

# CHECK & BALANCE

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POEMS  
LUISA A. IGLORIA

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LOCOFO CHAPS CHICAGO, 2017

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## Diction

Do you speak  
English  
Do you speak  
at all  
Do you speak  
in translation  
Do you speak  
or do you give  
up your rights  
Do you speak  
English  
Do you speak  
or are you  
spoken for  
Do you speak  
tribal  
Do you speak  
tiny like  
a girl or woman  
Do you speak  
English  
Do you speak  
after me  
Do you speak  
to give  
authority  
Do you speak  
like thumbprint  
on the dotted line  
Do you speak  
syllables  
Do you speak  
since this is  
America  
Do you speak

English  
Do you speak  
just enough  
for work

**The sign once said “guest,”**

but I read ghost –

The old-new signs said *Stay*  
in your lane, don't build

your houses next to ours;  
don't send your children

to our schools, don't  
make or eat and drink

your foods where we  
can smell them;

don't stand in front  
of the room and teach;

don't pick up that scalpel  
to get under my skin, don't

quote me science that sounds  
suspicious – With any luck

they hope to scrub the insides  
of their house, not seemingly

aware of how much they reek  
like schools of expiring fish.

## Color Theme

This week when a man shouts *Get out of my country* and opens fire on two brown

men sharing beers on the patio of a restaurant-bar, it is not a dream. Today when a software

engineer returning to New York from Lagos is given a test by border officials to prove

his tech credentials, it is not a dream. When the foreign-born gallery owner

who is a legal resident is detained for more than nine hours before being deported to Argentina,

it is not a dream. When a child traveling with his mother is separated from her and taken alone to a holding cell,

it is not a dream. When the insolent border guard shouts *Arabic? Arabic?* repeatedly at a grandmother

in a wheelchair who does not speak English but Farsi, it is not a dream. All of this is happening

right now wherever the real agents of hate and terror are drawing heavy lines and putting up

barriers in the common soil. That's where we need to insist on language: for every dark wound.



## What I learned from the Thrilla in Manila

*“...the future is unknowable – and that’s a good thing.”*

I was a gangly, scab-kneed girl of thirteen when the great “Floats like a Butterfly, Stings like a Bee” Muhammad Ali met Smokin’ Joe Frazier for their rematch in January ’74. Rumors had it that Ferdinand “McCoy” Marcos went over budget to have the match held in Manila, hoping all the media hoopla would deflect attention from stories of torture and the disappeared, and the fact he’d declared Martial Law in ’71. It seems to have worked, because even my over-cautious father, who not too long before made any excuse not to have to travel to the capital, was now shaking every connection he had to see if he could score tickets to the fight. Ali himself knew the value of a little pre-game psych war, telling reporters: “I like to get a man mad, because when a man’s mad, he wants ya so bad, he can’t think, so I like to get a man mad.” Which was how his taunt – “It will be a killa and a thrilla and a chilla when I get the Gorilla in Manila” – led to the fight being billed as the Thrilla in Manila. It was true, and all the bet-taking men craning their necks at department store TVs couldn’t be more thrilled at this spectacle of two gorillas insulting each other – Which when you think of it, considering how gorilla and monkey have been used pejoratively, as code for any immigrant or person of color in America, therefore isn’t it more than just a little moment of unthinkingness embedded there, showing the internalization of racist categories by the very people that have been its victims? And it may be this poem has traveled a long way from that year in Manila. But remembering the once great Ali – in Atlanta in ’96, willing his tremor-

filled hand to lower the torch that ignites the rocket  
that sets off the Olympic flame – and how he died  
last summer from infection and sepsis, all I can think  
is: Anything can happen. Though his shoe-loving wife  
and ambitious progeny are still alive, the infamous dictator  
who named the Philippines' first commercial  
shopping mall  
after Muhammad Ali is dead and rotted through  
on the inside  
of his carefully formaldehyde-treated shell. Anything  
can happen, anything can happen. The strong  
and powerful,  
the hideous and hateful alongside the beautiful – all  
reap in time the reassurance of the uncertain future.

## **Restriction**

When I read that the first  
all-female soccer team from Tibet

who were to lead the opening day  
parade at the Cotton Bowl Stadium

then play for the Dallas Cup –  
the first sports team of any sex

to represent Tibet in a tournament  
on American soil – have been denied

visas by the US Embassy who declared they  
“have no good reason to visit the US,”

I want to get people together to kick something  
really hard, send it sailing into a clearly marked

target rimmed in orange at the end of a field,  
and score and score and score and score.

## Triptych: Talismans

If I wrap this belt of bells  
around my hips, each step  
I take will sound the radius  
of a warding-off spell. Come then,  
hair of noble, bounding horses;  
come, phalanx of brass hawk bells  
heated in the mouth of fire.

\*

At the height of summer, I stood  
in front of ancient double doors  
carved with a frieze of saints  
and angels. But now they are our own,  
all their blond curls and garments  
plinthed in darkest wood – *narra*,  
*santol*, *acacia*, *yakan*, *almon*.

\*

The sentinel led us out through cool  
marble hallways, past massive curving  
staircases and doorways to ornate salons.  
For every stone, I counted the invisible  
pulse. For every pillar, a catalog of names  
erased. Beneath a tower, tongues knell  
the surplus of what history costs.

## All or nothing

In a room filled with straw  
I eat nugget after nugget  
of salt. I work all night  
to fill the urns with corn.  
I was promised deliverance  
and if not, my undoing.  
Wasn't it the same  
for my forbears?  
O daybreak, and the constant  
putrefaction made by cows  
in the field. I am wide-  
eyed. I get by on four  
hours of sleep and swigs  
of hard black coffee.  
A door opens when they  
remember to check if I  
am still in here, still  
alive; if there is anything  
I've made that might be  
worth trading. And I'm  
a genius — But when did my  
opinions ever matter? TBH  
I prefer living by myself.  
I think of the industry  
of bees and what they know:  
culling every last bit  
of sweetness from unseemly  
sources, carefully hoarding  
their one barbed sting.

## **There's something wrong**

with the picture of the girl made to face  
a charging bull—

She's meant to alter the landscape, subdue  
and neutralize

what snorts and paws at the ground, what gathers  
its girth for the charge

provoked by the sting of debts the faceless gods  
accuse us of having accrued.

And yet we do what we've always done: send  
a child to wrangle the animal,

to stare it down, to stand there in the open  
as she's done before,

vulnerable in her flesh before the flanks  
of the beast descend from behind.

## Rondo: Dying World

1

Deeper into the country, at some point after we cross the state line, the roads narrow and wind. Deeper still where towns fall away, where we can no longer see the radars of the last station; where there are no more rest stops with vending machines, where our phones do not pick up signals from the towers – there, among the grass and wildflowers, where wind or the river carry the only voices capable of truly unsettling.

2

Truly unsettling, the light that hovers at the periphery before it gives itself to the tent of darkness: burnished metal, sheen of some god's afterthought burning in the distance. And in the first moments after everything plunges into its depths, it is as if the world will never be visible again. We turn to each other, press close in this cleft among the rocks. We hear an owl begin to hunt: hear the muffled flap, thud of a small body canceled on the ground.

3

Not all things that fall to the ground are canceled – call it luck, call it faith, call it the universe's benign indifference. I saw photographs taken by a hiker in remote villages: among people we would consider poor, beautiful and grave arrangements of water buffalo horns strung

on house posts, end notes from a sacrifice.  
Neither trophy nor spoils, but the labor  
of humans alongside beasts, each at death  
aspiring to translation in another sphere.

4

Do you think it beastly that we're  
possibly the only creatures who aspire,  
at death, to translation in another sphere?  
Meanwhile, who knows where the dead beetle  
has gone, its bright shellacked carapace lying  
still on a rock edge, its red husk stippled  
with marks but light as air? But I admit there is  
a kind of comfort from taking part in the ritual  
called *pagpakada*: gathering around the deceased  
to watch as someone acting as his representative  
stands up, takes leave, bids the living goodbye.

5

*Pagpakada*: a leave-taking, a bidding farewell.  
How does the slug in the grass drag its soft  
permeable body through a cosmos of risk? Each  
fallen bloom a spirit house, the litany of heat  
rising steadily from dawn through noon. I want  
to remember everything – all the roads erased  
by rain, all the buildings that once stood there;  
the quiet light of afternoons making doors shine  
like wet bark gathered from the cassia tree;  
bits of yellow rubber from a sandal perhaps the last  
echo from schoolyards where children pledged allegiance.

6

There was a school here once, a flagpole  
before which you might imagine lines  
of schoolchildren, hands hovering above  
their breasts. Stories from the last



world war inform us of favorite venues  
for barracks: schools, hospitals, churches.  
Footfalls echo down long hallways: of course  
there are many dead buried in this soil.  
Observe roots of trees burnished with age,  
dressed in moss. The moon's metallic disc  
a bruised gong, rung too many times.

7

To the north, an outlook tower with a bruised gong  
above the cypress line. Bald shear of stone, openings  
in the base of hills where survivors could have burrowed.  
On clear days you can see the coast, green-again chain  
of mountains where roads once snaked, continuous  
relay like your best intentions. Often it is absurd  
to recall how much we worried about imperfections. Now  
it is exquisite to be able to remember even the smallest  
kinds of texture: slubbed crinkle of a dress, specific  
weight of a spoon; pooled honey in a wooden floorboard,  
splinter breaking through skin's calloused barrier.

## Hospital Raid

Another bulletin today – a hospital  
invaded by suicide bombers; by gunmen

disguised as doctors, firearms hidden  
under white lab coats. What could possibly

be gained by taking under siege these last  
few outposts where they tend the wounded,

where so many victims of war lie virtually  
in the arms of death? Ah, but it's the medics

they're after, the nurses, clerics, volunteers  
whose work is to thread fluids into veins, patch

uneven scraps of skin across a burn; nearly un-  
bearable, this cobbling of hope from blasted

parts of things so a shopkeeper might walk again,  
his wife live one day more to bury their dead.

## On Respectability

There are days when I no  
longer feel generous.

There are days when I don't  
feel like pretending to be

a good guest in your house. Besides,  
I've just in time remembered

it's my house and was so mine  
before you came into the picture,

so why should I have to suffer  
the indignity of paying rent

or answering to a property  
manager, of trying to find

an unfastened back window  
or trying to jimmy a lock

in order to enter what was my  
indigenous space to begin with?

I want to keep the water in the well  
free of contamination. I want

to sleep in my own bed and use  
my own toilet, have access

to the clothes in my closet  
and the books on my shelves.

And if I want to wake up late

or sing in the shower or cook

breakfast in just my undies  
you don't have the right

to issue executive orders:  
you don't have the right

to tell me I don't know  
how to run my own affairs;

that I eat the wrong  
kinds of food and buy from

the wrong kinds of people.  
Don't tell me my desire to send

my kids to good schools is unseemly;  
that I pick the wrong kinds

of friends to run with;  
that my values have all

gone downhill – Don't tell me  
I need to be hectored on all

the ways that threaten your own  
utter lack of discernment

and respectability, hence  
the daily wars you wage on me.

## Check & Balance

At the station, when a man lost consciousness and fell face-down on the moving escalator, a throng gathered quickly at the base to pull him to safety. A woman came through the barrier, saying "I'm a doctor." The station manager activated the safety switch and called for an ambulance. A young man with a skateboard under his arm rummaged in his backpack for a gym towel to stanch the bleeding. The emergency response team arrived with a pallet and a gurney. All this happened swiftly, with very few words exchanged – only the movement of hands and bodies wanting to save: strangers lifting the stricken one, instead of leaving him to possibly languish in a pool of his own blood; there in the middle of the city, on a grimy platform that shuddered every now and then as trains hurtled past.

**Luisa A. Igloria**

is the winner of the 2015 Resurgence Prize (UK), the world's first major award for eco-poetry, selected by former UK poet laureate Sir Andrew Motion, Alice Oswald, and Jo Shapcott. She is the author of *Haori* (chapbook, forthcoming from Tea & Tattered Pages Press, April 2017), *Bright as Mirrors Left in the Grass* (Kudzu House Press eChapbook selection for Spring 2015), *Ode to the Heart Smaller than a Pencil Eraser* (selected by Mark Doty for the 2014 May Swenson Prize, Utah State University Press), *Night Willow* (Phoenicia Publishing, Montreal, 2014), *The Saints of Streets* (University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 2013), *Juan Luna's Revolver* (2009 Ernest Sandeen Prize, University of Notre Dame Press), and nine other books. She teaches on the faculty of the MFA Creative Writing Program at Old Dominion University, which she directed from 2009-2015.

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Gabriel Gudding – *Bed From Government*

mLEKAL aND – *Manifesto of the Moment*

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Mary Kasimor – *The Prometheus Collage*

lars 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*

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Names*  
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