When in Monumento

Encounters of a Filipino commuter

Monumento, Caloocan. There is a great serpent in the city. It grows in length most astoundingly in the morning, when the city is already roused and vibrating. Its slender body lines the sidewalk and would sometimes cause an obstruction to passing civilians. It is tenacious however, and would not disappear so easily. It has been observed to remain under sun and rain for hours on end, and almost always moved at a crawl — an undulating gait unmistakable for any Filipino commuter, and a dreadful sight for those who have run late. It turns for the worse however, when the serpent takes to a halt; an unmoving body that signified — among other assortments of aches and pains — sore legs, wet napes, and an already exhausting morning for
all. But the serpent could not care less. Whether in a halt or a crawl, it only knew one thing anyway, and that was to feed. With an insatiable appetite, the serpent grows rapidly and peculiarly, eating with its tail and growing by the tail, lengthening for every victim it ate. On some days the serpent could even grow so incredibly that its body would twist, wind, and fold into residences as it snaked away from the spiny throat of EDSA.

This attainment of great length owes itself to the serpent’s natural ability to attract prey even from the farther cities. Each day, no less than a hundred commuters can be seen swarming to queue as they are consumed and subsumed by the behemoth that eternally stretches before them. In rare cases, a caught prey would sever itself from the serpent, leaving the frenzied sacrifice in search for an alternative. The majority do not however, and remain hopeful in weary submission to the endless procession. If not for the din of the city, the slightest sounds of their distress can be heard: a groaning, interspersed by tuts and sighs issuing like steam off their concealed faces, for no matter how much they craned their necks, strained their backs, or hanged on their hips, no one could figure how long the winding body had gone nor how long it would pass, that is, if it ever even did. Meanwhile, those in automobiles pass with a look of pity, exclaiming at the scene as if they themselves were not about to be lodged in the dyspeptic belly of an equally gluttonous beast waiting to swallow them as the rush hours approach. Unlike the lesser serpent, this one inhabits the convoluted gut of EDSA, owing to a colossal body that could reach several kilometers long when conditions are favorable. Once it is out to feed,
the beast is able to last for hours before finally disappearing, if only momentarily.

While the two are widely known as apex predators in their respective territories, they are not the only ones to prowl Metro Manila. In fact, there are many others, each with its own system of organs and mechanisms for ensnaring would-be outgoers. And they can be found roaming almost anywhere; offices, banks, shops, malls, streets, parks, schools, and most prominently, in government services. Besides being capable of elongating at alarming rates, common to all these beasts is their seeming ability to fast for impossibly long periods, with sightings belying years of supposed dormancy. It doesn’t therefore surprise that almost all these beasts are ancient, having spent decades gorging and metastasizing with little to no long-term consequence, their anatomy significantly evolving to become so utterly flexible that it isn’t unheard of when they take the form of the space they occupy, constantly shifting and distending their stomachs as they fill with copious amounts of prey. Perhaps this explains why they have gotten so big and voracious, not to mention densely single-minded and unperturbed when out luring for food, being the well-oiled organic machines they have been for ages.

Although the anomalous feeding habits of these urban dwellers are demonstrably well documented, their nature of reproduction has been largely unspoken or obfuscated, a curiosity given their scale and ubiquity. Previous sources have claimed that officials sat in government sired these beasts, aligning with the observation that the
most monstrous of them lurk in the gray hives of public agencies. Such claims, however, have consistently fallen out of media interest, lathered by popular tattle and given no more than a quick disdainful glance for a token or a boon. The topic of beasts itself is repeatedly chewed up and spat out by toothless politicians, or else gaped at by passive civilians. There seems to be no other reason for this aside from the apparent state of affairs that people may have already come to perceive the beasts as a normal if not insurmountable feature of their everyday.

Today, countless beasts are certainly being encountered by Filipinos on a regular basis. An ordinary morning would see a serpent or two openly feasting on the decaying grounds of Monumento and other industrial bowels of Metropolitan Manila. They linger indefinitely, striking and retiring in erratic fashion as if choreographed by an impulsive force. In the years to come, these beasts will continue to abound and feed upon us, our children, our children’s children, our grandchildren’s children, and so on, outliving dozens of generations after another. There is no telling when the enslavement will end or if the beasts will ever even meet their demise, but it seems clear that if nothing is done about them, it is not unlikely that in the future their presence will have become so pervasive that their ills are ingrained into culture and our intolerance have all but dissipated, beckoning a myopic reality accepted and unchallenged by a society succumbed to despair. If only some time then our minds could somehow stir from its deadened synapses and realize that we, Filipinos, have eventually, fantastically turned into beasts ourselves.

First published in Pluma Manila on Medium.