

Kent Leatham

Feast of Lanterns

(Pacific Grove, CA)

In a small town,
everything matters.

So, dutifully, we pile down
to the beach for the pageant where someone's daughters

ham with someone else's sons,
pretending to be lovers,

Chinese fishermen, or a royal court—
the dramatic clutter

has always meant less than the truly theatrical
meeting of neighbors

we've tried to avoid the rest of the year,
and the forced savor

of charity food—chicken and slaw,
beans, the platter

with tiny dishes of green-tea ice-cream
“to add that Oriental flavor.”

The fog has come in by the time it's over.

We hug awkwardly and retreat to the warmth
of the Prius or Rover

or vanish softly on foot or linger
with the trash in the settling darkness and shiver.

What We Sing

Come, Antinius, it's a beautiful day:

The bull sparrow sings from the top of the aloe,
The torch aloe lit by the long wick of dawn,
And the seals sleep late like politicians,
Piled on each other after a win.

Today the town will be filled with tourists,
Foreigners with oddly shaped tongues and eyes,
Eager to barter their bone flutes for wine,
Skins for their children, oil for their wives.

Come, Antinius, the dawn is rising:
The sun has almost slipped out of her dress;
The sea is tickling the toes of the shore
Like a lover who has no words after sex.

Today the shops will be draped in gold,
For our troops have returned after seven years,
Husbands and sons with arrows for eyes
And spines fused to unbreakable spears.

Oh, Antinius, you are young, I am old;
You don't yet know what a day like this means:
Each night the mice gnaw away at my bones;
Each dawn the doves fly off with my dreams.

I am a sandal, worn through the sole;
I am a ship that lets in the sea.
I owe many debts that must be fulfilled.
My gods have been reckoned. I cannot go free.

So come, Antinius, dance and sing:
Remind me what it means to be bold.
Today is a beautiful day for the young.
Bless me, Antinius, for you must be sold.

Prodigal

Oh, he thought.

Is this all?

Around him, his family,
his mother and father,
his little brother like a tanned leather strop.

All smaller,
diminished.

The feast, diminished.

Brown bread where there should have been cake,
water with cucumbers in place of the wine.

Behind him, the small house,
castle of his childhood,
now just two rooms.

But it was always two rooms.

This is all
because it has always been all,
he thought.

Nothing changes.

The same in the city:
at first every building housed nations, continents,
each window a university,
each face a feast,

then slowly the visions tightened, faces contracted,
till only the stripped reality was left:

men and women and
women and men.

Nothing new.

Nothing different.

Just farther from home.

So he returned again to the too-small house,

to his mother and father and their sun-baked routines,
to his little brother like a hard clod of earth,

and he slept in the bed with the old, small dreams,
and worked in the field that was partially wheat
but mostly foxtails and rattlesnake grass,

and into the oven his mother hummed
the lullabies she'd nursed him on,

and each day the sun slipped down through his eyes like a rope,
and the chapped air made fists in his lungs,

and he didn't forget that the city had also
grown small and bleak,

but what of the city beyond it,
and the one beyond that?

Why are we born if not to live,
to hold the world like an egg in the palm?

Oh, he thought.

There *must* be more.

So he worked and slept and laughed
and told his brother the joke about
the blind men and the elephant's penis,

and patiently let his father show him
how to mend the threshing board,

and he flirted politely with the neighbor's daughter
and bowed his head every Sunday in church

until one morning they woke to find
he'd gone

with his mother's songs
and his brother's shoes
and a skin filled with his father's blood.

A Story

“The flowerbed in our yard was outlined with bricks,” he said, “sunburnt pink, half-buried on their ends but tilted against each other, diagonally, like poor teeth.

California fence lizards lived in the yard, dusty racers whose soft white bellies were painted with stripes of cerulean blue.

Isn't that a nice word, cerulean?

It comes from the Latin *caeruleus*, which comes from *caelum*, which means sky.

The lizards loved the bricks.

They did pushups on top, then cooled down in the cracks between.

I tried to catch them.

I liked turning them over to see the sky.

I was five or six when I finally managed to grab one's tail as it darted away from the spook of my hand.

Without even a jerk, the tail came off, flailing and bleeding between my fingers.

You'd think I would have been horrified or sad.

Isn't that what normal people feel when they accidentally hurt something beautiful like the sky?

The lizard was hiding between two bricks.

I didn't know the tail would grow back after a few months, or maybe I did.

It doesn't matter.

You don't do that to me, that kind of trick.

I smashed the bricks together until the lizard was dead.

The primary component of cerulean, by the way, is cobalt stannate.

The color is expensive, and is particularly valuable for painting because of its permanence and opacity.

I never did like those bricks.”

The Wave Organ

—San Francisco, CA

I would rather be ashes than dust
is something Jack London did not say, the way
Samuel Clemens never described the coldest
winter he spent as the summer day
you and I parked at Crissy Field and walked
up Mason Street to the marina, the gray
wind in our ears, past the toadstool shack
of Dynamo Donut, past the yacht clubs, first
the St. Francis, then the Golden Gate, the shock
as the kenneled purebreds snapped against
their taut leads—

then out toward nothing,
wind and water, some gulls, a fence
of broken rock, the tail-end of a string
once pulled from the shore, now frayed, limp,
the only possible home for the thing
we sought:

ruined amphitheater, hideous pump,
skeleton hand of Atlantis still clutching its
last inch of earth. Art for the camp
that prefers chaos. We were supposed to sit
with our ears to the pipes that tentacled down
not quite to the sea, each stopping a foot
or less above the water—the sound
of each wave's different sonic death
our concert.

But the tide was out.
We strained, shifted, tried each mouth
with the same result: silence. Void.
Not even the hush of the wind's breath.
Frustrated, unimpressed, you turned to the guide-
book, which said the sculpture's debris
had been salvaged from graves destroyed
in the now-forgotten Laurel Hill Cemetery,
resting place of artists, inventors, and senators
for ninety-four years before their bodies
were disinterred, the ground paved over
for the Laurel Heights branch
of U.C. San Francisco.

Later,
in a supermarket, you pointed to a bunch

of orange fruit, their smooth sheen of skin,
and said "I love those," but could not clutch
the name *persimmon*.

At that moment on the pier, a wave washed
over the lips of the pipes: the song
was exquisite, it contained the wish
of the world, but we were somewhere else.

Kent Leatham's poems, translations, and reviews have appeared and are forthcoming in dozens of journals, including *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Fence*, *Able Muse*, *Zoland*, and *Poetry Quarterly*. A Monterey Peninsula native, he received an MFA from Emerson College and a BA from Pacific Lutheran University, served as an associate poetry editor for Black Lawrence Press, and currently teaches at California State University Monterey Bay.