

## “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](http://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.