

Special Literary Section: *Manila by Night*

ISHMA

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About the Author

Reuel Molina Aguila is a Professor of Filipino and Philippine literature at the University of the Philippines. He is a Hall of Fame awardee at the Palanca Literary Contest, and has won, among several other distinctions, lifetime achievement awards from the Unyon ng mga Manunulat sa Pilipinas [Writers Union of the Philippines], Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino [Philippine Language Commission], and the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. He was head writer for ABS-CBN Foundation and the scriptwriter of Behn Cervantes's *Sakada* (1976, uncredited; credited as script supervisor) and *Bawal na Pag-ibig* [Forbidden Love] (1977) as well as Lino Brocka's *In Dis Korner* (1982).

About the Translator

Marne Kilates has published four books of poetry, numerous translations of major works from Filipino into English, and was recently holder of the Henry Lee Irwin Professorial Chair for Creative Writing at the Ateneo de Manila University. He has won the Carlos Palanca Awards, the NBDB-Manila Critics Circle National Book Awards, and the SEA WRITE Award given by Thai royalty. He publishes and edits the online literary journal *The Electronic Monsoon Magazine* at <<http://www.electronicmonsoon.com>>.

Author's Note

Haibun is a Japanese verse form that combines poetic prose and short poetry. Matsuo Basho, pseudonym of Matsuo Manefusa (1644-94), is credited as the inventor of this form. When Westerners researched his poetry, they simply took away the short poems, which would then become known as the haiku; they set aside the prose. Unknown to the Westerners, the prose was integral to the whole poem, which would become known as the haibun. Only then would the West admit that there was such a thing as a prose poem.

The group known as the Beat poets introduced the haibun to America. They experimented extensively with the form. Whatever amount of prose, whatever amount of short poetry, even if the short poem was not a haiku, as long as the prose and the haiku were combined in one poem, it was a haibun. The Beats' experiment went as far as creating the haibun novel—a novel interspersed with poems and whatever else. Thus, as part of

Filipino poetry, the haibun might combine prose with such short forms as the tanaga, bugtong, haiku, tanka, etc.

The poem “Ishma” is part of an anthology being refined for publication, perhaps the first haibun anthology in the Philippines.

Ishma

Siya ang aming waiter ngayong gabi. Walang halong biro, at ngumiti pa siya nang ulitin niya ang aming inorder na beer. Siya rin ang may-ari ng munting salu-saluhang nakausli sa kalye malapit sa Kalayaan; siya, na batikan at iginagalang na direktor sa pelikula. Siya, na ang salita ay utos na dapat sundin; siya ang susunod sa aming salita ngayong gabi.

Sanay na raw siya sa ganoong pagsisilbi. Dati sa Grey November, isang joint sa may Ermita. Kababalik niya raw noon, noon pang dekada sisenta, bata pa s’ya; sabay nakiupo sa amin, mula sa paghahanap ng sarili, sa Uropa. Tapos nagliwaliw siya sa pelikula. Akala niya, doon niya makikita ang sarili. Hindi pala, sabay pakawala ng malagom niyang halakhak na waring pumaimbulog sa gabing mabituin na wari ding inggit sa ningning ng kanyang mga mata.

Kamakailan lang daw niya nakita ang sarili, pero may ilang taon na rin ang nakakaraan. Mabilis daw ang panahon tulad ng paglagok ng beer; di mo namamalayan ang pagkaubos. Pulutan? Bigla niyang putol. On me, sabay tayo na hindi na hinintay ang aming sagot. Labis ang saya niya ngayong gabi. Basta na lang siya nagkuwento ng kanyang buhay; at marami kaming napulot.

In love kasi ako. Humalakhak na naman siya. At humalakhak din kami sa muli niyang pag-upo, dala-dala ang hipon yata iyong nilasing. Hindi raw kami malasing-lasing kaya ‘yong hipon na lang. Tawanan uli kami. In love kasi si Ishma.

Kanina, bago umuwi
ang araw sa kung saan man,
habang nagtatalo pa
ang liwanag at dilim ...
umibig akong muli.

Isang batang lalaki,
mag-isa, tahimik
sa gitna ng pagmamadali –
pag-aagawan ng masasakyan,

ano ang kanyang laban?
May backpack na mas mabigat
kaysa sa kanya, isang payong
sa isang kamay, walang
mababanaag na pagkabalisa;
mabining nakisiksik at nakasakay.

Isang pamilya ang pumuwesto
sa bangketa, pinapasuso ng ina
ang sanggol, ang tatay
naglatag ng hapunan at karton,
nagkamay ang dalawa,
sumandal pa sa pader,
nagkwentuhan habang dinaraan
ng mga paang nagmamadaling
umuwi sa kani-kanilang bahay.

At ngayon napaibig na naman ako,
sa saliw ng napaagang magbabalot,

sa isang ginabing nagpapasan ng kurus –
isang katre, inilalako sa kalye.

Paano ka ba naman di iirog
sa kapwa Pilipinong nakikimahok
sa dagok ng lipunang bulok,
di nagsisilbi ng kalinga't ikaiigi.

Bawat pagsisikap ay makislap na sining
ng pakikibaka upang mabuhay:
dingin ang mang-aawit, sa bangketa,
nangangapang tinig sa ihahagis na barya.
Masdan ang mananayaw, sa pilapil,
indak sa kahirapang hindi susukuan;
ang mima, sa daungan at pabrika
sa tunay na trahedyang iniigpawang pilit;
ang makata, sa palengke, sakayan, tindahan,
mga bersong nananawagan ng tangkilik;
ang eskultor, sa tagpi-tagping bahay
ang pintor, sa makulay-madilim na buhay.

Ay, kay sarap silang ibigin.

Dahil sa pag-ibig na ito, natuto rin siyang magsilbi; hindi lang sa mga kaibigan niya. Natuto na rin daw siyang magsilbi sa mga walang kaya, sa mga aba, inaapi, mga hindi makapagsabi ng kanilang damdamin. Natutunan na niyang maging tinig ng mga saloobin, ng mga hangarin nila para sa maaliwalas na bukas.

Wala na sa aming tumawa. Lumagok ako ng mahabang lagok ng beer, saka nagkalakas ng loob para magtanong. Sa isip ko, ilang taon ko na ring nakatrabaho siya kaya may karapatan na ako, siguro.

Bakit? Paano? Ikaw? Marami akong gustong itanong. Pero hindi ako nagkalakas ng loob. Basta na lang siya nagkwento nang kwento. Tawanan kami nang tawanan. Masarap ang ganitong pag-ibig, wika niya; paulit-ulit.

Nagbiro pa siya: Kung gusto ninyo, hugasan ko ang inyong mga paa. Tumagay kami at namulutan sa di namin akalaing huli niyang hapunan.

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He was to become our waiter tonight. No, this is not a joke; he even smiled at us as he repeated our orders for beer. He's also part-owner of that tiny joint¹ that jutted out into the street near Kalayaan;² he who was the famous film director, whose words were our orders; he was to heed our orders tonight.

He was used to doing such serving, he said. He used to do it at Grey November, a joint in Ermita. He had just returned then, that was back in the seventies, when he was young; at this point he sat down with us at our table, back from searching for himself, in Europe. Then he strayed into film. He thought he would find himself there. He didn't, then let out that all-embracing laughter of his, which seemed to hurtle into the starry night, which in turn seemed resentful of the twinkle in his eyes.

He had found himself recently, he said, though it could have been a number of years now. Time flew, he said, like the way we drank our beer; you don't notice and your glass is empty. Finger food to go with the beer? He interjected quite abruptly. On me, he said, as he stood up without waiting for an answer. He was quite so happy tonight. He simply started opening up, talking about his life; and we learned plenty.

I was in love, you know. He gave that guffaw again. And we laughed in return as he sat down with us again, bringing that shrimp dish called "drunken." He couldn't get

us drunk, he half-complained, so he brought the “drunken shrimps” instead. We laughed some more. Ishma,³ you know, was in love.

This afternoon, before the sun
could go home to wherever,
while day and night
were still quarelling ...
I fell in love again.

A young boy,
alone, so quiet
in the middle of all the haste –
the hustle for ride,
how could he survive?
He carried a backpack that looked heavier
than he was, an umbrella
in one hand, he looked
unperturbed;
he calmly and gently pushed into
crowd and took his ride.

A family found their place
on the sidewalk, the mother was nursing
her baby, the father
laid down their dinner over cardboards,
the two of them ate with their hands,
rested their backs against the wall,
conversed amid the many feet
hurrying home.

And now I had fallen in love again,
amid the calls of the early balut vendor,

to someone caught by night carrying his cross –
a bed-frame being hawked on the street.

How would you not love
your fellow Filipino struggling
against the blows of a rotten society
offering no care nor comfort.

Every individual effort to live is a shining art
of struggle and survival:
Listen to the singer, on the sidewalk,
groping for coins thrown to him.
Watch the dancer, on the rice field,
stepping to poverty's rhythm, to which
he will not surrender;
the mime, at the pier and factory
in the true tragedy he must surmount;
the poet, in the marketplace, bus stop, shop,
whose verses call for love;
the sculptor, in patchwork shanty,
the painter, of the colorful-bleak life.

Oh, how sweet it is to love them.

Because of this love he learned to serve; not only his friends. He learned to serve those who had nothing, the humble, the oppressed, those unable to express themselves. He learned to become their voice, the voice of their dreams of a better future.

Then we stopped laughing. I took a long draught at my beer, and felt a bit more confident to ask him a question. I thought we had spent some years working together, so I had somehow earned the right to ask, perhaps.

Why? How? You? I had a lot to ask him. But I balked. So he kept talking and talking about almost anything. We kept laughing and laughing. I love this love, he said, repeatedly.

He even joked: if you want, I'll wash your feet. We filled and raised our glasses and picked our finger food on this we didn't know was to be his last supper.

Notes

1. Kasalo it was called; meeting place for writers and artists. With Ishma managing the place were the poet Tomas Agulto and the photographer Alex Baluyut.
2. Kalayaan Street, beside the Quezon City Hall.
3. Ishmael Bernal (one of his nicknames, a diminutive of "Ishmael").