

Seeking Answers Elsewhere

Desire in Conchitina Cruz's *elsewhere held and lingered*

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“Desire eludes final definition, with the result that its character, its nature, its meaning, becomes itself an object of desire for the writer. And not only, I suspect, for the writer. People like to talk about desire. ‘Let me tell you’, they say - and they do.”

Catherine Belsey, Writing About Desire

If there is anything that Conchitina Cruz's second book of poetry, *elsewhere held and lingered*, dares to explore in both content and form, it is desire both raw and deliberate – one that can only be conjured by surviving the actualization of this desire, resulting to hindsight that involves a criticism not only of desire but of the self that was consumed by it. As the self relives the entire ordeal by virtue of memory both clear and erratic, we see the desire for answers, for the company of the other and for the inevitable closure that comes with the end explicitly bared in front us, devoid of shame and pretense but filled with a loneliness so palpable there is no denying it.

Not lost altogether, only as if you were in another room, not away
but a way into the dream, a way out of the seams that hold it
seems the branches tapping on the glass say live now leave now
live now leave now, the leaves agreeing or not, the shutters
up, shut up, says the rose, the rows beneath an epigram
an epigraph, an epithet, and epitaph, the riddle of want
wanting, nothing ever enough, never enough said when
we talk it is always as if you are in another room.

(“From ‘Versions of *elsewhere*’”)

The book is desire reincarnated in the form of the written word. Even its subject matter is desire itself, an illicit one entertained in an adulterous relationship, with the story being told in the voice of the mistress who, at the end of it all, is left behind and relives the memory in fragments. Despite this fragmentation, the poems in *elsewhere held and lingered* are

cohesive and tight in both form and content that it is impossible to not read it as a “novel in verse” (Cruz, 2008). This is a work that clearly desires to break free from the conventions of both prose and poetry. This is a work that, when devoured to the very last punctuation mark, inevitably reveals a logical narrative arc told to us by virtue of the lyrical form.

elsewhere held and lingered is divided into chapters, much like a novel. There are six chapters, all linked together by threads carefully and deliberately placed throughout the book. Such threads may either be staring at us in the face, as with the case of the poem titles which, for one, are very straightforward, stressing that these poems are to be read in relation to each other and that the individual poem is only but part of a bigger, grander structure, even if the individual poems are able to deliver fascinating stories on their own. For example, the four poems all entitled “A sensible life” with one of each in Chapters I, III, IV and V (Chapters II and VI both only have one poem). There are also two poems entitled “Errand,” with one in both Chapter III and IV. These threads could also come in more discreet forms and yet sears itself into the subconscious, much like the incessant mention of body parts as in “The mouth in secluded places. The tongue and its conclusions.” (“Swivel”) or “Why edge their way/out—unlike you, remote in hand,/his arm draped over your waist.” (“Quiet”).

Poems in *elsewhere held and lingered* deviate from columns and the left margin, and lines are not restricted by rhyme and measure. The poems themselves illustrate the desire to break away from convention, to free itself from the once predefined confines of the poem once it is set on paper. Striking examples of this undoing may be seen in poems such as “This hand,” and “Inventory of a year” which makes use of footnotes, the first coming with an accompanying text while in the latter the reader is left to imagine the main text. For other poems like “Marginalia” and “Index of last lines” Cruz chose to make use of -- you guessed it – the marginalia of the page and index of the book in writing her poems.

¹ *If I may be so forward*, her invitation began, as if it were necessary to assume the voice of a nineteenth-century novel heroine to ask what she was about to ask, as if the remoteness would in any way camouflage the single-mindedness of her request, as if the infidelity were a study to be conducted to test a hypothesis, as if it would turn the act of spreading her legs for him right then into a civilized gesture, as if she were to lift the layers of her petticoat and bury the secret there, swallow it whole, compose for a beginning, middle and end.

(From “Inventory of a year”)

Hail Mary, full of grace, let me trace
 from this bead to the next a leap back
 to my girlhood grace, a reprieve
 from the wreckage of wed and wont,
 from carnal to candor, from wanton to wont.

(From “Finger exercise”)

Another characteristic of the book that makes its reader refer to the other poems as he reads a particular poem is the recurring images that work like echoes. For example, as one reads the first poem in the book, “The Marriage,” he “sees” a cat, a light source, hair, and the act of touching, images that are used in most of the poems. More generic and recognizable “echoes” include parts of the body mentioned all throughout the book, especially the **eyes** (“the sting of your wandering eye gone” (“Send me to the moon”), “His eyes on her” (“This hand”), “my lashes but where are my eyes” (“From “Versions of *delay*”)), **mouth** (“the volume low, their mouths/emptied” (“Quiet”), “The mouth in secluded places” (“Swivel”), “impressing the same songs upon their mouths” (“Inventory of a year”)), and **fingers** (“our fingerprints/on every object” (“It should be enough”), “If the dream/ends with the/tattoo of a/bird on one/finger” (“Marginalia”), “she slides her fingers down/the page” (“Fiction”)), among others.

The richness of the patterns and recurrences that exist among the poems in the book is not without contrast. This regularity, in fact, seems to be a guise meant to hide the unrest that is palpable from the first poem onwards. There is movement in every poem, and there is an anxiety that haunts each movement. Take for example the girl who is drying her hair in “The Marriage” who suddenly asks herself: “What if she could turn to him,/and not wait/to be touched?” Or the girl who is lost in her unusual prayer and asks “Oh Lord of my pre-tumescent bliss,/is with you the way,/the way out of this?”

The hesitation is also exhibited differently in a couple of poems in *elsewhere held and lingered*, specifically in the last lines of “Inventory of a year” and “Address to the body in the room” (“What do you become when the dress is pulled”). This particular manner is nothing

new to a reader of Emily Dickinson's poems: the use of the dash. The purpose of the dash in Cruz's work is different from that of Dickinson's, in the sense that even if both poets use the dash when faced with the "unutterable word," (Fagan, 2005) there is closure in Dickinson's last lines ("found the words to every thought / I ever had – but One –", There is no Silence in the Earth – so silent/As that endured/Which uttered, would discourage Nature/and haunt the world –) while there is only a sense of being left hanging and a feeling of loss in Cruz's ("What do you become when/you step out —" ("Address to the body in the room") ("What do you become when the dress is pulled"), "*The question never asked: —" ("Inventory of a year")).

But perhaps the most striking lines which exhibit this contrast between stillness and unrest are these lines from the poem "It should be enough," from which the feeling of uncertainty can already be felt in the title itself – an affirmation addressed to someone who believes that it's not enough:

It should be enough to wake
 from the dream and find
 the doors still opening
 into the wrong rooms.
 the keys still hanging
 like tongues
 from keyholes, the staircase still
 leading nowhere, the shelves
 still infested
 with indecipherable titles. It should be
 enough, the eyes
 in photographs restless
 the birds tugging themselves
 off the surface
 of teacups, the curtains poised
 for migration, the roaches gone
 to the neighbours.
 And still, we insist
 on staying, flicking the switches
 on and off
 in the dark,
 heating the leftover rice.

(From "It should be enough")

In this poem we, through the eyes of the speaker, see both stasis (“the doors **still** opening/into the wrong rooms,/the keys **still** hanging like tongues/from keyholes, the staircase **still**/leading nowhere, the shelves/**still** infested with indecipherable titles”) and motion in the scene (the “eyes/in photographs **restless**,/the [painted] birds **tugging** themselves/off the surface/of teacups, the curtains poised/for **migration**, the roaches **gone**/to the neighbors” (all emphasis mine)) And yet the speaker and the person he is speaking to “insists on staying” despite seeing the unproductive stasis and want for movement around him that “should be enough” to will the speaker into some form of action.

Since this work is a “novel in verse,” it is only logical to ask: where is the climax of this book? Surely it has to be that moment of discovery for the reader, that “eureka” moment where it is revealed to the reader that this is not your usual book of love poetry because this is about love that either came too late or just a welcome distraction in an otherwise stable relationship.

True enough, this moment of revelation packs a punch, although it can possibly be reduced to three specific lines in the poem “Fiction.” Before this poem, the possible assumption for the reader is that this is a story of a girl pining for her beloved, always having to wait and make do with what her beloved gives her. Take for example the lines in “The Marriage”: “*Talk to me*, she says, and ten years later,/he walks to the edge of the bed/where she sits, drying her hair.” Or “What now, my love?”: “What else—past the missing anatomies,/what more but shadows—/what now in place of—/past the edge/where the words sit—*that she be constantly/and immediately accessible*—” Or “Send me to the moon”: “love me/instead, mousy-haired and well-read/able to read genre for your sake,/able to take slasher in your company.”

But then we get to read “Fiction,” where we see two people lying on a bed, the man and the “you” with the man sleeping, while the “you” seems to be watching and imagining another woman sipping coffee and reading a novel in the dark, a woman whom she concludes to be “once you in the flesh.” The poem provides the reader with some sort of clue as to the relationship of the woman with the sleeping man once the reader gets to the

part where the “you” sees the woman “locking herself/inside the novel, taking it personally as if/she were brokenhearted—the protagonist gone missing/is her age, and the detective/is in danger of falling in love with her” but there is no direct claim as to what the situation exactly is between these three people, the “you,” the man, and the woman, until we hit the following lines:

in this heat, your lover asleep,
beside you instead of
with her—the woman he called earlier

(From “Fiction”)

Here the reader discovers that the man is the lover of the “you,” and that the woman the “you” is imagining is the partner of the man. The poem following “Fiction” is “Swivel,” whose title is quite telling as this is the turning point of the book, where the reader now sees the relationship he once took as being between two individuals as actually being shared among three.

The situation gets clearer, albeit no less complicated as soon as the reader gets to the poem “Address to the body in the room” (“Let the music appease the unnerved skin”) in which the “you,” is now the man who has a lover and who turns out to be married, as the reader finds out in this poem. The “you” speaks to himself, reminding himself three times that “*You are here*” in the midst of flashes that remind him of his earlier tryst with his lover before finally saying “Compose yourself accordingly./And dance with the one you married.” There is great momentum in the succession of these three poems, and this is where climax is with its peak at the three lines quoted from “Fiction.” The reader now also understands why the first poem, “The Marriage” had the word marriage begin with a capital letter, whereas the rest of the poems had titles written in the same way you would write your usual sentences.

husband remembers the details related to their first year together as a couple, especially after asking her “*Where in the world are they?*” as he said aloud the names of her roommates.

The poem “From the collector’s notebook of substitutions” provide insight as to how the characters’ perceptions may have changed, with regard to the meanings of *grief*, *maybe*, *afterthought*, *souvenir*, and *never*, among other words. The prospect of new beginnings is again shown to us, especially “By the time, that the poet lied/would be a fact” and there is nothing left to say but “*Begin*. Arm outstretched, hailing a cab.//*Begin*, I say, again” in the poem, “Peripheral vision.”

Both “Where were you all this time?” (“Look, you say, the world is itself again”) and “It’s good to see you out in the sun” show to us what happens after the man and his mistress finally end their relationship. These two poems are especially potent with melancholy and loss, even if what was lost wasn’t really hers to begin with.

waiting for you. When it is finally over,
 the man you walk away from
 no longer your lover, the world is itself
 again, tidy and literal, your body
 where it is, not beside, not away from,
 not on its way to, your words
 what they are, *I’m running a few errands*,
I’m working late, not tethered to
 the secret no longer
 a secret, the life no longer a life.

(From “Where were you all this time?” (“Look, you say, the world is itself again.”))

always an extra dish of peanuts with our order. I smile
 as I correct this error—the one person who knew us,
 the waitress who got it right: I say you aren’t in my life.
 She pats my arm as I stare at the bananas and pears,
 tells me how sorry, how sorry she is to hear that.

(From “It’s good to see you out in the sun”)

The second to the last poem, “Where were you all this time?” (“The knob turned, the door shut, the keys left on the table”) bears a startling contrast to the second poem in the book, “It should be enough” where we earlier found “the doors still opening/into the wrong

rooms,/the keys still hanging/like tongues from keyholes.” Here we can see that both the man and his wife finally have enough, content with “The fit good enough, true enough, almost as if she had never been away.”

The last poem, to which a whole chapter is devoted, is an index of sorts entitled “Index of last lines,” which is possibly a pastiche of last lines from different books arranged in order to come up with a new work in itself, a poem that gives us yet another new perspective in reading and digesting the story that has just unfolded in front of us. Given that the entire book worked as a narrative revealed to us in fragments, as a novel in verse, this last poem serves as a fitting ending to the novel.

The poems in this book are incredibly self-aware of its sound, its appearance on the page, and its content per se, a characteristic highly reflective of the disposition of a mistress or a third party in general who is wary of his appearance, thoughts, and actions – and this is *exactly* what this book is, a book that comes in between the existing relationship between novel and verse, a third party that has the capacity to break what relationship is already established but for now is left unnoticed in deference to the status quo. There are very few poets who can come up with a book such as *elsewhere held and lingered*, and we find one such rarity in Cruz.

Cruz is probably one of the most groundbreaking poets in the Philippine poetry scene, with her first book *Dark Hours* exploring the oxymoronic genre prose poetry and her second book *elsewhere held and lingered* exploring yet another successful attempt at hybrids, which is the novel in verse. Her poems in *elsewhere held and lingered* exhibit an extraordinary awareness of the conventions of different and unique genres in its ability to go around and beyond these conventions. This book is an attempt to redefine the traditional definition of novel and verse, an attempt to answer the question “What can limit a genre?” and in decidedly seeking answers elsewhere, has found a more than satisfactory answer.

Works Cited

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