

INTRODUCING THE SRPR ILLINOIS POET:
ANGELA NARCISO TORRES



Angela Narciso Torres's poetry collection, *Blood Orange*, won the 2013 Willow Books Literature Award. Her work appears in *Nimrod*, *Colorado Review*, and *Cimarron Review*, among other journals and anthologies. Born in Brooklyn and raised in Manila, she considers Chicago one of her literary homes, being the city in which she birthed her first book while raising three sons. An editor for the Chicago-based independent poetry journal *RHINO* and a publicity coordinator for Woman Made Gallery Literary Events (Pilsen) for nearly a decade now, Angela has received fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council, Ragdale Foundation, and Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Newcity Lit named her one of Chicago's Lit 50 in 2016. A graduate of the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College and the Harvard Graduate School of Education, she is an editorial panelist for *New England Review*. Find more information at www.angelanarcisotorres.com.

Translating the Dead

two days after he died my grandfather's letter arrived
from Manila thin blue aerogramme trifolded
and sealed by an aunt who kept vigil typing

what words he had left on Dad's Smith Corona
the lowercase *i* piercing holes through paper
i remember late nights after school finding him still

awake listening for my backpack's thud
on the wood floor leading to his bedroom
slowly he'd rise a smoker's cough clearing

his throat his voice tunneling the half-dark
Are you here now, hija? a direct translation
from Tagalog *Nariyan ka na, anak?*

meaning *You're here, child?* meaning
I've been waiting *my dear* holding now
the crinkled sheet against October's sky

i find another sky bluer pinpricks
of light shining through
like DayGlo stars *Yes, Papa. I'm here.*

Pearl Diving

*Is Memory, / as they pretend, / mother of the Muse? — / or
Forgetting,
—James Richardson, "Again"*

1/

She lapses into music, rising from dinner to play piano as we eat and talk. As if togetherness were a storm cloud in summer, filled to bursting. A brooding monsoon.

2/

Her memories, black pigeons flying off at dusk. Who knows where they spend the night? Dawn finds them back at the cote, softly cooing. In time their flights will cover greater distances. Some will disappear for days. A few will never return.

3/

When my father comes home from work, she claps like a birthday child: *Papa!* A pause. *Where's my husband?* My father, swallowing hard. *Still at work, hija.*

4/

Casting my line in a dark pool, I bait her memory like fish. *Mother, who painted that portrait of you? Tell me your lola's recipe for oxtail stew. When did you learn to play the kundimans?* Her eyes, two searchlights, sweeping.

5/

Later in bed she turns to him. *Where's Kit, Papa?* He dresses in the blue dark, retrieves his violin case from the hallway. *I'm home*, he says, kissing her forehead. He sits on her side of the bed till she falls asleep.

6/

Have you heard of the pearl divers of Davao—mere boys plowing headfirst into the freezing deep, holding their breaths for minutes at a time to find the largest oysters, the ones that might hold the prized black pearl, their only light, dim lamps tied to their foreheads?

7/

Her lips form the words to the Our Father all the way to the Great Amen. Her fingertips roll invisible rosewood beads.

8/

My father's voice cracks over the phone. She's been looking for you, he says. Calls you *Mama* or *Sister Amelita*. Or sometimes, *that little girl who was just sitting there*. I've been playing kundimans for her, he says. She knows the words.

Ode to the Areola

Dark pigmented nebula
deepening around the nipple
after childbirth, purple
haze surrounding
the storm's eye

not to be confused with
aureole—that crown of light
radiating from saints' heads
in certain medieval paintings
from the Latin *aureolas*
derived from *aurum*
meaning, 'gold'

which is also the root for *oriole*—
those amber-plumed passerines
flashing against late July's foliage
aging from Kool-Aid lime
to hunter green. Until recently

I thought *areola* descended
from the same root as orioles
and saints' crowns. But in fact
it derives from the Latin word
for 'open place'—which might
connote a sun-filled plaza
somewhere in Tuscany

and not a chocolate cloud
capping the snowy flesh
my newborn rooted for at dawn
his mouth a withered rose
his head a halo of light.

What Happens Is Neither the End

nor the beginning, my Zen teacher said.
But we're wired to look for signs. Consider
the rose bushes. One makes a perfect bud
after months of nothing. Another's leaves
are ringed with black rot. How can I not
think, *end*. How can I not say, *beginning*.

Leaves fall when the days shorten
because a tree must reduce
to its tough parts—twig, branch,
bark. My mother sleeps away
the daylight. She nods off while
chewing a spoonful of rice and fish,
her head a peony gone to seed.

My father calls to say she doesn't
recognize him anymore. Turning
to him last night she cried out,
certain a stranger was in her bed.
He played his violin till she slept—
a leaf in late fall, curling into itself.
Her neck bent, a tender stem.

In autumn, chlorophyll disappears
from leaves, cancelling the green
so yellow and magenta can blaze.
In my mirror I see her—the smile
that favors one cheek, eyes slanting
in the shape of small fish
we used to eat for breakfast.

Trees know best the *now*-ness of things.
What goes on has been going on
for centuries. Rinsing dishes, I rest
one foot on my standing leg. A fork
clangs on the tile. I rinse a cup.
I try not to think of endings.