Adam Thorpe: *Birds with a Broken Wing*

"On Her Blindness" and "Hands"

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Introduction: The Poet and the Poems

Adam Thorpe is a British poet and novelist. He was born in Paris on 5 December 1956 and grew up in India, Cameroon and England. After graduating from Magdalen College, Oxford, in 1979, he founded a touring theatre company, and he later settled in France, where he still lives. He is best known for his first novel, *Ulverton* (1992), which won the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize, but he began as a poet. His first collection, *Mornings in the Baltic* (1988), was shortlisted for the Whitbread Award.

"On Her Blindness" and "Hands" come from his fifth collection, *Birds with a Broken Wing* (Jonathan Cape, 2007), which was shortlisted for the Forward Poetry Prize. The title comes from words of Plenty Coups, a chief of the Crow nation, quoted in one of the poems: "We are like birds with a broken wing". The publisher describes the book as being about the discarded and the failed, with hope set against grief. A bird that cannot fly is a fitting image for these two poems, which concern a mother who lost her sight and a son who has lost his mother.

A small sequence of elegies

In the book, "On Her Blindness", "Ansaphone" and "Hands" stand one after another, and together they form a group of elegies for the poet's mother. "On Her Blindness" tells us that her last week alive was "a fortnight back", so the poems were written while the grief was fresh. The short poem between them, "Ansaphone", describes her voice still recorded on the father's answering machine. Read in order, the three poems move from her blindness, to her absence, to the son's regret.

A different kind of disability writing

Much disability writing comes from disabled authors themselves. Thorpe writes as a non-disabled son who watched his mother lose her sight late in life. This raises a question that disability studies takes seriously: who has the right to tell a disabled person's story? The rights slogan "Nothing about us without us" insists that disabled people should speak for themselves. Thorpe partly meets this demand by letting his mother speak in her own words and by admitting how little he could do or understand.

Most people who lose their sight do so in later life, and for them blindness often means the loss of a world they once knew. Thorpe's mother lost her sight slowly, hoped for a cure and never made peace with it. Her experience differs from that of a person born blind, and the poems should be read with that difference in mind. Students should also note that "handicap", a word used in the poem, is now considered outdated in Britain and in India; "disability" or "visual impairment" is preferred. A glossary of key terms is given at the end of these notes.

Poem 1: "On Her Blindness"

Context

The poem is an elegy written about two weeks after the death of Thorpe's mother, and it looks back over the years of her blindness. Her sight failed gradually, in what the poem calls a "long, slow slide", until her vision was "as blank as stone". The scenes move between places that mattered in her life: a restaurant in

Paris, the city where Thorpe was born; the country lanes of Berkshire, a county west of London; and the hospital where she died in the autumn.

Some details belong to English middle-class life. The Lanchester was an old British make of car that is no longer produced, so driving one suggests a person attached to old ways. "Dodgems" are the bumper cars of a fairground. The family's manner is reserved. They joke about her poor sense of direction, avoid speaking about pain, and expect suffering to be borne quietly. The poem sets out to question exactly this attitude.

The Title

The title echoes "On His Blindness", the name by which John Milton's Sonnet 19 is usually known (the title was added by a later editor). Milton lost his sight in middle age. In the sonnet he moves from complaint to patient acceptance, and ends with the famous line "They also serve who only stand and wait". Thorpe changes one word, "His" to "Her", and with it the whole outlook. His mother finds no such consolation and does not pretend to; she calls her blindness "living hell". The title therefore sets the poem in quiet argument with one of the best known poems of patient endurance in English. It also tells us that the poem is about her experience, although it is written by her son.

Summary

The poem opens with a confession. The poet's mother could not bear being blind, and he says so "to be honest", though he feels it is something one should not say. People are expected to hide the fact that severe disability can be hell. In public, he notes, we usually hear only from those who bear it bravely, "like a Roman", or who somehow find joy in the struggle.

He remembers an evening in a Paris restaurant. His mother, unable to keep the food on her fork, turned to him and whispered that blindness was living hell, and that if she gave up hope of a cure she would kill herself. He cannot remember his reply. It must have been the usual inadequate comfort, he says, from a son who was "locked-in" and could not reach her.

Yet she kept her dignity. She bumped into walls like a fairground dodgem, and her sense of direction, never good, grew worse; her father used to joke that she had no built-in compass. She pretended to ignore the emptiness around her or laughed it off. Sometimes she even pretended to see, smiling at her grandchildren's drawings and toys, so that the family forgot at times that her sight had gone completely. She went on driving the old Lanchester down the Berkshire lanes long after it was safe, visited exhibitions, admired films, and watched television while facing the wrong way.

The last part returns to her death, two weeks before the poem was written. Her final week was golden autumn weather, and the trees around the hospital blazed with colour. Forgetting that she could not see, the poet described the scene to her. Too weak to move and staring at nothing, she replied that she knew it was lovely out there. Death, he reflects, has not made her any more sightless, but now she can no longer pretend. In the coffin her eyes were closed, and it was left to the family to believe that she was watching them from somewhere.

Allusions and References

- **Milton's "On His Blindness":** See the note on the title. The people who bear disability "like a Roman" recall the patience that Milton's sonnet recommends.
- **Roman Stoicism:** To bear pain "like a Roman" recalls the Stoic ideal of Roman writers such as Seneca, who taught that suffering should be endured calmly. The English "stiff upper lip" is a later version of the same ideal.

- **A sop to Cerberus:** A "sop" is something offered to quieten someone. The expression goes back to Virgil's *Aeneid* (Book 6), where the Sibyl throws a drugged honey cake to Cerberus, the three-headed dog guarding the underworld. The son's "usual sop" is a small comfort thrown at a terrible fear, and the link with the land of the dead suits an elegy.
- **King Lear:** In Shakespeare's play the blinded Gloucester, in despair, wishes to throw himself from the cliffs of Dover, and his son Edgar leads him and tries to comfort him (Act 4). A blind parent, a wish to die and a son's inadequate words give the play a strong resemblance to this poem.
- **Locked-in syndrome:** The phrase "locked-in" comes from medicine, where it describes a person who is fully conscious but unable to move or speak. Thorpe applies it to himself rather than to his mother.
- **The elegy tradition:** Classical and English elegies, such as Milton's "Lycidas", usually end with consolation: the dead person lives on in another world. Thorpe offers only a hesitant version of this, since it is "up to us to believe" that his mother is watching.

Critical Appreciation

The strength of the poem is its honesty, and it announces this at once. The phrase "to be honest" appears twice, first in the poet's voice and then in his mother's, and between them stands the admission that "one shouldn't say it". Thorpe is breaking a social rule. Public talk about disability, he suggests, is full of stories of courage, of people who bear it "like a Roman" or find joy in the fight. His mother's whispered "living hell" cuts through that polite language.

For disability studies this raises a real difficulty. Activists have long criticised the view of disability as a private tragedy, which Michael Oliver called the personal tragedy model, because it makes disabled lives seem pitiable and less valuable. They have also attacked the opposite stereotype, the inspirational "supercrip" who overcomes everything. Thorpe rejects the second. Whether he falls into the first is a fair question for class discussion. He does not claim to describe how blind people in general feel; he reports how one woman who lost her sight late in life felt, in her own words. The disabled scholar Tom Shakespeare has argued that the social model should not deny that some impairments bring real pain. The poem respects that pain without letting it define her.

The mother is in fact far from a passive victim. She keeps her dignity, jokes, smiles at the children's drawings, drives the old Lanchester, visits exhibitions and watches television facing the wrong way. These details are funny and sad at once. They show a woman holding on to a sighted person's life and refusing to let the family's world shrink around her. Her pretending is a form of courage, and also of loneliness.

The poet is equally honest about himself. He cannot remember what he said in the restaurant and calls it "the usual sop". The phrase "the locked-in son" turns a medical term back on the non-disabled observer, for it is he who is trapped and unable to reach her. The hospital scene sharpens this. He describes the blazing autumn trees and forgets, for a moment, that she cannot see them, and her gentle reply is a last act of pretending, offered for his sake.

The form suits this plain honesty. The poem is written in unrhymed couplets, with long sentences running across the breaks, so that it reads like speech or a memory unfolding. The last line stands alone, set apart like the mother herself. The images are few and exact: the dodgem, the missing compass, vision "as blank as stone", the "royal" carpet of leaves. The ending plays on sight once more. With her eyes closed in the coffin, the family must "believe" she is watching, and the closing words "in the end" suggest that belief is all that is left.

Short Questions and Answers on "On Her Blindness"

Each answer is about 60 words.

Q1. Briefly comment on the title "On Her Blindness".

Ans. The title echoes "On His Blindness", the name by which Milton's sonnet on losing his sight is known. Milton moves from complaint to patient faith, ending with the idea that those who "stand and wait" also serve God. By changing "His" to "Her", Thorpe turns to his mother, who found no such comfort. The title sets the poem against a famous model of patient suffering.

Q2. What does the poet admit at the beginning, and why does he say "One shouldn't say it"?

Ans. He admits that his mother could not bear being blind. He feels this should not be said because society expects disabled people, and their families, to hide their suffering. Publicly we hear mostly from those who bear disability bravely or find joy in the struggle. By speaking honestly, Thorpe breaks a social rule and questions the cheerful stories usually told about disability.

Q3. Explain "those who bear it / like a Roman, or somehow find joy / in the fight".

Ans. These are the people whose stories of disability are usually heard in public. To bear something "like a Roman" is to endure it silently and bravely, in the manner of the Roman Stoics. Others turn disability into a heroic battle and find joy in it. Thorpe suggests that such inspirational stories hide the experience of people, like his mother, who simply suffered.

Q4. What happens in the Paris restaurant?

Ans. The mother, unable to keep the food on her fork, turns to her son and whispers that blindness is living hell. She tells him that if she gave up hope of a cure she would kill herself. The poet cannot remember his reply. He supposes it was the usual inadequate comfort. The scene shows both her despair and his helplessness before it.

Q5. Why does the poet call his reply "the usual sop" and himself "the locked-in son"?

Ans. A "sop" is something offered to quieten a person, like the cake thrown to Cerberus in Virgil's *Aeneid*. His reply was a small, routine comfort that could not touch her despair. "Locked-in" describes a condition in which a person is fully aware but cannot move or speak. The son was emotionally trapped, unable to reach his mother or to say anything that mattered.

Q6. How did the mother keep her dignity in spite of her blindness?

Ans. She bumped into walls like a dodgem, and her sense of direction grew worse, yet she did not complain in front of others. She pretended to ignore the emptiness around her or laughed it off. She smiled at her grandchildren's drawings and toys as if she could see them. In these ways she kept her self-respect and protected her family from her pain.

Q7. What did the mother continue to do after she had lost her sight, and what does this show?

Ans. She went on driving the old Lanchester down the Berkshire lanes long after it was safe. She visited exhibitions, admired films and watched television while facing the wrong way. These details are both comic and sad. They show a woman refusing to give up the life of a sighted person, holding on to independence and to her place in the family's world.

Q8. What happens during the mother's last week?

Ans. Her last week, a fortnight before the poem was written, is golden autumn weather, and the trees around the hospital blaze with colour. The poet, forgetting her blindness, describes the scene. Too weak to move and staring at nothing, she answers that she knows it is lovely out there. Even while dying she pretends, perhaps to spare her son.

Q9. Explain "Dying has made her / no more sightless, but now she can't / pretend".

Ans. Death has not added to her blindness, since she could already see nothing. What death has taken away is her pretending, the brave game by which she smiled at drawings and praised the autumn trees. In life she acted as if she could see; now she cannot act at all. The line shows that her pretending was a sign of life and spirit.

Q10. Explain the ending: "it was up to us to believe / she was watching, somewhere, in the end".

Ans. In the coffin her eyes are closed. The family can only hope that she is watching them from somewhere, perhaps in an afterlife. The roles are reversed: once she pretended to see for their sake, and now they must believe she sees. "In the end" means both finally and after death, and the line offers a doubtful, modern consolation.

Q11. How does the poem challenge the usual inspirational picture of disability?

Ans. Public stories often show disabled people as heroes who overcome everything. The poem refuses this. It records the mother's own words, "living hell", and admits she wanted a cure. Yet it does not make her a mere victim, since it shows her courage and humour. The poem respects the real pain of acquired blindness while honouring the person who lived with it.

Poem 2: "Hands"

Context

"Hands" follows "On Her Blindness" and "Ansaphone" in the collection and completes the group of elegies for the poet's mother. It begins in Waitrose, an upmarket British supermarket chain, and moves to the hospital where she died. The poem returns to her blindness, but its real subject is the son's regret that he did not hold her hand more often.

Two pieces of background help. For many blind people touch is a main way of moving safely and feeling connected to others, so a hand or an arm can be both a guide and a comfort. The poem also describes a habit of reserve in English families, where grown children seldom hold their parents' hands. In many Indian families too, adult children rarely hold a parent's hand, although touching an elder's feet in respect is common, so students will recognise the reserve the poem describes in another form.

The Title

The title is a plain plural noun. The poem concerns several pairs of hands: the young couple's, welded together in the supermarket; the blind mother's, for whom a hand was a lifeline; and the son's, which did not hold hers long enough. Hands stand for touch, help and love, and the everyday phrase "to give a hand" means to help. The plural also suggests two hands meeting, and the poem is about a meeting that happened too rarely.

Summary

The poem begins in Waitrose, a British supermarket. The poet notices a young, spotty couple holding hands so tightly that when the girl reaches down for a tin on a bottom shelf, the boy has to bend over with her like a clown. They seem welded to each other. Yet neither of them is blind, as his mother was, and for her a hand was a lifeline.

This leads him to think about death. When someone close to you dies, he says, you always wish you had held their hand a little longer; it is almost a rule. Or you wish you could have held it for ever, which is impossible. He is speaking of the real world, where regret has flesh and asks questions. In italics, regret asks why he did not take her hand and hold it a little longer, or why he did not hold it at all.

His answer is that in families, after a certain age, people do not hold hands unless there is a practical reason, such as helping someone over a gate, or when bad news suddenly breaks in. It is harder still when the roles are reversed, as they were in his case. It was not the mother comforting the child but the child comforting the mother, which he compares to the dying comforting the living.

Allusions and References

- **Philip Larkin, "An Arundel Tomb":** Larkin describes the stone figures of an earl and countess lying hand in hand on a medieval tomb, and ends with the line "What will survive of us is love". Thorpe's poem, with its couple holding hands and its thoughts on death and what remains, belongs to the same tradition of reflection on touch and loss.
- **King Lear:** The reversal in which a child must care for a helpless parent is central to Shakespeare's play. Edgar leads his blind father Gloucester by the hand, and Cordelia comforts the broken Lear. Thorpe's "wrong way round" recalls both.
- **Palmistry:** The "lifeline" is also the line on the palm that palm-readers claim shows the length of a person's life, a pun that suits a poem about a mother's death.

- **"Eruption" and "irruption":** Thorpe chooses "irruption", a bursting in, instead of the more familiar "eruption", a bursting out. Bad news breaks into the family from outside.

Critical Appreciation

"Hands" begins with comedy and ends with grief. The young couple in Waitrose, "welded" together, the boy bent over "like a clown", make a light, slightly mocking sketch. Then the poem turns on the word "But". Their hand-holding is a display of young love, while his mother's need was of another kind, for to her "a hand / was a lifeline". The word carries two meanings: a rope thrown to someone in danger, and the line on the palm that palm-readers say shows the length of a life.

Here the poem touches its disability theme. For a blind person touch is a main way of knowing the world and of feeling another person's presence. A hand guides, steadies and reassures. Writers on the ethics of care, such as Eva Feder Kittay, have argued that all human beings depend on one another at some point, and that dependence is no failure. The poem quietly agrees. The mother needed a hand, and the son's regret is not that she depended on him but that he gave too little.

The middle of the poem is an honest study of regret. Calling it "a kind / of rule" is an attempt to make grief general and bearable, but regret will not stay abstract. It "has flesh" and "interrogates", and its questions appear in italics, like a voice in the poet's head. His reply is social rather than personal. Adults in his kind of family do not hold hands except for a "purpose", such as helping someone over a gate or facing bad news. The examples are almost comically practical, and they show how a habit of reserve can come between people who love each other.

The ending reverses the usual order of a family. Normally a mother comforts her child; here the child had to comfort the mother, "the wrong way round". The final simile, "like the dying comforting the alive", is puzzling at first. It may describe one more unnatural reversal, as strange as the dying consoling the living. It may also hint at what really happened in her last days, when the dying mother, pretending the autumn was lovely, was in fact comforting her son. Either way the son is left feeling that he received more than he gave.

Like "On Her Blindness", the poem is written in unrhymed couplets, with sentences running across line and stanza breaks. The breaks create small shocks, as when "close" is left hanging at the end of a stanza before "dies" opens the next. The language is plain and conversational, so that the few images, welded, lifeline, flesh, stand out sharply. In a short space the poem shows how blindness, age and death can turn family roles around, and how hard it can be to reach across that change.

Short Questions and Answers on "Hands"

Each answer is about 60 words.

Q12. Briefly comment on the title "Hands".

Ans. The title is a plain plural noun. The poem is about several pairs of hands: the young couple's, welded together; the blind mother's, for whom a hand was a lifeline; and the son's, which did not hold hers long enough. Hands stand for touch, help and love. The plural suggests two hands meeting, and the poem is about a meeting that happened too rarely.

Q13. What does the poet notice in Waitrose?

Ans. In the supermarket he sees a young, spotty couple holding hands. They hold on even when the girl bends to take a tin from a bottom shelf, so that the boy has to bend over with her like a clown. They seem welded together. The comic scene leads the poet to think of his blind mother, for whom holding a hand meant much more.

Q14. Explain "they were welded to each other".

Ans. "Welded" is an industrial metaphor: metal pieces joined by heat so that they cannot be separated. It describes the young couple's tight grip and their eager, rather clumsy love. The word is slightly mocking, as is the image of the boy bending like a clown. It also prepares a contrast with the poet and his mother, whose hands were rarely joined at all.

Q15. Why was a hand "a lifeline" for the poet's mother?

Ans. Being blind, the mother depended on touch to move safely and to feel connected to others. A hand guided and steadied her, like a rope thrown to someone in danger. "Lifeline" also recalls the line on the palm that palm-readers link to the length of life. For her, a hand was a means of safety, of contact and of comfort.

Q16. What "rule" about death does the poet describe?

Ans. He says that when someone close to you dies, you always wish you had held their hand a little longer than you did. Or you wish you could have held it for ever, which is impossible. Calling this "a kind of rule" makes his grief general, as if everyone feels it, but the rest of the poem shows how personal his regret is.

Q17. Explain "the realm of the real, where / regret has flesh, and interrogates".

Ans. The poet moves from general wishes to real life. Here regret is not an idea but something physical, with "flesh", and it questions him like an interrogator. Its questions follow in italics: why did he not hold her hand longer, or at all? The personification shows how guilt after a death becomes a living voice that will not leave the mourner in peace.

Q18. According to the poet, why do people in families stop holding hands?

Ans. He says that after a certain age family members do not hold hands unless there is a practical purpose, such as helping someone over a gate, or when bad news suddenly breaks in. Holding hands without a reason would feel awkward. The poet blames this habit of reserve, common in English families, for the touch he did not give his mother.

Q19. What does the word "irruption" suggest in "a sudden irruption of bad news"?

Ans. An irruption is a sudden, violent bursting in, different from an eruption, which bursts out. Bad news breaks into ordinary life without warning, and only such a shock gives family members permission to hold hands. The careful word shows the poet's precision and suggests how strangely reserved families can be, needing a crisis before they allow themselves to touch.

Q20. What does the poet mean by "the wrong way round"?

Ans. Normally a mother comforts her child. In his mother's last years and days, the son had to comfort her. This reversal of roles, brought about by her blindness, age and illness, made hand-holding harder, since a son is not used to taking care of his mother. The situation recalls *King Lear*, where children must care for broken, helpless parents.

Q21. Explain the last line, "like the dying comforting the alive".

Ans. The line compares the son comforting his mother to the dying comforting the living, something that seems unnatural. It can also be read another way. In her last days the dying mother, pretending the autumn was lovely, was in fact comforting her son. The ambiguity leaves the poet, and the reader, unsure who comforted whom, and suggests the son received more than he gave.

Q22. How does the poem present blindness and dependence?

Ans. For the blind mother, touch was a main link with the world, and a hand was a lifeline. The poem does not treat her need as weakness. It suggests, as writers on the ethics of care argue, that people

depend on one another and that giving help is part of love. The son's regret is that he did not offer his hand more freely.

The Two Poems at a Glance

Aspect	"On Her Blindness"	"Hands"
Subject	A mother's blindness in later life and her death	A son's regret that he did not hold his blind mother's hand
Setting	A Paris restaurant, Berkshire lanes, a hospital in autumn	A Waitrose supermarket, then memory and the hospital
Speaker and voice	The son, in the first person; the mother speaks in her own words	The son, in the first person; regret questions him in italics
Form	Unrhymed couplets with a single closing line	Unrhymed couplets with strong enjambment
Key events	The restaurant confession; her pretending; her last week; the coffin	The couple in the supermarket; the son's regret; the reversed roles
Central image	Sight and blankness: the dodgem, "blank as stone", closed eyes	The hand as lifeline, welded hands, regret with flesh
Main allusions	Milton's "On His Blindness"; Roman Stoicism; Virgil; *King Lear*	Larkin's "An Arundel Tomb"; *King Lear*; palmistry
Disability issues	Acquired disability; honesty against inspirational stories; dignity	Touch and dependence; care; reversal of family roles
Tone	Frank, wry, tender and grieving	Wry at first, then regretful and questioning
Ending	The family must believe she is watching	The child comforting the mother, like the dying comforting the living

Key Terms

Term	Meaning
Impairment	The physical or sensory difference itself, for example loss of sight.
Disability	The disadvantage produced when society, institutions and attitudes respond to impairment with barriers or exclusion.
Acquired disability	A disability that begins during a person's life rather than at birth, often in old age.
Medical model	Sees disability as a defect in the body to be cured or managed by experts.
Social model	Argues that disability is created by social barriers and attitudes, so society must change.
Personal tragedy model	Michael Oliver's name for the view that disability is a private misfortune deserving pity.
Supercrip	The stereotype of the disabled hero who overcomes everything and inspires others.
Visual impairment	The preferred term for loss of sight; "handicap" is now considered outdated.
Interdependence	The idea that all people depend on one another, so dependence is not a failure.
Ethics of care	A view, associated with Eva Feder Kittay and others, that values care and relationships.
Elegy	A poem of mourning for the dead, often ending with some form of consolation.
Couplet	A stanza of two lines; both poems use unrhymed couplets.

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