

Puñeta: Political Pilipinx Poetry



Volume 3

Luisa A. Igloria, Editor

Puñeta:
Political Pilipinx Poetry

Volume 3

Edited by Luisa A. Igloria

Locofo Chaps Chicago, 2017

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Cover image: "Puñeta" (2015), embroidered on cotton by Jenny Ortuoste

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CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Jim Pascual Agustin	Threats and Deeds The Man with Very Few Words
Merlie Alunan	Balangiga, Samar, August 8, 1901
Ivy Alvarez	Lagot ang pisi Lumalaki ang ulo
Rodrigo Dela Peña Jr.	Right and Might
Jennifer Patricia A. Cariño	Stay
Jhoanna Lynn B. Cruz	Doing Time
Jose Edmundo Reyes	“How many islands does your country have?”
Dinah Roma	The Minimalist English Syntax
Chris Santiago	McKinley Praying
Dumay Solinggay (Florenda Pedro)	Privilege
Angela Narciso Torres	The Immigrant Visits Her Mother
R.A. Villanueva	Mass
J. Likha Yatco	PinaySpeak

THE POETS

FOREWORD

Puñeta! my paternal grandmother often exclaimed when something caused her great displeasure. She was proud of her mestizo blood, of the white and proud in her: the part that she said could be traced back to a town in Spain called Zafra. Even in her old age, she was patrician in bearing: aquiline nose, an air of perpetual condescension. Even in her green flannel housecoat and slippers, sitting on her haunches just outside the front door—she was like a formidable idol, thin-lipped and smoking her favorite cigarillos, sending out smoke ring after smoke ring into the chilled air of the garden. She lived with us part of the year in Baguio, when I was very young; and spent the other part of the year with her daughter and daughter's family in Quezon City. My father was her only son, and her favorite. That he had gone ahead and married my mother despite her disapproval was reason enough for a lifetime of bitter Puñetas! Even more, that my mother— a farmer's daughter who had put herself through school— pushed back and made her voice heard at every instance of domestic oppression, to establish her rightful claim over stewardship of her own household and marital life.

These were some of my thoughts as I helped to put this collection of poems together for Volume 3 in the series Puñeta: Political Pilipinx Poetry. Meanwhile, other poet friends raised eyebrows in alarm, reminding me that the word comes from the Spanish puño or fist, which is slang not only for Damn! or Go to hell! but might also mean "Jack off!" But given the current administration and the ways in which it has launched daily assaults on countless lives, especially impacting the marginalized—immigrants, women, children, people of color, the disabled, to name a few— this is no time for polite talk. And the Pilipinx poets on these pages are among the best writing from all over the world today—from Manila to Baguio to Tacloban to Davao to Capetown, South Africa to Singapore to London to Minnesota and New England— who can tell it like it is without flinching. They know that whatever threatens the decency and integrity of any one human being in our communities, threatens our common future. And that is why we must continue to raise our voices in protest.

~ Luisa A. Igloria
3 February 2017

≡ JIM PASCUAL AGUSTIN

2 poems

Threats and Deeds

*I love America
Her secret's safe with me
I know her wicked ways
The parts you never see
~ David Byrne, "Miss America"*

You are everywhere. Not by choice
of those who are
forced to stare
at your long arms,
or are they tentacles?

Hard to see
when, just as we think
we can sense your kindness,
one of us gets whipped
into submission.

Sat on.

Barbed Barbie
on missile point
heels,
if anyone says
Ouch

We get a taste of your beauty
and animosity.

~ with permission of author; from *Alien to Any Skin*, Jim Pascual Agustin (UST Publishing House, Manila 2011)

The Man with Very Few Words

Almost like a prayer, he utters
the same set of words again
and again. He believes them,

having hypnotized himself
early on as he walked down so many
passages walled with mirrors.

One wonders what made
him hate those with darker skin.
A childhood crush who kicked him

in the groin? A nanny who refused
being fondled? A teacher
who urged him to read books?

So many others to finger
and blame, thus
his addiction to Tweeting.

Balangiga, Samar, August 8, 1901

The Balangiga massacre was an incident in 1901 in the town of the same name during the Philippine–American War.

~ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balangiga_massacre

We live by a jungle, wilder than you could
imagine.
Tall trees keep the ground below always in
shadow.
Strange creatures crawl under the bushes.
Butterflies with wingspans wide as dinner
plates.
Bats hang upside down on every branch.
All day long the noise of birds,
a thousand invisible insects.
Pythons and lizards crawl to the village at
night.
They steal chickens, sometimes a dog or cat
disappears.
Nights I can't sleep thinking of this.
I tell you nothing here grows in moderation--
Plants with leaves so wide you can wrap an
infant in them.
The all-year sun. Or rain pouring down
like rivers from the sky. Storms here can blow a
man
clear to the other side of the island.
The leeches, I've seen them before they've
fed, thin as pencil lead.
They hide under the jungle leaves. When a
warm body approaches,
they allow themselves to fall, they drop on
your head, shoulders, back.
They'd crawl into your ears, nostrils, your anus,

and quietly
begin sucking your blood until they swell to
finger-size, at least.
Imagine thousands of them feeding off you as
you sleep,
and you not knowing anything until they've
sucked you dry...

The people are short, small-boned, thin, but
agile, and very strong.
They can walk and run fast, climb trees with
ease.
They're always telling stories to one another
while drinking palm toddy.
They love to sing and dance.
Wherever they go, men and women both, they
carry a long knife
called sansibar, even the children.
They can endure long hours of work

They can carry packs twice their weight and
size.
They go to church and pray a lot. Who can
blame them?
Danger all around, all the time.
Ay, but they're quick to laugh, and quicker to
tears.
Are they brave? What makes them angry?
What could they do if they're enraged?

Ah, this last nobody would want to find out....

🌊 **IVY ALVAREZ**

2 Poems

Lagot ang pisi

to say it aloud invites superstition

the coins might be missing but the feeling
wasn't

there was bounty under my feet

I often ate the sky and the sea

so don't say it

I only felt hunger scrape my belly in an affluent
country

through no fault of my own

Lumalaki ang ulo

To grow bigger is what it means to be a man. A small boy becomes a big man, with a big head, whether or not he deserves it. A little girl becomes a small woman, the smallest possible *she* she can be. That is the ideal. Squeezed to her thinnest self. Corseted and bound, sucked, spat out by holes in heads, she cannot recognise herself. Her head is huge, the only thing she cannot shrink. Even then she is told: You must not think.



RODRIGO DE LA PEÑA Jr.

Right and Might

Obverse and reverse sides of a coin. Obvious
enough for the audience to see, the rabble

craning their heads toward any semblance
of spectacle. A narrative to give shape

to a day, a life. Moro-moro, the silver
glint of a sword in a mock fight, delirious

comedy. Everyone laughing, slapping
their laps in an instant of forgetting,

the enemy not us this time, someone else,
somewhere else. Flip of a coin, its violent

spin mid-air, each gesture a kind
of currency to be spent and squandered.

Then a face, not random. The blade
piercing a body, darkness, its lethal

intention. And silence. Silence before
the curtain falls, the thunderous applause.

Stay

Sometimes the city becomes a box.
Sometimes it closes in around us: the cold
stark concrete, the endless twist and furrow
of road. I know that you have felt the pull.
I know you have been bent to your breaking.

Because I have felt it too; Because my fingers
are stained, and weary; because the day
has had its hour of hard sun. But because in
the quiet
of a passage, read from the middle of a book,
I find you,
there are songs that I wish to sing--

fragile threads hanging from a broken bough,
like an invitation from some long-forgotten
hymn.
Look to the left. There is a sunrise brushing the
earth
with its calloused palms. There is a page half-
buried
in the mouth of a river. Here the words are
edded,

and muddied in the ebb and flow. What more
can one wish for? Here. In the confines of a
single heart.

But also in the heart of the world. We sit
with our heads thrown back, waiting for swift
feathers of sound to rush past us, and hold us
up

to the light. Come close and listen. There is a
siren
cutting into the black, black night. A prayer,

lifted
from the leaves of trees. There is a young child
standing at the mouth of a river. The river is a
word.
A long black branch. Foliage, brushing against
bare skin.

We are the branches, falling to the sodden
earth.
Skin glistening under the gentle light of day.
We are
the vessels that carry our history. We are the
rocks
waiting only for wave to carry us away. And
when we hold
up our hands to the light, what wonder strokes
our eyes?

So if you should ever feel alone, in this box of
a city,
in this box of a heart, remember, there is a
feeling
called sun. Like the first time I saw you step
out
from the blue door on the left side of the
corner building.
You brushed your hair from your face, and said
Day

*is the rhythm we carry in our bones. So often
we forget.*
How the constant drumming of morning has
no choice
but to slip in, take us all in its urgent embrace.
So often
we repeat ourselves. In the words we scatter
throughout
the day. *Good morning... good morning...
good morning.*

How does a word become firefly, and
dreaming? How
does it leap from the firelight to bounce across
the cobalt sky
and trace constellations across your skin?
Routine
is the coldness vanishing in the lamplight.
Writhing.
Asking us all how truly whole we are. The
silence

is a straggling line of memory, folded into the
contour
of a heart; a quivering, like leaves; golden
footprints of sun.
There is a blackbird in my chest, furiously
beating
its wings. It says to me, "Stay now. Distill the
quiet.
Make it thick and potent. Stay now."

There is an utterance made of filigree. A word.
It is the sound a flicker makes. Billowing breath
of rain.
Sawdust on your tongue. Everything still left
unsaid.
And even though grace is not a dress I may
wear
very well, here is where I always hope to be.

Deep in the thick liquid of the world. Throat
bared
and thrust forward; back straight, music
streaming
from my outstretched fingers. Come with me.
All you
dreamers, and lovers of life. Come and sing of
the world.
The mad, sweat-stained, glorious mess of the
world.

You were meant to be here.
Come and stay with me.
Come and stay with me.

Doing Time

All jails have windows, double-edged boon,
a torture sweeter than steel bars and chains.
Wings stirring wind, a fingernail of moon:
mirage of wide expanse that window feigns.
Reading you, Amado, I see the glare
of sun in eyes transfixed by window high –
the one designed to magnify despair,
but which taught you magnitude of sky.
Not God, nor promise of Bastille saved you –
you knew what *stanza* truly meant. This room
of words was space enough. You conjured blue
without a rope, a vine, or magic broom.

Thus I learn to glide with voice through
walls
of countries with no doors, and not to
fall.

≡ JOSE EDMUNDO REYES

"How many islands does your country have?"

*~ a question sometimes asked of Filipinos by
foreigners*

*It depends, so goes the joke,
on whether the tide is high or low.*

The tide, then, must be high now,
for when you surmise
in our direction, all you see
is a mere patch of ocean
southeast of China.

Should typhoons rage over
our region, they'll find
no denuded mountains to devour.
We have neither copper nor coral,
no pineapples or coconut wine—
nothing conquistadors
could ever have stolen.

No sinuous verses have ever
been spoken. No volcanoes
erupt, burying nameless towns
in layers of lava and ash. No corrupt
mayors reside in plantations
guarded by armalite-bearing
phantoms.

Only imaginary numbers
scavenge reeking objects
orphaned from their nouns.

The tide never turns,
even as every ghost drowns.



The Minimalist English Syntax

Now think about syntax
as the word order giving meaning
to our thoughts. The scheme
by which our mind processes
experience. The lesson is simple.
"The men saw the dog," for instance,
displays the word order of intelligence.
It is sparse. The words' relative position
free of muddle. The verb follows
the men, while the object is animated
enough to be of interest. Yet what if
we allow for the sentence to slide
into the next, "Ahmet wants
his book," where Ahmet, the boy,
the name, drawn clearly from
Arabic lineage, by design or default,
troubles the aspect of desire.
Let the dog walk alongside him then
on a bright morning, with his book in hand,
as he passes through the orchard of olive trees
on his way to school or temple or mosque,
or wherever he could prove himself
and bask in his incipient power of language.
Plotting the hierarchy of sequences,
would the men be interested
in him once they learn the book is specific:
functioning as a proper noun,
one read in hours of reflection, guiding
the setting of the sun in his part
of the world, its pages frayed
from death and debate?
Consider further the permutation
in the last example: "The teacher chose
a student." Assume the student is our Ahmet,

and the teacher triumphant in his task
of unraveling the correlations
of language—his and the boy's
and their ancestors—mapping the planes
and rivers where their words
had roamed in the past.

Return now to that page where clarity
is argued to prompt every statement.

In the interest of time, go briefly

over the exercise, choose

the words, arrange them.

Let the structure take precedence.

Marvel at the possibilities.

Be as minimalist as you can.



McKinley Praying

Outside the egg of my Allness chuckles the greasy little Eskimo. Outside the egg of Whitman's Allness too.

— D. H. Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*

"Kill every one over ten."

— Gen. Jacob H. Smith, U.S. Sixth Separate Brigade, 1902

Sometimes like a sultan
I put on a disguise & walk among the
people.

The women have Modigliani faces.
The men wear nooses of fire.

I try to tell the soldiers
that every *insurrecto* they grease is Walt
Whitman
but they're getting angry & righteous
since he won't lie down or be licked.

I cover him with a blanket
I've just bought from a chuckling Eskimo.
It is many-colored
& uninfected by smallpox.

A murderer lurks among the stalls
but I do nothing to stop him—he's the
President
disguised as an actor;
you can tell by his yellow teeth.

One by one he kills my incarnations
while they browse for souvenirs

for my six thousand siblings who've gone
overseas for work.

From his hand he unfurls a bandage
long enough to blindfold
every bronze-skinned boy over the age of
ten.

They cock their heads, as if listening.

I hear footsteps behind me.
This is my last life
a vintage courtesy of a foreign power
ready to drink and black.

From the window of a nipa hut
Some kind of Indian offers me a wreath—

~ with permission from author; "McKinley Praying" is from *Tula*, Chris Santiago;
Milkweed Editions, 2016



Privilege

Privilege is not a lie.

It's not some New Age mantra:

"The cosmos will provide."

When you told me you are poor

and so decided to eat oats

with bananas as your daily subsistence,

you did not know I eat only once a day,

not out of choice but out of my given circumstance.

My job as a writer can't even feed me properly

yet to most in this country, I am still well off.

There were days I had to walk to go to you

because I had exhausted all the barya

in my pantalon, in my other bags,

in the pockets of my jackets.

Did I tell you I was denied

a US Visa thrice? I had nothing

for a one-way jeepney ride

but you asked me to go with you

.to Argentina, halfway around the globe

from where I am now.

The Immigrant Visits Her Mother

Those tropical mornings I woke to no sun
in a shuttered room, the shuffle of slippers
at my door, hall light flooding the gap
her slight frame could not fill, smaller
than when I last saw her. Through the net
of sleep floated her voice, repeating my name
till I rose, stumbled to my feet,
offered my arm. Her good leg leading,
we made our way to the dim-lit table
where I sliced a bagel neatly in half,
fed it to the glowing toaster. When the rounds
popped out—fragrant, golden—
I spread the cream thin with a knife,
layered the pink slivers of gravlax
from the packet I'd carried from Chicago,
a spritz of lemon to finish. One bite
and her eyes glazed over, forehead
uncreased. For an instant she was
twenty-seven, a medical student again,
lipsticked and bone-tired from the night
shift, sitting at a Brooklyn diner
to coffee, the Times, bagels and lox.
Here, decades and hemispheres away,
dawn burns through Manila smog,
licks the blinds of the kitchen where,
stooped over formica, my mother fills
her mouth again and again with the salt
and sting of her first Brooklyn winter
the year before I was born.



Mass

1.

The world has always been ending, I said. And you said: Yes. Today, half-lost

on the senderos, among its dry brush and thorns, I hear my mother's voice

in the rocks—see in the rust plains and lava bulbs and cairns stacked as markers

her cells massing upon her heart, lungs, running riot along her sternum.

Soon, the nights of marrow-talk, of jabs and the Seven Last Words. Serum nights

with viols, the Joyful Mysteries, thumbs on decades falling asleep. I light

a match with the end of another, warm poisons and gauze for the new year.

2.

The world has always been ending, she said. And I said: Yes. Today we walk bearing hymnals and lilacs for the gazebo green, for stairwells and chalks

drawn to mark the hem of a body.

We bring each place its dirge in the shape of teeth, slugs, a tongue pressed to concrete, its fugue scored for sirens and windpipes,

pellet guns and bells. We bless the blue
of this wide winter sky above our
city, for once. Let it mean more to
us than smoke, more than blood starved of air

beneath skin, more than anthems hollowed
or a field for stars, dying and dead.

3.

The world has always been ending, he
said. And you said: Yes. Today they are
burning the names of the boys they are
shooting in the street. This because we—

and they—know ashes mean undone leads
and muzzles loosened, floodlights and flares,
eyes doused with milk. At the chapel for
vespers, a woman holds a globe she

has decked with poppies and birch-tar and
foil; her son colors in a book of
heralds and dragons, traces his palm.

Now: the Magnificat. Now: I am
down on my knees sure only that the
fires will come again and again.



J. LIKHA YATCO

PinaySpeak

"This is too much from President Trump. Each and one of us was born to who and what we are now... We didn't choose our race, the color of our skin or our gender. We are what we are and we didn't have the choice to be otherwise!!! I cannot and will not stand President Trump's discriminatory and inhumane act against our brothers and sisters from those seven countries. Some of those for sure were like me, a hopeful individual who sought for a second chance in life. I am sad."

~ Lara Halili's Facebook status, Jan. 29, 2017.

too much, you say, dear friend of many
seasons?

try coming home to the 'Pinas where even a
first chance

in life is denied suspected drug addicts,
pushers

or the holiest of innocent bystanders (a child
who hasn't

quite outgrown her Barbie doll)

try coming home to an ashfall of curses:
enthralled radio listeners/TV viewers as El
Presidente

gives another rambling speech peppered *with*
putang ina's and hindot mo (fuck you's)

or indelicate references to his mistress' loose
vaginal folds that his soldiers can no longer
enjoy

when they return from battle

not our Presidents, dear Lara,
just two sides of the proverbial coin that test
our forbearance, our endurance for the long
haul

oh fuck! did i just assign us *another*
colegiala virtud?

but sister, now more than forever,
we must get down on knees that know
the strength that prayers give, pray
for discernment so amiss in this world,
then rise, rise, organize,
resist the force of
the deceptively irresistible

THE POETS

Along with links to their author information, each poet was asked to provide a few lines on how the Trump presidency affect Pilipinx poets or other Pilipinx across the globe.



Jim Pascual Agustin

https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/845630.Jim_Pascual_Agustin

In South Africa, when we first heard Trump had won, we laughed and thought it was an April Fool's Day joke told in November. But pretty soon fear crept in – for what might be faced by friends in the US, fellow Filipinos, and other nationalities. Also, we'd started saving up for a Scouts Jamboree in a few years, that one of our daughters has been so excited about. It's supposed to be a joint celebration between Mexico and the US, where participants get a chance to see both countries. How festive could it be given this atmosphere of blind hate and discrimination?



Merlie Alunan

merliealunan.blogspot.com

I understand why the Philippines has Duterte for president. But why Trump for the USA? Will he last his term, or will he be undone by the storms he is raising all around? I believe, though, that the American people are stronger than this clown who rules over them, and in the end they will prevail.



Ivy Alvarez

www.ivyalvarez.com

Once the US election results were announced in November, I overheard a white relative of mine remark, "Good," his tone approving and self-satisfied. With that one word I felt dismissed, sidelined and erased — the threat is real.

≡ **Jennifer Patricia A. Cariño**

<https://ph.linkedin.com/in/jennifercarino>

Whenever the world doesn't seem to make sense (which is unfortunately, all too often these days), I have to remind myself that the work I do is good, and that I have to keep doing what I do. It becomes increasingly important to keep on doing good work—whatever field you are in—because it's one of the simplest ways to ensure that the light we carry with us doesn't die out. It's when people give up on doing good work that the darkness is given a chance to grow.

≡ **Jhoanna Lynn B. Cruz**

<http://peril.com.au/topics/featured/jhoanna-l-cruz-wrice-profile/>

As a lesbian writer based in the Philippines, I am devastated by the Trump presidency, which seems like a message of hate towards the marginalised peoples that had been empowered during Obama's presidency. The bigotry of a leader legitimizes bigotry in people, as we have seen in the Philippines under the Duterte administration. I hope America will continue to stand up to this bully.

≡ **Rodrigo Dela Peña Jr.**

<https://foragepoetry.com/2016/11/05/in-the-house-of-the-sage-by-rodrigo-dela-pena-jr/>

Trump and his tentacles will try to build walls to shut off our voices— but we will not be silenced and will be steadfast in our struggles.

≡ **Dinah Roma**

<http://www.festivaldepoesiademedellin.org/en/Festival/25/News/Roma.html>

Throughout time we've seen what happens when people put up borders. I'd like to believe that it is human will that has made us survive all that. And we will still.

≡ **Jose Edmundo Reyes**

<http://twosylviaspress.com/the-russell-prize.html>.

Carlos Bulosan said: "I know deep down in my heart that I am an exile in America."

≡ **Chris Santiago**

<https://milkweed.org/author/chris-santiago>

I'm not sure what poets can do in these times. But I know my uncles spoke out against the Marcos Regime and made their country stronger by telling their stories. They paid an incredible price—exile, years in solitary confinement, and even a violent and early death. So I feel like I need to speak up.

≡ **Dumay Solinggay (Florenda Pedro)**

<http://www.hydlitfest.org/speaker/florenda-pedrodumay-solinggay/>

I met an American traveller along the border of India and Nepal and he said he found it unusual for a Filipina to be traveling this far. "Filipinos don't read," he said. I answered, "Don't generalize." To which he responded, "I can generalize. I can categorize!" How much more of this stereotype would I get especially after Trump said our nation is a country of terrorists?

≡ **Angela Narciso Torres**

www.angelanarcisotorres.com

My parents were "reverse immigrants" who came to New York in the '60s for medical training then returned to Manila after six years to teach and practice medicine as leaders in their fields. America gave them the opportunity to pursue their dream to serve their countrymen in a profession they both loved. It saddens me that this new administration may be closing doors on world citizens who might one day become pioneers in their own countries, stop global warming, cure Alzheimer's, or write the century's greatest novel.

≡ **R.A. Villanueva**

<http://caesura.nu>

"There is an end to everything. / Power and greed will ravage

beauty and give us / Loneliness. But the sadness will come to pass." ~ Carlos Bulosan, from "Letter in Exile" (1942)



J Likha Yatco

<http://www.vianegativa.us/author/j-likha-yatco/>

A Trump Presidency bodes ill for the arts and humanities. Gods and goddesses, saints and martyrs, help us all!

Locofo Chaps

2017

Eileen Tabios – *To Be An Empire Is To Burn*

Charles Perrone – *A CAPacious Act*

Francesco Levato – *A Continuum of Force*

Joel Chace – *America's Tin*

John Goodman – *Twenty Moments that Changed the World*

Donna Kuhn – *Don't Say His Name*

Eileen Tabios (ed.) – *Puñeta: Political Pilipinx Poetry*

Gabriel Gudding – *Bed From Government*

mIEKAL aND – *Manifesto of the Moment*

Garin Cycholl – *Country Musics 20/20*

Mary Kasimor – *The Prometheus Collage*

Iars palm – *case*

Reijo Valta – *Truth and Truthmp*

Andrew Peterson – *The Big Game is Every Night*

Romeo Alcala Cruz – *Archaeoteryx*

John Lowther – *18 of 555*

Jorge Sánchez – *Now Sing*

Alex Gildzen – *Disco Naps & Odd Nods*

Barbara Janes Reyes – *Puñeta: Political Pilipinx Poetry, vol. 2*

Luisa A. Igloria – *Puñeta: Political Pilipinx Poetry, vol. 3*

Tom Bamford – *The Gag Reel*

Melinda Luisa de Jesús – *Humpty Drumpfty and Other Poems*

Allen Bramhall – *Bleak Like Me*

Kristian Carlsson – *The United World of War*

Roy Bentley – *Men, Death, Lies*

Travis Macdonald – *How to Zing the Government*

Kristian Carlsson – *Dhaka Poems*

Barbara Jane Reyes – *Nevertheless, #She Persisted*

Martha Deed – *We Should Have Seen This Coming*

Matt Hill – *Yet Another Blunted Ascent*

Patricia Roth Schwartz – *Know Better*

Melinda Luisa de Jesús – *Petty Poetry for SCROTUS' Girls, with poems for Elizabeth Warren and Michelle Obama*

Freke Rähkä – *Explanation model for 'Virus'*

Eileen R. Tabios – *Immigrant*

Ronald Mars Lintz – *Orange Crust & Light*

John Bloomberg-Rissman – *In These Days of Rage*

Colin Dardis – *Post-Truth Blues*
Leah Mueller – *Political Apnea*
Naomi Buck Palagi – *Imagine Renaissance*
John Bloomberg-Rissman and Eileen Tabios – *Comprehending
Mortality*
Dan Ryan – *Swamp Tales*
Sheri Reda – *Stubborn*
Christine Stoddard — *Chica/Mujer*
Aileen Ibardaloza, Paul Cassinotto, and Wesley St. Jo – *No Names*
Nicholas Michael Ravnika – *Liberal elite media rag. SAD!*
Mark Young – *The Waitstaff of Mar-a-Largo*
Howard Yosha – *Stop Armageddon*
Andrew and Donora Rihn – *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

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Puñeta: Political Pilipinx Poetry

Volume 3 * Edited by Luisa A. Igloria

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Dumay Solinggay (Florenda Pedro)
Angela Narciso Torres
R.A. Villanueva
J. Likha Yatco

“Sometimes the city becomes a box.
Sometimes it closes in around us.” ~ J. P.A. Cariño

The world has always been ending, he
said. And you said: Yes. Today they are
burning the names of the boys they are
shooting in the street.” ~ R.A. Villanueva

“Danger all around, all the time.
Ay, but they’re quick to laugh, and quicker to tears.
Are they brave? What makes them angry?
What could they do if they’re enraged?” ~ M. Alunan

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