

## Gémino H. Abad Literary Awards for Poetry and for Literary Criticism Awardees

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### Bedlams

We do not speak of the violence from the night gone wrong,  
of the time the bedroom turned to bedlam, but it does not mean we  
have forgotten.

Rather, we regress, we make excuses and recite them until they become  
litany,  
until we start believing in the necessitated beauty in suffering. *What do  
you mean?*

I mean that there are witnesses with no voices to speak, defined by these  
broken details:

the curtains drawn, the door slammed, the chair overturned, the shards  
of glass strewn  
over linoleum tiles. Called at the stand, the resounding din is by itself  
an overture.

*What did he do to you, dear? What has he done?* My voice is too weak to  
bear the facts.

*I do not know. Please, do not make me remember –*

All this, again, is but a litany of pretexts. In truth, the reason I tell  
people for these bruises  
is that the artist in him has burst out, has taken over his body while he  
was busy  
fumbling with his hands, when he himself had wanted to lose control.  
On my skin, a perfect rendition of twilight as the sun moves below the  
horizon in degrees,  
the purple darkening of the firmament. This is what I mean by  
necessitated beauty.

I have learned that there is such a thing as art for the sake of art itself.  
We have no need to wonder at the wall turned canvas, at the blood cum  
paint,  
at the flesh that does not feel like flesh at all. We can shift the blame in  
degrees as well,  
say *He was not at fault*, say *It was me*, say *No, see, he had only been  
possessed* –

We do not speak of the violence from the night gone wrong, but how  
could we ever forget?  
How could I? One of these days, when I dream of the bedlam, I will no  
longer wake  
to bleak lights of emergency rooms with my mother in one corner  
praying and a rosary  
in her shaking hands, my father wearing the bleached floor with each  
fall of his footsteps,  
and my brothers wondering if tragedy is inherent in marrow. *Is it?*  
*What did he do to you?*  
*What has he done?* One of these days, when my voice no longer comes  
to weeping  
at the mention of his name, when a slammed door no longer means  
having to close my eyes,  
I will come to terms with how he has written his world on my bones –  
and know that they are mine alone to break.

## Cities

I remember the beaches in Carles when I think of you.

Feet bare, grit between toes – how we stood above what we wished we could be.  
The sunset as a funeral pyre, its reds consuming,

I imagined us burning through twilight and praying  
we were someone else come darkness –  
only to end up strangers to our selves.

On our last day in Kowloon, I spent the entire morning packing and unpacking.  
You were silent in the room until the third cycle when you said

*There should be space for everything you need.*

Though I hadn't known where to place my heart between shoes and maps and books.

*It's how things work in the universe, you added.*

*Matter takes up space and you can only have space for what matters.*

Back in Manila, you were arguing who the best Karamazov brother was.

I dreamt of taking your skin to see it up close,

reading Dostoevsky on your flesh; each unseen scar

a tragedy buried beneath such speechifying.

Somewhere in these fissures, words fall into place and become its own body –  
meanwhile we are trapped in the state of unbecoming.

My professor once told me *Something is stronger with gaps between its grains,*

without expounding on the reasoning, leaving me with no clarity of why.

So I left you at the train station in Tokyo, by the pillars you knocked on

and commented *How hollow,*

because I had thought *We're better off with this distance –*

when in actuality I hadn't known what it meant.

## **The Things I Think Of While You Sleep**

I.

If my heart is an ocean, then you are the moon  
pulling tides to crash against my breastbone.  
The weight of this, the gravity between –  
has it really been there since the beginning?

II.

I am an ascending supernova at the precipice of becoming.  
I am a hurricane restlessly traversing these landscapes.  
All this holy light spilling from within me, and yet when you  
reach out in half-wakefulness, the storm of my being settles.

III.

In our past life, I called you älskling. In another, golubushka.  
In all our selves, you are every name of love.  
Here, you are sinta.  
Here you are.

## Anatomy of Sunday Mornings

(Scientific text is lifted from Judith Barbaro-Brown's section  
The Hands & Feet in the book 30-Second Anatomy (Metro Books:2012).)

Each hand contains twenty-seven bones –  
    *On Sunday mornings, I fall in love without meaning to –*  
eight in the wrist –  
    *in the flickering motion as you stir –*  
five in the palm –  
    *sugar into coffee in your favorite mug –*  
and fourteen in the fingers and thumb –  
    *and bring it up to your lips.*

The hand has an excellent nerve supply –  
    *On Sunday mornings, the world could be envious of ceramic –*  
with the highest density of nerve endings occurring in the fingertips –  
    *how only it knows of how you taste.*

Human hands have an opposable thumb –  
    *On Sunday mornings, I am always, always on the cusp –*  
allowing for manipulation of small, delicate objects –  
    *of spilling out confessions, like milk on the counter –*  
as well as large, heavy ones –  
    *always, on accident, falling without intent, graceless.*

## Interim

He charts constellations out of water stains on my ceiling,  
traces maps with dust on the pillars of this house.  
He's figured out that there's a world beyond these walls,  
a world beyond my words,  
and now he wants to leave.

Even when he's here, he's not,  
and I am by the looking glass,  
always wanting to see in.

This is how we come to dream of cities we could never properly pronounce:

*Edinburgh, Versailles, Guayaquil –*

We imagine bright lights, views of sunsets and sunrises  
from behind thick curtains of hotel rooms, speaking phrases  
from translation guides taken on the way out of airports.

It will be beautiful, at first, as all things begin,  
the neon streets at night, the grass that isn't always summer-brittle,  
the way everything is nothing like our own favelas back at home.

It will be beautiful,  
until we're reminded of our impermanence,  
of how we have to return, and I comfort him this way:  
*It's not just these walls that confine us.*

We are each of us bound by the construct of flesh around the secrets of the universe;  
already by being born, defined to be a subset of stars,  
pursuing purpose other than burning and dying —

*There is nothing within us that cannot be found elsewhere,*

but he already knows that there's a world beyond my words,  
so still, he leaves.

Now, he sits on cold benches in the departure lounge,  
traces silhouettes with dust on whatever surface he can find,  
waits for his 4 AM flight while reconciling what he knows  
of the singularity of our beginning,  
of what we've come to know by its other names:  
The Big Bang, Pre-Stellar Evolution, God's First Miracle –

*It must have been beautiful once.*

By himself, he debates the merits of religion  
while imagining my voice:  
*We can still believe without truly understanding.*

We call this Faith, darling,  
and it is all that keeps me waiting.

## **These Aching Windows**

It's midnight now and all I can think of is how  
you're still in a September that no longer exists.  
Tonight, the trees outside my room are standing  
to attention. I asked them to tell me when  
you come home, but so far there is no news.  
Only the weatherman is warning of storms  
in this area, so maybe you're the rain  
I've been waiting to fall.  
There's a hurricane on the streets and it's uprooting  
all the trees that are expecting your return.  
The house is shaking and the roof is being  
blown away, even these windows  
are aching at the loss of you.  
I've been taught to run at the first sign of danger,  
but instead I'm on the open balcony,  
holding out my arms because I know how it is  
to restlessly search for somewhere to settle  
and call home. *Hello. Please, please come in.*  
*You must be tired.*



## **To The Wolves**

It is night and he's lonely, he's howling at the moon. In his grief, he's created a language of it. His hands are grasping at shadows for consolation, no matter the futility of his attempt for purchase. Boys like him are most beautiful when they're desperate, when they're all graceless sinew and muscle beneath struggling flesh, all ravenous veins with blood that cannot be sated. I have been forewarned of beautiful boys, of how they are wolves among sheep, but how could he be a beast? If our skin can only contain so much shame until we are overcome with it, does that not make monsters of us all?

It is night, so his animal heart is looking for something to corrupt, to devour, to leave mangled in the streets for someone else to find in the morning. This is the closest I will be to being holy after the culmination of my sins. This, how he has made a banquet of my body, a feast of dirty offerings on altars in his ungodly church, such hallowed grounds. How I am only beautiful in his hands. The rest of the city falls on their envious knees and comes to weeping at the sight of all this carnage, at the aftermath of lust. Is this not the essence of devotion, the crux of sermons? Do we all not desire to be consumed?

It is night and the name that is dying in his throat is not mine. It is night, so he crawls back to bed with blood on incisors and it does not belong to me either. I have been forewarned of beautiful boys like him, of how they are all broken bones and no tender, all fists full of hair and nails scratching spine, all surrender in mouth around junctures of neck and shoulder, all shaking and release in unholy sighs. I have been forewarned yet I have taken in his hunger and it has burrowed itself in my marrow. I have taken in his dark like it means salvation. Where do we go from here? Is there still something left to be faithful to?

## Habits

1

Every morning, I spend an hour in the shower, in ceremonials.  
An hour of taking off my clothes, dirt-ridden, and then my skin,  
after all this time, still *you*-ridden.  
I go through the motions. I read the labels behind the bottles.  
I sing along to the songs playing in the next room, and  
I change my soap every week just to see which will stick because I never feel clean,  
and it's wasteful – I know – but I'm trying not to make a habit of this.  
Rinse, repeat.  
Rinse, repeat.

2

See, I remember that night all too well. I had come to you  
with the right set of expectations and returned  
with the wrong set of hands stitched to my wrists.  
I tried to pawn them off the next day, but the lady at the counter told me  
*Sorry, I can't take these.*  
I tried to give them away to the next person I saw, but even he wouldn't take them.  
Afterwards, everyone I passed kept apologizing, kept saying  
*Sorry, sorry, sorry* – like they knew what the big damn tragedy was. *Sorry,*  
but it was all for the wrong reasons  
and I wouldn't take them.

3

We're breathless by sunrise, by white light knocking on windows,  
arresting attention, asking to be let in.  
He's most beautiful when he's drinking coffee, tipping ceramic only slightly  
to his lips, and I have always been familiar with the knowledge  
of how the light feels to be outside, at the fringes.  
He's most beautiful when he's making conversation,  
when he's  
asking if I've forgotten what it was  
that sent me  
into the fissure of his arms,

which is *you*,            so the answer is *No*,  
                                   so elsewhere the oceans are spilling with the world's  
                                   apologies,  
                                   so the light still hasn't found a way in,  
                                   so now we are making a science to walking through  
                                   windows.

4

There is a science to moving on.            He explained it to me this way:  
                                   Every twenty-four hours, the earth completes one full rotation on its axis.  
                                   Every twenty-seven days, the moon orbits the earth.  
                                   Every three hundred and sixty-five days, the earth circles the sun.  
                                   Even the entire solar system moves through the center of the galaxy  
                                   in every estimated twenty-five to two hundred fifty-million years –  
 No one really knows because no one's lived long enough to know,  
                                   but that's not the point. The point is that we can't make any more excuses.  
                                   We aren't liminal beings with the choice to stay in the in-between  
                                   of our turning worlds.                                    We have to go.  
 We have to go.

5

By noon, I'm already twisting words around my tongue.  
 This new language I created in my grief can only be understood by my windows,  
                                   how they know of aching.  
 There are things I'm still trying to find words for, like  
                                   how I used to trace Neruda over the scarred-sobbed skin of your cheek,  
                                   and the taste of persimmon in promises, lips that aren't half as full as the  
                                   moon, and  
                                   the way you make me feel when I'm standing all alone in the rain.  
 Also, I'm thinking of how it should translate.  
                                   When I say                                    *I miss you,*  
                                   it should read as                            *the bed isn't sinking with your weight.*  
                                   And when I say                                *I miss you,*  
                                   I want it to mean                            *I don't.*

6

When he places his lips on my wrist, it doesn't burn the way I remember.  
He's not you and for some reason this makes all the difference to my skin.  
Before the sun sets, I'm looking at him  
with what's left of the faded orange sky reflected on the walls  
and he calls me every name of love before kissing me again,  
again, until I am sundered.  
Our hearts have been splintering into halves and quarters  
for as long as we can remember, but this quiet, this tenderness,  
can be the healing gold to our fragments. We can love like this.  
We can be gentle. We can wear each other's skin bruised and broken  
or we can pick up the pieces and let ourselves be whole.

7

I spend my nights driving down these streets,  
nights waiting to be told I'm running on empty. Headlights flickering on signs.  
Tunes asking to be played on the radio. Rain splashing on the windshield.  
These hands fumbling for the wheel, unsure of the required motions.  
These hands still aren't mine.  
I spend my nights braking before intersections, counting down  
the seconds on stoplights, waiting for stop to go, go to slow –  
and it's wasteful – I know – but I'm trying not to make a habit of this.  
I really am.

**Recurse / Recourse**

(originally titled And At The End)

Your heart always belongs in another pantheon,  
 in another greater than life story which doesn't  
 involve subverted wrists or the banal act of  
 reading labels behind bottles to better understand  
 the composition of what we've come to rely on.  
 You want to lust for apples. You want wars.  
 You want beautiful boys on their knees or on their backs,  
 it doesn't matter. You want them telling you their body  
 is all yours, every graceless sinew, each shuddering breath.  
 You want blood seeping to the ground where one day  
 the flowers you plant yourself will blossom. You want  
 all these things and more, so the history of desire  
 continues to write itself and in it you are  
 every name of love. The hurricane outside my windows  
 remains uprooting, and even when the flesh is all wrong,  
 all mangled, it still wants to call you home.  
 The gale turns; the earth, the moon, the solar system.  
 We are each of us looking for a still point to hold on to,  
 but by now we know that to grasp at shadows is  
 to be desperate. *Now, darling, we have to go.*  
 Point anywhere to the map and tell me where  
 you want to go. Choose a city and I will pronounce  
 its name properly for you. Choose a city and I will write  
 you lines of how it felt to watch the sun move  
 in degrees from behind thick curtains of hotel rooms.  
 I will teach you how to fall without intent.  
 I will do anything and everything you ask of me and more.  
 This is the essence of devotion. *Let's go, sweetheart.*

If I can only have space for what matters,  
then I will place you here, beneath my breastbone,  
where the tides of my heart are  
constantly crashing with your presence.  
This heart, the one that doesn't belong  
in the same pantheon as yours,  
the one that has splintered into grains, that is sundered,  
the one that wants to believe in a quiet and tender love  
amidst all this bedlam. This heart, which is not quite a body,  
but is learning to become, surely.  
This heart is all I have left to give.  
It's all yours.