

Pearl Diving

*Is Memory, / as they pretend, / mother of the Muse? — / or
Forgetting,
—James Richardson, "Again"*

1/

She lapses into music, rising from dinner to play piano as we eat and talk. As if togetherness were a storm cloud in summer, filled to bursting. A brooding monsoon.

2/

Her memories, black pigeons flying off at dusk. Who knows where they spend the night? Dawn finds them back at the cote, softly cooing. In time their flights will cover greater distances. Some will disappear for days. A few will never return.

3/

When my father comes home from work, she claps like a birthday child: *Papa!* A pause. *Where's my husband?* My father, swallowing hard. *Still at work, hija.*

4/

Casting my line in a dark pool, I bait her memory like fish. *Mother, who painted that portrait of you? Tell me your lola's recipe for oxtail stew. When did you learn to play the kundimans?* Her eyes, two searchlights, sweeping.

5/

Later in bed she turns to him. *Where's Kit, Papa?* He dresses in the blue dark, retrieves his violin case from the hallway. *I'm home*, he says, kissing her forehead. He sits on her side of the bed till she falls asleep.

6/

Have you heard of the pearl divers of Davao—mere boys plowing headfirst into the freezing deep, holding their breaths for minutes at a time to find the largest oysters, the ones that might hold the prized black pearl, their only light, dim lamps tied to their foreheads?

7/

Her lips form the words to the Our Father all the way to the Great Amen. Her fingertips roll invisible rosewood beads.

8/

My father's voice cracks over the phone. She's been looking for you, he says. Calls you *Mama* or *Sister Amelita*. Or sometimes, *that little girl who was just sitting there*. I've been playing kundimans for her, he says. She knows the words.