

ANGRY CHRIST AND OTHER POEMS

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In 1950, artist and dilettante Alfonso Ossorio returned to the Philippines and stayed for 10 months in the family sugar estate in Victorias, Negros Occidental, where he designed and executed a mural for the parish church that his family had built for its workers.

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Sugar

Look inside my mouth,
they say—walls
the color of dove's plumage,
ripe flesh of mangosteen,
the sweetest sugar.

In these summer fields,
I'm the pale-skinned stranger
with every word I utter.
Never *kamót* for hand.
Always, fire for *kaláyo*,
sugar for *kalámay*.

On the sanctuary
where a preacher
once divulged the secret
to eternal life,
I paint
their indolent god.

One day, I'll let them in
on the real secret:
No one is ever listening.
We alone shall till
this earth till the walls
of our mouths turn white,
and sugar seeps
from the crowns
of our teeth, burning
our heavenly tongues.

Angry Christ

Alfonso Ossorio (c. 1950)

I have no memory
of you teaching me
to love.

Instead, I learned the sting
of my father's buckle
with every unrecalled verse.
Sharp crash of china
on the kitchen floor,
while in my room
I read the psalms aloud
to drown out the noise
of my mother's departure.

How the world
swoons at the story of how
you and your father
are one and the same,
and one with a third
being—hallowed ghost
in the form of a bird.

This is how I shall give
you to the world: as a tendril
of fear. Your heart on fire,
eyes suffused with fury, arms
outstretched, and behind you,
the most monstrous hands,
as if maneuvering
a demon marionette.

Our Father

Twelve years old, I feel the push
of wood against my knees.

Between bone and bare skin,
vessels and nerves crushed

as Lucifer beneath the angel's
feet in that picture I once saw

in a book I was forbidden
to read. The priest said ten

Our Fathers, and I could leave.
The books said nothing

about talking to paintings.
They were naked, the angel

and Lucifer. Arms and thighs,
torsos, all that muscle sewn

to alabaster bodies, a man
would suffocate under all that

weight. Here, Jesus smothers us
with his glare, his rage a blaze

of orange flat on the wall,
blinding color splashed on stone.

Closing my eyes, I see only
the angel, gripping my shirt.

I hover inches from the newly
waxed floor, grasp his wrist

as his wings spread wide and fill
my vision, and varnish floods

my nose. *Do not bring us to the test—*
I sink deeper into the kneeler,

flatten what little cushion
had been sewn shut within.

Skull

No genius
in matters of the body,
I cradle you in my palms:
accident of exhumation.

Why come to me now?

I hold you up to the sun,
see the light penetrate
your corroded crevices,
search for proof
that once, you were
someone's son.

Once, someone
called you
Father.

Tell me how the sky
bled the day you vanished,
how you came to inhabit
this unmarked grave.

Tell me how
to disappear
while the rest of the world
spins forward.

I, too, yearn
for the insignificant life:
To be held by a stranger
as if I were an ordinary stone,
a trifling, mortal shell
buried in loam.

Icarus Makes a Wrong Turn

and so his wings don't burn.
Instead, he drifts farther from the sun,
his stringy frame helpless in the wind,
spared the fatal tumble out of sky
and plummet into water.

This is how my son
will first hear the myth: A mere boy
drowning in the ocean
in pursuit of his one, great wish
only clips the wings of future men.

My son, who has yet to master
the strength of his legs,
the feel of the earth
pushing against his tiny feet,
will not learn to fear
dreaming of flight—
of setting the clouds aflame
like a hurtling meteor
fighting the pull of gravity.

He will learn to swim,
that when he plunges into water,
he will know how to plumb it
as if he'd breached the stratosphere
and entered the realm of stars.