

Health poems – Dementia

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1. SENIOR LAST MOMENTS

You forget what it was you went upstairs for
You forget your glasses are on your head
You forget that it's shuffle, not raffle, the cards
You forget to notice you've made a mistake.

You sometimes forget who the man in your house is,
Or that you've been married for forty-five years.
You forget that the old man in bed beside you, is
The young dashing airman who 'just left the room'.
You forget that your parents died decades ago,
And won't tell you off for getting home late.
Every night, you forget this, and fight to get back there,
Screaming and scared as an abducted child.

You forget 'son' and 'daughter', their names, but not faces,
You remember you love them – whoever they are,
You remember to laugh, and make jokes, and be playful.
You forget that you've walked til your ankle is broken,
You forget you're in pain and remember each minute,
Forgetting why.

You forget your manners, make comments, spit food out,
You forget how to eat with a knife, fork and spoon.
You don't hide the symptoms of your constipation
As your body forgets how to shift its own waste.
You forget to keep private your urination,
You forget the existence of shame and good taste.
You still eat, but your brain forgot how to use food,
You're starving, big bellied, on three meals a day.
You forget how to speak, you forget how to chew,
You forget how to swallow, as thirst forgets you.

Your brain's shutting down, beleaguered, defeated,
You can sit where you're put and you know how to smile,
Til you forget how to see, or move, or respond,
Your brainstem's on auto, the dinosaur relic,

That keeps your heart beating, your lungs breathing air,
And where now are *you*, do you hear, are you in there,
Do you know they are crying, and holding your hands?
Are you seeing your dead father come smiling to meet you
Or do you know nothing of your heart's last stand?

And now we remember we've almost forgotten
The you that we knew, who began to forget.

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2. ENOUGH

I tried
To reach
Him
To make a
Connection
He seemed
So detached
So unavailable
So preoccupied
He never embraced me
He just didn't know how to
I was just blessed
To get a smile
One smile
At times
I felt that was enough

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3. NOT IN TO VISITORS

It was the look
that did it. It
said everything that
words could not, and
my words weren't heard
or listened to. They were
irrelevances that
punctuated time.

The look was blank.
There was no recollection,
and it said, *'I can't be bothered,
give up,
you know I'm not listening.'*

I tried to stay away,
keep myself busy, let go.
It was impossible. Thoughts
of the past pulled me back,
drew me in.

Eager for news,
that was me –
but all that was left
was a husk, a dry frame
of anything that ever
meant anything. The person
I'd known, the father I'd
loved – vanished.

I didn't know who'd
taken his place.
He looked like dad, but
dad loved to talk, this
impostor just sat there,
never said a word,
not even *'goodbye.'*

[© Margaret Holbrook](#)

4. It was round, and on the wall above the piano

And sometimes little people came out of it
or a bird.
A wooden bird with a bright-yellow tongue.

It told me when to eat
and when to go to bed.
It was on my wrist as well.

It had hands
and a heartbeat if you listened
with your good ear.

We don't have it anymore.
They say we don't need it here.
They tell us everything now.

Is it time already?

© [Char March](#)

5. THE TESCO EFFECT

At the checkout
Victor fumbled
for his forgotten wallet
then wondered where on earth he was.

The boy
who looked like the Ghurkha
he fought alongside in Borneo
offered no clue

nor the view from the window
of concrete, cars
and a chap in a fluorescent jacket
rounding up trolleys.

Was this London?
Was he still managing
the warehouse
getting the goods in and out?

No. He stared at a pack of Kerrygold
and a bottle of Jamieson's
staggering by on a checkout belt;
decided on Limerick.

'You're in Leeds, love'
said the customer services lady.
The glass of water she gave him
was clouded and warm.

He took her word for it
but knew that places
could no longer be counted on
to stay exactly where he'd left them.

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6. CHANGING SEASONS

Narcissi bloom in miniature, in multi-coloured pots
beyond the fresh-cut sandwiches, the pizza, pasta,
spit-roast chicken. Remembering your delight
when *Tête-à-tête* and *Angels' Tears* broke through
the snow-squashed grass at Pennine Close,
I choose a pot and place them in my basket
with your favourite fruit: bananas, pears
sweet clementines. Next day I walk
to Oakwood House, dial in the code – one oh five six –
to spend an overheated hour with you.
You wake when I come in; you lift your small, round face,
receive my kiss, my hug. Your smile is fractured,
half-toothed, behind thin lips.
I leave the fruit inside my bag; it's close to lunch
and you would eat the lot – spoil your appetite
as years before you'd not let us spoil ours.
Instead I place the pot of tiny flowers beside your chair.
And while I talk to you – describe the uphill walk,
the chilly wind, the cloud streaked sky – you reach out
knuckled fingers, stroke the petals, lift the pot.

And with a single bite, snap off a head, begin to chew.

The mother now, I reach inside your mouth, try to catch
the yellow head, the green and spit-streaked stem. A twinkle
in your eyes; you sink your teeth on searching fingers.
As I retreat, you swallow.
Later, walking down the drive I feel the pain,
my fingers blooming purple as the budding crocus.

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7. SHAVING GRANDDAD

He won't let Grandma shave him,
lashes out, calls her a bitch –
so she'll call me, her voice cracking.

I clomp-swish into their kitchen
in my Doc Martens and tasselled skirt;
black-rimmed eyes and crimson talons
all set for their conjuring trick.

The dreaded kit – soap, Bic, bowl, towel –
stops Granddad in his tracks. Then he sees
my wrists, and dutifully sits.

Bangles and bracelets fascinate him.
They jingle and clank; massive mock-gems
catch the light. He watches them divide
and re-group as my arms move,
soothed by the click-clack-click-clack
of a baby's rattle.

I ring the changes – plastic, metal, beads
and glinting charms – the louder the better.

One hand steadies Granddad's chin,
the other ploughs through silver stubble
that sprouts relentlessly
from worn-out skin.
Scum swirls into storm clouds
in my water bowl.

A brisk shake of my bangles
and the trance is broken.

Grandma butters scones, brews tea
and fights the urge to ask me
what on earth I've got on.

It will be gone, this stuff, all binned,
when Granddad is at peace.

8. SLICES OF BRAIN

Third anniversary of my mother's death from dementia,
And I'm looking at slices of brain, stained pretty pink,
The neurones purplish, their nuclei clear as strawberry pips.

Like a magician in his many-coloured coat of patches, motley
Bow tie, hair like wild dendrites in a frenzy of thinking,
The pathologist initiates me into what death has revealed.

The donor's name is on the slides, their memorial, evidence
Of how memory escaped them. Alzheimer and his mates
(Lewy Body, Parkinson, Vascular, alone or in cahoots)

Miss no tricks. Tau Proteins strangle and swamp, cutting off
The synapses, keeping the thoughts corralled in tangles,
Scribbles of barbed wire around the nucleus, sometimes

Killing the cell like a rubber band round a lamb's balls,
So a ghost tangle is left, guarding empty space.
(Are there ghost memories inside?) Ameloid proteins

Lag the axons, the dendrites, the outreaching fronds
Which pass torches of thought, until
There's a plaque, like a fingertip print

Stubbed on the connections. Scattered booby traps,
You have to look out for them. Cortical, hippocampal
Layers, like lagoons and sandy beaches, slide after slide,

Pebbled with tangles, wracked with plaques,
In a shrinking brain losing weight and substance,
Because there's 'vacuolation', holes where words were.

And it happens, we don't feel it, until it's noticed by our friends,
And called a senior moment, until there are too many moments
To be funny any more.

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9. RUTH

Your hair, always so rational
In its plain plait
Secured by a single pin,
Wisps about your face like distracted thoughts.
Sometimes a hand goes up
To tuck and smooth,
As if to still some disquiet.
But they drift back,
The pale, floating strands,
Agitating in the heat from the fire.
You have taken good care of this body
Over many years.
You have neither indulged nor abused it.
It can walk for miles.
It makes your bed,
Takes back your library book,
Selects a new one
Full of meaningless symbols.
It could go on another fifteen years.
But your lips pucker,
A small frown appears,
And a hand goes up
To still a disquiet.

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