

Poetry Series

Justine Camacho Tajonera
- poems -

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Justine Camacho Tajonera(Jan.23,1975)

Justine Tajonera is happily married and, together with her husband, Vier, is raising their two year old son, Badger. She is a writer and poet by vocation, an editor by profession and has had a 13 year career in telecommunications: 4 years in internal communications and 9 years in marketing. She loves sharing her knowledge and insights on marriage, parenthood, pregnancy, breastfeeding, poetry, travel, career and work-life balance. She lives in Quezon City, Philippines. Her poetry has been published locally in anthologies and she maintains a Claiming Alexandria.

Justine's Books:

Poetry

Novel

A Filipino Writer Of English Poems To A Filipino Writer Of Spanish Poems

I think of the whiteness of snow
on a postcard from an immigrant aunt.
How sweet, how pure
and unreal like props
in a high-school play.
The closest I have seen of it is
crushed ice on halo-halo.
Why do I end up speaking
of white things?
I feel blond -
bleached and painted over.
But this is how I speak:
misted over with a foreign flavor
but in essence a native blend
of brown and yellow.
I think of how you must have
shivered in the European snow,
words warm in your heart.
I wonder if you dreamt
in Spanish.
Perhaps we dreamt
the same dream,
our incandescent souls
glowing beneath
the translucent veils
of tongues-to-suit-our-needs.
We were born in a land
of two seasons, not four,
unused to and awed by
words like:
autumn, winter, spring.
I think of snow and
how it melts into a
gray-tinged slush,
how these words of ours
will melt with the heat
of what we really mean.

But I think we wear
our costumes well.
If it is cold
we have to put
our coats on
but it will always be
with our skins
that we feel.

1996

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Afternoon Naps

There are few luxuries
in life
as precious
as afternoon naps.
Holding my son's chin
close to my
shoulder,
adjusting the pillows
around us
and watching his
smile,
I cannot imagine
a better place
to be.
Let everything wait:
exercise drills,
chores to be
done,
work to
submit.
This afternoon
is all about
his sleepy
grin
and his hand
holding
mine
as he falls
asleep
in my
arms.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

At Katibawasan

It is not true
that all things
are born
in warmth.

A strong stem
of white water
plunges into
a corner of
the emerald pool.

My arms are
outstretched
pale green
beneath
the water.

Swallows crush
their wings
against
the water's surface.

And I am in the
grip
of some
nameless ecstasy,
emerging from
water
cold
as ice.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

At The Rue De La Bucherie

The man I asked for directions did not know how
to explain it to me
but he smiled, took my hand
and showed me the way.
Voila! He said, when we got there.
I saw an unexpected view of the Notre Dame.
Entering the bookstore I was looking for,
a moment of bewilderment.
But only for a moment.
The books did not weigh me down or
give me flight.
A few titles illuminated.
Only one or two.
And I knew my journey was complete.
If you know what you are looking for,
the alleys, shelves and strangers
will take your hand and
lead the way.
Everything affirms
you only need to
decide.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Badger And The Jazz Musicians

He looks surreptitiously
when he sees one of them
hoist a violin.

Over baked potato
and iced tea
he has a faraway
expression as he
listens to this
different
sound.

He nods his head,
and jumps,
marches,
his smile
as joyful
as the music.

By the time
he attacks
his carrot
cake
in time
to the beat
of the
song

I know his
musical soul
is
full.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Celebrating Raksha Bandhan

This red thread
tied to my wrist
is tied around my heart,
is tethered to God's
very hand.

This red thread
binds me
and anchors me
to my dreams,
to dreams that
are still to come.

This thread
is tied to the wind
that allows me
to fly.

This thread
ties me
to my commitments,
my promises,
my word.

This thread is all
the strength
and fragility of
my life,
so easy to break,
yet so resilient,
divinely protected
and strong.

Raksha Bandhan (the bond of protection in Hindi, Punjabi, Oriya, Assamese and most other Indian languages) is a Hindu festival, which celebrates the relationship between brothers and sisters. It is celebrated on the full moon of the month of Shraavana (Shravan Poornima) .
(Aug.22,2009) .

Justine Camacho Tajonera

First Words

I listen to my son
saying words,
words that now mean
things
rather than the pleasant
babble of
infancy
and I realize
that he speaks
in our native tongue
just as much
as he speaks
our borrowed one.
I think back
to my own
toddlerhood,
without a mother
to raise me,
I must have
been speaking in
Bisaya,
eating ginamos
with my yaya
in the kitchen.
I kiss my son,
asking for
twenty kisses and
he teases me with
the word, ayaw.
I try to remember
all the lost
words
and promise myself
that my son
will not.

Bisaya - Visayan, a Philippine language
Tagalog - Philippine National language

Ginamos - salted, fermented fish
Yaya - Visayan or Tagalog for Nanny
Ayaw - Tagalog for I don't want to

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Floating On Batis Aramin

The pond is
quiet
except for
the birds.
A tree extends
its arms
across the
water.
We watch leaves
fall
slowly
as we row
from one end
of a bank
to another.
We have nothing
but time and
the promise of
grilled fish and
a kilo of sweet
rambutan*.

*Rambutan - *Nephelium lappaceum*, is a fruit considered exotic to people outside of its native range. To people of Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Borneo, and other countries of this region, the rambutan is a relatively common fruit the same way an apple is common to many people in cooler climates.

(Batis Aramin, Lucban, Quezon Province, Philippines)

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Gift

This gift costs nothing.
It is a rainy afternoon,
racing down a
giant slide,
laughing hysterically,
like there's
no
tomorrow.

It is miraculously
not fitting into
a bathing suit
but letting it
fit
me.

It is playing hide
and seek
and new games
like catch Mommy's
keys,
racing around
like a loon
with no
regard whatsoever
to anyone,
or anything they have
to say.

It's dancing
while doing
the groceries
and holding
hands during
stoplights
and eating
pan de sal
out of the blue.
This gift cost me
nothing
and everything.

(Sept.7,2009)

Pan de Sal - Pandesal (Spanish: pan de sal, literally 'salt bread') is a rounded bread or dinner roll usually eaten by Filipinos.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Hidden Light

They say millions of people
pass through this
shopping mall.

I feel lost in a sea
of choices:
shoes, bags,
jewelry, scents,
make-up, jeans,
shirts.

People of all
shapes and sizes
pass me by,
part of a
demographic,
a number
on a chart.

I will not see
their hopes
and dreams written
on their sleeves
or even in their
eyes.

I will not see
the love they
bear their
sons or daughters,
fathers or mothers.

I close
my eyes
and imagine
their collective
hope
beneath all the
surface garment
and skin
and this lifts me
on scented air
across a stream
of stars.

(SM Megamall, Mandaluyong City)

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Higher Things

How far are these 'higher things'
from what I feel for you?
The earthly, humble touch
of your hand,
the pressure of your shoulder
on the side of my head
when I'm tired,
the smell of laundry on your
shirt mixed with your
end-of-day sweat.
And what if these things
bind me to this earth?
Our baby's gummy smile,
the smell of his fingers
after he has sucked on them
because he's teething,
his warm cheek after he
falls asleep?
I would go no higher
than the height of our
shared bed.
I fix my eyes on the
circle that we make
and pray for God's
forgiveness for coveting
all this borrowed
time.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Homecoming

His smile could light up
the world,
I think, as he runs to me
from the door.
Skin to skin, bone to bone,
his face fits right between
my chin
and shoulder.
He says, 'Mommy' like it's
his favorite word,
the sweetest, sweetest thing
to hear over and over.
I hold in the scent of the
top of his head and
the feel of his chubby
little fingers, saving them
for days
when I feel lost
or drowned.
He buoys me,
melts me to my
very essence,
blessing me with
the privilege
to love him
for as long as
I possibly can.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

I Have Met Rome

I have met Rome both as beggar
on the street
and king on the throne,
as old man fumbling with words
and young, fearless man
with golden hair and
jubilant voice.

I have met myself in Rome
as woman without
a language,
at a loss for words when,
gripped with emotion
and tears going down
my face at the
sight of the Pope,
I realized that no one
translated his words
into any Asian language
despite a hoard
of Japanese pilgrims.

I have met myself as Rome,
victor and defeated,
slave and conqueror.

December 3, 2003

Justine Camacho Tajonera

It's Her Birthday Again

She is still here
with me.
Her love has lasted
three and a half
decades.
It doesn't matter
that I only had
three years of
her.
Love is stronger
than time,
than death.
The smell of her
hair
is gone,
the tone of what
I imagine
was a sweet
voice
is silent.
But there is something
about how she
must have once
embraced me
and whispered
in my ear
before I fell
asleep at night
that keeps me
strong
and full
of life.

(Aug.25,2009)

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Joining The Diaspora

I had a dream last night
about being pulled
by the waves,
clawing into the water
and drawing out a raft
that became a boat
that became soil
beneath my feet.

This morning, upon waking
I felt the slight rocking
of the sea
and listened for
the sound of the earth's crust
breaking
the sound of a continent
approaching.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Kay Gat Andres Bonifacio Mula Sa Isang Hudan

At kung magkikita tayo
balang araw
sasabihin mong
ako'y taksil
dahil lumaki ako
sa wika at lahi
ng mga dayuhan
at hindi man lang ako
lumaban.

Nilulon ko
pati ang pagbigkas
ng bawat
salita,
pati pagsuot
ng damit,
pati
pagsulat.
Nilulon, minahal,
inangkin.

Sinusugatan kita,
kadugo ko,
kapatid.
Turuan mo akong
masaktan,
magalit.
Gisingin mo
ako.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Last Day

Twelve and a half
years later
she packs away
books, certificates,
photos,
little mementos,
coffee mugs.
So many memories
flood the corners
of her office,
the halls.
She closes this
book
with so much
gratitude and
poignance.
There's no way
for her
to see it
from a
distance
now.
Tomorrow,
time will not
stop
for sure.
There is
something about
beginning
again
that makes
her heart
soar with
hope.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Looking Forward To Wine

Today was humid,
full of cares,
two parties to attend,
maneuvering the whole
day through
rain.

In between
everything,
we had groceries,
lists,
checks to
write,
bills to
pay.

But I remember
the wine that
we chilled,
waiting for
us
at home.

The hour-long
ride
back home
doesn't seem
so long.

We will have
our cool
sweet
blackberry
intoxication
in the end.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Morning Sun

I watch the sunlight
bounce off the water
running from my morning
shower

and meditate on
the meaning of
being a source
of light.

The sun does not
labor to rise,
it is a thing
of terrible beauty
unleashed
in the universe.

What is it
to be
unleashed?

To grow in grandeur
and power
and radiance
without ever
diminishing.

I am a sun
unto a world
I have not yet
defined.

I am an ember
that needs only
a draft
to raise me
into a bonfire.

It is only a matter
of time.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Mother's Day

Your father and I
discovered your budding teeth
while eating crabs on a Sunday.

Time stopped for me
as I counted back
all your goofy,
toothless grins.

I wanted to slow
down
and memorize
every one of them.

Do you know that
I bring your drowsy eyes
and sweet, milky breath
with me
every day
that I plod to work?

Though I can't wait
for you to call for me
by name,
I want to bask
in this quiet smile
of yours.

Wait a while for me,
dearest one.
Hold my hand
a bit longer.

(May 13,2007)

Justine Camacho Tajonera

October 28

The evening is soft
with revelations,
with ears open
to all manner of
secrets,
with embraces
waiting to be
filled.

In this silent distance
even the beating
of your heart
is eloquent
and the warmth
of your hands
is all that needs
to be
understood.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Picking Up A White Feather At Valbonne

I've sloughed off parts of myself on
this trip:

two shirts in Saint Paul du Roule

a pair of boots in Nice

and maybe a raincoat or a

sweater in Florence?

My aunt asks if I see Europe

as one big 'les poubelles.'

No, its only peeling

myself to an

indestructible core,

that part that can live

anywhere

and be satisfied,

that part that no

sun or wind

can defeat,

that part that knows

always

what to take

and what

to leave

behind.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Saying Grace At Palaisdaan

Before we leave
Quezon,
we have a meal
of grilled tilapia and shrimps
and hito stewed in
coconut milk
and pineapples.
We walk along
the floating
bamboo bridges
over the koi
and tilapia
pond,
looking for
our nook.
We find the
perfect spot
behind a stone
fish fountain
and a wheel.
We perch on a
wooden swing,
contemplating
the wind
sweeping over
rice terraces
that seem to reach
until the base
of Mt. Banahaw.
Life could not
be sweeter than
this.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Seven Years Later, Driving Home

It is impossible to fall in love again
for the first time.
The first blush, the heart quickening,
racing madly with a secret:
these things happen only once.
Yesterday, in the car, only half-listening to a song,
I remembered.
And in my mind, I turned around.
If I had known that I would never
see you again.
If I had known that afternoon in August,
I would have stayed rooted there.
Watching you.
Nineteen yet and dreamy.
I felt the years deaden me, one by one.
And all the headlamps around me
blurred.
It was so sweet,
even to feel
that wound again.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Sifting Sand As Meditation

A laborer's work
is simple
and clear.

I sift the sand
through a
screen,
swinging the
screen
backward and
forward
until all that
are left are
pebbles and
stones.

With a strong
heave, I watch
the pebbles
and stones
fly
from the screen
and land
in a heap.

I do this
hundreds of
times,
my bare hands
gripping the wooden
frame of
the screen.

I do this until
there is nothing
in my mind
but sand, pebbles,
stone
and flight.

I do this until
there is no difference
between labor
and

prayer.

(Sept.8,2009

Bgy. Pinagbuhatan Habitat for Humanity Build)

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Standing In Line

We are there for only
two hours
and yet
it is a flashback
of cliches:

that there are
professional fixers,
that there are
obsolete
equipment, like
a rundown
automated
cashier,
hanging around
for no reason,
that there are
lines that go
nowhere
and counters
with no
labels.

The rain
pours
and styrofoam boxes
stand agape, pointless,
collecting water leaking from
the roof
and trash from
people who have mistaken
the boxes
as trash bins.

For once,
I look into the eyes
of the man suggesting
that I short-circuit the line
with a few hundred pesos

and I tell him sincerely,
'Okay lang sa akin
pumila.'*

I am not a cow
being herded.
Despite the
inconveniences,
I choose
to stand
in line.

(NBI Satellite Office in Quezon City Hall
Sept.9,2009)

Justine Camacho Tajonera

The House That Jesus And Florliza Built

I observe the quality of light
streaming through
the windows
watching how it
touches the wood of the floor,
the metal of the wrought-iron
table that has been
in this house
for decades.

One day this house
will be gone,
or will belong to another,
with no one to see
the passage of time,
of love
through its windows,
and walls
and doors,
with no one to listen to
the laughter
of three generations
of children
that has seeped into
the peeling paint
and the dust
in the far
corners and
Lola's china cabinets.

But I am here now,
watching, listening.
I will remember
for them
that this house is
not just a frame
against the elements
but a temple
sacred with countless,
priceless

family artifacts,
each one touched
with love
beyond grief.

For Vier and his family

Justine Camacho Tajonera

The Leaf

I experience
the leaf,
the deadness
of it,
the meaning
of death,
the end
of meaning,
nothing.

I experience
how it lies
among pebbles,
how it is
brown,
how it is everything
and just
a leaf,
and all my
grief,
and the sound
of a silent
afternoon.

I am not
the leaf.

I am not
the pebbles
holding up
the leaf.

I mean
nothing
by this.

I let this
all go,
with a sigh,
like a wind
that lifts up
the meaningless
leaf.

This Space

This space
in my head is
a box,
a small one
filled with mementos
my mother
left.

This space
is a room
with a view
of the piazza
San Marco.

This space
is as big
as our wedding
feast in 2005.

This space
is as wide
as the kingdom
of our
shared dreams,
draped in grand
gestures and
ambitious
hopes.

This space
returns to
the distance
between us
when we
fall asleep,
the length
and breadth
of our own dreaming
son.

This space
is the sacred
boundary
where I

stand guard
over who
you are
and share
who
I am.

For Vier

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Two Hours Early

The world threw me
two whole hours
with sunlight
streaming down
my face
and a bagel waiting
in the toaster
oven.
I had seven waking
dreams
and a prayer
in my heart
that filled
each moment
to overflowing.
As I drank
chilled water
with the breakfast
my sister
made for me
I found that
I could not
ask for
more.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Waiting

The sound you make
is fainter than the sound
of rain softly falling outside
our windows.

I turn inwards
just to listen.

I cannot imagine yet
what whorls are forming
on your fingers
what dreams you might have
upon first waking.

I close my eyes
and try to see.

I try to think of my own mother,
humming, looking out the window,
waiting for me to touch her
through our barrier of skin.

I share her smile now.
I am waiting to see
yours.

Justine Camacho Tajonera

Walking Sparta

We take our Dalmatian
out to walk,
the three of us,
letting her go
her way.

No patch of
grass is ignored,
no smell is too
intriguing.

Life is simple:
it is the road
ahead.

Turning left or
turning right
is the major decision
of the afternoon.

As the sun retreats,
throwing back
her gorgeous mane
of gold and scarlet,
I catch a glimpse
of paradise.

We say we are walking
our dog
but it is our dog
who leads us
on our merry way,
teaching us to love
every sight and smell
and touch,
teaching us that
life can be just one
perfect afternoon.

For Badger and Vier

What Ditas Left

My mother left bangles
in her jewelry box,
poems that my father
can no longer find,
paintings of birds breaking
free from cages and
umbrellas catching
raindrops.

She painted me
looking over a butterfly-
sleeve and my brother
in blue and orange
with a look of awe.

My mother left me
a little trail of things:
pictures of her
beautiful, wide-eyed
saying 'wow'
over and over,
a gold pendant,
a set of books etched
all over with her analysis
of characters,
bright, bold declarations
as though I would debate
with her over time.
I recognize my own writing
in her staccato style.

Sometimes when I read
what she scrawled at the
back of her photo album
I cry:
Life is full of sound and
fury, yes.
But full of significance
too. Just you wait and

see, just you wait and
see, just you want and
see

only three
years with
you, Mommy.

I have a hand-
ful of gifts now,
things you never
thought
would mean so much.

You left me
your eyes,
your wonder,
you left me
my name.

Justine Camacho Tajonera