

Antero¹

Dinah Roma²
De La Salle University, The Philippines

She relished the firm bronze
of his body. Her letters back home,
past a continent traversed, conjured
the savage limbs, the agile sinews
of his back, the calloused soles
that had scoured the jungles
for heads and beasts.

Childlike, she always wrote of him,
pagan and the fierce retreating
each time he entered her home
at the call of the cold
night breeze.

The virile son of the tropics
etched against her whiteness.
The purity of his tongue possessed
her, reworded the arc of sun,
skinned the myths from his speech
to tame the wild that grew in her.

Hers was the script
in the fluent light, chronicles at her bidding,
history in the twin needs of a woman
loyal to the love for master and conquered,
claiming her own share in the daily
tales of home and empire.

¹ Antero (also known as Balonglong) was one of the famous Igorot boys who was taught English by the Americans in the 1900s. He was viewed as proof of the success of the modernizing project of American colonialism, and was a well admired “specimen” at the 1904 World’s Fair.

² **Dinah Roma** is Professor of Literature and Creative Writing at De La Salle University, The Philippines. She is the author of three award-winning books of poetry – *A Feast of Origins* (UST, Manila, 2004), which won the country’s National Book Award for Poetry in English, *Geographies of Light* (UST, Manila, 2007) and *Naming the Ruins* (Vagabond Sydney 2014). She has recently completed her fourth book of poetry, *Inevitable Allusions*, which is scheduled for publication in 2019. Email: dinah.roma@dlsu.edu.ph.

I trace the gesture of her hand
across each leaf, the contour
where history bended into the stories
of their days up in the mountains.

Her gentle laughter resounds in the Cordillera
in the peak of an afternoon, as she shapes
his mouth into a strange greeting,
the forests around them darkening
to augur the ritual of calling back the warrior-
hunters in a frenzied dance
gripping the bone of the *gangsá*.

Kabul

To learn how the desert obscures your sight,
The stretch of its dry whiteness against the sun,

Why its centuries have breathed in war, invaders
courting the terrains of its landlocked wells,

beheadings retold in crimsoned tales of nights.
The place where light is born and vanishes

each day in you, your face revealing the labours
of its terrain. Tonight, distant from our geographies,

we exhaust the night dancing, the wine softening
our limbs, flailing in the air, marking out maps

of longing against music, to the dance
that brought us here. To the many years between us.

To the locks limp on yours shoulders,
the dampness of your neck, to the softness

that is sand, to the voice that whispers of words
unknown to me. All these coming upon a moment

when moving along you is a wage for joy.
Your quiet breathing a glint in the dark.

Ah, tenderness. The anonymity of it.
The sprawl of desert. The haze before the oasis.

Hamburg

Four stops, then the central station.
Our luggage had each weighed heavier
With the wariness of destination. A day
Of travel, beyond the count of hours,
beyond the welcome the skies could bear.
Where to turn, who to ask, how to make sense of
the words of people who move, as if to pause,
would displace them in this circus of a station.
The disgruntle of a man torpedoing through a crowd.
A midlife woman, in her yet svelte form, rummaging
in the food court garbage, each dip of her lean arm
into it, cinnamon curls loosen onto a face
so delicate, once in peace with a somewhere,
as men in red satin jackets trumpet through the hall
for an event believed to be honoured in history.

It was an arrival we were not prepared for.
So when ease had come to our bodies again
the morning wind felt light and crisp. This was
a harbour city, after all, we've been told. Nothing stays
the same. The river flows, swells, overflows,
past histories of waters in rancour and calm
that bend around each curve and corner
of a coast, town, a dream. Who departs, arrives
at what time of the day is never questioned.
What is carried past the current survives
the doubt, the future forming
from slow returns.

Away from the frenzy of the unfamiliar,
we strolled into the city's heart, a landscape
out of a postcard I had once signed but failed to send.
Docked ships, cranes, the clock tower,
the lighthouse. The birds unnoticed:
hovering, gliding, careening,
never once touching water.