

Mikael de Lara Co

*On the Necessity of Sadness
& Other Poems*



As Adam

This much I remember: we were
happy, yes? Under the many bright trees
whose names we found tucked under our tongues
like stones or incandescent secrets floundering
as the air trembled. Sound, we called it,
even for that we had a name, but how could we
not have noticed that none called back? Sparrow,
we said, and it stared at us, unknowing with its black eyes.
Cricket we said, but they did not cease their laments,
their voices unwavering under the grass, their wings
violent, hidden. Desire I said, but I am not
as sure now, did I name it then or only afterwards,
beyond Havilah when as the fields grayed the grain
began their descent into bitterness? We were
too oblivious, too obedient to notice the absence
we granted things as we named them. Was it
this knowledge, or was it the naming itself
that undid us? Our tongues not content
inside our bodies, we longed to possess
even the other, possess them so long
as their suffering was not ours, and when they began

to shed their names by themselves, we invented
new ones; when they began to hurt us we broke them
down into more names, *the part of the rosebush*
that wounds us is the thorn; that of the tree, the promise;
that of the serpent, the truth. Or we simply looked
away, the way you looked away when we were driven
from the Garden, *the part of my body that hurt you,*
the heart. I was sitting by the river then, and this much
I remember: the fruit lingering in my mouth,
the names it burned on my tongue
as I scampered away from the Voice. Until now
there is no word for this, and this is the myth
I make of *it*, the loss, everything:
I will be grateful to you forever, for the fall.

On the Necessity of Sadness

Let me tell you about longing.
Let me presume that I have something
new to say about it, that this room,
naked, its walls pining for clocks,
has something new to say
about absence. Somewhere
the crunch of an apple, fading
sunflowers on a quilt, a window
looking out to a landscape
with a single tree. And you
sitting under it. Let go,
said you to me in a dream,
but by the time the wind
carried your voice to me,
I was already walking through
the yawning door, towards
the small, necessary sadnesses
of waking. I wish
I could hold you now,
but that is a line that has

no place in a poem, like the swollen
sheen of the moon tonight,
or the word *absence*, or *you*,
or *longing*. Let me tell you about
longing. In a distant country
two lovers are on a bench, and pigeons,
unafraid, are perching beside them.
She places a hand on his knee
and says, say to me
the truest thing you can.
I am closing my eyes now.
You are far away.

On the Translucency of Yearning

If this were a song
it would have no words.
If this were a window.
Looking out to Cubao saying,
look, an island. Mist then mountains
straddling the horizon. If this were
about distance I would believe
for a moment in the translucency
of yearning. Not glass. But curtains. A stray
lock of hair draping over your ear.
I whisper something and what do you hear?
Pain and my voice quivering
from rain. (Look, Cubao
worships rain.) This is a poem I wrote
long before we met. And how
will I map the strange geography
of your heart? I am looking for a street.
(A river, to follow out to sea.) A corner
where once I put my hand on your cheek.
Tell me its name. Tell me your name.
Tell the window, saying look,
look, Cubao worships rain.

Bulan

Silence like a starless
morning, which is not silence at all
but a form of longing, the moon like
an afterthought in the shape
of a sigh solid on your throat, a stone
turning into water, turning into
a starless morning like that blue
horizon a ship sees when wanting
to dock finally and the wanting becomes real
like suddenly a vast fogless bay, real like
its cargo of spice and crosses and music,
weightless things so heavy on the shoulders
of the small brown-skinned people
in their loincloths on the shores.
In their loincloths with spears impaled
on the sand, speaking in consonants
lost on the slumbering eardrums of the old
world. This is my country. This
is my country, old as water. This is my country
of pumice and songs only in minor chords
only my ancestors don't know it,
don't know what to call it, this sadness
in six strings only. Count the sadnesses
and I will sing to you of my
blue starless mornings, my blue
starless horizons choked
with the silence of my country,
silence I only now remember because
of more silence. I forget now the water
in my ancestors' eyes when they spoke of
the moon, Bulan with her one silver
eye, their lips forming the shape
of bubbles or rain or was it a comb
hung like a soundless chime in the heavens.
Bulan I call her now because it sounds
so brown. I forget now her hair black

as the rivers of my broken archipelago at night,
her ankles brown as harvest soil, her lonely eye
luminous as the grains soon to be in their bellies.
Bulan I forget now even the shadows
that each name held. Bulan to ask you to hold me
sounds so much like an infidelity, like someone
dying but when she cries for mercy her murderers
hear only some animal, howling.
Or maybe they hear some other thing,
Huwag meaning More or Please
I like it or Someday no one
will remember this so just go on
killing me. It's okay. Bulan I forget
your name sometimes but it's okay
the moon shines everywhere
and I can call you by whatever name I want.
I can even keep silent if I want to.
Even if I bleed.

Cure

"... They throw them on their backs, stick a gag in their mouths to keep it open, then proceed to fill them with water till they cannot hold more. Then they get on them, and a sudden pressure on the stomach and chest forces the water out again. I guess it must cause excruciating agony."

—from a statement of an American officer
published in the Springfield Republican, 25 April 1900

In search of secrets, you imagine them
tearing his chest open and finding
only water. On the page his eyes
are a century apart from yours.

You imagine his lungs swollen, pale as if bleached.
They poured and poured until the native
—until when? Until he was cured of his secrets?
They heard nothing but some animal, howling.

Sinunog nila ang parang. Ginapas nila nang tila
—stalks. They cut his brothers down like stalks.
There is so much time to search for words.
So much water in your country.

Dalawang gabi akong hindi nakatulong
nang una akong nakapatay ng kaaway.
Marahil dahil sa tuwa. This is the truth.
His body lying on the page like a puddle

of secrets, the names of his spies
pouring into the soil, the strength
of his numbers dissolving into his blood.
You imagine yourself cleansed.

As if betrayed by thirst, or maybe
the weightlessness of drowning.
There is nothing more to say.
You are only some animal, howling.