

Suspension...

.....the state in which the particles of a substance are mixed with a fluid but are undissolved; the state of being suspendedⁱ Sue Joseph

Swimming most days to tend to a physical ailment, I am spending significant amounts of time

under water of late, finishing every lap session with long, languid submersions. I used to do this as a child.....

....I was twelve years old...

...and now I am not, but seek suspension, cradling; held under by water, womb-like and calm; a loud, busy silence.

A return.

There is something about the goldenness of Gustav Klimt's art, his love of the female form, his desire to disrupt and provoke and prod and yell at Viennese society with his work at the turn of the last century. The fact that he used to wear long robes and sandals while he painted, and no underwear. He endures as one of my favourites, his work so satisfying to gaze upon. To me, he functioned on another plane, suspended in between societal acceptability and pariah status, painting orgasms and socialites and prostitutes and lovers. Possibly his most popularised work, along with his sensual 'The Kiss' (1907), is the Mother and Child image. But I always knew this Madonna-esque image was never his intention. Too cliché. And of course, mother and child are but two of the three subjects in the original; the third, a weeping old woman, the crone, is always edited out. And they are not three subjects, but one – old age, maturity, childhood: a beatific dark

haired babe in arms, sleeping, held by a peaceful, also slumbering, auburn haired young woman, leant over, almost draped by a stooping, old-age-ravaged, weeping naked female. She hides her face behind limp, dying grey hair, her head held in one hand, suffering in silence and knowing and despair. Her thin limbs are strewn with protruding veins, elongated as if pulled by gravity, back towards the earth. This, Klimt's homage to the 'Three Ages of Woman' (1905).

And I have it large – the complete artwork, with the Klimt-ian mosaic gold and silver leaf touch – this reproduction hanging in our living room, above our piano. A beautiful golden coloured frame surrounding a depiction of the progression of female life from the newness of birth to the disintegration and decay of old age. My partner found it for me online, sent over to Australia from Spain. I had been searching for the perfect reproduction of the entire work, so difficult to find, and he commissioned one for me, screen painted on silk. It was a breathtaking gift to receive and now, part of the fabric of every day of our life, the first thing we see on waking and entering our living room; the last as we turn the light of each night. The wholeness of it is satisfying and beautiful and screams – this is the one truth. This is what it is. All of this.

Breathing.

Living.

Growing.

Aging.

Dying.

Death.

Somehow, sleep apnoea induced dementia rather than Alzheimer's disease is an easier diagnosis to hear. Our mother was becoming a little forgetful – mild cognitive impairment – and forgetting birthdates, names of neighbours not often seen, names of her many grandchildren, what level she parked her car. Small things we laughed off at the time.

“No, it's simply sleep apnoea induced dementia. Just early stages.”

I can still hear myself, dripping in desperate denial, explaining ad nauseam to friends and family and acquaintances.

“She does not have Alzheimer's.”

Then there is a catastrophic car accident, where she remarkably runs over herself, resulting in a shattered pelvis and three months in hospital. She is catapulted into full blown dementia. Still, it is only called dementia. But not for long. She is officially diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, in 2016. And we learn that Alzheimer's disease is actually a common form of dementia: a chronic neurodegenerative disease, a period of suspension in between life and death; stealing her from us and her dignity from her. And the diagnosis makes no difference. The word makes no difference. She is still leaving us, slowly and cruelly. Stalked by a sucking dark shadow, a postmodern vampire ingesting her, bit by bit. Bite by bite. Day by day.

I do not know why I so emphatically refused the word. Perhaps its cultural, medical, finite-loading? Because it is just a word. The surname of the man who first described what was to become known as Alzheimer's disease: Dr Aloysius "Alois" Alzheimer.

It is just a word. A man's surname. A doctor's surname.

He was a German psychiatrist and neuropathologist fixated on a patient behaving oddly, with short term memory loss. When his patient died in 1906, Dr Alzheimer procured her brain and autopsied it, finding a build-up of amyloid growths deposited throughout. In the same year he presented his findings publicly, and four years later, Alzheimer's disease was first used by a colleague, explaining the same dementia patterns, in a journal article. By 1911, Alzheimer's disease was recognized and diagnosed throughout Europe, and gradually, beyond.

Alzheimer's disease is one type of dementia. Other types include vascular and frontotemporal dementia, and Lewy Body disease. Dementia is a wide ranging word used to define a 'loss of memory, intellect, rationality, social skills and physical functioning'. This year, there are 425,416 Australians living with dementia; worldwide, 46.8 million people.ⁱⁱ This year 250 Australians are presenting with dementia daily; by 2056 it is estimated that 1.1 million Australians will be affected.ⁱⁱⁱ Dementia is the second highest cause of death in Australia.^{iv}

There is no cure.

There are 1.2 million Australian people involved in the care of a person with dementia; by 2029 there will be a shortage of more than 150,000 paid and unpaid carers for Australians with dementia.^v This year alone, the number of Australians with dementia will cost the country more than \$15 billion.^{vi}

But these are just numbers, staggering as they are, and do nothing to explain the reality. The extraordinary pain; the incredible stress. The lived experience. The un-believability of what happens to someone you love, and the family, when Alzheimer's creeps into their lives.

It is always too late. Just a little too late.

During her three months in hospital, recovering from her car accident, our mother is disoriented, confused, angry, stubborn. Our once extraordinarily kind, sweet, intelligent, generous, professional and indomitable mother is gone, a doppelganger sitting in her hospital bed, at times vicious; at times broken; at times sweet and loving but at all times missing her 'polite' lens, inappropriate and shocking. Not knowing who had visited mere minutes ago; her tea too hot to drink; then too cold. Coffee, like-wise. Food inedible. Loud, running commentary on other patients, their visitors, their shape, their weight, the staff; judgemental and harsh.

When we go through her belongings after the accident and find her shattered watch, we learn the impact of the car was at precisely 12.49pm on 27th August, 2012, the date and time indelibly cemented, suspended, on the crushed dial. She left my home that day at 12.10pm, and it takes me a while – years really – to realise that that late morning coffee together and unsuspecting, nonchalant farewell as she drove away is the final time I am with our mother as I knew her all my life, intact.

And she is never, truly coming home to us again.

We get her out of hospital at the end of November that year, and gradually rehabilitate her back to almost sixty percent cognition. I can still recognise her in her sharp barbs of humour and her smile; her smiling eyes. Although, there is now a palpable distress emanating from her; she is so very aware that she is changed, seemingly suspended in between two cognitive planes, an urgent, anxious rebellion to something she cannot recognise or understand.

Another childhood pleasure re-discovered is floating on water: hands cradling my head, legs askew, just floating. Ears just below the surface of the water, muffling sounds. Calmly. Peering

up at the blueness of the sky, staring hard enough it transforms black-ishly and I convince myself I am looking at the beginnings of space; the start of the forever-ness of the cosmos, nestling behind the blue. I imagine the darkening of the sky as a theatre backdrop, clouds dancing downstage. On cumulus mornings, they are lazy, seemingly motionless mounds, rearing vertically. It is an optical illusion; a magic show; a slow, idle, horizontal cruise across the stage, they usually are gone by afternoon. On cirrus days, there is more blue than cloud, although the wisps make fluid, ever-changing shapes, balletic strands of hair-like tails lingering; swirling. And then the cumulonimbus afternoons, dangerous and threatening storm clouds gathering pace and intensity, dramatic and emphatic. The grand finale of all cloud productions. And when there are no clouds, the clearness; the cleanness; the clarity is overwhelming. The massiveness of the Australian sky.

Just floating, suspended. Watching. Quiet.

Fast forward six months after her hospital discharge and with the untimely and shocking death of our elder brother, our mother once again is catapulted into the heartland of her dementia. They say if you are prone to dementia, a single trauma can exacerbate it.

And so this does.

Our nephew, our brother's youngest son wishes to see his father; wants to look at him one more time, his face, in his coffin. I ask the coroner what she thinks. Will it be possible?

Our brother is dead in his home for five days before discovery. There is blood and decay and stench and fluids; gore. A dead and bloodied body lying in a steaming hot closed up room in regional NSW. It is his son who alerts the family – he rings from his boarding school, asking if

we know where his dad is because he is meant to be at a football match on the Saturday morning.
He promised.

His father is found by his landlord that day. The horror of his discovery remains potent.

“I strongly recommend a closed casket,” the coroner says. “The casket must be closed.”

I tell our nephew and he calmly accepts; but I am not sure he knows why. He is only fourteen.

He rings me just the other month, from school. It is after-hours and he is in bed, talking,
whispering under his blankets.

He asks: “Please, can you tell me what happened to Dad?”

“Of course but let’s wait until we are together – I will answer anything...”

“No, please, I want to know now. No one has ever told me.” He is urgent.

Did we do this? Did we forget to tell this young boy how his father died, nearly four years ago?

It is possible. There was so much pain; each of us turned inward, connected by this enduring
family aching throb. This loss.

So I tell him, this now seventeen year old, beautiful, fatherless young man. The two versions: the
official police one; and our suspicions.

“Thank you,” he says.

Just that: thank you.

The day before his funeral, we walk along the jetty behind our parents’ home, a party of fifteen
each with a helium filled balloon bearing an intimate, personal message to our brother – from a
mother, a father, a sister, a brother, a son, a daughter, a friend, a step-daughter. Our father is
reluctant to take part, his pain palpable. But I link arms with him and we walk out to join the rest.
When we arrive our nephew, his grandson, counts down...

10

9

8

7

6

5

4

3

2

1

... and we are meant to all let go at the same time.

Which we do.

All of us, except our mother.

She holds onto her balloon, as we gaze upward in awe at the sight of fourteen colourful orbs, twisting and dancing, suspended but flying, still flying, skywards. Wriggling dots, disappearing theatrically between the clouds (they are fading afternoon cumulus on this day).

Our mother keeps holding, vice-like, unwilling to let go. This final thwarting of release. Her first born. His pain and his suffering throughout his life. Her life. Ours. But finally, with an audible sob, she releases hers – and we watch in amazement as it seemingly catches up with the others. So impossible but we all feel it, in this release: there is some kind of magic on the end of that jetty that day. Somehow it helps soothe, just a little.

I live close to our parents and daily after the funeral, our mother comes to my home and asks whose funeral I have just organised. Daily, I tell her that it was for her eldest child; our brother; her son. It takes about a month of this harrowing ritual, with all its cinematic special effects, to sink in, and she finally retains the fact that her eldest child, indeed, is gone.

About a year later, we take some of our brother's children out to lunch, to decide what to do with his ashes. Our nephew knows exactly what his dad wanted, so it is decided – we will sprinkle him off the beach where they used to fish together, in a channel around the corner from where we live.

The next day, our mother knocks on my door.

“What are we doing about your brother?”

“O Mama,” I say, in my gentlest, possibly saddest voice. “He's gone. He died last....”

“O, for goodness sake, I know that! What are we doing about his ashes?”

I burst out laughing although I think it is because I am trying so hard not to cry. I hug her, hard.

There are moments of deep joy and hilarity along this demented way.

One hot summer's day last year, I am swimming in our parents' pool and sense someone watching. I look up, and there is our mother on their deck, just looking at me, half concealed by a deck post.

“Mum, what are you doing?” I feel annoyed and somehow, a little spooked. I simply want to wallow in the cool, alone, unthinking. “Why are you looking at me?”

She leans over the balustrade, gently and quietly, conspiratorially, asks:

“Who is your mother?”

It is almost a whisper, but it carries through the summer air, the scent of its loss profound, and smashes into the middle of my heart, like a fist blow.

“O Mama. You are.”

And then she exclaims out loud with relief, loud enough for the neighbours to hear:

“O, I am so very glad. I have such a deep, deep affection for you.”

I sink, suspended under the water to hide my tears; the sad ones and the joyful ones.

It is something to be so fiercely loved by somebody all your life, that even when her world is closing in on her and she is fearful of where she is and who is around, she still senses her love for you, despite it all.

We do much of our growing up in Bondi, my three brothers and I. As did our parents before us. Theirs were two solid, working class families. Ours, definitely middle class. Leaping in a generation from one demographic to another – manual labour skills swapped out for university degrees and the professional class, and all that that entailed back then. They did that for us. Our grandparents and our parents.

Everywhere we live, that beach a mere ten minutes’ drive away. Those summer days, building sandcastles and digging holes; eating ice cream, trying to finish before the heat melts the creaminess away, dripping down sun-kissed arms and tummies and legs. The manic squall of seagulls circling; the crash and rhythmic thunder of waves thumping the shoreline, dumping bracken-scented sea weedy debris to collect into mounds to jump over. Dodging armadas of Blue Bottles on the sand, shipwrecked by onshore breezes.

The smell of the surf – wet sand and sea-salted froth.

There is an old family shot of me, sitting on the beach in a green swimming costume. I am about three, head sideways, licking my shoulder and smiling; licking a delicious salty coating from my skin.

A perfect Sydney beach; a perfect Sydney summer day.

I remember the surf churning, inhaling foam as I clung tightly to our father, wading out to catch a wave;

jumping on his back and cleaving onto his neck as he body-surfed into the shore;

my own human surfboard;

trusting him implicitly.

The afternoon brine on the air, as each summer day gives into the perfect summer evening; the southerly blowing through, chasing away the mugginess; the Sydney summer fug.

Anything seems possible.

Even, I guess, this. We are on a family holiday up on the NSW northern coastline; our parents, my brother and I. It is summer; another perfect beach.

I am four and I nearly drown; I am nearly drowned.

I think that is the first time, as I try to break through the surface from below, I feel suspended in and held by water. I attempt to fight, trying to rise and fracture the lid of the sea. But I am not strong enough, too little, to swim upwards; to ascend by myself. I cannot gain purchase. And yet, within the suffocating panic, I remember feeling wonder at the sight of the surface's mercurial strength; its power to shut me in, held in a watery mould.

And I also remember giving up; stopping struggling, returning to a womb-like hazy liquid cradle; accepting; the world shut out; sounds stifled. And that is when he acts. When he feigns saving

me, pulling me from below, and dragging me into the air; out of the thunderous silence below and into the clamour of that chaotic summer's day.

And then, the splashing and shouting and running and the huge tanned hands grabbing us, hauling us from the sea. Our father holding us, my brother and I, against his sun-heated chest. It is my older brother, six, who does it. I know that now but at the time, everyone thinks he saves me. Which he does – but he pushes me off the sand shelf in the first place; holding me down, pushing me back under...

...again

and again

and again

and again.

And I never tell.

Our father carries us both to the shoreline. Our mother, dark haired and beautiful, wraps me in a towel and rocks me gently, gentle tears running down her cheeks.

“You saved your sister, son,” our father says, quietly, a smile in his voice. “You are a little hero. My little champ.”

Such pride.

Swimming most days to tend to a physical ailment, dogging me since teenage hood, I finish every lap session with long, languid submersions. I used to do this as a child. We grew up in a beautiful old barn of an Eastern Suburbs home in Sydney, and by the time our youngest brother learns to swim, our parents have a pool built in the backyard.

I am twelve years old.

I spend hours and hours and hours every summer from then on, mostly underwater in our backyard pool. Searing Sydney summer heat shimmering above; coolness and relief below. Refracted golden sunshine dancing across the bottom of the pool; a dappling diamond mosaic. Long, stretching, summer-browned arm strokes as I hold my breath; somersaults, both backwards and frontwards; diving and gliding from the steps.

These memories are returning to me some forty-five years later, as I submerge below and repeat the tricks now. And with them, the why. It is hauntingly quiet down there in the in between-ness. The world gleams and moves above the surface with phantom-like nuance. The greenness of hazy palms against the cloud speckled blueness of the sky; the towering opaque hugeness of a nearby eucalypt. Below, bubbles with rainbow clarity effervesce as quicksilver blossoms; their frantic rush to the surface. The surface – it still appears mercurial from below; a liquid, viscous covering into which the bubble blooms disappear without a ripple; a barrier between a watery play space and the air needed to stay. At certain angles from below, it acts as a mirror and I see parts of my body as though projected onto a screen. A fluid, kaleidoscopic screen, suspended between the water and the air above.

It is an escape. The quietness; the physical effort and concentration to stay suspended below, bubbles dancing along my body-line. Above is the family home; the family. Above, the elder brother and his reign of terror over me for twelve years. And beyond, in differing ways, really. For it is at this time, at fourteen, he begins to look outside the family home for his entertainment and leaves me more or less alone. Perhaps I swim below the surface to celebrate control over my own body; my own mind; to purge the childhood near-drowning at his hands. Perhaps it is the autonomy of the action; the closing out of above. Somehow I feel it is the quietness; the massive,

roiling, busy silence down there. Compared to the pain and despair suspended at the heart of our young family; rarely spoken, but shimmering darkly and ever present; its tentacle currents running through the walls and halls and rooms of our home like electricity, connecting us all. One continuous crushing, confused circuit, holding us together.

Family.

So many years later on weekends, our mother and I visit him in various NSW prisons, each government edifice with its own set of completely diverse and random rules. None of them matching each other's. He is moved to Cessnock Correctional Centre in the winter and he is cold, so we try to get a track suit – prison bottle green – to him. Thwarted by mail (because we took it out of its packaging) and in person (because we had to mail it in), our mother and I decide to smuggle it in. This of course breaks countless federal laws, but still, irrationally and risking imprisonment ourselves if caught (according to the huge signs blasting this message to all prison visitors on arrival), we devise a plan.

Mid-winter on the verges of the NSW Hunter Valley, and a long red cashmere overcoat is not out of place. En route to the prison, we stop at a roadhouse. I pull on the large green sweatshirt over my jumper; pull the baggy track pants up over my jeans. I then put on the coat, buttoning it to my throat. Our mother inspects me, our law-abiding, professional, astute mother, and nods her approval.

Lawbreaker that she is; we are.

We get through the first gates to sign in, deposit all our belongings in a locker, walk through the metal detectors, avoid the bored yet aggressive glares of the warders, wend our way to the visitor sector, and there we are in the prison visitors' yard.

Lawbreakers, like him.

We meet him and wander together to sit in the low slung winter sunlight. Firstly I wriggle out of the track pants and let them drop to the ground, kicking them behind his feet. We three keep talking and laughing. Slowly, he bends over and pulls them up over his bare legs.

Warmer.

Next, he helps me out of my coat, warming up as we are in the seasonal sunshine. Fifteen minutes later, I pull the sweatshirt off and leave it on the bench between us. When it is time to go, he grabs it, tying it around his waist. Walks to the gate that slams behind him; through it, locking him in.

We leave the prison, our mother and I, ecstatic felons.

He will not be cold tonight.

I write and deliver his eulogy and in it is this:

At different phases in my life this brother terrorised; charmed; frightened; manipulated; appalled; shocked; amazed; and loved me...I remember as a young girl thinking that if just once, just once, he came back into the family space after one of his horrendous and violent confrontations, and saw the damage and broken hearts he left behind, then he would never do it again. But at the time, I am too young to understand addiction. I know that now.

His transgressions towards me are never sexual; always psychological, and emotionally violent. And very, very clever, his duplicity at such a young age astounding. As such, my very first memories of him when I am still in a highchair are dark, shimmering behind hard shut doors in my mind. I know something but as small as I am, there is no articulation. I simply remember the feeling of a lingering dread; a tension.

It grows as we do. And I never tell.

It is heroin when I am twelve and he is fourteen; when he dies, he is battling an addiction to oxycodone, post-surgery. But our father and I believe something more sinister occurs. No drugs are in his system, lying in that gory pool of blood, a gash at the back of his head; an unused and full syringe, placed across his open palm. It is never tested. The police at the time, understandably, treating his death as a junkie one. That is what it looks like. They do not secure evidence; there is no chain put in place; his phone is released and his computer. There is no investigation of this death at that time. But we know he owed money; that he stole from bikies in a drug deal.

And we know for a fact they were looking for him. They are caught on CCTV.

They find his ex-wife at their former family home, asking her where our brother is; the same carload, asking for his address, at the local store near his own home, two weeks before he dies. Although she knows our brother well and where he lives, the store owner says she has no idea; hers is a gut instinct, a protective reply.

We are pretty sure they finally found him.

We tell the police everything but really, it is all too late by the time we put it together. And what does it matter? His life was always teetering, always on the edge of one more poor decision; one more disastrous choice. Nothing is bringing him back. As I say at the funeral service:

We six are now five; we four are now three, and it doesn't seem right and it doesn't seem natural. But it is what it is.

It is what it is.

His children roll his coffin to the hearse outside after the service. Once it is placed inside, our mother kisses her hand and places it on the casket, and will not move away, our father beside her. There are so many people there, but no one really makes a sound – the weeping is silent; the shuffling, just that. Shuffling. Finally, our father manoeuvres our mother away, gently, and the hearse drives off. We all stand there, suspended in our disbelief, willing it to turn around and drive back, to linger some more; not even this final farewell releasing us from a lifelong aching connection, watching this boy, this man, blast through his life, detonating much of what he encountered along the way.

Gone.

So the older me is again spending much of my time underwater these days, conjuring the twelve year old me to swim along, and putting it all together. Hiding from the family. Hiding from the outside world. Hiding from the devastation of loving and then, losing.

Somehow the loss of our brother, as shocking as it is, should not have shocked. We were all waiting for that knock on the door, for more than forty years. Waiting for the perfect storm he was for most of his life and ours, to come to an end. But that is the thing – he had survived for so long, that when he finally does die, it seems inexplicable.

Although inevitable and rational there is also shock in parental old age. Not only our mother, leaving us slowly and methodically, the amyloid deposits building up, congregating and

aggregating along the synapses of her brain; but our father, her carer, with his own medical problems. He loves her deeply, this paradoxically manifesting as anger and frustration and impatience. Sometimes harsh tenderness; sometimes tender harshness. And a determination that she will never 'go to a nursing home'.

And we are all caught, suspended in this space, waiting in between. Watching. Angry. Hopeless. Yearning. Loving. Grieving. Because this is where we are and it is too late.

It feels like a steel time trap.

It is our father's birthday and he turns eighty-four. He and our mother and I go out for lunch, and as is usually the case, we talk about the death. And I do not know why; and I don't really know how, after a lifetime of silence, I tell them. I ask them if they remember that summer's day on the beach when he saved me from drowning. Our mother of course does not, cannot remember. But our father does.

"You know dad, he pushed me out there in the first place. He kept pushing me under, before he started to drag me out."

The whites of his eyes enlarge as he looks at me; perplexed; confused.

"Why didn't you tell me?" His shock is deep.

Our mother refolds her serviette for the ninth time; rearranges the sugar container for the sixth; waves at the baby at the next table for the fifteenth.

The baby cries.

"I don't know. I was scared of him. Or too loyal."

Our agnostic mother looks up and says: "But he has gone to God now, hasn't he?"

And still I submerge under the water and channel her, my twelve year old self, to help me hold my breath, do somersaults, stand on my hands, come up and take a breath and do it all again. It must look quite odd at my age, but under here is a refuge; an eerie loud silence that fills my mind, rather than my thoughts. Of our slowly and cruelly dying mother; of our exhausted father; of our dead, perhaps murdered, brother.

It worked when I was twelve so I figure, why not now.

And then it occurs to me, fearfully, one night during those transit-lounge-moments suspended in between consciousness and sleep. Is this drawing back into my past, these childish games; this floating; these somersaults and hand stands; this submersion, this yearning to be suspended in water, this return to a womb-like state, the beginning of my own dementia? Am I drawing my own circle-of-life mantle around my shoulders? Am I trying to join our mother in her nether world?

I could be. Sometimes, it hurts so much to watch our parents disintegrate; their relationship and their bodies. Perhaps I too want to disappear like her so I do not have to bear witness any more. And as I write, I am so aware of people who have lost their parents too young; who would swap places with me in a heartbeat – to have parents still with them at grand ages. And I know this but still I must tell you, this long, drawn out sadness of loss is unbearable. It is crushing and weighty, this impotency to do anything; to engage; to make it better. Just make it something.

And yet it must be borne.

Aleppo fills the news airwaves. The carnage. Families ripped apart. Libya. Gaza. Mali. Somalia. The Ukraine. Sudan. There are more. Our own First Nations. Manus and Nauru. They say the

world is getting less peaceful each year. I can feel this. And yet in Australia, on our shores, some of us are lucky; should be grateful.

I am so very grateful, but still, it does not soothe our own family's pain.

I agree to sit with our mother while our father goes to a doctor's appointment. This seems an innocuous request; an opportunity to spend time with her. But as I arrive and he leaves, he spits over his shoulder:

“For God's sake, get her showered will you. She won't do it for me.”

A month earlier, she fell during the night, and is in such pain by the next morning that we call an ambulance to take her into the A&E, to see if anything is broken. X-rays are done, and the diagnosis: no breaks, just bruising. We bring her home, relieved, and wait out the designated days we are told it will take for the pain of bruising to abate.

It does not.

Daily, she seems to slip away. Her skin becomes translucent, the paler and sicker she becomes.

The pain is unbearable. I say to our father that I feel she is dying before our eyes.

Later, a doctor tells me: “What the family must remember, you never die of pain. She will not die of pain.” Her condescension, the arrogant cruelty of it, oozes down the phone line.

We call an ambulance and once again she is whisked away to the hospital. This time, a scan and diagnosis: a chip off the top of her femur, missed earlier. We are furious at the misdiagnosis and days of unnecessary pain, but also, once again, relieved. She is taken into hospital for a fortnight of pain management, and gradually recovers.

But we are now vigilante about minimising falling. A fall can be the beginning – another beginning – of the end with this disease and at this age. That is how I find myself helping our mother undress and hobble to the shower. And for some reason I am fuming. This is not my job – I have a full time job. I have so much to do – papers to grade; articles to write. So busy. So important. So many students. This is not right, supporting our naked mother under the shower. I do not want to spend any more time, watching this; feeling this; seeing this.

But as I look at her – steeply stooped, hunched over back; skin limp off fragile, bird-like bones; collapsed, empty breasts; her slumped stomach – there is a shift. I feel it, a physical shift.

Something breaks inside. Klimt's old woman, embodied in our mother. The image I have looked at and pondered on and loved for so many years, hanging on our living room wall, come to life.

I hold her gnarly hand, once so beautiful and smooth, in mine, and support her into the shower. I help her wash her back and her legs. I direct the water where she wants it and pass her the flannel to complete her wash. I hand her the towel and help swaddle her, drying her back and her legs for her. And I feel a sadness, but mostly I feel an overwhelming love for this woman; this old, sagging body suffused in pain. I realise this depleted body, somehow beautiful, is astonishing. Her age worn intensely, bearing with it a specific, awe-inspiring splendour. Her life longevity, borne deeply and loving hard. Grieving hard. Bearing witness to this is a revelation; another life gift she gives me. This woman who has always been there for me, my champion, my entire life. Who loves my own daughters as if they are her own. Perhaps even more deeply, because they are of me, her only daughter.

She struggles to dress so I help her some more. Holding her as she steps into her knickers; helping her clasp her bra; lifting her blouse over her head as she wriggles into it; balancing her, her fragile bodyweight leaning against mine, as we both pull her pants up. Watching as she

makes her way back to the bathroom, so slowly, to clean her teeth and do her hair. I help her comb her hair into place, the shower-damp silver grey, almost white strands barely hiding the pinkness of the scalp beneath.

She puts lip stick on, red, and a dab of perfume.

I must stay and watch; make sure she does not fall. I do not want her to fall.

I make us both a coffee and we sit on the deck and drink, looking over the water, not talking.

And I recognise this lapse, this slowing down of my day as the sum total of hers; both of us, suspended in time. Hers from a life she once had, left behind; mine from what I think is so important but simply is not.

This is what is important.

If not my own burgeoning dementia stalking me, then is this obsession with water submersion simply this – to be held? A yearning to be supported? To be held up for a short while; to abrogate responsibility and simply be held in place, suspended in water? To not feel the weight of knowing heavy loss; interminable heavy losses. To return to the lightness of the womb, the hushed muffling, suspended. I look up synonyms for the word suspension and smile:

break;

halt;

interruption;

moratorium;

postponement;

stoppage;

abeyance;
adjournment;
breather;
cessation;
deferment;
discontinuation;
dormancy;
downtime;
intermission;
latency;
pause;
quiescence;
remission;
respite;
time-out.

They all resonate.

So I grab my swimming costume and towel, goggles and bag, and head off to the pool again. I swim my laps and do my exercises. Then I play. Somersault after somersault; forwards and backwards; hand stands; gliding under water as long as I can hold my breath; trying to sit on the bottom of the pool amongst the dappling refracted dancing light, and looking up, always looking up, to the outside. To the shimmering spectre-like swaying of the eucalypts; the fronds of the palm trees flickering below them. Through the quicksilver watery mirrored lid, containing me.

Holding me in; cradling me. Listening to the loud silence down here; knowing it cannot last, I cannot stay here; lunging for the surface, breaking through it; gasping for air.

Re-birthing into the world.

Sometimes there is no choice: birth and death; and the in between-ness...

...of breathing...

...of living.

ⁱ <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/suspension>

ⁱⁱ Alzheimer's Australia: <https://www.fightdementia.org.au/statistics>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Economic Cost of Dementia in Australia 2016-2056 Report by the University of Canberra's National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM), for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM), commissioned by Alzheimer's Australia, February 2017; prepared by Professor Laurie Brown, Erick Hansnata and Hai Anh La

^{iv} Australian Bureau of Statistics (2017) Causes of Death, Australia, 2016 (cat. no. 3303.0)

^v The Economic Cost of Dementia in Australia 2016-2056 Report by the University of Canberra's National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM), for Social and Economic Modelling (NATSEM), commissioned by Alzheimer's Australia, February 2017; prepared by Professor Laurie Brown, Erick Hansnata and Hai Anh La

^{vi} Alzheimer's Australia: <https://www.fightdementia.org.au/statistics>