

POEMS

Letter to Amina, Who Must Surely Be Among Angels

July 29, 1994

Ormoc, three years after the flood

*Not by your old name I address you, no,
Not by the one you went by, living in our midst
Mamang, name that kept you bound
To cradle, washtub, sink and stove
Till your back bent and your singing
Caked into silence, song in your dreaming
Crushed like fishbone in the traffic of circadian need.*

*Your own name then, Amina.
Letters etched on stone in Ormoc's
Graveyard hill, syllables all music and gold
Gliding smooth upon the tongue of memory —
Amina. Back here, no news you'd like to hear,
Or that you wouldn't know: one day at noon,
In a year of war and famine, of volcanoes bursting
And earthquakes shaking the ground we stood on,
Floodwaters broke from the mountains—
Drowning our city in an hour's rampage.*

*You'd gone ahead to this hill three years before,
You weren't there to witness what we had to do
Among the leavings of the water, the mud,
The rubble and debris, the countless bodies
Littering the streets—your husband among them,
A son, his wife, their children—how*

*In the panic of our sudden loss
We pried and scraped and shovelled from the ooze
What once had been beloved, crammed them coffinless
Without ritual without tears into the maw of earth
Beside you on that graveyard hill.
Amina what have the angels got to say
About that gross outrage?*

*I keep my own name, true, and feel myself
Free to make the words of my singing,
But I sing only in my own woman's voice,
Cracked with too much laughter, or anger,
Or tears. And who's to listen, I don't know,
admitting as I do, no traffic with angels.
I remember only your women's beauty fading,
And this, what's left for a daughter to touch—
Your namestone mute among the grass green singing,
Your name I raise to the wind like a prayer.
If you hear it whispering in the lift and fall
Of angel wings, please send word somehow—*

*Have they given you back your voice?
I'd like to know—lost among the angels
What can a woman sing?
And what do you remember?*

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