

Abstract

The poems appeal to the idea of nostos or the homeward journey to an originary locus that is not accessible anymore. They anticipate the longing for a home—to which, in the end, one could no longer return.

Keywords

Philippine
poetry, lyric,
nostalgia,
longing, home

ENRIQUE THE SLAVE DREAMS FROM SEVILLE AND OTHER POEMS

JEFFREY B. JAVIER

ENRIQUE THE SLAVE DREAMS FROM SEVILLE

I still dream of you, bathed in the smell of wine. I dream of rain, acrid in musky earth. I dream of shredded coconut meat, white grits rolling like velvet and silk in my palms. Permit me my memories of your scent to permeate my armpits. My longing for you invades and salves my sleep. No one here washes the way we do, or rinses and rubs their crevices the way you do, or how every day we swim naked in our shallow streams, or nightly in the depths of my dreams. Their hair and clothes rank of piss, and their feet stink of fetid cheese. Like hints of carabao shit that traces the morning mountain air, this land reeks of ruin and decay. This land, this scene, is riddled with illness and disease. Hot miasma boils and leaks from their olive skin. Even the climate here is a legend of unease: the ravages of the tempest; dark clouds bring in dust from Sahara to Andalusia, to bloat up the bodies of men lost at sea, or to banish our faith away, as if to fold our hopes, to tuck our beliefs, and to bury us deep in the sand. Fear haunts their sleep. No prayers holy enough could burnish away the blood that would tarnish gold or the sins they openly carry, the pride and arrogance of their cross and sword. Unlike my master, I do not fear the open blue. I dream of setting the sails, pulling the ropes with my whole body, the way I used to hold on to you. I dream of flight, of stowing away, of seeing again a world

where I can touch you. I pray for weather fair, whenever loneliness allows, the way I pray for you. In waters, I will risk death, though vast waves may take me forever away from you. Until that one day arrives, I will hold myself still, dream of the sun, and fill my thirst of you. In my return, I will wash in your smell anew. As white coconut wine will spring forth from cups, my heart breaks into pieces for you. I will fizz in the froth of sand-baked seashells, flow in the streams of blazing blue light, flood in the long-dammed delay ebbing off my waiting mouth, rush in the swells of my aching and want. I will drink you whole, like how I swallow my sorrows and sad dreams of you. I will drink you slow, and drown as I go down on you, bathed, rain-soaked, in the odors of you.

BREATHLESS, OUT OF EDEN

Yanked out of life and fresh out
of love, we are fish out of water,
panting, winded. Air sometimes
smothers us breathless for a dive,
to swim back lonely into the dark.
This is how desire works: Heaved
sudden in release and borne out
of practice for breeze, we gasp
afresh to a world we do not want
and that does not want us back.
Exiles. We are evicted animals,
exposed creatures, ripe and right
out of womb, bred out of feelings,
and barred from returning whole
to a life source, to fix the broken
or the faulty in our making. What
a long return, this haul, this hefty
tow, this heavy toll of loneliness
and blame, back to the first moon-
rise, a crescent stone, a gleaming
curve of a white bone, cut clean,
germinal, beach-washed, squall-
dried, a bow of a sin plucked raw
from our naked and gaping side.

TRAINING CAMP

The task was to cook in the rush.
Not by the banks, but above water
where the surface swelled neck up
and rain from the upper mountains
flowed muddy into the murky river.
At midnight bell, we hurried tired
and sleepless out of camp, to stalk
the dark cold and to follow the slow
run of freeze. Anything that moved
was food. Even insect was enough
sustenance. That night, I learned
nothing of cooking. Now, everything
is provided well and prepared dead.
A comrade, years later, would burn
his arms; one would drown at sea.
But from the current, I took to be
a trunk, solid and stable, to feel
the freshwater crabs crawling up
my feet, to love the soft lapping
of black, pushing against my back,
our young bodies learning to brace
the persistent spill of the night.
To impress a lover later in my life,
I would say, Once, with trembling
hands, I steadied a stone so heavy
and flat, and under shaking trees
and starless sky held a small fire.
The rice boiling above us ended up
undercooked, but we ate the same,
so as none of the good should go
to waste, as if all grains and crumbs
were small dues we owed to the gods.
By motions of meandering streams,
life rushed along, took each of us
to places we never held to come
or return from, always pulling us

POETRY

back to that one night of exercise,
to prepare us for hunger so primal,
the coming of grief lasting and final,
that through the slow run of existence,
afloat we must stay above lifelong
fear and cold, must brace the chill,
must steady a flame, must also fill
the belly with freeze, fire, and rain.

AT THE RUINS OF BANZA CHURCH

Mosquitos swarm on the skin
of water where two rivers meet
by the ruins. What the plaque
misses are swells of tenderness
rippling through history. Ghosts
of bell still resound the chimes
in twilight, slipping across time.
Whose pledges were promised
here first in the tower? Tides
rise and fall to the surges, rush
of flood, drift and spin of water
come to wed the flow of streams.
Whose vows will suffer broken
on the last sunset as the vault
finally collapses and choirs ache
choral hymns on the coral stones
no more? Songs will be replaced
by twisting grips of balete roots.
Now faraway sunk in waterways,
time will also consume rumors
and dust, carried and scattered
by hordes that razed town after
town until none left their ranks.
Will spirits wander still on river-
sides where loose soil on slopes
recede uncertain to the banks?
What is said to us is only for us
on the altars of our ruin. Deep
dusk diffuses fast as dark clouds
gather for the night. Packed with
pour and portent, they ripen full
for a rainfall, to bless our farewell,
heavy with their final benediction.

EPILOGUE

At the end of love, life returns
to the more difficult bends.
No longer a dread, the view
of a tree is a welcome gift.
I go out dead into the night.
My weight carries me out
of my dreaming and of this
inability to sing. A scene
from a film: A solid stone hut,
solitary in a field of grass,
the ponds glisten after a heavy
rainstorm and reflect deep
the cobalt sky. Like mirrors
afire, the horizons are on fire.
Here, a young magician resigns
from his runes and rushes out
to catch his fallen demon,
to a shared ruin they must run.
With this sprite, he barter
his beating heart (a hefty sum
for so small of an organ—for what
is most prized is the heaviest)
into a devil's pact, to be young
forever, ceaselessly athirst
to learn the skills of fire, to spin
the webs of time, to relive being
and life, fragile under the load
of one's own tiny existence.
How can we go back to the days
of firsts—first bike ride, first
dive, fist swim, or first kiss—
and what exquisite human
body parts can we exchange
in return, to read once again
or to watch slowly with fury
and without foreknowledge
the best stories of our lives?