

*David Mura*

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## The Blueness of the Day

### I. MIZUNO IN PARIS (1947)

It happened in an instant:

On the ridge, shells gutted up dirt and smoke,  
a hundred mouths gaping at once. . . . In that streaming,

through leafless woods rinsed with light,

thirty yards ahead, Shig aimed;  
at this high whine, palpable as a spear

drilled through my eardrum, I hurled my weight to

the earth. I can still see my body arched like that, leaping,  
as if I were somehow there

and not there, freed from myself. . . .

✱

I envied Shig. Whenever he entered a church,  
in Rome, Naples, Paris, something  
spoke to him, not the about the strangeness

of living on earth, but some magical  
promise, whatever it is  
a clever boy sees in a broken toy.

In camp, our families were stuck  
in the same barracks, separated by sheets:  
snores, arguments, night noises of

our parents, war clips on the radio flooded  
our dreams. That day we signed up with  
the guards in the towers, we held the flag

to our hearts, staring in disbelief and wonder.  
Shig was smiling, the stupid fuck.  
But then, so was I, so was I. . . .

It was all so predictable, so mechanical:  
Like the way mother would raise her  
cleaver, crunch its blades through the chicken's

joints, searing the limbs. Or the way,  
seconds earlier, she drained its neck  
in the dirt, thumbing blood from

the spongy windpipe, squeezing out its  
wheezy squawk. It's like that German boy,  
he was a boy, really, his straw colored hair,

ruddy translucent skin, the way he stared  
at me, my bayonet in his belly, at me,  
as if he'd suddenly discovered his one true

connection to the world. I can see his face  
when I close my eyes, smell the rain flashing near  
the Arve, thunder that seemed to shake

the fields of green wet wheat, like  
girls tossing salt spray from their hair.  
—Yes, I never felt more alive. . . .

✱

“Okaa-san, life is glorious here. Death  
too. In the mirror I see the lines of bewilderment

that creased your face

as otoo-san stumbled each night  
in the barracks, mumbling *sakura, sakura*. . . .

Sometimes I think of what my hands have done,  
what my eyes have seen,  
and none of it connects to that face, staring back at me,  
its smooth dark skin: I am sick of being  
decent, dependable, Japanese. . . .”  
—Each night I write this letter;  
each night it comes back: *Sender Unknown*.

★

Once I worked with my father  
in the orange groves. Frost  
was coming that night,  
and we set out smudge pots, smoke  
rising amid the wet leaves.  
We were too hurried to speak, lighting  
and laying them down, row on row.  
I recall the black chortles of the crickets,  
the bull frog in the ditch,  
and the light at the tip of my father’s cigar,  
bobbing in the dark. The frost  
never came, the oranges were saved,  
hanging there, heavy  
and round as breasts  
the day we moved out, the early  
light lifting mist from the fields,  
their green shade. Mother carried our lunch  
in a *furoshiki*, Ginny her doll,  
and the smell of *shoyu* was still  
in the hall as I walked out the door.  
I remember we said nothing, knew  
nothing could be said. We  
left the brass Buddha in the basement.  
Who could we sell it to?  
When father stepped towards the car,  
he stepped across the morning  
sun, and his body turned  
to light, and I knew I hated him, his sharp

commands, "*Hayaku, hayaku . . .*"  
his useless tongue. And then,

then the gates opened.

✧

Shig's letter scatters on the floor. It started  
with a story I'd heard before: How, when he set off,  
his father took him by the shoulders

—he paid no attention to the guards at the gate—  
"This is your country. Make me proud."  
(Mine spat at me: "Bakka, when they let me out, then

I'll sign the oath.") Well, Shig did come home, only  
one arm was gone, and after they'd feasted  
on *tempura* and *sake*, after they'd laughed themselves drunk,

the father took Shig to the *ofuro*, helped him in,  
and began slowly, gently, lathering the stump,  
the back where black peppers of shrapnel worked themselves

out like points of a pencil. All the while  
he sang a Japanese lullaby, one  
Shig recalled from childhood. . . .

—What is it I can't believe?  
In the prairie grass, on the hill outside  
of camp, we buried a few *Issei*

and a baby, flung like a seed  
in the maw of earth. Last night  
I saw my mother there, laying out

plates of *teriyaki*, *gohan*, *mochi*.  
She arranged four sets of *hashi*,  
and I thought it was for our family,

but when she turned and looked  
back at me, I knew: It was  
*oshoshiki*. Food for the dead. . . .

✧

“Okaa-san, you ask me why I will not come home:  
But we only explain suffering to console

ourselves. . . . It is chance, not God

or *Dharama*, which placed me here, wounded,  
surviving, possessing nothing. Okaa-san,

there were camps here

so much more hideous than ours:  
Our suffering so small it might have seemed

paradise to these. Okaa-san,

even in my worst rages  
I could not slash the Mona Lisa or the sinners of Carravagio—

What allowed me to do what I have done? . . .

Okaa-san, think of this space between us  
as the wall where messages

are scraped out between two prisoners . . .”

—The words vanish.  
I begin again. . . .

✱

I walk the streets to keep awake.  
The empty parks, pigeons, strollers, gutters  
streaming with rain. Patisseries, flower stalls,

gendarmes, bicycles, boucheries. Stones  
in the cemeteries with legendary names.  
Bridges, grey and rainbeaten, arched

above the Seine. Poles marking an angle  
on the banks. Is it better to say, “I am suffering,”  
than, “This landscape is ugly?” Each evening

an alarm goes off. I start walking again.  
When I see them beneath a street light,  
or lounging in doors, their perfume

already trudging up a stairway to this small room,  
I know I am so far past bitterness  
I must be bitterness itself.

Near morning, in a tiny room in Pigalle,  
I'll rise, dress, the smell of her submission  
on my cheeks, a pile of cigarettes

left by the bed. And for a few minutes, I'll keep  
her face beneath me, almost dead, almost  
frightened of whatever she sees there:

I've thought so often it's my skin, the folds  
of my eyes, the alien energy thrashing her thighs,  
but no, it's just my face, that implacable mask.

## II. INTERMISSION (1991)

This is a draft in progress. As in a film without stars:

*And the camera circles*  
*the face of a Japanese-*  
*American, cigarette tilted off his lip,*  
*smoke curling from the tip.*  
*Cut to his eyes, the cobbles on the street,*  
*the balconies,*  
*their eight feet windows*  
*and black metal frames,*  
*and gutters swirling*  
*with an evening's rain.*  
*(Of course, I'd prefer black and white, the colors*  
*of Renais,*  
Hiroshima, Mon Amour.)  
*Cut back to scenes*  
*of the lovers in bed, the crenellations*  
*of flesh,*  
*vines scrawling up a building,*  
*a stocking laced like a question*  
*mark on the crumpled sheets.*  
*Her back arches above him,*  
*we see her torso, the ribs*  
*like grillwork, the nipples*  
*taunt, the areola*  
*just off center, so that the streetlight*  
*flashes on sweat beads,*

*and beyond a blueness*

*only filming at night*  
*can achieve. Her mouth whimpers, moans,*  
*and we cut*  
*to a cone of light above a desk, her hands*  
*on a typewriter*  
*the keys pattering out the letters*  
*of a novel, two lovers*  
*in bed—A room with shutters,*  
*shouts from the streets, charcoal fires,*  
*Chinese soups,*  
*a fan above the bed,*  
*whirling—Cut*  
*from the words*  
*to her cigarette in the ash tray,*  
*the remains of a pack*  
*stubbled out, traces of lipstick*  
*at the still moist tips.*

It's too romantic. Tear it up. Start again.

\*

The interviewer in my living room pokes and prods:  
 “There’s a brutality in your work,” she says, “you use  
 the word white man the way an existentialist uses God. . . .”

Taking the cue—Oh yes, the angry artist of color—  
 I start spouting Marxist ditties. Cut to reaction shots  
 of her chin nodding, then quizzical, wondering

what the hell Marxism means to anyone, now the wall  
 has collapsed. I drone on . . . This isn’t Malibu, of course.  
 It’s cozy St. Paul. My *happa* daughter shouts down the hall.

“Perhaps the author might better publish his material  
 in *Penthouse*. . . .” The flip-side too plays just as well:  
 “This knee-jerk feminist charade. . . .” Or: “Where is the lyrical? . . .”

There is simply no strong, personal presence. . . .”  
 Well, why tryst a Nisei with a Pigalle whore  
 who turns out to be a member of the resistance

very like, no, who is, Marguerite Duras?  
And why flesh this out on screen? *Always there  
and elsewhere at once*—I cough, her pen pauses—

*the actors possess the multiple presence of deities.*  
(Can we choose the bodies that fill our dreams?)  
“Got to have a yellow woman”—yes I know that dirty—

“if you’re a yellow man . . .” Why give a shit  
about the 442nd? *The face in the mirror: It doesn’t fit.*

★

As in a film:

*Silence. The lighthouse spinning  
its shadows through the room:*

“It was a Cholon . . .” she says.

Or: “. . . in Calcutta . . .”

Or: “. . . in Nevers . . .”

(I think of the German artist

I met in Tokyo,

her father who made films in Berlin

during the war, the skeletons

in charcoal of her early work, soft

and ashen, lyrically grotesque.)

*Cut to his face,*

*to a flash of a twig, snow melting*

*in droplets, the concave curled vision they give.*

*Boots, mud crusted laces.*

*A green fatigued leg.*

*Hands flat against the belly.*

*Which as the camera moves farther,*

*brings a small trickle of red,*

*like a stray thread, clinging*

*to his knuckles.*

*His face (serene or twisted: shoot both,*

*later in the cutting room, see).*

*Cut to*

*her face, against the bedboard,*

*she’s clutching her knees, the sheet*

*flowing as he moves himself up*

*on his elbow, still listening. The lighthouse*

*flashes on his face. The screen goes black. . . .*



Yes, as in a film: *Fields of wild mustard, a river  
empties into the sea,  
a white sand beach, gulls in V's.*

*In the room, she plays  
Piaf over and over. Shadows  
like lizards flit  
across their bodies. Her thighs  
shiny, slippery as melons.  
His chin darker with stubble.*

*Cut to the dialogue mocking the dour  
concierge, their faces in laughter louder,  
raucous, flashes of teeth, hysterical,  
obscene. . . .*

III. MARGUERITE (PIGALLE, ST. GEORGES,  
THE BRITTANY COAST, 1947)

*I thought your body would be soft like a woman's.  
Your cheekbones are so rounded, your eyes curled  
like sleep. You still wear the uniform. Why?*

*I had a lover once like you. In that city where  
the Mekong dragged down half a continent, boats,  
water buffaloes, crates, chairs, tigers, palm trees,*

*I was crossing on the ferry to school one morning,  
and out of a black limousine stepped a Chinese,  
in a white tussor suit, the suit of a banker. . . . It seems*

*so long ago, those continents, those cities: Calcutta,  
Phnom Penh, Rome, Bonn, Marseilles, Algiers.  
And each with its lover. Even then the Chinese*

*said I would love love. . . . But you're not like him.  
There's this scar across your belly. Another on your lip.  
Your French is like a child's. We speak in English.*

*On the ferry, I was wearing a man's fedora,  
gold lamé shoes, a white dress cinched at the waist  
by my brother's belt. I looked like a child prostitute.*

*Perhaps that's what you mistook tonight in me.  
You rise to the window, light a cigarette.  
When you turn, my face is covered with black*

*sheer silk, my tongue thrust forward, blue flames  
of light brim in the mirror over the roofs of Paris,  
a pigeon like a bullet sails out of sight, and you*

*fall upon me, diving through the surface, lungs bursting,  
you can't see, can't hear, and still your flesh beats  
against me like the sea. You don't come up.*

✱

*I can see a lighthouse at the end of the jetty.  
Waves crash there, spill with sunlight on the floor.  
Our towels billow on the terrace. A week*

*has passed. (They say even the continents are shifting  
—a little south, a little east.) I walk across a room,  
you finger my nipple. Pull me towards you. . . .*

*You know I'm not the girl from Bruyeres. The one  
who sliced bread for you. Her father sang drinking songs.  
Her brother eyed you like a Vichy collaborator.*

*"We came down the hills, and the villagers edged  
forward, carrying baskets. When they saw our faces,  
they looked puzzled—Japonais? Comment? . . ." (How*

*she slipped like water from the fist of your mind.)  
You don't want me to speak. I nod. Exhaustion's  
a shape I'm used to. My limbs are so thin, wiry*

*as a farmboy's. So conscious of their whiteness,  
tufts of hair in my underarms, sliding into me like  
lightning without thunder—flash, darkness, silence—*

*you lift my body, stagger with me to the terrace,  
and if, one day, all this will return to me  
etched in black on the blankness of a page,*

*as wind, sand, salt and sun, lather our flesh  
to a froth, nothing cries out, nothing gives way—  
what vanishes is the sea, the blueness of day.*

✱

*A gull wedges its white in the sky. The sand,  
bleached to a fine, grainy white, sticks to your skin.  
I scrape you against my flesh like a pumice stone.*

*There are little stones on the beach, the shells  
like eyelids, pink and azure; tan, vermillion.  
We are, I suppose, flowing into each other,*

*getting lost, the way lovers do, and so  
don't know each other, but enter to find  
these rooms unavailable, cluttered with furniture*

*someone sat in, like the house in the woods  
with the porridge still hot, steaming  
and no one home, no one to remember*

*the beds we slept in, sheets portraying the wrinkles  
that scald our faces, years from now. I am already  
forgetting your name. Or the letter that arrived*

*saying you have to return, it is too late,  
your mother is dead. Clairvoyance failed you.  
And my skin glowing in the dark, milky*

*as the eyes of someone whose sight has  
been shattered since birth. You tell me  
the earth is filthy and throwing us in her arms?*

*What will you say you found there? It's growing  
colder. I can smell the iodine in the air. A  
rankness of seaweeds. Our bodies. Where? Where?*

\*

*Years later you'll return to Paris,  
the cobblestone streets, cafes, lamps,  
gutters where rainwater flows with all  
the resonance a mirror lacks. You'll recall*

*how useless you felt, how that city  
was like finding in a forest the honey  
of wild bees. A stage with backdrops  
more brilliant, more authorial, than life.*

*Of course, the streets of Pigalle  
where women step from shadows  
beneath neon are still there. Cold,  
and living like a branch in March.*

*And you, you're a businessman, your company  
intact, your time free. As through the wide  
lens of a telescope, everything is  
smaller, condensed. Part of a country*

*which rules the world, you no longer  
feel part of it. History, that is. Crossing  
the Seine has ceased to console.  
It is just a river. The waters stirred.*