BY THE THIRD MOJITO AND OTHER POEMS

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About the Author

Noelle Leslie dela Cruz is an Associate Professor of Philosophy at De La Salle University, Manila, where she received her Ph.D. in Philosophy and her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. In 2009, her poem "Discourse" won First Prize in the *Philippines Free Press Literary Awards*. She co-edited an anthology of essays entitled *Feminista: Race, Class, and Gender in the Philippines*, published by Anvil in 2011. She is also the book review editor for the widely abstracted *Filosophia: The International Journal of Philosophy*. Her most recently completed research is an unpublished manuscript on the hermeneutical phenomenology of sequential art. She is currently at work on a study about Jan Zwicky's lyric philosophy as a framework for seeing how poems (as poems, not as propositional paraphrase) can be said to philosophize.

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BY THE THIRD MOJITO

The genie is out of the bottle and I
don't know who is speaking for whom—
puppet or ventriloquist, clasped hands

or shadow dog on the wall, fingers spreading
to become dove. I'm speaking in tongues,
huddling with apostles, licks of flame

taking the place of speech bubbles. I am
the brightest candle at the party,
talking philosophy like Plato planting

rumors of sunlight in Socrates' mouth.
I smile serenely beneath the ice, imagining
people imagine me as Ophelia

by way of Waterhouse, a floater
contemplating the transience of clouds.
My professor says the Self is less like

an avocado than an artichoke. We'll get
back to that. I'm enjoying myself too much
for the instruction of metaphor, reciting a poem

by popular demand. In the sudden silence
she unravels herself like a well-read scroll.
They listen avidly for the final verse

awaiting the big reveal, the core of story
or the point of peeling. I can only
tell you how the striptease feels like

from the inside, astonishing archeologists
digging in the ruins: Freedom is knowing
that under the last layer lies so much nothing.

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WRITER'S BLOCK

> "Some cuttlefish, and a few octopuses, go through an almost continual, kaleidoscopic process of color change that appears disconnected from anything going on outside them, and appears instead to be an inadvertent expression of the electrochemical tumult inside them."
>
> —Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Other Minds*

It had been weeks of poetry classes. Some afternoons I spent just sleeping on the couch, pretending to be inside a cocoon, dreaming of a butterfly future. My body was asleep and so were my fingers, my mouth. And then I saw a video clip of a cuttlefish in varying stages of camouflage. It was a small animal, its surfer board body capped by a prominent head, from which spewed a waterfall of arms. It was in a laboratory where scientists tried changing the backdrop, from a fine sandy field to one with a checkerboard pattern. In each instance, I watched its skin transform into a surface of glyphs. The second time, the ruse was not so good; though it mimicked its surroundings, you could still see its soft round body, plainly outlined, like a text with a standard reading. I figured the sudden ineptness was due to its recent displacement, a diaspora-like loss. I imagined it longing for the comfort zone of all its meanings. I wished they would put it back where it belonged, safe from predators as it blended into the seaweed or coral. But they wanted to perform their tests, to learn the secret of cuttlefish adaptation, its ability to disappear by becoming the world around itself. I both envied and pitied it, this mollusk whose poetry needed no words. How liberating must it be, for all that iridescence to be enough? And yet how painful, how confusing must it be, for one's genius suddenly to serve no purpose?

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ORPHEUS TO EURYDICE

Love, how night can swarm Into a room
when you leave it, the light switch making
too much noise. The day that cannot be wholly
recalled is finally over. I trudge to bed,
a choreography of stairs, past miles and miles
of stalactites, the cave's ferocious teeth
gleaming in the moonlight, feeling again
Cerberus' breath upon my neck. Now

I am not looking over my shoulder
at a half-invented past. I am not looking
for an exit, but for the shortest path
toward that other awakening. That is to say,
the mind's negotiations with night, a net
whose holes are big enough for live things
to slip through, tearing the delicate threads
of our speech and patchwork days. And then

you are there, gathering pieces of myself,
the un-tattered, un-torn me I say goodbye to
everyday, so we may meet again, like this,
so I can forgive you for always leaving. So
tomorrow comes the possibility of song.

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SERENDIPITY

My foot slipped on the stair step.
After too much wiping, the wood gleamed
with the worry of attentive labor
by the well-meaning house help.
I am teaching her to write. Her brows
knit each time I see her these days
as I await her book report
on *The Little Prince*. In a parallel world

as privileged accidents go
I tumbled down, broke my hip,
spent the rest of my days bedridden
fractures of self gathering
toward each other, possessed
by the memory of original unity.

In the wisdom of Leibniz's monads,
in this best of all possible worlds,
my fingers caught the railing in time.
Writing lessons are connected
to the traction of perspiration,
to the choreography of instinct:
that constant buzzing beneath
the river of language, to which
we owe our perception of grace,
our imagination of what the fox saw
when he said what was essential
was invisible. I think of her bent head

as she mulled over my questions,
about her favorite planet
in the little prince's itinerary.
What serendipity—look up this word—
put him in the stranded pilot's path
at exactly that spot in the desert?

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In that other universe, I could be
unconscious at the bottom
of the stairs. Perhaps I never
went to college, and this poem
was never written.

But I'm not, I did, and it was.

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