

In the Arms of Morpheus

“Trench...tunnel...tongue...tumor,” my mother says, her brain descending the rungs of a ladder until touching ground at “cough syrup.” “I haven’t taken my cough syrup yet.” The dog is on the bed, sidling up to her, looking for a rub. Her hand levitates over his belly, fingers occasionally touching down as she stares straight ahead. The curved nails partially cover her finger tips, which are round as spring onions. This is called “clubbing,” and this is why she can’t type or sign checks.

She is holding court in bed, wearing a pajama top and a diaper. She did not turn away these visitors bearing Malbec, who crossed the country to see her—much as she might have liked to. Many days when her best friend phones her, she looks at the caller i.d. and lets it ring. The steroids have plumped her cheeks but her lower half has been whittled from lying in bed. Her legs—right ankle resting on bent left knee—are concentration camp thin. She is eating, almost supine (“it worked for the Romans”), soft French cheese with her fingers. With the other hand, she waves her wine glass, crying, “I’m in the arms of Morpheus!”

*Son of sleep, maker
of forms, eraser*

*who replaces one image
with another
inaseamlesstransition
Imagine imago, but also
the study of structure,
words, molecules, stories:
an ebony bed, a cave
burning with flowers,
the wilted elm where dreams
hang
like golden pupa.*

Today she calls, panic in her voice: "I don't have enough morphine." "You have plenty," I reassure her. "You have the bottle you've been using and a whole other bottle you haven't even opened yet." "It's not enough," she insists. "Have you been taking more than usual? Are you in a lot of pain?" I ask. "No, no," she says, irritation in her voice. "I don't have enough to put an end to *this*."

I don't know how to respond. It's not as though we've never discussed her desire "to check out." But those discussions took place before hospice, before morphine. Should I remove the bottles from her bedside table and tell her from now on she can only have the bitter liquid she's come to love if John or I squirt it under her tongue? Instead, cruelly, I ask, "How do you know you don't have enough? If you think I'm going online to find out how much is too much, you're wrong. You know I can't do that for you."

Both of us have read my friend's book *Imperfect Endings*, in which three sisters struggle—each in her own way—with their mother's desire to end her life before Parkinson's made it unlivable. We read it a year ago the way other families might spread a map over the kitchen table to plan a road trip. The mother in the book, which is a memoir, learns that the only way she can kill herself and not implicate her daughters in her death is by ceasing to eat and drink. "It took her 12 days," says my mother despairingly. Midway through the fast, my friend's mother tries to hurry things along by drinking three-quarters of a bottle of morphine at bedtime. The next morning, reporting on her night in the underworld, she slurs, "It was...wonderful."

Like all our bodies, my mother's body is drunk on life. Who wants to pry the glass from its stubborn, resilient hands and lead the body to bed? Who wants to be the one to say: "You've had enough"?

*limning the thin
membrane
between day and dream,
straddling a rampart
what keeps apart
creation
and excretion*

My mother rises from the commode, pull-ups at her ankles and then, a little dizzy, falls forward, forearms and palms on the bed. She shakes her head and sighs, *singerie*, French for monkey business. She doesn't want a spanking but to explain in as few words as possible what she sees when she sees herself this way, which of course she can't. *Singerie*: Rococo paintings of apes posturing in brocade, prehensile tails peeking out to sign their duality. Mannered, irreverent, neither erect nor on all fours, corseted, extruding.

*Here but not here like my _____ passengers
gazing into luminous pools pocket mirrors
that sing and outside the bus strikers march
beating dry wall drums not hotel workers
not carpenters but happily employed homeless
and the messengers on their bikes gather
a lost tribe trading tales around the fire
of a bankrupt book store*

CNN flickers, crises ticker across the draped darkness and we are all sleeping, waiting for the resurrection. Or perhaps we're just molting. Houses vacant, cities occupied. Mic check? MIC CHECK. My mother is the human(ity) microphone: *No, no, no*. She doesn't want the hot water bottle even though she is cold, doesn't want morphine, doesn't want to be touched, doesn't want my touch. She is as alone as a woman giving birth. When a woman is in advanced labor, we say she is "in transition."

Women often do not know what they want during transition.

Many women can only talk in one word responses at this point...: "No!" "Stop!" "Drink!" "Stronger!" "Softer!"

The major emotional marker for this stage is giving up. Physical signs... include shaking or trembling which may resemble shivering.

... can become restless, irritable, discouraged, and confused. She may find that she focuses inward...She may have a hard time communicating her wishes. This is the point in labor when she usually needs the most support.

...know now that your loved one is no longer with us. She is in her own world so she can make it through.

My mother has been sleeping for 20 hours. Her boyfriend and I are awkward dinner guests, trying different conversational tacks with a silent host. Try indirection. Try.

I ask him, "Are her teeth still in?" "Yeah, I think so." "Ruth, do you have your teeth in?" he shouts. And my mother, lungs gurgling, responds by squaring her mouth, unsticking her lips and gums, and baring dentures. The death mask, momentarily broken, reassembles and her eyes flutter shut once more.

When her eyes finally open—the pupils no longer opiate pinned—she doesn't look at me. She looks at a spot on the ceiling. She is a driver concentrating, searching for road signs, afraid she'll miss her exit. No time for patter, but I sit with her anyway.

A woman giving birth should not be left alone. In study after study, continuous emotional support has been shown to shorten labor and lessen pain.

Even if that support comes from a researcher who, having failed to get the study participant's signature, apologizing and out of place, pokes her head into the delivery room. Even if it's from an untrained woman with a clipboard who commits to staying in the room until it's over.

Clipboard in hand, I am scribbling against the clock. I have committed to staying in the room, to taking dictation from the silence, a useless amanuensis. And the silence says: *I would prefer not to.*

Like many of my mother's generation, she learned stenography (narrow writing) and worked as a secretary. She was also a cocktail waitress (uniform: high heels and a miniskirt) and briefly a stewardess, with a BA in the history of philosophy.

A couple of months ago, she asked for a notebook in which to record last thoughts and advice for her granddaughter. A sort of death bed Hints from Heloise:

If you are not a doctor or high-powered lawyer, you might want a backup trade, like a nursing degree or master plumber's certificate. A nurse can get a job anywhere in the country, or probably the world.

Always do your homework before investing. You can take a few risks early on.

My mother spends many of her hours in bed rewinding and pushing play on her life.

“There are so many forks in the road but in the end, I always arrive at the same place.”

“Are there things you would have done differently?” I ask. “Not you. I wouldn’t have done you differently.” Then she pauses: “Next time, I would learn to drive.”

Dependant on others to be cleaned and combed, to eat and excrete, and on a machine to breath, she is most in the driver’s seat—hands at 10:00 and 2:00—when she is gripping the remote control with one and the bottle of morphine with the other.

There’s a fist in poignant.

While my mother instructs my daughter on how to lead her life, I worry about the after-life, my mother’s after-life. My mother has told the hospice nurse, no, she doesn’t want a priest, no, she doesn’t want a minister, no, she doesn’t want a rabbi, no imam, no lama, no, no, no.

I keep wondering if it’s important to define our beliefs about what comes next before it comes. Will the place my mother goes be any better or worse for not imagining it? Will it be anything like the arms of Morpheus? Morpheus, who leads you, past the empty velvet seats, to his baritone bed. In his realm, everything happens through the wrong

end of an opera glass in a distant spotlight, and the servants in their brocade smell of dead leaves and wind. There, every utterance is a silent libretto, broadcast in super titles.

Our units of measure have grown apart. Mine are macro, metric, dully universal and mostly unchanging. Hers: micro, relative, ever-evolving.

Pap smears	20 minutes until <i>Antiques Roadshow</i>
semester grades	the hospice nurse comes this afternoon
car inspections	turn on your side for a bit
capital gains	it's time to change your diaper
summer camp	two more hours until your next dose
walk for a cure	eat breakfast so you can take your pill
leaf collection	keep that arm elevated for an hour
principal paid	92% oxygen saturation
graduation	I dreamed I died in my sleep

As with other types of pupae, the chrysalis stage in most butterflies is one in which there is little movement. However, some butterfly pupae are capable of moving the abdominal segments to produce sounds or to scare away potential predators.

Tissues used and unused lie beside her, colorless petals. Gray hair above a white funnel of sheets, her body the storm's quiet eye. Her body quietly changing, shifting shape beneath the covers. She breathes in whistles and wheezes. The sound of sustenance—less and less each day—as it travels her empty, winding corridors. Call and response of gastric juices, a colonic chorus.

*all of us is singing
the blues
says Dr. West
this black-face nation
sitting on our lazy
dreams of being right
and my mother is still
breathing no matter
how fast her chest rises
falls
she can't get
enough
a machine
with a cartoon snore
fortifies the air she needs
she needs she needs she needs
a higher proof
turn off the lights
she says
I want to see the eclipse.*