



**Kristine Ong Muslim** \ FOUR PROSE POEMS

## Primal Shift

A surgeon, while repairing a partially severed optic nerve, finds the only purpose of sightlessness in the dark. A rift valley tells of how a figure gets transfigured because it is disarticulated. Continental drift can explain the unnatural composure of the horizon, the nonnegotiable repose of horizontal lines. Riverbanks are paved, and architects of such surfaces take instruction—literally—from the *Book of Decay*, where it is made clear that no one is meant to survive. Most objects in most rooms are inherently mad and insistent, intuiting how people have come to be the sum of their parts. Silting in eutrophied rivers. Thawing pithoviruses in melting Siberian permafrost. The massive break in the dwindling Arctic ice. Everywhere, these familiar symbols: the boat, the ferryman, the water.



# Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

We are inside a video game called *Feeding Frenzy*. In time-attack mode on our Intel Graphics HD screen, we chomp through school after school of little fish. We leave nothing to chance. We simply gobble up everything. We haven't yet earned the moral position to judge others by how they choose their methods for gathering their sustenance. So, our gameplay is still all about insatiable greed interrupted only by our having to avoid the jellyfish, avoid the poisoned fish, avoid the bigger, much greedier fish, and of course, avoid the underwater mines tossed by warring men caught in their own mindless cycle of feeding frenzy. Everywhere we look, it felt pointless—because this whole thing *is* pointless.

In the beginning, we are angel fish Andy. Then we become Orville the orca. We are always moving up the food chain. The more fish we eat, the bigger we become. The bigger we become, the more we have to kill. It may seem as if we have no time to hate what we had become, but we do. In between the various infernal levels, right before shapeshifting to a larger, more voracious form, we were sentient and able to realize the intrinsic wrongness of how this two-dimensional world had been devised. Tell us, tell us: where does this evil reside and how can we stop it from unfolding? Where do the variable strictures of the self end and pretenses begin? What is the purpose of this life?



## Modern Appetite

We are inside a video game called *Bombberman vs. Digger*. A cutaway sectional view of the earth shows us in our fundamental form—a chugging hybrid truck that can dig as well as plant bombs. We dig. We dig up, we dig down, we dig all around. Then we blow up others to get to the jewels that are not accessible. When collected, the jewels clink, a sound that momentarily excites us to go on with our rote, prescribed path for accumulating more material wealth. This excitement won't wane. As we move forward into various levels, we don't end up just digging. When we blow up others to get to the jewels that are not accessible, we start with small lies to rationalize our actions. Then we go on to make big lies, lies that revise the history of how we have reached each level. Big lies—until we convince ourselves we have no other choice or what we have been doing all along can be chalked up to self-defense, to survival. Big lies—until we are at home with the idea that the systematic annihilation of others is acceptable if that means we get hold of each and every jewel.



## Congregation of the Street Lights

These days the crowds are found in major cities of the world. They consist mostly of teenagers and some who are barely in their twenties. They come out when it's dark, gathering round certain street lights and spilling at times to partly block road intersections. Not too many people complain about them, because they aren't really doing anything unlawful. They simply get together around specific lampposts, lost in the hush of their strange secret language. They talk of many things, alluding frequently to the coming of moths, which news reports insist are *literally* moths. Surely, some people, especially older ones with time enough to kill even as they spend their waking hours resisting the slow throttle of their mortality, have doubts about this interpretation, but there are supposedly just way too many important and far more urgent things in the world to pay attention to than decoding what appears to be just harmless lingo concocted by hyperactive young minds.

One television pundit, who started his career selling grossly overpriced barbecue grills in an infomercial where he had always looked contemptuous as if he'd rather be elsewhere, labeled the nightly crowd as *Cult of the Moth People*. The name stuck.

And when the Cult of the Moth People get asked what they talk about and why they choose to hold nightly vigils around street lamps, they will say variations of this answer in any language and say so with a shrug, *Nah, we're not really talking. We're listening.*

*Nakikinig kami.*

*Watashitachi wa kikimasu.*

*Nahn nasghi.*

*Wir hören zu.*

*Ne degjojme.*

*Noi ascultăm.*

*Kami mendengar.*

*Naminaw kami.*

They all say the same thing. They only differ in the language used as the Cult of the Moth People congregate in many different places in the world. When asked what they have been listening for, they will say without hesitation, "The moths." And each time one of them refers to the coming of the moths, a low faraway hum





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from countless pairs of wings flapping together begins to sound. The sound may have been imagined, a result of suggestion—the mind, filling the gaps as it struggles with the ambiguity of a mental image, conjures a familiar resonance in an attempt to complete the puzzle. The sound may have been real but totally unrelated. Or, one can argue of the low faraway hum’s imperceptibility, as well as the impossibility of moths, but same with some things in this world, one ultimately learns to suspend disbelief.

