I /

**INDIOS BRAVOS**
INVOCATION

Thin dragées of falling light when I held the entrance open, made welcome. He smiled and glinted under the awning of his most polished smile. Is this the enemy, the dear distraction? I led him in, hung his smooth silks next to rayons and rain shedders decaying in the closet. Who would not plump cushions with her own hands, anoint window-ledges with yellow paste and cinnabar, all night pour pistachios into each gaping bowl? All the saved copper clanking in coffers I fed to the feast, all my silver. For it was months since sweetness had left the water, since moth wings grazed the burning lamps, sizzling down to papery ash. When would the compassionate affix his watermark, his sandal-print upon the page? So I could go on I festooned my lap with garlands, steeled my neck toward the fire. My muse was my desire.
La indolencia de los Filipinos . . .

INTIMACY DESERVES A CLOSER LOOK

on the boulevards, where a mural assembles nightly. Bodies the hue of scrap metal beneath train tracks, feathered by neon. My friend the pathologist walks back to Manila Hotel, cuts through the park and comes across lit fires in iron gratings. The third eye of a Sanyo rice cooker blinks the hours from a billboard. A man scrubs himself with a pumice stone in the fountain, a family of four sleeps next to their faded mango trishaw. So languid even in repose, he writes. Here, as in that part of the world, the spirit relinquishes itself. Lizards free-fall to the ground. Bells’ tongues rend the Angelus. But history expounds on the imprecision of Chinese water-clocks and the industry of Northerners, the brighter ink of spiked holly berries against white, the augur-shaped bodies of tropical parasites, the people that scan the skies for rain and omen birds, the fear of avian flu.
Rainy Day

after Gustave Caillebotte, 1877

No, I haven’t been to those streets
the caption says intersect near the Gare Saint-Lazare,
where gentlemen and ladies step out into the falling rain.
They stroll down a boulevard at the end of which rises
a brand-new building— Geometric in pearlescent light,
it houses what I imagine to be modern apartments,
a first-floor row of burgeoning cafés, flower shops,
patisseries, confectionery and milliners’ stores. In one,
the couple in the painting’s foreground might have purchased
cuff links for him, some eau de cologne, even the short-brimmed
bonnet she wears with its discreet mesh veil shading her eyes.

Rain being what it is, rain falls all day today as well in the south,
not south of Paris but through the Blue Ridge mountains,
over the Chesapeake, in the bible belt— where mildewed cornfields,
vehicles stalled in flash floods, a child’s bright green
umbrella with frog eyes snagged in a bush, might suggest divine
retribution. The deluge, once more undoing the constructed world.

And so I admire the way rain sometimes looks decorous; how
pavement stones have the sheen of well-scrubbed oysters in Paris Street:
Rainy Day. Nothing suggests the more familiar pell-mell scrambling
for any open doorway, awning, or bus stop. Somberly attired,
passersby walk seemingly without hurry, with restraint,
though the hems of their good wool trousers and skirts must be
waterlogged. After all, what could one do to avoid what will fall of its own accord and as if without mystery? Rain thins to drizzle beyond the kitchen window; the world outside looks strangely distant, like a place that could forget you at any moment. In Caillebotte, even the brittle ribs and paneled seams of silk umbrellas sigh in the rain just a little; and, unless you look very close, the tiny teardrop sheen of the woman's earring is hardly even there.
THE MINIM

In a music studio waiting room, waiting
for my daughter to emerge from piano lessons,

I read a magazine article on tubercular
Modigliani—how after his death, his lover Jeanne

leaped to her own from a Paris rooftop, pregnant
with his second child. It was a time

that critics describe as the emergence of
Modernity, the coming-of-age of that inconsolable

and perturbing child who gazes
through window gratings of an apartment

and sees the world fracturing into little cubes of blue.
What a world to have lived in, to have arrived in,

especially for the wayfarer, the exile
with his portmanteau of souvenirs, describing

the pavement between the world of no return and the world
of always beginning, and the light that shimmers

somewhere in the dusty trees. A public outcry shut down
his first exhibit, because it threatened prevailing notions of decency—

those women’s necks lengthening in twilight, their tulip thighs
promising welcome. Not sixty years before,
the painters from Manila made their way to Rome and Barcelona. 
*Only fifth or sixth class,* said Retana of Juan Luna; *no notable place among the ranks of Spanish painters.* Reviewers said the same of José Garcia Villa when he came to America to write among the early Moderns: *at best, a minor poet.*

Modernity, Modernity, how cruel you’ve been as Muse, demanding constant servitude and reinvention. In Luna’s *Spoliarium,* the two gladiators dragged from the arena to the chamber of bodies where they will be stripped and burned, leave rust-colored tracks upon the floor.

The music teacher, a Russian émigré who used to be a biophysicist in her former life, might recognize the paradox: distance infinitely halved, never sutured close.

*Spoliarium* is a mural by Filipino painter Juan Luna (1857–1899). He was among the cohort of Filipino artists and scholars who went to Europe in the 1880s, where they pondered the problems arising from a corrupt colonial dispensation in the islands, the issues of cultural and linguistic identity, social reform, and a burgeoning Filipino nationalism. Luna entered *Spoliarium* in the Exposicion Nacional de Bellas Artes in 1884, where it won one of two gold medals. In 1886 it was sold for 20,000 pesetas. It currently hangs in the National Museum of the Philippines.
Decoding the Signature

Kept towns,
attached, still we knew
to follow. Yearning
allows knowledge. Thunder,
yew tree leaning dangerous
on the cliff face—

How many names
for desert winds?
Imagine that historian
swallowed in a column of sand
so he could learn
even a few
of its hundred forms:

Whirling djinn,
copper fire.
Rifi. Ghibli.
Harmattan. Solano.
The stop in the breath
from knowing
inside the name.

Alloys keep their yes;
they’ve married
or intermingled
in the fat of gold.
They should never
be poor again,
if not for heat.
Who will read
and by what light, fallen
like stars years from now,
figures on the stone
fresco?

All parts of the body
ready for the other,
the atoms of desire
deflecting, one
moment more,

ready to forgive
the curve of distance,
the hunger that follows.
IN THE CLOTHING ARCHIVE

Barong Tagalog*

How cold the world grows.

Under a moon dyed the colors of rust
    and blood, threads spin

out of the bodies of worms.

The pith of green stalks feeds
    old fires. I embroider

suspicions with my hands. Worn
    loose, ends untucked, it declares

there is nothing I conceal.

Rendered so, I am a field
    open always to diminishment.

I am the skull

under extensions of flesh,
    the smile of a blade,

an amulet of nicked

* The Barong Tagalog is a traditional Filipino men’s shirt of sheer piña (pineapple) or jusi fabric, decorated by hand with intricate embroidery. Spanish colonial authorities were said to have enforced the costume in order to ensure that male colonial subjects were not concealing weapons on their persons.
bone. Wear it and wed
me, invisible shroud, my pale other. History
decorated with disappearing
stars and lacunae, it’s why
you want to look
even as you avert your gaze.
LETRAS Y FIGURAS

This art genre . . . began with albums of commissioned paintings by colonial officials and wealthy traders from the West who wanted to show images of the exotic peoples and places they had traveled, to their compatriots back home.

— Alfredo Roces, Adios, Patria Adorada

The security guard at the Museum explains that the ochre discoloration at the bottom of a pair of waist-high, gold-brushed Chinese jars, might be because of the remote location of public restrooms on that floor. Every relic bears a scar, then— the arts in 17th century Filipinas, like a new bahay na bato at the end of a row of wooden houses, waiting to be filled with tipos del pais, paintings as virtual albums of island life:

a farmer stands all day ankle-deep in water, diligent at the sod; a native woman kneels to graze with her lips the hand of the bishop. Indifferently he walks in the street. A young boy follows, bearing on a silk pillow what I see now is a red and gold biretta and not, as I first thought,
the pullet that lays the bishop's breakfast— eggs
he likes to eat with buttered ensaimada and thick

chocoláte. In Marché's La rue de l'Escolta
á Manille, 1886, the church is the point before

the vanishing point, its spire drawn high
against the scattering clouds— the obvious sermon

from which all figures in the foreground have for the moment
turned. The noodle-seller sets down his pole and baskets;

the women balancing clay jars on their heads
pause to wipe their hands on their camisas.

Two late risers slide an upstairs window open,
and the driver of the caruaje swivels his head

to look in the painter’s direction— and in mine,
anonymous face returning to these frames, curious about
the watery skies and ivory light, about Giraudier’s
*El Escribiente*, 1860, and what has made him push back his chair
from the lace-covered table to read so intently; why he stands
and bows his head, as if in prayer, over such a small scrap of paper.

Art works referenced in the poem:
*La rue de l’Escolta á Manille*, colored print by Alfred Marche, 1886. Marche was a French
explorer and collector of ethnographic, anthropological, and zoological objects, who
had also visited West Africa. He made two voyages to the Philippines (1879–1881 and
1883–1885), and wrote *Voyage Aux Philippines*.

*Native Woman Greeting a Priest*, by Jose Honorato Lozano, in *Album: Islas Filipinas,
1663–1888*, Jose Maria A. Carino and Sonia Pinto Ner (Makati City, Philippines: Ars
Mundi, Philippinae, 2004).

The art genre known as *tipos del pais* began when colonial officials and wealthy foreign traders
in the Philippines commissioned albums of paintings in order to show images of the exotic
people and places they had encountered in their travels. The earliest example of *tipos del pais* is
known as *The Boxer Codex* (c. 1595). The most famous artist of the *tipos del pais* genre was Jose
Honorato Lozano, who in the mid-1800s developed a style of embellishing letters of the alphabet
(as illuminated medieval manuscripts were wont to do) with *tipos del pais* scenes and
imagery; this latter subgenre came to be known as “Letras y Figuras.”

*Bahay na bato* (Tagalog): stone house.