



Time Is on My Side

Charles Rammelkamp

Time Is on My Side (yes it is)

Gym Poems

Charles Rammelkamp

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Still in the Ring

“Angie, you’re really somethin’,”
Flanagan croons to the towel girl,
gallantly grandpaternal but
with an erotic undertone
that erases the age difference,
reducing their relations
to the genital common denominator.

Her long lashes fluttering,
Angie understands the erotic content
of Flanagan’s compliment,
and the delicate need
to spare him the embarrassment
of an outright rebuff.

At Christmas she kisses him
hard on the lips:
she makes him feel
he hasn’t left the sexual arena,
his fifty years of monogamous marriage,
faithful as a refrigerator magnet
sticking to the big humming machine,
only adding to the aura of his prowess.

“Thank you, Mister Flanagan,”
she says, submissive
as a pliable consort
in the sultan’s private harem.

Floats Like a Butterfly

Shadow boxing in the steamroom,
poking jabs into the mist
while he danced and skipped,
Flanagan greeted me when I entered.

“Champ,” he grunted, dodging and feinting.
Some kind of associate commissioner,
Flanagan spoke the lingo.

“How you doing?” I responded,
raising my voice above the hiss.
I sat on the warm tile bench,
a devotee in some ancient religion.

“So what did you think of the fight?”
I didn’t need to say which fight.

Flanagan snorted his disgust.
“What a bum,” he grunted.
“He ain’t no boxer; he’s a streetfighter,
hittin’ below the belt. Buttin’ with his head.
I would have called the fight in the third.

“When you got a streetfighter,
there ain’t no rules no more.
That wasn’t no boxing match.
That was just a brawl.”

Billowing steam clouded the room.
All I could make of Flanagan,
a crouching silhouette
ducking and sidestepping in the haze,

a holy man in ecstatic prayer,
emerging from the vapors of superstition
into the light of reason, civilization.
Two steps forward, one step back.

Stings Like a Bee

“You think I’m fat?”
Flanagan hunched over naked beside me
in the little confessional box,
the sauna at the gym.

He sounded like my wife,
when she used to worry
about her weight
for years after
she gave birth to our children.

Of course, we all always
worry about our weight,
sins of indulgence and negligence,
but Flanagan made me remember
that need for reassurance:
almost a plea for absolution.

“No, you’re the fittest
guy around here. Don’t worry.
You’re in great shape.”

“But I feel fat, you know?”
With the eye of a prizefighter
who has hung up his gloves,
he looked at his ancient body,
its sagging putty-colored flesh,
“I mean, I just feel fat.”

“Really, you look great.”
A burden of deceit crept over me,
and I excused myself
and stole to the shower.

Passing a mirror
I glanced sideways
at the love handles
jiggling at my sides.

Sparring Partners

In the sauna at the gym
Flanagan holds court
about the latest boxing matches.

A retired old guy
saturated with memories
of his own days in the ring,

he gives the inside scoop
on the latest middleweight bout,
the upcoming title fight.

A provocateur, I try to spar with him,
toss a few fact-and-figure punches
his way just to get him riled up.

He knows more about boxing
than I'd ever care to, but I
try to stay in the ring with him.

Flanagan comes down to the gym
three times a week
to keep in shape, shaves

in front of the mirror,
shadowboxes in the steamroom.
He's afraid he's losing

his memory. It's this, then, that
keeps him going; this, then, that
compels me to be his sparring partner.

The Big Fear

Christie, the pretty blond towel girl at the gym,
lowers her eyes when Bill,
the gregarious octogenarian,
flirts, frisky as a pup.

Her cheeks glow pink,
lashes like curtains
over bright blue eyes,
and I think how her eroticism
lies precisely in her wholesomeness.

Christie was meant to make babies
and Bill and I both believe
we were made
to make them with her.

“I bet I have more staying power
than your boyfriend does,” Bill declares.
He waits a beat, then:
“On the treadmill,”
leering, gargoyle-grotesque.

“Oh, Mister Tucker,” Christie scolds,
blushing, more amused than offended.
He’s harmless, after all.

My big fear:
Christie thinks I am too.

Target Audience

Out of the overhead monitors,
voices of angels speak
to men and women
trudging on the treadmills
at ten o'clock on a weekday morning
like so many Sisyphus clones.

Motorized vehicles for older people
that may qualify for Medicare assistance!
the voice stresses, promising
mobility in the declining years.
Bayer, Excedrin, a variety
of erectile dysfunction drugs.

How to soothe an irritable bowel.
Miracle massages to eliminate pain.
How to minimize
the discomforts of chemo.
Heart-friendly recipes.

We plod on,
pilgrims on the way to oblivion.

Time Is on My Side

On the music video channel
blasting from half a dozen giant monitors
suspended around the cavernous gym
like enormous unblinking rectangular eyes,
a baby-faced Mick Jagger
in an artless beatnik sweatshirt
sneers, *“Tiii-yiii-yiii-ime is on my side.
Yes it is!
Oh, tiii-yiii-yime is on my side....”*

It’s footage from Ed Sullivan
or some other early 1960’s
television variety show,
not a scripted music video.

Nobody in the gym watches,
however, wrapped in his own struggles
with the effects of time,
not on anybody’s side here.
Age the real weight we lift,
pushing down on us, relentless
as a rock and roll beat.

Blessed

“I am blessed,” Witherspoon insisted,
the phrase like a shield
against some unspeakable horror.

At fifty-one he was a physical wreck,
stumbling around the locker room
like a wounded mastadon.
He faced hip replacement surgery
in a matter of weeks.
Stitched up his torso,
the visible zipper testified
to the bypass surgery
he’d undergone the year before.

“I am blessed,” he repeated,
but without going into detail,
a magic incantation
warding off evil.

“Yes indeed, Jerome,” I confirmed,
toweling myself off
on the bench by my locker,
not really sure
if my erstwhile racquetball buddy
was expecting a response.

“Yes, I am blessed,”
Witherspoon repeated again,
sounding less certain,
as if, like a transcendental mantra
inducing a trancelike calm,
the words had lost meaning,
resolved themselves to animal noises.

The Oracle Speaks

“I was with him
the night he won the championship,”
Flanagan declared,
Samuel anointing Saul.

“Two, three years ago
at the USAir Arena.
I didn’t think he was much then,
but you should have seen him
the other night:
you couldn’t touch him.
He danced, he skipped,
he boxed, he dodged.”

Flanagan sat on the tile bench,
shaking his head at the memory.
“I told him after the fight,
I says to him, ‘I never
thought you were this good.
You’re gonna have one helluva career.’“

Then the steam shot
out of the nozzle,
and we fell silent.
Naked, Flanagan disappeared
into the expanding clouds.

Bull's-eye

When I saw Sam
point the blowdryer at his genitals
in the locker room at the gym,
I realized there was a reason
beyond my baldness
that I didn't dry my hair
with the communal appliance
dangling like a yo-yo
from the coil in the wall.

“How's it going, Sam?”
Walking past from the showers,
a towel around my waist,
I met his eyes in the mirror.

“Great, Charlie. How about you?”
Sam lifted his leg,
aimed at his anus,
pulled the trigger.

First Church of the Health Club

Braithwaite hugs the Cybex exercise machine
as if he were having a religious experience.
Eyes closed, head bowed as though in prayer,
he grips the handles that pull the chains
that lift the weights that strengthen his biceps,
then rests against the metal scaffolding
that holds the apparatus in place.

It's one of dozens of similar machines
designed to isolate and exercise
particular groups of muscles,
like fiendish Medieval torture devices
constructed by zealous sadistic monks.

The rest of us in the gym this Sunday morning
move quietly around him, giving wide berth
so as not to invade his sacred space,
as if he were a holy man communing with the divine.
In his sixties, Braithwaite seems a priest
devoted to the rituals of physical fitness.

Later, towel about his waist,
elbows on knees,
Braithwaite bows low on a bench
in the hardwood confessional of the sauna.
In a grave voice he announces to us
he is leaving his wife of thirty years
to marry his secretary,
a woman half his age.
It's as if a great burden of guilt
has been lifted in the admission.

Remembering Details

“So how’s the chinchilla working out?”
I asked Karen, the pretty blond
towel girl at the gym,
less than half my age.

Flattered I’d remembered
the new pet she’d mentioned
a month before,
her clear blue eyes shone with gratitude,
their warmth inspiring
a brief middle-aged fantasy
of a tumble on one of the workout mats
with this lovely athletic girl.

But then her eyes clouded
with the memory
of another detail.

The poor animal had died
in a freak accident
involving a vacuum cleaner.

A Close Shave

“People who shave grow a day younger every morning.” -- Vladimir Nabokov, *Mary*

“You’re not supposed to shave in the steamroom.”

All lathered up,
feeling my whiskers relax
like moviegoers slumping in their seats,
clutching my razor,
I open my eyes to the muscular young man
hovering over me where I sit on the bench
in the clouds of steam,
a towel swaddled about his waist,
reminding me of the street-crossing guards
in elementary school,
their bright orange vests
their air of faux authority.

“No problem,” I lie,
casual as a kid playing hooky,
but feeling like the busted jaywalker,
hurtled back in time half a century.
“I’m just softening my whiskers.
I’ll shave out at the washbasins.”

“OK, sorry,” the kid apologizes,
“It’s just that it’s against the rules.
Health Department.”

As he turns away,
I check the impulse to trip him,
like a sixth-grade bad boy
on the edge of puberty,
anticipating the day
he’ll be able to shave like a man.

Can I Use Your Deodorant?

The unfamiliar man stands
by my locker at the health club,
having made what may seem to him
a perfectly reasonable request.

I remember using
the same aerosol spray
as my brother when we were kids,
the can of Right Guard
on the medicine cabinet shelf.

But a roll-on deodorant?
It's like asking a stranger
if you can borrow his chapstick,
use his toothbrush.

Are you serious?
Is this a joke?
I am speechless.
He stands there,
waiting for an answer.

Getting Away with Something

Flanagan believes his wife sneaks wine when she thinks he isn't looking.

He finds empty bottles of chablis, sauvignon blanc, rhine and a variety of reds tucked among the milk cartons and soda cans in the blue recycling bags in the basement.

He looks defeated confiding this in the cloudy confessional of the steamroom, where we both sit, naked, sweating, but he sounds philosophical, a contemplative thinker from the mists of history.

Maybe the thrill comes from flirting with death, because who wants to feel sick or out of control? The older you get the fewer the authority figures, all the idols smashed, the curtain pulled aside to reveal nothing. Just a private struggle between you and death.

He doesn't want to ask her about it, afraid he might drive her deeper into herself, into that delusional area where you think you get away with things, always come out on top.

His Deepest Fear

Just before he drove to Nova Scotia last summer,
Flanagan confided his worst fear:
becoming a nursing home vegetable,
his children visiting him on Sundays,
taking him out to restaurants on Father's Day.

Sitting on the wooden bench
in the hazy steamroom,
his face to the floor, contemplative,
he tells of visiting an old friend
"in one of those places."

"I saw people I didn't even realize
I hadn't seen for years,
people who used to be fit and active,
drooling on their chests,
pushed around in wheelchairs."
He might be Odysseus describing
the shades in Hades,
mighty Achilles insubstantial as mist.

"I don't want that to happen to me."
Sweating, naked, he makes me think
of a man awaiting his fate
in a death row cell.

He rises from the bench,
rolls his shoulders,
starts to shadowbox in the steam.

A Warning Sign

“What happened to your leg?”

Standing in the opposite shower,
I looked down at my thigh,
the scabbing red gash
covered by a clear plastic bandage.

Early morning at the gym,
the casual acquaintance – Mike –
making polite conversation over
the splash of water, the squeal of pipes.

I explained about the biopsy,
the melanoma, the surgery,
the stitches and the healing.

“This transparent film dressing
does it all. Waterproof,
so I can even swim, shower.
But if it comes off,
I just have to keep the wound
moisturized with –”

The word was about to tumble
effortless as an acrobat
out of my mouth, but
all at once I drew a blank, stammered.
Embarrassed, I muttered,
“Senior moment. It’ll come back.”
But it didn’t.

Back at my locker, I remembered,
petroleum jelly,
scuttled back to find Mike
shaving at the water basin.

“Oh, Vaseline,” he nodded,
and it was as if my whole life depended
on that word, on *Vaseline*.

You're Allowed to Be Naked

I'm sitting in the hot tub
next to the swimming pool,
the only place you're allowed

to be naked –
sort of. I'm wearing my blue trunks,
billowing out like gills

with the hot water jets.
Beside me Matilda,
the tiny retired lady, reclines

in a swimming cap and
flowery bathing suit.
Matty's talking to Jenny, the lifeguard

about her tattoos.
Matty has one that looks like a bruise
on her spindly arm.

Jen got hers at a parlor,
forty dollars an hour.
The guy stitched the unicorn

in under two.
She lifts her shirt to show
the design under her breasts.

It's not provocative at all.
We're all so "natural."
Feels like we're all friends.

Matty's polite but I notice she holds
her fingers over her own
like a cage concealing a bird.

From her age, her accent,
the way the smudge looks like numerals,
I can only guess what her tattoo signifies.

The Smell of Celebrity

“I taught Oprah how to swim,”
Eddie’s modest reminiscence
more bemused than boastful.
I’d just entered the locker room
from the pool at the Downtown Athletic Club,
standing in a puddle
in front of my locker,
fumbling with the combination lock.

Why not? Baltimore’s a small town.
Eddie knew Winfrey before
she made or broke bestselling writers,
decorated the front covers
of *People* and grocery store tabloids,
elected presidents.

The best I could say,
I knew a guy in high school
back in rural Michigan,
who later became
a studio musician, played
on one of Mick Jagger’s solo albums.
My daughter went to high school
with a girl who came in sixth
on *So You Think You Can Dance?*

Fame clings close
when you get next to it,
like the smell of chlorine
on the skin
after the swimming pool.

Taking Sides

“Dot vus dee reason dee war vus losst,”
Helmut hissed in an accent bitter as sauerbraten.
We stood at the wash basins at the gym,
naked, shaving, talking at each other in the mirror.

I didn't catch the reason the war was lost,
only that the war was “lost” and not “won.”
The old truism, history is written by the victors,
flashed across my mind like a photograph caption.

I remembered elementary school
in my 1960's southern Michigan factory town,
a classmate named Werner Schmidt,
whose father had been a Nazi.

Werner bragged about his father's bravery,
telling us stories of battlefield derring-do,
storming “enemy” lines,
getting shot up and taken prisoner.

Asocial as a nocturnal animal in daylight –
a cracker-pilfering mouse leaving
a spray of turds across the kitchen counter –
Gerhardt Schmidt worked the nightshift
at the steel factory, slept during the day
in a curtained bedroom bare as a prison cell.

Gerhardt tarred his backyard fence
to keep the neighbor kids out,
shouted at his family in German
so the whole neighborhood quaked.

But Werner boasted about his father's wartime feats
as if he were Sergeant Fury,
hero of the comic books the rest of us read,
glorifying American commandos.

Helmut must have sensed something
from my glance in the mirror,
the fog of history and memory
filming my eyesight;
averting his eyes from mine,
he lifted his head, began shaving his throat.

Heroes

Big Ed squatted on the steamroom bench,
four hundred pounds ugly,
threatening as a sumo wrestler,
but his eyes filled with relief and pride
when he greeted me.

“Got a call from my son.”

“Where from? Overseas?”
I knew LaRon was in the army.
I just didn’t know where.

“Kuwait.”

I flashed back to Vietnam,
another lost teenager
coming to see me
after his first night with a woman.
“Sergeant Wiest,” he said,
“I think I want to get married.”

Beside him, implacable, stood
a pygmy-sized Vietnamese woman,
probably forty years old
under her straw hat.

I took him aside.
“Kirby,” I advised,
“I *really* don’t think you do.”

“LaRon waited in line three hours
just to use the phone,” Big Ed told me,
ancient sympathy making his moon face
seem even bigger.
“He’s homesick.”

I nodded.
“I can imagine.”

1952

Thanksgiving morning I went to the gym
for my traditional one-on-one basketball
with my friend Charles,
standard as Turkey and cranberries.

Midway through the fourth game,
a freak accident:
the ball came off the rim
onto my right hand pinkie;
the skin in the crease
of the first joint tearing
like the rip of soft fabric,

terrifying warm blood spewing
into my cupped palm,
dripping in big red drops
as I dashed off the court,

.
At the clinic, before the stitches,
checking for broken bones,
the x-ray technician noticed
my birthdate on the paperwork.

“My late husband was also
born on June sixth,” she said,
her matter-of-fact tone
emphasizing the depth of her emotion.

“Really?” I acknowledged the coincidence
and noted the adjective.

“Same year,” she added,
as if nailing home a fact
that was more than a coincidence.

I didn't know what to say.
I wanted to know
when exactly he'd died and how,
but I didn't have the words.

"D-Day," I commented,
not sure what to say
but knowing it was the wrong thing.

"Was it?" her tone so dry
I forgot all about my finger.

Living

“They tried to blame it on boxing,”
Flanagan snorts, wheeling around the steamroom,
a septuagenarian’s strategic crabwise shuffle.
“But Parkinson’s is a *disease*.” His scorn drips
from his lips like the sweat down his body.

My eighty year-old mother
soiled her sheets the other night,
halfway across the country from me.
Her doctor says she shouldn’t live alone.

Last night I dreamed she was living
in a transient shelter.
The cleaning lady was stealing her change.

The consciousness of death in one corner,
the wish for comfort and dignity in the other.
A fight to the finish
in the theater of dreams.
Me in a ringside seat.

“Somebody joked he was coming out of retirement
for another shot at the title,
and some idiots actually believed it.
Jesus! Did you see him in Atlanta?
Hands shaking like St. Vitus
when he held the Olympic torch?”

Flanagan collapses on the bench.
“Brother,” he pants. “Some people are beyond belief.”
He shakes his head, disgusted,
as the nozzle starts to shoot out steam.
He disappears in the clouds.
The perfect way to go, I think,
as he vanishes into the mist.

Acknowledgements

- “The Big Fear” – *Pearl*
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“Remembering Details” – *Welter*
“Can I Use Your Deodorant?” – *Nerve Cowboy*
“First Church of the Health Club” – *Spillway*
“Blessed” – *REAL*
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“Target Audience” – *California Quarterly*
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“The Smell of Celebrity” – *Exit 13*
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