

Lakan Ma. Mg. D. Umali  
1-A S. Tũaño St., Barangay Batis  
San Juan City, Metro Manila  
[ldumali3@up.edu.ph](mailto:ldumali3@up.edu.ph)

## **Ten Poems for the Dead**

### **Prayer for the Sick**

God of worldly comforts, god of strong bones,  
god of once and never again will I  
vanish without telling anyone. God  
of why isn't he picking up? Call me.  
God of escitalopram, god of dust,  
god of the sweet waters and gentle faults  
who cradles all the lost children from birth  
to failure. God of what can't be let loose  
on polite society. God of plague  
and favor, god of sacred anger  
and total forgiveness, untangle me:  
grant total release, whatever it takes,  
touch me bare-faced, You possess such ways.  
Grant me grace, grant me strength enough these days.

## **Isolations**

Calcified time, the forbidden  
outside, endless contaminations

wait for my acquiescence to grief  
but I'm too tired to even wreck

myself. The slow room brandishes  
its singular, static objects;

patient books, emptied plates, pale peach  
walls, belatedly-swept floors, cool

kinetic wind, chattering sun  
insistent in its reminders

to wake up, I turn heliotropic,  
heat and light keep me from final decay.

Each small day a wan artifact  
of repetition, I sit, sleep,

pray the sickness stays still, away,  
dead in its own dying. For now,

inside or out, the world's the same.  
I ignore the catastrophes.

## **The Dog, Rose**

In the lonely sickness, she comes to me  
old, city-worn, shaky-legged, organ-scarred  
four years street-swept, six more at shelter

and deliriously happy, she leaps  
from car to garage, garage to garden  
to fill my grief with a great gold beauty.

Crossbred heart, mix of canine and angel  
she leaves hair everywhere, strands of daylight,  
relishes her safe meals, good for the kidneys

and offensively bland. At lunch, she wolfs  
the gruel too gladly, God-touched creature  
of simple wants, holy ways, she spends days

being, sun in her face, immaculate smile  
though she has only five broken teeth left.  
She lolls on earth and pavement, jumps and marvels

at fallen branches of pink bougainvillea,  
she squeezes rubber balls in her soft mouth  
and chews out my vain, mortal frustrations.

She moves in brightness, her arthritic limbs  
hop over grey potholes and tattered scraps  
of thrown-out life, she barks at no one

but me when she asks her right share of food  
or attention. When I descend to the garage,  
she swiftly emerges from her hiding

place beneath the car, runs to the tall gate  
and demands to walk through the battered world.  
It has been so cruel to her, but she is still

and certain in her love and pardon, she knows  
too well the course whims of people's frailty,  
knows she possesses the grace to forgive them

and me.

## Woman and Being

Solitude, the white, familial sunlight  
my constant, soft-fingered companion  
we've grown to be friends, cyclic images;  
Rose sleeping on the porch, my mother's birds  
darting rainbow-colored in their cages,

bubble-wrapped packages piling on steps,  
occasional trips outside to retrieve  
groceries, required and inconvenient  
visits to bureaucracy, staid city  
with its placid, grey impermanence.

Noise of daily life gone; heavy footsteps  
on blistering sidewalks, whir of a train  
on its way to elsewhere, the asinine,  
erotic conversations in nightclubs  
and strange bedrooms, the perpetual cries

of want, now silenced. I tremble at first,  
the magnitude of aloneness, nowhere

to run but inward, headlong into thoughts  
true and taunting with bright possibilities.  
What I was cannot survive the sickness  
nor do I want it to. I will not die

as a lie. I peel away the grief, the doubt  
to reach my future of long skirts, jewel  
tones, a daughter's face. The self coheres clear  
in the quiet: supple, serene, star-like,  
naked of disguises, raw as purity.

I grow alone, happy with animal  
company, Rose's languor, the house's  
chattering, I keep to myself, inner  
monologue and light my prime reflections.

Little clatter to foster straight denials  
or repressions, I have time for my body  
to consider, bend, touch, meditate, lie  
in truth, the real clear in crystalline air.

I've grown to love the lambent tenderness  
of gentle things: Rose lying at my feet,  
prayers of mother at nighttime, soft patter  
of rain on a slow day, caress of fine

blouses on my skin. Oh, the joy I taste  
to learn mis-lived life can instead be this;  
I don't need to move with the rough and noise.  
I can sway with the soft fingers of light.

### **Before My Grandfather Dies**

A storm meets my grandfather's pain. Droplets of translucent  
Brown leak from the exhausted ceiling and stain his white bedsheets.  
The gunmetal rain steals our bits of light. I and my uncle  
Hold his torso, the nurse lifts his oxygen tank, we carry  
Him to a spare mattress on the living room floor. The city  
Leaves no room for space. The beige sala is filled with wide glass eyes  
Of carved saints, floral couch, plastic plants, hand-crank radio, echo,  
Oil painting of him and grandmother, whom the lonely sickness  
Had stolen first. His rough coughing rises over roaring rain.  
We ensure we are masked. The nurse checks his cannula, considers  
His oxygen levels. My grandfather's brittle body steadies,  
The coughing gone, his tired finger points to my kind and patient  
Uncle, conscious of the coming heartbreak, and asks for a glass  
Of precious water. My uncle brings the mug, a golden-  
Anniversary souvenir, keen smiles of grandparents  
On the ceramic, he tips the rim to grandfather's quiet lips  
And he swallows with quick relief, sputters the last few drops out.  
My uncle wipes the spittle from his blue shirt. With no rain  
We would still be trapped here, each tremulous day a new record  
Of dead and infected, my grandfather one of twenty-thousand  
Air-starved beloveds with pneumonic lungs, bodies umbilical  
To machines for lifelines to borrowed breath. We know he will die.  
Denial does not delay. It's a matter of companionship,  
Tender voices in the dim room with him, so he won't go alone.

**For I consider the dog, Rose**

For the sun glistens the color of her cool eyes.  
For her breath stinks of nuclear waste, but I lean in to kiss her.  
For when she dreams, her slim legs run, and she swims in indigo lakes and velvet seas.  
For when our whole family contracts the lonely sickness, she does not demand to be walked.  
However, she justly demands to be fed, because her life is equal to ours.  
For when the quarantine lifts, she welcomes guests in her abundant grace.  
For she thinks she is a rabbit, hopping on slippery tiles; a horse, galloping on Manila's  
pockmarked roads; an explorer, finding the first trove of bones.  
For in her previous life, she was either a nun or duchess, and retained her dignity.  
For she has known heaven in the core of a bone-marrow treat.  
For she sniffs and considers the homosexuals smoking in the garden and judges them to be  
friends.  
For there are five different kinds of medicine in her food, ground pork with no salt, boiled sayote  
and squash, and she treats each meal like ambrosia  
For I wish it were ambrosia, she would have eternal health and youth, and there would be no  
punishments for her immortality.  
For friends think her full name is "Rosalinda" because of her sheer politeness.  
For colonial powers yearn for the gold of her fur.  
For she always recognizes and runs to me; masked or unmasked, sick or healthy, man or woman.  
For she extends her left paw by way of greeting and thanks.  
For she bows her head in reverence to matters beyond her consciousness and control.  
For on smoky New Year's Eve, she paces calmly around the living room, permitting the  
thunderous fireworks. She has suffered worse excesses in the city wild.  
For she grazes her teeth against my hand but never bites.  
For the threat of a bath imbibes her with superhuman speed and agility.  
For all dogs are wonderful and she is wonder.  
For she falls asleep as a child in the arms of God.  
For I pray God gives her back to me in the rose of the morning.

### **What Rose Knows**

Eternity in dog eyes, not bland beige but stark amber.  
Expert in the language of the stare, she does not bark

because she trusts her gaze to shine every need, affection,  
and hurt. A slight lowering of eyelids means displeasure

or constipation, and I must find the lingering problem.  
Eyes that can find the heart of a camera at first glance.

Eyes that cast suspicion but not hatred at other pets.  
Eyes that shimmer with love, eyes as big as the great sun

of gladness. Eyes alert to any danger on daily walks,  
a habit of surviving street dogs, difficult to unlearn

though I do all I can to make home palpable for her:  
ear scratches, belly rubs, cupcakes of salmon and apple.

She knows the secrets of blasphemous, arcane mathematics,  
the elixir for total happiness, the paths to buried,

gem-encrusted cities, the hard hungers  
of men's cruelty. Age and time can be cruel

too, tell me Rose, what must I do to keep  
your eyes open, sparkling to the world's new

delights? Not exhausted, sunken, drooping,  
flickering, flickering, asleep, don't be gone.

## Rose Has Died

As I leave work, my parents tell me she can't walk and that she barked at my father for the first time in years. In the garden I find her still except for her face, her eyes marveling at scarred rocks and bursts of bougainvillea, her mouth smiling at invisible angels. The earth quivers under the weight of her panting. After so many deaths the shadow of hers threatens a new incarnation of sorrow. It is midnight and all life-saving vets are asleep. I give her treats. I take her appetite as a hopeful sign that she is not really sick. I caress her head and she licks the crumbs from my hands. I take her in my arms and lie that I will be fine without her. She licks my neck. I lay her on the ground and wait for her passing. Tears for hours. When she closes her eyes, I stroke her head to say goodbye and she opens them again. I do this many times before I realize I am keeping her from sleep. I leave her in the dark warmth of the garden. I pace my room. I research on strokes among dogs and how to cure them. I bargain with God. I vow that, after I take her to the vet and she recovers, I will double her walks per day. I will order her special cupcakes every week and consider work secondary. I will spend afternoons sitting with her while we trade incomprehensible secrets. Sunrise, and she gets up. She urinates and defecates. I bring her outside to walk but her legs buckle. So, I carry and lay her down in the garden. I think my plan will go well. I bathe and get ready for work. I will bring her to the vet as soon as I get home later. I check on her before I leave.

She is not moving.

I call my parents, they go downstairs and cry.

I had cried enough in the hollow of the previous night.

Her body is still warm, her fur glistens like earliest gold.

Maybe Rose did not want me to see her pass.

Her open eyes venerate the distance.

She seems happy.

I worry we will bury her alive until I see her grey, misshapen tongue, like a monstrous slug.

When the shelter workers dig a grave for her, we drop a branch of pink bougainvillea in the hole.

I hope she is dancing with grandfather.

## **Remains**

Adoption papers, anti-tick wash, arthritis medication, bone-marrow treats, bowls, boxes and boxes, collar, cotton buds, dreams, ear cleaners, Elizabethan cone, Elizabethan manners, empty garden, eye drops, friends and their condolences, gratitude, hope, hurt, "I'm sorry," inklings, jawbone, kindness, knocks at midnight, learned habits, leash, mother's collages, multivitamins, notes, ontology, pandemic pet, photos, queen of canines, rest, rose petals, "she took care of me," shock, skeleton, squeaky toy, stasis, tabo at balde, threads of fur, toys, troves of bones, universe, vaccination papers, videos, weeping, wet-dog smell, x of rocks marks her grave at the animal shelter, yellow and all its lovely recollections, zen.

## **Last Words on the Dead**

If I had to be glad for anything in this bitch of a pandemic, it would be for you, Rose, who ambled lightly into my parched and prolonged loneliness, who strolled through the tangled weeds and muck and detritus of blighted life, and still lived and leapt and died warm in the garden.

I wish you would come to me in dreams. Perhaps you are peacefully asleep in the other-world, and one night for you is a hundred years for me. When you wake, you will see me in the prime of my death, and wonder why I was a day late for our walk. In your mild annoyance you will still run to me, tail wagging, eyes gleaming an impossible shade

of amber, fur soft and heaving with immortal youth. You will jump into my arms, I will smell the ordinary stink of your breath and cry, like the day of your adoption and the blink of your departure. You will bring me to grandfather and all lost and beautiful beloveds. We will have dinner, you will sit on my lap and I will feed you

bones from God's farm. We will stroll through sunny eternal afternoons. I am not with you yet. I go outside with friends again. I smile. I laugh with family, eat good food, forget harmless, pesky nightmares. In grey days, I watch videos of you trying to jump despite old limbs, laughing as I rub your belly, darting free when I open the gate.