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13 Ways of Looking at the Body

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13 Ways of Looking at the Body

Cover Page Footnote

A first draft of this work was generated as part of Rex Veeder's Survive and Thrive Writing Workshop.

Poetry

13 Ways of Looking at the Body

David E. Beard

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1.

His skin was yellow with jaundice, a symptom of the pancreatic cancer. His hair was flat and matted from his refusal to wash it, already resembling the hair my grandmother would comb, one last time, before the casket was closed. I looked at him, and I no longer saw my grandfather.

2.

The base of the tibia cracked as I fell. For a week I walked on it, thinking it was a sprain. I had no idea what a broken bone felt like. I don't know that I've ever really known pain.

3.

I shivered as her fingers touched my belly, reaching under the tails of my shirt as we lay in bed together. "Would you like to take this off?" she asked, pushing her fingers higher. I would never have asked; that she knew to ask me made me fall in love.

4.

My mother told me that her nipple pointed inward before she finally went to the doctor. Even as I shook, upset that she waited so long to seek help, I wasn't sure I wouldn't have done the same.

5.

Just after 2am, I parked along Stoney Point, about ten miles outside the city and its halo of light pollution. I turned off the car and rolled down the windows, letting the cool air in. It was so very dark, I could not see the lake twenty feet to my right, nor the road ahead. Without sight, only I knew the water was there by the sound of the waves reaching my ears and the spray reaching across the darkness.

6.

Standing in the hallway, outside her apartment on Wisconsin Avenue, talking about writing, she began to rub her lower back against the doorjamb. I reached out my hand and scratched her back and hoped, or knew, or hoped, or knew, that I would kiss her.

7.

I was eleven when the police came. The back door to our duplex had been left open, and my mother went upstairs to check on our neighbor, who was an organist at our Catholic parish. The man who strangled him didn't bother to close the door behind him as he left. The brutality of the murder

required a closed casket, though at the time, I didn't understand why. I thought that it was the fact that he had been murdered that kept me from seeing him: murder meant you didn't get to say goodbye. Which, I suppose, was true, but for different reasons than my eleven year old self understood.

8.

I have cried four times about still-living people in my adult life. Once from fear, when I learned my mother was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer. Once when I realized that my wife was moving out. Once when I realized that my wife would not come back. And once when I realized that the woman I fell in love with had fallen out of love with me.

On the other hand, I have cried more than a dozen times to the season four finale of my favorite British science fiction TV show. The music rises, my eyes quiver, tears form, a howl rises from the ache in the back of my throat, and my heart empties feelings it has stored for weeks, months, years, a lifetime.

9.

She whispered in my ear. It didn't matter what she said, so long as I felt the warmth of her breath.

10.

The first night I slept with a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure device), I lay so still, so very very still. I wasn't sure I'd ever really slept before, in my life.

11.

For the summer between high school and college, I stayed in their home. She had had a stroke and was unable to move one side of her body. She wanted to believe that she could compensate, so she kept some of the small routines -- watching her favorite TV shows, reading the newspaper. He had Parkinsons and was unable to walk or to use "normal" silverware or the phone, no matter how big the dial buttons were. About three years earlier, the tremors had taken away his ability to do search-a-word puzzles. About a year ago, they took away his ability to stand unaided; his insurance secured a power lift chair. In about six months, it will take away his ability to swallow, and he will die. The paramedics will clear his airway to administer CPR, and they will see it choked on the food his daughter prepared for him for breakfast.

But this morning, half a year before his death, I sat across them, feeding them their breakfast of stewed prunes (using a soup spoon for him and a teaspoon for her). Neither of them could chew easily: She could not, because of the stroke, though she would recover that ability over time. He could not, because the Parkinsons had burrowed even into the muscles in his jaw, forcing tremors that were a mockery of chewing.

Neither of them wanted to be with *me* in this way. (When I was a child, they cared for me.)

Neither of them wanted to be with *each other* in this way .

Every night, after their dentures had been removed and her wig had been removed and I lifted his legs into bed, she leaned toward him and they kissed each other. Nothing could stop that.

12.

The sound of the bar was deafening. I couldn't think, and I don't think she wanted me to be able to. She had decided that our relationship was over, and the noise ensured that there was no discussion.

13.

It was evening all afternoon. It was snowing and it was going to snow. The snow created silence. Silence is the loudest sound in the world, to me.