

THREE POEMS

Aida Santos

Corregidor Tales

The Laterals

In a lateral queue
we move stealthily,
shadows against history,
through lateral tunnels
bored through mountains
by prisoners who mangled their feet,
possibly died of diseases
or a broken heart,
maybe simply or exhaustion:
for a moment they were
heroes rather than thieves
and murderers — but no one
has put a marker anywhere:
only the mountains
bore their fingerprints
axes, picks and shovels,
their voices forever snared
in the earth's subterranean,
— penetrated, broken.
Laterals were refuge
for the violators of peace,
and for the war-makers, sanctuaries.

A lateral begins and ends
with another one
parallel, perpendicular,
that goes into another
and another: this is a journey
of descent to ascent, and back again
it never ends it seems.

I can get lost here,
to memorize those years
and listen to the voices
trapped in these mountains.
But I am afraid.

I can get lost here, and find
the meaning of life
and the paradoxes we live
and through which we lie.

This used to be
a thousand bed hospital
the guide's voice echoes,
sending shadows of death
dancing beyond our human eyes.
Here, one toilet for everyone.
A joke: was kidney trouble
a major illness?

Smile left me, laughter
has been frozen
in my throat
when I entered the laterals.

I am touching history
male and foreign.
Colonialists, to me
friends, to my forebears.
I come here to seek
what my foremothers did
or my sisters, perhaps blonde
and blue-eyed, suffered for.

We see our present
according to our needs
history make and unmake.

Corregidor
was never in my mind
until now.

Women of Sagada

Every day, except Sunday, you sit squat
behind your baskets laden
with beans and vegetables
in the concrete marketplace
across the town plaza
or properly queued, along the road
waiting for the buses
in the snake-like Cordilleras.

The women of Sagada are silent streams.

Eyes alert in hushed conversation
between the chewing of betel nuts
wrapped in faded *tapis* in colors as bright
as the ancestral hues of your generation
handwoven cotton with symbols
of life and death, birth and rebirth.
Your precious beads had been replaced
by the lowland's plastic trinkets:
there were times when the land
yielded no abundance.
Gnarled peasant feet, bare and exposed
to the dirt and soil of the farms
loves and labor entwined.
Muscular legs have slid down
hills and mountains countless times.
You walk regal with sacks on your heads
snake-bone necklaces gently undulating
from your pleated hair
black as the nights of these mountains.
Tourists gaze, some snapshots taken

local color frozen
town captured: modernization
and tribal culture contend.

And you, women of Sagada, are the silent streams.

Huairou, China

Huairou
bathed
in autumn rains
fine mist
upon my face
turned up the skies
I freeze
in its mountain
wind
I suck its
stillness
I drown in its
mystery
like a classic
painting
inscrutable.