

Loving What Doesn't Last

AN ADORATION OF THE BODY

Christina Kukuk



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For my mother, my first teacher
For my Beloved
For our children most of all



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Prologue

Sometimes I blame being raised by a surgical nurse for my adoration of the body. Each time a new edition of the *AORN Journal* (“The Official Voice of Perioperative Nursing”) arrived at our house, my teenage self studied the before and the after. Before, sometimes the skin bore marks of surgical ink. “Cut along the dotted line.” After, the tissue might pucker with stitches or staples, but it clearly claimed its way back to being made whole. I could flip through those journals for hours, fascinated by the human body: its wounds, its diseases, its ability to stretch, to open, and to mend.

Developing human embryos all have the same genitals until the sixth week of gestation, when genetics and hormones begin organizing all the parts into differing configurations we classify as male and female, sometimes imperfectly.

The human liver is the only organ that can regenerate. Because it can grow more of itself, we can lose a lot of it and still survive.

When our bodies finally shut down, the cells of the retina, I have learned, are some of the first to die. We lose the ability to hear last, which is why we keep talking to the unconscious and the comatose.

Why in the name of anything approaching holy does this matter?
Do our bodies matter?

For a couple millennia, some of the loudest and most powerful voices said no—or, at the very least, they insisted that these bodies are shells we work to leave behind, like an earthly chrysalis broken open by a butterfly soul flying off to heaven or dead skin rubbed off after a sunburn to reveal tender pink and brand new epidermis beneath. The body was seen as a means to a spiritual end instead of the very habitation of the holy. My own religious tradition, entangled with Western colonialism and white superiority, remains exceptionally guilty of such a view. The apostle Paul did not start the denigration, but he illustrated it as well as any. As an earnest preacher grasping

for metaphors in a world built on dualism, he saw the body as sin and death, and the spirit as life and righteousness.

“Wretched man that I am!” Paul wrote, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Some days, I can relate.

Human bodies have gotten no easier to live in since Paul first wrote. For all their assistance, advances in medical technology have made managing our bodies more fraught and complicated with each generation.

Paul and I share the same line of work and some of the same theology, but in a world where every woman is grappling with the gendered violence carried in her muscle memory, where our school-age children are taught to recognize their amygdala response on the playground, where everyone who works with people is retraining themselves to recognize adverse childhood experiences and the lasting trauma they write into growing brains, some part of our message that “the Word became flesh and lived among us” begs for reclamation.

One day, I rested my hands on the top of my thighs and felt in that simple act of self-compassion two severed halves of me were being made whole. With my body and not with my intellect, I comprehended in that moment that all the theology that had fed the dualism and division between body and spirit, though dressed in religion, was anything but holy.

We are only matter, in the cosmic sense. Bodies birth other human bodies to life through blood. We eat and bathe, embrace and ache, expire—eventually—and the dust of our bones washes away into the water table.

But as our particular story goes, into the dust of the ground the Holy One blows the breath of life. And the human comes to life. In a body.

I: BIRTH

Bearing from Before to After

The last time I saw Jane's face, her forehead and cheekbones bore bruises from the bloody eruption in her brain, sores flared in her nose where the feeding tube had been threaded through, and her lips peeled away in cracked, papery flakes. Those wounds did not unnerve me. Her eyes did. When she saw me, recognition flashed through them, then memory (I supposed) of what my presence meant or could mean.

I tried to smile, to reassure, to pray, and to bless. But I couldn't take away the fear.

And who could blame her? I had buried her husband not six weeks before, closing long years of days darkened by a tumor. She had stood near me, weeping, as I blessed and anointed his body, wasted but still animated by circulating blood.

Now she was the one in the hospital bed.

We had been told she was on the mend, so I joked, "These are prayers of thanks and healing, not last rites." She tried to laugh as I smeared the suspicious oil above her brow.

But the face my thumb touched is gone now. Gone within days, leaving behind a stupidly insufficient string of adjectives: extinguished, passed on, snuffed, stolen.

Our bodies green and bloat so quickly. We are fruit with a limited shelf life. Her face so quickly taking on the shade of a bruised Bartlett pear, her eyes closed to light. Perishable. That a religion would claim God chose to get all wrapped up in this thin skin still shocks and surprises. "He was God, and then became man," wrote Athanasius of Alexandria, "and that to deify us."¹ To claim this should make all the difference in how we live and die in these bodies.

1. Athanasius, "Four Discourses against the Arians," Discourse I, Ch. XI, Par. 39, trans. Archibald Robertson, NPNF2-04 (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 329, retrieved June 1, 2021, from Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

I have a groupie's affection for funeral directors. I admit it. After countless hours in a hearse, killing time picking the brains of morticians, my admiration for the care and compassion the good ones give only grows. I marvel at their work with corpses. The technical skill. The surgeon's precision. I file away the equally heroic and uncomfortable facts of organ donation. For example, tissue recovery technicians always replace organic material with some synthetic approximation. But the human circulatory system is a closed circuit, difficult to seal once opened. In a town where embalmed, open-casket viewings are the norm, the devil could live in these details—and really spook a family without the tactful intervention of a good funeral home.

In five and a half years of pastoring in one church, I performed a funeral almost every month. Each forehead, each hand, began to feel unbearably precious. I wondered if I could trace the origin of that reverence to my surreptitious study of surgical magazines as a thirteen-year-old. Poring over them, I grasped with a kind of ignorance some sense of the words I've since prayed from a fraying book most Wednesdays for a decade:

O God of heaven, you have made your home on earth
in the broken body of Creation.
Kindle within me
a love for you in all things.²

A dead body differs so much from a living one. Even an almost-dead, rasping carcass, the kind whose flesh seems to jump the gun on its disintegrating job days, weeks, or months before the heart stops. Even these bodies live, often stubbornly so.

Miriam's yellow wax-bean face, propped up with a towel by the hospice nurse until her two daughters could get there, and her father's face, propped in almost the same pose a few weeks later in a room just across the hall, both differed from the not-yet-dead. They were alive. And then, in what felt like moments, they were not.

2. J. Philip Newell, *Celtic Prayers from Iona* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997), 44.

A person can bear to care for the body on one side of the Great Divide or the other, and even rejoice in the work, but I may never grow used to shouldering a body as it crosses from before to after. No dotted line of surgical marker directs the way to fixing this.

“For we too are [children] and gods by grace,” another powerful church man of Alexandria once wrote, “and we have surely been brought to this wonderful and supernatural dignity since we have the Only Begotten Word of God dwelling within us.”³ I weigh the arm or hand or head I chance to cradle in my own perishable palm, and I can only pray.

3. Cyril of Alexandria, “On the Unity of Christ,” trans. John McGuckin (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995), 80.

Body Count: Mary Had a Baby

It's just baby toes. One December, I find myself gazing at a blurry black and white photograph of an infant's feet and guessing that I'm supposed to feel warm and fuzzy. At the sight of those little piggies, I am expected to slip into baby talk, gushing over chubby toesie woesies. It is December, when dimpled babies kill Christmas with cuteness. I'm supposed to caption this photo for a writing assignment.

I check myself: What do I really feel?

Progressive Christian folks avoid focusing too much on the baby at Christmas. It's not just kind consideration for the bereaved parents or those who are unwillingly childless. You could make a solid case that Christmas is more about the end of the world—as we know it—than it is about the little squirt who soiled those swaddling clothes. The sparse infancy stories in our Bibles make a pretty pathetic baby album for Jesus.

Then there are mothers like me who look at that photo of baby feet and think not, “How shall we receive the Christ child this year?” but rather, “Have they digitally altered that kid's toenails, or are my infants the only ones who came out with gnarly talons?” Caring for actual infants 24-7 stretches nativity sentimentality beyond credibility. Whoever wrote that “little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes” was not a parent. Babies are loud. And they stink. One may nuzzle your neck sweetly and a second later regurgitate their sour milk vomit into the open neckline of your shirt, down into your bra, and right between your breasts. For these reasons and others, I don't focus much on the baby either.

Except one year, when singing “Mary Had a Baby” felt like proclaiming a revolution.

It was 2013, the year three transgender women were murdered in Cleveland.

The day the first story broke, I cried and couldn't focus on work. The early edition of the newspaper for the western suburbs included a description crude enough to make any mother howl. Cemia "CeCe" Dove, twenty years old, had been stabbed forty times; her body was discovered in a retention pond where it had been submerged, tied to a concrete block. Something was wrong with the way the body was described, more as an object than someone's child. A violence committed again in print. She was twice dehumanized. It was not only her body that got mangled. Initially, the police and the newspaper mangled her story, too.¹

I sat at my dining table and started to sob. Why did it hit me so viscerally? Was it only that I felt the vulnerability of my children, one toddling and one bright-eyed and loving every minute of preschool? Or was it because one of my first and dearest colleagues in ministry was a wise, thoughtful trans man with a deep faith in Jesus? Later that year, a month after a jury sentenced CeCe's murderer to life in prison, people gathered to grieve and speak out for two more murdered trans women, Brittany and Betty.

My body is a white body, my skin a peachy-pink. My flesh is more protected than CeCe's, even from birth, and is almost never compared to food or drink in print. People describe my people's skin as white, like snow or wool. Elemental, not edible. Even after an enviable trip to the Caribbean or the Keys, we are "bronzed," not caramel or coffee or chocolate. And Baby Jesus? Well, for centuries, colonizing Christianity, the faith that shaped my childhood, depicted the infant holy only as a golden-haired and blue-eyed white child.

1. Michael Sangiacomo, "Concrete Block on Body Found in Olmsted Pond," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 20, 2013, https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2013/04/body_found_in_olmsted_pond_sta.html. Print edition received in the western suburbs differed slightly from later edition published online. Again in John Caniglia, "Oddly Dressed Body Found in Olmsted Township Pond Identified," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, April 29, 2013, https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2013/04/body_of_oddly_dressed_man_foun.html. See also Rachel Dissell, "Andrey Bridges Sentenced to Life in Prison in Stabbing Death of Transgender Woman," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, November 13, 2013, https://www.cleveland.com/court-justice/2013/11/andrey_bridges_sentenced_to_li.html, and Regina Garcia Cano, "Cleveland Police: Recent Slayings of Transgender Women Are 'Crimes of Hate,'" *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, December 15, 2013, www.cleveland.com/metro/2013/12/cleveland_police_recent_slayin.html.

It's popular in my new neck of the woods to divide the divine from the human in Jesus, to embrace the guy but not the God. I get it. I really do. Half of Jesus's real-life followers wouldn't have called him "God." Despite centuries of clerics decrying such Docetism as heresy, I can't blame a rational human for finding the "fully God and fully human" claim hard to swallow. If, for the ancients, the offense was God becoming human, our contemporary intelligence gets insulted by a human becoming God. Or at least only one man becoming God.

Yet I wonder how much more reverently we would treat the skin, hands, feet, faces, limbs, and wombs of Brown bodies if we really believed God inhabited one for a lifetime. The usual way we glorify the ending of that life—in brutal torture—misplaces the glory for me. It is tragedy, not triumph, writing large across history the inability of individuals and empires to honor the divine in the body of a little Brown boy resisting occupation. The glory is that God is in that body going where we fear so we don't have to be afraid.

A short time after the murders of these three trans women, twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was killed by police in the same part of Ohio. Because the playground where police killed Tamir sat just a few blocks from my friends' house, and because Tamir looked like he could have been our neighbor or my kids' schoolmate, I marched in protest for the first time: to police precincts during the day, hanging on the periphery of the federal building steps for a rally; at night through downtown singing "Carols for Justice," adapting lyrics to sing "O Little Town of Ferguson" and "Away in Ohio" and the Jewish song "Rock of Ages."

It was not the first public outcry over Cleveland police abuse of a Black body. In 2012, thirteen police officers fired 137 bullets at Malissa Williams and Timothy Russell through the windshield of their car in a middle school parking lot. Though police claimed they chased the car at high speeds because they thought they heard a gunshot, there was no gun in the car. Williams and Russell had been residents at homeless shelters in the city. Police tried to pull over their car because it was spotted in a place known for drug deals, despite no traffic violations and nothing coming up on the license

plate scanner. Because the driver fled instead, their lives ended in a shower of bullets. One hundred and thirty-seven bullets. Six officers were eventually fired for dereliction of duty, for chasing a car at high speeds despite any threat of violence from its occupants. The city eventually settled with the families for \$3 million.

But in 2014 it was a child named Tamir.

In Cleveland, the senses have many places to escape trauma. At least for a little while. A truly great lake, rivers, and nature preserves, along with world-class museums built by steel and rubber barons a century earlier, are frequent day-off escapes. The Museum of Natural History, chock full of children, was where I tried to recalibrate after too late a night following activist friends on social media. But everywhere I moved, I felt the whiteness of my skin, my white mother-ness, the relative skin safety of my white son, whom I sent into one bathroom while I spun into the other to discover only my white self and one Black mother. I battled the urge to say something, anything. What would I say? "I'm sorry." "Can I help?"

I did not say anything. I do think I offered an empathetic smile. In the cavity of my chest, my heart ached, and I felt the individual cells of the skin on my forearms, hands, and face as if whiteness had singed each one. I wondered if the other woman trying to wash her hands, unbothered by my earnest aura, felt anything similar yet different.

The author Thandeka calls the ache of my cells trauma—the trauma left behind by “learning to be white.” In her book by that title she proposes that there is a moment in the childhood of every Euro-American when they are “inducted” into whiteness, an initiation instigated and maintained by shame.² Assigned to me in a seminary course, I peppered the pages of that book with blue pen marks of both incredulity and conviction. My questions and exclamations deepened in the years that followed with each new hashtag and its aftermath. As I wrestled to understand how the holy might make a

2. Thandeka, *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

home in this body of mine, I had to wrestle, too, with the ways this white body related to Black and Brown bodies, our transcontinental muscle memories, and all the places past and present these bodies intersected in dances of power and violence. I will never ever fully understand what it was like for that Black mother to walk through the Museum of Natural History that day carrying the particular generational trauma of anti-Blackness.

Those were the years I started to sing Odetta's "Mary had a baby . . ." with desperate gusto. I sang not to debate the scientific improbability or the creedal value of a virgin birth. I know why that bit makes a good story. And I don't need other people to believe in the Incarnation—the technical term for God becoming human. I don't even need the members of my faith community to believe it. But I will tell you it's what keeps me following Jesus: There was a man with a body in whom other people met God. The wholly divine became a child of ordinary human beings so that ordinary human beings might become children of God. God took on flesh first in the womb of a woman. Mary had a baby so that here, in my body, I can be holy now—not just after I'm rid of it.

Emmanuel's coming made CeCe's and Betty's and Brittany's and Tamir's flesh sacred long before it was bruised and cut and pierced. I sang "Mary Had a Baby" to insist that and to pray that many more of us would live as the children of God we were born to be—and count every body as holy.

Perhaps that holiness is easier to believe when gazing at an infant. Vincent van Gogh painted the baby Marcelle Roulin three times by herself and twice on her mother's lap in 1888, explaining, "A newborn baby has the infinite in its eyes."³

Every body counts: the baby bodies with kissable toes and stinky heads. The elderly bodies we must wipe clean. The saggy bodies with rolls and dimples. The bony bodies with sharp angles and thin skin. The bodies subconsciously coded "dangerous" for no other reason

3. *Van Gogh Repetitions* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 2014), published by Yale University Press in association with the Cleveland Museum of Art and The Phillips Collection in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organized by and presented at the Cleveland Museum of Art, March 2, 2014–June 1, 2014.

than their pigmentation. The bodies that emerge from a womb to be assigned gender and identity vastly different than their owners know themselves to be. The bodies that discover in middle age childhood wounds that left scars more than skin deep.

Mary had a baby. And every body counts.