

## *Assisted Living: Aging, Old Age, Memory, Aesthetics*

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Kathleen Woodward

A FEW MONTHS AFTER THE ELECTION OF BARACK OBAMA AS PRESIDENT of the United States in 2008, I was asked by the editor of a University of Washington newsletter what I would say to our new president if I had five minutes with him. My subject, I responded, would be the importance of providing long-term care to those aging and old and in need of assistance. I would also recommend that he and Michelle Obama read Annie Dillard's remarkable novel *The Maytrees* (2007) and watch Cecelia Condit's beautiful video *Annie Lloyd* (2008).<sup>1</sup> Why? Because both *The Maytrees* and *Annie Lloyd* eschew a realist or documentary aesthetic and serve as a life-saving antidote to the palpable, if not bald, fear of "assisted living" that is omnipresent in the United States. I will focus on *The Maytrees* and *Annie Lloyd* in the latter part of this essay. But first I want to say a word about the cultural shapes the debilitating fear of assisted living can take, drawing

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<sup>1</sup> Annie Dillard, *The Maytrees* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); Cecelia Condit, *Annie Lloyd* (2008). See <http://www.ceceliacondit.com/>.



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on two additional stories from 2008 that in the final analysis, I believe, work to exacerbate it: Dudley Clendinen's *A Place Called Canterbury* and a segment from the long-running soap opera *The Young and the Restless*.<sup>2</sup> I'll conclude with a thought about the natural world and a return to the Obama administration.

British sociologist Julia Twigg has called for an exploration of how older people who are frail experience embodiment, correctly observing that most of the feminist work on aging has addressed issues of the third age (roughly the decades of the fifties through the seventies, which are characterized by independence and health and which we might call "aging") and has ignored the fourth age (characterized by dependence and frailty, if not debilitation and decline, which we might call "old age").<sup>3</sup> If the terms "third age" and "fourth age" are not common in the United States, the notion underlying them undeniably pervades our social, psychological, and political imaginary. I turn in this essay to the representation of women of the fourth age, focusing on the fear that accompanies the prospect of assisted living in old age (the very term conjures up the cultural invention of the nursing home, a place that instills dread across the landscape of America). That fear has serious consequences, blocking political will. The first two stories pivot on the uneasy relationship between the third and the fourth ages, with the first story conveying the fear associated with one-way travel between these two states of being, and the second registering the extravagant fantasy of being rescued from the fourth age and returning to luxuriously inhabit the third age.

### STORY ONE: "A PLACE CALLED CANTERBURY"

Journalist Dudley Clendinen's *A Place Called Canterbury: Tales from the New Old Age* is a book-length account of his mother's decline over a period of almost a decade. It turns in great part on the troubled relation between the third age and the fourth age, between inhabiting one and imagining the other, and exudes foreboding at the prospect of assisted living in what the title tells us is "the new old age." Canterbury Tower is a nonprofit continuing-care facility located in Tampa, Florida, a high-rise apartment building with a lower-level wing devoted to nursing. It is inhabited by middle-class women and men (the ratio of women to men is three to one), virtually all of them retired and by and large healthy and independent when they move in.

Clendinen's widowed mother—a spirited force of Southern nature but frail and prone to fainting spells—moves to Canterbury Tower when she is seventy-nine. Some three years later she has two strokes in rapid succession and is moved to the Health Center downstairs. There she lives, incomprehensibly (I mean the pun—incomprehensibly for her, for her son, and for us as readers), for another *nine* years, confined to a wheelchair and then to a bed, suffering from scoliosis and osteoporosis and arthritis, swallowing only with difficulty, incontinent, soon severely brain damaged, unable to speak, and weighing only a little over eighty pounds. Consider this telling scene—a toxic mix of the third and fourth ages—which occurs during his mother's eighty-fifth year and a little over halfway through the almost four-hundred-page book. One of Canterbury Tower's annual events is the staging of an afternoon performance for residents of the Health Center by a group of people who live in the tower (I am reminded of the tower in Condit's video fairy tale *Oh, Rapunzel* and the beautiful young woman who longed to escape it—I

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<sup>2</sup> Dudley Clendinen, *A Place Called Canterbury: Tales of the New Old Age in America* (New York: Viking Press, 2008). Hereafter, page references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Julia Twigg, "The Body, Gender, and Age: Feminist Insights in Social Gerontology," *Journal of Aging Studies* 18 (2004): 59–73.

will come back to this<sup>4</sup>). The mood of the yearly amateur medley is meant to be upbeat, but this year, for his mother—and for him—it is devastating. I excerpt from a scene that takes place over four pages of the book:

My mother had already been rolled over to the Tower from the Health Center and was parked in a line of wheeled chairs in the front row when I came into the assembly room, where the players perform. She didn't seem to notice as I squeezed a straight chair in beside her. She was staring at the little stage, where the women who had been her friends—when she had a real life—were beginning to appear. . . .

The skit began. I cannot remember the intended story line, but it was supposed to be campy and amusing, a sort of soap opera about life at Canterbury. There was laughter, and prancing, and some tottery conga-line dancing, all of it about ten feet in front of Mother. When her energy was up, I could sometimes get my mother to laugh by telling her a story of something that I knew would tickle her. But she wasn't laughing now. Her head didn't move. The houselights were down, and when I looked toward her again, there was another line in her expression, which I didn't recognize at first. And then I realized that the illuminated crease in her face was a tear, moving down her left cheek. She was trapped. And so was I. . . . There we both sat. Hemmed in by other old people in wheelchairs, unable to move, or leave. . . .

When the show was over and the lights came up, [two women who lived in the tower and to whom she had been close all her life] came up to say hello and stood talking—to me. Ignoring Mother. Or pretending that by talking to me, they were including her. They had been friends for generations, from childhood until now. They had been together literally thousands of times. Mother and Mary had lived two houses apart, raised us children together. . . . They had shared all the fun and sad and intimate things of life. [One] smiled in Mother's direction, and edged away. But Mary lingered, saying something to me.

"Say hello to Mother," I suggested, nodding to my right. Mary was standing two feet away from her.

"Ohh . . . she dudden recognahze me," Mary declared, in her exaggerated drawl, hardly glancing over. "She dudden knoah me from Adam." It had become her mantra about Mother.

I don't know how to describe the look I thought I saw on my mother's face. I am not a camera. I see through an emotional filter. But it could have been the expression of a proud, brain-damaged old woman who understood the moment well enough to feel it, and was trying, very hard, to look as if she didn't. (200–202)

About this scene I want to make three interrelated points. First, the severe spatial logic of the retirement apartment complex is meant to provide relief from fear by offering the possibility of residential nursing care as well as apartment living. But it also produces that very fear, with the tower "a time zone, a never-never land," in Clendinen's words (xv). The building separates people of the third age and the fourth age, yet they remain in such close proximity—adjacency in fact—that the psychic space of the third age is polluted with the fear of the fourth. The imaginative geography of health and independence and of illness and dependence is instantiated in the very architecture of the building, conveying the idea that there is only a thin line—a wall, an elevator ride—between the third age and the fourth age, a line that is fiercely maintained by the residents of the tower.

Second, the mixing of two "ages" produces denial on the part of those who still live in the third age: a denial that confers social death on the unwelcome guest from the fourth age. It takes

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<sup>4</sup> Cecelia Condit, with Dick Blau, *Oh, Rapunzel* (1996–2008), <http://www.ceceliacondit.com/>.

the form of the dismaying, self-reinforcing politics of nonrecognition.<sup>5</sup> Dudley's mother and Mary had once been the closest of friends, but now there is no reciprocal recognition between them. Mary's insistence that Mother does not recognize her is mirrored, if not sparked, by her own refusal to recognize her lifelong friend. What must be avoided at all costs—for the inhabitants of both the tower and the nursing wing—is the ominous and painful mixing of the two categories of health and illness, a situation that can prove to be all the more confusing because of the vast disparities that can exist between chronological and functional age.

Third, Clendinen describes himself as “trapped,” hemmed in by old people who are unable to move. I hope it is not ungenerous of me, but I would venture that his experience has itself been a trap of sorts, fostering a horrific vision of old age in general, one that in turn increases our fear of it. For this is what he writes in the introduction: “No generation before has lived so long, accumulated so much, grown so independent in old age, or become so demented, as have our parents” (xxv). “The people we love,” he says, “become like abandoned houses, a haunting reminder of the life that once was there” (141). Add to this the fact that the book jacket insists *A Place Called Canterbury* is “an essential read for anyone with aging parents, and anyone wondering what his own old age will look like” (I need hardly point out the gender of the pronoun). But we cannot generalize on the basis of Clendinen's mother's experience that this is what “the new old age” entails. Indeed, there is, I think, a serious confusion of genre here. This is not a book of advocacy journalism or personal investigative writing about old age. Rather, I read *A Place Called Canterbury* predominantly as an illness narrative. Or as a narrative of extreme disability. Or as a horror story. For Clendinen's mother virtually incarnates “bare life” in Giorgio Agamben's phrase, although not in terms of the state overtly or by force decreeing a zone where people are reduced to virtually nothing, but rather in terms of complex social values and practices as well as the dictates of biology.<sup>6</sup> She exemplifies—in the extreme—journalist Stephen Kiernan's conviction that dying, which for centuries was a brief affair (indeed almost an event), has recently become a long process, one saturated by medicalization and technologization, characterized by multiple procedures and technological devices, practices that for many people have brutally decreased the quality of life and diminished attention to the meaning-making that can accompany the experience of dying. Clendinen's mother incarnates what Kiernan calls *slow death*, one that can have “its own savagery.”<sup>7</sup> As he tells us, “56 percent of Americans alive today will wind up in a nursing home at some point. Of those who stay longer than two weeks, 76 percent will die in that facility.”<sup>8</sup> Just as Clendinen's long realist narrative (one leavened by his sense of the comedy of life as well as the tragedy of it) elicits a kind of bewildered horror, Kiernan's deployment of statistics, I would argue, works to increase our fear, generating statistical panic.<sup>9</sup>

Barbara Harrison Clendinen died on January 17, 2007.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> On the politics of recognition in relation to Alzheimer's disease, see Janelle Taylor, “On Recognition, Caring, and Dementia,” *Medical Anthropological Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (2008): 313–35.

<sup>6</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Stephen P. Kiernan, “The Transformation of Death in America,” in *Final Acts: Death, Dying, and the Choices We Make*, ed. Nan Bauer-Maglin and Donna Perry (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 165.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>9</sup> See Kathleen Woodward, *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> In *A Place Called Canterbury* Clendinen in fact never tells us the name of his mother, perhaps because he wanted to protect her identity, her individuality, her singularity. I searched the Internet to find it, wanting to anchor the story to a proper name.

## STORY TWO: KATHERINE CHANCELLOR FROM *THE YOUNG AND THE RESTLESS*

Various media possess constraints, fostering certain kinds of representations. Could Clendinen's experience be represented in the mainstream mass media? Nothing seems more impossible for a multitude of reasons, not least of which is the extended temporality of his mother's many chronic conditions, which do not lend themselves to the sensationalist drama on which corporate television thrives. As a counterpoint, the corporate image machine that produces television in the United States recently offered a powerful countervailing fantasy to the fear of extreme debilitation in old age: a story of a strong old woman who is, coincidentally, a long-running character in a long-running story. It is a story of the denial of fear.

I am referring to the fictional character of Katherine Chancellor on the US soap opera *The Young and the Restless*. Played since 1973 by the now eighty-three-year-old Jeanne Cooper (that's almost forty years!), Katherine Chancellor is fabulously wealthy (her net worth has been estimated at over eighty billion US dollars), having been at one time or another (she may be so even now; it is incredibly difficult to keep track) the owner of Chancellor Industries and of Jabot Cosmetics. She wears expensive jewels on a daily basis, has grit and an authoritative, not to say often haughty, manner, and flashes an absolutely enchanting smile. She also has two children, one of whom lives with her (Jill, with whom she has a tempestuous relationship, although they are nonetheless devoted to each other), and she has female friends across the span of generations (two examples are Nikki Newman and Amber Moore).

As an over-eighty-year-old woman, Katherine Chancellor (Kay to her friends) incarnates the fantasy of being both powerful (her money works wonders) and loved (she currently has a husband). She also embodies the fantasy of immediate access to extraordinary medical care as well as the means to retain a youthful appearance—or as youthful an appearance as possible at her age. The strategy of mass-advertising culture is both to instill fear of aging as decline and to provide hope in the form of a product, one that presents aging as a time of energy and vigor and even as leisure and luxury. As cultural critic Virginia Blum has argued so persuasively, we live in a visual consumer culture where identity is sited on the surface of the body, one where consumers—especially women—have so thoroughly internalized cosmetic surgery as a product and a practice that they see themselves through its youthful lens, one that intersects with celebrity and camera culture (as if in anticipation of our post-cosmetic surgery culture, Katherine Chancellor—and Jeanne Cooper—had an on-the-air facelift in 1984).<sup>11</sup>

Katherine Chancellor reads almost exclusively as an older woman, but not as an elderly woman. She is eighty-three, and there is absolutely no question that she belongs to the third age. But in the past few years *The Young and the Restless* has introduced illness—beyond the predictable (if also autobiographical) alcoholism—into her story line. Kay has had a stroke, from which she recovered impeccably. More ominously, several years ago lapses of memory suggested the frightening possibility of Alzheimer's disease. In November 2008 she insisted to her friend Nikki Newman, "I've been a powerful woman long after other people have retired," adding, "I don't want to be an old dotty woman everyone indulges." She then abruptly disappeared, apparently fearful of receiving a diagnosis of Alzheimer's disease from her doctor. A few weeks later she died—apparently—in a car accident, thus avoiding a decline into frailty and possibly dementia, which is to say, avoiding the slow death that Clendinen, Kiernan, and many others insist has

<sup>11</sup> Virginia Blum, *Flesh Wounds: The Culture of Cosmetic Surgery* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

come to characterize the experience of dying in the United States.<sup>12</sup> We subsequently learn, however, that it was in fact her double who was killed in the car accident (the double, by the way, belonged to the working class). We thus witness the miracle of Katherine Chancellor returning from the dead, unscathed, to take up her rightful place as the rich matriarch of Genoa City and as an inhabitant of the third age.

This sequence is kind of medical science fiction: dementia erased by the plot, by denial, by desire for it to be so, by TV. The terror of the loss of memory that is associated with Alzheimer's disease is translated into the character's confusion due to amnesia, a condition any spectator of soap operas knows full well will soon disappear. Thus, Katherine Chancellor is rescued from the disease that would have condemned her irrevocably to the fourth age by the plot device of a melodramatic disease that is temporary, erasing an ineradicable and irreversible disease.<sup>13</sup> What, then, does assisted living connote in terms of the everyday life of Katherine Chancellor? In addition to the work of the fanciful plot, she is wealthy beyond imagination, her children are devoted to her (well, sometimes), and she lives at home (it is a mansion, of course), *attended by her long-time maid*.

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How can we escape the prison of this fear of assisted living as institutional living, one necessitated by incapacitating disease? How can we understand our experience differently? One way is to attend to different stories. In the remainder of this essay I discuss the two stories I recommended in my imaginary conversation with Obama. Both of these stories possess a magical poetic quality and enlarge the space for thought as well as for feeling that is deliberative and nuanced and contextualized; these stories offer alternatives not only for how we might respond in our personal lives (however we define that sphere) but also for how we think about public policy in relation to aging in terms of the fourth age. These are stories to carry with us as we live further into our lives.

### STORY THREE: *THE MAYTREES*

Annie Dillard's novel *The Maytrees* follows a man and a woman, Toby and Lou, across their long lives as they marry, divorce, and live together again. Their natural habitat is the landscape of dunes, the sea, and the stars on the tip of Cape Cod in the temperate months; they live in a house on the beach in Provincetown the rest of the time. Their natural habitat is also the world of the books that they both read and that he writes (some three hundred a year between them) and the company of their equally eccentric neighbors—and, importantly, the bed in the old beachside house that she owns. Getting and spending is not for them the American dream, and adherence to the clock-time and media-time of modern everyday life they forgo for the rhythm of day into night and the turning of the seasons. They do not own a TV or hold on to regular jobs. They take their time—it is *their* time, not economic time—to deepen their interior lives

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<sup>12</sup> See Atul Gawande, "Letting Go: What Should Medicine Do When It Can't Save Your Life?" *New Yorker*, August 2, 2010, 36ff.

<sup>13</sup> See Anne Basting, *Forget Memory: Creating Better Lives for People with Dementia* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009). Basting sees a link between the representation of amnesia and Alzheimer's disease, one made explicit in this incident in Katherine Chancellor's fictional life. Basting suggests that the contemporary cultural obsession with amnesia, as revealed in recent films that use amnesia as a plot device, is a sign of our obsession with losing memory in general and of our fear of Alzheimer's disease in particular. Amnesia is in fact exceedingly rare; Alzheimer's disease is not.



and their lives together, to think philosophically about love and the meaning of life and how things change, and to live into the landscape.

Dillard draws us into the world of their experience on the level of everyday life, which is hilarious and odd and Yankee-down-to-earth, as well as sublimely transcendent. *The Maytrees* is a beautiful, quirky novel of a time outside our rapidly accelerating time, a way of living Dillard associates with the people indigenous to the Cape. It is a novel about how we view life over the long stretch of a lifetime—and in particular how (in the United States at least) we view people older than ourselves (this is part of the comic dimension of the novel). It is a novel about the ties that bind people together. It is a novel about caring. As I have remarked elsewhere, when I finished reading the novel for the first time (I was in the dark on a cross-country flight back to Seattle), I resolved to be a better wife to my husband.

In *The Maytrees* there is an abrupt end to Toby and Lou Maytree's living out of the reach of America's entrepreneurial and materialist culture. Toby leaves Lou because, among other things, he cannot bear her willingness to not blame the person who caused their son's serious accident. Toby runs away to Maine with a close friend of theirs, a woman who lives a wild and exuberant life even sparer than the one to which he and Lou are accustomed. But over the next twenty years, she (her improbable name is Deary) becomes enamored of making money and soon is managing a thriving construction business. She scales up in middle-class life, with brand names now defining her clothes (Lord & Taylor, McMullen, Papageno) and dinner parties for ten (with crystal, sterling, linen) punctuating their time. Toby forfeits his writing—his time—to work full-time.

And this brings us to the bed in the Provincetown house with its iron frame and white headboard and footboard decorated with rosettes. This is the bed where Lou and Toby made love, rapturously. This is the bed, hauled down to the lower floor and set in front of French doors that open on to the beach, where their son recuperated after the bicycle accident. And over twenty years later this is the bed Lou offers Deary, who is suffering from congestive heart failure. Again the bed is hauled down to the lower floor, where it looks out on the beach. Although Deary is only sixty-seven, her illness confines her to the fourth age, her weight a frail ninety pounds.

Assisted living? Deary—and Toby—want to avoid the medical establishment and its corollary institutions at all cost, when cost is actually no object (they have the funds). A heart transplant trial is suggested. So is monitoring in a hospital. Deary responds, mordantly, "I'd rather die."<sup>14</sup> Fortuitously, over these past years Lou has volunteered part-time at a nursing home, which allows Dillard not only to give her character the requisite experience in the lifting of bodies and the making of beds while they are inhabited by people but also to slyly note the inapposite, if not crazed, practices typically undertaken in nursing homes. Manor Nursing Home, as it is grandly called, is a place "where people proved their keenness by reciting received analyses of current events. All the Manor residents watched television day and night, informed to the eyeballs like everyone else and rushed for time, toward what end no one asked" (132). How to take care of Deary? Who will assist her in living—and dying? And how do Toby and Deary come to return to Provincetown?

Lou and Toby had been in each other's thoughts for years. Lou's forgiving nature, so enraging twenty years ago, now makes a resumption of their common life possible. Here is how Dillard, so wisely, describes Toby and Lou at this point in their lives: "Whole old people. At their age forgiveness could be child's play if you knew the ropes"—and they did (152). Toby's "will-

<sup>14</sup> Dillard, *The Maytrees*, 145. Hereafter, page references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.

ingness to ask was part of what he now knew best: to think well of those you have wronged, let alone those who have wronged you” (152). (I agree with this sentiment and am grateful to Dillard for expressing it.) Lou takes the two of them in, with an alacrity, a volubility, and a burst of practicality that surprises them all. She does not pause to consider risks and benefits, which is the dominant discourse of what we now routinely call the risk society. That would be a calculus unworthy of her. Elementally, Lou and Toby and Deary are old friends. Of course she will.

Here I am reminded of what the British literary editor Diana Athill recounts in her memoir *Somewhere towards the End* (2009).<sup>15</sup> Her prose, unlike Dillard’s, is matter-of-fact, for the most part not wryly poetic or moving. And yet I find myself often thinking back to several passages in her book. In her eighties, Athill understands taking care of a former lover—he still lives with her—to be something she simply must do. In explanation she offers this metaphor:

What, I sometimes ask myself, keeps me and, I am sure, innumerable other old spouses or spouselike people in similar situations, going through the motions of care? The only answer I can produce appears in the shape of a metaphor: in a plant there is no apparent similarity between its roots and whatever flower or fruit appears at the top of its stem, but they are both part of the same thing, and it seems to me that obligations which have grown out of love, however little they resemble what they grew out of, are also part of the same thing. How, if that were not so, could they be so effortlessly binding in spite of being so unwelcome? (127)

In Athill’s case, there was in a sense no other choice—there was no money, no one else—and still it seems like a choice, although one that is inevitable.

What comforts Deary? The view of the beach and the birds—the gannets and loons and black ducks. A baby (Toby’s grandson) on the bed with her. People who care. Although Dillard does not admit us into Deary’s thoughts, we are given to understand that her uncomplicated embrace of life and her sense of the absurd are also mainstays in her last days, which stretch to eight weeks. It is and it is not a slow death. We are meant to conclude that it is a good death.

Lou herself dies alone some fifteen years later at the age of eighty. She has grown frail. She walks with two canes. But she still lives during the summer months by herself in their one-room shack on the dunes (it is still *their* house). Her death comes as no surprise to us as readers: we have learned about it midway through the novel. But as readers we rue it. We also knew about it from the beginning.

A novel such as *The Maytrees* offers us a “whole world,” in Diana Athill’s phrase (146), one that allows us to see things differently, opening up a space for thought and for feeling, intertwined. I am sensitive to the fact that we might be tempted to dismiss this world—as well as Athill’s experience of taking care of her onetime lover—as one that reinforces the practices of patriarchy: it is a woman who provides unpaid care in the private sphere of what is understood as family—and an older woman at that. My view, though, is that it calls the institutionalization of care into question, offering us a world with values on which we can build. It is a world in which Dillard’s character Toby accepts that what impels him is “the natural wish to help Deary find comfort” (187). It is a world where Toby and Lou, together again, love each other again, easily. What we value changes over our lives and also, somehow, remains the same. “As Maytree aged,”

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<sup>15</sup> Diana Athill, *Somewhere towards the End: A Memoir* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009). Hereafter, page references to this work will be given in parentheses in the text.



Dillard tells us, “lasting love was starting to seem more central to a man’s life even than work” (130). And later the two of them value nothing so much as beauty in their last years.

Books such as *The Maytrees* both symbolize and instantiate whole worlds. “Books must know something,” Lou thinks to herself at one point in the novel (190). This is what I think too: books such as Dillard’s magical and meaningful *The Maytrees* know something. Lou and Toby—Dillard’s characters—possess one of the most valuable of gifts, which is curiosity. At one point Dillard writes that Toby and Lou know “love itself as an epistemological tool” (53). Books such as *The Maytrees* are epistemological tools (I daresay of love), and so is the art video *Annie Lloyd*, to which I now turn.

#### STORY FOUR: ANNIE LLOYD

An eighteen-minute portrait of her ninety-two-year-old mother, video artist Cecelia Condit’s *Annie Lloyd* presents a reassuring, even ennobling, affective counterpoint to *A Place Called Canterbury*. And unlike the mass-market TV tale of Katherine Chancellor, it does not rest on an impossible fiction. Like *The Maytrees*, it possesses a transformative aesthetic, one that repels the deadening litany of frightening statistics about what awaits us in the fourth age.

As the writer Nancy Mairs insists in *A Troubled Guest*, “Unlike information, emotional knowledge comes only through experience.”<sup>16</sup> It is emotional knowledge—of two women, a mother and a daughter—that we find in the extraordinary video piece *Annie Lloyd*, which paradoxically draws us away from the relentless focus on the body that is characteristic of our ageist visual culture and at the same time allows us to grow accustomed to Condit’s mother’s body, which we also see as a palimpsest of the psychic body over time. There is footage of her mother thirty years ago, eleven years ago, and now at the age of ninety-two, requiring a wheelchair and other help that is offered in the assisted-living facility in the retirement community where she has lived for eleven years. There is no attempt to disguise her frailty and physical incapacities (indeed, the piece opens with a shot of her sleeping with a needed oxygen line). But these physical debilities pale as her temperament is revealed to us and as her psychic life takes on depth and meaning—her laughter, her love of fallen leaves and butterflies, her activism on behalf of mourning doves, her delight in a gift of chocolates, her humorous wonder as she recounts a favorite moment in her life, and her pleasure in being filmed by her daughter (it is “a joy,” she says, a joy that has, I think, to do with the pleasure of being in a visual spotlight as well as being the subject of her daughter’s affection). As her daughter says in voice-over, “My mother’s life is full of undiscovered treasure. I just have to find it.” Her mother collects leaves, says Condit. “I collect stories. Mother’s stories.”

What constitutes that undiscovered treasure? Moments from the present. Dreams. And memories of the past (unlike Clendinen’s mother, Annie Lloyd has memories that can be told to others). Among moments from the present, consider, for example, this small treasure from everyday life, one cherished beyond its moment, prolonged into the future. We hear Cecelia Condit’s voice marveling at her mother’s embrace of this fleeting instant: “In late summer, early fall, a crow landed in the sugar maple outside my mother’s window. It was there only a moment and then it was gone. But mom talked about it for days. For weeks.” Condit does more than testify to her mother’s experience. She transmutes that moment into performance, putting on the mask of a crow, inhabiting its role, playing its part outside her mother’s window, as if increasing her mother’s

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<sup>16</sup> Nancy Mairs, *A Troubled Guest: Life and Death Stories* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2002), 96.

possibilities for happiness and at the same time calling forth her mother's gaze, even if only in fantasy. (Her mother also loves butterflies, and Condit puts on the wings of a butterfly too; indeed, Condit tells us that when she was little, she dreamed that her mother was a butterfly!)

Or consider the series of small scenes of her mother collecting fallen leaves (they must be from the sugar maple), pressing them into a scrapbook, preserving them, honoring them. It is something the two of them do together, revealing how reductively banal is the phrase "activities of daily living," reducing those things we "need" help with to purely functional matters (in *Annie Lloyd* toilet paper is put in the service of conserving leaves; elsewhere in *Annie Lloyd* the roll of unruly paper unfurls, escaping its regularly designated orbit). The leaves are "beautiful," her mother says, and "people love beauty." The leaves, she says, are "designs of God."

Regarding her dreams, we learn from Condit in a voice-over that "Mother dreams more now." If, as Freud has taught us, dreams present us with the fulfillment of our wishes, what does her mother wish? One, that she can walk. In her dreams, she says, she walks "very well"—and, in fact, sometimes flies! Two, that she can talk, effortlessly (Condit often uses subtitles to render her mother's speech intelligible). In one sequence dance music accompanies the recounting of the following dream: "I could walk and talk, so easily, and everyone wanted to talk with me. They thought I was so charming." "When I woke up I realized . . . a wonderful gift." Youth, it is a gift. The admiration of others, a world bound together by the arts of music and movement: these are wonderful gifts, so often withheld from the very old. And three, she wishes that her long-dead husband (he died seventeen years ago) would lead her into the next phase of her life, which is death, which, she says, is "the most interesting thing that could happen to us in our life." Going up through the steps of the past is transmuted—as if via Möbius strip—into learning how to die. But this particular wish is not, her mother insists, a dream at all. It is *real*. Consider this exchange between Annie Lloyd and her daughter:

Last night I saw your father, Walter, walking away into the woods.

*In a dream?*

No, I saw him. He was real. He was thinking that he loves me and that he would be waiting.

*Did he tell you that, Mom?*

No, he didn't tell me. He just thought it. Then he turned and went into the woods.

*She said, "Someday soon I will dance away into the woods."*

Her mother's conviction—so matter-of-fact, so insistent—is strange. And comforting.

Robert Butler, the late psychiatrist and powerful advocate for the elderly, famously speculated that in old age or near death we turn to memories of our past and evaluate our lives. For Butler, this process represents a developmental task in the spirit of the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. As we grow nearer to death and have a sense of life coming to a close, we contemplate our life as a whole. In terms of the life we have lived, we may be prompted to undertake what remains to be done, reconciling—or not—with those we have wronged (or who have wronged us), for example, or drawing our work to a conclusion.<sup>17</sup> As such, Butler understood a sustained backward glance as possessing an ethical dimension. In an essay I wrote some years ago I critiqued his notion of the life review, noting, among other things, that "locating the end of a life

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<sup>17</sup> Robert N. Butler, "The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged," *Psychiatry* 26 (1963): 65–76.

can itself be problematic.”<sup>18</sup> In retrospect, I confess that I feel a fool for making such a “logical,” “clinical” critique. *Annie Lloyd* helps us think differently. There is no question that the end of life is near. But at the same time Annie Lloyd does not review her life in the way Butler proposed. She does recount memories (one is of her favorite moment in her life, when she saw a huge moon over Silver Lake). But the act of remembering does not seem different in a qualitative way from her experience in the present or from her sense of what will happen next or from her dreams. Her everyday life, her dreams, and her memories of the past: all seem to have the same valence, which is presented to us as one of acceptance, devoid of fear.

The form of Condit’s piece itself instantiates the circling back and forward of memory, not only in terms of her mother’s life in general but also in terms of assisted living. Our knowledge of *Annie Lloyd*, both the art video and the woman Annie Lloyd, is immeasurably deepened by an earlier Condit video, entitled *Oh, Rapunzel*, where we see her mother more than a decade before *Annie Lloyd* was made, living in her own spacious house but as if in a tower, imprisoned by (reasonable) fear of her son-in-law. Her fantasy then was escape, and escape she did—to an assisted-living facility, the very place we find her ten years later. It was a triumph! (It was more than that: there she fell in love with a man named John.)

In *Annie Lloyd* temporality has not been reduced to the punishing vector of one-way time, and yet time will stop. Temporality in *Annie Lloyd* is expansive, a layering of memory and pleasure, a movement back and forth between the past and the present moment, a fullness of psychic time in the face of what is to come. In a sense the third and the fourth ages (the latter of which has several stages) are represented as coexisting easily, so unlike what we find in the toxic mixing of the two in *A Place Called Canterbury*. As much as we know that her mother is place-bound and largely immobile, *Annie Lloyd* offers us a great sense of psychic mobility, with lyrical flights caught by the camera and an intimacy between the two women figured literally in close-ups. The aesthetic of *Annie Lloyd* is not that of the conventional documentary. Rather, it hovers between psychological realism and a literal magical realism, one that speaks to the fullness of life and to the mystery that is death (as Condit says, matter-of-factly, “I take my mother with me, wherever she goes,” and then she literally, and wonderfully, picks up a life-size cardboard cutout of her mother, younger then, and carries her off into the woods). “Mother,” Cecelia Condit asks toward the end of the piece, “How are you doing?” Her mother answers, “I’m just fine. I’m just old, that’s all.” Cecelia: “I’d make you younger if I could, Mom.” The piece opens with her mother saying, “Hello.” It ends with her mother saying, “Bye, bye. Bye, bye,” and blowing a kiss to her daughter, who holds the camera—and thus to us. “I’ll wave to you from heaven,” she has said to her daughter. She has also said, “I loved you before you were born, I loved you when you were born, and I’ll always love you. . . . I’ll love you even when you are an old lady.”

Annie Lloyd did not die a slow death in Kiernan’s terms. She lived until she died on July 14, 2008, at the age of ninety-two.

In a study of temporality, aging, and photography, Anca Cristofovici writes that we search in “cultural representations not so much for images of immediate identification as their potential to increase our emotional knowledge.”<sup>19</sup> This is precisely what I find in *Annie Lloyd*. What I find

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<sup>18</sup> Kathleen Woodward, “Reminiscence and the Life Review: Prospects and Retrospects,” in *What Does It Mean to Grow Old? Reflections from the Humanities*, ed. Thomas R. Cole and Sally Gadow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1986), 160.

<sup>19</sup> Anca Cristofovici, *Touching Surfaces: Aesthetics, Temporality, Aging* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2009), 177.

is also a tribute to the value of care that extends beyond the prosaic requirements of attention to bodily infirmities. And this is care that is given in a place devoted to assisted living.

### NATURE AND AESTHETICS

Some twenty-five years ago the biologist E. O. Wilson declared that as human beings we have an innate tendency to affiliate with forms of life, to connect with the natural world, which is permeated with aesthetic value.<sup>20</sup> I am aware that what is conjured up by the word “nature” is complex and that much thought has been devoted to interrogating “nature” as a keyword. But here I want to understand “nature” in its commonplace meaning. I am thinking of the character of Toby in the novel *The Maytrees*, who, when older and caring for his dying wife, takes off his watch and sets his life to the rhythm of the tides. Of Deary—and Annie Dillard—who fix their attention and thus ours—on gannets and loons and black ducks. Of Condit’s mother, who takes such sustained pleasure in the sight of a crow in a sugar maple. Of Diana Athill, who in her fourth age finds that gardening is a cause for joy. “Getting one’s hands into the earth, spreading roots, making a plant comfortable,” understanding plants as “serene beings, quietly living their own mysterious lives,” marveling at the beautiful beings—daffodils—which return annually, perennially: it is, as Cecelia Condit might say, a wonder!<sup>21</sup> Health is not just the absence of disease. It includes not only physical but also social and psychological well-being. I would add that health entails aesthetic well-being as well.

I am also reminded of what I have come to consider a prescient passage in Diane Johnson’s novel *Lying Low* (1978). A central character—she is sixty—steals away to her room every evening at dusk to train her attention on the doves that live in the eaves of her Victorian home. Her disinterested sympathy for these doves (subject at every moment to the accident of death) and, by extension, for “the whole state of things” is what the narrator calls “cosmic work.”<sup>22</sup> I understand cosmic work as an instance of what E. O. Wilson calls “the conservation ethic.”<sup>23</sup> And I am reminded of what Doris Lessing said in an interview (she was eighty-two at the time): “I don’t mind getting old. It’s very interesting. I was always so busy I didn’t have time to notice how utterly extraordinary life is, how utterly amazing. I’m continually amazed at—everything, really.”<sup>24</sup> As Wilson insists, “We are in the fullest sense a biological species and will find little ultimate meaning apart from the remainder of life.”<sup>25</sup> In a sense it could be said that Wilson and contemporary theorists of the posthuman (those who draw our attention to our kinship with other beings) join hands here.<sup>26</sup> Appreciating the world of life, living—and dying—in tune with it and as a part of it: this is a step toward an ecology of being, one that provides a sense of belonging to something elemental and hopefully provides us, as we prepare to leave life, paradoxically with a sense of place.

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<sup>20</sup> Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>21</sup> Athill, *Somewhere Towards the End*, 101–2.

<sup>22</sup> Diane Johnson, *Lying Low* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1978), 15.

<sup>23</sup> Wilson, *Biophilia*, 119.

<sup>24</sup> Doris Lessing quoted in Sarah Lyall, “Such Fuzzy Ideals, Comrades,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Wilson, *Biophilia*, 81.

<sup>26</sup> Of the many theorists of the posthuman I will mention only two: Cary Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); and Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

I began by referring to what I would have said—and recommended—to Barack Obama after he was elected, had I the opportunity. I was thrilled when he signed the American health care act into law in March 2010 and am happy to say that it contains a provision for long-term care insurance, although the constitutionality of the law has already been struck down by two judges, and Kathleen Sibelius—our secretary of health and human services—has announced, before the provision has even gone into effect, that it is financially unsustainable as envisioned. It is nonetheless for us in the United States a momentous step in the right direction, one animated by the democratic spirit of the late Senator Teddy Kennedy. Obama, in a speech in January 2011 in Tucson following the attempted assassination and grave wounding of Gabrielle Gifford, a member of the US House of Representatives, said, let us “use this occasion to expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy, and remind ourselves of all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together.”<sup>27</sup> Earlier I quoted Nancy Mairs, who understands emotional knowledge—we could also call it emotional intelligence or emotional understanding—as being gained only from experience, not from information. The kind of experience she is referring to includes being in the company of such profoundly imaginative works as *The Maytrees* and *Annie Lloyd*, experience that may allow us to create new kinds of memories of the future for ourselves and for each other. For stories are collaborations, they circulate among us, and they can be given as gifts, expanding our collective sense of how we are indeed bound together and, hopefully, allowing us to think, and to dream, and to act together for the good, which includes, of course, assisting others with living. A

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<sup>27</sup> Barack Obama, remarks by the president at a memorial service for the victims of the shooting in Tucson, Arizona, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/01/12/remarks-president-barack-obama-memorial-service-victims-shooting-tucson> (accessed January 12, 2011).