

Susan Terris

### I SPEAK IN MY MOTHER'S VOICE

This is what is meant by old – older than my mother.  
And my body, so heavy these days, not fat  
just slow, hard to move; and here in my summer house,  
the children, my guests, breeze through rooms  
as if I'm gone. They cook in my kitchen,  
whisper about my TV. Once, before they were  
born, or as Harold (yes . . . dead now for  
more than twenty years) always said, *a gleam  
in his eye*, I was considered a beauty –  
seductive, smart, and everyone paid attention.  
Now, though, I'm failing and afraid of falling,  
I still hear, see, win at Scrabble, do a puzzle faster . . .  
*ort . . . pariah-dog . . . mai-tai . . .* play better bridge  
than any of them. For my 80<sup>th</sup>, they gave me  
a computer and stick-on tatoos. Now my 90<sup>th</sup> is  
coming. But, except for manicures, massages,  
a few forced kisses, no one touches me,  
and my nerve endings are dying. For pleasure,  
I think about the next meal and the next. Try to forget  
hospitals, swollen legs, bruises. The children  
find me as aggravating . . . *Trigger . . . Bermuda Triangle . . .*  
as I once found my aging mother. Everything is  
being taken away, except the present tense  
of food and TV sports. The children, you ask?  
Well, my youngest sleeps too much and does too little.  
My son thinks only about money. My oldest  
moves in her own world and has her secrets,  
but she does see my spark and my drive,  
my need to travel, to dance the night away.  
Yes, even with a walker, I dance. In the hospital, too.  
The last time, the discharge nurse gave me a list.  
Its final item: *Sexual Activity*, and she wrote in:  
*As tolerated*. While my daughter and I laughed,  
I thought of someone stroking my breasts, of a man  
inside me. Not Harold, though he was only 70,  
and, right now, 70 sounds about right. Of us, I remember  
mostly our travels . . . *largo . . . West Nile . . . espresso . . .*  
his temper, yet little about how he touched me.

My daughter touches everyone yet seldom me as if old age  
is contagious, as if one day she'll wake and find  
herself with my arms, my feet, my sack-of-potatoes  
belly. And slow, as I am. "Myrtle the Turtle"  
Harold called me. But my daughter's always moved fast,  
fast runner, whitewater girl. Now, still, she speeds  
as if she can keep age from catching her. The writer,  
the spark, and here up north: the camp counselor.  
But I know words she doesn't . . . *dik-dik* . . . *palimpsest* . . .  
After the stroke, they asked me the steps to change a tire,  
and I said I'd call the Auto Club and that Hamlet lived  
at Elsinore and Rosalind in the Forest of Arden.  
My daughter is an aging Rosalind, sharp,  
but she doesn't know a five-letter word for soap plant.  
She doesn't know the beach at Rara Tonga. Yes, I'm  
an adventurer who hangs elephant bells  
on my walker. And, still, some days when I wake,  
I think I am already dead. Those mornings, I don't  
feel my body at all – not hot or cold, pleasure  
or pain. My daughter's daughter always says people  
need to get a life. Well, I still have one. But look  
at me. Body dying faster than mind, and if I  
can't keep traveling, I think I *will* die. My last  
freedom. To my daughter, I gave more freedom  
than I ever had. Harold loved me, but I made  
the compromises. My eldest makes few,  
was never the beauty I was, but freedom keeps her  
exotic. My legacy, and she uses it – sometimes  
even against me. But that's okay. When she skims by,  
I pretend to go with her, see her secret life as mine.  
And this morning, when I move from my back, from  
this numb, turtled state, I'll sit on my shower stool  
until the hot water is drained from the tank.  
Then I'll phone about a foot massage,  
butter myself two slices of wild rice bread  
from Bemidji, and do my crossword . . .  
*Song of Solomon* . . . *ai* . . . *Arthur Ashe* . . . as I watch  
the Open and make plans for my next world cruise.