

## 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.

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## 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—