

KEHOE, KATHRYN J., M.F.A. *Body Want*. (2016)
Directed by Stuart Dishell. 40 pp.

The purpose of this study was to remove the liver, lift all three pounds of the smooth organ from our abdominal cavity, lay it out on a steel table, separate the four parts with our fingers, put our ears to the warm tissue, and palms to the chest to listen. We asked our bodies the following questions: How lonely will we be in the mouth? In the blood? In the heat? We argued that loneliness is a failure in wanting—wanting in the skin, in the muscle, in the bones. Our results were inconclusive; we found ourselves on the table shaking as struck birds.

BODY WANT

by

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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro
2016

Approved by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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Date of Acceptance by Committee

Date of Final Oral Examination

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CALLING THE DEAD HOME

At night, the man strung
cinnamon sticks in the windows.
He wanted warm winds
to carry the smell to her ghost,
the woman he loved
late in the bullet of summer.
He hung spoons and hoped
the sound of metal on metal
would remind her of how
the silverware shook
as she danced barefoot in the kitchen.
He left out bowls of honey, toast, and figs
for her to taste until gnats coated the sides.
When all this failed, he sat
on his porch, dusting
his shoes, waiting.

FIRST DESIRE

I did not collapse into nakedness;
I wrapped my mouth around a bright
burst and found our bodies.

Slice an apple down the core, we'll find a still lung,
around the center a still star: this was how I saw Eden:
all God and body without pulse.

So I took fruit abandoned after harvest, smashed
and split, the flesh as it ferments in dirt—
and became hungry.

Even now, I remember first desire
as the aftertaste of an apple,
crisp and fresh and gone.

PAULI EXCLUSION PRINCIPLE

Within the act of two people
hooking fingers, there is a field

of electrons that refuse
to occupy the same space,

the same curve
of a bay window,
the same bed,

so when I say:
I want to be closer,

I'm asking for electricity to turn off,
to fall through fields,
to touch flesh and bone.

Bodies are built for repulsion.

TO THE DADDY LONGLEGS WHO LIVES UNDER THE TUB

I haven't killed you yet,
but you're going to die
when I step out of this bath

and peel a twitching collection
of your legs from my heel.

I've noted the little webs
that shift in the night,

how your legs coil towards copper pipes
when I scoop water in your web,

or how they stutter silk from the pit
in your abdomen, urgent, hungry,

or how you scuttle at the bang
of my knees against the porcelain,

how I could swallow you,
or lift you into the water,

how we could float, naked in the tub,
how you're so less naked than me.

THE BUILDING

He leaned against the chain-link fence,
dusty and exhausted. She rested
her nose on his ear. They watched the demolition,

listened to the yawn of iron beams bending
and the collapse of brick corners crumple
as the long shovel tossed its head
on the roof of the building.

She wanted to drive off,
but he watched the slow crumble.
“What do you see?” she asked.
“I don’t know,” he said.

Maybe, it was something about glass on gravel
or how the metal framework shucked
off a load of bricks, but he couldn’t leave;
she drove away.

With glass and stones, he piled the rubble high,
he kept working even as the rocks fell,
even when the building was no longer there.

LILITH

He told her I raped men,
that I rode their hard cocks
in their sleep to get pregnant.

He told her I devoured my babies
as soon as their sticky heads crowned.
He needed to tell her something—

something so horrible she could trust
his body no longer craved mine,
that we no longer hooked fingers
to walk barefoot through Eden on hot nights.

I let him have his story
because I did the leaving;
I ate the tree alone.

He couldn't say:
I wasn't good enough,
or *She never wanted*
what I wanted, or I failed.

INDIAN HORNBILLS

They measure the width
of their wings

the way people measure
fingers palm-to-palm,

unrumpling their stories
from feathers—copulating mid-air.

Later, she searches
the trees for a hole.

With mud and shit
and sticks, he seals

her in. She waits
for her children to grow,

receiving his offerings
of insects from a small gap.

She loses all her feathers.

THE STATUE

Once there was a man who wanted nothing
more than for his beloved statue
to come to life. She stood at the center of town,
red hair carved to her feet, covering her nakedness.

Night after night, he chiseled her down.
He took her nose, her hair, her ears,
her breasts, and pressed the pieces
deep into his pockets.

He piled her body in stacks at his home
where he watched her before he slept.
As the pieces gathered, she started to reassemble:
the toes finding the feet, the hair the head.

She ran her hands along her arms,
stretched toward the ceiling.
She collected more and more
of herself, pulling a leg

into the hip, the arm to the shoulder.
until she was able to walk away.
When he woke he only saw her hair
scattered on the floor so red, so real.

BODY PAINT

The naked woman walked
into the crowd, blindfolded,
in one hand a brush, in the other paint,
she offers her body as a canvas.

They began to draw the swirl
of a snail shell on her stomach,
her thighs a cream fish belly,
her cheeks sharp and green,

like the triangular face of a mantis,
her nostrils flared black.

They etched her feet orange
as lizard scales,

the toes darkened as hooks.

Then crowd began to argue:
What should be created with her breasts?
Her shoulders? Her hands? Her hair?

MOURNING

Elephants do not shrink
from tasting their dead.

Not cannibalism,
rather, a gathering

of bare bones
to their mouths,

curling and uncurling
them in their trunks,

rolling the ribs
until they're dusted

in tight, dry grief
before returning
them to the ground.

WHEN OUR PARENTS TOLD ME YOU CRASHED ON THE HIGHWAY

I thought of how I slit your hand
between finger and thumb,
blood wrinkling your palm. We were laughing,
all panda in the playroom

until –*God*,
 Mom slapped me hard.

You returned with stitches:
Tight lines, rope ladders
compressed your grip as though
you were always offering
your hand as a cup. The scar

whitened, aged, spread to stretch the skin.
And I always thought I scratched
the distance long
between the thumb and pinky,
carved your years clean.

MALACHITE CRACKING IN SMALL DOSES OVER TIME

The silver of her melted each year
a little more into the locket of herself.

Pandas in the playroom, uncontrollable,
Playrooms of jack-in-the-box.

Forgetfully woke most every spring
In the darkrooms of memoriaum,

faded photographs, stuffed in milk cartons.

Urges to dive down wishing wells
that may or may not have been there.

Ten thousand honey suckles. Intimacy with flowers:
Sugar on the tongue. Extreme bruises as evidence.

Her single subject:
the idea that every detail of her
(the rape,
lost mother,
abandoned friend)
can be buried
by the detail of someone else's
(rape, lost mother, abandoned friend).

Early childhood: Chickenpox, near suicide;
High religious notions of "Fate."

Pink fairy for most parties, sequined wings, missing guests.

Believed despite all evidence, in sisterhood,
waited patiently for corroborating evidence of such.

Malachite cracking in small doses over time:
Always these echoes, she remembers, after leaving.

LETTER TO A PORTRAIT

You are not me, but you look like me.
That's why my parents bought you

at the yard sale. They wanted
some other version of daughter:

daughter as still life,
daughter as small child,
daughter as summer peach,
daughter as the child
they would have had
if they got to buy a daughter
who is quieter than Daughter.

You, daughter in lace,
are static as I perform
Daughter in nose ring
Daughter in purple hair,
green hair, blue hair ...

You perform daughter
when Daughter fails
to arrive for supper.

You are always
there, always six,
always ready to say
hello at the door.

STANDING IN A CORNER AT THE VET'S OFFICE

He stood in the doorway
with the animal wrapped in a blue towel,
the towel slowly seeping purple
as one eye sunk in its red socket.
Its nose never made a noise.
When the crowd parted for the man,
he offered the animal to the woman
at the desk, arms extended, but
everyone knew the gesture was
casting a fishing line
into the sky and reeling.

FORGET

I'm speaking of the verb
where the mind reaches
for a pen but pauses for a daisy—

it comes to us from the old German
and means, “to hold or grasp,”

which means that *forget*
never actually meant *forget*.

I open the bottom drawer
to run a finger over your ivory
piano key. When I bury it in the yard,
dig in the dirt until my fingers bleed,

until my hands smell of red
clay, grit under nails, I hear
your music in my ear.

BEIRUT, 1991

Captured by a man with a camera,
unfamiliar constellations
carved into a black canvas canopy.
He hopes to hold more in his lens than
the grey stone structure across the street.
He angled those punctures
to really look like stars,
like a screen pulled down over the city,
a half drawn night filled
with distant candles waiting for names.
But there is a tear in the canvas, a fracture where
the edge of the sky speaks a little louder,
and the frame always pushes the eyes back—
bullet holes,
Those are bullet holes.

IT WON'T STOP RAINING

When I'm alone
in the house, and the cat vomits
on the carpet, and the mugs
are all crusted with coffee cream,
and the house plant falls
off the window sill
to smash soil on the kitchen tile
there is nothing left to do,
but drink
the skunked beer in the fridge
on the front porch until
street lamps buzz with the electric shock
of flies dying on the bulb.

THE ENTOMOLOGIST

She spent hours watching insects,
spoke their Latin names
like lists of close friends
Diptera, Araneae, Coleoptera,

as she sketched the curve
of a hard shell,
the sheet of a wing.
And after she died,
in place of a lover's image,

we found a spider
suspended in amber
in the silver locket
around her neck.

RULES FOR SPEAKING WITH AN INDIAN GURU ON THE TELEPHONE

1. Set up a worship space

Spread a white tablecloth to the floor.
It must look clean and expensive— not like

the cardboard table it covers
that threatens to fall each time a candle

settles on the corner. Although
the guru is eighty, place two pictures

of him at twenty on the alter. The photos
should be black-and-white. He should

be shirtless, bearded, in the lotus position,
hairy, but well-groomed. Bring in

a small statue of Shiva in the female
form so as not to scare the women.

2. Be polite

When a shaven white man
rubs ashes between your eyes,
do not be alarmed.

The ashes have been shipped
from India, burned and blessed
by the Guru. Do not ask
how much ashes cost,

or suggest that the ash
comes from old newspaper
burned up in the man's fireplace
on a Monday night

because he forgot
to order the real ash
because he didn't know
where his girl went
because he couldn't stop

thinking about how his nose
fit perfectly in the curve of her ear.

1. Find a Mantra

The bottoms of our feet should not face the alter... The bottoms of our feet should not
face the alter... The bottoms of our feet should not face the alter...

2. Focus

Focus on the ashes
between the eyes. Keep the mind
from drifting to the egg
that slide from your hand that morning
to crack on the linoleum, or how later
when you went to kiss your lover
on the nape of the neck, he turned
away. Repeat the thoughts
until you're cracking
your egg on the nape
of your partner's neck
in the hopes that
he will love you.

3. Play music

Choose a maraca
or a tambourine.
Save the drums for the experts.

The Sanskrit will sound strange
in a foreign mouth, but the songs
will sound beautiful enough

to make the man a god, or make
you want to ask for a god
who hums the deep inhale
of rhythm and dance.

This is why we make men
gods; they dance.

1. Follow all instructions

Hold a bowl with a tea light
to the alter. Draw circles
in the air with the light.
This is your offering.
Why aren't you offering
your light to the guru? Don't you know how
to hold to your candle? Stand
in a circle and shake the bell
you have been given. There is no rhythm;
just shake until its sound shatters
the glass of the shirtless god's
black and white photo.
Until your wrist is sore,
until someone silences your clapper.

2. Listen

Once upon a time, a man with long hair and a tie-dye t-shirt handed you a cell phone. He said a guru was calling just for you. So you answered. The guru said all these magical things. But you couldn't hear what he said because all the other people in the room spoke loudly and a truck rumbled on the gravel as the guru spoke. Afterwards, you're offered blessed bananas because you've heard the good word.

THE FELT MAKER

She wrapped untreated wool
around a seashell.
She said it symbolized protection
to wrap something delicate,
in wool to create felt.

It was like wrapping
a clam shell in the meat,
exposing the innards
to the dangers of the sea.

But as she rubbed the shell's
encasement with water
and Moroccan soap
fibers hooked
hair strands to fabric,
like gathering twigs
to make an unbreakable bundle.

Then she showed us
how to make our own sea shells.
We stood in line one by one,
waiting for her to
press her two fingers
to our hands,
a priestess's blessing.

SNOW WHITE RECONSIDERED

No man ever came to her woods.
The dwarves stopped dusting the casket
and delivering lilacs. Birds shat on the glass.

Spiders hung webs in her ears.
Mice burrowed
in the wood and tore
pieces of her dress for their nests.

When she woke up, raised the glass herself,
and saw her reflection;
There was nothing in her face
that anybody could want.
she delighted in being nobody at all.

ODE TO PRINT NEWS

If I subscribed to the newspaper,
I'd spread the comics across the kitchen
floor, view the 60s television colors all at once
in my foot pajamas munching
on Captain Crunch.
I'd open every perfume sample
folded into the ads— the room
smelling of five hundred women
wearing one thousand petunias.
I'd read the obituaries to my cat.
I'd clip out all headlines
where people died
in automobile accidents
or train crashes, or wars,
and tape them to the windows
and doors. I'd live with their faces
until I rotated them every Sunday.

THE BULLFROG

On a grass trail stamped out
on the side of a mountain
I saw the legs of a bullfrog,

with smooth long toes,
connected at the thin film
of skin we might call the hip.

It had just rained. The limbs
floated in a pool. I saw
how if I wished

I could be the bullfrog
that once held summer
in its belly. My body

bumpy as the bottom
of a spring, the texture of soil
in my webbed feet, as they stretch

towards an insect
just as an owl severs the bulb
of my flesh and carries
my body to its young.

ON A WALK AFTER A SNOWSTORM

The bronze peoplescope covered in snow;
the dancers naked, kneeling, arms
draped around each other's bodies,
chins lifted as if in song.

Fresh flakes, polish of sun, round bellies, blur together
in winter silence, except one clean woman, faceless,
whose hand rests on her stomach, her legs
tucked close to her breast.

The veiled crowd makes her so naked,
her withdrawn posture so cold.
The snow creates something the artist never saw:
her image pregnant, round, alone,

neck swung backwards toward the dancers,
mouth open as if to say: *Dear body, though
our fingers are frozen and we are bare,
we are alive in the tundra.*

THE QUEEN TRIES TO GROW YOUNGER

She started with the lung, flayed open with a slit
of her knife, pink flesh browned, seasoned,
halves still connected at the trachea. She ate
slowly. Consuming the beauty of Snow White's hair,

skin, mouth? Embodied in the breath of a cooked
lung? Did she pause to imagine the seven year old neck
snapped in the woods? The chest cavity picked clean
by carrion, red lips pale, dark hair taken by birds for their nests.

How will her face change,
when she's consumed the flesh of a boar
who squealed as the huntsmen shot him
through the eye to the brain?

AFTERMATH

At the screen door of their house
she watched the sunflower pattern

of the ceramic plate he slammed
into the concrete burst, the bits

shook off as seeds that, if given
a chance to bury in soil, might

sprout. She held her body
as those seeds, counted time

by those seeds scattered in the lawn,
fucking and *shiting* as he sliced

his thumb on an edge,
a thumb that hours earlier teased

the belly of her thigh.
He gathered broken petal

and leaf to fracture again
against the pavement.

At what fault line would she split:
at the brow, between the breast,
below the spine?

TO YOU IN BOONE, NORTH CAROLINA

If I handed you in absolute abundance
all the hot season
blueberries,

so ripe they burst
sugar in the hands,
could we make those giant, dwindling,
fistfuls
last through winter?

Seeds sunk in the edges of teeth,
the taste of warm blue amid the frost.

Perhaps, it isn't enough to gather
fruit until our bodies stain purple,
or work soil until we're brown.

Buckets from still wells
are what our hands pull,
the water plentiful,
then not plentiful.

WHAT CAN'T BE KNOWN

I saw it happen from the coffee shop window.

She sketched chestnuts
that morning while I served her black coffee,
smeared charcoal on cream pages turning
her fingers smoky, red hair curling
from its braid as she bent over paper.

I imagined she would have spent her day
painting as she listened
to the radio, her clothes hanging
in the bathtub— too broke
to finish a load in the Laundromat;
Maybe, when her dress dried she'd have gone
to a pop art gallery to draw photos
of pin up girls in martini glasses.
She'd have drunken red wine with a man.

Instead, she paused to dig in her canvas bag,
perhaps for lipstick,
or her cell phone,
or a cigarette,

Then the truck spun
her in air, her blue heels cracking
on asphalt.

If I could, I'd slip
between her body
and the pavement
place my lungs
under her lungs and breathe—
with each inhalation and exhalation,
opening and closing.
I'd make some small music
for what can't be known.

EATING THE FIG

What if I could settle
between muscle?

Or flay my lungs
and measure each breath
yet to be inhaled,

wind and rewind images
collected in the cornea?

What if I could track the pulses
in the brain as it tells
the mouth to taste the fig,

as lips move to unfamiliar
fingers that feed me the fruit?

What if I could record the esophagus
as it swallows,
and then the fingers
as they reach out for fruit again?

As if I could exist in my body
as it loves.

DUNCAN MACDOUGALL

After the air
in the lungs collapsed,
after the excrement
released
from the bowels,
after the clothes
are fold in bags for next of kin
and the bodies are as they were,
wrinkled and fresh,
after he parsed out
the weight, 21 grams,
within the final exhalation,
stored somewhere
in the calcium
of the vertebrae,
or perhaps the clavicle,
only after
could he claim
to scalpel out
that measureable
expulsion of *you*.

FALL

A stagnant pool gathers
yellow leaves among the rocks.
Ahead this water pours
to the creek, clean and quick.
I am this sometimes:
still for such a long time
before the unseen tumble.

TO A SURVIVOR: A LETTER FROM. ALFRED CONRAD TO ADRIENNE RICH

The pact we wanted was so ordinary.
We desired each other.
In those early years,

we felt your belly swell. You'd grab
my hand to smooth the hard kick of our sons,
to smooth the hard kick of your fears.

Ropes were never part of my wedding vows,
but then again, my hands shouldn't have
gripped yours so tightly.

We tried. We hooked fingers
when the world sang
your songs back to us.

We walked together
to the rallies, to the sit-ins,
to the draft card burnings,

but I couldn't read
what you were mapping out
for the female body.

We are what autumn knew
would collapse
in the fire of our activism:

we could not fight
for the things we loved
and love each other.

When we ended, it seemed right
to rent a car, leave our city,
drive down to Barnet farm,

(where our boys smashed
fresh chicken eggs just to watch
the yoke soak in the ground,

where my body was a god
in your eyes, before
you parsed out desire)

pull out a rifle, and
unload a bullet to make room
for you to become.

ONLINE DATING PROFILE

Looking For:

Consider the preschooler in the marshmallow test: She's left alone with a single marshmallow, and promised a second only if she managed to wait. She might shove the whole gooey mess in her mouth. Or cover her eyes. Kick the table. Hum. A common reaction, but these kids also ate too soon. She could stroke the marshmallow, test it with a bite. Foreplay, I suppose. I imagine these are the kids who have oral sex and claim virginity.

Or she could stare at the marshmallow for the full fifteen minutes, deny herself something she wants. This is the choice everyone hopes she makes—they'll, (scientists, mothers, fathers, priests) reward her with two marshmallows if she waits. Few make it. Science claims these are the kids at the Ivy Leagues, our doctors, lawyers, beautiful virgins until marriage.

So I ask, am I screwing myself by screwing too often? Does my desire for casual sex make me the kid who eats the marshmallow too soon? I'd like to say no? — that there are things we learn in wanting, in taking, that we can't learn elsewhere, that I wouldn't have the typewriter if I hadn't been led to it naked.

<p>Age: I should stop seeing older men, but I won't.</p>
<p>Orientation: I made out with my best friend at her twenty first birthday party. She was drunk. And all teeth. We wanted the boys to watch. Recreational bisexuality is, perhaps, cruel to those who identity as gay and bisexual—I'm sorry. These days I sleep with men.</p>
<p>Gender: My hands never felt like a woman's: stubby, unpainted, nails chewed. But I'm told I'm beautiful in the way women should be beautiful; this only unsettles me.</p>
<p>Height: I dated a man who was 6'4—I am 5'2. We never held hands walking down the street. Our strides were so different.</p>
<p>Weight: On Adderall, 110, 115: Orange capsules filled with silicone like beads, prescribed eight, taken until eighteen. Among other things these pills supposedly kept me smart, but more often quiet and thin.</p>
<p>Body type: I have the type of body that loves to be bitten and pushed against a wall.</p>
<p>Smoker or Non-smoker: I take my cigarettes from the mouths of men I want to fuck.</p>
<p>Religion: I fold the palm I get on Easter Sunday to keep my hands busy. At home I burn it in the fireplace, watch the cream edges smoke and curl in.</p>

SNOW WHITE TELLS HOW SHE KILLED THE QUEEN

I heated the iron shoes myself,
carried them to her
like she carried the apple to me.

I placed them at her feet, steaming
and red, slipped her heel
in, grabbed her hands
to make her dance.

I watched her skin sweat, split.
I made her look at me
while she burned.

THE LOTUS SPEAKS

I am pink, but I do not blush.
I am white but I crave

the touch of mud. I sink at night
because I like filth.

Eat me, if you must, but
I am not from the navel of God.

Call me a mouth, no,

Call me a tongue.

I am not your Buddha; I am not your ass
tattoo that jiggles as you shimmy

out of purple satin panties.
Your lover cannot tease

my petals with his fat fingers.
Do not pluck me from my water.

Do not meditate on me.
I am not your enlightenment.

BECOMING THE RIVER GODDESS

I'll slip inside
the ribcage of a fish
and be dragged
to the silt of the river.
I'll scrape at bedrock
until my fingers bleed,
until I carve a curve
to sink
my naked body.
Where the river will kiss
my navel. Where my arms
and legs will stretch
for miles. I'll house
algae in my hair
and crawfish in the crook
of my elbows. Where
my mouth chambers an echo
for frogs' mating calls,

my toes a maze for minnows,
my vulva the source of the water,
my belly always
on the verge of giving
birth to something ready
to swim upstream.