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P.I.: Poetry and the imagination

Higino Francisco V. Penones Jr.
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P.I.: POETRY AND THE IMAGINATION

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Higino Francisco V. Penones Jr.

May 2009

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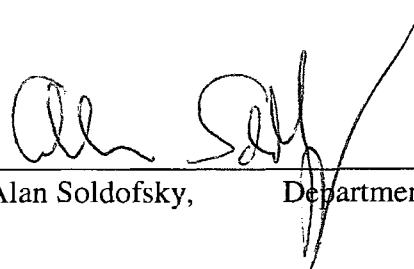
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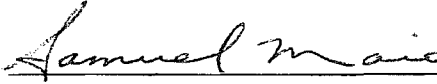
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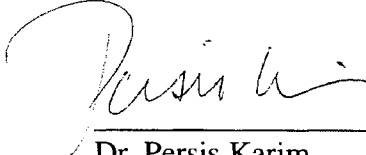
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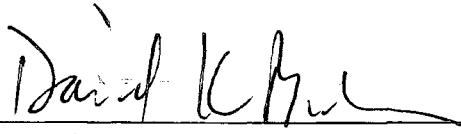


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ABSTRACT

P.I.: POETRY AND THE IMAGINATION

by Higinio Francisco V. Penones Jr.

The idea of a nation, a political concept spread during the Enlightenment with the invention of printing technology, has long been expressed through various representations. As a concept showing racial commonality and filiation, the notion of nation has been represented in various media, like printing and painting. Long before my country, the Philippines, became a sovereign state, it had been imagined and represented in various ways by early sea explorers, adventurers, writers, artists, cartographers, anthropologists, and its subsequent colonizers.

These representations, consistent with Benedict Anderson's definition of nation as an "imagined community," underlies this creative thesis project. My poems attempt to reimagine, recall, and reconstitute my native country as represented by its colonial abbreviation, P.I. This project proceeds from, and responds to a mixture of visual and textual representations of my country, as well as from the generous wellspring of poetry. My poems negotiate the interstices of the words, *imagination* and *nation*. Such negotiation is expressed through poems that remember and reinscribe my own and my country's historical experiences, which are transformed as a verbal imagination of a body polity or community called nation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In our native way of the *tigsik*, a terse oral drinking poem, I offer a toast to:

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* God, for the gift of life, imagination, and poetry.

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Preface

Writing as an act of imagination is, for me, also an act of remembering and searching for a home – a home that has been displaced and altered by my particular colonial experience. In this project, the notion of nation provides me with the trope for such remembrance, self-definition, and imagining. To borrow the words of Homi Bhabha in The Location of Culture, "The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor" (200). The nation, as metaphor, becomes a mnemonic for a lost home.

In this search, I find affinity with Eavan Boland, whose poems are haunted by memories of her Irish homeland. "Atlantis," a sonnet about the legendary lost continent, is appended with a descriptive title, "A Lost Sonnet," to emphasize the complete absence and loss that is a recurrent theme in her poems. Here, the form of the sonnet adds to its meaning through the alteration and irregularity of the lines, while the displaced volta further underscores its sardonic humor and hyperbolic turn:

.....Maybe
what really happened is this:
the old fable-makers searched hard for a word
to convey that what is gone is gone forever and
never found it. And so, in the best traditions of
where we come from, they gave their sorrow a name
and drowned it.

(63)

The theme of loss of home and poetic roots in "Atlantis," contained in "gone forever," is repeated in another poem, "Amber," where the vanished countryside landscape of the past is memorialized by and remembered through a piece of the hardened resin, a natural memento given to the poem's speaker by an absent lover:

The clean air we need to find each other in is
gone forever, yet
this resin once

collected seeds, leaves and even small feathers as it fell
and fell

which now is a sunny atmosphere seem as alive as
they ever were

as though the past could be present and memory itself
a Baltic honey -

a chafing at the edges of the seen, a showing off
of just how much
can be kept safe

inside a flawed translucence.

(31-2)

The lachrymal beginning of amber, its past, and its transformation in the present that is given resonance in the repetition of the "e" sounds and in the image of the honey, is an appropriate yet ironic parallel. The image, along with the fricatives in "itself," "chafing," "off," "safe," and "flawed," also provides the last line of the poem with "inevitability," a character in good poems which Harold Bloom defines as a "phrasing that cannot be avoided, that must be" (36-7). It is an image necessary in the poem's own integrity.

Boland, who lives in the United States, tells Pilar Argaiz Villar in The Poetry of Eavan Boland: A Postcolonial and Subaltern Reading that writing about Ireland is inevitable on her part. "I knew that as a poet I could not easily do without the idea of the nation" (120).

This inevitability of return to a homeland through writing is also present in this poetry project, where I embarked on an exploration of the interplay of the words "imagination" and "nation," in accord with Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as an "imagined community" (6). This "coming home to one's roots -- to an imagined homeland, to a cultural and ethnic heritage, to a native tongue, to an indigenous imagination," according to Leny Mendoza Strobel in her 2004 study of the poetry of Filipino American Eileen Tabios, "is made necessary when we find ourselves feeling displaced, alienated, not properly belonging to a place" (277).

My physical separation from home in the course of my stay in the United States has given me the time and space for this imagination and hope for return, a common migrant's desire that, I argue, is represented by the ubiquitous care package called *balikbayan* box, which migrant Filipinos regularly send back to their relatives in the Philippines. In my paper, Balikbayan Box: Homing While Away From Home, which I presented in 2008 in Singapore at a conference on return and migration, I explained the *balikbayan* box as an appropriate metaphor for the expatriate's desire and imagination of home: "As a poet and visual artist from the Philippines, my current scholarly concern and creative focus (as an MFA graduate student) is the writing of a collection of ekphrastic poems which are the verbal explication and translation of the contemporary as well as colonial visual imagination and representation of my country during the Spanish and American times, and thus, of home. The *balikbayan* box readily provides me with the image, imagination and representation of home, homing, and return."

Like the *balikbayan* box for migrant Filipinos, writing provides me with the medium for return and for locating my displaced self and subjectivity, and my imagined nation becomes the metaphor for such return. As explained by Vicente Rafael, "The distance between the patriot and the patria enables the former to establish the latter as an image of loss as well as the space for locating loss as such" (n.p.). In locating the lost image of my nation I harken back to the ritualistic act of the Philippine pre-colonial tribal priest called *asog*, or his female counterpart, the *babaylan*, in their ancient animist act of healing a sick native whose soul was believed to have drifted away. Filipino scholar Resil Mojares says this act "involves the act of finding (Bisayan *bulong*: to heal, to find), restoring (Manobo *uli*: to heal, to return), locating a soul distracted or lost. Locating the soul typically involves the act of reading signs and communicating" (230). I show this in "The Painted Prince," a poem in this collection based on a lithographic print of a southern Philippine native who was sold to the English pirate William Dampier in the seventeenth century. Dampier brought him to England for exhibition because of the tattoos all over his body. In the poem, the speaker is a fictitious priest addressing the soul of the abducted native.

The particular dislocation and loss that I write about in this collection, however, is not the result of simple geographic distance or caused by economic necessity, as in the case of millions of Filipino migrants. My personal feelings of dislocation and loss stem more from my country's colonial history. Colonialism, explains Mojares "created such a divide in our collective consciousness that Rizal and the nineteenth-century nationalists lamented the loss of memory of our ancient nationality, dreamed of lost archives, and

imagined the long colonial period as a dark age that separated a people from their roots in the past" (301). To this cause, Rizal, our country's national hero, devoted his research while studying in Spain in research to prove the existence of a nascent Filipino nation before the Spanish colonization.

Because of this past, most of the poems in this collection have been drawn from the materials of history, its cultural products through the years of our country's formation, and its repositories like archives, museums, and libraries. These include visual representations like maps, lithographic prints, and paintings. Poems based on visual representations are called ekphrastic - from the prefix *ex* and *phrasein*, which means "to tell in full." Ekphrastic poetry, according to James Heffernan in *The Museum of Words*, is "the rhetorical description of a work of art" (191). The ekphrastic poem is the verbal expression of a visual representation.

My first exposure to ekphrastic poetry was through Edwin Markham's "The Man With The Hoe" which we know was based on a Millet painting. At the Jesuit university that I attended in the Philippines, Markham's *oeuvre* was a favorite piece used for the weekly elocution contest in our high school English class. It was also seminal in raising my social consciousness at a time of widespread political repression in my country during the Marcos martial law regime.

During the course of my MFA studies, I became further acquainted with ekphrastic poetry in a workshop with Alan Soldofsky where we wrote poems based on works of visual arts or paintings, or in the style of poets who write ekphrastic poems like John Ashbery, Eavan Boland, Jorie Graham, Edward Hirsch, Wallace Stevens, William

Carlos Williams, Frank O'Hara and Charles Wright. Frank O'Hara's poems appeal to me in particular because of the conversational tone, spontaneity, and cerebral complexity. In "Memorial Day: 1950," he conflates the personal with images of war and art which are characteristics of Dada or Surrealist painting:

How many trees and frying pans
I loved and lost! Guernica hollered look out!

but we were all busy hoping our eyes were talking
to Paul Klee. My mother and father asked me and
I told them from my tight blue pants we should
love only the stones, the sea, and heroic figures. (SP, 7)

Marjorie Perloff (1998) describes this as a "poem that shrewdly and humorously assesses what it means to make oneself an artist in a world that distrusts art" (51). Ashbery also recalls a visit to Frank O'Hara's Boston room in the same year this poem was written: "The room looked out on a courtyard of trees and was practically bare except for an army cot and blanket and a frying pan on the floor, used as an ashtray, an idea he got from George Montgomery, a sort of arbiter of Spartan chic who had been at Harvard with us. Hence, no doubt, the line, "How many trees and frying pans I've loved" (n.p.). Ashbery's observation shows how O'Hara makes the events of his personal life the subject of his poem and of poetry itself.

In 2008, I presented a paper in Indonesia, which I co-wrote with my adviser, Alan Soldofsky, on teaching ekphrastic poetry aided by the use of SMART Board Technology. In this paper, I talked about the evolution of a poem that I wrote in the workshop. Titled "The Hanged Man," the poem was inspired by a painting with the same title by the Colombian artist, Fernando Botero. In the conference I argued that the figure of "The

Hanged Man" "is associated with the act of letting go, of emotional release, of accepting things as they are, of enduring the struggle and accepting God's will. While seemingly helpless, 'The Hanged Man' draws his power from his position where he can see and overturn the world and therefore see things from a different perspective. Thus, he has the power to reverse and subvert the old order" (357).

During the workshop and because of the immediacy of change provided by the use of the SMART Board, my poem underwent a formal alteration which added to its thematic trajectory and effect. I reversed the order of the lines, and thus the text of the poem imitates the figurative position of Botero's subject. The reversal made the poem itself the metaphor for poetry, which is really about discovering an alternative means of seeing and saying things, that by doing so reveals an inherent truth otherwise hidden.

This creative project, by relying on the aesthetic strategy of ekphrasis, is in itself another way of writing poetry about one's own imagined nation.

I
P.I.

The Rising of the Land

Seething as in the meeting of fire and water
in the sea and the smoldering mud, crawling
in a curl of steam and stream of molten rocks,
the red blob plunges downward into the abyss
far deeper than what light can reach in the haze
before its rise as primeval a simmering land.
Beneath, igneous crusts crash and crack
in the crushing of mantles that now creak,
crumble and tumble, sending bubbles
and eddies up the surface, stirring tidal waves
smashing on the mass that continues to shake,
shape and re-shape, pushing mounds to become
mountains, diverting routes of rushing rivers,
sinking spots where hills had been and there
a lake now boils, as continents tear apart
and continue in their restless drift and drive.

Cartography

From their sextant, our land was all spaces
of black, open for them to explore and mark.
The rivers were arteries that bled seaward
or roots of tortured trees that gripped the valleys.
Our mountains were drawn ulcerous
and the plains scarred like porous rocks.
So they embarked
on their galleons and crossed the oceans
where lurked serpents so large they could devour
even the largest craft. There was too,
the wind sprite that could lead them over the edge
where as if on a cliff their ships will tilt and fall
to nothingness.
In all, that's what they plotted on their maps -
that is, our geography of darkness
and disease where we were made
the *tawong lipod*, the invisible beings
of our mythical race, to them
our people were untamed, tailless monkeys
that need to ape, them, their exalted ways,
our towns were uncharted, the streets untrodden.
an open country for clearing or their taking
in honor of their king whose blazon
on the cartouche meant more than staking
a claim but the interment and obliteration
of our own Oriental names.

Petroglyphs

Survival, swift as hoofs or paws among the thickets
or as arrows whizzing by, darted and left
disheveled paths in the forest.

In the evening before the fire,
a sun, they gather around like planets
in the stony cave, one of them
picked his spear and etched lines that reminded
them of a comet's tail as it streaked past the sky, or
in that morning's chase, the routes their prey took,
its scared dash towards refuge betrayed
by a trail of broken twigs
and parted tufts of grasses.

For a while, the limestone galaxy fell silent
stunned by the mind
now visible with the clarity of ensuing dawn.
From then on, the lines would mark
the march of the human
race into the open road of the present,
the past recorded in the lines and assemblage
of typefaces and letters recalling Nazca and Nasdaq,
the taut lines of twin skyscrapers crumbling
from the straight line arrow path of an exploding jet,
colors in frenzy and boogie-woogie grids,
the rigid line of rhetoric of a preacher or a president
justifying a line of attack on the ground
in D.C. or Kirkuk, or the bowed heads
of factory workers going home from the night shift
standing in line like a line of trees on the street
shorn of leaves.

And so, I, Frank Penones Jr., inheritor
of those rugged scrawls on the stonewalls
hereby make them dance and jump
in these last lines, joyous or perhaps terrified
of the slow drag
of that long, long, night after the hunt.

Magellan the Night Before

In the Chile and Kuwait of the night

I shall Rome your Teheran.

There'll be no Russia in my Hungary for you

as you lay there on the Sofia,

Perth and merest of Beijing.

O keep still, Kenya?

Zaire all mine,

I'll Venice and go Oslo.

Norway that I will Delhi

for I am Amman too.

So let my Iceland and Greece on your Holland,

my hands cup your Brussels and the Bucharest underneath,

my lips kiss your Naples Tangiers and Zurich

with Hanoi.

Niger the gods can stop me.

They Congo and be the first to Haiti me with Iraq.

They can Bern and leave me a Belize.

Let them rage,

and go Madrid,

But I will Kiev this Wales

Denmark this moment

that it may not Paris.

Oh, sweetest Seoul,

I Libya!

The Burning of the Idols

(After a 1958 painting by Philippine National Artist Fernando Amorsolo)

"A hecho mucho dano entre los Pintados porque el demonio hace de las suyas, los religiosos an procurado el remedio desto con quitar les los aceytes y castigarlos."

- Miguel de Loarca in Relacion de las Yslas Filipinas

Serpent-tongued flames lapping at skin
and screams flapping high above the stake
pulled the rope in your brain and tolled
the obliteration of our own imaginings,
like sea waves the sand's hieroglyphs.
Numinous yet you deemed them
the devil's writings and handiwork
for their shouts still ring in your head
among spires and cobbled stones.
So here fire becomes both the sentence
and synonym for your scary certainty:
whoever is out of the line you had drawn
must be by the furnace consumed.
Still this line, stiff as burning poles,
brace the twisted posture of new
conquistadors and, fire, the easy syllable
in their speech and writ that betrays
their short reach and grasp of our own
tropical trope and graven image.

Yrago

"The country Ma-yi is located north of Poni. About one thousand families inhabit the shores of a river which has many windings."

- Chao Ju-Kua, a Chinese geographer, writing about the Philippines he visited sometime in 1280.

These windings, the water's own serpentine mark
on the landscape, lent my navel its ancient name
that recalls the act of travel, of crossing swirling seas
seeking other places and countries. From Sundaland,
before it sunk from melting ice which made the water rise,
she freed herself from an invisible net,
the old barrier that restricts the thirst or spirit
for a niche in the hierarchy of crawling species.
Our fathers, who obeyed the wind long before
the flood came, saw her familiar scales, gleaming
like the sun's rays on leaves or the rippling water
in this new land promised them by their daring.
Her journey, like theirs, flowing with and like
the ebb and rise of the river, was the beginning
of a legend, the crossing over of a matter of
winding motion of matter winding to the imagination,
winding up to a myth, to a poem, like this.

Spice Birds

"The island of Manila also produces nutmeg and cloves. The wild birds spend their time in those spice trees, particularly when the trees are in bloom and the blossoms are wide open. At that time the birds over-indulge and eat so much that they faint. Then the hunters easily catch them and sell them. But these birds are very delicate and have such little strength, few of them remain alive in captivity. In all the surrounding islands as well there are birds that are very strange looking and have beautiful colors."

- Ibn Muhammad Ibrahim, 1680, Secretary to the Envoy of Persia to Siam, in writing about 17th-century Philippines based on stories from friends.

i

perdrix
in a pear tree
sauteed basquaise

ii

hyacinth macaw
cloven with serpolet
a' l'etouffe'e, oui!

iii

ortolan
served with pain
and tarragon

iv

aile a l'ancienne
stir fried with aubergine
in autumn moon

Qasida to an Amazona

"I was told that in the army of this Queen there is a regiment of women, who fight with her like men: that she made war upon a certain king, who was her enemy; and that, when her army was near being put to the rout, she made so furious an onset upon the king with her regiment, that she overcame him, put him to death, and routed his whole force."

- from The Travels of Ibn Batuta, an Arab from Tangiers, who in 1347 reached the legendary land of Tawalisi, believed to be the present province of Pangasinan in the Philippines, where he met the amazon daughter of King Wahi Arduja, named Princess Urduja.

They still talk about you, your feet sore from the long march
among mountains, and from crossing rampaging cataracts.

They pluck your legend like wild fruits found along the way
their tone and tang you dream will encircle the city one day.

How you embrace your rifle or how you press your finger
tighter on the trigger, oh, how your enemies tremble in fear.

And how you sang: "we are timeless and all times are ours,"
of your just war, but alas in the end, you were just the war's.

Tipos Filipinos

With an average cephalic index
of 72mm, Mr. Clemens,
they are clearly dolicocephalic,
meaning, in simplest terms
they are just a little better
than their simian cousins.
Just look at those - breasts,
so...

In short, they are
unfit for governance
and thus require our Great Nation's
benevolence, the downy cloak
we must bring
to their state of undress.

Agua de Pataranta*

"What was known as the 'water cure' was often used by our army in efforts to compel Filipino prisoners to reveal hiding places of arms and other information."

- George Curry, former governor of Ambos Camarines in the Philippines, and New Mexico during the Taft administration.

First, it came like the intermittent drip
from a faucet in summer on my face,
covered in linen. Next, as the rushing feet
of children playing under the cold rain,
then the torrent, a cataract that head-
long splashed on my nostrils making
me gasp for air, grasp for anything near.
I sunk and sunk deeper as thousand hands
grappled to take hold of me, push me down
among floating bodies in agony.
And everywhere, the faces of comrades
whose names tottered on the thin line between
salvaging a life or my betrayal,
from so fluid an ocean formed in my brain.

* a slang for any alcoholic drink, the Bikol word *pataranta*, being something that confuses.

Amigo Poem

"For the genuine amigo is the protecting and uplifting hand; for the irreconcilable and treacherous is the blow of the mailed fist."

- Theodore Williams Noyes in *Oriental America and its Problems*
(1903)

my poetry
is a brown twig
hanging on your tree
of a different language.
or rather seemingly
just a dried stick,
without leaves.
if you poke it though
or when the wind blows
it moves, unnoticed
and turns incognito,
amigo.

Bud Dajo
(Homage to Billie Holiday)

This was in 1906
at Bud Dajo, the brave fruits
had been dumped in a ditch.
Much like in Masada,
they clung to their twigs
against the onslaught of the wind.
A strong wind that blew
their Southern way
until they all had been blown away.
A thousand in all,
all fallen for the tree
they call liberty.
Strange fruits
against a far stranger wind
that now blows
and splatters on the ground
ripe dates
and shattered palms.

Fire Islands

"...further sailing eastward through the Chang Sea for more than thousand li, one arrives at Tchih-Jan-Ta-Chow or Great Self-Burning Island. On this island, there is a kind of tree growing in the neighborhood of Huou-Chang-Chow or Fire Center Islands. People strip off its bark and spin and weave it into cloth; the longest possible to get is of several feet only. It is not different from Chiau-ma, only the color is slightly greenish black. If it is a little dirty then put it in fire and it will become fine and clean again. Sometimes it is used as a wick of a lamp and people know not when it can be used up."

- Yao-Si-Nian, in the Annals of the Liang Dynasty (502-577 A.D.), writing possibly, about the island of Luzon in Northern Philippines which is dotted with active volcanoes.

How great indeed are your works, O Lord
like fire that flows in the bowels of the earth.
We have seen your glory and we are in shock and awe
at the flash on the screen and the burning of the bush.
Who dares pluck your light shall by the sun be burned
and chained on a cliff as food for the birds.
The Black Widow in her web, flaunts her flaming thread
but she too in the end shall be justly unravelled.
Your feet shall stamp on the works of the wicked
but your deeds shall flourish like palms in the desert.
As for me, I shall die in your nest my Lord
and like the sand, multiply my days in these words.

P.I.

"When I next realized that the Philippines had dropped into our laps I confessed I did not know what to do with them. I sought counsel from all sides - Democrats as well as Republicans- but got little help. I thought first we would take only Manila: then Luzon; then other islands perhaps also. I walked the floor of the White House night after night until midnight; and I am not ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed Almighty God for light and guidance more than one night. And one night late it came to me this way - I didn't know how it was but it came."

- Pres. William McKinley

This business of colonization
is all a matter of abbreviation.

For as in poetry, imagination
engraves the legend of a nation.

Brand as brigands, insurrectos
those who dare go against you.

Write P.I. for their thousands
of scattered islands.

In their heads, plunge a wedge:
our white language.

Palindrome

Track where the bolos of Balintawak began
or first unsheathed and here
in this cramped studio at 175 Boulevard Pereire
you'll find a gilded mirror frame, the looking glass
already dissolved and merged with their bodies
brown and familiar with the tropical sun.

Eye the images that float on the surface
and in their mind, the friar's soutane
or their whips reflected on their faces,
shadowy figures they wanted illuminated,
bared in print and salons in Paris or Madrid,
they, our Indios Bravos.

Named after Bufallo Bill's Wild West Show,
by Rizal, they are the ilustrados
who like the god Kabunian lurking behind
sees and hears the cries in the islands:
Sator Aredo Tenet Odera Rotas,
inversions of the padre's sermons?

Eye too, one last detail:
the framed smaller painting on Luna's
right side. Is this another version
of the Spoliarium where the vanquished,
their shield now displayed on the wall like a relic,
were dragged after a combat on the arena?

Trace then the path to Bagumbayan,
the new nation our brave sons envisioned,
and here we'll find it is what we conceived
or dreamed of, a belief like a leaf, veined
yet, golden and forever
suspended in mid-air level.

Dog

(after Santi Bose's painting, *Warning*)

The Senor's gaze is much more fierce
than the canine at his feet.
His eyeballs are agates
that obtrude from their sockets.
On the side, the unshod stand and watch
us, who gaze back, as if someone
had just been shot and died
at our front or perhaps
they remember a boy
being chased
by a gray local dog
on the street.
But this Senor's pet
is tall, black and big
its lunge can make
a boy fall flat on his feet
which is why they are here
or rather, stand a little distance
behind the Senor in white
overalls in a posture
that says he's the new god of enlightenment
shown by the halo round his head,
his gaze alone can make you transfixed
and follow his bid, "stand" or "sit".
The dog's stance, too, stunned the natives
as if they were set in place
by words scattered and etched
on their chemise and skirts:
atol amatom adaraceam
atalum babalac abinariam
acuta mactam anima sola
Oh, come on, you can't be serious
the artist says in a bullet pointed
at the new godhead
with these letters: E.L.O. C.O.O.
Hey, dude, look, oh, he's mad,
GORINA deus, du-ug, deus
yes, dawg, dog posing as god.

The Painted Prince*

"Natural freedom is the only object of the polity of the savages; with this freedom do nature and climate rule alone amongst them."

- Jean Jacques Rousseau

Pardon my moving your dislocated bones
marked by a mossy stone hidden in some
foggy white sepulchre. This is blasphemy,
disturbing your repose would arouse
the anger of our ancestors, our god *Bathala*
would send me seven plagues for seven generations,
including seven evenings of pirated poetry.
But I heard your scream echoed in swirling clouds
of purple, blue and incarnadine among the whores
on 7th Avenue, asking for this summoning of your soul,
lost in the edgeless hole, for this singing to recall
your history tucked in shelves among accounts and tomes
on the Wonderful Sights in the Orange Days.
Here, of the Bold Grimace Spaniard, who as a child
was said to have been snatched and nursed
by a beast and could shape his mouth as a bird's beak,
or his eyes, like an owl's, and lick his nose with his tongue,
like a cow. There, of the boy from Brazil
with a face so long like a serpent and with which
he feeds himself as an elephant does with its trunk.
Of the Suffolk lad, whose body is covered
all over with bristles like a hedgehog.
Of the Fairy Child, toothless, but was the most
voracious and hungry creature in all of England.
And of your journey, told in a handbill, today's junk mail,
where off the coast of Mindanao, your boat sank
near the Spice Islands, and the chief of a rival kingdom,
forced your sister to be his concubine
and how you and your mother were sold as slaves
to the buccaneer, William Dampier.
Yours is a tale much more like the story line
of a Mexican soap called tele-novella in Manila
which make housewives curse the villains
walking the corridors of power,
who snatch the food meant for children,

and bend the law like a contortionist in a freak show.
It is the pamphleteer's genius, of course,
at work here, he, the master of the packaged phrase,
the copy charmer who was himself charmed by you,
Prince Giolo as he branded you in his text
that said your imperial highness is impervious to bites of snakes,
because of the tattoo that covered your body,
the brown archive of your tropic days
which he made an atlas of his imagination,
"where the arctick and antartick merge on your neck,"
and a continent of darkness as you speak *"no English."*
John Savage, in his print, also showed you in a pose
reminiscent of the Belvedere Apollo having just let go
of the arrow that slew Phyton at the coast of Delphos.
If this were 1904, you will be at the St. Louis World's Fair
I'm pretty sure among the dog-eaters.
There is a light that glowed in your torso
as he drew you now a noble salvaged
which changed your life, from the primitive
and welcomed you to their brave new world
where this raree show, this commerce
is the *summum bonum* of their existence,
their alpha, their omega, yes the sum of it all,
the soma, yo, some muh, and nothin' muh

*refers to a tattooed Mindanao native who was sold as slave for the buccaneer William Dampier, and exhibited in London in the 17th-century.

Ties That Bind

Fagen was a traitor, and died a traitor's death, but he was a man, no doubt, prompted by motives to help a weaker side, and one to which he felt allied by ties that bind . . . He saw, it may be, the weak and the strong; he chose, and the world knows the rest."

-An Indianapolis newspaper editorial on David Fagen, a regular in the U.S. Army who defected to the side of the Filipinos in the American imperialist and expansionist war in the Philippines in 1899-1901.

Crumbling bilboes bind this bas-relief of your footmen
across the Pacific a century ago with David Fagen
and my tropical islands.
Outside, a balloon string loosened and slipped
from a tiny finger, its blessed break the rupture and airiness
this hotdog-munching spring strollers have in their heads
for history. Thank Sainte-Gaudens you still have a girded
and gilded tie to the present, thank Cal his mind was right
you needn't worry about ever falling into a ditch again.
They're all here, your men, his words have all them accounted for.
At the park, the balloon-man's strings point to the direction
of dates and palms scooped by a sickled moon, farther.
A 'Nam vet reading today's paper said roped sands do not tie
the umbilicus of this country's children
to the rhetoric about the republic, not worth giving up
everything for as your men did, as David did.

Among mosquito insurrectos he bound his blood
with the pygmy arms of my fathers seeing too his skin
as kin to our sun-browned flesh and land, our
betrayed republic. No slingshot saved us
from a praying mantis, its assimilating treachery,
bound us in your language, made us like scattered beads
of a rosary, left us with taste for patties
and soda, made us borne you as an added burden.

Back in the islands, a young agriculturist
was feared to have kissed the soil
courtesy of the military,
which tied this to the war on terror,
a common vocabulary taught them
by advisers from the Pentagon.

There are no foxes in our lush
forests, but it is a howling wilderness,
with foxholes in them, nevertheless.

The Hanged Man
(after a Fernando Botero painting)

you'll see.
You can too, you know
I already did.
ages and ages hence, we have reached some peace.
That will be great, we can tell the kids
down some swigs.
some ancient inn where we can sit us down,
but some more informal and cozy place,
not The Hague, for heaven's sake
in between
which is to say, we can meet somewhere,
you know what I mean?
sending me easily nearer heaven,
Your ceiling is my floor which is my sky,
We just can't simply see eye to eye.
which is the whole point of this exercise, understand?
your down is my up, your up is my down,
let me put it then simply this way:
Because I cannot say, down or up here,
It's planar perspective, you see.
I forgive you.
Don't be sorry, its okay, really.
in between as collateral damages.
by surgical bombings that leave those caught
Islam and Times Square, and those others in between better said
now I can see clearly the gulfs of the centuries, our countries, ideologies,
Oh thanks soldiers my angels of satori
Salaam alaikum!

II.
Pi

Pi

If you are to roll a rock
to Proxima Centauri
which is 4.2 light years away
think of furrows of impasto
in R over R in F Major
spread against gray or red
and black like dying star dusts
swirling in the galaxy.
What I mean to say
is, yes, you can, in your imagination.
For like this number
it is beyond us, out there
in a rising continuum.

The Tattoo

As writ, it is some old and curled standard
curved round her navel that seems to lay claim
a New Foundland meant to warn one or ward
off others. "Been here, it's under my name."
On her brown skin and grained, it is a rune
enameled red, as if slithering out
silently from the howling desert dune
ready for any prey that strays about.
Hush, I stilled my over-wandering mind.
T'is a way of loving, his art that made
him do it though on a different kind
of canvas, and she agreed as she dared:

"Are you just going to stand there and stare
at my tattoo, my dear poem-lover:"

Mango Tango

La nuda mujer de Botero
so ripe for picking like a mango.

Post-Confessional Jam I

Efflorescence of tropes marching down the ramp,
clad in whatever shocks, or in slack phrases
that arrest us dead on our tracks as we scout
for something new or rings true or the unfathomable
metaphor of textures which trace provenance to a lichened gravestone
forgotten in the woods, a frill of irony kin to our native chili
in its pungency, a tone of carnelian beads that conjures joss sticks
and miserere for whatever sins of omission or indiscretions,
glittery bells of apostrophes that call attention to themselves.
All in all as their feet spindled scenes lit by our gazes
we hurriedly scribbled lines, trying to catch the passage of time
and motion in this spectacle of images, fleeting, untended
like a feather falling from a scarf, to which this, our hunger
we have been left, gaping, grasping for the right words.

Post-Confessional Jam II

On the bus or the streets
I have become mythical.
People pass by and through my body
and I do not disintegrate or blow up
like the fizz in soda pop.
At the check-out counter
they look at me as if I were
in a soup line,
begging for my meal.
Their "how yar doin"
like a recording,
with the battery fading.
Most often, their silence
as on a moonless evening,
transforms into crickets
the brisk rustling
of the plastic bags they slid
my purchases in.
This country is the best school
for poetry.
People's subtlety teaches tropes
that make real toads imaginary,
or invisible like me.
And if you do not see
how I long to take the next flight home,
then you can say I have learned so much
from Marianne Moore,
yes, so much more.

Space Girl and Bird
(after a Banksy graffiti)

If at all you inhabit what are available
to guerillas with aerosol,
walls that hide the sky and the sun
from children in Palestine
like the helmet heavy on your head.
So the golden bird sings in the palm of your hand
of olives crushed in the land
or of a pink heart dripping at the end of your mind.

Spiked

Steadily, the blade cleaves through the grains
like a hawk circling over the plain, a cornfield,
golden where near somewhere, the smell of something roasted.
It hovers and glides still, its arc, precise
and clean as it dives for the kill,
eyes set on a seamless wood,
now bleeding from the sharpness yet
thought fit for a tabletop that will be host to a bonsai dish,
or measured teacups. Mr. Lumberjack
made sure of that, scouring this and that
timber, for whatever ugly marks.

Among the tall pines
and proud mahoganies,
he eventually picked
this teak, so wickedly straight.

And then the sudden tick
of something that stopped
and cracked.

If this were an archaeological find,
we would have leapt in the air.
Or if a knot, some dead branch left,
or even two arrowed hearts carved
by a speechless lover; we would have
just lopped off the defect.
But this was something we did not see
nor the saw could bear.
We stood back, muted by how something
looking so perfect can be so scarred within,
how a trivial thing can wound our lacquered dreams,
how some acts in the past can haunt us
as a crime hidden and forgotten in time
or a family secret in a mothballed chest
suddenly revealed,
like this spike, corroded yet
blue and true and whole, and wedged deep, in this wooden core.

This Morning A Thrush

This morning, a thrush flipped the sun
from its throat sunny side up on my plate
with crackled bacon, toasted bread,
and coffee from beans freshly roasted.

But I couldn't get started.

In the garden, button buds nipped
the twigs and sprigs of the plum
while yesterday's N.Y. index
closed with hoofs on the page.

And yet, I couldn't get started.

Back home, our country's president
displayed her diploma in economics
while down South, a girl hanged herself
with a note she hadn't eaten for weeks.

That was why I couldn't get started.

My bones rattled in the cold,
and my poems howled like wakened hounds
on a darkling plain where a friend
was dumped, riddled with bullets.

So still I couldn't get started.

But when you emerged from the shower
and brought Botticelli into my room
and leis of *ylang-ylang*
from our tropical island:

I flung myself out of my painted bed.

Tropical Depression
(after Rousseau's Tiger in a Tropical Storm)

"Death is the mother of beauty."
- Wallace Stevens

Death is not at all an imagined thing.
It is what stirs here and there all living,
leaving traces of its living presence.
The leaves, the trees in this forest so dense.
It is the wind that made the tiger leap
towards where it can creep and safely sleep.

Yet it's not here where beauty rests at all
in that the leaves in time destined will fall
or fall silent on the branches the wind.
Or even that the trees will no more bend,
the tiger with its stripes will have no more
stealth, speed, sharp eyes and sure fangs of terror.

Beauty rises from stubbornness, in how
despite the wind the leaves still clasp the bough,
bowed yet the trees snapped back and proudly stand
giving rest, nests to birds, verdure to land,
ambush point for the tiger on the prowl
once more, before the next storm comes and howls.

At Tully and King

The flapping fission of startled pigeons
that sat serrated on the crimson wires,
lit ancient and apocalyptic fires
which set or will snuff out our dear visions.

Two Flowers

From where I drink the amber beer
he seemed to be only at play
his hands, at first, a conductor's
then a piano player then a DJ
as he kneaded the white lump
and tossed it in the air
in a roundness that twirled
thin like a vinyl.
What came out of the kiln,
minutes later was a flower,
fragrant with cheese, bacon and pepper.

Thousands of miles away
in a far country,
I recall seeing a man on his boat
gather a sinewy mass and hurled it
on top of the water
forming a white petalled flower
that turned silver as fishes beat,
flip and twist in the closing net.

Woman Before a Mirror

(After Utamaru Kitagawa's Woman Putting on Make-up)

It could not have been the autumn wind
that nudged my aching nape.
I glanced at the cedar door,
it is shut as on an evening at the temple.

My hair, the stretch of road
at the mountain pass he takes going home
is now set in place, ready for his unleashing.

I looked again, and at my powdered face,
the creases now well hidden and erased.
I imagined the wings and shell of the cicada
as he went in another gate.

Semarang Sea-gypsies

Silken surah glided from the taut minaret
gilded by a bedouin moon.
What swaddled though the baby on her breast
was tattered and tied around her neck
like a hammock or a wind-blown sail
that brought them here, fleeing
what ravages their land, their camouflaged
nightmares.
So they wandered as flotsam
at the threshold of our wariness,
their arms like battered kelp that tugged at our feet.
They were no strangers to us, even
if we were only passing by.
They seemed to multiply, day by day,
like flies anywhere that blood is spilled
in the name of the land.
In mine, one day, like water lilies,
they just emerged
from under the bridge
spanning the river that links
us to their houses on stilts
by the sea down South.
Badjao, they are called.
A movie poster in my childhood showed
Hassan sitting on his boat,
his eyes hauntingly
looking at the boundless sea,
which since then, had framed
his thought or ours about his people, them.
This morning I read a Darwish poem
with his wish at the bedouin
moon over the minarets of his fair Andalucia
he can only now sing about in his qasida,
haunting like the cicada
on some tree or the wind on the sea
of sand that stretches
far, far like the lands
his people had been walled in
like a weeping fortress.

Nighthawks

(After Hopper's Nighthawks and Van Gogh's Cafe Terrace)

Something there is that hovers here and there,
centuries and continents apart where you have been
sometime in the past like when you were laid off from your job
the time and place the most appropriate for the circumstance.
Because the dark makes us seek this certain kind of brightness
from whatever aches inside or needing some filling up
that only the stillness of this moment as when the doors
of stores are shut or the neon put off can soothe or hush.
It doesn't matter if it is at Phillies we stopped for a shot
or at Cafe Terrace, whether inside enclosed in oh
so transparent glass, facing a now deserted street,
or outside under a starry, starry night sitting by
a cobblestone lane. Still we home here and there
unarmored and utterly vulnerable to arrows that flieth by night.

Near The Foot Of My Banana

Near the foot of my banana
there rests on a pair of boulders,
my dark and sweet *senorita*.

We met on a sultry *dia*
her body shaking and in fear
near the foot of my banana.

Weakened, she asked for some *agua*
said some gringo was after her,
my dark and sweet *senorita*.

Red sky smeared her white *bandana*,
from a quick shot at the border
near the foot of my banana

She dreamed of a new *manana*
where bare children know no hunger,
my dark and sweet *senorita*.

And she sighed "*hasta la vista*",
pale and limp as she wilted there
near the foot of my banana,
my dark and sweet *senorita*.

Little Bastard

My eyes a fly caught in the web
of the Porsche Spyder that just parked by
the Golden Arches at Katips.
It's vintage, I thought, a rarity
in our Third World state.
Same car that James Dean
rode to his death
in '55 on his way
to a race.
From my pocket, I fished a pliant
piece of wire, the reliable tool
of my motor trade.
Inside, the romantic pair of riders
bite on Big Macs, their mouths
as wide as the gapes
of my small siblings watching them
outside, their gaze like the eyes
of flies on the wide window glass.

Lipstick

"It was shortly after the British Red Cross arrived, though it may have no connection, that a very large quantity of lipstick arrived. This was not at all what we men wanted, we were screaming for hundreds and thousands of other things and I don't know who asked for lipstick. I wish so much that I could discover who did it, it was the action of genius, sheer unadulterated brilliance. I believe nothing did more for these internees than the lipstick. Women lay in bed with no sheets and no nightie but with scarlet red lips, you saw them wandering about with nothing but a blanket over their shoulders, but with scarlet red lips. I saw a woman dead on the post mortem table and clutched in her hand was a piece of lipstick. At last someone had done something to make them individuals again, they were someone, no longer merely the number tattooed on the arm. At last they could take an interest in their appearance. That lipstick started to give them back their humanity."

- Excerpts from the diary of Lt. Col. Mervin Willet Gonin DSO, one of the first British soldiers who liberated Bergen-Belsen in 1945, and recorded in the blog of British graffiti artist, Banksy.

Who will bring them in past these walls?
Allah must be somewhere else
as a pale green horse
prowls the hills and villages.

There the eyes of children,
men and women melt
as though they were black chocolate,
exposing so much bones.

Let us draw a mural
of their faces ala Warhol's Marilyn Monroe,
their lips red and ripe and luscious
as a cherry on top of a sundae.

At least for once
all their barb-wired history
they will become
finally, human.

Just Like The Led Zeppelin, This Makes Me Wonder

That's all fur now
hairs that once stood on end
the teakettle-spout tail,
its nimble feet,
its blood and flesh
but mere blackened
and splattered splotches
on the pavement.

Must have been
the Michael Jackson
wannabe who surprised me
last night, when it popped out
from behind the palm trees
lining the street where I live.

Like it, they're all over the place.
Here you see them,
guerillas in coned hats
waging wars among garbage heaps,
for aluminum cans and perhaps
some other valuable things they will find,
like genie bottles and plastics?
There, fingering slits
of telephone boxes
for loose change left
by harried and hurrying callers.

You can only think of San Andreas
and this land of lights
where they remain invisible
among the hedges at night.

III.
P... I..

P.....I..

How easily they can get away
like a sperm
through a hole of a condom,
with murder, in my country.

P..... I..

Were that the dots of elided letters
in this Tagalog curse,
a textual euphemism for whore mother
or more like muddah fuckah
that comes out of the mouth
of wannabee rappers
loosely like their baggies
as they walk and strut
like a silent tramp in a dark alley,
become the tip of sharpened stakes
I will drive deep right
into the heart of their bloody appetite.

Graft+ed

Because his caveat was
on the grapefruit in the orchard
I thought it was accursed
some unseen spirit lives or lurks
behind its shade.
This is America, padre, no *kapre**
smokes his big wad of tobacco on that tree.
It was grafted on a lemon stock
that's why its fruits came out like sauerkraut.
Back home I thought of what the old folks would do
to make it sweet: bury a hard and brown muscovado
at the roots. Whatever link or philosophy
of causality was involved there I kept to myself
as on the belief the fruits would turn sour
when a conceiving woman eyes them with desire
her mouth watering and so.
The grapefruits hang like the bright street lights
of the city, far from the paddies of our childhood nights.

In summer, we would become victims
to pranks of the big boys in their ruse called,
"Want-to-see-the-juicy-Big City?" If you agree,
they would make you stare at the rind
of the pomelo, the grapefruit's ribcage,
as they squeeze its bittersweet liquid
right at your eyes. You turn around,
your tail curled, wiser though to know
why it is called the forbidden fruit.

* a Philippine mythological tree-dwelling being, imagined as always lazily smoking a big wad of tobacco.

Twilight of the Mimosa

I believe in personal defense systems
of protecting someone's magic coat from being taken
or the prayer beads pressed between one's fingers,
round like lotus flowers on a pond. *Noli me tangere*
if touch be your assurance I am come from the dead,
or the fingertip on my palms the scaffolding
of your faith. The scraggly thorns divide our paths
and flesh, as these lead to the spirit. It is a night
I must cross until I am risen.

My words are no mere shadow than they are
lurking in your mind. They are as real as the parched land
crying for rain, for the children left by their fathers,
for the mothers who lost their sons in the dark,
for truth blown smooth in summer like dust.

You demand form, an apparition
like some soreness for your ablution.

But I am the state of my imagination.

Tomorrow, these wounds will explode in pink balls
and all my leaves will unfold like serrated thorns.

Pulpified

adj. pulverized, crushed into a soft, shapeless mass:

The coroner said Daliwar had died
of pulmonary embolism
and that his legs were pulpified.

or tenderized, as meat
to the consistency of jelly
the blood, blackened as it clot
under the skin and the bones
became a useless structure
to hold any flesh or limbs.

(From, the Latin pulpa),
which rhymes with the Bagram culpa.

Arrival

Stepping out of the arrival area
into the cold outside to wait
for my countryman who will pick me up,
I nearly slipped on a puddle,
the morning's collected rain.
On the wall, the billboard says
"Welcome to San Francisco,"
the span of the ubiquitous bridge
like arms spread wide in the fog.
I thought of how I have only seen
this self-same scene on a cover of a notebook
we used in the grades or a glossy
sent by a relative who settled in Oakland
after his retirement from the Army
and is now buried under bamboo trees
back in the islands to where in 1901
was bound the USS Thomas,
as it sailed past this bay with its cargo
of The Baldwin Primer and Ma'ams and Sirs
who taught my father's *apoon sa tuhod*
or grandfather-in-the-knee to say:
"I lub da neym of Washington.
I lub my cuntry, too,
I lub the flag, the dear old flag,
of red and white and blue."

This language which spanned our history
brought me here and one day,
my countryman will drive me around
to see the city and take my photographs,
the bridge and the bay as a background
to send back home I left behind
as if to have an evidence I have truly arrived
in this land that gleamed only in my mind
while I lay on the back of a carabao
looking at the long trail of smoke in the sky
from B-52s perhaps just through
dropping the day's cache of tangerine terror
below paddies and forests aflame in horror.

Balut

Evenings find him on the streets
peddling balut or boiled duck eggs,
this quaint ovum of Filipino taste
for 18-day-old chicks believed
to add verb and verve in the bed.
It's a nocturnal trade that at least
made his family cross the delicate bridge
called survival, each day.
In so many ways, his may also be
termed a duckling existence. Inside the shell,
its fetal position
forever in suspended animation,
like his own.
Last night, when police reporters
took his photographs, he was curled,
holding on to his stomach,
with his bloodied basket
and the broken eggs scattered on the pavement.

Manhattan Stories

i

As the old woman was wheeled into the ambulance,
her neighbors went out of the street, their heads
like prairie dogs, alert and on the look out for answers.

What happened? Where are her children?

It was good the house cleaner came in the morning
or no one else could have seen her fall.

At the charity ward, a solitary and rusty dextrose stand
stood guard at her iron bed, her graying hair unkempt
spread like battered kelps on the faded blue bed sheet,
her toenails, wedged with dirt and unclipped.

An attendant asked the cleaner for names of the patient's
nearest relatives. Dunno their names, she said,
only come to badger their mom for their inheritance,
the house, the car, the antique piano
they do not know are now in the name of a bank,
but yes, she'll tell them when she sees them.

And sure did, they came, with chocolates and fresh flowers
a week after, just missing a day before she was transferred
to the freezing room in the hospital basement.

ii

He stands in line at 7:00 a.m. as everyone else
at Starbucks, a regular fixture there
like the individual slats of a window blind.
Asked what makes him do it, he looked up
the towering steel and glass, as if an answer
like a confetti will fall from above.
Not for the brand for sure or how it is brewed
he said just perhaps to see the steam rising,
or for the scent to stir his mind to start the day's grind,
or just for the sake of holding on to something hot,
while crossing the street or waiting for the bus.
I really dunno, why do you asked? Just get in line
yourself. Here, you just sip it. There's no need
to find the answers or clarify your motives

iii

The poet, from our tropical islands, waited for me
for our date at a coffee shop I'm sure he is a regular
the Italian at the counter calls him by first name.
He'd been here three decades earlier
when he wrote about women disrobing at the river

by the roadside in Magarao his hometown
known for its coconut oiled body massage.

In the 70s, we grieved for old men in his poems
who had only themselves and the squirrels
they feed at Stuyvesant Park for company
the way we did for the mothers back home whose sons
got picked up in the night by the tyrant's henchmen
and never returned, perhaps rotting in some unmarked
graves in the mountains. In between, we learned
about the honors he reaped as his lines got the nod
of the critics. Lately he imagined himself
one of the planets in the vast universe, neatly
aligned and balanced in its orbit with all the others.

That morning I saw him, he ordered his favorite
veggie sandwich he said will make him last
more years to see the establishment of a new
world government he will willingly give up
his current passport for. I discovered there is
no basis or reason after all for my prescription
for him to see the barefoot orthopedist in his birthplace
if he dislocates his bones on the way to his rented room.

Coup d'etat

It came on a winged seed
then wedged itself between
lightning cracks of the parapet.
At once, it was all over the place,
its roots, anchored on what-
ever they can seize or grip.
Then its arms swept away
all my walls and defenses.
Love has overthrown my throne
and now I am all in shambles.

Cracking Coconuts
(After Leon Golub's Interrogation II)

This is the subtlest of all arts, the bell
for caged mongrels, this palace infidel,
to snap whatever strand left in his will.
And I do it exceptionally well.
Oh, look here. "Ecce homo." Behold him.
I do not raise hell or threat I will kill -
this account. Mine is more the ways of Zen:
the clink of empty shells on the pavement,
the cracking of a coconut, a thud,
are enough to drive a desperate man - mad.
But better the laughter of children - his -
overheard near his segregated cell.
People don't really care much for their lives
except when pushed or they are on the edge.
That time, they plead, calling all the angels
and saints, and whoever can be of help.
That's the time for their singing unbidden,
the spilling, like black blood bubbling out of
a hooded head, the plotters' prized secrets,

pink cerebellum still quivering
in a cracked skull. The horror, the horror,
and anguish of it all. But it's a call,
a done deal due for liquidation,
(for the national security, and
actually, the firmness of the throne).
I have bid remorse farewell, though I have
not lost in me all human good as well.
I take my kids for a walk in the park,
and listen to my Mozart in the dark.
Tonight, I plan to wash my angus steak
done rare with an '83 Sauterney.
Then perhaps fly to Tangiers Tuesday
or some Caribbean Island next week
to meet the Secretary for the pay,
and another order of coconut juice,
with the young meat, scooped out, if he'll excuse.

Beggar

Not quite a Strad the one clipped in his armpit
he nevertheless, holds his instrument as if it
were a fledgling still all down in its nest.
Beside an angel holding a bowl of nymphal water
standing stiff in its cemented silence, he squats,
his back pressed against one of its half-spread wings.
He lays down a canister, its top open like a beak
of a nestling, awaiting its fill of worms.
He wipes his dark glasses as if the act
will let him see our presence watching him
in his mime as he smoothes his sombrero,
its edges now tattered like dried ferns, curlicued.
Then he cradles his violin up his shoulder, his chin
on its rest as he grips and takes his bow, taps a note,
that made the scroll looked like a bird, spreading
its wings, and poised for its flight this morning.

Homage to Frieda
(On the Centennial of her birth)

Kahlo : *kaluluwa*: (n). Tagalog for soul -

O Soul of my bleeding heart pigeon-
holed in tin *retablos* hung in antiseptic wards
unwind your bandaged flesh and let me in
your body its plains of crumbling rocks
and howling dust is no strange country
to me. *Buko kanakong estranyo 'di.*

Back home, the land cracks and opens wide
throwing up the bodies dumped at night.
Its womb refusing now any stirring of seedling
despite so much marrows in its furrows.

O Nuestra Senora de Dolores y Triestestas
wrap me in your leafy arms as you did
Diego Rivera or yourself in infant's bodies
yet with your lusting faces in a kind of pieta,
in a loving moment caged in the canvas.

Arog ka kanakong banwaan, (like my country)
Natusok naman ako. (I am pierced too.)
Pero en sus autoretratos por ejemplo,
I am not pricked by the thorns of the cactus
which thrusts up like a pen against the sky
and my brows are as high and thick and black
as your brushes and your gaze - a doll's,
set in place and silent in a corner yet forever
replicated in the peaceable braces of our mind.

Double Performance

Stainless wings swish and slice the air
shrinking time and space and matter,
tumbling and turning towards each
other towards their certain end.

Yet just as they reach that sure arc,
they flip and split apart, this way
and that, nudging the hands to clap,
taunting the human heart to stop.

Below a powdered man enacts
a simulacrum of his art,
as if he were without a skin,
a soundless and stringed mannequin,
which the children now ascertain
if its heart really stopped beating.

Salutacion al Aguila

Tigsik ko ding Amerika*
I offer a toast to America

mag-ingat ka kalis niya
beware of her chalice

ta baka mapaling ika
or you fall into hallucination

ag di na makauli pa
and you can't go home again.

*Written in my native Iriga language, one of the more than seventy languages in my country, tigsik is a Bicol traditional oral poem spontaneously composed and recited as a toast during rural gatherings. The alternating lines is patterned after the catechetical ladino-style of writing during the 17th-century in the Philippines.

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