

THE PALMS

• JAY SCOTT GRAHAM

In the south of the city, the fallen palms lay matted to the ground,
the stone streets still damp from yesterday's rain,
the red stone and the black stone, flesh of the colonial countryside.

Nothing here is remembered save that which is useful,
that recollected lesson, and nothing is useful save by memory.

The washing hangs on rooftop lines in the sun like a new kind of pastel ivy,
the colors wrung out. You have noted the absence of the color,
and having noted it, have welcomed the gray,
have welcomed the absence into that soothing part.

A woman's wrinkled hands motion you to the table,
the black in the palm,
she rolls tortillas out of emptiness and tradition.

From here we leave all that which is familiar,
we squeeze our pale arms through the outermost gate, reach for the clay cup.
The taste is from memory, the herbs dried and bitter.
This tea is from the same market where we bought the icon, remember
the Indian men hunched over their brooms,
fresh palms to sweep the sidewalks and courtyards.

If the combi stops then you can ride, the schoolgirls crowd in,
laughing through tight lips, the hem of the red-and-black uniforms ragged,
the leading edge of the needle and thread, front-line of domesticity.

Rock for the buildings of the center is quarried in the next valley.
If you like, we may borrow the consular officer's car,
drive out in the morning before the heat of mid-day.
The sunsets there are famous for their indescribable crimson,
and some of the locals make a special brew from the agave plant.
It is a haunting, addictive sweetness that rages to the roots of the teeth.

The red sky cuts an outline of the black car on the ridgetop,
red that leads back into the vein, sparking in the pulse line.

In the rural graveyards the families begin to arrive,
the road lighted with candles.
They brush and clear the stones,
decorate them with offerings of rum and food,
with sweet breads puffy in the shape of children. The yellow cenpochitile
flowers are laid
along the paths of the dead.

What was the name of that actress, the one who was kidnapped?
On Sunday I almost remembered it.
The performance was uninspired, you said,
the sound in the auditorium muffled, indistinct.

In the market you stumbled between the florist and the butcher, remember
that little scarfaced boy who helped you back to your feet.
Once the fat has been trimmed, the meat glistens on the slab,
darkened with flies, until the carnicero brushes them away.

If you knew me then, would you still say those hard words?

In the predawn cathedral, the supplicants scar their knees
and press their fingers into the wounds of the statue of Christ crucified.
The red water of the heart thinning, the black of the leather shoes,
the mumble and stammer of prayer.

In the orphanage, the boys pull small branches from the slender trees,
touch them to the burning trash pile and then the grass.
The grass hisses with flame,
the pall of the white smoke climbs lazily over the wall.

This is a complicated issue, and not all of the census has been taken.

Returning was a crude surgery, an excising of the past.

Drunk in Los Angeles airport, the bar well-lit,
“A free pour of tequila with every two pints.”

I sat with a Marine five years younger than myself, his face tight,
jaw muscles clenching, his throat open and working the drink down.

“And who here knows the difference between your face and mine?” he asks.

The devil is an inescapable force, his converse is release,
contorting your whole body through the bars of the cell, your first day of free
breath

can be a killer, the new atmosphere takes some getting used to.

The president-elect has asked that the execution be halted, but why?

This prisoner is more comfortable with the known gas of the chamber.

The bottles smiled and swayed on the shelf.

I tell you that I have never enjoyed the sensations of flight.

In the templo mayor, the new initiates frame the light through box cameras,
gods of every angle.

The truth has returned, broken into prisms, the teeth have sawed through the
gums,

the red and the black of it.

If there is not blood on Good Friday, then I will drink nothing.

The voice has quitted every throat, every object,

What once spoke now lies in silence.

In the south of the city I felt everything acutely.

Now that I have returned, what do I feel?

What once had voice has been sewn up, who now will speak to us of what is
to come?

Back in the house of my father and mother, the carpet whispers back at my
socks,

and the furnace starts its pulmonary cycle. The wall holds a series of
decorative plates.

I do not remember ever seeing them before, can I be sure that they ever were
there?

“Are you finished yet with your calls?” she asks,
“there are other people in this house who need to use the telephone.”

The new year celebration will surely rival last year, the crops have done well.

We had that good rain in early August, the wheat and barley heavy, remember,
the harvesters thick like locusts over the pitch of the hill,
coyotes and deer driven from the draws.

All that I have lost is all that I carried with me,
And all that fell from me is that which does not hold to memory.

From here you can begin to see the ocean through the green,
smell the dampness in the salt breeze,
hear the birds turn screaming over the breakers.

From here the palms still push into the sky.

From here the steady line of the aqueduct diminishing in the distance.

From here the Purepecha women with their blue and black rebozos.

From here the oval peephole of the plane banking, the upstart skyline of Seattle.

From here the wicker chair by the window where I write.

From here the light in this room of mine seems thin,
and all things dark and strange stare out at me from the corners.

• **JAY SCOTT GRAHAM** is a recent creative-writing graduate. In fall 2002, Jay studied the social forces in Morelia, Michoacan, Mexico within and beyond national boundaries contributing to and effected by migration.