

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

Vyxz Vasquez

### Where there are words, this absence

The birds had nowhere to land  
skyline deep in flood  
so I said to the dead ready  
to float to Manila Bay  
Stop waiting for the sunset  
*(here is my grave  
tall enough your birds  
may perch)*

To the dead surfaced  
by this roundabout archipelago  
of thought I said  
27,000 was not saved  
in the Great Flood that washed  
away all the dirt  
though guns have no use  
underwater  
*(you are treading still)*

There is salvation  
Everywhere you look  
nothing but heads bobbing  
saving breath from  
not speaking  
*(now drown the bird that rests  
on your head)*

The impossible  
frozen clear

## **Stationary Sigh**

Not mere apparition, the faces in the crowd are real  
hardened by the wait every day. It is getting dark  
and there are no flowers in sight, only piecemeal  
road repairs keep them company, bus light against black  
a sign of home. Everywhere it is much of the same thing--  
women in broken office heels, men in worn-out boots,  
conductors compress the aisle for space, the stepping  
on toes a belated rush away from hunger. We think  
we are lucky, to have a seat near the TV, never mind  
the blocked view or that we have been stuck for two hours  
that the bones in your butt protrude or that a baby puked;  
we are to be thankful, the train barely works. Elsewhere your  
metaphor can exist. Here it is hard to go beyond the living  
day to day, to look up to the sky and forgive electric lines.

## Without a Doubt

Past 3, a woman bends  
to the ground,  
picks up a walis tingting,  
starts cleaning the path  
to her front door.

The SOCO team  
has left the scene, and she  
is alone to finish the job,  
a body already taken  
away. She knows  
the man but there is  
no time; it is a common fact:

dried blood cakes up,  
becomes impossible  
to remove. So she  
takes a bucket of water,  
splashes it on concrete,  
scrubs away proof  
to the nearest crack  
her right arm vigorous,  
swishing back and forth,

scouring and scouring the walk,  
adding more water,  
hosing it down,  
sweeping, using her  
left arm to cover  
her nose, as she does when  
scoring meat from the market,  
cleansing and wiping  
the outside of their home,

the walis tingting  
like huge pencils scratching  
paper, sweeping and  
sweeping, the woman  
already an expert  
having years  
of random dog shit,

before completely washing off  
all that fresh blood, eliminated  
in record time,  
as if nothing  
had happened and she  
asleep, waiting to wake  
up to the neighbors'  
incessant rapping.

## Cruel Optimism

Unclaimed, the men  
are stored for a few days.  
Three in a shelf,  
on top of another,  
forced intimacy.

The one at the bottom,  
kissing the second's  
shoulder, is naked.  
Middle man almost  
the same, if not for a  
bracelet. The top might  
have it best, no weight  
on him and left with under-  
wear.

Stiff, arms on their sides,  
a clean, orderly line  
to heaven, yet more  
are stacked on the upper  
shelf, blocking  
their access. A couple  
of bodies: the first  
with a wedding ring,  
a watch on that works.  
The second in a dress  
shirt and loose slacks,  
as you would don  
for a job interview  
or final viewing.

On the floor, the new  
arrival the parlour men  
must make space for--  
young and not quite grey,  
almost fourteen.  
This is the last.

At capacity, the oldest  
needs to be let go,  
dumped in a shallow grave  
with the rest of the unnamed.

These days, turnovers  
happen quick  
save for the fresh  
corpse outside who,  
pending payment, is  
survived  
by family and friends.

## Aubade

This moment there is safety  
in our room: your tiny mouth  
on my breast, sucking milk,  
in between sleep and waking.  
Your father is snoring beside us.  
A bird we could not see sings  
the morning welcome. I'd rather  
stay in bed, but there is the garbage  
truck that is bound to horn-blast  
its way in, and later, news  
of a 12-year old shot on the leg.  
Same story: savages on motorbikes  
shoot the boy's father, shoot him ten,  
twelve times. The boy pleads  
with them to spare the last bullet  
so that he may say goodbye.  
The men are not cruel after all,  
leave the boy. Much later, a baby  
left behind, as four men barged into  
a home, killing her parents, instantly  
dead in the bathroom. How  
long did the baby cry before  
she was taken away? They spare  
her; they are not heartless.  
Your day has not started and here  
we are still, your hand lovingly stroking  
the stretch marks on my breasts.