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The Book of Martyrs, by Tejero

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but to bother with these may be to waste our time. After all, we are offered tales—and we get them—and fascinating ones at that. Complaining that we have been shortchanged is perhaps like demanding a transcendental insight from a commercial birthday card.

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The Book of Martyrs: Selected Poems 1982–1992. By Constantino Tejero. Pasig, Metro Manila: Anvil Publishing, 1994.

This book gathers together for the first time some 100 of Constantino Tejero's poems. The book is divided into three sections—"The Book of Songs, Prayers, and Revolt," "The Book of Curses and Exaltation," and "The Book of Martyrs"—each graced with the delicately detailed drawings of book designers Albert Gamos and Raquel Gomez.

Written between 1982 to 1992, the poems reflect the tensions and troubles of one of the most tumultuous decades in recent Philippine history. Especially in the first section, Tejero's journalistic background surfaces, as newspaper headlines (e.g., the assassination of Senator Aquino, the downfall of the Marcoses, the Mt. Pinatubo eruption, etc.) form the stuff of his poems. As he himself writes in a passage from "Attack of the Pagodas," which sounds strikingly similar to a speech from *Hamlet*, "There are more emotions in history/ Than anyone would assert or acknowledge."

One finds stirrings of social unrest lurking behind the nighttime stillness in "Nocturne in an Old Town" and intimations of violence in "Marag Valley Lament" and "Revolutionary Aubade." The desolation of the Marcoses rings loudly in the closing line of "Mrs. Imelda Marcos and the Darkness": "Ah, nurse, bring me the cup without poison." Poverty greets us in the form of Gregorio Añonuevo's "moss-grown face" and "two rows of lichened teeth" in "The Finest Hour of Beggar Goryo." "The Wedding of Crisostomo Ibarra" may be drawn from an earlier historical epoch but nonetheless conveys the unease of current times.

In such poems as "Oyster Country," "Urban Planning for the City of the Mind," and "Inner City" is depicted the grim and sordid landscape of Manila (p. 16):

The culvert clogs with dead cats. The plumbing
chokes, gasps, the faucet pours sand and dust.

"The Fog," another description of city seediness, resounds with imagery drawn from T.S. Eliot, notably "The Wasteland" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (p. 13):

The night is wet, the fog crawls along
 The flagstone path, past the man-made lotus pond
 Where hedgerow and sedges grow, past lovers
 Embracing fitfully under the arbors

In Eliotian fashion, Tejero includes as an epigraph the inscription on the gates to the City of Dis in Dante's *Inferno*. His point is made incontestably clear.

At times, Tejero plays prophet and presents dreadful visions of the apocalypse. "Zero Hour" is chilling in its understated (and contemporary) depiction of the end. There are no falling stars nor blackening suns, but "the globe drops like a guillotine/ as sounds and pictures disappear/ from television screens." In "The End of the World According to Jessica Soho" and "The Last Historian Reports From a Garbage Heap," Tejero gives us images from an environmentalist's worst nightmare. Meanwhile, the "Beast" of William Butler Yeats' "Second Coming" rears its head to be reborn in "Urban Planning for the City of the Mind" (p. 17):

What is it? What is it now? Is it Terror that hulks,
 or Mystery that lurks where one can never find?
 Is it Beauty in the guise of Death, that walks
 in a poet's swampy mosquito-infested mind?
 Manacle and maze and mirror merge:
 Manila again is open city to the Beast at large.

There are poems that dwell on more traditional themes, especially in the last two sections of the book, but these are never written without their own distinguishing twists: mutability in "Whiskey Nights"; cosmic indifference in "The Romantic Poet as Agamemnon" and "Dark Sonnet on Saint Valentine's"; erotica in "Ode on an Erotic Theme," and "Oda"; romance in "The Blue Moon Cafe"; loneliness and alienation in "Crepusculari," "The Life and Times of Andrew R.," and "To My Unborn Son Riding a Bicycle"; valediction in "The Negrito's Farewell to His Wife"; reminiscence (or the *ubi sunt* theme) in "Lacrimosa"; love versus duty in "Nocturne in Tiananmen Square."

In several poems, Tejero struggles with the problem of pain. "Palabra" and "Attack on the Pagoda" use actual incidents as springboards for reflection. "Sonnet to the Lord of Wisdom" prays for "the heart that will not distinguish/ the flower from the thorn, fire from ice,/ but as equals equally worth upholding." Failing that, Tejero resorts to stoic resignation in "Two Poets in a Vineyard" (p. 104):

Weep then for everything that has passed
 and suffer what remain.
 Find your speech and use the silence.
 Life is the grape, time is the wine.
 Drink then, my suffering friend.

And still there are more themes. "The Conquest of Maynila," a lament, is reminiscent of the "keening of the Trojan women" in the *Iliad* but is also replete with unmistakable local color, which saves it from being a generic literary exercise (p. 28):

Have I not told you beforehand that I heard the singing of the lizard,
And the crashing of the old tree at midnight in our backyard?
You are slain, O! and I, the flower of Tundo once, shall become a slave.
Sad children, gather around and behold the remains of your father now,
For he is gone, the unhappy, the unblest, gone, our beautiful, our brave ...

"A Guardia Civil Walks His Son Home From School" is a poignant reflection on the contrast between youth and age, innocence and experience (p. 39):

Shall I link his hand in mind? Better not.
So short his arm, his elbow will rub against my gun.
I look upon his face and he upon mine.
I see a baffling brightness, and what does he find?
The winter in my face, and I the springtime in those eyes.

Tejero also pays tribute to other artists like Vincent Van Gogh, Estrella Alfon, and Rainer Maria Rilke.

Through all this, Tejero displays his virtuosity with words by creating startling images ("So let the piano keys of my ribs splutter,") mixing languages ("When I wake this morning I will sleep no longer/ (Pinaslang ni Macbeth ang kahimbingan); / my days will be filled with your laughter"), and making music out of syllables ("Slime in the shallows swallows the ankle/ of clompickers"). He also displays the range of his literary exposure, as he invokes a host of names (e.g., Paz, Rilke, Schiller, Mayakovsky, Gray) and culls from a wealth of past writ, notably *Macbeth*.

However, his very creativity sometimes runs the risk of making his poetry sound hopelessly elusive and obscure, or else derivative (e.g., "the restlessness of birds"). Tejero also occasionally succumbs to mawkishness (e.g., "Go away, moon, do not watch the teardrops flow,/ With the wild wind wailing, a-lo-loy! a-lo-lo!").

Whatever else may characterize his poetry, Tejero at least cannot be accused, as Salvador Lopez once remarked of Jose Garcia Villa, of being cloying; for he is never an ivory-tower poet, and his poetry touches experiences genuine and varied. His own poem, "Ghost in the Met," perhaps sums up his poetics. The ghost of Hamlet's father rises "through the grating / from the roiled bowels of the sewer" to stand on a "Postmodern / stage" and speaks (p. 97):

*I am the ghost of Hamlet's father,
come to bid you do things for me,
come push you to the edge of your nerves
to separate Art from Ennui,
drive Art and Life to occlusion—
come to exact blood for Art. Revenge, revenge!*

It is no good, as he writes in "Slow Boat to Puerto Galera," escaping life ("the heat of politics, our social obligations, / the latest bulletin on drowned vacationists"), for "one's Muse won't make one rest." If Tejero is obedient to his own journalistic Muse, we can perhaps expect an equally competent collection soon.

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