

Arborescence

PAUL MARAVILLAS JERUSALEM

Fake Accent

*... I remember my tongue
shedding its skin like a snake, my voice
in the classroom sounding just like the rest. Do I only think
I lost a river, culture, speech, sense of first space
and the right place?*

— Carol Ann Duffy, “Originally”

At times I have to rehearse
my assimilation, checking
that my voice is placed not too far
front at my teeth—
the way I’ve been raised
to convey my thoughts
is only constructive in singing
someone else’s songs.
Otherwise, to be too nasal
is evidence of bumpkin.
To twirl your arse and elles
is proof of roots that have
betrayed themselves, writhing—
the soil, its poetry of erosion:
first by rewriting one’s name
from Baybayin to Latin; a month later
choosing surnames that mean something
only in another land. I’ve done well,

well to the point that the only time
my singing voice is liberated from
the guttural drain is when I'm drunk,
witnessing my tongue, a serpent
shedding Singapore seasoned skin.

Discreet Looking for Same

I can only offer: saccharine
 thoughts dashed by pepper
 and salt so no one can know
 what we really taste like;

 an arm's length apart,
 as if on a tactical mission
 but in broad daylight at the mall,
 two discreet people camouflaged,
 happening to be walking in formation,
 the same way to the same place for the same.

It's fine: you must be such a fan
 of Oscar Wilde
 you want a love that dares
 not speak its name;

 I'll make do with cinema touches,
 popcorn spilling, knee bumps prolonged
 in my mind; my left hand, sweating claws open
 upwards on my knee to test your discretion;
 me, not making space for your arms that
 overflow into my seat.

I now understand: a movie with you is but an attempt
to catch up, live my own
fantasies on the wrong side of the screen,
a decade too late for teenage dreams;

why Filipinos call closet cases *paminta*—
the person who coined that
euphemism must have accidentally bitten
into a stray peppercorn
betraying its desire to be mild and unseen.
Is this discreet enough for you?

Not in Baybayin

i	to find my	to force me	to tolerate. in exchange, i'll get
want	land, occupy	to adapt your	all my vowels wrong. it's hard,
you:	me, invent	made-up tongue.	you use the same writing for
	the idea of	never mind that i	languages that have nothing
	territory, and	already have my	in common, but the need to
	claim it for	own script. force	be used, on a nightstand that
	yours;	it into oblivion.	holds up the tethers of your
		amend the ways	colony. i won't retaliate. i shall
		i have always	call you master (even after you
		stitched every	have long gone), meticulously
		thread—tangling,	pronouncing every letter
		or tending toward	down to each last consonant.
		no return—in my	all shortcuts and unspoken
		head;	rules do not exist when one
			overcompensates, longing for
			your skin, even centuries later.

Arborescence

noun

1. finding out that the tree that shits every morning in the parade square its seeds, the objects of your undivided attention at first parade when you *sedia* and *senang diri*, is an *angsana* tree.
2. noting the futility of unleashing one's seeds onto gravel, trying to poeticize your daily duty with their nightly emissions, as you sweep away its crinkling pods, thinking of yourself as superior to prosaic platoon mates.
3. realizing that *angsana* is just another name for *narra*, the philippine national tree, finding actual poetry in nomenclature, storing it away to get you further.
4. learning that there's only so far its seeds can reach, so much that you can milk out of it, comforting yourself with it when you fail to reach; only money can buy some things.
5. at least in the process you learnt the exciting fact that your identity can be romanticized into a tree, airborne seeds to reach unknown territory, itinerant, or
6. imported to singapore to be manicured into a garden city. perhaps the original *narra* tree had hoped too that it would witness
7. the bildungsroman of its offspring. perhaps it too knew that some people are only stepping stones. some
8. people will meet the fate of trees standing on future condominium space. but some will be there through
9. the pruning, the finding of branches in places they shouldn't be,
10. if you stick long enough.

Ghazal of Deracination

The way Hokkien always sounds whiny is nothing to write home about; be less self-conscious of that tongue of yours.

All your country is good for, they say, is the miraculous conversion of diplomas and degrees into domestic worker permits.

They, whose beaches are adorned by litter and a reliance on migrant flotsam, will learn how beautiful those once yours are.

When you're twenty, someone will say "You look not bad, for a Pinoy."
Reply "Thanks, wish I had your flat nose, slant eyes."

You spent twenty years washing yourself, until rocks crumble into sand. With sand you'll try to reclaim land no longer yours.

When you're six, you try to sing the National Anthem, dubbing the words of "Majulah Singapura" over the tune of "Lupang Hinirang."

If you could turn back time, realize that "Lupang Hinirang" means chosen land, Paul. Unlearn neither the lyrics nor the language.

Let the Healing Begin

But, as always, like flapping battle scars,
scabs ajar on a hinge, hanging on

a single nerve: campaign posters,
after all, attract tourists too

inadvertently, layers that end
on a blank slate. Somewhere dementia

is a child painting on the wrong wall
the figure of its birthmark in the bedroom

of history. Somewhere
a housewife prays, telling herself
that Christ will wrest power from the Devil
and not into dirty dictators. Yet
somewhere far away, someone writes poems
that rhyme Erap and corrupt, instead
of his Southeast Asian Studies paper.
His grandmother traces—her fingers
embalming amnesia—
forehead, diaphragm, right shoulder, left,
forgetting to touch her lips before she leaves.