

# *Words. For Franz.*<sup>1</sup>

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J. Neil C. Garcia

**G**ender, like the identity it names, is a cultural accomplishment, a performance enacted repetitively and in that sense unthinkingly from moment to moment, that materializes the self it supposedly merely describes. If it must be either only this or that—man or woman, masculine or feminine, hetero or homo—it must forever be sad, for it arrives, it is achieved only at the cost of forsaking all the other possibilities it could have become, all the other possibilities it could have identified as, as well as loved.

All gender is melancholic, therefore, because it is haunted by a constitutive loss: what it might have otherwise been. For most of us, this is a loss that we cannot actually mourn (in private and in public, both), lest our gender's ritualized "nature"—which is to say, our very identity—come spectacularly undone.

As many of us may have intuited, among the more remarkable and courageous exceptions to this socially enforced rule are the drag queens—and drag kings—whose hyperbolic theatricalization of the genders they both are and aspire to be serves to unmask all gender for the regulative and performative fiction that it is.

Torch-singing drag queens are particularly poignant, because the unrequited love they croon about and lament isn't finally the object of their erotic desires, but rather the object of their desirous identifications: the woman that their culturally constructed anatomy as men tragically, officially, and in and through their obvious—and therefore doomed—impersonations at once all too visibly references and forswears.

Thus was I able to write this poem for Franz, who walked up to me unexpectedly at the end of my longish and highly theoretical disquisition on the gender performativity of drag shows (at our department's faculty lecture series, that took place a couple of months before he passed away), and told me, quizzically, that it's a greater thing to love than be loved.

I never got the chance to show this poem to him, as we never got the chance to take that ancestry-seeking trip to Vigan together—something we wishfully said we would do, when we saw each other for the last time at the ICW office in what would later be the ill-fated Faculty Center. I first read this poem at his wake in Delaney Hall. Today, as we celebrate the centennial of his birth, I am grateful for the opportunity to read it for him again.

## ***For Franz***<sup>2</sup>

Everyone is born naked and after that, everything is drag.

- Ru Paul

You sit to listen to me talk  
about men transfigured into women:  
we are what we wear, they seem to say,  
pointing their cherrylipsticked mouth,  
kicking their stilettoed heels,  
and twirling in their lace and sequined gowns  
before the tired and witless gaze.  
Refusing to accept their bodies' verdict,  
they awe us who are sadly trapped in ours.  
They tuck inside what should be hidden,  
thrust into view what must be seen:  
these are girls, buxom and brave,  
and how they take our breath away!  
Later you pull me aside, announcing,  
To be able to love is the noble virtue,  
to be loved is a lesser thing.

You leave me wordless, precious friend:  
how keenly you have struck, just now,  
my pain's raw nerve. Sheer luck.  
I know these days your lucent thoughts  
bubble up as language without warning.  
This time, it happens it's me right here,  
gratefully receiving them. Dear old man:  
I know this noble fate you speak—  
I've loved, and not been loved,  
and wouldn't wish the same on friends.  
But let me say, I understand your point.  
There is, in this, sweet vindication:  
queens ablaze with rhinestone tiaras,  
in darling makeup and gorgeous pumps,  
walk the platform like rutting cats—  
and know it well: to desire is to change,  
nothing more. Denied the Other's body,  
don't we all, in grief, turn to our own?  
We must keep on loving and desiring, then,  
if only for that strange, resplendent gift:  
the Self destroyed by longing,  
the Self transformed.

Franz was of course an entirely effective aphorist. His poems, stories, and essays abound in so many of these arresting and wise passages that possess the incantatory power of proverbs. Easily I will direct anybody wishing to find a gracefully phrased, moving, and pithy epigraph to a story, poem, or book to any of Franz's works, among whose foremost virtues is a refined and finicky care for language as well as the thinking—and the thought—from which it is finally indistinguishable.

I wrote a poem occasioned by one such memorable quote from Franz: "Words are not necessary to love." This is a truism that writers and artists can readily recognize and accede to, remembering all the people they know (and love) who are not like them, and yet precisely for this reason exceed and surpass them—morally or otherwise.

And yet, challenged by this uncomfortable truth, I find that in this poem I must throw in my lot with the sonnet-writing, boy-besotted, and immortality-bestowing Shakespeare (“So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,/ So long lives this and this gives life to thee”), and register a specific demurral against its message, too. Addressing a fellow writer, bestest friend, and foodie, whose successive “Beloveds” she has decided to write (and write about) almost always to the point of personal annihilation, I maintain in this poem that writers, poets, can and do love earnestly if not especially, with their words.

While considered less valuable in our grievously instrumental world, the love of artists—we simply must believe, invoking perhaps the evidence of our own ardent lives—continues to be a true, and rare, and precious thing.

## ***With Words***<sup>3</sup>

*For Ricci*

The mistake,  
so we are told,  
is to think our words  
can make them love us.

Words are not  
necessary to love,  
as they are not  
necessary

to any of life’s  
everyday motions:  
to crave, to fear, to die.  
And yet, we are certain

to our every feeling,  
words do offer  
something gracious  
and sunny, after all:

folded into the eggs  
along with the shallots  
and diced paprika,  
a hummed name

that means to say grace,  
even as our tears,  
shed for its owner's  
indifferent sake,

drop more than adequate  
seasoning to taste.  
Words then become  
the dark-eyed familiars

raving upon the forked tips  
of our tongues,  
become the bronze sunset,  
the slick-skinned puddle,

the cup of weak tea  
held like a heart  
inside the other's  
beautifully brutal hands—

anything, anything that winks  
at our spurned affection  
from within our naked  
need's half-lit rooms,

turns the notched length  
of its body  
full into our aching arms,  
and keeps us company

despite our being empty  
and cavernously alone.  
There, past our words'  
outstretched shadows,

in the scheme  
of ordinary things,  
again and again  
we are fled away from—

a sad beast floundering  
inside poetry's  
water-tight maze.  
Dearest fellow-

lover, one thing is clear:  
this world does not care  
to hold us close at all.  
It feels language

as a weight that wrecks  
and pins down.  
And yet, we understand:  
poured and painstakingly

spoken  
into the poem's  
shapely glass,  
words are nothing

if not at once the loving  
and the being loved.

## (Endnotes)

1 Read at “To Open all Closed Things: A Centennial Celebration of the Life and Works of National Artist for Literature, Francisco Arcellana,” Pavilion 1, Palma Hall, University of the Philippines Diliman, September 9, 2016.

2 J. Neil C. Garcia, *The Sorrows of Water* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2000), 30-31.

3 J. Neil C. Garcia, *Misterios and Other Poems* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2005), 196-98.