8 A Glut of Slippers

The Chronotope of Older Age in the Contemporary North American Short Story

Elizabeth Barry

The subjective experience of advanced old age is overshadowed – whether the shadow cast is felt negatively or not – by the sense of imminent ending. Wilma, the protagonist of Margaret Atwood’s short story “Torching the Dusties,” contrasts her residential home with a “maternity hospital:” “About the opposite, she thinks caustically: it’s an exit from life, not an entrance” (238). One’s sense of time constitutively changes in this period of life. And so there is, in this respect, a particularly good fit between this changed apprehension of time and the short story form. Mikhail Bakhtin observed that every genre is defined by its chronotope, generic conventions that disclose the “intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). In this respect, the short story as a genre is particularly well placed, as Rachel Falconer has argued in a different context, to “capture [the] sense of time foreshortened, or already run out” (699) that habitually attends the cultural understanding – and to some extent the lived experience – of advanced old age.

Falconer is not talking explicitly about age here, but the apocalyptic sensibility that attended the millennium – and arguably is even more prevalent since then, in the wake of a financial crash and at a catastrophic tipping point in relation to climate change (not to mention, most recently, a global pandemic). The short story is already primed by its very form to “net” what Falconer calls “our culture’s apocalyptic sense of impending crisis” (699). And this culture figures old age as part of the crisis, invoking the “grey tsunami” of boomer retirees and their expensive care needs. The contemporary short story has responded accordingly, making a direct connection between this sense of time in older age and the widespread cultural sense of foreshortened horizons. In one of the short stories this chapter will consider, John Barth’s “Peeping Tom,” the ageing narrator aligns his perspective on contemporary society with the internalised perception of the prospects of his age group: the world going “downhill, at least on balance, despite there having been no world wars lately. Nor are we-all what we used to be, either” (Barth 6). In all of the literary examples I will consider – Barth’s 2008 short story collection

The Development, in which “Peeping Tom” features; Margaret Atwood’s 2014 story “Torching the Dusties;” and Joy Williams’ 2016 “Stuff” – the form of the short story converges with the sense of ending encountered in old age and a contemporary sensibility in which temporal horizons are foreshortened by the threat of economic and environmental disaster. In Falconer’s words, “generic chronotope and contemporary Western time sense” – and to these we might add a seemingly bleak perception of old age – “converge upon a shared premise that [in the words of Melissa Clark (153)] ‘time and space are condemned entities’” (706).

Our expectations, then, of these stories might well tend towards the dystopian. The idea that life has all but already ended in older age is both symbolised and exacerbated by the confined, controlled and marginalised locales to which older people are consigned. The old people’s home in the popular imagination is seen as an institution tending more towards an archetype of prison than any recognisable definition of “home.” Dystopia is often identified, as Urzula Terentowicz-Fotyga has argued, with the destruction of privacy, “a critical representation of different forms of communal living and the ubiquity of surveillance systems” (17), all of which are also seen to characterise representations of care homes or security-conscious retirement communities (with a vested interest in policing those distracted residents who might wander, as well as those who might intrude and prey on vulnerable inhabitants). Barth’s narrator, Tim Manning, remarks upon the incongruity of “round-the-clock gatekeepers” and “phone-ahead clearance for visitors” in his low-crime area (5), but deals from the opening story onwards with the heightened sense of risk that older age itself can confer. Care home stories, as Sally Chivers and Ulla Krieburnegg have observed, can take the form of jailbreak narratives: uplifting tales, but at the same time narratives of individual freedom versus institutional control that leave the negative associations of care homes intact. And the world of these stories is likewise no utopia; there is little faith in the future in an environment showing the signs of decline and even imminent collapse. Old age seems to serve in this context as a metaphor for a contemporary society on the brink of financial implosion or environmental extinction. When we pick up a care home story by Margaret Atwood, in particular, what else could we expect?

Yet what emerges in these stories is a counter-intuitive distance between the older protagonists and the fate of their ageing world. They find a means to defy expectations of their life stage and retain agency and self-possession. Not only this, however, but if the “homes” that they inhabit are far from the positive archetype of “home,” this distance can in some respects be a liberating one. Even the apprehension of the end being near can galvanise as well as disillusion. Terentowicz-Fotyga has argued that “dystopian society either discourages or firmly forbids the forms of social interactions that might promote privacy, intimacy and individualism”

(17), qualities that are likewise seen to be negated by the managed spaces and intrusive personal care of the assisted living facility. The fiction in question, however, presents a variety of kinds of intimacy developing rather than declining in such environments, and in relation to an experience of crisis, and thereby offers a more nuanced understanding than might be envisaged of the life possible in “elder” spaces.

Space, Time and Genre in Stories of Older Age

The geographical and institutional silos in which advanced older age often finds itself “contained” – the nursing home, the assisted living facility, the retirement community – are often perceived, in Simon Biggs’ words, to have been “charged to manage the difficulties circumscribed within” (147). Glenda Laws has examined the relationship between age and space, observing the factors determining and limiting the space occupied by older people: namely, accessibility, mobility, motility (how far we can move), scale (how far we are allowed to move) and segregation. As we age, we are confined to a “discrete location,” whereas “youth,” in contrast, “is everywhere” (Laws 93, 91; cited in Snaith 125). Helen Snaith, reading Atwood’s story “Torching the Dusties” in line with Laws’ ideas, observes that it is easier for the young to (literally) besiege and attack older people in that dystopian story because of the latter’s concentration and static location in care homes (124).

The discrete locations of older-age care as they are described in these stories are not only an indictment of the marginalisation of older people, however, but also the occasion for a particular aesthetics that makes creative play with the tensions between inside and outside, private and public, care and control. I read these spaces here in line with the logic of Mikhail Bakhtin’s *chronotope*, which as noted earlier is a feature of narrative that brings time and space into explicit relations; where, in Bakhtin’s words, time “thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible” (84). The spaces of the stories in question institute and impose their own temporal laws and rhythms. They are often the starting point for a reimagining of older age allowing for a critique of structurally ageist practices, “an optic,” in Bakhtin’s words, “for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring” (427). In these particular narratives, however, they also have the potential to be a subversive world-within-a-world.

Perhaps the chronotope most often invoked as the archetypal locus of time and space is the *home*, and it is this concept that will be a focus for the discussion. I also want to follow one of the most well-known applications of Bakhtin’s idea: that in the film studies work of Vivian Sobchack. Her reading of locations in *film noir* and *neo-noir*, in connection with (or more often contradistinction to) the idea of home, serves as a model for reading the care home and the retirement development in this chapter. In

her classic essay on the chronotope in film, "Lounge Time," Sobchack talks of the "material premises" of *film noir* (130). It isn't clear whether or not the pun is intended, but it serves her argument and ours. The physical premises – the built environments of *film noir*, the "non-places" of transient social interaction (the cocktail bar, the hotel room, the boarding house, the bus or train station) – are also the logical premises for the narrative operation of *noir* storylines: the basis for the operation of spatial and temporal coincidence or disjunction, and the luck or misfortune these chance encounters or missed encounters represent.

What, then, if we think of care settings and retirement communities in a similar way? They are ostensibly places of stasis rather than movement: for some residents, at least, the interaction will effectively be one-way, an arrival without a departure. In one sense, then, this residence is permanent, none more so. In another, of course, it is the definition of transient. These are the waiting rooms for *le grand départ*. Like Sobchack's transient environments, they too represent a kind of limbo, characterised by generic institutional rooms and relationships that begin, at least, through no more than physical contiguity and temporal coincidence, "real" family relegated to the status of visitor. Sobchack describes the dissonant relationship between bars and hotel rooms and the chronotope of "home:" both provide food, shelter and a resting place, but in the former locales, these are only fractured and alienated substitutes for the "nurturant functions" of home (156–67). Even more pointed, of course, is the uncanny disjunction between the nurturant functions of the care "home" and the (forsaken) environment that one once called home.

It might seem an unlikely comparison, but the dystopian spaces, dark humour and often terse and ironic style of the contemporary American short stories of old age can be seen to negotiate space and its relationship with time in ways comparable with the *film noir* of Sobchack's argument. Both deal in environments that represent a kind of "non-space" that denies their inhabitants existential agency or fulfilment. Dana Polan in *Power and Paranoia* coins the idea of a "negative existentialism" (Polan 208 qtd. in Sobchack 138), observing that in American films of the 1940s, "environments . . . don't reflect back to a character his/her personality or values – that is, his/her freedom to shape externality according to individual desire – but, quite the contrary, rather demonstrate the radical externality and even resistance of environment to the imprinting of a self upon environment" (Polan 253 qtd. in Sobchack 138). The care home room, and its curation by the institution's staff, can also be seen to be a space particularly obdurate in its resistance to the imprint of the self. In Joy Williams' "Stuff," the care home where the protagonist Henry's mother lives puts stock photographs of generic "happy families" in the photo frames that decorate the rooms, in place of the residents' own families (par. 27). This simulacrum of family is intended to ward off suicidal thoughts: either the cognitively challenged resident will not

distinguish these photogenic figures from her own family, the thinking seems to run – or if she does, the photos will serve as a form of minimal company. The rupture with the idea of home as an extension of self is exacerbated in this story by the fact that Henry's mother, along with a number of other residents of the generically named "Ambiance" home, lost their original possessions in a catastrophic flood at their former care home. This disaster precipitated the current move and has meant that the space of their new institution is a kind of *tabula rasa* which they are unable to furnish with a link to the past, let alone the future. The name "Ambiance" itself is suitably an empty signifier which reinforces the impression of a perpetual present, a free-floating atmosphere that has to be constantly refreshed rather than having an organic relationship to past memories or future projects. In the home, or at least the idyllic archetype of the American home, quotidian functions such as sleeping, eating and drinking "are secured and transfigured into intimate social communion" (Sobchack 138); in the *care* home, they can be routinised, rendered "public" and remain *only* functional.

The cocktail lounge or hotel room, furthermore, "spatially rend and break up the home – and, correlatively, family contiguity and generational continuity" (Sobchack 158). The same can be said for care homes – the eating, drinking and sleeping functions are more contiguous than in the streets of late *noir* (or the strip malls seen in more contemporary cinema) but less than in the home proper. Wilma, Margaret Atwood's protagonist in her story "Torching the Dusties," prepares her own breakfast in her "kitchenette" at Ambrosia Manor. As Biggs observes of space in care homes, there is a "degree of privacy and autonomy" (147) here, while it remains – as Helen Snaith comments – also "safe space" (122) for the increasingly vulnerable Wilma. She has a degree of autonomy, but this is far from home territory. The "dry breakfast cereals" (Atwood 232) are provided for her, and she is at the mercy of the limited and institutional provisions – Tobias, for whom she makes breakfast, laments the lack of croissants. Other meals are taken in the communal dining room, residents guarding their share of the best bread rolls. Wilma's assistant, Katia, is somewhere between a domestic servant, a care assistant and a hotel chambermaid: the chocolates left on the residents' pillows ("it's the details that differentiate Ambrosia Manor from its rivals, said the brochure" [Atwood 253]) allow them to appreciate the luxury of their circumstances, but also remind them that this is far from being a true home.

Time is also a factor in Polan's "negative existentialism." He argues that "if the *project* (to use the existentialists' term) is a narrative activity through which human beings work to come to terms with an environment and make it their own," the environment of a *film noir* can be a "disruption, subversion, dispersion of projects," representing the gap between an enduring "intention" and the abandoned or foiled "realization" (209). In care home narratives, there are few projects in evidence.

Time is almost always felt, it appears, in relation to an imminent end which makes any sustained existential project futile. Just as leisure in *noir* is reframed as idleness, waiting and underemployment (Sobchack 158), in the absence or frustration of a *project*, activities and even socialising in care settings can be experienced as filling time or manufacturing a sense of purpose that can only feel contrived. In “Torching the Dusties,” Wilma reflects acerbically on the role of the therapist Shoshanna and “the finger-painting or pasta necklace making” she has “cooked up to give them all a reason for staying on the planet for another sunrise” (Atwood 243). It is not so much that life is felt to be uneventful, but that the one big event on the horizon will serve to terminate it. Life in this last phase is also often framed in terms of losses – of friendships, of responsibilities, of functions. Finally, this period can be seen in terms of *risk*. While the care home is designed to minimise risk, this very preoccupation forces attention to it. Every day can seem an exercise in short-term goals – the evasion of accident, over-exertion or simply the bad luck of a medical event – leaving little time or space for the realisation of larger plans.

The gap between home and care home, project and pastime seems to open wide, even in these stories, and their characters do not forbear to comment acerbically on the circumscribed motility and scale, in Laws’ terms (93), of their existence and the limitations imposed upon their future in terms of both space and time. The scope, structure and point of view of the stories provide, then, Bakhtin’s “optic” on the “forces at work” (427) in the social system in relation to the experience of ageing. In each case, however, the protagonists find intimacy even in their managed spaces and enjoy a new sense of shared purpose in the absence of Polan’s individualistic existential project. In “Torching the Dusties” and Barth’s “Peeping Tom,” this comes in response to an outside threat quickening the pulse; in Williams’ “Stuff,” the project is death itself and a programme of collective spiritual and mental preparation. The limitations of the situation are surpassed in all cases, whether the process is literal, psychological or metaphysical in nature. And it is the sense of impending catastrophe itself that is the catalyst for renewed energies and intimacies. Despite their acerbic tone, these stories assert the ingenuity, agency and, on occasion, sheer fun both conserved and spent in older age, in the face of both an immediate environment and also a world depleted of such resources.

“Stuff”

It was December, and he was in the windowless consultation room of his doctor’s office. A young man with a stunningly high forehead was informing him that he had lung cancer and would die – the certainty of this being considerable – soon.

(Par. 1)

The story opens with brutal directness. Even the symbol is direct here. The windowless consultation room in which the protagonist, Henry, is given a terminal diagnosis – a perfect chronotope of temporal and spatial equivalence – sends an unequivocal message: No Way Out. Henry is a middle-aged man – young to have this news – who still works in his local community, albeit feeling increasingly estranged from it by his advancing age. He has little family other than his ageing mother, whom he visits in her care home, and this unsparing opening makes it clear that he is likely to predecease her, upsetting the expected order of things and resetting the relations between generations in the story. The language of this passage is direct, but it is also unsatisfying. What is “considerable” certainty? What, indeed, is “soon”? But the outlook is clear. The story continues in a similar vein, full of wounding counterpoint but delivered baldly and without preamble. Henry employs a precautionary seat belt: he can “harness himself” into his car but not his life. He thinks back to the record he bought as a child, “How to Teach Your Canary to Sing” (par. 7) – but there had been no warning in this case. He “hadn’t even had a canary” (par. 9), and lo, his “canary record” (in another sense) is still deficient. He has found out too late.

The directness of the diagnosis and the prognosis will not, the narration suggests, be replicated when Henry tells his mother: “He’d never been able to tell her anything straight out, and this was no exception” (par. 12). He cannot even contemplate the scene directly, but sets it at a distance by imagining it via the column he writes as a journalist on a local newspaper: “He’d write a column about buying a last Christmas tree and then show it to his old mother in that frightful home she was in, and, in that way, inform her that he was about to die” (par. 12). The emotion that he might be feeling – must be feeling – is displaced into ironies, aperçus that he might be noting for a future column. He observes the unlikelihood of his parking fee being waived on account of the news with a similar strategy: “[i]f the recently condemned weren’t required to pay their fair share, the lot would bring in no money at all” (par. 10). Even the internal focalisation, his thoughts conveyed in the third person, registers itself an ironic device, we might almost imagine willed on his part, whereby his own perspective all but converges with the aesthetic effects he desires to create for his readers. Rather than simply bringing us closer to Henry’s thoughts and feelings, this narrative point of view (designed for intimacy) in fact makes us doubt the authenticity of these feelings: they are not fundamentally different from his “real” feelings, perhaps, but are always already being edited. Ironically (again), a more omniscient narration would produce the effect of a “realer” set of feelings. As it is, his whole life is lived at a distance, as a character, something capitalised on by his newspaper columns about local life and his role as face of the town – the living focaliser of its point of view – on the front of the telephone directory.

This distancing strategy translates into a lack of empathy, as when he describes the open sore on the receptionist's face at the care home as risking opening up and offering a glimpse of the "preposterous fundamentals, rather like the truth window in a straw house" (par. 29), the artful metaphor taking precedence over any sympathy for the man's plight. Henry seems to want to preserve a Wildean reversal of priorities in the story, life subservient to art. Indeed, reality is presented as so "preposterous" that a sense of normality must be constructed with pictures of fake relatives, or the "artist's impression" of the town's new windfarm: "[g]reen pastures, sleek white blades, blue sky" (par. 8). Yet everywhere that Henry goes, he is faced with the fundamentals that he can no longer ignore.

Indeed, the windfarm seems idyllic, an ecologically progressive new version of the pastoral, but there are darker undertones to the environment of this story, even beyond the world of the care home (which is, in this story, a haven of sorts, if not exactly home-like). Henry's mother has moved to her current residence from another care home, however, one which was destroyed by floods, as touched on above, and in which many residents were left for dead. The windfarm seems to have come too late, the artist offering in his or her vision of elemental harmony only a partial impression of the reality of Henry's surroundings.

In a twist familiar for readers of Williams' work, and in line with the argument I am making about the subversive potential of the time and spaces of older age, the story does not play out as we expect. Old age does not serve as a *memento mori*, and Henry's mother recovers her aplomb after her brush with apocalypse, in a way that Henry himself seems ill-equipped to do. He will die before his mother, the relatively young receptionist has the unhealed wound, not the aged residents, and the home itself comes to seem more a serene religious retreat than a place of incarceration or moribund decay. Here, Henry's mother at least has a space in which to prepare herself for death and companions with whom to talk about mystical philosophy. Neither is this simply a colloquially "philosophical" approach to death in old age – an equanimity synonymous with resignation. Instead, she has an existential project of sorts: a programme of engagement with an ancient and arcane branch of philosophy, Gnosticism. She is removing herself in all senses from Henry's world, but as well as a departure, this is an arrival somewhere else – an arrival that excludes him. She is in control of the process whereby she can gradually remove herself from worldly concerns. Henry, on the other hand, is summarily dismissed: from life by the doctor's terse sentencing, and from any support or guide to the transition by his mother's abrupt discharge ("Goodbye, Henry." "But I just got here," he muttered" [par. 52]). He is also dismissed from his role as a storyteller and interpreter (albeit a studiedly folksy one) of his environment. His role in life as a local journalist seems displaced by the "monitor" in the care home lobby on which "news of the weather scrolled by" (par. 54). The news may just as

well remain confined to the lobby: this care home is not, in fact, simply a poor facsimile of a “real” home, as the logic of the chronotope might suggest. It is a closed community with its own impenetrable language and conventions, and this – it is suggested – is at least in part by choice. The assumptions about age and its spaces – that it is excluded, confined, erased – are challenged here. This is a “little world” that has turned its back on the larger one, rather than the other way around.

Williams creates a form of anachrony by catapulting the middle-aged, or at least “young-old,” character over the heads of the much older care home residents in life course terms. He faces an imminent death before or at least more certainly than they do. The residents of the care home are not only more robust than he is in outlook and even in health, but they are also more connected to contemporary culture than he. His mother’s room-mate, Debbie, is “into dystopian video games” and is “very, very good” (par. 33). Henry has neither the knowledge of the older generation, nor the abilities of the younger. He has no connection with the youth he met earlier in the day: his love for the A. E. Housman lines the boy has tattooed on his arm a nostalgia for already nostalgic art; the young man’s a tribute to a more immediate loss, the untimely death of a friend (par. 20). The reference underlines, in fact, the disordering of the expected narrative in this story, one in which the younger generations are dying sooner than those who are very old. There is the sense of an ending, but that ending is an indiscriminate one.

We are not unsympathetic to Henry’s plight. Indeed, the reader might well also regret the vanished days to which Henry is attached: the direct connection to place and nature that his role as town reporter once gave him; the idea of a shared repository of consoling poetry (in contrast with his mother’s rebarbative mysticism). Henry’s writing – and his reading – keep him sealed from the present, however: striking attitudes rather than feeling. The residents reach back to Gnosticism, an ancient system of thought, and forward to the skill of playing video games. They move in a mentally mobile way between different forms of reality, different touchstones of cultural history, in a way that he – trapped in an outmoded analogue world – cannot. Here the form of the short story not only compresses the life course but plays with the expectations of its shape and order. It challenges norms of age-appropriate behaviour, as well as the expected ordering of genealogical succession. In this “home,” the parental figures are behaving like young people, and the figure of middle age – rejected as child but unrecognised as adult, without child of his own or forward-moving career – cannot find a place.

Yet in one sense this is a belated coming-of-age story, the protagonist dismissed from his mother’s care (in all senses) to navigate the future of his life on his own. He is birthed almost into death, and the story is full of these savage twists on the usual symbolism of life transitions. Exiting his mother’s room into the “cruelly illuminated” hallway seems akin to

a birth, and the mother's room as womb is also an ante-room to death. Old age is not the foreign country to discover, but a haven (at least in this affluent context) – a time and space of preparation and reflection – of which Henry has been robbed. Leaving the home is not escaping, but being forcibly delivered to one's fate. Nonetheless, Henry steps out in touch with his future, however short this will be, rather than living his present in the third person and as a kind of constantly edited past. Of necessity, now, he is ignorant of what comes next – but open to it; he has, as in the last line of the story, to “brave the outside, where there would be darkness and steps to navigate” (par. 53). For this visitor, the care home cannot be a space that encloses and protects, a “nurturant” home in Sobchack's terms, but it does offer a chronotopic threshold or a series of thresholds – the reception desk, his mother's room, the steps of the building – that make a new future of the imminent end.

“Torching the Dusties”

Atwood's story similarly depicts a ‘home’ which deconstructs the “nurturant functions” of the domestic home in ways other than we might expect. The (cruel) joke here is on not one individual, stranded without the knowledge of either the generation above or below him, but a whole generation, besieged in their mock mediaeval fortresses. The protagonist Wilma observes at one moment: “We have to be kind to one another in here. . . . We're all we have left” (Atwood 227). The idea that Wilma and her generation are under siege is, indeed, a literal one in Atwood's story. Wilma and Tobias, residents of an exclusive retirement home, Ambrosia Manor, are – along with their fellow inmates – trapped in the building by the mob of young rioters at the gates, threatening to set fire to the home and remove the economic burden of the “selfish” old. Wilma and Tobias escape; many of their fellows, the implication is, are not so lucky. There is not even this space, this silo left to them.

In one sense, elders are the victims in this story – or the underdog heroes. But in another, they are implicated. The problem here is at least in part money: systemic inequity, yes, but also tensions internal to one's class. This is a society in which relationships between generations are dominated by transaction and transfer (and withholding) of funds. The older people are holding onto wealth, the younger want to enjoy it; neither can see beyond it. There is a critique here, as Ulla Krieburnegg has argued, of ageism concentrated in an intergenerational conflict fuelled by the “burden narrative of old age” (49–51). And yet the message of the narrative is also more ambiguous than that implies. Elders participate in the materialism that contaminates the society Atwood presents. The “little world” of the residential home enshrines, memorialises and replicates a history of privilege, from the tiny feudal characters dancing at the edge of Wilma's eyeline (her visual hallucinations) to the figure of domestic

service (explicitly costumed as Victorian in Marlene Goldman's film of the story) to the fine-grained late capitalist differentiation of luxury food-stuffs. The home, Ambrosia Manor (its name at once rank cliché and all-too-plausible brand), is a shrine to past wealth. Its fountain references the statue of the peeing Belgian boy (the *Manneken Pis* of Brussels): an in-joke, a shibboleth between those rich enough to have travelled in Europe, privileged enough to know (mockingly) what the clichés of the European Grand Tour might be. The gates are adorned by "ostentatious, depressed-looking stone lions" (Atwood 234) that likewise speak of the Old World and money that knows that it cannot reproduce itself, let alone grow. The home is a whited sepulchre not because its inhabitants are old but because their money is old and their claim to it superseded. There is also a more fundamental sense of belatedness and dissipation: "The Manor was once a mansion in the countryside, back when people built mansions, back when there was a countryside" (234). The narrative hints at a landscape in which industrialised farming has destroyed the countryside as such and hence discouraged the building of such mansions there. In making money this way, the value of what it might buy has been squandered. If culture is the taming of nature, what is culture when there is no more nature to tame?

This dystopian sense that the countryside has already disappeared, that human society is already post-nature, registers subtly but pervasively in Atwood's story. We are not only in the era of the Anthropocene, but this is an era that will itself be – inevitably – short-lived. This underlying condition makes sense of the unsettling stylistic gesture we see deployed in Atwood's writing in this tale, whereby the texture of Wilma's daily life is described as both aesthetically pleasing and deeply unappealing. Wilma's sight being limited, she encounters the world via sound, but the sounds she hears are connotatively unstable and disconcerting for her and for the reader. She likens them to the natural world in comforting metaphors recognisable from a standard cultural repertoire. The sound of the cereals she and Tobias crunch are "crisp snow underfoot" (233); the voices of the other residents "sudden gusts of autumn leaves" (248). Yet *at the same time*, these sounds are described in much less comforting terms. Crisp snow underfoot turns out to sound like "Styrofoam packing peanuts" (233); the voices that eddy around her like gusts of autumn wind are also heard at the same time and in the same sentence as "squawkings, or cluckings, or wheezings" (248). What she does see, when she "escapes" outside towards the end of the story, for example, is similarly equivocal, and similarly suspended between the wonders of nature and the prosaic realities of her impaired condition: the sparkling light either "fireflies" or symptoms of her brain short-circuiting "like a toaster dropped into the bath" (265). The natural order is not only upset, its creatures struggling to survive, but it can be – and perhaps is being – displaced or replaced by unnatural, manmade alternatives.

Old age appears, in a sense, a symbol as well as a theme here. In presenting older people as a generation whose time has passed, Atwood paradoxically hints that they also represent the whole of humanity, in the process of extinguishing itself by gobbling up all resources; cannibalising past culture and colonising the natural world. Their self-interest, as that of the younger generation, not only brands this society as ethically damaged but has also wrought physical damage and threatens its very survival. They are not so much on the margins of society, then, as a symptom of its “ruined public sphere” (Clark 150); not so much an extinguished generation as a symbol of universal global extinction.

Atwood’s scenario in this story is described, in line with the genre she is perhaps most known for, as “dystopic” and its intent “satiric;” Krieger suggests that it is also “bitter” (50). Wilma and Tobias enact an escape narrative familiar in care home fiction that likens such residences to the disciplinary institution of prison (and Ambrosia Manor, for all its luxury, has the locked doors, security detail and “perimeter wall” [Atwood 262] – a “high brick wall” – reminiscent of such a space). Marlene Goldman, in her stylish recent film version of the story, even picks up the nod to this genre of prison escapes in the original story, expanding the detail about the police letting through the laundry van to have her protagonists (the visually impaired Tobias being led by Wilma in a smart gender reversal) make their escape under a pile of clothes and bedding in the laundry trolley. Atwood’s ending is hardly redemptive, however. Wilma and Tobias settle down to watch the show of the Manor’s torching with their peanuts, seemingly sanguine about their fellow residents’ deaths. Not only the effect of the previous injunction to be kind to one another, but also the solidarity felt in that earlier “we,” seems to have evaporated. If this narrative ending is troubling, the final cadence is still more so, Wilma seeming to retreat into the world of her malicious little people, who accompany the spectacle of the burning home with their “singing” (268).

There are hints earlier in Atwood’s story, however, that the destruction of this home is not straightforwardly the tragedy that her reader might conceive it to be – or not just this. The regret for Wilma is not so much that her life is nearing its end but that the flavour has gone out of this life in living it under its present conditions. Wilma has a “glut of slippers” (234), sent by a daughter careless of her true situation: not only a symbol of her circumscribed existence, in which day and night are interchangeable, but of an existence so static that even this footwear does not wear out. She lacks purposive activity, then – until the end, when she makes ready for a journey to the outside, generating a sense of purpose, however finite and whatever its chance of success (and hers of survival). In fact, the siege quickens the pulse of this existence in not only her and Tobias but also many of the other residents. With the enemy at the gates, there is a *carpe diem* quality to their living: “The evening’s dinner is more

vivacious than usual" (247). They go on to organise themselves to gather food and warn other residents (though the doors of the "Advanced Living" wing are – ominously – locked). Wilma herself has a complicated reaction, but it is certainly not ambivalence:

She can't pinpoint exactly what it is she is feeling. Not despair, not at all. And not hope. She only wants to see what will happen next. It certainly won't be the daily routine.

(255)

A dramatic ending is perhaps not the worst fate imaginable.

If Wilma is not bitter, it is hard to say the same of Atwood at moments such as the one when Wilma imagines the other residents, or at least herself in their place, "just giv[ing] up" (268) rather than trying, however ruinously, to escape. In the main, however, as has been suggested, the older residents respond with ingenuity and energy to the prospect of impending crisis. And if Atwood seems at times almost complicit in the view that it is "Time to Go," offering neither despair nor hope herself at the spectacle she creates, it is part and parcel of the fact that dystopia and utopia have been conflated in the world in which "Ambrosia Manor" is located. This affluent setting is the best care available in the neoliberal system, but life, like the breakfast cereals, is still dry to the taste – and that goes equally for a world outside the home, a world where all progress has meant is that there is no more "countryside," nothing left to buy. Neither the under-twenty-fives the radio commentator mentions nor this generation are fully the victims of the current "shambles, both economic and environmental" (257); both are complicit, unable to see outside the system. In this context, images of ending can be enlivening. Atwood imagines in the Manor's destruction not the sweeping away a troublesome older generation but the putative end of an unequal system itself.

The Development and "Peeping Tom"

The Development, the title of John Barth's short story collection, is a loaded one. The land is "developed," but the lives of the protagonists (all residents of the same area and appearing across the connected stories in the collection) are caught in a different, even opposing, dynamic. They are at best holding the line against the depredations of ageing, but sooner or later move in a direction that is almost universally seen as downwards towards dependency. The different areas of the development likewise chart the stages of older age, the design and function of their accommodation reflecting the increasing levels of dependence from autonomy to "assisted living" to full-time nursing care. We see here the monetisation of Sobchack's "nurturant functions," not only in the homes themselves,

and provision of food, but in the services allied to health and the (already euphemistic) care that are built into such environments.

In the first two of Barth's stories, Tim Manning, the collection's main narrator, lives in Oyster Cove, an area of the Heron Bay development that represents a kind of midpoint both in terms of house price and life stage. His locale, while not strictly speaking a retirement community, is populated by the retired or semi-retired and the late middle-aged to the "early" old. His duplex is a "halfway house" between mansion and condo, then; the community a halfway house between active adult life and the seclusion and dependency of old age. Margaret Atwood's residential home in "Torching the Dusties" – and countless others like it in life and literature – also mark out these stages physically, and Atwood's text mines the same euphemistic commonplaces:

[Residents] have their breakfasts in their own apartments; those of them in the Early Assisted Living, that is. In the Advanced Living wing, things are different. She hasn't wished to imagine how different. (232)

As living becomes more "advanced" in chronological terms, it risks becoming more reduced, more basic in terms of scope, activity and agency. The stories that involve Tim Manning also follow this trajectory within Barth's collection. The title of a late story, "Assisted Dying," reflects an assumption that "assisted living" (where Manning, now a widower, has moved, in the early stages of dementia) is the point at which living becomes synonymous with dying, an existence lived in the shadow of its end, although Manning is still able to reflect acutely on his own existence here.

We will concentrate in this chapter, however, on the story that begins the collection, "Peeping Tom." This story, like Atwood's "Torching the Dusties," suggests an external threat to the affluent community living behind its protective gates. The idea that there is a voyeur, a "peeping tom," spying on the late middle-aged characters in their bathrooms gives rise – in much the way of the squarer threat of siege in Atwood's story – to a complex mixture of fear and something like excitement. What the phantom voyeur represents, however, at least among other things, is the fear of old age itself. The anxiety is one of exposure to an external gaze that confirms these characters in their ageing. The resident academic in the community, tilting the story towards the metafiction for which Barth is so well known, suggests that their fears represent a form of what the narrator calls "projection" – they are the peeping tom seeing themselves, both literally in the window and symbolically as an embodiment of their own "fears, needs, desires" (17).

Taken together, it might be argued, these fears can be read as a kind of projection of the community's anxieties about ageing. The

voyeur is for the most part observing not sexual activity but other bodily functions: they are “peeped at on the potty” (17), as one resident puts it. The implication is that such functions are already a preoccupation of the protagonist, who sleeps naked from the waist down, “originally for romantic reasons, latterly out of long habit and urinary convenience in our three-pees-a-night old age” (10–11). The discussion between the narrator, his wife Margie and their friends Matt and Mary Grauer of the intruder interrupting Margie on the toilet (“mid-urination”) seems excessively, ostentatiously concerned to speak openly about these bodily processes and fear of their exposure or loss of control. Mary remarks: “If it’d been me, he’d’ve gotten a different kind of eyeful: I’d’ve wet my pants” (11), and they go on to discuss fecal incontinence via the expression “it scared the shit out of me.” This insistent emphasis on private, shameful processes and the threat of their impaired function in older age seems to bespeak an anxiety about the body and its gradual dysregulation. The fear is not so much that their bodies will arouse sexual desires in an onlooker as it is that they will not.

Just as Manning and his friends exhibit their fearlessness in talking of incontinence, one resident appears to face down, or perhaps aggressively play down, the fear of sexual impotence. Spied on while urinating, he reacts by unzipping his trousers again and exposing himself to the voyeur (or the darkness that he believes to contain him) in a display of machismo. He not only “marched to the by-then-dark window saying ‘*Eat me, cock-sucker!*’,” but “afterward boasted openly of having done so” (18), both actions an exhibition of potency – physical and discursive – that respond to a masculinity threatened in more than one way. That the women are more sanguine about the intruder, even joking repeatedly about the allure of being observed as a marker of continuing sexual attractiveness (one suggests it is a “turn-on,” another that she checks “her hair and makeup” [17] before undressing), is – it is implied – not assuaging the men’s complex reaction to this threat.

The story never resolves the question of who the voyeur is or, indeed, if there is one. The idea that he (for it is assumed without question that it is a “he”) is one of their own is floated, but the further idea that it may be a figment of their collective imagination is only approached obliquely. One of the residents, “catch[ing] sight of some movement just outside the picture window” does have a revealing experience, however:

I cross the room to check it out – in my robe and PJs, same as now? – and the guy comes at me from out there on the porch as I come at him from inside, and I’m thinking, Isn’t *he* a brazen bastard and traipsing around there in his nightclothes too!

(15)

The realisation that it's "my own reflection I'm looking at" is a humiliating one: "So I stand there contemplating myself in the picture window and feeling foolish while my pulse calms down" (15). The sense that it is advanced old age itself that these residents are fearing gains more support with this incarnation of the peeping tom as an older man "traipsing around in his nightclothes," embodying the wandering that is another familiar fear linked to dementia. These fortified spaces – represented in the elaborate rituals of entering and leaving in Williams' "Stuff," the locked doors and high gates at Atwood's Ambrosia Manor, and the gated developments and security patrols in Barth's Oyster Cove – mark the silent transition of the idea of "security" from keeping an external threat out to keeping the residents in; the threat is within oneself, an incipient danger that awaits one and which one cannot dislodge or eradicate. Manning himself comes to embody this fear, going to search for the voyeur in *his* "PJs" and hiding in the bush when the security patrol car goes past – changing places with the peeping tom whom he and his friends frequently speculate is "one of us," a figure that itself blends seamlessly with the spectre of an aged escapee from a dwelling that has become more prison than home.

Nonetheless, this episode, like the torching of Ambrosia Manor, might be seen as one that quickens the pulse – literally and figuratively – of the residents of this halfway house in the journey towards "assisted dying." If it projects their fears about ageing, it also – temporarily – provides a way of forestalling them. Manning and his wife come together "more passionately" (21) than for a long time after he briefly incarnates the peeping tom himself. The neighbourhood is also "agreeably more bonded" by this "common concern" than they had been before. "He" eventually departs without drama, the story "petering out," in Manning's words, "like most folks' lives" (22). This ending is not entirely downbeat, however: the incident leaves a memory of the quickened pulse, the briefly reignited sexual mettle of these early-old characters that is later missed but fondly remembered. The next incarnation of the night wanderer, a future exposure to "potty"-related shame, may indeed be one of them and represent a more genuine fear – that of old age itself; but, for now, that fear has been allayed.

Conclusion

Barth ends his collection – or starts the beginning of the end, as it were – by providing a narrative crisis of sorts: the arrival of a hurricane that destroys many of the homes in the development. The names of the different areas of the development – its bays and shoreline drives – have advertised its coastal position, and that of the real estate company responsible for it, "Tidewater Communities," underlines the fact

of this as reclaimed land, an appropriation of nature that might one day be reversed. The greedy developers respond to the disaster in a final chapter ("Rebeginning") with plans to rebuild bigger and better, while other voices point to the future that global warming is preparing and counsel a visionary "green" development. The competing visions both seem hubristic and short-sighted, however, in the face of the implacable planetary changes: the tides of ill fortune that await these affluent Americans and all the defences they construct against their own vulnerability.

Even before this narrative development, the tidewater lurks in every story in Barth's collection as a reminder of the reversibility of the development of Oyster Cove and the whole Heron Bay estate – as of every human "development;" the potential undoing of society's Enlightenment project of progress and perfectibility (as well as the precarious security of every family's instantiation of the American Dream) by the larger forces of climate change. This corresponds to the incipient sense of crisis in so much of this contemporary fiction. Even the security of the care home is upended in Joy Williams' "Stuff:" as has been seen, Henry's mother arrives at her current residence because her last "home" was flooded and destroyed, the residents left for dead by the staff but surviving against all expectation, found dehydrated but alive a week later. Older people are expected to die, whether in this catastrophic situation or just in the course of life; their survival does not generate "joy, just troubled amazement" (Williams 26). As with everything in Williams' story, the expected ordering of events is not followed, however: the form of genealogical succession is overturned, and elders exhibit a tenacity at odds with the apocalyptic tenor of the setting. And if Atwood's "Torching the Dusties" ends with fire rather than flood, the world into which its own indefatigable elders escape is also a world where both natural resources and reserves of compassion have been privatised and developed to the point of exhaustion. The crisis is not located in the dystopian spaces of commercialised "care," but in the larger system that creates them.

These examples can be seen to demonstrate, then, that the short story as a genre is a natural place for this sense of an ending. And in the contemporary short story, this is not just on an individual level but in finding as its locale what Miriam Clark has called the "ruined public sphere" (150). Despite the affluence of these locations, the characters and the world they inhabit have this dimension: there is no more countryside; resources are finite even for the young. The chronotope of an old people's home is a metonymic representation of a world exhausted of its capital. The older people themselves, however, are as likely to be tenacious as vulnerable to its incursions. The form of the short story, therefore, is itself also a fitting narrative chronotope. Norman

Friedman has suggested that “it is the imminence of the end,” that is, “its relative closeness to the beginning,” which differentiates the “effects” of short fiction from those of “longer works” (29, 26). If these authors’ stories reflect the dominance of the idea of looming closure as the defining chronotope of the contemporary short story, it is not so much that they have older characters as it is that the world they are writing about is facing the prospect of its own imminent ending. The older protagonists are simply waiting to see “what will happen next” (Atwood 255).

Works Cited

- Atwood, Margaret. “Torching the Dusties.” *Stone Mattress*. 2014. Virago, 2015, pp. 233–308.
- Bakhtin, M.M. “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics (1937–38).” *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, 1982, pp. 84–258.
- Barth, John. *The Development*. Mariner, 2010.
- . “Peeping Tom.” *The Development*. Mariner, 2010, pp. 1–24.
- Biggs, Simon. *Understanding Ageing: Images, Attitudes and Professional Practice*. Open UP, 1993.
- Chivers, Sally, and Ulla Kriebnerneegg. *Care Home Stories: Aging, Disability, and Long-Term Residential Care*. De Gruyter, 2017.
- Clark, Miriam M. “Contemporary Science Fiction and the Postmodern Condition.” *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 32, 1995, pp. 147–59.
- Falconer, Rachel. “Bakhtin’s Chronotope and the Contemporary Short Story.” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 97, no. 3–4, 1998, pp. 699–732.
- Friedman, Norman. “Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition.” *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*. Edited by Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clarey. Louisiana State UP, 1989, pp. 13–31.
- Kriebnerneegg, Ulla. “‘Time to go. Fast not slow’: Geronticide and the Burden Narrative of Old Age in Margaret Atwood’s ‘Torching the Dusties’.” *European Journal of English Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2018, pp. 46–58.
- Laws, Glenda. “Spatiality and Age Relations.” *Critical Approaches to Ageing and Later Life*. Edited by Anne Jamieson et al. Open UP, 1997, pp. 90–100.
- Polan, Dana. *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative and the American Cinema, 1940–1950*. Columbia UP, 1986.
- Snaith, Helen. “Dystopia, Gerontology and the Writing of Margaret Atwood.” *Feminist Review*, vol. 116, 2017, pp. 118–32.
- Sobchack, Vivian. “Lounge Time: Postwar Crisis and the Chronotope of *film noir*.” *Refiguring American Film Genres*. Edited by Nick Browne. U of California P, 1998, pp. 129–70.
- Terentowicz-Fotyga, Urzula. “Defining the Dystopian Chronotope: Space, Time and Genre in George Orwell’s *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*.” *Beyond Philology*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2018, pp. 9–39.

Torching the Dusties. Directed by Marlene Goldman and Philip McKee, cinematography by Henry Sansom, performances by Clare Coulter, Eric Peterson, Aris Tyros, Filmcoop Inc., 2019.

Williams, Joy. "Stuff." *New Yorker*. 25 Jul. 2016, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/07/25/stuff-by-joy-williams. Accessed 19 Jan. 2021.