

A TRIBUTE

for Lulu and all my friends in Manila

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I know
one week is not enough
for the birds to tell me their names
for the crickets to impart their rhythm
to the flow of untutored words
for the trees to explain the shape of their leaves

I know
one week is far too short
to knock on the doors
of shacks on the river's quay
and to speak Tagalog
with the garbage of Smoking Mountain
to be part of the struggle of mountain dwellers
to come down through the monsoon clouds
to the rice paddies

It will take
far longer for my eyes
to understand the green of the grass
and the greys and browns
of rusting paint-peeled houses
or the silver glint of a Mercedes
on Loyola campus

The taste buds
of my tongue
are startled by the blend of strange spices
and the blandness of McDonald's
but they don't yet know
the food of the peasant
the drink of the workers

I have a nodding acquaintance
with a distant typhoon
but I have not stood
on rocks parting in anguish
or lain under the rubble
of a school collapsing on my broken bones

I have not yet been imprisoned
or hunted as a terrorist
in the jungles of the Southern islands
I have not been interrogated
by anything worse than customs officials
but my eyes can read the colours
of the stars and stripes
in every soap opera
on every channel
of early morning TV

So what can I say
about these islands
under a tropical sun
hidden in driving rain?

I can say: tell me, show me, *kalabitin*.