

THE FLOOD THAT DOES NOT FLOW

KYLIE LADD

*Where have you gone? The tide is over you,
The turn of midnight water's over you,
As time is over you, and mystery,
And memory, the flood that does not flow.*
– Kenneth Slessor, *Five Bells*

I work in a memory clinic. The Cognitive, Dementia and Memory Service, to be precise, but no-one ever calls it that. People come in to see me, and I can hear them at the reception area just outside my office, voices wavering, anxious, 'I have an appointment with the memory doctor.'

The memory doctor. It's a misnomer, because whatever I might be able to do, I can't fix memory. No-one can. Bones re-grow, cuts heal, but memory—once lost—is gone forever. It's one of God's cruellest tricks, if indeed you believe in God, an inexplicable evolutionary flaw. We are essentially born with all the neurons we will ever possess—unlike almost every other form of cell, those in the brain do not replicate or reproduce. Drown them in alcohol, sever them in concussions or car accidents, use them up one by one in the everyday bumps and blows that flesh is heir to ... bad luck. They're not coming back.

Working in the field I do, this vulnerability of the very thing that contains our essence horrifies me. In reality it's not so literal, but every time I watch football players knock skulls I think, 'There goes Christmas 1973' ... or a first date, or a brother-in-law's address, or the day in grade four when the

teacher punished you for copying Peter's work, only you knew it was the other way round. The strands of identity fraying at the edges, fading with every jostle or jolt, eventually gone for good.

I saw an elderly couple the other day. Well, really I was seeing the wife, a seventy-five-year-old woman I diagnosed as being in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease. The history was typical: repetitive questioning, increasing disorganisation, word-finding difficulty, functional deterioration. She had started to leave the stove on after cooking dinner; frequently forgot if she had taken her tablets and ended up with a double dose or none at all. Frank personality change is rare in the first years of the disease, but to be thorough I asked her husband if she seemed altered at all. 'Oh, I don't know,' he replied, exhaling so hard his nose hair rustled. 'The first fifty years were wonderful, but it hasn't been the same since then.'

I would have laughed if what he said wasn't so sad. Memory defines us. It wasn't the dementia itself that was changing his wife, the relentless dieback of neurons. It was the memory loss. With her memory failing, his wife had become a different person: less confident, suddenly suspicious, prone to blame and argument and the tedium of the same question asked over and over again. Worse, she wasn't much company. In conversation she forgot anecdotes; could not recall enough from the news to join in discussion. Eventually I knew she would forget her partner of over half a century, their children, their sayings and everything they had shared. Then she would forget herself, the visage in the mirror suddenly frightening rather than familiar. And when that happened she would be dead, though she continued to breathe, eat, soil herself. Memory defines us.

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KYLIE LADD is a clinical neuropsychologist by training. She holds a PhD in the detection of dementia and currently works in both private and public practice. She is also a freelance writer, and her work has appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age*, *Good Weekend*, and *O magazine*, amongst others. Her first book, *Living with Alzheimer's and Other Dementias*, was published by Michelle Anderson Publishing in 2006, while her second, *Naked*, was published by Allen and Unwin in June 2008.