Geoff Goodfellow is one of those rare people who says what he thinks, usually with a few expletives added. When he learned he had cancer, he told the disease what he thought of it, and like a boxer, prepared himself for the fight ahead. Yet Geoff is also a sensitive man whose poems tap into the emotions unleashed by a close encounter with death. Randy Larcombe’s photographs are a perfect match. They are brutally honest about the impact of cancer and the treatment of it, and at the same time they are deeply moving because they reveal the human frailty of this proud man.

Roy Eccleston

I have admired tough nut Geoff Goodfellow’s work in both the building and poetry caper from a careful distance for years. No matter what he pulls out when he opens his tool box, whether it’s an HB pencil and a blank sheet of paper, or a claw hammer and spirit level, you know they will be put to good use. Whenever Geoff starts banging away it is always worth a good hard look. Have a read of ‘The Seventh Doctor’, it’s a cracker.

H. G. Nelson

Cancer is an experience that should be avoided. Those unlucky enough to be affected expect the best of care, for their cancer and for themselves, as people. These poems recount a journey through one man’s experience of cancer and its care. I recommend it to all patients, families and friends of those who have similar experiences. In particular I recommend it to all those who care for those with cancer – giving time, humility and a holistic approach is essential for the best of care.

Guy Rees MBBS FRCS FRACS

Grace Goodfellow’s wise, funny, sad story about her father’s journey with cancer will move you deeply, unless you are carved from ice. I recommend it highly.

Brigid Lowry
waltzing with
jack dancer
Also by Geoff Goodfellow

No Collars No Cuffs
Bow Tie & Tails
No Ticket No Start
Triggers: turning experiences into poetry
Triggers: the video
The Sex Poems Unleashed
Semi Madness: voices from Semaphore
Love is Cruel
Love is Cruel: spoken word + music CD
Poems for a Dead Father
Punch On Punch Off
Poems by Geoff Goodfellow

Story by Grace Goodfellow

Images by Randy Larcombe

waltzing with jack dancer

a slow dance with cancer
For Guy Rees

Once you were in my corner
I knew I could go the distance.
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Foreword

In January 2008 Geoff was admitted to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital with a sore throat. I took a number of messages and phone calls from him during that day. Generally they were angry calls but there was also a hint of anxiety as if he was already suspecting the worst. It was a very short SMS that finally communicated the diagnosis.

Throat cancer is one of several head and neck cancers. There is a strong link between head and neck cancers and the smoking of tobacco and cannabis and the drinking of alcohol. It is in many ways the baby boomers’ disease. It is also in many ways the working man’s disease and it was so described by Geoff’s surgeon, Mr Guy Rees.

When I visited Geoff at home the first weekend after the diagnosis he was surrounded by friends and family. There was no doubt he had been dealt a massive blow. For the first time I saw him hunched over instead of leading with his chin. He was in a dressing gown and speaking softly. I thought he had met his match. I shouldn’t have worried. He had not been beaten. Rather like a wily old boxer he’d simply taken some shelter on the ropes while he sized up his opponent.

By the time he had had his first meeting with ‘The Seventh Doctor’ the fight strategy had been well and truly set. The poem ‘Another Fight’ tells the story. Round by round Goodfellow came back.

On a wet winter’s day I found my way to the bed in the public ward to which Geoff had been admitted only to find it empty. There was a moment of anxiety before I discovered that Geoff had, by fair means or foul managed to work his way into a private room overlooking the Botanic Gardens. The poem ‘Night Moves’ tells you how.
After many rounds it was ultimately a knock-out win. The cancer was vanquished and transformed by words into this important book. The use of the Australian rhyming slang for cancer to play on the image of the dancing boxer gives this work a strongly Australian theme.

The comparison between the gum-booted surgeon in ‘The Seventh Doctor’ and the imagery of a concrete finisher is stark. The real story here I think is that Geoff hoped that his surgeon was as skilled as the elite building tradesman he knew from his years on building sites. In ‘Blue Sky Morning’, yet another contrast between Australia’s pristine blue skies and the tobacco saturated working lives of many blue-collar Australians in the post-war era. In ‘Maybe’ the glamour and machismo of cigarette advertising is contrasted with a cancer ward full of its victims.

There are many who have been shaken by the vision of their own mortality and recovered. Geoff is one of only a few who have transformed the experience into a work through which his life-affirming struggle can be shared with others.

**Chris Kourakis**
Justice, Supreme Court of South Australia
Waltzing with Jack Dancer

No Small Matter

At the palliative care unit
ten years ago
    i watched my father
die of cancer
    saw him each day
get smaller
    & smaller
    & smaller
until he was no bigger
than a leprechaun

i’d joke with him on visits
that we needed to hear his voice
to find him on the sheet
    but really —
it was no small matter

i took from him the strength
to challenge myself daily
    & since his death
i’ve swum in the sea twice
    a day
    & been close enough to
stroke a shark one afternoon
    but lucky enough to
have it swim away after we’d
eye-balled each other
i’ve competed too in an 8k run
for cancer awareness
   & pink faced & breathless —
been placed third for
my age group

i’ve grunted & groaned
& counted & sweated
through tens of thousands
of sit-ups & push-ups
   ached until my stomach
was a washboard

yet still
   i got tapped on the shoulder.
I remember being five years old
& walking up & down
the white quartz driveway
of our family home in Copley St
dragging on a Rothmans Plain

i was often up at 5am on those
summer mornings
   tip-toeing over the floorboards
& being careful not to let the
screen door slap as i’d creep
out to dad’s cream FX Holden
to sneak a smoke out of
the red soft pack he’d left on
the front bench seat

i’d walk the driveway then —
& practise doing the drawback
   feeling dizzy at times
but somehow enjoying it
   & i might do the
Chinese drawback too —
feeling the smoke drift up my
nostrils
   & i remember blowing
smoke rings into perfect blue
sky mornings
looking up at the apricots
at the end of the driveway —
& sometimes hearing them fall
 & seeing white cling peaches
still setting on the tree
 & the corn already high enough
to hide a boy like me

but i was big enough to work
 & even then i knew
i wanted to be a working man

those mornings i’d listen for
the jingle of empty bottles
 & the clip-clop of hooves
on our unmade street
 knowing that Lennie Sugars
the milky was coming
 & i’d butt my smoke into
the red clay soil & bolt out
to meet him

i’d spend the next two hours
placing pints on front verandas —
 hearing the clink of empties
from the back of the cart as the
horse worked his way towards
Lennie’s low whistle
 i remember too —
my forefinger & index finger
greasy from the residue of
so many poorly washed empties
i’d picked up
but over the next fifty years & more —  
i’d pick up more than just  
greasy bottles  

there were sixty to eighty cigarettes  
a day for fifteen years  
  & over twenty half coronas  
for another ten  
  & lots of five paper joints  
too  

& i’d pick up solvents & sealants  
& stains & paints & fluxes  
& fluids with peculiar smells  
  working through twelve hour  
days on building sites in blinding sun  
with no UV protection  

& yet no one can tell me with any  
authority  
  just how i got cancer.
Counting

Twenty years ago
when i was feeling
utterly invincible
    my first wife’s
new partner
    Drunken Duncan —
when nearing the bottom
    of a cask of white
    told me his worst
nightmare was looking
    out at his own funeral
    & seeing only six
or seven people

i laughed at him
    & his blood-shot
blue eyes watered a little

a week after waking one
morning with a lump
in my throat
    i was admitted
to a third floor ward
wired up to electronic
gadgets & hooked up to lines
of steroids & painkillers
    i found myself
far too wired to sleep

as i looked out before dawn
through double glazed
windows
    the distant suburban lights
winked at me

my thoughts then were of
fairyland
    & distant people

i started counting.