

Susan V. Meyers

Bathing Maxine

Mom's body is miserable now; you can tell just by looking at it: the tiredness, and awkwardness. After the heart attack, and all the surgeries, she's become a stranger to herself: uncertain where to put her weight, which joints and muscles are still reliable. "And to think," she laughs. "I used to be an acrobat!"

She needs help—a lot of it. Help out of the bed. Help steadying herself across the room, and shutting the toilet lid, and sitting awkwardly down on it. She needs help, too, getting out of her clothes. Her range of motion is limited—her body collapsing, curved inward, as though to keep nearer to itself, the synapses drawn more tightly, shortening the distances to be traveled. The left shoulder droops; it gives her trouble. She'd fractured a clavicle during the fall, and now her arm is halfway useless. She can't lift it much above a perpendicular—as to unfasten a bra, or pull a shirt over her head. She tries, but the effort makes her look foolish, the injured arm straining and flopping. Like the shape of a dinosaur: weak-armed and scaly-skinned, with a great, big idea of herself.

She doesn't say anything, but I'm already bending over to pull the socks from her feet; they come off warm, still holding the tiny arched form of her foot. Then she's unfastening her belt and bumping ridiculously up and down, slipping against the toilet lid and trying to wiggle her way out of those tight jeans she insists on wearing. Always, a size too small: the body wears down, but vanity does not. She holds out a leg, and I yank the fabric loose; then the other one. Now there's a pair of long underwear, and nylons, and more underwear. "You don't mind, do you, baby?" What is there to say, when your mother is eighty years old and suddenly wants you to ignore her nakedness? She hopes you won't mind. She doesn't.

So here I am, peeling off three layers of shirts and unhooking the bra behind her, the fabric springing loose across a back whose skin shifts over bones like sheets on a bed. It feels soft now, like putty—like something that could come off in my hands. She is almost frightening to touch: her nakedness tender but painful, the way looking at a newborn can be almost painful—so much delicacy there all at once. But at the other edge of life, it's even worse. The body loses cohesion: it's all points and wrinkles. Things get crowded; I don't know where to look. The simple fact of her is suddenly overwhelming.

"Uf!" she grunts, pushing herself up off the toilet. Then she stands there, her nipples pressed downward, almost no hair left anywhere on her body. "Here, Theresa." She stands at one side of the bathtub, her hands pressed down against the ledge, the bones standing out unapologetically against her skin. "Give me a hand." Then she's adjusting her weight onto me, and I'm lifting her up carefully, one leg and then the other. "Oh!" she squeals, her feet hitting the water. "So cold!" Steam rolls up out off the bath. "Can't you make it any warmer?" I swat the cold tap off with one hand and hold her shoulders as she lowers herself unsteadily into the tub.

"Oh lord," she sighs, leaning back into the bath, her breasts motionless and flat. "There were times I used to hate being a woman; now I just hate being old."

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

I pour bubbles into the bath, so I don't have to look at her all at once. "Thank you Sweetie. That's nice." Then I fill a plastic bowl and douse some water over her head; her eyes close. "We were so important as women, for awhile, during the war. You can't know, Theresa, just what that was like. To lose that." The water coming down over her body sounds soothing, like a fountain—the kind you might throw pennies into, but small, so it would never amount to much. "But then the men came home, and we had to give it all up—the jobs, the freedom. It was terrible." I start using my hands, splashing water over her—warm, almost greasy from the bubble bath. Pouring little handfuls of suds over her beaten chest, her arms shrunken narrow and muscleless.

"They were hard, those war marriages. Men were enlisting; women were getting engaged. That's just what you did. We all wanted to do our part; we were very patriotic."

I lean over and let the sudsy water drip off my fingertips into the bath—then glance upward toward the medicine cabinet and the vanity; the low-set sink with large, loose taps; and the emergency call button by the toilet. This is a place designed for safety. Mom doesn't need me to stay, but the fact of her talking means that she wants me here. My mother has always liked having an audience.

"But when they came back, they were all the same: GI husbands. Not at all grateful for what we'd done; they just wanted to forget. And we were stuck with them. It was such a disappointment."

My own husband had had a very specific way of dealing with disappointment. When I did something that displeased him—a lapsed bill, a poorly spiced steak—he would say, "I'm surprised at you, Theresa." Generally, he'd had faith in me. I had a sharp mind, he used to say; he'd expected better of me. After these small announcements, he would grow quiet, so I could think about that. Each time, I half expected him to leave. It was a fear I lived with constantly.

Once, for an annual office potluck, he'd signed us up to bring lasagna.

"But that's so caloric," I protested. I was trying to lose weight.

"Theresa, I've already told them that's what we're bringing. Please don't be difficult. What else do you possibly have to do tomorrow?"

"I was going to go to the gym."

"So go the next day. Theresa," he looked at me meaningfully, putting a hand under my chin. "This is important to me."

Benjamin was a good man, and it was such a mild request. How could I refuse? The following day, I boiled and sliced and spread and stirred. Then I put the whole thing in the oven, and the house smelled rich and meaty for an hour. When it was done, I stared at the casserole in disappointment: chunked tomatoes confused with cheese, ricotta spitting along the edges. *You're no surprise at all.* Then I did what I wanted to do: I dropped it. Just let the oven mitts slip out from underneath, and the dish exploded against the floor. It was a wicked and wonderful thing to do.

"Theresa," Mom says, reaching for the soap. "You can't imagine how it was for us back then. Those men, they didn't listen. They wouldn't

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

tell us anything. They were consumed by something we didn't understand."

Mostly, my husband didn't listen, either. Mostly, he would sit and read the newspaper or watch television. It never occurred to me to ask him to be any different; but the truth was, I hated my life. Sometimes I would say, "I'm bored." And he would look at me. "No, you're not." He was honestly taken aback. "How could you be? We have a good life."

But a good life was not this: sitting numbly on your kitchen floor, straddling the remains of a smashed lasagna: wet, insipid noodles flopped against the kitchen tiles, and little chunks of hamburger scattered like gravel.

When he got home, I told Benjamin what I'd done. He stared at me blankly. All of his surprise was suddenly exhausted. He simply did not understand his wife.

On the drive over to the party, we stopped for take-out. I had to hold the bag on my lap so that it wouldn't spill—freshly baked and too hot. Benjamin was silent, but I wasn't worried anymore; he wouldn't do anything. That afternoon, I had learned something valuable: my husband was mysterious, but he wasn't capable of any particular kind of mystery. I was. I was a woman who would slam a casserole off the counter. I could be foolish and reckless and stupid. And feel good about it.

"The worst part," Mom goes on, taking the soap from me, "is that you couldn't ask them about it. Those men, they wanted to pretend like it had never happened. But you can't ignore history, Theresa. You just can't." She drags the soap over herself, stretching so I can see the little scar from her angioplasty taking up its space on her chest, almost healed now: the only newness left on her body.

"Your father didn't say anything, but he would be up crying half the night. I just held him. When he got up in the morning and went to work and made decisions about our future, he felt better. So I let him. I talked to a lot of women back then, and they all said the same thing. So we just figured it was something we had to put up with for awhile, until the men got readjusted."

The things in my mother's life have happened for big, specific reasons; in my life, they happen for small ones. A week after smashing his corporate lasagna on the floor, I left my husband. I didn't offer any kind of explanation.

"But they didn't, of course," she goes on. "Things started out that way, and they never changed. Not until your generation, I guess." She hands me back the soap, and wiggles her butt in the water, to get more of it between her legs. She splashes lightly at herself. "Now there's all these women talking about work again. Theresa," she says, leaning forward. "See if you can't rinse out my hair."

The shampoo smells like lavender: Mom's favorite. Rubbing it into her scalp, I know that my fingers will smell like her for hours afterwards.

"But you loved Dad."

She considers, her head suspended like a globe in my hands. "I loved what he thought of himself."

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

"And you liked that—what he thought?"

"No." I let her go, and she rolls her head back into place. One lip pushes forward. "I didn't care especially what it was. He was wrong about it, anyway—too much of an idealist. But I loved it that he *had* an idea of himself; it was sort of romantic. I'd never had that; I didn't have the time."

"So you *did* love him."

"He was the best man I ever knew. He just didn't trust me. All throughout the war, he wanted to know everything I was doing. I had to write it all down and send it to him, so he could know."

She's still thinking this over as I set one hand at her temple and pour water across the back of her head with the other. The lavender lather mixes with runoff in a thin layer over her back.

"He was just jealous. We both were, I guess. Sacrifice can do that to a marriage. Especially during a war, when you're both willing to give each other up so easily, for a higher purpose. It damages the love somehow. Nobody ever warned me about that, but it's true."

Occasionally, my mother surprises me with these small wisdoms. They come out of her like sound bites: perfect and whole and not quite her. She can be remarkably honest, when she's not going after something.

"Your father was good in the war; he was very principled. But principles can be dangerous when they get in the way of real people."

"He hurt your feelings?"

"He did."

"But there was a war; it wasn't his fault."

"No—it was because he didn't mind. He was out there fighting the good fight, and that was enough for him."

She moves her body slowly—lifting little folds of skin and splashing everywhere. She's a person who takes her time; she enjoys the sensation of people waiting for her.

"If I had to do it over again," she muses, "I suppose I'd do the same thing, because there would be the same options. Here, Theresa," she motions. "Give me another rinse."

My mother is still angry at life in a thousand different ways; and she doesn't let you forget it. It's what keeps her going—all that used up energy, recycling itself through her brain. All the old hurts that she holds onto. But I know her—I know there's more to it than this.

"Mom, what's the bravest thing you ever did?"

"Huh!" she laughs, tilting her head back under the slow trickle of water. "Just that—marrying your father."

All those things—dangling high wires, burning bars, welding shut the hulls of ships—and this is what she chooses. "That's it?"

"Lord, Theresa. That's the bravest any of us gets: putting your life up next to somebody else's. I don't know anything harder."

When she's finished, she asks for a towel and begins to scoot her way back up into standing position, holding herself against the tub again

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

as I help her pull each leg out of the bath. She doesn't even smell like a woman anymore—no more sweat glands or hormones of motherhood or desire. It's impossible not to love her like this—fragile as she is, needing things the way she does. Already, I feel myself aching for her. My mother. She is so supremely imperfect. She loves me in her own way, for her own reasons. And because that affection is so inappropriate and so uniquely her own, I know it is inexhaustible.

She lets me wrap the towel around her and leans forward, holding it affectionately against her chest as I reach around to tamp off her back and shoulders. I take one corner from her clutches and towel off her head, quick and firm. Then she's shuffling back into the main room, her body pitched forward and her head comical—nearly bald, wiry in gray, wet curls. "Oh Theresa," she smacks her lips together fondly, scuttling her feet along, still wrapped in the towel. "That was so good."

A Seattle native, **Susan V. Meyers** has lived and taught in Chile, Costa Rica, and Mexico. She earned an MFA from the University of Minnesota and a PhD from the University of Arizona, and currently teach at Oregon State University. Her work has recently appeared in *Calyx*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Rosebud*, and *Dogwood*, and it has been the recipient of several awards, most recently a Fulbright Fellowship.