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A Eulogy for Roaches
Fishing Off Balayan Bay
The Leaven Christ

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THREE POEMS by *Bienvenido Lumbera*

A Eulogy of Roaches

(For D.J.)

Blessed are the cockroaches.

In this country they are
the citizens who last.
They need no police
to promulgate their peace
because they tolerate
each other's smell or greed.

Friends to dark and filth,
they do not choose their meat.
Although they neither sow
nor reap, a daily feast
is laid for them in rooms
and kitchens of their pick.

The roaches do not spin,
and neither do they weave.
But note the russet coat
the sluggards wear: clothed
at birth, roaches require
no roachy charity.

They settle where they wish
and have no rent to pay.
Eviction is a word
quite meaningless to them
who do not have to own
their dingy crack of wall.

Not knowing dearth or taxes,
they increase and multiply.
Survival is assured
even the jobless roach:
his opportunities
pile up where garbage grows.

Dying is brief and cheap
and thus cannot affright.
A whiff of toxic mist,
an agile heel, a stick
—the swift descent of pain
is also final death.

Their annals may be short,
but when the simple poor
have starved to simple death,
roaches still circulate
in cupboards of the rich,
the strong, the wise, the dead.

Fishing off Balayan Bay

I think of Chinese poets
who wrote briefly and much
about fishing as an act,
not art. Wang Wei, for instance.
It was for him mystical,
an exercise in calm
detachment from the world
of bureaucrats, scholars
and merchants. I wonder: would he
be shocked to hear our shouts
of concupiscent joy each time
a fish or fry gets took?
Perhaps he'll understand,
being Chinese, that noise
has its place in the sun.
Waiting, while the boat rocks
and the sun burns, must end
like the old year in rounds
of sound. Laughter and cussing
sometimes can compensate
for a man's patience and sunburn.
Besides sharks lie in wait
for silly fish that gulped
some fisherman's obvious bait.
Sharks, as we have learned
in the city where we live,
do not respect silence
or procrastination.
If one wants to land his fish,
he must reel in faster,
if noisier, than shark's

secret silent swift push.
Otherwise the fisherman
will sit and wait and seethe
and lose his fish and hook
and line and sinker to sharks
that sit and wait and are clever.

The Leaden Christ

The leaden Christ above my desk
is crucified on perfect wood.
When I found it, a fall had snapped
the stiffening victim's straining arms
and freed the body from the cross.
As art, the object no longer told
the truth, but it was saved somehow
by guilt I would not want to own:
without a thought of art or faith,
I nailed it to the nearest wall.
Now a miracle of twine
holds intact the sacrifice
to break it on some stony eye.
Dismembered thus, the elbow seeks
a dangled forearm, the other wrist
gropes for its hand.

The sigh appalls
the mind at times when trick of light
animates pain that lead denies.
In Calvary when day turned night,
what godly grief did darkness hide?
With human hands, the artisan
carved the mold and poured the lead
and, like a man, presumed his art
had caught the idiom of God's cry.
From the wall, broken, the leaden Christ
looks down: the wrack of pious lines
unstones the inner eye, defines
the margins of our art and lies.