

THE DEATH OF GLADYS PRESLEY

The doctor put her on a “soft diet,” then,
which she interpreted as Pepsi-Cola and watermelon,
but that didn’t kill her, her liver did, some clotting
problem, and after it was over, the wild excesses
of grief you might have guessed: “Look at them hands,
Oh God, those hands toiled to raise me,” bringing
in the Bible word *toiled* for added weight.
The kind of grief it’s hard to believe in,
from the outside, it seems to delight so in the show.
“Elvis, look at them chickens. Mama ain’t
never gonna feed them chickens no more,”
Vernon said, picking out objects to reverence
for their recent lostness. It’s the truth, though,
the way Elvis touched things, then, with handfuls of fire,
and the way the wind hit his face as the celestial
door opened and the voice that had been in secret
between mother and son shone tremendously,
at that moment, before death finished penetrating
her body, feet last. “Look at her little sooties,
she’s so precious,” Elvis cried, leaning over the coffin
and hugging and kissing her feet, then her hands and face
until they had to cover her in glass, the one
pure object waiting to be raised. “Everything I have
is gone,” he cried, and this was the truth, poor child
made of practically all suffering, having to come back
to it over and over to get it right, to suffer
all the way through the outer skin to get down
to the earliest thing you call human, to rest there alone.