Japanese garden; IX; Flags behind the fog

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.

JOSÉ WATANABE
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.