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Cubao Midnight Express, by Perez
Cubao-Kalaw, Kalaw-Cubao, by Perez

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Cubao Midnight Express: Mga Pusong Nadiskaril sa Mahabang Riles ng Pag-ibig. By Tony Perez. Cacho Publishing House. 1994. 252 pages.

Cubao-Kalaw, Kalaw-Cubao: Mga Premyadong Akda. By Tony Perez. Cacho Publishing House. 1995. 331 pages.

Like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha country, Tony Perez has staked out a fictional territory all his own. His Cubao is no longer the commercial district in the heartland of Quezon City. It has become a city, a country, a whole universe inhabited by Perez's quirky characters.

His fourth book, *Cubao Midnight Express: Mga Pusong Nadiskaril sa Mahabang Riles ng Pag-ibig*, was launched last 14 February 1995 at National Bookstore in Cubao. As in the other books in this series, this one was also designed by Rayvi Sunico of Cacho Publishing House. On the cover you have a pen, some books and a cigarette, an electric train and roses. They capture perfectly the stories in the book.

In "Pamamanhikan," the narrator seems like a typical enough suitor wooing a girl. But slowly, through language at turns lyrical and pungent, we enter the mind of a serial killer. He stalks his quarry carefully, falls in love with them—then rapes and kills them. But trust Perez never to create a one-dimensional character. His narrator-killer becomes a human being trapped by loneliness: "Malungkot ba ang buhay mo, Mahal? Mabigyan kaya ng ligaya ang isang tulad ko? Malungkot din, malungkot din ang buhay ko" (p. 35).

The same loneliness pervades the characters of "Basted." The story is written in the form of letters exchanged between Venuz Gisagis and her Daddy Kringle one Christmas. Perez, one of the country's most accomplished playwrights, shows us the tone, voice and color of "such small lives." He also shows the *kabaduyan* of it all, even inserting in the middle of the story a card which goes this way: "I'm A Loco Locomotive/ 'Cuz I'm Crazy 'Bout You." And inside the card: "My little steam whistle/ Is tootin' for you—/ Have a Merry Chug-Chug/ And a Happy Choo-Choo!" (p. 81).

But beneath the cloying cuteness are paragraphs like ciphers that give us a glimpse into the characters' inner lives. The woman writes: "Like you, I know feeling lonely and blue. We are many here in our typing pool, and from time to time we talk of favorite things and the different happenings. But this is only small talk, and afterwards we are lonely again" (p. 87).

Or the man talking about his work: "I get many headaches every now and then because of the noisy machines. Dr. Alulon in our clinic tells me it is alright, but we have to check up once a month because of the dusts in the machine area. When the machines are working sometimes I want to vomit. I feel sick, and when I look around everything is happening very fast" (p. 89).

Perez whips up a sexual storm in the next two stories. "Kaisplit" is written in the tradition of Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose* and Philip Roth's *The Breast*. Here, Valentin's best friend is his sexual organ (6.75", wet and wild). They go through various experiences: *Hustler*, fighting fish (porn movies), solo flight (masturbation)—and revolutionary *colegiales*. How to stop this mighty urge? "Deep freeze? electric shock? artillery bombardment? nuclear blast?" (p. 127)

If you think that's audacious enough, try reading "Katalo," in which four men play a rather curious game called Pretty Pretty Princess.

"Nagtanggal ng jacket si Vito—sa ilalim niyao'y nakasuot siya ng sando na Fuchsia at pinalamutian ng crown sequins at bugle beads.

"Naghubad ng sports shirt si Nilo, at nagpalit ng tube blouse na red-orange at tahi sa chiffon na masinsin ang shirring.

"Nagbukas ng clutch bag si Mon; naglabas ng Italian scarf na mauve at may dibuhong rosettes; ibinalabal yaon sa kaniyang liig at kaliwang balikat.

"Si Tex naman ay nagsuot ng mobcat at apron na may purple polka dots at ruffles na lime green" (pp. 133 and 134).

And so the campy game—and the outrageous wordplay—begins, sparing nothing. The volley of words ricochet, with racism, sex, and other things as sure targets. Cleverly, the story is framed by the thoughts of the neighbor, Miss Purita Cordero, who keeps on wondering how strange are the lives of her pet lovebirds.

But easily my favorite story here is not even about people, but a painful one about a dog called Kiss.

In "Kiro," Perez takes us into the mind of Kiss, a street dog which is adopted one day by a young man. Never has the dog been happier: in the afternoon he runs after the electric train owned by his young master. But the man dies, and a new master with a heavy hand gets Kiss.

"Di siya makatulog, at natakot siya sa dilim, at parang kay-ilap ng ligaya. Ilang ulit siyang napahalinghing at napabangon at nasakal sa hangganan ng maikling kadena sa kaniyang liig" (p. 198)

It is a brief and brilliant story, showing us how sharp loss can be.

Cubao-Kalaw Kalaw-Cubao: Mga Premyadong Katha is the newest book of Tony Perez. The cover shows a black-and-white photograph of two young boys on top of a ruined stairway.

The labyrinth of loss is again explored in this fifth book. It is composed of *Cubao-Kalaw, Kalaw-Cubao*, which was a co-winner of the Palanca Grand Prize for the Novel in 1984; "Sacraments of the Dead" first prize in the one-act play division of the Palanca in 1981; and "The Wayside Cafe," third prize in the one-act play division of the Palanca in 1982.

A crime that involves a brother, a father, and a foster-father lies at the novel's core. Years later, we meet the progeny of those involved in the crime. Curiously, their lives have begun to intermingle "tulad ng semilya sa tubig."

An almost hallucinatory quality informs the work. Dreams slide into nightmares. The Bible, bits of psychology, and a babel of tongues merge in one scene. In another, the rain is shown through a series of slants (///) that occupy a whole page. Words run only until the middle of a page, then they break and become whole again.

But unlike an Old Testament god of anger and revenge, this novel is an expansive one. It is full of generosity and grace. It looks at love from its many terrible angles.

Unlike the character Cezar, who is like a blind archangel of the alleys, Perez has seen wisely and well. His novel blazes beautifully in the darkness. The two one-act plays (by the fictional Enrique "Ike" Loria), the notes by Bienvenido Dancel, and the poems by Cezar Templo serve as counterpoints to the novel.

These two books show that, indeed, Perez is raising a body of work without equal in contemporary Philippine fiction. He deserves our admiration and our applause.

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