

Gémino H. Abad Literary Awards for Poetry and for Literary Criticism Awardees

Ned Parfan

HER ISLAND OF MEN: A BALLAD

The Blind Miller

“I regret it every day, I swear,
when I watched her dance at the foot
of the mountain.

I was young, new in town,
and foolish was the thought of her curse.
You must never see her dance,

they said, and she danced with the moon,
always, upon its night of fullness.
I waited for her there. I wanted

to prove everyone wrong.
And so my last sun rolled behind the sea.
The air parted, my flesh stiffened

as she ran past me. Then her body
contorted like a firetree emerging
from a rocky hillside, her hands bloomed

open and her hair was the last
movement I saw, her skin under the moon
my last light, before my eyes trapped

that night forever. She heard me cry out.
Or not. Stumbling on moss-covered
roots and rocks, I started crawling

in the woods, until I heard the rustling
of rice leaves—the edge of the field!
I cried out to my neighbors

until they came running.
But they would not come near me.
She owns you now, they said.

And I never saw anyone else ever again.”

The Landlord's Son

“I longed for her, all night,
all dawn, throbbing as a bird puffed
with the breath of monsoon.

She needed not to strip her clothes off
to cast the spell—she just parted her lips
and the shell curtains hanging above

the portal to her room.
It was her desire that whenever
she disappears through this passage,

the shells would dance and dangle
like dangerous baits. This is where
it happens, said the scent of sap

in the air, in the inside of her thighs.
It was I who undressed her, with my teeth
I pulled off her clothes

towards my heart, my neck straining
the way it did with my first unfamiliar
bites of sugarcane. Then she pushed

my face away, read my palm,
asked me to leave and never
return. From above the wooden steps

she blew me a kiss, and I felt it
perching on the tip of my finger.
A trembling emanated from it,

the way the frontal tips of rabbits
send their whole bodies quivering.
In obedience I kept my distance,

and daylight caught me beholding
her house atop the hill, where all over
her skin, water must be pouring now

from a brown dipper I chanced to see.”

The Mobbed Merchant

“Outrageous village, this coastal curse
of a carnival. I have never witnessed
anything more bizarre:

men rushing out of the church’s mouth
in a stampede of feet and curses,
forming around me a ring of flesh.

Too thick was the odor of sweat
for too early a mass, that I was certain
they were anything but praying

inside that church. They held me
captive, but I was more uneasy wondering
how painful it must be for them,

to press each other with their bodies
—fist to neck, elbow to chest—
too tight that when the wind blew hard

it came whistling between their flanks.
Where was I: In the middle of the road.
In a field. In a dream? But how come

I felt my sweat dripping colder,
and heat from the friction
of my belt sliding out into a python

hissing with its metal tongue?
How come I saw its breath glowing
in the cave of my navel?

I must have inhaled a haze of something,
because when I looked at those men,
their faces were spinning, like a flock

circling around me. It grew dark,
a woman was descending from above.
She caught me inside her skirt

where I thought I saw salamanders
clinging to her knees. I don't know
how she did that, that flying thing,

but it was damn good visual effects.”

The Goat Burner

“After many years in her service,
I have yet to understand why offerings
have to be these carcasses.

Dead on arrival, without return
address. After half a lifetime
of dwelling under her hut,

I’m still puzzled by her many
colorful flags. From the bamboo pole
in her vegetable garden,

her lingerie danced to the wind,
one for each goat, falling off
one by one. It would take years

before all of them falls
to the ground, more like a striptease
than the leaves of autumn described

in the book I struggled to read.
Yes, sir, she sleeps all day, goes out
on Sundays. Nights are stories

all by themselves, but I can only reveal
that when she invites someone in,
she would cover the floor with their clothes

so I may not peep through
the slits. This is how she loves me:
by acknowledging my existence

in the space that is her underworld.”

The Pirate's Ghost

“The heart a shattered animal,
the body a broken machine—this was all
that was left of me when the water

returned me to her. My back prone against
the rocks on the shore, my breath a bird
in an open cage. For her I drowned

a burning bullet in my blood.
And when she opened me she found
a nest of days still in my bones.

With a finger she traced a circle
around the wound, over and over
until the bullet came twisting out.

I searched my voice to ask her
how she did it. Her response?
Her hand on my mouth,

with what seemed like all her weight,
like how one would apply pressure
to a leaking vein. She held my stare.

I knew this, I belonged to her
from the start. And with one swift
movement of a leg she was on top of me.

A thick green vine broke out
from her navel, furious,
and drove itself straight into mine

as my breath turned into spindrift,
my back numb as a boulder,
my one good eye shuttered

from the morning sun.
I woke up in the town square,
in the trembling arms of my brothers.

They were holding up a mirror
to my face. Half a century I aged
within her embrace. I cried.

I paid for my coffin in gold
and kissed my young bastards
goodbye. I waited for her to visit,

she who stole my age without
knowing my name. She never came.
My body a shattered beast,

my heart a sunken ship,
and I could do nothing, nothing,
but love the scar she left me

through what little remained of my days.”

The Aviary Tender

“Not even a choice but my body’s
response, when she clasped me
from behind and I was spineless

in a bed of rocks, emergency
held hostage in the direction
of collapse, welcoming the dangerous

touch. She tilted me and I bent,
so selfless I could almost disappear,
my voice lost in the evening’s riot

of dogs barking tormented
by the scent of bitches and the wailing
of seasoned madmen. How when

her fingers glided upon me I forgot
I was there, all consciousness spent
on vigilance, like a prey. And as they

touched down I was sound
and motion, broken snippets of birdsong
lining the loop of my groan, toes

curling under sheets as she pulled
their strings. She elbowed
her weight up, kneeing the pillows,

eyeing the space I’m in, tonguing
my blur. The aviary was at once nothing
and there was only her

in the dark. And whatever
the distance left there in between
I fumbled and buried myself

in her skin, lost, and homing.”

The Heartless One

“I have loved their kind before, in another life.
When I had a heart to love with. Those simpler days
I would herd the goats back from the hill,

and I would walk with a caravan of men
on their way home—the tree-cutters, the fisherfolk,
the herb masters who had been summoned

to other villages. They wore sweat-stained shirts
and sunburnt hats, smelling of seaweed and smoke,
faces long as the afternoon, sandals crusted

with common mud. They all came home
to their women. Except for the schoolmaster
who lived alone. I gave him a flower

and he shut the door to my face. I nursed the pain
with wine, brine from my eyes for all to sneer at.
A year later I smiled at the basket weaver

bathing in the forest, and he slapped
the creek’s surface, splashing water into my nostrils.
And it kept happening: the butcher raised

his cleaver, the pearl diver paddled away.
Why could no one love me back?
I prayed to the spirits to change my nature.

I slit my wrist to offer blood, but nothing
came out. Instead, the crickets turned mute,
the egrets froze in mid-flight, a loose feather

floating in their trail. Clouds stopped drifting,
the grass stood still. An inanimate caterpillar
hung on a petrified leaf. It was then

that a bright vision cut through the tree line—
it was a woman riding a giant tortoise, plodding
towards me. They were the twin heralds

of change and permanence, they said. The woman
slid down and reached inside my throat
to fish out my heart. Untangled

and shivering in the clutch of her hand,
she whispered a melody into one of the burrows
left by its branches, a song moaning of vowels

and consonants of crackling and hissing fires,
all before my wide-open eyes. She fed it
to the tortoise. Don't worry, she said, your time

has come. And as soon as time resumed its course,
lightning struck me and I exploded
into fireflies, my consciousness carried by a horde

of little dreams. Eventually, my bright pieces
found themselves together, although no longer
in a man's frame. Slender fingers, heavier chest,

tips of my long hair tickling my back and elbows—
I had to touch myself to believe. Before leaving,
the woman stripped naked and handed me

her clothes. It's your turn to be me, she said,
and laid down on the tortoise as an old man.
Ageless, heartless, and gifted with a body as rare

as an eclipse, I roamed the village with a beauty
cursed to lure even cold-blooded men.
But I could never accept their hearts; to do so

would reverse the spell. I would need to remain
incomplete in order to be loved,
to be the most coveted creature on the island.

Even their wives avoided crossing me out of fear
their husband would be chosen for the night.
Oh, those poor women, whose only fault

was to make the impossible look so easy:
to be desired, adored, serenaded under the stars.
And the choice to reject what I could never

be given. Sometimes, in the emptiness of the night,
I hear my heart calling back to me, like stones
rumbling under the earth, and I finally understand—

You have searched this island for the same
answers I sought, and now the giant tortoise
has awoken. It's your turn now, for I am tired.

Your life ends here. Your time has come.”