

The Great Baptism · *Jane Thurmond*

THERE IS A TIME in my memory when my age is not measured in years. “Before the flood” or “after the flood” suffices. Days convert to water marks, distances calculated from the lapping surface of the lake to the roofs of houses. The flood must have come when I was nine. I’ve determined this by the watery memory of my possessions washing out my upstairs window—my birthday tea set bobbed by and Tiny Tears reached for me as I was dragged by my father toward the chimney. And then, of course, there are the people that I knew before the flood who I would never see again.

For months Mother called the flood the Great Baptism because, at first, it put us on the path to a better life. My own baptism happened in the church before the flood, but I was never better for it.

Eternal Life Baptist Church was saved from total destruction by the slope of the earth, but after the flood, when most of the survivors moved away and businesses shut down, the church followed. Last summer I made the trip back to see what was left. Eternal Life Baptist still stood. When I pried open its rotted walnut doors I could still hear the echoing microphone, the gallant choir, and the gentle sloshing of water. Not water from the flood, but baptismal water. Yet when I think of how baptism feels, it’s something like a flood. Or like falling off a dock with a dress on, the skirt billowing up around you as you sink. There comes an instant when you must choose whether you will punch against the preacher or simply lean back and trust the weight of his hand, strapped across your gaping mouth, blocking the water.

When my mother was twelve, she was baptized in a river. On the bank she stood in starched white lace, orange mud oozing around her ankles, until she was led into the water by the preacher in his soggy suit. She promised herself an indoor ceremony for me.

Perhaps she chose Eternal Life simply because of its baptistry that loomed like a large fish tank implanted in the wall high above where the choir stood. Facing the choir, we sat in stiff pine pews, our necks hinged back, lulled by our aquarium view. In a blue sea of organ chords we drifted with the waves on the other side of the glass and watched the preacher push the heads under, watched the elegant legs float up. Behind ripples and splashes swayed swirling aqua tile. Above the water line, the tile burst into a bright

mosaic sky where two enormous hands, God's hands, reached down as if they could scoop us all right up to heaven.

When I was eight my mother's wish was realized—me and the preacher chest deep in water, lit up from underneath so we were glowing.

Baptism is supposed to save you. That's the good part. The bad part is that it doesn't change you; it doesn't suddenly make you do right.

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Our town was perched on a limestone rise overlooking a narrow lake as smooth and green as a chalkboard. We lived in one of the split-levels built along the bank by the oil company and provided as part of Dad's pay. That's when they were still in love, before he started traveling. Each night sweets followed pungent plates of food set on crocheted trivets. Dad would hunch over his dinner, his hair falling across his forehead, one arm encircling his plate, and consume helping after helping of my mother's dishes. Mom would round the counter, drying her hands on her rick-racked apron and she'd reach for Dad's cheeks, bobbing his head back and forth. "Judy Ann," she cooed, "who's the *best* father in the world?" I sang back, "My dad." Sometimes we'd wrestle on the living room carpet or they'd spin around the pink stone patio pretending it was a ballroom.

One summer night Mom was out playing the organ for church choir practice while Dad worked late. I rocked alone on the patio glider, listening to neighbors' lives open up through lit windows that fell in yellow rectangles on the water. Across the inlet, the church steeple shot up with its stained glass window the size of the moon. Through the colored glass, music melted over the tops of trees. Lights flickered like blue flames across the lake. Someone over there was splitting wood. Coyotes moaned and dogs barked back. Fireflies darted through darkness. The seniors had just graduated, and the engines of their cars droned up and down Lake Avenue. Whooping boys and squealing girls kept time with the even squeak of my glider. I climbed down to the street and walked while the music calmed the whole town. Cars slowed, drivers straining out windows. People stopped on sidewalks to sit under trees and gaze out over the lake and listen. Sometimes there would be a long prelude of organ chords and I'd call across the water, "That's my mom."

When I wandered past the corner park, I heard someone humming, and turned toward the monkey bars where I found a girl hanging upside down. She stopped singing when she saw me. "Is it always this hot here?" she said, her arms dangling in the dark.

I leaned in close and squinted. "Who's there? Do I know you?"

"You know me only if you met me in the last few days," she said, swinging from her knees. "I just moved into a house down River Road. Our furniture filled up three pick-up trucks. They're *still* unloading."

I climbed a few rungs to get a closer look. Her yellow hair fell like an undone bolt of silk. Her cheeks were dark, reddened with blood settled in her head.

"My name is Judy Ann Wiggins," I said.

"Laura Leigh," she announced, sticking out a hand for me to shake. "Porter's my last name now. Before that, in Idaho, it was Villanueva, and before that it was McDougal, in Montana."

"Why does it keep changing?" I asked.

"Mom keeps changing husbands and houses. After each wedding she sits my brothers and me around the kitchen table, passes out paper and pencils, and we practice our new names. P-O-R-T-E-R," she recited. "This one's easier than the others."

Leaves high in the elm trees shuddered. The chorus swelled. I pointed to the steeple. "Listen for the organ. The person playing it is my mom." The music had captured me again and I climbed down. "See you around, Laura Leigh." I waved and walked backwards, watching the tangle of arms and legs and bars fade into the shadows.

"Hey, kid," she called. "What grade will you be in come September?"

"Fourth, and my name's Judy Ann."

"I'm older than you are, Judy Ann," she sang, then hummed along again with my mother's music.

Before I knew it I was down at the church in the blackness of the balcony, sitting with my feet up on the seat like I'd never do in a Sunday dress. No one even saw me. No one knew. Chandeliers brightened the rows below. The choir roared above the steady tap of the director's stick against his metal music stand. My mother bowed towards her sheet music, her fingers crawling over the keys, her feet dancing on the foot pedals. I leaned my head back and listened until their hymnbooks thumped shut, the organ lid snapped, and everyone shuffled outside towards the café. The chandeliers finally faded and the door slammed, leaving me alone with the rafters

swelling and creaking in the dark. And then, more than ever, the baptistry was a blue square of light, beckoning me like the doorway to heaven.

Heat engulfed me and sweat wet my back. My bangs dampened against my forehead. Is it always this hot? Laura Leigh had asked me this, and I had never answered. Now all I could think of was yes, yes. I wilted as I gazed at the baptistry until it occurred to me that I could be up there swimming.

I pulled myself from the bench, tiptoed down the balcony stairs, and slowly walked the center aisle, scanning every seat. Chandeliers barely swayed, creaking from the arched ceiling. The smell of newly-laid carpet rose around my feet. At the preacher's podium I turned and faced the empty pews to be certain I was alone, then slipped through the door to the tunnel that climbed to the choir loft and above to the baptistry. On all fours I felt my way up the stairs until I stumbled onto Reverend Culpepper's thick-soled shoes stashed on a shelf and his baptismal gown hanging from a hook.

When I realized where I had ended up, I crouched close to the cement floor, recalling the last time I was there, for my own baptism. I had been ordered to change out of my Sunday clothes near this very spot, in the dressing room next to the reverend's. Behind the drawn curtain I folded my sailor dress, stuffed my socks into my patent leather shoes, and slipped the gown that he had tossed me over my head. I smoothed out the creases and stood motionless in the center of the dressing room, listening for the others to emerge in their gowns. Instead, from the stall next to me, I heard the reverend's pants unzip, saw them drop and bunch around his feet. I imagined him in his shorts. His chalky knees. The little hairs curling against his chest. He cleared his throat and scratched.

Stretching the gown toward my ankles I had struggled to hide myself entirely with cotton so thin my nipples showed through. Finally, I filed out with the others, folding my arms across my chest, and had waited in line for my sins to be cleansed away.

I rolled on my back and opened my eyes wide to remind myself I was alone. My face felt cool against the cement. I stood and slipped out of my shirt and shorts. In my underwear, I crept to the edge, then slid into the tile-lined tub of water.

Pretending to perform for a large audience, I staged my own water ballet. I rocketed up, slicing the surface with a twist, my toes pointed, my hands pressed against my thighs. I jackknifed under water, every muscle straining for balance and grace. My stiffened arms spiraled up. The waves slogged

and broke against the tile. Underwater flips, hand stands, floating on my back.

No one came in. No one saw. I pressed my face against the glass and stared out into the church to check. Nothing. Only rows and rows of pews. Dark aisles. Just me in my private pool. A seal slipping under water.

So this became my secret. Nightly, I continued to swim.

Don't let me mislead you into thinking I led a lonely life. Before the flood I had friends on every corner. On warm summer nights as I walked home from the church, children dodged in and out of shadows, racing under streetlights clicking with June bugs, calling to me from games of kick-the-can. I recognized their Hula-Hoops spinning from dark yards, the shush of their Slinkies, and I'd wave their way, tossing my damp hair.

Weeks later, in a game of hide-and-seek, I met Laura Leigh again, hidden behind a house in a maze of hedges. Soon we were spending entire days together. She was from a large family, further down River Road where the earth swelled with the bare roots of trees. Although she had passed her eleventh birthday she was smaller than I. Her two brothers, three step-brothers, and Mr. Porter were rarely home. She could never guess the day of the week because for her, summer days all seemed the same. No one left her house for work on weekdays, and Sunday was a day no more special than the rest. At their kitchen table her mother sat like a statue, examining a deck of cards stacked and restacked in a never-ending game of solitaire. Through a cloud of smoke, she gazed up at us from her score pad and took another sip of scotch. "Bring Mama somethin' sweet," she slurred as we passed, tapping her cigarette into an ashtray that overflowed onto the linoleum.

Some nights Laura Leigh slept over. We'd lie in my wide bed and count the stars Dad had painted on the ceiling with phosphorescent paint. Big Dipper, Seven Sisters, an oversized North Star. From piles of stuffed animals we contemplated the universe. I imagined heaven on the other side of the ceiling. Who ended up there and who didn't was as clear to me then as the differences in the sun and the moon. You were either saved or you weren't—as easy as an instant under water. In Sunday School-teacher-fashion, I recalled the topics of my Sunday lessons, explaining to Laura Leigh the features of heaven and hell. But soon I would learn that, baptized or not, I would do unforgivable things that even a flood's undoing could not wash away. A flood I saw coming because of the bats.

One evening, just before sunset, Laura Leigh spotted my father's binoculars sitting on a shelf. Soon we were perched on the patio, staring at the bridge at the far end of the lake. Tiny cars crossed silently through the lenses. Beneath the bridge the water glowed like stained glass. "There they are!" she finally cried, thrusting the binoculars to my face. I peered through the lenses until I spotted a colony of thousands of bats spiraling upward from under the bridge. They swirled up like a pillar of smoke, then dispersed to specks in the purple sky.

"The bats feed every night," Laura Leigh explained. "They'll return to the bridge when the sun comes up." She slipped the binoculars back inside their case. "I've got another secret that I'll trade for one of yours." I nodded. We hadn't yet told each other everything. She leaned close to my ear. "Those bats were only the beginning of mine. Follow me."

We took the road along the lake past her house, under a moon so bright we cast long-legged shadows that slipped in and out of trees. Gravel crunched under our boat shoes. She led me to a metal shed nearly covered over with vines and pushed the door open, yanked me inside, then sealed the door behind us. I stood in the dark, trying to identify the musty smell. Laura Leigh's hands fumbled until an old Christmas candle in the melting shape of an angel lit up the room. She pointed up to the corner of the shed and I squinted in the dim light until I spotted a bat hanging upside down from a dowel. Its face had the look of a tiny newborn calf with a mouth as pink as my mother's lipstick, its nostrils like pin pricks, its eyes two black beads, its head crowned with oversized ears. Its wings fell like portions of a split parasol.

Laura Leigh stepped on a stool and stretched her arm up. The bat squeaked and bared its tiny teeth. "Her name is Barb. She can't see us so she's afraid. After she smells me and realizes who I am, she won't bite." Laura Leigh slowly turned with the bat hanging from her finger. Barb was as small as the palm of her hand. "Judy Ann, open that jar of bugs," she ordered. "Grab hold of a moth. Now, put it close to her nose." Barb grabbed the beating moth with one claw-like thumb, covered half her own body with a cloaked wing and ate. I ducked as Barb flew above her bowl of water, lapping with her tiny tongue, wings a brown blur.

"Did you get her from the bridge?" I asked.

"My brother caught a bunch in a net. Barb's the last one. The others died or got away, but Barb's stayed on for weeks." Laura Leigh blew out the

candle, and we stood silently in the dark. She added in a whisper, "I've thought about letting her go, but she depends on me."

Once outside Laura Leigh poked me with her index finger. "Now it's your turn. Tell me a secret."

I trotted ahead. "Follow me," I said over my shoulder.

The breeze coming off the lake had stopped completely and after running to the church, even the outside air felt stuffed up and soupy. When we pushed open the sculpted doors, Laura Leigh glowed in the blue shaft of light from the baptistry, her blonde hair tinged green. I slipped my arm around her shoulders and coaxed her up the aisle, past the podium, until she stumbled through the secret door. "You're going to love this," I promised, as we climbed through the tunnel, up the stairs and emerged, finally, at the edge of the water.

"Well this is it. Welcome to my private pool," I said, unbuttoning my shirt.

She twisted her hair around her hand. "You're kidding, aren't you? What if we get caught?"

I draped my clothes across the back of a chair. "Don't worry," I said. "No one's here. I've been doing this for weeks."

Peering over her shoulder into the darkness she undressed while I floated on my back. I pushed the air from my lungs and lay on the bottom of the pool. When I came up for breath she had perched at the edge, filling her chest until her ribs resembled the fine bones in Barb's fanlike wings. As Laura Leigh stepped into the water, her cheeks grew pinker and her lips drew into a perfect "o." When she ducked her head under, a halo remained on the surface of the water until she popped back through it slick and smiling.

"I'll show you what it's like to be baptized," I said, my left hand pressed between the wings of her bony back, my right palm raised and facing the glass. "I baptize you in the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit, amen." Then just like Reverend Culpepper, I pressed my hand over her mouth and nose, and pushed her head under. Her legs floated up. She didn't fight. Laura Leigh came up laughing, like people sometimes do with a real preacher, happy that they're safe now, saved.

I performed my newest water ballet. My triple floppy. My five-way splash. She turned three somersaults underwater without coming up for air. We sank and rose up pressed together and then, without thinking, we

clutched each other and kissed. Like we'd seen on TV. Like my mom and dad. The water slapped and churned. I pulled her towards me and we kissed again. "Let's try it this way," she said, arching my back over her arm, dipping her shoulders to meet mine. My legs slipped up and I started to laugh, until I heard a bump from the pews in the dark. We lurched forward and peered out into the church.

"Don't stop," came a choked voice muffled through the glass and sloshing water. "Kiss again." I sank back and looked at Laura Leigh. The color had drained from her face. Again, the voice ordered, "Judy Ann, do it. If you don't, everyone will know about your little swims."

Our limbs stiffened, but I obeyed. When we kissed for him our mouths were hard. Our bony chests bumped under water and our eyes blinked back the beginnings of tears.

When I heard the far away click of the door to the tunnel, I let go of Laura Leigh. "He's coming," I whispered, "let's get out of here." But she couldn't move, so I grabbed her arm and pulled. But she slipped away under the shadow of the man reaching for her. I can't fault myself for trying to escape. She lost her nerve. She wouldn't run.

I clambered down the stairs in the dark, bumping against the banister, then sprinted up the aisle. When I looked back, the baptismal tank was empty except for water churning against the glass.

Outside I crouched naked behind the azaleas. My pulse pounded in my neck. Even in the still heat, goose bumps spread across my arms. In the distance children laughed, but the church was quiet. The cold stone wall supported my spine.

I slowly counted backwards from 100, sang songs to myself and studied leaves on all the branches before me until the door finally opened and Laura Leigh stepped out, fully dressed, her blouse blotched with water. She stood on the top step examining her arms and legs as if she were checking to see if they were still attached. When I whistled she jerked her head my way. "It's me," I whispered. She came over carrying my clothes and threw them across the hedge.

"Why didn't you stick by me?" she cried. Her eyebrows were drawn together, setting a deep crease in her forehead.

I was silent for a while before I answered. "I didn't have my clothes." Slowly, I pulled on my shirt. "Besides, no one can find out about the swimming. We would have gotten caught."

“*He* would have gotten caught,” Laura Leigh whispered between her teeth. Muscles in her cheeks tightened and squared her face.

I stopped dressing and studied her. “What did he do?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “You know,” she said, letting her arms go limp at her sides. “You should have helped.”

My breath choked in my throat. “Did he hurt you?”

“What do you think?” she said, pressing her palms against her eyes.

“Who was it? Have you seen him before?”

“I don’t know anybody in this lousy town.” She backed away. “Not even you.”

As I wrestled with the buttons on my shirt, she turned and ran. A group of boys under the streetlight drop-kicked a football back and forth. The ball arched high until it slapped onto the sidewalk. Laura Leigh kept running as if she didn’t notice. Her clumped hair thumped her back. My hair dampened the collar of my shirt. Zipping my shorts, I stepped into the churchyard and the boys paused and waved, but I looked straight ahead and forced my legs to walk.

When I reached my house I stood in the yard. My father’s silhouette slipped back and forth across the window. It was Saturday, his evening to putter around the house wearing a tool belt, fixing leaky faucets and tightening loose screws. Through a crack between curtains, I could see my mother on the couch reading her Sunday School lesson. I entered through the back door, a smile plastered across my face, as if this were any other summer evening. “Good night,” I said, kissing their tender cheeks, and ran up to my bed.

I pulled the soft sheets around my neck and faced heaven. The four walls fell away. The painted stars began to move until I couldn’t tell if I was looking at the ceiling or the sky. I grappled with what I could or should have done. I sifted through whispered stories I had heard while sitting on dark curbs or gathered with my friends on the school ground. My face grimaced again in disbelief, recalling girls giggling through sordid stories. They illustrated with their hands, stroking their own bodies, or drew impossible pictures in soft sand.

I sorted through this gibberish again and again, trying to make sense of the deep crease in Laura Leigh’s forehead that had sliced through the darkness. The stories followed me into my dreams. I slept twisted and trapped in sheets.

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In church the next morning, as the sun streamed in on the rows of people filling every pew, I memorized the faces of the men as they bowed their heads in prayer, trying to figure which one. I listened to their voices in the lobby. I examined hands as the ushers passed offering plates brimming with dollar bills. From the balcony I studied Reverend Culpepper through binoculars, following him back and forth across the pulpit, focusing and refocusing my eyes.

After lunch I walked down River Road where Laura Leigh's mother sat in the open doorway. "I ain't seen her all day," she said without looking up. Every day that week I wandered past her house, peeking between leaves. I checked their dock and found one brother dangling his feet above the water and baiting a bamboo pole. "Not here," he said, shrugging his shoulders and showing a hook into the brittle belly of a cricket. I walked to the shed where I found Barb alone, silently hanging in her corner. Beneath her on the shelf, the angel candle was reduced to a small puddle of wax and a crisp wick that hardly held a flame.

A few days later at dusk, I stood on our patio thinking about Laura Leigh. My constantly churning stomach had lessened to flinches of nervousness. I tried to relax each night, pressing my eyes to Dad's binoculars, waiting until the gray spiral of bats emerged from under the bridge and circled and spread across the darkening sky. You might say I owe my life to the bats. Had I not watched for them, I would not have seen the wall of water burst through the bridge as the flapping wings emerged. I would not have shouted for my parents who ran outside in time to register the danger.

They dragged me by my shirt sleeves from the patio across the balcony, then boosted me to the roof. Water roiled around us. As we all teetered at the top, waves crashed against our house. My mother prayed aloud, her cheek pressed against the chimney. My father encircled us with his arms. We all shouted above the roaring waves. Beds and drawers and rooftops pummeled past. A car carried a howling cat. Tree trunks were tossed in the current like toothpicks. With each gasp for help that wrenched past, my father reached into the waves but came up empty-handed.

In a matter of hours our town shattered to pieces that scattered and finally settled in silt, like our next door neighbor's chess set that floated through

our kitchen window, popped open in the grand piano, and spilled and sank against the strings.

In the middle of the night, I woke up in the school gymnasium under dry blankets surrounded by rows of creaking cots. Wailing voices filtered through the bleachers from the doorway. My mother's dark hair spread across my bed where she rested, waiting for me to come alive from a fitful sleep.

A few hours later I awoke again. "No, I won't have it. We won't be separated. We're going with you," my mother said as she tightened a blanket around me. She carried me through the gymnasium behind my father to the company truck. We piled in and rumbled down a back road, washed over with water. My father hunched over the steering wheel, his clothes still caked with mud. My mother's breath frosted the side window. Her bruised and fragile fingers rested on my cheek. It was daybreak and the sun had drawn its first pink streaks across the horizon. The CB radio crackled with static. "Didn't Laura Leigh live somewhere out here?" my mother whispered. I sat up and tried to recognize what was left. We moved slowly, surveying the clogged path the flood had taken, crossing into pasture when the road swelled with water. "Survivors could be hanging on to anything," Dad said, his eyes darting from tree to tree. He pulled to a stop and examined every branch. I searched for waves of yellow hair.

"Hold on, would you look at that." Dad lifted me out of the car still bundled in a blanket and pointed across the water.

Bats were plummeting out of the sky towards the place where the bridge had been, nose diving into nothing but splinters and air instead of the cool dark space below the bridge where they had left their children hanging upside down. "They'll have to find another home, like us," he said, rubbing his bristly cheek against my forehead.

I heard my mother sigh, "Poor little things. I always feel sorriest for the innocent animals. They don't know what a dam is. They can't understand a flood." She rolled down her window to get a better view. "There's a difference in being spared and being saved."

Back in town I watched the sun rise higher in the sky. The flood water looked dreamy, steaming in the heat. By the third day, no trace of high water remained, but the town was coated and clotted with mud. The summer sun dried this silt to dust, and the wind blew it into muted clouds that hung over the jumble of houses, branches, and upturned cars. Each day

in the gymnasium, a miracle survivor appeared. Men sat on the edges of cots in mud-streaked waders, wads of tobacco puffing their cheeks, and swapped stories of daring rescues. Trips were organized to view the great gash in the dam. I walked up and down the streets, studying the face of every child. I checked and rechecked lists of names, searching for Laura Leigh. Kids from the neighborhood wandered through the rubble, and I asked each of them if they had seen or heard. My parents and the other survivors sadly sifted through their belongings. An air of reverence hung over the town as the death toll rose.

Reverend Culpepper conducted daily services in the high school auditorium where we clamored to make sense of the disaster that destroyed our town. From the back of the auditorium where I remained, the reverend shrank to the size of a moth. I sprawled on the cool linoleum and drew a picture of Noah's ark. Soggy animals bloomed from the butcher paper, paired on the deck of their fragile wooden ship. Hours passed. Under my stubby crayons, fog rolled in until all the animals' heads were draped in smudged gray clouds.

Within a week Dad had loaded a car with the little we had left. We coasted down Lake Avenue for one last look, then pulled out onto the main highway that paralleled River Road. Alone in the back seat I knelt on my knees, facing the rear window, and looked in awe for the last time at the tangled mass of uprooted trees with rowboats lodged in the branches. From the front seat my parents said their soft good-byes. "The world is recovering and so are we," Dad said, patting my mother's shoulder. Yet, we left without learning the fate of my friend. Watching the town disappear, I tried to find comfort in recalling her baptism. How she went under water without flinching, and the look on her face as she came up laughing.