

Latitudes & Other Poems

The Board of Judges, Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards
for Literature

The earth gives off a relentless hum...this murmur could originate from the churning ocean, or perhaps the roiling atmosphere. – April 17, 2008 LiveScience.com

Earth, scientists say, gives off a relentless hum,
of countless notes completely imperceptible
to the human ear. Say, this is a giant symphony,
pressure from waves or triggered by forces shearing
across the earth's surface, the roiling atmosphere,
possibly even the sun.

An enigma, earth's excitation is hard to measure,
and what is true above is equally true with us – hands give off sweat,
the heart beats faster, the mind whips up a dozen livid scenarios
before sleep comes, just like earth's hum could involve
patches of rock moving up and down, undetectable
in the warm air.

And if our planet emanates a constant rumble far below
the limits of human hearing, how does conscience register in a scale
of 10? How do our longings murmur?
Do fears twist our fates?
What landscapes do we willingly obliterate?

Send us your signals, we tell the earth
as we bend and rock the cradle,
hoping that the ocean opens a door
to its wide and infinite yearning.

Is wood. A bundle of primary phloem,
secondary xylem, vascular space of long
slender cells with tapered ends. A botanist's
intricate jargon wouldn't say chopped trees,
trees felled for polished floors, cupboards,
empty tables. His is not a description
of how we inhabit spaces. Imagine a house
that stands on the edge of rain, its windows
wide open, letting the water in, the back door
leaning on the wind and no one is home or perhaps
someone has been here, has been taken
by ambulance to some place far
from this cold kitchen where we now stand.

Consider the hearth that opens to my feet,
fire is its closest friend and it wrote the history
of a life spent on the periphery of empty
evenings lit by pieces of wood burning, flame
insisting on flame, a slow tongue moving
in darkness, taking shape or giving it
like the way the walls of inner wood
allow water to flow from cell to cell, feeding
the drying pith.

Outside this house the rain subsides,
its long tapered fingers flowing
into loam, picking out grit, ash, stone,
a sieve, liquid, lateral movement of water is
the second element.

THE WEIGHING

Begin by creasing the rib,

the soft spot where the ancients left
the obsidian scarab.

Unspool the linen gown
and wear the worn slippers
I placed by your delicate feet.

How your hands forget
the coin-filled pocket,
how the hair unlearns
the night's pained weight

or the way the wrist, blue-veined
and needled, turns inward to the palm,
seeking the bone of balance.

Something is awakened –
my familiarity with old age and old sleep.
For that, too, will be mine,

like a dented pillow
closely held
on this unmade bed.

SUBCUTANEOUS

1

It is strange how light
quickly fills up your body

like a clear glass filled to the brim,
close to the point of breaking.

Here, you said is a corner of pain,
less of a feeling

more like an aching thought
that rubs the seamless side of the brain.

2

When your old, wrinkled hand
clutches the knife, cuts open

the brown heart of ripe nectarines,
I, too, expect the morning to burst

and flood into this room that bears
the stubborn scent of formaldehyde.

3

We simply repeat the motions.
One hand holding the door

one hand seeking the knob
of fear, plunging, subcutaneous.

The nurse taps the syringe, feels the pulse,
unlocks the sharpness of needles.

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DANTE'S RECUERDO

*Spirits dwell in me, and tomorrow
I will grow sharp toenails in the dark.*
-Anonymous

The old man sits in a cracked chair

his legs broken in places, his arms
charred from the elbows, his fingers
stained yellow with nicotine.

Does he see the thick coil of rope dangling
round his neck? He wears the same trousers,
the same shoes since the night they found his wife
dead in the bedroom, twenty years ago,

the same evening when he stops responding
to the name Dante, when everything he touches
falls into small ashy heaps, or breaks into pieces,
shards of glass that stick to the sweaty floor.

One tug from above and the nylon rope
would recoil, jerk him quickly some two feet
above the floor, above the air pipe, the tongue
would stick out, the hands would shake.

Would they look for DNA? Would they
interrogate the neighbours? He speaks
to the chair, his own words curdling his brain.
He vowed to himself not to kneel, the folding

of knees is a sign of weakness, and angels
when falling, remain radiant. Beneath the stir
of feathers his hands grope, feel the quiet bones
resting in black, pointed wings.

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INTERIORS

*'No house should ever be on any hill or on anything. It should be of the hill, belonging to it, so
hill and house could live together each the happier for the other.'* -Frank Lloyd Wright

A covered driveway is not a driveway covered
to the rim, he calls it porte-cochere and a window
is also known as a glazing or a fenestration and a beam,
a trabeation. He steps into the empty bedroom,

carry on with the standard spiel without missing a beat.

Here nothing is flat, it is planar instead.
Consider, he says, the masonry, how it gives
lightness without betraying actual weight,
the hardness of stone and brick, such clarity,
such firmness, span of a well-toned muscled arm.

He segues from architecture to anatomy,
deftly mixing his metaphors. He leads the couple
to the living room where the paint reminds them
of freshly-bathed skin. And again he falls back to
jargon, mentions laminating resin, textured matte,
hollow cast, edge, matting tools and mount

the husband catches his wife's fragile-boned face
displays a worried or doubtful look, he can't tell
as he lingers by an open door, the 'archispeak'
drumming in his ears. The man guides the wife-
a hand touching perfumed elbows- through the post
and lintel, his slick commentary, tongue in cheek,
almost comic: two vertical structural members
support a horizontal member called a lintel
creating a covered space

such proximity, the husband has never seen.
But there is nothing to fear, happiness is never simple.
He sees her infidelity, clear as the ancient bloom
of ashes softly gathered
in the open hearth.

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INCIDENT

1.
A train hurtles 160 mph to its destination,
a sleek line knifing the agitated air.
Later, the evening TV news transmits footage
of a bloodied jaw, a body folded in two,
an arm pixelated on the flickering screen.

At the core of overheated engines is a heart

of disassemblage- a bundle of wires,
frayed, beating wildly
then quickly letting go, head-on
without dismay or turning.

2.
A bridge transverses a river,
all stones in place, an arching line
above the surging water.

Years later- hundreds, thousands—
the separate streams of stone and river are one,
heap of fragments, a dry single bed
of lichen and moss.

Absence is as strong as grief.
But grief is often stronger, pulled
like the heavy ropes of raw current
running through a meagre body.

MINGLANILLA

Everything in your world is measured:
before your birth waves have cleaved
to the shore, stones are collected
for the throwing, weight of clouds considered,

their movements carefully plotted.

Two women in your single dream,
one with soft huge eyes, the other delicate
as the seams of her piña dress; their palms
open to reveal stones, thrown into two
directions, one hurtling to a briny surface,
the other uncoils blue spirals of embryo.

What fabulous weapons do you hold?
Do you have a plan against the plague?
These islands were once borders, boundaries
to mighty oceans. Tomorrow, brown earth
will shape us and we will fit each other,
exact as two deep valleys bearing
the bright peaks of slow-moving continents.

LEARNING HOW TO BREATHE

What massive bony skull I have to use
to break ice drifting in these waters. I am the slowest swimmer,
I cannot dive deep. I travel alone, northwards.

The herds have left me, far ahead they drift to Chukchi,
the breach in ice providing direction. Now, I have none,
only the repetitive songs of mating will save me.

But I will reach you even if spring ends and the waters turn warmer.
I will reach for air even if it comes in short painful starts.
I will feed on copepods,

creatures
without need for a heart.
I will thrive in this carbon world,

close to the surface,
learning how to breathe
slowly and apart.

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THE FIFTH AND CAREFUL SEASON

Beyond October, before the lure
Of orange, the swarm flies across
Nevada's skies.

Listen, the talebearer says,
Listen as they drag the weight
Of distances from as far as Peru
And Cebu.

Head, thorax, abdomen,

Two antennae, six legs.
Lepidoptera. Scaly wings
Open (inhale) close (exhale)
The dusty breath
Of mute birds.

What is an army of itinerant moths?
A catapulted piece of the moon,
Flung to earth from the Sea of Tranquility.

But ours is a season of agitation
When guns in an arid land
Hound orphans, their pain looming,
Bigger than a mountain.

Tonight, the moths seek shelter
In mossy ribs of fallen logs,
Their wings encoding
Secret trajectories of storms.
What we hear though is neither
Typhoon nor hurricane

But the solid rain
Of ricocheting bullets
Hissing in the dark.