

## **So that's what old is!**

I am old; I volunteer at the local gallery.

It's usually quiet; I watch the street café outside.

She's often there. Shes are often there. Occasionally it's he. Mostly it's she.  
At separate tables.

Neat, barely visible, trying, striving to feel OK today. Solo, numerous.

She over-smiles at the girl who brings her cake and warm coffee.  
(Once you could get hot coffee.)

She's most agreeable to the 30-something office group who need another chair at their table.

She smiles and waves at the baby in a pusher when his mother stops to answer her phone. The baby stares back, then cries.

Crossword pages. The anticipated orange-almond cake with the small dollop is somewhat dry.  
She eats it anyway.

She sees the family groups but is not seen. None of the shes are seen.  
(Once she would have craved a moment of solitude.)

She silently enters the gallery.

I am her age; I know to ask.

Are you an artist?

Well, no, not really.

I am her age; I know not to believe that. I gently ask again.

...Quietly, home economically, matter-of-factly but with brighter eyes she speaks of a career designing and making dresses for Sydney fashion houses, of rearing children who now live overseas, of creating and installing wrought iron, of becoming a jeweller with enamelling skills.  
She was busy, sought after...

Silence. We look at each other somewhere between "It matters." and "So what?"

A couple enter the gallery. She is gone.

To smile at another baby? To apologise to the mum on the phone whose pusher trajectory is briefly disturbed? To return home? To check the letter box?

(Once there were hand-written letters.)

So that's what old is!

Not entirely, but certainly partly.

Brave? You betcha. It's not abseiling, not curing cancer, not rocket science.

It's doggedly, minute by minute, nurturing the relevance that was once nurtured by others.

She matters. Just ask her.