

Folk Taxonomy

Red maya birds that are not
maya birds, but sparrows and munias.
Words for the kind of rain that will leave us
without power for days, then the kind that sprinkles on
without further omen. The tropical gothic,
endangered. Pekpek flower, corpse flower.
The kind so pungent some who live near
the rare blooms go to the forest at night
to hack it up with a machete in secret.
Flower of my inner ear infection.
Radio static as I break the surface.
A diver who looked like my father.
With kinder eyes, clairvoyant,
edges melded with telluric green,
uncharacteristic of our region.
Taught me to suction the sea from my ears
with a lit cigarette, its filter stuck close
to the drum. The name for breathing
out. The words I invent to adore you.
A house, though so little, the plants
that grow there are many. Drag out
the iiiiii in patani. Eunice. The vowels
dragged out. Characteristic of our region.
The name for how you adore me makes me
suffer. Small islands emerging from the
crook of a stranger's neck. Kulani.
The cure: spit of two living grandmothers.

What we named things despite science.
Because our systems of knowing
know older wounds. Swallows labelled
as smaller birds. The several names
I called you despite not loving you. Yes,
we eat that, too.

Audition at the Feminist Church

In the rain-warped cathedral, they hover
beyond reach, considering my body.

Sixteen versions of an eggshell-coloured saint
decorate the pillars, ordered by their category of labour.

They watch shadows crawl to the altar as light peeks
through the crooks of their wooden silhouettes

like a nervous child. Their arms are bent at work,
cradling lambs, skulls, bibles, their nursing

carved into permanence. The pulp of a wet thing
beats back against my breast.

I spend my young life being told to forgive men.
They call this a feminist church

because all the saint figures are women carved
by strange artisans and brought here

with the galleons. Someone brushed hay from
their blank faces and bolted them to pillars,

content where they would be safe from peril.
Once after reading poems in public, a sparkling

redhead came to me to say my work was so feminine,
satisfied by my performance.

In war the saints did not touch, not even when
the cathedral became a coral rock bomb shelter,

promising relief between American and Japanese
artillery. Even the saints dissociate.

The truth is I can't forgive my own women
who let it happen to us, then took the hammer and nail

and made sure of our witness. Above me,
I might want to be one of them, unscathed

and preoccupied. When I leave,
they will not follow.