

'Bright words for my mother's colourful life'

When her mother, the writer and interior designer Jocasta Innes, died of cancer last year, DAISY GOODWIN found consolation in verse. Here she reveals how it inspired an anthology that offers solace to others facing illness and bereavement

IN FEBRUARY 2013 I went to see my mother, the writer and interior designer Jocasta Innes, at her house in London's Spitalfields. My stepfather Richard had just been diagnosed with throat cancer and I wanted to cheer them up. We went across the road to a French restaurant and my mum told a wonderful story about being rusticated from Girton College, Cambridge, in 1952 because she had been found entertaining boys in her room. She thought her father would be furious, but in fact he was delighted because she had been the lead story on the local television news.

My mother was always such good company, and I was so busy listening and laughing that the fact that she had eaten nothing didn't really register. When I thought about it on the way home, I decided that she was depressed about Richard's illness.

The next time I saw her was in the A&E department of the Royal London Hospital. She was struggling as a nurse tried to put a drip into her arm. The diagnosis was hyponatraemia (insufficient salt), which can cause mental confusion and physical debility. That could be fixed, but as I Googled the condition on my iPhone I saw that it could be caused by many things, the most serious being a tumour. My mum, always slim, was now painfully thin - for the first time in my memory she looked weak and diminished. I knew that only something deadly would have brought her so low.

Three weeks later she was diagnosed with

pancreatic cancer and she died at home on 20 April, a month short of her 79th birthday. At her funeral my sister Tabitha read a poem called *Heredity* by Thomas Hardy, which talks about the family face, and how people never disappear but live on in their descendants. My mother loved Hardy, and this poem in particular. I think she knew that with four children and nine grandchildren she was guaranteed a kind of immortality.

My mother's end was mercifully swift - by the time her cancer was diagnosed it was too late for treatment. But the few tests she did have were invasive and brutal: she was treated as a case, not a person. It was only when we got her home, installed in the sitting room, the walls of which she had painted so beautifully in the colour of a ripe apricot, that she had some peace.

I thought of my mother's vivid sense of colour when I went to see a Maggie's Centre after she died. These are gorgeous buildings designed by great architects that provide a space for respite and therapy for cancer patients. Ten years ago my stepfather designed one in Cheltenham and my mother did the interior. She believed strongly in making every room as beautiful as possible; bad design was an affront to the soul. And this is especially true for people going through the miseries of cancer treatment.

Maggie's is a charity, and I thought that

perhaps the best tribute I could pay to my mother's brave and colourful life was to put together a poetry anthology that would bring some solace to the sick and to the people who love them. I believe that the right poem at the right time can bring clarity and comfort like nothing else. After my mother died, I found myself reading Tony Harrison's poem *Long Distance*, about the death of his own mother: it made the hairs on my arms stand up with the shock of recognition. There was a huge relief in knowing that I was not alone.

I have chosen poems for every stage of illness: for the shock of diagnosis, the indignities of treatment and the unreal world of the hospital ward. There are also poems that celebrate the silver lining that sometimes comes with life-threatening illness - the ability to savour the small pleasures in life. There are poems, too, for those who stand and wait at bedsides and in waiting rooms - there is a useful one by Julia Darling about how to be a good hospital visitor. And, of course, there are poems that deal with grief and bereavement.

Poetry may no longer be part of our daily life, but in times of distress it is irreplaceable. In the US poems are given to student doctors to teach them to empathise with their patients - I think we all need a poetic map when navigating the unknown territory of illness.

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THOMAS HARDY
Heredity

*I am the family face:
Flesh perishes, I live on,
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon,
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion.*

*The years-heired feature that can
In curve and voice and eye
Despise the human span
Of durance - that is I:
The eternal thing in man,
That heeds no call to die.*

CHRISTINA ROSSETTI
Remember

*Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land:
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.
Remember me when no more day by day
You tell me of our future that you planned:
Only remember me: you understand
It will be late to counsel then or pray.
Yet if you should forget me for a while
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.*

■ 100 Poems to See You Through will be published by Ebury on 4 September at £10*. All the proceeds from this book will go to the Maggie's Centres charity. To donate to Maggie's Centres, visit maggiescentres.org/donate

Left: Daisy with her mother Jocasta