

Mookie KATIGBAK-LACUESTA

As Far as Cho-Fu-Sa

*"If you are coming down the narrows of the river Kiang,
Let me know beforehand and I will come out to meet you
As far as Cho-Fu-Sa." --Ezra Pound*

What I am ever is this: composure of stone.
Spare weather, visiting the garden, small as the hours
I keep watch by. Beyond this wall

must be better weathers. This claw of stars
must constellate somewhere into a bear,
else names would lie.

Since winter's thaws, no script from you
save this: I travel the river and follow
the white gulls.

Husband. See me walking the dusty pass
where loom our prior lives?
Here the years pass that I enshrine

within these walls, sparing nothing
from the ardors of my stare: blue plums
paired butterflies repeat you

in a walled world. I tell myself
to clear the moss, mend the gate
so long unswayed and caked with dirt

but nothing moves. Somewhere
you are actual. Happen to me there.

America Is In the Sweetheart

In the dance halls of California, a Filipino migrant worker could buy dime-a-dance tickets to dance with a taxi dancer. These were called Sweetheart tickets.

The roads that began in the fields of Binalonan
End here tonight in the dance halls of Stockton.

The roads through Moxee and Zillah, and Pasco,
End here tonight in the dance halls of Stockton.

I've crossed the heart-shaped valleys
In freight trains with Claro and Paez;

Julio carved his name on an orange tree
We hid behind, when kids no more than five

Struck us with rubble and stones. But all those roads
End here tonight in the dance halls of Stockton.

I am going to dance with Sally, Virginia and Mary
For ten cents a ticket and three minutes a dance.

I am going to dance with Sally, Virginia and Mary
For ten cents a minute, three tickets a dance.

They'll say, call me darling in your local
tongue, turning their eyes to the coil

on the floor: I'll say *mahal*.
Then we'll dance to a number as short as a swoon:

It's, it's only a paper moon—

They'll give me the slip to something
mid-tempo, slow by slow inch so I won't know

what hit me. I know the drill: the glint
in my eye, the beautiful lie in my arms.

All the cold, terrible sweethearts.
All the cold embezzlers of hearts.

We, Won't, Be, Tending, Gardens,

Watch, scant, grow, lush, won't, turn, the, earth
for bulb, or root, I've, longed, to, say,
 peppermint,
 and,
 thyme,
juice, a, tomato, with, my, teeth,

No, we, won't, be, tending, gardens, kiss,
A, wet, deep, for, what, might, grow, under,
 dark,
 and,
 succulent,
As, long, promises, the, orchids,

we, overlove, are, deep, in, water, do, not,
aspire, they, are, trying, to, tell, us, something,
 Trust,
 Says, the, sprig,
 And, *Trust,*
says, the, spray, and, I, fear, the, long, gather.

I, nestle, my, palm, on, a, groove, I've, no,
time, for, or, roots, to, spare, I, mark,
 my, air,
 with, dark,
 matter,
kiss, what won't, be, sown,

or, held, to, light, I'll, hate, my, scorn, and,
swear, a, tender, year,
 There,
 now,
 you, say, *there, there,*
toeing, dirt, over, the, groove,

Tending, other, far, gardens.

Portrait of Virginia Grasey

Renowned Filipino painter, Fernando Amorsolo, used natural light in his paintings and developed the backlighting technique Chiaroscuro, which became his artistic trademark and his greatest contribution to Philippine painting. In a typical Amorsolo painting, figures are outlined against a characteristic glow, and intense light on one part of the canvas highlights nearby details. Philippine sunlight was a constant feature of Amorsolo's work; he is believed to have painted only one rainy-day scene. –Wikipedia

Every portrait is a study in want. Damsel hues: rose, amaretto,
The sky peeking through foliage above Ms. Grasey's face.
Eyes I haven't the blue for: too deep for *asul*, too glad for *bughaw*.

She will sit for this portrait for the better part of the afternoon.
The provenance of that smile shall be ascribed
To a French song about roses, or a same-eyed *G.I.*

No one can guess how she has just brushed
Ants from her forearm; how she chooses to press
Her tongue against her teeth, rather than cry.

Portrait of Ms. Anne Solesby

“The women I paint should have a rounded face, not the oval type often presented to us in newspapers and magazine illustrations. The eyes should be exceptionally lively, not the dreamy, sleepy type that characterizes the Mongolian. The nose should be of the blunt form but firm and strongly marked...So the ideal Filipina beauty should not necessarily be white complexioned, not of the dark brown color of the typical Malayan, but of the clear skin or fresh colored type which we often witness when we meet a blushing girl.” –Fernando Amorsolo

She believes I am smiling
at the bougainvillea flowing
behind her. She believes I am fetched
by the slant of her black riding hat.
But I'm taken less by her grace
than the whiteness of her dress;
the way it recalls mama's second-best
table linens—not the prize of her trousseau,
not the one we kept for guests: the one rimmed
with wine and burnt with cigar ends, the white
of our mistakes. Decades later, I still hear her cry,
*Mind your manners, Pintita, you are missing the point
Of something so fine.*

Playa de Kamakura

Revolutionary Filipino painter, Juan Luna, traveled to Japan in the summer of 1896. In August of that year, he and his brothers were arrested on suspicion of being participants in the Katipunan revolution.--Museum of Arts and Sciences, University of Santo Tomas.

No turn in sea or sky,
no smear of sun or balm of air—
incredulous atmosphere, shattered
by neither gull nor human cry.

This is the end, I think, of allegory,
the end of red on the canvas, gaudy as
smoke in gentlemen's bars; I tighten my stroke
and keep my eyes plain on the scene.

Pewter and salt on the surf, the soft,
wet earth as dull and brown as *tsokolate-ah*
in Salvi's house—I try more silt in the dye
and black in the red.

The eye turns slack that kept its look
on gallant *monsieurs* who knew her tightest
quivers; and from the old vermilion,
only eggshell and slate.

Luna, I ask myself, is this the end
of a long pilgrimage—a sky that keeps
its leaden rumor of sun? Under the pillow,
I tighten the hand on the gun.

The Parable of the Sparrow

This morning, it isn't rain that beats my window. A sparrow knocks its crown against the glass: a wild, soft thud of bone no bigger than a knuckle. It beats against the window with such intent, it's a safe *perhaps* it sees not its face but the chestnut crown and slit black eyes of a rival bird. For a moment, the two are one and the same. Incessant knock and tick of bone. Tired of harm, the bird eases out of the mistake, and ruffled hardship finds flutter in him, then song. Already it rustles through leaves, declares its name to who might listen. Already, the moral about struggle. Already the poem that wants to end: that time you mistook tenderness for love, someone was showing you muscle. Already, what cannot be loved is loved. I am telling you a story about sparrows. I am telling you I am in the story. I am telling you I'm not the sparrow.

When The Heart Flies from its Place:
Accompanying Notes to the poem by Eric Gamalinda

The landscape of language has no geography. Already, love isn't an intersection between Ongpin and Misericordia, it's a small graveyard in Amherst, where Stansik, 5, is unlearning his Russian. He reads American names off stones the way my mother recited her mysteries: the plump, soft beads wet with tears and intention. His memory is still Russian; and when a tractor roars in the distance, cutting an oblique, clear line to tomorrow, the boy breaks my heart with words that must be Russian for *forget*:
When I hear these sounds, he says, the heart flies from its place. And again, the fork grates against a plate where my father eases fish meat from its spine. He cuts so cleanly under the bone, The knife slides from tail to head in a single, silken motion. He lifts the fish to my plate, the service a small one with grand intentions. In this memory, I am not much older than Stansik, this is not yet the father of my later poems; I am not yet the son of his late disappointments. He is parsing my dinner into fine shreds, making certain there are no secret bones, spindly thorns in the flesh he has cut so precisely, and with such care, I am still his prize. A needle-sharp pain catches in my throat, even water won't dislodge the bone. It is still there. Today, as it was all those years ago, it is still there. Whatever it is I have no words for, in mine or any English.

Gilding

*Some darkness practicing
on a tomcat. –Isak Dinesen*

Anything dear requires a bit of shine:
Relic and surface, mirror and frame.
What's common as dust desires its burnish.

A poem is a public photograph in gold.
Pounded into leaf, a hard emotion
Is both delicate and strong,

Turns whisper-thin, and shines.
Handled with bare hands, it can tear
And collapse, practically, into thin air:

October's a nip in the bone. I kiss
Your cheek and there's flint in the skin.
I am abstract in your eyes, a blur in the wick

Of a guided flame. You are solid as bone,
Factual as gold. I do not want you
To make me real, as a body is real:

The neat fact of skin, the hard lever
Of bone. I do not want my body
To tell you I am unlike other bodies,

The moon-shaped scar beside
The knee, the secret niche behind
The earlobe, more nerve than bone.

These are the terms you know:
The groove and swelter of my skin
Against yours, our mouths rent

By the oldest song in the world.

Love practices on us like darkness
On a tomcat, turning us fine
As gloss bristled on wood.

See how the surface shines and
Will not hold. See how we tear
Like burnished gold.

Landscape

The landscape of language has no geography.
— Eric Gamalinda

In love, the landscape changes. Bridges are half-way points. No one knows where they begin or end.

The sun cuts through a mesh of beams
And suddenly, one walks into light as one might

Walk into perfume; knows the exact moment
Lilac bleeds into orange, and after that, musk.

Language finds its tongue in want, and there are
Many words for absence: acute, wild, and night

Perpetual. But when we speak of the end of love,
We might as well speak of the end of language,

The way specialists tell of a dying English: words
So quickly on the move, their meanings change.

Dirty, for one, and then *arcane*.
What survives are words so old, we speak them now

As in ancient lore: *one* and *two*, and later, *four*.
Staying words every clock keeps, at any time.

No one but the lover knows the oldest words are
The first to go: *I*, for one, and the brevity of *you*,

In an arcane bar, the words dirty with longing.

John Fante Observes Carlos Bulosan
for his novel *Ask the Dust*.

i.

It isn't America but the kind of America he carries with him. One month it's apples in Yakima, one month it's peas in Imperial Valley. One day it's cops with brass knuckles in your eye; one day it's a blonde nurse in the poor man's ward, giving you love. Poor you, two bucks stuffed in your shoe, your last two bucks in the world, and the cops are licking you good and robbing you blind to get their Whisky fix. *John*, you'd say, *Johnny boy*, when you were drunk, *I didn't even know her name*, the Mexican girl four boys had their way with before she got to you in a picker's shack. The girl you shared asking, "Did you like it, honey?"

ii.

Carlos, you are the loneliest man in the world, if you still carry your mother's name like a talisman in the dark. Not just any dark, this one. If you still see stars, Carlos, you've never been more blind.

iii.

Such an exquisite face, dark as a Hershey's bar, the teeth white and gleaming. Half moons for eyes. Dressed like a dandy in a twenty year-old suit, nothing to his name but a typewriter and a library card. Japanese soup in his belly, sour and hot, for weeks at a time. Because Macario needed the money, or Amado, or Jose, or Julio. You were savvy with your English but stupid with your heart.

iv.

Cruelty and kindness, Johnny, that's America. They call you googoo, and monkey, and honey, and sugar. Cruelty and kindness. God bless America.

v.

"The highway detectives hounded us in the freight and Jose jumped off the train and splintered his leg on a stone. We had to chop it off with a knife. We stanchd the blood with tobacco."

vi.

One day, you saw buzzards hovering over a half-alive coyote in the desert. Half alive, Carlos, because you'd never call it half-dead. You saw the buzzards circling, but you only heard the birds.

viii.

"The smell of guava trees, Johnny, in the small tongue of land my father owned. I can't describe the smell but do you know what a guava smells like, Johnny, sweet as apples on the rot, no I don't mean rotten, John, just ripe, more than ripe but not yet rot, the pulp pink as a clit? There's no smell like it in the world."

viii.

I've given her a name, Carlos, the Mexican girl, and I've put her in my book. *Camilla*, that's her name. Don't do it, Carlos, don't cry. If you cry I'll have to cry, too. Look, Carlos, alright, the girl has nothing to do with you. It's only a story, Carlos, it's only a story.

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