



Photo by windflower

### Paul on the Floor in the Dark

By Susan Hodara

**I**t was a soft thud, like a pillow falling, but it was loud enough to wake me. Then a series of realizations: 2 a.m., a dark shape, my husband Paul, lying on the floor.

I turned on my reading light, jumped out of bed. He was on his stomach, sprawled across the threshold between the bathroom and the bedroom, his left arm outstretched by his head. He was clad in waffled long underwear—red bottoms, black top—with socks on his feet. His eyes were closed. I touched his back, his smooth scalp. “Paul, Paul, what happened to you?”

He passed out on the way to the bathroom the night we flew back to New York from Denver, where we’d spent the month with our newborn granddaughter and her parents. We’d never been away for that long. Upon our return, Paul consoled our two meowing cats while I discarded a pile of junk mail and put in a load of laundry. We ordered sushi, watched a movie in bed, turned off the lights and fell asleep.

There had been a few medical concerns: unexplained night sweats before we left for our trip, followed by a panel of blood tests that didn’t indicate much; a smidge of blood in his urine after we arrived in Denver that the doctor at home suggested he treat by drinking lots of water; and lethargy, which wasn’t unusual for Paul, but still worried me.

Otherwise, it had been a peaceful month, our days consumed with—delighted by—an infant. Staring for what turned into hours at every movement of her moon-like face, her legs punching, her arms lifting and falling. Her eyes closing in utter peace.

Then we flew home.

Paul opened his eyes when he heard my voice. “I’m sleeping,” he said.

“You are on the floor.”

He seemed small, his skinny legs forming a jagged line. We had recently turned 68, but to me he looked younger. He reached for the black sweatshirt that I’d taken off earlier and shoved it under his head.

Water. The blue plastic cup in the medicine cabinet. Paul pursed his lips to try to drink, but the water dripped onto the floor.

A straw. “I’ll be right back,” and I ran downstairs to get one. The flexible kind. I could bend it into his mouth. I ran back up to the bedroom, and he sipped.

"I'm going back to bed," he said. But he couldn't. Paul, who was stopped by nothing, who figured out everything, couldn't get off the floor.

Then, maybe because of the water, he was able to raise his body if I helped him. On hands and knees, he crawled to the bed, lifted himself onto it, slid over to his side, and pulled up the covers. "I'm fine," he said, and closed his eyes.

A doctor. For an instant I wavered: Paul said he was fine He would tell me not to. But I had to call. Of course I did. I sat on the bed as I told the medical center's answering service that my husband had fainted. I was cold; my teeth chattered a little as I waited for the callback, staring at Paul, stroking his head.

My conversation with the on-call doctor roused Paul. Tell them this, tell them that, he was saying, so I pressed speakerphone. Paul was reassuring: "I'm okay now," and the doctor said maybe he was, maybe he could wait till the morning to see his own doctor, but why didn't he get up and walk a little to be sure.

I watched as Paul stood up and began to move slowly around the edge of the bed. He wobbled once, then again, and again. "You're wobbling," I said, and the doctor said, "If he's wobbling, go to the ER now."

Now. A plan. I grabbed sweatpants from the bottom drawer and my sweatshirt from the floor. I put on my sneakers while Paul lay in bed. It was time to tell Sofie, our older daughter, who had flown back from Denver with us and was asleep in the other room. She was leaving in the morning. I didn't want her to get up and find us gone.

I sat quietly on the edge of her bed and touched her shoulder. Right away she was awake. "What?"

I told her, and she followed me back into our bedroom. Paul could get his shoes on if I slid them onto his feet. "No, not the brown leather ones," he said, "the black Nikes." He could walk down the stairs if Sofie and I supported his weight on either side and didn't let go. He could get into the car if we brought him to the passenger side, where I'd already moved the seat all the way back. I snatched a blanket from the living room and put it over his lap.

The hospital was less than 10 minutes away. I parked in the fire lane in front of the emergency room, put on my flashers and a mask and led Paul to the glass entryway. As soon as the doors whooshed open, we were greeted by a security guard who informed me I could not enter. "Only the patient," he said.

Covid. I hadn't thought. "Does he need a wheelchair?" the guard wanted to know, and, after a momentary pause, I realized that yes, he did.

Then I was alone. Paul was alone. The guard had pushed him through another set of sliding doors. I watched Paul through the glass. The ER was quiet, maybe one other patient there. I would wait until he was called.

I opened the second doors and stuck my head inside. "Can I just wait with...?" but before I could finish, the guard gestured for me to stop. "You can't come in," he said. "How will I know what's going on?" I asked. What if Paul passed out again? What if he didn't remember what to tell the doctor? What if something was terribly wrong? No one had asked me who I was or how to reach me. "Call his cell," the guard said.

Beyond the glass, Paul was facing away from me. I tried not to pace because my movements activated the door to the outside, and it was cold, and the repeated whooshing was grating. But it was hard to stand still. When I saw a nurse wheel Paul away, I got back into my car and drove the empty streets. I was home by 3:30 a.m.

In the bedroom, I found Sofie curled up under the covers on Paul's side of the bed. She lifted her head. "What time is it?"

I told her everything as I pulled the blankets on my side over me. I reached into the warmth and took her hand. "You did great," she said.

The day had begun in Denver, 24 hours earlier, after just a couple of hours of sleep. My body felt heavy and tight. Sofie fell asleep quickly, and I must have, too.

I called Paul as soon as I woke up, and there it was: his voice. He was talkative, full of information, soothing. His blood pressure had been very low, but it was coming up. He had been dehydrated, but they were giving him IV fluids. They'd done all sorts of bloodwork, urine tests, a CAT scan. Could I bring his phone charger? Oh, and his computer, so he could watch television.

With that, my darkest fears—the ones I hadn't let myself think—subsided. I assured Sofie that Paul would be fine, I would be fine, she should leave as planned. After she did, I made myself a cup of coffee and sat. I listened to the silence.

That was Wednesday morning. Paul called with ongoing updates: A diagnosis of prostatitis and a course of IV antibiotics. A run-in with the nurse who said he wasn't allowed to use the bathroom alone. A couple of visits from the hospitalist that I listened to on speakerphone.

And it turned out that since he was no longer in the ER, I could visit him in his room during limited afternoon hours, which I did on Wednesday and Thursday. I sat in a chair upholstered in aqua-colored vinyl next to the bed, where Paul wore a faded hospital gown with his long underwear and socks. The same long underwear and socks he'd worn on the plane. The same ones I'd seen when he was lying on the floor.

Now he was peppier, surrounded by his phone, his computer, the remnants of a turkey sandwich, and a plastic cup of orange juice with its foil lid intact. I sat and watched, relieved by his return to himself. "He's doing great," I told family members eager for updates.

On Friday morning he was discharged. He'd made up with the nurse: "We had a long talk, she's great," he reported. Could I bring something to thank her and the other nurses for their care?

I baked brownies. Visiting hours hadn't started when I came to pick Paul up, so I had someone bring them to his floor while I waited in the hospital lobby. It took longer than I expected, maybe half an hour, and then there he was, by himself—no attendants, no wheelchair—walking toward me. He was grinning, happy to be out of there. He said he was feeling "110 percent." It was New Year's Eve.

Last night I awakened to a noise. 2 a.m. A scuffling sound. I raised my head to find that Paul wasn't in bed beside me. I bolted up, saw a dark shape on the floor across the room. "Paul?" I could hear my own fear. "What?" Paul replied from the bathroom. The dark shape was the laundry basket I'd left there earlier. Paul had probably knocked it over when he got up. He came back to bed, picked up his phone and started scrolling. I tried to go back to sleep, but I couldn't.

It is spring now. April. Paul has had several reassuring follow-up doctor's appointments and remains healthy. He says he doesn't like water, so he drinks lemonade in larger quantities than he used to. He says he wants to walk more, to be in better shape. He says don't worry, he is fine.

But I do worry. The image of him sprawled on the floor returns to me. Unexpectedly. A spasm, an interruption, a blow. I see his closed eyes, his legs outstretched. On the floor. Shrouded in dimness.

I am different now. I go with him to see his doctors. Take notes. Keep a growing file of records. I think twice before I spend the weekend with my 95-year-old mother, afraid Paul will collapse alone in the night. "How are you?" I ask. "Are you okay?" Over and over, too many times, until Paul shushes me.

I am kinder now. The crumbs in the bed, the coffee grounds on the counter, the persistent nasal sounds Paul can't help but make. My irritation has flattened; the anger I always felt I should squelch has (mostly) quieted.

I want to save Paul: from his sedentary lifestyle, from the Pirate's Booty and peanut butter-filled pretzels he sometimes claims as dinner. But I have wanted to save him for most of our marriage and have never been able to change his ways. He insists. So I make him a banana and strawberry protein shake first thing every morning. I bring him tea. I peel oranges for him, arrange the slices on a plate and carry them to him as he's watching TV.

I used to joke sometimes with my friends that a surefire way to reawaken my feelings of love for Paul was to imagine him dead. Now I neither want nor need to imagine. In the middle of nothing, doing a crossword puzzle, chopping garlic, I will picture him. He will be there again, crumpled by the bathroom. My gut clenches, and I banish the image. He is fine, I remind myself, and continue with what I'm doing.

Until the next time: My husband, Paul. Lying on the floor in the dark. My timepiece. My conscience. My heart.

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## AUTHOR'S COMMENT

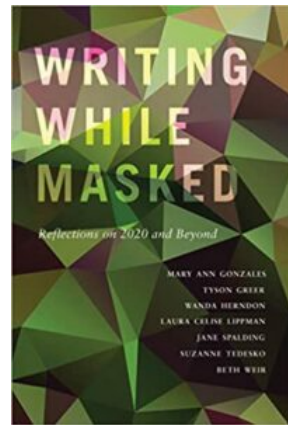
Fear comes with aging, and it comes with loving others. I accept and embrace that and try to remember to blend it with gratitude.

### Writing While Masked

by Mary Ann Gonzales, Tyson Greer, Wanda Herndon, Laura Celise Lippman, Jane Spalding, Suzanne Tedesko, and Beth Weir

Once a week, seven writers—all retired from professional careers—spent two hours together to discuss what they wrote the previous week. For a number of years prior to 2020, the group met in their homes over

coffee. The pandemic changed that. Members could not hug at Zoom meetings. On May 24, 2020, a white policeman pressed his knee to a Black man's neck. Other officers looked on with chilling nonchalance. A seventeen-year-old girl captured it all on her cellphone and the world exploded. The process of putting down their thoughts about the cascading events of the year helped the group weather the challenges of 2020 and beyond. The pieces collected in *Writing While Masked* are personal—writings of the moment, essays that reflect, detailed timelines and poems that express raw emotion. They include thoughts about what the authors experienced and learned, and what they want for the future. Most of all, they are words of hope. "Engaging personal views give us what will be seen forever as an historical contribution." Yvonne Higgins Leach, author, *Another Autumn* "I don't ever want to forget the pandemic's momentous events, disappointments, and gifts. This thoughtful book (provides) a reflection and reminder of the unique time in our lives." Ruth Kagi, retired Washington State



Representative "It has been a joy to have been one of the first bookstores to carry *Writing While Masked* and to see it now become one of our store's top selling books. Our community has been inspired by this collection." Kalani Kapahua, Manager, Third Place Books, Seattle Available from [Amazon](#), [Bookshop.org](#), [WSU Press](#) and your independent bookstore.

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## BIOS

**Susan Hodara** is a journalist, memoirist, and educator. Her articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, *Communication Arts*, and more. Her short memoirs are published in assorted literary journals; one was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She is co-author of the memoir *Still Here Thinking of You* (Big Table Publishing).



Photograph by Honey Lazar

**windflower**, her wife, border collie and mini aussie live on the Mendocino Coast in Northern California, on unceded ancestral land of the Pomo people. Her camera is a door into a journey of light and color and meditation – and a connection with the poetry in nature and her own spirit. Her work has been shown in several exhibits and publications. windflower is also a poet.

