



**Rappin'  
With  
Ten Thousand  
Carabaos  
In the Dark**

Poems by Al Robles



UCLA Asian American Studies Center  
Los Angeles

*For my mother, Etang, my father, "Bulldog,"  
and for the manongs and manangs*

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is dangerous  
You could get yourself killed

In the pool hall an old manong  
will bend slowly and aim  
and say "in that pocket  
over there"  
and know by the sound  
if the cue ball goes in or not

There is only one sound  
that comes from ifugao mountain  
Tagatac says that it tells you  
all you need to know  
An ifugao mountain nose-flute sound  
tells no lies.

## A Thousand Pilipino Songs: Ako Ay Pilipino

ako ay pilipino—from across the 7000 islands & seas  
i am the blood-earth patis flowing thru the mountain  
soil-veins of my people—the slated dung tongues of  
winter rain mud-carabao—ako ay pilipino—i am pilipino—  
the thousand-year-old savage-green moss-forest  
ifugao bagoong—the sharp baguio wind piercing naked  
igorat bodies—isda from the mindanao sea—  
ako ay pilipino—i am the slated pink salmon from alaska  
barreled in thick seasoned wood—floating around like  
orange-persimmon buttocks fermenting in a bursting  
semen-sky— isda clinging to the pounding waves—  
slashing across like a bolo—drifting down to the bay of  
san francisco—wading thru the thick soggy fog & down  
the seaweed rocky shores—ako ay pilipino—i am pilipino  
living out in the mission & manilatown & chinatown &  
japantown & in central city & stockton & vallejo & salinas  
& seattle & watsonville & san jose & hayward & mt. eden &  
centerville & sacramento & isleton & walnut grove & up &  
down the coast & on mountains & hills & below trees & near  
rivers & streams & oceans & in the delano fields of brown  
volcanic-breasts growing out of igorata nipa hut panao-  
minds—ako ay pilipino—i am pilipino in a graveyard of  
wallowing shrunken negrito heads—round savage faces—  
hard rock-winter ancient bodies—with thick mango lips  
sucking up tuba juice from carabao eyes—ako ay pilipino—  
i am pilipino—manila cafe—san miguel—one thousand  
drunken nights watching worn white silk whores trampling  
their bodies on a ten-cent lacquered counter—  
ako ay pilipino—i am pilipino—young & old—waiting for a  
new day to rise—to raise my bolo—to slash down—to hack  
the chain that binds my pilipino brothers and sisters—  
ako ay pilipino—i am pilipino pain excreting dead blood of

pilipino poverty-minds—ako ay pilipino—i am pilipino  
 i am kearny street & the brown feet of manongs treading  
 pool hall dreams—empty pockets of echoing sadness in the  
 pit of lonely carabao bellies—i am international—st. paul—  
 shasta royal hotel tomato sardines under warm mattresses—  
 ako ay pilipino—i am pilipino—saturday nights at the pilipino  
 center—brown hands holding the young pinays—dancing to  
 tino's music: "come to me my melancholy baby, come to me  
 and i'll be true"—to your adobo skin—dancing to the rhythm  
 of the night—ako ay pilipino—i am pilipino—slick black hair  
 combed straight back with a little wave to catch the pinay's  
 eye—perfumed with nelson's pomade—the florsheim shoes  
 polished reflecting the pinay's pompadour—ako ay pilipino—  
 i am pilipino—on the dance floor with black-gray pinstripe  
 suits stretched out slick & cool—ako ay pilipino—dimas  
 alang—at the christening adobo & pansit & isda—lick the  
 lemon on the fish & kapatid of loin cloth pilipinos in the  
 sacramento river rice-shacks—in central city—bayanihan—  
 bayanihan—bayanihan—ako ay pilipino—i am pilipino—  
 kain with your bare hands—feel the steaming hot kanin  
 warming up then squeeze the tomatoes like blood in your  
 hands mix the chili peppers with onions & shoyu—eat fish  
 tails & fish heads & fish eyes & fish eggs—kumain all day  
 with a thousand pilipino suns in your belly, with the flame in  
 your tongue, with the flame in your eyes burning the sky rag-  
 ing—red—ako ay pilipino—i am pilipino—  
 dance wild into the dark night with cracking bamboo flute  
 sounds—dance until the roots in the ground grow strong  
 dance to ancient ways with spears & bolos & bamboo under-  
 wear—dance to the thunder throbbing wailing naked brown  
 bodies wrapped in wet banana leaves—dance to the poor  
 peasants dance to the wild ifugao dung-moon-smeared  
 women—dance to the flowing blood of wild pigs, spilling  
 down from the minds of pilipinos—dance to autumn-goats'  
 intestines—to the erection of a thousand pig ears & pig eyes  
 & pig heads & dance to don carlos carvajal & legaspi—kearny

street poet & worker for the pilipinos—dance to carlos  
 bulosan, pilipino poet—dance to carlos villa & leo valledor &  
 sid valledor & serafino malay syquia & all the manongs & to  
 pilipino faces in the jungles, in the cities, in the ghettos—  
 dance to carabao smells & fleas & seasons & tae—dance to  
 magsaysay—dance to my tatay—pilipino clown—gambler—  
 wild boar running wild in the pool halls, in the cities—  
 fisherman in alaska & fruit picker in stockton & a pilipino who  
 sang a thousand songs to his children ako ay pilipino—  
 i am pilipino—goddamn it!—ako ay pilipino—  
 dance to my tatay who pained and died each day—the blood  
 in his body drained out his eyes, his face, his heart & stomach  
 & brain & pulled my tatay into a fish-like grave smothered him  
 with red blazing chili peppers and tomatoes of the earth—  
 dance to my tatay who stood in the cold streets of chinatown,  
 in the rain holding onto a telephone pole—reaching for the  
 sun, a child's face, a hand to spring flowers in his dying  
 brain—dance to my tatay who loved life & ulam & chunks of  
 a mountain baboy—dance to my tatay with fish and rice in his  
 mouth—dance to the burning castration of magellan & iron  
 crosses pushing down pilipino faces & minds & bodies—  
 dance to cock fights & to the gods of the seas & skies &  
 mountains—dance to pregnant ifugao spirits—dance to the  
 manongs chasing 7th street blondies—dance to the faces &  
 eyes & feet of pilipino children—dance to their spirit that  
 swirls round a thousand rice fields & playgrounds & alleyways  
 in central city—dance to the clapping of brown hands & the  
 stomping of ancient feet & the snapping of forest-fingers—  
 dance to bill sorro & emil deguzman of the international  
 hotel—dance to tino's barbershop—dance to manong camara  
 & manong osas dance to etang, etang, etang stroking my hair  
 filled with carabao tae—dance to my nanay in the pilipino  
 sky—dance to the pilipinos struggling in the cities & farms  
 of america—ako ay pilipino—I am pilipino



Collection of Ricardo Cayabyab

Pilipino workers, Delano, California 1930

## Agbayani Village

agbayani village  
 in the summer  
 the roosters cry out  
 this year  
 I saw manong taay  
 caressing his fighting cock  
 next year  
 when the rain falls  
 I'll be there too  
 when the rain water touches my face  
 I'll sing a hundred songs to the manongs  
 & a large fish will be cooking inside  
 ah, I've waiting a long time for this day  
 should I prepare for a long stay?  
 I didn't come to agbayani village  
 to keep silent  
 agbayani village is not too far away  
 from song or dance  
 even the roosters sing out  
 so how can agbayani village tales  
 tell you anything?  
 if you don't talk to delano carabaos  
 why one was buried the other day  
 ploughed the grape fields around the clock  
 and died very young  
 "but we celebrate his death  
 they'll celebrate mine, too . . .  
 when I die," says manong cardac.

## Uncle Victor, the Forgotten Manong

wobbles around freely  
in the sacramento fields  
lives in a run-down shack  
tilts to one side  
damp and cold  
two empty rooms  
a dirt floor  
old weathered rags  
dangle from a rusty nail  
wind and rain  
seep thru cracks  
nothing grows  
in the fields  
only a few onions  
uncle victor  
eighty-five-year-old manong  
still hanging around  
from the old days  
two old friends come by  
on sundays  
drinking up a gallon of wine  
laughing loud and crazy  
three drunk spirits  
laid out flat  
on their brown faces  
field rats run in and  
out of the kitchen  
carrying off a whole loaf  
of jewish rye bread

## Manong Felix

dear manong felix  
when i see  
your brown face  
i see  
the rain forest  
of my people  
before white man's history  
the luzon mountain landscape  
clears my mind  
in the deep crevasses  
of your ancient face  
the pasig river flows  
in agbayani village  
your family  
was celebrating  
your life  
manong felix  
i see  
my tatay  
& nanay  
& ninong  
& ninang  
& anak  
& kapatid  
& lolo  
& lola  
in you  
the chicken adobo  
smells good  
i can taste  
the thick adobo-ales  
of your life

inside  
your small room  
the rice is cooked  
your mata  
catches mine  
like a fishnet  
my coconut body  
sways toward you  
watch the sun burst forth!

## The Hawaiian Sugarcane Wild Boar Manong

Listening to manong lomanta  
will drive you crazy  
Everything he says is upside-down  
When I say up he says down  
When I say down he says up  
All his learning comes  
from chasing wild boar  
in the sugarcane fields  
Women come knocking  
on his door at all hours  
Nothing can keep them away  
Money comes on the first  
and third of every month  
Everything is gone in a few days  
Silk-laced panties hang  
from his door  
The glare in his eyes  
can swallow you up  
Life goes on no matter what  
Throwing his head back  
Twisting his lips

in spring, summer, autumn, & winter  
drinking wine with manong espiritu & asoria  
talking to the winter rain  
oh, how they can laugh  
oh, how they can laugh  
they never had time for books  
yet they can read the winter rains  
what is this place they call home  
why write anything down  
hold on to the waterbuffalo's tail  
before it slips away.

## Taxi Dance

taxi dance  
8 p.m.-2 a.m.  
blondies  
seven days a week

"i forgot  
my labors  
for awhile  
at the taxi dance"

the hand around  
your waist  
feels good

is nothing  
but my own

belonging to nobody  
but to you  
if you want it

"they're all blondies  
most of the women  
all mataba from the south"

but the goddamn tickets  
for you  
went so fast

into three minutes  
ten-cent squeezes



"ten cents a dance  
for three minutes  
maybe the pinoy loses all money

i lost five dollars in one night  
i think the girls get paid two dollars  
a night, there was some trouble  
in the taxi dances, the pinoy fight  
over the woman, they get jealous.  
after dancing you can accompany them  
to eat, but those so-called gang  
leaders are waiting for the girls  
outside, and if they don't like  
your face, they will fight with you."

my hands  
know better

the fat juicy grapes  
left behind

in the florin orchards  
fit so nicely between my fingers

my hands  
know better

the grapes

than  
the lining of your body.

## Manong O'Campo

crosses the tenderloin street  
dressed in old, clean goodwill  
sunday best  
straight up to this manong  
meeting o'campo 15 years later  
lit up the city streets  
1920 s.f. bound  
honolulu taxi-dance halls  
swinging to "my heart is sad  
& lonely  
for you i cry. . . for you dear only"  
filling up his old tired eyes  
"no big thing. why it's only ten  
cents a dance."

wild memories spring up  
sparkle like crystal snow flakes  
spitting out kearny street  
bakero tales  
records i-hotel uprising spirits  
on the tip of his tongue  
stained with bagoong  
tangled in balikbayan dreams  
searching for the other half  
of the waterbuffalo

"it'll be good if i last one year  
good enough!  
i'm 90 years old. . . ready to die!"

manong o'campo's eyes push far back

old tired bones ache  
brittle as summer leaves.

I shot. Goddamn it—don't shoot. I mean shoot. Shooting  
 Again. Get the hands in there. Inside. No! Inside here.  
 In her blouse like you mean it, Louie. That's it. O.K.  
 One more time. Like you really mean it. That's it. Yeah!  
 What a take! I mean what a shot. I shoot already. You shot.  
 Goddamn it...oh shit! This is a take. Hold it now. All right!  
 Your titi! Re-shoot. I love it is the same as I lobe it.  
 Cut. Don't cut. Shoot. Oh shit! I shot. Go ahead and shoot!  
 Shoot! Oh shit. I shot. Oh, what a shot! I mean what a cut.  
 Shut your mouth. Wait! "Come to me my melancholy baby."  
 Oh god! Shoot inside her blouse. O.K. Let's shoot again.  
 Oh shit!  
 "Louie—this time really mean it." Cut. He shot.  
 Oh beautiful!

## Carlos Bulosan: Pilipino Poet

carlos bulosan  
 pilipino poet

the manongs held you  
 down to the old cot

unbuckled  
 your leather belt

that kept  
 your thin t.b. body

together

yanked off your pantaloons  
 and then retreated

in the background  
 of music and playing cards

left your naked body  
 lying there alone

trembling with a woman

you kept  
 the cries down

for only a moment

wiping the pain away  
 releasing the milky sap

in pure savage-brown ecstasy

but lasting no more  
that a split second

the first and last embrace  
of a naked pilipino man  
and a chicana woman

brown arms clinging  
around each other

breathing

hot summer sweat

but it ended

because  
it held nothing

but a zero  
in a pocket  
of erections

like a sweet dream  
inside a warm opening

gone away

remembering nothing  
but the words

of the woman

"do you like it?"  
"do you like it?"

## II Back To The Land



## Poor Man's Bridge/Portsmouth Square

Poor man's bridge  
Portsmouth Square  
Forty pine trees scattered  
Trimmed and pruned  
Two trees dug out  
A few flowers bloom

The pine branches  
Cut in and out  
Green and brown pine needles  
A few horseflies on top

Persimmon-moon  
Three yellow faces  
Two children  
On a swing  
Swing back and forth  
In the wind  
Yellow-blue  
Thru the trees  
Round round faces  
Fresh as a thousand autumns

Poor man's bridge  
Portsmouth Square  
Pulls down dark shadows  
Old men and women sleep  
Spring away

No more children's playground  
Empty sandbox

Swings lay dead in the wind  
Tangled across

The cold icy bars  
No legs dangling thru

Poor man's bridge  
Portsmouth Square  
Yesterday  
Only yesterday  
The children's faces  
Twirled thru the wind  
Their tiny bodies played  
Hopscotch with passing clouds

Poor man's bridge  
Portsmouth Square  
The sun is buried underneath  
The cold cement

Far gone is the laughter  
That grows tall in Spring  
Far gone are the old Chinese women  
With ancient cracked-white  
Porcelain faces  
Chattering in the long day sun  
Far gone is spring

Poor man's bridge  
Portsmouth Square  
Six steel girder-branches  
Blossoms half-a-block long  
Stretching nowhere

Poor man's bridge  
Portsmouth Square  
Heavier than ten thousand  
dung mountains

Dead spring.

## Chinatown Blues for Blues Poets

chinatowns of america—run from coast to coast, from trinity county to sisikyu mountains, from locke california, to king street seattle, from stockton to San Francisco hidden cobblestone alleyways, from canton to fairfield. leongs, lims, chins, wongs, laus, lees, choys, toms fill the chinatown landscape. gung yan rise like winter storms. steel rails whip around gold mountain. blood & sweat flow deep two centuries back—yangtze valley memories linger deep. back breaking gung yan in tule swamps of the sacramento—san joaquin delta. long black braids in the sierra wind—like whips whipping the white snow where chinamen lay buried. screams from chinatown dragons burn. gung yan fly from china camps, fly home California chinatown, leaping with fire & shark fins. canton vision in the eyes of george leong.

## Jazz of My Youth

i remember jazz of my youth  
in the streets of fillmore  
crossing over to cousin jimbo's bop city  
where the green between his dark ebony fingers  
flapped in the cool post street wind  
take the A train & slide all the way down  
listening to sounds close to the ground  
fillmore street bound  
jazz comin' 'round  
conga tight skins crack  
snapping  
all day & all morn'  
all night session  
how high the moon  
laying down in the back room  
horns blowing to stars fell on alabama  
as the night fog squeezed in  
wailing sounds echoed in the air  
the streets sparkled like stars  
all the things you are  
jazz of my youth  
cruising over to soulsville  
stepping over cords  
guitar strings cutting loose on tenderly  
jazz of my youth  
jacks on sutter  
jackson's nook  
step back & be cool  
head to the back room  
thick smoke curling round  
a brown pilipino man  
blowin' it's almost like falling in love  
hunched over a piano

a gray sharkskin overcoat  
dark shades  
brown fingers runnin' up & down  
the ivory keys  
dark black hair gleams  
with three flowers  
charlie abing  
the jazz man from stockton  
blowing sax & piano  
what a rare mood i'm in  
it's almost like falling in love  
jazz of my youth  
runnin' the mo  
the cool streets  
talkin' deep & sweet  
i remember you. . . you're the one that  
made my dreams come true. . .

## Rappin' with Ten Thousand Carabaos in the Dark

International Hotel—in the mongo heart & isda mind of the Philippines—where old & young Pilipinos live, hang, & roam around all day like carabaos in the mud: eating, sleeping & working. Pilipinos scattered all over—brown faces piled high, moving like shadows on trees, concrete doorways, pool halls, barber shops. Guitar music echoes thru—down deep in your mongo heart & isda mind. Chinatown across the way. Sixty-thousand or more live in rooms the size of tea pots, stretching east, west, north & south. Thousands are crammed in damp basements, alley ways, behind run-down barrels of ancient Chinese mountain wine. Thousands of Chinese children run along soy sauce streets—long black hair glistening like a cool stream—a quiet moon watches. Short crop of hair—morning spring faces—underneath fresh-soaked clouds. All those tiny footsteps keep the winter belly warm.

All night session—ocean of words  
Legaspi—Frank—Bob—Bill Sorro—Mee Har—Me  
& somebody else.  
Early start at Legaspi's UFA mountain fortress

Put down your white mind  
with your eyes behind brown skin  
brown=brown=brown=brown  
fallen coconuts on a cold  
cold winter day.  
brown=brown=brown=brown  
fish drying  
in the hot summer sun.

Bill Sorro: "You know, when I go into the poolhalls  
& see my Pilipino brothers, I want to say to them:

'You know I know how you feel; I know how you think.'  
I want to say to them,  
'Manong, manong, manong, don't you know  
you are being fucked.'"

"I am brown, I am together, I am beautiful"  
Come down from those white flaky hills  
the smell of the carabao shit stills  
the mind  
keeps the pampano swimming  
in your belly.  
Put down your knives & forks  
and eat rice & fish  
with brown winter-soiled hands.  
Jump and wallow  
in the mountain-grass heap shit  
of the carabao.

Ah, Pilipinos  
if you only knew how brown you are  
you would slide down  
from the highest  
mountain top  
you would whip out your lava tongue  
& burn up all that white shit  
that's keeping your people down.

Don't you know  
you smell like  
the deep brown earth  
if you only knew  
if your eyes were  
only opened  
you would see the sun  
come down

if you only knew  
you would bring the sun down  
on the grass  
underneath brown children's feet.

You can't hide the fish heads  
in your pockets  
the smell is too strong.

But wait!  
I'll whip out  
a sharp bamboo leaf  
and push it down  
your throat  
but I'll be gentle  
I'll push it down  
with my bolo  
& you will cry out  
maybe see into the dawn  
hear water buffaloes  
galloping along the river

Rain will fall  
& wash your skin down  
& you will tear off your clothes  
listen to the strong wind  
& you will run wild with your bolo  
with your mind fired  
with tons of burning lava  
& you will feel the winter rain beat down  
on your naked brown body  
& you will be by the people  
on the sand  
by the water  
in the mountains

& you will have your sharp bolo  
& sing & dance  
& eat & fight

All day into  
the hot blazing sun  
thru the cool dark night  
onto the next morning  
Behind the early morning fog  
a million brown pilipino faces  
chanting: makibaka, makibaka, makibaka  
makibaka, makibaka, makibaka





Photo by Alan Kikuchi

**AL ROBLES** was born in San Francisco, California, into a large family of twelve. He has lived practically his whole life in the Fillmore area. A poet, he has taught in the schools and prisons. Since the early 1970s, he has been a member of the Kearny Street Workshop. As a poet-oral historian for the San Francisco Art Commission under the CETA program, Robles has worked closely with the manongs collecting their histories and stories in Manilatown.