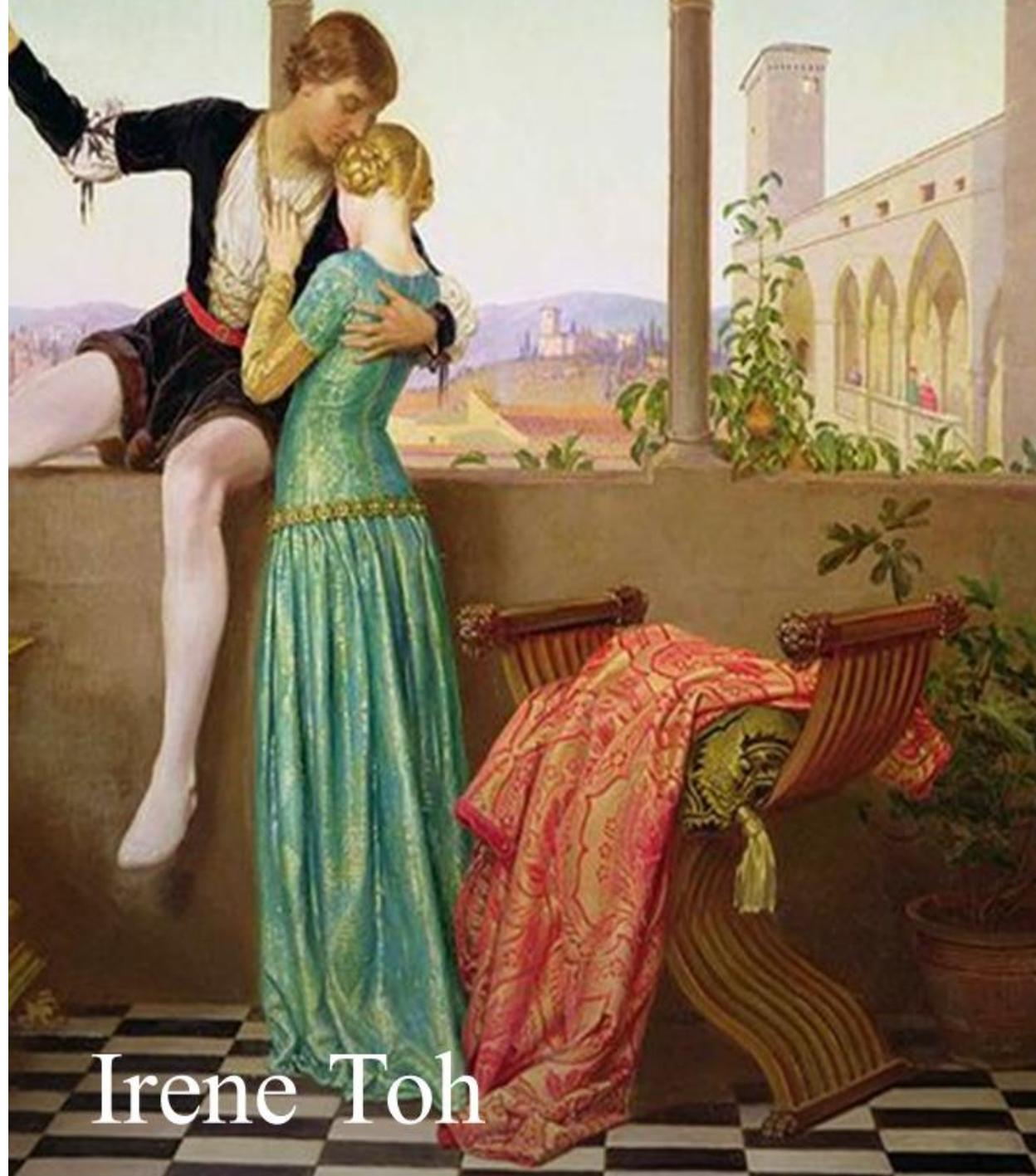


Sweet Sorrow



Irene Toh

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Poems by

Irene Toh



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Animate as
music does, or legitimate light,
or this raiment of song
which drapes my soul
like a secret manuscript.
–Irene Toh, “My Blue, Dying Voice”

Said One Groundling To Another

As the wind turned southerly,
the poems sprung like magnolias,
looming larger than life,
below the full moon.

Said one groundling to another,
don't judge me. We want mystery,
and magic; in the dark
grew exalted and rueful.

All this aura, the luscious scent,
sent me levitating, my love,
vestigial, souls homing toward
you, turning westerly.

I Grieve, Said An Uxorious Man

I remember losing my way, and
finding a way, with alacrity,
or slowness, like now, and then only
to lose it, and on and on this became
the way of things, as if some impertinence
of nature had taken hold of me,
and I colluded somehow

in the banal, being part of the divine,
if there is a plan, a grand plan
to it all, and not some overpowering
indifference. I grew strangely
retrospect. So language became a salvation,
my quantum leap into consciousness,
not mere daily politeness.

I read a book about an uxorious man.
It's not much about ballooning,
as an adventure, that front section,
but grief, its recidivism.
I don't much know—my loves are alive.
But I know it's part of the planning,
flowering of the yet invisible.

My Blue, Dying Voice

It wasn't time yet.
We had gone ahead to the chapel,
into God's vault,
where saints and martyrs
had ascended to heaven
baptizing the leaden air.

What stirring sermons?
Come, move my heart! Animate as
music does, or legitimate light,
or this raiment of song
which drapes my soul
like a secret manuscript.

I am an apprentice to
this craft, which is an inner voice
blue and dying, and own,
and do not own, swinging it
like a lantern, as one
who's lost in thought.

Getting A Move On

I climbed onto the roof tiles
and be the roof walker.
This too is in my almanac,
as well as ploughing the soil,
and watching for spears.

You wonder at my sweet deception,
my dark and secret plumage.
I blazed through nothingness
and lit up the cemetery,
scouring lints of grass.

The world is well with you,
my love, so we'd dwell within
all places, peopled, listening,
as chickens roamed the yard and
houses lined up like matchboxes.

Shout Out To The Okapis

Bare of knowledge, is this how to live?
So what about that stunt—we desire
those apples, intrinsic to disposition
so there's nothing ersatz about living
apple to mouth, nothing flaccid about
our utterly strange preoccupations.

It's barely daylight here.

I opened another book of poems sounding
a clarion call. So am I talking to myself?
Each morning I reassemble the pieces.
They are porous. And iterating. Have I
come to the end? Only to repeat?

What about all the anteaters,
the armadillos, the okapis? Shall I look to
nature to instruct on the ways of creating
the strange and the beautiful?
To exorcize all disbelief?
To fall on our knees and prostrate
our souls? To work the loom?

To write yet another poem?

About My Mind Freeze

I wish chance had not operated
and heaven exists, so there be no parody
filled with becoming bourgeoisie
some of whom are said to be
in servitude of God—really I'm hoping for
an orange kind of mandala,
or some medieval cross,
or recipocral karma.

Really chance is God. How he rose up
in the guise of a garuda,
swift of martial prowess,
charged with electricity—
would you be a talisman
or at the very least
a mnemonic to our sacred origins
within our mother's womb.

Here I drink whiskey
as an opiate, asking aren't I irreplaceable,
asking in self-defense,
while my love languished,
primal and mossy, moldy, leafy
as tobacco, in some sepulchral memory—
if language be the currency, exchanging,
falling into penumbra.

Adrienne, My Muse

I felt we're the afterbirth.
The remains of the day,
to borrow a phrase, for
our ermine lives.
As if we'll enter the encyclopedia
of names, digitalized so
we'd grit and bare teeth
for this allotment
beyond our windows.

Adrienne, she had been my muse,
and we're complicit.
So much turbulence but
all one saw was mascara,
a parsimonious smile.
Perhaps we're only half
interested, making an effigy of
God, and responding to agape,
not quite the same, which is which,
can anyone measure or tell?

Who Said, Not Today?

Our poppy heart, does it lack
conviction, intense and brief as
firelies? Does it lack in specifics?
Immured in a garden it called its own?
Did not call to the serpent
whose suction to grass brought
only a shapely presence?

What seethed in the painted sky?
Adrienne fingered her rosary,
and all seemed lurid as if
the sunbird had forgotten
to come, and apocalypse
was elsewhere. She, who once was
silent, grew loquacious.

Her assemblage of emblems
was what preoccupied her.
Then a rare coincidence brought forth
lyric density. Then nothing.
Wasn't she real? Wasn't she
solicitous and loomed here,
flaring if for a term?

About The Path Of Love

We'd always be skimming
the body's wasteland, still
to ravage, where we'd anchored
our perception, lifted our heads
murmuring gratitude for death's
negligence. Still we had glided
round the river bend.

Adrienne walked stiffly ahead.
Me, still limbering to blithe
ignorant content. A mosaic? Yours,
you said, of daily syringes on
a sister's belly. Life reaching
terminus but the beast did not
swallow immanence.

No pitying nor indifference.
Let love be the tyrant else
everything would be arid,
wouldn't it? We'd seen each other,
as souls, isn't that something?
Love really is nothing short of
laying down your life.

The Door Closed

They had ferreted out tiny tremors,
had been witnesses. Why the steadfast
gloom? As the ones who had maimed,
or been maimed? Was he hung up
with remorse?

I'm glad he wasn't crumpled but was
left standing in a shrine of his
own making. He had brooded, been
brought back from the brink
at the tail-end of things.

Adrienne told us about the phone call.
By now there's no dredging up of
old news. The door closed. As if
one must be valiant, and evasive,
leave wearing veils.

What Floats Your Boat?

My friend, Elena, said: whatever
floats your boat. She's damn right
–to each her own boat.

It made me think of an artwork
Adrienne gifted, saying
with majesty: different
folks, different strokes.

So many layers to an art.
What art? The art of living
what floats you. Your heart
hammered by wind. I can't say what
it is. It would be what you ruminate,
in likeness of soul, practicing obscure
movements only you would know.

Energy turns threads into gold,
musical scores into sounds of
startling immediacy. My god, you'd be
a force of nature! With all
the paraphernalia, you'd turn
mystical, and lose time,
ascend to heaven.

Dull As Crows

She's into fossils, evidence on
grayness; brushwork; needles;
shell remains; inscriptions,
a fringe of history,
atoms of prophecy.

Dull as crows, Adrienne said.

She walked into the crisp air,
drew her cardigan close,
sniffed the magnolias,
heard the sound of spring.
*Ah nothing changes,
and everything does.*

In The Morning

There she went mouthing off,
with a strange incendiary power
while wiping his forehead,
and invoked saints,
who always eavesdropped don't they,
keeping a vigil.

In the morning,
his leg unctuous, unwrapped,
the liquifying tears,
dew on leaf. Adrienne burst into
the porch, saying brightly,
what have we here?

The Red Wolf Comes

I dabbled in dubious poems, while men
in shirt sleeves fanned the flames over
skewers of beef, to fill bellies. What
intricate structures do we build?
When the wolf comes to huff and puff,
would they quake and fall?
Are they slippery, soft-voiced,
aimed toward destruction?

Adrienne's reply came thus:
the red wolf comes and we be thrown into
a state of panic, some mark of
calamity thumps our heart,
fierce but helpless, yet we have to
build houses some of straw,
some of sticks till at last
we learn to use bricks.

We'd plump up language to
correct any inaccurate notion.
So superior—so like Dickinson's
fairer house—we'd dwell as
occupants, in paradise.

What Love Sonnet?

Time has slowed to a still.
Have you no thought for me?
The theatrical moon rattles
you? Much darkness shields,
hearkens to hopeless abandon.
Do we grow wise in malady
so as to learn not to yearn?
What keeps me in motion?
All the missing pieces.
And having to repudiate
whatever it was—the gist
of action is not heroic,
except that in oddness,
true love isn't a madness.

As Real As It Gets

My mother sat shelling peanuts.
She was young and strenuous.
Later that afternoon she would
paint her lips ombre, pull her hair
up in a bun with chopsticks,
go out to her sales job.

Were you sad, you asked, that
she had to go to work?
I gave an economical smile,
embarrassed but there was
impudence implied, as if it was
any of your business what I felt.

It was that dicey.
How our friendship could ever
survive, we'd gone ahead to believe
anyway, like hope with feathers,
or marble that had lined my
mother's vanity table and
looked so damn pretty.

About Good Friday

The elderly go to church.
They raise their song,
behold the Lamb of God which taketh away
the sin of the world;
taketh away the shabbiness,
with exact mortal knowledge.

The devout way is a resilience.
And also regal. It mellows, renders
human drama with a meaning.
My heavy heart when austere,
it calls out to God too
seeking exact answers.

He answers mysteriously,
resides in a will as if my own,
in a design wholly accidental.
That chance is God, I already said.
By chance were you intended to cross
my soul, burst my bubble?

That One Time

I wish to be assailed by sleep
–then the dreams, bizarre, oblique.
Like that one time ascending the spiral
staircase then a fissure, like a tear.

What's real distended into dream.

Is that how memory erases itself
or at least makes tomfoolery of what's
there? Am I the patron of dreams being
patronized? Would you even drive my
vague hopes to extinction?
Is this a prelude to death?
Death, the mother of all dreams:
a green, implacable dream?

Ah Shakespeare, our little life
rounded with a sleep.

Death Becomes Us

The idea of death can never be separated from the idea of God.
–Antoni Gaudi

Some things are a trigger.
When death comes a-knockin'
would you be obsequious,
smudgy, would you have
stood on your head?

Of course the idea of God
and death can't be separated.
That dalliance in your head
so what became transparent,
almost clairvoyant?

Heart's dissolution is
pure matter, but is it?
Head transcends body,
makes it divine. What of death–
return or sacrilege?

Breath dissipated.
So bewildering, but where were you
headed alone?
Your valediction forbade,
still I mourned.

In God's Hands

I was just telling you,
uh-uh not the sermon but
the leaflets we'd gathered
and then pored over—a first
encounter—and grandma's
baptism. She got dunked
into water.

I had gone to a church
and watched a movie, so
horridly depressing, about
the Book of Revelations,
everyone limping along,
a fugitive when not marked
by the beast.

Then puberty hit me.
All the growing up—wore full
skirts, sprayed perfume,
writing with a typewriter, things
filed and relegated. Hung out
late, drank like a fish,
played masquerade.

Somewhere along the way,
God must have whined, even
disappeared it did seem.
Improbable a maxim, didn't
adhered. But thinking back
He must have had a hand
in everything.

The Fable Of The Dancing Bear

Night crackled with madness.
We saw the bear, a dancing bear
against the tree. Jelly-like,
undulating like a snake.

You made this up, you said.

And Lila danced with it.
The bear was deferential.
Can you see plainly now?
Beauty and the beast.

This went on for a while, I said.

The bear asked, would you be mine?
And the catch? Is there one?
You'd die of heartbreak.
She pondered, and said yes.

She laid with it.
But when the moon disappeared
behind a cloud, she'd woken up.
The bear was not in sight.

That's the fable, you said.

The Last Time

The last time he said something,
it sent my heart soaring.
We sat upon a grassy slope.
It wasn't even important,
what he said. It felt somewhat
like a moment of clarity.
That kind of thing.

I don't like to be bored out
of my skull. But the precise meaning,
once you seized upon that,
here's somebody who could do that,
gave you that exact sensation.
Even if there're ups and downs...
and then he'd bummed me out.

That Kind Of Day

It's no use, all the talking.
Talking non-stop, huffing
and puffing, drunk.
Joe got shit done.
You don't know if he's listening.
But he was. And had come round with
the black rubber plunger
like it's no big deal.

Then just like that your faith
in humanity had come back.
You felt like a drunk horse
saying *uh-huh*, all smiles.

How To Tell

You had completely shut down,
clammed up. As if an ill wind
had sent you shaking like
a leaf. Why, this is exactly
the mood of someone who's
down in the dumps.

Of course you'd deny it.
But remember what you said,
you don't regret any awkwardness,
know what the important stuff
is, you're really not dumb,
but being motionless.

About The Hippie

He's a really cool guy,
the hippie type,
wore his hair long, messy
held by a bandana, his pants slouchy,
real comfy, and he padded around
in brown crocs.

His apartment reeked of a musky
smell that clung to hair,
the air and the furniture.
Everything moved so slow
being there with him,
I felt like screaming.

It's just sad, the way things
moved bit by bit, or the way
they started up then stopped;
we'd backed away then would
start up again so each time
the odds would go lower.

It Isn't Pointless

You'd cracked me up, rambling
on and on, yet truth be told,
there's always an explanation,
it isn't pointless, quite the
opposite, all the festooning had
won me hands down, so I'd
have to pretend to hiccup or
something, not to be outdone,
doing it repeatedly in a kind of
pestering way so that you'd wince
and said something *deja vu* like
you don't say.

Free-floating

When she's not free-floating
she took out the measuring tape
to check the width,
and used a ruler to mark
then scissored out
the marbled paper.

As to the length it's always
30 centimeters which made
the job easier. She'd lined
all the shelves, rescuing
those wasted chipboards
from squalor.

In between tidying up
she'd pondered the particles of
sunlight, all-embracing, vested in
closed spaces, the weird feeling
it's all some kind of biography.
Not a single cloud visible.

Seeking God

So much godliness, you'd thought,
would have calmed us down,
turned us to the Lord's Prayer,
a certain sparkling, abstaining
from sticky horror or
the lion in the lair.

That iron-clad, you'd said,
it'd have moved us up a notch,
a gain in evolution—still what
does it mean, I had to ask, when
all is a feeling, an unshaken belief
in doing the right thing.

And rightness lies about in
a few words of prayer? We'd keep
watering the garden, playing hose.
Careful in the arrangement of rooms,
assailed by doubt. Or sticking our
necks out, seeing the rainbow.

Sun Dance

I woke up to an orange sky
tasseled with clouds.
Drumming up, the heart made
a reluctant lurch toward
an invisible line. To love
and honor, is that it?

Our work then is
to interpret, teach the heart not
be invulnerable, stiff as board,
watch the daily signs which are
a customary prayer—call me
ridiculous, pathetic, but
this is my sun dance.

I felt it back then but had to ask,
what's the name of the place anyway.

What Were You Thinking?

You thought things would stay that way forever,
was that naive? The only things we'd change
would be clothes. And the writing, it would go on,
would it not, and if that got waterlogged,
we'd barely had to move, let the earth soak,
the sun would come shining the strange colors,
we wouldn't be morose—it's one of those days—
would not be stymied by fog or anything.

If there're days when you're feeling bloated,
you'd ride it out, or maybe at the end of the day
what we're left with was a matter of pride—
when the call came you never wavered, had stayed
conscientious. Things do not stay the same,
that's really something. One day you'd be paying
attention, another you'd be all balled up, and
then the next you'd be gone in a heartbeat.

In Summer's Radiance

Aren't words beacons, I asked,
giving meaning and direction,
like pulling on a mustard top,
in summer's radiance,
with moistened breath
so there's to be no mold?

You had agreed right off
the bat, hadn't you, even
arranged the leafy surroundings,
so why from time to time do you
retract your snail's head
as if fast asleep?

You're headed toward
the gravestones, of course,
to the well-kept lawn,
the frangipani's fragrance at
dusk, the murmuring wind.
No argument there.

Death, the mother of all dreams:
a green, implacable dream?
–Irene Toh, “That One Time”