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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Department of English

Writing Program

LEAN TO

by

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Table of Contents

To Make The Dead Lose His Way Back	1
Hand Me Down	2
Aftermath	3
For the Martyr	4
Salvage	5
Safehouse	
[Wakened all the same when there was no]	6
[That there was a coat fit]	7
[Who moves the clock-]	8
[<i>Are you prepared to die, Lorena?</i>]	9
•	
Overcast	11
The Keep	12
Nest	13
Appetite	14
Messenger	15
Given	16
Esperanza	17
The Boy With Uncountable Cowlicks	18
With One Eye	19
Todos Los Santos	20
Hearing Distance	21
Riddle	22
Envoi	23
The Missing Body	24
•	
Telling the Tale with Water	26
Hearsay	27
[What held us together was a rope]	28
[When we each bared our feet for the washing]	29
[In the day between the breaking of bread]	30
[We were looking for bloodspot]	31
[We changed the course of a stream]	32
[We didn't understand bastard prayers]	33
[We carved our faith onto the land]	34
[Our histories were etched on]	35
[We recognized each other by our refusal]	36

[Their weapons: nothing like ours]	37
[In the book about a failed revolt]	38
[The voice we heeded had no grain]	39
[We peeled eyelids off our skin]	40
[So we believe it was not Lorena]	41
[On the eve of the attack we dreamed]	42
Assembling the Body	43
Positions	44
•	
Juego de Prenda	46
Dawn	47
A Manner of Proceeding	48
The Swarm	49
Day	50
Legion	51
In the Catacombs	52
Juan dela Cruz	53
Acolyte	54

To Make The Dead Lose His Way Back

Turn your shirt inside out.
Wear its dangling threads.

Stray from the road he remembers.
Do not look back nor call out
names of people you meet.
Let your own name drift past you.

Shake the dust off your shoes
before you enter the house.
Open the back door
but come home through a window.

When you have turned all mirrors
to face the wall, the grief of saints
hushed deep in the folds of red cloth,
the dog will growl at a stranger.

Light a candle. When it burns
without dripping it burns perfectly.

Hand Me Down

You wait for your turn to put on
the clothes of the missing,

sleeves too deep for your arms
to reach the end.

Above the neckline, your head
feels wrong, as if trying to stay

above water. You dig into the pockets,
you draw out fistfuls of earth.

Stone after stone you unstash
from the hem, loosen the years

you've waited to climb out of the ground.

Aftermath

You wake up. Under your pillow
a knife wasn't there before.

The handle dissolves into your hand.
You touch the blade. It draws blood.

Play it like a leaf between your lips.
A lullaby. Put it down on the table.

Wait for someone to pick it up.
Take you away. No one comes.

You stir stew with it. Stir up strife.
It sharpens only at night. It gleams

with its own light. How to wipe off eyes
that stare from it. Following you. Yours.

You keep it with your ropes locked
in a box, far from the reach of a child,

you. Take it down, cut bread.
Hand it back. No one comes.

You know you will kill with it.
Weeds will grow fast on the ground

where he will fall. You cut a path
through that field with this knife.

For the Martyr

On this side of waiting you recognize
his fist when you hear it: his breath
against the door.

You let him in without a word.
You know where to find his wounds.
The doors, the windows
you leave open. Nothing to fear.

Throughout the night you stay with him,
his face in half-light, half-remembered.

Before morning he disappears
without looking back. Without leaving
a stain. The water in the basin is clear.
You wash your hands.

You search for him
in every man you make love to
with a violence you've never known.

You bear his memory
until the day you give birth to him.

Salvage

The week-old news you peel
off 4 kilos of meat.

Disfigured man found in the field.

Safehouse

Wakened all the same when there was no

Every night called out

under guard outside taken to see

kept awake kept waiting even on a night when
up on sleep

Who of us

Who of us has never

pictured himself in never
thought up answers to questions he might be

In the room I noticed several identical doors—
far too many for one room.

That there is a coat fit
even for this
disfiguring

a body lodged
in a cell of salt

if tended properly grows
a perfect thirst.

It betrays another need: a mouth
fed by its own refusal to speak

slakes on itself to complete its self-
entanglement.

I open my arms to let the waters meet me
halfway through these sleeves unending.

Who moves the clock-
hands when I am not

looking? I close my eyes.
The light bulb still shines.

I wake to the same light
swinging above,

always an hour before
the appointed time.

Who moves the hands
approaching the hour?

Who keeps the light on
in that house with open

windows, a jacket
awaiting a body in her hands?

Are you prepared to die, Lorena?
I am not Lorena, I repeat.

The whispering man keeps
whispering and the man-

handling man keeps asking
questions I do not answer.

The door slammed then left
open to let me hear my screams

played back. My own voice,
not my own, caught in a loop.

Someone's sobbing, someone's
singing, someone's shouting

her name: a voice without a body,
free of this body. I crumple.

The manhandling man helps me up.
The whispering man whispers,

*Here you are going to tell all,
and open out like a rose.*

Overcast

Everywhere in the village waiting weighs the women down. Framed by windows, their eyes scan the edge of the field. They stand at the threshold of the church, unable to walk the aisle. They sit on the lip of the well, hands useless at their sides.

The boy tugs on his mother's skirt. She looks down, and for a moment, catches sight of a face she longs to see. A face the boy no longer remembers.

Her eyes scan the length of the river as if waiting for a body to surface. She can almost taste the sweet flesh of mudfish the boy's father caught with bare hands.

The waterline curls, hissing as it creeps, never touching her feet.

•

Most days the mountain is hidden. The boy has heard of a river on the other side that flows upstream. He's heard of forest dwellers with hair to the ground.

Once, he stared at the mountain clouds so long they began to move, crumbling then rushing towards him. He held up his arms. The immense mountain revealed to him.

The Keep

The carver of saints has gone mad, the man who stared into the eyes of wood to keep them still. His grip on eye-sockets: one for pigeon, the other for crow.

He smells the coming rain and mounts the church steeple. His shadow eddies around his feet. He says he won't come down until the flood recedes.

From his perch he shouts at churchgoers. *To whose christening would you wear such a fine veil? I smell no birth.*

•

Away from a circle of hands the madwoman breaks. Esperanza, a name so easy to rhyme. She walks down the church aisle to pick up fallen veils, handkerchiefs lost between pews.

Everyday she quietly falls in line for communion, always the last to rise from her prayers. She climbs the twisted stairway that leads to the belfry, bars everyone else from entering. She is holding the tongues of the bells. She is guarding the silence of Sundays. She is quilting herself a wedding dress.

Nest

The children discovered a new game to pass the time. They found pleasure hurling the wrong fruits into the furrows.

Their tongues had caught a song. The melody was the same as the harvest song their mothers used to hum. But the words spoke of the dead body of a man found in the field. The cruelties inflicted upon him rhymed.

Mothers had to slap the children's mouths. Their laughter resounded through the cogon grass, where a scarecrow stood, dressed in the clothes of the disappeared.

From a crowd of weeds a sparrow flew to the highest branch. In its beak: shredded scalp, caked hair.

Appetite

For miles and miles the stranger has walked, hunched under the weight of a sack. When he passes by, the games come to a stop. Head against a tree, the boy has no clue. He goes on counting.

Nothing can calm the infants. Nothing can explain why they don't open their mouths when forced to eat.

Someone is listening to the kitchen. Slowly, someone else puts back the covers over the pots to muffle the cries.

Messenger

The boy found it lying in the churchyard, a sealed envelope with the name of a man written on it. No one could tell him who the addressee was. Not his mother, not the women gossiping around the well, nor his playmates, who barely looked up from flaying the wood of their slingshots.

He carried the letter everywhere he went. Sometimes, he would take it out of his pocket and wonder from whom it came.

Before sleeping, he would set it on the bed, and with his hand, smooth the edges and flatten the creases. His excitement to meet the man never diminished. He wanted to deliver the letter intact.

One day the boy had the sudden urge to hold the envelope against the sun. As he was trying to make out the words, he felt as though he himself was being held against the light, that someone was seeing through him: eyes that would never leave his body again.

Given

The villagers named him Kakak Babi, the four syllables he can utter. Children who know he is deaf pretend to converse with him. All he can ever say to them is Kakak Babi. His fingers turn into strange shapes as he struggles to conjure up what he can't express: a bowl? a cradle? a boat? Kakak Babi. The children are amused. His twisted gestures fall on his lap. Birds pecking on the ground scatter for no reason.

At night, the boy can still hear Kaka Babi through the open window, shouting his name as though cursing it. His tone turns wistful. To the boy's mind Kakak Babi is singing a lullaby. He thinks if he falls asleep, Kakak Babi will sleep. In the morning, even before he opens his eyes, the boy is already listening. He hears nothing, then the birds.

Esperanza

One night the villagers heard the mad woman singing a song that had comforted them as children. She walked the streets aimlessly.

*Sleep now youngest one,
Your mother is far away.*

The women held their children close to their chest to shield them from her voice. They locked the doors and barred the windows. Her words pierced the walls.

*She can't come for you,
The way back is mud.*

When she passed the well she stopped.

Women used to gather here with the patience of earthen jars, in the village where the word for water was the same as martyr.

•

The bag on her lap seemed to grow as the shadows around her deepened.

No one knew what became of the child she carried. Some said she ate him at birth, others claimed she stuffed him in her bag, a child she continued to nurse when no one was looking. The threads of her bag so close to tearing.

The Boy With Uncountable Cowlicks

When he stood at the mouth of the cave, he knew he could no longer resist the urge. He heard someone calling repeatedly. He didn't look back. He left his name at the entrance beneath a coconut shell.

He groped his way through slippery rocks until silence swallowed him. He won't remember anything afterwards, except the touch of warm hands, fingers running through his hair.

With his head on his mother's lap he stares at the door. His mother searches his head for a wound but finds no trace of the years he has lost.

They both know that there's no place on earth where they can meet, no matter how close she draws him to her.

With One Eye

The women are tuning glasses lined up on the windowsill to the chant of the faith healer on midnight radio. He speaks of the healing power of water. His voice fades in after the gunmetal static, the wake of the President's Martial Law decree.

The children are hushed by *checkpoint, safehouse, salvage*—words they shouldn't ask about. To sympathize their fears with the trembling voice from far away is like swallowing a mute's echo.

They drink the moon from the water.

•

Behind a street corner, one rung above gunfire, crouched below the crosshairs horizon, beyond the frame of a window, between the blur and the clarity of a wound, where a breath is drawn, held,

the voices of women carrying baskets of fruits still wet with rain, hover over landmines, across a prison-sill where ants crawl.

Todos Los Santos

No curses in the air: all the dead have been buried. The boy pauses and looks back at his muddy wake. He doesn't know what he is missing.

To hear himself better, he plunges deep into the water. The clouds haven't moved for days. The villagers look past the trees lining the river as though they can see beyond the clear-cut sentence from an expired language.

How to mend the scream on the face of the earth. How to make *that* sound.

•

From grave to grave the boy moves past faces glowing in candlelight, the aqueous light of remembering the dead. The women bring flowers gathered on their way to the cemetery. With handkerchiefs they clean the names.

From grave to grave the boy moves like a collector of tears, a ball of wax growing in his hand.

Hearing Distance

Soldiers crouched behind bushes at the escarpment.

How still they are, eyes fixed on the next bend in the footpath. They have been waiting such a long time tendrils have grown around their faces.

They strain to listen to the nervous breathing of enemies. They hold their own. They can taste the silence of bombs being assembled. They cannot understand enemy tongue yet their unheard curses are already shrapnel.

In their minds the soldiers are composing beautiful letters to send home.

Riddle

The boy met a traveler who handed him a nut. It came from a village, he said, that lost its church bell during the war. Many of its sons were executed under an ancient tree and the enemy took the bell.

After the massacre, the villagers began making up riddles with a single answer: a word they wouldn't utter for fear the enemy would return to chop off their tongues. For many years they lived within the shadow of what they couldn't hear.

Then a strange thing: the tree that sheltered the carnage began bearing fruits that rang like bells.

The traveler shook the nut close to the boy's ear and he thought he heard a distant tolling. But when he was finally alone all he could hear was a dull sound against the shell.

Bored, he sang a made up song and the mountain sang back.

Envoi

Sleep now, little book.

The leaves of the acacia tree are folded
and in the shade, the ghost of a boy

is riding the swing again.

He is headless, they say. No, he's got his head
cradled in his lap as though to console it.

No one can remember the expression

on the child's face.

At the doorway, a mother calling.

The Missing Body

*Later in the plot, enemy soldiers talked about
the ghost of Tagalog leading rebel attacks.*

– Philippine Studies: Have We Gone Beyond Saint Louis?

In the wings, the actor playing the martyr
waits for the line that will cue his return;

from behind the curtain he overhears
gossip taking his place, his whispered name

moving through the procession, as it passes
the Church, Palace, School, Market, Bank,

Prison, past an audience standing up, one by one,
to join the march on its way out of the Theater.

Telling the Tale with Water

A child drew a line on the ground.
He turned to us as if to say, "This is the beginning
of a game you have forgotten." We moved close
to enter. We couldn't cross the river.

Still we stayed with it like a belief in origins.
We walked by it as it wound upstream far into
a mountain, rising beyond as though it would lead us.

•

When the woman who lived

When the woman who lived in
the heart

When the woman who lived in
the heart

of the mountain

uncoiled her hair, all the flame-
flowers deep in the forest floated downstream.

No one who had seen her face ever returned.
Her beauty we could say was legendary.

•

We gazed in the water then looked ahead
toward the next bend.

There were sparrows behind us
pecking at the little light left on the leaf-rot.

It was almost dark. We were waiting
for a hand to touch us.

Always we were hurrying, wanting to turn back.

Hearsay

The Lapiang Malaya affair is not an isolated event in Philippine history. It is not an aberration in an otherwise comprehensible past. We should be able to find meaning in it, not resorting to convenient explanations like “fanaticism,” “nativism,” and “millenarianism,” which only alienate us further from the kapatid who lived through it.

– Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution*

He did not die. When I was in prison he was a crazy man in the next cell. I talked with him and he told me many things through the wall.

– a leader of the peasant revolt

What held us together was a rope
that carried buckets of dark water
from the depths. No secret was spilled.
Into the ear of the well
we muttered wishes. Riddles

kept us awake. We were permitted
one guess each. The air thick with rumors
caught in the threads of cobwebs.

The Devil, too, always leaning
to whisper. We pulled the tail of a monkey
dangling from the sky. We heard no call
to vespers.

 This was the place to wait.
Our throats held a song rising only to our heads.
The well so deep it took years to return our voices.

When we each bared our feet
for the washing we felt almost ashamed.
How lonely we were

without the radiance of wounds.
When we covered our faces, lashes appeared
on our backs. We remember one another
by our injuries.

When Christ revealed
his name before Pilate he became a body.
He was buried. So we were called

among the hooded flagellants, led by sound
alone: the whipping of the one
marching ahead.

We moved like bandits
in the holy hours. The authorities almost caught
our shadows, the cleanest part of us.

In the days between the breaking of bread
and the lowering of the veil we hid
in plain sight. Shadows clear
in the eye-socket of a dead God.

We let loose the pilgrims in us, hunger
that ate itself. We let them indulge,
dripping with hosannas, we let them pick
and claw. We let them wound their way
to the cross.

The scapula is a bone primed for
the bearing, wing-stump on which we rested
our devotions.

These were the days for the feast
and the festering. *To each his own meat.*
We let the caution ants pass, we let them thread
their own prayers through a dead bird.

We were looking for bloodspot
on stone, branches twisted around
each other, skull of an unchristened
dead child, anomalies that summoned us
to be named.

Fang of Thunder,
Monkey's Breath, Whirlwind Veil,
Virgin's Navel, Stillborn Eye.

The wilderness drew us to listen for
the quiver of the misshapen, amulets
we would wear close to our chests
for the mishaps,
bullets, injustice, hunger, love, for the wrongs
inside our bodies like names of the unborn.
Vigilance was our day. Hope, a knot
of snakes writhing in our mouths.

We didn't understand bastard prayers
from a dead tongue. Still they made us weep.
In weeping we knew the outline
of our faces.

We inked bitter vowels
and devoured them. We inherited
the ash of another day on our foreheads.
So began the journey to wash off

from our hands what we had failed
to do. It weighed down on us like weapons.
The hem of blood to be shed sketched
around our feet.

Once we felt worthy enough
to imagine we were free. In the dark
we lay down to rest our shadows.
And the ground said no.

Our histories were etched on
the perishable: bark, leaf, nutshell.
We were unwritten. We were always there.

Rain between two nodes
of a bamboo culm. We struck it
with a branch. It gave the sound *elsewhere*.

Roots that crept beneath our feet surged
skyward to meet us up ahead: some for torches,
some for spears. The earth perfected
an armory in silence.

Landmines taught
to flower, shrapnel to take root inside
the body. The wood still rings. The fruit
held and hid our fists, our fingerprints
becoming legend everywhere.

We recognized each other by our refusal
to be met eye to eye. We knew

we were the wake of the same
hunted animal. To the arc of our aversion
a curse lay tangent. The gleaming path.

When the southwest wind prevailed
we leaned in its direction to ride
the rumors it carried. Justice, one-eyed,
couldn't be far behind. Nothing strayed us.

At times a hiding game beckoned.
We could be children behind branches,
searching for the perfect aim of a slingshot.
Deep in the woods we could pretend fruits

were not suspect. Nothing but sap on the edges
of our knives. Nothing between us to keep alive.

Their weapons: nothing like ours.
The curve of the blade not forged
to the mercy of slopes. Grace

entered us through the holes
they made, the wounds we refused
to exit.

Steps ahead: a whistle,
a voice we had thought fallen.
It was as strange as picking up
a bayonet from the ground
or warming our palms against enemy guns.

So close, so close, our names
whispered, *You are here, you are almost
yourself again.* Whomever we killed became
our dead. The land opened to receive them.

In the book about a failed revolt,
the young romantic snatches a lit lamp
full of gunpowder from a crowded room
of *principales*.

He dives through the window
into the river. Daydreams are part light,

part air. When we left, unlettered children
crouched at the edge of the river,
dissolving hymnals.

Out of the shore's mud they shaped
thin men, which they dried under the sun.
These quickly crumbled back into the dirt.

We couldn't return to meet their gazes.
Their hands were soiled. They dug and they dug
for what they couldn't say. "Don't light what's left
of the wick. It would shorten our breath."

The voice we heeded had no grain.
Our hollowness
the cavity it sounded through.
We understood.

Breathlessly
we ascended. Was it a mountain
or a song? Then there was nothing
but our listening, teeming
with the noises of the unseen,
the forest.

We were standing before
the mouth of a cave.
Sometimes the faint sound
of a bell would reach us.
How we longed to braid it into a rope
before it faded. Mountains, we had heard,
call out to one another.

We peeled eyelids off our skin.
Deep in the struggle, our path
marred by black bile, we moved

as through the darkness
within the hood of a betrayer.

We remembered his eyes
burning, we couldn't
get away. Still we searched for a sign
to stop the blade from leading us deeper:

the silk of wounds opening
into the guts the gods refused.

We ate what the gods refused.
With three clean strokes of a dagger
we cut a new boar open.

So we believe it was not Lorena
they found lying in the fern field.

It was not Lorena who let the bullets
inside the body. Just minutes ago she asked
for passage in the sudden silence
between our arguments.

She is no angel.

Lorena cannot be broken into maidens
who unravel their locks as they jump
from the mountaintop.

Lorena

is a song that darkens the sky, a voice
as clear as rain. She will never fall.

We cannot gather her
on our palms as a wound to bear.

On the eve of the attack we dreamed
awake all night. We tongued
a foretaste of copper, the cave's teeth
over our heads.

 In the ceremony
for the blinding of bullets
we barely touched the circle
of firelight as the flame pursued
the physiognomy of a flag.

We would descend the slopes
of a pealing bell, sound of metal
shivering into grains.

 We took our bolos
by the blade, our hands moving beyond
our reach. MAAM MAAM, we whispered
into the right eye of the sun.

Assembling the Body

Birds scattered in the wake of what we couldn't hear.
The wind stirred the leaves, the leaves the light.

No one was following us. It was only rain
brimming in our footsteps.

•

When we arrived at the water's edge we were ordered
to retrieve bones from the riverbed.

How with good hopes we dove in to piece together
what seemed to be a figure of our own death.

We laid down the remains to resemble a body.
We covered it with a white sheet, and facing away,

sat down to wait.

We kept watch without looking behind us.
We kept watch without turning to each other's fear
of waking it.

•

The chorus lifted their robes. They turned to face
the exit, revealing, below the hemline, no feet.

We looked up; no curtain fell from the sky.

Positions

How long can you stand?

The load on my back keeps me
from hitting my head against a cloud.

How long can you lie down?

I sleep deep enough to stay
awake for somebody else to sleep.

How long can you sit?

I look back on where we rested;
nothing tells us we were there.

How far can you go?

The songs we sing in our heads pave
the stillness through which we walk.

How much can you carry?

Clothes drenched in river water,
a book, a knife, a charm.

How long can you carry on?

I will be home that night
the mountain returns our voices.

How much can you lift?

I put down my book to carry you,
dreamer, body, comrade.

Juego de Prenda

Not here, says the bamboo grove.
Not here, says the banyan tree.

Not here, not here
the missing bird calls from behind
a thicket of closed eyes.

We are deep inside
a game, deep inside a night.
They are calling us.

Breathlessly misting windows
they are calling out names they gave us,

their wanting to be called back.
Beneath us, roots

like children wait to be unknotted
into hands and arms, their songs

leave the ground. Not here,
says the thorny bush. Not here,

says the veil of vines but not
quickly enough. We look up

the steep hour and all he's been
holding back falls heavily on our faces.

Dawn

And still we look up where our fathers' hand led us once
to trace the outline of a man and dog on their way
to slash-and-burn. We buried our fathers' hands.
Then buried our fathers. They are nearing the edge
of the sky. The tip of the scythe is the morning star.

A Manner of Proceeding

First comes the daydreamer,
raising a lamp, leading us.

Then blacksmiths, stonemasons,
carpenters bearing their tools.

The weavers follow.
Then the widows.

It is late in history, the chorus is silent.
On their shoulders, an empty casket.

We all dreamed this, unfinished,
and woke with hands
we couldn't lift.

Side by side, the trickster,
the riddler, the maker
of musical instruments follow.

*Tell me the names of our dead,
as many as you can remember,
help me get to the end.*

And the children, struggling
to carry the train of our shadows
as we walked toward the sun.

The Swarm

The cicadas are veiling a mountain
in the mountain: a dome
over the void of a church bell.

They will show you the way
to their hiding places
if you can catch one still singing.

On warm days their drone reaches its peak.
The noise fills all that it hollows out.
To resound is to disappear in the swarm.

Where is the slope, they seem to say,
where no one died fleeing?
Weeds grow ravenous on this soil.

I heard of the men
who wore the shroud of a jungle
to elude arrest. They never came back.

It takes a while for the mountain
to return the call of the bells.
Wind fills the husks of insects.

Day

With two shadows cast on the ground we lift our eyes.

The light of the day moon is veined

with a paler light. Dear ghosts, let this cup pass from us.

Your blood in our blood is searching for a wound, a way out.

Legion

Against the skin, restless seaweeds
darken the water. They keep my face
afloat.

My face afloat.

What makes them think
they know about my crotch?

The rosy underside of an eyelid
conceals me. Soft and damp,

my bed is a tongue.
The walls are teeth. Hair is the falling
darkness.

Hair is what I breathe.

Hair growing fast
from the meat I eat.

Where I hide is deeper
than my shame. Mercury beneath glass

makes the mirror dangerous: mirror
before which my body distorts
for more.

Juan dela Cruz

I choose the cross. The mirror cries: traitor.
But I cannot give back what it gave.

There is an Allan inside me who wants to speak
In the Name of All. He weighs down heavily.

He muddies the font. Dirties the missals.
He says: We are not one. We are seven.

The first is jumping off a cliff to marry his shadow.
The second swims in the river without getting wet.

The third puts his hand inside snake holes.
The fourth is walking around aimlessly.

I am awake at night as you are all day.
How long have you been waiting under that tree?

In the cross's shadow, the mirror lies unbroken.
I receive the name exactly as I requested it.

Acolyte

Ghost after ghost I am
walked through.

My pockets are vows,
my keep, elsewhere.

How to move, how to move
when all I have isn't mine?

Unbraid, you say, curl back
into the flame.

I gather my weakness to lift

the light
just below the wind.

My arms drop
a shadow on the ground.

Your reach is my rest.