

The Last Shower

By Leilani Graham

The Last Shower

It is late: we both should be asleep. He has to arrive early to the lab tomorrow, and he won't forgive himself for being anything less than on time.

The room he rents is minimally decorated and always cold. The one benefit of the twin bed is that our intertwined legs provide enough warmth to prevent the hairs from standing up on exposed skin. We lay quietly, each of us lost in our respective thoughts. He is slowly thumbing his way down my long scar: back up and then down again. He follows the path that cleaves me in half, ever so slightly rippled in its healed state. He navigates the track as it weaves somewhat left and then right, over the raised suture knot, and down into the depression where the skin is thinnest, having sunk into a pit of re-formed sternal bone. I stay silent, anticipating: Interest? Desire? Apprehension? Aversion? Awe?

He says nothing, moving his thumb further and further left until he reaches a nipple. Circling it, he expects a response. I say nothing and notice that I am holding my breath. I let it out slowly.

He stops. He is clever. He knows by textbook and, clearly, experience what the physiological response should be. He has cut and sewn enough skin by now to understand the workings of nerves. But nothing is happening. I sigh, staring at the ceiling. Several quiet moments hang in the air somewhere above my head as neither of us moves.

"It was actually kind of helpful," I offer quietly, more to myself than to him. "Both breasts were numb for more than a year after the surgeries. It made the weekly echocardiograms much more tolerable." I grimace. So many years later, I can still remember the first time an echo technician placed the gelled-up scope on my chest, forcing it down, to the left, and then diagonally up as she searched for the most precise image of the heart through the tissue and rib

cage. The probe would dig further between my ribs as it pushed the flesh aside unnaturally. I would wince in pain but never say anything. They needed me to stay still. They needed the lungs to move out of the way. They “Need to know if you’re in pain, okay?” Yet I knew, to get the best image, they sometimes needed me to lie. I would be sore for days afterward.

He “Hm”s in acknowledgment, having held those same scopes during his time in medical school. He traces smaller concentric circles, a human spirograph, looking askance at my face above him. “Can you feel that?”

I pause before answering. I want to be able to say yes. “I’m not sure... I think so.” Why is this is so difficult to answer? Neuropathy from multiple dissections made sense. Why, then, did I have any ambivalence over feeling that which I alone could know to be true?

Unbidden, the image of a sterile bathroom ripples into my mind. The shower: the last one I took before going under.

The nurse had handed me a bar of orange soap, a couple of washcloths, and a flesh-colored sponge. “They want you to wash your whole body for pre-op,” she read, looking quizzically at the order on the chart. “Huh, I’ve never had to ask a patient to do that before!”

Awesome, I thought to myself, my confidence fully instilled by her self-proclaimed lack of both experience and seriousness in what she was preparing me for.

I had already woven my long hair into twin french braids; each strand pulled as tightly as possible into the next. I knew I wouldn’t be able to wash it for days. The nurse pointed me to the accessible shower, oddly located in the unit hallway instead of in my hospital room. She entered

first, turning the water on to let it heat up. “Okay, scrub hard! Let me know when you’re finished!” she chirped as she shut the solid metal door.

I looked around: grey tile going halfway up the wall, beige paint, no curtain, one mirror, orange soap. I listened to the water hit the floor, watching steam begin to rise from contact with the cold tile. I had already surrendered the jewelry I otherwise never took off. I slipped out of the flip flops, shirt, yoga pants, and underwear, pausing as I felt for the catch on my bra. When was the next time I would be wearing it? Would it still fit? Who knew how different things might lay once my entire ribcage had been realigned.

I took it off as I stepped into the water. Standing still, arms crossed at my waist, I let the rain wash over me. I closed my eyes, trying to imagine the forest floor, spongy and fecund beneath my feet. I took one of the washcloths, wetting it until soaked before I slapped its expanse over my chest, covering myself like a second skin. I found safety in this ritual as a child, but the square towel felt so much smaller now, unable to hide me from the deluge. Still, I stood this way as long as I could, knowing my family was back in my hospital room and counting the seconds until I returned. Resigning to the inevitable, I opened the seal of the orange soap.

I spread the suds evenly over every surface before making extra sure I had scrubbed the true center of my chest, soaping it thoroughly as this would be the main surgical field. I paused, taking in the skin covering my sternum, knowing that it would never be this smooth again. I pressed down, moving the surface back and forth over the midline. Sheepishly, I squished my breasts together, secretly hoping that perhaps they’d get perkier with the tightening of tonight’s sutures. Well, at least the ICD scar could finally heal in permanence, I thought to myself,

unaware then as to the complications that would follow. I let the chlorhexidine soap slide off my body as I closed my eyes, turning slowly in the stream of water...

I fade back into the present as the answer to his question becomes clear. "I don't remember what it felt like before," I say quietly.

I had memorized my skin's surface, the placement of freckles, and the curvature of each rib just so, as they had been created. I had hummed to myself nervously as my nails dug in, scraping the first layer of cells from my waist. My hands had taken in a tactical topographic memory, eyes filing away the last moments of this terrain forever. But my touch had been cerebral, observational, and archival—a private attempt at a last rite. It had never occurred to me to try to remember how it felt to be touched. Can I feel this?

"No," I decide, forgetting the tracing of his finger, which has moved on to my navel. He finds the two sets of identical dots left of my midline, each mark spaced two centimeters from its partner. That move prompts a reaction. Hairs begin to rise near the dots. I stiffen instinctively, flashing back.

A cold metal table and thin breaths.

Hands holding me down.

The surgical lights bleach the backs of my eyes, making it difficult to see. I hear the clangs of a tray of instruments as they are brought hurriedly to the table. Someone is holding my legs.

Another forces my gown up, exposing me from the waist down, to access a central line. Snaps break as the fabric is pulled off of my upper half.

The drape falls over my face. Darkening green fills my vision as its descent blocks out the light. I thrash to throw it off, one arm freeing itself from the table as I try to find air. Someone grabs it, forcing my arm back into a cold restraint. Someone else peels the fresh bandage off of my sternum. Somewhere out of sight, I hear the sound of staples hitting a solid. I feel like I am drowning.

“Just shock it!” I gasp.

“What is it?”

I come back to Earth to find that his tracing has stopped. His wide-eyed look belies his calm voice. Had the memory evoked a gasp in real-time? I notice my right forefinger is digging a crescent wedge into my thumb. I quickly release it.

“What is it?” He asks again, his tone now urgent. I sit up slightly, placing a hand gently on his arm.

“It’s,” I smile faintly, peering off again, though this time in discomfort due to the ridiculousness of the statement forthcoming, “I just had a... a false memory of someone stapling me down - or, rather - the stapling down of some sort of drape above me.” I do not share more detail. In the wake of such trauma, I am now an expert at answering only what the question asks of me. I shift my focus back to his face. “That can’t be right, though,” I laugh. “It must have been a hallucination.” *Isn’t that silly?* asks my expression.

He pauses before answering, not at all returning the facetiousness in my words. “We sometimes staple drapes to the patient,” he says quietly.

The next morning I left when he left, neither of us speaking much. Whether that was due to the previous night's conversation or the indecency of waking up at 7:00 AM on a Saturday, I could not be sure. My drive home was brief and uneventful. The radio stayed on but unheard as I contemplated the previous night's conversation.

It was not until sometime later, standing alone in the filtered sunlight of my bathroom, that I noticed a pattern in what I had always assumed was hurried randomness. Outlines of the same two parallel dots were spaced every six inches in a line from my waist to my ankles. The scabs I had compulsively picked at - the ones that appeared after coming off of life support- I had thought were just scratches fueled into severity by heparin. These were neither ingrown hairs nor accidental scrapes. These were not marks from a staple.

Another vignettted clip of memory pushes its way back, though this one is even hazier and blurrier than the others.

Tiny holes filled with thick green thread. Someone is removing them in my still semi-conscious state.

They had tacked something along the length of my lower half. My stomach lurched as the clarity hit. The ECMO cannulas had not only been inside of me: they had been sewn down.

The idea that someone had stitched uncut skin with a needle and thread was somehow worse. I learned to sew when I was a child. Whereas I could not picture how one bore a cannula hole, cracked a rib cage, or secured an artery, this I could see clearly in my mind's eye.

I had not paid particular attention to my lower abdomen, hip crease, knee caps, or ankles in that shower. To do so had not occurred to me. Nothing, not even the essential tubes and lines appropriate in hindsight, had crossed my mind as further mark makers upon a three-dimensional canvas.

Desire, intimacy, sensation: these were gradually returning. Connections of bone, nerves, and sense of self were regrowing, and I was celebrating each one. But as I stood alone in the safety of my own bathroom, recalling what it was that had sliced them apart, I began to envy my remaining numbness. Those parts of me did not have to feel pain. They could not ache with emotion. The vulnerability and violation I felt were all harbored in me but went unfelt by them. Where I had wanted to reclaim my whole self expediently, now it seemed daunting to do so: to feel everything.

In the safe warmth of the streaming water, I had tried so hard to lock in the detail that would be lost. Even then, I could not take with me what my hands should have elicited: sensation in the places they touched. Maybe it was better this way. There was already so much, so many memories no one would ever wish to revisit. Maybe it was better, at least for now, not to remember how it felt.