

MUSIC AS SCRIPTURE

What we admire most about music
might be this – that at its best,
it escapes thought's context,
all mental concepts;
 that it provides evidence
 spirit can rise up (life's flame),
 freedom's vitality enough
 to give us wings.

We ride on the delicacy
of the strings,
enflamed by the spark
of percussion and woodwinds.
 The heart weeps,
 cinders rekindled as oud
 colludes with double bass,
 cries out against tyranny,

oppression, injustice, violence.
We are seduced,
led into the desert, reduced
to tears – the rababa,
 drums, the Bedouin band –
 music to bless the land,
 rhythm and beat each woman
 and man can understand:

may all beings be happy,
free from suffering, at peace.
Scripture of orchestra –
piano, percussion,
 accordion, oud drowning out
 the babel of rude rabble
 beyond walls of opera house:
 industry, construction,

sky-scraping, earth-raping, pulling
(pearling) new islands from the sea.
Music uttering the tragedy
of invasion and the vanished.
 Praise all music makers their breath
 and strength to go on airstreaming,
 strumming and dreaming,
 humming and drumming.

SVALBARD GLOBAL SEED VAULT

Outside Longyearbyen, eight hundred miles from the North Pole, scientists, counting and envisioning the cost of past and future disasters – even Syria's civil war – Aleppo's seed bank destroyed by bombing 2015¹ –

have tucked into a mountainside, ensured in permafrost, ample space for four and a half billion critical crop seeds worldwide. If the worst should happen, this backup collection will safeguard vegetation.

Or is it all mere speculation – no place feasible but the hereafter. But how to disentangle ourselves from earthly (Arctic) time and space? Standing in front of the entrance to the doomsday seed vault,

something about it putting a halt to doubt, I began envisioning what the seeds are all about. Was it too late to practice faith? Dalal from Kuwait had brought seeds from her desert home,

assuming she could contribute them right there and then. Tottering on the threshold of before and after, I prayed for faith as small as that biblical mustard seed. Immerse myself,

(next page, new stanza)

¹In 2015, the first withdrawal was made by researchers in Syria after their seedbank in Aleppo was destroyed by bombing. Those seeds have since been sent to Morocco and Lebanon, where they'll be planted and used to research how to grow crops in the arid region.

Svalbard Global Seed Vault, page 2, new stanza

I coaxed, in the hope of seeds,
that someday planted,
they can reverse the damage.
Feeling a thirst for roots,
recalling the burning bush –
how thorns and thistles are not

the earth's original natural fruit –
I wished upon a seed deposited
just then in the scat of that snow
bunting warbling and hunting
insects beside the mountain stream
flowing past the global seed vault,

toward the sea, under the midnight sun.

SURVIVOR

*For Ngawang Sangdrol, Tibetan nun,
released after eleven years*

I walk beside the lake, late afternoon, waves restless and seagulls drowsy in sun along its shore. Five cormorants on the decaying pier allowing me to watch them watching for fish, shadows under shadows on the water. If I hold a sprig of rosemary to my nose and inhale deeply, for a moment flesh will not burn. The chinaberry tree with its wrinkled stone tells of its own hard journey: pride of India transplanted here; its transformation imminent—fragrant purple petals on slender stalks. The otherwise useless chaulmoogra yields an acrid oil that eases leprosy. Once, at the foot of a live oak, I broke down and wept. Acorn cups were scattered throughout the woods, turned up by the gods to catch rain for squirrels and quail to drink. All things find their place. I come back to settle before the fire, drawn like the pandora sphinx moth to the candle in the window. I slice the carambola into five equal pieces, five cormorants on the pier, five women screaming, five beatings each day, and the cattle prods. The Chinese prison guards went home at the end of their shifts to wives and daughters. A phantom orchid in moist pinewoods feasts on forest duff—the fungus in its roots a saving grace.

KEEPING ME ON MY TOES

*When all is perishing moment by moment,
Who has time to be bored? – Yunus Emre*

To keep me on my toes,
I write a five-bu candlestick*
each week. And though I think
it's quite a pity how the one hibiscus
bloom spends its ephemeral life
out of sight, I leave it hidden from view,
turned toward the wall. Severing it
from its branch to place it in full view
would do no good at all.

As for prayer, I follow the mystics'
form of *strife with God*,
becoming a nightingale in His
cage, lifting up my unbridled
pleas that not another species
perish before its time, questioning
His nonsensical design.

To save me from despair, I keep
company on tiptoes with shorebirds,
note how plentiful are their fish and
crustaceans. Keeping me alert: ocean
edge, desert dune, sidra tree bathed
in the bulbul's reedy song at dusk
aligned with the day's last call to prayer
wafting from the mosque,
midnight garden wall of night-
blooming jasmine,

the blank page,
hibiscus bloom enfolding
its petals for the night,
the candle burning down
half an inch.

*a renga written in the time it takes for a candle to burn down 5 bu, or half an inch.

THE POL POT SOLDIER TELLS HIS SIDE

In no way did I let on
that I might want to put down
my machete and stop the others.
They would have me killed me
on the spot, cut out my heart
and thrown it to the wild dogs
that trailed us, or made the woman
eat it before cutting the fetus out of
her womb. They would have left
my body to rot among the canebrakes.

So I offered to do it single-handedly,
to prove myself. Stood over
the whimpering woman, raised
my machete and brought it down
into the mound of flesh
that could no longer protect
the life growing inside of her.
Brought it down into my own
mother's womb, into my own
pre-natal sac, into my own heart
that was split apart by her scream.

We left them there under a camphor-
tree. I was the one who looked back—
my compatriots bent on finding crayfish
for lunch. I saw the dead woman rise up
to cradle her infant; glancing away
from eating my heart, she looked at me
with my mother's eyes.