

Owen Lewis's *Knock-knock*: The poetry of aging and cognitive loss

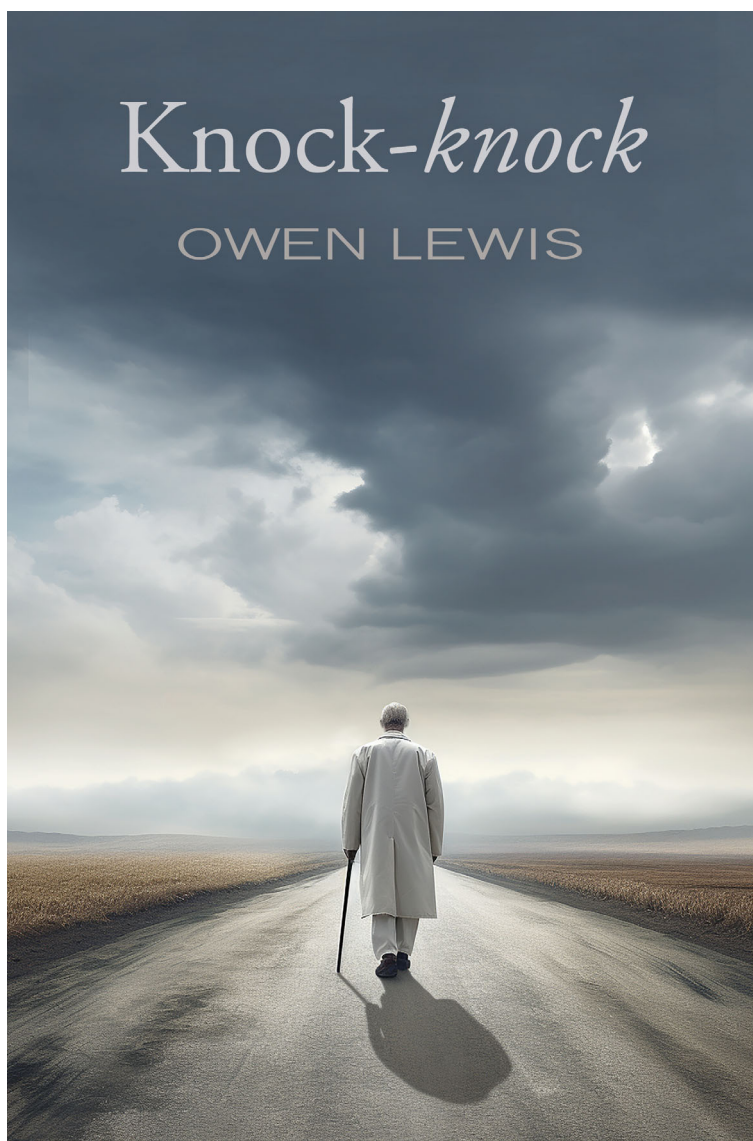
Robert C. Abrams MD

Department of Psychiatry, Weill Cornell Medicine, New York, New York, USA

Correspondence

Robert C. Abrams, Department of Psychiatry, Weill Cornell Medicine, Box 140, 525 E. 68th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA.

Email: rabrams@med.cornell.edu



Cover of *Knock-knock* by Owen Lewis. Cover art/design by Elizabeth Murphy. Reprinted with permission from Dos Madres Press.

[Correction added on 17 June 2024, after first online publication: Figure has been added.]

Knock-knock,¹ the latest book by physician-poet Owen Lewis, is a straightforward yet masterful collection of poems about the subjective experiences of aging and cognitive loss, including everything that these developments entail and portend. Insights into the emotional states of their patients are highly valued by geriatricians; to this end, the medium of poetry has a largely untapped potential to contribute. The poems in *Knock-knock* are in some ways specific to the persona created for this book, but otherwise they offer a relevant, generalizable account of how it actually feels to age, to decline cognitively, and to acknowledge what is taking place.

Before the book even begins, Shakespeare's concept of an equivocator in *Macbeth* is introduced as a kind of dedication. Soon its meaning becomes clear: When aging and cognitive loss are registered in one's consciousness, when even the most resistant can no longer deny their impact, the full truth can then become unbearable. At least some equivocation is justified. Faced with the prospect of the profound, irreversible losses of dementia, we are wont to deal in half-truths. No one believes a word of these half-truths, but for a moment the inevitable outcome is softened into ambiguity. The opening line of the book's first poem, "How I started to use a cane," begins with such an equivocation, if a benign one: "A day of almost rain."

Wherever it occurs, the metaphor of "knocking" is a worrying phenomenon, something that cannot be passed off as a "bad joke," like one of the Three Stooges bopping the head of another who had said something foolish; nor can "knocking" be dismissed as a parody of the conventional politeness of guests requesting entry to a celebration. Here, age-related declines in memory and concentration are among the unwelcome visitors seeking admittance, threatening an interruption of daily life and thought.

In the poems of *Knock-knock*, as in reality, reminders of such changes appear unexpectedly; the only certainty is that they will occur after progressively shorter intervals. Moreover, these menacing confusional interruptions, often accompanied by reactions of fear and shame, cannot be ignored because they are not always fleeting. The italic script of the second *knock* in the book's title, *Knock-knock*, reads as an echo, implying that the disruptive "guests" could eventually become permanent residents, as the character of Sheridan Whiteside schemes to do in the 1941 film, "The Man Who Came to Dinner." The second *knock* lingers for the reader, too.

The poems in *Knock-knock* focus not only on the events that signal cognitive decline but also on losses of function and identity. The emotional and real-world consequences are highlighted, beginning with the example of a new consciousness of uncertain gait. In the book's first poem, an older man—the central character—suddenly becomes attentive to something he had previously taken for granted, the ordinary act of walking:

I hadn't noticed at first,

The tap of the wooden end
on the sidewalk
just ahead of my right foot.

The motion, a natural
swing forward just ahead
of my right leg, sweet, easy--

In these lines the self-awareness of aging emerges over the course of an everyday stroll. What was once natural and automatic now calls for deliberation. The newly tentative quality of this man's gait becomes subtly evident in the way he relies on the percussive rhythm of his umbrella ("The tap of the wooden end/on the sidewalk") to keep moving. Next there is the need to reassure himself that all is well ("sweet, easy—"). The story of aging is written in the accumulation of small but milestone episodes like this one.

One of the most moving sequences in *Knock-knock* involves the abject humiliation of discovering the extent of one's loss of memory and concentration:

even as my daughter's name

my very own first-born's name
slips my mind, and I almost slip
from the sudden blank shock of it,

...

my mind can be anywhere at all.

Somehow, losing track of ordinary objects, especially in the aggregate, can be nearly as devastating as casting about for the name of one's first-born child. This is the topic of a poem in which the title, "I haven't imagined I've lost my scarf," bleeds seamlessly into the subsequent lines, the *enjambment* contributing to the plaintive mood and touch of irony:

I haven't imagined I've lost my scarf

then a coat, my phone, the book I am reading.

...

Where'd they go?

Lost and found
is not a planned
destination.

Here the "missing" objects are personified for the preservation of an older man's dignity. He is insisting that he has not lost these objects; that is a fact, he says, not

imagined. He disavows all responsibility for their disappearance and asserts that these inanimate things “went” somewhere on their own recognizance: “Where’d they go?” To a degree, such phenomena are universal in aging, but the poem ends on a note that is more consistent with moderately advanced dementia, whereby a formerly independent human person no longer retains the adult function of agency:

Who has decided
to put me out into the brisk
afternoon?

The title of the next poem, “When I’m not losing things,” re-establishes the true source of misplaced objects, the older man himself. But that admission is distressing. So the fantasy evolves in such a way that nothing can ever be completely lost now. Regarding missing items:

They’ve moved ahead
without so much as a knock. A prep-team
is stocking the next time zone.

Still, the idea of future time zones leads to an even darker line of thought. Here the person imagines himself to be one of those objects about to be moved passively into the future, into a care home—and beyond:

I wonder what time it is in the Care Home.

There they say I might need more care.
There.

The prospect of a living in a care home is found to be terrifying. This man now ponders the possibilities of escape via a “fugue state,” a concept that in psychiatric nosology combines elements of amnesia and flight from the environment.² He has the equivalent of amnesia, only it is not temporary, and he is incapable of flight. Wherever he finds himself, he is without an anchor, the once-dependable mental images of “home” becoming amorphous: “I don’t know where to/live when change is more than ever.”

Meanwhile, there are more knocks, more indignities, these aimed straight at the heart of the identities that bolster a person’s self-image. In this instance, the narrator’s daughter meets with his doctor while he remains outside:

(They ask me to step outside the office. Listening at the door. She’s telling the doctor things like I’m a misbehaving kid and he’s the bow-tied principal.)

He had once been a doctor himself, but is now decidedly a patient, feeling the same diminution of personal worth in a medical encounter as do the *hoi polloi*. The profusion of acronyms-become-verbs in contemporary medical practice sounds almost as strange to this former doctor as it would to the uninitiated: “*Echo him.*”

One bulwark against complete loss of identity is particularly demeaning: the embarrassing name tag his daughter insists that he display when she is not with him, a sad exchange for the stitched name in cursive script on the white coat he had once worn with pride.

Meanwhile, this man’s memories of his childhood home, his school, his teachers, and his religiously observant Jewish grandparents, are re-emerging with greater frequency than ever before. The flashbacks are startling because they seem unrelated to present concerns and are without obvious precipitants or context. But together they make sense as a compensatory effort to reaffirm identity at its deepest personal and cultural roots.

By the end many “knocks” have been endured, each one in some way about aging—an old man’s reliance on an umbrella or a cane, like a third leg tapping out the sounds of walking to sustain its forward movement; his chagrin at lapses of memory; his dismay at constantly losing things; or his alternating bursts of wakefulness, anxiety, and pain against a background of increasing vagueness about the self.

A pivotal scene is described in lines set in the dreaded care home, capturing a conversation between the central character and a fellow resident, a woman who also has signs of dementia. These words demonstrate how people, young or old, impaired or not, in settings conducive or unlikely, are able to find each other, to connect. Identity does not require a legible nametag; neither does friendship or love:

she asks what my name is I point
to the tag but my name’s already
a blue streak and I say that’s who and
she points to hers and laughs so much
there isn’t even a smear left on hers
and we become good friends.

That moment is intended to be transformative, and it is. Loneliness relieved, death can now be approached with an intrepid spirit, an equivocal almost-happiness:

I try to get myself ready,
give myself up...
The ride is gentle
into the pure and yonder,
the unclaimed

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Robert C. Abrams, MD is the sole author of this article and responsible for all contributions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Note: Spacing and indentation of the lines of poetry are presented as they appeared in the original publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

SPONSOR'S ROLE

N/A.

REFERENCES

1. Lewis O. *Knock-knock*. Dos Madres Press; 2024.
2. Stengel E. On the Aetiology of fugue states. *J Ment Sci*. 1941; 87(369):572-599. doi:[10.1192/bjp87.369.362](https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp87.369.362)

How to cite this article: Abrams RC. Owen Lewis's *Knock-knock*: The poetry of aging and cognitive loss. *J Am Geriatr Soc*. 2024;1-4. doi:[10.1111/jgs.18906](https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.18906)