

*The 2004 Editors' Prize Contest Winners*

*Joel Barraquiel Tan  
First Place*

manila zoo

rumors that human parts  
ligaments clear & chewy like jellyfish  
pulverized bone of the nameless      poor

mixed with cheap      grain are fed to the lions  
crocodiles      rhinoceros      chimps  
zoo animals feeding from the flesh

of beggars      before the time of cities  
mama explains before great nations      wild  
creatures      roamed freely      i like

them better in cages  
contained      thankful  
for concrete      cages

            & progress      mama  
marvels at  
            how i can spend hours at a stretch

in front of the elephant pit  
not at all interested in  
the other creatures      i beg

for elephant toys      elephant sheets  
upon my request      mama instructs  
the sastre to embroider elephants on

my shirts      and shorts      when i was  
a toddler      oh how mama loves this story  
barely able to sit up on my own

i drew elephants          page after page  
of flopping ears          fearsome tusks elegant trunk  
papa complains that mama spoils me

                look at the boy          fat so fat  
                he is turning into a blasted elephant  
each night i      pray for god

to turn me into an elephant  
to wake up      in a pit          surrounded by a gray herd  
far from papa's disdain

karama  
                mother ruler  
smallest elephant in the bunch

is ferocious      even the bulls  
tread carefully around her      circling  
protectively around the calves

i am there      when karama  
charges at the pit's rock wall  
at full speed      slamming

her head          repeatedly then  
doubling back          to do it again      fury screams  
the 3rd blow      cracks the hoary stone

surface          the 4th snaps her right tusk  
                zoogoers          motionless          stunned  
the frightened cries of children

bulls & calves cower  
                helpless zookeepers  
shouting          karama karama      stop          as she      rebounds

bloodying the wall's rocky cheek again & again  
mama grabs me by the collar  
i struggle yell no no no as she covers my eyes

her hands musky with cigarette smoke and american  
perfume no mama no  
i want i want to watch

a loud pop like thunder karama's screaming  
halts another explosion then another i break  
from mama's hold run to the lip of the pit 2 scrawny

men clad in the zoo's green uniforms pump  
karama with bullets each shot  
tearing holes the size of my small fists

in her trunk her flank she falls i  
lock eyes with the dying monster  
you she accuses you

before she dies.