

Classic Poetry Series

Ronald Baytan
- poems -

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Ronald Baytan holds a Ph.D. in English Studies (Creative Writing) from the University of the Philippines. He obtained his MA in Language and Literature, with High Distinction, from De La Salle University-Manila in 1996. He is currently the Chair of the Department of Literature of De La Salle University-Manila where he teaches creative writing, Philippine literature, gay/lesbian literature and world literature; and holds the Charles Lui Chi Keung Professorial Chair of China Studies. He co-edited *Bongga Ka 'Day: Pinoy Gay Quotes to Live By* (Milflores Publishing) with J. Neil C. Garcia and Ralph Semino Galan. He is currently working on *The Queen Lives Alone: the Orient: Personal Essays* and *The Queen Sings the Blues: Poetry 1992-2002*. He is a member of the ALON Collective.

Bath House Blues

Once more, I have set foot
On this promised land
Where dark is right
And silence is the source
Of all thrills.

All around me,
Men strut naked
Save for white briefs,
Neon trunks,
Torn green towels
About their waists.

No need for words
In this no-woman's land.

But the promise is not
For everyone.
One empty stare,
And we are reminded
Of what we have:
The belly only pregrant
Women should have,
The chest only Siddharta
Buddha should possess,
The body of Ganesh
The glass ruthlessly mirrors.

In one forgotten corner,
An old queen stands.
He wears his woes
On his wrinkled face.
Though he smiles his best,
Love or lust will not find him
On this island where
Youth and beauty conspire.

And so the likes of us
Have learned to partake
Of our own flesh.

Our eyes water
For the Ramas in our midst,
Celestial creatures ignorant
Of despair. Their eyes cannot
See us—we the Untouchables.

And so the likes of us
Have learned:
Dark cannot right
Our cursed bodies.
In the end, the only thrill,
And real dread, is swallowing
Our grief in horror,
In silence.

Ronald Baytan

He Who Sleeps On My Lap

My friend
who sleeps on my lap
loves someone else.
He says he is a man
and a man needs a woman
and I disagree.
We argue until he grows
tired of talking
and sleeps on my lap

on this chilly night.
And I sigh,
knowing he loves
someone else
but still sleeps
gently on my lap,
innocent, not knowing
that I am here
slaughtering
one wicked wish
that when he wakes up
I shall be his dream.

Ronald Baytan

Pan Zhang

In the south, there once lived Pan Zhang,
A man of immense beauty and skill
In poetry. He moved like a gentle wave,
And his skin glistened like berries in summer.
Men from the east and west had come
To be his friend, but he liked none of them
And soon the cherries began falling one
By one, and he stopped waiting.

Wang Chongxian from the kingdom
of Choi heard about his fame and wanted
To know the poems and the name.
They met by the lamp of Zhang's gate.
Autumn mist enveloped the two,
And syllables issued from their lips
Like blossoms falling upon the earth's lap.

The two lived together and shared
The pillow, and watched the trees
Change their color season
After season, until youth and beauty
Became faded portraits hung on oblivious walls.
They passed away together, and together
Blessed the ground of Mount Loufu.

One day, a tree grew from their tomb --
Its branches and leaves intertwined
As if in a tight embrace, and the people
Named it the Tree of Shared Pillow.

Ronald Baytan

Queen

Mama, the rhinestones are falling one by one
Because I always put the crown on my head
When you and Papa are sleeping. Imagine:
A fairy at the center stands with her wand
That stirs glowing waves of magic like sea
Shells in the dark. The crown is divine.

Mama, the gown I wore that night is fading
In the closet, unwashed black velvet exuding
Beauty irretrievably gone. It's a backless
Sleeveless tube with big slits on the side,
Silver sequins on the padded bosoms, and white
Gloves for the spectacular beauty that I am.

Mama, my shoe size is ten, and the pair I bought
Is plain, pure black, four-inch heels like ice cream
Cones, enough to make me feel like Diana.
When they stab the marble floor, I hear
The clicking of light, regal steps from a castle far,
Far away. One night, the queen knew.

Mama, my sash is kept in a hidden drawer
Where secrets abound as beautiful boys thriving
On paper. It is white, laced with gold strips
On the side and reads: Miss Gay Universe 1995.
They all loved that beauty, your son, when he
Walked. No doubt, the ribbon was made for my hips.

Mama, as you sleep in the other room, I am
Sushmita, head up, teeth white, lips red and wide,
Hands touching hips, foamy bosom out, tummy
Tucked. In my mind, Mama, I am holding a fresh bouquet,
Waving to a feverish crowd, and you are there crying
Because it's your son's farewell walk as queen.

Ronald Baytan

Room

Life takes
Without warning
Like flood heaving
Under the bed
Into the living room.

Suddenly, water rises up
To the waist, and you
Are a second too late to save
Journals, bed sheets, shoes,
Cassette tapes, and the old
Television set. Even the expired
Job contract is sailing in slow,
Oblivious movements
To your arms.

So much humanity lies
Dead in this room-
Turned-sea. One moment,
And life is watered down
By waves of grief.

But something survives
And you hear it calling:
There, the phone is afloat
On a tray, its voice muffled
By rain.
You rush to lift the receiver
As if it possesses
Life's last pulse.

The voice comes
Clear, as if it weren't a world
Away. Water is wailing

At your feet, but a brief
Exchange of words, and life

Takes you to a warm,

Familiar shore.

Ronald Baytan

Seafood

The paella is thick with the sea,
Creatures of the deep
Fresh and poised warm
On the platter of our desire.
You say you cannot finish it,
Nor can I. The dish is sticky
Like the night
We two went fishing
In the café.
Splendid catch,
We both agreed: a crab
Lay in the corner waiting
For a hand to tame its claws;
Miss Octopus swished
About and wept with joy
Because her tentacles
Had lost count of the muscled
Mermaids in her midst;
Some clams came
And reeked of glistening cum
(Though a few shut their shells
Like languid eyes).
And remember the sigh
Of shrimps, spent phalluses
That have shed copious tears
In rooms filled with longing.
Before the sun could see us,
We both left, anointed by
And full of the sea
Tonight we go
Home heavy, and in kinship know:
Tomorrow will serve another catch
Of love we could never have enough,
Of victuals we simply could never love
Enough.

Ronald Baytan

The Cut Sleeve

Dong Xian had dreamt
Of this day many, many times:
When he stepped
Out of the emperor's chamber,
He headed for his beloved Ai's grave,
Holding a sword firmly in his hand
To protect himself.

Without any heir, without any doubt,
Ai had declared Dong Xian
Emperor.

At his deathbed, Ai dismissed
Dong Xian's protest:
"How can a man rule the earth
Without Heaven's decree?"

Ai reached for Dong Xian's palm,
And handed him
The imperial seal. He said: "A force
Equal to the Heavens
Has mandated your reign."

And Ai took his last glimpse
Of human love.

But the enemies
Of the Hans never slept.

A few hours from now,
Dong Xian knew Wang Mang
And his armies would seize
The palace. And kill him.

No. Dong Xian chose to spend
The morning watching
From Ai's tomb
Cherry blossoms kissing
The earth's many lips.

He soon summoned the sword
From its sleep, and the loyal subject
Honored its duty: It painted
The ground red.

Before Dong Xian could shut
His ears to the world's wailing,
Memory took him back
To the red chamber
One misty morning:

He was dreaming
Across the sleeve
Of Ai's tunic, blooming
With golden chrysanthemums.
And careful
Not to wake him, Ai the Emperor
Cut off his sleeve.

Ronald Baytan

Threshold

Between the terrible ease
Of promise and the flowering
Of regret, I must lay myself bare:
I have learned desire
Is a habit, a calling of flesh
And spirit to repeat
Presences, a need for
Accumulation
Of movements,
Of moments.

In my room, at the office,
Inside the mall, on the train
Home, I still wait for the inanities
Of your texts, for your promises
Of intimacy, remembering
Weeks ago, you changed
Your number and your lover
So that you may know
The secrets of other bodies.

But I shall tell you
The costs: I am alone
Here in my apartment
Learning to unlearn

The habit of your existence,
Repeating your absences—
Oh not because nothingness
Is being's other self—
Because only one body
Is enough
In this faithless world:
One body, not ever our own,
Nor ever ours.

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