

How Will You Live? A Tribute to Mary MacRae, *Brittle Star*, Issue 24, Autumn 2009

A Tribute to Mary MacRae

by Lucy Hamilton

Mary has been a wonderful and important friend for eleven years and will remain so in my memories. Her enormous warmth and zest for life were balanced with a sensitivity and deep compassion that invited many to confide in her, came into play in her perceptive and incisive criticism and pervaded her poems. Later, as Mary battled the cancer that had plagued her for so long, her poems became increasingly visionary. Grounded in the natural world, they sought epiphany. The indomitable spirit that confounded doctors pressured through her language to produce poems of rare beauty and insight.

When Mary began sending me, first her revisions and then, later, the tentative drafts of new poems, it was a hugely enriching and rewarding experience. It was also a tremendous honour. As well as being more experienced, she was by far the better poet. Mary had taught English at a prestigious school for many years; she had also taught literature and poetry for Open University. She had a lightly-worn breadth of knowledge and a natural authority. I felt a great affinity with her work and when I realised that I could sense where she was coming from and that I could respond constructively to help her, as likewise she helped me, it was very exciting and rewarding. Sharing with Mary at this level expanded my world and invited me into other dimensions, for which I felt privileged and grateful.

The last poem Mary sent me was *Journey Across the Tundra*, a stunning poem with powerful echoes of Dante: the same three stages through the horrors and desolation of hell – “Everyone who asks here must sink to the lowest depth” – up through redeeming purgatory and into the light and love of heaven. This poem has authority. It is a lived experience of physical and spiritual crisis in extremis. The final part is breathtakingly beautiful and speaks from the same source as all Mary’s later poems. While her family had often featured in her poems, I had begun to sense that her grandson was a subliminal presence. In this final section Emyr Ceidrych is named, and the significance of his name chimes profoundly with her previous poems. Mary is spanning two worlds, not from a religious perspective, but from a philosophical and spiritual point of view, imbued with belief: the “prayer sent out into the void”, which by its dynamic fills the void and resolves the absence. That is its gift to the reader. As Vernon Watkins says, ‘In all good poetry the transience of human life becomes an illusion. Those who read or hear a good poem should remember that a good poem has two audiences; it is addressed to the living and the dead at the same time. If a poet dismisses the living he becomes morbid; if he dismisses the dead he ceases to be a prophet.’

Mary’s final poem consolidates the qualities of her previous poems and goes beyond: by its Dantean allusions, by the inclusion and naming of Emyr, linking him to the natural and spiritual worlds. It is grounded and visionary, it is unflinching and prophetic.

Lucy Hamilton’s article was later reprinted with the kind permission of *Brittle Star*, in ARTEMISpoetry Issue 3 (Second Light Publications, November, 2009), with the addition of the following poem:

Ghazal: For Mary

A goldcrest flew into my tree with a message for Mary.
Fluttering her wings, she sang in coded language for Mary.

I saw the heron again from the train, standing by the lake.
The sentry, he's keeping a vigil at Tonbridge for Mary.

The kestrel held time, scrutinizing the ground for sign of life
as she hovered above the sunlit ridge... for Mary.

Perhaps this is the same woodpecker that visits her garden.
How strong he is today, tussling in the leafage for Mary.

The flash of blue so quick... was it a trick of vision and mind?
Lucy thinks it's river's mystery: a homage for Mary.

Lucy Hamilton