

Meditation with Smoke and Flowers

It is Monday and I am not thinking of myself. My son, asleep
in his stroller, the dark conifers holding nothing but their scent.

I'm walking him to the place where loggers have cleared thirty acres,
leaving only ash and stripped tree limbs. The light now comes

to the places once dark—and now wildflowers where once
the moss grew thick and complete. The flame of something around the corner

and I'm thinking of the wild tiger lilies that line this gravel road below my house,
how they clump together, their stems bent down from the weight

of their flowers. How mouth-like they are, and how
their speechlessness makes the road quieter. Each flower is a surprise,

like the flaming tip of cigarettes in the dark. I think that the road
cannot contain all these mouths, though there are mythologies held

in check by the tongue. Like the story my father told me
about his father in war time, and how his own father forced him, with the threat

of a beating, to go under the house for a cigarette from a Japanese foot soldier
bunkered down. I can see my father's small trembling hand,

outstretched to this man whose face is mud-caked, smelling
slightly of fire and lubricant for his rifle. The smoke from the soldier's own

cigarette takes the shape of the underside of the house and I imagine
my father can hear his own father above him pacing.

But this road now, is free of smoke. The logging trucks have taken off
for the night and the tree remnants have smoldered into nothing

but charcoal. The wreck of everything is a vacuum, so too the wreck of a village
after war or the floor boards above a son's head in fear of his own father.

Here, though, there is nothing to fear. The wheels of the stroller on gravel
is the only sound and the idleness of the excavation trucks harkens to

someone asleep in the uneasy dark. No, I am not thinking
of myself. I'm thinking of an agreement my father must have made

with himself years ago when the houses were burning
into bright bouquets in the nighttime. How, perhaps

he swore he would not beat his own son while somewhere
in the afterlife his own father smokes and paces. Perhaps

there are no flowers in that place. Perhaps the lone soldier
through with hiding, crawled out after the guns had stopped

and dusted himself off, the sun striking his face with its unreasonable light.
I'm thinking of my son, asleep, and of the wild tiger lilies. How frail they are

in the new light. Why they come. Why they spring up, unannounced as suddenly as
the promises we make with ourselves when we are young.

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Oliver de la Paz is the author of three collections of poetry, *Names Above Houses*, *Furious Lullaby* (SIU Press 2001, 2007), and the forthcoming *Requiem for the Orchard* (U. of Akron Press 2010), winner of the Akron Prize for poetry chosen by Martin Espada. He co-chairs the advisory board of Kundiman, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to the promotion of Asian American Poetry. A recipient of a NYFA Fellowship Award and a GAP Grant from Artist Trust, his work has appeared in journals like *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *North American Review*, *Tin House*, *Chattahoochee Review*, and in anthologies such as *Asian American Poetry: The Next Generation*. He teaches at Western Washington University.