

Silárgan

Siláng

I

The town church wrenching its spires
out of the ground. The locals wake
to a fortification. They barely slept
because of the siege; thought the noise
was cannon fire.

This was prayer answered.
This was God intervening.
The idea is to not revise.

If myths were extricated into
existence: moss and sand and stone,
retablos and Spanish names. In 1897,
the conquistadors leveled
the entire town. The insurrectos
must pay for claiming land
that wasn't theirs,
for undermining the friars.

Nothing would be spared. Save
for the church and the convent.
Command explained,
*the symbols of faith must
be preserved.* Testament
to dominion, a manifest purpose.

Foreign names on street signs.
Strange words lent for signing
documents, for crossing safely
to sitios behind the mountains.

For starting the revolt, the town
would not receive this promotion,
will retain its lowly name east
of everything else.

By 1898, the revolutionaries
from neighboring Dasmariñas and Imus,
would help liberate the passage
into the boondocks.

Not particularly important
in the nation's grand narrative.
But the long war would make
the coffee beans taste like rust.
Pulling their dead roots
is like unsheathing rusted machetes.

The mind is a complex system
of instances, errors, insinuations.

What is lifted is what rises
from the rubble. What is birthed
is this sanctuary sprung overnight
amid mortar and gunfire.

Perhaps, after all, one must
involve the *I*. It could be
that my name will one day
stand for a tree, a sword.

II

Follow, said the tikbalang
in one of my father's stories.
All sorts of whisperings
in the field.

In the same year the town gained
its freedom, the Americans arrived.
Behind them the Japanese.

What does it take
to converse with fire?
To both worship and fear it?
Poor light made for a weak dome
around the house
to ward off the spirits.

Streets branch out
from the town plaza
into the alleyways
where shades assemble.

Rows of coconut trees
plowed down to give way
to new crops. Bananas, abaca,
grass trampled where new paths
were needed, where the barrios
can reach out to the town,
comprehend progress.

Father insists that whenever
the tikbalang toyed with him,
the coconut leaves would reach down
to strike the solitary bark.

Zoning kept the town
allocated for *far, hard-to-reach,*
agricultural. It would take forever
and a late November fog
to traverse the field separating
the West and Central elementary schools.

Rizal's statue in the plaza square
witness to all the town's misgivings.
The stage where we danced
We Built This City in high school,
where the sharp blades
of talahib hid the salvaged.

III

I've just cut open
my first coconut in years
with a dull bolo

IV

The cave's entrance, past the one tree
that fed the birds all summer long.
You imagine it sucking in air
into its blackened mouth like a yawn.
Somewhere deep within, they say
one will find the remains of women
who had dug despairingly into the ground,
buried their bodies in muted desolation.
Web of hair too young to have turned white,
wrists too small for shackles. Not one man
in there: they had all ran off into the evening,
keen on becoming like trees, their torches
extinguished by all-around whispers
of a revolt.

Some fireflies, tired of the light
that can betray them, flee from flame.
That was years ago, and this is
my grandmother's memory.
She would whisper, during dark nights

when rain pelted the rusted roof,
how ruthless the Japanese were.
How names were born under full moons.
So that certain stories are more important
than others. Even now you navigate
the undergrowth, answering the cave's
call – *Feel the walls; it's safe in here.*
No one points in the dark.

V

Sometime in the mid-1980s the town cinema just vanished, the night a thief that took all the film reels, posters, marquee letterings in crude paint mimicking decal which had lured in the townsfolk. It wasn't boarded up overnight; it simply wasn't there anymore that morning. Where the structure had been was a stall where strangers were selling second-hand clothes and other trinkets from Bangkok. *This was progress*, someone in the municipal hall declared. A chance fumigation of the riddle of bedbugs inhabiting the wooden chairs. This was the church ministers condemning the lewd billboards of weekly porn double-features. The mayor couldn't be reached for comment. But there were whispers that this was the machinations of the rural bank, rumored to be owned by an upstart businessman with ties to China. The children from the public elementary school, clasping free nutribun, were promised *Superman III* and *Robinson Crusoe*, back-to-back. Having just been fed soggy noodles as part of the Bagong Lipunan initiative, they are all giddy, eager to get to the front. Where does this line lead to, then?

Reducciones

Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria, holy patroness who knows the symbol waiting inside every image, the solemn verse behind all psalms, who had vanished nine times before being brought to the church where you have since always been, I must confess that last I saw mass before you had been for a funeral, had disappeared for decades, passed through Indang, Mendez, Amadeo to avoid the Aguinaldo Highway traffic, but now found my name again in your plaza, whispered by the man outside selling scapulars and talismans.

Second Event

Music begins with the second event,
the writer Dan Charnas once said.

One moment the backyard
hissed with the rustle of sugarcane.

Then it was coffee, pineapple,
papaya. Multiple cropping,
Father said, something he learned
from taking vocational classes
in the lowlands of Dasmariñas.

Suitable terrain, conducive climate.

Sometimes wind would come
barreling in from the distance,
carrying swift rainfall which pelted
the corrugated roof of the house.

This way, I knew early on
that everything passes.

That Grandmother's leaving
was but the first, that dirges
begin with a hum that
stays for a few dark days
before formally moving on.

Northern Rains

Such joy in skipping stones,
the planet gleanable from a ripple,
like weather inside a dewdrop.
Phenomenon cares not for aesthetics
but what do you make of this photo,
the leaf from this angle? Today
the strange bird wearing a vest
tarried longer by the window
before taking to the horizon.
A shroud of rain in Turin, all roads
leading to Rome flooded. Is it
a hard rain or is it just raining hard?
Redundant water floats the flowerbeds,
the stuff in the basements. Not mine
to divine the storm's path but
entirely up to me to track its eye.
So, what's your contingency plan?
Whoever blinks first loses; to be far
from this encounter is foolish,
to be absent unforgivable. I keep
glancing over to where the fox was,
but it's just tree shadow now.
Sun patches, dapple effects.
Now a gust strikes a hollow
in the leaf, making it oscillate.
What scarce clues we're offered
of nature's holding patterns,

scarcer of its wild turnings.

Birds

Afterwards we mused about
how these birds do that—
dart in and out of the foliage
without snagging their wings
on the jutting branches.
Nothing much to do with speed,
you said, but in their confidence
in their bodies. I mentioned murmuration
and will do again as that's
the easy explanation. But a seagull
had slammed onto a glass window
(which was what started this talk).
I said perhaps phenomena
are reminders that though
their borders are transparent,
certain parts of the sky are closed off.
But lightning pushes through, you said,
like birds. The rest of us drawn
to the light, dying,
gathered around the flame
just because it's there.

Cul-de-sac

Trees between lamp posts
and beneath their shade,
where its blacker and cooler,
sidewalk asphalt whose jutting parts
you imagine tripping on,
so that you've
to be extra careful
on this evening stroll.
A humming persists
on the wires
and you keen into it.

In spite of everything,
all this a reprieve.
No hurry in your steps,
as a late-risen moon
peeks past the city cover.
Where are you going,
tip-toeing around language?
Everywhere, the same
repeating scene – lines on roads,
broken unbroken broken
unbroken. Whatever error
in the computation
the mind fills in,
until the pattern is detected
and you settle into

a steady rhythm. Hint of music
from a faraway radio,
gust on windchime.

There is within each thing
a prism bearing wild light,
moonray. Just like the heart
in the hollow
within a murmururation,
everything living wants
to avoid collision while
becoming something else,
to save oneself and to ask
to be saved. So that
this is a dead end and there is
a wall in front of you.
Also, a way in.

Aubade

17th morning and still a symmetry
of them. Much grayer today, but
any moment now a hint of sun,
a trigger of blue. I suspect
the birds flying low over the lake
and the fog-hugged trees
are readier than I can ever be
for an insight. Ghost of clouds
on the mountainside, rotted barks
among the grass. Everything becomes
this voice insisting on a need
to find something one thinks not
to look for. Now another bend
that now spells *rounding*. Because what for
these paths, sure hands pointing to them
on the map? The signs warn *slippery*
when wet. But it's not wet; it's just early.

Depth of Field

It's staring past what's in front.
Dab of sunlight, ignited petals
among the zinnias, an entire study
inside the moss patches. How
there's a bee in every flower.
Everywhere a focus and a blurring,
you just opted to stay in. Or
did you – from the window
where my gaze would now and then
wander outside, I was looking things
up: the various species of succulent
residing in the cut-down trees,
what the coloration of that leaf
stands for, why I keep pressing
my fingers on air and stone
and bark, reaching to find a pulse.

The Neutral

Tree in the mind,
In the forest, in
The backyard.
What do you see,
The cut-down lumber,
Firewood? Or trail
Leading to nest,
Root, a kind space
A child's body can
Occupy. You need
To picture it, not just
Speak of it. The axe's
Function no different
From the parsing:
The sap is the ink
Doubling down on
The idea, smudging
The page. There is
No way around this.

Deterrents

The disguise is not the what distracts;
it's the bright color within.
Foreign folk in smart casual,
pebbles in their shoes. Nonetheless,
a held door, an outstretched hand.
Myriad voices gathered into one
privilege. Back there, trees and their
steadiness, their non-complaining.
A built-in yearning that knows
no bounds. I was hoping to flesh out
the characters but I keep coming back
to the setting. It's like sensing the clouds
pooling overhead and saying:
we are all of us to be rained upon.
I guess everything in transit
comes back to the familiar,
to kitchenware and cobweb
and bills. I want to stay everywhere
but I'm restricted to visits.
Thistle, gypsophila by the roadside,
puddle from last night's rain.
What was witnessed
must take up my space.

A Break in the Canopy

Sitting here overlooking an empty pond,
I sense the imperiousness of circumstance,
as though both a gift and a moment I somehow
devised. Yet nature insists on being here,
in increments of birdsong, wind drifting in
and out of the branches of surrounding beech,
pine, and other strange trees. The gray lake
in the distance mirrors the now-mid-May sky
of the *Pre-Alps*, as our Italian friend Edoardo
said of the region. Farther across, clouds
hug the peaks of the mountain range.
And where slight rain caressed the ground
a moment ago, sudden sunlight from a break
in the canopy that now finds its way to the gravel.
It's all of it both presence and absence.
In some places, they refer to this as fox weather,
this collage of climate, these intervals and synchronies.
In my country, it's when the mythical creatures
we call *tikbalang* celebrate their union. *In my country...*
So that the reverie is ended. I awake to how far away
I am: a May atmosphere where the sun stares at the fields
until the land splits open. Where storms that gather
around the same eye are typhoons, where
these coming months, monsoon rains will eat away
at the rice husks. We swirl in and out of memory
and phenomena. On the way back, I rest my fingers
on a camphor trunk. Moss-covered planks support

the tree from two sides. Its top was struck by lightning
some years back, offers the gardener. *Cinnamomum*
Camphora, the name tag reads, as though it were
still whole. I allow my hand to fall away, nodding
to the man, also to the tree. I will bring with me
its crippled name when I leave, as all intruders must.