

Marne L. Kilates

Beauty Hankering for Memory

(Poems after Seven Filipino Paintings)



At the Carenderia

(after the painting by Jose Honorato Lozano)

God is always with us.
We wear Him constantly on our breasts,
On our stiff backs slung with the scapular
We kiss before leaving for work
To feed the hungry, or helping at church
To feed the hungry reverend Padre,
Or as our fellow devotee sits
At our street-side stall, and before
We go to sleep to keep us from harm
And bad dreams. Among us He abides
By our industry and selfless devotion,
After our sins and our confessions,
And among the least of us: our barebacked
Men on a break from the *obras pias*,
Our well-dressed men fresh from the cockpit
And philandering. We are blessed
By the fragrance of white rice, newly
Harvested and supplied on credit
By the Chinese trader, my husband's
Compatriot in exile. We are blessed
With as much rice as we can eat
From three large earthen pots, with viands

From four huge wooden bowls
Of *caldereta*, *bringhe*, and *arroz*
A la Valenciana for the moneyed and finicky,
Plates of sweet glutinous rice cooked
In coconut milk, and dried salted fish
To taste. I dip from two *tapayan*
Of sweet water to slake our thirst,
And they never seem to dry up.
O God of our Lords, the Friars,
Please do not allow our blessings
To run out, spare us from *them*
And we shall bring scented oils
At your wounded feet, spare
Our land, our daughters, and our harvest,
And we shall have enough to eat.

(April 26, 2007)



Tampuhan¹

(after the Luna painting)

Was it a time of grace, of smooth
And even things? How long ago
Was it, how far away that seldom
We make a visit, even in our dreams?

Sun on the floor of a varnished afternoon
Before Christmas, lace on the *pasamano*,
Curve of elbow under gossamer sleeve,
Hand as delicate, missing its *abanico*,

Vines around the branches of *talisay*
Beyond the wooden balustrade
Of the *ventanilla*, brocade *saya*
On the polished planks of narra,

Velvet on slipper carved with flowers
Under the step of tender maiden heel
Hid behind the folds of skirt, now perhaps
Cold in the tropic heat like a heart.

Curled back of *batibot* chair, burnt
Rattan cane more like eyebrows
Than mustache, unable to comprehend
The afternoon's sudden gloom,

Window of *capiz*-shell beyond the shoulder
Of *camisa-de-chino*, and two faces averted
After the *pusuelos* of hot chocolate,
Rice cake and *suman* have been taken away.

How long ago was it? How long before
Or after the Parisienne, when men
In coats and stove-pipe hats sat whispering
In a café, on the eve of another Dream?

(April 25, 2007)



Hidalgo's Vendadora

(A Legend of the Lanzón in Unrhymed Dionas²)

*Carnal land
You must be redefined...*

*Mystical land
I unclothe the years
Of your unyielding quiet...*

Rio Alma

1
In the late Makiling light
She treads softly from the slopes
Of the goddess's orchard.

"Take from my brimming basket
The cool, sweet juice of the hills,"
She asks the two men she meets

On the brown path fresh with rain.
The air was fragrant, newly
Washed, the two men stare at her.

One is a priest, the other
A painter. Each must have a taste
From the bunches quite heavy

On the round shallow basket
Sitting on her head. She curtsies
To put down her tray of gold.

Pale as the sunrise behind
The mountain, the yellow skin
Enwrapped the soft pearl within.

"Take," she said, peeling the one
And then the other, which she
Smiling handed to either.



2

The friar then raised his hand
 And blessed the fruits, for they were
 God's, he said, the rain's sweetness

Risen from roots, guided by Him
 Through stem and leaf and bud and
 Flowering: translucent pearls!

And then he bit and chewed and spat
 The bitter pit, "Accursed dew,
 It's the Devil's nectar, phew!"

Flinging the fruit aside, he said
 "What good, indeed, could ever
 Come from this forsaken land!"

In a tempest, the friar stomped
 Like a child, and she, saddened,
 Watched him vanish down the path.

3

The painter took his pearl and
 Looked at the girl for guidance.
 "Part the sections tenderly

Like you would a garlic's cloves,
 Then eat but avoid the seeds,
 For you've seen the friar's fate."

But the painter bit into
 The bitterness that now filled
 His mouth. Still he kept his peace,

Held his tongue and did not spit
 The bitter pit, but took it
 In his hand and kept it there.

Again he ate the half-moon
 Part without the seed, and his
 Face was filled with rare delight.

4

"Maria of the cloudy slopes,
 My mistress, sent you this.
 Sometimes you will have to taste

The bitter sap, the better
 Way to find the sweetness, her
 Only way to touch your heart,

Whatever faith or purpose
 Takes you through the world. But you,
 You understand beauty more—

All its turns, like life, of which
 The bitter sap is part; like light
 Whose color is shadow too!

Come then, and with your wiser
 Eyes, bless my land, make it shine
 In the colors of your art.

(April 30, October 26, 2007)



Recollections of Paradise

(after the painting by Alfredo Roces)

In my memory, green bottles
 Meant oil or medicine kept by grandmothers
 For that slight fever or bout
 Of indigestion, perhaps from eating
 Too many guavas filched from the neighbor's tree
 At the other side of the fence;
 Or for that sprain after a rough game,
 Or for herself, her swollen knees
 And elbows: it meant a soothing liniment.
 Or this bottle. Inside, a miniature
 Tableau of the suffering Christ
 And the grieving Mother (and John,

And the Magdalene?): Did he remember Paradise
 Before he thought for a moment
 He had been abandoned by the Father?
 Or was it the Paradise he promised
 The repentant thief whose copy
 Is nowhere to be seen in this bottle?
 We had similar bottles at the other altar
 Grandmother kept in another part of the house,
 Not at the main shrine of the Sacred Heart
 That watched over our household.
 They contained sacred oils blessed
 By the Spanish priest at the Paschal hour,
 (Beside the blackened statue of San Roque
 With his faithful dog beside him,
 A piece of bread in his mouth),
 Old sacramentals like the faded novenas
 Replaced by prayer books and scapulars
 With words in English. We did not have
 This icon bottle. I thought of guavas,
 I see apples (and one glass marble),
 In this Filipino Catholic still life. What
 Have we replaced in our old faith?
 What have we given up? A Paradise
 Remembered in still another tongue,
 Like our faith of Sundays,
 Our innocence of catechumens,
 The scent of apples, a game of marbles,
 The liniment of holy oil that our grandmothers
 Rubbed us with to hasten our convalescence?
 What ails us? What is the name
 Of our disease? Because we cannot utter it,
 It is something we cannot conjure or cure.
 It is the memory before this Paradise
 That is the darkness of our soul.

(September 25, 2007)

The Huntress by Bencab

Dusk in the *azotea*, swain whistling
From the shadows, for she couldn't
See him without chaperone,
These seem what the whole languid
Posture of her betrays: far from the huntress
With her *escopeta*, sash gripping
Her waist like a bandolier of shots,
Unlikely accoutrements she could never
Use against the fawn at her feet,
Much less guard against the advances
Of timid young men, frightened as she was
Of the father that dominated her household,
Gentry stalwart, upholder of the status quo,
Owner of the wood that stretched just beyond
The walls surrounding the *bahay na bato*,
Where she grew up with novenas and scapulars,
And family dinners with the *cura parroco*.

But what makes her dream so blithely
Of danger in the moor where she leans
In provocative whimsy against
The twisted bole of a dead tree?
Whose incarnation was it she fancied
Herself to be: In her delicate *barò* and *saya*,
The crinkly *panuelo* hung from her
Shoulders like a Capuchin cowl pulled back
To reveal her fragile half-smile—
In pique for a thwarted tryst,
As she hurried back and found this tree
To rest her dainty feet and shins
All wrapped in leggings against
Thorn and *amor seco* clinging to her *saya*
From secret paths of *cimarron* and *insurrecto*?
Was she protector of the hunt
Or hunter herself, the Makiling goddess haunted
By the young man crying her name
Before the fusillade of Mausers,
Or Sinukuan handing out retribution
For the violators of her sacred wood?

Tones and deepening tones of brown
And indigo, the vermilion sunsets
Of our race, our pleasant masks
Of tenderness and constant ease, leave us
Such pained beauty hankering for memory.

(June 1, 2008)



Delotavo's Diaspora

They take good care of their luggage,
The contents and the bags.
The contents because those are what they are,
Including what they've left,
The bags because those will take them places.

We do not see their eyes,
Not because they've turned their backs on us
But only because they must look ahead
And get where they're going,
Or death would mock us, if they never left.

Beyond the glass panes of pre-departure
We follow them with our eyes.
They walk alone or in two's,
Glad for the company, or they leave
As whole families, taking with them everything,

Roots, branches, memories,
If they have not abandoned them,
If indeed they had chosen to become
Their destinations. For then they will shed
Everything, luggage and all, and the past is a blur.

Ingat, be careful, we intone
As we send them off. We have never been
Where they are going, where time and life,
And even God, is different. They kiss our hands,
We give them rosaries, scapulars, *anting-anting*.
Between them and us, a widening
Gulf, no matter how we cling to memories
Like flotsam. For we do not know,
Of refuse to know who, between them and us,
Are the survivors of a wreck.

(April 29, 2007)



Junkscape

(after Ang Kiukok's *Junkscape: Dove*)

*Tahimik ang gabi, tulog na ang mga aso...
Ito ang iyong siyudad, ito ang iyong sementeryo...*

Radioactive Sago Project

All this flap-flapping
To clean up after
The tantrum of brats:

Canon of brickbats
Blind turning
Of batty SALT & MAD

"Either you're with us
Or against us," says
The demented diplomacy

Rising from Ground
Zero: terror versus
Dementia praecox

All is hardware
& toxic double-talk
The Dove is old-

Fashioned, tired
Of flying over flotsam
From Mesopotamia

To Iraq: too much
To handle & all of it
Babble & junk

(June 24, September 22, 2008)



Notes

¹ Lovers' quarrel

² Old Tagalog verse form of seven-syllable rhymed tercets.