Look Closer

What do you see, nurses, what do you see?
Are you thinking when you are looking at me,
A crabbed old woman, not very wise,
Uncertain of habit, with far-away eyes,
Who dribbles her food and makes no reply,
When you say in a loud voice, “I do wish you’d try,”
Who seems not to notice the things that you do,
And forever is losing a stocking or shoe,
Who, quite unresisting, lets you do as you will.
With bathing and feeding, the long day to fill?
Is that what you’re thinking, is that what you see?
Then open your eyes, you’re not looking at me.
I’ll tell you who I am as I sit here so still,
As I move at your bidding, as I eat at your will,
I’m a small child of ten with a father and mother,
Brothers and sisters, who love one another,
A young girl of sixteen with wings on her feet,
Dreaming that soon a true lover she’ll meet;
A bride now at twenty—my heart gives a leap,
Remembering the vows that I promised to keep;
At twenty-five now I have young of my own,
Who need me to build a secure, happy home;
A woman of thirty, my young now grow fast,
Bound to each other with ties that should last;
At forty my young sons will soon all be gone,
But my man stays beside me to see I don’t mourn;
At fifty once more babies play round my knee
Again we know children, my loved one and me.

Dark days are upon me, my husband is dead,
I look at the future, I shudder with dread,
For my young are all busy with young of their own,
And I think of the years and the love that I’ve known.
I’m an old woman now and nature is cruel,
’Tis her jest to make old age look like a fool.
The body it crumbles, grace and vigour depart,
There now is a stone where I once had a heart.
But inside this old carcass a young girl still dwells,
And now and again my battered heart swells.
I remember the joys, I remember the pain.
And I’m loving and living life over again.

I think of the years all too few—gone too fast,
And accept the stark fact that nothing can last.
So open your eyes, nurses, open and see,
Not a crabbed old woman, look closer—see ME.

Phyllis McCormack

A Nurse’s Reply

What do you see, you ask, what do we see?
Yes, we are thinking when looking at thee!
We may seem to be hard when we hurry and fuss,
But there’s many of you, and too few of us.
We would like far more time to sit by you and talk,
To bathe you and feed you and help you to walk,
To hear of your lives and the things you have done;
Your childhood, your husband, your daughter, your son.
But time is against us, there’s too much to do—
Patients too many, and nurses too few.
We grieve when we see you so sad and alone,
With nobody near you, no friends of your own.
We feel all your pain, and know of your fear.
That nobody cares now your end is so near.

But nurses are people with feelings as well,
And when we’re together you’ll often hear tell
Of the dearest old Gran in the very end bed,
And the lovely old Dad, and the things that he said.
We speak with compassion and love, and feel sad
When we think of your lives and the joy that you’ve had.
When the time has arrived for you to depart,
You leave us behind with an ache in our heart.

When you sleep the long sleep, no more worry or care,
There are other old people, and we must be there.
So please understand if we hurry and fuss—
There are many of you, and too few of us.

Liz Hogben

Since The Sunday Post printed “Look Closer” in
1973, it has appeared in magazines and newspapers all
over the world, and been read on radio and TV.
Over the years, thousands of people have asked for
copies of it, and of a poem written by a young nurse as a
reply to it.