

VALENCIA (EN ROUTE)

The car speeds along an asphalt rollercoaster
with less joy than I remember.

Valencia.

O Valencia – those gliding syllables
are green undulate valleys
where light glows in steep tabernacles
that shower verdant air tuned to joy-cries of birds
and clapping streams.

Who remembers that your name's double echoes
a not-too-far bitter history,
or that your land was freedom country
from a war still bellowing its cause, *Black Lives Matter*,
at a stalled liberty?

O Valencia, that imagined light
before the loss was a luminescence
so without price,
its spectre became compass
and a genuflection to a ghost –
almost poetic.

Listen:

chainsaws eat at the necks of giants
and the eternal strain of trucks
that ply pocked roads with their guilt-burden groans
a requiem for the splayed land.

Look:

ruptures, voids pierced by lances of denuded rays
strike at an earth we pillage each day
to build us a brand-new world.

All this light
is so much a hurt. Its fierce flourish
no garden dream,
no shield against the valley's gutted womb;
so omission is the blinkered gaze I choose of late,

pelting all the way through to Matura,
as though fleeing a phantom dark.

The same uneasy divides intrude:
 the sanctuary's fabled whole or
the loss that teaches the pierced heart
 to love
and tips always to an enduring real,
as when the blaze of sun on a single leaf
expands a narrowed horizon
barred against grief.

What astonishes, and this is no ideal,
is that road through Valencia triggers rage,
like the violation of a temple,
and my vaulted memory of that imagined first
(now receding) shade of green,
like a missed step, burns to cinders.

 All else falls away –
and leaves what first
and always must be loved.

SALYBIA

I do not always veer right off the way
at the sharp turn that leads to Salybia Bay,
and, leaving the car behind
like a castoff encumbrance,
walk along the riverbank's shady aisle
to the screened stretch of beach.
I do not always stop among the believers;
but on approaching the bridge –
so wide it seems a stage –
I slow for a strained view of the bay
that lies beyond the precast slabs of concrete
that serve as rails.
I want to see the worshippers
in their bright cottons that fuse to a cosmic prism
where sea and river greet.
Anticipation is belief enough.
Even when the estuary is empty, they are there,
a vibrant kingdom wedded to a ground
and first ancestor origins sequestered in a name.
No brick and mortar need stake claim
to that everlasting cathedral on the sand.

BALANDRA POUI

Balandra stretch is usually a fly-by to Rampanalgas,
unless you are interested in taking the road
that leads to where fishing boats anchor.

Today is different.

Across from the bay's entrance, a golden poui
in all her glory interrupts the road's agenda.
Blossoms blaze against a cirrus and blue sky.
You reach for your phone,
hit the camera icon and click twice
to be sure you have the best shot
of what cannot be captured –
a singular beauty, so completely herself.

You take one last look
before you rejoin the road's flow,
and a Goodison poem surfaces, loops you back
to a dress of fallen flowers
shamelessly tangled about the ankles.
In an instant, that solitary tree,
in full possession of her blossoms,
is changed, forever.

SIMPLY, RAMPANALGAS

Whatever real and storied etymologies
are veiled in the tin-pan clatter
and gallop of its cadence, Rampanalgas,
for the traveller, now conjures a name
no more valiant than the roots that stay this coast:
Arthur's, a one-stop shop and bar combo
with thriving kitchens at its side, is the oasis
that ends the stretch of road barrelling
from Balandra Bay.

Long after the shop disappears,
its name's origin will suffer no loss,
will be subject of no query for being found
on the *right* side of history;
but positions change and places, too,
must relearn their names.

What matters here
are the stories that travel in scant traffic flying up
to Matelot from Grande.
Spilt onto the pavement is an animated mix
of villagers and wayfarers passing through to homes
or holiday houses further up the coast.
Like a ritual pause at statue or station,
they stop more to touch the spirit of the place
than to quench any thirst.

Talk makes light
and laughter erupts like surf
to dispel any cloud.
Speak the name Walcott: unabashed they ask,
"Who, Keshorn, from up Toco?"
Him they know, their javelin hero,
a trophy upheld. No tall-tale fishermen tell
to lift themselves.
No poem, shining god or leviathan
rises from the deep;

and across the road an untamed seascape,
framed by almond trees, is an open door
to a scene beyond history.
The tousled surf delivers
those glorious *slow horses* advancing on Bathsheba,
and racing them, a wind, salty with travel,
and scented with the ocean's washings,
conjuges like a Palaeolithic chant or spell
the drag and reek and grit and grind of a sulphurous opening line,
Miasma, acedia. . . and you know, Rampanalgas –
elemental, ordinary – is never,
could never be, simple.

CUMANA

Cumana is a name not wholly retrievable.
Those *who came* in such beautiful ships
put its meaning in the grave and left a cross
courage resurrected in the beat of a Baptist's drum –
struck even in the church at Mission.
Those who first baptized these coasts
of drumming sea and tall green remain with us.
They, too, are our dancing ghosts.
On its shores, a cruel age rusts down
cannons of conquest – a disappearance
unnoticed by children who emerge
shining from the sea dripping salt
like leatherbacks. They think nothing
of that surviving noun flung
off tongues with no ear or care
for old inflections, but for the season of *gabilan* –
crib of fresh conversions. Cumana,
an ancestral twin sits on the Main
where a revolution was born, and is here
ever more a place whose sense is made
by what is lived and held in memory,
as only a thing that is true can be.
So at the junction's shop where pasts fade
with the aged and rum-drowned cells of regulars,
China is a nearness villagers keep more alive
than the island *Chinee Frank* dreams;
and below the Anglais Road that spirals up to France,
the Tompire river empties with the tide's level
into a sea where dicey boats race to unburden cargoes
of the century's casualties and hope-seekers –
the grace and shadow of a world, like the pulse
and flow of an unfinished becoming...

PALM TREE JUNCTION

Sundays,
when morning is a wide-open eye,
you see them on spot,
waiting for transport where the road divides
at Palm Tree junction.

The signage points to cul de sacs
at Matelot and Point Galera –
not dead-ends in the ordinary sense,
but places of bucket-put-down decision.
When churchgoers of other communions
are busy orchestrating pots to oldies
piped through Radio Toco,
or arranging the cadence of clothes on lines,
they are on their way to pray –
women with heads wrapped like clouds
and the gait of ships, broad-
belted steadfastness, sturdy
as mountains.

Armed with Bible and bell,
they issue an awareness sharp as pleats,
and in the folds of dresses
finished with embroidered sleeves and fringes
like chapel windows,
children with sleep-tight eyes huddle.
To really see them
is to see brave sovereignty
become a signpost.

AT TOCO'S DEPOT

At Toco's depot, fishermen's boats, full-
bellied with silver harvests, gauge the jetty
to moor with accustomed precision.
They fire instructions at each other,
their language as direct as the light they bring.
The one called Bait greets me, "Mornin Moms",
then throws himself onto a bed of nets
to catch some sleep, cradled by his life's labour.
Today, his friendly marking my age is small pickings.
Something greater dawns that offers an anchor,
calms the worry-waves he'd once read on my face.
True to his word, I'm caught by a life of nurturing words
that will together take the air as a cast-net unfurls,
expands a cosmos and, unburdened of itself, dissolves
to a light right here that is poetry's – luminous, transparent,
as the converted.

TROIS ROCHES

There is no signage,
so unless you know the village
between Mission and L'Anse Noire,
it could be easily missed – just a place
through to somewhere else.

I did not know, and at my asking,
heard my informant say, Tuahwash
(maybe), a word I had repeated
until I caught its sound and later found
a meaning from a map, Trois Roches.

The bay with its signature three rocks
is overlooked by a plantation-styled resort;
but to villagers indifferent to a language
of estates reshaped on their tongues,
Tua-wash (maybe) makes its own sense,
like a recent sign further along the road
that reads *Sobay*,
a local transcription for a beach
that ends a precipice: *Saut Bay*,
meaning jump, or salt, must have a story.

I heard that women gathered on laundry days
at the river that flows into the bay:
Goin to the well, they said: *Tua-wssh*.
You hear water, syllables working,
cleansing – the song that remains.

L'ANSE NOIRE

Volcanic rock of time's first explosion,
swash and sizzle of a coastal tongue,
I do not know your history, not the all of it.
This stretch of coast battles the beat of waves
and dips down steep paths to coves carved from onyx stone.
Most are inaccessible –
what it means to look from the road's edge
to an unreachable rest.

I do not know your people,
those who were here from the beginning,
except for what is stored on faces
like ancient waterways, and in words,
though few, that still *carry*...
They came across the meeting of waters
to an island just over there – its paths mapped
by the whisper of travelling feet.
I know nothing, too, of those Tobago runaways,
like rebel Sandy, who legend says *swam*
to Trinidad and anchored
on this ragged and booming coastland,
where at Matura and Grand Riviere
leatherbacks lumber to shore
to lay their futures, weeping oceans
like those *Caribs* at Point Galera
before they leapt into a sea-full of stars.
More than survival lives on this coast.
Along its coiling road, pasts are polished rocks
kissed by the everlasting sea
that companions homes with gardens
where tough hope-flowers grow from cuttings
for will-come tomorrows.