MY MOTHER AS SAMUEL BECKETT

In memoriam: Bessie Maud Linney
For Naia Chloe Connah

"All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed.
No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."
Samuel Beckett Worstward Ho

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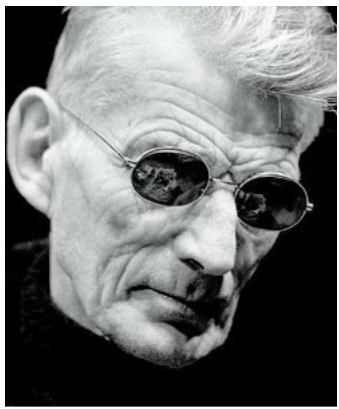
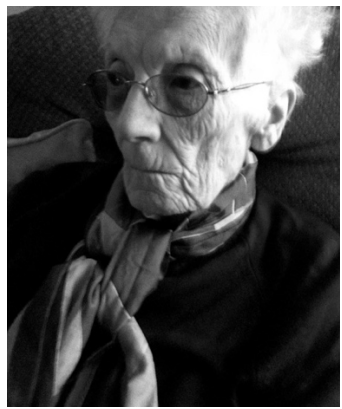
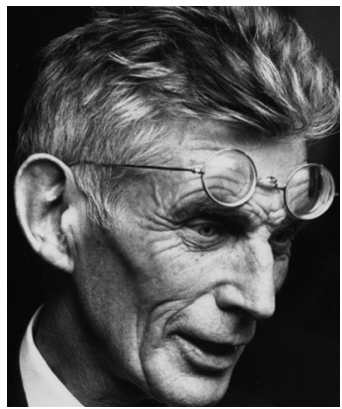
Roger Connah

Who is that person who has never foisted their
history on us, on anyone, not even on those close?
Who saw the line of the eyebrow plucked and dressed?
Now a slow but deep interest enters into a history
of those who emigrated, those who fought the wars of
other people, who lent their skills to the margins
of landscapes and literature. Fred, Lincoln, Ellen,
Samuel, George and Marguerite – names not lost
but buried in the websites of ancestry. Who is that person
who kept their history to themselves the most?
My mother.

When she asks, I slip the dark glasses on her in the nursing home and imagine the movie star from the 1930s. I can push my fingers through her beautifully thinned grey hair. I make sure a fresh box of chocolate eclairs is by her bedside. I can wait in calm now. Who is it that comes to mind? When the mouthful she has just taken is safely chewed and swallowed, this makes me the happiest person alive

Lost mother today at 11.25, 21st March 2013. For fifty years I had been taunted by the first words in Albert Camus' novel *The Outsider*: "Mother died today. Or, maybe, yesterday; I can't be sure. The telegram from the Home says: YOUR MOTHER PASSED AWAY. FUNERAL TOMORROW. DEEP SYMPATHY. Which leaves the matter doubtful; it could have been yesterday." As a young 13-year old I must have been scandalized by the sentence, by the imagined nonchalance. I must too, like many teenagers of the time, have been going through the beginnings of resistance and opposition. Opposition to siblings, parents, family, convention and what would eventually amount to a grand opposition to country. A four-decade life of travelling and self-imposed exile followed. Now I can no longer find the notebooks I would have kept nor the annotated volume of *The Outsider*. Underlining and marginalia everywhere, significance made deeply insignificant by inexperience. It was enough to imagine deep detachment, a withdrawal that must have begun so early. Fifty years on it was nothing like that nonchalance. I wept profusely for my mother. I was raw and mute; for days and weeks I walked aimlessly around my apartment. It was time to turn life around once more but to which direction and with what strength I could not say.

Who is the person doing this, taking this turn? What is this legacy we wish to leave? And why would this legacy need to be framed through a personal utopia of memory and history? What is this desire to be noticed, remembered and honoured in the dishonourable roll call? Am I this man or woman who knows where the world should be, should go, not what it is? Is this someone who thinks they can guide others into their worlds of history, of travel, of anatomy, tristesse and happiness? Is this a person so sure that their behaviour becomes tetchy, almost rude, in dismissing those that do not fit into the scheme of this unworthy life? What is this world made out as repertoire and narrative? Will we continue to produce memos, notes, poems and directives from the world beyond? Will they be dropped into the void known as a 'school of thought' and wait for the ripples? When the ripples come back with insufficient and improper echo, the emotional negligence will be clear. But these memos will be launched again as if unacceptable first time round. Historians too will then get in on the act once more. Each time, as if there is no past in the past and no history in history. Everything rectified to fit the accepted. Who is this person? Someone who has gone beyond the beyond. Someone who keeps on dying! Me, Samuel Beckett or my mother?

She was apparently on the floor all night. (Later, a year, two or three, mother will not remember how long she lay there). It was the next day when her neighbour entered. She was still there on the floor. She must have slept there. As her neighbour entered, mother must have looked up and said: "I owe you a pound." Her neighbour usually went for a paper and ran errands, especially on a Saturday morning. She would slip the packet of cigarettes quietly into the oven, lifting down the upper grill where she placed them. They would join the silver foil packages of cigarette stub and ash that mother stored in the unused small oven. Her neighbour picks her up. She gets back onto the armchair near the fire. They do not speak much. The day before mother had been for a hearing test. She had been prodded, poked and pulled apart. It always took days to get over any visit like this. She tells her neighbour about the hearing test. "I'll not wear them. I'll not use them. I only did it for my son!"The small blue packet containing the hearing aid was already buried deep inside the small table by the front door. Or was it wrapped in foil along with stubs and ash?

The message was passed on to my mother. He won't be in today. He's not feeling well. Been overdoing it, the nurses said, he won't be in for a couple of days. I knew you would accept the latter explanation rather than knowing your son had been taken into hospital for a suspected ruptured hernia. We have a history of this in the family. My father had his hernia belt and used it very often. But I could never work out how this bulbous contraption worked. I was amazed as a child watching him put it around his waist. I could not for the life of me see what it was achieving. I only know the pain was relieved and he could continue to work in his garden. 30 years later, I return from Spain and no sooner have I driven through the Welsh hills and I am in the house, I am on the floor in agony. I am now sitting in the SAU, the Surgical Assistant Unit. About 2 in the afternoon! By 4 I am told by an Iranian doctor to get off home, as the pain seems to have gone. I hold fast. I writhe in agony, press the vulnerable spot and say: "Impossible. I am travelling to America in 3 days". "All right, nurse! Ready this man for an immediate operation." I sent a message to you that I wouldn't be in to see you for a couple of days. You'd understand why. Been overdoing it, they said. My mother, the nurses said, lifted her face ever so slightly. "He'll be in by Friday", they repeated. A smile formed on her face. At 92, it could never quite achieve what used to be that full smile. But we knew. We both knew!

Sometime around October 2007, I was invited to lecture in the US, Texas A&M University at College Station. "I could come to California" my mother says, "but not Texas." There was to be a lecture and an interview for the Headship of the School of Architecture. Mother laughed. The temporary loss of teeth gave her usual winning smile an air of unintended menace. I put the cauliflower cheese in the microwave for her. "Put it on slow," she said. She would always say that, as if the microwave was like the oven or a hotplate that could cook slower. Well it could, of course. "Your sister's been," she said. No more words. As I retrieved the cauliflower cheese from the microwave, she had been writing a cheque. "If you are going to be a professor, you need a change of wardrobe." "No I can't, I can't accept the money" I replied. "Get yourself a suit. And no charity shop this time. And definitely no shirt from the Ladies department." Mother spoke in code. "You have a wife and daughter now." We both knew what she meant.

These fragments are assembled from at least six notebooks. Six notebooks from the time my mother lost her husband, my father, to the time of her passing in a nursing home. Over two score years I have divided my life up into different, and to my mother, separate entities. Selfhoods, if you prefer. Of course none of them exist on their own. In sum, 21 years since my father's death. There was and still is no narrative except fragments of text documenting her struggle to retain dignity and pride as she aged, as she became infirm and finally, as we might say, 'fatigued out'. The body closed down whilst the mind started a withdrawal, carefully but often unknowingly, on the death of her husband.

Bereavement, unacknowledged depression, isolation and then loneliness were all met with growing silence and retreat. The immediate family was small and became smaller. The large neo-Gothic window in her apartment in an old mill in North Wales became the portal for all life passing by; for all life passing on. This was the same window that had to be replaced when the apartment was flooded from the nearby river. A listed building, the officials merely said make the window like for like. She would move back in after 6 months in a hotel. The Chinese sofa would for a time be put alongside the wall where she could take her tea and look out. She always said she had to see the world passing by. That was 2001!

Mum's the Word! Asked by the Nursing Home for a list of the likes and dislikes of my mother, it came naturally. My mother likes a lie-in until 10ish, a cup of tea or beaker, milk with a smidgen of sugar, perhaps some porridge oats, even cornflakes occasionally. A slow morning to get ready for lunch fits her previous routine of 5-10 years sitting in the Castle Park Café from 11.30 till 1.15, reading the Daily Post. She likes to glance at newspapers then take a snooze after lunch between 2 and 4. She would, in latter times, rest on the bed moved into the living room rather than sleep sitting up in the chair. She likes to dress in stripes, cover her arms with cotton sleeves to stop any (recent) itching. And to hide her loss of weight and skinniness, she would say.

Plain turtle neck jumpers with white cotton under shirts. She likes thin scarves, has many of them. Useful, they can take any dribbling when eating and or when tired, instead of dirtying the jumpers. She wears a skirt occasionally and could be given the chance to do that, though she mostly uses trousers now. She has been known to feel comfortable in cotton and fleece sweat pants with drawstring (easy to pull on and off). She has a preference for the thicker Norwegian sweaters, as she often feels the cold, however warm it is. She sometimes uses zipped, sleeved or sleeveless padded fleece jackets or then a Norwegian cardigan. Her body grows colder by the day.

Not particularly a team player, she is more reserved and quiet, always did like her own company; she likes small corners to sit, where she can observe both people and the garden. In the home she will opt for the corner armchair, watching over trees, birds and sky. Generally reserved, keeps her own counsel but not difficult and will never impose. She has had serious migraines in the past and if she gets a headache now, she will remain withdrawn. She can be introverted having been used to hide her migraines in the family for many years. She would often go without asking for any medicine or Ibuprofen for the pain. She has handled this darkness, along with shyness for many years and though it may look she is displeased, it is often the inner pain that is 'talking'. She will often shield her eyes from any audience. Alert to events, people, things happening without always appearing to be. She is alert to the TV, the soaps Emmerdale, Coronation Street, music and travel shows likes the Eisteddfod and Fishlock. Her favourite TV programmes or one of them: probably Heartbeat. In our youth, no one would ever watch a soap.

Her hearing has been going for some years. She has refused any hearing aids over the years; pride meant she never wanted to be seen with one. She learnt to deflect this failing. So, more recently, it has not been easy to know whether she is hearing any non-direct speech or noise However, speaking to her, looking her in the eye, smiling at her, she is engaged. Conversations can be pushed out at random, or in passing, indirectly. Some are probably ignored or, more likely, go unheard. She has three pairs of glasses; though the wire-rimmed are new (the pink tinted pair). She still prefers the older plastic framed ones. One pair is for reading, one is for long distance, one for the sun. She experiences more than she sees now.

She eats slowly, speaks less and less but there is alertness in the eyes when engaged; it is expressed through symbolic gestures, like a smile, like a hand to the face to cover herself up (often for privacy or to shield any glare from a light). She often wears tinted or darkened glasses. Pursed lips can mean 'no' to more food (though not always). She likes to pick out lumps from the food (it catches in her failing, often painful teeth). This doesn't mean all food needs to be seriously pulped and blended; a variety of soft and semi-soft diet might be tried. Her habits are reversible however, which can surprise: minced meat, corn beef hash, baked beans, omelette, scrambled eggs, jacket potato with cheese, all go down a treat as does cheese on toast. She likes a good 'fish and chips' and will sometimes eat both fish and batter if helped. And also a few chips (but slowly).

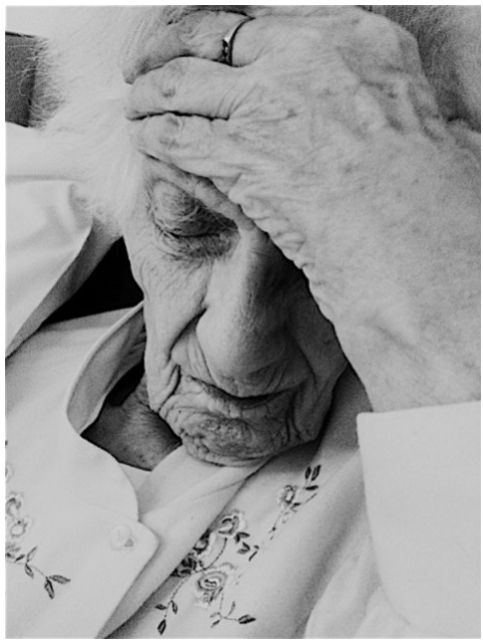
She likes pasta, cheese sauce (easy to eat) and rice. She prefers smaller cutlery; a small fork for food or small spoons. She rarely needs the plate piled with food, prefers it more sparing. She eats better, like all of us, when alert. She tends to dribble or forget to swallow if not awake or then sleepy. Her appetite has seriously changed and it is quite possible the taste buds have gone; thus she can eat a piece of chocolate at the same time as, say, minced meat and mashed potato (no harm in that); she would even smile when pointed out! She likes yoghurt, mousse, custard, vanilla, rice pudding, semolina, apple pie, lemon tart, blackberry pie, loves chocolate eclairs, egg custard, a soft (not hard) cream scone. She likes Kit Kat, Maltesers, chocolate Rolos, and these can be mixed with custard, or then left casually in front of her to be eaten together or separately. Useful to have water available in a beaker throughout the day. She likes tea in the evening or the occasional hot chocolate. She tastes more than she eats now.

Yes, she likes an afternoon nap; quietest time for her is 2- 4 pm. More so, the more fatigued and weaker she has become. She can be unpredictable and things are never linear in decline. It is hard to identify a pattern and she can surprise with speech, but will often remain silent unless otherwise engaged. She is 'knowingly' selective (or has been up to the near present) but will suddenly talk clearly and briefly. You can tell this by looking into her eyes, which also acknowledge and answer questions. She often uses a smile, a shake of the head or a nod, even small movements with the hand. She will put her hand to her eyes. This fields away any glare, and creates for her some solitude and privacy. She seems to want those places where she can get a privacy. She has recently got some allergies (2 years) and doctors have diagnosed various issues and answered with varying creams. Nothing has been resolved. The same is true with recent infections which seem to crop up regularly if inconsistently. Doctors have prescribed a variety of antibiotics, which obviously have their side-effects. Some have even made her dizzy and further unwell. It is unclear whether any of them really work. She tends all ailments with the trusted white miniature jar of 'Comfrey cream or ointment'. The body is moving its energy around in order to survive. She is a treasure!

Mother fell again, late 2007. This time she fell into the miniature pine plants outside her front door. This was before Social Service and the Rehab Team demanded that she had a step there with a railing either side. “Don’t tell my son,” she’d said to the people in the café. I’d gone in to visit her as usual at 1.15. By this time I was living in the stone cottage only 20 yards way, my family in Sweden. I could see her windows from my own windows. I always left her to have the morning herself, in order to make her own way at around 11 to the Castle Park café. There, her appetite closed eventually on a single choice, the baked potato. It became an unalterable routine for over 10 years. As unalterable as the amount of hot milk she would have in her coffee. The staff all knew her, they all liked this lady who came in a red beret, sometimes a suede jacket, sometimes a belted raincoat, sometimes a dark grey woollen coat. Sometimes she’d have on her dark glasses. Something glamorous in this gesture, they’d say. This time she was sitting in her armchair when I came in. She’d checked herself and sat down. She was shaken. A bruised eye behind the dark glasses and a scratch gave the fall away. I’d stopped saying be careful, but she knew how to interpret my look.

Mother fell again and again. This time June 2008. It was outside the café, during the walk of 30 yards from her front door. She was probably buffeted by the wind. She had become slight. Not anorexic but deficient in a chemistry that supplemented her loss of energy. The occasional Guinness was no longer helping, that is, if it ever did. She could lose concentration, look up, a sense of momentary vacancy. And then she was over, on the uneven asphalt. The small side road had not been re-surfaced for years. It was full of holes and dips. The stick she used suddenly became a liability. It would go into a hole and she'd lose balance. She'd got used to this and would right herself before falling. This time she didn't.

I had watched this without her knowing, agonisingly wanting to help. Later in another year or two I, or my daughter, would arrange to go at 11.15 and walk her, arm in arm to the café. The two regular ladies in the café would also come out to help her. They lifted her up, took her inside. Gave her a coffee. Later one of them walked her home. I was away travelling this time and heard it later from the ladies. At some stage I must have stopped noting the falls. Or then mother stopped telling me about them. She was good at hiding anything but the obvious cut, scratch or bruise. It was as if by not noting these falls it would lessen the frequency of them happening. There was no logic to this, but my own fear. She had the second hip operation then.



In 1998, still wrapped in a rather deep bereavement for my father that had turned into silence and depression, Mother was living in the family bungalow out in the country. But all activities done in partnership with my father had lessened. Gardening was an echo of what it used to be, cooking was ghostly and self-preservation seemed to be slipping away. Her relationship with her daughter was not the best and it continued to be a subject she preferred not to discuss. In time-honoured fashion they had had 'words'. They would keep on having words for some time. Nothing in their history seemed to allow them to get over the emotional burden they put on each other.

The help one wanted to give, the help the other resisted time and time again, meant for an uncomfortable relationship. So uncomfortable did it become that Mother at one moment arranged, with an old family friend, for a legal document asking her daughter not to visit. It was erratically alert. For some years this ban lasted until it trickled away. No one spoke about it, no one wanted to remember it after about 5 years. By then neither party quite understood how it had happened and why. Both had their versions of the discomfort they caused each other. Both were happy, though that is not the word perhaps, that it be all swept under the carpet. But imagine: you are asked not to visit your own mother. No one knew how hard that was, not even my sister.

On Thursday 5th November 1998 on a short visit from Stockholm the tension is clear. Nothing is said. I am over to look into a new property and moving Mother out of the country bungalow. This was the source of intense disagreement with her daughter who felt mother should already be cared for or closer to her family. We arrive at the eye clinic. Mother suspects a damaged eye because of the fall from the small stool in the kitchen. As we speak to the receptionist, she is asked for her telephone number. She doesn't give it correctly and slurs slightly. I correct the number. As we are guided to the waiting room, I mention that I must see the vicar in the evening and must call him. He has a telephone? I ask my mother. Yes, he's probably busy this morning but he'll be in tonight. For some reason I was alerted to her slight moment of distraction. Whilst sitting and waiting, I show the brochures of the property we are going to see after the appointment. Bessie, the receptionist calls. She goes off to see the Consultant. I read James Agee's *Letters to Father Flye* and am struck by the sensibility shown. Agee's letters at 20 years of age were like mine at 30. I felt I had reached the same understanding at 30 of what he knew at 20. I knew I was constantly out of time and delayed in life and this confirmed it. It went both ways. At 40 I'd be 50, and facing failure. At 45 Agree dies! At 55 what will happen to me?

I arrive back to Mill Cottage from Canada in April 2011. I miss my daughter Naia and the way she is with my mother. I immediately take the car and drive to the Cottage Hospital. Mother has been moved today, they said, to another bay in the ward. It felt as if they were giving up on her and for some reason I was not allowed to see her. Next day I was greeted with "Oh you again, you must be here to see your mother." The greeting was perfunctory, the nurse's face full of impatience. This type of greeting as nuisance was to grow depending on the staff present. I was forewarned. We had had 'words' about mother being difficult. I had explained to the doctor and nurses why she behaved in certain ways. She may go absent for moments, but she returns. They never return fully, the doctor said. She will decline at each stage. True, I said, but that was hardly a measure of difficulty or cussedness. They had tolerated me. My input embarrassed them. That is no reason to interpret this as difficulty or even wildness, I tried to point out, and certainly not in the way one of the nurses interpreted it. I was livid but kept quiet.

In the ward mother was slumped over. It had been like this the last time she had to come into the Cottage Hospital for a week. My daughter and I would take turns supporting her head whilst inserting another pillow. No one else appeared to notice. Yes, the ward was busy, but each time I requested another pillow there would be that look – not you again! This time I noted that Mother's name was spelt wrongly on the patient board above her bed. The nurse merely said: I haven't got a black pen. There was an abandon, that indifference again. The corrected name clearly didn't matter. Perhaps it didn't to the nurse. Tell me where to find the pen and I'll correct it. Not a word. I hope it is not misspelt on the official forms, would you mind checking? Not a word. I fear for mother's stay in the hospital once again. The ward is struggling. The staff is struggling. The hospital is struggling. The system is struggling. It is not cold, inefficient or unhelpful. But you could see why someone would think so. This time Mother looked as if she might not last the night.

There is one other notebook. It is Chinese. I had given it to my mother in 1977 around the time I had return briefly to the UK from Finland. It was always somewhere nearby in the bungalow but never in view. I had not imagined she had used it. When she moved into the Old Mill apartment, I didn't know where it was. I thought I occasionally saw it in the telephone table, in the drawer. She must have used it to slip letters and photographs inside. I had forgotten that I had asked her to write down anything she remembered. I wasn't expecting her to be as obsessive as I was. But she had a good hand and an alert mind. I imagined she could write at times when she might have felt she needed some comfort or reflection.

So it was with some surprise on her death, when I sorted out her papers I came across the Chinese notebook. It was in a box with some other papers and cards. It was as I suspected stuffed with photographs, some I had sent, some of my daughter and her Swedish mother Elisabeth. My two favourite girls she would say. It had letters inside, even faxed copies of letters she had written to us. As I flicked through the pages, she had written more fragments mostly towards the end of her life. It took me over 3 years to return to that book, so agonisingly painful did I imagine the love and loss she began to write out. I could read her beautiful hand, contrary somewhat to the arrogant illegibility of my own hand.

Mother comes out after having the laser treatment on her eye. She was then almost 80. She holds a paper handkerchief to her eye. The type of half crumpled tissue that I would find throughout the house. I would find them in the car, in the open glove compartment. She would use them to wipe the windscreen when she drove her Mini. Just as we are about to leave, she takes my arm. "Listen. A man just came up to me. He asked me if I knew the vicar. He wanted his telephone number. I told him I didn't have it but he was probably busy in the morning anyway. This man also had some brochures with him. He intended to look at a house, the Highlands I think. He thought I would be interested." I didn't say a word. Mother continued: "I don't know who he was. He had a stubbly beard." She paused. "Do you think we'd better call immediately? The house might have gone!"

Inside my blood seemed to stop circulating momentarily. I was close to blackout. I had been told by the doctor to notice any unusual signs. The doctor had used the word 'alarming'. Things are not quite right with your mother, he had said. Even my sister had warned me on arrival that things were not right. I must have been angry with her. This suggested a mental derangement so quickly, and – I pondered - on what evidence? I could not react properly. Any sense of making such a hasty judgment would have been disastrous to my mother's current confidence and self-esteem. Of course, the man with the stubbly beard she had been talking to before the laser treatment was me. Had she forgotten? Had she forgotten her son? Momentarily? Or was the doctor right. "Perhaps you were dreaming it," I said to her attempting to pass it off without saying anything further. She would live another 13 years.

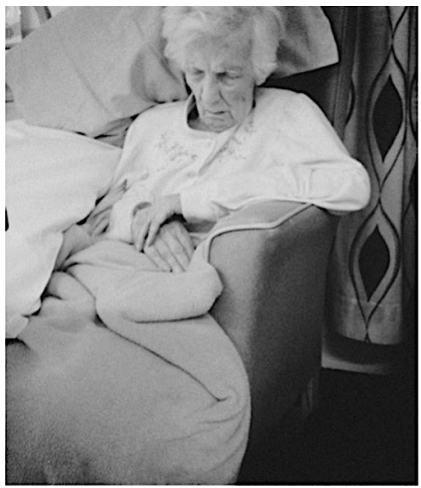
The periods in hospital during the last five years of her life blurred. The young doctor from the surgery was mid-30s, sympathetic but unlikely to ask for any backstory. Inflammation ointment, antibiotics, no anti-depressants, no aspirin, my mother would refuse all medicine if she could. The doctor didn't know what to do with her. The friendly manager of the residential home visited the hospital. The home had worked so hard to diminish the concerns of doctor and hospital. This time Mother looked slightly smaller, weaker. She was now 91 and unaware of the discussions. The bruising on her face looked fearsome. How many times was this? She managed a smile. Later I would bring her some dark glasses on request. The hospital nurse could not manage any discussion above the obvious. She will not survive alone. There is no chance she can ever live alone again. And so on. The nurse began to outline her issues: "Food is put in front of her. She makes no effort. We cannot sit with her. We don't have the time. She has become difficult." I turned.

"I quite understand this," I said, "but my mother is not difficult. She has a small appetite I agree and this should concern us. But how many of you actually touched her hand and before turning away after leaving the plate on the tray in front of her said: "How are you feeling, Bessie?" How many of you actually talked to her before leaving? Difficult? How many of us are difficult at home with our partners, our children, our colleagues?" I had watched this eating ritual many times. I had spent almost ten years trying to get some food down her each day whenever I could. Since she turned 80. Suddenly Mother moved from being difficult to high risk. Yet nothing had really happened. But she knows. This is one more step in silence she has to take. One more step before she loses a little more independence, and is forced to enter the prison of a nursing home. A prison was how she saw it. It was the word she would have used.

As far as you are concerned Mother, your son is under the weather still. In fact, he's been under the knife. A gentle operation necessary after having discovered that he was suffering from a double hernia. I didn't think much of it as I sat there waiting for the porter to take me to theatre. It was hours since I had signed the consent form for the anaesthetic consultant. I think I'd been asked at least four times by four others whether I had done that. I kept thinking of Roland Barthes in a French hospital. Was it so, according to one biographer, that after what amounted to a small collision with a car, a rather slight accident, he found himself lying in a hospital bed for longer than he ever imagined? Did he not have the energy to recover? Was his mother's recent death so deeply distressing? Three days later after the operation, as I go into the Nursing Home to visit my mother, I forget that I still have the identification tag on my wrist. Hosp. No: 442548. Surgical Assistant Unit: NHS 499 433 9600. My mother picked at it immediately, and turned it around as you would a watch. As she used to do with me as a child. She knew.

Now in the second ward, I recall the five hours in the first. Pain going in and out almost disappears when the Doctor came to check. Dr Amir was all for sending me away and returning on an elective, somewhere in the next 3 months. I recalled my father. I stood up, bent double and held my stomach. I recalled the picture of my mother as a near movie star in her 20s. I remembered her having to walk at school with a book on her head. Comportment lessons she said in Leamore Primary School, Walsall. I was due in Stockholm at the end of the week. I had said the US by mistake. It didn't matter. Dr Amir put the papers in motion. The pain disappears when lying but returns when standing. My mother can barely get out of the bed now. Her legs no longer have the strength to hold her. Her frame is disappearing. She is disappearing. The moment I stand the pain shoots back. The moment my mother tries to stand, she falls. She fell many times earlier until the walls of her small chapel registered her pain. I now live in her chapel.

A few men in various stages of pain, with catheters, oxygen, plasma, the works. A spider is noticed on the curtain around one of the beds. Someone shrieks. Probably one of the big men, the type who surely must have played rugby. Shane, who was reading a magazine about lorry driving got up to take it in his hand. He cupped it and took it to a nurse who screamed. Dr. Amir comes in. "Don't kill it," Shane says. The spider escapes from Shane's hand, walks over his back. Dr. Amir then takes it and cups it. Throws it on the ground. Stamps on it. No question. Mother is in the other hospital not far from this. She hated spiders too. But I never ever heard her scream. I am not sure how long she will survive. The doctors are more pessimistic than I am. I watch the spider crushed underfoot.



Why at 65 years of age did Monsieur Barthes not exit that hospital in Paris? I begin to think what might offer this relief, what huge tranquillity it might be to close one's eyes forever. What is that serenity that would ask of no further energy to live? "I am so tired," my mother would regularly say to me in a low whisper. "I am so, so tired." They move me to the next ward just at the moment the Scot gets his sixth medal in the Olympic Velodrome. Ellen, the small orderly, looks up, chatty. One man wants to go to bed. "I can't come yet," Ellen replies, "I'm busy. Just get up, wiggle your bum." The man looks a little miffed. Surgery is taking forever and my imagination mixes with J G Ballard and I blow another shopping mall to kingdom come. Hold on, Mother, I'll be there soon.

My mother never really knew what I did in life. Perhaps she didn't need to. I've come into the Castle Hotel to drink the local ale called Conwy Shipwreck. As good a name as any for a real ale. It seems appropriate for this slowness that has taken over. You could have died in there, someone remarked. It's happened. Go in for small snip, come out in the fridge. I was beginning to think of ideas about a traumatized architecture of the sea; a competition to do something with the wreck of the Concordia off the Italian coast. I'd given my mother recently a pair of dark glasses. She had always been complaining of the light in hospitals and homes, and held her gaze low. She looked terrific!

“Here,” I said, “take these Greta!” She smiled the half smile again. I was hoping she’d got the Garbo idea, but was never sure. For the architectural competition, I decided to go for an Italian job. Treat the wrecked cruise liner as cuts of cinema. Like partitioning a carcass of meat. This was the century of cinema that we’d lost. A cut from Antonioni, from Fellini, from Pasolini to Rossellini - surgical slices right through the hull of the Concordia liner lying on its side like a beached whale. The sea is smooth, the horizon flat. My mother comes out looking like Monica Wittig. The shipwreck is only our selves if we do not find a way out of our predicament. Back up son, you’re only supposed to blow the bloody doors off.

Is this the via negativa they speak about? Another world I seem to understand less and less about as I too age. I want to hold to this slowness now. I want to refuse to return to the pace I used to live, to the farce that life could become in a university. As my mother turned the patient's identification tag around in her hand, I knew she knew. Oh Canada, she might have gone there with her Aunt Ellen in 1926 when her father died. She was aged 6. Oh Canada, you seem so far away as to be fictional. You struggle to offer the lonely any dream outside that which your landscape controls. Oh Canada, this was the name in Auschwitz for the building where all the spoils taken from the Jews were stored. What is the measure of life you would have had there, Mother? And what is it you no longer know about this withdrawal, about life's unknowing?


100 JOBS
BOOST

She put my arm down. It is that spiritual training, by the second, by the minute, living a theology all your own. A miscalculated exile. Word-denying we are at the moment, my mother and I. But this cannot be the final act. Solitude and silence hold us together and we enter each other's eyes with renewed force. "It seems to me," the monk wrote, "that if a monk is permitted to be detached from these struggles over particular interests, it is only in order that they may give thoughts to the interests of all, to the whole question." John, the Welsh farmer in the second ward, used the word 'abattoir' at least five times. "When are they taking me to the abattoir?" he says to the night nurse, "this is the sixth time of asking."

They opened their mouths as if all went to plan, but nothing really came out. Were they accepting the dementia that hits the surface of the skull, soon to be beyond control? Perhaps it did emerge to find in Mother's sibilant hissing a reluctance to go on. Only then for her to back off, turn back inside, search the faces of those gathered around the bed for a sign of admission. Having failed to pick up on the confession or read the codes, they went out and broke the record for how long their sentences could go on without ever having to pause, or even, and this has since disappeared, without ever having to be teased about meaning. Meanwhile Mother teased the room with her presence and the snagged memory of lovers too distant for even this staged journey. Nothing to send them back to re-live those years. Mother on the beach, paddling, dress tucked in, shoes off. We are talking of Lauren Bacall, my mother's favourite.

I am inventing conversations with you, conversations we will probably never have. But that doesn't matter. Each time I think of this I imagine something released from the past and brought into the present. This brings me closer to you as far away as you are. Apparently, according to a film on television recently, *The Secrets of Growing Old* (Oxford Scientific Films) 90+ years of age is the new 70. Something to do I gather with the biological age vis a vis the mental, physical and body age. Thinking of you this was obvious – you are there in your 60s! Would that mean I am still in my 40s? I am not sure I got that right but secrets indeed. As I watched the wonderful 'specimens' photographed from ages of 60 to those in their 90s, I thought of you, your wit, alacrity and beauty. Our combined sum of years is 156. And I laughed. Secrets indeed, what are they that there is still another life in waiting? Humour was one ingredient. I laughed again seeing your laughter. Apparently this humour is similar to the smiles and laughter of children. Perhaps we are reversing though not in any infantile way.

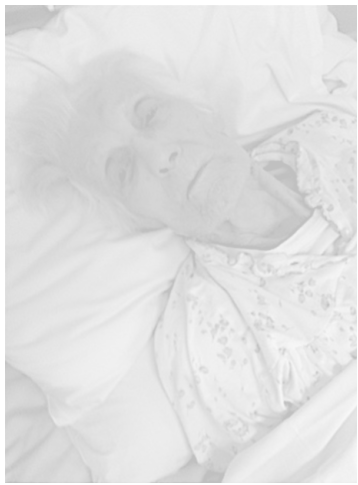
How do I sense this change in me, this feeling of being 'home', unconditionally released? It's not that I don't want to travel anymore, I do. It is more that I do not want to rush off to Asia, Africa or Latin America. Or is it that I do not want to travel in the same way? But what was that way? This summer is unusual; this time I have besides your pictures a small miniature patio garden, a few plants in a line. I don't need to lie in shorts with a naked torso facing the burning mountains in Laos. I want to watch the few flowers and plants grown in this small garden. I have never felt like that even though I come from you both, a mother and father who spent their whole lives in some way or another in the garden in the various properties we lived in. I hear talk of a lived wisdom. I wonder what exactly that means? At the end of the TV film the final ingredient for this aging well, or this wisdom was of course 'love'. It did not quite go into detail. It didn't talk of the second breast, a woman dressed in a towel walking across her apartment to change the all-important music. But I sensed it meant all that and more. Mother, where were you in the War?

I am constantly thinking of how to write to you. I have written some small fragments with you in mind, celebrating this coming 'home'. I am so glad that you have the Black Book on silence by your bed. I know you didn't open it. It is as if I am there as you read between the lines you never read. It was an extremely hard year in the city this year. I don't know how long I want to stay in another country. In the mean time I am turning to books in my library that by happenstance also include passages on old age, or should we say, the wearing out of body not mind. It follows on from this return to reading Samuel Beckett and Marguerite Duras. Loving each other in impossible ways. It still has to be possible. You see it's you and Samuel Beckett, Mother!

I have just finished Max Frisch and his *Drafts for a Third Sketchbook* in which he suggests an advanced senility might be at work as he faces his memories, his lovers, his rage at America (he had an apartment in New York, Zurich and a house I think in Ticino). He appears to be growing apart from the current lover who lives in New York. A fall from a ladder, he hides from all. Except his sketchbook! You will recognize this well and even if I have not quite reached that stage (he was in his 70s or was it his 80s?) this 'creative' upset and interruption into life's activities doesn't seem so far away at times. The loss of a name, the stretched memory, the aging body; recently whist undressing for swimming I noticed the lines on my underarms, signifying losing flesh, just as you did, just as you mentioned to me many times. You were anaemic and eventually appalled that you had such thin arms and legs. Your hands though I always thought of as unspeakably beautiful.

There is more than a strange creativity in this indifference I find I have at the moment. It's more like a welcome retreat from, a resistance to, all the links and sources, all the events and happenings that go on around us. In the city, in the world, that ecstasy again! Previous years, this time in summer, I may have rushed off to Venice, turned over to another life and persona for a week or two. Now, as I am sent images of the sweet, sophisticated things you can buy in the Venetian shops, I no longer need to go there. Instead the sweet things are all around me. Even in your old chapel where someone else now lives in this small town. It's quiet, but this somewhat shabbily maintained silent community still thrills. The river banks, the grass defence floods were all mown yesterday, the smell of freshly cut grass was delicious. One elderly man who swims at the same time turned yesterday and said: You've been away. America was it? No, I said, Canada. But it was too long. 8 months! So you missed home? he asked somewhat mockingly. I said, certainly yes. So we have something still here in this country? I said, indeed, we have more than that.

I go from Frisch's Sketchbook to Gunter Grass's *The Box* (*Tales from the Darkroom*). I expect something on old age or aging; Grass had reached that stage. Though I have read all books by Grass, after 20 pages of the memories of his 8 related children and grandchildren, I realized it was not what I wanted to be reading right now. It went back on the shelf with all the other Grass volumes in their Penguin paperback gold covers. Old age and advanced senility might appear somewhere else. You will smile I hope. I found Joseph Heller's novel The Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man, I would re-read it as I would Beckett's *Molloy*. Where is that phrase "I can't go on. I'll go on"? Cited almost as much as "fail again, fail better". I was glad to be writing this with you, to you. To be sharing this intimacy and impossibility. They become texts in mind and body. They might make a new book. An exhibition. One never knows. *Mother, you don't have to go on!*

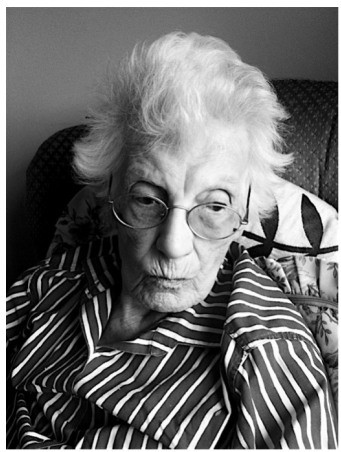


decade. Yet she treated it with the dignity and privacy that was very much her. Born in 1920, the lady known as mum, mother, nanna, Bessie or Mrs Connah had to develop many strengths to deal with her life in this and the last century. Many of my mother's ilk did not talk of their past. They recalled the past but little, perhaps wishing to move into the future rather than recall the joy and of course struggle of pre-war and post-war Britain. The war of course was never spoken about. She was born Bessie Maud Linney in Ashton under Lyne, near Manchester; born into the Jazz age, the difficult 1920s. Linney is an old English, female name. It comes from the combined words Lindgifu; from lime, that is a shield of rock, and from the word gifu which means 'gift'. Losing her father at the age of 6, she emerged out of this reserve and shyness, a young married woman. She entered into the Silver Cross Pram Age of Britain in the 1950s, taking the train on her own to Rhyl Station from Chester, to take my sister and I on the sands, pushing the pram through wet sand. These were the Tupperware years, the years of colour, hair perms and yes, eventually later, holidays abroad.

Bessie to many, Mrs Connah to others, was one off. Of course we always say that about our mothers, but there is no doubt she was. If I had to list only five characteristics, it would be respect, generosity, reserve, kindness and pride. There are others. She possessed fortitude in never wishing to impose. Like many fortunate to have been born so long ago she saw the last century out and spent her last years in this somewhat new and strangely networked century. All have known her in their own special way. She requested today to wear something bright, not to resort to accepted convention. Perhaps a surprising request from someone so unimposing, but therein lies her own strength and mind. She was a fine swimmer, a good tennis player.

Had she had more schooling, had more schooling been made available in those early years, I suspect she would have chosen art or music, areas of life she could only barely touch in the lack of opportunity and time available. The gaiety of her earlier life is more difficult to recall when we are this end of the spectrum, but it is there for all to see, in photographs, in games of tennis or bridge, in visiting Cannock Chase or cycling into Wales for her honeymoon. To wear something bright then is a token of how she wishes to be remembered. It is also a gift and a celebration, and we are reminded of this just as her granddaughter awaits the arrival of her own child. No better moment to signal this circle.

She struggled with aging certainly, yet she survived by 21 years her husband, William Connah, the gentlest of men, with such quiet dignity and strength. She lived alone until she was 90 and for the last 3 years was fortunate to be treated as kindly as possible in the 'home' she never ever wanted to end up in. In the last few days, I was looking through the images taken on the iPhone. For her last 8 years I would visit her as often as I could from Canada, a country where her relatives left in the early 1900s, a country her Aunt Ellen wanted to take her. I don't really know what I was looking for, perhaps one image which captured something of the essence of my mother. As if one image can do this. Then she began in an uncanny way to resemble those photographs of Samuel Beckett. My mother as Samuel Beckett! She would have laughed had she known who Beckett was. Yet one photograph seemed to pop out. It held me with the beginnings of a smile, a glint in her eyes. Those from her café days in the last decade of her life know that glint very well as she sat at her favourite table reading the Daily Post and, as she said, watching the world go by. This was the endgame.



This photograph held something so beautiful of her. She was wearing one of her favourite striped shirts, the 100 per cent cotton ones I would buy in Finland, this time the red one. The beginnings of a smile on her lips made me think of her past, the 1940s, movies and fashion, and the actress Lauren Bacall. She was a star in many other ways. I could say more, but more really is unnecessary. This is not sternness on her face, but detail. It is only ever a fraction of the narrative of this lady's life. As I pass this photograph around during the funeral – on an iPad why not? - I end this brief eulogy to a quite simply wonderful mother; a quite distinct lady of character and quietness. In celebration of a life and - specifically - what has been a good death, she was quite simply an immeasurable gift.

The Gift

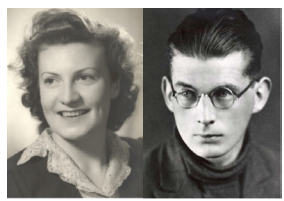
What if this is one of the most beautiful shots?
a mother beyond all mothers
where the smile is unformed but forming
where the eyes, cataract-safe, so still and alert
where the face has contours,
where it holds that mischief
of a mother to a son,
chastised for his occasional cheekiness?

And in it you cannot fail to see the world
in those deep eyes of the lived,
in the beauty of lips slightly pursed,
unmoving, opening.

there is always that movement
the moment after, when the smile formed
turned into aged but dignified laughter,
when we surprise each other again
with deep love and an inner beauty
untouched by death.
What a (movie) star!
What a (lasting) gift!

Who is this person? Someone who has gone beyond the beyond, someone who keeps on dying! We have become imposters. It arrives at moments in our lives, which are not always recognized. If we become contemplative, even solipsistic, the moment arrives where we walk through the books that supposedly still guard us against icon and image, against the fraudulence of the latest truth. The imposter holds onto words in a private democracy and wisdom abdicates responsibility when the authority to speak is questioned. We are triumphant only when we identify that moment, when we know we are unlikely to gain and no longer need the upper hand in the years left us. Most of us walk around with a secret. Told that the world has become deleterious, that if we do not return to a state when we take words seriously, we will not only eventually die, for we stopped breathing comfortably years ago, but we will not recognize an existence lived through. Life then will remain unexamined. The scare however is no longer enough and many secretly know they will now no longer read one single book throughout their life. I have become the imposter. Contrary to predictions however, the intelligence necessary to make constant error will remain the same. Actually it is likely to rise.

MY MOTHER AS SAMUEL BECKETT
Bessie M Connah née Linney 1920-2013



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