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Going to America An Imaginary Letter to My Twin Sons

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GÉMINO H. ABAD

Going to America

Go, said Papa, visit with them before you leave.

In a week I was leaving for America;
 already I saw the spires of the U of C
 and listened nights to notes on a supreme fiction
 gently cascading from a poet's blue guitar.
 But Papa meant his brother, priest of our hometown
 Barili, where bedridden in a sinking house
 of stone and deep-forest timber, his eyes followed
 every morning the way all his mornings crept
 down a dry vagabond cadena de amor
 that hung famished from a rafter into his room;
 where too my spinster aunt, herself a sorry twig,
 racked with cold, her hands trembling with the medicine tray,
 spent her days between his sickbed and her icons
 all in a row gazing on her creaky pallet;
 the oil lamp's glimmer barely made out San Roque
 baring his wounded thigh and his dog looking up
 with a query on canine faith—San Antonio
 de Padua, coddling the Child Jesus in his arms—
 Holy Mary, her fireproof mantle sheltering
 the weeping souls in Purgatory—

O how long

ago to childhood I had caught their murmurous
 presence in my town's quiet day-to-day survival.

I must go back then before I leave yet again.
 It being my first plane ride, Manila-Cebu,
 a surly fate abashed my provincial breeding.
 I mistook the plane to Davao, and as I sat
 shaping to my mind's eye a pleasing heraldry
 to my island home—sea horse in antique armor
 amid coral swaying to his joust with sea pens
 —a pretty stewardess in hysterics called out
 my name! Everyone looked where the sea horse,
 wild and shy,
 lost his gallop tottering out to his next real plane.

So now borne aloft, the turbines softly purring,
I reconsidered my dream to match the malice
of my fate, and to an imaginary cat
that prowled the clouds fed my sea horse, armor and all.

On terra firma the problem of direction
dogged me still, but my tongue suddenly recovered
its childhood amid the hum and drum in Lahug,
so that the road to Barili shone like coral
in the sun, and when I asked the sweating porters,
they opened to my heart's longing and with my old
gang's cheer, pointed where my heart cried for a blessing.
It was hot and dusty on the gravelly road;
pigs and chickens, tobacco smoke and human sweat
condensed their essences in the rickety bus,
but I was rapt: through flitting coconut trees shone
the sea—Here is home! and would my friends know the thought?
after long silence, what words to speak? It isn't
when smiles die, so much a question of language still.

When I stopped the bus, for a moment I doubted.
A man alighted too with his Texas cradled
In his arms; then a hare-lipped woman with a box
and a dark girl in tow carrying sunflowers.
I watched awhile my fellow-passengers trudge down
the same dirt road where, in times past, barefoot,
marbles and slingshot hid, to the public schoolhouse
I went. How could I have known any doubleness
of speech would exact such a deep perilous prize?
Having learned my first English words, they invaded
my thought, annihilating in their shade its grubs
eating off a wilderness of legend and faith.
A sadness smote my mind; in that early going,
I must have lost more than those blind larvae coddled
in words. So whence could a country metamorphose?
what dream not trapped by the coils of other speech?

From the schoolhouse it was a short walk past a creek
to the Spanish-style house with the winding staircase
lined with flowering plants. Over a scraggly wall
of wild bougainvillea I called, but no one came.

The house kept still, kept all the hubbub of boyhood
 like a bell; ah, what gift of tongues could free that sound
 to fathom my soul in the rifts of double speech?
 I wandered around the strangled yard exhaling
 its heat and pungent odor of weeds and their bloom,
 till a sudden fear of childhood's green cunning worm
 seized my feet—the *udto-udto!* whose quick venom
 worse than sorcery cancelled reason in madness
 and burst at the next noon hour death's iron petals.
 I ran like a foolish thief to the outdoor stairs,
 and breathless, laughing to myself, hanged at the door.
 I knocked once, twice, then knew at last I had become
 a stranger to my youth, my playmates the empty shells
 of remembered monickers reverberating
 in lost echoes of the old vernacular speech.
 How restore the robust truancy of their myths?

My aunt who came at last to the door, a starveling
 apparition, touched her trembling hands to my cheek,
 and sighing, confirmed my world's death with soft weeping.
 She led me to her brother's room where he lay gazing
 at cobwebs of light on the wall, the smell of age
 and sickness thick in the air; he returned my look
 and smiling faintly, called my name; he knew the tramp
 just passing through again, dreaming of home too deep
 for names. It wasn't a simple thing of belief,
 when one lay at death's door, to hold dear the brown soil
 that one's bare feet trod. I wasn't a poet's conceit
 to sound death as vagabond metal in the blood
 that made holy the things of earth; if it could speak,
 there were no language could translate that realm of light.
 But I, having wandered far, and through a language
 from another land, learned a way of thought too clear
 to bear the meek wayside flowers along its course,
 could see no country in death whose promise of home
 glimmered to the wild sea horse, all broken coral!
 What blue guitars to thrum for our supreme fiction?
 Or, to thwart our past, what credences of summer?

It was so right that I should see for a last time
how I had moved from one death to another dream.
Hypocrite! I reproached myself, America
in the heart, indeed! dissimulation of void.
My country has been well lost beforehand for lack
of will to break the fetters of words and there forge
their meanings in our own heart's fire. Filipinas!
Illusion today and dream tomorrow, what words,
what stinging words to shape from the world's languages?
Uncle, holy priest, grant me tomorrow the grace
to track your death's wordless path to my childhood faith;
dearest aunt, may your dark martyrdom of silence
hallow my anguish in the mad brew of language.
How could there ever be a language to translate
each man's fiction of country or home if only
the words in speech were at risk without sacrifice
of belief in the splendor of their bold illusion?
Never was there home to seek, nor country to lose,
where other tongues or other cultures only crossed
the pages of a book, for what could their words bear
other than the thoughts that I myself will to weave
or the longings that, famished for the sex of things,
contrive a kingdom inaccessible to death?
Should the words overrun my page with those meanings
that do not answer my intent, what sly labors
could repair their breach if I myself sink to sloth?
There indeed is my country lost, and no sainthood
of mind carved from suffering the contest of words.

An Imaginary Letter To My Twin Sons

Dear Davie, Dear Diego,

I am on an island called Oahu,
And there are many white people, and they are called Haules.
Yes, I thought at first it should sound like Howls!
The others are Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos.
I have seen the fields of sugar cane
Where the Ilocanos worked when they first came here.
How poor they must have been and lonely.

There are very few native Hawaiians,
 Their words which are the names of streets and buildings
 outnumber them.
 What happened to them?
 A long time ago, they had a queen, but soldiers came from
 America
 And they took away her throne and then all the land.
 Those who fought were killed, and then, many more died
 Because they did not know the diseases that the soldiers
 brought—
 They were never so sick before on their island.

It is a beautiful island
 Perhaps because nature's story is so different from ours.
 And perhaps, because our own story is dark,
 We see only half that beauty—and only dream of good will
 and peace.
 O I cannot fathom the human sadness infects our sense
 for beauty.

Let me just tell you now about the Chinese banyan tree
 by my window.
 Tonight it is my father because his love was like a great tree
 But without speech; yet every morning, on that banyan,
 Many species of birds are in full throat,
 So that now I wonder: would my sons, years from now,
 Gather from a tree's silence my own heart's affection,
 And in that moment know that once, while I made their world,
 I had deeply wished, when they shall have left that world behind,
 I would be the tree to their morning.