The Nimrod Literary Awards
The Pablo Neruda Prize for Poetry

Finalist
Melanie Figg

Untitled

after Doris Salcedo

1. Atrabiliarios

It sounds like melancholy
& rage but it is untranslatable.
We will cover the walls
of scholarship with flowers. Mourn the dead.
(women’s shoes sewn into holes in the wall)

The news today:  2,500 have been killed in X
Over 20,000 casualties broken & returned
Civilians 10x that

He says we are making progress.
(the shoes are behind windows of stretched animal gut dried & cloudy)
You have to work hard to see what is there.

My sister called me from the psych ward to tell me that the Devil
is not in her left hand.  She is not she.  The phone line

stretches to cracked porcelain, a voice
more of a mewling, a mandolin’s tremolo but not

*After Doris Salcedo’s Atrabiliarios, 1992 (wall niches, shoes, animal fibre, surgical thread; dimensions variable) and other installations. Lines in italics were spoken by Doris Salcedo.
my sister. The girl who fed me while the marriage collapsed around us. That girl is not.

I am walking through a lawn of shoes, commemorating the dead so far in Iraq. 100s of men’s army boots & an occasional stuffed animal, plastic flowers: a moving cemetery. A side-show.

There is a pile to represent Iraqi civilians—women’s shoes & the shoes of small children.

_these piles should be bigger_, I keep thinking, as I walk unsatisfied through the field.

What happens when we cannot trust the dead?

The artist fills an armoire with a woman’s cotton nightgown & cement. You can see corners of soft cotton emerging from cement, but can do nothing, cannot brush it aside _knowledge and control are precarious tools for us to deal with reality_—The cotton coughs _yes she was_

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My sister re-tells history—her history & mine—until our past is not ours. I cannot argue.

If I interrupt with my version she will turn at me, eyes skipping in panic, her face tense & no longer hers. She will become something

I cannot recognize & remember how to love.

Her voice will stretch high & taut (animal gut over a broken window)
& her words will spit out tight & fast,
faster with accusations covering years of my life.

So I say
nothing. Why such allegiance to a past
full of men’s hands? Why not give up & give her
my childhood & stop fighting? The radio says we are bombing Faludja.

2. Museum

You must buy a ticket to walk through the Holocaust Museum. Once you’re in, you can’t come back
without another ticket & timeslot. I don’t believe that space can be neutral. My brother & I take four hours
& skip lunch. The museum is built like a lyric: a corridor conveys us past the sheer cliffs of another. We move
slowly between a left wall of portrait photographs, a right wall full of names. Dozens of tourists pass us,
talk of other things past thousands of destroyed Russian villages. Gone.

Words on a wall, then piles of eyeglasses,
& piles of hair, even higher, mostly brown—
(a haystack, a __, not this —)

It takes all our energy to stay awake & to keep this hair pile hair:
— to resist the clamp of nouns. The fixing of sight lines.
So much depends on where
you stand to look, to lose, we stand back, gazing across
the expanse

of similar versions: the body of history.
By the time we get to the empty boxcar
on the third floor, boxcar is no longer boxcar.

My brother & I walk not speaking to the Mall & devour
our sandwiches. I tell him about the neighbor who touched me
& my sister when we were very young. He looks up,
his face exhausted, rinsed clear from the exhibits: “I am
so sorry it took you this long
to tell me.” The space between my sister & me contracts for a moment,
then widens.
There are so many ways to hide the body count:
contract workers
consultants
embedded journalists
And if we want to see the dead returned under flag-cover?
We must be morbid, insurgents.

& a sister who returns from psychiatry foreign, invaded
 by generic drugs, dominated by diagnosis—
& the family—
 How to find what the artist seeks \textit{(the splendor of a complete life)}?

In the gallery she tries to give us nothing
to see—to experience almost, but not—
(a bookshelf full of cement) \textit{These pieces stand as pure absence}.
to leave a trace—

Where do I put the other sister, the one before disease came to stay?
In a photo album, the lines of a poem, a cement-filled bed?
Quantum theory says both exist—
what version of me do I use?

3. Unfinished

She was born premature & pigeon-toed & worse.
Three operations before her first birthday.
“I put her small legs in casts & kept them
 separated by a steel bar when she slept.
The doctors said it was a good idea.”

Come into this world & —
the body will adjust to another’s —
“I raised a girl knowing
there was no where to run.
I believed the diagnosis.”

The artist stacks up the boxes in the corner of the gallery. Beautiful
boxes of dried cow bladder, lacquered & waiting.

She stores our escape—
Look at the family albums.
See for yourself.

News flash & then gone: we bombed the Kabul Zoo.
The streets are full of wild animals,

uncaged & starving, schoolboys
corner a tiger in an alley,
taunt her & eat her. Suck the grease off each finger
one at a time. Polish their shoes with their hands.

4. Not To Relic

_Third World waste is extreme like our reality_—
she wanted to make sculpture out of nothing—

after eight Colombian Justices were torched
inside the court & she smelled their dying.

She could only make work out of nothing—
so she took objects that had meaning
to the deads’ living & worked the objects until they had no

meaning, but still this was not nothing,

not nothing—

Our ordinary terrorisms:

to wake in the night to watch your daughter beaten
& shoved into a car
& then nothing.

How to build from that?
If your daughter disappears, you must go to the mass grave & look for her shoes. You will not find her thin ankles, you will not find the small scar on her left knee. You will only find her shoe (is it hers? it might not be) — in one object is the dispersion of an epoch & you will take that shoe home (you will hide it in your sweater so others do not know & you can hold the secret & carry doubt’s public shield) & you will put this shoe in a box in a corner of the attic where you do not go & not for a minute will you doubt the shoe is gathering power, getting larger & pushing against the walls of the box. It glows slightly when the village sleeps. It shudders when you think of it too long, or her name is named in the café. You have no doubt, & so when the artist comes from Bogotá you take her to the attic & hand her the shoe. She tells you her art will take responsibility for your grief & you surrender — In these pieces I see the light of a memorial ethos. & your daughter is & is & is &.

I try in vain to recuperate the irreversible. There is only history blurred by politics / cataracts of public memory. Such pain has no borders & to remember such pain has no place & time so it is all wheres & no wheres & even the body cannot contain it—even the body— & once the body cannot contain your panic—what then? pain leaves & wanders an abandoned house
it is a hopeless act of mourning

what can possibly
ever stop it from expanding
into wind? into a desert of windstorm? & once into landscape
with no language how can it not become world?
& then, o god, what then?

Because she cannot describe the disease, or the side effects,
it will haunt & conquer.

I am aware that art has a precarious capacity to denounce.
True: our tanks drove over parts of Babylon.
True: the winds drove over parts of Babylon.
If ever. What happens when we are long gone
dead before the restoration? When will hope be conjured?

5. No End in Sight

Once memory
of the paining is memory itself, the reason
she remembers at all, I can no longer determine
where my center actually is — If we are always preparing
for war, for diagnosis, what are we—
to turn this intentional oblivion
which is no longer present into a still
here, into a present

& the artist will create from that nothing,
nothing, remember — more nothing—