

A black and white illustration of a woman with long, flowing hair, wearing a long, textured dress. She is holding a large, detailed moon in front of her face, as if it were her head. The background is a dark, starry night sky with a large, partially visible moon at the top. The overall style is reminiscent of a woodcut or engraving.

# Daw

POETRY SAMPLER

Isabela Banzon

## DAW: POETRY SAMPLER

“Billboard Wants” was first published in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal* (2018).

The rest of the poems in this sampler are from *Paper Cage* (The Mabolo Group, 1987), *Lola Coqueta* (The University of the Philippines Press, 2009), and *Maybe Something* (The University of the Philippines Press, 2015).

Grateful acknowledgment is made to The University of the Philippines Press for permission to include these poems from *Lola Coqueta* (“In the Fifties”, “DH Sunday, Hong Kong”, “Lola Coqueta”, “Rindu”, “Letter to Mr. Thumboo”, and “Killing Memory”) and *Maybe Something* (“No Win-Win Situation”, “Grammar Class”, “Three Girls”, and “Divorce Day”).

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*Designed by Michael Balili*

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DAW

# No Win-Win Situation

Cease the day  
but give him the benefit of the daw;  
time is of the elements  
when the feeling is actual.

When it rains, it's four;  
still, keep the bear in mind:  
every cloud has a silver lightning  
yet in the wink of an eye  
it can all happen or take it away.

You can have your cake and bake it too.

If worse comes to shove  
eat your hat out  
for that's the way the cookie jars.

Been there, been that;  
we're only human nature.

Now grab the bull by the balls  
and get the most of all worlds.

# In the Fifties

when Dick and Jane played house  
or skip-roped in their fancy yard  
all day, or simply idled,  
or on a brand-new bike  
careened downhill and head-on  
edged Pepe and Pilar out of  
my grade-school book, I knew

I wanted that life. No more  
rooster calls at 5 a.m. to tidy up  
the house and rid the yard  
of snakes that put a frown  
on Mother's lips. No  
rice and salted fish for breakfast,  
lunch and even dinner.  
I look through the window grille  
at Father gone to work.  
He's left his homemade radio high up  
on the shelf, switched off.

When I grow up, I'll get an automobile  
to drive around the neighborhood.  
Father, Mother, baby and I  
shall smile and wave the way it's done  
in my new schoolbook,  
and by our gate my dog Bantay

will wag his tail and bark,  
but he too has left his post to Spot.

# Lost, after People Power

All  
of a sudden,  
after summons  
to a battlefield  
of sorts and  
given Third  
World choices  
—no matter  
how belated  
or if by accident—  
as die, pig!  
like in the movies  
or live long-  
er but perish  
nonetheless, swear  
not to look back  
no, no  
turning back  
now and shame  
to give  
up or in to  
—what?  
The war  
zone's still  
the residential-cum-  
commercial mess—

children  
come to life  
out of US  
magazines like Nic-  
araguans in South  
east Asia, poking  
where money's  
to be made;  
women, lapped up,  
postage-free,  
and going, going  
gone...anywhere  
oh  
dear, men play  
the fool—  
Santisima,  
stop the war  
and be dead serious  
for once  
as where were we  
before all this?  
what now?  
where to?  
Puñeta,  
get this straight:  
da balas are for real.

# DH Sunday, Hong Kong

I'm not ashamed to be Pinoy:  
my contract's not expire, so pity,  
but I want a little to enjoy.

I no stop working but "unggoy"  
or "please" they never say to me;  
well, I'm not ashamed to be Pinoy.

No play on day-off, no toy  
with lift that go updown, no sorry  
too but I want a little to enjoy.

I fix Pinoy foods, hot like batchoy,  
very near to Jollibee.  
Why I ashamed to be Pinoy?

Jewelries, pants, you like, 'Noy?  
Ma'am, you pay? I take your money  
'cause I want a little to enjoy.

I also buy, but cheap only, hoy,  
pasalubong for my family.  
I'm not ashamed to be Pinoy.  
I want so little to enjoy.

# Lola Coqueta

*No hay sabado sin sol  
como no hay vieja sin amor.*

Long ago, Cecilia,  
the halls of Balanga  
swelled like the moon outside  
your window. Ay, sus,  
the frog in the dry grass  
of my throat kept pleading  
to be freed and it was  
hard not to turn away, just,  
and ignore the hot  
Saturday dust from your  
Lolo's mahogany  
cane tapping to the croak  
of my sweet kundiman.  
Ay, the things you must do  
to ensure a wedding—  
un poco pintura  
y polvo, champaka  
on the shy skin. It was  
on such a night as this  
under the gas-fed light  
Don Manuel led me  
to the courtyard of his  
loneliness.

A stage  
presentation, hija,  
the impresario said.

Pero, ahora, for  
what are those tears? If  
Ramoncito could see  
the distress in your eyes,  
he would no longer wait  
to wake the maya in  
your song. You must show him  
your life is in his hands  
and you must be grateful  
to be at his service—  
for what is a woman,  
haber, but nada without  
the grip of a man on  
her life—por favor,  
use your cocote  
and do not waste on that  
poor boy Fidel your  
undying love.

# Rindu

Last night, when you were missing love  
as I was,  
we were lying on a huge bed,  
each with nobody beside.  
I will slip under  
your mosquito netting  
and you may, if you wish,  
find your way  
into me.  
*Aku cinta padamu,*  
but it is morning  
before I understand  
what you say in the dark.  
We can't go on meeting like this,  
suspended  
on wire, post  
to post, through cable, under ocean,  
under ground.  
Fated to each other  
but living without,  
we rendezvous in a language not our own.  
*Aku ingin*  
*mencintaimu dengan sederhana.*

I want  
to love you simply,  
without fear, without metaphor,  
but it is difficult  
in English.

It is difficult to imagine how we are  
together,  
gecko to the other in the permeable air.  
You live in me,  
outside me.

*Kamu hidup di dalam  
dan di luar diriku.*

The river rushes below.

What are we in the hands of the *dalang*,  
emotion, our puppet master.

*Kita tiada sebelum kita bertemu lagi.*

We are shadows in a show not of ourselves.

Who are we

that to leave you in the island of the gods  
is difficult.

We do not exist.

*Di bahasa Inggris, kita tiada.*

*Lines in Bahasa Indonesia are from "Aku ingin" by Sapardi Djoko and "Enkau angin" by Sitok Srengenge in Secrets Need Words (Ohio U, 2001) translated by Harry Aveling.*

# Letter to Mr. Thumboo

I am curious about the chempaka in your poem  
“Threes.” Is your chempaka my champaka? I  
refer to the glossary for clarification: “frangipani  
usually found in graveyards.” Flowers for the dead.  
I read your poem over to get it right: her “last  
look, that silent cry / Stays in the sap of my daily eye.”

It is my mother, not your mother, who by “the fall  
of hair,” “the quick scratch of hair-pin,” is about  
to leave me. What remains of her is a photograph  
above the casket—a woman in bloom and the scent  
of champaka held by a pin to her hair. Is this  
what you meant by the “chempaka scent be ours alone?”

Where I come from, the champaka is like  
the ilang-ilang, the frangipani is the calachuchi;  
but I suppose, they aren’t important, these  
distinctions. Violets, roses, any flower will do—  
for in whatever language, flowers “give the levelling  
sun more dew,” tell of a loss, our life passing.

# Killing Memory

Three months ago, I thought I would die  
when you pulled the rabbit trick on me.  
Poof, just like that.  
You made me disappear from your life.  
I could have done the same,  
reasoned you out of existence,  
but I've decided,  
I will love you to death, instead.

I've taken the midnight flight, so you'll be asleep  
by the time I get to your place.  
I see, you've been busy,  
all of nine floors to your balcony  
and the sliding glass door deadlocked  
from the inside.  
You should be proud of me.  
I'm now an expert  
at climbing walls and picking locks,  
not wasting away  
like the cactus in your living room.  
You forgot to switch off the tv,  
but it doesn't matter.  
Reruns have kept me alive  
long enough to choose my weapon.  
I've gone over the details more times than I care  
to remember.

Blood on the wall, your body  
on the bed, my note on the night table.  
I didn't mean to slice you open, only to see for myself  
if, truly,  
a heart were beating there.

But that's not what I came for.  
I want you to finish what you started.  
It's a simple enough request.  
Be quick.  
Hand me the rat poison.  
Even now, my face contorts like a clown's  
and I choke on your name  
as I would  
with my body convulsing against yours.  
It's not a pretty sight,  
but you'll be rid of my misery, finally.

Your bed's empty, and I've to change plans  
on the spot.  
I hadn't prepared for you,  
alone on the beach  
in t-shirt and jeans only.  
The moon is sliding down the horizon  
and I'm afraid to look into your eyes.  
They've a habit of turning indigo  
like the sea.  
I feel I'm walking on a tightrope  
and not the sand that keeps sinking my resolve.  
But you're not fooling me.  
I promise, you won't catch me  
off-guard again.

After tonight, when I'm through acting out  
little scenes and conversations in  
my head until nothing remains but  
your absence,  
I'm back to square one.

# Grammar Class

Turbek, sixth grade classmate,  
small wonder that at 10.40 last night  
you weren't ready  
to call it a day. You lived  
night before day, end  
before beginning, illness tormented.  
Victor, Tor-Vic, Turbek,  
beside me a head too short.  
I kick you, and you go  
bite the dust, Shorty.  
In death, minus the khaki shorts,  
the sweaty stinky t-shirt, the snot,  
you lean over me  
like the school quadrangle's  
sun-filtering acacia.  
Childhood opponent, why loom  
over my bed? Why draw me  
to the blackboard? It's over now,  
the weekly spelling contest,  
you pitted against me.  
We've gone our way since,  
took other turns,  
  
but already Miss Macalos  
is spitting out words from her list

of misspellings: *separate,*  
*necessitate, accommodate...*  
Use these in a sentence...

The rest of the hour is reserved  
for parts of speech.

We diagram language,  
we draw long lines, flat lines,  
lines resembling branches and twigs  
leafing connections, transitions,  
furthering meaning.  
When the bell rings,  
we fall in line, fall into place  
like words that hold and bind.  
Then out in the schoolyard  
in the heat, we rough up  
lives and places we used to populate  
to fill dismissal time.

# Divorce Day

If true we should do as the Vietnamese,  
not protest at the UN, just buy  
a submarine. Whatever the issue,  
the testosterone scramble for dots  
on the West Philippine Sea aka  
the South China Sea, or partnership,  
friendship, and any near synonym  
that mean only one thing: love  
aka suspect; if true we should do  
as the Thais too, let the army have  
its field day with words, words  
that can main, like *I thought;*  
*but you said; oh it's complicated,* before  
gun-powdering dissent. Give us  
wisdom, give us peace but also  
torpedoes, give us dignity instead  
of the POW mentality we've been shackled  
to for 7, 10, 40 odd years. And if true  
we should do as the Singaporeans  
tracking the extravaganza  
performance on radar, appalled  
at the distortion we've made of a ghost  
tale, of love more than duty, not  
targeting gains, only disintegration  
aka the extinction of our once true love.

# Three Girls

When three college girls approached us  
on campus and asked what the happiest day  
was in our life, I couldn't think of a fast  
enough answer, distracted as I was  
by our interrupted conversation  
about your stolen letterbox, yanked out  
and spirited away like your front lawn  
rose bush. And I was thinking of three girls  
even younger, still in junior high school,  
climbing up one hill to the next one night,  
clownishly crossing a shaky bridge,  
gin or rhum or something stronger than  
fruit juice in their guts, singing  
*Going Out of My Head*, out of beat,  
out of tune. Best friends for life then,

we were the good girls in the neighborhood  
brought up to be proper like our moms;  
and what took over our senses four decades ago  
lies rusted and wasting in the dark shed  
of memory like the YIELD sign we  
hysterically took turns at pole dancing  
and snitched. Now your letters, askew, scatter  
across the grass. Connections such as ours  
we've gone to great lengths to nurture  
or to repair gone to the dogs.

To yield is neither giving in nor giving up  
at intersections. We have chosen  
to meet again though I asked only for peace,  
which to you is muted happiness.

# Billboard Wants

Today, a Manila postcard sunset. Old,  
in doubt, we had asked for a sign, but God,

what else could it mean but the traffic  
below is a scream. What kind of god

would think a standstill home commute  
sound proof that this life is flawed. God,

*Talk to me*, you could say, but the Pasig  
River remains undredged, reflects no god

like light. Aflame, the main avenue  
bodies forth our secret wants. My God,

mightn't we *Need direction?* Needless  
to pray to the towering steel-boned god.

This I want. That I want. We need to  
talk. The times are odd without a God.

I want chicken, I want white, I want new,  
sleek, fit, trim, young. Such fancy god

sent treats leave us wanting here on earth.  
Or are we above it all? Talk to God

if you (*Can't sleep? Don't count sheep.*)  
count black tarp hallelujahs. Signed, *God.*

## *About the Author*

Isabela Banzon is the author of the poetry chapbook *Paper Cage* and the poetry collections *Lola Coqueta* and *Maybe Something* (recipient of the Gintong Aklat Award and the Philippine National Book Award). She is one of the editors of *An Anthology of English Writing from Southeast Asia*. She once headed the University of the Philippines Diliman creative writing program.



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