

Inglisero etc.

Kabel Mishka Ligot

Inglisero

I saunter into the language as a domesticated plant
sits in shade and decodes the sun.

Brother, there isn't much difference—within
me still is the same embedded faculty of light

and shadow—the only variables between us are estimations
of moisture, altitude, how acrid

the soil there is. Dare I say this tongue is inherited, not
borrowed, not imposed in the same way

some farmers know only the sugarcane
fields of their birth, live entire lives inside

the expanse of the proprietor's birthright, have dreams
sprawling no further than a provision of burlap

and barbed wire. Despite this, one knows where
the clay is richest, almost blood-

red. Babbling mouth of the twice-diverted
river. Where there once was a forest of hardwoods

that his father's father was forced to fashion
into effigy. Where in the kudzu and tangle of water

hyacinth he and his brothers were conceived, the narrow
gate where he will skim death's even teeth

at the picket line. Yet surely grace and mercy
must follow him in all the days of his forefathers'

contract, and he will dwell
ample in the furrows of the fields of the word,

will till and woo sweetness
out of a land he will never own in deed.

Vashti, dethroned, leaves Metro Manila

Esther 1:15-22

1.

Only three things curb the traffic and crime rate in this country:
typhoons, boxing matches, and beauty

pageants. We're past the part
with the swimsuits, the long gowns, and their tricks of light and fabric.

I hate the question
and answer portion. I'll have you know
I pored over newspapers for weeks, memorizing dates
and names of men until my fingertips were charred with ink.

Recited Hamlet's soliloquy in the mirror and wore all the unfamiliar
words until I was only choreography, the lip-syncing pantomime

my own reflection. If only talent
and trivia could cement the gilded silk sash onto your shoulder.
These girls don't know anything

about public policy, about what to do about disappearing

islands, the rising sea level, only how to cater to algorithms about flesh-
colored paste caked on a mouth, the golden mean
ratioed in parts of the body. I've tried to get inside
their heads, these girls, see if they feel guilt

about the jewelry their mothers pawned for plastic
surgery. The sole colt or carabao for a visit to the dermatologist.

This girl won't win it—her knees turn quietly
towards each other like laundrywomen
about to gossip. This one has enough teeth

for the rest of the girls on there. This one might have a fighting chance; favored
by the camera, but only because she's likely the show producer's niece.

Will they know what to do when the diadem anoints them,
whose old body they will molt and step out of
as they trot out into the stage lights? I finish

2.

this cold meal in even and tempered gulps. All the oils
and curdle of it. Like everywhere else,
they're airing the footage live at this roadside carinderia,

even the onyx flies on the bowls'
supple and melamine lips sit rapt, fixated
on the static of the television's glowing borders.

I have never seen these dirt streets

so empty—only a lone dog, swollen and mangy
with age barking in the distance.

At the military checkpoints, men in fatigues ask why such
a woman is traveling on her own, the klieg of daylight my only alibi.
In the heat of this village, the only thing that blankets

my body is the accusation of the passersby's gaze.
I don't stay long enough for the double-

take. Perhaps: in the next town I'll become pedestrian,

more escapee than exile. There where his face no longer envelops
the rickety buildings and lampposts in wheat paste and early campaign
posters. Where the frail antennae of the household
radios are unable to parse

the broadcasted touch of his damp teeth on the winner's
sugared cheekbone.

O charity, you sleepy beast;

on the pockmarked roads I am crowned
in only dust and salt. I don't look back
at the city. It will not return

my gaze either way—all cameras within its floodgates triangulate the shy-eyed

girl on the screen now, who can't be more than fifteen.
She'll win. The glint in her borrowed chandelier
earrings like a sudden kiss of knives.

American Wholesale

They built it in the field on the corner before the turn
 that led to our rowdy subdivision, the humming exterior
 shabby like an ancient marble slab unearthed, or an alien
 ship that descended from the dirty, mustard- colored heavens.
 And what exotic treasures it contained: boxes of sugary cereal, big as our televisions
 had advertised. Whole barrels of ice cream and sherbet in cartoon colors.
 Galleries of frozen pizzas a la Chicago or New York for the ovens we had
 yet to buy. Perfectly cylindrical fish sticks, white as teeth and breaded
 in gold. Shopping carts glowing orange in parking lot illumination, wide enough
 for all four of your brothers and sisters to sit in. Candy that boasted REAL
 FRUIT JUICE!!! on the packaging. Driving through our neighborhood, we knew
 who'd just been there: slides and swing sets cast in brown and green
 plastic took root in the yards. Rotisserie chicken and greasy calzones
 dripped and wafted out of windows at dusk. And we knew who hadn't,
 whose kids rapped on certain metal gates in the afternoons, begging
 for a turn on the brand-new trampoline. That summer, the macopa trees bloomed,
 heavy with automatic birdfeeders for blue jays that never came. Six-year-olds grew tall
 chewing gummy bear vitamins instead of brown-bottled syrup in cold spoons.
 Mothers balanced barrels of animal crackers on shoulders as they strutted
 down streets, crisp paper bags snug with apples, Kool-Aid and gossip.
 One Christmas, our plastic tree slept under the stairs, outshone and exiled
 by the new and very real Douglas fir jammed in the dark corner of our living
 room. We let its needles wilt and scatter on the floor until March, standing in for snow
 we had always, always wished we had. Before of all this,
 one only had the Duty Free at the airport, a long hour's drive
 away. It was that or an aunt or uncle working night shifts in a Tacoma hospital,
 whose bimonthly boxes cradled sacks of pistachios, bottles of conditioner
 as long and large as our forearms. Sometimes parts of them, too: starched
 scrub uniforms, rolls of socks, squeaky nurse's shoes, white and glossy
 like the laminated discount signs hanging, swinging in the industrial air
 conditioning like halos over the shelves of each wide and smiling aisle.

St. Peter's Fish

Eat everything: the tail like driftwood
from the ruin of a brittle ship. The flesh,
of course, pliant and forgiving,
which is why you should

eat everything but the scales,
clear as glass, and the bones. Save for last
the belly and its skin of ink, coming apart
the mouth like the most convincing lie you've ever told,

or the most liberating truth. Eat
even the eyes, gelatinous
and full of every dull thing
the fish has possibly seen in its brief life:

bubbles, silt and dust, frescoes
of duckweed and water lily. Commas of tadpoles,
curlicued larvae with what would later become
wings; endless universe of gray-green. If this is everything

the earth has to offer you, eat it all;
as if this small beast has lived
a beyond acceptable life, has witnessed
every beautiful thing, all worth

being considered worthwhile.
As if its eyes (again, its eyes), two pearls
with their impossible cores of talc
have seen, once, a flash of sainted gold,

another fish taking a bright star into its mouth.
The tilapia is an invasive species. It is a miracle
there is still so much humility left
in this world both parched and rapidly flooding.

At its end, a man at the gate will offer you a fish.

after Haley Heynderickx; after R. A. Villanueva

Batás ni Kalantiaw

Napoleon Abueva

Undated (1950s–'60s?)

205 x 46 x 46 cms.

Steel mounted on concrete block

Forged in steel and pared into the merest outlines,
the past reveals our inherent capacity for justice.

There's been talk of human rights as colonial apparatus: whose
past reveals our inherent capacity for justice?

With all this textbook marginalia, it's easy to presume; our curiosity
reveals our inherent capacity for justice.

All but one tenet accounted for by squares, a drowning man descends into
our inherent capacity for justice.

Another stands upright: does he signal reprieve or verdict? Crossed arms betray some
inherent capacity for justice.

Centuries later, these islands are still framed as home to kin of beasts with no apparent
capacity for justice:

black ants, crocodiles, slavery with negotiable terms—other people have done much worse
for justice.

Essaying among the entrails of a national lie, we all wring histories' necks for vestige, what
just is.

Adam admits to his doraphobia

a persistent fear of fur, animal skins

And when he had spoken, I touched my face with fire-
forges hands. My shoulders. The hair on my head,

the hair under my arms, on knees yet to be worn
smooth and even by kneeling in the clay and shale;

my sex—newly-named—the sealed seam on my side.
A fingertip of wind threaded through the hushed garden.

And she was the one who did it, held the thing like a heart
in her fist, the sharpened rock plucked from the brook,

let it glide on the unbroken white of the goat's belly,
its offal blooming like unabashed peonies thirsting

for a warm sun they too were scandalously promised.
I could not watch as she eased what was

once the bleating beast out of its hide.
Undoing it, unlatching it from its name

that we had once given to it, the skin
it wore not too long ago when all we could see

and sense was the humming of godwind
in every warm body. Later I would see the poor thing,

yes, like the stone adze, a thing now,
rotting in a clearing, a robe of obsidian fruit

flies adorning its exposed parts.

Tonight, she returns from washing

the necessary crimes in the shallowest lake.

I close my eyes, my nakedness

disappearing if only for that moment. Only shame

can mask the oil-slicked face of shame.