

Share your story

Are you a woman over fifty and would you like to share your experience of ageing and (a)sexuality with us? Send us your story! We created a digital space where women can share anonymously their experiences, thoughts and statements with us and with each other. By visiting our website lili.ugent.be you will be able to write and share your story. If you prefer to use slow mail, here is an old-fashioned form you can send to us. Stories can be written in any language!

On this page you can share your personal story. We are interested in women's personal testimonies on the experience of their ageing body, and of relationships, intimacy and sex. But we also welcome reflections on older women's representations, for example, about books, films, series, blogs, etc. that you find important or problematic. Or perhaps you would like to share practical tips with other women? Short and longer texts are welcome, and you are free to use an alias or pseudonym instead of your real name. The editors have the right not to publish, to edit or to shorten contributions. If you prefer to participate in the scientific research instead of publishing a story, send a message to lili@ugent.be.

Thank you!

Name or alias:

Age:

Location:

Your story:

To be sent at:

Carla Besora Barti
Center for Research on Culture and Gender
Blandijnberg 2
9000 Gent

Your story will be published in our website: lili.ugent.be

Dear reader,

Thank you for joining us in this meal. It has been cooked slowly, fermented and aged in honor of older women and their too often forgotten wisdom, struggles and joys.

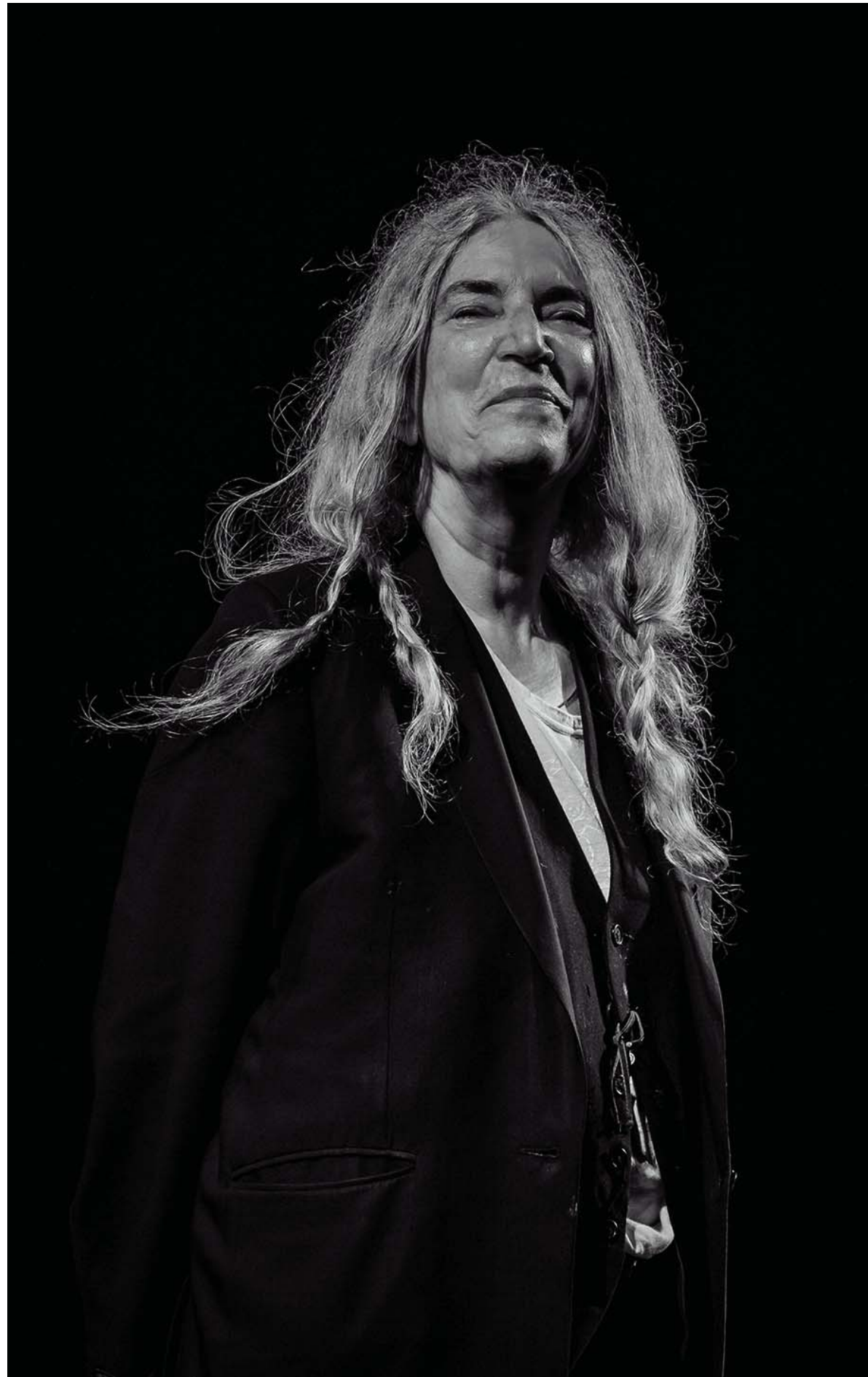
Much attention is paid to the work of young artists, but less to older artists and writers. Especially, the perspectives of older women in regards to ageing and sexuality are not paid much attention to. At this literary buffet, we will shift the attention towards them, sitting together and reading texts written by women in later life. The readings will be accompanied by a tasting of foods and drinks which become tasty, sparkling or simply different over time. This zine has been created on the occasion of the 2022 edition of the Konvooi arts festival. It serves as a menu and a reader to navigate the afternoon with. If you are reading this in a different context, you can accompany the reading with some food or drinks that needed a process of maturation to become what they are now. Fermentation, drying, and preserving are some of them.

A buffet is not a formal meal. You can choose what you eat, what you combine with what and in which order you taste it. For this reason, in this menu, starters do not always come first and desserts do not always come last.

Be our guest!

From the New York underground to the largest stages of the world, Patti Smith (1946) is now an icon of poetic charisma and uncompromising style. Her autobiographic writing, poems and song lyrics speak forcefully about passion, spirituality and ageing unapologetically.

Patti Smith



time

digestion

M Train

"As a child I thought I would never grow up, that I could will it so. And then I realized, quite recently, that I had crossed some line, unconsciously cloaked in the truth of my chronology. How did we get so damn old? I say to my joints, my iron-coloured hair."



Simone de Beauvoir

Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) wrote extensively about the experience of becoming older as a woman. Both through fiction and essay, she explored the gradual encounter with invisibility that comes with ageing. The characters in her stories and novels are struck at encounters with mirrors, or the disinterested gaze of men. In her novella "Misunderstanding in Moscow" (Malentendu à Moscou), a woman becomes incapable of sexual intimacy with her partner after noticing how a younger man looks at her: without any trace of erotic interest. Beauvoir is mostly known for her work "Le deuxième sexe" (The Second Sex) where she famously wrote that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. She reflected on her own experience of ageing in "La force de l'Age" (The Prime of Life), written when she was only fifty two. Later, she extensively wrote about the marginalisation of older people in "La Vieillesse" (The Coming of Age). In her works on the topic, she observes how contemporary Western culture is afraid of ageing, considering later life as a "semi-death". Despite the ageism she experienced and identified, she wrote about growing old as a privilege of perspective, a life stage that not everyone attains.



Pra Fuder

Olho pro meu corpo,
sinto a lava escorrer
Vejo o próprio fogo,
não há força pra deter

Me derreto tonta,
toda a pele vai arder
O meu peito em chamas
solta a fera pra correr

Olho pro meu corpo,
sinto a lava escorrer
Vejo o próprio fogo,
não há força pra deter
Olho pro meu corpo,
sinto a lava escorrer
Vejo o próprio fogo,
não há força pra deter

Unhas cravadas
Em transe latejo
Roupas jogadas no chão
Pernas abertas
Te prendo num beijo
Sufoco a sofreguidão

Meu temporal me transforma em loba
Presa, você vai gemer
Feito o cordeiro entregue pra morte
Seu sussurar a pedir

Pra fuder, pra fuder,
pra fuder, pra fuder, pra fuder..

Me derreto tonta, toda a pele vai arder
O meu peito em chamas solta a fera pra correr
Pra fuder, pra fuder, pra fuder, pra fuder, pra fuder
Pra fuder, pra fuder, pra fuder, pra fuder..

Elza Soares

The Brazilian samba singer Elza Soares (1930-2022) wanted her album “Mulher do fim do mundo” (The Woman at the end of the world) to be about sex and Blackness. Released when she was 85, it spoke about her life’s pain and the social struggles she witnessed around her, but also of the fierce joy with which she embraced life. The song “Pra Fuder” (To Fuck) burns with fiery unapologetic desire.



The Coming of Age

“Growing, ripening, aging, dying — the passing of time is predestined, inevitable.”

Misunderstanding in Moscow

Why was she so far away from her own life? It was a fine June day. The trees were in heat; the pigeons were flapping about in the pools of soft, fleecy pollen lying on the pavements, and its white flakes were fluttering down around Nicole, getting into her nose and mouth, sticking to her hair, making her head spin. They were fluttering down into the library and sticking to her hair on that afternoon when she had, in a certain way, said goodbye to her body. There had already been signs before that. In the mirror, in photographs, her image had come to look worn, but she still recognized herself in it. When she was chatting with male friends, they were men and she felt herself to be a woman. And then this young man that she did not know—he was so handsome—had arrived with Andre. He had shaken her hand with a kind of distracted politeness and something had definitely been undermined. For her, he was a young, attractive male: for him, she was as asexual as an eighty-year-old woman. She had never recovered from that look; she had stopped coinciding with her body, which was now an unfamiliar skin, a kind of distressing disguise. Perhaps the metamorphosis had taken rather longer than that, but her memory crystallized it in that image: two doe eyes turning away from her with indifference. From that point on, she had remained unresponsive in bed: you have to like yourself a little to take pleasure in being in someone’s arms. Andre had not understood her, but little by little he had allowed himself to be defeated by her coldness. The memory came back to her every summer, on this very same date, but she had stopped being wounded by it long ago. She usually took in good spirit this vague, springtime nostalgia that the dance of the pollen awakened in her, seeing it as a reminder of a time when the beauty of each day contained promises for the future.

Antje Krog (1952) is a South African journalist and poet. Her collection 'Verweerskrif' (Body bereft) was awarded the Protea Prize for best Afrikaans poetry in 2006. In the poem 'Manifesto of a grandma', an older woman goes through a conflicted stream of thought when she is asked how does it feel to be a grandma. She woefully reproves the clichéd negative images of grandmthood that are still ubiquitous, just to end up replying politely: "Lovely, my dear, absolutely lovely."

Manifesto of a Grandma

Casually you ask, 'So how does it feel to be a grandma?' and I thought to myself, oh god, My child, what would you have me say? '... very old thank you'? or 'I don't Get cock past my lips anymore'? I mean, what

Does one say? More important perhaps is why A question like this makes me so the moer in? Do I suffer from excessive vanity or am I ashamed Of my early breeding ability..? But really, Deep down, I know: it roots in the word 'grandma'.

'Grandma' has such a poo sound, sounds so blubbery So almost tubbery, it mumbles so cuntless, so toothless Inaudibly that it rips your nose wide open for grandma-bashing and suddenly you smell the entire written media unaware of wild yam and hrt.

Children's books are full of modern moms with clogs Buying pizzas and dads bathing babies, but in the Background somewhere inevitably lurks misshapen A grandma anachronistically in Dr Scholl's shoes Joyously knitting – spectacted abd bunned. A bun

For fuck's sake! My own children don't even know anyone With a bun, not to mention my culturally mixed-up grandchildren! Sometimes a grandpa fumbles along with stick, coat and grey felt hat, (grey what?) – a surprised expression on his face suggesting that throughout life he has peered only through bifocals.

A headline announces: 'High jump record for grandma'. What does it really suggest? For a grandma She jumps rather high? How high is a grandma Entitled to jump? Or should she indeed jump But not over a bar in public?

Sister Gin

brain be all ages.
the middle can look
ard, she will naturally
anticipate, to expect, and
claim, to have available.
he who can be old at
low, Su, that it's not
to think old. It has been
'e forever old."

June Arnold (1923-1982) wrote a provocative and sensitive novel challenging all the clichés, stereotypes and misconceptions about women, ageing and sexuality. In Sister Gin, older women fall in love with each other, suffer and enjoy being old, delight in each other's "withered" bodies and admire each other's wavy white hairs and expressive wrinkles. However, Sister Gin is not a soft wholesome story: passions and pleasures coexist with alcoholism, dark humour, anger and violence.

”Only in age can one
 Because a woman in
 forward and backwa
 see that youth is to a
 age is to possess, to
 ... The truly free is s
 any age. Now you kn
 necessary to be old t
 said that geniuses ar

‘Grandma of three sues premier for sexual harassment’
 What is the message here? That a grandma should actually
 Be grateful that someone still wants to fondle her
 Or that the premier must really be desperate
 To molest a grandma to get his rocks off?

Note that the premier himself is presented with neither
 Kith nor cunt. The head Scorpion states that he will not
 Jail Winnie Mandela, because grandmas don't belong in
 Jails. Grandpas can go to jail, but no grandmas. No
 Dammit! I claim my right to the dignity of inmate.

At Pick'n Pay I stop behind a kombi from the Sunset Home.
 Gingerly they emerge – no spectacles or buns in sight.
 Short-clipped hair, running shoes for shopping.
 Nimble a gent hops from the passenger seat – in one hand
 His aluminium strut, with the other he smoothes his ponytail.

Then it strikes me: the primal source of my aversion
 To the word 'grandma' comes from the
 Well-known children's rhyme 'Grandpa and Grandma'*
 On that bloody stoep with they errant sphincters.
 Grandma asks Grandpa, 'What was that roar?' Grandpa
 Sighs euphemistically, 'My tummy's sore.'
 Then Grandma asks (of all fucking things she asks):
 'A pear for the pain?!' whereupon Grandpa draws
 A highly scientific conclusion:
 'Then I'll fart again.' For ever and ever in three
 Rhyming couplets metred in the falling
 Rhythm of dactyls this senile hogwash of stoepsitters
 Is conveyed from generation to generation
 as the very essence of grandpa- and grandmahood

'So what did you ask?
 You asked about being a grandma? Lovely, my dear,
 Absolutely lovely – as you can see:
 Grandpa and I here on the stoep
 – We take it lying down.'

* This refers to an obscene Afrikaans children's rhyme, cherished by generations of small children as their first encounter with subversive text:

Uupa en Ouma sit op die stoep,	Grandpa and Grandma sit on the stoep
Uupa gee 'n harde poep.	Grandpa farts an enormous whoop.
Ouma vra: 'Wat makeer?'	Grandma asks, 'What was that roar?'
Oupa sê: 'My maag is seer.'	Grandpa says, 'My tummy's sore.'
Ouma sê: 'Eet 'n peer.'	Grandma asks, 'A pear for the pain?'
Oupa sê: 'Dan poep ek weer.'	Grandpa says, 'Then I'll fart again.'

Clarice Lispector

The Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector (1920 – 1977) published two collections of short stories three years before her death at fifty six. They are erotic short stories, often involving older women, their bodies and desires. Even if she did not reach old age, she had strong feelings about ageing and “loss” of beauty. In her later stories, women experience shame and disgust at their ageing bodies and fiery desires. The desiring older woman appears in her stories as an unsolvable problem, something indescribable, incommunicable. In the short story “Ruído de passos” (The sound of Footsteps), included in the collection “A via crucis do corpo” (The via crucis of the body), an old woman faces the persistence of desire in later life with shame, and is haunted by the ghostly presence of her deceased husband’s judgement.



Leaving it
opened up
the

possibility of finding love. Love should be as important to women in midlife as it was to us when we were girls, when we were wide-eyed teenagers looking for true love and perfect union. We are still looking. Some of us have found the love we longed for. The magic of midlife is that many of us now know more about the meaning of love; we know more about what it means to love and be loved. We are more experienced. Most of us have suffered heartache. Pain has opened us up— given us the opportunity to learn from our suffering—to make ourselves ready for the love that is promised. We know love is there. Some of us are still waiting. We know we will love again. And when we love, we know love will last. Significantly, we know, having learned through much trial and error, that true love begins with self-love. And that time and time again our search for love brings us back to the place where we started, back to our own heart’s mirror, where we can look upon our female selves with love and be renewed. Feminist critiques of love made it difficult for progressive, powerful women to speak about the place of love in our lives. This silence has undermined the freedom of all females to be fully self-actualized, which women’s liberation first championed. While feminist thinkers and activists were right to rip apart and throw away outmoded, patriarchal ways of thinking about love and romance, girls and women still need to fill the gap with new liberatory visions full of hope and promise. Without these new visions to serve as guides and maps, the path to love remains difficult to find and the search for love leaves us unfulfilled and lacking. Women, along with the culture as a whole, need constructive visions of redemptive love. We need to return to love and proclaim its transformative power.



To conform they have to give up power. Giving up power has been what aging has traditionally felt like for most women. And with the loss of those feelings of power came the fear that we would be forever abandoned, unloved. Now midlife and thereafter has become not only a time to reclaim power but also a time to know real love at last. More than ever before, women talk about the difficulties of being powerful in a world that has changed a lot but that still remains patriarchal. Hence we have enormous freedom in a world that is not yet fully accepting of our freedom. This fact creates new issues, ones that most women in the past did not face. Think, for example, about how many of our parents remained or remain in marriages of more than fifty years where the woman is miserable and unhappy. Yet the world they were raised in told them this was a woman's destiny. Today masses of women—women who would never call themselves feminists, who may not even feel that their lives have been in any way affected by a feminist movement—are empowered to leave relationships when they are terrorized, or miserable, or maybe not treated poorly in any way but are merely unloved. Leaving these bonds opens up the possibility that they may know love in their lifetime. The older stay-married-forever generation were and often are cynical about love. I can still remember the pain my mother expressed at a time in her life when my father was being particularly unkind. He had always been a womanizer, but now his behavior had become just plain crazy and terroristic. They had been married for close to twenty years at that time, and I was about to finish high school. I remember urging Mama with all the hubris and wild courage of late-sixties adolescence to leave Dad. And I have never forgotten the sad and weary look on her face when she turned to me, saying in the smallest voice, "Who would want me?" With pure adolescent wonder, I was astounded by this response; I saw my mother as the most marvelous being. I demanded to know, "What on earth do you mean?" In a sad and tremulous voice she explained that she was already over the hill, that she had lots of children, that men did not desire women like that. This was one of the most painful lessons about love and heartache I learned as a girl in the bosom of patriarchy. It warms my heart that women today, even those who may feel trapped in longtime marriages where they are unhappy, at least know that there are ways out, that there is still a world out there that desires their presence, their being. (...) Until recently there has been little discussion of our fate when it comes to romantic love and partnership, other than the more commonly known notion that any single woman over thirty who is heterosexual is more likely to be alone forever. And God forbid she reaches forty without having found a man. When mass media seized on this notion, using it as propaganda to strike fear in the hearts of women, it

was a subtle, indirect form of antifeminist backlash. For those of us who were focusing more on attaining higher education, building careers, and—let's face it—"making some money" so that we could be in charge of our economic lives, being bombarded with messages telling us we were more likely to die in airplane crashes than to find a mate was nothing short of a warning. In the popular movie *Sleepless in Seattle*, everyone in the life of the character played by Meg Ryan encourages her to feel worried and panicked because she is not married. Pondering the statistics that suggest she will not find love, she frets about her otherwise happy life. As a threat, these statistics served to warn women that we'd better get back to focusing on the business of getting and keeping a man—that this above all else should be our primary concern. Now, when this dire warning struck my life, I was struggling with whether or not I should leave the man in my life. We had been together for more than ten years, but I was simply not satisfied. He was not committed to personal growth or emotional openness. While he supported equality in the workforce, in our intimate lives he saw me as there primarily to serve his sexual needs. Like many women, I heeded the warning that I might never find another partner. Among other fears, it probably served to keep me in the relationship longer than I should have been. Ultimately, my fears were not as important as my longing for freedom, self-actualization, love. To me, leaving this relationship was not about giving up on love; it was the gesture that would set me free to really search for love—the gesture that would allow me to love again. And so I left. And leaving felt good. I was never going to know love in that relationship.

The Sound of Footsteps, story included in the collection The Via Crucis of the Body

She was eighty-one years old. Her name was Mrs. Cândida Raposo.

Life made this old woman dizzy. The dizziness got worse whenever she spent a few days on a farm: the altitude, the green of the trees, the rain, they all made it worse. Whenever she listened to Liszt she got goose bumps all over. She'd been a beauty in her youth. And she got dizzy whenever she deeply inhaled the scent of a rose.

It so happened that for Mrs. Cândida Raposo the desire for pleasure didn't go away.

She finally mustered the great courage to see a gynecologist. And she asked him, ashamed, eyes downcast:

"When will it go away?"

"When will what go away, ma'am?"

"The thing."

"What thing?"

"The thing," she repeated. "The desire for pleasure," she finally said.

"Ma'am, I'm sorry to say it never goes away."

She stared at him in shock.

"But I'm eighty-one years old!"

"It doesn't matter, ma'am. It lasts until we die."

"But that's hell!"

"That's life, Mrs. Raposo."

So that was life, then? this shamelessness?

"So what am I supposed to do? no one wants me anymore . . ."

The doctor looked at her with compassion.

"There's no cure for it, ma'am."

"And what if I paid?"

"It wouldn't matter. You've got to remember, ma'am, you're eighty-one years old."

"And . . . and what if I took care of it myself? do you know what I mean?"

"Yes," said the doctor. "That might be a remedy."

Then she left the doctor's office. Her daughter was waiting down below, in the car. Cândida Raposo had lost a son in World War II, he was a soldier. She had this unbearable pain in her heart: that of surviving someone she loved.

That same night she found a way to satisfy herself on her own. Mute fireworks.

Afterward she cried. She was ashamed. From then on she'd use the same method. Always sad. That's life, Mrs. Raposo, that's life. Until the blessing of death.

Death.

She thought she heard the sound of footsteps. The footsteps of her husband Antenor Raposo.

Toni Morrison

The African American novelist Toni Morrison (1931-2019) delivered a powerful commencement speech to the Wellesley College Class of 2004. In it, she addressed the societal youth-obsession that privileges early life, neglecting the virtues, wisdom and joys that may come with life experience.



family with lots of great-grandmothers, grandmothers, great-aunts, aunts, daughters, and their children—I learned early that aging would be full of delight. Women around us talked about the prime of their life as though it was indeed the promised land. Like beautiful snakes, they were going to reach their prime, boldly shed their skin, and acquire another—this one more powerful and beautiful than all the rest. Something in them was going to be resurrected. They were going to be born again and have another chance. These were poor women born into a world without adequate birth control, a world where having an abortion could end one’s life, psychologically or physically. They were women who saw menopause as a rite of passage in which they would move from slavery to freedom. Until then they often felt trapped. This feeling of being trapped was one they shared with women across class. Even women who were solitary, celibate, and quite able to manage economically lived with the ever-present fearful possibility that all that could be changed by sexual coercion. In their world, once a woman was no longer able to bear children, she was just freer—midlife, the magic time. Oh, how I was filled with delight when I heard Mama and her friends carry on about the joys of “the change of life.” They never used the word “menopause.” How intuitively sensible! Had they taken to heart medical ways of defining shifts in midlife, they might have been forced to take on board the negative implications this word would bring—the heavy weight of loss it evokes. Instead they had their own special language. A subtle, seductive, mysterious, celebratory way of talking about changes in midlife emanated from them. Like a perfumed mist whose scent has followed and haunted me, it touches me now. I have arrived. I am receiving the signs. I am in the midst of change. To Mama, her friends, and lots of other women she would never know, the approach of midlife was exciting because it meant that they were no longer compelled to spend all their time taking care of others. They were finally to have time for themselves. The absence of free time—time spent doing nothing—had plagued them all their lives. And they looked forward to days when time would hang heavy on their hands. Days when they could think about play and rest and forget about work. Listening to Mama and her friends, I never thought about what



I wanted my life to be like in midlife; I just accepted on blind faith, with absolute trust, the conviction that it would be sweeter than it had been before. Even if the before was sweet, midlife would be sweeter still. I did not know then that midlife would also be a time to rethink everything I had learned about the nature of women and love. Most writing by women on midlife talks about menopause as though that’s the only “happening” event. Not true. There are so many happening events it’s hard to keep track of them all. From day one, when woman hit Earth, she has been the heartbeat of all happening events, except that most of those events were not arranged by her or for her pleasure. Much of what makes midlife magical for women now is that we are the ones making the arrangements— inventing our time and our way. For most of our lives women have followed the path of love set for us by patriarchal pathfinders. Despite our disappointments and heartaches, we have gone along with the program and accepted without challenge and critique the notion that love can exist in a context of domination. A feminist movement and many heartaches later, more women than ever before now know that love and domination do not go together—that if one is present, the other will be absent. For some of us this has caused more heartache. Since domination is still the primary order of the day, women, especially women who desire to be in partnerships with men, want to know how to love and be loved. That’s one of the big questions this book answers. When I first talked with women about writing this book, the most frequently asked question was whether or not love was as important to women in midlife as it was when we were younger. There are so many women I talked with who, like me, never thought about midlife, so many of us who thought we would be dead before the age of thirty. Our reasons for thinking this were rooted in tremendous fears about growing up, about becoming grown women. We wanted to be girls forever. As girls we felt we had power. We were strong and fierce and sure of ourselves. Somehow, as we made our entrance into the realm of young womanhood, we began to lose power. Fascinating research on girlhood is happening these days. It confirms that young girls often feel strong, courageous, highly creative, and powerful until they begin to receive undermining sexist messages that encourage them to conform to conventional notions of femininity.

Black American feminist bell hooks (1952-2021) wrote accessibly and powerfully about the intersections of gender, race and class, while exploring a broad variety of subjects including love, community, pedagogy and ageing. The following text is a chapter in her book 'Communion: the female search for love.'

Every day I talk to women about love and aging. It's an over-forty thing to do. The exciting news is this: Everyone agrees that aging is more fun than it has ever been before. It has its joys and delights. It also has its problems. What's new for many women is that the problems don't always get us down. And if they do, we don't stay down—we pick ourselves up and start over. This is part of the magic, the power and pleasure of midlife. Even though trashing feminism has become as commonplace as chatting about the weather, we all owe feminism, the women's liberation movement, women's lib—whatever you call it. It helped change how women see aging. Many of us feel better about aging because the old scripts that told us life ends at thirty or forty, that we turn into sexless zombies who bitch bitch bitch all the time and make everyone around us miserable were thrown away. So it does not matter that feminist movement has its faults—it helped everyone let these scripts go. And I do mean everyone. We have changed our ways of thinking about aging and we have changed our ways of thinking about love. When the world started changing for women because of feminist movement and a lot became more equal than it ever had been, for a time it was only women who had been allowed a taste of power—class privilege or education or extra-special-hard-to-ignore-gifts—who most “got it” and “got with it.” These women were among the feminist avantgarde. Often they had exceptional advantages or were overachievers. While feminism helped these women soar, it often failed to change in any way the lives of masses of ordinary women. Many advantages gained by women's lib did not trickle down, but the stuff around aging did. By challenging sexist ways of thinking about the body, feminism offered new standards of beauty, telling us plump bodies were luscious and big bellies sublime, that hair hanging under our arms and covering our legs was alluring. It created new possibilities of self-actualization in both our work lives and our intimate lives. As women have changed our minds about aging, no longer seeing it as negative, we have begun to think differently about the meaning of love in midlife. Beth Benatovich's collection of interviews *What We Know So Far: Wisdom Among Women*, offers powerful testimony affirming this fact. With prophetic insight, writer Erica Jong declares, “I believe that this is a moment of history in which we are engaged in a kind of spiritual revolution—the kind of revolution that creates pathfinders. . . . Older women are again being accorded their ancient role as prophetesses and advisors. . . . That's the great transformation that's happening again in our time. In looking to things other than the body beautiful for inspiration, we're being forced to redefine the second half of our lives, to become pathfinders.” Difficulties still abound for aging women. What's most changed is the constructive way women of all ages, classes, and ethnicities cope with these difficulties. Open, honest conversations about the myriad ways empty-nest syndrome, the death of parents or a spouse, and/or the deeply tragic death of a child all create psychological havoc in our lives have helped. Our talk of this suffering would be stale and commonplace, were it not for all the creative ways women are attending to the issue of aging both in midlife and in the postsixty years. The courage to choose adventure is the ingredient that exists in women's lives today that was there for most women before the contemporary feminist movement. Contrast the women who suffered breast cancer silently with the women today who speak out, who proudly and lovingly claim their bodies intact, whole, and beautiful after surgical removals. Poet Deena Metzger boldly proclaims the beauty of the one-breasted woman on a poster. Theorist Zillah Eisenstein tells all about breast cancer, her personal story, in *Man-made Breast Cancers*. In these ways women in midlife are changing the world. In the exciting world of women I was raised in—an extended

I'm sure you have been told that this is the best time of your life. It may be. But if it's true that this is the best time of your life, if you have already lived or are now living at this age the best years, or if the next few turn out to be the best, then you have my condolences. Because you'll want to remain here, stuck in these so-called best years, never maturing, wanting only to look, to feel and be the adolescent that whole industries are devoted to forcing you to remain. One more flawless article of clothing, one more elaborate toy, the truly perfect diet, the harmless but necessary drug, the almost final elective surgery, the ultimate cosmetic—all designed to maintain hunger for stasis. While children are being eroticized into adults, adults are being exoticized into eternal juvenilia. I know that happiness has been the real, if covert, target of your labors here, your choices of companions, of the profession that you will enter. You deserve it and I want you to gain it, everybody should. But if that's all you have on your mind, then you do have my sympathy, and if these are indeed the best years of your life, you do have my condolences because there is nothing, believe me, more satisfying, more gratifying than true adulthood. The adulthood that is the span of life before you. The process of becoming one is not inevitable. Its achievement is a difficult beauty, an intensely hard won glory, which commercial forces and cultural vapidty should not be permitted to deprive you of. (...)

Of course, you're general, but you're also specific. A citizen and a person, and the person you are is like nobody else on the planet. Nobody has the exact memory that you have. What is now known is not all what you are capable of knowing. You are your own stories and therefore free to imagine and experience what it means to be human without wealth. What it feels like to be human without domination over others, without reckless arrogance, without fear of others unlike you, without rotating, rehearsing and reinventing the hatreds you learned in the sandbox. And although you don't have complete control over the narrative (no author does, I can tell you), you could nevertheless create it.

Although you will never fully know or successfully manipulate the characters who surface or disrupt your plot, you can respect the ones who do by paying them close attention and doing them justice. The theme you choose may change or simply elude you, but being your own story means you can always choose the tone. It also means that you can invent the language to say who you are and what you mean. But then, I am a teller of stories and therefore an optimist, a believer in the ethical bend of the human heart, a believer in the mind's disgust with fraud and its appetite for truth, a believer in the ferocity of beauty. So, from my point of view, which is that of a storyteller, I see your life as already artful, waiting, just waiting and ready for you to make it art.

Mostly known for her short stories, poetry and political activism, the North-American Grace Paley (1922-2007) wrote about the confrontation of being perceived as an older woman in 'Just as I Thought'. Later in life, in her eighties, she came back to the subject and wrote about her father's determination in teaching her how to grow old.

A couple of years ago a small boy yelled out as he threw a ball to a smaller boy standing near me, "Hey, dummy, tell that old lady to watch out."

What? What lady? Old? I'm not vain or unrealistic. For the last twenty years my mirror seems to have reflected — correctly — a woman getting older, not a woman old. Therefore, I took a couple of the hops, skips, and jumps my head is accustomed to making and began to write what would probably become a story. The first sentence is: "That year all the boys on my block were sixty-seven."

Then I was busy and my disposition, which tends to crude optimism anyway, changed the subject. Also, my sister would call, and from time to time she'd say, "Can you believe it? I'm almost seventy-eight. And Vic is going on eighty. Can you believe it?" No, I couldn't believe it, and neither could anyone who talked to them or saw them. They've always been about fifteen years older than I, and still were. With such a sister and brother preceding me, it would seem bad manners to become old. My aging (the aging of the youngest) must seem awfully pushy to them.

I returned to my work and was able to write the next sentence of what may still become a story: "Two years later, two of the boys had died and my husband said, 'Well, I'd better take this old-age business a little more seriously.'"

You may begin to notice that you're invisible. Especially if you're short and gray-haired. But I say to whom? And so what? All the best minorities have suffered that and are rising nowadays in the joy of righteous wrath.

You are expected to forget words or names, and you do. You may look up at the ceiling. People don't like this. They may say, "Oh come on, you're not listening." You're actually trying to remember their names.

While he could still make explanations, my father explained to me that the little brain twigs, along with other damp parts of the body, dry up, but that there is still an infinity of synaptic opportunities in the brain. If you forget the word for peach ("A wonderful fruit," he said), you can make other pathways for the peach picture. You can attach it to another word or context, which will then return you to the word "peach," such as "What a peachy friend," or springtime and peach blossoms. This is valuable advice, by the way. It works. Even if you're only thirty, write it down for later.

Upstaging Time

Grace Paley



MANIFESTO:

We demand recognition of our grace which has been hard won over many years on contested ground, not handed to us by approval.

We share and recognise our debt to each other.

We reject an art market capitalising on the myth of uniqueness and narratives of the singular heroic figure, with traction and trend dominated by the cult of youth and warped notions of beauty.

We intend to rupture the symbolic from within, and borrow from the saboteurs of the big daddy mainframe.

We demand the abjuration of male-controlled and imperialist systems of oppression which we understand as exploiting women for labour and demeaning our grace.

We hold violence in contempt.

We hold deliberate ignorance and narrow horizons in contempt.

We hold patriarchal geo-political justifications for greed and power in contempt.

We hold the laws of our fore-fathers and current tyrants which renders a person illegal or deserving of poverty, in contempt.

We demand vegetables, tenderness and trust.

We demand clean water and poetry.

We demand blankets, dappled light and a woman's right to choose.

We demand mechanisms to grace and protect feminist liberties.

We demand pluralism, promotion of ideas and innovative methods to break the monopoly enjoyed by patriarchs and messianic preachers of cultural orthodoxies.

We demand an understanding of life as a truly communitarian experience and expect a population that is respectful of older women as infinitely precious and possessed of capacities for reason, art and love.

Therefore:

We demand the revocation of all contracts for military purposes, and a total ban on the use of fossil fuels. We demand sustainable agriculture, a comprehensive re-nationalisation of our public health and social care, education and transport systems and all other commonly held necessary structures. We demand rigorously implemented, loophole free, fair and progressive taxation to pay for the well-being of all – according to need and awarded with grace.

AND WE DEMAND our rightful place in the aesthetic values of our culture, securing and ensuring the recognition that we are exquisite, beguiling and learned, for ourselves, for each other, and for all to see.

Signed:

GRACE GRACE GRACE

KM for GGG with acknowledgement to Valerie Solanas, Mary Wollstonecraft, VNS Matrix et al.

The art collective GRACE GRACE GRACE denounces ageism, sexism and femicide against older women through protest actions, playful performances and powerful manifestos. They reclaim the identity "old" for women, which is still a taboo and an unwanted label.

Grace Grace Grace



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My father had decided to teach me how to grow old. I said O.K. My children didn't think it was such a great idea. If I knew how, they thought, I might do so too easily. No, no, I said, it's for later, years from now. And besides, if I get it right it might be helpful to you kids in time to come.

They said, Really?

My father wanted to begin as soon as possible.

Please sit down, he said. Be patient. The main thing is this — when you get up in the morning you must take your heart in your two hands. You must do this every morning.

That's a metaphor, right?

Metaphor? No, no, you can do this. In the morning, do a few little exercises for the joints, not too much. Then put your hands like a cup over and under the heart. Under the breast. He said tactfully. It's probably easier for a man. Then talk softly, don't yell. Under your ribs, push a little. When you wake up, you must do this massage. I mean pat, stroke a little, don't be ashamed. Very likely no one will be watching. Then you must talk to your heart.

Talk? What?

Say anything, but be respectful. Say — maybe say, Heart, little heart, beat softly but never forget your job, the blood. You can whisper also, Remember, remember.

My Father Addresses me on the facts of old age

May Sarton

The writing of Belgian-American poet, novelist and memoirist May Sarton (1912-1995) is filled with erotic female imagery. In later life, she wrote a journal where she explored the physical and social challenges of old age, as well as the passionate friendships and love she shared with other women.

At eighty two: a journal

Saturday, July 31, 1993

Today A remarkable letter from Cathy Sander, the Wellesley student who was hired by Eleanor Blair to do odd jobs and became deeply involved and caring in the last two years. There is something so touching about that relationship between an eighteen-year-old and a ninety-six-year-old woman, blind and quite deaf, living alone, coming to the end of her strength. Cathy says in her letter:

"You know, May, the most giving relationship I've had my entire life was with Eleanor. I always felt so loved when I was with her. Eleanor really taught me how to love, to give of myself without asking in return, to love because love is beautiful not because I want love in return. Our love for each other just seemed to flow, giving and taking in turn. The hours I spent with her were among the best times in my life. Nothing was expected. Nothing was taken that was not offered." Otherwise a rather dim day here, humid and foggy. I'm packing up copies of Encore for friends, and it is fun but tires me. However, I did manage to write Cathy right away, an imperative.



Girl, Woman, Other

Amma takes a sip of her Americano with its customary kick-starter extra shot in it as she approaches the Brutalist grey arts complex ahead at least they try to enliven the bunker-like concrete with neon light displays these days and the venue has a reputation for being progressive rather than traditionalist

years ago she expected to be evicted as soon as she dared walk through its doors, a time when people really did wear their smartest clothes to go to the theatre

and looked down their noses at those not in the proper attire she wants people to bring their curiosity to her plays, doesn't give a damn what they wear, has her own sod-you style, anyway, which has evolved, it's true, away from the clichéd denim dungarees, Che Guevara beret, PLO scarf and ever-present badge of two interlocked female symbols (talk about wearing your heart on your sleeve, girl)

these days she wears silver or gold trainers in winter, failsafe Birkies in summer

winter, it's black slacks, either baggy or tight depending on whether she's a size 12 or 14 that week (a size smaller on top)

summer, it's patterned harem pants that end just below the knee

winter, it's bright asymmetric shirts, jumpers, jackets, coats year-round her peroxide dreadlocks are trained to stick up like candles on a birthday cake

silver hoop earrings, chunky African bangles and pink lipstick are her perennial signature style statement

Yazz

recently described her style as 'a mad old woman look, Mum', pleads with her to shop in Marks & Spencer like normal mothers, refuses to be spotted alongside her when they're supposed to be walking down the street together

Yazz knows full well that Amma will always be anything but normal, and as she's in her fifties, she's not old yet, although try telling that to a nineteen-year-old; in any case, ageing is nothing to be ashamed of especially when the entire human race is in it together

although sometimes it seems that she alone among her friends wants to celebrate getting older because it's such a privilege to not die prematurely, she tells them as the night draws in around her kitchen table in her cosy terraced house in Brixton

as they get stuck into the dishes each one has brought: chickpea stew, jerk chicken, Greek salad, lentil curry, roasted vegetables, Moroccan lamb, saffron rice, beetroot and kale salad, jollof quinoa and gluten-free pasta for the really irritating fusspots

as they pour themselves glasses of wine, vodka (fewer calories), or something more liver-friendly if under doctor's orders

she expects them to approve of her bucking the trend of middle-aged moaning; instead she gets bemused smiles and what about arthritic flare-ups, memory loss and hot sweats?

Bernadine Evaristo

Girl, woman, other, written by British author Bernadine Evaristo (1959) follows the lives of twelve characters in the UK through the course of several decades. One of them, Amma, decorates herself with an exuberant style which is not always of the liking of her daughter Yazz, who calls it a “mad old woman look”.



Saturday, August 7, 1993

I have begun this journal at a time of difficult transition because I am now entering real old age. At seventy-five I felt much more able than I do now. Forgetting where things are, forgetting names even of friends, names of flowers (I could not remember calendula the other day), what I had thought of writing here in the middle of the night—forgetting so much makes me feel disoriented sometimes and also slows me up. How to deal with continual frustration about small things like trying to button my shirt, and big things like how to try for a few more poems. That is my problem.

It does help to keep this journal; it forces me to be alive to challenge and to possibility. I want to learn to walk again with Pierrot, who precedes me, tail in air and meowing for fear that we are getting lost, but “the walk” makes a circle and when he realizes we are home, he runs very fast and leaps up the stone steps to the terrace, a magnificent sight for me, who plod slowly on a single path toward the lawn.

Monday, August 1, 1994

Ronnie Carpenter-Healy’s Christmas present, to do for me some task that needed doing, is surely the best present I have ever been given. I thought of a few things such as cleaning the bird feeder, sweeping the garage, but nothing seemed special enough. Why must it be special? A real challenge. When I came up with cleaning the attic, which I was sure was a fire hazard, I knew that was it, for I shall never do it myself. But I was a little shy of asking. When I did ask Ronnie, she said at once that Jim, her husband, would help and they would bring their truck—why had I imagined such a difficult task as somehow worthy!

So many people offer to help by gardening for me, for instance, offer to serve in some generous way or another, and always I am amazed. How is it that I have acquired so many friends who have never met me yet offer to pull weeds? I feel overwhelmed until I come to see, over and over again, that they want to help me in any way they can as my books and especially the journals have helped them. They are thanking me.

Most who write are women, women of all ages and backgrounds. It is always a thrill to find a letter from North Dakota, for instance, or New Zealand. The people I hear from, from children to the very old, are celebrating their discovery of a writer they consider a friend. They feel free to become themselves because I have done so. What a wonderful reward such letters are!

Yet what have I said? An old woman living alone writes poems, cooks up a supper of asparagus on toast with hard-boiled eggs, a woman who is often depressed but has learned how minds change and how to handle the down in weeks or months. Still, I am aware that very few solitary women of eighty-two who live alone are as lucky as I am, surrounded by lovingkindness. How did it ever happen to this old raccoon!

And now, the combination of slightly cooler weather and my being slightly better should be rousing. With that hope I close this eighty-second that they want to help me in any way they can as my books and especially the journals have helped them. They are thanking me.

The North-American science fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018) used the flexibility of the medium to explore social injustice, engaging with gender, race, class and power. In her 1976 essay 'The space crone', she questions the primacy of young men as social representatives and reclaims the wisdom and human value of older women.

On being a man

"I am not sure that anybody has invented old women yet; but it might be worth trying."

Ursula K. Le Guin

