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The Conversion

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Para sa Dayuhan sa Bangkok: Paano Kausapin ang Puta

Walang kinikilalang bayan ang libog at yaman
maliban sa alpabeto sa dulo ng daliri
na walang bagong katinig at patinig
walang bagong himig.

Basta't pinapasok ang lupain ng katutubo
mga burol, lambak, pati masukal na puklo
hinahawi anumang sagabal sa pag-aari

habang unti-unting lumitaw
sa kahabaan ng katawan
ang nakatitik mong katauhan
sa 'yong mata, taga-hilagang magulang
sa dila, sili't luyang dikdik sa anghang
sa mga palad, guhit ng paghahanap
at sa baywang, lantik ng yukong halaman

habang unti-unting lumitaw
sa kahabaan ng katawan
ang pinagdaanang kabihasnan
ang luhang lawa sa paninging bintana
ang pagtaginting ng templo sa pagtawa
ang pag-aalay ng insenso at ilaw
ang di-pagpatay maging lamok o bangaw.

Sa dulo ng daliri ko
ilinuluwal kang tao.
Sasapuhin ka ng palad
hindi ka lamang malaglag.

J. NEIL C. GARCIA

The Conversion

It happened in a metal drum.
They put me there, my family
that love me. The water
had been saved just for it, that day.

The laundry lay caked and smelly
in the flower-shaped basins.

Dishes soiled with fat and swill
piled high in the sink, and grew flies.

My cousins did not get washed that morning.
Lost in masks of snot and dust,
their faces looked tired and resigned
to the dirty lot of children.

All the neighbors gathered around our
open-air bathroom. Wives peered out
from the upper floor of their houses
into our yard. Father had arrived booming
with his cousins, uncles.

They were big, strong men, my uncles.

They turned the house inside-out
looking for me. Curled up in the deepest corner
of my dead mother's cabinet, father found me.
He dragged me down the stairs by the hair
into the waiting arms of my uncles.

Because of modesty, I merely screamed and cried.

Their hands, swollen and black with hair, bore me
up in the air, and touched me. Into the cold
of the drum I slipped, the tingling
too much to bear at times my knees
felt like they had turned into water.

Waves swirled up and down around me, my head
bobbing up and down. Father kept booming,
Girl or Boy. I thought about it and squealed,
Girl. Water curled under my nose.
When I rose the same two words from father.

The same girl kept sinking deeper,
breathing deeper in the churning void.

In the end I had to say what they all
wanted me to say. I had to bring this diversion
to its happy end, if only for the pot of rice
left burning in the kitchen. I had to stop
wearing my dead mother's clothes. In the mirror
I watched the holes on my ears grow smaller,
until they looked as if they had never heard
of rhinestones, nor felt their glassy weight.

I should feel happy now that I'm
redeemed. And I do. Father died within five years.
I got my wife pregnant with the next.
Our four children, all boys,
are the joy of my manhood, my proof.
Cousins who never shed their masks
play them for all their snot and grime.
Another child is on the way.
I have stopped caring what it will be.
Water is still a problem and the drum
is still there, deep and rusty.
The bathroom has been roofed over with plastic.
Scrubbed and clean, my wife knows I like things.
She follows, though sometimes a pighead she is.
It does not hurt to show her who is the man.
A woman needs some talking sense into. If not,
I hit her in the mouth to learn her.
Every time, swill drips from her shredded lips.
I drink with my uncles who all agree.
They should because tonight I own their souls
and the bottles they nuzzle like their prides.
While they boom and boom flies whirr
over their heads that grew them. Though nobody
remembers, I sometimes think of the girl
who drowned somewhere in a dream many dreams ago.

I see her at night with bubbles
springing like flowers from her nose.
She is dying and before she sinks I try to touch
her open face. But the water learns
to heal itself and closes around her like a wound.
I should feel sorry but I drown myself in gin before
I can. Better off dead, I say to myself
and my family that loves me for my bitter breath.
We die to rise to a better life.