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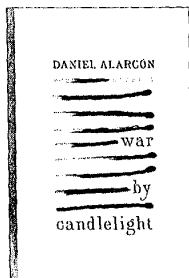
TOO-TRUE TALES

War by Candlelight

by Daniel Alarcón

HARPERCOLLINS

BY PAMELA FEINSILBER



these are only flights of fantasy. On the other hand, great fiction can make great use of real events, especially when they're far from our own lives and distressing to read about. The prison uprising ending in flames; the little village buried in mud; the revolutionary's lonely death—headlines you'd skim in a newspaper, the stuff of mesmerizing tales in an artist's hands.

And at 28, Peruvian-born Daniel Alarcón is such a writer. Though he was raised in Birmingham, Alabama, and now lives in Oakland, he spent many childhood summers with relatives in Lima and studied there as an adult. He considers the city and its long-suffering people his "enduring obsession"—this noisy,

potholed, polluted place in which "the dilemma we faced was which way to suffer," in which a cop can shake down an unemployed bank worker in a desolate corner "where the cobblestones shone through the crumbling cement like open wounds" and "dying is the local sport."

Alarcón writes in a flat, almost affectless way, with an easy touch that makes his hard truths and tragic scenes more palatable: his stories can hurt your heart but his artistry is exhilarating. Sometimes he sounds like a sardonic private eye: "He was in the process of aging poorly," the former bank worker says of his girlfriend's father in "A Science for Being Alone." And sometimes his spare prose can make you cry. In "The Visitor," a man and his three children survive the mudslide that wipes out their town because they're at the cemetery; their mother stayed behind and died. Later he wonders what the children remember: "'Where did we live?' I asked them. 'With mother,' was all they ever said. We gave our emptiness a name. That name was Erlinda."

It's nothing new to say that works of imagination can show us the common humanity in the most disparate lives. But sometimes only fiction can convey that reality in a way that we can bear to hear. ●

Reading these nine gripping, often painful stories, it's tempting to believe the images arise from imagination. The dead dogs hanging from the streetlights ("Die Capitalist Dogs"); the woman swabbing hospital floors the night of her husband's death, unable to take him home until she discharges his debt—it would be easier on the soul to think