

# From *Tangere*

Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr.

## *Banquet*

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Lay out the lace  
tablecloth with its scalloped  
fringe, the porcelain plates  
and cups rimmed with gold.  
Polish the silver  
cutlery, rub the surface  
smooth until each piece  
gleams, scintillant  
in the light cast  
by the crystal chandelier.  
Your hands know all  
too well how this feast  
is artifice, what lengths  
you go to show the bric-  
a-brac of Chinese  
lanterns, birdcages  
without birds, globes  
of frosted glass hung  
from the ceiling.  
For good measure, plump  
the cushions and run  
a finger on the banister:  
not a speck of errant  
dust should touch your skin.

## ***Crisostomo Ibarra***

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*Welcome back to your country  
and may you be happier in it  
than your father was—*

Welcome  
back. By which I mean to say  
that no, you are not wanted  
here. Not the accent you caught  
like a wayward sneeze, not  
your decorous manners, scented  
with a whiff of noblesse  
oblige. *Please*. What tells you  
that you can casually open  
a door double-bolted exactly  
to keep you out? You who come  
and leave like the wind, you  
are the son of your own  
undoing. And if you so  
insist, take a seat to see  
how everything unravels.  
Exposition's measured syntax,  
these little dramas of rising  
action. Then a finger  
pulling the trigger.  
The bullet's clean trajectory.

## ***The Dinner***

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concerning the manner in which chicken  
neck wings scrawny as a beggar in the streets  
are served from a tureen into a friar's

plate who takes it as insult grievous slap  
that stings all the more because the hand  
is brown brown face smiling across the table

what else could it be food as mirror  
of who we are what are we but flesh  
bared just for hunger nothing is enough

to fill the mouth the tract a void within  
the body nothing to sate the tongue not  
in any manner not chicken neck not wings

## ***Heretic & Filibuster***

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In this story, a man is convicted of crimes that he did not commit. A stone flung from a slingshot hits a bird on the wing.

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The story goes that he fell out of favor with the parish priest, who accused him of not coming to confession. How could he not have erred when everyone else was so besmirched?

\*

The man becomes a story only after he dies. Death is the frame that bounds a life, rendering it final and complete.

\*

To be a heretic is a great danger; to be a filibuster is worse. The story is repeated to anyone in need of a cautionary tale.

\*

The story spreads all over town, each mouth tasting of rumor. The church bells sound rampant when pealed.

\*

The story is an evasion is a carriage is a thorn. It takes the shape of its container: an earthen jar, a crystal goblet, a broken tea cup mended with lacquered gold.

\*

The story hardly matters. What counts is how it propels the narrative and leads a son to be heroic or tragic. In this sense, the story is a shadow of another story.

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The story is everywhere and nowhere. It itches and festers, a phantom limb that throbs every time it is told. Grief is the root word of grievance.

## A Schoolmaster's Difficulties

Every student is a postulant.

The mouth learns how to shape itself  
into an O, how to roll the names

of saints on which day and for what

purpose. A child memorizes words  
he does not know the meanings of:

*doctrina, jopeccador, sepultado.*

As the tongue stumbles on bitter  
seeds of a fruit goldened by sweetness.

Some birds in captivity mimic

human speech. Others are shorn  
of their songs and caged in silence.