LITERARY SECTION: POETRY

THE POEM AS ANAGRAM:
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF VINCENZ SERRANO

Conchitina Cruz
University of the Philippines, Diliman
chingbee.cruz@gmail.com

About the author
Conchitina Cruz teaches creative writing and literature at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, where she is an associate of the Institute of Creative Writing. A recipient of Fulbright and Rockefeller Foundation grants, she is the author of two books of poetry, Dark Hours and elsewhere held and lingered.

There is much disorientation to be had in the poetry of Vincenz Serrano. At times it is the outcome of radical manipulations of lineation and layout to approximate simultaneity—subjecting the reader to dilemmas such as which line follows what, which section of the page to read first, and so on—the kind of disorientation that is immediate, blatant, unwavering in its intensity. Other times, it unfolds rather than assaults, discreet in its descent upon the reader, much like getting high on (as it turns out) pot being smoked in the next room. How the latter discloses itself while somewhat disguising the plot of its arrival is intriguing, especially since the disorientation seems driven by “a method akin to derangement”—a calculated, supervised chaos. It does not bear the markings of the surreal (whose network of associations permit and even seek the option of not adding up) and most certainly not of chance operations (whose idiosyncratic results are accountable to nothing, not even the terms which yielded them). Like the most serendipitous of highs, it almost but doesn’t quite spin out of control, and the poem, while loosening its tethers, doesn’t slip its moorings, the widening gaps only making discernible the filaments at work to constrain them.

Serrano’s method of composition could be described as anagrammatic, engaging the generative properties of a fixed set of terms. An anagram delights for its capacity to turn into something other than itself while remaining completely of itself, its transformation confined within the finite, governed not by addition, or deletion, but the rearrangement
of its parts. What you see is still what you see—and also not quite, and also, not at all. In Serrano’s work, the peril of dissolution is confronted and kept at bay through a measured unhinging and reassembly, a steadily paced opening of the doors of perception. It is a practice of Serrano to begin a poem by establishing a pool of terms and affixing their relations to each other, and then, in the course of the poem, dislodging them. Words take flight and migrate, trade places and contexts, and relations, in turn, shift, bleed into, and transform each other, the effect of which, at times, is the textual equivalent of an optical illusion—the poem intact yet altered, still yet makeshift, simultaneously itself and another, multiple others.

The perspective of choice in Serrano’s poetry is that of the flaneur in the city, whose outings are also anagrammatic in quality, fixed and unfixed in place, the routine always new, the collisions reliable and reliably various in configuration. In Manila, of course, dismantlement and disparity are defaults, and any attempt to diminish their grip on the city and the one who walks in it—any attempt toward the ideals of cohesion and coherence—is at risk of futility and therefore heroic. The balance between dissolution and resolution which allows an anagram to exist tips in favor of the former, the parts more susceptible to fragmentation than attachment, more prone to hurl into disorientation rather than avert it. “Definition of metaphor: the collapse of what separates us.” It is this collapse that is sought in every poem of Serrano, the convoluted wording indicative of a clear-eyed recognition of contraries built in the ideal, the desire for union unfettered by its prerequisite violence, the violence enacted again and again in juxtapositions and collaborations always struggling to surpass the identities of autonomous parts, the friction at most producing disfigurement but never union. And still the walker walks, thwarted but not swayed, uttering plea, or perhaps prayer, or perhaps command: “let me merge with who I am,/and come out undisguised.”