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By the Pasig
From the Journals of Mary F.

Ma. Fatima V. Lim

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MA. FATIMA V. LIM

By the Pasig

I

yes, that is her in the photograph.
the grey-dressed one, in shadow
her features all blurred by her frown.
she was always frowning, that one.
see? even then, she dragged along that sack
of books, garden shears, empty perfume bottles
and the incisor tooth she dug
from the grave of her pet hamster.
her fist balls the edges of the sack
but you can make out the top of the head
of an ifugao doll she slept with—
a man doll, naked to the waist.
those are her sisters towering over her.
lovely things they were, even now
their laughter shaking their chins.
but the youngest. witchchild, i called her.
god forgive me, but her dear mother
must have seen a murdered man
or enjoyed the seeds
of the sampaloc, sucking on them
too long, as she carried that child.
the older ones i could handle
frightening them off to sleep with tales
of handsome men with beards and detachable heads
who would carry them off, off under their arms
to their castle under the putrid pasig.
screaming, they froze instantly into sleep
but the little one—i would find her
by the window, that horrid doll clutched
to her ribs—her face to the moon
or something else much nearer—
begging almost, to be swallowed up.
i know little else since i soon left.
boils on my thumbs, bunions on my toes
and a hard pebble on my right breast.
i tell you, that little one did it.
when my back was turned, she spat
on my soup, stole the hair from my comb

planted the man-doll under my bed.
 so if you ask me, it is not surprising
 her end came the way it did.
 i saw it then, even if i have not set eyes
 thank mother mary—upon her, these twenty years
 see? the photograph will show.
 living in shadow, she gave life to it.

II.

the boa. the grey feather boa.
 manila in the summer is ninety degrees
 in the shade. but she was never to be seen
 without that thing, living almost
 around her neck. 'if i remove it,'
 a rare smile deepening her frown,
 'my head will roll off'
 in the darkest corner of the sidewalk cafe
 i told her of my husband afloat on a cannery ship
 somewhere off the coast of alaska
 and of my baby, born blue in the face.
 we would sip the juice of wild limes
 cracking peanut shells between our teeth.
 and she would listen. and she would talk.
 she taught me how one should snip hibiscus.
 at an angle to stop the flow of white sap
 how to find first editions in the chinaman's
 hardware store and how, when a room got crowded
 feeling stifled, she would spray herself with air.
 she would stand, without warning, suddenly
 with such grace, leaving me trailing after her
 watching as others watched, her head in clouds
 and the overcast-colored skies of her skirts.
 and she would run into the night air
 holding out her hands
 to the heat, to the burning yellow moon.
 she would bend, towards the slimy waters
 of the pasig, as if to throw herself in.
 'how it shines,' she would say softly,
 'like a newly-molten snake'. and she would sing:
 'my headless lover, heartless and handsome
 gropes in the dark—to eat me and the moon.'
 yes, that is her in the photograph,
 but do not ask me why she did what she did.
 what she had to do. i can only sing her song
 for you. the rest is shadow.

III.

i do not like my toys with flaxen hair
 and stiff pink dresses. nor the woman
 who looks after me, who looks at me
 always as if i were waiting for her
 to turn her back. i like the things
 i keep in a sack—some yellowed pages,
 rusty scissors, broken bits of glass and the sharp
 sickle moon. i keep a backyard of bones.
 and i know a song.
 but i cannot sing it to you. the woman
 will come and take it from me
 locking it up with my mother's dresses
 and the lovely feathered thing the color of dust.
 my mother. they said she was beautiful
 and sad. and that she did a terrible thing.
 the woman says i am the most terrible thing
 my mother created. sometimes i want to run away.
 run to a castle deep in a river i dreamed of.
 and sometimes i see my mother calling to me
 from the shadows at the foot of my bed.
 who is she? i do not know the laughing women
 but i am in the photograph.
 no one else does not smile.
 only me, my headless doll and the full moon.

From the Journals of Mary F.—
 (Philippines, 1902)

They came in battalions, 600 of them on board
 the *SS Thomas* sailing from San Francisco in July
 1901—surely the most remarkable cargo ever
 carried to an Oriental colony. . . . The Thomasites.

— Renato Constantino

Capiz. On the island of Panay, beyond Mindoro,
 southwest of Manila Bay—

The mote on the map of Southeast Asia loomed:
 stilt houses, the violet tracery of hills,
 scent of hothouse flowers still a shore away.

How the heat seared. From the prow
 of the banca, I stared into the sun-frenzied waters:

the amputated arms of corals rose to greet me,
grab me down.

They all came, the people of the barrio:
the old and the goats, children and gnats, the next of kin.
I crossed the ten-inch plank, unsupported. I placed
my leatherbound foot on the shore. And I moved,
moving slowly, water-flowing limbs, to satisfy
the curious who—wanted to count my freckles,
make fiber of my hair, carve the blue
out of my eyes.

The Gobernador's residence. It took many months
to prepare for this—the feast for La Maestra.
Flies in unison rose from the steaming viand pots.
The floors gleamed, polished by the women on their knees
who now circle me, in their best
pineapple fabric finery, and something else, necessarily
red, white and blue. We toast with muscatel.
'Mabuhay, las islas Filipinas! Long live, America!'

My house. On the edge of town.
Under an acacia. Overlooking the century-old
church and cemetery. Shining new in the dark.
I enter the single room, stared at by the grunting pigs
below me, eyes yellow through the bamboo slats.
I undress in the light of the gasera.

Dipping into the earthen tinaja, I peel
my second skin of sweat, sending the pigs squealing
to the farthest walls. And I sleep, not surprisingly,
dreaming different dreams now: 'Señorita,
be sure to shut your window fast at night. The 'asuwang'
sucks out maidens' hearts, with his long, black tongue'.

The church of San Roque. The dead bodies fill, spill out
of the holy doors. Whatever is this illness,
it kills quickly. The natives are dying
ten per diem. I must eat cucumbers.
Spread round my house, half a bushel of chloride of lime.

And I must write. Write of the one-storey
schoolhouse. My students 189 voices singing 'Swanee River'.
The rainwater reaching to my thighs. The fish eyes
staring from a garnished plate. The men's faces darkening
at the sight of my ankles. And these spots, my chills,
forgetfulness. I must write. Others will follow me.
I must write and ask for a cross over my grave:
A cross made from the corals of Capiz.