

Summer Dresses



My mother and her five sisters each sooner or later developed Alzheimer's Disease. As my mother slipped into dementia she became a time traveler, moving freely back and forth through the 94 years of her life: she was again a young woman preparing lessons for her third-grade classes, or returning home from visiting her parents. When we tried to pin her into the present by pointing out that her parents had died some 50 years earlier their loss was a fresh shock, as if we'd said they were struck by a car that morning. Her shifting reality was so vibrant that I came to doubt my own, and to think, who am I to say she's wrong?

I encountered, a few years ago in a Scientific American, a theory of time (which I grasped poorly and distorted to please myself) in which time is not linear and irreversible but a structure rather like a dense crystal, in which all of time is simultaneously present; and it seemed to me that one might move through this structure in an unexpected direction.

Or: what if the chaotic neurons of Alzheimer's Disease make an unorthodox connection, shortcut back to the heart of one's life as they short circuit memory, growing into a beautiful web connecting past and future, the whole of a lived life, before finally they black it out?

(Sometimes on a mellow afternoon the mental noise of daily life is broken, just clears off, and this moment could as easily be from an afternoon 20 years before, or 5, or 50. The years fold and disappear and the breeze freshens as the sun passes behind a little cloud.

It's June, I think, or May, and the smell is earth, thin grasses, peonies. Briefly I pass into the picture and out onto that wide Kansas prairie, and hear the laughter and chatter as the women move apart and on into the rest of their lives. Then the moment ends, real life raises a ruckus, the image becomes a memory and fades.)

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