

### ABSTRACT

In *Poems Around Calcetta*, the microcosm stands in for the big picture through a fictionalized version of the author's hometown in Bohol. Both historical events and ordinary everyday coincidences of a place are (re)imagined to tackle issues on the climate crisis and environmental decline, progress at the expense of preservation, and the increasing neglect of sound political decisions. Through this mini suite of poems, the provincial proves to be universal, and wherever one is situated in this world, the consequences of our decisions and of our state are just trailing behind us, or worse, already in front of us.

### Keywords:

climate crisis  
natural and unnatural  
disasters  
state policy  
typhoon odette  
bohol

# POEMS AROUND CALCETTA

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F. JORDAN CARNICE

## AROUND CALCETTA

This morning the orioles and their liquid leitmotifs fill the garden. They swoop in and out of trees, their yellow a piece of the sun anointed with wings, and against the skies, like heavy mangoes swinging from the branches of heaven.

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Yes, we're still here in a place that doesn't know what to do next. As if stuck in transition, a province in the form of a shrug. Day after day, the last of the roadside trees give a little wave with their leaves to people and cars rushing by, and we never even notice the kindness.

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How many cats do we have to see flat on asphalt, crushed on concrete, until we say something is not right? What of abandoned pups, shanties, the last giant ficus at the wet market, children? There is a heart that beats beneath these streets, and in this heart another word for *thrive* that is understood by all manners of tongue and temper. This is our life but this is not how we live.

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There is a story here that has to go somewhere, and it just left us.

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Under the rain a black goat stands motionless, closely against a wall as if in a shed visible only to the eye that cares. As if the less movement it makes the more it is sheltered from harm. Such could be the makings of this life, how it goes and endures a shed that will never be built. To be still in the middle of a storm because this is what we know of peace.

## MOST LIKELY, WHEN THE GROUND SHOOK ON THE 15TH OF OCTOBER 2013

It was eight on a holiday, everything outside still dewy, and most likely you had breakfast, filled and fortunate, while the rest resumed to thread the thickening patchwork of labor. Most likely, some were still fixed to their beds when the earth groaned and lurched forward as if from a nightmare, opening all eyes and unlocking every hardened joint in sync. Most likely, there was shock and a curtain of stockpiled jars, plates, bottles, and picture frames billowing in every corner. The idle hanger and wardrobe coming for your neck and legs, cardboard walls folding in on you. Most likely, a string of prayers to lasso everything back into order. Most likely, we were on all fours to remind ourselves once we were children, once we were innocent. Nine years later, most likely, we have not heard 222 lives perished, that nine in ten newborn babies weighed more than 2,500 grams, about 14 large apples priced at forty-one pesos each in January 2023, that a thousand and two birds immediately knew what to do, and that a centuries-old tree leapt from its stead, reached for the heavens before everyone else did. Most likely, these jeans would outlast us. Most likely, many of us simply did not stand a chance. As well as bridges and roads dispirited by hollowed hands. Many of these were long built to never bring us anywhere. Notice how the word *gap* breathes in *gaping*, how the seas have receded from coastlines as if the whole island outgrew its clothes. Notice how uncertainty is a limb paralyzed or a sky so calm and blue it refuted the tragedies down below. Most likely, when the ground shook, we didn't think of chances. We didn't think of favor.

We didn't think of home but of a life way ahead  
of us. Most likely, there is an ancient mountain  
in despair, that we are lucky to evade its grievances  
year after year until we are not. Most likely,  
we imagined we could've been better.

## ODD QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING TYPHOON ODETTE

Do you hear that? Is it the rain or is it the ground breaking apart again?

Where did the gentle tap dance go? What's with the gunshots unending above our heads?

Is the earth this thirsty? How did we end up depriving it by this much?

When a river rises, spills over its banks, is it still a river? Or is it a return to form, a showing of its true might?

Is there enough ocean to welcome all this water? Why dams?

Is drowning an embrace we've been avoiding all our lives?

Is there a sick joke hidden between flash floods and when life flashes before our eyes?

Is this a life we want, the idea to be in a cycle of cyclones?

Have you seen the eye of the storm? Is it staring back at you? Are you guilty?

Can this tempest pry out the names of politicians plastered on every project, fade those faces haunting every corner of the city?

Can it tell the difference between here and there, this trail of destruction?

Can the grasshoppers survive this? The earthworms, the millipedes, the frogs, the ants, the spiders, the lizards, the birds tucked tight within their own wet feathers?

Why do we say flamboyant for something full of color, brimming with soul like the Philippine trogon, when it is just what it is? Is there a limit to our spectrum?

Why are there far more questions than answers?

Why is the drainage system still unfinished after ten soaked years? Is the plan to be unprepared, bold against the monolith and the mythical?

Am I strong enough for another day?

Pa, what did I do?

How can you forget if you have not forgiven? Do you have to keep it in your chest for so long?

When did we start learning the ease of abandonment?

When a Badjao's house-on-stilts remains standing after the storm, are he and his people resilient? Are we using this word correctly? Or are he and his underwater-breathing ancestry the first line of defense, a living seawall like the dwindling mangroves?

Have we treated everything and each other so poorly?

Are you going to write about this?

Isn't this enough, this foolishness?

If we're lucky enough, do we have to smile at rainbows?

Do you smell that? Did you leave the iron on?

Where is the light? Why is everything heavy in the dark?

When will the false rescue of the sun arrive for us?

Why is there a need to enumerate your gods and saints when I am here all along?

Ma, where is our roof? Tree, where are your branches?

Despite all this, would you rather be terrified of men than of nature?

Do you need to remember this?

## THE SQUAWKING MACHINE

On New Year's Eve, in between children's firecracker snaps and bamboo cannons that give palm trees their unwanted updo with smoke and powder, a loud bang seizes the day and the stirrings in every household—television sets are put on mute, soaps are dropped in bathrooms, ladles stop ladling in kitchens. Cats and birds begin to blend in the shadows. We believe a thousand yellow flowers also unbloom in the outer fields of Calcutta. The explosion segues into a series of beats booming, increasing in broken tempo as if to be pumped into every covered ear. Word travels fast like dogs dashing on and off the streets with riotous curiosity—the new neighbors and their music. There is a tear in the night sky and the disturbance slips into everywhere our windows jitter in their rusting frames. The joy over there must have reached new heights, big thrills to turn melody to mockery, song to sonorous assault. But this is their joy. What do we do in the face of other people's happiness? At midnight we raise our sparklers, point to the direction of the squawking machine of a festivity as if to cast a spell. We can at least imagine. We play our parts and then life goes on. Now keep the music playing.

## VANTABLACK

And so we thought nothing could be more sightless,  
darker than a crooked man's promise. Here's a shape

confused by its lack of dimension, cube missing within  
its own corners, or a hole cut in the air like the end

of a massive star served on a plate, pleasing no poor man's  
appetite. It is a picture nobody has ever thought of

until it is pictured—a black so lurid it jumps at you, robs you  
of your senses and those that turn dreams dappled, saturated,

and hopeful. But it is not for lack of trying, to appear  
sophisticated and perfectly still in the face of emptiness.

In a nation of daylight robberies, we've had enough  
practice. On loss, on keeping forgetfulness close to our chests.

To best describe an absence, we need not look further  
than what surrounds us: boy knocking on car window

with greasy knuckles, housewives handwashing yesterday's  
undergarments during a rainstorm, the fundamentals of living

even when there's not much light. A scientist explained  
it is not a color but a material—like steel, wood, or acrylic—

made of an expanse of tubes, each the size of an atom,  
where light enters and never goes out. Never goes out.

As in a prison for things that could only matter to us  
when lost, when we say we see but see nothing at all.