

Room 65

Suzi Ehtesham-Zadeh

A few weeks ago, I celebrated my 65th birthday. The day came and went like any other: a walk in the park, a meal, an evening glass of wine, a book. In the intervening days, though, I have begun to feel like I have walked across a threshold into an unknown place. I have entered Room 65: the twilight realm.

Room 65 is a mystifying place, characterized by the questions, both large and small, that float through the air. They twinkle on and off like stars, making them impossible to pin down, let alone answer. There isn't much electricity in the room, and what little there is seems to come from a cheap generator. Those of us inside the room aren't sure exactly where we are or why we are here. We wander about in a daze, squinting to see each other but not knowing what to say when we do. As if this atmosphere weren't bewildering enough, the boundaries of the room keep shifting: 60 was once the new 40 and then became the new 30, which means that 65 is either the new 45 or the new 35. We have entered all the way into the room, but we are supposed to keep a leg dangling out the window.

Shortly after entering Room 65, I had a peculiar dream in which I was clambering up a tree, pausing to inspect each branch and twig as I went. It was a winter tree with no new growth, but the branches were supple, and I was not afraid to venture out onto even the tiniest ones. It wasn't clear exactly what my goal was, but I could feel myself being driven forward by a burning sense of purpose. Suddenly, in that way dreams have of blurring lines, the tree morphed into my mother, and I became aware that the branches and twigs I was examining were the lines on her face. I touched them reverently, hoping they would reveal something — a secret, a story, a truth — but then I opened my eyes and the tree-mother vanished, replaced by the early winter light that was seeping through my bedroom window.

When I got out of bed that morning, I studied my own face in the mirror to find a tree like my mother's, but I didn't find it. The tree on my mother's face was planted in the North Carolina soil of her childhood, but mine was fashioned from the arid land where my deceased Iranian father grew up. It is shaped like a melting heart. The eyelids have grown hooded, the once-rounded cheeks have sagged, the contours are now difficult to find. I insist, privately and publicly, that I am not bothered by this. I could do without the nagging joints and the dimming eyesight, but I'm not a celebrity, so my identity doesn't begin and end with my physical appearance.

And anyway, the inhabitants of Room 65 are always being told that physical appearance isn't what matters. Age is just a state of mind, they say. I enjoy exercising

my mind, so I guess this should be comforting, as it suggests that I can go in and out of the room as I please. Maybe if I try hard enough, I can even make the room disappear. And yet everywhere I turn inside Room 65, something whispers to me that this particular age is more than just a state of mind. Now that I have reached it, I am not just *quantitatively*, but also *qualitatively* different. I might think I am transcending the room, but that thought, too, is a state of mind. I am hopelessly trapped here.

The numbers don't matter, they say. And yet in the metaverse to which I, like all of us, am hopelessly bound, I am bombarded daily with numbers and numbered lists: 6 *Timely Medicare Tips*. A *Quick Retirement Checklist*. *11 Steps to Take if You're Turning 65 This Year*. *12 Things You Must Do as Soon as You Turn 65*. Among the suggestions listed are "get a complete physical," "have a conversation with your loved ones about end-of-life wishes," and "dust off that bucket list." Now that I have crossed the threshold into Room 65, I am urged to "enjoy every moment." In the all-seeing eyes of the metaverse, I am a wind-up toy whose days of ticking are numbered.

And so, inside Room 65, I find myself measuring out my life with spoons. Mine are not filled with coffee, as Prufrock's were. They are filled with some substance I don't recognize, something unctuous and complex that unnerves me even as it defines me. My life has become a series of measurements, all of them abstract and arbitrary, none of them consequential. It is the flip side of the absurdist's conundrum: the search for meaning reduced to the most absurd of human behaviors.

Among the many baffling concepts I must grapple with in Room 65 is that I am supposedly more susceptible now to the dread virus that is the scourge of our days. This happened overnight, the very instant I crossed that threshold. A few short weeks ago, 64 and fully vaccinated, I was no more vulnerable to COVID than Taylor Swift. Now the virus has become a dark presence lurking just outside the door of Room 65, holding my coat and snickering.

Being a child of the sixties, I can't help but wonder sometimes who benefits from encouraging these measurements and stoking these fears. That notion temporarily fills me with life-affirming outrage, but then it scuttles away, and the fears take hold again. Most of the time my rational self can find a way to conquer the fears, or at least find a place to put them. They are not usually Prufrockian. I am not afraid to eat a peach. I live in Georgia, the peach state, where paradoxically, peaches are nearly inedible unless they are imported from Chile. I can wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled, or not, as suits my desire for comfort or my sense of the ridiculous. I don't need to decide whether to part my hair behind or in front; it now seems to part itself most of the time, and I am fine with whatever way it falls. I am not bothered by women – or men, for that matter – coming and going and talking of Michelangelo; that topic is preferable to the

ones I usually hear. I have become quite adept at preparing a face to meet the faces that I meet, though I choose to meet fewer and fewer with every passing year. I think I know how to spit out the butt-ends of my days and ways, whatever that means.

But one question Prufrock poses looms large now, in the eerie light of Room 65: the question of whether, or to what degree, I dare to disturb the universe. I am not sure what this question meant for Prufrock, and even less for Eliot writing about it when he was 27, younger than my youngest child. For me, the question is the loose thread of a sweater that unravels and keeps going until there is nothing left to wear.

The unraveling starts with broad, ill-framed questions. Can anyone hear me from behind the doors of Room 65? Does anyone care what I say or do in here? Does it matter if no one cares? Will any of my words or actions reverberate outside these walls, or will the universe go on as it was, undisturbed by my presence? To put it simply, have I become irrelevant and obsolete?

As the yarn is pulled further, more precise questions, woven deeper and closer to the collar, emerge. I don't posit them; they present themselves to me, teasingly and in random order. What happened to me in Room 21 to make me leave my homeland and move to the other side of the world? Will I ever go back to any of the rooms before that one, or am I destined to look at my lost homeland through a window from now on? What do I carry with me from Rooms 22 through 27, when I flitted over continents? Did I make a mistake in Room 28 when I married into a third culture, thus tainting the air in all the rooms? How well have I done since Room 32, when I became a mother? Have my children found a comfortable corner in each of my subsequent rooms, despite the muddied air? Why did I fail to recognize the factors that led to my father's death in Room 48? In which room was it that I first became restless, and how will this restlessness play out in the next rooms I enter?

These questions are obviously specific to me alone. But I see similar random-sets of questions etched on the faces of the other inhabitants of Room 65. The unwritten rules of the room dictate that we should not voice them; to do so would be a violation of the grace and gravitas that befits our age. And so, we just carry them around, like luggage for a trip to nowhere. With the future of the universe itself in question, lugging these questions around seems petty and selfish. If the metaverse is to be trusted, it is also impractical. What we should be asking is how we can craft the most comfortable retirement plan, how we can delay inevitable illness, how we can hide the visible signs of aging, how we can recharge our waning energy, how we can find new outlets for our presumed creativity, how we can discover talents we didn't know we had, how we can make our encounters with those we love more meaningful, how we can find new love, how we can make each ticking moment count. In short, how we can transcend the

borders of Room 65 even while we are being reminded, everywhere we look, that we are stuck here and there's no turning back.

The walls of Room 65 should be padded.

I recently read about the fossil of a dinosaur egg that was found in China, seventeen inches long and frighteningly well preserved. The creature was crouching in preparation for birth, but 66 million years ago, something stopped it right there, just before it emerged into the world. As I read the story, I found myself trying to mine the many meanings of this bizarre paradox wherein a sudden death became an eternal monument to the miracle of life. How am I to calibrate those 66 million frozen years with 65 years of a life lived?

My mother passed through the door on the other side of Room 65 a long time ago and is now in Room 91. She sleeps more deeply, laughs more heartily, and cries less frequently than I do. She no longer grasps for memories, but she delights in the ones that overtake her when she least expects them. She keeps her identities in perfect balance, cherishing her childhood in North Carolina while at the same time holding her five decades in Iran close to her heart. She does not scorn, or even question, her gender-fluid grandchildren. She knows the future is not in her hands, but she remains optimistic about it. She does not live in fear of the dread virus; if it finds its way into her aged body, she will accept her fate with dignity. The news of the dinosaur egg does not fill her with existential questions, but rather with the wonder of a child.

Even though it comes from some distance down the hallway, I can see my mother's light shining beneath the door of Room 65. When I fall asleep tonight, I will try to return to the tree on her face. I know it will never bloom again, but I am convinced that navigating it will lead me in the right direction. At the very least, I can cling to its branches to avoid drowning.