

# AN EDGE BETWEEN

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## From where I perch

I am born with a tooth in my mouth. Breast feeding is impossibly painful for my mother. This tooth is causing my gums to bleed. I am not able to tolerate my mouth. I am not crying despite daily mouthfulls of blood. I am not eating, and so my tooth has to be removed. The moment the dentist dislodges it from my days-old flesh the earth moves to an earthquake so strong buildings come tumbling down, and from then on, my missing baby tooth leaves a gap amongst my upper front teeth until I am six, when the permanent tooth that replaces it decides to come out.

My permanent front tooth is growing out. I run down a small hill, arms spread out like airplane wings, hair blowing in the wind. The thrill ends when my lips, thinking they are my landing gear, head straight for the trunk of a tree. My lips crack open with this kiss, covering my white school uniform with bright red pain. It is painful. But like some residual oral conditioning, I do not cry from the pain. I run my tongue along my gums to check if my growing tooth is still in place. Blood flows from it whenever I move my lips to talk, so I stop talking. I discover what happens when people do not expect to hear from you. They leave you alone.

I stop being called on to recite in class. Kids do not bother calling out to me from afar because I would not be able to holler my reply back. When they do manage close proximity talking, it is limited to what I am able to respond to with simple head movements. I master the blank-stare-smile face you give people instead of explaining yourself. In this way life goes on around me like I am not there. Life becomes a fascinating thing to watch while perching alone, in this quiet place that people ignore.

At home, it is more difficult to be ignored. I hear them calling, and I know they can't find me; I don't want to be found, not just yet. I am here looking for things myself. I'm little, and the branches of another tree, this time my Bayabas, are hiding me from my impending bath and siesta. My days of kissing trees with bloody lips are over, at least so far. I don't want to be found just now, on this point Bayabas and I both agree, not just yet, I like it here. We are up to something. We don't know quite what, but we know we are... this branch, oh wait no, that branch, or maybe possibly the other branch further away? It is hide and seek, but my little girl self does not know what Bayabas is hiding. It's not a game. Bayabas knows my missing parts, the leaves that surround me like sand filling the gaps left between the river rocks that I have collected from lives past in the clear glass that I am, still so young and curious, already knowing I'm incomplete.

### **The winds of life move me and yet it is all still**

At six years old my universe consists of school and home, home and school. Home is home, but school is another planet where the rules do not make sense. Travel to this other planet every school day takes at least three hours from my home-door to my classroom-door each way. Every day it takes forty-five minutes to drive to my cousin's house where we assemble the car pool; thirty minutes to wait for my cousins to get ready to leave; ninety minutes travel time to another province, all the way to the mountains where the school is located, fifteen minutes to get my bearings in the parking lot and walk across the small hill to my classroom. Every day I arrive at school with school life already in full swing and I just quietly sneak in, and sit in my chair. I cannot understand what is going on because the mysterious instructions must have been given before I arrived. There are thick books with color-coded pages with hundreds of questions that need answering. This is what all the other kids do all day long, answer these pages.

In this school planet I am quiet and I believe questions are meant to be kept inside my head; I do not think I ought to make questions come out of my mouth. When the other kids in this planet school finish a set of color-coded pages, I set myself to copying their answers. I sit in my chair watching my elementary schoolmates. I figure out who is best in what— math, science, english, history, religion. I do not know how I decide who is best and who is not; I think it has something to do with how happy they are with themselves. Copying the workbooks of the best kids for each subject, that is how I learn

what to do. But my classmates would bring their books to the teacher to be checked. She uses these cardboard sheets with holes where the answers can be seen. When the teacher deems it worthy, she gives the student a slip of paper and off she goes to take an exam in a different room called the Exam Room, then after that, she goes back to the classroom for more of the same.

I am classified as one of the slow ones. I will be kept behind because I am always plodding two or three colored chapters behind everyone else. Except that my results for those end-of-color-chapter exams are always perfect. The teachers do not know what to do with the quiet little girl who misses the first two hours of the school every day, but ends up getting perfect scores. My quarterly report card shows a beautifully consistent sequence of numbers all in the barely passing seventies range. These numbers are good enough to move me on to the next grade, so they leave me alone.

### **Because in me I am already bound**

As a child I decide to be silent. I do not know right from wrong. No one explains things to children who do not ask questions out loud. It does not mean that these children are empty of questions. I do realize that children need help to survive, so instead of looking towards the adult world for support, I create for myself a force field, an invisible dome promising my little self that I won't scatter into the wind while I look for my own answers. In the middle of this containment unit I plant my sentinel, more like my guard post, giving me my focus point as my restless child spirit wanders safe and searching. My grounding rod roots deep into the soil and yet always spreading its branches far and wide, always promising that it would gather the different parts of me that indeed scatter into the wind while no one else is looking. My sentinel gives me my safe place, the space inside me where I sit quietly, giving myself a chance to understand. My sentinel gathers me, whatever the me that I become, whatever the me that happens. I do not feel displaced because of this. I am tethered.

### **And so from there I grow**

I was a very quiet child. The distance that quiet children have, turn them into serious adults. I am in high school when a set of exams to steer my life is given. These exams are to help the guidance counselor advice me on what college course to take. I test to the second decimal place equal in both

arts and science. They call me into the guidance counselor's office; she tells me about my score and says that she does not know what to do with me. Out of the-quiet-child default in me, I still give her my well mastered blank-stare-smile face, now nuanced with a bit of I-wonder-what-you're-going-to-do-next twinkle in my eyes. I believe the pressure makes the counselor mention architecture, a word I never heard of. She says it is something that has both science and art in it. She says I am going to make buildings. When I ask her, "How do people make buildings?" she gives me her own well mastered your-time-with-me-is-over-now-be-on-your-way look. We have a five second stare-down ending with me giving up and leaving. But I do take her advice; a ranking equal to the second decimal point must mean something. I become an architect.

Being an architect has given me a different perspective, a new way to observe and learn about people. With my clients, this distant vantage point I still prefer helps me see the homes they are meant to have. After a couple of decades renting, one of my first clients, whom I already built a vacation home for, is ready for me to design her family's home in the city. She is a mother of two bright young ladies and a wife to a businessman. She is herself a strong personality who knows what she wants and how to get things done. This new home she is to share with her mother, an equally stellar personality with a very active social home-life; hosting parties for thirty people weekly, as well as meetings and workshops for a dozen or so people every other day. Mother and daughter have not lived together in thirty years.

To peacefully cohabitate, what they need is an architect with a magic wand. We design and build the home in twelve months with no problems. That in itself is unheard of in my industry. A decade later I'm still able to visit this home and things are still very much as they were when we turned it over to the family. The test of time is really where I measure whether I've done well by a client or not. The two young ladies of the house have grown up into capable women, reflections of their strong maternal lineage. All four women I saw recently when the matriarch of the house launched her latest book. My client measures her two daughters against my miniscule stature and they all tell me about how their rooms changed or changed-not to accompany their growth spurt. They tell me how a designated mahjong room has now become more multi-functional. My client quietly mentions how her mother wants to rearrange the way her collection of painting by national artists are displayed in the house, but, with reasoning, the paintings manage to stay exactly as they are positioned.

## **Into my roots and branches**

It is bazaar day, and I am off with my girlfriends to do some shopping. It is more the meeting than the shopping part that makes me go. In this bazaar, it seems, sellers are also makers, and makers are always fascinating. A tall almost six-foot-high woman in a long baby-doll dress towers over me. She seems endless, something about her makes me think of Mother Earth with her dark skin and bright brown eyes.

“I love your dress,” I say. She beams down at me and replies that she makes each dress by hand. I gaze up silently. She pulls out a dress from the racks and says, “I believe this one is for you.” It is long, pink baby-doll, almost a match with hers, with an applique flower just below the right bosom line. I try the dress on. Close to the long bottom hem, almost at my feet is a swirl of patchwork fabric, almost like a quilt. I spread the billowing skirt to examine further. In odd mix-matched retaso it reads “I love trees.” I’m quiet as Mother Earth says, “I’ve only made one of these, what do you think?” I think maybe one for now, but maybe someday there will be more of me.

## **I see an edge between what I previously thought to be me and what I thought was other than me**

I board a small *banka* and head out about a hundred meters from shore into a black moonless night. The boat man paddles in front of me into the horizon, the sky and water have merged. It is only his instincts that tell him which direction to go. There are no stars to make the water glisten, only the smell of salt in the still air offers confirmation that I am still earth bound. He stops and keeps his back to me, silent. We’ve prearranged this and no more instructions are necessary from me or from him. He settles the wet oar into the hull of the small boat and lights a cigarette.

I slip out of my clothes and into the water. It is warmer here. I submerge and swim away, just below the still surface, making my silent entry. Soon the black water tells me “Here, now, stop.” I turn and surface, belly up and suspended, the water rimming the edges of my eyes tracing a caress down the side of my face to kiss my chin just barely to the edge of my parted lips. This is air just slightly warmer than the liquid that holds me. I am gazing up at the blackest of skies devoid of moonlight and empty of twinkle. I am in nothing, or am I in everything?

I exist and allow myself to be taken from below or from above or within somewhere, not knowing what matters, to what purpose or for what consequence. I have no thoughts and allow myself to be embraced and overwhelmed. It is here that I allow myself to feel possessed and owned, with no challenging, no questioning, only acceptance. As the tips of my fingers break surface tension in reverse, I test what is not inside, but what is pecking at possibilities. Am I singular in this, or one of many? It need not matter. I can be, I become just as it wishes. Just in existing here something is being fulfilled, when unencumbered, removed by a conscious purpose. I surrender to following and allowing. It is in itself a peace.

### Testing waters

I try to maintain my childhood state of being inconsequential, perhaps too much. I avoid being anyone's significant other. Could it be on purpose? There are almost moments, when I would step down from my solitary perch and into someone's arms. Once, back in high school, while lying on the cold marble floor of my living room in our blue and white uniforms, with only the moving light of the television screen painting our faces, he holds my chin and lifts my lips to his. He is tall with chinky smiling eyes. He is also quiet, known as shy. He plays center in the winning intramurals basketball team, a combination that attracts half the girls in our batch to him, including one of my best friends. Two of his closest friends already try to win a more than friendship affection from me, when to everyone's surprise, most specially mine, he becomes the third. And win it he does, I think more out of curiosity on my part than anything else.

We do not do too much talking. Inconsequential means silence. I still keep my preferred position of quiet listening to this boy who seems to have hardly any voice at all. It is there on the cold marble floor as he holds me quietly in his arms that I open myself to a new kind of oral experience, an unfamiliar one. This new sensation has no pre-conditioned enjoyment to reference. Initially his lips feel soft and cold, the experience is as of a guessing game, then the searching warms up, the wanting goes past these soft gates and into parts of each other, exploring.

After that night, while we are in school, he searches for my hand under tables while looking away; he sits closer to me on the bench so that our thighs touch. When we find ourselves across each other in a room he has a little twitch he does with his full lips. He makes sure that I understand. This

means that he is thinking of me. It is our lack of shared words that makes all these otherwise insignificant gestures mean the world, our own way of connecting. In the five years we are together this quiet man teaches me just how delicious tasting a quiet first love can be. The first innocence of complete romantic trust being held so gently by one who is himself unsure. Both of us willing to discover the unknown together. With this boy I stay long enough outside my comfort zone to play out these experiences. But I always knew I would leave him, turn my back and once more return to sit alone in my quiet place.

### **How much can still water preserve or destroy**

I had a first love. It ends and is followed by a seven-year relationship with a man loved by no one in my life. A stark contrast to the first. Being in this new relationship is hard to acknowledge, hard to admit. I am young in my early twenties, but he is even younger, in his mid teens, and magnetic in the way bad boys can draw the world to themselves. We create for ourselves a kind of precarious perch, just for the two of us. He , the strong, dark, mysterious brooding male moving in close, so as to whisper his intentions, questionable to most, but intriguing to me. It is not trust that makes me do this; it is morbid curiosity and an incapacity to fear. That is not a good thing. Fear, I am told is there for a reason: so that you will know when you are in danger. But are you in danger when danger is not known to you?

We are on a four-hour car ride out of town in the middle of the night, in the back seat of an owner-type jeep, one of those home-made vehicles with no walls. It has a steering wheel that requires three full turns to make a ninety degree left or right maneuver. I am sitting directly behind his friend, who is driving when we inadvertently cut into the path of a car while making a challenging u-turn. The owner of the car overtakes us, crossing our path and cutting us off. From it alights a man with a gun, shouting that he is a cop, pointing the gun at the head of our driver, the smell of beer pervading his breath. He is swaggering. We can hardly understand his stammering. The business end of the gun vacillates between the driver's head and mine as we negotiate our release. Eventually this supposed cop does release us, more out of inebriated exhaustion from standing and shouting than anything we actually said.

I spend the next four hours wondering if I could have died, trying to convince myself that I could have died, telling myself that riding a tin can

that's no better than a five-passenger tricycle on a highway is not a good idea, but not really convincing myself of any of this. I am with him, I feel his energy and keep going back to that thought. He is in his element, alpha to this pack of testosterone bags of flesh. They are all on some kind of inebriated high themselves now, and joke about the things they could have said to the man, how they should have pulled out their own guns. At least two of them have admitted to having pieces in their bags including alpha-man. There is no danger here.

### **When everything is held in surface tension**

It is dawn and we arrive at our island destination. My alpha boyfriend and his pack of friends are high from the adventure of driving for hours straight through the night. They immediately don their swim shorts and challenge each other to swim across the small channel to another island nearby. They set out as I wade into the water myself to await their return. In about fifteen-feet of water one of his friends swims up to me. He says he wants a kiss. I don't want him to realize I am in my element. I hover just beyond his reach as I gauge and confirm that I am the better swimmer. I don't want to, I tell him. He assures me that my boyfriend won't mind. They've done this before with his other women. Done what? With what "other women"? If I want, we could keep it a secret, this kiss and anything else we want to do. He starts to tire. We've been threading water for about ten minutes now. He eventually gives up and swims back to shore.

If I were one of those "other women" and if this retreating beaten bag of flesh were my more-worthy alpha-man, I would have been beaten. My alpha-man is a much better swimmer than I am; he is much more attractive than his all-bark friend. My alpha would have bested whatever woman it was he wanted and apparently, he has. We will be in this island for days. I'm thinking to myself "I should leave," wondering if I can drive the tin can of a car that got us here, by myself, for four hours to go back home.

This is how it is between my boyfriend and me. I allow this man to fill my days with intense emotions that are never discussed, but played out to challenge all our young breaking points. In this place, and with this man, I realize a new capacity for my turning away from the world. No one in my family likes him: none of my friends trust him. They do see him with other women, and they decide to tell me despite knowing I will always accept whatever explanation he offers as an excuse.

He and his mother move apartments every year; he stops going to school at least three times and when he does finish, he refuses work he is qualified for. I live with his joys and pains, his success and failures, his capacities and inadequacies, and I revel in it all as I allow him to fill me without question, as if I were an empty vessel. There are places in me satiated by this, but not all of me, for I am not empty. There are parts of me even he cannot reach. What he cannot reach, he cannot hold.

### **With both hands pushing at the stress points**

I attend a total of eight weddings in one year, in five of which I am part of the entourage. I end up with two blue gowns: a yellow one, an orange one, and a green one. I will never wear again. I perch far beyond the everyday lives of my matrimonially committed friends and live vicariously by paying attention to their stories, valuing the mundane details of their lives like intel-gathering for some future mission impossible. As young wives, their talks always center around how to get the whites white, how to keep the blacks black, and no matter what you did, keep the reds away from the coloreds. Dinner get-togethers are scheduled around tutoring their children. I wonder why they are even paying teachers at all. Starbucks moms are easy to locate. They convene in the same coffee shops after they drop off their kids at school, as they send their drivers off on long lists of errands that they monitor via mobile phone. They convene in the mornings and adjourn when their kids need to be fetched. Lists of restaurants and hotel lounge acts are compared for that special once a month date-night with their busy husbands. Once in a while a hushed serious tone takes over the mood of these sessions; sometimes with tears, sometimes with contrived indignation, always collectively with a kind of team-support-system-battle-cry that no matter what—they will prevail. One Starbucks day at a time they do prevail. If you've convinced yourself you've won, it must be that you've won. Yes.

### **Run Me Through**

*A Buddhist monk sat in the lotus position where the road leads up to the entrance of his abandoned monastery, it was deep in the mountains, his eyes were closed. A harras of horses thundered up the road and barely stopped just before trampling over the quietly sitting man. The leader astride the biggest stallion bore down on the monk saying "Move." The monk did not. "Move. Don't you realize I*

*can run you through?” With eyes still closed the monk replied, “Don’t you realize, I can be run through.”*

*Run me through.*

My Labrador Una, he was big and black and the gentlest of souls I’ve ever known. Mothers are brave. I know that now.

At almost eleven years Una’s vet once told me that Una is going through the whole check-list of medical conditions a dog could possibly go through in a lifetime. Una made real for me what a union filled with unconditional love could be. Even through our share of days and nights spent lying together on the floor of the operating room, waiting for him to recover from profuse bleeding, his days-old blood staining my unwashed dress. It is Una who gives me a stoic kind of peace. I never question the fact that I will never leave him alone when he isn’t feeling well. His vets ask me how I can stay so relaxed and calm; they are the ones already in near panic at the many possible moments when we were on the verge of losing him. When it came to Una’s challenges I’m just always calm. I tell myself it is because he will feel frightened if I am not brave for him. My dog’s own calmness as he healed reassured even the experts around us. We were both calm. Even I wonder how that was possible.

He is just over a year when he is invited to the first-year birthday of Lucas, a yellow Labrador with amped-up alpha tendencies. It takes three people to bring Lucas to the vets, this is to keep the rest of the dogs in the waiting area safe. The invitation to Lucas’s first birthday party might as well be an invitation to a reality canine version of the Universal Fight Club. I read up on alpha male dog behavior. Every word written on it says the same thing; for two male dogs almost the same age, they have to be left alone to decide the hierarchy of the pack amongst themselves. The least amount of human interference the better, even if they drew blood.

We arrive at the gates of the alpha hound’s well-appointed home. My instructions are clear. Joy who is Una’s god-mother and the actual friend of the alpha hound’s doting human-mother was to go in first and instruct the household staff to keep Lucas off-leashed when we walked in. They were not to interfere. Only I would stop the carnage. After all it is just a matter of how much blood I could take before I took to mauling the alpha hound myself. Una and I sit in the car parked along the street when Joy calls my phone from inside the house, “The people here are not sure this is a good idea. They want

to at least leash Lucas when you walk in with Una. Are you sure about this?" I wasn't sure. I was almost sure I wanted to drive Una back home.

*Run me through.*

We enter the lair. Una immediately walks up to the tense Joy and claims his pat on the head. Joy's eyes ask if they could leash the yellow Lucas now. My eyes say: No. The yellow alpha hound perks up and positions for the kill ten meters away, under the dining table. Una walks around and inspects the sofa seemingly oblivious to his attacker, who is already coiled up for the release between two upholstered dining chair legs. Una moves on to inspect the arm chair and then the potted plant beside it. For half a second my worry shifts to...oh no please don't mark the furniture! But then I spot the yellow Lucas on stealth mode creeping up to Una's black hind quarters. The whole room is tense, the waiting staff all ready to pounce at a moment's notice. My Una has bad hips. Lucas is positioning for the classic Dominatrix-Humping-Take-Down Move. Lucas at age one is a full-size Labrador himself.

*Run me through?*

The yellow Lucas is five meters away. Una ignores him. Two meters away, still acting like the attacker is not there. One pounce-stance, smelling distance from his butt hole...this is it! I don't see how it happens. It is just too fast. Una's black full victim's tail, brushing distance from the assaulting yellow jaws is suddenly replaced by an attacking black crocodile-large cavern of teeth and a growl so loud and ferocious that it could only mean death by removal-of-yellow snout. The snap is so close to Lucas's nose that I am sure some dog spit entered his nasal passages. Lucas collapses on the floor in a defeated shriek-like whimper. What is happening? Did Una draw blood? The black one turns and continues his furniture inspection, completely ignoring the cowering yellow one. Still all yellow, with no red. The peanut gallery howls and jeers their snide remarks at their defeated yellow Spartan. The deed is done.

Una lets hamsters sleep on his head. I had no idea he is a super male. Lucas, true to character, makes one more attempt, but all it takes is a sideways glance from the real alpha and the yellow one again turns submissive. I tell Una to be kind; this is his house. They ask me if it is ok to now bring out the other dogs from hiding. There is a Dalmatian, a German Shepherd, two Alaskan Malamutes and a Doberman corralled in a room for their own safety. Yes, the hierarchy of the pack is now established. There will be no blood.

I realize the absence of the human mother of Lucas is fortuitous; she is at the parlor getting her hair done. Lucas might not have been easily defeated if she had been there. By the time she makes an appearance, the herd of large animals are all jumping in and out of her pool while all manner of toys are being thrown for them to fetch and retrieve. The humans play mahjong for the rest of the day.

After swimming, the pack get their fur washed, pampered and blow-dried. The herd, fully satiated with cow ribs, enter the air-conditioned mahjong room and sleep peacefully together, with Una at my feet and Lucas a respectful three meters away. I would sometimes look at the yellow one as he eyed the black one stealthily.

*Run me through to the finish line.*

It is the last year of Una's life. He is starting to have grand mal seizures. I have become an epilepsy expert. I have instant ice packs flown in from Australia so I can have them on stand-by for him in case he has an episode while we are out on the beach and he needs to be cooled down.

We are called for a Doctor Dog session for the typhoon victims relocated to the nearby airbase. The Doctor Dogs are there to provide much needed therapeutic emotional support for the evacuated, grief stricken and traumatized children living in the temporary tent city. We arrive, and it is hot and crowded, and the air is thick with stress and anxiety. I find a cool spot for Una under the shade of a tarpaulin.

Suddenly it happens. I can feel it a few seconds before he goes into seizure. He gives me a look, and I go down on my knees to safely put him on his side as I hold his legs down with my body while my hands hold his head gently. I can never get anything into his mouth in time to protect his tongue; we just deal with that later. Throughout the whole episode I nestle my face in his neck and continuously whisper in his ear that he will be okay. I gently hold his seizing body and reassure him that it will all be over soon. All the while his whole body is shaking uncontrollably. He pees and poos and it gets on me because I am holding him down.

These seizures can happen anywhere even in the middle of a busy highway. Where ever it may be, I will drop to the ground just like that and stay with him until it is finished without a single thought for anything else but protecting him and getting him through it safely.

In the evacuation camp when I feel his seizure end, I slowly release him and I feel his temperature. He is ok, just totally exhausted. He will not move for a while. We will have to wait until he is fully recovered. I once again become aware of the rest of the world. I look up and I see women and children crying. I motion for them to come closer, and about a dozen little boys and girls form a small, tight ring while squatting around me and Una on the concrete floor.

“Ate, anong nangyari sa kanya?”

“Nagkaseizure siya. Pero ok na siya ngayon. Pagod lang. Sige, hawakan niyo lang siya para maginhawaan naman siya.”

“Ate, mukhang hirap na hirap siya.”

“Oo, pero ang importante, tapos na.”

“Ate, kami rin, yung nangyari sa amin, hirap na hirap din kami.”

“Ako ate, ako nalang ang natira sa pamilya ko. Namatay ang buong pamilya ko ate.”

“Ako rin ate. Kasama ko ang bunso kong kapatid nung namatay siya. Wala na kasi akong magawa.”

“Sige, hawakan niyo lang ng hawakan yung aso. Giginhawa rin ang pakiramdam niya.”

That is all I could think to say. Watching Una go through his challenge opens a flood gate of memories that flow in a shared attempt to make all of us feel better. Even as in the beginning they were crying for Una, not a tear is shed when thoughts turn to themselves. Their own experience, they approach so matter of fact. They are in so much shock, the unknown future petrifying them into an emotional stone defense. But what happened to each child is real, as real as the recovering dog they were all holding in their hands.

They had been run through.

### **Run through in search of where true strength lies**

There are forests where species thrive and reproduce themselves, assuring survival, continuity, harmony and balance. Eco-systems, dense and packed, complex, united in facing challenges, and massive in their impressive gathered potential.

And then like me, there are seeds, blown by the wind, carried by the talons of far flying birds, dropped on rolling hills, pushed and shoved by rivers and rain, and caught between crevices and cracks of other worlds. As I search for my own answers I rest in pockets of calm with just enough nourishing to encourage a crack, on a peek into my battered, armored shell. Maybe a possibility? The courage to sprout in an unknown place, in an alone place, in a quiet and nothing place. But there is never nothing. It is not courage, for a new seed knows no fear. Perhaps armed with many lifetimes of knowing that there is richness in stillness and solitude, sustenance in deeply drawing and searching, and then holding fast, knowing how to take without losing one's self, until from a sprout I become a plant viable. I know I am destined to survive, despite being an unknown thing, nothing similar around me to indicate what I might be. Someday I will be full grown, strong, solid and thick. I then become my tree.

Perhaps as I too watch but perch alone all these years I am able to grow in me the same kind of hope. That through all this time unbeknownst to me, I am gathering here and there insignificant twigs and sticks and fashioning quietly my refuge, my own safe-place, a place where parts of me will not be violently extruded from my flesh, where the soaring of my spirit will not end in a bloody crash, where I am not bracing myself for a loss, a place where maybe someday I can be with someone, someone that wasn't to me, just a curiosity.

I look around this safe place and realize that each time I return I bring with me small amounts of variously shaped trust, in others, but mostly in myself. Little residual traces of unconditional believing, that surviving life on a daily basis is coating me with. Trust, that in this safe-place I feel comfortable enough to shed, carelessly on the floor, where one on top of each other, they lay for years and years unnoticed. I grow to believe that I do not need them to survive in the world, brazen and unprotected as I am accustomed to being. It may have started as a small pile of multiple discarded quilts and blankets, but now I see that the pile has grown. It has always lain ready for me to crawl into, which I must have done from time to time for now it feels that in the comfort that they bring, there is some amount of elbow room, some space.

It has always been safe here in my perch, for me it has always been enough. But now I look around, and, to my surprise my heart seems to have made manifest a deepest desire. While I was not looking, my empty perch became for me, a kind of nest.

## Tonight, walk with me

I am in a place where no one wants anything from me, far from my days as a child when I stopped talking, and quietly sat watching my friends and those that I love. Back then, it was I who chose the silent state. But now, here I stand, in the middle of a street and there are no sounds, no sounds from immediately where I am nor from anywhere I can see, no sounds from far flung places I can possibly imagine, no clues and hidden messages in the sounds that they are not making. I feel as if I am not here. No one and nothing is calling my attention. No one is calling anyone's attention. There are people; things do go on, but without a sound. The string that connects us is just not there.

So when I pass a patch of pavement, and hear bells and whistles, beeps and beats, it feels like an assault. A cacophony. I must discover from where, from what. A hall two-floors high, covered as far as the eye can see in hundreds and hundreds of Pachinko Pinball Machines. It is colorful, it is deafening, and it is overwhelming. In two minutes the wall of sound has made me deaf, like super-sonic earphones I am plugged in, like so many white-shirt and black-trouser clad Japanese men, individually glued to the recesses of balls and flashing lights. They are practically motionless and still not there.

It is a short walk from the train station. I follow the instructions emailed to me in broken English hoping I won't get lost. I go into an alley leading to the service entrance of a building, a staircase empty of people, up four floors with closed doors, silent and abandoned at this late hour in the day. I walk through a hallway leading up to an unassuming door with a poster of a couple in an embrace, all the words in kanji. It's all new and unfamiliar... until the door opens and the old music I've known for many lifetimes welcomes me in.

*She sits and looks without looking, not wanting to seem eager, but wanting the men to know she is available.*

He is sitting on the table top putting on his shoes, already three adoring Japanese ladies, in their three-and-a-half-inch stiletto heels, stand giggling around him. I catch his eye making sure he knows I want him. He smiles politely, not shy at all and used to the attention. I'm hoping that curiosity over a foreign stranger interests him, but he continues with one adoring Japanese lady after the other, walking them clumsily across the dance floor, even as they trip and stumble, he continues to dance them like they were the honey to his bee's pajamas. He is not coming for me. I need a

different strategy. I position myself next to his mother and whisper in her ear, “Can he dance with me?” She motions the introduction.

“Felipe esto esta Señorita Popi. Puedes bailar con ella?”

“Si Mama.” He beams the smile of a gentleman, and offers me a deep bow, all seven years of him.

As I stand ready for his abrazo, his mother whispers in his ear, “Solo caminada y ochos only ok.”

“Si Mama.”

This Columbian gentleman, half my size takes me into his arms. He is a child and yet his caminada is that of a man. He walks straight into me with no apologies and full of attention, none of the polite side stepping that beginner tangueros do. His timing is flawless, his pausa, as delicate as a thoughtful sigh, after which he inhales us deep into the next phrase. I am held. Caminada—si mama... then ochos—si mama... to the front, and then to the back, dutifully following his mother’s instructions...he is feeling me, inside him when with our locked confidence he takes up the challenge and leads me straight into the more complicated paradadas, and then challenging me with spaces for adornos. All this catches his mother’s eye. She stops chatting with one of the previously stumbling Japanese ladies. There is no stumbling between Felipe and me. I know she knows it is all him. Every motion is Felipe flowing through me, turning me into his music. In two beats the end of the song is signaled as he leads my foot perfectly to meet his, and we close the dance. My heart locks with his mother’s in shared love.

*Gazing upon one hand on top of the other, the pair of heels side by side across the pair of wing-tipped shoes; she shifts her gaze to across his shoulder as she submits.*

She was mundial champion for scenario stage tango once. He was mundial champion for salon pista tango once. He is there to be her partner, a professional arrangement. They make a good pair, I think. Two world champions. He helps her run her tango studio in Tokyo. This Argentinean man gives credibility to the work that she is doing, drawing in the serious students, the ones who aim to compete and win. Women much like her, and men who want women like her. That night she stands from behind the refreshment bar counter, refilling the bowls of chips and making sure there are enough cold drinks. She looks like she is deep in conversation with one of her regular guests, but she is really watching him on the dance floor. He

is dancing with that out-of-town lady who just walked in this evening. It is a courtesy dance, that's all. He knows what is expected of him. He doesn't need prodding. These out-of-towners have money, and if they like him they will spend on lessons just to be able to be in his arms.

It is a good night for her studio. The dance floor is crowded. The tanda is Pugliese—she knows it is his favorite. She doesn't like the way he is holding this out-of-town guest. Where did she say she was from again? She doesn't like the way this guest moves, the way this unknown woman is letting him move her, encouraging him, and he is allowing this. It is what he does when he wants to be dirty; when he wants to show her that with him there are no rules; when he wants to remind her who is really in charge. That other woman's hands are all over him, even in his hair. She is lost in his embrace. That is not done, not where everyone can see. That is not proper. She knows it is he who is making that woman respond that way. She knows where that is coming from. She knows where that could go.

*Held in your embrace, I promise to show you my heart.*

He has a full head of long white hair. There is something about this old Japanese man. He is hardly moving with the woman much younger than he is, probably a granddaughter. They came together. She is just going through the motions. When they sit down, I ask him to dance. This surprises him as I know it would. I am gaijin and forgiven the boldness. He asks for permission from his companion. I look to her and gesture to ask the same, and we are obliged.

The first abrazo, he holds me with respect, too much, so much so that it is too little. I show as I respond in my body that I can allow a bit more. Not a lot, not right away. He is the man, he must come and get it if it is something that he wants. And he wants. To my invitation he makes me feel he wants... more. So, a little bit more? Yes, like that, until the space between us is crossed and he takes what he wishes, as he so wishes it. And then we dance.

*I gather all of you that my arms can hold and we move together without letting go.*

She is all woman, voluptuous with long hair and the piercing dark eyes of the exotic French. She is all woman in men's shoes. She holds her hand out, an unquestionable request, I stand, a definitive answer and acceptance. She does not lead like a man, she does not feel like a man. She feels like a woman who requires the leader's position of control, and at the

same time she feels nurturing and so strongly maternal. It is a different kind of love. "Is it too strong?" she whispers. It is not the strong force of man, but it is the powerful enveloping energy of a woman who wants to own me.

*He sits and looks without looking, not wanting to seem eager, until he chooses her and sharpens his gaze.*

He sits without smiling in his dark suit. He is not tall. I wonder why it is taking him so long before he asks me to dance. He danced with so many other women who are a lot taller than him. Our heights are well matched. I know he is watching me dance with these other men. There must be something he does not like about the way I dance.

It is almost the end of the evening when he walks over and offers his hand with a bow. When he holds me, he is filled with questions. He searches for answers intentionally. I close my eyes to drown the inquisition, until I feel him relax. I measure his lead and follow just below his intensity. I make him feel that with me it is ok, a safe place, where he can be himself. The questions stop and he lets himself go, knowing that with me he is enough.

## **And trust**

I approach what looks like a Japanese style wooden barn surrounded by a quiet rock garden. It is a small structure in a small prefecture. The lack of windows is an imposing sight. The meticulous alternating vertical wooden slats reveal that this is precious packaging for a wonderful gift hidden inside. A concrete floor flanked tightly by the same wooden walls with a lone winter tee at the end of a covered walkway. It is a beacon, basking in the sunlight showing me that this is the way around to the back and into the space.

An old Japanese man and a young cheery Japanese lady give me a warm welcome. I ask if I have to remove my shoes as is customary in most of these exhibition spaces in the island of Naoshima. She says it is not necessary for this James Turrell installation. But she leans in and I am told to listen to her instructions carefully. I listen and follow.

I rest one hand on the beautifully textured wooden wall. I continue like this as I walk around tight passages with the light fading and fading away behind me until it is completely gone. There are benches I am assured, just keep going. In the complete darkness I sit down as I'm told to wait.

Complete darkness with the eyes open, so different from the commanded darkness when I close my eyes. One is willed and in my control;

the other a condition I've just been subjected to. With what consequence, I do not know. The cheery Japanese voice leaves. There are other people here—I feel them breathing. They are so quiet. They must be Japanese as well. I look around. I am so used to gauging an unknown with sight. For now, it is almost muscle memory. I let my eyes do as they please, roaming the nothing caressing the nothing, relaxing into the nothing. Maybe my eyes know something I don't.

It first comes as a soft, soft whisper, almost uncaught, not a sound. A color? What was that? Did it leave? Did I make it up? It comes again, a feather touch, not on skin, teasing warranting a glance... at what? Something is here, there, somewhere. It is coming... or am I going? This is enticing. My chest is on the verge of a swell. My heartbeats command me...wait. It will be a pleasure, it promises...wait. Oh unfolding, not as a wrapping that covers, but revealed as the delicate imperceptible breath of a lover's approach. Drawing in, drawing on, drawn all around me.

My eyes are adjusting. The space begins to be defined. All too quickly recognition comes. No not yet. Please. Let me savor the hesitation of almost meeting...one more moment? To push it away, is it possible? But it has arrived. I am seeing. My heart settles in its embrace, not disappointed, only fulfilled.

### **As the moon pulls the tide**

These warm tropical waters of Donsol I slip into to find your promise that you are out there somewhere; somewhere beyond the five feet visibility window I'm offered through the tempered glass mask enclosing my eyes. The sun has just come up when we set out on outrigger boats. We are promised you will come. My breathing is magnified in my head through the snorkel appendage that allows me to dwell in your atmosphere, in the thick salty cloud that is your food, the morning sun glistening against krill and other floating edibles. Submerged, I await the signal of your approach.

The guide flashes the cue. We had been told to watch his neon yellow shorts for the sign. His finger points towards a random direction. I see nothing but his legs two arm-lengths away from me, pointing at what? I don't know, but I obey and position myself to swim in the direction he indicates.

And then you come upon me, the moment I first see your face, instantly, as the dense fog surrounding both of us slips past and reveals entrance of the gaping open hole that is your hello, close enough to embrace

me, all three thousand tiny teeth and kilometers of gums. I spread my tiny arms to engulf you back, or is it more to steady the bursting of my heart at the sight of you? Your slow approach with an agile turn prevents our aquatic crash and puts me just in your periphery. How could you have known? You have x-ray eyes? X-ray eyes and strong unseen arms, you were going for the embrace after all! Again another slight turn of your head and I am caught in your slip stream, drawn into weightless hold, effortlessly moving with you.

I am but a small moon, drawn and steadied by the silent pull of your gravity. There were others when we first started out together; their distance from me giving clues to your form. I know you are big; I was told you were big, but right there as you hold me in the embrace of your current, to me you are everywhere, everything. Lying against the pillow of your force, I memorize the shape of your head, the spots like wrinkles telling me stories of who you are, a survivor's scar strongly cutting across the spots on what would be your neck if enormous fish had necks. I hear you whisper a promise... it was so fleeting I did not understand. Was it that you would keep me with you forever? Was it that you would never let me go? Or was it...until we meet again?

I feel you lowering from me, diving deeper, slow but determined, away, I feel the hold disengage as I now struggle to keep up. Now you show me who you really are. I move past your beginning and pass your middle, look up to the mountain that peaks at your mouth, there is so much of you, you are more complex. You go lower and lower, farther and farther, growing smaller and smaller, until the cloud engulfs you again and you are completely lost to me. I continue to watch for moments, suspended, allowing the waves, like taunting memories, to nuzzle me.

When I finally allow myself to let you go, accept that we are finished, my head surfaces. What is above feels more unknown than what was below. No one is there, I am alone. You are below somewhere, you are below everywhere, and I am still held.

## **Marking time**

### **Ready to risk**

It takes roughly three hours to drive from Manila to Anilao, but at four in the morning with no traffic I can take it in just over two. Do you know how many times you can listen to The Chainsmokers and Coldplay's 'Something Just Like This' over and over two hours? Hundreds.

*I've been reading books of old  
The legends and the myths  
Achilles and his gold  
Hercules and his gifts  
Spiderman's control  
And Batman with his fists  
And clearly I don't see myself upon that list*

It's crazy how he affects me. It doesn't make sense. How a dismissive "k" as a response to my 100-word message can take me down for the count. He couldn't even be bothered to capitalize. Staring at the red light like a beacon in the darkness, as the melodic lullaby storybook rendition speaks to me. I feel like I'm being challenged and it is quite possible for me to lose. I download the tune into my phone, jack my phone into my car speakers and press repeat. My emotions take a ride on a freight train sometimes; they need to be lulled into a straightjacket of numbness by hypnotizing repetitive audio anti-simulation.

*.. "Where you wanna go?  
How much you wanna risk?  
I'm not looking for somebody  
With some superhuman gifts  
Some superhero  
Some fairytale bliss  
Just something I can turn to  
Somebody I can kiss"*

*I want something just like this*

Moving at 130 kilometers per hour feels like standing still. Everything blurs and it's all instinct, no thoughts. I don't even understand why it hurts. He wants me to think he doesn't care. That another man, his recognized senior, complimented me, encouraged me, gave me a challenging time knowing potentially I can be more... k. Fine. It's how this all affects

me—that's important right? All of that from someone more superior than him means nothing, if it's the "k" that matters. I just drive.

*I've been reading books of old  
The legends and the myths  
The testaments that told  
The moon and its eclipse  
And superman unrolls  
A suit before he lifts  
But I'm not the kind of person that it fits*

The drowning in Chris Martin's baritone works. I'm practically empty. I've had my windows down for the last thirty minutes. I can breathe again and the air feels good, still cold from the evening while blowing on my face, but already smelling like the hint of sunrise. I drive through myopic darkness. I arrive to an expansive still black horizon slowly bleeding into color.

*... "Where you wanna go?  
How much you wanna risk?  
I'm not looking for somebody  
With some superhuman gifts  
Some superhero  
Some fairytale bliss  
Just something I can turn to  
Somebody I can kiss"*

*I want something just like this*

I follow the unspeaking procession of men half sleep while carrying my gear from my car; it's too early for cheery formalities. Only the roosters are awake. Already the welcome drink waits for me on the reception table. I can hear the kitchen busy with chopping and the sizzling sounds of frying. I'm home. I arrive alone and it feels like I've been embraced.

*I want something just like this*

Forget LSS. After a hundred repetitions it has become a mantra in me like inhalations and exhalations. My dive buddies arrive one at a time,

in pairs, in groups, surrounding me with the sound of spoons against early morning coffee cups, forks against plates shoving eggs and fried rice together with dangit. He appears to be all but forgotten, but he's really just tucked away. The crooning in my head a gentle reminder as I slip into my wetsuit, booties, grab my gloves, fins and mask.

*...”Where you wanna go?*

*How much you wanna risk?*

*I'm not looking for somebody*

*With some superhuman gifts*

At seventy feet below I listen to my amplified breathing of two thousand PSI of compressed air, think Darth Vader in a good mood while strolling through a meadow. He would have been holding hands with Mr. Martin walking right along beside him, if Chris didn't need both hands to play his accompanying guitar. I'm no longer just embraced, I'm engulfed. Held together and up by the gravity defying weightlessness of current and thermo cline. It reminds me there is so much more than me, if I can just be where I am nothing is impossible.

*Some superhero*

*Some fairytale bliss*

*Just something I can turn to*

*Somebody I can kiss*

*I want something just like this”*

I look towards the refracted reverse glistening of the water's surface from fifteen feet below. In the far distance the motor of a banca goes by. I'm at the safety stop, decompressing, waiting to surface. The mantra, hearing myself breathe, having no weight, for an hour being part of a whole that knows no boundaries, it's better than therapy, it's better than anti-depressive meds, I stare upwards completely at peace.

*I want something just like this*