

Betsy Struthers

MY MOTHER DEFINES PURGATORY

Wakes, or at least thinks she wakes. Sniffs, expecting mahogany, black earth, gets a whiff of lemon polish, an outhouse door left open. On her back, arms at her sides, not wrapped around her husband – *where is he?* Flexes fingers, toes, ankles, elbows – joints respond the way they should do. Rubs one palm down her thigh, slick of a nylon nightgown. Once, on her honeymoon, she slept in pink satin.

Opens her eyes. Gray square a window in the wrong place, wrong shape to be her room at home. Too much stuff – wardrobe, armchair, bookshelf – too many pictures on the walls, all white borders, black frames – oh, family photos, her children and grandchildren. How can she be as old as her own mother? Feels the weight of her infants in her arms.

Knock, knock – door opens before she can ask *who's there?* Squeak of soles, rough hands, a soft voice urging *get up now, it's time to get up*. Sheet pulled off and the stink of pee, a baby's wet the bed. Can't they hear the baby crying?

Half carried, half pulled into a bathroom. Light too bright, rods bracketing the toilet. A sink. No tub, no shower. Shivers when the gown's stripped off, folds her arms across her single breast. The scar aches. Heart hammering.

Tugged and heaved and a diaper pulled up between her legs. Finally, allowed to sink back into bed, though it's too hard and barred just like a crib. Sheets frosty cold and stiff, stink of a chemical that mimics drying on the line. She always dried her sheets out on the line. Where is she now? A hospital? A prison?

Lies flat on her back, stares at shadows pulsing on the ceiling. A thread of light under the door now shut. Straightens her legs, feet arched against the cramps. Folds one hand on the other, palms flat against her chest, feels it rise and fall with each sighed and stubborn breath. Eyes closed, counts sheep. Wills her body to be still. To be prepared. Practicing for death.

