

ON THE WRITING OF 'SHADOWBOXING IN POLYESTER'

by Ned Parfan



*Ned Parfan is the author of two collections of poetry, *The Murmur Asylum* (2014) and *Tilt Me and I Bend* (2017), both published by the University of the Philippines Press. He currently serves as the deputy director of the UST Publishing House.*

Because it is a structure of interlinked poems or fragments, the lyric sequence is a form tailor-made for obsessions and obsessive tendencies. It affords the writer the form to mull over the same subject or write, essentially, varieties of the same poem into exhaustion.

I became obsessed with lyric sequences while studying at the UST, as a member of the now-defunct Thomasian Writers Guild (an organization that did not survive the dearth of enrollees during the K-12 transition). Very active student writers and mentors from the original Creative Writing Center headed by Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta were my immediate influences, and key to the stimuli were the first volumes of *Dapitan*, the annual literary folio of *The Flame*. Back then, submissions were solicited from the best writers we could reach out to, regardless of affiliation. But it was the Thomasian

writers—from Cirilo Bautista to Eric Gamalinda to Nerisa del Carmen Guevara—who wrote the kind of poetry I knew I wanted to write, and I believed many of my contemporaries on campus felt the same.

When the anthology *Crowns and Oranges: Works by Young Philippine Poets* (co-edited by Bautista) came out in 2009, the critic Adam David posited that what set the Thomasians apart from the rest was an excess of imagery. And it wasn't hard to imagine why. Bautista's labyrinthine epics tumbled from one mesh of images to the next, Dimalanta and J. Neil Garcia's elegant collections sprawled out feasts of visual metaphors, and Lourde de Veyra's often hectic verses marched towards the Beat and its anaphoric, bombastic catalogs. This brings me to the excerpts of the sequence I'm presenting here, an attempt at an *homage* to this tradition.

The project is titled "Shadowboxing in Polyester," where all first lines are from de Veyra's *Shadowboxing in Headphones* (2001) and all the last lines are from Dimalanta's *Lady Polyester: Poems Past & Present* (1993). I browsed the two books side by side, picked a line from each to match, and filled in the middle with lines that I thought sounded right. There's also one line in each part dedicated to allusions. Writing my own lines was the easiest thing to not think about. The energy had always been there, and I just had to tap into it. What others refer to as inspiration, I call a state of porosity, and working on this sequence meant picking and choosing from whatever the mind had absorbed at that time.

Younger readers might ask, is there plagiarism involved because of the borrowed lines? No. In fact, there is an entire tradition of poems composed completely of borrowed lines called the *cento*, tracing its origins back to Virgil and Homer. The most comprehensive contemporary example I know of is Simone Muench's *Wolf Centos* (2014) where you can find, in two full pages at the end of the book, the names of the poets she borrowed all her lines from.

I sometimes write poems out of a single word I'm obsessing about, and the seed of this whole thing was the word 'cantilever,' which was not new to me, but it piqued my interest while listening to an architect on Netflix. It grew into the phrase "cathedral of cantilever and slope" which I frankly didn't know where to use. So I decided to write a sequence around it to get rid of the line in my head and free myself from the obsession. If I didn't, it would be haunting me every day. I'd be mouthing the phrase while watering the plants or scribbling it in yet another notebook. "Cathedral of cantilever and slope" as a sound, in the voice of Tom Sturridge or Emma D'Arcy reciting to me late at night while I'm schedule-sending emails for the morning. "Cathedral of cantilever and slope," neither as literal or figurative image, but as a marquee of five words flashing neon above the NLEX trees on my way home.

Aside from scratching an obsessive itch and attempting a humble homage, I also started this project to indulge my unabashed nostalgia for the happiest days of my life, as a Thomasian undergrad. After all, my imaginary audience has always been my younger self—a curious and awkward *promdi* determined to learn more about this darned thing called poetry, and surrounded by brilliant friends and eccentric mentors whom I'm still trying to subconsciously impress to this day.

SHADOWBOXING IN POLYESTER

1.

Crazy heart humming to the infinite beat
A bird flapping within the beast
Static in the wide wild wetlands
These long longitudinal landscapes
Traversed by the elected weight
Of statistical anomalies garnering praises
For creature feature and lack of lisp
Tyger Tyger in the burning bush
Motion-sensor punctuation unclear
The interminable tapeworm of time unreels

2.

The verdant decibel pounding on God's door
Eden's exiles shedding original skin
For secondhand shirts and sexy socks
Spun from the silk of spiny punks
Lord you are not worthy to receive me
In your overpriced parking building
But only say the word in Spanish for milk
And the snake will bite the apple crushed
Butter my heart O three-headed seraphim
Breaking from the womb of night

3.

Digital display in a desperate dance
Of cymbals dumbbells dolls and doldrums
My sensitive splendor suspense surreal
For the starry frappe slash dildo expert
Vibrating visibly in the devil's cabinet
Wearing cowboy boots to twirl in trance
Hideous daydream I suffered enough
My little red robin hoodwinked far

Far beyond long and out of control
Above this cosmic swirl of hands

4.

Knock on me and you will hear a hollow ringing
The skull a cathedral of cantilever and slope
Choreographed to spin around the year 1997
And voice crystal-clear in the voracious void
Found pestilence to be harbinger of prayer
You the sweet-talk and the all-too-human poke
You who knew I skipped lunch for weeks
To complete my Dragonball action figure set
Non-vaedictorian foreboding and mourning
The greatest, saddest songs of our lives

5.

Then you arrive, agitating the curtains
With a series of sounds only trains can make
What happens to lotion thrown to the fire
Oh the unsustainability of it all
Ate the T-Rex from Noah's ark, medium rare
Its mate spared for another day
Calloused promise every ounce a chirp
Washing machining the pages to hell
Until the angel's anchored in naked sight
For dear makeshift life, and scrambling

6.

It covered my nostrils, my throat, my lungs
Baygon used for bouffant hairspray
On TV she was on stage she loves the stage
And apparently there's a blessed hole in the sky
Where 3,000 more pairs of shoes are waiting
Cancerous snake who snacks on the cosmos
Dynastic pageantry over his grave
Attacking poverty with stationery glitter

And the narrow vote to the steep north
Her cold macabre way of striking back

7.

Is that blood on your mouthpiece
You there spitting with volley and heft
Biblically splitting my brain in two
What happened to your mother, Jacob and Esau
Do camels in your desert drink blood now
Fascist Maria in a parallel apogee
Bequeathed vernacular at the foot of the false god
Touch me not you sinkhole feely buster
And when the parade ends we will all be there
To bring you roses, bleak black roses

8.

Frequencies of fear getting louder and louder
Misshapen screams pulled from a whisper
Do you know they take pictures of our students
Do you know they use it to threaten the parents
No wonder little fireflies would rather burn
No wonder the lessons never seemed moral
Snap assault paid for by taxpayer's money
What do you pray for when you're angry
Rage, rage, against the snuffing out the light
And no more dark and no more night

(All first lines are from Lourd Ernest H. de Veyra's *Shadowboxing in Headphones* and all last lines are from Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta's *Lady Polyester: Poems Past & Present*.)

