

Fisherman out of Water

Victoria G. Smith

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His sunglasses blended with his cropped, black hair, his burnished, obsidian skin toasted from hours toiling under salt-sprayed sun when he'd proudly commandeered, he said, not the rusty white cab cutting through Manila's Gordian traffic knot, but a sleek, hand-hewn wooden banca,

its bow a knife slicing through the silvery-teal waters off of Masbate Island, taking his place in his age-old clan vocation gathering Neptune's gifts. But no, not anymore, he said—all these, rejoinders to my polite reply to his innocuous question, how are you, ma'am, as I slid into

the back seat and mindlessly said, fine, thank you, and how about you, as if this was all he'd needed to launch into the oral tradition of his people, singing their story, that if I had known, I would not have invited by that response, fine, thank you, and how about you—his answer, a jagged knife to my unsullied ears,

an inconvenient call to action as he told me of how his tribe was driven from their ocean by Chinese fishing boats that rained bullets upon them, chasing them from their heritage into unnavigable streets of the asphalt jungle now slowly drowning them, and this man—this small, dark man grew

before my eyes, transformed into a giant snorting flaming dragon's breath, whose veins, as he sang of his people, flexed, pushed, and throbbed against skin that evolved into scales from burning under a different sun that burned a different heat magnified by city walls, crawled like a tangled ultramarine net

along his arms before ensnaring hands that gripped his new fortune's wheel—he sang his song to me as if I was capable of doing something of consequence for his people, now homeless water gypsies turned concrete vagabonds, fishermen out of water fishing on dry, ruthless shores,

fishing for the two hundred pesos I quickly fished out of my purse to bribe him to stop, please just stop singing his cursed song, overpaying him yet relieved as I slid out of the stern of his now metal and rubber vessel, thankfully escaping into the cool, safe oasis of the shopping mall.

These days, I don't greet strangers with how are you anymore.

Philippine-born author and poet Victoria G. Smith practiced law in Manila doing pro-bono criminal case advocacy for indigent clients. She began as a law student civilian insurgent during the 1986 Philippine People's Power Revolution that toppled the Marcos dictatorship.

As a U.S. immigrant, she continues her social justice advocacy through her writing. She is the author of the award-winning novella *Faith Healer* and the poetry collection *Warrior Heart, Pilgrim Soul: An Immigrant's Journey*. She writes a poetry column for *Via Times*, an immigrant-focused newsmagazine. VictoriaGSmith.com.

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