

Manila, 1970's and other Poems

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Manila, 1970's

I grew up at a time
when the men and women of Manila
paid three pesos to see movies.
They smoked in the theaters,
tendrils of smoke rising
into the light of projectors
showing gritty Tagalog films
like the ones where a *probinsyano*
searches for his hometown sweetheart
turned prostitute in the city,
pining for love lost on the corner of
Ongpin and Misericordia.

I grew up at a time
when the men and women of Manila
shared sodas in pre-war ice cream parlors
walked hand in hand along Manila Bay at night,
sat on the sea wall by Roxas Boulevard, watching lights from
Laguna fishing boats bobbing in the distance,
wishing the night would never end.

I grew up at a time
when the men and women of Manila
married in ancient churches,
took 7-hour bus rides to Baguio City
where they breathed cold mountain air
craved each other's warmth
when the fog rolled in at night,
their faces glowing in the heat of the hearth.

I grew up at a time
when the men and women of Manila
made love to music that
opened with pops and crackles
on mammoth speakers
the moment the needle touched the
shiny black surface of 45's like
Minnie Ripperton's "Lovin' You."

And when I look back,
I wish I was all grown up then,
a woman in love with a man
once upon a time in Manila.

Haunted

after Amiri Baraka

Lately I've been reading about dead people
trapped on earth, unable to walk into the Light.
Makes me wonder if the woman standing
next to me on the cold subway platform is really alive
or just one of the many New Yorkers walking
the city with haunted faces.

Who will set us free?

At night after I cook and eat dinner and wash
up and put away the dishes, I like to curl up
in front of the TV to watch the news.
But then it's all about the little girl murdered in Queens,
a rape on the Upper East Side, an elderly lady
burned to death in her apartment in Brooklyn.

How can anyone sleep?

And yet last night as I lay in bed with my face buried deep in my pillow,
unable to shut out images of haunted faces, people who walk the city
at night, dead and alive and half-dead, frightened by the darkness in the room,
my husband slipped in between the sheets and lay his leg over mine
till his warmth enveloped me completely

and I fell asleep, smiling.

Brad's Cafe on Waverly

I'm sitting at a table near the window
watching a hard rain fall.
NYU students clamber for shelter—
Girls squealing, boys laughing,
Shaking the wet from their hair.
I count chocolate raisins
Put them in my mouth
And wonder how many I'll have
Before you arrive.

I lose count when you walk in
And quickly put them away
Since you don't like chocolate
And you don't like raisins
And I wonder if you'll taste them
When you kiss me.

But you don't kiss me.
You only mutter hi
and curse the rain,
the streets, the city.
You're not happy
you're sick of this place
you're thinking you need a change
a change that might
lead you out west
and there's nothing that suggests
you'll take me with you.

So while you're talking to the table
hands deep in your pants pockets
forgetting that I am there
I take out my chocolate raisins
put them in my mouth and

watch kids shake the rain from their hair.

Lola's Backyard in Taal

was a small quadrangle—
hemmed on all sides
by four stone walls.

So simple, really.
A pig pen in one corner
a chicken coop in another

and in the center
a cement chopping block
covered in blood.

I fed the pigs mango skins
and banana peels
and leftover rice from lunch.

Once, I watched the *kusinera*
chop off the chicken's head
and I stared at the chicken

running, headless, flapping
wildly 'round the block
till it plopped down dead.

I looked up at the square of
blue sky and as the clouds
raced above me,

imagined the backyard in flight.

*Creative
Nonfiction*

