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Scattered Felicity in Philippine Poetry

L. M. Grow



Of the Filipino poets who have never published a book or have been lionized for a single outstanding work and thus have passed into obscurity, especially because of being passed over by literary critics, Salvador Bernal, David B. Bunao, author of "Felix Culpa," Fidel De Castro, Augusta De Almeida, Visitacion De La Torre and Antonio Descaller are among those who have produced works worthy of rescue from oblivion. In the penultimate paragraph of his "Egyptian Journal," Benesa (1976, 75), might be speaking for all of these poets:

. . . what is left of me when I die except the undying: thought, the product of mind; feeling, the product of sensibility; consciousness, the product of the universal unconscious, the All-Mind. My words are my pyramids collectively, and they will live after me if they truly have life; if not they shall remain buried in the sands, probably to be resurrected by some scholar poking about the ruins and the shards, looking for something to base a thesis on.

In the works of these seven poets, there certainly is something to base a thesis on: the realization that scattered amongst the celebrated monuments that are the renowned volumes of Filipino poetry in English are the shards in the literary desert sands, usually unnoticed: meritorious individual pieces by poets whose voices are mostly unheard. Only Bunao has, so far at least, been excluded by compilers of reference guides. De Almeida is too recent to be included in either Mella or Valeros and Valeros-Gruenberg.

Salvador Bernal

Although Salvador Bernal's "Call Me Pirandello in Love," "Nursery Rhymes," and "Revelation VI" were in F. Sionil Jose's *Equinox I*,

his few other published efforts have sparked no discernible interest in the reading public. "Revelation VI" is, like other Bernal pieces, bland, in this case deceptively so. It involves an encounter with death but is done in a quite low-key, sometimes even almost casually bantering manner, perhaps because it is in the conditional mode:

What if it were night
 And you, a bastard child,
 Had come, a black child
 Come with teeth-white
 Invitation to play domino.
 Should I say no
 And cause your eyes to ball
 Like domino eyes at all?
 But if you'd tempt me
 With a game of cards
 I'd have the jester's glee,
 Laughing at ace, diamond bards.
 We would hold sceptres, talk
 Hand in hand past the clover garden.
 I'd like surprises. Then
 Giggling, you'd strip off
 Your face to reveal soft,
 Card-white invitation
 Of your skull.

"What if it were night/And you, a bastard child, / Had come . . ." (lines 1-3); "Should I say no" (line 6); "But if you'd tempt me" (Line 9); "I'd have . . ." (line 11); "You would ask me . . ." (line 13); "We would hold sceptres . . ." (line 14); "I'd like surprises" (line 16); ". . . you'd strip off . . ." (line 17).

Though the subjunctive verbs seem to hold death safely at bay and though death in the form (guise?) of a giggling child seems harmless enough, death is death, as even the rhyme scheme subtly suggests. An interweaving of rhymed quatrains and couplets is abruptly terminated in the last two lines, consisting of the "Card-white invitation/Of your skull," thereby at least slightly jolting the reader. An initial uneasiness could well have been generated because the child is a "bastard"—an indication that the child, born outside the sacramental state of marriage, is also outside the realm of the holy? If so, is there any ominous significance to walking past the clover garden? Granted that clover is a three-leafed plant (the genus

being *Trifolium*), is there any sense of exiting an Eden, hallowed garden, the initial stage of a journey similar to that of the protagonist into the woods in Hawthorn's "Young Goodman Brown"?

While the child's visit could simply be motivated by the desire to find amusement in table games, the selections of dominoes is suspicious. Like the 'game of cards' mentioned in line ten by the narrator, the game's stakes could be high, a la Death and Life-in-Death playing dice for the crew's souls in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." A series of words with possible double meanings supports such a possibility. "Domino" in lines five and eight might be taken to mean one wearing a hooded cape or a mask. Though dominoes are worn by clergy, they are also donned by masqueraders for parties. Cf., Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death." The mask as an entertainment accoutrement is of course directly paralleled in the 'jester's glee' of line 11. Even if "domino" is just a block used in the table game, it mirrors, in its white dots and black backdrop, the color scheme of death. Cf., "A black child" (line 3) who comes at night (line 1) has a "teeth-white/Invitation to play domino" (lines 4-5). The invitation to line twenty is the "Card-white" one "Of your skull" (lines 20-21). The "diamond bards" of line twelve make sense in context only if they are understood as pieces of armor used to protect or ornament horses rather than as especially wise national poets. In this sense there is a clear hearkening back to the prefatory quatrain:

I looked, and behold a
pale horse:
And his name that sat
on him was Death.

Bernal's "Room" also seems to be centered around death and again has a narrator not quite certain of whether to go through the portal that leads to the room of death:

The difficulty of opening the door
Is not the silver twist of the knob, or
White hand like anything starched:
Shirt or soul; not the key when
It is cold and its teeth like
A tiger's. But what's behind:
A room, a ceiling, low as man's
Breasts weeping on the floor. Or

In the corner of the room
 A porcelain shepherd sings a ballad:
 "But where are the snows of yester-year?"
 Cannot make sure the iron-bed has
 Slept with a woman, cannot make
 Certain, whether or not an ancient mister
 Would come welcome sitting, complacent
 As the folds of the belly
 Of Buddha when he laughs like a chorus
 Of vestal hyenas, and the door leads
 To an inn where there is no room:
 Just the sky making love to God.

The narrator's hesitation has the same grounding as Hamlet's concern about what lies beyond:

The difficulty of opening the door
 Is not the silver twist of the knob, or
 White hand like anything starched:
 Shirt or soul; not the key when
 It is cold and its teeth like
 A tiger's. But what's behind: (lines 1-6)

How one dies ("the silver twist on the knob") or at what age ("white hand like anything starched:") or how unpleasantly ("not the key when/It is cold and its teeth like/A tiger's") does not matter. What one encounters thereafter does matter. It could be the confinement or "A room, a ceiling, low as man's/Breasts weeping on the floor" (lines 7-8) or "an inn where there is no room" (line 19), or it could be limitless extension, "Just the sky making love to God" (line 20). Temporal limitation is also a consideration. The porcelain shepherd of line ten is fixed in time, like the lovers depicted in Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Appropriately, the shepherd's song of line eleven is an *ubi sunt* (where they are) lament. Or is time so unrestricted that "an ancient mister" (line 14) can come calling? Whether the afterlife is material or spiritual is also a question, first raised in the "Shirt or soul" combination of line four. Do sense experiences remain, or is all sensation immaterial? The narrator can't decide: "Cannot make sure the iron-bed has/Slept with a woman" (lines 12-13). Is love exercised personally and palpably, "man's/Breasts weeping on the floor" (lines 7-8) or purely metaphorically, "Just the sky making love to God" (line 21)? Does non-earthly existence have the

ferocity of "teeth like/A tiger's" (lines 5–6) and "vestal hyenas" (line 18) or the placidity of "sitting, complacent/As the folds of the belly/Of Buddhas" (lines 15–17)? Does the title mean "a room" (with boundaries—walls, floor, ceiling—) or "room" (available space)?

David Bunao

David B. Bunao's "Voluptuary" is cozy, precious even:

A rose warming a worm
 Shouts out a storm warning
 A worm warming a rose
 Posits a poet's raging
 And I, votary to these
 Holds, if you please
 That I rage at a rose
 That is warmed by a worm
 And storm at a worm
 That is warmth to a rose.

In part the cuddly quality is the result of a structure that differentiates it from the sort of lyric it on the surface might seem to resemble: that found in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Here there is no experience, no embedded evil, no post-Lapsarian condition to be wary of. There is still the possibility of latent phallicism in the worm/rose imagery, but if so it is without insidiousness. The rose and the worm warm one another and alert one another to the impending storm. They are not, respectively, a brightly-burning tiger and a lamb, artificially co-existing. The "storm" may well be no more than macrocosmic rendition of the creative forces released by the poet's raging and storming, forces creative rather than destructive. In any case, "warming," "warmed" and "warmth" are exactly in the middle of the four lines mentioning them (lines 1, 3, 8, and 10), suggesting the insulation and thus preservation of the heat from the external conditions that might menace it. "Rose" and "worm" are its buffers, the 2nd word in the case of line one and line three and the last word in the case of lines one and two and seven and ten. A finishing touch is the sense of vertical encasement created by the only rhyming end words appearing in lines five and six. Perhaps it is womb-like, but the warmth is sheltered, whether it is to be relished

by a votary or a voluptuary—perhaps they are simply two labels for the “I” of lines five and seven.

Felix Culpa

“Snails,” by an author using the pseudonym “Felix Culpa” (ironic in terms of the poem’s content), is a sardonic reflection on the Creation:

I strip the curled and dying leaves
Of snails that cling like a wet shirt,
And let the snails crawl in a pail
With salt, and watch the slugs melt
When they came, to slime.

When shells
Are empty, there is one who grieves
Over the death of a creature that kills
As over the withering leaves.
Lord of indiscriminate grief,
Remember, too, the caustic thief.

Inevitably, the leaves are “dying.” Gratuitously, the speaker removes snails from the leaves and places them in a pail of salt, with the result that they “return/Whence they came, to slime” (lines 5–6). Stanza two devotes its six lines to an expression of regret. However, the identity of the “one who grieves/Over the death of a creature that kills” (lines 8–9) is never established (the speaker? an unspecified outsider?), nor is it quite clear who the “creature that kills” is (the snail? the speaker? any living thing that is part of the food chain?) Likewise, is the “Lord of indiscriminate grief? God? Since “Lord” begins the line and since the traditional verse practice of capitalizing each line’s opening word has been adhered to, it is impossible to be certain about the reason for the capital “L.” Again, why is the grief “indiscriminate”? Because it is experienced in situations that don’t call for it as well as in situations that do? If so, is the death of the snails a situation in which the grief is appropriate or a situation in which it is not?

The “caustic thief” must be the speaker, “caustic” because he causes the slugs to “melt/Like plastic sheets aflame” (lines 4–5) and

"thief" because he takes their lives from them. But "caustic" could as easily describe the tone of the poem, in which case it becomes a protest against the fact that all living things must die. Is there an implication that we are no more than the "curled and dying leaves" of line one or the slugs melting back into the slime from which we derive? If so, *culpa*, yes; but *felix*, no.

Fidel De Castro

Fidel De Castro has had the distinction of having works included in prestigious anthologies: *A Doveglion Book of Philippine Poetry in English*, *Heart of the Island*, *Man of Earth*, and *Philippine Writing: An Anthology*. Because of the editorial practices of omission and emendation of lines and stanzas (c.f., the note to Poem 248 on p. 342 and the note to poem 86 on p. 287, respectively), I have not used the texts of poems from this work. Yet de Castro's reputation as a poet is so tenuous enough that Mella excludes him, perhaps because even his anthologized poems, with the exception of "Stillness," are mediocre. No doubt Villa was attracted to "Stillness" because of its Villaesque features: a prominent "I" narrator, an emphasis on luminosity, and, as subject, the exploration of an inner state. In fact, a few passages could well have been penned by Doveglion himself; e.g., "So bright my sight/I see the lilting/Notes leap . . ." (lines 13-15) and "Oh, a stillness more/Luminous than Death . . ." (lines 28-29).

Standing still—I never seem
To know when it comes, the trance,
I mean—I feel the stream hushed
Under the thin glass,
The horses, motionless, clinging to
The hill, a cloud balancing the sun
In a cotton hand.

I hold my breath. Then from the
Mouth of a tree explodes a flock of
Birds, flight and feather weaving
A brittle spell: beaks
Spilling crystals lighter than dew
On spider webs. So bright my sight
I see the lilting

Notes leap, glint, hug and tease
 The air, nimble as motes, do almost
 Anything but disappear: with supple
 Twists perform like
 Aerialists. This miracle a canticle
 To the stillness all around. And
 Round the edges of

The sound of birds I feel a lit
 Stillness deeper than of horses,
 Cloud and stream, a stillness bigger
 Than love, brighter than
 Light, or darker than the darkness
 That moves above and under the ground—
 Oh, a stillness more
 Luminous than Death, and I feel
 It breathing in myself, no longer
 Standing still but walking away—
 The sunset on my back—
 My pious feet stepping on the ground,
 Behind me leaving no marks, no quiet
 Or the slightest sound.

The poem stands on its own merits. It is a mood piece, not unakin to Edna St. Vincent Millay's "White Shoes." However, the tone is celebratory, not sombre. The speaker relishes those times when his senses seem to become acutely perceptive of nature around him. Personification is used to create an atmosphere that stops just short of the precious: ". . . a cloud balancing the sun/In a cotton hand" (lines 6-7); "the/Mouth of a tree . . ." (lines 8-9); ". . . the lilting/Notes leap, glint, hug and tease/The air . . ." (lines 14-16).

In spite of careful structuring, the poem flows unimpededly, the words doing what the birds' songs do: 'Notes, leap, glint, hug and tease' (line 15). The five seven-line unrhymed stanzas do not compartmentalize, much less restrict, the outpouring delight on the part of the speaker. The traditional verse practice of beginning each line with a capital letter is unobtrusive. A casual reader may not even notice small articles of craftsmanship such as the interrupter "I never seem/To know when it comes, the trance,/I mean" (lines 1-3), creating in the poem the same stasis that the speaker is experiencing, or the "still point" produced by the little dagger "I hold my breath" (line 8), perched fulcrum-like between the first stanza (which is all

one sentence) and the remainder of the second stanza (likewise all one sentence). In stanza one, the enumeration of objects—stream, horses, hill, cloud, sun—is from lower to higher, as though the eye were systematically taking in the surrounding scene. The order does change in stanza four to ‘horses,/Cloud and stream’ (lines 23–24); the variation, however, only prevents the possibility of a too-symmetrical structure sounding mechanical.

There is only the slightest suggestion of a religious epiphany, but perhaps just enough to make the reader wonder whether the speaker’s experience is a bestowal of Grace: “. . . This miracle a canticle” in line nineteen and “My pious feet stepping on the ground” (line 33). The oxymoron in the concluding two lines of the poem at least perpetuates a sense of mystery about the speaker’s trances: “Behind me leaving no marks, no quiet,/Or the slightest sound.”

Augusta de Almeidda

The motif of silence reverberates throughout. Augusta de Almeidda’s free verse piece “I Name Our Silent Escapade” as well:

I
Name
Our silent
Escapade:
the
Mooning
River-boat
-Marooned equestrian in
Waters.
Danseur derelict leaping to the
Grace
Of eternity’s music
-I am
Come un-
Tamed
In the riddle of this life.
To weave what salutation
-Glass-mirror questioning

the
Light.
Do I

Sing to the hush of your
performance?

Do I
Speak to command what
Silent song?
Leaping as I
Am
-Poised of the stars that
Bounced in this silent

Silent
Silent tune of our
Dance?

In lines four to eight, the narrator abandons languor ("mooning," "Marooned," and, in terms of celerity, "Riverboat") for adventure, an exchange cemented by the parallelism of "Marooned" and "Danseur derelict," "derelict" as "intentional abandonment of a ship at sea" and "Marooned," of course, meaning a person stranded. However, the element of intentionality is constant. The "escapade" is the pursuit of life's meaning. The answer may be in the life of art and/or the artist, as the speaker and the danseur perform, but more likely the thematic conclusion should be that the key to life is activity, not passivity. "Danseur derelict leaping to the /Grace/ Of eternity's music" is clearly harmonizing with the music of the spheres, with "Grace" having the double sense of "Divine bestowal" and "fluidity of movement." The speaker is impelled to participation, becoming "un-Tamed" (lines 14-15) and "Leaping" (line 27). Even the poem's spatial configuration—a series of short lines forming a column—might well be taken as emblematic of the dancer dancing.

The escapade is a quest, not a discovery. Life remains a riddle (line 16); the "Glass-mirror" is "questioning" the light (line 18); and three Prufrock-like unanswered questions run from line twenty-one to the end of the poem (line 33). But why must it be done so noiselessly? It is a silent/Escapade" (lines 2-3); the speaker insists on the "hush of your/performance" (lines 22-23), a "silent song" (line 26), and a "silent/Silent tune of our/Dance" (lines 30-33). Because of "the stars that/Bounced in this silent/Silent/Silent tune . . ." (lines 29-32). Sound would drown out the music of the spheres, and the success of the pursuit of the answer to the "riddle of this life" (line 16) depends on becoming attuned to the celestial harmonies.

Visitacion De La Torre

Visitacion R. De La Torre's "Genesis," done in unrhymed quatrains, is a paeon to life, as its title suggests:

soon, the mango leaves turn to crisp green,
they open up; savor the earth's summer brown—
not to die, nor to shy away from stress
but to respond to someone's solitude.

Redolent of perfume, the tonic of listless souls;
and since love lives close to someone's presence,
the rain consoles; the wind chuckles,
nurturing the mango leaves.

yes, while the leaves face the sunburst
they flaunt their cool, green charm
and dance their freedom song
in wild hosannas.

and as the beloved hums the receding strains,
he watches some mango leaves cavorting
in the river where two solitary streams
have mingled.

The mango leaves that open up, "respond to someone's solitude" (line 4), are "redolent of perfume" (line 5), are consoled by the rain (line 7), "flaunt their cool green charm" (line 10) and "dance their freedom song/in wild hosannas" (lines 11-12) are, palpably enough, representative of human females. The leaves are "cavorting" in line fourteen because "two solitary streams/have mingled" (lines 15-16). They open to "savor the earth's summer brown—/not to die, nor to shy away from stress" (lines 2-3). Their perfume is the "tonic of listless souls" (line 5). In other words, they exist to receive love, and their perfume stimulates the male who might otherwise be inattentive. The phallic implications of the consoling rain are transparent to anyone conversant with Chaucer's "Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*. As the poem says, "love lives close to someone's presence" (line 6).

Antonio L. Descaller

Antonio L. Descaller's "Testamental," conversely, is an appeal to be delivered from artistic creation, which, the speaker claims, produces pain (line 1) and does not sustain life (line 14):

O let this song-creating pain
 Be as brief
 As fall of midnight rain
 Or as turning of wind-whirled leaf

I cannot hold it long:
 The elemental god of this mind
 Can not sustain it into song
 With eyes unmiracled and blind.

Then evening me into silence.
 Unsung songs are not imperative;
 The quest in words for their equivalence
 Is not the bread by which I live.

Whether the title means that the poem is a legacy, a piece of evidence, or a statement of the speaker's credo, it is a plea for relief. Why the "elemental god of the mind" (line 6) has "eyes unmiracled and blind" (line 8) is never made clear. Perhaps the speaker feels inadequate. As Whittier would have it, perhaps he feels that he can only produce the buckboards of verse. If so, it is a teaser, for the supple syntax and the ironic implication of the concluding stanza make us regret that this poet's voice will—if his plan holds—cease, like Keats' nightingale as abruptly as a "fall of midnight rain" (line 3). The poem is ample evidence of the ability to "sustain it into song" (line 7), but the speaker, conceding, will allow "evening me into silence" (line 9). And it simply is not true that "Unsung songs are not imperative" (line 10). They may not be "the bread by which I live" (line 12), but most assuredly they are the nourishment of the readers. And probably the nourishment of the speaker as well. When the speaker invokes "The elemental god of this mind" (line 6), he is calling on not a "basic" or "punitive" impulse but rather one coterminous with the elements of nature, as his similes and metaphors reveal: ". . . as brief/As fall of midnight rain" (lines 2-3); "as turning of a wind-whirled leaf" (line 4); "evening me into silence" (line 9). Poetry does, indeed, seem to be "the bread by which I live" (line 12).

"Prelude" seems almost mistitled; granted its content, "Postlude" might seem a better fit:

The mind remembering you
 Is not a city of sound,
 But stillness dripping slow.
 This is music's burial ground
 Where shout can not lance the stillness through

And the past comes to unbind
 Remembrances that gently clap
 Back dreams of years lost behind—
 Like waters falling drop by drop—
 Upon the shingles of the mind.

Its message is that the speaker wishes to recall the unnamed "you" of line 1 in dollops, not all in a rush. "Gradual" is equated with both "stillness" in lines three and five and "slow" (line 3), "gently" (line 7), and "drop by drop" (line 9), and this is the manner in which the speaker opts to "unbind/Remembrances" (lines 6–7). In so doing, the speaker is able to savour his memories, if that is what he is doing. The expressions "music's burial ground" (line 4) and "Like waters falling drop by drop—/Upon the shingles of the mind" open the possibility that memory is dead, entombed and thus impervious to the waters of recollection that fall drop by drop on the shingled roof of a mausoleum.

Both "testamental" and "Prelude" are mellifluous, even conversational, in spite of traditional verse practice. The former's abab cdcd efef rhyme scheme and quatrain stanza structure do not go unnoticed, but given the fact that each line begins with a capital letter do not undercut the unspooling of sentences. The same can be said of the abcb deded format of the two five-line stanzas of "Prelude." Traditional verse, in both poems, becomes the vehicle for quite original content.

Conclusion

With whatever verse forms, the works of Bernal, Bunao, "Felix Culpa," De Castro, De Almeida, De La Torre and Descaller discussed here should, as Benesa would have it, be pyramids—they are not pyrites to be lost on desert sands.

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