

## Franz

(for Francisco Arcellana)

Ricardo de Ungria<sup>1</sup>  
University of the Philippines Mindanao

1

Are you always already angelwards,  
among simplicities whose nakedness  
ignites our dreams? Have you quenched the physical  
of its gooseflesh and pain, and with what wine  
from what fruit? How do stories turn and find out  
where we are? What common imperfections  
do we give up to the sky, that day or night  
we lose one another and the rain falls?  
What is the fiber of the shadow's wing  
that has began like music to lift you  
from our madness? What anthem is emptiness  
and what law is silence that they can stand  
love on its shadows and no bread is burned?  
What is this country we people with songs  
where God fights for food and gropes for his past?  
For all that our inner lives brush away,  
must the words remain healthy for our sins?  
When we think we've left everything behind,  
why are we carried round to start over?

2

If it is morning and still we can't sleep,  
why would a tale begin? And why must we  
finish it into a life not our own  
that takes over our life and becomes us?  
Why do we feel we've moved worlds when nothing  
happens? What is our strength that we attract  
beauty and pain, from whose unroofed rooms  
we return no longer the same? Is it why

---

<sup>1</sup> Ricardo M. de Ungria teaches Creative Writing and Literature at UP Mindanao in Davao City, Mindanao, where he was chancellor for two terms, 2001-2007. He has served as Commissioner for the Arts at the National Commission for Culture and the Arts from 2008-10. His latest book is *Tala Mundi: The Collected Poems of Tita Agcaoili Lacambra Ayala* (Manila: UST Publishing House 2011), which he edited and for which he wrote a Critical Introduction and Guide.

we could kill, almost, when the smell of cooking  
brings in the wife with a ladled moral  
from the pot for us to taste and we lose  
the exact word? What is tenderness that  
keeps it words away from the play of mind?  
Whose are those arms that keep us forever  
young, renewing our lives in words when words  
are all we have left to build a life with?  
And must our skill pass through a hundred lives  
to pare art down to its most exact heart?

## 3

Is it exacting because its landscape  
grows only as much as the lives we can  
keen into it, the proportions of loss  
and desire, of truth, injustice, and stars  
having been left for us to work out  
not into laws that tower above our heads  
to protect us, but into time passing  
when we say *yes* and we say *no*, and that  
is all, simply, and is the time of love  
and nakedness thrown into deep waters  
or drying in the sun, when we give names  
to shadows and they are gone, and the space  
where we move becomes full of absences  
and books unread for the first time today,  
and we smile as if in complicity,  
and our solitude renews its surprise?

## 4

Or is it because when we are gathered,  
and we look around for our possessions,  
our themes are not ours alone and we can build  
on almost nothing and still make things stand?  
And how will our words cleave when we grow old,  
and the darkness and the silence have all  
been dug up to their roots and slipped through our hands?  
Is the emptiness the same as when we stare  
today at the sea-stalking mud that is  
“the stampede of a thousand carabaos”  
and once was our ricefields, rivers, and towns?  
When the neighbors, spewed like volcanic ash,

return from lands beyond, princely with monies  
and disquiet, or undone by blows that throb  
with the heart, or shipped posthaste in coffins,  
what pain sulks deep no art can poke it out?  
When all is wounded, what is there to heal?

## 5

When the same tears fall, do we dream the same  
dream? If we can talk to death in English,  
why are we still a soul away from home?  
In this life we have allowed to choose us,  
why must shadows deepen to bring out the light?  
Why can't those who have left us finally  
leave? Why does a touch of happiness sink us?  
When we have become more human in our  
daughters and sons, and the trees we've planted  
have taught us the flesh excitement of fruits,  
should we care if the last of the meanings  
stand like a god who never closed his eyes?  
What are words that when said we lie naked,  
and all we could be and all we have been  
spring into one sung life yet to begin?  
How do those cared-for lives left out use us  
that we thrive in the thick of extremes and endings?  
How much silence can unspoken words endure?  
Why feed on deaths to free the will to love?

## Pepito

Ricardo de Ungria

*The soul may be the part of you that sees the dream.*  
Balayan, a Tasaday poet

1

The dragon floated up  
and dropped his pants.  
The griffins cheered,  
the bleak leviathan laughed.  
It was the eve of Adam  
going for hours and hours  
without naming the parts.  
It was a time for flowers,  
not fangs.  
The darkness wept  
when the lights went on.  
Remember, it's only transcendence.  
He he he

2

In a drunken drowse  
he is tongue of flame  
very slowly quivering,  
trapped between gentle  
shoulders of friends, or else  
jostled towards a coming forth,  
occultly,  
by who-knows-what  
uncoiling, circling, circling  
some known thing  
come unstuck.  
Always there is that  
at work inside him  
oceans down.

3

Which globe he is in  
there is no telling.  
By this time

words had sprawled  
on the mind's floor and gnawed  
away at their bold syllables.  
There must have been also holes  
for your mind's eye he could see  
clearly, and you agree.

*You know, I mean*, he says.  
You get the drift with lesser grace.  
Or else his *c'est la vie* hand  
flashes in the air:

*Es muss sein, es muss sein,*  
sir!

his grin shaping the way of answers  
to all life's problems tonight.  
Are there enough questions to ask?  
Is there space left to put in  
things we don't yet understand?  
And what of those we do?  
Do we have enough lakes  
or gardens in Heidelberg  
to keep them in? *Basta!*  
Bring out the bongos and congas  
and beat on their *balat*.  
The animals that wore them  
will answer you in the name of Huseng Gubat.  
Wowooooeaceaah!

He he he

*i.m. pepito bosch*

## Stone

Ricardo de Ungria

Among the strewn whiteness of noon  
on this gravel path,  
how very white of you  
to break cover and tell,  
“Here mislaid, a drop  
fallen from an angel’s breast.  
Cramped and cold, still a bone  
for the day just rising.  
Take me as pen takes to paper.  
You may consider again  
writing a love letter.”

And you little flesh of stone,  
on your flatter side,  
your terse lines recall  
someone’s nudity  
from behind, callipygic,  
the shy cleft rubbed by thighs  
to a standstill in midstep,

while the other side’s creases  
sketch a face, catlike  
with eyes closed, bruised  
by death or sleep.

Here are my palms  
for each of you  
still dreaming and almost warm,  
thrust into light  
between bushes of dying roses.