



Old Women Look Like This

Susan M. Schultz

Argotist Ebooks

Cover image by Elizabeth Berdann

Copyright © Susan M. Schultz 2010
All rights reserved
Argotist Ebooks

The manuscript was inspired by a series of paintings of old women by Elizabeth Berdann.
You can find some of them here:

http://www.elizabethberdann.com/gallery_singleHuman.htm

Old Women Look Like This

Old Women Look Like This

Women fighting aging skin are most frequent users of cosmetic treatments. A stainless heart contains Emma (89) her neck an inverse organ, cheek a palimpsest of kidney, eyes steel, nearly shut against the frame. Crazy women fight over a man; old bitches fight in Backa Palanka. Rose (98) is all forehead, her face leaning toward the point of her heart-shaped frame, nose abutting it. Her foundation is copper; her paints are not cosmetics. A little old lady went into the Bank of America one day carrying a bag of money. Or, a little old lady walked up to the cashier and placed a bag of cat food on the check out counter. There are more homeless people on campus lately. Do not refer to them as them or as they or as those people, because we could be they as they could be someone else. Edna (91) lives inside a diamond, her nose the line between first and second base; her ear and neck lobe toward home plate; a single eye opens to the field, yet remains contained within the light; the outfield dark. Bald women can be sexy, can have intercourse with pets, they can have, and you can go there. Mildred (89) smiles at the bottom of her heart, half her mouth cut off by sentimental line, chance line, wrinkle in time line. Her right cheek blurs against the heart's curve, but there is blue sky behind her to the left. Her nose appears broken, slants oddly against the heart's certain frame. Do 50-year-old women really need a sex life, or do they want what they had at 25? Many were still having a pretty good time, says *Newsweek*, which wonders about older women who haven't had sexual intercourse in a while. Women may not mind. Agnes (90) wears her square face oddly inside her cut diamond. Her jaw is a shelf the mouth rests upon; eyes so nearly consumed by face, one bright curl a laser pointer to the tight angle at the top. She floats there, her neck rooted to the soil of its own shadow. Women talk openly about their sex lives after 60; I passed two women who held hands the way I imagine widows do. There are men who look like old lesbians on cracked.com, but on the plus side, I look a lot younger than my age, or those who become senior before their time. Rose (90) has wide astonished eyes, hair a white nest; absence where her neck should be; she is all heart at the heart of her frame. My friend (63) says kindness is what there is; I (51) agree it matters not what we know, while the paranoid man of no age resembles a renaissance god within his diamond eye, knows his cobwebs are gone and at age 80 success is not peeing in your pants. Green bananas are an investment now, and I just hate to waste money.

Are You My Mother?

Martha (92) was once a jay, the kind that chases cats, children, eats your eggs; in old age, she is finch, sparrow, slender bird who misplaced her song on a bank of reeds, for whom the Second War was an oboe played unto forgetting.

Martha lost her mother, her nest, her song, set out to find her Henrietta in the common room, the dining room, the corridor, in every cranny of her home. But all she found was an Edna (90) and a Mildred (89) and an Edith (95) and a Rose (90); none of them resembled her, as they were old. “Are you my mother?” Martha asked them each, and they said no, they were not hers but someone else's mother, sister, aunt, niece. “I took care of you,” one said, “but I am not your mother; look at me, I am tall and you are short; my hair is gray and yours is white; my eyes are brown and yours so blue.”

Martha wondered if the bulldozer was her mother, or the ambulance, or the collie. She wondered if the air-conditioner was her mother, or the heater in winter, if the clothes on the line were left by mother, if the woman who did her hair was her mother, if Betty or Christine or Amber were her mother. Someone fed her still. Someone laid out her clothes on the narrow bed. Someone took her to the bathroom after lunch. Someone turned on the television in the morning, and turned it off at night. Someone kept trying to hug her, though she refused.

The story ends when the little bird finds her mother is a bear. The bear takes her home, where she finds siblings in the pig, the hippo, the alligator, and they all eat apple pie. But Martha can't find herself in that story. She is bird and she is bear, but she is also orphan. The end is not the beginning, is not an end, is an ongoing whose plot cannot find the door, the bed, the chair. Happily ever.

—After *Are You My Mother* and *A Mother for Choco*

Villa Villekula

3/10/10, COLUMBIA, S.C. —When Juanita Goggins became the first black woman elected to the South Carolina Legislature in 1974, she was hailed as a trailblazer . . . Three decades later, she froze to death at age 75, a solitary figure living in a rented house.

Way out at the end of a tiny little town was an old overgrown garden, and in the garden was an old house, and in the house lived Juanita Goggins. She was 75 years old, and she lived there all alone. She had no mother and no father, although she did have a son, and that was of course very nice because there was no one to tell her to go to bed just when she was having the most fun.

Juanita's dad was a sharecropper, though she liked to think of him as a fisherman, an adventurer. She imagined him King of the Arctic, and herself its princess. “She could sell an Eskimo ice,” said her sister, Ilese (88). “I am not going to be a black spot in the House,” Juanita said; “these feelings go beyond color.”

It soon became known throughout the little town that a 75-year old woman was living all by herself. No one thought this would do. Probably she cooked for herself on her small stove, and in moments of glee threw all the eggs in the air and watched them fall, cooking only those that hit the bull's eye of her bowl. She likely had imaginary friends, a horse perhaps, monkey, or neighbors no one saw otherwise. She had time to scrub her floors, to mend her socks, to tend her garden within. By now, her clothes were patched and mended, at once too long and too short, her shoes a size too small, and her braids gummy; lacking audience, what need had she perform?

They adopted words for her: *reclusive, withdrawn, divorced, self-reliant*. They toyed with *dementia, stubbornness*. They came to her door but then they went away. Someone mowed her lawn, and watered it. An ex-husband came, and left. “I don't know why I didn't go over there and hammer on the door,” a neighbor said. But the house remained, and whatever lived within it, which was what they imagined for her and what imagining she refused to share.

They said the heat was working when she died, but it was not on. They said her stove was working, but she was not using it. They say she was wearing several layers of clothing. They say a part of Route 5 was named for her. They say she'd been mugged and changed the locks. You could never tell, said one. We just never could tell about anything when it came to Juanita. We could see nothing of her at the end except her feet resting on the pillow, her recently wiggling toes.

—After *Pippi Longstocking* by Astrid Lindgren

Diary of an Alzheimer's Kid

Chapter One

[Editor's note: because F cannot write her own diary, the editor has taken it upon herself to write one.]

F (90) is not the only one who gets in trouble.

A (85) swung her purse at [name & age unavailable] because she took her chair at lunch.

E (78) said naughty things to the old women in the common room.

J (83) sucked on her raggedy Ann's black-socked foot.

But F (90) is in some hot water now. She got ahold of M's (92) daughter's (51) wallet from her purse. M's daughter found her surrounded by credit cards, coins, bills, and photos of small children (8 & 10). I don't think M's daughter was too happy about that.

Does looking through the wallet make you a better person, F?

[A good minister. He had one of the other. Test the girls. Dropped one, and that was me.]

Does it make you more popular in the Alzheimer's home?

[Not against, but sort of.]

How do you feel having rifled through someone else's wallet?

[When people ask information, it's given opposition.]

Do you have anything to say to M's daughter for having taken her wallet from her purse?

[Not long, but over 7.]

Chapter Two

C helps F (90) get ready for lunch, reaches out her hands, helps F (90) to her feet, guides her to her chair at the first table. She sits with her back to the window, to well-dressed J (85, because he says so), to P (78) who groans at her food. P (78) and B (76) are buddies; he guides her when she falls, but sometimes he refuses to let her go.

After F (90) eats her lunch—F (90) loves to eat!—C guides her back into the television room, where F (90) keeps telling story bits to her chest. When it's time for Edith (94) to go, she gets up and dumps whatever she didn't eat on the tablecloth. *Don't be rude!* someone says, loudly. *Sit down and be quiet!* Everyone's obsessed with etiquette.

Chapter Three

Thank god F (90) won't be in the audience to see me humiliate myself.

—After Jeff Kinney's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*

To an Old Philosopher Dying in a Nursing Home

Every 70 seconds, someone in America develops Alzheimer's. By mid-century, someone will develop the disease every 33 seconds. You must use the word "develop" in the negative only; do not develop your thesis or your mind; do not develop your property. To develop is to clarify. To clarify is to render clear, like a face born out of a chemical

bath. I want to see the hinge between the 70th and 71st, or between the 33rd and 34th seconds: did Rose (98) pause in mid-sentence, as if from the coherence of "I'm going to the store" did not follow "to buy milk and eggs," rather a side-snarl to her sibling dead in 1958? If art's autonomy cannot be separated from its social effects because the turn

of the sentence has fallen away, comma skittering like a leaf on uncertain ground, where ground meets ocean or ocean reef, then the clouds that waft over this nursing home have flown somewhere and someone remembers them in their vanishing and reconciliation, parallels marked as such if only see them in the twin poles of Bill (83)'s walker or in the fork and knife

at Elizabeth (78)'s setting, before she uses one to cut at the other. Just a warning, Edith (89) is in one of her states today, and we're not talking geography. The 85-years-and-older population currently includes about 2.4 million people with Alzheimer's disease, or 47 percent of the Alzheimer population aged 65 and over. The threshold, ManorCare, and that more

merciful ManorCare beyond, where buildings are remembered and this sitting room with its stuffed chairs and large television, its railings and accessible restrooms, its caregivers (90% of them women), its carpet comforts, blurs into the place you were where others knew you but you did not, and Ethel (91) spoke constantly but to no one present and Martha (92)

never spoke and to no one present and the present was a board on which they shuffled, if they walked at all, toward the blurring "distinction between death *with* dementia and death *from* dementia" that lodges itself in the lungs while 12.5 billion hours of care were provided in 2009 alone, where even a small state like Rhode Island held within itself 44.6 million hours of unpaid

care; these hours deepen as the patient's condition worsens, until 24 hour care must sometimes be mandated by the family with a certificate of guardianship from the state. "I guess no one will fight over this estate," the judge said, on seeing that the plaintiff was an only child. To fight one needs to have one's wits about, which doesn't say much for wits. I write in memory of hers,

though my memory creases over time, de-creases, which is not to say I fear losing it but that your face cannot coexist with the name I once uttered for it, nor can the name answer to the idea I gave to it, grace note to 454,000 new cases this year and to the relatives for whom this means being known

less as themselves than as a falling away, a loan held against death, monthly check (to the tune of \$6,000) for room and board and hair styling and medical care. It is a kind of total disruptiveness at the end with every visible thing diminished and yet there is still a bed, a chair, a common room for conversation, a nursing station, and a nook with benches for sitting on: The moving walkway is now ending. Watch your step.

—After Wallace Stevens and the Alzheimer's Association 2010 report

Ronald Reagan (90) Remembers His Challenger Disaster Speech

I I I I I I to you plan
Union State
events of today's last
year pained Challenger
this with this loss

19, 6, 2, 9, 1
the day the ground ago
never never never never lost
flight, my heroes
I I I I I I loss mourning

America—(how many?)
Joy! Grown it's had had a
special pioneers needs
I want baby 25 25 disk
cover it it it belongs to

crew had what nothing to
space that's the way it is—
teacher says **no no no** but
same time as Drake dead
I'm dead, I am, lived
slipped surly bye bye
touch daddy's earth face
forget forget, how many
now, God oh God, with
I for all daddy, thank.

Soap Opera Generator

11/13/2007, WASHINGTON—Retired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor's husband, who suffers from Alzheimer's, has found a new romance, and his happiness is a relief to his wife, an Arizona TV report reveals.

Rose (98) stalks the paranoid man, of indeterminate age, while Mildred (89) bids a tearful farewell to Bob (95) in the middle of a citywide blackout. Emma (89) decides to go after Tom (85) but as she turns to leave she finds the door locked, the keypad a mystery, so Agnes (90) shoots Betty the caregiver, before the plot can be foiled by Anne, the administrator, and Edith (98) fools Martha (92), demanding the dollar it takes to ride a bus from this city to Paris, where she lives; nearby, on Bliss Lane in the county of Fairfax, beside the Confederates' highway, Bill (76) obsesses over the surry with the fringe on top as Xander, the moderator, shifts to the current events of 1985, when President Reagan still remembered his own name and Min (79) gets drunk, wakes up with Bill (67) who still gets it up, and con men descend on the care home to steal the paintings and raid the safe, while delivery men drop off Depends and Ensure, until Rose (98?) stops stalking the paranoid man, who was worried about it, and Anne (80) who was a professional pianist tries to remember the lyrics to Frank Sinatra songs while the truth will out about Martha (92) who stuck her family photos in the drawer, and Bill (67) who would give her flowers if he could get through the padlocks, and Agnes (90) who suffers a fit of remorse for her actions as the romantic picnic in the lunch room begins, with cloth napkins and real glasses, the chairs scraping linoleum as in a love story to which we will later affix a soundtrack, more strings than horns, more horns than drums, and Ethel (87) discovers who was the *real* grandfather of her grandchild and endures a shotgun wedding with Bill (76) and they live happily ever after in legal wedded bliss. The End.

Anne of Manor Care Gables

The residents are all relinquished.

The residents who had birthed or adopted us are left at the stoop of assisted living with a suitcase and some photographs.

The residents, who had wanted us (we hope), are always the wrong age, the wrong gender, always wear their clothes in the wrong way.

The residents enter their asylum wanting ice cream. For a time they want to go home, but cannot remember how to get to the street whose name escapes them, or the city they never lived in but whose name they know.

The residents do not recognize themselves, boxed up and memorialized beside their doors.

The residents all have the same hair style: Founding Fathers for the women, and 9 to 5 for the men.

The residents live in a geography of wings, of corridors, of rooms, of chairs.

The residents use magical thinking to unmagical results. They emerge from the closets under their children's staircases, clutching dolls or pencils or purses.

The residents know that you are stealing from them, and you and you. You are taking their keys, their money, their clothes, their words.

The residents do not know why she fell and hit her head and left blood on the carpet. It might have something to do with John's children, or with her being in the wrong room, or with a grudge that no one can possibly remember.

The residents do not know why they live in a parking lot, why no one comes to drive them home.

The residents are not as terrified of themselves as you are of them.

The residents are like children. No one says that children are like them.

The residents include a president, a film director, a chef, an artist, and a boxer. Or so we tell them.

The residents cannot know the plot devices that will lead them to find a new family or to work on the farm or to dye their hair green.

The residents do not understand PR. They do not know to say they live in a home run by the Champions of Care, 1999.

World Cup

P (78) rises from her chair—a one, a two, a one two three—stands as if hanging from invisible wire—spins slightly, on the verge—left foot—forward—totters—catches “self”—turns—in slow weave—sends right foot out—in pink sock—into open territory with slip-on canvas shoe—pirouettes on common room floor—war movie music backg . . .—slowly—eyes not on feet—nor on the near distance—wavers, stalls, re-starts—hangs—her body does not move so fast—large & yet precarious in air—feet stutter toward J's chair—J (76) clutches her doll—one foot clips J's leg—outstretched—the fall begins—slowly from foot & head—no contact between—her body's mass gathering toward—one knee & the next—elbows—[]—spectator B (77) groans, rises from his chair—P sobs—doll collapsed on floor—body flung outward—hand outstretched—volitional—

Waiting Adults

M (92) has a sweet temper, though sometimes she pushes her caregivers away. She speaks only when spoken to (or says “get away from me”), consumes a can of Ensure each day through bendy straw, and walks only with the assistance of others. She does not interact with peers, but sits slumped over in a chair. Does not submit easily to bathing or to having her hair done.

F (90) has a lovely face that features deep folds under blue eyes. She wears dapper sweaters and talks constantly, although her sentences never end as they promise to begin. Took care of sister until her sister died. A curious woman, she occasionally rifles through the possessions of visitors. Speaks with a strong New England accent.

J (85) is well dressed and sports a mustache. He moves constantly, as if he has somewhere to go. Someone says he was the drummer in a band. Victim of family expectations, he takes unkind words to heart and must be reassured by a caregiver before he calms down.

E (82) has been on our list for nine years now. He has his wits about him (a very good long-term memory, decent short-term); aside from inappropriate sexual remarks, he is kind and appreciates his foster situation. E was an engineer, and talks a blue streak about the Baby Bells.

J (78) is mostly taciturn, but becomes a good old boy at dusk, glad handing his friends and caregivers, unveiling the soul of a salesman. He has some delays in ambulation, but can still walk on his own and does not yet suffer incontinence.

S (90) wants a job. She worked as a seamstress and owned a shop. She dreams of traveling to Europe and back to New York City, where she grew up. S is conspiratorial, and knows who's been messing with whom. She wears dresses and high black socks, carries a black purse and a newspaper with her at all times.

P (82) is sweet and kind and listens to Christian radio. She misses her baby, and often cries over him. Aside from her nearly constant depression, manifested in frequent sobbing, P is a good friend to her peers, and they to her. Her memory box shows a heavy set woman with a wide smile.

J (76) appears stoic, but mutters, occasionally gets angry. Does not appear to have family that visits her, though there are photographs in her box of a husband and adopted daughter. Carries a deep worry line in her forehead, but is in good health aside from her mental deficits.

A (82) looks to be a very proper woman. She wears skirts and slacks and carries a purse. Gossips a great deal, and is overly interested in her peers' activities. She's been seen walking the halls with the new man, a former school principal with a Roman nose. Suffers occasional outbursts of profanity, but is never loud. Hospitable, she will invite you into her room.

E (85) is kind only if you speak to her in Spanish. She does not like cheese, nor is she happy when her bag is missing from her walker. Glowers at company, but eats a good sized portion of her meals, and especially enjoys red juice and mashed potatoes.

J (86) has a raggedy Ann that she hugs constantly, whose feet she sucks. She often talks to herself about pleasure; there is some inappropriateness to her conversation. She loves Pat, and offers her the

doll when she sees her. Jean still talks, but her conversation rambles, often incoherently. We're told she may have suffered a head injury.

J (84) was born in Shanghai and translated Japanese documents for the State Department. If you tell her to use a fork, she puts it in her right hand, then eats with her left. She cannot speak, but communicates with her eyes and her hands. Often appears surprised. Looks cute in a buzz cut.

News

Little **S** (87) found a new placement two months ago. A pert woman with New York accent, she sang through lunch and supper, laughed loudly at her own jokes.

P has died. She was the fair-haired woman with bangs, glasses and a walker.

Susan M. Schultz has lived in Hawai`i for 20 years. She teaches poetry and creative writing at the University of Hawai`i and edits Tinfish Press out of her home in Kāne`ohe on the island of O`ahu. She is author of several books of poetry and poetic prose, including *Aleatory Allegories* (Salt, 2000), *Memory Cards & Adoption Papers* (Potes & Poets, 2001), *And Then Something Happened* (Salt, 2004), and *Dementia Blog* (Singing Horse Press, 2008). Her book of essays is *A Poetics of Impasse in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (University of Alabama Press, 2005).

She edited *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry* (Alabama, 1995) and co-edited, with Annie Finch, *Multiformalisms: Postmodern Poetics of Form* (Textos, 2009).

She blogs at <http://tinfisheditor.blogspot.com>