

ELIAS' STORY and Other Poems

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Elias' Story

An incendiary ignites the story. What other choice do I have but be drawn to the flame?

To be tied to a horse and whipped, paraded around town. To carry memory as ornament, as chain, as sentence.

You imagine if the mountains would be a good place in which to die. The sea would bloat a corpse, floating as a postulant under the sun.

If nothing else, the air is heavy with quiet. The horizon outlined by crags. The night sky asterisked with stars.

Take the end of the rope and form an S. The steps to tie a hangman's noose are simple enough if you follow.

A weapon delivers injury. One can only receive it.

You can / not make this up: a criminal / body cut apart, head / and arms and / legs severed/ from the torso, hung / from long- / fingered branches, / scattered / in different / indifferent / towns.

The birds could keep secrets to themselves. As have I.

What would you give, what would you not give? Each page is an invention. Each silence too.

I have been foraging all my life for something to sustain me. Dear retribution, dear revenge: tell me how to find your watermark day after fractured day.

All Saints

That the dead could be buried

but are not, lying

on the ground

instead. Skulls and a heap
of bones, like a rosary

undone. They don't mind
(aren't they beyond
minding)

but see how random
it all becomes. God

of entropy, the universe is yours

to play with, an art
for which we are breathless

with prayer.

I don't pretend
not to know what I am:

skeleton

dressed in skin, eating
and wanting, touching,

riding buses, trains (mind
the gap), dragging my shadow
across the pavement, digging
and always digging.

Soil is mostly dirt
and dead
organic matter.

There is no mystery.

This world is a graveyard.

Basilio

When a bullet grazes
your forehead, consider
it nothing to think
about. This is the way
one lives from moment
to given moment: wood
whittled and nicked
with a persistent chisel.
If there is pain burrowing
in your skin, you know
it is a sign that
your body can still feel.

The Espadañas

In which the characters arrive in a carriage, stirring dust along the way, their rococo names unfolding as a lotus blossom: Doctor Don Tiburcio de Espadaña and Doctora Doña Victorina de los Reyes de De Espadaña.

She wears the world and its gewgaws. A gown in silk taffeta, embroidered with tendrils and flowers. A velvet hat with a stuffed parrot mounted between a burst of ribbons.

How easy to make a caricature out of something that you are not. But to paint a self-portrait, the hand hesitates and trembles, brushes the air and cups a bandaged ear.

He hobbles after her, stooping and shuffling, the walk of a defeated man. He stammers when he calls out to her. His mouth fills and fills with stones.

Marriage as an exchange of vows, as chain-link fence, as drop of a judge's gavel. He tells her that rice powder makes her face unnaturally white. Her eyebrows wrinkle and she stares at his false teeth.

Someone told her, Señora, you are the only strong-spirited person in this tropical outpost. Her husband blinked and said, The strongest s-spirit that I know of is a-ammonia.

Vessel of the Holy Spirit, pray for us. Humble friar and champion of the faith, pray for us. Wounded victim, balm of deepest sorrow, mirror of vice and virtue, spare us, O Lord.

A cross that sweats or a cross that grows—which is the greater miracle? The pilgrims wave handkerchiefs as the parade passes. The Espadañas follow each bead of prayer, each dreaming of their versions of heaven.

Maria Clara Weds

Permit me this voice when nothing else
is true. Nothing passes without drama—

what I am about to confess must color
every rustling page of my story.

Fact masquerading as fiction; fiction
disguised as fact. In truth, I am tired

of this story, of my ever pregnant
silence in this story. The theme is sorrow

and I am its variation. Running
the scales on the Bösendorfer before

Angelus strikes, pray for us sinners now
and at the hour of our death. Prayer threaded

to every breath, bite, the marching cadence
that is called a day. Between enough and not

enough, what can I want from this world?
My dress is lined with itch. My life has never

belonged to me—it belongs to my father
and to my husband waiting at the end

of the aisle. Then to my children yet
to be born, who will latch on and suckle

my milk, every minute of a year
indistinguishable from other years.

What a lark to say this, to cut through the rib
cage and hold the heart under the sun for all

to touch and see. The truth is beating—
how I long to probe its ragged veins,

palpate the muscle, crush it in my palm.
How I long to extinguish a flame,

how I thirst to be annihilated.