PERFORMANCE
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HOW TO WASH A BODY

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For Lotte

Caring for the dead includes a wide range of culturally and materially informed practices that deal with parting from the spirit of life as well as the physicality of the body's natural decomposition toward burial or final disposition. The washing of a dead body has held great significance across cultures and histories as a dignified rite connecting the living and the dead in support of the journeys ahead for both. While there are an array of religious perspectives for this ritual, I am interested in a secular approach that emphasizes practice-based skill training, death wellness, and intentional grieving as part of care for the living, and subsequently, the dead.

While this is something that has long been outsourced as a practical and cosmetic procedure in preparation for ceremony in many parts of the world, the washing of a dead body by loved ones or even members of a community has the power to bring the dead closer to home—both in place and in hands—for a connected and compassionate experience in death and grief. On one side, it holds generative possibility for grievers to recognize *this* death through the senses and help to rearrange the current reality around the truth of death. On the other side, this practice also provides us with agency to resist any interest from the commercial funeral industry to profit from this act over and above consumer education and empowerment. The washing of a dead body is part of practical skill-training in holistic deathcare and, coupled with understanding about the laws and regulations related to caring for the dead in one's specific context, the practice reaches further possibilities that are both personal and political, including the ingenuity and connectedness in ritual design as well as reclaiming death from bureaucracy and capital. Further, in the washing of a dead body, the living bodies are reminded of their finitude through their encounters and performances of this ritual.

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As a holistic deathcare worker for a few years, death is never far from my thoughts and experiences. In an earlier stage of training, when I had not yet washed a dead body, I practiced on my partner, someone whose aliveness challenges my real inability to fathom how I would cope without her. This is an example of a *memento mori* ("remember death" or "remember you must die") performance, a rehearsal in preparedness and sinking more deeply into death awareness.

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On the floor in the living room, you lie on your back atop a white sheet on our carpet. It's evening in cold January and we have only the soft warm light of the standing lamp. With all the curtains closed and our dog sleeping on her mat nearby, we are safe, protected and calm. I am a little nervous. With my thumb and middle finger, I close your eyelids and remind you not to speak. You are playing dead, and I am practicing how to prepare a body for washing and dressing as part of my death-doula training.

Kneeling at your side, I try to gently roll your body with one hand on your hip and the other on your shoulder, pulling you toward me. I can feel your lively resistance, muscles flexing, yet I know you are leaning into your dead weight. There's only so much I can do by myself, but I want to see if I could roll you to one side and place a disposable pad underneath you. This way I could press on your abdomen to encourage any bodily fluids to escape, and then replace the pad. You laugh because I look so serious. We are doing our best. It would be far easier to have four people, two on each side, at each junction of the hips and shoulders. To move you would be better with six to ten people, making sure to have at least one holding your feet together and another—god forbid it would roll—your neck and head.

I would have cut your shirt open to make it easier to remove, but we pretend that you are naked already and I cover your body with another white sheet. As the fabric rests over you I think about the countless times I have seen this image of you draped in sheets while you slept. How fondly I regard a material simply because it gets to be so close to you. Your chest slowly rises and falls.

I place a candle on the floor above your head. Next to me are an assortment of items: scissors, incense, hydrogen peroxide, a trash bag, extra towels, the book *Rose: Poems* (1986) by Li-Young Lee. Not that I would use all these materials, but I want to see what it is like to have some of them around me, prepared. I could arrive at any scene with my doula bag and be ready. From the kitchen I grab a bowl of warm water, and then add rose essential oil. In our shared silence, I light the candle.

One of the most practical and profound acts of death care is that of physically, materially caring for our dead. For the last hundred years in North America and Europe, with the medicalization of death and death-care industries, this act has been outsourced. This means that as soon as someone dies of expected death, the funeral home is contacted to come collect the body of the newly deceased, and then there's embalming, dressing and the addition of make-up, all at an eerie distance. We have enlisted their help because we believe that this is what we are supposed to do, but we are also disenfranchised by fear. This is fashioned as a loop without a clear beginning or

end, similar to other dilemmas in holistic death care, wherein our fear of death limits us in accessing alternative options. The funeral industry has taken over the tasks that we already anticipate as challenging to bear or think we aren't allowed to do safely or legally. We have intuitive knowledge of natural death care, since it is as old as human time, but we have to be reminded of what we know. There are many funeral practitioners who support family and community involvement, but not always. Most natural death care takes place at home, but it is still possible to arrange something at a hospice or hospital. With good collaboration between medical and funeral establishments, you can make many things happen. Having a holistic death-care worker nearby or on call, someone with whom you are already bonded and whom you trust, means having a personal advocate, one who will support you in being present for this process, and remind you that you're doing it "right," that all of this is normal. I wish for everyone to have this kind of experience directly after their loved one's death, if this feels right to them and the cultural context allows. And for those who haven't, to have grace for themselves for what they didn't yet know, or just simply wasn't possible. Any future moment in which you can be present with a dead body can be time used to acknowledge and grieve for all those others who you couldn't be with before.

Now, with everything prepared for the bathing ritual, I begin at your head and I explain what I am going to do, imagining that in the future I would be guiding loved ones in these actions while I was at their side, the highest honor possible. My role is to support and empower families, caregivers, and loved ones to care for their dead. But my role is also to hold the space with thoughtfulness and intention, help give structure, and slow things down. Often there is an impulse to act (as if an emergency?) but right after a gradual death it is important to do as little as possible and in no rush. Now's the time to connect with the profundity of it all in this sacred space—and experience just how very alive you feel. There will be plenty of actions and decisions to take. For now, just wait. Intuitively and with support, you will know when it's time to do the next thing.

With you, I will only rehearse this once. I wasn't going to wash your curls with shampoo, but I gesture as if I did, rubbing your skull with my fingertips. I know this feels good to you. While I narrate my actions, I think about how healing can be spurred in the act of saying what is materially happening. I say how I would clean your mouth, as you lie there quiet and motionless, then I use the washcloth to clean your face.

Gliding the cloth across your forehead and brow, I whisper to you, "for all that you have known and seen," and think about how you have known and seen me in ways I can't and won't fully comprehend.

My erect finger within the cloth runs down each of your cheeks, along your nose, and encircles your mouth. "For all that you have smelt and tasted," I say, and I think about your body's unique fragrance—it changes but it doesn't grow old to me—and then I think about most of you I've held in my mouth.

I remind myself to breathe as I follow your jawline. "For all that you have spoken and heard." I think about how I can't fathom living without you, but how I would learn to figure it out. You've had to figure out how to grieve a former version of yourself, now that long COVID has fundamentally

altered your life. There will be so much that we figure out together. I sail down from the nape of your neck to your collarbone and shoulders.

Then I wrap a silk, floral scarf around your head to keep your jaw closed (before rigor mortis would set in), and then I slowly move down your body like a meditative scan. I bathe one uncovered limb at a time.

I place my hand between your legs and motion as if I were to wash you here. This is what I would likely do for families in case they didn't feel comfortable doing so themselves. But in this instance, I glance over to find your smirk. With my hand I have loved you. Your love for me comes from a well that I help dig.

How we interact in the hours after a death can serve us very well. Touch helps us to understand. We witness and start to accept the beginning of cascading losses as the body begins to change. We see ourselves in each other, humbled by the miracle of life and death. Here we were, very alive, softening a fear, playing pretend. Emotional boundaries are paramount when doing this work. "Soft front, strong back," as Zen Buddhist teacher Joan Halifax says. But when it is someone that you know, that you love, all sides are soft. You will never be fully prepared. Ritual—some physical practice enmeshed with an idea or feeling—helps to acknowledge a transition, to mark reality, and steward a reclamation. I trust that it will be there when I need it.

Sitting next to you, I pick up *Rose: Poems* by Lee, and end the ritual by reading the poem "From Blossoms." The last stanza reads, "There are days we live as if death were nowhere / in the background; from joy / to joy to joy, from wing to wing, from blossom to blossom to impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom." Your body begins to wiggle as you wrestle out from under the sheet. You reach for me as I help to lift you up.

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Biography

Staci Bu Shea (Miami, 1988) is a curator, writer and death doula based in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Broadly, Bu Shea convenes with others over aesthetic, critical, and poetic practices of social reproduction and care work, as well as its manifestations in interpersonal relationships, daily life, community organizing, and institutional practice. Bu Shea's debut publication *Dying Livingly* is released in 2025 with Sternberg Press as part of the Solution Series edited by Ingo Niermann. Bu Shea was curator at Casco Art Institute of *Working for the Commons* (Utrecht, 2017–2022) and co-curator with Barbara Hammer of *Evidentiary Bodies* at Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art (New York, 2017). Bu Shea holds an MA from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College (Annandale-on-Hudson, 2016). stacibushea.info / stacibushea.care