

“MAGUINDANA O”

WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL CANNOT BE LEFT BEHIND

So to head for home with nothing,
With no bag, no bread, no water,
Was his vow—to see his folks
As he was, with just the shirt
On his back, but in the air
Was a bird that found his arm,
Which he shooed away, since he
Would not carry any weight,
But the bird flew to a tree
And there sang a song of grace,
Such a song as would remain
And which he could not dismiss,
And it filled him up like bread,
And refreshed him just like water,
Like a bag it held his longings
Which included the desire
To be rid of everything,
Which was heaviest of the loads,
Which was why his mother wondered
When she saw him coming home
Why he staggered as he walked.

THE LOBOC CHILDREN'S CHOIR SINGS ROSAS PANDAN

Singing has its obligations
Such as now for instance
When the children must perform
Not just with their mouths
But also with their hips
With their hands and feet
Like a country woman
Who comes to town with only
Her song and dance
The littlest singer for instance
Who hardly reaches the shoulders
Of the rest of the choir
When they sway she sways
With more than eager hips
When they open their arms
Her arms enclose a bigger circle
When they turn around
She turns around
Faster than the others
Smallness has its obligations

MAGUINDANAO

What have I learned about Maguindanao?
It seems a place I'll never get to know
Except in stories—images that flow
In the imagination, or that plow
It, because they can turn up and endow
The mind with fresh furrows that gape as though
They were a series of wounds a big hoe
Had cut across the hill's capacious brow.
But what I know of childhood, be it brief,
And love, they have them in Maguindanao,
But it can happen that something robs us
Of these, and life, and what I know of grief,
That something may again be here, that now
Splinters speech into syllables and sobs.

IF ON A NEW YEAR'S NIGHT

Three things he loved: men, drink and wedding marches.
All three conspired to bring about disaster
On New Year's night after he left a party.
While cruising, his car flashed upon a hunk,
And then his driving became so erratic
That it alerted the man, an officer,
Who stopped him, and asked him one or two questions.
The cop detected a slur in his speech
And ordered him to get out of the car.
On a straight line he was made to take steps,
Heel-to-toe, then turn around on a foot.
To steady himself he intoned a march,
One that he knew well as a wedding planner.
He started with "The Prince of Denmark's March,"
Then followed it with Wagner's "Bridal Chorus,"
And next with Pachelbel's "Canon in D,"
To conclude with Mendelssohn's "Wedding March,"
But halfway through he was flailing about
For balance, and then after the ninth step,
When he was about to turn on a foot,
He collapsed into the policeman's arms.

HOW I LEARNED KOREAN

She sat across the aisle,
The young Korean girl
Holding her baby, who
Peered at me from above
Her mother's shoulder when
We trooped towards our seats.
But when the plane took off,
The baby began bawling,
And I would have bawled, too,
Thanks to the turbulence
That turned the plane into
An agitated cradle,
But then the baby's crying
Cut short my vertigo
And left us all subdued.
I wondered what the questions
Were then on every mind—
Was it because of hunger,
Sleepiness, flatulence?
Sure, everyone had theories
About the baby's pain,
But knowing no Korean
Not one of us spoke to
The harried mother, who
Embraced the crying baby
And kissed it and said something
To it repeatedly

As though reciting the
Declension of a noun.
At first I thought that just
Like me the little one,
Not yet one year, would not
Understand, but at once
The baby stopped its crying,
And then I thought I knew
The meaning of the word
And said it to myself.

WHY I WEAR SHADES

The eye knows what's forthcoming
And so instinctively
Defends itself—the eyelid
May be as thin as silk,
A veil more than a shield,
And yet in the face of
A fast approaching pin
Or falling water, or
A kiss, it shuts itself,
Then the imagination
Takes over, if not sleep—
Nothing, in fact, will close
The fluttering eyelid faster
Than the inexorable dream
Of rain.

AUBADE

But it's still dark inside our room
And I won't draw the drapes as yet
Because you're sleeping, and the dreams
Within your eyelids are aflutter
Like the hand of a worked up gauge.
And I think of weighing myself
(I usually do before a walk),
And yet how can I weigh myself
In darkness? With my foot I feel
The shape of the small weighing scale,
But then what is the use? It's like
Being in the dark with somebody
Who does not say a word—and so
I slip outside the room and put
The scale beneath a shaft of sun.
I see that the pointer has moved
A little to the right of zero.
I turn it back. I make adjustments
For the initial weight of morning.

AT THE CHAPEL OF THE DIVINE MASTER

As we passed by, the woman smiled,
She sat in the shade just outside
The entrance—she could not have chosen
A better place for begging—prayer
Would not be prayer which did not make
A person kind, and so when we
Came out after an hour, my hand
Instinctively fished for a coin,
But she was not there anymore,
And when I was about to put
The coin back, I saw her on
The other side, with the same smile—
The shade had moved and so had she.
Waiting turned time into a beggar.

BAKHAWAN BEACH, DAANBANTAYAN, CEBU

I cannot say if truly
I understand the sea,
But on our walk that morning
Everything was as thought.
Strewn on the beach were bottles
(No messages inside),
Such odds and ends as combs,
Lone slippers, refuse that
The tide left during the night,
Which made me cast my eyes
On the clean stretch of sand
Toward the water's edge.
Across a strip of sandbar
A mother tried to catch
Her toddler playfully
And we could hear their laughter,
And further off, a heron
Walked in the failing water
And with a bound took off
And after three wing flaps
Alighted on a pool
And thrust its beak at once
Into a ripple's eye.
But then a card, half-buried
In the sand, stopped us in
Our tracks and made us think—
A muddied nine of hearts.
Why, you asked, was the card

Not an ace or a king,
Queen or just knave, and showed
Surprise that suddenly
The sea should now trick us
And deal us such a hand.

MONSOON

Perhaps in monsoon weather
The questions come to haunt her,
Each an insistent whisper
Of rain, which is the father
Of desire, and the weather,
Which finds her heart a feather
In the slush, sends a tether
Of breeze to bring her hither,
Far from the monsoon, either
To sleep or to remember.