

# Bathing

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In forty-five years, since I was a young child bathed by my mother, I have taken, I think, exactly five baths. Most have been this past year, in a claw-foot tub my husband and I hauled up Rainbow Pass to this cabin in the shadow of Nipple Mountain, where longhorns still linger at the brink of old prospecting glory holes. It's not that I don't understand the need to purify the body: the dark stain of consciousness still flowering out of the old garden, out of the old wounds—Eve the rib fleshed and wanting. I have stood at the mouth of ancient baths in underground ruins, know of the ritual mikvah baths of my husband's Judaic heritage: lover, bride, menstruating wife, all the grieving who have placed their hands on the newly dead—equally impure and so immersed in the living waters of springs and deep groundwater wells. It's simply that I did not bathe.

In Ohio, when I was thirteen, we lived on a farm behind a cemetery where the metal hulls of parked cars glinted beneath the moon, where high school lovers swam into each other above the soft and dented graves, mornings the damp grass I wept over littered with their beer bottles and spent balloons. Here, the Catholic milk farmers raised their sons and daughters in long barrack rooms, ate meals on heavy wood tables longer than caskets, swam naked to cleanse themselves in summer cow ponds. I remember the daughters of the cemetery caretaker who bathed in metal horse troughs with the well water they heated on the kitchen stove, carried steaming into loafing sheds sagging beneath the weight of their long winters. In our house of brick and stone behind farm fences and locked gates, half built in the years of the Civil War above vanished pig

yards, and filled with ghosts my mother sometimes heard—voices of those dead farmers passing idly beneath our bay windows—I took my daily showers like a confessional in bathrooms of tile and indoor plumbing.

I sit now in water pumped from an aquifer some four hundred and sixty-five feet below me, where I imagine the calcified bones of thirsty dinosaurs must rest. Outside the window, jets cruise over me, weave the sky with their white contrails above this mountain plain where once miners washed in the phantom springs I've named. Before the well, before this cabin, we had no real water, bringing the little we could in small coolers when we camped out dirty and ashy, the wild din of coyotes crowding us from the far valley, the summer stars above our small fires blurred.

I will tell you I did not bathe because I am almost 5'10", because I don't have the body for it—my knees awkwardly splayed above the water since I was an adolescent. I will tell you I did not bathe because I've never had the predilection for it—the words of my mother, a “shower” pragmatist, filling me with disdain for the lingering dirt of my own body. I will tell you I did not bathe because I grew up guilty as this “landed gentry”—my father, a successful doctor in a wealthy suburb of Cincinnati, moving us to those cow ponds and horse troughs, to those dirt roads named for the grog once brewed in Prohibition stills rusting now in fields and creek beds and bounded by such resentful poverty. What I won't tell you is that I never loved my body enough.

Once I read that young victims of rape will sometimes go through a stage of promiscuity. I think of the lonely, vulnerable, adolescent girl I was, listening beneath the kitchen window to her parents discussing their concern that she wasn't “over it yet,” this girl the one ghost my mother could not hear. In Ohio, I sometimes swam naked with the Catholic girls. They didn't like me, but they came anyway to swim in our spring-fed pond, to shed their suits at our sand shores, half hidden by the weeping willows. I remember covering myself with shamed hands while a birthmark like the whole of a virginal country I had left long ago stained unembarrassed the pelvis of the prettiest girl I wished to be. It seems you live your whole life beneath a bruise, and though you push it down, anything can bring it back—an unexpected glimpse at a science study you are too afraid to follow up on, the words of a girl you hear who asks,

“Why would anyone want to rape her?” When the Catholic girls stepped into the water, I watched their backs skim the surface like new pennies—this a baptism I could not receive.

I crack the window open—the moon a thumbnail now, and the earth gone flat beneath the night snow. My own breathing rocks me. I imagine the motion of my mother walking, her belly full with the weight of me rising and falling, the sound of her voice through the placental waters. Even in this tiny amount of bath water, my hands want to lift into the air, swell out of the water like the pale fish at dusk that swam with me those summer nights I was so alone, insects cratering the small moon of my sinking body. Into my twenties, I could count the men in my life on two hands, their bodies slipping finally and always just past me below the stilled waters. For a while, I forgot, that thirteenth year disappearing unnoticed, until I saw the weak, frail sex of my premature daughters, my mother holding them beneath the kitchen tap to cleanse them because I could not, afraid to touch their nakedness, afraid to touch their fragile skin still flushed with those thimblefuls of my own blood. I think of them now at seventeen, of the stranger who stared at them on the light rail, finally mouthing the word “beautiful” to them before he stepped off—how long they waited for this, the moment when a girl suddenly realizes her own beauty, comes into the whole body of it, and the world awakens to her. I sat next to them, beaten in that florescent light, remembering too, though I never realized that moment, never.

The dog pushes his long, delicate snout through the cracked door. He cries and whimpers. I pull the plug and step out of the water, bath bubbles clinging to me. In the dim mirror, my body is a study of shadow and light. I think it was made to be seen against the warmth of cabin wood, the knots and linear waves of Douglas fir, the brown tones of it melding into the long grain the air darkens, all the voices finally gone. Tonight I will sleep on the couch in front of the woodstove, where the aspen stump I dug out of the drifts cracks and burns. The wind sings through the window like a siren, and the steam floats from my skin like thin milk.

