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Poems

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Poems

Abstract

AMAKURA, HEARTLAND (for Brian Stevenson), BENEDICTION, GULL, OL' HIGUE, ENIGMA (for Victor Chang), INVITATION TO TENDER

Mark McWatt

AMAKURA

Spokes of dusty light
descended from a hub above the trees
and pierced the black skin
of the river. Twin engines
of wheel and water
created an interior space
where memory now blooms
like the smell of time
in long-shut rooms.

Blue butterflies stitched the rare sunlight
to the jealous gloom of the overhanging trees
that shaped your womb of silence:
thus visual simplicities
constitute the reality
of rivers one must live by...
the way all of life, sometimes,
is reflected in an orchid – or an eye.

Men, like vivid butterflies, must
end by losing themselves
in the density of thought that surrounds you,
like those men in the beginning
(of my time, not yours) whose crude oaths
broke your silence, not your spirit,
as they searched in vain
your dark veins
for signs of Eldorado.

Yet it can not be true
to speak of silence and of you
in that same breath that stalks
the surface of your dream, like a spider...
I have only to think
of Amakura, and your distant vowels
enter my soul (inter

my soul) – a cold seepage
from an old, old world – and help shape
my life-sentence: ever
to be apart
from your sacred sibilance
and the language of my heart.

HEARTLAND

(for Brian Stevenson)

We thought we had found it once
in a pool of resonant emerald
beneath an unnamed waterfall.

But who knows where, among the miles
of rotting and spawning green
is the smallest
of the concentric circles,
heart of growth or oblivion,
greenheart or granite
– and how secure
from the bleak eye of God
blue beyond the leaves?

The shifting premises of hope
wound the heart's certitudes,
as heartland swims eternally beyond place,
drowns in seas over the horizon,
hides down the path not taken when
a parrot snake shuffled across its leaves.

The heart's conception
and the heart's deception
may occur in the self-same place,
where movements in the undergrowth
are more than a fugitive breeze
but less than the breath of God.

Although it often seems we live
so that reason can erase
the numinous glyphs of love

inscribed in every landscape,
There is something *there*,
after all,
that is the central spider
in our web of dreams,
that weaves the net of Eldorado,
that launches the drunken boat...

There is something,
other than the setting sun,
that catches the river afire.

BENEDICTION

*...vitam sine termino
nobis donet in patria.*

The mangroves at the water's edge,
their plumbing exposed by the tide,
deride my love for this drowned place
of waist-deep mud and river so wide
the very sun is often late
for its daily death on the other side.

Yet roots and branches form the web
woven by that spider sun
to sift the alluvial souls of rivers
and trap their sins as they run
to the sea's salt, purgatorial troughs
where soul and substance become one.

And I am left on this near shore
where all the dreams of heaven start:
Who sifts the clotted sins of earth
where land and sun and river part
in obscene mangrove fingers, will find
the trifling treasure of my heart.

- I come from this, in this I move.
Blessed be this place I love.

GULL

Yuan Chang

My son brought home a seagull
with a damaged wing
his mother and sister helped
him fuss over it and feed the wild,
ungrateful thing.

They treated the raw, unfeathered
patch and tied the drooping limb
to its body with a strip of cloth;
deciding not to name him yet,
they placed him for the night
in a shoebox lined with an old towel
complete with plastic tot of water
and two smelly sprats, procured
with difficulty at such short warning.
The boy guessed all would be right,
come morning.

In fact the thing died.
when I checked before breakfast, it
was stiff, and its rank death
had already attracted a phalanx
of tiny ants. My son said nothing;
looked at it a while, then
dealt it an almighty kick, box and all
and sent it crashing into the opposite wall.

So much for the nameless bird.
Sister and mother were aghast,
upset he could be so uncaring,
But I understood why he kicked it,
and approved, beneath the mandatory frown.
I think it's right to kick at death,
especially when you're young.
He was not uncaring, what he cared for
was life, the chance to see the creature mend,
to release it and watch it soar;
the lifeless form was cruel recompense
for all the love and care he'd felt before
- and so he wanted no business
with dead things, his savage kick

focussed his argument more sharply
 than these words, and I hope for him
 a life as fiercely free as he had wanted
 for that awkward, damaged bird.

OL' HIGUE

You think I like this stupidity –
 gallivanting all night without skin,
 burning myself out like cane-fire
 to frighten the foolish?
 And for what? A few drops of baby blood?
 You think I wouldn't rather
 take my blood seasoned in fat
 black-pudding, like everyone else?
 And don't even talk 'bout the pain of salt
 and having to bend these old bones down
 to count a thousand grains of rice!

If only babies didn't smell so nice!
 And If I could only stop
 hearing the soft, soft call
 of that pure blood running in new veins,
 singing the sweet song of life
 tempting an old, dry-up woman who been
 holding her final note for years and years,
 afraid of the dying hum...

Then again, if I didn't fly and come
 to that fresh pulse in the middle of the night,
 how would you, mother,
 name your ancient dread?
 And who to blame
 for the murder inside your head..?
 Believe me –
 As long as it have women giving birth
 a poor ol' higue like me can never dead.

ENIGMA (for Victor Chang)

The language you speak
is not the language
your characters must speak,
and yet they seek
identity, comprehension.

Apprehension
concerning those who must read
a language they do not speak
leads you to seek
compromises.

And the surprise is
that every sentence you write
is a sentence passed
by unexpected judges,
initiates of a different rite.

To right
the historical wrongs
of all traffic in tongues
is beyond the power
of sentence, story,
novel-writing – and yet...
Olive reading *Summer Lightning!*
And yet...Bob Marley's songs!

INVITATION TO TENDER

(Project Eldorado, Phase I:
the felling of trees)

Place your ear to the thin wall of my chest,
gently – as on the rough bark of a tree;
listen to what my lips
can never tell: there is a deep down drum
that beats for you and me.

Place your thin lips, like a scar,
upon my cheeks – crisp as dried leaves
clinging to their stalks;
and ask then why I close my eyes and sigh:
you are the place where my fevered spirit walks.

Put your arm around the thick trunk of my neck,
and remind me that the flesh is warm
like the breathed vowels of your name;
then if you feel me sway beneath your touch
imagine I am bending in the storm.

Then swing your axe above my planted feet,
savour each stroke that severs earth from sky;
let the pain of love pierce your wooden hands.
And it is not for me that you must weep.
and it is not for you that I must die.