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Bloodred Dragonflies:
New & Selected Poems in English and Versions from the Filipino
by Jim Pascual Agustin
Deep South, 2022 90pp.

Review by Gary Cummiskey

A man arrives in South Africa in 1994. He is from the Philippines, an archipelago of islands with a history of colonial oppression and the object of a tug of war between Spain and the US a hundred years ago. And having shaken off the colonial yoke, the islands were then subjected to a series of dictatorships and rampant corruption.

It's something that sounds strangely familiar. This is no doubt why Jim Pascual Agustin's latest poetry collection – his first to be published in South Africa – resonates within the contemporary South African context, since both the subjects and imagery remind us of our own history and more recent tribulations.

The first poems in this collection, such as 'After the First Monsoon Rain', 'The Crabs' and 'Naartjie', deal with childhood, but even within this cocoon of innocence the outside world of pain, fear and violence occasionally intrudes, such as in 'You Had to Leave', which starts: "Nightmares no longer scare you / like they used to", or more strikingly in 'Seeing in the Dark', in which the child is given the following prophecy:

*you will leave your country
stare loneliness in the eye
bury the dead among the living*

It's only a few poems later that violence and oppression burst into the poet's consciousness, and the past world of innocence is crushed, as was his family's house:

The government didn't just tear down
its foundations. They buried it
under twenty feet of soil.

('Dragonflies')

In 'Face in the Tar', the children of the dictator are showered with lavish gifts while ordinary citizens go without, and anyone who dares speak out will "disappear from their homes and be found / floating down a river...".

But life continues under such conditions, and in 'Citizens Military Training' the poet recalls being conscripted and wearing

Hand-me-down boots
deep jungle green
a size too big, reeking of memories
of someone else's feet.

Not surprisingly, there is also the rousing voice of resistance, as in 'Defiance' or 'We Will Not Allow the Dead to be Silenced':

Though the dead may be left
unclaimed in morgues
or dumped on the side of the road,
their faces bound with packaging tape,

they will never be silenced.

But Agustin does not focus solely on contrasting worlds of innocence and (political) experience – to do so might risk becoming formulaic, predictable and one-dimensional. In the third part of the collection, there are poems more intimate in tone, with memories of his father, such as 'Rats' and 'My Father, Leaving', or meditations on ageing and mortality, such as 'Angels of the Old Cemetery' or the somewhat alarming 'What I've Always Been':

someone who loses and gains
all the time. Not seeming to care

or able to see an oncoming train
on its side, the ground grating

against its metal skin, screams
twisting on the tracks.

The collection consists of both new and selected poems – some written in English and others translated from the Filipino – though with the exception of some giveaway poems, such as 'Subway, Rondebosch' and 'The Undiminished', it is not clear which are older poems, perhaps written before his arrival in South Africa, and those written since living here. 'The Undiminished', for example, opens with a description of a clearly recognisable South African suburban rush-hour:

[...] a dash to join
others who wait in line

for a taxi packed beyond capacity.
Always, the unavoidable
pressing of skin against skin, sharing
the scent of familiar strangers.

An eternity to get to work.

Considering *Bloodred Dragonflies* is a selected volume, it is a pity there is not a greater number of poems – I certainly wanted to read more.
