

Carlos Bulosan

Selected Poems



Carlos Bulosan

November 24, 1913 [Binalonan, Pangasinan, Philippines] –

September 11, 1956 [Seattle, Washington]

Bulosan was born to Ilocano parents in the Philippines in Binalonan, Pangasinan (his exact birth year is disputed). Raised on a farm, his family was deeply impoverished. He left the Philippines for Seattle in 1930 and never returned. He moved to Los Angeles in 1936 to recover from tuberculosis in Los Angeles County hospital where he had three operations and spent two years convalescing. He edited *Chorus for America: Six Philippine Poets*, published in Los Angeles in 1942, and published his only book of poems, *Voice of Bataan*, in 1943. His most famous work, *America Is in the Heart*, an autobiographical novel describing the difficulties faced by Filipino laborers in California, appeared in 1946. As a labor organizer and socialist writer, he was eventually blacklisted. He died in Seattle suffering from malnutrition and bronchopneumonia.

Chorus for America: Six Philippine Poets. Los Angeles: Wagon and Star Publishers, 1942.

The Voice of Bataan. New York: American-Philippine Foundation, 1943.

History of the Heart

It was not like what I thought at all.
Anger and arrogance conflicted. Pride remained
Disarmed till the aching heart cried aloud:
There is no race or region to life.
So I walked homeward through bourgeois homes,
Hearing the sharp cynical laughter storming
The clear and lucid pools of the brain.
I walked homeward to America, across the snow,
Fearing the heart would break with all the pride
Of the living and spill hate upon the snow—
Because there was nothing I could do.

Then I thought of running away from myself
Without some forgiving words of departure,
Without star witnesses, except America,
But the dawn found me with a new memory
And a clear conscience, whispering: Time is change.
I was not aware of time and my other self,
The very self that cried the other day;
But I ran to the other room, to my brother,
Saying: “Look, my heart is beating fast again!”
He paused momentarily at the fountain of sleep,
Crushing dreams of immaculate strivings ,
Muttering: “What can you do about it?”

What could I do about it?
I will be simple. I rushed downstairs,
Opened the front door, and knelt on
The earth of America bright with snow.

Multitude and the Dance of the Multitude

And suddenly I turned the other way to face
The sunlight showering the heart of America.
It was summer and the hour was like other hours:
A pinch of forever hurrying down the awakened heart,
The million dialectics of blood and bone and flesh.
Did you notice how I watched the men, glancing
At the hilltop where machine guns might have
Attacked the buildings, and the streets where trenches
Might have been dug or where tanks might have been mounted,
And the sky where bombers might have scoured
The defenseless nerve centers of America?
But you turned the other way to evade
The tide of scornful eyes that might have been
Snipers watching the street where we were waiting.
You wondered: What is our crime?
And turned to me. Then I saw the shadow
Of the country of my vision in your face,
Where the American dream might have crossed a thousand
Times to touch the mainspring of the awakened heart,
Whispering insistently that the time has come . . .

Many Voices

Europe is on the other side of the ocean,
Three thousand miles from America;
But telescoped through rushing voice of wires,
I see the dead bodies and the wrecked homes.
I hear the machine guns killing and leaping
Over boundaries of peace. I see
The sharp head of the bright bomb.
I feel the slow agony of the dead.

Let me look at America. Children laugh;
They play in the sun. They are happy.
Birds are in the air. Dogs run on lawns.
From somewhere a train whistles eastward,
Racing overland toward the edge of progress.
I face the window and take a long deep breath,
Feeling the clean air entering the empty lung.

All is well. My b'r other reads a new novel.
Van Gogh is a bright glow of red and yellow.
And Gorki, quiet on the wall, is a friend.
Here is a bunch of grapes—a burst of color—
That a late visitor set upon the table.
This is America today. *But tomorrow—?*

And on the desk are letters from relatives.
Let the suspiring heart beat for the carcasses
That lie rotting in the night-wastes of Europe.
The physical indifference of time is ruined.
Ruin is history. History is a crime.
Crime is the nightmare of peace.

Death and Transfiguration

This is the land. These are the people.
Trees are full under fine starlight.
Fields are bright with drooping wheat.
Heaven, heaven. Paradise in whose mountains
The heart leaps to higher desires: the return
To simple childhood and moonlight, the power
Of dreams and nightmares, the joys of sin...

This is the city. These are the buildings.
The long streets are empty tonight.
The lamps die with the death of midnight.
And the tenements are dark. Cold, cold.
I feel every moment that moves to blind
The heart with sadness, and slowly, softly
Turns the flaming mind into solid stone.
No man is free when life is a fragment
Of a dream whispered by a dying woman...

The hours move. Noiselessly the night
Escapes the terror of emptiness. Coldly
The poor cry in hunger under breaking snow.
From the window I move to reach the years
For the one moment in whose ageless chain
My wishes flame like full wheat under moonlight.
Soon the day will break and show our crimes.
And nothing can stop the million voices;
Not till this land and these people
Rise and conquer the loneliness together.

