On Her Blindness

SUMMARY

The poem's speaker remembers that his mother couldn't stand being blind. People aren't supposed to say this, he reflects; people with disabilities are meant to conceal their terrible suffering.

The only people who get to speak up in public about their disabilities are the people who handle their pain stoically, or who manage to find some kind of pleasure in their struggles.

At dinner in a restaurant in Paris, the speaker's mother was having awful difficulty getting a forkful of food (*you* try spearing food on a fork in a dark room, the speaker tells the reader).

She confided to her son that her blindness felt hellish. If she didn't hold out hope that someone might discover a cure, she said, she'd kill herself.

The speaker doesn't remember what he said in response to that, but he knows it didn't feel helpful: all he could come up with was some trite consolation. He felt emotionally frozen.

Though the speaker's mother was miserable, she managed to hold onto her dignity, even when she was bouncing off walls like a bumper car. She'd never had a good sense of direction, and blindness didn't improve it. Her husband joked that she didn't have a good internal compass.

So she pretended not to care that she was blind, or made her blindness into a joke—or sometimes smilingly pretended that she could see things she couldn't see (when her grandkids wanted to show her a drawing or a toy, for instance).

What with all that pretending, her family began to forget that her vision had slowly deteriorated until she was fully blind.

Before then, she kept driving the old family car down narrow country lanes long after her eyesight had gotten bad.

She'd still go to museums and watch movies, even when she wasn't looking in the right direction.

The last week of her life—which was only two weeks ago, the speaker says—the weather was absolutely beautiful. The trees and the ground were bright with autumn leaves.

The speaker told his mother this when he visited her in the hospital, where she lay in bed so weak she couldn't move, staring blankly in front of her. She assured him that she knew how beautiful it was outside.

Now that she's dead, the speaker says, she's not any blinder than she was before—but now she can't pretend to see. In her coffin, her eyes were shut.

Her family could only do their best to believe that she was watching over them now that she was gone.

THEMES

DISABILITY, STOICISM, AND SUFFERING

"On Her Blindness" explores the way that people cope with disability—or don't. When the speaker's mother loses her sight, she finds it almost impossible to manage not just because her life is exceedingly difficult but because the world wants her to stoically, quietly bear her suffering. "One should hide the fact that catastrophic handicaps / Are hell," the speaker ironically remarks, observing that people *without* such handicaps are often too frightened to listen to what it's like to suffer from them. Disability, this poem suggests, is only made more difficult by the world's refusal to face the suffering and struggle it often entails.

Everything in the speaker's mother's life becomes difficult and painful after she loses her vision. Struggling to "find the food on her plate with her fork" and "bumping into walls like a dodgem" (a bumper car), she's left in constant humiliating frustration, embarrassed and unhappy. She's so miserable that, as she confides to her son, she feels sure she'd "bump [her]self off" (kill herself) if she didn't hold out hope of a cure.

Her struggle is only made more difficult by the world's insistence that people with "catastrophic handicaps" should set an example of cheerful stoicism. "One tends to hear / publicly from those who bear it / like a Roman," the speaker drily observes: in other words, the only stories of disability the wider world is interested in hearing are inspirational tales of persistence and good cheer in the face of unfathomable loss. The darker side of disability is just too sad and frightening for many able-bodied people to face.

The speaker's mother thus gets into the habit of behaving as if she's doing better than she is, even pretending she can still see to keep other people from being too uncomfortable. While this denial might help her to get by in the world in some ways, it also leaves her alone with her deeper pain.

The speaker's observations of his mother's life make him feel that people simply aren't ready to imagine the serious struggles and losses of disability. Such squeamishness, he suggests, puts an even bigger burden on the shoulders of those with disabilities.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-45

LOSS, PAIN, AND HELPLESSNESS

The poem's speaker mourns for his mother twice: first when she loses her sight, then again when she dies. Watching her struggle with everyday life to the point that she contemplates suicide, the speaker feels totally "inadequate" to support her in her pain. By the time she dies, the speaker can find consolation only in the idea that her eyesight might have been restored in an afterlife, so that she might be "watching, somewhere, in the end." In the face of some kinds of loss, the speaker reflects, people are utterly helpless: all that one can do is try to have hope that things might be different in another world.

As the speaker's mother struggles with daily life after her blindness, the speaker simply doesn't know what to do. When she confides in him that her life is "living hell, to be honest," and that she's been tempted to kill herself, all that he feels he can say is "the usual sop": empty consolations that make him feel "inadequate" and "locked-in," unable to reach out and meaningfully help her. It's deeply painful for him to watch her suffering; it's even more painful that he can't do anything about it.

His mother, of course, is just as helpless in the face of her blindness. All she feels she can do is pretend she can see better than she can so as not to make the people around her uncomfortable.

The only comfort the speaker can find in the situation comes after his mother has died, when her "eyelids [are] closed / In the coffin." She's "no more sightless" dead than alive, he reflects—but at least, in death, he and the rest of his family can try to "believe" that she's "watching, somewhere." Some losses, the poem thus suggests, simply can't be made less painful by anything on earth. Only the hope that there might be some kind of restoration or healing beyond death offers any kind of consolation.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-45

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-7

My mother could ...
... in the fight.

"On Her Blindness" begins bluntly:

> My mother could not bear being blind,
> to be honest. [...]

From the forceful alliterative /b/ sounds of "bear being blind" to the exasperated "to be honest," these words suggest that the speaker is fed up with *not* being honest. This will be a poem about his mother's blindness, yes, but also about how the wider world reacts to disability.

As the speaker remarks a moment later, "one shouldn't say" that anyone "can't bear" their disability. The world, he now knows, often simply isn't ready to hear that "catastrophic / handicaps are hell." Listen to the ironic tone of the speaker's parallelism here:

> [...] One shouldn't say it.
> One should hide the fact that catastrophic
> handicaps are hell; one tends to hear,
> publicly from those who bear it
> like a Roman [...]

All those little instructions about what "one" should or shouldn't do make it clear that the speaker is mocking a common attitude. The tone here suggests that much of the world thinks it simply isn't *polite* to admit to suffering deeply over a disability: such feelings, after all, make able-bodied people frightened and uncomfortable, forcing them to understand that one might not be totally all right after such a loss.

Therefore, the speaker notes, the only people with disabilities "one tends to hear" from in public are those who "bear it / like a Roman"—in other words, those who stay as stoic as a Stoic. And of course, "bear[ing] being blind" is exactly what the speaker just said his mother can't do; the repetition underscores her difficult predicament.

Right off the bat, then, the speaker's mother has *two* problems. Not only is she struggling with the devastating loss of her eyesight, but she can't even complain about it openly.

Here, readers might consider the poem's title, which alludes to John Milton's great sonnet "When I consider how my light is spent," also known as "On his blindness":

- In that poem, Milton laments that God gave him tremendous skill with poetry, then made him blind (and thus unable to write unassisted). He wonders why on earth this should be so.
- Eventually, he concludes that serving God faithfully means trusting that even doing nothing might be a kind of service, if patiently doing nothing is what God seems to want one to do. As Milton famously puts it: "They also serve who only stand and wait."

In other words, Milton comes to terms with his blindness through putting his trust in God. This poem's speaker and his mother will endure a similar struggle. While the speaker is clearly angry both at his mother's suffering and at the cultural demand that she keep a stiff upper lip, he and his mother will be

left with few options but to face what can't be helped.

The speaker will tell this story over the course of 23 stanzas of free verse, quiet and conversational as if he's confiding in a friend. Notice that, while the poem uses no rhyme scheme or meter, the speaker does neatly divide his lines into roughly even lengths, often through sharp enjambments. The careful-but-jarring rhythm this creates feels rather like the movements of a newly blind person feeling their way around a room, bumping into unseen obstacles and coming to sudden abrupt pauses.

LINES 7-11

She turned to ...
... a pitch-black room)

The speaker now recalls how his mother, unable to speak honestly about her blindness in most public places, confided in him about just how unhappy she was.

This memory takes place "in a Paris restaurant"—a place where one might expect to have a pretty good time. For the speaker's mother, though, even a Parisian dinner is just another trial. She struggles to "find[] / the food on the plate with her fork"; notice how the strong alliterative /f/ sounds there evoke repeated unsuccessful stabs.

The enjambments here feel similarly halting and awkward:

> [...] still not finding
> the food on the plate with her fork,
> or not so that it stayed on (try it
> in a pitch-black room)

Notice how those odd line breaks suggest uncertain, jarring movements: the fork aimed in the wrong place, the food escaping just as the mother is about to lift it to her lips.

Here, the speaker makes an aside to the reader, telling them that, if they want to imagine how difficult eating must have been for his mother, they should "try it / in a pitch-black room." That aside reveals his empathy. He's trying his best not just to look on in dismay at his mother's struggles, but to really imagine what it must be like for her, to put himself in her shoes; he asks his readers to do the same.

LINES 11-16

and whispered, ...
... the locked-in son.

At last, utterly frustrated, the mother leans in to whisper to her son:

> "It's living hell, to be honest Adam.
> If I gave up hope of a cure, I'd bump
> myself off." [...]

The repetitions here make it easy to see how deep an impression these grim words made on the speaker: the language highlighted above appeared back in the poem's first stanzas, when the *speaker* was telling readers the truth about his mother's suffering.

Notice, though, how complicated the tone is here. In a sense, the speaker's mother *is* being stoic. Even as she admits that she's suffering to the point that she'd consider suicide, her voice remains oddly casual, even darkly funny: to "bump [yourself] off," for instance, isn't what you'd call a somber description of suicide. The speaker's mother is serious about her pain, but doing her best to bear what she "[cannot] bear," too.

These lines also make it clear that the poem's speaker is the poet himself, Adam Thorpe. This, sadly, is a true story.

The speaker hardly knows what to do with his mother's confession that she's almost suicidally miserable. While he remembers the exact words *she* used, to the point that he could shape this poem around them, he can't "recall what [he] replied."

That's because it "must have been the usual sop": that is, it must have been some trite, meaningless consolation, totally "inadequate" to the situation. In this moment, the speaker touches on one of the things that makes it difficult for the able-bodied world to hear about the pain of a disability. There's only so much one can say in response to a confession of deep suffering.

The speaker feels personally responsible here, though, guilty for being "the locked-in son." That metaphor hints at a kind of irony. His mother is locked in by her blindness, but reaching out to him with openness and honesty; he's locked in by his inability to *respond* to her blindness (or her misery) helpfully.

This particular incident, then, stays with the speaker because it made him understand how much pain his mother was in—but also because it made him feel guilty and helpless.

LINES 17-22

She kept her ...
... laughed it off.

The speaker now turns from a specific memory of a difficult dinner in Paris to general memories about what his mother's life was like after she went blind. Once again, there's some dark humor here, a helpless laugh at an impossible situation.

While the speaker remembers that his mother "kept her dignity," he also remembers her "bumping into walls like a dodgem"—that is, like a bumper car—and getting teased by her husband, who joked that she'd *never* had much of a "built-in compass," even when she could see.

The simile of the dodgem car and the gentle teasing here suggest that, after all, everyone in the speaker's family *is*

learning to "bear it like a Roman," to take the mother's blindness in stride—perhaps simply because there's nothing else they *can* do besides sink into despair.

These lines characterize the speaker's family as affectionate and caring, but perhaps a little bit repressed, too. Like the consolations the speaker offered a few lines before, the father's jokes might at once be genuinely loving and "inadequate" to the situation.

Part of the difficulty of the mother's blindness, this passage hints, is that it means she's alone. No one can really reach her, and no one quite knows what to say. Blindness means her "sense / of direction" gets "cast / inward"; so does a *lot* of her emotional experience. The speaker knows that his mother is so miserable that she'd consider suicide if she didn't hold onto "hope of a cure." He thus knows, too, that when she "laugh[s...] off" her blindness with her family, she's only "pretend[ing]."

Though the speaker's mother might act as if she can "ignore the void," it's always there; other people, ironically enough, just don't want to see it.

LINES 23-28

Or saw things ...
... blank as stone.

Alone with her blindness, the speaker's mother did her best to behave as if nothing had changed, covering for other people's awkwardness or forgetfulness. Here, the poem's irony becomes especially clear: sighted people forget to "see" the mother's disability, metaphorically speaking.

Of course, in some cases that's understandable. The speaker remembers that his mother would smile and pretend to admire a grandchild's "latest drawing" or "new toy," a small illusion to keep her grandchildren happy and comfortable. However, she gets so good at this kind of pretending that the rest of her family begins to "forget, at times" that her eyesight is gone.

Consider the figurative language the speaker uses here:

> [...] we'd forget, at times, that the long,
> slow slide had finished in a vision
> as blank as stone [...]

The mother's vision, the metaphor of the "long, / slow slide" suggests, didn't vanish all at once. Rather, she had to endure her eyesight degrading bit by little bit. The /sl/ alliteration of the "slow slide" evokes a slippery process, as if the mother's vision were a cloth slowly but surely slipping off a table.

Finally, though, the mother is completely blind, with a nasty finality. The simile of "a vision / as blank as stone" paints a picture of blindness as dungeonlike and claustrophobic, like being forced to stare at the same stone wall forever. That stone's blankness might also suggest an uncarved tombstone, a grave that can't even be marked. After all, the mother doesn't have much chance to talk about her loss, and the people around her sometimes even forget that she can't see.

LINES 28-33

For instance, she'd ...
... the wrong way.

Pretending that she could still see, the speaker's mother wasn't just trying to keep her family comfortable. She was also trying to persuade herself that she wasn't as impaired as she was.

"Long after it was safe," the speaker recalls, she used to drive the family car, the familiar "old Lanchester," down windy country lanes. That recklessness suggests both the mother's denial and her concealed despair: perhaps part of her just didn't care too much whether she got in a crash.

She'd do plenty of less dangerous pretending, too. Listen to the speaker's asyndeton here:

> [...] She'd visit exhibitions, ||
> admire films, || sink into television
> while looking the wrong way.

By leaving out any concluding conjunction (like an "and" or an "or") from this list, the speaker creates a kind of verbal shrug: it's as if he could go on at length listing more and more things his mother pretended to see and enjoy. *This isn't the half of it*, he seems to say.

This list also draws attention to all the simple pleasures that the speaker's mother is locked out of. Her refusal to admit that she can't see a thing here begins to suggest both pride and desperation. She'd rather keep on *trying* to do what she can't than resign herself to her fate.

LINES 34-41

Her last week ...
... lovely out there."

The speaker now remembers another specific encounter between him and his mother: a day when he went to visit her in the hospital during "her last week alive." This, he says, was only "a fortnight back," two weeks ago. The poem, in other words, has been a painfully immediate kind of mourning, written while the shock of the mother's death was still fresh.

The speaker's imagery also suggests a vivid, recent memory:

> Her last week alive (a fortnight back)
> was golden weather, of course,
> the autumn trees around the hospital
> ablaze with colour, the ground royal
> with leaf-fall. [...]

This portrait of a gorgeous autumn day suggests richness, warmth, and wealth: metaphorically, the trees are "ablaze" like

a roaring fire, the ground is "royal[ly]" decked out in robes of leaves, the weather is "golden." This autumn day feels like a luxury, in other words. However, it's also an ordinary, accessible, democratic kind of luxury: sometimes, a truly beautiful day just comes along for everybody to enjoy.

That is, of course, if everybody can go out and enjoy it—which, enclosed in both her hospital room and her blindness, the speaker's mother can't. For a moment, the speaker forgets this, as he's been encouraged to by his mother's long years of pretending to see better than she can. He remembers that he "told her" how beautiful it was outside "as she sat too weak to move, staring / at nothing"—and that she gamely replied that she knew how "lovely" it was "out there." "Out there," of course, isn't just outside the hospital, but out there beyond the mother's eyes, in the visible world.

Here, the poem plays on the idea of what can't be said in its very shape. The speaker doesn't add, *And then I was overcome by guilt and sorrow for having added to my mother's burden by reminding her of all the ordinary pleasures she'd never enjoy again*; he doesn't need to. Instead, understatedly, he lets his description of this moment do all the talking here.

LINES 41-45

> *Dying has made ...*
> *... in the end.*

The speaker turns abruptly from his memories of his mother's last days to the days after her death. Dying, he observes, hasn't made her any blinder than she was—though "now she can't / pretend" to see.

There's a hint of humor in that idea, right alongside the speaker's grief. Just as the speaker's father joked that his wife had "no internal compass" even before she went blind, the speaker now deals with the sight of his mother "in the coffin" by making the mildest of jokes at her expense.

Once again, though, the speaker's humor also understatedly gets at something serious and almost too painful to say directly: the pure strangeness of grief. Even as the speaker sadly teases, he marvels that the known, loved person in the coffin truly can't ever open her eyes again.

That unchangeable fact, oddly enough, is what finally leads the speaker to a kind of hope. This whole poem has been about dealing with what can't be changed, whether through denial, humor, or an occasional quiet declaration of pure unhappiness. Now, dealing with death—the ultimate unchangeable thing—the speaker decides that it's "up to us," up to his family, to "believe / she was watching, somewhere, in the end."

In other words, his mother's death opens a tiny window of hope for the speaker and his family. Like many mourners before and since, they find themselves trying to believe that death might not have taken her away forever, but *healed* her: perhaps in an unknown afterlife somewhere, she's conscious and she sees.

This last line reaches back to the Milton sonnet the poem alludes to in its title. *That* poem's last line, remember, is "They also serve who only stand and wait"—a statement of resignation to God's will, but also, in its way, an expression of hope. Those who "wait" on God's command, after all, are ultimately waiting for Heaven.

Here, finally, the speaker takes on a similar task of resignation and belief, picking up the burden where his mother left it. It's "up to us to believe," he says: it takes a serious effort to hope that his mother might be in a better and happier place after her death. Perhaps it's not a belief that comes naturally to him.

However, an internal rhyme—the poem's first—supports the idea that the speaker has found at least some consolation in the thought that his mother's blindness might have ended with her death:

> [...] now she can't
> pretend. Her eyelids were closed
> in the coffin; it was up to us to believe
> she was watching, somewhere, in the end.

That tiny, unobtrusive flicker of rhyme also suggests the hope of some kind of rhyme (and reason) in the universe. The speaker's mother suffered terribly in ways that no one could really help her through. But perhaps, the grieving, loving, guilty speaker hopes, there might be a new kind of vision for her beyond the grave—and perhaps she's still "watching," still with him somehow.

POETIC DEVICES

ALLUSION

This poem's title alludes to John Milton's great sonnet "On his blindness" (also known as "When I consider how my light is spent"):

- In that sonnet, Milton laments that his blindness makes the great work he knows he's capable of nearly impossible. He wonders why on earth God would have given him his poetic talent only to prevent him from exercising it.
- Stoically, he concludes that his blindness has also forced him to trust in God, and to believe that "they also serve who only stand and wait." In other words, accepting his blindness means accepting that it's God's will for him and that people can be called to serve God by doing what appears to be nothing.
- (Of course, the blind Milton went on to complete his great work *Paradise Lost* by dictating it to his daughters, so perhaps he felt as if he'd stood and waited enough.)

"On Her Blindness," meanwhile, offers what at first seems an angrier, more despairing reading of a similar predicament. This poem's speaker (and his blind mother) don't think in terms of bravely accepting God's will. Rather, they protest, observing that "catastrophic / handicaps are hell" and that it's downright inhumane to expect newly blind people to stoically accept their lot in life (or to ignore them if they *don't* "bear it / like a Roman").

Nonetheless, the speaker's mother ends up taking on some Miltonish resolve, playing down her blindness so as not to make her family uncomfortable. The speaker, meanwhile, comes to admire her bravery even as his heart bleeds for her.

At the end of the poem, the speaker even tentatively reaches toward a hope not unrelated to Milton's: that death (and an afterlife) might possibly offer healing. Just as Milton might hope to better understand God's will in Heaven, the speaker feels it's "up to us to believe / she was watching, somewhere, in the end": that his mother's suffering was not the final word in her life.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-7:** "My mother could not bear being blind, / to be honest. One shouldn't say it. / One should hide the fact that catastrophic / handicaps are hell; one tends to hear, / publicly from those who bear it / like a Roman, or somehow find joy / in the fight."
- **Lines 41-45:** "Dying has made her / no more sightless, but now she can't / pretend. Her eyelids were closed / in the coffin; it was up to us to believe / she was watching, somewhere, in the end."

SIMILE

The speaker's similes frame his mother's dilemma in dark humor.

Early in the poem, the speaker observes that "one tends to hear, / publicly from those who bear [blindness] / like a Roman." To "bear it like a Roman" isn't just a simile that suggests blind people are meant to be as stoic about their suffering as an ancient Roman philosopher. It's also an idiom, an old cliché (especially in England, where this poem is set).

By using this line here, the speaker suggests that there's a lot of cultural pressure on his mother to keep a stiff upper lip and not complain about what is, after all, a devastating loss. Only those blind people who "bear it like a Roman" are allowed to speak about their experiences publicly.

Another simile finds a hopeless laugh in the mother's predicament:

> She kept her dignity, though, even when
> bumping into walls like a dodgem [...]

Here, the speaker's simile juxtaposes his mother's inner dignity with her outer predicament, in which she's bouncing off unseen walls like a "dodgem" car (known as a bumper car in the U.S.). The image of a fairground ride suggests that there's something bleakly funny about the situation—or that all the speaker and his mother can think to *do* in the face of her blindness is laugh, however hollowly.

The poem's final simile, however, is merely tragic. Toward the end of her life, the speaker recalls, his mother had lost so much of her eyesight that all she had left was "a vision / as blank as stone." That blank stone might evoke not just the flat darkness of the mother's eyesight, but an uncarved monument: a tombstone without a name, an image of all that couldn't be spoken about the mother's loss.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 5-6:** "those who bear it / like a Roman"
- **Lines 17-18:** "She kept her dignity, though, even when / bumping into walls like a dodgem"
- **Lines 27-28:** "a vision / as blank as stone"

IRONY

After declaring that his mother "could not bear being blind," the speaker drily remarks:

> [...] One shouldn't say it.
> One should hide the fact that catastrophic
> handicaps are hell; one tends to hear,
> publicly from those who bear it
> like a Roman, or somehow find joy
> in the fight. [...]

The formal little instructions here—"one shouldn't," "one should"—drip with irony:

- The speaker is mocking a cultural taboo that insists people who face a "catastrophic" disability should either be quiet about their pain or be stoic and inspirational about it.
- To express one's full grief and rage at such a devastating loss would be, in this framework, simply *impolite*: it would make able-bodied people too uncomfortable.
- By putting on a mock-polite voice here, the speaker suggests that a stiff upper lip simply isn't a fair, kind, or humane thing to expect from a person facing disability.

The poem also closes on an ironic note—but a different, gentler flavor of irony. When the speaker's mother dies, the speaker says, she's "no more sightless" than she was before. In fact, her death offers a crumb of hope that her vision might, in some mysterious way, have *returned*:

> [...] it was up to us to believe
> she was watching, somewhere, in the end.

The familiar, hopeful image of a dead loved one "watching" from an afterlife suggests that, ironically enough, the closed eyes of death might have restored the mother's sight.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-7:** "My mother could not bear being blind, / to be honest. One shouldn't say it. / One should hide the fact that catastrophic / handicaps are hell; one tends to hear, / publicly from those who bear it / like a Roman, or somehow find joy / in the fight."
- **Lines 41-45:** "Dying has made her / no more sightless, but now she can't / pretend. Her eyelids were closed / in the coffin; it was up to us to believe / she was watching, somewhere, in the end."

IMAGERY

A patch of autumnal imagery toward the end of the poem helps to convey all that the speaker's mother lost when she went blind.

When the speaker's mother was dying, the speaker recalls, it was gorgeous outside: "golden weather" had left "the autumn trees around the hospital / ablaze with colour" and the ground "royal / with leaf-fall," decked out like a monarch in red and gold.

The autumn was so beautiful, in fact, that the speaker told his mother how lovely it was in a moment of forgetfulness. The speaker could be "forgetting" more than one thing here:

- His mother has long pretended that she can see better than she can, so perhaps he's forgetting that she can't share his pleasure.
- Or perhaps he's forgetting that hearing about the beauty she can't see might bring her more pain than delight.

The speaker's mother replies kindly, agreeing that "it's lovely out there" even though she can't see it. This poignant moment reminds readers that, for the speaker's mother, the whole *world* is now "out there," closed off by her blindness as surely as the hospital walls close her off from the autumn day.

By painting a picture of the simple seasonal beauties his mother can no longer fully enjoy, then, the speaker emphasizes the depth of her loss.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 34-38:** "Her last week alive (a fortnight back) / was golden weather, of course, / the autumn trees around the hospital / ablaze with colour, the ground royal / with leaf-fall."

ALLITERATION

Dense alliteration gives the speaker's words force and music.

Listen, for example, to the patterns of alliteration in the first few lines of the poem:

> My mother could not bear being blind,
> to be honest. One shouldn't say it.
> One should hide the fact that catastrophic
> handicaps are hell; one tends to hear,

First, three /b/ sounds in a row bluntly introduce the mother's predicament and her pain: each /b/ in "bear being blind" feels as emphatic as a thump on a table. Then, a run of /h/ sounds links the "hell" of a serious "handicap" to the idea that blind people are meant to "hide" their suffering, since it's too uncomfortable for sighted people to "hear" about it.

And listen to the sibilant alliteration in the lines in which the speaker describes how his mother coped with her blindness. The speaker recalls how she pretended she:

> [...] saw things she couldn't see
> and smiled, as when the kids would offer
> [...]
> slow slide had finished in a vision
> as blank as stone.

Here, /s/ sounds link the lines in which the speaker's mother *pretends* she can see—with a loving "smile"—to the lines describing her actual, terrifying experience of feeling her vision fade away. Notice the evocative /sl/ alliteration of "slow slide," which suggests that the last vestiges of her vision go bit by bit, like a silk scarf slowly slipping off a table.

The speaker's choice of whispery /s/ sounds here suggests both sadness and secrecy: his poor mother endured a torturous experience quietly, trying not to disturb her loved ones with her pain.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "bear being blind"
- **Line 3:** "hide"
- **Line 4:** "handicaps," "hell," "hear"
- **Line 6:** "find"
- **Line 7:** "fight"
- **Line 8:** "finding"
- **Line 9:** "food," "fork"
- **Line 12:** "hell"
- **Line 13:** "hope"

- **Line 14:** “recall,” “replied”
- **Line 15:** “sop”
- **Line 16:** “son”
- **Line 17:** “dignity”
- **Line 18:** “dodgem”
- **Line 19:** “direction,” “cast”
- **Line 20:** “compass”
- **Line 23:** “saw,” “see”
- **Line 24:** “smiled”
- **Line 27:** “slow slide”
- **Line 28:** “stone”
- **Line 29:** “Lanchester”
- **Line 30:** “long”
- **Line 31:** “lanes”
- **Line 33:** “way”
- **Line 34:** “week”
- **Line 35:** “weather”
- **Line 36:** “around”
- **Line 37:** “ablaze”
- **Line 38:** “fall,” “forgetting”
- **Line 43:** “closed”
- **Line 44:** “coffin”

VOCABULARY

Bear it like a Roman (Lines 4-6) - To "bear it like a Roman" means to endure suffering stoically.

I'd bump myself off (Lines 13-14) - To "bump yourself off" is to kill yourself.

The usual sop (Lines 14-15) - In other words, trite, "soppy" (or sentimental) consolations.

Dodgem (Lines 17-18) - A bumper car (the fairground ride).

Fortnight (Line 34) - A period of two weeks.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"On Her Blindness" is written in free verse, without a rhyme scheme or meter. However, it does use a fairly firm structure. Of its 23 stanzas, 22 are built from two lines. The final stanza is a single line in which the speaker imagines that his mother, after her death, might still be "watching, somewhere, in the end," her sight restored in the afterlife.

All those short, even stanzas feel careful, measured, and restrained, keeping the speaker's grief, guilt, and anger subdued and orderly. It's as if he, like his mother, is holding feelings back, not quite letting himself rage (or weep) about what happened to her.

METER

Written in free verse, "On Her Blindness" doesn't use a meter, giving the speaker's voice a quiet, everyday tone, as if he's reflecting on his mother's suffering in conversation with a friend.

However, the speaker does carefully keep every line of the poem about the same length *visually*, often using enjambments to break longer sentences into even pieces. This even, meticulous shape might evoke the way his mother had to move through the world: slowly, deliberately, steadily, trying hard not to bump into unseen obstacles. Perhaps this form suggests that the speaker is still trying to smooth an easy path for his mother even now that she's gone.

RHYME SCHEME

This free verse poem doesn't use a rhyme scheme. That choice fits in with the speaker's tone: his voice sounds conversational and everyday, as if he's confiding in the reader.

While there's no steady pattern of *rhyme* here, the speaker does use plenty of patterned *sounds*: alliteration and assonance weave a musical thread through the poem (as in the blunt /b/ alliteration of "My mother could not bear being blind" in the first line).

There's also a moment of subtle internal rhyme at the end of the poem:

> [...] but now she can't
> pretend. Her eyelids were closed
> in the coffin; it was up to us to believe
> she was watching, somewhere, in the end.

By including a single rhyme (albeit a buried one), the speaker hints at his own faint, uncertain hope that terrible and inexplicable pains—experiences without "rhyme or reason," one might say—might somehow be resolved in the afterlife.

SPEAKER

The poem's speaker is Adam Thorpe himself, telling the true story of his mother's disability and death. In this autobiographical poem, Thorpe lets readers in on his mother's pain over her blindness (and his own guilt that he couldn't do more to help her). However, he also maintains a quiet emotional distance from much of what he felt, letting poignant anecdotes about the way his mother used to pretend she could still see speak for themselves.

That reserved tone doesn't conceal either Thorpe's grief or his anger at a world that's only willing to hear the stories of people with disabilities if they're inspirational tales of people who endure their suffering with the stoicism of a "Roman" or "somehow find joy" in their troubles. Such an attitude, he

suggests, leaves those who *don't* feel totally stoic struggling under a double burden of pain and silence.

SETTING

Given that "On Her Blindness" is autobiographical, readers can assume that the poem is set in contemporary England—and, even more specifically, in Berkshire, the county where the speaker's mother lived. Thorpe paints a picture of a culture that demands a stiff upper lip even from those who are suffering dreadful losses. When he notes that "one shouldn't say" that blindness feels almost unendurable, his formal tone suggests that he's exasperatedly mocking a very British attitude toward pain: even when something unspeakably terrible has happened, one mustn't grumble!

The picture Thorpe paints of the "golden" autumnal countryside, though, also suggests that his mother's home is a beautiful place, making her blindness that much more poignant.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Adam Thorpe (1956-present) is a British writer, translator, and teacher. Over the course of his long and varied career, he's lived all over the world and written everything from poetry to novels to essays to radio plays.

Thorpe might be best known for his debut novel, *Ulverton* (1992), which tells the invented history of a small (imaginary) English village over the course of 300 years. Hilary Mantel once described the book as "a late-twentieth-century masterpiece." Since *Ulverton*, Thorpe has also found acclaim as a poet. He has published seven collections of poetry, much of it (like "On Her Blindness") autobiographical.

Thorpe often writes in reflective, conversational free verse, and remembers being inspired to begin writing poetry by the work of the influential 20th-century writer Ted Hughes. His interest in narrative poetry, however, draws on his childhood love of 19th-century storytelling poets like Robert Louis Stevenson and Walter de la Mare.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"On Her Blindness" tells the true story of Thorpe's mother's disability and death—a subject Thorpe often returns to in his poetry. This particular poem, besides memorializing Thorpe's mother's bravery and pain, records Thorpe's anger at a world that doesn't know how to cope with a loss as great as blindness.

When this poem appeared in the 2007 collection *Birds With a Broken Wing*, disability campaigners had earned many hard-fought legal rights, protections, and accommodations. But these were a long time coming:

- In the UK, for instance, the Royal National Institute for the Blind successfully demanded that political parties offer their manifestos in braille and audio forms—but only as recently as 1991.
- In the U.S., the Americans with Disabilities Act (which introduced anti-discrimination laws protecting people with handicaps) went into effect in 1990.
- A similar Disability Discrimination Act became UK law in 1995.

Even in a world that makes more accommodations for those with disabilities, the speaker observes, the *suffering* of disabled people remains taboo: "one shouldn't say" that blindness is "hell" if one wants to be listened to, it's just too uncomfortable for able-bodied people to hear. Disabilities, this poem suggests, are made doubly burdensome by the fear and incomprehension of the able-bodied world.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- An Interview with Thorpe — Read an interview with Thorpe in which he discusses his work as both a novelist and a poet. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/16/adam-thorpe-interview-ulverton-flight)
- A Brief Biography — Learn more about Thorpe's life and work via the British Council on Literature. (https://literature.britishcouncil.org/writer/adam-thorpe)
- More of Thorpe's Work — Read a selection of Thorpe's prose from Granta magazine. (https://granta.com/contributor/adam-thorpe/)
- Thorpe on Writing — Read an interview with Thorpe in which he describes how and why he writes. (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/oct/08/whyiwrite)

HOW TO CITE

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