



Dangerous Music

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The Work

The poems in *Dangerous Music* were composed after Jessica Tarahata Hagedorn began “discovering myself as a Filipino-American writer” in California. Orientalist Kenneth Rexroth had placed five of her early poems in his 1973 anthology, *Four Young Women*. “The Death of Anna May Wong,” included in that edition, signified the poet’s rejection of Hollywood stereotypes of Asian women as demure or exotically sinister. *Dangerous Music* continues the author’s search for authentic images of non-Europeans that describe her own situation as well as those of other minorities. The intensity of many of these lyrics, written while she was performing with her West Coast Gangster Choir, became a way of expressing whole dimensions of society largely ignored or misunderstood by generations of European Americans. Although on the page such poems resemble songs without music, their occasional arrangement in ballad quatrains sometimes imitates blues music. The influence of Latino or African music is visible in the more jagged, syncopated lines of such poems as “Latin Music in New York” or “Canto Negro.”

The cultural environment that is so much a part of the voices she assumes in *Dangerous Music* can readily be imagined. “Something About You,” for example, affectionately connects Hagedorn with fellow artists Ntozake Shange and Thulani Davis, with whom she performed poems set to music for New York’s Public Theater. Other poems identify her with Puerto Rican or Cuban musicians. More typical poems, however, describe a love-hate relationship with the American Dream. In “Natural Death,” a Cuban refugee seems satisfied with fantasies of cosmetic splendor, though warned about bodies buried in saran wrap on a California beach. Loneliness and anger are conveyed by the mocking refrain: “o the grandeur of it.” Yet the Philippines, which is remembered in “Sometimes” (“life is very cheap”), is equally far from being ideal. “Justifiable Homicide” warns of urban dangers anywhere in the world, when differences among people become cause for mutual indifference.

The only defense against the insanity that comes from cultural and economic stress is found in singing, according to “Sorcery” and “Easter Sunday,” even if the songs themselves are passionate outcries of pain, not lullabies. The unacceptable alternative to release through song is to surrender one’s memories of better dreams or, as in the case of “The Blossoming of Bongbong,” the one prose fantasy included with these poems, total forgetfulness of one’s personal identity.

Suggested Readings

Casper, Leonard. *Sun surfers Seen from Afar: Critical Essays 1991-1996*. Metro Manila, Philippines: Anvil, 1996.

Zapanta Manlapaz, Edna. *Songs of Ourselves*. Metro Manila, Philippines: Anvil, 1994.

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