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The University of Southern Mississippi

FILIPINO, TOO: COMPOSITIONS ON CULTURE AND IDENTITY

by

Randy Eugene Gonzales

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2014

ABSTRACT

FILIPINO, TOO: COMPOSITIONS ON CULTURE AND IDENTITY

by Randy Eugene Gonzales

May 2014

“Filipino, too: Compositions on Culture and Identity” is a creative dissertation that documents my journey to understand my cultural heritage, focusing on my displacement as an expatriate and as a third-generation Filipino American.

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2014

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Approved:

Angela Ball

Director

Rebecca Morgan Frank

Linda Allen

Jeffrey Kaufmann

Charles Sumner

Maureen A. Ryan

Dean of the Graduate School

May 2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer would like to thank the dissertation director, Dr. Angela Ball, and the other committee members, Dr. Linda Allen, Dr. Rebecca Morgan Frank, Dr. Jeffrey Kaufmann, and Dr. Charles Sumner, for their advice and support throughout the duration of the project.

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INTRODUCTION

This collection documents my journey to understand my cultural heritage, focusing on my displacement as an expatriate and as a third-generation Filipino American. It seeks to understand the condition of being displaced and the impact displacement has on our perspective. It is the record of my evolving understanding of culture as a living concept that defines, binds, and isolates us. This Introduction charts the writing of this dissertation, touching on my motivation to write, my writing methods, and my influences. The first section documents my compulsion to write about identity and culture. The second section explains how I use poetry to understand experience and to create new experiences. It concludes by addressing my concerns about crafting poems for an audience while staying true to my concerns as a writer.

Becoming “Filipino, too.”

My wife, Arleen, is Filipino. She was born in the Philippines to Filipino parents, grew up in Metro Manila, and has a Filipino passport. My sons, Kyle and Del, are Filipino, too, or more accurately “Filipino, too” since the adverb “too” often accompanies their designation:

“You don’t need a fork, eat with your hands. You’re Filipino, too.”

“His nose is really American, but if you look at his eyes you can tell he’s Filipino, too.”

“You wore those clothes to a funeral, throw them away. You know you’re Filipino, too.”

They are mixed, second-generation Filipinos whose sense of being American overwhelms their sense of being Filipino. The longer we live in the United States the more a Filipino identity becomes an addendum to an American identity.

My father was “Filipino, too,” with a vague sense of what that meant, because his Filipino father left his “Filipino, too” mother when he was a child. It was not until after my father passed away, while I was in graduate school, that I began to imagine myself as “Filipino, too.” The process began in the re-imagining of my youth in a poetry workshop. In my early twenties, struggling for anything of substance to say, I turned to the stories of my youth for content. Unfortunately, these stories were either not very interesting or failed to register in me any significant emotional response. To be a poet, I needed to learn to write with passion about things that were important to me. I needed a childhood trauma, but I did not have one. My childhood was pretty average, so I inflated smaller concerns into an experience that carried the weight of an emotional trauma. This is what the workshop seemed to want from me. It valued confessional poetry that evoked a painful past, highlighted displays of deviant behavior, or showcased otherness. The truth was that my past was not very painful, any behavior I considered deviant was going to remain private, and I liked to think of myself as just a white boy with a Spanish name. To write poems for the workshop, I imagined a Filipino identity that my lack of cultural knowledge and my immature ideas about what it meant to be Filipino in America condensed to tropical fruit and dark skin. In the poem, I was afraid to be associated with symbols of the Philippines and embarrassed by my dark skin: “I like coconuts, / but as a boy I was scared / to eat them, especially / in the summer when my skin / was darker.” I

re-imagined my youth through the lens of difference, conflating narratives of racism with my experiences of childhood. This was my first failed attempt to imagine myself as Filipino and to understand a heritage that I was reluctant to claim.

I have one memory of seeing my paternal grandfather. I have cultivated this memory with family stories, facts brought back from the Philippines, and my own need to restore my family heritage. I was around four when I saw him grinding coconuts in a house in New Orleans' Ninth Ward. I was with my father, who seemed not to notice the ornaments of culture that were so curious to me. His focus was on my grandfather as a man, as a father, not as a representative of a people or a culture. His disappointment in him resulted in a door slamming on their relationship and marked my memory with sounds and images I could not reconcile with any other experience. When I first wrote about my grandfather my re-creation of the scene was limited by my knowledge of him and his world. I decided that the language the dark men in the house spoke and the one that my father was denied was Spanish, connecting the surname Gonzales to the colonial language. I had not heard, or heard of, Tagalog, a gap in my knowledge that I understood as a consequence of my Filipino grandparents' success in living the American melting pot narrative. Assimilation had erased a heritage I felt a need to understand.

The narrative of assimilation excuses our ignorance of our ancestral heritage by writing over our diverse stories with a singular narrative of American citizenship. Through this narrative cultural values of the homeland are subordinated and stories of difference melt into a larger story of shared values. The melting pot narrative becomes a justification for not knowing and not needing to know. The family narrative that I was

told, or I told myself, fit the national narrative, allowing me to dismiss my fragmented understanding of Filipino culture as a consequence of my ancestors being good Americans. Thinking of my family as living the typical immigrant life assuaged my desire to learn about an alternative cultural heritage. I was content with the standard narrative, even though the image of my grandfather grinding coconuts sat outside of this story. The persistence of his image and the realization that any attempt to understand my relationship to a Filipino heritage had to include him as part of my family's history pushed me to explore my cultural heritage more deeply by learning more about the Philippines and the life of Filipinos in America. I had to hear, see, read about, and experience narratives that would help me recreate the varied narratives of my immigrant ancestors. I had to understand my cultural displacement by placing those ancestors into a context that more accurately reflects their history. I had to understand my father through the story of an absent Filipino father and a first-generation Filipino American mother. I had to understand his cultural identity as forming through dominant American narratives that silenced alternative stories. I had to understand my connection to a Filipino heritage as part of an historical process that started with the colonization of the Philippines. To do this, I had to recover and also to recreate my Filipino heritage.

In the United States, national and local narratives helped define my cultural identity. I did not feel a consistent external push to identify with the Philippines until I started teaching in Asia. I taught English language classes in Japan, Korea and the United Arab Emirates for over a decade. I introduced myself to students in initial class meetings by writing "Randy Gonzales" on the board and encouraging each student to ask me a

question. The students asked a range of personal questions in line with their cultural expectations for me. In Japan, students inquired about my marital status, my favorite Japanese foods, and my stance on nuclear weapons. Each time they asked me where I was from, I told them I was from the United States and asked them if they had heard of the state of Louisiana or the city of New Orleans. Often, they had not heard of either, so I would draw a rough map on the board, explain U.S. geography, and point out Louisiana and New Orleans. Students would appear interested in the explanation of my origins as geography, but they would inevitably respond with “But Teacher, where are you from? Are you Spanish or Mexican?” I reiterated that I was from the United States and added that I was American, to which students would respond “but your name is Spanish” and “you don’t look American.” My explanation did not match my name, so I explained that “Gonzales” was a common name because of Spanish colonization and that I acquired the name by way of the Philippines. “So you’re Filipino,” students responded. I provided a more detailed genealogy explaining that most Americans are “mixed” and that as far as I knew I was 3/8 Filipino, 2/8 French, 1/8 English, 1/8 Irish, and 1/8 Spanish. Students tightened their faces to contemplate how this recipe made up my identity, nodded their heads, and started chatting. In Japan, I heard “firipin-jin” passed from student to student until they were all satisfied that I was Filipino. I started to distinguish between my home and my ancestry, telling students I was from the United States, but had Filipino ancestors. The longer I stayed overseas, the more I started to think of myself as “Filipino, too.”

When I arrived in the Philippines for the first time, I expected to meet my uncle, my father’s cousin, in the airport. We had exchanged letters prior to my visit, and I

anticipated meeting him there. Inside the terminal, there were no signs welcoming me to the Philippines. Outside the terminal, families crowded around returning overseas workers; men loaded boxes into vans or on top of private jeepneys; police in brown polyester uniforms pointed and whistled; tourists climbed into compact taxis; no one greeted me. Beyond the arrival ramp a crowd of people waited behind a chain-link fence. They held signs and yelled out across the sound of welcomes, loadings and leavings. Some Filipinos dragged their luggage over to the fence and went into the crowd, but most waited for a car to twist and honk its way through to the curb of the arrival gate. I glanced over to the crowd of faces behind the fence. Convinced that the fence was there to keep something away from me, to separate us from them, but unsure of the reasons for this separation, I stepped into the nearest taxi. Later, I found out that the private vehicles that picked up arriving passengers had started out in the parking lot beyond the fence and the eyes looking through the chain-links were waiting for someone. Uncle Ferdinand waited for hours in the crowd behind the fence, holding my name up to anyone who peered in his direction, trying to match someone to the photograph he had of me standing by a temple in Kyoto.

On this trip, I meet my grandfather's family. I met his two surviving siblings, numerous nieces and nephews, and their children. They all welcomed me as Enrique's grandson, a member of the Gonzalez family. They opened their homes to me, took time to show me around, and organized parties to introduce me to a widening circle of relatives. I had mixed feelings over the hospitality and inclusion, delighted to be welcomed into Filipino homes, but uncomfortable because I was being welcomed based

on a familial relationship that meant very little to me. I had only seen my grandfather once. While his image was memorable, he lived in my mind mostly as a symbol of my father's disappointment. I knew him as a man who abandoned his children. When his sister was introduced to me, she held her unsteady hands out to my face; with my cheeks in her palms, she cried. "He came back just once," she said referring to her brother's short visit to the Philippines in the 70's after a forty-year absence in which he married, had three children, divorced, remarried, and became an American citizen. She wrapped her arms around me and pulled her head into my stiff body. I represented three generations of absence from the Philippines. She held me as if she knew me, as if I were the one returning to a homeland. I put my arms around her weakly. I was twenty-five and had nothing to cry over.

Alfredo Navarro Salanga, in the poem "A Philippine History Lesson," suggests that there is a shared Filipino identity that time has diluted: "It's history that / moves us away / from what we are" (256). If there is a Filipino cultural essence, my visit to the Philippines taught me that I have moved far away from it. I left the country with a suitcase full of books and a piqued intellectual curiosity about the country my grandfather and great-grandfather left. I was appreciative of the hospitality the Gonzalez family showed me and felt delighted to have met my extended family, but the trip was more a vacation than a homecoming. I felt no strong emotional attachment to the country or the family that welcomed and accepted me. My father had passed away years earlier, making it easier for me to resist identifying with people that might have been his, but felt too far removed to be mine.

However, I was still named Gonzales. The assimilative replacement of the concluding z with an s was not enough to dismiss questions about my ethnicity. Living and working in Asia, I was asked repeatedly to see my name as ancestry and ancestry as essential to identity. Being an expatriate made me sympathetic to the physical displacements of my ancestors and made me more culturally aware, an awareness that translated into a desire to learn more about the Philippines and Filipino culture, and to reimagine my father as Filipino.

According to Stuart Hall the view of cultural identity as a shared heritage or a cultural essence is balanced by another view of cultural identity that recognizes the fluidity of identities. In this second view cultural identity is “a matter of becoming as well as of being” (Hall 225). In this light Salanga’s statement, “it’s history that / moves us away / from what we are,” is taken as a given, as identities are always in negotiation with the narratives of the past. History moves us away from what we are, but it also helps us to become what we will be. If I could imagine my father as Filipino, I could become Filipino, too. Filipino Studies critic S. Lily Mendoza notes a pattern of second, third, and fourth generation Filipino Americans looking to reconnect to a disavowed historical past. She sees this desire to reconnect as a “Fanonian moment of decolonization” that allows for a diasporic identity to develop (Mendoza 199). My explorations of a diasporic identity took on more significance when my sons were born. I felt a need to understand how my family let our Filipino identity slip into a few dishes and a name. If I understood my father’s loss and my own, I could re-imagine our family heritage, give my sons a stronger sense of their Filipino ancestry, and help my wife negotiate the conflicting desires to hold

onto her identity and to assimilate. If I could become “Filipino, too,” I could help them hold onto their Filipino identities.

Identity and culture have become my writing obsessions. Lines that wake me up in the middle of the night end up circling around these elusive terms. That poetry workshop introduced me to an absence that I still struggle to understand, but writing poetry is a means to come to moments of understanding. The poems I write become objects of this understanding, new lines in my identity narrative.

Outside In, and Inside Out

It took me twenty years to finish that poem about my grandfather. Not only did I not know enough about him, but I also did not know myself as a poet. I learned as much as I could about the Philippines and Filipino culture, about my father and grandfather. Like T.S. Eliot, who described the mind of the poet as “a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images” that collect until they can “form a new compound” (30-31), I believed that if stored up enough knowledge to fill the scene of the poem that my imagination would be able to mold it into a whole. I had romantic notions that, with the proper knowledge and touch of inspiration, poetry would flow from my imagination in uninterrupted streams of brilliance. If, as Wallace Stevens asserted, “the imagination is the power of the mind over possibility . . . over external objects” (136), then I should have been able to write the poem through the strength of my imagination. The persistence of the memory should have triggered the imagination and my mind should have helped form the poem, but it does not happen that way for me.

William Carlos Williams has been a model for my poetry and poetics. Williams looked to the imagination as a creative force that could make reality. He was not interested in representation, but wanted to create a “separate existence” that replaced “the reality of experience with its own” (Williams 45). I spent a lot of time writing poems I considered Willamesque—concise poems from a single perspective. The poems I wrote often ended up essentializing a single aspect of a scene or event, reducing experience through the language of the poem. In poems like “the rose is obsolete” from *Spring and All*, Williams was able to layer experiences into a poem that appears to come from a single perspective. A close reading of “the rose is obsolete” reveals that the poem draws on outside objects, including a Juan Gris painting, “Rose,” (“the broken plate/glazed with a rose”) and the work of Duchamp and Apollinaire (“the Milky Way”) (30-32). Williams believed that the poet should “fix the particular with the universality of his own personality” (27). He internalized the work of these artists into his understanding of a rose that included modern art. Like Eliot, Williams placed the site of knowledge inside the poet, with the difference being that he connected it to personality, not the mind.

I was trying to follow the methods of the poets I admired, but their methods did not fit me. I am not like Eliot, Stevens, or Williams, self-contained poets like the poet Jack Spicer describes as “a beautiful machine which [manufactures] the current for itself, [does] everything for itself” (5). Spicer was not this type of poet either. He thought that poets needed “an Outside,” that they should be open to outside transmissions that they would tune into like a radio (5). I would never be that beautiful machine, so I found a method to write that allowed me to work in relationship to an outside.

When I am inspired to write, the inspiration suggests a perspective (look at the items in a pharmacy as if you have seen them for the first time, imagine the inside of that room as a Filipino space). I write until I exhaust this perspective, stopping when it appears that nothing new will come from the activity. In the past, I would shape these single-perspective poems until I felt I had written something complete. But, I was unsatisfied with these pieces; they lacked the possibility I seek in poetry. These poems come from the part of me that wants TRUTH. They come from an inside perspective that is limited by my memory, my experience, my understanding of experience, my cultural upbringing, my moral sensibility, and my personality. The inside perspective limits us to what we know. It looks to control the outside, limiting the experience of writing to the known and channeling all investigations back towards the self.

I want to balance this inside perspective with outside perspectives that create possibilities. Outside objects, like facts, images, scholarly articles, word lists, poetic forms, what I hear someone say to his dog, or an overheard line of poetry, change the perspective of the poem, introduce randomness, and help me follow Richard Hugo's advice to get off the subject. Allowing outside perspectives to enter into the writing process allows me to engage fully in the moment of writing without having to rely only on memory to write a poem that draws from multiple perspectives. A movement towards outside perspectives is not an attempt to escape the self. Poets are always part of their subject, with their personalities determining their sense of the world and this sense determining their subjects (Stevens 128). My search for outside perspectives is an attempt

to expand “the universality of [my] personality” (Williams 27) during the writing process.

One way I expand my “universality” is to question the language that comes easily to me. I follow the model of John Yau, who used constraints like made-up forms and a vocabulary restricted to what is found in scientific books, to break comfortable patterns and writing habits (*Approximating* 383). I regularly employ a syllabic line to constrain the line length of my poems, which forces me to think about each word as sound and meaning. For “Itinerary,” I used the formal restrictions of a sestina to push the poem into new experiences. I also use word substitution, a technique that gave Yau the politically charged phrase “chink of meat” (*Edificio* 86). By replacing words that I judge to be too pedestrian with words of similar sounds, but different meanings, I break writing habits and create new possibilities for the poem.

Hugo tells us “all good serious poems are born in obsession” (7). Writing a poem about a memory of my grandfather was one of my obsessions. But, I couldn’t complete it until I looked to outside perspectives to fill in the spaces where memory faltered and my imagination proved insufficient. The poem I wrote about my grandfather, “Object Benefit of a Grandfather as a Coconut Grinder,” is composed around a sentence, “He was cutting coconuts in a house in the ninth ward,” that I wrote in a poetry workshop twenty years earlier. This sentence provided the scene that outside objects like a word list generated from a concordance of selected essays, a scholarly article on the object benefit of short-term memory, and images of coconut grinders, would help develop. The poem progressed between inside and outside perspectives, the imagination moving from one perception to

another. The outside objects were incorporated into the scene as words strung together, processes were suggested, and a rhythm formed. The engagement with an outside allowed the imagination to find words to create the experience of the poem.

Once a poem is written, it becomes an outside object, a perspective that I cannot entirely claim to be my own. The imagination fuses inside and outside perspectives to turn the poem into a new reality that rests outside of the internalized experience of writing it. “Aubade” is partially composed from five single-perspective poems written and filed away. These poems were monuments to my experience, but lacked significance. They gained new meaning when I thought about them alongside the line “We sat grown quiet at the name of love” in William Butler Yeats’ “Adam’s Curse” (81). The line led to a series of perceptions that equated the sense of wonder in the line to the wonder I felt when living in Japan. To write “Aubade,” I gathered these single-perspective poems and let my imagination read them against the Yeats line. The poem progressed as my imagination jumped from one perception to the next, following the music of the Yeats line and the logic of a form that was revealing itself as I wrote. “Aubade” has a consistency of tone that suggests a single perspective, but the poem required multiple perspectives to develop. The tension between these perspectives stimulated the imagination and shaped the poem.

I write poetry to get to that moment where the imagination recognizes the possibility that disparate perspectives can form a new reality, a poem. The reality created by “Object Benefit” has personal significance, since it validates my memory of my grandfather and overwrites it, giving me a sensually and intellectually heightened

experience as a replacement. “Aubade” becomes an object of my nostalgia for the wonder of experiencing a place for the first time. Writing poetry allows the imagination to float between perspectives and to create new experiences from memory.

Writing Poetry About Culture

I write poetry to understand experience through an engagement with ideas, language, and memory, but I work to craft my writing into a poem in order to share the experience with an audience. When I write, I generally follow the guidelines Charles Olson laid out in “Projective Verse,” particularly that “form is never more than an extension of content” and that “one perception must immediately and directly lead to a further perception” (16)(17). But Olson, and many of the avant-garde poets that followed him, wrote poetry that reaches audiences who share a cultural understanding. In the late 20th century when I was beginning to formulate my poetics, there were few Asian American poets who wrote about cultural experiences without relying heavily on narrative structures, familiar lyric patterns, or ethnocentric clichés. It appeared to me that an Asian American poet either had to write in a familiar form that explicated experience or write language-centered poetry that muted personal identity.

John Yau, a poet I tried to use as a model for my work, did the latter, writing language-centered poems on a range of topics. When he wrote poetry about Asian America, he did so from an emotional distance, and with references that were available to the average American reader. For example, Yau’s “Genghis Khan” series touches on the politics of ethnicity through allusions to the representation of Asians in the media. The isolation Yau felt as a Chinese American did not provide subject matter for his poetry;

instead he chose to address this isolation in his prose work, writing first-person narrative pieces that addressed his Asian American identity. Prose allowed him to contextualize and explicate his experience for an audience, something he could not do in his poetry while sticking to his language-centered aesthetic. Yau helped expand my poetic range, but he did not help me write about culture or identity. Yau resisted writing poetry from the perspective of a subjective “I,” seeing the position limited by the poetic tradition of the confessionals: “to write about one’s life in terms of a subjective ‘I’ is to accept an academicized, historical legacy... to fulfill the terms of the oppressor” (Interview 49). Like Yau, I resisted the personal “I,” but my obsession with identity and culture forced me to identify methods to write from a subjective “I” position. The challenge was to write from this position about culture and identity, and still stay true to my desire to write an investigative poetry that did not explicate culture.

Catalina Cariaga in *Cultural Evidence* taught me that it was possible to write on your own terms and still use the subjective “I” perspective. Cariaga, a Filipino American poet, followed a poetics of resistance, but instead of seeing the subjective “I” as part of her oppression, she identified oppression in the American poetic tradition that limited the forms of her writing. Cariaga expanded her poetic range by writing in a variety of “other forms” that she “would still consider poetry” (Poetics 38). She overcame the obstacle of audience by writing about culture as if she were a “local” writer addressing a “local” audience knowledgeable about immigration issues, the history of Filipino and American relations, and Asian American literature (Cariaga Poetics 37). By narrowing her audience, she freed herself to write poems that challenge readers to engage with the

historical, political and social issues that affect Filipino Americans. Her poetry “documents a reclaiming, retrieving, and remixing of culture metaphors, symbols, nuances, queues . . . to enliven and set them in motion in a world and time that is most intent on forgetting and denying them” (Cariaga Poetics 39). Despite her focus on the “local” reader, *Cultural Evidence* contains a number of single perspective poems that allow the “non-local” to imagine the cultural context that frames the more complex poems. Cariaga designed the book to develop from single perspective poems that set up the cultural context to multiple perspective poems that investigate more fully this context.

Cultural Evidence models an approach to audience that includes the cultural insider and outsider, introducing a cultural context with single perspective poems and challenging an audience to engage with the particulars of this context in multiple perspective poems that experiment with language and form. In my collection, I use prose-like pieces and single perspective poems to help set the context and highlight persistent concerns. The prose poem “Pineapples” adds context to the identity question introduced in “Object Benefit,” defining my early relationship with a Filipino identity and introducing my father as someone with an uncertain relationship with his Filipino identity. The poem lays the groundwork for a reader to enter into later poems like “Paternal Archive” and “Balik Sa Bayan (to return to your country).”

I value the multiple perspective poems because after I have completed them I can read them again, gain new insights, and come to new understandings. I value my single perspective poems as guideposts for my interests, as they often get straight to my concerns. For example, the single perspective poem “Paniki” draws attention to the theme

of perspective, itself a concern throughout the collection. The poem describes a scene in which the speaker of the poem and a local Filipino look at the same space, but focus on different objects, seeing what they believe to be of most significance at that time and in that place. The speaker cannot see past the bats that fly overhead, while the local looks past the bats to the stars above them.

Whether written from an objective distance or with the subjective “I,” my poetry will always partially be about my perspective. Readings in cultural anthropology reinforced the notion that my sense of the world and, thus, my poetry are limited by my subject position. The question I now face when writing is how to account for my subject position and clue the audience into my perspective. When writing about culture, the perspective of the writer is significant, since it can range broadly from cultural insider to ethnographer to cultural tourist to imperial agent. In poems that are written from the perspective of a cultural outsider, I feel the need to define the speaker. Like a voice that speaks from behind the camera to remind the audience that the camera’s eye is being controlled by a filmmaker, I interject myself into poems that might work without an “I” present. In “Orientalism,” I define my perspective as an astonished visitor with lines like “I’m a fisherman adrift along her shore” and “I am a wide-eyed tripping stick.” In two poems on Thailand, “Itinerary” and “Coconuts,” I point to my outsider identity and, thus, the limits of my cultural knowledge by using the language of a tourist guidebook. I want my subjectivity to be obvious, making it clear that I am expressing nothing more than my understanding of culture at a particular time and place.

My poetry looks to re-invent a cultural experience and have that experience be meaningful for a reader. I push the particulars of my experiences, real and imagined, into a socio-political and cultural context that make them meaningful for a wider audience, but the poems should not just be about my identity and my perspective. The multiple perspective approach should allow readers to engage with the text, find meaning in the tension between perspectives, and create an experience that expands “the universality of [their] personality” (Williams 27).

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OBJECT BENEFIT OF A GRANDFATHER AS A COCONUT GRINDER

History is constructed on quotidian
objects: bikes with no wheels, hubs
of metal blades, halved coconuts, varnished shells.

My grandfather's legs, like lesions
across the brain, italicize action.

His articulate kinetics:
cigarette hung from thin lips,
pedals pump continuously,
white flesh snows from shells,
hands pile, and pull out brown flecks
as me and my father enter,
a slow head gesture.

The room becomes a story of implicit items:
a family's scream,
a drupe's split, thickened
endosperm scraped fresh.

The sprocket pulls my fluid eyes into a loop,
his legs turn out the flesh,
fix on memory's chain a history
simultaneously invoked and denied.

Heritage, my heritage a wall
scattered with dark men who bend
their words towards English.

Facial expressions are not part of this memory,
but are re-constructed as: pushed-in nose-curling sneers,
weary rolling eyes, lip-glued grins,
screaming lower jaws, or eyes
whipping above rigid noses.

Leaving becomes a yellow-framed
screen door, a wobbly coconut cup,
wide active springs extend, snap.

PINEAPPLES

“Pineapple” and “Harry Lee” attached to me through my father. Harry Lee the popular Chinese American sheriff of Jefferson Parish. From a distance my father resembled the cowboy-hat wearing sheriff. He didn’t resemble a pineapple. Spanish colonists brought the pineapple to the Philippines. American colonists brought my great-grandfather to the United States. American opportunity brought my grandfather to the United States. In the Philippines I learned to cut a pineapple into an eyeless spiral. My father made decorative melon ball displays of cantaloupe, honey dew and watermelon, carving bowls from the rinds. He started wearing cowboy hats after *Urban Cowboy* which made him look more like the sheriff. We took the big pot to the rodeo. Hand drawn signs for Cajun Land Boudin and Sausage. My father’s round Asian face setting under a cattleman crown, selling boudin-rice, pork, cayenne, seasonings blended in a thin hog-intestine case-steamed slow so not to flow into a grainy burst. Harry Lee worked in his family’s laundry and restaurants, before law school and election. The Chinese Cajun Cowboy was popular and flamboyant, winning each election until he died. My father was friendly, talked to everyone. They went to the same high school (Francis T. Nicholls). He played up this confusion and willingly took on the nickname. I didn’t. When I was called “Harry Lee” or “pineapple,” I would mock and dismiss them with what my mother called a “shit-eating grin.” I ate won tons and fried rice, but didn’t trust egg rolls. Asia had nothing to do with me.

I answered to “andele, andele, arriba, arriba.” I went to Mexico with my father walking across the border at Nogales, Arizona. I bought a sombrero. They joked that it was hard to get me back across the border. In freshman Spanish Mrs. Rosario had to stop the tape when Senorita Flores’ breasts popped out of her blouse. I didn’t learn anything new that day. My father knew Asia from the river, from crates he acquired. He knew Asia in the hibachi we picked up from the dock. He smoked turkeys in the clay Japanese smoker basting them every thirty minutes with black pepper and vinegar. I saw one in Japan, outside of Ono castle, yellow-fleshed sweet potatoes roasted on the grill. Hibachi translates to fire bowl. He cut the breast across the grain, a sliver of skin on each slice. Just right, not too thick so anyone got a disproportionate amount. They still talk about his turkey. Harry Lee was born in the backroom of a Chinese laundry. They called him ‘chink.’

What if he was Filipino? I was the fastest mouse in Mexico. I went to Spain to make up for not knowing how to roll out my name as expected. They didn’t know it took the long way around and traveled through the islands. The roasted suckling pig in Segovia, Spain was like the lechon Uncle Ferdie roasted in Quezon City. The first in line get the crispy skin. The sheriff’s paper-mâché head was surrounded by fortune cookies. The Philippines is the largest producer of pineapples. The United States the largest importer. My father ate the cookies. I collected the fortunes. My cookie said “if the table moves, move with it.” A large section of the pineapple industry moved from Hawaii to the Philippines. The flesh sweetest where the eyes golden. You can dip them in salt when they’re sour. I put my sombrero in a shopping bag to cross the border. It made a difference.

ONE PHOTOGRAPH

I.

Sept. 10, 1948
To Evelyn
& the Children:

This is just a remembrance from your Filipino Folks who admired and loved you all and still admire and love you all inspite of everythings.

This picture was taken during the Japanese occupation and developed from an old negative.

affectionately yours,
Minoy

Front Row (L.-R.) Diana, Mama, Papa & Lydia
Back Row (L.-R.) Salvador, Eugenio, Cirilo, Carmen, Bernardo, Antonio, & Guillermo

II.

Jan. 11, 1950

To Evelyn and
the children

May this picture remind you of your relatives in the Philippines.

From
Minoy

This picture was taken on April, 1944 in Manila during the Japanese occupation.

Sitting— Diana, Adelaida (Mama), Eugenio (Papa), Lydia
Standing— Salvador, Eugenio, Cirilo, Carmen, Bernardo, Antonio, Guillermo

III.

Mar. 15, 1960

To Evelyn

I hope you haven't forgotten your family in the Philippines.

This picture was taken in 1944. Mama and Papa are gone. Enrique has not come home.

Minoy

Front: Diana (Nena), Mama (deceased), Papa (deceased) & Lydia

Back: Salvador (Buddy), Eugenio (Gene), Cirilo (Liling), Carmen (Minoy), Bernardo (Bernie), Antonio (Tony) (in Virginia), Guillermo (in Florida)

PAPER BALLONS

It was time to be drunk and unidiomatic
(the damp frogs have begun their song)
just follow along, follow along.

Balloons rose all night, an impersonal light
rising from the glare of the blustered boulevard.

I was a fool (for light through a knothole)
white paper moons in night's wall.

“Crazy balloon,” youth cried.

Flames dropped from the sky,
ashed-out in cobbled streets.
Crowds tossed out screams
and clattered under awnings.

Even after balloons cleared the rooftops,
bodies moved in tilted patterns,
the sober eye shopped the air, anticipation
of globes falling into oblivious parades.

I brandished tourist swords into the sky,
called for that prick Donnie to bring back
the wine and turned into verse (falling
balloon your ardent light scorches
the fingers of my youth).

The streets emptied into a beach.
The beach considered the sun.
Eyes held steady on the locals
unclothed in the cold green sea.

I buried my feet. A naked
girl crossed the sand.
I thanked her for the light.
That's all I knew of sunrise,
I hadn't seen as much as that.

MEMORY

I am an awkward cub slapping
at surfaces to catch the splash.
Each abstract packet of noodles
heats a dinner of memories,

bowls of soup arrested in hiragana.
The mind dances on its stem,
a hundred poems drift across
waves of ramen.

I follow the conventions,
boil flavor out of shells,
watch it float in froth
tangle dried sardines and kelp
into circling carp.

I stare past clouds blooming
over seafood subjects,
past red melamine edges,
push aside tentacles
extending across the bowl
to see into the broth.

Splash and the obedient
ear engages careless rhythms.
Slurp and sound out the heat
push breath into the heart.

Taste and the ingredients
evaporate into the squeezing
of chopsticks before lips
as the noodle is bitten off.

ORIENTALISM

She pushes me down tight alleys.

“Kyojin,” she calls out, “kyojin.”
Children respond in clamorous
gallops, fall away in mock fear,
are crushed under my stride.

I am a giant of narrow spaces.

She’s an excitable short skirt,
a uniformed eccentricity,
an early evening display.

At the Love Hotel, she is the hand
sliding out the key, the unseen clerk.
Romance should be discreet, but women
leave their stories in bedside books.
She reads them as regret.
She names the anonymous by occupation,
or fruit-like peculiarities, speaking tenderly
of the persimmon, cackling at the teller’s
impassioned confession to the banker’s wife.

We bend to a nearly complete
moon of azuki bean pastry.
“Now you know,” she raises
her icing eyes. We are knee-deep
in sea-sprayed narcissus.

I am an obtuse landscape
sharpened in scenic gestures
and crafted panoramas.

She is pyroxene from the Greek-
fire and stranger. She sparkles
in metamorphic rock- waves
fracture against her cliffs,
a spirit of stones revisited,
calling across turbulent tides.

She is a shrine of bountiful catches.
I’m a fisherman adrift along her shore.

She is stretched down the Eichizen coast,

flowered on roadside rocks, ruminated
in endings, unclaimed, she remakes
herself a red-lacquered myth.

I am a wide-eyed tripping stick,
stumbling into her crowds,
changing perspectives, I float
variously in her scenery, taking
in her unarticulated waters.

In the exotic pastry shops,
she is a mime of caracal-eared
croissants. "What is it in English?"
A chocolate-tipped flaky French
form. An octopus tentacles towards
c-scaled fish. She is questions
and answers. An enigmatic
crème oozes under a griddled crust.

She resides in a castle of intricate gables,
protected by carp molded to incant liquids.

She is a wooden room
heated by small fires,
fragrant smoke encircles
her open beams. When
I begin to burn, rain taps
the heads of her carp.

AUBADE

We sat grown quiet at a nibblet
in a chopstick grip. We sat at soft sake
sips over bottle clack. We grew quiet
at *tatami* stretched to welcome mat.

Grown quiet at blow fish swollen
in wide-brim hats. Quiet at trains
departing a temple's grasp. At rice-
field shimmer
under a mountain's chest.

Still quiet at a hawker's melon-
bouncing shout, an *obassan*
in blossoms swept. We sat at
her broom-bent back, grown
reconciled with neat white piles.

At angles pigeons patch-- quietly
at blue sky circle back, Yuka's
fourth kimono change, sunlight
sprint over woken toes, first
rice tangled in steaming bowls.

We knelt quietly over tea
cups held in whispering blows.

We sat quiet at piano curls
in stilted horns, Trish's
stare-raising voice. We sat
in incense waft, temple's draft,
strumming blues-hot curry bowls,
teapots cupped with hands of snow.

At Mirin bowing to her toes, flowers
rising in the surf—crashing waves
to blossoms birth, school girls,
freshly printed plaques—less rhythm at
wood clattered prayers. We quietly sat
in *yakitori*-tongue
entrée skewered.

In snow snapped limbs of sculpted trees,

childhood chases of paper cranes,
morning tilts against the breeze.

At petals turned, futons stacked, golden
sunlit *tatami* mats, trembling rays we go quiet at.

PLACES WE HADN'T BEEN

She said she hadn't been
to Cebu. I noted soft
vowels of Melbourne.

We ambled across Ubud,
through tourist talk,
overheard volcanoes.

I hadn't been to Fiji,
Melaka, Palawan. She
Romblon, told of each
white palmed beach
she hadn't curled up on.

We tilted from sloping rain,
together, young dancers
bent upon still as deer-
a quick trip in chocolate
hazy hills, Bohol briefly
a place we could be.

We sauntered past leaf-
carved beams, drizzled
through puddled walks
to waterfalls' wet feet
reef-enclosed lagoons
lined in fine sand, conch-
shell moans call out
through the laughter of
indigenous instruments.

POETICS OF A JAPANESE PHARMACY

On entering we consent to a conversation of objects:
sprayed on happy endings: dolls in skit of Fresh Light:
wing padded pigs presented shyly: cuddled grins.

She smiles: uncertainty smiles bright packages: (smile
smile): I wrap myself in the culture of toilet rolls:
gesture to comic contorts: curve to breathless figures.

I play an ecstatic game: amend cows to Boxes
of Beauty: animated applications: before: she smiles:
and after: Hot Curvy Oilgel: examine Misty Throat.

She sorts a cavalry of products: daily divining
the common: puts personality to object: intones
kawaii to a purple Crying Rash Cream.

I am drawn to rounded eyes: questioning clouds:
giggling shaped answers: stacked to counter
my quizzical tilts: soundless shelves of white.

Contained between Sky Hat and Happy
Family: I am a solitary packet: she mimes
my display: stock-still in silent resolution.

DUKE AND TOLA

Tola looked over her English-phrase book as she waited for Duke to return with his guest. Her finger stopped at the word *heritage*. She would be the tour guide for the week. She didn't know Sam, but she looked forward to his visit. They would go places they hadn't been.

Duke's English had gotten worse since his study abroad summer. He struggled to move English words from the page to his tongue. He was glad Tola could help him talk to Sam. He wanted Sam to understand his country. Sam called him by his Thai name, Anuchtai, working on the pronunciation until Duke could recognize it when Sam called to him across the quad. At the end of the semester Duke told him he preferred the nickname.

Duke thought Sam wanted to go where other foreigners went. Tola read about the entertainment district in police reports. She wasn't going to miss her chance to see it for herself. She sat at the bar between Sam and Duke, watching intently as a performer found ways to insert ping pong balls into her body. Duke watched Sam who swiveled his head between the performer and her audience. That night in their studio apartment, Tola made a place for her and Duke on the floor, left a pillow in the bed for Sam. Duke smiled through Sam's protest.

The next day Duke drove them to a 14th century city. Tola told Sam stories that weren't on the English plaques. Duke added news of missing artifacts with Tola helping him tell the stories of their theft. On the way back, Sam and Tola slept, his head on the passenger window of the single-cap pickup, her head on his shoulder. That night, Sam made a place for himself on the apartment floor. Duke put Sam's pillow in the bed. Sam was his guest.

For two days they toured the Northeast. Tola taught Sam how to pray. Sam knelt beside her bending as she bent, rising when she rose. He rubbed a flake of gold on the cheek of a Buddha. He placed flowers at the feet of the heroine who outwitted foreign invaders. When they got back to the apartment, Sam went to sleep in the bed. Tola climbed in with him and hugged the unoccupied edge. Duke with nowhere else to go spread himself out on the floor.

In the morning, no one talked about the night. They spent the day searching out waterfalls. They strolled an open-air market. Tola wanted to see how far Sam would venture when sampling from the row of fried insects. Duke asked Sam if he had learned about Thai hospitality. Of course he did. That night, Duke put his pillow in the bed. Sam made a place for himself on the floor.

COCONUTS

Once the untannable coral-pink Swede has his last drink,
everyone tucks into their huts.

The wind picks up.

You are on an island of palms.

You now know coconut palms and banyan, and the rough-tongued lick
of beach dogs in search of morning mist, as you know temples, shrines,
and waterfalls; and fish from barracuda and kingfish to ribbon eel.

The generator has been cut.

Light hides in the back rooms of clouds.

You are learning about darkness.

You undress and dress in the blind knowledge of yourself.

You trust your steps but are uncertain of where they may fall, so
you flood spaces with light before committing to move any further.

When the crash comes, you are plucking leafs from your uneaten dreams.

It sounds like an activity practiced by people with one foot in the grave, or
a poor recording played back through a tiny speaker, or a teenage girl
from the wilds of rural Limerick, a snail-shell when a thrush beats it on a stone,
or a tray of pint glasses cascading to the floor, like the fight's happening
on all sides of the bed at once.

You are on a small island with seven other people.

And no boat.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes,” you say, “but I haven't found my flashlight.”

“Okay, goodnight.”

You are alone on an island under wind-blown palms,
in a palm-thatched hut with snakes living in the roof.
You have heard of three-inch cockroaches falling in soup,
of ghosts unleashed from breaking jars that huff under
the weight of air, and spirits that have their fun
bowling charms into coconut palms.

Your flashlight's bright beam reveals a green coconut settling like an orb on the earthen
floor.

You find a cluster of coconuts, up to four snakes stunned
and still, and another like a broken string of beads dangles
near the hole where the coconuts rained through.

It's a crash and then dead uneasy silence.
You are not afraid of snakes. It is 2 am.
It's a simple exercise in how to slow your heart.
It's a criterion for curling up under mosquito nets.

Save your laughter for the fishermen asleep
under leaning palm trees at the foot of the dock.

Save your smiles for the panting dog
at your feet when you wake on the beach.

GET YA FATHER FROM THE BAR

I knew he'd spin me on a stool--
choose. A t-shirted magician he'd
pull a packet of dried shrimp
from his cap-*this*. A beef stick
would appear from an ear-*or this*.
He'd prop me on the bar disappear
in the smoke of his stories.

He hid in caves, pages where palms
popped-up. He climbed coconut trees-
all he had to eat and drink-dropped
them down. Bombs curled to the ground.
He grew swift-forest slanted with
Japanese. Skilled at dodging enemy
attack he spun, grabbed their attention
swallowed the underbrush. Gone.

I knew he'd sing me home
shuffle past raised silent porches
on Congress Street. He'd wave, call
faces out of windows, tap and slap
with sidewalk choristers. *Knees up*
he'd say, as I bent up familiar
steps, stumbled to the holstered
arms of mother. I'd throw myself
around her before she could draw.

PANIKI

outside the luminous
dome of Manila soft
glow of windows cuts

across rice fields bats
smooth winged dark
chasing dark skim edges

sight a few pixels
displaced in the static sky
“paniki” I say again

it darts around the cave
of my mouth pushes lips
open surprise in turns

the pedicab slows legs
loose feet follow pedals
driver stretches back

faces sky glides through
darkness “estrella”
he prances out syllables

announces brilliant
star-lit night begins
to pedal again

ITINERARY

You now know coconuts and red-tailed rat snakes,
and the rough-tongued lick of beach dogs that break
in search of morning mist, as you know cascading sounds
of blossom-strewn temples, solitary shrines, and stone-
stepped waterfalls; and trees from coconut and sugar palms
to the densely crowned Arenga and its flowered flows.

Go, now, to where the channels of pleasure and profit flow.
Leave soft sand shores and boardwalks. Snake
down tight scooter-lined alleys, into pubs adorned in neon palms,
where bar girls and lady boys mingle into an international conference of breaks,
holidays, and escapes. Join the coral-pink skinned parade across stone
bridges of culture. Order a watered-down drink with a name that sounds

like laughter and the shuffling of feet in the mouths of any who sound
it out properly. Have a chat with a bar girl, because pleasure flows
from board games. Ask her to teach you the Asian game with black and white stones,
or challenge her to Connect Four. Buy her a drink, and then play Snakes
and Ladders, a simplicity she may prefer as her attention breaks
between wayward gazes. Her hands not trained for Jenga, her palms

weighted for trays, her fingers flicker from the constant sipping of palm
sugar drinks she substitutes for Rum and Coke. Because you can sound
out her name, buy her another. Because she shares her smile, don't break
from the game. Draw upon the culture of contradiction. Engage the flow
of commerce and local conversation no matter how the Dog-toothed Cat Snake
perverts her line of argument. You have seen the five heads of Naga in stone,

slithered tongues crusted in gold. In her stories you play a two kilo skipping stone
at the edge of being thrown, you blaze in her palm,
an overweight deity, a dragon, prosperity and snake,
many heads and shapes. You'll come back for the sound
of her voice, for the myths she knows, return to hear her Hollywood-flow
and pop-accurate phrasings. No need to subtitle her scripts, stresses do not break

in an off place. Non-descript, loose-jeans hip. Like you, she pushes about broken
coasts in a confusion of knowing and wanting. In a balance of familiar stones
you must move to differentiate. Acknowledge the cultural flows,
round and near. Have her map her origins in ink. Is her island scratched with palms?
Count the bars that dot her shores. Does she sketch a sound?
Is it to the East or West? Note whether water ripples like a surge of snakes,

flows along the shore's shape. Don't tell her your story of coconuts that drop from palms
and crash into the night like stones. She will tell you five more. She will laugh a sound

knowing laugh that breaks you from your expectations, swallows your surprises with snakes.

TROPICAL DEPRESSIONS

The path as reported. Filipinos settled here before the Louisiana Purchase. In history in the eye. From Manila to Acapulco to St. Malo La. Their platform destroyed rebuilt destroyed into assimilation. Their children attended New Orleans schools. The turns more than pinpoints. What moves with it? Misplaced in currents. The push of history time curves culture community. My grandfather lived out his life in the unincorporated areas. Wide lawns squirrels hiding out the storms north of the lake. Flying debris trees falling. Rarely water like in the delta St. Bernard and down rising tides. Force out a whole way of living. Fishermen are most at risk. In Manila Village dried shrimp blown off rooftops. They are moved inland. Integrated. Living room love of boats. Startover. There is only one beginning. How many readjustments? 1763 built Philippine-style villages in St. Malo. Its course without change predictable between the highs and lows. The possibility it could turn into the lake empty into New Orleans. A hurricane demolished the settlement in 1915. The huts perched above the swamp lifted (wind or water?). Catalyst for exodus. How long could they last? During the depression Filipinos came south cheaper living. A new south community on the way in. We are moving closer to water. Manila Village rose out of Barataria Bay an island of homes. All water my grandmother said. Integration. A dried shrimp industry muskrat shrimp oysters at the edge of the gulf. She never could have lived there. She's always lived about a mile from the river. We don't start over. Something remains. A structure. Pylons. Barnacled. The unpredictable turns. She lost everything. There are no pictures of what slips past her. My grandfather peddled a stationary bike contrived to grate coconuts. Life of other American. Great-grandfather left everything for a more affordable south. New Orleans is a bowl. Grandfather came ashore dropped to the bottom. Returned home once. In Quezon, his sister held me. A memory snatched from blowing away. The still beauty of the eye. The winds sway the tall pines testing for the snapping point. They remain adjusting to the new conditions. The ability to speak Spanish gave the Manilamen access. There were no Filipinas. My grandfather must have thought the same when he met my grandmother. Only a generation for the words to go. Blonde-haired Cajun accented descendants. There is no going back. Who knew at the edge of the swamp they existed? Every beam, plank, board, and shingle of the houses upon stilts. She can cook adobo and sotanghon. They escaped from Spanish galleons jumping ship running to the swamp. *Ulam* without rice. Vinegared fish. A solitary world of men. Their wives stayed in New Orleans. Melting into America. Married Cajun women, Indians, and others. Running to the water. My grandmother rode it out in Baton Rouge. There is no going home. Debris of what she came from. My grandfather is buried in Pearl River. Far from the Mississippi in tall pines. The turn comes. The pilings are left.

DIALECTIC

Too many fish, she said.
A salty surface of tilapia rippled the moon.
Tilapia, I said.
Hands move from her *abaya*,
push sand to the horizon.
We dig more ponds.
The soft white flesh splashed at the edge.

Oranges we grow.
In the desert? I asked.
Here, is an oasis.
Her finger sketched out the dunes.
But, orange trees? I asked.
Anything we can grow.
The *faluj* clapped and flowed.

Her hands circled in fruits.
Mangoes, round ones too.
Guavas glistened.
And dates? I asked.

Too many, she ate
disrupting her thin black veil.
Sweet, I guessed.
With camel milk, she said tasting good.
No, I soured.
I like it.
I don't.

I like you.
Yes? I asked.
Fruit trees tapped into the dunes.
But... she started.
Tilapia swimming in large schools.

You don't..
I wondered where her lip bent.
You don't believe like me?
A camel in the distance fed.
Yes, I said.
Date palms swayed along the fence.

She steadied the sagging fig.
I don't, I meant.

Green bee-eaters perched in the twigs.
Yes, she bit.

MULTICULTURAL

—at the Future International School

The children decide
their own teams—
Arabs versus non-Arabs.

Filipino boys joined
with Pakistani, Indian,
a lone American against

their Arab classmates
from nine different nations.
Some days it's about faith:

“Who's Muslim?”

“Who Christian?”

“Who will the Hindus join?”

KAZUHICO AND KAZUKO

Kazuhico wore the blue jumpsuit of a laborer. He shook away the last snow from the dense needles of his white pines. Kazuhico and Kazuko were taking down the bamboo poles that supported the trees through winter. Kazuko held the poles in place as Kazuhico unwrapped the ropes binding them to the branches. It took both of them to lay down the thick supports. The land had been in Kazuhico's family's for over four hundred years. He married Kazuko to live on the land with him.

They lived in a home of sliding paper doors. When all of the doors were slid open the bare-bellied Buddha at the center of the home could see into the smaller rooms that enclosed it. Kazuhico and Kazuko rolled out their futons in different rooms on different sides of the shrine. They left their thumping hearts with others. But, Kazuhico thought it might be love that woke Kazuko early to make him miso soup before he boarded the train. He thought it looked like love when he met her at the station on frigid nights. Kazuko stopped thinking about love when they agreed not to have children.

During the week Kazuhico worked at a city bank. He wore clean white shirts with cuffs that stayed crisp into the evening. He didn't go to singing rooms or hostess bars when his work was done. If he wasn't in the English school above the sweet shop, he was on the local back to his village. The village was a collection of walled residences surrounded by fields.

Kazuhico and Kazuko planted rice seedlings in a field to the north of the village. They grew rows of turnips and potatoes in the field within their walls. The rows rolled across their property like a scroll, on the south edge a field of large black stones that memorialized Kazuhico's ancestors. Every weekend Kazuhico raked the debris of the persimmon tree from the memorial garden. He washed the stones he had stories for, but let fade those with dull etchings that were past living memory. His mother, Okaasan, planted incense around the base of her husband's stone.

Kazuhico inherited the lessons of the land from his father. If Kazuhico forgot them, Okaasan would lead him to the right path. She was shaped by this land, legs bowed, back hunched. With only a slight squat she could plant a seedling or pull up a white radish. Kazuko was still learning how to lower herself into the fields. She had small hips that qualified her to be a flight attendant, but made her unsteady as she bent between rows. Kazuko didn't complain, but on the way to the fields she folded her hands before each small shrine, and before the morning work was done she walked towards the mountains to drink from streams of melted snow.

With the bamboo poles in the barn, Kazuhico dug up the last row of potatoes. He rose out of the root cellar and saw Kazuko with a long pole knocking persimmon from the tree. She struck just above the stem. The fruit loosened and dropped through the leafless branches into her small hand. Kazuhico looked through her collection. The fruits were ripe, but not bruised. Kazuko struck with love. Kazuhico felt his heart flutter on his fingertips. He shivered, felt their burden.

THREE DISASSEMBLED SONNETS

—For Elvie who stays on
renewing her visa after they're gone

I. Memorial

In a crosswalk, flowers, blood stains,
shards of glass, reflective
marks, left shiny chocolate wraps.

In a living room, car keys, rosary,
passports— visas stamped, leaned in pictures,
return tickets, glowing Virgin— Mama
Mary, melted altar wax, candle flickers
in small dishes, incense burns, white smoke tails
of frankincense.

Start with seven round fruits, one should be plums,
 finish with lychee, sticky rice
in banana wraps , or finger-worn
photographs. Still life in daily spaces,
futon, two chairs, folding card table.

II. Chocolate Tita

We don't avoid her. We don't pretend
to not know. Kyle and Del know her as giving
with loss-- the tita who lost her children.
They know her stacked and bent boxes
of biscuits. They cry out from behind
baskets, slide around the counter,
Tita, tita, chocolate, tita!
Anaks, she says, and gently smears their faces.
Touch opens their hands. She holds them steady
at their wrist, counts,
drops squares into their palms.
Grins squint their eyes. Colors fall from her
fingers. *Why does Tita cry?*
No one knowing the faces answers.

III. Elvie Responds

I'm still here amongst the white towers
of men who wait on shuffled circles of bread,
where each dropped sesame biscuit lowers
girls in bright child dress to crosswalks, extends
their brothers' arms to a familiar pause.
I'm thick in geometries, arbiter
of wide round trays of sweets, of discrete loss,
where a date *maamoul* is an accident
rolled over and over in memorial.
Slips become a stain of sweetness, sworn
in negotiated tongues, flaking memory
of baklava as surface gloss,
until a daughter moves,
until she finds her stumbled feet.

BROWN

Filipina: Brown.

Filipino, too: Why brown?

Filipina: I'm brown, and you're part brown, so they're mostly brown.

Filipino, too: My grandmother was white. Her father Filipino, mother English.

Filipina: They checked white, because she's only half brown.

Filipino, too: Is she white?

Filipina: Sure, if no one cares. If you can't get in trouble, why not? Make our son white, too.

DIASPORA

Annie sets out
four places
fork and spoon
by each plate

with none design-
ated for serving
she uses whichever
spoon's at hand

picks up one on
her way around
she may or may
not put it down

she uses spoons with-
out a thought for
where they belong
who may need them

her children laugh
at her patterns
her husband too

she measures her
servings spoonful
after spoon her son
grows stronger

more than enough
she tells them
how lucky they are
their smiles grow

they measure luck
against hers or
others she knew
who were or are
like she once was

if she knows she
doesn't let on not
a word begin-
ning of a smile

a hand sometimes
her hand needs
reaches across
the table

who having
observed would
deny her or ask
her to change

PATERNAL ARCHIVES

In monochrome I find my father
a lot darker, brown boy
integrated onto the white team,
darker Italian, his sister would say,
he, not so proud (the flying flip)
would play it up (Filipino flash)
up on his toes in a full sprint.

In newsprint I find him under
center, squatting, defenders
wouldn't see him, eyes
wide & white, framed with legs
of linemen (valuable back) 22'd
find a way through the gap
(offensive sparkplug of the Rebels)
(small part carrying 2 electrodes)
rushed across and back, but,
2 mirrored 2, brought Filipino
to America, one oyster-
shelled street becomes another,
the sprint home a little longer as
play reverses around to islands,
coconuts & palm trees, stilted houses,
he waits to receive the ball,
I can hear the cadence, he calls
in his slow New Orleans English.

In articles, legal documents, laws
I find him running around end,
did he know it might be unlawful
to marry (color) (white) / (brown)
(white) / (Malay) (white) / (Filipino)
(white) and not tell her, so much
play in his lines, you couldn't tell what
he knew or didn't, he built a field
from the games he was good at,
played by simple rules of youth:
stick together & defend, then
disperse, never run straight home.

In Mississippi not enough browns
to matter, found a judge, went back
to Louisiana (felony). Who knew
the civic code? (null and void)

He ran the half-loop, turned
(speedster) straight flash down
the street, before whoever it was
was after him turned onto Rampart
he'd be gone, void, alone, home.

No one trained him like he
trained me, each day, sprints
across the yard, explode
off the line, on your toes,
not satisfied with slow,
in need of numbers,
quantifiable attributes, 4.4
in the 40, 2.2 in the 20,
known for speed (best back)
(an all-the-way threat) quick,
couldn't catch him, had to box
that slippery bastard in,
deceptive, story
telling, scotch drinking,
feet flying father
of memory, allusive,
documented, shifty.

BECOMING

What we are (work
hard) (adaptable)
negotiates
(don't complain)

with what we were
(dropout poor) (un-
employed) (dreams
of (_____))

we value where
we know (province)
(city streets) (southern
suburbs) (barrio)

where we were (mango
groves) we wrap
presence (work) (sleep)
(sorrow) in time

and distance (dress
they couldn't afford)
(always open
doors) (comfort zone)

(not forgotten)
negotiates with
what we can be
(resident of (_____))

(opportunity)
(migrant) (contented)
to become (transform)
what we came from

(sardines and rice)
(polite) (cement block
hamlet) (two-stop
jeep ride) shapes us

(diligent) (contract
worker) (thankful)
positioned (on
whose foot) (call me

(____) we (narrative
passengers) can
become (money
to send) (name it)

(blank stare audience)
we make internal
transfers ((new) home)
(make-believe peers)

grasp (cultural
essence) what we
can (fish-head soup
both of us cook)

AMERICAN SCULPTURE

“Take me picture
by the White House,
the Capitol,
what is it called,
take a picture,
with me in front?”

Fit all of me,
my feet, leave Lincoln
with his hair.

I’ll climb his lap;
take me sitting
on his knee, stretched
across his legs,
a smile equal
his grin.

White and smooth,
his buttons jut up
to tickle under my ribs.

I could curl up
in his hands, if
he’d roll his wrist,
as large as... who
was it whose stone
arms held the earth?

Can you see me
with eyes hidden
in hair; take fully
the twilight
of my face as
it gleams across
his wide thigh.

Just write *America*
land of the free,
share my pictures
in fields of soldiers,
cheek reflected
against black stone,
my memory,

theirs like flowers
and teddy bears
taken away daily.

Attach Lincoln
and me: we are un-
yielding.

Tag me and let
them who still dream
imagine themselves
carefully composed:
arms held up, in-
determinate
flowering hands,
extended, ascend-
ant back lit
silhouette.”

BALIK SA BAYAN (TO RETURN TO YOUR COUNTRY)

My Philippines is a land
still foreign, I am charmed
by twilight skies of clowns in love.
Oh,
beautiful sulky *bayan*, dancers
are not always sensitive to your heart.

Even birds that free their wings along straw-spring streams
wear cages of trees.
Like us,
they cannot fully splendor the nakedness of escape.
Cage them,
then weep.

At umiiyak for my Pilipinas.

Who welcomes me to this nest of tears?
Hold me as a consolation
for those who won't return.
Cull their lost faces
from mine,
bring them to your cloudy eyes.