MAKING SCENES

She and her husband once lived in Sagada, a mountain town half a day away from Manila. The town was so remote not even cellphone signals could reach it. One day, two friends visited. After dinner, they would choose a film and reconstruct it entirely from memory. The husband would describe the opening scene. She would comment on music, then on the transition to the next few scenes. One friend would talk about cinematography. The other friend and the husband would recreate dialogue. Often, they would contest each other: at this point, the camera shows the entire room, not a close up of the lovers’ faces. The mise-en-scene is cramped; the relationship is stifling. That may be so, but silence makes the room seem larger. Why is footage of a housing shortage riot included when most of the action happens in corridors, rooms, kitchens. It was like putting together a cut up map of a city where there is so much rain, and using that map to go through a city where there is so much sunlight.

Distance makes artifice possible. Someone may mention details—wet empty streets, lampposts—when, in fact, it may have been otherwise. Someone may tilt the angle of her telling too sharply. Someone may impute melancholy when there was none: rain fell as a man and a woman, who may or may not have been lovers, were having noodles in an alley,
talking. When she told me this, we were in Manila: it was a sunny day and she sounded happy. Now, she, her husband, and I are elsewhere. It rains all the time. Memories fade like towns in a map folded so many times that their names vanish into the creases. In my room I write them scenes I can remember. Edges of details seem to fit, but the image formed seems inaccurate, as when four people in a room talk about a scene’s angle of light and roughness of noise, while outside, the night is as dark and still as a grand perhaps. Nobody contests me. I produce ghosts to make solitude bearable. Remembering starts with shortage, then ends in perplexity. Memories emerge from, then disappear into, the folds of artifice: long take, depth of field, dissolve.

Ora Pro Nobis

After the child was shot, the man carried her in his arms. The crowd in the background did not leer and gawk like extras in a spectacle. No music, only ambient sound. The camera focused on the man carrying the child. Silence was a character imposing itself on the scene. It was as silent as watching a cloud taken apart by wind coming from this direction, then that.

John en Marsha sa Amerika

When the policeman chanced upon John, he had already taken a leak. “Hey fellow,” he said, “that’s against the law.” John said, “No, it’s against the wall.” Reverse consonance, by then, had fallen out of fashion, but the policeman was amused and let John go. Passersby kept to themselves and walked along, though if this had not been a comedy, they would gather—at a distance but within earshot—waiting for an arrest to be made.

Batang West Side

In a dream, water jars fell one by one from a balcony. A woman walked across the foreground, taking several minutes to cross from end to end. Her dress trailed behind, her shadow was beside her. Water splashed on the pathway. Pieces of jar scattered on the ground, like severed ears straining to hear her shadow’s faint footsteps.
Batch ’81

“Did Martial Law help or harm the country,” the master asked the initiate strapped to the electric chair. The batch was ordered to watch as the master hit the switch. Little did the batch know that this was a test: should they obey the master and watch their friend get shocked, or should they disobey and get expelled. The wide angle shot took everything: the master’s face, the batch’s hesitation, the initiate’s voice, help help help. Look at one of them pressing against the frame as if he wanted to break through to another life.

Darna

Narda ate the stone, shouted “Darna!” and became Darna. She could defeat the villain who had snakes instead of hair. She could run fast and rescue people in distress. She could fly: watch her image (close up) superimposed on a view of the city (panorama). An anagram is a sign of distress: a riot rearranges crowds, an incantation rearranges names, a villain rearranges lives.

Maynila sa Kuko ng Liwanag

The man from the province failed to find his lover—Ligaya Paraiso—in the city. In despair he killed the Chinese man who he thought held her captive. A mob chased him down the street. He was unfamiliar with the city. He ran into a dead end. The crowd caught up with him. As he was being lynched, the camera focused on his face. A close up holds in captivity the range of possible expressions. After a few moments, her image appeared—her name, translated, means “Happy Paradise”—then his face and her image faded into black.

Bayaning Third World

The name of the national hero was everywhere: matchboxes, streets, funeral parlors. His statue was in every plaza. His books were in all the libraries. “I am just as how you want me to be,” he said to the filmmakers who wanted to make his biopic. The mise-en-scene conflated past and present: near the hero were dungeons and prison bars, near the filmmakers were cameras and computers. “But you cannot know me even if you tried.” The hero lit a cigarette. The smoke moved from one side of the scene to the other: from there and then, to here and now.
SHORT WALKS

To walk through a city is to cut it into parts: like a wound or a landscape the city opens, then like a scab or a room it closes. My scholar and I move in a pace so slow it is like postponement. When we walk through a city we hurt it, my scholar says: we make it aware of how much it is against itself. Our shadows are the bruises of buildings, our slowness keeps the wound from healing, our being together means we are prone to surprise: this church, clouds, that house, chance, this sweat, glance, that touch.

Show your face, dear city, then hide, says my scholar. How you reveal yourself is inseparable from how you conceal: it is a gesture called history. My scholar loves a street that leads to a point along a riverbank, ends where another street begins, ages along with its buildings, becomes blind corner, betrays its old name for a new one. In the ache of opposites, the city knows it is alive: crowd and solitude, old and new, beauty and decay, feeling and fact, silence and noise, grasp and emptiness. Make sense of this with me, says my scholar: if we talk to the city, how the city responds is a clue to how we shall be together.

I disagreed with my scholar’s way of thinking. I wanted to take things apart. In the city there is a steel church whose parts were made in another country and then sent here on separate ships. I thought to do the opposite: pry things apart, set the parts adrift, observe how dismantlement leads to the new: a dialogue between buttress and transept, nave and steeple. The streets which my scholar loved made sense to me, but only after going through a method akin to derangement: arriving at the unknown after a long period of poison, suffering, disorder. Melt the steel of the steeple and create money. Take in water from the river and make thirst. Put two people side by side and produce silence.

My scholar believed that separate things, even if they were in pain, comprised a whole; I believed that the distance between particulars, the space between statues and plazas, the blank between noise and sublimity, a gap between a river and the knowledge of itself, had to be maintained by force: the parts would cohere only when they could overcome the force that kept them separate. But this would entail so much violence that when the parts merged they would no longer be recognizable. In other words: ugliness. In other words: the new.

On the day we parted, my scholar said: in another time, walking was slow incision, people walked led by tortoises. Umbrellas, boots, liquor, curl of shopkeeper’s moustache, history of objects on display: the slowness made shapes and sounds and stories clear. I cannot describe my talent for causing a swiftly-ruined thing, but for penance I took walks,
without tortoises but pilgrim-slow: hence these words that follow, hence silences, hence the 
blanks that link you and me, hence crowds, hence clues, hence a kind of motion that opens 
shut things, as when one is in a room collapsing into the size of departure, one sees bodies 
approaching each other—which one is me, which one is you—like lips of a wound that 
ever close into a kiss.

R. Hidalgo

Cliché to say crowds reside in a loner cliché to say in you 
there are multitudes cliché to say a crowd is an image of loneliness look 
at that woman going down the underpass who will she be once 
she emerges on the other side like an aphorism about to fall in love 
with gossip.

Anloague

For years he built houses made of wood and thatch and when stone and tile became 
fashionable he swam down the river and was never seen again.

Quiapo

There are two statues. The head of the first 
is true. Its torso and limbs are copies. The torso 
and limbs of the second are true. Its head 
is a copy. If I tell you which one goes out every year 
to be touched by crowds you would see 
how much of you inhabits me. Truth copy 
limb crowd twin touch copy torso.

Bilibid Viejo

Hands tied, eyes blindfolded, feet bound. 
Passersby talk about where they had gone. 
Listening is the only way you can travel from now on.
Estero Cegado

I was open.
   In consequence, moments were taken from me without my knowing.
I was unkind.
   Nevertheless, desire looked at me from head to foot.
I was occupied.
   In the meantime, from inside buildings voices spoke into mirrors.
I did not know how to love without ruining the other.
   In another city, shadows teach
light how to shine by refusing to cast themselves on surfaces. In the absence
of shadows light burns more brightly, out of horror.

Hormiga

Perhaps smallness perhaps longing perhaps the linking
of streets perhaps laughter perhaps satiation perhaps
a way of entering another wherein compassion was
indistinguishable from violence perhaps pausing
perhaps a glance perhaps breathing perhaps another.

Ongpin

A walk is a form of tenderness not slow enough to mean let’s be still, not fast enough to
mean let’s flee.

San Sebastian

There was little time left before parting.
   We stayed there the longest.
It has withstood war and earthquake for it knows how it began:
   in pieces, complete only in the mind, then in fragments coming in—pillar, steeple,
   buttress, altar—parts of a lack longing for the opposite of upheaval,
   one by one arriving from far away.