

Manifest and Other Poems

RODRIGO DELA PEÑA JR.

La Parisienne

Because the truth could not be stated
plainly, Juan Luna paints her worn-
looking and askew, as though the world
had tired of her and she had nowhere
else to go but be here on the canvas.
Scarlet and ochre, deep color of rust,
fading gold: the scene suggests no joy
in the realm of *la belle époque*. Instead,
a woman whose disquieting gaze
dares you to look at her without flinching,
her downturned lips on the edge of what might be
a confession. What secret is hidden
beneath the folds of her dress, what story?
He tells her to stay still, hold the pose, *el trabajo*
no está terminado. Years later, he would aim
a revolver and in a jealous rage,
kill his wife and mother-in-law at their home
in Paris. The French court would acquit him
on grounds of temporary insanity.
By then, his work would be finished, sold

to the highest bidder. And the woman
in the painting stares longingly, fumbling

for words, help, *au secours, aidez-moi,*
s'il vous plait, but no one is listening.

Manifest

On May 3, 1882, José Rizal boarded the SS Salvadora and headed to Europe for the first time.

1. A pair of steamer trunks with iron locks, filled with clothes to be used for years before you would be able to go home.
2. In your pocket, a silver watch whose crown had to be wound up each day.
3. Talismans worn smooth: tarnished medallion inscribed in Latin, green quartz egg, crocodile's tooth.
4. Names that weigh heavy on the tongue; names that would remain unspoken for time to come.
5. Sheaves of paper, a set of quills, India ink. The lengths we go to skirt around that which cannot be said.
6. Memory and its many ruses, wavering, like the flicker of shadows cast by the ship on the water.
7. A crucifix on the crook of your clavicle, pendant of what you struggle to believe in.
8. Cities not yet seen, letters that have yet to be written, already vivid and pulsing in your mind.
9. Hands clasped and eyes looking ahead, that seem to hold all the sea contains.
10. The horizon shifting as you move along, the world's edge never to be reached.

Summer Ghazal

Each morning, the sun commands attention.
In my country, it is always summer.

This heat like a blowtorch: arrays of windows
open, unfurl to the fullness of summer.

Rizal felt and thought about it too, bones
turning indolent in the face of summer.

Bales of tobacco leaves scorched by the sun,
a scent I remember from many summers.

I crave for green mangoes dipped in rock salt
and vinegar, a childhood taste of summer.

Swish and flick of a carabao's tail; grass
left to wither in the languor of summer—

details of a scene that Rizal must have missed
as he cursed another winter. Where is summer?

Count how many hours until evening comes.
Days seem longer in the torpor of summer.

Drink, says the sky to the earth as rain
falls. Welcome the brief respite from summer.

Ukiyo-e as O Sei San

How quick the season
turns, winter's chill giving way
to green buds of spring

in the hushed gardens
of Azabu. Nothing here
in a path of stones

conceals the secret
 names I have of you: little
 dragonfly, azure-
winged magpie, dear kite
 unmoored in a floating world.
 What you see reveals
what must eventually
 be lost, so here is my face
 pressed on rice paper.
From my lips, a song.
 Who else but you will hear each
 lilting note? My eyes
give me away. Soon,
 days will be lit by summer.
 Then comes the changing
air, the leaves of fall.
 See how inch by inch I crane
 my head and look back,
meet your gaze, the point
 where everything converges,
 everything vanishes.

Blood Compact

After Juan Luna's Pacto de Sangre

In this painting, our gaze is drawn to the light-skinned figure against the ink-dark background:

Miguel López de Legazpi, the Basque conquistador sent to the other side
of the world in service of the empire.
Half of his face is hidden in shadow,

deep in thought about the word of God
and how it must translate, without question,
into the work of faith. His breastplate gleams
and behind him, a coterie awaits
at the ready. A priest in his cassocks
stands ponderous beside soldiers in full
battle regalia, halberds sharpened, red
pennants raised, foreshadowing skirmishes
that will be sparked, the knife-point of bondage.
And what of the local chieftain Sikatuna,
rendered at the edge of the frame, almost
like an afterthought? He sits opposite
his equal, his back turned to us, frozen
in a gesture he will endure for the rest
of his life. His tattooed right arm clutches
a dagger, which must have punctured flesh,
extracting blood to mix with wine for the pact
they now toast to. How the drink must be bitter
down his throat, with an aftertaste of iron.
How faceless he has become to us,
like so many natives who will die
fighting to reclaim their share of light.

Photograph of Teodora Alonso Holding the Skull of Her Son

Consider this tableau
of mother and child,
or what remains
of her son years after
his death. Unassumed
and unassuming

facts of a life, recorded
as evidence through
an aperture of light.

Here is the skull
laid bare for everyone
to see, osseus profile

cradled in her palms,
given and received.
Bones that emerged

from her flesh, the nomad
who has come at last
to his resting place.

What answers
are to be found
in this thread of story?

This is all she can
bestow: composure
of grief in stippled gray,

her face a palimpsest
of years she had to bear.
To be so diminished

as the camera clicks.
To be done, to be
finished, to be over.