

Richard Tayson

Sacraments

1

Along lower Broadway where we walk
together for the first time, stars
of Bethlehem dangle from metal girders.
I feel your hand
take my elbow, pull me
toward you as you try
to tell me something —
but the sirens pulsing
and the woman screaming at the drunk
splitting his head against the railing
and the punks trying to sell me dope
are drowning out your words. A woman
knots the tubing at her arm, a beggar
crushes his dog's jaw with a skillet,
a man in a turban smashes a car window.
Beneath falling ice a choir sings *to save us all
from Satan's power when we were gone astray*,
your hand slips inside my coat. I smell the gin
of your breath, the salt of your body
indistinguishable from my desire.
I move closer to you, the choir drones its melody,
the crowd jostles my body
while you kiss me beneath the blare
of horns, the ecstasy of voices, your beard
chafes my lips and cheeks, I
lean against you and you tell me your name.

2

Out the window snow is falling, dawn over 13th Street.
Coffee steam rises like breath between us.
You tell the story: last December, the old Italian
collapsed on the icy sidewalk. When you breathed
into him, his face became deep purple. You touch
your face when you tell me this. I close my eyes,
taste the blood where your skin broke
when I bit your lip last night,
see you lying on some pavement,
your face turning purple until the blood
comes from your mouth, sand freezes
in your beard. I remember you lying on your back
as my thighs gripped your hips, your hands
along my ribs, pulling me over you, your beard
against my face as I leaned down to your lips,
heard a woman's voice wailing for her dead husband,
chanting "Hail Marys" as she washed ash and bile
from her husband's face, the sound of rosary,
the weakness of language.

3

In church, the men in black make their bodies
invisible. I am 12, watching the candles burn,
hearing the angels sing. I look at the painting
of the people carrying the body of Jesus.
Shadows strike his chest where the blood runs down
his pelvis, the muscles of his abdomen. The loose wrap
of stained cloth covering his genitals holds my attention.
Hands on his elbows, ankles, the tapered waist.
What I want is to kneel before him, to lick the blood off,
to feel his beard against my face, to let the breath
rise between us, to call out *love* to this man.

4

Body of holiness, body of light, arms in the shape of the cross,
 shadow between clefts of breast flesh, breast bone, body of pink
 jewels and beard fur glistening, fine gold hair trickling down
 his chest. Words break the surface, stones break one at a time

across the vaulted ceiling, the framed pietà whose arms cradle him,
 whose eyes bless his body as words break across Christ, fall into
 the porcelain bowl at the foot of our bed, steam rises
 full of coffee smell, above the altar of gardenias and gold flames

the red angel circles. I taste this weird molecular buzz,
 the water washing across his skin, the amber undergrowth
 and the pink head with its salt of consummation, I kiss
 this temple of pure life, I say mass on his chest.

5

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow
 of death, I will fear radiation*

seeping through the ozone, earth's immunity.
 I, a man whose power relies on other men,

will fear the toxins rising
 from the earth's interior. I will

fear the body asleep in the other room —
 anoint his skin with sacred myrrh

and lick his wounds. I will fear
 rain, earth, fruit, tree: bear witness

to the fear in equal portion to the beauty.
 I will fear my brother's blood, for his blood

is my own. Whatever comes of us, we will say
 we lived in the valley, built a home in the shadow.

6

When Christ met the punk rocker on the road
the sea went still and the motorcycle
flared briefly then was silent. The boy
stood watching Christ in his white robe
with roses woven across the chest.
When he looked down at Christ's feet
he saw blood where the stones had torn the skin.
Christ looks older than in the books, the boy thought.
His face is wrinkled, his body slumped like an old man's.
Christ turned to him and said the world had changed
since he'd walked the desert
yet he liked the boy's buzz cut
and the rose tattoo on his left shoulder.
Christ took the boy's head
in his worn hands and began kissing
from the crown to the base of the neck.
Christ took the rose tattoo into his mouth
and the wind ceased. The punk rocker
looked up at him and took a cloth rose
into his oily hands — his hands became clean.
The rose came alive, sprouted
in his palm like breath of fire.
Christ lifted the boy's chin
and took his mouth to his own.
After Christ had taken his white robe
and laid it on the sand, after the boy
had combed Christ's beard with his fingers
and watched his hands become smooth and pink,
the punk rocker folded his body
into the cradle of Christ's arms.
A crowd of photographers flocked
like disciples around them. The people
arrived with heavy poles and silver spikes,
sat in a wide stone circle of fire,
told stories of barren years and falling ice.
Christ sat with the punk rocker beneath a shrub
of flowering mock orange. In the night,
while fire cast angular shapes into the sea,

Christ and the punk rocker mounted the nuptial bed.
By morning two bodies hung limp on the cross:
the blood of Christ dripped from the cloth roses
and the boy's tongue hung black from his red mouth.

7

All along the beach suburban houses burn.
I stand inside barbed wire, watching Her
toss stones in a basket, sift them like seeds,
plant them along the length of wire.
I taste your blood in my mouth. She, too,
has lost lovers. She does not want me to spit you out.

When the smoke clears and the beach is still,
I taste ash and know that shapes are bodies rising.
At the point of each barbed wire, a holy flower bursts forth.
Transformation is what the sea desires.
When I open my eyes all our places are gone and I stand alone.