

Listening to the Lord

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A rare treat in Manila—real grass,
short and green, probing tentatively
out of rich soil. The sky
waits to rain—black clouds
bloated, moving slowly and tenderly,
as if they might spill open any moment.
Urban tragedy lies below us—
an uneven sprawl of light
dimmed by smog, spread
about us like a tired dog,
clumsy sky-scrapers filled with rot,
paint peeling in strips and windows stained black,
uncomfortably upright, angular,
like legs kicking aimlessly
at the humidity. And all those helpless
people trapped inside! And below, where jeepneys
honk their endless, unmoving parade
and squatters hold noses tightly shut
against the hot stench of rivers
they've gradually made hell.

But here, the grass
Is painstakingly trimmed, and trees shrug
upward, branches raised in indifference,
hanging leaves and pink flowers one acacia sonata
sewn with reflected light, our mingled voices.
The white crosses are rank
and file, like good soldiers, over rolling
green hills—heavy marble
oblivious to delicate landscape.
We're talking, of course, about God—
200 of us, missionaries flown over
on the wings of testimony,

our parents' tears. Lucky us, I think,
these other boys sent in legions
just to die, never knowing the language,
the enemy. It's no sacrifice at all.
Fittingly, he speaks of Jesus'
heavy cross—heavy as a world—
wood beam pure weight
on harried shoulders, back broad
as the sky. The Jews all spit and talk back—even the Apostles
stand back, don't know what
to say.

Watch how the night plays
tricks on us. One moment
those thick white crosses point
a weighty finger at earth, stakes
pinning grass to ground, the hill
rising from below like a sigh, belated,
undulating; we look again
and it appears the land is sinking,
depressed, into the earth,
and the buoyant stone is lifting
off like marble balloons.
The mineral blooms all lined
in a row, stately stems
hammered into the garden.
The sermon *is* the mount—
a terrible new law, the wine
poured out of old bottles like dregs
into bitter new cups.
Each eloquent word carried
by wind, garnished
with grief—somber décor, really.
We want to say the word
so good that even God
will listen and answer our poem
with a blessing. Even Jesus
rested in the grass,
an ugly cross
singing in his ears.