

Notes
from the
dementia
ward

FINUALA DOWLING

KWELA BOOKS/SNAILPRESS

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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.

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?’

Shift aside

Those nights I lay awake, calculating our ages:
I was ten to your fifty,
 would be fifteen to your fifty-five,
 twenty to your sixty.

I pushed them as far as they would go:
 thirty to seventy,
 forty to eighty,
 fifty to ninety.
 The numbers toppled –
an orphan, at any age.

I stood in the dark doorway,
awaiting your invitation.
Sleepily, on your elbow,
you would ask: 'A nightmare?'
and shift aside on the three-quarter bed.

Your back was warm;
your pillow fragrant.

These nights I lie awake calculating our ages:
I am forty-five to your eighty-five,
 will be fifty to your ninety,
 sixty to your century.

I stand in a lit-up doorway
– disinfectant upon human soil.

You wince slightly as you shift aside,
pat the space beside you: 'Lie here.'

I wait only until you breathe evenly.

Mere oblivion

I cannot stop them;
they come with us,
my mother's former selves:

blurred box-brownie baby from Ficksburg,
skinnymalinks hand-standing at the Wilderness,
buxom WAF officer in her pips,
aquiline actress, face turned to the light,
amused matriarch captioned 'dear Octopus?'
unamused wife of an alcoholic,

glamorous widow,
charmer of bank managers,
sudden understudy:
drama teacher, estate agent, broadcaster and

at last, travelling grandmother
with quip, quote, recipe
and iodine for everything.

I cannot stop them;
they come with us,
touching the bent one gently.

Not quite the riddle of the Sphinx,
not quite the March of Progress.

More like melancholy Jacques,
if you can imagine
all seven ages (and more) on stage at once,
waiting as a cast waits
for the house lights to come up,
for mere oblivion.

Where Google has not been

I have asked so much of the Internet:

'Is it true what I once saw as a child –
an umbrella hoisted high in the mass?'
'What are the traits of a zebra?'
'Who or what is a senior wrangler?'

*'Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
when hot for certainties in this our life!
– Who said that?'*

And I have found such answers
along its fast electric autobahns:

*Meredith! Pugnacious! Odd-toed!
The opposite of a wooden spoon!
A processional canopy was what you saw –
holy things must be covered!*

I grew sick of Google's cleverness
and I grew sly. And so I asked:

Where is Farrah Fawcett-Majors now?

Why won't my mother die?
Can we hasten death?

And Google said:

*Try to limit the number of difficult situations
your loved one has to face.
Distract her from her hallucinations
by engaging her in a pleasurable activity.
Caring for someone with dementia
can be very rewarding.*

On another page Google offered
a photographic view of a vulva

but I have a thousand places inside
where Google has never been.

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.'

Your children, parents, siblings, spouses,
pets, bêtes-noires, acquaintances

They will all die
but not in the right order.

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.

How I knew it wasn't me

I only realised I was at risk
when my brother phoned to check if I was still alive –

he'd heard it on the radio:
a woman fitting my description apparently wept
on the harbour wall before she dived.

'So it wasn't you?'
a query rising in his tone.

I too – as I replied – couldn't help sounding
unconvinced
as if searching for stronger proof.

After verbally confirming my existence,
I walked to the bay window and considered
the breakwater, the beacon,
the beckoning sea
and the woman who jumped in my place.

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.

Homesickness

I know that no one will ever love me
so little as this hotel room.
High-rise and franchised
it spits at me its
grudging sachets and tight sheets.

I know that no one will ever love me
so little or so anonymously
as the twin pictures of nothingness
on the wall of this hotel room
that doesn't love me
in so many ways –
with its flickering bathroom bulb,
tepid water,
detergent carpet
and deathtrap view of the freeway.

Though once in a crowded dining room you begged:
'Pretend you don't know me' (and I didn't)
– still you loved me more than this hotel room.

This hotel room won't follow me into the night air
like an electrician familiar with my porcelain fuses
and this hotel room will never say: 'Sorry'
or hold me close and let me weep for home.

An initiative to increase the number
of male readers

We do love men with charming looks
but send us more who have read books.

We ogle men who're built like champs
but send us more with reading lamps.

We still like men who make us passes
but send in more with reading glasses.

We'll race with men in racy cars
if they have valid library cards.

Please, please, goddess, before it's bed
send in men who have read
hardbacks.

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.

Why Steve wants to be a shopping trolley

In an institution in this city

there is a boy – let's call him Steve –
and Steve wants to be a shopping trolley.

Teachers and parents like to ask:
'What are you going to become?'

That's at least one reason why
Steve wants to be a shopping trolley.

You fill in your ID a thousand times
but still they don't know who you are,

which is perhaps why
Steve wants to be a shopping trolley.

The more people you love
the more funerals you'll attend,

which could be why
Steve wants to be a shopping trolley.

They tell you how life is a raft
but leave out the main part

– where you have to eat one of your companions –

which is doubtless why
Steve wants to be a shopping trolley.

Multilingualism in the dementia ward

When I release her from the restraining chair
she is grateful for her freedom
but concerned for the guest she is leaving behind:
'I'm so sorry, but we're leaving now.'

'Uh uh uh uh!' groans the trapped Alzheimer's patient.

With a lifetime's practice of politeness, my mother listens:
'I beg your pardon? Really? I must look into that.'

We walk out. I am humbled by her power:
'Do you understand the language that woman speaks?'

'Oh yes . . .
I *think* it's Sotho.'

More advanced thinking from the dementia ward

Like a mistrustful toddler
she keeps opening her eyes to check on me

because, as she says,
I have a habit of slipping away.

'I have to leave now, Ma – it's school tomorrow
and I've forgotten to turn up Beaty's winter skirt.'

'If you just concentrate hard enough,
the skirt will turn itself up.'

Birthday in the dementia ward

We are discussing her eighty-sixth birthday.
She pulls herself up from her cushions:
'I wonder – I would really like my mother to come –
could you arrange that?'

(Your mother was born in 1888,
even if she were Japanese
she could not come.)

'I'll see if I can arrange transport.'

Odd one out in the dementia ward

It's a cold, bleak day
which might explain why she says:
'This is my daughter Nuala,
who has come all the way from South Africa to visit me.'

'Though,' she adds, looking at the nurse,
'by the looks of you, you come from there too.'

Well satisfied with her own civility,
she whispers: 'I was going to say
This is my daughter Nuala –
she's just a *little* bit odd.'

Devolution in the dementia ward

My mother's tongue is lizard-like now
as she devolves.

Still, she discriminates:
'This place is full of the most boring lunatics.'