



Juliet Robertson

Blood Lines

Living and dying with cancer
– a lyrical journey

Praise for *Blood Lines*

As someone living with a blood cancer, the resonance felt with this beautifully messy and creative means of communicating the harsh reality that is cancer is profound. How does one speak of the unspeakable? How does one make sense of that which makes no sense? Robertson generously provides an opening into the realities of cancer treatment through poetry, soundbites and diary entries, correctly making clear that we cannot know what this journey holds as we will undertake a lot of it alone. For who wants their loved ones to observe cancer treatment's harsh reality? Robertson does a beautiful job of sharing her experience while embraced in the unenviable task of coming to terms with her own mortality. A gift of wisdom, straight from the heart of the wound.

Dr Lisa Cherry, director of Trauma Informed Consultancy Services, author of *Conversations That Make a Difference to Children and Young People*

What an amazing, moving and uplifting read.

Juliet manages to capture the experience of living with cancer with creativity, candour, humour and tremendous soul. So much of her writing resonates with my own experience of living through those final months with someone you love dearly. Juliet captures the rollercoaster of emotions, and there will be much in these pages to comfort both the living and the dying. True to form, Juliet's writing offers support and gentle guidance for those on their own journey and leaves the reader with a sense of hope even in the most adverse times. A beautiful book.

Thank you for letting me read it!

Ruth Swailes, curriculum consultant, improvement advisor and author of *A Child Centred EYFS* and *The Oxford International Early Years Curriculum*

Blood Lines brings together the deeply personal and the broadly social. Each poem stands alone, and yet the collection is a whole narrative—it reaches far and wide in feeling and subject and in time and space. It is imbued with the natural world and with a passion for words and literature. In her writing, Juliet is the teacher we always wanted: fun, creative, honest, profound, challenging and full of original and independent thinking. In *Blood Lines*, there are many generous invitations—for example, to take 'a pacifist approach / non-violent direct action' or to 'dance and play' with feelings—lessons for everyone but, as the collection so powerfully reveals, particularly for those living and dying with cancer, and for those standing with them. At Flynn's Barn we have felt this generosity and are immensely grateful to Juliet for the belief and support that she has shown us.

Robin Ewart-Biggs, co-founder of Flynn's Barn, Cumbria

I think Juliet's book of poetry, musings, advice and intense thinking is inspirational to the right reader who wants a companion, comfort and also a dose of reality on the most difficult journey of all. Juliet is quite incredible.

The varied styles of the poetry give a personalised and informal feel and are such a wonderful way to give an authentic voice to the writing. It's almost unbearably real. I get the impression that writing it has helped Juliet, and it may well help others too. The images are sharp, they fall across the reader's mind in a multitude of emotions and seem exactly what they are: feelings expressed in a high-level, articulate way that follow no pattern but Juliet's own. She writes as the day demands in her mind with charts, thought bubbles, data and a context for each poem. The section divisions really help the sense of a journey. It's fast, it's painful but it's beautiful in places too.

Some people in their final days, or going through long treatment, will certainly benefit from reading something so honest but also very well written with hugely effective word use and image making.

Thanks for the privilege of reading this.

Bob Cox, author of the *Opening Doors* series

I applaud and admire anyone who faces up to a terminal illness. To write honestly and even lyrically about it is quite remarkable. Juliet Robertson has done just that.

In *Blood Lines* we meet Juliet exploring, chronologically, her myriad experiences of cancer and its treatments. But we also meet ourselves. Her poetry encourages us to put ourselves in her position. Her belief that 'everything will be alright' is perhaps a surprising—even challenging—conclusion.

Juliet's poetry highlights the interdependent and collaborative aspects of her journey. She is being continually supported by her husband Mark, her family, her friends and innumerable healthcare individuals. This is not a poet seeking pity, but elucidating how loving relationships provide her with healing, hope and light, particularly when they are in short supply.

This is a poetry book, but it is so much more! It has a colourful Amish-esque quilt of care; a humorous map, with umpteen road signs, of Juliet's journey; a surreal game of snakes and ladders and even a DIY Death Notice!

Juliet Robertson has gifted us a vibrant and heartfelt insight into how she is enjoying *and* enduring her confrontation with the 'omnipotence of cancer'. And she ain't done yet!

David S. Hutchison, psychotherapist and hospice wellbeing coordinator



When my blood became ink,
words began to flow.

Juliet Robertson's collection, *Blood Lines*, is a poetic exploration of her terminal cancer diagnosis. Throughout the collection, Robertson's resilience and positivity shine through: 'I'm a dancer with my cancer / fabulous partners in crime', she states. At times she uses startlingly original visual representations to respond to the processes surrounding her diagnosis; at others Robertson uses unusual imagery to transform the slow steps of her journey: it is a bus ride, a space trip, a road journey, a seashore. Heartbreaking and heartwarming, *Blood Lines* is a handbook for living and dying well, delivered with grace, fortitude and humour.

Sue Burge, writer, mentor, editor, tutor

Blood Lines, despite the overarching and painful subject matter (the poet's terminal diagnosis of acute myeloid leukaemia), is a beautiful book. A poetry collection wrapped in bright photography and captioned with journal notes, Juliet Robertson has created something complete and powerful—a document, a testament, a whole world contained inside its pages. The poems are accessible and playful (the traffic signs of 'C Road Journey'); specific and harrowing ('The walk of a sentenced woman'); yet universal and soulful ('To pull clouds over the moon'). She allows the reader to experience devastating empathy without ever losing her way into clichés of self-pity. Everyone's experience of cancer is different, of course, but as a former leukaemia patient myself, the black comedy of Robertson's laughing hyenas and medical vampires, the threat of relapse and the very real sensation of 'Scanxiety' resonate hard and true to my illness too. Juliet's writing is steeped in love, driven by a pursuit of understanding, and offers catharsis and acceptance. This collection is exactly what it needs to be: heartfelt, fragile and honest.


Jamie Woods, poet and former leukaemia patient, author of *Rebel Blood Cells*



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p. 9 the author was delighted to be able to take and use this photograph of Crawick Multiverse.
'Graceful swallows', 'The visitor' and 'Floating on a sunset ocean' appeared in an article on the HealthTree Foundation website in September 2022—a global nonprofit organisation that supports and connects patients with researchers. For more information visit <https://healthtree.org>.
p. 118 inspired by listening to Sophie Ellis-Bextor's track, 'Murder on the Dancefloor'.

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This book is dedicated to my mum, Lisa,
and her hand-squeezes of encouragement in her latter years.

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Introduction

In my working life, writing came easily to me. Yet when I was ill for months on end, I struggled to focus on much, least of all writing. I was unable to articulate all that was happening and its personal impact.

Whilst in hospital, two friends sent me poetry anthologies. These turned out to be what I needed. Books where it did not matter if you started reading at whatever page the book fell open. Poems that could be read multiple times, others that could be skipped over. Eventually I started writing poetry. It provided the cognitive stimulation I needed and a cathartic release for processing my thoughts and feelings about having cancer.

The result of all the reading, processing and tentative first steps into poetry is this collection. It documents my living with acute myeloid leukaemia (AML), which is one of many blood cancers. Yet I hope that anyone with any cancer diagnosis and their families, friends, workplace colleagues as well as those who work in cancer-related fields will find this book relevant.

The poems tell my story and have helped me to open up difficult conversations with my husband, Mark, as well as my family, friends and strangers, around living with cancer. The collection has grown slowly over three years. I attended several poetry courses which have helped me to develop the diversity of my poems and reflect critically on what I am creating, alongside mentoring. I have many practice poems tucked away that never made it into this book.

I continue to be part of an online creative journaling course for people with a blood cancer diagnosis. We talk, listen, write, create art and express ourselves through our sessions. There is a lot of laughter and empathy, especially when we mention our frustrations and struggles. This has helped me to make sense of the complexity and depth of feeling below the surface of my daily life.

To the poets and my journaling friends, I am grateful for your inspiration. To the thousands of well-wishers, thank you for your ongoing kindness and messages of love and support. To Mark and my family, who have been continuously by my side through the wilderness of uncertainty, I love you very much.

These poems may stir up memories and feelings from your own life experiences. Please seek help if you are suffering. There are many mental health and cancer support charities that offer counselling, drop-in sessions and creative approaches to self-expression. You are not alone.

This book does not provide medical, healthcare or well-being advice. It is a creative exploration of my own experiences. The medical commentary may not always meet the precise expectations of those who work in haematology as it is my understanding and interpretation as a patient, based on memories, discharge sheets, my calendar, notes and downloadable booklets from cancer charities. I remain grateful to all those involved in my treatment and care.

All royalties from this book will be donated to UK cancer charities.

Blood ... that fragile scarlet tree we carry within us.

Osbert Sitwell, *Left Hand Right Hand!* Vol 1: *The Cruel Month*



Section 1

In the beginning

Who I am

I'm a time traveller, a joiner of places
who nails events from then to now.
I'm an amplifier, of ideas and principles
explainer of concepts—basic know-how.
I'm a translator, trusted by people
welcoming me into their tribes as kin.
I'm a placater, a person of reason
reassuring all, I don't do spin.

I was the player, of pianos and pack cards
inventor of street games on a concrete backyard.
I was the runner, a lover of breathing
a child who sought action, finding stationary hard.
I was the follower of friends who loved 'Pop Muzik'
dancing moves to video-killing radio stars.
I was the sweet swapper of Black Jacks and Mojos
street talking—*why-aye-man*, *howay* and *diven-nas*.

I'm a land lover who speaks up for spirits
of flora and fauna both present and past.
I am a seeker of practical possibilities
determined to find solutions that last.
I am a creator of caring customs
knitting community with poise and grace.
I am a child of ideas and what-ifs
who imagines a future we must all dare face.



We are people with life histories and rich stories. We have hopes, dreams and aspirations. We have values that underpin our thoughts, words and actions. We have voices that need and deserve to be heard. We are not defined by our cancer or other chronic illnesses. In the busyness of cancer treatment and its aftermath, this can be forgotten. Taking a few minutes to write down your story can be helpful in times of ill health and adversity and to remind yourself of what makes you the remarkable person you are.



Learning sense

place reading
worn paths, rubbed bark, tree growths
wonder marks

motion watching
land travel, cloud forms, sun sky track
movement transforms

earth smelling
fungi emerge, leaves decay, branches rot
time changes

intense tasting
berries, gathered nuts, apple munch
tongue memory

nature writing
mud sticks, scratched messages, carved rocks
etched ideas

outdoor learning
tree walls, sky ceiling, soil floor
room for everyone

Before my diagnosis, I was an education consultant specialising in learning and play outdoors. I loved working with children and adults to enable this to happen. It never seemed like work—unless I was doing my tax returns!

The week before Christmas

The phone call tore through my life:
a poinsettia shredded and scattered
across my mind. This Friday night chat
with a nephrologist left me dusted in
powdery mildew: fungal worries

spreading through my brain. I hit Google
searching for the okay as Monday neared.
Vitamin deficiency or cancer. My bet was on
the Big C, odds 3-1 in favour of leukaemia,
lymphoma or myeloma. I pulled apart

the literature, wrestled with the research,
snatched at life stories and stared through
a glass pane to a smeary future. Questions,
blood samples, examinations, expressive eyes
floating above face masks. Comments dropped

softly, like red bracts falling, releasing
the language of cancer: blasts, cell counts,
a bone marrow biopsy and me, holding on
for the diagnosis to emerge, flawlessly
administered by the consultant who would

pare his speech down to the bone truth.
I knew before being told. The unwanted gift,
torn corners revealing clues about its contents.
I waited patiently while poinsettia confetti
turned to splinters in my head as I ruptured.



In December 2020, I signed up to be a living kidney donor. An array of blood tests were undertaken on the final Friday afternoon before Christmas. To receive an evening phone call, with strict instructions to go to hospital if I felt at all unwell, was unnerving, especially as I was asymptomatic.

Diagnosis

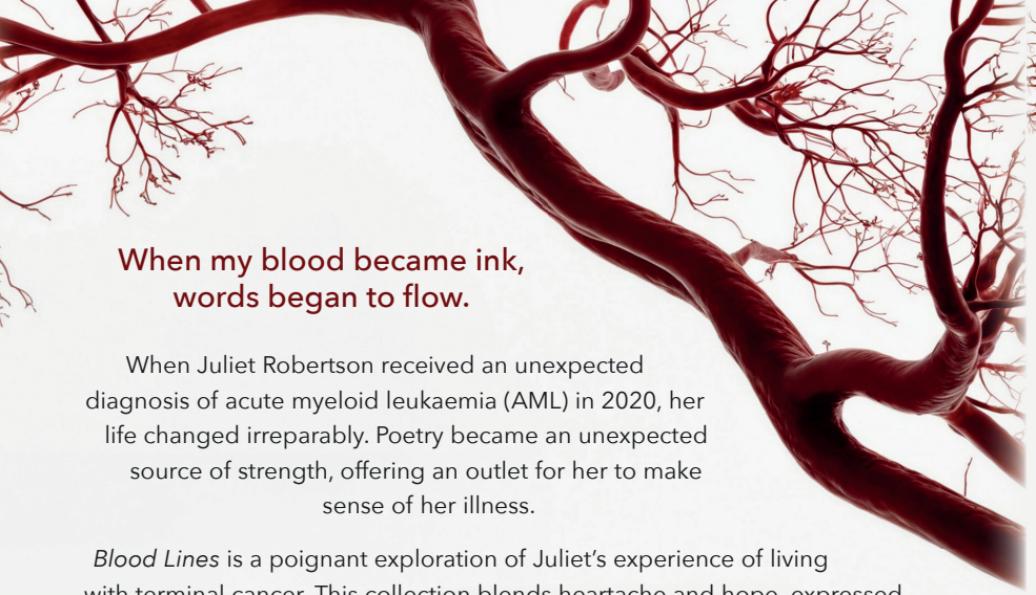
my universe explodes
space collapses
time sags slows spirals
into the black hole inside me

a billion stars glitter their promises
I am light years from reaching them
suspended in interstellar limbo

a new sea of gravitational reality
ripples through me
deep in my space
rebirth begins



Being told I had leukaemia was a surreal moment. Time froze. The space between me, inside and outside my body, and the doctor was like straddling different universes. It is imprinted into my memory forever—the end of one part of my life, the beginning of another and a venture into the unknown.



**When my blood became ink,
words began to flow.**

When Juliet Robertson received an unexpected diagnosis of acute myeloid leukaemia (AML) in 2020, her life changed irreparably. Poetry became an unexpected source of strength, offering an outlet for her to make sense of her illness.

Blood Lines is a poignant exploration of Juliet's experience of living with terminal cancer. This collection blends heartache and hope, expressed through an array of different poetic forms that balance humour with honesty.

An inspiring read for anyone who has been personally affected by cancer, including patients, their families and friends and oncology professionals.

Robertson's resilience and positivity shine through.

Sue Burge, writer, mentor, editor, tutor

Juliet is quite incredible.

Bob Cox, author of the Opening Doors series

This is not a poet seeking pity, but elucidating how loving relationships provide her with healing, hope and light.

David S. Hutchison, psychotherapist and hospice wellbeing coordinator

This collection is exactly what it needs to be: heartfelt, fragile and honest.

Jamie Woods, poet and former leukaemia patient, author of *Rebel Blood Cells*

A gift of wisdom, straight from the heart of the wound.

Dr Lisa Cherry, director of Trauma Informed Consultancy Services



Juliet Robertson is a retired education consultant specialising in outdoor learning and play and the author of two popular books, *Dirty Teaching* and *Messy Maths*. In 2024 she was awarded an honorary Doctorate in Education from Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, in recognition of her pioneering work and significant contribution to education.

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Coping with illness and specific conditions