

DESCENT

In 1904 more than 1100 indigenous Filipinos were transported to St. Louis, Missouri, to serve as live exhibits at the Worlds Fair and Exposition.

Far from the province of
beginnings, I can acknowledge my face
has finally begun to resemble the canvas it feared
most. But I remember how it was to feel my way
down mountain trails, drink from hair-lined throats of plants, sleep crouched
among the fiddlehead fern. Three days, five,
then the canopy lightened. I walked past clearings where crops
had taken hold: sweet potato and beans trained to the stake,
runners and tendrils curling toward commerce in the markets. Even before I saw the
first few shingled houses, unhappy dogs
tethered to their posts smelled my approach. Faces gawked as I walked
past. To them I was a stranger,
dark and not to be trusted; my woven skirt a red-striped carnival tent
that might open to what they
could not imagine- though I'd spent my whole life until then, no farther away
than where they might glance
at the sun lowering itself at the horizon, between notched limestones; a few
moments of convulsive light, mother-
of-pearl sheen, ripple of cream, stroke that primes the canvas before
darkness closes around the world like a bead.

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Detached figure, I walked to the bay where crowds gathered around fishing nets. Flies
hovered above their heads, dark wings gold-tipped

like doors of miniature tabernacles, though this was before *the time of my saving and instruction*. The heat, threaded with salt and moist as a mouth,

made me swoon. What I desired: to hoist myself over the side
of the first vessel I saw, lie down in its shadowed hold, as if

the lap-lap, lap-lap of water would take me to you. But my purpose
was intercepted. Someone came forward, guided me across a road,

into the town. *Whereto?* I did not know, but at that time I believed
all paths would make themselves plain again so I could find my
way.

I slept and woke. In a glass, a woman brought me the-milk of an animal
and made me drink. I rose from my pallet in the night and shat in the garden
under a *manzanilla* tree until my sweat was warm again, unclammy.

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A season passed. We stayed a few months in that town, and then another
just like the one to which I made my way when first I left our
village.

The man I worked for took pictures - some landscapes, farm houses
and crosshatched dwellings; they sighed a little

as ethers in the tray affixed their souls to paper. A few of wildlife:
a bird with its breast rouged as though from harm, one lost

cloud-rat before it skittered away toward the forest.

It came to me his interest was people that in some way resembled
me

as I resembled them. He loved our habit: the tiny bells that women
dangled from belts of plaited horsehair, their combs of polished
wood,

boxes where areca nut and leaves are stored for chew, their insides
stained the same wild red as spit. He loved their deformities and
rituals:

he catalogued the splayed toes and claw-feet of grandfathers, earlobes
distended by pipes and padlocks; folds of skin, ftngers troubling a
pig's spleen

for omens, horoscopes. His wife had me help in the maintenance
of their world: buying food from white or lowland traders, boiling

to render safe for consumption; mending the *worn but goodly*
linens. It was she instructed me and sought to baptize me, secretly

afraid of words I mumbled in dreams, in my own
language. Husband, even then I dogged your
shadow in my sleep.

I learned to wear shoes on my feet. Garments covered my
breasts and arms, and these I took off only when,
eventually, I posed for him-

my dark breasts artfully concealed under an arrangement of
necklaces, agate and carnelian. I came to
understand their talk, their gestures

and nuances. I was cook and laundress, subject; apprentice, their apprentice,
surrogate. They praised me *like a daughter*.

In the sun, I whitened clothes. I ripened
beside the honeysuckle, tending my time.

by Luisa A. Igloria

The Philippine Reservation at the 1904 Worlds Fair and Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri, was laid out across 47 acres near the Arrowhead River. The cost for building it, as well as for transporting Over 1,100 indigenous Filipinos from the islands, amounted to more than a million dollars and was financed by the American Government and its colonial branch in the Philippine" The Filipino bodies at the fair made up half-and the largest-contingent of native bodies. Live exhibits of Filipinos, Ainu, Native American Indians, and pygmies, were meant to illustrate the development of nations from savagery to civilization, and Americas role as a new imperial power.