



BARBARA JANE REYES
CAROLINA KROON

“OPENING THE EYES WIDER STILL”

Winner of the 2005 James Laughlin Award:
Barbara Jane Reyes

James Longenbach

TO SAY THAT there is no other book like *Poeta en San Francisco* does not do Reyes’s achievement justice. For while an idiosyncratic vision is hard won, there is something harder: a vision that depends not on shutting the eyes, staking individuality on a refusal of likeness, but a vision that depends on opening the eyes wider still, amalgamating what once seemed like mutually exclusive alternatives into an explosive whole. Like some books of poems, *Poeta en San Francisco* is driven by political commitment. Like others, it is lusciously erotic. Like still others, it is linguistically daring, careening from disjunctive prose to gorgeous lyric. Today as much as yesterday, poets seem forced to choose, but Reyes has committed herself to the most gratifying work a poet can find: she writes poetry as passionate, as heart-driven, as it is formally complex.

No one person will understand the whole. Most of *Poeta en San Francisco* is written in English, but some of it is written in Spanish, and some of it is written in Filipino, formerly Pilipino, formerly Tagalog, the language that was in a sense created as the national language of the Philippines in 1937. What’s more,

parts of the book are laid out in the beautiful Baybayin script in which Tagalog was written prior to the introduction of Western alphabets. By locating itself at the intersection of a variety of cultures, a panoply of languages, *Poeta en San Francisco* makes no reader feel like an outsider: on the contrary, the book allows everyone to rediscover the pleasure we take in language we do not yet understand.

But while sonic delight is paramount here, the book also refuses to disdain our craving for meaningfulness—as if plain sense were merely for other people.

En La Misión, between earth and sky,
at crossroads, we are vigilant, poised
with trumpets and warrior blades.

Such conviction fuels every line of every poem, but at the crossroads, between earth and sky, conviction in itself is never enough: rarely has such conviction been expressed with such craving for lyric astonishment.

Among the tombstones, a glade
of heaven hides. Beneath our boots,
murky water rushes to the sea.

If William Blake were alive and well and sitting on a eucalyptus branch in the hills above the bay, this is the poetry he would aspire to write.