

BENILDA S. SANTOS



## A Domestic Discovery

Sometimes love does not require a straight gaze—  
I see more of what I cannot see  
in your face whenever I look at you  
out of the corner of my eye as I sit  
writing while you watch “Business Nightly”  
on television until it lulls you to sleep.

I remember a Sunday afternoon in our bedroom.  
I am glued to Kafka’s *The Castle*. It is K., the Land-Surveyor  
in the novel, who stirs up my marginal vision to sharpen  
and shine like a freshly wiped spoon. You are on our bed  
holding close to yourself our two granddaughters  
who are demanding a story, “Please, please, please, Papo...”  
You hold up the book *Pinocchio* as though it were a skein  
of thread made from Rapunzel’s golden hair, and oh  
so delicately weave the tale with the woof and warp  
of your voice. Alya and Bella look at you  
as though they are seeing Papo for the first time.

I quiver. I return to K. on page 412 to hear him say,  
“I can see for myself, one doesn’t need  
any training for that.” I feel a warm glow  
all over my body. I go downstairs to the kitchen  
to pan fry salty bread on one face of which  
I had spread some salty margarine. I arrange slices of salty  
carabao’s milk cheese in a pile next to the goldened salty bread.

I go up the stairs to bring the snack to my three,  
an angel that would thaw the salt  
that was keeping Lot's wife in its embrace,  
making her want very badly to be with K.  
on that uncomfortable sledge on the way to The Castle.

## A Prospective War Zone

You pull the front door shut  
and depart  
with a pain not unlike the pain  
I grimly bear at my beauty salon  
each time the manicurist digs a trench  
around my nails' boundary  
to nip unsightly skin  
that isn't quite thick  
but is thickening.

## Eve, to God

When you touch me,  
you, the slightest breeze at daybreak,  
I know I am not naked.  
I am become Eve  
clothed in the shimmer  
of the first golden ray of grace  
in the field of red globe grapes.

In the early coolness  
we are entwined:  
tendrils, shade, vine.

When the grapes  
heavy with sweetness  
burst  
and the winepress  
bids me rise,  
I carry the noonday sun  
upon my shoulder.  
and you unclasp  
the serpent's grip upon my heart.

Released, my feet grow wings.  
I rise, rise, rise—  
a body-spirit, spirit-body  
hastening to gather  
fruit from the vine  
to turn into wine.

Nowhere will you go  
now that I pick and harvest  
and pick and harvest  
the divine.

Forever we twine:  
Tendrils, shade, vine.

## Hong Kong Holiday

Plane ride to Hong Kong. GrandAir.  
Mosquitoes in the plane  
hover around the thick black hair  
of a shy domestic helper  
in a sequined jean jacket  
with matching flared pants.

Joined package tour. Rode sampan  
around Jumbo Boat Restaurant.  
Two domestic helpers hold on tight  
to the rails and whisper to each other  
and giggle. The sun's rays enhance  
the golden sheen of the earrings, rings,  
necklaces and bracelets they wear  
with grace, ease, and a hint of pride.

Then, to Repulse Bay, a plaza of plaster  
and concrete. Replicas of Chinese icons  
like the Buddha, the god and goddess  
protectors of swimmers, some unknown  
others gleam in colorful acrylic paint.  
A group of four domestic helpers  
clamber up one icon. They request  
someone from another group to click away  
at a fancy-looking camera while they  
pose with arms linked and give out smiles  
wreathed with life's rewards. Seagulls  
occasionally appear—gray wings  
crossing misty skies. Balmy weather.

It is Sunday at the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank Plaza. A crowd of domestic helpers on their day off. This is their country today and how they show it. Handbags slung on their arms, hands clutching a burger sandwich or a chocolate bar, they fill up every other square meter in clusters of three or five. And they buzz, oh how they buzz the time away with their stories. Sometimes leaning over to one's ear, more often speaking out loud for all to hear. Now and then, peals of laughter, exclamations of disbelief draw stares from the more quiet comers.

Far from the rest a pair huddles on a bench. One with a red stretch blouse has her left arm on the shoulders of the other in a faded yellow dress. Head bowed over a crumpled handkerchief, she wipes her eyes brusquely and blows her nose. Those nearby take a glance at them, look at each other, then, look away. The pair of bronze lions standing guard at the bank's entrance might as well have been icebergs reflecting absences enough to drive one mad.

Extremely stylish in their dress. Hong Kong women pass by the Sunday throng wearing blank faces. Their stockings hug slim legs; too slim, in fact.

GÉMINO H. ABAD



## My Country's Imp

*After EDSA 3*

And we are nowhere still, hostile to process  
And living mostly on the surface of things,  
Captive to our Imp's "metaphysics" of happiness –  
A spate of all the world's amber mornings.

For we blink the sad, dark faces of things,  
The razz and dazzle of our Imp's humor –  
Flux of all the world's electric mornings –  
Blank time's malice to rouse our spirit's ichor.

O razz and sparkle of our Imp's humor,  
Such gristle as shatters the tyrant's laws,  
Voids history's ills, and fires our spirit's liquor  
Where coups vaporize in politics without clews!

What Imp's grit to scatter the despot's laws!  
And because our fathers loved us, their sins fade  
Where ventures choke in scams without clews.  
Brief triumph! hubbub and rabble of barricade.

And because our kin are loved, their follies fade  
Where shanties barnacle our suffocated creeks.  
Fleet glory! and baffle and babble retrograde,  
Our Imp still rules, and our laughter leaks.

Where our shacks teeter over poisoned creeks,  
The thief's our saint who had faith and was saved.  
The Imp enthralls yet where our carnival leaks;  
But here is no country still, our honchos depraved.

The thief goes scot-free, by a helicopter saved,  
The Imp outwits our writ of habeas loot.  
No logic avails, no country where lawyers rave,  
Everything is soon forgot, all heroics for naught.

Yet our wit is wound with wounds that wail,  
Captive to our Imp's "metaphysics" of happiness.  
We bear our fathers' sins ever without bail,  
And we are nowhere still, hostile to process.



## Imp of Ear

It's a losing game, Al,<sup>1</sup> it seems to me,  
restoring the second *r* to "Alfredo"  
on page proofs and blueprints of texts;  
our friend Krip's in the same pickle,  
excising the redundant *o* to Alfred;  
I too have been variously termed,  
Genuíno, Geminiano, Germínio –  
best my Apache moniker, Gerónimo!  
and what about that Palanca entry  
under the guise of Cirilo de Ungria!

What omens, *kaibigan*, or none  
in that mess of near hits and misses?  
I don't know what spells they cast  
on those fictions our lives weave –  
inadvertences after all abound  
in the coil and roil of each day's toil  
and perhaps weave more urgent  
news than noise of our yclept et al.

Hoorah the *alii!*—those others, less  
than ghosts, yet fart at fastidious  
policing of our names. O, I know

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<sup>1</sup>"Al" is Alfredo Navarro Salanga (double *r* on "Alfredo"). "Krip" is Alfred A. Yuson. "Cirilo" is Cirilo F. Bautista, and "de Ungria" is Ricardo M. de Ungria. (The accent mark above *é* in my name is how my father wrote my name, and so, that is how I remember him when I write it out.) We—Al, Krip, Cirilo, Ricky, and I—founded the Philippine Literary Arts Council (PLAC) in 1981. "Butch" is Jose Y. Dalisay, Jr.; he too is a member of PLAC, and what a great memory he has of old songs!

from mishaps to our alphabet,  
they are those metaphysical imps  
must turn and twist our sense  
so that we might have eyes behind  
our ears, and see our own meanings  
quite paltry, quite jejune,  
without scripture of definition.

I must conclude, Al, with this one  
proof—a mishap of hearing:  
For years until Butch disabused me  
I had always thought (and kept  
its erotic ghost secret as Echo)  
that I had heard, "Shut the door"  
in that song, *C'est magnifique*,  
where a woman says, "J'ai t'adore."

I have of course sound excuse,  
my large ears catch only English.  
But, oh, that imp of Ear!—for  
years since Marlene Dietrich sang,  
I've had no rest, that deep-throat  
voice, that bedroom door, how  
my youth endured such delirium  
tremens from her Echo's liquor.

DANTON REMOTO



## The Mevlevis

(Whirling Dervishes)

The white skirts  
should resemble the triangle,

the shape that reaches out  
to the universe.

The hands should be stretched  
out, like wings.

Only then can you begin to whirl  
in a perfect circle,

to the rhythm and chanting  
of the *dhikr*,

turning against the movement  
of the clock,

turning on the left heels  
only,

gathering motion with  
the right foot,

your arms spread wide  
in the ocean of space,

your face pure and intense  
as air,

as you spin like the stars,  
whirling in a blur,

turning and turning  
like the galaxies,

like the very universe itself,  
always in circles,

always toward  
the One.

*Dhikr* – chants typically consisting of vocative formulas  
constructed from the many “Beautiful Names” of God  
(*al-Asma al-Husna*).

# The Oyster's Heart

*(For E; a farewell poem)*

A spit  
of sand  
landed

in the very  
heart  
of an oyster.

The texture  
of small rock  
rubbed itself

hard  
against the skin  
sensitive

as an eye,  
until  
the oyster

shed tears  
clear  
as water

rivering themselves  
round  
and round

the sand,  
polishing its rough  
edges

and cutting  
the sharp  
corners,

forming something white  
and pure  
as the sky.

# Song of the Moon

*(For Jude and Jun-jun)*

While a torch song  
starts tiny flames  
in the smallest spaces

inside us, we look up  
the glass dome and see  
the last,

the brightest moon,  
of the century—  
a startled eye

in the ravaged face  
of the sky.  
What in the years

behind us  
have prepared us  
for this moon

whose light  
glistens  
like tears?

## Song of Junayd

The road curves.  
toward you,

the pistil points  
in your direction.

The bees hum  
their honeyed song for you,

the grasses grow  
between your feet.

The mountains brood  
all about you,

rising and falling,  
the sun follows you

You fill  
even the empty spaces—

the black, desolate  
wastes—

between the stars.



# Song of Rumi

*(Maulana Jal-aluddin Rumi, 1207-1273)*

Everything around me  
is whiteness—

pebbles white  
as skull,

the sand grains sloping  
to infinity,

the sky mute  
as memory.

I am made  
of bone,

my skin feels  
like sand,

my flesh brittle  
like sky.

But whence comes  
this river of words

roaring out  
of my veins,

carrying semen,  
spore, and light,

the voice of the Beloved  
beautiful as blood?

## Song of the Flute

*(For T.)*

I like the caress  
of his fingers

on my warm,  
brown body,

while his mouth  
blows into me

(the moist air filling  
my very lungs).

But I miss the bark  
that used to embrace me,

the wind messing  
the leaves of my hair,

the sap that wells  
inside me,

gathering and forming,  
rising and rising,

until the very sun  
explodes into tears.

# Tariqa

*(The Sufi Path)*

“Amazing! These Orientals pierce themselves, yet no blood flows.”  
—A western documentary

With your bold hands,  
lift the veils

that cover your face  
like a thousand masks.

Do not be afraid of skin  
tearing. There will be no blood.

Then you will fall  
into the well of a trance,

knives and picks piercing  
the lobes of your ears,

your tongue, your chest,  
your arms. Do not

be afraid of skin tearing.  
There will be no blood.

For you would have traveled  
into the inner labyrinth,

your gaze turned only  
to the face of the Beloved,

the divine light healing  
the many sorrows of your heart,

polishing them until they gleam  
like mirrors.

## Song of the Migrant Bird

It is winter again,  
the elms thin charcoal

against white.  
I begin my long journey

to my Beloved,  
thousands of miles away.

My wings are hands  
waving farewell

to the river  
turning into ice,

the buildings hardening  
into tombstones,

sky the color  
of a blind man's eyes.

But my wings  
are torn

and they will never  
reach

my Beloved.  
May the wind—

this pure breath  
of an *houri*—

carry my tired body  
to the doorstep

of the One  
I love.

*Houri*—angel

## Song of the Tissue Paper, 1

In my dream

I am like skin

turning hot and glowing

(my pores opening

and receiving

your many tongues

of flame)

when suddenly a spurt

of white light

burns a hole

in my very core,

filling the room

with the smell

of something chemical,

with the taste

of tears.