

Crawl Space and Other Poems

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Crawl Space

The blast blew a huge hole on the right side of the northbound Newman Goldliner plying the Baclaran-SM Fairview route.

—“EDSA bus bombing: 4 dead,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (January 26, 2010)

I.

From the window seat we remember
the bright glare of sunlight
blinding then elucidating
the city's habits. It unfolds
behind the thick glass, cheap satin curtains,
its laments silenced
to a murmur we can ignore:
like peanuts, unmarked water,
a stranger with an envelope we say no to
without even looking. We adjust
our earphones tighter.
Our playlist includes Beck (that song
about the blizzard), Sting (“Fields
of Gold”), some Alanis (the early years).
We crawl to the next gridlock, our lives
inching toward the perfect future
we imagine in our seats:
I will not overcook the rice;
I will drop by the church;
I will catch the evening
news, shake my head at the unrest.

II.

The towers un-loom, smaller in the horizon. An ambulance interrupts our peace, blaring, chasing the next breath of air, the body turning blue at every corner. We lean our heads on white leather rests and peek at the people getting on: the nurse, the nun, the stranger with the meaningless box. We trust they are just. We trust they are just trying to go home.

III.

The light, in the split second, is warm, almost soothing.
The stillness crawls, the flat line rings, final and cold,
all manner of reaction forbidden.
In our heads, we must have done something
futile: like the fetal position, inward to the watery womb.
But what first to protect: Our ears from the thunder underneath?
Our faces? Our vulnerable legs, the culprit hidden under our noses?

The glass finds its way,
the blue charred to gray.
There is no future
except the evening news.
We cannot say no
to the mischief.
We trust the blizzard.
We crumble,
we close our eyes.
We rest our heads
on the malevolent street.

IV.

But we are just trying
to go home,
the day,
at noon,
already,
long.

What are the chances?

For him, the possibility
of love is a bus exploding
in the middle of EDSA.

That is: it is possible.

That is: there is an off-chance
it might happen to you
on your innocent Tuesday commute.

Two years ago his last chance
was blown to smithereens,
with a few beers and even
fewer tears. For him, the possibility
of another is like his last lover's frame.

That is: slim to none.

That is: slender.

As likely as the culprit
getting caught.

That is: if you're lucky, perhaps.

That is: don't count on it
unless you're ready
for routine disappointment,
unless you're expecting reprieve.

Everything, a metaphor

you don't believe. When I tell you the days
are sun-baked hills until you came along, you refuse
to drop again, precipitation-wise. When I say
I am a desolate gasoline station in the middle
of nowhere, you inquire about the true-to-life possibility
of cab drivers sipping coffee in a nearby roadside eatery,
downing bowls of *arroz caldo*, comparing stories
about the time when rain didn't stop for weeks

and floodwater was a putrid blanket
that covered the cold city from head to leanest side street.

It is raining now.

We are in a gas station in a corner we don't recognize.
Do you feel the tug between symbols and the vanishing
pavement? Between this body
and the endless shivering.

Phone call

Above the static, you tell me
you have found a strange book
on a roadside stand.
Will I read it? I nod, forgetting
you can't see my head, ascending
and descending in promise.
'Least that's what I heard; there is rumble
from a ten-wheeler or else the miles asserting
the distance of places.

On my end, it is quiet.

The air is a whirl
of freshly brewed coffee. Soft jazz music
wafts from piped-in speakers. I am saying
something unimportant,
something mundane, interrupted
by wayward thunder
and Billy Holiday's velvety voice
purring a lyric about a hopeless
assignment, tenderly about you:
how you cross latitudes, your shadow
lengthening over
rainforests and skyscrapers, and all
I have to do is look outside
for your pending darkness.

Years later

The man on a chair, alone in a gas station in the middle of a strange town. He sits underneath a pool of light, one of the sporadic flickers one passes by on a trip south of the city. A small radio plays a scratchy old tune. Soon, the roar of an engine. With a tilt of the head he greets the bringer of ruckus then asks him how much. The reek of gasoline chases both their noses. They ignore it, with a vague notion of courtesy, forbearance. The transaction done, he tells the man to keep the change. He thinks that he had done him a favor by interrupting the man's vigil, by rescuing the place from the night's endless palette. Another pleasant tilt of the head, and from the radio, the song ended, replaced by careless static. The engine's final note has faded. The man sits back down, basking anew in the fleeting light, not quite invigorated.

Kilometer Zero

At dawn the rain abated. I did the things
one does in daylight, I acquitted myself.
—Louise Gluck, "Eros"

There is a place in the city
we have not mapped
with our deliberateness,
our rites of tender passage.
Safe from our trace,
it unfolds in shadows
for now, in a sallow hue. Here,
light is tamed, muted
between porticos,
under dome ceilings,
inside palms I will now
unclench, done with prayer,
unlike the desolate
others. Watch this inundation,

then stop. Exhale.
You must know: I recede
with the level intake of air,
calm and never forceful,
the quiet direction of feet
toward a small entrance,
where the light is coming from.
I have forgotten this.
There are places in the city
that will not bear
the imprint of your shoe,
the weight of tenderness
we carried on our shoulders.
I have forgotten this. Sky—
the shadow of an object
in retreat, in revolution until
it returns. Here—
where we are, it is dark again.

There is always someone

At some point, the city becomes his lover, traffic his lullaby, torrential rain a surprise burst of emotions running down pavements, its damp cheeks. He tells the driver his destination, a word for *good intentions*, then a big hospital as additional clue. But in the coffee shop he cups the warmth like the concave of someone's mouth and the city beyond the sweaty glass becomes a memory. There is always someone in the vicinity whose warmth he thinks of: the one behind the expensive laptop, the one buried in legal books, the one who is always there, in that spot by the terra-cotta pots, as familiar as the various routes available in case of flooding, in case of unusually heavy volume of cars on the road. He imagines taking the seat across him with the boldness that only intimacy affords, a swell of love, a cursory "Where were we?" and the many words we assign to the task of continuing where we left off.