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Angels

Angels of high orders
Should run the city dumps,
Collect the garbage;
Instead of trucks
Slowing down on discards of
Scotch and Levi's
Ketchup and spam,
Classics in Coke,
The spineless books
Pulpy, sticky, and saucy,
Napkins and tics,
And bloody Schicks.

Angels of a celestial bureau,

Blow away and sweep
With your colossal wings
Refuse in rags from riches,
Stench from hence:
Dole of thins, the plastic flaps and bags,
Cards and cartons full of
Muck, grime and slime,
Saran in soot, the putrid madness in
Lurid boxes and bottles, shards and shreds in
shame,
In wrapped up sins.

Angels closing ranks,
Heavenly in class,
Bemedalled army of the godliness of clean,
Deliver the world
From all trash and garbage—
Let fall into divine recycle the wasting men

Who keep refusing the order of the clean.

Grief

The living will assume what the dead cannot,
Too stiff to move they simply lie
In little rooms of their demise; while
The bereaved will write obituaries,
Dial here and there overseas
The close and distant ties:
Kin, friends, and memories.
And so will the siblings agree without ado
What appropriate plan will do—
A chapel or a parlor,
A casket to seal what's gold or silver,
The handles of chrome or brass,
Whichever hold that last.

So here in this hour of hush
Is a willingness from all to rush
And call a priest,
Prepare and press the final dress,
Request the natural look be full
A face so lifelike and blissful,
Make sure the guests who'll leave
Will sign their grief,
And keep an ample stock
Of sweets, drinks, prayers, and snacks

For what else will follow—
The sympathies of daisies in wreaths,
The waking days of sons and daughters
Who pray the final vigil,
Reminisce courage and kindness departing,
Behold the wait, the wake,
The show of loyalties, and, for their sake,
Tomorrow—its dread or even now—
The hope of the living for the loving.

Then after the funeral, perhaps later
Or even days or a year to come,
On a morning when a family will get together
To celebrate the living—
After the usual hellos, hugs, kisses
The pat on cheeks and courtesies;
When conversations begin to fade
As pink carnations
In curtain swags in bloom—
Will then a brief and sudden quiet lull the room,
When for the first time enters mourning,
Grief for the loved one's passing.

Visit to Jose

Like hands growing wings in the shadowplay,
The plane lifts itself above the runway
Cutting through clouds in seconds until airborne
Drags in its arms the trailing dark.
But I had made too many excuses about this visit,
A trip too late.
And such regrets are not fully understood,
A sigh before the plane descends
Until I find myself in a room
Where I see you curled up in sleep,
Looking thinner than I saw you last—

On a train
With the trees flashing
In the windows
Leaves and branches
Leaning on your face
As shadows even darker
Than—‘a purple mask’, I said.
Of course, you heard nothing;
Instead just thanked me
For something or other
A fur cap maybe,
That long ago escaped—
A red fox into the windy
Streets one night.

I will console myself, dear friend,
For all my sins and promises not kept,
In the cold apathy of white ceilings, walls, and light,
I am here beside you,
And let me speak all the words too late—but not
For the unresponding hand or the vinyl floors,
The narrow corridors, the stairs leading
Down the glass doors and empty streets.

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Taking My Soul to Account

This is an accounting, and I will not
go gentle with you, soul,
or whoever you are, insider of me,
pre-empting and defining me always
to myself, and I cannot gainsay it.
I regret there'll be no peace between us
unless you yield.

What universe did you fill, soul,
before you found my hovel?
What was it made you think
that I might be companionable?
I can't recall how we were introduced;
I believe I'm often civil, and smile
like a fool through every discomfiture.

Remarkable how our relationship has
endured!
Reviewing our curious history, I find
that lacking the skill to feign a pure
motive for my deed, I've been cunningly
caught in a corner where you mock.
My underground spy, I know your suit,
I've glimpsed your ploy, I've caught
your dazzling act.

When I was young I had no language
to fabricate a special grammar and syntax
to my need which, soused with the thick brew
of feeling, tore things open and broke
a young girl's heart. I hadn't reckoned how
from those hurts and wrecks you'd draw
the alphabet to weave my speech to myself.

Now your voice runs rings round
my words, and I cannot gainsay it!
You leave me no choice in the matter.
You are greedy, soul, but I shall act
the rebel to your play, and smile to wrap
the murder in my thoughts with the same
words that root and flower in your field.

The same words, but in the world's long
night, I am too their homestead!
By their light, I lose the force and color
of my deed, and my proud solitude suddenly
empty, I find this book of accounts
quite silly in the making, too self-regarding –
Do I not see your hand again in that reprise?

What shall I do with you, soul,
dead ringer of me, and too sudden meaning
which mines that which I would do
and blasts my move to run counter
and encompass your will with me?
How acquiesce with grace in my rout?
You must supply the cord to my hanging!

For I only live as you will,
and as my night's slant-eyed harlequin
heats my blood, I must invent other ruses
to forestall again your customary guile.
I do not think you can always run my days
without breaking stride. There, where
Once you falter, I shall break your speech.

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Of Souls and Trees

I suppose, in time, it can happen to anyone—
the love of souls and trees. In the dark
you make me walk on thick wet sod, because tonight
you wish to let me know: here, the mango sapling
from two years back, there the mahogany already grown
above your head, and further, the talisay or some such bole
that promises a canopy of henna-colored leaves.
And as I watch I know it is your soul you tend,
in this late hour of your solitude's bright garden:
how else must be it for you, who tended the body
and felt it glow and teem, who loved the body's love
and journeyed its windswept journeys, only to arrive breathless
at this spot, this plot of earth whose claims are not denied?
Except perhaps the tree, dear tree, that Wordsworth saw
takes root in deep black soil, is our own prefigurement—
curled inside the seed's blind grief it wakes, it breaks
its pact with its own bleak gravity to rise, to thrust beyond
the cold, familiar gloom: a sun-spun song, a heave
of mottled brown and green into the flowing sky, a soul...
They will outlive even our names, we sigh,
and carefully walk away. Beneath our bodies, against
my vivid feet, I hear a distant dreaming pulse of light.

Melu

Why must it be strange
that a world should spring
from an itch?
Melu, creator of the Bilaan,
was as black as a stone's pure heart.
In the first twilight he rose,
his eyes and teeth glinting like stars
in the horizonless sky.
Sensing a gap all over his body,
he discovered
he desired nothing
but to rub himself with his hands.
Palm against skin he scratched
and stroked, and flake
by sheer flake the earth drifted away
from his shape,
to gather in a heap below him.
As he rubbed, and his rubbings fell,
he felt himself grow lighter
and whiter.
Soon he was invisible as air,
floating above the crumbled shell
of his old self.
The story tells us: creation is the body
shorn clean
off a god's brilliant need
for formlessness.

We cannot help but wonder:
 as our skins slip past each other
 in this life,
 do we not help
 this first sacrifice to proceed—
 accomplishing the sacred duty
 meant for us all along?
 Out of love, or pain,
 and every time our edges touch,
 we grind our itchy bodies
 hard against this world's darkness—
 praying we, too, may know light.