

The Elegant Ghost

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Self Help

Begin on a bet on doubt, otherwise clarity.
Proceed on a description of a real thing —
Either fragrant, globular or darting. If not,
A darling, the singular face to last a lifetime,

Whose one true gesture is the way he puffs
Cigarette-smoke skyward. Momentarily,
Forget about stars, their coal, coal hearts,
The spheres, paintings that you have not

Personally seen. If it can't be helped, a scene,
The landscape hopefully more complex
Than the last time: gable roofs, arcades,
A throng of bees. Invoke the insects

& the algae, the quartz & the cabbage.
If this will not yet suffice, civilizations,
Lost or emerging. The past is not the enemy,
It's always with us, informing cities

Of ruins, the impermanence of empires.
Do as the Romans do. Go easy on myths
Which are tricky as funhouse mirrors. Better
Prepare with a keyhole, a submarine window,

A small clue that you will follow through.
See the potential in domesticity: two voices
Unloading their heartbreak in a room,
For the first time unjudging, may say

Something precious about human nature
Though sometimes I doubt it. Specify
If it's rain, hail or sleet. Murders and wars
Are not wholesale commodities unless epic.

Insinuate the use of money, credit cards,
Postage stamps. Allow occasional carelessness
With an image: an oak tree in autumn
Need not lay down its irresistible silk.

Seasons are okay, not weather if used as a stage.
Music, let it set the pace. Or the movement
Of something wounded staggering across
The space. If at a crossroad between

Plain speech & the rose, always choose
The elegant ghost. Revise to your art's desire.
If the poem failed, there's still your life waiting
To be unshucked: a pearl of grit & prize.



The English Channel

I.

The requisite, of course, is to look at the sea's gray slate,
To calibrate vision—just so—to accommodate the particulars of light
That by now are transfusing the atmosphere with a shot
Of tangerine, incarnadine and a burn of green at the sky's edge—
Not to compare and contrast the vista with all the previously felt
Remembrances but to take them all in, deliberate conjugations
Of matter creating such fantabulous tricks, without
Any help or worry from outside force, brutal in their thanklessness
That by now, even the waves lashing at the shingle beach
(Each pebble a round echo of the initial stirring) are construed
As simply evocations of a subterranean machinery and
The remnant surf scattering tatters of lace on the shore
As merely air captured by salt water. What we hear then
Is unhusked from the terror it inspires, scattering among
The fishermen's quarters painted in black, the cliff
And its funicular, now murmuring on the seaside estate
Of East Sussex, its vernacular lost among the pelican cries.

II.

Surely, no ocean can be seen for the first time. What varies
Is merely vantage point, say five o'clock in the afternoon
This early autumn, near the unfinished dock, the parking lot,
At the shortest possible distance between France and England.



As the English Channel spills its wild cadence, packing
Its every iamb with evil force, I simultaneously see and hear
All the other bodies of water seen and heard in Pagudpod,
Palawan, Panglao which inflect this vision with their motions
And insinuations, tinkering with the coloring of the sea,
Draining away the novelty until at last, this is *déjà vu*
With a reference more pivotal than a dream, the breath
Already modulated into normal frequency and the eyes,
Previously blameless in the absence of intent, now scour
The roots of the waves with hard-fast familiarity, tipping
The sun's grandiose ink across the diminished gray,
Chastised by the absence of dangerous cargoes and ships,
Reduced only to this: a blank, unserviceable sheet.

III.

And yet, this is the same sea that madly summons language
On my part, asking to be reconstituted into noble parts,
Not in its entirety when at last it is almost irrelevant
In its billions-of-years eternity, rolling and rolling
Not knowing when to stop, but in this particular slice
Of the northern hemisphere, stilled as it were like a bolt
Of intensity in my mind, dying into a syllable from which
It will rise and tremble in its newfound form: aglitter. Sadly,
It is I who have approached the sea, asking for its blessing.
It has nothing to do with me except to release its archetype,
Prove its immense power beyond doubt. I see what I want



To see, find what I want to find, and this is because
I am helpless against the sea's durability, its pebbles
That will survive longer than all the dialects enlivened
By our throats. The sea inside me will not spill into
The English Channel funneling into the Atlantic and I am
Looking for the right word for this particular loneliness.



The Infidel in the Kitchen

How he shuffles with no motive and intent –
His feet shod in hotel slippers – checking
Out his ref for preludes of a meal because it is late,
Because the dusk has complicated the light.

Should we judge him for his solitude,
His particular impoverishment, that whenever
He inspects a patch of rot in a vegetable,
He, in his attention, doesn't once waver,

Doesn't call it as mystery? His hunger is holy.
No family upstairs that needs to be fed.
In the living room, a television flickers
Its multitudinous hues. It exists unwatched.

Nothing conspires against the old bachelor
As he, thumb on the blunt nape of the knife,
Splits the onion into two. His eyes tear
From the minute suffering of the given.

If you watch him stride through his window
At this very hour, you will see a monk,
His bald patch his tonsure, confident
In the gesture of his devotional task:

When he turns its knob and hears a click,
A stove will flourish into fire. The pan sizzles:
Oil and water negotiating their boundaries,
Smoke assailing the ceiling like the menace

Of manna. After this commonplace ritual,
He knows whereof he sits: in a chair in front
Of his dinner, in the kitchen that floats
In space, like the planet outside of it.



Mountain Province

The moon douses the pines
With chemical light,
Soaking their roots as if,

By scalding them as such,
Something of earth
In its blind sleep would

Reveal itself: silver,
Contiguous, indefatigable,
That which will prove

The landscape in its un-
Movingness is a fraud
And the tight rings of trees

Are propelled outward
By its generous spirit.
Instead of stepping out

And witnessing this
Transubstantiation
In a grand scale, this

once-in-a-lifetime thaw,
We choose our privacies,
Not wanting this intrusion.

What we want is to go on
With our lives untouched
By the unknown, confident

In our knowledge that
Our own earthly powers
Will suffice or simply,

That the night, no longer
Young, is just wiping
Her own mirror in the haze.



On my way to the Suite Vollard

In a train, stuffed with all folks of life
I saw a young man of beauty, height
Tall enough to meet my gaze – hard

As it was to feign modesty when
His neck, luminous with sweat
(Ditto his chin, daubed with a wet-
Ness that made his buttery skin

Look even more holy, delectable)
And holding a face of supreme proportion
Was worth every second of attention,
As if to miss one would mean incalculable

Suffering on my part and so I, with
A chance to sit down, remained standing
And took note of the cardigan cladding
His chest that tapered at the waist, the fit

Pair of gray denim hugging his thighs,
Knees, calves, the ramrod bones of ankles.
Back to his face: a study in well-
Ness, it held the slits of his eyes

As base to the perfect triangle whose
Tip was the deft notch on his upper lip.
His cheekbones, soaring diagonals, kept
Their alignment with the jaw. Close-

Up: even his eyebrows were perfect.
I wanted him to utter a word
So at last he could step into my world
In speech and not just be this spectacle set

On a drifting cloud of anonymity
That would any moment disappear.
I willfully missed my stop, and another.
What he did, as the indifferent city

Unspooled its scenery, was sneeze
Three times, not consecutively (yes, I counted),
Which rendered on his cheeks, a tint of red.
Before I could get seized by the police

For a crime I was no doubt committing,
The young man – who I'm sure
Never sinned even once, pure
From birth to death – alighted, joining

The throng of passengers, his back
Showing a posture of delicateness
As he shouldered with no self-awareness
A backpack. My private vice vanished; my luck

Was up. I rehearsed him in my mind, not let
It smudge my life's one good, sorrowing thing.
Later, I would linger at a Picasso etching:
Sculpture of a Young Man with a Goblet.



History of a House in 21 Fragments

I.

Here was the *bahay na bato* (wooden legs, stone skirt) –
Two floors held standing by post and lintel – facing
Obliquely to the east, so the ascending sun flickered

II.

Between the clapboard slats of its brown walls.
The windows, louvered, slotted into grooves, adding
Further transparency to the house, likewise recalled

III.

The porousness of wood. You could see passing bodies
Sliced neatly by spaces between panels and exercising
Decisions that resembled free will. A careful study

IV.

Might reveal something ordinary, transgressive.
It was the boy who had all the time to observe, leaning
Into the floor, getting glimpses of flesh submissive

V.

To water's clarifying assault. On the sills of windows,
Pots of sampaguita and oregano shedding
Their leaves on the jutting first floor roof endowed

VI.

With rust and hardened excrement of cats. The boy
Would broom off the offending material, meaning
He was ready to be humiliated by the world. Whose ploy

VII.

Was it but his own? The sky relentlessly poured
Its worry through cracks, holes, slits, missing
Nothing but the space under floorboards. Should

VIII.

You claw open the slats, you would see balls of dust,
White scorpions, strips of foil. The boy, conducting
His own investigation, found orphan earrings, last

IX.

Decade's stamps, Bagong Lipunan coins. It was a house
Where nothing was ever thrown out, making everything
Difficult to find: matching pair of socks, towel with cow

X.

Print, a precious ring of uncle. Was the ring lost or pawned?
But Jesus Who Follows You with His Gaze surveying
From the wall near the stairs would have known

XI.

The culprit. The mirror, however, did all the talking,
But only in the span of the event, never sharing
In retrospect. It was the old woman's, deflecting

XII.

What it wished to forget. Among the broken furniture,
The mirror had the most wisdom, rectangularly revealing
The moment by moment crisis, the terrible future

XIII.

Awaiting the house: fire. When she saw plumes of distant
Smoke, she assuredly packed her meager belongings —
Dresses unworn through the years, a large metal can

XIV.

Of tailor's chalk, threads. The mirror was never more wrong.
Workers armed with machetes and crowbars, loosening
Nails, smashing foundations, swinging their strong

XV.

Hammer force on every surface, made the house cave in.
The house opened to more sky and neighbors' eyes, letting
The wind to have a more organic shape, not countering

XVI.

The sun's unremitting claim on 150 square meters
Of once sovereign space. By then, its dwellers were riding
In a cargo truck, jostling with beds, coffee makers,

XVII.

Sewing machines – anything to see all of them
To a more fortunate life – foolishly investing
Their faith on separate dwellings in apartments,

XVIII.

Condominiums, almost shanties. In less than a day,
The house was sequestered in junkshops, transitioning
From the actual to the archetypal, which is to say

XIX.

It is no longer load-bearing, site-specific. Its freedom
Resembles nothing of its old self, allowing
The sky to claim it as its singular hearth, domed

XX.

With a perpetual glow that will never leak. Once a room
Is entered, another disappears, swinging
At the back of the head like a slim dream. Zoom

XXI.

Further in and you see the furniture gold-leafed,
All the mirrors opaque. The once lost ring
Is returned. Only the old woman has never left.



Sestina for Street-side Sorrow

Nothing famous ever came out of Cuatro de Julio,
The street that always interrupted the sleep
Of its inhabitants, including my grandmother's,
Who had to listen through the bawling sorrow
Of drunkards, the scampering of the police,
All of us under their mercy: our inheritance.

Largely debt and unhappiness, our inheritance
Was not visible to those living outside Cuatro de Julio —
If it were, other people, especially the police,
Would have been more forgiving, allowing our sleep,
Our silence and our poverty. Exposed to sorrow
Like salt, we swallowed our tears, like grandmother.

Setting up a house by the street, my grandmother
Soldiered through a husbandless life, her inheritance
From God. No one was a witness to this sorrow
Except her five children and Cuatro de Julio
Which, in its early years, was conducive for sleep.
They would be meddlesome decades later, the police.

Once, on my way to public school, I saw the police
Chase my cousins for drug pushing. My grandmother



Never intervened. Soap operas and afternoon sleep
Were her chosen companion, her inheritance.
For living so long in a street called Cuatro de Julio
She should have been spared from this kind of sorrow.

Sometimes, like shabu or cough syrup, sorrow
Could be addictive. Even the steadfast among the police
Are honeycombed by it. Patrolling Cuatro de Julio,
What wild sadness were they storing? My grandmother
Could teach them a thing about this native inheritance
So instead of beating their wives, they could sleep.

In a riot or in the stoning of our house, I feigned sleep.
There's a limit to a boy's body in containing sorrow;
Feverish, I once wept complainingly over this inheritance.
They were busy searching another's house, the police
But I knew she heard me loud and clear, my grandmother.
In shame, I would write my address as Fourth of July.

Grandmother, forgive me for forsaking my inheritance.
I may have left Cuatro de Julio but not its sorrow.
The police have one less thing to worry about now. Sleep.



Upriver

Confined into narrow boats – essentially coffins –
Motorized as if by afterthought, painted with
The blue of the tropics, set on a course upriver,
Off to the dappled interior of Sarawak we enter.

Extravagant doesn't even begin to describe
This shameless showmanship of light as it strives
In earnest to speckle our bodies, the radiant flesh
Of marine animals too far from here. Your English

Is rendered useless – the eye of the camera captures
The greens better than language – and the lurch
Of the boat unannounced can't be summarized
By the curt, "*That was fast.*" The wood prized

For this purpose is water-proof, meant to skid
On river stones so what we experience, instead
Of the clench of the current, is the failure of grasp,
The river giving way. When the hull strands

On a dry segment – the grit underneath jarring
The spine – it is time to let the rapt, hovering
Mind take stock of what it can colonize: roots,
Orchids, bromeliads, bridges plaited in rope.

We aren't sure whether the present resides
In this forest which, in seamless strokes, braids
The almost timeless with the eternally fleeting:
Newts, sultans, travelers, creatures still evolving

Sight. When we take in the jungle this way,
What do we fail to see? Strands of now, the lay
Of the land simultaneously rolling from both
Sides of the banks? If so, what is this boat

Other than a stilling element for our attention,
Affirming maplessly an assured destination?
How would this perspective inflect our tongues
With the spare crystal of a new clarity? An

Orangutan swinging in the leaves is what
I want to see, rare as the sighting of the white
Raja who, more than a century ago, once paced
These Bornean forests, keeping the peace.



Cold District

This could be a place of lucky prospects
As I, walking your borough's famous street
Past midnight, bereft of anything
Except meaningless bills and a dumbness
That comes from being in a new city,

Might surreptitiously collide with the glee
Of the new or re-minted possibilities,
Might slip into an updated outfit of self,
Or if fortunate, might avail the revelation
Of the particular in your commonplace:

Shop windows (mannequins shrouded
For the night), telephone booths made ir-
Relevant by the use of cellphones, pocket
Garden thronged with autumn leaves
Where much later, a man will tourniquet

His arm with a garter and take a hit.
Which means, I am fully invested in you,
Cold district, the hope of Europe,
The font of English. You've handed me
Myself, scrubbed free of distinction

And impermanence, in the gaze of your
Citizens, on the doors of rushing trains
(False wind tunneling), in the chimera
Of modern art. You love me enough
To watch me in your ten thousand

Surveillance cameras. You won't see me
Waving or making undue complaints
But simply walking with intent,
Appearing to belong, like how
A young man should in a foreign place.

You treat me with indifference which
Is good advice. You allow me
To slow or quicken my pace, present
My credentials to the elements
And without strategy and draft,

Acknowledge the one good thing about
My life – the dignity of anonymity
Pre-supposed of its innocence,
Untouched by government or fraud –
As I make my way to Tottenham Court.



Song

There's nothing I can tell you that you don't know yet
Or at least haven't heard about— only, you have set
Plenty of things to do for the day and firmly decided
To disengage from the philosophy of the fools so-called,
Declaring allegiance, in the face of unwithering belief
In yourself, to the tight slots of the quotidian, bereft

Of music and spectacle, picked terribly clean of oracle
And superstition, their sole, susurrating miracle
Is that they allow you to live without complication
And the tragedy of endless rhymes and repetitions,
The sheer ardor of it all being resolved to the world's
Immaculate plainness, tufts of slight, windless words

Nodding their heads in agreement. "What's wrong
With waking up and interrupting the morning's song
To brush my teeth and tie my shoes, do my work
And pay my taxes," you ask. Nothing, and your luck
Is something I respect, no condescension there.
After all, the revealed is something I truly adore

Since at first glance, the universe needs no improve-
ment on our part, operating its majestic improv



Without any audience and theater, rehabilitating
Its innumerable cells, shedding the excess, rounding
Life's corners to distinct awareness and flickering sight.
Indeed, we are all lucky to be here and alive!

What's the use then, as you imply, of dreaming
And tinkering, of pursuing lightning and building
Empires – the many way of killing time – when
We have been launched adrift at the onset, challenged
And buffeted from all sides and all we want to do
Is to cross the channel with the littlest pain and woe.

But that doesn't mean we play fence-sitters only,
See the ball but not the game, the forest from the trees.
The city where you are now has transpired through
Hits and misses, the countless attempts to make it new.
He who resists inertia is the messiah – no happenstance.
Your life is purchased by chance so you can dance.



Archipelagic Doctrine of the End of the World

I.

Long before any prophet declaimed
The world's fall with the conviction
Of a fraud, having carefully examined
Animal guts, the writings on the wall, long
Before an epileptic saint was seized
By a burning vision of a plague, cities

Afire, mad wind howling through
Crevices and cindered trees, long
Before any almanac noted future
Events in cryptic riddles and songs,
Long before Magellan set foot
On Mactan and availed a great loot

For the Crown of Spain, the end
Was already implicit in the shape
Of the country: a man severely bent
While holding a staff, the heft
Of invisible cross digging between
His shoulderblades, his spleen,

Liver and heart shattered for God's
Absolute seeing. He looks longingly



At the continent he abandoned, the load
Of his suffering exacerbated fully
By the magnitude of the Pacific Ocean
On the entire length of his back. Once

He pivots on his heels submerged
In Celebes Sea and see, with horror,
That emptiness, would the unmerged
Pieces of the solitary archipelago
Break further down to smithereens —
Trace minerals, glass bits, bare elements?

Or would he cohere the puzzle
Of the fragments? What is known
Is the frequent quaking of his muscles,
His wild tremors and volcanic burns,
His edges inundated by raving waters,
His top-of-the-line storms scatter-

ing bodies like illegally cut logs,
Matchsticks. What are we to do,
Prostate on his surface, wrapped in smog
And numbness, once he lets go
His enormous chains and reveals
The furious outline of a beast?

II.

Astride on the curvature of the Sierra
Madre of his spine, skin of shoreline,
Cavities of volcanoes and calderas,
Submerged or otherwise, nerves of faultlines,
We know the intimate pulse of the country,
The diastole and systole of his mortality.

As such, we calibrate our lives according
To the whims of his humors and flesh,
Carve our foothold, grasp anything
For support, that once he attempts
To scratch where his fetters clasp his being
(Releasing an equivalent temblor, quaking

Plates generating town-obliterating waves),
We may be held in place and be safe.
But once the blur withdraws, it leaves
Us with the innumerable dead, escaped
Into lesser freedoms. No doubt, most
Of our grief is man-made – the lost

And irrevocable forest that could
Have kept rushing water in its roots,
Bodies of water, air tainted with cold,
Toxic chemicals, the false, sooth-



Ing notion that tragedy could happen
Next door but not in our protected dens –

But no one could explain the undue
Quota of the unrewarded when it comes
To these deleterious onslaughts. Few
Could argue that what shall slam
The world as final verdict is nothing
But poetic justice: the grand toppling

Of the human pyramid. But we, gripped
In the fatigued mercy of his hold,
Are perhaps more familiar with
Destruction, its grand and bold
Declarations. The wind carries the stench
Of our doom and in fear, we clench.

III.

If I were to imagine the country in its
Final death throes before the sky blurs
Into a grainy expanse as the last bit
Of signal from the moon and stars scur-
ries to disappearance, I predict a kind
Of silence, out from the open, land-

Ing on the archipelago like a bomb,
Our ears picking up the shifting
In the air like a deluge of sand.



We shall see provincial plazas darkening
Into shadowy squares, the skirted
Bulbs in foil madly swinging in markets,

The wasted trees along highways
Exploding like the sound of motorcycles,
The public clocks shattering, the clay
Blackening in rice terraces, the kill-
ing fields surrendering all their dead.
A terrible ache shall pulse in our heads

And within a minute, the landscape
Will have a thin film of ash burning
Through our throats and tongues. Raped
By incinerating winds, our dwellings
Will be hot to touch and we shall stagger
Outside and for the first time, waver

In our hate of those who don't resemble us:
Assassins for hire, prostitutes, poets,
Separatists, infidels, basketball stars,
Vendors, money launderers, pirates,
Speculators, psychics, call center agents,
Gambling operators, stevedores, insurgents.

We, the indoctrinated long trained to lift
Our eyes prayerfully in extinction,



Shall be united in the face of the swift
Disemboweling of the planet – all factions
Healed – before the islands shall exalt
And erase our multi-syllabic names in salt.

IV.

On my way to Sagada, baskets
Crushed under my seat, windows
Open to swirling dust, landscape,
The hammered metal of the bus low
In the advancing fog, I saw the end
In the face of an Ifugao woman.

She must be eighty, her teeth stained
By betel, her hair under a woven cap.
Ambling merrily along, she was plain
In her conviction to not look and stop
As the bus thundered on Halsema Highway,
Not minding for once that she may

Be tipped over the lip of the road
And rush headlong into crags and rocks.
It was as though the gossamer cord
That fastened her to life never took
Even a faint tug. She made it appear
That should she fall, there was none to fear.

She made that scenario look like destiny.
Our bus, missing her by inches, swerved
And sputtered, while the woman, tiny
And old, emerged unscathed. On a curve
Of the road, we were finally stranded:
In a patch of Eden called Pakpakitan, Benguet.

Should the world end, it would be
In the manner of that old woman,
Long-drawn and ongoing, contrary
To what others may secretly hope as one
Quick stroke. It doesn't require our mention,
Or slow down with our attention.

Neither will it be as grand and as dramatic
As what the cults in Banahaw believe:
A reunification (geologic or symbolic?),
Of Golgotha and their mountain, in the sleeve
Of which Jesus will return, proclaiming
New Jerusalem, the Philippines.

Our particular smallness and weakness
Notwithstanding, we shall, according
To them, rule the world, bring peace
For a thousand years, teaching
All peoples with mercy and compassion
Before basking in the light of ascension.

V.

We, including our forebears, have known
You only briefly, razed your scalp
And scavenged your ancient bones
So we may build our settlements, capped
With a flag that heralds your sun,
Which we forget in this talk of the end —

The same sun whose ceaseless light
Has accompanied the Earth
Since its early days as a pebble (bright
But not yet quite ready to give birth
To life), insistent with its foundations,
Nourishments, incalculable solutions.

It will outlast our civilization as it did
The former ones, as possibly the Earth will
After it has cleansed itself of us and our bid
For immortality, we who slowly kill
Ourselves with the toxic things we release
Into your veins, and with our immense

Weapons, future and present. We spit
At your generosity when we think
The end will come from your massive
Disassembling, when the clear link



To our demise connects to the holocaust
We can conceive and personally cause.

Held fast to your stoop shape and energy
And continuance, let the sun continue to fling
Its rays on Luzon, Visayas, Mindanao with
Their shattered quarters and corners, sing
From the pavement and the dirt the song
Of the walking wounded, those long

In the world's suffering, be sheer in
Its stubbornness to never stop burning,
Correcting the blasted mountains,
The poisoned rivers, providing a version
Of regeneration (if we only care to look
At its prodigious effect and export,

A rebuttal against doomsaying nonsense)
As it blazes pouring and enlarging,
Its tropical love making no sense
To all of us unconcerned, drying
The tears, and the bodies from where
Those tears emerged, in its hard stare.

