

First Bath

SONYA LEA

Seattle-based Sonya Lea has written screenplays, essays, a novel, and has won a number of writing awards. Lea actively blogs and has published essays in magazines such as the Southern Review, Cold Mountain Review, and the online Brevity where this essay first appeared in Fall 2012. Her husband is a cancer survivor.

On Writing: *Commenting on this essay, Lea observed: “I began to write our memoir from the notes I made when I lived with my husband in a cancer hospital for three weeks. He was being treated with an aggressive surgery and chemotherapy, which had caused an anoxic insult, a brain injury in which his mind emptied his memories. . . . When we returned home, I wrote as a way to make sense of the events, and to release the trauma of that time and place.”*

Before Reading

Connecting: Have you ever had to care for a loved one who is ill or who has had surgery?

Anticipating: Lea is describing a simple action; what makes her description so vivid?

- 1 **H**is shoulders hang low and his back is bowed. His body is forty pounds lighter than it was a few days ago, before the cancer surgery, before the blood loss that caused his mind to empty its memories. His is a body without strength, without vigor, without lust, without intention, without history. A body taken apart and reassembled, a body that has not settled into the space of gravity, a body that knows nothing about its own scars, crevices, grumbles.
- 2 “Would you like to bathe your husband in private?” Nurse Jen asks, and I walk across hard linoleum, and I come to his side, and I say, “Yes.” She brings me a pink bowl filled with warm water where a bar of soap soaks. Nurse Jen lays out towels and a washcloth. She walks across the room and she pulls the curtain and she exits and the door closes fully behind her and the room is no longer open to the constant movement of others as it has been for the time we have been living in the cancer hospital.
- 3 My husband closes his eyes, and I take his hand in mine. The light of the new moon is in his thick fingers and large square hands. I squeeze the water from the cloth, rub across the soap, begin to make swirls in his palm, pressing into the flesh of the lifeline, stroking through each of the fingers. I lay the dry towel across his knees, and place his hand to rest there while I glide the cloth up his arm, softly caressing against the grain of his wispy black hair, smoothing over his wide shoulder. I lift his arm onto my shoulder

and I rub under as the silky soap makes a trail into the pit, dark curls slick with lather. Once I could lick there, swirling his hair in my tongue, breathing in his scent as if to memorize the salty musk. Now there is no odor, except of chemotherapy, the smell of ice on steel. His skin holds the fragrance of his first cancer treatment: a scalding mitomycin liquid, isolated from *Streptomyces lavendulae*, a 104 degree tumor-killer which they'd poured inside him while his organs lay on the table near his open body. I imagine the medicine binding to his cells, the sick cells dying, the dead cells pouring out of him, onto my cloth. I imagine the movement restoring his mind, the mind we will not know for six months hence has been permanently altered by an anoxic insult, a brain injury, a memory-eater.

4 I soak the cloth in water again, and rinse him, warm droplets sliding down his forearms where I hope to wake something that wants to live, where I hope to rouse some fire under the pallor. I dry the length of his arm, almost as big as half of me, and so weak it flops to his side without support. I rub down his broad back, pat his left arm and hand, touch the skin tenderly, walking around the pole that holds his IV lines, avoiding the tape and tubes near his wrist. I wash the dried blood near his chest tubes, move the water away from the tape down his middle, a wide bandage over two feet long, where his skin is quietly re-stitching. He is without his umbilicus, the part that connected him to his mama, the center that made him man, the place where my fingers found him in the dark. My hand travels down to clean his penis, and I gently swab around the catheter, my hand finding his testicles, holding their weight in the way I would if I'd wanted to make love. I wipe him with sweet strokes. I look up to his face. He opens his eyes. Tender, surrendered eyes. Tears fall down my chin at the dignity in his submission.

5 I wrap him in his clean gown, and lean him back into a fresh pillow and strap on the leg bands that will pulse his blood through the day and night, making the sound of wind, a measured music in our unsteady life. ■

QUESTIONS ON SUBJECT AND PURPOSE

1. An "anoxic insult" (paragraph 3) occurs when the brain has suffered a complete lack of oxygen—a result of the blood loss that Lea mentions (paragraph 1). What have been the consequences of that event?
2. What is the focus of the essay?
3. Why might Lea have written the essay—that is, what seem to be her reasons for writing about the experience? Is it an objective description of her husband's surgery?

QUESTIONS ON STRATEGY AND AUDIENCE

1. In what verb tense does Lea write the essay? Why that choice?
2. How does Lea describe her husband's reaction to the bath?
3. What expectations might Lea have about her audience?