



***Snail Fever: Poems of Two Decades* by Francis C Macansantos. The University of the Philippines Press. 2016. 109 pages. 6 x 9 in.**

This is the kind of book that hopefully brings the poet closer to a good number of readers he most deserves.

The book which locates small things in the grand scheme of existence is a quiet, sometimes febrile, seeking of stories and ideas, so that the poems about a guava sapling, or shells, or snails are in fact also about many other things, all intimating humanity's brief but bewitching existence.

The two decades in the title hints at the tantalizing mix of the poet's work. As there are shorties interspersed in between longies, there are poems—such as “The Look” and “Wild America” whose language is refreshingly lean and current. But perhaps, Macansantos' genius lies in longer poems which remind us of his previous works, particularly *Womb of Water, Breasts of Earth* (2007). The artist's propensity for expansive expression recalls the all-consuming desire to recite, to teach, to tell a story, which in oral tradition is epitomized by chanting.

To chant is to sing one's yearning, flinging one's words around one's past, one's obsession, or one's ache, slowly, slowly touching it until it becomes silence. This is why the poem may start with snails gone berserk, shells spat out by the sea, the wind and waves and their sistering, but for Macansantos, they inevitably spiral to higher ideas or spark sudden and delicate insights they could only from a place of so much experience and so much understanding, that place where wisdom connects artist to artist, chanter to chanter.

In poems such as “Return to Maryhurst” (my personal favorite), “Indian fall,” “Emblems, Echoes,” we see the poet in his element. His lyrical power is in its most sustained, his rumination in its most articulate when it is sourced from nature and its infinitesimal details, connecting image and thought, matter and spirit, sight and insight.

Even when in foreign landscapes, though alienated (a feeling he likens to being in movie without exit), he continues to be awed and taught by nature, finding deeper connections with sky, clouds, and maple trees. This connection or oneness of the physical and the spiritual finds its trope in the sky and earth meeting, a recurring image which in his poems is a moment of ineffable splendor and complete harmony.

Every now and then, the poet uses “symplegadic clash,” “chitin mementos,” “pentimentally possessive,” (expressions that make me worry I’ll miss the bigger picture) and all sorts of allusions which remind me of poets in his generation, poets attuned to the classics and erudition.

For me, it is when the poet writes “small” that he becomes pleasurable accessible, and provides just the right contrapuntal balance to his introspective flair. It is when he addresses his daughter, his wife, or talks about a week-old laundry, or his Aunt Juanita, or about a sturdy Yakal post in his hometown -- when he somehow relaxes his language -- that he genuinely shares himself, and thus becomes more identifiable, relatable, and memorable to the reader.

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