

An Engineer's Dream

For Srinivas Kuchibhotla, RIP, and my father, Jose Maria de Jesús (1930-1999)

1.

I tried to avoid
this news¹
as it was
too close to home/heart
The child of brown emigrants knows
danger is always around the corner
no matter what dreams, degrees, politics
one's parents had
All Amerikkka sees is
 brown/black = other

2.

My father had an American dream
a dream of coal and steel and "progress," as he liked to say
an engineering dream, to be exact
His own father, Dean of the UP Vet School, told him in order to be a successful engineer,
 he'd have to leave home for the States
So he made his way, on his own terms, as usual
to Lehigh University, in deepest Pennsylvania

 His fashionable but overly thin khaki balmacaan
 of no use against the autumn chill
 on a Sunday evening in early October
 his dark curly hair ever unruly
 slide ruler in his pocket
 leather briefcase at his side
 standing before the Alumni Memorial Building
 the canopy of yellow leaves glowing in the dimming light
 the clock in the chapel striking six
 I'm finally here, he breathes, satisfied.

3.

I imagine him walking briskly across
the Hill to Hill bridge
marveling at the Bethlehem Steel plant slung dark and low
prowling all along the Lehigh
the railroad lines astride it
the trains chugging into infinity
the clamor of industry
fire and smoke
clanging,

singing a song of
Man over Nature
man versus time
man versus decline
A song of progress
 where men of every color labor together
 in the mill
 making the steel
 that makes
 America

Oh, the possibilities it offered--
1954 and America is still filled
with love for its *little brown brothers*: "*Remember Bataan!*"
needing highways and bridges and steel
and civil engineers to make it all happen

My dad was supposed to leave upon graduation
But Industry enabled him to stay
Letter after letter from his professors
Ads in Baltimore papers attesting to his prowess
Now on his way to green card and citizenship

4.
Jose saw opportunities
and made them his
Then he made us, his large family
 also raised in Bethlehem
 four of us at Lehigh, too
A Filipino family sown in Lenape soil

But Srinivas Kuchibhotla won't have this same chance
His American dream stopped by the bullet
of a violent violent racist
who saw Srinivas' dark skin and concluded
 not
 H1-B aerospace engineer with MSc from Texas

but
Middle Eastern
other
terrorist

All of this to say
Srinivas could have been
 my father
He who built America
and highways and bridges you travel on daily
who believed in the promise of America
 as he was taught in English before the war
 as it was brought to him by the GI's who liberated Manila
 as it was sown in those engineering textbooks he memorized

5.
We, the brown and well educated
immigrants and children of emigrants
may keep to ourselves
because we know the tenacity and the fragility of these dreams
we know America's welcome is always conditional
we may be successful but are always uneasy
we know those bullets
 are always
 meant
 for
 us.

MLJ
February 24, 2017

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/02/24/get-out-of-my-country-kansan-reportedly-yelled-before-shooting-2-men-from-india-killing-one/?utm_term=.4f9c2ebff5e0