

An Abundance of Selves

Division/Category: Poetry in English

Tryst

*Let's have another round for the bright red devil
who keeps me in this tourist town.
- Joni Mitchell*

Here is the plan
you do not know about yet:

I will meet you at your door
an hour before midnight,

and pull you out with me
into the evening.

You will be sleep-mouthed,
half-dreaming, and we will agree

to bring a couple of
beers with us,

enough gumption
for the night chill or the water-

slap against seawall: a sound
soft enough to betray height,

saying there is little to see
from such a distance.

The sky will be mute so we can hear,
beyond us, the slow breathing

of a ship asleep before it recedes,
unmoored, into morning.

Words will be few.
The last lights still warm

in this coastal town
will soon enough speak for us

– in their flickering out,
their slow inward collapse –

to show us brevity's shape,
the face of impermanence . . .

This, dear one, is the plan.
I have told you,

And you will come with me.

Cliff-diving in Salagdoong

I.

You mistake
water's mutable face
for acceptance,
the sea-glimmer
twenty feet down
blinding you,
the shine of its
cresting skin
an apparent call,
so you dive

into presences
that falling now
lets you sense:
wind chafing
against weight,
shout catching in
your throat,
the water finally
receiving,

but not until
it opens your limbs
to pain, your body
entering not
as an exact spear
but a loose fist,
bruises already
blooming through
your surfaces
before you
swim up

II.

from the pools
of his eyes, you see
limpid depth,
not because you may

look into them—
no—

but because clarity
is its own
empty offering,
his eyes saying
this is nothing

III.
you can plumb,
you say,
the lapping tide below,
as teenage boys part
on the cliff-lip for you,
each breath a stone
down your gullet,
the fixity of desire
permitting belief
that you can do it,
because
you think you can
because
you do not know

The Farm

*This will be yours, you said,
yours and your sister's, though not
grandly, only as a matter of fact.*

Five hectares of fruit trees sprawled
before and around us, paths
stamped in grass by decades

of walking, which you were doing
slow now but expertly. Behind
you, I swore and scratched

at cuts weeds scythed across my
shins, pausing only when I saw fruit
bruising on the ground,

wind and rain plucking them
from branches that would have
fed them sweet.

*Such a shame, I said, but this
you only shrugged at. At sundown
the trees were fractal, the farmscape*

a teeming code my urban eyes
could not probe, but I loved this strange,
living land and love it still

because you – gray-headed,
sure-footed – were on and within it,
as a matter of fact.

for Dad

Revolution

*I return from exile and an uncertain future
with only determination and faith to offer.*

-Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, Jr.

Nursed in hope,
they stumble from the arms
of kin and friends begging

them *stay safe* –
words for the abandoned –
and into streets

where, with found voices,
they join multitudes. The tanks
in repose are no less

poised, but still the people
march on, thousands crying
for freedom and life,

misjudging or perhaps
welcoming death's easy swift-
ness, and so: they come

with flowers and song,
gifts a child might offer
to an unseeing mother, land-

ing now on his knees
for solace or succor – innocent,
each time, of tomorrow.

Man with Flowers

Splitting the throng
like some terrible creation,
fireball, bullet, or torpedo,
but not exactly –

what he is
is a man with flowers
running through the business district
at the end of the day,

when everyone
is walking down one direction,
following the blue arrow
pointing home,

and the sun
is a sighing animal
trying to keep its head
above the water.

One wonders if this man
shouldn't be elsewhere –
in a heaving bus or buying dinner –
instead of *here*,

leaping down
the opposite way we are going,
a jubilant bouquet in his hand
and a little dance almost

breaking from each
foot when it meets the sidewalk.
Who knows whom the flowers
are for? Some girl, maybe,

bent over her desk
in any of these skyscrapers,
rubbing her eyes and yawning.
It's true: nothing

will keep that sun
from turning its face away,
the shadows from
running like ink spilling

off our bodies, decay
from its sightless course.
And yet we part for him,
this man and his flowers,

we make room for his passage
with something that feels like guilt
or longing struck dumb:
an awe for unabashed life.

Note from a Comet

"As the Rosetta orbiter nears the comet Churyumov-Gerasimenko 67P and prepares to fire the Philae lander at its surface, scientists from the European Space Agency have been puzzled by an unexpected phenomenon: the comet is 'singing.'
- *The Independent*, 11 November 2014

Instruments pick up noise
bubbling cold across
space

that your ears cannot
strain toward, your
bodies

limited as I am not.
Your books paint
me

in constant flight, bright
as a ghosting
thought,

but books aren't enough—
you want more.
Now

your satellite approaches me
with a teenager's
hunger:

clammy steel, lights winking
and—*what's this!*
—sounds

you proclaim are mine
reach across matter,
appearing

as my aural footprint.
You celebrate this
from

half a million kilometers
and call it
singing

because you are romantics
doomed by your
gravity,

assuming the best of
every small, plain
thing.

Letter from the Space Agency

But one observation has taken the [Rosetta Plasma Consortium] scientists somewhat by surprise. The comet seems to be emitting a 'song' in the form of oscillations in the magnetic field in the comet's environment.
-from the Rosetta Blog of the European Space Agency

There is no arguing provenance.
We have long found a way to cross

atmospheres, toward the darkness
we understand as night, when stars reveal

their lit ciphers. Once upon a time
the moon was only a story, and then

it was under our feet. Once upon a time
the Crab Nebula was a dream.

Let the Philosophy Department
ossify with the old questions. We know

what we have seen and what else
begs beholding – as in today,

when the Rosetta orbiter picked up
the comet's own song. It is like the sound

a girl makes when she blows
through a straw into her fizzy drink,

her throat warm from humming.
Her father says, *Stop playing with your food,*

but how could she? There is more where
the music came from, and – *ah* – so much joy.

Habit

1.

A lovely Saturday afternoon
and all the time in the world,

but here we are anyway,
hunkered down or on our knees,

scrubbing dirt off the apartment floor.
In my mind, the dust

gathers as a behemoth, roaring
testament to our negligence.

How could we have lived,
all these months, in such a hovel?

I half-expect the filth to consume us
now that we are fighting it,

but it lies speechless underfoot, and
already, the language of disorder

is translating into stacked books,
folded shirts, the gleaming bottom

of a frying pan. Oh, my foes
are so imagined, and this helplessness

is all illusion, one I will dispel
with a broom and a bucket

of soapy water. I begin
with a single neat sweep of my arm.

2.

It must have been mere apparition,
a sight swift to retreat:

the apartment finally clean,

the dust remitting, a cinch to cast off

with broom and eager muscle.
But now the clutter is back,

almost inexplicably, grinning at us
from unmade beds,

photos spilling from a box, a gray sock
straying close to the fridge.

Such a dog habit is,
a creature slow to realize dismissal,

the closed door never just that,
but also an invitation.

I see the dishes piling up again,
but lassitude overtakes.

Maybe I will let
that damn dog in.

Maybe I will scratch
its calling belly.

The Poem

It speaks where your worlds are:
the bending moan of a train speeding off

or your mother's whistling in the kitchen.
It moves in the stories unknown to you,

the ones that escape possession:
a war removed from you by decades,

a shrub blossoming in another
country, a letter unanswered.

It rises too, by the millions, from
women and men lush with words,

here and there surrendering
their bodies to a new language,

an eloquence for ways of living
otherwise discordant.

It occupies song and silence,
the interstices from breath to breath.

It is born of thought aching or joyous,
of the quickening verb that is you.

Galápagos

There is no only you. You
have become multiple
to me, an abundance of selves.
On mountain-trail

I see you in the bed of moss
by my glancing foot,
and here you are again
in the clutch of berries

red and foreign, and there
you are some more in the bone-
breaking cold, the thinning air,
the crumbling sod.

In town, a man whittling
a face from wood takes
your shape, as does the boy
now turning away

from a woman asking him
a question, in this cafe
where a song I know you like
is playing plain and long.

O this must have been what
Darwin felt in the Galápagos,
when, studying petal and leafrib,
he saw the curved neck

of an orchid in another island,
finchbeak and wrenwing recalling
a pattern truer than memory,
the familiar in the multiform,

as you, love, are yourself
an earth prolific, your lifeprint
everywhere shown and becoming—
always becoming.