

## Introduction

The events related in this book are an attempt to make sense of what happened to two people during the first four months of 1998. Some of them were recorded in poetry while they were taking place, some are reported in retrospective prose. All are dedicated with love to patient number 332256, whose name was Philip Gray.

Between Philip's leaving hospital and his death two years afterwards from metastatic liver cancer, he worked feverishly, mending and creating. But he was not the man he had been before, and his old skills, when he called upon them, sometimes let him down. When this happened it saddened and frustrated him.

In September 1998 he was asked to write a paper on systems concepts and found it difficult. He worked long and hard on it and I helped where I could.

He was given the Bernard Babington Smith Award by the Coverdale Organisation. This was a much-needed cash injection, but he believed in his heart that the award was charitable and while he appreciated what he saw as the kindness of his colleagues, he was certain he had not done justice to the subject. We had an understanding that he would do it better, later.

For Philip, there was not enough later. This is for him, to put it right.

## Feeding Charybdis

Today we are going to the hospital  
To hear results and learn what must be done.  
You had the first bath, which is only right,  
Yours being the body under consideration,  
And there was not much water left for me.

I have washed myself quickly. Now I kneel  
Like a colossus over the plughole  
Watching the baby maelstrom swallowing  
All the small bits of human detritus  
Dithering into its tiny bailiwick.

First each coy dancer circles round the spot.  
Then comes a mad dive round and round and down  
And the wild spin into oblivion.

Now, as the water cools around my thighs,  
I search out little bits of you and me:  
Small platelets of exfoliated skin,  
Gobbets of navel-fluff and pubic hair,  
Pushing them forward with a soapy finger  
Through the tense surface towards Charybdis.

Dearest, we need all the help we can get  
So I am seeking out all sources of power  
And offering-up. Always offering-up.

## Diagnosis

Philip and I loved each other in disparate ways but the love itself was never in any doubt. We were the best of friends although in many ways our relationship was not conventionally close. We had been together nine years and were regarded as a couple but although he no longer mentioned his search for a soul-mate, I still felt as if I were playing Viola to his Orsino. We both preserved our separate lives and he still occasionally got angry when I took too much for granted.

I had known for some time that he was not well. He complained more and more often of an “upset stomach”. I would urge him to see a doctor and he would plead lack of time, pressure of work or the uncongeniality of the practitioner. When he mentioned finding traces of blood he did finally agree to go to a GP but came home with medication he never used for haemorrhoids he never had.

He was away from home leading a training course when the symptoms struck with enough force to persuade him to consult the hotel doctor, who insisted that he see his own doctor without delay. He was referred to a consultant at the local hospital and went on his own for the initial tests.

I offered to accompany him but he was a private man and regarded it as an intrusion. I respected this because I understood it; his self-centredness mirrored my own. It was only when it became obvious that there was something seriously wrong that I asked again if he would like me to go with him to the next appointment. When he said, “Yes” I heard the fear in it.

He had told me about the tests so far. He was going to hear the verdict and I waited outside the consultant’s

office, holding Philip's overcoat, reading glasses and the book he had brought with him. He hated wasting time.

When he came out he walked past me, sucking me up into his slipstream, saying, almost over his shoulder, "It's cancer. He says they'll do a colostomy. He thinks they've caught it in time..."

I caught his hand as it swung with soldierly determination at his side, and he didn't take it away.

We went for a drink in the Angel. Philip bought the first round. Sue the barmaid asked how he was and he said he was in rude health, thank you. He said it loud, for me to hear. We sat in our usual corner, by the hat stand. I had the round stool with my back to the window and he sat in the wing chair, small and stiff on the sagging burgundy leather. We wore big smiles and chinked our glasses ostentatiously.

"I expect I'll soon get used to my little bag," he said.

"Think of it", said I, "come the millennium, we at least will be assured of an anus mirabilis."

"Could be worse", he said.

"Indeed it could", I said, "you could've been gay."

I was ashamed of myself at once, but a few months later I was to ask a staff nurse on the surgical ward how a gay man would come to terms with a colostomy and she said it had never occurred to her. I felt better then for having thought of it; horrified that she hadn't.

Prior to surgical removal of the tumour, Philip was to have a week of intensive radiotherapy. The oncologist's name was Dr. Mort. Neither of us commented on this.