

*Pentimento*

## Luna

Latin: moon. Satellite of dry seas and craters.  
Crescent-crowned goddess driving a two-horse  
chariot. Romanian: month. Page ripped  
from a calendar, one of a dozen.  
English: silk moth. As imago, wings lime-  
green with eye spots. Spanish: ocean sunfish  
or common mola. Flat as a millstone,  
hence its Chinese name 翻車魚, toppled  
wheel fish. Sanskrit: a clipping, a cutting.  
Woundedness. Arabic: date palm. Of the genus  
*Phoenix*, sold dried, pitted and glazed  
in a souq stall. Filipino: towns in Apayao,  
La Union, Isabela. Also stones, night-black  
and smoothed by the sea. Brothers inscribed  
in a nation's blueprint, one a general,  
the other an artist. Syllables liquid  
to the tongue from which a sketch,  
an army, a universe might emerge.

## Amorsolo's Light

Don Fernando, it is no secret how light  
fills your canvas, how in the tropics, light  
is often unseen but felt, the summer light

searing as laser, and it is under this light  
that you painted alla prima, your hand light  
on the brush, facing the easel at first light

so you can see the sky gradually lighten  
until every surface is awash in light,  
the world sun-stained, an abundance of light

falling on farmers planting rice, light  
on their feet and singing, a fugue of light  
rippling, becoming the iridescent flight

of birds over a field, filigree of light  
threading the canopy, the mango trees lit  
with fruits ripe for the picking, the fact of light

common and real as gravity, as light-  
years away stars combust, radiating light,  
inflected, refracted, lush on the light

brown skin of women washing clothes, their slight  
bodies luminous, how wavering light  
becomes distilled into wonder, delight,

the day opening into a world of light.

## **After Carlos Botong Francisco's *First Mass at Limasawa***

A priest celebrates mass along the shores of an island  
Magellan has claimed for an empire. It is Easter

of 1521 in the year of our Lord and a religion  
is born in what is not yet a country. The century

is a ship drifting from coast to coast, buffeted by storms  
and currents. Nicolaus Copernicus ponders the motions

of celestial bodies, considers something other than the Earth  
as the center of the universe. *Decet Romanum Pontificem*:

the Medici Pope is pleased to banish Martin Luther  
from the heavenly city. Some names are crossed out;

some are added. Rajah Humabon is baptized  
as Don Carlos while his wife Hara Humamay, also known

as Amihan, is given two gifts: the name Juana  
and an image of the Santo Niño, the Child Jesus garbed

in imperial vestments. In Basel, Hans Holbein the Younger  
sweats over a detail of putrefying wounds in another

Jesus, an oil and tempera painting of the dead Christ  
entombed. His model for the work is a body fished out

of the Rhine, a likeness of a likeness. The world spins  
and turns beyond the frames of a painting, beyond the gilded

pages of an illuminated manuscript. Samurais  
in Japan are honed to a single intention: vanquish

the enemy, blood smearing blades etched with cherry  
blossoms. Across the steel-blue waters, the Jiajing Emperor

starts his rule in the Ming Dynasty, drinking the menstrual  
fluid of palace virgins as an elixir for eternal life.

Maps are being drawn and redrawn, scrolled out  
on the quarterdeck with a compass. The natives listen

to the Gospel in a language they seem to but can't  
quite understand. Suleiman the Magnificent, Sultan

of the Ottoman Empire, conquers Belgrade with over  
a hundred ships and a quarter of a million soldiers.

He writes: *Everything aims at the same meaning but many  
are the versions of the story.* In Limasawa,

the sky swells with possibility. The royal banner  
flutters and candles flicker beside the cross. The sea

wrinkles and smoothens, wave after wave after wave.

## Netsuke

How small can a world  
    be reduced to, this toggle  
        by which a cord

is threaded and knotted  
    for something to be hung?  
        It looks simple

enough: a rabbit  
    with coral-black eyes, legs  
        tucked out of sight.

A general the size  
    of a finger stands, caressing  
        his flowing beard,

his right arm holding  
    a halberd behind his back.  
        Carved with fine blades

from ivory, box-  
    wood, cypress or ebony,  
        a miniature

sculpture takes months,  
    the craftsman's hand steady  
        to whittle, polish,

render each detail  
    of hair or whisker. It matters  
        to pay attention

and see the object  
    from all angles, its underside  
        bearing the signature

of its maker. Firefly  
    cage, dangling token,  
        worn elegy

to form, it rests  
on the palm with the weight  
of its promise:

whatever is ours  
to lose is something  
we must first keep.

**After Anita Magsaysay-Ho's *Women with Baskets and Mangoes***

Trinity of grace,  
they are the fruits swiveled  
from the branch, stillness

and still life of summer's  
inflorescence. They are the baskets  
they carry like a fretwork

of memory, weaved story  
by story, morning after morning.  
Their skin is the color of dried

tobacco. Their headscarves are haloes.  
They are quiet as their labor  
of cleaning, mending, washing,

mothering. They are echoes  
of each other's gestures, and of the women  
before them, and of the first

hand that plucked a fruit,  
achingly sweet and forbidden.  
They are harvesting.



## Jose Rizal Poses as an Egyptian Scribe in Juan Luna's *The Death of Cleopatra*

I am sphinx-like  
in the foreground, looking  
at you looking at me.

*Tableau vivant:*  
re-creation

as recreation, art  
as a baroque  
mirror one gazes into.

How divine  
to be decked in classical  
kitsch, this striped headdress

a fantasy  
worthy of an epic.  
History's all  
a matter of playing  
dress up, costume  
party in fast  
forward. With papyrus  
scrolls and other gewgaws,

I am ready  
to act the part  
I have been fated.

I do not flinch  
when the flash explodes  
for a split

second. My eyes  
are fixed on the lens  
as the aperture closes.

**After Simon Flores y de la Rosa's *Recuerdo de Patay of a Child***

And here you are, silent on your bed

adorned with flowers picked from mother's garden.

You could be sleeping but you are not.

You could be dreaming of small animals

curling themselves around your feet. Instead,

there is the fact of your story: too brief

to have a chance at witnessing life

as it unscrolls. Delicate as the heirloom

lace where you have lain, your face betrays

the kind of afterlife reserved for those

who barely breathed, innocents made holy

by virtue of your dying. Dear little

corpse, you have been born but that does not mean

you will survive. That we have survived

does not mean we will be born into a poem

or a painting, still life of pillow, flesh,

baptismal dress. The frame has become

your coffin. Your lullaby is a requiem.

## Pentimento

Literally, a repentance. From the verb *pentirsi*, meaning to regret, the artist swerving from an initial composition

and painting over a telling detail.  
In John Singer Sargent's portrait  
of Madame X, a jewelled strap slips

from her cadaver-pale shoulders, reason  
enough for a scandal among Paris'  
*tout le monde*. He would later correct

the placement of the strap and keep the canvas  
for 30 years before selling it to a museum,  
saying *I suppose it is the best thing*

*I have done*. The Old Masters were known  
to have altered their works, X-ray scans  
and infrared reflectograms making

a face buried for centuries visible. And there  
is a story of a conservator in Cambridge,  
puzzled about a donated Dutch painting

of what appeared to be just a simple scene  
of people gathered by the beach. Why was there  
a crowd bundled in their winter clothes

by the windswept stretch of water? Cleaning  
the seascape with solvents and a scalpel,  
she would uncover the hidden creature:

a dead whale, washed up on the shore, object  
of the gaze obscured by the artist. On paper,  
I have crossed out words, each substituted

letter an echo of *what if* and *instead*.  
What unfolds? Think of the dyes and pigments  
accruing, the hand's infinite variations

on the theme of atonement. Stippled by light,  
a painter considers what to reveal  
and what to conceal from the world, as if

a wayward strap can be hitched as a gesture  
of penance, as if a leviathan  
can be shrouded by the surface of the ocean.

**After BenCab's 32 Variations on Sabel**

Your shadow meanders down the street where I seek you, silhouette volatile as water.

I think of you, a cipher contained in your cellophane dress, barefoot and bedraggled, seeding the air with your spells and gospels.

Our Lady of Detritus, you gather all that can be found, aware that the world wants more and more and more.

What are plastic bags and cardboard boxes if not artifacts?

You have no mask, as most of us do when we see each other. A storm runs its full course across your face.

Once, you were someone else: a daughter with a name, a mother, a wife, another life long ago.

Unfixed, you become as various as Hokusai's views of Mount Fuji.

Say *cleave*, *salvage*, *weather*. Sabel, tell me about the dangers of language, how some words can shift meaning from one breath to the next.

All of your attention is distilled into a question: what can be fashioned out of an archive of loss?

O scavenger, wildling, nomad from heart to heart, you pass through each hour as if it were the last hour.

## Untitled

Standing before Juan Luna's *Spoliarium*,  
I notice at first the bolts and rivets  
fastening the frame, chains tethering  
the painting, how they seem to surface  
from the scene itself, an echo  
of the rope used to drag the fallen  
gladiators, and I begin to see  
the body in the center, wounded,  
stripped of its weapons, taut as a string  
about to snap, axis around which  
everything turns, and I remember  
what Rizal imagined to have heard  
when he made a toast at a banquet  
in honor of the artist, *the tumult*  
*of the throng, the cry of slaves,*  
*the metallic rattle of the armor*  
*on the corpses*, the world not entirely  
changed as I think about the photo  
of a woman cradling the lifeless  
body of a man, casualty  
of a drug war, and I could hear  
her wail in my mind, a widow's  
ululation, not unlike the howl  
of the woman grieving in the painting,  
her face turned away, her suffering  
invisible but commonplace  
while a crowd streams past the corpses  
in a basement of the Colosseum,  
the litter-strewn and blood-streaked sidewalks  
of EDSA, the hallways of a museum  
now getting dark, and I wonder  
about the old man in the background,  
crouched with a torch, looking perhaps  
for a son or something to salvage,  
where to locate the pain that he bears  
and what else can be said of his story,

how long will his light burn, flickering  
before it is extinguished  
and everything becomes draped in shadow.

*Italicized lines are from Jose Rizal's speech on June 25, 1884 in Madrid, translated into English by Encarnacion Alzona and Raul Guerrero Montemayor.*