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Hannah Hodgson, *163 Days* (Bridgend: Seren, 2022). Pp. 86. £9.99.

Hannah Hodgson's debut book of poems, *163 Days*, documents the writer's journey from hospitalisation to diagnosis, and her attempts to make sense of her experiences as a young disabled woman. Taking its title from the author's longest hospital stay to date, the book is in two parts. The first, '163 Days', takes the form of a diary, where Hodgson's meditations on each day on the ward are juxtaposed with her hospital notes. In the second, 'After Care', Hodgson explores the experience of living with chronic illness, tackling themes including pain, desire and facing normative life course expectations with a non-normative body.

Hodgson's 163 days in hospital begin on Monday, 19 January, when, following a four and a half hour wait in A&E, she is seen by a registrar who '*rolls her eyes*' when Hodgson cries out as her first cannular – a small flexible plastic tube inserted into a vein – is administered. As the tube is inserted, Hodgson notes that: '*I feel as a tin must, when an opener / pries a portion of its lid*' (9). Unable to eat without vomiting, a naso-jejunal tube is fitted to help bring nutrition into her body. On Saturday, 21 February, Hodgson writes that she is '*holding a memorial service*' for the foods that have departed from her diet: '*hot Ribena on bitter afternoons*', '*fish fingers in buttered baps*', and baked beans, '*the enemy of Breakfast*' (17). Such dietary losses reflect not just an inability to enjoy familiar tasty snacks, but also a growing feeling of disconnection from the comforts of home and the sense of a 'normal' life slipping away. It is a theme returned to several times in the collection. On 14 March, she describes her attempt to distract herself at mealtimes on the ward but feels that she is watching a television stuck on a channel that only shows 'Come Dine with Me *reruns*' (21). In the poem 'Window Eating' that appears in the second half of the collection, Hodgson imagines going to the bakery at M&S to gaze like a voyeur at donuts,

> *gaining their skin*
> *in the fryer*
> *to hold the warmth*

of cookies in my nostrils
unable to partake (73).

Another theme running through Hodgson's account of her hospital stay is temporality. Aged sixteen when admitted to hospital, Hodgson is placed on a children's ward. She spends her seventeenth birthday in her hospital bed, opening presents '*meant for another self*', including a '*laser printer for uni*', a sewing kit and make up (15). An expected future of educational possibilities, independence and sexual maturity appears to be reversed by a body whose increasing dependency on medicine and caregivers threatens to return her to the childhood of her infant wardmates. Instead of studying for A-levels and enjoying nights out with friends, she is handed colouring books by the play leader to fill her time: '*Normalcy is long gone*' (16). Hodgson describes her body as a '*regressing flip book*' (15). As disability theorist Alison Kafer has observed, normative narratives of time 'presume a linear development from a dependent childhood to an independent adulthood', but the realities of disability and chronic illness create new queer temporalities that throw into relief the ableist assumptions upon which ideas of a 'normal' life course rest.[1] In a particularly revealing passage on Wednesday, 17 June, Hodgson writes about how '*illness has burgled my expected future*'. The fact that this 'burglar' is not an external protagonist but something intrinsic to her new chronically-ill self, fills her with guilt. '*I wish illness and I could be separate entities*', she writes, '*then I'd have someone else to blame for this condition*' (47).

The author's sense of being stuck between childhood and adulthood is reinforced by hospital bureaucracy. On Wednesday, 11 March, she reports that the children's hospital where she is staying has a policy of not operating on over-sixteens, whereas the adult hospital refuses to operate on under-eighteens. As a seventeen-year-old, she remains trapped in her '*cage of illness*', while '*two departments with bolt cutters / argue over who should let me out*' (21). As Hodgson comes to terms with living in what Kafer and others refer to as 'crip time', where normative temporalities are bent out of shape, the painful realities of her illness expose the hollow promises of medicine's curative time. On Thursday, 30 April, she recalls her consultant's confident claim made months earlier that '*"I will make you better by April"*'. '*I wish to erase those words*', she writes, and like a musical score '*recompose / that*

conversation' to acknowledge the truth that chronic conditions do not end in a triumphant fanfare of cure played by a '*full orchestra*' (34).

Hodgson documents vividly the monotony of life on the ward. She wishes she could dissolve into powder '*to move without pain in the breeze*' and have '*a small chance at arriving home*' (19). Instead, she is trapped, '*like a dog leashed to this drip stand*' (30). She recalls the well-meaning but insensitive comments from nurses who try to empathise with her situation. Referring to Hodgson's inability to eat 'normal' food, a nurse tells her that she herself is a vegetarian so knows all about '*missing out*' (19). A volunteer hands Hodgson a Sudoku before recommending that she reads *Me Before You*, in which the central character kills himself, '*made to believe*' that his disability makes him '*a burden to his girlfriend*'. '*I go back to the sudoku*', Hodgson drily notes (32). Moments of sardonic humour run through *163 Days*. A children's entertainer visiting the ward drops her act to confide that she hates her job and has applied to join the circus '*as my get out*' (42). In the poem 'I Wear a Set of Lungs as a Necklace', describing a visit to church, Hodgson's reflection on the list of causes for illness handed down to disabled people by religious leaders over the ages – as punishment for having sex too young, or sent as a '*wake-up call*' or a '*trial*' of endurance – is interrupted when her carer '*panic-farted*' because her belt had got hooked onto Hodgson's wheelchair (67). Occasionally there are moments of pure terror, as Hodgson describes seeing an air bubble advancing along her IV tube towards her veins, her calls for help answered in the nick of time by a nurse who asks, '*Can we keep this between us?*' (37).

The author is eventually discharged from hospital on Monday, 29 June. She is given an overarching diagnosis of Mitochondrial Disease and is placed on the palliative care register. The second part of the book, 'After Care', explores through a series of unflinchingly intimate poems the author's experiences of living with a terminal diagnosis. 'Creation' discusses the build up to leaving hospital as a process of generation and birth, in which the author must face the outside world newly born into a body that does not function as it once did. In 'Death Inc.' and 'Hospital Corners', Hodgson reflects on mortality. In 'Dancing with a Doctor', she expresses a yearning to be seen as something more than a patient:

> *I want them to forget I'm a cardiac arrhythmia,*
> *forget I'm a venous system, forget I'm necrotic tissue.*
> *Tonight, I am sequins. I'm a lost clutch bag.* (60)

Following this, the poem rejects the reduction of sick and disabled people to a set of symptoms, and the desexualisation that often accompanies it. The author wants the doctor who danced with her '*until I fainted*' to not just measure her pulse rate but to see how '*she makes it quicken*' (60).

The position of sick and disabled people during the Covid-19 pandemic is addressed in the poem 'post pandemic Britain'. Here, Hodgson highlights how the pandemic has heightened inequalities, and encouraged eugenic discrimination against lives deemed less worthy of living. The collective sighs of relief when it is reported that those dying of Covid-19 have underlying health conditions – people with '*my face and not yours*' – explode daily like a million popping balloons. The meagreness of food packages delivered to the shielding measures out how little life is worth '*if your legs don't work*'. Empty bureaucratic platitudes such as '*we recognise vulnerability*' contrast with the two-hour waiting time to get through to the Personal Independence Payments helpline, with callers warned to speak in the first ten seconds once their call is finally answered, otherwise the operator will hang up. While holiday makers flee their locked-down homes at the first opportunity and climb hills to fill their lungs with fresh air and eat ice-creams sold by a man '*touching money not washing hands / between customers*', the lives of shielders become even more circumscribed: '*I've wheeled around my bedroom / for eighteen months*', writes Hodgson, '*the only landmarks: chest of drawers / hospital bed pink drip stand*' and a '*medicinal cabinet*' (63 –4). The pandemic highlights the disconnection between living with disability and chronic illness and the 'normal' life that non-disabled people seem desperate to resume.

163 Days is a richly evocative portrayal of hospitalisation, illness and disability by a brilliant and original new poetic voice. This is a deeply personal collection but one in which the connection between the personal and the political is always present. As such, it deserves to be read by anyone interested in disability studies, medical humanities, by patients and their caregivers, and by anyone who values creative writing as a way of evoking experiences of living differently in the world.

David M. Turner,
Swansea University

Notes

[1] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 35.