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Letter for All Souls' Day
San Francisco Blues
Cargoes
At the Est Indies Organics Store
Providence

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MARIA LUISA A. CARIÑO

Letter for All Souls' Day

A smell like rain
descends upon the flowerbeds
to make the grass
distinct, more pointed.
I wake from a dream
of earth pelting my face,
the memory of you
released, with a tug.

Here, by the lake
throwing off blue
scales of water,
the leaves detach themselves
from out-thrust branches
slowly, the difficult
sap still heavy
in their veins.

Your eyes were the last
kindness, unfaltering
even as your face stiffened
into a shape beyond
finality, your body
yielding its old wounds,
giving up all
indentations of flesh
to view.

I want to imagine
you floating away
on unshadowable water,
away from the bowls of food
and garlands of flowers, away
from the rising sea of smoke
and candlewax—

your heart now
 lighter than its papery
 vessel, its last
 bloody filament
 on the white pillow
 the only thread to tell me
 where you have gone.

San Francisco Blues

In Union Square pigeons root
 around the base of a pillar
 marking a battle no one
 remembers much anymore.
 Garbage left over from greeting
 the new year wilting like flags
 in the insignificant bushes. Beyond,
 the new world expands in sky-
 scraping rows to the diminished
 peaks: ambivalent
 grace knocking
 on windows, rousing
 the coiled body each morning
 with a well-timed blast, volume
 turned to high—and it's out
 of a dream of cocks
 crowing through snail-
 strewn grass, dawn riding
 into the high
 heat of noon on the other
 side of the world.

Obedient, still
 a child of the morning
 and always the last to get up,
 you stumble through the silent house
 to the kitchen where your daughter-
 in-law has left cold milk, cereal, bread
 risen from a sea of blond wheat
 somewhere in Iowa or Kansas,

far as the eye can see and virtually no
 human hand has touched
 in the harvesting. Concord,
 an old-fashioned word meaning
agreement: pictures of handshakes
 across tables or continents, across
 the trenches where your *Tatang*
 gave up his life trying
 out fatigues for the '*kano*,
 so everyday your son can count
 shiny new dimes and quarters
 tumbling out of the mint and
 both of you can joke about how he
 makes a helluva lot
 for a living. Afternoons
 you walk, remembering
 the rust of that fabled bridge, the first
 thing your mother saw when the ship
 labored into the harbor. Pressed
 to her side, you saw only blue,
 her good skirt whipped
 by wind across your eyes, sweet
 stain you remember everytime
 a spoonful spreads like sky
 on the roof of your mouth.

So you talk to *paisanos*
 on the corner of Market
 and Powell, where the trees
 shade you while you sit to count
 how many *kayumanggi* faces
 are in the tourist crowd. A girl
 has the young profile of Iniang,
 her hair knotted at the nape
 like the day you saw her balancing
 a basket of vegetables on her hip.
 How she could cook! And now
 nobody has no time in the morning even
 to crush slivers of garlic into a panful of oil
 followed by last night's rice, no time

to saunter with a plateful of eggs
 and tomatoes to the window,
 fingers flaking the bronze
 scales off thin, hard
 bodies of salted fish or dipped
 in sardine oil. Wide
 open eyes dream a stream of scrubbed
 schoolchildren chanting "*A*
is for epol," tongues seeking
 the grooves of a new language.
 The bounties of Victory
 Day: reams of cigarettes,
 bars of foil-covered chocolate you ate
 by the handful up in the forked
 guava tree until your belly
 ached. After the smoke clears,
 it is the same. The wheel
 of fortune spins and because you shop
 at Lucky's and use
 your head, you do even better
 than the yoyos on "*The Price*
Is Right" who— *putragis!*—
 probably never finished high
 school, unlike you. But you've stopped
 writing letters home that speak
 of this world you have proven
 exists beyond the fenced schoolyard
 and cobbled street leading from post
 office to market, outside the same hills
 in your old mountain town that heard
 the fleshy thump of His Honor the Governor
 Taft's rump descending from a carabao.

These days, you float back to a pool
 of watery sunlight, limbs splayed in the eye
 of an American morning, winter thinning
 only in the imagination and in your blood
 perennially longing for the arms of a warmer
 awakening. Only a stretch of highway separates
 this coast and that, only an arc of infinite sighs,

steel ramps and bridges strung
with their necklace of lights
and beckoning further
into darkness, away
from Stockton and Watsonville.
The trains hurtle so fast through the bay no one
can jump them now, even at memory's
passing. So many trees, bloated with fruit.
Too many moons, floating like fish heads
severed in the waters of another time.

Cargoes

*" . . . for one sole monastery in the Philippines
in which the Holy Name of God was conserved,
Lord Philip II would expend all the revenues
of his kingdoms."*

Cinnamon bark, pepper,
clove and cayenne from the Spice
Islands. Brass beetles with hinged
carapaces for hiding
vials of scent. Ivory
statues, sundials, a slant-eyed
Lady of Guadalupe embellished
with gold leaf.
In a cobblestoned Mexican
village called *San
Angel*, porcelain
plates of China blue
pressed into the sides
of a fountain at *Casa
del Risco*. Diamond-
studded gold
crosses wrapped
in raw silk and linen.
Antimony.
Saltpeter.

Vinegar, sulfur,
 wine. Nine
 hundred and ninety-
 seven filigreed buttons
 and a comb, *años* 1618,
 bearing half the name of *Doña*
 Catalina de Guzman
 of Intramuros in raised
 gold dots. *Nuestra Señora*
de la Concepcion navigating
 the reefs under stars so close
 everyone, from the mariners
 to the nuns and condemned
reos in the hold, suffers
 hallucinations. Flies
 fall into jars of drinking
 water. Thick bean soup
 clotted with maggots.
 Someone on deck, singing
 visions of silks and corpses
 washed upon an ocean bed
 and, centuries later, a woman's
 white neck articulating the weight
 of an antique locket against
 a twilit window.

At the East Indies Organics Store

for Roland Tolentino

Here are our dresses
 in the season's newest shade
 of mildly distressed
 blue, taupe, ivory
 and driftwood.
 A safari of scents
 to tame the tiger
 in your man.

Skirts and crepe
 jackets in summer's
 brightest banana yellow
 from faraway republics.
 Moroccan beads in cinnabar
 and other multicultural
 shades. For cold evenings,
 you can slip your shoulders
 into the sleeves of a *United*
Colors sweater, rainbows
 of yarn fluffy and warm
 as a Colombian embrace
 or an Ecuadorian hug.
 For the beach, a *sarong*
 or thong to sling low
 around your thighs,
 the tribal way. Yes,
 this is the season
 to show some skin, a bit
 of cheekbone, not too much
 emaciation.
 Perhaps you'd like
 a vest of woven
 threads, repeating a design
 whose name I can teach you
 to say: *ojos de Dios*, the eyes
 of God, eyes that surely approve
 the way you look, approve
 the nimble fingers of your Asian
 and Latin American sisters sewing
 in factories from Saipan and the Cayman
 Islands to the Honduras, secretly
 embroidering fierce dreams of
 escape. Go forth on their behalf
 and revel, each cheek stuffed
 with a choice of our complimentary
won ton dumplings or bite-
 sized *samosas*. In your new
 outfit you can colonize
 anything—fly an airplane
 over coffee plantations, found

a small empire, discuss Mandela
and Bosnia over stone-ground
wheat thins and three-bean
dip, pondering the shape
of this hyperreally bright,
hypnotically suave
new world.

Providence

. . . *'toy nasipnget a lubongco, incaca'd
silawan tapno diac maiyaw-awan.*
(. . . on my dark world, shine your light,
o radiant moon, that I might not lose my way.)
— "O Naraniag a Bulan"
(traditional Ilokano folk song)

1

In the the story of the boy's life,
notes from his father's saxophone
float through an open window.
Somewhere a sky brims with stars
and small fish swim obediently
to another country.

Occasionally, heat yields
its body to wind.
Suppers of rice, bamboo
shoots and okra, winged
beans greener than lagoon
water. This is a time
he remembers with clarity:
letters from far-off places
collecting dust in a glass
jar; shadows pared clean
from lamplight, music
in the ear growing
unrecognizable, thinned
to the texture of scales.

2

Child, my sparrow
by the window, eat.
Out of the corner
of my eye I watch
you listen to bullfrogs
belly their songs
to the river.
Pierced by moonlight—
skin-shoulder
blades. Fevers
come and go.

Into a bowl I crack
a day-old egg,
drop grains of rice.
Water seethes;
I call you back
with an incantation
of new names,
my own gifts.
Now or at the end,
what will it matter
that in this house,
ours are the only two
hearts wreathed
into each other,
that already you
repeat the pattern,
abandoning me
as in your coming
manhood?