

SUGAR BURNS BITTER

a review by Hannah Dela Cruz Abrams

Ina Cariño. *Feast*. Alice James Books, 2023.

HANNAH DELA CRUZ ABRAMS is a recipient of the 2013 Whiting Writers Award for her novella *The Man Who Danced with Dolls* (Madras Press, 2012) and her memoir-in-progress, *The Following Sea*. She has also received a Rona Jaffe Literary Award, a North Carolina Arts Council Fellowship, a Hartshook Fellowship, and a Byington Award. Her work has appeared in *Orion*, *Oxford American*, *Southern Humanities Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Carolina Quarterly*, and elsewhere. She teaches in the Department of English at UNC Wilmington and is a member of the North Carolina Humanities Board of Trustees and the *NCLR* Editorial Board.

Ina Cariño delivers in *Feast* an incantatory collection that calls its readers forth into the complicated poetics of the devoured world. The work here aches and swells with the memory of home and family, throbs with the discovery of self, reaches for the sharpest edges of reckoning, flinches, and heals.

Throughout the volume, Cariño moves fluidly from English to the languages of the Philippines and back again. Since islands often compass what Gloria Anzaldúa once termed “living language,” she shifts, which are not italicized, read at once as a true evocation of place and as a quiet refutation of Western exceptionalism. In this collection’s pages, the beauty of a lingua franca emerges. Translations are subtle but come often in repeat or semantic clues. As is most often the case with language, however, it’s better when considered. “Piyesta” ends with these lines: “as if waiting for the pain that makes me / whole again, alive: nabiaq ak.” Depending on who you’re talking to, that closing phrase might mean “I’m broken” or perhaps “I’m diced up, cut small, as with fruit.”

INA CARIÑO is a queer Filipinx American poet originally from Baguio City, Philippines. They hold an MFA in creative writing from NC State University. They are a Kundiman fellow and the winner of the 2021 Alice James Award for *Feast*, a 2022 Whiting Award winner for poetry, and a winner of the 2021 92Y Discovery Poetry Contest. Their work has been featured in a poetry series called “Beyond Resilience,” which showcases poets dealing with disabilities/chronic pain, and they were a featured poet at the Geraldine R. Dodge Poetry Festival. They have published in *The American Poetry Review*, *The Margins*, *Guernica*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Poetry Magazine*, *The Paris Review Daily*, *Diode*, *Waxwing*, *New England Review*, *The Oxford Review of Books*, and *Tupelo Quarterly*, among other journals. In 2019, they founded a poetry reading series, Indigena Collective, a platform that aims to center othered and underrepresented creatives in the community, including but not limited to BIPOC, QTPOC, and people with disabilities. During their undergraduate program at ECU, they served as an *NCLR* intern.

The opening poem, “Bitter Melon,” is an instruction in balance and contrast. The fruit begins spiky in the mouth: “you’ll wince. you’ll think of the taste / of your own green body.” But, in a theme that reprises and refracts throughout the book, we encounter the flavors that are hardest to swallow only to find that they can travel from an initial abdication of experience to the craving of experience – and further still, to the craving of being experienced. The speaker, via a memory that is theirs alone, collapses psychic distance entirely in the final lines: “huwag mo akong kalimutan, / you’ll plead – / taste me. / taste me.”

Researchers may tell us that lexical-gustatory synesthesia is the rarest classification of the condition, but the alchemy at work in *Feast* conflates, again and again, one sensation with another type of awareness. In “Piyesta,” we taste learning another tongue:

language cut on sweetened rim –
chipped teeth whitened.



COURTESY OF INA CARIÑO.

but sugar burns bitter. I watch
my sentences crack candy glass
shattering on foreign floors.

Nowhere is the dimensional encounter between senses, and its inherent symbolism, more poignant than in the title poem: “& he slips cooked muscle / into my mouth, as if talking / were the means to something // only adults know. for dessert.” As the speaker bears witness to the killing of an unweaned pig, the writer behind the speaker locates something of the unlo-

catable: the fleeting moment of metamorphosis between childhood confusion and actualized pain. Cariño writes: “I can’t tell sweet from bitter, can’t // remember how to swallow salt / the way a suckling in slaughter / must swallow its own briny tears.”

The artistry, the ouroboros of *Feast*, lies in its ability to freight reincarnation with memory. We relearn the self with wonder, but something of us has been here before. We have felt these hun- gers; they are heavy and familiar. ■

ABOVE Ina Carino reading at So & So Books in Raleigh, NC, 25 Mar. 2019

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