. 'I don't know where this inner strength comes from and I don't ask', she said; 'I'm just grateful for it.' In the last weeks she spoke to us on several occasions about how extraordinary it was that she felt so alive.

Jackie's adult life had three quite distinct and fulfilling phases. After reading mathematics at Cambridge she travelled extensively, partly in connection with her role as Overseas Programmes Administrator for the charity War on Want. After we married she devoted ten years or so to bringing up our two young children. She then read for a PhD in the History of Mathematics at the Open University, and in 2000 made her first connection with Oxford where in due course she became Senior Research Fellow of The Queen's College and Lecturer in the Oxford Mathematical Institute. Among the nine books that she wrote, largely on developments in algebra during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was her much acclaimed 'The History of Mathematics: A Very Short Introduction.' In Jackie's obituary in the *Guardian*, her friend and colleague at Oxford, Dr Peter Neumann, referred to 'her exceptional breadth of scholarship.'

At Jackie's funeral our daughter, Ellie, spoke of how her mother's deep sense of the past seemed

to make her 'unusually comfortable with her own limited space in time and to give her a quiet confidence in the future.' This confidence and trust is beautifully conveyed in a message she wrote to young people – *'my beloved children, their wonderful friends, nieces, nephews, students'* – that she asked to be read out at her funeral: *'I want you to know how much I loved you, how much I enjoyed seeing you make your way into adult life, each with your own particular energy and expertise. I want to tell you that for a very long time I have been learning more from you than you could ever have learned from me; that wisdom and understanding are not the prerogative of the old or middle-aged, they are yours too. And I want you to know how profoundly I respected your values: your care and respect for me, for your own families, for each other, and for the world about you. I am confident of a future that is in your hands.'*

Jackie's own role in that future will, I believe, be more than just the influence that is inspired by memory; she was less sure of this. Life and death, time and space, the wisdom and beauty that surrounds us – we each had our own way of expressing our understanding and appreciation of these great mysteries. She was increasingly drawn to the silence of a Quaker meeting.

Some months before she died I told her that I wanted to write a book for her. 'You'd better hurry up' was her reply! Yet she knew what I meant and that I believed much could still be conveyed between the living and those who have died – albeit not in words as such, but through what lives in our hearts.

I hope, therefore, that what follows – the thoughts and feelings that prompted what I have written – will be a bridge of sorts, both to her and also to those who sense that there is indeed a bigger picture. Some of the poems are also intimations that in our efforts to extend boundaries of every sort there is, in fact, no shore too far.

Jonathan Stedall

Beauty

So often, as I stand in awe
of beauty in its many forms –
the flowers, a frost,
the kindness in a person's eyes,
our grandson three days old –
I long for you to see them too,
to share the joy,
to share the thrill
that life so often brings.

But then I think,
or rather hope,
that all this beauty isn't lost
because of where you are.
Perhaps, indeed, that joy is there,
and greater than for us;
for you can see
and you can hear
the essence of this world we love
in greater depth,
with brighter light
than those of us still here.

If this is so,
and not some ruse
to keep at bay my tears,
then when I kneel
to thank the world,
I know you're kneeling too.

A Bigger Picture

She said to me,
this brave and thoughtful soul
I so admire and love:
'Why all this talk of angels and the like –
there's so much beauty,
so much goodness here on earth.
Why should we look elsewhere?'

And she was right;
a world sublime
and wise beyond belief
indeed right here at every turn,
and in our daily lives.
And yet like so much else
we witness hour by hour:
the wind, our thoughts,
the life that calls forth flowers from tiny seeds,
we cannot always see
with eyes that have to close at night.

Miracles abound,
both seen and unseen,
day in, day out
and in the here and now.
So, too, the angels and the gods,
of whom I sometimes speak,
are not for me far out in space
or in another world,
but working in our daily lives
to help us out of bed,
and out into the rain;
to help us take the next step,
and the next.

And now she, too,
is nowhere to be seen —
my dear and precious friend,
my wife.
And yet she lives,
of that I feel so sure;
closer perhaps than when we still held hands
or disagreed about the meaning of it all.
Together still, united in our search
for what I sometimes call
a bigger picture:
a journey and a quest
that maybe never ends.

That Robin

That robin who became so tame
when you were ill
is back again,
but not so close.

Perhaps he knew –
not in his tiny brain,
but in his feathered being –
that you would welcome such a friend
when times were hard.
For what keeps animals at bay
comes tumbling down
when people drop their guard
and boundaries start to shrink.

The garden was your world.
You saw each flower and tree anew.
Perhaps you saw them as the robin does.
No wonder you became such friends.

In Touch

There is no number I can call,
and email doesn't work;
yet where you dwell,
just out of range,
is not that far away.
So I must make my own device,
and not with bits of wire,
but woven from the love I feel –
a love that flows through all our lives,
in sky at night,
in light of day,
and will do evermore.

Marmalade

When white, not orange,
cold, not heat,
reminded us our friend, the sun
was very far away,
you, carer of the four of us,
took down your cauldron from the shelf,
and chopped up fruit,
which boiled and boiled,
and filled the house with steam.

And so our treat for months to come
would slowly fill up jars;
and breakfasts were a daily feast
reminding us at start of day
of Spanish warmth,
and English frost,
and all those hours of toil.

Now all is quiet,
but nothing lost –
I live both now and then.
Your skills I miss,
but what remains
so links me still to winter days
when you brought warmth
to all our lives
in many different ways.

But now there's only one jar left,
and that I'll have to keep;
for stored up there
is treasure rare
which helps me not to weep.