

ventriloquist

what is there in this pungent darkness?
notes drying on shelves
hollow mandolin
pinch of salt like stars
there is no wine

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this thing which wants to be more than that of mind
a signpost a directory a map of human speech
let's rewind the clock
whose hands flow into bodies
where are you in this pythonine dream?
the air is denser than you

walk & it sustains me
i have no doubts the air also sustains me
these voices deliquescent unsustained glimmers

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the morning light is utterly different

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to enter dislocated sleep
loiter for the strain

hung by the voice
till the throat dries

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empty & quiet
does the land speak
when one walks on it
when rain
blood drips from branches?
toward a sky of broken plows
there is the work to be done

—Mông-Lan

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Birthing the "ventriloquist"

I wrote this poem when I was living in the Arizona desert. I hiked a lot back then in the mountains of the desert. The desert has a lot of echoes, with wolves and goats roaming; it can be a hallucinatory place. The heat can induce surreal thoughts. I think that the surreal is a type of sponge that can soak up extremes of emotions particularly well. And the desert is a place of extremes—a sense of timelessness pervades the dry air; cacti and saguaro have been there seemingly forever. The "ventriloquist" was born in the desert.

The ventriloquist is a person who throws voices. In order for the ventriloquist to throw voices, she must have a sense of her own voice, her own soul. She must know about the properties of people and objects, even if on an unconscious level. Throwing a voice, a voice is echoed back, reflected by the walls, the air, different objects, a person. The ventriloquist, as speaker of the poem, tries to project voices from objects, tries to find the voice from each object.

The poem is a study in non-personality, disembodiment, and the border between sanity and insanity. It is a study in resonances from the natural world and certain illusions created by people, like the illusion of time.

Being also a visual artist, I am sensitive to two-dimensional space and use the white space of the page as a canvas, the poem against the white as a type of silence. To let the poem breathe, and attain a life of its own, I try to respect how the poem develops and grows, where it wants to lay itself out.

"ventriloquist" is from my second book of poems, called *Daguerreotype of Sleep*, which details meanderings from the San Francisco Bay Area to the Sonora desert of Arizona to New York City to my country of birth, Vietnam.

— Mông-Lan