“SHE HATES ELMO’S VOICE” AND OTHER POEMS

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About the Author
Jim Pascual Agustin writes and translates poetry in Filipino and English. He grew up in the Philippines during the Marcos dictatorship. He moved to Cape Town, South Africa in 1994. Some of the publications where his work has appeared are New Coin (SA), Rhino Poetry (USA), Rusted Radishes (Beirut), and Modern Poetry in Translation (UK). His books of poetry before leaving Manila are Beneath an Angry Star (Anvil, 1992) and Salimbayan (Publikasyong Sipat, 1994). Two books were simultaneously released by the University of Santo Tomas Publishing House in Manila in 2011: Baha-bahagdang Karupukan (poems in Filipino) and Alien to Any Skin (poems in English). The same publisher released two new collections in 2013: Kalmot ng Pusa sa Tagiliran (poems in Filipino) and Sound Before Water (poems in English). He blogs on www.matangmanok.wordpress.com.
Bulletproof

The dictator had no idea my parents adored him like a patron saint. He came from the north like my father. We watched him speak on our black and white TV in Ilokano and English, his jaws barely opening.

They said he was going to visit us, the people who didn’t choose to give up the land where their houses stood, but had to, for a highway in his name. But he never came.

Instead, his wife, the former beauty queen who years ago survived a bolo attack on the shoulder, blessed us with her presence. She waved in a blur of black bulletproof cars. People said they saw tears.

Perhaps just a trick of the noonday sun on glass. In eight years the first couple would be forced to flee the country in the unexpected heat of February. And my parents would weep every night.
Nails on the Floor

There’s a rippled haze
wherever I turn, like gas
escaping, but nothing
catches fire or explodes.

The skin on my left arm
remembers staples. But
I never had them there,
just on my fingers

when I played with a stapler
at six. Or was I nine?
The neighbors will hear me
talking to myself again.

My scalp can’t stay like this
much longer, it needs a blunt razor.
Jesus. He’s always leaving
these nails for me to step on.
Ignoring the Hand of God

The hand of God has been cut off. It lies palm up under the couch where old newspapers soften the footsteps of fleas, but not of cockroaches.

The changing light from the TV makes it look like it’s beating, slender veins going bruise blue, then old photo yellow.

I am ignoring its existence. That odd smell could just be a damp sock the dog pulled out of the laundry basket, or an offering from the cat before dinner.

One day that hand will grab me by the ankles. Or so my grandmother warns, unless I go down on the floor and reach for it without disturbing the spiders.

Pray for me, I ask her. She has been transformed into a lace handkerchief in a locked drawer, but she can hear me whenever I say “Please.”
She Hates Elmo’s Voice

not necessarily the puppeteer. She knows there are countless other things more disturbing in this world.

So she mimics Elmo with the speech from a Nobel Peace Prize winner responsible for making parents dig graves for their own children. What a charming interview on a late night show.

She is careful to keep her voice down. Her kids love Elmo. They don’t know he’s hollow.