

THERE IS NO EMERGENCY

Conchitina Cruz

University of the Philippines Diliman / State University of New York Albany
crcruz@albany.edu

About the Author

Conchitina Cruz teaches creative writing and literature at the University of the Philippines in Diliman. A recipient of Fulbright and Rockefeller Foundation grants, she is the author of *Dark Hours* (UP Press, 2005), *elsewhere held and lingered* (High Chair, 2008), *Two or Three Things about Desire* (The Chinese University Press, 2013), and (together with Adam David and Delilah Aguilar) *A catalogue of clothes for sale from the closet of Christine Abella—perpetual student, ukay fan, and compulsive traveler* (the Youth & Beauty Brigade, 2012). Together with a few other Manila-based writers, she runs a small press called the Youth & Beauty Brigade. She is currently pursuing a PhD in English at the University at Albany, State University of New York.

TODAY WE HAUL A DOZEN PLASTIC BINS filled with books into the study. The aging cat swats a few dust balls, grooms, curls up in a corner. We spend the afternoon cross-legged on the floor, snacking, thinking up systems for classifying the books on the shelves.

I would like the ceramic hippo in a tutu to be a disposable artifact from my early twenties. I just need to reread the notes to self that I slid through its slot in lieu of coins to confirm that this is so.

In response to the persistent solicitor at the gate, I walk to the window and yell out an apology.

If I could set aside my sharp declaratives for what is after all a treatable infection.

Music pouring out from you into the house, some notes almost childhood summers, the kitchen air humid from my newly pressed school uniforms. I pull up a stool next to the laundrywoman. Together we sympathize with the heroine of the soap opera.

The sputtering motor of the fridge, the dying engine of the car, the parking lot in the reclamation area, the concrete eroded by the waves of the sea, the cracks insinuating an open grave.

According to the calendar, we are days away from a demonstration and a birthday dinner.

By the unused sink, the stack of brick-hard books retrieved from the flood.

In between writing out the receipt for the rent and rummaging through drawers for the electric bill, the landlady tells me her instructions to her niece for her own wake and funeral. Money is the best child you can have, she says.

I deposit another rosary from my mother in the jar where we keep our spare keys.

In bed I play the girl you fucked while I was away. I come out of it with a craving for seafood and, two days later, a bruise on my shin.

Dear animal, I write, mimic my face so I can touch you.

*

Track three on the loop today to drown out the wailing of the neighbor's child. The sound of wood on metal, metal on skin, skin on skin. The cat arches its neck to look out the window.

I re-color the reindeer with a felt-tip pen, which doesn't conceal its broken leg.

A gaggle of girls in balloon skirts and pumps emerges from the church across the street, ready to terrify pedestrians with their apocalyptic flyers.

If I could conduct the confrontation via questionnaire, a box to check for every unfounded claim.

I read lips as I stand by the screen door. *Garden. Guard them. Warden. Ardent.*

You are still younger than I was when I met you.

The chart on the bill plots our increasingly irresponsible consumption of energy.

Thirteen reminds me of glasnost and perestroika, the fall of the Wall, the coup d'état. I do not remember the state of the world when I was twenty-five. Something has clearly gone wrong along the way.

The cab driver would like to know what I'm doing out alone late at night without a male companion.

With subtitles, the window view transforms from ominous to cathartic.

In bed I am the intern from the second floor who gets Thursday afternoons off to attend worship. I am taught to do things with my mouth.

The reminder joins the bouquet of motivational post-its on my desk.

*

Up on the roof today to investigate the leak, we scan the city and divide it into north, south, east, and west, tracking the fault line and the path of last year's flood. The young man who suns himself daily by the corner store sees us and waves. He's not quite all there—you say to me, again.

I steady myself with one hand on the scales of the fish inked on your arm.

Signs on the road to the neighborhood hardware store: the hotline to salvation, the tea for inducing weight loss, numbers of plumbers for hire, the obscenity on the pedestrian's shirt.

If the admission were true rather than a more bearable version.

There ought to be a spot in the house where the object can be admired as a symbol of hard-won purchasing power and not a symbol of the summer that needs to be undone.

Because there is still one missing body, the news continues to distinguish between official and unofficial counts.

My father tells me, as we watch the protagonist of the telenovela die a slow death, that the actor is in fact alive, unharmed by the shot to his chest. I don't know if he is commenting on my occasionally infantile sense of reality or misreading my lethargy for heartbreak.

The earthquake is what you talk about when you talk about having done your time.

In bright light, the term of endearment is almost acceptable.

I nurse a beer to keep up with my subjunctive mood.

In bed you want to watch without touching. This goes on for a while.

Dearest—. My fingers follow the fault lines.

*

Today I travel from room to room, pausing at every doorway where, overhead, a crucifix hangs, left by the previous tenants. Is this their passive-aggressive method of spreading the good word or their passive-aggressive method of renouncing their faith?

The mysterious thing on the carpet is actually the missing beak of the wooden bird we thought to be beyond repair and discarded along with yesterday's take-out.

The vagrant standing outside the fence eyes me with suspicion.

If I could fold myself into *garden*, fold myself into *near*, fold myself into *are*.

Sometimes the lie sits up in bed and clicks incessantly, surfing channels. Sometimes the lie keeps the faucet running in the bathroom. It wants to know what it's up to, but it won't say where it is.

You watch me turn the knob eight times to make sure the door is locked.

Because I believe my name is too strange to be duplicable, I feel guilt when a police record pops up, even though I am not fifty-five years old, have no birthmark on my cheek, am not from Bulacan.

I learned *white elephant* from the nuclear power plant, not from the monosyllabic writer.

In the dream I misread *howl* for *how* and understandably end up wasting time.

Keep your vegetables raw, my mother says.

In bed I ask if you can tell I've been newly fucked.

The better to see you, my dear.

*

Today, walking to the bakery to buy bread and laughing at the photoshopped politician's head on the tarp, I am awash with the joy of being alive, soon replaced by the dread of being mistaken.

The dog on the counter bobs its plastic head up and down in agreement.

In case the world is listening, the neighbor, by way of videoke, wants to dance with somebody, wants to feel the heat with somebody.

If I could reduce the crisis to a quip I wash down with the last of the wine.

The epidemic on the news, an unread message from your mother, leftovers for lunch. The epidemic left over, the message for lunch, news from your mother. Leftovers unread, the epidemic for lunch, the message new.

A child's bike now parked in the balcony of our old apartment.

In the hospital lobby, I pass the time reading the unpronounceable names of doctors, some of the letters having fallen from the words they spell, littering the bottom of the glassed-in directory.

I share a birth date with a senator afflicted with logorrhea, a penis-fixated comic book artist, and a volcanic eruption that reduced global warming by a few degrees: this is one available explanation.

The fortune cookie says, if it isn't something, then it's something else.

The siege does not yet merit more than a ticker tape footnote grazing the chin of the weeping soap opera star as she performs her most daring role to date.

In bed I lean on your shoulder as you scan our lewd photos. I am impressed by how often I changed my hairstyle in the course of a year.

Enough, I write—the last item on the grocery list.

*

In the mail today: an invitation to lunch with a friend at her favorite restaurant, the one place on campus which pairs forks with knives rather than spoons, she never fails to note, as if this were the height of civilization.

Things that fall from the pages of books: ants, drugstore receipts, flower petals, moth wings.

The office girl pauses before a parked car, leans close to the window, and checks her makeup.

If it were a phase rather than a habit, I suppose.

Because they are flustered, I ask: Is *iamb* an iamb? Is *trochee* a trochee? Is *anapest* an anapest? Is *dactyl* a dactyl?

It ought to be unlikely that the owner of the coffee shop I frequent is the former neighbor who turned his living room into a sweatshop of life-sized naked-girl pillows, the whirr of sewing machines keeping me company as I nursed my insomnia.

The phone rings without letup, caller unknown.

The semester of the drought, I stood in line every morning to have a pail filled with greasy water from a fire truck. In this way I began to know the girls in my dorm.

Advice from the radio announcer: infidelity is a natural disaster.

It would be funnier if it were called *They Think They Want The Same Thing*.

In bed you want to hear about the proposition at the bar. And then what? you ask, your knuckles pressed against my back.

Dinner in the fridge, I scribble on a post-it and stick on the door.

*

Today the shoeshine boy at the gate wants to know if we can spare any empty plastic bottles. While waiting, he snaps his fingers and clucks at the cat, trying to get it to look at him.

You volunteer to move the dead shih tzu from the middle of the road to the sidewalk.

Oblivious to the tricycle behind her, the girl continues to text on her phone.

If it were any other day—or year, for that matter.

It would have to depend on whether you meant *to*, or *too*, or *two*.

On the news, the ambush of a retired general. The camera zooms in on the broken glass and blood on the concrete, then zooms out for a panoramic view of the traffic. He had a lot of people killed during martial law, my father says, bewildered by my sympathy.

Between us, a total of two things won by raffle: a trip to Australia and a toaster.

In the kitchen cabinet, you keep the bottle of ashfall scooped up from your childhood backyard.

I have never been known for betrayal, says the politician to the poker-faced crowd.

Is it unfortunate that we know the answer to every blind item?

In bed I am the waitress who never gets our drinks right.

Here, I type.

*

After I let the cable guy in today, he holds the door to let a companion in, and then another, and another, and another. Now there are five men in the living room and I begin to plot my escape, in case the need arises.

The tail of a mouse dangles from the ailing cat's mouth.

A cab pulls over. The driver gets out and pees by the gate.

If the weather could serve as a reliable indication.

Days when we live in a house with a yard. Days when we live in a yard with a house. Days when we stand by the window and watch the grass. Days when we stand on the grass and watch the window.

It would've been easy to find, had they not replaced the tree with the corner store with the barangay outpost with the pawnshop.

How much longer before it stops being a prank?

Apparently, it is possible to blast black coral the size of two cities without our feeling a thing where we are.

In the computer shop, the young girls hover over the screen. Yes, say that, one giggles.

Newly framed and beside the reading lamp, the photograph I've come to think of as *1998* becomes *2007*.

In bed I am an ex who will only do rough when angry.

It isn't either-or, says the scribble in the library book.

*

Today the landlady shows off a set of wicker chairs with mismatched cushions, newly stationed in the porch, collateral for money loaned to one of the neighbors. The cat hops onto one seat, kneads.

Track three on the loop to drown out the mewling of newborn kittens from the nearby gutter.

After the vendor hands me my change, he spits on the sidewalk.

If the blue car turns left, then. If the water arrives before noon, then. If the appointment doesn't come up in the phone call, then.

The horse pauses mid-spin in the carousel on the postcard. The postcard hangs on the fridge, held there by a magnetic fish. On the fish, the misspelled name of an island—or what we'd like to think is a backhanded joke of a child laborer with a wicked sense of humor.

I have taxidermied my way to an irredeemable regret.

Things that go bad in the refrigerator: tomatoes, eggplants, birthday cake, curry from your mother.

Do you love her unintelligible work less because she calls war a natural phenomenon?

After six hold-ups, I wouldn't mind driving around with a gun, says the cab driver.

I caption the bad weather to pass the time.

In bed we kiss by the light of the porn on the screen.

My happiest days have always been with you, you inscribe.

*

Today I sweep up the cockroaches coaxed out of hiding by the scent of insecticide and littered about the house, their bodies upturned and dry. I count them as I sweep, even though I'd rather not.

The lion, open-mouthed and mid-leap, threatens to emerge from the calendar on the vendor's cart.

The stranger at the gate needs bus fare to attend a funeral in Bicol.

If the signature could signify having read the terms and conditions.

The new message from my mother reminds me to eat a princess for dinner and check the news for diploma chops. I give her a call and walk her through disabling autocorrect on her phone.

The needle lands on a song out of a mix tape from my cousin, now ten years dead. The laundrywoman hums along. If her death were a child, it would be in elementary school, she says.

At last, the cat regains its appetite.

I remember the energy crisis as sometime between the ruptured appendix and the bounced check, before the kidnapped students and after the massacre of the farmers.

The days of injustice are numbered, says the optimistic sign.

Because they are being particularly unhelpful, I explain my situation in English.

In bed I put my hand on your mouth.

The final notice goes into the folder of letters for previous tenants.

*

Finally, today's rain washes away the leaves clogging the skylight. We wake with sun in our eyes.

You take photographs of the bruised branch, its welts from the rope the neighbors used to hang the rabid dog.

I fashion another theory out of the wailing across the street.

If I could stop flicking on every switch. If I could stop opening every drawer.

I watch you adorn your excuse with adjectives. I contribute a noun or two.

From the proverbial top hat, I whip out a broken collarbone, a burning building, a car crash, a dying animal, an erupting volcano, a flooded highway, a ghost, an unnamed illness. Isn't it time you changed your safeword? I ask as I stand, neck-deep, in a catastrophic mess.

Eighteen years on the pill to make sure that nothing happens.

To reduce the prevalence of hunger, the state declares a lower figure for meeting one's required daily nutritional value.

Nothing happens to you without your permission, the landlady says as she writes out the receipt for the month's rent.

I would rather title the period *Small Talk*.

In bed I am bewildered when you call out my name.

Dearest—if need be. If possible.

*

On the news today, another update on the territorial dispute that I feel obliged to read. Which senator made which suggestion for which claim? Which court case buttresses which decision?

The stuffed animal guarding this week's trash appraises the world with its lazy eye.

I would've recognized the unsolicited advice, but nothing gave it away.

If you could divide your time between the version where you call it a ghost and the version you describe as ill-timed but apropos.

I confront an anagrammatic conundrum at my desk. The titles on the spines volunteer an unsympathetic fortune.

Each time we pass the highway, you pine for the burger joint of your youth. Do you realize it's still there? I say, pointing to the neon sign.

The recommended allocation for rent, like foreign debt payment, is a third of the budget.

What kind of slip is the anchor's repeated substitution of *national* for *natural* disaster?

It wouldn't have happened if it didn't have to happen. Etc.

The usually slick interviewer stutters her way to the right preposition.

In bed we play ourselves on the day we met.

Dear animal, I say to the shell on the windowsill.