

What Do You See?

At age twenty-six, Pat Moore performed an unbelievable experiment. An industrial designer, Moore wanted a better understanding of senior adults, so for three years she frequently disguised herself as an eighty-five-year-old woman. From 1979 to 1981, she utilized the skills of a professional makeup artist and visited 116 cities throughout fourteen states and two Canadian provinces in

her elderly persona. From her experience, Moore estimates that one of every 25 senior adults is abused, with most victims being 75 or older. She was impressed with the compassion and care she received from senior adults when she was in character, but she received harsh treatment from younger generations. Unfortunately, society has widely accepted a practice called “social

dismissal” of the elderly, poignantly illustrated in what Moore classifies as “one of the most touching letters I’ve ever read.” The letter came from a nurse who works in a geriatric ward at Ashludie Hospital in Yorkshire, England. This nurse found the following poem in the belongings of an elderly patient, who wrote it before she died:



What do you see, nurses, what do you see?
What are you thinking when you’re looking at me -
A crabby old woman, not very wise
Uncertain of habit, with faraway eyes
Who dribbles her food and makes no reply,
When you say in a loud voice, “I do wish you'd try”;
Who seems not to notice the things that you do,
And forever is losing a stocking or shoe?
Who uninteresting or not, lets you do as you will
With bathing and feeding the long day to fill?
Is that what you're thinking, is that what you see?
Then open your eyes, nurse, you're not looking at me.
I'll tell you who I am as I sit here so still,
As I rise at your bidding, as I eat at your will;
I'm a small child of ten with a father and mother,
Brothers and sisters who love one another.

A young girl of sixteen with wings on her feet,
Dreaming that soon now a lover she'll meet.
A bride soon at twenty, my heart gives a leap,
Remembering the vows I promised to keep.
At twenty-five now I have young of my own
Who need me to build a secure, happy home.
A woman of thirty my young now grow fast,
Bound to each other with ties that should last.
At forty my young sons have grown and are gone,
But my man's beside me to see I don't mourn.
At fifty once more babies play at my knee,
Again we know children, my loved one and me.
Dark days are upon me, my husband is dead.
I look at the future--I shudder with dread.
For my young are all rearing young of their own,
And I think of the years and the love that I've known.
I'm an old woman now, and nature is cruel;
'Tis her jest to make old people look like a fool.
The body it crumbles, grace and vigor depart,
There is now a stone where I once had a heart.
But inside this old carcass a young girl still dwells,
And now and again my battered heart swells.
I remember the joys, I remember the pain,
And I'm loving and living life over again.
I think of the years all too few, gone too fast;
And accept the stark fact that nothing can last.
So open your eyes, nurses--open and see,
Not a crabby old woman. Look closer at me!

* Disguised, Pat Moore, 1985, p. 165-167

Remember now thy Creator in the days of
thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor
the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I
have no pleasure in them; Ecclesiastes 12:1