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Richard McCann

NIGHTS OF 1990

*The sweatings and the fevers stop, the throat that was unsound is sound,
the lungs of the consumptive are resumed. . . .*

Walt Whitman, "The Sleepers"

1.

What I could not accept was how much space
his body was taking with it: for instance, the space where
I was standing, the dazed fluorescence of his hospital room
where each night I watched him sleep. *So this
is the spine*, I thought, this articulation
of vertebral tumors, this rope of bulbous knots;
tissue, I thought, as I studied his yellowing skin--
tissue, like something that could tear.
Afterward, I waited in the corridor.
When I came back, he was alive and breathing.
Here, let me rub your back, I said.
Was it true what I'd heard, that the soul resides in breath?
Was it true the body was mere transport? I untied
the white strings that secured his pale blue
hospital gown. The blue gown drifted
from his shoulders. I rubbed his back.
I rubbed his back. *Not so hard*,
he said. *I don't need to be burnished yet.*

2.

Tonight I am loyal to the young men in leather jackets loitering by the lighted windows of the Churrería San Sebastian. To Manuel Mendoza Hernandez de Gato, one name for each day I loved him, Patron Saint of Café-Bar Lolita and the gypsy caves of Sacromonte.

To Juan

Salvador Perez del Castillo, to the black stars and coiled serpents tattooed to his hands. Tonight I am loyal to The Bar With No Name.

Each night that summer I stood by a path that transected *El Retiro*, a park whose dangers the police patrolled. Tiers of streetlamps silvered terraces of ornamental roses, the vast statuary of a crystal palace abandoned during war. If memory

could build its own monument to that moment
--There was a field by the train station, well-known
among a certain kind. Past midnight I knelt
in the wet uncut grass, sheltered
by the man who stood before me.
He quickly came. He zipped his trousers.
He stroked my face. *Mi amigo*,
he whispered, *I have a favor to ask.*
Will you suck off my friend?

Yes, I said. I will suck off your friend.

3.

What was it you said?

*Better to pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory
of some passion...*

Here, let me touch your face again.

Your face, in the full glory of some passion.

When the bleeding woman touched Christ's garment
and straightaway the source of her blood was dried up
so that He felt the virtue going out of Him to heal her--
why did He turn in the crowd to demand
Who touched my clothes?

The disciples said:

*Thou seest the multitude
thronging thee, and sayest thou,
Who touched me?*

I remember those nights.

It was dark. You traced your name on my bare chest.

When you straddled my hips and rose above me
I knew I had no choice but
to submit to touch again, I knew I'd have to endure
this wish forever. The long line of your spine
looked like a scar perfectly sealed.

4.

In my dream, you were alive. You had been dead.
To prove it, your arms were cut off at the elbows.

We were in a factory basement. Someone was whispering,
A terrible, terrible accident. You showed me your bandages.
Then you told me: *I'm ready to go home now. Home,*

I thought. *Where was home?* Only later did I realize you'd been
through fire. The next morning when I dressed for work,
that is, I saw the silver vase that holds your ashes,
and I realized you had no body, no body at all;
you were less than even the word *body*.
Sleeping, I had believed you were a ghost, maybe—

Ghost of a chance. I still loved you.
Then why in the dream did I leave you? And why did I say
I would never go back--not ever--to the room where you sat
touching yourself with your bandaged arms? *Touch me,*
you pleaded. But you were not restored. You would never be whole.

5.

And you. God, if you were to speak to me now
through his body --his reckless body; his tender, feathered
body; his fragile body that even in its dying sometimes
seemed newborn, so compassionate and astonishing...

Or through that other body, the body I saw in the street.
trousers down around its shit-smeared ass, flies
swarming over; bleeding, half-conscious body; Christ's body
--if Christ were old, and despicable...

Here, let me hold your body against this clean white linen;

here, let me hold your body against myself, a stranger's body
I might one night have drunkenly borne
--your come on my chest, my mouth. Dear God,

in your dearness, what were you but each night's longing
shaped by a stranger's touch? And what was I
but the agent of that longing cast to earth
so I could fend for us both? Was it your sin if you felt unloved?

Here, let me comb your hair before you die...

Here, press your body to this white sheet, the miraculous imprint...

What was it men used to tell me?

Sure, I'll call you. Leave your number on the dresser.

*I read somewhere, a friend said, that in the old days
the saints actually prayed for wounds. Can you imagine
actually praying to have wounds?*

Yes, I imagined myself saying. *I can imagine praying for wounds.*
Of course I was tired. Of course I wanted to get home.
Like many others, I was trying to hail a taxi.

When you were dying a woman came to your room.
I couldn't tell if she was the janitor or the chaplain. She said
there was a miracle occurring among us at that very moment.

*In this lime green room? I thought.
In this lime green room? How perfectly horrible.*

She straightened the pillows. She built a pyramid
from the miniature juice cans you'd left on your windowsill.
I thought, *So this is what one does to prepare /or a miracle.*

On the door to your room a discreet white sign warned:
Caution. Bodily fluids.

(You whispered: "Long I was hugg'd close--long and long.")

In *The New York Times* surgeons were daily discussing their fears
of bodily fluids:

*"Every so often you take off your gloves and your fingers are
covered with blood."*

*"I can't count how many times my arms were covered with blood.
I can't count how many pairs of shoes and socks I soaked and ruined."*

When the hospital therapist asked me what was the matter
I told him my heart had broken. He placed his hands on my chest.
He said, "Now I'm going to press down harder."

That final glorious spring Saturday. You said,
Let's take a walk around the neighborhood and see who's dying.

On your wrist an infant's blue plastic bracelet warned:
Caution. Bodily fluids.

("Long I was hugg'd close--long and long.")

Late that night, on the way home from the hospital,
I stopped for a Coke at a 7-11 where there was a robbery in progress.
Three boys were filling a paper bag with cash
and powdered donuts. *Your money or your life,*

they were joking with the customers, who wouldn't budge from line.
Evidently the customers were people who'd all been robbed before.

-All but the one who was hiding by the freezer case, that is, the one who
was crying. The customers were yelling at him: *Shut up!*

Can't you see you're scaring us to death? Really,
he was frightful, with KS lesions on his face, and his hair
mostly fallen out. *I refuse to die,*
he was crying. *I refuse to die in this 7-11.*

Once, sitting in your hospital room, I told you
I had wanted a man to touch me
in a way that would feel like "forever."

It wasn't that I didn't die trying, you said.

You, come here. Sit beside me. I'm not that unhappy.
After all, not even a touch of faith lasts forever.
And, after all, it's true that what life gave me sometimes proved
enough: its simple, loving,

courteous touch --which could have been yours,
or a stranger's, or even the masseur's
as he pressed his hands between my shoulder blades
and whispered *Breathe,*
Breathe deeply,
Why do you keep forgetting to breathe?