

Isabela Banzon

X

I can't recall his name.
It's not like I've been in the company
of so many men.
The thing is I can't even picture
his face. I sort of know
his moves, his staying power.
But what I won't forget
is the way he lay in bed
gripping a wooden cross
as if it were a woman.

after Jack Gilbert

CLICHÉ MOVES

And can we call her that, really
 —‘cunning’ or ‘conniving’—
 without mentioning
 in the same breath,
 in the same whisper,
 the company who took her
 not for the Other Woman
 but as his recent love
 who was not his to love
 but somehow he’d dreamed
 in her laughter, her calm,
 her winning ways, so to speak,
 the wife he was losing
 to time. In death

he woke up, as she feared
 he would, to cast out
 the impostor who’d been
 playing himself. Now
 he lives with memory shaped
 to perfection, in his wife’s
 image, when she was still
 growing on him. Now
 as for the other woman
 left with random quotations
 to live by, she thinks
 Anaïs Nin is speaking
 to her directly, relating to her
 how we can postpone
 death by living, by suffering,
 by error, by risking, by giving,
 by losing—until she moves
 the cursor elsewhere.

FOUND PHOTOGRAPHS

1.

So you wish Juanito
in marriage. Too early
perhaps but you are ripe
for him. Already you
swell like a yellow
papaya and the seeds that
sprout from your insides
assure him of additions
to the family tree. For sure
he intends you to be his
hacienda, his protestations
of love sweet and earnest.
But how can I give you
my blessing?

2.

The harvest season
has come. The refinery
rumbles, sugar flows.
Your name fills
the family bodega
to bursting. Woman
of sorrows, your father
holds the reins
to your heart. Little
one, he nudges, fly.

3.

On the roof
a bleeding-heart pigeon
lies still. But not you.
Rust is the color of blood.
Your best friend wipes
her lipstick smile off
your lips. In high school
it was rumored you stole
a pocketknife, you
slashed flesh. Blame
the corrosion on history,
the nuns comment before
shutting the door on you.

4.

You fought with your mother
over supper. No knives
on the table, only your father
and his bottle of beer.
Your mother is packed
earth, her talk crude. This is
your inheritance, the parking
lot. In the ticket booth
you sit like a made up matriarch.

5.

How long before words start
losing their odor?

*The door itself
makes no promises.
It is only a door.*

after Adrienne Rich

CEBU

On the island of Cebu
during the war
in 1942

my mother's classmate
in medical school
was hung from a flag pole
in the city plaza

as though the slaps
and whips and bayonets
of the Japanese army
were not reason enough
to break her silence.

She smiles
in my mother's photo album
and looks out to sea

and it shimmers
as it did under a red sun

when she was naked
and bloated
and without fingers
and breasts.

Sometimes now
when crossing the Cebu Strait
on a ferry

I see her smile among tourists
and doctors returning
from a mission

and in the distance
though my eyes fool me
sometimes I catch her

head above water

among swordfish
and dolphins.

When I meet an army
of uncles and aunts
and giggly cousins
speaking her language
without pain of betrayal

it is to salute her
who has brought us to port.