

## FOUR POEMS

*Mookie Katigbak*

### Snapshot

Snapshot of a father and child: I'm six.  
Leering from a diving board, the itch  
For the finish a wriggle in my thigh  
Like a boy's last seconds before a urinal  
Or the last shudder into love. A gun goes off.  
Stop clocks blink their digits on a smarting

Screen: I'm six and all blood.  
It races through me like ivory teeth  
In a mess of hair. My arms tear at water  
Like claws into skin. I flash without air  
Into a record eighteen seconds, then slump

And sink into chlorine. They think I'm drowning.  
The sun a piss-green slog in dirty water.  
Then my father's khakis plunging in,  
I bruise where his arm tugs my rib. He knits  
His torso to my spine—this is true, I am there,  
Hoisted to rescue and catcalls after—This is 1986,

My father at forty seven has never told me  
One useful thing, has never let his belt  
Lick my thigh like a cattle hand branding a nag.  
Decades after, he'll edge wordlessly toward  
My mother on a hospital bed, nudge his head

Over and over against hers. No one will know  
What it means, only that in his final hours,  
He never asks for his absent child. As though  
He knew again the limits of her air, her body

A jackknife in difficult water—knows she's  
Swimming for her life as fast as she can,  
The chlorine as strong to the eye as seawater,  
Dirty brine, her heart on its second wind,  
Giving in. The whole human length of her

Crying *swim, swim*.

## Puzzle

Leaves in their last light beg of dust  
a last immortal minute. In easy sight,  
a *New York Times* I'll not look at  
flusters a chair.

A puzzle leaves a gaping clue:  
best-selling woman writer of 1922,  
nine letters, the tenth inked out.  
Mitchell, I hazard, that's eight,  
dear Margaret, not enough archaic.

Black on white, the child like scrawl  
defeats your careful hand. It inks  
a lazy bet on *curb*, thirteen across,  
a six letter word you've chanced with  
*Temper*. And easily the word admits

to 20 down. *Remove*: to move again  
or take away like players on a board.  
Black on white, the words scroll down  
a famous mystery:

You never left a puzzle bare. It meant  
to call you back into your chair, into  
a grid as straight as a private's spine.  
So why should I care for Tokyo's claim

to a pacific name, 17 down?  
Why should I dream dark words  
into so many white boxes, chiseling  
your absence in the puzzle's core:

Old diamond, put there for show. Not meant  
for me to lose you less, or let you go.

## **Naming Stars**

Once, to ease a nighttime terror,  
a father tells his child how stars  
we take as token signs are actual:

Bears, archers, sovereigns,  
as plain to the eye as satellites  
seen from the window of an initial

descent. "And Ursa Minor's  
a small bear in the high wild?"  
"Absolutely." "And it isn't the eye  
pretends it there?" "Of course."  
Solving the riddle on an evening  
sky, she never did see girth or paw.

Years later, the father reads a poem  
in a book where his child describes  
how the three moles on her lover's thigh

are an archer's constellation.  
Words of pure invention, she says,  
a poet's lie. He notes the brisk

arpeggios of her hand against  
her thigh. “Absolutely,” he says,  
and “Of course.”

If one should disbelieve the other,  
both know it can't be righted.  
As we posit lit equations  
of faiths we keep untrue for,  
and why there isn't a lie  
a man won't tell his child.

## **Women Talking**

I see hard hands turn slack  
with diamonds and pearls.  
I'm a crown of hair below  
a window screen. They crack  
dried watermelon seeds  
between their front teeth,  
pelt tables when the bowl fills.  
The mouths know by rote  
the Lenten kiss: Salt and pit.  
I have seen this air in movies  
where presidents and generals  
cloud rooms with smoke  
and secrets. No one lets us in  
on their dangerous laughter.  
When a door slams, talk turns  
to maladies or weather.

Everything I need to know about  
the stranger is in those words.

They smear my mother's teeth  
with lipstick. She whispers them

Between the crack and pelt  
of dried seeds. Everything

I need to hear, I can't be told.  
I'm too young to know

anything in time can turn  
a mouth tender. Even salt.