

Fluid

By Elisabeth Hedrick-Moser

Like in so many instances—the mongoose in Hawaii, the police, the NSA—what was first meant as defense was now itself a danger. Plato’s question about the watchman rendered corporal. Who watches the lung fluid? I do, now. Now that I carry it with me in three boxes, attached to tubes subtly winding their way up under my hospital gown to their nesting place hidden in my rib cage. The objective of the surgery was to scrape out of my right lung what used to be fluid but now was becoming increasingly solid and would eventually solidify completely, effectively killing the lung. After the operation, the surgeon inserted three tubes into my chest, through openings in between ribs, to drain out remaining fluid that had gathered in my lungs—the body’s way of fighting off the flesh-eating bacteria gnawing its way into the organ. The fluid is pinkish yellow and fairly viscous. An unimpressive amount, perhaps an inch or two, has gathered in each foot-tall box. It swishes back and forth when I walk, as I always do, with the boxes in tow. Sometimes, when I walk around the PCU to get my exercise, various family members take the chore of pushing the cart that carries the fluid boxes. Yet again, the insides of my body are here with us on the outside, on display in all their abjection, a sign of impending death, the power of horror itself. The body has trespassed its boundaries. The grotesque, rolling on a cart, like popsicles on a summer day.

More horrible, perhaps, was the removal of the tubes. One by one, and only one per every couple days, the surgeon entered my cell to yank out a tube. I’d get an extra shot of deltoid, but still, the sensation of the thumb-wide tube sawing through my ribs and exiting with a champagne cork pop turned my insides like freefalling off a cliff.

They take the boxes away on a little cart to do who knows what with. Experiments? Lab tests? I imagine them falling from the sky into a huge medical landfill of plastic containers and body fluids, surrounded by crows rapping their curved beaks into the plastic, dabbing their beaks in the pink.

All through the long night, the long days, I’m lying on my back, the backs of my shoulder blades, the back of my butt, the backs of my arms and legs. Sometimes in the middle of night, when I have to pee yet again, I just want to roll on my side, to push myself up, kick my feet over the bed, stand up and walk ten small steps to the bathroom right here in the room with me. I will myself to roll over. Will my core to pull me over. With every muscle engaged, I muster my body to inch over to the right. I rest awhile, gather my energy and channel it all to push myself up. I sit there considering how lovely it would be just to do this on my own. Ah! Like dreams of flying—I defy all the laws of gravity and float on my feet lightly to the bathroom. The freedom is exhilarating! The wind rushes through my short hair, my arms are

buoyed up by the oncoming drafts of air. I rise up and see the world below grow small. The space from my bed to the restroom shrinks to a skip. The adrenaline of free movement pulses in my veins. Power and energy make me feel heady and loopy. I see myself lying in a heap on the floor. How long would I be there? Tangled in all my tubes, my IV stand knocked over and medicines draining all over me, making the floor slippery with viscous, chemical smells. I push my nurse button.

“Yes?” “I have to use the bathroom.” I’ve tried every version of this line. I always feel like a kid, needy and helpless, taking someone’s time just so I can pee. I know it’s their job, but I can’t shake that feeling of being a grown woman having to ask someone’s help to use the bathroom every time I have to pee. I even asked them not to take out my catheter. I asked them, Do you have any idea how many times I have to pee at night? Well maybe I didn’t say it like that. They were still filling me with these fluids that would make me pee more than usual because my body is full of water weight from when my veins opened up and rushed water to my body to flush out the infection. Who knew veins had water? Maybe I should have taken Anatomy. Or not ditched the entire year of Biology, showing up once or twice, stoned and stunned at the small pig body on my desk. Well, it turns out that veins do have water, and veins weep when under attack. When Strep bacteria jumps from your throat to your lungs to your bloodstream—over the course of five days, while you celebrate passing your Ph.D. comprehensive exams with your sisters, self-medicating with Aleve and whiskey and *Micheladas*, until you cough up blood and they induce you into a coma—your veins let loose a river of water to wash away the invasion. When your veins weep your whole system takes months to recover. Your skin fills up like a leather canteen. Your skin stretches as the water seeps out of the veins, leaving small, wavy, vertical lines on the surface when the water finally makes its way out. That’s why my body is still swollen up like a marshmallow over a fire. That’s why I have to pee between 5 and 7 times a night. This huge ordeal of getting up, using all my energy to make my way to the toilet, lying in bed waiting, about to pee myself, then sitting on the toilet waiting for them to come back. Seven times a night. I don’t have time to sleep. They told me—it’s good for you. It will help you recover faster if you have to get up to pee, plus there’s less risk of infection. Good lord. Doesn’t sleep help too? When I have a cold, the best thing I can do is sleep, if I have time. In the hospital, you have nothing but time, but there’s a giant conspiracy to keep you from sleeping. I’ve been exhausted since I got here.

Back in bed, panting, my very bones aching from the exercise, from using muscles so recently torn, stabbed, cut through, trying to heal, to re-attach—these muscles throb as if re-opened. My boxes of lung fluid settle on the ground next to me. I close my eyes.

I’m under the trees in Tower Grove Park at the beginning of May. It’s one of the first Saturday farmer’s markets of the still-early growing season in St. Louis, Missouri. The vegetables—still mainly greens and salad mix, a few small beets and new potatoes, warm in the rising sun. A crowd is gathered to practice yoga in the fresh morning air. Breathing evenly, filling my lungs, emptying my lungs, sending oxygen and energy to my hamstrings, my hips, my forehead presses into the grass, dirt, a pesky acorn. We shift positions, I come to a crouch slowly, bend my body around, knees on the ground. I place my head on the grass so that the top of my head is flat on the grass, weave my fingers together around the back of my head. I straighten my legs, sticking my butt in the air. I unfurl backwards. My head points to earth,

my feet walk along a clear blue sky. I'm breathing evenly, relaxing into it, feeling the blood rushing to my heart, to my brain. I sway slightly in the breeze.

I open my eyes in a dark room. The air is the same air I've been breathing for a month. I breathe faster faster, noticing the air getting smaller and smaller, like being on an airplane that's grounded. It closes in and gets suddenly hot and the people close together, or like when I was lost in a cave in Big Bend, and the air escaped out the vacuum of a tunnel. Get out! The window, thick and ten feet away, recedes into the distance. I can't see out, I see only the shapes of the machines hooked to my body. I see my feet in the glass against a dark background, my legs like leaden stumps on my hips. I want to thrash about and hit something, kick the end of the bed, knock over the IV stand, smash the boxes of fluid. My huge arms and hands look like someone stuffed me inside someone else's skin, muscles, bones, and feet—except the connection hasn't taken. I don't have control over the appendages yet, only the nerve endings have joined to my brain, sending my consciousness heightened messages PAINPAINPAINPAINPAINPAINPAINPAINPAINPAIN, like when people lose one sense and the other senses compensate by heightening other perceptions, when you find yourself in another skin and none of the muscles work, the nerves compensate by telling you more and more loudly PAIN from the ribs PAIN from the back PAIN from the inactive legs PAINPAINPAINPAINPAINPAIN. The nights are spent peeing and listening to PAIN, breathing small air and listening to PAIN, tuning out the frequency of PAIN and still hearing PAIN coming through the thick window pane, coursing through the IV PAIN, pulsing in my veins PAIN, swishing around in lung fluid boxes and settling on the floor a stagnant box of pink lung fluid PAIN.

I ring the nurse button. "Yes." "Is it time for more meds yet?" "I'll check."

After the tubes are out, I'm getting stronger, taking more and more carnivalesque, butt-flashing laps around the PCU every day, walking slowly with my whole family, all six carrying some accoutrement of my illness. A parade of IV stand, oxygen tank, and fluid boxes slowly progressing around the square unit. The nurse tells me it's time I get a shower. Ah, water flowing over my body, streaming through my hair, lapping over the sweat that has been gathering over my skin for the month I've been here.

Going for a dip, we called it. We'd light out from Camp and speed down around the mountain roads. My friend and co-mountain-bike-guide, Rebecca, said she knew a good swimming hole. "Stop here." "But this is someone's house." "Yeah it's the Monroe's. They don't care." "Well, ok, I guess." To my surprise, we walk straight in the front door without knocking. Rebecca calls out, "Hello? Anyone home? Well, I guess no one's here. Let's go." We walk through the house and out to the back, where I see why we've come. A wooden dock stretches out past the edge of a drop off, hanging about 10 feet over the water. Without a word we start stripping. Naked and sweating in the Alabama summer sun, we stand on the warm, dilapidated wood. "You first." Silently I step to the edge. I raise my arms to the sun, close my eyes and lean so slightly that I have to wait for my weight to catch up and pull me slowly to the tipping point. My body arches over that point and plummets to a rush of cold river water enclosing my body. It's all over me inside me the tension of the day weeps off and

floats downstream. I rise to the surface and water sprinkles over my face. The water around me shifts up and back down. Rebecca is there next to me, grinning, face shining with water and sun. We laugh and swim around for a while, tread water and chat. “Uh oh.” “What?” “A boat!” The river is small, maybe 15 feet across. It’s murky, but not enough to cover the fact that we are bright white and naked in the open Alabama waters. “Quick—the canoe!” I have no idea what Rebecca has in mind, but I swim after her. She upturns the canoe and dodges under it. I follow her just as the boat rounds the corner. We struggle with our laughter and with the swaying bobbing canoe, urging them to stay still, to resist the water we’ve stirred up. The boat motors past slower than my older sister swims, her head above water, daintily scooping water in front of her to her sides and kicking her feet in a perfect frog pattern. Finally they’re definitely past and we laugh and swim out, replace the canoe to its upright position, and clamber up the ladder. We lie in the sunshine, drying quickly despite the humidity and jump back into our clothes. We walk in the back door and find the family putting away groceries, in the kitchen, with a huge window facing the wooden dock.

My right hand touches my left rib area, ‘the chest tube site,’ as the doctors call it. My frame tightens, and jabs of pain shoot through me. In my mind the holes go straight through my body. The shower water sears through like rubbing alcohol. I slip in my blood and rip open the crevasse in my back. A nurse prepares me in the bathroom. I stand unsteadily, wobbling on the tile floor. She covers the gauze over my back with a waterproof cover and tells me that I don’t need to cover the chest tube site. I don’t believe her, but I nod ok. I mean these holes are the width of my thumb and go straight to my lung. How can we not cover them? Erick comes in to help me shower, to make sure I don’t fall. In a week it will have been a year since we were naked together in a tent on our New Mexico honeymoon. We camped for a week in the Gila, then went to Santa Fe, stayed in a nice hotel and snuck our dishes in to wash them in the bathtub, before going to the mountains outside Taos for another week or so. He helped me shave my head in the hotel room, and I put on my new blue dress for dinner at Café Pascual’s. We raised our cocktail glasses, content, and hungry. That night, two separate tables offered to buy our dinner because, they said, we were glowing. At home in St. Louis, we ride bikes on our dates. I’m always trailing a little behind him, and he looks back to see how far. Now I stand unsteadily, feeling the water rush past my face, brush through my hair. I’m naked, and he’s clothed close by. The water makes me nervous, tight, and drawn in, waiting for pain to touch me as water runs over the holes in my chest. My head is light and my breathing fast. I rinse what soap I’ve managed to apply off me and turn off the water. I just want to be dry and in bed. I want my body not to be porous. Erick hands me a towel and leaves me alone.

My body dries in front of the mirror. The tube holes, like three gunshot wounds, have not, it seems, let any water in. I haven’t seen myself naked in so long. In normal life, I look at myself in the mirror often. Sometimes I’m critical, berating myself for the fat bunching around the waistline, even though it goes against my creed of not judging myself by photo shop standards. But often I just like my body, like looking at the muscle structure. It’s a coming to peace. Seeing me in the mirror, saying, that is me. Internalizing my physical self and trying to make it fit with the self in the mind. Trying to make them one. The person I see right now is not a me I recognize. She is gaunt and pale and disproportioned. She is shot through and hunched over. My body is open to the outer world. The inside is outside. The inside vulnerable to the

outside coming in. I want to be one within the boundary of my body. I want to enter water without it entering me. I want my fluids to remain within the walls of my skin, my veins. I want my body, full of water, to arch and fall into rivers of water, body of water within body of water, an embryo in river womb.

I stand there for a while, panting without my oxygen, trying to get to know the figure in the mirror. A knock on the door. "Come in." I don't think about who it might be anymore. Erick comes in to see if I need anything. I wonder what he's doing, still here. I'm so glad he's still here. He kisses me lightly and helps me put on a fresh gown, dry, and warm.

A native of El Paso, TX, Elisabeth Hedrick-Moser lives in San Antonio, where she explores the city and the surrounding hill country with her two daughters and husband. She earned a doctorate in English Literature from Saint Louis University and has published academic essays on war literature, trauma, and teaching. Currently, Elisabeth is writing a series of essays meditating on experiences of motherhood through the paradigm of pilgrimage. One of these, "Speed and Space of Mind" was recently published in Lucia Journal; another, "Pilgrim, Mother," was recently a finalist in Talking Writing's Writing and Faith contest.

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