

# This Tender Gravity

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Poems

To live in this world

you must be able  
to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it

against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.

- Mary Oliver

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# This Tender Gravity

## Aimlessness

*Or must I be the first,  
I who have enough stones  
Yet sung through the aimless miles?  
- David Wagoner*

Do I let myself choke and fall  
through the dirt-ash,  
or speak in rhythms  
until sound yields to the mortal?  
Do I run? Do I insist on the density  
of these clouds peering through  
the canopy as the shadows thin  
and flail against the dilution of light?  
A small animal scampers and I let it  
lead my way. Quiet river,  
sing me your rapids.  
Wayward branch, teach me  
to gather food from brightness.  
Sparrow, there is a grace to your flight  
that fills my throat with water,  
that empties my pockets of gravity  
and allows me to name distance.  
Cleverness undoes my tracks.  
Has the forest not shown that kindness  
is the only map? Kneeling is a sin  
only for those who are never lost.

I am once again lost.

And I am once again path.

World, you will never find me.

World, I am always here.

## Kneel

All summer we yearned for water.  
Wet blankets billowed  
on their taut wires as leaves  
rasped against naked statues.  
Blood caked like mud on the backs  
of penitents, their brows pierced  
by spirals of thorns. They plodded  
through the heat only to drown  
when the gathering seas  
returned. Oh how we pay for our sins:  
Christening our storms as we would  
our own children, then watching  
from higher ground as they shatter  
our windows and fill our paddies  
with corpses. The seasons turn,  
the clouds gain weight, the trees  
lean away from the coastline,  
steady themselves with trembling,  
evergreen hands. A priest stares  
at the gray horizon and gathers his flock  
on a hill. We will feed ourselves  
with faith, he says. We will make  
this storm kneel before our resolve.  
Now let us pray.

## Two Notes on Breathing

1.

Brother when you slung  
a rope over a beam

and asked Is this high enough  
When you clawed at the paint

on the walls imagining rats When you  
taught me how to handle a knife

saying This is my edge This  
is my legacy Did you thirst

Did you swallow against the deep  
jagged rasp Did your throat

constrict and were you  
afraid?

2.

Did you forget to breathe Did you forget  
the ferocity of blades Did you wail

and wail and did the ripples  
not spell out your name On the balcony

a ghost and behind the curtain the ripples  
of a ghost because in my memory

everything is water I am not  
water I am a strip of asphalt fixated

with poison And in the memory everything  
repeats like the acrid cries of cats Did you

fall Did you imagine ocean and was it  
a dream that twitched as you paddled

against the horizon Tell me Constancia Did you  
Four days later they hung your wet

dress on a wall Cut your chest open and found  
your wet bleached heart Four is *si* and *si*

is death also This is a truth present only  
in ideograms I am the captain of bedrock

of turbulence This is an archipelago  
where sorrow is the most abundant

fruit So many ships pointing cannons  
at the Pacific So many droplets  
of rain.

## Steps

I travelled to Baguio to sit by a grave.  
Brought flowers. And then it rained. Ran  
for cover as a grief lilted in my veins.  
Drove on to Sagada to burn leaves and inhale.  
Shared secrets with trees and stubbed  
my toe in a cave. Good job, I said  
to the mountains teeming with green.  
Good job, cloud. Good job, I said to the roads  
as they widened to accommodate my pain.  
Drank gin from a can and chucked my keys  
down a cliff. Rolled after it and screamed,  
Where are you, stop hiding beneath the twigs,  
let's go, it's getting late. There was a glint  
somewhere but of course I couldn't see.  
There was a philosopher once who wondered  
whether consciousness was the sole  
determinant of existence. As if this plant here,  
this pocketful of soil I filched from a vase,  
this chest full of brambles weren't already  
brimming with ghosts. Good job, detritus.  
The whole way back I smelled of landslides  
and clay. At a pit stop in Tarlac I read about  
how if a spider walks an inch per second  
along a rubber band being stretched  
at a mile per second, the spider  
eventually gets to the other end.

Assuming infinity. Good job, song.  
Blessing me with too little persistence  
and too few legs.

## War Chant

Because thirst is common. Because once a goblet was left to gather rainwater and you were forced to drink so finally the visions disappeared. Because there are scabs, because there is the memory of scabs, there is always monsoon shrieking through the rusty steel contraption outside your window, useless now and bound to be dismantled. In the dream the man shackled and kneeling. You, behind him with a cudgel in one hand and a shovel in the other. There is nothing familiar about the hunkering trees, nothing familiar about the mud. When you were a child you would drip wax over your boils, believing it would harden the pus. It didn't. Soon enough you became privy to the gradations of pain, learned to sate the violent, nameless hungers of your predatory self. Devour this now. Fall. Say, no blunter force than gravity, say I am an animal, howling and wingless. Say, these bones can never be content inside this body so watch me shieldless, trembling, feral. Blood moon above and the expectant detritus underneath, and in the dream, beyond the haze, ruins. A patch of wet leaves, a war chant swelling in the distance. A sky, teeming with spears.

## Kundiman

When scientists pressed their ears  
against the universe, they found it  
whistling a single note in A minor.  
I learned the word for hold  
in another language. I left  
the door open and wiped  
the dust off the table. I drank.  
Ships pointed cannons at each other  
for the right to name a sea.  
I danced to the drip of faucets, clapped,  
mistook apples for grenades.  
I ate alone. I grew old. I grew older.  
I said hold in my own language  
again and again, hawak, kapit,  
tahan na, uwi na. Then strained  
to hear all the engines in this city  
droning in A minor. A knife  
scraped against marble. A stick  
rattled towards stillness. A minor.  
All the lullabies ever hummed  
coming together to vibrate  
in the saddest of frequencies.  
Your keys dangled by the sink.  
Somewhere a chord is diminished  
to static. Kundiman means  
the opposite of if ever.

All those knuckles rapping  
against doors.  
Forgetting to turn the knob.

## Resonance

It is the nature of throats.  
Every people that has suffered enough  
has suffered through song.

It is the way a ribcage  
articulates ember.

It is the universe vibrating in minor chords only.

It is the fish humming in the gulf,  
the fishermen wading through a history of murder.

In a clearing in Cotabato a tribe of B'laan  
spends mornings sweeping the ground of fruit  
and shards of mortar.

Spends evenings sharpening needles.  
This is the weave of the world.

Everything doubles as a weapon.

Everything a compass to navigate  
window and monsoon, benevolence and war.

Every ache, however vast, is knowable if held  
against the little body.

A blind woman grabs a stranger's arm

and asks, "Are you real? Sing if you are."  
A prayer lilts and dissipates from a mosque.

I bleed.

## Why We Wait

Because goodbye.

Because sometimes we imagine benevolence in leavetaking.

Because mostly there is none.

Because mostly the world treats earnestness as sin,  
looks for trees beyond windows when often there is only city.  
Here a dry rag dragged across a table.

Here a closet full of blankets only, curtains drawn,  
sometimes too little light to begin with.  
So much cloth keeping no one warm.

Here a room and a bed and a child sitting on a bed.  
My cupped hands containing a whisper,  
my pockets brimming with stars.

You keening for some hidden brightness.  
Because the heart relies on wishing to keep its rhythm.  
Because the task of hands is to insist on holding.

Because mostly we fail.  
Because mostly we wish each other forgetfulness.  
Sometimes we wish each other well.

## The Book of Doors

In a dream there was a lake, and the lake was soft and kind. It was a kindness that knew a hidden, feral self, that held a quiet envy for the river whose waters it could hear flowing from not far away. The lake grew heavy with the weight of the many feet that had wet themselves on its shores, the many underbellies of boats, mossed over and green, a dark lonely green. And so the lake spoke its sadness to the waiting skies, and the skies began to understand gravity, and began to cry. And the lake was happy for once, a real happiness, because for the first time it heard a language other than stasis. Its fishes leapt and the trees lining its banks swayed and the worms nestling by the trees' roots danced like limbless dervishes in the mud. In a dream there was a body of water that was once a lake until it was devoured by a river. Stories are told of an island that stood dark and brimming with shadows, once, in the middle of a lake. On the island was a cabin. It was a cabin with many windows. By the steps there was a book about storms and the perils of thirst. Its pages flap in the wind, a dry, sandpaper wind, dry like palms that for too long had been clasped in prayer, like a secret that a lake had shed. In another dream there is a door.

## Grand Unified

It took this season of typhoons,  
stretched until December. It took  
these roads brimming with trees  
and debris and the swirling birds  
navigating through my country in search  
of a single dry twig. It took all year.  
It took a kingdom of fireflies to consume  
a city, and ash to remind me of the  
bone-filled shoreline between death  
and more death. When the first  
terrorist bombed his first parade,  
a farmer struck an axe on a loaf of bread  
and said, Enough. Chip your teeth on that,  
world, pry from that your empire of yeast  
and hunger. I am two oceans away,  
and it took all that water for me to realize  
that a circle has everything  
you need to complete it. Warmth  
from the first matchstick swerving  
towards Fukushima. Magma  
insisting on stone. If every choice  
splits this universe like a cell  
inside the womb, then perhaps godliness  
is sifting through this world fully awake,  
fearful that the tiniest of intentions  
can beget another infinity of atoms

and rain. Conversely: Stasis is violence.  
See this flower? Pluck off a petal  
or move the vase to a shelf. This cat:  
Call him Jesse or Fred. A predator  
prowls under the wobbling moon, the fish  
get tired, a pebble rests inside  
a slingshot's womb. A child wakes  
to a dream of chrome and in Geneva,  
scientists cover their mouths in terror,  
perhaps also in awe: It is time.  
We have dismantled the secret,  
intricate agonies of light.

## Gravity

*Tell me the truth.*

*Tell it to me beautifully.*

*Try not to fail.*

Wings can only be so heavy.  
Moths are mostly misunderstood.  
Stasis is sometimes mistaken for fragility.  
The weather happens.  
From time to time the monsoon  
lays its hands on asphalt and sparrows  
cower under awnings.  
Still there are too few moons to get by.  
All water in this city empties into the bay.  
What is water yesterday  
should be water today but isn't.  
Snow is water lent weight by a memory of ground.  
I borrow more things than I give back.  
Confession is easy.  
It is in the hidden that we persist.  
During the war my grandfather buried  
a stash of rifles in the backyard.  
This is true because spoken over his grave.  
There is a lack of detritus in this visible world.  
Truth is the film of dust  
that settles atop leaves and glistens  
when observed from a particular angle.

Some trees are much taller than others.  
This tree is different  
from the one you see in your mind.  
I would like to open a window  
and not think of flight.  
Plummeting is sometimes construed as failure,  
but always it means return.  
I wish more creatures had evolved wings.  
I had a friend who believed in horses.  
Once there was a house  
and beside the house was a stable  
and that is where my grandfather  
met my grandmother.  
She was the daughter of the man  
who cleaned the stables.  
I would like to have been borne  
of ancestors who once held swords.  
There is today a lack of edges.  
I own two knives. My wife tells me  
I smell of coconuts and rice cakes.  
I believe I smell of gunpowder.  
Sometimes limbs are severed from bodies,  
and always bodies severed from souls.  
Souls may be true. Souls may be not true.  
There is of course talk that the soul is water  
cradled by the basin of the body  
and thus sinking is an act  
of both cruelty and grace.

I dream sometimes of muzzles  
pointed at the sky.  
I dream sometimes of kites  
and I am the string tethered to a wrist.  
Gravity is a consequence of mass,  
which is itself a product of collapse.  
I dream sometimes of falling.  
I am grateful when I wake.

## Incarnations

1.

What sadness

this only city.

What rage

this rhythm of lamps.

What mystery

the precipice of memory.

Tremendum et fascinosum.

What resonance

this distance between rooftops.

What hollowness

beneath these imagined wings.

2.

A SKY, TEEMING WITH SPEARS:

I was torn from a tree.

THE FIRST SEED:

There is always the eventual burial.

A SKY, TEEMING WITH SPEARS:

Force is mass

made violent by acceleration.

THE FIRST SEED:

We are all prey to dust.

Despite velocity.

A SKY, TEEMING WITH SPEARS:

I am the once and imminent  
you.

THE FIRST SEED:

Yes.

3.

Nylon, wood, mother  
of pearl.

A note

becoming blue because held  
against the mortality of scales.

Here, a neck, wrung  
until sonorous and hungry.

A cavern

wishing it were lung.

What sadness, this placement  
of fingers.

What rage.

4.

Listen

All these bodies  
falling  
towards/away from  
one another

We are all children  
of collapse

We are all expanding  
towards collapse

5.

RIVER SINGING ITS RAPIDS:  
Sand. Then pebble, then pumice.

AN INFINITY OF ATOMS AND RAIN:

A gathering smoothness.

Immensity.

RIVER SINGING ITS RAPIDS:

A history

of igneousness.

Erosion.

AN INFINITY OF ATOMS AND RAIN:

The savage, inconsolable winds.

RIVER SINGING ITS RAPIDS:

The halving of lives. The sea.

AN INFINITY OF ATOMS AND RAIN:

There is always sea

although not everything is water.

RIVER SINGING ITS RAPIDS:

Yes.

5.

This fist.

This waiting.

This forest

an echo only.  
Twig, path, bramble.

Crow, I would like  
to hunger now.

Leaf, I have named you  
until dry.

6.

In the beginning an explosion.  
Tendrils of presence  
outrunning even light.

One moment  
more mortal than all others.

To this day a nothingness  
between stars.  
What gravity cannot apprehend.

Every atom refugee  
from that first violence.  
Heavy, heavy feet.

Every burning core pulled  
towards an ancient, invisible fringe.

7.

A STRING TETHERED TO A WRIST:

There is wind,  
hungering.

THE UNIVERSE IN A MINOR:

There is rattle  
and nebula

A STRING TETHERED TO A WRIST:

There is battle  
between flight and pulse.

THE UNIVERSE IN A MINOR:

Beyond flight  
the tug of void  
Beyond pulse  
another pulse  
dissipating

A STRING TETHERED TO A WRIST:

Is this epicenter?  
Is this womb?

THE UNIVERSE IN A MINOR:

It is throat  
It is frequency

of kinesis

A STRING TETHERED TO A WRIST:

I quiver.

Is this how it is to be wave?

To be residue?

Is this how it is to succumb  
to the endlessness of gravity?

THE UNIVERSE IN A MINOR:

Yes

A STRING TETHERED TO A WRIST:

There is perhaps a tenderness  
in surrender.

8.

Yes.

## Elegy

Praise the brief and quiet  
ends of things that punctuate  
creation, the lilt of a sentence  
dispersing into breeze, a leaf  
spiraling to ground, asking,  
is it over? Is that all? Then why  
does the canopy refuse to descend?  
A bough shivers and I think,  
perhaps it is not mortality we fear,  
but the solitude it entails.  
A fruit punctures a river, sinks,  
and as the ripples reach the banks  
the fruit becomes mere afterthought,  
is rendered casualty to dissolution.  
How many seeds does it take  
to create a forest? Perhaps only one.  
The first. Birthing root and limb  
from wound. Dying  
to rename the seasons.

## Precipice

Before all mantras begin,  
find a nice spot with vegetation.  
Sunlight is optional

but recommended. Bring a machete.  
To hew a path. Then leave it  
by a boulder, preferably one

by a river. The fish, of course,  
have no use for edges.  
But the water does.

It has, in fact for ages, been trying  
scrape off its allegiance to salt.  
Put a pebble in your mouth

and remember that all water  
calls the sea home. But now  
all is home. Try to forget

the texture of thirst.  
Walk back into the forest.  
You will hear the sparrows sing,

and it is imperative that you sing back.  
You will find a cave; walk on. You will  
encounter steepness. It is your friend;

walk on. You will know you are there  
by a persistent urge to take off  
your shoes. Take off your shoes

and point them north.  
There might be clouds. If a mountain  
is visible from where you stand,

go to it. There will be a fear of flight.  
Speak it. Allow the wind to curve  
your syllables. All is home.