



I SING
THEREFORE
I AM

I Sing, Therefore I Am

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Introduction

Dr Dinah Roe

The poems you are about to read emerged from a series of online writing workshops entitled 'Occupations & Interruptions' and hosted by Oxford Brookes University's School of English. The workshops were created for unpaid carers looking after loved ones at home. Sessions were co-designed and led by the poet and lecturer Sarah Hesketh, whose collection, *The Hard Word Box*, is based on her work in a residential care home. Further advice and design support for these workshops was generously provided by Carers Oxfordshire. Poems from separate workshop groups are published here in numbered volumes.

Our primary aim was to give carers time to read, write and reflect on their experiences, along with providing a community and resources for creative work. Another hope was to amplify the voices of carers whose contributions are largely unsung, especially among themselves. According to the NHS, many do not even think of themselves as carers, and this lack of recognition and self-recognition is a major barrier to accessing support from employers, educators, healthcare trusts and politicians.

The workshops grew out of my own research on the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti, or to be more precise, the interruption to my Rossetti research caused by the Covid-19 lockdown of March 2020. Virtually overnight, the pandemic hit pause on my plans to work on a new edition of her complete poems for the Longman Annotated English Poets series. My university office disappeared and my ongoing domestic duties jostled for space with my full-time work and parental responsibilities. The living room was overhauled to become an online classroom for my students and a school / playroom for my young child.

Rossetti didn't vanish completely, however. I had always wondered why the author of great lyric poems like 'In the Bleak Midwinter' and 'Remember me when I have gone away' stopped writing new poetry in middle age. Lockdown pushed me towards an answer that neither I nor anyone else has really addressed: for much of her life Rossetti had full-time caring responsibilities. She was what we would recognise now as a 'young carer' for her father, looking

after him at home alone at age fourteen following his severe mental and physical breakdown. In her early fifties, and by this time in chronically poor health herself, Rossetti became sole carer to her two ailing maternal aunts and mother, who were all in their 80s. During this period, Rossetti worried about what she called the 'extinguished coals' of her poetic powers. She wrote that she was 'sure that not one of my readers would be more genuinely pleased than myself if I could always write poems! But just because poetry IS a gift...I am not surprised to find myself unable to summon it at will and use it according to my own choice' (20 May 1885 letter to W. Garrett Horder).

Instead of trying (and perhaps failing) to write new poetry, Rossetti produced *Time Flies: A Reading Diary*. Comprising a short entry for each day of the year, it is minor work that Rossetti calls 'a miscellaneous set of short readings in prose and verse', many of which are recycled from older, unpublished poems. Among the many subjects explored in *Time Flies*, Rossetti contemplates how her caring duties cause her to rearrange her priorities. Given her aforementioned anxieties about her waning poetic gifts, we might assume that Rossetti sees the unavoidable distractions of household work as an impediment to creativity. Instead, Rossetti develops what she calls a 'startling view of occupations and interruptions!' When we are 'called ... to forego a pleasure, or break off a task, or leave a cherished work incomplete, or serve someone we find it difficult to love', we should not dismiss these 'interruptions' as 'vexatious', but treat them as 'providential' because they are 'sent us'. Rossetti urges us to look for spiritual and creative opportunity in divided attention (*Time Flies*, entry for 20th August).

The workshops gave plentiful evidence of Rossetti's idea of providentially creative interruption. Dr Hesketh began one of the scheduled sessions by telling us that her toddler had been ill the whole week, and she was operating on hardly any sleep. Never have I seen a group of writers better-placed to understand and accept this circumstance; in fact, that session turned out to be one of our most productive and bonding. It made me think that enhancing the visibility of caring work is not just good for carers, but good for everyone. How much healthier (and better-prepared) might our society be if instead of concealing our family lives and caring responsibilities, we were encouraged to acknowledge, share and accommodate them? After all, most of us will become carers in our lifetime: according to Carers UK, at least three in five. Since the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak, there has been a 50% increase in the number of unpaid carers.

Time Flies was one of the touch-stones of our workshops. Each session began with a passage from the book encouraging us to think about the relationship between caring work and writing. We also looked at poetry from more recent writers, such as Brian Bilston, James Schuyler, Anya Silver and Jean Nordhaus, among others. Participants responded by writing poems or ideas for poems, lists or fragments, or whatever came to mind. Sometimes we talked about writing, sometimes we listened as someone spoke about their own circumstances and struggles, their pasts or their future dreams. Some of the participants said very little during sessions, and then sent me poems whose power knocked me sideways for days. Others weren't able to contribute their poems to this collection. In some cases, this was because of a sudden decline in the health of those for whom they were caring. The absence of these writers' voices is a reminder not to romanticise either care or creativity. I wish this collection could present a portrait of literature riding to the rescue of those in distress, but the truth is messier and more complicated. Despite Rossetti's hopes for the providential power of interruptions, the relationship between writing and caring is precarious, troubled and uncertain, as susceptible to sad or ambiguous endings as redemptive ones.

When I set up these workshops I had no idea how deeply they would affect my approach to scholarship, my preconceptions about creativity and care – and even my body, which was suddenly incapable of suppressing tears and laughter. I was reminded of bell hooks, who urges teachers to ‘practice being vulnerable in the classroom, being wholly present in mind, body and spirit’ (*Teaching To Transgress*, 21). Decades of subordinating my physical and emotional self as a teacher melted away, particularly when participants read their poems, written in the moment, out loud. I wasn’t reaching for my tissue box just because the poems were sad (though often they were), but because they existed. The undeniable, strong emotions this workshop engendered derived partly from the communal discussion of the pleasures and pains of caring responsibilities and the exposure of rich, hidden lives, but also from the transformative act of making them into art. One workshop participant puts it beautifully: ‘I would never have thought of using poetry to help me reflect on my role in caring but it has been a wonderful way of reflecting on thoughts and feelings previously barely acknowledged’.

The title of this collection comes from the anonymous writer of ‘Singing In The Morning, Or In The Night’. The poem is about a man who wakes up singing songs to his wife. His dementia means that he has forgotten she has died. For our poet, this bittersweet performance is at once tragic and hopeful:

Singing is the way
Of connecting. I sing, therefore I am

Apparently, Christina Rossetti was not very musical herself, at least according to her brother William Michael. What she did understand, however, was the power of singing; many of her most famous poems are simply entitled ‘Song’, including for example ‘When I am dead my dearest’. Singing, like writing poetry, is an outburst of creativity, a way not simply to connect, but to recognise and honour the creative self. I invite you to accept these poets’ invitation to witness their work coming into being.

Foreword

Dr Sarah Hesketh

When Dr Dinah Roe first asked me if I would like to help design a series of workshops for those with caring responsibilities, inspired by Christina Rossetti's *Time Flies*, I will admit I was a little daunted. Rossetti's book was written in the 1880s. She was a woman subject to all the expectations and pressures of her period with no support structures in place for her care work. There was no welfare state, nothing like our contemporary awareness of long-term illness or mental health issues, no diagnosis pathways for those suffering the aggressions of age. Surely we had moved on since Rossetti's time in how we relate to those in need of care and, more importantly, in our recognition of those who find themselves taking on the complex, overwhelming, and often undefinable role of a 'carer'.

I should have known better. What became apparent from our very first workshop is that being a carer remains a tremendously difficult, often lonely, often traumatic experience. Almost all of the participants in the workshop talked at some point about how this was the first time they had been in a space where they were able to even talk about what it was like to be a carer, with other carers. The point of these particular workshops, and the reason they quickly felt so special to be a part of, was not just that people were able to find ways to express their own individual experiences and feelings through the poetry we were writing, but that the poetry became a vehicle for sharing and solidarity across the group. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the barriers to creativity and self-expression were something we returned to often in the workshops. Each brave and beautiful poem shared by someone in the group offered a moment where others could exhale and say oh yes, me too, oh I'm so glad I'm not alone.

It is difficult to make the poetry of care sound uplifting, but I have seldom looked forward so much to meeting with a group of writers. 'The immediate is easier' writes the anonymous poet of 'Why', and I'd like to thank all the writers in this anthology for taking the time away from their busy lives to write and share their work with the world. The time I spent with these writers will stay with me, as will their words. Rossetti came to believe in the power of interruption as a part of her creativity. I hope you enjoy reading these poems. Let them interrupt you, disrupt your day. There are great rewards to be had in being thrown off course.

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