



In a Tub

Amy Hempel

My heart -- I thought it stopped. So I got in my car and headed for God. I passed two churches with cars parked in front. Then I stopped at the third because no one else had. It was early afternoon, the middle of the week. I chose a pew in the center of the rows. Episcopal or Methodist, it didn't make any difference. It was as quiet as a church. I thought about the feeling of the long missed beat, and the tumble of the next ones as they rushed to fill the space. I sat there -- in the high brace of quiet and stained glass -- and I listened.

At the back of my house I can stand in the light from the sliding glass door and look out onto the deck. The deck is planted with marguerites and

succulents in red clay pots. One of the pots is empty. It is shallow and broad, and filled with water like a birdbath.

My cat takes naps in the windowbox. Her gray chin is powdered with the iridescent dust from butterfly wings. If I tap on the glass, the cat will not look up. The sound that I make is not food.

When I was a girl I sneaked out at night. I pressed myself to hedges and fitted the shadows of trees. I went to a construction site near the lake. I took a concrete-mixing tub, slid it to the shore, and sat down inside it like a saucer. I would push off from the sand with one stolen oar and float, hearing nothing, for hours.

The birdbath is shaped like that tub.

I look at my nails in the harsh bathroom light. The scare will appear as a ripple at the base. It will take a couple of weeks to see.

I lock the door and run a tub of water.

Most of the time you don't really hear it. A pulse is a thing that you feel. Even if you are somewhat quiet. Sometimes you hear it through the pillow at night. But I know that there is a place where you can hear it even better than that. Here is what you do. You ease yourself into a tub of water, you ease yourself down. You lie back and wait for the ripples to smooth away. Then you take a deep breath, and slide your head under, and listen for the playfulness of your heart.

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