

The 'Golden' Years

By Jeanette Urbas

September days are here. The turning of the seasons. I am in the grip of an uneasiness that is more than the uncertainty generated by change in the external world. More than a regret for the passage of summer; long, hot days overtaken in the race of time by cool, fleeting ones. The leaves have not yet begun to fall; but they are already falling in my heart. I identify the emotion that invades me: it is fear — the fear of my self becoming a prematurely bare tree, exposing naked, pleading arms to winter. This is the first time in many years that I have not returned to the classroom right after Labour Day. The college where I have worked up until now will not have me any longer. I have been made to retire.

Can I ever forget the turmoil of the week at the end of summer when I cleared my books off the shelves and started to pack them in cardboard boxes obtained from the college bookstore? I tried to maintain a semblance of order: French books in one box, English in another, business texts in a third. But they kept getting mixed up, as if responding to the confusion and resentment in my mind. A mechanical self went through the routine procedure while the real self stood by and watched, alone and distraught. How would I manage...? How would I...?

When the work was done I could not bear to look at the stripped shelves, hollow spaces restored to emptiness now that I had removed all vestiges of accumulated thought and love.

I no longer had the heart to sort out my files before packing, as planned. Marking papers or planning courses at my desk was one thing, but sitting there for hours sifting through materials as superfluous as I had become — I tumbled them pell-mell into boxes, along with a pile of letters and memos, some commending my contribution to the college, some requesting a postponement of retirement, humble messengers whose appeal went unheeded.

On Friday afternoon before leaving I stared helplessly at the dismantled office. The barren shelves, the abnormally tidy desk, the empty drawers, already registered my absence. I turned my back on the familiar setting and locked the door for the last time. Then I did a curious thing. I should have turned in the key to the chairman whose office was just down the hall but — consciously, unconsciously? — I left it dangling on the key chain. It is still there, an item in the museum of my past.

Labour Day has come and gone. It is as if a giant hand has lifted me bodily and evicted me from my home. On the surface everything appears the same. Yet in reality everything is totally, irretrievably different. Underneath my calm exterior there is a steady suffering and the inevitable fear — fear of loneliness; fear of endless, vacant hours; fear of uselessness. Now that the alarm is no longer set to get me up in time, will I even want to get up in the morning? Fear is the deadliest companion in the world. Fear and the disruption of long-established work habits.

The terrifying aspect of the whole experience is that it is internal. My anguish does not call attention to itself. As far as the world is concerned, it does not even exist. If I had a fatal illness its ravages would show and I would get heartfelt expressions of sympathy. If I had a fit of madness and banged incessantly on walls or threw myself in desperation on the hard floor, I would command notice. But my situation is insidious, undramatic. That makes it harder to bear, for pain seeks acknowledgment of its presence. Above all, it is unjust.

My retirement is not related to my ability to perform. All the individuals I approached in my attempt to be allowed to work beyond the age of sixty-five freely admitted that I was a good teacher, even an exceptional one. They praised my skills and my rapport with the students. I am also in good health. These considerations made no difference: they were adamant that I must retire. It is the law and law gives them right and power. But other, more subtle factors operate as well. We were two irreconcilable opponents. Our discussions were amicable enough; we did not pull knives or wrestle one another to the ground, but the chasm between us was too wide and deep to bridge.

My arguments were solidly based on humane reasoning. Sixty-five is an arbitrary figure pulled out of the social hat at someone's whim. I love my work; I'm good at it. Why shouldn't I be allowed to continue making my contribution to society as long as I feel able? If I were jaded, my patience worn out and my nerves drawn taut, it would be another matter. Not only can I function as a teacher. I am still involved in research; my mind is open to new ideas. I am not old in the sense that the word "retirement" suggests. I am not yet ready to be put on the shelf as a marginal person. My work is a vital part of my being. To eliminate it is a form of malpractice, like cutting out a healthy organ.

In this operation there are psychological side-effects as well. Gone are the right to decide, the feeling that I control my life and can determine its direction. That has been taken out of my hands now that I have been told what to do. There is a strong, undermining current in this form of authority. An undemocratic shove into oblivion. By implication, I am no longer a thinking person of judgment, capable of arriving at solutions on the basis of evidence.

It is a throwback to childhood, when others, bigger and wiser than myself, laid down the rules and had the last word. But since I am not a child, have not been one for many years, I resent being treated like one. I did not feel old when I turned sixty-five, but actions like this are calculated to change this perception of myself, to make me more hesitant, more cautious. Young children tend to live up to the image that adults project of them: the "bad" boy continues to be "bad" because it is expected of him. The same mechanism is at work here; on retirement people grow

old because the two states are synonymous in the public mind.

My arguments are logical. Some of my opponents at the college even agreed, privately, with me. "But" — they added. It is a very big "but." Their arguments, they claim, are practical and hard-nosed. They pull long faces and ask me, in solemn concern, what will happen to the young people who are graduating from university and are unable to find employment? Where are jobs going to come from if oldsters like me insist on staying on? Must they wait on the sidelines, a pool of unused energy, because older people, who have already had years of employment, stubbornly refuse to make room for them?

At first glance this argument seems difficult to refute. It appears to be supported by the natural cycle of life — youth moves into old age, then the old disappear to make way for a new wave of youth. In our society we are all drawn to the young. We give them priority in our advertisements. Youth is depicted as the privileged and desirable time of life. I, too, sympathize with the young. I have been teaching them for years. My own children are part of that work force continually threatened by unemployment and frustration.

Still, I detect a fallacy in the way the issue is being presented. Youth and age should not be sparring partners; they are links in a chain of continuity. Society is responsible for meeting the needs of both, not pitting one against the other. Unemployment exists on such a massive scale for the young that compulsory retirement

by itself is not going to solve the problem. The government has an obligation to respect the rights of both generations.

Besides, it does not follow that all workers beyond the age of sixty-five automatically refuse to retire. The choice is a highly personal one, dependent on a variety of factors: financial stability, years of service, the desire to pursue avocations before it is too late, health, and so on. A number of individuals opt without coercion for early retirement.

Behind the insistence that I must yield to a younger person is another, more cogent argument. In my talks I heard behind the words the loud clink of hard cash in the coffers of institutions and enterprises. On more than one occasion I was reminded that my replacement would cost much less money. A salary scale is adjusted to experience and seniority; at age sixty-five I am up near the top. Jane Beginner, just out of graduate school, with little or no experience, will be at the bottom. That spread, in which the dollar bills crackle and crumple, is now my undoing. The years I have devoted to developing my understanding, to honing my skills, are no longer an asset; they are a handicap. I have become too expensive because I am too qualified. I am a commodity that the educational market needs more desperately than ever in human terms but which it claims it cannot afford. In this area of compulsory retirement one contradiction follows on the heels of another.

Retirement falls particularly heavily on me because I am a woman. Though I

worked pretty well steadily through all the years of child-bearing and child-rearing, most of that work was part-time. This meant it was not very remunerative and there were no fringe benefits, no opportunity to build up a pension fund. None of this seemed important to me then; I was young and an undefined number of years stretched ahead of me into infinity. Besides, any woman who works, runs a household and raises a family at the same time is far too busy to see beyond the needs of the immediate moment. She is relieved just to be able to juggle her various responsibilities with a semblance of efficiency. The consequences of such a work pattern, all too common for women, do not become evident until much later.

My present job, or I should say, the one from which I have been evicted, was the longest in my fragmented work career. I have been with the college for fifteen years. However, for more than half of this period, I was employed part-time because there was a freeze on hiring and no new tenured appointments were being made in my division. I had a foot in the door and there the foot stayed precariously for over eight years, one semester at a time, in constant danger of being dislodged. When the door finally opened to permit me to enter as a full partner I was already sixty. Five years is not enough time to build a sizeable pension, as the Personnel Office has already informed me.

I am afraid and the fear grows in me as circumstances conspire to turn me into a marginal person. Deprived of paid employment, I am already on the fringe of the normal, shunted from the mainstream. Financially restricted, I am made to feel inadequate in a society that entices everyone to buy and indulge. Every time I have to count pennies, every time I decide not to purchase, I become aware of my insufficiency. In addition, I am defined as old in a culture that worships youth and caters to it. Three strikes against me would seem to be enough. But there is yet another.

I am a widow. My husband died soon after I finally achieved full-time employment. We can no longer pool our resources as we once did. I have to sink or swim on my own. The loss is more than financial; it even goes beyond the personal and the emotional. In our society a woman is always better received when she is attached to a man. Social intercourse is arranged to exclude the single woman. Not in an obvious way. There are



Louise Z. Francke, *Companions*, 1991, oil/linen, 11.25" x 15.25"

no signs posted which state: "Single Women — Keep Out!" The exclusion is subtle and practised, often unconsciously, by friends who consider themselves broad-minded and above petty forms of discrimination. Is it because women invest so much of their time and emotional energy in their relationships with men? Whatever the reasons, I sense that I am now less desirable than I was before. The irony is that I should be more in demand; the time and energy I once devoted to my marriage have been diverted into developing and improving myself as a person.

I am no exception; my case is the rule for so many women in my age bracket. Statistics indicate this, but until recently I did not identify with them. Now the numbers have acquired human faces. They are people with grey hair, some of them frail and stooped, many of them poor and alone, still reeling from the multiple blows life has dealt them. They all know my fear.

Some chastise me, saying it is wrong to be so puffed up with self-pity. They cite the many possibilities that exist for enriching retirement. These can become golden years of relaxation and enjoyment, "the last of life for which the first was made." I reject these clichés. They may hold true for some, but they do not apply to others. My resistance stems from a hard core of resentment: I was not permitted to *choose* the time and place to embark on this new phase of my life. Retirement is a major adjustment, a complete break with past organization. It should be mine completely, determined by me, planned by me. Then I could approach it with zest and enthusiasm — as if it were truly a new voyage of discovery.

Instead, I am grounded in still, shallow waters, tugging at the restraining anchor in my desire to ride the high seas again. I could not choose the date of my birth, nor am I able to determine when I will die. Surely I have the right to choose the date of my retirement. Must it have the same inevitability as the other two?

Jeannette Urbas is a specialist in French-Canadian literature, who teaches part-time in the Women's Studies Program at Glendon College. The goal of her present research is to produce an anthology of the personal writings of French-Canadian women outside Quebec, using excerpts from their letters, autobiographies, diaries, etc. She is also interested in Hispano-American women.

ANNE MARRIOTT

Exit

(The natural earth
scares us with metaphors
we pave them out of sight
inventing more
more obvious)

Never clearly marked
it differs with the maps
fingering off from the highway suddenly.
A driver ahead is drawn away
before he has time to signal
is out of sight in seconds.
We speculate as to where he may have gone
the possible nature of the territory.

More uncertain sights are coming up.
We switch lanes quickly
putting more space between
us and an undesired turnoff
making a barrier
if only of air.

We have a long way
(we believe)
to go yet.

(from *Aqua*, Wolsak and Wynn, 1991)

MARGARET RODGERS

Hard Currency

The days fall away like
ripe plums.
September gold
Is spent lavishly
Then:
the largesse gives way
to iron cold
steel gray
unforgiving
frugal
winter.
My days



Women Against Osteoporosis

Women Against Osteoporosis is an organization of people concerned with this crippling disease that affects one out of every four women. It was first formed by a group of Toronto patients to generate funds for research, increase public awareness and offer support to fellow patients.

Osteoporosis is a disease that causes normal bone to become porous or brittle, resulting in fractures of the vertebrae, hip, wrist or rib. It is usually not noticed until after fifty years of age, but the "Silent Thief" may appear earlier.



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(Please detach this portion and mail with your cheque to the address shown below)

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58 ROSSANDER COURT,
SCARBOROUGH, ONTARIO
M1J 2B7

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