

# The Lyric Body in Emma Lou Thayne's *Things Happen*

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Mine is no callous shell,  
I have instant conductors all over me whether I pass or stop,  
They seize every object and lead it harmlessly through me.  
I merely stir, press, feel with my fingers, and am happy,  
To touch my person to some one else's is about as much as I  
can stand.

—Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"<sup>1</sup>

Beauty is momentary in the mind—  
The fitful tracing of a portal;  
But in the flesh it is immortal.

—Stevens, "Peter Quince at the Clavier"<sup>2</sup>

THE EPIGRAPH TO EMMA LOU THAYNE'S BOOK *Things Happen*<sup>3</sup> from Alice Walker reads: "One wants to write poetry that is understood by one's people." In the same spirit, I want to write to my people about a poet, one of our own, whose poems I believe stand among the finest. Some of these poems I read when they were published ten or more years ago; one, "Love Song at the End of Summer," has stayed with me all those intervening years, shaping both my readerly and writerly consciousness with its heartbreaking grace. In order to address what I take to be a crucial ontological issue in lyric poetry, Emma Lou Thayne's in particular, I want to set up a rubric, and to do that I need to talk about my own studies of, and concerns about, the lyric.

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1. Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," in *Poetry and Prose* (New York: The Library of America, 1982), 27.

2. Wallace Stevens, "Peter Quince at the Clavier," in *Collected Poetry & Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 74.

3. Emma Lou Thayne, *Things Happen: Poems of Survival* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991).

I have been studying a very long poem, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, by James Merrill, a contemporary American poet. The poem details the encounter of a late twentieth-century consciousness with a world other than this one. Merrill's sensibility as a poet is pronouncedly lyrical: most of his poems prior to this one, and since it, are lovely and highly wrought, and decidedly short, lyric poems which limn the characteristic subjects of the lyrist—"love and loss," in the words of one of the inhabitants of the long poem's other world. Merrill's poem struggles not only with how to believe the unbelievable, the insistent intrusion of another world into this one, but also with how to express it—how to employ the lyric gift in the service of an unwieldy and mysterious narrative. In some ways, this struggle becomes a meta-discourse on how to fit the human into the domineering narrative of the divine; and what I find is that for a lyrical sensibility like Merrill's, one solution is to give the human its own insistence, to raise up again and again the figures of the human as a kind of caduceus, to ward off the blinding power of the divine. The otherworldly narrative that invades the lovely world, the this-world, of the lyrist, seems in this long poem to threaten to abolish it at every turn. Thus, one of the things that might be lost in Merrill's poem is the very world he loves, the world that those in the other world also want, paradoxically, to save.

The world that Emma Lou Thayne's poems inhabit is not troubled or threatened by the encroachment of the divine, but it is troubled, as are all lyric poets, by the encroachments of time, decay, and death. The very things the singer celebrates are shadowed by their own ghosts: loveliness by bleakness, abundance by scarcity, flourishing by decay, the sentient body by its failure. The nearness of the ghostly to our loved presences is often so close to consciousness that we cannot bear it; so we make tropes to save this world. Commonly, we abandon this world, this beauty, for another that seems more durable—a spiritual world that trounces the angels of death hovering so near. One consequence of this trope is that the voice of the singer, then, can take us only so far and then no farther: if the spiritual world becomes the ground of all lyrical metaphor, the voice of the singer may lose its earthly force. Think, for example, of the plaintive wishing of Yeats's singer in "Sailing to Byzantium" in hoping for an extra-natural state from which to sing:

Once out of nature I shall never take  
 My bodily form from any natural thing,  
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
 Of hammered gold and gold enameling  
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake. . . .<sup>4</sup>

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4. William Butler Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," in *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan Press, n.d.), 193.

Inherent in this dream of a body no longer in nature is the loss of the human. And a singer that is not human has no song to speak to this world. What Yeats here subtly reminds us, and what many great lyric poets do as well, is that for poetry we have no other world than this one; and the song the poet sings is drawn from actual breath taken into an actual body.

The seduction of a spiritual world in which nothing dies, nor decays, nor falls apart, is powerful for us who love this world, this body, this flesh; we long to redeem what we love from the forces of time and death, to ward off what will, finally, dismantle us. I have said this is an ontological issue in lyric poetry, because in many ways, the figural efforts of poetry are made in order to save the lyric world from extinction, from not-being; therefore, the types of tropes and our readings of them are most profoundly about lyric poetry's being. It is an epistemological effort as well: if the consciousness of the lyricist is purely consciousness, it more easily turns into spirit, a saving of the transient matter of this world by capturing its ideal, non-material, state. If we know in poetry by the mind alone, we turn more easily, of necessity, to an other world. But the lyric poets always remind us of their one truth: that the body in poetry can only be redeemed by raising it, as itself, as a fleshly body, again and again as the figure and ground of our love and loss. This seems to me the profound truth in any theorizing of lyric poetry. It seems to me true as well of the poems in *Things Happen*, where the poems save the body, which saving simultaneously saves the body of the poem as well—its participation and being in this world. This is part of what moves me about them, what makes me want to return to them, what makes them great poems.

You can see what I'm talking about in the first poem in the volume, "Planting Wildflowers in September at the Cabin." As read in its entirety, the poem enacts the perpetual lyric drama of redeeming the body into the body itself:

Easy, say directions on the can:  
Scatter, rake, or stomp in gently,  
spray/sprinkle till damp, not wet.

The moist seeds, webbed in the floss  
of each other's company, buried alive,  
come out with my fingers  
winged, Gypsy-ready for somewhere new.  
Shaggy, hung with their own marsh  
and mountains, they cling to my fingers,  
scatter like kisses on the brown hillside.

I rake them in, say,  
Live here, tantalize spring.

In winter dreams  
 I will return again and again,  
 My palms wet with you,  
 my nails sprouting your musky scent.

And flowers, surely flowers,  
 wild as Gention and Indian Paint Brush,  
 will grow from my fingertips,  
 silky bouquets to touch across my face.  
 And I will rise with them  
 no matter where I am.<sup>5</sup>

A reader of this poem will certainly hear, gently but insistently, the trope of the resurrection in the final lines: the speaker rising with the flowers, "wherever I am," in the many destinies of a human singer, the wherevers that may, in truth, be the nowhere of death. One senses here, implicit in the tradition of such tropes, a turning away from this world, a rising above and beyond; rising into transcendence. But the world is ever the poet's lover: it lives in and through and upon her body, growing from her fingertips as if she were the earth itself. It is the weird engendering made possible by the bodily being of the poem: the speaker plants the seeds in a piece of beloved ground, then blesses them with her utterance: "Live here, tantalize spring." The poem itself tantalizes eternity, tempts it to come near, beckons it to turn our attention, in the dream-space allowed by lyric, to another world, where we may rise. But we do not rise: instead, we stay in the dream-space, where the body of the poet does not decay or waste. The poem raises up, in the traditional topos of transcendence, of resurrection, a body leafy and floral, a body magically, for the space of the lyric dream, both world and lover of the world. The body raised up in the poem is not a transcendent one, but a body rising with and through flowers.

I read this poem at length to give an example of the phenomenon I spoke of in my introduction: the body raised up as figure and ground of love. And there are plenty of poems in this book that enact the same gesture, patiently or not so patiently, turning our attention back to this world, to the bodily force of the lyric space we are in as we read. Take, for instance, the poem "Margaret at 94 Refuses a Retirement Center." Margaret speaks to us as a consciousness; but she does not allow her wasting flesh to fade from our attention nor let us forget that her voice speaks with breath drawn into lungs within ribs:

Vintage now, under the birthdays and loose clothing  
 I am more than whispering out my time.  
 I refuse to be lost in what I have been.

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5. Thyne, 13.

With my knees bone on bone, my legs parentheses,  
 My back the curve of meeting itself,  
 I would still be a body lighted by love.<sup>6</sup>

If "Planting Wildflowers in September at the Cabin" veers dangerously near the transcendent turn, the figure of a woman at the verge of death begs for a release from the insistent reminders of the body's transience. Even here, though, the world is lover; the body is still beloved in its abjectness. She says: "God still sings in my shape though more of me / goes every day to join me later." The pathos of this body is redeemed by the figure of the divine; yet it is a specific sort of God that sings in the shape of the old woman: it is a god who takes his form from a natural thing, who does not shun but rather embraces the specific bodily shape of this woman and the longings that spring from it. Even as she imagines death, it is not a death which leaves the body behind:

Then, when an old door shuts itself  
 I will leave undemolished,  
 me, a container of secrets, set for surprise.

Few enough times in our lives we get to wake up.  
 I would wake swaying, I swear, like a sapling

enough to please the sky, my skin, and me  
 and him  
 in a fitting place  
 acquainted with the size  
 of who I am.<sup>7</sup>

Though God circulates in this poem—as singer of the shape of the body, as one who fits a place for "the size / of who I am"—it is most strikingly here as lover he appears, even in the very refusal to name him as more than a pronoun. Though death demands an account here, the poem raises up the body; "swaying . . . like a sapling, enough to please the sky, my skin, and me / and him / in a fitting place / acquainted with the size / of who I am."<sup>8</sup>

This poem raises the most potent questions. If the body may magically raise itself up in the face of absolute loss, insisting on its own force, then what of the body in pain, the body itself as the radical site of loss? This book is founded upon such an eventuality: its title reads *Things Happen: Poems of Survival*. One might add that things happen to the vulnerable body, yet the body survives. The poem of that same title refers to an accident that the speaker survives, though not without trauma:

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6. *Ibid.*, 18.

7. *Ibid.*, 20.

8. *Ibid.*

Things happen. A crash like a shot, your hand full of blood  
 From temple and eye, the split second. Speed ramming steel  
 Into your newly spent lifetime the blanks of bewildered abruption.  
 Not in on what was before you, gone the luxury of seeing, of choice.  
 From the highway, through the windshield the splatters of morning.  
 Smashed to floating that side of your face, what it held.  
 Instant the clouds, the passages saying You hear me?  
 Another place, a distant light, a flower in wind, you echoing Why?  
 Spilled questions wrenching your temple and eye to strenuous focus:  
 A dark navigable by caress and whisper. A stillness.<sup>9</sup>

While one might expect, in a poem such as this, the abolition of the old body, and in its place pure consciousness (as is the case in the poem immediately following this one in the volume, "When I Died"), what happens instead here is the phenomenon of the body's wound making the opening, the lyric space. In some sense, this poem issues from the wound, and its "new manual of how" helps us to interpret the body as locus of both pain and song. In "Margaret at 94 Refuses a Retirement Center," you remember, we are told "few enough times in our lives we get to wake up." The occasion of the wound is also the aperture through which new sight is possible. Sight is a trope for consciousness; the consciousness this poem provokes is located in the body. This is true also of the healed body figured in the poem, "You Heal," where after the "morning you woke / and everything works / and almost nothing hurts," what happens is that

. . . the heart of not  
 figuring a way back  
 just happens again  
 in the still world  
 like rain running the  
 skies and green becoming  
 the hand of the sun  
 with God standing by.<sup>10</sup>

The world and the body are redeemed. Again, God stands by, and what he does is approve, as of a new creation, of the reconstitution of the world, the body, by the process of the healing of flesh. Such consciousness, new sight, located in and through the body, is not restricted to the moment of violence. Rather, what these poems point us to, over and over, is the fact that, in the space of the lyric, all sight, all consciousness, is located specifically in the body. If we look at the longer poem, "Nirvana," we can see this most profoundly. Subtitled "Last Morning after

9. *Ibid.*, 57.

10. *Ibid.*, 60.

Time Away," the poem accounts for a state of mind that becomes talismanic for the speaker who has been away from home and family. What this speaker enacts for us is the way that everything of the mind—memory, wish, conception, idea—has a specific bodily force. It is as if the body were the only real register of acts of consciousness:

You are ready for bed without knowing  
everything in for speculation. Formalities  
take shape: kneeling sitting lowering to a pillow  
nothing yet touching off edges and ends  
trying to let go of themselves:

Perhaps you will read them to rest.  
You will know when it is time:  
You will reach for the light  
barely sink from it to remember your scalp:  
how it likes to draw back on its goods  
free its face to feel: the pillow the cheek  
the temple the jaw the ear flush with the down  
the case. . .<sup>11</sup>

The speaker registers drifting off to sleep as a series of specific bodily renderings: thoughts erupt in the head; as she drifts off, she "remembers" her "scalp." But waking up is represented in the poem as slow and precise, a kind of ritual of bodily remembrance. It is as if the poem reconstitutes the body, piece by piece, sense by sense:

Then it is morning probably not late:  
No sound has found you only dreams  
not wanting to be lost. An eye might flicker  
toward the window for a time:  
No matter. The lid is unwilling  
to part for long with what is behind it:  
the generous granter of wisps waiting for form  
liberators, informants  
characters of a language never inconceivable.

You cohabit the space that is nowhere:  
Drafts and injections spill within you:  
You are empty and full by now weightless.  
Enjoy the luxury of levitation: Nothing  
is separate: No wrist or hip has ligament muscle.

Examine the comfort of everything  
come into place: tongue to mouth palate teeth  
surfaces having found each other:

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11. *Ibid.*, 74.

legs sheets bottom the outside of  
your ribs arms shoulder what they lie on.<sup>12</sup>

What this poem gives us is the body as talisman; the flesh as magic protection against the undoings of the night.

I've saved the best of these splendid poems for last. "Love Song at the End of Summer" is a love song to the body. It enacts for us the famous mind/body split of western thought. Albert Grossman, in *Summa Lyrica*, says this of that split:

The poem is a solution to the mind-body problem in the same sense that a self is a solution to that problem. The unity of the poem, like the unity of self, being otherwise without a name, is disintegrated by discourse and restored by experience.<sup>13</sup>

As this poem is read aloud, one can see how its discourse allows for the disintegration of being, while the experience of hearing the poem restores us to the body:

It is clear now, body. Every day can be late August  
after the birth of babies, never quite cold.

But one must learn early what you are for forever.  
Good old leather tiger, half domesticated  
by paws in pans and shoulders hung too often with beaded fur,  
you may think I forget. But you do not let me.  
By now I know better. I come back.

Still, you never take me not surprised, faithful one,  
by how to arrive, and the pleasure of sweat,  
and how to shiver away the bee.  
You move to the song behind the dance.  
Even after a standard, plain white, unstriped day,  
you ripple in our sleep and wait, mostly unperplexed.

And when, no matter how faint, the music breathes  
behind the catcalls of too much to do, you muster  
almost without my inclining, potent as needing to dance,  
to pace off the house, the garden of weeds, the clogged creek,  
and the midnight clutch of vagrancies. You pad from  
some spring, and wild, except for my importuning,  
go. To do it all.

When we lie down, it will be like the squirrel there,  
unflagging in the last swift moving in the leaves,  
August stashed in crisp piles above the dust.

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12. *Ibid.*, 75.

13. Allen Grossman, "Summa Lyrica: A Primer of the Commonplaces in Speculative Poetics," *Western Humanities Review* (Spring 1990), 85.



I may find no way at all without your sleek taking.

Under the wrinkles that tell you no, I can hear you now  
saying, "I still love you," and to time, "Leave her alone."<sup>14</sup>

The very form the poem takes is a dialogue of the self—the soul?—with the body. What the powerful discursive self is constantly in danger of is forgetfulness of the body—forgetting what we must learn early—"what you are for forever." The body surprises: its force is not to speak, but to be, to take the speaker where she needs to go, whether she knows it or not. The body here is its own argument: its presence, "old leather tiger," is its own reason for being, and its own way of knowing. The self is subjugated, domesticated; but the body is wild and potent, and releases, dances, moves, with the self, even as the self is in thrall to the "catcalls of too much to do." The body is the lover of the self, and does not flag, and never fails: "When we lie down, it will be like the squirrel there, / unflagging in the last swift moving in the leaves, / August stashed in the crisp piles above the dust. / / I may find no way at all without your sleek taking." When the speaker tells us, earlier, "By now I know better. I come back," the last clause has more than the force of a return to some important, remembered thing. It is also a reappearance—"I come back." In forgetting the body the lyric self is abolished; in remembering, in returning, the lyric self may be reconstituted, may come back. It is this that is the lyric's most powerful surprise, and one that takes us over and over: that the lyric body, lifted up each time, is the lover that may ward off time and death even as we draw inexorably nearer to them:

Under the wrinkles that tell you no, I can hear you now  
saying, "I still love you," and to time, "Leave her alone."

This, finally, is what poetry is for. As Philip Levine tells us in "Making Light of It":

I can follow the day  
to the black rags and corners it will  
scatter to because someone always  
goes ahead burning the little candle  
of his breath, making light of it all.<sup>15</sup>

14. Thayne, 79-80.

15. Phillip Levine, "Making Light of It" in *New Selected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 261.