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Where Power Comes From (Brownout in Tondo)

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WHERE POWER COMES FROM (BROWNOUT IN TONDO)

—Tom Montgomery-Fate

Eighteen families spliced electric lines to one pole
outside Rosa's second story window.
Through that suspended bramble of stolen power,
that buzzing tangle of hope
lessness,
she watches the rain,
her street become a river.

She turns on a light,
plugs in an iron.
Bolts of energy surge
through the cracking maze of cables,
the snarled lives,
desperate to escape.
No exit.

BROWNOUT.

Eighteen tin and plywood compartments go black.
Dozens of brains clench,
curse the dark heat.
Mothers pick up crying babies,
lean out window frames,

wait for a breeze,
or the sound of laughter.

Someone out on the pole in the rain
mends hot, jumbled wires
with soft, open hands.

The power returns.

Nine radios overwhelm
a frantic child's scream,
a tinny, five string guitar,
a pan of hiss-popping *empanadas*,
and a *bolo* whack-whacking
a coconut husk.

Rusty fan blades labor to a whirl,
move heavy air and frustration
to new locations.
Naked bulbs in muddy kitchens
startle the rats,
scatter the cockroaches,
elongate days
so that they don't end.

Stolen power is unreliable.
Last month Fely died
playing in the flood waters.
A wire snapped and fell,
sizzle-danced on his head,
short circuited his heart.
He washed down the street
like a dead fish.

When Rosa remembers her son,
that wild blur of it,
the drifting corpse,
the bobbing coconuts,
the pair of swirling sandals,
and his dog,
madly thrashing in the torrent
toward anything and nothing,
she wonders where power comes from—
who will lose the next Fely
for a radio or fan.

*Tondo is one of Manila's largest and most well-known urban poor areas.

bolo: machete (Tagalog)

brownout: synonymous with a blackout—an abrupt cut-off of electrical power.