

Joel M. Toledo

Ruins and Reconstructions:
Poems



Oppositions

The persistent
pairings of nature:

butterfly and moth,
all grace and flutter,

flame and death. Always
terror crosses over into

beauty, the tender
undersides of caterpillars.

Then wings. Tremor of color.
Great shakings of flowers

and from somewhere,
waft of burning candles.

Tell me, where do
they die, effervescent

and funereal,
where do they live?



Stone-turning

I am moving and assembling the semblances, roads
like the long unraveling of the blackest tresses.

Everywhere things are waking to tenderness, and I am
staring. I will leave no room for chance, no less

than the naming of everything that passes, because some
are avoiding significance. The path winds and forks,

and I am witnessing this full-eyed, along with other
recklessness and faults and slow giving in of things

by the roadside. See now the hard light that strikes then
strokes before losing its sheen, an owl blinking,

shudders inside its dream of a generous evening. And look, trees
bristle in their impermanent greens, stones turning in the mind,

when, at last, everything I can find has pooled in the twilight
and here, under this rock: crumble, ruin of sky, night.

Harvest

Every day, come summer, I fear for
the limitations of our two-toned seasons

and for my garden. And I hate leaving
the house during vacations. Because

the equations are simple enough—
the tragedy of wailing afternoons

fuming with fire trucks and heated
news about weather, and wilting

flowers. These tropical depressions:
they attend to the greenhouse

like a crowded congregation
waiting for glorious homilies,

that assuring voice of the pastor
who loves greenery and God

yet offering nothing much but
coming months of restless clouds

finally obeying, some holy water
for cleansing, or warm wine. Yet

he speaks of another garden teeming
with just the right amount of rain-

fallen apples: fiery red, fresh,
and sinless come harvest time.

Bird Watching

Because the eagle, by itself,
is beautiful and allows
the whole expanse of its body
to span across the high air as it

gazes down on our awkward gestures
and flailing and failures. But
I, for one, value instinct over
intelligence. Or the devotion

of penguins, the delirious flutter
of a mockingbird. There is no
loneliness in them, no noticing
of the splendor of sunsets. Also,

those little sonnets doves make,
their endless preening, these are not
done out of love. Their fleeting presence
on the thin wires of trees or behind

windowsills—these do not concern us
as much as we'd hope. They are
the given observers, and they never
look too close, nor care enough.

And while we continue primping
in front of our mirrors, they simply
watch as new leaves sprout above
and heighten the canopies, notice

the new antenna installed above
some rooftop. And if you manage
to get some bird to eat from your hands,
it does so out of necessity. So we go on

taking pictures of such encounters.
We study their feathers and try to measure
the true importance of color. We feel,
we fall, we stumble. And they continue

flying in perfect formations, rising
and soaring and seeing everything, oblivious
to our daily want for grandeur—these dull,
imperfect limbs bristling with all-too-human

commotion. Every day I lose a potential
feather. Then I find another by the roadside.
And holding it up, wonder how the wind
animates it, this bodiless thing. I guess

there are too many mistakes to atone for.
And so wide and persistent a sky to elevate to.

Construction

We are busy uprooting trees, sorting out
branch from stem, black root from black soil.

And afterwards, we will pluck out feathers
from birds we have caught, devour the eggs,

unravel the nests. We will cut cleanly through
the trunk and stare at the whorls and the ages.

This is to say, I speak not of fallen fruits, nor
of that moment when leaves, after the wild scattering,

relent. Only that which is still permissible:
mild breeze, shaking of trunks. The watchful will notice

the rain of beetles before they hit the ground
or their frenzied flights. I dare not look upon a leaf

and say, *look, the universe is gathered here*, collapsing
faster than the fact that what snaps, snaps, simply because

this is acceptable—whenever is inhibited should rely on
the imagined, the eventual transitions of language toward

meaning, timber turning to houses. What is left in the middle
is non-negotiable. They call it labor; they point to it, saying,

usefulness, space recovered. I say, *centipedes underfoot*,
crushed flower, crackling twigs. But everyone is tired

and not listening. Still, I am concerned with the leaning tree,
having just left the workers' hands, being pushed forward

to the ground, the many leaves stilling, stirring, rising
again, and of the new light now busy pointing to the mess.