

Translating Wildfires

72 Hours

It was a Monday. / On the day of my father's passing, / all the birds flew south / towards my house. / They must have known / I was still asleep, / arrived as a flock / because they knew / not even sunrise was enough / to wake me. / I was still processing the grief / of a life, / all the love I had lost / in 2020: / when everything began / to end for us. / End of laughter / end of touch. / They came for my windows, / pecked at the dog food / I had left / at the front door. / I had gone elsewhere. / My body was winter, / wilting. / There were no sirens / loud enough / to warn me: / the pyre in my dreams / was my father, / his last cigarette / dropping to the ground / as he laid to rest. / It took days for the birds / to beckon me / awake. / And as my dreams finally came / to a close, / it was already Wednesday. / The ones who waited / crooned / into their damn feathers. / It must have rained a dozen storms / while I was away. / They brought me to the river / where skyline meets water. / A spectacle of seagulls / drenched in soft white light. / Then there I saw / my father, / all bird-like, / his arms spread out / like he was ready / to take flight.

Interrogation Room

ONE:

1. Do you know who this is?

I look around my bedroom. The men had dirtied my floors when they barged in. I look to my lover and sigh. *What now?* Of course I know this man. We've slept on the same bed for years now. *I do.*

2. Do you know where he is from?

Somewhere far from the capital, I think to myself. Still unsure about what's going on, I get up from bed and I feel a hand gently press against my shoulder. The right side of my body turns to stone. Yes. *I do.*

3. What's this on his face?

Grief, most likely. I mean, imagine being a father to a daughter you can't call yours. When you run away from truth, they say it comes back tenfold. Is this his history chasing after him? *I don't know.*

TWO:

1. Do you know why you're here?

Love. I truly blame all this on love. The walls are cold and the winter cold bounces off them and kisses my skin. I argue that my lover is innocent. I tell them that I am at fault. My fever rises up to 38 degrees.

2. Tell me about this man.

He's got boulders attached to his hands. Drinks
like a felon. Speaks like a runaway. Dreams like
the world is ending. He has one day a week for rest,
spends weekdays at work. *What do you want to know?*

3. Did he love you?

I think about this a lot these days. His heavy hands.
There was a coldness to winter whenever he was in it.
We lived on the moon alone, together. Dinner was always
served warm. *He woke up early in the morning on Tuesdays.*

THREE:

1. Did you love him?

They're going to take you from me. Come inside my rib cage
let me keep you like a bird. I would do this without question.
Speak of ruin, you instruct me. I keep my palms
open to the sky. Is this where we start to say goodbye?

2. This isn't your fault.

But I tell them that it is. I tell them over and over
that it was I, who lunged for the eye. That it was I,
who hung the bones out to dry, kept the ashes and built
castles for the crows to live in. There are no accomplices.

3. Did you love him?

The men start roping my hands into a knot like a present
or a book ready to be sent out for shipping. We brought socks
and a sweater with moths living in it. *I suppose I did love him.*
Why else would I allow winter to take me away from him?

Warning Sign

I've been watching snakes burn
in the firepit dogs have built
in their pursuit of bone.
I hate to admit I get inspired
when there is a man in my life.
These days, I watch the wildfire.
I stare so hard my eyes can trace
my man's world without moving;
I dismantle all utterances of grace.
I stutter, hesitate to speak
the language of my own flesh.
My country is left submerged
in the smell of rotting flesh,
the custard taste of a dying city.
Warning. They're speaking in tongues.
Warning. I can't feel my chest, my hands.
Warning. I must have seared his lips wishing
ache was someone whispering my name.
All I want from life is to be loved, not hurt.
One morning he led me to the edge of his bed,
counted how many minutes we had left
before everything began to burn.
Until we were nothing but sky. Warning.
How do I say this in a language
no one needs to understand?

Blank Slate

How the body works:
the wheels turn with no
hesitation. Grease
the gears. Remember,

your heart might fail you.
Dreams won't come to rouse
you from sorrow, grief
about the birds, limbs

of trees, hollowed out
nests, continents of
seed. The world is all
but grain, soil, and flesh.

I have waited years
for deserts to touch
rain, waited for snow
to reach me in heat.

Glide over open
seas, over islands
that cease to exist.
I think of cities—

all at once I loved.
The foxes outside
your window, wailing
at the moon. Wonder

how rain has stolen
our fears, tepid
water slipping in

houses that live still

stranded in my dreams.

I've learned how to love
again, the collapse
began. I crack, grab

a crow by the wings,

I find myself in
your weakness. Same place,
same dusty books. Oh,

this is it. The end

leading the exit
wound, circling in
the mouth of a storm.

Aromatherapy

for Danabelle

I heard about the news and I ran out of the house, peppermint oil in hand because, how do I begin to tell you about the pain? How it carves into the bone until you're intricately spent. Until your skin has painted itself a color of lament. My room was doused in peppermint the first year my father passed; a season where he and I were born under trees of fire. Peppermint reduces pain, helps you sleep. It must have worked because when I woke, the cold wind had passed over the riverbank. Already grief had settled in my joints and every crackle reminds me of that winter, months after his passing—a season so still and I can keep writing about it. I can keep writing about the chill, the absence of pollen, the groan of the radiator, all the cracks on my palms the wind left in its path. But there is no winter here. Only bamboo lined up like corpses kept upright, securing the perimeter of every house I've owned. How they managed to stay alive in Ibaraki or Kyoto or Kamakura, I wouldn't know. They always seemed to be alive in Japan, all forests dancing, but it's different here. Where I write this, the bamboo guards my family from storm, from restlessness. Arrived without soul. First to break, but last to rot—much like stiff bodies waiting for the tide. Watch the stones, stacked, balanced to carry the weight of air birds bring as they take flight. Let this wind be the silence we afford to those we choose to protect. When he arrives, you'll recognize his palm pressed on the back of your hand. He might smell like Christmas. You will know it is him when it sounds like a sigh of relief. A sound from your mouth even deaf gods can hear.

When the Storm Fled

I left the country in a wreck, thought about you,
this city you were born in. Here, where I live now.
I would send you a postcard of what it looks like today,
but postcards are futile—they still get lost in the mail.
Instead, here is a photograph of rubble and grime,
the expanse of Las Piñas. Dimly-lit, heaving with smoke.
Let me tell you, they never quite got the origin of its birth,
whether the city was named after pineapples or rocks.
I never learned how to rest my feathers where I sleep.
I fear wheels growing beneath me, all four legs
like an animal's weight on my chest. If I never wake up,
you might find my body drenched in the riverside.
Find me asleep as I drown with fossils, fossils of fruit.

Anecdote¹

¹ When Esperanza fell in love with the river, she packed only the essentials: sweat, sun—the building blocks of a playground. No flowers, no bells, no sound indicating arrival. No leave-taking. Arms stretched wide open, I dream in tongues. When families dream in the same language, do they hum the same song? She sang a kundiman about my father and the song never reached the city. A song of lovers between oceans and whales. She waited for his love to arrive, prayed to rain to wash off the ache in her bones. Cleanse the hurt. If honesty is the universal language of love, listen to no one. Watch silence cut your hands off in your sleep. Cradle them in your arms, dry them like fruit ready to be peeled, dry them like summer tangerines. I have learned how to assert pain in different languages. For *them* to understand. How do I translate dread when my palms are suspended in air? Will the bullet reach my head? How do I calm a fearful heart? It isn't the ringing, bells offering salvation, calling for *Esperanza*, breath of hope. I need a language that understands the expanse of separation. Should I write it in English? What I mean to ask is, will it be easier to love this way? Had my father known she was going to walk into his life the moment he was ready to die, he could've closed his eyes, he could've shielded himself from song.

Law Abiding Citizen

I.

Is the body with a functioning clock.
Is the segregation of what can and cannot be burned.
Is the scent of bodies pressed against the exit.
Is the kitsune you haven't banished from under your bed.
Is the house I live in.
All the addresses I've kept.
All the debt.
All the things I haven't quite memorized yet.

II.

You are requested to surrender your phones upon arrival.
The building will reek of cold metal and old cement,
but nevermind that. There will be documents.
If you write your name over and over you
will eventually understand the meaning of it.
Your mother's name will be there somewhere,
written in shapes that look like a brutalist building
trying to survive the end of another era.
Everything ends at the final stroke of your father's name.

III.

What you get:

Functioning trains, segregated trash, staying in line,
safety at the hands of the police, being able to cross
the street without being afraid of getting run over.
A bleak but steady future. Everything is at stake.

What you bring:

Two suitcases and a backpack. A passport.
The country that issued this permanent.
A stranger. An outsider. Round eyes that
curve at the corner. Skin that burns like
chestnuts under the sun.

What the law says:

There is no resolution, only acceptance.
You have always been and forever be a citizen of this land.
What others say is no excuse. There is no escape from the fact.

IV.

(Multiple Choice. Fill in the blank.)

Upon arrival, your father asks you, “ _____ ”

- a) How is your mother?
- b) Where have you been?
- c) Who are you?

my twenties, abroad

23.

they say i should be lucky.
because while i was away,
the rest of my people back
in the country i grew up in
started to disappear
from their bedrooms.

yes, you heard me.

Japanese TV had no coverage
about the nightmares
my friends had to sleep with,
that they couldn't walk without
looking over their shoulder.
i didn't know how every sound
made them flinch, that everyday
things were used as tools
for destruction. use a pencil,
dig it deep into the socket
so police won't see
where you might run to.
use a different ip address
because you won't know
what the government is up to next.
my friends are now conditioned to think
we are always being watched
by people who have a rulebook
of the intricacies of murder:
how to dispose of a corpse,
how to make the body sink.

24.

and yes, i want to explain:

i am so, so lucky!

but i was also very lonely.

when the sirens came, i led death

to my apartment. it was only he

who understood the way i spoke

because loneliness is a shared language.

thing about death is you first notice

his raven-like wings, how they smell

like cigarette burning on the ashtray.

then his eyes. brown, barren, foreign.

he was ready to jump at the train tracks

all at once. with no hesitation.

maybe that's how i trusted him;

the conviction to shoot the bullet,

not be the one to get shot.

25.

two truths, and many lies:

i spent so much time praying for him

in temples, prayed to spirits in the shrine.

i still don't know if he loved me back.

the cycle applies to most of my lovers—

or how it works with life and death.

you live and live to receive the kiss

and then you're gone. so was my father.

as though he was a stray weed meant to be

taken from earth then swept away

by tsunami. like he was an itch

just waiting to be relieved then forgotten.

my father knew love was bound

to kill one of us so he opted to go first.

test the waters out for me

like a parent would for a child
understanding water for the first time.
i can swim without fearing depth.
my father and i. my father and i.
we never even got to swim together.

26.

death is something to make peace with.
after all, my mother says as she peels fruit,
aren't we all just hurtling towards slumber?
she knows growing can free us from sorrow.
sometimes, she'd tell me to come home.
love is tiring, anak, she knew my lover's face
may hold the eyes that wish me death,
he had eyes that can kill you in your sleep.
she knows. so whenever i came home,
she'd pluck the crow feathers off my back,
one by one. *it isn't time yet, wag muna.*
ridding me of wings like i wasn't meant to fly.

27.

look, i'm still alive despite all the revolutions.
the feathers on my back have turned to powder,
became the wind. i still never learned how to
shoot the bullet, be the protector not the assailant.
i have returned in the land of disappearing men,
i watch out for death. what form will he come in next?
will he wear a peacoat? will he wear a dragon tattoo?
will he come in uniform? will he bring a gun?

This Common Greeting is to Say Farewell

Oftentimes a nod to persistence.

お疲れ様でした² to the wildflower that refuses

the hand. Refuses to be plucked or swayed
by wind. My tongue is my back arched, bowing

to strangers I've never met, when I thank them
for all the time they've spent. They work for a city

they remain a stranger to, still try to hold on to,
and these are the words I utter under my breath.

A phrase that has become as frail as my father's hair.

You might find my mouth dark in the evening,

terrified to speak of farewells. お疲れ様
approximates the palpable distance between us,

urging each other to rest. I say this as a greeting
to the body in the room—one that hums to the sound

of bells. You thank them for persevering. Offering
お疲れ様 to the foolishness of a young girl's heart.

Lately, I've been wishing to hear my father's voice
on the phone. お疲れ様 – to hear the air whistle, his voice

like a bicycle song. The denouement sees no beginning.
Here is a demolition notice waiting to be read.

² *お疲れ様でした or otsukaresama deshita literally means “you are tired” when translated to English, which sounds derogatory but there isn't an actual translation. Usually, the phrase is used as a salutation, greeting, or sometimes to give thanks. お疲れ様でした is a way to express one's appreciation to another for the hard work they are about to do or have already done.

Changing Narratives

Your father tells you he sees infrared,
that the rings around your head are purple.
He picks blue cigarettes because it reminds him
of the sky you both look up to. He didn't carry stones
inside his pockets but had those ocean eyes that welled
whenever he felt a wave about to crash. He danced
in rain because people would see madness, not the storm.
Not the storm that brings deluge into the city.
Listen, he worked to the bone but here you are,
scrolling through the fucking internet. Scrolling through life,
sometimes you live without a care in the world when
he worked nights so he wouldn't lose another daughter.
Your father lived not knowing you lived a life of poetry
about a father who disappeared, then became the garden.
But there were nights he would call to tell you he was
riding the wave. You taught him poetry, and for you he learned
the flow. Child, when you think of him now, think of sand
that he wanted to hold. Think of the chuckle, quiet
laughter from his lips. All the violets that never made it
to his last sleep, think of the seas he has yet to meet.

The Bubble Economy

In the lexicon of death, you may find the following:

1. Oximeter
2. Sweat
3. Dehydration
4. Recession
5. 過勞死³ which, in the English language, does not exist.
6. Hopelessness
7. Asphyxia
8. Starvation
9. An enclosed gasket
10. Sound of space

Outside, a hundred lanterns mourn for the end of the Showa Period.

It was in the Showa Period that the term 過勞死 was coined. In 1969, a man a year away from his 30s died from a mysterious heart-related problem. During an interview with the country's biggest press, his parents spoke about a river. They wondered if his heart knew that it was about to strike its final pulse, wondered about his veins, if they let out a howl before they collapsed. About a decade later, the term 過勞死 was coined referring to the phenomenon of the largest collective that had dropped to the ground, writhing from a heart attack. Authorities assumed this was a mass suicide by a group of twenty-somethings, but it wasn't. Death was not their first choice; they only wanted the cyclone under their beds to bring them back to shore.

In the last year of the Showa Period, my estranged lover was born. The first person I would wake when, for the first time in my life, the Garden Town would be covered in immaculate snow. The first person I would decide I am ready to die for. He would wake in the morning to leave for work, then come home in time for us to bruise each other's palms.

When they found my father's body, they noticed his fingers were stained with mulberries which was odd because mulberries did not grow where he wept. They checked the CCTV and the last sound they

³ Karoshi (過勞死, Karōshi), which can be translated literally as "overwork death", is a Japanese term relating to occupational sudden mortality.

could catch was the crack of his back. It seemed louder than a clap of thunder, louder than the hiss of a nation's dwindling birth rate.

An ebony curtain draped over his torso. There were lacerations on his ankles and you could tell that he had tried to sever his feet off so that he had no choice but to stay. To not go home. Perhaps he wanted to run away by rendering himself disabled.

When his ghost finally made it to my doorstep, I welcomed him unknowingly with an open mouth wider than a whale swallowing the earth. My body's first instinct was to eliminate all bodies of water that resided peacefully with my organs.

The first to leave was the lake I dug and kept in my stomach. The second was the kill that connected my bladder to my intestines. I could feel his hand brushing over my hair like a worried parent watching his child, all drugged up and weary. My cheek touching the porcelain lip of a toilet. Hands unmoving. Ears ringing with regret. His vague form crouched over me, whispering: *watch the whirlpool.*

Stare into the eye of the world.

Whale, Goodbye

*Legend has it that 52 has been roaming
the ocean for decades, entirely alone.*

By the 1960s, almost all the large whales had gone,
and I can't help but quote several lines from this study
because look at the mess that we made. Listen

to the whales calling out
in higher frequencies
man has yet to decode
'cause all we ever do
is caress the water.
And then life turns to dust
as our bones, our joints.

What I can say is, boy,
do we spend our time
washing off all the blood
that's meant to keep us dead.

Why on earth do we cloak
our feet in leather
on such warm, humid days?
Can almost hear the yowls
of the cow whose rotting
flesh must have stiffened up
with every lash and pierce.
A curved, burning metal
the butcher used to scare
and to sear their skin with.

Can whales hear the anguish
of walking on four legs?

A whale wishing for light,
crying out ancient songs
into the ocean's void—

bathypelagic creatures,

first to react to the quake.

You can hear the overtone of delight
from the moans of a walrus next door.

In the cavern to your right,

a whirlpool.

Life

is a shitshow,

is a sitcom

waiting for the storm to arrive.

And after decades worth of research, science writes:

the loneliest whale in the Pacific spent years vocalizing at 52Hz.

To give you a better idea:

think of a human

laughing

after losing a life.

Think of a sleepy man,
red, box-cut overalls,
sunflowers in his hands,
but when he opens his
eyes you can almost *feel*
the chill of an ocean,

can *see* the barnacles
on his knuckles, the ones
blooming on his forehead.

His voice the fermata,
a national anthem;
the way your country weeps.
Oh, I do love singing,

How lonely it must be
getting lost for decades,
only to meet with spear
or bullet or poison

or self.

Imagine crying out,
fists cut and pulsating.

Imagine, crying out
only to be ignored.

October

after Gabrielle Calvocoressi

“All a ghost wants is to be chained
to a place, to someone who can’t forget
her.”

— Sally Wen Mao

If I’m going to grieve an entire lifetime, I intend on doing it
in increments. A year has passed, but today I miss you most.
You arrived in my dreams again last night, wanted to tell you
how much I miss you. Miss you constantly, miss your smoke,
the way thorns come out of your tongue when you try to speak
(so you smile instead—bashfully) miss your pale skin, the scars
on your cheek. Miss you and your leather jacket, all patches,
all song. You would’ve loved me now. You would’ve wanted me
to stay in the city longer. Miss you, wish I could’ve cried with you—
did you cry when the wind took me away? Like when we met again
when I was 13 on the hotel bed and you kept staring at my face,
how I looked like my mother but had your nose. Couldn’t tell you
that we had the same heart, that my world began to fall in place
when I saw myself in you. Miss you. I remember all your tears,
all your fears that we would never meet again—but we did.

I’m sorry. I miss you. I still leave flowers at your door.
Nevermind what shape. Come in ghost form. Let’s take pictures.
Miss you. We could’ve had the blackest coffee in Tokyo together.
Spent all that time on the telephone and kept thinking we had
the rest of our lives to work out a schedule to meet. Miss you.
Why didn’t you say goodbye? Not a single email. Not even a call.
When the world began to enter ruin did you stop to think of me?
Did you miss me? Hate how I have to speak about you in past tense.
We liked to have coffee together. We liked to play the guitar together.
We had limited time together. We had the same sneeze. We cried quietly.
And now I keep waiting for ghosts by the window. All the things
that reflect lead me back to your light. Miss you. Won’t you come by?