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Telling Stories:
Aging, Reminiscence,
and the Life Review

Life can only be understood backwards.

—Soren Kierkegaard

*In reminiscence my experiences do not
fade, they grow more vivid.*

—Marcel Proust

With these two epigraphs in mind—the first by the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard underlining the importance of the work of memory in arriving at an understanding of one's life as a whole, and the second by the twentieth-century French writer Marcel Proust underscoring the significance of intense memories in lending emotional meaning to one's life, I devote the first part of this paper to making some distinctions between the life review and reminiscence. My interest is primarily in the rich domain of reminiscence, and in the second part of this paper I draw on the work of several theorists of memory—all of them psychoanalysts—to sketch the rudiments of a composite theory of reminiscence in old age. In the third part I turn to several written autobiographical accounts published in the last four decades that offer compelling varieties of reminiscence in old age. My major theme will be the emotional state that accompanies reminiscence and the function of that emotional state. I will be emphasizing the role of reminiscence in creating a certain mood as well as what I call the protective role of mood, or emotional protection. Throughout I will be referring to the figure of companionship, whether real or implied. Since I am what I call a professional reader of literature, I will be privileging the more private practice of writing as reminiscence over more social forms of telling stories about our pasts. Finally, as a coda, I will turn to a memoir from the domain of film and show a brief clip from Deborah Hoffmann's *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*. In its closing scene, reminiscence as a mood that binds people together takes on a radical and—for me at least—altogether revelatory meaning.

In his seminal theorization of the life review published some thirty years ago, the distinguished psychiatrist and geriatrician Robert Butler argued that the prevalence of what I would call memory-work in the elderly is not a symptom of degeneration but rather the mark of a normative process (indeed he used the word “universal”). The function of this memory-work is to contribute to an evaluation of one’s life as a whole and to aid in the process of psychological integration. The life review is thus not synonymous with reminiscence, although it does include it. It is a psychological process, undertaken under the pressure of the coming ending of one’s life, in which one strives to see one’s life as a whole, as if it were a coherent narrative. Butler stresses that the life review will in all likelihood be characterized by the resurgence of unresolved conflicts. It offers the potential for personality reorganization—and even reconciliation (Butler qtd. in Norman). As he has recently insisted, *“only in old age with the proximity of death can one truly experience a personal sense of the entire life cycle. That makes old age a unique stage of life and makes the review of life at that time equally unique”* (“Looking Back, Looking Forward” 17).

There is thus a sense of totalization to the life review. The emphasis is on what is known—and judged. The emphasis is on the examined life, on how we evaluate our life, on the arrival at a certain truth. Although the life review is of course necessarily accompanied by emotions, the stress is on the analytic work, on the cognitive, or to evoke again my epigraph from Kierkegaard, on understanding: *“Life can only be understood backwards.”* The classical definition of an autobiography is relevant here—it is the recounting of an entire life, one’s life, *a* life, the summing up.

Like the life review, reminiscence is also a process. But it does not promise the totality of the life review. It is more fragmentary and partial. Reminiscence is concerned with a certain moment, or moments, in the past. Furthermore, unlike the notion of the life review articulated by Butler, reminiscence necessarily carries within it the figure of companionship, of the social. Reminiscence implies or points to the social world in a way that the life review does not—or need not. We can all remember wonderful times when together with a group of friends we have talked pleurably about our experiences together in the past. Thus we will say, for example, that we spent an evening with a friend reminiscing about our middle school

days together. We will say that we reminisced about the day we met; I might say, I remember what we had for dinner, or I remember what you were wearing. Or we might say to one of our children, I remember your first day of school. Or I might say to my mother, I remember when I was eight and you were twenty-eight and you were wearing a white flower in your hair. But we cannot say, “we life reviewed.”

Reminiscence has to do with the recalling of familiar past events. It has nothing to do with repressed memory syndrome. It has nothing to do with trauma. It is generative, restorative. I’m especially interested here in research that suggests that a certain kind of reminiscence may be associated with a time of life. In an essay entitled “Autobiographical Memory Across the Lifespan” that was published in 1986—it is included in a volume of essays entitled *Autobiographical Memory*, the authors (they are psychologists and psychiatrists) conclude the following on the basis of research across the lifespan: “Individuals begin to reminisce when they reach middle age; they recall a disproportionate number of memories from their early lives” (202). By reminiscence they mean an increase in early memories (from age 10-30), and they insist that this kind of reminiscence is not present in those younger than 50; “by age 50 there is reminiscence which is just as pronounced as it is with 60 and 70 year old” people; for them “reminiscence consists of memories from when we are about ten to thirty years old.” Like the life review, reminiscence is, from the point of view of this research, developmental. But it is not totalizing.

Given the non-totalizing nature of reminiscence, given that reminiscence is underwritten by the figure of a social process (although reminiscence is of course a psychic process and can be purely private—I will come back to this later), reminiscence has, I would argue, a function that is less analytical and cognitive than the life review. When we reminisce we are less concerned with finding the truth that we are with creating a certain atmosphere. What I want to insist is that it is the atmosphere of a certain companionableness. It may be convivial or quietly intimate, but no matter what the emotional valence, whether it is an environment in which one feels buoyed up in exhilaration, quietly delighted in friendship, or held in Winnicott’s sense, it is marked by the hope if not the promise of trust and security. Ultimately, then, for me reminiscence is about the creation of a certain kind of mood, one that is generative or restorative. Finally, if the life review is

analogous to autobiography in the classical sense, then we could say that reminiscence is analogous to certain moments in autobiographical writing—or in what today is referred to as life-writing.

II

With these distinctions between the life review and reminiscence in mind, I turn to three theorists of memory whose work has been important to me in thinking through the emotional significance of reminiscence—the psychoanalysts Helene Deutsch, Christopher Bollas, and J.-B. Pontalis. In 1973 Helene Deutsch, known primarily perhaps for her research on female adolescence and then eighty-nine, published her autobiography. The impulse of *Confrontations with Myself: An Epilogue*, as its title suggests, is predominantly analytical. Her autobiography, cast in classical form, takes on the shape of a life review. She seeks to understand the choices that she made in her past (why did she marry this man and not that one, for example). But for my purposes, what interests me is her theory of writing. She writes from the vantage point of an old age and still in mourning for her husband who had died nine years before. She writes, she tells us, out of a “never-ending grief” (215). She writes primarily, she theorizes, to fill the “loneliness” of her present life, to fill an “emotional vacuum” (77). She begins the book by stressing her emptiness—in particular, her emotional emptiness. Among psychoanalysts, she is one of the only ones I know who theorize, however briefly, old age as a stage in life, one that is characterized in great part by loss. Memory for her is above all “emotional memory” (77); it affords her what I call “emotional protection.” As she observes, whether the facts associated with a memory are accurate is not the point: what is important is the *feeling* of the memory, the memory of the *feeling*. “Sometimes,” she writes. “only the emotional atmosphere has been retained and the forgotten actual situation has had to be reconstructed” (86). This is crucial—for we often think of it as the other way around.

Moreover, Deutsch notes that there is an “emotional bias” in what she is remembering: “the negative elements are often omitted” (40), rendering, as it were, the emotional memory more supportive, more protective. On balance, she finds this positive, not escapist. As she puts it at the end of the book, “the patina of time has enhanced and mellowed my own experiences, softening my sense of blame towards others, and making me more tolerant of my own shortcomings” (213). This is what Pietro Castelnovo-Tedesco calls “emotional perspective” (124).

Helene Deutsch, now 89, writes about her intense loneliness as a child, much as she is now as she writes this book, and how her older aunt became for those years “her close companion” (77). For her as a writer the act of writing and the book itself becomes a kind of holding environment, a companion to her; she is quite aware of the fact that as an old woman she has “increasing needs for loving care” (213)—and that she has, in a very real sense, diminished resources. Her book is, we could say, itself an instance of creating companionship; it offers an important theory of the solace of emotional memory.

A remarkable psychoanalyst whose work is not sufficiently known in the United States, Christopher Bollas has written astutely and wonderfully on mood. We have all had the experience of longing for a familiar environment, and Bollas has theorized this as in part a longing for a certain mood—not a particular emotion, but rather a mood that reconnects us with and attaches us to a mood that was important to us in our childhood. As an analyst he is interested especially in the phenomenon of an adult recreating the family dynamic that was experienced as a child through the medium of a mood, a mood which becomes a distinguishing facet of the adult’s self-expression—or “characterological,” as Bollas puts it (99). These kinds of moods recreate the “intimacy” that we felt early in life (108). As Bollas explains, “When a *mood* serves to release this feeling of intimacy from the past which is associated with a certain person, for example, it differs from ordinary affect experience in that the true self is allowed an unusual freedom of expression precisely because of the dissociative feature of a mood as an allowed for, and therefore unintruded upon, right” (112).

Bollas reminds us that we describe a mood as something we are “in.” A mood is for him a “special territory” (100) in which we experience ourselves in a certain way; it is characterized by what he calls “self-experience.” “Moods,” he writes, “are complex self-states” (102). Moods can be malignant. (We all know how people can be aggressive with their bad moods—sulking, for example, and trying to impress upon us their presence in altogether disagreeable ways, forcing us to confront them.) Moods can also be generative. A person who is inside a mood—and I emphasize his use of the word “inside”—is to us “not present in some private and fundamental way” (99). For Bollas moods are a psychic process similar to dreaming. They are essential to us, “essential for the creation of a being state . . . that may represent some child element in contemporary life” (100). With Bollas’s

sense of mood, then, we have a radically private notion of reminiscence.

Finally, I want to suggest a third facet of a theory of memory as reminiscence by drawing on the work of the French psychoanalyst J.-B. Pontalis. The work of Pontalis has in fact influenced Bollas, and Pontalis, who is now some seventy years old, has himself recently written autobiographical pieces of reminiscence that evoke precisely the kinds of moods I have in mind. Here, however, I want to refer only to a section from his book *La Force d'attraction*, published in 1990, where he writes not so much about himself but about his experience with one of his analysands, a man who would take great pleasure in evoking a certain time in his childhood before it exploded into chaos. For this person, Pontalis tells us, this privileged time in his childhood was enclosed, like a garden, but infinite, like the universe. To Pontalis it was as if in continually invoking his emotional memory of an almost magically secure environment he was inviting Pontalis to enter into it. It was as if this analysand—and here the word “analysand” does not seem completely right—wanted to draw him into the space, which was the space of a feeling, a mood, so that it could also be experienced by Pontalis. The point precisely was not to tell a story or to organize the events of the past, or to arrive at an analytic understanding of a certain structure to his experience over time. For this man this time in his childhood was one he wanted *to hold onto*—“comme on tient une main,” as one holds on to a hand (9). Thus it was as if in invoking this time from his past (it is more description than narration), he was extending his hand to Pontalis, asking if he would take his hand, hold onto this space of description, and enter into it. Here the space of psychoanalysis is one of a virtual invitation to reminiscence in an altogether unusual sense. Here again we find the figure of companionship.

To summarize: from Deutsch, we have the theory that emotional memory fills the empty space; from Bollas, that the character of this feeling is that it is a mood that is generative and restorative; and from Pontalis, that at the same time one feels oneself to be in a private space, one has a sense of extending oneself in companionship—as one holds a hand.

III

As I turn to autobiographical writing as reminiscence in old age, I begin with an instance of emotional memory from a book by Joyce Horner that may serve as an exemplum of literary reminiscence as I have been developing it theoretically. Entitled *That Time of Year: A Chronicle of Life in a Nursing Home* and published in

1982, it is written in the form of a diary (the chapter titles are the numbers of years—1975, 1976, 1977) and was readied for publication after Horner became too ill to write. Horner had been a single woman all her life and until recently had lived in a house that she shared with a friend. But degeneration of her knees, coupled with an accident, required that she enter a nursing home. She had been a teacher and had written poetry, and she turns to writing now. Her words are more often than not painful to read. She is unsparing of herself and often despairing of her situation, which is exceedingly depressing, often to the point of misery. She writes of her acute sense of confinement, of “the feeling that I *can't get out*, can't get anywhere where I could get over the perpetual feeling of wretchedness, chill” (100). For my purposes this passage is instructive:

Having just finished my poem for my mother, or about her—and had it approved by [my best friend] Elizabeth—I found myself strangled with an emotion or complex of emotions beyond analysis. Nostalgia and guilt only part of it. It was partly the feeling for the way life crystallizes itself, though it may not become art—the poignancy of what is vividly remembered.

It is not the content of the memory that is important here—Horner does not even include the poem in her pages. Rather it is the vivid feeling that is precipitated by writing about her mother, by the act of remembering. It is the feeling that attaches her to her past and that animates her, momentarily sheltering her from a deadening despair. Notice that analysis is not what is at stake, although she does name some of the feelings that make up this complex mood of intensity. Notice too that in asking Elizabeth to read her words, she has drawn a friend into her literary world of reminiscence. As she tells us in *That Time of Year*, solace in old age is offered first by “companionship” (97).

If this passage from Horner serves as an exemplum of literary reminiscence in old age, in what follows I look briefly at other instances that complicate this model in what are for me interesting ways. Each one represents a different form of autobiographical literary reminiscence, and each suggests a different kind of emotional protection.

Consider, for example, *The Third and Only Way* by Helen Bevington, a kind

of day book spanning more than a decade that was published last year. Bevington, a writer who was a member of the Department of English at Duke and is now retired from teaching, begins *The Third and Only Way: Reflections on Staying Alive* on a desperate note of anguish. It is 1980, her son has just committed suicide, her husband had died some years before, and, in her mid-seventies, she finds herself living alone. In these opening pages she confides, "against my will I am solitary like my mother and suicidal like my father, both the one and the other" (3). She is very much writing, as Helene Deutsch suggested, to fill an emotional void. In fact so alone is she and so attracted to writers like Thoreau and Montaigne who led their lives as solitary figures that she envisions that her reader will be—herself. Here is the second sentence of *The Third and Only Way*: "As it happens I'm writing just now, in this particular month and year, for a reader who has shown a passing interest in my life and admits to being doubtful as to how it will turn out—the reader being myself" (2). I understand this as a peculiarly solitary but compelling form of reminiscence, one that takes place (or will take place) between two different instantiations of oneself over time.

A cultured woman of dry and often distancing wit, a curious and careful writer who fills these pages over the course of more than a decade and a half with musings on books she has recently read and with the wonderful results of her ongoing research (most notably, micro-life portraits of many important women), she is philosophical about her life, stoical about how to pass the time. Work, which is writing and thus reading, occupies her. "I write not to redeem the time but to cancel it," she notes; "I'm not living my life, I'm recording it" (14). "Enid Bagnod," she observes, "who wrote her autobiography at eight, drew a picture of a writer in old age sitting alone at a table lost in her game of solitaire. She goes on carefully piling word upon word till, with a faint smile on her lips, she falls dead face down on her pack of words" (6).

Bevington, however, does not fall face down on her words. Books are her "company" (37). She writes, she reads. And time passes. She opens Part II of *The Third and Only Way* informing us that it is now 1991. As a reader I am, it would seem, as surprised as she is. Anguish has yielded to a kind of bafflement that she has survived as long as she has—and indeed when the book was finally published last year she was ninety years old. Bevington is anything but a sentimental woman. She has a strong sense of living in a timeless zone where neither the past nor the

future exist, and she insists that she has "little use in reliving the past" (117). Nor does she, as we have seen, crave or require sociability. The prospect of moving to a retirement home, as have many of her friends from Duke, appalls her.

Given all this, a small incident that she reports in Part II captured my attention. It is one that almost escaped my notice because it seemed to me at first a mere anecdote, the story of her engaging in one of the most banal social forms of reminiscence—the reunion. Improbably, Bevington goes to her college reunion. Imagine. She herself can hardly imagine it. It is her sixty-fifth reunion. The place is Elmira College in upstate New York. She recounts this trip back with a knowing humor. How to recognize someone whom you haven't seen in sixty-five years? Interestingly, the effect is not one of shock, the response most often noted in work on aging. Rather it is the slighter, more humane sense of being somewhat "startled" (126). Of two classmates whom she had not seen for all these years, she writes, affecting in her directness, but with her characteristic wit, "I loved them both for being alive, keeping their identity, presumably their sanity, against heavy odds in these going-on-a-hundred years. Luckily we had all three become great talkers, given our big chance now to hark back to the twenties" (127).

The promise is thus that they will reminisce, that they will talk about the past in a tones of binding conviviality, generating a convivial mood. But Bevington's temperament is to draw back, and thus she finds her own particular way. It is her signature. She concludes reasonably that Elmira was after all an appropriate choice for her, and she appraises with a cool and steady eye the vision of these twelve women out of a class of three hundred returning to their college days. As she dryly notes, several of them were "escorted by their daughters who with a steadying hand kept them on track" (127). Of the two women with whom she shared a suite that weekend, she has this to say, "My two companions were widowed old ladies who hadn't yet caved in. Long ago I had escaped Elmira and gone my own way, and they had not. They had conformed, obeyed the rules. But in the end, "Bevington asks—and I find this a brave if dark question, "had it made any difference?" (128).

Suddenly, almost as if against her better judgment, she finds herself missing her beloved college roommate, who had died (she doesn't tell us how long ago). And here she casts reminiscence with the friend she longs for into the subjunctive mode. If her friend had been there, they would have laughed together, both about

the present and the past. Bevington thus invents a way to remain solitary but to reminisce with a friend—in imagined companionship. The other two women could not offer her real solace or perspective on their baffling place in life—advanced old age. But nonetheless Bevington concludes this section on a note of intimate if wry laughter, a mood of mutuality. “Had my roommate Dottie been alive beside me,” she writes, “I would have whispered . . . in her ear, ‘Only to gods in heaven comes no old age, nor death of anything,’ and we would have laughed aloud at our predicament” (128).

Here reminiscence is among members of the same generation. What of reminiscence between generations? when what happened was not initially shared and when what is remembered an older person is in fact recounted by a person who is younger? I’m thinking here of Simone de Beauvoir’s beautiful memoir of her mother, a book which is autobiographical as well. Entitled *A Very Easy Death* and published in France in 1964 soon after her mother died at the age of seventy-eight, the book took shape for Beauvoir as her mother lay ill with cancer in the American Hospital in Paris. Its chapters alternate the present in the hospital with the evocation of the past, telling both of her mother’s life and of her own and of how they intertwined.

A woman who had not lived for herself but against herself much of her life, a woman who seldom spoke about herself or her past, Beauvoir’s mother begins in fact in the hospital and near the end of her life to reminisce about herself as a young woman. Here Beauvoir presents her to us as in the kind of mood that Bollas writes of, one that is both restorative to the self and enigmatic to others. Consider this passage, for example, where the nurse is arranging her hair with her daughter looking on:

Gently Mademoiselle Leblon undid her plait and untangled her hair; she plaited it again and pinned the silvery coil round Maman’s head. Mama’s relaxed face had recovered a surprising purity and I thought of a Leonardo drawing of a very beautiful old woman. “You are as beautiful as a Leonardo,” I said.

She smiled. “I was not so bad, once upon a time.” In a rather mysterious voice she told the nurse, “I had lovely hair, and I did it up in bandeaux round my head.” And she went on talking about herself,

how she had taken her librarian’s diploma, her love for books. . . . Maman went back to her memories of the time she was a young woman. . . (58)

This is in the present of the narrative. But *A Very Easy Death* also draws in the past. When Beauvoir turns to contemplate her mother’s experience of childhood, about which her mother had told her very little, Beauvoir remembers only this single positive memory. “I only remember her speaking of one pleasant memory—her grandmother’s garden in a village in Lorraine, and the little plums and green-gages they ate, warm from the tree” (39). Notice that Beauvoir, the daughter, is repeating a reminiscence of her mother’s, one that she first heard herself as a child, confiding it to writing in her late forties. That it is a memory of a garden that gave warmth and nourishment is all to the point. Her mother, in recounting the memory, evoked the lineage of three generations—herself, her grandmother, and thus by implication her own mother, even if she were absent from the scene. Beauvoir, in repeating it, evokes four generations, linking herself to that village garden in Lorraine. Here the sense of the past, generated through the repetition of a reminiscence that becomes Beauvoir’s own—is like a mood that stretches across time and generations. For Beauvoir it is a memory that was at first historical—it belonged to her mother. In repetition the reminiscence became, as it were, her own memory. In transmission across the generations such a memory becomes collective.

And within the space of *A Very Easy Death* the number of generations expands to five. Neither Simone de Beauvoir nor her sister had any children. In the daze of reminiscence to which I referred above, her mother invents grandchildren for herself. “She was very fond,” Beauvoir tells us, of the daughters of a woman from her home town, “pretty, blooming, cheerful girls” who came to see her in the hospital. “I have no granddaughters and they have no grandmother,” Beauvoir’s mother declares. “So I am their grandmother” (59). Thus, in this space of reminiscence a continuity with the past stretching into another generation is established in the present.

Can we say, then, that we can create a reminiscence? Reminiscence can take on an profoundly imaginative quality, with the intense mood of reminiscence yielding the longed-for event. We generally define reminiscence, as I did earlier for the

sake of ease, as the remembering of a familiar memory. But this is too limiting a definition. I am thinking here of a magical moment in the final chapter of the autobiography of the Swedish filmmaker Ingmar Bergman. Entitled *The Magic Lantern* and first published in Swedish in 1987, it has the shape of a classical autobiography. Bergman begins with the story of his birth and progresses through the chapters of his life. But Bergman, with his gift for seeing worlds that most of us could not begin to imagine ourselves, does not remain in chronological time. In the final chapter he creates for himself a final scene of reminiscence with his mother. Unlike Beauvoir's memoir of her mother's illness, this never happened, it never existed. Here is Bergman, in his late sixties, sitting in a church on a Sunday in December—his father was a parson—surrounded by the music of Bach. And in his mind's eye he imagines going to find his mother:

Mother is sitting at her desk, her glasses on her nose, her not yet white hair in slight disorder as she leans over her diary, writing with a slim fountain pen. The picture is smooth and compelling, but microscopic. (282)

With the disquieting word "microscopic," we already have the foreboding sense that all will not, in fact, go smoothly.

She quickly turns her head and catches sight of me. (How I have yearned for this moment. Ever since Mother died, I have yearned for this moment.) . . .

I know I'm disturbing you. . . . It was beautiful, the light was beautiful and all the time I thought: Now I'll make an attempt, this time it will be successful. (282)

He wants to clarify a memory, one in which he imagined that she had chosen to be so close to him that they could have held hands. He wants to draw her into the space of reminiscence, to establish a mood of intimacy that will be as beautiful as the light, uniting them in the confirmation of a common memory:

I want to ask Mother about something urgent. Several years ago, I think it was in the summer of 1980, I was sitting in my workroom in Faro and it was raining, that soft quiet summer rain, as if it were

going to rain all day, the kind that doesn't exist any more. I was reading and listening to the rain. Then I felt that Mother was very near me, beside me. I could have held out my hand and taken hers. It wasn't even a supernatural event. I knew Mother was with me in the room, or did I imagine it? I can't make it out. Now I'm asking, Mother. (283)

Her answer? She has left her desk, she is cold, she pulls a shawl over her, she is tired, she lies down on the bed. His sense of urgency is met by her fatigue. She remains emotionally distant. "It probably wasn't me," she says calmly. "I'm still far too tired. Are you sure it wasn't someone else?" (283).

With her refusal of reminiscence, Bergman escalates his demand, pressing her for more. "We became friends, we became friends, didn't we? The old apportioning of roles of mother and son were dissolved, and we became friends? We spoke openly and intimately. Didn't we?" (283). Her answer? "You must talk to someone else about that" (284). And although he continues to try to engage her, to question her, this is the last time she speaks. She continues to say nothing, just as she did when he was younger. And thus, horrifyingly but inevitably, the same mood that filled his childhood is reestablished in the space of writing the end of his life. Even in a kind of hallucination of reminiscence, he is not "successful." At the end of the scene his mother, so detached from him, vanishes horribly in front of his eyes, her body dissolving, coming apart. "In reminiscence," wrote Proust, "my experiences do not fade, they grow more vivid." Here too in reminiscence, Bergman's experience does not fade but rather grows more intense, although certainly not in the sense that Proust intended.

If this is an instance of hallucinatory reminiscence, reminiscence imagined, reminiscence failed, I turn briefly to something altogether different in my final literary example of reminiscence, to what I call prospective reminiscence. It is a form of reminiscence that is imagined into the future, thus creating a future for reminiscence in old age, offering the prospect and promise of a certain protection, "the protection of perspective," in Robert Kastenbaum's phrase). The mood of reminiscence, I want to suggest, has the potential to generate the future and not just to revivify the past.

Two poems by the American poet Marilyn Hacker will illustrate my point.

Hacker, who is near fifty and has recently suffered from breast cancer, lives part of the year in a little apartment in Paris and often travels in the south of France. "Letter to Julie in a New Decade" is a poem included in her collection *Winter Numbers*, one that is marked by Hacker's stringently impassioned meditations on the premature deaths of her friends from AIDS as well as her own struggle with cancer. Against what would seem all the odds, she declares her friendship, as one declares one's love, projecting their epistolary closeness into the far future when she will be an old woman and they will be what they are today—feisty, dynamic women. These are the last lines of the poem:

If I live long enough, my small ambition
is, to be the old lady on the third
floor (blessed with indoor plumbing), in condition
to send the next and next-to-last word
to you, in some warm green place, with your grown-up
granddaughter, and dogs, where it's not raining.
I hope we won't be jailed, or veiled, or blown up
And have the energy to keep complaining.

This "old lady" who lives on the third floor in Hacker's building, the woman who serves as a model for Hacker, is ninety-nine. (In "August Journal," the closing poem of *Winter Numbers*, we learn that Madame Mehling has died at the age of one hundred and two.) Notice that Hacker extends their future together in the poem into indefiniteness. Her "ambition" is to send the "next" word and the "next-to-last word" to the woman who is her beloved friend still, but not a last word.

What would this future together be like? It would be summery warm and clear, filled with desultory and ardent conversation, and wine, as we see in another poem. Hacker and an old friend are in a village in the south of France. That they are on a hilltop affording them far-away sight is critical. It is as if they can see into the future, one where as old ladies they will talk together still:

The air was gold
with broom—and grape-leaf, plane-tree green, the air
was blue blue blue July. With wine, we told
each other that we'd be old ladies on a hill like this,
where people still grow old.

IV

A few weeks ago I visited the Helen Bader Center, a residence for women with Alzheimer's Disease that is part of the Jewish Home for the Aged in Milwaukee. As I was being shown around the facility, a young-looking woman with long, straight black hair and a short skirt kept coming up to me and asking in a somewhat vociferous tone, "What's your number?" The first time I didn't understand the question, so she plunged ahead in the conversation without waiting for my reply. "Mine's fifty-one," she said, matter-of-factly but with punch. It was her number. It was her age. The next time she asked me, I knew how to answer. "Fifty-two."

How could reminiscence between people—really between them—be possible if a person had Alzheimer's disease sufficiently advanced so that she couldn't hold onto both ends of the conversation, couldn't recall from one moment to the next who the other person is (or was), couldn't remember the facts. In such a situation the life review as theorized by Robert Butler is patently impossible. But what of reminiscence? We find a wonderful answer to this question in Deborah Hoffmann's *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter*, an autobiographical film about her mother who has Alzheimer's Disease and is at a certain point no longer able to recognize her. Although the film revolves primarily around the daughter and mother, a third woman is important—the cinematographer Frances Reid, who is Hoffman's partner and thus a member of this family.

In the final and quietly moving scene, it is not the sharing of memories that bind them together. For Hoffmann's mother, this kind of memory is gone. Rather it is the feeling of warmth, forged out of a sentence here and there, that brings them close. It is a remarkable form of reminiscence, one that generates a mood of trust. Hoffmann's memories of childhood are important to her, she tells us, but

with her mother's experience and with her experience of her mother she has learned that you can still have "definition" without memory. Here is what her mother says, addressing both her daughter and her partner, addressing us as she speaks to the camera: "I did have a warm feeling for what the few of us made, made a sentence here or a sentence there go. . . . Just now, just recently, just within the last hour or so, I began to think, we were all parties together. That simply hit me today, just now. And I'm happy it's here. And I'm not sure I remember where everyone lived and so forth. But there's something close that's still with me, and I'm grateful for it."

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