How to Wash Your Hands
Stephen Ira

When I was a girl in Beverly Hills,
and things were just beginning to get bad,

they brought handwashing experts to prep school
one day. There were two, and the two of them lectured

on proper procedure: how to turn the water off
while you lather, how to take a paper towel

and turn the water off for good, after rinsing,
with it on your hand, so as not to pick back up

the germs that were on you when all this began.
And I remember waterfalls, which the other

silver-spoon girls found essential: sharing by pouring
a little of another girl's beverage into your mouth,

so that nothing touched her mouth, then yours, then hers.
I remember their bubble handwriting, how it curved,

and how the girls repelled the ground, and spit, and birds.
"Who knows where *that* has been?"

Who knows that about anything? After these lectures,
every girl now knew she couldn't turn the water off

with her bare hands, and so the waste became
embarrassing, extreme, and pretty gross,

since girls would leave the towels wet and curled,
like dead weasels, around the handles to the faucet.

I thought the whole thing was so silly. At assembly,
they had to make all-school announcements

about it every Friday for weeks, saying to stop.
But these girls had input from outside experts.

They'll never stop it now, I thought,
and I was right: all semester,

dead wet weasels on the handles, decomposing
long enough to come apart at a touch.

No one would say directly, Hey, you brats,
you know somebody has to clean that up!

None of us thought of it— not me, certainly. I wonder
whether this went on in the boys' bathroom too, but

I don't remember the boys evincing that need
for the idea of being clean. They hated me

naturally, because of being boys, whereas
the girls' hate was a failure of solidarity,

and I hated them back, more than I hate
anyone in the life I live now. To turn off

the water with a paper towel soon became
a status symbol, proof a girl cared more

about her clean safe body than authority.
I cared for nothing. I don't wash my hands.

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