

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Creative Nonfiction:

Two Trains

Juaniyo Arcellana

Philippine Studies vol. 53, no.2&3 (2005): 269–271

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Two Trains

JUANIYO ARCELLANA

After a few flights of stairs, there is the rush of wind in a tunnel, elevated as it is with a view of the city and its pontoon of noises. At the exact same moment, two trains leave their respective terminals from opposite sides of the city, albeit on different tracks; how long would it take for them to pass each other and at which station, high above the roofs and electric wires of tenement houses and dark offices, in which at some obscure corner a faceless couple may be making love, the point of entrance and fusion?

There is a girl's name you want to call out, though that name may no longer exist, at best forgotten in the stories that are the succession of stops the trains make at each station between them. Was it Carmen or Olga, names from a disjointed past that could no longer ring the proverbial bell, except for the warning chime just when the automatic doors are to close and our journey to resume again.

And the characters in our midst, each has a separate history, in their own way trains themselves, but on intersecting multiplaned tracks full of abstractions and taking the shape of other vehicles in the course of the day and night: pedicabs and carretelas, the view of a man and a woman riding tandem on a motorcycle, the wind in their hair of grayest matter, cars, jeepneys, trucks, ten- and twelve-wheelers; bicycles suddenly gathering dust in a bodega.

Many years ago there was an essay that came out, romancing a beggarman on Avenida. Today there is a blind man at the façade of the Sta. Cruz Church off Carriedo Street, playing an orange whistle he holds with his stumps of arms, the occasional coin jangling into his tin can. Could he be the same one who never gave up like love and its

gadgets of goat's eyelashes not anymore sold openly on the sidewalks beside the Mass cards and amulets? At times the orange whistle would be missing and the blind would sing in his shaky tremolo of a Holy Week voice, amid the shuffle of pedestrians' feet and the repetitive percussion of coins, this for God and manna the sightless syndicate of dreams.

Now we return to . . . the two trains. Screech of tracks and blur of faces on the opposite side, almost as if they are rummaging through memory's dire cabinets and drawers of wood, the paint peeling off them. Boni Avenue at the foot of the stairs, just before you hit the rolling incline homewards, there is a barbecue vendor with his meaty goods, smoked to perfection and salt spicy vinegar, beside the convenience store that smells of Lysol to keep clean the shelves stocked with beer and canned goods, manila paper, chocolates, finger food for thought.

At some point the two trains converge, though on opposite platforms at EDSA, one southbound to Baclaran from Monumento, the other also southbound to Taft from North Avenue. Flash of recognition at the mall that joins the two platforms, endless lines for the rote frisking by guards at the simulated entrance, rush of gray wind in the gloaming. The clocks are never right at the station, always a few seconds, minutes, hours ahead or slower, so it does not matter if one is rushing or taking one's time at the turnstiles to insert the card with the small picture of the small woman named Gloria. But once there was a time of tokens.

Another story, another stop.

Vito Cruz Street, now known as Pablo Ocampo Street, fourteen years we lived there, a nearly subterranean existence during the monsoon season, until "Here Comes the Sun" played on the radio and we waited patiently for the floodwaters to recede. Many years without a phone either until the invention of the cellphone, the first models resembling ice scrapers in sidewalk turo-turos. How many commuters are texting on their phones at the moment of intersection of trains on Vito Cruz corner Taft, one going south to Baclaran and its Wednesday faith, the other northwards to Monumento and its statue of the Great Plebian? And what exactly would those text messages convey? Always running late, high above the flood and safe from the downpour in the womb of the LRT station, a stone's throw away from De La Salle

University where once a girl named Lisa attended a booklaunch long before her father shot himself in the head like Richard Corey.

And when the sexes were segregated in the LRT, members of the Parahipo gang moaned their lament, no more would they get a chance for the quicksilver touch, those quickening preludes to procreation; or is it the Parahipo's imagination running away with them? When the same ice age segregation was suggested at the MRT, adherents of the Chewbacca tribe were likewise saddened, no more would they get the chance to ponder the fate of flashers, those weird and dirty species of the male who've forsaken all subtlety, ciphers of the lost art of dissimulation.

Would that we be happy with two trains, intersecting every which way but never colliding, like the real thing but not quite, because anyway now there are three trains, the LRT 2 recently launched by executive fiat, stretching from C. M. Recto Mendiola eastwards toward Marikina, whole new chapters of forbearance. Would that these three trains become two, and two trains become one, and so on, and so on. And so long, Doroteo Jose Street where once there was a bookstore, wall to wall titles of lambent obscurity, and the Chinese proprietor nodding his head at the ingress and egress of dazed customers.

There were titles on homelessness, of living under the bridge, under flyovers and elevated train stations, laundry hanging like multicolored flags of some Kurosawa battlefield, except this time the space was cramped, and any glimpse you got was a benediction. Under the bridge, the three trains became two, then one. A lone one of obscurity chugging along the tracks, shaking like the hand dragging a pencil across paper. Of course, she would be waiting there, whoever she is, faceless like the rain.