

An Essential Filipino Experience

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Curled over
into your own lap
like a crestfallen wave
or a foetal question mark
– gestures of helplessness –
your head nevertheless
banging on the iron roof,
your arms smashed against
the rusty cross struts,
fuel in your nostrils,
smuts in your eyes,
a Manila tricycle ride
is an experience
to be savoured

only when over.
After you arrive
you can uncrumple
your poor body,
the fume choking engine
still wheezing
in your ears
and can say with surprise
“I’m still alive!”
and soon after
the words are spoken
realise only a handful
of bones are broken.

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On the UP Campus

dog tired after a day's
 teaching and hours of arguing
 with a computer that behaved
 as if it had a gorilla inside,
 I was approached by three
 young women, students, camera in hand,
 fresh-faced, lively and laughing.
 They had a project, a survey
 with just one brief question:
 "What was the happiest
 moment in your life?"

Happiest, saddest, best, worst...
 As if life was a test of absolutes,
 not gradations,
 yet I picked one:
 the moment you stood in
 our crumby, half-collapsing flat
 in London, straight from the doctor's,
 long-haired, a little plump,
 little older than these girls,
 and with a slightly hesitant smile
 told me you were pregnant.
 In my mind the moment is so vivid
 it stands utterly outside time.

A doctor would point out
 that it's just biology –
 a sperm meeting an egg –
 but I thought it a miracle.
 Forty-one years later
 our son has his own son
 and you are two years dead.
 Life has its hard-bitten lessons
 and of them I've had my fill;
 I know much more than I once did;
 and yet it seems to me
 a miracle still.

At the Balay Internasyonal

No tv, no radio, the internet
 intermittent at best,
 the rest of the world
 drifted away.
 There my everyday,
 simple acts became
 simpler still,
 more deliberative, more thoughtful,
 my grasshopper mind slowed,
 time slipped
 down a gear. Through
 slatted blinds the light came up
 softly, and at day's end
 gently died away. The warmth
 of the air surrounded my arm.
 Through a rabbit hutch opening
 in screenwire that kept
 dengue fever and malaria
 at bay I could push the windows
 out into the world

where silence never visited. A great racket
 of traffic argued incessantly
 on the nearby highway:
 a cacophony of cars, beeping jeepneys, ruptured trucks,
 a wheeze of fraying motorbikes
 haggled for position. Below
 my window what seemed
 hundreds of roosters
 in celebration or fright
 with no clock in their brilliant heads
 crowed all day
 and much of the night.

There translucent
 insects the shapes of commas
 skittered around the floor,
 a flesh coloured gekko
 camouflaged on the wall
 kept me company, and

it was a delight to be one
of these living creatures.

I had nothing, I did nothing, and nothing happened
you might say.

Central

Rain sticks to the smooth-faced window
 as silk clothes mesh with saturated flesh.
 In the mornings I walk steeply,
 shin splints aching, feet flapping,
 baffled head angled to my feet:
 had Newton been born in Hong Kong
 gravity would have had no need of apples.
 The lemurs and baboons screech
 from their high wire trapezium cages.
 All about the green and soggy island
 lit-up windows stare, unblinking but inconstant
 like hints in punched card concrete code
 where life is lived vertically
 up and down mountainfaces
 that seem to say to our hurtling sleeves
What are you doing here, what
consequence? Government towers,
 shopping towers, escalators of possessions
 soak up the fast-paced, still air.
 The Hong Kong Art Museum displays the
 Seven Disciples of Tian Feng almost for free
 but you must really pay to see Luis Vuitton.
 A world of difference lies between
 Magazine Gap Road and Tsim Sha Tsui,
 between St John's Cathedral and the IFC.
 What is central to others, to me,
 as ferries creak across a soupy harbour?

Go Gently

(For Bill Shepherd, my father-in-law)

I come to see you this one last time
as you shake in your firm framed chair.
How hard it is to say a goodbye
that can but mean never again.

No matter how blanketed, you can't get warm
because the blizzard of death is blowing
from within; blood leaches from your body
all the dim day and throughout the night:

for the first time you don't drink coffee I bring,
your hands can't stop shivering around
the cup, your fingers are porcelain, your toes
numb, your organs shutting down one by one.

Though your endeavour has been full and long
a strong sense of pointlessness at the end
absurdly betrays us. "We will never forget you"
I say, but "never" is not a human word.

I turn and walk down what suddenly seems
too short a corridor. One last wave:
there's no more to give, all words gone.
Go gently and silently, with dignity and calm,

yet no matter how seriously we try
there is no human way to say goodbye.

In My Thinking

Here on business one more
sad time, these days far too often,
I no longer even mumble my way
through the neatly rhymed hymns;
what kind of Him needs his creatures
to raise their voices endlessly
in praise, as if He
didn't know his own Godliness?
In the magnificent cathedral's cavernous

imitation sky, the gold cross
held high glints and shines, the voices
below speak on schedule
in rare and strenuous air the doubtful
solemnities of prayer, servants to
a master. Incense, robes, the light
shining at times through vivid, sanctified
glass. How many friends and personages
for whom I'm practising the change

from "know" to "knew," who
never to my knowledge ever spoke
of divine belief go off
with a whiff of incense – their choice
or that of those left behind? –
"God be in my heart, and
in my thinking," sinking at last
with calm, understandable relief
into the desperation of belief?

Monday Night Outing

Monday nights, one kilometre
of Beaufort St is strung
with stalls: Sicilian arancini,
crepes francaises, curries, kebabs,
kangaroo skewers, crème brulee...
The atmosphere is purely
carnival, friendly, casual, and
deliciously inexpensive.
Amongst the throng
we went to sit
on a low brick wall

when suddenly I keeled
out of the world.
My friend, a cardboard
plate of Moroccan something
in hand, screamed
and grabbed my shoulder
– I know these details
only from her –
a stranger jumped
and stopped me
hitting the pavement.
When I came back
the ambos said,
“Come to our van,”
but I needed
to just sit
in the cold, clammy sweat
up and down
my face and arm.
Fluttering-stomached
I sipped their water
then stumbled over.

They put me in a chair,
torchlit my eyes,
and pricked my fingers
as in a fairy tale.
When I went again

out of existence
or existence went out of me
they were worried.
I was soon back
but they were firm:
“See a doctor!”

Hazy-headed and queazy
I vaguely directed
my friends the cornering,
darkened way to hospital.
Taken through into
medically organised
frenetic night actions:
people staggering,
people on crutches,
behind curtains
an eight months pregnant victim,
a man whose rat of pain
ran up the clock
of his spine.
I lay back
for an e.c.g.,
for all the tests,
gave blood and urine,
and was drip-filled
for hours. All tests
fine, then
they took out
the canula,
ripping the hairs
from my arms.

The experience of nothingness
is nothing
but somehow you
know you’ve had it:
a vacancy registers
in the brain.

I staggered out
with my friends,

wondering if it was
a warning, a dry run
for the nothing
I and we
will all become,
for there's nothing like
five hours in Emergency
to make you think,
“How quick?” “How long?”