

Classic Poetry Series

Nick Carbo
- poems -

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Nick Carbo()

Ang Tunay Na Lalaki (The Real Man) Is Baffled By Cryptic Messages

He finds on cheap match covers.

PLEASE MAKE ME
TASTE LIKE A MAN

is the first one he reads after lighting up an American Spirit cigarette on the corner of Broadway and Houston. The painted Statue of Liberty on the giant DKNY ad on the side of the building winks her big blue eye as if she understands what those words mean, as if she could make him taste like a man.

The street sign changes to WALK and the natural smoke of the natural cigarette feels good in his lungs. He thinks of the taste of fried garlic, of anise seeds, of rambutan fruit, of broiled tuna-- none comes close to what a man would taste like in his mind. He reaches underneath his shirt and sweater to scratch his left arm-pit. He smells his fingers and thinks: this is what a Filipino man must taste like to American women. To test his hypothesis, he sticks his index finger in his mouth, pulls it out with a slurpy sound and points upwards as if he were testing the wind, as if he were carrying a flaming torch.

Nick Carbo

Ang Tunay Na Lalaki (The Real Man) Stalks In The Streets Of New York

Looking to harvest what makes him happy.
The AA meetings have thrown
him into iconoclastic jousts with Titans
and Gorgons with glowing snake eyes
and leather pants. This is life
without the Filipino bottle,
without the star fruit boogie,
without the "bomba" films. He wears black
Dr. Martens boots because slippers
would expose his "provinciano" feet
to the snow. He wants to ride
the back of a caribou and bolt
up Madison Avenue screaming
like Tandang Sora or shout
"hala-bira! hala-bira! hala-bira!"
like his Isneg cousins in Aklan.
"Ay, susmaryosep!" Such bad behavior
from the "true male" of Filipino
advertising. He looks at his reflection
on a book store window, notices
that his hair has grown shoulder-length
like Tonto in the Lone Ranger
he would watch on TV. He turns to the right,
his profile now looks like the young Bruce Lee
as Kato in the Green Hornet. Yes,
he realizes it will always be the face
of a supporting character. Rejected
from the Absolut Vodka magazine ads,
he decides to change his name
for an upcoming afternoon audition
for a Preparation H commercial - "Al Moranas",
American but with a Filipino flare.

Nick Carbo

Ang Tunay Na Lalaki Meets Barbie At The Shark Bar

on Mulberry and Spring on a rainy night.
Her head sticks out of some woman's tote bag
placed on top of the bar, she winks
at Ang Tunay na Lalaki. He looks at his gin and tonic,
looks back at the doll and hears her tiny voice
even though her lips aren't moving. "Hi there,
big guy. I was made in the Philippines. You look
like you were made there too." He responds
just to humor himself, "Where, at the Subic Bay
manufacturing plants? Did you enjoy
being made by exploited laborers?" Barbie crawls
onto the sticky bar and sits herself on the edge
crossing her legs. "I remember those delicate fingers
expertly sewing the hairs to my head. Those women
were so nice to me." She bends at her waist
to let her hair down and dramatically lifts her head up
so her blond locks turn into a glamorous puff,
"See, they did a good job. You must admit."
"You're incorrigible," he exhales a cloud of smoke
after lighting up a cigarette, "And you're
all plastic, petroleum based plastic."
Barbie places her palms against her face
and begins to sob. Ang Tunay na Lalaki sticks out
his middle finger, strokes the back of her head,
"Now, now, doll. First time anyone ever told
you the truth?" Barbie lifts her left arm
to swipe away his finger, "My name's Barbie!
Not Doll, Sweetie, Honey, or Dolly. It's Barbie!"
Ang Tunay na Lalaki sips his gin,
"Look, Barbie. You have the perfect life,
you're the world's best-selling doll
and millions of little girls are buying you dresses.
Even the top fashion designers design
outfits for you." Barbie straightens her back
as if she had a spine, places
her hands on her lap, "But you don't know
how hard it is to be beautiful all the time. See,
you made my mascara run." He takes a napkin,
dips it into his drink, proceeds to wipe off

the small black streaks on her cheeks, "It's acrylic,
a water based paint." He reaches into his pocket
for a ball-point pen, draws rich eye lashes
around her eyes. Barbie slides over to a shot glass,
stares at her reflection, "Hey, you're good
at this. Have you ever considered a career
in make-up? I could recommend you
to our designers, you know."
Suddenly a woman's human hand plucks
Barbie off the bar, stuffing her
back into a tote bag. His eyes follow
the tote bag out the door. All he can see
is a puff of blond hair and a stiff arm
swaying back and forth like a metronome.

Nick Carbo

Ay, Que Dolo!

Dona Josefina has thrown my goat
out onto the calle El Fez--
Ay! The menu of pain is as big
as a queen-sized aha umbrella.

The lolita from the barrio chino licks
the sellos and then my luau--
there is a hint of ajo from Ab-derabad,
with periodos of adages and lapis lazuli.

I have known the fonda of Dona Josefina,
the jetty of her hips, under the veil
of her mild protests where pigs and lox
do mix in a yodel of ah-do-do-dah.

The lolita from the barrio chino is a rider
of net gains and bronze sea snakes--
she holds a baroque club in one hand
and ma of mana from a mouse in the other.

Nick Carbo

Capis Windows

How do you enter that Manila
frame of mind, that woven
mat of noodle house restaurants,

that dawn of tapis tasting women,
that hankering of hourly hauntings?
Drive along Roxas Boulevard

when the moon has just clocked
out of third shift and the sea horses
are returning to their feeding stables.

Walk the afternoon trees of Taft Avenue
and talk to the mechanics of Sunday
medicine. Ask them for recipes

to cure fire-retardant love. Bask
in the baying of mahogany dogs on Mabini
street and pass through the red

wrought iron gates of Calle Remedios
where you'll find a house with capis windows
where Doña Inez waits to sew your skin.

Nick Carbo

Grammarotics

The angle of delight is best
achieved while rubbing

the pluperfect button
in tiny syllabic circles

while the glottal stop needs
firm accentual strokes

for copulative conjunction
to occur. The placement

of the preterite tense
at the entrance

of a lubricated sentence
assures the inevitable

apostrophe. However,
if the apostrophe occurs

prematurely the result
is then a dangling

modifier, also
commonly known as

a pathetic fallacy.

Nick Carbo

Little Brown Brother

I've always wanted to play the part
of that puckish pubescent Filipino boy

in those John Wayne Pacific-War movies.
Pepe, Jose, or Juanito would be smiling,

bare-chested and eager to please
for most of the steamy jungle scenes.

I'd be the one who would cross
the Japanese lines and ask for tanks,

air support, or more men. I'd miraculously
make it back to the town where John Wayne

is holding his position against the enemy
with his Thompson machine-gun. As a reward,

he'd rub that big white hand on my head
and he'd promise to let me clean

his Tommy gun by the end of the night. But
then, a Betty Grable look-a-like love

interest would divert him by sobbing
into his shoulder, saying how awfully scared

she is about what the "Japs" would do
to her if she were captured. In one swift

motion, John Wayne would sweep her off
her feet to calm her fears inside his private quarters.

Because of my Hollywood ability
to be anywhere, I'd be under the bed

watching the woman roll down her stockings
as my American hero unbuckles his belt.

I'd feel the bottom of the bed bounce off my chest
as small-arms fire explodes outside the walls.

Submitted by Samuel Hamada

Nick Carbo

Mal Agueros

If you come to Mojacar
and peel open an orange full of worms,
count how many there are because
those are the days it will take for your body
to decompose after you are buried.

If you come to Mojacar
and find a small green snake with its back
broken, don't step on it or you'll cause
an earthquake that will catch up to you
while you sleep in a continent far, far away.

If you come to Mojacar
and two brown long-legged spiders crawl
on your face and shoulders, keep a sharp eye
out for two individuals, a mother-son, or
sister-sister who will try to take your money.

If you come to Mojacar
and see a scorpion scurry by your feet,
note the direction it ran to, north, south,
east, or west. You must avoid going there
or risk the sting of losing a loved one.

If you come to Mojacar
and a cock crows ten times at three
in the morning, lock your door and all
the wooden windows because nightmares in silver
dresses will arrive to slip into your bed.

Nick Carbo

Running Amok

In the slums of Tondo, people dwell
in shacks of cardboard, bits of bamboo,
corrugated metal, and a few cement blocks.

They come from all the provinces--
a farmer's son from Cagayan,
a coal miner from Bulacan,

a field hand from the banana plantations
of Davao. They come to Manila
for work, for better pay.

The highest incidence of men
running amok is in Tondo,
or at least, that's what the local tabloids

have for headlines every week. Amok in Tondo
kills seven! Police shoot him to death!
During the Filipino-American War

from 1900 to 1902, the Colt .45 pistol
was refined to kill crazed
Moro fighters who ran amok

and would not stop attacking
with rabid animal urgency
when shot with bullets of lesser caliber.

The superstitious old women in Tondo say
that no rice, no shoes, and no work
breed beetles and violence.

They say that small black beetles
can lay eggs in a man's ear,
and this is what makes a man run.

Nick Carbo

Speech Impediments

"I like dappled hats," she said
as she lit the incendiary device.

He enjoyed her wet diphthongs
on her nape, his frequency
modulator, his frenulum.

"You must warn me," she said
as she manipulated the milibars.

He was engulfed by the heat
of her cardamom mouth, her amplitude,
her guttural declensions.

Nick Carbo

The Filipino Politician

When he finds his wife in bed with another man--

The conservative politician feels an ache in his stomach,
remembers the longanisa and the tapa he had for breakfast.
He doesn't know whether to get the doctor or Cardinal Sin
on the phone. He calls one of his bodyguards, tells him
to shoot the man and then, his wife. He takes his .38 magnum
from his brief case, shoots his bodyguard in the back.

The liberal politician pours himself a glass of Courvoisier,
remembers a passage from an Anais Nin story.
He is suddenly the one they call the Basque. He removes
his Dior tie, his Armani shirt, his Calvin Klein boxer shorts.
He puts on a black beret, whispers, tres jolie, tres jolie,
que bonito, muy grande my petite amore. He joins them
in bed, begins his caresses on the man's calves,
kisses his way up the man's thighs.

The communist politician does not call his wife a puta,
nor does he challenge the man to a duel with balisong knives.
He stays calm, takes out a book of poems by Mao Tse Tung.
Inspired, he decides to advance the Revolution.
He takes a taxi to Roxas Boulevard, he begins to curse
and throw rocks at the American Embassy.

Nick Carbo

Typhoon Signal No. 1

This is where the typhoon starts—
inside the fourth paragraph,
ten city blocks away,

where the neurosurgeon halves
La Celestina, where you occupy
the spot under that Tiffany lamp,

where Edgar Rice Burroughs laughs,
where sugar cane is thigh
high, where you apply lipstick,

where the address numbers
are transposed, where hearts
take on airs of Parisian avenues,

where Mexican silver coins
are exchanged for salt, where
there is no fine line between art

and pornography, where the big
gingerbread boy answers
to the name of Alfredo, where you

take that moment to adjust
to my poem, where the metaphor
escapes from your throat.

Nick Carbo

When The Grain Is Golden And The Wind Is Chilly Then It Is Time To Harvest

Leron-leron sinta, umakyat sa papaya
Dala-dala'y buslo', sisidlan ng bunga

In a dusty village in Cagayan Valley,
Ramon and his father were planting rice when soldiers

appeared on their farm. They questioned his father,
if he'd seen any communist rebels recently

in the area, and when he did not give them
a good enough answer, they beat him with the blunt ends

of their rifles, shot him as he was lying
on the ground. Ramon snuck away but remained hidden

in nearby bushes, to witness the soldiers
laugh out loud as they chopped his father's shaking body--

'they first removed his penis, then cut below
the knees, then the ankles, then the elbows, then the neck.'

Leron-leron sinta, umakyat sa papaya
Dala-dala'y buslo', sisidlan ng bunga

After dusk Ramon ran home to his mother
and younger brother. She feared the soldiers would soon knock

on their door, so she took her sons deep inside
the muddy jungle of the Sierra Madre mountains.

After about four weeks, she sent Ramon to buy
rice, some fish, and a few canned goods. The sun was heavy,

the road to the village kept stretching further
and his legs felt weak, so Ramon boarded a jeepney

to take him to the market on Luna street.

A soldier recognized him at a military

checkpoint and he pointed his gun at Ramon,
yelled at him to step out with his hands up in the air.

Leron-leron sinta, umakyat sa papaya
Dala-dala'y buslo', sisidlan ng bunga

No questions were asked. Ramon told us the most
painful torture he endured was when the soldiers joined

two blocks of wood and used the weapon to hit
him directly on the ears, over and over

until he bled. He doesn't remember how
he escaped but he found himself wandering around

the countryside for days, eating grass,
guava leaves, bamboo shoots, and bananas to survive.

Leron-leron sinta, umakyat sa papaya
Dala-dala'y buslo', sisidlan ng bunga

Here, at the Children's Rehabilitation
Center, Ramon made friends, played with the other children,

started to learn how to write. He asked questions
about his mother and younger brother, he wanted

to know when he could return to his village
to harvest their rice fields. He said it was important

to go home because 'when the grain is golden
and the wind is chilly, then it is the time to harvest.'

After four months, we learned that Ramon's mother
was probably dead. 'Where's the body? I want to see

the body, I want to bury my mother.'

I told him we didn't know where the body was, but we

would try to find it. After a long silence,

he finally went to his room. Then I followed him

upstairs, found him hunched over the bathroom sink
washing his red face again and again and again.

Leron-leron sinta, umakyat sa papaya
Dala-dala'y buslo', sisidlan ng bunga

Ramon is still with us, his friends have brought him
out of his shell, he has learned how to speak Tagalog,

and he is beginning to read. Ramon dreams
about going home. He writes letters to his younger

brother even though we tell him he is still
missing. We collect those letters he writes every day.

He tells his younger brother, 'If you come here,
you will have many good friends to play with, eat plenty

of food, and these nice people will let us stay
here in Manila, but maybe I will go home first

and see what's happened to our family farm.'

He then writes, 'Do you know that your mother is now dead?'

Nick Carbo