Overheard and Other Poems

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About the Author. A recipient of the Palanca Awards this year, Rodrigo V. Dela Peña Jr. is the author of the chapbook Requiem. He has been a fellow for various national writers’ workshops in the Philippines. His poems have been published in the Sunday Inquirer Magazine, Philippine Graphic, Quarterly Literary Review Singapore, We are a Website, Atomic, and other journals and anthologies. He was a finalist in the first Maningning Miclat Poetry Awards (2003) and won First Prize in the 2008 Meritage Press Poetry Contest. He is currently working as an events and marketing professional in Singapore.
Overheard

Because we open the lights and jingle
in the C.R., because we eat and run

and couldn't care a damn, it's really
more fun in the Philippines, more feelings,

more everything else but the kitchen sink.
Come, let's join us, let's gimmick somewhere

out there, maybe Boracay but if there's no
budget, Puerto Galera will do. Promise?

In fairness, we've come a long way since
those days of Marcos, when Imelda loomed

over Manila like a giant butterfly.
These days, you'll sell hotcakes if you're young

and pretty enough to be a viral video.
Just don't make a sex scandal, OK?

Joke only. Basically, you have to go
with the flow, try and try until you die.

If worse comes to worst, then at least
the worst is over and you can rest in peace,

language spilling like garbage, words and phrases
salvaged, the chatter of a hundred

million people cacophonous, each mouth
barking at the wrong dog, the wrong tree.
Petals on a Wet, Black Bough

alarms abuzz accept again
beating beyond broken babel
crowded corpus curtail complaint
dizzy danger delayed duel
erase email error encore
fractal fatwa friction fever
glacial gizmo gulag galore
hold-up habit hashtag heckler
irate idler implode inward
jampacked jostle jester jargon
kismet killer knowing keyword
libel language languish legion
mangle music metal metro
neon neither normal nadir
obey outcast over oh no
pensée pedant plastic plunder
quasi quarrel quiet question
reject routine rush hour racket
survive standstill shackle station
tremble theory toxin target
usual ulcer utter urgent
viral visual vacant visage
window waken without warrant
exert extra exit exile
yuppie yeoman yielded yearning
zombie zone out zipping zero
Ars Vivendi

Abide by constellations.
Describe every filigree,
Gossamer—how intricate.

Jimmy keys: locks
may not open
promptly. Quicksilver rays
stream, turning umbra
visible. Whisper Xanadu,
Yggdrasil, ziggurat.
Brief Interview with a Poet

“Sometimes, I start with dialogue,” he said.
“Doesn’t it feel more natural this way? Like making love skin on skin, right there in an army bed.”

A boyish smile lit up his face and before I could ask another question, he continued: “It’s not always the case, you know. Because poetry is all about nimbus clouds shedding their metaphor of rain. Because it is all about the body that asks to be touched or kissed in secret places. Because it is all about people opening, closing doors on each other. Because, my dear, it is all about anaphora.”

A pause as the gravity of his words sunk in. Tendrils of cigarette smoke hung in the air. “I slept with a married man, once, twice, it doesn’t matter. You see, it was my own act of resistance, thumbing the nose of the system that tells us what not to do, not to say, not to write on the page.”

Another pause. “Don’t you feel it—that chain heavy around your neck, your hands and feet shackled?”

But as I answered, my voice was drowned by his slew of characters, descending on us like flood, weeping, shouting, raising their fists like blunt spears against the sky.
Reel

In the movie’s last scene, no words are uttered between Nora and Vilma, no tears shed

in a confrontation where everyone expected slaps, high drama, tears falling

from the left eye, the reward of a showdown withheld, only this, a largesse of silence,

the lush garden a necessary setting for all that is unsaid, concealed beneath leaves

quivering in the breeze, the air heavy with the promise of rain as one of the women

takes a few steps, almost eager to spill her reservoir of heartaches, the other

at first unmoved and unmoving, head aslant, her glance now blossoming from a quiet

fury to a kind of wonder, her look a question that needs no answer, it’s all

in the eyes (Ishma knew), her eyes telling what words cannot say, here a nod, a flicker

of forgiveness, the film coming to its end because it must, because there is more to this world

than this story that goes on and on, unspooling from its center, as life goes on for these two women

who happen to love the same man, reaching a truce, a mute and mutual understanding—