

At the Edge: Madness and Medicine

UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN



WEEK 5 Seeing and living with dementia

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When she was 83, my mother began to show signs of dementia. She was absent-minded – lighting gas flames under plastic yoghurt containers; she was frightened and refused to be left alone. It was so hard to accept that our mother’s great mind, which had solved enemy codes in World War Two, and which had been so resourceful when my father died and left her a widow with eight children and no money – to think that that mind had been overthrown.

This poem is called, **At eighty-five, my mother’s mind**

When she wanders from room to room
looking for someone who isn’t there,

when she asks where we keep the spoons,
when she can’t chew and spits out her food,

when her last dim light flickers with falling ash
and she exclaims: ‘What a dismal end to a brilliant day!’

When she calls her regular laxative an astronaut,
When she can’t hear words but fears sounds,

when she says: ‘Don’t go -- I can’t bear it when you go,’
or: ‘Just run me off the cliff,’
or wants to know how many Disprin ends it,

then I think how, at eighty-five,

my mother's mind is a castle in ruin.

Time has raised her drawbridge, lopped her bastions.
Her balustrade is crumbled, and she leans.

Yet still you may walk these ramparts in awe.
Sometimes, when she speaks, the ghostly ensign flies.

Time cannot hide what once stood here
or its glory.

Do not think that we are good
or merely tourists.

That which detains us
was once our fortress.

Looking after my mother I felt quite desperate: sometimes near madness myself.

Taking

After two years of house arrest –
what they call 'home care' –
I take the soiled sheets from my sister,
put them in the machine,
lift the heavy carpet,
break down.

The men come running,
take the carpet from me
(something to do).

Then I steady my mad mother
who, staggering downstairs in her frail bones

and failing sight,
takes me in her arms and asks:
‘What is the matter darling?
Whatever is the matter?’

Putting my mother in a frail care facility nearly tore us apart. But eventually, the day came and we had to face it:

Lastness

All this brouhaha about birthdays and first days
while anniversaries of lastness pass us by.

Hallmark has nothing to say about
the last time you laced your daughter’s shoe,
the last time a stranger looked twice at your face,
the last time you swam naked,
the last time you ran so fast your chest burned,
the last time you made love and meant it.

Even if by carrot juice and determined zest
you have missed these listed lastnesses –
making meaningful naked underwater love
after lacing your surprised daughter’s shoes –

you’ll never avoid them all. In particular,
there will be a last day when you steer
your mad mother down her own front steps,
drive her silently from her own house
for the last time, carefully not saying:
‘Look back, Ma, look up – that was your home.
You are seeing and leaving it for the last time.’

Carefully not saying:

‘Because you no longer lace shoes.’

My mother was an actress. For her, madness was inherently theatrical. I grew up with her quoting -- ‘Out, damned spot’ and ‘will these hands never be clean?’ and her favourite, the opening lines of Edward Albee’s play *A Delicate Balance* ‘I might some day, or early evening I think more likely, - some autumn dusk - go quite mad ... some gentle loosening of the moorings setting the balloon adrift’

My mother continued to give performances in frail care for a further three years until she died.

Self-portrait from the dementia ward

After a few mouthfuls of supper
she lies back on her pillows,
struggling against the bedsore to be comfortable.

Words elude her: ‘Everything is so’
and she moves her elegant fingers
in a way to suggest a Jackson Pollock painting.

I think about prompting her
but I want to hear the substitute –
the synonym that her shattered genius will provide.

Even so I am surprised:
‘... modernistic,’ she says eventually
and closes her eyes,
exhausted by the last stand,
the self-portrait.

Brief fling in the dementia ward

My mother has a brief flirtation
with Mr Otto, a rare male in Frail Care.

He has the look of a Slavic conductor
– sweeping, side-parted silver locks
offset his visible nappy line.

‘How odd,’ Ma says of Mr Otto,
‘to meet the love of one’s life in a kitchen’
and to him, within hearing of the nurses:
‘Your place or mine?’

But then, just as quickly, she forgets him
and Mr Otto wanders the passageways again,
asking if anyone has seen his wife;
it’s not like Mrs Otto to be home so late.

Widowhood in the dementia ward

‘Oh my God, I’m so pleased to see you,’
she says from her nest of blankets.
‘I’ve been meaning to ask –
How is your father?
How is Paddy?’

‘He died,’ I say, remembering 1974.

‘Good heavens, now you tell me!
How lucky he is.’

‘You could join him,’ I suggest.

‘I didn’t like him that much,’ she replies.

My mother taught me to send up life as a way of coping with its most trying times. I feel that she gave me the license to write these poems and that she is their co-creator.

* These poems were published in Dowling, Finuala. *Notes from the Dementia Ward*. (Kwela Books, 2008).



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