

FROM TANGERE

Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr.

IL BUON DI SI CONOSCE DA MATTINA

Let the morning come
with the birds' sing-song
gossip, the rustle

of wings skittery

among the leaves. Let
the light ripen
to honey, spangled

with dust and pollen,

the hive awhir
in its glistening
et cetera.

So much preamble

when you only want
to eavesdrop. To hear
the subterranean

pulse, how the smallest

tremors can sever
a leaf from a branch.
A mouth can go on

and on, and it does.
What else is there to do
but listen? You press

an ear against the wall,

wondering what silence
would say if only
it had a tongue.

THE CATASTROPHE

When a gun, finally,
is fired, it is not
a surprise. A gun

fulfills its purpose
to launch a bullet.
And a world might change;

the world might not
change. The gun itself
is indifferent

as a mirror, clear-
eyed in its gaze.
Meanwhile, eight o'

clock, the rattling
of plates. Meanwhile,
a tectonic shift.

A house is burning
while you read this line.
Another chapter

unfurls yet again.
O reader, O hand
tracing the outline

of the barrel
and muzzle, what
constitutes a life?

There is friction.
The texture of it
and how you remember

as the texture of it.
When a gun fires
and you are singled

out for ruin, take
heart in the beauty
of ash. How it feels

like your body
is scorched, your smoldering
bones ground up.

THE CHASE ON THE LAKE

Here is the world and here, if you zoom in,
is the human condition, a pursuit
of something or someone, the heart's familiar
refrain in the back and forth of asking
and answering, the story sliding from one
sentence to another, a punishment
borne by the mind, its singular affliction,
attention as a river meandering
through a forest dense with the scent of mud
and wilting flowers, the mouth again busy
with conjuring atmosphere, details inked
on skin and every surface, *horror*
vacui, the body in motion burdened
by itself, the weight of its wants, its voice
pleading for yet another line, hook
caught in the throat, language a lure one keeps
chasing, the syllables slippery as quick-
silver, rushing headlong into the brambles
of history, how far the words have come
from their source, how much it has cost to know
or not to know what they mean, always a price
for each hunger, however small and quiet,
insistent as rain needling the lake,
the sky's incantation to return water
to the earth, no end to be found when all
the hand does is to spin and spin a tale if only
to undo the weave, thread snagged, fraying,
until a poem, a day, a string breaks.

CHRISTMAS EVE

The day comes when the landscape bleaches to gradations
of bone: off-white, mother-of-pearl, the many names of snow.

Tropical gothic rendered post-apocalyptic, ode
to a fractal world being made and unmade, the heart

clenching, unclenching, no other choice except to stop.
Description of weather, disclosure of portents

to cloud the setting. Page after page, the calendar
reaching its end, the arc of the story thrown into high

relief. A man dies without seeing the dawn but not
before saying something epigrammatic, inscription

for a hero. A woman runs and runs on her way
to her last breath. What a year it has been, and almost

it is over. It is not over. There is still the tongue
indexing each pain of the smallest bone and muscle.

There is still the wind that changes everything it touches.

EPILOGUE

I admit light
is only an excuse to see a shadow.
How much

more interesting: a still
life edged
with the rippling
dark.

A story cross-hatched with Victorian
pathos, each bruise
an ampersand

that links one
episode to the next. And thus
this poem,

this chapter an arc
bending as wish

fulfilment.

Anti-climax: a priest dying
of apoplectic
stroke. Of *bangungot*: sleep

paralysis, the mouth held
mid-breath, mid-scream,
a nightmare

that only deepens
and deepens

into a submarine
shade of black.

Another man

succumbs to opium,
his name forgotten in the fullness
of time. Someone

else dies of dysentery.

We should gladly

kill all of them—or we should let others
live so that they can suffer.

What does it matter

if they die
or do not die?

Every life is touched
by hunger, rain, salt-
flecked wind, dust. And dust
and dust. Let me start

again with light.

Let me start again with shadow.