

Clean and Stupid

Joyce Hinnefeld

In recent years I've become almost nostalgic for dirt. Muddy shoes, a whiff of b.o., unwashed hair, an unswept floor. A crumbling house that's gradually succumbing to a riot of overgrown grass and weeds. Maybe I'm just tired, worn out by all the time I've spent trying (and generally failing) to keep myself, and my daughter, and my house, and my yard, up to some unreasonable standard of tidy perfection. Maybe it's both an unreasonable and a mythical standard; maybe it's all in my head. But I don't think so.

In the annals of American history, we have John Wesley's "Cleanliness is next to Godliness," cleanliness as tenth on Benjamin Franklin's list of thirteen "Virtues," and Depression- and Dustbowl-era photographs of poor and dirty Americans. When I was a student at a small college in the Midwest, I recall my mother chastising me for displaying one of the old black and white photos I'd framed and brought from home. It was an image of my oldest brother and a cousin as toddlers, playing in the dirt of the barn lot behind my grandparents' house; my grandmother, in a clean but worn dress and apron, towers over them, Grant Wood-style. "It looks like you're from Appalachia," my mother said, clearly embarrassed that my college friends were seeing this image of not my, but *her*, past – a past that included dirt and suggested poverty.

I teach college students, and it's surprised me, over the last few years, to hear them use the word *hippie* as a term of mild disapprobation. Not an insult exactly; there tends to be an undercurrent of humor, even affection, when they use the term. I've also heard the occasional sneering reference to *dirty hippies*. To be fair, my students have tended to speak more of hippies than of dirty hippies, and they sound almost embarrassed when they use the word. *Real* hippies, they know, are, or were, the age of their grandparents. But in recent years there has been this other thing, this long-haired, tree-hugging, pot-smoking vegan in unfashionable clothes, maybe with dreadlocks, showing up at Occupy sites and anti-fracking rallies. What he or she stands for is all okay probably, maybe even good, but the whole look is just kind of distasteful to certain of these students. For one thing – and it's a big thing – it's probably been a while, a few days or even longer, since this person has had a shower.

Some people my age, born in the early to mid-1960s and rounding out the years of the Baby Boom, felt disappointed to

have missed out on the authentic hippie years – the Summer of Love, Woodstock, all those homegrown hallucinogens. Instead we got disco and the revival of the preppy look, Oxford button-downs and Sperry topsiders and Ronald Reagan as president. As a young teen in the seventies, I listened to Joni Mitchell albums and aspired to be like my older brothers, packing an old Ford Falcon for the long drive west from our home in Indiana and some backpacking in places like the Badlands. Maybe one day I'd go backpacking in a place with an evocative name myself, I thought. The only problem would be my hair. A week without a shower would be very bad for my seventies-style long hair with "feathered" bangs that required a blow dryer and a curling iron (think Farrah Fawcett). I hated even imagining what a stringy mess my hair would be if I went backpacking and couldn't take a daily shower. Maybe I could wear a bandana the whole time, I decided. And maybe I'd be sure not to go backpacking with a guy.

This was a problem I never had to solve, because I never went backpacking in the Badlands, or anywhere else. After college and a year of graduate school I moved to Chicago for two years, and then to New York. This was in the 1980's, before the terms of Richard M. Daley in Chicago or Rudy Giuliani in New York – two mayors known for having "cleaned up" their cities, cracking down on crime and burying their seedier elements under a smooth corporate veneer. People like to moan about the bad old days in those cities, the "Dinkins era" in New York or the years prior to Chicago's second Mayor Daley, when Harold Washington was at the helm. But even though there were things I didn't like about the dirt and grime of both cities in those years (waiting for trains in the sticky, smelly summer heat; dealing with aggressive panhandlers; the stench of uncollected garbage on a hot city street), I loved the fact that both were very clearly *cities*. They were worlds away from the small-town life I'd known until I moved to Chicago, and a big part of what set them apart, what made them true cities in my mind, was the fact that they were *dirty*. They had dusty pigeons and graffiti and stairways to the el train or the subway that reeked of urine. They also had lots of independent bookstores and cheap places to eat and little hardware stores where you could have a key to your apartment made for your boyfriend, and nary a Gap nor a Target, Office Max nor TGI Friday's to be found.

In Chicago I went to cafes and clubs in neighborhoods like Wicker Park and Bucktown, which still felt artsy and edgy and mildly dangerous back then. I rode there on the back of my boyfriend's motorcycle (Who needed backpacking in the Badlands? I *was* bad!). In New York I walked to Astoria Park, near the Triborough Bridge, from my first apartment in Queens. Once I watched an underwater dance performance in the massive Astoria Pool, another time a concert by the strange and wonderful Sun Ra and his Arkestra, and always I saw large and boisterous families having picnics. *I am definitely not in Indiana anymore*, I thought, as I walked by the men seated outside the Greek tavernas on 30th Avenue, drinking their coffee and watching me. A friend that I worked with in Manhattan invited me to a party at her boyfriend's place in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, but some other friends at work – white ones – advised me not to go alone. That's how long ago this was: Williamsburg was not yet the destination neighborhood it would become. No place in Brooklyn was, really, with the exception of Brooklyn Heights, and maybe Park Slope.

I should mention that through the nearly ten years that I lived in both gritty, pre-Richard M. Daley Chicago and dirty, Dinkins-era New York City, I was never the victim of a crime. Except for one time, when my checkbook was lifted from my bag on the subway in New York. (That's also how long ago this was: we wrote checks.) On a day when I'd carelessly thrown the thing in an unzipped pocket and sat down, in a sleep-deprived daze, right next to the door of a very crowded car – something no reasonably rested and conscious New Yorker ever did in those days. There my checkbook sat, right alongside a quick and easy exit, beckoning. *I might have taken it if it hadn't been mine – and if I hadn't known how little money was actually in the account.*

And yet it's not quite accurate, historically, to depict cities as sites of dirt and anarchy.

"In the process of making art," writes Lee Upton in her book *Swallowing the Sea: On Writing and Ambition, Boredom, Purity and Secrecy*, "an idealization of purity may become a bitter antagonist, sternly disallowing much of what is muddled, snarled, and anarchic about being human." It was that muddled, snarled, and anarchic stuff I was after, I think, in moving from small-town Indiana to Chicago and then to New York. And yet it's not quite accurate, historically, to depict cities as sites of dirt and anarchy. As historians Suellen Hoy, author of *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness*, and Kathleen M. Brown, author of *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America*, both note, *all* Americans – both rural and urban – were initially perceived as filthy in comparison to civilized Europeans. And eventually American cities, with their improved systems for providing water, handling sewage, and preventing disease (thanks to the efforts of organizations like the Municipal Order League in

Chicago, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union and Ladies Health Protection Association in New York), were understood to have far surpassed still-dirty rural America in civility, and cleanliness, and class.

Even the first century stoic philosopher Epictetus connected cleanliness with cities. If you want to be a philosopher, for God's sake take a bath, he advised his pupils – lest you drive people away from philosophy with your unpleasant smell. And if you insist on reveling in your body's natural odors, stick to the countryside. "You think you deserve to have a scent of your own," he is recorded as admonishing his listeners in *The Discourses of Epictetus*:

Very well, deserve it: but do you think those who sit by you deserve it too, and those who recline by you, and those who kiss you? Go away then into a wilderness, where you deserve to go, and live by yourself and have your smell to yourself, for it is right that you should enjoy your uncleanness by yourself. But if you are in a city, what sort of a man are you making yourself, to behave so thoughtlessly and inconsiderately?

I never lost a sense of myself as a child of the rural hinterlands during my years in Chicago and New York. This may explain why, though I was blonde and fair and didn't speak Spanish or Greek or any of the other languages I heard as I walked along the Queens side of the East River in the late 1980's, I felt a greater affinity for the big, noisy families I saw picnicking there than I did for the people I saw during the week, on the sidewalks of midtown Manhattan. "O generation of the thoroughly smug / and thoroughly uncomfortable," writes Ezra Pound in "Salutation" – a brief poem that, when I first read it years ago, reminded me of my earlier walks through Astoria Park – "I have seen fishermen picnicking in the sun. / I have seen them with untidy families, / . . . And I am happier than you are, / And they were happier than I am."

Was I happier than those people in midtown Manhattan? Probably not. I was often lonely and confused about my future; I wanted to be a writer but felt afraid to say so, and I was chronically worried about money. And were those families picnicking by the East River happier than I was? That, of course, is impossible to know, just as it's impossible to say who was cleaner or tidier.

"And the fish swim in the sea / and do not even own clothing," the poem concludes – an inarguable point. Of course the "thoroughly smug" and "thoroughly uncomfortable" generations Pound was addressing in his poem were not clean, well-heeled New Yorkers but, more likely, other poets of his generation, the ones he and T.S. Eliot and H.D. and William Carlos Williams aimed to displace with their imagism and vorticism, their *vers libre*. Still, there's no denying the fact that in the world of "Salutation," the only people who come close to the happy lives of unencumbered fish are those who are "untidy." Surprising, maybe, considering the fact that, as Lee Upton notes, Pound sought a kind of purity in language and poetry, admiring "the fascist 'purifier' Mussolini," and echoing French poet Stéphane Mallarmé, who "sought to purify the language of the tribe."

Upton's exploration of purity in literature ranges widely, from the hot baths Elizabeth Taylor is purported to have described as virginity-restoring through Pablo Neruda's defense of "impure poetry" and Anne Carson's explorations of women and desire, fluidity and impurity, in Ancient Greece. The female body, like the poor body, is another site of uncleanness; it bleeds, and smells, and produces raging hormones, all the things that lead to greasy hair and blemishes on the skin and various other terrors of my life as a female teenager – my own years ago, and increasingly, these days, those of my teenage daughter.

For all the defenses and explorations of impurity in some writers' work, the lure of purity remains potent in both our language and our literature, Upton knows. It's there in the work of Ezra Pound, as well as that of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath, and in the lingering influence of works like Charles Lamb's "Cleanliness," with its depiction of soil that "Argues a degenerate mind, / Sordid, slothful, ill inclin'd." I like Upton's take on the point-of-view character in Muriel Spark's story "You Should Have Seen the Mess," with her stolid middle-class preference for cleanliness over pleasure or intellect or art. "This hygienic, self-satisfied little person seems perfectly comfortable and benignly confident about her choices," Upton writes. "She's clean, and she's stupid."

My wistful recollection of my younger life in untidy cities – what I've begun to call my nostalgia for dirt – seemed to reach new heights in the winter of 2012, when I attended an academic conference in Chicago. I'd been back a few times before that, but, maybe because I'd stayed with a friend on the northwest side of the city on those previous visits, I hadn't quite taken in the changes downtown, in the Loop, and along Michigan Avenue. The polished chrome, video-screen, Disney/the new Times Square look of so much of it. *Some* things were still the same, I was relieved to see, like the bare, cold, closed-down winter feeling of Grant Park south of Randolph Street, and the dirt and noise of the Wabash Avenue elevated tracks.

On several occasions I met up with people I knew at a Starbucks in the Blackstone Hotel, at the southern end of the Loop, and I told all of them the same story. For a brief period in my early twenties, I worked in the box office of a little theatre that was housed in a ballroom on the lobby level of the Blackstone. When, on this visit to Chicago in 2012, I went in search of that box office, I found that its window had been discreetly paneled over. A potted plant stood in front of it. Back in the 1980s, there'd been an old-fashioned coffee shop one floor down from the lobby, at street level, that was always closed by the time I came to work. I have a vivid memory of sitting on the carpeted stairway outside this closed coffee shop one Saturday evening, waiting for a friend to return from the bathroom in the lobby, and watching through the window as three rats chased each other around the counter stools. That place had become the Starbucks where I now sat chatting with my fellow writers.

Who cares? the friends I met up with in Chicago probably thought – or more likely: did you have to include the part about the rats? But they all humored me. These were writers, after all, people who were comfortable with my nostalgia and

sympathetic to my misgivings about the city's new sleekness and fastidiousness. Its purity. The sidewalk outside the entrance to the main conference hotel was packed with mostly younger writers, many of them probably graduate students, all of them smoking. Each time I walked in or out of the Chicago Hilton's front doors, I passed through a dense cloud of smoke. Through the smell of an old coffee shop or an old bar. Of my own impure youth.

Everywhere I turn these days,
there are antibacterial soaps and
ointments, hysteria over Ebola
or the next virulent strain of flu.

Now I live in a town that, for reasons I don't fully understand, often smells like clean laundry – olfactory evidence of Suellen Hoy's observation that by the latter half of the twentieth century Americans had become "a people that used more water and had more bathrooms per family than any other nation on Earth." The dryer vents from many of the apartment buildings and college dorms must somehow be directed towards Main Street. When I walk around downtown I smell, not urine or garbage, not even automobile exhaust, but fabric softener.

I see this tidying, hygienic impulse everywhere, even on visits to the Midwestern farm town where I grew up and where, in recent years, the influence of Martha Stewart has been undeniable – trimmed, weed-free lawns and orderly pots of impatiens in front of the houses, old bicycles or sleds artfully arranged beside them. And in the farm fields that surround the town on all sides, ridiculously neat rows of corn and soybeans, grown from genetically modified seeds. Everywhere I turn these days, there are antibacterial soaps and ointments, hysteria over Ebola or the next virulent strain of flu. And behind this hysteria: the shift from seeing our own bodies as potentially contagious to potentially vulnerable that has fueled the anti-vaccination movement, as recounted by Eula Biss in *On Immunity*. The clean and supposedly "natural" twenty-first century body, in need of protection from dirt and bacteria on one side, and from the vagaries of medical science on the other.

"We need germs," Biss reminds us, pointing to immunologist David Strachan's 1989 "hygiene hypothesis," which suggested that our overly sanitized environments could actually be making our children more susceptible to allergies and asthma. At least some measure of people's fears of environmental toxins – and of vaccines – Biss notes, is rooted in notions of personal purity that go back to cultural anxieties about "the evils of the flesh," and about poverty. And purity, she reminds us, is "the seemingly innocent concept behind a number of the most sinister social actions of the past century." For example:

A passion for bodily purity drove the eugenics movement that led to the sterilization of women who were blind, black, or

poor. Concerns for bodily purity were behind miscegenation laws that persisted more than a century after the abolition of slavery, and behind sodomy laws that were only recently declared unconstitutional. Quite a bit of human solidarity has been sacrificed in pursuit of preserving some kind of imagined purity.

I think a lot about my young teenage daughter's efforts to navigate the cleanliness-and-purity gauntlet. That winter when I returned to Chicago, when she was ten, she wasn't yet preoccupied with purity – though at age five, she did announce, with disgust, that the only clean place in all of New York City was the American Girl store. At age ten she was a deep appreciator of dirt and clutter. She preferred to be barefoot at all times. She hated having her nails trimmed and argued vehemently against taking showers. Until recently, she was baffled by my constant urging that she at least make a path through the pile of clothes and books and other unidentifiable things on the floor of her room.

But my daughter is now fourteen, and part of a generation that seems to have at least some things in common with mine, back in the Reagan-era eighties. Sperry topsiders, the preppy shoe of choice during my college years, are back, and my daughters' friends' conversations – like a number of my students' short stories – are littered with brand names (Starbucks, Vineyard Vines, Burberry, Warby Parker, Urban Outfitters). A few years ago, when I drove my daughter and a friend of hers by the local library – where our small but faithful band of Occupy protesters had camped out on the neighboring public plaza – I'm certain I heard the polite, sweet-natured young friend in the back seat mutter, "Get a job."

Possibly the only thing worse than being a dirty hippie in an age of rampant consumerism and corporate-sponsored shaming of physical imperfection is being the mother of an unclean child or the keeper of an unclean house. "To keep the world clean – this is the one great task for women," wrote nineteenth-century home economics lecturer Helen Campbell. At some point when my daughter was younger I became aware that some of my old teenage fears were resurfacing, now focused on her. What would her teachers – or worse: the mothers of her friends – think if I let her go out with her nails looking like that? Should I tell her she really ought to take a shower because her hair (her long, seventies-style hair – sans Farrah Fawcett wings, of course) is starting to look, well, a little *greasy*? "The germ-obsessed twenty-first century mother," writes Kathleen M. Brown in *Foul Bodies*, "has inherited the Victorian mother's responsibility for setting and enforcing standards. Nagging, repeating, and reminding mark her role as civilizer."

At times I hear that nagging, repeating Victorian civilizer voice coming out of my very own mouth, and when I do, I hate its shrill, upper-nasal cavity sound. Friends with older kids used to assure me that soon enough my daughter would want to take several thirty-minute showers a day. Let her find her way to an all-American obsession with cleanliness and purity on her own, they told me – and they were right. With puberty has come daily showers and the familiar worry about less than squeaky-clean hair, or a body that smells like something

other than fruity soap. Just like that she's become a version of me, of the me I recall with a mixture of wistfulness and pain. Obsessively preoccupied with my skin. Embarrassed by the need to head to the bathroom with a tampon or pad.

Here I am, supposedly older and wiser, yet still capable of deep embarrassment about, for instance, the state of my untidy house and yard. But what pre-hygienic American wilderness am I actually remembering, or imagining, as I succumb to this nostalgia for dirt? My hometown, pre-Martha Stewart? The lawns and houses might have been less orderly, but it truly wasn't equivalent to, say, James Agee and Walker Evans' world of Alabama sharecroppers. And the farm fields that I recall as less pristine were, in fact, part and parcel of a monolithic system of factory farming, even when I was a child.

I think there's something else about this particular historical moment that has made me so attuned to our passion for cleanliness, and that is my sense of this as a kind of liminal moment, a sort of holding of our collective breath before exhaling – into what exactly? After Martha Stewart and late twentieth-century excess, after gallon upon gallon of anti-bacterial soap and diseases we can't seem to eradicate, after a stubborn economic downturn that all our gadgets and online shopping and viewing of silly videos can't quite distract us from, what comes next?

I had a profound sense of this liminal moment in the fall of 2014, when I attended my thirtieth college reunion. The town on the Ohio River near my alma mater has been Martha-ized as well, for years now, and while the restaurants and the coffee are undeniably better, there were things that I missed on that visit. Like the old hotel where, pre-gentrification, my oldest brother and his wife stayed when they came to visit me one December weekend in 1980 (I remember, because it was the weekend after John Lennon was shot). Back in those days that hotel had a single bathroom down the hall and mainly housed long-term residents. But when I returned in the fall of 2014, a friend and I had lunch in an expensive restaurant on the ground floor and learned, from the restaurant's host, about the extensive renovations upstairs. The next morning, walking around the town, I came upon a big brick building I didn't recall, an old cotton mill near the river; the windows were blown out, and torn white curtains fluttered in the breeze. The inside was empty, stripped bare, and on the brick wall beside the padlocked front door was a poster with an invitation to invest in the forthcoming "Riverfront Mill Resort" and a drawing of the planned restoration. The poster was so sun-faded that I could barely make out the words. Later I found a 2009 video depicting the beautiful, sustainably designed restoration plans on YouTube; it had 439 views and one comment: "Will anything ever happen with this glorious old building or will nature reclaim it like it has so many others?"

Which feels like a version of the question I keep asking myself: What's next? What happens once we've rid our bodies and our houses, our fields and our food, everything, of every visible physical flaw? One of the best answers to this question that I've seen is Tina Fey's riff on Photoshop in *Bossypants*: "I don't see a future in which we're all anorexic and suicidal. I

do see a future in which we all retouch the bejeezus out of our own pictures at home. Family Christmas cards will just be eyes and nostrils in a snowman border.”

Our images of the future, at least as they appear in films and books and other popular media, seem to me to fluctuate between two extremes right now: a sleek, pure, minimalist space-age world (think the latest Apple product) and a dystopian wilderness (smoking and trash-filled in some versions, wildly overgrown and populated with ravenous and possibly genetically mutated beasts in others). My picture of the first version, as I try to imagine it enacted in my own life, looks like this: a clean, white desk with nothing on it but a thin electronic tablet of some kind. The desk I’ll presumably never have, because I keep writing things down on pieces of paper and tucking these into random and disorganized files, with the vain hope that all this note-taking will help me keep track of all the things I keep not finishing, or not remembering. In certain moods my desk and my office – like my house, like my yard, like my own body, still, at times – shame me. They’re anarchic messes. *You should have seen the mess*, hisses Muriel Spark’s stodgy character and other imagined judges in my mind, as I peruse the piles of paper and files, the boxes crammed into corners and under tables.

Or my messy, overgrown yard. Because now, as if it weren’t enough to worry about my less than perfectly clean house, there are the beautifully landscaped lawns and gardens of my daughters’ friends, generally viewed from the front seat of my car as I’m dropping her off. Or, even worse, the new concept of the “outdoor room”: not a yard, not even a mowed and reasonably tended one, but a space that’s so pristine, and with such comfortable and attractive furniture, that you can cook, eat, and live there. This has been my most recent experience of feeling inadequate – that is, less than pure – as a mother: my sense that our unkempt yard and crumbling back porch mark me as a kind of failure as an American adult.

Years ago I saw a sign in my neighborhood advertising a lawn care business called “Silent Meadows;” apparently the owners of the company had not heard of Rachel Carson. “Lawns are nature purged of sex and death,” wrote Michael Pollan back in 1989 in “Why Mow? The Case Against Lawns;” “no wonder Americans like them so much.” Today, though we may have banished DDT from American landscapes, the chemicals we’ve continued to spray on our perfectly green, perfectly trimmed lawns have had disastrous effects on the ecosystem, diminishing populations of pollinators like honeybees to dangerously low levels.

Yes we need to practice basic personal hygiene. Yes we need clean water and sanitary waste disposal and a means of routing cholera, and yes, as Eula Biss argues forcefully and eloquently, we also need vaccinations. Because we are part of a community, and part of the larger world, and as such, we have certain responsibilities, including making use of our many resources and economic advantages to control contagion and work to eradicate disease. But an obsession with purity is isolating, and can negate that sense of connectedness and responsibility. “We have more microorganisms in our guts than we have cells in our bodies,” Biss reminds us – “we are crawling with

bacteria and we are full of chemicals. We are, in other words, continuous with everything here on earth. Including, and especially, each other.”

So I’m training myself to appreciate my own backyard, to see it as a wonderfully wild outdoor room, one that’s been “reclaimed by nature,” with as much clover and thistle and Virginia creeper as grass (probably more). There is no plant classification called “weeds,” my sister-in-law reminds me every time we talk about gardening; *weed* is just a word for something you don’t want. I’m trying to want all of it, or most of it – the native species, at least, and, as my neighbor, the beekeeper, is teaching me to notice, the plants that are beloved by pollinators and birds. And that’s the other image of the future I’m calling up lately: wild things growing as they wish, something like that “glorious old building” reclaimed by nature, or the world of so much recent post-apocalyptic fiction. Like the setting of Emily St. John Mandel’s novel *Station Eleven*, a middle America, and presumably an entire world, in which electronic gadgets – electricity for that matter – are only a vague memory, and the heroic young woman at the novel’s center wields knives, *Hunger Games*-style, with ruthless precision.

Today, though we may have banished DDT from American landscapes, the chemicals we’ve continued to spray on our perfectly green, perfectly trimmed lawns have had disastrous effects on the ecosystem . . .

I suppose my growing fondness and nostalgia for dirt seem to point to a preference for this second view of the future, for an old mill that’s overtaken by nature, slowly sinking into the earth, rather than a renovated home for stores and condos – nature triumphing over technology, or something vaguely silly like that. But I’m enough of a child of the sixties (I was born then, at least) to long for a different picture than that of the violent, post-apocalyptic worlds of recent American books and films. It’s a utopian, rather than dystopian, picture: the image of my daughter in recent summers, deep in the woods at the wonderful, electronics-free, dirty-hippie, Quaker summer camp she attended. Each time we picked her up she was barefoot, in a tie-dyed t-shirt and dusty old shorts – muddy, faintly ripe-smelling, and wielding no *Hunger Games* knives. Also happier, and more placid, than she’d been for months leading up to her time at camp.

But last summer was her last at that camp, until she’s older and maybe goes back as a counselor. She also keeps her room pretty tidy now, or at least I think she does. If she doesn’t, I don’t have many opportunities to nag her about it. The door’s generally closed.