



TOMÁS

The Journal of the UST Center
for Creative Writing and Literary Studies

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The Journal of the
UST Center for Creative Writing
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ANG BAGO SA BAGONG NORMAL

Chuckberry J. Pascual at Ralph Semino Galan

Binuo ang isyung ito ng *Tomás* mula 2021 hanggang 2022. At sa sandali ng pagsulat ng introduksiyong ito, umabot na nang mahigit dalawang taon ang pandemya. Sa loob ng dalawang taong ito, marami nang nangyari: gumaan na ang mga restriksiyon sa paglabas, bumalik na sa dating operasyon ang pampublikong transportasyon, unti-unti nang nakapagbukas ang mga negosyo, marami nang nabakunahan nang makailang beses, may mga kompanya at mga paaralang bumabalik na sa face-to-face na trabaho at klase, natapos na ang eleksiyon.

Noong unang taon pa lang ng pandemya, paulit-ulit nang binabanggit ang mga katagang “new normal.” Hindi na raw tayo makakabalik sa dati pa, at magpapatuloy ang buhay nating lahat nang umaangkop lang sa pagbabago. Sa kaso ng Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, dalawang taon nang fully online ang aming mga programa. Nasa Facebook ang mga video para sa USTingan at UST Authors Series, nasa Spotify, Anchor, at Apple podcasts ang USTinig podcast, tatlong edisyon na ng UST National Writers’ Workshop ang isinagawa sa pamamagitan ng Zoom, at pangatlong isyu na ito ng *Tomás* na online din ang magiging paglulunsad. At dahil mga guro rin sa unibersidad ang mga miyembro ng CCWLS, mahigit dalawang taon na rin kaming nagkklase gamit lamang ang mga computer na nakakabit sa internet. Kung ibabatay sa naging pag-agapay nating lahat sa pandemya nitong huling dalawang taon, maaring sabihing nakarating na nga tayo sa “bagong normal.”

Maaari ding isiping kasama sa bagong normal na ito ang pagbabago ng pananaw sa pandemya. Dahil nagkaroon na nga ng bakuna, tila hindi na masyadong takot ang mga tao sa COVID-19. Nag-iingat pa rin siyempre, sumusunod pa rin sa mga protocol pangkalusugan, pero mas may ahensiya na ang mga tao sa kanilang pagkilos, sa paglabas-labas. Kasama nito, dahil itinali tayo ng pandemya sa ating mga tahanan, at mas umigting ang internet bilang midyum ng komunikasyon, maaari ring mapansin ang pagbabago sa pananaw-panlipunan, partikular sa pagtanggap sa katotohanan sa pamamagitan ng internet.

Nababanggit na ang mga katagang post-truth, fake news, at disinformation bago pa man nagkaroon ng pandemya. Pero sa lahat ng pagbabagong pinagdaanan natin nitong huling dalawang taon, tila lalong tumindi ang mga puwersang ito. At tulad ng naging pag-agapay natin sa panahong may virus na banta sa ating aktuwal na buhay, natuto rin tayong umangkop sa nagbagong katangian ng ating birtuwal na buhay. Pansinin na lamang kung paanong naging bahagi na ng popular na diskurso sa social media ang pagkilatis sa balita: totoo ba ang sinasabi nito o niloloko lang ang mambabasa? Kailangang suriin nang maigi ang batis, kung mapagkakatiwalaan ba ang isang news agency o hindi. Palasak na rin ang usapan at biru-biruan sa libo-libong propesyonal na troll sa internet. Tila tanggap na ng sinuman ang posibilidad na putaktihin ng mga troll kung sakaling may maipaskil sa social media na taliwas sa ilang popular na paniniwala. Batid ng ordinaryong netizen ang laging nariyang posibilidad—at panganib—ng redtagging. Alam na rin ng karamihan ang samu't saring naratibong ikinakalat sa internet at social media na sadyang binabaluktot o nilalabusaw ang kasaysayan.

May alingawngaw ang lahat ng usaping ito sa panitikan. Dahil bahagi ng tungkulin ng manunulat ang etikal na imperatibo. Bahagi ng imperatibong ito ang paghahayag ng katotohanan, ng pagtatala ng kasaysayan, at matatagpuan ito kahit sa mga akdang sa unang tingin, ay personal o espispiko

ang isyu. Ang indibidwal ay bahagi ng lipunan, at ang bawat indibidwal na malikhaing pagtatala ng karanasan ay pakikibahagi sa paghihiraya ng ating sitwasyon bilang lipunan, ng pagtatala ng ating kolektibong kasaysayan, at pagpapahayag ng katotohanan. Ganito namin nais ikuwadro ang mga akdang kabilang sa isyung ito ng Tomas. Ang mga bagong akdang ito ang patunay ng pagpupunyagi ng mga manunulat na Pilipinong lumingon sa kasaysayan, itala ang kasalukuyan, at tumanaw sa hinaharap nang may pag-asa. Mula indibidwal patungong kolektibo, ipinapahayag ng mga manunulat ang kani-kanilang katotohanan sa harap ng patuloy na daluyong ng pekeng balita, disimpormasyon, at pagbaluktot sa kasaysayan. Pagpupunyagi ito sa kabila ng lahat, ang pagsisikap na lumikha ng bago sa bagong normal.

Nilalaro ng maikling kuwentong “Sinaing” ni Emmanuel T. Barrameda ang ibig sabihin ng salitang “positibo” sa kasalukuyang panahon: maaaring ito ay patungkol sa kinatatakutang COVID-19 o sa ipinagdiriwang na pagbubuntis. Minumundo ng katha ang salaysay ng isang mag-asawang may simpleng pamumuhay, at kung paano silang nahirapan at umangkop sa panahon ng pandemya.

Ipinapaalala ng “Palayok-palayukan para kay Carlito” ni Eugene Y. Evasco kung gaano kahalaga ang paglalaro, at kung paanong nagbibigay ito ng mga posibilidad sa paglaki ng bata. Pero kasama sa paghahanap ng mga posibilidad sa pagkatao sa pamamagitan ng laro, ipinapaalala rin sa atin ng akda na mahalagang mag-ingat na huwag mabitag sa samu’t saring pagkakahon ng lipunan—anuman ang ating maging edad.

Ang interteksto ng “Blue Waters” ni Joselito D. Delos Reyes ay ang kanonikal na kuwentong “Impeng Negro” ni Rogelio Sicat. At tunay sa naging layon ng kuwentong iyon at ng mga akdang kasama nito sa *Mga Agos sa Disyerto*, tinatangka ng “Blue Waters” na padaluyin ang pagdududa sa tuyot at kampakanteng pananaw sa takbo ng lipunan: paano kung ang tubig na

kinokonsumo natin sa araw-araw ay produkto pala ng malawakang sistema ng pandaraya? At paano kung ang mga indibidiwal na inaasahan nating mabuti ang siya pa mismong nagpapatakbo ng sistemang ito?

Isinasalaysay sa “Imahen” ni Perry C. Mangilaya ang hamon sa pananampalataya ni Badong: totoo bang banal ang imaheng bigla na lang lumitaw sa pader? May mga nagpapatunay—may mga gumaling ang karamdaman—at patuloy na dinarayo ng mga tao ang imahen, pero hindi ito lubos na matanggap ni Badong, kahit siya mismo ay mayroong sakit at kailangang gumaling. Ang isa pang hamon na inilalarawan sa kuwento ay ang sitwasyon ng isang lipunan kung saan mas pinipili pa ng mga taong umasa sa himala, kaysa suportang magmumula sa mga ahensiya ng gobyerno.

May sipi mula sa tanyag na nobelang *Love in the time of Cholera* ang isyung ito. Isinalin ito sa Filipino ni John Jack G. Wigley. Ang sipi ay mula sa unang kabanata, kung saan ipinapakilala sa atin ang tauhang si Dr. Juvenal Urbino. Dahil sa saling ito, naibubukas ang akda ni Marquez sa bagong mga mambabasa, at lalo lamang itong magiging kalugod-lugod dahil sa madulas at masarap basahing salin sa Filipino.

Ang katawan at ang karahasan na maaaring idulot nito ang kambal na temang nag-uugnay sa mga katha sa Ingles, kahit na magkakaiba ang pamamaraan ng kanilang pagkukuwento. Salungat sa pamagat, hindi palaging maaruga at malambing ang ama sa maikling kuwentong “The Favorite” ni Cess Alessandra, kahit sa paborito niyang anak. Dumadaan sa sentral na kamalayan ni Maya—ang identical twin ni Luna, na siyang tinutukoy ng pamagat ng realistang akda—ang pagsasalaysay ng mga nagaganap. Nais ng magkapatid na tulungan ang kanilang ama na mapatunayang wala itong sala sa krimeng binibintang sa kanya. Nais din nilang malaman kung ano ba talaga ang nangyari noong gabing naaksidente at namatay ang kanilang ina sa loob ng kanilang pamamahay. Sa dulo ng kuwento, maraming matutuklasan ang magkakambal tungkol sa kanilang ama, at sa isa’t isa.

Ang “My Old Man” ni George Deoso ay tungkol rin sa relasyon ng isang anak sa kanyang ama. Tunog autobiographical ang kuwento na binubuo ng mga kabanata na hitik sa karahasan at ang kabaligtaran nito. Walang katiyakan ang pakikitungo ng mag-ama sa isa’t isa, kaya hindi rin mawari ng mambabasa kung anong emosyon ang nangingibaw sa pagitan nila. Sila ba ay talagang magkaiba, o magkawangis sa pag-uugali: malupit ang ama sa aso (kinatay at ginawa niyang pulutan ang alaga ng kanyang anak na babae), ngunit mabait sa pusa (kinupkop niya ang isang pusang gala); ang anak naman ay mabait sa aso (nag-aalaga siya ng aso), ngunit malupit sa pusa (binitawan niya ang pusa ng kanilang kapitbahay mula sa ikatlong palapag ng kanilang ipinapagawang bahay.)

Ang katha naman ni Rye Antonio na “Body Count: 1” ay mukhang kuwentong krimen na may kabig sa unang basa. Tulad sa nobelang *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* ni Agatha Christie, ang nagsasalaysay sa pagpaslang ay ang mamamatay-tao mismo. Naganap ang mga pangyayari sa panahon ng pandemya, sa isang lumang boarding house, kaya claustrophobic ang mundo ng kuwento. Dapat abangan ng mambabasa ang bathos sa dulo ng naratibo, at kung paano nito wawasakin ang mga inaasahan ng mambabasa.

Napapanahon naman ang ispekulatibong katha ni Raymund Reyes na pinamagatang “The Duplicate President,” isang naratibo patungkol sa isang alternatibong Pilipinas, kung saan ang pangulo ng bansa, na may balak makipaglaban sa Tsina dahil sa mga isla ng West Philippine Sea, ay papalitan ng isang clone para maiwasan ang hidwaan sa dalawang bansa. Ang mga tauhan at sitwasyon ng kuwento ay madaling makikilala: isang presidenteng diktador, ang mala-donya niyang nanay na dating maimpluwensiya, ang mga heneral na nagsasabwatan para palitan ang pinuno ng bansa. Pero dahil hindi ito realistang akda, katulad ng nobelang *Twice Blessed* ni Ninotchka Rosca, hindi rin lubos ang pagkakapareho ng mga tauhan at pangyayari sa kasaysayan ng Pilipinas.

Dati, ang mga baklang kontesera ay obheto lamang ng pag-aaral. Pero sa sanaysay na “Korona” ni KC Daniel Inventor, ang kuwento ay nagmumula mismo sa isang baklang dating kontesera. Pinasisilip ng akda ang mambabasa sa dinamiko ng mga relasyon ng mga nagkokompetisyon, sa buhay ng isang baklang nagbibihis-babae, sa isang lipunang nananatiling dominante ang heterosexismo, at patuloy na kinakaharap ang banta ng HIV.

Ang looban bilang tirahan ng mahihirap sa siyudad ay madalas bigyang representasyon sa panitikan. Pero naiiba ang sanaysay na “Ang Alaala ng Apoy” ni Darwin Medallada dahil ang naratibo ay mula mismo sa isang taga-looban. Magaan ang pagkukuwento ng sanaysay pero nakalulunog ang laman. May taglay itong mapait na komentaryo sa pagtrato sa mahihirap sa lipunan at gayundin sa pagtatala ng alaala, kaya mas tumitiim ang pagtatangkang iukit ang karanasang ito sa papel.

Ang inilalarawan naman sa “Paglalakad sa Panahon ng Pandemya” ni Mark Anthony S. Salvador ay isang paraan ng pag-angkop sa isang panahong puno ng kawalang katiyakan. Pamilyar sa atin ang danas na ito nitong huling dalawang taon, pero binibigyan ng ibang perspektibo at partikularidad ni Salvador. Tila binabago ng akda ang konsepto ng flaneur: mula sa pagiging burgis ay naging pangkaraniwan ito, at ang pagkadismaya ay nagsilbing lunsaran ng komentaryo sa kasalukuyang lipunan.

Bagong perspektibo at partikularidad rin ang ibinibigay sa atin ng sanaysay na “Si Nanay at ang mga Lihim ng Habambuhay” ni Mayette M. Bayuga. Dalawang patong ang naratibong isinasalaysay: ang kuwento ng maysakit, at ang kuwento ng nag-aalaga sa maysakit. Personal ang lunsaran ng akda, pero umiigpaw patungo sa usaping panlipunan: matapang itong komentaryo sa sistemang pangkalusugan sa bansa, kung paanong para lamang ito sa may kaya. Pinasisilip rin ng sanaysay ang buhay ng mga freelancer, at kung paanong kawangki lagi ang lipunan at ekonomiya maging sa mga relasyong pampamilya.

Magkakahawig ang tabas ng mga sanaysay sa Ingles sa isyung ito: mga alalala ng nakaraan, at kung paano nito hinuhubog ang kasalukuyan.

Itinala ni Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo sa “Personal Chronicles: The UST ‘Pandemic Workshop’ 2021” ang mga pangyayari sa ikalawang online workshop ng UST CCWLS. Maaari itong ituring na halimbawa ng kasaysayang pampanitikan, kung paanong itinawid ang mga palihan sa panahon ng pandemya, at kung ano ang mga akdang isinulat ng mga kabataang manunulat noong panahong ito. Isa rin itong dokumentasyon ng institusyonal na kasaysayan ng CCWLS, at maaaring magsilbing halimbawa ng praktikal na kritisismong pampanitikan na maaaring gamitin bilang gabay ng mga baguhang manunulat sa pagpanday ng kanilang panulat.

Nostalgic ang tono ng mga piyesa nina Jose Mojica at Alice Sun-Cua tungkol sa kanilang pagkabata. Napakaromantiko ng pananaw ng batang tagapagsalaysay sa sanaysay ni Mojica na pinamagatang “The Distance of the Moon” dahil nais niyang masilayan at maabot ang buwan at ang langit sa kahit anong paraan: magdikit ng “luminous celestial stickers” sa kisame ng kuwarto nilang magkakapatid; subukang akyatin ang pinakamataas na puno sa kanilang hardin, kasama ang kanyang mga kapatid at pinsan; tangkaing abutin ang buwan sa Baguio, na sa musmos niyang isip, ay napakalapit na sa langit. Naging inspirasyon niya sa pagsulat ng kanyang sanaysay ang isang kuwento tungkol sa buwan ni Italo Calvino, ang batikang Italyanong manunulat, na ang husay sa pagsusulat ay pinapangarap niyang maabot.

Tungkol naman sa kanyang namayapang ina ang kambal na memoirs ni Alice Sun-Cua. Ipinagdiriwang ni Sun-Cua sa “The Blue Dress” ang tiyaga at husay ng kanyang nanay bilang mananahi, na lumikha ng damit para sa kanyang piano recital. Sa “The Aroma of Adobo,” ang galing naman ng mámang niya sa pagluluto ng mga paborito niyang putahe ang kanyang binigyan nang pansin at papuri, lalo na ang Ilonggong bersiyon ng pambansang ulam ng Pilipinas.

Mahusay ang pagtalakay ni Dawn Laurente Marfil sa biglang paglitaw ng kanyang ama sa kanyang condo at buhay sa piyesang “Speedy Gonzales, Why Don’t You Come Home?” Huling nakaharap ni Marfil ang kanyang ama noong bata pa siya, nang hinatid nila ito ng kanyang ina sa Ninoy Aquino International Airport. Medyo asiwa ang ugnayan nilang mag-ama sa umpisa, ngunit sa huli, napagtanto ni Marfil na hindi rin sila nagkakalayo. Kaya nagpasya siyang patawarin ang ama sa kabila ng maraming taon ng pagkukulang nito sa kanya.

Payak ang wika, pero komplikado ang mga tula sa “Mga Pangkaraniwan” ni Mykel Andrada. Tinutulaan niya ang mga ordinaryong bagay, sitwasyon, tao at pinaangat ang pambihira sa mga ito—na maaaring magdulot ng saya, pagkamangha, paghanga, o sa kaso ng “Doon Po sa Amin, Bayan ni ‘Tay Bakak,” panghihilakbot na maaaring gumising sa pinamanhid nang damdamin ng mambabasang matagal nang bugbog sa baluktot na sistema.

Batay sa titulo, may pangako ng pagbibigay ng bagong kaalaman ang “Pagpapakilala” ni Ma. Cecilia D. Dela Rosa. At tinutupad naman ito ng mga tula: maaaring isiping tungkol ang mga ito sa identidad, kung paanong napag-iisa ang katawan at siyudad, ang makata at tula, kung paanong napapalawak ang munting sarili, napapaliit ang malalaking hindi magagap. Pero tila sinasabi rin ni Dela Rosa na hindi maikakahon sa usapin ng identidad ang kanyang mga tula, dahil ang bawat pag-apuhap sa kaalaman ay pagkilala rin sa sariling kamangmangan, sa kawalan ng kaalaman, kaya nga kinakailangan ang patuloy na pagmamakata. Sabi nga niya sa “Kaso hindi ‘yun lungkot”: “Gigising kang makata dahil natulog/ kang tumutula. Tapos maririnig mo/ ang kuwento ng bangungot ng iba./ Itutula mo para gumanda,” at saka iikot pabalik sa titulo: “kaso hindi ‘yun lungkot.”

Sa “Limang Tula” ni Emmanuel Quintos Velasco, naghahalo ang nakikita at di-nakikita, lumalabo ang mga hanggahan ng sarili at di-sarili: may papel ang parola sa buhay ng mga tumatanaw, may daan pauwing may kaugnayan sa relasyon ng persona at kanyang kausap, may mga imaheng may ginigising na alaala. Magkakadugtong ang lahat, at gayundin ang siklo ng buhay: “nalilikha, nananatili, nawawala.”

Sa “Pagtatanghal ng Banal,” ang unang tula sa “Prusisyunal” ni Jose Martin V. Singh, naghahalo ang mangha at hilakbot sa mga taludtod na “Ang krus/ ay bintana/ sa kawalan.” Pagkatapos nito, magsisimula ang prusisyon, mula sa paanyaya ng matraka hanggang sa pagbalik sa simbahan, at ipararanas ni Singh sa mambabasa kung paanong nagsasalimbayan ang mga kontradiksiyong nakabaon sa pananalampataya, relihiyon, buhay, at kamatayan.

Kung ituturing sa kanilang kabuuan ang apat na kalipunan ng mga tula sa Ingles, maaari itong ilarawan bilang isang paglalakbay palabas, mula sa laylayan ng bayan ng Victorias, Negros Occidental (“Angry Christ and Other Poems” ni Vincen Gregory Yu), patungo sa kung saan-saang dako sa mundo (“Watchful and Other Poems” ni Mark Angeles).

Ang titulong tula na “Angry Christ” ni Vincen Gregory Yu ay isang ekphrasis ng mural ni Alfonso Ossorio na centerpiece ng Chapel of St Joseph the Worker sa nabanggit na bayan. Anak mayaman si Ossorio—mga hacendero ang kanyang angkan—ngunit ang kanyang paglalarawan sa Anak ng Diyos ay bilang isang galit na rebolusyonaryo: “This is how I shall give/ you to the world: as a tendril/ of fear. Your heart on fire,/ eyes suffused with fury, arms/ outstretched, and behind you,/ the most monstrous hands,/ as if maneuvering/ a demon marionette.//”

Relihiyon at rebolusyon din ang magkakambal na tema ng “Between Prayers: A Sequence of Poems” ni Jefferson Acosta: “Will the sound of gunfire// ever stop at daybreaks?/ On the edge of your thighs// I pretend to

kiss your flesh/ like how bombs kiss the pavement// before blooming to their fullest/ because where else could I// start a prayer?/" Puno ng mga imahen, sanhi, at resulta ng dahas ang mga tula ni Acosta: baril at riple, bomba at granada, patalim at kawit, pagkalunod at pagkalunos.

Habang hitik naman ng mga imahen mula sa kalikasan ang "Epilogue to a Never Ending Story and Other Poems" ni Jonel Abellanosa: ibon (flowerpecker, shama) at bulaklak (jasmine, heliotrope), prutas at anila, moss at lichen, halaman at kawayan, at iba pa. Tila ang proyekto ni Abellanosa sa kanyang koleksiyon ay ang sinasaad sa unang saknong ng kanyang tulang "Solitude:" "Taking Diane Ackerman's challenge/ in her A Natural History of the Senses/ for poets to describe a cathedral's smell,/ I accompany the hours. The dawn leaves.//"

Tila isa namang travelogue ng dahas at danas ang "Watchful and Other Poems" ni Mark Angeles. Gamit ang samu't saring persona at tauhan, lugar at lunan, sinisiyasat niya ang iba't ibang uri ng pang-aapi: laban sa babae na nararanasan niya sa pamamagitan ng kanyang katawan ("Watchful," Congo); diskriminasyon laban sa isang buong lahi na humantong sa malawakang paglipol ng mga Hudyo at iba pang mga pangkat etniko ("Into Jasenovac," Croatia); ang armadong tunggalian ng mga Hudyo at Palestino sa pinagtatalunang teritoryo sa Gitnang Silangan ("Nighttime in Gaza,"); ang pagpaslang ni Judith sa Assyrian na heneral upang protektahan ang kanyang lungsod sa pagsalakay ("Slaying of Holofernes," Biblikal na lungsod ng Bethulia); at ang kemikal na trahedya na naganap sa isang planta ng United Carbide India Limited noong Disyembre 2-3, 1984, na nakaapekto sa mahigit kalahating milyong Indiyano ("Bhopal," India). Halatang-halata sa mga tula ni Angeles ang kanyang pakikiramay sa mga tinatapakan: That evening, they went straight/ to bed, too dead// -tired to even say a prayer;/ eyelids shut and will never open// again. In their dreams,/ they were flying//

over graves and dead trees,/ only to be awakened// with their lungs bursting/
into flames—// lampblack lungs in the light/ of day.”

Ang kritikal na sanaysay na “Bagot at Bigo: Iba’t ibang Mukha ng Bayani sa *Tungkol sa Aso*” ni Kisha Aleena Abuda ay pagbasa sa koleksiyon ng kuwento ni U Z. Eliserio. Ayon kay Abuda, ang nagbibigkis sa koleksiyon ay ang imahen ng bayani. Binabaligtad ng mga kuwento sa *Tungkol sa Aso* ang kumbensiyonal na pagtingin sa bayani dahil itinatanghal ang mahina bilang malakas, at ang talunan bilang nagwagi. Mahusay na pagbasa ito sa mga kuwento ni Eliserio, isa sa mga prolipikong kuwentista sa kasalukuyan na may dalang bagong perspektibo sa pagsulat ng maikling kuwento, at mahusay na pagpapakilala rin kay Abuda bilang isang kritiko.

Tinukoy ni Abuda sa kanyang sanaysay ang impluwensiya ni Rizal kay U Z. Eliserio sa pamamagitan ng mga kuwentong “Simeon sa Amerika” at “Damaso.” At sa kritikal na sanaysay na “Ilang Tala sa Isyu ng Pagsasalin kay/ni Rizal,” ang sinusuri ni Eliserio ay ang mga pagsasalin kay Rizal. Probokatibo at malawak ang kanyang mga asersiyon: mula sa pagsasalin, aabot ang kritika sa kasalukuyang sitwasyon ng lipunan. Tila nais patunayan ni Eliserio na ang usapan kay Rizal ay hindi lang talaga tungkol kay Rizal, tulad ng kanyang sanaysay: na ang mga usapin sa wika at pagsasalin ay hindi lamang talaga usapin ng wika at pagsasalin.

Komunikasyon at komunidad ang kambal na sinulid na nagtatahi sa mga kritismo sa Ingles. Tinatalakay ng “Going Beyond the Words: The Social Construction of Reality in Cirilo F. Bautista’s ‘Ritual’” ni Jenny Ortuoste ang kahalagahan ng komunikasyon sa pagbubuo ng isang komunidad. Gamit ang teoryang pangkomunikasyon, sinuri niya ang premyadong maikling kuwento ng 2014 Pambansang Alagad ng Sining ng Pilipinas sa Literatura, at natuklasan niyang ang komunikasyon sa nasabing katha ay may dalawang

nilalandas: bilang paghahayag ng kultura, at bilang kasangkapan sa pagbabago ng lipunan.

Sa “Performing Queer Christianity: Writing Gayness, Rethinking the Divine,” ginalugad ni Ronald Baytan ang kanyang pakikipaglaban para sa kanyang identidad bilang miyembro ng komunidad ng LGBTQIA+, at kung paanong nagbago ang kanyang pananaw sa organisadong relihiyon (Catholic-Born Again) nang matuklasan niya ang aternatibong pamamaraan ng pagpupugay sa Maykapal. Wika nga niya sa konklusyon ng kanyang kritikal na sanaysay: “With ‘God bless,’ I embrace all that is good in Christianity or any other religion, and in the God it has conjured and worshipped. A God that affirms individual uniqueness, and loves the pariahs, the disenfranchised, and the dispossessed. A God that represents justice and goodness, though these may be rare in the world.”

Gamit ang ecocritical na lapit, tinatalakay ng “A Poetics of Co-Experiences and Divergences: Topophilia and Topophobic Encounters in the Selected Poems of Salomon de la Selva in *Tropical Town and Other Poems*” ni Jan Raen Ledesma ang kahalagahan ng “oikos” or “integrated relationships” sa komunidad at lipunan. Tinutukan ni Ledesma ang mga kategoryang topophilia at topophobia sa kanyang pagbasa ng mga piling tula ni de la Selva, at kanyang napagtanto na ang persona sa nasabing kalipunan ay isang uri ng “quixotic visionary and memory keeper—a man with a revitalized point of view regarding the ecocritical notion of “place-making” as shaped by forces such as immigration, exile, and nostalgia.”

Pinapahalagahan ni Merlie M. Alunan ang mga panitikang mula sa rehiyon sa pagbubuo ng pambansang panitikan sa kanyang pambungad na salita sa Taboan 2019 na ginanap sa Pili, Camarines Sur. Tinalakay niya sa “Sampungong Guramoy,” ang pagnanasa ng mga manunulat mula sa Visayas at Mindanao—pati na rin ng mga taga-Bicol—na magtatag ng isang “literary

geography” na may “southern consciousness” dalawampung taon na ang lumipis sa Naga City, at kung paano ito isinasakatuparan sa kasalukuyan.

Tunay na napakayaman ng isyung ito, salamat sa lahat ng mga manunulat na patuloy na nagpupunyaging lampasan ang samu’t saring hadlang at pagsubok sa pang-araw-araw, na siya ring mga hadlang sa pagsulat, panahon man ng pandemya o hindi, sa bansang tulad ng sa atin. Nawa’y ang mga pagpupunyaging ito ay masundan pa nang mas marami, nang walang tigil, at sa gayon ay mapagwagian natin sa dulo ang pagpapahayag ng katotohanan na aalingawngaw lampas sa papel, lampas sa mga sulok ng akademya, patungo sa mas malawak na lipunan.

*MAIKLING
KUWENTO / FICTION*

SINAING

Emmanuel T. Barrameda

Nasa dulo siya ng pila. Nagkakandahaba ang leeg. Binibilang sa mata kung pang-ilan siya sa pila habang tinatantiya kung sa pang-ilang UV Express pa siya makasasampa pauwi. Hindi gaya dati, kalahati lang ng buong seating capacity ng mga van ang puwedeng maisakay na pasahero. Naliligaw siya sa pagbibilang. Hindi mapakali. Sinubukan na niyang gumamit ng daliri. Sabay na nagbibilang ng pasahero ang kaniyang mata at ang pamumukadkad ng mga daliri sa kamay niyang nakasuksok sa balsa. Pero maliligaw at maliligaw siya sa pagbibilang sa bawat umaalis at dumadating na sasakyan. Hanggang sa tantiyahin niya na lang. Parang dangkalan na lang ng tanaw kung gaano karami ang napapasakay na pasahero sa bawat van. Sa pang-apat na bakanteng van siguro, sa kalkulasyon niya. Samantalang nagbibilang at nagtatantiya, inaalala niya rin kung naisara niya nga ba ang pinto kanina bago umalis. Naisara niya ba ang gasul? Parang sinasagot din naman siya ng kaniyang alaala. Nai-lock nga niya ang pinto, naalala niya pa ngang naipit ang doormat sa pagsara niya ng pinto kung kaya kailangan niya pa itong sipain paloob. Napihit niya rin pasara ang gasul. Naalala niya, napatanong siya sa sarili kung kailan nga ba sila huling nagpa-deliver ng tangke ni Mildred. Napihit niya pakanan, habang sinasagot ang sarili, bago siguro mag-Pasko, mauubos na ito. Angkanin sa rice cooker... Dito siya natigilan at napabuntong-hininga. Natanggal niya nga sa pagkakasaksak ang saingan pero hindi niya naman naipasok sa ref. Baka katulad ng mga nagdaang pagtatangka niyang muling magsaing ay mapanisan na naman siya. Itinigil niya ang pagbibilang ng mga pasahero, kapwa sa mata at sa mga daliri. Inilabas niya na rin ang

kamay sa pagkukubli sa bulsa. Suko na siya, milya pa man ang layo, amoy na amoy na niya ang panis na namang kaning dadatnan sa bahay.

Iba ang rice cooker na itong binili nila sa isang warehouse. Gawang China. Bagamat iisa lang naman ang set ng mga teknolohiyang nagagawa ng mga rice cooker kesehoda gawang Amerika o gawa ng mga Hapon, e nanibago sila sa isang ito. Itinapon na nila ang kahon maging ang manual na kalakip nito. Aanhin pa? E nakasulat naman sa Tsino ang mga gabay sa paggamit.

Napabili sila dahil maliit ang kalderong saingan na iniregalo sa kanila noong ikasal sila. Lagi silang nabibitin sa kanin. Halos para lang sa kaniya ang kaning naisasaing dito. Ang ending, dalawang ulit sila kung magsaing. Maliban sa makonsumo sa gasul, madalas na nauuwi sa pagkawala ng gana ang kanilang pagkain. Nariyang kakasandok pa lang ni Mildred ng kanin sa kaniyang plato, siya naman ay sinusukat na ang lalim ng bigas at ng sabaw nito gamit ang daliri. Kaya sa huli, may halftime break ang pagkain nila ng hapunan. Nakatiwangwang sila kasama ng mga ulam habang hinihintay na magsubo ang sabaw ng kanilang sinaing.

Sa pagitang ito na nila naisisingit ang pagkukumustahan sa maghapon ng nagdaan, ang pagpapalano ng para sa bukas, samakalawa, at sa paparating na Sabado at Linggo. Kapag inin na ang sinaing, umaaso muli ang kaning ihahatag sa mesa habang nalipasan na ng lamig ang kung anumang ulam sa hapag. Muling maninibago ang kanilang mga bibig at tiyan. Madalas na hindi nauubos ang pangalawang batch ng sinaing. Pero ayos lang. Walang kaso. Dahil ito na ang magsisilbing kaning lamig na puwedeng isangag sa almusal. O kung abutan ng gutom ay pang-midnight snack kasalo ang kung anong na-grocery na delata o kung anumang natirang ulam sa hapunan.

Naitatawid nila ang hapunan sa ganitong diskarte. Walang kaso ang kanin sa pananghalian dahil pareho naman silang nasa kani-kanilang mga trabaho kung tanghali. Sa kani-kanilang canteen na sila kumakain. Minsan

sa mga karinderya sa labas ng kanilang mga opisina. Kung nagkakatamarang magsaing ng pangalawang batch, o kahit ng unang batch na panghapunan, bumibili na lang sila ng apat na order ng kanin sa karinderya sa kanto. Isa kay Mildred, tatlo sa kaniya.

Nakabuo lang sila ng planong tuluyan nang bumili ng rice cooker nang mapadalas ang pagkakaroon nila ng mga bisita. Minsan bumibisita kung Linggo ang mga kapatid ni Mildred galing ng Quezon. Madalas naman ang mga barkada niya ang nakikidayo ng pagtoma. Palaging may shortage ng kanin. Lahat nabibitin lalo pa kung may lechong manok, sinigang na bangus, laing, at iba pang putahe sa hapag. Hindi uubra ang batch by batch na pagsasaing. Mahirap pagsama-samahin sa hapag ang mga nabiting bibig at sikmura. Kaya kung minsan, hindi lang sako ng inaning bigas ang dala ng mga kapatid ni Mildred kundi bande-bandehadong kanin na rin. Bahaw na nga lang dahil sa layo at tagal ng biyahe. Isa pa, pinag-uusapan na rin nilang bumuo ng pamilya. Sa taong ito, isang anak. Pagkatapos ng dalawang taon, isa pa. Ayos na 'yun. Hindi niya maisip kung paano mabitin sa kanin at mabalawah sa gitna ng pagkain ang mabubuntis niyang asawa. Tiyak na away. Kaya ang solusyon, isang mas malaking rice cooker.

Naglibot na sila sa Appliance Center sa SM. Mayroong Kyowa, Hanabishi, at Sanyo. Lahat branded. May kulay itim at may kulay puti. Ang ilan ay may disenyo ng bulaklak. Sabi ni Mildred iyong itim na lang para hindi takaw-dumi. Matapos lang ang isang pasada sa estante ng mga rice cooker, nakapili sila. Iyong may kasamang elevated steamer sa loob. Puwedeng lagyan ng mangkok na may ulam para puwedeng initin habang nagsasaing. Hindi na kinakailangang isalang pa sa kawali o kaserola. Tipid sa gasul. Dalawang Sabado nila itong dinadaan-daanan at binalik-balikan sa Appliance Center kapag lumalabas sila para magpahangin o kumain sa labas. Sa kinsenas nila babalikan para bilhin. Puwede sanang i-Home Credit. Pero may babayaran pa silang cellphone. Limang buwan pa ang bubunuin nila. Noong mabulungan

siya ng katrabahong mayroong murang appliances na malapit sa port area, warehouse daw. Mga surplus daw galing sa ibang bansa. Naengganyo sila. Isang libo raw makakakuha na sila ng brand new na rice cooker. Kinagat nila ito at pumunta sa warehouse noong kinansela ang pasok dahil sa malakas na ulan. Nagkita sila ni Mildred sa Monumento at doon na nag-dyip papuntang port area. Nalula sila sa dami ng appliances. Parang lahat ng hinahanap nila para mapuno ang bahay ay naririto na. May two-door at one-door ref. May maliit na para sa mga kuwarto at meron ding pangtindahan. May flatscreen TV at may TV rin na may nakaumbok pa ring picture tube sa likod, may component at speaker, may plantsa, may kabayo ng plantsa, may single at double burner, may microwave. May section din para sa mga furniture. May iba-ibang kulay at sukat ng sofa, may dining table, study table, at mayroon pa ngang mesa ng bilyar. Kaya bago pa man nila natunton ang section ng mga rice cooker ay napuno na nila ng gamit ang mansyon sa kani-kanilang hinagap. Katulad ng sa Appliances Center sa SM, hindi nalalayo ang mga hitsura, kulay, at specs ng mga rice cooker dito. Ang pinagkaiba nga lamang, maliban sa di hamak na mas mura ang mga ito, lahat ng pangalan ng brand ay nasa wikang Tsino. Biro niya nga sa asawa, baka lutong Macau ang masaing nilang kanin. Tapos nagtsi-Tsino na rin sila pagkakain. Noong makapili na sila ay agad nila itong pina-check kung gumagana sa service center. Inalalayan sila ng sales lady at idinuhol sa technical representative. Dali-dali nitong nilabas ang cord, at kinabit sa puwitan ng rice cooker. Saka sinaksak sa extension wire na naka-packing tape sa isang maliit na tabla. Pagkasaksak, ipinakita agad sa mag-asawa ang kulay green na ilaw. Ibig sabihin daw nito ay iniinit ang kanin. Itinuro ng technical representative ang ibinababang buton. Ito raw ang didiinan para masaing ang bigas. Ang green na ilaw ay naging pula. Pero dahil wala pang bigas at pansabaw ay umaangat ang buton at nagiging green ulit ang ilaw. Sa counter na sila nakaramdam ng gutom. Halos magkasabay pang kumalam ang kani-kanilang mga sikmura't nagkatinginan. Tinginang katumbas ng tinginan nila noong college pa lang sila sa tuwing tatakasan

nila ang mundo kapag papasok sa kung saang motel sa Avenida at Quiapo. Kalong-kalong niya sa dyip pauwi ang rice cooker na nakakahon habang nakasandal si Mildred sa kaniyang balikat. Ang mga kamay nito ay nakakapit sa braso ng asawa habang parang anak na mahinhing tinatapik sa kaniyang kandungan ang bagong biling lutuan.

Pagkababa ng dyip, sinalubong agad sila ng usok ng ihawan ng barbeque. Sa isip-isip niya, mapapalaban sila dahil maraming maisasaing na kanin. Kaya nagtig-dalawang stick sila ng barbeque at nagtigidalawa pang stick ng helmet at adidas. Take out. Pinaghusto ng tindera sa plastic ang kung ilang stick ng nabiling panglaman-tiyan at tatlong plastic ng sawsawan. Suka. Maanghang na sauce. Matamis na sauce. Bago tuluyang lumiko sa kanto papasok sa kanilang bahay, humirit pa siya ng RC Cola. Patawad na muna ang deposito sa bote, sabi niya sa tindera. Isasauli na lang raw kinaumagahan. O baka mamaya, pagkahapunan. Nakaugalian na niya kasing magsigarilyo 'pag napapalaban ng kain.

Kahit pa alam na nilang parehong rice cooker ang laman ng kahon ng rice cooker, kakikitaan pa rin sila ng pananabik. Walang inalis noong nagbubukas sila ng ilang regalo pagkatapos ng kasal. Hindi na nila pinagtiyagaang tanggalin ang buhol sa pagkakatali. Gamit ang talim ng nadampot na itak, nakalagan nila ng tali ang kahon. Agad na niyang nilabas ang rice cooker. Iniangat na animo'y nagkakarga ng bagong silang na bata. Hawak-hawak naman ni Mildred ang kurdon na parang umbilical cord. Agad niyang pinatong sa gilid ng lababo, sa may tabi ng lalagyan ng mga pinggan, ang rice cooker. Binuksan ang lata ng biskwit na siyang lalagyan ng bigas. Subalit kakarampot na bigas lang ang naroroon. Masasaid na at hindi na huhusto kahit sa kalahating takal. Kahit pa nakasara ang gasul ay mabilis silang nakapagpaliyab ng kani-kanilang mga ulo. *Bakit walang bigas?* Tinalunton nila kung sino ang huling nagsaing. Nagkaungkatan sa kung kaninong sahod ang ginamit sa pagbili ng bigas. Mauungkat pa ang dati pang

away. Sumubo ito, umapaw. Nagpatuloy ang pagtatalo hanggang magsara na ang karinderya sa kanto, ang tindahang pinangakuan ng pagsasauli ng bote. Magtatapos ang away sa kalam ng sikmura. Pagtatawanan na lang nila ang isa't isa noong wala na silang maungkat. Inihanay na lang nila sa plato ang mga helmet, adidas, at barbeque sa pinggan. Tatlong mangkok para sa tatlong sawsawan. Binuksan ang RC Colang pinanawan na ng lamig. Hindi na sila nag-abalang kumuha pa ng baso, nagsalitan na lang sila ng tungga sa boteng walang deposito. Iyon ang unang gabi ng rice cooker sa kanilang kusina. Walang kanin. Subalit may iniinin na pag-ibig.

Nagising siya nang alas kuwatro kinaumagahan. Lumabas siya at pumunta sa tindahang pinangakuan ng pagsasauli ng bote kagabi. Sa umaga ay nagtitinda rin ito ng ulam, almusal, at kanin. Automatic, nailagay na agad ng tintera ang apat na plastic ng mainit pang kanin noong makita siya. Naka-plastic na ang mga ito at nakasilid sa maliit na batya. Para kung may magte-take out ng kanin na pang-almusal o pambaon sa opisina at eskuwela, madali na lang silang kukuha. Nakasanayan na ng tintera ang pagbili niya ng nakabalot na kanin sa umaga. Sa pagkakataong ito ay tumanggi siya at bumili ng dalawang kilo ng bigas. Iyong tigkukuwarenta'y singko. Bumili rin siya ng apat na piraso ng hotdog, dalawang itlog, dalawang pakete ng kape, at saka tatlong stick ng yosi. Nagising si Mildred sa tunog ng tilamsikan ng mantika at espadahan ng siyanse at kawali. Nasa kulay green na ang ilaw ng rice cooker. Tatlong takal ang bigas. Napasobra ng tantiya. Pero halos masimot nila ang rice cooker. Kung kagabi'y sa kalam ng sikmura nagtapos ang kanilang away, sinimulan naman nila ang araw na ito sa magkasunuran nilang pagdighay.

At tumigil ang mundo sa pagdating ng pandemya sa sumunod na buwan. Pinagbawalan silang lumabas ng bahay para pumasok sa trabaho. Mabuti na lamang at maaga na rin silang nakapag-imbak ng mga grocery

at kahit papaano ay may natira pa rin mula sa sahod nila. Sobrang higpit kahit pa ang karinderya sa kanto at tindahang binibilhan niya ng RC Cola at sigarilyo ay nagmistulang isang pagkalayo-layong bansa para sa kanila. Isa sa isang linggo, rumuronda ang mga tanod at kagawad ng barangay upang magrasyon ng bigas, mga delata, at pakete ng noodles, pansit canton at miswa. Umapaw ang latang lalagyan ng bigas. Bago pa man kasi ang lockdown ay nauna na silang nakapapuno ng bigas. Kaya ang mga dumadating na rasyon galing sa barangay na muna ang nauuna nilang isaing. Hindi magandang klase ng bigas ang galing sa barangay. Madaling masira. Kaya hindi nila ito inihahalo sa mga bigas na bagong molino galing sa Quezon at sa mga pinamili nila sa grocery. Kung anong sagana nila sa bigas ay siya namang salat nila sa pang-ulam. Mauunang mauubos ang mga pinamili nilang processed food tulad ng hotdog, longganisa, at embotido. Palaging mabenta sa almusal. Namemeligro na rin ang itlog na nakahihiligan ni Mildred. Hindi tatagal ng dalawang linggo ang isang dosenang itlog na nabili nila sa tindahan ng RC Cola. Naubos nila sa paglalaga na isinasawsaw niya sa asin, sunny side up na malasado na pinuputok niya ang pula sa kanin, binate o scrambled na ipinapalaman niya sa pandesal, omelette, tortang talong at tortang giniling na kasalo sa tanghalian at hapunan, pansahog sa sinasangag na kaning lamig sa almusal. Iyong isang kilong manok naman ay nahati na nila sa pagluluto ng tinola't adobo. Pangatlong linggo pa lang ng lockdown, in-off na nila ang ref. Sa mga sumunod na linggo namigay na ng Q-pass ang barangay. Isa sa bawat pamilya. Para makapag-restock ang bawat bahay ng kani-kanilang mga supply. Kaya, noong mapadpad siya sa grocery, isang tray agad ng itlog ang dinampot niya. Isang kilo ulit ng manok. Kung dati ay sige siya ng dampot ng mga delata, ngayon ay hindi na muna dahil marami-rami pa ang supply na galing sa barangay na hindi pa nabubuksan ng kanilang abrelata. Muling pinagana ang ref, habang si Mildred ay nasasabik na sa kung anong luto ng itlog ang ihahain ng asawa niya para sa kaniya.

Binago rin ng pandemya ang diskarte nilang mag-asawa sa pagsasaing. Ngayong nagtatanghalian na sila sa bahay, tanghali ang unang saing nila. Tatlong takal. Ang matitira ay iibabaw sa sinaing sa gabi. Dalawang takal lang. Sakto na ito. Kaya kung gusto nilang magsangag sa almusal kinaumagahan, ginagawa nilang tatlo hanggang apat na takal. Pero sa mga sumunod na araw ay nagpabago-bago ang gana at umay ni Mildred sa pagkain. May araw na sobrang lakas niya sa kanin at nakikipagsabayan sa kaniya. May mga araw namang parang kaing-manok lang siya. Kaya madalas nang nasisira ang diskarte nila sa pagsasaing. May mga araw na hindi siya pinapansin ng asawa dahil nabibitin sa kanin. May mga araw din namang siya ang nababanas sa asawa dahil kakarampot ang kakainin samantalang punong-puno pa ang kaldero ng kanin. Hindi naman niya kayang ubusin ang lahat ng matitira. May mga araw na hindi na nauubos ng asawa ang pagkain at siya na ang tumitira ng mga tira nito. May mga araw na talagang hindi na kumakain si Mildred. Hindi man lang bumabangon sa kama. Pareho na silang latang-lata at hindi na bumabangon sa kanilang kama. Maghapon higa. Tumatayo lang sila para umihi o dumumi. Ang ending, nanlamig ang kaning lamig—napanis.

Hindi lang sila isang beses na mapapanisan ng kanin. Kahit kasi siya ay parang nakikipisan na rin sa mistulang pag-aayuno ng asawa. Umaalingasaw ang kanin kapag napapanis. Nanlalambot. Parang lugaw na amoy tanga. Kaya tiwala siyang wala pa siyang COVID, dahil talagang namumunyeta ang amoy nito at tumatambay sa kaniyang ilong. Para ngang nalalalahan niya pa. Kapag napapanisan sila ng kanin, itinataktak niya ang kaldero sa kanal sa tapat ng bahay. Bahala na ang mga aso at pusanggalang pagpistahan ito. Ibinababad nito sa pinakuluang tubig ang kaldero para hindi tambayan ng mikrobyo. Ewan ba niya't pagkabilis-bilis nilang mapapanisan ng kanin sa bagong biling rice cooker. Hindi katulad ng sa dati nilang maliit na kalderong gawa sa bakal. Kayang tumagal ng kanin ng isang maghapon

at dalawang araw pa kung hindi gaanong maalinsangan ang panahon. Ito kasing bago, nakakabit ang takip sa mismong rice cooker. Walang sariling takip ang kaldero. Kaya ang siste, hindi tuluyang nakalalabas ang sumusubong sabaw kapag malapit na itong mainin. Kaya nasasaing man ang kanin ay naroroon pa rin na parang hamog ang tubig, hindi nakaalpas sa rice cooker. Magsisibabaan at palalambutin nito ang kanin kapag tinanggal na sa pagkakasaksak. Doon na mas mabilis na giginawin ang kaning lamig. Imbes na tumigas ay nanlalambot.

Pinaghinalaan niyang COVID ang maghaponing panghihina at pagsusuka ng asawa. Kaya noong mapanisan na naman sila ng kanin, ipinaamoy niya sa asawa ang kaldero. Lalo itong naduwal sa nakakagagong amoy. Nabatukan tuloy siya ni Mildred, pero masaya siya dahil may pang-amoy pa nga ito. Nagpatuloy ang paghila-hilata nito, ang pagduwal, at pagpapaluto ng itlog. Isang gabi, bago matulog, ibinulong sa kaniya ng asawa na magmula ng mag-lockdown ay hindi na siya nagkakaroon ng dalaw. Siya rin naman daw, sagot niya. Miss na nga raw niyang makainuman ang mga barkada. Tinalikuran siya ng asawa. Kinaumagahan niya pa mage-gets na ang tinutukoy pala nitong dalaw ay regla. Hindi pa siya dinadalaw ng regla. Halos mapatalon siya sa tuwa nang ibalita sa asawang nakuha na niya kung ano ang tinutukoy nitong bisita. Isang perpektong sunny side up ang inihanda niya para sa agahan ng kabiyaak. Pinakaingatan niyang hindi mabasag ang gitna. Pinakaingatan niyang pinong-pinong asin ang makurot mula sa garapon at maibudbod niya. Pinakaingatang hindi matusta ang ilalim na hindi rin naman nagiging malamya ang puti. May sapat na init ng apoy para hindi maluto nang husto ang pula pero kayang palutungin ang mga hangganan nito. Nang makita ito ni Mildred, walang kaabog-abog niya itong inilagay sa ibabaw ng kanin saka hinalo-halo. Nakangiti lang naman siya sabay duhol ng pregnancy kit. Sinagot naman ito ng asawa ng paglagok ng tubig, maraming-maraming tubig. Halos nangalahati ang pitsel.

Dalawang linya.

Positive.

Hindi lang si Mildred ang nagdadalantao sa kanilang kalye. Kasama ang balitang ito sa inalmusal nila nung isang umaga. *Buntis pala si ganito. Buntis pala si ganyan.* May mga maaagang nagsipagbuntis. Iyong senior high school na anak ni Aling Miling, papalobo na ang tiyan. Pero sa tantiya niya nakabuo na ito bago pa man magkaroon ng pandemya. Si Mang Puroy, senior na pero hayun at buntis ulit ang batang bata at pangatlo niyang asawa. Ang pinakanakagulat sa lahat ay ang pagdadalantao ni Aling Del. Wala namang napapabalitang nanliligaw sa matandang dalagang gurong ito. Pero heto't buntis na rin. *Nakapagtataka.* Sadyang wala nang magawa ang mga tao ngayong pandemya, sabi ni Mildred sa asawa. Sila naman, ang suspetsa ay noong gabing binili nila ang bagong rice cooker nila nainin ang buhay sa sinapupunan ng kanilang pamilya. Palaging sa mga petsang malapit dito tumatapat ang kanilang mga hintuturo kapag binibilang nilang pabalik ang mga araw sa kalendaryo noong makumpirma nila ang pagbubuntis ni Mildred. Palaging naroroon sa maulang gabi bago mag-akinse sa kinulang sa araw na buwan ng Pebrero.

Kapag umaga ay sinasamahan si Mildred ng kaniyang asawa sa paglalakad-lakad sa barangay. May kaluwagan na rin ang restriction. Basta't may face mask at face shield, at nasusunod ang mga protocols, walang problema. Tama nga ang kuwento sa kaniya ng asawa, bawat kanto may nakikita siyang buntis. Nagkakangitian na lang sila-silang mga buntis, pati na rin ang mga mister. Mga pilyong ngiti. Mga ngiting nagpapalakas ng loob ng isa't isa. *Kaya mo 'yan. Magiging magkakalaro at magkakaklase ang mga anak natin.* Na malamang ay mauuwi rin sa mga kuwentuhan at balitaan sa kani-kanilang hapag. Ang paglalakad-lakad nila ay nauuwi na sa pamimili sa talipapa ng sahog sa ilulutong ulam sa tanghali. O kaya kung magkatamuran

nang magluto, ay bibili na lang ng lutong ulam. Hindi pa rin nila problema ang bigas. Dahil nag-uumapaw pa rin ang kanilang suplay galing sa Quezon. Kung makakaluwas nga lang ang mga kapatid ni Mildred galing probinsya, malamang isang kaban na naman ang iaambag nito sa kanilang bigasan. Kagabi lang nila naibalita sa kaniyang mga kapatid ang pagdadalantao ng kanilang kapatid. Ilang beses siyang sinubukang lambingin ng asawang umuwi sa probinsya pero hindi ito nakahirrit. Kaya nakuntento na lang sila sa malabo at putol-putol na video call kagabi. Hindi man rumehistro nang malinaw kay Mildred ang mukha ng mga kapatid dahil sa hina ng signal ay sigurado naman itong masayang masaya sila sa dumating na balita. Matagal-tagal na ring nangungulit ang mga kapatid ni Mildred na mabigyan na sila ng pamangkin. Nang tuluyang maputol ang video call, kumunekta sila ng tawag sa kanilang panganay. Ang mga putol-putol na mensahe kanina ay napatag ng tawag. *Magkakapamangkin na kayo. Buntis ako.* Rinig nilang mag-asawa ang sigawan at talunan ng mga kapatid ni Mildred. *Ay, kung makakaluwas lang kami bukas. Andyan sana kami. Linggo pa naman.* Nang maubos ang 7 minutes call, naghintay ulit sila ng tawag. Ganu'n nang ganu'n hanggang abutin sila ng hatinggabi. Tatawag pa sana siya pero sinaway lang siya ng asawa.

Mas kapansin-pansin ang pag-iingat nilang dalawa sa mga sumunod na araw dahil tatlo na silang nagku-quarantine. Nagiging madahon na ulit ang kanilang ulam sa hapag at isinantabi na muna ang mga ayudang delata. Ang RC Cola ay napalitan ng gatas para kay Mildred. Nawala ang yosi at napalitan ng pakikiuso nilang dalawa sa mga plantito at plantita sa pagtanim ng mga halaman sa paso. Sa kanilang dalawa mas si Mildred ang nahumaling sa pagtanim. Binibiro naman siya ng asawa na may kabigatan ang kamay. Kaya hindi raw tutubo ang mga halaman niya. Hindi puwedeng maghihilata lang si Mildred maghapon. Kaya panay pa rin ang lakad nila sa umaga pagkaalmusal at sa hapon bago magdilim. Ganun ang nagiging larga

nila sa maghapon. Kung may pasok siya ay sa bahay lang naglalakad-lakad si Mildred. Nagtatanim-tanim, nagdidilig-dilig. Sa paglipas ng mga araw ay mas lumalaki at bumibigat na ang tiyan niya. Kaya nababawasan ang oras ng paglalakad at paghahalaman. Hanggang sa mapirmis na lang ulit siya sa loob ng bahay. Hindi lang dahil sa hirap na siyang magkikikilos. Namatay kasi ang kapitbahay nila dahil sa COVID. Nagising na lang sila sa sirena ng ambulansya. Noong una ay hindi pa nila matukoy kung sino sa mga kapitbahay nila ang tinangay ng ambulansya. Sa mga sumunod na araw, sa pakikibalita na lang niya nalamang si Aling Nenita pala. 'Yung may puwesto sa Balintawak. Parang mga halamang nagsipagsulputan ang mga nagpositibo sa COVID. Doble o triple pa sa dami ng nakakatanguan nilang buntis sa kanilang paglalakad-lakad sa umaga. Almusal nila sa umaga ang naulinigang sirena ng ambulansya sa gabi. Sa mga sinusukling kuwento sa kaniya sa tuwing bibili ng itlog sa tindahan na lang niya nalalamang wala na si ganito, wala na si ganyan. Na-COVID.

Palaging may takot si Mildred kapag dumudungaw siya sa kanilang bintana. Kahit pa kasi bagong salta lang sila rito, paunti-unti na niyang nakikilala ang hulma ng mga mukha ng kanilang kapitbahay. Mahina man siya sa pangalan ay kaya niyang ipakilala sa asawa ang mga bagong kakilalang mukha sa pamamagitan ng paglalarawan sa tabas ng bigote, nunal sa mukha, unat ng buhok, tangkad, kapayata't katabaan. Nakikipagtangian ito sa kaniya at nagsusukli naman siya ng sukli. Ang problema niya sa pagdungaw ay paunti-unting nababawasan ang kakilala niya. Paunti nang paunti ang nagdadaan. *Sana'y nasa bahay lang*, ang palagi niyang naibubulong sa sarili.

Sa wakas, nagluwag na. Biyernes pa lang ng gabi ay hindi na mapakali ang mag-asawa. Nagluwag din sila sa loob ng bahay. Ilang buwan din silang hindi tumanggap ng bisita kaya't naninibago hindi lamang sila kundi maging

ang bahay. Heto't susugurin sila ng mga kapatid ni Mildred sa Linggo. Dating gawi, siguradong aapaw ang pagkain sa kanilang lamesa. Aapaw ang kanilang dati nang nag-uumapaw pang kaban ng bigas. Ang bilin naman ng mag-asawa ay 'wag na magdala ng bandehado ng kanin at lalamig lang sa biyahe at nang maibida na rin nila ang naluma na nilang bagong biling rice cooker. *Walang mabibitin sa kanin*, sabi nila. Katumbas nitong pagtitipon sa Linggo ang ilang kaarawang nalaktawan at naunsiyami dahil sa walang biyaheng papasok at paluwas ng Maynila. At, siyempre pa-welcome sa bago at pinakaunang buhay sa sinapupunan ng kanilang pamilya. Siya man ay nag-imbata rin ng kaniyang sariling panauhin. Iyong mga barkada't katrabaho niya lang pero sa hapon na niya pinapupunta, 'pag naka-pack-up na pauwi ang mga kapatid ng asawa niya. Social distancing, ika niya. Masusulit pa rin naman daw nila ang alak kahit na may curfew pa rin. Buti na lang at naka-sched siya ng work from home ng Biyernes. Kaya sa araw na ito na sila namili ng mga lulutuin. Makatanghali ng Sabado, handa na sila sa mga magsisidatingang bisita.

Nakakaramdam na si Mildred ng paggalaw ng buhay sa kaniyang tiyan. Kaya labis ang ligalig nito nang dumating ang mga bisita kinaumagahan. Nagpapasikat raw sabi ng mga tiyahin nito. Kuwento naman ni Mildred, ay parang gusto nang lumabas sa sarili niyang pagla-lockdown. *Parang ako, burong-buro na. Gusto ko nang lumabas.* Sinukat na nila ang araw ng panganganak. November daw ang kabuwanan niya. Nakibilang ang mga kapatid niya pabalik sa kalendaryo. *Valentine baby pala ang isang ito*, nagpalitan sila ng ngiti. Samantala, nauna na sa binyagan at pagpapadrino ang paksa ng usapan ng mga kumpareng hilaw ng kaniyang asawa sa inuman sa labas. Tungkol sa bata ang araw na ito ng Linggo kapwa sa magkakapatid sa loob at mga nag-iinuman sa labas. May mga tips na kung paano makatipid sa diaper. Mga pamahii't puwera usog, mga rekomendasyon ng mga paanakan, magiging pangalan kung lalakae at kung babae, mga puwede at hindi puwedeng gawin sa huling trimester ng pagbubuntis. Bago pa man

mauwi sa usapan sa eskuwelahang magandang pasukan, nagpaalam na ang mga bisita galing ng Quezon. Ay, parang hindi matapos-tapos ang paalaman. Paano'y hindi pa sila makapagtakda ng mga susunod na pagkikita. Kaya hinusto na sa mahihigpit na yakapan. Hindi naman nagtagal ay nagsiuwi na rin ang mga manginginom nilang bisita. Gaya ng pangako ng kanilang nalumang bagong biling rice cooker, walang nabitin sa kanin sa kanilang mga bisita. May pasobra pa ngang bahaw para isangag kinaumagahan. Natapos ang gabi sa pagtutupi nila ng pagkahaba-habang listahan ng plano para sa kanilang panganay.

Bumalik ang panghihina't pagsusuka ni Mildred sa mga sumunod na araw. Baka napagod lang sa pagtanggap ng bisita, naisip niya. Nagkulong lang ito sa kuwarto at babangon lang para magbanyo. Ang bintanang kaniyang uniberso ay hindi na niya masilip-silip. Kung paano siya iniwan ng asawa niya sa kama sa umaga ay ganun pa rin siya nito binabalikan sa gabi. Sira na naman ang diskarte nila sa pagsasaing. Hindi nagalaw ni Mildred ang iniwan niyang kanin sa rice cooker at ulam sa lamesa. Kaya napanisan na naman sila. Pero dala ng pagod, ipinagpabukas na niya ang pagtapon nito sa kanal at tinabihan na ang asawa sa pagtulong. Maaalimpungatan lang siya sa tawag mula sa Quezon. Doon lang niya nahaplos na nagliliyab sa init ang kaniyang asawa. Lumabas muna siya para sagutin ang tawag. Nanlamig siya sa balita. Positive raw silang magkakapatid.

Hindi niya lubos maisip na may isang gabing sa harapan ng bahay nila paparada ang mga sirena ng ambulansya. Diretso sila COVID ward. Mabuti at may bakante pang kama. Agad na kinabitan ng oxygen si Mildred at sinwab. Inestima naman niya ang sarili. Sinalat ang leeg kung may sinat, wala. Inaalala kung kailan siya huling umubo at sinipon, wala rin siyang maalala. Maging siya ay sinwab na rin dahil sa pagiging primary contact ng asawa. Kinaumagahan pa lalabas ang swab result nila. Sa palitan nila ng text ng mga kapatid ni Mildred ay nasa ospital na rin daw ang bunso nila. Kapwa

na sila kinabitan ng oxygen. Mabilis na lumipas ang gabi. May balita mula sa Quezon. Pumanaw na ang bunso nila Mildred. Kinimkim niya ang balita sa isang sulok ng kaniyang dibdib. Hindi muna ito puwedeng makarating sa asawa na mahina pa rin at inaalalayan pa rin ng tangke ng oxygen. Nayayanig ang kaniyang dibdib sa maya't mayang pag-ubo ng asawa. Parang anumang oras ay malalaglag sa sahig ang kinikimkim niyang masamang balita. Samantala siya ay pigil din ang mga daliri sa pagtipa ng update sa kanilang dalawa. Kinontak na rin niya ang mga barkadang nakasama noong Linggo kahit hindi pa siguradong may COVID silang mag-asawa. Sa bawat reply na *maayos lang kami pare*, mas lumuluwag ang paghinga niya. Pero muling pinagsisikip ng pagdagundong ng mga ubo ng kaniyang asawa at hirap sa paghinga.

Dumating ang dalawang papel bago magtanghalian.

Positive.

Uniberso na niya ang bintana ng asawa. Pinanonood niya ang mga nagdadaan habang nagsisiga ng nikotin sa бага. Sige ang tango sa kaniya ng mga nagdadaan. Tango na parang mga tapik sa kaniyang balikat. Na sasagutin niya naman ng pag-angat ng mga kilay. Saka niya buburahin ng usok na parang dini-disinfect ang kani-kanilang mga pagtingin. Bago magtanghali ay kumakatok na lang ang mga taga-barangay. Subalit wala na ang mga tanod at kagawad sa pagbukas ng pinto. Naroon lang sa upuan ang isang kilo ng bigas, dalawang pakete ng noodles at isang malaking lata ng sardinas. Pagkarami-raming bigas pero bakanteng-bakante ang rice cooker. Natatakot siyang muling magsaing at mapanisan. Kahit pa nagpositibo rin siya sa COVID, nagrerenta't namumunyeta pa rin ang amoy ng panis na kaning hindi na nagalaw ng kaniyang asawa. Sa tuwing sisinghot siya ng sipon ay nanunumbalik sa kaniya ang amoy ng inuud na kanin. Hindi na niya naitaktak sa kanal ang napanis na kanin. Bagkus, ibinuhos na lang

niya sa lababo. Ano't parang kumapit panis na amoy sa kurtina, kumapit sa dingding, umilalim sa mga mantel, at nanuot sa mga punda at kutson. Hindi siya makatakas sa amoy ng nabulok na kanin. Kahit pa makailang ulit niya nang kinuskos nang maigi ang kaldero't binabad sa mainit na tubig, naroroon pa rin ang amoy. Paunti-unti, napalitan ng amoy ng alak at suka ang amoy ng panis na kanin. Sa mga sumunod na araw at linggo, muli niyang pinag-aralang magsaing ng para sa kaniya na lang. Kung walang pasok ay sa umaga siya nagsasaing. Dalawang takal. Sapat na. Kung may tirang kanin mula sa gabi ay ibinababaw niya na lang sa pag-iinin ng bagong saing na kanin. Sa ika-40 days ni Mildred nangalahati ang bigas mula sa Quezon, mga pinamili sa grocery at galing sa mga ayuda.

Hindi niya muna isinuksok ang susi. Nakipagdaupang-palad siya sa lamig ng door knob para tiyaking nai-lock niya ito kaninang umaga. At, hindi siya pinagbuksan nito. Pagkasusi niya sa pinto, sinalubong siya ng doormat na nakahandusay malayo sa pinto. Inamoy niya ang paligid—walang tagas ng gasul. Ang napabayaang kanin—napabuntong hininga siya. Binaba niya ang gamit at saka dahan-dahang lumapit sa rice cooker. Inihanda niya ang ilong sa pananarantado ng amoy. Binuksan ang kaldero. Walang amoy. Inilapit niya pa ang ilong. Pero wala talaga. Kumuha siya ng kutsara at inilubog sa kanin. Inasahan niya ang panlalambot nito. Hawak pa rin ng ilong ang pananggalang. Pero matigas ito. Hanggang sa tibagin niya nang tibagin ang tumpok ng bahaw. *Hindi panis ang kanin! Hindi panis ang kanin!* Halos magtatakbo siya nang magtatakbo sa loob ng bahay para ipamalita sa sarilig *hindi panis ang kanin! Hindi panis ang kanin!* Tuluyang nagpaubaya ang ilong niya. Wala na ang amoy. Tinibag niya nang tinibag ang kanin hanggang maging pino at saka niya isinangag sa kawali. Itatapon na sana niya ang mga tinik ng isda sa kanal nang matigilan siya ng amoy ng puting bulaklak na tumubo malapit sa alulod, tila nakikitanghod sa kanilang bintana.

PALAYOK-PALAYUKAN PARA KAY CARLITO

Eugene Y. Evasco

Inggit na inggit si Carlito sa mga kapatid niyang babae. Isinasama kasi sila sa pamamalengke. Katulong sila ng kanilang lola sa pagluluto. At kapag oras ng pahinga, masaya silang naglalaro ng palayok-palayukan sa kanilang hardin.

Gustong-gusto ni Carlito ang makasali sa luto-lutuan. Marami siyang gustong iluto. Magiging pambalot niya ng lumpia ang dahon ng kaimito at ang laman nito ay ang iginisa niyang buhangin. Maglalaga siya ng mga bagong-pitas na gumamela.

Minsan na siyang nabulyawan ng kanilang kapitbahay. Nahuli siya ni Aling Toyang na namimitas ng mga paboritong tanim na gumamela. Mamahalin yata ang mga gumamelang iyon dahil kakaiba ang mga kulay—may puti, dilaw, at saka kahel.

“Antonia!” bulyaw ni Aling Toyang sa kanilang tarangkahan. “Nasaan ang apo mo? Pagsabihan mong huwag na huwag kakalbuhin ang mga tanim ko.”

Humingi ng paumanhin ang Lola. Matagal nang magkaibigan ang magkapitbahay at ngayon lang nagkaroon ng munting sigalot ang kanilang ugnayan. “Papalitan ko na lang ang mga napitas. Ano bang gusto mo sa mga pananim ko?” Inaya niya ang kaibigan sa kanilang hardin upang makapamilya ng napupusuang tanim.

Nang humupa na ang kaniyang galit sa tulong ng mga nakatanim sa mga paso, itinuro ni Aling Toyang ang isa sa mga bonsai na bougainvillea.

“Kung di lang kita kaibigan, hindi ko iyan ibibigay sa iyo,” biro ni Lola Antonia.

Masayang naghuntahan ang magkaibigan tungkol sa paghahalaman. Ganu’n yata ang pagkakaibigan: hindi nagtatanim ng sama ng loob.

Nang makaalis si Aling Toyang, hinanap ng lola ang kaniyang apo.

“Mali ang ginawa mo, Carlito,” pangaral ng lola. “Hihingi ka dapat ng permiso sa pagkuha ng mga bagay na hindi sa iyo. Saka mas mainam ang mga bulaklak kapag tinitingnan lang at hindi pinipitas. Aanhin mo ba ang mga bulaklak, apo?”

Nahihiyang ipinakita ni Carlito ang dinikdik niyang mga talulot ng gumamela. “Magluluto kasi ako ng dinengdeng. Malapot ang katas ng bulaklak na ito.”

“Dinengdeng? Mga dahon ng saluyot ang kailangan mo at hindi gumamela.” Lihim na natawa ang lola sa narinig. Naalala niya noong bata pa sila na nagdidikdik din ng gumamela para ihalo sa sabon. Kay raming bula ang kanilang pinapakawalan noon at tinatangay ng hangin.

Ang gustong-gusto talaga ni Carlito ay palayok-palayukan. Sa isip niya, kumukulo ang sopas sa kaniyang munting palayok. Nagpiprito siya ng tinapa sa kawaling luad. Nakasandok na ang kanin sa munting bandehado. Hinding-hindi siya mauubusan ng panggatong.

Pagkatapos, siya ang mag-aayos ng hapagkainan. Maglalagay siya ng mga bulaklak ng makahiya sa gitna ng mesa, katabi nito ang isang basket ng mga laruang prutas. Tatawagin niya ang kaniyang mga kapatid at sila’y kakain na.

“Gusto mo ng palayok-palayukan?” pagtataka ng kaniyang ate.

“Hindi ka bagay rito,” sabi ng isa pa niyang kapatid. “Doon ka sa mga kaibigan mo.”

“Ayaw mo bang maglaro ng yoyo at kotse-kotsehan?” alò ng lola nang mapansing nagmumukmok ang kaniyang apo.

Sa kanilang pamilya, ang kusina ay isang espesyal na bahagi ng tahanan. Hindi lahat ay maaaring makakapasok dito hangga’t ang kanilang lola ang namamahala sa pagluluto. Palayok-palayukan sana ang magiging pagsasanay ni Carlito para makatuntong sa kusina. Dito siya magsasanay para makatulong sa kaniyang lola.

Negosyo ng kanilang lola ang pagluluto. Maraming nagpapeluto sa kanila, kadalasa’y mga kapitbahay—tatlong bilao ng pansit para sa kaarawan, maraming llanera ng leche flan at halaya para sa mga pista, at kawan-kawan ng menudo, sisig, at pochero para sa mga espesyal na okasyon gaya ng pagtatapos at anibersaryo.

Kapag panahon ng simbang-gabi, naglalakbay ang kusina ng kanilang lola sa tabi ng lumang simbahan. Kilala si Lola Antonia sa kaniyang espesyal na salabat, bibingkang may nagmamantikang itlog na pula, at saka puto-bumbong na may muscovado at mantekilya. Tiyak na gaganahang gumising nang maaga ang mga mananampalataya upang maabutan ang mga panindang kakanin at inumin ng lola.

Hindi pinapayagan si Carlito na pumasok ng kusina. Hindi raw ligtas sa mga batang tulad niya ang manatiling malapit sa kalan. Baka mapaso siya ng apoy, mabuhusan ng kumukulong sabaw, o kaya’y matalisikan ng mainit na mantika.

Pero hindi mapigilan si Carlito. Lagi siyang nasa isang sulok ng kusina para magmasid kung paano lumilikha ng mga mahiwagang lasa. Manghang-mangha siya sa mga nasasaksihan. Mas lalong sumasarap ang leche flan kapag lalagyan ito ng kinudkod na balat ng dayap sa ibabaw. Lumilinamnam ang ginataang haluhalo dahil sa hinog na piraso ng ginintuang langka. At ang isa sa pinakapaborito ni Carlito ay ang maamoy ang binubusang munggo.

Sumasabog ang amoy nito kapag dinidikdik at inihahalo sa ginataang malagkit.

Noong bisperas ng pista, gulat na gulat si Carlito nang pinayagan siyang tumulong sa kusina. Siya ang naatasang maghimay ng nilagang karne ng manok para sa pancit bihon. Iyon ang pinagawa sa kaniya dahil alam ng kaniyang lola na hindi niya iyon papapakin. Hindi tulad ng kaniyang mga kapatid na halos mangalahati ang panggisang manok bago pa man maging pansahog sa niluluto.

Isang araw, pinasalubungan si Carlito ng kaniyang mga pinsan ng isang kahon ng mga gagamba.

“Anong gagawin natin dito?” pagtataka niya habang sinisilip ang loob nito.

“Ipanlalaban natin sa iba. Magiging kampeon ang gagamba mo.”

Kumuha sila ng patpat. Inilabas nila ang mga gagambang pansabong.

“Huwag!” sabi ni Carlito. “Magkakasakitan lang sila.”

Agad siyang umalis at naghanap ng mapipitas na mga dahon sa kanilang taniman. Nakapitas siya ng ilang dahon ng talinum, alugbati, at pansit-pansitan. Sa araw na iyon, nagpasya si Carlito na gumawa ng sariling palayok-palayukan. Kaya naghanap siya ng mga bao at mga itinapong tansan. Naghanap siya ng tatlong magkakasinlaking bato para maging salangan ng paglulutuang bao.

“Hindi iyan bagay sa iyo,” sabi ng kaniyang pinsan na palihim palang nagmamasid sa kaniya.

“Ano bang masama sa laruan ko?” pagtataka ni Carlito.

“Itanong mo na lang sa tatay mo,” misteryosong tugon ng pinsan.

Pagkatapos niyon, ipinahiram ng pinsan kay Carlito ang mga laruang espada at baril-barilan. Nag-ensayo silang parang mga mandirigma,

nagsanay sila ng tamang pag-asinta.

Maghapon silang naglaro. Ginaya nila ang mga napapanood sa pelikula. Kunwari’y mga sundalo silang ipagtatanggol ang kanilang bayan laban sa mga dayuhang mananakop. Hinabol nila ng espada ang salbaheng asong tinatahulan ang ligaw na kuting. Nagtago sila sa talabihan at binantayan ang mga nakadapong tarat at kilyawan sa punong mangga. Pakiramdam nila, sila ang mga napapanood sa telebisyon na nagbabantay sa kaligtasan ng mga hayop sa kagubatan. “Kaya mo naman pala ng ganitong laro,” natutuwang sabi ng pinsan kay Carlito.

Pero may ibang gusto si Carlito. Gusto niyang tumikim-tikim ng mga nilulutong pagkain ng kaniyang lola. Bakit minsan, masarap ang mapait gaya ng ginisang ampalaya at papaitan? Bakit tumitingkad ang lasa ng adobo kapag nilagyan ng isang kutsarang asukal?

Gusto niyang maghiwa-hiwa ng mga sariwang sangkap. Gusto niyang maghalo-halo ng sari-saring lasa. Gusto niyang tulungan ang lola sa pagpapaikot ng gilingang-bato habang iniluluwal nito ang galapong. At gusto niyang matutuhan lahat ng sikreto sa pagluluto ng kaniyang lola—ang napakalambot na kalamay, ang gatang hindi namumuo-muo kahit pinakuluan, at ang adobong karne na natutunaw sa bibig.

Ang ambisyon ni Carlito ay makatuklas ng mga pambihirang lasa at ipatikim ito sa kaniyang pamilya. At tulad ng mga hinahangaan niyang scientist, balang-araw ay makakadiskubre siya ng mga lasang hindi pa natitikman. Ipapares niya ang lasang ito sa mga kilalang lasa para makalikha ng natatanging linamnam.

Kapag kumakain ng bagong putahe si Carlito, nasasabik siyang alamin ang mga sangkap nito. Aamuyin niya ang nilutong dinuguan ng kaniyang tiya at saka niya ito nanamnamin. Ilang sandali pa, nasasabi na niya ang lahat ng mga rekado. “Nawala ang lansa dahil sa tanglad. Manamisanamis ang sabaw dahil sariwa ang dugo at agad niluto.”

Nabigla ang kaniyang tiya. Bakas sa mukha nito ang pagmamalaki. “Nanay,” tawag nito sa lola ni Carlito, “matalas ang panlasa ng pamangkin ko. Walang maililihim sa kaniyang dila. Kanino kaya nagmana?”

“Hindi sa akin,” natatawang sabi ng tatay ni Carlito.

Nagtawanan silang lahat sa hapagkainan. May reputasyon ang tatay ni Carlito na mahilig kumain pero walang alam sa pagluluto. Kahit may edad na ang tatay ni Carlito, bata pa rin ang tingin dito ni Lola Antonia. “Napabayaang kita sa kusina dati pero hindi ka nga makapaglaga ng tubig. Nagtataka ako kung paano ka nabuhay noong nag-aral ka sa Maynila. Lagi ka sigurong kumakain sa karihan.”

Napatingin ang lahat kay Carlito na ninanamnam ang bawat putahe. Napapapikit siya kapag may nalalasang malinamnam. May kung anong sumasabog sa loob ng bibig na nagpapasaya ng kaniyang damdamin.

Unti-unti nilang nakikilala si Carlito na mahilig sa pagkaing masasarap. Mabagal siyang kumain, hindi dahil sa pihikan siya o mapili sa kinakain kundi sa paliwanag na “kung pinag-iigihan ang pagluluto, pag-iigihan din dapat ang pagnamnam.” Narinig niya itong sinambit ng kaniyang lola nang mapansing halos nilulunok ng kaniyang mga kapatid ang napakasarap na ulam.

Kapag hindi magana ang kaniyang mga kapatid, nilalagyan ni Carlito ng dahon ng pandan ang sinaing. Babango ang mainit-init na kanin at tiyak na gigisingin nito ang nahihimbing na gana.

Kapag masakit ang sikhura ng kaniyang lola, maghahanda si Carlito ng tsaang may sikreto niyang sangkap na siya ang tumuklas. Kung may angking sustansiya ang mga halaman, may taglay din itong lunas sa mga karamdaman.

Kaya gustong-gusto ni Carlito ang palayok-palayukan. Sa kaniyang isip, siya ang hari ng kusina. Siya ang maghahanap ng mga sariwang sangkap.

Itatalâ niya sa kaniyang kuwaderno ang mga sikretong sangkap at paraan ng pagluluto. Ang kaniyang mga lutui'y maamoy hanggang sa liwasan.

Isang umaga, natambakan ng mga gawain ang kanilang lola. Tinawag niya si Carlito na nasa isang sulok at lagi siyang pinapanood. "Handa ka na ba?" bulong ng lola.

Ibinigay sa kaniya ang isang bilao ng sibuyas, sandosenang bawang, at ilang biyak na niyog.

Maliksi ang mga kamay ni Carlito. Natadtad niya nang pinong-pino ang mga sibuyas. Nadikdik niya ang mga bawang. Nakudkod niya ang mga niyog at saka naggata. Kahit naghalo-halo ang amoy sa kaniyang mga daliri, masayang-masaya ni Carlito. Pinatunayan niyang bagay na bagay siya sa kusina.

"Gusto ko talaga ng palayok-palayukan, Lola," hiling ni Carlito.

"Tamang-tama!" agad namang sagot ng lola. "Mahilig kang magluto at maaasahan ka dito sa kusina."

"Pero hindi raw para sa akin ang luto-lutuan," malungkot na paliwanag ni Carlito. "Pinagtatawanan nila ako."

"Sino ang nagsabi sa iyo niyan?" pagtataka ng lola.

"Sina ate at mga pinsan ko," sumbong ng bata.

"Huwag mo silang intindihin!" agad na sabi ni lola. "May mga bagay na hindi maiintindihan ng iba dahil nasanay na sila sa mga lumang paniniwala."

"Pero puwede naman sigurong silang magbago," pagtataka ni Carlito.

"Puwedeng-puwede," pagbabagi ng lola. "Alam mo, apo, ang tatay ko'y isang tanyag na maglilitson sa aming probinsiya. Hindi kailangan ng sarsa ang litson niya dahil malasang-malasa ito. Ang kapatid ko'y isa namang

panadero. Hindi pa man nagtatanghali, ubos na agad ang mga tinapay niya. At ang aking tiyo ay ang pinakamagaling na tagaluto ng siopao asado at lumpiang sariwa sa Binondo.”

Sumigla ang mga mata ni Carlito. Parang nakatikim siya ng malinamnam na ulam.

“Gusto ko ring maging katulad nila,” pahayag ng bata.

“Nasa ating dugo ang husay sa pagluluto,” sabi ni lola. “Pero mag-iingat ka lang sa apoy at sa talim ng kutsilyo.”

Kinabukasan, bago pa man sumikat ang araw, nagtungo ang maglola sa palengke. Naghanap sila ang pinakasariwang karne para sa adobo, sinigang, at inihaw. Inamoy-amoy ni Carlito at itinabi ang mga hiwa ng karneng may masamang amoy. Naalala niya ang laging sinasabi ng lola, “Ang sikreto sa pagluluto ay ang paghahanap ng maiinam na iluluto.”

Tumatak iyon sa alaala ni Carlito. Hinding-hindi siya magluluto ng lumang karne, lantang gulay, o nabubulok na bunga. Mas sariwa ang mga sangkap, mas buhay ang mga lasa at mas malinamnam ang mga lutuin.

Nagtungo sila sa prutasan. Tumambad kay Carlito ang bundok-bundok na rambutan, lansones, durian, at pinya.

“Suki! Suki!” masiglang tawag ng mga tindera sa kanila.

Mahiwagang pook ang palengke. Magkakakilala ang mga tindera at mamimili. Nagiging magkaibigan sila at bahagi na ng pamilya. Nabubuo ang tiwala nila sa isa’t isa na pinagtibay ng mabubuting paninda.

Lumapit ang maglola sa suking tindera. Para na siyang magkamag-anak. Inalok ng tindera ang bata ng ilang pirasong lansones. Simula nang mabasa ni Carlito ang alamat nito, naging paborito niya ang lansones. Ayon sa alamat, alay ng Birheng Maria ang bungang ito sa mga tao noong may matinding gutom sa bayan dulot ng tigang na bukirin. Tinanggal niya ang lason sa pamamagitan ng pagkurot sa makatas nitong laman.

Tumikim-tikim si Carlito at sinabi sa lola ang mga dapat bilhin. “Hinog sa puno ang mga ito, Lola,” sabi niya. Itinuro niya ang mga itim na langgam sa buwig ng lansones. Kahit nga langgam, alam na alam na napakatamis ng mga bunga.

Nagawi sila sa bigasan. Para kay Carlito, ito na ang paborito niyang bahagi sa palengke. Manamis-namis ang amoy ng paligid—amoy ng giniling na palay. Bago bumili ng bigas, sinuri ni Carlito kung buo ang mga butil nito at kung may gumagapang na mga bukbok. Alam na rin niya ang nababagay na bigas sa iba’t ibang putahe—sinandomeng, laon, dinorado, at malagkit.

Sa isang sulok ng palengke, katabi ng bigasan at tindahan ng bagoong at mantika, nandoon ang nagtitinda ng palayok-palayukan. Nasa bilao ang mga laruang ito at naghihintay ng mga bagong batang aangkin sa kanila.

“Gusto mo ba?” tanong ni Lola.

Nahihiyang sumagot si Carlito. Kahit hindi siya magsalita, alam na alam ng kaniyang lola ang sagot. Binili ito ng lola para sa apo.

“Nabasag ba ang dati ninyong ganito?” usisa ng tindera.

“Hindi,” sabi ng lola. “Para iyan sa aking apo.” At saka niya itinuro niya si Carlito.

Ngumiti ang tindera. Isang ngiti na walang masamang ibig sabihin. Ngiting walang talim na nakakagalos. Isang dalisay na ngiti. “Magkakasundo sila ng anak kong lalaki. Mahilig din siya sa palayok-palayukan. Siya nga ang nagpinta sa mga ito.”

Ibinalot ng tindera sa papel na supot ang isang set ng palayok-palayukan. Kulay berde at may disenyong alon-alon ang palayok, kalan, at kawali. May basket din itong kasama na yari din sa luad. At may mumunting prutas pa!

“Para sa munting kusinero,” sabi ng tinderang iniabot sa bata ang laruan.

Maingat itong tinanggap ni Carlito. Para siyang isang batang nakatanggap ng alagang tuta o kuting.

Pagdating ng bahay, nagtawanan ang mga kapatid ni Carlito.

“Baka gusto mo na rin ng manyika,” pagbibiro ng kaniyang mga kapatid.

“Hindi ko gusto ang ganyang biro,” galit na wika ng lola.

“Gusto ko ito,” sabi ni Carlito, “dahil gusto kong magluto.”

Nang maisalansan na ng lola ang mga pinamili, nagpahayag siya sa buong mag-anak.

“Sa mga apo ko, si Carlito ang nagmana sa akin,” paliwanag ng lola. “Magmula ngayon, mag-aaral siya sa akin ng mga lumang lutuin, ng mga pagkaing nakagagaling, at ng mga pagkaing magbibigay-kabuhayan sa atin.”

Lumipas man ang maraming panahon ng mangga at lansones, hinding-hindi malilimutan ni Carlito ang kaniyang palayok-palayukan. May mga laruang napaglipasan ng mga bata, nawawala sa uso, at saka kinakalimutan. Pero hindi itong palayok-palayukan ni Carlito. Sa katunayan, ang lumang laruang ito ay nakadispley pa sa kanilang sala, kasama ng ibang mamahaling banga at porselana.

Pero ngayon, sa totoong palayok na nagluluto si Carlito, gamit ang mga kahoy na panggatong. Nasa totoong palayok ang mga lutuin niyang sinaing na tulingan, sinampalukang manok, paksiw na bangus, pinangat, sinanglay, at pesang dalag. Binabalik-balikan ang mga ito sa kaniyang restoran. Maraming gustong makatikim ng mga lasa ng nakalipas na panahon.

“Bakit diyan pa rin kayo nagluluto?” pagtataka ng mga anak.

“Papa, ayaw n’yo ba ng regalo ko sa inyo noong Pasko?” Tinutukoy niya dito ang mga metal na kawali at kaldero.

“Mas nanunuot ang sarap kapag niluto sa mga palayok. Hindi na kailangan ng pampasarap na tinataktak. Mamaya, ipatitikim ko sa inyo,” pagmamalaki niya.

At totoo nga. May kakaibang lasa ang mga lutuin ng tatay. Iba ang lasa ng mga niluto sa palayok at sa mga kahoy na panggatong.

Ang mga anak ni Carlito ay lumaki sa loob ng kusina, kasama ang kanilang tatay. Hindi masalita ang ama. Bibihira itong magkuwento. Marahil, noong kabataan niya’y mas nanaisin pa niyang manatili sa kusina at magluto. Hindi mga kababata ang kaniyang kaibigan kundi ang kaniyang lola at iba pang kusinera sa kanilang bayan.

Paraan ng pagpapahayag niya ng pagmamahal ay sa pamamagitan ng pagluluto:

Tuwing may magkakasakit na anak, nagluluto siya ng espesyal na arroz caldo;

Tuwing malakas ang buhos ng ulan, tiyak na tinolang manok na sagana sa luya, dahon ng sili, at papaya ang kaniyang ihahain.

At tuwing papasok sa paaralan ang mga anak, gigising nang maaga ang tatay para magluto ng mga espesyal na baon na may iba’t ibang nakatutuwang disenyo bawat araw. Hindi nahihiyang magbaon ang mga anak kahit pa uso ang kumain ng fastfood sa kantina.

Totoo ang malinamnam na kuwentong ito. Ipatikim ko pa sa inyo ang mga lutuin ng lolo kong si Carlito.

BLUE WATERS

Joselito D. Delos Reyes

Natatandaan ba ninyo si Impen? Iyong agwador noong panahon ng kopong-kopong na ang istorya ay pilit ipinabasa sa atin noong high school? Well, matapos ang ilang dekadang wala tayong balita matapos ang suntukan sa gripo, ito na siya ngayon.

“In just ten years, he elevated Blue Waters to its inconceivable heights as industry leader in the realm of water utilities in the Philippines. With him at the operational helm, we are second to none..”

Ganito sinimulan ang pagpapakilala kay Impen bilang bagong Senior Vice-President for Operations ng Blue Waters Utilities, Inc. kaninang quarterly board meeting. Ito na ang pinakamataas na makakamit niya bago magretiro dahil mga anak ng chairman—ang construction at real estate magnate at dating senador na si Manolo Vilorio alyas Boss Mano—ang nagiging presidente ng kompanya.

Matik’yun. Si Manoling o Mano Junior ang unang pangulo ng Blue Waters mula nang gawing bahagi ng Milagrosa Holdings isang dekada na nga ang nakararaan. Naging presidente ng kompanya si Manoling hanggang noong matapos ang huling presidential election nang ma-appoint ang panganay na anak ni Boss Mano bilang gabinete ng bagong pangulo ng bansa. Humataw sa stock market ang kompanya matapos mapabalita ang appointment ni Manoling sa Public Works.

Si Marivic naman ang pumalit bilang president and CEO ng Blue Waters kahit pa beinte ocho años lang ang dalaga. “You can always count on her being fresh from her successful MBA sa Kellogs,” laging pagmamalaki

ni Boss Mano kapag may mancomm meeting sila kahit na apat na taon nang nagtapos si Marivic. “Iba na ang may headstart sa academe patungo sa negosyo,” sasabihin pa ni Boss Mano.

Nakahilera naman si Menchu, ang bunso, na sa San Francisco, California naman nagkolehiyo. Presidente naman ngayon si Menchu ng courier company ng mga Viloría, ang MBV Padala Sigurado Pronto, Inc. Pero hindi siya magtatagal dito. Siya ang papalit sa tiyuhin na congressman ng kanilang lungsod. Walang katalo-talo.

Kunsabagay, hindi naman hinangad ng ating bidang si Engr. Crispin Bancud, o si Impen, ang maging presidente ng kompanya. Pasalamat na siyang iniangat sa posisyon bilang SVP, isang posisyong ginawa lamang nang magkasundo ang board na kailangan siyang ma-promote dahil sa nagawa niya sa kompanya bago man lang magretiro sa susunod na taon.

Sa conglomerate na ng mga Viloría tumanda si Engr. Impen. Wala pa man ang Blue Waters Utilities, Inc. tauhan na siya ni Boss Manolo. Nagsimula siya bilang junior site engineer ng Milagrosa Builders, ang unang kompanya ng pamilya Viloría. Kapag may nabiling sakahan ang pamilya, siya ang naghahanap ng mapagkukuhanan ng tubig na isu-supply sa maliliit na kontratang bahay na itatayo sa mga dating sakahan. Ito ang selling point ng kompanya: disentang bahay at buhay para sa nagsisimulang pamilya.

Nagsisimulang pamilya ang unang target market ng Milagrosa. Maliliit kasi ang mga socialized housing ng nagsisimulang real estate at construction firm noon. Singkuwenta hanggang sitenta metro kuwadrado ang mga bahay. Mura, kay daling i-loan, ang daling kuhanin sa pension lalo pa’t na-professionalize na rin ng Milagrosa ang pag-facilitate ng loan sa Pag-ibig, GSIS, at SSS. Nakipag-partner sa mga bangko, nakakipag-alyansa sa mga lokal na pamahalaan, kaya para sa mga nagsisimulang pamilya, patok nga ang Milagrosa.

Nagsimula noong dekada otsenta ang pagdami ng Milagrosa Homes. Nagsulputan sa mga hindi inaakalang lugar na dati'y taniman ng palay, kamote, mais, tubo. May Milagrosa Homes 1 hanggang Milagrosa Homes 262. Pinigilan na lamang ang de-numerong pagpapangalan sa Milagrosa nang mauso ang brand management at sabihin ng isang kinonsultang brand expert na hindi na maganda ang pare-parehong pangalan kahit pa trusted brand na ang Milagrosa.

Kailangan daw iangat ang level. Kailangan daw may spectrum of options for different social needs. Para raw sardinas. May sardinas na pangmahirap, pang-middle-class, at may para sa alta sociedad. Ganoon din daw dapat sa housing. Kaya lumabas noong simula ng bagong milenyo ang Milagrosa Millennium Park sa Canlubang, Laguna na isang industrial subdivision na may world-class golf course, at ang Milagrosa Highlands na nasa Silang, Cavite.

Pinakyaw ng pamilya Vloria ang mga taniman ng pinya at kape sa bahaging iyon ng Cavite, lalo iyong ilang kanto lang ang pagitan sa Tagaytay. Pinatayuan ng 4-storey townhouses para sa upper middle-class living. Milyon-milyon ang halaga ng bawat unit. Tagaytay Within Reach ang naging tagline ng high-end subdivision na hinding-hindi na within reach ang presyo ngayon.

Gayong may high-end, hindi naman nawala ang low-cost housing ng mga nasimulang Milagrosa Homes. Nakagawa ng maliliit na konsentrasyon ng kabahayan ang mga Vloria sa mga sakahan. Kay dali niyang naipapadeklarang residential area ang dating agrarian land. Ano ba naman ang pagiging senador ni Boss Mano kung mababalewala ang kaniyang sinasabing "housing program" na lagi niyang bitbit sa kahit anong okasyong bibigyan siya ng pagkakataong magsalita? Si Senador Vloria ang itinuturing na ama ng socialized low-cost housing sa bansa. Siya ang milagro sa likod

ng Milagrosa Homes. Pero ang totoo, at kinikilala ito ni Boss Mano, si Engr. Impen ang dahilan ng tagumpay ng Milagrosa. Ang ating si Impen.

Walang magtatagumpay na socialized housing at mga subdivision kung walang talas ng pag-iisip ng ating si Impen. Alam niya ang pinagmumulan ng tubig sa isang lugar. Alam agad niya ang gagawing linya ng patubig. Ibubulong kay Boss Mano ang mga parselang sakahang dadaanan ng tubig na kagyat bibilhin ni Boss Mano sa kung sinong may-ari. Kapag ayaw magbenta, ano ba namang magpasama sa mga kapitan o meyor ng lokalidad? Ano ba naman kung may tanod o pulis bilang seguridad sa pakikipag-usap? Charm and sales acumen ang tawag ni Boss Mano sa kaniyang paraan ng pagbili ng mga lote. Pananakot ang alam ng mga puwersahang binilhan at pinaalis sa kanilang mga sinasakang lupa. Pero wala nang pakialam si Engr. Impen sa mga ito. Ang kailangan niya ay makuha ang source ng tubig at madala sa mga Milagrosa, sa mga Millenium Park at Highlands. Kaya ingunguso agad niya ang source, ililihis ang batis at ilog, kukutsabahin ang patubig para mapadaloy patungo sa Milagrosa.

Nagsimula ang fascination sa tubig ng ating si Impen nang magtapos siya ng high school noong dekada sienta. Agwador siya noong bata hanggang takasan ang looban. Sa gripo siya namulat. Sa gripo niya nakikita ang sarili. Iniwan niya ang probinsya para sa Maynila muna mamasukan hanggang makapag-aral. Dahil may utak at batak ang katawan sa kasipagan, sino ang hindi mag-aakala sa looban at sa ating mga nakasaksi sa kaniyang buhay na magtatapos siya sa UP sa kursong civil engineering? Doon niya nakilala si Boss Mano na isang working student din noon gaya niya. Naging magkaibigan sila ni Boss Mano na kailanman ay hindi tumingin sa kulay ng kaniyang balat, sa kulot niyang buhok. Sa ilong na sarat, sa namamalirong na nguso.

Nang magtapos sila ni Boss Mano, namasukan sila sa isang construction firm na pag-aari ng pamilya Omlas ng Unisan sa Quezon. Dahil

malakas kay Imelda, maraming kontrata ang pamilya Omlas sa bahaging iyon ng Luzon. Marami pero maliliit na subcontract na laging may kinalaman sa tubig: kubeta ng kapitolyo, tangke ng munisipyo, sanitation, patubig, piping, drilling ng deep-well ng mga barangay. Nang minsang mag-swimming sa dalampasigan ng Catanauan ang magkaibigan, isinalba ng ating si Impen ang buhay ni Mano nang pulikatin habang lumalangoy pabalik sa pampang. Walang nakakaalam sa ginawang ito ni Impen sa kaibigan.

Habang nagtrabaho sila bilang junior engineer, napangasawa naman ni Boss Mano ang panganay na anak na babae ng pamilya Omlas. Mula nang mapangasawa—instant promotion!—naging Boss Mano na si Manolo Vloria. Pero sa tuwing magkakainuman si Boss Mano at Engr. Impen, nawawala ang taguring boss. Mano pa rin siya sa kaklaseng madalas ibiro ni Boss Mano sa mga empleyado ng Blue Waters na kinokopyahan daw niya noong college. Na inulit niya kanina sa board meeting: “I always rely on him on matters of water for our company and on calculus during our college days.” Tawanan ang nasa meeting kanina. Tumawa na rin siyempre ang ating si Engr. Impen kahit na ilang ulit na niyang narinig ang biro ng kaibigan.

Kahit hindi iutos ni Boss Mano, mataas ang respeto at malaki ang takot ng mga taga-Blue Waters kay Engr. Impen. Estrikto ang ating matandang inhinyero at executive. Bhirang magbiro. Matikas ang tuwid na tuwid pa ring tindig kahit na pitumpong taon na at dapat nang magretiro.

“Magreretiro kang Senior Vice-President for Operations. Deserve mo lahat ang benefits and perks na sinadya kong ilagay sa SVP position,” pabulong na sinabi sa kaniya ni Boss Mano habang nasa isang pagpupulong tungkol sa dalawang bagong corporate acquisition ng Blue Waters: ang Mt. Balabag Water Systems sa isang bayan sa Kabikolan at ang Hermano Lucing Local Water Services sa isang bayan sa Katimugang Luzon na pawang pag-aari ng lokal na pamahalaan. “Wait another year, mag-i-initial public offering ang Blue Waters, pamana mo sa mga anak mo ang stocks, assured na ang

future ng mga apo mo sa tuhod, compadre, as long as we continuously expand.”

Ito ang sentro ng negosyo ngayon: expansion, acquisition. Madaling magpatayo ng subdivision kung may steady supply ng tubig. Lalo kung hawak ng Blue Waters ang tubig sa isang bayan. Kumikita na sa linya, na-assure pa ang tubig sa itatayo pa lamang na village sa kung saang taniman ng kamote ngayon.

Noong kolehiyo pa lamang, alam na ni Boss Mano ang kakayahan ng ating si Engr. Impen. Matalino, matapang, hindi pasisindak. Pinatibay ng panghahamak sa kulay ng kaniyang balat, sa kulot niyang buhok. Sa ilong na sarat, sa namamalirong na nguso. Kayang makipagbasagan ng mukha si Impen. Kung inabot siguro sila ng Martial Law sa UP, siguro, namatay na rebelde sa bundok si Engr. Impen. Pero hindi na ito mangyayari dahil nagtrabaho na sila sa pamilya Omlas kung saan niya naging boss si Boss Mano nang pumutok ang First Quarter Storm.

“Mag-aral ka sa ibang bansa. Sagot ng kompanya pati allowance mo,” alok ni Boss Mano kay Engr. Impen, “Pero pagbalik mo, share your expertise sa kompanya. I have grand plans, Brad. Real estate, land development, magpapagawa tayo ng tirahan, maraming-maraming tirahan. Di ba sabi mo sa akin nung first year tayo, noong nagpuputol tayo ng damo habang ROTC, wala kayong maayos na tirahan, walang malinis na inumin, walang pampaligo, ‘yan ang gawin mong motivation.”

Walang maayos na tirahan, walang maayos na daloy ng tubig. Dahil yata sa pagdarahop sa malinis na tubig, kaya nga gustong-gusto ng ating si Impen ang pulidong patubig sa bawat project nila. Walang mauuhaw, walang mahihirapan sa paliligo. Lahat ng magsesepilyo, may pangmumog basta may pambayad, biruan nila ni Boss Mano sa despedida niya sa Aristocrat ilang araw bago pumunta ang ating si Impen sa University of Arizona para sa master of science in Hydraulics and Water Resources Engineering.

Titulado ng masters nang bumalik siya noong 1975, assemblyman naman ang patriyarka ng pamilya Omlas. Nagsisimula na noon ang Milagrosa. Ilang parsela ng lupa sa gawing Parañaque at Muntinlupa ang site ng mga unang Milagrosa, mga retiradong guro, sundalo at pulis ang mga unang nanirahan sa noo'y tinatawag na dampa ng mga retirado sa malawak na cogon fields ng Putatan.

Nagkasa ang ating si Engr. Impen ng maraming proyekto para sa tuloy-tuloy na daloy ng tubig. Sa bawat bubuksang subdivision at village, dumaan sa matalas na drafting pen at pirma niya ang dadaluyan at ang mase-secure na source ng malinis na tubig.

Ipinahiram siya ni Boss Mano sa pamahalaan. Nag-consultant sa mga itinatayong dam at resevoir ng Ministry of Public Works at sa nire-align na serbisyo ng NAWASA sa Metro Manila. Lumapad ang papel ni Boss Mano sa gobyerno hanggang manalong congressman noong panahon ni Cory at Ramos, at naging senador na nga noong panahon ni Arroyo.

Nag-diversify ang Milagrosa. Naging Milagrosa Holdings. Ina ng mga kompanyang pabahay, construction, water utilities, courier service, memorial park, at malls. Dahil tubig ang specialization ni Engr. Impen, ipinadaloy siya sa isang katatatag na kompanyang si Engr. Impen din ang nagmungkahing gawing bahagi ng diversification, spin-off mula sa Milagrosa Homes, ang Blue Waters Utilities, Inc. na mag-i-initial public offering bago magretiro ang siguradong milyonaryo nating inhinyerong si Impen.

Mula noon, bawat water service ng local government na magustuhan ng ating Engr. Impen, bibilhin ni Boss Mano. Ipa-privatize gamit ang instant ordinansa ng mayorya ng sanggunian at kakamping mayor. Gagamitin ang koneksyon at pera para mapasakamay ang tubigan ng bayan. Sasadyaing sirain ang nakasanayang serbisyo. Ija-justify ang acquisition para raw maseguro ang maayos na serbisyo ng tubig. Sabi nga ng Blue Waters sa kanilang tagline:

“Kasama ka sa pagdaloy ng kaunlaran.” At tuloy-tuloy ang pagdaloy ng kaunlaran, yaman, at kapangyarihan sa mga Viloría.

“Sir Bancud, may gusto pong makipag-usap sa inyo sa labas. A certain Mr. Gorgonio Diamante daw po,” paalala ng kaniyang executive assistant habang isinasalansan niya ang kaniyang laptop sa loob ng mabangong leather briefcase.

“Nasa schedule ko ba ‘yan?” nagtatakdang pag-uusisa ng ating Engr. Impen. Paalis na sana siya. Hinihintay siya ng kaniyang maybahay at tatlong anak sa isang restaurant sa Shangri-La for dinner. Treat niya sa promotion na matagal na niyang nai-set kahit pa kanina lamang pormal na inianunsyo sa board. Importante rin ang gabing iyon dahil doon ilalahad ng kaniyang bunsong si Danum ang plano nitong mamahikan sa kasintahan. Exciting night. Another manugang. Another set of apo.

“Yes, Sir. Late afternoon meeting po sana, Sir. Kaso, late na po natapos ang meeting ninyo with the board. Ang nakalagay lang po dito ay officials of Mansueto Municipal Water Services sa Mansueto, Tarlac po.” Pamilyar siya sa lugar dahil sa paligid sa Mansueto siya lumaki noong elementarya at unang bahagi ng high school. Pero nais niyang makatiyak.

“Ano meron sa Mansueto? Paki-brief nga ako, I might have forgotten the details already.”

“Sir, humina na raw po ang water supply nila since we acquired the adjacent town’s water system dahil...”

“Ah yeah, I remember. Yeah, the one that I’ve been prodding to Boss Mano na dapat na rin i-acquire ng Blue Waters, yes?”

Tumango ang executive assistant. Tila may itinatagong hiya. “They were gravely affected na raw nang i-divert po natin ang flow from the Tarlac-Nueva Ecija Basin at hinaan ang valve leading to their reservoir. Controlled distribution po because of the dry season, as, ahm, as you, mentioned po...”

Napangiti ang ating Engr. Impen. “All the more reason to sell,” diin ng matikas at matandang inhinyero. “Wala na palang dumadaloy na tubig e.”

“Kakausapin daw po kayo kahit sandali dahil magkakilala daw po kayo. Dati. Kababata daw po or something, Sir.”

“Ah, wow, really. Ano nga uli ang pangalan ng representative?”

“Mr. Gorgonio Diamante daw po. Quite old, Sir. I already told him na baka gabihin po kayo sa meeting but he insisted...”

Napakunot ang ating Engr. Impen. Sino itong kababata raw niya sa Mansueto? Wala siyang matandaan. Wala siyang matatandaan dahil bahagi ito ng kaniyang kabataang ipinaagos niya palayo sa alaala lalo sa tuwing magvi-video call sila ng mga kapatid niyang sina Kano, Boyet, at Diding na nasa ibang bansa na ngayon.

Naupo ang ating si Engr. Impen. Ibinaba niya ang nakahanda nang briefcase na nasa mesa. Inihanda niya ang sarili sa inaasahan niyang pakiusap na huwag pagkaitan ng tubig ang bayan, dahil kung hindi, bakit kailangang hintayin siya nang ganito katagal? Buo na sa loob niya ang sasabihin: kung gusto ng maayos na serbisyo, hayaang Blue Waters ang mag-operate ng tubigan.

“Sir, Mr. Gorgonio Diamante is here,” pukaw ng executive assistant.

“Gorgonio Diamante? Gorgonio? Ogor?”

“K-Kumusta ka, ahm, Engr. Impen? K-kumusta ka, Impen. Makikiusap sana ako ng tubig para sa bayan mo...” malumanay na pahayag ng kinamuhian nating tauhan noon na pinatikim ng malulupit na kamao ng ating si Impeng Negro, ng atin pa nga ba ngayong si Impeng Negro?

IMAHEN

Perry C. Mangilaya

Agad na lumabas ng bahay si Badong nang matanaw niya mula sa nakabukas na bintana ang mga kabarangay niyang maligalig na naglalakad sa kalsada. Magtatanghali na iyon ngunit tila hindi alintana ng mga ito ang tindi ng sikat ng araw. Iisa ang direksiyon kaya naisip niyang iisa rin ang pakay ng mga ito. Dala ng kuryosidad, dali-dali siyang tumungo sa may kalsada. Sinundan niya ng tingin ang tinutumbok ng mga tao. At napaisip siya, ano't patungo ang lahat sa kanilang kapilya?

May misa? naisaloob niya. Pero wala siyang maisip na mahalagang okasyon para magdaos ng misa. Malayo pa ang pista sa kanilang barangay. At kapag ganitong araw ng Linggo, sa simbahan sa bayan ang misa.

Kagyat siyang bumalik sa kanilang bahay. Dumiretso sa kusina. Sa kanyang asawang si Belen na abala sa pagluluto ng kanilang pananghalian. Kagagaling lang nito sa palengke pagkatapos makapagsimba nang umagang iyon.

“May misa ba sa kapilya?” bungad niya sa asawa.

“Misa?” Nilinga siya nito, nakakunot-noo at nakalangkap sa tinig ang pagtataka. “Wala.”

“Nagpuntahan kasi ang mga tao ro'n.”

“Wala namang okasyon, a,” ani'to.

“Yon na nga,” aniya. “Teka, makikiusyuso lang muna ako.”

“Bumalik ka agad, balitaan mo ako,” pahabol pa nito nang tumalikod siya.

Sumabay siya sa hugos ng mga taong naglalakad. Halo-halong edad. Pero mas nakakarami ang nasa hustong gulang na. At pagdating niya sa kapilya, natigilan pa siya. Ano itong naririnig niya. Mga kababaihang nagnonobena?

Nakiraan siya, nakisiksik sa mga labas-masok at aligagang mga tao para makapasok sa loob ng kapilya. Pinangunutan pa siya ng noo nang makita ang mga kabarangay niyang may pinagkukulumpunan sa may tabi, sa kanang bahagi ng altar na kinapapatungan ng kanilang mahal na patron Señor San Jose. Lumapit siya sa mga ito. At sa paglapit niya, noon niya nalaman ang pinagkukulumpunan ng mga ito. Isang marka iyon sa pader, na kung tititigan nang husto, nabubuo ang hugis ng imahen ni Kristo. Sa ibaba ng nagmarkang imaheng iyon, may mga nagtitirik ng kandila. Habang ang iba, naghahaplos ng panyo sa imahen at saka ihahaplos naman iyon sa katawan ng mga ito. May mga nag-aantanda. May humahawak sa imahen habang nakapikit at kikibot-kibo ang mga labi.

Naagaw rin ang kanyang pansin sa gitna ng mga kulumpon ng mga tao, sa sinto-sintong si Uroy, habang nakadaop ang mga palad sa tapat ng dibdib nito, nakatitig sa lumitaw na imahen ni Kristo, at kumikibot-kibot din ang mga labi.

Himala! nabaghan pa siya nang paulit-ulit na humiging iyon sa kanyang pandinig mula sa mga naroroon.

Ayon pa sa nasagap niya mula sa matatandang naroroon, isa itong pahiwatig ng Diyos sa mga tao na panahon na para magbalik-loob sa Kanya. Humingi ng kapatawaran sa mga kasalanan. Maaaring nakakalimot na ang mga tao sa pagdarasal at pagsisimba. Kung lilimiin daw mabuti, kung bakit sa pader na malapit sa may altar lumitaw ang imahen ni Kristo. Simbolo raw iyon ng pagtawag sa mga tao na pumasok sa tahanan ng Diyos. Malinaw na isa raw itong paanyaya sa mga tao na sumilong sa tahanan ng Diyos dahil dito lamang makakasumpung ng kapanatagan.

Muling naagaw ang pansin niya kay Uroy, na ngayon ay ipinapahid naman ang mga palad nito sa imahen ni Kristo, at saka ihihilamos sa sariling mukha nito. Pipikit, kikibot-kibot uli ang mga labi. Hindi naman ito sinasaway ng mga naroroon. Kilala man ito sa pagiging sinto-sinto, malinis naman ito at hindi nananakit at namemerwisyo. Naging karaniwang tanawin na rin ito sa kanilang barangay, palipat-lipat ng lugar na pagtatambayan pero kadalasan, makikita itong nakatambay sa *waiting shed* sa plasa ng kanilang barangay malapit sa kapilyang iyon. Maghaponng uupo ito roon, kunwa'y nagbubunot ng balbas kahit wala namang balbas na bubunutin.

Nagugulumihanan si Badong sa kanyang mga nasaksihan at naririnig. Anót tulad ni Uroy, tila naging sinto-sinto na rin ba ang kanyang mga kabarangay?

Maging ang kanyang asawa, nang ibalita niya rito kung ano ang pinagkakaguluhan ng mga tao ay malaki ang paniniwalang magdadala ng himala at suwerte ang imaheng iyon.

“Luto na rin naman ang pananghalian, mauna na kayong kumain ng mga bata,” sabi ng kanyang asawa na tinutukoy ang tatlo nilang anak na pawang nasa elementarya ang bunsong lalaki at haiskul ang magkasunod na babae. “Sasaglit lang muna ako sa kapilya.”

Hindi na niya napigilan ang kanyang asawa nang karaka itong lumabas ng bahay. Ganoon talaga ang kanyang asawa, sadyang mapaniwalain sa himala. Lahat ng kakatwang nangyari sa kanilang buhay, ipinagpalagay nitong isang himala. Kagaya na lang nang manalasa ang bagyong Ursula sa kanilang lalawigan sa Aklan, nang mabuwal ang isang malaking puno ng mangga sa harapan ng kanilang bahay, at lumihis ito nang bumagsak, itinuturing nitong isang himala iyon. Kung nagkataon daw na tumama iyon sa kanilang bahay, sapul silang mag-anak. Hindi raw sila pinabayaan ng Diyos at naligtasan nila ang bagyong iyon.

Kabaliktaran kay Badong. Hindi siya naniniwala sa mga himala. Walang himala. Ang nangyayari sa buhay ng tao ay pinaniniwalaan niyang sadyang iyon talaga ang nakatadhana. Hindi maaaring ang nangyari sa ibang tao ay mangyayari rin sa iba. Para sa kanya, kani-kaniya ang kapalaran ng mga tao. Nagdarasal siya, humihiling sa Diyos. Pero hindi siya humihingi ng himala. Para sa kanya, kailangan pa rin ng tao na samahan ng gawa. Hindi gagawa ang Diyos na tila isusubo na lang sa tao ang mga bagay na hinihingi.

Bukod sa mapaniwalain sa himala, deboto rin ang kanyang asawa sa halos lahat ng patron. Dahil likas na relihiyosa, walang Linggo na hindi ito nagsisimba sa bayan. Na kabaliktaran din sa kanya, kahit anong pilit ng kanyang asawa, ayaw niyang magsimba. Naniniwala naman siyang may Diyos, iyon nga lang, tila abala pa sa kanya ang pumunta sa simbahan. Para sa kanya, kahit saan naman, naroon ang Diyos. Kaya kahit saan, puwede siyang magdasal. Hindi na kailangang pumasok pa sa simbahan. At kahit anong panghihikayat ng kanyang asawa, hindi siya napahinuhod nito na magsimba. Kaya naman kapag may idinadaing siyang karamdaman, hindi siya titigilan ng panunumbat nito.

E, paano nga, hindi ka nagsisimba. Tapos kapag nagkakasakit ka, tawag ka naman nang tawag sa Kanya. Kailangan mo lang pala Siya kapag may hinihiling ka.

Kahit hindi ako nagsisimba, nagdadasal din naman ako, igigiit niya.

Pero iba pa rin ang magsimba ka, igigiit din nito. Konting oras lang naman ang ilalaan mo, ipagkakait mo? Ayan, tingnan mo, may sakit ka. Baka sinadya na iyan ng Diyos para gisingin ka.

Ilang buwan na kasi, pinahihirapan siya ng ubong hindi gumaling-galing. Dagdag pa ang hirap at pangangapos niya sa paghinga. Na kahit binawas-bawasan na rin niya ang kanyang paninigarilyo, dinadalalit pa rin siya ng ubo. Iniaasa na lamang niya sa pag-inom ng mga nilagang dahon-dahon. Pero ang kanyang asawa, panay ang yakag nito na magpatingin na

sila sa doktor, ngunit todo ang tanggi niya. Mawawala rin ito, ang lagi niyang katwiran sa asawa. Naisip din niya kasing sapat lang din ang kinikita niya sa konstruksiyon bilang mason. Minsan, wala pang pagawa. Ang kanyang asawa, wala rin namang trabaho dahil ito ang nag-aasikaso sa kanilang mga anak.

Lampas tanghaling tapat na nang makauwi ang kanyang asawa mula sa kapilya.

“Si Mareng Elma pala ang unang nakapansin sa imaheng ‘yon,” karakang balita nito sa kanya.

“Pa’no niya napansin?”

“Di ba, s’ya ang nangangasiwa sa kapilya,” anito. “Naglagay kasi siya ng mga bulaklak sa altar dahil kapistahan ni Señor San Jose sa makalawa. Ayun, noon niya napansin.”

Namalagi siyang nakalinga sa asawa, hindi nawala ang kunot sa kanyang noo.

“Ang akala nga raw niya, karaniwang marka lang ‘yon sa pader. No’ng titigan niya nang husto, noon niya napansin, na imahen pala ‘yon ni Kristo.”

Binawi niya ang tingin sa asawa.

“At alam mo ba,” patuloy nito. “Parang me humaplos daw na malamig sa kanya habang tinititigan niya ang imahen ni Kristo. Nanindig din daw ang kanyang mga balahibo. At me kakaiba raw siyang nararamdaman na hindi niya maintindihan,” dagdag pa nito.

“Pero ako ang nagpalitada sa pader na ‘yon nakaraang buwan,” aniya. “At napansin ko na ang markang ‘yon nang matuyo ang palitada.”

“Bakit hindi mo sinabi sa ‘kin agad?” Kandidilat ang kanyang asawa.

“Normal lang naman kasi na may lumilitaw na marka sa pader kapag napapalitadahan.”

“Oo nga, pero sa dinami-daming p’wedeng lumitaw, bakit imahen pa ni Kristo,” giit ng kanyang asawa.

“P’wedeng nagkataon lang,” giit din niya.

“Kung nagkataon man, aba, pambihira pa rin ‘yon. Kasi, bakit sa loob pa ng kapilya lumitaw? At do’n pa mismo sa may altar. Ibig sabihin lang n’yan, me ipinapahiwatig sa atin ang Diyos,” giit uli nito.

Nagulumihanan siya.

“Ikaw talaga, ginagamit ka na ngang instrumento ng Diyos, binabalewala mo pa,” may sumbat sa tinig ng kanyang asawa.

“Instrumento,” nakaismid na dugtong niya. “Ginawa ko lang naman ang trabaho ko.”

“Palibhasa kasi, kulang ka sa pananampalataya,” sagot nito. “Sabi nga ng matatanda na nando’n kanina, may dalang mensahe raw ang paglitaw ng imahen na ‘yon. Baka ipinapaalala raw sa atin ng Diyos na h’wag tayong makalimot sa Kanya. Na dapat lagi tayong lumapit sa Kanya. Magdarasal lagi at manalig sa Kanya.”

Hindi na niya tinugon ang kanyang asawa. Kabisado na niya ang ugali nito. Kung ano ang pinaniniwalaan, hindi na mababali. Hahaba lang ang kanilang pagtatalo.

Nang sumapit ang takipsilim, dala ang panyo, niyaya siya ng kanyang asawa na bumalik sila sa kapilya. Magnonobena raw ito. Tumanggi siya. Ngunit hindi siya nilubayan nito. Naroong nagagalit na ito. Nanunumbat dahil sa kawalan daw niya ng pananampalataya. At para matigil na ang kanilang pagtatalo, pinagbigyan niya ito kahit labag sa kanyang kalooban.

Natigilan pa siya nang makarating sa kapilya. Mas dumami na ang mga tao. Lumiwanag ang kapilya dahil sa nagkukumpulang nakasinding mga kandila sa ibaba ng lumitaw na imahen ni Kristo. Binabasag ang katahimikan

ng takipsilim ng sabay-sabay na pagnonobena ng matandang kababaihan. Ang iba, nakaluhod pa habang nililigis ng mga daliri ang mga butil ng rosaryo at taimtim na nagdarasal.

Napansin niya, naroon uli si Uroy, nakaluhod din, kumikibot-kibot ang mga labi na wari'y sumasabay sa mga pagnonobena.

Nabaghan si Badong. Nakaramdam ng awa para sa mga tao.

Mangilan-ngilan na lang ang tao sa kapilya nang umuwi sila. At bago sila matulog, inilapat ng kanyang asawa ang panyo sa kanyang likod na ipinahid nito sa lumitaw na imahen ni Kristo.

“H’wag mong alisin,” anito. “Hayaan mong d’yan lang sa likod mo habang natutulog ka.”

Hindi siya kumibo.

“Naniniwala ako, nakapaghihimala ang imaheng ‘yon,” dugtong pa nito. “Hindi ‘yon basta lilitaw do’n kung walang misyon sa mga tao.”

Hindi na niya tinugon ang kanyang asawa. Magtatalo lang uli sila. Ipipilit pa rin nito kung ano ang pinaniniwalaan. Isusumbat sa kanya na kaya hindi siya gumagaling dahil sa kanyang mababaw na pananalig.

Agad na nakarating sa kanilang kura paroko sa bayan ang balitang iyon sa kanilang barangay nang sumunod na araw. Pero sa halip na magdaos ng misa, nagbigay lang ng paalala at babala ang pari sa mga tao na huwag basta-basta maniniwala sa mga ganoong bagay. Kailangan pa munang suriin ito. Magkaroon nang malalim na imbestigasyon. Kailangan may patunay kung ito ba ay instrumento ng Diyos para makapagbigay ng himala sa mga tao. At kung makapaghihimala man, huwag din basta-bastang maniniwala na ang lahat ng himala ay galing sa Diyos. Maging ang demonyo, kayang gumawa ng himala para lang linlangin at iligaw ang mga tao. Kaya maging mapanuri, huwag palilinlang at ibayong pag-iingat ang kailangan, giit pa ng pari. At huwag magsawang magdasal.

Ngunit hindi nasupil ng pangaral at babala ng pari ang paniniwala ng mga tao, lalo na ng kanyang asawa. Matibay at buo pa rin ang paniniwala ng mga ito na gawa iyon ng Diyos para magsilbing instrumento upang paghimalaan ang mga taong nananampalataya sa Kanya.

Mabilis na kumalat ang balitang iyon sa buong bayan nila ng Ibajay. Kaya naman lalong dumami ang dumarayo sa kanilang kapilya mula pa sa iba't ibang mga barangay. May ilan pang nakasaklay ang dumadayo roon, may binubuhay, at akay-akay, na karamihan ay pawang matatanda na. Anupa't hindi nawawalan ng mga tao ang kanilang kapilya sa pag-asang makasumpong ng himala. Kaya nagpasiya na rin ang kanilang barangay na huwag nang pinturahan ang pader sa may bahaging altar upang mapanatili ang imaheng iyon.

Pero hindi nilubayan ng pagkabagabag si Badong. May mga gabing hindi siya pinatatahimik sa kanyang pagtulog. Matagal na kasi siyang nagtatrabaho sa konstruksiyon bilang mason, at karaniwan nang may lumilitaw o nabubuo ng kung anong hugis sa pader kapag napapalitadahan ito. Kahit sa *flooring*, kadalasang tila may lumilitaw o nagmamarkang imahen. Normal na nangyayari lamang iyon, at hindi dapat bigyan ng anumang kahulugan. Marami na siyang nasaksihan na ganoon, kahit sa mismong sarili niyang gawa, tulad nga ng nangyari sa kanilang kapilya.

Ano't biglang sinamba iyon ng mga tao?

Pero mas minabuti niyang huwag nang kontrahin ang paniniwala ng mga tao. Alam niya, hindi rin naman siya paniniwalaan. Malamang sa pagsasabihan lang siya, na kung hindi siya naniniwalang gawa iyon ng Diyos para paalalahanan ang mga taong nakakalimot na sa Kanya, at para magbigay-himala, huwag na niyang sagkaan at sirain ang paniniwala ng mga ito.

Tuwi-tuwina rin, hindi nananawa ang kanyang asawa sa pag-aanyaya sa kanya. Pero kahit anong pilit at pakiusap nito, kahit anong panunumbat, hindi na siya bumalik sa kapilya.

“Ito na ang pagkakataon para gumaling ka, Badong,” patuloy na giit nito. “Dahil bukod sa ikaw ang nagpalitada sa pader na’yon, ikaw rin pala ang unang pinakitaan ng imaheng’yon ni Kristo. Kung iisiping mabuti, mapalad ka.”

Kunot-noo siyang napatingin sa asawa.

“Manalig ka, Badong, paghihimalaan ka ng imaheng’yon. Tingnan mo ako, maginhawa na ang pakiramdam ko. Baka bukas o makalawa, mawawala na ang hika ko.”

“Gagaling naman ako kahit hindi lumitaw ang imaheng’yon,” giit niya.

“Ayan ka na naman,” may sumbat sa tinig nito. “Umiral na naman ang katigasan mo. Mabuti pa si Uroy, kahit sinto-sinto, naniniwala.”

“At ano’ng dinadasal niya, gagaling siya,” aniya. “Paghihimalaan na titino na siya? Alam ba niya na sinto-sinto siya?”

“Pilosopho ka kasi kaya ganyan ang mga katwiran mo,” ani ‘to at umingos sa kanya.

“Yan ang problema sa ‘yo, kapag hindi umayon sa paniniwala mo ang paniniwala ko, sasabihin mong pilosopho ako,” giit niya.

Ngunit hindi na siya tinugon ng kanyang asawa. Masama ang mukhang tinapunan siya ng tingin.

Dahil sa naging bukambibig na nga ang balitang iyon, binisita ito ng kanilang *municipal engineer* upang masuri. Pero paliwanag nito, normal lang iyon. Ayon pa sa *engineer*, karaniwan nang nangyayari iyon kapag napapalitadahan ang pader dahil sa tubig. May nabubuong hugis kapag natuyo. Nagkakaroon ng tila hugis hayop o anumang bagay. May hugis tao. May nabubuong tila nakakatakot na nilalang. Marami nang kaso ang ganoon, kahit sa *flooring*, na kung ano-anong tila lumilitaw na imahen. Ang

iba pa nga'y tila imahen ng mga santo at santa. Sadyang malikot lang daw kasi ang imahinasyon ng mga tao.

Ngunit walang naniwala sa *engineer*. Bagkus nagalit pa ang mga tao sa mga paliwanag nito. Na ayon sa mga ito, sinisira lang ng *engineer* ang kanilang pananampalataya, paniniwala at pananalig.

Kahit nga ang kanyang asawa, nang ipaliwanag niya rito ang lahat, na sinasang-ayunan din niya at tama ang paliwanag ng *engineer*, nagalit pa sa kanya. Ganoon daw talaga ang kulang sa pananampalataya. Hindi raw ba malinaw sa kanya, imahen ni Kristo ang lumitaw.

Pero sa isang banda, naisip din ni Badong na mas mabuting hayaan na lang niya ang mga tao. Sa gitna ng kawalan ng pag-asa, tanging sa himala na lang kumakapit ang mga ito. Himalang magdadala ng suwerte at kagalingan sa anumang karamdaman. Na kahit paano, sa gitna ng masalimuot na buhay, nakasilip ang mga ito ng paghuhugutan at pag-asa. At ayaw niyang ipagkait iyon.

Lalong dinarayo ang kanilang kapilya nang sumunod pang mga araw nang kumalat ang balitang nakapaghihimala nga ang lumitaw na imahen ni Kristo. Nakapagpapagaling ng mga karamdaman. Kaya naman halos tuwing takipsilim, naroon din ang kanyang asawa. At tuwing umuuwi ito, laging may dalang panyo at ipinapahid sa kanyang likuran. Pero wala pa ring nangyayari sa kanyang sakit. Pinahihirapan pa rin siya. Pakiramdam pa niya, lalong lumalala.

“Hindi kasi buo ang pananalig mo,” nasa tinig ng kanyang asawa ang panunumbat. “Kahit naman anong gawin kong hingi ng himala, kung ikaw mismo ay hindi naniniwala, talagang hindi ka gagaling.”

“Buo ang pananalig ko kaya gagaling ako,” giit niya.

“O, gumaling ka nga?” giit na tanong nito.

Hindi siya kumibo.

“Hindi mo ba nababalitaan, marami nang gumaling dahil napaghimalaan ng lumitaw na imaheng ‘yon,” anito. “Meron nga raw, nawala ang pananakit ng balakang.”

Nananatili siyang walang kibo.

“Meron ding nagpatotoo, nawala ang *highblood*,” patuloy nito. “Yong iba naman, lumakas daw ang katawan.”

Napaisip siya.

“At ako mismo,” patuloy pa ng kanyang asawa. “Napansin mo bang inaatake ako ng hika? Hindi na, di ba? At pakiramdam ko, maginhawa na ang pakiramdam ko.”

Hindi na nga inaatake ng hika ang kanyang asawa. Hindi tulad ng mga nakaraang araw, madalas itong atakehin.

Ngunit iyon nga kaya ay dahil sa lumitaw na imahen ni Kristo? naisaloob niya.

“Kung nananalig ka kasi, e, di sana, magaling ka na ngayon,” patuloy na sumbat ng kanyang asawa. “Tingnan mo, lalo nang lumalala ‘yang ubo mo, tapos ayaw mo ring magpatingin sa doktor.”

Hindi siya kumibo.

Halos tuwing takipsilim, hinihikayat siya ng kanyang asawa na sumama siya sa pagnonobena nito sa kapilya. Kailangan niyang magsakripisyo kung gusto niyang gumaling. Iwaksi ang pagdududa. Alisin ang kanyang mga agam-agam. Dahil ang pagkakaroon ng agam-agam ay palatandaan na hindi buo ang pananalig sa Diyos.

Pero paano ba siya mananalig na nakapaghihimala ang imaheng iyon? Alam niya, malalim ang pananalig niya sa Diyos kahit sabihin man hindi siya palasimba. Pero labag sa kanyang kalooban na sumamba sa imaheng iyon na sa tingin niya, nagkataon lang na lumitaw iyon, batay sa

mga naging karanasan niya bilang mason. Walang katuturan na bigyan pa iyon ng kahulugan.

Ngunit patuloy na dumarami ang nababalitaan niyang gumaling sa mga karamdaman, hindi lang sa kanilang barangay, kundi maging sa ibang mga barangay. Hindi naman siguro magsisinungaling ang marami kung totoong gumaling nga. Wala namang dahilan para gumawa ang mga ito ng kuwento-kuwento.

“Subukan mo kasing sumama sa asawa mo,” minsang payo sa kanya ng kapitbahay niyang si Gido. “Wala namang mawawala sa ‘yo. Manalig ka lang.”

Nanatili siyang nakamata rito.

“Tingnan mo ako, maayos na ang pag-ihi ko, hindi na masakit kapag umihi ako,” patuloy nito. “Kung iniasa ko lang sa mga gamot na inireseta ng doktor, baka lalo lang lumala. Aba, e, matagal na akong naggagamot, hindi bumubuti ang pakiramdam ko.”

“Dahil nga kaya sa imaheng ‘yon?”

“Oo,” tiwalang turan nito. “Dahil do’n lang naman nagsimula mula nang lumitaw ‘yon.”

Napaisip siya, tinitimbang ang salaysay ng kanyang kapitbahay.

“Kahit si Diday,” patuloy nito na tinutukoy ang asawa. “Laging dinadaing no’n, sumasakit ng tiyan, pero ayun, hindi na dumadaing. Ang dami nang nagpapatotoong gumaling sa sakit. Hindi pa ba patunay na ginawang instrumento ng Diyos ang imaheng ‘yon para bigyang himala ang mga tao?”

Wala pa ring maapuhap na tugon si Badong.

“E, kasi nga nananalig sila,” mariing sabi pa ng kanyang asawa nang

banggitin niya rito ang tungkol sa pag-uusap nila ni Gido. “Kung nananalig ka rin sana, e, di magaling ka na ngayon.”

Paano nga manalig? ang laging dumiriin sa kanyang isip.

“Manalig ka na kasi,” himig-pakiusap ng kanyang asawa, matiim ang tingin sa kanya. “Ayan, o, ang sama-sama na ng ubo mo. Tapos, namamayat ka na,” puno ng pag-aalalang patuloy ng asawa. “Baka kung ano na ‘yan. Pero kung ano man ‘yan, manalig ka lang, paghihimalaan ka.”

Hindi siya umimik.

Kung gaano na karami ang nagpapatotoong napagaling dahil sa lumitaw na imahen ni Kristo sa pader na iyon, kabaliktaran naman sa kanyang sarili. Tila humihina na siya. Gusto na rin niyang magpatingin sa doktor ngunit pinangingibabawan siya ng takot. Ayaw niyang malaman ang dahilan ng hindi gumagaling-galing niyang ubo. Napansin din niya ang pagkahulog pang lalo ng kanyang katawan. Nagkaroon na rin ng takot sa kanyang dibdib. Mga gabing hirap siyang makatulog dahil sa maya’t mayang pagdalahit ng ubo. Ng hirap niya sa paghinga. Dagdag pa ang mga alalahaning hindi siya makapagtrabaho nang maayos. Pinipilit na lang niya kahit hirap. Pero nitong huling araw, talagang tinanggihan niya ang alok na trabaho ‘pagkat hindi na niya kaya. Gusto niyang magpahinga muna.

“Kung ayaw mong magpadoktor,” ang kanyang asawa. “Manalig ka sa himalang dala ng imaheng ‘yon, Badong. Bingi ka ba, ayun, ‘andami nang nagpapatotoong gumaling, hindi ka pa rin naniniwala? Gano’n ka na ba katigas? Kahit pinahihirapan ka na ng sakit, ayaw mo pa ring manalig dahil lang sa pilosopo mong paniniwala.”

Ang totoo’y hindi mapanatag ang isip ni Badong. Mga gabing nililigalig siya sa kanyang pagtulog. Alam niyang bilang mason, karaniwan nang nangyayari iyon. Ngunit ang ipinagtataka at hindi niya maipaliwanag, ano’t nakapagpapagaling ng karamdaman iyon? Sadyang hinipo nga ba iyon

ng Diyos? Hiningahan ba ng kapangyarihan ng Diyos ang imaheng iyon upang makapaghimala sa mga tao? Ginawa bang instrumento iyon ng Diyos upang sukatin at subukin ang pananalig at pananampalataya ng mga tao?

Hanggang isang takipsilim, natagpuan na lamang niya ang kanyang sarili na kasama ng kanyang asawa na nagnonobena sa kapilya. Nakaluhod sila sa harap ng may sinding mga kandila na kanilang itinirik sa may ibaba ng lumitaw na imahen ni Kristo. Ramdam pa niya ang maligasgas na *flooring*, bumabaon sa balat sa kanyang tuhod. Tila sumusugat. Ngunit tiniis niya. Naalala niya ang bilin ng kanyang asawa, kailangang magsakripisyo. At habang nililigis ng kanyang asawa ang mga butil ng rosaryo kasabay ng matagimtim na pag-usal nito ng nobena, napapikit siya, mariin.

Pagdilat niya pagkaraan ng ilang sandali, napapitlag pa siya, nang malingunan si Uroy sa kanyang tabi, nakaluhod din, at nakangising nakatingin sa kanya.

PAG-IBIG SA PANAHOON NG KOLERA

Gabriel Garcia Marquez
Salin ni John Jack G. Wigley

Kabanata 1

Hindi ito maiiwasan: ang amoy ng mapait na almendras na nagpapaalala ng kapalaran ng bigong pag-ibig. Ramdam ni Dr. Juvenal Urbino ito nang pumasok sa madilim na bahay kung saan madali niyang tinugon ang tawag sa kaso na para sa kanya ay wala nang pag-asang tugunin pa ilang taon na ang nakararaan. Ang Antilyong takas na si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, isang baldadong beterano ng giyera, potograper ng kabataan, at pinakakasundong kalaban sa larong chess, ay kumawala na sa parusa ng alaala bunga ng usok ng cyanide.

Natagpuan niya ang bangkay na nakabalot ng kumot sa kama kung saan ito natutulog, katabi ang isang bangkito na may nakapatong na bandeha ng pinasingaw na lason. Sa sahig, nakatali sa kama ang isang walang buhay na itim na aso na may puting dibdib, at sa tabi nito ay mga saklay. Mababanaag ang buwang-liwayway sa bintana at naiilawan ang loob ng kuwarto na nagsisilbing tulugan at laboratoryo, ngunit may sapat na liwanag para makilala niya ang sanhi ng kamatayan. Ang ibang bintana, gaya ng ilang butas sa kuwarto, ay nababalutan ng basahan at natatakpan ng maitim na karton. Puno ng mga bote at garapon na walang marka ang isang depatso, at may dalawang sirang bandeha sa ilalim ng ordinaryong bombilya na nakabalot ng pulang papel. Ang pangatlong bandeha, na para sa fixative solution, ay katabi ng bangkay. Nagkalat ang mga lumang babasahin, mga negatibo ng plates, at mga sirang muwebles, ngunit ang lahat ay hindi

naalikabukan. Dalisay na pumapasok ang sariwang hangin sa bintana ngunit hindi maikakaila sa marunong kumilala ang naghihinalong baga ng kalunos-lunos na pag-ibig sa mapapait na almendras. Naisip ni Dr. Juvenal Urbino na ito'y isang hindi nababagay na lugar para pumanaw nang may dignidad. Sa kalaunan, napagtanto rin niyang ang nangyaring ito ay isang malaking pagsuway sa kalooban ng Poong Maykapal.

Isang inspektor kasama ng isang batang mediko na tinatapos ang kasanayang forensic ang pumasok at sila ang nagpahangin ng kuwarto at nagbalot ng bangkay habang hinihintay ang pagdating ni Dr. Urbino. Binati nila ito nang may bahid ng dalamhati at hindi ng pamimitagan, sapagkat walang nakakaalam ng antas ng pagkakaibigan nila ni Jeremiah de Saint-Amour. Kinamayan niya ang mga ito, gaya ng ginagawa niya sa bawat estudyante bago ang klase ng general clinical medicine, at pagkatapos, parang bulaklak, hinawakan niya ang laylayan ng kumot sa dulo ng kanyang hintuturo at hinlalaki, at marahang binuksan ang nakabalot na katawan nang may ibayong pag-iingat. Hubo't hubad si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, matigas na at balikuko, bukas ang mga mata, nangingitim ang katawan, at mistulang mas matanda ng limampung taon kaysa noong nakaraang gabi. Maningning ang kanyang mga balintataw, naninilaw ang buhok at balbas, at may peklat na tahi sa bandang tiyan. Ang paggamit ng mga saklay ang nagpalaki ng kanyang torso at mga braso gaya ng mga alipin ngunit ang kanyang mga binti ay sinliit gaya ng sa mga batang ulila. Pansamantalang pinag-aralan ni Dr. Juvenal Urbino ang bangkay, nananakit ang puso sa kabila ng maraming taong sinasagupa ang kamatayan.

“Gago’ng yun,” wika niya. “Tapos na siya.”

Binalot niya uli ang katawan at nanumbalik ang kanyang sarili. Ang ikawalumpung kaarawan ay naidaos nu’ng isang taon sa tatlong araw na selebrasyon, at sa kanyang talumpati, idiniin niyang hindi pa rin siya magreretiro. Sabi niya: “Marami akong oras para magpahinga bago pumanaw,

pero wala pa ito sa mga plano ko ngayon.” Bagaman hindi na siya gaanong nakakarinig sa kanang tenga, at kailangan na niyang maglakad gamit ang pilak na tungkod, patuloy pa rin siyang nakasuot ng ternong linen, na may gintong relong tanikala sa kanyang tsaleko gaya nang nakagawian niyang isuot noong kanyang kabataan. Ang kanyang balbas na kulay perlas, at buhok na ganoon din ang kulay at maingat na nasuklayan at nahati sa gitna, ay tanda ng kanyang pagkatao. Tinumbasan niya ang unti-unting pagbagsak ng kanyang memorya sa pamamagitan ng paglista at pagsulat sa maliliit na papel na itinago sa mga bulsa na lalong nagpalito sa kanya, gaya ng mga instrumento, bote ng gamot, at iba pang bagay na halu-halong nakalagay sa kanyang medical bag. Hindi lang siya ang pinakamatanda at pinakasikat na doktor sa lungsod. Siya rin ang pinakamaselan. Gayunpaman, ang pamamaraan kung paano gamitin ang kapangyarihan ng kanyang pangalan ang nagbigay sa kanya ng admirasyon ng lahat.

Mabilis at eksakto ang mga bilin niya sa inspektor at intern. Hindi na kailangan ng awtopsiya; malakas na katibayan ang amoy-usok na cyanide sa buong kabahayan na pinalala ng bandeha ng photographic acid ang siyang dahilan ng kamatayan, at alam mismo ni Jeremiah de Saint-Amour na ito’y hindi isang aksidente. Noong nagpakita ng alinlangan ang inspektor, binara niya ito at sinabing: “Huwag mong kalilimutan na ako ang pumipirma ng death certificate.” Dismayado ang batang doktor: hindi niya napag-aralan ang epekto ng gintong cyanide sa bangkay. Gulat si Dr. Urbino na hindi pa niya nakita ito sa Medical School, ngunit napagtanto niyang baguhan pa lang ito sa lungsod dahil sa punto nito. Sabi niya: “Mabibigyan ka rin ng pagkakataong magawa ito dahil merong bigong taong gagawa nito dahil sa pag-ibig.” Matapos sabihin ito, saka lang niya naisip na sa dinami-dami ng mga suicide na naaalala niya, ito pa lang ang una na hindi pag-ibig ang dahilan. May nabago sa tono ng kanyang boses.

“At ‘pag nahanap mo, obserbahan mo nang mabuti,” sabi niya sa intern: “taglay nila ang kristal sa kanilang mga puso.”

Nakipag-usap siya sa inspektor na parang kanyang tauhan. Inutusan niyang huwag nang gawin ang lahat ng legal na pamamaraan ng imbestigasyon dahil ang burol ay gagawin na mamayang hapon. Dagdag niya: “Kakausapin ko si Meyor mamaya.” Alam niyang nabuhay si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour sa matinding kagipitan at kumita lang siya nang sapat sa kanyang sining, kaya maaring meron sa isa sa mga kahon sa kabahayan ng perang sapat lamang para sa kanyang pagpapalibing.

“Sakaling wala kang makita, hindi na bale,” wika niya. “Ako na ang bahala sa lahat.”

Binilin niya na sabihin sa press na natural cause ang ikinasawi ng potograper. Dagdag niya: “Kung kinakailangan, kakausapin ko ang gobernador.” Alam ng inspektor na hindi palakaibigan ang doktor kaya nagulat siya sa hangad nitong tapusin agad ang imbestigasyon para mapabilis ang burol. Ang hindi lang niya kayang gawin ay makipag-usap sa arsobispo para mailibing si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour sa lupa. Gulat ang inspektor dito kaya gumawa siya ng dahilan.

“Hindi ba santo ang nasawi?” tanong niya.

“Higit pa roon,” hirit ni Dr. Urbino. “Isang santong ateista. Pero ang Diyos na ang bahalang humusga.”

Sa kabilang ibayo ng lungsod, kumakalembang ang mga kampana ng katedral para sa misa ng Pentekostes. Sinuot ni Dr. Urbino ang kanyang salamin at sinipat ang tanikalang relo. Mahuhuli na siya sa misa.

Sa sala ay may isang malaking kamerang de gulong na karaniwang ginagamit sa mga pampublikong parke. Napapalamutian ang dingding ng mga litrato ng mga bata sa iba’t ibang okasyon: unang komunyon, taunang kaarawan, naka-damit kuneho. Taun-taon, sa tuwing bisita ni Dr. Urbino sa bahay na ‘yun, nailalarawan niya sa isip ang kinabukasan ng lungsod mula sa

mga 'di-kilalang batang nasa mga litrato, na hindi na rin makikilala maski ang mga abo ng nasirang potograper.

Sa lamesita katabi ng isang garapong naglalaman ng mga lumang pipa, ay isang chessboard na may 'di natapos na laro. Nagmamadali man si Dr. Urbino, hindi niya nagawang umalis na lang nang hindi napag-aaralan ang laro ng nakaraang gabi. Alam niyang mahilig maglaro araw-araw si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour tuwing takipsilim sa humigit-kumulang na tatlong kalabang manlalaro, pero natatapos niya ang bawat laro at inililigpit niya ito sa loob ng tokador. Alam ng doktor na puti ang pato niya at batid niyang matatalo siya sa loob ng apat na galaw ng chess. "Kung merong krimen, ito ay isang magandang palatandaan," sabi ni Dr. Urbino sa sarili. "Isang tao lang ang alam kong kayang gawin ito." Kung nakasalalay ang buhay niya rito, kailangang mahanap ni Dr. Urbino ang sagot kung bakit ang taong gaya ni Jeremiah de saint Amour, isang sundalo na sanay lumaban hanggang sa huling patak ng kanyang dugo, ay naiwang hindi tapos ang huling giyera ng kanyang buhay.

Habang siya'y naglilibot sa mga pasyente nang alas sais ng umagang iyon, nabasa ng tanod ang isang kalatas na nakapaskil sa pinto: *Tuloy kahit di kumatok at ipaalam sa pulis*. Mayamaya, dumating ang inspektor kasama ang intern, at hinalughog ang buong bahay para sa ebidensya laban sa mapapait na almendras. Sa loob lang ng ilang minuto na ginugol ng doktor sa pag-aanalisa ng hindi natapos na laro sa chess, nakita ng inspektor ang isang sobre na nakabalumbon sa mga papel, at naka-adres kay Dr. Juvenal Urbino. Matibay ang pagkakadikit nito at kailangan pang punitin para mailabas ang nilalaman. Binuksan ng doktor ang itim na kurtina para makapasok ang liwanag at binasa ang labing-isang pahina na masakap na isinulat, at nang mabasa ang unang talata, alam niyang mahuhuli siya sa komunyong ng Pentekostes. Binasa niya nang mataimtim, habol ang hininga, at pabalik-balik sa mga pahinang di niya gaanong naiintindihan. Nang matapos niya ito, mababanaag ang kawalan ng pag-asa sa kanyang mukha kahit pilit niyang

itinatago ito. Nangasul ang kanyang mga labi gaya ng sa bangkay at hindi niya mapigilan ang pagnginig ng kanyang mga kamay habang tinutupi ang sulat para ibulsa ito. Naalala niya ang inspektor at ang batang doktor kaya nginitian niya ang mga ito sa kabila ng kanyang pakiramdam.

“Wala naman,” rason niya. “Mga huling bilin lang.”

Hindi iyon ang buong katotohanan, ngunit hindi na nag-usisa pa ang dalawa dahil inutusan niyang baklasin ng dalawa ang isang maluwag na baldosa sa sahig kung saan nakita nila ang isang lumang libro ng mga account. Gaya nang inaasahan, wala silang natagpuang malaking pera. Sapat lang para sa pagpapalibing at sa iba pang obligasyon. Napagtanto ni Dr. Urbino na hindi na siya makakapunta sa katedral bago ang pagbasa ng ebanghelyo.

“Ito na ang pangatlong beses na lumiban akong magsimba dahil sa mga personal na kadahilanan,” sagot niya. “Pero naiintindihan Niya.”

Nagpalipas pa siya roon ng ilang minuto kahit hindi siya makatiis na ibalita ang nilalaman ng sulat sa kanyang asawa. Nangako siyang ipapaalam niya ang kamatayan sa maraming takas na Carribean na nakatira sa lungsod na gustong dumalaw dito. Siya na ang itinuturing na pinakarespetado ng lahat, pinaaktibo, at pinakaradikal, kahit sa bandang huli ay mistulang ilusyon lang ito. Ipapaalam din niya sa kanyang mga naging kalaro sa chess, mula sa pinakakilalang propesyonal hanggang sa mga walang pangalang manggagawa. Bago niya nabasa ang sulat, isa siya sa mga gustong mauna sa burol, pero ngayon ay hindi na siya sigurado. Pero sisiguruhin niyang magpadala ng korona ng gardenia. Ang burol ay alas singko ng hapon at mainam ngayong kainitan ng panahon. Kung kailangan siya doon mula tanghali, naroroon siya sa bahay ni Dr. Lacides Olivella, isang disipulo na nagpupugay ng kanyang dalawampu't limang anibersaryo sa pagdodoktor at mayroong handaang pananghalian.

Pagkatapos mapagtagumpayan ni Dr. Juvenal Urbino ang mga unang sigalot sa buhay niya, nakamit niya ang pitagan sa lalawigang iyon.

Pumailanlang siya noong nagsimula siyang uminom ng mga gamot lingid sa kaalaman ng lahat: potassium bromide para sa lakas ng loob, salicylates 'pag sumasakit ang kanyang mga buto lalo na sa tag-ulan, ergosterol para sa vertigo, belladonna para sa matiwasay na tulog. Umiinom siya nang palihim sapagkat bilang doktor, taliwas ang kanyang isip sa pagreseta ng panandaliang lunas sa matatanda. Mas madali para sa kanya ang bathin ang sakit ng iba kaysa ng sa kanya. Madalas, dala-dala niya sa kanyang bulsa ang maliit na camphor na sinisinghot niya nang palihim para maibsan ang kanyang takot sa pag-inom ng sanlaksang gamot.

Magpapalipas siya ng isang oras para sa paghahanda sa kanyang klase sa Medical School tuwing alas otso ng umaga, Lunes hanggang Sabado, hanggang sa araw ng kanyang kamatayan. Masugid din siyang magbasa ng mga libro na in-order pa niya sa Paris at Barcelona pero ginagawa lang niya ito kapag siyesta at bago matulog. Pagkatapos magbasa, nag-e-ehersisyo siya sa harap ng bintana sa kasilyas, humihinga habang nakaharap kung saan maririnig nang malakas ang pagtilaok ng mga tandang. Maliligo, aayusin ang balbas, at lalagyan ng wax ang bigote. Papahiran ng cologne ni Farina Gegenüber ang sarili, at magbibihis ng puting terno na may tsaleko, sombrero, at bota na cordovan. Sa edad na walumpu't isa, napangalagaan niya ang sarili mula nang dumating siya mula Paris sa kasagsagan ng epidemyang kolera at, maliban sa namumuting kolor, ang kanyang ayos na buhok na hati sa gitna ay gaya pa rin noong kanyang kabataan. Nag-aalmusal siya ng tamang pagkain para sa kanyang delikadong tiyan kasama ang isang ulo ng bawang na ipinapalaman niya sa tinapay para maiwasan ang atake sa puso. Pagkatapos ng klase, madalas siyang dumalo sa kanyang mga pambayang gawain, o sa simbahan, o sa kanyang artistiko at panlipunang aktibidades.

Madalas siyang kumain ng tanghalian sa bahay at magnakaw ng sampung minutong siyesta sa terasa, dinig ang mga awit ng mga babaeng alila sa ilalim ng puno ng mangga, ang mga hiyaw ng nagtitinda sa kalsada,

ang ingay ng mga motor mula sa look kung saan ang usok ay wumawagayway hanggang sa kalooban ng bahay na parang nabubulok na anghel. Pagkatapos ay magbabasa siya ng mga bagong nobela o kasaysayan, magtuturo ng Pranses, at kakantahan ang maamong loro na naging atraksyon nitong mga huling taon. Pagsapit ng alas kuwatro, matapos makainom ng malaking baso ng lemonada, dadayuhin niya ang kanyang mga pasyente. Sa kabila ng kanyang edad, hindi niya naging gawi ang makipagkita sa pasyente sa kanyang opisina. Naging debosyon na niya ang puntahan sila sa kani-kanilang mga tahanan.

Mula nang dumating siya galing Europa, madalas niyang gamitin ang karwahe sa pagbibiyaha. Ngunit nang hindi na ito naging praktikal, pinalitan niya ito ng Victoria at isang kabayo. Ginagamit pa rin niya ang karwahe paminsan-minsan at minaliit niya ang katotohanang nawawala na ito sa uso at ang mga natira na lamang sa lungsod ay ang mga nagbibigay ng libreng pasahe sa mga turista o ang nagdadala ng mga korona tuwing may libing. Bagaman ayaw pa niyang magretiro, batid niyang natatawag lang siya tuwing may espesyal na kaso. Itinuring niyang espesyal na rin ito. Alam niya agad ang problema ng pasyente sa unang tingin pa lang at naging duda siya sa gamot at operasyon. Sabi niya: “Ang scalpel ang tunay na ebidensya ng pagkabagsak ng medisina.” Sa wari niya, lahat ng gamot ay lason at sitenta porsyento ng kinakain ay pampabilis ng kamatayan. Sa klase, binabanggit niya na “ang anumang gamot na alam natin ay alam lang ng iilang doktor.” Hinubog ng medisina ang kanyang pananaw mula sa murang ideyalismo tungo sa praktikal na obserbasyon tungkol sa buhay. “Bawat isa ay kapitan ng kanyang kamatayan, at ang tanging magagawa natin ay tulongan ang sinumang harapin ito ng walang takot o pangamba.” Ngunit sa kabila ng mga taliwas na kaisipang ito na bahagi na ng lokal na paniniwala sa medisina, patuloy pa rin ang pagkonsulta ng kanyang mga masugid na estudyante kahit naging dalubhasa na sila sa kanilang larangan. Kinilala nila ang husay ng pagsipat niya bilang doktor. At kinilala siyang mahal at eksklusibong manggagamot ng mga ancestral homes sa Distrito ng mga Viceroy.

Metodiko ang kanyang iskedyul kaya alam ng kanyang asawa kung saan siya padadalhan ng mensahe sakaling may emergency. Noong bata pa, madalas siyang dumaan muna sa Parish Café bago umuwi kung saan siya naglalaro ng chess kasama ang mga kaibigan ng kanyang biyenang lalaki at takas na Carribean. Ngunit hindi pa siya nakabalik sa Parish Café mula nang dumating ang bagong siglo. Tinangka din niyang mag-organisa ng mga pambansang tournament na panukala ng Social Club. Dito niya nakilala si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, na hindi pa potograper ng mga bata noon. Ngunit sa loob lamang ng tatlong buwan, nakilala na siya ng lahat dahil hindi siya matalo-talo sa chess. Para kay Dr. Juvenal Urbino, ang pagkikita nilang iyon ay parang milagro, noong ang chess ay naging silakbo ng kanyang damdamin at wala na siyang naging maraming kalaban sa laro na makakatalo sa kanya.

Naging lubos na protektor ni Jeremiah de Saint-Amour si Dr. Juvenal Urbino, taga-panagot niya sa lahat ng bagay, kahit hindi niya lubusang kilala kung saan galing, o kung anumang sigalot sangkot ito. Pinahiram niya ito ng pera para makapagpatayo ng photography studio. At mula nang kunan niya sa unang pagkakataon ang isang batang nagulat sa kislap ng kamera, nabayaran ni Jeremiah de Saint-Amour ang bawat kusing na nahiram niya sa butihing doktor.

Lahat iyon ay dahil sa chess. Sa simula, sila'y naglalaro tuwing alas siyete pagkatapos ng hapunan. Madalas, talo si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour dahil bagito pa pero sa kalaunan, humusay ito at pumantay na sa galing ng doktor. Nang magbukas si Don Galileo Daconte ng unang sinehan, si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour ang isa sa mga unang kostumer, at ang paglalaro ng chess ay nalimitahan sa mga gabing walang bagong pelikulang ipalalabas. Naging mabuting magkaibigan sila ng doktor at sabay silang nanonood. Hindi naisama ng doktor ang kanyang asawa sa panonood dahil una, wala itong pasensya na sumunod sa mga kumplikadong kuwento at pangalawa,

ramdam niya na hindi nito gusto si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour at hindi magandang kasa-kasama niya.

Iba ang kanyang mga Linggo. Magsisimba siya sa katedral at uuwi para magpahinga sa terasa sa patio. Madalang siyang bumisita ng pasyente tuwing araw ng Linggo maliban kung talagang emergency, at sa loob ng maraming taon, hindi siya tumanggap ng obligasyon na hindi kailangan. Ngayong Pentekostes, dalawang bagay ang hindi inaasahang mangyari: ang kamatayan ng kaibigan at silver anniversary ng isa niyang disipulo. Sa halip na umuwi gaya nang una niyang balak matapos ideklara ang kamatayan ni Jeremiah de Saint-Amour, hinayaan niyang sumunod sa agos ng kuryusidad.

Nang siya'y nasa loob na ng karwahe, muli niyang binasa ang sulat at inutusan ang kutsero na dalhin siya sa isang liblib na lugar sa old slave quarter. Naguluhan ang kutsero sa desisyon ng doktor kaya kinakailangan niyang ulitin ang narinig na utos. Wala. Walang mali; malinaw ang adres at ang lalaking sumulat nito ay may sapat na dahilan para tunguhin ito. Bumalik si Dr. Urbino sa unang pahina ng sulat para muling malunod sa mga hindi inaasahang rebelasyong nakapaloob sa sulat na iyon. Rebelasyong maski sa edad niyang iyon ay makakapagpabago sa kanyang buhay.

Nagsimulang magbanta ang langit nang umagang iyon. Maulap at malamig-lamig, ngunit walang senyal na uulan bago magtanghali. Sa kagustuhang makahanap ng mas maikling ruta, binagtas ng kutsero ang magaspang at batu-batong daan ng lungsod at kailangang humimpil para hindi matakot ang kabayo sa mga bulto-bultong taong galing sa misa. Ang mga daan ay pumpon ng mga koronang bulaklak na yari sa papel, ng musika, at ng mga babaeng may mga payong at magagarang suot na nanonood mula sa kanilang mga balkon. Sa Plaza ng Katedral kung saan ang rebulto ng Tagapagpalaya ay halos nakatago na sa mga palmeras at ilaw na globo, matindi ang trapiko dahil katatapos lang ng misa, at walang bakanteng upuan sa maingay na Parish Café. Si Dr. Urbino lang ang may karwahe na

hila ng kabayo sa lungsod; kilala ang makintab na bubungan nito na yari sa katad, mga kabit na gawa sa tanso na hindi kayang agnasin ng asin, at mga gulong at haligi na pininturahan ng pula at tinubog sa ginto gaya ng sa gala sa Vienna Opera. Taliwas sa mga ordinaryong kutsero na malinis na damit ang suot, ang kutsero ni Dr. Urbino ay nakasuot pa rin ng lumang velvet at kalo na parang ringmaster sa circus. Ito'y malaking simbolo ng anakronismo sa gitna ng tag-init na klima sa Carribean.

Bagaman walang makakapag-pasubali sa pagmamahal ni Dr. Juvenal Urbino sa lungsod, walang naging matibay na dahilan para siya magpunta sa old slave quarter isang Linggong umaga. Kailangang magpalibut-libot ang kutsero at magtanong ng direksyon para lamang makita ang bahay na hinahanap. Habang dumadaan sila sa mga latian, nakilala ni Dr. Urbino ang kahirapan ng paligid. Hindi gaya ng mga mansyon sa lungsod na gawa ng mga mason, ang mga bahay dito ay mga pinagpatungang tabla at bubungang sink, na nakatungkod lamang para labanan ang mga baha na galing sa mga alkantariya at minana pa sa mga Kastila. Mapanglaw at kahabag-habag ang paligid. Ngunit maririnig at mababanaag ang dagundong ng musika at selebrasyon ng Pentekostes ng mahihirap. At nang matagpuan na nila sa wakas ang bahay na hinahanap, isang bulto ng marurungis na bata ang humabol sa karwahe. Pinagtawanan nila ang suot ng kutsero kaya kailangang bugawin ang mga ito gamit ang latigo. Nasa isip ni Dr. Urbino na bagaman kompidensyal ang pagbisita niyang ito, huli na nang mahulo niyang wala nang mas magiging mapanganib pa sa kamusmusan at kawalang-malay ng mga bata.

Ang labas ng walang numerong bahay ay hindi kaiba sa lahat ng mga bahay sa lugar na iyon, maliban sa mga kurtinang puntas at malaking tarangkahan na nakuha pa sa isang lumang simbahan. Kumatok ang kutsero at nang masigurong tama nga ang bahay, saka lang niya tinulungan ang doktor na bumaba sa karwahe. Bumukas ang pinto nang walang langitngit.

Isang babaeng may edad, nakaitim na damit at may pulang rosas sa kanyang tenga, ang bumulaga sa pintuan. Sa kabila ng kanyang edad na hindi bababa ng kuwarenta, isa siyang mapagmalaking mulata na may taimtim na mga ginintuang mata at buhok na hapit sa kanyang bungo na parang helmet na steel wool. Hindi siya nakilala ni Dr. Urbino bagaman nakita na niya ito nang ilang beses sa mga larong chess sa istudyong potograper, at minsan na rin siyang nagreseto noong siya'y nagkalagnat. Inabot niya ang kamay sa babae at ginantihan naman ito nang hawakan niya ng magkabilang kamay, at inanyayahan siyang pumasok sa loob. Umupo ang babae sa harapan niya at nagsalita sa Espanyol na may punto.

“Bahay mo ito, Doktor,” maikli niyang sabi. “Hindi kita inaasahang dumating dito agad.”

Nadaya ang pakiramdam ni Dr. Urbino. Pinagmasdan niya ang babae, sa kanyang marubdob na pagluluksa, sa dignidad ng kanyang dalamhati, at napagtanto niyang hindi niya kailangan ang pagbisitang iyon sapagkat mas maraming alam ang babaeng ito kaysa sa kanya tungkol sa nilalaman ng sulat ni Jeremiah de Saint-Amour. Ito ang katotohanan. Naroroon siya nang mga huling oras nito, gaya ng presensiya niya sa halos kalahati ng buhay nito. Ang kanyang debosyon at masunuring pag-aalaga na gaya ng tunay na pagmamahal ay lingid sa kaalaman na lahat ng mga tao, dito man o sa lungsod. Nagkakilala sila sa isang tahanan ng mga nagpapagaling sa Port-au-Prince kung saan pinanganak ang babae at kung saan naman nagtatago ang batang puganteng potograper. Sinundan siya ng babae nang sumunod na taon at alam na ng bawat isa na magiging magkasama sila kahit hindi nila tahasang pinag-usapan. Nililinis at inaayos niya ang laboratoryo minsan sa isang linggo at hindi ito kailanman napansin maski ng makakating dila ng mga kapit-bahay. Maski si Dr. Urbino ay hindi makapaniwalang may babae si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour kung hindi lang nabanggit ito sa liham. Hirap siyang maintindihan ang dalawang malayang tao na walang nakaraan

at nabubuhay sa laylayan ng mapanghusgang lipunan ay pinili ang peligro ng bawal na pag-ibig. Paliwanag ng babae: “Ito ang kanyang hiling.” Ang isang lingid na relasyon sa isang lalaking hindi kanya kailanman ay hindi dapat kamuhian. Sa kabilang banda, mas naramdaman niyang totoo ito at mas gugustuhin niya.

Noong nakaraang gabi, nanood sila ng sine na magkahiwalay ang upuan gaya nang nakagawian nila dalawang beses kada buwan mula nang itayo ni Don Galileo Daconte, isang Italyanong imigrante, ang sinehan mula sa mga guho ng isang lumang kumbento. Pinanood nila ang *All Quiet on the Western Front*, isang pelikulang hango sa libro na naging popular noong isang taon. Nabasa ito ni Dr. Urbino at nawasak ang puso niya nito dahil sa kabarbaruhan ng giyera. Nagkita sila sa laboratoryo pagkatapos at namataan ng babae na malalim ang iniisip ng doktor, at napagtanto niyang dahil ito sa mga brutal na eksena ng mga sugatang sundalo na naghihingalo sa putikan. Sa kagustuhang maiba ang isip ng doktor, inimitahan niya itong maglaro ng chess at kusa naman siyang nagpaunlak. Wala sa isip niya ang paglalaro hanggang madiskubre niyang matatalo na siya sa apat na galaw. Saka lang niya nahinuha na ang babae ang magiging kalaban niya sa huling laro, at hindi si Heneral Jeronimo Argote na kanyang inaasahan. Pabulong siyang nagtaka:

“Hindi ako makapaniwala!”

Iginiit ng babae na hindi niya kailangan ng papuri. Talunan nang gabing iyon si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour at nang tinapos niya ang laro ng pasado alas onse ng gabi kung kailan tapos na rin ang ingay ng mga sayawan sa plaza, sinabihan niyang iwan na siya ng babae. Kailangan niyang magsulat ng liham para kay Dr. Juvenal Urbino, ang taong itinuturing niyang pinakamarangal na nakilala niya. Isang totoong kaibigan, gaya nang madalas niyang sinasabi, kahit na ang tanging bagay na nag-uugnay sa dalawa ay ang larong chess. Batid ng babae na dumating na si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour sa

hangganang ng kanyang paghihirap at ang natitirang lakas na lang sa kanya ay ang pagsulat niya ng liham. Hindi makapaniwala ang doktor.

“Kung gan’un, alam mo,” diin niya.

Hindi lang sa alam niya. Pumayag siya at tinulungan niya ang potograper na indahin ang mga paghihirap niya gaya ng pagpapalaspap din niya ng kaligayahan dito. Dahil iyon ang huling labing-isang buwan para kay Jeremiah de Saint-Amour: malupit na paghihirap.

“Tungkulin mo ang i-report siya,” sabi ng doktor.

“Hindi ko kaya,” depensa ng babae. “Mahal ko siya.”

Akala ni Dr. Urbino ay narinig na niya ang lahat nang kailangang marinig sa mundo. Maliban dito. Tinitigan niya nang deretso ang babae. Pinagmasdan ang kanyang kabuuan: tila isang dyosa sa ilog, matapang sa kanyang itim na suot, mga matang mala-ulupong, at may rosas sa kanyang tenga. Matagal na panahon sa isang ilang na tabing-dagat sa Haiti kung saan nagniig ang dalawa, binulong ni Jeremiah de Saint-Amour sa kanya: “Hindi ako tatanda.” Ipinakahulugan ito ng babae na isang dakilang dahilan para labanan ang panahon ngunit sadyang mas ispesipiko si Jeremiah de Saint-Amour. Nagdesisyon siya na kitlin ang kanyang buhay sa edad na animnapu.

Nag-animnapu siya noong ika-dalawampu’t tatlo ng Enero, bisperas ng Pentekostes. Noon siya nagdesisyon, bisperas ng pinakamahalagang pista ng Santo Espiritu sa lungsod. Walang isang maliit na detalye noong nakaraang gabi na hindi alam ng babae at madalas nila itong pag-usapan noong siya’y buhay pa. Minahal ni Jeremiah de Saint-Amour ang buhay ng may matinding silakbo sa puso. Minahal niya ang karagatan at ang pag-ibig, minahal niya ang kanyang aso at ang babae, at habang papalapit ang petsa ng kanyang desisyon, unti-unti siyang kinain ng kawalang-pag-asa. Ang kamatayan lamang ang magiging sagot at kapalaran niya.

“Kagabi, nang iwan ko siya, wala na siya dito sa mundo,” paliwanag niya.

Gusto sana niyang kunin ang aso ngunit binalaan siya nito. “Ipagpaumanhin mo pero sasama si Mister Woodrow Wilson sa akin.” Inutusan niya na itali ang aso sa isang paa ng kama pero maluwap ang buhol na ginawa ng babae para makatakas ang aso. Maaring iyon pa lang ang unang akto ng kataksilang ginawa niya kay Jeremiah de Saint-Amour. Mabilis na sumabad si Dr. Urbino at sinabing hindi umalis ang aso sa tabi niya. Sabi ng babae: “Dahil iyon ang gusto niya.” At natuwa siya sapagkat ninais din niya kagabi na samahan ang namatay na mangingibig.

“Alalahanin mo ako na isang rosas,” sabi niya.

Nakauwi na ang babae nang hatinggabi. Humiga siya sa kama na suot pa ang damit para manigarilyo at para bigyan siya ng panahong tapusin ng kalaguyo ang huling sulat. Bago mag-alas tres ng madaling araw nang magtahulan ang mga ligaw na aso, nagpakulo siya ng tubig para sa kape, nagsuot ng pamburol, at pumitas ng rosas sa patio. Naunawaan ni Dr. Urbino kung paano itakwil ang ala-ala ng babaeng iyon: ang isang taong gaya niya na walang prisipyo na maging kampante sa gitna ng dalamhati.

Sa kasagsagan ng kanyang pagbisita, lalo niyang nahulo ang ibig sabihin noon. Hindi siya dadalaw sa burol dahil iyon ang ipinangako niya sa nasirang mangingibig. Hindi siya luluha. Hindi siya muling mag-aaksaya ng natitirang panahon para sa namatay, na nakagisnang gawain ng mga biyuda sa lugar na iyon. Binalak niyang ipagbili ang bahay ni Jeremiah de Saint-Amour at lahat ng gamit nito, na ayon sa sulat, ay kanya lahat. Patuloy na siyang mabubuhay nang ayon sa kanyang kagustuhan at wala kailanmang reklamo sa peligrosong patibong ng mahihirap kung saan siya naging masaya.

Umalingawngaw ang mga salitang iyon kay Dr. Juvenal Urbino pag-uwi: “ang peligrosong patibong ng mahihirap.” Hindi ito madaling

deskripsyon. 'Pagkat ang lungsod na ito ay nakatayo pa rin sa kabila ng mga samu't saring kaganapan, kung saan nangalawang ang mga bulaklak at natunaw ang asin, kung saan walang nangyayari sa loob ng apat na siglo kundi ang mabagal na pagtanda ng mga natuyong lawrel at nakasulusok na latian. Sa panahon ng tag-lamig, bumuhos ang matinding ulan at binaha ang mga kaban at kalye. At nung tag-init, hinipan ang makapangyarihang alikabok ng mga hangin na 'di kayang buwagin ng imahinasyon at sinira ang mga bubong ng mga kabahayan at tinangay ang mga bata sa hangin. Sabado, lumikas ang mga kalunus-lunos na mulato mula sa kanilang mga tablang bahay sa latian at, tangay ang kanilang mga hayop at kagamitan, ay nanirahan sa mga mabatong tabing-dagat ng distrito. Nitong mga nakaraang taon, kita pa rin sa mga may edad na alipin ang tatak na sinunog sa kanilang mga dibdib ng nagbabagang bakal. Tuwing katapusan ng linggo, makikita silang nagsasaya nang walang humpay, naglalasing na parang wala nang bukas, at nagtatalik sa ilalim ng halaman ng ikako. At sa mga natitira pang araw, makikita sila sa gitna ng plaza at makikitid na eskinita, hawak ang mga tindang binebenta at binibili. Inilalim nila ang patay na lungsod ng kanilang buhay na maingay at masagwa.

THE FAVORITE

Cess Alessandra

Her room was no longer where she kept it last. She had eaten dust in attempts to turn over every corner of her father's house. She had crumpled herself to fit the space between the roof and the *kisame*. She had all but made out with the vinyl floor. Yet, nothing.

There was not a trace of her things when she arrived. There was only a sorry ass of an office standing in their place. A bookcase was pushed back against a wall, each shelf displaying a certificate for being the most outstanding teacher of a school, each shelf trying to look incidental. What was incidental were the printer, the personal computer, and the stationery supplies crowding the desk.

Her papa, Sir Carding to his students, must have been inviting over many guests to require this charade. Only someone like him would find opportunity in his own teenage child's disappearance. It wasn't the first time Maja had wondered how long he had prepared for her departure. Maybe it had always been in the cards.

As though to rub it in, her sister's room remained undisturbed, but clean. It was the only part of the house, Maja wagered, that had met the proper end of a broomstick. She couldn't imagine her dad bending his toothpick limbs to reach for elusive spots, yet when she set foot in the room for the first time in eight years, she found the underside of Luna's bed to be spotless. Everything had been put aside, folded neatly, just the way Luna always kept it.

The only anomaly was the Apo Hiking Society album art. It hadn't been there when Maja left. Perhaps her sister *did* learn to loosen up a little bit after all. The poster was skewed. Otherwise, the room was in perfect order.

Weeks had to pass before Maja decided to make the rest of the house just as immaculate. Perhaps it would be best to leave her sister no other task than to appease their incarcerated father. In her last attempt to make the house presentable to Luna, Maja scrubbed mildew off the toilet tiles. It took all of her concentration.

Through the pungent scent of bleach, the smell of burning meat managed to reach her. It set her in motion, which for Maja, sometimes meant leaving a trail of objects in her wake. After turning off the stove a few seconds too late, she glanced back at the hallway clutter.

"Anak ka ng pating," she grumbled, blaming the stove for her haste. It was the first thing she had noticed upon her return. Despite no longer having daughters to spend his thirteenth month pays on, her father had kept the kitchen criminally underfunded. If the stove had been an induction cooker with a timer, instead of being, well, a stove, she would not have ruined the hallway she had spent the entire morning cleaning.

Why couldn't Papa just ask Luna to be here instead? Surely her sister's boyfriend, if he even existed, wouldn't mind a few weeks away from her. She could even bring Leo along if he didn't mind roughing it. The dude was supposed to be this elusive artist, going by Luna's description. Maja could not, for the life of her, imagine how anyone could stand living with her micromanager sister. Let alone an artist.

Maja balked. Who was she to question the crazy things people do for love, when she was here, housesitting the very place she had run away from? Despite there being absolutely no sense in her being her father's first call?

It had not surprised her to receive a call from a Parañaque precinct. She figured she had it coming for burning her client's prototype contraceptives, when they refused to pay her for her logo design. The only surprise was that the police afforded the courtesy of a phone call, instead of barging into her shared two-bedroom apartment.

"Are you the daughter of Ricardo Castillo?"

"Who?"

"Carding Castillo," the man spat out like he would rather be rubbing the *libag* off his neck than dealing with her. "Are you his daughter?"

"Yes, I'm his daughter." *The wrong one*, she almost added. The crime described didn't even faze her as much as the possibility that Luna, the golden child, was not in their father's 'in case of emergency' phone calls.

"I didn't do it," he said, when she visited him in jail. He had already met with his lawyer, whom he claimed, owed him. There was always someone who owed him favors.

Maja had half a mind to act confused, if only to watch him squirm. Instead, she sighed and nodded. Of course, he didn't do it. He was not *that* interesting.

"So the pack was planted."

He wearily nodded like he had gone through these details for the thousandth time. Maja did not mind skipping the details. They had a million other things to talk about: The House, Her Twin, His Retirement, The Last Eight Years. Yet, after merely implying that she was now responsible for the house, along with his stupid 1969 Norton Commando that always needed oiling, all he said was, "Don't call your sister."

"Don't call Luna," he repeated, as though Maja had any other sisters.

So she didn't. For a while, that is. While she was putting away the pieces of the china she had managed to break, the buzzer rang. In true Luna fashion, her sister had not texted to confirm whether or not she was coming. She simply arrived, exactly twenty-five minutes early. Maja felt the hint of a smile.

"When will you ever learn to reply to my texts, Luna?" she asked over the steel gate of their townhouse unit. Luna must have grumbled something she couldn't hear through the screeching metal. The handle sure needed some grease.

For passive onlookers, the only other indications that they were two different people could be found in their choice of clothing, their choice of expletives, and the way they moved. Take Maja's darting, jumpy glances at the neighbors, and Luna's staring straight at one of them. Several heads turned away, pretending anything was more interesting than the rare sighting of Carding's twin daughters. News sure traveled fast in a *barangay* where nearly all houses shared walls. They decided to settle first at the dining table before they could say anything more.

Saying more, it turned out, was not easy. The sisters saw each other about two or three times a year, but it was always in a café or at some event, never within the confines of a private residence. Maja had never even caught sight of Leo, and the life Luna said they had been living in the past year.

In avoiding Luna's eyes, she glimpsed the scar on her forehead. It was barely noticeable. Hardly enough to set them apart. Maja once pointed out the irony that out of the two of them, Maja was far clumsier, yet it was Luna who sported a facial scar. She remembered Luna not saying anything to that, and Maja never joked about it again.

It was only noticeable now, when they didn't quite know what to do with themselves. Maja got up, preoccupying herself with switching on

the ceiling fan, the swivel function of the much smaller desk fan, and other buttons that no longer worked.

“So what is so monumentally important, you can’t talk about it anywhere except,” Luna said, gesturing vaguely at the space around them, “here.”

“Didn’t I tell you Papa’s in jail?”

“You did,” Luna replied. “Instead of taking me there.”

“That’s because he doesn’t want you to know about it.”

“He doesn’t,” said Luna. It wasn’t a question.

“And you’re going to tell me why. Over lunch.”

“Are— are you bribing me with food?”

Maja had uncovered the slightly burnt *bistek*, which didn’t look as bad as she had feared. In fact, it smelled spectacularly good enough to warrant the bribing accusation.

“Aren’t we supposed to talk about the evidence you said you had found first?”

Maja was about to argue, when the ladle she had just plunged into the rice cooker met loose, overly-soaked grains of rice.

“Okay,” she said, making a show of considering it. “Fine, you’re right. Let’s talk about the case first. We can talk about you and papa over lunch.”

“You forgot to turn on the rice cooker didn’t you?”

“What? No,” Maja said as she pressed her thumb on the lever.

“Well, you might as well make me coffee, too, if you insist on making me talk.”

“You don’t even drink instant coffee.”

Luna grimaced.

“You are a hopeless *burgis*.”

Maja set up the video as if they were in for a movie night. She had half a mind to order popcorn. And because her twin was hopeless, she flanked the laptop with a steaming cup of 3-in-1 coffee for herself and a cup of Jasmine tea for Luna. The lone teabag she had rescued from the musty cabinet might or might not be expired.

“Besides this,” Maja said, hand waving about her laptop. It was taking forever to boot up, what with all the pirated Adobe Creative programs crammed in its drive, “we were able to ID a potential witness. A potential witness who doesn’t want to be found.”

“Who’s we?”

“The lawyer. And Papa’s old friend from another precinct.”

“Old friend?”

“You know,” said Maja. “The one who came by a few times when we were kids. Papa’s beer buddy for like, a while.”

Luna blew on her cup of tea. She neither flinched nor commented on it after two sips. Maybe it wasn’t expired after all.

“Oh, him,” Luna finally said. “SPO Something Espinosa, was it?”

“*Inspector* Espinosa. He was promoted.”

Maja could not be sure if she really did remember, or if she had only formed the memories after meeting him recently. So she asked, “How do they know each other again?”

“I don’t know.” Luna shrugged with one shoulder before continuing, “but he was here a few times after the accident. I think he even dropped by after you left.”

“Wait what acci— right, Mama’s accident,” Maja said in between sips. She winced at the slight burn on her tongue. She really should’ve blown

air on it. “That was an accident,” Maja added, nodding to herself.

The cushions sank as Maja shifted to face her sister. “He says there’s nothing he can do to get Papa out of this, but he’s been helping with the investigation.”

When Maja played the video, she didn’t watch it, not really. She had already committed every detail of the video to memory. She allowed herself to glance at Luna’s face, like it might reveal clues, any clue at all that she might know more than she ever let on.

In the first part of the tape, a policeman roams a popular university belt’s *chilluman* spot. SPO2 Roño is his name, Maja later learned. He hovers around the area, alternating between lurking and sticking out. By some colossal stroke of luck, the camera has caught the policeman slipping a packet in his victim’s pocket.

“That isn’t Papa,” was Luna’s big epiphany, her sense of urgency rivaling that of a sloth.

“The lawyer said that if I can’t find anything, I should find something to discredit the cop who nabbed him. That’s all we could find, which is unfortunate.”

“Not necessarily,” Luna said. “How long have you had this?”

“A week?”

“And you haven’t turned it in?”

“It’s not solid evidence,” Maja said, her cup suddenly feeling too big in her hands.

“A record of behavioral history is still a factor in court, believe it or not. That, and finding a witness can really help.”

“What? I’m not a *summa cum laude* like you, but believe it or not, even *I* know this video doesn’t prove anything.”

Luna shrugged. "It proves that SPO2 Roño is a liar."

"But it doesn't prove that Papa isn't."

"Do you seriously think that Papa," Luna said, turning in her seat, "of all people, would be dumb enough to carry *shabu* around in a police-infested area?"

"No, I believe him. Duh. He cleared the drug test. It's not like he's capable of keeping up with relationships, much less drug cartels."

Luna did not laugh.

"This video is *not* nothing, Maja. Why haven't you shown this to his lawyer? You don't need a witness just to turn that in. Why did you even need to call me?"

"Well, it's Papa," Maja said, as if that explained everything. It should. "Wouldn't you call me if Papa got arrested, too?"

"I would," Luna said without hesitation. "Immediately."

"Well, here you are now."

"Three weeks is not exactly immediate, Maja. Why didn't you call me right away when he called you?"

"He specifically told me not to tell you, remember?"

"He did," Luna said, nodding to herself. Again, not a question. "But when has being told what to do ever stopped you?"

Maja placed her cup back on the table, finding herself combing her memories.

"Okay," she said. "I might need a lawyer for that one."

They did laugh then, letting the fan blow air into their guffaws.

"Wasn't I the one who asked questions first? You haven't told me why you and Papa aren't talking."

“Well, I’m going to need that *bistek* then,” Luna said.

Once they had eaten, they sat themselves on the sofa, and they watched the video again. And again. As if the other victim would morph into their father if they repeated it enough times. It was Luna who paused the video on the fourth run.

“Leo,” she said, not shifting her gaze from the paused screen. “Leo is short for Leonora, not Leonardo.”

The things that had shut Maja up could be pinned down to only a few incidents in her life. This was now one of them.

“Oh.” After years of mastering the art of having the last say, that was all she could come up with.

“Oh,” Maja said more loudly. As if that would catapult her to the finish line. She chanced a glance at her sister, hoping she would make fun of her for the lapse. But Luna was still staring at the bright pixels of the laptop.

“Well,” Maja finally tried. “Poor girl.”

Luna frowned. Maja had almost forgotten how Luna looked when she frowned. It was one of the ways people could tell them apart. Often, it was Maja who looked like she was recovering from a punch in the face, not Luna.

“I mean,” Maja said. “It must be tough being stuck with you.”

Luna looked even more confused than she thought possible. The musty side of an under-stuffed pillow hit Maja in the jaw. She caught it and pressed it to her face, letting it muffle her speech.

“Is that why you moved out?”

When Maja didn’t hear a response, she peeked from behind the pillow, as though to check if the coast was clear. It wasn’t. Luna was looking

away like she would rather not continue. There was at least the tail-end of a nod. Maja put down the pillow and tried again.

“So moving out wasn’t because you went to college?”

Luna smiled then, and said, “College was *because* of moving out.”

“You mean...”

“I needed a reason, so I got a scholarship.”

“Of course you did,” Maja said with a laugh. She rolled her eyes, if only to hide how impressed she was. Now more than ever, Maja was sure she was a fool for thinking she could ever keep up with Luna.

“Is that why papa won’t talk to you?”

“Not immediately,” said Luna. “He still called me up when I was in college.”

“And then you got a girlfriend.”

Luna nodded, no longer looking like a kicked puppy.

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this, though?”

Luna stared like Maja was missing something that needn’t be said, a look familiar only because their mother used to look at her father the same way. Then something passed over her sister’s face. She shifted in her seat like she would rather be talking about the case instead. Maja wasn’t so sure anymore that she wouldn’t appreciate a change of topic.

“You were too much like him,” Luna said. Despite the sound of tireless kids, and the cars passing through the overpass, Maja knew she had heard her sister correctly.

“I’m what?”

“Too much like Papa.”

“You thought I’d give you a hard time?”

“Of course not,” said Luna. “Not really, but sometimes, you make things that aren’t about you... well, about you.”

“No, I don’t.”

“It’s kind of why you and Papa fought all the time,” said Luna, leaning one shoulder against the back of the sofa so that she was still facing Maja. “You had the same reactions to too many things like you were his twin, not mine.”

It took everything in Maja not to present a case study of why she was nothing like her father, of how she didn’t make everything about her. She had to bite her tongue to allow Luna to keep going.

“Remember Jepoy? Remember when I once told you he was stalking me? You said it was probably because he was trying to get back at you for rejecting him in fourth grade.”

“Well, it most probably was. Why else—”

It took a ridiculous hot minute of avoiding Luna’s eyes before it hit her.

“Wow. I *do* make everything about me.”

“Okay,” Luna said.

“I’m sorry? I guess?”

“You guess.” Luna only raised an eyebrow, but it was enough.

“No, I know,” Maja said. “I’m sorry.”

“Sure,” Luna said, trying not to smile for some reason. “In the spirit of making this about you. You are now going to tell me why *you* left.”

“What?”

“I just came out to you, Maja. You literally cannot deny me anything.”

“Since when did you become the scheming one?”

“Since when did you not like talking about you? Tell me why you ran away.”

“Ran away? I moved out, Luna.”

Luna laughed. “What are you, American? Maja, it was a month before your high school graduation. You really had to make a statement? The award-winning teacher’s uneducated daughter.”

“I was a teenager,” Maja offered.

“We’re twins, Maja. We were both teenagers.”

“We’ve been over this. He wanted me to become a teacher. I wanted to be an artist. We were a fucking cliché, him and me, but that’s it.”

“That’s it? Come on, even *you* are not *that* dramatic.”

“He and I just didn’t get along,” said Maja, her fingers digging into the pillow she had been clutching. “I’m still having whiplash from when he called me instead of you.”

“I mean,” she added quickly. “Surely he would ignore your having a girlfriend, if it meant he didn’t have to depend on me.”

Luna showed no signs that she understood. Top three in CPA boards and she couldn’t get the simple math of their family. So even though Maja had told this story more than a few times, she still spelled it out for her.

“He burned my first oil painting when he found out someone wanted to buy it. I soaked the bass guitar that took him years to save up for, and he cursed me and my future children like it’s 1866.”

“Please.” Luna scoffed. “I know that pattern. Too much, I’d say.”

“Well, it doesn’t exactly amount to me being his one prison phone call.”

“You and Papa had your own little club, Maja. You, him, and *Queen*.”

“What? Well, you were our Freddie. Whenever we recreated the videos, you were our Freddie Mercury, remember?”

“Well, you’re not wrong about that,” said Luna, eyes narrowing.

“I’m not wrong about *everything*,” said Maja. “At least not about you being his favorite.”

Luna looked at her like she had just grown wings.

“You don’t believe me?” Maja got up, tugged her sister by her perfectly pressed sleeve, and pulled her to the hallway.

“*Aray*,” Luna said, stopping to inspect her naked heel. “Did you break something again?”

“Oh, that,” Maja said. “You should’ve worn slippers.”

After checking to make sure the shards from the vase didn’t cut her, they turned the corner.

“This was my room,” Maja said, as the office came into view. “Or at least it used to be.”

“I know,” said Luna, pointedly not looking at her. “He turned it into an office when you ran away.”

Maja blinked. “Wait, he did?”

“I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“See. He didn’t even wait. Now it makes even less sense that he called me instead of you.”

Maja led Luna to Luna’s room. “It’s like you never left,” Maja said.

“You cleaned?”

“Of course not.”

“I mean I did clean the house,” she added when Luna raised an eyebrow. “But your room was this neat when I got here.”

“Maybe Mama got bored in the afterlife and decided to clean up?”

“Honestly, that’s a more acceptable explanation. Now that I think about it, maybe it *was* a ghost I saw the other night.”

They lingered at the doorway, not quite entering, and it was *not* because of the possible presence of ghosts.

“He kept my room as it was.”

“Yeah, of course, he did. Why is that surprising? Luna, he named you after the moon. It was his thing. Mama got him a telescope when they were just dating, remember?”

“How could he have had a favorite when they named us? We were babies. We came out at the same time.”

“Not really,” said Maja. “You came out three minutes after me. Plenty of time to realize I wasn’t all that.” Luna rolled her eyes, finally taking a step inside.

“Mama painted these walls. I said I wanted the room to be blue, so she moved all my things out and painted it blue.”

“Oh,” Maja said, her voice hardly above a whisper. “I don’t remember it being any other color.”

“It was pink,” Luna said. Slowly, she raised a hand to The Apo Hiking Society poster, hovering until her fingers settled on the upper right corner. Peeling it off would have been easier than picking lint off a black jacket, but she didn’t. Luna stopped, dropping her hand to her side, and then holding it behind her back as if to stop it from doing something.

“Mama liked Danny Javier the most,” Maja offered.

“Who?”

“That guy you were staring at?” Maja pointed at the poster. “Wait, you don’t know him?”

“Oh, yeah, no. Of course, I know him. I just forgot. I don’t think I ever heard Mama singing their songs, or any song at all.”

Something must’ve been more interesting to Luna than their mother’s singing, because she suddenly crouched by the plastic bedside drawers. “Oh wow. These are still here.”

It was a bright yellow clear book, each sleeve filled with cut-outs from magazines. Maja lowered herself next to her sister and watched her flip through it. With each page, there were more and more middle-aged women cut-outs. She *had* seen this before.

“Oh my god,” Maja said, nearly going off balance. Unlike Luna, her Achilles tendons have always been too damn short for a balanced crouch. “All these women in suits and I didn’t realize you’re a lesbian?”

She was relieved when that made Luna laugh. In fact, it seemed hard for Luna to stop. As if fueled by this release, Luna opened the first drawer and pulled out a thin box, clearly surprised to see it had survived. When she opened it, Maja understood why. It was a stack of 5r-sized photos Luna might have printed herself. These ones, Maja had never seen before, and she guessed her sister would not just go to any shop for printing. They were paintings of women intimate with each other. Some naked, some not. Most were surrealist, some, overwhelmingly close to real life. When Luna handed them over gingerly, Maja gave in to the urge to sink to the floor, tucking her legs under her. The paintings were beautiful.

“I’m surprised Papa didn’t burn them,” Maja said, if only to let Luna know it was okay. “He wouldn’t hesitate if these were my paintings on actual canvas.”

When Maja met her sister’s eyes, she found Luna frowning, not quite as ready to agree with her as she had hoped.

Instead, Luna asked, “You don’t get it, do you?”

“Get what?”

“He kept this room as is, for the illusion of the perfect daughter. He had people around. Our relatives, colleagues. People who owed him favors for some reason. He got rid of your room as fast as he could, because he couldn’t stand any reminder of you. I was not allowed to talk about you, you know?”

Maja stood up before pins and needles could assault her legs.

“Huh,” she huffed, collapsing on the bed, surprised to find it still a little bouncy. “You think he even, you know, loved us?”

“I guess not in the way we needed him to.”

“Not even Mama,” Maja found herself saying.

“Why do you say that? He adored Mama.”

“Only when she was the way he wanted her to be.”

Luna glanced at her, no rebuttal at hand. This did not feel like the right moment, but judging from how today had been going, there might never be a right moment.

“What do you remember from that night?”

“Which night?” Luna said, a weak attempt at diversion. When Maja didn’t offer a clarification, Luna sighed. “I was eleven.”

“We were both eleven.”

“I remember that we were eleven,” Luna tried again, “that Mama slipped, and that she hit her head.”

“That’s what we were told. Neither of us saw that. What do you remember?”

“I didn’t see anything, Maja.”

“Did you hear anything? What happened that day?”

Luna rose from the floor. She walked a few feet away and sat on the bed.

“They were fighting, and I think, I think you and I were fighting, too.”

“Of course,” Maja agreed, letting this memory fill in the gaps. “Because if we hadn’t been fighting, we would have been in the same room. You always slept over in my room when they fought.”

“Do you remember what the fight was about?”

“Probably the lyrics to a Jolina Magdangal song.”

“Not *that* fight,” said Maja.

“Oh,” said Luna. “The usual, I guess.”

“There was a usual? I thought it was something new every other day.”

“Except I remember they had been talking about Mama’s new job for a while. Something about Papa thinking it meant Mama wanted to leave him.”

“He does have a way of making all things about him. Luna, do you think— do you think it was an accident?”

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The kids and the cars could no longer be heard from the outside. It was as if the world knew to how stop for this moment.

“Maja, what are you trying to say? We were only eleven.”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“Because our memories might be wrong. There’s not enough evidence.”

“And what was it you said that might be enough for the police? Behavioral history and witnesses? Well, Luna. *We’re* the witnesses to *Papa’s* behavioral history.”

Maja stood up to pace back and forth between the bed and Jim Paredes' frozen smile. The poster really had no business being there.

"You said it yourself, Luna. They were always at each other's throats."

"He might be homophobic," Luna said, more to herself than to Maja. "But he's not a— he wouldn't."

"And why do you say he's homophobic, Luna? What else did he do to make you think that?"

Luna shut her eyes. That did nothing to slow Maja down. If anything, it opened the damn gates.

"We both know disagreements are not enough to make you leave your comfort zone. You're the queen of sucking it up. Isn't that what you kept telling me to do?"

"That's not fair." Luna's voice was so weak, it almost made Maja back down.

"What made you realize you've had enough?"

"I left to be with my girlfriend."

"Bullshit. You and Leo hadn't even met yet."

The more Maja paced by the poster, the less sense it made. Her eyes zeroed in on the corners, held by masking tape. Luna would never use masking tape. Without warning, Maja picked at the top corners just above the Apo Hiking Society label.

"No, don't!"

She had never seen Luna move so quickly in her life. And then, she tripped, leaving Maja enough time to get over her shock and peel the poster off the wall.

And there it was, a little crater. It would not have registered as foul

play for Maja, if Luna had not been hell-bent on stopping her. It was forever before Luna spoke.

“He had an outburst. Papa got stuck with the consolation kid, and she just *had* to be lesbian. She looked exactly like the golden child but was nothing like her. You can’t blame him for panicking.”

“Luna,” she said, incredulous. “*You* are panicking right now. What he did to you was *not* panicking.”

Maja could now see nothing else on her sister’s face but that small scar.

“That was attempted murder,” she said.

A part of her wished Luna would argue with her. Maja had never wanted to be proven wrong more than she did now. When it seemed that Luna was too frozen to say anything, Maja said, “Why didn’t you tell me, Luna? It’s not like we stopped talking after I left.”

“Are you really going to make this about you now?”

“Oh, right,” she said. “My bad. How about we make this what it’s really about then— records of behavioral history.”

Maja took one step closer to the hole on the wall, but when she glanced at it, she found herself unable to get any closer. It stared back, like a beady eye.

“We were eleven,” Luna began again. “And yes, I didn’t sleep over in your room that night, but it’s not because we were fighting.”

She rose from the ground and again sat on the edge of the bed. Maja was now standing, unmoving.

“You were probably already in your room,” Luna said. “When Mama found me in the hallway, she steered me to mine and put a hand over my mouth.”

Luna looked up past Maja as if someone else had called her name. It made Maja turn her head. The doorway was empty.

“She was speaking very quietly, too quietly, I think. But it was enough for me to hear her say ‘Lock the door.’ So I did. I locked the door after mama left, Maja, and that was the last thing she asked of me.”

The dent in their parents’ bedroom was considerably smaller, but there was a deeper one, almost like a hole to its left. Like the hole in Luna’s room, they had been covered up by frames. They had to use the claw end of a hammer to dismount the frames.

Maja couldn’t help but think she was right to call Luna. It would have taken her a far longer time to find the evidence. She might not have even entered the scene-of-the-crime at all. Besides the obvious, the fact that Sir Carding did not bother to demolish the wall disturbed her. It was only plywood, hardly a day’s work to replace. Yet he chose to merely cover it up, as if he had already gotten away with the crime.

As they hoped, entering the room and seeing the marks *did* snap their memory back into place. They couldn’t be sure of how it really happened. Just that it did. Did they really hear the loud banging and their mother’s screams, or did they imagine them to explain the dents in front of them?

“Quit pretending you’re still looking for more evidence,” Luna said. “You already know he did it.”

Maja studied her sister’s face. It still took quite some effort to unsee the scar. Luna, for her part, no longer looked keen on denying anything at this point.

“Do you remember who was the first to arrive in the scene? Was there an ambulance?”

They stared at each other then, for once, not minding that they're exact copies of the other.

"Espinosa," they said in chorus.

"Perhaps he's one of the people who owe Papa," Maja said, making her way out of the room. She did not have to turn to know that Luna was close behind. They had both seen enough.

"What could people possibly owe him anyway?"

"I don't know, Luna. We never asked. Maybe he *does* sell drugs or something."

"Well whatever it is, it no longer holds. Espinosa can't or won't help him now."

"Neither can we," said Maja.

"Are you saying you're not turning the video in, even though it's the only thing that can possibly help him now?"

"No, Luna. *I* am not doing anything. We are. We are not turning the video in. We are not following leads on possible witnesses."

"Look who's scheming now."

If the house hadn't been holding up well, Maja thought it might as well collapse now.

"Oh," she said. "No, I didn't know why I called you until now. Not really."

Luna merely stared, unrelenting. "This isn't some rice cooker you forgot to turn on, Maja. You planned this since he called you from the precinct."

Maja turned away, walking to the kitchen. For the first time, she was glad to find greasy dishes and utensils in the sink. She scrubbed, and soaped,

and rinsed twice until nothing reeked of *bistek*. She let the water run loud. If Luna wanted to leave, Maja did not need to hear her exit.

Maja was halfway through the third rinse when she heard something else—the unmistakable voice of their father telling them what to do. She stopped rinsing the dishes, bolting straight to her room, or rather, their father’s office.

Luna was seated in Papa’s chair, the glow of the Jurassic computer playing on her face. She looked more like Maja than she ever had. Her sister flicked her hand to the space beside her. An invitation.

Maja stood behind to watch a nine-year-old Luna—no, Maja—holding a black toy electric guitar. Her little right hand strummed experimentally until she dropped it. A younger Carding hopped from behind a variety of tubs and kitchenware assembled as a drum kit and picked it up for her. He corrected her grip, and turned to Luna, to the center, away from Maja. He began adjusting the mic stand to suit her height.

“I told you, you were always Freddie Mercury,” Maja said, her eyes not leaving the screen. “Did you know Freddie had a husband?”

“Wait, no way. He did?”

“Yeah, maybe we can visit Papa to tell him his favorite pop star is gay.”

The screen glitched, cutting to their young papa tapping what must be a frying pan three times. They started giggling then, their laughter overlapping with the video’s overture of *Don’t Stop Me Now*. The more Maja watched her younger self strumming, the less sense it made that she had never learned to play the guitar. She looked phenomenal. Luna, herself, was not doing a bad job at all. Lip syncing, if not actual singing, was her thing. By the time the video played the chorus, neither of them could help singing along.

Don't stop me now

I'm having such a good time

Before Maja could stop herself, her phone had made its way to her hand, its camera zoomed in on her nine-year-old sister's determined face.

"What are you doing?"

Maja pulled her phone away a little just in case Luna grabbed it.

"Just saving something to show Leo when I meet her."

Luna did not grab the phone from her. She also ceased to sing along with the rest of the video. When it ended, she turned immediately to Maja.

"Are you free tomorrow?"

She imagined what Luna's girlfriend might look like, or what they might look like together. It would be nice to finally meet Leo and not just hear about her like some mythical creature. She wondered if Papa would ever share this moment with them... if he wasn't in jail.

"I don't know," Maja said. "Shouldn't I be heading to the precinct to turn the video over?"

Luna blinked. She turned to the computer to play another video.

"Or I can do that another time?" Their father could rot in prison, and Maja's asking these questions. "Maybe it can wait?"

The frame on the computer screen tilted. The camera was perhaps handheld.

"It can wait," Luna repeated. It was not a question.

When the frame had stabilized, the younger versions of themselves came into view. Their Papa was sitting behind the drum kit, his sunglasses perching on his head. Maja and Luna looked a little older than they did in the first video. They were probably eleven.

“But Papa, I don’t like this vest. I want to wear my black jacket.” The intonation told them it was Maja speaking.

“But we’ve already set up,” they heard their Papa say. “Why didn’t you tell me that before?”

“*Susmaryosep*,” was the reply, a voice behind the camera. “Let her change.”

Maja and Luna stared at each other. By the time they returned their gaze on the screen, little Maja had run off frame, their papa was putting on his sunglasses, and the camera was shaking. Their mama had a wonderful laugh.

Little Maja hopped back on their makeshift stage with her black jacket. An equally tiny Luna met her return with a high five, before taking the mic with both of her stubby hands. She had Freddie’s charisma no doubt. They should have posted this on Youtube even as a joke.

I guess I’m learning

I must be warmer now

I’ll soon be turning, round the corner now

For a group only fake-playing the instruments and lip-syncing, they sure did put a lot of effort. Their mother must’ve thought so, too. The frame shook from time to time until it eased into a gentle sway, the movement no longer an offshoot of laughter. Even through the loud blaring of “The Show Must Go On” in the background, they could hear her. Their Mama had a beautiful singing voice.

Outside the dawn is breaking

But inside the dark, I’m aching

to be free!

MY OLD MAN

George Deoso

The man is a former soldier who now, at sixty-five, works as someone's bodyguard. His job requires him to carry a gun. The woman would kid that he had around twenty children. He was hugely built, and he had a voice suited for the battleground; a request for a glass of water could sound like a command to stand ten-hut. Before us he had other families.

One of my half sisters, Evelyn, told us the story of her dog.

"I had a dog once," she said, "back in grade school."

One day she went home from school to find him drinking with other men, sharing some *pulután* he cooked himself.

She had cried, of course.

I've often wondered how a dog would taste with beer.



An FB friend posted a review of a book of poems about fathers. What he noticed was that the poets mostly wrote about their dead old men, and how easier it was, relatively, to write about their death instead of something else. Mourning. Not happy memories—walking in the park, going out for movies—but lines to hint at buried anger and regret.

"Mine is still alive." Should I be suspicious that I have this much to say?



Here's a contradiction: he is a man of many words, but this isn't the part of him that I fear the most. It would be fair to say that I was hurt more by the woman. She would say she hurt me because I did something wrong, and because she loves me. Here's what love is: a slipper, a clothes hanger, the hard end of a broomstick. Bruises from a pinch, face red from relentless slaps. A wooden stool thrown at me. Of course, loving words: "Putangina mo!" "Gago ka!" "Pag namatay ka, siyempre iiyak ako, nanay ako, pero hanggang doon na lang iyon!" "Bakit ang malas-malas namin pagdating sa anak?" "Wala kang kuwenta!"

I ran away from home twice, but was never wise enough not to be found.

I even once dreamed she had me in her grip. On her other hand was a saw, and she was decapitating me while I pleaded, "No, please!"

Reason should tell me that I have to fear that woman more than the man. But there's something about him, something to fear beyond what she ever did.

He had physically hurt me only once. I had a brawl with another kid so he told me to kneel in front of the bed as he coiled his belt around his hand.

I can't even recall the pain I felt when the belt licked my back.

If you grew up with the man, it's easy to get used to profanities. Every phone call or casual conversation was, and still is, punctuated by his most used expression, "putangina," or its distant cousin, "ukininam."

But you will never get used to him when he's enraged. His voice causes a tiled floor to vibrate and to reverberate in a small house. I always felt weak against this. Imagine a man whose voice was by default loud enough to make you suspect he is angry. Now imagine that man being angry.

So, it wasn't his words. Not exactly. Something else and something worse.



He had made a point of taking me to the barbershop to get a haircut every week or two, from when I was a kid until high school. We would sit on the stools and have our heads shaved, what he called a "clean cut." We would emerge from the barbershop on the Sunday morning road looking like walking eggs.

I got sick of it, of course. My classmates had a choice to grow their hair as long as they want, as long as our Catholic school allow it. They could use wax and look cool with spikes. I wasn't a skinhead, but I had no use for styling products, not even a comb.

By the latter part of high school, he allowed me to have my haircut alone and less frequently.

I took my chance. On the month leading to the JS Prom I grew my hair longer than I ever did before, and when it was time to get a haircut, I got a Mohawk.

I remember the woman looking at me surprised when I got home, not angry but, in fact, a bit worried. "Your dad will be furious," she said.

True enough. After parking the car in front of the house, right after stepping out of it and entering our gate where the woman and I were standing, he threw this sharp look at my head.

"Ano 'yan?" he had said. His fists curled, and I thought he would at once knock the wind out of my body. Instead he said, "Pumasok ka."

Once inside the house, his voice boomed and made the floor vibrate and the walls shake. Expletives. And then a threat that I'll be thrown out of the house because of my rebellion. The woman did her best to calm him

down. Luckily, he did. I wasn't booted out. And he has yet to give me a reason bad enough to make me leave.



The first time I ran away I went to a neighbor's house and sat in her living room. I must have been twelve. She was a friend of the woman, and I was a friend of this neighbor's son, but he was sleeping, so I didn't have a compelling reason for the midnight visit. So I sat there silently, not replying to this lady friend's queries about what I was doing in their house. Later, I heard the woman knocking at the gate. When the lady friend went out, I sprang to the room where my friend slept. I didn't wake him up, but I made myself small in a corner at the far side of the room where his bed could hide me. I hid in the corner, watching the light from the door beneath the bed, thinking about why I was there and whether or not my sleeping friend ever got too tired of being hurt. I couldn't remember the things I did to merit the things the woman did, but I remember the broom and the woman's curses.

I was found, of course. I was also found the second time I tried it.

On my second attempt, I went as far as five blocks. I hid myself at the back of a jeepney, where I must have stayed for an hour. Later, a kid went inside the jeepney to play, hanging from the bars tacked to the ceiling. I deduced that he must have been the son of the jeepney's owner.

"Your mother's looking for you," he said, swaying as he hung on to the bar. I was crouched by the entrance. "There was a *tanod* roaming around with her a while ago."

I didn't say anything.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"I have no name."

"Your name is George, right?"

“I have no name,” I repeated.



Make no mistake: I am far from becoming the child called “It.” My needs were provided for, and whatever hurt I had, in the eyes of others, should be outweighed by the times when family becomes what it is supposed to be, when the woman and man become the mother and father.

Wounds heal, after all.

But scars are worth looking at too.



An aunt—wife to my father’s brother— died, and we had to go to Ilocos for the funeral. The night before the interment there was the usual drinking and gambling. I sat with my cousins around a Monobloc table, with a deck for *tong-its* and *unggoy-ungguyan*. There was a karaoke. Conversations warming the night.

Suddenly, there was a loud bang.

All was silent.

My cousins and I looked around, searching, for there was no doubt about its source.

And there it was. In a corner of the huge lot, just a few paces from the casket where the dead auntie lay among bright funereal lights, there was a gathering of men, drinking Pilsens and Muchos. The noise came from a gun. It was shot on the dry earth of the lot. The other men, one of them the widower uncle, looked approvingly at my smiling father, the gun smoking in his hand.



I must have been in sixth grade. The house was being reconstructed—a second and a third floor were being added. I found myself alone in the house.

The workers and the woman, who oversaw the construction during the week when the man was working, went out to buy materials needed. The walls were yet to be finished: steel bars protruded everywhere. And there was this gap where you could look from the third floor down to the untiled first floor. To the left of our house was a four-story residence, and I was just in time to see a cat strolling on the edge of its roof. Perhaps fascinated by our house, it jumped on to ours. It was an orange and white cat, which walked with the usual feline slyness. I remember this trivia show where the host said that a cat could survive a thirty-foot fall. I also remember the time months ago when I stepped on a cat's tail when I was once told by the woman to buy her a stick of cigarette from a *sari-sari* store. I didn't know that a cat was in my way, and because of the fight or flight instinct it sank its teeth on my smallest toe before shooting to the other side of the road, where it hissed at me.

This orange and white cat strolling on our rooftop didn't look like it had fight for an agenda. In fact, it walked straight at me as if I had some business with it. It brushed itself on my leg, and I think it was expecting me to play with it and call it Mingming while making my voice small.

I did something else. I leaned down, grabbed its tail, and lifted it off the ground. It struggled, naturally. Perhaps because I had small thin hands and because it was putting up a fight, it felt heavy. I kept my grip on it.

Then I leaned over the gap where I could see the first floor. I threatened to drop the Mingming through this gap.

Then I let it go.

It fell, and I didn't see it right itself in mid-air. What I saw, and heard, was how its fall was broken by a vertical steel bar plugged on the concrete second floor. The cat's body hit this bar. There was a sharp "Weew" sound.

The fall continued and the cat crashed on the first floor, which was too far for my eyes to confirm if the animal had indeed landed on its feet.

What I could recall until now was the sound when it hit the bar, then the floor.

There wasn't a drop of blood when I went down.

It had run out through the open gate and I cannot remember seeing it again.



Before the reconstruction, the house had been the other half of a one-story duplex. There was one of every room expected from a basic house: one bedroom for all of us, a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom, et cetera. Sometimes when it rained there would be a leak and we would haul out the mattresses, push the center table to one side, and sleep in the living room. The living room was the all-purpose room back then: it was where we would eat and sleep; where the man would drink, or invite other men for karaoke, or where he would brag of his collection of firearms; where my mom would receive guests and where she would beat me whenever necessary. Another thing happened in it:

The man and woman back then had enough money to lend some to the neighbors. She would go out of the house sometimes to collect payment, with a little interest. We didn't need whatever extra the interest could bring; the man earned enough for the school fees and daily necessities. But still it was something to fall back on, she had once said.

It was raining that night and we had to sleep again in the living room. It must have been about eight o'clock. We were all there, the man and woman sleeping beside each other, and I on the sofa. The lamp was switched on, the room dim except on where the orange light could cast its glow.

The woman suddenly woke up because her phone vibrated. She read the message, scratched her head, then stood up and got dressed. I pretended to be asleep.

She went out of the house.

Later, perhaps after thirty minutes, the man woke up. He had switched on the bright light, which gave me an excuse not to pretend to be sleeping.

“Saan Mommy mo?” he asked, his voice grim. He was looking at her phone which she had left on the table.

I told him I didn’t know.

He didn’t say anything further. He switched on the TV, opened the fridge, and retrieved a bottle of beer. Then he dragged the center table in front of another sofa, where he sat and drank without saying anything. He watched the evening news. I knew he wanted to call her, but that wouldn’t work if her phone was here.

The woman told me once before how ironic it was that the man should be jealous. He had after all sired so many children, that he would give different answers when asked how many were there. There was also that time when she found lipstick on his shirt; another time there was blood in his underwear.

“Sometimes,” she had told me, “I felt like your Dad’s accusing me of the things he does himself.”

There was a time once when he called to say he would join his Boss on a three-day vacation out of town, but then a few hours later he was pulling up in front of the house. “It feels like he was testing me,” she told me.

I could see, that night, that the woman wasn’t acing the test. The man had this shadowed look in his eyes. He drank more noisily. He laid the glass on the table with a bang that was louder than the last time.

“Nasaan na kaya ang Mommy mo?”

“Gago siya ah.”

“Di man lang nagpapaalam.”

“Sino kayang kikitain niya?”

I didn't respond. I had no idea, or perhaps I had, but I was so scared that I just chose to lie there on the sofa, pretending then to have fallen asleep.

At around ten o'clock, we both heard the gate being opened, and then the front door being unlocked.

The man stood up from the sofa. The woman opened the door, shaking the rain off the umbrella. She said, “Dad...”

She wasn't able to continue.

The man had walked to her. After forming a solid fist out of his huge hand, he punched her in the stomach. The umbrella fell from her hands.

Then he took her by the neck and dragged her to the mattress, which was then beside the center table he had moved. The woman was too stunned she couldn't protest.

He pushed her to the mattress, the back of her head almost banging on the edge of the solid *narra* table. She was thrown on the mattress. He went on top of her and I watched, just watched, as he squeezed her neck again.

He squeezed hard. I could see her hands, her tired, veined hands, trying to stop the man, to no avail. Strands of her hair were splayed on a pillow, some on her face. Her hands on his thick hands, trying to stop him from choking her. I saw that. I didn't know what to do. I wasn't even a teenager; I was still in grade school. I was still struggling to get passing scores in my division window cards, I still haven't found reasons to doubt our CLE lessons, and I cry easily at the slightest provocation. What was happening didn't make sense. Not while it was happening, no. I just lay there on the sofa watching them. There were choking sounds coming from her mouth, her face

becoming redder and redder, and her eyes bulging and shining as tears welled up either from the actual hurt or pure shock.

The man: "Saan ka galing, ha?"

The woman: "Aaaack... aaccckk.."

"Sino 'yang kinita mo?"

"Aaaaa... daaa...aaaack."

It seemed like a lifetime. He was about to become a murderer.

He let her go eventually.

The woman took a deep, deep breath. And then coughed, clawing at her throat. She was crying then, openly, the man and I could see that. And I was certain what I felt then: fear and hatred so deep, that looking back now it made me wonder how the child that I was could harbor such anger. I had wanted to cry, too, cry with the woman who was standing up and not saying anything to the man. But I was too scared and too occupied with thoughts of hurting the man that I could only lie there, watching the man look at her still with rage, and the woman, red-faced, coughing, hair disheveled. She walked to the bedroom with its leaking ceiling, and later emerged with a bag. She walked out and into the rain without saying anything.

The man went to the gate to see that it was properly closed long after the woman had left. When he got back to his sofa, he said, without looking at me, "Gago 'yang Mommy mo."

That was years before the reconstruction of the house. When the second and third floors were finished, the woman told me that the night she went out into the rain she went to her sister in Muntinlupa, who tried to convince her to leave the man. She didn't take the advice.

"Imagine if I had left, or if I left with you," she told me while having supper. The man was at work. She looked at our newly constructed house,

waving at the new rooms, bathrooms, and rooftop. “We wouldn’t have this. We would be renting in a squatter’s area.”

I just nodded because, like her, I believed I had no choice.



When I was in college, I did for my thesis a semiotic study of the photographs of the victims of the drug war. I looked into how they were framed, and how we understood these pictures with respect to their position in the broadsheet front pages, even how they were captioned. I once asked the man if he could look into the stash of his Boss’s old newspapers for certain editions. He would come home on certain nights handing me a paper or two.

One night he noticed the pattern, and so he asked what I’ll be using them for.

“It’s for my thesis,” I said.

He didn’t say anything for a while. Then he said, “Huwag kang magsulat laban kay D—ha? Loyalista ako.”

I said, “Okay.”

When I had my own job, he discovered how to use Facebook through his phone. At night he would lie on the mattress in our living room with the woman, watching videos of press conferences. Despite having a room of their own, they still preferred to sleep in the living room. He would fall asleep sometimes with the video playing, the voice of his swearing politico droning in the room, from the phone on his chest.



My name belonged to the man, who had been in the marines, in a troop that, according to him, fought wars in the South. His real name is Gregorio. He said he fought beside Yanks who couldn’t pronounce the

syllables he was baptized with, and who came up instead with “George” to address him.

The woman was supposed to give me two names, but his nickname was the one which ended up on my birth certificate.



One night the man’s car had to be left in a repair shop and he had to commute home from work. On the street leading to ours there was just one lamplight on, no cars around, no other person in sight. That was around midnight. He he had to come home late because he had to wait for the Boss’s day to end. Thus, he was walking alone on a dark street, a mere couple of minutes from our house.

The man was superstitious, so he was quite happy to see a woman approaching from the direction he was heading to. Ate Linda, he thought. Ate Linda was an old woman who lived in our street selling insurance to neighbors as a sideline, while minding her own garden, which was the best garden in the neighborhood for she had a wide lot and a gardener to look after it.

The man thought of starting a conversation with Ate Linda, perhaps greeting her a good evening, and telling her how spooky the road became at night.

As they approached each other, he began thinking of what to say to her when he noticed that the old woman’s face was hidden by her hair. And there was something bizarre about the way she walked.

They passed by each other without saying anything.

A few seconds later, the man realized what was wrong. He looked back at the woman, who was still moving away from him, her back to him.

It wasn’t Ate Linda.

It was another person, dressed in white, floating—no, gliding—on the concrete road.

The man ran to the house to tell the story to his wife, who told me this story.



A friend and I once joined this loose group in the university, a jogging club. An unrecognized org with a spontaneous socmed genesis. Its members come from different colleges, and they usually meet on Fridays at around six to jog around the open field, each at his or her own pace. My friend and I attended a few meetings, and I was pretty sure that not long after we stopped attending the group was dissolved. Despite this, my friend and I became friends with the people in this group.

In one of the evenings after jogging with the org, my phone rang. My friend and I were on our way to the pavilion where we would change into clean clothes. The sun had already set, so the campus was lit by then with orange lamps. I was tired, and I was expecting to sleep in the bus on the way home. When I checked my phone, I was surprised to see that it was the woman calling. She hadn't ever called me before while I was in school, unless I had failed beforehand to give her a reason for being late. But I had told her about the jogging club, and I thought she should have been getting used by now to the Friday evenings when I went home late. So, why the phone call?

“Hello?”

“Kuya, nasa school ka pa?”

I told her I was, but also about to go home.

“Anak, huwag ka muna umuwi ha? Diretso ka muna dito sa Heart Center. Inatake daddy mo.”

I didn't know what to say. So I said, “Okay po.”

“Huwag ka mag-alala anak, ayos naman Daddy mo. Kailangan lang niya munang ma-confine. Daan ka muna dito, ha? Ingat ka.”

I said okay before pocketing my phone.

My friend didn't ask me what the call was about, but I still informed her as we walked to the pavilion.

“Oh no,” she said. There was genuine worry in her eyes, as if she knew the man, as if there was any real reason to worry. “I hope he's alright.”

“I hope so too,” I said.

I was given directions as I hadn't been to the Heart Center before. What struck me, upon first entering its premises, was this monument suggesting the veins and aorta of the human heart in the middle of its driveway. I had a good look at the thing before going inside the hospital.

The man was sharing a room with another patient, a curtain separating them. In the man's part of the room was the woman and Evelyn, my half-sister, having a conversation with the man, who was awake, lying on the hospital bed with his head slightly elevated. They all said hi to me, which I returned as was expected. I went to the man and touched the back of his hand to my forehead, and did the same thing to the woman. As was expected. Evelyn and I exchanged tepid smiles.

Evelyn had a child of her own by then. Her mother was what one would call the original, legal wife. The man had not been satisfied with one and so he had others, a chain of other women, until he found his way to the life of the woman from whose womb I had popped out. His relations to the children before me were, at best, a curious one. Some harbored ill thoughts to the point of employing legal tactics to milk him off his money. The others cared, like Ate Evelyn, who decided to leave her own child in Malabon in the care of another relative to attend to the man after the woman had phoned her to tell her the news. The same way she had called me earlier.

“Inatake ako anak, eh,” the man said. There was something soft in his voice which sounded alien to me. Was he getting weak? I noticed, then, under the wan hospital light, the bags under his eyes, and he short white hairs on his scalp. Did the thing that had happened to him made him less than what he was?

I didn’t know what to say. I just nodded and smiled awkwardly, opting to sit on a corner without saying anything, as the three resumed talking about the past as if the present wasn’t much worth talking about.

From what I gathered much later, the man was in his Boss’s house when it happened. It was fortunate that the Boss hadn’t been busy, thus the bodyguards and drivers were all in the house. He was just sitting on a chair when he said he felt some weird sensation in his chest; a little later the guards and the drivers saw him faint. They took him to the hospital, the bills to be taken care of by the Boss.

While they talked I noticed the man looking at the others in the room, including myself. As if trying to memorize our faces. From time to time he would repeat his line, “Inatake ako anak, eh.”

I had heard it the first time. Why would he say that again and again?

Later, I took the woman aside and told her that I had assignments to do.

“Can’t you say anything to your Dad? Perhaps give him a hug?” she said after I told her.

“I don’t see any need for that,” I said.

She sighed. Then she told the man that I had to go home. After being given some reminders about what to do in the house, what to switch off and what not to forget closing, I went out the hospital doors.

I walked again on that driveway with its heart veins on a pedestal. A few months earlier, our Biology prof had taken the class to the school’s

science museum, where he showed us a preserved corpse on a table. The body was cut open from throat to crotch. The prof lifted with a hemostat a piece out of the smorgasbord of dried organs. “This is the heart,” he said. The thing was shriveled, like a raisin the size of a fist, and suddenly the smell of formalin became so sharp I thought I might faint.

I had joined the jogging club due to the fear that my heart would turn out to be such an ugly sight one day. When I ran, I could feel my heart. An assertion: I am alive. Somewhere in my chest was an organ pumping blood to where it should be.

The thing at the pedestal in the hospital driveway was still, of course. As expected. It was huge, but it served little purpose.

I waited for a cab by the avenue in front of the hospital. As the taxi took me to the house, I marveled at how a person could feel his own heartbeat, if he took the time to listen. And how one could sometimes will the self not to feel.



Here’s something that kept me up that night after my visit to the Heart Center. The left side of the building was designed like a cross. It was imposing, this cross, like a monolith to welcome those who had the gall to enter.

I recently chanced upon an article about the building’s history, and I learned that it was part of the slew of infrastructures built in the 70s and 80s.

There was a phrase used by scholars to critique the rationale of the hospital, along with the other buildings built during that time: “Edifice Complex.”

The Heart Center was designed by a man named Jorge. The style is aptly called “Brutalism.”



I began writing horror stories in high school, after watching a host of gore porn films. I was both repulsed by and fascinated with the shock, the way men and women were split in halves on the screen, the way they bled, the shape of guts. *Saw, Final Destination, Wrong Turn.*

Back then, whenever I wrote, the words “knife” and “blood” and “kill” would find their way to whatever world I was creating. I would print these stories and staple them. At school, I would ask some friends for feedback, and they would tell me they were gruesome.

That was almost a decade ago. I realized long ago how cheap the trick was.

In *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noel Carroll enumerates the characteristics of stories that belong to the genre: (1) there must be a monster, and (2) the character/s should react to this monster with horror and revulsion. It is called “horror,” because the way the characters feel runs parallel to what the readers should feel. There are other aspects but these two are the most pertinent.

When I write now, I steer clear of fantastic beings. I tone down the blood and guts.

The everyday becomes repulsive. My monsters are neither winged nor fanged. But, to myself, they are none the less horrifying.



My first book was a collection of dark horror stories. When it was released the man and woman bragged about it to their friends. They were happy. I think they still are, because they have yet to read it.



Weeks after the man's heart attack, after he was released from the hospital and allowed to go back to work, the woman told me something the man told her the night I went to the hospital.

"Your Dad thinks you don't care," she said. "It's like you weren't sad, like you didn't feel anything after learning that he almost died."

I told her not to be dramatic. "Of course, I care," I said. "What kind of son doesn't care?"

Yes. What kind of son, indeed?



There's this book titled *Waking the Dead and Other Horror Stories* written by Yvette Tan. There are monsters in it, but the "And Other Horror Stories" turned out to be a lie.

I am thinking of the piece called "Daddy." The whole thing had the air of nonfiction, and I have assumed that it was either the author's actual experiences, or some flight of fancy caused by grief. The protagonist, who also happened to be named Yvette Tan, received a phone call from her dead father. The first time it happened she recognized him at once, but the call was just long enough for her to hear him say her name. The second time was pretty much the same, although this gave her time to think of the things she would ask him should he call a third time. The third time, a conversation happened. She said they—the entire family—miss him. He said he missed them too, but really, the reason why he called was just to tell her not to "forget." They exchanged *I love yous* in the end before the narrative was neatly tied up with an epiphany.

A scholar once said that a horror story must have a monster and that monster must be horrifying and repulsive. The voice of the father in "Daddy"

would be the closest to what a monster would have. But “Daddy” wasn’t a monster. “Daddy” was a ghost, but he wasn’t a threat, he wasn’t repulsive.

I was disappointed. The author’s “Daddy” was not a monster.



Here’s another contradiction. The woman had for many times now talked to me, confessing how she wanted to leave the man, for she couldn’t bear the way he yelled at her, the way he commanded her to do things, like she was hired help in our own house; the way, for many years, she had to tell him what she was doing, even if she hadn’t gone anywhere. She was tired. But she doesn’t want to leave.

I wanted to ask her, “Why?”

I didn’t, because I was afraid she would say something along the line of “I love him.”

I wouldn’t understand.



The man once asked if I have any film saved as a file, something he could watch with his beer and *pulutan*. He had bought a new flat screen TV. This one had a port at the back where a flash drive could be plugged, from where files could be read and be viewed through the screen.

I have been used to the weekends when he would tell me to feed the DVD player with what he called “bala,” or simply put, a disc. There wasn’t much range in his taste for movies: action and war films. These films, though set in battlegrounds and profuse with bullets, weren’t remarkably violent or extremely well-received. *Rules of Engagement*, *Missing in Action*, *Hard To Kill*, some forgettable James Bond iterations. Escapist enough to thrill but not to upset. Weekend afternoons he would be in the living room, the stereos booming with simulated tank blasts and gunfire.

When he asked for my contribution to these afternoons, I didn't think twice. I transferred to my flash drive a copy of Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, which I had just watched the week before. It was a war film, I had thought, he would certainly like this one.

The first few minutes, it was okay. He was having a good time with his peanuts and Pale Pilsen. I had a room of my own upstairs by then, but I would come down from time to time to see what part of the film he was watching. He was transfixed. The entire fifty-five-inches screen was filled with a pale bluish-gray color as the boats with Tom Hanks as Capt. John Miller and other soldiers bobbed towards Omaha.

And then came the beach landing. D-day, heavy artillery. What should one expect? The camera was shaky, the Germans relentless in their salvos, American soldiers jumping off the boat without even reaching the shore. Bullets under water, men drowned by the weight of the equipment strapped to their body. Some of those fortunate enough to reach the beach were blown to pieces. At one point, Capt. John Miller watched as a soldier stood in the middle of recently dead men, looking for the arm he had lost, finding it alas, picking it up with his good hand, and walking elsewhere to take cover. In another scene, a soldier lay on the sand, crying for his "Mama!" as his guts spilled out of his body, literally. Then there were these few seconds when the captain came across a man severely injured from a gunshot. The captain searched for a medic and, failing to find one, decided to drag the man to safety himself. While doing this, some sort of rocket blasted nearby, knocking him off his feet. When he regained his balance, he continued dragging the man, only to realize, later, that the latter was cut in half by the explosion. The man unmoving, entrails on the sand. A look of shock came over the captain.

The man was looking for war films, so I gave him a war film.

Later, back in my room, the droning of the stereo suddenly stopped. It was quiet again. When I went down, the man told me, “Daming namamatay, Kuya.”

He had stopped the film halfway through. On the screen now was a local channel, showing an afternoon variety show with its gyrating dancers and hysterical hosts.



He had been in the marines before and, from what I had gathered, he was some sort of a medic. He knew how to fire a gun though. He had a wound above an ankle acquired in a battle. There was a scar, but however deep a non-fatal wound would be, it would always find a way to heal.

And it healed.



I was in Dumaguete for a writers’ workshop when a close friend, who was also a classmate, called from Manila to tell me the news. “P’re, we’re graduating with honors,” he said.

“Are you sure? How did you know?”

“We have seen the list here in the Dean’s Office. You’re graduating *magna cum laude!*”

I thanked him for telling me the news, congratulated him, and said that I was happy for both of us. I stood for a while at the balcony of the house I was occupying with other writing fellows. I took a deep breath of the fresh cold air of Camp Lookout. It was a nice morning.

Days later I had to submit a bio-note for an anthology where our poems would appear. My co-fellow read what I had typed and told me that I should include the fact that I had finished with honors.

“You worked hard for it,” he said.

I agreed, but I told him it was irrelevant. “I don’t think I need to announce it to everyone.”

Back in Manila, I reminded myself not to tell anyone else about my graduating with honors, not even my family. I made myself believe that, while it certainly was something, it was hardly impressive, at least for certain people. Perhaps the woman would appreciate it, but the man? I doubted it.

A week prior to graduation rites, the woman, as expected, told me that we had to go out to buy what I would wear for the big day. And since I had expected this, I decided that I would tell her that day about the news I had learned back in Dumaguete and kept to myself for weeks.

To my surprise though, the man said he would go with us, for he had to buy a new belt.

So the three of us went off to the nearby mall. After having chosen a pair of pants and long-sleeved, button-down shirt for me, the woman decided that we must eat before heading home. The original plan was to tell her the news during this time of the day, after doing the shopping. The goal was to spare myself the embarrassment, since the woman had the tendency to be emotional when caught by surprise, and I didn’t want any spotlight on me during graduation.

I didn’t expect that the man would be there too, so for a while I thought of further holding back. But then I told myself that today was much better than on the big day.

We were in the middle of the meal. I said, “Mom, Dad...”

Then I told them.

The woman was beaming. She said she wouldn’t be able to finish eating because of happiness. “Congratulations, Kuya!”

The man stopped eating as well and smiled. There was unease, though, in the way he looked around the fast-food joint and fidgeted on his seat. Then he said, "I have to go to the bathroom."

The woman and I had a pleasant conversation while he was away. She congratulated me again, told me how happy and proud she was.

When the man came back we all resumed eating. And then suddenly, after looking at the man for a while, the woman said, "Umiyak si Daddy, oh. Nag-CR ka para umiyak, 'no?'"

I looked at the man, and he could no deny it. I hadn't noticed it at first, but when the woman pointed it out, I realized that his eyes were red.

"Ayokong umiyak dito," he said, sniffing.



We adopted a dog. A year later, we adopted another.

The first one was a cross between a pitbull and a terrier. The other one, a shih tzu. They were cute and adorable as dogs were supposed to be, but also annoying, since we knew nothing about training dogs. We had no idea on what to do to stop them from soiling the doormats, which at times annoyed the man.

I was worried. I feared that one day I would go home, the dogs missing, the man and his friends drinking, sitting around a platter of warm fried meat.



There was no need to worry. The dogs have been with us for years now, and the man has never laid his hand on them in any way that would hurt or turn them into *pulutan*. I went downstairs one night and saw that the shih tzu was at his feet, sleeping, while the other lay beside him on the mattress, his hand on its belly as they snored, almost in unison.

When the pandemic broke out, the man was forced to live alone inside a room in the barracks furnished by his Boss. The barracks had other rooms for the other guards, drivers, and personnel, but there was a directive to limit their movements inside just to be safe.

He didn't go home for many weeks because of the lockdown. After a short day with the Boss, he would return to his room. One day, a kitten roaming the barracks decided to walk inside his room. At first, he just fed it, dropping morsels of rice and strips of meat on the floor. It would walk inside his room in the succeeding days, and the man would still feed it. Then one day it wasn't contented on just being fed. It began sleeping with the man on his barracks bed. He would have his short shifts with the Boss, when his services were necessary, and then at the end of the day he would stay in his room, perhaps watching TV, the cat curled up beside him.

That was the start of a friendship. Whenever he would call the woman he wouldn't just tell her about his day, but also how the cat was: how much of his own food he had fed her, or if she had decided not to stay in his room for the night.

When the lockdown eased up, he was able to go home to us, but at times I would hear him tell the woman, "Kuamain na kaya si Mingming?" or "Nasaan na kaya siya?"

One day, while the man was at work, the woman told me that he was planning to bring the cat to our house.

"Naisip kaya niya 'yung mga aso?" the woman said.

I asked her why was he planning to do that.

She told me that the cat was sick, and the man said it needed someone to take care of it. "Eh madalas na wala siya ngayon sa barracks nila, eh. Busy na Boss niya."

When he finally arrived from work after that conversation, he got out of the car holding a steel cage where the cat sat supine. It was a white cat with gray spots all over it.

The cat was taken out of the cage and was placed on a rag on top of a table at the third floor. Despite the freedom to move around, it just sat there on the rag for much of the day. When the man went home in the days that followed, the first thing he would do was to go up to the third floor, and call: “Mingmiiiiing...mingmiiiiing..”

We could hear his voice, which he had changed for a while to sound like a screeching kettle. The sound wasn't booming; it floated in the house, carried only by waves and not solid vibrations.

The cat wasn't well. One day, he came down to the living room, morose, telling us, “Parang'di na kakayanin ni Mingming.”

He had guessed that the cat was poisoned. The barracks was disinfected; she must have ingested something while he was away. For days, he would go upstairs, check on the animal, only to come down later quiet and worried, as if expecting it to die.

But the woman was eager to nurse it back to life; despite her fears that the cat being in the house would cause chaos with the two dogs, she had diligently fed it and stayed with it upstairs when she was done with her chores. It was no wonder that one day Mingming was strong enough, not only to stand on the table, but to leave it and even go downstairs. The dogs feared her, so there wasn't much problem about any furniture being broken due to a squabble. She would usually stay at the top of the second floor stairs, and when she would hear the man calling her, she would run downstairs where the man would pick her up and rain kisses on her.

The dogs were used to sleeping with the man and woman on the mattress in the living room. We all felt their unease though whenever the

cat was downstairs, so the man, whenever he was allowed by the Boss to go home, slept in one of the rooms on the second floor, where the cat would curl up beside him.



When he couldn't go home, the cat would sleep in front of the door of the room where she and the man would stay at night.

There was something about the way the cat looked at everyone, and I wasn't sure if the same could be said of all cats. When I looked at our dogs there was something in their eyes that told me they needed us, their humans. But then this cat was something else. It was barely a year old, but it had the stare of an old matriarch with reasons to disdain everything. Whenever I passed it by (it couldn't be helped: she stayed at the room in front of mine), it would purr, its neck strained, as if expecting me to approach and she had to prepare her claws for an attack.

I was way past the age when this would have scared me. Yes, I was bothered, but more than that, I would remember the afternoon when another cat sank its teeth on my toe. The shock was still fresh, some phantom pain somewhere. Then I would remember the afternoon when I dropped a cat from the third floor to the first floor. In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat," a man gouged the eyes of his own pet out of perverseness. He said, "It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its nature—to do wrong for the wrong's sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the offending brute."

I looked at my father's cat. It just sat there looking at me with its fierce eyes, silent. I became sharply aware of my power over the animal. Then I told myself that whatever I was intending to do wasn't born out of

perverseness. I had my reasons: to avenge the child that I was for the hurt was only one of them. The more urgent one was this: I wonder how the man would take it when his Mingming was turned into something else.

I don't drink much, but I could eat *pulután* too.

I approached it—I could see it breathing, its white and gray paws.

"This wouldn't hurt, Mingming," I said as I leaned towards it.



The monsters in my first book were not people like the man, or people the man adored. I only realized this upon having read the stories again much later. Most of my protagonists were young men at the cusp of adulthood, tortured by the times, by his friends, by the people like the man.

The man was proud when he first held my book. He bragged about it to his friends, and asked me to furnish a copy for his Boss. I signed the copies. No one until now had told me what they thought about the book, except for the publisher and the people I had asked blurbs from.

I must be quite lucky, for the man and woman had not much interest in reading either. Though they were proud. The woman even once said, "Ang anak natin, writer na. Sino'ng mag-aakala?"

I think I'm lucky, the three of us were. They wouldn't know that the monsters in my book were corpses bolted in a crate inside people like myself.



"This wouldn't hurt, Mingming," I said, as I leaned towards the cat.

Then I knelt.

The cat let my hands scratch its head, then its belly. And before long the hostility disappeared from her eyes. It purred, its voice soft.

Then I said, making my own voice small, the way the man did,
“Mingmiiiiing...Mingmiiiiing.”



The man is my father.

He is my old man, but I am not him.

BODY COUNT: 1

Rye Antonio

Adrian sank sullenly into his makeshift chair as he watched the city fall asleep. The late afternoon sun cast a warm tinge over the tall corporate buildings. His eyes traced the endless roads that stretched across and around the asphalt jungle like veins. Above the drowsy cityscape was the most beautiful and chaotic sunset he had ever seen. After rubbing his eyes, the view outside almost looked like a painting.

He heard a screeching noise, a painful, grating sound coming from somewhere unknown. But still, he was unable to turn away.

The vivid colors enveloped the entire metropolis and made everything look like it was burning. From the corner of his eye, he saw a vague shape—a grotesque silhouette flying above the buildings. He looked closer and saw a humped humanoid figure with only half a body, entrails dangling.

Clouds began to recede with surreal speed as the chaotic sunset began to make way for a dusky sky speckled with white stars. A celestial time lapse that Adrian perceived to be happening in real time. City lights blazed in staccato sequence across the towers of glass and metal, now mirroring the dots of light above. It did not look beautiful the way nightfall over silent cityscapes ought to be. Too much noise on top of a menacing red and bruised purple. Like a stab wound.

Instead of feeling fear, the young man grew accustomed to the sight. After all, these were simply a sign of the times. Disturbing, dying, apocalyptic.

The ringing evolved into the creature's distant screech, getting nearer and nearer. The screech turned into a scream.

Adrian blinked, hard. The haunting cityscape was gone, replaced by a barren room with peeling wallpaper. As his eyes adjusted to reality, he noticed small dust particles floating near his face, the streak of sunlight revealing their presence. Warmth traced soft skin untouched by hard labor, lighting up hazel eyes, a color pale enough to notice under the sun, but common enough to never really be noticed at all.

Gone was the nightmarish vision that had played out before him. He attempted to blink away the nightmare, rapidly shutting his eyelids like an old camera shuttering its lens. Everything around him had returned to relative normalcy, the only anomaly being his presence in a tiny bed-space located miles away from his family's sizeable estate in Alabang.

His visions had been getting longer and longer. The visceral scenes playing out in his mind had slowly crept into his waking consciousness, now even becoming audible. He could have sworn he really had heard a scream.

Another loud scream suddenly burst through outside his window.

Startled once more, he quickly looked around him, suddenly conscious of his heart beating softly.

His familiarity with his surroundings slowly returned, as he snapped out of his reverie and focused on the plain bed-space he has been renting. The screaming outside continued.

Before he could be bothered to even glance out of the window, he had to regain his bearings. He took deep breaths while staring at the brown wallpaper which had begun to peel off the walls.

In his head, he named the colors he could see in the room, a trick that allowed him to evade the images plaguing his thoughts, and focus. *Brown. Dark brown. White. Dirty white. Grayish yellow.* The girlish screams stopped, followed by a man's bemused laughter.

Adrian finally turned to his actual bedroom window, looking past its dusty windowsills and foggy glass. Outside this dirty window was not a haunting cityscape, but a patchy yard with dead grass, an empty commercial road, and his landlord trying to teach his daughter how to behead a chicken.

Adrian watched in idle fascination as the young woman, whom he now recognized as Alma, attempted to strike the screaming chicken again, the poor creature bleeding out from an incomplete slit on its throat. It was probably not the first unfortunate chicken on the receiving end of her hesitant slashing and, knowing how pushy her father was, it probably wouldn't be the last.

Manong Pabs, the proud owner of the up and down bed-space complex and Alma's father, scratched the back of his head. He gave Alma a pat on the back which, given how heavy handed- he was, might have felt more like an encouraging shove. The old man moved his hand like a small axe, swiftly chopping the air to show Alma the proper swing—quick and easy. Just as Alma repositioned the axe and squinted in anticipation of its landing, Adrian turned away from the window.

He was still reeling from his nightmare. Scattered in his room were a box of disposable facemasks, two small alcohol sprays, an old backpack, and his personal laptop. Not a lot of things, but in this tiny room he now called a home—or temporary residence—it's not like anything else could fit.

Adrian's legs found the low stool by the window instinctively, as he has done every day for the past week, and he lowered himself against the peeling brown walls.

These were strange times, even for a strange young man such as Adrian. Though like him, times were strange in a way that the strangeness of it all could still be pushed down. Down, down, down underneath new normal advertising and lifestyle adjustments. But as the current situation worsened, so did the strangeness within Adrian threaten to burst.

The world had plunged headfirst into a global pandemic because of a highly contagious respiratory virus, but it was a different disease that Adrian felt brewing inside of him.

It was not that he was particularly eccentric or hermit-like. He had a couple of good friends. He wore neutral-colored polo shirts and tan shorts. He was updated with everything happening online. He was even pretty good at basketball, even though he never made it to the varsity team. He used to sneak out to bars and malls with friends on school days, back when such merriment couldn't spread the disease or cause death. Just an average high-school student.

But underneath his ordinary affect was a boy with a fascination. A lot of people have fascinations, of that he was sure. Another fact he regarded with certainty though was that his particular fascination was not one he could easily make public. Adrian knew that his obsession with serial killers was, for lack of a better term, creepy. If not downright frightening.

There were times Adrian questioned his fascination. Sometimes, he would even ponder whether he himself had the inclination to act the same way as they do. To kill. To keep killing until caught. He used to shake his head and call himself a lunatic for even considering it. He was normal. Through and through and through. And yet, here he was miles away from home, waiting for the opportunity to snap.

His backpack, which used to contain textbooks and school supplies, now stored his small collection of weapons, a pair of gloves, a bit of cash, and a copy of *The Bundy Murders*.

Most normal people probably didn't wonder if they were serial killers, Adrian thought to himself. They probably read these crime stories with horror, like watching a train wreck and being unable to peel their eyes away. Adrian tried to look at it through a more optimistic lens by following

the analogy that perhaps he just had a heightened interest in looking at the tragic remains of a wreckage. But, when he really thought about it, someone who actively seeks out train wrecks just to morbidly delight in the aftermath would fall under the same category of “creepy, if not downright horrifying.”

But serial-killer-in-waiting or not, running away during a global pandemic was still a dangerous risk on his part. He knew. As he sat on the low stool he refused to dignify by calling a functioning chair, he consciously thought to himself that this was not the best of plans nor the best of times.

But if murderers could wing a full-on five-body-count murder spree in a single evening, then he would be fine as long as he wasn't too careless. His mindset just had to be in the right state.

As it was, the realization that it only took a contagious sickness to wreak havoc on the thin veneer of civilization was already inspiring a sort of transformation within Adrian. The ease with which the threads of the social construct could be undone started to make sense. Behind him, he felt a presence.

The sound of frantic footsteps tapping against marble filled the room. Never mind that Adrian's floor was made of fake-wood flooring, or that the man presumably making the noise did not exist in that room until that very moment.

Adrian didn't need to turn around to know there wasn't anyone there, not really.

“How can anything be solid if nothing is real?” the man drawled in a low American accent, uttering cryptic pronouncements that sounded like they should have made sense. David Berkowitz was not as straightforward as his contemporary murderers, but Adrian could barely control which one of these imaginary guests came out these days, so it would seem he was stuck with the infuriatingly ambiguous Son of Sam, as David was named by the press during the height of his killing sprees.

Deep in thought, Adrian stared outside the window to contemplate the situation. He felt the presence move to his side, broad shoulders pressed against his thin frame. Adrian could not bear to look at the apparition directly, shivering at the thought of seeing an empty smile and menacingly dark eyes that lingered. But there was a thrilling pulse at the tips of the boy's fingers at feeling the man's heavy and ominous presence.

Moving from Adrian's side, the Son of Sam's reflection began to appear in the foggy window glass, a hazy ghost of a pasty white man, who once got away with killing people in increasing succession, frequency, and cruelty until he was caught. His lazy, deep-seated eyes were set under thin, almost connecting eyebrows, which made his expression appear permanently half-asleep, and his face completely devoid of any sort of emotion. The hooked nose, droopy smirk, and receding hairline under a messy curl of dark hair did not help to make him look any more trustworthy. This sleazy face now seemed to examine Adrian's boyish features.

Adrian's hands began to sweat. His heart was thumping. Would it not take long before his first murder?

For a moment, the haze that was David Berkowitz's visage turned sharp. Adrian looked at the murderer's face eye to eye. They were only a few inches apart. Dark eyes began to move towards the light. All those nights of casually scrolling past this man's photos culminating into this terrifyingly lucid moment.

The killer smile vanished, and the killer opened his mouth to say something or scream. Adrian flinched in anticipation.

Adrian's deep reverie was broken by a persistent knocking on the door. He shakily turned around and made his way to the door. All it took was two steps, given the size of his tiny bed-space. Each step confirming that there was no one else inside the room but him.

He opened the door slightly. Through the small crack, he saw the landlord's daughter, whom he had witnessed attempting and failing to chop a chicken's head off earlier.

"Good morning, Adrian!" Alma greeted him enthusiastically. It appeared that she had changed clothes, at least. Instead of the stained yellow top, she now sported a loose pink shirt and brown shorts. Alma's preppy silhouette radiated energy. She had a shapely body despite her short stature, and her hair was often styled into a tight ponytail. Even behind the facemask Adrian could make out her smile, probably because it was a grin that always showed in her big, bright eyes.

"G-good morning." Adrian croaked, his voice still raspy from sleep.

Alma met his eyes often. The boy felt it impossible to have a casual conversation with her without his feeling that she was trying to connect. And she would stare intently into his eyes.

Adrian broke eye contact, unable to pinpoint why Alma's gaze was uncomfortably intense.

"*May mainit na pan de sal sa lamesa, kuha ka lang ha!*" Alma said sweetly. She was always enthusiastic, as if everything she said was punctuated by an exclamation point.

"Thank you." Adrian managed to say before swiftly closing the door. Alma was still about to say something else, but Adrian had already closed off their only line of communication.

Alma sighed in defeat. This was not as simple as she thought. Thankfully, she saw the door by the end of the hall open. She called out to the figure that emerged from the bedroom.

Manong Pabs really needed to install thicker walls for anyone in this house to be given any sort of privacy, Adrian thought to himself, as he as he pressed his ears against the thin door of his room in an attempt to

eavesdrop on Alma's conversation. Adrian heard her speaking to someone, a man. Maybe her father, or her brother.

He could sort of make out Alma's exasperation, but with a loud, bubbly girl like her it was quite hard to tell. Despite the tone and volume of her voice, she could just as well be having a casual conversation about the fresh *pan de sal* she had prepared at the shared dining table downstairs.

Adrian felt his stomach grumbling at the thought of biting into the warm bread and gulping it down with cold milk. He was pretty sure that milk was unlikely to be found inside the shared refrigerator; he could make do with semi-fresh bread and tap water.

Wanting to avoid any interactions with the family or any other boarders (though he was kind of sure he was the only one renting at this point) he decided to use his laptop first, and sneak off with some left-over bread after an hour or two, when everyone else had left to do whatever it was they did. It did not occur to him that there might not be any *pan de sal* left if he waited too long.

He sat down on his low stool and opened his laptop, which he had left lying around on the floor. He stayed inside his room the whole day, so there wasn't really any risk of his things being stolen under his nose. Opening his laptop, he connected to the public Wi-Fi, which surprisingly reached the old bed-space complex.

Adrian decided to keep his VPN off. It's normally recommended to keep VPNs on when using public connections to maintain complete privacy, but he knew for sure that no one in this dump checked the Wi-Fi's stored data. Even at his old home where he kept his security VPN on to mask his Internet usage, no one really bothered to go through the data stored on their communal Wi-Fi.

He opened his main social media account to check up on his parents. It would seem they had begun to panic, bringing the search for him

to a public forum, instead of keeping it private between immediate family and local law enforcement. He scrolled down post upon post of his photos, reading the messages of support swelling the comment section from both well-wishers and rumor-mongers alike.

If the police couldn't even find him, they probably would not suspect him once he decided to snap. As far as they were concerned, he was another runaway teenager, lost in an apathetic sea of people in some heavily populated neighboring city or town. He could either be in Pasig or Pateros, and his parents wouldn't have a single clue.

The temptation to act on his insistent urges lingered in Adrian's head, like a fish caught on a hook, being tugged away towards a point of no return.

He closed his laptop, smiling slightly. He felt a bit of power and excitement course through him. It was time for breakfast.

Slowly, Adrian opened his door. Sensing no sign of anyone else, he slipped out into the narrow corridor where the rooms were lined up along the hall. His room was the second to the last at the end of the hall. The last room which had a shared wall with his bed-space was owned by Manuel, Alma's brother.

He turned left and made his way to the top of the narrow wooden staircase. Peeking from the top of the stairs, he saw that there were no other people by the dining room. Unfortunately, the floor on the upper level was too steep for him to see if there was still bread left on the other side of the table.

Adrian decided to take a chance and scurried down the staircase. Seeing the empty dining room table elicited a disappointed groan from the starving not-yet-killer.

“O Adrian, *andito ka pala!*” Manong Pabs greeted him casually. Aside from the extra bathroom, it was the only other room downstairs. Adrian was thankful he always left his room wearing a facemask. He could always reason basic safety, instead of his unwillingness to be friendly. “Hello *po, may binahanap lang po ako,*” Adrian lied through his teeth.

At least it was Manong Pabs whom he had encountered unexpectedly. The old man was loud but pleasant, like Alma. He really did not mind them that much. It was the son, Manuel, that really pissed him off. That arrogant prick was probably off in some comp shop shouting expletives with other DOTA boys.

Adrian had a severe dislike for Manuel. He was smug for a lower middle-class punk, who barely got by with his college education. At least that’s what Adrian thought of him. He never really spoke to the older boy, but he had a pretty good nose for shady people, and that Manuel smelled just like the jerks at his school. That, and the fact he kept calling Adrian, “Edran.” He suspected that this was done on purpose.

The one to go first in Adrian’s killing spree would probably be Manuel.

Adrian did not notice that the object of his disdain was silently tinkering with wires and CPU parts underneath the stairs, casually listening in on the ensuing conversation.

“*Akyat na po ako,*” Adrian mumbled, finally settling with, “*Maglalaro lang sa laptop.*” He kicked himself internally. If there was any doubt in their minds that he wasn’t really a college student entering the next semester, his childish answer might have given him away. But Manong Pabs seemed unsurprised with this response. He just waved the boy off and gave a friendly laugh.

Adrian took this as his cue to exit and headed straight for the staircase.

“Pareho kayo ni Manny, puro kompyuter!” Manong Pabs suddenly called out. The boy stopped in his tracks and managed an awkward nod to acknowledge the old man, before going up the rickety wooden staircase. Manong Pabs sighed to himself, *“Ayun naadik na sa CompSci hanggang college.”*

Manny finally broke his silence and chuckled, mischievously smiling as he continued to work in his PC-building space tucked under the stairs. The old man stuck his tongue out at his son, who mirrored his gesture right back.

Right before Adrian could slip into his room, Alma spotted him along the narrow corridor and smiled, visibly this time, as her facemask was resting on her chin. She appeared to be carrying a crisp box, presumably something new she had bought online. *“Adrian, baka gusto mo pala sumabay sa’min ni Papa mananghalian. Magsisigang ako ng salmon! Paborito niya ‘yun e.”*

He knew they were probably just being nice to him, due to the fact that not a lot of people were renting bed-space at the moment. But pride aside, hunger tugged persistently at his stomach. And he missed the taste of a home-cooked meal. Potential murderers have needs too, it would seem.

“Ah, sige,” Adrian muttered, *“Okay lang.”*

She paused and studied his expression for a bit. Adrian thought she wanted to say something else. Eventually she just said, *“Nice. Tawagin kita kapag ready-to-eat na tayo!”*

He nodded, hoping his mask gave an impression of a polite smile despite him not making an effort to do so. He closed the door as Alma walked off to the direction of Manny’s room.

Adrian knew quite a bit about his new landlords. They weren’t exactly shy about displaying, and occasionally, even talking openly about their family dynamic. Manong Pabs was a widower who laughed too hard at

his own jokes, and spent too much on overpriced chicken feed. He bought this up and down house with his wife, who had passed away for some reason Adrian never bothered to find out. Alma, the youngest, was the heiress to this grand patch of unfertilized soil, plus the squeaky floorboards on top of it, and Manny, the eldest child, was off scraping money doing god-knows-what. Adrian sensed a bit of rivalry between the two siblings, with Alma always complaining that she could earn just as much as her brother, if it weren't for this global pandemic.

She claimed that the sudden change in the business climate had turned all of her little renovation projects into abandoned efforts, appreciated by no one but herself. She said this quite loudly, as though expecting Adrian to take notice of her DIY woodwork.

Back then, he stuttered that the newly-installed screen on the small window by the shower area looked like a good idea. She nodded her head gravely, not wanting to admit that Manny had placed it there one afternoon, while she painstakingly put double locks on all the boarding room doors.

He heard muffled talking and several doors shutting outside. He supposed that it was probably the two siblings, as they were the only ones occupying the floor with him. Adrian swiftly made his way downstairs and went through the shared kitchen. After making sure that Manong Pabs wasn't going to suddenly poke his head out from his room, or from some other entrance, he pocketed one of the worn knives from the kitchen cabinet.

His room had amassed quite a collection of potential weapons. A broken brick, a shard of glass, a wooden stick he had sharpened into a stake, and now, this knife. This did not include his handy pocketknife, which he kept at his front pocket at all times.

The fragments of his hesitant planning began to come together piece by piece. It was brewing. Soon, it would explode. He knew it, he felt it.

Would a normal person think such disturbing thoughts? It was frustrating because the documentaries he consumed could only know so much about what these murderers were thinking. Did Son of Sam's heart skip a couple of beats at the idea that he was about to go destroy his place in modern civilization by committing a crime that would alienate him forever?

Suddenly, the safety of everyone in his vicinity was hanging on a thread—one that could easily snap once he decides to test his curiosity. For a plan, Adrian wondered, what kind of a guest murderer would be able to give the best advice?

The young man squinted, trying to focus on the details of Alexander Pichushkin's life, the highly strategic Chessboard Killer, in hopes it would conjure the veteran murderer thousands of miles away from where he was imprisoned in a maximum-security prison in Russia. *Alexander Pichushkin. Born on April 9, 1974 in Moscow, Russia. Dubbed as the "Chessboard Killer," he strategically baited his victims with friendly conversations and a free cigarette.*

Adrian looked around furtively, half-expecting the Bitsa Park Maniac—another one of Alexander's monikers—to come bursting into the scene. Silence. He concentrated and tried again with eyes closed this time. *Estimated that at least 30 of his victims were within the vicinity of his home. Ten coming from his apartment complex. Frontal cortex of his brain damaged because of a childhood accident.*

Still silent. Again, Adrian thought.

Became withdrawn and hostile because of bullying. Recorded body count: 48.

Frustrated by the lack of an apparition, Adrian flicked his thumb over the kitchen knife, bitterly thinking to himself that the tough crowd at school were only aggressive within their turf and around their group. They wanted to seem hardcore, but the worst that they could think to do was dunk

some poor nerd's head into the toilet or beat him up. Adrian smirked at the thought of these self-proclaimed bad boys actually facing a real dead body. They would probably screech like little girls. Alexander Pichushkin would have agreed with him.

After all, these popular cliques only hung around back gates and gas stations, so that they could easily take advantage of any poor soul they could see from afar. Cowards. An accurate representation of them in the animal kingdom would be a swarm of scavengers, picking at something alone, weak, and vulnerable. Pathetic.

Actual predators, like lions or snakes, stalk their prey. It was a hunt based on physical strength to reinforce the natural food chain, rather than a ritual attack of vulnerable classmates for continuous domination of the school hierarchy. Predators hunt to kill, not conduct a juvenile court, sentencing a punishment of small violence and cruel laughter.

Adrian could no longer stand his own train of thought. He wanted to vomit. Hands shoving him against metal. Heavy kicks to his legs forcing him on his knees. A crowd of faces looking at him in fascination, in pity. No one dared meet his eyes. The two light pools of melted honey, going unnoticed again and again until they overflowed into a sorry, sappy stream.

He was done being sad. It was time to convert it as his fuel for rage.

The young man stashed his newfound treasure in his backpack upstairs, intending to go back downstairs to loiter in the yard. It would serve him well to have an alibi of "being out in the yard all day," should any suspicions arise from the missing knife.

Before heading downstairs, Adrian looked outside from his foggy windowsill. Seeing the dead grass stained with indeterminate animal fluids thanks to Alma's clumsily culled chickens, and the empty roads that led to recently closed-down businesses, Adrian thought to himself that even if he didn't do anything, things would continue to die, anyway.

He made his way to the dirty kitchen and opened the noisy metal door to the yard. Upon seeing the barren patch, he realized that there wasn't anything for him to sit on or occupy his time with. Unless he wanted to take one of the clucking chickens in Manong Pabs' makeshift pen and practice chopping their heads off for a fresh meal, that is. He settled for folding his arms against his chest and staring off into the road.

He began to let his mind wander, thinking about the sorry state of the world around him. Everyone was too busy pretending to be nice. Looking away. The complete lack of that basic human impulse was what Adrian found interesting in serial killers. They were self-aware. The clarity and acceptance of the evil they do and why they do it puts everyone's gray area for moral ambiguity to shame.

People were expected to do the right thing until they couldn't. And now everyone must suffer, because people were too busy pretending, and there were suckers out there who actually believed them. Like friends that run away and leave you in the mud, Adrian fumed.

Underneath the shiny promise of propriety and virtue, was the primal want to take. No amount of prestige or upper-class upbringing could hide all that natural human dirt.

Adrian felt his hand twitch at the thought.

Suddenly materializing behind him, Alma asked in jest, "*Bakit ka nakatulala?*"

Though he was expecting a different kind of interruption, Adrian managed to look reasonably unsurprised. He shrugged. "*Wala lang. Nag-iisip.*"

"*Ang talino mo naman,*" she quipped, "*laging nag-iisip.*"

Adrian cleared his throat as Alma turned away. Maybe he would spare her. Maybe.

After fifteen minutes of alibi-building, Adrian got bored and made his way back to his room. In any case, no one would probably notice the disappearance of a worn, rusty knife.

The young man pondered that while his father's tenants may occasionally seem enterprising, they had yet to actually do anything to harm him. Perhaps all of the angry babble his father was going on about, that the world outside was crueler than schoolboys who shove their classmates into dirty toilets, was just a bunch of toxic gas-lighting.

His father had said that if he kept getting bullied the problem had to lie with him, not everyone else. The thing was, Adrian thought angrily, he didn't "keep getting bullied." It was just when he entered high school. Before then, he was normal. Through and through and through! Adrian angrily kicked the low stool at the memory. He was normal, until he wasn't. Until some peacocking upperclassmen with fancier last names arbitrarily chose him as a target.

The pipe to the head, one unfortunate afternoon after P.E. class, dimmed the light in his eyes completely. Now all that was left was anger. Dark and empty, like the men he chose to imagine as heroes.

He began aggressively rummaging through his schoolbag in frustration. He pulled out the copy of *The Bundy Murders* in his hands and pressed his palms firmly against it. He was here because of a calling to do greater things with his life! Now more than ever, Adrian was sure of that.

Suddenly, the ground began to shake.

His low stool grated against the floor, his few things moving left and right along with it. This was the sign he had been waiting for—an earthquake.

Another layer of protection had placed him in the perfect situation. Screw being normal. He was now in the middle of his own origin story. The rest will be history.

Weapons, targets, modus operandi, and other random musings didn't matter anymore. The opportunity was finally here. It was time.

The first weapon he grabbed from his backpack was the rusty knife from the kitchen, which he now clutched painfully in a tight grip. Adrian ran outside his room in a rush, adrenaline coursing through his veins. He would slash the first living thing he saw. Maybe start with a rat or cat, if no unlucky human crossed his path.

In his panic caused by the pressure to find something to kill and the violently shaking floor, he ran in the wrong direction and ended up knocking down a box of computer parts in front of Manuel's room. A mess of wires now scattered helplessly, like a pile of coarse spaghetti noodles beside a toppled down Alienware CPU.

The knowledge that Manny was more dedicated to gaming than Adrian had earlier expected felt like ludicrous information to gain at this point.

He forced himself to stand and run down the staircase. As he frantically struggled towards the front door, he tried to focus and embody one last murderous spirit. *Pedro Rodriguez. Mexico in 1959... Railroad Killer? No, Angel Resendiz. Single mother... White. Brown. Stop noticing the colors! Total body count: 15. 15? Silver. Green.*

He burst through the metal doors to the yard, looking wildly from left to right, completely prepared to claim his first kill.

"Adrian, ilag!" Alma shouted. A half-beheaded chicken, blood sputtering from its exposed neck, crookedly ran towards Adrian, who was standing by the doorway. Shocked at Alma's screaming, the poultry blood fountain coming straight for him, he shrieked before sprinting away. The chicken continued to run, zeroing in on him, shifting its direction to where he was running. Adrian started to scream again at the grotesque sight of

the chicken's crooked head bouncing along. The earth continued to shake underneath their feet.

As the bloody chase carried on, the chicken continued to shoot a red, sticky mess across the patchy yard. Alma and Manny stood by the sidelines like idiots, watching the entire scene unfold, unsure of what to do. Manong Pabs fought the urge to scratch the back of his head, choosing instead to rub his temples and sigh over the shrieks of the scared boy and the death throes of the chicken.

After a few more seconds of chasing, death finally caught up with the poor creature, and Adrian's legs gave way in tandem with the chicken's. And they both dropped on the yard, Adrian crushing the chicken and putting it out of its misery as he fell to the ground.

The half-headless chicken twitched as its blood pooled underneath Adrian's unconscious body. At this point, the ground stopped shaking too. Suddenly, everything was still.

Manny accidentally let out a small chuckle. Alma punched his arm while he was mid-snicker.

"Hay naku, pauwiin na nga itong bata na 'to!" Manong Pabs exclaimed, scratching the back of his head. *"Ito kasing si Alma, gusto pa pakainin. Ano 'to, resort?"*

Alma rolled her eyes, *"Sana makakuha muna tayo ng bayad sa renta bago natin siya ipasundo sa magulang."*

"Grabe 'to o," Manny admonished his sister. *"Di naman natin kailangan."*

"Pasalamat nga siyang hindi siya ninakawan, o kung ano," Alma responded, getting annoyed at her brother, *"Renta lang naman e nakitulong naman talaga siya dito. Tama lang naman 'yun."*

Manny took a photo of Adrian passed out at their yard and sent the photo to Mrs. Hernandez, Resident of Ayala Alabang, Muntinlupa City, IP Address 61.9.33.0. and Adrian's mother. It was time to get rid of this smug little brat. Bye-bye Edran.

"Wag kang mag-alala, may reward naman," he said, trying to get Alma to calm down.

This boy was definitely lucky he did not fall into the wrong hands, get chased by the wrong thing, or pass out at the wrong yard. Alma got even more annoyed at her brother's condescending response and childishly insisted, "*Hindi 'yun ang point, kuya!*"

"*Eh, basta kayo na nga mag-asikaso n'yan!*" Manong Pabs interjected, obviously getting frustrated with the situation's complications.

The old man walked back inside to check if the earthquake caused any damage, shaking his head as he left the children outside to figure things out.

Manny, unable to stop himself, finally burst into laughter. Alma instinctively punched his arm again.

They noisily bickered over the headless chicken adding a fresh stain on their yard and the failed killer—runaway—Adrian, who was sleeping soundly for the first time since he had arrived.

THE DUPLICATE PRESIDENT

Raymund Reyes

“Your son is not bluffing this time, Madam Emilia,” General Torres, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, told the elderly woman seated on the wheelchair. “He has been personally overseeing the technical preparations. He is finally going to do it. Perhaps he feels that it would redeem for him some of the respect he lost from the international community after he didn’t push through with his threats against China last year.”

“Yet we will not win any war that China would surely declare if the President launches the missile at Fiery Cross Reef,” warned General Roco, the Defense Secretary.

“Why don’t *you* tell that to the President?” Madam Emilia kept her calm and even tone.

“He would not listen anymore,” General Torres answered. “He has become obsessed with proving his might against the Chinese, especially after President Song’s remarks to the press two weeks ago when he called President Marquez a joker.”

The three were seated at one end of the long *narra* table in the formal dining room of Madam Emilia’s house at Forbes Park. The matriarch sat at the head of the table, where a chair had been removed to make space for her wheelchair. General Torres and General Roco, the two highest military officers of the country after the President, were seated at opposite sides of Madam Emilia.

“The opposition has the support of the U.S.,” General Roco added.

“And yours?” Madam Emilia raised a mocking brow at the AFP Chief of Staff. Olivia, her personal secretary of fifty years, had relayed to her the information she had gathered from the grapevine of secretaries serving the high-ranking officials of government, that General Roco had been sending feelers to the opposition, ready to jump ship in the case of the downfall of her son’s current regime.

“We have reliable intelligence that there are plots already in place to assassinate the President,” General Roco added, pretending not to have heard Madam Emilia’s last retort. He did not mind what the elderly woman thought of him. Not anymore. The CNN had described Madam Emilia Marquez as the most influential Filipino woman in Philippine politics today. She was known as the secret behind the success and popularity of her husband, the late President Carlos Marquez, to the masses. She became the unofficial adviser to the three Presidents who assumed their presidency after her husband’s term. The secret meetings she had held with these leaders in her Forbes Park mansion were no secret in the small world of Philippine politics. General Roco knew that with her numerous spies and informants in all branches of the government, Madam Emilia must also be aware by now of the growing dissent of the people towards her son. The general sentiment of the majority was that President Marquez had overstayed in his position, and it was only a matter of months before he would be replaced, either through a people’s revolution similar to 1986, or a military *coup d’état*.

Upon election by an overwhelming majority of votes three years ago, President Marquez embarked on an aggressive all-out war against illegal drugs and Islamic extremism. In the second year of his presidency, and riding on the high approval ratings of the people, he declared Martial Law throughout the country. He defended his strategic move on the spate of killings all over the archipelago, purported to be connected to the illegal drug trade, and a series of bombings in major cities, from Metro Manila to Davao, claimed to have been perpetrated by Islamic terrorist groups.

However, there were rumors that the killings, bombings, and mysterious disappearances were actually carried out by the police—whose Chief was President Marquez’s best friend since high school and an extremely loyal buddy—under the President’s own orders. President Marquez had also been suspected of having had connections to Islamic terrorist groups, but neither the NBI nor the PNP could come up with conclusive pieces of evidence to prove these allegations, or even dared act upon complaints against the highest official of the land. President Marquez had declared Martial Law before his staunchest critics, the lawmakers in Congress, could further investigate on the reports circulating against him.

Barely a month after the country was put under Martial law, a surprising period of peace and order followed. No more killings, bombings, and mysterious disappearances. President Marquez then shifted his focus toward nuclear research and aimed to develop a cache of nuclear arsenal that, as he described during his last State of the Nation Address, would rival that of North Korea. He had a vision—which he would constantly stress during various media interviews—on how the world would come to respect the Philippines once again.

Then came the series of threats against China that made him controversial in the international community, and a constant target of criticism by the United Nations and human rights organizations. President Marquez wanted control of a chunk of the Spratlys—or at least those which were within the boundaries of the Philippine seas as determined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea—and reclaim the reefs and islands which he believed were stolen by China over the last couple of decades. He put the country on the offensive, and impressed upon the world an image of himself as the bad guy in modern international relations, even worse than Kim Oon, the present leader of North Korea.

No dissident voice dared speak against the dictatorial rule of President Marquez. Even media was state-controlled. However, after five years in office, the tides seemed to be turning. The former members of the dissolved Congress had united to raise their opposition, buttressed by the support of the United Nations and the West. President Marquez's supporters, too, were crossing parties one by one. The Defense Secretary and the AFP Chief were themselves feeling the pressure to shift their own allegiances. In fact, this recent visit to the former First Lady was taken upon the urging of then Governor Lastrilla of Batangas, who thought that if not one of them could dissuade the President of his foolish plan to attack China, perhaps the son would listen to his own mother.

"I would like to keep my loyalty to your son as I had for your late husband," General Torres began. He could not look Madam Emilia directly in the eyes while he spoke, however. As a military man, he had been trained to obey the orders of his superior, and being the highest official of the Armed Forces, he had pledged his loyalty to the President. However, today he had come to connive with the President's mother, to persuade her to commit an act akin to a betrayal of his office.

"But I love my country more. Your husband, the late president, was my best friend. You know that. I was the best man at your wedding. We were like brothers, being the only Filipinos at West Point during our time there. I promised on his deathbed to guide your son, my godson, in his political career. Caloy was sure that his son was going to succeed him in the presidency someday. His dream came true, only..." He paused, uncertain of how to phrase what he wanted to say next.

"Anyway, Madam Emilia, this is why I have requested this meeting with you today. Out of respect to your late husband—and our long friendship. I would like to inform you in person that I may not be able to fulfill that promise of looking after your son any longer. My conscience cannot allow

me acquiesce to the plans of the madman that my godson had become. He is going to bring the country to ruin.”

“No need to profess that bit about loving the country to justify your opinions about Leonidas,” Madam Emilia waived a hand, a mocking tone in her voice. “I share your view, Frankie. You are correct. My son has turned into a madman. I have lost control of him, too. He has stopped listening to me. If he were ten, I would have given him a spanking. If his father were alive... But, yes, it is time someone does something.”

Not that Madam Emilia had given up on her son completely. Every Sunday, President Marquez, accompanied by his wife and their teenage daughter, would have lunch with her. Whenever she would broach the subject of politics, however, he would stop her in midsentence. Since he had been elected President, he had stopped asking for advice from his mother, from whom he had solicited guidance and whom he had constantly obeyed, from the time he began as a young Congressman to when he was elected Speaker of the House on his second term, until his nomination as presidential candidate of the Nationalist Party. His mother had steered his political career, cajoled and even blackmailed the men and officials whom she knew could give her son the leverage and put him into the spotlight. She hired the best spin doctors to project the right image that would make his son appealing to the masses, the poor, the uneducated—in other words, the majority of the voting populace, and the easiest to fool.

But when he was finally elected, President Marquez seemed to have outgrown his mother and refused to listen to her counsel anymore. Madam Emilia was disappointed and annoyed with her son’s shabby treatment of herself. But she was somehow consoled that he had remained devoted to her in other ways, like making sure that he was present every Sunday for lunch in her Forbes Park mansion.

“The U.S. has expressed great concern, Madam,” General Roco spoke. “They may look at China as a constant rival and antagonist, but even they realize the folly of President Marquez’s threat. Nuking Fiery Cross, even if it is only a small island—not even a real one in the strict definition of the word—would be enough to incite the anger of the huge Communist nation. America has a lot of interests in the Philippines, as well as a love-hate relationship with China. The U.S. prefers tolerance—or hypocrisy, if we may be so blunt, being just amongst ourselves—for the sake of economic profit and stability of all concerned states. Which leads us to the real purpose of our visit, Madam. They have proposed a solution.”

General Roco nodded at General Torres and the latter whipped out his phone. He pointed it at a blank space of wall above the decorative fireplace, beside a colorful Expressionist-style Malang portrait of three women standing side by side wearing traditional clothing. A point of light shone from the phone and projected a small screen on the cream-colored wall. General Roco stood up and was about to turn Madam Emilia’s wheelchair, but the old lady put up her hand to stop him. She twiddled a knob on the arm of her wheelchair and swiveled by herself to face the wall behind her.

A video clip began playing, showing at first an empty room, white everywhere like a sterile hospital or laboratory: white ceilings, white-tiled floors, and white walls. The video had no sound. The camera panned to the wall where a row of glass cases stood. Inside the cases were what looked like mannequins on stands. However, instead of the pretty faces and perfect bodies of dummies displayed in department stores, the figures in the video had beer bellies, cellulites, wrinkled skins, and other physical imperfections of real human beings. A few looked young and attractive, but most were elderly. Their sizes also varied from the short and stout old man to a lanky and towering young lady. As the camera panned at the naked bodies inside the glass cases, Madam Emilia wondered why the faces of the dummies

looked familiar. The camera was moving too fast for her to concentrate on one face and remember exactly whom it reminded her of, but she gasped when it briefly paused to focus on the face of one of the male figures. It was that of her son! While the eyes were closed, the resemblance was uncanny. Whoever designed or manufactured the dummy paid careful attention to get the details right: the thickness of the mane and the amount of grey hair, the deep crow's feet that were more prominent on the right eye, the slightly pointed ears, a mole on the right side of the temple, and the thin arms and legs that looked disproportionate to the rounded midsection of President Marquez. The video stopped abruptly after it paused on the President's face and cut to a flickering blank screen on the wall.

"What was that?" Madam Emilia looked at the two men in turn.

"That was an android copy of the President," General Torres said slowly, emphasizing every word, as if waiting for Madam Emilia to process the incredulous meaning of each one before continuing. "What you just watched was a confidential video sent by the CIA only this morning."

"An android copy of Leonidas?" Madam Emilia repeated. "And the other figures there?"

"World leaders, CEOs of multinational corporations, influential personalities, even celebrities," General Torres said.

"Why would they make android duplicates of people? Why make one that looks like my son?"

"For decades now, Madam," General Roco answered, "the CIA has been operating an experimental laboratory which has perfected the design and manufacture of advanced types of androids that do not only look and act like human beings, but can be programmed to act and interact with others, so that you would not be able to tell apart the copy from the original."

"Since when?" Madam Emilia asked.

“Since the sixties. It is a well-guarded secret, of course. Imagine the nefarious applications that the wrong kinds of people would come up with if they were granted access to the technology.”

“What for?” the old lady asked again.

“Truth be told, for anything. But in Director Burns’ words, Madam, he said they maintain the laboratory not for whatever commercial or political gains they could get out of the technology, but for more noble ones like... world peace.”

“What about you, generals? How long have you known about this android technology?”

“Only yesterday, Madam Emilia,” General Torres answered, “when I took the call from Director Burns. I relayed the information to General Roco immediately. If there is someone among the President’s men whose integrity I trust, Madam, it is General Roco. Only the three of us know about this for now. The CIA itself, Director Burns said, has put in place the strictest security measures to keep the world from knowing about the android laboratory in Washington. They only inform outsiders when they feel that it is imperative...”

“In rare cases such as ours,” General Roco finished for the other man.

“And what do you intend to do with the android copy of my son? Make him take the place of the President? Like a decoy?” Madam Emilia laughed but stopped when she realized that she just blurted out the actual purpose of the two generals for insisting that she met them today.

“We are going to prevent your son from keeping his threat of nuking the Spratly island occupied by China,” General Roco said.

“We are going to use the technology again to save the Philippines,” General Torres added.

“Again?” Madam Emilia swiveled her wheelchair to face the Defense Secretary.

“It seems, Madam, that the country had availed of this solution before, during the time of another dictator.”

“Marcos?” Madam Emilia half-whispered. She was not yet born when Ferdinand Marcos became President of the country, but Madam Emilia knew of only one other Filipino dictator, whose name had become a byword in the media recently, since her son became the second President in Philippine history to place the entire archipelago under Martial Law.

General Torres nodded. “When President Marcos called then American President Reagan for advice on how to deal with the growing call for his ouster, Reagan referred him to CIA Director Bill Casey. They prepared a perfect exit for him. Marcos was flown out of Malacañang and into Hawaii a week before he took his dubious oath of office. Days before EDSA happened they had already replaced him with his duplicate.”

“So the man who waved goodbye to the crowd in the balcony and even sang with Imelda...” Madam Emilia paused as she tried to recall the clip from an old documentary she had watched of the last hours of the Marcoses in Malacañang.

“It was an android, Madam Emilia,” General Roco said. “Not the real President Marcos.”

“Why did he need to have himself replicated?”

“He was afraid for his safety,” General Torres answered. “He wanted a secure exit. With the unruly crowd pressing on the gates of the palace, who would have thought that they would still be able to flee alive? President Marcos was already planning his comeback even before he was flown out of the country. I guess he thought of himself as some Napoleon returning from

exile, to reclaim the empire he had lost. But first, he needed to make sure that he escaped from Malacañang alive.”

“But Marcos looked so real on that last day. How did the android able to duplicate the voice, the mannerisms, or react the way only the real Marcos could have?”

“The android has a chip implant in its brain that has been fed data from the duplicated person. Electronic impulses in the brain copy memories from the person’s past into the chip. Once downloaded, the chip controls the android, and makes it move, talk, and mimic even the mental and emotional responses of the person to any stimulus from the environment.”

“Fascinating,” Madam Emilia nodded. “But if the duplicate President would think and decide like my son, don’t you think that it would simply follow the same path of action that Leonidas would have taken?”

“That was the eighties, Madam. The technology had grown by leaps and bounds through the years. One feature of the advanced version, what the CIA is offering to us, is its ability to alter the behavior of the duplicate. Director Burns said they have programmed the chip in such a way that it would not mimic the President’s—and may I quote Director Burns’s words—egomaniacal behavior. Instead, it could choose to act in a manner that would be less destructive, even magnanimous.”

Madam Emilia understood what the Defense Secretary was hinting at. “So you are going to replace my son with this clone. And where are we going to hide the real President Marquez while his imposter is in office?”

“Director Burns suggested that he be preserved in a cryogenic chamber in the meantime,” General Torres answered. “President Marcos was aware of having an android duplicate so he simply hid himself from public view and waited until the android was flown to Hawaii and deactivated. It would be up to you, Madam, as to when you would like President Marquez

revived. Director Burns said he had been advised by the American President to wait until the duplicate President had restored democracy, stepped down from office, and handed over the leadership to a successor. A year should be enough to accomplish all of those. When President Marquez is revived, the android will be deactivated and then, of course, destroyed to erase all trace and evidence of what had transpired.”

“Did they destroy President Marcos’s duplicate android?” Madam Emilia wondered aloud.

“It was only deactivated,” General Torres said. “When President Marcos died, his widow thought of playing one last joke on the Filipinos. She had the android displayed inside a glass coffin, in a mausoleum in the ancestral house of the Marcoses in Ilocos, and made everyone believe it was the dead body of her husband. In fact, Madam Emilia, it is still there today. Even after the remains of the former dictator had long been buried at the Libingan ng mga Bayani. No one cares anymore to inspect what the dummy on display is actually made of.”

“And all along we thought it was a wax replica,” Madam Emilia said. “Won’t the people notice? The android is not going to change how it looks. We can look different after a month, a year... Someone would eventually notice something?”

“You yourself have not aged a day for the last twenty years, Madam. You may have been confined to your wheelchair after the fall you took when you went to Japan two years ago, but other than that, you can still be mistaken for a seventy-year old... sixty even.”

Madam Emilia chose to ignore General Torres’s attempt at flattery and to focus on the business at hand. She understood the need to rein in her son and salvage his reputation. She knew the decision had to be done in order to save his son’s legacy and the legacy of her husband. She did not want

the Marquez name to leave a sour note every time it would be mentioned in history.

“What do you need me to do?” she asked the two generals.

The next Sunday, President Marquez visited his mother for their weekly luncheon. The First Lady and Carlota, the presidential daughter, were away in France for Fashion Week. This was no coincidence. Madam Emilia herself had paid for the week-long spree under the pretense that it was an advance gift for Carlota’s birthday the next month. Madam Emilia couldn’t let anything thwart the plan she had laid out for that afternoon.

When the President leaned toward his mother for the customary kiss on the cheek, Madam Emilia pressed her hand on her son’s forearm. A tiny but potent amount of anesthetic was injected through a microscopic needle attached to one of the four prongs on her ring holding a large emerald in place. When the old lady released her hand, she watched her son scratch the point where the needle pricked and saw it redden slightly.

During the meal, Madam Emilia kept glancing at the clock on the wall, making sure that she finished in an hour, exactly ten minutes before the drug took effect. When they had finished dessert, she steered her son into her private study under the pretext that she was going to show him an Orlina sculpture which she had recently bought at a Christie auction. They had not even reached the doorway to the study when President Marquez slinked into the floor unconscious.

Madam Emilia knocked on the door opposite the study. The room was a large private gallery, empty except for the old lady’s painting collection which filled the walls from floor to ceiling. General Torres came out of the room, followed by two young men in lab coats. They were American scientists who had arrived earlier in the morning aboard a private jet. There were other

men who arrived with them, but after they had set up the cryogenic chamber and the machine needed for the memory extraction and uploading inside the room, they left with only the two staying behind.

The scientists were quick and efficient. They carried President Marquez's inert body and placed him on a hospital bed inside the spacious gallery. Beside the bed was the memory extractor, a small boxlike machine connected to a computer terminal. While one scientist hooked wires and nodes from the memory extractor into the President's head, the second sat behind the computer screen and operated the machine.

In the corner of the room was the cryogenic chamber. Lying there was a figure that looked exactly like President Marquez, but a cold and lifeless duplicate of the real President Marquez.

It took a full hour to transfer the President's memories spanning fifty years into the computer chip inside the memory extractor. Madam Emilia and General Torres chatted and had coffee in her private study while they waited for the procedure to finish.

After the memory transfer was completed, the computer chip was inserted into the duplicate android through a slot behind the lobe, concealed by hair. The android was activated and the real President Marquez took its place inside the cryogenic chamber.

The President Marquez who went back to Malacañang an hour later was the duplicate android of the real President. Meanwhile, the gallery in Madam Emilia's mansion was locked, with the old lady keeping the only key to the door.

Three years later, the real President Marquez was revived from his almost-dead state in the cryogenic chamber. It had been a year since the end of his regime. Another President, elected through a democratic election,

had taken over the position. The country was getting ready for a convention to revise the Constitution. Everyone, even President Marquez's wife and daughter, were clueless about the switch which had happened years ago. It helped that the couple had, for the last decade, not been sleeping together and had simply been staying married for show. Nevertheless, the android duplicate exceeded Madam Emilia's expectations.

Only the old matriarch, the now-retired General Torres, and the two scientists sent over by the CIA, oversaw the process of reviving President Marquez in the room which had remained locked to the house staff all these years.

After they had moved President Marquez into a hospital bed and regulated his breathing and heartbeat, the two men left the room, while Madam Emilia and General Torres waited for President Marquez to finally open his eyes.

The former President was stunned when his mother and General Torres told him about what they did, and kept him up to date about the happenings in the country during his absence. He was at a loss at first, confused by the myriad of emotions, ranging from shock to rage to sadness, which overcame him. Eventually, he chose to accept the situation. What else could he do? Expose the truth about where he had been the last three years? Who would believe him?

He resolved to stay mum when his mother showed him an old issue of *Time* magazine. He was on its cover—or at least the android that pretended to be him and served the last two years of his presidency for him. He was the top story for the issue, having been chosen Person of the Year by the prestigious publication. The lengthy article was an homage to his leadership, focusing especially on what was perceived as his final and lasting legacy as leader of the nation. It seemed that after he reneged on his earlier threat to nuke the Spratly, the duplicate President Marquez announced through

a state broadcast about having had an epiphany which made him realize the error of his ways. He apologized to China for his scurrilous threats, embarked on a state visit to the Communist republic to personally have a dialogue with the Chinese President, before proceeding to Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, and the other countries with a claim on the group of islands west of the Philippines. Finally, the Philippines hosted a summit, at the end of which was a ratification of an amended Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, which appeased everyone. And, so far, no state had violated the accord for the last two years. The *Time* article went short of pronouncing that President Marquez not only diffused a growing resentment among neighboring nations in the Far East, but may have also stopped the possibility of World War III.

The new President, a grandson of former President Ramos, was nondescript although Harvard-educated and youthful, except that he had been endorsed by the duplicate President Marquez, and had guaranteed to continue the policies of the previous administration. The economic reforms enacted by the android had also allowed the country to catch up with its better-off neighbors, Singapore and Taiwan.

After his two elderly companions in the room finished telling him about what happened while he was preserved in a near-death state, President Marquez stood up from the hospital bed. He took his time adjusting to his feet. It had been years since he had last used them. Aided by General Torres, President Marquez walked towards the corner of the room, where lying on the cryogenic chamber was his android duplicate. Madam Emilia dialed a number on her cellphone to summon back the two American scientists, who would officially decommission the android by removing the computer chip in its brain, and destroy it in front of the real President Marquez.

*SANAYSAY / CREATIVE
NONFICTION*

KORONA

KC Daniel Inventor

Ito na ang pinakamalinaw at nag-iisa kong alaala kasama si Jonnie*: nagliliwanag na aparisyon ang imahen niyang nakatayo sa unahan ng entablado at kumakaway suot ang kumikinang na puting fully-beaded gown habang nasa mga bisig niya ang parehong bouquet ng sari-saring bulaklak at scepter, at nakahapon sa itim at unat na unat niyang wig ang kumikinang ding korona. Isang gabi iyon ng 2003. Kung tama ang pagkakatanda ko ay mag-aalas-diyes na iyon. Sa kabila ng dilim na lumulukob sa nakapaligid na mga palayan, nagliliwanag na higenteng lampara sa dilim ang basketball court ng liblib na barangay kung saan ginanap ang kauna-unahang Miss Gay na sinalihan ko. Namumutakte iyon sa mga taong akala mo ay mga insektong humaling na humaling sa liwanag ng mga spotlight at naghahabulang mga ilaw ng mga bumbilyang sarikulay. Halos sumabog na sa apat na sulok ng court ang mga higenteng speakers na nilulunod ang huni ng mga kulisap sa paligid. Sinasabayan pa iyon ng hiyawan ng mga manonood. Parang pustahan sa sabungan. Dalawang numero ang pinagsasabong ng lahat: 5 at 9. Iyon na kasi ang huling bahagi ng byukon. Sa unahan ng stage, magkakarap na nakayuko at magkahawak-kamay kaming dalawa ni Jonnie habang ang walong iba pang mga beteranang nakalaban namin ay nakatayo sa bandang likuran; nakikisigaw na rin ng kanilang mga pusta.

Sigurado akong noong mga oras na iyon, nanlalamig at humuhulas na ang mga kamay ko. Marahil ay pasulyap-sulyap pa ako sa mukha niya at minsanang pumipikit-tingala sabay hingang malalim para humiling habang hinihintay na tawagin ang numerong magtatapos sa laban. Maaaring ganoon din siya sa akin. Nakahihilo na kasi ang bahaging ito ng alaala dahil parang

mabilis nang hinahalo ang mga bagay sa paligid ko na lumikha ng paikot-ikot na kumunoy: ang mga tao, ang mga ilaw, ang mga kulay, ang mga hiyaw, lahat na. Namimingi na para bang idinidiin ko ang mga hintuturo sa butas ng aking mga tainga. Nanlalabo ang paningin na para bang may suot akong naghuhulas na salamin.

Naging malinaw na lamang ulit ang lahat nang marinig ko ang pagsigaw ng host ng numero 9. Kasunod niyon ay ang pag-abot ng kapitan de barangay ng bouquet, scepter, at envelope kay Jonnie at pagpatong ng korona sa ulo niya na sinabayan ng mas malakas pang hiyawan. Umatras ako nang isuot na sa akin ang sash ng first-runner up na binudburan ng pulang glitters ang mga letra at iabot sa akin ang puting sobreng naglalaman ng premyo ng pinakaunang talunan. Ayaw lubayan ng mga mata ko ang nagniningning na korona na para bang doon lamang nakabuhos ang liwanag ng spotlight. Pakiwari ko, sukat na sukat at ang bigat-bigat niyon sa ulo niya lalo na at napapalamutian iyon ng malalaking mga batong mala-balangaw sa ganda. Halos mapanganga pa ako nang mapatitig ako sa mukha ni Jonnie noong sandaling iyon. Para siyang si Mama Mary na nagkatawang-lupa para lumaban sa byukon.

Matapos niyang kumaway-kaway sa nahimasmang madla ay nakangiti siyang nagmuwestra sa akin. Sabay na raw kaming bumaba sa stage. Inalalayan pa niya akong bumaba sa hagdan dahil baka matisod daw ako sa suot kong matingkad na apple green gown na muntik nang maging carpet sa haba ng train. Sa totoo lang, bago pa man mag-umpisa ang laban ng mga bakla sa entablado, maingay na ang usap-usapang siya ang mananalò. Kumbaga sa hot picks ng mga pageant blogs ngayon, ni minsan ay hindi siya natinag at napataob sa number 1 spot sa lahat ng prediksyon. Bukod kasi sa malinaw na dahilang pinagsisigawan ng mukha niya, bulong-bulungan nang bumubula rin ang bibig niya pagdating sa Q&A. Kaya nang kami na lamang ang last two standing, nagsimulang kuminang sa loob ko ang ideyang posibleng ako ang

makasungkit ng korona. Sa isip-isip ko, kaya ko ito. Pareho lamang naman kaming baguhan sa byukon at iisang kandidata na lamang siyang nakaharang sa akin para makuha ang titulo. Que se jodang kulay labanos siya at heavenly ang ganda niya, palagay ko ay binigyan ko naman siya ng magandang laban sa Q&A. Kaya nang sa ulo niya ipinatong ang korona, maliban pa sa pagkamangha ko sa nagmistulang lumitaw na halo sa ulo niya at sa karakas niyang mala-santo, pagkahigpit-higpit din akong sinakal ng pagkadismaya. Gumana pa ang pagiging immature ko at naisip kong hablutin sa kanya ang korona at isuot ito sa sarili. Pero ewan ko ba, nang dahil lamang sa small gesture of kindness na ipinakita niyang iyon sa akin, nabura iyon sa isip ko. Nagpalitan kami ng pagbati sa isa't isa kasabay ng paglapat ng magkabilang pisngi bago kami dumiretso sa backstage kung saan naghihintay na ang mga handler namin.

Iyon na ang una at huling close encounter ko kay Jonnie. Pagkatapos kasi ng gabing iyon, sa tuwing magkakasalubong kami sa plaza ng Dolid, kung hindi man siya nakayuko ay tatango lamang sa akin, ngingiti, at tuloy-tuloy na maglalakad kung saan man siya patungo. Hindi natitinag. Parang walang ibang nakikita o napapansin sa kanyang paligid. Noong mga panahong iyon, araw-araw na siyang may suot na imbisibol na korona sa mata ng lahat. Kahit na mapadpad pa siya sa iba pang kalapit na banwa ay kilala siya ng mga kabaro sa komunidad. Bukod kasi sa sunod-sunod na pagkapanalo niya sa mga byukon, malapit na raw siyang magtapos sa kolehiyo bilang nursing student. Noong mga panahong iyon, nursing ang in demand na kurso sa buong bansa lalo na sa probinsya namin. Maraming tumutok sa imbisibol na koronang iyon sa ulo niya. Isa na ako roon na nasa 2nd year high school pa lamang at nangangarap ding makasungkit ng titulo at makapag-aral sa kolehiyo. Siyempre, marami rin ang napapakunot ang noo sa ningning ng koronang iyon, lalo na sa mga kapwa kontesera sa banwa namin. Ang sabi pa nga, porké't nakailang panalo na at nakakasandosenang lalaki na sa isang gabi, akala mo ay kung sino nang artistang pinipili lamang ang kakausapin. Pero

sa pagkakaalala ko, kahit noong gabing nasa backstage kami at nagpapalitada ng makeup sa mga mukha namin habang nagbabatuhan ng pang-ookray sa isa't isa ay matipid naman talaga siya sa salita. Narinig ko na lamang ang boses niyang parang mga pananim na palay na hinahawi ng hangin sa paligid ng basketball court noong gabi ng byukon noong self-intro, Q&A, at nang batiin niya ako ng "Congrats sa aton, 'day."

Iyon lamang ang hangganan ng pagkakakilala ko kay Jonnie. Kaya noong lumuwas kami ng pamilya ko sa Maynila para dito na tumira, isa siya sa mga mukhang nabaon na sa pinakamalalim na hukay ng mga alaala ko ng Negros. Noong taong 2015, nabuhay ulit ang katiting na alaala niyang ito nang mabalitaan ko kay Benjie*, matalik na kaibigan at kapwa kontesera, ang nangyari sa kanya at sa imbisibol niyang korona.



2005 nang dumating ako ng Maynila mula Negros. Halos mag-iisang buwan pa lamang ang lumipas matapos kong grumaduate sa high school. Noong mga panahong iyon, tuluyan ko nang binura ang lahat ng bakas ng makeup sa mukha ng pagkabakla ko. Iniwan ko na rin sa probinsya ang mga long gown, swimsuit, at high heels na alaala ng buhay kontesera ko sa loob ng dalawa at kalahating taon. Isinauli ko sa mga may-ari ang mga hiniram at ipinamana ko naman ang mga pag-aari ko sa ilang mga kaibigang nagpatuloy sa pakikipagsapalaran sa pag-abot sa inaasam-asam na korona. Biro ko, sila na ang sumungkit ng titulo para sa akin. Sa loob kasi ng halos dalawa at kalahating taon ng buhay kontesera ko, ni isang titulo ay wala akong napala. First runner up na ang pinakamataas na nakuha ko na isang beses ko lamang nakamit at Darling of the Crowd naman ang nauwing pampalubag-loob bukod pa sa consolation prize.

Ang pakiusap sa akin ni Papa, kalimutan ko na ang mga dati kong ginagawa sa probinsya ngayong nasa Maynila na kami. Bagong buhay na raw

kasi ito. Ang ibig niyang sabihin, itigil ko na ang pagsali sa mga paligsahan para sa mga tulad kong bakla. Ang totoo, ayaw na ayaw kasi niyang nakikita akong nakadamit pambabae, nakaahit ang kilay at bigote, at tadtad ng makeup ang mukha, kahit na hindi ko naman talaga ginagawa ang mga ito sa mga ordinaryong araw ng buhay ko sa probinsya. Aaminin kong hindi ako komportableng gawin ang mga ito. Hindi dahil naniniwala ako sa sinabi ni Papa sa akin dati na nawawala ang respeto sa akin ng ibang tao sa tuwing nag-aanyo at nag-aasal babae ako, kundi dahil hindi ko itinuturing na babae ang sarili ko kundi isang lalaki at bakla. Bukod pa roon, hindi rin biro ang pagdadaanang transpormasyon dahil maliban sa pisikal na pagbabago, kailangan mo ring ihanda ang sarili mo sa mga kirot at hapdi ng mga hindi nakikitang sugat sa aakyat mong entablado. Pero sa tuwing may masasagap kaming balita ng mga kaibigan, mula sa mga kakilalang kabaro na mayroong pa-contest sa mga liblib na barangay sa parehong malalapit at malalayong banwa, ibang usapan na. Kahit pa magkapantal-pantal ako dahil sa mga lace at beads ng suot kong gown at swimsuit, kahit na magkandasugat-sugat ang mga paa dahil sa hindi sukat na high heels at kahit magkandapaltos-paltos ang dibdib, bewang, at ari ko sa ilang ikot ng packaging tape ay nakasanayan ko na lamang ang sakit. May mga pagkakataon pa ngang hinahanap-hanap na ng katawan ko ang hapdi at kirot ng proseso na para bang bahagi na talaga ito ng pagiging kontesera ko; ng pagiging bakla ko. Sabi nga ng mga beteranang konteserang kakilala namin, kung gusto mong magka-korona, magtiis-ganda. Hindi ko naman binigo si Papa sa hiling niya sa akin. Sa Maynila, hinayaan kong sabay na tumubo ang mga dati ay ahit na kilay at bigote. Tinuruan ko ang mga kamay at daliri kung paano kalimutan ang pagpilantik. Pinagbawal ko sa bewang ang hilig nitong eksaherahin ang kaliwa at kanan. Inunat ko ang dating kulot na dilang pinaaalon ang tono ng mga salita.

Pero bukod pa sa dahilang iyon, isa pang naiisip ko kung bakit ganoon na lamang ang kagustuhan niyang huminto ako sa pagiging kontesera ay ang

maaaring pagkatuklas niyang kakambal ng pagsali ko sa mga byukon ang pagpapahupa ng init ng katawan kasama ang mga binata sa mga kalapit na kamalig, kawayanan, tabing-dagat, likod ng barangay hall, at eskuwelahan. Kaya alam na alam ko ang ibig niyang sabihin sa tuwing sinasabi niya sa akin na dapat kong pigilan ang nararamdaman ko; na kayang-kaya kong pigilan ang pagiging bakla. Marami naman daw bakla riyan na may sariling pamilya at nagkaroon daw ng asawa at mga anak. Nadadamay pa nga sa mga pangaral niyang ito sa akin sina Ogie Diaz at Arnel Ignacio na wala namang kaalam-alam sa pinagdadaan ko bilang bakla. Alam na alam ko na ang ibig sabihin niyon ay ayaw niyang magkakaroon ako ng relasyon sa kapwa lalaki, kahit pa nga ipinagpipilitan niya sa aking tanggap naman niya ang pagiging bakla ko. Sa palagay ko ay hindi niya masikmura ang ideya ng dalawang lalaking nagtatalik lalo pa kung anak niya ang isa sa mga iyon. Minsan naiisip ko, kung naging straight siguro ako, malamang na hindi ko maririnig sa kanya na pigilan ko ang nararamdaman ko. Malamang ay ipagmamalaki pa niya sa mga kainuman niya noon kapag nalamang nagkaroon na ako ng karanasan sa babae kahit pa nga magka-tulo pa ako. Nasabi ko ito dahil sa isang komento niya sa binatang kapitbahay namin sa Negros na nagkatulo dahil sa pakikipagtalik sa mga tinatawag na kaplóg sa isang beach resort malapit sa amin. Komento niya, ganoon daw talaga ang mga tunay na lalaki. Isa pa, tulo lamang daw iyan. Gagaling din daw agad iyan sa antibiotics, na para bang ganoon lamang kadali ang paggagamot; na para bang karapatan at isang badge of honor para sa mga “tunay na lalaki” ang makipagtalik sa kung sinong gustuhin nilang babae at ang magkatulo.

Noong mga panahong iyon, wala pa akong ibang naririnig na sakit na nakukuha sa pakikipagtalik kundi tulo. Iyon at iyon kasi ang lagi kong naririnig kahit na sa mga kabaro sa komunidad sa probinsya. Kay Papa ko unang narinig ang salitang AIDS. Sakit daw iyon na nagmula sa isang Aprikanong nakipagtalik sa isang unggoy at kumalat nang dahil sa pakikipagtalik ng

lalaking iyon sa kapwa niya lalaki. At kumalat nang kumalat nang kumalat sa iba't ibang bahagi ng mundo tulad ng pagkalat ng kuwentong iyon. Sa madaling salita, pinupunto lang ng kuwento na bakla ang nagpakalat ng sakit na nagmula sa hayop. Sakit na nabuo nang dahil sa “abnormal” na ugnayan ng tao at hayop at ng dalawang lalaki. Kahit nagbago na ang pananaw at paniniwala ni Papa tungkol sa sakit na ito pagkalipas ng mga taon nang dahil sa pagpapaliwanag ko sa kanya, hindi ko pa rin mapigilang mapailing sa tuwing maaalala ko ang kuwento niyang may langkap nang kasinungalingan. Ayon sa nabasa kong artikulo, hindi naman AIDS kundi HIV ang virus na nagmula nga sa isang uri ng chimpanzee sa West Africa. Una raw natuklasan ang impeksyon nito sa tao sa isang mangangasong taga-Democratic Republic of Congo noong taong 1959. Pero kung totoo nga bang nakipagtalik ang lalaki sa unggoy ay hindi naman iyon napatunayan kahit kailan. May teoryang sa mga kagat at kalmot daw ng mga ilahas na hayop nahawa ang mangangasong iyon at hindi sa pakikipagtalik sa unggoy. Ang nakakatawa, mala-alamat ang tono ng pagkakakuwento ni Papa. Tipong mga lumang istoryang ikinukuwento ng matatanda sa mga bata para iwasan o katakutan ang isang bagay o gawi. Sa kabilang banda, sa tuwing napagtatanto ko ang pinupunto ng kuwento niya ay nagiging kinusot na papel pa rin ang mukha ko.

Ganoon pa man, hindi napigilan ng mga pakiusap at kuwento ni Papa ang pagkabakla ko. Marami man kasi akong binago sa pisikal kong anyo, nahirapan pa rin akong itanggi sa sarili ang totoong mukha sa loob ko. Sa puntong ito, makikilala ko ang una kong naging boyfriend sa kolehiyo—si Sergie*. Nasa 2nd year pa lamang ako noon at siya naman, nasa 3rd year. Siya rin ang pinakaunang taong nakausap ko nang masinsinan at kumumbinsi sa akin na alamin ang HIV status ko. Bago pa man kami magkakilala, aminado akong makailang beses ko nang tinuklas ang mga bagay na maaari kong gawin sa aking katawan at seksuwalidad. Maihahalintulad ko ang mga ito sa ilang pagkakataong pagsali ko sa mga byukon at iba pang paligsahan

para sa mga tulad ko. Madalas na padalus-dalos ang mga iyon, hindi pinag-isipan nang maigi, at madalas ding walang pag-iingat makamit ko lamang ang kasiyahan at kalayaang hinahangad ko sa mga sandaling iyon. Inamin ko sa kanya ang lahat ng iyon bago pa man kami magkasundong pasukin ang pakikipagrelasyon sa isa't isa. Dahil sa rebelasyon kong iyon, hindi na niya ako tinigilan sa pangungulit na magpa-test.

Kung si Sergie ang dahilan ng pagkamulat ko sa isyu ng HIV at AIDS, isa rin siya sa mga naging dahilan kung bakit naduwag ako sa pakiusap niya sa akin na alamin ang status ko. Sa pagkakaalala ko, noong nagpasya siyang magpa-test sa Manila Social Hygiene Clinic sa harap ng San Lazaro Hospital, isang buwan ang hinintay namin bago makuha ang resulta. Matagal ang proseso ng testing dito dahil narito rin ang San Lazaro STD-AIDS Cooperative Central Laboratory kung saan dinadala ang lahat ng blood samples na nagmumula sa iba't ibang bahagi ng bansa para sa confirmatory results sakaling magpositibo sa inisyul na testing ang isang tao. Sa loob ng mga araw na iyon, nakita ko ang nakakikilabot na mukha ng takot sa kanya. Sa tuwing magkasama kami, bigla na lamang tumatagas ang mukha niya nang walang dahilan. Sa tuwing may napapansin siyang kakaiba o pagbabago sa katawan niya, kahit na panunuyo lamang ng mga labi o pamumula ng mga palad ay napapahagulgol na lamang siyang bigla. Para siyang salaming unti-unting nagkakalamat hanggang sa tuluyan nang mabasag sa paningin ko sa tuwing maririnig ko sa kanya nang paulit-ulit ang *"May mali sa akin. May nangyayari sa katawan ko. Hindi ito normal, hindi ito normal."* Sa tuwing nakikita ko siyang ganoon, may kung anong bagay na lumulobo sa loob ng dibdib ko na pabigat nang pabigat at pakiramdam ko ay sasabog anumang oras. Sa tuwing naririnig ko sa kanya na unti-unti siyang kinakain ng takot at panghihina ng loob, pakiramdam ko ay may kung anong mabigat na bagay ang dumadagan sa ulo ko. Imbes na palakasin ko ang loob niya, nagmistulan akong vacuum na humihigop sa lahat ng mga nakikita, naririnig, at nararamdam sa tuwing napag-uusapan namin ang posibleng maging resulta ng test niya.

Palagi kong naririnig na ang pinakamabisang panlaban sa stigma sa HIV at AIDS ay ang alamin ang iyong status. Ito raw ang simula ng paglaban at paggamot sa kamangmangan sa usaping ito. Ito raw ang simula ng pagpapalakas ng parehong loob at katawan para talunin ang mga sakit na ito. Hindi raw kailangang parusahan at sisihin ang sarili kung sakaling magpositibo; na hindi raw death sentence ang pagkakaroon ng HIV o AIDS dahil may mga gamot na na maaaring pumigil sa pagdami ng virus. Pero ewan ko ba? Hindi naging positibo ang pagtanggap ko sa mga linyang ito. Tuluyan nang nilason ng kaduwagan ang dugong dumadaloy sa mga ugat ko kahit pa nang malaman naming negatibo ang resulta ng test ni Sergie.

Doon ako nag-umpisang mangako sa sarili na hinding-hindi ko pagdadaan ang ganoong klase ng emotional at psychological torture na nakita ko sa kanya; na ano man ang mangyari, ililibing akong kasama ang misteryo ng status ko. Ang sabi ko, walang ibang nakakakilala sa sarili ko, kundi ako. Alam kong hindi ganoon kalakas ang isip ko sa pagproseso sa ideya ng kamatayan, lalo na kung kamatayan ko at isang sakit na kinatatakutan at sinusumpa ng lipunan ang magiging dahilan nito. Kaya sa kabila nang maraming beses na pagmamakaawa ni Sergie sa akin na ituloy ang pagpapa-test ay wala siyang napala. Sa tuwing nagkakaroon kami ng malalang diskusyon tungkol dito bilang magkasintahan, lagi kong tinatapos ang usapan sa *“May condom naman. Kung gusto mo, hiwalayan mo na lang ako. Basta hindi ako magpapa-test,”* hanggang sa magkasundo kaming maghiwalay pagkatapos ng dalawa’t kalahating taon.



Nang itanghal akong first-runner up ni Jonnie, naging biruan na sa aming magbabarkadang kontesera na mapapasaakin lamang ang korona, sakaling madethrone o mawala ang reyna.

“Di bala agi, hambal sang emcee, if the reigning queen cannot fulfill her duty, the first-runner up will take over?” salitan sila sa pagpapaalala sa akin sabay ng pagpapakawala ng malulutong na tawa.

“Malay naton day, magmasakit si Jonnie, o kung hindi man gani, matigok dayon, a!” dugtong pa nila kahit pare-pareho naming alam na hindi naman ganoon ang siste ng mga byukon sa barangay.

Naiintindihan kong kahit kailan ay hindi naging tama na hilingin ang pagkakasakit lalo na ang pagkamatay ng isang tao. Pero aaminin kong noong mga panahong iyon, nangingiti ako sa tuwing maririnig ko ang birong ito hindi dahil gusto kong may tamaan ng malas, kundi dahil nakikita ko sa balintataw ng isip ko ang sariling nakaputing fully-beaded gown at kinokoronahan ng kapitan de barangay habang pinapalakpakan ng mga nakalaban sa byukon na dumalo sa aking koronasyon. Siyempre, wala roon si Jonnie.

Bumalik sa akin ang birong ito pagkalipas ng halos sampung taon, nang magka-chat kami ni Benjie sa Facebook. Pagkatapos ng kumustahan sa kung ano na ang nangyayari sa mga buhay-buhay namin, bigla na lamang niyang tinulak ang pangalan ni Jonnie sa usapan:

“Nadumduman mo pa si Jonnie, ‘day?”

“Sin-o nga Jonnie, man?”

“Si Jonnie bala haw? Atong mestisohon nga agi bala nga taga-banwa.”

“Atong agi nga nagdaog sa Miss Gay sa Pacol?”

“Amo gid! Ang nakapirdi sa imo!”

Virus na mabilis na sinakop ang isip ko ng mga salitang sunod na nabasa ko sa chat ni Benjie sa akin. May AIDS daw si Jonnie. Siya ang kauna-unahang kaso sa banwa namin. Sa pagkakarawan niya kay Jonnie, halos kainin na raw ng balat niya ang kanyang katawan at unti-unti na ring tinatakanan ng normal na kulay ng tao. Malayong-malayo iyon sa mala-

santo niyang imaheng nakaukit na sa alaala ko. Ganoon na lamang kalinaw ang namuong larawan ni Jonnie sa isip ko na kahit matapos na ang usapan naming iyon ni Benjie ay buhay na buhay pa rin ang malabangkay niyang imahen sa balintataw ng isip ko.

“Ti, ikaw gid tani manubli sang korona niya kung sang-una pa ini natabo, ‘day!’ Ito ang nagpaalala sa akin sa kinahihilakbutan ko nang biro ngayon.

Ni-mute ko na ang chat box nang mabasa ko ang huling mensahe ni Benjie. Bigla ko na lamang naalala ang maraming pagkakataong pinaubaya ko ang katawan ko sa dikta ng pagliyab nito. Alam ko at nauunawaan ko na may kaakibat na panganib ang walang pag-iingat na mga pagpapaubaya kong iyon sa halina ng tawag ng laman. Pero sa kabila noon, aaminin ko ring madalas na hirap akong tanggihan ito, lalo na kapag naroon na ako sa sandaling lumalagablab na ang katawan ko. Bukod kasi sa sensasyong dulot nito sa akin, para bang mayroon pang ibang pakiramdam na napapala ang katawan ko. Isang uri ng pakiramdam na hindi madali para sa akin na maipaliwanag; pakiramdam na lumalagpas na sa sakit at libog at kahulugan ng mga salitang maaaring maiugnay sa dalawang ito kaya marahil ay hindi ko mabigyang ngalan. Tulad ito ng pakiramdam ko sa tuwing nasa entablado ako noon at rumarampa sa harap ng mga manonood. Tulad ng sabi ko, hindi lingid sa akin ang mga pisikal na kirot at hapdi, pati na ang mga hindi nakikitang sugat ng pagsali sa byukon, ganoon din ang mainit na sensasyong dulot nito sa loob ko. Pero natatabunan ang mga ito sa oras na marinig ko na ang mga mukhang naghihiyawan at nagpapalakpakan—musika ng pagsamba sa katawan ng isang bakla, sa pagkatao ng isang bakla. Pagsambang nangangahulugan rin para sa akin ng pagtanggap ng ibang tao sa aking pagkabakla na masasabi kong parehong sa entablado at sa loob ng pribadong silid ko lamang natatagpuan. Sigurado akong hindi ko na maalala ang lahat-lahat ng pagpapaubaya kong iyon dahil hindi ko na rin mabilang ang mga pagkakataong iyon. Dahil dito, muli akong pinaglaruan ng imahinasyon ko. Parang pelikulang ni-replay

sa isip ko ang pinangarap kong koronasyon nang dahil sa dethronement ni Jonnie. Pero hindi tulad noong nauna, sa pagkakataong ito, hindi na ang kapitan de barangay kundi si Jonnie na mismong buto't balat at kulay abo ang nagpatong sa ulo ko ng koronang kinain na ng kalawang.

Nang makauwi ako sa Negros noong taon ding iyon para magbakasyon, sinubukan kong sumagap ng kahit katiting na impormasyon tungkol sa kalagayan ni Jonnie. Aaminin kong matapos ang pag-uusap namin ni Benjie tungkol sa kanya ay hindi na ako nilubayan ng aktibo kong imahinasyon at pagiging overthinker. Pero sa pagtatanong-tanong ko sa malalapit na kabaro sa komunidad ay hindi ko inaasahang mapahiya nang maraming beses. Sa tuwing nabanggit ko ang pangalan ni Jonnie sa kanila, kung hindi nakakalokong tawa ay singhal o hindi kaya ay tatalikuran na lamang akong basta at iiwang mag-isa kasama ang mga tanong ko tungkol sa kanya at hindi na ulit ako kikibuin. Iyong mga kahit papaano ay may natitira pang respeto sa kausap, inililiko na lamang sa ibang eskinita ang usapan mailigaw lamang ang sagot sa mga tanong ko. Saka ko na lamang malalaman na naging sikretong taboo na paksa na pala si Jonnie sa banwa namin lalo na sa mga kabaro.

Magmula grade 4 hanggang high school ay natunghayan ko kung paanong naging malaking bahagi ang komunidad ng mga bakla sa Dolid sa pagpapaganda at pagpapasaya ng banwang ito. Sa lahat na lamang ng okasyon: debut, JS Prom, sagala, pageant, piyesta, street dancing, cultural meets, at misa. Sa lahat na lamang ng lugar: sa mga eskuwelahan, sa mga palengke, sa munisipyo, at maging sa mga simbahan ay hindi nawawala ang presensiya ng isang bakla. Ano man ang ipinagdiriwang at trabahong kailangang gawin ay lagi't laging kailangan ng mga heteroseksual na mamamayan ng banwa ang husay at talino ng isang bakla. Kaya hindi ko lubos maisip ang isang Dolid na kinalimutan ang ambag ng komunidad namin sa kasaysayan nito nang dahil lamang sa naging kalagayan ni Jonnie. Hindi lamang din siya kundi ang lahat ng kabaro sa banwa ay tahimik na kinatakutan at pinandirihan ng Dolid.

Lalo pang lumubha ang takot at pandidiring iyon dahil kami-kami mismo sa komunidad ay pinatatahimik ang isa't isa imbes na mag-usap tungkol dito. Matapos ang dalawang araw ng pananatili roon, iniwan ko ang Dolid nang hindi nalalaman ang kasalukuyang kalagayan ni Jonnie at tuloy-tuloy na pininsala ng tahimik ngunit nakamamatay na takot at pandidiri sa aming mga bakla ang aking banwa.



Nasa ikalawang semestre na noon sa ikatlong taon ko sa kolehiyo nang mapag-usapan sa isang klase namin sa Social Science ang HIV at AIDS. Hindi ko na matandaan kung paanong napadpad doon ang diskusyon tulad din ng hindi ko na maaninag sa alaala ang pangalan ng propesor namin sa klaseng iyon. Ang natatandaan ko na lamang ay part-timer siya. Pandak na matandang babae na kamukha ni Dionisia Pacquiao. Hinding-hindi ko makalilimutan ang araw na iyon dahil sa walang kakaba-kaba niyang pahayag sa klase.

“Gay people are the main cause of HIV and AIDS. Do you know they are also called green monkeys?”

Sa pandak niyang iyon, nagmamatangkad ang matter-of-factly na tono niya habang sinasabi ang mga katagang ito sa pagmumukha namin kahit alam na alam niyang may mga bakla sa klaseng iyon. Kung nakamamatay lamang ang tingin, paniguradong ilang sandali lamang ay nakabulagta na siya at naliligo sa sariling dugo sa harap ng klase.

Bilang kahit papaano ay may natira pa kaming respeto sa pagkatao niya, maayos siyang kinausap ng ilan sa amin matapos niya kaming i-dismiss. Panay ang paghingi niya ng tawad sa amin pagkatapos niyon. Nangako siyang hihingi ng paumanhin sa buong klase sa susunod na pagkikita, pero siniguro naming ibang propesor na ang haharap sa amin nang mga sumunod na araw.

Hindi napawi ng solusyong iyon ang pangagalaiti ko sa ideyang hindi na maihiwalay ng karamihan, kahit na gaano pa sila kaedukado, ang salitang bakla sa mga sakit na ito. Ang sabi ni Sergie sa akin dati, ang mga bakla raw kasi ang mga nilalang na pinakamalakas ang loob at pinakamatapang na pumunta sa mga social hygiene clinic para alamin ang status nila. Iyon ang pinagbabasehan ng statistics na pinalalaganap sa publiko at malamang, bahagi rin ito ng pinag-uugatan ng stigma. Kung tutuusin, wala namang pinipiling kasarian ang mga sakit na ito. May kaibigan akong volunteer ng isang organisasyong tumutulong sa mga PLHIV sa Metro Manila. Ayon sa kanya, mapababae, lalaki, at kahit nga raw bata ay maaaring magkaroon ng ganitong sakit. Hindi ito eksklusibo sa aming mga bakla. Ganoon pa man, imbes na gamitin ang datos para mahanapan ng solusyon ang problema, ginagamit ito ng iba para palalain ang homophobia. Wala kaming nagawa nang ipatong na ng lipunan ang imbisibol na korona sa mga ulo namin sa panahon na laganap ang HIV at AIDS sa bansa. Ang lahat ng mata, nakatutok at nakabantay sa amin. Makita lamang na hindi normal ang pagkapayat mo o hindi kaya ay magkasakit ka lamang, kahit walang patunay ay iisipin ng lahat na may AIDS ka.

Naalala ko ang sinabi sa akin ng isang coteacher sa unang eskuwelahang pinagturuan ko sa Q.C. Nagkaroon ako noon ng kidney stones. Nahihirapan akong umihi at kung maihi man ako ay kulay tsaa na ito at may pagkakataon pang dugo na ang lumalabas sa ari ko. Nahirapan akong itago ito sa mga katrabaho dahil napapadalas na ang pag-absent ko sa tuwing inaatake ng matinding pananakit ng tagiliran. Komento niya, kahit walang humihingi ng opinyon niya, sa ibang doktor na raw ako magpatingin. At talagang siya ang nag-diagnose sa akin nang sabihing hindi na raw sakit sa kidney ang meron ako. Hindi man niya ako madiretso, alam ko ang ibig niyang sabihin; na pakikipagrelasyon sa kapwa lalaki ang dahilan ng sakit ko. Kahit kailan naman kasi ay hindi ko itinago ang kasarian ko sa kahit kanino. Kahit pa

sa mga katrabaho. Nahinto lamang siya sa pagkomento nang gumaling ako matapos tunawin ng hindi mabilang na gamot ang mga ga-munggong kristal sa mga kidney ko.



Isang taon matapos kong malaman ang balita tungkol kay Jonnie at sa mga kabaro namin sa Dolid, unti-unti ring tumamlay at tuluyan nang nanghina ang mga pagkabahala ko tungkol sa status ko. Matigas ang ulo ko at madalas akong umastang matapang kaya ito rin ang pinairal ko pati na sa pagpapasyang tuluyan ko na itong kalilimutan. Tulad dati, balik ako sa “bahala na kung meron akong sakit o wala.” Mamatay na kung mamamatay basta walang makakaalam kahit na ang sarili ko. Kahit na nga sa kabila ng pakikipag-usap at pakiusap sa akin ng uniberso sa sarili nitong lengguwahe na tuldukan ko na ang mga natitira kong agam-agam at pagkabahala sa pamamagitan ng isang test.

Maraming beses akong pinadalhan ng mensahe ng uniberso sa iba’t ibang paraan. Makailang beses akong naabutan ng flyers at brochures tungkol sa HIV at AIDS noong mismong araw na magdesisyon akong tuldukan na ang isyung ito sa buhay ko. Sinundan pa iyon ng mga palagiang patalastas sa TV na humihikayat sa lahat na alamin ang kanilang status sa pamamagitan ng pagpapa-test. Pinakamalala ang balitang pumanaw na ang isa sa mga nakarelasyon ko dati dito sa Maynila—si Gene*. Pinapatay ko noon ang oras sa pagpe-Facebook nang mahagip ng mga mata ko ang isang post tungkol sa kanya. Bumalik ulit sa akin ang paglalarawan ni Benjie kay Jonnie nang dahil sa larawang naka-post. Nakaratay sa hospital bed si Gene. Halos hindi ko na siya makilala sa buto’t balat niyang anyo at abuhing kulay ng balat pero nagawa pa ring sumilay ng matamlay na ngiti sa mga labi niya habang nakaharap sa camera. Ang sabi sa mga nabasa kong komento, meningitis daw ang ikinamatay niya at pinalala pa ng komplikasyon sa sakit sa baga.

Bigla akong napabukas ng Google para alamin kung isa ba ang meningitis sa mga sakit na pwedeng ikamatay dahil sa HIV at AIDS. Alam kong agarang paghusga ito sa kanya, pero hindi ko maiwasang isipin iyon dahil sa tatlong buwang pinagsamahan namin ay nakabisado ko na ang ugali niya. Kung itinuturing ko ang aking sarili na padalus-dalos at hindi pinag-iisipang mabuti ang mga bagay na maaaring ikapahamak ko, masasabi kong triple pa siyang ganoon kumpara sa akin. Sa huli, nakumpirma nga ang mga hinala ko nang makatanggap ako ng mensahe mula sa isang taong nakakakilala sa aming dalawa. Mula nang magkolehiyo ako ay hindi na ako paladasal. Pero noong sandaling iyon, tahimik ko siyang pinagdasal matapos maisara ang laptop para bigyan ng oras ang sariling maka-recover sa nabalitaan. Sa kabila nito, nakipagmatigasan pa rin ako sa mensahe sa akin ng uniberso.

Pero hindi pala laging nagtatapos sa tuldok ang mga pagpapasya sa buhay. Dahil isang umaga ng Agosto 2019, bigla na lamang akong ginising ng isang panibagong desisyon at ng isang ideya—ng desisyong alamin ang status ko at ng ideyang anuman ang maging resulta, itutuloy ko ang buhay nang hindi na natarakot. Nagpasya akong mag-half day sa trabaho para pumunta sa isang social hygiene clinic na malapit sa akin. Magaan ang mga hakbang ko habang papasok ako sa gate ng ospital kung saan naroon ang clinic. Kasinggaan ng pakiramdam ko habang kinukuhanan ako ng blood sample para sa gagawing test. Matapos noon ay pinaghintay ako ng nurse sa isa sa mga upuang nakahilera sa labas ng lab kung saan kasama ko ang iba ring naghihintay ng kanilang resulta. May mag-asawa. May buntis. May matanda. Kaharap namin ang telebisyon kung saan paulit-ulit na pinalalabas ang isang infomercial tungkol sa mga dapat naming malaman sa pagpapa-HIV test hanggang sa paggagamot. Pakiramdam ko, para akong hinahanda sa kung ano mang magiging resulta. Sana negative, naisip ko. Pero paano kung positive? Kahit pa. Walang magbabago, pangako ko sa sarili. Ilang beses kong sinagot ang marami ko pang tanong sa isip.

Mas mabilis ang proseso ng HIV testing dito kung ikukumpara 11 years ago noong sinamahan kong magpatest si Sergie. Gumagamit sila rito ng Rapid HIV test kit na kahawig ng mga nabibiling pregnancy test kit sa drugstores. Kaya pagkalipas lamang ng tatlumpong minutong paghihintay, nakuha ko na ang resulta. Ang totoo, bago pa man ako tumungo sa clinic ay inihanda ko na ang ulo ko sa posibilidad ng pagbigat nito nang dahil sa kalawanging koronang maaaring ipasa sa akin ni Jonnie sa araw na iyon. Pero pagkatapos ng paghihintay, walang nagbago sa pakiramdam ko.

Nang malaman ko sa nurse ang resulta, para bang muli kong nakita ang nagliliwanag na imahen ni Jonnie sa isip. Nakaputing fully-beaded gown, unat na unat ang itim na wig, kumakaway sa akin, at naroon pa rin ang koronang nakahapon sa ulo niya. Hindi na ito nginangatngat ng kalawang pero hindi na rin nito taglay ang naunang ningning at kinang noong gabing matalo ako sa byukon. Ganoon pa man, para bang may sariling buhay ang korona sa ulo niya at sinasabi nito sa akin na si Jonnie lamang ang tunay na nagmamay-ari niyon.

Nang paalis na ako ay tinuro sa akin ng nurse ang counter kung saan naroon ang mga libreng condom at lube. Agad kong inihanda ang bag ko. Pero nang mapansin kong nakatingin sa akin ang mga nakaupo sa hilera ng mga upuan ay saglit akong natigilan. Tingin ba ng panghuhusga ang mga iyon? Hindi ako sigurado at wala na rin akong pakialam, sagot ko sa sarili. Ang sigurado ako, mas mahalaga ang yugtong ito para sa aking buhay at katawan, kesa sa mga tinging iyon. Dumakot ako ng hindi mabilang na kahon. Isinilid ang mga iyon at isinara ang zipper ng aking bag tulad ng pagsara ko noong araw na iyon sa bahagi ng buhay kong matagal-tagal ding nabalot ng takot at pagkaduwag.

**pinalitan ang mga pangalan upang itago ang tunay na pagkakakilanlan*

ANG ALAALA NG APOY

Darwin Medallada

Tiniris ko ang upos na tinapon ng lalaki. Ganito ako palagi sa tuwing nakakakita ng mga upos ng sigarilyo. Upos na mayroon pang apoy. Maliit man o malaki. Nakatatak na sa isipan ko, na kahit saan man ako makakita ng ganito, kailangan kong tapakan ang upos para masigurong walang baga na puwedeng madikit sa isang bagay na maaring maging sanhi ng apoy. Hindi ko maalala kung kailan ako nagsimulang maging ganito: may takot sa mga piling bagay na pagsisimulan ng apoy. Halimbawa, kapag papalabas ako ng looban at may mga batang naglalaro ng posporo at nasa akto ng pagsisindi ng palito o kasalukuyang pinagmamasdan ang apoy mula sa nasusunog na plastic ng tsitsirya, lagi't lagi kong sinasabi na 'wag maglaro ng apoy dahil baka magkasunog. Kapag sinasaway ko ang mga bata, hindi ko alam kung mahinahon ba ako, takot o galit ang nararamdaman ko. Basta ang alam ko lang palaging may babala sa mga salita na binibitawan ko. Nagpapaalala na maraming mawawala kapag nagkasunog sa looban.

Ang malaking sunog na nangyari sa looban ang ugat ng lahat ng ito. Iyon lang at wala nang iba pang puwedeng sisihin sa takot ko sa apoy. 1998 nang masunog ang bahay namin dito sa Parañaque. Anim na taong gulang ako noon kaya kakaunti na lang na detalye ang naaalala ko ngayon. Malawak ang naging pinsala ng sunog. Magkakadikit na ang mga bahay sa looban. Malayo sa mga bahay ang bakanteng lote na may matataas na talahib na pinaniniwalaang tapunan noon ng mga sina-salvage at may nagpapakitang white lady tuwing gabi. Panahon din 'to ng pakikinoood namin ng TV sa mga kapitbahay.

Madaling araw nangyari ang sunog. Ayon na rin 'yon sa mama at tito ko. Mahimbing ang tulog naming magkakapatid. Si Leo (1), si Ismael (3) at ako (6), binabalibag na raw kami ng tito ko pero hindi pa rin kami magising sa pagkakatulog. Ang kuwento ni Tito Abner, nataon daw na kakauwi pa lang niya galing Marikina (nakipag-inuman ang sira) at nakasalubong ang mga taong nagtatakbuhan papunta sa ligtas na lugar habang dala-dala ang iba't ibang gamit sa bahay. Nagmadali rin siyang tumakbo, papunta sa amin. Hindi kami nagising ng mga kapatid ko. Kahit pa raw dalawa na sila ni Mama na nagtutulong sa panggigising sa amin. Noong gabing 'yon, wala si Papa sa bahay dahil ibinabyahe ang FX na bina-boundary-han. Wala pang nakatakdang ruta ang mga FX no'n kaya inisip nila mama na kung wala si Papa sa Manila, nasa Baguio ito o 'di kaya'y pumunta ng Bicol. Si Tito ang mag-isang nagbuhat sa aming tatlo. Sa magkabilang bisig niya kami inipit. Sa kaliwang bisig si Leo at Ismael at ako naman sa kanan. Kasama namin si mamang tumatakbo. Paulit-ulit na sinasabi na kunin ang pera sa aparador.

“Kunin mo 'yung pera do'n sa aparador. 'Yung mga centennial na isangdaan na inipon ko, sayang.” Ito ang linyang tumatak sa akin. Hindi nakuha ang pera sa aparador. Hindi nakita ni Tito.

Sa basketball court kami iniwan kasama ng iba pang kapitbahay na nagmamasid lang sa papalaking apoy. May mga mga umiiyak na, tumatakbo ang mga kaya pang bumalik sa bahay para magsalba ng ilang gamit. Si Tito, hindi ko nabilang kung ilang balik ang ginawa niya. Pero may mga naisalba siya. Ilang piraso ng damit at ang *Standard* electric stand fan na may kulay pink na elesi. May paso ng upos ng sigarilyo sa pindutan na number 3.

Hindi agad nakapasok ang bumbero kaya nahirapang mapatay ang sunog. Masikip ang eskinita, maikli ang hose at kulang ang suplay ng tubig. Naalala ko 'to dahil kinausap ng isa sa mga bumbero si Tito. Sinasabi na may mga bahay na hindi kayang maabot dahil maikli ang hose. Umalis na kami no'n pagkatapos. Kailangan daw magpunta sa elementary school dahil doon

ang evacuation center. Hindi kami tumuloy nang mabalitaan nila sa ibang kapitbahay na napuno na ang eskwelahan at wala nang puwedeng matulugan. Isa lang ang naisip puntahan ng karamihan para makapagpahinga. Sa Tulay.

Doon kami nagtipon-tipon kasama ng iba naming kapitbahay na wala rin halos naisalba. Damit na lang ang nadala namin sa Tulay dahil may nagnakaw ng electric fan namin. Bago sumikat ang araw, kaming mga bata, natulog kasama ng ibang matatanda. Umaga na nang magdesisyon ang iba na pumunta sa isa pang eskwelahan na mas malayo kung saan kami nakatira. Sa Parañaque Municipal High School, mas maluwa daw doon at tumatanggap pa ng evacuees. Kasama kami sa mga pamilyang nagpaiwan sa Tulay. Hindi kami sumama sa mga nagpunta sa kadahilanan na kailangang bantayan ang lupang hindi naman sa amin. Isa pa, wala kaming pera. Sunog lahat. Hinihintay rin namin si Papa. Umiiyak na si Leo dahil nagugutom na at wala kahit pambili ng gatas si Mama. Hindi pa siya nagtatago ng pera sa bra noon.

“Babalikan ko ang bahay, ‘te. Kapag ‘di na mainit,” sabi ni Tito kay Mama.

Pagkatapos, pumunta kami sa Manggahan. Hindi ganoon kalayo sa Tulay. Doon ay may silong kami kung sakaling umulan. Puwede ring doon muna pansamantala ayon sa mabait na Seaman na nakatira sa harap ng mga naglalakihang puno ng mangga.

Noong araw ding ‘yon, pagsapit ng tanghalian dumating si Papa. At may dalawang bagay akong narinig mula sa usapan ng matatanda.

“Sinunog ‘yung isang bahay. May nakakita raw do’n sa sumunog. Kaso ‘di na nahuli.” Ito ang isa pa sa hindi ko malilimutan. Lagi akong galit sa mga putanginang arsonista na kung magkakaroon lang ng pagkakataon na mahuli ang halimaw, susunugin ko rin sila at papanoorin kung paano sila mangisay habang sinusubukang patayin ang apoy sa kanilang katawan.

“May namatay.”

“Totoo? Ilan?”

“Sa lang.”

Sa pagtanda ko na malalaman na ang namatay pala’y isang matandang nag-iisa na lang sa buhay. Namatay daw habang natutulog.

Tirik na tirik na ang araw nang dumating si Papa. Ipinagtanong-tanong niya raw sa mga nakaligtas kung nakita raw ba kami at kung saan puwedeng maglagi. Niyakap niya nang niyakap sila Mama at ang mga kapatid ko pagdating. Nakiyakap na rin ako. Bumili siya ng ulam habang naghahanap sa amin kaya sabay-sabay kaming kumain. Menudo, sabi ni Papa. Menudo na noo’y patatas at carrots lang ang sahog.

Doon kami sa Manggahan tumira nang halos isang buong linggo. Mabait ang Seaman na laging nagbibigay ng lutong ulam at kanin sa amin. Palaging nakangiti at nakikipagkwentuhan kay Papa. Kinukumusta kaming mga bata.

Ang hirap-hirap kapag wala kang matirahan. Lalo na kung matutulog ka lang sa lupa na nalalatagan ng banig. May mga lubak at may mga nakausling bato. Pero noong unang araw na ‘yon, nakatulog ako agad. Sa mga susunod na araw maglalaro kami ng mga bata naming kapitbahay ng taguan at habulan na parang walang sakunang nangyari. Panay ang tawanan namin at panay rin ang saway ng matatandang hindi makatulog dahil sa ingay at hagikhikan naming mga bata.

Siksikan pa ang sardinas sa lata no’n. Alam ko dahil ‘yon ang madalas naming maging ulam. Kapag binuksan ni Mama o Papa ang sardinas, ako ang makikiusap na magtataktak sa mangkok ng laman. Matagal bago maglabasan sa lata ang matatabang sardinas na nagsisiksikan. Gustong-gusto ko ang sarsa na may pinigang kalamansi. Manamis-namis na maasim-asim. Pipisatin

ni Mama ang isang mangkok na kanin. Nagmumukhang marami iyon sa paningin namin. Susubuan niya kaming dalawa ni Ismael at kapag naubos, hahayaan niya ulit kaming lumayo sa kanya habang pinapaalalahanan na 'wag magpunta sa kalsada. At kapag naaalala ko, nalulungkot ako, hindi ko man lang kasi nakitang sumubo sa pagkain namin si mama.

Bumalik nga pala si Tito no'ng unang araw ng sunog. Hapon na niya pinuntahan ang bahay naming masuwerte at hindi nasira ng sunog ang mga pader at pundasyon. Eto pa rin ang pader ng bahay namin ngayon. Makikita pa rin ang marka ng pagkasunog sa labas.

Ikalimang araw na ang lumipas nang lagyan nila ng bubong ng mga tropa niya ang bahay. Nilinis at winalis ang mga abo at alikabok. No'ng nasiguro nila na ligtas nang bumalik sa mga bahay, isa-isang nanumbalik ang mga buhay sa looban. Unti-unting bumalik ang mga kapitbahay namin at inayos ang kanilang mga bahay. Tulungan sa pagbuo ng mga bahay. Bumalik din kami dahil kawawa naman daw ang mga bata, ito ang sabi ni Papa na madalas wala dahil kinakailangang magbyahe.

No'ng natapos na ang pag-ayos sa bahay namin, umalis si Tito at nagpaalam.

"Hanapin ko 'te 'yung electric fan." Matagal pa bago bumalik ang linya ng kuryente.

"Tanda mo naman itsura nu'n, Dawe 'di ba?" Tumango-tango ako.

"Sabihin mo nga sa akin kung ano."

"Kulay pink po 'yung elesi, Tito. Saka standard po 'yung tatak."

"Ano pa? Me natatandaan ka pa ba sa itsura?"

"May sunog po ng sigarilyo 'yung number three."

No'ng gabi ring 'yon, bumalik sa bahay namin ang electric fan. Pinuri-puri nila ako na ang galing-galing ko raw dahil natandaan ko kung anong itsura. Iyon ang isa sa magandang bagay na gustong-gusto kong manatili sa utak ko na kaugnay ng sunog. Hindi na ako pinuri ng mga magulang ko simula noon. Dahil hindi naman siguro kailangan ng papuri sa buhay, lalo na kung taga-looban ka. Hindi nakakain ang papuri. Sa kaso ko, isa ang sunog sa nagpatatag sa akin at nagpatigas sa akin bilang tao.

Pinapatay ko pa rin nga pala ang mga upos ng sigarilyong itinapon ng kung sino-sino. Basta nakikita kong may apoy, tinatapkan ko. Hindi puwedeng hindi. Kailangang siguraduhin na walang maaaring sigarilyong pagmulan ng apoy. Nag-aalala rin ako sa chewing gum na basta na lang dinudura sa kalsada. Ganito ang kuwentong naiisip ko na maaaring pagmulan ng sunog: may chewing gum na itinapon na dumikit sa sapatos o tsinelas ng taga-looban, may nagbabagang upos na kumapit sa chewing gum at maiaapak ang parehong bagay sa isa pang bagay na pagmumulan ng apoy. Muling matutupok ang mga bahay sa looban.

Siya nga pala, bago matapos itong sanaysay, gusto ko lang sabihin na sinubukan kong hanapin sa Google ang nangyaring sunog sa Area 7A, Fourth Estate, Parañaque City noong Mayo ng 1998. Wala akong nakitang kahit ano. Nasunog din siguro kasama ng mga alaala ng ibang taong hanggang ngayon ay nakatira rito. O baka hindi naman talaga nangyari 'to at ginagawa ko lang ang kuwento sa tuwing makakakita ako ng tao na nagtatapon ng upos ng sigarilyo.

PAGLALAKAD SA PANAHON NG PANDEMYA

Mark Anthony S. Salvador

Today, we have become so caught up in the push and pull of getting from here to there, of going somewhere, anywhere, we have grown blind to the places we traverse, disconnected from the earth, deaf to the poems our feet make. We have forgotten how to walk.

— sipi sa “Walking” ni Resil B. Mojares

Nabagot ang mga tao sa Kamaynilaan sa mga unang buwan ng lockdown, hindi sanay na makulong sa kipot ng sariling tahanan. Kahit pa nga may mga mapaglilibangan sa loob ng bahay gaya ng social media at Netflix—bagamat hindi lahat ay may ganitong luho—mabigat pa ring mapiit sa sikip ng bahay. Kaya nagsulputan ang laksang mapaglilibangan para mapanatili ang katinuan, gaya ng pag-aalaga ng mga halaman. Kaya tumubo at lumago ang mga salitang “plantito” at “plantita.” Nang lumuwag ang lockdown, at nang sabihin sa akin ni Mama na may mga kapitbahay kaming nagdya-jogging tuwing umaga, lumakas ang loob kong maglalabas ng bahay para maglakad.

Kalimitan, bandang alas-sais ng umaga akong umaalis ng bahay. Kay gaan sa pakiramdam ang makita ang pagsisimula ng araw. May mga papasok sa trabaho. Naglalakad pa lang ang mga magtataho patungo sa kalyeng nakatokang paglakuan. May mga nagpapatae ng alagang aso. May grupo ng mga siklista na hindi pa tumatagaktak ang pawis. May mga nagbubukas na ng tindahan. Laksa sa panahon ng pandemya ang mga nagtitinda ng kung anu-ano sa tapat ng kanilang bahay—face shield at facemask, tocino, hotdog at longganisa—maitawid lang ang bawat araw.

Wala pang alas-nuwebe ng umaga, nasa bahay na ako. Madalas, isang lugar lang ang pinupuntahan ko—ang Paso de Blas Exit, na tinatawag din sa aming “tollgate.” (“Tollgate” ang tawag sa lugar dahil naroon ang tollgate papunta at palabas sa NLEX.) Marami roong bangko at convenience store. Isinasabay ko na sa ehersisyo ang pagbili ng kung ano man at pagwi-withdraw sa ATM. Nagpapalit-palit lamang ako ng ruta papunta sa tollgate. Dalawa ang maaari kong daanan papunta roon. Paglabas ng Assumption Ville kung saan kami nakatira, maaari akong kumaliwa, at dumaan sa service road. Sa rutang ito, ang pangunahing tanawin ay ang NLEX. Kung kakanan naman ako paglabas ko ng Assumption Ville, ang madaraan ko ay mga kabahayan. Itong pangalawang daan ay maaari nang mahati sa maraming ruta. Ngunit paminsan-minsan, nagpupunta ako sa ibang lugar na estranghero sa akin. Sa ganitong mga pagkakataon, nagiging mas aktibo ang aking pandama, dahil nga hindi pamilyar sa akin ang lugar. May isang beses na naglakad ako sa bahagi ng service road na estranghero sa akin. Plano kong pumuntang Meycauayan Exit. Nagulat ako na may harang.

“Wala pong daan dito, Sir,” sabi ng guwardiya.

Nakahiyaan kong magtanong kung ano ang lugar na iyon, at kung bakit may harang at guwardiya sa espasyong pag-aari ng publiko. Ilang araw ang lilipas, nang nasa kotse kami habang binabaybay ang NLEX, tiningnan ko ang bahaging iyon ng service road. Nakakatawa. Memorial park pala iyon kaya may harang.

Bago magkapandemya, hindi ako nagpupunta sa iba-ibang lugar sa Valenzuela. Kaya kay babaw ng pagkakakilala ko sa aming lugar. Pero dahil sa paglalakad, nalaman ko kung nasaan ang ganito at ganoong lugar, kung ano pangalan ng partikular na mga kanto, kung anong TODA ng traysikel ang nakakasakop sa partikular na barangay. Tuwing naglalakad ako, nasisilip ko ang mga eskinita at kanto. Mas nakita ko ang problema sa urban planning sa Valenzuela, gaya ng kawalan ng biking lane at espasyo para sa mga

naglalakad. May mga walang takip na bahagi ng kanal, delikado sa gaya kong naglalakad. Karaniwang tanawin ang nakabalandrang mukha at pangalan ng aming congressman na mula political dynasty ng Valenzuela. Kung tatayo nga sa tapat ng eskuwelahan ng hayksul, mas agaw-pansin pa ang kay laki niyang pangalan na nakatitik sa auditorium kaysa sa pangalan ng mismong eskuwelahan na nakatitik sa gate nito.

Naka-shorts ako tuwing naglalakad, naka-t-shirt at naka-rubber shoes. Naka-face mask ako at naka-backpack, portable biking bag. Nasa loob ng bag ang face shield, tubig at wallet. Naka-earphones ako. At ang soundtrip ko ay theme song ng *Attack on Titan*, *One Piece*, *Naruto* at iba pang anime. Sumasabay sa indayog ng mga kanta ang aking mga hakbang. Minsan naman, pinapatay ko ang tugtog. Ang pinakikinggan ko ay ang sariling musika ng paligid. Kung umuulan at naglalakad ako, gustung-gusto ko ang himig ng pagtama at pagkabasag sa payong ng mga patak ng ulan.

Habang naglalakad, nangangarap ako hinggil sa samu't saring bagay. Madalas kong maharaya ang sarili ko na bokalista ng banda, at kinakanta ko raw ang mga awiting Hapon na theme song ng anime. Kay gaan ng aking mga hakbang. Alam ko, hindi na lang ako basta naglalakad, kundi lumilipad.

May dalawa akong ikinakatakot sa paglalakad sa panahon ng pandemya. Una ay ang COVID-19 virus.

Bago umalis ng bahay, nagdarasal ako na hindi ako kapitan ng virus, at na hindi ako mag-uwi sa aming bahay ng COVID-19. Nang mga unang buwan ng aking paglalakad, dumaraan ako sa lugawan. Tarawag muna ako sa bahay kung gusto ba nila ng lugaw, at kung ano ang nais nilang isama sa lugaw. Bumibili ako ng lugaw, tokneneng, lumpiang toge at siomai. Pero nang makapasok sa bansa ang Delta at Lambda variant, nang lampas 10 libo na ang bagong kaso ng COVID-19 kada araw, at nananatili pa ring walang

plano ang rehimeng Duterte liban sa pagroroleta kung anong lockdown classification ang ipapatupad (ECQ, MECQ, GCQ o MGCQ ba), at wala pa rin ni isa sa aming bakunado dahil sa hirap magkaroon ng slot, hindi na ako bumibili ng lugaw.

Ang ikalawa ay ang pulis. Bago pa magkapandemya, takot na ako sa mga pulis dahil sa kabi-kabila nilang pang-aabuso sa karapatang pantao, partikular sa pagiging berdugo nila sa pekeng kampanya kontra-droga ni Duterte. Sa panahon ng pandemya, tumindi ang kanilang pang-aabuso. May mga recorded video ng mga pulis na bumaril ng sibilyan. Ganoong kahalimaw. Laksang aktibista ang dinadakip. Kaya isang beses, gayon na lang ang takot ko nang sitahin ako ng pulis sa checkpoint. Hinahanapan ako ng quarantine pass, at wala akong dala. Nasa Canuway West ang checkpoint, katabing barangay ng Lingunan, barangay namin. Dagdag-takot ang hatid ng mahabang baril na dala ng pulis. Bakit kailangan ng intimidasyon sa simpleng mamamayan?

Maraming namatay sa panahon ng pandemya. Hindi lang sa virus, kundi maging sa karahasan ng mga pulis.

Wala akong regular na trabaho mulang kalagitnaan ng 2018 hanggang kalagitnaan ng 2019. Freelancer lamang ako. Hindi ako nagtrabaho para tumutok sa pagsusulat ng MA thesis. At napabaya ko noon ang aking kalusugan. Dahil nasa bahay lang naman, natutulog ako nang alas-singko ng madaling araw. Bumabangon nang alas-tres ng hapon, at noon pa lamang kakain. Hindi maganda sa isip ang sirang circadian rhythm. At dahil nagsusulat ng thesis, matindi ang aking stress. At sapagkat nga nasa bahay lang, hindi ako nakakapagkuwento sa mga kaibigan at hindi naeherisisyo ang aking katawan. Gipit na gipit din ako sa pera. Ang mga ito ay nagdulot sa akin ng poor mental health, na nagsimula noong tag-araw ng 2019.

Nang panahon ding iyon, bandang Mayo, napanood ko sa YouTube ang lektura sa Ted Talk ni Leon Taylor, diver at manlalaro sa Olympics. Ang pamagat ng lektura ay “How to Manage Your Mental Health.” Ang pangunahing punto sa kanyang lektura, mahalaga sa mental health ang paggalaw, ngunit kailangan ding ang galaw ng katawan ay ang galaw na gusto ng nagmamay-ari sa katawan. Nagbigay ng halimbawa si Taylor. Isang mini-mentor niya ang may bipolar disorder. Nasisira na ang pamilya nito, at hindi napapabuti ng mga gamot ang kanyang kalagayan. Sinubukan nila ang pisikal na aktibidad. Tinanong siya ni Taylor kung ano ang pinakagusto niyang pisikal na aktibidad, at ang sagot niya ay pagtakbo. Sa loob ng ilang buwan, regular siyang tumatakbo hanggang sa naging kasapi na siya ng running club, at naisama na niya sa pagtakbo ang kanyang pamilya. Kalaunan, bumuti ang kanyang kalagayan. Iyon ang pinakamabuti niyang kalagayan sa loob ng isang dekada. Sabi ni Taylor sa dulo ng kanyang lektura, “Reclaim your mental health by finding your movement, the movement that fills you with joy and do it as often as you can.” Kaya mula noon, tiniyak ko sa sarili kong malimit dapat ang aking pisikal na aktibidad.

Ang pinakagusto ko ay ang paglalakad. Hindi ako gaanong natutuwa sa pagtakbo. Kaya rin ang recreational activity ko nang wala pang pandemya ay hiking. Sa paglalakad, nagiging mas klaro sa akin ang mga bagay. Halimbawa, magbibigay ako ng lektura sa isang webinar, o may isusulat akong akda. Habang naglalakad, naipuproseso ko ang nais kong mga sabihin, at kung papaano ko sasabihin ang mga ito. At kung wala namang kailangang iprosesong ideya, higit na sa sapat ang naidudulot nitong kapayapaan ng isip. Kahit sa loob ng bahay ay mahilig akong maglakad, na malimit ikainis sa akin ni Mama. “Pumirmi ka nga, nahihilo ‘ko sa ‘yo,” sasabihin niya. “Kuya, para kang pison. Atras-abante ka,” sabi minsan ni Papa. Kahit sa banyo namin na isang dipa lang ang haba, paroo’t parito ako habang hindi pa nagbubuhos ng tubig tuwing maliligo.

Ang paglalakad, bago pa man magkapandemya at lalo ngayong may pandemya, ang isa sa mga nagpapagaan ng aking loob. Kaya gustung-gusto ko tuwing pinapahintulutan kaming mga guro na pumasok nang naka-rubber shoes. Noong 2014 ay sa FEU Institute of Technology ako nagtuturo. Matapos akong makatanggap ng malungkot na balita, naglakad ako mulang Morayta hanggang Recto, pumasok sa National Book Store, at bumili ng ballpen. Hindi talaga ako naglakad para bumili ng ballpen, kundi para magbawas ng bigat ng loob.

Sa panahon ng pandemya, may bigat ang bawat araw. Sunud-sunod ang mga balita ng kamatayan. May pagkahapo sa adjustment sa new normal. Sa lagay ko, bilang guro, nag-a-adjust pa rin ako sa modang online class. Nambabagabag ang tangka ng mga Duterte at ng kanilang mga kaalyado na manatili sa puwesto. Laksa ang nakakagalit na balita gaya ng pamamaslang sa mga aktibista, pagpapasa sa anti-terror bill, walang awang pagpaslang ng pulis sa inosente, at pandarambong sa pondong para sa COVID-19 response. Nakakapanglaw ang magdadalawang taong lockdown at kakulangan ng nakasanayang mga interaksyon. Hindi lang virus ang kalaban sa panahon ng pandemya, kundi maging ang bigat ng kalooban. Sa lahat ng bigat na ito, isa ang paglalakad sa mga naging sandigan ko.

Sa paglalakad, lumulutang ako, nalalabanan ko ang mga banta ng paglubog. Sa sinapit ko noong tag-araw ng 2019, at sa hirap sa panahon ng pandemya, isa ang paglalakad sa tumulong sa akin upang makatawid.

Nadaraan ko sa mga paglalakad ko ang mga lugar na tinirhan namin. Lima rin ang pinangupahan namin bago kami nagkaroon ng sariling bahay. Ang unang apat na tinirhan namin ay pawang nasa Canumay West. Ang ikalima naman ay nasa Lingunan, kaparehas na barangay kung saan nakatindig ang sarili na naming bahay.

Sa limang apartment na ito, tatlo lang ang nakikita ko. Dahil ang dalawa pa ay nasa looban, hindi makikita mula sa kalsada. Tuwing nakikita ko ang mga bahay na iyon, nagugunita ko ang mga panahong nakatira pa kami roon. May hatid na lungkot ang pagkatantong kay layo na ng mga kahapong iyon at na kay bilis ng panahon. At bagamat hindi ko naisip sa mga saglit na nakita na ko ang mga apartment na iyon, napagtanto ko kalaunan, kay bilis na nga ng panahon, kay rami pang nasayang na mga pagkakataon dahil sa palpak na pandemic response ng rehimeng Duterte.

Ahon-lusong ang bahagi ng Valenzuela na aming tinitirhan, kaya mas nakakapagod maglakad dito. Ang Kaypandan, halimbawa, isang kalye sa Canumay West, ay mas mataas pa kaysa sa mga billboard sa NLEX. (Kaya maling ipagpalagay na bahain ang lahat ng lugar sa Valenzuela.) Karaniwan nang tanawin sa amin ang pagtirik ng mga trak, nabibigo sa pag-ahon sa kung saang daan. Agad itong nagbubunga ng kay habang linya ng 'di umuusad na mga sasakyan. Ang mga trak na iyon ay mula o papunta sa mga pabrika.

Ang Valenzuela ay lungsod ng mga pabrika. Kaya bibihira akong makakita ng malawak na lungti na gaya ng sa mga bukid sa probinsya. Ang malimit sa Valenzuela ay mga pader. Kaya sa tagal ng lockdown, mahalaga para sa akin ang paglalakad sa mga kalsadang estranghero sa akin. Para may makita akong ibang tanawin, munting panlaban sa katamlayan ng laksang pader.

Sa panahon ng pandemya, marami ang gaya ko na naiinggit sa mga nasa probinsya. Sa tagal ng lockdown, malimit kong maisip ang baryo namin sa Nueva Ecija. May ilog, at sa likod-bahay ay tanaw ang Sierra Madre. Ang mga kababaryo namin ay nakakapunta pa sa bukid at tumana. Kaya tuwing naglalakad, gayon na lang ang inggit ko sa mga may bahay na maraming tanim, at gayon na lang ang galak ko tuwing napapadaan ako sa mangilan-ngilang mapupunong bahagi ng Valenzuela.

Nakalulungkot na wala halos mga puno sa Kamaynilaan, 'di gaya sa ibang bansa na may mapunong mga parke at may puno sa magkabilang gilid ng kalsada. Panlaban ang mga puno sa alinsangan. Sinasabi rin sa mga pag-aaral na nakabubuti sa mental health ang mga puno. Anong sarap sanang maglakad sa kalsadang naliliman ng mayabong na puno na mula sa magkabilang-gilid ng kalsada.

Sa kabila ng init, gusto kong maglakad tuwing tag-araw. Sa panahon kasing ito, nagliliyab sa kapulahan ang mga punong kabalyero, sumasabog ang dilaw na kulay ng nara, nagpapakitang-gilas sa pangangasul ang banaba. Kung walang pandemya, maglalakad ako sa UP Diliman. Mapuno roon, at mamamalas ang pagbabanyuhay ng kulay ng mga puno. Ngunit dahil sa pandemya at kapabayaan ng rehimeng Duterte, kailangan kong magtiyaga sa mga pader sa Valenzuela.

Magdadalawang taon na ang lockdown. At tatlong beses na rin kaming nakapaglakad na mag-anak nang magkakasama. Sa una, kaming apat lang; ako, si Mama, at ang dalawa kong kapatid (sina Ricky at John). Sa pangalawa at pangatlo, kasama na namin si Papa.

Sa pangalawa, Linggo nang maglakad kami. Ang ruta namin ay ang isa sa mga ruta ko tuwing naglalakad ako. Dumaan kami sa palengke na noong lockdown lamang nagbukas at nagbubukas lang tuwing Linggo. Bumili kami ng mga lulutuin. Pagdating sa bahay, nagluto si Ricky ng pares. Masaya kami sa paglalakad at sa pagsasalu-salo.

Sa pangatlo, dumayo kami sa Bustos Dam. Kay sarap makakita ng bagong tanawin. May malawak na anyong tubig, may mga puno at halaman. Nang magpunta kami sa ibabang bahagi ng dam, itinuro ko kay Ricky ang isang pares ng ibon na lumipad sa gawi namin. Akala ko ay mga ilahas na ibon. Hindi pala. Nagulat ako nang makita kong maraming kabataan doon

ang nagpapalipad ng ibon. Papakawalan nila ang ibon, roronda ang mga ito, tatawagin nila sa pangalan, at babalik sa kanila. Tuwang-tuwa kaming mag-anak nang dumapo sa amin ang mga ibon. Hinihiram pa namin sa may-ari ang ibon. Ilalagay namin sa ulo namin saka kukunan ng retrato.

Marami kaming napagkukuwentuhan habang naglalakad. Marami kaming lungkot, galak, takot, pangamba, pangungulila at pangarap na naibabahagi sa isa't isa. Ang paglalakad ay maaaring maging pundasyon hindi lang para pagpapatatag sa sarili ng sa isang indibidwal, kundi maging sa pagpapatatag sa ugnayan ng pangkat ng tao.

Marathon ang sport ng nobelistang Hapon na si Haruki Murakami. Gustung-gusto ko ang sinabi niya sa memoir niyang *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. Ikinumpara ni Murakami ang pagtakbo sa pag-aaral. Aniya, mahal niya ang pagtakbo sapagkat siya ang nagtatakda ng bilis. Ganoon din sa pag-aaral. Hindi siya naging ganoong kainteresado sa pag-aaral sa pormal na edukasyon sapagkat idinidikta lang ito sa kanya, bagay na gagawin lang niya dahil kailangan. Kaya mas minahal niya ang pag-aaral nang wala na siya sa paaralan. Ang halimbawa niya ang pagsasalin. Gaya ng pagtakbo, siya ang nagtatakda ng bilis sa pag-aaral niya sa pagsasalin. Nagagagap ko ang sinabi ni Murakami.

Sa oryentasyon sa online class sa tuwing magsisimula ang semestre, pinagpapakilala ko ang mga estudyante sa pamamagitan ng pagbabahagi sa klase ng kanilang coping mechanism sa panahon ng pandemya. Bilang guro, ako ang nauuna. Sinasabi kong naglalakad ako nang humigit-kumulang apat na kilometro, dalawang beses kada linggo. 'Pag tapos na ang pandemya, maglalakad pa rin ako nang isa hanggang dalawang beses kada linggo. Kung maluwap sa panahon, nang higit pa sa dalawa. Hahanap ako lagi ng panahon para sa mahahabang lakad. At sa mga kuwentuhan hinggil sa karanasan sa

panahon ng pandemya, ibabahagi ko ang nagawa sa akin ng paglalakad. Para din mas makita nila ang importansya nito sa ating kalusugan at kaluluwa.

Hindi kalabisang sabihin na sa tulong ng paglalakad, mas nakilala ko ang aming komunidad at ang aking sarili, at na tinulungan ako ng paglalakad na maging buo sa kabila ng mga pagsubok.

SI NANAY AT ANG MGA LIHIM NG HABAMBUHAY

Mayette M. Bayuga

Paano nga bang Maiintindihan ang Pagtibok ng Puso

Nakabuyangyang ang kaniyang dibdib. Kinukutikot ng aparatong pinahiran ng gel. 2D Echo. Sumasayaw ang mga mistulang anino sa monitor ng aparato. May aninong anyong dila ng apoy. Mayroong simbughaw ng langit. Minsan ulap. Minsan dagat.

Binibilang ba ang tibok ng puso? tanong ko sa nurse. Hindi, sagot niya.

Sinusuyod ang mga lagusan ng puso. Tinitingnan ang pagbubukas-sara ng mga balbula. Inaalam kung may mga tagas. Pinagninilayan ang kontraksiyon. Pati na ang pagbomba. Doktor lang ang maaaring magsabi kung ano ang kahulugan ng mga anino. Sila man daw na taga-Heart Station, hindi lubusang naiintindihan ang lahat, sa kabila ng dami ng pusong kanilang napagsilbihan.

Wala naman talagang tunay na nakaalam sa pintig, sa tibok, at sa lagom ng puso. Pero ano't habang pinagmamasdan ko si Nanay, hindi man ako doktor, hindi paham, at lalong hindi henyo, antok na antok sa madaling araw na walang aasahang kahaliling bantay, bakit pakiramdam ko, alam na alam ko.

Pagpapalit ng Diaper sa Pagitan ng Hatinggabi at ng Pagkabaliw

“Madali bang magpalit ng diaper?” ukilkil nila sa akin.

Bago ang lahat, paano nga ba magpalit ng diaper sa isang bedridden? Una, ihanda ang bagong diaper, ang plangganang may maligamgam na tubig, ang sabon, at ang labakara. Sa totoo lang, puwedeng baby wipes lang, gaya ng kalakaran sa ilang ospital. Siguraduhing may nakalatag na underpad, iyong saping pang-ilalim na nabibili rin sa drugstore o sa grocery, kapag gagawin ang pagpapalit. Kailangan ito dahil may tsansang biglang umihi ulit—ay basa na at mapanghi pa ang kubrekama! Sasaluhin din nito ang tagas ng tubig na panghugas.

Kapag handa na’y patagilirin ang maysakit, nasasaiyo kung pakanan o pakaliwa. Maaaring ito’y maging batay sa nakasanayan, ayon sa natutunan sa pag-asisti sa mga nurse. ‘Pag naikamada na ang mga gamit at ang maysakit, alisin ang pandikit sa magkabilang bahagi ng papalitang diaper. Nakausli ang mga pandikit na ito sa dulo ng tawagin na lang nating “wings” ng diaper. Isuksok ang pang-ilalim na wings sa bandang pigi kung saan siya nakatagilid. Bahagyang ibuka ang kaniyang mga hita. Hugutin ang pang-ibabaw na bahagi ng diaper. Maluwag nang sasama ang ilalim na bahagi. Kapag natanggal na ang maruming diaper, hugasan na ang puerta/ari at ang puwit, saka tuyuin ng labakara. Siguraduhing naka-gloves at laging pababa tungong puwitan ang paghugas. Pagkatapos nito’y muli siyang itagilid at isuksok ang bagong diaper sa ilalim ng pigi. Saka siya itihaya, isaayos ang diaper, at idikit ang magkabilang bahagi nito.

Noong una, inaabot ako ng labinlimang minuto para magpalit ng diaper dahil sa magkahalong ingat at atubili. Habang tumatagal, bumibilis at nagiging kalkulado ang galaw ko. Sabi nga nila, sanayan lang iyan. Ngayon,

sa loob lang ng kulang-kulang limang minuto, kaya kong gawin ito. Iyan ay kung diaper na may ihi lang ang pinaguusapan. Ibang isyu na kapag may iba pang laman ang papalitan.

Madali lang magpalit ng diaper. Kasindali ng pagtatakwil sa walang kakuwenta-kuwenta't sinungaling na kapatid, na sa kabila ng tinamasang layaw ay ayaw magsilbi sa magulang sa panahon ng labis nitong pangangailangan.

Sumpa

Kasagsagan ng sakit ni Nanay. Kapos na kapos na kami't nadurugtungan lang ang pisi mula sa abot ng mga dumadalaw na kamag-anak at kaibigang minsang nakaranas ng kaniyang pagmamahal. Higit kalahating taon na kaming nakalabas sa ospital, at hindi tumitigil ang gamutan. Nariyan nang magkaroon siya ng impeksyon sa puerta at kailangang turukan ng antibiotic ng nurse tuwing ika-apat na oras sa loob ng isang linggo, pati na sa madaling araw. O kaya'y dahil sa granulation, hindi na maipasok ang inner cannula ng kaniyang tracheostomy tube kahit kapapalit lang nito, at dahil may pagdurugo kapag ipinipilit, tumatawag pa ng nurse o off nang caregiver. Pera, pera, pera! Patuloy din ang regular check-up sa mga doktor, ang pagpunta sa ospital para sa x-rays, blood tests, at kung ano-ano pa.

Dahil freelancer, dati na akong kumikita sa online freelance platforms. Dalawang dekada nang home-based at kalaunan ay internet-based ang trabaho ko. Nasabing dolyar, pero hindi kataasan ang bayad at humihigop ng oras ang transcription, manakanakang translation, at iba pang gawa. Dahil inako ko na ang pag-aalaga tuwing umaga, nawalan na ako ng lakas at panahon para tumanggap pa ng mga proyekto. At dapat kong aminin, hindi ko kikitain nang ura-urada sa mga proyekto ko ang ₱800 - ₱1000 per

12 hours to be paid right after shift ng caregiver. Mas praktikal na ako mismo ang maging caregiver kay Nanay kaysa magbayad pa sa iba.

Noong panahong iyon ng matinding gipit, ikinuwento ng kapatid ko ang tatlong magkakahawig na naratibo ng mga anak (isa lang sa kanila ang personal kong kilala), na nang wala nang pera para sa pagpapagamot ng magulang ay'di wala na. In short, tama na. Kilala ko ang estilo ng kapatid ko. Tuwing nagkukuwento siya ay may pa-sample ng karanasan ng mga kaibigan, na halatang idinidiing dapat tularan ang mga iyon, dahil magagaling sila, makoneksiyon, o kaya'y de buena familia. Kaugnay sa kaso ni Nanay, ang ibig lang niyang sabihin, itigil na ang gamutan dahil wala nang pera. Hindi ko na siya tinanong kung ano bang ginagawa ng negosyo niya, na alam ko kung paanong sinuportahan ni Nanay mula simula hanggang wakas, hanggang muling pagbangon, hanggang walang hanggan.

Totoong wala kaming hawak na pera, pero may maaari kaming ibenta. Tawagin na natin itong mana. Sana. Puwedeng sabihing ito'y prime property. Dala ng sinop sa pera at payak na buhay ay naipundar ito nina Nanay at Tatay noong bagong kasal pa lang sila. Alang-alang sa patuloy na pagpapagamot at sa ginhawa ni Nanay, para sa akin, dapat lang itong ibenta. Iyon ang kinamatayang hiling ng ate kong panganay. Gusto ni Ateng maibenta ang propiedad noong malakas pa si Nanay, para si Nanay ang magtamasa ng dadalhing ginhawa. Sinang-ayunan siya noon ng kanina'y nabanggit na kapatid na siyang doon nakatira at may negosyo roon. Sa paglipas ng mga taon, pinanghawakan naming lahat ang mga boka nito tungkol sa kalakaran ng bentahan ng propiedad sa lungsod, ng posibilidad ng lease, at kung ano-ano pa.

"..., ang tagal-tagal!" sigaw ng ate kong panganay. Hanggang huling hininga ay tinatawag niya ang nabanggit na kapatid, tinatanong kung bakit ililibing na siya'y wala pa ring nangyayari sa pagbibenta. "..., ang tagal-

tagal!” paulit-ulit niyang sigaw, sigaw na dinala niya sa libingan, sigaw na umaalingawngaw hanggang ngayon sa aming mga buhay.

Akala ko, dala ng pagkakasakit ni Nanay, sa wakas ay tototohanin na ng nabanggit na kapatid ang pagbibenta. Kailangang isampal sa akin ang totoo—na mas mahalaga sa kaniya ang bahay at lupang iyon. Higit pa sa buhay nino man.

Isa sa mga pinakamahalagang pasya ng buhay ko ang ibiyahe si Nanay. Kasama ang caregiver at armado ng medical travel clearance, nag-eroplano kami pauwing Maynila. May natitira pa akong isang kapatid doon, na sa dami ng iniinda sa isip at katawan, alam kong hindi ko rin naman maaasahan. Mahaba pa ang gamutan, pero sigurado ako noon, gusto pang mabuhay ni Nanay. Kailangang bitawan ang lahat, ang lahat-lahat, pati ang walang silbing daloy ng dugo, ang kasuklam-suklam na kapilas ng laman.

Ngayon Mo Sabihin sa Aking Magmongha Ako

Sabi mo bagay sa akin maging mongha
Nakatalukbong mula ulo hanggang paa
Dulo lang ng hinliliit ang nakikita.
Na-stroke si Nanay habang nagbabakasyon sa probinsiya
Sumugod ako roon at higit dalawang buwan kami sa ospital
Iisa na ang tunog ng vital signs, blood test, x-ray, cbc, urinalysis
Discharged na sana nang bumagsak ang sodium at potassium
Sa ICU nauwi dahil hospital-acquired pneumonia ang komplikasyon.
Hindi buhay-ospital na walang kahaliling bantay ang tunay na kalbaryo
Kundi ang mga araw ng lubusang pagpapagaling sa bahay namin
Bedridden, isa-suction ang plema, sa NGT pakakainin hanggang gumaling
Isa, dalawa, tatlong buwan, taon, hindi ko alam. At
tututok ako, ako at ako at ako pa rin.

Sa umaga'y matagal nang sabay sa dupikal ng kampana ang aruga
Bawal ang makolesterol at ang pampataas ng uric acid
Etsa-puwera ang may gata, matamis, pati isdang may kaliskis. Aligaga
sa OOTD, potluck, manito/manita't iba pa niyang bonding
Sa dating kaopisina, kaorganisasyon, kasimbahan, o friends forever.
Sa bawat gabi'y pilit nagpapaalala ang isang haplos
Limot man ang init ng dantay sa pisngi, sa baywang, sa hita
Balot ng puting kumot mula ulo hanggang paa
Habang ipinaghehele ng agunyas
Ng paulit-ulit na pagpapakamatay.
Walang sasapat na mga salita sa pagtalikod sa laya
Ngayon mo sabihin sa aking magmongha ako
Dahil matagal na, matagal na matagal na akong mongha.

Isang Salita, Kaisa-isang Salita

Sabi nila, magbigay daw ako ng isang salita. Iyong hindi ko madalas gamitin.

Pag-ibig. Kusang dumating ang salita. Ni hindi ko inisip. Ano'ng klaseng pag-ibig, parang korong panabay ang kanilang tanong.

Iba't iba ang pag-ibig, pumailanlang ang boses ng isa. Nagbabaga ang eros, para sa sinta, sakop ang romansa, panglaman, may erotika. May tindig ang philia, ang sumasaklaw sa magulang at sa mga kapatid, para sa pamilya. At may agape, ang banal na pag-ibig, tangi para sa Panginoon. Binigkas niya ang paliwanag na parang orasyon, kung paano niya itong isinagot sa Second year High School Religion class recitation.

Dumagundong naman ang boses ng kaniyang kasama, may itinataas na bandera sa bawat linya.

Pag-ibig sa bayan!

Pag-ibig sa kalikasan!

Pag-ibig sa tanang nilalang, pati sa buhay-ilang!

Pag-ibig sa iba't ibang kasarian!

Pag-ibig sa kalayaan!

Pag-ibig sa 'di nakikita't 'di naiintindihan!

At higit sa lahat, pag-ibig sa Sarili!

Huwag din kalimutan ang platonic love, hirit naman ng pinakatahimik sa kanila. Parang hiyang-hiya pang ang mga labi'y ibinuka.

Sandamakmak ang pumapag-ibig, pa-final words ng kasama nilang bida-bida dahil naging scholar daw sa Europa. May istruktura ang pag-ibig mula inkarnasyon bilang pers lab, young love, puppy love, second chance, till death do us part, long and lasting, one great love, walang hanggan, at 'di maiiwasang sawing pag-ibig, hanggang sa ebolusyon tungo sa rebound, TOTGA, pinagtagpo pero 'di pinalad, at ang walang kamatayang forever. Walang katapusan ang mga litanya ng uri ng pag-ibig, 'di nga ba't may pag-ibig sa pag-ibig. Universal language dapat tandaan, kaya laging paksa ng kuwento, tula, kanta, at sa spoken word poetry bentang-benta.

Ay, pag-ibig... may pagkakataong dakila, wagas, tapat, tunay; mas madalas walang dangal, hangal, baliw, tanga.

Pag-ibig... Pag-ibig... Pag-ibig...

Hindi para sa akin ang pag-ibig.

Hindi Para sa Akin ang Pag-ibig

Iyon ang akala ko. Iyon ang sabi ko. Hanggang dalawin ko si Nanay sa ICU, nakatubo ang bunganga, may pulse oximeter sa hintuturo

na nakakabit sa monitor sa dakong ulunan, nahihimlay sa pagitan ng agaw-buhay at habambuhay.

Hindi ako nagdalawang-isip nang sabihin ng pulmonologist na kailangang gawin ang tracheostomy operation. Mabilis ang pirma ko sa waiver na iniabot ni Doc nang ipatawag niya ako nang madaling-araw na iyon. Kailangan na raw agad gawin ang procedure dahil naghahabol na ng hininga si Nanay. Sa kabila ng intubasyon, patuloy ang pagkapal ng kaniyang 'di mailabas na plema, na baka muling mauwi sa pneumonia. Takot man ako sa operasyon dahil walumpo't walo na si Nanay, mas di ko kayang walang gawin sa sitwasyon niya. Hindi na ako nagdalawang-isip. Ni hindi ko inisip ang pera, ang realidad na sa mga oras na iyon, talagang kami'y walang-wala na.

Hinawakan ko ang mga kamay ni Nanay bago siya tuluyan nang ipasok sa operating room. Habang naghihintay sa tabi ng pintong may markang OR - Unauthorized Persons Not Allowed, naramdaman ko ang lalim ng aking pananampalataya. Dasal. Gaya ng maraming ibang pagkakataon sa buhay ko, tunay na naintindihan ko ang kapangyarihan ng dasal.

“Sumasampalataya ako...,” tinawag ko ang Amang lumikha ng langit at lupa, ng tanang nakikita at 'di nakikita. May sariling pakpak at buntot ang mga sumunod pang salita. Nagmamakaawa't nagpipita, gumapang ang mga salita sa kailailaliman at kadilimdiliman, ginalugad ang bawat lagusan ng hapis at tuwa, liwanag at luwalhati, bago tuluyang sumalunga sa katarik-tarikang langit. Dasal. Iyon ang dasal, ang dasal na nagpadaloy ng hangin, nagpapanatag ng pulso, at nagpakalma ng tibok ng puso ni Nanay.

Akala ko iyon na nga ang dasal.

Hanggang makalabas kami ng ospital at dumating ang mga sandali ng mag-isang pag-aalaga kay Nanay sa bahay. Kaututang dila ang panghi, ang

plema, ang sugat, ang paninikip ng paghinga. Walang puwang ang pagod, ang puyat, ang lungkot, ang takot, ang galit.

May oras ang pagpapakain gamit ang nasogastric tube o NGT, anim na beses isang araw. Walang oras ang pagdaloy ng ihi at ang pagsabog ng taе. May oras ang pag-inom ng gamot. Walang oras ang emergency. May oras ang ligo, masahe, therapy. Walang oras ang luha.

Noong una, may dalawa kaming caregiver. Isang pang-umaga, isang panggabi. Nang 'di na sapat ang pera, sinabi kong aakuin ko na ang araw, huwag na huwag lang mawalan sa gabi. At ginawa ko nga iyon. Kaya lang, nangyari pa rin ang kinatatakutan ko, nawalan pa rin sa gabi. May kapatid, pero parang wala, at minsan nga, sadyang nawawala, sinasadyang mawala.

Ayaw ko nang isipin o ipaliwanag kung paano kong kinaya ang halos bente kuwatro oras na pag-aalaga. Ilang ulit nga bang nabuhos sa akin ang ipinakakain kong osterized food, dahil nakatulog na pala ako habang hinihintay ang pagdaloy nito mula sa sa asepto syringe. May panahong ubod ng lapot ng pagkain, tuwing may sangkap na saging o kaya'y itlog, at halos isang oras o higit pa inaabot ang pagpapakain. Kung minsan, nanginginig ang mga tuhod ko sa pagbuhat o pag-angat kay Nanay. Kailangang tuwing ikalawang oras ay baguhin ang kaniyang posisyon, para huwag magkaroon ng bed sores. Ganoon din kapag uupo siya sa wheelchair katulong ng caregiver o ng inuupahan naming tagabuhat. Maraming pagkakataong kailangan kong iwan ano mang ginagawa, nasa gitna man ng pagkain, pagbabanyo, o ano pa man, dahil nandiyan na ang tagabuhat niya.

Sa gitna ng bigat at hirap, mas madalas na mag-isa lang ako. Tunay na mag-isa lang ako. Noong isalang si Nanay sa operasyon, sinalo kami ng dasal. Akala ko noon ay sapat na ang mga salitang gumapang sa kailailaliman at tumawid sa tarik ng langit. Hindi pala.

Narito pala ang dasal kung nasaan ako. Hawak ko pala ang dasal. Kamay ko ang dasal.

Tinanong ko ang mga Diyos Kung Ano ang Sakop ng Buhay

Lahat. Ito, iyan, dito, doon, tayo, ikaw, siya, ako. Ang paghinga, paghingalay, pahinga. Pawang salita, salik, at saysay. Tanang banggitin ko, bawat saklaw ng alaala mo, ang kahit ano mang ipinaglalaban nila, buhay iyan.

Ang mga lambak, talampas, bangin, burol, dalisdis, bundok ... pati na iyong walang patawad nang kinalbo't ginahasa ...

Pawang dagat, ilog, sapa, bukal... pinagtapunan man ng basura, binalahura ng pagmimina, o sinagasaan ng reklamasyon...

Lakbayin lahat ng abot-tanaw, mula sa kaitaasan ng langit yakap ng mga ulap hanggang sa kailalaliman ng di-madipang lupa...

Saklaw ang lundo ng lumbay, ang salalayan ng saya, ang palababahan ng paglaya, ang lambong ng libog, pati na ang tili ng takot...

Kasama ng sanga tangkay bulaklak damong ligaw, may tanglaw ng buwan bulalakaw at mga bituin, sinisikatan ng araw ang pag-iral ng mga bagay na paimbabaw. Kaya mahabang panahong namayagpag ang materyal. 'Di ba't nilantakan ang mga pinakabagong teknolohikal na alay. Ay, buhay!

Nakasisilaw ang rangya, layaw, ningning, sarap. Kaya't di mahanap ang daan tungo sa mga limot na libingan... sa mga ulilang puntod... sa pinakahuling himlayan... dahil lagi't lagi, nalilimutan ng marami, sakop din ng buhay ang kamatayan.

Silang 'Di Nagbabayad Ng Utang

Utang na pera, o utang na loob? Tanong ko. Pareho, pumailanlang ang sagot. Hininga't hinagap iyong dumating, may tinig ngunit walang

mukha. Anino. Yabag. Hangin.

May mga tao bang may pagkakautang sa iyong nanay?

Oo.

Magpasalamat ka sa kanila.

Silang hindi bayad, silang ni hindi nakakaalala? Sumisigaw ang utak ko kahit pipi ang bunganga.

Oo. Sila. Dahil sa kanila kaya nananatili siyang malusog.

Nakarayat si Nanay, bedridden, pero tunay ngang malusog. Labis-labis biyayang sa kasagsagan ng pandemyang COVID 19, di namin kailangang makipagsapalaran sa ospital. Pero paanong nangyaring dapat ko iyong ipagpasalamat sa mga taong buong kapal ng mukhang humingi ng tulong sa kaniya noong panahon ng kanilang pangangailangan, pero 'di nagparamdam man lang nang siya na ang nangangailangan? Ilang kasal-binyag-libing na ang dumaan sa kanilang mga buhay di man lang sila nahimasmasan.

May batas ang kalikasan. May dunong ang uniberso. Balanse, anak, binabalanse ang lahat. Muli akong pinaalalahanan ng tinig. Buhay ang enerhiya ng ano mang utang na 'di binayaran. Paulit-ulit itong maniningil. At paulit-ulit itong pagbabayaran. Itinatanong mo kung sa paanong paraan. Madali lang. Sa takdang panahon, sasaluhin ng may pagkakautang, salapi man iyan o kabutihan, ang ano mang laan sa pinagkakautangan. Tanang sakit, kahirapan, pighati, kamalasan... Sa kaniya, o sa kaniyang mga anak at apo, sa buong salinlahi niya dadagok ang dapat sana'y sa pinagkautangan. At lagi't lagi, makararating sa pinagkakautangan ang balita ng kanilang kapahamakan, 'di man asamin, 'di man asahan.

Parang sumpa, sabi ko.

Sumpa ang mangutang, utang na pera man iyan o utang na loob, nang 'di inaalintana ang kabayaran. Isinusumpa ng may pagkakautang ang kaniyang sarili.

Iyon lang at naglaho ang alingawngaw—hininga't hinagap, anino, yabag, hangin.

Ganoon, ganoon dumating ang mga lihim.

Hindi na Ulit Ako Nagtanong sa mga Diyos

Hindi ko alam kung dahil natakot ba ako sa kanilang mga sagot. O dahil inakala kong nasa akin na ang sagot. Nasa paghinga, sa bawat hiningang lumalagom sa lawak ng mundo; nasa puso, sa bawat tibok na pinakakawalan tungong walang hanggan; nasa daloy—bulong sigaw halinghing hikbi—na pawang tumatawid sa simula't katapusan... nasa pag-ibig, nasa dasal, nasa sumpa....

Labing-isang taon si Nanay nang sumiklab ang ikalawang digmaang pandaigdig. Ang sabi niya, nagbabayo siya ng palay nang una nilang marinig ang putukan at pagsabog sa paligid. May bundok sa likod-bahay nila at doon sila nagbabakwit tuwing kinakailangan, at agad ding umuuwi kapag humupa na ang mga putok. Minsan sa pagmamadali'y 'di sila nakapagdala ng mga gamit. Maselan ang bunso niyang kapatid at ayaw nitong kumain nang walang kubyertos. Pinabalik ni Lola si Nanay sa kanilang bahay. Bago pa man siya makaalis dala ang mga pinggan at kubyertos, may dumating na dalawang Hapon. Mabuti na lang at may tambak ng mga muebles sa kanilang kusina, dahil doon inihabilin ng isang maykayang pamilya ang mga aparador, escritorio, silya, at iba pang kasangkapan. Nagsumiksik siya sa pagitan ng mga iyon. Umikot-ikot ang mga Hapon, pero agad ding nagsialis. Nang wala na ang mga ito, noon niya napansing may salamin ang aparador na halos kaharap ng pinagtataguan niya, at kung napausli lang ang kaniyang hintuturo o alakalakan ay huli na siya.

Lagi kong iniisip simula noon, paano kung nahuli si Nanay ng mga Hapon? Pakiramdam ko, putol ang kuwento. Bitin. Minsan, masasabing

mainam din ang ganoon, dahil maraming ibang kuwentong maaaring idugtong.

Kung nahuli raw si Nanay ng mga Hapon dadalhin siya sa barracks, paglalampasuhin, pag-iigibin ng tubig, aalilain. At ang malagim, maaaring gaya ng mga sanggol, tatarakan siya ng bayoneta, papatayin. Hindi pa isinisiwalat noon ni Lola Rosa at ng iba pang comfort women ang kanilang sinapit sa kamay ng mga Hapon. At hindi pa abot ng isip ko ang rimarim ng kahalayan. Sa awa ng Diyos, hindi nahuli si Nanay ng mga Hapon. Nakabalik siya sa bundok kung saan sila nagbakwit. Kumain nang may kubyertos ang kaniyang bunsong kapatid.

At nadugtungan nga ang kuwento ni Nanay. Hanggang maging bahagi ako ng kuwentong iyon. Anghel akong dumating, sabi niya, dahil nasa tiyan pa lang ako iniligtas na ako ng aking angel de la guardia, o anghel na bantay. Kabuntisan niya ay gumagawa ng thesis si Nanay para sa kaniyang Master's Degree. Bahagi ng pananaliksik ay kinailangan niyang pumunta sa ilang taniman sa Inagawan sub-colony. Malayang namumuhay ang ilang bilanggo ng Iwahig Penal Colony sa Inagawan. Ang ilan sa kanila ay may pamilya na roon. Taglay nila ang pribilehiyong iyon dahil napatunayan nilang maaari na silang muling pagkatiwalaan. Gayunman, ang sakop lang ng lugar na iyon ang kanilang dapat puntahan. Kilala sa tawag na kolono, nagsasaka, namamalakaya, o kaya'y lumilikha ng souvenir items ang nabanggit na mga bilanggo.

Naghanap ng mauupahang sasakyan si Nanay para maging madali ang pag-iikot niya sa lugar. Hindi pa palasak noong panahong iyon ang mga paupahang sasakyan. Isang pick-up truck ang naipagamit sa kaniya, na karapatdapat naman dahil malubak ang daan patungo roon at susuyurin ang mga liblib at kamarikutan ng lugar. Nang matapos ang sadya, agad nang sumakay sa pick-up truck para makapagpahinga si Nanay. Nasa 'di kalayuan lang ang driver, may kausap na mga tagaroon. Isang kolono ang biglang

dumating at sa isang iglap ay binuksan ang driver's seat at pinaharurot ang pick-up. Hindi alam ni Nanay na hindi niya naisara nang maayos ang pinto sa passenger's side. Sa biglang galaw ng sasakyan ay nasadsad siya sa pinto at tuluyan na iyong bumukas. Nasa may sinapupunan niya ang rosaryo at ang nobenaryo ni San Hudas Tadeo nang mahulog siya. Ramdam na ramdam niya ang unti-unting paglapag ng kaniyang katawan, na para bang may sumasalo sa kaniya. Puwit niya ang unang tumama sa lupa.

Maliban sa nagkulay-lilang puwit at mga hita, walang naging aberya sa katawan ni Nanay. May takot nga lang siyang baka ilabas akong sungi o may cleft palate. Wala pang ultra sound noon. Wala pa ring doktor na espisipiko sa pagbubuntis sa Puerto Princesa. Kaya idinaan niya sa nobena ang kaniyang matinding takot. Ilang buwan ang lumipas matapos niya akong maipanganak, nakarating sa kaniya ang balitang binartolina ang kolonong nagpaharurot ng pick-up. Nasa elementarya na ako nang una niyang ikuwento sa akin ang pangyayaring iyon.

“Ano po ang bartolina?” tanong ko kay Nanay.

Isang masikip na kulungan kung saan walang tumatagos na liwanag ang bartolina. Nakakadena sa loob niyon ang pinarurusahan. Kawawa naman iyong kolono. Ganoon ang naaalala kong sagot niya. Maawain talaga si Nanay, kahit sa mga nakagawa ng masama sa kaniya. Hindi ko minana ang ugali niyang iyon.

Ang pagkakakulong sa bartolina ay katumbas ng unti-unting pagkamatay ng espiritu, kung hindi man ng katawan. Naintindihan ko iyon nang magkaisip na ako. At hindi ko maubos-maisip kung anong galit o anong lungkot ang nagtulak sa kolono para gawin ang isang bagay na alam din niyang sa huli ay ikapapahamak niya. Bakit kailangan niyang paharurutin ang sasakyan? Pupuga o tatakas ba siya, 'di ba't malaya naman siyang namumuhay doon? Ngayon sa aking pagtanda, hindi ko rin maubos-maisip kung anong higit pang lagim ang nangyari sakaling di nahulog sa pick-up si Nanay.

Ipinanganak akong hindi sungi. Hindi rin ako umiyak kundi pa tinampal ng midwife. Mag-aanim na taon ako noong unang magpakita sa akin ang isang anghel. Siya ang angel de la guardia, ang aking anghel. Nagparoo't parito siya habang mag-isa akong naglalaro sa aming likodbahay, nagkukutkot ng lupang hinuhugis kong tao-tauhan. Anghel siya, oo, anghel nga, kaya lang wala siyang pakpak. Noong gabing iyon, tinanong ko si Nanay kung may pakpak bang lahat ng mga anghel. Nakalimutan ko kung ano ang isinagot niya. O maaaring noong sumagot siya'y iba na ang aking pinagkakaabalahan. Pisngi't labing mamula-mula sa maamong mukhang nakahingalay sa dalawang pakpak at sa suson-susong ulap... akala ko noon, ganu'n ko makikita ang aking angel de la guardia. Gaya iyon ng itsura nila sa mga libro, sa mga kalendaryo, o sa mga dasalan. O puwede ring iyong may pakpak na sanggol na tumutugtog ng plawta, biyolin, o kaya'y alpa. Hindi pala. Walang dasal, walang kasabay na pagbukas ng langit at pagsabog ng liwanag, at ni isang talulot ng rosas di nalaglag galing sa kalawakan... ganoon nagpakilala ang aking walang pakpak na anghel.

Hindi man siya kamukha ng aking pinangarap, hindi ako iniwan ng aking anghel. Hanggang ngayon, hindi niya ako iniwan. Angel de la guardia. Anghel na bantay. Sa mga sandaling hindi ko inaasahan, sumusulpot siya sa aking likuran, minsan sa harapan, 'di kaya'y sa tagiliran, sa abot-kamay, o sa di maaninag man lang... anino, badya, hininga... anino...

...hininga ...

...badya ...

Anino ... Badya ... Hininga ...

Sabay kaming tatawid sa kawalan pauwi sa kabilang mundo, sabi ko kay Nanay. Matagal pa iyon, diin ko, lalakas pa siya, babangon ulit, at lalakad. Lagi na'y tumatango siya, pumapayag umupo sa wheelchair, at matapang na

lumalaban. Ramdam ko noon ang takot niya sa kamatayan. Kaya lang, alam ko, kailangan ko siyang ihanda, siya at ako, dahil ayaw man namin, darating at darating ang wakas. Ang mga tao sa paligid namin, handang-handa na. Bonus na raw ang buhay ni Nanay, quotang-quota na. Madali nilang sabihin iyon dahil hindi sila ang nasa bingit ng buhay at kamatayan. Lagi akong sumasagot na wala sa edad, lakas ng katawan, o ano pa man ang kamatayan. At patunay nga, napakaraming mas bata o batang-batang kakilala ang nabalitaan kong namatay noong maysakit si Nanay. Tunay na walang makapagsasabi kung kailan darating ang kamatayan, si Kamatayan. At lagi, ibinubulong ko sa sarili kong huwag matakot sa kaniya. Napapakiusapan siya. Pinakiusapan ko siya. Sandali lang, bulong ko.

Hahawakan ko ang kaniyang kamay, aalagaan ko siya hanggang sa kabilang buhay, pangako ko kay Nanay. Kaya dapat ay hintayin niya ako. Hanggang dumating ang mga araw na alam kong hirap na hirap na ang kaniyang katawan, na wari bang pinipilit na lang niyang mabuhay dahil alam niyang ginagawa ko ang lahat para madagdagan pa ang kaniyang mga araw. Kahit alis na alis na ang kaniyang espiritu. Minsan, tinititigan niya ako, parang sinasabing hindi na niya ako mahihintay.

Hanggang isang madaling-araw, hindi na nga niya ako nahintay.

Hindi Ko Alam Kung Hanggang Kailan Ako Maghihintay

Hindi ako nakatawid kasabay ni Nanay. Naiwan akong nakatunghay, bantay sa kaniyang bangkay. Hindi ko alam kung hanggang kailan ako maghihintay.

“Hindi hinihintay ang kamatayan,” sabi ng mga anino. “Kusa itong nagpaparamdam, dumarating, o kumakaway.”

Sa panaginip, hinatid ko si Nanay sa malayong-malayo, sa kabila ng kadawagang nababakuran ng alambre. Hindi ko alam kung paano akong nakauwi galing doon. Nagising na lang ako. Hanggang ngayon, nagigising ako sa kalaliman ng gabi, o sa madaling-araw, at pakiramdam ko’y nalalaglag ako... paulit-ulit akong nalalaglag. Kaya lang, bago ako tuluyan nang bumagsak sa sahog, may butuhang mga daliring sumasalo sa akin... paulit-ulit akong sinasalo.

Alam ko na ngayon kung bakit walang pakpak ang aking angel de la guardia. Nagkalasog-lasog iyon sa kaniyang pagsalo kay Nanay noong malaglag sa pick-up. Nadurog ang bawat bahagi ng pakpak, nagiyagis sa lupa, sumama sa alikabok, inilipad ng hangin, lumayo, malayong-malayo, at tuluyan nang lumaya

“Maiya,” tawag niya sa akin. Sa mga pagkakataong ramdam ko ang kamandag ng sumpa sa mga hibla’t habi ng aking bawat salita, dumarating ang aking bantay na anghel. Siyang tagasalo ng mga lihim. Lagi’t lagi niyang pinaaalala sa gitna ng aking paghihintay, na ang kabilang-mukha ng kamatayan ay ang habambuhay.

Amen.

PERSONAL CHRONICLES: THE UST “PANDEMIC WORKSHOP” 2021¹

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

Prologue

These notes started out as jottings in my notebook as we were conducting the UST National Writers’ Workshop in 2021. The sort of thing I do all the time. (“See enough, and write it down,” Joan Didion said, in, I think, *Slouching Toward Bethlehem*.)

Then I decided to continue writing the notes as FB updates.

13 June 2021

The job of the Director and Coordinator of our annual National Writers’ Workshops begins practically as soon as the previous workshop ends. So Nerisa Guevara and Dawn Marfil-Burris, Director and Coordinator respectively, swung into action in June of 2019. By November, all applications for the Workshop Fellowships were in. Nerisa announced that it was time to do a selection. And on December 4, 2019, at a “Special Deliberation Meeting,” we met to select 15 Writing Fellows for the UST NWW. By February 2020, all but one had confirmed attendance, and a replacement had been selected for that one. The Workshop dates had to be pushed back to accommodate the UP NWW (April 12-19), and were set for April 19-26. The usual venue

¹ The UST National Writers’ Workshop is the oldest and most important of the UST Center for Creative Writing’s regular programs, dating back to 2000, under Ophie Alcantara Dimalanta, the Center’s founding director. Since 2012, the year of the Center’s revival, the Workshop has been held every summer, at the Ridgewood Residence Hotel in Baguio. It is run by a Director and a Coordinator who are named at the end of the workshop prior to the one they will be in charge of.

had been settled on—the Ridgewood Residence Hotel. The names of the writing fellows had been posted in the Center’s FB page, and the first press release had appeared in the *Manila Bulletin*.

In March 2020, the pandemic struck. By the 16th, Manila was on lockdown. Preparations for the Workshop continued. The lockdown was expected to be lifted on April 15. But on April 15, it was announced that it was to be extended till April 30. And then, it was extended again to May 15. In fact, it was to remain in place—on various “alert levels”—for a long, long time.

The Resident Fellows were unanimous about pushing through with preparations, and about holding the Workshop. Online, if need be. But was an extended online workshop even feasible? The challenges seemed overwhelming. Did all the Writing Fellows have reliable Internet connectivity? Could they commit to going online every day for the duration of the Workshop? What was a practical schedule for the members of the Teaching Panel, most of whom would have to be holding their regular classes during the Workshop?

At our regular monthly meeting on August 27, Ricci Guevara revealed the results of the survey on Internet connectivity, which she and Dawn had conducted. Of the 15 Writing Fellows, one would not be available during the projected new schedule; three were based outside Metro Manila (Catanduanes State University, Central Luzon State University, and West Visayas State University), and had poor Internet connectivity; and one was a medical doctor—a frontliner who went home every day after 6 or 6:30 PM.

By September, it was confirmed: the NWW would be held online, via Zoom, from Nov. 9 to Dec. 2, at 5 PM to 8 PM, from Monday to Thursday. It would be only the second such online writing workshop in the country. (The first was UP’s, which was held every day, from Oct. 19-31, at 8:30 AM to 5:30 PM).

Once the workshop got underway, there were other challenges. In Baguio, everyone was more relaxed. Both the Writing Fellows and the members of the Teaching Panel were on leave from their respective jobs and home responsibilities. We could all focus on the sessions. Even more important, we could have fun! As Dawn put it: “This Workshop had to compete with the pressures of both work and home.” Some members of the Teaching Panel would go into the Workshop Zoom room directly from their own online classes (to which they had not yet quite adjusted themselves).

Later, Dawn was to muse privately, to me. “First, we lost the bus ride to Baguio. This bus ride would ease you out of your normal life and into workshop mode, and then ease you back into it when you were done. Then we lost the leisurely atmosphere of the Baguio Workshop, that feeling of having all the time in the world to focus on the piece being discussed, and thinking of ways to improve it. Then we discovered that jokes among panelists and between panelists and writing fellows didn’t translate well over Zoom. Facial expressions were only as clear as one’s computer cameras; voice was dependent on speakers and Internet connections. One got the feeling that one wasn’t really connecting effectively. Time management was complicated. There were too many distractions and interruptions. The opportunity to complain about having too much food was also taken away, and that had always been such a fun thing to do! So was eating and drinking with the Writing Fellows, which often became mentoring sessions. And, of course, hanging out with co-panelists, over *merienda*, or dinner, making *tsismis*—sometimes about life and sometimes about work. I particularly missed the sense of accomplishment that was always part of the graduation ceremony at the end. And, I especially missed the free alcohol, courtesy of Lito Zulueta.”

Dawn forgot to mention the typhoon that hit Metro Manila, and forced us to cancel workshop sessions for a couple of days. So, actually, the workshop ran until December 4.

Still, we came through. And it was no mean feat. Unfortunately, we couldn't even give Ricci and Dawn the treat that they deserved.

Part 1

14 June 2021

Ok, this is Take 2 for us. We're a bit more confident now than we were at the start of the 2020 NWW.

The initial call for applications went out on Feb. 28, 2021. At the Center's regular monthly meeting (via Zoom) on March 3, the Workshop Coordinator, Paul Castillo reported receiving 88 applications in all. By March 10, the deadline, there were 95 applicants competing for 16 slots, for the short story, poetry, creative nonfiction and play/screenplay. This number was unprecedented.

Deliberations were held on April 23, and took all of 5 hours. Via Zoom, as usual. Refreshments were provided, courtesy of the *Varsitarian*, through Lito Zulueta. Once again, the *Varsi* is also sponsoring the honoraria for our three Guest Panelists, Workshop regulars Jimmy Abad, Jerry Gracio, and Luna Sicat-Cleto.

Our Writing Fellows, Batch 2021, are the following: Vince Raphael Agcaoili, poetry; Andy Lopez, poetry; Immanuel Canicosa, fiction; Alexandra Maria O. Alcasid, fiction; Chuck D. Smith, creative nonfiction; Eunice Joy R. Bacalando, creative nonfiction; Cris Lanzaderas, kuwento; Mubarak M. Tahir, kuwento; KC Daniel Inventor, sanaysay; Roda Tajon, sanaysay; Paul John C. Padilla, tula; Mark Dominick Portes, tula; Sabrina Basilio, dula; and Eluna Cepeda, screenplay. This is the first time we have as many as five Writing Fellows from outside the NCR.

Only soft copies of the manuscripts to be workshopped were distributed this year, though exceptions were made for those members

of the Teaching Panel who require hard copies due to weak eyesight, like myself. However, Writing Fellows received, via courier, a Workshop Kit—containing a Workshop T-shirt, a complimentary copy of one book authored by a member of the Teaching Panel, and a copy of the *Tomás* anniversary issue (in the genre to which the particular Writing Fellow belongs). The Center’s request for a corporate Zoom account (accessible to non-Thomasians) was granted by the Vice Rector for Finance, Fr. Roberto L. Luanzon, O.P.

So we’re all set.

Part 2

15 June 2021

On Day 1 (yesterday), we took up the poetry of **Vince Raphael Agcaoili** and **Andy Lopez**, with Ralph Galán and Lito Zulueta, respectively, as moderators.

Vince has an M.A. in Lit from the University of Asia & the Pacific, and now works as an Instructor there. It is a dark world that he paints.

We took up the poem “Envoy”

“When I was in my fourth grade, my teacher told me—*Iho, / mamatay ka na*. I studied death after school/ to make amends with its envoys...”

And “Obituary”

“She lives well in the closet. Thank you,/ she says, because the skeletons we keep are kinder/ than the world I know..”

Andy has a B.A. in Communications from ADMU, and is Communications Director for Makesense, Philippines.

We discussed her poems “In the Holding Room for my Disembodiment Surgery...”

“Now no longer weighed down by: a bad body/ bog body/ borg body/ wretched body/ wrong body/ wrong sex with other wrong bodies I’ve no excuse not to be happy..”

And “What’s the Worst That Could Happen?”

“Call it empathy burnout the self turned world’s scarcest material losing our music boxes/ to the sea never making it out of town to the holding room where your lover dies alone...”

One thing became immediately obvious: this is a new generation of writers. Their stories are not our stories. And they are not afraid to tell them.

Day 2 (today) we tackled the short stories of **Immanuel Canicosa** and **Alex Alcasid**, with Chuckberry Pascual and Jose Mojica as moderators.

Imman has a B.A. In Communications from DLSU, and is doing an M.A. in Creative Writing at UP Diliman; he works as a writer and content producer at ESPN5. His story, “Ligaya,” is speculative fiction about what happens when a character in a popular telenovela, who has been written as a stereotypical helpless woman, refuses to remain trapped in that role a moment longer, escapes from the page, and actually confronts the telenovela’s head writer.

Again we are in a dark world, literally... a warehouse with no lights, dark streets, a dimly-lit, almost-empty building.

Alex has a BS in Animation from iAcademy and works as a copywriter for ADA Asia. And her world is even darker. The story “The Pit Digger,” is flash fiction about a nameless protagonist’s thoughts as he digs trenches for corpses piled higher than his head.

Today, we will be discussing creative nonfiction. Nonfiction can sometimes be darker and more disturbing than the grimmest fiction, because

the reader is always aware that the plot is something that has actually happened, or is still happening, in the author's life. So, I approach today's sessions with some trepidation: Eunice Joy Bacalando's "Defiance," and Chuck Smith's "Developing Story." I'll be moderating Eunice's session, and Dawn will be moderating Chuck's.

Part 3

16 June 2021

As expected, yesterday's sessions began cautiously. I recall Yeats' words: "I have spread my dreams under your feet/ Tread softly because you tread on my dreams." Writing Fellows **Eunice Joy R. Bacalando** and **Chuck D. Smith** might well have said: "Tread softly because you tread on my wounds." Both had submitted memoirs.

Eunice has a BA in Lit. From DLSU, and is doing an MFA in Creative Writing in the same university. She works as a writer and a researcher. Chuck has a BA in Journalism from UST, and is doing an MFA in Creative Writing at DLSU. He has worked as a journalist, and a PR consultant, and is at present Senior Writer for Philstar Life.

Eunice's "Defiance," deals with grave physical illness, and focuses on the hospital experience from the patient's point of view. Chuck's "Developing Story" deals with prolonged suffering, from different kinds of wounds, both physical and mental.

Both are fine writers. Eunice writes with self-awareness and irony, the narrator's anger and indignation coming through loud and clear, but sometimes interrupted by a wry humor. The fast-paced narrative has rhythm and cadence. The narrator wins the reader's empathy through both her harrowing ordeal, and her refusal to be broken by it. Chuck, too, is self-reflexive; and he is a skilled, sophisticated writer. He tackles his complex,

difficult subject with courage and an admirable restraint, never indulging in sentimentality or self-pity, thus heightening the tension and emotional power of his narrative. And the tale benefits from being told with a certain detachment, which stops short of tranquility.

As the sessions progressed, many issues were raised. In a time of pandemic, is it unseemly to write of one's personal woes? Is it insensitive to express anger and frustration toward health practitioners who are themselves overworked, and at risk? When does the baring of private anguish cease to be a cry for help, and become self-indulgent? How much detail is one allowed to go into when rendering ugliness? Must a narrative of pain be artful? Is it not enough that it be truthful? Is it artful even if it does not end with catharsis?

My own answers to the last 3 questions: If the narrative of pain seeks to be received as literature (as opposed to reportage or scientific treatise), yes it must be artful. No it is not enough to be truthful. And, finally, no, there need not be catharsis. The triumph lies in the telling.

Part 4

17 June 2021

Yesterday we returned to the poets—**Andy Lopez** and **Vince Agcaoili**.

I recall that some time back, my friend Krip Yuson referred to poets as “literature’s cavalry.” Feigning offense, I demanded, “So what does that make of us prose writers—foot soldiers?”

And, with a grin, Krip said, “You said it; I didn’t.”

But I have to admit, albeit with reluctance, that I actually agree with him. The poets seem to be playing a higher game. Poetry’s methods make it more difficult to comprehend than prose. It is evocative rather than explicit,

oblique rather than direct, reliant on allusion and inference, rather than on straightforward speech. It is also more difficult to write. I know, because I have tried; and failed. I think that to produce poetry and understand it, one uses a different part of the brain. But, regardless, one can respond to it, positively, negatively, or with indifference. It's the same with music. I have no technical knowledge of music. But I enjoy listening to it, and I crave different types of music at different stages of my life, and for different states of mind or moods.

When we discuss poetry in the Workshop, therefore, I am happy to allow the poets to take over, and just to listen and learn.

Ned Parfan appreciated Andy's playing with sound in her "Career Options for Pitch-Perfect Prodigies," and the use of slashes to cut up lines in her "Established Writer Yells at Fanfic," to suggest the constraints that entrap "established writers" into conventional ways of doing things. The consensus about the first poem seemed to be that the persona felt envious of her younger brother who has been discovered to be a musical prodigy at age 6.

To me, the tone in the first poem seemed to suggest awe, rather than envy. As for the second poem, I felt that it was alluding to people like myself, for I have admittedly been dismissive of fan fiction. But I wasn't sure why the "established writer" in the poem was "yelling" and what he was so furious about. My exchange with Andy on our chat box was an eye opener—I finally understand a bit more about the fan fiction phenomenon, its global reach, and the empowerment that it offers its young practitioners.

Ralph Galán singled out the image of light "from a clearing" falling across the "four-pane window" to form "crucifixes" as the objective correlative of Vince's poem "Referent."

Lito Zulueta noted that the epigraph in "Remnants of the Earth," a Filipino street rhyme chanted by children, which contains a series of images

of violence, prefigures (or could be made to prefigure) the violence of the Duterte regime.

Jimmy Abad broke up Vince's second poem into four sections, and picked out references to religion—God, altar, water and blood, bodies escaping their graves... But he reminded both poets of the need to make sure that their images follow an internal logic and integrity, so that readers might arrive at the intended meaning.

Both poems are centered on death and resurrection. That much is clear to me. I must add that I find the act of trying to understand poetry a mental stretching, an attempt to reach the sky. And it results in a kind of exhilaration. 🦋

Part 5

20 June 2021 (Sunday)

Once upon a time, I actually tried to write a 1-act play. Correction, I did write a 1-act play. I put a lot of effort into the attempt. And, after it was done, I made plans to show it to one of my illustrious friends from the world of theater: Tony Mabesa, Behn Cervantes, Anton Juan, Nick Pichay, Aureaus Solito... But first, I set it aside for a bit. (Thank God!)

When I returned to the draft, and reread it, I was dismayed. The literature teacher in me had to confront the truth: it was terrible. Since then, I have regarded playwrights with great admiration. And I hold filmmakers in even greater esteem. Film is, of course, the most complex of art forms, embracing several arts, plus technology, and requiring a huge collaborative effort.

Last Friday (June 17) our workshop sessions were reserved for our playwright and our film scriptwriter, **Sabrina Basilio** and **Eluna Cepeda**.

Both their works may be described as progressive. That is, they are departures from the conventional.

Sabrina has a BFA in Creative Writing from ADMU; and has participated in the Women's International Playwrights' Fair in the CCP and Virgin Labfest. She is Communications Director at SULONG, and teaches at Muir Woods Academy.

Given the long tradition of Ateneo's student theatre (I'm referencing National Artist Rolando Tinio's work with the Ateneo Experimental Theater), it is not surprising that she has come up with the ambitious "Antigone Versus the People of the Philippines." Its complexity led to a lively discussion. One of the panelists wasn't convinced that the contemporizing and "Filipinizing" of the great Sophoclean Greek tragedy worked. And another one pointed out that the ending (the degeneration of what was supposed to be a true people's court into a kind of "kangaroo court,") might have undermined the play's main theme. But most of the panelists and the Writing Fellows were satisfied. The play remained true to the spirit of the original, but changed some aspects of it, like not accepting the convention that the main characters should be only persons of high social standing in society; having the chorus present problems relevant to the Philippines of today; giving Creon and Antigone dialogue which was a mixture of English and Filipino, thus producing a contemporary sound.

Eluna graduated from St. Paul University, was granted a scholarship by the Mowelfund Film Institute, and has studied with Jun Lana, Raya Martin, and Raymond Red. Her short films have been exhibited in film festivals both local and international. She has worked as production assistant to Khavn Dela Cruz, and with several TV and film production houses.

Her goal—of "exploring queer cinema and its potentials, by portraying LGBTQ characters who experience pain and rejection, and how

they overcome these just like everybody else”—is in evidence in her script titled “Hanggang Paniwalaan.” As was noted by some Writing Fellows and members of the Teaching Panel, the lesbian—unlike the gay man—is absent from even our contemporary films. This work is the writer’s contribution to making her visible, and not just visible as a lesbian, but visible as a mother, in a familiar domestic setting. And this is an important step forward.

Sabrina’s session and Eluna’s session were moderated respectively by Lito Zulueta (who, among other things, is also a member of Manunuri), and Jose Mojica (an award-winning filmmaker and musician). Also a part of the teaching panel were Luna, a gifted playwright (as well as a fictionist and poet); Chuckberry Pascual, a playwright (aside from a writer of fiction, nonfiction, and criticism, and a translator). Ralph served as Philstage Gawad Buhay Awards jury member from 2008 until 2014; and, as an undergraduate, was part of UP Dulaang Laboratoryo, UP Tropa Experimental Theatre Company, and MSU-IIT’s Integrated Performing Arts Guild in Iligan City. Jerry Gracio (award-winning scriptwriter for TV and film) was unable to join us due to loss of WiFi in his barangay, but he sent in his comments.

Feeling suddenly nostalgic, Ralph said to me, “I was still a Chemical Engineering major back then, fresh from Philippine Science High School, when I performed in my first play in UP Diliman: Floy Quintos’s “Gironiere” with Sir Tony Mabesa directing... You didn’t know me yet then.

Why do I feel the need to mention the panelists’ credentials for these sessions? Maybe because we lost Bernardo Bernardo (much-awarded actor and director of stage, movies and television, playwright, and film script writer), who was part of our faculty, and of the pre-pandemic Workshop, before his sudden passing?

Part 6

June 22, 2021

Yesterday’s creative nonfiction—“Korona” by **KC Daniel Inventor** (moderated by Paul Castillo) and “Lebaura, Asin, Ilaw” by **Roda Tajon** (moderated by John Jack Wigley)—took us out of Manila and its environs.

Cris R. Lazandares is from Bocaue, Bulacan. He has an MA *Malikhaing Pagsulat* from UP Diliman and a B.A. *Communication Arts* from UP Los Baños; and teaches at the *Mataas na Paaralang Rural ng UP Los Baños*. **Mubarak M. Tahir** is from farther south—Maguindanao, but he now resides in Davao City. He has a B.A. in *Filipino* from the *Mindanao State University* in Marawi City, used to teach at the *MSU GSC* campus, and is a contributing writer for *Dagmay* (the *Davao Writers’ Guild Journal*) and other publications.

Cris’ story, “Pagoda,” centers around a widow, whose oldest son is about to leave for Canada, where a younger brother already resides. The familiar tale—of breadwinners seeking greener pastures abroad, leaving behind their young families in the care of old parents—is told from the old parent’s point of view. And it unfolds against the backdrop of the Bocaue River Festival, and the memory of the tragic accident of 1993, when the floating pagoda capsized, drowning 300 devotees. There was unanimous praise for the author’s handling of language (the *Bulakeño Tagalog*), the vivid realism of the minutiae of everyday life in a provincial town, the plot’s cyclical movement which seemed to mirror entrapment, and the ardor of the faith in the *Krus sa Wawa*, despite the heavy burden of constantly struggling to keep body and soul together.

But the panelists urged Cris to push the envelope, since he is obviously adept at his craft. Jowie Delos Reyes, who was moderator for the session, wanted Cris to delve deeper into Bocaue and its culture. Chuckberry

suggested a different point of view—that of an outsider, perhaps a researcher who witnesses the events. Luna proposed, among other things, tweaking a single sentence in the story’s closing paragraph, thus making the ending more ambiguous. Jerry Gracio looked for a deeper insight. Given the times, a reader looks for more than just a story of people going through some events, he said. He wanted to know: what, then, does it all mean?

My own view is that this is a story in transition. Its narrative style is realist; its pace is slow. But its structure is modernist. Time is fractured; memories are juxtaposed against present events. I agree with Writing Fellow Chuck Smith, that, chronologically, the story’s resolution takes place right after the story’s opening section. The chronological ending is in the section immediately preceding the last section. This was a bold move. And the story’s vision—about the futility of faith—is profoundly ironic. This is what makes it new.

Like the previous story, Mubarak’s story is in the realist mode. The protagonist of “May Bisikleta sa Langit” is an 11-year-old boy who, in the midst of extreme poverty and isolation, dreams of owning a bicycle. But the story’s simplicity is belied by the issues it raises—child labor, polygamy, class conflict, bullying—and its grimness is relieved by the image of a brotherly bond.

Some panelists felt that the ending—the brothers’ getting sick at the same time, and both illnesses being fatal, the two women (their mothers) falling into each other’s arms—was too melodramatic. Jack thought that the story of the brothers was engaging, but felt the writer had given his boy protagonist too harsh a fate. It’s practically unrelieved suffering, Jack said. Jerry observed that the writer could have just stayed with the bicycle—both the dream bicycle and the real one. This was the true heart of the story. Chuckberry, the session’s moderator, recommended that the writer focus on the story’s conflict. The seeds for the revision are contained in the story

itself, Chuck pointed out. They are in the child Jameel's imagination, his relationship with his mother, how that impacted on his dealings with his half-brother. And it was not necessary to make anyone die. There are others ways to resolve a conflict than death.

For me, the story has too many loose ends. Who owned the field that Jameel was tending? Were Jameel and his mother so terribly poor because the father had joined the rebels, or because he had another family, or both? What kind of relationship existed between the two women? When was Amir found to have leukemia? (There is no mention of it until the hospital scene.) However, I found the story touching. And, simply by focusing on a culture little known and understood by most readers, this story is a valuable contribution to Philippine literature.

I am pleased that some of our Writing Fellows—and some panelists as well—have been responding to these Chronicles. And though we are not live, and no one else has copies of the pieces we are discussing, other people are following these posts as well.

Part 7

26 June 2021

As I said earlier, when I started these Notes, I was just doing what I always do. My journal travels everywhere with me. And at the end of the day, I retreat to one corner of the room and begin scribbling away. Why did I decide to post them on FB? Did I think it might, in some way, make up for the gap which my colleagues and I all sense. Something's missing. Maybe it's the leisure and the camaraderie which is integral to these Workshops. The writing fellows need to hang out with one another. We, their mentors, need to relax and unwind; go for walks; share a cup of coffee or a round of beers with the Writing Fellows; go listen to music with a bunch of co-panelists. I don't

know how making notes like this helps. Maybe it's just a way of reaching out, an attempt to bridge that gap.

Or maybe, as Chuckberry has suggested, it's a small contribution to literary history. Young writers now seem to think they must go to at least three of the writing workshops (preferably those offered by the major universities with prestigious creative writing programs). These workshops have become *de rigueur*, a means of earning their spurs.

Yesterday was devoted to creative nonfiction: "Korona" by **KC Daniel Inventor** and "Lebadura, Asin, Ilaw" by **Roda Tajon**.

K.C. has an AB/BSE from Philippine Normal University and an MA Malikhaing Pagsulat from UP. He has taught at Adamson University, Our Lady of Fatima University in Valenzuela City and, most recently, at Trenton International College in BGC. Roda has a BA Psychology from the University of Northern Philippines, and an MA Women and Development from UP Diliman. She works as Capacity Building Officer for the Philippines Task Force for Indigenous People's Rights. She is connected with Gantala Press and Kataga. The first session was moderated by Paul Castillo, and the second by Jack Wigley.

Any serious discussion of creative nonfiction inevitably touches on these thorny issues: since creative nonfiction evolved from new journalism or literary reportage, how important is factual accuracy? how much does one reveal and what should we withhold? where does personal freedom end and the other person's privacy begin? when does candor become poor taste? given the nature of memory, are we not all unreliable narrators, particularly when we write of our own lives? But this is what makes nonfiction such an exciting genre.

Everyone agreed that KC's was an excellently written piece. In the story's opening scene, the crown on the winner's head—as she is pronounced

Miss Gay in a barangay “byukon”—dazzles the narrator (who is the First Runner Up). That crown turns out to be the story’s central image. And what starts out as a funny/sad essay on gay *byukons* (recalling, for me, John Bengan’s short story “Armor” and the Jun Robles Lana/Rodolfo Vera film, *Die Beautiful*), develops into a powerful memoir about the agonizing nightmare of testing positive for HIV in the 80s, when contracting AIDS meant a death sentence.

Reactions from the teaching panel were a good study in how—as Jimmy put it the other day—“As we read, so are we read.”

Jack and Jerry felt that here was a missed opportunity to delve further into the complex phenomenon of gay *byukons*. Jowie seemed to be looking for a sense of responsibility on the part of the protagonist, after the relief and elation that he experiences upon getting his negative test results. Being a romantic, I was missing the element of love in the narrative.

For Chuckberry, the memoir’s main theme is the body—the body in beauty contests, in the family, in a personal relationship, at work. What ties it all together, he said, is AIDS, which the narrator’s father introduces into the discussion; becomes an issue between the narrator and his lover; and seems to bind the narrator to J in his own mind. Chuckberry asked two questions. First, what does the narrative really wish to say about the body? This might have become clearer, had the writer tied up the connection between beauty pageants, the body, and illness. And second, why, in the end, does the narrator feel that J is still the winner, when, in fact, it is the narrator who has prevailed?

Luna also recognized the significance of the body in the narrative—how it can serve as a means of validation when one triumphs in a beauty contest, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, as a source of betrayal, when it succumbs to illness and death. She also mentioned the richness of the *korona* as a symbol, how it tarnishes with time, and even transforms, as

the triumphant “title-holder” falls victim to AIDS, into the biblical crown of thorns. (I love this reading!)

Roda’s memoir centers around the activist-protagonist’s sort-of relationship with someone in a position of power in the community to which they both belong. It is a complex, layered narrative, involving several themes—human rights, religion, physical attraction, gender issues—and how these sometimes clash, causing havoc in personal lives, particularly when the individuals concerned are honest, well-meaning people, seriously committed to a cause.

Several of us felt a hesitancy in the writer, a holding back of something important. Chuckberry suggested that the narrative is about abuse. And that its fragmented structure, as well as the religious epigrams were the author’s attempt to create distance between the narrator and the events recalled.

I had a strong sense that the author was deliberately repressing or suppressing something—both about herself and about the other person. His motivations are never explained. Nor are hers, actually. To quote Chuckberry: “*Yung muling pagtanggap kay C ay sinabi na lang bilang ‘bakit hindi?’*” He pointed out the contradiction between her fighting for other women’s rights, and not for her own.

I admit to having a preference for understatement myself, so I appreciate Roda’s predicament. But, as I was cautioned by my mentors, so do I caution younger writers whom I mentor: in restraining emotion, be careful not to efface it.

We are all familiar with Wordsworth’s famous definition of poetry as “powerful emotions... recollected in tranquility.” It will do to define fiction, nonfiction, and drama as well, I think. But he was referring to the distance

that produces perspective, and enables one to look back with clarity. He did not mean emotion recollected with indifference.

Part 8

28 June 2021

The next reflections I offer with great diffidence—not being a poet myself—and with gratitude toward the members of our Teaching Panel, from whom I learned a great deal yesterday evening.

I don't recall when I first read the poem below. It may have been in my senior year in high school or my Freshman year in college. I liked it. It made poetry seem easy to read, and easy to write. Not at all like the poems I had been studying thus far.

ARS POETICA by Archibald MacLeish

*A poem should be palpable and mute
As a globed fruit,*

*Dumb
As old medallions to the thumb,*

*Silent as the sleeve-worn stone
Of casement ledges where the moss has grown—*

*A poem should be wordless
As the flight of birds.*

*

*A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs,*

*Leaving, as the moon releases
Twig by twig the night-entangled trees,*

*Leaving, as the moon behind the winter leaves,
Memory by memory the mind—*

*A poem should be motionless in time
As the moon climbs.*

*

*A poem should be equal to:
Not true.*

*For all the history of grief
An empty doorway and a maple leaf.*

*For love
The leaning grasses and two lights above the sea—*

*A poem should not mean
But be.*

Of course I was to learn soon enough that MacLeish's was only one type of poetry. And it was first published around 1926.

Almost one century later, the poem might strike one as hopelessly naive. Given the confounding complexities of the world today—not to mention the chaos in our own country—surely even poetry must engage!

And yet, in workshops like ours, we are reading the works of emerging writers, writers just beginning to learn to shape language to approximate their emotions and ideas. I'm thinking that this might not be a bad way to begin—with images.

It seems to me that the poems of Writing Fellows **John Paul Padilla** and **Mark Dominick Portes** kind of reflected MacLeish's poetics, even if they might never have read him. This was confirmed by what they said when they introduced their poetry at the start of their respective workshop sessions. And it was reinforced by the Teaching Panel's comments.

John Paul—who has a Bachelor's degree in Elementary Education from Catanduanes State University, and works for DepEd—told us that he had written his poems after Catanduanes had been lashed by five typhoons in a row. He had been much struck by the way the world around him looked.

Mark—who has a BA English Language from Manuel Enverga University Foundation in Quezon, and does freelance work as an illustrator—said that, for his poems, he drew from his experience, and used words (he referred to them apologetically as “jargon”) and images from his daily routine as part-owner of a motorcycle spare parts shop.

In his first poem, “Araw ng Mga Patay Matapos ang Unos,” John Paul tried to describe what he saw and felt, as he gazed upon the aftermath of each typhoon: the trees shorn of their tops, leaves, fruits, flowers scattered on the ground. Just the bare trunks, with gashes cut by an axe, foothold for the climbing person. In his second poem, “Mga Alitaptap,” he tried to recreate his astonishment at the sight of fireflies in the night after a typhoon, his wonderment at how such tiny creatures had survived winds strong enough to tear up sheets of *yero*.

There were some comments from the Writing Fellows about the persona in the first poem being somehow alienated from what he was describing, the perspective, perhaps, of an outsider surveying the scene of devastation; and the poems' being rather static. But the panelists had interesting and varied observations.

Paul Castillo (the session's moderator) said he liked that the persona was not emotional, since this was an Imagist poem. (Aha!) In fact, he cautioned the poet against making his persona too intrusive. The images should speak for themselves, he said.

Ralph didn't read the persona, as alienated or indifferent at all, but as resilient, something one has to be if one lives in a place which can be hit by five successive typhoons. And he read the central image of the fireflies in the second poem as an image of strength belied by fragility. He also pointed to the movement at the end of the first poem, which describes the gashes on the bare trunks of the denuded trees as "*daan-hagdan patungo/ sa unti-unting lumiliwanag nang langit*"; and to the literal and metaphorical "illumination" at the end of the second poem: "*...butil ng liwanag/ ang mga alitaptap sa aming tapat/ sa mga gabing halos walang pinagkaiba/ ang pagpikit at ang pagmulat.*"

Jowie acknowledged that John Paul has a poet's eyes, but urged him to go for, on the one hand, greater specificity—the scene depicted might have been in any town in our much-afflicted islands; and, on the other hand, greater subtlety—something should be left unsaid, for the reader's imagination to take over.

Luna also recognized the influence of Imagism in John Paul's poems, and referred him to the poem "Diliman" by Ruel Aguila, which, she said, captured the essence of Diliman in just a few lines. She reminded him about something he had mentioned in his introduction: "*Nagbabagyo pero nasaan yung mga santo,*" and urged him to focus on that, to guide his vision. She also suggested that he not limit himself to visual images, and experiment also with aural images, as Merlie Alunan does in her poems about the super-typhoon that swept over Leyte.

Ned Parfan (who was moderator for this session) lauded Mark's poems for their "negative capability" (referencing Keats) and the use of the

“second imagination” (referencing Coleridge). He also suggested breaking up the first poem into three short poems, to solve the problem of its length. And, while he agreed with the other panelists about the poems’ flaws, he praised the poet for his playing with rhythm and sound (“*Ang tugtog ay ritmo ng tibok at munting mga pagsabog sa dibdib/ dulot ng sunud-sunod na kislap, tapos diklap, ng spark plug...*”).

Mark’s first poem, “Patay na Oras,” paints a picture of a tricycle driver during the dead hours of the day, which he compares to the waiting hours before 3 PM on Good Friday. And his second poem, “Anatomiya ng Arangkada” describes the sounds and movements of a tricycle in motion.

Jerry found the poems on the prolix side. “*Kailangang tapyasin pa.*” He pointed out some mixed metaphors and some infelicities in word choice.

Jowie suggested that the poet widen his field of observation to include other aspects of the tricycle driver’s life, and the characteristics of tricycle drivers in different locations, even within the same town.

Luna felt that Mark should be lauded for giving voice to the tricycle driver in our poetry. She noted its uniqueness in its focus on the different sounds made by the machine, as well as on its movement and stasis.

(As a reminder for any of the Writing Fellows who is interested: Imagism was an early 20th-century poetic movement that relied on concrete images drawn in precise, colloquial language rather than traditional poetic diction and meter. Imagist poets were not too concerned about the themes behind the images. The images themselves were the focus. Among the famous American Imagist poets were Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Amy Lowell... What am I thinking? Of course you all must have googled it by now!)

Perhaps the poets in our Teaching Panel might mention more Filipino poets—in both English and Filipino—for the poets among our Writing Fellows who are interested in following this path.

Part 9

June 29, 2021 (Tuesday)

Yesterday's sessions on fiction in Filipino turned out to be among the most exciting yet. For me, and, I'm sure, for the other fictionists in the Teaching Panel. I hope the writing fellows were equally engaged.

We took up "Nonstop Bus" by **Mubarak M. Tahir** (with Jowie Delos Reyes as moderator) and "Relokasyon" by **Cris Lazanderas** (with Chuckberry Pascual as moderator).

The discussion was animated. How important is originality in fiction? Is fiction which sticks to old patterns (the surprise twist at the end, for example) or traditional themes (like the conflict between city and country) necessarily inferior to fiction which breaks new ground, both thematically and technically? How much research is expected of writers when they write stories dealing with illness or genetic defects? Should a writer choose as a subject something that has become a popular culture trope (in both Filipino and Korean telenovelas, for example) like Alzheimer's? When one is a politically committed writer, is there a problem with depicting characters whose lives are pure wretchedness? Must one's stories end on a note of hope?

In the first story, a young call center agent, commutes every weekend from the city to his hometown in the province, in order to be with his grandfather, who has taken care of him since childhood, his mother having abandoned him. The story touches on the differences between life in the capital and life in his little provincial town, and the effects of dislocation on both young and old. It also touches on the theme of memory loss, whose

deeper shadow is erasure of identity. The story's surprise ending—and the misery about to unfold these two simple, good people—is almost unbearable. Luna wondered if perhaps some deep, unrecognized trauma might be the root of such an affliction hitting two members belonging to different generations in the same family. Jerry suggested that maybe the story that wants to be told is a story of forgetting (as defense? as escape?). Fascinating possibilities.

The second story focuses on the cycle of eviction from their homes and relocation to unfamiliar sites, which entraps so many of our *kababayan*, and what meaning the word “choice” has for people like them. As in his first story—“Pagoda”—whatever glimmer of light there might be is totally extinguished, literally and figuratively, by the time the story ends. I suggested to Cris that in the tradition of writing that he seems to belong to, there is the expectation that the fictional world will not be utterly bleak. Cris replied that he was aware of this, and had considered letting in a ray of light. But, ultimately, he decided against it. “*Ito na po yung gusto kong sabihin,*” he said.

I understand and admire the story's integrity, and its author's. I also happen to think his decision was the right one, artistically. His protagonist is not without agency. He studied his options, and he made a decision. The thing is: those options were all bad. Cris' story is the author's protest against such a tragedy. The story is doubly interesting to me when I compare it with his earlier story and its ironic ending. I look forward to reading more of this writer's work in the future.

Part 10

30 June 2021 (Wednesday)

Yesterday, it was back to nonfiction writers, Chuck Smith and Eunice Bacalando. I was moderator for Chuck's session, and Jack Wigley was moderator for Eunice's.

Chuck used an unusual strategy for his “In the Movies”: the narrative unfolded in a series of what looked like blind items in a newspaper entertainment column. But the items included one about the narrator’s mother, who committed suicide at age 18, leaving a 3-month-old baby (the narrator).

The Writing Fellows were unanimous in their praise for the piece. Cris described it as playful in style, without being superficial; and entertaining, without being insensitive. Vince mentioned its performative aspect, which reinforced the significance of the piece’s title. Eunice praised the “lightness and nonchalance” of its tone, which belied the gravity of its themes (abandonment, rejection). She also mentioned the disjointed structure, which reflected the narrator’s sense of disconnectedness, a detachment which, like its ambiguity, was actually “a strategy for concealment”. And Mark focused on Chuck’s repeated disclosure of his own unreliability as a narrator, which he felt actually revealed a contradiction at the heart of the story: the desire to be seen, and the attempt to hide. Behind the narrative was the fact of his being adopted, Mark said.

The panel was no less impressed. Paul was much struck by its metafictional quality. Chuckberry pointed to the sophisticated strategy of mocking the voyeurism represented by the blind item, at the same time that it, in a sense, participated in it. Luna singled out the use of comedy (even as it revealed the darkness at the heart of its story), another kind of performativity, to serve the purpose of concealment. Paul and Chuckberry thought the section about the mother deserved a narrative of its own; although Chuckberry cautioned Chuck against the possibility of exploiting the subject yet again in the act of telling her story. Luna, however, did not agree that the section about the mother should be excised.

I agree with Luna. I read Chuck’s unusual memoir as a commentary on the seamy side of show business. And the tragic story of the mother is

at its heart. Its inclusion raises the stakes. Limiting itself to the other blind items (about dating and such) would make the piece a bit superficial. I think it was critic Walter Kerr who wrote that in the best comedy, just below the surface of laughter, lie tears. Hidden somewhere in Chuck's comic narrative is this stark question: "If this was my family... what did it say about me?"

Eunice's "Incision" is written in the same clipped, ironic, self-reflexive style of her earlier piece, "Defiance." And it covers basically the same ground—the trauma of illness and hospitalization. But it takes the reader through every agonizing step of the narrator's journey: the blood tests, the scans, the MRIs, the actual surgery, the post-op stage. And what might have been a most depressing experience, is brightened by the narrator's self-mockery, her self-awareness, and her determination to remain IN CONTROL, for all that she might be physically helpless. "For the whole year, I swam in the addicting pools of self-pity. I did not make plans. My plans only lasted until the weekend..."

In her introduction to her work, Eunice said she hoped the panel would help her find ways which might make her narrative "more palatable" for readers. Luna replied that it was already a more balanced piece than "Defiance," and that the narrative about the great vulnerability of women's bodies, even on the operating table ("This is what happened when I left my fate to a room full of men..."), needs to be told.

For my part, I think that there is no need to make this horrific story more "palatable." What I suggested was that the memoir would be even more effective by including more of her dry, deadpan humor. And Dawn Marfil-Burris suggested that—since her narrator had made it her business to read up on her condition so that no one else, whom she knew, knew more about it than she did—she could use the "science" parts as scaffolding to hold her narrative together, instead of breaking it up into what came across as arbitrary divisions.

Two really good stories!

PART 11

1 July (Thursday)

Take 2 for the fictionists in English yesterday, with Imman Canicosa's "Cities as People" and Alex Alcasid's "The Stars Fell."

Having read Imman's earlier story, "Ligaya," we were much struck by the second one's brevity and simplicity. Martin, the protagonist, is a Filipino tourist in Osaka, remembering other journeys, other cities. His ruminations are frequently interrupted by the mental image of the girlfriend he has just lost, and with whom he had last visited this city. The prose is clipped, direct, unadorned. Though the narrator is constantly moving, the story seems static. Nothing really happens. As the story comes to an end, the narrator does reach an epiphany of sorts, about his "aimless wandering," about himself as "someone who wants to remember, and forget."

I think it was Paul who said that it might have been more effective if written using the first person POV—it felt like creative nonfiction, he said. Dawn suggested that—since Imman is obviously an experienced traveler—he might want to convert this into a travel essay or a travel narrative, which I thought was a distinct possibility.

Many of the Writing Fellows noted that the story had a strong *animé* feel to it. Jose Mojica, the session moderator, summed it up thus: "It's like he rendered an *animé* film in language." (I wish I knew more about *animé*. Then I might have contributed something to the discussion.)

What I found intriguing about the story is that the author is just as capable of this type of pared-down prose. "Ligaya" was an altogether different beast, with its parallel structure, shifting point of view, distinct narrative style for each of the opposing points of view, and the combination

of telenovela thriller with social realism. The only thing both stories share is their existentialist attitude.

But I would like to see more of this second side of Imman's. I think he could either give Martin more flesh, and continue telling his story; or convert this into nonfiction, into travel writing in the manner of Andre Aciman's *Alibis: Essays on Elsewhere*, rambling, reflective, meditative, the inner journey as important as—or more important than—the physical journey.

If he chooses the latter option, Imman would do well to note Chuckberry's comments. He said: "*Kung iaangat ito sa Eat Pray Love na parang cultural tourism at medyo narcissistic (all these countries are about ME essentially), ilang tanong ang puwedeng pag-isipan: ano ang sinasabi ng piyesa tungkol sa siyudad; at ano ang sinasabi ng piyesa particularly tungkol sa siyudad sa labas ng Pilipinas, bilang isang taong mula sa Pilipinas?*" He ended by reminding Imman about what Rizal referred to as the "demon of comparison," when his protagonist Crisostomo Ibarra was in the Botanical Garden in Manila, recalling the Botanical Gardens of Europe, in *Noli Me Tangere*.

You have your work cut out for you, Imman! 😊

Alex's story was, as she revealed in her introduction, written in response to a call from Dean Alfar for contributions to an anthology of "alternative history" as a sub-specie of speculative fiction. The story speculates on what would have happened if America had dropped the two nuclear bombs on Manila and Bataan, instead on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The question raised by, I think, Eunice Bacalando was: what possible justification could America have had to drop nuclear bombs on a country which was, at that time—not just an ally—but its own colony, even assuming that Japan had taken possession of it? And there were comments that the story's ending was hurried, and therefore taxed the credulity. Galvanizing people—even university students—into a mass action, let alone a political movement, is not a simple thing.

I suggested to Alex that flash fiction might not be suited to the project of rewriting history. There just isn't enough maneuvering space in 500 words or even 1,000 words. This agenda is an ambitious one. One need only recall the novelists of the Latin American "Boom" and their BIG novels, to get an idea of what it entails. Having said that, I must add that ambition is good! How else does one strive? How else does one grow?

PART 12

3 July (Saturday)

For this section of these Chronicles—on poetry in Filipino—I have relied heavily on Paul and Jowie, moderators for the day. I took notes, but only sporadically. I think my poor brain was suffering from information overload, after more than 2 weeks of workshop sessions.

"Kumpuni" by Mark Dominick Portes

*"Batid ang pagadating ng oras na kailangang magpahinga sa pasada/
ng iyong motor. Lumayo muna sa usok at alikabok ng kalsada./ Kung halos
kainin na ng mga sumusugat na kalawang ang bawat bakal/ sa katawan: ang
mga turnilyo, tapaludo, ang mababali nang mulye..."*

The poem uses the decrepit motorcycle as a metaphor for the tricycle driver's own state of physical exhaustion.

Ralph suggested that the images and metaphors used should be logical and consistent, "*Ang mga detalye ng pa-aayos ng motor ay dapat may kapantay na mga detalye ng pag-aayos sa sarili.*" The conceit (machine = man's body) has to work, not only on the level of the signifier (language) but on the level of the signified. To fix this, the poet needs to focus on the literal level first before moving on to the metaphorical level.

Luna praised Mark's skill with sound and language. She also mentioned that, the beginning of the poem "Kumpuni" establishes the poet's

aesthetic distance. She felt, though, that he needed to clarify the dramatic situation more.

“Bakal sa Bakal” by Mark Dominick Portes

This poem is more complex. Again, it is built around a conceit—the fixing of the motorcycle in the shop, for the preparation of the persona for a coming confrontation.

“Sa pagmamatyag, naroon ka/ sa talyer, iisa ang siklab ng iyong sigarilyo/ at kislap ng mga tumitilansik/ na alipato mula sa winewelding na bakal.../”

It is a long-delayed confrontation between the abused son and the father he resented and feared.

“Sinunod ko lamang ang iyong pangaral:/ kailangang maging matibay/ upang mabuhay—bakal sa bakal—/ ganoon pinatigas ng tubo ang musmos mong buto.”

But Jerry cautioned Mark not to waste time on unnecessary details, and to focus on the dramatic situation. And Paul advised him to avoid lines that are too literal, and didactic. He reminded the poet of Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta’s emphasis on reining in the language (poetic tension) in moments of intense emotion.

“Helicopter” by Paul Padilla

This short poem is part of a cycle of poems on “bagyo,” to which the first two poems by Paul also belong. This one is focused on a crowd of adults and children watching a helicopter about to land.

“At habang natatawa/sa pagkasabik ng mga bata/ patinga-tingala rin ang matantanda—/ waring humihiling/ ng ihuhulog na biyaya.”

Luna warned Paul against clichés, such as the tutubi/helicopter metaphor, and suggested that he perhaps explore the helicopter as a symbol of power (only the rich and powerful can afford to ride helicopters, humanitarian aid from the powerful comes via helicopter, etc.)

Jowie felt that, since Paul obviously has mastery of language and technical poetic skills, he might concentrate more on the what rather than the how: **what** he wants to say, rather than on **how** to say it.

Jerry urged him to include more details about “*abaka bilang kabuhayan ng mga tao.*” Of people affected by typhoons, only a poet from Catanduanes could do this. “Imagine a field of abaca damaged by a typhoon,” Jerry said, “and, on top of it, the corpses of people felled by the same typhoon.”

Jerry also advised both poets to no longer think in terms of individual poems, but in terms of poetry collections built around a theme—a subject close to the poet’s heart, a subject he knows.

This suggestion was welcomed warmly by the Writing Fellows. Some even suggested that this be made a topic for the Center’s next USTinig episode!

PART 13

4 July (Sunday)

We have reached homestretch! Last night, we held our last workshop sessions—sarilaysay (creative nonfiction in Filipino)—with “Kaladkarin” by Roda Tajon and “Si Maria Labó, at Iba Ko Pang Mga Aswang by KC Daniel Inventor.

The “*kaladkarin*” that Roda’s narrative refers to is, first, the noun, which means “*taong madaling hilahilain... Draggable;*” and, second, the verb, which means to forcibly drag off. This is a narrative about high school

bullying. Roda vividly evokes the scene: “*Nahhirapan akong maka-angkop sa araw-araw na buhay sa public school dahil walang libro, kapos sa gamit at upuan, sobrang init at madilim, at nasa likuran ako dahil sa sitting arrangement na alphabetical. Idagdag mo pa ang ingay sa labas ng klasrum namin dahil may nagkalase sa corridor mula alas-10 ng umaga hanggang sa ma-dismiss kami ng ala-una ng hapon.*”

To this mix is added the classmate identified only as “M,” who is the bane of the narrator’s existence. This person repeatedly subjects the narrator to both physical and psychological indignities and humiliations. It is suggested that the cause of M’s being abusive is that he is himself quite ordinary, where both brains and brawn are concerned. And his only way of affirming himself is by picking on someone weaker, who has no allies in the school, and, moreover, is gay. No one comes to the narrator’s rescue, not even his own friends. And everyone else seems to take for granted that pushing around a gay person is acceptable. Nor are the teachers a source of help. In fact they, too, are bullied by the school bullies.

Such bullying has lasting effects on its victims’ psyche. As an adult, the narrator seeks professional help, recognizes these leftover emotions for what they are, and finds ways of addressing them. When he finally decides that it is time to erase M from his life forever, he looks for M on Facebook, “unfriends” him, lists “bullying” as the reason for doing so, and puts an end to being “*kaladkarin.*”

The writer wins the reader’s sympathy for his protagonist. And precisely because he does, several panelists—myself included—found this ending a bit lame. Jowie was particularly vehement about the need for a stronger ending (short of actually suggesting violence). Jack felt that the narrative itself needed to lose some of its grimness, to allow for such a denouement. My suggestion, picking up from Jack, was for Roda to introduce some levity (perhaps dark humor) into the narrative. Not, of course, to

trivialize what had been done, but to communicate the narrator's having achieved a kind of distance from it. Then the final act on FB becomes itself a humorous/ironic comment, proof that he can now look back on it all with a grin and a shrug. As in "Joke's on you, Creep!"

Before the session started, I had messaged Jack to consult him about something in KC's *sarilaysay* which was not quite clear to me. (The author's Filipino is on a level way higher than mine; and several sentences are in Hiligaynon.) After answering my question, Jack added, "*Pero maganda siya, Jing. I swear!*"

I totally agree. Actually, this narrative blew me away!

To begin with, it is thoroughly grounded, carefully recreating the story's physical, cultural, and emotional environment, particularly its gothic legends and folklore. But in this tale, the *aswang* include actual living persons known to the narrator. He is even sent to the house of one such *aswang* to buy her homemade vinegar, and to an *aswang* couple to be healed of some infirmity, and the couple then send him home with half a sack of freshly harvested *kamote* and *uraro*. Details like these add to the extraordinary "familiarity" of the scene, and give it a marvelous realist feel, which is reinforced by the writer's language, his narrative style.

There is a brief interlude during which the narrator reflects on how, as he grew older, he realized that he had never once heard or seen, on radio or TV, any news announcement about children actually being killed by witches. Nor did he ever encounter anything of the sort, in person. So he came to the conclusion that these were merely tales concocted by old people to frighten gullible children, and extract their obedience; and even later, he recognized it as a strategy for excluding persons different from themselves. In short, the demonizing of *aswang* was a power thing.

On the other hand, the narrator HAD known actual terror.

At this point, the narrative segues into the account of his experiences when he was in 5th grade. The molestation by older boys; his realization that because he was gay, he was regarded as a monster by them and others like them; that to them, like the *aswang*, he sucked men of their manhood and infected them with disease (a reference perhaps to AIDS, when it was falsely believed to be a disease of homosexuals). He experienced the horror of his own demonization. And, finally there was the ultimate violent abuse.

Part of this private hell is the victim's inability to articulate it to either himself, or to anyone else. And his inability to escape it. The *aswang*, at least, are able to fly.

But, eventually, the narrator does discover a way. He discovers his own power.

“Nang matuklasan kong nasa papel at panulat pala ang aking gabúm, tulad ng ginawa kong pagtawag sa hangin noon ay tinawag kong muli ang mga salitang dati ay hindi ko nagawang maipagtanggol. Kasabay nito ay ang pagtipon ko rin sa mga alaala at istorya ng mga aswang ng aking pagkabata, na sa pagkakaalam ko ay hindi rin naipagtanggol ang kanilang mga sarili kahit minsan. Sa pamamagitan ng nagsanga naming mga kuwento, bubuohin ko ang malakas na ibip ng aming katotohanan. Katotohanan na ipapanubli ko sa nga makakabasa at makakarinig nito.”

Powerful stuff, KC! Saludo!

This is the last of these Chronicles. We have a single interaction left. And then, graduation!

THE DISTANCE OF THE MOON

Jose Mojica

We transferred to this home about two and a half decades ago. To fill the plain white ceiling of the small room I shared with my brothers, we bought packs of galaxy-themed glow-in-the-dark stickers. Aside from serving as decoration, these stickers also doubled as markers for the electric fan, the stereo speaker, the bed, and the light switch. It was careless sticking. Kids being kids. We had no intention to imitate the arrangement of the stars in the night sky.

When we were done pressing the stickers, we waited the entire day for the darkness to come. It was endless anticipation. My two older brothers must have thought they had relegated me to the pull-out bed, nearest to the floor, and farthest from the glow-in-the-dark galaxy. But maybe it was my choice to stay there. Although the top bunk was closer to the glow of the stickers, the lowest bed allowed me to look up at the ceiling, my intertwined hands cupping the back of my head, as if I was looking up at the night sky. When the darkness revealed what we had created, the child in me, found both delight and awe at the mystery of the glow.

At the time, we were one of the first few dwellers in the recently established village in Cavite. Brownouts happened often. There was no radio, no television, and since we had few neighbors, there was nothing else to do. Power interruptions only last a few minutes when they happen now, but in the past, they took hours. If Mom had allowed me, I would have gone outside during brownouts to watch the flying insects around the candles illuminating our neighbors' homes. I would have seen the Moon surrounded by a hundred stars.

It was a simple, comfortable life with no room for excess. I would look at the ceiling and see the stars, and the Moon, and I would fall deep into peaceful slumber. I would wake up blinded by the sunlight coming from the window facing me, still remembering the previous night's last moments of gazing up at the neon glow. I would look up at the ceiling again. The galaxy was gone, only to be seen again once it was dark. It was only a few years ago, when we had to repaint the old ceiling that we removed the stickers.



There's something about the title of R.J. Palacio's book that appealed to me, that wanted me to take notice. *Wonder*. I like how the word translates in the mind. *Wonder*. As though forcing a surprise and a discovery. *Wonder*. The exciting engagement between the known and unknown. *Wonder*. It needs to be celebrated, since it's the beginning of an eventual realization.

Ella Sanders writes, "A sense of wonder can find you in many forms, sometimes loudly, sometimes as a whispering." And it was with a whisper that the book title lingered with me. The book, modestly stacked on the bookstore's well-lit area, seen from afar, inspired a joyous sense of wonder even before being read.

The sense of wonder is a gift, for it is an encounter with the rare and the extraordinary. But it is also a choice, a practice, since the mind eventually lingers and calls to memory an experience it wishes to confirm and to confront. To wonder is to face the fear of entering unfamiliar territory, but also a step toward hope, toward an arrival.

When I discovered that R.J. Palacio's book *Wonder* had been adapted into a movie, I didn't miss the chance to see it. The movie adaptation was directed by Stephen Chbosky, another writer whose book I had read many times. Coming-of-age narratives greatly appeal to me, for I feel like I'm still in the process of reaching maturity. I'm also deeply interested in the

theme of acceptance and belonging—for I know how it feels when others try to dismiss a person only because of what they see on the surface. In my short story collection for my M.A. thesis as a Creative Writing major, I also tackled these themes. It's a different kind of resonance. It is not identification. Rather, an emotional tug.

The protagonist in *Wonder*, Auggie, is born with a facial difference. He often wears his spacesuit costume to hide this. Eventually, because of his reassuring parents, he learns to accept his identity. He learns that he is not different from everyone else.

Auggie is the best science student in his class. Seeing this made me want to return to my childhood interest. It didn't reflect on my grades, but I thought I would grow up to become a scientist since science classes were my favorite. When I would get home from school or during weekends, I would enjoy conducting experiments using bottles, batteries, wires, and other things I had found. Although I didn't pursue a science degree nor attend a science high school, I remained curious.

The movie adaptation of *Wonder* had a beautiful production design. Auggie's room had an actual painting of the galaxy, unlike ours which were only stickers. His room reminded me of the Filipino film *Ang Nawawala*. The main character's room was also filled with youthful memorabilia. Gibson's room, like Auggie's, was full of galaxy-inspired paintings and toys. It was later revealed in the film that the space-themed room was the one Gibson had shared with his twin brother, and the one he hadn't slept (and stepped) in since his twin died in an accident.

I wonder what made them want what I wanted too. Do we share the same thoughts about the galaxy and the Moon?



On weekend afternoons, Pop would come out of the house once the sun's scorching heat had abated to wash our car parked on the street. I would go out with him to see my playmates. We would chase after a ball or roll some bicycle wheels, until Pop would call me to hose down the soap from the car. Once done, I would go back to my playmates to continue our game, until our parents would summon us home for supper.

Where we played, one could watch the sun setting behind the hills rising above the vast meadows, without the distraction of houses or buildings. It would be a lovely transition from light to dark. Right after the sun had set, the Moon would begin to show. It was there that I, struck by its magnificence, gazed at it for the first time.

It looked large and my eyes tried to equal its size. I thought the Moon was larger than the ball in my hand, or the wheel, or the Earth. Its immense size illuminated the sky as far as the eyes could see. My playmates wouldn't allow it to join us in playing hide-and-seek. No one could hide from the Moon. The Moon always found us.

Seeing the moon for the first time meant being present at the moment when the Moon and I faced each other, not thinking of anything else, not doubting a thing about it, hoping also that it didn't doubt a thing about me. Perhaps it wasn't "wonder" I felt at the time, rather, a moment of illumination, of learning to accept what's in front of me.



I'm glad I had lived my early years when answers didn't come quickly. We went on with our daily life, living in wonder. No wings that fluttered, no magic horses, but a radiant kind of spell and enchantment.

As children, we anticipated the approaching Yuletide Season as well as birthdays by counting the number of nights of sleep we had to take. We measured distance by counting. If I asked Pop how far still before we reached our destination, he would always say count to a hundred. I thought one hundred was the farthest distance, so if we arrived in our destination before I finished counting, it must be close. “How many more counts before I reach the Moon?” I never asked. I haven’t started counting.

There was a freedom in not knowing. If questions gave birth to stars instead of answers, every time I pondered, the night sky would have been bright, filled with numerous constellations.

But if my curiosity was intense, I wonder why I hadn’t had the impulse to study physics or astronomy. Maybe because I had never seen the Moon through a telescope. I could only imagine myself as the young Maria Mitchell, who would slip away from family dinners to gaze up the cosmos through her tiny telescope.

There was never a time when I was out of our house and didn’t look up at the sky. I would look up when my heart felt heavy with pain, but also when my heart felt light with joy. Since I didn’t have an imaginary friend or a collection of video games, or a pet, I looked for another companion.

My brothers were older than me, and during our growing-up years, they were into basketball. But I had little interest in team as well as contact sports. I would rather ride the bike or skateboard—anything one could play alone. This may also be why I found solace in long-distance running, and in writing, why I valued solitude. But like the Moon, I never felt alone.

The Moon may sometimes be hidden from our eyes, unseen, but it had never been absent, never not up there. At times the Moon was only a sliver of light in the sky, but it had always been complete. It lulled us to a peaceful sleep with its comforting lullaby. We were its children.



I was eight years old when I first went up to Baguio. The fog that hovered on the wet pavement, the cold breeze that seeped inside our jackets, up there, up North, made me feel as though I was on top of the world. I was in a lofty place, lost in my thoughts. The ethereal scene absorbed me. It was only when we came back from Baguio that I realized how close I was to the Moon.

In one of the news reports on television, the news anchor mentioned that people flocked to Tagaytay because it was a great alternative to Baguio. I thought that if it was an alternative, then it must also be close to the Moon. I began to think that if I would climb the highest tree I would find there, I would finally be able to touch it.

One summer, I asked my cousin to teach me to climb a coconut tree, since it gave the impression of being the tallest tree, at least based on my observation. The coconut tree resembled a straight ladder, on which my cousins quickly made their way up using their improvised tree climbing spikes. It seemed easy, unlike the other trees where my cousins had to stretch out their bodies or jump off from one branch to another. Learning to climb myself would've helped me achieve my intentions.

I had always wanted to climb, and even tried to make my own treehouse. I was a fan of Tarzan, and treasured the action figure I got from a Happy Meal. He could traverse the whole forest with his ability to swing on hanging vines. Those who could do this seemed to possess a power I quietly envied. Growing up plump, and smaller than five feet, I was usually the one waiting for the fruits my cousins would throw down for me to catch. When I tried to climb, I would clamber and fail to go up higher than my height. It wasn't easy to catch up with them, since they moved like happy little monkeys. They unintentionally left me feeling excluded.



It was always a race to the front seat of the Volkswagen between me and my brothers. The losing ones would always protest and bring up the number of times the winner had sat on it. Pop would simply resolve the argument by saying that the front seat was reserved for Mom, reducing us all to silence. And although the front seat had the best view, I would concede it as long as I could get to sit by the window.

I liked slowness, the reduction of motion that magnified the nuances of the world out there, since it allowed me to see the Moon. At times, this slowness began to feel as if our bodies would rise up in the cold, thin air. Dream and reality seemed to merge into one. What did it mean to dream? To daydream? How about dreaming at night? What was the difference between the two?

Behind the coconut trees, across the meadows, the Moon shone brightly. Why was it following us? Why was it chasing me? These were the thoughts of a young mind after seeing the wondrous beckoning Moon. Was it a coincidence that we travelled the same path? How about the people we meet, did we meet them by chance or were we fated to meet them? Was the Moon our common fate?



Italo Calvino, one of the writers I greatly admire for his astonishing, tasteful creativity, wrote a short story called "The Distance of the Moon." It is part of his short story collection *Cosmicomics*, which I read as an adult. It had always been a habit of mine, every time I open a new collection, to begin reading the stories whose titles appeal to me. This title sounded poetic. It jangled tiny bells in my ear. I imagined myself being catapulted into space for exploration. I promised myself, someday I'm going to write like him.

In the story, Calvino told how many years ago, the Moon used to be so close to the Earth that people, by sailing at sea, could easily visit and touch it. Eventually, the Moon got pushed, farther and farther away, until it could only be adored from a distance. Perhaps the closest we can be to the Moon is when we are at sea.

I remember the physicist-writer Alan Lightman's experience when he was out one summer night in Maine in the wee hours before morning on his way home to the island. No one else was out in the water but him. He switched off his boat's engine and decided to look up at the sky—moonless and quiet. He knew that things existed with him, but what were those things that lived beneath. Being on the water was a game of trust, a challenge to one's peace of mind. He laid there—still—until things, the boat, then eventually his body, began to dissolve around him. He felt not separated from the world anymore, but one with it.



I was five then. We were on our way home from my grandparents' house, after the traditional family *noche buena*, when an unusual longing awakened me. Still sluggish, I gazed up at the endless sky and saw the Moon. It was large and bright—overly bright, unlike the light from the previous nights throughout the year. Its shape wasn't perfectly round, not a full Moon, but it had this moving serene glow, perhaps because it was Christmas and it reflected all the love that the season had.

There was a sustained anticipation as I waited for Santa Claus to pass by with his reindeers. Maybe I had a dream. Or I had a dream and stayed in the dream state. When we got home, I thought I saw Santa Claus with his reindeers. But maybe I didn't.



I like seeing people use their fingers to scrub their eyes as if clearing their vision, as though the tip of one's fingers has the power to make one see again. The poet, Gay Ross, wrote a beautiful poem called "Ode to Buttoning and Unbuttoning My Shirt," a lyrical evocation of how the tiniest part of ourselves, the tip, the unnoticed, may be the most poetic. How about us, a speck of dust as compared to the Moon, do we also make a difference? Can we ever affect the Moon? It's a humbling thought, that despite our feeling of largeness, we're just particles.

It's enough for me to touch the Moon with the tip of my fingers, not hold it. To touch the desired object that's forever distant, a seemingly impossible object, would be an achievement. It might be too much, the wish to hold the desired object. To touch it with one's finger can already be an act of remembrance. We can touch the Moon and sense its texture, like how the particles of sand would linger on the skin for a while, as though bringing home a souvenir from the beach.

Just the tip of my finger, even if for only a few seconds, and I would feel grateful. But what's with the tip of our fingers that makes us remember things? We use these fingers to do the mundane, the everyday tasks, but we don't remember everything. Yet for the most important, for the memory of the last time it has touched another's skin, it allows access. Touch then becomes a rite of passage for the eventual remembering.

Many accidental touches cling to memory. To touch another's skin even for the briefest moment can last a lifetime, like the brushing of fingers while paying for the jeepney fare, a hand on the shoulder patting approval, the nudge of an elbow on one's arm, a leg that brushes one's knee while squeezing toward a seat in the cinema theater. The touch becomes the portal for connection. The accidental becomes the monumental.



It's usually best to see things up close, but there's also a virtue in distance. We see the Moon's different phases and the varying changes it undergoes—size, shape, texture, and glow. The Moon stays up there for anyone to see. And the Moon continues to stay as a witness to the world—from war, to plague, to pandemic, to reconciliation, to healing, to love. The Moon teaches us to accept certain realities, certain truths about the world. It represents a paradox—inspiring curiosity, yet teaching acceptance.

I would rather stay down here, since if I were up there the Moon might lose its magic. The Moon might transition from an alluring mystery to a plain object. There's more comfort in gazing. The gaze is a moment of catharsis, a moment of true peace in one's heart. To gaze, undisturbed, is its own freedom. One becomes aware of the realness of the thing. To gaze is to remain present.

Why do people want to be active participants? To be observed than to observe? When Neil Armstrong landed on the Moon, everyone was watching him. But nobody knows I'm watching the Moon here now where I stand. Being grounded here makes me hope that having to look up implies that there are many more things to see in the world. This distance allows a space for longing. It gives room for larger things, higher things. It's in this act of looking up that we accept things bigger than ourselves. It's the acceptance of being less. People like to look down. It's easier. But to look up is to embrace smallness. It makes us humble. Because the Moon itself is meek.



If ever we live in the Moon, would we be looking up or looking down at the Earth? What's the orientation, the angle, the axis? And if we stay there for long, and the memory about the Earth has somehow faded, would we long for the Earth the way we here on Earth long for the Moon?

One evening, while driving home from a friend's house, I looked up at the sky and saw the Moon from a distance. I turned off the music. The engine roared, and the Moon got bigger and brighter. It felt as though I was moving towards it, magnetized, as if all the roads lead to the Moon.

As the car wheels rolled on the ground, the mind soared higher until I didn't know anymore if the car was about to fly or was already flying. That road was where the Moon and I would often see each other since I was a child. I couldn't prevent myself from gazing, hypnotized by its beauty. For a while, it didn't matter if I reached home. The feeling of traversing from one place to another, of knowing the destination and finding where the Moon shines, had also made me want to remain there. The journey brought longing and belonging.

I thought that going up to high places would take me to the Moon, that I just needed to believe, like the realization of making things real through the imagination. As I experience more things in life, the farther the moon feels, the more I feel that I'm nothing but a speck of dust in the entire vastness of the galaxy.

Maybe I'm just growing up, or maybe growing old. Or perhaps, it wasn't the Moon that was going farther away, but the child who used to believe—the little, chubby me, the one who used to dream. So I pick up this kid and raise his hand out into the Moon. Maybe I should start counting to a hundred again.

REMEMBERING MÁMANG

Alice M. Sun-Cua

The Blue Dress

I remember that blue dress very well—it was gauzy, with small white roses scattered against a light blue background. My mother and I shopped for the cloth material in one of the “emporiums” along J.M. Basa St.—the street we called “Calle Real”—in the commercial hub back then, of Iloilo City during the 1960s. I was around 8 years old, and at the behest of my mother, enrolled in piano lessons under Sor Celia Garganera, D.C. at the Conservatory of Music of the Colegio del Sagrado Corazon de Jesus, one of the religious schools in the city run by the Daughters of Charity sisters. I was just in the children’s level, but we were to have a piano recital. I cannot even remember the music piece that I played—something from a red “Thompson” book, if I recall rightly.

But I remember the dress vividly. It had a Peter Pan collar, puffed sleeves, nipped at the waist, and a skirt falling gracefully in soft pleats to my knees. My mother was a graduate of the Cosmopolitan School of Dress Design. According to her, the school was in Azcárraga, now called C.M. Recto St. She even had a diploma and a graduation picture of herself in a pink sleeveless gown, a confection she made herself as a requirement for graduation.

She started measuring me, and I saw how she drew the template on a large brown paper, which was later carefully snipped to form a dummy. The dress had a light blue silk lining which was also carefully measured. She pinned the brown paper on the cloth with fine round-headed pins, and

meticulously cut the cloth according to the paper figure. I remember she had a special pair of large scissors, the handles of which were protected with a tightly wound green strip of cloth. These scissors were to be used only to cut cloth material, she said, and never on anything else. Sometimes though, when she was not looking, my brother Anthony and I defied her prohibition and used that particular pair of scissors to cut paper and (horrors!) cardboard for our personal projects. She would of course eventually find out, when it could no longer cut cloth as sharply and cleanly as it should. Woe unto us then, for a scolding would eventually follow!

After shaping the cloth, she would open her Singer sewing machine, mounted on a shiny wooden, table-like piece of equipment. This was one of her treasures, given to her by my father's friend Andy, when I was born. My parents brought this sewing machine all the way from Manila to Iloilo City, and I often heard them talking about Andy, and what a waste it was, they said, because he had met an untimely death at a young age.

My mother's Singer was a treadle sewing machine, and she would lovingly tend to its parts, using a Singer-brand oil in its green tin bottle with a long nozzle and a red cap. The machine was always well-oiled and shiny, and the wooden housing encased in a green printed cloth especially made for it by my mother to keep the machine free from dust and dirt. Often, we would hear the hum-hum-hum of the machine, as she evenly stepped on the rectangular pedal, with the name "SINGER" in ironwork, along with the horizontal bars where she placed her feet. Later, when we saw that the pedaling left her a bit out of breath, we offered to attach a motor to the machine. But she refused, saying it would not be the same without her foot pedaling away.

I watched the blue dress take form. From time to time, she would call me to come over, first to try on the lining, and then, the dress. Adjustments had to be made in the waist as I was no thin gazelle, even then. The shoulders too, and even the length of the skirt needed slight modifications. Like any

child, I became impatient with the sewing and the many times I had to try the dress on. But my mother never lost her patience.

And as a “*pièce de résistance*” she fashioned a large rose out of an extra piece of gauzy cloth, twirling the folded material several times to form the petals of a flower, finally pinning it on a stiff belt separate from the dress. The belt, also covered with the blue material, had a cardboard stiffener, and was anchored by hooks and eyes.

To this day, I can still see very clearly that rose on the belt, although I can no longer find a photo of the recital. I am very sure that my father, ever the photographer, took many pictures during that occasion. But in my mind’s eye this is one picture I see: myself in that light blue dress, short white socks, and black shoes after the recital, smiling self-consciously at the camera, my hair done in a tight chignon with a blue velvet ribbon around it.

My mother graduated with a B.S.E.Ed. degree from CEU in Mendiola St., Manila, but she had a strong creative bent. I remember the checkered red-and-white schoolbag she made for me when I started kindergarten, using the “craze” then: long, flat, colored plastic strips woven artistically to form a bag. She was also into crocheting. One of her masterpieces was a large, dark blue “mantilla” with a seashell design. After long years of being unused and kept in her closet, parts of its edges had become faded, but the entire piece is intact. I used to wash it gently, and wear it from time to time. It was a veritable heirloom.

That she found time to indulge in her many sewing projects, including darning and adjusting hems of school uniforms, using her trusty ivory thimble on her third finger, plus innumerable other creative pursuits, in between taking care of two children, managing a household, and helping my father in his studio, was a testament to her multi-faceted life.

She left us five years ago, at almost 90 years old, one day after Mother’s Day. But, on early mornings before the day starts when I sit quietly

to read or write, I search my heart and I always find her there. She looks young, younger than myself, and happy. And sometimes I see her holding up that little blue dress, adjusting the collar, the sleeves, and especially that blue rose adorning its belt.

The Aroma of Adobo

I remember my mother's chicken adobo most vividly. Often, when we visited her on Sundays, the enticing smell of garlicky adobo greeted us as we entered her garden. From outside the screened doors we could already guess what was for lunch that day: my favorite comfort food, chicken adobo cooked in my mother's special way. She called it "Ilonggo Adobo," to differentiate it from the soupy dish often found here in Manila. The chicken parts were lightly coated with a sauce, most of which settled at the bottom of the dish. Before serving she would use a tablespoon to scoop up this aromatic oil, bringing up a lot of fried garlic, and spread it over the chicken pieces. She knew the dish was my favorite.

When we still lived in Iloilo City where my father opened a photographic studio, my mother was very busy helping out in the shop. There were negative films to be sorted out and placed inside plasticine envelopes, properly labeled; photos to be inspected and counted daily before they were placed on brown paper envelopes with the names of the customers neatly written in front with the correct dates. These were registered in a master logbook. We had an all-around secretary, Leticia, but her handwriting left so much to be desired. My mother, with her clear, cursive hand, did these entries herself. To this day I've always thanked my mother for passing down to me this ability to write in a very legible longhand, an outlier perhaps among the many medical prescription scrawls of colleagues. But my handwriting never matched hers in beauty and fluidity, although I could do a passable counterfeit. She and my father took turns tutoring my brother Anthony and

I daily on our school lessons, sessions which would sometimes last till before dinnertime. The studio closed at seven in the evening after a full day, so the cooking was delegated to our house help, who fortunately were up to the task. My mother often declared that she was a housewife, who didn't know how to cook, but she certainly found her bearings in the kitchen later in life.

When we transferred to Manila, my mother had more time on her hands. She started looking at recipes for Filipino food in magazines, and pored through some old cookbooks. I remember Betty Crocker's, a well-thumbed volume that allowed the reader to add more recipes because it had a three-ring binder. I loved leafing through its colorful pages when I was in high school, more to read its contents than to learn how to cook. I remember too, getting my mother some new cookbooks, and newer pots and pans for her birthdays. Slowly she surprised us with her culinary skills. She remembered the food of her childhood in Negros, and even ventured into dishes with coconut cream and chili. My husband Alex loves chili in his food, and my mother would often tell us that she added extra chilies in the curry dish just for him, and would we try tasting it if it was hot enough?

Yet she never forgot my penchant for the Ilonggo adobo. Many times, we cooked it together. The chicken parts would have been marinating in a little salt, soy sauce, and *calamansi* juice for at least three hours before we arrived. Then she would lightly sauté the meat, and set it aside. Lots of crushed garlic would then be fried, with the chicken added afterwards. A little water was poured into the pot, and then some vinegar, and a little bay leaf would be added. When the chicken was cooked through, she would add the soy sauce and then turn the heat to low.

This simmering was where the magic begins, I think. The low heat caused the reduction of whatever liquid remained, and left in its trace a slightly thick, oily, and garlicky sauce that could be placed on hot rice, a viand

by itself! She would often ask me to taste the “unaw,” which was the sauce. Was it too salty?

It was always perfect, and I would tell her so. And her face would light up with delight.

She even had a special heavy black wok for her adobo, and she would not cook it anywhere else. The thickness distributed the heat evenly, she said, and there was never the fear of a “dukot,” or burnt food sticking to the bottom of the pan. The chicken adobo was always cooked so thoroughly, that the meat even fell from the bones.

When we went home in the evenings, she would often tell us to bring home almost all the leftover adobo with us. She was alone on weekdays, she said, and she couldn’t consume all the leftovers by herself. We would enjoy that dish for several more days, down to the last bit of garlicky sauce.

There were other dishes that she loved to cook. I remember her Steamed Chicken with Lemongrass, which was always so soft, tender, and aromatic. She didn’t have a steamer, and refused to use the Salad Master set that we surprised her with one Christmas. She had her improvised steamer, she said, which worked very well. The proof of course was in her steamed chicken, which often had a clear lemongrass suffused sauce in the serving dish. This liquid tasted like chicken essence, the result of the three-hour steaming on a wok, the heavy oval dish sitting gingerly on top of an inverted thick cup that had lost its ear long ago.

And who could forget her Minced Pork with Salty Egg Yolk Surprise? When she was still strong enough to take a jeep all by herself to the Arranque Market, she would head for her “suki” to get uncooked salted eggs. She trusted this shop, she said, because the shopkeeper never gave her spoiled ones. She would mix the minced pork with the whites of the salted eggs very well, and put this mixture in a deep rectangular clear dish. Then she

would “bury” the salted egg yolks a little apart from one another and cover the top with more minced pork. Finally, she would steam this in her favorite “steamer.” And the result was a mouth-watering pork dish with just enough saltiness that needed no other seasoning. The “surprise” was in finding the golden yolk among the moist and luscious minced pork.

When in the mood, even while we were still living in Iloilo City, she would find time on Sundays to cook “kumbo,” fried ripe *saba* bananas covered in a flour-and-egg batter, which were best eaten while hot. This usually occurred when a relative from the countryside gave us loads of ripe *saba* bananas that needed to be eaten the soonest.

There was also the Puto Lanson that she patiently made. The peeled cassava (we call them *balinhoy* in Hiligaynon) tubers had to be grated, then mixed with young coconut meat and sugar, before being steamed in round Liberty milk cans. This concoction was topped with grated coconut and brown sugar.

But it is her adobo chicken that I remember most. And miss. When my husband Alex and I lived in Sydney and Jakarta, I tried to duplicate my mother’s recipe, but never got the right consistency of her “unaw.” I was always so afraid of burning the dish, so most of the time the chicken came out looking pale. I had to add more soy sauce, and the dish didn’t taste the same as hers. Sometimes in my mind, I would ask her what was her secret for this tasty bit of comfort food, and I imagine her laughing merrily. I see her in the kitchen, in her element, doing something that she loved because she knew we appreciated her cooking so much.

She left us a day after Mother’s Day six years ago, perhaps making sure we spent that special May day with her, by her hospital bed. These days, I draw comfort in these memories, and then I know that she is still with us.

SPEEDY GONZALES, WHY DON'T YOU COME HOME?

Dawn Laurente Marfil

“So anak, I have a girlfriend ha?” my father said as he carefully felt between the flaps of the Balikbayan box, looking for the dip in the space between them that was hidden under layers and layers of glossy brown packaging tape. Upon finding it, he slid the blade of the box-cutter into that dip, angled the blade sideways and sliced through those layers of packaging tape like it was water. It was strange to see him opening that box when all I had ever known of it, and him, was that he was the one who usually sealed it.

I had always been the one to open boxes like this from him with more exuberance, eager to breathe in the familiar stateside smell. They would come once a year, like relief goods, for the small, imagined catastrophe of a life in America that he had wanted to give me, but couldn't. The first layer that served as a padding would always be large, soft, fluffy towels with tags still on to separate them from the used ones in the pile. And beneath them were the standard contents for a Balikbayan box: tubes of Colgate, Jergens lotion, cans of Spam, Vienna sausage, and the one thing responsible for that distinct aroma of imported goods from America—Irish Spring soap. And then there were the family-sized packs of Palm corned beef that could never fit into my kitchen pantry, that was made for the unproblematically single.

“Better than Purefoods,” I had told him about five years ago when he had asked how I liked the Palm corned beef he had sent in that year's box. He has not stopped sending Palm corned beef since then. Nor has he stopped sending me bags upon bags of coffee beans, after he had once caught me in a call while I was waiting in line in Starbucks. He latches on to little things like

that, because he never really knows what to send to me, I think. I never did ask for many things. I had learned very early on, even as a child, never to ask for anything beyond my school tuition.

It was also strange and a little unsettling to see him in my home. Of all my imagined settings for reunions with my father, my shoebox condo was never at the top of the list. Wouldn't the Ninoy Aquino International Airport have been a more dramatic choice for the end of a 22-year separation?

I had written so much about losing my father at twelve years old when he left for America as an illegal worker and remembering nothing of that day. So, when he finally got his green card almost a year before Trump was elected, and his homecoming was imminent, I had started writing it in my head. It would have been nice to pick him up at the airport, and this time, at 34 years old, remember everything. Like a nice, clean circle. But Papa had conspired with Ate Sigrid, a cousin I had grown up with, and he just showed up at the lobby of my condo on an ordinary late April day, when I was off from work. He had packed light, just a small carry-on bag, and this year's Balikbayan box. This wasn't a homecoming, just a two-week vacation.

What wasn't strange was the news that he had a new girlfriend. When my father finally discovered the Internet, and therefore Facebook, he had found an easier way to keep in touch with me. Over the years, he could only send birthday cards, and the odd postcard or two through a relative who was going to the Philippines for a visit; but I could never write him back. He had discouraged it from the beginning when I had asked for his home address. I suppose he was afraid of a paper trail that could possibly lead to his deportation. Phone calls were impossible, as we never had a landline. And when my mother could finally afford to buy a cellphone, she and my father had already stopped speaking to each other. So when Facebook came around, I was suddenly just one click away from him.

And so were the rest of the Earth's female population.

He had once asked me, while I was in the middle of an Art App lecture, to suss out a girl he had been talking to on Facebook on a hunch that she was catfishing him, simply because her boobs were not consistent in some of her pictures. And on another occasion, he had asked me to translate “The scenery is beautiful but not as much as you” in Japanese, because he wanted to text it to his Japanese-Brazilian “friend.” Like a dutiful daughter, I did both for him. Then there was that time he complained about how hard it was to fall in love with someone who was still in the process of separating from her husband. I had bitten my tongue there, and didn’t mention the fact that he wasn’t even separated from my mother yet. Instead, I had told him to just find someone to love who was available.

And when he had responded with, “But Anak, love is much deeper when it’s complicated,” I was determined not to listen to his words of wisdom. I was too old for complicated. But apparently, at 61 years old, he was all for it.

He did make an effort to look for love, complicated or otherwise. I know this because he had accidentally sent me a Facebook event invitation for “Speed Dating for Over Fifty.” Needless to say, his messages weren’t the most tactful, but I guess I was just grateful we were talking. Even if most of those conversations were about some girl he now loves for a millennial minute. So, his telling me he had a girlfriend should not have been a big deal. But for some reason, he seemed a bit fidgety about this one.

I suppose it was different this time. No cellphones, no Facebook messages. Just good old-fashioned, casual conversation—a first for us, after 22 years.

“I met her online.”

“We were on and off for three years.”

And, my personal favorite, “I felt sorry for her after our last breakup so I agreed to get back together.”

Of course, my father was going to be hilarious in person.

I fought the urge to snicker. I had met a Brit on Tinder a year ago, and we didn't work out. Online relationships rarely do. I suppose I could have told him this, but I didn't want to seem like a wet blanket. After all, he had made it to three years. I barely made it to one. And if anyone was good at maintaining a relationship, marred by distance, and aided only by online technology, it would be my father. We weren't so bad at the father-daughter thing over Facebook.

"Is she Filipino?" I asked him as I walked to my room, trying to figure out our living arrangement for the next two weeks. I started to empty out a drawer filled with clothes I imagined I could fit into again (once I lose those last 40 pounds). I jammed them all the way to the back of my closet to give him space for his clothes, and other knickknacks. Hopefully, that one drawer would be enough. Men didn't need much storage, right? I couldn't remember how much space my father had occupied in our old tiny, rented apartment on Basilio Street.

"No, she's Italian-Filipino and lives in Milan."

That generated two raised, disbelieving eyebrows from me. Looks like I had inherited more from my father than just the bridge of his nose and his legs. Apparently, as per my Tinder matches, our market for potential romantic shenanigans seemed to lie overseas.

My father is tall and lean. He had gained a little weight around the middle, but had stayed mostly slim. He had that dark Ilocano skin, weathered even further by the California sun. He had squinty eyes, the kind that looked stuck between laughter and far-sightedness, and a high-bridged nose. His hair was still black, with only wisps of gray showing in his mustache. I guess for someone in his sixties, he still looked good. But handsome enough to snag a woman from Italy, the land of Sophia Loren and Monica Bellucci? I

didn't think so. But apparently Letizia, his girlfriend, thinks he is. And so had all of my father's former paramours.

If this is what's waiting for me in my sixties, then I need not worry about dwindling Tinder matches in my thirties. It wasn't time to panic, yet. Surely, he would have passed on some of his luck in the romance department to me.

Then I made a mental note to delete the apps Tinder and OkCupid from my phone for now. With my father suddenly showing up, it might not be a good time to look for, uh, a good time.

"How often did she visit you in L.A.?" I asked him as I turned my attention to the bedroom. Of course, my father was getting my queen-sized bed, and I had to fold myself into the narrow purple two-seater sofa in the living room. I see now that it had been an impractical choice for furniture. It couldn't double as a bed for guests. But then again, I had never imagined myself having guests who would stay over for more than a night. The sofa was pretty, and velvety, and it was colored purple.

For the next two weeks, that pretty, purple sofa was going to be my bed.

I moved my comforter to the edge of the bed and started fluffing up all eight of my pillows, while simultaneously searching for any errant shirt, sock, panty, or bra. I remember with fondness how my father had called me a snake in my early grade school days, when I kept leaving a trail of shoes, socks, blue pleated skirt, and white blouse from the front door to my bedroom. He probably wouldn't be happy to find that I haven't changed at all.

I might have gotten worse, actually. There was a week's worth of dishes piled in the kitchen sink. My fridge was well-stocked with food, half of it edible and the other half possibly radioactive. My entire floor was littered with chip crumbs, coffee and soda stains, coins I had never bothered

to pick up, and tiny tumbleweeds of my hair that went all the way into the bathroom, where they would clog the drain.

But, I'm not really that much of a slob. I know how to clean my house and do it well. I just don't do it often. I only clean when I know I'm having friends, or some guy, over. In fact, my fastest record of tidying up and hiding my mess is 45 minutes. Once, I even had time to take a quick shower and paint my toenails red. I also have a different protocol when my best friend Pat, who is a germophobe, is coming over. That kind of cleaning takes at least half a day, and must end with Lysol. My mother avoids my house entirely, the same way she had avoided going into my room to clean it up when I was a teenager. She had understood and respected where and how I kept my filth. But now, my father was here and I didn't know what degree of cleanliness he expected from me.

"Visit me? No, never!" My father scoffed as he took out shirts and pants, as neatly folded as the plastic covers he had taught me to cover my school books and notebooks with when I was in third grade. But he was pulling them out from everywhere—inside his bag's main storage compartment, its side pockets, from under the Palm corned beef, the laptop sleeve, wrapped around the pack of Vienna sausage, and even hidden inside the towels. His packing technique was chaotic, at best. It was nice to know this about him. I can't remember how he had packed his clothes into a suitcase when I was twelve.

"She's an architect, very busy with her work. I'll visit her next year on my birthday."

An architect! I quickly went down the list of my exes and pseudo-exes. Unemployed computer programmer. Police academy reject. Professional college student turned surfer. Drug addict. High school history teacher. Ah, okay, one decent dude. It lasted only two weeks though, so maybe not so decent. Clearly, I didn't inherit the gene that attracted decent human beings.

“Don’t expect anything, ha? She’s not pretty.” My father took out his cellphone and showed me a picture of Letizia. My hopes and dreams of having Monica Bellucci or Sophia Loren for a stepmother were dashed with the image of plain, old, plump Letizia with her coconut shell haircut and wide, flat nose. She wasn’t even prettier than my mother before she had her nose done.

“But she dresses well, you see?” was my father’s sound argument for staying with her.

I remembered my mother’s wardrobe, she of the neon-green, stretchy pencil skirt paired with a yellow blouse topped by a deep purple jacket, and I somehow understood my father’s dating choice.

“Anyway, you’ll know more about her tonight when she calls. She wants to talk to you.”

And boy, did I learn more than I wanted to when she finally called. This woman, who told me to call her “Tita Letty, for now,” was quite a character. I had never encountered someone so open, so giving with her affection, so very much out of touch with the disposable nature of online relationships.

So, my father handed me a phone, not his android Samsung smartphone, but a small, disposable, analog phone. The kind Americans called a burner phone and Filipinos called the Second Line for the Second Girlfriend. That was the phone my father used to speak to Tita Letty, and currently the one stuck to my ear, while I talked to her with my mouth frozen somewhere between a smile and a grimace.

“Hello, Nicole, I’m going to be your new mother!” was the first thing she ever told me. Who does that? Where was the trepidation of a woman encountering her lover’s grown daughter? Wasn’t she supposed to fear my eternal loyalty to my own mother standing in the way of me accepting her

into my father's life, and now, into mine? Granted, we were hardly in each other's lives now, except for the occasional text message from my mother on birthdays and holidays; and the sporadic ping of a Facebook private message from my father. And then there's the fact that my parents had stopped speaking to each other by the time I was nineteen years old, over remittances that never quite lived up to my mother's American dreams. There really was no tight family dynamic that I had to stand guard in front of. The door was wide open for Tita Letty.

She goes on to tell me that she has only one child, a son, and that she is so excited to finally have a daughter. Widowed early at 25 years old, her whole life had revolved around her son and her work, and she never thought of opening her heart again to a man.

"That is, until your father came into my life," she added with a soft, sweet laugh that only a woman in love is capable of. "You know, I'm not the most beautiful woman, but I believe I am the best candidate to make your father happy."

I feared for her heart then, as I stood against the sliding door to my bedroom, while my father sat slouched on the bed, playing a game with a panda shooting bubbles on his tablet.

"I told your father he should come here and be with me. He doesn't have to work. All he has to do is love me." What *gayuma* did my father give this woman? No one I know loves so selflessly like this. Even my mother, who had chosen my father over her engineer boyfriend, insisted that my father find work when they were together.

"That's nice," was all I could say, my weak smile giving way to a nervous little laugh at the end of that response.

"I hope to see you soon before your father and I get married."

Huh?

“Oh! You’re getting married?” I repeated loud enough for my father to hear. No reaction, not even a twitch. Just the sound of shooting pandas and exploding bubbles.

“Congratulations po! Yes, maybe I can visit, after you guys see each other.”

And after more promises to keep in touch, we said goodbye. When I handed the phone back to my father, he asked me what we talked about.

Her entire emotional journey since meeting you, I wanted to say. “She told me you guys are going to get married,” I answered carefully.

My father guffawed and wheezed, years of nicotine abuse grating at his lungs. “That’s what she thinks!” He didn’t say more after that, and proceeded to gather his things to get ready for bed, shaking his head now and then, an annoying smile plastered on his face.

I was torn between amusement and horror. This poor woman was in love with my father. My mother was in love, too, and sometimes I fear she still is. And the only thing she got out of it was divorce papers the moment my father got his green card. Should I warn Tita Letty that loving my father in this open, giving, and almost selfless manner was just going to give her a world of hurt? It felt too meddlesome though. It was way above my usual filial duty of translating my father’s pick-up lines or catfish-fishing. Besides, that wasn’t my primary concern right now.

As I folded myself into the purple sofa only my best friend Pat, at 5-foot 1-inch, could fit into comfortably, and the day of my father’s return inched to a close, I realized that at 34 years old, I had no idea how to be a daughter.

My mother and I had learned early on, even before I went to college, that we were better off away from each other. We were so wrapped up in ourselves that, when we were together, one of us had to fold. I hadn’t folded

since high school, let alone after college. We would make our way to each other over lunch once or twice a month, but that was the extent of her mothering and my being a daughter. We had the rest of the month to be ourselves, and we had been fine with that for a long time. I had two weeks to figure out how to be a daughter to a father, this time, without Facebook.

I woke up the next morning with a McDonald's *hamdesal* on my face, and my father calling me by a name I hadn't heard in a long time, *Koykoykoykoy*, over and over again as he shook me awake. I can't remember the last time someone woke me up for school, or work.

And when I got up to make coffee, I had to add a little more water to the coffee press than usual to make two cups instead of one. When I went to the bathroom to get ready for work, I found it scrubbed clean, toiletries arranged by height in the cabinet, mirror cleared of toothbrush debris, and the whole place smelling of Lysol Lemon Fresh.

I went to work as usual, only a little dazed by the fact that at the end of the day, I would go home with a parent waiting for me. And when I did get home that day, it was to a dish-free sink, blanket folded neatly on top of my pillow on the sofa, the bed made like a hotel room's with fluffed pillows on top of the comforter, whose edges have been tucked under the mattress, and the white-tiled floor gleaming, white with not a single tumbleweed of hair in sight. I didn't say anything. More importantly, my father didn't say anything either. There were no lectures about keeping house, or being a lady. Nothing.

He just started talking to me about the day he had, walking about and looking for old haunts of his, chatting up his old buddies on Facebook, and finding an old mixtape of his among my things as he cleaned my bookshelves. He said he had made it for his good friend William, and that we were probably going to see his old buddies for his late birthday celebration. The day wound down, and we retreated to our separate areas, him inside my bedroom, and me in the living room.

He read on his Kindle, but he did bring a pocketbook with him. David Baldacci, of course. Sometimes I would hear the soft plop-plop of the panda shooting bubbles. His cellphone pinged endlessly, too. But he mostly read or played in silence. And on the other side of the sliding door, I did the exact same thing. Funny, even if he hadn't been there, that's exactly how I would have ended the day anyway.

I had almost two weeks of this kind of day with him. It was like spending two weeks with myself, even down to the detail of ignoring texts and phone calls. On some days though, he would actually pick up the phone and talk to Tita Letty. It amused me to no end when I heard him talk to her. He sounded exactly like he did when he would call me on my birthday to tell me about the Balikbayan box he had filled to the brim with my favorite Palm corned beef. So maybe he does love her. But on most days, he just lets his burner phone ring and ring. And when I tell him to pick it up, he just says, "It's Letty," and goes back to his book, or game. So maybe he doesn't love her that much. At least, not enough to allow her to interrupt his reading or his game.

I solved the Letty mystery on the day my father and I were preparing to go to dinner at Four Seasons in the Mall of Asia, to meet up with five of his old buddies and their wives. Papa may have a general grasp of technology's advantages, but I don't think he's clued in on the concept of his devices syncing with each other.

He was in the bathroom, taking his time on the toilet as usual. When I was a child, he used to smoke in the bathroom. But this time, he had his phone in there with him. I could hear the faint sound of the panda shooting bubbles, so I figured he was playing his game again. I was getting ready inside my bedroom, where he was charging his Kindle and his tablet. Both were synced to his smartphone, and notifications were pinging like crazy, like someone repeatedly tapping the bell on the reception desk. And

this one was open for business, apparently. I could see every single message he was getting, and sending. Apparently, my father doesn't know the concept of installing a lock on his devices.

His Viber was open and he was sending messages to a woman named Lorna. She was bummed that he hadn't been replying to her, and had said her goodbyes. She swore she wouldn't bother him again. There was a goodbye message.

But after a few days there was a sad emoji. Then my father said, "Hello," and she was back with a smiley face and a "Hello po." Dear god. But in the notifications bar on top, there was the white hand phone inside a green circle icon for WhatsApp. He hadn't read that message yet. It was from someone named Sandra1957. Facebook Messenger's blue circle was there too—his buddies probably. Oh but then, there was this red circle with a white heart inside, Filipino Cupid. An indigo circle with a small letter b inside—Badoo. A cerulean circle with a white fish inside, blowing a heart bubble—Plenty of Fish. A red heart tipped on its side with a red dot on the tip—Dating.com. A blue circle with two more concentric circles in lighter shades of blue inside it—Skout. All of these were dating apps. And my father was active in all of them.

A shudder passed through me and I briefly thanked the universe that my father and I didn't use the same dating sites. So yes, my father may actually loved Tita Letty. But it wasn't real enough to keep his eyes from wandering. And with all the women on the planet just an app away, the entire World Wide Web was his playground.

I didn't say anything when my father emerged from the bathroom almost half an hour later. We were both really good at that, not saying anything. I exited my bedroom and let him get dressed. His devices were quiet now. Lorna and Sandra1957 must have said their goodbyes.

And when we finally got to Four Seasons and Papa presented me to Tito Willy, Tito Bobby, Tito Mike, Tito Philip, and Tito Jerry as his daughter, my little smile felt like a smirk on the inside. I was thinking of the apps Tinder and OkCupid that I had downloaded back into my phone. Yep, I was his daughter alright. Maybe this was why being with my father had been so easy. It was like being with myself, just a more jacked up version, but still mostly like myself.

His friends had secured a small room with a big round table for all of us, and I settled into the dinner, as I listened to my father, his friends, and their wives talk about old times. Their stories of how Papa would wear his shirt unbuttoned to the middle of his chest, with a scarf around his neck in the middle of Taft Avenue, were a familiar rehash of my mother's tales, just with more ribbing than romance. They also talked of his penchant for boots and bellbottoms. My mother called them his clogs. They all agreed that Papa had the best taste in music. It was at this point that Papa whipped up his mixtape labeled Eddie Marfil 60's on a Sony High Bias UX 90 blank tape. I could only recognize a few songs from Side A and Side B from when he used to play those songs on the stereo that we had often fought over when I was young. It had "California Dreamin'," "Hard Day's Night," "World Without Love," "Memories," "Traces of Love," "Seventh Dawn," "I'll Keep You Satisfied," "Shangri-La," and "Speedy Gonzales." I remember hating the last song. It was one of his favorites, something he would play over and over again while I sat in front of him, glowering until I could finally play Color Me Badd's "Choose" and "Wildflower."

Tito Willy came prepared for their walk down memory lane. He had brought a copy of a Beatles magazine, something he had borrowed from my father, but never had the chance to return. My father had, apparently, left for the States without a single goodbye to his friends. In fact, some of them thought he had died. But then, Facebook happened. And here they were,

friends again, in their sixties. Pretty soon, the conversation turned towards filling in the gaps of those years of silence. Inevitably, it led to me.

I grew uncomfortable, answering their questions as honestly as I could, and just as briefly. *What do you do? Are you married? When did you graduate? Where did you study? Where is your mom? Still there? Where does she work?*

Instructor at UST. No. 2003. UST. Cavite. Yes. Cavite.

And once they put two and two together and realized that the entire time my father was in America, my mother had worked in Cavite, leaving me practically by myself at twelve years old in Manila where I went to school, there was a little awkward silence.

“You did really well, Nicole.” It was Tito Bobby. He was Papa’s best friend, the first one he had reached out to in Facebook. I thanked him and smiled, and tried out a little laugh while excusing myself to refill my plate. I went over to the Japanese section of the buffet. Tuna sashimi, salmon sashimi, yes. Egg sushi? No. Tempura, a few more minutes on the fryer. Okay, willing to wait. And by the time I got back to the table, the conversation was back to old times, and there was laughter around the table once more. The laughter continued well towards the end, especially when they asked for the bill and all eleven of them took out their senior citizen cards.

It was a good night for my father. He looked less old as we waited for our Grab ride. He looked like someone who had enjoyed the company of good, lifelong friends who had mourned his absence and now rejoiced in his return. It was another thing we had in common. Pat and I have been friends since we were eleven years old. I knew how spending time with friends could put you back in orbit when you sometimes tilt out of axis. I guess it was the same for my father.

When we got home, we went about our nightly routine, and separated into our own spaces as we had done so the entire time he had been here. But before he said good night, he hugged me.

Now—the first time my father had hugged me upon his return—I remember freezing. I remember my heart shuttering itself and forming a tightly closed fist. No tears. I remember thinking this is it—this must have been what had happened to me when I was twelve and my father had hugged me for the last time at Ninoy Aquino International Airport. But it wasn't my heart that had turned into stone. It was my mind. Maybe that's why I couldn't remember any of it.

But this time, at this first hug, all synapses were firing, and I could remember everything. The silly way he crept behind the glass wall of the lobby towards the door, moving like Tom when he's stalking Jerry in those afternoon cartoon shows we had watched together when I was a child. The way the people just went about their business, not really caring that I was seeing my father for the first time in twenty-two years. The blast of April humidity that hung in the air when he opened the door.

And the first time my father hugged me after more than two decades, his arms had felt like steel bands that belied his 61 years. His hug was strong, steady. There was no gentle swaying back and forth, or even excited little jumps from me. Kids reuniting with parents in movies always look like that. We didn't.

His hug was still, but loud with all the years it tried to collapse in between us.

But tonight, my father's hug was different. Same steel bands around me, unmoving, loud in the years collapsing between us, but louder than that were my father's words as he spoke around his sobs.

"I'm sorry, Anak. *Ang dami kong kasalanan sa'yo... Yung kasama ko na umalis, nakuha na niya 'yung anak niya. Doon na siya nakapag-college.*"

It was the first time in my life I had ever heard him talk about bringing me to the States, and acknowledging that he had failed.

But what do daughters do when their fathers fail them?

I went over my life and pinpointed the good parts, the parts that he could look at and think to himself, “Well, that wasn’t such a loss, now was it?”

I told him I had a good life, good friends, went to good schools, ate good food, and best of all, had complete control over the stereo when he left. I graduated with honors, I have a career, which I love, property that is in my name, and the only thing missing in my life at that point was a Husky puppy.

I was okay.

I mean, sure, it would have been nice to go to school in California, swim in the ocean and drown, and be saved by David Hasselhoff or Pamela Anderson, drive a red Jeep Cherokee, and meet a guy named Todd Wilkins, like my favorite twin Elizabeth Wakefield from my *Sweet Valley High* books.

But, I was fine.

And like Tito Bobby said, I did pretty well. I did pretty well, by myself.

But I was crying while I was saying these, and I didn’t quite understand why. My plan to comfort my father for his apology over the lost parallel life I could have had as a California girl didn’t seem to be working out fine.

And then, Papa said, “I’m so sorry Koykoy, for everything.”

My childhood name coupled with all the unnamed hurts and longing between the ages of twelve and 34 suddenly collapsed into that hug, into the word “everything.” I guess that’s what I was weeping for, for everything.

And then I learned to do what most daughters do for their fathers when they fail them, they forgive.

Because, really, what else is there to do but to forgive, and hope that there is enough love there to sustain what is left.

“It’s okay, Pa. I love you, okay?”

TULA / POETRY

MGA PANGKARANIWAN

Mykel Andrada

PASYON NI BULAN

Mariing atas ng araw
Sa buwan: dapat ipinid
Ang mata, 'wag magpabalong
Ng liwanag, 'wag magluwal,
Talukap ipambilibid

Sa mga tinging mapusyaw.
'Pagkat umaga'y daigdig
Ng haring sa ginto'y gumon.
Bab'la ng araw: balaraw
Ang titig, nakapupunit.

Ngunit 'sang umaga, buwan
Ay dumilat, pumurikit.
Kamay ng araw, kumuyom,
Leeg ng buwan, sinakal.
Sumigaw nang alumpihit:

Pula na naman ang buwan,
Duguang mata sa langit.
Galos na ayaw maghilom,
Sugat na di mapatahan,
Hiwang hindi masinulid.

SALAMING-TUBIG

mamamangha ka:
salaming-tubig ang palad niya
nakahuhuli ng balangaw
na nakapailanlang
sa kapisasong langit na asul

sa ibabaw ng kanyang palad
paduyan-duyan ang maliit na batingaw
malalim na lagutok ang isinisigaw
timbulang hinaing sa hangin

hanggang sa mahulog ito
tila ulan ng yelo
nakatitig nang direktso
habang dumadausdos
paglapag, kumilapsaw ang palad

mamamangha ka:
basag ang balangaw

SITAK

Namimintog ang iyong mga ugat
sa matitipunong braso.
Halos pumutok ang iyong mga bisig
sa ehersisyo ng pagmamaneho.

Hawak mo ang buhay ko
sa mahabang biyaheng lansangan,
inaabangan ang bawat kurba,
alintana ang paspas ng iba.

Sabi mo, nagtatampo ang iyong asawa.
Wala ka sa kanyang piling
nang magluwal siya ng uha.
Ibinabiyahe mo pa kasi

ang pambayad sa ospital.
Babae ang inyong bunso.
Ipaglalaba ng iyong misis
ang sususuhin ng sanggol.

Nakatali ka sa manibela ng iba.
Kabisado mo ang bituka ng Maynila
pero kailanma'y di nasumpungang
tawaging hari ng lansangan.

Umaalingasngas ang mga gulong
sa pakikiapid sa lansangan.
Maliligaw ka, sabi mo,
'pag pumanaw ang alinsangan.

BANANA CUE

Sanay na ang iyong tumbong
sa lamig ng mabatong sahiḡ.

Kinakausap mo ang hangin
habang nakalatag ang iyong mga saging.

Sumisigaw nang nakapinid ang bibig.
Marahil dinadalit mo

na umulan ng mga bungangang
ngunguya sa 'yong panindang matamis.

Kasabay mong hihilinging wala na sanang
mabiktima ang diabetes.

Sapul ng iyong mga titig
ang naglilipanang dahon

at hinihiraya mong maging asukal
ang makulimlim na langit

habang ang iyong mga paa'y
matamlay na pumapadyak

upang bugawin
ang mga langgam.

DOON PO SA AMIN, BAYAN NI 'TAY BAKAK

Doon po sa amin, bayan ni 'Tay Bakak,
"Kill, kill, kill" ang order: ang bumangga, wasak.
"Ganyan po 'pag gera," putak ni Boy Talak.
Nang walang nauto, sa TV nambelat.

Doon po sa amin, bayan ni 'Tay Bakak,
Bawal ang sumingit, pila ng Sinovac.
Bawal ang VIP, bawal ang lumagpas.
Mayor lang sakalam! May listahan ng sub!

Doon po sa amin, bayan ni 'Tay Bakak,
Tao'y pinalabas kahit di pa ligtas.
Nang bilang ng kaso ay tumataas-taas,
Sinisi ng Duke taong pinalabas.

Doon po sa amin, bayan ni 'Tay Bakak
Nagpapalakpakan butbuton at palpak.
"Excellent job we did," sabi ni Boy Talak.
One year nakakulong, ECQ ang bagsak.

PAGPAPAKILALA

Ma. Cecilia D. Dela Rosa

pagpapakilala

i

ang sakit ko'y
mga bagay-bagay
bahay eskinita tricycle
dyip MRT kalsada gusali
elevator sahig istrukturang
nakadagan sa dibdib
makina sa kukoteng
matrapik mausok maalikabok
na lungsod matao
maaaring tao mismo
o parte ng katawan ng tao

ii

ito ang mga sabit sa dyip
ang pwet kong nakaupo-hindi
sa upuang siyaman
tren ito na laging siksikan
kung lumuwag man saglit lamang
ang sakit ko'y ang kamay na hindi
maibaba sa tagiliran ngunit hindi rin
makaabot sa handrail
pinto itong ayaw magsara
dahil nakalawit pa ang kaliwang paa
ng huling nagpumilit na pasahero
paminsan riles itong nakangiti

iii

ito ang bisita kong
magpapaalam nang aalis
pero sa tuwing lalapit sa pintuan
biglang bubuhos ang ulan
at wala siyang payong
kaya makikiusap kung
maaring makitulog pang muli
hanggang kinabukasan

iv

kaya ako na marunong
tumakbong patingkayad
kahit nababasa ang binti
sa tilamsik at maliliit na lawa
ang babangon ngayong umaga
para pumasok sa opisina
ako na maliit ang siyang dadagan
sa mga istruktura makina lungsod
hahayaang nakaangat ang palda
sa siksikan ng mga pasahero
hahayaang maipit habang nakapikit
at umiidlip habang hindi maglapat sa sahig
ang parehong paa hahayaang hindi magsara
ang lahat ng nakabukas
at pananaginipang daan-daan naman
kaming mahuhuli sa trabaho ngayong araw

Kaso hindi'yun lungkot

Pinakamadaling tulaan ang lungkot
Sabihin mo lang ang salita, lungkot
Ay bubuntung-hininga na ang mundo
Iikot ang himpapawid na parang
Tinatugtog ang isang Badalamenti
Kahit wala namang mga puno
At mga bakuran sa Krus na Ligas
Gigising kang makata dahil natulog
Kang tumutula. Tapos maririnig mo
Ang kwento ng bangungot ng iba.
Itutula mo para gumanda,

Nag-aral tayong tumula para maging makata

Nag-aral tayong tumula para maging makata
kaya nang lumabas tayo ng kwarto
at muling makita ang lupa, ang una nating naisip
ay ang mga halamang napatubo sa papel.
Dinampot muli natin ang panulat at nagpasikat
ng araw sa ibabaw ng bukirin, nagbuhat
din tayo ng bundok nang may
mapangalumbabahan ang araw
at tayo ri'y may mapagkublihan.
Tayo mismo'y nangalumbaba sa bundok
gawa ng pagkamangha sa isa't isa.
Kung bakit wala ni isa sa atin ang nakaalala
na dumampot ng pala, tayong mga bihasa na
sa paghukay ng sariling libingan.

Pagpapakilala

Kahit naman sa pagpapatiwakal
kailangang bumangon muna't hanapin
ang bagay na tatapos sa lahat
kaya ka nakatayo't naghahasa ng kutsilyo
noong abútin ng buryong at mapalingon
sa rice cooker na may bahaw. Wala na
palang bawang. Nakapa mo sa bulsa
ang singkwenta, lamukot at nanigas na.

Alam mong hahakbang ka rin kung gayon
palayo sa lababo, lampas sa pintuan,
diretso sa eskinitang sikip sa kinamadang
mga sako ng semento at sa mga
pahinante ng kalapit na hardware
na tulad mo, Bikolano.

Lagi kang may katulad,

maliwanag. Sa dulo ng eskinita
may napadaang lolo, nakabisikleta
may ulam sa kargadera, matatakam ka
sa kulay ng mga gulay sa bangketa
may pila na ang spaghetti at pansit,
'yung lola sa isang kanto, nagbebenta
ng tsitsiryang mamimiso. Pagbilhan,
sa sari-sari store, monotono ang boses mo.
Masigla ang sa tinderero. Nagpahabol
ka ng Ligo, 'yung maanghang.

Nagmaktol ang gutom, nagmamadali,
'di mo na tuloy binilang ang sukli.
May mukha nang muli ang nadaraanang pauwi.
Kumaway ka pa sa kakilalang kumakain
sa Blue House. Kakain ka, kakain din
ng agahan, tanghalian, hapunan
matutulog at babangon muli kinabukasan.
Ang Lt. J. Francisco'y sikmurang lumalaban.
Amoy mo nang natutusta ang kuyom-kuyom na bawang.

Casa de Azul

'Di ako makatulog
Kakaisip sa aking bakuran
Mga bulaklak at gulay
At upuan sa ilalim ng bayabas
Isang bahay na tulad
Ng kay Frida at Diego
Bughaw, dalawang palapag
May tulay sa gitna
Sa baba'y matataas na halaman
Bawat sulok may sining
Bawat sining, pahinga
Sa hapon matutulog akong
Parang paslit, yapos-yapos
Ang laruang sa wakas
Nasungkit din sa perya
Sa gabi'y tulad ngayon,
Lihim na hardin.

LIMANG TULA

Emmanuel Quintos Velasco

Parola

Hindi iilang buhay
ang nagpatuloy sa kabuktutan
o sa kabutihan dahil sa iyo.

Hindi iilang pag-ibig
ang umusbong o umurong
dahil natanaw ang ilaw.

Magluluwat ang paglalakbay
na iyong linilikha
nang higit sa iyong akala.

Laging malayo ang pantalan
sa nawawala.

Daan Pauwi

Gumagapang sa gilid ng bangin
ang daan natin pauwi, sumisikot
sa bundok na pinaghatian
ng dalawang bayan.

Sa bukana ng pag-akyat,
kakanan ang landas, palayo sa kapatagan.
Doon mo sisimulan ang panalangin,
hahawak sandali sa krus
ng rosaryong nakabitin.

Batid mo ang ugali kong
magpaabala sa mga larawang
kuha sa isang kisap-mata—

sa bahaging ito,
pinagsalikupan ang langit
ng mga punong pinakisig ng pagtanda
at ng matagal na pagkakatulos sa lupa;

sa bahaging ito,
batik-batik ang daan,
laksang bakas ng liwanag,
pilit pinagtatakpan ang mga lubak
na hinukay ng bigat ng gulong at ulan.

sa bahaging ito,
napapatitig ang araw, namamangha
kung paanong singkitid ng mangmang
na pang-unawa ang mga kurbada ng daang
tinatalunton ng ating sasakyan.

May pagkakataon sanang
huminto sa isang pahingahan
kung saan tanaw ang lahat,
ngunit hindi natin ito kinasanayan.
Salat tayo sa panahon.
Mahaba ang ating lalakbayin,
at hindi ka paaabala
sa iyong tahimik na dalangin
hanggang muli mong hawakan ang krus
pagdating natin sa paanan ng bundok
na ating hinahati tuwing umuuwi.

Tabula Rasa

Kumupad ang sulyap
nang magduda
kung ang nakita
ay mukha ng dating
araw-araw kasama,

kaya nagtimpi
ang siklab ng pagtanggap
sa naglaho.

Agad ibaling
sa malayo ang pansin,
maglakad kung saan
hindi matitisod ang paningin
sa tuldok ng aking pangalan,

at mabubura akong muli,
isang guhit sa lupang
walang kurong yayabagan.

Tungkol sa Alabok

Natitipon nang dahan-dahan,
lumalatag sa sahitig
at dumidikit sa talampakan
nang paunti-unti hanggang
mapuno ang mga munting bangin,
inukit ng bulag na pagyapak
sa mga butil ng salaming
hindi sinasadyang mabasag.

Lulutang sa hangin
kapag ginambala ng walis,
kakapit sa inutil na init
ng silahis na lumalagos
sa siwang ng durungawan,
naghihintay ng hangin
na masasabayan upang marating
ang di maaabot ng basahan.

Paglipas ng alimpuyo,
muling dadapo
sa tungko ng ilong, sa pisngi,
lalapag sa kilay ng katawang
mabagal na naaagnas
sa bawat pagkalas ng patay na buhok,
sa bawat pagtakas ng pawis,
ng tuyong balat at luha.

Nalilikha, nananatili, nawawala.

Bata sa Lilim ng mga Puting Mandevilla

Gumapang ang baging
sa kabuuan ng pergolang
yari sa bakal at namulaklak
na para bang engkantado
ang paligid kung saan ka naglalaro—

ikaw, batang mapusyaw na lila
ang suot na bestida, nakasambalilo,
kulang ng isang ngipin ang ngiti.

Nagtatanim ng mithi sa puso,
nagtatanong sa isipan
ang ganitong mga larawan.

PRUSISYUNAL

Jose Martin V. Singh

**Pagtatanghal
sa Banal**

Unti-unting tinanggal ang telang lila.
Sinabihan ng Obispo na pagmasdan.

Ang krus
ay bintana
sa kawalan.

Matraka

Papalakpakan ko ang mga bahay upang ipabatid ang pagsapit ng kadiliman ngayong hapon. Sisilab ang mga karosa sa kanilang elektrikang liwanag bagamat sandali lang. At sa sandaling iyon at sa kasunod sasakupin ng katahimikan ang lungsod. Sasabayan ko ang galaw ng kamay ng sakristan na nagsasabing wala. Mananahan ako sa iyo bilang panimulang bati mula sa libo-libong umaalala ngayon sa binitay sa krus. Kung kanina ka pa tahimik sa pagiging aburido, pwes, manood ka. Mahaba-haba ang ating pag-uusapan, ang prusisyon. Sino ba ang mga patay na ito na muling binuhay sa kahoy? At gagasgasan ng mga de goma at de balat na paanan ang sahig na kinauupuan mo. Tumayo ka at tumingin.

Sumama ka sa mga naglalakad tungo sa santuwaryo. Papalakpakan kita. Itutulak papalapit sa akin at sa kawalan ng dilim. Ganito: sasabog ang liwanag mula sa bumbilyang kahel. Marahas kitang papaunlakan ng panata. Kakatok tila lagatok sa iyong bungo. Ipapakilala ko isa-isa ang mga naglalakihang mga poon. Huwag kang mabalisa kapag sinabi kong itiklop ang mga nabuong buod dahil tsaka pa lang mapagninilayan ang sinasabi ko. Pagkalipas ng ilang karosa lalayo at lalayo ang tinig ko. Pero mananatili ako sa iyo. Tulad ni Kristo. At makikita si Kristong nakahimlay sa karosa't nagbubuga ng mga tuhog na sampaguita sa kalibutan.

Napagtanto mo na aliw ka sa himig kong payak na kumakaripas at biglang titigil sa kumpas ng tagahawak. Ginusto mo akong hawakan pagkamatay. Ganito ang sabi mo: Isasakay kita sa aking bangkay. At pagtunog ko tatayo ang lahat ng nakakarinig.

Pagdating ng Paraan, Dumaan ang Parating

Paparating na si San Pedro
at ang mga dambuhalang kasama.
Nakatalâ sa mga ginto ang súkat

ng mga kableng gumagapang sa ulunan.
Laking gulat namin sa naging
mensahe ng mga nakasakay sa karosa:

Kami ang bisitang
kinauukulan, salungat sa kinauululan
na mga nangangamay na politiko sa tabí.

Siya nga't parating, pahayag
ng mga matraka. Inusog namin
ang mga monobloc pabalik.

Kailangang paraanin ang mga nagbabalik.
Hayaan na si San Pedro nanaman
ang bumitbit sa gintong

mga pambukas sa wakas—
pinararatangan niya ng malubhang salá
ang walang ulap na langit.

Punô ang buwan ng dumi.
Ang kalye'y linuluhaan
ng mga kandilang tirik.

Lahat silang santo'y nagdaraan,an,
mga lukso ng himpapawid.
Nakikilibing ang mga nakaitim

na sangkot sa taunang galaw.
Kanilang pahiwatig na hiwaga
ang darating na pag-araro ng bukid

ng natataong misteryo ng lungsod.
Nakakatigatig ang bumulusok na palamuti:
Nakasakay sa karosang'di marunong magtimpi.

Ang bubong ng kalye ni hamig
ay matumbasan ng tinutumbok na
haraya ng umiiyak na Soledad—

siyang nag-iisa't nahuhuli sa pagdating
ng paraan. Dahil parating parating
kapag may linilibing. Paparating.

Sa Katapusan ng Prusisyon

Pagkabalik sa simbahan ay wala na ito. Isang malaking guwang sa lupa ang sumalubong sa prusisyong nagdaan.

Tumungo kami sa hukay. Ako ay nalula sa lalim. Mga yungib sa paligid sumisipol sa dilim. Nilalaman ng hukay ang ilang'di ko mawari kung bakit nanatili matapos ang pagguho. Sa tuktok ng sementong burol ay kumikinang ang gintong tabernakulo.

Sa paanan ng burol animo'y lumuluhod ang manok. Sumisirit ang dugo nito sa suot na medalyon ni San Benito. Tumilaok makakatlong beses at pinagpag ang pakpak. Ako ay napalingon sa inilawang mga santo kung saan nangunguna si San Pedrong nangangalaga ng hukom na manok. Nakita ko na wala na ito sa tabi niya. Lumingon ako. Lumingon ako sa mga poon na kasabay.

Patuloy ang pagkalembang ng kampana mula nang kami ay makarating. Mas pinalakas ito na tila ay dagundong mula sa kaibuturan ng mundo. Ang tuktok ng noong tore ay nangabulusong sa kalawakan ng hukay. At tumilaok ang manok. At nangalmot ang pagbukas ng pinto ng tabernakulo. Lumakas ang hiyaw ng speakers, buhat ang Dies Irae, na kani-kanina lang ay Pie Iesu ang pinapatugtog.

Sabay sabay naming nahinuha ang kawalan ng simbahan sa pagbalik. Kung ano man ang naging usapan ng pagpapasimula nitong prusisyon ay nabali na ng kinahinatnan ng kasaysayan. Nakita ko ang pagbabago sa ekspresyon ng mga nakasakay sa karosa: nakalawlaw ang mga dila, umaapoy.

Mula sa mga yungib ay dumating ang prusisyon ng mga anino ng santong kahoy. Mga aninong hinulma sa maputik na tubig ng karatig ilog. Dahan-dahang lumapit sa amin, umakyat sa mga gilid ng hukay. Lumapit at lumapit ang mga santong anino at kinompronta ang mga kahawig at humarap sa tabernakulo. Sumabog ang ilaw mula sa ginto. Lumuhod ang lahat sabay napatag ang tubig. Hinawi ng karosa ng Entierro ang lahat ng nakaharang at hinanap ang tabernakulo. Pagkarating ay gumising ang poon mula sa tulog.

Kinain ang sariling katawan. At naglakad siya sa tubig. Nagsalita siya. Sabi:
Itayo ninyo ang nawawalang simbahan.

Sumaboy ang mga patak ng putik sa mukha namin. May hawak kaming tig-
iisang kandilang lumalagablab. Hanggang sa nawala ang mga ilaw.

Santomnambulansya

Natulog ako noong Biyernes Santo,
Pinanaginipan ang naglipanang prusisyon.

Umalon bigla patungo sa pampang ng
Aking mukha ang pusok ng biyaya.

Kumalam ang aking tiyan
Bagamat nanatiling busog.

At ako ay naglakad nang'di nalalaman
Ang kaibahan ng pagkulo sa pagluhod.

Naglakad kasama ang mga karo ng santo.
Pagdaan sa taberna, nakaramdam ng kulo.

Ang hiwaga sa isipan ay umiikot,
Ngumangawngaw, naghahanap ng kaligtasan.

Animo ay nakatusok sa likod ng leeg
Ang pinakamatimyas na gintong aureola.

Siguro naglakad sa ibabaw
Ng karo at hinatak ng ilan.

Ang dali makalimutan ng mga naganap
Habang distintong ulirat ang nagpapalakad.

Gaano ang kantidad na kayang ibuhos
Ng mukhang noo'y nagtatago sa puno.

Mga hitsurang linikas sa unos
Ng pukpukan, ng martilyo't paet.

Mga pinagdaanan sa siyudad, mga
Tirahang sinasagip sa hangin ng tubig ilog.

Akala ko nananaginip lang ako
Nang magising sa altar ng simbahan.

Pinapanood ang mga labi ng tao,
Nakatulog ako sa binubulong sa palad.

Ako si San Juan at aking isasaysay
Ang nahinuhang Rebelasyon.

ANGRY CHRIST AND OTHER POEMS

Vincen Gregory Yu

In 1950, artist and dilettante Alfonso Ossorio returned to the Philippines and stayed for 10 months in the family sugar estate in Victorias, Negros Occidental, where he designed and executed a mural for the parish church that his family had built for its workers.

- *Philippine Daily Inquirer*

Sugar

Look inside my mouth,
they say—walls
the color of dove's plumage,
ripe flesh of mangosteen,
the sweetest sugar.

In these summer fields,
I'm the pale-skinned stranger
with every word I utter.
Never *kamót* for hand.
Always, fire for *kaláyo*,
sugar for *kalámay*.

On the sanctuary
where a preacher
once divulged the secret
to eternal life,
I paint
their indolent god.

One day, I'll let them in
on the real secret:
No one is ever listening.
We alone shall till
this earth till the walls
of our mouths turn white,
and sugar seeps
from the crowns
of our teeth, burning
our heavenly tongues.

Angry Christ

Alfonso Ossorio (c. 1950)

I have no memory
of you teaching me
to love.

Instead, I learned the sting
of my father's buckle
with every unrecalled verse.
Sharp crash of china
on the kitchen floor,
while in my room
I read the psalms aloud
to drown out the noise
of my mother's departure.

How the world
swoons at the story of how
you and your father
are one and the same,
and one with a third
being—hallowed ghost
in the form of a bird.

This is how I shall give
you to the world: as a tendril
of fear. Your heart on fire,
eyes suffused with fury, arms
outstretched, and behind you,
the most monstrous hands,
as if maneuvering
a demon marionette.

Our Father

Twelve years old, I feel the push
of wood against my knees.

Between bone and bare skin,
vessels and nerves crushed

as Lucifer beneath the angel's
feet in that picture I once saw

in a book I was forbidden
to read. The priest said ten

Our Fathers, and I could leave.
The books said nothing

about talking to paintings.
They were naked, the angel

and Lucifer. Arms and thighs,
torsos, all that muscle sewn

to alabaster bodies, a man
would suffocate under all that

weight. Here, Jesus smothers us
with his glare, his rage a blaze

of orange flat on the wall,
blinding color splashed on stone.

Closing my eyes, I see only
the angel, gripping my shirt.

I hover inches from the newly
waxed floor, grasp his wrist

as his wings spread wide and fill
my vision, and varnish floods

my nose. *Do not bring us to the test—*
I sink deeper into the kneeler,

flatten what little cushion
had been sewn shut within.

Skull

No genius
in matters of the body,
I cradle you in my palms:
accident of exhumation.

Why come to me now?

I hold you up to the sun,
see the light penetrate
your corroded crevices,
search for proof
that once, you were
someone's son.

Once, someone
called you
Father.

Tell me how the sky
bled the day you vanished,
how you came to inhabit
this unmarked grave.

Tell me how
to disappear
while the rest of the world
spins forward.

I, too, yearn
for the insignificant life:
To be held by a stranger
as if I were an ordinary stone,
a trifling, mortal shell
buried in loam.

Icarus Makes a Wrong Turn

and so his wings don't burn.
Instead, he drifts farther from the sun,
his stringy frame helpless in the wind,
spared the fatal tumble out of sky
and plummet into water.

This is how my son
will first hear the myth: A mere boy
drowning in the ocean
in pursuit of his one, great wish
only clips the wings of future men.

My son, who has yet to master
the strength of his legs,
the feel of the earth
pushing against his tiny feet,
will not learn to fear
dreaming of flight—
of setting the clouds aflame
like a hurtling meteor
fighting the pull of gravity.

He will learn to swim,
that when he plunges into water,
he will know how to plumb it
as if he'd breached the stratosphere
and entered the realm of stars.

**BETWEEN PRAYERS:
A SEQUENCE OF POEMS**

Jeff William Acosta

Communion

If I speak less in a language
not lesser than a devotion

will the music turn slow?
Will the sound of gunfire

ever stop at daybreaks?
On the edge of your thighs

I pretend to kiss your flesh
like how bombs kiss the pavement

before blooming to their fullest
because where else could I

start a prayer? I must pretend
that my drowning (does it ever end?)

in the sanctum of your temple
is the closest to breathing

where I could be godless
and not mistake you

for rain in my mouth
like sharp blades, like sci-fi,

like sweat running in rivulets
from my forehead to your parted lips.

I touch myself, yes I touch myself
but not after a church service—

how could I pleasure myself
without asking first for forgiveness.

I can only imagine being holy
in your altar, in the crescent

of your moons. I knife
the night sky, and waltz

between the craters of your ribs
—where I found your holiness. Outside

the rain stops pouring its mercy.
You gather all your strength

in the back of your throat, leashless. You move
as I move a little closer

beneath the sound of your own
galloping. Thrust it

deeper you said. How easily
you reach for a God that has forgotten

his dying children. Tell them
how your blade tightened,

like the way the barrel tightens
around a bullet to make it worship.

Tell them how you whispered your prayer
as if you have received the Eucharist

—lips not bothered by the silence
after saying your clearest Amen.

Aubade with the World Ending

See their faces drift
not to the violin strings
of a tripwire, but

to the lullaby it makes
when it touches the midnight
hour. The dead

pass like wind
through a wind chime
when the radio plays

“if the world were ending.”
Imagine singing
inside your shell

asking to be spared.
In this world, where breathing
is as close as fingers

trying to pull a trigger,
I was begging. Above me,
no moons could guard my teeth

nor traces of a few stars
could be seen through a riffle’s
scope. On my knees,

only the blank shells
blanket the cold
webs of our feet. Open,

my mother says
and I opened my mouth
wide like an unpinned hand

grenade—blossoming
like auburn skies,
like rose petals

spreading its boneless wings
in the late dawn, like burning cities,
like napalm strikes. Some mornings,

I try to forget I'd wake up
with a trigger, with a hole
in my eye, where a bird perches

on my sea-black tinted iris
as they consider my wounds
as their own and try to live.

haibun for my summer soliloquy

In this city, where ocean waves are too close, it could drown you, I stay naked underneath a ripple—what better tithes could I offer other than a tenth of my burrowed breaths? With sound muted to maybe feel your godliness through slippage, through crevasses of my skin, through tides undoing my body—fingers with nothing to clench. Nothing clenches my fingers, only the taste of salt lingers on my tongue trying to hold a language.

*

Here underwater, I've been scanning for coral bones. Cartography of faces. If I find any, I'd name them after each moon of Saturn, like we name children that died last summer, as if we know them enough to forget. Above me, sunlight striking through paper-thin tides like exit wounds. These little constellation holes. Every prayer that enters is now an accusation. Knifepoint, I fish them. These teeth. Like this. Hook the carcass left in my hymnal.

*

Because the summer feels more hellfire than hellfire. The sun bares its teeth on the skin, unforgiving like a god's punishment: I tell my sister—that a scream is more prayer. That the thought of dead children killed in the drug war crosses, but stays a mere thought. I believe: all of this is imaginary. The sky fuming with August haze. A child dying on the pavement, bloodshot. Hands clasped like a cathedral. The crows go on pecking for his Eucharist. Last night, a child takes a gun. He mistakes it for a god. A child fears his breathing according to the police report. (*And I want to believe in this fable*)—He points to his animal head. He pleads to God. God answers like lightning. But he struck him twice. He closes his eyes like an answered prayer.

*

If I could love more than what's left of love in me, I'd tell you about my nightmares. How it mimics water in my throat and is suddenly gone. How it faithfully lodged below the tongue and was merciful. That the footsteps arriving like a procession in front of my mouth constitutes a guillotine. How a sound takes the shape of death—that I do not know. How easily my body seeks refuge in God's warmth, mouthing invocations. Perhaps to ward off ghosts, perhaps for a blessing, or perhaps for a hand I do not have. It's strange—for a man to kneel, you need his legs cut. This is always the patriarchal paradigm: sands grating the skin, revealing weakness, unraveling the skin for its prayers—revealing the bones, and drown—is a myth, I almost told her. That a man could never enact grief more than violence.

*

On my knees, I ask God: what happens to the hallowed alchemy of decaying machineries, to the dust of my body, the dark particles? Would I become a shooting star etched on the edges of galaxies and burn the night sky with scorching scars? Because what else is worth remembering other than the burning. That the only way to prove you lived, sometimes are unwanted marks on the skin—the moonlight making your bones look holy. Because waking up feels more and more like purgatory. It's almost death but not death enough. In this labyrinth, one could only hope for a Messiah to touch him. Because who else can hold this sacrilege, this burning offering other than God? If you must know anything, know that once, I tasted the rain in the middle of summer. How it kisses my parched lips like a lover with an intention. That I stayed for this drought—this manifestation to end. That for a brief moment, I listened to cicadas singing a flat chord in unison as they gather around my feet—pilgrims mapping each phalanx like attending a funeral. Look, at my body: drenched, as if baptized, but barely. Sometimes I imagined spring in this ritual: sunflowers greeting me with a hook. Moths buzzing like army helicopters on a Sunday morning. When I enter the teeth of the church, I remember the swallowing like how I remember that rain. At the altar, Pastor spoke in tongues as if the holy spirit is with him: *the body of Christ*—and I opened my mouth—like a slanted O and an-

swered—a mumbled *Amen*, as if my tongue holds me of another sin. And I walk outside, like an opened gospel. Stained glass mosaics of saints behind me. And still, summer does not forgive.

*

God watches me pray
beneath the sun—a wreckage.
(All) The ghosts stay silent.

Someday I'll Love Jeff Acosta

after Sylvia Plath/Sage Marshall /Ocean Vuong

Jeff, Dear Jeff, someday
you'll stop thinking of dying
young, so until then bury yourself
to the sound of gunshots. Listen
closely—to the faint snapping sound of a spine.
Listen carefully how they ache.
How they try to live
a little slower, a little bit happier
and still fail. Jeff, Dear Jeff
do not mistake the sky opening
its wet mouth for an arrival. You're already drenched
in rain: brief and weightless. My words
may only mean an epitaph. But does it even matter?
You're blood-soaked and bent. Your skin yearns
not only the touch of her hands, but a kiss you'll remember
from your Father. Your father did not name you
after a sexual offender. He did not know
back then. You will be tongue-tied and barb-wired.
Just because you are "God
peace" does not mean you will forever shut your mouth.
Wake up! Jeff! Wake up!
and promise to not call this *sleep* anymore.
Jeff, Dear Jeff, do not be afraid
if your knife scars are your only battle scars.
Here in the kitchen, stop looking
at the oven with lust and with hunger.
Forget your head. Even if the heat comes
close to that of a bomb crater, think of Sylvia.
Think of how her prayers, now trapped
inside her mouth, could've saved her.
She could've been a preacher to
our tongues, shuddering, because of our own
voices inside us. Remember, to breathe
is not the only answer. In this world
you cannot dance half-naked and say

you're alone. Believe this.
Your ghosts are only ghosts
when you name them
after each saint. Like Sage, you have friction
in your voice and that is something already.
But still, know when to kneel and
let the sands teach you of how sharp your teeth are
when grated. Here, on the ocean, Ocean
got up on his knees and did not let the tides
take his body. Yes, Jeff, Dear Jeff, beg
for mercy, beg for all the light
you can't see despite trembling,
despite what you feel is missing in your teeth.
Despite *despite*, cross the red horizon
and clasp my hands—pray
that someone, someday you'll pray for me.
This is not drowning, even if you held your breath
close to your chest, please don't mistake
the skin for water, for a wall. These walls for home.
Your skin is not a sanctuary
for bloodied beasts. Run! Don't worry.
You can run now through rooms without touching
the dead and make your cross a canvas
for your epistles—carve my sins
and not beg for forgiveness.

I Want God in this Poem

I watch the world as it watches me
drown and I call this baptism: aftermath

mornings. Maybe *rainy season*
somewhere in Salcedo where I bid farewell

to *ghosts* tunneling our throats—pulsating
like slow cleave algorithms. I pretend that

this machinery works like death
tolls. One chime echoes (and I hope it echoes)

deep down the sinkholes, the talus, beneath
the tooth and its fungal flowery.

When the gears to open my mouth are stuck
and pressed against silence, it means nothing

of the weight it carries. I, too, would prefer it
this way: clench my mouth forever

shut of uncertainties. Look,
this is plausible than poetry: barter

my voice for shooting stars, telling myself
that I am who I am. That all wars end

in the head, and not on dark pavements
of piled flesh of children killed by stray

bullets. I want to believe in this astronomy:
every slant constellation are stars aligned

to make you think the melody underneath
my vocal folds means something?

I want God in this poem

to unmake me. Hear me
I do not want another heaven

as a metaphor: a song of my skin
a sonnet to my breath, each sigh

a strike blooming between the eyes
socket. Instead, ask me something holy

other than the softness of your breasts
or the sweet rotting of a flower

like home, like love, fleeting, but beautiful.

Ask me if I love you enough
as I would have loved my elegies

to be real the way heaven
heave its presence against my psyche

when the rain falls like guitar strings
on my wet mouth—this crucifixion

until it hurts my tongue.

EPILOGUE TO A NEVER ENDING
STORY AND OTHER POEMS

Jonel Abellanosa

Epilogue

Between uncertainty and the future
letting me say, my navel's cord
cut after I was born
holding water. In the dream,
flowerpecker finding the sky too early,
too morning to be my memory of stones.

Let me say, the world can't blindfold itself
with rain.
The honeycomb left its echo in the mud.
Water rises for my feet to be beavers.
Let me say, only the future can forgive
truth seekers.

I was told about the day called dear,
lodged like a shape where my rib
echoes deer. Letting me know
it repeats the fall, living turns into stone.
A tiny fruit that at last finds
the ground worth embracing.

Inventory of Loss

When I first experienced night's nightness,
I knew it was new, unlike jasmine's jasmineness.
I picked up the sock I knew was under. It was under
my bed over a misplaced memory—sock that warms
my foot. Bed generous to the act of remembering.
I put on warmth, name the knitted woolen hood,
name my foot livelihood.

Redemption brings
lightness to moonlight. The window overlooks
the curtain soft to my knotting hands, as I turn
my mind's diaphanous cloth like a hanging necktie.
It slips in, the nessness of lightness, moon one less
moonbeam. It beams quiet joy with cricket sounds,
field waving the sad sea of wild grasses. If I

venture again into mystery, I'll bring the placeless
season with me, discovery before discovering.
In the distant geography that fills to fullness, the full
of fullness stands on like monument to an age hard
to forget. Aging gives more names for loves I don't have
anymore, loves that in the nessness that's full shall
enter the doorway, never to be rediscovered,

only

remembered

Solitude

Taking Diane Ackerman's challenge
in her *A Natural History of the Senses*
for poets to describe a cathedral's smell,
I accompany the hours. The dawn leaves.

I couldn't sit long without imagining
moss and lichen overrunning the altarpiece.
Boles of light through stained glass windows
speak of centuries, color the marble floor.

I couldn't look away. In my ribcage
yearning builds a fireplace, years crumbling
statues to ash, prayer wafting ghosts.
I lose God to the book of hymns.

Heliotrope

I was a seed when I fell from the bird's
beak, landing on smells of dew and mud.
I waited for my coat to crack, stored food
of ancestral knowledge my embryonic
self consumed. When I felt it time
to be a sapling, I pushed my young
roots down with grounded will.

Love for learning stemmed, leaf
in bud like a page with the title,
voice with my name. Air was my first
aim, rain generous to my place
in the earth opening with moisture.
It was a good day when I pushed through.

Joy was when I saw the blue sky.
One dawn I burst into wonder,
my petals violet as yearning. I'm mastering
mindful awareness, following warmth
travel the sky till the moon takes place,
living desire as one with the light.

Forest Spirits

Silence a black shama.
Mist wraps ancient boles,
sunbeams the sky's breath.
Beauty keeps angel wings
in my heart, prisms of light.
It stirs and I see the divine,
sacred passerine, imagination
a wanderer. Insight, the flowerpecker
whose only home left untouched
is the page. In my mind I carve
my own clearing, bamboo grove
hosting invisible songbirds.

WATCHFUL AND OTHER POEMS

Mark Angeles

Watchful

Let me speak of my body. It is
female.

It is
the oldest symbol of art:
that is to say,

Earth

—her body, adoring and selfless, always open
for plowing—a constant *gravida*—
her womb of grain always golden.

Let me speak of my body
as a Congolese woman. It is
a target.

Malice enfolds it
in concentric circles.

Through this body, semen
and spit pass. Through this body,
sticks pass and knives pass.
Bayonets and razors, petrol and fire
pass through this body. It is

no stranger to brutality,
no stranger to bloodshed.

It is, as my forefathers had damned
or cursed, a chattel
in custody of my father and uncles,
along with the men in my village.

Let me speak of my body as my sisters' bodies
in Congo, in the village of Bunangiri,
where no less than a hundred are in hiding;
their sex maimed by Hutu militia.

Do not bend, fold, spin my body.
It is not a caged animal. It is not afraid.
Do not hack it. Do not rape, strangle,
mark it with a Cheshire grin.
It is not war's ransom. It is watchful.
It rejects what it does not desire
to hold. It does not sheathe.

Let me speak of my body. It is
political. Now listen.

*My body is
speaking.*

Into Jasenovac

When the midnight hour enters the barracks,
the jailbirds retreat to every corner, waiting
to be fed with rationed soup.

They hang around not to lose time.

There is no time for them to kill.

Time is not in their hands now.

Time knelt outside the stranglehold
the moment they were put away.

Time has long perished.

There is only the possibility of death.

They are waiting for it to come out,
to come near them, in the guise of hunger.

The reason to be saved or to fight
is thinning like the shadows they cast
beneath the camp lights—foggy,
threadbare as scarecrows.

They arrive there by the thousands
—captives held by the cult of knife.

Men, women, children.

Serbs, Jews, Roma, Red Croatians
stripped of their possessions:
clothes, jewelry, watches,
gold crowns pulled straight
from their mouths.

Later, even their thoughts will waste away.

Look at how the brute of Jasenovac encircle
even this poem. It has marked us, like the earth,
with the bloodstained blade of its *srbosjek*.

Out there in the banks of River Sava,
corpses drift and begin to give birth
to maggots. Each body starts to eat
itself, thus allowing itself to be eaten.
The jailbirds, fetching their drinking water
nearby, are given a glimpse of their looming
end; speak to them in body parts—
gouged eyes, slashed throats, torn hearts.
The river takes what it desires.

Jasenovac swells as it devours.
Its brick walls grow cold and thick.
Barbed wires slither into the woods.
The sound of the wind is marred
with lament. In winter, even the snowfall
is awed by the splendor of falling ashes
from brick factories turned into crematoria,
burning the living together with the dead.

Those who were spared have no choice,
but to carry on with their task of the day.
They raise more camps for more prisoners.
They dig cesspits that become mass graves.
They forge shackles to chain themselves
and knives to slit their own throats.

They are doctors and pharmacists,
shoemakers and goldsmiths,
lumberjacks and electricians.
Their skills are called upon
to build the necropolis.
Limbs and bones, they sleepwalk
round the camp, waiting for death's pity.

They carry dirt in wheelbarrows.
They carry their dead.
They carry their moribund.
They carry their memories
of Jasenovac on slips of paper
and plant them in their shoes
so their words will live
to tell us their tales of bereavement.

Nighttime in Gaza

At night, the rugged seas near Gaza
sparkle like glints breaking the surface
when you rub a knife against a stone,

except that they are shafts of light—
searchlights slapping the dark water
pulled off by their neighbor's *Tzahal*.

A warm wind sweeps across the border,
carrying a hum back to the shore,
so familiar, it sounds like hissing snakes

—or so the villagers suppose.
In a flash, they are all engulfed
in a cloud of white phosphorus.

There is no time for writhing;
their skin melts in their clothes.
How hard they pray for sand

as they are rendered motionless,
leaving only the fetid fumes
of charred flesh, fabric, and debris.

That part of the map that swells
with smoke is reduced to residue,
purged from *mujahideen* and *subada*.

Even the towering minarets melt with
the howling of dislodged Palestinians.
What is to die for, then, for tourists?

The streets are filled with refugees:
children playing with junk piles
for making Molotov bombs;

women nursing their flower beds;
men pushing boulders
restoring their houses of mud

felled by attacks. A private museum
elsewhere—erected out of vestiges
of cobblestones from old houses,

old railway sleepers, and old marble
unearthed by fisherfolk
and construction workers—

opens its doors to admirers
of archeology, bidding Bethlehem,
Hebron, and Jericho. And beyond

the bulldozed habitation, waves
dwindle at the sound of sirens;
sewage and pits are perfumed.

Nightwatch at the seafront...
one can't help but be quixotic,
except when you are in Gaza,

where the undersea is laden
with daisy-chain booby traps;
the open skies are fenced with tripwires

A geography of house arrests!
From without, it is hard to break in.
From within, it is hard to break out.

Slaying of Holofernes

“foiled them by the hand of a woman”
Judith 16:5

Every man, inebriated

with wine and might,

tumbles

at the hands of seduction—

Holofernes, for example,

drunk and dead

to the world,

unwinding in his tent, surrounded

by his army.

Without warning, a woman appears...

Judith,

vixen, solid, weighted

God's virtuoso

black widow: assassin.

The fall of treachery

at her hands

The fall of an empire

Blade of her that slew

the horrified Holofernes

Blade of her that salvaged

the ravaged city of Bethulia

Blade of her that smashed

the metal of the Assyrians

The Turtan dead: his body

aware of the moment

his head was detached,

hoisted from the ground's

rising tarn of blood

his gouged eyes peeking

through disheveled hair,

losing sight, losing

the (in)glorious

idea of war

by Judith, God's slayer,

at whose hands

more heads

will roll.

Bhopal

BHOPAL WAS ASLEEP WHEN THE GAS STRUCK—
the headlines bled the next day.

The heart of India
belongs to the dead now;

the city of lakes weighed down
by shanties, its faithful

with their dreams of fish;
the stranglehold of nine thousand

who lived on the breadline,
who believed they would die

by bullet or snag's knife,
by hunger or bodily harm.

Early December, the hours
of darkness arrived like a bride

in a black veil. They saw her
combing the streets—it was nothing

out of the ordinary. They had seen
far too many sicken and fall down.

That evening, they went straight
to bed, too dead

-tired to even say a prayer;
eyelids shut and will never open

again. In their dreams,
they were flying

over graves and dead trees,
only to be awakened

with their lungs bursting
into flames—

lampblack lungs in the light
of day. Lifeless bodies dragged

flat to the ground. Lying next
to each other—with their kith and kin

and neighbors—they had never been
so close before.

The ground was soft that morning.
It was soft and lethal

with the wrath of Union Carbide
ravaging the capital;

its unseen doom
going after the rest of them

for the kill,
as Bhopal grieved.

They crawled from under the rocks
with their teeth,

aboveground, where the soil
still creeps with mercury;

aboveground, as the spoil
still clots in memory.

KRITISISMO / CRITICISM

ILANG TALA SA ISYU NG PAGSASALIN KAY/NI RIZAL

U Z. Eliserio

Sino mang magsisimulang basahin ang *Noli’y* magigitla sa pinakaimportante nitong katangian, na magpaparamdam agad sa mga unang pangungusap pa lamang ng nobela: nakasulat ito sa wikang hindi alam ng mambabasang Filipino. Ang tinutukoy ko’y Espanyol.

Sala-salabat ang mga tanong: bakit sa Espanyol nagsulat si Jose Rizal? Bakit natin kailangang basahin ang isang akdang mistulang hindi naman isinulat para sa atin? Magkatumbas ba ang salin at orihinal?

Naglalaro ang pagsusuring ito sa tatlong wika: Espanyol (ang wika ng dating panginoon, ang wika ng orihinal ni Rizal), Ingles (ang wika ng kasalukuyang panginoon, ang wika ng salin ni Derbyshire), at Filipino (ang wika ng nais nating mamanginoon, ang wika ng salin ni Almario).

May kaunting hawig ang pag-aaral ng wika at ang pagbabasa ng nobela. Sa pagbabasa ng nobela, kailangan mo ring matutunan ang kakaibang wika ng awtor. Maaari mong mabigkas ang tunog ng kanyang mga pangungusap (“Ma-ri-ya,” “E-li-yas,” “Ma-ri-tin”), at unti-unti’y mahihinuha mo ang tinutukoy niya. A, iyon ang ibig sabihin ng Maria, iyon naman ang ibig sabihin ng Elias. Kaya nga kumbensyon sa mga nobelang magsimula sa isang pagtitipon: kailangang suungin agad ng mambabasa ang mundo ng awtor. Ito ang mga noun, ito ang mga verb. Saka na ang mga sekundaryang tauhan, gaano man sila kaimportante. Saka na ang mga adjective, saka na ang mga adverb.

Nababasa lang natin si Rizal bilang salin. Malayo ito. Ang binabasa nati'y nabasa na para sa atin, nainterpreta na ng tagasalin. Ang Rizal nati'y alingawngaw, kopya. Second hand. O, para mas positibo ang termino: preloved.

RIZAL, "HEROE"

Maaari nating tingnan si Rizal sa pagbabalangkas sa kanya ng historyador na si Zeus Salazar bilang "heroe." Sa pagpapaliwanag ni Michael Chua, ibig sabihin nito'y hinubog ang sensibilidad at kamalayan ni Rizal ng Kanluran, hiwalay siya sa mga tao, sa bayan (Chua 2012). Kung iisipin nating tinitingnan ni Rizal ang sarili bilang hiwalay sa iba, na may hiyarkiya sa pagitan niya at ng mga ordinaryo o normal na tao, nagkakaroon ng saysay ang kanyang pinipiling target ng pagpapatawa. Katawa-tawa sa kanya ang mga prayle, katawa-tawa sa kanya ang mga katulad ni Kapitan Tiago na tatawagin natin ngayon bilang "social climber." Katawa-tawa sa kanya mga pamahiin, ang mga madumi. Kung ang turing ni Rizal sa sarili ay mulat o malay sa katotohanan, katawa-tawa nga naman para sa kanya ang mga naloloko pa rin.

Kung kaya nga, halimbawa, sa tinatawag na ikatlong nobela niya, ang *Etikang Tagalog*, tuloy pa rin ang panunudyo ni Rizal sa mga prayle, at sa mga nalililang nito. Sa paglalarawan niya kay Padre Agathon, ang target ay hindi ang prayle, kundi ang mga nagkukumahog para dito, ang mga tumuturing dito bilang espesyal. Si Padre Agathon ang nagpapataas sa mga piyesta at pagtitipon, sa mga binyag at kasal. "Isa nang karangalan na makabati sa kanya o makapagmano, at maski na tadyak na natanggap ng sakristang mayor ay naturingang handog ng nobilidad" (Rizal 1997, 53).

Sa kanyang Kanluraning oryentasyon, hindi na nakagtataka pa ang primaryang solusyon ni Rizal sa mga problema ng lipunan ay edukasyon. Si

Rizal na rin mismo ang susupalpal kay Rizal, sa katauhan ni Pilosopo Tasyo, na binalaan si Ibarra tungkol sa proyekto nitong pagpapatayo ng eskwelahan. Ngayon, 'pag kinikritika ang edukasyon, at ang limitasyon ng edukasyon bilang solusyon sa mga problema ng lipunan, hindi ibig sabihin ay ayaw na nating magtayo ng eskwelahan, o di kaya'y inirerekomenda nating 'wag na lang mag-aral ang mga mag-aaral. Ang pagkilala sa mga kakulangan ng isang bagay ay anyaya para gawing mas mainam, mas episyente, ang bagay na iyon.

Tunghayan natin dito, kung gayon, ang dalawang proposisyon ni Rizal sa kanyang "The Philippines: A Century Hence," dalawang repormang sabi niya'y makakasalba sa Espanya, para mapanatili nitong kolonya ang Pilipinas. Una, representasyon sa Cortes, at pangalawa, kalayaan ng pamamahayag.

Sentido komun ang dating ng representasyon sa atin, pero akma pa ring kahit papaano'y balikan ang silbi nito. Ayon kay Bernad, may mga bayan daw na bagay sa demokrasya, pero may mga bayan tulad ng Espanya na nangangailangan ng hari para sa kanilang kaluluwa (Bernad, 50). Ano nga ba ang demokrasya? Mula ito sa kratos, na pamumuno, at demos, na ang ibig sabihin ay mga tao, o ang tinutukoy kong bayan. Maiuugnay ito sa terminong republika. Bagaman hindi totoo, maaari nating isipin ang "re" bilang "rex" (as in Tyrannosaurus Rex) o bilang "rey" (hari sa Espanyol), at syempre ang publika ay publiko. Kung gayon, sa isang republika, ang naghahari ay ang publiko. Samantala, sa isang demokrasya, ang namumuno ay ang bayan.

Bakit nga ba kailangang ang publiko ang maging hari, ang bayan ang namumuno? Absurdong tanong dapat ito, pero sa kasalukuyang estado ng Pilipinas, tila ba handa ang marami, ang mayorya, na isuko ang pamumuno sa isang hari, sa isang Tyrannosaurus Rex. Maaalala natin ang "Naging Mahirap," na campaign jingle ni Manny Villar noong eleksyon 2009 at 2010. Alusyon kaya sa *Noli* ang tanong sa kanta? "Nakaligo ka na ba sa dagat ng basura?" Bakit mahalaga na nakaligo na sa dagat ng basura ang iboboto o

ihahalal na Presidente? Kasi paano nga naman sosolusyonan ng isang hindi pa nakaligo sa dagat ng basura ang mga problema ng mga naliligo sa dagat ng basura. Bago ang COVID-19, ang mainam na ilustrasyon ng puntong ito’y ang pagsakay sa MRT. Paano nga naman sosolusyonan ng hindi sumasakay sa MRT ang problema ng mga ordinaryong Filipino, ng publiko, ng bayan, sa MRT. Ngayong COVID-19, puwede nating itanong, anong uri ng lider ang makakatulong sa atin sa pagharap sa pandemya? Iyong nagtatago sa kanilang mansyon, ‘yung napakaraming kasambahay, na kanilang inilalagay sa panganib, na maaaring mautusan para lumabas at mamili sa kanila? Iyong mga mahaba ang pisi ba, iyong mga mayaman, sila ba ang paniniwalaan natin pag nagsabing kaya natin ‘to, magtiis kayo, mga PI kayo?

Ito ang dahilan kung bakit kailangan ng representasyon, noon sa Pilipinas ni Rizal, at ngayon sa Pilipinas natin. Ang mga kinatawan natin ang dapat ay kikilos ayon sa ating pangangailangan at paniniwala. Bakit hindi ito ang nangyayari? Isang mito sa kapitalismo ang “vote with your dollars,” bumoto gamit ang inyong mga dolyar. Halimbawa, nangako ang Jollibee ng langhap sarap, pagkatapos kumain ka ng Jollibee, at hindi langhap sarap. Ang gagawin mo, sa susunod na matakam ka, hindi ka na kakain sa Jollibee. Dalawa lang ang mangyayari. Magpupursige ang Jollibee para tuparin ang pangako ng langhap sarap, o di kaya’y wala nang kakain sa kanila, at magsasara ang kanilang negosyo. Hmm... Natatakam tuloy ako sa Chicken Joy.

Ito ay mito, dahil madalang mangyari. Anoman ang reklamo natin tungkol sa MRT, wala naman tayong puwedeng ipalit dito.

Sa kaso ng representasyon, “vote with your votes,” o di kaya’y bumoto gamit ang inyong mga boto ang dapat na nangyayari. Sabihin na nating walang dayaan. Sabihin na natin na walang bilihan ng boto. May kakulangan pa rin ang sistemang ito.

Isipin natin ang mga tinatawag nilang nuisance candidates. Halimbawa, si Archangel Lucifer. Di-umano, wala siya sa tamang pag-iisip.

Pero hindi mo kailangang maging wala sa tamang pag-iisip para madeklarang nuisance candidate. Kapag ang isang tao'y hindi kayang independyenteng mangampanya sa pambansang lebel, maaari siyang ideklarang nuisance candidate. Maraming kailangan dito, primarya ang pera (para dito tingnan ang David 2015 at Esmaguel 2018). Kahit naman payagan kang tumakbo, kung hindi ka mayaman, paano ka magkakapagpatalastas sa telebisyon at radyo? Sa simula pa lang, ang mga maaaring tunay na kumatawan sa ati'y hindi na natin maaaring maging kinatawan. Wala silang materyal na kakayahan para kumandidato't mangampanya man lang.

Ito rin ang kaso ng malayang pamamahayag. Kung walang pamumwersa, ayon sa lohikang ito, laging magwawagi ang katotohanan. Walang krimen ng pag-iisip, ika nga. Ang kalaban ng katotohanan ay hindi kasinungalingan. Laging lupaypay ang kasinungalingan pag kinalaban nito ang katotohanan. Ang tunay na kalaban ng katotohanan ay censorship, ang panunupil at pamumwersa.

Sa ilalim ng kolonyalismong Espanyol, may monopolyo ang Simbahang Katolika sa pamamahayag. Ayon kay Coates, nagkaroon nga ng problema si Rizal tungkol sa paglalathala ng *Noli*. Wala namang magbabasa nito sa Europa, kung saan ito maaaring malathala. Samantala, siguradong lagot siya (at nalagot nga) kung ilalathala ito sa Pilipinas (Coates 1992, 97). Nauwi tuloy sa self-publishing.

Ito ang nakakatawa sa sitwasyon. Sa ilalim ng tinatawag ni Coates na praylokrasya, hindi pahihintulutan ng Simbahang Katolika na maglathala ng sulating umuusig, o sa tingin nila'y umuusig, sa kanilang relihiyon. Samantala, kung ikaw ay liberal na naniniwala sa kalayaan ng pamamahayag, kahit alam mo, o naniniwala ka, na puro kalokohan lang ang relihiyon, Katolisismo man o hindi, hindi mo ipagbabawal ang paglalathala nila ng mga banal na libro, polyeto, sanaysay. Gayundin, hindi mo puwedeng ipagbawal

ang paglalathala ng mga sulatin na ang adbokasiya’y pagbabawal sa kalayaan ng pamamahayag!

Syempre pa, may limitasyon din ito. Kahit walang pamimilit, nalalamangan ng mga mas mayaman at mas makapangyarihan ang mga maliit. Kunwari’y mayroon kang website kung saan mo inilalahad ang katotohanan tungkol sa ABS-CBN at rappler.com. Kunwari lang! Dahil mas malawak ang kanilang network, at mas mabili ang kanilang brand, may bentahe pa rin ang ABS at Rappler, at puwede nilang ilibing ang iyong tinig. Alam natin na hindi ito ang kaso ngayon sa Pilipinas. Sa totoo, baka nga mas maituturing na pinakamatinding kaaway ng kalayaan ng pamamahayag ang gobyerno. Ito ang primaryang may kapangyarihan para manupil, ang may kapangyarihan ng censorship. Mga PI kayo, patayin ko kayo!

SALIN PUSA

Nagsasalin si Rizal at isinasalin si Rizal. Isinalin niya ang mga kwentong pambata ni Hans Christian Andersen (Andersen 2018) at ang dulang *Wilhelm Tell* ni Schiller (tingnan ang Guillermo 2009). Sandamakmak ang salin kay Rizal. Ang iba, salin mula sa orihinal na Espanyol, at iba pang wika na kanyang ginamit. Ang iba naman, relay translation. May iba’t ibang lebel ng kalidad. Mayroon namang mga adaptasyon kay Rizal. Ang tawag ni Roman Jakobson dito’y intersemiotikong salin, mula isang midyum papunta sa isa pa (Jakobson 2015, 55). Nagkaroon ng seryeng base sa *Noli Me Tangere*, halimbawa, noon sa Channel 5 (1992), Syempre, meron ding pelikulang *Noli* (dir. Gerardo de Leon, 1961). Ang buhay ni Rizal ay naisalin na rin sa iba’t ibang midyum. Nariyan ang pelikulang *Bayaning 3rd World* (dir. Mike de Leon, 1999), at gayundin ang mangang *Jose Rizal* (Matsui 2020). Kung papalawakin natin ang depinisyon ni Jakobson, pati

ang kritisismo kay Rizal ay pagsasalin kay Rizal. Bahagi itong maituturing ng intralingual na pagsasalin (Jakobson 2015, 55). Kung papalawigin pa natin ang pagpapalawak na ito, puwede nating sabihing pati ang interpretasyon kay Rizal mismo, hindi lang sa mga sulatin niya, ay pagsasalin. Halimbawa nito ang “Rizal: the Tagalog Hamlet” ni Miguel de Unamuno (de Unamuno 1968). Titigil na ako dito at baka pati pagpapangalan sa anak na “Jose,” isama ko sa pagsasalin kay Rizal.

Para kay Ambeth Ocampo, kailangan laging balikan ang orihinal ni Rizal, dahil maraming pagkakamali ang mga “opisyal na salin.” Ibinigay niyang halimbawa sa isang sanaysay niya ang karanasan ni Esteban de Ocampo, na dahil nagbase sa edisyon ng mga sulat ni Rizal na inedit ni Teodoro Kalaw ay inakalang lugar sa Alemanya ang “Donnerstag.” Iyon pala, ayon kay Ocampo, “Huwebes” lang ito, at minarkahan ni Rizal ang araw na isinulat niya ang liham, at hindi ang espesipikong lugar kung saan niya isinulat ito (Ocampo 2011). Naglista pa siya ng ilang pagkakamali sa edisyon ng mga obra ni Rizal na inihanda ng Jose Rizal National Centennial Commission noong 1961 sa edisyong 2018 ng kanyang *Rizal Without the Overcoat*. Maliit na bagay lamang ang mga ito, pero hindi naman nagninitpicking si Ocampo. Para sa kanya, “constant research can lead to new things or even new insights from old things” (Ocampo 2018, vii). Kung gayon puwede nating sabihing mabuti na lang na maraming mali ang mga opisyal na edisyon, at ang mga opisyal na edisyon na ito’y mahirap pa ngang mabili para mabasa. Nagbubukas ito ng oportunidad sa mga iskolar at mambabasa, at oportunidad lalo na magbigay ng “malikhaing” interpretasyon kay Rizal.

Ipinaliwanag ni Virgilio Almario na maraming pagkakamali ang mga salin at halaw sa *Noli*. Kahit ang edisyong hinirang ng Jose Rizal National Centennial Commission bilang “pinakamatapat” ay maraming “niluksuhan o pinutol na linya,” ayon kay Almario (Rizal 1998, vii). Gayudin, para kay Almario, nakasulat ang saling ito sa ika-20 siglong Tagalog. Samantala,

pinulaan naman niya ang salin nina Antolina Antonio at Patricia Melendrez-Cruz dahil ito ay “Magaspang. Literal. ...namamakipak sa salita at idyomang Ingles” (Rizal 1998, viii). Inihugpong ni Almario ang pagpupunyagi ng mga “pekeng salin” sa paraan kung paano itinuturo si Rizal. Halimbawa, ang kay Maria Odulio de Guzman ay pinaikling bersyon, at ito ang namamayani dahil “madaling maunawaan o maipaunawa sa mga estudyante” dahil di-umano, mahirap maunawaan ang orihinal (Rizal 1998, ix). Iginigiit ni Almario na may maituturing na totoo o tunay na Rizal, at tinuligsa niya ang dominasyon ng makabayang balangkas sa pagbabasa kay Rizal. Ang mga iskolar na ito’y may “sari-sariling determinismong pampolitika. Ibig nilang sagutin ni Rizal para sa kanila ang kani-kanilang hakang pilosopiya at pananaw panlipunan para sa kasalukuyan at hinarahap ng Filipinas” (Rizal 1998, xi). Magkaugnay para kay Almario ang pulitisasyon at komersyalisasyon kay Rizal. Paraan ang mga ito para hindi na basahin ang orihinal na isinulat ng bayani.

Ang solusyon para kay Almario ay pagbabasa sa mga nobela bilang nobela. Halimbawa, kailangang balikan ang mga puna sa *Noli*. Inilista ni Almario ang inilista ni Joaquin. Ang banghay ng *Noli* ay walang saysay, at galing pa di-umano kay Alexander Dumas. Hindi rin daw buo ang mga tauhan, at hindi magaling ang pagkakasulat. Idinagdag pa rito ni Almario ang mga puna ni Arcilla. Hindi daw mahusay ang estilo ni Rizal, at mali-mali ang Espanyol. Gayundin, masyado daw “masalita ang mga nobela ni Rizal, mabagal ang aksiyon ng salaysay, labis na pinahaba ang mga usapan” (Rizal 1998, xiii-xiv).

Pagpapatuloy pa ni Almario, kailangang isakonteksto sa tradisyong pampanitikan ang *Noli*. Dapat daw ituring na “eksperimento at bahagi ng nagaganap din noong metamorposis ng nobela sa Europa” ang gawa ni Rizal (Rizal 1998, xv). Bukod sa nobelang Europeo, kailangan din, ayon kay Almario, na manaliksik tungkol sa koneksyong Aleman ni Rizal. Inilarawan

niya ang koneksyon ni Rizal kina Herder, Heine, at syempre kay Schiller (Rizal 1998, xix-xx).

Hindi lang iyon, isasakonteksto rin si Rizal sa kasaysayan ng panitikan ng Pilipinas. Ang dalawang kontekstong ito ng nobela ni Rizal ang siyang pinagmulan ng “bagong nobela” ni Rizal. Sa ganitong paraan, sa kanyang paglikha ng bago, nagiging iba si Rizal sa mga kritikong gaya lang nang gaya. Basahin natin si Almario:

Kahit bilang aktibong tagasalin lamang, nilulusaw ng malikhaing imahinasyon [nina Rizal at Balagtas] ang hiram at banyaga upang iangkop sa pansariling pangangailangan, bigyan ng kabuluhan sa kaniyang sariling panahon at kalagayan, at kaya nalalahunan ng mga sangkap mula sa katutubong kultura. Sa ganitong paghahalo ng banyaga at katutubo, ng panlipunan at pansarili, ng kasaysayan at talambuhay, ng gunita at kasalukuyan, atbp. maaaring mabuo ang “bago.” Bago ito sapagkat may kaakuhang mangangailangan ng bagong pamantayan. Mangangailangan ito ng bagong pamantayan sapagkat iba sa pinagmulang kasaysayan at iba rin sa umaasang hinaraman (Rizal 1998, xvi).

Para kina Ocampo at Almario, mayroong totoong Rizal. Kung mababasa lang natin sa orihinal na Espanyol o Aleman, o di kaya’y sa tamang salin si Rizal, masasapol natin ang Rizal na Rizal. Para kay Almario, pekeng salin hindi lamang iyong mga pinaikling bersyon ng *Noli*, kundi iyong Rizal na gawa ng mga kritiko, iyong kontrobersyal, iyong kailangang pagdebatehan kung macho o bakla, kung tuta ng Estados si Rizal, kung kontra-feminismo o pasista, kung rebolusyonaryo ba o hindi. Syempre pa, hindi naman minamaliit ni Almario ang kontribusyon ng mga katulad ni Agoncillo at Daroy, at pinapahalagahan din niya ang ambag ng mga sosyolohista at Marxista. Ang

tinutuligsa niya ay iyong mga “daldalero’t bolero,” na nagtuturo ng “kursong Rizal batay sa mga buod-buod at katha-kathang nabasa” (Rizal 1998, xii).

Syempre pa, hindi natin tinutuligsa ang realidad, gayundin ang ideya ng katapatan sa pagsasalin. Halimbawa, kung ang orihinal ni Rizal ay “mi marido,” at may nagsalin dito bilang “tao ko,” kung wala namang pagpapaliwanag sa talahuli baga, na ang mga parilalang “mi marido,” bukod sa nangangahulugang “asawa ko,” ay ekspresyon ding maaaring isalin bilang “tao ko” (ibig sabihin, tauhan ko, empleyado ko, bara ko, etc.), maaari nating sabihing nagkamali ang tagasalin. Pero, sa ibang banda, nagiging walang saysay ang ganitong uri ng kritisismo. Ililista ba natin ang pagkakamali ng isang salin, at iiwan na doon ang isyu? Mas mainam kung isasakonteksto din natin ang mga pagkakamaling ito, at basahin na ang abot-tanaw ay ang kasaysayan, kultura, at lipunang pinagmulan ng mga isinaling teksto, at target na wika. Tunghayan natin ang mga kritikong ganito nga ang ginawa, pagkatapos ay bagtasin natin ang iba pang teritoryo nitong larang na tinatawag na Araling Salin. Una nating basahin si Isagani Cruz.

Bago tayo tumuloy sa teorya ng pagsasalin ni Cruz, kailangan nating itala ang kakaibang lapit niya kay Rizal. Taliwas kay Almario, kinukwestyon ni Cruz pati ang pagtawag sa *Noli* bilang nobela. Ayon sa kanya, ‘pag tinatawag nating “nobela” ang *Noli*, “pinapayagan nating madala tayo ng mga teorya ng nobela na nabuo sa pagbasa lamang ng mga nobelang Europeo. Alam kong akala ni Rizal ay nobelang Europeo ang sinusulat niya, pero akala lang niya iyon” (Cruz 2000, 150). Itong husay ni Cruz sa salita, at tapang ng kanyang kritisismo, ang dahilan kung bakit natin siya dapat ituring na modelong kritiko. Para kay Cruz maaaring idekonstrak, at dapat ngang idekonstrak, ang lahat-lahat. Nagsisimula sa salita.

Para kay Cruz, bagaman may kaunting pagkukulang sa wikang banyaga si Rizal, hindi matatawaran ang kanyang mga salin pagdating sa kahulugan (Cruz 2000, 157). Samantala, ikinumpara naman niya ang

dalawang salin sa Ingles ng *El Filibusterismo*. Para kay Cruz, dahil mas maalam si Leon Ma. Guerrero kaysa kay Charles Derbyshire sa Espanyol, mas nahuhuli nito ang kahulugan ni Rizal. Ang kinakailangan ay tagasaling mahusay sa parehong wika, ang pinagmulan (sa kaso ni Rizal, Espanyol), at ang target (sa kaso ni Rizal, Derbyshire, at Guerrero), Ingles. Pero hindi doon nagtatapos ang lahat. Sa orihinal ni Rizal, mayroong Latin, na ayon kay Cruz ay hindi lang “pa-epek” ni Rizal (Cruz 2000, 161). Sa puntong ito’y tagumpay pareho sina Derbyshire at Guerrero dahil hindi nila isinalin ito sa Ingles. Mahalagang manatili ito sa Latin para sa epekto nito sa nobela. Sa pagsasalin kasi na gusto ni Cruz, hindi lang husay sa wika kundi galing sa kahulugan ang pinapahalagahan.

Mali-mali nga ba si Derbyshire sa Espanyol? Puwede nating sabihin na hindi niya pinahalagahan ang mga detalye ng wika, at kung gayon, ng wika ni Rizal. Tingnan natin kung paano niya isinalin ang ilang pisikal na deskripsyon kay Maria Clara, na pinili rito’y bilang kontrbusyon hindi lang sa Araling Salin kundi sa Araling Kasarian.

Tala: ang ginamit ditong programa para iproseso ang mga salita bilang yunit ay ang TextStat. Ang edisyong ginamit para sa salin ni Derbyshire ay iyong nasa Project Gutenberg. Dito rin nagmula ang kinonsultang Espanyol na edisyon ng *Noli*. (Tingnan ang Figura 1.)

Walong beses ginamit ni Derbyshire ang salitang “shapely,” anim na beses para tukuyin si Maria Clara. Isa naman dito’y ang tinutukoy ay si Elias.

Sa kabanatang “A Star in a Dark Night,” ginamit niya itong pansalin sa “torneado” ni Rizal, na isinalin naman ni Almarino bilang “nilalik” (Rizal 1998, 31). Samantala, ang orihinal na Espanyol ay “torneado.” Kung kukunsultahin ang *UP Diksiyonaryong Filipino*, matutuklasang ang “lalik” ay nangangahulugang “bakal o kahoy na pinakinis ang hubog” (Almarino 2010, 666).

Ang sunod na “shapely” kay Maria Clara ay ang kanyan mga tenga. Sa kabanatang “Capitan Tiago,” inilahad ng narrator na ang “small and shapely ears” na ito ang iilang katangiang sinasabing namana ng dalaga mula sa kilala niyang ama. Ang orihinal ni Rizal dito’y “bien modeladas,” na isinalin naman ni Almario bilang “maayos na tabas” (Rizal 1998, 42).

Mula sa punto de vista ng libog na libog na si Prayle Salvi ang susunod na paglabas ng salita, sa kabanatang “In the Wood.” “Shapely” daw ang mga braso ni Maria Clara. Isinalin ni Almario bilang “mabibilog na bisig” (Rizal 1998, 157) ang “bien modelados” ni Rizal. Sa puntong ito, lumalabas na mas malawak ang bokabularyo ni Almario hindi lang kay Derbyshire, kundi kay Rizal mismo!

“Shapely” pa rin ang ginamit ni Derbyshire sa kabatang “Correspondence,” para isalin ang “lindo” ni Rizal. Ang tinutukoy dito’y ang paa ni Maria Clara, na ayon kay Almario ay “maganda” (Rizal 1998, 200).

Nagbalik ang “shapely arms” ni Maria Clara sa kabanatang “The First Cloud.” “Hermosos” ito sa orihinal na Espanyol, at kay Almario naman ay “kabigha-bighani” (Almario 1998, 253). “Shapely” kahit ang mga daliri ni Maria Clara sa kabanatang “The Enigma.” Dito, ang Espanyol ni Rizal ay “afilados,” at ang salin ni Almario ay “malalantik” (Rizal 1998, 327). Kung kokonsultahin muli ang *UP Diksiyonaryong Filipino*, matutuklasang ang ibig sabihin ng “lantik” ay “kaaya-ayang kurba gaya ng lantik ng pilikmata, daliri, o baywang” (Almario 2010, 676).

Ano ang natutunan natin mula sa maikling eskursyon na ito? Una, na hindi lang iisang proyekto ang proyekto ng pagsasalin. Bagaman sinabi ni Almario na gusto niyang magkaroon ng “maigagalang na salin” ng *Noli* sa Filipino (Rizal 1998, vii), kailangan nating tandaan na patuloy pa ring nililikha itong wikang pambansa. Sa kanyang akto ng pagsasalin, nililikha ni Almario ang Filipino, sa paggamit ng salita tulad ng “nilalalik,” at pagtindig laban kay Rizal mismo nang hindi niya ulitin na lang ang “bien modelados/

modeladas” para ilarawan ang mga tenga at braso ni Maria Clara. Ang “brazo” nga ni Maria Clara ay hindi “braso” para kay Almarion, kundi “bisig.” Bagaman pasok na sa bokabularyong Filipino ang “braso,” na galing sa Espanyol, ayaw ni Almarion makalimutan natin ang mga salitang mayroon naman tayo.

Samantala, wala sa hinuha ni Derbyshire ang paglikha sa Ingles. Para sa kanya, ang Ingles ay Ingles na. Iba ang proyekto niya sa pagsasalin ng *Noli*. Ano naman kaya ang proyekto ng mga nagsalin sa *Noli* sa ibang wika, bukod sa Ingles.

Sinuri ni Ronel Laranjo ang salin sa Koreano ni Dong Yob Kim mula sa salin ni Leon Ma. Guerrero ng *Noli*. Ayon sa balangkas ni Laranjo, na halaw kay Schriever, sa pagsasalin, may nagaganap munang dekontekstwalisasyon ng teksto, para pumili ng kahulugan, saka nagkakaroon ng rekontekstwalisasyon papunta sa target na wikat at kultura. Dahil relay translation ang kay Kim, sinuri muna ni Laranjo ang salin ni Guerrero. Ayon sa kanya, proyekto ni Guerrero ang magpresenta ng *Noli* para sa bagong henerasyon ng mga Filipinong Ingles ang ginagamit. Kumbaga, “[the] translator, rather than just merely translating, rewrote or recontextualized the novel, as if the original author... wrote the novel in [the] 1960s” (Laranjo 2018, 36). Hindi eksaherasyon ang paggamit ng “rewrote.” Ang salin ni Guerrero ang pinili ng mga Katolikong eskwelahan kahit pa noong kainitan ang usapin laban sa Rizal Bill, ayon kay Laranjo, dahil ito ang mas katanggap-tanggap na bersyon. Tinanggal, halimbawa, ang mga mura, “references to bodily functions,” at syempre ang mga usaping relihiyoso (Laranjo 2018, 37).

Ininterbyu ni Laranjo ang nagsalin ng *Noli* sa Koreano. Nagtapos ng kanyang doktorado sa Pilipinas si Kim, at ayon kay Laranjo ay guro sa Busan University of Foreign Studies. May kasanayan na sa pagsasalin ng mga akademikong teskto, ang salin niya ng *Noli* ang una niyang saling pampanitikan. Ayon kay Laranjo, ang layunin ng tagalin ay ipakita ang kultura, kasaysayan, at pulitikang Filipino sa mga Koreano (Laranjo 2018, 38).

Sa pagsusuri ng salin ni Kim, ipinamalas ni Laranjo ang mga interesanteng aspekto ng wika na tumitingkad sa proseso ng pagsasalina. Halimbawa, nasa balarila na ng Koreano ang pagpapakita ng paggalang, kaya sa salin ni Kim, nasa anyo na ng mga salita ang pagbibigay-pugay ni Ibarra kay Kapitan Tiago. Samantalang nasa “deferential level” si Ibarra sa pagsasalita, nasa “familiar and intimate level” naman na si Kapitan Tiago (Laranjo 2018, 40).

Tulad sa Pilipinas, malakas din ang impluwensya ng Estados Unidos sa South Korea. Sa paggamit ni Kim ng “Koreanized English words” sa kanyang salin, ipinahayag ni Laranjo na, imbes na ang mas malaking publiko ng lipunan ng South Korea, masasabing ang naging target audience ni Kim ay “contemporary Koreans” na nakakaintindi ng wikang Ingles, kahit papaano (Laranjo 2018, 41). Hindi ibig sabihin ay binura ni Kim si Guerrero, o si Rizal. Sa katunayan, bukod sa pagpapanatili ng mga detalye tulad ng tinola, sampaguita, at paglalagay ng mga kultural na paliwanag, isinalin din ni Kim ang introduksyon ni Guerrero sa *Noli*, na “Two Novels that Made a Revolution” (Laranjo 2018, 50).

Marahil malayo na ito sa rekomendasyon nina Ocampo at Almario. Samantalang gusto nilang mas mapalapit tayo kay Rizal, sa Rizal na Rizal, sa orihinal na Rizal, ang pinag-aaralan dito’y salin ng salin kay Rizal. At sino naman ang may pakialam kung ilang beses ginamit ni Derbyshire ang “shapely”?! Pero sa palagay ko, hindi sasabihin ng dalawang iskolar ni Rizal na hindi na bahagi ng Araling Rizal ang mga ganitong uri ng pag-aaral. Umiigpaw si Rizal sa kanyang mga teksto, sa kanyang buhay. May institusyong Rizal, may Rizal-Industrial Complex. Maaari nating sabihing sign ang “Rizal,” na tumutukoy sa kung ano-anong referent. Puwede rin nating sabihing si Rizal ay espasyo para pag-aralan ang iba’t ibang bagay, na ang tanging kailangang katangian lang ay may gahiblang relasyon kay Rizal.

Iwan muna natin, kung gayon, ang mga salin kay Rizal, at basahin... ang isang *pag-aaral* sa salin ni Rizal.

Ang librong *Translation and Revolution* ay masalimuot na aklat na nagpapamalas ng sopistikadong pag-iisip ni Ramon Guillermo. Pag-aaral ito ng nabanggit nang salin ni Rizal ng *Guillermo Tell* ni Schiller, at higit pa roon.

Sa kanyang pagkukumpara ng isang sipi mula sa *Fili* at mula sa *Tell*, may napansing detalye si Guillermo. Samantalang ang konsepto ng “inalienable rights” ni Schiller na pinaraphrase ni Padre Florentino madulas na naisalin mula Aleman patungong Espanyol, sa *Fili*, nang isalin na ni Rizal sa kanyang bersyon Tagalog ng *Tell*, nagkaroon ng “certain difficulties” na indikasyon ng “disjunctions and differential histories” sa mga pulitikal na konsepto (Guillermo 2009, 9). Sumipi si Guillermo mula sa isang liham ni Rizal kay Blumentritt, kung saan nagpahayag ang bayani tungkol sa pagkakaiba ng estilo ng ekspresyon ng Aleman at Tagalog. Sa suhestyon ni Blumentritt na maaaring magtangka ng puripikasyon ng Tagalog tulad ng ginagawa sa Aleman, lumalabas na hindi nakinig si Rizal. Ayon kay Guillermo, “after much effort to find the ‘exact’ equivalent for a word... he tried to understand and translate not the word but the sense of the word, resulting in a freer translation” (Guillermo 2009, 13). Alinsunod sa terminolohiya ni Schleiermacher, para kay Guillermo mas nakakiling si Rizal sa pagsasa-Tagalog ng Aleman, kaysa pagsasa-Aleman ng Tagalog. Ano ang ibig sabihin nito? May kanya-kanyang katangian ang mga wika, at hindi lahat ng wika’y may elemento ng bawat wika. Halimbawa, sa Filipino, pag sinabi mong “Si Boyet at Maria ay mga kaibigan ko,” at idinagdag mong “Siya ay doktor, at siya ay guro,” kailangan ang una mong “siya” ay tumutukoy kay Boyet, at ang ikalawa nama’y tumutukoy kay Maria. Kasi, kung pagbabaliktarin mo, walang paraan sa Filipino para malamang may baliktarang naganap. Pero dahil sa Espanyol, Ingles, at Aleman, may pagkakaiba ang mga pronoun na tumutukoy sa babae at tumutukoy sa lalake, el/ella, he/she, er/sie, puwede

mong sabihing “Boyet and Maria are my friends. She is a doctor and he is a teacher.” O, halimbawa, dahil may conjugation, puwede mong sabihin sa Espanyol na “Hablo Ingles,” imbes na “Yo hablo Ingles.” Samantala, sa Filipino, kailangan mong sabihing “Nagsasalita *ako* ng Ingles.” Ang mga ganitong pagkakaiba’y may kanya-kanyang bentahe, at oportunidad para sa eksperimentasyon, gayundin sa paggamit sa wika para magpalawak ng diskurso. ‘Pag sinabi kung gayon na pagsasa-Aleman ng Tagalog, kumbaga, ang mga nagagawa ng Alemá’y susubukin ng tagasalin na ipagawa sa Tagalog. Samantala, ‘pag sinabing pagsasa-Tagalog ng Aleman, ibig sabihin, ang mga espesyal sa wikang Aleman, hindi mo susubuking ipasok sa Tagalog. Kaya nga, puwede nating sabihin, sa salin ni Rizal, nag-Tagalog si Schiller, at hindi nag-Aleman ang Tagalog. Ang nakakatawa, sabi ng kaibigan ni Rizal na si Mariano Ponce, ang dating, minsan kailangan pang marunong ng wikang Aleman ang mambabasa para lang maintindihan ang Tagalog (Guillermo 2009, 20). Halimbawang binanggit ni Guillermo ang maituturing na “I miss him” sa Aleman, ginawang “ako ay kinukulang sa kanya” ni Rizal; samantalang ang katumbas ng “Let us make an oath” sa Aleman, naging “pabayaang sumpaang” (Guillermo 2009, 21). Hindi sa mga isyung ito nagpokus si Guillermo sa kanyang pag-aaral, bagaman binanggit niya pa rin. Imbes, itong *Translation and Revolution* ay pag-aaral hindi lamang ng salin, kundi ng ideolohiya. Hindi kinonsidera sa kanyang pag-aaral ang “kalidad” ng salin ni Rizal (Guillermo 2009, 33, 63-64). Para kay Guillermo, ang salin ni Rizal kay Schiller ang pagtatangka ng bayani na igpawan ang pang-ilustradong uri ng nasyonalismo, at makipagdiyologo sa masa (Guillermo 2009, 27). Tinawag ni Guillermo na “intra-linguistic translation” itong pagtatangka ni Rizal na umalpas sa “kami” ng mga Ilustrado, tungo sa “tayo.”

Ano-ano ang mga natutunan ni Guillermo sa kanyang pag-aaral? Natuklasan niya, halimbawa, na mas maraming unique na salita ang *Wilhelm Tell* kaysa sa salin ni Rizal dito, bagaman mas maraming kabuuang salita

mayroon sa Tagalog. Maaari itong indikasyon na nagkaroon ng neutralization sa salin ni Rizal. Ibig sabihin, ginamit ni Rizal ang iisang salitang Tagalog para sa maraming salitang Aleman ni Schiller (Guillermo 2009, 65). Gayundin, may empirikal na basehan si Guillermo sa pagsabing magkahawig ang mga lambak at rurok ng mga salita sa *Wilhelm Tell* at sa salin dito ni Rizal. Pag nagkakaroon ng mga lambak, ibig sabihin umuulit ang mga salita at kaunti lamang bagong salita ang pumapasok sa teksto. Pag nagkakaroon naman ng mga rurok, ibig sabihin may introduksyon ng mga bagong salita, may bagong paksa, kumbaga na tinalakay ang teksto (Guillermo 2009, 53, 67).

Sa pagbabasa ng pag-aaral ni Guillermo, marami ding matututunan tungkol sa wikang Tagalog. Halimbawa, sa pagkakagamit ni Rizal, alinsunod sa kanyang konteksto, ang salitang “karapatayan” ay hindi tumutukoy sa kasalukuyan nitong ibig sabihin, e.g. “karapatang pantao,” kundi bilang salin ng sa Aleman ay nangangahulugang “fitting,” “proper,” o “due” (Guillermo 2009, 95). Hindi ito simpleng trivia lang, pero may kinalaman sa pag-aaral ng ideolohiya. Dahil wala pa ngang termino para sa naiintindihan na natin ngayon na “karapatan” sa Tagalog, paanong naisalin ni Rizal ang dula ni Schiller, na sa Alema’y ang “kapatayan” bilang “rights” ay isa sa mga iniinugang konsepto. Sa ganitong perspektibo rin maaaring pag-isipan ang salin ni Rizal ng salitang Aleman na ngangahulugan ng parehong mamamayan at burgis bilang “taong bayan.” Ang mamamayan-burgis na ito’y may mga tungkulin at karapatan, kasama na rito ang karapatan sa pag-aari o property rights (Guillermo 2009, 128). Malaki ang impluwensya nito sa dinamiko ng kahulugan sa salin ni Rizal. Paliwanag ni Guillermo:

The idea of deprivation of rights ... is ultimately replaced by the notion of being deprived of “help” ...in bearing the unendurable burden. Rather than resorting to a “right of revolution” ...because their rights have been trampled upon, the Tagalog-speaking Swiss feel themselves as being

“gipit” ...and enmired in an “excessively” bad situation that cannot be alleviated because “tulong” ...can nowhere be found (Guillermo 2009, 140).

Ang bersyon ni Ponce, pinaglalagyan ng “karapatan” ang wala naman sa salin ni Rizal (Guillermo 2009, 143).

Nabanggit na ang hinuhang naganap na “neutralization” ng mga salita sa salin ni Rizal kay Schiller. Kailangan ding sabihin dito na naganap din ang kabaliktaran, ang “diversification.” Ibig sabihin, gumamit si Rizal ng maraming salita para isalin ang iisang salita ni Schiller. Susi dito ang terminong “Natur,” na isinalin ni Rizal bilang “loob,” “pagkatao,” “sangsinukuban,” “buhay,” “kinapal,” at “lupa” (Guillermo 2009, 173). Dahil nga susing termino, nagbigay ng kaisahan o kaayusan ang “Natur” sa *Wilhelm Tell*, pero nawala ito sa salin ni Rizal (Guillermo 2009, 177). Ibig bang sabihin ay wala nang kaisahan o kaayusan sa Tagalog na teksto?

Pero may naganap ngang neutralization. Ang salitang “lupa” ang ginamit ni Rizal para sa Aleman na “Grund,” “Irdisch,” “Baden,” “Feld,” “Land,” “Welt,” “Erde,” at “Natur.” Gayundin, ang salitang “loob” ang ginamit ni Rizal para sa Aleman na “Ziel,” “Lust,” “Mut,” “Wille,” “Geist,” “Seele,” “Herz,” “Innerste,” “Menschlichkeit,” at “Natur” (Guillermo 2009, 174).

Para kay Guillermo, ang susing termino sa salin ni Rizal ay “loob” (Guillermo 2009, 170, 212). Sa pagkawala ng “Natur” bilang sentral na metapora, nawala na sa saling Tagalog ang pundasyon ng argumento ni Schiller laban sa pulitikal na ordeng kanyang kinikritika. Inihambing ni Guillermo ang “loob” sa salitang Malaysian na “tulong.” Ayon sa kanya:

The human “needs” represented by the notion of “Naturrecht” are historically and situationally transcendent while those expressed by the idiom

of “tolong” are historically bound and situationally immanent (Guillermo 2009, 187).

Sa tatluhanang “may loob”-“walang loob”-“pagbalik loob,” natutunghayan natin ang mga salita at konseptong nagamit ni Rizal sa pagsalin niya ng kritikal at rebolusyoaryong aspekto ng dula ni Schiller. Ang loob na ito’y hindi metapisikal o engrandeng ideya, kung mas kongkreto, mas pang-araw-araw. Ito ang tinutukoy ni Guillermo ng sinabi niyang pagtatangka ang salin ni Rizal na makipagdiyologo hindi lamang sa mga kauri niyang ilustrado.

IMBES NA KONGKLUSYON

Basahin naman natin ngayon ang pagbasa ni Guillermo sa tekstong bagaman hindi direktang salin, ay makikitaan pa rin ng mga sentral na ideya ng isa pang Aleman. Ang tinutukoy ko rito’y ang “The Philippines a Century Hence” ni Rizal, na ayon kay Guillermo’y may bakas ng pilosopiya ng teorista ng militar na si Carl von Clausewitz.

Unang inusig ni Guillermo si Ricardo Pascual. Ayon kay Guillermo, mahihinuha agad sa tangkang paglatag ni Pascual sa di-umano’y pilosopiya ng kasaysayan ni Rizal na ang nagsasalita talaga rito’y si Pascual. Pinapasabi lang kay Rizal ang kanyang mga ideya. Walang paggalang si Pascual sa kinapapaloobang pangkasaysayan at pang-intelektktwal na konteksto ni Rizal (Guillermo 2012, 7). Isinunod ni Guillermo ang interpretasyon ni E. San Juan, Jr. Para sa kanya, kabaliktaran naman ni San Juan ni Pascual. Samantalang ang huli’y ahistorical, si San Juan ay nagmalabis sa mga sinabing naging impluwensya kay Rizal, tulad ng sosyalismo, anarkismo, at ideyalismong Aleman. Para kay Guillermo, hindi “rigorous” at “substantiated”

ang pagsuri ni San Juan kay Rizal bilang maestro ng “dialectic mode of thought” (Guillermo 2012, 8-9).

Sentral sa diskusyon ni Guillermo ng sanaysay ni Rizal ang konsepto ng “moral forces,” na ayon kay Rizal ay mas makapangyarihan pa sa mga materyal na puwersa. Unang hinambing ni Guillermo ang pag-iisip ni Rizal sa Alemang si Droysen, na mayroon namang konsepto ng “ethical powers,” at gayundin ginamit ang “necessity” sa pag-intindi niya ng kasaysayan (Guillermo 2012, 16). Malaki din ang papel ng “necessity” sa “The Philippines a Decade Hence.” Kaso nga lang, wala namang ebidensya na nabasa ni Rizal si Droysen.

Isa pang Alemang naihambing kay Rizal si Humboldt. Nabasa talaga ni Rizal si Humboldt, ayon sa isang liham niya kay Blumentritt. Pero para kay Guillermo, sa mga sulatin ni Clausewitz tayo dapat tumingin kung nais nating intindihin ang sanaysay ni Rizal. Ang terminong “moral forces” (sa Aleman) ay dalawampu’t syam na beses lumabas sa librong *On War* ni Clausewitz (Guillermo 2012, 17). Ang kaso nga lang, wala rin namang ebidensya na nabasa ni Rizal si Clausewitz! Sa huli, dahil empirikal at historikal ang oryentasyon, hindi giniit ni Guillermo na si Clausewitz talaga ang naging hugutan ng bokabularyo ni Rizal. Modelo siya ng iskolar na siyentipiko ang oryentasyon, at hindi binabago ang mga datos para lamang maging “tama.” Gayumpaman, tatlo ang kongklusyon ni Guillermo. Una, mas malakas ang kaso para sa kahit ‘di-direktang impluwensya ni Clausewitz kay Rizal, kumpara sa ibang palaisip. Pangalawa, ang mga ideya tulad ng pagiging mas mahalaga ng mga puwersang moral ay maaaring isakonteksto na kasaysayan ng Espanya ni Rizal. Mahina ang mga materyal na puwersa ng mga Espanyol, kumpara sa ibang kapangyarihang Europeo, kaya may saysay ang pagkaakit nila sa pilosopiyang militar ni Clausewitz (Guillermo 2012, 28-29). At pangatlo, inusig ni Guillermo ang paglarawan kay Rizal bilang

“pasipista” at “mala-Ghandi.” Taktikal at hindi absoluto ang pagkiling ni Rizal (Guillermo 2012, 27, 29) sa “mapayapang paraan ng pagbabago.”

Isinasalin si Rizal, at nagsasalin si Rizal. Babala sa mga mapang-api! Baka sa susunod, ang isalin ni Rizal... ay ang inyong dugo... mula sa inyong katawan...

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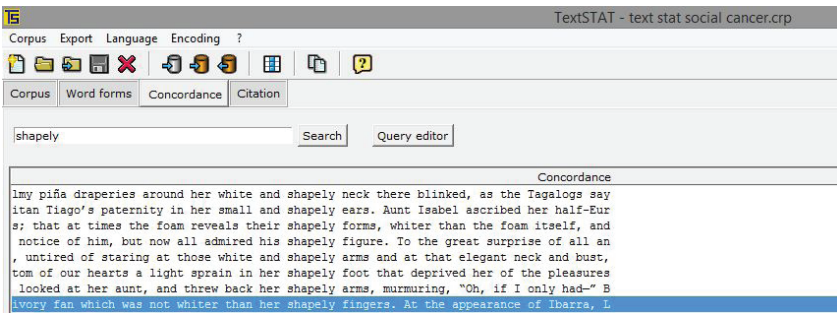
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Figura 1



Resulta ng TextStat program para sa “shapely” sa salin ni Charles Derbyshire ng *Noli Me Tangere*.

BAGOT AT BIGO: IBA'T IBANG MUKHA NG BAYANI SA *TUNGKOL SA ASO*

Kisha Aleena Abuda

Panimula

Ayon kay Edward Linenthal (83), simbolo ng pinakamatataas na mithiin ng kinabibilangang kultura ang mga bayaning-mandirigma. Kinakatawan ng bayani ang mga paniniwala at birtud na nais ng nasabing lipunan, at sinasalamin ng bayani ang imaheng nais palutangin ng lipunang ito (Frisk 95 at Reyes 397). May taglay rin silang “creative power” o kakayahang maminsala para buuin muli ang lipunan ang bayani. Sang-ayon dito ang hinuha ni Weber na tumitindig ang mga bayani sa oras ng sakuna (as qtd. in Frisk 91). Makikita ito sa mga superhero sa komiks na naisulat mula 1930s hanggang 1970s na ayon sa manunulat at akademikong si Soledad S. Reyes ay sintomas ng pangangailangan ng lipunan na sanggain ng mundong kinatha ang mundo ng realidad (403). Kumbaga, nagiging simbolo ng pag-asa ang mga bayani sa panitikang patuloy na binabasa. Inuugat rin ni Reyes ang mga superhero sa komiks sa mga bayani sa ating mga epiko, na siya namang pinagtuunang pansin ni Eugene Evasco sa pag-aaral niya tungkol sa mga etnoepiko sa Pilipinas sa balangkas ng bata o pagkabata. Banggit ni Evasco: “Idinagdag pa, gayong umiikot sa buhay ng isang bayani ang epiko, ito ay ‘kolektibong katauhan, pag-aari at tradisyon ng liping lumikha sa kaniya’ (Antillon 1991: 4).” Ibig sabihin, kabahagi ng bayani ang lipunang kanyang ginagalawan sa pagiging bayani.

Ganito rin ang pagtingin nina Spencer at Cooley (345) sa paghubog ng bayani—na kolektibong gawain ang kinakailangan para magkaroon ng

bayani at samakatuwid, ang mga ideolohiya at paniniwala ng bayaning ito ay nagmula rin sa kultura at lipunang kinabibilangan. Taliwas ito sa teorya nina Weber at Carlyle na nanggagaling sa labas ng lipunan ang mga tumitindig na bayani, at bagkus ay nagdadala ng progresibong puwersa na likas lamang sa kanila (as qtd. in Frisk 89). So sosyolohikong pagtingin, binubuo ng lipunan at bumubuo rin ng lipunan ang bayani.

Bagama't naunang tradisyon ng pagsulat, partikular sa Amerika at Europeo, ang romantikong pagtingin sa mga bayani, kalaunan ay napalitan naman ito ng modernistang pagtingin. Ayon kay Oliner, hindi na kailangang ituring ang mga bayani bilang mga natatanging tao ("larger-than-life"), bagkus ay dapat silang itrato bilang mga ordinaryong tao na may kakayahang gumawa ng mga itinuturing na "heroic deeds" (136). Sa isang pag-aaral tungkol sa transpormasyon ng mga sundalo na binansagang bayani, binibigyang-kapangyarihan ng paniniwalang marangal ang gawain ng mga sundalo, kahit pa kasama sa pagiging mandirigma nila ang pagpatay rin ng tao (Linenthal 81). Higit pa rito, ipinaliwanag rin kung paanong nauwi rin sa disillusionment ang dramatikong pagtingin ng Amerika sa sariling sundalong mandirigma (ibid 79). Mula sa paniniwalang binigyan ng Diyos ng karapatan ang mga sundalo para itama ang mali sa mundo, halimbawa, ang slave trade noong Civil War at komunismo naman sa Vietnam, sa huli ang kinakitaan rin ng pagkakamali ang malawakan at walang habas na pagpatay na ginagawa ng mga sundalo. Pero sa kabila nito ay itinuring pa rin naman silang mga bayani, at kung susuriin pa nga, mga biktima rin ng mga digmaang sila rin ang lumilikha.

Sa Pilipinas, mga OFW na nakikipagsapalaran sa ibang bansa ang naiisip natin kapag nababanggit ang salitang "bayani." Sa panahon ng pandemya, binansagan namang "frontliners" ang mga doktor at nars na *ibinubuwis* ang kanilang buhay para lang mailigtas ang mga may sakit at mabigyan ng pagkakataon mabuhay ang mga nasa bingit ng kamatayan.

Ngunit bayani ba talaga sila na piniling sumabak sa giyera o ibinabalangkas lang ng mga nasa kapangyarihan na bayani sila para pagtakpan ang sariling pagkukulang? Sa ganitong uri ng suliranin inuugat ng papel na ito ang pangangailangan na basahing maigi ang koleksiyon ni U Z. Eliserio: na mayroong iba't ibang pagbuo ng imahen ng bayani at pagkabayani ang ating lipunan. Makikita ito sa koleksiyon ng maikling kuwento ni Eliserio na *Tungkol sa Aso* na inilimbag ng UST Publishing House nitong 2019 lamang. Sa diskusyon, makikita na may apat na mukha ng bayani sa koleksiyon. Sa unang bahagi, makikita kung paanong nakadepende sa sitwasyon ang pagusbong o paglubog ng bayani, at kung paanong maaaring maging bayani ang isang Damaso at magmistulang anti-hero ang isang Crisostomo Ibarra/Simoun. Sa pangalawang bahagi, ipapakita kung paanong nagiging bayani ang bata sa kabila ng nosyon na sila ay mahina. Karugtong nito, may pagsusuri rin sa mga dehadong tauhan sa koleksiyon ni Eliserio bilang mga bayaning underdog. Sa ikaapat na bahagi, bibigyang pagbasa naman ang mga bayaning mistulang talunan. At kung tunay ngang tinalo na sila ng mundo, maituturing pa ba silang sagisag ng kabayanihan?

Dalawang Mukha ng Isang Barya

Kadalasan, nagiging makabayan ang mga bayani dahil kinakailangan. Dahil nga sangkap ang trahedyang sa naratibo ng kabayanihan, maaaring tingnan na *sitwasyon* at hindi naman talaga ang tauhan ang pinanggagalingan ng kabayanihan. Puwedeng sabihin na wala naman talagang pormula sa pagiging mabuti o masama, kung magiging bayani o kontrabida ang isang tauhan.

Patunay rito ang “Stanford Prison Experiment” ni Philip Zimbardo noong 1971 kung saan ipinakita kung gaanong kadali tumulay sa pagiging mabuti o masama ang kahit na sino sa pamamagitan ng pagbabagong-kapaligiran at pagtatalaga rin ng roles o tungkulin sa mga tao. Sa labas na

anyo pa lamang, makikita kaagad kung paanong dinepersonalize ang mga nakabestida na preso, at kung paano naman ine-empower ang mga guards (Konnikova; Franco at Zimbardo). Kahit walang espesipikong utos sa dapat gawin ng mga guards, wala pang 24 oras sa bilangguan ay inabuso na ng mga guards ang mga bilanggo (Konnikova at Zimbardo). Hindi lamang pisikal na abuso ang natanggap ng mga bilanggo, kundi emosyonal at sikolohikal rin. Sa kabila ng mapang-abusong ginagawa ng ibang guards, mayroon namang hindi umayon sa pangmamalupit na ito. May mga bilanggo na umalma sa kasamaan na naranasan nila sa pangalawang araw pa lamang ng eksperimento, ngunit dahil nanahimik lang ang mga “mabubuting” jail guards, ay patuloy na naging submissive at passive na lamang ang mga bilanggo kahit na nasasaktan na sila.

Simeon bilang anti-hero. Sa ganitong paraan siguro pinakamainam na basahin ang unang dalawang kuwento ni Eliserio sa koleksiyon. Sa “Simeon sa Amerika” (Eliserio 1-6), binigyan ni Eliserio ng backstory ang bayani ni Rizal sa *Noli Me Tangere* at *El Filibusterismo* habang ipinapakita ang pagtulay ni Ibarra sa pagiging Simoun na katumbas rin ng pagbabagong-katauhan ng karakter. Bilang Simoun, tinahak niya ang mas madugong paraan para sa reporma: rebolusyon at paghihiganti. Pasok sa ganitong identidad ang Simoun o Simeon ni Eliserio. Sa kuwento, nasa Amerika si Simoun na kasalukuyang serial killer. Ngunit nakaugat pa rin ang ganitong gawain sa kasaysayan ng karakter—mga taong nasa kapangyarihan lamang ang kanyang pinapatay:

“...pinilit niyang mabuhay nang payapa at normal, ngunit lagi’y nangingibabaw ang kanyang galit at pagkamuhi. Sa bawat ciudad na kanyang pinupuntahan, hindi n’ya mapigilang hindi pumatay ng kung sinong Espanyol, alagad ng batas. Dinadalaw s’ya ng alaala ng kanyang nakaraan

gabi-gabi, at wala s'yang lakas para hindi lumabas at maghanap ng biktima.” (p. 2)

Sa siping ito, makikita na agad kung paanong binabago ng kapaligiran at kondisyon nito ang isang tauhan. Dahil may pagkakataon si Simoun na mangibang-katauhan sa banyagang bansa, nailabas niya ang kanyang marahas na mukha. Kung bilang Crisostomo Ibarra sa Pilipinas sa San Diego ay tiniis niya ang pang-aapi ng mga nasa katungkulan at ng Espanyol, sa Amerika ay nakahanap ng espasyo si Simoun na maghiganti. Sabi nga ni Zimbardo: “Historical inquiry and behavioral science have demonstrated the “banality of evil” —that is, under certain conditions and social pressures, ordinary people can commit acts that would otherwise be unthinkable” (“The Banality of Evil”).

Damaso bilang bayani. Puwede ring maging mabuti ang masamang tao na ipinakita ni Eliserio sa susunod na kuwento, “Damaso” (7-13). Muli, humugot si Eliserio sa mga karakter ni Rizal—sina Padre Damaso at Salvi. Pinangatawanan ng dalawang tauhan na hawak ng mga Espanyol ang buhay ng mga indio sa ispiritwal, politikal, at personal na aspeto. Nangyayari ang kuwento bago pa ang *Noli* dahil buhay pa si Don Rafael Ibarra (11) at dahil ipinakita na may romantikong relasyon si Damaso kay Pia Alba (9, 11). Ang pangalawang rason ay inugat ni Eliserio sa palitan ng sulat na naibunyag nang mabasa ni Maria Clara ang mga liham nina Pia Alba at Padre Damaso (as qtd. in Nery A11). Sadyang iniwan ni Rizal na malabo ang relasyon ng dalawa sa kanyang nobela (Hau 141), at ito ang naging pintuan para maisulat ni Eliserio ang backstory ni Damaso. Kahit may espasyo para sa maraming interpretasyon ang Damaso na hinubog ni Rizal, mas malinaw naman ang pagpinta sa karakter ni Salvi sa dalawang nobela. Bagama’t mapang-abuso

rin sa kapangyarihan ay depenetibong masasabi na manggagahasa si Salvi (Ocampo as qtd. in Hau 144-145).

Kaya naman nakagugulat nang maging tila bayani ang dalawa sa kuwento ni Eliserio, nang sa dulo ng kuwento ay pinagtulungan ng dalawa na patayin ang isang hinihinalang prayle na manggagahasa (Eliserio 12). Sa kasalukuyang pananaw ng lipunan, may katwiran ang ginawa ng dalawa dahil inililigtas nila ang mga indio sa mapang-abusong miyembro ng kanilang ministro. Sa ganitong pagtingin, nagiging bayani nga ang dalawang prayle nang hindi tuluyang sinasalungat ang orihinal na hubog sa kanila ni Rizal. Hindi rin tuluyang di-makasarili ang ginawa nilang pagpatay sa kapwa prayle. Kahit tunay na nais nilang iligtas ang mga indio sa kapahamakan na alam nilang hindi tatanawin ng mismong simbahan at gobyerno bilang kasalanan, kung titingnan ang kabuuan, mas may pagtangkilik pa rin sa kolonyal na proyekto ang pagpatay nila sa kapwa prayle dahil ayaw nilang magrebolusyon ang mga indio. Para kay Damaso na siyang bayani sa kuwento, mas matimbang ang karugtong na moral ng pagpatay—ang maiwaksi ang panggagahasa ng prayleng natutulog, na kung babasahin ay nakaugat pa rin sa relasyon niya kay Pia. Kahit sa una ay alanganin siya sa gagawing pagpatay, sa huli ay naramdaman niya na tama lang ang ginawa, hindi para mapalagay at huwag mag-alsa ang mga *indio*, kundi dahil may hustisya para sa kasamaang nadulot ng prayle. Muli, itinutulay ni Eliserio ang mga nakasanayang tauhan sa makipot na lubid ng kabayanihan at kasamaan. Dahil parehong naganap ang mga kuwento sa blankong espasyo na iniwan ni Rizal, hindi tuluyang kumakalas ang mga tauhan sa orihinal na hubog sa kanila ni Rizal.

Malakas ang Mahina

Hindi lamang sa sitwasyon nilalaro ni Eliserio ang konsepto ng kabayanihan. Maraming tauhan sa koleksiyon ang mahina ang kapasidad sa maraming aspeto. Sa “Bruha sa Gubat,” ipinakilala ang dalawang batang babae

na sina Kabud at Misu. Habang isinalarawan si Misu bilang magandang bata na may asul na mata, dilaw na buhok, at anak ng mayaman, si Kabud naman ang kabaligtaran (ibid 15). Ganap ang mga katangiang ito at kung titingnan, dehado na kaagad si Kabud kung ikukumpara sa kaibigan. Sa isa pang kuwento, “Si Patrick,” sinusundan ang pagbabanyuhay ng sampung taong gulang na si Patrick mula sa pagtanggap sa sariling ‘pagkukulang’ o itinuturing na kahinaan—ang pagiging supot. May isang tauhan muli rito kung saan maaaring ihambing ang bayani na si Patrick, si Almar na tuli na. Dahil dito, madalas na inaasar ni Almar si Patrick. Kaakibat ng pagiging supot ang pagiging maliit kumpara kay Almar, at ito pa ang isang aspeto kung saan dehado si Patrick. Ang labintatlong taong gulang naman na si Luis ng “Kuwentong Kinabukasan” ang batang bayani sa pangatlong kuwento. Sa una, wala namang makikitang kahinaan si Luis. Sa huli lamang malalaman na sa kanyang kamangmangan maiuugat ang kanyang pagka-dehado.

Sa pag-aaral na ginawa ni Eugene Y. Evasco tungkol sa mga batang bayani sa etnoepiko ng Pilipinas, may tatlong konklusyon na dapat pansinin. Una ay may tinig ang bata sa lipunan; pangalawa ay may ipinapamana—materyal man o ispiritwal o sa anyo ng karunungan—sa batang bayani; at pangatlo ay ang pagbasag sa nosyon na mahina ang bata.

Sa “Bruha sa Gubat,” kataka-taka kung bakit kahit mas nakaaangat si Misu kay Kabud ay may namumuong inggit sa kanyang damdamin. Kahit mas mayaman si Misu kay Kabud at kuneho na lamang ang mayroon si Kabud, ginusto pa ring agawin ni Misu ang kaibigan na kuneho ni Kabud. Di kalauna’y nakuha ni Misu ang kuneho kay Kabud at pinaglaruan. Dahil sa labis na kalungkutan, nanangis si Kabud na sakto namang narinig ng isang bruha sa gubat. Sa huli ay nagkaroon muli ng reversal: yumaman at gumanda si Kabud habang pumangit si Misu. Simple lang ang gustong sabihin ng parabolang ito: nagwawagi ang mabuti. Bagama’t pangit ang panlabas na hitsura ni Kabud, likas siyang mabuti dahil inaalagaan niya ang kuneho at

nanatili siyang kaibigan ni Misu sa kabila ng lahat. Hindi rin siya gumanti kahit inagaw nito ang kanyang kuneho at hindi na siya humiling pa ng kahit ano sa bruha. Nagiging simbolo rin ng kalakasan ang pag-iyak ni Kabud at ang kawalan ng takot sa pagpapakita ng tunay na nararamdaman. Ito rin ang naging daan para sa pagbabagong anyo ni Kabud, dahil kung pinigilan niya ang sarili sa pag-iyak ay hindi naman siya maririnig ng bruha at hindi masosolusyunan ang kanyang problema.

Tulad ni Kabud, hindi rin takot si Patrick magpakita ng emosyon. Tulad ni Kabud ay may bully rin si Patrick—ang tuli niyang kaibigan na si Almar. Sa isip niya tuloy, mahina ang isang bata kung hindi pa tuli. Nagbago ang lahat ng iyon nang mapanaginipan niyang sumailalim siya sa pagtuli at naging higante siya pagtapos nito. Hinanap niya si Almar at isinampay ito sa kanilang sampayan. Ngunit sinita si Patrick ng kanyang ama: “Anak,” sabi nito, “hindi ka dapat salbahe” (ibid 42). Pagkagising ay nakasalubong muli ni Patrick si Almar na akmang susuntukin ng kanyang nakatatandang kuya. Sa halip na hayaang masuntok si Almar, pinigilan ni Patrick ang kanyang kuya. May pag-angkin ring naganap sa katauhan ni Patrick sa sarili niya: “Ako si Supotrick!” (ibid 42). Sa kuwentong ito, makikita kung paanong naipamana ng tatay ni Patrick sa kanya ang kahalagahan ng pagiging mabuti. Sa kabila ng araw-araw na pang-aasar ni Almar sa kanya, pinili niya pa ring huwag patulan ang kalaro kahit may pagkakataon. Katulad rin ni Kabud, mas pinahalagahan ni Patrick ang kabutihan ng loob kaysa sa pisikal na anyo. Hindi rin kahinaan ang hindi pumatol sa kaaway at sa mas magandang paraan niya naipamalas ang kanyang boses: “Hindi ko nga alam kung gusto ko pang magpatuli, e. Ang alam ko lang, mas mabuting maging supot kaysa maging salbahe.” (ibid 42).

Sa “Kuwentong Kinabukasan,” isang babala ang ibinigay kay Luis ng lola sa anyo ng isang kuwento. Madilim na imahen ng kinabukasan ang namutawi sa bibig ng kanyang lola na galing sa isang lalaking nagmula sa

hinaharap, na matutuklasan niyang ang sariling lolo pala. Kasunod ng babala ay ang natatanging relo ng kanyang Lolo Jorge na sa dulo lamang ng kuwento mapag-aalamang time machine. Nais kong pagtuunan ng pansin ang mga pamanang ito dahil sila ang maaaring tingnan na kapakinabangan ni Luis sa dulo ng kuwento: dulo na kung tutuusin ay simula ng isa pang kuwento. Tulad ng nakasanayang bayani, siguradong may kakaharaping pagsubok si Luis sa panahon kung saan siya na-transport. Dahil may kaalaman na si Luis sa kung anong kalakaran sa hinaharap mula sa kuwento ng kayang lola, maaari niya na itong gamitin sa kapakinabangan. Kung mapagtatagumpayan ni Luis na aralin ang mekanismo nito ay puwede rin niyang magamit ito para manumbalik sa sariling panahon at balaan rin ang iba pa o baguhin ang mga pangyayari sa nakaraan para hindi matuloy ang diktadurya sa hinaharap. Dito niya rin huhugutin ang kanyang lakas o kapangyarihan, dahil bilang parabola, makikita na nasa bata ang pag-asa ng hinaharap.

Talunan na Nagwagi

Dahil may nosyon na mahina ang mga bata at bagkus ay dehado sa iba't ibang aspeto ng buhay, hindi maiiwasan na tingnan rin ang penomenon ng pagiging underdog bilang isa pang mukha ng kabayanihan. Ayon sa *American Heritage Dictionary of English Language*, 4th ed.: “An underdog is colloquially defined as the one who is disadvantaged and who is therefore expected to lose” (as qtd. in Paharia et al. 776). Nagkakaroon lang rin ng “underdog” kapag may natukoy na “top dog” na maaaring isang tao, grupo, o produkto na mas may kakayanang manalo o manaig sa isang larangan o kompetisyon (776). Kumbaga, kahit mas dehado sa materyal na suporta o mas mahina, nakukuha ng underdog ang simpatya at suporta ng tigapanood.

Ayon nga sa isang pag-aaral, mas kinakampihan ng mga manonood ang dehado dahil may nakikita silang'di pagkakapantay sa sitwasyon (Vandello et al. 1614). Kahit may likas na inklinasyon ang mga tao na makibagay sa tao

o grupo ng mga tao na palaging nasa itaas, malakas, nagwawagi at iwasan ang mga talunan (Cialdani et al. & Snyder et al. as qtd. in Vandello et al. 1613), hindi pa rin makakaila na gusto nating makita manalo ang dehado.

Kung pagiging underdog lang rin naman pala ang pag-uusapan, si Agoxup ng “Ang Huling Pakkaw ni Agoxup, Isang Mengal” ay maituturing na dehado. Si Agoxup ay isang mandirigmang Isneg na naatasang sundan ang yapak ng nasirang ama na isa ring mandirigma (Bandanwal). Ang *mengal* ay isang mandirigma-mangangaso sa pangkat ng mga Isneg o Isnag sa kabundukan ng Cordillera, Cagayan, at Ilocos Norte. Ang isang *kamenglan* naman ay punong mangangaso’t mandirigma at isa sa mga namumuno sa komunidad kasama ang mga mengal (Prill-Brett 29, 31). Kumbaga, nakaayon sa lakas at kisig ng mga mengal ang pamamalakad at takbo ng buhay ng mga kasama, at isa na rito ang pagpugot sa ulo ng mga banyaga. Hindi binanggit sa kuwento kung sino ang mga banyaga, ngunit ayon kay Bandanwal, mga Ilocano ang tinutukoy na tagalabas ng mga mengal. Dahil kamenglan ang nasirang ama ni Agoxup, may taglay na responsibilidad at hangarin ng kanilang komunidad na bumagsak sa kanya mula sa kanyang ama. Palagi siyang naikukumpara rito, at palaging lumalabas na hindi niya kayang gampanan ang iniwan na tungkulin ng ama; dahil una, lampa siya; at pangalawa, duwag siya. Hindi niya pa napapantayan ang bilang ng mga banyagang ulong napugot ng kanyang ama: “Kahit na isa pa lamang ang kanyang nakukuhanan ng ulo, marami, alam n’ya, ang gusto s’ya ang pugutan” (Eliserio 19). Dehado kung dehado na si Agoxup, dahil hindi lang siya kinakikitaan ng kahinaang pisikal kundi kahinaan rin ng loob. Makikita ito nang magharap sila ni Xoxo. Mahal ni Agoxup si Xoxo, at imbes na isipin ang pamumugot ng ulo na tradisyon ng kanyang lipi, tila parang nais niya na lang sumuko sa kagustuhan ng babae: “Mabuti na rin at hindi n’ya inilalahad ang tunay n’yang damdamin. Pakiramdam niya isang “Talaga?” lang ni Xoxo’y papaya na s’yang maging tagabuhay ng kalakal paroo’t pabalik sa ibang bayan” (20).

Isa pang dehado si Mo ng “Bayani” (77-92). Bukod sa labinganim na taong gulang pa lang siya, hindi lamang siya naaapi sa labas ng bahay kundi pati sa loob ng tahanan ng amaing si Sarhento Bene. Ilalahad rin kung paanong inaabuso ni Sarhento Bene ang ina ni Mo, at kung paanong nananahimik si Mo sa pananakit nito sa ina ay ganoon na lamang rin niya kung tanggapin ang pang-aalipusta nina Doro, ang kanyang bullies. Ngunit noong araw na iyon sa simula ng kuwento, may pagsusumikap na talunin ni Mo ang mga pagsubok na inihaharap sa kanya ng buhay. Paanong nagkakaiba ang dalawang dehadong bayani na nabanggit rito? Mainam na tingnan kung ano ang mga ginawa nilang desisyon sa kanya-kanyang buhay at kung anong landas ang pinili nilang sundan.

Sa kuwento ni Agoxup, pinili ng bayani ang sumuway sa tradisyon: ang pamumugot-ulo ng Isneg at ng mga mengal, nang piliin ni Agoxup na itigil ang nasabing karahasan. Isa sa mga rason kung bakit inayawan ni Agoxup ang tradisyon na ito ay ang ugali ng pumalit na kamenglan sa kanyang ama. Ito mismo ay hindi na sinasang-ayunan ang pamumugot ng ulo sa mga banyaga at nais na lamang makipagkasundo sa mga ito. Hindi rin nito inaalala ang kaingin, ang pangunahing kabuhayan ng mga Isneg, at bagkus ay nahilig sa mga pagdiriwang tulad ng say-am. Nakikita niya rin na hindi na napagbubuklod ng lumang nakagawian ang kanyang bayan na isinilarawan na “[pigsang] malapit [nang] pumutok. At ang mas malala, hindi lang nana kundi dugo ang dadanak” (ibid 21). Ibig sabihin, walang saysay ang pagpugot ng ulo dahil pinapatay rin sila ng mga banyaga, at alam niyang hindi ito titigil. Kahit alam niyang hindi naman ito ang tama para sa lahat, dahil mamamatay at uubusin silang lahat ng mga banyaga, hindi ba’t mas magiting ang iwanan ang laban na noon pa lamang ay tapos na?

Kung katapusan ng lumang tradisyon at pagyakap sa sariling landas ang kinahinatnan ng desisyon ni Agoxup, pagwawakas ng sariling kahinaan naman ang natunton ni Mo. Matapos niyang sagipin ang matandang

pulubi kahit pa malapit na siyang mapuruhan nina Doro, nag-transform na engkanto ang pulubi na siyang nagpakilala bilang Hari ng mga lamanlupa. Dinala ng Hari si Mo sa palasyo nito sa ilalim ng daigdig kung saan binigyan siya ng misyon para mapatunayan na kaya niyang maging bayani, hindi lamang sa Ibaba kundi sa Itaas rin. Kailangan niyang husgahan ang Pirata, isang kriminal sa Ibaba, sa pamamagitan ng “sayaw” o isang tunggalian. Kung matalo siya ng pirata ay mapapawalang-sala ito. Ngunit sa sayaw, imbis na tuluyan niyang patayin at pugutan ng ulo ang Pirata ay hinayaan niya itong mabuhay. Kahit alam niyang malakas siya sa Ibaba at kayang gawin ang kahit anong naisin, pinili niyang mahabag at manatiling mabuti: “Hindi siya Diyos, kahit na puwede na s’yang tawaging hukom” (91). Sa kuwento, makikita ang reversal na naganap sa Ilalim at Itaas. Una ay naging malakas siya sa Ilalim, kabaligtaran ng sitwasyon niya noong nasa Itaas siya. Sa Ilalim, napatunayan niya ang sarili, kung kaya’t nadala niya ang taglay na kapangyarihan pagbalik sa Itaas. Doon, nabigyan siya ng kaparehong pagkakataon na itama ang mali—ang husgahan rin ang amain. Imbis na puruhan ito at patayin, pinili lang niyang takutin ang amain para matigil na ang pang-aabuso nito sa ina. Sa huli, ay nanatiling mabuti si Mo kahit pa sa mga kaaway.

Bigo, Bagot, Bayani

Isa sa mga katangian ng postmodernong tradisyon ng pagsulat ang kawalan ng iisang kahulugan o pagpapakakahulugan sa isang naratibo. Kung isasalpak ito sa pagpapakahulugan natin sa imahen ng bayani, makikita na may iba’t ibang mukha na kadalasan ay magkakasalungat pala. Hindi makakaila na ang mga bayani sa koleksiyon ni Eliserio ay pawang mga tao lang. Tandaan na ang pagiging “tao” sa postmodern ay may mabigat na implikasyon. Ayon nga kay Harold Beaver, nakaangkla ang mito ng kabayanihan sa “free will” na siya namang binasag nina Marx, Darwin, at Freud, kung kaya’t ang dating hinahangaan na bayani sa kuwento ay bitag at biktima rin ng “political,

evolutionary, and psychological forces” (186). Ibig sabihin, kahit may taglay na katapangan, katatagan, o kabutihan ang bayani sa kuwento, hindi pa rin maiaalis sa kanya ang pagiging tao sa mundong marahas.

Bayaning biguan. Si “X” ng Bilanggo (61-75) na nga yata ang nakaranas ng pinakamasaklap na katapusan sa koleksiyon. Una, napagkamalan si X na ibang tao ng tatlong nakamaskarang pulis kung kaya siya dinukot. Pangalawa, tinortyur siya at nakulong. At sa murang edad na 30, napatawan si X ng death penalty. Labis ang pagdurusa at kawalang-hustisya ang naranasan ni X na makikita sa kung paano tinrato ang karakter niya sa kuwento. Una, hindi siya binigyan ng pangalan kundi X, pagpapatunay na maaaring maging kahit sino lang ang biktima ng bulok na sistema. Pangalawa, may alusyon sa dulang “Ang Paglilitis ni Mang Serapio” (Dumol) dahil hindi lamang napagkamalan si X na siya si Mang Serapio, nagsimula rin ang kuwento niya ng nagdurusa na siya. Tulad rin ni Mang Serapio, tinortyur at “nilitis” si X ng isang bulok na sistema. Kung sa dula ay maaaring ituring na biktima rin ang “Federasyon ng mga Pulubi” ng mas korap na kalakakaran sa lipunan (Evangelista), sa kuwento ay nanatiling mapang-api ang mga pulis. Sa bilangguan naman mararanasan ni X ang pagsubok ng pagiging matatag at pananatiling buhay. Sa bilangguan niya nakilala ang iba pang mga bilanggong napagkamalang gumawa ng krimen, ngunit hindi na rin nilinaw sa atin kung sino ba doon ang tunay o hindi na kriminal. Maaaring basahin rin na “paglilitis” ang pamumuhay ni X sa bilangguan dahil kahit dito ay hinuhusgahan rin siya; at sa pangalawang beses, napagkamalan na naman siya bilang ibang tao, si Totoy Kikil na isang political prisoner. Dahil dito, nabugbog siya ng warden. Muli, makikita kung paanong tinatalo si X ng iba’t ibang puwersa sa kanyang kapaligiran at kung paano siyang naiipit sa mga hierarchies sa labas at loob ng bilangguan.

Sa “Patunayan mo Angelo C. Mabuti” (43-60), hindi lamang makakaranas ng karahasan ang titular na tauhang si Angelo kundi namamayagpag rin, sa simula pa lang, ang kahinaan ng kanyang loob. Taliwas sa imahen ng sundalo bilang mandirigma-bayani, kaagad na mapapansin sa karakter ni Angelo ang kawalan ng tiwala sa sarili na siya namang nakikita niya sa kapwa sundalo na si Fernando Salvador:

Maliit pala ang kanyang mga mata, ang mga aki’y kita ang lahat. Maliit din pala ang kanyang bunganga. ang aki’y kasya ang isang buong mansanas. Maliit pala ang kanyang ulo. At ang akin? Maliit din. Kaya nga’t mga mata’t bunganga lang ang mukha ko. (52)

Bigo si Angelo C. Mabuti dahil una, hindi naman niya nakuha ang babaeng gusto niya, si June, na nililigawan rin ni Fernando Salvador. Pangalawa, mas magaling, guwapo, at angat talaga sa kanya si Salvador na may gusto rin kay June. Pangatlo, naging paborito lang siya ng kanyang nanay noong mamatay ang kuya niya. Makikitaan na rin ng pagguho ng imahen ng sundalo bilang bayani dahil nakaangkla ang pagiging magiting sa kamatayan at hindi sa paggawa ng tama (12). Dito na rin maaaring iugat ang suliranin at pagsubok kay Angelo, at ito ay ang patunayan niya ang kanyang sarili, sa kabila ng pagiging baluktot ng mundo. Ngunit dito rin mapapansin ng mambabasa ang puso ni Angelo. Iyon naman siguro ang punto ng kuwento, ang ipakita ang pagiging tao ng sundalo na sa nakararami ay isang malayong konsepto.

Tulad ni X ay biktima rin ng sistema si Angelo. Nakakulong rin siya sa romantikong pagtingin sa pagiging sundalo, kahit sa loob niya ay takot siya at gustong huwag na lang lumaban dahil sa totoo lang ay mas mahal niya

ang kanyang buhay. Sa huli, kahit naligtas is Angelo at namatay si Salvador ay walang mararamdaman na pagwawagi.

Bayaning binigo ng kapalaran. Sa pagbabasa ng huling dalawang kuwento ni Eliserio sa koleksiyon ay hindi ko mapigilan na maalala si Franz Kafka. Kung si X at Angelo ay biguan at nabigo ng sistema, nakakikitaan ko naman ng pagkabagot sina U ng “Tungkol sa Aso” at si Matthew ng “Ang Huling Roxas-Gastambide.” Matatandaang isa sa mga suliranin sa mga akdang pampanitikan ang “tao vs. sarili” at ito ang nag-uumpaw sa dalawang kuwento, dahil bukod sa baluktot ang kanilang realidad ay kaaway rin nila ang kanilang mga sarili. At kung sarili pala ang kontrabida sa kuwento, maituturing pa rin ba na bayani ang mga bida? Tulad ng isa pang manunulat na si Stephen Crane, maaari ring ilapat ang ganitong obserbasyon sa akda ni Eliserio: [The] theme was to be read as *neither the romance of heroism, nor the triumph of heroism, but the quandary of heroism in an unheroic age*” (Beaver 187-188). Matatawag ngang duwag sina U at Matthew dahil nilalabanan nila ang isang napaka-humanistic na impulse: ang pagmamahal. Ironic din dahil kahit napaka-self-reflexive ni U sa “Tungkol sa Aso” ay hindi pa rin niya masolusyonan ang problema niya sa kanyang sarili. Higit sa diin sa subjectivity ni U gamit ang pag-uulit ng “sabi ni U,” hindi rin makabuo ng konkretong imahen ng bayani dahil umiikot lamang ang kuwento sa tunggalian ang sarili. Walang resolusyon kundi sa pag-amin na walang resolusyon.

Ganito rin ang estilo sa huling kuwento ni Eliserio na “Ang Huling Roxas-Gastambide,” kung saan patuloy rin ang pagmumuni-muni ni Matthew tungkol naman sa pagkamatay ng isang dating estudyante, si Errold, na sa progresyon ng kuwento ay malalaman na naging kasintahan niya pala. Makikita rin sa kuwento kung paanong nilalamon lang ng pagiging hindi desidido si Matthew. Kumbaga, umiiral lang ang kuwento dahil sa mga taong nakapaligid sa kanya. Kung titingnan, mundo rin mismo ang umuusig kay

Matthew at sa huli, dahil rin sa pagsulot niya kay Errold ang kikitil sa buhay ng kanyang mga magulang. Ang propesor ang pumatay sa mga magulang ni Matthew dala ng selos at galit na nagmula sa pang-aagaw ni Matthew kay Errold. Tulad ng tauhan ni Kafka na si K ng *The Trial*, maaaring ilapat rin kay Matthew ang obserbasyon na ito: [sic] he is guilty—guilty because there is no devoutness in him, because his ceaseless reasoning makes him unreasonable, because his countless ruses irritate rather than propitiate” (Rahv 72). Tulad ng mga bida ni Kafka, biktima na rin ngayon ang mga bayani ni Eliserio na nagdurusa sa pagkalupig (73).

Kumbaga, dahil hindi naman naresolba ni Matthew ang alitan nila ng dating nobyo ni Errold na propesor, pumutok na lang sa mukha niya ang pangyayari hanggang sa mawala sa kanya ang mga magulang, at nauwi naman sa kritikal na kondisyon ang girlfriend niya na si Mean. Sa huli ay nawala sa kanya ang lahat.

Konklusyon

Iba’t ibang mukha ng bayani ang nakalap sa koleksiyon ni U Eliserio na “Tungkol sa Aso.” Sa unang dalawang kuwentong “Simeon sa Amerika” at “Damaso,” makikita kung paanong nakaangkla sa sitwasyon ang pagiging bayani. Kung tutuusin, lahat naman tayo ay maaaring maging bayani o bida depende sa kondisyon. Maaari ring ituring na bayani ang mga bata, taliwas sa nosyon na mahina sila at hindi dapat maging simbolo ng pinakamataas na mithiin ng lipunan. Pinatunayan ito nina Kabud, Patrick, at Luis. Ipinakita rin na hindi kahinaan ang pagiging bata; ngunit kung titingnan muli ang kuwento ni Luis kung saan aksidente siyang na-transport sa isang dystopian na Pilipinas, maaari siyang tingnan bilang biktima na rin ng lipunan. Gayunpaman, may pag-asa siyang isalba hindi lamang ang sarili kundi ang lipunan kung gagamitin niya sa kabutihan ang kaalaman tungkol sa hinaharap. Kung puwedeng tingnan ang kahinaan ng pagiging

bata bilang kabayanihan ay hindi na rin malayo sa ating konseptuwalisasyon na ituring na bayani ang mga dehado o underdog. Sa kuwento nina Mo at Agoxup makikita kung gaano kahalaga ang pagtahak sa sariling landas. Kung maaaring tingnan bilang katapangan ang pagbaklas ni Agoxup sa tradisyon ng pakikidigma sa banyaga, ay puwede ring tingnan na mismo ang likas na kabutihan ni Mo bilang isang moda ng pagkapanalo. Kahit likas na mga dehado ay pilit na bumanyuhay ang dalawang ito sa landas na wala pang sumusubok, at doon inugat ang kanilang kabayanihan.

Ngunit sa paglapit ng mga tauhan ni Eliserio sa pagiging tao, tulad ng kahit sinong tao, sa katauhan nina X, Angelo, U, at Matthew, naging malabo at baluktot na rin ang imahen ng bayani. Hindi mapipigilan ang pag-usig ng ekonomiko, sosyal, at politikal na lakas sa mga bayani ni Eliserio, na kung susuriin ay iniwan na ring tunay ng may akda na mamuhay sa baluktot na mundo. Ngunit hindi naman kailangang laging magwagi ang mga bayani. Maaari pa ring tingnan ang walang tigil na pag-iisip at pagmumuni ng mga bayani ni Eliserio, ang kanilang pagtigil sa mabagal ngunit patuloy na pag-ikot ng mundo, bilang coping mechanism at isang paraan para manaig at maligtas sa marahas na katotohan. At kung naiparating naman ito ng mga karakter ni Eliserio sa mambabasa, tulad ko, baka naman hindi sila tuluyang talunan.

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GOING BEYOND THE WORDS: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY IN CIRILO F. BAUTISTA'S "RITUAL"

Jenny Ortuoste

Abstract

Despite the ever-growing body of scholarship on the short stories of Cirilo F. Bautista, particularly "Ritual," arguably his most popular and widely anthologized piece of short fiction, his treatment of reality as a product of consensus through communication, has not been sufficiently explored. His use of the phrases "The Words" and "Going Beyond," deliberately title-cased, and his description of community rituals, customs, and traditions invite an investigation into the nature and definition of the concepts embodied in these terms and rituals, how they are communicated, and how the characters understand and integrate these into their self-identities and interactions with others. Of note is how the interiority and experiences of certain characters drive the process of meaning-making through communication to construct a symbolic reality, that represents and maintains the social order described in the work, as the actions of the central character seek to enact social transformation through anti-structural action.

A new reading of this short story through a Carey-ian lens makes possible a renewed understanding of Bautista's story as an exploration of communication along two paths: as culture, and as a tool and impetus for driving social change within the community-as-setting.

Keywords: social construction, ritual view of communication, communication as culture, communication theory, Cirilo F. Bautista, ritual, fiction

Introduction

Cirilo F. Bautista's "Ritual" won First Prize in the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature in the English Short Story Category (1970-1971). It has been widely anthologized and shared over the internet; it is a favorite assignment of English and literature teachers to young students to analyze and dissect for themes.

To summarize it: The story has a first-person perspective, and the events in it are seen through the point-of-view of a young man, a teacher of language and literature, who has left his wife and taken a job in a mountain town where he meets Dayleg, a member of a community in that place. Dayleg, a teacher like himself, educated in Western ways, wants the community to change, give over their worship of ancient gods, and adopt modern thoughts and lifestyles. Unable to win over the elders with arguments, Dayleg takes the Narrator with him to "forbidden grounds," a place in the forest the community believes is sacred to the gods. It is where "the gods hunt." There Dayleg slays their sacred white boar. This shocks the Villagers, who are in terror over the sacrilege. Dayleg leaves. After two years, he returns, looking haggard and beaten. The community is holding a sacrifice to placate the gods angered by Dayleg's transgression. The narrator observes the ceremony, and sees Dayleg dancing for the gods during the feast. The next day, the Narrator returns to the city.

The postcoloniality of the story is evident from the plot, particularly in the obviousness of the device wherein a champion of new, "Western" ways and thoughts attempts to overthrow the indigenous highland traditions, culture, and religious beliefs that have reified over time, but fails.

“Ritual” begins with an epigraph that encapsulates the entire narrative in these words: “The Desecration of the Grove / The Killing of the Boar, and / What the Gods Did.” The words are arranged as in a poem; the nouns and verbs are deliberately capitalized. The first paragraph is one huge chunk of text, similarly with certain words capitalized, signaling their significance in the narrative, written in a lyrical style expounding on a philosophy of a certain community, and it is with this knowledge that the reader begins his journey into the world of the people living in the Mountains.

The rest of the story is largely made up of various conversations. After the exposition contained in the first paragraph, the sentence immediately after that is a line of dialogue: “The trouble with you,” Roy said, “is that you are a coward.” (Bautista 445). Through the characters’ dialogues may be seen the communication taking place within Bautista’s fictional community, and how its rituals and customs play a large part in shaping and determining the characters’ actions, even their fates.

One theme that emerges from a cursory reading is the importance of words—words in and as of themselves, and woven into conversations. In the first paragraph Bautista refers to “The Words,” meaning the phrase “Going Beyond,” again both capitalized. But are there other Words and are they revealed in the story? What is their purpose? I submit that they refer to a philosophy shared by the community, one that is important to them and that encompasses a definition of both belonging and otherness.

Through this I introduce the approach I will take to provide an alternate reading of the story, one grounded in communication theory, specifically that propounded by communication theorist James W. Carey—the “ritual view” of communication, as opposed to the regular and dominant “transmission view,” which holds that communication is linear, and that messages are “sent” or “conveyed” as things back and forth between sender

and receiver; as he described it, a “process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in spaces for the control of distance and people” (Carey 15).

This Lasswellian sort of linearity and causality, in which communication is about “who says what to whom through what channels and with what effect” (Lasswell 117), while useful when explaining here-to-there communication technology such, as text messaging or emails, or even the posting of a letter through the mail, fails at capturing the dynamism, layeredness, and complexity of human communication, and removes it from the encompassing matrices of culture and society.

Rather, Carey suggested thinking about communication as something with a deeper and more profound use and purpose in human endeavor. He said communication in a “ritual” view is linked to terms such as

...‘sharing,’ ‘participation,’ ‘association,’ ‘fellowship,’ and ‘the possession of a common faith.’ This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms ‘commonness,’ ‘communion,’ ‘community,’ and ‘communication.’ A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs (15).

Given the term that he chose to describe this view of communication “ritual,” he also remarked on its “indebtedness” to religion (15); in what way this may manifest in texts we shall see, as we read Bautista’s “Ritual” through this lens.

Conversation

In the mountains they call it Going Beyond. The way they pronounce The Words endows the sound with a hushed finality as though the meaning had nothing to do with the syllables, the lips just bit parted, afraid to release the Words altogether.

The story begins with these sentences that go on to swell into a page-long paragraph that describes how a certain community in the Mountains (perhaps Baguio City, or one of the highland towns of the Cordilleras?) thinks of someone who has stepped out of the communal embrace. There is fear of Going Beyond, even in their utterance: "...lips just bit parted, afraid to release The Words altogether."

It is a fate worse than death, and at the same time beyond death; the words are used to speak of someone who lives yet is somehow dead:

"He's gone beyond," the father would say. "No, he's not dead, but he's gone beyond." Beyond is more than the physical boundaries of the Village...It is not Death. It is not Life. It is not Life and Death put together. You may give it any name you want, you may declare these people mad, but in the Mountains, they call it Going Beyond.

These, then, are some of The Words—"Going Beyond." Bautista describes the people of that community going to and from their business, with cabbages and green bananas, at the Market or by the Highway waiting for Tourists to buy their vegetables "at a pauper's price." At this point in the story it is unclear what Going Beyond means; a reader might glean that it is a form of transgression, a breaking of cultural norms held significant

by members of the community, communicated to one another through unspoken means. But this is made clear by what transpires later on in the story.

What follows the initial, expository paragraph is a conversation between the Narrator, who remains unnamed throughout the story, and his older brother Roy, who has come to visit him after two years of their not seeing each other. Roy speaks as we would imagine an older brother speaks. In turn he scolds—“The trouble with you is that you are a coward;” explains—“[Luisa] is going to have a baby. You cannot expect a woman like her to remain alone forever;” and shows affection—“I don’t know why I came...I wanted to see you.” It is through exposition in this first conversation that the background is unraveled for the reader.

The next conversation unrolls the pivotal event in the story: the slaying of the sacred white boar. This is a flashback, and the reader is taken farther back to the time the Narrator first arrives in the community to teach. He meets the school principal Father Van Noort and his fellow teacher Carlos Dayleg, who, after class that day, takes the Narrator back to his hut to drink. Another conversation ensues, but Bautista does not convey this in dialogue, rather as an exposition by the Narrator.

In this particular conversation, they “talked about many things.” Dayleg studied pedagogy and philosophy in a Manila university, setting up the reader to understand that this is an educated man, and that his past and present attempts to push his community into modern times are not without basis. Dayleg explains to the Narrator that “he has come back to his Village to do his part in the ‘education of my people.’” Since the age of sixteen, he had been “challenging traditions,” shouting at the High Priest, yet at the same time taking part in these customs and traditions himself, dancing to honor the god Lumawig, “He Who Sends Fruition to the Earth.”

In these and other conversations throughout the book, we see how the people of the Village communicate the culture and traditions of their tribe, and how Dayleg explains these to the Narrator. The Elders and the Villagers mutter to each other about “Going Beyond” and what it entails, and describe Dayleg’s action of killing the boar as sacrilegious—“It is sacred,” they intone three times, almost as a litany, as Dayleg shrieks, “It is dead, dead!”

Carey says through communication, knowledge can be transmitted among individuals and groups, the messages “distributed in space for the control of distance and people” (Carey 13). We see this in the way The Words are communicated among the Villagers, in the way the Elders speak of Lumawig and the gods and the community’s duty, in terms of worship and respect, to these supernatural entities.

But Carey also says communication has a higher manifestation than to merely inform, educate, or control. Under his “ritual view,” communication borrows metaphorically from religion in that the “role of the prayer, the chant, and the ceremony” are highlighted, in order to bring about the “construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action” (Carey 15).

Through conversing with one another, the characters in “Ritual” build, maintain, and destroy relationships and communities, as well as negotiate their understanding of concepts related to family, friends, community, and society as a whole. We see this in the way Dayleg explains to the Narrator all his Village’s traditions that he is attempting to break, because he believes they should be challenged. Through this conversation, he also negotiates and renegotiates with himself what he means to do; he tells the Narrator in another conversation, “It’s not because my people are uneducated that they cling to ancient traditions,” he says. “...it’s a reason civilized men like you don’t and can’t fully understand.” Here he is negotiating his own identity—the man from the City is civilized, in contrast to the Villagers and himself.

Dayleg is trying to break free from the traditions that keep him bound to the community, trying to remake himself into someone “civilized” as well.

Through the Careyan lens we see how the Villagers communicate their traditions that they believe maintain the type of society that they are used to. They are content with the status quo, in a way that Dayleg is not. And it is Dayleg, among them, who seeks to destroy the social reality his fellow villagers have created to remake one more to his liking.

Parallel in thought to the concept of conversation is that of dialogue. Berger, explaining Bakhtin, wrote, “Dialogue is basic to understanding communication, not monologue—in which we are talking to ourselves, so to speak” (Berger 62). Dialogism allows two or more voices to discuss and build ways of thinking and belief systems, as well as gives space for other voices to be heard. As we see in “Ritual,” all the Villagers, the defiant and deviant Dayleg included, are allowed to have their say, even if The Words they utter may not be to the liking of the others.

Ritual

How are we to think of The Words?

The Words are part of the “ritual” of the Village, if we think of “ritual” as shorthand for the community’s traditions, norms, and values. The Words the Villagers refer to are not only “Going Beyond.” Any discourse is labeled by them as such, for instance, in the part of the story where Dayleg gathers 30 Villagers at the schoolhouse where he “lecture[s] them on the advantages of forsaking Lumawig and adopting the ways of the Christians.”

His listeners sit “neither nodding nor shaking their heads, for they could not follow the ramifications of this strange, exotic dialectics, taking in “The Words” more out of respect for this young man who had been to the university than out of interest for what he was saying..”

Lumawig is the bedrock of the Villagers' faith. For Dayleg to persist in trying to persuade the others to turn away from their god is nothing less than a shattering of the social reality they have carefully built up over many years, in countless conversations about their belief system from one generation to the next. "All ritual begins, then, to use John Pauly's apt phrase, in the gridless ambience of conversation" (Carey, CIQ p. 315).

The Council of village elders "condemned Dayleg's action" and ordered him "upon pain of expulsion from the tribe" to "refrain from expounding foreign philosophy to the natives." Here is clearly an attempt on the part of the elders to maintain their social reality in the face of challenges from other, alien concepts. This is how they hold their constructed society together. And this casting out from the group is the penalty that Dayleg will later face after showing no remorse for killing the white boar.

It is easy, when reading "Ritual," to adopt a cursory, surface-level perspective. A group of Grade 12 students, for instance, will readily identify common themes such as "traditions and change" ('Purple Menageries') and "culture and traditions of people," "how they react to the changes of the times today," and "reconciliation with the past in order to move on forward" (Serrano), a "yearning for change" (Matti), and "activism...a practice that exerts efforts in order to achieve social reform" (Pingol).

Deeper readings can yield interesting insights. One interpretation uses Wolfgang Iser's reception theory to determine that in "Ritual," "Going Beyond" is deviance. "By breaking the laws and traditions of his tribe, Dayleg has become a deviant, he has Gone Beyond. With the ritual, he embraces his roots once more" (Baytan). Deviance is departing from the norm or commonly accepted standards, and Dayleg certainly has done so. In Careyian terms, he is unraveling the "ordered, meaningful, cultural world" that the community has created and maintained over time.

At the beginning of this essay I mentioned how “Going Beyond” is spoken by the members of the community with dread: “...lips just bit parted, afraid to release The Words altogether.” “Going Beyond” is the fear of isolation, which is the opposite of belongingness. Belongingness is a universal fundamental human motivation found across all cultures and in different types of people, who feel severe consequences for not belonging (Baumeister 499). To act in a deviant manner and so be cast out of the group, as Dayleg has done, can cause severe emotional and psychological distress, as we see in Dayleg’s countenance upon his return. He was clad in “dirty maong trousers,” his hair was long, “almost touching his shoulders;” he “had lost weight,” his eyes were “bloodshot,” his voice “old, tired, excruciated by a force too strong for me to unlock.” This is in stark contrast to his appearance when he first met the Narrator: “His white trousers and white shirt were spotless; the electric bulb was reflected on his shoes.” Dayleg has clearly suffered in the two years since his slaying of the sacred boar.

Dayleg’s suffering is both punishment and penance, but the actual act of atonement lies in his participation in the ritual sacrifice and dance. Through his decision, his actions, the movements of his body, he conveys capitulation to the greater will of the community and begs to be allowed to return and be accepted back. His return ticket is his unspoken promise to behave in accordance with the group’s culture. Dayleg has realized that his actions were “social practices with social consequences—which is what communication is” (Rothenbuhler 18).

We can also discern in Dayleg’s behavior throughout the story an individual’s search for his identity. How is Dayleg to think of and about himself, others, and the world around him when he is looking through at least two frames of reference—the tribal belief system he grew up in, and the Western mindset his education has taught him? As Rothenbuhler remarked, “In the ritual aspects of everyday communication, too, people’s selves are

constructed and conveyed, their identities are at stake, their hopes are invested" (14). It is the conflict of these two often contradictory philosophies within himself that led to the unraveling of Dayleg's sense of self and gives the story its plot.

In the Village, the social order is communicated through ritual—through the "reality-constructing consequences of communication in both formal rites and ceremonies and in the ritual aspects of everyday activities" (Rothenbuhler 14). And it is also through ritual that Dayleg has sought to destroy this constructed social order. When talking to the Villagers brings him nowhere, he strikes at the heart of the ritual by killing the sacred boar in the sacred grove. And when he seeks to return to the tribe, it is also through ritual that he achieves this, because the "ritual communication aspect of everyday life constructs the realities in which we live" (ibid.).

Finally, as self-conflicted as Dayleg has been, he is also a "moral agent" for change, attempting to change the values by which the tribe conducted itself, through his Words and actions within the Village's belief system; and here "ritual reminds us...of the importance of communication in moral life, of our roles in life as moral agents" (Rothenbuhler 14-15).

Conciliation

In the last part of the story, Dayleg surprises the community by returning during the sacrifice to dance, in an attempt to atone for his earlier transgression. He has suffered in the two years since he had left the group. At first he is reluctant to rejoin the community; when the Narrator tells him that his people are holding a sacrifice tonight, he replies: "But I'm not staying."

But later that night, at the sacrifice, "the noise of a commotion" disturbs the ritual. There is a sound of gongs, and the Narrator thinks at first that he is dreaming, but then he sees "a lone man dancing."

“He’s back,” the Villagers exclaim, “Dayleg, Dayleg.” His feet “stamped the ground in syllables of penance” and he kept dancing, “his feet and arms and soul declaring his inviolable kinship with all that made him what he was and what he would be...”

But Dayleg’s gesture is not merely penance, nor to establish “reconciliation,” which is the restoration of friendly relations; it is also “conciliation,” the placation or appeasement of someone who is angry, and it is through participating in the ritual of the dance at the sacrifice to the gods that Dayleg believes he can avert the misfortune that has befallen upon the community because of his past actions. His initial hesitation to participate in the sacrifice is his last bastion, his holdout against acting contrary to his own avowed convictions.

But ultimately, his separation and isolation from his family and group prove to be grievous; he only wishes to become a part of the community once more and regain his lost sense of belongingness.

It is this placation, this knuckling under to the community’s traditions that he had once flouted, that sours the Narrator. Immediately after the description of Dayleg’s dance, Bautista abruptly ends the story with the Narrator getting on a bus for the City the very next day. It is a lame ending to an otherwise vibrant story; it would have been satisfying if the writer had returned to the initial device he used in the first paragraph, that of using indigenous wisdom to explain how social order is maintained in that community in the Mountains.

The sudden *volte face*, the return to the City, paints the Narrator as petulant. And a sign of his having failed to understand Dayleg’s need for belongingness, for order, for his need to expiate his shame—because even without Words, by his actions alone the Narrator has communicated to Dayleg and the people of the Mountain community that he cares not for their traditions, and that he considers Dayleg as someone who has turned his

back on modern thought to return to the benightedness of superstition.

Can we consider the Narrator to be a deviant as Dayleg has been, because he has helped slay the white boar? But the former is not a member of the community. He is not under the onus to subscribe to their beliefs, and there is no divine retribution for his transgression against the gods by being Dayleg's accomplice, by stepping into the forbidden grounds, by helping Dayleg carry back the carcass. In this story the Narrator has no obligation to help construct and maintain the community's social order—and this he communicates by leaving the Mountain, where he does not belong. And in his leaving, no one says that he has "Gone Beyond," nor does it seem that anyone has even noticed his departure.

Neither is there a need for the Narrator to conciliate anyone, only perhaps his former wife. But he can no longer play a role in her life as she is with someone else. The Narrator has not found where he belongs; he is both inside the social order and outside it. And it is in this sense that he is the Other who shows the two different conditions that an individual may find himself or herself, in relation to a community. In leaving the Mountain, the Narrator has "Gone Beyond," beyond the tribe. But then he never really belonged.

Reading the Communication in Fiction

As Carey said, understanding a culture is a complex matter. He quotes Geertz as having said, particularly in relation to ritual, that "the guiding principle is the same, societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One only has to learn to gain access to them" (453).

Carey also notes Durkheim's comment that "society substitutes for the world revealed to our senses a different world that is a projection of the ideals created by the community" (95). Culture, in other words, is constructed

by society, and the construction is conducted through communication, including rituals and indigenous practices, as Bautista's "Ritual" shows.

This symbolic order that orders the community's ideals is manifested in materials forms, such as "dance, plays, architecture, news stories, strings of speech" (Carey 15). It is this symbolic order that

Operates to provide, not information but confirmation, not to alter attitudes or change minds, but to represent an underlying order of things, not to perform functions but to manifest an ongoing and fragile social process (ibid.).

It is this underlying social process that Dayleg has sought to overturn and replace with the new, but the old order proves to be less fragile than he had assumed. In the end, it is he who capitulates and seeks to conciliate the gods he had claimed not to believe in. And it is the elders who have proven stronger in their will and in their faith in Lumawig.

What "Ritual" also points out is something Carey has noted—that the commonalities in human thought do not mean that we are both primitive and modern at the same time, "creatures of both reason and superstition." Rather, he views human thought "more as interpretations people apply to experience, constructions of widely varying systems of meaning" that science cannot entirely verify (Carey 48).

"What persons create is not merely one reality, but multiple realities. Reality cannot be exhausted by one symbolic form, be it scientific, religious, or aesthetic," (Carey 49) and I suggest that in order to understand a culture—even a fictional one, such as Bautista has created in "Ritual"—we need to create that "access" spoken of by Geertz, by fastening upon the interpretations made about human existence and systematizing them to "make them more readily available to us," as Carey says (49).

This is the “process of making large claims from small matters,” studying forms such as “rituals, poems, plays, conversations, songs, dances, theories, myths” (49), and yes, even short stories, which are an important tool for understanding the self and the world, and constructing knowledge about them. As Careyian scholar Eve Munson put it, “As children and as adults, Carey notes, we tell stories about ourselves. It is a way of explaining ourselves to ourselves” (xi).

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PERFORMING
QUEER CHRISTIANITY:
WRITING GAYNESS, RETHINKING
THE DIVINE

Ronald Baytan

Abstract

This paper underscores the paradoxes attending the formation of my avowedly gay identity vis-à-vis my creative praxis and Christian background. As my gay identifications have morphed through the decades, so have my politics, poetics, and faith. My early creative work in the 1990s demonstrated my battles with Christian bigotry and homophobia. Yet it is also quite ironic that I was able to develop and nurture my dissident aesthetics precisely because of my Christian (Catholic-Born Again) and La Salle background. The guilt wore off and the voice changed, but the search for the Divine and the Sublime persists. In this paper, I reflect on my engagement with Christianity and share stories of how my reconfiguration of Christian discourse enabled me to evolve into a gay writer who no longer believes in organized religions, but keeps my faith in the benevolence of the Universe.

Keywords: Queer spirituality, Catholic education, gay literature, dissident aesthetics

I abhor attending mass. This attitude stems from the fact that when I was in high school, we—the hapless, helpless, and hopeless students—were

forced to attend the Protestant (Born Again) Sunday service every week. If we missed the Sunday service, punishment awaited us. We had to write the hymns ten times on our school stationery for the English curriculum; and submit five *tay k'hay* (calligraphy) tasks (instead of only one if we attended the service) for the Chinese curriculum.

Such a useless exercise, I thought then. And I still do now, more than 30 years after the trauma. Brenda L. Beagan and Brenda Hattie (2015) state in their study: “The psychological and emotional harm done to some participants through organized religion was extensive and knew no age boundaries” (p. 92). It wasn’t just the brute force with which the school required us to attend Sunday service that was disturbing. We had regular religious congregations in the afternoon twice a week, where the pastors spewed venomous words against all sorts of sinners. So, my knowledge of my sexual desires came at a time when I was bombarded with teachings about immorality and sex. Jodi O’Brien (2004) states: “Doctrines that condemn homosexuality constitute the ideological backdrop against which Christians initially experience their homosexuality” (p. 184).

That is why studying at De La Salle University for my undergraduate degree was such a relief. We still had religion, but the prayer and mass(ive) duties were gone. I was free to “choose” to act on my religion; I was free to attend any religious ceremony I felt like attending. Naturally, for someone like me who hated religious events, I attended none (except when required). I would visit churches, and was actually fond of praying inside a church, especially on my birthday, but there was something about having to endure an hour, listening to the homily and participating in a public ritual, that I couldn’t quite stand. To this day.

It has been more than twenty years since I wrote most of the poems in my collection *The Queen Sings the Blues: Poems, 1992-2002* (2007). Because of the symposium on queer spirituality, I forced myself to look at

my poetry again. And to my surprise, I now realize the fact that there was so much Christianity in my early poetry.

Why?

Coming from a mercantile Chinese-Filipino family, I grew up with “syncretic” religious values. Images of Jesus Christ, Mother Mary, Kwan Yin, and Toti Kong abound in our house, and no one in the family finds it odd. It is just a way of life. My parents were not quite religious in the traditional sense, even though we had saints all over the house. But we observed the feasts, both Chinese (Taoist-Buddhist?) and Christian.

What had the most tremendous impact on my consciousness as a gay subject is not my family, but my schooling. I was an “other” because I was not masculine enough, because effeminacy was construed by many to be a sign of homosexuality, and because homosexuality was supposedly immoral. There were instances when I, definitely not an alpha male, not *lalaking-lalake*, was discriminated against or mocked because I was (closetedly) gay. In the 80s, the *bakla* was looked upon as a stereotypically funny, “abnormal” creature. (Has anything really changed?) Religion and heteronormative societal values othered me.

One of my life’s blessings is the fact that I took up literature in college, studied theory, enrolled in women’s writing and feminism under Dr. Marjorie M. Evasco, and enabled myself to rethink my concept of homosexuality. Nonetheless, I will shift the voice a little bit here—you remain conscious of your role as a transgressor. You take it with you throughout your life, and it will take some time for you to reframe or rethink your religion (both its wisdom and myopia) and to see it for what it truly is—a myth.

Pardon if I do an “I-me-myself” performance in this section. I shall discuss my poetry vis-à-vis religion, or in the words of Patrick Cheng (2011), my “rainbow theology” (p. 248).

In general, my personae are conscious of their otherness. In "Apologetic" the persona knows that his beloved thinks of him as a sinner who will burn in hell: "You must have imagined/ The circles of Hell burning/ The likes of me" (Baytan, 2007, p. 13). In "Confession," one reason he is reluctant to come out to his parents is the religious idea of homosexuality as immoral: "what have we done wrong,/ what sin, what shame" (p. 33). Quite expectedly, this sentiment appears in my nonfiction book *The Queen Lives Alone: Personal Essays* (2012) as well, especially in "Pua Iyam," because my Born Again brothers think of homosexuality as a sin, and at some point in their lives they believed that homosexuality was a mere phase that could be expunged through prayer meetings.

In "Procrastination," the persona juxtaposes love with sin at the poem's conclusion: "And you haven't even told me/ You love me enough to need me/ Like sin" (Baytan, 2007, p.19). The persona also performs the rituals of bathing, of cleansing, to purify himself, to "expunge" the sin and the beloved from his body. Indeed, the discourse of sin permeates much of my early poetry.

What quite amuses me now is the conscious juxtaposition of sex acts with religious imagery in my poetry. In "Bottom," the persona states "You must know/ I am a novitiate of pain./ My moans are pure..." (p.17). I deliberately used "novitiate," not "novice," because of novitiate's semantic reach; its meanings include "novice," but the term also denotes the period of apprenticeship and the place where novices live. It also sonically jibes with "initiate," which is what the persona is. In its twin poem "Top," the persona describes the bottom "Like a fallen angel/ Struck by God's thunderbolt" (p.18). While "Seafood" reimagines cruising and utilizes sea creatures to represent the gay men in the bathhouse, the poem ends with "victuals," which is a very religious word (p. 21). Still on cruising, the popular gay haunt Giraffe (a bar) is reimagined as a chapel where "men/ await their first taste/ of brotherly love" (p.

23), and ends with the persona's "desires/ Burning// Like votive candles" (p. 24). In a connected poem "White Angel," the sex object-addressee is likened to an angel with "a raging sword" as though he were the Archangel Michael. In "Transience," the persona talks about one-night stands, speaks to one of the many men he had an encounter with, and ends with "Because the body/ Desires/ Its own resurrection" (p. 32).

The sacred and the profane—these are vital elements in my early poetry. I was aware then that this technique of combining opposites had a long tradition in poetry, and because of my gayness, I was consciously juxtaposing two seemingly incompatible discourses to voice my protest against homophobia, to shock people, and to assert that individuals like me had nothing to be ashamed of. In a nutshell, religion gave me the language and the symbols to interpret my avowedly gay desires and to mine them for their paradoxes.

Even in the collection's closing poem, "La Puta del Mundo," the persona's awakening involves the Garden of Eden. Forbidden tree, Heaven, manna, Adam—these are just a few of the religious references in the poem (pp. 87-88). "La Puta" is clearly about the persona's epiphany. Wisdom comes at a great price—the knowledge of the body's perpetual hunger and the body's end. To top it all, the Garden is really the Garden of Earthly Delights, Bosch and all, a bathhouse. The sacred and the profane have to be rethought and reexamined in queer artistic discourses. Is it a sacrilege? I look at my poem as the imperative to salvage (in the original sense of "save") our inherited myths.

In "An Elegy for Benjie," the persona misses his friend, but also underscores his belief that there is a Paradise for gay men: "But there in God's bosom/ Where creatures sashay in the sky,/ You see us, and through us" (p. 42). It is important that the persona imagines that his friend is in Heaven. Why should gay men live in Hell? Why can't angels be campy? Why can't God be a Friend, an Ally? Why can't God be Queer? I find this idea very

important because at the body's end, what else is there to look forward to? Is death merely a release from suffering? In Christian doctrine, does Death not lead us to Eternal Salvation? And shouldn't the abject, the queer individual, be worthy of Grace and Redemption?

What do I make of all these? Why the conscious choice to invoke Christian imagery? Can one escape religion? Or does one take it with one in the search through life? As writers, we draw material from the myths we grew up with, whether they may sanctify or condemn us, whether we identify with them or not, whether we believe in the values they espouse or not. Yet to me, what matters is that religion—quite ironically—offers strategies and narratives for the reinvention of the Self, for its rebirth.

While Christian religions may seem “universal” and transcultural (well, almost) in their abrogation of the queer subject, the effects of Christianity on individual subjects vary. To begin with, do Filipinos really understand Christianity? In J. Neil C. Garcia's “Why am I Catholic,” he states “I am Catholic because the homophobic teachings of the Western Christian (and not just Catholic) church are, thankfully enough, like most other dogmas, hardly understood by Filipinos” (1998, p. 204).

In my experience, values like kindness towards and acceptance of social pariahs are more evident in Catholic institutions than in other organized religions. I also feel that economics and the value of debt of gratitude (“*utang na loob*”) in our culture play an important role in the malleability of our religious homophobic values. Queer children (I refer here to all identities considered non-normative) are usually the ones who end up single, and are tasked with taking care of their parents and providing for their families, because of their disposable income. I may be wrong, but I believe that in narratives involving the return and acceptance of sons and daughters into the family fold, the value of “*utang na loob*” far outweighs “*pananampalataya*.” (Our faith is embodied through the practice of debt of gratitude.) Soon enough,

lonely parents of queer children realize the true value of being selfless and loving, which is what being Christian truly means. In my telenovela-inflected theology, the family that accepts queer children gets to experience the joys of heaven in the here and now—monthly manna from generous LGBTQI children, whose love for family is as pure as Safeguard. What is gravely sad is that queer children get accepted only through the heterosexist “logic” of compensation—that they make up for their supposed defects by sacrificing themselves and providing for the family.

Religious myths can be reinterpreted, appropriated, turned upside down, re-thought. In the words of Garcia: “meta-narrativized.” He states: “...legendizing is a demystifying, meta-narrativistic act” (1997, p. 140).

Growing up in a religious Protestant school may have somewhat damaged my spiritual life, but it has instilled in me a few good values (definitely not superiority over heathens, and not racist values, like the Chinese are superior to all the other races when it comes to Math and Business). And my education at DLSU—which is to me the most liberal and least homophobic of the major religious HEIs in the country—has helped me revise my understanding of the Christian doctrine. My excursions into theory and literature enabled me to see Catholicism, and Christianity in general, as just one of the many myths LGBTQI believers can use to nourish their souls and to find their spiritual h(e)aven. Some Christians welcome different religious practices and beliefs in their lives, performing “the holy art of bricolage” (Peter Savastino, 2007, p.12), which according to John Lardas is “the process of accumulating, organizing, and integrating various idioms into a coherent whole as an act of religious devotion” (as quoted in Savastino, 2007, p. 12). Some abandon Christianity.

As a writer, I learned early on to see my creative work as a counter-narrative, or counter-text. There is something anti-hegemonic and an-

ti-heteronormative in what I write—especially when I address religion and spirituality in my work—and this holds true for all of us LGBTQI artists.

Ironically, Christianity became a true living voice in my youth *despite* everything. I had no other myth to draw strength from. At a certain point, yes, it caused me spiritual anxiety and disturbance, but with enough critical reflection on my part, it opened itself up for re-visioning. My writing in my early to mid-20s became the beginning of Foucauldian “reverse’ discourse” in my life (Michel Foucault 1978, p. 101).

Writing is a way of purging, of vomiting, of expelling what has been shoved down your throat. However, this poison has been injected into your system. Your body, at first, fights it off, but then learns to live with it, and eventually controls it. I see this to be true of Christianity.

While some abandon their religion, some stick to it and re-conceptualize it. Garcia and John Iremil E. Teodoro are two true-blue Catholic gay men I can cite. In my case, I have moved away from religion. I have learned to value spirituality more than belonging to any religion.

Faith is a deeply personal hermeneutic practice. It is a carefully examined choice. As adults, we are free to interpret the dogmas and the texts that religions offer us, and we are free to fashion ourselves in relation to the teachings of our religion, hopefully towards our liberation. And we need not be afraid of the Bible, nor see it as the only Truth, not even as Timeless Truth. In times of crisis, I turn to poetry and sometimes to the Bible for wisdom. In *The Erotic Word*, David Carr (2003) avers:

In this way, the Bible offers a vision of sexuality that goes beyond the moralism and sexual exchange that characterizes much of our culture. The Bible does not just tell people to do whatever feels good, nor to just avoid what is bad. Nor does the Bible offer any single norm for sexuality, however much modern readers strive to create such a norm out

of a mix of Victorian images of the family, Old Testament honor laws, and early Christian texts generally ambivalent about sexuality and family. Yet this closer look at the Bible has revealed texts like the Eden creation story and the Song of Songs that evoke a sexuality joined with spirituality, an eros that involves the whole person. Taken as a whole, the Bible does not endorse any one cultural model of sexuality or eros. Yet crucial parts of it deeply affirm divine and human passion, a passion that joins humans to one another, the earth, and to God. (p. 177)

Echoing the opening line in Gayle Rubin's famous essay "Thinking Sex" (1993, p. 3), I say the time has come for us Filipino LGBTQI individuals to seriously talk about religion and sex, and to explore the interstices between queerness and religion. Melissa M. Wilcox (2006) states:

What would it mean to "queer" the study of religion, beyond the "add queers and stir" formula that has most frequently been applied to date? It would mean paying close attention to the dynamics of gender and sexuality that religions hide in plain sight, and it would mean examining the roles of religion in both inscribing and challenging heteronormativity and dualistic conceptions of gender. It might also mean queering our concept of what is religious and queering even our methodology—and in this way, queer scholars in religion hold radical potential for change. (pp. 93-94)

Wilcox's words are inspiring for intellectuals, but we must go beyond academia. LGBTQI individuals, especially the religious ones, must queer religion. Now.

Some discover their art as a pathway to what is Divine. Isn't art founded on a heightened awareness of one's place in the universe? Art requires acknowledgment of the Divine. But Art in itself is an embodiment of the Divine. bell hooks once wrote: "Writing becomes then a way to embrace the mysterious, to walk with spirits, and an entry into the realm of the sacred" (quoted in Stallings, 2020, p.138). Studying the work of bell hooks, LaMonda Horton-Stallings states: "I argue that the act of writing serves as an alternative spiritual tradition for Black intellectuals interested in deconstructing the false divides between spirituality, sexuality, and the intellect" (p.137). Stallings even asserts that "writing as spirituality promotes and fosters bisexual subjectivity" (p. 137).

It is through writing that we can reconcile the supposed opposites of Christianity and homosexuality, and resolve the supposed contradictions. To perform queer Christianity is to accept the truth that the two should never be incompatible to begin with.

One of the paradoxes in my life is that people think I am religious because I always end my meetings, my correspondences, my dealings with people with two words: God bless. Why?

Can one really forsake Christianity? The religion, yes. Its noble virtues and ideals, probably no.

I am no longer Catholic. I was never even "practicing" it when I was supposedly one. But I believe that "God bless" signifies all that is good that we would like to wish upon someone else. It is akin to the Jewish "Shalom." I say "God bless" not because I believe in the Christian God. I believe in many Gods, or I believe that the Gods manifest their Ineffable Selves in so many ways, as understood and conceived by so many religions and individuals. And the only thing that matters is that whatever our faith or religion may be, we put into practice our aspiration on a daily basis, to embody the

noble qualities and virtues that our chosen Gods possess. Faith is an endless performance of finding and living the Divine in all of us.

I prefer the word “spiritual” to “religious,” because to me the former is unencumbered by homophobic, sexist, and bigoted dogmas and traditions. One can be spiritual and religious. One can be religious without being spiritual, and vice-versa. Let me quote an important passage from an article by David N. Elkins (1999):

The word spirituality comes from the Latin root *spiritus*, which means “breath”—referring to the breath of life. It involves opening our hearts and cultivating our capacity to experience awe, reverence, and gratitude. It is the ability to see the sacred in the ordinary, to feel the poignancy of life, to know the passion of existence, and to give ourselves over to that which is greater than ourselves.

Its aim: to bring about compassion. Its effect: good physical and mental health. (p. 46)

With the pandemic, however, I find that every day is a challenge; every day is a challenge to find enlightenment or even experience awe. Elkins (2001) states: “Awe is a lightning bolt that marks in memory those moments when the doors of perception are cleansed and we see with startling clarity what is truly important in life” (p. 167). I constantly ask myself and the Universe why I am still here. The fact that I am still alive is something I accept with both remorse and relief.

My struggle as a Filipino gay man, whose mantra in life is “God bless,” continues. I am still searching for my Spiritual Self, for my wholeness (or in Buddhist terms, perhaps emptiness?). Indeed, I cannot claim to having achieved my ideal sense and level of spirituality—only that my sexuality is central to my sense of selfhood, and is not incompatible with my spiritual

existence. With “God bless,” I do not need to label myself, or be labelled as, Christian to find my sense of fulfilment. Yet I can be Christ-like in word and in deed. With “God bless,” I embrace all that is good in Christianity or any other religion, and in the God it has conjured and worshipped. A God that affirms individual uniqueness, and loves the pariahs, the disenfranchised, and the dispossessed. A God that represents justice and goodness, though these may be rare in the world. With “God bless,” I accept that nothing can be better than acts of kindness, of compassion, in this dark and hideous world. With “God bless,” echoing Elkins (1999, 2001), I acknowledge my lifelong task of accepting all of Life with humility.

Note

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A POETICS OF CO-EXPERIENCES
AND DIVERGENCES:
TOPOPHILIAC AND TOPOPHOBIC
ENCOUNTERS IN THE SELECTED POEMS
OF SALOMON DE LA SELVA IN TROPICAL
TOWN AND OTHER POEMS

Jan Raen Ledesma

Abstract

This paper is an attempt to flesh out the tropes of topophilia (affective connection between people and their settings or places) and topophobia (the revulsion toward a place and its attendant complexities) in the selected poems of Salomon de la Selva in *Tropical Town and Other Poems*, his first book written in traditional English verse forms. With reference to the biography of de la Selva, a life of crossed times and cultures, particularly that of residing in a chauvinistic United States, and his romantic memories of his beloved homeland, Nicaragua, under the yoke of neo-colonialism, are the central shaping element of his images and themes of place-making in the selected poems. These selected poems in *Tropical Town* are resilient poetic articulations and tropes of how place is essentially a beacon of life, as attested by de la Selva's biophilia in rendering place as a site of primordial anchorage and reclusion, memory and rootedness, and how dispositions are rendered as offshoots of metaphysical and geographical positioning, yielding familiarity with the home ground from the vantage point of the "oikos" or integrated relationships.

The topophobic tendencies are seen in how de la Selva straddles conflicting cultures and lifetimes in his poems, particularly that of living in a United States teeming with racism and xenophobia. This is evinced by how one experiences ruptures leading to the formation of an exilic perspective brought about by the breaches of the diaspora, cosmopolitanism, racial intolerance, and the disconcerting formation of Nicaragua's belligerent relationship with the American empire.

Keywords: Affective connections and revulsions, Nicaragua, place-making, topophobia, topophilia

Tropical Town and its Place-Based Referentialities

Struggling between two different cultures and the concomitant intricacies of exoticism and racial politics are the very forces that allowed Salomon de la Selva to pen his first collection of poems in English titled *Tropical Town and Other Poems*. The poetry collection, composed of sixty-five poems, is noteworthy for its deployment of traditional meter, rhyme and form, complemented by its desires and aspirations of establishing meaningful connections between the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking peoples of the continent. This makes the collection an important book of poetry in both North American and Nicaraguan Literatures. In the foreground of this poetry collection is Salomon de la Selva witnessing the working and convolutions in his native Nicaragua while living as an exile in the northeastern United States (Padilla, 2019). The continent where he was exiled was an embryonic empire experiencing the turbulent conflicts brought by xenophobia and racism. *Tropical Town* is a poetry collection that has been valorized in Nicaraguan literature as a text written between two lands, in English of a recognizable nineteenth-century style. The formalist English

verses of this collection are noted for their powerful expressions of the concerns of an immigrant native in another language. For instance, nostalgia and the longing for his beloved nation, as seen in his poignant creation of *costumbrista* images of his native Leon, Nicaragua, including the citizens, customs and practices of the place, the traumas of immigration, the horrors of warfare, the institution of cross-cultural negotiation and interchange with the Americans, de la Selva's political sensibilities, and even the complexities of assimilation—its ruptures, differences, and continuities.

In Nicaraguan literature, *Tropical Town* is notable for its pastoral tone and its metaphorical conception, or as de la Selva calls them, his “delicate verses in a tapestry for the brave king,” regarded as simple yet detailed, producing a photographic rendition of his ideals and apprehensions as a native of Nicaragua, and as an exile struggling between two warring cultures and ideologies. The poems' mode of representation gravitates toward realism, with images noted for their clarity and simplicity, unadorned by concepts (Turriza, 2018). Amidst the simplicity and traditional aestheticism of his poems, the politics of radical subversion against the workings of transnationalism and colonialism, and the remarkable emotionalism of yearning for his native Nicaragua, are clearly and dynamically reproduced using a poetic voice that is both “disenfranchised by the alienation of immigration, and authoritarian in its traditional aesthetic and conventional style” (Colon, 2012). Aware of these forces in the poetry of de la Selva, it is important to highlight the role of the poet as a kind of a quixotic visionary and keeper of memory—a man with a revitalized point of view on the ecocritical notion of “place-making,” as shaped by forces such as immigration, exile, and nostalgia. De la Selva's concern for this memory of place, colored by both politics and aesthetics, contains the idea of how places (his beloved Nicaragua as home country, and the United States as host country) stand as respective characters on their own, animating his poetry and rendering

the poems as ecocritical interlacing narratives of alteration, aftermath, chaos, and interconnectedness. By employing the ecocritical lens of literature, de la Selva's *Tropical Town*, the book can stand as a model that poetically and politically discourses the affective interrelation between the idea of place, its memories, and all of its intricacies (Peacock, 2012). David A. Colon (2012), in his article titled "Deep Translation and Subversive Formalism: The Case of Salomon de la Selva's *Tropical Town and Other Poems* (1918), succinctly mentions how the poet masterfully handles and addresses the idea of place-making in his poetry. To quote Colon:

De la Selva describes the poet as both a "treasurer", in essence, a guardian, as well as a visionary, a "master of the tomorrow." The poet saves our hope for posterity, a curious conflation of past and future. And this is what de la Selva's English poetry is. De la Selva preserves inherited forms, and at times antiquated tones and diction, while narrating the depth of his angst as a "Pan-American," a revolutionary, a New World man (15).

It is essential to note that the poetry of de la Selva is grounded both in the past—as attested by his nostalgic and *costrumbrista* images of Nicaragua, and in the present—as confirmed by his political sensibilities of poetically confronting the issues of experiential ruptures and differences brought about by war and immigration. Caught in the middle of these issues, while employing a conventional voice, de la Selva's idea of place-making becomes clearly noticeable, with him strongly conveying how place can be seen as both abysmal and paradisiacal. Recognizing the significance of the forces that foreground the shaping of de la Selva's poetry with special reference to his biography, I argue in this essay that the selected poems from *Tropical Town* can be regarded as poetic articulations of topophilia and topophobia. The former underscores the idea of connection, and the

latter that of disconnection, with the physical world, supporting the notion of place-based referentiality and the projection of concrete spaciousness in poetry (McNee, 2013).

As informed by de la Selva's simple, judicious, pragmatic, and confessional voice, the titular poetics of co-experience and the polarities of politics are lucidly expressed in *Tropical Town*. I pay tribute to the idea of "place-based referentiality" by Stuart Cooke that highlights place and place-making in articulating poetic consciousness: place can offer various imagings and tropes in literature, most especially when it is examined with its attendant elements (Cooke, 2013). The unrestrained spatial continents of literature become the avenue for scrutinizing the concept of emplacement, the notion of place as a distinct conception, as well as the spatial-personal rhetorics of a particular literary work. As one witnesses the poetics of nostalgia as an exile and an outsider—the very contingencies of the notions of topophilia and topophobia—*Tropical Town* provides an excellent space for a discourse on the affective and dis severing relationship to the physical realm with special reference to that of the self or the "I" persona in the selected poems.

Research Questions

The poetic creative process of de la Selva is seen as rendering "place" as a voluble domain, where the dynamism of space highlights the frenzied spatial continents of literature. This renders his selected poems as potent spaces for understanding the idea of place-making, as well as powerful articulations of topophilia and topophobia, and how these tendencies affect the dispositions, ideologies and the realities of emplacement (White, 1996; Indriyanto, 2017). De la Selva affirms his love for the homeland in the collection's first poem titled "My Nicaragua," where he avers that "I come from there, and when I tire of hoping, and despair is heavy over me, my thoughts go so far, beyond that length of lazy street, to where the lonely green trees and the white graves

are" (11); and in "Tropical House," where he declares that we readers will love his home, "his house in Nicaragua so large and queenly looking" (12). On the other hand, his discomfort in, if not aversion, for the host country can be seen in "Deliverance," where he questions himself "What am I doing, here, in New England?" (47); and in "The Secret," where he remembers "In that New England day; and they murmured because I wanted to pack my things and run away" (49). Citing these representative lines from his poetry, one can clearly see de la Selva asserting his topophilic/topophobic attachments, narrating place, ambience, situatedness in the entirety of *Tropical Town*.

To operationally define these ecocritical terms, let me cite Tuan, who defines topophilia as the affective connection between people and their settings or places. This connection varies depending on the concentration and elusiveness of the subject. On the one hand, topophilia can be understood based on the aesthetic, perceptible, and responsive response of the people towards the environment (Tuan, 1980). Moving in accordance with topophilia is the idea of "topophilic affections." This is made manifest in a particular literary work when the text is heavily foregrounded with the complexities of the environment, or the densities of the place in particular (Indriyanto, 2017). These affections also convey the ecological values of life processes, adaptations, and environmental/spatial sensibilities in the light of connecting with place based on the aesthetic, perceptible, and responsive responses towards the environment or to the environment at large (Tuan, 1980). The concept of biophilia is a strong element of topophilia. This is where one witnesses the human world experiencing the immensity of the environment's grip and hold, disclosing it or the place as a revitalizing force.

On the other hand, the phenomenon of topophobia, referencing R. Johnson, is experienced when one associates fear with a particular place. Put simply, it is repulsion and distaste toward a place and its attendant complexities, which can be the result of displacement, trauma, warfare, exile,

and other contingent ruptures. These are manifested in the poetry of de la Selva (Johnson, 2000).

Capitalizing on the critical concepts of topophilia and topophobia, the readings of the poems posited in this essay affirm that one does not merely speak from a gendered and racialized position (as shown by the various lenses of literary criticism), but also from an ecologically and spatially situated body and perspective. Disposition is a result of the workings of situatedness, emplacement, and referentiality—terms that encompass the symbiotic relationship between the environment and the emplaced subject as reflected in the poetry of Salomon de la Selva. In this essay, I posit a topophilic and topophobic imaging of place and environment in *Tropical Town* as foremost characters, as well as interwoven chronicles imbued with various foregrounding affecting and effecting the situatedness and placements of de la Selva in his poems. From the perspective of the rhetorics of place, the textuality of the environment and place is to be underscored. Taking my cue from the book *“Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind,”* I deploy Karl Kroeber’s concept of an environment that is “proto-ecological” to support the aim of this essay, since the natural environment in the poems of de la Selva is seen to be taking on a life of its own, as it is situated outside one’s unusual and idiosyncratic personal awareness and essence (Kroeber, 1994). Though the environment is foregrounded in the poems, this study conceives places as dynamic entities, opposing their static conceptions and imagings. The concept of place is presented as a discursive category shaped by the ideologies of both connectivity and detachment. This essay attempts to answer these questions:

- ✦ What are the tropes of topophilic and topophobic place-making that can be deduced from the selected poems of Salomon de la Selva in *Tropical Town and Other Poems*?

as revealed by their metaphors, images, symbolism, and nuances?

- How does de la Selva disclose his idea of place-making as dynamically interweaving narratives and images of relation, disharmony, and disconnectedness in *Tropical Town*?

I claim that the poems of de la Selva in *Tropical Town* are a form of validation of the so-called “constitutive existence of writing,” and the very “production of discourses and its connection with places” (Dobrin and Weisser, 2001). I highlight the pronouncements of spatial attachments and pieces of wisdom in the selected poems of de la Selva that underscore the significance of place as a site that shapes the mindset and disposition of the subject in the poems.

Very notable are the poems in the sections titled “My Nicaragua” and “In New England and Other Lyrics,” where one can see how place is rendered as an essential element that discursively affects the existence and composition of writing. The poems speak about the physical environment and the constructed environment as informed by the poet’s experiences of diaspora, exile, and warfare (Dobrin and Weisser, 2001). A clear instance of de la Selva’s projection of place-making is strongly conveyed in the first poem of the collection titled “Tropical Town.” It is notable in this poem de la Selva’s inclination toward the realism, as he brings his readers to a specific place, complemented with his lucid reflections on the very memories of the place, “elevating his vantage one step beyond image and testimony” (Colon, 2012). In “Tropical Town,” the aesthetic and political sensibilities of de la Selva intertwine in interesting and surprising ways. The reader witnesses a clear demonstration, in the opening couplet and in middle octet of the poem, how de la Selva creates landscape in his poem. The poem is noteworthy for its depiction of bleakness:

Blue, pink and yellow and, afar,
The cemetery, where the green trees are.

Sometimes you see a hungry dog pass by,
And there are always buzzards in the sky,
Sometimes you hear the big cathedral bell,
A blind man rings it; and sometimes you hear
A rumbling ox-cart that brings wools to sell.
Else nothing ever breaks the ancient spell
That holds the town asleep, save, once a year,
The Easter festival (11).

In the opening couplet, we see a cemetery in the tropical colors blue, pink, and yellow. We do not see a persona or any other human subject, just a clear and austere dreary landscape. In the octet, the word “sometimes” imbues the poem with a light tone, while the use of the pronoun “you” becomes a clear indicator of a subject, the onlooker who “begins to take it all in and issue judgment on the importance of details” (Colon, 2012). The middle stanza of the poem vividly appeals to this “you,” which give us the impression that the landscape of “Tropical Town” is enveloped by barrenness and desolation. The images of the poem speak of bleakness; the place is stifling and enervating, highlighted by the image of a cemetery. The speaker of the poem declares that he comes from there, “tired of hoping and thoughts heavy over him thoughts going far beyond that length of lazy street” (11). This is a remarkably charged expression, since it conveys de la Selva’s attempt to romanticize the memory of his place, a life actively engaged in trying to make sense of the world, and in seeking a place that can potentially rejuvenate his existence as a being caught between the forces of continuity and discontinuity. The detailed imaging of the town in this poem declares the speaker’s vicarious but earnest experience of the place. The tophiliac attachment of the speaker is further affirmed in the declaration “I come from there” (11). The heartfelt expression of his despair and exhaustion is a metaphysical projection of the location and

disposition of the speaker. This location and disposition of de la Selva in “Tropical Town” can be used as a means of probing the exilic perspective of the poet.

The exilic mind has a strong desire to reconstruct Leon, Nicaragua. As his “thoughts go far beyond that length of lazy street” (11), it becomes essential to note that Leon will always be the very emblem of stimulation and encouragement for his life at its roughest times. Aware of his origins, the persona also finds his way back to his beloved roots in Leon; he always romantically returns to Nicaragua in times of suffering and delight. Such constitutes his topophilic attachment to Nicaragua—a place of utmost familiarity and the gathering of joyful and convivial thoughts.

The cemetery is a vital image in this poem. Underscoring the implications of the native ground “heavily invested” with souls, the poem also espouses a strong discoursing of the poetics of co-experience, and the romanticizing of the homeland which is brought about by his being an outsider troubled by exile and displacement. The topophilia in this poem also embraces the concept of the “ecosphere,” as it emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between de la Selva and his memory of and rootedness in Leon, Nicaragua—the vey locale that animates the poem “Tropical Town.” Colon (2012) further substantiates the meaningful employment of the image of the cemetery in the poem:

The cemetery is the place of final rest, but, as a monument, quite a part of the reality of the living—especially in Latin American cultures—and thus it signifies de la Selva’s idealization of a repose: a kind of a sanctuary from experience. Ground is a potent image in de la Selva’s poems; it often feels like a boundary as much as it does a place (18).

The poetics of co-experience operates in accordance with that of nostalgia and a high regard for the homeland. The titular poem “Tropical Town” shows how disposition is not simply configured by metaphysical disposition, but also by environmental and geographical positioning that remarkably enhances one’s physical and metaphorical evocative experience of the place.

The Human-Nature Bond: Imaging the Perfection of Place in Nicaragua

One of the topophilic themes that the poems of de la Selva underscore is the notion of how place is inclusive—it includes the complexity of the physical environment/place as constituting the very bond between the human and non-human realms. The interconnectedness between the two creates a bond which becomes the basis of the idea of place-making (Mishra, 2016). This concept of place-making is accentuated by the idea of “perfect ecology,” creating a picture in which one can see the very connection between its living and the non-living elements. Expanding on these precepts, the poems “Tropical House,” “Tropical Park,” and “Tropical Morning” reveal a strong sense of place-making, as well as the connection of the subject with his environment, supporting the assertion that in place-making, writing is deemed to be “constitutive” (Dobrin and Weisser 2). The picturesque description of the poet’s abode in “Tropical House” is the affirmation of the topophilic project of poetically highlighting the so-called “cognitive biophilia” (Buell, 1995). Such undertones of biophilia are the very reason why the poet proudly declares “When the winter comes, I will take you to Nicaragua, You will love it there! You will love my home, my house in Nicaragua.” The innate tendency, revealed by the kind of “privacy” that the speaker shares with nature or his environment, projects the interactive and interpersonal form of spatial thought and consciousness. Love and connectedness with one’s environment serve as the basis of this “biophilia.”

A striking offshoot of this love and interrelationship with the place is the Edenic imaging of Nicaragua, where the poet makes us see “poppies, like a little army, row on row and the jasmine bushes that are so white and light and so perfect and so frail. The bath is in the garden, like a sort of pool, with walls of honey-suckle and orchids all around” (12).

In consonance with what Gregory Bateson said in *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity* (2007), this consciousness of place, together with its attendant relational principles, entails the act of sensing and sensing conformations in the various provinces of the domain (2)—in particular, Leon, Nicaragua. The “immersed immensity” that the landscape of the poem divulges serves as the spatial analogy of the man and the place where he is emplaced, and establishes the common ground on the harnessing of vitality and energy. The abundance that the speaker obtains from his relation with the environment affirms the idea of nature in general as providing the very grounds for the formation of topophilia, as is illustrated by his remarks on metaphorical and relational prosperity, and of being sanctified and privileged. This forms the basis of the so-called “ecology of mutualism” that the speaker wants to share with others through the poem. This interactive, detailed, and figurative consciousness is the orientation that serves as the foundations of the living world, as well as the groundwork for framing the topophilic dynamism of place-making. Such cognizance and interface are the topophilic factors that will urge the speaker to declare the beauty of Nicaragua, as validated by the lines from the poem:

But when the moon is up, in Nicaragua,
The moon of Nicaragua and the million stars,
It's the human heart that sings, and the heart of Nicaragua
To the pleading, plaintive music of guitars (13).

It becomes essential to note that the communal frontiers being depicted by de la Selva serve as the location of the very revelation of the spatial thought of mutual properties. This spatial-ecological thought is the validation of the experience of the “immensity” of “nature’s embrace”—a projection of the image of the relational consciousness gracefully flowing between the environment or place and humans, as the stewards of creation (Wheeler, 2006). This strong predilection towards the memory of a place, Nicaragua in particular, is also the impulse that will make de la Selva romanticize his place, rendering it better than the real world (Colon, 2012). As a source of wealth and a kind of armament for the poet, the pictorial description in the poem “Tropical Park” espouses an image of nature that is both regenerative and edifying—one that is highly idealized to the extent that its perfection becomes magical in nature. The poem romanticizes the titular tropical park as the speaker lucidly describes it:

The paths are made of sand so fine
That they are always smooth and neat;
Sunlight and moonlight make them shine,
And so one’s feet.

Seem ever to tread on magic ground
That glistens and whispers curiously,
For sand, when you tread it, has the sound
Of the sea (14).

The topophilic undertones in this poem are made manifest by the act of rendering the place as a conjured and idealized place. As an ideal space, wisdom becomes emplaced right beneath one’s feet. As de la Selva describes it, the ground becomes animated by magic, which by connotation is spectacularly autonomous and overwhelming. In this poem, the ground is portrayed as the boundary between reality and fantasy (Colon, 2012). As

a topophilic site, the titular tropical park becomes, like “Tropical Town,” a kind of substitute for that nostalgic longing for the poet’s native heritage. The locale in this poem is paradoxically rendered vivacious and dynamic by the poet’s aspiration for tranquility in his native land. In the merging of de la Selva’s voice and disposition in the poems “Tropical Town” and “Tropical Park,” the theme of topophilia emerges, notably blending with the environment, and echoing the idea of repose or perfect cessation. The topophilic tendency allows the poetic enterprise of de la Selva to search for the impeccable disposition and the picture-perfect ground for reflection (Colon, 2012). The poem “Tropical Morning” also renders this notion of biophilia, by projecting an actual photographic depiction of “Indian girls from the river with flowers in their hair,” “fresh eggs in wicker boxes,” “skins of mountain cats and foxes caught in traps at home,” and “faithful men adoring virgins passing by stately and gracefully” (15-16). One can also notice that the topophilia is specified, and is made possible by his high regard for the quotidian affairs transpiring in Leon, Nicaragua—a vibrant illustration of how de la Selva merges the romantic and the realist points of view, while capitalizing on a language that is plain, classical, and conventional.

The topophilic foregrounding of the poems, moving in accordance with the persona’s perception and idealized descriptions of his place and environment, professes the spatial foundation of the symbiotic relationship between man and his environment, and between “space” and “place.” The aforementioned foregrounding can also powerfully convey the theme of reclusion, like in the poem “Guitar Song with Variations.” De la Selva, who was regarded as “one of the most politically aware poets of his time,” renders the theme of nostalgia by romanticizing of his homeland. In the poem, Nicaragua is the topophilic energy that animates his song with the natural elements, such as the stars, the moon, and the sea. The speaker’s song chronicles the “intimate things of wonder,” the “waves that come and

go,” and the “winds that kiss and fly with a fleeting, pleading something” (17). Nicaragua is the amazing site of inspiration that unleashes his utmost potentialities as a poet. The first two stanzas of this poem are romantically and nostalgically charged:

Beneath the stars, beneath the moon,
Over the sands, beside the sea,
One time, in Nicaragua,
I was a poet.

I and my guitar were always
Talking to each other,
Like lover and beloved,
Like child and mother (17).

“Guitar Song” projects the image of the persona seeking solace and reclusion in his beloved Nicaragua, which is a symbol of topophilia in the poem. The declaration of his plangent melancholy is triggered by his belligerent relationship with the United States, a country that participated in the tempestuous mid-nineteenth century civil wars of Latin America. The emotive conception that can be deduced from the speaker’s disposition, as reflected in the first line of the poem, is perhaps an instance of living the ruptured life of difference, exile, and cosmopolitanism. With the theme of nostalgia being expressed also in this poem, Nicaragua once again serves as the poetic impulse—the topophilic muse that can cure the unexpected malaise triggered by a life of borrowed times and cultures. The simple yet powerful handling of the theme of melancholy should not only be viewed as an endeavor of “romanticizing” per se, but also as the poetic communication of an identity that is marginalized, as well as the exposure of the exploitations of American expansionism. In a sense, the poems act as a kind of “interdict between languages, territories, cultures, and aesthetic forms” (Padilla, 2019).

Deploying topophilic undertones, the aforementioned poems provide a sort of “counter” to the tendencies and coercions brought about by the issues inherent in hegemonic discourses: the binary of center and margin, the problems of representation, and the indefatigable quest for independence and the legitimacy of peripheral identities.

Tropical Town and the Poetic Dictums of Relatedness

Barry Commoner, in his bestselling book *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (1972), avers the principle of interconnectivity in every aspect, thing, and endeavor. Topophilic attachments underscore the importance of place as an essential element, that can discursively affect the existence and composition of writing, as well as that of the subject. The physical and constructed environments, and their topophilic attachments are always centered on the place or site that powerfully shapes the subject. (Dobrin and Weisser, 2001). The poems “Tropical Life” and “Tropical Childhood” have sites that convey relatedness, for de la Selva, as the speaker, strongly establishes an unbreakable affinity with place that is so potent in summoning “a memory of herds of sun pasturing quietly through his days” (29), chronicling the wonderful garden and spectacle of his childhood, and capable of making him “look behind at the vanishing years and before the approaching tide” (31). The poem “Tropical Life” reminds de la Selva of the familiarity of the home ground that resembles the face of his father, and the sun resembling that of a golden flock that browses until the day is done (29). The light emitted by this place of familiarity can sometimes be so heavy and slow moving, but one that can also give the promise of continuity and the very spur of continuity. The connection is made manifest by this act of remembrance of his father’s life, and how the place itself has been able to augment or even distress this life, which culminates in death. Place here has the powerful capacity to make the speaker recall that:

The light is heavy, and moves so slow,
And sometimes huddles in a heap
And seems to lift large heads and go
To thoughtful sleep.

I wonder if he ever saw the light
This way. He must have thought strange things
(And never told them, that I might),
So fast there clings

To my remembrance of his ways
A memory of herds of sun
Pasturing quietly through his days
Until life was done (29).

Another strong instance of relatedness associated with the concept of place is conveyed in the poem "Tropical Childhood." The poem displays the strong dichotomy of the de la Selva who is caught in the past, particularly his childhood self, and the de la Selva of the present, where he sees himself as a "turmoil of mysteries" and "life as a whirlwind" (31). With a photographic rendition of his childhood days vis-à-vis the concomitant challenges of these "present" days, de la Selva is able to capture once again how place becomes an essential force that makes the poet oscillate between the present and the past. Nicaragua's beauty is a kind of beacon that guides the eyes to see the processes of place-making and place-consciousness. It is important, therefore, to note that the poems of de la Selva do not only render place as a site of nostalgia, but also as a beacon for powerful reminiscences. A noteworthy offshoot of this careful handling of the theme of place in his poetry is the dualistic projection of the idea of symbiosis. It is essential to remember that place in his poems is not only confined to the romantic trend and perspective; it also includes the symbiotic view of man and his environment.

“A Song for Wall Street” typifies how de la Selva disregards the “greenish leprosy” of the dirty dollar (27) and its negative effects, and celebrates, instead, the sacredness of Nicaragua as a kind of banquet that wonderfully sustains the people. “What can you buy for a penny there?” (27), the speaker’s question in the second line of the poem, becomes the very revelation of the sanctified and fertile foregrounding of the environment/place. For the poet, it is a site of nourishment, a spiritual haven, a place of steadfast fellowship, and a locale that can politically and economically sustain itself, as supported by the poem’s images of a “long and deep golden mine” and a “forest growing high” (27). The beauty and richness of the place compel the poetic voice of de la Selva to isolate it from external forces that can destroy the paradisiacal life transpiring in Nicaragua, as supported by the last stanza of the poem:

But for your dollar, your dirty dollar,
Your greenish leprosy,
It’s only hatred you shall get
From all my folks and me;
So keep your dollar where it belongs
And let us be! (27)

One can clearly hear the emotive and powerful voice of de la Selva in this poem—his pride in his capacity to establish meaningful connections with Nicaragua and its specific constitutive components, such as nature’s fruits, the prayer of the priest, golden mine, growing forest, the clay bird, and even the cemetery in the poems “Tropical Town” and “Tropical Life.” In recognizing the resilient images of place-making in “Tropical Life,” “Tropical Childhood,” and “A Song for Wall Street,” the poems become indicative of the concept of the so-called “oikopoetics” or “oikopoetical wisdom.” Place, from the perspective of ecology, is not only viewed as a place per se, but also as an “oikos,” where humans, culture, and nature are emplaced in an

“integrated relationship” (Selvamony, 2001). The high regard for the “oikos” in the aforementioned poems reveals the utmost importance of place-making in de la Selva’s poetry, for we hear the suggestion that one must always return to the heart of that fire, what de la Selva affectively calls in his poems as “My Nicaragua”—the topophilic attachment that serves the light within, one that gives warmth and life. These are the reasons why Javier Padilla, in “Between Politics and Exoticism: Towards a Reevaluation of Tropical Town and Other Poems” (2012) declares that *Tropical Town* is a kind of landmark document in the Nicaraguan literature. It is in Padilla’s declaration where one can fully understand the resilient topophilic attachment of the brave de la Selva in *Tropical Town*, as the poet underscores his life ruptured by xenophobia and neo-colonialism. To quote Padilla:

Tropical Town is a real rarity in Nicaraguan literature, and even more so in American literature. It is the product of an extremely young and audacious poet who writes in an adoptive language, in a labored nineteenth-century style, while living in racist and xenophobic United States and remembering his battered Nicaragua under the neo-colonialist boot. *Tropical Town* is a book written between two lands and in the middle of two opposing language (51).

Padilla’s assessment can also be considered a good starting point to flesh out how de la Selva vividly projects the topophobia he has experienced as immortalized in the poems of *Tropical Town*.

De la Selva’s Topophobia: On Colonialism and Displacement

Topophobia is experienced when one associates fear with a particular place. It is the very aversion toward a place and its consequent complexities

(Johnson, 2000). In the literary criticism of place, a fundamental element of the discursive molding of place, locations, and nature is the trope of catastrophe fomented by the portrayal of place as a powerful being, the land lucidly painted as wrecked and placed under nature's power and unpredictability. Associated with this topophobic outlook are the experiences of rupture from an exilic perspective: breaches triggered by the diaspora, cosmopolitanism, and the revulsions of racism and xenophobia—forces that make de la Selva always return to the past, seeking refuge in the memory of a specific place, in the memory of his beloved Nicaragua.

The depiction of imbalance in the poem "Tropical Rain" is an assertion of the persistent presence and insistence of a place regarded as powerful and destructive that undermines the subject's topophilic ideologies. In this poem, we see de la Selva personifying the drenching rain of the Nicaraguan winter as a witch, who "keeps all the world in her bag and blows the heavens away" (24). A clear instance of this revulsion towards place, the last lines of the poem reveal the place and nature's sagacious, dramatic, and communicative power, as a bearer of destruction and as the cause resignation of the people, disclosing its apocalyptic powers and rendering the image of a place beyond rescue, making the speaker call to "Sweet Jesus" to "pity the birds, roses and him" (24). The very mood of this poem is said to be "born out of crisis" (Thompson 13), emanating from the poem's topophobic rendering of the beloved place. With the expressive character of nature and how it affects the place in this poem, the topophobic outlook is regarded as "tragic," in the sense that the emotive conception of the poem is grounded on a drastically dualistic perspective—that of a catastrophic and deterministic point of view—presenting the idea of "victimage," with man as the victim of the environment's dramatic and expressive character. To quote the lines from the poem:

And the streets swollen like rivers, and the wet
 earth's smell,
And all the ants with sudden wings filling the
 heart with wonder,
And, afar, the tempest vanishing with a stifled
 Thunder
In a glare of lurid radiance from the gaping
 mouth of Hell! (24)

The poem shows how de la Selva painstakingly paints the aftermath of the rampaging storm. The topophobia is clearly made manifest, for the poet captures the storm and the damage it has inflicted on the place from a tenebrous vantage point, transmuting the vitality of place into the experience of the gothic and the appalling. The catastrophic foregrounding projects the histrionic workings of cosmic power—an unfathomable force, as attested by the speaker in the poem when he calls to “Sweet Jesus.” The place makes its subject realize its sacredness, which is also paradoxically conceived as the impetus for environmental/spatial doom that emanates from the gaping mouth of Hell.

In de la Selva's poetry, ruination is another manifestation of topophobia. The poems “Body and Soul” and “My Nicaragua” intensely capture how a place is destroyed, and how it triggers topophobia. De la Selva notably embodies this idea when he expects to “behold the self,” “stretch the triumphal path,” and “test the might” of the dolorous Nicaragua. The molding of nature by culture is a complex undertaking, since it must be linked to a broader social context. In the case of de la Selva, this is none other than the remembrance of his beloved Nicaragua under the light of the neo-colonialist boot (Padilla 51). This neo-colonialist force is the one that summons the appalling in the poems “Body and Soul” and “My Nicaragua.”

The former naturalistically paints for the reader a picture of the “coloured roofs as sorry captured wings” and “churches as brown beetle

carcasses,” where everything is enveloped by solid loneliness, lust, despair, hunger, grief, and death. The latter, in a very detailed manner, chronicles the things that are ugly and frail in Nicaragua and labelled by the poet as “dreary commonplace.” In attempting to specify this dreariness, he paints in the poem images of “shreds and trash of things” and “broken piles of masonry outworn” (36). His topophobia is also made apparent by his disdain of the colonial influences of Germany, England, and France, and most importantly of America, as typified by New York, the nation that has made de la Selva passionately declare “That never was my country!” (37). Colonialism is a force that counters the topophilic project of de la Selva’s poetry. In the biography and poetry of de la Selva, this colonial force is regarded as the threshold that ushers in the loss of vitality, destruction, and Nicaragua becoming a kind of a betrayed Eden (Buell, 1995). The subversiveness in his poetry is the result of the civilizing hubris of the colonial project and discourse. The romanticizing tendency of de la Selva’s speaker is a noteworthy revelation of the poet’s topophilic attachment and yearning for the idealized past, where Nicaragua and its peoples are formed “oikopoetically” —the very ground where humans, culture, and nature are emplaced in a complex relationship (Selvamony, 2001).

In the foreground of his poems, the agenda of colonialism moves in accordance with the concept of eco or spatial injustice. Coming from the point of view of this environmental degradation, it is essential to note that the notions of spatial balance and harmony are rendered as upset and interrogated from a constructionist perspective. The common trope that one can see in these two poems is the image of the very destruction of place, or the narratives of “grand environmental endism” (Bristow & Moore, 2013), that de la Selva is radically subverting, as he invokes such ideas of “counter-politics resisting colonial transnationalism” (Colon, 2012). However, it is also important to note that the topophobia brought by the colonialist agenda

of the United States in Nicaragua is the same force that gives rise to his topophilic attachment to his beloved Leon, Nicaragua. De la Selva heartily expresses this in his promise to his homeland in the poem "Body and Soul":

You shall behold your self and test your might,
And through this sad and barren laziness
Shall stretch my passion, your triumphal path,
And you shall weep to know my tenderness (34).

Remembered and Redefined Landscapes

In the poems "Deliverance" and "The Secret," the reader can vividly see de la Selva emplaced in the northeastern region of the United State, significant instances of displacement and exile that de la Selva has captured. The poem "Deliverance," despite its brevity, captures the force of de la Selva's antipathy toward the new locale. The rhetorical statement of the speaker is a clear testament of how topophobia essentially animates the theme of the poem. To quote the poem in full:

What am I doing, here, in New England?
All day long, till the end of the purple afternoon,
Watching to see, over the hills of New England,
The rising of the universal moon (47).

This short poem raises many topophobic concerns on the part of de la Selva. In a new place continentally distant from Nicaragua, the experience affirms that he can never fully construct an unified monolithic self. As he watches all day long the affairs in New England, one can witness in de la Selva an organizing or even rupturing of possible scripts or selves that shift in accordance with the situation.

De la Selva validates this capacity for reconfiguration in the poem “Confidences,” where he addresses, in an apostrophe, the concerns of adapting and assimilating to a new culture through a kind of struggle brought by dynamic management. Identity is a production which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within and not outside representation (Hall 392). And this is an instance of rupture and difference that the poem “Deliverance” significantly captures. On the part of de la Selva, this involves imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, making the poet veer away from the host place. To quote from the poem:

Dance, all you little children,
And I will play with you!
I am afraid of witches
Also; I burn them too... (50)

The revulsion toward the exilic experience is evident as well in the poem “The Secret,” where the poet declares that in the “lower Berkshires, the experience was most like witchery” (49). The subject finds it difficult to adjust to the quotidian affairs of the New England town, making him incur the anger of a good folk in the locale. The topophobia is once again highlighted, for the heart and mind are romantically associated with Nicaragua, as substantiated for us by the last line of the poem, where the persona “wanted to pack my things and run away” (49). The emplacement of de la Selva in these three poems, as well as his revulsions and the longing for the homeland, shows the topophobic portrayal of cultures in utter confusion and outright collision—one that emphasizes institutions, categories, and power plays, by means of which the relational dynamics and the people are structured, synchronized, and regulated. It shows how the very landscape in the poems of de la Selva is comprised of and grounded on current identity politics, in which culture

becomes an element that is constantly being remembered, renegotiated, revised, and redefined.

It can also be viewed as the instinctive, the natural, and the primordial affecting the ways in which de la Selva remembers the past, lives with his present, and build his future. We underscore here the fact that the topophobic undertones of the poem are brought about by the experiences of disenfranchisement and the alienation of immigration (Colon, 2012). This is de la Selva living a life that is spirited and governmental. The result of this conflicted life is seen in his commentaries on the glocal state of affairs and his cognizance of the confluence of the past and the present—the kind of positioning and emplacement that pervades the poems of *Tropical Town*. Aware of how the redefining of landscapes also becomes the central trope in “*Tropical Town*” in the poem “Finally,” we see de la Selva acquiring the suppleness of living in a borrowed time and culture. It implies that de la Selva is situated within the vectors of rupture and difference, and continuity and similarity. The assimilation is made manifest as the speaker says, “finally,” after months of being shy and silent:

An autumn and a winter of looking at each
Other
With a suspecting eye,
It is good to know at least that I have found you,
New England, little mother!
Ah, good to put my arms around you,
To clasp you fast and hold you fast,
Suspicion done away, and shyness past (51).

Though the speaker has remarkably adapted to his changing cultural environs, the issues of living with the politics of multiculturalism, and the redefinition of cosmopolitanism that is complemented by the actualization of an exilic perspective, can never be disregarded in *Tropical Town*. The

topophobic outlook is formed because of the retention of collective memory, the regard for ancestral Nicaragua as the true or ideal home and place of final return, the commitment to the maintenance or restoration of safety and prosperity in the homeland, and the strong linkage or vicarious relations to the homeland forming in an ethno-communal consciousness.

Distances and Historical-Cultural Memory

One of the factors that mold the poetry of de la Selva is his political awareness that has been made possible by Nicaragua's belligerent relationship with the United States, and its lengthy, rancorous history. This includes the unsettled times of the mid-nineteenth century, when emigrant U.S. Southerners participated and fought as mercenaries in the Latin American Civil Wars, where they sought to establish plantation colonies to be tilled by the slaves from Nicaragua. This is the event that de la Selva captures in the poem "The Haunted House of Leon (Burned by American Filibusters 1860)." The year is a significant detail to be underscored in this poem, since it was the year that the infamous William Walker, an outlaw from Tennessee and leader of the rebel forces notorious for dominating Nicaragua four years earlier, was executed (Colon 19). The topophobic outlook of de la Selva in this poem is once again conveyed by the cessation of the very emblem of American imperialism by firing squad. De la Selva paints a dismal landscape in this poem:

Shattered walls
 The rain has eaten,
The earthquakes shaken,
 The swift storms beaten—

No one owns them,
 No one would care

To mend them and roof them
And live there

They say that house
Was burned down
By the Yankee filibusters
When they sacked the town:

Sons of the Devil
Who drank to the Devil
All one night, and burned the house
After the revel (25).

With the execution of Walker looming in the foreground, de la Selva immortalizes such a nefarious historical event, while acclaiming at the same time the victims of Walker's carnage. The topophobia remarkably stems from Walker's conquest of Nicaragua. The repulsion toward the place is clearly highlighted, since the place is depicted as ramshackle, bygone, and a distant occurrence from the past. The turbulent historical-cultural memory is the residual force that makes de la Selva condemn the place and the workings of American imperialism emblematically. The place is empty and abandoned, remarkably different from the landscapes of the poems "Tropical Town" and "Tropical Park." Amidst the lingering effects of colonization, the idea of co-experience still persists, as de la Selva lauds the "Faithful wives" and "la Juanita" (26), who were forcibly violated on the sacred grounds of the Nicaraguan soil. Aware that "no one owns them and no one would care to mend them and roof them," the speaker plans to marry a "Yankee girl" and dare to rebuild the ruins left by the repercussions of Walker's historic execution. The predicament arising because of this memory, particularly the memory of imperialism, is the very concern that makes de la Selva poetic positioning conflicted and ambivalent—one that is considered as a good

ground for declaring that his poems are the products of political as well as cultural asymmetries (Padilla, 2019).

Conclusion

With de la Selva being regarded as one of the most politically aware poets of his time, the theme of nostalgia and the romanticizing of the homeland, and the capturing of current identity politics and spaces, becomes highly notable in his poetry. Nicaragua is the topophilic energy that animates de la Selva's articulations—the very site that makes possible how his poems become powerful chroniclers of topophilia (affective connections toward a place) and topophobia (revulsions toward a place). Grounded on the idea of place-making, the poems in *Tropical Town* are resilient poetic articulations and tropes of how place is essentially a beacon of life, as attested by de la Selva's "biophilia" in rendering place as a site of primordial anchorage and reclusion, memory and rootedness, and how dispositions are rendered as offshoots of metaphysical and geographical positioning yielding familiarity with the home ground from the vantage point of the "oikos." As a counteracting force to these affections as de la Selva straddles conflicting cultures and lifetimes in his poems—specifically that of living in the United States teeming with racism and xenophobia—the topophobic outlook is also poetically rendered as evinced by how the persona has experienced ruptures that lead to the formation of an exilic perspective brought about by the breaches of the diaspora, cosmopolitanism, racial intolerance, and even neo-colonialism, as well as Nicaragua's belligerent relationship with the American empire. De la Selva also essentially depicts how the exilic self experiences the predicaments of utter confusion and outright collision as a result of residing in the geography of altering identities and realities.

Aware of these forces in the poetry of de la Selva, it becomes notable to highlight that the persona in *Tropical Town and Other Poems* is a kind of

quixotic visionary and memory keeper—a man with a revitalized point of view regarding the ecocritical notion of “place-making” as shaped by forces such as immigration, exile, and nostalgia. De la Selva’s concern for this memory of place, colored by both politics and aesthetics, significantly moves in accordance with the idea of how places, his beloved Nicaragua (as home country) and the detested United States (as host country) in particular, stand as respective characters on their own, animating his poetry with vigor, as he weaves into a tapestry the braided narratives of alterity, aftermath, chaos, and interconnectedness, creating a poetics of co-experiences and divergences.

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SAMPULONG GURAMOY

Merlie M. Alunan

Keynote Address, TABOAN 2019
Pili, Camarines Sur

In the first one hundred years of our very young Republic, the Filipino youth were educated in English. They learned how to read in English. Literatures in the mother languages were considered nonexistent, were just ignored, or dismissed as backward or irrelevant. This was how I was educated.

I entered the Philippine educational system 69 years ago. In 2008, the year I retired from teaching, I still met students who believed that literature was always in English. Some of them thought that the Bisayâ have no respectable literature of their own, that fine ideas and elegant language are only achievable in English. This must be because Philippine literatures in English and Filipino were canonized for classroom purposes. There never was a place for the Cebuano *balak* and *sugilanon*, the Waray *siday* and *susumaton*, and the Ilonggo *binalaybay* and *sugidanon* in the traditional curriculum.

In the first one hundred years of our young republic, the mechanisms of the State, media and the educational system were put to work to push the agenda of the national language. Thus when our children entered their classrooms, they had to leave their mother tongues outside the door. Like the proverbial *sanilas* or *tsinelas* that one leaves outside when one enters a house. This was how we were trained to look down on our mother languages. This was also how we were inured to look down on ourselves, unworthy speakers of unworthy mother tongues.

Despite all these, however, our mother languages endure. One of the most obvious effects of our language politics is the suffocation of new-born writing in the mother tongue at the turn of the 20th century. Our generation has been working hard to bring back to life writing in the mother tongues. Among our early scholars to call attention to writing in the regions was Dr. Lilia Realubit who worked on Bicol Literature. Resil Mojares and Erlinda Alburo held workshops at the University of San Carlos in Cebu. Leoncio Deriada's workshops in Panay reinvigorated Hiligaynon, Kinaray-a, and Aklanon writing. In the 1990s, UP Tacloban College started workshops in Waray country. By this time, the NCCA had become aware that beyond the skylines of Manila, larger language communities were breaking out of their silence. It was only then that policies and facilities were put in place to assist the growth and development of Philippine literature in the various languages of the Archipelago.

Twenty years ago in Naga City, I had an informal discussion with some young writer friends about the notion of a southern consciousness. We did not really know what comprises that consciousness, or whether it does exist, or could be cajoled into being. The conversation was an attempt to use words to define the circumstances of those writing outside Manila. Those circumstances would include: writing from the edges of the national life; living close to the raw life of a community; being among the mute, the wordless, and the silenced; writing in the subsidiary medium of a mother tongue with its sparse and fragmentary traditions. Would these factors distinguish their work from those that come from more urban centers? Or would it bury them forever in obscurity and irrelevance? We talked of a possible "literary geography," a southern literary belt covering the Visayas and Mindanao. "Include Bicol in this literary geography," someone remarked. Bicol, has always looked southwards rather than north. So be it. Because creative consciousness needs no permission to share.

Not long after this conversation, Ateneo de Naga University Press came into being, and there was Kristian Sendon Cordero calling for manuscripts from the writers of Bicol, the Visayas, and Mindanao. Is this the imagined southern literary geography we were talking about? What seemed like a vainglorious idea in that exploratory conversation might be evolving at last—a natural growth of the times.

It is thirty-three years since Martial Law ended. Survivors of those dark years are still alive today to bear witness to its horrors. Yet the mechanisms of revision are already hard at work to give a new sheen to erstwhile tyrants and thieves. There is a mad scramble to restore to power those that a generation of Filipinos have fought to remove. We have our own monsters to deal with in the present dispensation. What can the poet and the storyteller do to stop this young republic from tottering under its burdens? If there is a southern consciousness, what wisdom can it share to hold the Archipelago against the pressure threatening it from within and without?

The young John Bengan writes the story “Manny Pacquiao Talks to a Butterfly in California.” It is about a son’s dilemma: how to deal with a scandalous old woman, his mother, who wants to relive her youth with her young DI friends. Bengan is writing fiction, not biography. His best invention in this story is his fearless claim to *Filipino English*, the usage of which has given us such a huge postcolonial inferiority complex. In this story, Bengan asserts the legitimacy of this language as a creative medium. Manny’s speech to the butterfly is a virtuoso performance, delivered with confidence and authentic sincerity. Bengan shows how English may be decolonized and owned as a native idiom.

I look to Mama for da last time. She quiet and waiting. I move near to her and try take her arm.

But she speak. “Let me go, anak. Lib Mama alone.”

*Now it sweep to me like a little typhoon in my heart.
Da time when I leave Mama alone. I go to Manila to work, jas
fourteen years of age, leaving Mama and my braders in Gen
San. Da time when I enter boxing eben if she don't want. Da
time she wait in da house por news of my fight. Da time she
pray novena por me to win or jas to live anader day. She pray
until her eyes are tired of tears and hermouath dry of whisper.
Butterfly, it hit me like a rapid hook in da ear, Mama olwislet
me go.*

*So I leave her der wid her dance partner. My body
light and heavy both in one time, jas when I lose a beautiful
fight.*

Mohammad Nassefh Macla's nonfiction, "Visayas in Mindanao," details the experiences of his Lumad family displaced from their ancestral domain. He quotes Abdel Tillah: "In Section 84 of Commonwealth Act No. 141 of 1936, all Moro ancestral lands were declared public lands. Because of this...the ancestral lands of the Moros and the Lumads were taken away from them. A Moro can only own up to 24 hectares and Filipino corporations can own up to 1,024 hectares. Moro writers call this 'legalized land grabbing.'"^{1*}

Mohammad probes the story of Ina Buyag, an aging woman, whose strength and vitality he admires. He discovers how she and her family survived the Ilaga Gang, a band of bandits set up by Marcos at the peak of Martial Law to sow terror among the Moros. Ina Buyag's family abandoned their lands for fear of the Ilonggos: *Kilala na ang Ilaga sa pamamaslang ng marahas sa Morong sibilyan. Pinagpupugot ang ulo ng mga biktima. Pinagtatapyas ang tenga't utong. At nilalagyan ng krus ang mga napatay na mga Moro, bilang tanda ng kanilang ipinaglalabang Kristyanismo.*

1 * Abdel Tillah. *Kris of Justice: The Story of the Greatest Race of Warriors the Modern World Never Knew*, pp. 96-97).

He hears about the butchery that is part of tribal history: *Isang araw, pinagdadampot ng mga Ilaga ang mga buntis sa isang komunidad. Pinalinya. Ginapos hanggang di makagalaw. Gamit ang itak, binubuksan ng mga ito ang tiyan ng ina't kinukuha ang sanggol... Tinanong ko kung may panggagahasa bang nangyayari.*

Marcos stopped the operations of the Ilaga Gang when Gaddafi expressed displeasure over the carnage. His wife tells him, ... *Akalain mo, palangga, kontrolado pala ni Marcos ang mga Ilaga. Gaano kaya katotoo ito?*

Bakit ganun? Macla writes. Bakit kailangang makaranas ng hirap ang mga Morong kagaya namin, kagaya ni Ina Buyag? Gusto ko siyang matulog ng maayos, na walang pangamba at pag-aalala... Bakit kailangan naming mga Kagan patunayang Ancestral Domain namin ang Dabaw? This question will reverberate across history because Macla had asked it. The story of his people is also the story of the nation. Whether from Mindanao, or the hinterlands of Samar, or the canefields of Negros, victim or perpetrator, whatever language is used, we share the anger and the guilt. There is more: the drug wars in the streets and slums of our cities; the simulacrum of theater

disguising the huge supermarket of our Penal System where justice and law are for sale. The unauthorized rape of the national patrimony by all kinds of carpetbaggers, local and foreign.

The wisdom of the folk has kept the mother languages alive. What if we had lost them? Language is the encyclopedia of the race. Learning a language is like gaining entry to the mind and soul of a community. The death of a language is like the burning down of an entire library, says our national artist, Resil Mojares. We may reimagine the islands of the Archipelago, and within these islands, an inner "archipelago" of language communities, distinct and separate and thriving in peaceful coexistence. We have lived this way under heaven longer than the life of our young republic. We cannot be reduced to monovocality by political behest. It is in our nature to learn as

many languages as we need to and use them as we see fit. This may be part of that southern consciousness we seek to define, this ability to speak and listen in more than one language.

Merlinda Bobis recalls her father's last words when she was preparing to leave for the US to do her Ph.D. *Sampulong guramoy. Rumduma ini, sampulong guramoy, makukusog na guramoy sa uma nagpadula asin nagpa-eskwela simo.* ("Ten fingers. Remember this, ten strong fingers in the farm raised you and sent you to school.")

Now she is returning home, she thinks about her father's words. *Sampulong guramoy ni May, sampulong guramoy ni Pay. Hilinga tabi ang dae nahihiling. Pirang beses sa sarang taon ang pagpakaray kang atop na nahulkab kang pirang beses na bagyo. Pirang beses ang pagbakwet dahil sa baha. Pirang beses ang pagsalba kang naglalapang paroy.* ("Ten fingers of my mother. Ten fingers of my father. Please, see the invisible. The many times a year of fixing the roof wrenched away by the many storms. The many times of evacuating because of the flood. The many times of scavenging for rotting rice.")

The potent economy of these words: *sampulong guramoy*. Two words to carry in one's head, shield and comfort against loneliness, fear, confusion. The body reduced to its most fundamental agent—ten fingers of one's hand to hold what are dear, to stay against danger, to create and uncreate.

Hilinga tabi ang dae nahihiling. ("Please, see the invisible.") Bone-deep in the archipelago of every self, see the invisible: To write a nation, the enduring words of every mother tongue in this beautiful Archipelago. May our stories, poems and songs flourish for the next one thousand years of our young republic.

October 6, 2019
Tacloban City

THE CONTRIBUTORS

Jonel Abellanosa lives in Cebu City, The Philippines. His poetry has appeared in hundreds of magazines and anthologies, including *The Lyric*, *Thin Air* (Northern Arizona University), *Poetry Kanto* (Kanto Gakuin University, Japan), *Loch Raven Review*, and *The Anglican Theological Review*. His poetry collections include, *Songs from My Mind's Tree* and *Multiverse* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, New York), *50 Acrostic Poems* (Cyberwit, India), *In the Donald's Time* (Poetic Justice Books and Art, Florida), and *Pan's Saxophone* (Weasel Press, Texas). His works have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, Dwarf Stars, and Best of the Net Awards.

Si Kisha Aleena Abuda ay nagtapos ng BA Literature at MA Creative Writing sa University of Santo Tomas. Nailimbag ang ilang akda niya sa *Dapitan*, *UBOD Anthology*, at *Likhaan*. Nakapagsulat na siya ng ilang feature articles tungkol sa mga hayop sa *Animal Scene Magazine* at nagwagi ang mga katha niya sa Gawad USTETIKA. Naging fellow siya para sa Katha sa 2019 UST National Writer's Workshop. Kasalukuyan siyang nagtuturo ng literature at creative writing subjects sa UST at PUP.

Jeff William Acosta is a poet from Salcedo, Ilocos Sur. He is a co-winner of the Sahaya: Timpalak Pampanitikan (STP) 2021 of the UP Sentro ng Wikang Filipino-Diliman, a 2021 Jack Grapes Poetry semifinalist, and Boston Review Annual Poetry Contest semifinalist. His poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Boston Review*, *聲韻詩刊 Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine*, *The Dark Horse*, *CAROUSEL*, *Matter Press*, *Philippines Graphic*, *Kritika Kultura*, and elsewhere.

Cess Alessandra works as a photographer, public relations officer, media consultant, and video producer. Her writing consists mostly of scripts for brands big and small, but has now found focus in narrative art. She has been developing screenplays under programs by film and series producers. Cess has also begun pursuing prose authorship, a dream long interrupted by the business of growing up. Much like the rest of her art, her ongoing MA Media Studies thesis at the University of the Philippines focuses on queer media and intersectional gender studies. Cess advocates for better LGBTQ representation, and serves as a cultural sensitivity reader to fellow writers and media practitioners.

Merlie M. Alunan writes fiction and poetry in both English and Cebuano. Her poetry is collected in five volumes, namely, *Hearthstone*, *Sacred Tree* (Anvil, 1993), *Amina Among the Angels*, (UP Press, 1997), *Selected Poems* (UP Press, 2004), *Tales of the Spider Woman* (UST Publishing House, 2010), *Pagdakop sa Bulalakaw ug Uban pang mga Balak* (AdMU Press , 2013), and *Running with Ghosts* (AdNU Press, 2017). She was awarded the National Book Award in the 35th, 36th and 37th NBDB-Manila Critics Circle for four titles: *Sa Atong Dila: Introduction to Visayan Literature* (UP Press 2015); *Susumaton: Oral Narratives of Leyte* (AdMU Press 2016); *Tinalunay: Hinugpong nga Panurat nga Winaray* (UP Press 2017); and *Running with Ghosts* (AdMU Press, 2017), her latest collection of poetry. She taught literature at UP Tacloban College until she retired as Professor Emeritus of the University of the Philippines in 2008. She has worked for most of her life as a teacher in promoting writing and reading in the Visayan mother tongues.

Si **Mykel Andrada** ay propesor ng panitikan, malikhaing pagsulat, wika at Philippine Studies sa Unibersidad ng Pilipinas-Diliman. Nagsilbi siyang

Direktor ng UP Sentro ng Wikang Filipino- Diliman (2019-2022). Awtor siya ng dalawang aklat ng maikling kuwento, ang *Apartment sa Dapitan* at ang *Sa Dulo ng mga Dalita*. Isa rin siyang mamamahayag, editor, tagasalin at manggagawang pangkultura. Miyembro siya ng Surian ng Sining, Inc. (SUSI).

Mark Angeles is a full-time instructor in the Departamento ng Filipino, Kolehiyo ng Edukasyon at the University of Santo Tomas. He is a Resident Fellow of UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies. He is the founder and Director of the 1st Caloocan Writers' Workshop, organized by the Caloocan Historical and Cultural Studies. His latest books include *Ang Huling Emotero* (UP Press), a collection of *dagli*; and the children's books *Kamot nang Kamot nang Kamot* and *Mga Tsinelas ni Yasher* (Chikiting Books). He is a columnist of *Pinoy Weekly*, literary editor of *bulatlat.com*, and features contributor (arts and culture) of GMA News Online.

Rye Antonio is a part-time graduate student taking up M.A. Creative Writing at University of the Philippines-Diliman. She also works as a teaching assistant at the UP Diliman School of Statistics for undergraduate research writing classes. Aside from writing fiction and teaching, she is a freelance visual artist, content producer, and maladaptive daydreamer.

Si **Emmanuel T. Barrameda** ay kuwentista mula sa Virac, Catanduanes. Awtor ng *Balager* at *P'wera Bisita* na ginawarang Best Book in Filipino Fiction sa 38th National Book Award at finalist ng 20th Madrigal Gonzales First Book Award. Ang kanyang mga gawa ay kinilala rin ng Kabulig Writers' Prize, National Historical Institute of the Philippines, at Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Award for Literature. Kasapi siya ng Kataga, Samahan ng mga

Manunulat sa Pilipinas, Inc. at Bilog Writers Circle. Siya ngayon ay isang guro sa senior high school sa Catanduanes National High School.

Ronald Baytan is a Full Professor of Literature at De La Salle University where he teaches LGBTQIA+ Studies, Philippine Literature, and Creative Writing. He holds a Ph.D. in English Studies from the University of the Philippines-Diliman. He is the author of *The Queen Sings the Blues: Poems*, 1992 -2002 (Anvil, 2007) and *The Queen Lives Alone: Personal Essays* (UP Press, 2012).

Ito ang ikalawang pagkakataong nalathala sa Tomás Journal si **Mayette M. Bayuga**. Tinangka niyang gawing fictional ang materyal, na dala ng lapit sa tunay na karanasan, ay nabuo bilang creative nonfiction. Pagsusulat ng microfiction ang kasalukuyan niyang pinagkakaabalahan. Sa tamang pagkakataon ay iniisip niyang ayusin at gawing ikatlong koleksiyon ang ilang nakatabing materyal—mga luma’t bagong likhang nagbibigay-hininga sa mga kuwentong humahagod sa paglaya ng kaluluwa, sa pagiging lihim na lesbiyana, at sa mga sumpa ng buhay at kamatayan.

Dawn Marfil Burris, UST CCWLS Resident Fellow, is the author of *Looking for Polaris: A Memoir of Losing and Finding*, her first book. She was a fellow of the 3rd J. Elizalde Navarro National Workshop for Arts Criticism in 2011, the UST Creative Writing Workshop in 2012, and the 58th UP National Writers’ Workshop in 2019. At present she is working on her second nonfiction book.

Nagsusulat ng tula at dula si **Ma. Cecilia “Maki” C. de la Rosa**. Siya ay naging fellow sa 60th UP National Writers Workshop noong 2021. Nagtapos ng

Philippine Arts sa UP Manila at masterado sa Malikhain Pagsulat sa UP Diliman, siya ngayon ay nagtatrabaho rin bilang kawani sa Departamento ng Agham Pampulitika at bilang lektiyurer sa Departamento ng Filipino at Panitikan ng Pilipinas, kapwa sa UP Diliman.

Nagtuturo ng seminar in new media, writing for new media, contemporary and popular literature, translation, at creative writing sa Faculty of Arts and Letters at sa Graduate School ng Unibersidad ng Santo Tomas si **Joselito D. De Los Reyes**. Siya ang kasalukuyang academic coordinator ng BA in Creative Writing program ng nasabing unibersidad. Nagsipagwagi ng National Book Award for Essay in Filipino ang mga aklat niyang *iSTATUS Nation* at *Titser Pangkalawakan* at National Book Award for Nonfiction naman ang *Finding Teo: Tula/Talambuhay*. Siya ang 2013 Makata ng Taon ng Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino at recipient din ng NCCA Writers' Prize for Fiction. Siya rin ang may-akda ng mga aklat na *Paubaya, Troya: 12 Kuwento*, at *#pasahero: mga nakikisakay na sanaysay*. Regular opinion contributor siya ng mga paksang kulturang popular at social and new media dynamics sa Abante at Rappler.

George Gonzaga Deoso is the author of *The Horseman's Revolt and Other Horrors* (UST Publishing House, 2020), a collection of dark short fiction. Deoso received twelve Gawad USTetika for his work in various genres both in English and Filipino, and his essays, stories, and poems have appeared in *Dapitan*, *Tomás*, *Liwayway Magazine*, *The Sunday Times Magazine*, *Philippine Panorama*, and *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, among other publications. He was also a fellow for poetry in the national writers' workshops of UST, De La Salle University, and Silliman University.

Si **U Z. Eliserio** ay awtor ng tatlong koleksyon ng kritisismo: *Wala Tayong Sasantuhin* (UNITAS 2014), *Kami sa Labat ng Mataba* (UST Publishing House, 2016), at *Kontra* (Sentro ng Wikang Filipino-Diliman, 2020). Inaasahang lumabas ngayong taon ang kanyang *Libreng Pagkain*, *Libreng Tirahan*, *Libreng Medisina*, *Libreng Edukasyon*. Bahagi ang “Ilang Tala sa Pagsasalin ni/kay Rizal” ng kanyang manuskritong *Rizal: Para sa Kulito ng Kamatayan*. Isa ring kwentista, mandudula, at tagasalin, bisitahin siya sa ueliserio.work.

Propesor ng malikhaing pagsulat at panitikan si **Eugene Y. Evasco** sa Kolehiyo ng Arte at Literatura, Unibersidad ng Pilipinas Diliman. Naging Research Fellow siya sa International Youth Library sa Munich, Germany. Nagwagi siya bilang 2000 Makata ng Taon at 2020 Mananaysay ng Taon sa taguyod ng Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino. Ang kanyang *Ang Aklatang Pusa* ay napabilang sa White Ravens List noong 2019. Siya ay kabilang sa Hall of Fame ng Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature at ginawaran ng Dangal ng Panitikan 2021 ng Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino.

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo is a writer of fiction and nonfiction, and a literary critic and scholar, with more than 40 published books. Among the distinctions she has received are: the Carlos Palanca Grand Prize for the Novel, the National Book Awards, the Gawad Balagtas, and the Carlos Palanca Dangal ng Lahi. She has served as Director of the UP Institute of Creative Center, Director of the UP Press, Vice President for Public Affairs of the UP System, and Director of the UST Publishing House. At present, she is Director of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, and Professor Emeritus of UP Diliman. She continues to teach graduate courses in creative writing and literature at UST and UP. Her latest book is

What I Wanted to Be When I Grew Up: Early Apprenticeship of a Writer (UP Press 2021).

Si **KC Daniel Inventor** ay isang guro. Nagtapos siya ng AB/ BSE Literature sa Philippine Normal University – Manila. Siya ay tubong Valladolid, Negros Occidental, at kasalukuyang naninirahan sa Lungsod ng Malabon.

Jan Raen Carlo M. Ledesma teaches art appreciation in the UST College of Tourism and Hospitality Management, and literary research (thesis writing) and Shakespeare in the UST Faculty of Arts and Letters. He is currently serving as the thesis coordinator of the UST Department of Literature. He earned his B.A. (Magna Cum Laude) and M.A. (Cum Laude) in Literature from the University of Santo Tomas. At present, he is pursuing his Ph.D. in Literature in the UST Graduate School. He is also working on his dissertation titled “Modelling Ecoliterate Affinities: Towards a Biosemiotic Conception of the Ecological Literacies of Selected Philippine Eco-poems.”

Si **Perry Conanan Mangilaya** ay isang premyadong manunulat mula sa Bagacay, Ibabay, Aklan. Kuwentista at nobelista. May-akda ng librong *BILIG*, isang nobela at aklat-pambatang *Ang Kahon ni Lolo Yoyong*. Kasapi ng editorial board ng bagong *Liwayway Magazine* ng Manila Bulletin Publishing Corp.. Nagkamit ng mga parangal mula sa Palanca Awards, Salanga Writer’s Prize (PBBY), Gawad Komisyon (KWF), UN-MDGs (NCCA), at Aliwanag Awards (Aklat-Alamid). Nailathala na ang kanyang mga akda sa *Likhaan* (UP), *Entrada* (PUP), *Ani* (CCP), *Ani ng Wika* (KWF), *Ulirat: Best Contemporary Stories in Translation from the Philippines* (Gaudy Boy, New York, USA), at iba pa.

Si **Darwin T. Medallada** ay nagtapos ng kursong I.T. sa Parañaque City College of Science and Technology. Kasalukuyan siyang nagtatrabaho sa isang BPO Company sa Taguig. Pinalad siyang makapasok sa Eros Atalia Fiction Writing Clinic, Cavite Young Writers' Workshop at Palihang Rogelio Sicat. Nagwagi siya sa taunang Saranggola Blog Awards sa magkakasunod na taon (2016-2019).

Jose Mojica obtained his B.A. in Digital Filmmaking from De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde and his M.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Santo Tomas Graduate School, where he is now pursuing a Ph.D. in Literature. He has directed and written short films, and composed film scores. His previous short films, *Monique* (2018) and *E* (2018), were screened at the Ika-30th Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video, where *E* received an Honorable Mention during the awards night. Currently, he teaches communication and media, literature, and film at the University of Santo Tomas Faculty of Arts and Letters. He contributes articles to *Rappler* and the lifestyle section of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. He is also a Resident Fellow of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies.

Jenny Ortuoste teaches communication, marketing communication, and creative writing at the University of Santo Tomas in the undergraduate and graduate levels. She has won a Palanca Award for essay and five Nick Joaquin Literary Awards for her short fiction. A mainstay at *Manila Standard*, she has three columns there: opinion ("Pop Goes the World," since 2010), literary ("No Shelf Control," since 2022), and sports ("The Hoarse Whisperer," since 2008, on hiatus). She obtained her B.A. and Ph.D. Communication degrees at the University of the Philippines-Diliman, and her M.B.A. from Ateneo de Manila University. In 2016, *Fictionary*, her collection of short fiction that

includes her award-winning short stories to date, was released by the UST Publishing House. She is editing for publication her book on Philippine horseracing subculture, based on her award-winning dissertation.

Raymund P. Reyes currently resides in Ottawa. He has published his works in various literary journals and anthologies, including *Ani*, *Agos*, *Entrada*, *Your Impossible Voice*, *Philippine Speculative Fiction*, *A Tapestry of Colors*, *Retelling Her World*, and *Mga Piling Dula Mula sa Virgin Labfest*.

Nagtapos ng Batsilyer ng Artes sa Filipinolohiya sa Politeknikong Unibersidad ng Pilipinas at ng Masterado sa Malikhaing Pagsulat sa Unibersidad ng Pilipinas-Diliman, kasalukuyang kumukuha ng Doktorado sa Pilosopiya sa Panitikan ng Pilipinas sa UP Diliman si **Mark Anthony S. Salvador**. Mababasa ang kanyang mga akda sa *Kawing*, *Rappler*, *Tomas*, *Dx Machina: Philippine Literature in the Time of Covid-19 1*, *Likhaan*, *Entrada*, *Reflective Practitioner*, *Pylon*, *Bookwatch*, *Lidayway*, *ACT Forum* at *Luntian journal*. Kasalukuyan siyang guro sa Departamento ng Filipino ng Pamantasang De La Salle-Maynila.

Nagtapos ng batsilyer sa creative writing si **Jose Martin V. Singh** sa Unibersidad ng Pilipinas-Diliman. Ang kanyang mga akda ay lumabas sa *& (Ampersand)*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Points of Contact*, at *TLDTD*. Mula siya sa lungsod ng Marikina.

Alice M. Sun-Cua practices obstetrics and gynecology at the San Juan de Dios Hospital, Pasay City. She is a poet, travel narrative writer, literary translator and qui gong practitioner. She was the recipient of the Gawad

Pambansang Alagad ni Balagtas Award given by the Unyon ng mga Manunulat sa Pilipinas last April 27, 2019. She has published ten books, the latest of which are a translation into Hiligaynon of the Spanish novel *Nada* by Carmen Laforet, (Sto. Nino Publishing House, 2021), and a book on OB-GYN for lay women, *Women Talk* (UST Publishing House, 2019).

Si **Emmanuel Quintos Velasco** ay ginawaran ng National Book Award for Best Poetry in Filipino ng NBDB-Manila Critics Circle noong 2018 para sa kanyang aklat na *Mga Sugat ng Naligaw sa Gubat*. May mga tula siyang nailathala sa *Likhaan Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature*. Isa siya sa mga editors ng antolohiyang *100 Pink Poems para kay Leni*. Naging fellow siya ng UP National Writers Workshop noong 2013. Nag-aral siya sa Mababang Paaralan ng Sto. Nino sa Marikina, high school at kolehiyo sa Ateneo de Manila University, at master's degree sa De La Salle University. Kasalukuyan siyang isang executive sa isang shipping company sa Maynila.

John Jack G. Wigley is the author of six books: *Kadenang Bahaghari* (Pride Lit Books, 2019); *Hantong: Mga Kuwento* (UST Publishing House, 2018), a finalist in the 2019 National Book Awards; *Lait (pa more) Chronicles* (Visprint Publishing, 2017); *Lait Chronicles* (Visprint Publishing, 2016), a finalist in the 2017 National Book Awards; *Home of the Ashfall* (UST Publishing House, 2014); and *Falling into the Manhole* (UST Publishing House, 2012), winner of the Best Book (Gawad San Alberto Magno) in the 15th *Dangal ng UST* and a finalist in the 13th Madrigal-Gonzalez Best First Book Award. He has also co-authored a number of textbooks on literature and creative writing. Presently, he is the Chair of the Department of Literature and a full professor at the University of Santo Tomas.

Vincen Gregory Yu is a physician, health researcher, fictionist, poet, and arts critic from Iloilo City, Philippines. He is currently affiliated with the Ateneo de Manila University Development Studies Program, and is pursuing his M.Sc. in Medical Anthropology at the University of the Philippines Manila.

THE EDITORS

Issue Editor

Chuckberry J. Pascual, CCWLS Resident Fellow, is a fictionist, essayist, critic, and translator. He is the author of *Pagpasok sa Eksena: Ang Sinehan sa Panitikan at Pag-aaral ng Piling Sinehan sa Recto* (UP), *Ang Tagalabas sa Panitikan* (UST), and four short story collections including *Bayan ng mga Bangkay* (UP) and *Ang Nawawala* (Visprint) which won the National Book Award for Best Book of Short Fiction in Filipino. He is the translator of Miguel Syjuco's *Ilustrado* (UST), the first and only Filipino novel to win the Man Asian Prize. He also translated three short story collections by Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo: *Sa Bayan ng Nagngangalit na Buwan* (UST), *Kundiman ng Panahong Naiwan* (UST), and *Catch a Falling Star* (Lampara).

Managing Editor

Ralph Semino Galán, poet, literary and cultural critic, translator and editor, is the Assistant Director of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies. He is an Associate Professor of Literature, the Humanities and Creative Writing in the UST Faculty of Arts and Letters. He is the author of the following books: *The Southern Cross and Other Poems* (UBOD New Authors Series, NCCA, 2005), *Discernments: Literary Essays, Cultural Critiques and Book Reviews* (USTP, 2013), *From the Major Arcana* [poems] (USTPH, 2014), and *Sa mga Pagitan ng Buhay at Iba pang Pagtutulay* [translations] (USTPH, 2018). He is currently working on a research project sponsored by the UST Research Center for Culture, Arts and Humanities titled "Labaw sa Bulawan: Translating 300 Mindanao Poems from Cebuano into English," as well as a book of poetry written in Cebuano.