

The Naked Poet: In the Flesh

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When I was young man living in Chicago I wandered one day in to the Unabridged Bookstore and was looking through the poetry section when a particular volume caught my eye. It was a book by a poet named Gavin Dillard. I must admit that I was curious about the book mostly because the poet and I share the same last name. Upon picking up the book I glanced at the cover and saw a photo of a strikingly handsome man in the nude. I then opened the book and read a few of the poems. I liked them. So, I bought the book. This was my introduction to Gavin Geoffrey Dillard and his poetry. I knew nothing of him beyond that one book of poetry until I happened about another volume and bought it as well. I was a fan.

Now, I had a history with poetry having studied it college and having written a bit of it myself from time to time. I'd performed poetry in oral interpretation courses as both an undergraduate and graduate student and at performance festivals. I was not much of a fan of the poetry ready where the poet reads their poems to the audience. I have mostly found them lifeless and boring. Mostly I avoided them so as to not have the poetry of a favorite poet ruined by their own, what I thought, awful reading of their poems. I believed that poetry needed more than a simple calling out of the words or an emphasis in those calling out of the words of the structure

of the poem as it appears on the page. I believed that poetry demanded more of an embodiment and commitment to the meaning and emotion of the poem.

I would later learn that Gavin had a different approach to doing a poetry readings. He too, as he states in his autobiography hated the traditional poetry reading. He writes in that book,

As we all know, poetry readings can be some of the driest, most apoplectic and humiliating experiences known. When obliged to attend, I've learned to bring a pad of paper and writing instrument with which to scribble notes to myself, poems, or just draw dirty pictures. Anything to avoid yawning or tittering with the neighbors (225).

He does admit, however, that some poets make it work. He goes on to write about a reading given by James Broughton saying,

But when Master Broughton began one night in 1988, the entire studio went into a hush. As the seventy-five-year-old saint disseminated, softly, thoughtfully, we found ourselves alternately guffawing and weeping from the evocations. Some of LA's all-time jaded queens were there dabbing handkerchiefs and blowing their fat old noses. It was awesome (225).

I do know what Gavin means about the dry uninspiring reading. I too have endured them. The poetry of W.S. Merwin was ruined for me one night years ago in Hawaii when I suffered through his reading that went on for over an hour. His voice was boring and each poem ended up bearing a striking resemblance to the one before. I had loved his poetry up to the point but to this day cannot read his work without hearing that awful poetry reading in my head. At yet there have been times when the poet transcended and brought the audience in to an experience of the poetry that moved and altered our perceptions. I think of a wonderful reading by Sonia Sanchez for instance.

So, Gavin took a different approach to doing his readings. In short, he took his clothes off. Now how is that for an attention getter? In an email to me he says he did this primarily to get the attention of the audience. It was a means to get the attention of shoppers who were milling about the bookstore chatting and making noise. It was an attention getter to pull the audience in to the reading.

However, as an attention getter Gavin also reports in his memoir that this manner of reading has other benefits.

Eventually I consented to do another poetry reading, though they bored me to tears. After much deliberation and consternation, I decided to do the reading in my altogether altogether.

I came out wielding only a book and a gaudy candelabra ..., which provided the only lift. And I discovered something; it was the first time I had ever encountered a room that was absolutely involved in listening to poetry. Instead of giggling and jeering, as I might have feared, the listeners were completely humbled by my vulnerability.

I decided that naked is the only way to read poetry. Richard Rouillard, then gossip queen for the Herald Examiner, planted me with the now cozy moniker "LA's Naked Poet." But the most impressive thing was the audience. Dressy housewives from the Valley, come out for an evening of Hollywood-hip, came up to me afterward with mascara streaming down their cheeks saying things like "I never knew that a man

could feel like that...” Plain and simply, they had listened. It was marvelous. Hence the title of my next volume, *The Naked Poet*. I have since done in-the-buffs at cafes and bookstores in both Los Angeles and San Francisco, and have never had more emphatic and affirmative responses (182).

In an interview with Owen Keehnen, Gavin talks more about doing his readings in the nude and how he views them. In relation to what it was like to first do such a reading he says, “It was something I thought would be impossible so I didn’t think about it – I simply took off my clothes and walked on stage. Once I’d done it I could imagine doing it again, but it was very challenging.”

And when Keehnen responds, “And it goes so well with your poetic theme of vulnerability and exposure (np), he replies

I always saw it as a spiritual metaphor. Naked is how we leave the world so that’s where I’ve always been headed on a spiritual level. Unfortunately most people see it as a sexual statement. That’s why I stopped doing it. It’s too bad because I’ve always thought people needed to divest themselves of all their stuff and be willing to appear in all their innocence to the world (np).

All this leads me to contemplate what it is about nudity that fascinates us so in our society and also leads us to also think of the nude as something odd or out of place in various contexts.

My Life as a Nude

When contemplating this issue I am reminded of the times I have been naked or at least agree to be naked outside the confines of my home. The first time it occurred was when I was a freshman in college. I auditioned for the play *Equus* and was fortunate enough to be cast as the young man. I had no hesitation about taking the part and taking off my clothes to play the part. It was after all art. But the play was never produced. You see, I went to Blackburn College a private liberal arts college affiliated with the Presbyterian church in a small town in Illinois. When the Provost got wind of the plans for the play he immediately called a halt to the production. It did not meet the moral standards for the university, primarily, because nudity was not allowed. Interestingly enough, the next year they allowed a production of the play *Hair* so long as no one got naked.

I was, however, eventually allowed to be naked on the campus of Blackburn College. Blackburn is a unique school in that it has a student run work program. Back when I was there you were required to work fifteen hours a week in a campus job without pay. The idea was that the college kept costs down for the school by having the students run the place. Also, you would gain work experience while you were taking classes. One semester while I was at the school I was having trouble putting in my required fifteen hours a week and consulted the student work leader about where else I would be able to put in my hours. She informed me that they needed someone to be the nude model for the art classes. It was the only thing available.

Once again, I did not hesitate to say yes and found myself in a drafty art studio at eight in the morning posing naked. Now the art students were used to seeing people naked and could care less which naked body was put before them for class. I did not find the nudity a challenge so much as I found holding a pose for the class a chore.

One of the more interesting things that occurred as I posed for the class was walking around the class afterward to see the drawings. For weeks I noticed that one woman would only draw my feet. Nothing else just my feet. I found this odd and wondered if she had a foot fetish. I even overheard the instructor once try to get her to draw more of me. He pointed out my jaw line and how interesting it was and that she should draw it. I peeked out of the corner of my eye as I heard this to see her shake her head no.

So, Blackburn College would not let me be naked on the stage for a play but I could be naked in a more intimate setting with my fellow students. I was a bit perplexed.

Have I been naked outside of my home since then? Well not really. I've been semi-nude on numerous occasions; most notably at Gay Spirit Vision conference during the dance. Most of the men who attend this dance wear very little to it. Traditionally, one wears a sarong tied at the waist and nothing else. I'm pretty well known for making my sarong rather short and as the night of dancing wears on, it tends to slip off a bit and no one seems to mind. In short, the nudity is condoned and seen as natural in this setting.

If one contrasts that to the view of nudity at my undergraduate college with it's somewhat schizophrenic attitude toward nudity you can't help but wonder at which response is more sane. It's odd to me as I look back that the school would not let me be naked to tell an essential element of a story but basically turned around and told me to go take off my clothes for my classmates in order to fulfill my obligation to the school.

The Nude as Taboo in Live Performance

Much is made in the world of performance and art in general about the subject of nudity. People have difficulty with viewing the nude form in an audience even if they would have no trouble pulling up those same images on a computer screen in the privacy of their home. And

perhaps that is our hang up. We don't want to let others know that we are ok with the nude. We don't want to look like we condone what is thought by some to be taboo. It is, in my opinion, our own general negative attitudes about the body in general and what it might reveal about us as human being. Essentially it is our sameness as humans. When we strip down, we strip away pretense. When we shed our clothes we shed our inhibitions. And if we can do that we just might upset the social order.

In short, our bodies might act in ways we are afraid of. I'm reminded of when I directed the play *The Normal Heart* by Larry Kramer at Central Michigan University. In one scene of the play two men passionately kiss. I watched night after night as the two men kissed and watched night after night people walk out of the theatre after the kiss. Note that they walked out **after** the kiss and not during. As I staged the kiss it lasted a good long while. There was certainly enough time for the offended audience members to walk out during the kiss but it never happened. It was always after the kiss. So, they wanted to witness it but then were afraid of what their staying after witnessing the kiss would say about them as a spectator so they had to make the statement that they thought the kiss was wrong. But why stay through it if it is so wrong? Mere curiosity? I can't, of course, say for sure. But had they stayed they would have understood the kiss better. Much like staying in the presence of nudity lets the novelty and perhaps shock value of it wear off and you can see it for something deeper and more meaningful.

Later in my career I was cast as Prior Walter in a production of *Angels in America*. There is a scene in the doctor's office where Prior disrobes and shows his vulnerability as a sick man. For this production in Macon, GA I was given a very loose pair of boxer shorts to wear for this scene. It was never explained to me why I was to have these boxer shorts on but indeed I was told to wear them. One night during the run of the play I forgot to change in to the boxers and

was wearing a rather skimpy pair of tight briefs which outlined my package pretty well. As I stepped out of my pants that night I could tell that there was a very marked difference from the audience that witnessed this and the audience that witnessed me in boxers. I think that the scene played as titillation when I was in the skimpy briefs and detracted from the scene in a way the boxers did not but also in a way that it would not had I simply been able to shuck the shorts altogether. Let them see it and get it over with so we can tell the story.

Some Tentative Thoughts

What I learn when I contemplate Gavin's experience with reading in the nude and my own performance experience with nudity is double edged. I am left wondering about the context for the nudity. How can we move audiences past a prurient interest in the nude into seeing the nude as a vehicle for exposing more than the flesh? How does the naked body help us tell our story? Is there such a thing as the proper context for the nude body?

I'm afraid I don't have any firm answers to any of those questions. I do know that poetry readings can move people and poetry readings can bore people just like any other type of performance. But surely an approach that seeks to help audiences attend to what the poet is trying to say is always appropriate. Whether that approach be as Gavin has described in the soft and thoughtful vocal evocations of a James Broughton or in the literal baring of the flesh and soul of a poet like Gavin. They are all, ultimately, in my opinion, simply tools in the tool box.

Bibliography

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