

SWELLS, SOURCES, AND SPRINGS

Jeffrey B. Javier

Faculty, Department of Humanities

University of the Philippines Mindanao, The Philippines

jbjavier2@up.edu.ph

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9712-8961>

How to cite Javier, Jeffrey B. “Swells, sources, and springs.” *The Grove. Working Papers on English Studies*, vol. 32, 2025, e9027, <https://revistaselectronicas.ujaen.es/index.php/grove/article/view/9027>

Ahead of the vision rose
and began what became
later for us the dreaming.
Dreams then soon stirred
legend. Legend fractured
after into our oral history.
What ease for our history
then, creases deep, crests
high, thicker and bleaker
than your brows, had there
been scripts of your pleas,
remains of your fatal feral
spirits, the untamed river
sprites, streaming creeks
of seared ink, secret ways
and footpaths that reveal
only to us with sure sheen
the clarity of your speech,
bestowed maps and charts
for us to trace your desires,
for your lost songs to rest
firmly into our memory,
to be fixed back into these
isles where—for load, fill,
burden, or yoke, bondage
and unrest, chains of lead,

lines of leashes, long iron
fettters of spite—they stole
you, sold for a few pieces
not even of gold, snatched
captive from these seaside
towns, from these foothill
clefts, they were to escape
from, run away with haste,
and hoist their beaten sails
by unreasoned rush, quick
to sprint and swift to flee,
without having to confess
any crime or simply to ask
for our pardon, that what
they did to us was merely
for mercy, blessing, charity,
that for you and all others
after you, everything was
for greed, for glut, and for
storm, where they swear
one day to return to, bolder
and braver, stronger back
to these emerald shores,
once their fire and forces
are restored, to take whole
the lot, and to replace these
islands with their sickness,
their rot, that they neither
once quite freed from, got
fully rid of, nor far forgot.

*

How could they neglect,
even forget so certainly,
ever so easily, the isles,
the archipelago, the vital
living waters, the shores,

the mirrors of our origin.
Now lesions. Now sores.
The wound they thought
you were worth, weighed
not in wealth, but burned
in words, written scarred
white on our brown skin,
to unseat your hard-won
feats, tattoos of intricacy,
these ornate patterns you
earned by punctured pain
or pierced plans of flairs,
now buried as cut of loot,
under-skin as a plunder's
roll, as indices of spoils
for plunderers to tick off,
or to cross away later for
other thieving tasks, now
seared memory, and now
a metonymy for the stains
on our rich green terrains,
on highland lush, scented
piles of herbs, of mineral
ores, the coasts bountiful
with nectar orbs, honeyed
fruits, of sundried spices,
of sprays and surfs, water
zests, of the endless wind,
of riverbends, wild beasts
roaming, of ancient spirits
wilder. So grave, so grim,
so sweet were once these
life-giving, soul-satiating
swells and springs of pain.

*

Burden of innocence: you
knew these waters would
swallow you whole, sink
down without any residue
your heart. So, by spring
of luck, or a leap of fate,
you took chance, ever so
slim, ever deadly the risk
of sinking deep, to jump
on board, and took barely
what few you could: fair
scraps of your few shirts,
one chosen for sleeping,
one sheer for days under
the sun, scorching heavy,
through on-deck works.
And finally, you lodged
in your throat the songs—
the rings and the rhymes
that your ancestors dead
once owned, now openly
free to croon and to haunt
in your bones. How holy,
how broken the beautiful,
how sad were the sounds
as you pressed some lean
verse after another verse,
packed away, stowed out
of hearing, into your past.

*

The cook accusing you of stealing bread:
Of course, it was a lie. Pushed to hard work
you brushed windowpanes without meals,
chewed your rain-soaked shirt, and sucked
water and sweat to feed your weary frame.
Sweet wine of bodily strength disappears.

Down on the floorboards, you grew grim
into a man, forgot the sounds of whistling
wind, how paper kites lift, bask in smell
of pandan, of freshly steamed white rice,
how dew drops gather in breaking dawns
and explode a thousand suns, sugar-crisp
on the tip of your tongue, how not to stray
away from the long-worn treaded tracks,
how to touch rough green summer grass.

*

The open sea, an escape
so few only would take:
mist spraying over ship
hull, blisters and dreams
of the islands, promises
of your horizon hidden
in blue. You knew well
of star-charts, but not of
sea-maps. Cargoes you
alone carry within: You
were too young to hold
on tight, to pull the coils
of the sailing masts, too
short to see past vapors,
to perceive these ropes
of hope, your heart was
still small, still too pure,
too raw and ever so new
to behold a blue future,
to be beholden beyond
the curves of tomorrow.

*

Ship to a new port and down the planks
walk upright your new self, a new man.

Wooden boards squeaked upon your gait.
No more the devil restless in your steps,
or youth unbridled with hair wind-swept
from a run. The shadows hurried distant
beyond the hills. Thickened into leather
from years under ocean suns, your skin,
once of morning earth, like paper sheets,
now glistens loneliest under full moons
and oil lamps. You, too, will soon return
to flight. To wind, light as a paper kite.

*

In aching depths, your heart
the water swallowed. There,
the yearning stayed. Away
from the islands, you never
found your way back home.
But words and verses still
call. The dead, in cool air,
on clear nights, also sings.
They sing of the wild birds,
of a slice of a sun shining
through leaves. They sing
of rain passing over islands.
They all sing of your haste.
Sing the swiftness of youth.
They sing of loss, of unease.
They sing this new disease
and of these fretting wounds.
They sing of lights spinning.
They sing of the open seas.
They sing these faces. They
sing the liquid spells. They
sing of the white salt. They
sing of mornings and your
need for silence. They sing
dreaming of the wild spices.

Sing deep of kindly songs,
the sparkling springs, river
swells, rich green fills, lush
highland streams, of vibrant
fruits, of the welling waves,
of the ebbing flows, of live
lava sparks, of the breathing
embers of the dying bonfire,
of root coils, of the blissful
river twists, of water swirls,
of footwells in lower tides,
of shallow runs, of oceans,
of deeps, of songs, of sweet
rolling sounds of your pain.

*

Yes, I wait, certainly most,
for you. Under naked grits
of the sky, the stone gems
in the water, in my nightly
swim and in the daily seep
of morning shallow streams,
I wait for you. In my dreams
of the dark and in the depths
of my sleep, I pause for you
patiently. I steep soaking in
plain rains. How long had I
been alone, a single disciple
of my own solitude, the sole
attendant to my solid grief?
From the hot winds, I drink
every vision of your arrival
inevitable. I swallow whole
my hunger for you. Beneath
the gaudy greens of mango
trees, I anticipate the falling
of golden buds. How I stall

and forestall my ever long
thirst and longings for you.
And I can all well foretell
in aching winds the divine
coming of the full eruption,
your ruptures and breaches
as revelations in my mouth.
I cut my skin fresh to allow
the sap of my care and my
repair to leak sugar-thick,
down on my arms, drip all
unmovable. Bloody thirst!
I ripen and swell. I endure
and quell all my yearnings
for you. I press and squeeze
into my open wound sours
of lime. I crush my lesions
anew to stay awake for you.
I stand wet, blanched white,
fresh under the monsoons.
I eagerly listen for that tell,
that slanted sound of wind,
that sad call of birds, that
croon of wild beasts, those
whistles of the mad future.
I sit still at the end of my
waiting, edge of the land,
beginnings of the eternity
and the sea. I keep songs
inside of me, too. I break
and linger as I sing alone,
lost as I finger my pulses
for you. I wait and I bask
under the sun, like death
manifest, rotting for you.
However long the delays
of days may persist, I stay
starved and ever vicious

for you, as ever famished
 in my miseries, as greedy
 for my memories of you.
 Come pull and pluck me
 from the brittle branches.
 Ravish and wreck me red.
 Gut me ravenous and raw.
 I cling as the dead-weight
 overripe fruit, all swollen,
 all festering sweet for you.

Note

The short poetry sequence “Swells, sources, and springs” responds to what Resil B. Mojares, the Philippine National Artist for Literature, refers to as the “sudden shock” and “dislocation” that a colonized subject must, could, and/or would undergo, that “leav[es] the body derelict and disoriented” after a “long colonial period as a ‘dark age’ that separated a people from their roots in the past” (300). This form of colonial trauma, of displacement and of uprootedness, is not only evident and prevalent during the period of occupation and in the exact moment of subjugation, but also persists residually as a “structure of feeling” (Williams 121–7) through generations, where, once a momentary corruption, is now embedded organically, like an affliction, in the fabric of one’s personal history and in the membrane of the collective memory and of the national imagination.

References

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