

Plantation House

Lazy heat on the veranda.
Slow crawl of days. Time ripples
like white veins through red marble.
The ceiling fan slaps a devil mask

in beating shadows. The man reads
a two-day old Financial Times,
taps ash from a cheroot. The woman
wears a white dress and straw hat,

and the machete hacking foliage
is the pulse in her breast.
The library soundtrack hums
with overloud cicadas

while the point of a dried leaf
scrapes on chessboard tiles.
Bird song is persistent, and choric.
The camera performs a close up.

In the far trees, disgruntled monkeys
plan a complex retribution
for the mowing of the stately lawn.
The owner is a Singaporean banker

but no one *really* belongs here
except the house staff
who pad through corridors
lightly on bare feet.

They wait for the scene to play out
with sly patience. They hold keys
to all the rooms. The next guest
will always look like you.

Ornithology

Like a fluid burst of a saxophone line
skittering out of silence
and syncopating emerald ash the spring
of new wet wood the rash
of orange mould on green bark
the sprig of crimson flowers
bursting at the tree line
the sky beyond the mountains
and scree-littered vistas
the mist bleeding from the lake
down into paddy fields
where the men weave palm leaves
into a roof for an outhouse

but we can also reclaim a habitat
a pond a late spring
some thirty years before
my father bending to my shoulder
pointing into grey sky as blue
-edged wings hiccup
on the upwards beat a flash
of red at the hood and white at the breast
a crest springing upwards to write

a perfect gift
is to see a thing
and name it.

Traffic

Dawn and its white importunities:
the soft cumulus of morning,
a taxi hailed outside the hotel,
the slender curve of the moon.

Rogue shapes glide above us
bent as bows, solemn and assiduous,
sliding over date palms, the tiles
of flat roofs. We imagine them to be birds

but discover they are bats
gliding on fanged wings
in slow circulations, their eyes trained
for mango and papaya pulp,

the juice of burst peaches.
They skim like fleet fish,
as we follow the route out of the city,
past the closed up market stalls,

the paper factory, the stucco fort
and dockyard development,
a banana box wicket
from a backstreet cricket match.

The bats are angels of our departure,
surveying the walled gardens
of the out-of-town development,
the toll booth where traffic queues

wait for the absent attendant.
Beside the dark motorway,
gulls gather on a playing field
ready to scatter

as we drive on by.

Bathing in Ella

Steam is the dominion,
the white blush
against glass blurs

the mist beyond,
erases mountains and
finer intricacies of scrub:

a burst of date palms
on the cliff edge
is dissolved to spurts

of fading smoke
a pure sublimation,
chemical, diffused.

I sink
deeper in the tub,
plunge through water

the colour of red apple skins.
Two thirds landscape,
I embrace this surrender,

this womblike simmering,
an absent heart of this
deft disappearance,

a vague citizen of its empire
only a knock
at the door spins me back

Feathers

Sylvia stayed reckless for beauty
and fled to Malaga with a younger man,
until disease called her homewards
into cures and those recriminations
that drift, circle, but never land.

Everyone spoke about her final walk:
Hyde Park, late spring, a wagtail
descending on her finger,
illuminating in a photograph
what people called her soul.

The family would be haunted by birds.
Magpies, peacocks, pigeons,
the strange omens of crows and ravens.
The parrot, Priscilla, lost in Kuwait
hastily renamed from Elvis

after they'd discovered its sex.
Or the sister released to a coastal town
by widowhood, who suspected
that one beady-eyed gull
was her husband, picking over her peace.

After Sylvia died, a robin
invaded her daughter's house
to chirp news from the dead. Now,
as we sit on a veranda, a wagtail
escapes the egrets and barbets,

the mist of these foreign hills
to spy on us with impertinence.
'Take a photo,' her granddaughter says,
because such visits are expected.
'It's Sylvia, come back to say hello.'