

Joel M. TOLEDO

Poems

The Real

World fixed at half-mast
and the undone. The Big Dipper
upright in fleeting imposition
then gone again unanswered.
I mean, so many things
wind to a close. If I can
offer you anything, that will be
a foreign leaf, something to
squeeze and to ease the
yearning. What is *Rosemary*?
I fetch the unrecognized, I palm it,
allowing minute rustling, temporal
scent. So that what I carry with me
is *estrangement*. As when atmosphere
is calibrated, as when daylight
is no refuge because there's
too much interference, rescue
forbidden by turbulence.
The stable always refuses
stability, the quiver leading again
to twitching, catastrophe.
So then temper the tides with
gentle grazes of fingers on wind.
Because we are eternally
involved. And to insist otherwise
is to mean nothing. See, magic
requires consensus. I'd rather
the commonplace cracks
on the pavement, my feet
hurting from the involvement.

For Kuniko

The Pitch

Winslow, AZ - Hundreds of Winslow residents are grieving after a 13-year-old died while playing a baseball game. Hayden Walton was a member of the Winslow Little League. As he went to lay down a bunt Tuesday night, he was struck in the chest by a pitch. - ABC15.com

And again, reconsider youth –
Read closely.

Nowadays
too much news. Everything

news. Nothing else truer
than its constant aggravation.

Lead paragraph: boy, bunt,
catch. The arrest. Just imagine

those. Always ends with the why. *Why?*
The round does the same damage as

the pointed. See, he never even reached
first base. The ground quickly tugged

at his shocked heart. What comes next?
Silence, rushing, silence again. And

again. Future failure means nothing now.
Nor ambition. Forecast. How to console is

a complex language: try pronouncing *Commotio Cordis*.
In any flash report there is no maybe, no

what-ifs. Just facts. The field

empty and grief, damn you,
you keep trampling on grass,
permitting it again. And again.

Grass. Growing and growing,
untended blades in the backyard.

Blunt-force-trauma. This
is chronic. No one recovers

by declaring *I understand*. Nobody
can, will. Can will it. Memory

will haunt all spaces, occupy all
vacancies. Try counting hurt

by lifespan: How old was he? 13.
Only. Yes, only. *If only*—

That floor does not exist; logicians
insist it does. Should be true

but what about the child skipping
stones? So many ways to cheat

gravity, *formerly*: Space, parachutes,
wings. But the true is never real; Absence

is. Where's that child pointing? Where is he
pointing at? Back at home,

parents are missing
laughter, mud stains on the rug. Running

shoes. Stay *sharp*, *stay sharp*. Cling

to the bat, keep your grip.
Maintain, *maintain*. And
come on home. Don't

stray to the middle. Stay.
Stay. Here. *Here is*

Loss - the ultimate newscast.
Rounds up, recaps. Again

and again, bulletins. Always too soon.
Strikes everywhere. Hits.

My Many Grudges Against Water

It filled my mother's lungs. When
does forgiveness start? I always
come home late, scowling at
prosthetics and poets indenting
lines without knowing the implications

of pause. *Of rest*. I almost drowned
the other day. My son quickly
pushed me toward the graspable.
My heart was ready to give out
but instinct had saved me: not mine

but another's. For a while, not a word
was spoken. Intelligence did not matter —
language had nothing to do with this.
I had that moment sensed myself
indented. It was not *coaxing*, it

was harsh love. Brutal, primal,
necessary. My mother had an enlarged
heart and I've yet to understand
the meaning of *the stroke*. "Feel
the water," said my wife. "Let go."

Echo

I expect nothing more than repetition. This situation calls for plenty of space and far-flung boomerangs. This berth, this height, this denial of silence. Whenever I mimic frogs, a snake, the myna bird, I press the recorder then look at the mirror and say no, no, this won't do, this is too close. Yet I believe constant shouting forces the world to continue reverberating. Mountains are shields but how come rain keeps bleeding into the valley? *Remember, remember*, mind insists. But I cannot. Instead I have notes. To look at, to hold, to hold on to and to revise. All other empty spaces are for imagining: I am always facing a cliff. I am always on the verge of lying. And that's my final answer. *Do you really hear yourself?* Listen, listen: that's my final answer, that's my answer, my answer, answer. *No change, no flood, no prediction, no thanks*. I expect nothing, nothing at all, in return.

Epiphany

is lightning. Serrated proposition that awe depends on the proximate. They say thunder is reliant on distance. Disagree.
(It is but an unreliable footnote.)
Lightning stands for the unclear.
It betrays counting, approximation.

It tags everything, defines vandalism
in the purest sense. Look! The sky's dilating
once more. Lightning hovering above
the open field, splitting open the too-
aspiring and declaring its innocence.
I was never there, it maintains.
Quickly after the shock. Way before
that always untimely clapping.

Heart

I don't anymore want melody
with its wont for pleasing and pattern
and why should I have it lilting
in the background when
consoling relatives? My heart
is forged for frailty and failure.
I am accepting this now – its many vessels
leading to sorrow, its southpaw stance.
I pin a right hand over it at times,
out of duty or earnestness or just to check
if it's still here. Yes, there is always some
grand grief in its capacity to quiet everything,
eventually. And I do not cherish such knowledge.
So every day I work it, this heart,
pacing it because I hate syncopation. Skip

that. I want complete mono/tone. I prefer
the cadence, the metronome. I insist on heart.

PISO

I must have lost it in the fall
of a foreign country.
Strange weather — the leaves
pushing out of their bodies
the breathing colors of fire and green.
All day long they keep leaving
and the trees keep exposing
their bare fingers: now letting go
then letting go again. And I thought
certain losses just take place

this way: in seasonal relinquishing,
that heavy one-peso coin falling
out of my pocket, Rizal's head
turning toward gunfire, his body
coiling and recoiling again
under the many coppers of littering
Autumn — flipping and flipping back
to the year of my birth, 1972
etched on its tail like the stain
of nickels, martial bullets

and many cruel days of rain
and disappearances. I still remember
how Grandmother would unfold
her scarf and shuffle the coins
in her hand. *One for you,*
she would say, like she was doling out
rations during grade school feeding,
those long childhood lines leading
to dark republican bread and darker

evenings, poor lamplights surrounded
by the steady drone of crickets
and that muffled clinking of old coins
somewhere within Grandmother's dress
as she ambled about the old house.
Those days, there were just too many
secrets, slow silhouettes. Old people
counting lightning, a kind, wrinkled hand
offering again and again, *One for you,
one for you. Don't tell your father. Here.*

Years later, I've found other new things
recompense: *here*, rust of old maple
and former fig, and *there*, another new
brown leaf. They offer the strangest
consolation, fine findings from another
season. And I will bring them home.
But the beautiful bruise of that coin's
reeded edges against my empty palm,
lost in this siege of all-around leaving,
please, please, keep that one for me.

Asian

The ease of fleeing to old temples.
To just go. Matchsticks for candles,
incense for warding off spirits,
homilies to absorb cleansing.
Culture's but a phone call away,
a channel away, a plane ride
way out of my way. Now

and then I find myself studying
inflation rates, departure dates.
Now and then I hear myself
saying *tao* and mispronouncing.
It's like a complex game
of scrabble I keep losing.
Civilization: I love that, that
word. Not that I'm disoriented;
I just can't, I just can't
afford it.

Bereavement Leave

Pass out the biscuits. Pass around
an exhausted hand. Match the grip
of strangers, firm in their insistence
on lapsed kinship. I pass by the old
mirror and do not find grief. Maybe
because that can wait. No, not that —
because no one stares at mirrors hoping
for the sudden sorrows. Even actors
cannot do that, I think. One instead
finds it in the faces of a new cousin,
aging relatives helping out in the kitchen,
neighbors whose name you will never
recall when this leave's over. Death
has a funny way of extending the family.
Or delaying the absence. Looking now
at my mother, the curl of her lips
tracing a smile beneath the glass,
I realize the world can wait. She holds
her peace well, and nine days after
it's still not the time to speak, but for

simply passing the time, passing by
the mirror again and again, holding back
the necessary arrangements. Because
now a newfound uncle, the one with
a booming laugh and the thickest
barrio accent, is asking for coffee.

What Are The Odds?

*And we all run the risk of
To remain silent, I don't know....*
-- China Crisis

I know. The clichés abound --
The world's round, the calm's before
the storm. They grow malignant,
feasting on sudden deaths, old ties.
They flourish in symmetry, as children
balancing on seesaws aspiring for
that plateau, instances of evenness,
flatlines. Still

the crows are circling the field
and the scarecrow stands useless.
And, moving on, I realize that
horizons fluctuate because the sea
simply permits it. I was waving my
goodbye to someone, in a dream,
in a hospital. Her head

tilting like left-behind women
on the docks in films. Cruel gestures,

preventing voice. Far away now,
farther away. Until even how her
lips moved has become an aspect
of the sea. Collision

or silence. Heartbeats stroking
the evenings toward land. Spikes
protruding now over the belabored
absences. In that dream, I felt
happy. In that dream I sensed
presence. See, there lies reco-
very. See, there goes

drowning and this fear of depth.
What are the odds, whispers my
sister, finally summoning speech.
We are staring at grass, surveying
the earth, aware of how the sudden
wind is carrying our words somewhere
else far -- the sea,

a hospital. Because it is not
the ground shaking but
our bodies. Because this is not
a dream and the flowers are
wilted. And because the world
is, always been, and ultimately,
flat. Even in death.

For my Mother, 1950-2010

Boomerang

Threatening the throw,
the betrayal of weight
and the resistances
of wind, tail, aim.
Fingers unfolding
and darting into space.
Any moment now
you will let it go —
flick of wrist, the stroke,
and sallying forth now

the release. But this is not
the point. At the tip of all light
lies the consumed thing.
An eye for an eye, swish
and arc. Slingshot arched
toward bird or desired slope,
enough hope of hitting
the mark, voices that keep
coming back given uneven
mountains, right heights.

Such wide berths we give
to firmament, the many presences
that it keeps. We whistle
for wind, calling out
to the missing, and in the dark,
that elaborate maneuver
of pointing to ignited things,
great capture or failure.
Perfect human gestures forever
motioning *risk, raise, return.*

Mirage

Today it drizzled for a moment,
as I sat there and looked up
from a crossword puzzle I was
having a particularly hard time with.

It's a good thing we tend
to look elsewhere when
thinking of the right words.
In any case, I did notice,

brushed by some passing cold,
that brief glimpse of thin rain.
It disappeared just as soon
as it arrived. See, it never

gets cold this time of year here--
blooms of Golden Showers
drooping in thick, blazing yellows
under another cloudless sky.

Other trees are just too silent.
The cicadas are months away
from waking. And my friend,
he loves this weather. He can't

get enough of these steady
streams of sunlight. I tell him
these things do not make me
happy. He insists they could.

I do know what he means.
One can always choose
to roam around seeking
for wind, an evening, shades.

I want these ghosts. I want
to catch their speech, to ask
if summers keep them warm.
Also, I want to know if they live

basking under slight rainfalls,
and if that apparition back
there, my noticing, was actually
their quiet doing.

Distillery

All the new thinking is about loss.

– Robert Hass

Jump high and skip
a heartbeat. Split
that second. Aspire
for discovery, stagger
up the trail. Then down
you must go, to town,
exhausted, the locals
avoided. You are ready
for remedy. Ale and mead
and wine most fermented.

Gauge your landing, test
the water, disturb rocks
unbothered for centuries.
Speak only to stones. Stray
to the square. Stand there
then sneak into the distillery.
Relish all the liquor, embrace
stupor, extract all essence.

Wait there for two years.

Then wound back up to
the abandoned house where
all the hangovers started.
Sober now, ready to sort
through the clutter of memory:
cobwebs, dust, inventory.
All that needs fixing, settling.
Your father's unsteady hands
groping, longing for holding.
With those you may begin.

Heart

Where is it, exactly?
Not in things hollow.
Nor inside the fist fore-
grounding sky, a bullet
buried in the rotting
carcass. Never in the pulled
tusks, the flowerless vase,
cages. Not in the untended,
unattended. Perhaps in
the looking-away toward
convenient distractions.
Relativity, the manner
by which we express
excuses. The justified right?
Not there. Certainly never
in the nothing-personal;
the literal is the perfect alibi.

Yet it is not hard to find,
really. Just go ask freshly
snapped twigs, the trampled
undergrowth. Dig, dig
in the dark. Moon
not necessary. Dig deeper.
Let this tedious task declare
its whereabouts. Permit
the throbbing pain *there*,
somewhere left of center.
