

Chris Santiago

## McKinley Praying

*"Kill every one over ten."*

*Gen. Jacob H. Smith, U.S. Sixth Separate Brigade, 1902*

Sometimes like a sultan  
I put on a disguise & walk among the people.  
The women have Modigliani faces.  
The men wear nooses of fire.

I try to tell the soldiers  
that every *insurrecto* they grease is Walt Whitman  
but they're getting angry & righteous  
since he won't lie down or be licked.

I cover him with a blanket  
I've just bought from a chuckling Eskimo.  
It is many-colored  
& uninfected by smallpox.

A murderer lurks among the stalls  
but I do nothing to stop him—he's the President  
disguised as an actor;  
you can tell by his yellow teeth.

One by one he kills my incarnations  
while they browse for souvenirs  
for my six thousand siblings who've gone  
overseas for work.

From his hand he unfurls a bandage  
long enough to blindfold  
every bronze-skinned boy over the age of ten.  
They cock their heads, as if listening.

I hear footsteps behind me.  
This is my last life  
a vintage courtesy of a foreign power  
ready to drink and black.

From the window of a nipa hut  
Some kind of Indian offers me a wreath—

## Homecoming

A boat-load of ugly Americans  
bound for the Underworld.

I blended in but it was my first time  
going to my ancestral home.

We disembarked in a poor harbor town  
lined with souvenir shops

& massage parlors. Shanties & red earth  
led up to temples, feral dogs.

I was swarmed by dozens of orphans who, for all I knew,  
had the same shriveled thousand-year-old mother.

The best English was spoken by the whores  
followed by the peddlers, then the law: all anyone wanted

was a penny, which I'd already spent;  
it was impossible to have more.

Still, when I turned down a girl  
with a flower in her teeth, she seemed heartbroken

& so did I. Maybe because for an instant  
I fooled myself into thinking we

could've fallen in love; I could've stayed there  
for good.

## The Poet's Mother at 13, Killing a Chicken

As for the bird, its pedigree  
was impeccable: rose-combed & indigenous

cockfighting in its blood. My grandfather had folded  
its ancestor under his arm

in a bolt of jute & the boxcar dark. He was young & bound  
for the Provinces, fleeing

with his bride the rifled capital, the Arisaka Type 99,  
its stock chrysanthemum-stamped, its blade

jabbed half-jokingly into my grandmother's  
stomach—swollen the private thought

not with limbs but a stash: dowry. Doubloons.  
Maybe even meat. In the clatter & sway

the hen held its tongue, producing  
eggs but no epiphanies

though the flesh of its forebears had delighted  
the palettes of missionaries, good-

intentioned Baptists in the wake of cholera  
& reconcentration: nation-

builders. Tenderfoots. Virgins still wet with  
honeysuckle & whitewash

who brought among other things Home  
Economics, so that fifty years

later my mother would have to corner  
& seize it. Wring its wattled links.

Pluck it & gut it & waste nothing. Fold the blood-  
line into hers.

### Photograph: Loggers at Kuala Tahan

To be burned together into wet cells is something not to be taken lightly;

+

only after I swear to send copies do they agree to have it taken.

+

Lank & boot cut, they smoldered against the tree line.

For a living  
they laid low the mysteries  
for which we'd made our pilgrimage.

+

*Kuala* they said meant *confluence*.

We drank to it  
first emptying our bottle  
then something sweet & secret  
of theirs—

+

soon, we understood each other  
or thought so:

dark & large-eyed  
quick to befriend or fight.

+

We were kinsmen  
cousins, brothers—split  
by lapse & current & soon  
to part ways again: for Sarawak;

for home;  
for false starts & failed relations, days  
lashed to this one  
only through trade & tariff.

+

And rain—  
tail-lit, unseasonal; drumming  
the cinder blocks of the pharmacy.

We've come out  
cat-eyed & liquor-bright, crowded  
together against a void.

+

The lab tech, a Fijian doubling  
as cashier, understands something  
of their dubiousness  
or else it's the intensity of their wish to have  
in hand  
this verandah, this  
not being alone, though he loads  
only paper  
& doesn't bother to make the room

+

dark. Out on the broad lot, even rainwater is refused.

Out on the broad lot, it pools thick as palm oil.

+

Soon they'll fire him  
for grinning too sagely or too often  
giving comps no one asks for. Soon

to give notice I'll hunt  
for my landlord's face, somewhere off Venice  
fused to its screen door  
beside a number I never fail to forget

so that I have to nose among the bougainvillea  
& carports, which besides the river  
are all that stays dry:

slake & slag  
squared to the outrush, forgotten most easily  
when crossed.

+

Dingbat & waterway. Their laughter slashed to the banks.

+

On the white  
of the peeled off label, one of them  
scrawls the address.

*Tahan* he says means *last*.

+

For them  
the forest was what they could see  
& because at the end of each day they could  
still see  
more than they could cut the next  
they could choose:  
fire over water.  
Stihl over cross hatch.

Smoke over lianas.

Dusk over sleep.

+

Below us  
the restaurant floats;  
the Tahan muddies the Tembeling.

+

One of us  
had secretly shouldered the Scotch  
from Narita to Jerantut  
into shade that had never known ice  
& consequently teemed with life  
so that inside the hide's rain-smattered slats  
we could hold all night  
to the idea of tigers.

+

Still I shield the faces  
so they do not whorl or ruddle  
though I've lost what they wrote down  
& will send the prints  
nowhere.

+

We woke to a loop  
of birdsong, rising  
but never arriving.

+

Nothing  
slung near enough  
to take stock of us with its stillness  
but a troop of backlit macaques  
too indifferent to change course.

+

Even in the true dark & downpour  
our breathing  
had bent blades.

## Fault Lines

It was Tojo.  
It was McKinley.  
It was Mauser & Gatling  
& Arisaka & three hundred years  
of brands & chalices. It was rain  
& the collarbones of women  
bloomed by heat & miscegenation.  
It was shoes.  
It was corrugated iron.  
It was homegrown & inequitable.  
It was nephews, friends of friends, the good  
life that wanted to keep on keeping.  
It was smokeless.  
It was capital.  
It was the logic of the emerging  
global market.  
It was ramping up.  
Bleeding. The prepared for guest  
called away across the water.  
It was called across the water  
but still it was not American.  
It followed this form: a. wandering  
b. acceptance c. cast out again  
It was hungry. It went to meetings.  
It spent a tenth of a day's wages to dance  
with Riot & Exclusion.  
It was not American.  
It learned how to swim  
but could still remember not knowing how to swim  
& drowned.  
It was evening.  
It sat at the bottom of the Pacific & listened  
to its eyes being eaten.