

WHAT
the
Body
WANTS

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Please Straighten That Up

I loved to look down that long hallway
after I'd washed and waxed it, admiring
the smoothness and shine of it. It was
the closest thing to perfect I knew.

Once, while it was still wet with wax
a small army of eighty-five-pound
football players
rained out of their practice

came charging down the gleaming hallway
all helmets shoulder pads and cleats.

Another lesson
that nothing remains perfect

after Tommy's year in Vietnam
Frank's long hair
rock and roll, the smell of dope
Jimi Hendrix blasting through the house

Dad yelling Turn off that goddamn noise.
And burned-up neighborhoods in D.C.
seen driving down North Capitol Street
and Rhode Island Avenue, on the way

to Griffith Stadium
where we watched the Senators
play baseball on a perfect green
diamond. Looking back

on all that riotous imperfection
I cleaned the hallways
at St. Camillus grade school.
A janitor for Jesus, I called myself.

Now I'm still desperate
to make the world neat and clean
as if it is my duty
to order the Universe, keeping death

and all kinds of disorienting
passion
at bay. So far I've lost my mother
and my innocence

leaving though a number
of clean passageways.

Upon This Rock

From the basement
I'd hear him
coming home from work.

I'd hear the soft thud
of his black leather
wingtips

on the entranceway
linoleum; the pa-lunk
of his briefcase

on the floor
by the knick-knack shelf
where he would ka-lank

down his keys
onto a glass dish;
the rickety metallic

winging open
of the louvered closet door
to hang up his coat

and the gentle smooch
of his kissing Mom
hello.

Then I'd know
that it was five-twenty
and exactly

ten minutes 'til dinner time.

A Nature Poem

I was visited by a young stag
with thick felt on his new antlers.
He came outside the window of my bedroom
in Berkeley, to eat the rotting plums

fallen over the fence from my neighbors' yard.
As he moved around the house, I followed
down the pictured hallway
through the bathroom with two doors

my office and into the guest bedroom
where I saw him again through the window.
We went back and forth like that, from
bedroom to bedroom, until he had his fill.

I wonder why he came from Tilden Park
down the Berkeley hills, among all those houses
gardens, recycling bins, sidewalks
and curving roads to my house

to eat my fallen plums
and make me spin like a Sufi dancer?
Is he a deer who longs
for sweetness? Or is he like

those elephants who migrate for days and months
to get drunk on fermented fruit?

The Man Dad Brought Home from the War

Ed Kasanski came to our house
early on Saturday mornings
to wake up me and my brothers
grumpy and silent at first.

We went fishing by the thick, brown
fast-moving Potomac
never catching anything but catfish
and feasted on baked beans

dark rye bread and sausages
cooked over a fire we made ourselves.
On the way back we'd stop
for Catocin Mountain peaches

in August
or bulging chestnuts from Rock Creek Park
in the Fall. One summer day
we came home, unloaded our peaches

and my sister asked him
to join us for dinner. He stood in the door
in the same old clothes he wore
his olive shirt and black boots

as old as the war
looking like the homeless man
kind people took him for
handing him dollar bills

as he stood smoking a cigarette
outside the Hot Shoppes restaurant.
I dont want to be a bother he said.
You're no bother, you're family she said.

I don't believe he ever cried during the War.
He cried then, tears sweeter than peaches.
He tried to hide them but we saw a man
who would die knowing that he was loved.

Transformation

You smelled damp on the afternoon you died
like something growing in the dark; like mushrooms.
And your forehead was cool where my lips touched.
I whispered, "Mom, don't be afraid. Let go."

The nurse loosened the plastic mask
with the rubber band from around your neck
laying it on the soft flat rise of flesh
between your breasts and throat.

From lungs flooded with water, you brought up
a few rattling breaths and then stopped.
The look on you face at the moment of death:
peaceful, calm, serene.

I imagine the same look
as you watched each of your six children
being baptized. And other scenes:
the sad blue bathrobe you wore on Mondays

cleaning day; the delight you took
in conversation about politics and religion.
Laughing out loud while reading
The World According to Garp.

And the black silences when I wondered
a boy eager to please you, what I had done.
It was never something I did.
Your storms were your storms.

I saw light in your face the day you died
light coming as from deep water
below the wave-speckled surface of a lake
and then stillness.

Male Love

I

Bob and I have been friends
for fifteen years, except
for two, when we didn't talk
to each other

because I felt, for a time
like we were married, and didn't know
how to ask for distance.
So we separated, for two years.
When my mother died

I let him know I needed him.
Bob is bald, buffed and has
a thick beard. I didn't know
he was gay, he didn't trust me yet
to tell me

until we sat
having been friends for nine years
on a bench
overlooking the Golden Gate.

When we hug he feels tightly drawn
strong.

II

When I hug my father, I feel
his round stomach push against
my rounding one
and his and my face stubble
rubbing together like warm sandpaper.

We used to shake hands until
college graduation, when my mother said
"Aren't you going to hug your son?"
His fingernails are bitten down
to narrow embedded ovals, from worry.

His hands felt rough and dry
as he caressed my face each morning
to wake me, when I was a boy.

In Response

Thirsty for first things
surrounded by water, sensual
surrender, thirsty for first things.

My father must never die, must
never hold on to me, need me.
Could I hold his weakening hand?

Go poet, speak for me, wise man,
broken man, honest man, lovely
man, speak for me.

Transmuted, transmogrified, change
continual change, eat, digest, shit
again and again and again.

Sweet travails, sweet transportation
delivering us from here to there.
What is the benefit of flies?

In myth they lead us
to the underworld
where we meet dead relatives.

My mother is dead. Do I believe it yet?
She came to me in a dream, confident,
beautiful, strong, smoking.

Augustine called it the music
of the spheres, Eliot, the music
heard so deeply, you are the music.

Squaw Valley Penitential Rite

I confess to almighty God
and to you my brothers and sisters
that each morning between 10 and 12
was a feast. We passed out poems

like hymnals. In groups of 14 to 16
we broke life open, one by one
casting up bits and pieces of it
into a sacred circle: pain, joy

laughter at ourselves, sex, sorrow, death
and all the body parts.
We ate each other's body and blood.
After a morning of sharing poetry

I was juiced. I ran up the hill
to climb granite rocks and landed
before a waterfall. We sang songs
to each other, shouting

"I am your mother. I am your father."
The big rocks
did a little shimmy for me, a shimmy
for Jimmy.

Love is patient. Love is kind.
I came to Squaw Valley from a community
off priests, to be alone
among poets, but found poet priests.

And that I am a priest poet, a poet
among poets, a human being with his family.
We have celebrated a rich Eucharist.
I ask blessed Mary ever virgin,

all the angels and saints,
and you, my brothers and sisters,
to pray with me to the Lord our God.

What the Body Wants

The body wants to dance.
It wants to get up off
the floor and dance.
It wants to get up out of
the chair, and dance;
to get from behind the desk
and dance;
to get out with people
and dance.
The body wants to move.
the body wants to move
and touch
and move together
with other bodies.
It wants to smell other bodies
and taste other bodies.
It wants to be up to it's neck
in body.
The body wants to be a body.
The body is tired of waiting
and resting beneath the mind.
The body falls asleep thinking.
It can't stand the wait
between action and action.
It doesn't want to write
or call somebody, talk or
take a nap.
It wants to move out
into the world. It wants
to touch the world of bread
and coffee, soft cloth and rough cloth
pavement, tree bark
hear car sounds and water sounds.
It wants to tread on things
and to feel the weight of things.
It wants to squeeze somebody
and be squeezed by somebody.
It wants warmth, sunshine
breezes and wet sand
between its toes.

It wants to jump in water
and float.
The body wants to jump off
the Golden Gate Bridge.
It wants to fly.
It wants to feel with every cell
the pull of gravity
and the centrifugal force
of turning.
It wants its energy
and it wants peace and tranquillity.
The body wants to know
that it is not alone.
It wants to be big sometimes
and small sometimes.
It wants to fit into small safe places
and fill up rooms with shouting.
The body wants to vibrate
to its own voice
and to feel harmony with other voices
and dissonance.
It wants to dance slow and dance fast
to flow, to thrust, to bend, to be still.
It wants to make beautiful lines
and be seen.
It wants to be fat and skinny
to burst out of its seams.
The body wants everything.
It does not want to be bounded
but loves to rub, push and bounce off
surfaces.

Up From Depression

Two years ago I fell off a mountain
and deep into the earth.
I climbed back

through the Mercy
of friends, the treatment center
then poets and dancers. I found life

in the large eyes of the woman I held.
It was in her long legs
wrapped around my skin.

In the morning, alone
I woke up dancing and then came
the hot sobbing and I looked

at the icon of Jesus on the wall
of my bedroom and said
“Love, don’t ever leave me again.”

Lacuna

I visited Mary and Michael
in Nevada City.
She has breast cancer.
We hugged, as usual.
I couldn’t tell.
She seems thin though.

My mother died of breast cancer.
So did two women
I brought up in conversation
with Mary, but I didn’t say.
I just said they died
a feminist theologian who hurt me
who said my preaching was too

personal
and another woman
who I can’t remember.
Not the woman I saw
at the Pride Parade
proudly baring her chest
one breast hanging loose and large.

Mary’s been hearing
horror stories
from people who should know better,
who say they knew someone who died
quickly, or how much this one suffered.
It caused a divorce.

She gets an unconscious fear
and fascination from me
like when I touched the lumps
growing
under the skin of my mother’s back.

Mary’s grief is feeling half human
or not there at all,
dead already.

Things to do While Leaving the Priesthood

Call your sisters, the older one for advice that you don't take in the end and the younger one for support.

Make out a resume. Do it again, only more professionally.

Start taking Aikido classes but quit because you have spent enough time wearing a uniform, submitting to authority and being on your knees.

Do more than one Yoga class each week with a teacher you like.

Hike in Tilden Park. Paint. Dance. Write poetry. Say it out loud.

Refill your Zoloft prescription.

Pay attention to your dreams.

Eat the chocolate bunny your friend gave you and don't worry about gaining weight. Eat Fruit Loops for breakfast and at night before going to bed. Have dreams with colorful fast-moving characters.

Pray for trust. Pray for trust. Pray for trust.

Count on your friends.

Feed people. Talk with homeless men in recovery.

Don't, no matter how much you feel like it, crawl into a hole and die.

Approaching Forty

My high school friends and I would laugh looking from a safe distance at the middle-aged men of our suburban parish.

We would laugh trying to calculate the angle of their belt buckles which wouldn't stand straight up but hung at some impossible angle

and devise formulas involving the viscosity of National Bohemian beer brewed in Baltimore the weight of their wives

and the love or disdain of their children. We wondered how their pants stayed up holding on like rock climbers under those stomach ledges.

The man who won was usually a veteran of many card games and butter-soaked Maryland crab feasts.

Now I look in the mirror having done my share of eating and drinking, and begin to determine my own approaching middle-aged belly angle;

full of myself the things I wanted to say but didn't promises I wanted to make but didn't the love I wanted to share.

Physics

When I was seventeen I came home drunk
and before going inside
ran laps around the family Impala

parked in the driveway.
I made circles hiking in Tilden Park
around the pain of my friend leaving me

after eight years of chaste friendship.
I learned this becoming a man
running back and forth in gymnasiums

around cinder tracks
and in steamy weight rooms
trying to get stronger and deader

at the same time.
Having recently left the priesthood
I fall at night into the little death

of sleep, insistent dreams
inviting me to remember the body's pain
passion and joy

that is like the sap
of a Juniper tree, rising
becoming grey/blue berries, then medicine.

Not The Mom We Were Used To

Mom cooked the sauce long and slow
with big chunks of pork on the bone
or pepperoni big enough

to shut the mouth of my biggest brother
Tommy. She doled it out on mounds
of pasta to all seven of us

so the littlest wouldn't
go out from the table hungry.
On this particular Monday

which was also, by the way, cleaning day
there was stillness in the air
as though something big were going to happen

like before the August storms swept in
off the Atlantic and two hundred miles
inland to blow the big trees in our back yard

like grass. Eight glasses of milk
stood before us, big glasses
and cold.

I don't remember who did it
who tipped theirs over.
The next thing I remember was Mom

making a slow deliberate circle
around the table, with great dignity;
a milk-spilling engineer

and the chill
of more than ninety-six ounces of milk
spilling out over the table top

cascading over the edge, spreading
in a circle on our jeans;
pooling in our sneakers, our Sears Jeepers.

Imagine all that spilled out and flowing
nurture,
all that abundance

and our mouths closed shut
in awe and wonder.

The Artificial Heart

It was mostly plastic and titanium.
My research involved
an ultrasound transducer

a thin stick
half as long as a cigarette
that made little noises

aimed into fake blood
flowing around a fake
circulatory system. The sound waves

bat-like, bounced off tiny plastic
blood cells.

There was a little piece of quartz

at the end of the transducer
that shook when it was shocked
so fast no one could hear it.

But a computer listened
and made a map of blood flow
in the pumping chamber

of the artificial heart. When done
with measurements of shear stress
and stagnation

so I could write my Masters Thesis
and leave the basement of Hammond Building
Penn State, the little piece of quartz

fell off the stick. It lay there
on the no longer beating artificial heart
as exhausted and silent

as I was. I unplugged everything.
I had no idea where I was going
nothing to sound out

but the movement of skin, muscle and bone.

Yes

It was on the floor
in front of a chaise lounge
in a friend's apartment

where my celibacy ended.
We had decided, earlier
to have dinner and see a movie

but didn't leave the soft mandala
of oriental carpet
in front of a sofa

too small to fit us both.
Later we ate pasta and eggplant
in a crowded restaurant

holding hands across the table
and glowing.
But in the half-darkness, I said

her face six inches from mine—
Yes. Now. I want to make love.
Something rang

like a clear interior bell
declaring liberty
for a body so long without it.

Muir Beach

I love the ocean. I love her smells
and the breeze on her. She caresses me.
The smell is like sage. It is sage
dry sage caressed by wind, having caressed
the ocean, caresses my nose
and the inside of me. Ocean.

She plays with me standing in the surf.
She pushes me one way then another.
It is difficult to keep my balance.
My feet dig deep into the shifting sand
up to my ankles.

I can't get enough of the rocks

and the way the waves crash against them.
I can't get enough of the birds floating
above the rocks. I can't stand the way
the waves constantly break on the sand.
It's too much! I squint against the sun

reflected off her skin. I love to look
at her. I love to be near her
to smell her
and see the fog roll in on her.

I am buried in the sea.
She has me. She loves me.
We were together all afternoon.

Portrait of a Woman from the Gardens of Egypt in the First Century

She looks at us with dark brown eyes
and rose lips applied with beeswax
on linden wood.

She looks as if nothing were between us—
not 1900 years, not nations being born
and buried

not war and famine, millions of lovers,
the invention of the printing press,
Newtonian and then Quantum Mechanics.

She could be my neighbor. I would love it
if she moved in to the empty apartment
across the hall.

She seems to know something but is not
telling. Maybe it was the painter
who said, Stay still for another minute

for the wax is cooling or maybe
she was in love with the painter and maybe
she wasn't married to the painter and

she was ready to burst with love and passion
for the painter. Or her children were swirling
about her knees, feeling neglected.

She knows something but is not saying it.
She knows, maybe, that nothing will change
in 1900 years

and she is looking at me, at us
with compassion. Hoping that we can adorn
ourselves with lovely pearls like hers

that there are still bread and children
and that people still find joy
in each other's bodies, that

war has ceased and everyone
has enough food to eat. It was a portrait
affixed to her coffin.

There isn't anything between
her eyes and ours. I feel that we will meet
and I will have to answer for my life.

From the age of reason and probably before that but I can't remember, I have wanted tomato sauce that tasted like tomato sauce, the kind my Mom made and my grandmother, Carmela Romeo, still makes at age ninety-five. Not too sweet, not drowned in spices.

For the past several years I've been asking myself one question a lot: *What do I want?* And because the most basic desires, besides for food, have been pretty much socialized and educated out of me over the years, *What does my body want?*

This question was awakened at an Interplay workshop, where I experienced my embodied presence for the first time in an improvised dance. Moving into the question of what I want has taken me down some roads not taken before: doing contact improv (dirty dancing to some), getting treatment for depression, being real with men in transition from homelessness and recovery from addiction, finding a place in the poetry community, soaking naked in a hot-tub, yelling obscenities at the Pope in Tilden Park, and leaving the priesthood.

Writing poetry has been a way to move into the question. At the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, I realized I could continue my priesthood in a new way. Sharon Olds said there that poetry was about transforming matter into spirit. After joking with her about her poem 'The Pope's Penis,' I had to agree with her and rejoice in our common priesthood. Eight months later, on my way to hear Marie Howe read poems from her book *What the Living Do*, I dropped my letter of resignation into a mailbox. It was April 1, 1999: the 10-year anniversary of my ordination.

(continued)

Since then I have had shingles, nightmares, heartburn, and just this morning, I cut my foot on a rusty doorstep while cleaning my tiny bathroom floor in my tiny studio apartment. I sat for a while, pressing toilet paper to the wound and looking at the small pools of dark red blood on the tile floor. It never stops.

The big and little dying never stops. With all this old karma burning away in my body, I have never been happier or more at peace with myself. I can write. I have interesting work. I'm learning to take care of myself. I have friends. And God is becoming more and more real, in my body. Maybe that's the best answer to my question. The body wants God just as God wants a body. This is pretty traditional incarnational theology dating back to the writings of Athanasius, a Christian theologian from the 4th century. Only my version has all the body parts.

—Jim Gunshinan, December 1999