

Barbara Jane Reyes. *Poeta en San Francisco*. Kaneohe, Hawaii: Tinfish Press, 2006. \$13, paper (ISBN 0-9759376-4-2), 109 pages.

Reviewed by Danny Thanh Nguyen

Barbara Jane Reyes' *Poeta en San Francisco*—whose manuscript won the 2005 James Laughlin Award—has been described by Juliana Spahr as a “long, necessary lament,” “a multilingual litany” that “looks at what wars . . . have done to the home front, to the city streets.” Yes, Reyes’ book-length poem is all this, but it also becomes more than a lament triggered by imperialism. Its speaker, the unnamed “poeta,” conducts a Mass of sorts, using languages, geography, and the notion of consequences in a liturgy of words that are at once angry and calm, constantly pointed with heat and urgency. The main text is sandwiched between a prologue and epilogue, while the main body of *Poeta* is divided into three sections: *orient*, *dis·orient*, and *re·orient*.

In the prologue, Reyes’ speaker finds herself “combing through ashes / for fragments of human bone, studying maps drawn for the absurdity / of navigation.” Reyes is not just sorting through the bones of her native Philippines—its history of Spanish colonialism, of US occupation—she is also trying to find voices for the dead fallen in the name of globalization, those who cannot speak. This search is heightened later in the first section, *orient*, where, in a letter to a nameless love, the speaker realizes what popular culture makes of these bones which she sorts through:

. . . they have mistaken my home for a
hollywood set of your home. even my language was a stand-in for
yours. your country is not a war. my country is no longer mine.

It is not just the dead that preoccupy Reyes, but also the living derivatives of ethnic strife that bubble up onto the streets of San Francisco, which the speaker navigates. Juxtaposed against the “street corner’s beat up boombox” that blasts The Clash’s “Charlie Don’t Surf” is an “amputated ’nam vet whose only words are / hellfire and oriental pussy whose only friend is a 22 oz clear bottle of / king cobra.” In the second section, *dis·orient*, beneath the city’s noted cultural diversity, is a particular “neighborhood’s charming / blend of latin turf war and martini bars in stilettos” and shouts of “allthemfuckinggooknamesoundthesame!”

The *dis·orient* section also strongly showcases Reyes’ dynamic use of geography. Incorporated with the English text are Spanish and Tagalog, as well as Baybayin, the pre-Romanized language of the Philippines. Bouncing from present-day San Francisco to the foreign-occupied Philippines of the past, we see how “women strap explosives to their bodies” and “adolescents wield scythes and semiautomatic rifles”—“the opposite of eden.” And in this exchange of geography emerges one of the most exciting features in *Poeta*: use of language.

Language, in this case, is not just ethnic/national tongue, but also pop-culture, street talk, and the language of media and propaganda. Propaganda and consumerism are wrung out in poems such as “why choose pilipinas?”—a sales pitch for “the finest group of / islands in the world, its strategic position unexcelled by that of any / other global positioning.” This is true as well in its “remixed” counter-version, turned into an even more perverted mail-order bride ad:

pilipinas are Christian, so you are assured that they
believe in the one true god you do . . .
. . . In short, the pilipinas
are custom tailored to fit your diverse needs.
now will that be cash or charge?

It is also this perversion of language that propels *Poeta* beyond reactionary war poetry. Reyes' manipulation is poignant in its controlled balance of rage and sadness, and clever in its irony. The speaker cannot help but give a salute (in the form of a backhanded parody) to exoticized-food-equals-"ethnic"-poetry: "cellophane coconut milk displayed silent / women glass encased to service you though not for the weak-willed / this is an adventure you shouldn't pass up!"

In a time when poetry borrowing from the language of prayer has become cliché, Reyes injects her own startling take on the habit—by appropriating the colonialist's number one tool for conversation: religion. And this is what makes the form of the Mass so powerful.

our lady of neon strip joints
our lady of blowjobs in Kerouac alley
our lady of tricked out street kids, pray for us

And later,

Queen of race riots, pray for us.
Queen of heathens' torched flesh, pray for us.
Queen of tortured prisoners, pray for us . . .

Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God.
That we may be worthy.
Pray for us.
That we may be.
Pray for us.
That we may.
Pray.

Language here speaks to one of the poem's major ideas of voice: how, even when you find that your culture, your "country is no longer" yours, the voice can be the only weapon you possess. *Poeta* adds to the tradition of artists like the Hutchinson Family Singers, Phil Orch, and Diamanda Galás. Reyes becomes a hymnist, singing a struggle song for those who have become consequences of political progeny—and the byproducts that cause action met by reaction.

It is also in the prayer of outrage against violence and violation that the speaker finds some peace. The final section, *re-orient*, is bittersweet. The speaker acknowledges the pain of disembodiment from native culture and "vying for geography. there is a prayer stuck in my / throat. douse me in gasoline . . . let's see / this prayer ignite to high heaven." But she also finds acceptance and, most importantly, power as a "keepsake sister of morning dew in languages of other times." The speaker honors unnamed causalities because "the art, grandpa says, is in matching / the corpse. to suture is to fix a hole."

Aleda Shirley. *Dark Familiar*. Louisville, Kentucky: Sarabande, 2006. \$13.95 paper (ISBN 1-932511-36-9) 88 pages.

Reviewed by Hannah Faith Notess

Dark Familiar is Aleda Shirley's third full-length collection of poems, following *Chinese Architecture* in 1986 and *Long Distance* in 1996. The world of *Dark Familiar* is haunted, and not just by the usual ghosts. Haunted by the living, the absent, and the dead, in a landscape washed in the saturated colors of Mark Rothko's paintings, the speaker of