

Always Moving Toward Justice

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Fairly commonly these days, poets end their volumes with a short prose section, usually footnotes or glosses on the poems. Likewise, except for a short epilogue-poem at the very end, the closing section of the new book *Balikbayang Mahal: Passages from Exile*, by E. San Juan, Jr., is a work of prose. But it is not brief, nor is it made of footnotes or clarifications of the poems. It is a 31-page essay, part scholarly, part autobiographical, and all enjoining, on the state of exile. And what it urges us to do, by way of analyzing the history of the colonizing of the Philippines, is work for the revolution that alone can save the world's targeted and vulnerable peoples from occupation or exile. "Revolution," writes San Juan, "is the way out through the stagnant repetition of suffering and deprivation." At stake is of course a homeland, from which millions tearfully depart to find jobs or to save their lives. The Philippines' main export is, after all, a labor force of ten million people working, without legal protections, mostly in the service industries of rich nations. Their employers call

these workers not exiles but recruits, and colonization has created a home economy that offers no alternatives but to leave. Intellectuals and activists who oppose this economy are also driven out, and San Juan counts himself among the exiles, disguised as an “itinerant and peripatetic student without credentials or references, sojourning in places where new experiences may occur.”

In this sense the essay, meandering as it does from space to time, from the autobiographical to the historical, extends the ambitions of the poems. To underscore this theme of exile even further, most of the poems appear in two or more languages, English and Tagalog and sometimes Chinese, Russian, Italian, or German. (For helpful translations from Tagalog, the reviewer wishes to thank Rei Lagman.) This is no celebration of institutional diversity or of a melting pot but is rather a mapping of the poet’s migrations, what he calls “a succession of detours and displacements.” And yet the poems refuse to become travel literature, as they insist more on the history of home than on the consumption of destinations. Still, they are no less concerned with time than with space. In “The Tarantula,” for example, the venom of the beast’s blood is unleashed from its “millennial” spines; and in “Balikbayan Beloved” we hear that “everything is late,” including “the hours of an infant’s deliverance and funeral dirges.” The titles of two recent poems announce their own times and places as the Netherlands in 2007 and Willimantic, Connecticut in 2005. And yet both poems invoke the homeland, with bitter recognition of the atrocities of the “U.S.-Arroyo regime” in the first and the question “But why does the Abu Sayyaf sneak into the mind?” in the second. Timekeeping in the Philippines, according to Ian Bartky’s new history of the globalization of time measurements, split along colonial lines. For more than two centuries Manila and the Catholic Philippines observed American time, while southern islands kept Asian time, usually a full day’s difference.

In “the milieu of transition,” writes San Juan, “may be the site where space is transcended by time.”

A note of reassurance is in order. Recent forays into anti-Bush politics in U.S. popular culture—examples include an album by Neil Young and a movie by Robert Redford—have been scolded for focusing so intently on their message that they lose their art and their heart. Yet readers will discover in San Juan’s poems a snarky humor, a vibrant sensuousness, and a rich embrace of literary history. Mayakovsky appears in several poems, not only for his manifestoes but also for his passions. Near the end of the wild poem “Vicissitudes of the Love and Death of Vladimir Mayakovsky” come lines that recall Hopkins and Whitman and Mayakovsky himself: “Dice of electrons run amok in your brain’s reservoir / Vladimir / and uproot oases until the panting deer / Christ-Self’s surrogate / is devoured by gnomes and ourang-outangs / from the extreme unction of your epic verses.” These lines splay across the page, tracing a path as seemingly haphazard as many migrations. In “The Forked Fountain in the Nest of Your Eyelash” the poet immerses himself in a sensual world of silt and cobwebs, incense and kisses, claws and vulture’s teeth, but in the end it is only an illusion of love that is “embraced / by the guerilla astutely spying.” And “The Sweetheart of Ludwig von Wittgenstein” teases with a “sulphur-black dinosaur” rising from lava caves and arguing “against / the equations of your love.” What soon becomes clear is that, for San Juan as for Mayakovsky, passions suffuse alike the material and the political.

But, even at their cleverest and most teasing, these passions are also entwined in the sorrows of exile. Perhaps the most lyrical poem is “The Way Things Are,” made of five quatrains with images of birds hovering in old buildings; yet even here “We wait for miracles / With daggers to console / Us,” and a metaphor for circling birds—of angel droppings