

The Going

(2002-2008)

Poems on dementia by Rogan Wolf

Turns at the Mirror



She paused in the doorway,
a blurring silhouette.
All love derived from there,

all safety and measure.
She said, "Whenever I look
in the mirror these days

I get such a shock.
'Who's *this*?' I ask myself.
'What's been happening?'

Nothing *inside* has changed.
In here, where I live,
I'm still the *me* I always was.

But when I see
the way I *look*,
I'm a stranger to myself."

Her finger had been caressing
the space between my eye-brows -
the crowning joy of my day.

Forty years on, I can still feel it
soothing me, bedding me down,
as again she hovers

blurring in the doorway -
with *me* before the mirror now
and *both* of us in shock.



Finding Something to Say

I've been wordless for weeks.
Having nothing to say
is life-threatening.

Calls out of nowhere,
calls not my own,
echo round my sanctuaries

and drive me
from my standing.
Too easily I've languished

at the receiving end -
the most dangerous place
in the universe.

Millions are trapped here
among the bones,
the refuse,

the frantic, wandering eyes.
Best break clear.
Best get moving

to music.
Best make my own
glorious noise.

Skirmishes with the Gods



She told me the winds
had scattered all her boundaries.
Events just tore through her
without noticing.

She yearned to act,
to impress herself
on the Furies, to take hold
of something,

but her nature, schooling,
the massed bodies of that time -
they stood against her
and she yielded.

A life in the shadow
of others' needs
leaves nothing to spare
for skirmishes with the gods.

So she didn't know
as she waited to die
if anyone
knew who she was.



The Going

The going's getting harder.
More often now, I'm losing hold
and have to keep dealing with the world
from ledges frighteningly deep.

Listen, world.
I'm hanging on, down here.
I can still get words out
but the going's so much harder.

It's all down to words.
Let them just be crystal clear.
Let me not mince any
nor flinch from the meanings they yield

as the going keeps getting harder.

Visiting



You were silent most of the day.
*She seems detached this time,
Do you think she's retreated
into some private cell
of her own imaginings ?*
No. I caught you at it -
groping at all times for words.

And they fled from you
like scraps of waste paper
cavorting in the cruellest of storms.
Dry land has become a suggestion
made of mist, forever beyond you.
In panic you throw out your hands -
it's vapour they close on.

I realised towards the end
of our day together, you were making
one last effort to connect.
You plunged forward, but then
meeting the gulf yet again,
meeting again this slither

of meaning towards hazy shapelessness,
you gave up, exhausted.
A-a-agh, you said, in disgust,
without energy.
You meant (did you ?)
Ah God help me.
Save me from this place.

But then at last we talked.
I'm going now, I told you.

You'll come back, won't you.

Yes. I'll come back.

You will come back ?

You will come back ?

You will come back ?



A Dangerous House

It's almost gone now -
my power to hold,
to put things together.
I can't speak

can barely walk.
Even the ground's a stranger.
It keeps shrugging beneath me.
I shuffle in case I fall.

And my knowledge, my memory store,
my life-time's horde, my subtle treasure -
I feel it daily
draining from me,

seeping out of my feet
like blood ;
it's unique, first-ever, unrepeatable -
I shuffle through a dangerous house in search of my treasure.

Nothing holds good except another.
Not *I*, now. The words that speak for me
must now come forth from lips that blush
with younger blood than mine.



Tracing a Name

“Your date of birth, please sir,
and your mother’s maiden name”.

I wrote “Gladys Mary”
and pushed it under the screen.

She was about to pass out the money
when, reading the words, she paused.

“Her maiden name ?”
Oh God.

“Ah, her surname !”
The word Williams

established my credentials.
It was good to have you with me,

young, naïve, wide-eyed.
It was good to spell out your name.

Being Together

I didn't know that sound
was in you –

that bass growl
past all wording.

Your head never left the pillow.

You watched my spoon of water
approach your lips,
but never looked at me.

I didn't know such moments
were possible.

We learnt quickly.
We hardly spilled a drop.

I stroked your forehead
between your eyebrows
silently
silently.

Your eyes closed.

You come awake you taste

Still you come awake. I am confident you taste.
But though it seems you also have sight

your eyes don't look any more.
I conclude you're beyond thinking.

You neither talk nor smile
but sort of bay sometimes

to expel a frog in your throat. You defecate
with no restraint

or sign of surprise
into your nappy.

I clip your finger nails
to stop them spearing

your palms, so clenched
your hands all day, the stink

of your fingers like bad feet,
my mother, it stays with me for hours

after I've fled from you. For I do not
last long. I bring flowers

in case you catch their fragrance
after I've gone,

I bring a chocolate mousse
for sweetness on your tongue,

I bring cream
to moisten your scaled

and haggard face. I bear to stay
just half an hour each month,

my mother -
then away.

The night before her funeral

We're going north to make an angel of you -
you whose clenched fingers
in those last hours of being human
stank like unwashed feet.

What phantom pursued you
hour after hour ?
What claws griped at you
from the borderless dark ?

All your life that ghoul
was lying in wait
for words to fail
guard to drop.

I have a picture of you
young as my sons are now.
How vivid you were. How easily hurt. A joy
to meet you, Ma'am - oh mother.

I would be worthy
of your dreams, I would
adequately succeed you.

I would
if I could
you had died easy.

The Isabella Plantation

is quiet in mid-winter but passing today I heard two words of yours still hanging there.

I had brought you down for the week-end and in my garden you had apologised to my sons for your lengthening silences

due not, you said (struggling for lucidity), to anything they had lightly said or done, but to corruption of your own faculties within.

And then I brought you here, at a time in Spring when it is all so glorious that words cannot describe the wonder of it.

We were lost for a while in the wonder of it, until you said, “it’s lovely..”

almost choking, as if you knew that these two words were almost the last you’d ever speak and perhaps therefore

could have been kept for something else, later.

Then I drove you home.

Footnote :

The Isabella Plantation is a fenced woodland garden in Richmond Park, south west London. It is famous for its azaleas and rhododendrons.