

A WORLD IN TRANSIT

Poems by Eric Tinsay Valles

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*To Papa, Mama, Edwin and all
those who work for God's glory
everywhere*

What
is this world? And what doth man desire?
Now with his love, and now in his cold grave
Alone without any company.

- Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales (Trans.)*

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A South Asian near an Arundel Tomb

Raincloud cheek turned to one side,
The Calcutta councilor's child seems in a nap
As before on his Grandma's wobbling lap;
Dry from noon rays dribbling like summer rain,
Marble curls press against a stony pillow of leaves;
Struck down by cholera, the boy's likeness is what
remains.

Were his grandma's hands stained by an oil lamp?
Was his coffin garland-strewn as by the Ganges?¹
Was anyone scalded by candle drippings amid dirges?
He makes no reply, but his unbound marble thumbs
And one foot behind the other speak
Of innocence broken like inlaid camel bones.

Might he find me and my camera irksome,
My flash vandalizing his century-long sleep?
His cherub face winces as if pinched across time
By dark strangers echoing in a strange accent
How imperial duty snuffed out embers in the family
hearth,
Hardened his Mama's and Papa's hearts into granite.

After tears had been swept away by floods,
Only then did they return to pay respects
And his tomb sculpture details inspect.
Today is my turn, a rock trader from Calcutta, to see him.
I'm amused by the figures of Yama's² dog and its mate

Lapping at the feet of his noble neighbors.

Embraced by each other's stony visage,
The Arundel patriarch and matriarch³ keep warm
Below sleet dying on stained glass, pigeons leaving the
roost;
Rapt in timeless conversation, they pay no heed
To our lilting speech and silken stoles,
The child's glassy call for family bliss.

Love cast the art of the high-born couple,
The child's ancient neighbors, in stone.
His plea, in a parentless world unflown,
Is smothered beneath a rock-woven dhoti⁴ sheet.
Spared his loved ones' betrayal and fate's ill stabs,
He lies bundled like threshed wheat:
One more quaint picture for my little Rajeev
Who looks outside our window for a trace of my shadow.

1 A holy river near Calcutta where the ashes of the dead are scattered

2 The first mortal to die who leads the dead to the afterlife

3 A noble couple whose tomb inside Chichester cathedral was the subject of a poem by Philip Larkin

4 A cotton cloth

Smuggling Roast Duck (For Prof. E.T.)

I lugged contraband –
cut-up, plum sauce-soaked, each morsel dressed
in Japanese gilt paper, a present fit for a Tu Fu –
as a deacon does consecrated bread
–with hands clasped –through Aquino airport
on a sugary morning in the season of giving
as a favor for a mentor poet.
How foolish to risk being locked away without books,
grinding teeth in the dark, being racked
for hauling dead fowl. But guards in starched blues,
abuzz like vultures, as always
were on the prowl for deadly, pricy quarry.
To the golden December sun I dashed,
racing heart stilled, embraced family,
peeked into the stash intact –
feast for poets who hold fast not rules
but fellowship across borders,
served with the cup of hospitality,
what old reformers toasted as *solidaridad*,
licked, lapped up in my adopted land.

A Golden-Arched Diner in Bargo¹

A bushfire ignited
In this retiree's belly: a spur
To amble to the main street
Of this New South Wales town,
In a race with December fruitflies.
Digestive juices churned
In step with the chug
Of a greying train engine,
Its cargo bay laden with necklace-like
Noodles, ruby pork and plum sauce,
Treasures whose fragrance
Floated among trees, cars low on gas,
Grizzled neighbors on a hunt,
Walking a rotund grandchild:
Hunger pangs in a homey scene
Repeated in various climes
(in Texas A&M,
Keppel Road or Shenzhen),
Near satisfied upon sight of the gold
Marquee of a Chinese restaurant.

The leatherbound menu's
Pan-fried noodle-like characters,
Dish names conjuring eternity
("Buddha jumps over the wall"),
Captured moments of self meals ago
As chopsticks snared duck in black sauce;
Sweet-and-sour fish teemed in *mee*;²

1 In New South Wales, Australia

2 noodles

Veggies dressed in rainbow hues
Sacrificed in the urn of the belly.
God's bounty, cut up and served in woks
By a Middle Kingdom chef offering
A taste of Chinese hegemony,
Silenced base appetite
For an hour of contemplation
In gastronomic nirvana,
Kept my homesick soul at ease,
Lured folk from grubby stores,
Half-dead retirement homes,
Humdrum surfeit for a passing
Taste of childhood bliss.

Reunion

Suckling pig
Charbroiled, pierced,
Crunchy-gold skin pinched
By family back at table
Since the last leap year.

Succulent flesh sliced, mouth-watering on a plate
Passed to a brother back from the Mid-East,
A bite silences voices in his head

Starved of aromas and flavors of his homeland:
Briny, oily, with a hint of calamansi.
His tongue recalls the loves he left behind

And his gut assures
That today's feast will be
Tomorrow's refuse.