



Source: Robin Wright and Michael Abramowitz, 'Bush ditches top brass in Iraq rethink', *Washington Post* in *The Age* online, 06/01/07.

Tags: [celebrations](#), [death](#), [corporeality](#), [child/parent](#)

Writer/s: [Annemaree Dalziel](#)

© 2008 Barbara Campbell and the writer/s

"What will you say?" he repeated.

"Say?" she replied.

"You'll have to speak," he said.

They had been talking about tomorrow's Christmas lunch. Her great uncle was coming, still sharp as a tack at ninety-seven and certain to demand three beers and as many cups of tea as the afternoon required. She was puzzled. She knew his question did not mean that kind of speaking. Words were moving quite freely between them.

"At Christmas?"

As she asked she wondered what he was after. No one in her family ever made speeches at Christmas. Only at weddings, or funerals, or special anniversaries. Special Occasions. Before he could reply she added, "What good are speeches anyway? They're just an excuse to hold the floor and bore everyone silly."

"They change things. Remind us of what really matters."

"But why at Christmas?"

"No, not at Christmas, at his funeral, when he goes."

Her uncle must be wondering how many more Christmases he would see. Perhaps he was thinking about his funeral: after all, he had been to enough of them by now. But was she ready for this?

"Why me?" she asked.

"Why not? After all," he said, "Ank might make it to a hundred. Think of what you could say."

He looked at her, expectant. How could she refuse? He is speculating, she thought, asking me to prepare.

"Just think about it," he said. At that, he left the room.

She gathered her thoughts.

They had scattered before his questions and the look on his face. Why now? She wondered.

A hundred, she thought, a hundred things about Ank scattered over the horizon. She sought to take stock of their unruly flight, bring them together. She strained her senses to catch drifting thoughts, bring images to mind. Some travelled far from view leaving a retinal trace that lingered, tantalizing promise of invisible words. They did not even whisper and she could not hear a thing. One brushed against her side and slipped from her grasp.

She let her mind drift out over memory, dragnet its gullies.

She recalled Ank's hands. His bones were elegant and true, his joints unmoved and slim. She and her father shared his square palm and long fingers. Her son had inherited them too, the likeness emerging as his bones

became adult. But the old man's hands resembled the boy's hands more than hers. In the boy's hands, the whiteness of youth remained unchallenged. Her hands, her father's too, were knobbly, coloured and wrinkled from work, sun, life. The old man had smooth white skin with no blotches. His thin skin drew firm over his skull without a wrinkle or a spot. The only hint of time was a growing transparency that revealed blue veins and the pretence of idleness, as though he had worn chicken skin gloves most of the time. From a little distance, in stillness, his hands might be those of the boy.

Where were the traces of his work? She knew that he had been a dairy farmer till fifty and built fences for the railway for fifteen years after that. Did he always wear a hat and gloves? Would her son's hands remain so unmarked?

She remembered his baby hands making paper cranes, little hands with little hint yet of the milky whiteness to come. They were flying down for her grandmother's funeral. Grandma Kate was Ank's big sister. Kate died at ninety-three, only able to let go when the doctor said her circulation was getting so bad they would have to take off her legs. She took her legs to the grave: laid out in Virgin Mary robes, her tiny, fine polished ankles protruded and her gnarly old hands gripped her rosary beads tight. Red paper cranes flashed on her pillow.

A vagrant thought had flashed past, but hid like a sneak. Traitor, she thought. She knew she shouldn't reveal this one yet. She left it to lurk.

Death revealed the incredible toughness of Kate's character, written stark on her face. Unlined or not, Ank's tiny ankles and bony face are similar. The fragility belying tenacity and endurance, only the surface is unmarked. This is what she might speak about.

She returns to the traitorous thought, but not while her grandmother might hear.

In such a Catholic presence, no one could talk about the lack of lines in her elderly brother's face: not a granddaughter anyway.

Sex.

Ank did not marry until he was over 60. His very happy marriage was short and left him with inherited children, grandchildren and the skin of his youth. Sex and all the releases that it brings had not stolen his youthful skin. Children and all that life force passed down generations were his by marriage, not sex.

She knew if she asked Ank he would tell her it was the beer. Or gambling. Or laugh at her a tiny bit stony-eyed and leave her wondering about genetics.

Left to her own thoughts, she had decided it was sex.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Annemaree Dalziel.*