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Category: Poetry

A Public Person

Jemima Wilkinson, a Rhode Island Quaker in the 1800s, fell ill with a fever. Wilkinson woke and claimed to have died during the illness, reborn now as The Public Universal Friend, a genderless evangelist. The Friend went on to lead their own religious sect, until dying their 'second death.'

1. Fever Wake

Heat melted *I* and *you* and *she*. Now
I was just *Public*. I was just *seen* and *thought*

of between bites of cucumber sandwiches
and *called* into the kitchen to stir the stew.

I woke up cold. Last dream and last Tuesday laid
next to each other, stuck their fingers in each other's

noses. Every crevice was empty. You could search mine
and I wouldn't even feel excavated, numb. I would feel

new. Because I was, I was shiny like that, I was crying embryonic
fluid. Squeaky. An umbilical cord protruded and I cut it myself,

with my old sewing scissors. Someone else had held these silver
scissors, someone gentler, with less arm hair. Someone who wouldn't

hump the air with the curtains open. Not me: I was Public Nuisance. I had left Time
at a fever pitch, and now I was Public Service. A utility. I was sexless;

I could lead people and they could look at my ass and I wouldn't feel
anything because I was their Friend. A Friend was universally accepting of shifting

buttocks and names. Jemima rolled over to Public Friend. Fingers connected,
privately. Smaller, more secret bones connected. But that was not a Public concern.

Thou sayest it.

That is what Jemima received, now. Dead on the carpet.

Jemima's tiny fingernails: *Thou sayest it.*

Jemima's pink nipples like pencil erasers: *Thou sayest it.*

Jemima's baby hairs, frizzed with light: Jemima's worried brows,
curving down at the edges: Jemima's lips receding into her small mouth:

Thou sayest it.

Jemima, with its clotted letters, was released. It buzzed away, through a hum of carpenter bees. I responded to universal publicness, airing laundry, a scrape of white

paint on a windowsill. I was to be used, a government subsidy, a program for repentance, with early admission. I was a welfare check, I was a hand-out,

I would be given to the world as an offering and everyone would stare and light would interrogate every corner of my being and I would be Public so all this would be seen, maybe even documented.

2. Before

A circle of silent people meet, curve outwards so air stretches, cat-like, in the middle. This is Public Worship, is Private Prayer. Speech

suppressed until it bubbles over, until fingers tingle with Word. Smooth stone passed around, thumbing raw. Thumbed numb, like a thigh. I speak, I stand. A performance

of humility, of God. I endure no meditation except: which monologue to try out this time. I snap rubber bands on my wrist, claw my initials

into the leg next to mine, draw flowers in inflammation. I store toys in socks. Anything, anything not to close eyes and feel static, to feel a false beat along my upperness, to become

Private and miss this Public world. Oh God I don't want to miss any of it: the boy rolling his ankle, the girl dozing in the corner, the one determined to pick her nose,

the new bangs, the new pimple, the new the new the new. Closing is the same every time. I will always be open in Public I will always press my tongue to the bottom of my teeth

and welcome and overfill and break hinges clean.

3. God-Cloth

Our God had already said no satin. No sequins no reds no tulle no emeralds no cashmeres no calfskin no, no.

I took it one step farther. I said no woman. The cloth makes Her and I wasn't Her, I was Public. I stripped

cloth and searched the scent of skin. An unashamed bare onion smell. I was left as discarded popcorn kernel, peach pit. Condensed.

Hard. Unadorned but handsome in that strange way we call old men. Shriveled behind a polished oak desk. I stroked

what wasn't there and let dandruff dapple the black shoulders of my suits. I spread my legs and didn't

feel a pinch. I spread my elbows on both armrests, pretended this was comfortable. God had never allowed me to wear pink,

I didn't miss it. God had never allowed me to dangle
ornate objects from my ears, stretching the lobe like

dough. God had never allowed me to rub red paint on my lips
and curl the color upwards so the flush never ended, only narrowed

up. I could govern myself now. I took over as Being. I covered my legs
separately, forbade them to rub up against each other. A partition

of black cloth, a blindfold between thighs. I forbade and felt dirty
when I touched my own skin. And you all followed, wrapped your thighs

the same way. We were all separate but that wasn't enough;
we partitioned off our bodies from ourselves. We meditated on each bone. I said:

Focus on each bony finger, each knuckle's dark hair follicles, each
warm pocket of fat, each blurry-edged birthmark, each fat speckled tongue, each—

4. The Followers Tell of the Second Death

The second time, we expected another new
name. A new personality, theology, outfit.

Instead, the Friend died. Well, first,
the Friend's legs swelled up like water

balloons. Well, first, the Friend emptied
out the cellar to fit the windowed coffin. Well,

first, the legs had to drain, simmer down.
A new type of weed popped up

around the town of Jerusalem,
the town of Universal Friends.

It was named *Jemima weed*.
An old name, dug up from the ground,

dead a long time ago. Commemorating
a time before fever, before followers,

before the Friend. There was no funeral,
only a meeting of people between space,

passing a stone to speak. This was according
to the Friend's wishes. The Friend

was transferred to a field where *Jemima weed*
grew over the grave. The Friend covered

by a thin layer of Jemima, the Friend resting
under alive Jemima. Yes, here is Jemima, reaching

into the wooden box, waving through the coffin
window as it rolls past. Yes, here Jemima comes back,

taunts decomposing Friend through random act of
flora naming. The Friend does not respond to Jemima's taps

on the glass. The Friend pulls away, flatulates. Yes, here
the Friend finally becomes Universal, becomes true Public,

becomes nameless dead.