

# THE LITURGY OF THE HOURS

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*poetry*

For nineteen months I pumped breast milk  
for my son who couldn't eat by mouth,  
the longest spiritual discipline I've practiced.

The machines are pretty good now,  
at least the hospital-grade ones are.  
You have to pump every few hours at first,  
and then after you've got a good supply  
(say thirty-two ounces a day or so),  
you can cut back  
to seven or eight times a day.

And so I pumped the hours:  
matins lauds prime sext  
none terce vespers compline.

It's not rocket science.  
It's like most mothering,  
a simple task whose  
importance and meaning  
lie in doing it  
over and  
over and  
over  
whether you feel like it  
or not.

You clip together

rubbery bladder

cap

valve

bottle.

Put the flange over the breast

(enter the eleven-dimensional universe of string theory,  
the nipple pointing every direction but straight.)

Turn the cycles to low and the frequency to fast  
to simulate a hungry baby.

When you feel the tingle,

and the milk jets out

in two or four narrow streams against the back of the flange,  
turn the frequency down for the baby settling in.

Wait ten minutes, until you have  
two or three ounces on each side—  
whatever you're going for that time.

Afterwards it's hard to get up again.

The letdown releases oxytocin,  
the orgasm hormone.

So the sweet difficult thing is that you have that  
sleepy after-sex feeling eight times a day  
and it's hard to remember

what

you wanted

to

accomplish

after

You pour the milk in containers  
put it in the fridge or freezer  
wash the parts and set them  
to dry on the counter.

Go on with diapers and  
feeding and naptime and cuddling.

Repeat  
repeat

repeat  
repeat  
repeat  
repeat  
repeat

That's one day.

The early Christians  
spoke of God's love  
as Mary's milk.  
In hundreds of paintings  
*Maria Lactans* feeds baby Jesus.  
The cross was still too real  
for metaphor.

I never could make head or tail  
of the idea that some guy's  
execution by torture two thousand years ago  
could wipe away anything I'd done wrong and  
secure me a place in some future heaven.

But God making food for the beloved to eat  
and giving it freely  
over and  
over and  
over  
whether She wanted to  
or not—  
*that* I could understand as  
radical  
self-giving  
love  
that might save someone,  
even if just  
one baby.

Given for you  
*this* is my body.