

Aria and Trumpet Flourish

Prime

As the deer longs for running streams

As the day rises to life, ears vigilant to the honk of a vendor peddling bread, the bellow of another hawking soybean custard, silky to the tongue, to the mouth's hunger that cannot be slaked –

As the sky lightens, its dark veil lifted layer by layer until morning reveals itself, the sun's devotion first a promise then a bright revelation –

As the kitchen stirs, the stove's ring of flames searing last night's leftovers –

As the body grows accustomed to the shock of cold water, familiar with the unceasing drip of the faucet yet the heart still quickening –

As steps hurry in the street, rushing to where they need to be, their various destinations –

As windows open, curtains lifted, as church bells peal the hour, their clanging a kind of benediction –

Terce

Trickle of water
on glass, lattice of lightning
with its attendant

thunder: the window
frames and mirrors the weather,
medium of our days

that sets the mood, blurs
the line between the body
and the surrounding

air: wind vane pointing
to the direction of what
the fickle heart feels.

O God beyond all
praising, God of infinite
disguises, you leave

us to talk about
the sky and its terrible
burden of rain. Like

Noah, disciple
and madman, we look for you
in the shadow of

nimbus, this morning's
sudden downpour and knee-high
flood, never mind how

it reeks of garbage.
How we search for the divine,
make dear pathetic

fallacies *that which*
we are, we are. Let the hours
stream while we remain

unscathed. Dear God, let
the wind falter, let the rain
stop. We will call it

mercy. What forecast
awaits us? What fate? Dearest
Lord, let us endure.

Vespers

Come sunset, you rush to the MRT station
and join the bedlam of rush hour. God is nowhere

in sight, at least not in this latter-day circle
of hell. The idea ripples: God is nowhere

along the lines of nuisances you have to live
and contend with. Ever-present, God is no – where?

Certainly not in the train that just passed by,
heaving with humanity. Ask God: is nowhere

the destination where everything leads to?
In your imagined afterlife, God is nowhere.

But why rely on visible proof of that
which you believe by faith? God is nowhere

to be seen, elusive cameo reserved
only for prophets and saints. God is nowhere

in the fading light, the suffocating smog
that envelopes the city. God is nowhere

yet you persist in invoking his name
amidst the rumbling crowd. God is nowhere,

the tinnitus hum repeated over and over: God
is nowhere, God is now here, God is nowhere.

Vigils

Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht: that old
chestnut again – but listen, the city
always buzzes with action, hardly ever

shuts up. No chorus of crickets to mark
the calm that doesn't happen, no place for monks
chanting prayers to herald sacred hours.

Instead, the whir and rumble of buses
rattle the air while conductors yell their full-
throated barks of Fairview! Quiapo! Cubao!

Under flickering neon lights, a blind man croons
a medley of forgotten songs, the plink
of coins punctuating his performance.

Rustle and hum, clatter, slam of a door,
the neighborhood racket – I could go on
and list all the notes of this soundtrack

that won't let up but the heart yearns
for the world whittled into silence:
one naked night, silent and holy,

to hear your own heartbeat. Still, the city
gives what it can, its many voices,
its singing. This nightly riot? I'll take it.

Add to it your aria, your trumpet flourish,
as the blind troubadour strums a final chord
and takes a bow, grateful for his bounty.

Compline

In the calculus of ordinary time, a brief flowering –
dense clusters of creamy white blossoms, pale as marbled paper.
Such extravagance, the night perfumed with their sharp sweetness.
And days after, the earth drenched with rain, strewn with twigs and petals.
This is my devotion: to account for the world's bounty, its finite grace.
To exalt the flourishing it contains, to ache for what is taken away.

Father, I've Come Back to How We Started

our many quarrels, the way words sparked your rage
and fed the anger that stoked your heart all these years.

I left home, returning from time to time,
the wayward son. When you barely spoke to me,

I felt invisible, written off and gone.
You harbored hurts, unable to forgive while

the seismic faults between us grew.
You harbored hurts, unable to forgive while

I felt invisible, written off and gone,
the wayward son. When you barely spoke to me,

I left home, returning from time to time
and fed the anger that stoked your heart all these years:

our many quarrels, the way words sparked your rage.
Father, I've come back to how we started.

Hometown

Apatut, Bulbulala, Camiling: the familiar names of barrios roll off the tongue like a secret language. I was born in

Camilo Osias, near the town center, renamed after Balaoan's dear illustrious son who became Senator and translated into

English our national anthem. Land of the morning, the sun rose above fields of rice during the rainy season, tobacco in summer.

Grandfather's name was a golden ticket, one that guaranteed hospitality: front row seats at the plaza come fiesta time.

Instead of fastfood outlets, we trooped to Tres Hermanas for noodles, jukebox playing records from the 70's and 80's. A few

kilometers away: the crags of South China Sea, waves licking the shores of Paraoir, where we once owned a beach house.

Much later, we left town, my father imposing self-exile, never to come back until after he died, ashes in a marble urn.

Our orbit remained around Balaoan, La Union, with gossip passed along the grapevine of how relatives bickered and

quarreled over small town politics. What does it mean to return when in all those years of being elsewhere, our hometown

stayed in our mind, the tug of memory holding us no matter the distance? Weeds overran my mother's garden while

ungathered fruits fell from trees, overripe and heavy, their sweet decay veiling the house we left empty. In another part of the

world, the cold burrows into your bones and each night, you look at a map where X marks the spot, a satellite view of the streets you walked, the church

you went to as a child. It is as though you still live in that time zone, sun-drenched at this hour, the pinnate leaves of mimosa opening.

Father in the Hospital

And of the body's
pain Does it hurt
here Here

The nurse's ministrations
holding forth Quells
the growing

in your cells Not
the spread
but the burn

The brunt of it Mutated
DNA replicating again
Again

Until cancer
Perfects itself
in your body How

many weeks Or days
left is a question
the prognosis has

no answer to Except
maybe tomorrow
The next day

The last day
How long How does it matter
amidst the stale air

The commingled smell
of urine and alcohol Door
swiveling on hinges

A routine check
every quarter hour Dose
of morphine

to let your mind slip
away into the bottom
of the sea where you do

not resurface And your eyes
once burning defiant
now dim glaze over

The gleam
the pulse of light
through the window

come evening
O astonishment
What lament

Inventory

Four IV drips, two piercing each bony arm.

Eight doctors: a pulmonologist who saw the carcinoma in his right lung, a cardiothoracic surgeon who removed it, an oncologist, an anesthesiologist, a cardiologist, a pathologist, a hematologist, an otolaryngologist.

Three meals and two snacks, delivered like clockwork, never eaten. Two blood extractions per day.

Three sisters who crossed the Pacific, jetlagged, to see their brother, the only one among them who remained.

Three sons who all left his house, the separate threads of their lives wound together in this room. One dutiful wife who stayed, whom he pained and caressed over and over, when he still had the strength. Father's eyes flooded with morning's light.

One breath: sixty two years, six months.

Requiem

Dear namesake Beloved father Senior
and signatory Dear father gone and never

to be seen again Dearly departed Dear Mister
Dear miser Prodigal father whose voice

silenced everyone at the dining table
Ruler of our home's tiny fiefdom Dear body

in a coffin Recipient of a letter
you will never read Dear heart harvested

from the chest cavity Look what have become
of you Father most feared Proof of the world's

abiding trick Now you see him Now
you don't Dear missing addressee Engineer

and custodian of failed fever dreams Dear
necessary loss What else is there

to say Dear father Dear absence

Chrysalis

From the Greek word *khrysos*, meaning gold,
the pupa's metallic sheen a whispered

hint of the brilliance that lies within.
They dangle from stems, indifferent

to the fruits about to ripen, the sudden
gust of wind. By what design lodged deep

in its cells does the cocoon know when
or how to finally emerge from hiding?

I shouldn't see such things as metaphor,
how all of us are transmuted from one

form to another, the body discarded
so that the soul might quiver and break free.

But there – I just said it, those in-between
insects becoming more than just pendants

in the foliage. Dear Father, you who have been
silent in your death, forgive me if everything

I wanted to tell you is cloaked in verse,
silky web spun around my skin, pulsing,

brocaded. Tell me what to find in a sea
of constellations. Tell me how it is,

how to peel off that gilded husk of what
you once were, crossing the threshold where wings

unfurl and flutter, even create a storm.

Now That My Father Is Gone, I See Him

everywhere: the faces of strangers on the streets,
passengers on buses and trains during rush hour,
his eyes rheumy and jaundiced, his gaze faraway
as though looking into a future where he would
have disappeared, I hear the rasp of his voice in snatches
of conversation, the drill of steel on concrete,
the gravity of his silence, I feel his presence
in rooms, in trees shedding their leaves, brown and crinkled
as his skin, the swoop and swerve of birds in unison,
the breathless moment when the sun burnishes the sky
with its dying light before the world falls into darkness.

Myth

1.

At the ridge of the cliff,
the hero's rosy hands
grip the edge, facing rock,
sheer drop and rip tide.

The urge to yield to flight
flickers for a breath, then fades
when the sun-bright sky appears
and his father waits with wings.

2.

In the story of the winged boy who fell
from the sky, it is easily apparent

that I am him, the tragic figure blinded
by light, disobeyed his father's warnings

of getting too close to the sun. Sometimes,
not often, I think of myself as

the father, devising ways to escape
a labyrinth that he himself had built.

It occurs to me now that I might have been
the beast all along, whose animal

hunger drove father and son away
and apart, doomed to wander inside

the maze, searching in vain for an exit.

Widowhood

There is nothing urgent to do. What a luxury it is to linger instead of stumbling out of bed and putting the kettle on the stove, the interim space before the shrill whistle of boiling water.

*

Padding to the kitchen, she remembers how it was once rich with the smell of bile, the vital ingredient for a breakfast stew of carabao meat and innards.

*

Every summer, her bougainvilleas in the yard burst with purple-pink sprays, gold, white blooms veined with faint green streaks--the shrubs growing more flamboyant as water becomes scarce.

*

In her former life—but she cannot think of it that way. She remains who she was: still the same woman tending her garden, walking to market, getting a manicure. But days pass slowly, the hours almost inert.

*

Susurrus of wind by dusk. She gathers her clothes dried by the sun, light as cocoons, and folds them in a basket, ready for ironing.

*

At night, the bed is suddenly too large, an ocean she drowns in when she sleeps.