



**Rodrigo Dela Peña Jr. \ PENTIMENTO**

# Luna

Latin: moon. Satellite of dry seas and craters. Crescent-crowned goddess driving a two-horse chariot. Romanian: month. Page ripped from a calendar, one of a dozen. English: silk moth. As imago, wings lime-green with eye spots. Spanish: ocean sunfish or common mola. Flat as a millstone, hence its Chinese name 翻車魚, toppled wheel fish. Sanskrit: a clipping, a cutting. Woundedness. Arabic: date palm. Of the genus *Phoenix*, sold dried, pitted, and glazed in a souq stall. Filipino: towns in Apayao, La Union, Isabela. Also stones, night-black and smoothened by the sea. Brothers inscribed in a nation's blueprint, one a general, the other an artist. Syllables liquid to the tongue from which a sketch, an army, a universe might emerge.



## After Carlos Botong Francisco's *First Mass at Limasawa*

A priest celebrates mass along the shores of an island  
Magellan has claimed for an empire. It is Easter

of 1521 in the year of our Lord and a religion  
is born in what is not yet a country. The century

is a ship drifting from coast to coast, buffeted by storms  
and currents. Nicolaus Copernicus ponders the motions

of celestial bodies, considers something other than the Earth  
as the center of the universe. *Decet Romanum Pontificem*:

the Medici Pope is pleased to banish Martin Luther  
from the heavenly city. Some names are crossed out;

some are added. Rajah Humabon is baptized  
as Don Carlos while his wife Hara Humamay, also known

as Amihan, is given two gifts: the name Juana  
and an image of the Santo Niño, the Child Jesus garbed

in imperial vestments. In Basel, Hans Holbein the Younger  
sweats over a detail of putrefying wounds in another

Jesus, an oil and tempera painting of the dead Christ  
entombed. His model for the work is a body fished out

of the Rhine, a likeness of a likeness. The world spins  
and turns beyond the frames of a painting, beyond the gilded





pages of an illuminated manuscript. Samurai  
in Japan are honed to a single intention: vanquish

the enemy, blood smearing blades etched with cherry  
blossoms. Across the steel-blue waters, the Jiajing Emperor

starts his rule in the Ming Dynasty, drinking the menstrual  
fluid of palace virgins as an elixir for eternal life.

Maps are being drawn and redrawn, scrolled out  
on the quarterdeck with a compass. The natives listen

to the Gospel in a language they seem to but can't  
quite understand. Suleiman the Magnificent, Sultan

of the Ottoman Empire, conquers Belgrade with over  
a hundred ships and a quarter of a million soldiers.

He writes: *Everything aims at the same meaning, but many  
are the versions of the story.* In Limasawa,

the sky swells with possibility. The royal banner  
flutters and candles flicker beside the cross. The sea

wrinkles and smoothens, wave after wave after wave.





After Simon Flores y  
de la Rosa's *Recuerdo  
de Patay of a Child*

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And here you are, silent on your bed

adorned with flowers picked from mother's garden.

You could be sleeping, but you are not.

You could be dreaming of small animals

curling themselves around your feet. Instead,

there is the fact of your story: too brief

to have a chance at witnessing life

as it unscrolls. Delicate as the heirloom

lace where you have lain, your face betrays

the kind of afterlife reserved for those

who barely breathed, innocents made holy

by virtue of your dying. Dear little

corpse, you have been born but that does not mean

you will survive. That we have survived



does not mean we will be born into a poem  
or a painting, still life of pillow, flesh,  
baptismal dress. The frame has become  
your coffin. Your lullaby is a requiem.



# Pentimento

Literally, a repentance. From the verb *pentirsi*, meaning to regret, the artist swerving from an initial composition

and painting over a telling detail. In John Singer Sargent's portrait of Madame X, a jewelled strap slips

from her cadaver-pale shoulders, reason enough for a scandal among Paris's *tout le monde*. He would later correct

the placement of the strap and keep the canvas for 30 years before selling it to a museum, saying *I suppose it is the best thing*

*I have done*. The Old Masters were known to have altered their works, X-ray scans and infrared reflectograms making

a face buried for centuries visible. And there is a story of a conservator in Cambridge, puzzled about a donated Dutch painting

of what appeared to be just a simple scene of people gathered by the beach. Why was there a crowd bundled in their winter clothes

by the windswept stretch of water? Cleaning the seascape with solvents and a scalpel, she would uncover the hidden creature:



a dead whale, washed up on the shore, object  
of the gaze obscured by the artist. On paper,  
I have crossed out words, each substituted

letter an echo of *what if* and *instead*.  
What unfolds? Think of the dyes and pigments  
accruing, the hand's infinite variations

on the theme of atonement. Stippled by light,  
a painter considers what to reveal  
and what to conceal from the world, as if

a wayward strap can be hitched as a gesture  
of penance, as if a leviathan  
can be shrouded by the surface of the ocean.



# Untitled

Standing before Juan Luna's *Spoliarium*,  
I notice at first the bolts and rivets  
fastening the frame, chains tethering  
the painting, how they seem to surface  
from the scene itself, an echo  
of the rope used to drag the fallen  
gladiators, and I begin to see  
the body in the center, wounded,  
stripped of its weapons, taut as a string  
about to snap, axis around which  
everything turns, and I remember  
what Rizal imagined to have heard  
when he made a toast at a banquet  
in honor of the artist, *the tumult*  
*of the throng, the cry of slaves,*  
*the metallic rattle of the armor*  
*on the corpses*, the world not entirely  
changed as I think about the photo  
of a woman cradling the lifeless  
body of a man, casualty  
of a drug war, and I could hear  
her wail in my mind, a widow's  
ululation, not unlike the howl  
of the woman grieving in the painting,  
her face turned away, her suffering  
invisible but commonplace  
while a crowd streams past the corpses  
in a basement of the Colosseum,  
the litter-strewn and blood-streaked sidewalks  
of EDSA, the hallways of a museum  
now getting dark, and I wonder  
about the old man in the background,  
crouched with a torch, looking perhaps





for a son or something to salvage,  
where to locate the pain that he bears  
and what else can be said of his story,  
how long will his light burn, flickering  
before it is extinguished  
and everything becomes draped in shadow.

*Italicized lines are from Jose Rizal's speech on June 25, 1884 in Madrid, translated into English by Encarnacion Alzona and Raul Guerrero Montemayor.*