

## Departures

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## Extramuros

The walls of Sta. Lucia speak to us in the Braille  
of its mosses and ancient pockmarks.  
From the Baluarte Plano de Santa Isabel,

one could reach to an ocean ghosting  
in the memory of five hundred years  
of arrivals and exiles. That we can derive

fresh pain out of inherited recollections  
is something uncommon among animals,  
this trait of remembering the stings

of moisture on someone else's lesions  
when caressed in a half-second of eternity.  
Beneath the cobblestone quarter next to a river

bleeding into the bowels of the old town,  
there are lines scrawled by unknown fingers  
said to have been the number of dawns or sunsets.

Tomorrow, we welcome the sight of sunlight  
embracing a stray cat on the street where,  
on his way from thumbscrew to Bagumbayan,

my litter-bound great-grandfather begged  
his guards for water, but really, the young man  
was beseeching the quiet deity of his Sangley heart

that he be buried at the house where he learned  
the native word for love. Where the lunette ends,  
there are districts that take you places – Saudi Arabia,

Singapore, Hong Kong – offering new methods  
of exile for a ready pound of flesh. No one  
would understand this sudden yearning

of hurtling into the sea, this strange acceleration  
from sickness unto death, this habit of measuring  
our piety based on separation and departures.

## **Petrochemical Gothic**

The office stinks of souls the color of heartbreak.  
Signatures fly everywhere, notes lost in translation.

All this business of begging the earth to cry black rocks  
so that Manhattan's kings and queens can sit on a miracle

of hydrocarbon. Let us dehydrate ourselves of what-ifs,  
we who have no youth, no adulthood, waiting for the sun

to love us beyond the unparted sea, standing behind  
rose-colored windows overlooking the beautiful beast

sprawling over the land with no horizon,  
in a meeting room where every day is a cry –

an eternal haggling for the last dollar of the century.  
We are here, black in tooth and claw, gray but brave,

speculating on an hourly basis what could go wrong  
and where we would be in the great undoing.

## After Dark

We take to the city when the house cannot  
make a home for Christmas. We take  
to the cloister of dim lamps, inquiring  
for a corner to extinguish our craving for light.  
We take the angelic hands of fishnet baronesses  
of Walking Street, who, vested with the authority  
of pungent breaths and malfunctioning voices,  
marshal their children in assembly lines  
that begin to run at six o'clock.  
In a country where markets negotiate days  
in dialects of pleasure and pain,  
the one who leaves nothing for herself  
is the one who survives. A teenager gives herself  
over to the laws of nightfall, but before fate  
bares its knuckles to seek bread in the famine  
of her youth, she begins by whispering  
the story of a girl who took to the city  
at age sixteen, all because her house  
did not have a room for dying in.

## Arabian Rain

Arabian rain falls in parentheses.  
Images dissipate in the calling of heat,  
beige reacts to poetry, air translates into  
forms and patterns you loved and lost —

the shore one moment, the woodland the next.  
You flee into symbols and believe that the droning  
of sand belongs to the sea, that the laughter  
of warblers are your children's, that the bellow

of distant dust storms constitutes rhymes  
in your songs. You bask in the translucence  
and call it a city. You enclose latitude in the frame  
of your fingers and announce that creation is yours.

You plumb the crags with your voice, only to learn  
that when it reaches you back, it reaches you back  
the voice of a complete stranger. How perfect  
your corroboration of magic, how vast

the incongruity of colors, how you've risen  
by the vapor of dismantled matter under  
your feet. How costly the unbidden restitution  
that lets you maintain your secret order of things.

## **Amor Fati**

She has a secret.  
It's instagrammable.

A dachshund strays and finds  
her soliloquy of feet  
shaped like spondees  
dragged across a desert of bodies.

Dreamcatcher earrings,  
beads and faux pearls  
burn around her neck,  
altarpieces she contemplates  
wherever she appears human  
before herself –  
in the face of a dream-like puddle,  
an aging storefront,  
or the tinted window of an unattended car.

It scares her sometimes,  
but hell, does she love to be scared,  
to look at history  
as if it is a fresh  
and open wound  
wanting to be touched.

And when  
she thinks she has enough  
of the sovereign sweetness  
of her surgical pain,  
she retreats into her room,  
borrows smiles from primetime shows  
and then gets lost in the glare  
of someone else's digital lacerations.

In bed,

she does think of daybreak,  
of going someplace where  
she can plant her  
soliloquy of feet  
among a darkness of  
abandoned bodies,  
find a place to lean back on  
and pour margarita on her bones,  
at a slanted angle where  
some things rhyme such as  
“meat” and “universe” and all  
because there’s nothing much  
to do but close her eyes and watch  
the stars die between her thighs.

## The Birth of a Tragedy

*"Some people are born posthumously."*

*--Nietzsche*

Some of us were born outside time,  
outside the moment of our moment,  
beyond reach of judgment,  
beyond earshot of prayer,  
past the memetic tableau we took  
for either salvation or original sin.  
The sculptor doesn't spare a rib.  
He hews out of it a country shaped  
like fog. He passes it for his child,  
"Son of Man," he calls it, and little  
by little casts upon it his ecstasy  
of quiet pain, one leg dangling  
from the rock, the other  
disappearing in your faith.  
Dreaming is a lost art.  
You gaze at your handiwork  
and contemplate the living  
blankness of its ivory eyes,  
the blood on its crown of thorns,  
the tragedy required for creation.  
One gives himself to the world  
despite his disappointment,  
realizing that in the era of illusions,  
prisoners do not die of despair,  
they die of hope.

## Sunday

The passage of time is a figure  
of mathematical speech. Cemeteries are  
our schools and history is but a synonym  
for counting our dead – the anarchy, the dirt,  
the cramming for the aftertaste of love so long

as air lasts, the loneliness of dragging  
your body across a carnage of dry leaves  
through midnight cracking to a field of gold and red,  
settling in at some unkind hotel in a village  
of upright tombs pitched upon a rock so dry  
it lacks the tongue to grieve.

You know you're in for a change in darkness,  
yet you fall headlong into prayer and give  
thanks for surviving the march of possibilities.  
You do not think about poverty, you only dream  
to live before life and to not die after death.

So human, this revelation.  
Hundreds of thousands of years and yet  
we have not stopped counting our desires  
to play the role of the living and assume  
we did discover all when we discovered fire.

Sunday before the fall, a priest explained  
his theodicies using a coroner's equations,  
how a rock like this came to figure in a tragedy  
of divine love, making no mention of God  
inventing Man so He would understand  
how it was like to be abandoned.

## The Astronomer

The Perseids crashed into each other  
the day he was born (so his parents say).  
They took it as a prophecy that he would  
never fall over his two hind limbs.

When he grew up, he could identify  
his brother stars without leaving  
the dominion of the skin, call them  
in the order of their discoveries,

and watch them flicker at the thermal  
heat of his voice. At times, they would  
send him dust clouds grazing the night  
sky in a procession of flames disintegrating

into rain, consuming all space and spreading  
into dense patterns of make-believe: demigods,  
animals, goblins, heraldry, memory,  
things he would name for the sake of naming,

knowing how transient presence is,  
knowing that nothing was so singular  
or absolute as could be the subject  
of eternal regard. When a star died,

its light would break into a thousand  
songs. *Do not mourn for me.* It had been  
thirteen thousand years since anyway.  
It would send him jewels, *take,*

*this is my body,* and steal away  
into a genesis of forms, the earth  
that becomes today or the April  
burning into tomorrow. Where

cogon grasses swayed to the cadence  
of bugle-hymns, and human grit  
disappeared under the shadow  
of finite things, he would rummage

through stones for echoes, chasing  
the charred remains of its promised  
tears, only to chance upon puddle  
and the story of a dying race.

*It had been thirteen thousand years.*  
He broke a pencil crossing the sea  
at the sight of the night's Perseids  
marching over the last citizens

of tradition. *The universe is a verb  
and it takes the face of everything in its path.*  
What right – he thought – what right  
had he to take it for his own,

when he was but a mere moment  
in its flesh and bones?

## Comets

No one knew where the dust might lead the living.  
Down old roads, we were secret worshippers of names  
who travelled light of faith and suffered the pain of immortality.

When we first came across the dithering of the heart,  
when we first learned to play with fire and in the flame  
discovered that our hearts were made of wars,

you wondered if beyond the womb were unthought-of  
worlds. I could only trace the comets for you as we watched  
their tails undress the Milky Way of its silver typhoons,

like a lancet paving the wound for the birthing of a new real,  
and faraway atmospheres fluctuate from one faith to another.  
Isn't it a wonder how, in the perpetual transformation

of our fantasies, two things always remain the same:  
a pebble contains so much truth,  
and a raindrop can summarize us all.

## Hermitage

In your palace of meanings,  
existence is broken down into  
vague elements of surprise,  
evading your notice from time  
to time as you slave away the days  
seeking refuge in your own  
ambiguities.

There's a place in the wall  
where one can hear the plots  
of the outside world. You've  
suspected the myth of liberation  
in your kennel of a room once,  
*but men were born in a vastness  
more deceitful.*

A false equivalence, perhaps,  
yet what have these words to show  
except for the dribbling of water  
from the eaves in the stirring  
of the new season across rust,  
the scrambling of the prayed-for  
tide through a dying patient's veins,  
the process of night and day.

*One doesn't know what lies beyond  
the rustling of those paper structures.*  
Maybe the edge of the world,  
maybe the weariness of time,  
maybe the reflections of stars  
serving an illusion of infinity,  
maybe a troupe of sallow  
actors reenacting the shower  
of pigeon droppings everyone  
mistook for history.

It may be you, gloriously alone,  
walking toward the mirror  
to welcome your oppressor.

## Retreat

It is said, seek ye God in the post-partum  
echo of stillborn revolts, in the cautiousness  
of cessation, in the aporetic cadence  
between conciliatory speeches and passive  
resistance of evasive eyes. Wars, of course,  
have their aftershocks, the calamity of having  
to receive a new oppressor. My father dead,  
we moved to the part of the country  
where people turn to a god in pain,  
his frozen writhing resembling a poet's  
umbilical death, contorted in an existence  
far from his making. They said they're hiding us  
from our sins, that absence would redeem us,  
even though in my mind, I could barely understand  
the poet's melancholia under his ecstatic light  
of freedom, or exile. They told me here no one  
accepts the death of a god in pain, rather they  
celebrate him in his writhing and utter in one breath,  
*Do it again, do it again.*