

Naomi Ayala

Papo, Who'd Wanted to Be an Artist

Papo, lying on a Divine Street bench,
the divinity of neighborhood
angels kissing open his eyes.
Hymns, hymns for the angels
to whose work-beaten faces cling
the fishing nets of insomnia between the broken
bottles of missed hits at the numbers
store and the traffic going by. Papo,
he has small brown hands
that reach out from his eyes.
With them he smears the pollen
of *amapola* memories, dreams up an entire
town of angels, faces the color of the sun.
Amidst this flowering, he calls
for Ochún, her tight embrace. Ochún,
who has been in hiding. Once,
during a great experiment of will,
papo managed to pull silver
wings from Miguel's *costado*—
just before Miguel died. He had him flying
through smog, concrete, out to the air
bus he was always missing.
But Papo could not come along with him.
How was he to get back afterward?
Angels have such short life spans.
And, how was he to know?
That night, Ochún greeted him
with blood-red roses,
kissed his small weeping hands,
gave him moon
water from her breasts.
He was sure she'd come out this way again.
He had been waiting politely.

It Was Late and She Was Climbing

It was late & she was climbing
 up the hill with her babies,
 late and he climbing onto her—
 her belly glowing fire.
 She climbed the steps of the day
 with all she could carry
 & the day climbed onto her, too
 & they rolled together until night broke
 them into pieces they looked
 for in the morning.
 Everywhere light
 spilled out from her belly.
 It doubled with every touch.
 This went on for a long time
 until everything around her became light.
 Late & no matter how early,
 dawn sometimes,
 she went on blinding birds
 & men & children
 & women showed up to her house wearing visors
 & she had to hug every thing & everyone
 to grow small enough
 to fit into her climbing.

This Breathless Minute

Our blood runs free forever before we ever
 do. Do this, do that, but our blood glides
 smoothly the way we sometimes wish
 we could—over concrete, past the screeching
 wheels of patrol cars, stunning the whiteness
 of emergency after emergency come
 a little too late. I am sick

to breathlessness. My body's sick. I
 got the cancer you get from the spell
 spilled blood casts on you. Everywhere I look
 blood brands a house front, draws a line
 of impermanence across a child's butterfly belly—
 no growing down into her bones
 before she gets that glimpse
 of the bridge across, a bridge we think is sturdy
 and will hold out walking. I am trying to stay
 inside this country. I am trying very hard
 to stay inside this country—today, this afternoon,
 this breathless minute, but everybody's blood
 is mixed into the blood that runs through here
 and I can't tell my left foot
 from my right hand.

My Brother Pito

My voice, when I ache for his
 is the steering
 wheel of a car under my fingers
 in wintertime
 before the car warms up.

His voice
 a voice whose words I rummage
 through like a dresser drawer
 where everything falls in and away
 and is bound
 to show up somewhere sometime.

Voice of *naranja dulce* and
limón partido . . .
 Voice of give and embrace.

Voice like train tracks
fade into the skyline,
into a fine nowhere I never
get to see long enough to
follow the wind.

Palm leaf, ripe mango skin voice,
he gives to me a joy
of spirit like coconut
water in desert heat, enough
for me, enough to pass around.

For "S"

If a green leaf is no more alive to you
than your toe is without you
then go on about your life
flattening soda pop
cans for a pastime
leaning against the concrete
walls of shopping plazas
or gray corporate buildings waiting
on some cash to rain down
leaning against the soft side
of a woman trying hard to be gentle & alive
you can watch t.v.
tan in its technicolor splendor
though maybe
a toe's better off without you
sure it could feed something
sometime
or some new thing
shoot out from it like huckleberry
from a dead tree

Hole

One morning they dig up the sidewalk and leave.
No sign of the truck,
only the large
dark shadow digging and digging,
piling up sludge with a hand shovel
beside the only tree.
Two o'clock I come by
and he's slumbering in the grass beside rat holes.
Three and he's stretched across a jagged stone wall,
folded hands tucked beneath one ear,
a beautiful young boy smiling,
not the heavy large shadow who can't breathe.
Four-thirty and the August heat
takes one down here.
He's pulled up an elbow joint
some three feet round.
At seven I head home for the night,
pass the fresh gravel mound,
a soft footprint near the manhole
like the "x" *abuelo* would place beside his name
all the years he couldn't write.

Within Me

War begins right here on my street.
It begins with me.
I see her weapons in the eyes of a child,
her face on windowpanes.
There are times I want war.
I lie down with her.

I stroke her back.
 There are times she enters my house
 and I enter into battle with her.
 War slips in, into my name.
 I have her in my blood.
 She sweetens my morning coffee on Saturdays.
 I betray her. I hide from her. I run away
 but already war knows the course of my dreams
 and wants to steal the children of my soul.
 War begins with me.
 It is with me that war begins
 right here on my street
 in the small showers of bullets
 in an empty garbage can
 in what I say and do not say
 in the bewitching ivy of tedium
 in the soap I use to bathe.
 She is in my fingers
 in the shadow of my eyes
 in my lover's hair.
 I sing to her so that she may leave
 so that war leaves me.
 Today I sing to her
 and she lets me sing.

Thus

At six the glass roses would be watered.
 At six the tomatoes and lima beans.
 At seven the machete would be sharpened.
 At the forcible hour, the groan of the moon
 swelling in women's bellies.
 At that hour in which the crow would kneel
 on the shoulders of the ripened breadfruit.
 At nine the return to coffee,

the tip of the chin sweating its scent.
 At nine the noontime sun would be lying.
 At twelve, nine perishing.
 At one Eve's rib would suffer
 the weight of the man it held up.
 From the body, wheat ears sprouting.
 The viand loosening from the iron pot,
 the cassava would fight the *yautía*,
 the sweet banana make a scene.
 At two love was a mirror,
 watching the cane fields from the corner of its eye,
 hurling the bait of its breath,
 forgiving mornings predictable as catch.
 At four, four would become a gag.
 At five, five would explode.
 At six the bread would bless itself
 and the dishes wash themselves alone.
 At seven, the porch and the hammock,
 the night a country without borders,
 without muddled languages.
 Mute as the rooftops
 the spirits guarding their turn.

Griot

Saturday adrift
 on the wings of a strange bird
 shrieking Spanish.

Blue smoke in the cold air
 beneath helicopters, real
 cliff-hangers.

He spins bodega loves
 come and gone,
 low-down addictions,

who got turned back
from the not so pearly gates
only to suffer more.

He could graffiti a poem
back of the only bus here
if only it would come to him,
if only he could make it
through the muttering wind.

Horses

I don't know shit about horses.
I only see them in some of the dogs
that walk through here.
See them in the bear I've seen at the zoo.
Dark is all these things that
remind me of horses.
Dark like the wind
against the street with its lightbulb eyes.
Dark like you own the ground
and your own running.
This is the year of my horses.
They leap from my skin
and let loose on the block.
Bare back.
This is the year.
I speak horse with my skin
and own the language of hoofs hitting the ground.
My wind and my way out.
I came with horses into this dark
of no wind.
Prepared and unprepared.