

**A MOTHER SPEAKS,
A DAUGHTER LISTENS**
JOURNEYING TOGETHER THROUGH DEMENTIA



Felicia Mitchell

Wising Up Press

Wising Up Press
P.O. Box 2122
Decatur, GA 30031-2122
www.universaltable.org

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ISBN: 978-1-7376940-2-1

Catalogue-in-Publication data is on file with the Library of Congress.
LCCN: 2022941055

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INTIMATION ODE

My brother fed me my bottle,
lying next to me in his diaper
with me in mine, so young.
We were so young
we did not need words
other than eyes and sighs,
but one day we talked.
We talked in a language
invented by angels
and understood by only us
and perhaps God,
the God who stood over us
the day our mother baptized us,
herself, far outside the city limits
where our concrete house
was as holy as the Vatican
to our father, excommunicated
for marrying our mother
and having these children
who talked like angels
while their daddy worked and worked
and their mama, pregnant again,
fed coal to a potbellied stove.
What did we say to each other?
I think we talked about that time
before we were born,
a time that hovered outside the window
like a flying saucer
only a few could believe in.
But our parents did.
They believed in flying saucers
and babies and metaphysics
and living on next to nothing
as if it was everything,
everything in the whole wide holy world.

AUDREY'S MEMORY

*You know, I want to go to Charleston.
And that cute boy,
Before I sent into then,
we have a beautiful house there.
After Daddy and everything.
It was a very good place.
It didn't bother me.
He was so visitble,
he draw a beautiful build.
We just wonling.
Right by the water,
very beautiful water by the water.
And Brownie, she said, "Well, just do it."
And we all dived!
I liked sunsing.
We had everything.
Money.
Charleston.
I used to stare there.
They had a good time.
Two dead.
Had the same thing in it.
Right from the water.
We had a beautiful house, but he died.
It was a big, big, big house, and was so beautiful.
Where we did.
Oh, I loved it.
I can't get out and go.
But to see it.*

AT THE S&S CAFETERIA

The woman at the next table
wants her mother to use her right hand.
"Use your right hand, Mother," she instructs,
shifting the fork from one side to the other
while green peas spill into rice like punctuation marks.
Mother, seated in a wheelchair, does as she is told,
moving food to mouth without uttering a word.

The woman at my table, my mother, eats her turnip greens
and comments on the macaroni and cheese.
She says the same thing about her food each time.
Soon she will ask for a bag for her pecan pie
so she can take it out and eat it later.

What I do at times like these is eat my slice of sweet potato pie.
It's sweet as memories spilling from Mama's mouth,
stories that get mixed up between bites of greens
and cheese that could be cooked a little longer.
I listen to every word my mother says
and watch her watch the woman spilling peas.

THE TRICKS WE PLAY

I part my hair in the middle.
Sunday, I put on a pretty dress
and pull my hair into a ponytail.
My mother loves my shoes.
I sip green tea while she smiles.
Monday, I wear my hair
the way I did in high school,
some of it pulled back
into a flower-shaped barrette.
I buy a bottle of Wind Song.
Tuesday, I wear an old ring
my mother gave me, pink coral,
something I picked out and she bought.
Wednesday, I try to fit into a dress
I bought thirty years before,
its embroidered mirrors
reflecting a lifetime of change.
I buy kefir and decide to give up sugar.
I stand in front of hair dye at the drugstore.
Sunflower gold or honey blond?
Or should I buy curlers?
Thursday, I wear Mary Janes again.
My mother loves my shoes.
I love pomegranate seeds and salmon.
Friday is the day I try the perfume.
I spray it all over my body
before I walk into my mother's arms.
Saturday, I sit dazed on the couch,
wondering what I will try next:
starched petticoats, dark chocolate,
a Brownie uniform from E-bay?
What will help her to remember?

MISSING

My mother is missing a breast.
At Sunday dinner, no concentrated sugar allowed,
she pulls the fabric of her blouse and lets it fall
against her deflated chest.

And then she points to the other one,
the one not even I, her daughter, suckled,
the one poised there like a teardrop.
I tell her they had to cut it off, that missing breast,
and smile and point to her plate.
"Here," I say. "You'll want to eat your turkey."
But she won't eat this white meat
pulled clean from the bone, soft and tender,
only yellow pudding sweetened artificially
and one slice of a bright orange yam.

She wants to be like everybody else, my mother.
She wants it all: two breasts, a real dessert,
a daughter whose white hair does not surprise her.
She wants to find the words to tell me she wants it all.
She wants to know who *they* are.

In the top drawer of a dresser she does not use,
my mother's prosthesis has a life of its own.
Neither jellyfish nor boob nor recyclable,
it lies in wait.

One day, my mother will find her breast,
and she will want to play catch with it
or dress it up like a baby doll or eat it with a spoon.
"Here," I'll say. "You'll want to drink your milk."

THE OTHER NIGHT AT GRACE HEALTHCARE & REHABILITATION

The other night,
I lay next to my mother
and let my hair fall against her face.

She giggled when it tickled her nose
and reached both hands out,
as if to hug me,
but she grabbed my hair instead—

gathering one pigtail in each fist—

and laughed some more,
as if she remembered exactly
what it means to mother.

FEAR NOT

I can still read some words,
FEAR NOT among them
standing almost as tall as Jesus
on this piece of paper
I can hold in my own two hands.
A nice woman brought the words,
leaving them with a smile.

Jesus looks like John Henry.
He is enough to make me drop my fears
like a fork on this sanitary floor
where somebody mops daily—
John Henry, my son, who left this earth.
He was both afraid and not afraid.
And so young.
He died.

That is just the way it goes.
I do fear sometimes, true,
trapped here in a body that is not mine—
this old woman, who is she?
Unable to dress herself or pull a weed.
At least I know how to swim.
I do not know how to die.

Later, somebody will wash my hands,
wiping this newsprint off;
but, for now, I hold onto the paper
for dear life, my life,
my hands as gray as ash.

A PANSY FOR MY THOUGHTS

Every February,
when she planted pansies
in the bed where daffodils bloomed,
Mama picked some
and wove them in my hair—

so that is how I walked to school
on my birthday until I lost count,
not so much a child of the Sixties
as my mother's child—

somebody closer to the earth
than to the sky above her
or the ocean across the bridge
or those people I'd see in their yards
looking longingly at stars.

Years later, one arrived in the mail,
passing from South Carolina to Texas,
a pansy folded in a card.

Now I plant them in February—
picking every color I find
at Kroger and K-Mart—
and I stare at them long and hard,
seeing my furrowed brow prophesied there,
something I did not see before,
when I wore pansies in my hair
and my mother remembered February.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Felicia Mitchell was born in South Carolina and spent her childhood there and on the coast of North Carolina with her parents John A. and Audrey McClary Mitchell and three brothers. Following graduation from Booker T. Washington High School in Columbia, she received both BA and MA from the University of South Carolina. After completing a PhD at The University of Texas at Austin in 1987, she moved to rural southwestern Virginia, where she currently resides. Felicia taught English, including linguistics and creative writing, at Emory & Henry College for many years before retiring with emeritus status. Her scholarly work includes editing *Her Words. Diverse Voices in Contemporary Appalachian Women's Poetry*. Her poetry collections include *Waltzing with Horses* and a chapbook, *The Cleft of the Rock*. For ten years, she wrote a weekly column for *Washington County News* and, in recent years, she has blogged about experiences with cancer for *Cure Today*.