

The Act of Counting

Death is careless at times. It confuses love with a wet afternoon in an empty room. The unpainted walls a reminder of how sex can resemble poverty. A hollow cry. An open mouth falling inside as you sleep. I prepare my heart and language with better words, like worlds in small selves I've built. Every month, one dollar buys me one brick. But how many bricks does it take to build a house? A stray dog barks late at night. I can't see him but know he's there. He reminds me that here, dreams have dangerous turns. I turn around to no one naked beside me. I play it safe not to see the fire in my hands. But let us be clear: I'm no beggar. It's just that there are times when the world is a sound that cripples the air, and the soul. When what seems arranged—glazing and strange, like music played on tin cans—turns into wilting noise. When suddenly, all that exists is a small boy trying to focus on the pain lifting a nation. A telephone call: *He was wearing black shoes, a Calvin Klein T-shirt that he found in a hotel trash, brown slacks. She was wearing one earring on her right ear, one sock on her left foot, a dress the color of sky. She bought him a canne à sucre. He pulled her close, said, Ti cherie. And after they promised to meet later, she winked and walked leisurely in the shade. A tremble followed. When he turned around, her body was one of a thousand on the streets. He ran towards her, stood by her arm, unable to see her face.* The call drops. I begin to count the ways I tolerate my dry mouth. To count the glasses of water I gave away to make up for my sins. But this act does not count when we fall out of our hearts.

The Sound

Forty seconds. It was forty seconds exactly. We heard the sound. Forty seconds earlier a child was reading Dumas. A *machann* counted the mangoes she sold forty seconds before. A fisherman prepared his bark forty seconds before. The morning breeze delivered what's alive in us forty seconds before. The church bells bent the cough of a peasant forty seconds before. A woman told her husband *ravin lan plen*, the ravine is full, forty seconds before. In exactly forty seconds a sudden silence. The child buried alive in forty seconds. The *machann* buried alive in forty seconds. The wind out of breath in forty seconds. The city fainted in forty seconds. The birds died under their wings in forty seconds. Bodies piled up, unnamed, in forty seconds. Blood on wheels, walls, rubble, bones aching against hearts in forty seconds. A breath moved the dust, forty seconds, and finally a voice, forty seconds. Death on its back, lying where we are accustomed to wish, forty seconds. Quiet clouds, and in the distance, a fire rising, falling off, forty seconds. Terrifying forty seconds. Forty seconds on every clock. The ash of forty spreading the dark farther than we can see.

after Federico García Lorca

As We Wait

*It's not death, it's the humidity that blinds us from who we have become, an old man tells me. And I think, where is the rain? What begins to beg begins as people wait. If we stay unfound—why wonder if forever exists, if the heart is not ready for the soul, if music just shows the way we starve, if saints disagree where to place us, if soldiers replace regret with leisure, if forgiveness is just a shadow split into two, if being alone is a way of reminding us we will never see the full moon? The streets are full of people without wallets or pictures; foreign languages competing for space. The news is at the edge of our fear. I start to run. And then I see the cross. It's still standing, *Le Marron inconnu* still standing. I stop. That's how I choose to wait, to catch what aches in beauty.*