

# Five Poems

Gémino H. Abad

## Now

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Now is the poem, *kaibigan*,  
and time, our supreme fiction:  
break of dawn, fall of night,  
all brokenness  
in time made whole again.

Now is the real, the self, the poem.  
O, the wonder of it,  
“the achieve of, the mastery” —  
all goodness, and truth, and beauty:  
be each one or myth or illusion,  
never the less  
each bears our quotidian meaning  
for voids of days  
in our words’ multifoliate clearing,  
Language our Muse!

Yes, now *is* the poem!  
the very mystery of it  
where one weaves his own text  
like the spider his net—  
hung with morning dew,  
sensitive at all points  
to chances of his cunning  
and craft  
and persevering vigil.

Now, *kaibigan*, now!  
it passes, and future is past,  
but you may still open  
  where,  
                        says the Snow Man,  
you see “nothing that is not there,  
and the nothing that is.”

## ***No One Wants To Die***

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No one wants to die, *kaibigan*,  
whatever form the end takes  
dissolving all relation;  
since it is our common lot  
though hardly ever supposed,  
each one's time comes for him—  
his own, and once only,  
and deadly,  
                    beyond protest,  
and no remedy.

Ah, how absurd to love,  
if one's journey had no haven  
and were simply done,  
people being always less lovely  
than one's desire—  
even your little daughter who now  
may be in tears, inconsolable,  
because you can't come home again  
with surprises, who too may forget  
to visit come All Souls' Day.

The time is now, and too soon,  
though you rage  
that time make pause;  
oh, let mind be still and settle  
on that evening's happenstance,  
that secret foretelling  
in which you may have peace  
    as you cease  
since you had known even then  
your journey's end.

Yes, one of night's solitaires,  
a lone firefly  
visited with you and would not leave,  
its small light steady  
for all its flutter,  
its body invisible in the light  
which it bore,  
three days and three nights  
as though it would risk the ephemeral  
against all surrounding dark.

## ***Manang Bitá***

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Harelip from birth, she grew  
at our grandparents' farm  
ten hills away from our town Barili  
"as the crow flies," depending  
on whether the wind had tractable will  
or enchanted mind.

We could not always  
perfectly guess her drift or drivel,  
part gossip, part lore;  
she minced no words, yet ate some,  
snout and tail,  
the telltale froth about her mouth  
where all her teeth abutted;  
but sometimes she left a tip of a tail  
to twitch upon our silence's shimmering  
paten.

How she loved *tuba*,  
her blood-red drink at sunset,  
then swayed a scraggly bamboo  
to her stuttering tale of romping ogres  
in a wild nightmare forest.

My brother and I  
would not sleep till she had hung  
her narrative from a bewitched cliff,  
then ride upon her high-strung mare  
to night's skulduggery and derring-do.

At cockcrow she led us barefoot  
to school, a long way downhill and up  
—a creek to cross, the soldiers' barracks,  
then the *nipa* chapel in a coconut grove—  
and companioned us home again  
toward dusk, the same way, or sun or rain.

No soldier Jap with fixed bayonet  
or silly headgear with ear flaps for helmet,  
could browbeat her or intimidate  
at whichever checkpoint he chose;  
neither would she bow or salute,  
if she even knew,  
but rather blow her nose, or fart  
a cannonball, as once she did, or  
holding her skirt ballooned from her,  
make water in the soldier's disgusted  
view.

Once too she stood her ground  
to bloody a bully's nose  
with spittle of lime and betel nut—  
a reckless imp who dared to mock  
her speech, then threw a foolish rock.

Oh, she was our Valkyrie,  
squat and feared, unkempt of hair,  
solitary and impassive at our Eden's gate.

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## ***Stick-writing with Mud***

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I write, *kaibigan*, in two “styles,”  
determinations of the will, both “sticks,”  
if you read, in the anguish of our slime;  
I’m at odds with time, its verdure of words,  
a need ravens me, and I must write,  
depending only on what the mind gives,  
whether she is to be born yet again  
or merely speak on the porch, as it were,  
of a quiet evening awash with stars:

Either simple, circumstantial speech, low-key,  
watching with friends perhaps the sky swinging  
her constellations like censers, so that  
our thoughts sometimes forget they’re only words;  
or rich, nervous, severe, elaborate,  
a brinkmanship of expression that scatters light  
with infinitive aim, all its nouns verbs  
that chain those constellations to their roots.

It is of course the mind’s habit to light  
athwart those several speeches of things,  
parleying for parables of their names.  
Like stick-writing with mud! there’s no language  
can track their murmurous spoor to their verge.  
But at odds with time, oh! I must write still,  
whether to stake the mind’s nativity  
on the unraveling of alien speech,  
or merely to speak at midsummer’s eve  
of incense rolling across the mind’s porch  
where stars rain their infinity around.

A pity there's no boon for such madness;  
our words must balk at the unnatural strain  
on their tight composition, their sounds  
but fathoming the silt of other words.

Words and words!

how they lie shameless and bare  
like starfishes dead on bleaching coral,  
their odor the sea breeze's crown of thorns.

I plant those sticks in fecundating mud,  
my mind at risk for the devil's ruses.  
But since my cap has lost its point, my bells  
their sound, I probe for that clearest pool  
where mind weeps to see her face at the brim.  
And knowing how words quickly run to seed,  
I cannot grieve the loss, but rest content  
with dreamy talk on a quiet evening  
as friends gaze at the rainy Pleiades.  
Those predicates we invent for speeches  
all fall down tonight like shooting comets;  
and grateful for their silent exhibit,  
I bury my black starfish in the mud.



## ***A Longing Like Death***

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Going home at sundown up the mountain road,  
the same route as far back as their honeymoon,  
a longing like death seized him, clasp of ice!

“Eat my dust!” he mocked,  
“sentimental fool, mind your wheel!”

But the tremor would not subside, just then,  
and made a desert where the rush traffic roared  
and lights from everywhere scattered  
the shades of passers-by flitting past  
like—oh, like black butterflies!

Then flashed to mind a dream that often came—  
pale, shy girl smiling at a window,  
her long hair covering her young breasts,  
and where he stood in spellbound garden,  
she shone like a star,

then flew out of sight,

a butterfly!

all tangerine streaked with night.

And he fell, the spell broken,  
and six beasts came, like wild pigs without eyes,  
and licked his wounded feet where he groaned ...

Aiei! romantic dreamer,  
how his wife would be quite regaled  
by that wild spell of sweet desolation!  
“Forest boars?” her eyes lighting up with mischief,  
“rooting blindly for smell of your blood ...  
oh my heart! were you ever hunter?”  
And their children, why, they’d surround him,  
though he is come home without gifts,  
their laughing faces all the bright syllables  
of nights and days without term.

And so he came home, quite shaken,  
and at the daughter, his daughter kissed him,  
but his young boys, crowding at the stair,  
would not come, but loudly called to her  
to cap her story to them with the villain’s fall—  
Ah, but they would soon, they would,  
and clamber on him, their magic mountain,  
ride horseback around and around  
with shouts of love and pell-mell glee,  
after their sister’s story’s ghost is laid.

But his wife had gone to town,  
perhaps for flowers on her kitchen’s sill  
that later would wave a yellow semaphore  
to mock the other flowers in the yard ...  
He touched his hand to the Sacred Heart  
on the family altar in the living room  
(“Come to me, all ye that labor ...”)

Then he turned the radio on  
for blare of the hot evening news,  
and looked out to catch a falling star.

A gibbous yellow moon floated  
in the void's basin, wisps of cloud trailing.

On a sudden,  
the mountain road slid through his heart,  
cold slither of a feeling that would speak,  
and clasped his mind and made it light.  
Nights and days without term—  
he saw then just how it was!  
not to be missed being the fullest measure  
after the heart's garden turns desert  
from a great longing like death.