

Stellar and Other Poems

Dinah Roma

STELLAR

for Bimboy Peñaranda

During a break at a late night poetry reading
you asked me to look up at the skies. Inside the hall
younger poets were huddled still over what could
have been a better line for an image conjured
by a girl yet too young to even think of poetry.
How could she have thought of galaxies that way?
asked one with impatience. *Why not?* You said gently
as you led me to a spot on an empty driveway nearby,
where at the end of it a street lamp was the only source
of light from a world elsewhere, a lonely halo
hanging around it. *Do you see them?* you began
pointing into the night sky. An outline of a figure.
Another one, traced by your finger. At the farther end,
another shape you named as you smiled. *On a really dark night,
you can see more than a thousand stars.* At that angle,
they were perhaps more agreeable to the eyes.
More than a thousand stars and yet I kept missing the sight.
They were to my urban mind merely the beyond,
sphere and an outstretched arm not giving up
on another poet seeing those mythical clusters again—
the water bearer, the crane, the king, the hunter, dwellers
in time and space, remnants of stories that engulf
in each shift of bright and dark, gifts to poets all,
bestowed by the lesson from sorcerer or sage
coming upon a celestial map here on earth

revealing the secret of what it is to stand still,
sharpen one's vision against the dark,
while our metaphors constellate
into the wide circumference
of the universe.

WE SHALL WRITE LOVE POEMS AGAIN

for Gwee Lee Sui

When you pointed out the tree
And the moonlight as you recall her hand
Soft in yours like the first time
You held her close to you, I wanted to urge you
To do many things before your voice
Trailed into the burden of images
Choking you to tears.

 You see,
I had my own battle
With love poems. Some time ago.
Betrayed by them. Worn out by them.
I used to think we poets owe
The world beauty. Wizard of words,
I trouble them for the possible.

Until I learned love poems
Do not bleed for broken hearts.

We mine the world for its coldness
To shield our naivety even as the tree
flourishes on its own. Pebbles settle
into the walkway under the rain.
The moon's glint tires in the change of day.

What we forget are the roots
That do not care for secrets.
They gnarl into loam, in deep moist,
shunning surfaces.

Speak of love again
after bearing its truth and you can
breathe more deeply now,
desire for that one again.

And your eyes that once could no longer bear
the empty night skies will discern
the faint outline of star-crossed lovers,
and wish for the wisdom of those
adrift in their own realm of the heavens.

CITY ILLUMINATION

November dusk. Attempts at writing
the last paragraphs of a letter before the day fades,
the light fades, before the city loses its details,
and corners blend into the thoroughfare.

Night falls. Before my mind weakens in focus
as the glass walls of this café chill
in the shift in weather, and the trees outside,
oh, yes, the sentinels of seasons,
their branches now covered in a thousand
pins of lights. The illumination startles.

The slow change of color. Its radiance
redeeming the city's darkness, redeeming
the only street we had walked up once,
when nothing could no longer be redeemed,
and we are overcome by the plainness
of the moment when we remember
the street in its starkness

Before dusk. And how for a second
we are bewitched
by a faint radiance nearby.

EARTH SONG

Here I mend my quarrel with the earth
for the decades it eased my passage
through its landscapes, for what could count
as its gifts, the mountaintops beyond
my reach, shorn now of their forests,
the quiet waters in the grooves, drawn
to ruins. For what I did not see
as my life, as my own trudge into the dark
of trees, for what I was only able
to see as my own, separate and free,
for the fiction that now drives me
to seek once again what made me reach
this point, thinking neither of hell nor angels,
the lands shaking us to the core
steading us to the loss of everything,
to track in daily the only rejoice of life,
where there was once beauty
intractable now but through song
like the wind invisible except
for the graceful quiver among the leaves
hostage to the seasons

FIRE DANCE

We gathered around her to look
at what was left of what could have been
her breast. Her skin's silky texture
roughened. The mold of fertile years
flattened. By the bank of dried leaves
at the foot of the tree where smoke rose
like ghostly lure, she went. She didn't know
what fire can do. At the instant it caught her,
we didn't know where the crackling came.
The dress she had worn in play was hemmed
in hues. The leaves, the flesh, the burning
was the same. All I remembered was the little
body and its face grimacing in pain. A small
hand frantic to stop the flame. As if it could
lift the heart out of its cage. A moment
so familiar as when she danced
whirling in joy. So blessed,
my niece, winged with fire.