

Letters Inherited

By Jessica McKendrick

She sits.
Motionless, allowing the tide of time to wash over her.
Antiseptic acrid and eye watering.
Sinuses burn as fingertips grasp hospice bedsheets.
Hair, aged silver birch, cascades across her tired eyes.
Memories buried so deep, never to be recovered.
Weathered and worn thin over knuckles, tissue dries tears.
The words ricochet. *'Alzheimer's'* they say.

Alzheimer's?

Some plague of age, a high price to pay for a lifetime well spent.
Such grief is this.
Mourning who is not truly lost but who is still living.
Mother turned stranger. Brain turned monster.

Senile plaques grow tendrils deep into the synapses of her brain.
Rooting far below ground level; down through the cortical layers of soil.
They grow and leech, drinking her brain dry.
Fibrous and folded origami, the roots grow deeper, spawning infestation, rotten plum.
But there's a damp that's creeping in.
Trickling. Seeping. Lifting the wallpaper. Its edges curling.
There in the corner, where occipital lobe meets cerebellum.
As paper peels, putrid citrus sprays, neurones slither and tangles twist.

'Alzheimer's'

The words ricochet to the vestibule.
The echo chamber for her thoughts, her fears.
How terrifying is the mind when it becomes a stranger? An infestation, one's own creation,
the repercussion of age.

‘Alzheimer’s?’ she hears.

A crescendo, applause from the audience?

In a panic she rises to her feet, but posture seizes.

Standing ovation!

Spine, frozen icicle as bone grinds together to a halt.

Each individual groove of her spine, overgrown in the garden of cartilage, a wild wisteria taking her home as its own.

Stems strengthen and calcify between vertebrae, as cartilage wears away and pain sears deep, weaving between the balustrade.

She is trapped. A prisoner in her own home.

Her hand reaches out; her cold fingertips finding solace in the warmth of my palm.

Arthritic knuckles melting into her own flesh and blood.

As her hand sits patiently in mine her eyes close for night.

I fear for the letters she is passing down to me, and from me to my own daughter.

Origami concealed plague of age

An envelope filled with malign destiny cast crimson in the light.

An envelope embossed with wax sealing my malignant fate.

Scientific Statement

Letters inherited is a creative piece exploring the neurodegeneration associated with Alzheimer’s disease. As the most common form of dementia, Alzheimer’s is broadly characterised by progressive memory loss, cognitive decline, and behavioural changes. Its pathological features are protein ‘plaques’ and ‘neurofibrillary tangles’ that accumulate around and within cells of the brain, ‘neurons’. Plaques and tangles disrupt transmission of signals between neurones, trigger neuroinflammation and ultimately lead to neuronal death. The piece draws parallels to the insidious spread of plaques and tangles in the brain of affected patients which lead to the described symptoms of memory loss. Additional reference to ‘calcified stems’ and ‘arthritic knuckles’ refers to the degeneration of bone associated with arthritis and osteoporosis, both frequent comorbidities in elderly patients with Alzheimer’s. Hereditary imagery invokes the genetic undercurrents recognised in these disorders and alludes to the intergenerational concern of inherited susceptibility.

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