Letter for All Souls' Day
San Francisco Blues
Cargoes
At the Est Indies Organics Store
Providence

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 43, no. 3 (1995): 468–476

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Letter for All Souls' Day

A smell like rain
descends upon the flowerbeds
to make the grass
distinct, more pointed.
I wake from a dream
of earth pelting my face,
the memory of you
released, with a tug.

Here, by the lake
throwing off blue
scales of water,
the leaves detach themselves
from out-thrust branches
slowly, the difficult
sap still heavy
in their veins.

Your eyes were the last
kindness, unfaltering
even as your face stiffened
into a shape beyond
finality, your body
yielding its old wounds,
giving up all
indentations of flesh
to view.

I want to imagine
you floating away
on unshadowable water,
away from the bowls of food
and garlands of flowers, away
from the rising sea of smoke
and candlewax—
your heart now
lighter than its papery
vessel, its last
bloody filament
on the white pillow
the only thread to tell me
where you have gone.

San Francisco Blues

In Union Square pigeons root
around the base of a pillar
marking a battle no one
remembers much anymore.
Garbage left over from greeting
the new year wilting like flags
in the insignificant bushes. Beyond,
the new world expands in sky-scraping rows to the diminished
peaks: ambivalent
grace knocking
on windows, rousing
the coiled body each morning
with a well-timed blast, volume
turned to high—and it’s out
of a dream of cocks
crowing through snail-strewn grass, dawn riding
into the high
heat of noon on the other
side of the world.

Obedient, still
a child of the morning
and always the last to get up,
you stumble through the silent house
to the kitchen where your daughter-in-law has left cold milk, cereal, bread
risen from a sea of blond wheat
somewhere in Iowa or Kansas,
far as the eye can see and virtually no human hand has touched in the harvesting. Concord, an old-fashioned word meaning agreement: pictures of handshakes across tables or continents, across the trenches where your Tatang gave up his life trying out fatigues for the ’kano, so everyday your son can count shiny new dimes and quarters tumbling out of the mint and both of you can joke about how he makes a helluva lot for a living. Afternoons you walk, remembering the rust of that fabled bridge, the first thing your mother saw when the ship labored into the harbor. Pressed to her side, you saw only blue, her good skirt whipped by wind across your eyes, sweet stain you remember everytime a spoonful spreads like sky on the roof of your mouth.

So you talk to paisanos on the corner of Market and Powell, where the trees shade you while you sit to count how many kayumanggi faces are in the tourist crowd. A girl has the young profile of Iniang, her hair knotted at the nape like the day you saw her balancing a basket of vegetables on her hip. How she could cook! And now nobody has no time in the morning even to crush slivers of garlic into a panful of oil followed by last night’s rice, no time
to saunter with a plateful of eggs
and tomatoes to the window,
fingers flaking the bronze
scales off thin, hard
bodies of salted fish or dipped
in sardine oil. Wide
open eyes dream a stream of scrubbed
schoolchildren chanting “A
is for epol,” tongues seeking
the grooves of a new language.
The bounties of Victory
Day: reams of cigarettes,
bars of foil-covered chocolate you ate
by the handful up in the forked
guava tree until your belly
ached. After the smoke clears,
it is the same. The wheel
of fortune spins and because you shop
at Lucky’s and use
your head, you do even better
than the yoyos on “The Price
Is Right” who— putragis!—
probably never finished high
school, unlike you. But you’ve stopped
writing letters home that speak
of this world you have proven
exists beyond the fenced schoolyard
and cobbled street leading from post
office to market, outside the same hills
in your old mountain town that heard
the fleshy thump of His Honor the Governor
Taft’s rump descending from a carabao.

These days, you float back to a pool
of watery sunlight, limbs splayed in the eye
of an American morning, winter thinning
only in the imagination and in your blood
perennially longing for the arms of a warmer
awakening. Only a stretch of highway separates
this coast and that, only an arc of infinite sighs,
steel ramps and bridges strung
with their necklace of lights
and beckoning further
into darkness, away
from Stockton and Watsonville.
The trains hurtle so fast through the bay no one
can jump them now, even at memory's
passing. So many trees, bloated with fruit.
Too many moons, floating like fish heads
severed in the waters of another time.

Cargoes

"... for one sole monastery in the Philippines
in which the Holy Name of God was conserved,
Lord Philip II would expend all the revenues
of his kingdoms."

Cinnamon bark, pepper,
clove and cayenne from the Spice
Islands. Brass bettles with hinged
carapaces for hiding
vials of scent. Ivory
statues, sundials, a slant-eyed
Lady of Guadalupe embellished
with gold leaf.
In a cobblestoned Mexican
village called San
Angel, porcelain
plates of China blue
pressed into the sides
of a fountain at Casa
del Risco. Diamond-
studded gold
crosses wrapped
in raw silk and linen.
Antimony.
Saltpeter.
Vinegar, sulfur,  
wine. Nine  
hundred and ninety-seven filigreed buttons  
and a comb, años 1618,  
bearing half the name of Doña  
Catalina de Guzman  
of Intramuros in raised  
gold dots. Nuestra Señora  
de la Concepcion navigating  
the reefs under stars so close  
everyone, from the mariners  
to the nuns and condemned  
reos in the hold, suffers  
hallucinations. Flies  
fall into jars of drinking  
water. Thick bean soup  
clotted with maggots.  
Someone on deck, singing  
visions of silks and corpses  
washed upon an ocean bed  
and, centuries later, a woman’s  
white neck articulating the weight  
of an antique locket against  
a twilit window.

At the East Indies Organics Store  
for Roland Tolentino

Here are our dresses  
in the season’s newest shade  
of mildly distressed  
blue, taupe, ivory  
and driftwood.  
A safari of scents  
to tame the tiger  
in your man.
Skirts and crepe
ejackets in summer’s
brightest banana yellow
from faraway republics.
Morrocan beads in cinnabar
and other multicultural
shades. For cold evenings,
you can slip your shoulders
into the sleeves of a United
Colors sweater, rainbows
of yarn fluffy and warm
as a Colombian embrace
or an Ecuadorian hug.
For the beach, a sarong
or thong to sling low
around your thighs,
the tribal way. Yes,
this is the season
to show some skin, a bit
of cheekbone, not too much
emaciation.
Perhaps you’d like
a vest of woven
threads, repeating a design
whose name I can teach you
to say: ojos de Dios, the eyes
of God, eyes that surely approve
the way you look, approve
the nimble fingers of your Asian
and Latin American sisters sewing
in factories from Saipan and the Cayman
Islands to the Honduras, secretly
embroidering fierce dreams of
escape. Go forth on their behalf
and revel, each cheek stuffed
with a choice of our complimentary
won ton dumplings or bite-sized samosas. In your new
outfit you can colonize
anything—fly an airplane
over coffee plantations, found
a small empire, discuss Mandela
and Bosnia over stone-ground
wheat thins and three-bean
dip, pondering the shape
of this hyperreally bright,
hypnotically suave
new world.

Providence

. . . ‘toy nasipnget a lubongco, incaca’d
silawon tapno diac maiyaw-awan.
( . . . on my dark world, shine your light,
o radiant moon, that I might not lose my way.)
— “O Nariang a Bulan”
(traditional Ilokano folk song)

1

In the the story of the boy’s life,
notes from his father’s saxophone
float through an open window.
Somewhere a sky brims with stars
and small fish swim obediently
to another country.

Occasionally, heat yields
its body to wind.
Suppers of rice, bamboo
shoots and okra, winged
beans greener than lagoon
water. This is a time
he remembers with clarity:
letters from far-off places
collecting dust in a glass
jar; shadows pared clean
from lamplight, music
in the ear growing
unrecognizable, thinned
to the texture of scales.
2

Child, my sparrow
by the window, eat.
Out of the corner
of my eye I watch
you listen to bullfrogs
belly their songs
to the river.
Pierced by moonlight—
skin-shoulder
blades. Fevers
come and go.

Into a bowl I crack
a day-old egg,
drop grains of rice.
Water seethes;
I call you back
with an incantation
of new names,
my own gifts.
Now or at the end,
what will it matter
that in this house,
ours are the only two
hearts wreathed
into each other,
that already you
repeat the pattern,
abandoning me
as in your coming
manhood?