

Five Poems

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At the Top of Mount Santo Tomas

At the top of Mount Santo Tomas
the sky loomed clearly, uncluttered by trees

which spread like a carpet before me.
Top of the world—this was

all about the first syllable and the first fruit.
Under my feet the ocean rushed

to fated shore and I wait for a revelation
but a hawk with a lonely cry

broke the silence into a thousand unheard voices,
though I felt the earth churning as if to release

bodies from rock holes with no dates on them.
No, that could not be harrowing, so far away

from mortal safety, more like a tillage of soil
at sunrise, the words now in their assigned places

in the perfect garden, titles of origin
before titles of heroes, and the visitors,

who would swarm the gate when allowed inside,
would wonder at the absence of tablets

bearing biographies and notice,
furthermore, angels keeping to themselves

under the rose trellis, weaving flowers into
garlands as I watched the clouds

of Mount Santo Tomas swirl and dissolve
after forming the rigid signals of day.

There's nothing much I could have witnessed
at a level with little air, but I knew

the universe began and ended here
under my shoes. The rise of the forest carried

the alphabet the angels wove at the vanguard
of creation, and the plants and animals

learned their diction from inevitable acts
of harm and retribution, no quarters given,

the blood left to dry on the ground, untouched.
The forest was quite too: on the branch the hawk

had left, a torn leaf dangled and the mouse
he could have snatched scurried warily.

The dews began to drip on the grass.
I uttered a name but no one answered.

Was this the revelation I had waited for—
truth and law inclined to the order of things?

Too Much Rain

I wish someone would tell me
why it rained so much yesterday,
if God could not have thought
of something else to drive sense
into our thick skull. Houses
sank under lagoons of brackish
liquid, furniture swam
to knock down streetlamps
or tear the door from your carport.
We had nothing to eat.
We slept on rooftops.
We know that would happen.
We built on a valley
that does not suck floodwater fast enough
so all night, as thunder rolled
and lightning burned the powerline
it rose and confounded
our understanding. Next morning
cars piled one atop the other
like broken monoliths,
and people looking out of the windows
at a changed world. Some touched
their heads as if entranced by the leaden sky.
God, give them a drink of water.
It's dark enough where they have been.

More Secret than a Carved Stone

I live near a hospital and everyday at intervals
I hear the shriek of ambulances as they
speed through the neighborhood.

On death's account
the summer hurries
through its pace, rolls up its sleeves to yield the blood
for protocol or compromise. For quite a while the gray birds
sit motionless on the powerline, listening, following the last
anxious note of emergency.

What death brings
it takes away to some
place more secret than a carved stone—a voice, a memory,
a tune—to lie forever covered with freezing raindrops at noon,
that is what the birds watch for beyond the surface sound,
beyond the unwritten pain, a cross-stitched beingness of nevermore.
In my sleep I die hearing the sound over the crickets' noise
in the grasslands of the park, then I live again when silence occupies
the vacancy, but the urgency remains, the tension at the wire
that takes away the good men and leaves nostalgia twitching
along little sparks, as if a signal for a conflagration, as if to say
the body is a paradise, beware what you touch it with.

Today I touch it
with my palm
in the room where everything cries for attention, grope for the nose,
the familiar jut of the chin, down the breast and abdomen and crotch.
I feel the life sliding on bony crags, the unseeing eyes, and know
in the end a heaviness will cover the sleeping town, the post office,
the shopping malls, while now and then the siren blares
with blazing lights, but you cannot tell if it is
coming or going, only that nothing can stop it, nothing.

The Day You Were Born

Always not as you left it.
the trees inverted, the water
flowing upward and the feeling that
the car would not stop at first try,

on a sullen day in December,
or was it just what you thought
on the day you were born? No ship
sighted on the bay, the palm trees

like coastal guards. You knew the door
would be shut, but you knocked just the same,
shouting a message without language
about a dark forthcoming when it

was dark all around you. And corn,
yes, corn boiling in an oil can
and filling the kitchen with the sweet
scent you could not smell. There were rumors

building up to a catastrophe
but not as strong as your desire
to step to the future where your past
belonged, forgettable, absent

in the chronicle of love.
They had to do with hayrides
and summer moons, carols and folktales
and dancing in open fields—

no frills of apron or crossed lances
for a pricked pride, no god of
salvation. Now the troops moved,
weapons engaged, targeting

your century. No last drink, no last
kiss, no romance to soften goodbye,
but goodbye just the same among
the innocent boats. We threw

our things into the horse rig
and galloped to the village square
where the men waited to bring us
to the mountains. You were quiet,

sensing by the movement
and noise that something would happen.
We were brought to the depths of
the San Mateo wilderness where

a community had grown
to take care of emergencies.
A clearing held stacks of flashlights,
barbed wire, shortwave radios,

ropes, canned goods, rice, old newspapers.
In a year of uncertainty
what would these insure? We ate
and waited for the singing birds

to bring news of secret compacts
for blood in the sea, we ate
and hoped to be untouched,
a distant prospect because

those without majesty, without
charity had pushed the papers
already. Our hands shook
with the knowledge, fixing

grenades, tuning to sharp
frequencies, no dance music
to expel the passion within,
but reports, reports to known

and unknown advisers in the hills.
Once we trailed a suspect
to the plaza, then he slipped
into the marketplace, then into

a cockpit. We left him exposed
in a meadow to stare at the crows.
Provisions insured quick feet,
that's all, but would not drive away

the anxious hours of waiting.
We trembled as the dogs howled
where there were no strangers,
but the darkness taught us caution

and the courage of the unseeing.
We learned not to sign our names
on anything that could be torn
and replaced, we expected conflict

but not gunfire, for we were
at the edge of nowhere, camouflaged
and hard to get to. What we feared most
were snakes slipping into our bags

and hats. They could not be appeased
with food or speech. This was not
about sacrifice but survival
to see whose flag would wave the longer

although at certain points
I wondered why people should be saved,
why you should be kept alone like that,
why not let the ship come

and scoop us all and leave us
in an island to do as we pleased,
but the world must have its way,
so when the news came of planes and bombs

and a harbor, we were engulfed
by astonished acceptance that things
would not be the same again,
but not you—you kicked the door

of your room, kicked and kicked
until the woman who had
a hard time finding leaves to boil
turned the knob and gently pulled you out.

You were stung by the light and cried.