

## (PRE)OCCUPATIONS

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### **About the Author**

John Revo Ocampo is taking his Master of Fine Arts degree, majoring in Creative Writing, at De La Salle University-Manila. He currently works as a freelance project-based editor. His creative pieces have been published most recently in the first literary issue of Ateneo de Manila University's *Kritika Kultura*, *The Kritika Kultura Anthology of New Philippine Writing in English*. He was also one of the workshop fellows at the 9th Palihang Rogelio Sicat, organized by the Departamentong Filipino at Panitikan ng Pilipinas of the University of the Philippines-Diliman.

**CANTABILE**

He taught her scales to perfect her pitch—what’s sharp, what’s flat, what’s in between. How to hit notes, how to belt each one, how to make an audience stand in ovation. He showed her how open her vowels must be, how to breathe from the diaphragm, how to sing in falsetto. He coached her through the punishment her vocal cords would endure. How valuable it was to drink only warm water, to keep her distance from sweets, to go to bed early, and to vocalize in the morning—in the shower, let the neighbors hear how it’s done—

Then he tells her to sing, and sing with all her heart at that, and she has no idea what it is he means so she slumps her way onto the stage as the pale of her skin turns pink and the judges start smiling for all the wrong reasons. But how does one sing with the heart? Her lips part and she inhales to sing something of a note, *smile* she sings *when your heart is breaking* uncertain, *smile* unsure if her lyrics are right—even *though it’s aching* she sings away anyway—

He will see her again onstage in a few minutes (or what will seem like decades) and she will either be clutching the trophy or recounting the song in adagio, figuring out where she went out of tune or lost her voice. Either way, she will take a bow for putting her crooning heart in the spotlight, for facing the inevitable coda of this cadenza. It’s reward enough for learning about *affrettando* in preludes and the necessary *allegro* of good riddance.

**SENTRY**

Before the end of his shift, he is a gargoyle  
jutting out the facade of this cathedral of an apartment,  
leaning on his courthouse lectern, eyes  
cemented on the driveway with its burnt-out lampposts,  
intermittent headlights flickering past  
the dark shattered by lightning drawing maps in the sky.  
Once in a while, the twenty-something  
spots vermin near a downspout or an odd visitor's cab.  
A door swings open, introduces a guest,  
another name on a logbook, a new face caught on CCTV,  
a break from being a sculpted fixture  
on a cornice, a chance to chat with someone other than  
the usual suspects living in the complex.  
He checks the stranger's ID, asks who's visiting who, buzzes  
the tenant in question. "A few minutes left,"  
he relaxes back into his terracotta scowl, the workday almost over.

## HORTICULTURE AT A TRAIN STATION

In the garden of collisions along the slapdash tracks of the city, remember that when bruises bloom on Asian skin, they're not always purple. Most shades of brown merely dim darker. In cases of yellow, they burn more saturated—from red-orange, becoming incandescent little suns. And, in the palest of circumstances, they spring amaranth: a blush borne by the likes of the tassel flower and the kiwicha—flora that cannot comprehend how internal bleeding heals a body the way we do. We have a woodland of names for hues that mark recuperation from the recklessnesses we have yet to recognize the pigments of. Like Violence, Accidents, Self-Inflicted Pain. But this is not to cut down the forests of meaning held within the borders of a battered arm or a beaten leg or the face of someone who claims to have simply slipped and fallen; rather, this is a reminder of how we sometimes inadvertently take on new tincture in the thicket of daily life. Moss green, for example, cannot be synthesized by human skin without physical intervention—it requires an impact abrupt enough to break blood vessels, time long enough to catabolise heme then release biliverdin where it can be seen, and soreness conspicuous enough to spell out Danger or Man at Work—Here Is Where the Body Rebuilds, here is where I farm experience, here is where I am most human: in the fields of my smallest mistakes. Like every blind vine climbing toward the light, we cannot see quite far enough into the future to know where we're growing into, what our body parts reach. So, next time, please be careful—not just as you twine your fingers with your lover's, like tendrils on a trellis, while you kiss the night away—but also when you meld into a hurried crowd in midday because your elbow might get buried in a chest a little too deep or your knee might hit a thigh in your foot's effort to evade that rainbow-streaked puddle gleaming before you. In this train, packed tight as rose petals, even the slightest flinch or turn of a shoulder can seem like a thorn boring into flesh. Tonight, when I take off my shirt, my sweetheart will ask how the broad of my back came to be blotched with blue but I will not blame you. Instead, I will say with utmost certainty, in order to calm the worry that accompanies such beauty, that bruising is natural in the jungle that is the rush hour commute where each stranger carries an infinity of colors and that this lilac blemish had simply spilled over onto a plot of my skin. Eventually, it will ripen and fade into its last winks of pink, the point where skin can become more resistant even to the deepest, darkest plums.

**WAITRESS**

I'd like to be the one you fall for. I'd like to be the one who tells you your hair in the florescent light has more kick than this steaming latte. I'd like to be the one to lay down with you to look at the spinning fan blades screwed to the ceiling and to talk to you endlessly about grinding and brewing coffee beans. So, yes, I admit I let the pot slip my grip: a ruse to take your mind off the phone you keep checking, off the lover you've been waiting for, off the conversation you're expecting to unfold in this café. Today, as I apologize profusely for faking being clumsy, I smile at little joys like seeing you laugh off this silly mishap, learn what I am called beyond waitress or server, and help me wipe away the cold spilt milk on your table, near where passers-by might peek at us through these glass walls and maybe even wonder why two grown women would be holding hands, lying on a tabletop, and giggling at their feet unintentionally knocking chairs down. This quick break from biding your time is all I can afford you during this shift: small talk with a genial stranger, a brief "Hello, I see you too," a kind of chatter that only happens between people who have known each other all their lives or, at least, believe they must have. As I clean up this mess that is our newfound familiarity, I bend over to suggest, out of the corner of your eye, the choice of an ample bosom and full hips—curves like question marks, a number of possibilities: a different order, a new house special, someone you might never have thought would ask if the seat across you has already been taken.