

Written by Bobby M. Reyes

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It is nearly a decade since Conrado de Quiros delivered what I consider one of his better speeches, if not his best literary work. Since April 2001, his speech has been stored in my computer's memory bank. And whenever I feel that I, as an Overseas-Filipino worker, no longer understand our people, I read again Mr. De Quiros work. His speech always reminds me that my countrymen are like the frustrated builders of a modern-day failing Tower of Babel, with its confusion of so-many "Tongues on Fire." And Divine Providence chose to scatter – just like in the Biblical story – at least 10-million Overseas Filipinos to some 120 countries (and counting).

( **Editor's Note:** To read an account of the Tower of Babel, please click on this link, <http://ldolp.hin.org/babel.html>

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Here then is the "Tongues on Fire," a 15-page speech delivered by Conrado de Quiros on April 24, 2001

, before the French Business Association of the Philippines

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columnist. Readers may be able to read more of Mr. De Quiros' columns in the Inquirer's online site,

<http://www.inquirer.net>

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{xtypo\_quote} But that is the reason this country has never been able to understand itself for more reasons than that it has as many languages as it has islands. – Conrado de Quiros  
{/xtypo\_quote}

The story is told that Jose Rizal once boarded a boat bound for the south.

Sauntering on the upper deck, where the more well-off passengers were trying as best they could to survive the ride, he met a Spaniard and after begging leave to sit at his table soon struck up a conversation with him.

The Spaniard was amazed that he spoke Spanish very well. Rizal replied that he had studied at the university and indeed lived in Madrid and Barcelona for some time. The Spaniard was impressed.

Not long afterward a German joined them, and was soon in the thick of a conversation with them. Occasionally, for the benefit of the newcomer, Rizal would speak in German to make a point. The German was amazed that he spoke German very well. Rizal replied that he had toured Germany, and had lived in Heidelberg for some time. He did not say that he finished writing a subversive novel there—there were limits to conviviality. The German was impressed.

And still not long afterward, a Frenchman and Englishman joined them, and were also soon drawn to their conversation. Again, for the benefit of the newcomers, Rizal used a smattering of French and English to drive home his point. The Frenchman and Englishman were amazed that he at least knew French and English, even if he didn't speak it well. Rizal replied that French was not entirely unlike Spanish though it posed enormous problems in pronunciation.

As to English, he said, he had begun to study it seriously. He did not say that he was doing so because he was seriously trying to win the love of an Englishwoman. He might have gotten the advice that the French language was better for that purpose. But the Frenchman and Englishman were impressed.

When they all stood up, Rizal went sauntering once more and soon found himself in the lower deck. It smelled of sweat, men, women, and children huddled in cramped quarters along with their frayed belongings. Wishing to learn more about them, Rizal spoke to an elderly man in Tagalog, asking him where he came from. The man answered in Cebuano, saying he could not understand Rizal. Not knowing Cebuano, Rizal couldn't understand him either. He turned to a woman beside the elderly man and asked her the same question. The woman spoke in Bol-anon, saying she could not understand Rizal. Not knowing Bol-anon, Rizal couldn't understand her either. Finally, Rizal turned to a young man nearby and asked him the same question.

The man shrugged and spoke in Tausug, saying he could not understand Rizal. Not knowing Tausug, Rizal couldn't understand him too.

Rizal left the lower deck none the wiser about the people there.

The story is probably apocryphal. But it remains a gem for the insight it gives about the situation

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of the intelligentsia in this country, most of whom are far from being half as intelligent, or inquisitive, as Rizal. That intelligentsia of course consists of the people who run government, the banks, the courts, the schools, and organized religion. I was about to add organized crime, but one might think I am putting it on par with organized religion, and these days that has consequences not unlike the ones that visited the irreverent during Rizal's time.

That intelligentsia is impressive in that it speaks the language of the cosmopolite, or what is known today as the language of globalization. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in particular was the chief defender of the WTO-GATT when the treaty ratifying it was brought before the Senate. In conferences abroad, Filipinos are the second most articulate, or cantankerous, lot—the first are Indians—among the Asian representatives. That is so not just because of a good knowledge of English but because of a good knowledge of developmentalese, or legalese, or organizationalese, entire languages unto themselves. NGOs are especially adept at them.

And of course the kids of the rich and middle class in Metro Manila know the language of MTV, with its sub-languages, which are the languages of Eminem and Limp Bizkit. They know the language of "text," the kind used in cellular phones, the language of icons, the kind used in computer programs, and the language of "cool." The last, the language of "cool," is an entire language unto itself too. But it is another story.

But I don't know that that intelligentsia—though it is not always easy to include people who listen to techno music in that category—knows, or understands, the other languages that are spoken by the teeming masses huddled at the lower deck of this ship of state, or ship of fools.

I don't know that they know, or understand, the language of April Boy, or Rey Valera, or in an earlier time, Yoyoy Villame. I don't know that they know, or understand, the language of "kumparehan" or godfathering—the luminous phrase for friends who have a falling out is "nagsulian ng kandila," they gave back their baptismal candles—; the language of "barkadahan," with its compelling logic of "walang iwanan," we're in this through thick and thin; the language of hospitality and reciprocity, of treating a guest to a can of sardines gotten on credit from a neighborhood store in hopes of befriending a future patron. I don't know that they know, or understand, the language of one Joseph Estrada, ex-President and, barring a civil war as his ardent followers prognosticate in the event of his arrest, future con.

In the 1970s, I used to say that you strayed one kilometer away from Metro Manila, and you would not just step into another ground, you would slip into another world. You would not just step into another setting, you would crash into another dimension. You would not just step into the countryside, you would plunge into the twilight zone. The poverty and violence and wretchedness there were not just a higher, or lower, order of things, they were another universe entirely. They were often too absurd to be believed, the stuff that made for black comedy. It was a world where rubber-slippered and Armalite-toting Caguis mounted checkpoints and asked for donations to the local dance, where sugar barons built private roads near the sea in the heart of Sakada country to race their Porsches and Mercedes Benzes on, where scientific-minded NPAs tried to explain scientifically to the wife and children of a man why they were executing him for being an informer.

## More than a Filipino Version of "A Tale of Two Cities"

I used to say that in the 1970s. Today, I say that you just stray one street away from your house, and you would not just step into another neighborhood, you would slip into another world. The poverty and violence and wretchedness aren't just "out there," they are "in here," right where we stand. They are not just a higher, or lower, order of things, as those euphemisms, "underprivileged," "undernourished," more exposed to crime, suggest. Or indeed as statistics showing them to live below the poverty line suggest. They are another city entirely, the sense that Charles Dickens used the phrase in "A Tale of Two Cities."

This is a world where a dozen people are able to squeeze like circus performers into breathable space separated from the next one by cardboards, tin cans, and the aluminum posters and streamers of candidates—the last finally have their uses!—and still manage to have a love life, which is why they are 12 (children) in the first place. This is a world where garbage has turned into a mountain, blocking out sun and air and hope, burying people where they stand, or sleep, when it falls in a fit of rage, mocking them with a parody of what the activists like to say, which is that some deaths are as light as a feather and some deaths weigh like mountains.

This is a world where taxi drivers are knifed to death in the dark of night for a thousand bucks, the murderers sobbing at the police station later on when they are caught that they needed the money to buy medicine for a child that was sick and dying.

I do know a thing or two about poverty. I was vastly amused some months ago when I got an e-mail from someone who said he pictured me as some kind of Spanish-speaking hombre, or even caballero, as my name suggested, sipping wine and listening to opera, and generally living the quiet life of gentry in one of Metro Manila's suburbs, or in one of the places Erap likes to put up mansions for his mistresses. He got everything wrong, except for the sipping wine and listening to Puccini—some things in life are a matter of life and death and may not be foregone. I live in a 72-square meter unit in a tenement that has seen better days. I do have a glorious-sounding sound system, even if I do not always have glorious-tasting wine—some things in life are a matter of trade-off—but that is pretty much it. I do not know that books and records count for wealth in the reckoning of GNP, or social status.

More to the point, I grew up in an impoverished section of Naga City, the heartland of Bicol. We rented a P15-a-month living quarter, one of the bottom parts of a decrepit house. When it rained, it flooded, and it was all the drunks, who became so by whiling away the gray skies with bathtub gin and wild caterwauling with the aid of a broken-down guitar, could do to balance themselves on an elevated wooden plank that led from the house to the street. Some fell on the water, which did little to revive their senses, though it did much to revive their laughter, which cackled above the drone of rain. When the sun bore down in the dead of summer, it became an

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oven, and it was all an American Jesuit priest who came to visit us one day, could do to relieve himself of the oppression with a handheld fan and a much diluted glass of pineapple juice. Indeed, it was all he could do to get through the door, stooping through a ceiling that defied his height, which did little to improve his humor, though it did much to improve his understanding of the country MacArthur had vowed to return to.

But all this notwithstanding, it wasn't until much later that I caught a glimpse of what being poor really meant-or conversely, what being rich really meant. It happened quite by accident, the product of the juxtaposition of two seemingly disparate events.

The first was a meeting among friends from "civil society"-at that time I thought "civil society" was just another name for "polite society"-which I somehow got invited to. This was way back during Cory's time. The people at the meeting were NGO representatives, scholars, a couple of bankers helping out NGOs, experts in this or that field. The discussion had to do with putting up a foundation that would espouse decentralization or local autonomy or strong local governments, or all of the above, and an academic institution that would back this up. Everyone was enthusiastic about the idea, and was soon making all sorts of suggestions on how to go about it.

No obstacle seemed insurmountable. A bureaucratic problem came up, and it was forthwith solved by someone saying he would take it up with the Secretary of Local Governments, who was Aquilino "Nene" Pimentel at the time. A financial problem came up, and it was forthwith solved by someone saying he would talk to his bank for a loan, and to a senator and a couple of congressman for help with the project. A legal problem came up, and it was forthwith solved by someone saying he would talk to a Supreme Court justice about it, if not indeed to the Chief Justice himself. At one point, someone even said she would talk to Cory about the project to get her endorsement for it.

Shortly after leaving this meeting, I read about how a man committed suicide and brought his family to share the same fate. If I recall right, the man had been jobless for some time, a fact that had led to his wife and brood of six children going hungry.

Despite his willingness to take odd jobs and take odder recompense, he could not find enough of them to keep his family afloat. Not one of the children was old enough to help put food on the table, and it was all his wife could do to cook and wash clothes and take care of the kids. Which left the burden of keeping the family's body and soul together solely on him. A reasonably considerate and neighborly fellow when he first arrived from the province, he became morose and taciturn over the years, and was often seen talking to himself in a corner.

On the fateful day, he came home in high spirits. Their problems, he told his family, were over. He did not say how, his eyes merely gleamed with a maniacal light. That night, he mixed insecticide in the gruel they had for supper. And before long, they were groveling and retching all over the floor.

The kids went first, turning blue in the face and choking to death. The wife went last, scrambling frantically to the side of the kids who were writhing in pain when her husband's diabolical plot

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finally dawned on her poison-misted brain before she herself blacked out. She was brought to the hospital but they could not bring her back. She probably did not want to come back.

The neighborhood was shocked and wondered what had made him snap. To this day, I do not know what makes people do. I did hear when I was in Bangladesh some years ago about a man who also did the same thing to his family after his wife decided to pawn her nose ring. To him, nothing could come lower, nothing could show more the utter pits they had reached, nothing could speak more of his utter unworthiness to be a husband and father. The Filipino himself who murdered his wife and kids had been heard to say he could no longer sleep, the sobs and whimpers of his kids while they wasted away before his eyes bore through his brain like mosquitoes buzzing crazily in the ears. He had become nothing, he had become less than nothing.

Of course not all the poor commit suicide in the face of seeming hopelessness, any more than they become sex performers as a result of it.

Not all the poor, or poor husbands in particular, find in their personal unworthiness a reason to include their loved ones in a monstrously self-destructive attempt at penitence, or search for oblivion. Not all the poor reach such depths of madness. I say all this because this is a strange country too in that you make a movie about people becoming sex performers out of desperation, and even those who claim to be artists crucify you for advocating performing sex as a way out of poverty.

But the two events above put side by side, despite being extremes, or probably because of it, drove home to me the true divide between rich and poor. To be rich is to be replete with possibility. To be rich is not just to have money in your pockets, as the idiom goes, though that is a marvelous thing enough in itself. Heaven knows having a pocket full of holes, which is the other idiom to describe being broke, is often a literal thing in itself. But you may not have money in your pockets and still be rich. Most rich do not. Only the nouveau riche do. In these days of miracle and wonder, to use Paul Simon's phrase, to have money in your pockets is no longer to be rich, it is to be cheap.

To be rich is to know that nothing is impossible. To be rich is to know that you can go around any obstacle, go under or over any obstacle, go through any obstacle. It is to know that when you want money, you can lay your hands on it. It is to know that when you need people, you can get in touch with them. It is to know that when you want something done, you can get it done.

To be poor on the other hand, is to be assailed by impossibility. It is to be thwarted at every turn by the improvident hand of man or God-or fate. It is to have obstacle after obstacle put in your path until you no longer see the goal, until you no longer know there is a goal, until you learn only to toil to get past the obstacle you wake up to each day at crack of dawn. It is quite literally to have no one to turn to.

Not the family heaving their sighs at the other side of the cardboard box, not the brother or father who are themselves shrilly issuing cries for help, certainly not the government or bank official who cannot understand why in this world of endless alternatives, you cannot find a job or

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livelihood to get you past your despair.

## Is "Empowering the People" the Same as "Empowering the Poor"?

We keep hearing the phrase, "empowering the people" or "empowering the poor," who are in fact most of the people. The metaphor that comes to mind among many of those who quite seriously and often heroically try to make this possible is that the poor have been gagged, and that if you can only remove the muzzle that keeps their mouths shut, they would send their powerful shouts to heaven.

But what if the poor have lost their voice altogether? What if the sheer disuse of their vocal chords has deprived them of the power of speech altogether? What if the knifing of taxi drivers for a thousand bucks, the keening of hungry children like dogs at the scent of death, or the pitiless or pitiful decision to embrace the comfort of oblivion to the discomfort of sensate life for oneself and for one's loved ones are the signs of a cavernous muteness?

Most Filipinos live that way today. In the lower deck of this ship of state, or ship of fools.

How to talk to them? What language to communicate to the voiceless, to the mute, to those who have lost the capacity to dredge up a sound from the pit of their lungs, or souls?

Like Tevye, I don't know.

I am no longer young, and though I have not lost a great deal of my energies, I have lost a great deal of my certainties. I can only guess in this age, personal and social, of radically diminished expectations, that the first step toward that purpose is a change of attitude. To be able to talk to the human cargo, or derelicts, in the lower deck, you should first want to. And truly, if you have been to one of the boats that used to fly such grand old-world flags as Compañía Maritima, you know that the conditions in the lower deck are not unlike those of an old-world slave ship. It is at least a testament to Rizal, whether the tale is true or not, though he was never averse to breaking bread with the masa as witness his days in Dapitan, that he was willing to do so.

That is not as easy as it seems. Quite literally in the case of a real boat. I have been to one, way back in the late 1970s. It added whole new dimensions of meaning to the phrase "floating coffins." If it floated at all, it was only by the grace of sun and sea: I dreaded to think how it would fare in fitful weather. The coffins were almost literal. Habitation in the third class consisted of wooden bunks piled in rows, one on top of another, like the tiers of the dead in La Loma Cemetery, with nearly exactly the same amount of height between them. There was only little more than space for a casket, or for your chest to rise and fall with each breath. To get to your bunk, you had to weave through a tangle of callused arms and legs and consumptive bodies

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strewn below. Each time I hear about a boat that sunk in the waters between these islands, I see that sight again, and shudder.

But I am glad the Jesuit Volunteers Association for one makes it a requirement for its volunteers to take that boat, third class, to where they are going, which are the places in this country God and government forsook. A slow boat to Zamboanga is bound to spark more insights into the national condition among Ateneans than all their lessons in politics and sociology put together.

It is not easy to want to go down to the lower deck of the literal and metaphorical boat. The sight and the smell assail you from the very top of the stairs, like the gaseous emanations from a parched earth at the first patter of rain. Society's answer to that problem in fact has been to make the people in the lower deck disappear completely. It has been to make them invisible. "Invisible Man" is the name of Ralph Ellison's novel about a black man living in the southern United States

in the first half of the 20th century. That was the condition of blacks generally then: People who were there but were not there. People who served but were not observed, people who spoke but were not heard, people who existed but were not seen.

Invisible men are what Filipinos are in the heart of this country in the first year of the third millennium after Christ. Or invisible women, as the women's groups are bound to insist, women living even more phantasmagoric lives than men in this country. They are the shadowy figures that surround us but which we cannot see. They are the strands of insubstantial matter that float around us, but which we cannot catch.

They are the emaciated forms that lie on the sidewalks at night, finding temporary refuge in oblivion through the deadly fumes of rugby, whom we pass by but acknowledge as there only in the same way that we acknowledge the pavement to be there. They are the blotches we see through the rain, tapping on the windows of our cars with scrawny fingers, whom we flip coins to and roll the glass rapidly down on not so much to avoid getting wet but to avoid looking at their faces and impaling them with our eyes into reality.

Everywhere, the institutions of society conspire to hide them from sight. The Church does so by turning them into a radiant flock, filling up the churches in their Sunday best, their eyes turned heavenward in blissful supplication.

Someone makes a movie about the poor caught in the clutches of desperation they copulate without shame in front of an audience-no, more than this, fallen in the lassitude of despair they laugh without joy at the thought of salvation-and it protests the distortion of the superimposed image. Imelda used to put up huge billboards of her nutrition program on the road used by visiting dignitaries to hide the hovels that lay in the path of their vision. The sensation is not unlike that.

Government makes the poor invisible in a similar way. Except that in lieu of huge billboards that proclaim the divine plan, it erects ones that proclaim the human plan. "On this site," say the billboards that hide the jagged roofs made from La Perla Biscuits afire from the setting sun, "will rise the new Philippines." Through the magic of "developmentalese," the poor are no longer the

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tangle of arms and legs and the mass of consumptive bodies we must extricate from to get to our bunks, they are a statistical aggregate that has been temporarily disadvantaged, dis-empowered, and inconvenienced. But not for long. Growth will eradicate poverty, even if it has to eradicate the poor.

The media make them invisible even as they transfix them into very visible corpses that float on the river, or headless bodies that rot in iron drums. The charitable institutions make them invisible even as they transform them into very palpable bottomless pits resembling human bellies that make food and medicine, alms for the body and balms for the soul, disappear. Even the poor themselves make them invisible even as some of them materialize from the fog of invisibility to become very visible maids and nurses and forklift operators in strange lands.

### Showing the Country in a Better Light?

The last I caught a glimpse of when a group of OFWs in Singapore protested the airing of Probe Team in Singapore on the ground that it was giving their country a bad name. The TV program had featured among others rampant pedophilia in Pagsanjan, fraternity hazing in the University of the Philippines, and the mountain of garbage that had buried the folk of Payatas. Why couldn't the program show the country in a better light?—they asked.

We want to pin down the gaseous emanations that suffuse us daily, which we breathe like air, or contract like virus, without knowing, we have to discover the magic wand that makes their atoms come together and integrate them into solid matter. We want to talk to them, we have to discover before the impetuous anger that drives us to stoke their resentments into a revolutionary flame-and revolutionaries too make them invisible even as they forge them from battle fire into very visible ideologically correct juvenile or even infantile veterans of war-the utter innocence of a child, the kind that would allow us to say, "But, mon ami, the emperor is stark raving naked!"

There is one other thing we have to do if we want to talk to the human flotsam that occupies the lower deck of this boat. It is to want to speak their language.

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## Rizal Tried to Learn Several Filipino Languages

I understand that Rizal left the boat he took with that vow in mind. Henceforth, he resolved, he would learn as well to speak Cebuano, Bol-anon, and Tausug. Or so the storytellers say, or so our own myth-making minds say. I don't know that Rizal ever learned those languages before he was shot in Luneta, an attempt by the Spaniards to still his tongue that made it speak louder than ever, down to the generations. But he did try to, according to the story. He could have been content to know Spanish and German and English and French, kept to polite or very civil society, and been the envy of his race. But he did not. He could have insisted that if the huddled masses in the lower deck yearning to breathe free, or just breathe fresh air, wanted to talk to him, they could always learn Spanish or German or English or French. But he did not.

He strove to learn their language.

It's not as easy too as it seems. I often wonder, in our time, if the elections themselves are not our way of saying that if the poor want to talk to us, or at all, they must speak our language. I know that in a column, I applauded the zealous efforts of the television networks and various groups to help voters vote wisely. But I don't know that that really strikes at the heart of the matter. Voter education campaigns do help to show voters how to vote wisely. They do not help to show the poor why they should.

Why should the poor vote wisely? Why should the poor vote at all? Why should the insubstantial shadows that flit around us that we do not see take elections as though they were the air they breathe or the flurry of love-making-such as sex on a cramped mat among the sleeping brood can be called that-they take fleeting refuge in? You are a spouse or lover, would you easily melt into the arms of someone who ignores you or disappears from your life for months on end and suddenly materializes from out of nowhere with a rose in one hand a bottle of wine on the other demanding to get a lay in the hay? The only difference being that the candidates do not disappear for months from their lives, they disappear for years.

We call the poor dumb for not voting wisely, which is just another way of saying for not voting the way we want them to. Isn't that a little like calling the spouse or lover you treat like dirt, or the thing you push hurriedly away after love-making, ashamed to have surrendered to your needs and fearing its powerful smells might cling to you, a whore for preferring the charms of more attentive though, from your end, completely undeserving suitors?

If the poor are what I've said they are, then even elections themselves take on the aspect of giving cake to the hungry. If the poor are what I've said they are, then pointing out to them the differential parliamentary virtues of candidates takes on the aspect of pointing to those who need bread the differential dietary properties of cakes, some of them being less fattening than others. If the poor are what I've said they are, then even appealing to their parental instincts to think about the future of their children, if not about themselves, takes on the aspect of appealing to the desperate to keep the cakes fossilized in the cupboard so that their more civilizable children will have the chance to appreciate their aesthetic, if not culinary, properties one day.

A friend of mine, an American journalist, once gave me to see just what elections mean for poor

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folk. Her experience was with Kampuchea, but it might as well be the Philippines, or at least some parts of it. It was the second time

Kampuchea

was having elections after the fall of the Khmer Rouge, and my friend went this way and that interviewing people about what they thought about the exercise. One old woman answered very thoughtfully: "Well, it's obvious the elections didn't work the first time. That's why we're having them again."

Given all this, the tempting course is just to keep to the upper deck, where the breezes blow and the wine flows, where the sun shines on those who speak English and Spanish and German and French and fill them with a glow. The tempting course is just to speak the language of the cosmopolite, the language of globalization, the language of power and domination, and insist that the disjointed bodies below somehow manage to shuffle their feet to their beat. The tempting course is just to speak the language of MTV and cellular text and Eminem and Limp Bizkit, and hope that the shivering bodies below somehow get to catch the feel of cool, which is an entire rhythm unto itself.

I cannot say I blame those who have taken that course. I cannot say I blame those who have embraced that cause.

But that is the reason this country has never been able to understand itself for more reasons than that it has as many languages as it has islands. We want to heal that rift, we want to bridge that gap, we have to reconstruct atom by atom, strand by strand, sinew by sinew, the tenuous mass that has melted in the dark below till it becomes distinguishable, living and breathing human forms. We want to mend the break, we want to glue the tear, we have to piece together, word by word, syntax by syntax, meaning by meaning, the indecipherable whispers and loud bellowing issuing from the pit below till they assemble themselves into something resembling speech. We want to stop the alienation, we want to shake the hand of the other part of our schizophrenic self, we have to rip off plank by plank, beam by beam, ballast by ballast, the thing that divides this ship of state, or ship of fools, into upper and lower decks till we commonly feel the rush of wind and smell the briny water.

And then maybe, just maybe, one day: We might leave this tub a thing or two wiser for having been there. # # #

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