

# The Color of Death and Other Poems

RAE RIVAL

## The Color of Death

Black is not the color of death—  
it is fresher than that.  
It does not reek of disintegration,  
and it does not decompose. It composes  
itself over and over again.  
Eternal as the ritual of falling leaves—  
a silent continuation of a cycle.

Its color is that of a descending sun,  
marking an ephemeral close.  
A preparation for a perforation of the liver.  
Death is a vulture that religiously comes  
to pierce and puncture a body  
that has come to heal itself daily.

## Orange

I push the door open, and I let him in.  
A body that is made up of a dining table,  
Six chairs, a wall clock, and an olive sofa.  
Of course, there is a window.  
Light seeps in through its curtains  
And makes its way to the white walls.  
Of course, the warm light is accepted with grace  
and a kind of hunger familiar to cold cements alone.

Now, fertile hues permeate the room.  
Outside, the neighborhood is warm  
With the sour glow of the setting sun.  
The olive sofa has now become a womb,  
cradling two bodies.  
And his exquisite torso is bathed  
In orange light. I begin to understand  
How luscious is the citrus of a simple afternoon.  
I begin to understand that ripe things  
Are not always sweet but that they swell  
With fecund calmness, bursting with fresh flesh.

## Shadow Play

(After watching *Umaaraw, Umuulan, Kinakasal ang Tikbalang*)

The moon rears a language  
of shadows—  
a system of shedding skins.  
It is a belly that conceives  
crooked creatures and curves of different kinds.

It speaks  
of constant mutation  
and alterations.

Layering  
dimensions  
deforming contours of a dog  
to make way for a woman dancing in a state of frenzy.

Collapsing cul-de-sac  
to open a passage  
that leads to a plush domain.  
A realm where Capres and Duwendes  
reside to hide  
and heed the summons of shapeshifting.

## **Immigrant**

I dance every night  
to summon the limbs that I have lost.  
Swaying to a distant humming,  
The margins of my hips drift  
beyond the borders of being  
here and moving forward.  
My feet follow a rhythmic stomp  
as I tread upon this foreign soil  
that has clung to my toes.  
My arms extend to reach for the limbs  
tangled up in a tree outside my old house.  
Memory of the house where I grew up  
entangled with the rest of my childhood.  
I am but a branch undulating  
to the winds that bite men  
as they head home.

## **Remnants of a Summer**

I.

Visiting province after province,  
listening to sea wave after sea wave,  
learning languages and tasting delicacies  
cooked with keenness.  
Feeling fabrics in flea markets  
and riding tricycles of different kinds  
only to be reminded of a childhood summer  
in our little pueblo and the sound of the raging river  
not too far from our house.

II.

I keep remembering the taste of native chicken  
served with fish in tamarind soup  
and the sound of *Ayo-ayo*, *Limpyo*, and *Manga-on*  
that my tongue was too shy to utter.

III.

Motorcycle rides remind me  
of that ride in a *habal-habal*.  
The four of us, Judy, you, me,  
and the driver riding a *habal-habal*.  
How I turned pale as the driver  
worked his way in the muddy tracks of our steep,  
steep mountain.

IV.

The long ride to the flea market  
and the equally long ride back home  
gave me a headache,  
but the sight of my playmates and fireflies  
playing hide and seek scared it away.  
We kept looking for each other  
as the scent of sautéed garlic and onion  
from different houses  
wafted through the air.  
Shouting *Taya!* to mean I found you.

V.

How the smell of soap lingered in the air  
as we crawled inside our mosquito net,  
fresh from shower and ready to recite our prayers.  
Visitors of Tatay's little town  
finding comfort in tracing the patterns of the *banig*  
and the familiar rose print of my thin blanket.