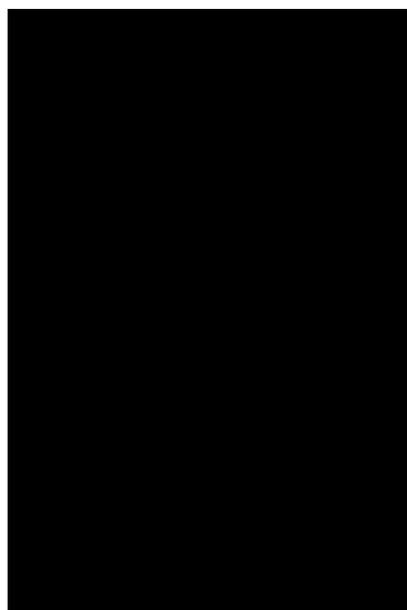


# Settle by Theresa Muñoz

## Review by Marija Spirkovska



Theresa Muñoz's *Settle* is her debut collection, following the publication of the pamphlet *Close* and inclusion of her poems in several journals. It also shortlisted for the Melita Hume Poetry Prize 2014. *Settle* is inspired by a significant new chapter in the life of the poet – the change of homeland and re-settlement from her birthplace, Canada, to Scotland. As a woman of Filipino descent, she has a two-fold familiarity with the theme of migration – both first-hand and in a mediated way. Her parents emigrated from the Philippines to Vancouver, and she continued the overseas trajectory and decided to relocate first to

Glasgow, and then Edinburgh, and embark on a burgeoning poetic and research career.

The first sequence of the collection, entitled *Settle*, traces her transition from being uprooted from her parental home, with its Canadian-Filipino culture, to her adoptive Scottish home and community. The first few poems abound in temporal transformations from linearity to cyclicity as she acknowledges that her parents' migratory movement is an heirloom of sorts. As she probes their past and follows in their footsteps, repetitions of history create an important vehicle of self-discovery and self-assertion:

*Once I heard her say,  
twenty-two is the age I left Manila ...*

*left the only patch of land she knew  
to wonder as I did, on that cold step:*

*should I go back, or have I begun again?*

— 'Twenty-two'

*[...] because my dad and I were never late,  
never slept in.*

...

*it was our way  
back then, to measure our worth.*

— 'The Way'

A striking reconnection of the loss of indigenous roots is found in the poem Home . Rich in sharp and vivid imagery that plays with light to enhance the atmosphere Streetlight on the greasy windows it bridges an imagined, second-hand memory of her mother s home in Manila and a real memory of her Vancouver one. The hopelessness and destitution of the former is driven to its dramatic culmination in the lines: A bus poised for the road / but didn t go anywhere . She instils the image with a sense of suspension, curtailed movement that almost feels exhausting. However, thankfully, such lapses into sadness do not comprise the driving force of the poems. The downward movement of such lines as Glided down the escalator at seven am is countered by the second stanza s uplifting, hopeful tone, an ascending movement, and a crescendo of light: my mother s face lifted/by the day s long, long light .

A good deal of the sequence s thematic innovation comes to the fore when Muñoz dissects the long and arduous process of becoming a legal UK citizen. This evidently springs not only from her own encounter with its administrative opaqueness, but also from her acute sense of observation and collective plight:

*And when the guard says come in  
the whole day feels torn from them,*

*their mind's dull hum,  
replaced by crackling microphone sighs.*

— 'Brand Street'

Once she has successfully navigated the institutional labyrinth, she becomes a cultural and social insider, and then she is able to investigate her own private self and the inner workings of her emotional life. The poems that convey this relief and liberation from the shackles of culture clash are either imbued with a

meditative calm or open up to a scope of subject matter that far surpasses that of the first poems. Thus, the rhetorical questioning *On Arthur's Seat* departs from the top of the famous Edinburgh hill and traverses a far-reaching meditation on human precariousness:

*How do I lean into nothing*

*walk to the cliff edge*

*and look over without*

*falling, like on train platforms*

*how black those ground wires*

*and how near to the yellow line*

*should people loiter*

Muñoz is at her best when she pierces into such doubts. Although she seems to leave her poem teetering between the fear of losing one's footing on foreign ground — what's the rule now / for getting close to danger — and the pull to a reckless leap in the dark, the final query, standing alone, ends with an affirmative full-stop rather than a tentative question mark:

*what would happen*

*if I strode along stamped grass*

*peered over the edge*

*into emptiness*

*trusting myself to the town's tiny lights.*

Such an intervention in punctuation, in my view, signifies a choice already made. Indeed, Muñoz's application of punctuation and orthography are frequently telling of her inner shift from frustration to satisfaction stemming from her integration into the community. For instance, *On a Lake* mirrors this by completely foregoing the use of capitalisation and limiting punctuation to the occasional comma:

*being here, under the blurred*

*bodies of pines*

*and the curved gloomy edges  
of fog, not feeling lonely*

*or declarative just hoping  
and paddling slowly*

If *Settle* portrays the flux of identity as it expands, then the second sequence, *Digital Life* provides ample room for testing the boundaries of identity in a setting that Muñoz, as a member of the Facebook generation, is necessarily accustomed to. In it she registers, in meticulous and colourful detail, the trappings of digital existence and the unique emotions, (rifts in) communication,

namesakes lives as her own alternatives:

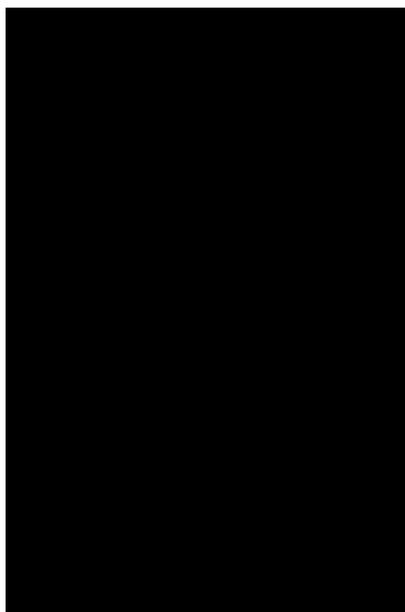
*If I could be one of them,  
I'd paint in watercolours, deserts with low suns  
in my life's last month*

*or I'd be an athlete, chasing the cork path  
my chin level  
till I crossed, sweat lacing my neck*

However, despite often falling victim to the veneer of reality in social media, she comes to the sobering conclusion that, in the Digital life, nothing really lives, I know.

Overall, *Settle* is a collection that, by addressing issues of home, expatriation, and public and private identity, fills a significant gap in the contemporary British and global poetry scene. It manages to be equally plaintive and playful, curious and endearing, profoundly personal yet sweepingly universal. In tune with the world that has inspired it, for all its anxiety and raw reality, it celebrates life born out of the moments when reality itself is a tentative concept. For this, much gratitude.

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into emptiness*

*trusting myself to the town's tiny huts*

*I'd slip it on while you were out:  
you'd be the red dot running*

*down my olive shoulders*

In the poems that scrutinise the characteristics of e-mail communication, Googling, and the careful construction of one's online social persona, Muñoz showcases a witty and pun-laden playfulness, as in *How* (how to run a business / how to run long distances), a parody of the typical spam e-mail contents, as in *Junk* (Your relative of the same name has died. / You are the beneficiary of a heavenly sum. ), and an acknowledgment of laptops as repositories of our lives, deserving of a solemn parting once *A film clogs their webcam eye. / Their battery hearts slow.* Again, she excels when a personal whim opens a pathway towards orchestrating an exploration of a broader existentialist theme. In *Googling the Other Theresas* she tackles Otherness, the layering of identity, and the questionable nature of reality in the digital world, as she envisions her namesakes' lives as her own alternatives:

*If I could be one of them,  
I'd paint in watercolours, deserts with low suns  
in my life's last month*

*or I'd be an athlete, chasing the cork path  
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