

# Surfacing: Secrets of the Women's Locker Room

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and *Writers Without Borders* (2008). "(Im)Patient"—the story of two rotator cuff surgeries necessitated by her daily swims over thirty years—was named a *Notable Essay* of 2005. She still swims every day.

Every day, year round, I swim laps. After a dozen years at the university pool, most of the regulars, including faculty, even some students, migrated three years ago to the newly opened community recreation center. The parking is close at hand; no more lugging gym bags across campus. With its reliable staff, we no longer mill about in damp towels, shivering in wait for the no-show guard. The water in the regulation pool (the rec center modestly refrains from bragging "Olympic-sized," though that's what it is) seems slightly warmer than the university's. There's a smaller pool with designated hours for rehab, and other times for families (our infant grandson was initiated on a recent visit)—invited to play with rubber duckies, frogs, and best of all, spouting whales. I have read in the *New York Times* about gyms, even the swanky ones, where vigilant attendants have to keep people from hogging the exercise machines, fighting over the lap lanes, and commandeering all the locker space, but except for a few children who evade parental discipline, this is not the local ethos. The lobby offers magazines (bring some from home, take what you want), Internet connections, free coffee. The perfect setting for conversation. But the locker room is better, especially since it has been designated a "cell phone-free zone."

When I was new to the campus, all the bodies were blurred, streaked figures in or out of water in the pool and in the university's common shower room, suitable for George Bellows' boxers with its harsh lights, sweating pipes, cracked tiles, concrete floor, no curtains. Politeness dictated no staring, though it was hard to ignore the presence of people who appeared naked inches away under the shower day after day. In those days I would silently compare my body to theirs. Fatter than me. Thinner. Breasts bigger than mine, they could scarcely be smaller. Is she pregnant, or just flabby? Older than me. Younger. The spraying water bestowed innocence, washing away makeup, hairdos, neutralizing skin colors.

We moved in concert when the toilets were flushed in the adjacent room, dance or be scalded. Gradually we began to talk, under the

streaming water. Where to get good maple syrup. Sightings of blue-birds, coyotes, a red fox. Hiking and youth hostelling in Australia's Blue Mountains, and Tasmania. Peace Corps work in the Peruvian Andes. RN training in hospitals versus college nursing programs. When to plant tomatoes so they wouldn't freeze. How children learn three foreign languages simultaneously, with native accents, and never mix them up. The Met's pre-Impressionism show ("Don't go"). Dissertation research—astrophysics, patiently explained, and explained again . . . Sometimes we talked when we swam laps, with pauses for the turns—as we do in the new pool.

The new community building has separate shower stalls, but we continue to dress in a common area, now Mondrian in functional design but populated with bodies by Rubens, Renoir, Picasso (in all incarnations—rose, blue, cubist), Jacob Lawrence, Frida Kahlo, anime. The conversation continues, the reclusive hiding beneath headphones, iPods, big towels. A Mexican linguist knows good places to learn Spanish, "But it's really easy anywhere with an interactive computer program." What and where to feed horses during a summer of drought. How to encourage more girls to study science. Could they be recruited through UConn's summer program for kids, in which last summer's physics class consisted of twenty boys—and one girl who dropped out when she saw the numbers. An AAUW activist is on the case. Good books to read. Book club choices, pro and con.

When we're discussing the ambivalent mother of the narrator with Asperger's syndrome in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, I compliment the mother of a spastic teenage daughter on her consistent, soothing kindness. She smiles in reply, "Parents without patience don't come here." A lawyer, a divorce mediator, devours history, biography, autobiography—works that show people taking charge of their own lives. "The people I represent are so powerless. No money, no leverage, no hope of better jobs. In most cases, I hate to say, they'd be better off to stay married." "Can you tell them that?" "Not unless they ask. Their minds are usually made up by the time they see me." "Are they women?" She knows I'm an English professor, and tactfully ignores the fact that I've asked the obvious. "Every one of them." "I'll email you that autobiography reading list," I promise.

I think of this conversation when I overhear the Voice of Experience advising newly divorced Innocence on the virtues of becoming a landlady as a way to augment her income. "Buy a duplex," Experience recommends, "You can claim tax deductions not just for the mortgage, but for repairs, painting, cleaning—even the mops and cleanser. It will pay for itself in four or five years." She may be right, I think, aware that even small apartments here rent for \$1300 a month. "The only trouble," says Experience, "is dealing with the tenants. But you can be very upfront in telling them what you expect. I know of a house near here that's just come on the market." As Innocence heads for the exercise room, Experience promises, "Tomorrow I'll give you a list of what not to do when you start dating again. I wish I'd figured this out the first time around, the second time—we're not married, but we're living together—is so much better."

Even on dry land we dive beneath the surface. Issues close to home. On one super hot day as we shiver in wet bathing suits in the air-conditioned dampness, I observe, "The first thing we did when we moved here was to install central air conditioning. Some summers we hardly use it, but it keeps us up to speed on days like this." "We only have a window air conditioner in our bedroom," she moans, "And the kitchen is sweltering. We have electric heat," which means a lot of money and upheaval to install air conditioning. "I'd rather move to get air conditioning than remodel." Her face breaks into a smile. "My son moved home right after college. Now his older brother has come home, too." "How old are they?" I ask. "They're twenty-one and twenty-three, good kids, and they're saving money by living with us. But the only freedom my husband and I have ever had was the nine months when our younger son was living in the dorm his senior year." She is smiling broadly now, "I'll sell the house. That will get them out!"

At the rec center even parents of small children can find some respite by leaving them in the nursery while they exercise. During the diaper change that invariably accompanies the reunion, older children cluster around to watch the process, smugly confident in their own continence as they exclaim over the protagonist's anatomy. Sometimes the parents discuss day care, policies, and possibilities. Health care, ditto. A pharmacist says she always volunteers to work on Thanksgiving and Christmas. "And leave your family?" I inquire,

since she's often there with her adolescent daughter, who sounds as sweet as she looks. "Yes. The people who come in are so lonely. They'll buy a can of nuts they don't need and talk for a half hour. All day long they appear, there's no one at home." We speculate on the eleven-day Christmas tour of the Norwegian mail-and-passenger boats through the fjords beyond the Arctic Circle in pitch-dark day and night. What lost souls book passage on this stygian voyage? Do they, like Dante's Guido, as naked spirits speak candidly to one another in this closed circuit of incandescence, flaming out against the jagged ice of bergs, mountain crags, and northern lights so far from home? I tell people whose names I do not know things I have never told my own sister, fears, frustrations, secrets bubbling to the surface.

The doctor's office-type scale is the focal point of the room, impossible to ignore. So we all weigh ourselves, averting our eyes not from the naked body on the slightly elevated platform but from the numbers on the balance beam. Who among us does not want to lose the vacation ten? The freshman fifteen? Agile high school girls shimmy into two layers of bathing suits before removing their underwear, ecdysiastic artistry that pales before the tattoos visible on women of all ages. A discreet butterfly poised on an ankle. A rosebud amidst cleavage. A directional arrow on the derriere—you go, girl! A permanent bracelet, its inky weave overlain by plastic circlets, neon pink and yellow and green. Concentration numbers still ragged, indelible on a forearm. And scars. I stare resolutely into the eyes of a friend with a mastectomy, even though it's a decade old. A newer acquaintance, whose bald head signals recent chemo, seeks advice on a literary agent for her children's stories. Will there be time enough to develop her talent. . . . She does not finish her sentence. "Try writing the stories and see what happens," I say, and give her the name of an experienced children's author.

Unlike the cramped locker room in the old building, the new locker room has ample space for wheelchairs and rehab equipment. A woman in a back brace who has progressed from a wheelchair to a walker to a cane after three months of hydrotherapy looks svelte and tanned, erect in her uniform of tights and tunic. Another, however, has become progressively more dependent on her motorized scooter and aide. Newly wed, she tells us of her trip to California to be with her

three sisters for the marriage. We survey her finger—no ring, too small at the ceremony, it's being enlarged. Our toast is water, always water.

Together we lift from her wheelchair yet another feminist-in-arms whose daily swims transform her crippled legs to arcs of grace. When her husband's not there to share a private family changing room, she counts on the reliable regulars to slip on her panties and slacks, and slide them up. She has served as a community consultant on the construction of this new building, for handicapped shower and toilet stalls, and we acknowledge their installation—seats, grab bars, waist-high controls, adjustable shower height—as we talk about writing, hers, mine, ours. Later we turn out strong for the publication party for her book, *Body of Diminishing Motion*, and there we are, surprise! in “Legs” and “Laps” and “Morning Swim.”

Into the shower's ebb and flow, the lap lanes, the new therapy pool with warm water, the women come and go. The high school swim team seniors graduate, to be replaced by the next wave, glistening in braces and matching Speedos. Gaggles of gigglers, but at least once a week someone will be crying, usually over betrayal by a friend, boy or girl. Pregnant women, suits stretched taut, more graceful now in this immersion than on dry land, in energetic preparation for new immersion. New colleagues arrive with young children who are learning to swim and waving sodden certificates to prove it. A former grad student appears; her children have metamorphosed from dipping timid toes into the water to fearless divers, in training for the swimming team. A trio of a certain age, one teaching two friends how to breathe underwater, how to do the crawl, the breast stroke—the Three Graces, surely. Another graceful swimmer, her Warsaw ghetto accent still strong after fifty-two years of marriage and life in America, disappears the week before her husband dies, spirited off to Assisted Living by her children as they decamp for Arizona. Others leave for good—new jobs, new climates, new marriages, reunion, repatriation.

But I like it fine, right here. I would not exchange these locker room experiences for a private pool. Make no mistake. Locker rooms, like other public spaces, are known by the company they keep. Those in the Japanese “country inns,” what Americans might call big spa hotels, are to die for, with every amenity for bathing, shampooing, creaming, drying. The Japanese take baths—with sprayers, handheld

showers, sometimes filling small wooden tubs in fountains to rinse off—before entering the communal pool. Although we did not speak the same language, in every spa in the Hakone region I found myself amidst a cordial community of women of all ages, energetically scrubbing and inviting me, with gestures and giggles, to do the same. When we were clean within an inch of our lives, they would welcome me to the nearly scalding pool, gently splashing and pouring water in a bicultural baptism; more giggles—Mary Cassat with Asian wash. I have never felt so much at home.

The locker room in the Stockholm hostel during another vacation was, however, of a different order. With our adolescent sons tucked in bed, and my husband off to the men's shower, I headed in the opposite direction, down a long, empty corridor where the large, hand-lettered sign tacked up on the heavy door read "Damar. Women. Frauen. Dames." The doorway revealed an abyss of midnight black, dead silent, not even a faucet dripping. When I finally found the switch there leapt forth a clean, fluorescent-lighted room that could have been painted by Edward Hopper, so spare that I had to leave my clothes and towel on the narrow windowsill.

As I turned to step into the shower, a man wearing an electric blue track suit and running shoes burst from the shower stall across the aisle. I began to scream, in impeccable English, the only language I knew by instinct, "Get out!" My voice had the wrong words, the wrong language, yet as he charged toward me I added, still screaming, "You're in the women's shower." He kept on coming, his face suffused with hatred, the eyes vacant—I have never seen such blankness before or since—looming over mine. I screamed again. Then he was hitting me on the mouth, on the cheek; I could taste the salty blood as he battered my head.

Then time slowed down, inside my head, the way it does when you think your car is going to crash as it goes into a skid, and I could hear the voices, all mine, in cacophony. One voice, terrified, could say nothing at all. I had never been hit before in my life—how could I know what to do? The man in blue, silent, never let up. "I need to get my clothes and get out," I thought. But that would mean going past him one way to retrieve them and back again to reach the door. "I should just escape," I told myself, as the windmilling blue arms

continued to pound me. "If he knocks me down on the tiles," where bare feet have no traction, "he'll kill me." Still screaming I suddenly realized, "I don't want my children to hear this," but I could not stop. I was losing my balance when the angry message came, etched in adrenaline, "I didn't ask for this, I don't deserve it, and I'm not going to take it." I pushed past him and ran naked into the hall, now full of men, milling about. Although roused from sleep, they would not cross the barrier of that sign in four languages.

My husband, still wet from his own shower, came running in response to the piercing cries, surprised to find they were mine. As Martin was covering me with his travel trench coat, my assailant emerged, saw the crowd, blinked, and retreated to the sanctuary of the locker room. He stepped out again, nonchalantly, as Martin began to guide me back to our room, and this time the other men nailed him to the corridor wall and called the police. We spent much of the night at the police station filing a complaint, calling the American embassy. ("If he'd murdered you, the allegation would stand a chance," the sympathetic lawyer advised, "but Swedish law favors the criminal.") Our children slept soundly, and in the morning we continued our travels.

Although in the defiant spirit of "take back the night" I deliberately do not dwell on this story or the stories it embeds, I always feel Emily Dickinson's "zero at the bone" when I enter any locker room and it's empty. I take a sharp breath. I pause and check to see whether there are any shoes visible below the stall doors though today's unisex clothing offers ambiguous reassurance, at best. I breathe deeply. Then I plunge in anyway.

But I'm happiest when the room is crowded, a cocktail-party atmosphere with water the beverage of choice, the talking nonstop, energy level to match. This community is as fluid as the medium we swim through, life's lap lanes restorative and resilient. Over the years I've met and made good friends. A fiber artist designs and makes me the perfect dress, simple, comfortable, distinctive—"I've never done this for anyone before." An intrepid trekker and world-class photographer tells me how to arrange to walk New Zealand's Milford Track, or—if I prefer—to be dropped into northern British Columbia for wilderness canoeing, from which she has just returned, unusually

fatigued by the arduous portaging of canoe-cum-tent-cum photographic gear. I respond with an account of our three-generational hikes in five national parks of the Canadian Rockies, the best ones followed by a swim in a pool that must close, by Canadian law the sign says, when the temperature reaches twenty-two (centigrade) below zero. I give another swimmer, a Thai microbiologist who moonlights as a caterer, copies of my books. We share recipes. We will cook together soon, in her house and mine.

When any one of us arrives, we join in the dialogue; no matter who stays or goes, the conversation carries on. The rec center's logo captures this continuity. Three bare figures, heads erect, arms and legs outstretched, on the move, are leaping in energetic silhouette against a dark circle. The largest body leads the way, bursting out on the left; the middle-sized figure is completely centered in the circle; the smallest enters from the right. The water, too, embraces all as we plunge in, move through, at our own speed, closing over each as we leave, surfacing—ever hospitable, ever open.