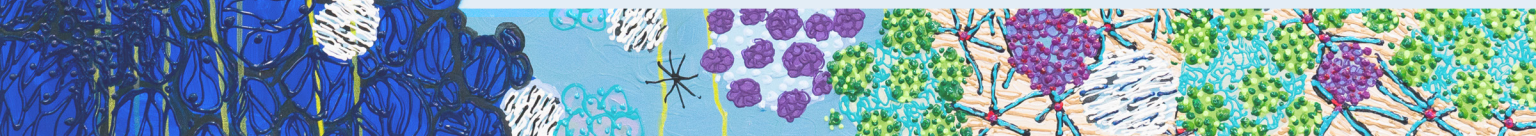




To the Bone

Angela Narciso Torres



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IF YOU GO TO BED HUNGRY

If you go to bed hungry, your soul will get up and steal cold rice from the pot.
Stop playing with fire before the moon rises or you'll pee in your sleep.

Sweeping the floor after dark sweeps wealth and good fortune out the door.
Fork dropped: a gentleman will visit. Spoon: a bashful lady.

Bathing after you've cooked over a hot stove makes the veins swell.
For safe passage to the guest who leaves mid-meal: turn your plate.

The adage goes: coffee stunts growth. Twelve grapes on New Year's: the opposite.
Advice from the learned: book under your pillow. Never step on. Never drop.

Every rice grain that remains on your plate you'll meet again on the footpath
to heaven. You'll have to stoop to pick up each one.

SUNDOWNING

for my mother, Carmen

The sweetest meat clings to the bone,
my mother says, knifing her steak.
Carmen. Silver spade on my tongue.

Mahjong nights, her mother and father gone,
she cried herself to sleep. Blamed in the morning
for her mother's losing hand. *Unlucky tears!*

The sweetest meat—she begins
at dinner, tearing off a chicken leg.
What will she recall by morning?

Named for Our Lady of Mount Carmel,
she pinned brown scapulars under our shirts,
wet stamps that cleaved to our skin.

Carmen. Prayer on the breath.
Amid potted ferns, she works
a jigsaw puzzle. Bizet on the radio.

Unable to sleep, she made me lie next to her.
My brothers clambered the moonlit trees.
My legs twitched, a broken clock.

Her kisses are guava and rust. She sings
kundimans her mother sang.
Sampaguita. Dahil Sa Iyo. Saan Ka Man.

Sunday morning. Puzzle pieces
strewn on yesterday's news. Maria Callas
on the phonograph. Carmen.

Citrine fire. When she plays
the piano, the lovebirds fall silent.
Alabaster eggs tremble in glass bowls.

Afternoons, she woke with an urge
to bite the brown loaf of my arm.
The marks on my flesh faded by sundown.

The sweetest meat clings—
she insists. Peels a mango.
Amber rivers tracing her elbows.
A trail of *L'air du Temps* wafts
in her wake. I follow it to her room,
dab the scent on my wrists and throat.

Evenings, she sang kundimans.
Hatinggabi. Nasaan Ka Irog? Carmen.
Song of the mangosteen moon.

Before you go, I want to give you something
She hands me a thimble painted with a map
of Cuba. We've never been to Cuba.

In the dream, a sister pours rosary beads
into her cupped hands. Upon waking,
a dead wasp curled in her palm.

SELF-PORTRAIT AS ROSARY BEADS

Curled amid lint and loose change,
tucked in a jacket's satin lining or crushed
with used gum in seams of blue denim,
I've known pain clinics and airports, taxicabs
and stale schoolrooms where time is
a honeycomb in winter. I am olive wood,
carnelian, plastic, black onyx. Am rosebuds
pressed into fragrant spheres. Your heat
is my musk; your worry, my fire. Pick
your mystery. If Tuesday: sorrowful, if Saturday:
glorious. I've held you in grocery lines,
picket lines, the hours between sleepless and
woken. Hold me. I am glass shattered, smoothed
by my mother's nerves, pillowed beneath
her cheek. Counted, accountable, counting,
counted on. Crystallized, dangled on a string
or hung from a mirror in a river of traffic,
praying for green, for an end, for a mutiny
of rain. Litany of sorrows, of praise,
I'm a crown of roses, a crown of purple
thorns. I am faithful as breadcrumbs
on barbed wire. Lose me to birds or to night's
starred thicket. Touch and be splintered,
sundered. Soothed, surrendered.
My scent on your fingertips.

VIA NEGATIVA

The air in a room after
a door closes. The grotto
of quiet after the last clap.
What occupies a glass when
it's emptied. Two equal parts—
the difference between. The void
housed by a heart squeezed of longing.
The period. The white after it.
A name on the tip of your tongue.
The earlobe after the earring
is unhung. The no one at the end
of a phone ringing. When a painting
is removed, its cream shadow
unbleached by sun.

THE IMMIGRANT VISITS HER MOTHER

Those tropical mornings I woke to no sun
in a shuttered room, the shuffle of slippers
at my door, hall light flooding the gap
her slight frame could not fill, smaller
than when I last saw her. Through the net
of sleep floated her voice, repeating
my name. I rose, stumbled to my feet,
offered my arm. Her good leg leading,
we made our way to the dim-lit table
where I sliced a bagel neatly in half,
fed it to the glowing toaster. When the rounds
popped out—fragrant, golden—
I spread the cream thin with a knife,
layered the slivers of smoked salmon
from the packet I'd carried from Chicago,
a twist of lemon to finish. One bite
and her eyes glazed over, forehead
uncreased. For a moment she was
twenty-six, a medical student again,
lipsticked and bone-tired from her shift
sitting at a Brooklyn diner to coffee,
a bagel, and the *Times*. Here, decades
and hemispheres away, dawn burns
through Manila smog, licks the blinds
of the kitchen where my mother fills
her mouth with the salt and sting
of her first New York winter
the year before I was born.

ALZHEIMER'S

there was a piano she loved

cherubs carved on cherry wood

hands ripple over keys

she nods off, chin to chest

do you want to lie down? *no*

under the palms in a pink housedress

what is your name? she asks

again *cherubs playing violins*

sunlight slips behind ferns

NARROW BED

Carpenter ants picked the T-bone clean.

The dog's leash tautened toward
a square of sun.

A hallway lamp wavered.

Slice of lit motes through
the cracked bedroom door.

Her slipper under the bed, another on the armoire

On the shell comb, a single strand.

Her blue robe still damp.

*

a narrow bed in an endless
row of beds tucked tight
like chalk-white pills
cocooned in plastic

no visitors no cellphone no
end to night but the nurse
who relayed messages
telegraphic—send blue

bathrobe Saint Jude
rosary lime-flavored
Jell-O chenille slippers
boar bristle brush

*

why am I here?

pressed in her suitcase
between terrycloth and silk

where is my husband?

on a prescription slip, scribbled
in her physician scrawl

when will I go home?

barely three days before
the words slowed to a trickle

WHAT I LEARNED THIS WEEK

No more fireflies in Northern Indiana.
The fish in Lake Erie are dying out

because they're ingesting plastic microbeads
used in exfoliants. Yellow x's mark

the trees on our street that workers will axe
next week. Ash borers are eating them alive

so they cannot absorb water or light. This week I learned
my mother is losing dexterity in both hands.

But when I play Bach's *Ave Maria* on the piano, she lifts
her head, motions me to move her wheelchair closer.

She leans over the keyboard to try the melody, finding
the notes each time. Her fingers can barely strike

the keys, but I hear them. Some say music memory
is the last to go. Still, I have no windfalls

for the empty baskets of my mother's eyes.
When I returned from Manila, the peonies I'd left

in half-blossom were stunted by spring storms.
A bud that will not bloom is called a bullet.

PRELUDE AND FUGUE

Something of late November
sifting through a window
brings back this prelude—

two voices blend, I lean
into the keys, draw back
when the voices part.

How the body remembers—
Señora V in a floral dress,
talcumed hand soft

on the curve of my spine
imprinting what she knew
of love and time. How could I know

what those notes would mean
decades of preludes ahead.

SELF-PORTRAIT AS WATER

why does the body feel
more beautiful underwater—
is what goes through me

when I break the glass
surface, levels rising as I plumb
the tub's white womb

this second skin thinner,
slicker, gleaming wet
as a lacquered bowl

because the simplest
of molecules—two H's
one O—love

to love each other, cling
to what they touch,
how this universal solvent

swallows every hill,
fills the hollows
of my surrender

most forgiving of
substances, I resolve
to live like you—to fill

and be filled,
to take the shape
of my vessel

dispensing heat
displacing matter
lighter than air

RECUERDO A MI MADRE

I remember brownouts. Melted wax
cooling against my scar. How it
formed a pebbled lakebed.

Decades ago we spread blankets
on our parents' bedroom floor. I fell asleep
watching my beautiful mother sleep.

Cloaked in her frayed bathrobe, her guava
scent, I clutched my fears like lost teeth
then let them slip down the drain.

*

I've been avoiding the telephone,
spending dusty hours at the piano.

Broken chords. I stutter the cadenza.
Prolong the fermata. Each note

insists like the past.
Prayer and dirge.

*

Today I let light have its way. Lavender
candles ribbon the air with scent.

Sun presses into a window.
Into silence a jackhammer drills.

I close my eyes
and see a trembling star.

*

Finding my mother
crouched on the tiled floor

her flickering eyes swollen,
the housedress she loved

in shreds, my father led us
outside. Called an ambulance.

Her silence an explosive
he'd learned to detonate.

*

My sister lights a trail
of ants with a match.

Some pop, others scurry
from a dead finch. A few linger,

stitching a loose border
around the bird's stone eye.

I couldn't look, couldn't

stop looking.

*

Bewildered, I grew up,
learned to embroider

an alphabet. I dipped my pen
in father's tears. To know

my mother requires
the patience of a miner

carving amethyst from rock.
To know my mother

is to memorize
a labyrinth of longing.

WHAT ISN'T THERE

Even without leaves
the Bradford pear keeps
its bell silhouette.

Above, a commonplace moon,
somewhere between half
and full, waxing edge

rubbed like the worn
ridges of a lucky quarter.
A sentence partly

erased—brightness
that might have been.

TO THE ONE WE LOST

child when the blue-black sac of you dropped
 a yolk of matted cells and plasma into the toilet's
bone-white walls i blamed the rain the fried eggplant
 the trip to the mall blamed my past selfish ways
faulted the oak that fell across our fence
 while you sailed off my second my spawn
little prawn i never met peaceful
 you floated from your watery cave
to the salty grottos of the sea
 where perhaps a spiny anemone caught you
in its tentacles a coral bed your cradle
 and the manatee moaned a mournful song

STONE FRUIT

Her sadness is coarse and thick as a horsehair coat.
As a child I tried it on. Its heavy folds engulfed me.

I learned to balance the weight on my head the way
fruit sellers carried baskets of mangoes on their crowns.

Mornings it cloyed to my throat like the hairy pits of drupes.
My eyes teared. I tried to spit. It insisted, impeded my breathing.

I swallowed the bitter stone. Washed it down like the whale
who gulped a grown man and kept him in darkness for days.

As a child I learned this from an aunt:
If you swallow a seed, a tree will grow in your stomach.

I nurture her sadness like a sapling.
Decades of summers pass. The tree fruits.

Lay your hand on my chest. Feel the heft
of sour-sweet drupes my mother's tears have fed.

FOUR YEARS AFTER DIAGNOSIS

Sudden rain. Our heads
bowed together like monks
in this hot green place.

I study the slow script
of her movements. The cross
and uncross of her legs,

fingers forking together,
pulling apart. Secret dialect
of her face: a firefly flick

in the iris, lips curling
like kelp. Speak, mother.
Your daughter is listening.

THE ABSCISSION LAYER

a semi-found poem from an Encyclopedia Britannica article on leaf anatomy

abscission layers form when leaves
are damaged by insects, disease, drought
their normal formation in autumn
appears to be, in part at least
due to the shortening of the day
perhaps the shorter days accentuate
the senile changes normal in older leaves
as a result, a zone of cells across
the petiole becomes softened until
the leaf falls a healing layer
salves the stem and closes the wound
leaving the leaf scar—a prominent feature
in many winter twigs

know when it's time to go as apples
sometimes hearts cannot recoup
like one cracked open or
when the blues descend
come autumn
a lack of dopamine in the brain
making everything look bleak
the jagged calligraphy of twigs
I can barely lift my head
[infusion of ginseng and bergamot]
I breathe watch for color
I look for signs of budding

SOME USES OF FRICTION

A hazelnut's husk is the thinnest paper.
Rubbing the roasted globes between
my palms, I make brown rain.
In my hand: five dusty suns.

When mother's memory became a slide
I planted questions like sandpaper. *Isn't*
that so-and-so?—in the frame at her bedside.
Some things caught. Others didn't.

Crickets have teeth on their bottom wing.
The upper wing brushes across the teeth
to make sweet music. And flies?
They rub their legs to keep them clean.

When we had to decide if she should move
to a home, two camps formed: a silent war.
We'd been warned: *A parent's illness could*
cause friction. The very air rubbed us raw.

Dry grass wedged in ancient rock.
A hunter picks up a stone,
takes aim, strikes the rock.
And the first sparks fly.

SELF-PORTRAIT AS REVISION

I am the storm-torn palm frond draped on the balcony wall.
I am the cumin in the soup stirring the lentil's sleep.

I am the olive's skeletal pit, the cat's paw, the thistle spear.
The clay in the kiln cast into a small flask to hold centuries of musk.

For weeks I do not sing, though I gush, an underground rill carving blindly to the sea.
I succumb to thunder, the urchin's sting, the softness of moss. This is my prayer.

I am driftwood—parched in white heat, soaked in January rain.
A seashell pressed to its pale grave.

The wind rises, rewriting the hymnals of dunes.
I am hurricaned. Worn smooth again.

SEA PSALM

after Psalm 86

Let me begin again, Lord.

For my sins scatter
like starfish at low tide

and my good works are scant.

Bow the conch ear
of Your kindness, Lord. I am frail

as kelp, flailed on the seabed,
greedy as the bottom-feeder.
Help me, Lord. Preserve

my soul. When fog breaks
over the shore, even groundfish
feel the sun. Be merciful.

You possess the patience
of mollusks. Crack me open.
Make me porous, that Your light

may filter through me like
the plankton-rich waves.
Your love is boundless as silica,

majestic as the sun. O, bleach
my blackened bones, Lord.
Grazed and glazed in grit,

even shards become jewels.

Polish me brighter than nacre.
When pride hardens my heart

into abalone, leave me not
unturned that in the gleaming
You might see Your face.

PEARL DIVING

*Is memory, / as they pretend, / mother of the Muse?— / or forgetting,
—James Richardson*

1/

She lapses into music, rising from dinner to play piano as we eat and talk. As if togetherness were a storm cloud in June, filled to bursting. A brooding monsoon.

2/

Her memories, black pigeons flying off at dusk. Who knows where they spend the night? Dawn finds them back at the cote, softly cooing. In time, their flights will cover greater distances. Some will disappear for days. A few will never return.

3/

When my father comes home from work, she claps like a birthday child: *Papa!* A pause. *Where's my husband?* My father, swallowing hard. *Still at work, hija.*

4/

Casting my line in a dark pool, I bait her memory like fish. *Mother, who painted that portrait of you? Tell me your lola's recipe for oxtail stew. When did you learn to play the kundimans?* Her eyes, two searchlights, sweeping.

5/

Later in bed she turns to him. *Where's Kit, Papa?* He dresses in the blue dark, retrieves his violin case from the hallway. *I'm home,* he says, kissing her forehead. He sits on her side of the bed till she falls asleep.

6/

Have you heard of the pearl divers of Davao—mere boys plowing headfirst into the freezing deep, holding their breaths for minutes at a time to find the largest oysters, the ones that might hold the prized black pearl, their only light—dim lamps tied to their foreheads?

7/

Her lips form the words to the Our Father all the way to the Great Amen. Her fingertips roll invisible rosary beads.

8/

My father's voice cracks over the phone. She's been looking for you, he says. Calls you *Mama* or *Sister Amelita*. Or sometimes, *that little girl who was just sitting there*. I've been playing kundimans for her, he says. She knows the words.

WHAT HAPPENS IS NEITHER

the end nor the beginning.
Yet we're wired to look for signs.
Consider the peonies. One makes
a perfect bud after months of nothing.
Another's leaves are ringed with
black rot. How can I not think *end*.
How can I not say *beginning*

Leaves fall when days shorten
because a tree must reduce
to its tough parts—twig, branch,
bark. My mother sleeps away
the daylight. She nods off while
chewing a spoonful of fish and rice,
her head a peony gone to seed.

My father calls to say she doesn't
recognize him. Turning to him,
she cried out, certain a stranger
was in her bed. He played
his violin till she slept—a leaf
in late fall curling into itself.

In autumn, chlorophyll disappears,
cancelling green from leaves
so yellow and magenta can blaze.
In my mirror I see her—the smile
that favors a cheek, eyes slanting

in the shape of small fish
we eat for breakfast.

Trees know best the now of things.
What goes on has been going on
for centuries. Washing dishes, I rest
a foot on my standing leg. A fork clangs
on the tile. I rinse a cracked cup.
I try not to think of endings.

Notes

p. 21. “The Abscission Layer” The lines on the left column are from an Encyclopedia Britannica article on leaf anatomy: <https://www.britannica.com/science/leaf-plant-anatomy#ref286335>

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