

At The Still Point, Various Small Movements

Sandra Nicole Roldan

Sandra Nicole Roldan teaches literature and creative writing at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, where she also earned an MA Creative Writing degree. She has received local and international writing fellowships, and won a Philippines Free Press literary award for the essay. Her poetry, fiction, and nonfiction have appeared in various publications and anthologies, most recently in Mondo Marcos (2010), Kritika Kultura (2011), Hanggang sa Muli (2011), Motherhood Statements (2013), and Fast Food Fiction Delivery (2014). She lives in Quezon City with her husband and two dogs.

1. perpetual possibility¹

Growing up, I spent weekends at the library in my grandparents' house in Project 4, Quezon City. Theirs was the largest house in the neighborhood, and the only one with a room called THE ROLDAN MEMORIAL LIBRARY². Nothing grand about it, just books that most middle-class families were expected to own: the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, *The Philippine Readers*³ series, and *Reader's Digest* condensed books. Well-thumbed potboilers by LeCarré, Ludlum, and Fleming shared space with yellowing paperbacks of *Ivanhoe*, *Catch 22*, and *The Jungle*. I read my way up from the children's books at floor level (*Robinson Crusoe*, *Little Women*, *Treasure Island*) to a set calling itself *The Great Books*, whose spines indicated there were no great writers from Asia

besides Mao and Tagore, and that only dead white guys like Milton, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Marx could be called great.

The only females in that tiny room (apart from myself) were writers in drag (George Eliot and the Brontë sisters) or damsels trapped in domestic dramas (the heroines of Jane Austen and Louisa May Alcott) or nymphos in the naughty books (*Kama Sutra*, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, *Fanny Hill*, *Fear of Flying*) which I discovered hidden in the highest shelves when I was nine or ten. What has stayed with me all these years is not the erotica, which I spent the next year or so reading in secret, dutifully dog-earring the best parts for next time. Rather, it was the shock I felt upon seeing several photographs of naked ladies tucked between the pages of a rather plain-looking now-forgotten book.

More shocking than the nudity itself was the visual dissonance: the demure half-smiles above pendulous breasts and staring nipples, legs crossed at the ankle tucked discreetly under the expansive heft of a naked rump, huge masses of hair piled in domes (which I later learned were called beehives) that were in turn balanced on long delicate necks, the stark bareness between gobs of eye make-up and stilettoed feet. It was a bizarre sight, those women who posed for a second for some camera and were frozen forever in their ladylike poses, enormous breasts defying gravity above hands folded neatly on their laps. After the initial shock and wonder of "who put them there?" and "why?"⁴ I got to thinking about those women.

They were real persons, that much I was certain. But who were they? And who fixed their hair? Did they choose to pose that way or did someone tell them to tilt their heads at exactly that angle? How long were they under the lights and brushes, the powders and combs? What was the last

thing they said before the camera clicked? What was the first thing they did after? Did they like the finished picture? Were they embarrassed? What was it like to know that their naked bodies would be seen by so many strangers? As they looked coyly at the camera in their birthday suits, I wondered what they thought, if they were thinking at all, or if they willed their minds to go blank because it was easier that way.

That afternoon, I compared those pictures with the only other old photo in the room, this one in a heavy ornate frame: the faded sepia photograph of my great grandparents on their wedding day. Neither of them was smiling, and I thought I knew why: Lola Candy was Lolo Osong's second wife (the first had died of cervical cancer) and, to rub salt on the wound, was unable to give him children. Like any child who read too much, I longed for drama I didn't have to deal with, and was gratified to have a tragic family history. Only later did I realize the reason for their not smiling could be as mundane as crude technology. Dating from the early 1920s, the wedding photo seemed to have been taken by a camera that required long exposure, forcing the sitters to stay perfectly still, as any movement (no matter how small) would register as a blurring at the edges of even the most formal and carefully composed tableaux.

So much can happen in the time a photograph is taken, no matter how long the exposure or how quick the shutter. Where does one place the line that separates what happened and what didn't? When does the unknowing make that subtle shift into knowing? The only truth I knew about any of them—the naked ladies, the great grandparents—was that they were *there* at that moment, solid flesh, when the shutter clicked. Everything else is possibility, is fiction.

2. at the still point, there the dance is

If you Google “the still point of the turning world,” the search engine will bring up more than fifty results for a bestselling memoir by Emily Rapp⁵ before giving you anything referring to the original source, T.S. Eliot's 1935 poem, “Burnt Norton,” more familiar to English majors as the first part of “Four Quartets.” The phrase is justly memorable because even in its brevity and clarity, there remains much space for the ambiguous: what, precisely, does this still point refer to? Scholars have attempted to define Eliot's still point for the past seventy years, ascribing to it multifarious meanings—the unchanging triune God (Watts 55), a “symbol for Logos”⁶ or the Word of God (Weitz), a “mathematically pure point” (Wheelwright qtd. in Matthiessen), a timeless release from the compulsions of this world (Matthiessen), and transcendence from time and the sensual body (Moody).

My own interest in the still point is autobiographical: it is one of the few lines from Eliot that have stayed with me in the twenty years since I was required to read his work. The second movement of “Burnt Norton” is one of the few sections of the “Four Quartets” that I can claim to have more-or-less understood. So explicit are the images in the first stanza—“garlic and sapphires in the mud,” “the dance along the artery,” “reconciled among the stars”—they allow even the most obtuse reader (i.e. me) to gain some foothold into the rest of the poem. But rather than going into a line-by-line analysis of the entire text, I am more interested in how this one line (“the still point of the turning world”) has defined the direction of my reading, which has evolved in the last two decades into a search for the still point's many variations. Also interesting for me is how the discovery of these variations has shaped my own writing.

My exploration for this paper comes in the form of a catalogue, a process that many today will label as “curating.” The term is quite popular these days—everything can be and *is* curated: the clothes in one’s closet, the MP3s in a music player, the contents of one’s purse. Even a poet I greatly admire spoke recently of collecting and curating sentences. I do understand the impetus behind this label: whatever is collected are artifacts, and the process involves selecting and re-presenting these into an assemblage from which new meaning can be derived. Still, to my mind, curation is strictly tied to a specific institution (i.e., the museum), and since I am in no way connected to one, what I do is simply a process of selection.

Reading is a series of small movements. There is the act of turning the pages at more-or-less regular intervals, the eyes moving inexorably across the page; one slows down to savor a line or speeds up during a particularly gripping scene. There is a compulsion to stay with the story until the very end. When we read, it is the moving passages, the most indelible images, the most original turns of phrase that stay with us. And these are the moments that comprise the catalogue I am presenting here.

But more than just gathering items to showcase in a catalogue⁷, I am attempting this taxonomy to find significance in the variety of still points available to writers like myself. In gathering and highlighting the still points and small movements in these texts, I am trying to examine Eliot’s still point through the prism of my own reading, through the texts that I choose to read. These texts (in which the still point and the small movement play a significant role) are assembled and examined for patterns so that I may understand more clearly the technical, craft-oriented choices I make as a writer. In the longer version of this project, I hope to create a taxonomy of the still point’s many possible

forms—among others: the pause and enjambment; hesitation, restraint, and control; fear, desire, and paralysis.

Although writing itself is a form of stillness, in that poetry is “emotion recollected in tranquility,” it also requires movement, a trigger, “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”⁸ (Wordsworth par. 26). Writing begins with a start: something flashes in the head. One is jolted by an insistent rhythm, a compelling phrase. An image jams the gears in the brain and what comes next is a mad fumbling to get the thought written down. Even when writing resembles a passive activity (as in waiting for stories), various elements slowly crystallize along an arc, and details are nudged along that trajectory until the story is complete.

The work that goes into writing seems relatively invisible. Unlike in music, dance, or the visual arts which involve moving the body and/or implements, the writer in action is a person sitting in a room with pen in hand or fingers on keyboard. The physical movements are so small they are barely noticeable: the brow furrows in concentration, the pen moves to make marks across paper, the hand hovers above the keyboard looking for the right word, fingers tap keys to delete everything and start over.

Such small movements are made central in works like Nathalie Sarraute’s *Tropisms*, twenty-four short pieces often described as prose poems, a study on what the writer calls “certain inner movements” (7) or vague wordless feelings that are so faint they barely register, so fleeting we barely recognize their having existed. Paul de Guzman’s “Various Small Movements #1,” from which I took part of this paper’s title, is a series of vignettes about the daily hell of commuting to Makati. One scene in the story, excerpted below, demonstrates how the smallest gestures, barely

perceptible, can have huge implications on the inner life of a person:

The woman feigns sleep, or sleeps as if she were feigning sleep: how her knees encroach (from the Old French *encrochier*: *en-* “in, on” + *crochier*, from *croc*, “hook”) into your space; how they intrude (from the Latin *intrudere*: *in-*, “into” + *trudere*, “to thrust”). How these small movements belie a violence that inhabits, animates them. How yielding induces, *is*, a kind of pain: Her legs advance, and you imagine the skin on your back tightening over the contours of your spine; her legs advance, and you imagine your spine leaving a transient cast of itself on the backrest’s cushion; her legs advance, and you imagine your limbs receding, shrinking, becoming vestigial, as her knees continue occupying the progressively larger space you’re ceding. Your destination is still twenty minutes away, but it’s as if you were already gone.

3. the leaves are full of children

There may be a biological reason behind one’s interest in still points and small movements. In “The Painter’s Eye,” the poet-naturalist Diane Ackerman details how research and archival material suggest that many of the Impressionist painters – Cézanne, Van Gogh, Monet, Renoir, Degas – depicted the world quite literally, as they saw it through their defective vision. Their myopia, glaucoma, cataracts, and retinal damage made them see the very distortions in color, line, and shape that had defined both their individual work and Impressionism as a movement (267-8). Trevor-Roper goes further to assert that artists, mathematicians, and bookish people have a myopic personality. Not only do they have “an interior life different

from others," they also focus on things that "can be viewed at very close range" (qtd. in Ackerman 269) – which brings into question the notion of artists having an original vision.

Ackerman delves deeper into metacognition in "Creating Minds" by asking whether artists really are "born into a different sensory universe" (159). A closer look into her own mental processes reveals that "creative ideas are forged in an alchemy of mind, as the brain uses electrochemistry to confect ideas" (163) and uses the same processes to infinitely rethink those original ideas. What may appear as creativity might actually be "hereditary or compensatory" or even possibly a brain anomaly, as evidenced by an artist's astounding ability to develop expertise, likely from being "superbly good at paying attention," which Ackerman calls "the [only] useful application of obsession" (166).

Other researchers concur that the most successful artists and innovators are able to effectively channel their psychiatric maladies such as OCPD⁹, or obsessive compulsive personality disorder, to productive ends (Jamison qtd. in Kendall). Another useful illustration is mathematician Henri Poincaré's metaphor of the creative mind as a sieve, an extra filter that allows only the best ideas to pass through, which is forced to open wider when the need for innovation arises (Ackerman 168-170).

I first encountered the still point's paradox in Theodore Roethke's 1948 poem, "Cuttings," as a sophomore in Prof. Thelma Arambulo's Humanities I class. What resonated the most during an entire semester's worth of readings in four genres was a single line ("The small cells bulge;") appearing midway through Roethke's poem. The humble monosyllables, the soft |ɛl| sounds repeated throughout the line, culminating in the blunt| |sound,

even the semi-colon appearing awkwardly at the end of both the line *and* the first stanza – all these helped me *see* the cells bulging and pushing themselves up into a tendril’s tip poking through the soil.

I tried to echo this brevity more than a decade later in my first published creative nonfiction piece, “Seeing Things,” where the persona describes how it is to wear eyeglasses for the first time: “the colors emerged one by one until the world happened again.” A more discernible attempt at a similar image can be seen in the description of individual leaves in the tree outside the persona’s window: “... the veins on a single green leaf, spread open like my palm. The indentations like small rivers on a map ... Clear liquid ooze pushing against the waxy cells ... All of these tiny silent rivers had been there all along. I just never saw them.” Since that day in my college sophomore year, I’ve been watching for other such moments in my reading.

4. do not call it fixity

A variation on the still point opened up to me when I learned the difference between end-stopped lines and enjambed lines (from the French *enjamber*, “stride over”) in an undergraduate class with Prof. Issy Reyes. Unlike the caesura (from Latin, *caes-* “cut, hewn”), which creates a fairly regular pause around the middle of a line, enjambment more easily achieves a compelling rhythm that remains varied and appealing. The reader may choose to read the enjambment as an end-stopped line, or to stride over the break, reading continuously till the end so that multiple meanings may be read into the same words, with the optional pause as the sole mark of difference. Here then is enjambment as a pause that may or may not be there, a stillness that is also a progression.

This is exemplified in the last stanza of Edith Tiempo's "Bonsai"—"And life and love are real / things you can run and / breathless hand over ..."—where the lines can be read either as a declaration that life and love *are* real (not imagined) or as things that must be passed on (taught) to children *quickly*, while they are young. The process described by the poem itself (making things small) is an act of sublimation, where the mundane detritus of everyday living is made into palm-sized heirlooms weighted with all the love a mother can muster "for the moment— / And for all time, both."

Similarly, Alfred Yuson's brash and ventriloquial "Andy Warhol Speaks to His Two Filipina Maids" presents another instance of the perfectly placed enjambment: "... in truth my dears, art is dead // center, between meals..." True to Warhol's pop art ethos, the poem playfully suggests (but does not force the issue) that Art as we know it (traditional, elitist, commodified) has been supplanted by the notion that art is for the masses, of the masses, and by the masses. The white space at the end of the stanza creates a longer pause than a comma, but its lack of punctuation underscores the temporary nature of that pause.

5. love is itself unmoving

Stillness can also be a pause indicating both tension and hesitation, a holding back. Standard discussions of Estrella Alfon's much-anthologized story often address the mother's titular magnificence, along with the visual cues that foreshadow Vicente's acts of pedophilia and overall questionable character. More fascinating for me as a writer is the pacing of the story and how this relates to point-of-view, which though in the third person, is clearly that of the girl.

Time slows down at crucial moments, as when Vicente is caught molesting the girl (195) by the mother who steps into the glare of light that holds these three characters like a tableau. To the girl, her mother's voice is a bell of safety, and the scene's tension is foregrounded by the description of fizzy bubbles in the zarzaparilla going up and down in the dark liquid (196). Such a small detail can only be noticed by a child who doesn't quite know what is going on, who then focuses her attention on the small and the familiar. Likewise, towards the end of the story, the mother hesitates and changes her mind about making the child burn the pencils given by Vicente (197). The mother's stillness here shows restraint, holding back her impulse to destroy everything connected to Vicente when she realizes this may further harm an already traumatized child.

The elderly man who speaks in Nathalie Sarraute's "Tropism VIII" similarly exhibits restraint but this time, it is an adult's restraining grip whose effect on a child's small hand is "benumbing" (29). When the speaker, who seems to be a grandfather,

... [takes] one of them "walking," as they crossed the street he squeezed tight the little hand in his own hot grasp, [he restrains] himself so as not to crush the tiny fingers ... so that his little darling, his precious little child, this living, tender, confident little thing for which he was responsible should not be run over (28).

Although there is protection behind the strong grip, the primary motive seems to be to exert control and authority over a smaller and weaker person: "When he was with fresh, young creatures, innocent creatures, he felt an aching, irresistible need to manipulate them with his uneasy fingers, to feel them, to bring them as close to him as possible, to

appropriate them for himself" (28). Also noteworthy is the use of scare quotes (unneeded quotation marks) around the word "walking," which are clearly meant to draw the reader's attention and create doubt towards the whole dynamic between the old man and the young children around him.

A single eighteen-word sentence is all we have to consider in the flash fiction piece "Almost Over: What's the Word?" by Lydia Davis:

He says,
"When I first met you
I didn't think you would turn out to be so
... strange." (218)

And yet, as in poetry, there is so much to consider: segmentation and how the writer chose where exactly to break the sentence into lines, the effect of these line breaks on sound and rhythm, and the rhetorical movement of the entire piece.

We wonder about the characters, who are identified only by the barest pronouns, and what exactly transpired between them in the relationship (from beginning to end). Clearly, the still point in this story is the hesitation indicated by the oft-abused ellipsis, used masterfully here to give a visual signal for the long awkward pause during which the reader can imagine the speaker wracking his brains for the most judicious euphemism possible. Why choose this word ("...strange") over another? And what exactly does he mean by "...strange"? The brevity, the segmentation, the use of blankness (white space between lines) and silence (ellipsis) seem to invite readers to fill them all up with personality, possibility, and motive.

6. where past and future are gathered

The still point contains within it both time present and time past, which we often equate with nostalgia (from the Greek *nostos* “return home” + *algos* “pain”). This yearning for the past (not necessarily a happier time, but longed for all the same) necessitates the act of remembering, and grasping at connections that grow weaker as the days pass. This is evident in a few key scenes in Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient*, where the tension between stillness and movement relates to this longing for home.

There is Hana, the young Canadian nurse, crouched inside an empty stone fountain outside the abandoned Italian abbey that is now—at the tail-end of the Second World War—also an abandoned hospital. The text is mostly a description of how it is to sit inside the fountain. Water is rationed because of the war. And as she waits for water to arrive so she can bathe, her mind moves to thoughts of her father (“I wonder how Patrick is now?”) whose death she seems to have forgotten. When the water comes rushing out of the pipes, the effect is an unexpected crashing because it was preceded by such meditative stillness and quiet (81-83).

Another scene at the end of the novel opens with Kirpal, the young Indian sapper that everyone calls Kip. Now a doctor with a family, he goes about his day but at the same time, he thinks of Hana and wonders about her life in Canada in the years after the war. He considers it a gift, this ability to “see” her at every moment “as if a camera’s film reveals her, but only her, in silence” (73). Kip “knows” she leads a lonely life in Ontario and in the last few sentences of the novel, he “sees”

... Hana [move] and her face turns and in regret she lowers her hair. Her shoulder touches the edge of a

cupboard and a glass dislodges. Kirpal's left hand swoops down and catches the dropped fork an inch from the floor and gently passes it into the fingers of his daughter, a wrinkle at the edge of his eyes behind his spectacles (258).

The scene is narrated from Kip's perspective and he states matter-of-factly that he *does* see her. He says it is not imagined. But Kip's claim that he and Hana still have a connection can be easily explained as nostalgia, because there seems to be no agency in the Hana of his mind's eye. She is reduced to an object to be contemplated. She appears to be moving but he could just be imagining her in a series of still moments, and his memory is what animates these images of her.

The Lover by Marguerite Duras has little, if any, of the yearning and romance that moves the characters in *The English Patient*. The dynamic between the adolescent girl and the Chinese lover twice her age might be different because the novel itself straddles this gray area between fiction and memoir. While it is possible to look at the stillness of the tropics, and to comment on the mask-like stoicism of the two characters¹⁰, more compelling to examine would be the scene at the novel's beginning, set in the dramatic present, with Indochina a lifetime away.

Outside a theater, a strange man approaches the apparently famous narrator and describes her face as "ravaged" (3), which the man prefers to the woman's younger face. After the encounter, she looks at herself in the mirror—watches herself aging, decades compressed into a single paragraph—and decides that hers is "a face laid waste" (5). Choosing these particular words to describe her own face is a small but explosive rhetorical gesture. In place of nostalgia, there is defiance, a preference for the present.

She watches herself aging, perhaps in “partial ecstasy... partial horror” (Eliot). She prefers to see this aging as “concentration without elimination” (Eliot); her face may be “ravaged” but she is not destroyed. All she chooses to see is one face morphing into another, the result of countless small and incremental changes—changes whose finality the woman accepts without flinching. “The weakness of the changing body” that age brings is fiercely, willfully ignored.¹¹

The novels of Ondaatje and Duras have a more fluid treatment of time, allowing the characters to perceive or experience time in non-linear ways. In contrast, the factuality that creative nonfiction requires can make remembrances of things past seem more immediate, and therefore more acute. The two essays that follow are all the more unusual for being written by grown men who bleed and have all sorts of complicated feelings, and who in the end come across as being all the more manly for it.

Carljoe Javier’s “Monday” from *The Kobayashi Maru of Love* demonstrates the heartbreaking agony of a recent break-up, filtered through the consciousness and experience of a geek.¹² What happens here is a series of still points, where the persona goes through his Monday work routine trying mightily to keep himself from shattering. His voice breaks in the middle of a meeting after he remembers small random things about her, and about *them* together. He seeks refuge in his cubicle, looks up her Facebook profile on his computer, and feels the urge to touch her hair. But he cannot. Instead, he puts a finger on his laptop’s trackpad, and strokes the cursor over the pixel-version of her hair (18-19).

Exie Abola’s essay takes its concept from M. Scheil’s¹³ *An Encyclopedia of Love: A Memoir*. The book

compiles and arranges alphabetically 450 vignettes on 22 topics that codify all the many aspects of a particular monogamous relationship, which ended when one partner died. Similarly, the persona in Abola's "Lost Letters" takes random memories about the beloved, some recent but many of them decades old, and arranges them alphabetically. The effect is a non-linear narrative of something that wasn't quite a relationship. This essay does not only play with the concept of still points as units of small memories that make up a larger assemblage. In addition, it stands the tropes of unrequited love on their heads by using the male perspective and experience, and by presenting the lover as viewer and collector of moments. But these moments are still points only because the lover has chosen to see the trivial as sublime.

7. there is only the dance

In the afterword to *Wittgenstein's Mistress* by David Markson, Steven Moore remarks on the originality of the novel's form, suggesting that its "nearest precedent ... might be Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 story 'The Yellow Wallpaper.'" Both stories are "narrated in short paragraphs by a woman seesawing between sanity and madness" (244). The one-sentence paragraphs in Markson's novel are reminiscent of philosophical writing where one proposition follows another. Of course, Markson owes much to the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, especially the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* where he examines (among other things) the connections between language and reality.

Although seemingly fragmented, the novel does come together to form several possible narratives: (1) Kate the narrator is the last person alive in the world, (2) Kate *claims* to be the last person in the world, (3) Kate is writing the novel which we are reading, (4) Kate is communicating

with whoever is reading the novel, (5) Kate works at a typewriter in front of a window overlooking a garden. The only thing we can be certain of is that the novel exists, and that someone (Kate? Markson?) typed it up at some point in the past. Someone's fingers hit a keyboard for a length of time so that we can read this thing called *Wittgenstein's Mistress*.

"Here" by Conchitina Cruz bears a strong resemblance to *Wittgenstein's Mistress* in terms of form. The short sentences placed equidistantly from each other, clearly separated by white space, give the effect of reading a series of individual statements. Still, one tries to find connections between these discontinuous declarations of the self performing different actions in a variety of locations. The brevity of each sentence and the surrounding spaces give the reader room to pause and consider what isn't being said, so that some larger story can be formed during the very act of reading.

Although the lines are *there*, what is on the page remains elusive. Despite the concreteness and specificity of each place and action, we can only guess at the occasion and the motive that prompts the persona in each line. We are never told *why* the persona is in those places, only that she is there. Since we can never fully know what is behind those small actions or movements, the reader is given license to fill the gaps with possibilities.

Because each statement strictly follows the same sentence structure (in this place + the self + performs action) in which there is no space to designate time, all these actions appear to exist in the present simultaneously. The syntactic similarity of the statements gives them all equal weight when taken individually. Yet instead of the deadening effect of repetition, the reader's interest is sustained all

throughout. Interestingly, despite the very rigid formal constraints placed upon the poem, with strict repetitions taking a third of each line, the result remains varied in length, rhythm, and rhetorical approach. The centrality of the self can make the occasions appear like personal revelations, almost confessional in the specificity of detail, and yet because the tone remains detached, the statements remain oblique – and therefore intriguing.

This poem can seem intimidating because it looks and sounds very different from the more conventional lyric poems we encounter. It takes familiar elements from travel writing, the lyric, concrete poetry, and the prose poem, with unexpected results. Reading this poem requires an atomistic approach, which in philosophy means regarding something as “interpretable through analysis into distinct, separable, and independent elementary components” (“Atomism”). At the same time, the poem itself can be described as atomistic; each single-sentence unit is able to stand on its own.

Rather than a variety of tropes leading the reader towards a single epiphany or some other significant experience, the poem is a collection of still points that readers may choose to expand at will. The poem, for me, signals a change in direction for poetry and writing in several different ways: How poetry can use plain language and still resonate profoundly in the reader. How writing can be done differently using tools already familiar to us. How the relationship between writer and reader can be less transactional and more about encounter, participation, and exchange.

8. surrounded by a grace of sense

The characters in the following stories by Lydia Davis all suffer from some form of affliction, and all of them

use language to assuage the situation. People who have nothing left turn to their words and thoughts, forgetting that the mind is an excellent servant but a terrible master. To them, consciousness is a means to salvation, freely available because human beings experience the world through language.

There is little movement in these short works by Davis. External action is mostly absent, internal action is circular. Much of the prose is comprised of speech directed, not at another character but, straight into the echo chambers of the narrator's mind. Reality is filtered through questions about language. These characters seem to take comfort in the stability of language, with its rules and conventions. The effect is often claustrophobic, and almost always upsetting.

In "Suddenly Afraid," we do not even have a complete sentence, just a continuation of the title—"because she couldn't write the name of what she was: a wa wam own owamn womn" (Davis 189)—confirming precisely what we feared: something is terribly wrong. And this is compounded by all the details left out of the story: What exactly is wrong with her? Who is she? How can she get help? What will happen to her now? The story seems funny at first reading but what looks like a punchline is actually a cry for help that could be the woman's last words. Similarly, the woman in "Lonely" needs help: her paralyzing need for even the slightest human contact (e.g. a phone call) has rendered her unable or unwilling to leave the house and meet people in case somebody *does* call (86). We know things will not end well for her.

Although "Grammar Questions" is a much longer story, it feels as constricting as the shorter pieces because we are in this woman's head, sharing her thoughts about her father's impending death. There is an obsessiveness and

myopia in the way the character scrutinizes every implication brought by small changes in grammar:

In the phrase “he is dying” the words “he is” with the present participle suggest that he is actively doing something. But he is not actively dying. The only thing he is still actively doing is breathing. He looks as if he is breathing on purpose, because he is working hard at it, and frowning slightly. He is working at it, but surely he has no choice. ... “He is dying” sounds more active than “He will be dead soon.” That is probably because of the word “be” – we can “be” something whether we choose to or not. Whether he likes it or not, he “will be” dead soon. He is not eating. (28, 29)

For these women, the still point is that state “between un-being and being” (Eliot), a kind of limbo where they are trapped by grief or solitude. The daughter is already grieving for her dying father because she knows it is just a matter of time. She uses grammar as escape and distraction, as a way of displacing the anguish, as a means to take herself out of time, because “to be conscious is not to be in time” (Eliot).

Paul de Guzman’s “What is right” is the third of four brief vignettes that comprise “What I mean to say is this,” a sudden fiction piece that traces the decline of a marriage through the wife’s meditations on how the couple uses language. This wife takes comfort in language games because they remind her of better times. Early in their relationship, before marriage, she and her mestizo lover-husband had devised a private language using Tagalog, English, and Spanish. She realizes something is wrong when she notices the husband speaking to her in

increasingly vehement Spanish sentences, which, when translated into Tagalog only, into English only, strike you as code words for “I’m seeing someone else.” *Estoy cansado. Llegaré tarde. Tengo previsto asistir a una reunión en Hong Kong el fin de semana que viene.* (“A reunion in Hong Kong?” you ask. “A *meeting*,” he translates, speaking slowly.) (98)

Their language game becomes a source of doubt and, later, of despair. Taking refuge in language that she *does* understand gives her some agency, reminds her of options, as we can see in the third section, “What is right,” reproduced here in full:

A few words you need to keep reminding yourself sometimes mean something else. *Derecho* does not always mean going straight (*recto*), but going right; being right is not always being correct (*correcto*), but being good (*bien*); *bien* is not always good or right, grammarwise, when *bueno* or *buena* is good or right. The lapse into English, in these moments, to clear the confusion. The desire not to have to go or be right, but to go or be left instead. Confusion sets in again: to go left is *izquierdo*, to be left is *dejado*; *dejado* also means messy, and in Tagalog *dehado* is the one no one bets on. (99)

In this brief but discombobulating paragraph, the wife seems to be giving herself a remedial lesson in Spanish. In truth, she is reminding herself that she doesn’t have to stay in this unhappy marriage, that she can choose to go. At this point, it does not matter who is more right or more wrong between them; she is no longer interested in being right because right is not always good. She clarifies to herself that she does not want to be forced to leave the

marriage, nor to be right about his cheating. She wants to leave on her own volition, or be the one left by the husband; no more pretense just to protect the in-laws' reputation. But to be the one abandoned (left) is not just messy; it also means she stands to lose everything and she has no one on her side.

Of interest, too, is how she is playing language games with herself, and not just because the husband refuses to play along. It is also because she is in denial; the situation is so bad she cannot even talk to herself directly about it. Spanish lesson notwithstanding, when the time comes for her to finally leave, with bags packed and ready to go, she chooses to play one more language game when he catches her by the door on her way out. She lets him win even if he is unaware the game is on (De Guzman 99). Her language game is a distraction that ultimately fails her, not just because "words move ... only in time" but also because "words strain, crack and sometimes break" (Eliot).

9. down the passage we did not take

Even before I could write my name, I knew that writing was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. We are a family of readers and writers. Lola read her ESV Bible daily and named her eldest daughter after Daphne du Maurier, her favorite novelist. Lolo headed UST's *Varsitarian* with Frankie Sionil Jose after the war, and later worked closely with Don Chino Roces at *The Manila Times*. We grew up with books because we knew that "human kind cannot bear very much reality" (Eliot) and when the horrors come, as they inevitably will, we must turn to writing.

A few years ago, my Lolo who has Alzheimer's visited the Loyola cemetery in Marikina. He said the place looked familiar. They used to visit someone there, someone

close to the family (which he says when he doesn't remember the person). But he did remember the markers to the grave, and he delighted in pointing them out: *there* is the tree, *there* is the wall, *there* is the grave. Curious about the person they were visiting, he knelt to read the name on the gravestone, and went perfectly still. A moment later, he asked for pen and paper, and slowly copied everything there—the name, the dates, a verse from the 23rd Psalm. At the bottom, he wrote: “Today, I visited the grave of my wife, Santa Batoon Roldan. (signed) Atty. Constante C. Roldan.” His hand must have shaken so much when he was writing because I could barely read his scrawl.

Although writing triggers often come from a static visual image, remembering or inventing what comes before or after the flash requires movement. There may also be a need to move from genre to genre, sometimes within the same writing project. My undergraduate training in poetry was the starting point of this way of writing. I think in images, in moments, and so I wrote poetry by moving from one moment to another. When I shifted to writing the narrative (fiction and nonfiction), I was forced to consider movement even more because of the exigencies of plot and the need for character development. Something must happen to a character, so the character must do something. For a character (or persona) to have agency, she must always move from stillness or contemplation and into action, *in medias res*, in the middle of things.

When writers talk of being in The Zone, they add this macho growl to their voices, even if they are 92-pound girls, and they begin to swagger like they just made a three-point shot by jamming a gorilla into the basketball hoop. This is because writers like to pretend they're sporty, and because the term is a neologism borrowed from sports. The Zone is “a state of such concentration that one is able to

perform at the peak of one's physical or mental capabilities" and it probably originally referred to a "specific area in a court, field, rink ... to be defended by a particular player" ("Zone").

In writing, The Zone is a state of heightened concentration, where nothing can shake you from the writing. It is often referred to as being centered (well-balanced, both confident and serene). That, I believe, is another elusive still point I need to pursue. Because the still point is necessary for writing to happen. We sit still to animate our thoughts, nudge the story along, make our minds move. Which is why when we are interrupted in the act of writing, it takes much time and effort to get back to the point of stillness.

A quick word on writing implements. Although a computer offers much capacity, ease-of-use, mobility, and connectivity, all of these bring the demons of Internet and gaming distraction right to our desks. There will be times when the best writing implements are those without moving parts—pen and paper. The movements when writing analog-style are small: How you grasp the pen more tightly or loosely to control the shape of the marks you leave on paper. How you shift your grip to redistribute the pen's weight in your hand. How you lift the tip of the pen when at a loss for words—nib or rollerball, or the polished graphite nub of pencil—only to bring it back down again when the room goes quiet, or when the body becomes still, and the mind once more begins to move.

A quicker word on Fictocriticism. Shortly before I returned to teach at UP, after a few years of teaching freshmen at the Jesuit university down the road, I had a good conversation with a colleague who was in Manila briefly for vacation-and-research from Australia's La Trobe

University. Prof. Mary Thomas told me about this great new way of writing scholarly papers that's a huge thing in Australia right now – something called Fictocriticism.

It's a literary approach, using a more personal tone to make the dry, boring numbers in your research project not just more palatable to harried journal editors but also to make it accessible to a popular audience. It also sounds suspiciously like "essaying" – what we've been doing forever in creative writing programs. No matter. What's key is that there is a trendy new name for what we writers have always done when we're not producing literary texts. Fictocriticism: a small movement that fuses creative writing (storytelling) and critical theory (constructing an argument). Popular in Australia and Canada. Considered postmodern, experimental, and feminist. Another label for the kind of research that writers have always done.

A final point: The thinking that happens when we write can seem at times like a kind of possession. The vague feelings rush through us rapidly, half-formed, at the speed of neurons. Synapses are formed by bridging – this neuron to that – a constant coupling and uncoupling at the speed of light. Except that there remains a space or gap at the junction across which nerve impulses pass. The nervous system where the brain is king is described by poet Peter Redgrove as "a tree of ice with sunlight shooting through it." That tree of ice is rooted in each of us, and therefore rooted also to the ground. And so when the earth moves (and we move along with it) in that long slow dance around the sun (to the music of the cosmos!) (that to our minds will last forever!) we are reminded of time's passing. And we mourn the eternal stillness that will one day consume us.

But when the Light of the world¹⁴ hits the tree of ice that we carry within us and the colors scatter, we stop for as

long as we can – on fire! an intense burning! – to prolong the moment. And then we move as we always do, as we *should*. We are moved. So that others may move as well. To catch and scatter the Light is what we are all here for. We have just forgotten. Because we mark time by the dance of the earth around the sun, the “slow rotation suggesting permanence” (Eliot) makes us believe we are trapped in perpetual stillness. That we may as well be stationary. But we are not. We never were. We have always been in motion.

Notes

¹ Titles for each section of this paper are taken from T.S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton."

² Created in the late 1960s by my grandfather, Atty. Constante C. Roldan, in memory of my great grandfather, Fructuoso Barreras Roldan, a former tax inspector of Baguio City who was at the time still very much alive.

³ Edited by Camilo Osias, with line drawings by Fernando Amorsolo, this was a series of books read by public school pupils before World War II.

⁴ Most likely, my grandfather put them there. And for obvious reasons.

⁵ A name familiar to those constantly online, Emily Rapp's story about her son, Ronan, being diagnosed with Tay-Sachs disease went viral in 2011. Google Books describes the memoir as "A mother's experience raising a terminally ill child, and what it teaches her about family, grief and parenting."

⁶ In Theology, Logos is the Word of God, or the principle of divine reason and creative order, identified in the Gospel of John with the second person of the Trinity incarnate in Jesus Christ ("Logos").

⁷ An activity better suited to magpies and wealthy art patrons.

⁸ The complete quote from Wordsworth is: "I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the

emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.”

⁹ not to be confused with OCD, obsessive compulsive disorder.

¹⁰ That would be Orientalism in action on so many levels. So, no, I’d rather not go there.

¹¹ Because “only through time is time conquered” (Eliot).

¹² Usually, a videogame-playing, comicbook-reading, superhero-worshipping, socially awkward young male.

¹³ M. Scheil is the pseudonym of an American woman playwright living in England.

¹⁴ In a 2005 graduation speech given at Kenyon College, the novelist David Foster Wallace asserts that there is no such thing as not worshipping. What we choose to worship and how we worship animates us, defines how we live out each single day. Please feel free to substitute for the Judeo-Christian image “Light of the world” with any object or entity you feel is worth worshipping.

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