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Transcending the Body Politic

Katherine Wise

Ohio State University College of Law

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TRANSCENDING THE BODY POLITIC

I.

Teri Mae, I am thinking
about your chili and cornbread,
about standing beside you
in the kitchen, chopping vegetables.

I am good at the menial tasks,
and onions don't make me cry.

You stand over the simmering pot
adding spices
fervently enhancing, revising.
You pass me the wooden spoon
to taste
and I share your satisfaction
your pleasure.

This is a combined effort,
equally risked, equally shared,
although I provide the substance
and you devise the flavor.

In your poetry you talk about food
and the female body
about the culturally feminine process of cooking
about wanting to reclaim food
your body
to achieve transcendence through it
instead of always trying
to transcend it.

We are both obsessed with food
with this need to ingest
this fear of ingesting
both needing
consuming this world around us

wanting to take it all in
 to be taken in
 digested
 to be made sense of
 to be made use of
 not used
 to make sense of
 to make use of
 not to use.

Teri Mae, I love you
 your garlic hands the sweetcorn yellow streaks in your hair
 your runner's calves
 the way peppercorns and feta cheese
 excite you

II.

I believe the sexiest part
 of a woman's body is
 her upper arms
 the curves of deltoids, biceps
 a strength I associate
 with carrying water
 stones
 children
 a guitar
 Tracy Chapman
 has the sexiest arms
 of any woman I have
 ever seen.

III.

Amy is a dancer
 she has pale arms
 long black hair beaded braided
 a tiny nose freckles

size three Converse
and purple overalls

she choreographed a piece with Nikki

I saw
see it

there is laughter screaming outside
Amy Nikki run in run round the audience
girls playing tag
girls playing
Amy stops
hands in her mouth
sucking fingers biting nails
not knowing what to do with her body
her energy
 reminding me
 for a minute
 of my younger sister
 also Amy
 who walked into doorways counters for months
 not recognizing her new size
 who stopped dancing
 stopped dancing
 because she was
 too big
this Amy can't stop dancing
can't stop moving

this Amy

my first love
who I met dancing in white
outside in the August heat
as I sat on the porch steps watching
as I watch now
this woman with her body always moving
knowing her body every muscle every ligament.
so free to move

so free to invent movement
 sexuality
 everything I am afraid of
 hating my body
 its restrictions
 its inaccurate representation of me
 and I watch her now
 running
 running in circles
 running in circles around the room

*what are you running from
 what are you running from*

she stops breathless
 grabs the back of a chair
 but doesn't sit down
 standing breathing deep
 she says

*I refuse to participate in the cultural dialogue of thinness
 I refuse to participate in the cultural dialogue of thinness*

this woman
 powerful
 strong upper arms
 clenches both hands in a fist
 swings both arms downward in a violent arc

I refuse to participate in the cultural dialogue of thinness

(background laughter. Nikki: *are you doing this for shock value?
 what are you so afraid of? 'fraid of?')*

violent downward arc
 this woman
 powerful
 strong upper arms
 says

*I stopped menstruating for two years and I was proud
I weighed eighty-five pounds and I was proud
my hipbones protruded like holsters and
I was proud*

violent downward arc

I am gripping the sides of my chair
to keep from taking her in my arms
in my arms
which are neither thin nor muscular
but mine.

IV.

It has been said that eating disorders
are like hunger strikes
for injustices that cannot be articulated

Eating disorders are a way to prevent growth
to restrain breasts hips thighs buttocks
to reduce fat cells which contain hormones
to stop the bleeding

we are afraid of being women
afraid of taking up more than our allotted space
afraid of accepting
expanding
our selves.

John Gorka sings
clear voice acoustic guitar

*He was always
a likable guy
The women passed under him
as if
he could fly
The women passed under him*

*as if
he could fly*

women passing underneath
grounded by the knowledge
of their weight
grounded by the fear
of their weight

*I'm too heavy
I'm too heavy*

more afraid of crushing
than of being crushed.

V.

Brian wants to discuss the politics of identity.

we invariably discuss the politics of identity
personal politics
body politics
the sexual is personal and the personal is political
and the political is inevitable

I wear pigtails
I wear pigtails and I don't shave my leg hair
I shave my armpits about once a week
and my pubic hair when I go swimming (rarely, although
I love the water)
I don't bleach my facial hair
I have scars from picked scabs
acne, I wear my hair long and thick
my one major concession to non-comfort
to invisibility

Brian dislikes leg hair (aside from his own)
says I have fallen victim to the radical rhetoric

I want to know why I always have to be the victim

I want to know why Brian dislikes fat
(aside from his own) he calls it unhealthy

he read an essay called *Letter to the World From a Fat Woman*
written by a woman claiming her title
her body her life and he has the audacity
to mention feminism and something about
fulfilling stereotypes
self discipline
personal hygiene (!?)

I know what the real problem is
and he knows I know but he won't say it

he won't say it

he wants me to say it for him
so that he can get mad at me
take the blame off of himself

I refuse I refuse I will not take the blame
I will not make it easy for him
he is running and he is afraid and he
does not want to participate in
weighty dialogue
but I am going nowhere
running nowhere
I am waiting

finally he says
*I feel like I'm supposed to be
sexually attracted to this woman,
to fat women*

I want to say what on earth
makes you think that this woman wants
you she simply wants your
non-judgment I mean you can't be

sexually attracted to *everyone*
 you just have to question
 which choices are yours
 and which are being made for you
 in which case your options are being limited
 in which case you have to
 change your vision or at least
 place the blame properly
 on society or yourself your weakness
 but do not do not blame the other do not blame
 the other
 or you have lost

VI.

I have tried to make myself smaller
 to shrink
 pull my stomach in
 speak softly
 less
 about heavy things
 more about clouds
 helium
 to be insubstantial
 unintimidating

but I am not able
 to deny the knowledge
 of my own weight.

VII.

A boyfriend in high school
 cooked me dinner once
 his mother supervised
 bought the flowers for the table
 told him that he was putting
 too much on my plate because
girls eat differently

sample or helping
sample or helping
give me a taste
then let me fill
my own plate.

*Katherine Wise**

* Katherine Wise is the Coordinator of the Feminist Law Caucus and a student at the Ohio State University College of Law.

