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“You could scream the place down”: Five poems on the experience of aged care  
Miller, E\*., Donoghue, G., & Holland-Batt, S

Creative Industries Faculty

Queensland University of Technology

Contact\*: e.miller@qut.edu.au

**Author Biographies:** All authors are affiliated with the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology, Australia. Associate Professor Evonne Miller is an environmental psychologist and her current research in aged care is exploring the potential of creative arts and visual methodologies (photovoice, digital storytelling, poetry etc) as a means of data collection, analysis and dissemination. She is developing an interest in poetry writing, bringing to her work the unique trans-disciplinary perspective of someone trained in quantitative psychology, working in a design school and increasingly immersed in qualitative inquiry. Geraldine is a sociologist and Research Fellow in the School of Design, Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology. Her research focuses on the social dimensions of ageing and the ways in which creative methodologies can be used to explore the lived experience of older persons. Sarah Holland-Batt is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing and Literary Studies, and an award-winning poet, editor and critic. Her first book, *Aria* (UQP, 2008) was the recipient of a number of national literary awards, including the Arts A.C.T. Judith Wright Prize and the Thomas Shapcott Prize for Poetry.

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## **“You could scream the place down”: Five poems on aged care**

This article presents five poems constructed from interviews with older people adjusting to living in residential aged care. They are part of the “Inside Aged Care” project, on-going longitudinal phenomenological research tracking the lived experience of aged care from the perspective of residents, family members and service providers. Poetry, through the process of poetic transcription, provided an engaging, evocative and almost visceral way to help us appreciate what it might be like to be ageing in aged care. To date, despite a growing body of work documenting the importance and impact of research in the form of poetry, applying a literary lens is rare in gerontological research. At a very practical level, therefore, we hope these poems help older people, their families, students and those working in aged care better understand the unique world and perspective of new aged care residents.

**Key words:** aged care, ageing, poetry, poetic inquiry, research poems

**You could scream the place down**

My family said

I was too old

to be on my own,

that I needed organising.

You lose everything

you lose everything

to come in here.

You only have the barest minimum

there's not much here.

It is not nice, not nice at all.

It is not good for me.

I can't get out.

That's what you lose, when you come in.

All your independence is taken away from you.

I'm not able to do it myself.

That's very hard to take,

you get so frustrated at times

you could scream the place down

*Joy, Age 85*

### **Life's different, over 80**

Life's different

life's different

once you are over 80.

I have three children,

who have died

and my mother

and my husband, he died

my friends,

they are as old as me,

perhaps older

And I feel it's too late

to make new friends

you don't make a new friend at our age.

I didn't know

by coming into a nursing home

I didn't know, you don't realise,

what you are giving up—

freedom, I suppose.

Well, there's no control now.

I have to get a girl to come,

to put my shoes on

they shower me

and do everything for me.

I don't do anything now.

I don't want to be bothering people.

I don't know why they are putting up with me

they haven't got time

they haven't got time for intermittent listening.

No, television is the only thing I enjoy now.

I understand the television

I like to be left on my own.

*Jane, age 86*

## **Being 86**

I am 86 this year

I have been getting not so good

I can't do much, anyway.

I can't really go out at all.

I can't walk, I can sit

I can't write my own name

I can't even make a cup of tea

I would rather be healthy.

I wouldn't say "happy".

I didn't wet the bed when I came to live here.

I haven't really made friends with anybody.

I feel I need a bit of privacy

I would rather be in my own house

I am alright when I am on my own

I like a little chat like this, now and again.

*Jane, age 86*

**Can't pretend you are a teenager, can you?**

It was hard to begin with.

I have reached that age.

There were things I couldn't do

you know,

you have just got to realise

you can't pretend you are a teenager, can you?



Very pleased, in a way, to be here.

It's inevitable, really.

You are not a number here, you are an individual:

they are always there if you need them

they will give you time, if not too busy

they will sit down and have morning tea with you.

I am very happy with my room, now

I found it hard to begin with

it's a bit hard to leave the home you are in,

and to come to just the one room

but it's adequate, there's every facility.

On the whole, I couldn't complain,

you know, you have got a roof over your head for life.

I have been very fortunate

my eyesight is not as good as it used to be

my hearing aid is in the drawer.

But I can still move my hands,

I can still crochet.

I have outlived my friends

At my age, it could be tomorrow, couldn't it?

I just look forward to being alive tomorrow.

*Nancy, age 93*

### **You're taken care of**

You're taken care of.

I'm very satisfied

with my room.

I got me own furniture,

so why wouldn't I be?

It's just like my own home,

only I don't do no work.

I got me friends here,

I go to bingo,

I join in exercises,

I go for any walks,

I have a good family,

they take me places.

though I haven't been able

to find a nice man yet.

*Ethel, age 80*

These five poems provide rare, emotive insight into the experience of ageing and what life in a nursing home (termed residential aged care in Australia) is like for new residents. Drawing on interview transcripts from the “Inside Aged Care” project, ongoing longitudinal phenomenological research tracking the lived experience of aged care, these poems offer a highly effective yet little utilised way to convey and communicate the experience. The first three poems (“You could scream the place down”; “Life’s different, over 80” and “Being 86”) highlight the sometimes challenging reality of life as an older person in a communal aged care facility, while the last two poems (“Can’t pretend you are a teenager, can you” and “You’re taken care of”) reflect how some older people seem to be generally more positive and accepting of ageing in residential care.

#### *The emergence of poetry in qualitative social science research*

Gerontological researchers are only just beginning to realise the potential of poetry in a research context, although the arts-based research technique of poetic inquiry emerged in the

social sciences literature nearly two decades ago. At its simplest, poetic inquiry is a form of data analysis and representation whereby researchers create poems from interview transcripts, utilising participants' own words. These research poems, variously termed poetic transcription, found poetry, transcript poems and poetic representation (Butler-Kisber 2002; Glesne 1997; Luce-Kapler 2004; Richardson 2002), powerfully 'merge the tenets of qualitative research with the craft and rules of traditional poetry' (Leavy, 2009, p.64). Glesne argues that the creative process creates a third voice, which fuses the interviewees and researchers voices to provide a compressed poem that can 'introduce spirit, imagination and hope' (1997, p.214-215). As our five poems on the experience of aged care hopefully illustrate, the use of poetry to present qualitative data uniquely and powerfully 'connects with audiences on a deeper, more emotional level and thus can evoke compassion, empathy, and sympathy, as well as understanding' (Leavy, 2009, p.13). As Faulkner (2007) argues, poetry is a 'special language' that can engage, reach and resonate with more diverse audiences than traditional modes of research reporting.

The intuitive and reflexive process of creating research poems is described as 'creative, emergent, and changing' (Sparkes & Douglas 2007), with no strict rules or one 'how-to' guide. Fortunately, several researchers have documented, in detail, their process and learnings (e.g., Butler-Kisber, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Fitzpatrick, 2014; Prendergast, 2006; Walsh, 2006). The first step is similar to the data analysis choices and interpretation processes in other qualitative and quantitative approaches: a process of data reduction that begins with identifying the key central elements (Langer & Furman 2004; Kendall & Murray, 2005). Prendergast (2006) describes this as an intuitive sorting process that synthesizes metaphorical, narrative, and affective meaning, with Butler-Kisber (2002) explaining her nonlinear process of seeking out the most valuable 'nugget' words and phrases. The second

step is to create the poems. Whereas a poet purposely selects each word to evoke our senses, memories and imagination, research poets rely on their participants words, whose use of colourful imagery and engaging metaphors will vary depending on their individual speaking and communication style (Öhlen, 2003). Typically, research poetry is created from one participant's interview and utilises their exact words; the researcher will then apply poetic language, approaches and techniques – such as metaphor, rhythm, imagery, emotion, image, constraint, synthesis and lyrical forms – to create a poem from the research data. Although research poems are typically viewed as a form of narrative poetry, in that they tell a story, they are best viewed as lyric poetry, in that they are comparatively short poems that express personal and emotional feelings from a first-person point of view. Laurel Richardson (1997) clearly explains the difference: narrative poetry is about storytelling, whereas lyric poetry stresses emotion in a shorter, condensed form. The lyric poem allows us to stand behind, stand before, stand beside and inhabit the voice of its speaker (Stewart, 1995, 36), allowing the reader to experience some imaginative and empathetic identification with the speaker. In terms of the actual presentation, Öhlen (2003) suggests two main approaches: letting the poetry speak for itself or also providing a standard qualitative interpretation.

At this juncture, it is important to acknowledge that the poetic quality of these research poems varies. On one hand, researchers such as Piirto (2002) and Neilsen (2004) query both the poetic qualifications of the researchers and the quality of the poems. They suggest that much of the poetry written by social science researchers is inferior and would not meet literary standards, written by poetasters – that is, incompetent poets (Harmon & Holman 1996). As Faulkner (2007) provocatively notes, she is 'tired of reading and listening to lousy poetry that masquerades as research and vice versa' (p.220); the answer, she explains, is for social science researchers to prioritise learning, applying and engaging in the craft and art of

poetry, *ars poetica*. Faulkner (2007) proposes six criteria, blending artistic and scientific concerns for evaluating research poetry: artistic concentration, embodied experience, discovery and/or surprise, conditionality, narrative truth, and transformation. On the other hand, it is important to note that most researchers pragmatically argue for what they term ‘good enough poetry’ and for social science researchers to have the time, space and support to develop from writing ‘inferior’ to effective and refined poetry (Lahman & Richard, 2014). As Theil argues, learning to write a good poem is ‘something we must often stumble upon on our own’ (2001, p.11), through actively engaging with the poetic craft and exploring how using sound, rhyme, imagery, metaphors and other poetic techniques might alter the experience and impact of a poem.

To date, despite the increasing use of poetic inquiry in social justice-orientated research that gives neglected and vulnerable populations a voice (e.g. Carroll, Dew, Howden-Chapman, 2011; Hanauer, 2014; Poindexter, 2013), researchers have not yet utilised poetry to investigate and communicate the experience of aged care. This paper addresses this knowledge gap, applying a poetic lens to provide unique insight into the experience of ageing in aged care.

## **Method**

### *Research Design, Sample and Interviews*

This article draws on data from the “Inside Aged Care” project, ongoing longitudinal participatory qualitative research exploring the lived experience of aged care in Australia, from the perspective of potential and current residents, as well as their nominated family member and service provider. Our qualitative study design was guided by phenomenology (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005), which emphasises in-depth understanding of how an individual

person, in a unique context, makes sense of a specific phenomenon - in this context, aged care. This article utilises interview data from the developmental phase of the study (Stage 1), which explored and tracked the aged care experience of ten new aged care residents over 18 months in 2012-2013, through two workshops, two in-depth interviews (approximately fifteen months apart), a bi-monthly quality of life survey and photovoice activity, as well as a photographic exhibition. Notably, of the ten participants in Stage 1, only five completed the second interview, as two participants passed away, two left the study and one experienced a significant decline in health. It is the intention of the authors to review and discuss the research-authored poems with all residents, and to check whether they would like to use their own name or a pseudonym. Unfortunately, in the case of the five poems presented in this article, this was not possible: both Joy and Jane passed away, Nancy had withdrawn from the study, and Ethel was unable to be contacted due to a health concern. As a result all names are pseudonyms, although Ethel may request her first name to be reflected in future disseminations once the research team is able to re-establish contact with her. All residents have been encouraged and supported to create their own poems through participation in poetry workshops held on site. Their reactions, and our method of involving the participants in the poetic enquiry process, will be addressed in future publications. To date, the poems have been publically disseminated at two academic conferences and the research team plan to exhibit the poems, both physically and in the online world via audio-and video recording of interested participants reading a poem depicting their experience.

The two in-depth interviews were conducted by a team of experienced qualitative researchers (including the authors), who had no prior relationship with any residents. Interviews were conducted in a private location within the facility, typically residents' rooms, and lasted between one to two hours. Standard best practice ethical protocols were followed, with

informed consent forms signed by each participant prior to commencing the audio-taped interviews that were later professionally transcribed. The second author then went back to the audio recordings and/or interview notes to ensure the professional transcripts reflected the intent and intimate richness of the participant's stories. Such an approach is inline with notions of attentive listening (Reissman, 2008), where the researcher listens and re-listens in order to engage and re-engage with the voice of the participant. A flexible semi-structured question guide, developed by the research team and refined in the field, covered the following key areas: expectations and current experiences of aged care, satisfaction with different elements of daily life in aged care (room, complex, food, activities, staff etc) and reflections on their personal situation (family relationships, quality of life, mood, health etc). The complete guide is available upon request. In keeping with phenomenological principles, the emphasis was on discovering and discussing the interviewee's unique life-world, meanings and experiences.

### *Process of Poetic Analysis*

The construction of the research transcript poems took place in four key stages, adopting Glesne's (1997) approach insofar as the poem only uses the participant's words and does not add or otherwise alter their syntax. However, like Butler-Kisber (2010), we utilised 'poetic license' to create more rhythmic sentences by changing word/sentence order, which were not necessarily in the same sequence as the original interview. Immersion was the first step, which involved identifying all of relevant comments in the transcript that the participant made on the nominated topic; here, the focus was the experience of ageing in aged care. The second step was the arrangement of those statements into a logical or sequential progression. The third step was to focus on the technical arrangement and flow of the lines. The final step



was to edit the poem down for brevity and impact, ensuring that it retains the condensation and simplicity required of an effective lyric poem. An example of the process is depicted with Poem 5 in Table 1. On the right column is a relevant part of the interview transcript and on the left is the poem. Underlined are the words and phrases utilised in the poem. The poetic prose appears as participants spoke the words during in-depth interviews, although the order varies and, in places, words have been deleted to make the poem stronger. When phrases are repeated, it is because participants repeated them during the interview.

*Table 1: One example of creating a poem from an interview transcript*

<b>POEM 5</b>	<b>Excerpt from interview transcript</b>
<p><i><b><u>You're taken care of</u></b></i>  <i>You're taken care of.</i>  <i>I'm very satisfied</i>  <i>with my room.</i>  <i>I got me own furniture,</i>  <i>so why wouldn't I be?</i>  <i>It's just like my own home,</i>  <i>only I don't do no work.</i></p> <p><i>I got me friends here,</i>  <i>I go to bingo,</i>  <i>I join in exercises,</i>  <i>I go for any walks,</i>  <i>I have a good family,</i>  <i>they take me places.</i>  <i>though I haven't been able</i>  <i>to find a nice man yet.</i></p>	<p><i>So we're just talking about your experience living here. You said, that you love it, so tell me more about why.</i>  <i>If anything happened to me I'd be in the right place.</i>  <i>Right. Ok, so it's a sort of safety?</i>  <i>Yes, safer here in your own mind. Yeah, safety in your own home.</i>  <i>So that no matter what happens--<u>you're taken care of.</u></i>  <i>Yeah, yeah, well that's what I believe.</i>  <i>That's good. So now we're going to talk about different things, ok?</i>  <i>So the first thing we want to talk about is actually your room.</i>  <i><u>I'm very satisfied with my room, I got me own furniture so why wouldn't I be?</u> (laughs)</i>  <i>Is there anything you'd change about the design to make it better?</i>  <i>Not in my opinion.</i>  <i>So nothing? Ok...</i>  <i><u>It's just like my own home, really - only I don't have to do no work!</u> (laughs)</i>  <i>Now thinking about how you spend your time here, is there enough for you to do?</i>  <i>Yeah, yeah, <u>I go to bingo, and I join in exercises, and I go for any walks..... are you able to do things you like to do?</u></i>  <i>Yes. (quietly). <u>Though I haven't been able to find a nice man yet</u> (laughs)...</i>  <i>So your social life, is that pretty good?</i>  <i><u>With people? Yes, I got me friends here</u></i>  <i>Yeah it's good, <u>I've got a good family and they take me to places.</u></i>  <i>You know, we can go and have a meal together, you know, things like that. And I go to, if they've got a party on for somebody's birthday, I'm always invited.</i></p>

The first three poems ('You could scream the place down'; 'Life's different, over 80' and 'Being 86') highlight the sometimes challenging reality of life as an older person in a communal aged care facility. Poem 1 ("You could scream the place down") is grouped into stanzas, each dealing with a specific step of the thought process being represented: the first stanza deals with the role of her family in the move; the second and third stanzas highlight her sense of loss and why living in aged care is not good for her, with the fourth and final stanza capturing her frustration. Poems 2 and 3 are from interviews with the same resident (Jane), but explore the difference of utilising the 'I-poem' approach (Poem 3, 'Being 86'). The 'I-poem' is central to a voice-centred relational 'Listening Guide' method developed by Gilligan et al. (2003), which pays detailed attention to the use of the personal pronoun 'I' in order to critically engage the researcher with participants' unique, distinct, multi-layered and often silent 'voices'. The 'I-poem' is the second phase of Gilligan et al's listening method, which typically includes listening for the plot (Phase 1), listening for contrapuntal voices (Phase 3) and composing and analysis (Phase 4). Typically, the 'I-poem' is utilised in the analysis phase only (to help bring the researcher hear the participant's voice), but has modified and utilised in many different contexts; for example, Edwards and Weller (2012) utilised the I-poem approach to illustrate how one participant's relationship with her sister changes over time.

In comparing Poem 2 and 3, we can see how different approaches to poetic enquiry can reveal distinct insights into participant lives. Poem 2 ("Life's different, over 80") is grouped into stanzas, each dealing with a specific step of the thought process being represented: the first three stanzas highlight Jane's awareness that everyone close to her has died and there is no point making new friends in older age; the next three stanzas illustrate her sense of loss and frustration with the ageing process, that makes her unable to do anything for herself

anymore; the final stanza emphasizes her loneliness and isolation from the world, with the television her only desired companion. In this poem, Jane describes her macro world – her people, her place - and her relationship to each of these (loss and isolation), whereas in Poem 3, we are very much invited into her micro world and the bodily space she inhabits. In the first stanza, Jane describes how she feels about her ageing body and the sense of stasis that her immobilities have generated. In the second stanza she articulates what small things she needs ('to be on my own') and what she likes ('a chat like this, now and then') in order to improve her lived experience. In contrast to Poem 2 where we are able to see more of Jane's external world and past life, by tuning into the first-person voice in Poem 3, we are given insight into her present inner tensions. Although the general tone and 'feeling' of poems 2 and 3 is similar, our experimentation with the I-poem approach has illustrated, as Ely, Vinz, Downing, and Anzul (1997) note, that the "one joyful thing about writing poetry is that, given the same data, different people create differing versions" (p. 136). Interestingly, although Jane spoke of isolation, loss and the death of three children, in actuality she lost a baby in his first year of life and has three living children. Unsure if it this was due to the onset of mild dementia, a simple error or reflective of her feeling isolated, we went back to talk with her about it. Sadly she had passed away in the month prior, and we were not able to resolve this spoken moment in the transcript. Consequently, original reference to the 'death of three children' remains in her poem; this is because we made the decision not change or 'fact-check' residents' stories, but to create the poems from what they told us – their perceptions, experiences and feelings on the day of the interview.

Finally, the last two poems ('*Can't pretend you are a teenager, can you?*' and '*You're taken care of*') reflect the inherent differences in how older people seem to experience aged care, with these two residents generally much more positive in nature and accepting of the realities

of ageing. Ethel’s personality and positivity shines through every line, whilst the reader can feel Nancy’s gradual acceptance that she now needs help to do even the most mundane, personal daily activities of living, such as showering and dressing. More specifically, Table 2 below illustrates how our poems endeavour to meet each of Faulkner’s (2007) six *ars poetica* criteria; of course, as Faulkner notes, poetic craft is a skill that comes with practice and we ask readers to keep that in mind as they judge the quality of our first research poems.

Table 2: Applying Faulkner’s (2007) six *ars poetica* criteria to our poems on aged care

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Poem</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Artistic concentration (careful attention to poetic detail and feeling)	You could scream the place down	From the purposely evocative title with its memorable deployment of metaphor, to the repetition of words and phrases using the rhetorical technique of anaphora (e.g., “You lose everything, you lose everything, to come in here”), this poem utilises an array of poetic tools (sound, rhyme, word choice, enjambment) to engage the reader.
Embodied experience (makes reader feel)	Life’s different, over 80	The reader has a very visceral experience of this older women’s feeling of loss, sadness and resigned acceptance, as she recounts outliving her family, being too old to make new friends and relying on the television as her only trusted companion. This visceral experience is conveyed powerfully through the poem’s direct second-person address to the reader, which implicates the reader in the feelings and thoughts of the poem’s speaker (e.g., ‘you don’t realise / what you are giving up’).
Discovery / Surprise (learn something new)	You’re taken care of	Generally positive about aged care, the poem’s last two lines surprise with humour: “though I haven’t been able / to find a nice man yet”. It subtly challenges stereotypes and reminds us that older people in aged care remain interested in relationships. Additionally, the poem surprises the reader with the particularity of the speaker’s voice, including the speaker’s colloquialisms and vernacular syntax (e.g., “I don’t do no work”; ‘I got me own furniture’), which evoke a specific and memorable sense of personality accompanying the experiences being narrated.
Conditionality	Poems 1-3 versus Poems 4 and 5.	Presenting five poems emphasises the individual, conditional partiality of the aged care experience: the poems here traverse both positive and negative

		responses to a variety of aspects of aged care, giving a holistic, balanced view.
Narrative truth (facts as presented should ring true)	Can't pretend you are a teenager, can you?	The tone of this poem is intimate and honest, reflecting on the reality of coming to terms with ageing in aged care. The poem deploys several colloquialisms and rhetorical questions, as seen in its title, which add to its aura of authenticity.
Transform (new insight, social change)	Life's different, over 80	This poem provides rare and unique insight into the day-to-day lived experience of aged care, and especially the way in which aged care residents experience the transition to an increasing reliance on staff to help with intimate activities of daily living, such as showering and dressing.

### **Reflections on writing and sharing research poetry on aged care**

It would be fair to say that, although extremely rewarding from a personal and creative perspective, engaging with a poetic transcription approach has been demanding. As Fitzpatrick and Fitzpatrick (2014) note, outside the arts, poetry continues to occupy a marginal space and is an unusual output. Even though they describe themselves as experienced poets, Fitzpatrick and Fitzpatrick explain how using poetry as a research supervision tool, required them to be vulnerable and open in a way that was liberating but very challenging. Similarly, Butler-Kisber (2002) also admitted that her work with found poetry pushed her, both “personally and pedagogically” (p.237). In many ways, this is because creating research poetry un.masks both the participant and the researcher (Prendergast, 2002), with the honest emotion evident in poetry frequently quite confronting and upsetting. This has been true for the non-poets in our team (Miller & Donoghue), with the process and writing paradigms far from the comfort zone of the conventionally-quantitative training of one researcher (Miller). From a personal perspective, it was surprisingly difficult to initially find the courage to share these poems publically; there was a worry that academic and industry audiences would find them too emotional, too negative and

too confronting. A key concern was that the poems would be dismissed as “non-academic”. Fortunately, our experience to date has been the opposite. They have proved to be a valuable and powerful way to engage diverse audiences of students, educators, industry and policymakers with the lived experience of aged care. We have also started to collaborate with poet (Holland-Batt), who as well as being immensely supportive and educating us on the poetic process, has described her process of composing poems from transcripts as both surprisingly difficult and incredibly enjoyable. Our intent is for future publications to explore, in detail, the process and learnings from this unusual, but promising collaboration between a poet and social scientists, exploring where and how our processes differ.

In conclusion, as Butler-Kisber (2002) notes, arts-based practices such as poetic inquiry help us push the boundaries of qualitative research, producing vivid and authentic representations of the lives and stories of participants. Poetry not only helps researchers to more deeply listen to the stories that participants so generously share (Gilligan et al, 2003), but also to publicly share the intimate richness of lives that are being lived, composed and re-configured. It is a form of enquiry that helps the researcher to think *with* rather than *about* the participant’s experience. In the context of older persons, often words are spoken *for* them or *on* them, but here using poetic enquiry, we have been able to speak *with* them. We hope that reading these poems has let people viscerally experience, for a moment, the actual lived experience of ageing in aged care, with the poems acting as ‘detour we willingly subject ourselves to, a trick surprising us into the deepened vulnerability we both desire and fear. Its strategies of beauty, delay, and deception smuggle us past the border of our own hesitation’ (Hirshfield, 1997, p.125). Critically, while a number of the poems contain negative sentiments, it is important to state that as each of the poems were constructed from a research interview, the words capture just one hour (or so) in time: but by revealing that moment, we are able to

glimpse the tensions and releases that are associated with growing older and living in aged care.

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