

Lakan Umali

ECHO AND THE BELOVED

You should know this;
where you run, I must pursue.
Tethered to you, I can do nothing
else. My feet forced to brave all terrain:
the hard brown valleys, glassy rocks
beside the great lake's shore,
peak of a cloud-touched mountain,
even the lip of a cliff edge;
no matter the height, where you stay
I am compelled to find rest.
My motion depends on yours.
Shadowing you, a heart lunges
for traces of your footsteps
My ears hear the crunching
of leaves, and I dart into forest
past overripe mangoes rotting
in the undergrowth, past snorts
of a wild boar, caterpillars
chewing lilacs, the imprint
of bare feet on soft black earth.
I catch a flash leagues away
and the chase brings me
to where the green turns
into lengths of asphalt-gray.
Better the primal forest
than the blur of a train cart
passing into night;

better the crunch of leaves
than this city dirty with sound
where I wade through the noise
to pluck your voice from the crowd.
Between the lover and the beloved,
an echo traverses an entire
country. By the time you hear
this, you will have already left
for the next distant place
where my voice stills, gives chase.

DAPHNE IN OLD AGE

Each time, the end is escape;
the nymph sprinting
to the river,
her leg, torso, hair
changing to root, trunk, leaf.
Is all escape a kind
of transformation?
The pursued being
changing herself
to finally evade
the pursuer?
Time has taught me
to splinter; in the outer world
sprigs shoot from my hair,
laurels sprout on my crown.
When I return to you,
all the green reverts

to flat color: hair as white
as your dirty sando,
yellowing teeth,
the pasty skin
shrouding my limbs.
You do not cease
to remind me this.
Perhaps I felt I loved you
because I was pursued
and because I thought
no one else would give
chase. And what the years
should have given grace,
instead I find a living
room of crumbs, beer cans
lolling on the floor,
and your slumbering
form, leaking spittle,
melting into shapelessness
on the creaking couch.
Husband, we are both
too old to run. So I tell you:

I will use the last of my powers
to meander from this home,
and flee to a grove of trees
where I can commiserate
with those like me.
And when I finish,
I will reach the last stage
of my transfiguration;
Wrinkled bark will cover

my breasts, legs will shoot
deep into earth, and graying
hair will bloom flower-white.
And when you pass by this grove,
you will not perceive me, hidden
by my own shining beauty.