

'WHEN SHE KISSES MY HAND' – WRITING ABOUT MY MOTHER

My mother developed the early symptoms of dementia around 1993, and died in a nursing home in 2009. So she struggled with her illness for sixteen years, from the age of sixty-four. Of course trying to care for, respect and protect a parent with dementia is a profound experience. For years I've used writing to attempt to understand experience, to give it meaningful shape if possible, measure its circumference with words.

One of the terrible effects of my mother's dementia was that it eventually robbed her of the power of speech. In the last years of her life she couldn't form words anymore. She was a strong, capable woman, and always held herself back from expressing her emotions verbally, so this new involuntary silence felt particularly cruel.

When I was struggling to comprehend the deteriorating effects of her illness I turned to writing to help me, as I'd turn to a trusted friend. I realised there were poems about our relationship, and its changes, that demanded to be written, even as her symptoms increased.

I was struggling with the fact that physically my mother was there - beautifully, heartbreakingly there, next to me - palpably in the present. I could hold her hand, talk to her, make her laugh, try and reach her, and sometimes her smile hinted that I might have succeeded, even fleetingly. But the elusiveness she showed in our relationship before her illness - her strong working-class taciturn quality - returned in an altered way. When she could no longer speak, say any words back to me, in an odd unresolved sense I felt as if I was still trying to 'reach' her.

Although watching someone deteriorate with Alzheimer's has been called a living bereavement, it seems to me that two essential elements of bereavement are the physical absence of the loved one, their disappearance, and the survivor's continuation without them. During a long illness there can be no sense of 'closure' for the parties involved. The struggle is partly due to the paradox that many of the loved one's important characteristics are lost, although the loved one remains. So the relationship continues unresolved in the present: still open to the possibility of change.

It's no surprise that poems should always stay open to the possibility of change during the writing process, and even after we think the poem may be finished. For example, the sonnet 'Hands' arrived soon after the experience it describes, because I knew there was communication between my mother and I that was beyond words, which she was attempting to express through her illness and by her actions. It felt important enough to commemorate this experience – to make it live, to keep it present – by using the words that she had been denied.

HANDS

While I wonder if she knows me anymore
or if her smile's an empty reflection
of mine, my mother (whose words are gone)
holds my hand and studies it, like she'd pore
over each finger's meaning for an hour
and be none the wiser. Who is her son,
why this hand with its similar skin,
what relation to, difference from, her?
She was never a mother for fussing,
not one for words or touching years ago
so when she kisses my hand I'm crying.
She's absorbed by veins and knuckles now,
thumps my palm for comfort, any kissing
of hands her blessing, as if I should know.

This poem was published in my third collection 'Torso'. As her illness progressed, my writing took me towards a sequence of seven sonnets 'The Lesson of Sand', published in my fourth collection 'Blue Wallpaper'.

Since my mother's death, poems about her continue to arrive, apparently out of nowhere, presumably because important relationships survive even after death. We still need to understand the person we've lost – to reflect on their lives – and poems can serve as a route towards compassion, new realisations, greater understanding.

An extract from this essay was first published in 'Dying, Bereavement and the Healing Arts' Edited by Gillie Bolton (Jessica Kingsley, London, 2008)

© Robert Hamberger 2021