

"Back When Elvis Was a Preacher" by Carmen Emerson

I.

Back when Elvis was a preacher,
he wore his faith as boldly as he wore his gold lamé tuxedo,
with gold ruffled shirt and gold lamé tie.

Few are the people who can wear that much gold lamé
Without looking stiff or silly.
He looked certain.

II.

And back when Elvis was a faith healer,
His body was always ready for the work:
Head cocked, shoulders turned away from torso,
Torso turned away from hips,
Hips turned away from thighs,
Thighs turned away from knees,
Hands loose and beautiful at his sides.

Some people would have a hard time maintaining
Such a spring-loaded posture without seeming threatening.
He looked prepared.

III.

Then back when Elvis was a cantor,
When he would take his first deep breath to sing the prayers,
My breath would be taken, too.

Most people are afraid to pray that deeply.
He rejoiced in it.

IV.

But when Elvis became a televangelist, something was lost.

The gold lamé faith was lost to a caped caricature of what once had been.
The spring-loaded body was abused into something that embarrassed us.
Because he had lost his way to caring about them,
the holy prayers became pathetic, and almost obscene.

V.

Is physical confidence an essential element of faith?

Is physical confidence that which puts the charisma
into charismatic faith?

What is the delicate dividing line between physical confidence
and threatening arrogance?

(I think confidence invites Other, while arrogance mocks Other.)

Will I ever possess/be possessed of the physical confidence of

Elvis the Preacher,

Elvis the Faith Healer and

Elvis the Cantor?

Will it matter?

It matters to me.

I know for certain that I never want to be Elvis the Televangelist.

VI.

Elvis wasn't silly in gold lame,

Or threatening when spring-loaded,

Or afraid to do what he was born to do,

Because he was doing what he was born to do.

Until he became a televangelist

Elvis had answered his call

with dignity

and integrity.

VII.

It is good to be at home in one's own body.

It is good to be at home in one's own calling.

Amen.