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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 bettles 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?