

# **Blood Compact**

## Blood Compact

*After Juan Luna's Pacto de Sangre*

In this painting, our gaze is drawn to the light-skinned figure against the ink-dark background:

Miguel López de Legazpi, the Basque conquistador sent to the other side

of the world in service of the empire.  
Half of his face is hidden in shadow,

deep in thought about the word of God  
and how it must translate, without question,

into the work of faith. His breastplate gleams  
and behind him, a coterie awaits

at the ready. A priest in his cassocks  
stands ponderous beside soldiers in full

battle regalia, halberds sharpened, red  
pennants raised, foreshadowing skirmishes

that will be sparked, the knifepoint of bondage.  
And what of the local chieftain Sikatuna,

rendered at the edge of the frame, almost  
like an afterthought? He sits opposite

his equal, his back turned to us, frozen  
in a gesture he will endure for the rest

of his life. His tattooed right arm clutches  
a dagger, which must have punctured flesh,

extracting blood to mix with wine for the pact  
they now toast to. How the drink must be bitter

down his throat, with an aftertaste of iron.  
How faceless he has become to us,

like so many natives who will die  
fighting to reclaim their share of light.

## **Manifest**

*On May 3, 1882, José Rizal boarded the SS Salvadora and headed to Europe for the first time.*

1. A pair of steamer trunks with iron locks, filled with clothes to be used for years before you would be able to go home.
2. In your pocket, a silver watch whose crown had to be wound up each day.
3. Talismans worn smooth: tarnished medallion inscribed in Latin, green quartz egg, crocodile's tooth.
4. Names that weigh heavy on the tongue; names that would remain unspoken for time to come.
5. Sheaves of paper, a set of quills, India ink. The lengths we go to skirt around that which cannot be said.
6. Memory and its many ruses, wavering, like the flicker of shadows cast by the ship on the water.
7. A crucifix on the crook of your clavicle, pendant of what you struggle to believe in.
8. Cities not yet seen, letters that have yet to be written, already vivid and pulsing in your mind.
9. Hands clasped and eyes looking ahead, that seem to hold all the sea contains.
10. The horizon shifting as you move along, the world's edge never to be reached.

## **José Rizal at the Singapore Botanic Gardens**

How strange that in this land, the heat inspires  
not indolence but the work of industry:

all this wilderness, tamed and shaped, each species  
labeled with its name and origin. Here,

the rubber seedlings thrive, their dark green leaves  
growing free and lush in the hothouse

weather. Frangipanis, heliconias,  
ginger lilies: such plenitude, the air

scented with the brightness of summer.  
Touch-me-nots dot the landscape, leaves folding

at the slightest touch. Jelawi trees  
stand majestic, their buttress roots anchored

to the earth. Who can blame the first woman  
and man, exiled from the garden? Before

the fruit ripened to a globe of sweetness,  
there came hunger. Before the bud that burst

into crimson, an aching in the heart.  
Flare of orchises, yellow bells, roses.

See the world flowering into fullness.

*Draco rizali*

Flying dragon whose wings  
are a hand's breadth, I dream  
of you, gliding from tree

to stolid tree, the forest's  
scattered axes. Where  
do you lead me, synonym

and cynosure, whose name  
must color each animal,  
vegetable, mineral?

You are the shiver  
the leaves make as you land,  
borne by the wind, barely

out of reach. My voice pursues  
what passes as your shadow.  
The mind wanders, its clandestine

weather. Beneath the canopy,  
a branch bends a little  
to register your weight.

## **José Rizal Considers the Mud Lobster**

To burrow in the earth, claws tunneling  
through mangrove mud, feeding on detritus:  
I confess I've always mistaken hunger  
as a need for love and the need for love  
as hunger. To be a misnomer  
myself, not a lobster but a giant  
shrimp, being an aberrant species, name  
smeared with sludge. And in my single-  
minded digging, to have built a mound  
where others might seek shelter. Come, spiders  
and clams. Come, snakes and burdened ants.  
To be endangered and still have pushed  
and pushed the world, shaped the soil to create  
a fortress. The door is open.

## Summer Ghazal

Each morning, the sun commands attention.  
In my country, it is always summer.

This heat like a blowtorch: arrays of windows  
open, unfurl to the fullness of summer.

Rizal felt and thought about it too, bones  
turning indolent in the face of summer.

Bales of tobacco leaves scorched by the sun,  
a scent I remember from many summers.

I crave for green mangoes dipped in rock salt  
and vinegar, a childhood taste of summer.

Swish and flick of a carabao's tail; grass  
left to wither in the languor of summer —

details of a scene that Rizal must have missed  
as he cursed another winter. Where is summer?

Count how many hours until evening comes.  
Days seem longer in the torpor of summer.

Drink, says the sky to the earth as rain  
falls. Welcome the brief respite from summer.

## Ukiyo-e as O Sei San

How quick the season  
turns, winter's chill giving way  
to green buds of spring

in the hushed gardens  
of Azabu. Nothing here  
in a path of stones

conceals the secret  
names I have of you: little  
dragonfly, azure-

winged magpie, dear kite  
unmoored in a floating world.  
What you see reveals

what must eventually  
be lost, so here is my face  
pressed on rice paper.

From my lips, a song.  
Who else but you will hear each  
lilting note? My eyes

give me away. Soon,  
days will be lit by summer.  
Then comes the changing

air, the leaves of fall.  
See how inch by inch I crane  
my head and look back,

meet your gaze, the point  
where everything converges,  
everything vanishes.

*La Parisienne*

Because the truth could not be stated  
plainly, Juan Luna paints her worn-

looking and askew, as though the world  
had tired of her and she had nowhere

else to go but be here on the canvas.  
Scarlet and ochre, deep color of rust,

fading gold: the scene suggests no joy  
in the realm of *la belle époque*. Instead,

a woman whose disquieting gaze  
dares you to look at her without flinching,

her downturned lips on the edge of what might be  
a confession. What secret is hidden

beneath the folds of her dress, what story?  
He tells her to stay still, hold the pose, *el trabajo*

*no está terminado*. Years later, he would aim  
a revolver and in a jealous rage,

kill his wife and mother-in-law at their home  
in Paris. The French court would acquit him

on grounds of temporary insanity.  
By then, his work would be finished, sold

to the highest bidder. And the woman  
in the painting stares longingly, fumbling

for words, help, *au secours, aidez-moi,*  
*s'il vous plait*, but no one is listening.

## José Rizal Dissects an Eye

cornea

clear, refractive outer layer

barrier against wayward dirt, germs and foreign objects that cause damage

densely innervated and thus sensitive to pain, it can spark a cry

iris

heralds the blossoming of spring

but also defines eye colour, yours, mine, a cathedral's stained glass window

brown, blue, manifold buds waking to a spectrum

pupil

behold the aperture of light

a magician knows how useful a hole is for his repertoire of tricks

light passes through to make something luminous

image

created by the retina

what you see: the world reflected as a world or a likeness of a world

there is all the difference

blind spot

also known as punctum caecum

the truth glimmers, faceted with many versions, each angled surface true

close one eye and focus on a letter until you see another disappear

## Photograph of Teodora Alonso Holding the Skull of Her Son

Consider this tableau  
of mother and child,  
or what remains

of her son years after  
his death. Unassumed  
and unassuming

facts of a life, recorded  
as evidence through  
an aperture of light.

Here is the skull  
laid bare for everyone  
to see, osseus profile

cradled in her palms,  
given and received.  
Bones that emerged

from her flesh, the nomad  
who has come at last  
to his resting place.

What answers  
are to be found  
in this thread of story?

This is all she can  
bestow: composure  
of grief in stippled gray,

her face a palimpsest  
of years she had to bear.  
To be so diminished

as the camera clicks.  
To be done, to be  
finished, to be over.