Dinah Roma, *Naming the Ruins* (Vagabond Press, 2014)

Dinah Roma’s *Naming the Ruins* speaks to the broken places in life, both physical and emotional, looking not to find what once was or in an attempt to repair the un-repairable, but to acknowledge and navigate these new states of being. The time Roma is capturing is one ‘after the pain exhausts;’ a space of silence left in the void of misery and joy. This space leaves the poet open to whatever may drift in and fill the void be it God, celestial bodies, illusion of companionship with others, or time itself. This openness is not to be mistaken for uncertainty however. The narrator’s tone does not indulge in a questioning reflection of the void, but speaks assuredly of that which has come to fill it; for, as the reader is told, being human is to be ‘fated to the feasts of mercy.’

The identification and filling of absences and ruins is presented in four ways, each mainly kept separate in the four sections into which the text is divided. Thematically these sections have the effect of a lens zooming out, starting with the personal and ending with the cultural with the bookending sections starting and ending the text in search of spirituality that could be, should a reader so wish, identified through a nameable dogma, though such specificity is avoided on most occasions.

This organisational division starts the collection off with a section that may be off-putting for less religious readers. The poems in the first sections are of a highly religious nature, as Roma heavily utilises phraseology from Christianity. ‘The Liturgy’ and ‘Repetition Compulsions’ both cry out to a capital G god, while waiting in the absence of a response, crying out:

And why not?
Why shouldn’t I seek
The likeness of God? Of Him
who preaches love is knowing
something is born in us again.

An external answer to the questions asked of deities is not to be found here however, as the focus shifts inward before the end of this first section. God is no longer mentioned by name and though slightly biblical images of leavened bread, famines, and ashes remain, a more personal form of spirituality bound to nature begins to emerge. The state of living and being, of completion, is found in other places, in the ‘in-between of memory.’

Through this fade from one type of spiritual experience to another Roma avoids a complete disconnect between the text’s sections. Ending the first with images of time as it is tied to nature and natural movements, she can begin to explore the connection between physical passages of time and memory. Roma’s two favourite expressions of these concepts, no doubt tied to her geographical residence in the Philippines, are water and the sky. However the water here takes on more than mere cleansing properties; it is also violent. Water here both ‘burns deep into my skin’ and ‘reveal our own;’ it ‘hold[s] the world’ but is ‘unnavigable.’ The narrators of these poems see both the beauty and the havoc water brings but see it as unavoidable as the sunrise, both of which are used to measure time. In ‘Present Perfect’ the narrator remembers walking with a loved one down streets next to ‘a river cleansed of its salty air’ as they both ignore ‘the claims of dawn.’ For this narrator, and a few others, water shifts around our memories and the dawn forces new days on us which cause us to forget experiences in lieu of linear time. ‘Of Time’ presents a narrator whose experience
of the temporal that is broken through the act of trying to identify it, so in the same manner other poems learned to master their own ever changing states with a matter-of-factness acceptance.

This carries over into the first poem of the third section, ‘The First Four’. Toward the end of this piece reflecting on the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan a mother is shown continuing cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes amongst the images of wall-less houses and black body bags lining the streets. She is carrying more than this culture mourning as well, one of her own children is missing, but ‘life can only wait so much for the dead;’ she has two other children who need tending to. This hushing of fears and worries, of sadness and disconnect from other people carries through the rest of this section. Loss through death is presented as unavoidable, even in Roma’s version of the story of Lazarus, the man whose own death mirrored that of Christ. The narrator tells us that the miracle in the story is not in the raising of the dead, but how Lazarus will only die once again, nothing has been escaped:

… In his finite self
and divine, a man leaves alone another
another in suffering. In his finite self
and divine, man torments
at how nothing disrupts death.
This is the miracle.

From here the loss and leaving move to the less extreme; the finality of death gives way to leaving of friends in ‘The Wine Company’ and the drifting away from a loved one in ‘Toronto.’

Loss and distance move the collection through to its final section, turning the lens toward lost cultures and religion and the literal ruins they have left behind. Here the Cambodian temple of Angkor Wat is explored as holy pilgrimage, a search to ‘arise from my own ruins’ by reassembling the self through myth and worship. Reflections on the poetry of Rumi and the Mekong River bring nature images back into the spiritual, leading to the final poem. By ending with the poem ‘Tak Bat’, Roma weaves all the threads of the various sections together; religion, nature, the personal, and the interpersonal all come together through the description of this lost ritual. Roma avoid attempts at reassembly of ruins throughout, but in this last naming a hint of an answer lies, a suggestion of ritual that brings all the pieces together into something which does not need searching to name.

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