Athabasca University

Master of Arts –Interdisciplinary Studies

THE THIN OF THE WEDGE

By

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ABSTRACT

Informed by a literature review on aging and women in Health Sciences, Communication and Media Studies, Theatre Studies, and Psychology along with results from an ethnographic component of recorded, qualitative interviews exploring participant attitudes towards aging and age stereotypes, this fictional work explores experiences and perspectives of aging in a culture where youth is worshipped (Saucier 2004). The interviews were conducted as three informal, in person sessions with groups of women between the ages of fifty-nine and eighty-five. The voluntary participants responded to questions about their bodies and aging, individual beliefs and experiences specific to the topics of representation of young and old female bodies in the media, folklore, fiction, advertising, television, and the internet, as well as notions of eternal youth, mortality, and sickness and dying. The research was used to compose a narrative in multi-media, hybrid prose/performance form with fictional characters and stories inspired by the findings and the author's reactions to both the process, the women, and the documentation. Considering the theory that positive self-perceptions of aging increase longevity and overall health while the opposite is true for negative stereotype internalization (Levy 2002), this work champions positive internalized beliefs and challenges the status quo.

The Thin of the Wedge

Reading Instructions

1. When there is reference to weight gain, or fat bodies, please go make yourself a snack.
2. When there is reference to aging skin, grey hair, wrinkles, please take a deep breath and list five life accomplishments that have had nothing to do with your looks.
3. When there is reference to loss of mobility, or physical strength, forgive yourself and take a five-minute nap.
4. Ignore references to loss of brain function. You'll forget them soon.
5. Click on the internet links when prompted in the story and listen to the full sound file. Yes, technology has crept into fiction and is now as ubiquitous as a cigarette between Bette Davis' fingers.

Prologue

Late morning.

Over a vast stage, the stainless-steel proscenium shines out, reflecting audience members, and mirroring back their distorted faces and bodies. Reactions to the action on stage create a living set, and the tableau of unrecognizable emotions accompanies the story. The bare cherry hardwood stage floor, live sawn, exposes long, wide slabs of ancient trees with polished knots and growth rings. Projected onto the entire back wall, an image loop of various cross sections of the human body: skin, hair, heart, veins, organs. The sound of a steadily beating heart is projected into the audience.

A woman, CRONE, walks on stage wearing worn out black lululemons and a faded light blue, over-sized sweatshirt. She is wearing a mask, with large buggy eyes, hanging jowls, large beak nose and moles on its cheeks. She is eating from an oversize bag of Cheetos.

CRONE

I'm trying to understand the difference between soft skin and old skin. Soft, supple, especially that bit on the inside of a wrist, or the lower back. Then there's skin that droops and starts to fall off. It gets loose around your bones. Or skin that is dry and scaly, even when moisturized. What about old skin that is moist and smooth? Slippery and thin, but thicker than the peel of a boiled tomato. That's just a flap, a sheet of transparent red vinyl. This skin is denser; pinched between two fingers it holds worlds of sun, and rain, and cold, and touch. Snakes are wet, no not wet, moist. Are scales moist? A young boy once asked me, "why do you have scales on your legs?"

Four large square pillars rise out of the floor upstage. Perched on top are the body part characters. They are dressed in whites, browns, pinks and reds. Casting should be of cis-female, trans, and non-binary actors, of any age.

SKIN

Because you've stopped taking care of yourself!

BRAIN

Drop it.

SKIN

No, this neglect is disgraceful.

BRAIN

To whom?

SKIN

To me! I'm flaky. I used to be so smooth, and shiny. Admired. Now she only cares about our subcutaneous fat, which most certainly gets catered to.

CRONE *broadly*

Stop quarreling. We're fine. Snake legs are in this season.

SKIN

That's what you think.

CRONE

I am letting myself go, finally.

FOREHEAD

Look at me, I'm cracking. You rub me, stressed, and you flick white dead skin cells off me to blow away in the wind like fleeting snow. I need help. What happened to your whole evening

routine? Abandoned after so many years of dedication! Crisp cold liquid on cotton, the cucumber and aloe made me tight, stretched, and full, then silky cream, swipe, swipe, circle and swish, smiling eyes in the mirror.

EYES

She still smiles in the mirror.

FOREHEAD

Sure, glassy eyed, swaying smiles.

CRONE

Leave me alone, all of you! I'm enjoying these changes.

Lights fade out with the following recording. Reader, click on the link below. If you have printed this text, you will need to type it into your browser.

Audio - "Ladies, what's your complexion problem?" Palmolive Soap

Black out

O Hebe, goddess of eternal youth! Festooning woodland boughs and sweet vervain adorned these altars, nearby which she dug as many trenches. Then, when all was done, she slaughtered a black ram, and sprinkled with blood the thirsty trenches; after which she poured from rich carchesian goblets generous wine and warm milk, grateful to propitious Gods — the Deities of earth on whom she called — entreating, as she did so, Pluto, lord of ghostly shades, and ravished Proserpine, that they should not, in undue haste, deprive her patient's aged limbs of life.

Metamorphosis, Ovid.

As soon as consciousness breaks through sleep, Hebe opens her eyes, twirls swiftly on her butt, and hops out of bed. Quick steps to the bathroom for a long, furious pee, then the morning routine. She starts with facial yoga, which she began on her sixtieth birthday. The following exercises are her favourite and come highly recommend by *Ageless for More*, *Take me Down Studio*, and *The Weinstein Group* (now dispersed). Hebe knows the routine well, and she mouths the instructions to herself in the mirror.

The Cheek Lifter

Happy Cheeks Sculpting

1. Smile! with your lips pursed together so your cracking teeth don't show.
2. Focus on smiling with the corners of your mouth. This forces your flaccid cheeks up.
3. Put your fingers at the corners of your mouth.
4. Slide your fingers to the tops of your cheekbones.
5. Hold for 20 seconds.
6. Relax and then repeat.

Eyebrow Lifter

1. Press three bony fingertips from each hand under each eyebrow to force your eyes open.
2. Smile and try to push your now inexistent eyebrows down.
3. Close your eyes and roll your eyeballs up.
4. Hold for 20 seconds.

5. Repeat.

Jowls Reducing Facial Workout

1. Press your filthy tongue up onto the top palette.
2. Clench your teeth.
3. Grab your turkey neck, and pull the skin to the right, then to the left, slowly for 30 seconds, twenty-six times.
4. Repeat.

Forehead Mobility Training

1. Massage your furrowed forehead.
2. Stretch the skin away from the centerline.
3. Pinch the skin between two fingers.
4. Repeat until you feel faint.

Hebe then drinks two cups of warm water. Heated in the kettle, not warmed from the tap or the microwave. Next her supplements: Collagen, Resveratrol, Creatine, Calcium, Vitamin D, B12, Omega3, Magnesium. Followed by one ripe banana peel applied to forehead and cheeks for thirty minutes. Finally, 10X mirror-mirror on the wall to pluck, pluck, pluck the hairs on her chinny chin, chin.

***

Hebe's results came back today: cholesterol great, blood pressure perfect, T-cells awesome, heart rate solid, oxygen levels strong. At seventy-two, salubrity reigns. Looking close into the magnifying mirror, breath fogs her reflection, "I'm done with life." If Hebe was brave, she'd do MAID. Call MAID. Have MAID done, or whatever it is that happens when the very generous government helps you die. But she won't. She'll muddle through and count a few more sunsets. And she won't let herself go, she's as stylish as ever and looks gorgeous. It is okay to want to stay thin you know.

While blow drying her hair, Hebe's arms get heavy. They ache as she holds up the hot straightener for so long. Pull tug, slide. Press. Sizzle. Pull tug, slide, press sizzle, spritz. When opened, the mirrored bathroom cupboard wiped clean of steamy bath dew, exposes innumerable bottles, coloured plastic with fancy branded fonts and gilded logos. Some are long and thin, and the higher-end products are oval and pear-shaped. Stretched clear vials filled with golden serums advertising ingredients from far-off, inaccessible destinations. The fibres extracted from the filaments of the husks of the garum nut harvested in the remote, pristine isles of who knows where. These are the only ones that work for Hebe, and she buys multiples of the same, in case they are discontinued. That's happened before, many times, and she was desperate, forced to try a new moisturizer, skin toner, make-up remover, hair detangler, heat protector, volumizer, or shine serum. She stocks up now on everything.

Outside, the late summer sun shines cold. Hebe pulls up the collar of her starched white button-down, and fluffs her fingers through her thin, freshly straightened, 069 Medium Champagne hair. She's a bit late to meet her daughter Aurora. She'd done three extra reps of facial yoga wanting to look her best. It was worth it; she's glowing. Then she couldn't find her house keys. They weren't in her bag, or the buffet in the front hall. After ten minutes of searching, she finally found them in the fridge of all places. She's preoccupied with their fight. Aurora's comment still stings. She was way out of line, and they haven't spoken since. It's innefeble. Innefable? *Ineffable*, that her daughter could be so cruel. Hebe has not 'succumbed to the beauty machine' as Aurora put it. Nor has she ruined her face. She might be trying to help, but Hebe's not hideous. She is her proud self and looks fabulous in her favorite jeans that still fit.

Act I. CRONE's morning routine.

CRONE lies on a double bed, center stage. She is curled in a foetal position and looks out an imagined window at the audience. The body parts look down from their pillars in silence.

CRONE

That light's lovely, shining off those cars…the shadows form sidewalk wheels. The leaves are losing their luster. My underwear smells a bit. It might be stinking through my pants…What should I make for dinner? There's hamburger in the fridge, and garlic. I think I have zucchini too, maybe onions. No canned tomatoes. Shit. Maybe I've got some passata? I've got black beans don't know why. And Ramen, and oatmeal and that blue Tupperware. Where is the lid? It can't be lost. Maybe I threw it out? Nah. I've got lots of red wine.

BLADDER

Get up.

CRONE

No.

LEGS

Stay in bed, then.

CRONE

Yup. I'm going through my cupboards. Keeps the brain sharp.

BRAIN

True.

HEART

You're wasting the day.

CRONE

Fuck off.

BRAIN laughs.

LEGS

At least do some mattress stretches please, I'm cramping up.

CRONE

Ugh, fine.

CRONE yawns, the sound echoes throughout the audience, making everyone yawn in contagious unison. CRONE wriggles on the mattress as LEGS narrates her movements.

LEGS

Good, point your toes now, point and flex, point and flex. A few more, no? Please?

CRONE

No more. I've wasted too much of my life exercising. No more. But I'll get up, I need to pee.

LEGS *describing CRONE's laborious journey out of bed*

Here we go then. Arms and poor Wrists push Torso up. Back arches tense and, ouch, we swing out off the edge of the bed. C'mon help me here Belly, pull in. We're the ones going to be taking it all on now, and we need some support to get going. Knees bend, and yes, dreaded contact with floor is imminent. No going back, and up we go. Agonizing pressure on the soles of Feet. Calcaneus accepts the transfer with gritted marrow yearning for eternal retirement. Calcaneus transfers her body weight the ground. Crone you're so heavy now! Pain sears into Plantar Aspect and Heel when you stand!

CRONE

Deal with it.

LEGS

Tingling pins make Ankle throb, and Tibialis Anterior's pulled pointedly, suffering the same torture of her ancestors, stretched on the Rack for witchcraft and rejecting innocence. The trauma's still in our bones and joints. Memories of the crimes against us. We're vertical logs, slowly scissoring from the bed to the bathroom. A decrepit, aged terminator making its way into battle, back of the line, no longer useful on the front. Or Optimus Prime, unable…

CRONE *walking painfully across the stage.*

Transformers? Really, how do get from tortured witches, to logs, to transformers? This complaining through metaphor is getting out of hand. Just help me to walk will you please?

LEGS *ignoring her.*

Or Optimus Prime, unable to click clack swift shift back from human form into the sleek, powerful, fast-wheeling Mac Truck, saviour to all. With every awkward step, Head, Arms, and Torso lean from side to side as we try to take the weight off each Foot. Extensor and Flexors are alert and stiff. Knees, doing their very best to encourage the lift. Navicular, Cuboid, and Cuneiform on both left and right, frail, and bitter, ready to snap.

LUNGS

Let me help.

CRONE's chest heaves as LUNGS open and close, stretching the diaphragm. CRONE continues slowly across stage left.

LEGS

We share our tasks with each step. We're walking on burning coals, with little hops all the way to the bathroom for you to relieve yourself Crone. If you had just stretched a bit longer, we would've been fine!

BLADDER

I can't hold it much longer! She put it off for so long. Hurry!

LEGS

I'm trying. It hurts.

HEART

She is failing us.

The body parts watch as CRONE painfully makes it off stage left. Sound of urinating fills the theatre, and BLADDER sighs with relief. CRONE enters stage left and crawls back into bed, sitting up.

CRONE

I have these strange, greyish-brown and black growths that pop up, everywhere on my body. On my legs and belly. Look. They're fascinating.

CRONE lifts her sweatshirt, exposing her stomach. Holding it up with her chin, she points to a myriad of spots, skin tags, barnacle growths and three thriving seborrheic kertosis on her upper rib cage. Seeing her arms, she holds them out, letting her shirt drop.

Look they're all over my forearms, and my wrists. The amount of moles and spots I have now is truly astounding. I used to look down at my wrists and my hands and feel pride that they were so thin and smooth. I'd flick my long fingers and turn my hand around admiring how delicate they were. My forearm tapered down into a love curve blossoming into hand. My rounded veins intertwined across metatarsals; their soft blood conduits married to the taught sleek bones. Now my treasured bracelets don't fit. My bloated wrists, practically as wide as my hands, overpower the jewelers craft like a metal fence clinging to a gnarled branch. Have you ever seen these? When conscientious, or lazy, city landscapers, tasked with clearing out overgrown roadside

vegetation, leave bits of tree behind in the fencing. Foliage and smaller twigs get sacrificed first. Then the stalworth, central trunk is destroyed, exposing the stump's rotten inside. Crumbling soft yellow fibres give way with the kick of a well-worn steel toed boot. That's surely why the city ordered the clearing. Young seedlings yield to their yanks and weedwhackers, yet the branches, wrists of older trees, have formed a lasting relationship with the fence, embedding themselves through to the sapwood. Sawed cleanly on each end, displaying multiple circles of lived winter, spring, summer, or fall…A*ll you have to do is caaalll.* They cling to those metal wires to avoid being shoved into the woodchipper. The wire incises into their textured bark like a thin bra strap into a flabby back. I don't wear those bracelets anymore.

WRISTS

You were healthier then.

CRONE

And you were fragile; remember the wobbly pain when I downward dogged. You could have snapped.

WRISTS

Well now we're bloated 'cause you don't care.

CRONE

Watch it. I'm finally choosing not to care SO much. What's unacceptable about that!?

BODY (all the characters in unison)

You are killing us.

CRONE

It's menopause. Leave me alone! I'm turning into a Billy goat.

HAIR

I enjoy showing up on different body parts. Saying hello to Chin.

CRONE curls up into a ball and pulls the bedcovers up over herself.

CRONE

I'm going to die anyway.

The following ads are projected on the back screen. As this commercial jingle plays:

Cut out the fat, get it right,

Just a swift slice and you'll be outta sight!

We'll get you the blade and a clean-up crew,

One quick chop and you'll be a younger you.

Three types of blades, all sanitized,

Cut out curve to an acceptable size.

Order today, don't you forget,

Treat yourself to an hourglass silhouette.



Figure 1Public Domain. Source : [Marisa Martino]



Figure 2 Public Domain. Source : Marisa Martino

Image from Children's Healthcare of Atlanta's Strong4Life campaign is projected.[1]

[1] Copyright request was made to Children's Health Atlanta (CHA) for use of the image of the young girl in the anti-obesity ad. CHA stated they no longer have talent rights to the image from the campaign. I contacted both NPR and author Kathy Lohr about the use of the image. They stated they were given approval to use the image at the time of publication in 2012.



[2]

Black out.

[2] Beiersdorf Canada Inc. rejected my copyright authorization request to use an advertisement for one of their Nivea anti-wrinkle creams. This image was generated in ChatGPT using the prompt “create an advertisement image for anti-wrinkle cream”. Then I further edited it using Canva.

Small salads, St. Pellegrino for Hebe, and a large chardonnay, Aurora's second, stand between mother and daughter. Neither has said much beyond commenting that the candied pecans are too soft, but the roasted butternut squash is lovely. Aurora keeps staring at her mother when she looks the other way. As though Hebe doesn't notice. She can feel her daughter's eyes scrutinizing her forehead and lips. Ridiculous really because her mum has been doing cosmetic treatments for years, and Aurora didn't notice a thing! Only after this last blepharoplasty and dermabrasion has she finally clued in and jumped on the natural aging bandwagon. Let's see how she feels about it when her own eyelids betray her. "Are you coming for Thanksgiving?" Hebe asks.

"Yes Mum, I told you last week."

"Oh, yes, yes, of course."

"How's the play going?" Aurora asks.

"Fine, thank you honey. The houses have been great. We're selling out."

"Well, I'm glad I got my ticket. I'll be there tonight." Aurora smiles.

"Really?"

"Mum?"

"Yes, I knew that. Did you read the review in the *Globe*?"

"I didn't. Was it good?" Aurora ventures delicately. She'd read the reviews from the *Globe*, and others, for Hebe's last production, a comedy at the Shaw Festival. They were far from glowing, with quips that really had nothing to do with the production like 'past her prime', 'aged out'. "They're praising it as brave," Hebe beams. "Calling it the best original Canadian work to come along in years."

"That's wonderful Mummy!"

"It is."

Silence again. Hebe takes a long gulp of her St. Pellegrino. She's going to be tired at the show tonight. Aurora has stopped staring and picks at her salad instead. Lightly sliding the dried cranberries off to the side, trying not to make the irksome sound that her mum hates of the knife scraping the plate. Stupid girl. Cranberries are brain food; she should know that. Hebe has shared the updated brain healthy food guide with her many times. "I'm sorry about the other day." Aurora dares.

"Well, you should be."

"Fuck Mum," Aurora blurts. "Grow up!"

"Grow Up? Listen. You have no right to tell me how to live my life, or police what I should and should not do with my face. Freedom of choice, my dear. Women's rights are women's rights."

"You're seriously not comparing a face-lift to abortion? Can you possibly be more superficial? You look like a monster. Another species. It's not inter-racial marriages that are going to homogenate humans. It's surgery! And fillers, and Botox, and the goddamn never-ending media perpetuating the cycle of women buying into the cosmetic industry's propaganda! Mum, you should know better."

"Aurora, darling, you have no idea. I can't get old."

"You already are Mum. Face it." Aurora snaps, then takes a gulp of chardonnay. Not fair Aurora, low blow.

"I don't *feel* old." Hebe returns. "And when I do become that person who shuffles along, hunched and bent, incoherent, just shoot me."

"I know, you've been saying that since I was a kid."

"Have I? Well good then. Do not leave me in a chair somewhere drooling."

"Mum, I'm here for you. We have tons of time to figure that out!" Aurora blurts.

Hebe takes a large uncomfortable bite of salad. Aurora shifts in her seat. Now or never, Dear.

"Mum, do you remember, in the mornings before school, when you'd kneel in front of me, zipping up my coat, and beg, 'Aurora, make me promise you that I won't eat today'."

"Vaguely."

"What was I supposed to do with that Mum?"

"Yes, well you know how sorry I am that my eating habits have been hard for you."

"Hard?"

"Aurora, I had enormous pressure to be thin. It was my collateral."

"It took me years to understand why you only had a bowl of beef consommé for dinner."

"I was probably in a show, or auditioning."

"Probably."

They both look away. The restaurant's lunch crowd has emptied out. As the serving staff clear off the tables, the sound of plates clinking bounces off the chintz walls and the tinkling, contemporary chandeliers. Hebe feels tired and won't show it. Her feet are starting to swell, and they have been sitting for long enough that it will be hard to stand, especially since she's in heels. She'd never be caught dead in comfy granny shoes. "Your hair looks nice." Hebe smiles. "Really? I thought you wouldn't like it." Scoffs Aurora sliding a lose strand behind her ear. "Well, it takes a while to get used to, and I do wonder if you'd be better off dyeing it, you know, for work."

"I'm a consultant mum. It's not advertising or your industry. It's better to have graying hair, shows I've got some wisdom. Gravitas."

Hebe stares at her daughter. She can't believe that her beautiful spring baby, born just before Easter, when the dark slushy snow sank into the soil exposing yellow and purple crocus, just turned fifty. "Well, I think you could cover the grey. It would liven your face up a bit."

"Because I look deathly?"

"Just not as youthful."

"Mum, youth is for children. That word loses all meaning and becomes reductive when used for anyone other than a toddler or a teenager! Can we not just coin another word to represent someone who is old, yet full of life? One that does not worship and cherish that time we are pressured to preserve. Shit Mum, you fight tooth and shellacked nail for eternal youth, and you are brainwashed by a society obsessed with outer beauty. Give me a word for old that venerates age without irony, or placation, or pity. A term that's not afraid of the future shortening. Where is the ontological commitment to shuffling feet and comfy shoes?"

"That's enough Aurora."

"Why? I'm sorry you're uncomfortable, but I'm sick of watching you transform yourself for nothing." Hebe stops listening. She pulls out a lipstick and compact from her purse. Swiftly applying a soft red, she puckers, and has a quick look at her hair in the tiny round mirror. Her call time is in two hours, and she'll need a nap for sure. Going straight to the theatre seems the best option, instead of all the way home and then out again later. It takes her ten minutes more than before to get anywhere lately. Hebe spots their server and mimes the 'check please!' sign with flourish. This bistro has been her lunch spot for over forty years. The server, a handsome young buck with bulbous biceps brings the check. "It's been a pleasure Ms. Geong."

“And delicious darling, thank you. Now, can you please tell me where your bathrooms are located?” Hebe asks.

“Mum, what are you talking about? They’re at the back.”

“Yes, yes, of course. Goodness Aurora, stop being so controlling.” Hebe pushes her chair back and as she walks to the bathroom adds, “Your treat today dear?”

Act 11. Late afternoon

CRONE is hanging upside down from the lighting grid by a long rope made of knotted sheets. Not starched hotel sheets, white and crisp, but thin old bed sheets, victims of pilling, with varied faded floral patterns. They threaten to drop her at any moment. The rope loops between her ankles and twirls her slowly round. Her hair is long and gray, stringy, greasy, and matted. The following recording plays:

Audio - "Dream girl, beautiful Lustre Cream girl."

Projected on the back screen is a hair dye colour chart, complete with pictures of hair samples. CRONE recites them aloud, one after the other.

CRONE

Natural Hair Colours: Light Ash Blonde, Light Blonde, Extra-Light Natural Blonde, Light Reddish Blonde, Light Golden Blonde, Light Beige Blonde, Medium Golden Blonde, Honey Butter, Beeline Honey, Medium Champagne, Butterscotch, Rich Auburn Blonde, Dark Golden Blonde, Dark Beige Blonde, Dark Natural Blonde, Light Cool Brown, Light Brown, Light Golden Brown, Intense Auburn, Light Auburn, True Red, Chocolate Brown, Dark Golden Brown, Medium Ash Brown, Reddish Blonde, Light Auburn, Light Reddish Brown, Medium Auburn, Medium Reddish Brown, Red Hot Cinnamon, Medium Natural Brown, Dark Reddish Brown, Dark Mahogany Brown, Dark Golden Brown, Deep Burgundy, Dark Brown, Soft Black, Mocha, Expresso, Jet Black.

Fun Colours to Cover Gray Hair: 101 Crystal Clear, 030 Ginger, 038 Sunrise Orange, 039 Orange Blaze, 046 Spiced Amber, 048 Honey Brown, 052 French Cognac, 056 Cajun Spice, 058 Cinnamon, 060 Truly Red, 064 Ruby Red, 068 Crimson, 069 Wild Cherry, 070 Raging Red, 071 Intense Red, 072 Paprika, 076 Copper Brown, 078 Rich Amber, 079 Burgundy Envy, 082 Pink Rose, 083 Fiesta Fuchsia, 085 Burgundy Bliss, 086 Raspberry Twist, 099 Magenta, 090 Lavender, 104 Sienna Brown, 112 Indigo Blue, 113 African Violet, 114 Violet Gem, 116 Purple Rage, 117 Aquamarine, 140 Neon Pink, 142 Pink Blush, 150 Platinum, 155 Titanium, 158 Mystic Gray, Cosmic Yellow, 163 Green Apple, 164 Electric Lime, 165 Clover, 168 Emerald, 172 Baby Blue, 174 Sapphire Bleu, 176 Ocean Blue, 186 Rich Eggplant, 190 Cotton Candy, 191 Fruit Punch, 192 Pink Petal, 193 Soft Lavender, 194 Sweet Mint, 195 Jade, 196 Sky Blue, 197 Periwinkle, 198 Powder Blue, 199, Luxe Blue.

The ‘Sparling Silvers’ website warns that hair colour lightening formulas damage hair and scalp. Be wary silver sisters and take care when highlighting or blending at home. For those brave enough to go gray, here are some popular shades: Snowy Gray, Silver Babylight, Transitional Gray, Hints of Blonde, Silver Curls, Mushroom Gray, Salt n’ Pepper, Antique Grey, Natural Shadow Rooting, Greige, Marble Gray, Platinum Gray, Smoky Gray, Elegant Gray.

CRONE continues to twirl as HAIR enters stage left and stops under her, stage center. The following images are projected in a loop in the back wall.



Figure 3 Public Domain. Source : [Gordon Hurd]



Figure 4 Public Domain. Source : Susan Grote

Contemporary adverstisements of grey hair coverage are also projected.

HAIR

What's my life cycle? Relatively short considering the amount of time my host kicks around. Most of me is dead, really. I'm alive for only a millimeter. It's neat. I'm alive *and* dead, both above and below the epidermis. Above, my shaft's a thin, flexible cylinder of non-living, keratinized epithelial cells. Ha! That's a mouthful. Below the epidermis, I'm alive! A follicle that enlarges at the base and forms the hair bulb. So, it doesn't hurt that much when I'm poisoned, just a numbing feeling. Poor Blood suffers the most. Hair dyes contain paraphenylene-diamine and, bear with me please as I get through pronouncing this list: naphthylamine, aromatic amino compounds (that one wasn't so bad), Phenylenediamines, Toluene diamines, Arsenic, Bismuth, Denatured alcohol (which is probably not half as bad as the amount of vodka Crone drinks), Lead, Mercury, Pyrogallol, and Silver. Silver Foxes! All these cause non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, leukemia, and bladder, uterine, and breast cancer and ovarian tumors, respiratory problems, allergies, and rashes. I won't even bore you with the hundreds of cases of intentional self-harm in developing countries, mainly in India and North Africa. Young girls gulping down bottles of 048 Honey Brown or 116 Purple Rage.

On one of the back pillars, BRAIN stands.

BRAIN

That's enough. Let's cut her down. I'm about to explode. I think they get the point.

HAIR

Fine then.

A large hot gust of air blows HAIR off the stage. The following jingle plays as CRONE is lowered down from the grid.

Audio – "Halo everybody, Halo!"

She crumples onto the floor, stage center. As she speaks, she removes the rope from her ankles.

CRONE

Is it so hard to believe that I no longer care about young and gorgeous? My spirit's thriving.

BRAIN

Is it?

CRONE

Doctors say it's better to have more weight on when you age, for padding. Anyway, through the fat, scaly skin, aching knuckles and bloating, I'm still the same person. Although the attendant at the Air Canada check-in didn't recognize me from my passport photo.

SKIN

That was rough.

CRONE

She doubted it was me! Balked shocked, laughed, she pulled the passport right up to her foundation caked face, then far away again, beside mine, comparing. I lifted my glasses, assuring, confident, *yes, that is me*. She said, 'really, wow, you've, uh, changed.' The photo is seven years old. Yeah, I've aged and gained weight. Let myself go, but it is still me. The passport photo was taken at the best place in Toronto. A wide, white room on the second floor of a shop in China Town. It's a father and son operation. No need for Shopper's Drugmart when you've got

this place. There are no windows, just big posters of black and white Paris and a glass display case with thousands of faces in little rectangles, discarded or left over prints from past customers. I hope they have all holidayed in memorable spots. Been issued their Visas, PR cards, and whatever else they were getting with a check list that required them to visit this hidden gem of a business. At the door, beside the blank wall stands a long mirror, in front of which a table displays an array of brushes, combs, elastics, bobbles, and barrettes at the clients' disposal. Do people make use of these offerings? I didn't. Just looked in the mirror, redid my up bun, smoothed out the runaway frizzles, put on a bit of lip balm and told the father I was ready. He is calmer than the son, though just as enthusiastic. They both play music. The son rocks out to 80's tunes, Queen, The Police, singing and dancing along as he takes the shot, adjusts it on the computer, then sends it to print on one of the three large white machines behind the glass display, behemoth descendants of *HAL 9000.* The father drifts along to Vivaldi or Telemann, as he works. As I said, a calmer experience. Their photoshopping techniques are the same though. For my 2012 passport, I was reluctant when the son said, 'Let's make it better' airbrushing out the few lines on my forehead, and beside my nose. Erasing the bags under my eyes. 'Are you sure that's allowed?' I put timidly, never one for conflict. 'Yes, yes, no one knows.' He grinned. *I waaant to break fre-ee, I want to breeeaak freee.* 'Okay.' I succumbed to my curiosity and loved the results on my polished face. A perfect passport photo - the reason this place is so popular.

Five years later, back again in 2017, and again not needing the follicle paraphernalia. I didn't even bother to look in the mirror. Frizzle, frizzle, letting myself further go. The father altered my face as well, making it younger, less defined. I didn't object, lulled by Lully. Who wants to be defined? I guess I do, but I'm conditioned by restorative hoop-la. He removed my flakes, and freckles, scars, and sags. There was no issue at the airport on that trip that I

remember. Why could that last Air Canada attendant not accept the digital woman in her hand as the same one standing at her counter? Was she worried about security, or simply stunned that someone could give up on themselves to that extent? I am not giving up on life. I'm giving up on idealized, unrealistic beauty.

BRAIN

Remember when we were all bundled up with a toque and ski jacket, and that salesperson came up and said, 'can I help you *sir*?'

SKIN

That's not the same, she looked like a man! People like to look good. Nothing wrong with that.

CRONE

If the consequences are that its normal, and even commonplace for a stranger to comment on my body, then there is something very wrong with that. I do not exist for their gaze. Really, why do you care what I look like? There are so many more vital and important things to consider. The state of my appearance is agonizingly superficial compared to every single other issue destroying this world.

HEART

Feeling good makes life easier.

CRONE

Resilience does not reside in a bottle of moisturizer, it lives in the moment I wake up each morning and say, oh well, here we go again.

Like in a stadium music concert, a live stream of CRONE is projected on the back screen. She begins dancing on stage, waltzing at first with an imaginary partner, and the larger-than-life video of her in real time gives the audience a close-up of her movements. The music speeds up

and CRONE's movements become more abstract. She lifts her shirt again, exposing the protruding belly. The camera focuses in on her face, her wrinkles, double chin, and imperfect skin. CRONE's movements quicken, and she continues to dance. The sound of a quickly beating heart booms loudly into the theatre. CRONE loses her balance now and then. She is out of breath. The body parts stand stiff on their pillars, then one by one they seize and spasm, twisting with pain. The movements reach a climax and all the body characters collapse.

Black out

The woods decay, the woods decay and fall,

The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,

Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath,

And after many a summer dies the swan.

Me only cruel immortality

Consumes; I wither slowly in thine arms.

Here at the quiet limit of the world,

A white-hair'd shadow roaming like a dream

The ever-silent spaces of the East,

Far-folded mists, and gleaming halls of morn.

Tithonus, Alfred, Lord Tennyson

The greenrooms backstage are large, and Hebe is grateful to have her own. At Shaw she shared with her twenty-year old stage partner. It was exhausting. There's about an hour before curtain, just enough time to put her face on. Literally. The director, who'd spent years roaming the French countryside in a caravan with a travelling theatre company is obsessed with masks. She wanted Hebe to lose herself completely to the part of Crone. The mask was created especially for her, a shrivelled thing made of silicone, papier mâché and real human hair. Hebe hates it.

She pulls on the mask, fixes the elastic under the matted wig, and stares at the old woman she has become in the mirror. It's best to do her breathing and vocal warm-ups while wearing Crone. The mouth and nostril holes are large enough to breath freely, yet the sound wheezes out, her voice transformed into a creature from beyond. As Hebe hums, buzzes and trills, she ponders

how nice it would be to get sick. Not just with a cold, or even a flu, but dying sick, doctor looking grave talking about the options sick. Her heart flutters. *Yes, doctor, I understand, cancer you say. Of the bowel, metastasized? Really, well then, how awful.* The release from the daily routine, from the long hours of life fills Hebe with an acute sense of relief. When does it stop? When will the small rolls in her belly no longer burn with shame? Do you know the movie *Se7en*? About the seven deadly sins, and the part about greed? The man was found with a pound of flesh cut out of his side. The serial killer made him kneel and tied his hands behind his back. He was on the floor of his office, and next to him was a double-pan scale. The balance tipped with one side filled with a pound of fat cut out of the man's side. An open red smile gaped out of his waist. 'One pound of flesh; no more, no less. No cartilage, no bone, but only flesh.' A punishment for greed, though it seems like more of an appropriate punishment for gluttony. The consequences of the sin of eating too much and not looking hot. For having your stomach bulge over your pants or stick out as far as your boobs. Just cut out that part of yourself. It's a punishment but also a remedy. It'll hurt and you'll look thin. C'mon, right?

A knock at Hebe's door. The Stage Manager opens it just a crack and pops her head in. She jumps a bit at the sight of Hebe in mask. It's always disconcerting to see Crone staring back at her. "It's your 10-minute call Ms. Geong"

"Thank you, Cassi."

"Uh, it's Alli, Ms. Geong."

"Yes, thank you, Alli."

"How are you feeling tonight?"

"What?"

"Are you alright?"

"What goddam business is that of yours?" Hebe snaps.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Geong, just asking." Alli shuts the door quickly and tip toes away. Little fuck. Who does she think she is? Hebe will be having a chat with the director about her after the show. She sighs and stands looking at herself in the full-length mirror across her dressing room. She arranges the fake belly and starts to run lines softly to herself. *I'm trying to understand the difference between soft skin and old skin. Soft, supple, especially that bit on the inside of a wrist, or the lower back. Then…*Hebe blanks…*inside of a wrist, or the lower back. Then…Then..Then…inside of a wrist, or the lower back. Then there's the skin that droops and starts to fall off.* She repeats it again, *Then…Then there's the skin that droops and starts to fall off. It gets loose around…*Blank. Hebe drops her head, and jumps up and down a bit, shaking out her arms. She tries to get the text back. She takes a deep breath to focus, but it's gone. Squinting her eyes, she looks for it, to visualize the words. There is nothing but a tense rise of tears in the back of her throat. She wants to scream. Where are the words? Her mind tries to pin down the text like an index finger poking at a bit of eggshell trapped in its translucent white. As soon as you think you have it pressed against the edge of the bowl, it slips out from under the pressure and slides away. Hebe stands very still. Then the tears fall. She stamps her feet, and clenches her fists, wailing in a tantrum of powerlessness.

Alli knocks sheepishly at the door, and shares from the other side, "It's curtain Ms. Geong."

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CRONE takes us out of the woods, and into our own fears.

Interview by Carmen Ochre

September 12, 2024.

We're cozy and warm in her Distillery District loft, despite the floor to ceiling windows exposing the bitter January day. The different living areas under the seventeen-foot ceilings are separated by heavy oak and tapestry screens. Piles of books teeter in every corner and colourful, grotesque face masks from the around the world peer down at me from the exposed brick walls. This Canadian icon, and internationally renowned director is as down to earth as they get. Leaning her pink and red bedazzled cane against the back of the couch, she serves me green tea in a set that's as mismatched as the mad hatter's. Bare foot, in gold lame pants, and a tight tee with embroidered pink flowers, she sneaks a suck on her vape before and after every one of my questions. This interview was hard to come by. At 76, the notoriously eccentric Jeannette Bertrand refuses to speak to the press in person, preferring to send her publicist out with carefully worded scripts. I didn't want to waste any time.

You haven't directed for over five years, even though your last production was both a critical and box-office success. What brought you back?

Crone did. I mean, like she really did. She reached out and literally grabbed me by the scruff and said, "get the fuck to it!'. Ha, seriously, I've been looking for a story like this, for a character like this, forever. Being a female director is often lonely, there still are not many of us around. And I just think it's time that we see what true vulnerability is, you know? What it is to be faced with decay and death, and to scream out, 'I don't care!' You know, to reject any beauty standard that's ever been shoved down your throat. I had to do it.

Many critics have questioned the use of the mask for Crone. Why cover the performer's face when you are trying to defend aging naturally?

'Aging naturally?' I'm sorry, but that's just bullshit. That statement's useful for advertising and cosmetics. Aging IS natural, and not some fabricated concept. We age. If someone wants to get Botox, and that's natural for them, then fine. Crone is not a mask; she's a reflection of our culture's fear of its own demise.

There has been some backlash about the choice of casting the very slim Hebe Geong and putting her in a fat suit, instead of simply using a bigger actor.

Someone who is really fat, you mean. You can say it. FAT. Hebe's an incredible performer, and her truth is visceral. A costume is a costume. People need to get over themselves. I understand, although I've never really struggled with weight issues myself. I see the pressure and can empathize. No one escapes it in the entertainment business. You've gotta look good, you know. For me, it is not about beauty; it's the spark. And if you're fat or thin, old or young, have a different type of face, and crooked teeth, that doesn't matter. It's that spark. And some might have it for

one role, and not for another. That's the great magic of theatre. Although the industry doesn't often see it that way.

The character of Crone, as she struggles with letting go of control, doesn't try to stop the aging process. What about you?

Is this interview about me or my play? Let me say this, I came across this story from the Smithsonian about a man in his late 70s who suddenly got rich and married a young woman. No surprises there. Anyway, he wanted a way to live longer and enjoy this fab new life but didn't know how, so he went to the doctor. The doctor said don't smoke, don't drink, don't eat fatty, processed foods, or meat. Eat less, steam, don't fry, rest, don't have sex." After hearing all this the old geezer asks, 'doc, if I do all this, will I live longer?' The doctor responds, 'I don't know if you'll live longer, but it will seem like an awfully long time.'

So, staying healthy to stop the aging process is no fun?

Well firstly there is no stopping it! And secondly, if you are doing all that work, diets, supplements, surgery, with nothing else that you're passionate about to fill your days, then yah, that's no fun. I've been in an out of retirement for years and my mantra has been, keep busy, keep moving, and keep learning. The body does get older, and you need to let the spirit age as well. Keeping a positive attitude helps.

The run for this production has been extended and there are rumours that it'll be remounted on Broadway. What do you want these audiences to walk away with?

Whatever they want.

Surely there is a larger message you want audiences, women, to take away from this play.

You know, if this production can carve out a small space away from all the media that reflects unrealistic images of youth and thinness, that's cool. If someone stops taking those images as symbols of prestige, happiness, love, and success, then I'm satisfied. Shit, over a lifetime we consume something like 600 ads per day. These ideals sink in deep, and we're only fulfilled when working our asses off trying to achieve them. Women are afraid of real, and of imaginary wrinkles, of cellulite, fupa, and muffin tops because age discrimination and romantic rejection exist. Remember my story about the old rich guy and the young wife? If we start exploring our real feelings, like Crone, and fulfilling our true needs, maybe we'll need less approval from this warped society. But hey truly, you know, go get Botox if it makes you feel healthy and happy, there's no judgement here.

CRONE, directed by Jeannette Bertrand, starring Hebe Geong is produced by Canadian Stage and runs until February 24th.

Act III

Evening. The moon is full. All body parts are on the back pillars, listening. CRONE stands still, looking out. She is in a hospital gown. There is a peripheral IV in her hand and the tube is wound up her arm like jewelry.

CRONE

Old age watches me like a little girl. Her legs dangling off the couch, kicking playfully. Her feet far from the tiled floor, ankles crossed, twist into each other. Her left big toe bends back and forth into the right foot's palm. Sliding playfully back and forth along its arch, serene sensations of dry on soft dry. Wrinkled, clean skin, red and pink. Clasped feet, toes pointing to the ceiling, then curling to the floor. Legs swiftly straightening, then knees bending, once an excited child, allowed into the living room with the guests, now close to the end of days, a woman, the host of guests, tiny, nimble, leader of all. Flicking feet, active alive.

She holds eternity. She's the only one who knows each story. The trauma of bleeding for the first time at the age of eight. Not knowing what it was because Mother didn't discuss such things. Needing to wash soiled clothes in the sink, in hiding. Or of being watched for the first time by men. Feeling them stare at the sensitive bobbles now popping out under our tee-shirts. Stories of being defined by our bodies, and needing to be seen, or of shying away from that gaze. Stories of finally feeling free, because once we're old and wrinkled, no one looks anymore. Of being able to flirt playfully without fear. Stories of needing to decide on hormone replacements in an undecided medical industry that has no idea because all the money goes to Viagra research.

Old age curls her little legs up under her, still watching. The hem of her dress pulled over her feet, tucked under her toes, babies warm in their crib. Her bright eyes smile wide below

sunken lids, and when her thought drops, textured cheeks ripple. The folds of soft flesh pull this way and that when she laughs, dancing dimples holding the history she keeps.

MIND

Invite her in.

CRONE

I'm not stopping her.

LEGS

She needs to be cared for.

CRONE

I'm done with caring.

MIND

She'll come anyway, and instead of delight, she'll bring more pain, more loss. Remember the apple doll you made with Gram? It took time and attention. To be peeled, then carved. Waiting as the flesh slowly lost life, vibrance. While it softened, it kept the integrity of its form, only caving in a little. The face, the smile, appeared as the precious moisture drained. She hugged into herself, protective of the newfound vulnerability. The tight skin, that crisp crack gone, replaced by a foam like matter, spongy but not porous, springing back to life with your touch.

CRONE

Then we twisted some wire from the shed into a stick figure body and sewed a long dress. Gram marveled at my small stiches. I was so proud as I pulled the needle in and out of the pattern we'd cut out of an old pillowcase.

A collage of apple doll faces is projected onto the back wall.



Figure 5 Reproduced with Permission. Brian Francis



Figure 6 Used with permission by Elisa Kleven, from the book THE APPLE DOLL



Figure 7 Fair game. Source: Fresh Plans

We pulled hair out of cotton batting and pierced through the spongy skull with black ball quilting pins for her shining eyes.

HANDS

You cared for her.

CRONE

For her, sure. She was worth it.

HANDS

So are you.

CRONE

Not so sure about that. And I'm tired of caring for myself. Look what happens when I let go. I'm rushed to the ER. It's a waste of time. I'll never be what is expected. And that dried apple doll is as stereotypical as the interfering mother-in-law.

SKIN

Crone, stop hiding behind the patriarchy. You can create your own expectations. You can find a balance between letting go and acceptance.

CRONE

It's a thin line.

BRAIN

And you won't always know which side you are on.

LEGS

Just stay attuned to us.

CRONE

A judgmental person has followed me across every decade.

BRAIN

Forgive her.

CRONE

She's just so annoying.

HAIR

She's been through some shit.

CRONE

Tell me about it.

MIND, LEGS, SKIN

Start by taking care of us again. Stop drinking so much. Stretch in the morning, take a walk, have a shower. Be with people. And chips, for dinner?

HEART stands tall on the pillar and begins to tense, squeezing her fists, all her muscles. Then starts pounding on her chest. CRONE starts breathing heavily.

CRONE

I've cooked healthy meals every day for me, husband, kids. One protein, one carb, two veg. Sixty-five thousand seven hundred meals. Shopping, prepping, putting up with requests, complaints, dishes. So many filthy, food encrusted dishes. Chips are easy. Everyone's gone now, living their own lives, and I am left with empty days and the fluttering glee of not having to plan what's for dinner. Chips are freedom!

The stage light shifts to a moonlight white. The pillars descend as CRONE makes her way downstage center.

***

Offstage, Alli watches from the wings as the body part characters ready themselves for the pillars to descend. She's calm. There have been no issues tonight, still she wants to get home. It's been a long and demanding run. She checks the volume on the headset and readies herself for the next set of cues. The last act is the most demanding technically with ten set cues, twenty-five lighting cues, and twenty sound cues. Jeannette Bertrand always works with the best lighting and set designers, but this show has been over the top. The body parts are standing still on the pillars.

Crone walks downstage and when Alli hears the verbal cue, 'Chips are freedom', she calls, "Warning."

"Warned." Responds the TD from up in the tech booth.

"Standby Pillar Q39."

"Standing."

"Pillar Q39, Go."

The four pillars sink slowly into the stage floor as the body parts breathe in unison. The audience watches in determined silence. Crone makes her way downstage and Alli waits until she arrives at her mark to call into the headset, "Warning."

"Warned." From the booth.

Crone, downstage center, looks out at the audience. When the pillars are at ground level, the Mind, Skin, Legs, Hair, and Heart characters walk downstage and circle around Crone, forming a chorus. They speak in unison. "Freedom is being able to take care of yourself." Alli calls into the headset, "Standby LX Q63 on Crone's line: *I'll take better care of us.*"

"Standing."

Crone does not move for a moment, then a soft mumbling drifts out from behind the mask. After a long pause, Crone shakes her shoulders back and forth as the mumbling gets louder. Suddenly, she grabs her head as her torso collapses forward. She stamps her feet and blurts out, "I'm trying to understand the difference between soft skin and old skin. Soft, supple, especially that bit on the inside of a wrist, or the lower back." Alli stares out at the stage confused. Crone, struggling, sticks her fingers up under her jaws and begins to peel off her face. "Then there's the skin that droops and starts to fall off." She calls more loudly. The audience sits motionless, holding its breath. Alli whispers into the headset, "What's going on?"

“Beats me.” The TD responds.

“Should I call curtain?” Alli asks.

“Wait.”

The body parts timidly look at each other, unsure what to do next. Crone writhes about and gasps, pulling at her sagging jowls and wrinkled skin, breathing heavily. When she finally manages to pull the entire mask and wig off, Hebe drops her arms by her side and stands panting. “Then there’s the skin that droops and starts to fall off.” She sways, taking a few slow steps, then sits on the edge of the stage, legs dangling. She takes the Crone mask and looks at it with a smile, cradling it in her arms like a baby doll. The body parts kneel beside her, and Hebe looks to them with wide eyes, discovering.

Aurora, in the third row, stands abruptly. She pushes passed the crossed legs, and steps over knees making her way frantically to the aisle. She runs up to the stage and puts her hands on her mother, trying to look into her eyes. “Mum?” Mind and Skin have come to sit beside Hebe, breaking out of character, they whisper, “Hebe, you okay? What’s going on?”

A moment of silence hangs in the theatre. Alli clenches her fists and calls sharply into her headset, “Black out!” The stage snaps into darkness. A brief silence hangs a moment before the explosive applause blasts through the theatre. The entire house leaps to its feet and resounding ‘bravas’’ are heard from all around.

On the edge of the stage, there is just enough light to see each other’s faces. “Mum, mummy. It’s me. It’s Aurora.” Hebe does not respond at first, then giggles at her daughter, “Aurora. What a lovely name. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

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