

To Desire in Liturgy

Mysterium Crucis

Before you, I knew wood as my arms,
sprouting from my island body.

Brown seeds spun coconut husk
then split to brown man, brown woman.

I am not a god of scripture or doctrine,
but I reside in them; they in me.

We saw you in the distance of white clouds.
Two pieces - one upright,

as a sword piercing the sands,
another outstretched, a preacher's open arms -

borne on ship and fluttering winds.
You were the tip of that behemoth wood

ripping the veiled sky.
Light spilled on the skin

of marbled demons while they sunk
our painted bodies with their anchors.

We refused you at first.
Blood the price for keeping faith.

Your weariness bore us down.
Blood a pact for changing it.

I thought we had survived
each time my children sprung anew from

my scorched and salted lands,
molested by zeal.

Upon my feet,
my daughter as virgin,

her baro't saya
slumped, sloughing off

defiance,
remembrance.

On my uncrossed brow,
my young brown boy

tacked to a mockery
of you, his soutane

tattered before it
drapes body waiting.

Take these reposes,
horizontals parallel

to the bark of your bed;
yours accrued gold

headboard to foot.
Theirs crusted in grime and worm.

How could
your face be long?

Time cocoons and plods on like a mollusk,
adds a spiral for every year

my children invoke your praise –
A mouth decreeing your altar in halls and laws.

A pair of lungs gasping for dry land
in floods and fires for the unworthy.

A megaphone blasting asphalt
calling a dictator to humility and holocaust.

And after all these centuries,
I wonder how you stay

there barely clothed,
drooping yet never dropping,

as if the weight we took from you
did nothing for your wounds.

Whenever I pray for you to ease
this burden we share,

you point to your sternum, it whispers:
Our heart is suffering.

Psalm of Creation

What Godhand had created
a clod of clay and decided
it be a vessel for a soul,
clumsy and misshapen,
at least for a device of eternity?

Or a sculpture so like Adam
that it cannot distinguish reflection
from desire, companionship from
lust? Forge me from iron, with a
tinge of acceptance
ringing in my tongue.
Clay washes away
and Eve wonders
how my gaze can wander.

Blessed be the one
who perseveres in his own design
and touches the edge of Eve's mouth.

Blessed be the child of Nature
who attends to his mother's wishes.

Blessed be the worshipper,
he will never slip shame under his clothes.

Yet,
blessed be the strong,
those who realize desire is not
the philistine hammer
rather,
the sweet tasting
water softening the clay container
without washing it away.

Crush

I am nine.
I have my first male class adviser.
Something is different; I notice his ears too often,
his skin the color of coffee I do not drink yet,
his perfume that lingers in the air
of the classroom at dismissal.

I am eleven.
I pretend to be a slave to the clock,
turn my head like a sunflower
seeking its sustenance.
I find it in the cherubic face
of the class president.
He catches me once and beams,
his cheeks cushion the eyes that
narrow likewise into smiles.
The sunflower goes against its nature,
wilts in the heat of what keeps it alive.

I am twelve.
A classmate walks up to me, impish grin.
Hey, do you do this?
He forms a circle with his meaty hand,
pumps it up and down above his groin,
sticks out his tongue.
My blank face gives away my innocence.
Not so many months later,
I turn a newspaper page
and a vision appears to me -
a bronzed god emerges from the ocean,
kissed by the chisel of the Creator.
I study where every sinew leads
and rename the underwear ad to
The Birth of Venus into Adonis Beloved.
Finally I understand what the hand-circle is for.
I tuck the paper in a dark corner of a cabinet.

I am fifteen, sixteen, seventeen.
I try to talk to girls at parties.
I message them online.

If this is what love is supposed to feel like,
then it feels like nothing.
I feel more alive when I slip
past the stony gaze of the saints
in the hallway of my home
and into the computer room,
to discover how divine fire tastes when
it explodes in my body,
torch lit by images of reclining men.

I am eighteen.
I see a giant of a man in class,
commit his full name to memory during roll call,
believe in Fate when we're assigned to the same group.
I sit with him on the floor, but how can I concentrate
on literature when already I write verse
as my sight sails a maiden voyage
across the sea of his shirt,
the grooves of his shorts,
the golden forest that grows on his chin and shins?
There is no shadow of a crucifix
to flag this expedition.

I am twenty-three.
I feel like a stranger in my own clothes
when I'm on dates. A crepe halved with
an almost neighbor turns into one movie,
then three, several chai teas, paintings, dinners.
If Time always reaps rewards,
I learn what risk looks like instead -
a taxi ride of a martyr ending in tears.

I am twenty-five.
I have created a chimera in the laboratory of my mind;
his hair, chest, shoulders, arms, belly, legs gathered,
snatched from men in the movies, streets,
boardrooms, daydreams. I visit him whenever
I grow bored. I'll have to release him
one day but not now, not today.
Oftentimes I cannot cross the threshold to love.

Absolution

Father, teach me how to pray.

Father,
I ascend this mountain,
not to heed the reward of wounds,
but to ask for enlightenment.
Lesser spirits of Nature have afforded me
truths I cannot bear.

Father,
tell me why the mothers and sisters
of the lakes and ponds
hide so far away.
The men are like trees.
They also sway
when a sigh is imposed on them.
I learn to count leaves
when they have fallen,
collecting the gifts of a season
proud of its forgetfulness.
Yet there are moons when
they have whispered to me
to gaze upon the naked branches.

Hic corpus est. This is my body.
It is a sapling, it must grow
unimpeded by any coffin of desire.

Father,
what has bound me I cannot unbind.
Is there any absolution
for tempting descent?

Portrait of a Saint with a Chained Dog

You are
silked in light,
the skin across your face follows.

Peace fingers raised,
The triumphant blare
soft in simmering gold
behind your head.

Your shrug lifted by unpainted wings
taken to celestial flight,
so is your gaze heavenward.
We know all of this
when we pray.

I, the beast, darkened dog.
Snout frozen in snarl.
Black electric wrath
fettered at the mouth,
spine bristled in wretched arc.

Like unfaithful husband
or grieving mother,
I beg for your compassion
but the cry is caught, hidden
in a drenched forest
of a coat.

Our distance is the chain
you wield around steady fist;
I am turned against
the painter's brush.

The air burns too bright
for anyone to see
your callouses.

Lover's Synecdoche

To sing your bones is
to release you, long
before I have even
kept a single bead
of sweat.

Memory is a
wishbone snapping,
two clavicles
engulfing the wilderness
sewn between these
blankets.

I forget the gristle
of guilt. I am nakedness
of want.

I am virgin's rapture.
I am

an account of
deep exploration -
drawn string of Cupid's bow,
suckle on the fruit of a rounded lip,
skim an incisor, film of spit,
the ghost of soap haunting
slope of a neck.

How I have held you:
wrists crossed,
the nooks under your armpits,
pelvis upon lumbar.
The body of fear, I feel his rib
cage, the uninvited partner.

We,
victims of solitude,
on a quest to wholeness.
We cause each other
to glisten.

Hymn of a First Kiss

The setting is a Hopper painting:
A car parked by the orange glow
scattered by a lone lamppost.

When he leans in,
you wonder at the nature of
a kiss – a mark slung in blindness,
a trust that a mouth will find
its pair.

But only for a moment,
before soul frees body –
wetness surprises you, leaves you
with an inability to distinguish
bottom lip from tongue,
gives you thirst to drink in
every muscle with the tips
of your fingers. The meandering
is worship; to stop now,
blasphemy.

For this is the miracle of a dream
dressing in flesh.
This is the miracle of loving
in such dark times,
the supreme act.

Prodigal Glass

I recognize the malleability of glass
from a window
when the car pulls out of absolute
darkness and leaves
the sickly pastel paint
of these rented rooms
that fail to mimic their floral namesakes.

The man beside me pulls the stick
shift down and we hurtle
through the night.

Mother, is this how you expelled me
from your womb? Hand over prayer
over control, before letting go,
tasting the future of loss
as you brought me
to the light?

Now I span latitudes
in this journey,
cross rivers into slums,
enter side streets to escape
sight and traffic.

Mother, do not learn this city.
You will not bear the view
of me splayed,
threadbare and thin,
across the hands of a stranger.

Only when silica and shadow meet,
do I understand my reflection
in this prodigal glass.
Only when I am pinned between
another weight and mattress
do I understand lightness.
Only when I am completely shed,
breath on a nape,
do I unburden pleasure.

But tonight, when I glance
outside the car window,
I remain unchanged
while the trees outside
bow to the rushing wind.
Maybe they recognize return
even before we do.

Mother, I can see you
in the face a rosary bead,
like a tear.
Rest, I am going home to you
tonight.

Garden of Darkness

When the shadows of questions collapsed,
the garden of darkness grew over time

in between two wars of desperate love
and unbridled hate, a stabbing

cry signals an unheeded truce
and nails of passion gleam momentarily.

Her head is a balloon deflating,
his hands are a distant landing.

Faithless tongues can lash until five
and life is fleeing as a morning run.

Rising, the sun, he feels like a message away
and passing as a breath in a lathering dream.

Illumination has cast her in a different face,
her arms now curled into drywood knots.

He takes the position of driftwood, supine,
an exercise in giving in to every demand.

Heart. The heart is the only victim of battle -
ragged muscle set off from a misty shore

pushed by four hands that refuse to stack
and form a tower for a white flag to fly.

In the end, there is only noise. In the end,
unseeing. Let there be dark.

Creation's End

Some stories are a circle like this island.

Aloft on an alien current, we reached
this coast in some cosmic soup.
Formed from ridges under
volcanic oceans and ash,
we scraped off the dew-turned-rheum
to witness each other.

Remember the behemoth cartilage,
the evolution of our finned hands.
We emerged from the universe
to forge our own in steam of want,
rumbling cataclysm of will.

Eventually the centuries will take notice.
For now, sunlight is tricked when it falls here,
a basin that tips the blessing from brim to brim.
And when night comes, I seek the patches
of missing suns and find instead our twin shadow
overtaking.

The end is another ridge on this ring of fire.
I am not afraid to join the cliffs steeped with coral.
What will be left will be ossified to fossil and flake.
See how we can still rejoice when
the moments are rendered amber.

Our creation evidences
that memory can withstand burning,
And this story is a circle like this island.
But for now, may we be content on its curve.