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## Mater Dolorosa Ivatan

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JOHN B. LABELLA

**Mater Dolorosa Ivatan**  
*for Soledad Reyes*

Black lace covers the statue  
of the grieving mother in this northern island parish.

Held on her head by a brass crown,  
a black veil drapes over her shoulders, its hem  
below her waist.

The lace maker must have long known pain,  
crafting its black ornaments  
all over the black transparence to unmake  
what the gaze  
might memorize of the thinning  
pale woman,

except where her eyes, her face,  
shines like moonlight through parting clouds.

Even there, at the level  
of pursed lips, the lace darkens  
with a full bloom.

The time until the world's end  
is long and harsh.

The bread of life crumbles, and the heart waiting  
thorns with patience.

It is just as well the rite  
today requires no unveiling; the gospel remembers

nothing of the mother's language if  
some of it came out whole.  
And what voice, what sound, has love to offer  
a dead god?

For days the absence  
of tears swells and ebbs, eyes stung with unknowing  
as if looking out to sunless  
churning waves when none of the fishing boats return,  
as if casting into the deep all thought  
of the empty tomb.

Seen through a church window,  
spring heat mellows across a small walled pasture  
where black goats, black  
but tinged with early-evening gold,  
are chewing herbs.

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John Branzuela Labella currently teaches at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Part of the specialized faculty at the Department of English, he offers courses on rhetoric and Asian American literature. John was formerly the head of Filipinas Heritage Library in Makati, Philippines. He holds a doctorate degree in English from Princeton University, where he won the Charles Scribner Prize and read critical theory as well as American poetry. His poems have won first prizes from the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards and from the Philippines Free Press. Among his recent projects is "New Humans for Old Soil? A Question for Architects," an essay written for the Philippine Pavilion curated by Renan Laru-an and the artist Christian Illi at La Biennale Architettura in Venezia.