

BOOK REVIEWS



Black Arcadia

by Kristine Ong Muslim, published by
University of the Philippine Press, 104pp,
6.10" x 9.09"

The Bright Noise in Black Arcadia

The preface, though not necessary in many books, is helpful here as it provides a glimpse of the author's extensive reading. It helps readers traverse with some degree of confidence the poems' dark, haunting habitation: a habitation that shows the writer's prodigious literary energy sustained by her wide-ranging interest in speculative literature. Aside from mythology, the overlapping areas of history, popular culture, science especially astronomy, literature, and info technology are the rich sources for the promptings and the inner working of the poems. Thus, there's always this sensation of exhilarating encounter when reading Kristine Ong Muslim.

The writer – surprise of all surprises – comes from Maguindanao, a province in the southernmost part of the Philippines. Yes, there's a tone here all too ready to slide into sarcasm, just to play up a bit the long-standing antimony between north and south; between writing from the monolith center called Manila and writing that is painstakingly and steadily growing from the uneven edges called other-than-Manila; between writing facilitated and governed by institutions and writing that is self-directed (and therefore perhaps freer and more ambitious in spirit?). This latter writing, in the case of Muslim, is the kind that gets away from the conundrums and betrayals of local legitimation and canon-making as it chooses to hurt and hone itself in the global writing village.

As in any art, the process is long, arduously long for sure, but this

stretch of time is right away attuned to the standards of the best writers in the world. Thanks to social media, writing has been liberated from the tyranny of stifling isolation; thanks to the Internet, the problem of what books to read and the multi-ways to write have been made “navigable.” I am making a guess here when I say that writing (particularly in the field of fantasy and speculative fiction) has made a huge, irreversible turn in the last decade. As writers commune globally by the minute, reading and learning from one another’s skills, writing becomes more and more borderless, genre-less even, allusive, and fluid in form and content, and thus egalitarian in spirit and truly competitive.

Just like her other books, this one composed of 64 poems introduced by a haunting epistolary prose, strays relentlessly away from the mimetic qualities into the highly speculative. The resulting world is irrepressibly dark, almost apocalyptic. But despite the imagery of decay and ruin, despite the hundred ground quivering with dying fish and swallows, the smashed surfaces and dwindling terrain, there is the underlying vague theme of beauty and growth in a world where “birds drown and live forever,” and “wildflowers bloom the darkest of hues.” The poem “The Lost Colony” in the second chapter seems to encapsulate the energy of the book. It’s a poem that uncannily embodies life and death, and what results is a harrowing intimation of the fate of human life and civilization. It opens with an image of ruins and inevitable reconstruction: “The lost colony calls out for its broken children, its trespassers and doomsayers.” And it ends with an image of dormancy and future growth. “Someday, the ancient/ fireball, the razed continents, the lull of the first ocean: what has carried you this far must be allowed to rest.”

The images and tropes of Muslim, acclimatized to other re-cyclic writings of similar mythic and fantastic sourcing, may run the risk of becoming overburdened with multiple layers of significations (and here the readers may get lost in the labyrinthine world of speculation); and yet, and yet, it is this beautiful risk, this delicate line running between safety and danger that makes the collection what it is. This sense of portent hovering over her work is modulated by her voice speaking to us with the kind of sureness that makes us trust her. As she draws us into the wild, inner dialectic movement (signaled by the book’s title) of oxymorons, of utopia and dystopia, of mythology and technology, of

dark and light, and the cyclic patterns of creation-destruction-creation, we're too spellbound to disengage from the teller's "bright noise."

The bright noise in the poem of the same title then becomes the poet's own: "What guttural/ sound of longing and frustration clammers out/ of your darkest of throats to present itself as/ language describing the beauty of this world?" This beauty, an analogue to soul, is understandably fragile; it gets distorted in our techno-driven world which could find no connection to the bright voice. Despite everything becoming dark, the voice — because it has seen everything from a far place that deeply understands ("Levitation"), and because it exists outside of time — it persists in its clarity in disclosing the world. Sourced straight from the realm of the subconscious, it demurs at anything familiar, and slips into stunning defamiliarization.

The **you** addressee then, difficult to pull off in writing, becomes a natural narrative stance for this kind of prescient telling. Eliminating the ego of the "I," this viewpoint compels the reader into the text's world and be implicated in the experience which is increasingly becoming familiar because he has become unavoidably part of its unfamiliarity.

What Muslim herself describes as "overwritten" or intentional "superciliousness" in this collection (as opposed to *Lifeboat's* relatively pithy style) may simply come to the reader as cogent coaxing into the author's consciousness, into the way she fleshes out a strange world of archetypal images with a depth of field of the human situation. This depth means: it is not what happens per se, but a sharp sense of what's happening to us? where will this all lead up to?—what one poet calls "meaningfulness" (not meaning) which is what cogently holds the pieces together.

In the end, you collude with the writer in her project, however insane. – Here, I am almost tempted to think of Kristine Ong-Muslim as Philippine's new literary juggernaut crushing down the fainthearted in its path. But no, I stick to my metaphor of her as a voice. A voice, brave and enthralling, we don't mind going to Black Arcadia with her, which is wherever she brings us.

R~Arlene Yandug