

FROM *EPISTLES*, PART 2

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About the Author

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THE PRAYER OF DOÑA PIA ALBA

Sunlight slants from the chapel windows
of Capitan Tiago's house,
merciful. The sun's pull, the dance
of these giant spheres, the equinox, the heavens,
merciful. The flowers, the faces of the house-gods tilt
to the light. *We are so small, Creator.*

Spared from comets,
from black holes we are small. *You who lit
the wick, You who sparked the descending flame
and kept it alive—*

What I want to say, my love, is this:
puerperal fever, her childbirth as death
sentence, the orchard dying right after the harvest.

Her husband silent before the icons:
Sagrada Familia, Lucia, Antonio
de Padua. So much gravity it must be,
the proximity to God.

And there's so much room in this world,
with the massacre of infidels
and the martyrdom of saints.

A world equal parts light and dark,
where a daughter's flesh is always naked
to danger, delicate as a dragonfly wing
flung into the air.

SALOME

On the boat to Mindoro,
Salome woke up with a preview
of time.

She left the little hut by the lake,
gave one last glance to her bamboo grove,
bid the doves goodbye.

Even the sunrise simmering over the lake
where her father drowned—
it had to go.

Leaving it all behind
in the receding land mass of Luzon,
she saw it, on the surface, as the prow
crashed against the waves:

Elias, in the future, beside her.

The revolution had come and gone
and she had given him a son
where the sea continues the river.

Like her, he was a little red flower
in his palm.

Rough as the sound of waves,
the matter of her husband surged by her side,
mumbling a dream,
as he burrowed his face deeper
in her hair, the cradle swinging
in the breeze.

Spooning, he thrust
even in sleep.

Midway down the gangplanks
to the dock, the water rose
and dipped on one side, shifting
the boat's angle.

She pivoted on her heel, throb
skipping a beat.

The moment she set foot on the ground,
she recognized it, that strange feeling
when the earth on its axis
recalibrated,

and the future tilted
some other way:

fish in the sand, story of another man,
the lake a memory.

THE FALL OF MARIA CLARA

I swear to you, my love,
I saw the cobbled ground beneath her
ripple into an earthquake
on the other side of the world,
into the tidal wave and temblor
that sunk an empire.

Did anyone hear her song
detonate into radioactive hellfire?

Did anyone witness her nipples
at the mercy of the kempeitai?
Or watch her chamber
dictator-defiled?

Wasn't it her friction with air, my love,
which sparked and burned
Manila to the ground?

Wasn't it the lingering heat
from her thighs
that got drunken storms
so ravished with the earth?

She fell. The blood did not bloom
as she sank into the ground
—it may have opened to let her in—
and she broke through the crust,

dove straight across the mantle and the core

before emerging
through the opposite face
of the planet, a newborn goddess,

and went on zooming past the clouds,
past the moon, the meaningless constellations,
out of the galaxy,

and farther on she still goes
until she explodes
light years and light years away.