

Babaylan

**An Anthology of
Filipina and
Filipina American
Writers**

**Co-edited by
Nick Carbó and
Eileen Tabios**

*Aunt Lute Books
San Francisco*

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Nick Carbó

The Other Half of the Sky

IN THE PHILIPPINE LITERARY CONSTELLATION, most of the brightest stars (whose names are repeated by the lips of every Filipino high school student) are those of men: Jose Rizal, Francisco Balagtas, Jose Garcia Villa, Bienvenido N. Santos, N.V.M. Gonzalez, F. Sionil Jose, and Nick Joaquin. But there is another half of the sky—pacific blue, pearl white, alizarin sunset red, a keeper of secrets at night, a mysterious kiss, a music box of precious scents, a shelf of sounds, a comfortable womb, a rainbow of silk, a sudden storm—a place that is eternally feminine. This is an area of the sky that male literary cartographers have rarely paid attention to with their sextants, compasses, telescopes, and slide rules. Though there is little mention of Filipina writers like Leona Florentino, Magdalena Jalandoni, Paz Marquez Benítez, Estrella Alfon, Angela Manalang Gloria, or Paz M. Latorena, these women—poets, short story writers, and novelists—contributed much to Philippine literature during the last part of the nineteenth century and well into the first half of the twentieth century. Without them, Philippine literature would be only half as rich. The scholar and critic Thelma B. Kintanar notes: “A bibliography of the Philippine novel from its beginnings to 1975 shows that of 352 novelists listed, 33 were women who wrote 167 of the some 1,200 novels in the list—roughly 10 per cent” (*Emergent Voices* 1994).

The tradition of women's writing in the Philippines can be traced back to the pre-hispanic era of the archipelago when, in certain communities, priestess-poets called *babaylan* (Bisayan) and *catalonan* (Tagalog) held sway in the spiritual and ritualistic lives of the people. These women provided healing, wisdom, and direction for the inhabitants of their *barangays* (towns) with morality stories, myths, poems, prayers, and chants. When the Spanish colonizers arrived with Ferdinand Magellan in 1521, they called these women *pintadas* (painted ones) because of the decorative tatoos on their arms. During the subsequent three hundred years of Spanish colonization under the Catholic Church, these priestess-

poets gradually lost their positions of privilege, and much of that early oral tradition has been erased.

The earliest Filipina woman of letters is a poet, Leona Florentino (1849-1884). She was born in Vigan, Ilokos Sur, to a rich landed family and began to write youthful verses in Spanish at the age of ten. Her parents, following the feudal/patriarchal tradition of the time, married her off to Elias de los Reyes, the son of another landed family in the area. Together they had five children, but their marriage was full of strife. Her husband forbade her from writing and threatened to ban her from his house. Leona considered the threat and came to the conclusion that her writing was more important than her marriage to an abusive husband. So she left her children in care of her sister and went into self-exile in a place called An-annam, Bantay. Considering the strong patriarchal and religious codes of the time, this was a very brave act, even braver when one realizes that the husband Leona dared to defy was then the *Alcalde* (Mayor) of the town she lived in. Living in relative isolation, she was free to express her creativity in verses and plays she now wrote in Iloko, her native tongue. She wrote mostly for herself, not intending to have her work published. At the age of thirty-five, she died of tuberculosis. It was only after her death that she became the first Filipino poet, man or woman, to achieve international acclaim. In 1887 her son, Isabelo de los Reyes, of the *Ilustrado* generation living in Spain, managed to have a selection of her poems exhibited at the Exposition Filipina in Madrid. Her poems were also included in the 1889 Exposition Internationale in Paris and were subsequently selected by Madame Andzia Wolska for inclusion in the book *Bibliothèque Internationale des Ouvres des Femmes* (1889). Leona was a contemporary of the poets Christina Rossetti in England and Emily Dickinson in America, and her uncompromising poems record a rich imagination that only a Filipina could have captured. Here is a poem of hers, translated from the Spanish by Norma Lua (another appears at the end of this volume to close out the poetry section):

To An Old Maid on Her Birthday

A maiden who turns twenty-eight years old
is like a wilted jasmine, and she should indeed worry
that her merchandise does not become consumo.

Because even if all possible efforts are exerted
to sustain a jasmine past its bloom, when it bends
toward the earth, it always has to fall, for its vitality

has been spent. As early as possible, therefore, you must avoid
terrible old age; always show vitality and cheerfulness
although your old age is already approaching.

If you measure well the wine that you sell
(she addresses a beverage vendor),
many will like you, especially the old men S and B.

Check your bad temper because it is one
of the reasons for the hastening of age,
especially when G the flirt puts one over you.

Try to divert yourself especially when
the old women D and N become flirtatious,
for they are like the plant tigui that makes one itch.

If you follow my advice, have no doubt that you will get
to the seventh sacrament, which Don Domingo
(another old suitor of yours) has offered.

Another matriarch of Filipina writing is Magdalena Jalandoni (1891-1978), who wrote twenty-five novels and seventy volumes of *corridos* in Hiligaynon, a Philippine dialect. She was born in Iloilo, on the island of Panay, and from a young age was considered a "rebellious" child. When her mother discovered that Magdalena was writing poems and stories, she discouraged this activity by beating her daughter; Magdalena's brother, Luis, on the other hand, was encouraged when he showed some talent in writing. The beatings, however, did not stop Magdalena from expressing her rich imagination; by the age of 16, she had written her first novel *Ang Mga Tunok Sang Isa Ka Bulak* (*A Flower's Thorns*) behind her mother's back and had it published under a pseudonym. Magdalena is known as the first full-time Filipina woman of letters. Devoting all of her energies to the life of the imagination, she stipulated that if she were to ever marry, her husband would have to be "a man with the soul of an artist...and as a first test, the man must first write a good novel." She stayed single her whole life.

The arrival of another colonizer, the United States, to the Philippines in 1898 brought a new language which the natives used to express them-

selves. 1902 to 1940 marks the period in which Philippine literature in English begins to "emerge" from the shackles of American colonization. During this period of literary "apprenticeship" (in English—as noted above, Filipinas already had well-established literary traditions in native dialects as well as in Spanish) several Filipina women took the front stage in the development of English as a Philippine literary tradition. The first published short story in English that attained praise from American and Filipino critics was "Dead Stars" (1927) by Paz Marquez Benitez (1894-1983). Other master short story writers of this period included Loreto Paras Sulit, Paz Latorena, and Estrella Alfon. Angela Manalang Gloria was the first woman to publish a book of poetry in English in the Philippines. Her collection *Poems* (1940) was entered in the competition for the Commonwealth Prize but did not win because a number of the judges (all male) objected to three controversial poems: "Revolt from Hymen," "Querida," and "Heloise to Abelard." She had to revise the book, changing the word "whore" to "bore" in one of her poems, so it could be used in schools.

The closing decade of the twentieth century brought change, a new horizon, and new stars to the Philippine literary constellation. Patterns of migration have brought Filipinos to the United States as immigrants and sojourners. Among these pioneer writers is Felicidad V. Ocampo, who authored the novels *The Lonesome Cabin* (1932) and *The Brown Maiden* (1933), both published in the United States. The first Filipina poet to achieve a measure of success in the U.S. was Edith L. Tiempo; her poem "Lament for the Littlest Fellow" was published in the February 1952 issue of *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, and her book of poetry *The Tracks of Babylon and Other Poems* was published in 1966. In 1975 Jessica Hagedorn published *Dangerous Music*, a ground-breaking book of poetry, and followed it with a book of short fiction, *Pet Food and Tropical Apparitions* (1981). Hagedorn's star began to glow brighter in 1990 when her first novel *Dogeaters* was published by Pantheon and was nominated for a National Book Award. She followed this success with a book of poetry and short fiction *Danger and Beauty* (1993) and a second novel *The Gangster of Love* (1996). Another Filipina novelist whose star is illuminating the night sky is Ninotchka Rosca. Her two novels, *State of War* (1988) and *Twice Blessed* (1992), are watershed marks in Filipino and Filipino American literature.

Other Filipina writers' works have gained acclaim in this part of the world as well, including Marianne Villanueva's acclaimed book of short

stories *Ginseng and Other Tales from Manila* (1991), Cecilia Manguerra Brainard's first novel to be published in the U.S., *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept* (1992), and first-time novelist Sophia Romero's *Always Hiding* (1998). Filipina poets' collections are also making their mark in the U.S., such as Milla D. Aguilar's *A Comrade is as Precious as a Rice Seedling* (1984), Virginia Cerenio's influential *Trespassing Innocence* (1989), and Maria Luisa Aguilar-Carifio's *In the Garden of the Three Islands* (1995). In 1995, Fatima Lim-Wilson won a Pushcart Prize and the Journal Award/Ohio State University Prize for her book *Crossing the Snow Bridge* (1995). All of these prominent Filipina poets and writers have also had two or more books (written in English) published in the Philippines.

The Filipina American literature written in this country is inextricably linked to the tradition of Filipina literature back in the islands. The appearance of this anthology, dedicated solely to the writing of Filipinas and Filipina Americans, is an historic first in the United States. There have been anthologies of women's writing published in the Philippines within the last twenty years, such as Edna Zapanta Manlapaz's watershed collection *Song of Ourselves* (1994), Tina Cuyugan's *Forbidden Fruit* (1992), and Milla Astorga Garcia, Marra PL. Lanot, and Lilia Quindoza-Santiago's *Filipina I* (1984), but until now, none has been published on this side of the Pacific Ocean. *Babaylan* does not attempt to be a comprehensive collection of all the important women writers of Filipino heritage. Instead, what Eileen Tabios and I have assembled here is just a glimpse of the varied contemporary talent of women writing today. We begin each section with the work of a woman writer (Paz Marquez Benitez's "Dead Stars" and Angela Manalang Gloria's "Revolt from Hymen," "Querida," and "Heloise to Abelard") who is no longer alive but is considered a literary matriarch in her field. Then we present the writers and poets in alphabetical order, to let the works speak for themselves in their natural grandeur. We have created a sub-section, "Poetry in Translation," which includes poems written in Tagalog, Ilocano, Cebuano, and Kinaray-a with English translations. Some of the poems were written originally in native dialects, like those of Luisa A. Igloria, Elynia S. Ruth Mabanglo, and Milagros Lachica. Marjorie Evasco, by contrast, "transcreates" into her native Cebuano poems written originally in English. We hope that this section helps to elucidate the multilingual aspect of Filipino culture, in which a writer is comfortable expressing herself not only in her native dialect, but also in the national language (Pilipino/Tagalog) and in English. The transnational component of Filipina writing

is represented by women who have productive creative lives in cities as glamorous as Paris, Madrid, London, Sydney, and Singapore. These Filipinas, like the formidable short story writer Reine Arcache Melvin in Paris and the multi-awarded poet/ fictionist/ playwright Merlinda Bobis in Australia, have made their careers in their respective countries as Filipina-identified writers.

There are also many younger Filipina Americans, emerging as points of light on the horizon, who are now establishing publishing careers in the United States, like M. Evelina Galang, author of the influential collection of short stories *Her Wild American Self* (1996); and Lara Stapleton, author of a critically-acclaimed short story collection *The Lowest Blue Flame Before Nothing* (1998). In the genre of poetry, Catalina Cariaga announces the presence of a powerful Filipina voice in the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement of American poetry with her first book *Cultural Evidence* (1999), while Marisa de los Santos' prize-winning first book *From the Bones Out* (2000) provides a glimpse of a future star in American poetry. The Filipinas in this anthology will continue the rich tradition of Philippine literature in English, and they will contribute much to the ever-expanding vista of the American and global literary sky.

I would like to thank my parents for all the support; my wife Denise for all the love and lovely revisions; and all the talented Filipinas in this anthology. Maraming salamat. To Joan Pinkvoss and the amazing and inspired staff at Aunt Lute Books, a heartfelt thanks for believing in this book.

Rupturing Language for the Rapture of Beauty

"One of the most effective ideological instruments for establishing U.S. colonial domination was the teaching of the English language."

—E. SAN JUAN, JR., *The Philippine Temptation: Dialectics for Philippines-U.S. Literary Relations*

"Poetry is like painting. You say you are going to paint a portrait. You start with a blob of color and then wash, and when the lines are taking shape, you see a landscape, perhaps people. You are not quite sure what you're driving at, but it means something in the end. And the first person to be surprised is the one who made it."

—TITA LACAMBRA-AYALA (b. 1931), a leading member of the first group of Philippine poets to write in English

I AM DELIGHTED to join Nick Carbó in introducing the first comprehensive anthology in the United States of Filipina women writers and poets writing in English. When we distributed our submissions call, we placed no constraints on the type of fiction and poetry which could be sent to us for consideration. Thus, I am pleased to note that the wide range of topics and writing approaches we received reveals the hidden wealth of Filipina literature which long has been ignored by American publishers as well as by American universities and their English departments. *Babaylan* includes a story by Paz Marquez Benitez and three poems by Angela Manalang Gloria—both were among the Philippines' first generation of writers to use English as their creative tool of expression. To contrast the works of these literary matriarchs with the writings of some of the book's younger, emerging artists, such as Luba Halicki-Hoffman in fiction and Michella Rivera-Gravage in poetry, is to see how far the Filipina writer has evolved.

The rich variety of expressive styles can also be viewed as a latent response to the colonialist introduction of English to the Philippines. The

contemporary women writers in this book challenge the reader to pay attention, not just to the stories themselves, but to *how* they wrote their stories, whether it's through the pungency and underlying music of Jessica Hagedorn's language; Gina Apostol's smooth, adept lapses into irony and humor; the sweet beauty of M. Evelina Galang's diction; or the steel muscle in Lara Stapleton's technique. Though perhaps these methods are not any different from how writers generally seek to control their craft, it seems to me that a certain self-consciousness of language is appropriate for the English-language Filipino writer and, further, that any fragmentation of text (e.g., Catalina Cariaga and Jean Gier) or reconsideration of syntax (e.g., Celine Salazar Parreñas) can be considered inevitable.

Since Nick Carbo has provided a general introduction to Filipina women's literature, I would like to offer an analysis of my work as an example of how one Filipina writer might proceed from the historical context shared by all writers in this book. I note that the majority of *Babaylan's* writers seem more welcoming of narrative than I am in my work, which delights me, for the postcolonial Filipino writer would never allow the silencing of one's stories—the priestess-poet “Babaylan” has never been successfully colonized. *Babaylan's* insistence on artistic freedom has resulted in a multiplicity of characteristics and methodologies; rather than speak on behalf of my *comadres*, I thought it best to discuss the process of writing a poem dedicated to—and based on the works of—the writers in this book. In doing so, I believe I also offer an example of the long reach of my shared history with *Babaylan's* writers. I begin with a memory from Thanksgiving 1998:

I was in Paris looking at the Millet/Van Gogh show at the Musée d'Orsay. Images of shoes, peasant farmers tilling the fields or taking a break by napping, haystacks, star-filled nights, individual laborers, a resting woman with a shawl and cane—again and again the comparisons depicted Jean-Francois Millet's influence on Vincent Van Gogh. With stunning clarity, the show illustrated how much Van Gogh “copied” Millet. But the show also proved that Van Gogh's artistry was not due to the images but to how he painted them. By the time I finished perusing the exhibition, I had a crick in my neck, having frequently nodded in recognition as I contemplated the paintings. For me, the show validated the approach I have come to practice in writing poetry—an approach that was birthed from each of my poems' consistent insistence that the Poem transcends authorial intent.

Recognition—the presentation of the two artists' juxtaposed works confirmed what I have come to realize as a poet: originality cannot be my goal. For my poems cannot help but reflect my identity as, in the words of Lara Stapleton, a “bastard of the Philippine diaspora.” As a poet, this means I have no desire to be original in my use of a language that was introduced to my birthland, the Philippines, as a tool of imperialism and colonialism. I prefer to experiment with subverting words' dictionary definitions or the cultural contexts in which I perceive the words posit their referentiality. With this awareness infusing my poetry, I began to write in a surrealist vein before moving to collaging fragments from other people's writings in order to begin the poem. With the latter in particular, I wanted to use “found” words in order to evade the conventional stress on individuality and originality and, therefore, push both myself and the poem's reader to grasp a new level of meaning and emotion. If “plagiarism” is the most extreme application of my disinterest in originality, I believe nevertheless that such “plagiarism” is a valid way to begin writing the poem. For the Poem (or the type of poem I wish to write) surfaces as its own entity—just as Van Gogh's art transcended his “copying” of the images in Millet's works.

I have found this approach to be synchronistic with my exploration of “Identity” through language. In this process, I have found a home in “abstract poetry”—that is, poetry that doesn't rely on narrative so much as on my desire that it be the reader's subjectivity that completes it. It is an approach that I consider consistent with my unease with the English language which, in turn, allows me to avoid having to concoct a narrative before I can begin to write the poem. I write the poem only to offer a means for generating an emotional relationship between the poem and its reader. And I do not wish to supplant the role of the Poem's reader by being the one to identify the narrative's story or idea—and, thus, constrain the possibilities—of that relationship. (Similarly, the abstract painter needs not identify the brush stroke for the viewer, leaving it to the viewer's eye to imagine a tree, a shoreline, a human being or other images—if any—from the brush stroke.)

What does this have to do with being Filipina American? There is first the obvious effect of being part of the Philippine diaspora. I was born in 1960 and immigrated to the United States in 1970. Had I remained in the Philippines, the influence on my poetics would have been different—certainly I don't believe that I would have been unaffected by Ferdinand Marcos' Martial Law regime. Like many Filipino

poets, I might have ended up writing overtly political narrative poetry; I even might have stopped writing in English altogether to write in one of the Philippines' many dialects in order to protest (by avoiding English) the imperialism that continued with the U.S. support enjoyed by Marcos during most of his tenure. Because I left the Philippines and was raised "Americanized," my poetry came to be influenced primarily by the visual arts, themselves a catalytic inspiration for modernist American poetry. I enjoy the freewheeling, wide-ranging variety of poetic styles in the United States. Charles Simic once said that the greatest achievement of American poetry is that there is no such thing as a school of American poetry.

Initially, my poetry was influenced significantly by abstract expressionism. I feel I found a home in the form of the prose poem because the avoidance of line breaks facilitates my feeling of "painting" (versus "writing") the poem with lush brush strokes laden with gesture. I write "abstractly" because I wish my poem's reader to follow the painterly gesture through emotional resonance, uninterrupted by "thinking" over meaning. Nevertheless, when I also began to "plagiarize" I didn't think this avoided the presence of my own "I"—specifically an "I" who is concerned with Beauty. Perhaps the use of others' texts actually requires more from me because I have to make sure the sensibility of the poem, in its final draft, transcends the "plagiarism."

I should say, too, that although I think I'd formed my interest in abstract poems prior to 1998, I believe 1998 was important to my development as a poet. 1998 is not only the centennial anniversary of the Philippines' Declaration of Independence from Spain, but also of the United States' aborting of the Philippines' first attempt at national sovereignty. On June 12, 1898, the Philippines declared its independence from Spain, its colonial master of nearly three hundred and fifty years. However, on December 10, 1898, the United States signed the Treaty of Paris with Spain, through which it purchased the Philippines for twenty million dollars, and thus became the Philippines' new colonial master. The Philippines protested against American intervention through a bloody war that's been called the United States' "First Vietnam"—about thirty thousand American soldiers died, but over one million Filipinos were killed. After their military victory, the United States' colonizing efforts also won on cultural and linguistic terrains. In 1901 the United States transport ship *Thomas* arrived in Manila Bay carrying five hundred young American teachers. The English they spoke spread across the

Philippines, becoming the preferred language for education, administration, commerce and daily living — thus the reference among Filipinos to English as a "borrowed tongue," though "enforced" tongue is more accurate.

Many Filipino writers and artists participated in centennial anniversary related events; in the process we came to learn more about and/or heighten our consciousness of how English was a tool for American colonialism in the Philippines. The lessons I learned from such activities bolstered my poetic approach toward abstraction as a way to transcend poetically—or subvert politically—the dictionary definitions of English for my poetry. Consequently, I am not simply playing with language as material—there is a political component to my work, even as I continue to be inspired by the beauty of abstract paintings. Certain words are also beautiful outside their meaning, like azure or jasmine or cobalt. This is partly the place of abstract poetry, in addition to what's happening in that space between words, lines, sentences and paragraphs. Of course, others may disagree with how I consider other words beautiful—words like centrifuge, polychrome and lothario. But it is this same subjectivity that makes interesting the response to Art, whether it's a poem or a painting; the artist Agnes Martin once said, "The life of the work depends upon the observer, according to his own awareness of perfection and inspiration" (*Agnes Martin*, Whitney Museum of Art, 1992).

I choose to believe that my personal history as a poet ranges from ancient Greek sculptors to nineteenth-century French painters to twentieth-century American artists and contemporary poets who fragment text. When Filipinos claim global history as ours, we are only hearkening back to the history of the Philippines itself, which Filipino poet Eric Gamalinda has described to be "as intricate as the mosaics of the Alhambra, and which can be traced to the refugees of the Sri Vijaya empire, up to the traders of the Madjapahit, China, Siam, Mexico, Peru, Barcelona, London, Paris, New York, California, New Orleans, and the Arabic empires." And, our history is also informed by the Philippines, whose troubled history teaches passion, compassion, hope, of hopes thwarted, perseverance, of human frailty, humor, irony, humility, pride—influences that well up during the writing process to stain the surface of my poems with shades ranging from the lightness of watercolor to the heaviness of oil. Specifically, because my people's history teaches me hope and compassion, I wish to continue reaching out to the reader to develop a relationship: ultimately, this means my overriding goal through

writing poetry is Beauty. Because my goal is beauty, it doesn't mean I don't believe in the possibility of communication, despite my approach of rupturing language. Simply, what I wish to show through poetry is how the definition of Beauty includes the Rapture that comes from Rupture.



As a manifestation of my poetics, I offer the prose poem "Corolla," which I began in homage to Filipina women's literature. I began to write this prose poem by "plagiarizing," then collaging, and then rewriting fragments from the works of many of the Filipina writers represented in *Babaylan*. I show below the original fragments that I used as "Raw Material" for the poem. I titled it "Corolla" because when I think of Filipina women, I think of flowers: the beauty and variety of flowers—including the lush bloom who is my mother—that comprise my motherland.



I. Raw Material:

GINA APOSTOL: The unembodied truth, a disinterested, full adoration: she could feel this in her fingers, sometimes, as she prayed. It was a cold, pointed feeling.

LILLEDESHAN BOSE: I am quiet as hell, and I prefer being placed at the edges: of my classroom seats, of pictures taken of me, of too long dining tables... And she played herself perfectly.

CAROLINE CHENG: She seemed so light, lighter than any of the babies that I had cared for...; I wondered then if her bones were hollow, like a flute made out of reed, and if music ran through them instead of marrow.

MICHELLE M.C. SKINNER: The Virgin Mary looked newly painted in her white gown with the blue cloak. She held her arms out from her side and looked up to heaven. For a Virgin Mary I thought she had very prominent breasts... After a while, I prayed because I thought I should.

M.EVELINA GALANG: She is not interested in calming down. She has no use for it.

SUSAN S. LARA: Perhaps even a mouse, he thought, between a cat's swipes and jabs, might be thankful for a reprieve to appreciate the softness of its tormentor's paws.

REINE ARCACHE MELVIN: Her first lover. Who had wanted to marry her, with an insistence she would later find only in virgins or fools.

TARA F.T. SERING: It looked like it had been a beautiful crystal chandelier but now it simply hung there, ignored, unattended, sorry-looking, like an ex-beauty queen still hung up on former glory. Things here were not as lively as the family that owned them, and she blinked, fighting back a growing resentment.

LARA STAPLETON: ...the controlling mechanism, the driving force behind the decision which directed this life to come, was a fear of his own capacity for degradation.

EILEEN TABIOS: My body was a Christmas tree. I never considered the black-faced children stumbling out of tunnels dug deep enough to plunge into China's vagina.

LINDA TY-CASPER: My head was hurting. Could I drown on air?

MARIANNE VILLANUEVA: Her roommate groaned with abandon and she was embarrassed, as if she were doing something bad by listening.

JESSICA ZAFRA: This town was celebrated for two things: most of its men went into the priesthood, and most of its women took up prostitution. This is an example of the balance of nature.

CYAN ABAD: flying kites

BABYLU ABAYA: on the purple number 7, suck my lollipop

MILA D. AGUILAR: The meanness of the mien

LUISA A. IGLORIA: I would be stunned by the world

JOYCE ALCANTARA: for my mouth that longs to be fed

NERISSA S. BALCE: exchange. Love is haggled before it is

MICHELLE MACARAEG BAUTISTA: Balikbayan they call her, but she does not know what to call this country she returns to.

SOFIYA COLETTE CABALQUINTO: rope hammocks and roasted pigs

CATALINA CARIAGA: how a high fever can turn into pneumonia—in an instant

VIRGINIA CERENIO: how to help my child find in this dark

CORINNE LEILANI DOMINGO: silencing the afternoon with a finger

MARJORIE EVASCO: Of the world's magnificent indifference

JEAN VENGUA GIER: Green tomato pickers wanted.

ERNA HERNANDEZ: And the dark red lipstick...

LESLIANNE HOBAYAN: Lolo Eddie's leg massages stretched us tall

DOLORES DE IRURETAGONYENA DE HUMPHREY: You smothered votive lights.

FATIMA LIM-WILSON: Upon my burning tongue. Who is my father

CRISTINA MARTINEZ-JUAN: in fitless sleep.
 FARAH MONTESA: the phone off the hook. May you be barren
 BARB NATIVIDAD: feed the animal I was, through the bars, feed me
 YOLANDA PALIS: Space must be used to be of value
 CELINE SALAZAR PARREÑAS: the rice cooker flirting with its lid
 BARBARA J. PULMANO REYES: At that point where land meets water
 DARLENE RODRIGUES: And the daughter is afraid like the father
 MELISSA S. SALVA: There, veiled ladies sing out of tune
 MARISA DE LOS SANTOS: Her pain spreads open, a gray wing, a sky
 NADINE L. SARREAL: Sprinkle dust upon the stairs
 IRENE SUICO SORIANO: You may still be hiding in a *delicadeza* moonlight
 EDITH L. TIEMPO: Green calyx around its burden.
 ROWENA TORREVILLAS: An instant lifted whole out of context
 DORIS TRINIDAD: the layered auras of decay entranced her

II. The Poem:

Corolla

Sometimes, I pray. Love is always haggled before it becomes. I clasp my hands around my disembodied truth: I am forever halved by edges in group photos, on classroom seats, at mahogany dining tables whose lengths still fail to include me. I play myself perfectly, containing a Catholic hell within my silence to preserve the consolation of hope. *Hope*—once, I tipped Bing cherries into a blue bowl until I felt replete in the red overflow.

If my bones were hollow, like flutes made from reeds, I might savor the transcendence of Bach flowing through me rather than the fragile movement of marrow. "These are thoughts which occur only to those entranced by the layered auras of decay," my mother scolds me. I agree, but note the trend among artisans in sculpting prominent breasts on immobilized Virgin Marys. She replies, "But these are moments lifted out of context."

The green calyx emphasizes the burden of generously-watered corollas, though beauty can be emphasized from an opposite perspective. I have no use for calm seas, though I appreciate a *delicadeza* moonlight as

much as any long-haired maiden. You see, my people are always hungry with an insistence found only in virgins or fools. It is my people's fate for focusing on reprieves instead of etched wrinkles on politicians' brows and mothers' cheeks. We are uncomfortable encouraging dust to rise.

I feel pain spread like wine staining silk—a gray wing, then grey sky. "Only God," I begin to whisper, before relenting to the tunes hummed by ladies with veiled eyes. The definition of holidays becomes the temporary diminishment of hostile noise. I do not wish to know what engenders fear from my father, even if it means I must simulate an aging beauty queen clutching photos of tilted crowns. I prefer to appreciate from a distance those points where land meets water: I prefer the position of an ignored chandelier.

When lucidity becomes too weighty, when the calyx sunders, I concede that I make decisions out of diluting my capacity for degradation. I frequently camouflage my body into a Christmas tree. I cannot afford to consider soot-faced children stumbling out of tunnels dug deep enough to plunge into China's womb. You say the rice cooker is flirting with its lid; I say, *I AM DROWNING IN AIR*. I have discovered the limitations of wantonness only in the act of listening. There is no value in negative space without the intuitive grid.

Sometimes, I pray. For, often, I am stunned by the meanness of the mien. It makes me search for rust-covered bars so I can plead like an animal in an impoverished Berlin zoo: "Dress me in a pink dress, stranger. Forgive me. Feed me." I possess the dubious honor of an ex-lover whispering, "May you be barren." In response, I kept the phone off the hook until I swallowed the last crumb from a seven-layered wedding cake. This seemed a logical decision for someone born in a town where most men become priests and women become prostitutes. I am always flying kites through my fitless sleeps. Consistently, string breaks and I wake to a burning tongue wrapped around the question: "Who is my Father?"

I am called "Balikbayan" because the girl in me is a country of rope hammocks and *waling-waling* orchids—a land with irresistible gravity because, in it, I forget the world's magnificent indifference. In this country, my grandmother's birthland, even the dead are never cold and I become a child at ease with trawling through rooms in the dark. In this

land, throughout this archipelago, I am capable of silencing afternoons with a finger. In this country where citizens know better than to pick tomatoes green, smiling grandmothers unfurl my petals and begin the journey of pollen from anthers to ovary. There, stigma transcends the mark of shame or grief to be the willing recipient of gold-rimmed pollen. In my grandmother's country, votive lights are driven into dark cathedrals by the flames of *la luna naranja*, a blood-orange sun.

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Prose

Dead Stars

I

THROUGH THE OPEN WINDOW the air-steeped outdoors passed into his room, quietly enveloping him, stealing into his very thought. Esperanza, Julia, the sorry mess he had made of life, the years to come even now beginning to weigh down, to crush—they lost concreteness, diffused into formless melancholy. The tranquil murmur of conversation issued from the brick-tiled *azotea* where Don Julian and Carmen were busy puttering away among the rose pots.

"Papa, and when will the 'long table' be set?"

"I don't know yet. Alfredo is not very specific, but I understand Esperanza wants it to be next month."

Carmen sighed impatiently. "Why is he not a bit more decided, I wonder. He is over thirty, is he not? And still a bachelor! Esperanza must be tired waiting."

"She does not seem to be in much of a hurry either," Don Julian nasally commented, while his rose scissors busily snipped away.

"How can a woman be in a hurry when the man does not hurry her?" Carmen returned, pinching off a worm with a careful, somewhat absent air. "Papa, do you remember how much in love he was?"

"In love? With whom?"

"With Esperanza, of course. He has not had another love affair that I know of," she said with good-natured contempt. "What I mean is that at the beginning he was enthusiastic—flowers, serenades, notes, and things like that—"

Alfredo remembered that period with a wonder not unmixed with shame. That was less than four years ago. He could not understand those months of a great hunger that was not of the body nor yet of the mind, a

craving that had seized on him one quiet night when the moon was abroad and under the dappled shadow of the trees in the plaza, man wooed maid. Was he being cheated by life? Love—he seemed to have missed it. Or was the love that others told about a mere fabrication of perfervid imagination, an exaggeration of the commonplace, a glorification of insipid monotonies such as made up his love life? Was love a combination of circumstances, or sheer native capacity of soul? In those days love was, for him, still the eternal puzzle; for love, as he knew it, was a stranger to love as he divined it might be.

Sitting quietly in his room now, he could almost revive the restlessness of those days, the feeling of tumultuous haste, such as he knew so well in his boyhood when something beautiful was going on somewhere and he was trying to get there in time to see. "Hurry, hurry, or you will miss it," someone had seemed to urge in his ears. So he had avidly seized on the shadow of Love and deluded himself for a long while in the way of humanity from time immemorial. In the meantime, he became very much engaged to Esperanza.

Why would men so mismanage their lives? Greed, he thought, was what ruined so many. Greed—the desire to crowd into a moment all the enjoyment it will hold, to squeeze from the hour all the emotion it will yield. Men commit themselves when but half-meaning to do so, sacrificing possible future fullness of ecstasy to the craving for immediate excitement. Greed—mortgaging the future—forcing the hand of Time, or of Fate.

"What do you think happened?" asked Carmen, pursuing her thought.

"I suppose long-engaged people are like that; warm now, cool tomorrow. I think they are oftener cool than warm. The very fact that an engagement has been allowed to prolong itself argues a certain placidity of temperament—or of affection—on the part of either, or both." Don Julian loved to philosophize. He was talking now with an evident relish in words, his resonant, very nasal voice toned down to monologue pitch. "That phase you were speaking of is natural enough for a beginning. Besides, that, as I see it, was Alfredo's last race with escaping youth—"

Carmen laughed aloud at the thought of her brother's perfect physical repose—almost indolence—disturbed in the role suggested by her father's figurative language.

"A last spurt of hot blood," finished the old man.

Few certainly would credit Alfredo Salazar with hot blood. Even his friends had amusedly diagnosed his blood as cool and thin, citing incon-

trovertible evidence. Tall and slender, he moved with an indolent ease that verged on grace. Under straight recalcitrant hair, a thin face with a satisfying breadth of forehead, slow, dreamer's eyes, and astonishing freshness of lips—indeed Alfredo Salazar's appearance betokened little of exuberant masculinity; rather a poet with wayward humor, a fastidious artist with keen, clear brain.

He rose and quietly went out of the house. He lingered a moment on the stone steps; then went down the path shaded by immature acacias, through the little tarred gate which he left swinging back and forth, now opening, now closing on the gravel road bordered along the farther side by madre cacao hedge in tardy lavender bloom.

The gravel road narrowed as it slanted up to the house on the hill, whose wide, open porches he could glimpse through the heat-shriveled tamarinds in the Martinez yard.

Six weeks ago that house meant nothing to him save that it was the Martinez house, rented and occupied by Judge del Valle and his family. Six weeks ago Julia Salas meant nothing to him; he did not even know her name; but now—

One evening he had gone "neighboring" with Don Julian; a rare enough occurrence, since he made it a point to avoid all appearance of currying favor with the Judge. This particular evening, however, he had allowed himself to be persuaded. "A little mental relaxation now and then is beneficial," the old man had said. "Besides, a judge's good will, you know"; the rest of the thought—"is worth a rising young lawyer's trouble"—Don Julian conveyed through a shrug and a smile that derided his own worldly wisdom.

A young woman had met them at the door. It was evident from the excitement of the Judge's children that she was a recent and very welcome arrival. In the characteristic Filipino way, formal introductions had been omitted—the Judge limiting himself to a casual "Ah, ya se conocen?"—with the consequence that Alfredo called her Miss del Valle throughout the evening.

He was puzzled that she should smile with evident delight every time he addressed her thus. Later Don Julian informed him that she was not the Judge's sister, as he had supposed, but his sister-in-law, and that her name was Julia Salas. A very dignified rather austere name, he thought. Still, the young lady should have corrected him. As it was, he was greatly embarrassed, and felt that he should explain.

To his apology, she replied, "That is nothing. Each time I was about

to correct you, but I remembered a similar experience I had once before."

"Oh," he drawled out, vastly relieved.

"A man named Manalang—I kept calling him Manalo. After the tenth time or so, the young man rose from his seat and said suddenly, 'Pardon me, but my name is Manalang, Manalang.' You know, I never forgave him!"

He laughed with her.

"The best thing to do under the circumstances, I have found out," she pursued, "is to pretend not to hear, and to let the other person find out his mistake without help."

"As you did this time. Still, you looked amused every time I—"

"I was thinking of Mr. Manalang."

Don Julian and his uncommunicative friend, the Judge, were absorbed in a game of chess. The young man had tired of playing appreciative spectator and desultory conversationalist, so he and Julia Salas had gone off to chat in the vine-covered porch. The lone piano in the neighborhood alternately tinkled and banged away as the player's moods altered. He listened, and wondered irrelevantly if Miss Salas could sing; she had such a charming speaking voice.

He was mildly surprised to note from her appearance that she was unmistakably a sister of the Judge's wife, although Doña Adela was of a different type altogether. She was small and plump, with wide brown eyes, clearly defined eyebrows, and delicately modeled lips—a pretty woman with the complexion of a baby and the expression of a likable cow. Julia was taller, not so obviously pretty. She had the same eyebrows and lips, but she was much darker; of a smooth rich brown with underlying tones of crimson which heightened the impression she gave of abounding vitality.

On Sunday mornings after mass, father and son would go crunching up the gravel road to the house on the hill. The Judge's wife invariably offered them beer, which Don Julian enjoyed and Alfredo did not. After a half hour or so, the chessboard would be brought out; then Alfredo and Julia Salas would go out to the porch to chat. She sat in the low hammock and he in a rocking chair and the hours—warm, quiet March hours—sped by. He enjoyed talking with her and it was evident that she liked his company; yet what feeling there was between them was so undisturbed that it seemed a matter of course. Only when Esperanza chanced to ask him indirectly about those visits did some uneasiness creep into his thoughts of the girl next door.

Esperanza had wanted to know if he went straight home after mass. Alfredo suddenly realized that for several Sundays now he had not waited for Esperanza to come out of the church as he had been wont to do. He had been eager to go "neighboring."

He answered that he went home to work. And, because he was not habitually untruthful, added, "Sometimes I go with Papa to Judge del Valle's."

She dropped the topic. Esperanza was not prone to indulge in unprovoked jealousies. She was a believer in the regenerative virtue of institutions, in their power to regulate feeling as well as conduct. If a man were married, why, of course, he loved his wife; if he were engaged, he could not possibly love another woman.

That half-lie told him what he had not admitted openly to himself; that he was giving Julia Salas something which he was not free to give. He realized that; yet something that would not be denied beckoned imperiously, and he followed on.

It was so easy to forget up there, away from the prying eyes of the world, so easy and so poignantly sweet. The beloved woman, he standing close to her, the shadows around, enfolding.

"Up here I find—something—"

He and Julia Salas stood looking out into the quiet night. Sensing unwanted intensity, she laughed, woman-like, asking, "Amusement?"

"No; youth—its spirit—"

"Are you so old?"

"And heart's desire."

Was he becoming a poet, or is there a poet lurking in the heart of every man?

"Down there," he had continued, his voice somewhat indistinct, "the road is too broad, too trodden by feet, too barren of mystery."

"Down there" beyond the ancient tamarinds lay the road, upturned to the stars. In the darkness the fireflies glimmered, while an errant breeze strayed in from somewhere, bringing elusive, faraway sounds as of voices in a dream.

"Mystery—" she answered lightly, "that is so brief—"

"Not in some," quickly. "Not in you."

"You have known me a few weeks; so the mystery."

"I could study you all my life and still not find it."

"So long?"

"I should like to."

Those six weeks were now so swift-seeming in the memory, yet had they been so deep in the living, so charged with compelling power and sweetness. Because neither the past nor the future had relevance or meaning, he lived only the present, day by day, lived it intensely, with such a willful shutting out of fact as astounded him in his calmer moments.

Just before Holy Week, Don Julian invited the Judge and his family to spend Sunday afternoon at Tanda where he had a coconut plantation and a house on the beach. Carmen also came with her four energetic children. She and Doña Adela spent most of the time indoors directing the preparation of the merienda and discussing the likable absurdities of their husbands—how Carmen's Vicente was so absorbed in his farms that he would not even take time off to accompany her on this visit to her father; how Doña Adela's Dionisio was the most absentminded of men, sometimes going out without his collar, or with unmatched socks.

After the merienda, Don Julian sauntered off with the Judge to show him what a thriving young coconut looked like—"plenty of leaves, close set, rich green"—while the children, convoyed by Julia Salas, found unending entertainment in the rippling sand left by the ebbing tide. They were far down, walking at the edge of the water, indistinctly outlined against the gray of the out-curving beach.

Alfredo left his perch on the bamboo ladder of the house and followed. Here were her footsteps, narrow, arched. He laughed at himself for his black canvas footwear which he removed forthwith and tossed high up on dry sand.

When he came up, she flushed, then smiled with frank pleasure.

"I hope you are enjoying this," he said with a questioning inflection.

"Very much. It looks like home to me, except that we do not have such a lovely beach."

There was a breeze from the water. It blew the hair away from her forehead, and whipped the tucked-up skirt around her straight, slender figure. In the picture was something of eager freedom as of wings poised in flight. The girl had grace, distinction. Her face was not notably pretty; yet she had a tantalizing charm, all the more compelling because it was an inner quality, an achievement of the spirit. The lure was there, of naturalness, of an alert vitality of mind and body, of a thoughtful, sunny temper, and of a piquant perverseness which is sauce to charm.

"The afternoon has seemed very short, hasn't it?" Then, "This, I think, is the last time—we can visit."

"The last? Why?"

"Oh, you will be too busy perhaps."

He noted an evasive quality in the answer.

"Do I seem especially industrious to you?"

"If you are, you never look it."

"Not perspiring or breathless, as a busy man ought to be."

"But—"

"Always unhurried, too unhurried, and calm." She smiled to herself.

"I wish that were true," he said after a meditative pause.

She waited.

"A man is happier if he is, as you say, calm and placid."

"Like a carabao in a mud pool," she retorted perversely.

"Who? I?"

"Oh, no!"

"You said I am calm and placid."

"That is what I think."

"I used to think so too. Shows how little we know ourselves."

It was strange to him that he could be wooing thus: with tone and look and covert phrase.

"I should like to see your home town."

"There is nothing to see—little crooked streets, yunut roofs with ferns growing on them, and sometimes squashes."

That was the background. It made her seem less detached, less unrelated, yet withal more distant, as if that background claimed her and excluded him.

"Nothing? There is you."

"Oh, me? But I am here."

"I will not go, of course, until you are there."

"Will you come? You will find it dull. There isn't even one American there!"

"Well—Americans are rather essential to my entertainment."

She laughed.

"We live on Calle Luz, a little street with trees."

"Could I find that?"

"If you don't ask for Miss del Valle," she smiled teasingly.

"I'll inquire about—"

"What?"

"The house of the prettiest girl in the town."

"There is where you will lose your way." Then she turned serious.