

# **MUG WITHOUT A HANDLE**

Life after Loss of a Long-term Partner  
One Woman's Experience

Alison Chippindale

# Introduction

## Setting Out

A Gentle Leaving	5
Death	6
Shiny Shoes	7
Going Solo	8
My Not Man	9
My Air Man	10
Absence	11
He Wasn't There	12
Afterwards	13

## Adjusting

Changes	30
Mug without a Handle	31
We to I	32
Early Morning Intimacy	33
Soup or Scrambled Egg	34
Unaccustomed Space	35
Missing Witness	36
Lost Memories	37
Communities Go Too	38

## Going Forward

Survivor	50
Building a New Life	51
Never Safe	52
Digesting Life	53
Another Milestone	54
His Clothes	55
His Shed	59
Clearing Your Work-table	61
Summer Separation	63
Revisiting Pembrokeshire	64
The House is Mine	65

## The Sadness

Always Absence	15
Bedtime Sadness	16
I Miss You	17
Despite Everything	18
Crochet not Knitting	19
Mornings without You	21
I Want to Talk to Him	22
The Gift of Tears	23
Balloon Time	24
The Big Gap	25
The Long Grief	26
Yearning	27
Grey Day	28

## Strategies

On Becoming a Widow	40
Sundays with You	41
Some Compensations	42
Body Wisdom	43
Needing a Break	44
Dilemmas	45
Night Solace	46
Transitions	47

First Tellings	66
Still Processing	68
Time Does Help	69

# INTRODUCTION

Eighteen months after my husband Rhon died, the first poem came to me, totally unexpectedly. I captured it with joy. I had not written any poetry for twenty-eight years. Many poems were to follow. They became, still are, an important tool in my grieving, helping me to work out and express my feelings. After all, he was, and is, not here to talk to. I live with “the constant presence of his absence”.

As I began occasionally sharing them with friends, I realised that they could be useful to other people too. I have a need to be useful, not always easy when roles have been lost through retirement and widowhood. One way could be through my poetry, something positive coming out of my sadness.

I hope these poems will help people. (Maybe even encourage others to have a go at writing about their feelings. . . .)

People in a similar position, through death, separation/divorce or the mental deterioration of their partner, may draw comfort from knowing they are not alone, and from seeing that some of what they may be feeling and experiencing can be, has been, put into words.

These poems may also become a resource for people who are supporting the grieving, giving them an insight into how it can be.

More generally, I hope they will contribute to a greater understanding of living with grief, and create more openness about sharing.

Finally, friends enjoying long-term relationships have told me these poems have reminded them to appreciate more what they have, not just to take it for granted.

Above all, I see my poems as a celebration of life and love, for anyone.

Thank you, Rhon.

*[www.alisonchippindalepoet.co.uk](http://www.alisonchippindalepoet.co.uk)*

# SETTING OUT

## **A Gentle Leaving**

“You are on your way out, my friend.”

Easier to hear than the nurse’s stark words.

Lying on a bed in a private room, tucked  
away behind the packed morning clinic,  
my weakened husband was ready.

Certainty at last, the task now clear.

He handed himself in and was beautifully  
cared for, a ward, then the hospice.

Friday to Tuesday morning, precious time  
for goodbyes, a family party round his bed,  
his modest last wishes fulfilled.

Then the waiting, no more talk,  
as he breathed his way to death.

Kind, alert nurses tended his body.

Close friends and family flowed  
and settled round his quietness,  
holding his warm hands.

## Death

He breathed again,  
eventually again,  
and again.

We waited, poised,  
nothing happened.

Silence.

They tidied him,  
removed tubes,  
straightened the bed.

We found him  
lying peacefully,  
so very, very still,  
and solid.

None of us went to the  
undertakers to see him.

## **Shiny Shoes**

Afterwards we collected his shoes,  
a good strong brown laced pair,  
his favourite style, bought to last,  
only just broken in, we chose them together.  
Our daughter had cleaned them for him.

And his ashes. In a small but heavy box.  
They were happy to burn the clothes  
he was wearing, his comfy jeans,  
a pink shirt, but not the shoes.

His son wears them now.

## **Going Solo**

I could have done with him  
after he died.

That was when I really needed him.

We did all the big things together,  
falling in love, childbirth, twice,  
my father's sudden death and funeral,  
the girls learning to walk,  
starting school,  
leaving home.

Side by side, sharing experiences,  
mutual support, deepening,  
deepening what we had.

This time I had to do it  
alone.

And for ever after.



## **My Not Man**

Not in the garden,  
not in the kitchen,  
not in his shed,  
not at the piano,  
not in the bathroom,  
not on the stairs,  
not in our bed.

Not out, but coming home later.  
Not away, but coming home on Tuesday.

Not,  
not.

He is not.

But

I

am.

## **My Air Man**

The rest of the room looks fine.

I have filled up the void,  
my clothes spread along the hanging rail,  
in every drawer.

Even two dressing gowns  
on the back of the door,  
both mine.

The bed though  
is something else,  
the empty space  
where you should be.

I stick to my side,  
sleeping, and slipping  
in and out,  
never crossing  
onto yours,  
where you still are,

my air man.

## **Absence**

Idle chat on coming home,

“How was it”?

Choir?

Yoga?

Your friend?

As we cooked together,

laid the table,

put the bin out.

Ordinary, everyday.

Thirty-six years.

## **He Wasn't There**

He wasn't there:

singing in the basses,  
his bright white hair making him easy to spot,  
absorbed and glowing with his pleasure in the music.

He wasn't there:

milling afterwards, bumping into old friends,  
wine and mince pies, sharing a joke,  
catching up on news,  
easily, side by side.

He wasn't there:

walking to the bus in the sharp cold night,  
arm in warm arm, enjoying a gossip,  
delighting in a job well done.

He wasn't there:

as I made a drink,  
locked up for the night,  
hearing the silence of solitude.

## Afterwards

On my allotment  
there's a round, deep hole  
down in the orchard,  
a veritable mantrap,  
a firepit.

In it are the ashes of my husband.

And he's spread across the bed  
next the water tank,  
where last year we grew potatoes.  
He'd have liked that.

Closer to home some of him  
is in my flowerbed  
opposite his shed window,  
helping to feed my plants  
he loved so much.

But he is in none of those places.

He is always with me,  
tightly held.

This time  
I will not let him go.

# THE SADNESS

## **Always Absence**

He doesn't have to do this,  
he went first.

He would have managed with his 3 ems -  
motorbikes, meditation and men friends.

I'm sure another woman in his life too.  
From twenty on  
he was never without.

I manage,  
as I said  
I would.

## **Bedtime Sadness**

Sometimes going to bed without you  
is still hard.

I do these my days  
day after day.  
Nearly a thousand  
since you slipped away.

I was interested in his days  
and he in mine.  
He was in my days  
and I in his.  
He was my chosen person, always.

And now there is space  
and only my thoughts,  
feelings,  
opinions,  
reflections,  
comments.

A monologue running in my head.

Pudding, no cream.

Sea, no surfboard.



## **I Miss You**

I did not choose to live alone.

I chose to live with you.

Thirty-six years  
of choosing that.

If I follow my mother's longevity,  
another thirty-six years  
of having  
what I did not choose.

I see the advantages of my solo life,  
but sometimes  
my widowhood feels like  
premature menopause.

## **Despite Everything**

My daughters help,  
and the grandchildren,  
my wider family,  
all my friends,  
cat, house, garden, allotment,  
polytunnel, neighbours.

The list is endless,  
bike, river,  
walks along the ridge,  
wood-burner,  
electric blanket, radio 4,  
books, films,  
yoga, dance,  
singing, writing,  
seaside holidays,  
surfing.

They all help, my life packed.

I am happy.

And lonely.

A raspberry ripple life.

## **Crochet not Knitting**

There is a lot of learning to do.

And it is lonely

learning without you.

We were doing very nicely,

knitting together harmoniously

from one fat ball of wool,

the soft, strong cloth stretching out behind us.

You suddenly dropped out,

spinning away into oblivion,

your stitches slipping into a void.

Some caught by me just in time,

others left suspended, gaping open.

Any of my movements dangerous,

threatening the unravelling

of all we had created together.

There was a pause of shock.

Slowly, very carefully,

I picked up each hanging stitch,

claimed it as my own,

so the cloth remained intact.

But what next?

Only one needle.

Switching to crochet?

A single-needle craft.

The actions would change,  
and the feel and look of the cloth,  
with a marked break of transition.

I have never done crochet.

I have always been  
a two-needle knitter.

## Mornings without You

I want you there, making coffee.

Every detail of your coffee-making ritual  
known to me, putting the kettle on,  
finding the measure in the drawer,  
the walk to the fridge for the packet,  
the careful levelling of the scoop,  
tipping out twice, a double knock,  
pouring on the boiling water.

After a pause, laying your place  
with toast, butter, marmalade, plate, knife,  
the gentle steady pressure on the coffee-pot lid.

Finally to the table, with your favourite mug.  
Radio 4. And often conversation.

Now, I do yoga alone in the conservatory,  
the only sound and movement  
the turning of the washing machine.

The kitchen behind me otherwise quiet.

Empty and still.

No coffee smell.

## **I Want to Talk to Him**

I want to talk to him

about our daughters,  
their lives, the changes,  
how we were at their age,  
similarities, differences,  
to understand them,  
and us, better.

I want to talk to him

about his beautiful shed,  
the leaking roof, what to do,  
my constant joy in seeing it in the garden,  
long and low, all timber,  
how I use it now.

I want to talk to him

about my yoga holiday,  
the dance class,  
my visit to a friend,  
the book I'm reading,  
the huge crop of carrots,  
the new place  
to keep the jam.

## **The Gift of Tears**

I cry most days,  
in the house,  
along the river.

Sometimes with joy and relief,  
sometimes just tiredness,  
or my endless sadness.

A minute or two of tears.

Whatever the feeling,  
a valve is released,  
the steam escapes,  
I can become fully present again,  
seeing clearly,  
alive to the world.

The drying salt on my cheeks  
a symbol of my constant gratitude.

## Balloon Time

You are gone,  
but memories of you,  
and gratitude,  
and love,  
inflate every cell in my body.

Luckily my structure,  
bones, muscles, tendons,  
is strong and taut,  
nurtured.

Able to contain the pressure,  
maintain inner and outer balance.

But sometimes I grow so big  
I am jammed,  
cannot move,  
on the stairs, in the shower,  
between your two sheds.

A tiring process,  
this hidden life  
without you.



## The Big Gap

I have always hated  
breaking or losing things.

A cup, a bowl,  
gloves, a scarf  
left on a train.

The gap hurts,  
gone the pleasure,  
its comfort,  
usefulness,  
beauty.

And the waste,  
china into landfill.  
(At least with clothing,  
someone else benefits).

But for pain and loss  
your going beats  
every piece of crockery,  
every small garment.

## The Long Grief

After thirty-six years together, from the initial miracle,  
through family, parenting, work, fun, holidays, full lives,  
to the warm steady closeness of your illness and dying,  
these two years seem as nothing.

Our last precious times together as vivid as ever,  
indeed more so, unexpected.

Of course there was shock at the beginning,  
and the busy distractions of funeral, probate, paperwork,  
selling your precious motor-bikes,  
big adjustments to all the individual minutiae of  
our rich, complex daily rounds.

So much new,  
re-shaping the house for one,  
family relationships re-forming round the huge gap you left,  
learning alone to live alone.

Now in calmer waters, I have time and space to reflect.

These days I miss you more deeply.  
Longing and pain swipe me sideways,  
as I know at last  
the specialness of what we created together.

This is the real start of my solo journey without you,  
the long slog of hurting.

## **Yearning**

A man swims across the bay  
and I wish it was you.

A man steps off the bus  
and I wish it was you.

## **Grey Day**

Sometimes it's a dull ache,  
this missing you,  
a heavy drag,  
slowing me down,  
shunting me into a siding.

Where I wait in grey,  
chilly stillness,  
till it passes,

and I can re-emerge,  
my fire alight,  
steam up,  
pounding down  
the main line again.

# ADJUSTING

## Changes

Difficult week.

Monday evening

mother died,

husband

Thursday morning.

Stark choice.

With him,

not her.

Then Friday, Saturday,

Sunday, Monday.

Every day full

of their absence.

Especially my husband's.

Swollen with memories,

I manage to fill the house,

and garden,

alone.

## **Mug without a Handle**

Around me couples go to the pictures,  
away on holiday,  
plan for the grandchildren's visit,  
shop together.

I'm like a mug without a handle,  
my long relationship with you  
snapped off.

People throw damaged china away,  
but not me.  
I have a mug like that in my cupboard,  
useful for leftovers in the fridge,  
for beating eggs.

Always at my side  
will be the mark of  
where we were attached.

But now I can be held differently.

## **We to I**

We to I.

Our to my.

Concentration's needed.

Sometimes a "we" slips out, not an "I",  
an "our" instead of a "my".

It happens, say, when I show new friends  
round house and garden. "We've got photovoltaics  
on the workshop roof . . . we used to have a lawn at the front".

Easier when I'm out,  
chatting to strangers,  
"I live near the bus stop,  
my house, my garden, my car".

How can they know?

I wear no wedding ring now.



## **Early Morning Intimacy**

I like lying in bed and talking.

The best place.

Held within your arm, my head on your shoulder,  
the safety and ease of gaze into your warm body,  
up at your face, towards the ceiling,  
adjusting positions and touch  
to match the flow of our chat.

We did a lot of it, waking together each morning.

Since you died, my conversations have taken place  
on opposite chairs in kitchens and cafes,  
side by side on many sofas,  
bodies dressed and separate.

Usually in social hours,  
planned in advance.

## **Soup or Scrambled Egg**

All the decisions are mine now.

Soup or scrambled egg,  
holidays, car insurance,  
whether to build a downstairs loo and shower room,  
how to spend every single moment  
of every precious day.

Unfettered, uncompanied,  
unchallenged, unshared.

Freedom to be lonely in,  
or to enjoy.

My choice,  
every single moment  
of every precious day.

## Unaccustomed Space

We had found the beauty of ordinariness,  
living in a semi, bus stop outside,  
library down the road.

Now the bed beside me is flat,  
the dining chair opposite empty,  
I sit in the driver's seat in the car,  
lie across the whole sofa,  
move freely round the kitchen,  
no you at the sink blocking the light.

Space,  
everywhere space.  
Silence,  
and stillness.

At first, I didn't want it.

Now I have learnt to  
fill it,  
enjoy it.  
Mostly.

## Missing Witness

What would you think  
if you were to come back now,  
and see how I am living without you?  
How I look, feel, what I radiate?

What would you think of  
my lifestyle, my friends,  
how I parent our daughters?

What would you think of  
the ways I have changed  
the house, your shed,  
the motor-bike workshop,  
the garden, the allotment?

All is mine now to do with as I please,  
but I really would value your comments,  
helping me see it all from your perspective.

So it's not just you I miss,  
life partner, co-parent,  
daily companion,  
it's you as witness,  
reflecting, challenging.  
We did that for each other.

You don't need me now, I assume,  
but sometimes I could do with you.

## **Lost Memories**

Remembering our past there are big gaps,  
lost memories, that you are not here to help me find.

We would have prompted each other,  
pieced it together, my bit, your bit, making the whole.

Now, when I look back I see less, only part of what was.

In losing you, I lose my past.

## **Communities Go Too**

My mother died.

I lost my regular contact  
with the home, my relationships  
with the wonderful managers, the team,  
chats with other residents,  
all so uplifting.

My husband died.

I lost my time with his friends,  
traffic through the house  
and motor-bike workshop,  
cups of tea,  
easy talk,  
interesting encounters.

# STRATEGIES

## On Becoming a Widow

I have never done this before.

On the final drive to the hospital, my “I'm going to be all right, you know”  
and your “I know you will” our only preparation for my years without you.

In those first tricky raw months  
I no longer feared time as I had.  
It became clear what I needed to do.

I never did the time-filling I was advised to do by so many.  
I learnt to live with, rather than hide, my deep sorrow.  
I sat with the sadness and the loneliness and found my way.

.  
Early days, and it's not always been easy.

I am seizing the opportunity you have given me.  
What else can I do? There is no other way, this my belief -  
*I remain open and everything I need comes to me.*  
I needed this, though not wanting it, nor knowing why,  
and you were beautifully ready, and with grace accepted.

So I remain here, in deep gratitude,  
reaping the rich rewards of our life together.

In living like this, I honour you and our relationship,  
the learning we did together.

You would have done the same.

But the job is mine.



## **Sundays with You**

Sundays are the hardest, our stay-at-home-together day.

Slow start, my fruit salad, your coffee,

cooked breakfast with the Archers.

Chatting, sharing, laughing,

drifting round each other,

in the kitchen, doing this and that.

Relaxed.

Perhaps planning, making joint decisions.

Then you to your motor-bike workshop, door wide open.

I pottered and tidied in house and garden,

popping in for an occasional chat.

Till I would find you in the kitchen

making scones, heavy with seeds and fruit.

We sat together.

Home-made jam, Earl Grey tea, best china.

To start with, I went away most weekends.

Now I stay at home, time alone to miss you.

I am getting better at doing Sundays on my own.

It's still my day with you.

## **Some Compensations**

Now you are no longer here,  
I have moved the table.  
Every day I face my beloved garden.  
Before we were both side on,  
sharing the view equally.

No more hospital visits,  
two years of those inward-facing  
packed rooms,  
waiting, not knowing,  
the power always with them.

And I will never see you slip  
into lonely dementia,  
nor be parted from you by  
illness or craziness,  
nor jointly struggle  
with elderly caring at home.

It could have been different.

## **Body Wisdom**

My body marked my losses,  
a broken chunk of tooth for each death,  
permanent, irreversible.

Dentist visits before each funeral.  
Lucky, just a few doors down.

Happily, my chewing ability  
and smile  
were not impaired.

Life goes on.

## **Needing a Break**

Sometimes I need to be in someone else's house,  
with companionship, friendship, chat,  
talks, meals, outings,  
ordinary sharing togetherness at home.

A rest from my solo life here,  
the moment-by-moment intensity  
of living with the constant  
presence of your absence.

## Dilemmas

I don't know how grieving a husband works, not having done this before.  
The deeper and more frequently I feel the pain, the faster it will go away?

Do I visit the places where it will hurt the most?

The garden I saw three days after you died,  
your favourite walk along the river,  
the restaurant we had our last meal out,  
the seaside places we enjoyed together.  
It's a long list.

Or avoid?

Always new places.

People say, "Do what feels right for you, everyone is different".

I experiment constantly, with familiar and new.

It makes no difference.

The boring sadness drifts through it all.

## Night Solace

I used to turn to you,  
slip my arm around you, spooning  
against your solid familiar back,  
for silent, warm comfort  
and companionship,  
calmed into sleep again.

Now the space beside me lies flat, empty, cold.  
I turn the other way,  
reach down for paper, pencil.

Into that rectangular void  
I breathe my life.

## Transitions

Becoming a mother, becoming a widow.

Someone comes in, someone goes out.

Each a sudden end to the former life  
into a new and unknown place, for ever.

A shock, however prepared. Dazed,  
we have to withdraw, take a day at a time.

Reading and concentration become impossible,  
the mind drawn back to re-living the change.

The loss of usual daily routines, life revolving now  
round the demands of the in-comer.

Who am I? Everyone views us differently now,  
the new role the reason for contact.

Family dynamics change immediately,  
our new status repositions us in the clan history.

Our sense of community and belonging shifts,  
where we will be welcomed, will fit.

Language too must evolve, from I to we,  
mine to ours, or from we to I, ours to mine.

Our house around us is not the same,  
filling with baby kit, emptying of his things.

Yes, widows who are mothers  
have done a big life change before.

Survived and grown.



# GOING FORWARD

## **Survivor**

Through the tears  
I make the most  
of all I have  
and seek more.

## **Building a New Life**

Time and space are the gifts  
they give us,  
our deceased partners.

New.

Unwelcome.

Baggage attached.

What to do with them?

## **Never Safe**

Wham, bam, here it comes again,  
sudden tears, deep sadness,  
sitting in the opticians,  
trying on my new specs,  
peering at the new me  
through bleary tear-filled eyes.

I look different from how he saw me.

Such a seemingly safe activity  
on an ordinary Friday morning.

## **Digesting Life**

We lived life twice,  
double the value.

Cow-like, in our together time  
as we cooked, sat over a meal,  
we would bring back up  
stories of our day,  
chatting over events, sights, experiences,  
extracting every last drop  
of interest, learning,  
humour, sadness.

So was I nourished.

Alone, after your death,  
I have worked very hard  
at the art of solo digestion.

Am rounding out and sleek  
once more.

## **Another Milestone**

I took it off today,  
two years after you died.  
I'd tried before  
but it hadn't felt right.

Over thirty years I wore it, always.

Our marriage now a memory.  
No widow's weeds, a ring.

It's sitting on the chest of drawers.

## His Clothes

For months our bedroom looked the same.  
A visitor would not know he wasn't there.  
Clothes hanging, drawers full, books by the bed.  
Only the rounded pillow, plumped up by me after you died,  
showed your absence.  
(You were not one to straighten your bed in the morning.  
But only I would notice that).

Clothes in the laundry bag got washed and replaced.  
What else to do? Every so often I opened a drawer,  
touched the row of trousers and shirts,  
then turned away. daunted, decisions beyond me.  
Not yet then.

Finally, one brave day, tears running down my cheeks,  
I took big plastic bags and carefully filled them,  
sorting as I went, socks in one, shirts in another, trousers, fleeces.  
A few precious, favourite items saved in one special "you" drawer.  
A couple of jumpers put into mine, for wearing in those hard moments,  
when I needed to feel your strength.

Into the loft they all went. Gone.  
After the funeral, your son had already taken  
your heavy, dark green dressing gown off the back of the door.  
Our bedroom, my bedroom, looked  
suddenly naked, starkly empty,  
crying out to be filled.

I found more hangers, stretched my clothes along the rail,  
spread my things among the empty drawers.

All in a semblance of solo ownership, an act initially,  
till I could do it for real,  
inhabiting the space as mine alone.

It was many months till I knew what to do next,  
the bags sometimes weighing on me,  
up there, very close, in the loft.  
Options running round in my head, unresolved,  
till I decided on a simple process,  
a big relief to know and put in motion.

After Christmas, for your son's birthday,  
we all gathered here, four children and their families,  
an occasion to remember and celebrate, the first time since the funeral.  
We scattered your ashes on the allotment,  
shared your favourite Sunday cooked breakfast.  
Alone each adult went into the loft, chose a few items.  
Not easy.

Later, much later,  
I invited your three closest friends  
to choose and take what they wanted.  
Friends well versed in second-hand clothes,  
charity-shoppers all, as you were,  
appreciating an opportunity to expand their wardrobes,  
wanting to own and wear a memento of you,  
helping me out with a difficult task.



Waiting, nervous, tearful, afraid.

I needn't have worried - it was wonderful,  
a big celebration of you and life.

You would have loved it.

All the bags laid out on my daughter's double bed.

In we all dived, a glorious jumble sale,  
but with mirrors, and trying on, no price tags, experimenting,  
with friends to comment and admire.

We delighted in memories of you.

I remembered where things came from.

They talked of occasions they had seen you wearing that shirt,  
that jacket, those stylish, stripey socks.

"Step up, step up" we shouted in unison,  
as they dared to be smarter in your classy work outfits.

Or "That's you",  
as another sported your favourite tweed cap  
and your black, charity-shop, funeral coat.

Prize items, your pink tee shirts, some of your lovely shirts,  
(you had an eye for quality cloth and design),  
were negotiated over.

Pleasingly, even your trousers fitted and were chosen,  
all three slender men, near enough your height.

The biggest transformation was in Adrian,  
usual wearer of baggy jogging bottoms, worn old tee shirts, hoodies.

Your well-cut, hardly worn black suit fitted him a treat.

With a smart shirt underneath, he looked a different man.

We applauded his beauty.

At last, with talk of having a smart dress-up party  
to show off their new looks,  
they left in triumph, a job well done.

Much was left of course, ties, braces.

Days later they too were bagged up and taken to the village charity shop,  
with a request for display off my patch, elsewhere.

(I did not want surprises. Seeing the three of them was fine,  
sporting familiar clothes, but not strangers).

And now sometimes there is a soft hollow in the pillow next to mine.

Left by Adrian who,  
though wearing your shirt before,  
does not wear your clothes  
as he slips into bed beside me.

But that was much later.

And you would have liked that too.

## His Shed

Nearly two years now  
and I still haven't tackled clearing his shed,  
his beloved timber-framed workspace,  
beautifully designed and built,  
his desk for architectural drawings looking out over the garden,  
my mother's comfy old armchair in front of the wood-burner.  
Books and tape-recorder to hand on shelves beside,  
plenty of room for motor-bike mags.  
His British vintage motor-bikes just feet away, in the workshop,  
a simple slipping through the skinny interconnecting door.  
(He always did want to live in a shed at the bottom of the garden).

Gradually I have moved his possessions  
from the house into his shed,  
pictures no longer wanted,  
books, music, instruments,  
until the house feels fully mine for me alone.  
He is there, of course,  
in every saucepan, every wooden spoon,  
the windows he carefully designed,  
the coffee pot, the piano, the self-closing loo seat,  
yes everywhere,  
but I can live with that. It's now my norm.

The shed feels different,  
his own space, where I was a visitor, not a co-habitee.  
Long desk still covered with papers he was working on,  
pencils, pens, next project drawings, a list of materials.  
Low shelf, now dusty,  
holds the book he was reading, notes he was making.

Once I go in and make order,  
tidy up, remove, dispose of,  
he will be truly gone.

A naked space.

The stripped bed after a hospital death.

No, not yet, not yet.

Soon.

## Clearing Your Work-table

Today I started. Not easy.

How could it be after two years?

Special pens, pencils, slide-rule, set square,  
precious tools of your architectural trade,  
littered over and around your drawing board, left in mid-flow.  
Small motor-bike bits, a pile of well-thumbed business cards,  
carefully sought over many years and many events,  
skilled enthusiasts, creating replacement bits,  
fine tuning, out of distant sheds and garages.  
The list for your favourite hardware shop,  
the small bag of specified screws,  
ready for your next garden structure project.

All now just detritus, not needed on your journey.

I move slowly, gently, not knowing how to do this,  
such an intrusion into your space, your things.

Start simple.

With my duster I begin to tidy up,  
cleaning each item in turn,  
seeing them in your beautiful hands. Sorting, grouping.

Separate piles, dead wasps and spiders into the bin.

OK. Keep breathing.

Next I realise I could move it all to the door end,  
wipe the whole surface,  
stack neatly at the window end.

Yes, that works.

Soon I have neatness and order.

The beauty of quiet emptiness.

## Summer Separation

In late August he loaded his elderly BMW  
with tent, stove, food, walking boots,  
heading for the Isle of Man ferry,  
his annual pilgrimage to the Manx, the classic bike races.

In his luggage, near to hand, a large Tassajara cake  
baked by me, to the monks' special recipe,  
varying a bit every year,  
sometimes dark with blackcurrants, often crimson with raspberries,  
always brazil nuts, coconut, raisins, oats.  
His ritual sustenance for the tiring journey and the settling.

Back home for twelve days alone I continued the looking after,  
house, garden. A few texts or phone calls, hearing the quiet.

The October after he died I took his ashes across the sea,  
to scatter on the course, at his favourite camping spot,  
away in the field, under the oak tree.  
Feeling his love for the island.

These days it is I who enjoy beautiful home-baked cake and bread,  
dense with fruit and nuts, brought to me by my new man,  
to feed and sustain me in my solitary life here at home.

But I still miss the missing.

## Revisiting Pembrokeshire

He will be with me  
as he always was

as I stride along the coast path,  
rest my back against a rock  
with picnic and vast sea-views,  
feel the waves soft over my feet

He will be with me  
as he always was

at the lighthouse,  
round the harbour,  
in the cathedral

This time  
no-one else will see him.



## **The House is Mine**

I have been knocked through,  
one long room now,  
new stove and hearth,  
wooden floors, walls painted,  
soft wool, nice shade.

Confidently and kindly  
the experts swept away  
the spaces we had shared.

After they left,  
I cleaned the windows,  
the first time.

(He liked cleaning windows,  
but that was a long time ago).

Carefully rubbing  
the big panes  
and the little lights above,

I wiped away  
the last remains of his breath.

## First Tellings

My mother got two from me,  
those can't wait to tell her,  
daughter to mother imperative phone calls,  
fresh from the joyful life-changing event.  
"I have met him, he is the one".

Two and a half years later,  
seven a.m., I nipped next door in  
my dressing gown, my phonenumber down,  
leaving my newly home-birthered baby with him,  
now my partner, the new dad.  
"I have had a daughter".

Much later I had moved into the mother slot,  
this first baby daughter an adult.  
I was at work for my first receiving,  
discussing wording for important documents,  
my mind more focused on a Manchester hospital.  
"You have a granddaughter".

I rang her dad at once, drove home,  
celebrated with him,  
our new grandparenting lives stretching before us.

We were together for the next, our younger daughter.  
In a Coventry hotel, Sunday breakfast,  
cathedral yesterday, transport museum today.  
The place was packed with coach parties.  
"We are an item".

That time he congratulated too over the phone.  
We beamed all day among the ancient vehicles.

This last one I was in front of the wood-burner,  
Monday evening, reading, alone.  
My younger daughter at Macbeth at the National Theatre,  
her thirty-first birthday outing from her live-in partner.  
She phoned in the interval.  
(Not a big birthday, that was last year).

“We are engaged.  
You are the first to know”.  
(His parents next, then her sister).  
“Don’t tell anyone”.

But he is not here to tell, your dad.

Who else matters?

I hope there will be more receivings.

I will withstand the pain.

## **Still Processing**

*Back from the hospice,  
our house full, we paused,  
felt the gap,  
planned what next.*

*They dispersed,  
my daughter and babies  
staying to help.*

*All here again for the funeral,  
a big celebration.*

*Then I was alone.*

Five years on, memories continue to press.

## **Time Does Help**

To start with I stumbled a lot,  
tripping up endlessly over the missing of you.  
Sudden, sharp shocks of hurt,  
upsetting my attempts to move forward.

Now the way feels clearer.  
I am getting into my stride,  
gliding more smoothly over the humps of sadness.

I have been stretched.