

JOSÉ WATANABE

Japanese Garden

The stone,
among the raked white sand,
was not brought by violent nature.

It was chosen by the spirit
of a quiet man
and placed,
not in the center of the garden,
but rather skewed to the East,
also by his spirit.

Not much taller than your knee,
the stone asks you for silence. There is so much noise
made by empty and arrogant words
that struggle dishonorably
to represent
the errors of the world.

Look at the stone and learn: it,
in the floating light of the afternoon,
with tact and humility,
it represents
a mountain.

IX

Narrator

It was midnight
and the palace of Creon seemed to be a ship anchored and secure.
The wind had slackened
and the torches consumed themselves with flames static and blue.

Contemplating the building, I thought of the modes of power:
a ruthless man sleeps in silk, I said to myself.

Suddenly
in the highest room a light ignited and then another
and I saw Creon pace and pace troubled. Was he awakened
by a nightmare
or the sting of distrust that trembles in the flesh of all
tyrants?

Creon

The guard's tongue spoke superstitious words. Seeing no tracks,
he and the simple men with him
thought a god had tried to bury the corpse of
Polyneices.

What god would bother himself
with the man who arrived at the city gates
raising red torches
eager to set temples, altars and sacred treasures on fire?

Or have we reached the time in which false gods
honor traitors?

No: now I see: the innocence of the guard was faked
and the burying god was a shrewd lie
to conceal his paid guilt.

There are citizens angry because they do not occupy a place by my
side.

Eyes that I send throughout the city
have seen that behind my back they shake their heads and mutter
diatribes.

They are not hurt by the corpse on the hill, they are hurt by my power,

and to undermine it
 they allowed coins to fall into the venal palm of the guard.
 Yes, my servant's shameful, risky acts
 can only be explained by greed.
 And then they wished to confuse me like the innocent king of the
 fables
 replacing a god with a madman who kneeled before me
 and spoke confused words between cries and spittle.

Power and betrayal are on the same coin.
 The day of my first command I had my first felony:
 the mortuary mask of Polyneices disappeared, the one
 I fashioned so the enemy may have a face
 before beneath the sun, as I ordered, he may lose his features.

Oh traitors, tremble, because neither will simple death be enough
 for you.

Flags behind the Fog

An old age sad and obscure hangs about the port,
 more rust on the dock
 and suspicious bars on the shoreline
 where before there were houses ringed by stubborn herb.

One night, when a mist dense and murky
 covered the world, I walked groping
 along the planking of the dock. Still a youth,
 perhaps I sought the joyful terror of dwindling away.

I went on feeling the railing with my hands, its metal
 joinings, the ropes of the crab traps
 tied to the rusted keels. The crabs
 prowled by night among the gutted fish and their innards
 that rolled in the deep sea
 or wound themselves like serpents around the pilasters of the dock.

I listened to the gentle push of the waves
 at the sides of the small boats that
 in the mornings they went out to gather nets
 passing between the warships stationed in the bay.

A dog, as blind as me, whimpered
in the bottom of a boat.

Then I saw someone, in the distance, waving
flags behind the fog.

I was awestruck and mute. No footnote
on beauty will ever speak truly of those flags.