

## THE HARD WORD BOX

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ALSO BY SARAH HESKETH

*Napoleon's Travelling Bookshelf* (Penned in the Margins, 2009)

# The Hard Word Box

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## INTRODUCTION

*“When you tell this story, make sure you tell it right.”*

It was my last day at Lady Elsie Finney House, and I was saying goodbye to some of the residents and K, a member of the care staff. Although initially confused about what a poet might be doing in a dementia care home, K had warmed to me over the nine months of my residency. She saw the value in trying to get the attention of the outside world on issues surrounding dementia. She had spoken honestly with me about how she wished she had more time to spend just chatting or doing activities with the people in her care, and she had made it clear how undervalued she felt – both by her own managers in the care sector, and by society as a whole. “Just remember us, and tell it right,” she said, and then went on dispensing medication, shunting her trolley around the day room. I nodded and smiled, the same way I had seen residents nod and smile, when they were told that it wasn’t time for lunch yet or that they couldn’t go home today: I had absolutely no idea how I could ever respond to her request.

For 20 weeks in 2013, I took an early train out of Euston each Friday morning, and spent the day at Lady Elsie Finney House in Preston. Lady Elsie Finney House is a secure residential care home, designed for people with dementia. It’s modelled on a New England clapboard farmhouse and there are three ‘wings’ – Willow, Saffron and Amber – each of which houses up to 15 people at a time. Each resident has their own room, plus access to a day room and bathrooms. Many of the residents are immobile and require moving in a hoist. Almost all require help going to the toilet or washing; a

small number no longer speak, or communicate only through facial expressions, physical movements and/or other noises.

I was there as part of an artist-in-residence programme with Age Concern Central Lancashire. Funded by Arts Council England, *Where the Hearts Is* was the first project of its kind in the UK: an artist-in-residence scheme that aimed to go beyond the usual approaches of art therapy. We were not there to help residents produce watercolours or embroider cushions. The project posed the question: what would happen if you placed practising contemporary artists in dementia care settings and asked them to create responses? We were encouraged to collaborate positively with the people we met, but not to make comfortable art. If we uncovered some difficult truths along the way, that would be ok. In the care sector, art is often used as a PR tool, or a way of putting a positive gloss on some dark situations. Age Concern and the project management team wanted us to “tell it right” as well, but what “right” might mean in these circumstances was largely up to us to discover.

To begin with, I felt at a real disadvantage compared to some of my fellow artists. Dance or painting — these were activities that already happened regularly in the centres we were visiting. People were comfortable with the idea of them, and they seemed to offer more obvious ways to get to know people. Poetry isn’t the most popular topic at the best of times, and for the residents I was working with, language was something difficult; something they now had to fight with; something, even, to be afraid of.

What I hadn’t anticipated was how quickly, when people are no longer trusted to speak for themselves, language and texts begin to accrue around them. One of the first things I had to do was

learn the language of care: people are 'service users'; looking after people is 'person-centred care'; you don't suffer from dementia, you are a person with dementia. Then I became fascinated with the language of the care plans that are produced for each resident. These plans are meant to provide a record of a person's interests, their likes and dislikes, so that staff can develop a better understanding of the people in their care. The result was a strange set of profiles comprised of often random-seeming details. Just as people begin to struggle to articulate clearly who they are, a whole set of alternative identities are being created for them.

A number of poems in this book combine real phrases from these care plans with the actual words that people said to me. Some of these poems are found poems, taken from posters and instructions around the home. The poem 'Elizabeth' is made up of every word that Elizabeth said to me during my 20 visits. The three longer pieces are edited transcripts of interviews, and I'm incredibly grateful to George, Marlene and Angela for taking the time to tell me their stories.

When I first started working on *Where the Heart Is* I thought my job would be like that of an archaeologist. That I would help people to recover who they had been, and explore new ways to hang on to that. Instead, I realised what was most important, was not that Maureen used to like jazz, or that Bill had once been a butcher, but that Jack tells great jokes, Phyllis likes helping others to the table — that's who these people are now. They are still living their lives, and these lives are what need to be represented — in art, in policy, to families. Especially if the lives people are living in care are to change for the better.

A number of the residents died during the time I was visiting

Lady Elsie Finney House, including Ron, Angela and Elizabeth. It was a real privilege to spend time with people and their families at this point in their lives.

If the experience of reading this book is a little disorientating, then that is probably a good thing. If I learnt anything at all, it's that the experience of dementia is different for absolutely everybody; 'telling it right' would have been an impossible, and in some sense, pointless task. Here are some of the people I met. Here are some of the things we said. Sometimes there isn't anything else.

Sarah Hesketh

Discover more about the project at [wheretheheartispreston.tumblr.com](http://wheretheheartispreston.tumblr.com)

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My thanks also to my fellow artists in residence on the *Where the Heart Is* project: Chiara Ambrosio, Sarah Butler, Jennifer Essex and Liam Walker.

Special thanks and love to my family for their support, Hannah August for her editorial notes, David Clegg, without whom nothing would ever happen, Tom Chivers for his eternal patience, and Padraig Reidy for all the love and all the chicken.



For the residents of Lady Elsie Finney House, past and present.  
And for my grandma, who never has two eggs.



'... always the hard word box they wanted'

*Mimmermos: The Brainsex Paintings*, Anne Carson



*THE*  
Hard Word Box



## Service User Belongings on Admission

White knickers 10 pairs (named)  
Silk full body underskirt (named)  
Floral dressing gown pink and black (unnamed)  
Cardigans x2 pale blue (unnamed)

Handbag one dark large in size flowered pattern  
Hair brush x1 lilac handle smiley face

Toilet bag x1 lilac see-through contains:  
Toothbrush and case x1 clear plastic  
Toothpaste x1 small tube fresh mint  
Soap in clear case x1 Plus comb

Handkerchiefs x3 white (unnamed)  
Dresses x2 blue patterned (unnamed)  
2 x flannel one pink one blue

Tights x5 pairs nude  
Shoes x1 pair black

Kit Kat x3 packs and bars  
Television chair x1 brown

Suitcase x1 small red

Pictures x4: 2 cream frames  
1 silver 1 black

## Spoons

Spoons break up the day.  
Yes. No. Out of mouths  
wedged in the spaces  
between who and when. In  
bookshelves and along  
windowsills, bright slugs  
who came in for the night.  
Such shiny visitors,  
they give us back to ourselves,  
our faces strangely curved.  
Small windows into tiny worlds  
we hold to impossible angles.