

## Poet's Choice

### *Ten Best Poems*

#### Things

I

All in the room had announced her  
So humbly, so clearly, all these years,  
Till each thing, growing jealous of the other,  
Formed for itself some variant tongue,  
So that the small, private talks between her and one  
Remained a mystery to all the rest,  
Though all their ears had tickled and itched.

The Chair, fat and prosperous guardian of her leisure,  
Knew the exact weight of her every fatigue,  
Could almost tell what tried the joints of her soul  
From the way she drew her breath or sighed.  
He liked her small hands resting on his arm;  
When their fingers drummed, his old being ached so,  
He lost her body's weight  
And seemed a rhythm of her blood.

The Wall knew very little of her,  
And she, he sadly felt, so much less of him.  
But he loved her grace of movement,  
It took all stiffness out from him.  
And sometimes, when light favored the moment,  
He felt her shadow passing across his soul --  
Or the shadow of her hand only --  
Lavishing creatures upon his void of light.  
From her only he first knew of Imagination.

The Window was open-handed millionaire,  
Rejoicing in the thought that he gave her joy.  
Through him she first felt the great outdoor Sun,  
Kindly making distinction between sky and earth;  
And with him she had always had a crop of stars,  
Each fertile witness to time; and she had read over  
And over the sad, ancient tale of the Moon --  
The imperfection, the incompleteness of human love.  
It was the Moon haunted her dream.

The Desk, from her arms' pressure, still and tense,  
Or the tide of her thoughts on the verge of being,  
Had always gathered the sheaves of her mind's silences,  
Foreknowing that with her silence is pretext only.  
She was so patient she drove back time and thought together  
To their first existences, and had such firm and gentle  
Will for order, she carried away the passions, like the young  
Of animals, to securer lairs in words of her song.

The Bed, wise Ancient in the room,  
Knew both the mythology of her  
And the Realities that made her beautiful and holy.  
He remembered the first shedding of her blood,  
Onset of youth and first vague desire;  
And dreams, and events, that wove eyes into her soul,  
Like the wild peacock, and grief and horror and weariness  
Interfused with the bright plumage of her thought.

## II

All in the room had become as Presences of her,  
Each thing humming some big news of her,  
Though none ever begged for intimation of her name;  
When Eternity came, all felt time go hollow  
And lose all its core, so that when they ached for her,  
They knew the horror of hell, stark absence of her.

The chair is now both void and superfluity,  
So much of its reality is all her weight,  
And time's own body, rhythm of her blood.  
The wall has not even a memory,  
Blank of light or shadows' chaos,  
Its soul, bereft of her imagination.  
The window, mere hole of air, dropping the sun  
On the floor, or letting the crazy moon through,  
Indifferent, having lost the world outside and within.  
The desk is as the silence there, solid,  
Without thought or passion; it only seems to mourn  
But is bulk or merchandise, with gross and attic air.  
The bed afflicts the room with emptiness  
When motes of the stray sun dance in the air  
Or the moon floats by, the sad and ancient moon.

All in the room are as Absences of her,  
In the air, not even an incense of her.  
How she must have moved through their doomsday:  
All things quivered with pangs of her ghost  
And returned without sound to original stolidity.

## I Teach My Child

I

I teach my child  
To survive.  
I begin with our words,  
    The simple words first  
And last.  
They are hardest to learn.  
    Words like home,  
Or friend, or to forgive.  
These words are relations.  
They are difficult to bear;  
Their fruits are unseen.  
    Or words that promise  
Or dream.  
Words like honor, or certainty,  
Or cheer.  
Rarest of sound,  
Their roots run deep;  
These are words that aspire,  
They cast no shade.  
    These are not words  
To speak.  
These are the words  
Of which we consist,  
Indefinite,  
Without other ground.

II

    My child  
Is without syllables  
To utter him,

Captive yet to his origin  
In silence.

    By every word  
To rule his space,  
He is released;  
He is shaped by his speech.

    Every act, too,  
Is first without words.  
There's no rehearsal  
To adjust your deed  
From direction of its words.

    The words are given,  
But there's no script;  
Their play is hidden,  
We are their stage.

    These are the words  
That offer to our care  
Both sky and earth,  
    The same words  
That may elude our acts.  
If we speak them  
But cannot meet their sound,  
They strand us still  
In our void,  
Blank like the child  
With the uphill silence  
Of his words' climb.

    And so,  
I teach my child  
To survive.  
I begin with our words,  
    The simple words first  
That last.

## Baby, Cradle and All

*For Tosi*

There was no help or quick  
or potent enough. It was, clearly,  
the end.

And so he might be  
forgiven a little bitterness:  
the stars promised eternity  
to his child's soul in a cold,  
remote twinkle of obscure speech,  
but it was not for succor he looked  
to them, no, it was not for super-  
natural space to contain his loss.

Full of that knowledge  
that once had stood in the middle  
of sleep and mocked the song,  
he had no time to look idly  
down a street and spend his mind's  
recognition on a stranger.

It was, clearly, the end,  
it was that he had to meet again,  
turning from the gate,  
climbing the stairs,  
inventing the words of comfort  
where it had no shape,  
except that his wife, who had not  
seen the stars nor heard the fall  
of their light, might also invent  
the final word of their assent.

Who could tell  
if in that sleep his son,  
too young for thought, had learned  
a motion toward his father's wish  
that he look from his cloudy bough  
where the wind rocked all his years  
to rest, and looking, cheer  
with constant weather of his innocence,  
to help the mind cradle the swing,  
the burden of that windy truth?  
And so in a later time,  
it might be found that it was all  
in song, but the sense of the words  
different:

the gust did break  
his mind so the next stroke  
and blow might gain less fearsome touch,  
so mind might learn to bend  
and be made more competent to bear  
the weight of each loved one's death.

## Twin Brothers

On that feast day of the Sacred Heart  
whence, they say, the strangest love bleeds,  
the twin brothers passed into our time  
but having no name,  
found no shore  
where their cries could fall.

Their father had passed beyond  
whence he had no mind to return,  
nor could anyone remember what path  
upon troublous waters he roved,  
or what words fell like sand when he left.

Their mother, waiting in vain, turned  
from her grief and to strangers gave away  
her sons, she could not bear the sound  
of waves without certainty of shore.

The first nameless one  
kicked out of her womb's midnight sea  
swaddled in blue-green weed of its tide,  
and then the other, unexpected, pushed  
against his drowning and came  
with a mournful, watery cry.

The strangers had promised  
even before they laid eyes on them;  
waiting, they had reached out in faith  
to the time they would be born.

How could they tell the gift would be twins,  
brothers adrift upon their midnight sea?  
Yet they were already loved before birth,  
and the strangers' longing had shaped  
a sandbar for their coming ashore.

By what strange fate  
is their stranger mother's name Mercy,



and their father's that which  
 in an ancient tongue means "twin"?  
 These strangers came in rainy weather  
 and stormy dark, and gave them  
 their names: *David, Diego*,  
 children by starlight in a cogan shack,  
 still wet with the amniotic cold  
 and sea-green weeds of their birth.  
 The strangers had always known:  
 at sea, in that timeless journey  
 where nativity is always at peril,  
 one's name may be the first act of love,  
 and when one answers to its sound,  
 one rises out of the sea, and only then  
 does love come as whole as clear.

Now the strangers wait again  
 for the time the brothers would answer  
 to the sound of their names.  
*David, here I am, your father*,  
 who gave you your name,  
 and here by me your sweet mother.

Diego, here is your brother  
 upon that sandbar by starlight  
 where first two strangers came  
 and gave thanks for your birth.

Your father, I am he, and  
 Your mother is here by me.

Time shall pass, or rather,  
 we shall pass, moment to moment,  
 yet Time shall become more and more  
 our only shore, for so long  
 as our names sound above the waves  
 and we answer each to the other's call.

## Where No Words Break

*After EDSA 1986*

Where no words break  
I thirst no longer for truth,  
am very still, at peace.

Time was  
the truth was future perfect;  
but I no longer seek,  
all my pieces I have collected

and let no words break

Where no words break  
my thirst is quenched  
by every spring,  
the spring is everywhere.

Time was  
I strove for truth,  
the passion grew,  
but words could not appease.  
Truth had no bounds

and let no words break

The president whose State was a Lie,  
the soldier who did not fire,  
people shouting, words dying ...

Or fruit of achiote,  
snails after, things swarming...  
Once these were truth's sundries,  
its daily exhibits,  
but did not make a book

where no words break

I thirst no longer for truth,  
Am, without words composed.  
Our ticks have lost their itch,  
the tocks of doom have grown serene.  
I no longer even roam

where no words break

## Jeepney

Consider honestly  
this piece of storm  
in our city's entrails.  
Incarnation of scrap,  
what genius of salvage!  
what art or craft, what cunning.  
Its crib now molds our space,  
its lusty gewgaws our sight.

In rut and in flood,  
claptrap sex of traffic,  
juke box of hubbub —  
I mark your pride of zigzag  
heeds no one's limbs nor light.  
I sense our truth laughing  
in our guts, I need  
no words to fix its text.

This humdrum phoenix in our street  
is no enigma.  
It is a daily lesson of history  
sweating in a tight corner.  
Its breakdowns and survivals  
compose our Book of Revelation.  
It may be the presumptive engine  
of our last mythology.

Look, our Macho Incarnate,  
sweat towel slung round his neck.  
He collects us where the weathers  
of our feet strand us.  
His household gods travel with him,  
with the Virgin of Sudden Mercy.  
Our Collective Memory, he forgets  
no one's fare. Nor anyone's destiny.

See how our countrymen cling  
to his trapeze against all hazards.  
All our lives we shall be acrobats  
and patiently survive.  
Our bodies feed on proximity,  
our minds rev up on gossip.  
We flock in small spaces,  
and twitter a country of patience.

Here is our heartland still.  
When it dreams of people,  
it returns empty to itself,  
having no power of abstraction.  
Abandoned to itself,  
and in no one's care,  
jeepneys carom through it,  
our long country of patience.

Nights I lie awake, I hear  
a far-off tectonic rumble.  
Is it a figment of desolation  
from that reliquary of havoc,  
or, out of its dusty hardihood,  
that obduracy of mere survival,  
a slow hoard of thunder  
from underground spirit of endurance?

## How Our Towns Drown

How in the downpour our towns drown,  
downstream of doom to sea we are returned,  
houses and pigs in ceaseless procession  
as skies boom and fall thundering spears  
to beat down all curses and tears to tide –  
among seaweed and driftwood and water hyacinths,  
prayer-wreaths for the dead and the drowned,

downstream of doom to sea we are returned.  
Tottering over manholes, shivering in the blast  
of a blind monsoon, its hollow howl  
the rolling dreariness of our emptied hills,  
our feet doubt their ground where streets  
vanish in the gorge and swill of slime –  
to flood at last we are flotsam and scum,

houses and pigs in ceaseless procession.  
And rushing past our brethren, those lovelorn  
cats and cockroaches, amid floating roofs,  
lumbering cadavers of cherished scrap,  
our naked brats scamper and gambol  
over their scavenged loot of murky things,  
tires and handbags and bottles and shoes,

as skies boom and fall thundering spears  
on Cherry Hill slumping down its slope  
and shoveling homes in one boulder swoop –  
landfill of families in moaning mud!  
so sudden, their screams no echoes bear,  
abducted to questioning rage of mind  
by what “state of calamity” or “act of God”

to beat down all curses and tears to tide.  
 Antipolo to Pangasinan the earth rivers  
 and shoves down Pinatubo's renegade ooze  
 to our paddies swelling to ocean of muck  
 and fishponds collapsing to swamp;  
 for bridges are down, and mountains too far,  
 to flee and shelter from the water's gore

among seaweed and driftwood and water hyacinths,  
 what word, what route? what water world  
 for breathing space, the floors of our dreams  
 but shiver their fittings and leak their gloom.  
 Clutch of seaweed for hair,  
 driftwood for limbs, hyacinths for a cloak,  
 what new indigene, only survivor to offer

prayer-wreaths for the dead and the drowned?  
*Requiescant in pace ... vitam aeternam,*  
 so cradle the infant, swaddled in rubble grime,  
 just now excavated and no mother to hush  
 its lost wail, no father, no sibling –  
 surely now their wreck is deaf to cranes  
 or fingers digging, to what end any change

how in the downpour our towns drown.

## Idea

Is earth, soil, root of that I touch  
most deeply and call by name --  
For, as the word flashes to mind,  
there at once, by its light,  
what I live through is the very living:  
a test, a calling, an uncommon dare.  
And everywhere I look or speak from,  
all things begin to surround like sunlight  
the sharp living moment at its own place  
and time where it achieves, mysteriously,  
its own meaningfulness.

With what alphabet shall I  
(Eye, the inspector within) unravel  
that lightning flash over the scatter of living  
to form the single word by which  
the world to itself is again made vocable?

Oh, whence the idea?  
Is one's mind single, itinerant Eye  
sun to sun, or is it rather the Universe  
shaping through this mind its infinite  
possibilities?  
And what then the idea's light?  
How does its meaning form by which  
its light is cast?  
Is there not a greedy void, a darkness  
without syllable, by which light  
is known?  
Or if no idea had flashed,  
what might there be athwart  
the moment's sharp thorn  
toward its singular rose?  
how else might it have been held?



Is it incredible? --  
That the mind in love with mysteries  
beneath our words' dream  
is the Universe in quest of a language  
to shape, like the rose its ardent flower,  
its yearning exuberance.

Oh, what weird weather of mystery  
unscrolls our skies over those things  
and incidents that breathless await  
their telling!  
Where winds blow but cannot shape  
a vowel,  
the clouds break and wander hapless  
with their alphabet.  
It must needs be lightning the word's  
dumb shell to crack.

## The Light in One's Blood

To seek our way of thinking  
by which our country is found,  
I know but do not know,  
for its language too is lost.  
To find our trail up a mountain  
without a spirit guide -  
here is no space where words in use  
might stake a claim.

Speaking is fraught with other speech.  
Through all our fathers, Spain  
and America had invented our souls  
and wrought our land and history.  
How shall I think counter to the thick  
originating grain of their thought?  
“I have not made or accepted  
their words. My voice holds them at bay.”

Look then without words,  
nor jump about like ticks  
missing their dumb meat.  
If there be enough blood yet  
in our story for counterpoise,  
in speech take no meaning  
from elsewhere,  
be more thorough than passion.

Whence does one come  
when he speaks, his eyes lighting up?  
Before speech, all words are dead,  
their legends blind.  
No one comes from language,  
the truth is what words dream.  
One speaks, and language comes,  
the light in one's blood.

What ravening lions roar  
in our blood for our thoughts?  
We too have our own thunder  
from lost insurrections;  
even the present seems a gift,  
but mostly unopened.  
So much thought is scattered  
like grain upon burnt ground.

The soil is ours, and inters  
the secret bones of our loss.  
We must know our loss, all things  
that ghost our time.  
Speak now, collect every bone,  
lay the pieces together.  
Here is true speaking,  
a mountain rises beneath our feet!

Is language already given?  
- yet we have its use:  
a double forgery!  
No essences are fixed by words.  
Proceed by evacuation  
of first seeing; in emptiness  
gather the pieces  
of breaking light.

No language is beforehand  
but its shadow; nothing  
in the script, but the other's myth  
that now frets your soul.  
What breathed there before the words  
took their hue and creed?  
How, with the same words,  
shall another tale be told?

The same words, but not the given,  
for void its speech of empire!  
Our eyes must claim their right  
to our landscape and its names.  
What cataract of other minds  
has flooded their sight?  
We must even fall from our own sky  
to find our earth again.

## **That Space of Writing**

And when I write, I want the largest space,  
Of such breadth, of such length as this world  
Never had of forests nor virgin paper,  
Where the words never were, their script accursed,  
    but only now  
        Descending to cry, Freedom!

Then my hands should never feel there were walls  
That grow their ominous lichen between my fingers,  
Nor my elbows graze the wild beards of rocks  
That cathedral my tribe wailing for their god,  
    but only now  
        Descending without speech!

The words that never were create anew my race,  
Their mornings stand clear where ancient skies cascade  
Down the singing gorges of the wind. My hands  
Draw again the map that alien voyages had wrecked,  
    O long ago  
        Descending with Cross and Krag!

My elbows swing where rooms void their space,  
And I laugh to see the weird syllables of speech  
Open their abyss, and stride across the heartland  
Of my people's silences where their eyes pour  
    like sunlight  
        Descending to claim the earth!

O when I write again, the words of any tongue  
Shall find no tillage in our blood, nor my hands  
Scruple to choke their weed, for first must they bleed  
Their scripture in our solitude and yield to our  
    scythe's will  
        Descending to carve our heart.