

TOMÁS

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UST CENTER FOR CREATIVE WRITING
AND LITERARY STUDIES

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

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Introduction

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

When I look back on the University that I entered as a freshman in the mid-60s, it seems to me that everyone I knew was a writer. The tiny Faculty of Philosophy & Letters to which I belonged occupied only one third of the 3rd floor of what was then referred to as the Education Building, and later became the Commerce Building when the College of Education moved to its own building in another part of the campus.

But my college was proud of being the “the writing college,” with an illustrious tradition of producing writers who were among the country’s most distinguished fictionists, poets, and journalists.

Unfortunately this tradition has so slipped between the cracks that when I mentioned it to my graduate creative writing class in the University of the Philippines, they were all quite surprised, including the two Thomases among them.

It is perhaps this cultural amnesia, if you will, which led National Artist for Literature Bienvenido Lumbera to observe that it was high time that UST’s significant contribution to Philippine literature was recognized. In his UST Paz Latorena Lecture, delivered in February 2011, he said, “Literary production in the University, in the beginning, was an offshoot of the sheer talent and personal drive of its students. No special courses were offered for the cultivation to creative talent.”¹

Lumbera was referring specifically to the 30s, the 40s and the 50s. But the same was true of the UST that I knew. Our professors often spoke

of the people Dr. Lumbera mentioned in his lecture—Domingo Abadilla, Frankie Sionil Jose, Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta, Wilfredo Nollado, Rolando Tinio, Johnny Gatbonton, and of course Bienvenido Lumbera himself. They were among the outstanding alumni writers in whose steps we were expected to follow.

But we received no actual training in the craft of writing. Students entered one of two streams: philosophy or journalism. Philosophy graduates tended to end up in academe and Journalism graduates joined one of the national newspapers or the profession of advertising and public relations, an ascendant industry in those days.

Our professors, always aware that their classrooms were filled with young people who dreamed of becoming writers, assumed that we were all voracious readers, and fed that appetite with literary masterpieces. The books that did not find their way into our courses' official syllabi, we discovered by ourselves, in the shelves of Popular Bookstore and P & P Bookstore, which were a stone's throw away from our campus, and those of Frankie Jose's La Solidaridad and Tony Abaya's Erewhon on Ermita.

So we learned to write by trial and error, exchanging dog-eared copies of our latest discoveries, copying our idols, showing each other our manuscripts, and timidly submitting them to the *Free Press*, which nine times out of ten rejected them outright.

UST's Philets antedated UP's Institute of Mass Communications (later the College of Mass Communications), and in my time, media, advertising and public relations were dominated by Thomasians. In fact, one of the college's attractions was that most of the faculty teaching the upper-division courses were practitioners—newspaper or magazine editors or heads of advertising agencies—who recruited the best of their students into the organizations/companies they worked for. A good number of my classmates were practicing journalists. But they were also, in fact, poets or fictionists, and every year, Philets dominated the annual *Varsitarian* literary awards as well as the annual examinations held to select the new *Varsitarian* staff.

To the names already mentioned by Dr. Lumbera—Rogelio Sicat, Norma Miraflor, Cirilo Bautista and myself (and I wish here to express my gratitude for his inclusion of my name in his list of writers)—I would add the names of other contemporaries of ours: Kit Tatad, Cesar Aguila, Andy

del Rosario, Joe Burgos, Jose Flores, Julie Yap, Jean Pope, Jaime Maidan Flores, Albert Casuga, Rita Gadi, Benjamin Afuang, Sonia Cataumber, Roy Acosta, Chito Bautista, Manny Azarcon, Jake Macasaet, Manny Sison, Bernardo Bernardo, Rey Datu, Gil Portes, among many others. Kit, Cesar, Andy, Joe and Maidan were already journalists, working students who attended evening classes. Most of us began our writing careers as staffers of the *Blue Quill*, Philets' paper, which had a literary section; and later joined the *Varsitarian*, which also had an excellent literary section.

Kit later entered politics. After martial law was declared, Joe Burgos briefly joined the Development Academy of the Philippines (DAP), but later returned to journalism. Andy and Sonia became diplomats. Cesar left for Australia and eventually became a banker (though he also published a novel, and only last year, a collection of short stories published by the UST Publishing House). Albert, like Cirilo, joined academe. This was also true of Norma and myself, both of us beginning our teaching careers in UST. Norma later returned to journalism. Rita became part of *Solidarity*, the journal run by Frankie Jose. Julie, Jean, Ben, Jake and Rey remained journalists. I think Manny Azarcon and Chito Bautista went into advertising. Manny Sison eventually set up Booksale and became a millionaire. And when he returned from graduate school in the U.S., Bernie Bernardo entered the world of show biz, like Gil Portes, who became a film director.

When Philosophy and Letters was merged with Liberal Arts to be thenceforth referred to as Artlets, it continued to produce writers like Eric Gamalinda, Merlinda Bobis, Neil Garcia, Vim Nadera, Roberto Añonuevo, Rebecca Añonuevo, Jose Wendell Capili, Michael Coroza, Lourde Veyra, Ramil Gulle, Nerisa Guevara, Alma Anonas, Lito Zulueta, Carlomar Daoana, Francesca Kwe, Natasha Gamalinda, Angelo Suarez, and others whom I might have forgotten. Some of these young writers became junior associates of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Studies when it was set up in 1999, with Ophelia Alcantara Dimalanta, who had taught us Contemporary British and American poetry, as its first director. They were joined by Ralph Galan and Eros Atalia, who, though not UST graduates, were Dimalanta protégées.

It is devoutly to be hoped that, with the revival of our Center and the revitalization of our M.A. Creative Writing Program (and, hopefully, the

establishment of an undergraduate program), UST will once again become a hub of literary activity.

I am pleased to say that when I was serving as director of the UST publishing house, several of our alumni sent us new works which became part of the “400 Years, 400 Books” presented to the public in an exhibit in January 2012. Among these were Cirilo Bautista, Teo Antonio, Cesar Aguila, Norma Miraflor, and Rita Gadi.

And now, we have identified a core of writers who will form the nucleus of what we hope will soon be a vibrant literary community. Several of them were part of the UST Writers’ Workshop, held last May in Baguio City, either as members of the teaching panel or as writing fellows.

It is with this in mind that the CCWLS decided to devote the initial issue of the revived literary journal *Tomas*, to Thomasians. The succeeding pages feature the previously unpublished work of Thomasian alumni, faculty members and graduate students.

Dr. Lumbera’s “Magaling Datapoa: Ang Galing at Dating ng Estetika ng Ating Panitikan” critiques the tendency of Filipino critics and literature teachers to use Western aesthetic standards when evaluating Philippine literature, including more traditional texts. And the late Dr. Dimalanta’s “Literature and Religion” is an impassioned manifesto about the role of faith—true faith—in art and poetry, and about the “profound spirituality” in the work of the greatest artists. This paper was read at “Inter/sections: Crossroads and Crosscurrents in Literature and Cultures,” a national conference held in UST in January 2008. It was given by the author before she passed away to Ferdinand Lopez with the understanding that it was to be published.

Thomasian alumni are represented by several contributions. Vim Nadera’s ritualistic play “Binhi” presents a rich tapestry of agricultural ceremonies, practices, myths and legends, all having to do with rice, a testament to its importance in our culture. Teo T. Antonio’s suite of five poems is a study in the intertwining of the personal and the political via the poetic voice of a revolutionary who is also a lover. The suite of five poems by Albert Casuga is imbued with a sense of irretrievable loss, of vanished seasons... “a collage of dispersing dwindling drawings on skies that darken at sundown drowning them all.” Kit Kwe’s “True Lies: an Essay on Writing Fiction” is an interesting hybrid piece, part memoir, part meditation

on her own poetics. And then there's "The Choice" by Joanna Parungao, a story submitted to last summer's UST Writers' Workshop, one of the rare few in our literature which truly deserve the label "science fiction." It opens like a traditional tale with "Once, a long time ago, I went to a fortune teller who told me she could divine, my future simply by looking at the lines imprinted on the skin of my palms." But before the reader quite realizes what has happened, it has slipped into the world of tablets, parallel worlds, wormholes, physics, quantum mechanics... with dizzying effects.

From the faculty we have an equally rich harvest.

Love and loss resonate through the five minimalist poems in the suite by Ralph Semino Galan, weaving in and out of images of sand and sea, storm and flood, ghost ships, butterfly in a gilded cage. Augusto Antonio A. Aguila's short story "The Lost Season" takes a clear-eyed, unflinching look at a Catholic university and finds it sadly wanting. John Jack Wigley's "*Bui Doi* in the City of Angels" is a heartbreaking memoir of boyhood as a poor, bastard son who never knew his American father. Dawn Marie Nicole L. Marfil's "Roche's Limit" explores a different sort of heartbreak, a narrative saved from sentimentality by its protagonist's sharp self-awareness. Ferdinand Lopez's "The Two Trees" is a short memoir of the late Ophelia Dimalanta and Milagros Tanlayco, a tribute no less moving for its being humorous. "Brgy. Magapo" is the first chapter of Eros Atalia's novel-in-progress, and follows an unnamed broadcast journalist as he travels by *habal-habal* at the height of a tropical storm, to investigate illegal logging operations in a remote barangay. Then there is "Kapre" by Chuckberry Pascual a marvelous-realist tale of a *bakla* whose encounter with the hirsute, tobacco-smoking mythical creature triggers the break-up between him and his significant other. And there is Joselito D. de los Reyes' "Derby," a short story which exposes the vicious entanglements of dirty politics, tabloid journalism and high-stakes gambling through the eyes of a newly-hired assistant to the town mayor. Finally, there is Rebecca Añonuevo's essay "Sto. Niño sa Tondo" which captures the carnivalesque spirit of the Tondo town fiesta. Here is a straight woman whose understanding of queer consciousness enables her to appreciate the liminal spaces occupied by different gay men in an otherwise conservative religious festival.

"The Old House," a story by graduate student Giancarla Agbisit, takes the reader into the mind of a young matron in middle-class suburbia

and records her awakening in crisp, pared-down prose, made more powerful by its being so low-key.

All together they make for an auspicious re-entry into the local literary landscape for *Tomas*.

We look forward to more new work by Thomasian writers for our next issue, and in the coming years, to the contributions of writers from other universities, as well as from writers not based in academe.

October 2012
Manila

Endnotes

1 Bienvenido Lumbera. "Stepping Forward at 400: The Literary Production of UST," Paz Latorena Memorial Lecture, 2 February 2011, UST (unpublished).
2 February 2011

The Choice

Joanna G. Parungao

I.

Once, a long time ago, I went to a fortune teller who told me she could divine my future simply by looking at the lines imprinted on the skin of my palms. “Only for a small fee,” she assured me. Initially, I declined her offer, certain of the fraudulent nature of her wares. How could one predict the future when time was in flux and forever changing? A student of physics, I was a person of logic, of mathematical equations and scientific formulas — I understood the possibility of predictions, but only up to a point. Even the fractals of chaos theory could not predict the entirety of the universe without using a limiting parameter, a blind spot. How could the grooves etched on my palms provide the key to discerning my future?

“No,” I told her as I moved away, but she held out her hand and caught me by my fingertips. She insisted that I stay, despite my protestations. If palmistry did not interest me, then she would use her cards. “It is what you like, yes?” She smiled knowingly. “Your numbers and your shapes and your counting — always the counting with you. How many dimensions now? Four? Nine?”

I blinked, surprised. “M-Theory says eleven but there’s a new theory, F-Theory. It posits that there may be twelve.”

She laughed and shook her head, “Wasn’t it easier when reality consisted of just three dimensions? You have your up and down, and left and right, and backwards and forwards. Now it is all jumbled up. Come inside, come inside...” She ushered me off the quad and into her small tent. It was dim and smelled of incense. I hesitated at the threshold, wary.

“Come sit down,” she said.

I shrugged and stepped inside.

She seated herself behind a small round table covered in heavy brocade and gestured for me to take the seat on the opposite side. I was pleasantly surprised at the plump softness of the cushion beneath me. Nothing inside her tent looked cheap or vulgar and a part of me could not reconcile the potential earnings of her profession with the apparent luxuries to be found around us. It bothered me, this incongruence. It was impossible for the cloths to be actual silk and the threads used in the embroidery of the tapestries, glinting silver and gold, could not possibly be genuine. I told myself it was a trick of the light and perhaps the perfumed air.

“You are very mistrustful.” She gestured to the tapestries, the throw pillows, the tassels and various accoutrements that went with her trade. “These things they do not put you at ease. They are meant to. It is to help you enter a different state of mind, facilitate a belief in a different type of world, not so hard, not so cruel, not quite so isolating. Ah, but then you already know of such a world with your multiple strings and their vibrations, don’t you?” She rummaged underneath her table and took out several decks of cards. “You know about this already, the perfect symmetry of these cards? They are just numbers, these decks, and they will unlock the future for you. Now, what to choose? The Rider Waite is a crowd favourite, feel the energy in the deck, touch it with your hands.” She withdrew the cards after I touched them. “Or how about this one, the Tarot of the Old Path, very popular with those drawn to white magic and nature based religions... or how about this Cosmic Tarot? Very few symbols, easier to understand if you prefer...”

In truth, as she prattled on about arcanas, wands, and fools, I was gripped with a desire to stand up so strong that it made my calves ache and my toes curl. I shrugged without comment. I wanted to leave but I knew instinctively that she would not let me until she deemed it was time for me to go. Somehow, I felt no real trepidation despite this knowledge. I was

more put-upon than afraid.

“You do not understand me, do you? Very well, shall I speak your language then?” She shook her head, voice petulant. I stared at her, not remembering her to be quite as beautiful as she seemed at that moment. It was the same face, and yet different. I squinted at her and she laughed at me, like a child. Had she always been so young? “Yes,” she said. “Now pay attention! These are the tarot cards, yes? Do you see? And the reading of them is the reading of a pattern. You like patterns, don’t you? The golden ratio, remember? The sum of the quantities to the larger quantity is equal to the ratio of a larger quantity to the smaller one...”

“1.618.”

“Clever girl! It’s the divine proportion, the fingerprint of creation. You’re very smart; this is why you were chosen. Now listen, patterns emerge when you shuffle the cards, and in the dealing of the spread, the paths to your past, and your present, and your future are opened. These patterns in the change, the difference between the final and the initial, they are just mathematical functions calculable with differential calculus — static images interpreted, projected into the past and the future.”

Her smile was self-satisfied when her eyes met mine. She told me she could map out the entirety of my existence thus far using only her cards. She chose one deck and fanned out the cards on the table, all seventy-eight of them. “With Rahdue’s Wheel, I can lay out your past and your present lives; give you a glimpse of what your tomorrows will bring.” She tilted her head to one side and studied me. “But it is not the future you seek to see, is it? And no interest in your past lives either... Oh! I see!” She put away her decks and placed what looked like an Apple iPad at the center of the table. “Here we go. This is more suitable I think. This is a tablet.”

“That’s an iPad.”

“No, it’s a tablet. With a windows application.”

“Oh. China made?”

She reared back a little, as though my question affronted her, which apparently it did. “I’ll have you know this was forged with the stringent howls of icy winds and the most forlorn sighs of the fire mages. Alloys were bent and stretched on the forge to craft this! Elements not naturally occurring in nature came to be in order for this tablet to be formed!”

"I see." I fidgeted. "Is this going to take long? I have homework and I really must go. I'll just pay you and be on my way." I started to rise but the force of her glare stopped me. "Look, you said you were going to tell me my future, but then you said you don't think that's what I want. You're perfectly correct. I don't want to know my future. All I want is to get out of here."

She smiled. "Exactly." She tapped her index finger on the surface of the tablet and it lighted up to show, as it was initiated, a whole black apple that slowly became red. "It's from Snow White. Not the first witch to use surveillance but she is the first one to use semi-sentience to fulfil that task. Usually they send out birds or small animals. Very difficult. They have small brains you know. Tiny. No real cognition. It's very uncomfortable trying to get into the mind of say a squirrel or if you want it closer to home, a cockroach or a rat." Before I could call her insane, she grinned and beckoned me to look at the screen. "Look, it is open. This is the windows application. It taps into the nodes of the strings in your universe, even the unfurled dimensions and the possibility spaces."

I saw an infinite number of strings vibrating on the screen, arranged with an intricate geometric balance that was nothing short of beautiful. It reminded me of the night sky with the millions of stars all connected with bright light.

"I thought you might like this theme," she said and I looked up to see that her eyes were trained on me. "It's beautiful isn't it? Very elegant."

I nodded. "The theory of everything."

She smiled. "There are other templates of course, should you desire a different view. Would you like to see them as branes? Fantastic things. Or would you be more comfortable with little soap bubbles floating in the dark? How about slices of bread in a loaf? I can show you a weave of quantised loops if you prefer. No? All right then, we'll stick with this one. The window is only the frame after all, doesn't matter as long as you get to look..." The fortune teller tapped on one winking point in the tablet's interface and it expanded into a bird's eye view of the world. It was like Google Earth and the more she tapped, the closer the view, until the tops of the buildings became the view in the street, close enough to see people's faces and hear them speak.

"You know how each choice you make is the fulfilment of one possibility? Parallel worlds are thus created, a multitude of them, reality split-

ting again and again. Come closer and take a look, this is a universe where you were born a boy, would you like to be a boy? No? How about this? In this world you are a dog... or how would you like to be a model, look you are taller and your face is more angular, more beautiful, oh but then you die very young. Sexually transmitted disease, who knew you could be so promiscuous?" Her chuckle discomfited me more than the image of my model-self dying alone in a hospital bed. I hugged my jacket tighter against my body. "Would you like to be a doctor? A lawyer? A surgeon? A teacher? There's a universe where you're the Miss Universe and there's one where you're a meth junkie with no lower jaw. Would you like to be a mermaid? A fairy? A narwhal falling down from the sky? Would you like to know the feeling of living on the snow-capped Alps or would you like to be on the FBI's most wanted list?"

On and on, she presented me with all the possibilities, both fascinating and terrifying scenarios, fingers flying on the interface of the tablet, showing me all my different selves in an infinite succession. I wanted her to stop talking but I couldn't help but listen to her speak. It was as though her voice and the images flashing on the tablet's screen held me in thrall. I could neither leave nor look away, like matter caught within the radius of a black hole's event horizon. Her voice pulled me forward, all voluntary motion ceased, and I was only aware of her voice, my other lives, and the rapid beating of my racing heart. Caught as I was within this invisible sphere of no return, this space wherein time stops the closer you get to the center, a place of singularities where all known laws of the universe ceased to matter, my reality splintered, time dilated and I felt myself become fragmented as the strange woman's voice, slow and steady, somehow kept abreast with the nimble movements of her fingers flying over the tablet's interface. I panicked. "Stop it!" I said, half-rising from my chair, hands gripping the table's edge, the brocade scratchy on my palms. "Why are you doing this? Stop it! Please stop!"

She did.

She gazed at me intently, all the manic energy gone. She kept very still, as did I. I couldn't move. There was something almost predatory about her gaze, as though she had anticipated everything that had transpired thus far and was set to make the final move. I should have run out of there then. It would have been the smart thing to do, certainly, but I couldn't bring

myself to leave. Anomalous occurrences of such a degree rarely happened, and to have it happen to me of all people, how could I turn away? It was not in my nature. I sat back down.

She straightened in her seat after what seemed to be an eternity. Her face wore a look of concern, her voice gentled. “What’s wrong Maica? Why are you so terribly unhappy?”

Of all the things she could have said at that moment, I had not expected that.

She showed me my life, a sequence of disjointed events. I hated looking at myself from the outside. I hadn’t realized I walked with such a defeated gait or that I have a groove, faint but deepening each year, right where my eyebrows meet whenever I frowned — and why am I always frowning?

“You’re a healthy young woman. You’re smart. You have a family and a future. No deformation mars you. You wanted for nothing during your childhood. No extravagances of course, but you were cared for, loved. Again, why are you so unhappy Maica?”

Her tone rankled. It was mild and reasonable yet I couldn’t help but feel as though she had accused me of something, judged me as wanting. “You have no idea about my life. Those are just random slides. You don’t understand anything about me.”

“I understand you have ambition. I understand you have your goals and your dreams.” The woman smiled. I felt uncomfortable at the sight. It looked strange on her face suddenly, too wide and with too many teeth. “You have a lot of potential energy, but you do not harness it and it stagnates inside of you. Right now, at this moment, you are almost past the point of your ripeness. You will begin to decay soon, if you do not do something about it, and that would be a real shame. I propose this. Let me show you something.” She motioned to the screen of the tablet between us. “Look.” It was a bird’s eye view of a house with a red roof and a garden with a mango tree on one side. She tapped on the interface of her contraption in order to zoom in on the picture. My breath caught when I saw the girl seated on the same bed, in the same room as mine. “Looks the same as you, doesn’t she? She’s the same age, lives in exactly the same place. She’s at the top of her class and has a good family, the same as you. She has a boyfriend though, and has lined up an internship in a large company. She’s going to go abroad to study, enroll in CalTech or MIT. She’s not sure yet, hasn’t even

applied yet but she will, and she'll get in."

I drank in the fortune teller's words as I stared at the image on the screen. It was everything I wanted. I leaned forward, fascinated. She looked like me, but different. I watched as she got up, arranged the bed, and bounded downstairs. My brother, no, *her* brother greeted her as she sat down to eat breakfast with the rest of the family. It was like watching a rerun and I experienced a strange sort of *deja vu*. Everything that had happened at the breakfast table with my family that morning recurred at this other table. It was all replayed, the conversations, the motions, even the silences. Like me, the other girl remained quiet all through the meal. The only difference was that halfway through breakfast, the doorbell rang and the other me stood up to see who it was.

"It's the boy you like." The woman said. "They've been together for a while now. He asked her out last year during the school dance. The one you didn't want to go to."

It wasn't any of her business that I didn't go because nobody had asked me so I kept that knowledge to myself. I watched the other me open the door and true enough, there he was. He smiled and their fingers twined as she pulled him inside. I felt a pang. No matter how alike we seemed, she and I were leading very different lives. I turned to the fortune teller. "Why are you showing me this?"

"I could give you her life, for a price. I told you, only a small fee and I can give you what you desire. Think on it. You have energy inside of you, enough so I could send you to that reality and pull the other one here."

At first, I declined her offer. The idea was tempting, should it prove feasible, but there were too many unknowns, too many variables to consider, too many things that could go wrong. I made to stand up and leave but she held out a hand and bade me to wait and to listen.

"Haven't you wished constantly, fervently, to forget yourself for a moment? This is your chance. She is who you are, in the same way that you are who she is. You can lead another life without losing yourself. I can give you a week to decide," she told me. "A week to live her life, to experience your every desire fulfilled in her shoes. After the seven days, should you wish to return, everything will go back to the way it used to be. You need not stay in that reality, merely experience it."

My eyes strayed towards the tablet's screen as it displayed a montage

of scenes featuring the other me as she went about her life. We went to the same school, had the same classes and classmates. “It is almost the same life isn’t it?”

“*Almost*, yes.”

“The only real difference between that reality and mine is that...” I watched her stop to talk with one of my few friends. Then she went on to join a group of people I did not know. She laughed. There were so many people, so much laughter and merriment. I narrowed my eyes at the scene. “I’m happy there aren’t I? Successful...”

The woman inclined her head.

“What would you get out of it?”

“Your leaving would leave a vacuum in this reality. I told you, you have potential energy inside of you. What you are now, is not what you were meant to be. With the creation of this vacuum, energy will be expended. I will harness that energy. That will be my fee.”

I told her to send me to that other world... and she did.

II.

I cannot describe exactly what it felt like to crossover. There are several theories about inter-dimensional travel, most of which end up with matter being crushed by the gravity of a black hole, long before it could reach the wormhole at the heart of these dead stars. The Einstein-Rosen Bridge Theory stipulated that though these bridges, these wormholes existed, they were impossible to get to and get through due to the gravitational force of the black hole. But Einstein and Rosen were thinking about stationary black holes and not spinning stars. With Roy Kerr’s black hole as a spinning star, a dying star could collapse into a ring of neutrons which would remain stable due to the intensity of its centrifugal force pushing outward thereby neutralizing the inward force of gravity and enabling matter to pass through safely. In through the black hole, sucked through the wormhole, out through the white hole into an entirely new dimension of reality.

Was this what had happened to me?

The instability of Kerr's ring is problematic as light getting pulled into the black hole could cause the entire balance to shift, preventing anyone from passing through unscathed. And then of course there were the traversable wormholes by Thorne and Morris which use exotic matter to hold the bridges open. In fact, considering the changes wrought in general relativity by the Gauss-Bonnet theory, exotic matter is omitted entirely as wormholes are seen as natural occurrences in brane cosmology.

I've had some time to mull things over but I am no closer to comprehending the manner of my transition from one world into another. I cannot even accurately describe it. The sensations, the sights, the sounds, how does one explain what one does not understand? If there are words to describe the experience, certainly none of the languages I know have a vocabulary sufficient enough to capture clearly what had transpired as I traveled. Suffice it to say it was a non-linguistic experience. If there is a language in the world that would enable me to describe it; I have not learned it yet. Perhaps it hasn't even been invented. For this, I invoke Newton's *hypotheses non fingo*.

One thing is clear though. The world I found myself in — *this* world — is a chiral world, enantiomorphous to mine. Though my past and current realities mirrored each other, they were not the same in every respect. For example, I had met the fortune teller because the school I had been attending had set up a carnival in the quad in order to celebrate the centennial anniversary of its founding. As a member of the student body, I had been enjoined to attend. The school grounds in my world had teemed with people, most of them milling around, going on rides and partaking in the general festivities. I had been on my way to find my adviser and have my attendance noted when the fortune teller had caught my attention. She had spoken directly to me, picked me out amidst the tumult that had surrounded us. In this world, I found myself standing alone in the school quad. There was no carnival to celebrate its founding. Unsure about how much difference existed between the worlds, I wasn't certain if the currency I carried would be accepted. I walked home.

The fortune teller let me keep her tablet and assured me that its signal would never fail and that its battery would never bleed dry. "There's an application that searches for the nodes where the strings of the universes intersect. This is the coordinate of your world. If you wish to view how the

other you is faring, all you need to do is to tune into this coordinate.” She reminded me that after the week was through, she would consider our arrangement permanent. I agreed.

To spend a week living a life where my every desire had been fulfilled, to have this experience and suffer no consequence — how could I turn the chance down?

I wish I could say that from the moment I landed in this world I have lived a charmed life but the truth is, like most every wish that sees its fulfillment, the reality of it did not live up to my expectations.

Oh, it had been wonderful in the beginning, yes. The symmetry of the two worlds amazed me. History, science, celebrity, the news, they were the same. Our families were identical down to the most intimate details, like the scarring on dad’s eyebrow or the mole on mom’s back, the type of food each one liked and what drove the rest of the family mad. The first few days, I found myself poring over photo albums and marveling at the familiar photographs stored within them.

Remarkable as were the similarities between the two worlds, it was the minute deviations between them that fascinated me. They were not obvious, just minor things. It was quite easy to assimilate into her life with her family so willing to accommodate her “lapses,” and I had made lapses as I tried to become her in those seven days. Sometimes, there would be a false note, an experience lived differently, a person not recalled, and I would falter, fail at remembering and fulfilling what was expected of her. I found it a bit more difficult to deal with her life in school, though I enjoyed it all the more for its difference from mine.

I had always been keenly aware of my marked difference from others of my age group and I consistently failed at societal interactions, though how exactly to remedy the situation, I did not know. To find myself suddenly surrounded by so many people, so many friends, was a novel experience, one I greatly enjoyed in the beginning for it had never happened to me before. I was much in demand. Apparently my other self had a hand at almost every organization in school, from the student council to the school paper to the photography club. The phone at home would not stop ringing and my cell, a new one programmed with the numbers of people I knew but had never been friends with, would constantly be filled with their messages.

The seven days passed in a whirl of activity. When the woman called to ask if I would like to be pulled back into my reality, I told her no. Why would I? Here, I felt no isolation. People did not treat me with indifference. I mattered. I belonged. My life was perfect. Or so I thought.

I should have known.

Nothing remains in stasis. The universe is not a stagnant place. Nothing can remain perfect forever. Entropy will get you every time. I enjoyed all the attention and the accolades heaped on me, but soon the pressure got to be too much. I felt restless, hounded. People expected so many things from me, encroached on my time to the point where I felt as though I were being pulled in too many conflicting directions. I couldn't cope. I had no mechanism to handle that sort of pressure.

I found out that it was just as easy to feel isolated while surrounded by people as it was while alone. To make myself feel better, I watched the other me as she tried to acclimatize herself to her surroundings — my life. There is a function in the tablet that allowed me to replay recorded events as though I were watching a movie. In the beginning, she was as miserable as me, probably more, because at least I knew what had happened. She just woke up one day with a different life. I watched her approach people that she knew and was friends with only to be rebuffed because I did not know them, did not normally interact with them. When she tried to talk to the equivalent of her boyfriend in my world, he only looked at her strangely and walked away. That night she cried herself to sleep; I felt equal parts guilt and aversion. How could she cry over a boy? How could she permit herself such weakness? I liked him too, but never, not once, did I allow him that much power to hurt me. It was her own fault for being so careless.

Our lives paralleled in a strange way. When there was an exam in my school, there was also one in hers. When there was a play at her school, a play was also being staged in mine. I tried to make decisions according to how she did things. I tried to maintain her life, or at least a part of it. Most of the organizations she was a member of meant nothing to me, but I did try to stay in them though it took much effort on my part. She, on the other hand, did not live her life the same way as mine. Despite the difference in how other people perceived us in her world and in mine, she kept on as she was until, after a while, just as how her perfect life began to crash around me, she was gradually turning my life into another version of hers.

It took a few tries and a couple of months, but soon she began to thrive. My parents, initially surprised by the changes in my behavior, began to take the change in stride. I was left breathless with hurt the first time I witnessed my father comment on how much I had changed, how happy I seemed, and how glad he was for it. I felt gratified every time my younger brother grimaced when my other self behaved in a way drastically different from me. “You’re weird,” he would say with a roll of his eyes. I loved him all the more.

As for her boyfriend, funny how it turned out that I didn’t know him at all. He had always been part of my idea of a perfect life but as it was, I wasn’t as affected as I thought I’d be when he asked to break up with me. He wasn’t mine to lose to begin with. He was the least of my worries.

My relationship with her family was similar to the one I had with mine. It was clear that they loved her, and by extension me, the one who had taken her place. There were times though when *her* parents looked at me with concern, asked if something was wrong, because I was not performing as well as their daughter had. I was miserable. *Her* brother frowned at me all the time and asked me “What’s wrong with you?” every chance he got. I did try, but he seemed to sense that something was amiss. He even asked me one time if I was all right and the genuine concern in his voice made something in me ache to get back home.

It was one thing to be unhappy with my life, but to be unhappy living the life of another was something else. I knew I needed to do something to fix everything but I was at a loss as to what course of action to take. True the tablet continued to work, but whenever I tried calling the number that the woman had used to contact me, it was always out of reach, the signal too weak. I even returned to the quadrangle, at the same exact spot I had found myself at the beginning, hoping that the proximity to the point of spatial intersection would help boost the signal, but I still couldn’t reach the woman using her number. I tried connecting the tablet to a booster kit to help with the signal. I used a router and downloaded applications from the Internet. For all intents and purposes it was still a tablet after all and it allowed itself to be used as such. Nothing worked.

Then, almost by accident, I hit on it. The answers to the most complex questions are usually simple, elegant, brief, and beautiful — like Euler’s Identity and Einstein’s mass-energy equivalence, complex mathematics

reduced to barely an inch of solution. This is the principle behind Occam's Razor and this is what slapped me in the face one afternoon as I fiddled with the woman's tablet in the quad after class. There was a function on the gadget, the Contact Service Provider. I accessed it and the tablet initiated the communication. It was connecting! When the woman answered my call, her face appeared on the screen. She looked bemused. I informed her of my desire to return.

"Oh my dear, I'm sorry," she replied, not sounding sorry at all. "The portal has closed. I told you, once the days are done, our arrangement becomes permanent. You can no longer cross into this reality. That would be dangerous to the fabric of space and time. You might cause a rip and then where will we all be?"

I knew this, at least theoretically. Fissures formed when stretching the fabric of space and time. "But you did it once! You can do it again. You have to!"

"You've expended your potential energy. You know you can only travel from a higher energy frequency into a lower one. The reverse, as of now, cannot be done. There is nothing I can do."

"You can't! You can't do this to me..."

"Oh but isn't this what you wished for?" she asked me. "Didn't you say it was the exact same world? You were correct in that assumption. It is exactly the same world as yours. Each parallel is created from potential, remember? A choice not taken, a test not passed, a love never loved, even a sandwich left uneaten."

"I don't understand!"

"Whether or not you wish to continue lying to yourself is none of my concern."

"I don't want to be here anymore. I want my old life."

"And you do have it," she smiled. "You see my dear, in another world, we've never met." She bid me goodbye and dropped the call. I tried to contact her again several times but the CSP option had ceased to be effective. I couldn't even view my old world, my old life, my other self. That function too had been locked.

Determinism, they say, is a philosophical belief that each occurrence is based on the preceding action — it was Newtonian, Karmic, Heaven

and Hell, Crime and Punishment. It made sense. It was my decision and I found I could blame no one but myself.

By the end of the school year, people had begun to turn on me, thinking me a changed person. The only friends I was left with were the self-same people I had in my original world. I was astonished to find that this time around, I did not mind. Why had I been so unhappy before? This mirror world is almost the same exact place, populated by the same exact people as the ones in my world. I was the only independent variable, the x in the equation. I could be happy here, I knew that now, but the desire to go back home, to make amends, was a constant, nagging ache in my chest. I didn't belong here. I needed to find a way to get back.

To stave off the loneliness, I carried the tablet around, using it as much as I could and sometimes trying, though in vain, to see if perhaps this time I could contact the woman again — persuade her to let me go back. It never did work again though, not after that first time.

III.

There are no coincidences. The law of large numbers assures us of this. Still, I can't help but describe the manner in which Professor Rilke entered my life as something of a meaningful coincidence. The first time I met her was on the third year of my study in CalTech. I entered the classroom and there she was, immaculately dressed in a charcoal grey suit. She was tall, blonde, and blue-eyed with not a hair out of place. She could have been the poster girl for Nordic superiority had she been so inclined.

I had enrolled in Hum/Pl 9, a class called Knowledge and Reality, because it promised to examine the nature of the world, knowledge and the self. The course description stated that one of the topics to be discussed was the quantum enigma which is a particular interest of mine — I've found that things always get more interesting when consciousness comes into play. Professor Rilke was the assigned instructor.

Initially, I thought we would get along as she herself had an MS in the field of Physics, but on the first day of classes, she had, upon learning my major, looked me over and inquired if I thought I had the gumption to fin-

ish the course. When I answered in the affirmative she smirked at me and rattled off the Copenhagen Interpretation, explaining to her non-physics students that “according to this interpretation, no property of a microscopic object exists until it is produced by observation.” She shook her head at me as though this was somehow my fault. “Reality explained away so succinctly. A pretty delusion all you physicists subscribe to in order to circumvent an inconvenient truth.” She raised an eyebrow. “How craven ...”

Imagine my surprise when a few days before the end of the semester, I found myself summoned to her room. The reason behind the summons was not clear, only that she wanted to speak to me. She had been unaccountably antagonistic towards me since the beginning of the semester, always teetering on the brink of being unprofessional but knowing just when to rein herself in. I had considered dropping her class after the first day but had decided to stick with it instead of allowing her to run me off. I had a goal to fulfill and I wasn’t about to let her stop me from attaining it. I missed my family. I wanted to go home.

It’s been five years, nine months and two days since the last time I spoke to the fortune teller. I’ve moved from Manila to Pasadena, built a life here for myself. My surrogate family has been supportive and loving, but my awareness of the true state of things has prevented me from assimilating fully into their fold. In Pasadena, away from the life I had stolen, how difficult it had been to finally own up to the truth of it. But now I feel more at ease. Here I have more freedom to be myself.

The tablet still worked. I carried it around with me all the time. People often inquired as to why I bothered with such outdated equipment when there were newer, more powerful ones available in the market. I have those too of course; I needed them for my research. My friends surmise that it’s a part of my idiosyncrasy, for every scientist and mathematician has one. How quaint, they say. Not really. It simply afforded me a modicum of comfort.

Sometimes, during my more philosophical moments, I would think about what that woman, the fortune teller, had said about attending CalTech or MIT. Had she been talking about the other me or was it me she had been referring to all along? I had applied to both schools and had been accepted into both. I had chosen CalTech because of its strong theoretical physics department and its smaller, more intimate campus.

If one were to subscribe to the belief that time was not limited to a linear state of causality then could she have known that it was I who would be fulfilling her predictions? I took up Professor Rilke's class thinking it might help me come to terms with this conundrum. The thing about Newtonian Law and Determinism — it's so obvious I can't believe it had slipped my mind — is that they are mere estimates. What is real, on a molecular level, is quantum mechanics. Einstein and Schrödinger knew better. Newton had been debunked. His universal laws are only approximations for the movements of large scale objects. They don't hold true in the microscopic world and it is this world, the world of sight unseen, that I needed to be more familiar with.

I found that the deeper I delved into the quantum world, the less logic had to do with reality. If I depended too much on logic, I would doom myself to the same flaw the Greeks had succumbed to. Not everything that is true is logical. Heisenberg once said that "the experiments about atomic events deal with facts, phenomena as real as any found in everyday life. The atoms themselves however, the elementary particles, are not real but form a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than one of things or facts." I like that description, a world of potentialities and possibilities. I held on to it, made it my mantra. The thought of a photon and an atom in a superposition state that gives way to all possible positions after the photon bounces off an atom and becomes a probability wave moving in all directions gives me comfort. Following this line of logic — if the world is then reduced to wave functions and probabilities — then the possibility existed that I would be able to find my way back. Going home ceases to be an impossible notion.

I rapped on Professor Rilke's door and it opened after a moment's pause. She ushered me inside. I had never been to her office before but the décor, with its sleek lines and minimalist feel, was exactly like I expected her office to be — austere.

"Sit down," she said, gesturing to one of the chairs placed in front of her glass-and-metal desk.

The chair was sturdy and was as comfortable as it looked — which is to say, not at all. I forced myself to keep still and avoid squirming, despite the fact that the metal and leather contraption brought to mind a streamlined electric chair. I placed my messenger bag on the floor and it rested

against my leg. The familiar feel of my ancient tablet through the ratty canvas was a presence I drew comfort from.

Professor Rilke did not sit down. She stood behind her desk and continued to loom over me, her arms crossed and her demeanor cold. I had never felt her to be a comforting person, and her flinty blue eyes, as they stared me down, did nothing to disabuse me.

“You’re a mole from the Blacker House aren’t you Miss Mendoza? Do you enjoy living there?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“The House of Fucking Geniuses, am I right? Tell me, do you still have the letters HOFG running along the tunnel walls?” She held up a hand. “No, no, never mind, I don’t really care.” A sigh. “You are a physicist, yes? Well, you want to be... you’ll be pursuing graduate work?”

I nodded.

“Have you thought about which group you’d like to join for research? You work on quantum gravity yes? The Particle Theory Group I think will be particularly suited to you,” she smiled. “Before you decide though... I’d like to know: what did you think of some of the subjects we took up this semester? They weren’t at all very scientific. More metaphysical perhaps, certainly not the science you know. Not the kind of physics you are used to, in any case. Have you retained anything or did you simply accomplish the course work to get it over with?”

“I’ve learned many things. And they were very helpful in broadening my understanding of...” A curt motion of her hand cut me off. She was being rude and her line of questioning was strange but, so far, as in countless other times before, she hadn’t really said anything that would warrant a complaint. I waited.

“I hate pandering, Miss Mendoza. It’s undignified and a waste of time, don’t you agree? Why don’t you explain to me please, what an odic force is, if you really did retain as much as you claim.”

I started. “I’m sorry, Professor, am I being quizzed?” I could feel the furrow between my brows deepen in displeasure. I endeavored to smooth it out and attempted a smile. I failed at both.

A slim, blonde eyebrow flew up in response. “I suppose you are at that. Any objections?”

I shook my head and reminded myself that the end of term was only a couple of days away. I had tolerated her thus far. I could do so for a little while longer. It would have been easier had she shown the same degree of antipathy towards everybody else. However, it seemed as if she had singled me out.

“Any time now, Ms. Mendoza.”

“I’m sorry, Professor. Odic force... from what I remember... it is said to be the universal fluid, the vital energy that pervades all of nature.”

“Give me an aspect of this force.”

“Objects charged with this force can influence each other at a great distance. The force itself is said to show properties similar to electromagnetism.”

She smiled. “Does this remind you of anything Ms. Mendoza?”

“I’m sorry, Professor...”

She tutted. “I dislike mindless apologies. Think, Ms. Mendoza. What you said about odic forces. Does it remind you of anything?”

“Quantum Mechanics,” I said after a pause. “Because the same holds true. The theory states that observation of one object can greatly affect the behavior of another distant object, despite the lack of any physical force connecting the two.”

She nodded her head in approval. “Very good. That is correct. However, it must be noted that unlike the case in magnetism, those charged with similar odic polarities are *attracted* to each other and not repelled.” She smiled again. “An interesting facet of this force is the inherent paradox in its behavior — that it can be both particulate like fluid and energetic like light waves. It echoes the wave-particle paradox of light. But what you have to understand, really, is what the odic force is. Put simply, it is energy. It has as many names and elucidations as there are cultures and belief systems in the world. Knowledge corresponds despite the separation due to physical location. It’s inevitable — the human brain trying to make sense of the world it inhabits — though it doesn’t always do a very good job.”

I nodded.

“You must be wondering why I asked to meet you. I must admit that I did not expect to be impressed by the paper you submitted for your finals. Consider my expectation thoroughly subverted.”

It took a moment for her meaning to sink in, and when it did, it was so unexpected that I found myself unable to speak for a moment. When I managed to force a few words out, they sounded like a garbled yelp. True to form, Professor Rilke cocked a derisive eyebrow my way. She gave me an amused smile. “I like what you wrote about the correlation of the Earth’s ley lines and vortices to the chakras of the human body. It’s a paper that has been written before of course, but I enjoyed your take on it. I commend the effort and thoroughness of your research.”

“Thank you, Professor...”

“I give credit where it is due. In your research, could you reiterate, off the top of your head, what you learned about vortices?”

“Vortices are high energy spots on earth, supposedly caused by the planet’s electromagnetic field. They are said to be connected by ley lines. NASA research has proven that our own energy fields, human energy fields, are attuned to certain earth waves that oscillate between seven to eight cycles per second.”

“Hmmm... I’m curious. Why did you choose to work on this particular topic?”

“Because of the connections formed, because of the coordinates and the geometry formed. The representations of some of the chakra types remind me of Calabi-Yau shapes.” I began to wonder what she was trying to get at with her line of questioning. I tried to keep the suspicion from my eyes but I could feel the furrow forming in my forehead again. I squirmed in my seat, the hard metal in the contraption discomfiting me further.

“Did you encounter vile vortices in your study?”

“A little, though I didn’t dwell on them too much.”

“What can you recall?” she asked as she walked over to stand next to the 50-inch screen mounted on her wall. “If there is anything at all?”

“I know that there are twelve of them. Also, that they are called the Devil’s Graveyards.”

“Yes, that’s true,” she said with a nod. I watched her initialize the screen to show a map of the Earth. “The twelve together form an icosahedron.” The map folded to show a rotating globe overlapped by a twenty-faced polyhedron. “Ivan Sanderson, the founder of the Society for the Unexplained, was quite involved in investigating ship and plane disappear-

ances linked to the paranormal. Ten of his vile vortices can be found in the tropic region of the earth, distributed equally between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn.” She pointed out the location of each one on the screen, each part she touched becoming marked with a red dot. “The remaining two can be found in the north and south poles, here and here.” She smiled at me. “This brings us to 1973 when three Russian scientists extended Sanderson’s theory. They proposed that the earth had twelve pentagonal plates that made up a matrix of cosmic energy.”

The globe shifted and became a map overlaid by a planetary grid made up of a complex mix of polyhedrons. “It is said that the sixty-two junctions produced by the intersection of any three plates have proven to be sites of anomalies and mysterious phenomena. Now, of the twelve, there are three areas which are the most popular, the most active. These are the Bermuda Triangle, the South Atlantic Anomaly, and of course, the Dragon’s Triangle in the Devil’s Sea.”

It was all very interesting really, but something inside me was telling me to go. This woman had an agenda. Our conversation had ceased to be about academia and my future in it quite a while ago. This was no longer a talk between a student and her teacher. A feeling of awareness, of entrapment washed over me. I stood up. “I don’t really understand what this has to do with me, professor. With all due respect, we never took this up in class and I’m really not in the position to comment on...”

She motioned for me to sit down, her frosty blue eyes brooking no argument. “Quiet! I’ll ask for your opinion when I need it. Right now what I need from you is your attention, your mind. This has been a long time coming. Surely you must sense that.”

I stared at her, felt the gravity of truth in her words, and obeyed.

“Look at this, in the region of Asia right here off the coast of Japan between Iwo Jima and Marcus Island, almost exactly opposite the Bermuda Triangle. That is Ma-no Umi, the Sea of the Devil. It doesn’t appear on any of the official global maps but it’s there...” With quick motions of her fingers on the screen, she zoomed out of the Dragon Triangle and showed in a broader angle, the continent of Asia. “If you were to incorporate the world grid, the new one by Becker and Hagens,” as she said this, the planetary grid shifted and became even more intricate, “look here, see how even the land masses are shaped, how they correspond to the pattern? Even with

your Philippines, right here on the bottom, see how its curve follows this circle here?”

I pressed my back against my chair. Like this, eyes bright and voice intent, Professor Rilke reminded me of *the fortune teller*, despite the difference in their looks and general demeanor. My heart began to race and I felt a faint trace of fear slither down my spine. Did she *know* about me?

“Obviously the vortex is very strong here in this spot.” She pointed to the Dragon’s Triangle. “The Devil’s Graveyards, these vile vortices, are areas of the earth where disappearances occur, mechanical failures, time-space distortions. Explorers have disappeared if they were unlucky enough to cross these places at the wrong time of the lunar and planetary alignments. These factors serve as switches that activate particular areas. Look here, the green dots represent an approximation of anomalous disappearances and where they occurred.”

The number of green dots that appeared astounded me.

“Those are just disappearances, mind you. Miss Mendoza, are you all right? You seem very uncomfortable. Shall I guess the reason? You are baffled, I suppose. Why am I telling you this? Well, because you see ... aren’t you an anomaly yourself?”

I kept my face impassive and I looked her in the eye. “Excuse me?”

“It all sounds so very esoteric doesn’t it, but you should know. What, no comment? Nothing to say? All right, I suppose I can understand your reticence. I’ll tell you a story then, so listen. Sanderson went about his investigations and in one of them he found the story of a pilot who had flown very near one of the vile vortices in Hawaii. He had been flying with passengers, maintaining constant radio contact with tower officials, when suddenly he found himself flying blind. His equipment had been rendered useless and he had lost all communications with the outside world. He flew anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour, relying only on his sight and his instincts. Then, just as suddenly as it began, the experience ended and he found himself able to get in touch with the tower once more. What is so strange about the incident is that for the people in the tower, no such time had elapsed. One moment, the pilot was speaking to them about his coordinates, and in the next moment he was in a panic, calling out that he had lost communication and that he was flying blind, had flown 350 miles without the aid of any instrument. Time is relative yes, but by that much?”

She leveled me with a glare that brooked no argument. “How could such a thing happen?”

I answered automatically, before I could stop myself. “They must have entered into a time warp, a different dimensional frequency unaffected by time.”

“Exactly so,” she nodded, the note of approval unmistakable in her voice. “That’s what I think as well. You’ve seen how particles behave, existing simultaneously in all directions until observed. The relative weakness of gravity is explained when other dimensions are factored in. What do you think about the possibility of parallel universes? Do you believe that they exist?”

How could I not? I grew cautious but nodded nonetheless. “Yes, I do. But it’s all theory right now, mathematically consistent, but theoretical still. But what does all this have to do with me? I’m not an anomaly.”

“Oh, aren’t you? I have seen you around. More than that, I have *sensed* you. You possess a great deal of odic force, though much less than the levels you are capable of carrying. You were depleted somehow, weren’t you? Someone must have taken it away.”

I kept silent, my heart racing. “What?”

“You don’t belong here,” she stated matter-of-factly. “You’re from an alternate plane.”

“You’re insane!” I cried, all the while wondering if I should just tell her everything. Could I trust her? This was the first time anyone had ever mentioned anything even remotely related to my not belonging to this reality. I stared at her, her too-old eyes looking out from a too-young face. How old was she anyway? Not even past her mid-thirties, only a few years older than myself. What would she be getting out of this?

Professor Rilke snorted, the sound seemed obscene coming from her fine-boned face. “You *are* an anomaly. It’s easy to see when you know what you’re looking for. I knew from the moment you stepped into my classroom. You don’t belong here. You carry it around with you everywhere. Your energy distorts the matter around you.”

I looked down accusingly at the bag resting on my calf. Was the tablet the reason? Or was it really me? I toed my bag away. “Can you sense any fluctuations in the level of the odic energy I emit? If what you say is true,

then haven't you considered that perhaps I've simply served as a conduit to an outside source?"

She laughed. "That tablet of yours is a part of it, but mostly it's coming from you."

"How do you ... how can you ... ?"

"You should let me help you. It's the reason you're so intent on understanding gravity, isn't it? You think it might be the key. That's a smart inference. What is it that you want? To explore? To replicate the process? You and I, we could help each other. There are others like you, just as there are people like me. We are the ones who know about this phenomena occurring."

"We? People like me?"

A sardonic twist of her lips preceded another laugh. "Do you honestly think that you are the only one? We are dealing with quantities as large as infinity here, worlds splitting again and again enumerable times." She lifted an eyebrow and regarded me with a level stare. "Well then, are you interested?"

"Interested?" I repeated, something like hope beginning to unfurl inside of me. I squelched it before it could fully bloom. After years of nothing, here was this woman, this professor, presenting me with the means with which to attain my goal. It didn't feel real.

"You're being tiresome, Miss Mendoza, and it's starting to annoy me. You were not this slow in my class. Yes, I'm asking you if you are interested. Do you want to learn more? Follow Alice down the Rabbit Hole, step through the looking-glass, look far down into the abyss and have it look back at you?"

I stared at her quietly for a moment, needing a bit of time to process what was happening. I felt excited and anxious, wanting to believe and yet afraid to let myself hope. Should her promise prove false, if this was all some kind of psychotic scam, the worst case scenario would be that I'd end up dead in a desert somewhere. Taking this into account, would the risk be worth it? As of now, Professor Rilke's offer was my best chance at finding my way back home.

"Well?" she prompted. The look on her face told me that she knew exactly what my answer was going to be.

“Okay,” I said with more confidence than I actually felt. Whether or not I *could* or *should* trust her did not matter. In the end, it all boiled down to me, to whether or not I was willing to risk it ... to risk everything for this one chance.

Yes I was.

“I’m interested,” I said. “Let’s do it.”

This Old House

Gian Carla D. Agbisit

Juliet opened her eyes.

Lying on her left side, facing the wall, she saw, through the green *mosquitero*, a child's doodle that looked like a balloon. She smiled, convincing herself that fifteen years ago, the four-year-old Shari drew it for her. She crawled out of the *mosquitero*, stood up, and looked around for her eyeglasses.

The bedroom was a catacomb of memories. The heavy wooden door, that was not really a door because it had never been closed, opened into the room, like a mouth frozen in the middle of a yawn. The rough white walls still bore the girls' doodles even though they had all gone to the city to attend college. Among all the indecipherable symbols and shapes, written in blood red, was the first word Lana had learned how to spell: NIDO. And there was the balloon, suddenly looking like a sperm cell.

At the center of the room was a bed, a couple of pillows, and a rumpled blanket. Across from the bed was a wooden closet — inside, a few empty hangers displayed on the rack, like collar bones without the skin. Beside the closet were two filing cabinets cold to the touch from the air conditioning. Leo kept them locked; with the keys worn like a warden does with prison keys. Sometimes, Juliet would have nightmares about what could be inside them. And she was grateful that Leo did not open them when she was around. When they were cooled like this, she would imagine that inside were cadavers waiting for their embalmer.

Juliet's mobile phone started buzzing. Text messages had been flooding her phone since the day before. The girls had called a few times to greet her in advance. They had been asking about her plans. "Ma, will you go on a date with Pa?" Lana giggled. "Ooh- uyyyy..." Shari said in a sing-song voice. *He has not met up with the girls yet.*

Manang Azon, upon learning that Leo had gone to Manila on a business trip, called to invite her for dinner. "I prepared fruit salad and I ordered *pancit* just for you," Manang said. "It's your birthday; you should spend it with family." *She must be lonely*, Juliet thought.

Since their mother died, Manang Azon had always taken good care of the family. For Juliet, Manang Azon was her mother. When Manang started working in Manila, Juliet remembered tagging along, sleeping on Manang's lap as the *Pantranco* pushed against the night. When she was 12, whenever that soldier would visit Manang Azon in their boarding house in Sampaloc, Juliet would always be close by, sticking her tongue out at the visitor. *Had Tatang approved of the soldier, would Manang Azon have married?*

After taking early retirement, Manang Azon built her own primary school and she had been offering Juliet a teaching post since then. "Juliet, this is good for you, now that the kids are grown up. It also helps that you have your own money. You could buy anything that you want without asking Leo."

"Leo wants the house guarded," Juliet reasoned, adding, "Leo provides well for the family."

After their father's death last year, however, Juliet's unmarried sister seemed to have all the time in the world — something she spent cooking *malagkit* every Saturday and checking in on Juliet. *Today, I have all the time in the world, too. But Leo is probably very busy. He hasn't called yet.*

After taking her bath, she opened her closet and picked a half empty-lotion bottle. It made squeaky sound when she squeezed it. **One: buy lotion.**

She surveyed the room. A framed family photograph hung on the wall, its surface, a little dusty. Well, everything looked a little dusty and gray and cluttered. Since Leo fired his secretary, Juliet had been busy with all his paperwork. Juliet saw this as an opportunity to apply what she had learned in college. After all, she, too, was a Commerce graduate. Juliet would stay up late, making financial statements for Leo to affix his signature to.

She squeezed the bottle again. *If it hadn't been for Leo's filing cabinets, which he insists should be in the bedroom, there could have been a space for a dresser. But no matter, necessities first*, she shook her head — as if making the idea go away. *Necessities first. One: clean the room. Two: Buy lotion.*

She started by clearing up spaces, taking out empty lotion bottles, empty sachets of a whitening product, and a button or two, from the cluttered closet. She pulled the last drawer and discovered about a dozen issues of “This Old House.” It was a DIY magazine that Leo’s brother had subscribed to when he was in the States. He brought some home and gave these to Juliet and Leo or in her opinion, disposed of these by dumping them on Juliet and Leo. They had been stacked in a chest in her closet since then.

The latest so far was the 1997 issue. She flipped through the magazine and saw a picture of an old couple. Behind them was a white two-storey house, the same house featured in the cover and written in big bold letters:

“A man builds a house. A woman creates a home.”

When Leo and Juliet were newlyweds, she had wanted a two-storey house with a small garden. Leo, on the other hand, reasoned that a bungalow would be more suitable for raising children. “Stairs are dangerous,” he said; and so she acceded. For a while, she maintained a garden and it attracted orchid-lovers. Visitors would ask for cuttings and passersby would crane their necks to look at the flowers. But when they bought a car, her garden turned into a driveway — Leo had everything buried in cement.

Juliet had been smiling at the picture in the magazine when the phone rang, breaking into her reverie. *It must be Leo*, she thought. But it was not. It was Juliet’s other sister, Manang Evelyn, greeting Juliet and at the same time complaining about her own life. “*Buti ka pa,*” she started. “*E, ako.* Look at me! I do everything to please his family. Taking care of his mother, paying the bills! Do they appreciate it? NO! And he sides with them. Am I not his wife?”

Manang Evelyn ranted for five minutes more, promised Juliet to visit some time, then hung up. Juliet felt sorry for her sister. Evelyn and her family were still living with her husband’s mother, and God knew the kind of hell Evelyn had to put up with.

Juliet looked around. *I may not have a garden or a two-storey house or a dresser in my room, but everything is within my control.* Her sister was right. *Buti pa ako,* Juliet thought as she stared at the telephone cord.

By noon, Juliet had cleaned their room and had moved to the kitchen for a cup of instant noodles. She was humming a birthday song while rearranging her teacups, which actually functioned as coffee cups. She washed her Pyrex serving dishes and noticed one of *Manang Azon's* Tupperware pieces. Juliet could not help but laugh at the sight of it. She had been convincing her sister to "invest" in glassware. "*Manang*, Pyrex looks nice on the table. And they come in sets, so you get a lot with one purchase. Good for the family." Juliet echoed *Manang Evelyn's* sales talk.

But *Manang Azon* insisted that plastic containers were more practical. "They don't break. More durable," *Manang Azon* puffed.

Juliet and *Manang Evelyn* thought otherwise, until one serving dish accidentally slipped off Leo's hands. "It was not washed thoroughly," he said. "It was greasy." That was his apology.

Two: Return Tupperware. Three: Buy lotion. Holding the container, she made a mental note. It was from her last visit, when *Manang Azon* had begged her to stay for the night. "Leo is waiting for me. He thinks I'm coming back. I haven't even cooked him dinner yet." She excused herself, pushing the guilt to the back of her head. *She's my sister; she'll understand,* she remembered thinking. *A lonely sister is better than a suspecting husband.*

It was four in the afternoon when Leo finally called. "I've been very busy and so are the girls. I took them to dinner yesterday. They're asking for a raise in allowance."

Silence. *Dinner yesterday,* she thought. She waited for more.

"I thought they needed it, so... And I opened ATM accounts for them, so it would be easier to send them money. More convenient."

Smiles are good in masking feelings but surely not when on the phone. Nonetheless, though she was sure her husband could not see her, she forced one. "I think so too," Juliet said. Pause.

"Oh, yeah. Happy birthday! I almost forgot; I've been very busy *kasi*. Well, what do you want for a gift?"

"Really?" she replied. But inside her, it sounded more like "REAL-LY?!" It just came out wrong.

But the one at the other end of the line was oblivious to all this. He laughed. “Of course. Anything! For twenty years, don’t tell me, you still don’t believe in me. Didn’t I tell you I would not let you die of hunger?” This line never failed to amuse him. Like a joke only he could understand. “So, what do you want?” he asked.

Juliet mumbled, “Lotion.” She said goodbye, then hung up. Lana has been calling to ask if Juliet and Leo had gone out on a date, yet. “Where did you go, Ma? What did you do?” Juliet looked around. *Dinner yesterday.*

The bedroom looked dark; but thinking about it, it had always looked that way. She fixed her gaze at the filing cabinets. They towered over her, like a box waiting for Pandora to unleash its Hell. *What is your secret?*

The phone rang again. “Juliet, *ha.*” *Manang Azon* reminded her of the fruit salad she had prepared and of the *pancit* she had ordered. Juliet rubbed her eyes, as one does after waking up. She looked at the filing cabinets, then at the doodles on the wall. Then, she tossed a few clothes into a duffel bag, went to the kitchen for the plastic food container, grabbed the keys, and went out.

It had been a week and Leo said he was still on a business trip. But Juliet had been so busy that she did not really mind. Juliet looked around the room. The filing cabinets had been moved to Leo’s office and had been replaced by a dresser, on top of which were bottles of lotion, and perfumes. Juliet wanted an old fashioned dresser — the one that had three oval shaped mirrors that would allow her to look at herself in different angles. But they did not make that kind anymore, and so she had to settle for what she could get. Juliet opened her closet. What were once empty hangers now proudly displayed her new clothes. Juliet ran her fingers through a sequined blouse. ***One: Accept the teaching post.***

A *mambobote* passed by and from the room’s window, Juliet called out to him. When he stopped, she hurried out, cradling the issues of “This Old House” in her arms. And through the grills of the gate, she passed the magazines to the boy. For a very brief moment, before walking away, the boy stared at the picture on the cover of the 1997 issue, and then he grinned.

Juliet, on the other hand, was looking at her own house and its cemented driveway. And for a very brief moment, she closed her eyes. ***One: Talk to Leo.***

She took a deep breath.

The Lost Season

Augusto Antonio Aguila

Sissy, a small plum-colored pig with ribbons tied around her two ears, was whining about the stolen chocolate cakes that she had placed inside the refrigerator. She started crying. Her tears were coming out of her snout instead of her eyes. The other animals did not know what to do because they knew that she always complained about her little trivial concerns. Besides, Sissy liked getting everyone's attention all the time. She wanted them to fuss over her.

A motherly porcupine was trying to pacify Sissy by giving her some fruit-flavored candies but she cried even louder. The skunk, the bitchiest animal in the apartment, with a British accent yet, raised his right eyebrow till they almost reached his scalp. He found Missy annoying. He was not interested in the whiny pig's drama. He whispered to the fur-coated armadillo, "Do we have to see this all over again?" A buffed and tattooed hippo and a voluptuous warthog were eyeing each other. The latter was batting her eyelashes. It was actually hippo who had eaten all of Sissy's chocolate cakes. Nobody knew except the object of his affection, the warthog. After all the drama, they were all singing some country ditty which seemed to have solved all of Sissy's problems.

Arthur had no other choice but to watch the ridiculous stuff on television. He had already outgrown cartoon shows but he had to distract himself from the nervousness he felt. The receiving room had a very strong smell, like flowers for the dead. It was probably the air freshener the secretary had bought. Arthur felt a little nauseous. The room was intended to

create an air of authority yet it only looked gaudy. The large painting on the wall facing the sofas depicted a smiling woman seated on the river bank biding her time watching the water flowing. Arthur thought it was a lazy picture; it made him feel sleepy. He noticed that whoever the painter was didn't even bother to sign it: Perhaps, he didn't want to be associated with his own work or was ashamed of it. The nuns might have bought it in some flea market. Right beside the painting was a bronze marker with the engraved names of the past presidents of the University since 1910, as well as the name of the incumbent president who started holding office three years ago. It was difficult to read because they all had similar names like Teresa, Matilda, Carlota, and about a dozen Marias. But there was one who had a sexy name — Sister Vivianne, who didn't finish her term. Another plainly-named Sister Maria took over the year Sister Vivianne was voted president. This happened sixty years ago. "What could've happened during her term?

Arthur thought, now there is a story. Did something scandalous happen? Did she die during her term? Did she elope with someone? Did she get pregnant? Did the other sisters connive to oust her?" Arthur thought.

The sofas all had black leather seat covers which were in total contrast with the feminine painting. The brown cloth that covered the center table as well as the fake oversized sunflowers that screamed at visitors looked totally out of place. They did not match the black leather. The thick pile in the *nito* rack was an assorted collection of back issues of magazines about housekeeping, family life, and travel. The kind no one wanted to read. One of them was even dated February 2002, which was eight years ago. Nobody had bothered to replace them with new reading materials. It was like they were placed in the rack as mere decorative ornaments to give the receiving area an "office" kind of feel.

The secretary, Mrs. Cabote, a woman in her forties looked more like a housemaid than a secretary. She was wiping her table with a soiled rag. She was laughing at the animals who were all singing. Ramon was amused when she greeted him with "Gud murning ser. Jas wit por Sester Carluta ha. Shel be around en awhile." She did not look like a good choice for an office frontliner. The only word in the sentence that she had pronounced correctly was "awhile". She had made an effort to have her hair rebonded, probably in some cheap hair salon — the type one sees usually beside a

hardware store or *sari-sari* store. The hairstyle made her face look more rotund. Her only saving grace was that she was at least nice to people and had a pleasant attitude. Rumor had it that she was one of the nun's relatives. Most of the employees in the University were anyway. They were the eyes-and-ears of the nuns.

Arthur looked at his watch. It was ten-thirty. He was told he had to be around at nine for an interview. He was tense but a little excited, too. His hands were a little sweaty. He wiped them with his already wet handkerchief. He must learn how to relax. He didn't want the University president to think that he was some nervous ninny. He had received a call yesterday from Sister Carlota's office telling him that she wanted to see him about some urgent matter. He had a feeling what it was about. Some of his colleagues in the Department of Humanities were teasing him that he was going to be appointed the new director of the Office for Academic Concerns, the department responsible for providing teachers with training needed for their academic growth and more importantly, their promotion. It also looked into every profile to see whether teachers could be promoted based on the quality and quantity of output they produced during a period of three years.

If ever he would really become director, it would also be his responsibility to provide training workshops that would fit the needs of every college. It was a tall order, but he had a strong feeling he could do it. He was a hard-working man. Aside from the high salary which was triple his present pay, he was happy that at twenty-eight he would be trusted to take on a big responsibility by the university. It took most people decades to be promoted as Administrators and some never saw it happen in their lifetime. Some of the administrators he knew — a number of them nuns — whispered to him that he would be getting good news very soon. They seemed to be more excited for him than he was himself. They all told him to keep mum about the whole thing. But there were those who openly congratulated him on his new appointment.

Gossip in a Catholic academic institution spread like wildfire, just like in a small town. Everyone knew that an employee in the accounting department was trying to lose weight, and that a spinsterish teacher had gone on a date with a handsome and much younger man; they knew which nuns were quarreling about vases and flower pots, and the number of times

the librarian had been tardy; they knew that the security guard was not a Catholic and that, the gardener fed the nuns' pet dalmatian and dachshund with walnuts.

Arthur just smiled and shrugged his shoulders every time they told him about the rumored promotion, but he was the type who did not believe in mere hearsay. He decided to pick a magazine at random from the rack. He flipped the pages and merely looked at the pictures, which were mostly of smiling people embracing one another, a nun teaching children about something, girls and boys laughing. There were articles about the value of unity, reverence for authority, the importance of obedience, living a simple life, and spending the day with orphans. He did not have any intention to read them. What was the point in reading articles that all said the same things? He often wondered why articles of this nature still had to be written when there were more important matters that needed discussing. The terrible things that the three dumb girls on TV were saying got into his nerves.

Arthur was still mindlessly flipping the pages of the boring magazine when a big, masculine-looking woman entered the room. Sister Carlota took big steps on her way to her office. She didn't look at the other people in the room. She ignored Arthur and her secretary's greeting. She just walked past them and she was inside her office in a few seconds.

Mrs. Cabote smiled sheepishly at Ramon and said "Shel jas cul fur yu. En fayv menits shel be redi." Her phone rang and she answered it immediately. She fidgeted like she too was as tense as Arthur was. "Yis sester... in a pew sekends po...opo...opo...opo...okay po sester..." Mrs. Cabote was saying on the phone. Arthur pitied her because she looked like a slave quaking before her master. After her brief conversation with Sister Carlota, she smiled at Ramon and signaled him to enter the president's office.

Arthur opened the door and immediately greeted the formidable woman seated behind an imposing table. She resembled a bulldog up close with her large nostrils and sagging cheeks. She didn't look at him because she was reading some letters, but her finger pointed at a chair, instructing him to sit down. Her reading glasses made her look much older.

"Thank you *po*, Sister," Arthur replied. He sat on one of the chairs in front of the sister's table. He placed his clasped hands on his lap like a toddler in nursery school trying to look obedient to avoid being scolded by

the teacher. The room was bigger and looked much better than the receiving area. It was also cooler. There was a set of black or brown books and a number of bibles and prayer books neatly stacked in a bookshelf looking like they had never been read. The glass cabinet situated right next to it displayed trophies of different sizes mostly those won in sports events and quiz contests, miniature models of airplanes, ships and vintage cars, expensive-looking statues of male saints, and picture frames that proudly boasted of some of the University's winning moments. The only female image in her room was a framed picture of the Virgin Mary nailed to the wall. There were also sofas inside the office which were replicas of the ones he saw outside.

"I don't understand why these people do not know how to write decent letters," Sister Carlota said in a gruff voice without looking at Arthur. "I'm really disappointed," she continued. He just made a sound like he was amused. He didn't want to make any comment because she was merely expressing her disgust.

"What I don't understand is, these people have MA's and PhD's yet they write such horrible letters. Sometimes, the students even write better. Isn't it ironic, Mr. Peralta?" She finally looked at him.

"Well ...," Arthur just smiled. He didn't know what to say. He was jolted by her icy glare.

"That's why I expect you to write better letters because you have a Ph.D. in Literature. It's unforgivable for someone like you, a literature major, to make grammatical errors like this... I don't know where the fault lies..." She smiled for the first time even though she looked exasperated. Arthur was a little frightened because the most powerful nun at St. Peter's looked more menacing when she smiled.

"I think it would be good to have a training workshop on letter writing to reacquaint faculty members with the form and content of business letters. It's really a handicap, Sister, if academicians do not know even know how to write simple letters," Arthur said.

"Very true, Mr. Peralta, I see your point. You know I think the problem lies in ... don't tell anyone *ha* ... but many of our faculty members and administrators finished their MA's and PhD's in fly-by-night schools. I'm happy that you finished your degree at UST. There must be some policy about those dubious degrees. Anyway..." she said.

"Well, education is the best investment, Sister," Arthur answered.

"I agree. By the way, Mr. Peralta ... can I call you Arthur?"

"*Opo*, Sister."

"I called for you because I have some good news. I hope you will consider it good news..."

Arthur smiled shyly when Sister Carlota said she had good news for him.

"The Sisters' Administrative Council had a meeting last week to discuss new appointments ... and uh ... we believe that we need young blood to occupy some key positions."

Arthur was listening intently.

"I'm sure you know Dr. Vicaros. She had been our Director for Academic Concerns for nine years. That's three terms actually. She will be ending her term at the end of this month. She will be transferred to another office. I don't know if you have heard about it, Arthur? You know how word gets around. She will be the new Director of Property and Maintenance," Sister Carlota revealed to him.

Arthur knew that it was a token administrative position because Dr. Vicaros was no longer effective as Director of Academic Concerns. It was a demotion even if the pay she would be receiving would be the same as her previous position. His colleagues in the College of Liberal Arts were complaining about the kind of seminars they had to attend. It was the same lot every year: test construction, grading system, the art of questioning, and stress management. The nuns knew something was wrong because the number of faculty members attending the seminars decreased every year. News went around last year that the nuns freaked out about having to spend thousands for the food and snacks, and only thirty-two teachers attended the seminar. The worst part was Dr. Vicaros didn't bother to confirm the attendance of the teachers from the deans of the different colleges. That was the last straw. She had to be transferred to another position to spare her from the humiliation, but this time she would have the chance to sink her teeth into janitorial services, food safety, equipment maintenance and repairs.

"And so we decided that you will replace her starting this school year. You think you can handle the job, Arthur?" the sister asked him.

“First of all, Sister, I would like to thank you *po* and the rest of the council for considering me for the position. I have to admit, Sister, that this is the first time for me to be appointed as an administrator, but I am basically a learner and I learn fast. It’s just a matter of learning and mastering of-fice policies and procedures. I know I have to work double time to learn the ropes. It would be, of course, a little difficult at first during the adjustment period but everything, as I have said earlier, can be learned. I always believe, just like what one advertisement said *po*, that whatever the mind can conceive, the body can achieve.” Arthur was careful with his answers. He didn’t want to sound too excited, neither did he elaborate on his inexperience. He avoided the hard-sell trap most candidates for positions fall into. He felt that he just sounded formal, professional, concerned, and matter of fact. Literature had taught him the effect of crisp dialogue in fiction, the art of unsaying the word in poetry, the subtle but direct language of essays.

“You might be a little surprised, Arthur, but we keep track of our teachers’ accomplishments. You may only be in your late twenties but we know that you have achieved quite a lot,” Sister Carlota told Ramon. She enumerated all of them: finishing his PhD in his twenties, winning the best teacher award for six consecutive years, the consistent outstanding rating in the student evaluation, his good reputation in the College of Liberal Arts, his good attendance record. “That is why even if you do not have any administrative experience yet, we think you’d be good for the job. And we think that now is a good time to give young and dynamic achievers like you a chance.” What Sister Carlota was saying was music to his ears.

“So, what do you think, Arthur?” Sister Carlota asked him.

“I’ll do my best, Sister,” he answered.

“I guess that means a yes. I’m glad that you accepted the position. For your information, you’ll be running the office for three years. That’s the initial appointment. If you do well, you’ll get reappointed for another three years,”

“I understand *po*, Sister,” He answered.

Sister Carlota suddenly stood up like she was in a hurry and said, “Well, congratulations, Arthur! We are looking forward to a wonderful working relationship with you. You know that we, the sisters and of course the institution, expect much from you.” She shook his hands firmly.

“Thank you very much Sister. I promise to do my best *po*, Sister,”

Arthur couldn't hide his excitement over the promotion.

"I have no doubt about it. I know that you will be an asset to St. Peter's," she continued. "You'll be starting in about three weeks, just in time for the start of the school year. Dr. Vicaros had already filed for a leave of absence. You may go to your office tomorrow to acquaint yourself with the staff and more importantly the many concerns of the office," she continued.

"I will, Sister. Thanks again *po*," Arthur assured her.

He closed the door of her office. He was smiling to himself. Mrs. Cabote was eyeing him curiously but she too smiled at him. She understood quickly why he was happy.

"Thanks so much. By the way, Mrs. Cabote, I think your new hairstyle looks good on you," Arthur believed what he was saying because he was in a swell mood. Promotions did that to people.

"Uy tenk yu ser! Riband lust wik. Cungrach, ha," she giggled which Arthur found really funny, but he tried to control his laughter.

Arthur left the office. He walked slowly, savoring every word Sister Carlota had said. He would go out with his friends to enjoy the day because in three weeks he would be entering a new phase in his life. He never thought a promotion could come this early in his life. He felt lucky. He promised himself he would work doubly hard to prove the sisters that he was worth the promotion. He never doubted his capacity as a teacher but being an administrator was something new. It would mean he had to stay longer in the university because aside from keeping time in the office, he knew that being a school head meant addressing important concerns beyond office hours if there was a need for it. He had no problem with that. His girlfriend of two years whom he met in a conference some years back would understand. She, too, was a teacher in another university. Everything that concerned his love life had to fall either on a Saturday or Sunday. He was sure she would be happy for him. He couldn't wait to tell her.

On his way down, he bumped into some of his students who were taking advanced courses in summer. They all greeted him. He engaged in some small talk with them. He was in the mood to talk to almost everyone. He felt high. Energetic was probably the right word. He was able to say something about nonsensical things like the current stupid soap opera they were all watching and their favorite snacks in the cafeteria. Arthur re-

alized that this was how it felt to be finally recognized by the University and by his superiors.

But despite the excitement he felt, he was a little worried about certain things, like the many tasks and changes that had to be done in his new office, the people that he must coordinate with in order to facilitate seminars and workshops, the preparation of the budget, the intrigues that came along with being appointed as a school official, the inefficiency of the staff. He did not like the idea of things getting out of control. He was a stickler for order and correct procedure. His friends always teased him about being obsessive-compulsive. He had to stop himself from worrying. There would be time for that when he finally sat as the new Director of Faculty Concerns. At the moment, he was happy. He texted his friends to meet him in their favorite coffee shop in an hour. He'd break the news to them and he knew that they would be happy for him.

Arthur had been in his office only for two weeks. When he had told his dean about the promotion, she gave him a blowout in her office; she bought two big boxes of sausage-and-onion pizza. She gave him some tips on how to become an effective school administrator. Most of the tips were about how to please the nuns. He respected his dean a lot because, aside from her being somewhat like a mentor, she was also like a mother to him. Arthur knew that he was her favorite teacher. His friends were equally excited for him. But there were a few naysayers who wanted to dishearten him by saying that being an administrator was a thankless job. They smirked and did not congratulate him. They wished him luck with a sneer. It was like they secretly wanted him to fail. He detected bitterness in their voices. It was something that Arthur expected. He did not think about it anymore. He could not please everybody. Maybe they thought he was too young to be holding such a high position. But generally most of his colleagues were positive about the chance given to him.

The first few days at the office were toxic. Arthur met his staff which was composed of a secretary who was just another Mrs. Cabote, only younger. He had to teach her basic rules in pronunciation. He was worried that callers who were mostly academicians and educators might think that he was running an agency for people who were in dire need of hired help. It was good that she knew how to use the computer but that was the extent of her skills; Arthur had to revise her letters all the time. He was patient in

teaching her. He did not want to be a “tongue-lashing” boss this early. But at the moment he would perform the role of both boss and secretary. There were also two clerks to assist him. One was a thirty-something woman who loved to laugh at her own jokes; the other was a young man, a casual employee. When Arthur talked to him one late afternoon in the office while they were checking out some files, he learned that this fellow had been a casual employee for three years, but had not complained because he needed the job. Arthur was surprised when he heard this “problem” but he did not worry about it that much because it was the human resource office’s concern. The personnel office was probably working something out for casual employees unless St. Peter’s wanted to cut costs, which was actually happening almost everywhere.

Arthur thought it was ironic that a “problem” like this could happen in a Catholic institution that constantly preached about justice, equality and fighting oppression. He would give himself a few months before he would broach the subject to the head of the human resource office. He was sure that his request would be granted if he presented his staff’s situation objectively.

The first two weeks exposed Arthur to the many issues that had to be addressed. He found out that many faculty members did not get promoted because the supposed certificates that were mentioned in the summary form either got lost or were misplaced. He also discovered that many promotion forms had erasures. He wasn’t sure whether they were erased by the faculty member or by the former director to prevent teachers from getting the promotion they deserved. There were those who didn’t deserve promotion because of lack of points but were promoted nevertheless.

Arthur decided that he would conduct a thorough study of the matter, and when he already had a solution, he would talk to Sister Carlota about it. Arthur also made a listing of all the seminars and workshops the former director conducted, and it was true, after all, that all the colleges had to deal with the same trashy seminars every year. The only changes were the different speakers who were invited to deliver lectures on the same hackneyed topics. Maybe this malpractice was one of the reasons why he was appointed by the nuns who ran the university. They were looking not only for changes but also progress, and maybe even an instrument to clean up the mess.

When Arthur met Dr. Vicaros for the first time, she didn't smile or frown at him. She was very civil when she turned over the responsibility to him. She didn't say much. She told him that everything that he wanted to know about his job could be found in the job description. She did not explain anything to him. After giving him the keys to the office, she just left abruptly before he had any chance to thank her. Arthur did not blame her. He had a very good understanding of people and human nature. The impressive degrees or even the lack thereof did not help much when something was taken away from people, like positions and titles. Everything was considered personal by most people be they chief garbage collector or the company vice-president. Arthur hoped that he would not end up like that. He was afraid that he too might get swallowed by the system. deHeHHe knew that positions in an academic institution were not forever. He was aware of the fact that nobody was indispensable. The first thing that he looked for in his appointment paper was the expiration of his term as director. That expiration date reminded him to keep his feet on the ground and not to put his position in his head.

Arthur felt relieved that Dr. Vicaros's new office was located near the garage that kept two big melon-colored school buses, very far from his office. He was also secretly happy that that he did not have a lot of business to do with Dr. Vicaros unless it concerned complaints about janitors or the equipment to be used in trainings. Simply put, their offices had nothing much to do with each other.

One of the things that Arthur found really amusing during his first few days as an administrator was that people whom he didn't know or who had ignored him when he was still a teacher were suddenly nice to him. One was the director of external affairs, Dr. Miclat, a man in his forties who had a fixed grin on his face and constantly denied that he wore a toupee. The director was the joke secretly shared by everyone in the whole institution. People thought it strange that he was in charge of external affairs because he looked more ridiculous than affable. Rumor had it that he was responsible for obtaining big donations for St. Peter's.

The security guards also became more respectful to him. He found it funny that they all stood straight and saluted him whenever he entered the building. Arthur didn't have a problem with that. If they wanted to do it, that was probably what was expected of them. He just played their game.

He humbly acknowledged their praises but he knew deep inside that many of them did not care about him as a person. All he only wanted to do was to perform his job well and to do his best to make a difference. He wouldn't waste the opportunity given to him.

The conference room was alive despite the drab gray-and-black stripes painted in the middle of the four walls. Everyone important at St. Peter's was present. They had to be. Administrators must make a good impression on the people who appointed them. Arthur was seated on the seventh row. The first administrative consultative meeting would start in a few minutes. He was one of the first to arrive. It wasn't good especially for a newly-appointed administrator to be late. He saw all of them come in — deans, directors, chairpersons, executive secretaries, mostly middle-aged women garbed in their Sunday best. There were only a few males in the room, only about eight. Most of them either smiled or waved at him. There were a only a few who just eyed him curiously but he was sure they had an idea who he was.

Seated on the front row were nuns talking about their maladies like arthritis and migraine. Some administrators huddled together laughing and making funny comments about each other's age. There were those who were talking in whispers, thinking that the other people in the room did not notice that they were exchanging the latest campus gossip. Their very act of trying to conceal something made them even more noticeable. There were five others like him who were just quietly seated. Arthur surmised that they were new administrators like himself. He recognized two of them.

Arthur was wearing his new ivory barong Tagalog to look every inch the part. He knew that it was important to have a good head above one's shoulders but it was equally important to look professional and presentable. It was like giving due respect to the institution. The big bosses liked such an attitude. He didn't dare wear t-shirt and jeans, like a few of those milling around. He noticed that some of the nuns were eyeing them with disgust. First impressions did last.

The administrators started to take their seats when they saw one of the sisters approach the rostrum. The meeting was about to start. She signaled them to stand up for the prayer and the national anthem. Afterwards, Sister Carlota gave her welcome remarks which consisted of the usual talk

about the challenges of the new academic year, a call for support, thanking everyone for a job well done. After her speech, Sister Carlota sat on the first row beside the other nuns. The emcee returned to the rostrum.

“Hello!” the emcee, a short and plump nun, greeted the audience.

“Hi!” the audience responded.

“Hi!” the emcee said

“Hello!” the audience laughed as they responded in their loud voices.

The giggling went on for a few seconds.

Arthur did not see anything funny about it. He thought the hi-hello joke was downright corny.

The emcee told them to stand for the icebreaker to keep them awake. They all had to sing and dance to another corny ditty and make awkward gestures. Arthur had no choice but to sing and dance like the others. He thought he looked stupid dancing in his barong Tagalog. The others looked worse like their hipbones had been temporarily dislocated. He hoped there was no one recording their hideous bending and gyrating. He was afraid it might end up on Youtube. That would have been horrible. It was over in about five minutes but it was like the longest humiliating dance Arthur ever did in his life. He was thankful it was finally over.

The emcee called another nun, the Vice President, to introduce the newly-appointed administrators. Arthur was the third one to be called. He stood up and he received perfunctory applause from the audience. After the last one was called, the Chair of the Department of General Education, the Vice President, started explaining the rationale of the meeting. She told them that the university would be celebrating its one-hundredth year anniversary in November and that they were expected to propose possible activities in the brainstorming session. Arthur already knew about this session because his dean told him to prepare a good project to present in the meeting. He was also informed that the chosen activities would be presented to a higher body that would discuss and approve budget requirements. The Vice President also mentioned that the school would be raising money to augment the existing funds. She asked if there were any volunteers. Everyone in the room giggled nervously but they knew that most of them would be called sooner or later. They just didn’t want to go first.

“Since nobody wants to volunteer, I might as well volunteer some people,” the Vice President said.

“Sister, what about the newly appointed administrators?” one dean suggested.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea! It’s their time to shine... like their initiation... What do you think?” Toupee man said.

Everyone agreed. It was one way to bully the neophytes. It was all done in the guise of fun. But the truth was they just wanted to see someone embarrassed. The new heads couldn’t say no, of course. Arthur was not worried because he was ready. He was advised beforehand by his dean. Sister Vice President seemed to like the idea.

“May we hear from Prof. Samantha Mateo, the new head of community development?” the VP said.

Everyone clapped. All eyes were on Prof. Mateo. It took time before she was able to stand up. She looked a little confused; it was like she didn’t know what to say or do.

“Sister... ahh... mmm... actually... actually po... ahh...you know... I didn’t know we had to suggest possible activities today... I have no idea...” Prof. Mateo stammered.

“That’s okay Prof. Mateo, maybe some other time,” the nun said with an obvious smirk on her face. The poor woman sat on the mono-block looking a little embarrassed.

“What about Dr. Arthur Peralta, the very young Director for Academic Concerns?” then the nun called Arthur. Again everyone clapped, but they clapped even louder when Arthur stood up and went to the front. He was going to impress them. For days, he had studied what he was going to say.

Arthur fixed the microphone before he spoke. He greeted everyone a pleasant morning. The nuns were pleased when he acknowledged them one by one. One of them even giggled like a schoolgirl. Arthur did not carry any sheet of paper with him. He knew his presentation by heart. He told them about his plan to hold a national conference on current issues in education. He wasn’t really very keen about issues in education but since it was going to be the first they might conduct, he might as well propose something everyone could relate to. He would propose conferences on special

disciplines in the future. If his proposal merited the approval of the nuns in the audience, it was going to be the first-ever national conference held at St. Peter's University. Arthur explained to the audience how it was going to work — the call for papers in July, the mileage the university would have in the academic arena, the benefits the faculty members would get when they presented their papers, the prestige the institution would have when they invited big names in the field, the people and the offices that would be involved, the conference that would happen in November, the possible regular holding of conferences in the university if the first one succeeded. He ended his talk with an estimate of the amount that would be needed to finance the project. Arthur did not buckle. He spoke in clear English. He was confident. He knew that his project was important and relevant. An academic institution must be known for its intellectual pursuits. It was the just right time since the University would be celebrating a milestone very soon. The University people had to think big.

After making his proposal, Arthur returned back to his seat. The audience was quiet. Only a few clapped their hands. It was like they were not interested in what Arthur had said.

"Thank you, Dr. Peralta. What does the body think about the conference?" the presiding nun asked the audience.

There was still silence until one nun with a gap tooth said, "It's a good project, but I don't think we have much time to prepare for it and the budget... it's quite big!" she said.

"I agree, Sister," one director said. "The amount is quite staggering. Probably we need more time to prepare," he continued.

"What do you think, Dr. Peralta?" the nun asked Arthur.

"If other institutions can do it, I don't know why we can't. It's only a matter of coordination... and it's our one-hundred years' anniversary..." Arthur defended his proposal.

"But we have not done it before... We might fail... we have to prepare... and again the budget..." another one commented.

Arthur saw heads nodding in agreement. He felt a little disappointed. The Vice-President asked the audience if there were other comments. No one said anything about the conference anymore. They were just not interested.

"Now, who would like to go next? Do we call on another new..." the presiding nun asked.

"Sister," Dr. Vicaros interrupted the nun. "I think Dean Cora wants to say something," she continued.

"Dr. Cora Fortez, the dean of the College of Education, has something to say... A brilliant proposal perhaps... Please come forward," the nun smiled at Dr. Fortez.

"Hello to everyone," Dr. Fortez greeted her fellow administrators. "I actually have a few proposals," she said. The audience clapped and cheered. "Since we will be celebrating our one-hundredth year as an institution, I think it would be nice to first hold an acquaintance party for the entire Peterian community. It's good to be thankful for all the blessings that we have received. Since no venue can accommodate the five thousand student population, maybe we could hold it in the school grounds like some sort of street party," Dr. Fortez said. The other administrators were nodding their heads again in agreement. The murmurs were an indication that they were excited about the idea. "We can tap the young administrators, the faculty, and the Student Council to help us with the program."

"I think it would be also good to make every department and college wear, let's say, Disney costumes during the acquaintance party... and there will be a cash prize for the best costume," she continued.

"I'm going to be Snow White," one administrator said. The audience was getting more excited by the second idea. Some of the administrators, including the nuns, were joking about the costumes that they would be wearing in the party. They were already showing some interest in Dr. Fortez's proposal. One even shouted, "I so love it!"

"And lastly, I think it would be nice also to hold a grand variety show; one that will showcase the singing and dancing talents of the administrators, students, employees and of course our beloved sisters," Dr. Fortez continued excitedly.

"We can include magic too, and probably some juggling or fire-eaters!"

"This is going to be the best celebration eveeeeerrr!"

"What about renting rides like caterpillar and ferris wheel or putting up *tiangges*?"

“Yeah, food booths are very, very important!”

“Maybe we can invite movie stars... the Boys Town... the kids would love those adorable teens!”

“This is what I call an activity!”

“... lots of media mileage *pa!*”

“We should start looking for a caterer!”

“The best one, huh... with lots of *lechon!*”

“Uy, who would you be?”

“The feather duster in Beauty and the Beast, of course!”

“We can ask Mr. Chua to sponsor the ice cream.”

“Let’s form committees *na!*”

Before Dr. Fortez could end her talk, her voice was drowned by the administrators who were already making so much noise. The nuns seated in the front row were all smiling. Dr. Fortez was grinning from ear to ear as she returned to her seat.

Arthur knew that the proposal of Dr. Fortez had sat well with the nuns and his colleagues. The emcee did not return to the rostrum. She too was busy talking excitedly about the project with her fellow nuns. Arthur sat quietly in his seat. He closed his eyes for a while and breathed heavily. The excited chatter was getting louder and louder. There was no stopping the audience.

He no longer understood what his colleagues were saying. Their voices sounded like thousands of tin cans falling on the cemented floor. He finally opened his eyes. He felt tired and dazed. He made an effort to open his bag, pretending that he was looking for something inside. He felt embarrassed for them.

The room suddenly felt small. And the three black lines painted on the walls looked like fences that kept the shrieking and hollering people inside the pen like animals in a zoo placed in one big cage.

Kapre

Chuckberry J. Pascual

Hindi naman sila talagang nagtatago, pero hindi naman sila nangangalandakan. Parang puno ng akasya, nandiyan lang at nakabaon sa lupa. Parang mayang nakahapon sa kable ng poste ng koryente. Matapos lumitaw ang kapre, hindi na nakabawi sina Gabriel at Alejandro. Bagaman kung ano ang babawiin, silang dalawang mismo ay hindi rin naman sigurado.

Hindi na mababago ang katotohanan: hindi talaga sila nakabawi. Lalo na si Gabriel na napansin lamang ang pagsablay ng mga pangyayari nang sa kalagitnaan ng pagtumpit ng kanyang palahaw na hindi nakikita pero nasigurong gumuhit sa hangin ng perpektong parabola, napansin niyang mag-isa na lang siya sa paglikha ng ingay.

Hindi lang naman si Gabriel ang pumunta noong hapon na iyon sa basketball court na malapit sa istasyon ng traysikel, sa sari-sari store ni Aling Minda at sa baleteng napagkasunduan na lang tawagin ng lahat bilang Berto o paminsan-minsan ay Berting (kung susumpungin ng paglalambing sa higitang ugat na tinubuan ng mga dahon) kundi marami pa, marami pang gaya ni Gabriel na handang gasgasin ang lalamunan para lang makisaya sa bawat bolang naibubuslo ng koponang sinusupportahan.

Sa katunayan, namumutiktik nga sa katawan ang paligid ng basketball court. Sandamukal ang mga naglisaw na mukhang noon lang nakita ni Gabriel, mga dayo mula sa kung saan-saang barangay. Gaya ni Gabriel, tagaktak din sa pawis ang mga mukhang ito, ilang segundong nauunang bu-

mati ang singaw ng katawan sa ilong ng bawat nakakagitgitan bago susugan ng mga kilay na saglit kumakandirit o mga babang bahagyang lumulukso para magpahayag ng rekognisyon bilang kabarangay, kamag-anak o simpleng kapwa tagahanga, tagamiron.

Agos ang pawis ng madla kahit hindi naman sila ang mismong nakikipagtakbuhan, nakikipagbalyahan, at nakikipag-agawan sa bola. At tila ba nagbanyuhay sila bilang higanteng lalamunan noong maalinsangang hapon na iyon, lalamunang masunurin at buong giliw na gumaganap bilang koro sa misa ng bolang kahel na yari sa goma: umaawit, humihiyaw, pumapalakpak, at kung minsan, pumupukol ng tungayaw sa mga manlalarong naiwan yata sa kasilyas ng bahay ang kakayahang maglaro.

Kaya hindi talaga maitatatangi ni Gabriel na noong fourth quarter, kung kailan dikit na dikit ang laban, kung kailan walang ibang naririnig sa buong court kundi ang kabadong timpani sa mga dibdib ng mga napalaki ang taya sa ending at alingawngaw ng paulit-ulit na pagtalbog ng bolang goma sa semento, nawala talaga siya sa hulog.

At sino ba naman ang hindi ang mawawala sa hulog, sukdulang humiwalay sa agos, lumihis sa daan na pinili ng nakararami, mahilu-hilong bulong ng isip ni Gabriel bilang tahimik na tugon sa mga tanong na umulan sa kanya makalipas ang ilang minuto, paano'y hindi magkamayaw ang mga tao sa mga partikularidad ng pangyayaring bumulaga sa kanilang lahat: anopaanobakitsaan?

Pero walang mahuhugot na matinong sagot, dahil may matinong sagot bang maibibigay na titighaw sa kuryosidad kung ang totoo'y ang lahat ay parang multong dumaan lang nang saglit, pero nag-iiwan ng kilabot na nabubuhay nang paulit-ulit sa bawat muling pagsasalaysay, kahit pa iyong nagbibida sa mismong naratibong salimbibig ay wala nang buhay?

Sumiksik sa isip ni Gabriel ang gayong pangangatwiran sa reaksiyong sumira sa momentum ng misa noong mga sandaling dinudumog na siya ng mga kapuwa manonood na hindi naman kilala, noong ang pakiramdam niya, nasapol niya nang panandalian ang ubod ng hilakbot sa puso ng tauhang si Elsa sa *Himala*, ang unang pelikulang napanood niya sa telebisyon noong may isip na siya, o mas nararapat yatang sabihing noong panahon na nag-umpisa na siyang matutong kumilala ng ilohika at irasyonal sa mga pangyayari: gayon pala ang pakiramdam na malagak nang hindi inaasahan sa gitna ng umaalimpuyong pandemonyo.

Pandemonyo. Oo, iyon nga ang salitang parang kamay na sumasaklot sa sitwasyon na parang bola ng basketball, iyong uri ng pagsaklot na ire-reklamo ng mga nanaghili bilang madaya dahil sikretong pinagkit ng epoxy ang palad bago sumalang sa laro kahit ang totoo ay hindi naman, sadyang natural na natural ang pagdaiti ng goma sa balat: dahil hindi ba't maysa demonyo naman talaga ang nakita niyang nilalang? Maysa demonyo naman talaga ang ugat ng lahat ng pagkakagulo? Maysa demonyo dahil isa ito sa mga kilala ng kahit na sino bilang isa sa isangkatutak na pininsan ng anghel na isinumpa ng Langit dahil sa labis na kayabangan?

Paa ang unang lumitaw. Itim na itim ang talampakan nitong nang-ingipalpal sa kalyo, gumagaspas sa mata, hindi kayang duwendehin ng basta-bastang distansiya, at lalong-lalo pang mukhang naghuhumindig sa perspektiba ni Gabriel noong hapon na iyon na biniyayaan ng liwanag na galit sa mapaglihim na pusikit. Lumawit na lang basta ang paa mula sa isa sa mga madahong sanga ng baleteng si Berto, tigmak ng dumi, libag, putik—imposibleng kakitaan ng nunal sa talampakan, pero paniguradong paa ng layas.

Sunod na sumulpot ang binti na sa mata ng nagmamadali ay puwedeng ipagkamali bilang katawan ng isa sa maraming kapatid ni Berto sa kung anong bakawan, iyong mga hindi nilalambing, iyong mga walang pangalan. Maliban na lang sa hindi ito kailanman tutubuan ng mga dahon, lalo't higit pa ng dilaw na prutas na puwedeng maasim o matamis, kundi tanging mga buhok lamang—itim, kulot, nangangalirang.

At galis! At mga galos! Samut-saring galos, may mga naglalangib, may nakanganga pa, naglalaway ng dugo, inaagasan ng nana, para bang katatapos lamang magtatakbo ng may-ari ng binti sa parang na pawang nagtatanimang talahib lang ang naninirahan.

Pagkuwa'y lumitaw na ang kabuuan ng hita—mas malaking bersiyon ng binti, mabuhok, sugatan, nagngangalit ang kalamnan na pakiwari ni Gabriel, kung tititigan ay hindi na dapat pagtakhan kung ginagapangan din ng mga ugat na singlintog at singberde ng mga hose na ginagamit ni Aling Minda sa pagdidilig ng mga palumpon ng halaman na patuloy niyang inalagaan kahit hindi naman namumulaklak.

Sumunod ang buong katawan.

Braso.

Mukha.

At iyon na nga: ang makalusaw-tutuling tili ni Gabriel.

Lumikha ng espasyo ang tunog: nag-urungan ang iba pang mga manonood na nakapalibot sa may-ari ng babagtingang biglang nangingig. Saka na lamang nalaman ni Gabriel, noong balikan na siya ng himasmas, na nagpulasan ang mga katabi niya nang marinig ang palahaw na may kanya-kanyang multong binuo ng takot sa ingay na sumulpot—may mga nagakalang may sunog, may mga nag-isip na nagsimulang mabiyak ang lupa, may mga nagsuspetsang nagkakanakawan na pala ng cellphone, may mga nag-isip na may bulalakaw na bumubulusok at tutupok sa buong basketball court.

Noon napatunayan ni Gabriel na totoo ang dila ng sinumang matandang nagpakalat ng kasabihan: may taglay na biyaya ang kawalan ng muwang. Dahil oo, pansamantalang nagbalik sa kamusmusan si Gabriel nang lumitaw ang kapre, hinatid siya ng nanlilimahid na higante sa nakaraan, partikular doon sa panahon kung kailan walang ibang kinikilala ang sanggol kundi ang mukha ng ina, at tanging mga tahimik na lawiswis ng dugo at tinunaw na pagkain sa samut-saring ugat sa loob ng katawan na hindi kayang unawain sa anumang uri ng bokabularyo ng matatanda pero kasimbisa ng alinmang wika sa mundo ang kinakasangkapan sa komunikasyon.

Gayunman, iba ang mukhang dumulog kay Gabriel sa sandali ng kanyang pagpalahaw bilang muling-sanggol: maitim ang kutis, makapal ang kilay, malamlam ang mga mata, matangos ang ilong pero maaaring mapagkamalang pango dahil sa bilugang tungki, makapal na labi na pinapayungan ng bigoteng papatubong muli, matatambok na pisnging napapalamutian ng naglalalimang biloy.

Para bang nagkaroon ng eklipse ng mga Biblikal na imahen: natakpan ang mukha ng demonyo ng maamong mukha ng isang morenong arkanghel.

Si Alejandro.

Bumilis ang kanyang pulso, tumahip ang dibdib, nalukob siya ng kilig, pero sa halip na mapagod ang puso dahil sa pagkabog sa kaba, tila ba binalot pa nga ito ng payapa.

(Hanggang sa huling sandali, nang balikan ni Gabriel ang alaala ng mukha ni Alejandro noong hapon na iyon, bumilis ang kanyang pulso, tumahip ang dibdib, at nalukob pa rin siya ng kilig. Gayunman, hindi naman nangahulugan ang replikasyon ng pisikal na lugod na muli siyang

bumalik sa pagiging bata: sa halip, noon nga naramdaman ni Gabriel ang wagas niyang pag-abot sa ruok ng pag-iral.)

Tunay nga, kung bibiyakin ang dibdib ni Gabriel noong mga sandaling iyon, ilang minuto—segundo?—lamang ang pagitan mula sa pagpapawala niya ng sigaw na sumira sa sustenidong sarap ng panonood ng madla, paniguradong walang ibang masasaksihan kundi ang itsura ng pusong kinokombulsiyon pero hindi nababahala.

Naramdaman na lang ni Gabriel ang pagsapo ng malalagkit na kamay ni Alejandro sa magkabila niyang pisngi, at parang kumpol ng mga dahong nalaglag sa puno na winalis ng hangin, naglaho ang kanyang mga bagabag, lalo na nang itanong ng binata, Bree, anong nangyari?

Kapre.

Mahina ang pagbigkas ni Gabriel sa salita, kay layo sa taas ng boses niya nang masilayan ang pagbaba ng kapre mula kay Berto, pero parang inulit lang niya ang pagsigaw na parang wala nang bukas.

Trumiple pa nga yata ang lakas batay sa naging epekto: isang salita lang ang gumulong sa kanyang dila, pero agad itong sinapo, pinagpasa-pasahan hanggang ang kaninang manonood lamang na mga naglisaw ay nakalikha ng sarili nilang uri ng palakasan gamit ang salita bilang bola: umugong ang basketball court, may mga naghiyawan sa takot, may naghagalpakan, pero halos lahat, tumungo rin sa pag-uusisa kay Gabriel—walang tigil sa pagpapasa-paghahagis-pagpapatalbog sa semento ng mga opinyon, tanong, kuru-kuro tungkol sa baklang sumigaw na lang nang basta-basta habang nasa kainitan ang laro ng mga binata ng barangay.

Doon, doon sa kumot ng ingay na iyon, habang nararamdaman niya ang pagbuhat sa kanya ni Alejandro, sumingit sa agaw-malay na isip ni Gabriel ang naging kapalaran ni Elsa, ang bulaang propeta.

Saka nagdilim ang lahat.

Sa sariling sala na nagkamalay si Gabriel. Nakahiga siya sa sofa. Nasa kusinang katapat ng sala si Alejandro, nakahalukipkip sa harapan ng kalan, nakatitig sa takoreng nakasalang.

Dalawang taon na ang nakararaan noong huli niyang makitang gano ang postura ni Alejandro. Natalo ang koponan ng binata sa paliga ng

kabilang barangay, at nagkamaling biniro ni Gabriel si Alejandro bilang “primero bangkero”: nakalimang foul kaagad ang binata sa second quarter ng laro dahil masama ang gising at inilabas na lang ang init ng ulo sa pambabalya ng mga kalaban, kaya hindi na pinasali ng coach hanggang matapos ang laro.

Sinurot ng takot si Gabriel.

Nanatili na lang siya sa pagkakahiga sa sofa, pinanood ang panonood ng binata sa takore, pinakinggan ang mahinang ugong ng bulung-bulungan mula sa labas. Kahit hindi na sumilip, batid ni Gabriel na naglisaw sa labas ang mga kapitbahay na nakasaksi sa eksenang pinagbidahan niya sa basketball court kani-kanina lang.

Sadyang nararamdaman ng balat ng bawat pinanonood ang paghimod ng mga matang namboboso: napalingon si Alejandro kay Gabriel.

Kumusta, tanong ni Alejandro. Gising ka na pala, hindi ka man lang nagsasalita. Nakahalukip pa rin ang binata.

Ayos naman, sagot ni Gabriel habang bumabangon.

May masakit ba sa iyo? Ititimpla kita ng kape. Sandali lang itong tubig.

Sorry, ha.

Sumipol ang takore. Pinatay ni Alejandro ang kalan, dinampot ang takore, isinalin ang laman nito sa termos. Pagkuwa’y kumuha ito ng isang mug na may nakasawsaw nang kutsara, sinalinan ito ng tirang mainit na tubig mula sa takore, pumitas ng isang sachet mula sa kadena ng 3-in-1 coffee na nakasabit malapit sa kalan, binuksan ang sachet gamit ang ipin, itinaktak ang laman sa mug, hinalo ang pinulbos na kape at tubig gamit ang kutsara, saka lumapit kay Gabriel.

Kape.

Ali, sorry. Hindi ko naman sinasadya. Nakita ko talaga yung kapre.

Sabi ko, kape. Hindi kapre, sagot ni Alejandro.

Nakita ko. Nakita ko yung kapre.

Inumin mo na lang yan. Para tubuan ka naman ng nerbiyos. Kung anu-ano ang pinagsasasabi mo.

Gusto pang magpaliwanag ni Gabriel, pero ayaw na niyang makipag-talo pa. Hinigop na lamang niya ang kape. Alam niyang para sa mga tamad ang kapeng ito at kaagad nang timplado ang tamis, pero hindi gayon ang

sumalubong sa kanyang dila: nadaig ang tamis na artipisyal ng pait na dulot ng tanawin sa kusina—bumalik na roon si Alejandro, nakahalukipkip at nakatuon ulit ang atensiyon sa kalan kahit sa pagkakataong iyon, wala nang takoreng nakasalang.

Pinili ni Gabriel na isiping ilusyon ang pait ng kapeng timplado ang tamis. Hindi totoo ang sensasyong inihahatid ng dila sa kanyang utak. Ang tanging totoo, ang sensasyong inihatid sa kanya ng mga balintataw kanina sa basketball court: ang kapre. At ito ang inulit-inulit niya kay Alejandro.

Inulit-ulit din niya ang paghingi ng tawad. Hindi na nga siguro ma-aalala pa ni Gabriel ang eksaktong bilang ng pag-uulit niya ng paghingi ng tawad, basta sapat nang naubos niya ang kape—wala nang laman ang mug, pero nabasa ang sahig, nanlagkit rin ang harapan ng kanyang kamiseta—at natagpuan na lang niya ang sarili sa kusina, nakayakap nang mahigpit kay Alejandro, na nananatili namang nakahalukipkip at nakatitig sa kalang walang nakasalang na takore.

Sorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorry.

Walang ibang naririnig si Gabriel noong mga sandaling iyon kundi ang sariling nagmamakaawang tinig at ang nanunumbat na pagbuntong hininga ni Alejandro, pero hati ang isip ni Gabriel sa posibilidad ng hindi pagtanggap ng binata sa paghingi niya ng dispensa at sa katotohanan na malamang kaysa hindi, nagpipigil sa paghagikgik ang mga taong nananatili sa labas pero pinanonood sa kanilang mga isip at tenga ang dramang naganap sa loob ng bahay.

(Pinilit sabihin ni Gabriel sa sarili sa gitna ng kahibangang dulot ng paulit-ulit na pagrorosaryo ng kapatawaran sa bigla-biglang sinantong lalaki: hindi siya dapat mabagabag. Dahil dapat niyang maintindihan, papalit-palit lang naman silang lahat ng papel sa sariling barangay, sa kabilang barangay, kahit saang barangay.

Wala pang isang buwan ang nakalilipas, siya mismo ang gumanap sa papel ng usisero, noong gabing magwala si Tetchie, ang kabit ng isang matipunong tanod na tubong Camarines Sur: ipinaghahagis na lang ng babae sa kalsada ang kung anu-anong gamit sa kusina—may nabasag na mga plato at mangkok, nagkalansingang kubyertos, sumalipadpad na mga kaldero.

Isa si Gabriel sa mga nagbilang ng mga platong nabasag, pumulot ng mga naligaw na kubyertos, nagtama sa kung anu-anong hugis ng pagkakayupi ng mga kalderong mumurahin lamang pala. Ginawa nila ito ha-

bang patuloy na ngumunguyngoy sa loob ng bahay niya si Tetchie.

Alam na alam ni Gabriel na alam din ni Tetchie na nasa labas siya, sampu ng iba pang kapitbahay, nagkukunwaring may pakialam sa pamamagitan ng walang pakialam na literal at di-literal na pamumulutan sa mga literal at di-literal na pagkakalat na ginawa ng isa sa mga popular na kabit sa barangay.)

Hindi maitaboy ni Gabriel ang isiping iyon—ang pagtatawa ng mga taong kilala at hindi nila kilala ni Alejandro at oo nga, mayroon naman talagang kinalaman sa buhay nila, pero walang karapatang manghugsa sa kanila, at sa kung anumang mayroon sila, walawalawala—ang isiping iyon, na amihang umihip at nagpalala sa pagsuka ng usok ng kanyang pagmamakawang noon ay kasalukuyang sinisiga.

Alam mo namang maraming tao, ingos ni Alejandro.

Sorrysorrysorrysorrysorrysorry.

Alam mo naman na nandoon si Corinth.

At napunit ang kumot ng tahimik na ugong na dulot ng sariling tinig na humihingi ng dispensa.

Natunugan naman ni Gabriel ang lahat. Sa katunayan, hindi lang noong hapon na iyon ang unang beses na nakita ni Gabriel ang babae, kahalubilo ng iba pang mga nanonood ng laro ng koponang kinabibilangan ni Alejandro. Iyon na ang pangatlong beses na nakita ni Gabriel ang babae, at noon din niya napatunayan na tama nga ang kanyang mga hinala.

Noong unang dalawang beses, ipinagwalang-bahala lamang ni Gabriel ang mga pag-aalinlangan. At kahit pa may nadama nang kurot ng kaba si Gabriel noong makita niya rin ang babae kahit hindi naman naglalaro ng basketball si Alejandro—nasa basketball court ang babae, sa tapat ng tindahan ni Aling Minda, malapit sa baleteng si Berto, nakikipag-umpukan kasama ni Alejandro at ng iba pang kabataan, ang ilan ay kilala ni Gabriel at karamihan ay hindi, pihadong mga kaibigan ng babae na niyakag pa mula sa kabilang barangay o kung saan mang lupalop—pinili pa rin ni Gabriel na walisin ang mga agam-agam.

O mas marapat yatang sabihin na pinili niyang manangan sa kapangyarihan ng multiplisidad ng posibilidad.

At bakit naman hindi? Bakit naman hindi niya pipiliing tagpasin ang umuusbong pa lamang na talahib ng takot sa puso? Ilang manlalaro ba ang

kasamahan ni Alejandro sa koponan? Ilan ba sa mga manonood na kasabay niyang tumitili sa bawat laro, ilan ba sa mga ito ang pumupukol kay Alejandro ng mga tingin na hitik sa pagnanasa?

Kung kukuwentahin ni Gabriel ang lahat ng posibleng kuwento na maaari niyang mahugot mula sa kung tutuusin ay wala namang batayang mga suspisyon na hindi maikakailang lumilisaw-lisaw pa rin sa kanyang isip sa gabi, lalo na sa mga gabing hindi niya katabi sa kama si Alejandro—sa apat na taon nilang pagsasama, umuuwi pa rin naman si Alejandro sa mga magulang kahit si Gabriel na ang tumutustos sa pag-aaral ng binata—may matitira pa ba siyang oras para namnamin ang ligayang dulot ng sariling pagtili para sa lalaking piniling irugin? At higit pang mahalaga, may matitira pa ba siyang oras para sa sarili?

(Nakikita ni Gabriel ang nakikita ng iba kay Alejandro. Naiintindihan niya kung bakit nagkakaroon din ng interes ang iba sa binata. Siya man, paminsan-minsan ay napapalingon sa iba—manlalaro ng basketball, guwardiya sa bangko, waiter sa restaurant, estudyante sa kolehiyong tumutubo pa lamang ang bigote—pero alam ni Gabriel na hindi nanghihingi ng aksiyon ang gayong mga pagsulyap: mata lamang ang nababatubalani, hindi ang puso.)

Batid ni Gabriel, kailangan niyang panindigan ang pilosopiyang na-kaugalian na niyang ipamarali sa mga kaibigan na tulad niya, pinili ring magmahal na hindi lamang nakabukas ang puso, kundi pati bituka, at lalo na ang pitaka.

Kailangang hindi matinag sa presensiya ng babae, sa hindi maitatangging lutong ng paghalakhak nito sa mga biro ni Alejandro, kuntodo may kakambal pang masuyong paghampas sa braso, pagpapapungay ng mga mata, paghawing mahabang buhok.

Ito na ang pagkakataon ni Gabriel na patunayang hindi lamang ampaw ang mga salitang namutawi sa mga labi ni Alejandro—wala akong pakialam sa mga tawag-tawag na yan, hindi ko alam kung ano ang dapat itawag sa kung anuman ang mayroon tayo, ang mahalaga lamang sa akin ay mahalaga ka sa akin, at mahalaga rin ako sa iyo, wala naman akong dapat ipaliwanag sa kanilang lahat—dahil sinasambit ito sa kanya ng binata kahit walang pag-alalay ng alkohol, lalo na sa mga sandali na inaatake si Gabriel ng pagdududa, ng paniniwala sa kapangyarihan ng mga kategorya, pero napapawi naman ang pagdududang ito, lalo na at makailang ulit din namang

pinatunayan ni Alejandro ang katapatan sa mga salita sa pamamagitan ng masuyong paghalik at mainit na pagyakap kay Gabriel. Kahit pa nga sa pamamagitan ng pakikipagsuntukan: noong minsang nagawi silang dalawa sa palengke at may lalaking nagkamaling mangutya sa paraan ng pagsasalita ni Gabriel, sa hindi maitatangging pagkulot ng boses niya habang nakikipagtawaran sa isang tindera ng mga panlalaking kamiseta, na para bang walang karapatan ang sinuman na magsalita nang gayon sa publiko at ang sinumang magtangka ay karapat-dapat parunggitan, pamukhaan ng kaibahan, ng kaibahang sang-ayon sa batas na pinaniniwalaan ng bastos na lalaki at ng iba pang bastos na gaya niya ay dapat bukalan ng matinding kahihiyan ni Gabriel. Sinalya ni Alejandro ang nambastos na lalaking iyon, saka binigyan ng wagas na bigwas sa kaliwang pisngi. Oo, ginawa ito ng binata sa harapan ng lahat, itinaon nito sa sahig ang anumang maaaring isipin ng mga tao sa mga nakapaligid na tiangge, maipagtanggol lamang ang dangal ni Gabriel, maipakita lamang sa lahat na walang karapatan ang sinuman na hiyain si Gabriel, siyang kasama ni Alejandro na bagaman walang pinapasukang kategorya ay itinuturing naman pala talagang mahalaga.

Ito na rin ang pagkakataon na patunayan ni Gabriel na hindi lamang pipitsuging hangin sa bibig ang mga salitang binitawan niya sa iba't ibang okasyon na umiyak ang sinuman sa kanyang mga kaibigan dahil sa matinding pagseselos—matinding pagseselos na madalas kaysa hindi, ay naging dahilan ng pagmamarakulyo ng bakla, panunumbat sa lalaki, panunumpa sa babae, pag-aaway nilang tatlo, pamimili ng lalaki, pagwawagi ng babae na nangangahulugan at nangangahulugan lamang naman ng iisang bagay: paghihiwalay ng lalaki at bakla, ano pa ba?

Hindi tayo kailanman mananalo sa ganyang sitwasyon, sabi ni Gabriel. Ang tanging magagawa natin ay umunawa.

Ikaw na lang ang umunawa nang umunawa, ang madalas marinig na sagot ni Gabriel sa mga kaibigan. Pagod na kami, gusto na namin ng kapuwa bakla. Gusto namin ng tunay na pagmamahal. Iyong pagmamahal na hindi lamang puro pagkabig ang alam gawin ng iniibig.

Pero pagkatapos ng galit na bunsod lamang ng paunang sakit, madalas kaysa hindi, nagreresulta ang litanya ng pagdurusa sa matiim na deklarasyon ng pagtanggap ng baklang tumatangis na umupo sa trono ng talunan: ke lalaki o bakla, mamamatay at mamamatay tayong sawi sa larangan ng pag-ibig. Mabuti pang mag-alaga na lang ng hayop. Kahit pa halaman.

Makailang beses niyang ipinaliwanag sa mga kaibigan: walang ipinagkaiba sa pag-akyat sa Golgota at pagpapako sa Krus ang pagtingin sa pakikipagrelasyon na inaasahan na sa simula't simula pa lamang ang kalunus-lunos na katapusan—baka nga kinasasabikan pa, kaya't lalong nagmumukhang isang uri ng perbersiyon ang pakikipagrelasyon na ikinukubli lamang sa katawagang pag-ibig.

Wika ni Gabriel, ang kailangan lamang nilang gawin ay kilalanin ang katotohanan ng kinapapaloobang sitwasyon—ang pagmamahal ay pagmamahal—walang ipinagkaiba sa pagsasabing puti ang isang kamiseta kung wala talaga itong taglay na anumang kulay: hindi dapat husgahan dahil walang dapat ibigay na panghuhusga sa gayong uri ng pahayag.

Sa pamamagitan at sa pamamagitan lamang ng matapat na pagkilala mababalaho ang anumang uri ng pagdududa sa rasyonalidad ng romantikong relasyon. Oo, romantiko, sagad sa kaibuturan ng salitang romantiko ang romansa sa kanilang mga relasyon, igigiit ni Gabriel sa lahat ng pagkakataon. At napatunayan naman niya ang paninindigan: walang lugi-lugi, lahat ay tumutubo, lahat ay kumikita, hanggang sa katapusan. Kahit sa katapusan.

(Ironiko ngang maituturing na ang pagdidiskurso sa pag-ibig na para bang magkapatid ang mga salitang pinansiyal at romantiko ay doon mismo sa tindahan nabanggit ni Gabriel, doon mismo sa harapan ni Aling Minda, ang babaeng ang relasyon sa buong barangay ay nakabatay sa pera. Pero hindi ba't nararapat lamang, si Gabriel na rin ang mismong nagtatanong at nagbibigay ng katwiran sa gayong pangyayari, dahil kung tutuusin namang tunay—ang anak ay binibigyan ng baon, ang mag-asawa ay nag-iimpok nang sabay, nagpapalibre sa isa't isa ang magkaibigan, nagreregalo ang manliligaw sa nililigawan, binibilhan ng pagkain ng amo ang kanyang alaga—aling relasyon ba ang hindi nakalublob sa usapin ng salapi?)

Mauuna na ako, sabi ni Alejandro. Kumalas ang binata mula sa pagkakayakap ni Gabriel. Pupuntahan ko lang si Corinth.

Hindi na sumagot si Gabriel. Tinanggap na lamang niya iyon bilang senyal na siya naman ang dapat tumingin sa kalan na walang takoreng nakasalang. At gayon nga ang ginawa niya: humalukip at itinuon ang pansin sa kawalan sa ibabaw ng kalan.

Ilang segundo lang ang lumipas bago umakyat ang tubig sa mata ni Gabriel, na nagsanhi ng pagbabara ng kanyang ilong at maging mga tenga,

na nagsanhi ng kawalan niya ng kakayahang makarinig at makadama ng hiya sa paghuhubad ng emosyon sa sariling pamamahay kahit pa nang buksan ni Alejandro ang pinto at hindi lang ang ingay ng mga bulung-bulungan ang pumasok, ingay na likha ng mga walang modong naghahagikgikan, sabik sa pagkapit sa pagkakataon na pataasin ang sariling ihi sa pagtuntong sa mga taong kasalukuyang nakadapa, kundi pati amoy ng mga katawang nagpapawis sa ilalim ng matinding sikat ng araw, mga kilikili at leeg na nagsisibulaan, makasagap lamang ng tsismis, at siyempre, ang mga matang hindi nakapagpigil na sumilip, bagang-bagang pagmasdan ang sinapit ng baklang naging dahilan ng pagkaudlot ng larong iniibig ng lahat.

Noon din dumapo ang desisyon kay Gabriel, ilang sandali pagkatapos umalis ni Alejandro, ilang sandaling sumiguro na hindi na malalaman pa ni Alejandro kung anuman ang mangyayari sa bahay ni Gabriel, maliban na lamang kung pipiliin ng binatang lumingon, pero marunong namang magkuwenta si Gabriel, at sigurado siyang nasagad na ang panahon na pipiliin ng binatang lumingon, lalo't naipaalam na sa kanya ni Alejandro ang pakiramdam ng pagpapaalaman nang hindi naman pinagpapapaalaman talaga, sa halip ay pinagkukublihan pa nga, dahil sa pagbibitiw ng pagpaalam na nagbabalat kayo bilang pansamantala lamang, may pupuntahan lamang, pero wala namang pangako ng pagbabalik, wala naman, wala, kaya hindi na kinuwestiyon ni Gabriel ang pagdapo ng desisyon, hindi na baleng makita nilang lahat ang mga pisngi niyang tigmak ng luha, ang ilong niyang inaagusan ng uhog, ang mga labi niyang unti-unti nang namamalirong, parang dalawang pinagpatong na piraso ng chorizo na paboritong agahan ni Alejandro, kasama ng binating itlog, dinurog na kamatis at sinangag.

Lumabas ng bahay si Gabriel.

Tunay nga: nandoon ang mga kapitbahay, mga bubuyog na nagkumpulan sa bahay ni Gabriel na nagbanyuhay bilang pulot-pukyutan na pinupupog ng mga usiserong naging mga insektong walang konsepto ng kahihyan, walang ibang alam kundi sumugod, at iyon nga ang ginawa nila noong hapon na iyon na pinili ni Gabriel na harapin ang noon lamang din niya napagtantong lohikal na konklusyon ng mga pangyayaring nagsimulang gumulong nang pakawalan niya ang palahaw sa gitna ng basketball court, lalo't higit dahil nagawa na ni Alejandro ang pagtatanggol sa kanya doon sa Divisoria, at ang pagsalo sa kanya kanina, ang pagbitbit sa kanya tungo sa kaligtasan ng bahay ay hanggang doon

na lamang, hanggang doon na lamang, anumang paghingi pa ng higit pa roon ay maaari nang makasakit pa, nandiyan na si Corinth, at sapagkat kay layo naman talaga ng agwat ng lalaking bastos sa kahila-hilakbot na kapreng nagmula sa balete, walang punto para ikumpara ang dalawa, labag sa batas ng kalikasan, imoral pa ngang maituturing kung ipipilit: sinugod ng madla si Gabriel, sinugod nila si Gabriel gamit ang kanilang mga mata, sinuyod nila ng tingin ang buong katawan ng bakla, nilamon nila ang imahen ni Gabriel na lumabas ng bahay, naglakad pabalik sa basketball court, at doon, doon sa espasyong nababatid ng lahat, doon sa lugar na malapit sa istasyon ng traysikel, malapit sa sari-sari store ni Aling Minda at malapit sa baleteng napagkasunduan na lang tawagin ng lahat bilang Berto, doon tumayo si Gabriel nang walang kaimik-imik, ni walang pinakawalan kahit isang impit, kahit noong lumitaw muli ang kapre, na noon lamang talaga nasilayan ng lahat, at tunay na bumakas ang sindak sa kanilang mga matang nangagbilugan halos sabay-sabay, noon lamang din nila nasinghot ang sangsang ng higante, na sumulasok sa kanilang mga ilong na isa-isang nagsikunutan, napabahing pa nga ang ilan, tila kiniliti ng mabantot na tambo ang mga butas ng ilong na parang butas ng ilong ng mga kabayong sumisingasing, pero hindi sila nagpatinag, nanaig ang tindi ng pagnanasa nila sa ispektakulo, iyong ispektakulo na paulit-ulit nilang tatangkaing muling buhayin sa pamamagitan ng paulit-ulit na pagsasalaysay sa isa't isa sa mga darating na araw, linggo, buwan, taon, hanggang sa mga susunod na henerasyon, hanggang sa patuloy ang pananalig at walang puknat na pagdalo nilang lahat sa misa ng bolang kahel na yari sa goma, gagawin nila ito, kahit na magkaroon na ng bagong basketball court, gagawin nila ito, kahit wala nang basketball court, gagawin nila ito, silang mga sumaksi sa naganap noong hapon na iyon, kung kailan napako ang buong madla sa kinatatayuan, nawalan ng kapangyarihan, walang nagawa kundi pagmasdan kung paano dinampot ng kapre si Gabriel, binuhat na parang babaeng naka-trahe de boda, at saka isinama ng higante paakyat sa balete, sa ilalim ng mga dahon, sa ilalim ng tirik na tirik na araw.

Bgry. Magapok*

Eros Atalia

Kahit gabi, wala syang magawa kundi pagtyagaang lakarin ang maputik na daan. Binitbit nya na ang kanyang sapatos. Maging ito ay sumuko sa putik. Sabihing pang imported ang Timber at dinesenyo para sa ganitong sitwasyon, nawawalan din ito ng silbi kapag ang buong hiking shoes ay lubog na sa putik. Kakaiba ang putik ng Brgy. Magapok ng Sta. Barbara de Bendita. Putik talaga. Lupang bundok. Pinong pino. Hindi mabato, di gaya ng ibang putikang lugar na napuntahan nya.

Ginawa nyang panggiya sa daan ang ilaw ng kanyang handycam. Isa-saboy nya ang liwanag sa mahabang maputik na daan. Saka nya papatayin at maglalakad. Dapat tipirin ang baterya. Malayo pa ang destinasyon. May spare battery naman. Kaso, kapag ganitong masama ang panahon at daan, malamang hindi nakabili ng gasolina ang barangay para sa generator.

“Sige Boss, ako na, kabisado ko yun,” ang sabi nya sa boss nya ka-hapon, Miyerkules.

“Nakabereavement leave ka pa di, ba? I’m just asking you kung mai-gigiya mo lang sina Dex at Val papunta sa site, magpapasunod na lang ako

* Ito ay ang unang kabanata ng nobelang in-progress

ng tao du'n," ang kanyang boss na si Carmen Maglaya. Ramdam naman nya na sinsero at hindi lamang ito nagpaparinig.

Kagagaling lang ng team sa isang community ng mga small-scale minero sa kabundukan ng Barangay Marulas, bayan ng Sta. Barbara de Bendita. Dokyu ang sadya doon. Paano nabubuhay ang mga maliliit na minero sa butil-butil na gintong pinagbubuwisan ng buhay ng marami. Patayan ng magkakamag-anak, magkakapitbahay, magkakababayan. Hindi lang pagmimina ang natisod ng grupo, laganap na rin pala ang illegal logging.

Kung sisilipin mula sa itaas, hindi mahahalatang nakakalbo ang kagubatan, mahusay ang istrategiya ng mga loggers. Hindi nagpuputol ng mga puno na dikit-dikit, mahahalata kasi na may parteng nawawala. Napanot. Ang solusyon, salitan ang pagputol.

Mahusay. Pinagsama-samang guerilla style na may subcontractualization o outsourcing at networking. Pinalabas na proyekto ng gobyerno. May ilang taong nagpunta sa mga maliliit na komunidad. Nagturo ng kabuhayan. Paggawa ng organic fertilizer. Yung isang tao, puputol ng isang puno. Tatapyasin ang mga hindi kailangan. Mga sanga, dahon at iba pa. Iipunin ang mga sanga. Gagawing uling. Yung mga dahon, patutuyuin, iba-baon, pabubulukin, gagawing compost. Naging organic fertilizer. Tuwing Linggo ng umaga, dadalhin ng tao ang troso, uling at fertilizer sa isang parte ng bundok. Kunwari, mahigpit ang polisiya. Isang tao, isang troso lang. Babayaran ang troso. Tatlondaang piso ang isa. Pero dapat tama ang sukat. Mula 45 hanggang 48 na pye ang haba. Yung uling, bibilhin ng sinkwenta pesos isang sako. Yung organic fertilizer, trenta pesos isang sako. Sa paanan ng bundok, nandoon ang pila ng mga truck. Yung uling, ikakarga sa jeep at ibebenta sa bayan.

Isasalansan ang troso sa mga container van. Tatlong pahalang. Tatlong patong. Lumalabas na syam na troso ang laman ng van. Tapos, sasapinan ng lona. Dahil 52 pye ang haba ng van, ang sobra, lalagyan ng mga sako ng fertilizer. Sasabuyan ng fertilizer ang mga guwang at pagitan ng mga sako hanggang sa tuluyang matakpan pati ang lona. Saka sararhan ang van. May kandado at lalagyan ng selyo. May sticker din. Sa harapan ng van, may nakalagay na "Government Project, Do Not Delay."

Lunes ng maagang maaga, nasa kalsada na ang truck. Mga walong container van ang magkakasunod na babagtas sa kalsada ng Sta. Barbara. Laging Lunes ang iskedyul. Kasi, obligado ang lahat ng government offices

na magsagawa ng flag raising tuwing Lunes ng umaga. Kaya, mga alas syete pa lang, nasa Kapitolyo, munisipyo at iba pang opisina ang maraming taong gobyerno. Kasama doon ang mga pulis, militar at iba pa.

Kapag may “Government Project, Do Not Delay,” malaking porsiyentong walang haharang. Kahit buksan, makikitang puro fertilizer ang laman. At kapag nagkabukuhan, isang tawag lang sa mga padrino, madali nang mapagbigyan. Syempre, may kaunting pangkape ang makasisita. Pero dahil nakatimbre na ang ganitong “proyekto ng gobyerno,” may regular nang pangmiryenda ang mga nasa posisyon.

Diretso ang mga container van na ito sa isang malawak na compound. Sa gate ng compound, nakalagay ang “E- F.O.R.E.S.T” at sa baba ay nakasulat ang Environmental, Friendly, Organic and Recyclable Energy for Sustainable Tomorrow. Idiskarga ang mga organic fertilizier, ilalagay sa maliliit na supot. Ipamimigay ito sa mga pampublikong eskwelahan, ibebenta sa maliliit na magsasaka sa napakamurang halaga. Yung troso, direktso na sa Rio de Gracio. Nandoon naman naghihintay ang mga barge galing Tsina na nagdadala ng coal para sa isang planta ng Napocor. Ikakarga ang troso sa barge ng coal para pagbalik nito sa Tsina, may baon nang troso.

Kung tutuusin, maliit lang ang logging activity na ito. Pero kung linggo-linggo naman na mahigit sa limampung troso, saku-sakong fertilizier, pwera pa ang uling, pag pinagsama-sama, jackpot na rin. Higit sa lahat, walang tax na binabayaran kasi nababakuran ng kapangyarihan ng pagiging Non-Governmental Organization, dinadakila dahil sa pagtataguyod ng alternatibong kabuhayan, pagtulong sa mga magsasaka at higit sa lahat, pangangalaga ng kalikasan.

Legal ang organic fertilizier. Mamulot ng tuyong dahon na napakarami sa kagubatan. Legal ang paggawa ng uling basta’t ang kukunin lamang ay ang mga nalaglag na tuyong sanga. Pero ba’t nga naman hihintayin pang malaglag ang sanga, mamulot ng tuyong dahon, eh, pwede namang padalin? Putulin ang sanga. Kuhanin ang dahon kahit sariwa pa. Mamamatay din naman ang mga yun. Matutuyo rin. At para mas mabilis, kesa akyatin ang dahon at sanga, putulin na agad ang mismong puno.

Dahil malapit nga lang naman, ang nasabing team na rin sana ang magko-cover sa forecast ng PAGASA sa mga katabing lalawigan ng Sta. Barbara de Bendita na tutumbukin ng bagyo. Martes ng madaling araw, mga lalawigan ng San Dionisio, Maglabong, Aryahan at Sulakbo ang tina-

tayang daraanan. Pambihira ang penomenang ito, ayon sa PAGASA, ilang dekada na ang nakalilipas nang huling salantain ng bagyo ang mga nasabing probinsya kapag buwan ng Marso.

Nataranta ang maraming network kung paano iko-cover ang pam-bihirang galaw ng bagyo. Nagkataon nga na malapit na sa mga nasabing probinsya ang team. Isang trabaho na lang kapalit ng isang mahaba-habang bakasyon. Kaso, nagkasakit ang Senior Correspondent na si Lester Dimaanan na kasama nina Dex at Val, ang suspetsa, malaria. Naobligang i-admit at ma-confine sa Sta. Barbara de Bendita Provincial Hospital. Under observation pa. Kapag lumala, malaking problema kung paano iuuwi sa Maynila ang may sakit sa gitna ng nakaambang na bagyo. Maiiwan sina Dex at Val, hihintayin ang kapalit. Sya nga.

“Boss, alam ko ang mga probinsyang ‘yun. Ako na, malapit lang ako dun,” pagpiprisinta nya sa boss nya. Nasa kalagitnaan na sya ng byahe papuntang Sta. Barbara de Bendita galing Maynila.

“Okay, ‘kaw bahala, aayusin ko na lang yung extension ng leave mo, in lieu of this assignment.”

“La ‘yun, boss, kaw pa...”

“Mong, salamat talaga, ha? I owe you one.”

Dala nya sa byahe ang kwadro ng nanay nya. Bilin ito ng kanyang nanay noong nabubuhay pa, maglagay ng picture nito sa kapilya ng Brgy. Magapok, ang lugar na napalapit sa puso ng kanyang nanay kahit hindi naman talaga sila tagaroon. Ihahabol nya ito sa pyesta ng Brgy. Magapok.

Ikaapat na Linggo ng Marso ang pyesta dito. Pero tatlong araw ang selebresyon. Byernes ang iba’t ibang pa-contest tulad ng karera ng kalabaw, palakihan ng mga aning gulay, beauty pageant ng mga bakla at iba pa. Sabado, karakol. Isasayaw ang patrong si Sta. Barbara de Bendita sa kapatagan ng barangay. Linggo, pyesta at sa gabi nito ay prusisyon.

Social worker ang nanay nya. Noong magge-grade six na sya, naobliga silang lumipat sa Poblacion ng Sta. Barbara mula sa Sampaloc, Maynila nang na-promote ang nanay nya sa pagiging Regional Director.

Masama ang loob nya, kailangan nyang sumama sa nanay nya. Buti pa ang ate nya na second year college, naiwan sa Maynila. Sya, kasi nga bunso, bata pa, obligadong sumama sa nanay nya. Sa lugar na hindi nya alam kung saan. Na wala syang kakilala ni isa man. Pakiramdam nya, may

nawala sa kanya. Nadaya sya.

Hindi lang sa maiiwan nya ang mga kaibigan, kalaro, kapitbahay at kaeskwela ang ipinagpuputok ng kanyang butse. Kundi, hindi nya na makikita ang crush nyang si Cynthia. Top One sa klase nila si Cynthia, maging class valedictorian. Sya, swerte na kung 3rd or 4th honorable mention, sana. Chubby na maputing tsinita ang crush nyang parang ngumunguya lang kung mag-English at dumidighay lang kung mag-solve ng math problems. Kahit hirap sa Filipino, halatang inaral ito. Natural mas mataas nang kaunti ang grades nya sa Filipino at Home Economics kesa kay Cynthia. Pero sa public school, huli sa listahan ng pinakamahahalagang subjects ang Filipino at Home Economics kasama ng P.E. at Homeroom.

Walang syang pakialam kung kasama sya o hindi sa honor roll, lalong-lalo na sa nanay nya. Hindi naman sya pine-pressure ng nanay nya na maging honor student kahit pa sabihing salutatorian ang ate nya noong elementary at valedictorian noong high school sa eskwelahang pinasukan nya rin. Ang hindi okay, yung, aalis sya. At wala syang magagawa.

Nagtampo sya sa nanay nya. Ilang gabi nya yung iniyakan. Palihim. Pilit nyang tinatanong sa nanay nya ba't kailangan pang sa malayo sila pupunta para lang magtrabaho gayong may trabaho naman ang nanay nya sa Maynila. Kasi nga na-promote. Na-promote? Di ba, dapat, mas magandang posisyon at kundisyon? Bakit parang hindi yata?

Hindi na bago ang mga ganitong eksena at sitwasyon sa buhay nilang journalist. Parang hangin kung saan mapadpad, basta't tawag ng trabaho, nandodoon. Sa limang taon nya sa ganitong buhay, sanay na sya at ang kanyang mga kasamahan sa tensyonado't kumplikadong trabaho. Kapado ang mga protocol, safety measures, back-up plan at higit sa lahat, marunong mag-improvise.

Sya na ang sasama sa team para mag-cover ng bagyong darating. Nagtawagan na lamang sila nina Dex na cameraman at ni Val na assistant cameraman (pero driver talaga ang pangunahing papel). Nagkasundo sila na magkikita-kita na lamang sa Provincial Hospital ng Sta. Barbara de Benedita ng Linggo ng maagang maaga. Para Linggo ng gabi, nakapwesto na sila sa mga probinsyang maapektuhan. Sinabi ni Mong na pupunta muna sya

sa Brgy. Magapok. Pero kung masusundo sya sa bukana ng Rio de Gracio ng Linggo, mas mabuti.

Nagmumula ang Rio de Gracio sa pagitan ng mga bundok ng Marulas at Malinta. Kakanan sa gilid ng kapatagan ng Brgy. Magapok, babaybayin ang paanan ng Bundok ng Alibangbang at tatagos sa pagitan ng bundok na ito at ng Yakal patungong South China Sea.

Sa bukana rin ng Rio de Gracio ang istasyon ng habal-habal. Malalaking motorsiklo na syang pangunahing transportasyon. Kapag mababa ang ilog, kaya na nitong tumawid. Kapag mataas, isinasakay sa balsang gawa sa troso. Sa makikipot, mapuputik, matitinik na daan bumabagtas ang habal-habal. Pero kapag talagang masama ang panahon, mas masama ang daan, sumusuko rin ang sasakyan kahit pursigido pa ang piloto (tawag sa drayber ng habal-habal).

Hindi kaya ng anumang sasakyan pumunta sa Brgy. Magapok maliban sa helicopter at habal-habal. Kung tag-araw, parusa ang alikabok. Sumpa ang putik kung tag-ulan. Pag sisipatin mula sa itaas, parang nakabaligtad na tansan ang nasabing barangay. Malawak, malapad na kapatagan. Napapaderan ng mga kabundukan ng Brgy. Yakal sa hilaga, Brgy. Marulas sa timog, Brgy. Malinta sa kanluran at Brgy. Alibangbang sa silangan. Para itong isla ng patag na lupa. Matabang lupa. Mabiyayang lupa. May Ilog. May bukal. Yun nga lang, kung gaano biniyayaan ang barangay na ito sa likas na yaman, naging maramot naman ang kalikasan sa maayos na daan. Nakulong sa sarili nitong yaman.

Isang araw ang byahe. Isang bus mula Sampaloc at dalawang jeep hanggang Rio de Gracio ng Sta. Barbara de Bendita. Tumatagal ang byahe dahil sa hihintaying pang mapuno bago sumibat. Kinabukasan na kasi ang balik ng sasakyan. Mga walong oras lang kung may sariling sasakyan.

Dala nya ang pang-isang linggong damit. May jacket, malong, insect bite lotion at iba pang kakailanganin. Gamot sa mga karaniwang sakit. Pati pampersonal hygiene. Dala nya ang mga ito kahit hindi naman sa coverage ang punta nya. Force of habit.

Noon pa man, hindi nya problema ang pagbibitbit. Bukod kasi sa may sasakyan naman, pagdating sa site, may mga guide at boluntaryong handang magbitbit ng gamit. Pero syempre, sa mga documentary films, balita, investigative report at iba pa, may maliit na backpack lang ang reporter. Lagi rin syang may dalang video cam. Sa tulad nya, dapat laging may

magagamit na pang-dokumento ano't anuman ang sitwasyon. Kahit mag-isa, makakuha ng magandang anggulo, sipat, kahit mapitik-pitikan lang ang subject.

Mula Maynila, nakarating sya sa bukana ng Rio de Gracio bandang alas tres na ng hapon ng Huwebes. May dalawa pang habal-habal na naghihintay ng pasahero. Sa bukana ng Rio de Gracio, sinimulan nya nang pumitik-pitik ng kuha. Ipapaalam nya sa boss nya na nandoon na sya sa Sta. Barbara, bukana ng Rio de Gracio. Sa gawing ito lang kasi laging may signal ng cellphone. Tsambahan kung makapasok ang signal kung nasa mga bundok na. Nagsisimula nang umambon. Maliwanag pa nang kaunti ang kalangitan sa gawi nya. Pero madilim na sa parte ng Brgy. Marulas.

Tumawag sya agad sa boss nya. Masama ang balitang kanyang natanggap.

Kahapon, super typhoon. Signal number 4. Mabibilang sa daliri kung ilang beses lamang nagpalabas ng ganu'ng signal ang PAGASA, kaya natataranta ang lahat ng government agencies sa posibleng pinsalang maidudulot. Taranta rin ang lahat ng network at news agencies para makakuha ng balita. Ang problema, tatlong araw lang ang naging advance forecast ng PAGASA, dahil sa naunang anunsyo, naghanda ang mga bayan na inaasahang daraanan. Kaya, ilang araw bago pa mag-landfall, nasa mga probinsyang nabanggit na ang iba't ibang network. Ang Sta. Barbara, di matitinag. Malayo-layo naman kasi. Maswerte kung mag-signal number 2 dito. Kaya nga susunod sana sina Dex at Val, kasama nga sana si Lester. Pero dahil nagkasakit, sya na ngayon ang sasama.

Pero iba na ang balita ngayon, nagbago ang direksyon, taranta ang lahat.

Santa Barbara de Bendita na ang tutumbukin.

Gaya ng inaasahan, bugbog sa mura at batikos ang PAGASA. Natural, pinakamagandang depensa ay kulang sa budget at makabagong kagamitan. Saka syempre, climate change at global warming. Palit-plano. Madalian, mabilisan ang paghahanda. Ang apat na araw na bago mag-landfall, dalawa na lang ngayon.

Ang problema, hindi basta-basta makakalipat ang mga network dahil hindi birong ilipat ang mga OBV at microwave van. Kung wala ang mga ito, wala ring silbi. Hindi makakapagpadala ng video o makaka-hook sa satellite. Wala ring komunikasyon. Problemado ang mga regional network kasi

mas madaling pumunta ang mga taga-Maynila na may dalang equipment kesa sa regional network na pumunta sa karatig na probinsya. Bukod sa problema ang transpo, walang masyadong OBV at microwave ang mga regional network.

“Wala sana tayong kalaban, kayo lang ang makakakuha, kayo lang ang nandyan. Cancelled ang lahat ng domestic flights pa-south. Sabi ko kina Dex, wag nang piliting bumaba ngayon. Gabi na. Sabi nila, bukas ng maagang-maaga, punta sila Kapitolyo.” Dito naglalaway ang bawat network, makakuha ng eksklusibong footage at balita.

Na-trap ang ibang network sa mga lalawigan ng San Dionisio, Maglabong, Aryahan at Sulakbo.

Parang sinasadya talaga. Nag-iisa lang ang team nila sa Sta. Barbara! Sya sa Brgy. Magapok, sina Dex sa Brgy. Marulas.

Tinawagan nya sina Dex at Val. Masama ang balita. Susunduin na sana sya ng grupo. Kaso, bukod sa mataas ang ilog, malakas din ang agos. Hindi makakatawid ang mga sasakyan mula Brgy. Marulas ng Sta. Barbara papuntang Brgy. Magapok. Ayaw pumayag ng dispatcher na magbakasakali. Dati namang isinasakay ang bus sa balsang gawa sa troso. Pero kapag malakas ang agos at pagabi na, ayaw na nitong magbakasakali o sumugal. Ang kalakaran dito, uunahin munang itawid ang bus at mga kargamento, saka isusunod ang mga pasahero. Minsan nang tumagibang ang balsang troso. Patay ang driver at kundoktor. Sa kabilang barangay pa napulot ang bangkay ng mga ito. Ligtas ang mga pasahero.

Walang magawa sina Val at Dex kundi hintaying bumaba ang tubig sa ilog.

“Sabi nina Dex, pag-passable na sa Rio de Gracio, sunduin ka nila dyan, tapos diretso na kayo ng RDRRMC.”

Sinubukan nyang i-assess ang sitwasyon.

“Kelan ang dating ng bagyo?” tanong nya sa boss nya.

“Landfall mamayang gabi, sabi ng PAGASA, kung di daw magbabago ang takbo, by tomorrow morning, mararamdaman na dyan, how’s the weather there?”

“Ambon-ambon lang. Pero maliwanag pa nung dumating ako, anong plano?”

“Yun nga, di ka masusundo ng crew ngayon.”

Lumalaki ang patak ng ambon. Ibinalot nya sa plastic ang cam recorder. Hindi naman masyadong malakas ang hangin pero sa talim ng kidlat na gumuguhit, nagliliwanag ang tuktok at balikat ng mga bundok sa kanyang harapan. Posibleng umuulan na sa kabundukan. Iyon ang kanyang daraanan. Sasalubungin nya ang ragasa ng tubig. Madulas at maputik ang daan.

Nagdadalawang isip sya kung magpapatila muna o lakasan na lang ang loob para makarating agad sa Brgy. Magapok. Kapag tumaas ang ilog, lalong hindi sya makakatawid. Pero, madilim, madulas ang daan. At nandoon ang sadya nya, sa likod ng bundok.

Nakaalis na yung isang habal-habal. Sinabihan sya ng natitirang piloto na aalis na rin ito. Nag-aalala na lalong tumaas ang ilog at lumakas ang ulan. Tumawag sya sa Boss nya. Ipinaalam ang sitwasyon nya at ang usapan nila nina Dex at Val. Sinabi nyang mauuna na sya sa Brgy. Magapok, doon na magpapalipas ng gabi. At bukas ng maagang-maaga, pupunta sa Kapitolyo para kumuha ng update sa Regional Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (RDRRMC).

“Mong, pag delikado, forget it. No news worth dying for, alam mo ‘yan, baka makakuha ng footage sina Dex, sasalsalin na lang dito,”

Uso naman sa kanila ‘yun. Pagsasalsal ng balita. Paghahanap ng iba’t ibang anggulo sa iisang balita. Halimbawa, mga limang team ang nasa isang site, gaya ng evacuation area. Yung isa, naka-focus sa relief distribution. Kung paano tinutugunan ng local at national government ang pamamahagi ng tulong. Natural na isasama sa balita ang relief operation ng kanilang network. Yung isa sa facilities. Mga nagrereklamo sa kawalan ng comfort room, mga nagkakasakit na evacuees, siksikan at magulo. Yung isa sa mga kwento ng mga survivor o may mga namatayan o nawawalang kamag-anak. Yung isa naman, kwento ng kabayanihan. Kung paano nailigtas o nagligtas ng kung sinuman. Isinasama rin ang mga trivial stories tulad ng nanganak sa gitna ng sakuna, nailigtas ng planggana, inunang iligtas ang mga libro

kesa sa sarili, epekto ng baha sa mga alagang aso at iba pa. Kapisasong balita, pahahabain. Bibigyan ng importansya.

Pero minsan, hindi totooang ‘no news worth dying for.’ Bida sa opisina kapag may exclusive footages. Kasi maging ibang network, hihingi ng permiso sa orihinal na may kuha tapos dahil habang nasa ere, ipinapakita na ang footage ang courtesy ng ganitong network. Trending din ito sa mga social networking sites. Ito rin ang makakatawag atensyon sa mga government agencies lalong lalo na sa international news organizations.

Maraming mga senior correspondent na bigla-biglang nabibigyan ng malalaking break kapag nakakakuha ng malalaking eksklusibong footage o spot report na matagal-tagal mapag-uusapan. Katumbas ito na posibleng maging anchor sa mga news and public affairs program. Radyo o telebisyon. Kalaunan, may mga commercial endorsement na rin. Instant celebrity. Katumbas din ito ng mas malaking kita, mas magandang sasakyan at mas malaking bahay.

Sumakay na sya sa huling byahe ng habal-habal. Luminga-linga pa ang piloto. Tumingin-tingin sa relas.

“Sige na boss, special na. Ako na bahala,” naramdaman nya kasing naghihintay pa ang piloto ng iba pang pasahero. Hindi naman kinakailangang mapuno ng limang pasahero bago lumarga. Alam ng piloto na kapag ganitong masungit ang panahon, bihira ang pasahero. Masalo man lang sana ang pangkrudo at may maiuwi kahit papaano sa pamilya, pwede na.

Pandalas sa pagsikad ang piloto. Ayaw mag-start. Bumaba sya habang kinakalikot ng piloto ang motor.

Lumalaki at lumalakas lalo ang patak ng ulan. Parang umuugong ang paligid dahil sa ihip ng hangin. Dumidilim lalo ang kalangitan. Tinignan nya ang relas nya. Mag-a-alas singko pa lang. Pero parang pasado alas seis na ang paligid. Inilabas nya ang camera na may balot ng plastic. Inilabas nya rin ang jacket nya. Isinuot ito. Binuksan ang camera. Pumitik-pitik sya ng kuha.

Yung sumasayaw na mga puno. Yung namumuong maitim na ulap. Yung guhit ng kidlat sa kalangitan.

Nag-start din ang motor. Sumakay na sila ng piloto.

Humarurot ang habal-habal. Mga isang oras ang byahe ng habal-habal. Depende sa kondisyon ng daan at bigat na kargada.

Pinatigil nya ang motor. Bumaligtad sya ng pwesto. Magkadikit ngayon ang mga likod nila ng piloto. Yung bag nya, inilagay nya sa harapan. Yung kaliwang kamay nya, ikinapit sa motor. Yung kanan ang ginamit para makuhanan ang nilalampasang daan. Sayang, wala ang crew. Mas okay sana ang effect kapag nakukuhanan ng crew ang correspondent na sakay ng habal-habal na kumukuha rin ng shots. Pero katwiran ni Mong, kapag nagkita sila ng crew, pwede namang dayain. Kuha na lang uli.

Pinatigil nya uli ang habal-habal. Ibinalik nya sa bag ang camera. Bumalik sya sa dating ayos ng pagkakaupo.

“Kapit mabuti, sir, paakyat na tayo,” bilin ng piloto.

Mabuti’t sya lang ang sakay at hindi masyadong hirap ang motor. May mga pagkakataon na halos pumupugak-pugak ang motor sa bigat ng kargada at paakyat pa. Pero hirap pa rin dahil basa ang daan. Maputik. Gumegewang-gewang ang likurang gulong lalo na’t hindi masyadong nakakakapit sa lupa.

Todo na ang buhos ng ulan. Dumudulas lalo ang daan. Lalong nahihirapan umakyat ang sasakyan. Pinasya nilang sumilong muna.

Sa ilalim ng punong antipolo, sumilong ang dalawa. Nanigarilyo ang piloto, si Mong, inilabas ang camera. Pumitik-pitik. Kinunan ang madilim na kalangitan, ang ragasa ng tubig, ang sayaw ng mga sanga. Ilang minuto na lang sana, nandoon na sila sa pinakamataas na bahagi ng pagitan ng mga Bundok Marulas at Bundok Alibangbang.

Kumukulog-kumikidlat. Lalong lumalakas ang hangin. Matindi na ang buhos ng ulan. Kumalat na ang dilim. Tanging бага ng sigarilyo ng piloto ang pumupunit sa dilim. Kinokoberan ng piloto ang бага.

“Mukhang matatagalan pa ang tila nito, bay...” ang hirap na pagsasalita ng piloto dahil subo-subo pa ang sigarilyo, bahagyang nagliwanag ang mukha ng piloto dahil sa бага.

Sinilip nya ang relos nya. Alas sais na.

“...pa’no ‘to, bay?” dugtong ng piloto. Lumilinga-linga ang piloto. Inaaninag ang pinakamataas na bahagi ng pagitan ng mga bundok. Malampasan lang nila ang mga ito, mas magiging madali at mabilis na ang pagbaba.

“Kakayanin ba natin? Hindi ba delikado?” nakilinga at aninag na rin sya.

Hindi makasagot ang piloto. Sa halip, inilabas nito ang sigarilyo. Tumanggi sya nang alukin sya ng piloto ng sigarilyo. Matagal na syang tumigil sa paninigarilyo. Halos isang taon na. Pero ramdam nya na rin ang lamig. Kumuha na rin sya. Nagsindi. Nangangatog ang piloto. Hindi nya maisip kung gaano kahirap sa piloto ang dinaranas na lamig. Sya ngang may waterproof na jacket na isyu ng network, nilalamig, yung piloto pa kaya na nakakapote lang na gawa sa pinaglumaang tarpaulin?

Inilabas nya ang camera. Binuksan ang ilaw. Inaninag ang dadaanan. Malakas na ang ragasa ng tubig. Tinanaw nya ang dulo. Nagbakasakali syang may signal ang cellphone. Mataas na naman ang pwesto nila. Wala pa rin. Pinatakan ng ulan ang screen ng phone. Pinunasan nya agad ito. Isinilid uli sa plastic. Ganoon din ang camera. Balik uli sa bag.

“Hindi naman ganoon kalakas ang hangin, ‘yun nga lang, matindi ang buhos ng ulan, ano?”

“Ikaw bahala, bay... baka kasi abutan tayo ng ulan, bay, baka bukas pa tumigil yan, maninigas tayo dito sa lamig. Para tayong papsikol bukas. Yawa!”

Sinikaran ng piloto ang motor. Nirebolusyon. Nakita sa headlight ng habal-habal kung gaano kalakas ang patak ng ulan. Halos wala silang maaninag sa daan. Dahan-dahan ang andar ng motor. Pagapang. Matarik. Hirap ang motor. Lalong madulas ang daan. Lalong hindi kumakapit ang mga gulong. Lalong gumegewang ang sasakyan.

Tsinaga-tsaga nila ang akyat kahit na parang sisigok-sigok at pupugak-pugak ang habal-habal. Pero tuluyan nang nabalaho ang motor. Masyado nang madulas ang daan. Masyado nang malambot ang putik. Masyado na ring malakas ang agos.

Bumaba sila ng motor. Iniwang bukas ang makina para makapagbuga ng ilaw ang headlight. Inaalalayan ng silinyador at clutch ng piloto ang pagtutulak nila.

“Gaano pa kalayo?” sigaw nya sa piloto.

“Ay, yawa, mga dos kilometro pa, bay.”

Malaking bagay ang malalabay na mga sanga at malalagong dahon sa kagubatan, kahit papaano ay basag na ang ulan pag dating sa kanila. Sa

nakikita nilang kapal ng patak, kung wala pa ang mga nagsisilbing payong, baka hindi lang ‘yun ang maranasan nilang ginaw at hirap.

Sige silang dalawa sa paglalakad habang umaandar ang motor. Nirebolusyon ng piloto kapag umaandap-andap na ang ilaw. Kahit burado na ang trail, saulado pa rin nito ang daang dapat tahakin.

Napatigil sila. Hindi dahil sa pagguhit ng kidlat at dagundong ng kulog.

“Bay, narinig mo ‘yun? Yawa! Dyablong buwang!”

May kung anong parang ingay na tumitili, umiihit, umiigik. Papalapit. Ipinaling-paling ng piloto ang unahan ng motor para masinagan ng headlight ang paligid. Wala silang makita. Pero papalapit ang ingay. Parang kinakatay na hayop.

Nagkunwari syang walang naririnig. Pero alam nyang may ganoon ngang ingay.

“Guniguni mo lang ‘yun,” luminga-linga sya.

Madilim na sa paligid. Napilitan sya tuloy ilabas ang flashlight. Iginala ang flashlight. Ingay ng motorsiklo, kaluskos ng dahon, tikatik ng ulan, ang mga ito ang matingkad nyang naririnig. Pero meron nga talaga syang iba pang naririnig din.

Lumakas ang igik. Nabitawan ng piloto ang motor sa takot. Namatay ang ilaw ng motor. Buti na lang at bukas pa ang flashlight. Papalapit ang ingay. May kumakaluskos sa kung saan. Hindi nya maintindihan kung hakbang o gapang sa putikan. Pinakiramdaman nyang mabuti kung saan nanggagaling ang tunog.

“Bay, bay, yawa, yawa! Dyablong buwang. Dyablong buwang... baka malakat na ‘yan,” hindi magkandatuto ang piloto kung paano bubuhayin muli ang motor.

“Ano ka ba, hirap sa inyo, may internet na, nagpapaniwala pa kayo sa mga malakat...” pasigaw nyang saway sa piloto habang tinutulungan nya ito sa paghawak sa motor samantalang patuloy ang pagpaling nya ng flashlight sa paligid, “kaya hindi umuunlad ang bayan na ‘to’ halos pabulong nyang sabi.

Nag-start uli ang motor. Iginala nila ang ilaw. Nirebolusyon ng piloto para lalong magliwanag ang headlight. Pinaalalayan nya sa piloto ang backpack nya. Binuksan nya. May hinalungkat sya sa loob. Nakapa nya. Agad

nyang binunot. .9mm.

Lisensyado ang baril nya at may permit to carry. Bilang isang dating reporter na matagal na nakabeat sa police and crime news, madali para sa kanya at sa mga tulad nya na makakuha ng lisensya at PTC. Hindi nya pina-halata sa piloto na baril ang nakuha nya. Abala pa rin ang piloto sa paglinga-linga. Kabado. Palihim nyang isinukbit ang baril sa likuran nya. Naka-safety naman.

Pumuwesto sya sa likuran ng motor. Nakatalikod sya sa motor. Ipi-naling-paling nya ang flashlight. Nakadukot ang kamay nya sa baril.

Hindi malabong may kung isang taong nandito rin sa kabundukang ito. Maaring isa sa mga mangangahoy, kaingero, o kung sinumang posi-bleng gumawa ng katarantaduhan sa kapwa. Sa tapat nya nanggagaling ang ingay. Itinutok nya dito ang flashlight. May gumagalaw. Parang bungkos ng dahon. Pero masyadong mababa kung tao. Kinilabutan sya. Hindi lang gu-magalaw, papalapit ang bungkos ng dahon sa pwesto nya. Papalapit din ang ingay. Napansin iyon ng piloto.

“Bay, ibwelta mo motor mo, bilis, dito mo itutok.”

Kabado sya. Sanay syang magpapatok ng baril. Madalas syang nagpapatok sa ilang firing range kasama ng ilang taga-media, pulis at gun enthusiast. Pero hindi pa nya ito nagamit sa totoong away o engk-wentro.

Kilala sya sa Maynila bilang isang journalist at reporter. Kaya kaylan-man, hindi pa sya napasubo sa gulo. Pero sa ganitong lugar, ang mga nagso-shortcut ng pagpapayaman sa pamamagitan ng pagkidnap, ang mga tulad nyang sikat ay pwedeng pagkakitaan agad. Yun ang iniiwasan ng mga tulad nya. Silang mga tagapaghatid-balita, magiging bahagi ng balita.

May naghahagarang mga kabayo sa dibdib nya. Tinalo ng kaba nya ang lamig.

“Bay, kahit anong mangyari, wag mong papatayin ang motor, re-bolusyon mo!”

Ganoon nga ang ginawa ng piloto. Kitang-kita nila na may bungkos ng dahong gumagalaw na papalapit sa kanila. Papalapit din ang ilaw.

Iniluwa ng dilim ang kanilang kinatatakutan. Isang baboy damo. May nakatusok ng sanga ng puno sa may balikat nito.

“Putang ina ka, buti na lang ...” sigaw nya.

Nagkikisay ang baboy damo sa harap ng ilaw ng habal-habal. Parang minamasdan ng hayop ang liwanag. Sumabay sa agos ng putik ang dugo ng baboy damo. Ang igik ay nauwi sa hagok. Tuluyan nang namatay ang baboy damo. Parang humanap lang ng liwanag ang hayop bago mamatay.

Nilapitan nya ang bangkay ng hayop. Akma nyang bubunutin ang sanga nang sawayin sya ng piloto.

“Bay, yawa, bay, wag mong bunutin, baka malakat yan, pag hinugot mo, mabuhay uli.”

Umiling-iling lang sya. Binunot nya ang sanga. Tumilamsik ang dugo sa mukha nya. Tumilamsik din sa ilaw ng motor. Agad nahugasan ng buhos ng ulan ang dugo.

Lumapit ang piloto sa hayop. Sinipa-sipa. Tiniyak kung talagang patay na. “Kadyot lang bay,”

“Bakit, bay?”

“Baka magbalik-tao ba, duda naming yung mambabarang sa Marulas ang malakat, yawa talaga, bay.”

Nagkamot ng ulo si Mong.

“Hanggang ngayon ba nagpapaniwala pa kayo sa aswang, multo, barang? Sus!” kinuha nya ang baboy.

“Aanhin mo ‘yan, bay?”

“Ihahanda bukas sa Magapok, pyesta di ba?” kinarga nya sa motor.

“Baka magbalik-tao ‘yan?”

“Hayaan mo, sagot ko na ang upa nya,” ngumiti sya. Tinapik-tapik sa balik at ang piloto.

Itinali nila ang baboy sa pinakadulong likuran ng motor. Inilabas nya ang Swiss knife. May maliit na parang hunting knife doon. Sinundot nya ang lalamunan ng baboy. Pinatutulo nya ang dugo. Sumasama kasi ang lasa ng karne kapag hindi agad napatulo ang dugo. Humahalo ito sa laman. Sumilong muna sila. Hinayaan nilang bukas ang ilaw ng motor. Bitbit nya pa rin ang flashlight. Naglabas uli ng sigarilyo ang piloto. Nang alukin sya, hindi na sya nagdalawang isip na kumuha. Ngayon nya lang nalasahan ang sama ng lasa ng mumurahing sigarilyo. Sa tagal nyang tumigil, at naka isang istik na sya kanina, ngayon ang pangalawa, bumabalik ang dating panlasa ng kanyang dila sa sopistikadong nikotina at filter.

Nakabilad sa ulanan ang baboy damo.

“Kadyot lang, bay, parang napapanood kita sa tv, ha? Kilala kita. Ay, yawa...”

Tumango-tango lang sya.

“Paano mo nalaman na nasa tv ako, bay? Anong palabas?” huhulihin nya kung talagang kilala sya ng piloto.

“Eh, nasa jacket mo, ba,” inginuso nito ang tatak ng kanilang network “Ay, oo, kaw si Gardo, yung kontrabida sa ‘Bakit Ikaw Pa’? Ay, pagkasama ng papel mo dun, ganun ka ba talaga sa totoong buhay? Kaya pala mata-pang ka, saka magaling kang pumatay. Dedbol agad yung aso sa iyo, yun bang papasukin mo na yung bahay na totodasin mo yung pamilya?”

“Bay, reporter ako, hindi artista sa telenobela.”

“Ay, yawa, kamukha mo kasi, yawa” nagkamot ng ulo ang piloto.

Humihina na ang ulan. Tinignan nya ang relos. Alas otso pasado na. Nagpasya silang maglakad na. Akay ang motor. Halos patila na ang ulan. Pero mas malakas ang ragasa ng tubig. Mas mahirap ang paglalakad kesa kanina. Kaunti na lang. Tyatyagain na lang nila.

Nilibang nila ang sarili sa kwentuhan. Napag-alaman nyang taga-Magapok ito. Paghahabal-habal ang trabaho. Nalaman din nya na kaya ginabi, kasi sa halip na apat na byahe, pinilit nitong makalima kasi nga, pyesta. Bukod sa maraming pasahero, kailangan ng pera panghanda. Sa Magapok, hindi bale nang walang maihanda kung Pasko o Bagong Taon, wag lang sumala ng handa kapag pyesta. Nagulat si Berto, ang piloto, nang ipakilala nya talaga kung sino sya. Ano talaga ang sadya nya sa Magapok.

“Ay, yawa ka, anak ka ng nanay mo, anak ka ni Ma’am Esther?”

“Uy, bay, iyon na ang Magapok,” itinuro nya ang mga bahay na may ilaw. Ang pinakamaliwanag ay ang barangay hall at ang kapilya. Generator ang nagsu-supply ng kuryente sa buong barangay. Nang tingnan nya uli ang relos, mag-aalas dyes na. Kailangan nilang magmadali. Alas dyes, papatayin ang generator. Tatapusin lang kasi ang mga telenobela.

Patila na ang ulan. Pero malakas pa rin ang ragasa. Lalo na ngayong pababa na sila. Kung kanina, mahirap ang umakyat at pasalubong sa agos, ngayon naman, madaling bumaba. Itinutulak nga lang sila ng agos. Walang ibang paraan para mapuna sila ng mga nasa ibaba. Bukod sa malamang na wiling-wili ang mga taga-Magapok sa pinapanood, yung iba ay maagang natutulog dahil maagang-maaga rin nagigising para magsaka. Nirebolusyon

ng piloto ang sasakyan para magliwanag lalo ang headlight. Ipinaling-paling. Baka sakaling may makapuna. Para naman sa ganoon, kahit papaano, baka may sumalubong sa kanila. Sinubukan nilang sumakay. Alalay ang takbo.

Maya-maya pa, nandoon na sila sa barangay hall. Nagpakilala sya sa kapitan ng barangay. Hindi makapaniwala ang kapitan kung sino na sya ngayon. Ang batang dating uhugin, madalas madulas sa pilapil, madalas na makikain, makitulong kung kani-kaninong bahay, ngayon ay isa nang journalist. Nakikita sa telebisyon. Matapos nyang bayaran ang piloto at pasobrahan nang kaunti, inalok nyang pumarte ito sa baboy damo. Iiutos agad ng kapitan sa mga nasa barangay hall na linisin at isangkutsa ang baboy para di masira.

“Ay, ikulao mo pala yung mukha, at mamaya ay makapagpainit tayo,”

Ibinalita nya sa kapitan at sa mga taga-Magapok ang kanyang tala-gang sadya. Inilabas nya ang kwadro. Natigilan ang lahat. Nalungkot. Inakbayan siya ng kapitan.

“Kape ka muna, nagpapahanda na ako ng makakain nyo at mamaya, may pampainit, maha-habang kwentuhan,” iniabot ng kapitan ang tasa ng kape.

Sa lamig, gutom, pagod, namimitig na mga binti, iyon na yata ang pinakamasarap na kapeng natikman nya.

Tila na ang ulan.

Inihanda nya ang gamit. Maliligo sya. Maghahanda para kumain. Magkape. At malamang, makipag-inuman. Mahaba-habang kamustahan, kwentuhan sa mga taong ilang taon nyang nakapiling sa kamusmusan, dito sa Brgy. Magapok.

Derby

Joselito D. Delos Reyes

Hindi akalain ni Jul na magsisimula sa madehadong pa-derby nila Urso sa Del Monte Cockpit Arena ang pinakamahabang araw niya. Natalo ang huli at liyamadong manok ni Urso, “parang binaril,” ayon sa handler. Samantala, si Urso, tunay na binaril pagkatapos ng derby. Haka ng marami, pinatay si Urso dahil sa trabaho niya bilang kolumnista ng *Bulgaran*, at isa ang among meyor ni Jul sa mga may motibo para patahimikin si Urso na pangulo ng Camanava Press Corps.

Totoong gustong apulain ni Jul ang “lambing” kay meyor ng kolum ni Urso, pero hindi sa paraang bistayin si Urso ng tingga. Naipit si Jul sa labo-labo ng camera, walkie-talkie, mikropono, at nag-iisang text message na nagbabantang isusunod siyang likidahin. Sa bisa ng isang text message, nakita ni Jul ang hindi kagandahang mukha ng gaya ni Urso. Sa bisa ng isang text message, mababasa ni Jul ang mga kubling mensahe sa pagi-pagitan ng mga balita sa dyaryo at ng mga nagbabalita sa dyaryo. Sa bisa ng isang text message, malalaman ni Jul kung paano mapabilang sa isang liyamadong derby. Ngunit kaiba sa lahat ng derby, mistulang isa siya sa makikipaglabang tandang.



ASA PABABANG BAHAGI ng MacArthur Highway sa Malabon, padausdos sa ilog Tullahan, ang malaking layak ng kahoy, yero, at magaspang na kongkreto na kung tawagin ay Del Monte Cockpit Arena. Elementarya pa lang ako, Del Monte na ang Del Monte na sintanda na yata ni Heneral MacArthur. Ilang bihis na ng may-ari at pangalan ang ibang kakumpitensiyang sabungan sa Camanava, pero ang Del Monte, Del Monte pa rin.

Kinawayan ako ni Bilibet, ang ayudante ni Urso, nang malapit na ako sa takilya ng sabungan. Kinausap ni Bilibet ang bantay sa pinto. Tumango ang nakasimangot na bantay na kakambal yata ni Odette Khan. Humiwalay ako sa pila ng mga papasok na sabungero. Umingit ang dispalenghadong stainless na turnstile ng sabungan. Maliwanag ang cock house nila Urso na nasa labas ng gradas. Nakipagsalimbayan sa hiyawan ng mga namumusta ang kakak at tilaok ng mga tandang. Binayo ako ng ingay ng pa-3-cock derby ng Camanava Press Corps.

Sa loob ng sa tantiya ko'y tres por tres metrong inespasol sa alikabok na cock house na pinaghatiran sa akin ni Bilibet, bumungad si Urso tangan ang makisig na talisain, sinisipat ang pileges ng pakpak. Paibabaw sa kaniyang antipara ang nangingilalang tingin sa akin ni Urso. Tinanguan lang niya ako nang akma kong kakamayan. Iminuwestra ng nguso niya ang upuang monoblock para upuan ko. Inilapag ang tandang sa scratching pen na pinatungan ng fluorescent lamp na panlimber para masanay ang talisain sa liwanag ng salpukan sa ruweda. Sa isang sulok, binuksan ni Urso ang isang cooler ng ice candy, inilabas ang namamawis sa lamig na Fundador. Humugot ng disposable na baso si Urso sa supot ng 7-11. Pinangalahati sa baso ang alak. Kinamayan ako bago iniabot sa akin ang basong singnipsis ng cellophane.

“Alak ‘pag derby, ha. Sa lamayan lang ang kape,” maaskad na siste ni Urso sa akin. “Napwersa lang kayong mag-entry ng amo mo, ‘no.”

“Sori po, Ser Urso, wala kaming alam sa sabong ni Meyor kaya si Konsehal Dumalang na lang pinag-entry namin.” Inalog-alog ko ang basong cellophane na halos mayupi kahit sa banayad na pagkakahawak ko.

“Namputakte, mag-eentry lang kayo ‘yun pang bantres ha. Kayo pa last fight ko.”

Kasunod ng dumadagundong na hiyawan mula sa loob ng sabungan ang paghangos ng tatlong lalaki papasok sa cock house.

“Dale si Siochi, Urso, hahaha. Nadale sa karyuhan,” humihingal na pagbida ng mabilog at pawisang handler ng manok ni Urso. “Anlalim ng tawag, lo-dyes, may onse pa. ‘Kala siguro pantupada lang lemon naten.”

Ayon sa kuwento ng naglilinab na handler, parehong pamatay ang tama ng mga manok sa unang salpukan pa lang. Naleegan agad ang dehadong pulang linaw ni Urso ng lasak ni Siochi, ang pinakakilalang sabungero ng Obando. Pero nang kumikig ang manok ni Urso, nasalo at bumaon sa kilikili ng kay Siochi, malalim ang tama kaya naunang namatay. Nakatuka lang ang pulang linaw pero nautas rin. Wala pang sangminuto ang itinagal sa ruweda ng dalawang mandirigmang tandang.

“Tangna, katsaw sana, two wins na ‘yun,” panghihinayang ni Urso.

“Pero for-champion naman tayo,” sabat ng mananari ni Urso habang nagsasalin ng Fundador sa baso ng Nescafe.

“Stay put ka lang d’yan bugoy ha,” angas sa akin ni Urso, “Hintayin natin si Orly at Braulio saka natin ayusin ‘yang agenda n’yo,” humugot si Urso sa pitaka, pinigilan ko. Nag-abot ako kay Bilibet ng dalawanlibo, pambili ng pulutan at dagdag na bote ng Fundador. Tumingin ang ayudante kay Urso, nagpapaalam ang tingin kung tatanggapin ang perang iniaabot ko.

“Kunin mo. Bili ka pa’ng dalawa. Saka pansit. Saka makukukot. Ipa-kakapon ko betlog nyo ‘pag tinalo tayo ng bantres neto mem’ya,” singhal ni Urso kay Bilibet.

Sa ganap na alas-nuwebe ng gabi, nagsimula ang hindi ko inaasahang pinakamahabang araw ng buhay ko.

“BAKET, DI KO NAMAN ginustong maging president a. Gusto ko lang naman, ayusin kami. Hindi na ‘ko tatakbo next year. Ayosh na kami e, bati-bati na lahat,” sabay higop ni Urso sa laman ng disposable na baso at pag-ayos ng nawala sa puwestong antipara. Sumampiyad ang Fundador. Pinahiran niya ng kuwelyo ang bibig. Nagsalin uli si Urso, dinakdakan ng piraso ng mga natutunaw na tube ice galing din sa cooler.

Halos umapaw ang baso ni Urso sa dami ng itinaktak na yelo. Kumunat na ang binili ni Bilibet na tsitsarong baboy, buto-buto na lang ang dalawang Andok’s. Sa ilalim ng plywood na lamesita, madalas tamaan ng paa

ko ang nakatimbuwang na dalawang boteng basyo ng Fundador. Maasap na maasap sa usok ng sigarilyo ang cock house.

“Kung hindi ba sa ‘kin sa’n pupulutin ‘tong lintik na samahan na ‘toh? Ako lang bumuhay dito, inisyatib ko lang,” himutok ni Ursong kahawig ng pinapussyaw at pinalapad na Ben Tisoy habang inaayos ang nawala uli sa puwestong salamin sa mata. Inayos din ang nagulong kombinasyon ng ubaning buhok sa manipis na tuktok na kumikinang sa pawis, at pinahiran uli ng kuwelyo ang bibig na nangingintab sa mantika. Umatungal ang koro ng mga dehadista.

Mag-aalas-tres na ng madaling araw noon. Nakasandal na sa kalawang-ning chicken wire ng cock house ang vice president, si Braulio ng *Metro Bulletin*. Ala-una nang umalis si Orly ng *Balitaan*, auditor, kakatagpuin ang syota niyang floor manager ng Love Boat sa Caloocan. Sa Bagong Barrio na daw sila magrerelaks. Humingi sa akin ng balatong sanlibo bago umalis, pang-good time daw.

Na-fastest kill ng bantres ni Konsehal Dumalang ang pang-champion ni Urso na nag-roll ng paradang binakasan ko ng tres mil. Parang binaril ang last fight ng naliyamadong si Urso, kuwento ni Bilibet na binantaan kaninang kakapunin kapag natalo ang talisain. Wala daw sugat ang kay Konsehal Dumalang na napabalitang lahi pala ng manok ni Pacquiao at ni Sabong Idol.

Ilan lang sina Urso, Orly, at Braulio sa mga opisyal ng Camanava Press Corps. Ang samahang niligawan ko bilang parte ng trabaho ko noon sa Public Information Office ng Malabon. Dahil mahigit sanlinggo nang puro banat ang lumalabas na balita sa diyaryo tungkol sa amin noon kaya ipinaayos sa akin ni meyor ang samahang naglalambing diumano sa kanya.

Magdadalawang buwan pa lang ako sa trabaho noon. Kagagradweyt ko pa lang ng Political Science sa San Sebastian nang ipasok ako ni Tito Ben, kapitan ng Barangay Maysilo, dahil magandang training daw sa akin ang trabahong city hall. Makatutulong daw sa pag-aabogado ko. At baka gawin pa daw akong iskolar ni Meyor.

“Ilang taon ka nah?” maangas na usisa sa akin ni Urso habang sinisindi ang nakasumpal na baluktot na Hope. Reporter at kolumnista ng *Bulgaran* si Urso na siya ring pangulo ng Caloocan Malabon Navotas Valenzuela o Camanava Press Corps. Hindi ko alam kung dahil sa tama ng Fundador o dahil kakaunti na ang laban kaya parang nanahimik na ang

sabungan ng madaling araw na iyon pagkatapos ang dehadong sultada.

“Ilang taon ka nah?! Hindi ka na sumagot d’yan. Ano ngah uli pangalan mo? Bugoy ba talaga?”

“Julius pero Jul po tawag sa ‘kin. Bente dos lang ako, Ser Urso.”

“Taena, wala bang mas matanda sa ‘yo? Unfair kamo shi pareng Meyor, bagets ang pinapaharap sa amin e forgets na kamih. Dapat senior versus senior, hindi junior versus senior, lugi kamih n’yan eh, ‘di ba Braulio? Braulio? Tangnang ‘to’ tinulugan na naman ako porke nasimot na koh.” Dinukwang ni Urso si Braulio sa pagkakasandal sa chicken wire, sinundot-sundot ang tagiliran. Naalimpungatan si Braulio. Ininom ang laman ng baso niyang natunawan na ng yelo. Nang maubos ang laman, binuhusan uli ng Fundador at dinakutan ng yelo na nakababad na sa tubig ng cooler na nakapatong na sa mesa. Halos tubig na ang nasalok ni Braulio. Lalong naglawa ang nakasasalubsob na mesang plywood. Naghamon ng kampanya si Braulio.

“Haaaaaaappppiiii beeeeeertday Oooooorrly! For champion tayoooo! Yuhooo!” Walang sumunod sa kampanya niya. Yumukayok si Braulio pagkainom nang straight sa Fundador.

“Gagoh, simot na tayo, wala na shi Horly, saka samakalawa pa bertdey no’n P’re. Sa Mystique tayo. Isponsor ni meyor. ‘Di ba, ha?” Tumatalsik ang alak at laway ni Urso habang nagsasalita. Kumindat-kindat, hindi ko alam kung mannerism o dahil nawala lang uli sa puwesto ang salamin, o para lang maobliga akong sagutin ni Meyor ang birthday ni Orly.

“Ano ba problema n’yo ng amo moh? Eh totoo naman ‘yung heksposey ni konshehal Martin na walang bidding ‘yung mga bota ah,” sabi ni Urso na nagpupunas ng laway at alak sa baba at pisngi gamit ang manggas at kuwelyo ng kaniyang halos mahubad na polong checkered na asul na dalawang butones na lang ang nakakapit.

“Gaya po ng sabi ko kanina Ser Urso, balik na po kase sa Ombudsman ‘yung kaso, may position paper naman kami kaya lang di lumalabas sa inyo,” mahina kong usal habang nakatungo, nilalaro ang manipis na basong may tumabang na Fundador. “Galing po sa calamity fund ‘yung pondo ng biniling bota at kapote kaya di na kelangan ng bidding. May statement din ang COA kaso po, ‘yun nga, di lumalabas sa dyaryo.”

Magdadalawang linggo nang paksa ng mga kolum ang meyor namin noon. Nasa unang termino pa lang si Meyor nang magsimula ang kasong pinanggigigilan ng mga komentarista sa radyong nasa dulo ng pihitan at

kolumnista ng mga tabloyd gaya ni Urso: ang pagbili ng mga bota at kapote para sa mga barangay tanod ng Malabon. Suspendido sana si Meyor kung hindi lang nakakuha agad ng TRO sa Court of Appeals. Matatapos na ang ikalawang termino ni Meyor. Pakiramdam ni Meyor gagamitin ang isyu ng bota sa eleksiyon kaya binubuhay uli nila Urso. Ang misyon ko, pakiusapan ang buong Camanava Press Corps na hinay-hinayin lang ang banat ng diyaryo at radyo sa amo ko; na baka meron pang ibang magagawa para hindi na umabot sa kasuhan ng libelo; na baka puwedeng may mapagkasunduan. At kung merong mapagkakasunduan at may kaunting gastos, baka makatulong kami ni Meyor.

“Tekha, lelekturan kitah Bugoy,” kumalas si Urso sa pagkakaupo, hinigit ang mabilog na katawan patayo tangan ang yupi-yuping baso. Lumigwak ang alak. Hinawi ng paa ni Urso ang dalawang monoblock na upuan na nakahambalang sa daraanan niya. Tumabi ng upo sa akin si Urso. Inakbayan, tinapik-tapik, at diniinan ang balikat ko. Nagsindi uli ng Hope kahit nakasindi pa ang isang kapapatong lang sa ashtray na namumulaklak na sa upos at balat ng Double Mint. Inayos uli ang maluwag at makapal na antipara. Dumura-dura ng tinga. Hindi ko alam kung may nasabi akong sablay. Magising sana si Braulio para umawat. Humanda ako sa pag-ilag kung sakaling magpakawala ng lasing na dagok o kutos si Urso sa akin.

“Lam mo, k’ya ‘ko naging president ng Camanavah, kase dahil may integrity akoh. Lahat ‘yan, may reshpeto sa ‘kin,” habang itinuturo ng daliring may nakaipit na sigarilyo ang tulog nang si Braulio. Akbay pa rin ako ni Urso, dumura-dura uli. Pumalahaw ang sigawan, masaya uli ang dehadista sa madehadong pa-derby nila Urso.

“Kaya ako naging president kase never akong nasuhulan, sabihin mo ‘yan sa meyor mong mukhang botah, ha. I hate bribery! Ulitin koh ha, I hate bribery!” Dumura-dura uli si Urso. “At ikaw ha, bago ka pa lang, bente dos anyos, samantalang ako trenta anyos nang nagmi-media. Nasa betlog ka pa lang ha, ha, press na koh. Kasabay ko sina Mike Enriquez at Kabayan. Nauna pa ‘ko kay Ted Failon. Tae pa lang ang *Bitag* ni Tulfo, press na ko. Ganyan na koh ka-antigo ha, Bugoy.”

Biglang nanuyo ang lalamunan ko. Naglasang tubig ang laman ng baso ko, makunat na makunat na ang tsitsarong baboy na sinubukan kong ngata-ngatain. Malabsa na ang sangmangkok na maning sinabawan ng tumalsik na yelo. Kumuha ako ng isang stick sa bagong bukas na kaha ng

Marlborong nabasa na ng naglalawang mesa. Tumulikod ako nang bahagya. Noon ko lang napansin na may nakatali sa likurang chicken wire na dingding, kupas na tarpaulin ng kompanyang gumagawa ng patuka sa manok. Nakasulat sa tigmak ng alikabok na tarpaulin ang pag-isponsor ng B-Meg sa derby ilang taon na ang lumipas. “Basta B-Meg Derby Ace, panalo ka!” sabi ng tarpaulin na may asiwang babaeng naka-two-piece, bantulot na bitbit ang puting tandang sa harap ng umaapaw na dibdib.

Sa tuwing lilingunin ko, pakiramdam ko, nakatitig sa akin ang asiwang babaeng kamukha ni Rufa Mae Quinto. Wala nang tubig ang plastik na pitsel ng chaser kaya ininom ko ang naglalabang pait ng Fundador at tubig sa baso kong cellophane. Wala nang mautusang bumili ng bottled water. Nananarabesya o umuwi na ang mga amuyong ni Urso na kuwaresma ang mga mukha dahil inunsiyami ng bantres ang huling laban nilang for-champion.

“Di naman po sa ganun na nanunuhol Ser, nabalitaan po kasi namin na maraming okey na projects ang samahan n’yo,” pinilit kong buuin ang boses, magtunog na may kumpiyansa. “Marami kayong projects as president gaya nitong pa-derby na ‘to. Baka lang naman makatulong kami, Ser. Halimbawa po, scholarship ng mga anak ng media sa Camanava o kaya pa-paayos natin office n’yo. O kaya papa-register sa SEC ang Camanava Press Foundation. Handa naman kami ni Meyor, Ser.”

Lalong umasap sa loob ng cock house. Nagsimula nang umikot at mamanglaw ang paningin ko. Sumulyap uli ako sa asiwang Rufa Mae Quintong may tandang.

“Okey, okey, ‘yan, d’yan tayo mag-shtart. Ayosh ka palang kausap e. Si Mang Max puroh angas wala namang betlog. O kampanya tayo!”

Si Mang Max ang matagal na hepe ng Public Information Office. Inilipat sa Public Parks Maintenance Office dahil hindi maampat ang pambibira ng media kay meyor bukod pa sa nakasagutan nito si Urso at ang mga opisyal niya nang minsang malasing si Mang Max sa gimikan. Inupakan din ng media si Mang Max pagkatapos ng pangyayari. “Tuta, mas maangas at mas abusado pa sa among meyor,” pamagat ng kolum ni Urso noon.

Walang hepe ang opisina namin kaya ako muna ang pinatayo noon ni Meyor na emisaryo ng city hall sa bisa daw ng kurso ko at, sabi nga ni Ninong Ben, dahil best debater at features editor ako noon sa Tinajeros National High School.

“Magkitah tayo ha, bukas, sa Mystique, ‘pakilala kitah sa adviser namin. Shikat ‘yun. Pabertdey n’yo na rin kay Orly. Hokey, ha?”

Hindi na kami nagkita ni Urso kinabukasan, o mas tamang sabihing hindi na kami nagkita nang buhay ni Urso. Isang magazine ng tingga ang inalmusal ni Urso sa Letre habang pinagagasolinahan ang kaniyang owner-type jeep nang pauwi siya pagkagaling namin sa Del Monte.

HINDI NA NAKUHANG DALHIN si Urso sa ospital. Hanggang isakay ako sa patrol ng pulis, nakahambalang pa sa Morning Blue Gasoline Station ang owner-type jeep ni Urso. At si Urso, labas ang malapad na likurang naglalawa sa dugo, nakaipit, nakatalungko, nakasiksik ang katawan sa pagitan ng manibela, upuan at sahig ng kanyang duguan ding sasakyan.

Kahihiga ko pa lang nang tawagan at papuntahin ako ni Meyor sa pinangyarihan ng krimen para ma-update siya sa pangyayari at maalalayan ang mga darating na media na magko-cover sa insidente. Alas-sais ng umaga at amoy Fundador pa ang hininga kong hindi nagawang burahin ng amoy ng Colgate nang ipakalampag ako ni Meyor. Nahihilo pa ako sa alak at puyat nang makarating sa crime scene. Doon na rin ako inimbitahan ng pulis nang matuklasang magkasama kami nila Urso sa Del Monte ilang oras pa lang ang nakalilipas.

Tinawagan ko si Meyor, nagkakandautal kong sinabi na ineeskortan ako ng mga pulis patungong presinto. Pagdating sa presinto, naroon na ang hepe ng Legal Office ng city hall.

Isa-isang dumating ang media. May mga OB van at sasakyan ng mga media sa labas ng presinto. Dumating si Orly kasama si Braulio na hindi na nakapagpalit ng damit-pambahay. Pakiramdam ko, nag-amoy cock house ang masikip na reception area ng presinto ng Malabon.

Kinuhanan ako ng statement ng pulis. Bukod sa bio-data ko, itinanonong kung anong oras ang pagkikita namin sa sabungan ng nagdaang gabi at ang oras ng paghihiwalay namin sa madaling-araw, at mga pinag-usapan habang nag-iinuman. Ininterbyu ang asawa at mga anak ni Urso. Hagulgulan. Ininterbyu din ang mga kasamahan ni Urso sa media lalo na si Braulio at Orly na pinangingiliran na ng luha, at ang gasoline boy na pangunahing saksi sa krimen. Nang lapitan ako ni Gusting Avergas ng ABS para tanungin ng ilang detalye bago kami maghiwa-hiwalay ni Urso sa Del Monte, dinumog na rin ako ng media. Tinutukan ako ng mga camera, halos

mahalikan ko na ang mga cell phone, mikropono, at walkie-talkie ng mga reporter. Hindi ko alam kung sino ang uunahing sagutin. Silaw na silaw ako sa flash ng mga camera. Bumalik ang amoy at lasa ng Fundador, lit-song manok, at tsitsarong baboy. Lalo akong nahilo. Namula ang paningin at humapdi ang sikmura ko. Parang nadinig ko uli ang hiyawan ng mga dehadista. Pinilit kong hindi maduwal.

“Ano pinag-usapan n’yo sa sabungan?”

Madami po e.

“Wala bang sinabi si Urso tungkol sa death threat n’ya?”

Wala po.

“Bakit kayo inumaga?”

Derby po ‘yun. Sugal, inuman, kuwentuhan po. Hapi-hapi.

“May binanggit ba s’ya sa ‘yong kaaway n’ya?”

Wala po.

“Armado ba si Urso kanina?”

Di ko po alam.

“Empleyado ka pala ni Meyor, ipinadala ka ba ni Meyor kagabi sa derby para aregluhin si Urso?”

“Bakit ka umiiwas?”

“Magkaaway ba si Meyor at si Urso?”

“May itinatago ba kayo ni Meyor?”

Hinatak ako palabas ng hepe ng Legal Office. Naroon din ang dalawang pulis na bodyguard ni Meyor para hawiin ang nagkulumpon sa aking media at mga usisero.

“We will wait for the proper time and venue to answer all the inquiries pertaining this sad incident,” sagot ni Atorni sa mga nagsala-salabat na cell phone, mikropono at walkie-talkie habang inilalayo ako sa media. Hindi na magkamayaw sa presinto: pisikan ng flash, sigawan ng mga reporter, mga pulis at usisero, hagulgulan. Sa mayor’s office malapit sa presinto ako dinala ni Atorni.

Noon lang ako pinayagang manigarilyo sa loob ng mayor’s office para daw ako kumalma. Binigyan ako ng utility boy ng maligamgam na bottled water. Walang nagtanong kung kumain na ako. Dumating si Meyor, may kausap sa cell phone, nang makita si Atorni, kaagad niyaya sa loob ng con-

ference room ng opisina. Nang lumabas sila sa conference room, binulungan ako ni Atorni: wala daw akong dapat banggitin sa problema ng bota at kapote ng mga barangay tanod. Banggitin ko lang daw ang detalye ng lakad kagabi sa Del Monte, walang labis, walang kulang. Si Gusting Avergas lang ang pinapasok ni Atorni para mainterbyu ako. Eksklusib.

Habang inaayos ang camera at ilaw, kausap ni Gusting Avergas si Meyor at Atorni. Kay Gusting Avergas ko narinig na sumigaw muna ang pumatay kay Urso bago siya pagbabarilin.

“Walang makikialam, mga NPA kami!” kasabay ng bunot sa armas. Nadinig daw ito ng gasoline boy na tumakbo na palayo sa Morning Blue Gasoline Station nang makita ang kulay stainless na baril ng suspek. Kasabay nito, may tumutok naman sa guwardya ng gasolinahan, hinablutan ng shotgun bago pinadapa at tinapakan sa ulo. Kalibre .45 ang ginamit na pang-utas. Hindi na nakahuma si Urso. Pupulas sana sa owner-type jeep niya pero naharang ng isa sa diumano’y dalawang salarin na sakay ng dalawang motorsiklo. Pinaputukan muna sa ulo bago tinadyakan si Urso papasok sa loob ng owner-type jeep saka binistay nang malapitan sa loob ng sasakyan. Bukod sa malapad si Urso, naisip kong hindi na rin ito makatatakbo nang mabilis at malayo dahil sa kalasingan. Diumano’y lumakad na parang walang anumang nangyari ang tirador kasama ang nanutok sa guwardya, at saka sumakay sa naghihintay na dalawang hindi naplakahang motorsiklong tumakas sa magkahiwalay na direksiyon.

Kaibigan daw ni Gusting Avergas si Urso. Si Urso daw ang kasa-kasama niya nang magsimula siya bilang reporter sa police beat kaya napakabigat daw sa damdamin na istoryahin ang isang kaibigan at kabarong walang-habas na pinatay.

Bago magsimula ang interbyu, nakita namin ni Atorni na binabasa ni Gusting Avergas ang kolum ni Urso noong araw na iyon sa *Bulgaran*. “Ang Mahiwagang Bota at Kapote ni Meyor, part 8” ang pamagat ng artikulo ni Urso. Siguradong tungkol na naman sa amo ko. Kinausap ni Atorni si Gusting Avergas. Baka daw magkaroon ng insinuation sa interbyu, pahaging ni Atorni.

“Alam n’yo na Ser Gus, lately, topic lagi ng kolum ni Urso si Meyor,” malumanay na pakiusap ni Atorni kay Gusting Avergas. “Ayaw naming makulayan ng pulitika ang nangyari hangga’t wala pang official statement ang police force namin regarding their investigation. You know, insinua-

tions, undertones. But one thing's clear, that we condemn the murder of Benito Ursolino of *Bulgaran*."

Katwiran naman ni Gusting Avergas, detalye lang daw ng lakad namin kagabi ang itatanong niya sa akin. At hindi daw niya ilalabas sa prime time news ng kanilang estasyon ang interview. Ilalabas daw niya kung sakali ang interview sa sikat na sikat niyang programa tuwing Huwebes ng alas-onse y media ng gabi, ang "S.O.C.I." o "Scene of the Crime Investigation." Ilalabas "kung sakali" ang interbyu dahil baka daw may lead na ang pulisya noong araw na iyon tungkol sa mga pumatay at sa mastermind nito. At kung may lead na, hindi na kailangan pang ilabas ang interbyu sa akin dahil baka daw ma-preempt ang operasyon ng pulis.

Nakabantay naman noon si Atorni sa interbyu.

Unang tanong ni Gusting Avergas: "Bakit kayo nagkainuman ni Urso?"

Gaya ng bilin ni Atorni, walang labis, walang kulang na sinabi kong may entry kami sa derby kaya napasyal sa cock house ni Urso.

Sino daw ang nagpainom. Sabi ko, dumating akong may alak na, tapos nagpabili ako ng dagdag na bote at pulutan.

Sino daw ang mga kasama ni Urso. Sinabi kong mga taga-media din, saka si Bilibet, saka iyong mananari, handler, at mga amuyong na hindi ko na nakilala.

"Madalas ka bang magpainom sa media?"

Noon lang ang una.

"Madalas ka bang magsabong o mag-derby?"

Biglang uminit ang pakiramdam ko. Isang nagmamadaling lagnat ang kumumot sa katawan kong hindi pa nakakaahon sa bayo ng Fundador at sa takot sa pagharap sa pulis at media. May bumarang laway at hangin sa lalamunan ko. Nagpilit umakyat ang gumuguhit na asido sa sikmura ko. Hindi ko na nasagot ang tanong dahil wala naman talaga akong alam sa manok-manok o sa sabong, lalo na sa derby. Si Konsehal Dumalang talaga ang sabungero. Lulutang na emisaryo lang talaga ako ni meyor. Inapuhap ko ang mata ni Atorni.

Tumayo si Atorni sabay sigaw ng "cut tayo, Gus." Inakbayan ni Atorni si Gusting Avergas. Kinausap nang sarilihan. Nakasimangot na si Gusting Avergas nang pasigaw na sinabi sa crew niyang hindi na itutuloy ang in-

terbyu. Parang korteng “putangina” ang naging buka ng bibig ni Gusting Avergas bago siya lumabas ng mayor’s office. Matalas ang tingin sa akin ni Gusting Avergas. Walang kangiti-ngiti. Walang pasa-pasalamat. Tuluyan na akong nilagnat.

Kinagabihan, habang nakahiga at may nakapatong na basang bimpo sa noo ko, napanood ko ang putok na putok na istorya ng pag-ambush kay Urso sa balita sa telebisyon. Nag-report si Gusting Avergas. Hinintay ko ang parte ko sa ulat.

“Hindi pinayagan ng kaniyang abogado si Julius Manigbas, alias Jul, na diumano’y tauhan ni Meyor Prudencio ng Malabon, na makapanayam siya upang linawin ang kaniyang kaugnayan sa biktima. Pero ayon sa inisyal na ulat, kasama diumano ni alias Jul si Ursolino sa isang sabungan sa Mac-Arthur Highway dito rin sa Malabon bago mangyari ang pananambang.

“Matatandaang ilang araw nang paksa ng kolum ni Ursolino si Meyor Prudencio dahil sa kontrobersiyang kinasasangkutan ng alkalde hinggil sa maanomalyang pagbili ng mga bota at kapote ng mga barangay tanod sa nabanggit na lungsod.

“Samantala, nagpalabas naman ng opisyal na pahayag ang Malabon sa pamamagitan ng city administrator nito: (binasa ng city administrator ang pahayag na isinulat ko pagkatapos ng naputanginang interbyu ni Gus sa akin) *The city government condemns this barbaric act, this cowardice, this cold-blooded murder of Benito Ursolino of Bulgaran. We assure everyone, especially the dedicated members of our fourth estate—the media—that this is an isolated case. The city government and the whole Malabon Police as well as the full force of the Northern Police District headed by Chief Superintendent Bernardo Verastigue are leaving no stones unturned; in fact the city government and Chief Superintendent Verastigue just created ‘Taskforce: Urso,’ the team will solely handle the investigation of the case. Mayor Prudencio is also offering a two-hundred thousand peso reward to those who can offer intelligence data that can lead to the arrest and prosecution of the suspects.* Sa kabila nito, iisa lang ang hinihintay ng mga kaanak, kaibigan, at katrabaho ni Ursolino, ma-bilis na hustisya. Gusting Avergas, patrol ng Filipino, Malabon.”

Posibleng maraming kaaway si Urso, ispekulasyon ng ibang segment ng balita. Kagawad siya sa kanilang barangay. Maraming adik at pusher na nakabangga. Tapos, pinakamasigasig si Urso sa mga dyaristang tumutok sa shabu market sa North Bay Boulevard nang ma-raid ito noong nagdaang

taon. Ibinulgar diumano ni Urso ang mga protector at operator ng shabu market na pawang matataas na opisyal ng militar. Si Urso ang nagbinyag at nagpasikat sa bansag na North Bay Boys sa mga kasangkot sa kaso. Nakakulong na ang mga diumano’y protector at operator, at dinidinig na ang kaso sa korte. At siyempre, nabanggit din ang mga kolum ni Urso tungkol sa bota at kapote ni Meyor.

SA BISA NG NAG-IISANG text, na-exile ako sa bahay ni Meyor sa Lourdes Subdivision sa Baguio. Sabi ng text sa akin: “MARAMI KANG ALAM JUL. SUSUNOD KA NA KAY URSO” Sapat na ang mensaheng iyon para itago ako sa Baguio kasama ang isa sa pinakabeteranong bodyguard ni Meyor. Kinausap ako ni Tito Ben, sinabing temporary lang daw ang bakasyon ko. Tuloy-tuloy ang suweldo ko at puwede pa akong mag-aral sa Baguio ng Law kung gugustuhin ko. Sagot lahat ni Meyor ang gastos. Buhay-prinsipeng hindi makalabas-labas ng kastilyo ang buhay ko. Natural na alalang-alala ang mga magulang kong OFW na salamat kay Tito Ben—ang puno’t dulo ng lahat ng kinasangkutan ko—na hindi naman nagkulang sa pagbabalita sa aking magulang tungkol sa kalagayan ko sa Baguio. Madalas akong tumawag sa mga kaibigan at kamag-anak gamit ang halos sampung sim card ng cell phone.

Tatlong linggo halos ang lumipas nang tuluyan nang matabunan ng ibang istorya ang pagkamatay ni Urso. Matapos ang bumahang pagkondena sa pamahalaan at pulisya dahil sa pangunguna ng Pilipinas sa bansang pinakadelikado para sa media, naging karaniwang tantos na lamang si Urso sa statistics na ito. Kahit lumabas ang mga cartographic sketch, walang nadakip na suspek sa kaso ni Urso. Wala nang napabalitang progreso.

Tatlong buwan na ako sa Baguio at nakakauwi-uwi na rin sa Malabon nang dalawin ako ni Braulio, ang humaliling presidente ng Camanava Press Corps, isang Sabado ng Setyembre. Bumalik na parang matagal na nawalay na kaibigan ang kaba at takot ko sa nangyari kay Urso at sa death threat sa akin. Nag-aaral na ako sa Baguio. Ni-recall na rin noon ni Meyor ang bodyguard ko. Isang katiwalang taga-Malabon na lang ang kasama ko sa bahay-bakasyunan ni Meyor.

Nabanggit daw ni Mang Max na nasa Baguio na ako, sa rest house ni Meyor na ilang beses na rin daw natuluyan ni Braulio kapag nasa Baguio siya.

“Palagay mo, kung di ako parehas, pagtitiwalaan ba ‘ko ni Mang Max? Syempre kaalyado n’yo ‘ko,” paglilinaw pa ng presidenteng tila aparisyon sa harap ko.

Lalo akong hinambalos ng kaba nang may tawagan sa cell phone si Braulio. Ipinasa sa akin ang kausap.

“Tito Ben mo ‘to. Kaibigan natin si Braulio. Okey ‘yan.”

May bago akong kaibigan, praning ang pangalan. Kaya pagkatapos kong makausap ang nagpakilalang si Tito Ben ko raw, tiningnan ko ang numero ng cell phone niya sa telepono ni Braulio. Pareho ng nasa phonebook ng cell phone ko. Nabawasan ako ng kaunting takot at kaba.

“Alam mo bang dito ‘ko graduate ng Journalism?” simula ni Braulio noon. Sa veranda kami ng rest house ni meyor nagkape. Taga-Pangasinan pala si Braulio. Ikinuwento niya ang buhay niya sa Baguio, kung bakit Journalism ang kinuhang kurso, ang mga kaibigan, mga tinambayan, at ang buhay niya sa on-the-job training sa *Baguio Midland Courier*.

Una’t huling beat ni Braulio sa *Metro Bulletin* (*Metro Bull* daw, in short) ang Camanava. Sa Caloocan na siya nakapag-asawa, at doon na tumira. May negosyong furniture sa Maypajo ang pamilya ng Tsinoy na misis ni Braulio. At dahil pahulugang furniture at appliances ang negosyo ni Tito Ben na humahango sa pamilya ng asawa ni Braulio, nagkakilala sila nito. Barangay Tanod Executive Officer pa lang ng Maysilo si Tito Ben noon.

Mula sa kabundukan, nakatira siya ngayon sa karagatan ng Camanava, banggit niyang iiling-iling na para bang sising-sisi siya sa naging buhay.

“Pero walang pagsisisi ha, best of both worlds,” sabi niyang nakangiti bago higupin ang lumamig na kape. Pagkababa ng mug, tinutop niya ang dibdib, “Nasa Camanava na ang puso ko, Jul.” Unti-unting nabawasan ang takot ko noon kay Braulio, nagkaroon na ng katawan at mukha ang aparisyon ng presidente.

Sa pananghalian, nalaman kong tatlo ang anak ni Braulio. Magkokolehiyo na ang panganay sa susunod na pasukan. Sa Saint Louis o sa University of Cordilleras niya balak pag-aralin. Kahit anong kurso ang magustuhan. Malamig kasi at natututong maging independent agad ang bata. Oo, maraming tukso, pero katwiran nga ni Braulio, saan ba wala? Nalaman ko rin ang iba’t ibang adventure niya sa Camanava Press Corps. Ang buhay ng media sa loob at labas ng propesyon. Hindi dumako kay Urso ang kuwentuhan.

Natulog ang presidente pagkatapos ng tanghalian. Nagpabili sa katiwala ng resthouse ng beer at pulutang papaitang kambing pagkagising. Sinabi niya sa akin pagkaalis ng katiwala na pondo ni Meyor ang ipinambili niya ng beer at pulutan, pati ang pamasaha niya at allowance pagpunta ng Baguio. Nagtaka akong hindi ko na pinagtakhan ang tungkol sa pondo ni Meyor. Hindi ko na rin pinagtakhan nang sabihin niyang utos ni Meyor ang ginawa niyang pagpanhik para kausapin ako. Ito lang ang pinagtakhan ko: kung bakit kailangan pa akong sadyain samantalang puwede naman akong pababain noon sa Malabon at doon kausapin dahil kung tutuusin, empleyado pa rin naman ako ng city hall, tuloy-tuloy ang suweldo kahit walang serbisyo. O ghost employee.

“WALA NA KASING KABA si Urso. ‘Yun ang nakakatakot sa trabaho namin. Natin.”

Natin?

“Pinabababa ka na ni Meyor at ni Kapitan Ben. Tapusin mo na lang ‘tong sem. Sa Maynila mo na lang daw ituloy, sa Beda, sa UST, sa Arellano, sa Baste uli. Madami kang pamimiliang law school du’n. Hawakan mo na daw ang public information.”

Konsehal pa lang ng Malabon si Meyor at kagawad pa lang ng Baranggay Maysilo si Tito Ben nang maging magkaibigan. Si Tito Ben na ang isa sa tumatayang political adviser ni Meyor mula noon. Isa rin daw sa adviser si Braulio. At napagkasunduan nilang tatlo na kailangan ng isang korderong haharap sa media. Sa loob ng dalawang buwan na pagtatrabaho ko nang full time noon, napansin daw ni Urso ang diplomasya at galing kong maki-tungo sa kanilang mga miyembro ng media sa kabila ng mga bira sa amo ko. Napansin na rin daw ito ni Braulio kaya iminungkahi daw niya kay Meyor na magkita-kita kami sa Del Monte noong derby. Sa derby! Noong gabing tinambangan si Urso! Biglang pumait ang beer na muntik ko nang maibuga. Nag-rewind ang eksena sa loob ng cock house at gasolinahan sa Letre. Bumakat sa isip ko ang slide show ng mga retrato ng nakangising si Urso habang nakasumpal ang baluktot na Hope, habang hinihimas ang talisain, habang inaayos ang salamin sa mata, habang lumalaklak ng Fundador, at ng isang bangkay na nakasiksik sa driver-seat ng kaniyang owner-type jeep, nakasubsob, duguan.

“Mayor Bota” at “Mayor Kapote” na daw ang naging bansag kay Meyor ng mga taga-Malabon. Epekto ng pagbira nang husto ni Urso. Dagdag pa ang pagkakasampiyad ng pangalan ni Meyor sa listahan ng posibleng may motibo para iligpit si Urso.

“Planuhin nating mabuti. Nasa likod ako every step of the way. Kelangan lang namin ni Meyor ng talking head at organizer.” Pangalawang bote na ni Braulio. Iilang lagok pa lang ang nababawas sa una kong boteng uminit na sa tagal ng pagkakahawak ko.

Maayos daw akong sumulat ng release at statement. Mabait daw ako. Bata. Nasa linya ng pinag-aralan at nasa dugo ang politika. At higit sa lahat, nag-iisip. Asset. Idinagdag pa ni Braulio ang ipinapasabi raw ni Tito Ben, na dapat na raw akong pakinabangan ng city hall lalo na ni Meyor.

Bigla kong naalala ang pabetlog-betlog ni Urso noong derby. Unang binanggit na ipakakapon ni Urso ang betlog nila Bilibet kapag tinalo ng bantres ni Konsehal Dumalang ang talisain. Pangalawang nametlog si Urso nang sinabi niyang nasa media na siya nang nasa betlog pa daw ako ng tatay ko. Iyong huli, si Mang Max na walang betlog kausap. Hindi binanggit ni Braulio kung kasama sa katangian ko ang pagkakaroon ng betlog kaya nila ako piniling maging talking head. Mapait ang lumigamgam na beer. At napapait ang luto ng biniling papaitang kambing.

“Ser Braulio, sino’ng nagpapapatay kay Ser Urso?” Wala pa kasi akong maitanong noon tungkol sa mga binabanggit at mga paliwanag ni Braulio. Ayoko namang magtanong tungkol sa betlog.

“Siguradong hindi si Meyor,” nilasahan ni Braulio ang sabaw na kahahango lang sa kaldero. Napangiwi siya sa pait. “Alam mo... kase, si Urso... basta, ‘tapang e. Minsan, minsan wala na sa lugar,” nakasimangot sa pait niyang inimik.

“Nagkakagulo daw kayo bago s’ya maging president?”

“Bakit, tumino ba kami? Lip-service lang ‘yung sinabi ni Urso na okey na kami, pampataas ba ng presyo.” Tumayo si Braulio. Ibinalik ang sabaw sa kaldero. Ininit uli ang papaitan, nagdagdag ng tubig. Naghanap ng kalamansi sa refrigerator. Nang walang makita, nagpabili sa katiwala na nanonood ng telebisyon sa sala. “Para magmukha kaming buo, at saka, ano ka, atat na atat si Urso na maging president, anong ayaw n’ya,” dagdag pa ni Braulio habang hinahalo-halo ang sabaw ng papaitan sa kaldero.

Pakiramdam ko, naglalasing-lasingan lang si Braulio noong mada-ling-araw sa cock house. Iyon na kasi sana ang isusunod kong tanong sa kaniya. Kung napilitan lang talaga si Urso na maging presidente ng Camanava.

“Galit ka sa kanya, Ser? Dapat yata, hmmm, suspek kayo e, tapos vice pa n’ya kayo dati,” pabiro, na sana ay nagtunog biro kong sabat.

“Di ako galit sa pobre, Jul, kaya lang ayaw namang makinig e. Hina-ngin ang ulo,” tuloy pa rin ang halo sa papaitan. Umuusok na ang walang takip na kaldero. “Di ako magmamalinis, wala akong plano ‘no, pero di rin naman ako manggugulo gaya ni Urso lalo na kapag di nakuha’ng gusto,” Dumating ang kalamansi. Piniga, isinama sa kaldero pati ang balat. Lutong panggalatok daw. E di mapait din, sa isip-isip ko.

“Tikim ka,” umaaso sa init ang papaitan pero nabawasan nga ng pait. Napalitan ng asim. Tinungga ko nang madalian ang uminit na beer.

“Nagkakagulo ngayon sa Camanava. Andaming ayaw sa ‘kin. ‘Dami ngang naghahamon ng eleksiyon, pero next year pa dapat,” nagbukas uli si Braulio ng beer. Pangatlo. Kauubos ko pa lang ng isa. “Sabi ko, sige, botohan, kudeta, anarchy, tatal ganu’n naman ang utak ng grupo e.”

Ganoon yata ang walang practice sa inom, madaling mahilo. O nahilo na lang ako sa kuwento ng pangulo. Hindi ko alam kung nagmamalinis si Braulio, o paano.

Inisa-isa ni Braulio ang raket ni Urso sa Camanava hanggang Quezon City at Bulacan. Mula night club, video karera hanggang peryahan. Mga AC-DC. Lumiit sa isip ko ang mataba, napapanot at nasasalamanang itsura ni Urso.

“Para pala kayong... ano ba, sindikato ba?” Natakot akong ma-offend si Braulio.

“Parang gan’un nga, kahit pulis takot sa ‘min e.” Kaswal na sagot niya. Hinarap ni Braulio ang pulutan. Hindi tinantanan hanggang hindi nauubos ang nasa mangkok. Pagkaubos, sumandok uli. “Pero syempre atin-atin lang ‘yung tungkol kay Urso ha. Alam ko naiintindihan mo na ‘to, he he, ‘til proven otherwise.” Noon lang nagkatunog ang tawa ni Braulio.

“Pramis,” sabi ko nang nakataas ang kanang kamay na may nakaipit na sigarilyo.

“Di ako magmamalinis sa ‘yo, Jul. Magka-college na’ng panganay ko dito. Halos lahat sa ‘min, rumaraket. Naka-retainer ako kay Meyor. Bagsak

ang furniture ni misis, di pwedeng asahan kung suweldo ko lang,” humugot ng pagkalalim-lalim na hininga si Braulio. “Di ako idealist, pero di naman kasing lost command ni Urso.”

“Teka Ser, bakit di n’yo inayos si Ser Urso nu’ng binibira kami?”

Pinayuhan daw niyang mag-ingat si Urso at dahan-dahanin kami. Dumami na ang nababangga ni Urso. Sinabi niyang baka isabay sa isyu ng kapote at bota ang pagbanat sa kanya dahil sa dami ng parehong pattern ng nililikidang media. Hinangin sa ulo. Walang pinakinggan si Urso. Ni wala daw dalang bakal noong madaling-araw na iyon. Iniwan sa kabit niya. Hindi rin daw niya maintindihan dahil may araw naman daw na akala mo dadalo ng party sa Afghanistan sa dami ng bitbit na bakal. Noong gabing ma-ambush si Urso, betlog lang daw ang bitbit pauwi.

Betlog na naman.

Pakiramdam daw ni Braulio, ang North Bay Boys ang nagpatira kay Urso. Isinabay lang sa isyu ng bota at kapote para mabintang kay Meyor. Kinarir daw kasi ang pagiging drug czar sa Navotas. Bukod pa sa napaka-predictable diumano ang pag-uwi ni Urso, laging madaling-araw. Iisang gasolinahan lang ang pinagpapakargahan dahil nakaka-discount at nakakautang daw siya dito kapalit ang hindi pagbulgar sa raket na paihi sa pier ng may-ari ng Morning Blue Gasoline Station. “Kung di ba naman ungas,” pahabol pa ni Braulio.

Si Braulio na rin ang naglayo sa kuwento tungkol kay Urso at sa Camanava Press Corps. Inisa-isa ang mga dapat kong gawin sa siguradong liyamadong re-election bid ni meyor. Isinulat ang kalendaryo ng mga mangyayari mula kampanya hanggang canvassing hanggang proklamasyon. Isinulat ang mga scenario lalo na ang magiging hakbang ng kalaban namin na diumano’y hawak din ng ilang taga-Camanava Press Corps. Hindi na naalala ni Braulio ang lutong-panggalatok na papaitan na tuluyan nang lumamig.

Nang magpaalam siya para matulog, ibinulong kong hindi pa ako sumasagot sa lahat ng sinabi niya. Tapik sa balikat ang itinugon niya sa akin bago siya pumasok sa kuwerto.

Hindi ko na inabutan si Braulio kinabukasan. Ayon sa katiwala ng rest house, maaga daw bumiyahe ang pangulo dahil dadalaw sa mga kamag-anak sa Pangasinan bago bumaba sa Caloocan. Noon ko lang naungkat ang cell phone ko. Nakapitong missed call si Tito Ben. May dalawang

text message din na nagtatanong kung ayos lang daw ba ako at kung kailan daw ako bababa para mag-full time sa trabaho. Noong gabi pa ito ipinadala. Ang isang text ay kinaumagahan ko na natanggap. Nangungumusta.

Ito ang text ko noon kay Tito Ben: “Gud am. Di na me muna ba3x jan. Nxt wik reresign na po ako. Pksabi ky mayor. Aral muna me d2. Ska takot pa po me sa lahat ng nangyari. Senxa na po, decided na me. Umwi na po prez braulio.ü” Nagpahabol pa ko ng isang text: “Gudluck konsi tito ben! Malabon needs u.;-)”

“K. Galingan mo aral. Ingat lagi, atorni. Dalaw me jan minsan.” Sagot ni Tito Ben.

Tinawagan ko din ang mga magulang ko ng araw na iyon. Sinabi kong magpadala agad ng pera sa Western Union dahil kailangan kong humanap ng bagong matitirhan. Kinabahan na naman siyempre ang mga magulang ko dahil sa biglaang pagbabago ko ng tirahan sa Baguio. Sinabi kong resigned na ako at hindi na puwedeng tumira sa rest house ni Meyor.

NATALO SI MEYOR BOTA. Landslide. Nadamay ang Tito Ben ko dahil nakasuot daw ng “bota at kapote” sa kampanya. Walang nagawa ang tag-line na “Mayor Prudencio, Mayor na Makatao!” at “Malabon, Tuloy-tuloy ang Pagsulong!” Mas tinandaan daw ng mga tao ang islogang bitbit ng kalaban: “Mayor Bota at Kapote: Walang Gawang Mabuti!” at “Lubog na Malabon: Sama-sama Nating Iahon!”

Tuwing makababasa ako ng *Metro Bull* ngayon, iba na ang by-line ng nasa Camanava beat nila. Nababasa ko na si Braulio sa mga balitang paksa ang Department of Health, Simbahang Katoliko, at PAGASA. Awtomatikong hindi na siya presidente ng Camanava Press Corps kung hindi na ito ang beat niya. Kung demotion o promotion iyon sa kanya bilang dyarista ay hindi ko na nalaman.

Surfacing

(An Ars Poetica)

Albert B. Casuga

Surfacing. We allow ourselves this one
salving act when every balm fails.

Bobbing up for air where it is rare,
we pray that this will hold long enough.

Enough for the moments at dusk when
we must dive again, submerge again,

into depths we know will one day hold us
down, and remain there to mend hurts

that in those magical spaces become
like pearls: prickly cutting dirt engulfed

into bivalved flesh that may in turn
become a magical gem from the agony.

Surfacing, we find ourselves some river
stream to rest with the rolling river stones.

Surfacing, we know we must go back
to the darkened depths, and like oysters

bear the pain cutting through our flesh
that we may surface soon with a new pearl.

(June 27, 2011)

Undiscovered Country

Albert B. Casuga

*Why do we return to/what we know? Do we uncover any anchors/or nets.
Homeward bound,/the song goes, which means heading for home/or tied
up in looking.*

– from “Homeward Bound” by Hannah Stephenson, *The Storialist*

Cups, bric-a-brac, milestone pictures, pillows,
even rarely-washed security blankets spell it:
it is the smell of knowing that makes us run
to her stove as soon as we drop our wee world
of toy trains, biscuit cans, disrobed barbies,
and ask if favourite cakes are cooking in the oven.

It stays with us, this habit of pinning the tail
on memorial behinds. We know them well.
On the darkest nights, on most tempestuous times,
haven’t we gone back home quiet and blindfolded?
They know we would grow up and go away.
Folks enter into one-way contracts like these.

Then home becomes hazy in uncharted distances.
Looking ties us down, we follow familiar scents
only to lose them along the way. Pavement arrows
do not point to where the heart lingers and stays.
Is there no clear map to this refuge? In the fog,
how can the faithless promise he is home at last?

An undiscovered country before long, home
turns up around the bend, but we also find out
that it is the nook from which we cannot return.

(July 27, 2011)

Return Mail

(After “Letter to Green”)

Albert B. Casuga

Verde, que te quiero verde.

– Federico Garcia Lorca

It must have been in Andalusia
(or was it Bilbao?) when I got
your last note raving about blue
skies, verdant bluffs, laurel bushes
turning to green fire under trees
sing by fierce sun rays cutting
through a *fandango* of branches
swaying with winds roiling the sea
beneath the cliffs where you swore
we will be when you come this way
again —

I wore my green *pañuelo* then;
and running your fingers
through the stray hair mottling it,
were you not recondite, mi amor,
when you said: *Yo te quiero, Verde?*
Or coy perchance, when the green
you were declaring ardour for
was not the shawl on my shoulders
nor my short lime-sequined *vestido*
but my eagerly trembling haunches,
wondering how green the grass
would remain under our bodies
while we stared at the cerulean magic
of the patch of sky seen through leaves
of the tree trunk where you carved:
Verde, yo te quiero, Verde.

A covenant made when you last said
you will be back to engrave my name.
I can only see pale shadows there now,
and on the murky ground a patch of snow.

(March 1, 2011)

Rhythms at Sundown

Albert B. Casuga

On my hammock, on afternoons like this,
I have the whole sky for a taut canvas.

It is easy enough to paint a landscape
rolling on clouds that transform quickly.

That mass of cumulus moving toward
the hillocks of Nara is my father's face.

I can see my Chloe in a furious pirouette
among those swirling cirrus. A ballerina.

Are clouds the sum of all our memories?
Do they shape the fears that we run from?

Or have I just run aground, no wind
on my sail, no seascapes nor harbours?

On afternoons like this, on my hammock,
I cull the pictures I have collected, a collage

of dispersing dwindling drawings on skies
that darken at sundown drowning them all.

What have I rushed for, hieing to a country
of old men? These are empty spaces of empty

hours, a dull ache that stands for a leftover life
marking rhythms of time on a swaying hammock.

(June 15, 2011)

The Image of the Mirror

Albert B. Casuga

Sit. Feast on your life.

– from “Love After Love,” Derek Walcott

Although this invitation will prolong our wait
in the cold antechambers that we surround
ourselves with, we will cautiously accept it.

Why not? Sitting here, staring at a kaleidoscope
of the many faces we have constructed to meet
other faces, I celebrate a love affair with myself.

Who else will do that for me? There were lovers,
and there *were* lovers, but they held on to their
own chisels to pare and scrape their own image

of what they could have and hold not unlike
a wild-eyed Pygmalion sculpting flesh onto his one
desire, a Galatea of his rawest wants and dreams.

I will sit and wait for the feast of all feasts
to be served on my table, my head on a platter,
my heart seasoning a bowl of hope, a *soupçon*

of little mercies that lovers often do: a salving
of hurts, a troth of endless fealty, a promise
that the image on the mirror is finally, only mine.

(June 21, 2011)

The Beauty of the Sea

Ralph Semino Galán

On a clear day like this,
the view of the sea
from the promontory
where you stand

is breathtaking,
its surface breaking
like a precious gem
into prisms of light.

So you scamper
to the beach below,
the sand crunching
beneath your feet

and scoop a cupful
of blue in your hands.
But already the humor
inside you changes,

since always beauty
betrays, making you sigh,
for once captured
it begins to slip through

your fingers, the way
water escapes your grip
no matter how long
or hard your try.

Time and the Beloved

Ralph Semino Galán

When I am with you
time moves differently
it accelerates
like a bullet train
a speed boat
a jet plane
the surroundings blurring
into a haze of faces
a labyrinth of landmarks
a whirlwind of words
as I focus my attention
on you and you alone.

Or it decelerates
into triple slow motion,
so that a second stretches
and lasts a lifetime,
a gesture takes forever
to accomplish, an utterance
becomes comprehensible
only several centuries after,
and I end up remembering
the timbre of your voice,
the texture of your arms,
the tint of your eyes.

Silence and the Beloved

Ralph Semino Galán

In a love poem like this
only the lover speaks,
articulating both heart
and mind, connecting
this stark image
with that emotion,
this metaphor
with that state of mind.

The beloved remains silent,
whose absence
determines his presence,
whose mutable face
is likened to the changes
in the weather:
sunny as a summer day,
grim as a stormy night.

But he is always there:
the minty taste
after the torrid kiss,
the shadow cast
by the departing figure,
the musky scent
left on the damp sheets,
the empty room's silence.

Two Ships

(Iligan City, December 2011,
After Tropical Storm Sendong)

Ralph Semino Galán

On the night
 of the Great Flood
two ships appeared
 in the rising waters
a ship of light
 and a ship of darkness
one sailing downstream
 the other upriver
mysterious in the heavy rain.

The ships started
 to gather passengers
both the drowning
 and the drowned
the young and the old
 the rich and the poor
to destinations
 and destinies
uncertain unclear unknown.

The ships were nowhere
 to be found
the morning after
 no visible trace or chart
of their sudden passage
 except perhaps maybe
days and weeks later
 in the bleeding hearts
and the countless wakes.

After Watching Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*

Ralph Semino Galán

Removing my black faux leather jacket
in Café Adriatico, I notice an ink stain
on my pink shirt the color of cherry blossoms.

Earlier in the evening, second act of the opera,
while my heart was fluttering like a butterfly
inside the gilded cage of my heavy chest,

Cio Cio San appeared in a western dress:
hothouse flower, a carnation off season
against the snowy white of the shoji screens.

How many Pinkertons are bound to betray me,
I wonder? How many bushido blades
would attempt to plunge into my heaving guts?

Why do I still sing *Un bel di vedremo*, aria
full of hope despite the diminishing odds?
Diminishing like my hair, beauty, youth ...

I guess I have survived all these years
by allowing words to flow like music
from the bottomless inkwell of my heart.

(June 23, 2012)

LIMANG HIBLA NG PAGMAMAHAL

Teo T. Antonio

APOY NG HIMAGSIK

Di na ikaw ang kahapong
tinutudla ng salita,
upang ating pag-ugnayin
bawat pitlag at kataga.
Pinag-isa ng panahon
ang pangarap at pagsumpa.
Hanggang ito ay magsanga,
mamulaklak at lumaya.

Sumibol ang mga supling
namukadkad na bulaklak,
upang ating pagbuhulin
bawat hibla ng pangarap.
Sa nagbuhol na pag-asa,
panagimpan at pagliyang,
may nabuo na tahanan
di mayanig ng habagat.

At sa dapyo ng amihan
hinahagkan ang pag-ibig,
na minsan ay sinusubok
ang tatag ng pananalig.
Sumuko ang pandarahas
sa sulo ng pagtitiis.
Tumitingkad ang liwanag
at ang apoy ng himagsik.

HIBLA NG PAGMAMAHAL

Ngayon ay hindi na
batang-pusong nangangarap.
Nagmamahal, umiibig,
sa pader ay umaalpas.

Nar'on pa rin ang himagsik
sa dilim ay nagniningas.
Naghahanap ng pagsintang
sa apoy ay sinasalab.

Pero bakit ang pag-ibig
nadarama'y ibang-iba,
na pinanday sa palihan
ng maraming pagbabaka?

Ang unawa't pagtitimpi,
lumalalim parang sugat,
na tinudla ng palaso
naging pumpon ng bulaklak.

Ano't bakit naging dagat
dating ilog sa pag-agos?
Nakakayang halakhakan
dagundong ng bagyo't unos.

Ibang-iba, kakaiba
sa pagsalok nitong pintig.
Kung tubig mang rumagasa
nagsasanga ang pag-ibig.

Isang dagat ang pag-ibig,
isang tabo ng alamat.
Habang iyong sinasalok
lumalalim na dalumat.

PANAHON MAN AY NAGBAGO

Nagbago na ang panahon
pero hindi nagbabago,
ang pagsintang noo't ngayon
nakatitik sa puso ko.

Sa panahon ng cyberspace
may e-mail man at may Facebook.
Naka-encode sa dibdib ko
ang dalisay na pagtibok.

May laptop man at may iPad
di ma-delete ang pagsinta.
Ang memory ay naroon
buong sumpa at panata.

Kaarawan mo'y dadalaw
sa gunita at pagtanda.
Habang wala pang Alzheimer
ikaw'y sintang MUSA'T TULA.

ANG GABI'Y MAY NINGAS NG MGA BITUIN

Tumitingin siya
sa gabing mabituin.
Katulad ni Van Gogh
nang ang obra'y likhain.

Naroon sa gabi
ang talang maningas,
naroon sa gabi,
ang dilim at liwanag.

Ito ang hinanap
ni Jacinto sa "Kartilya."
Na itanim sa isip
sinumang makikibaka.

Marawal ang landas
pagtahak sa mithiin.
Ang paghihimagsik
di pistang lalandasin.

At ito'y malayo
dapat magsakripisyo,
sinumang susuong
tungo sa pagbabago.

Dapat buo ang isip
at pusong tumitibok,
dahil ang pagbabago
madugong paghahamok.

Alaalang pamana
ng “Utak ng Katipunan,”
ibinuwis ang buhay
sa ngalan ng KALAYAAN.

HANGGANG DITO LAMANG

Huwag mong hanapin ang pilosopiya
“at mayamang dunong ng matematika.”

Ang kahanga-hangang siyens’ya’y nagdulot
ng komunikasyong sa mundo ay handog.

Di ako si Einstein, Shakespeare o Darwin
o kaya’y si Karl Marx, Mao Tse Tung o Lenin.

Kanila ang dunong, pinagpunyagian,
dunong ko’y nagmula sa kung saan-saan.

Sa nilalandas kong bukirin at kalye
mga talinghaga’y aking hinuhuli.

Di ko lalagpasan ang kanilang dunong,
kahit si Balagtas, si Rizal o Tolstoi.

Inihihibik ko ang “dusa’t hinagpis”
ng sariling bayang nag-iwi ng hapis.

Naroon ang tuwa, ligaya’t halakhak
habang dinarama sugat na bulaklak.

Di kayang alpasan iba't ibang teorya
na nagpapalito sa aking memorya.

Hanggang dito lamang ako sa pagtula
habang hinahabi ilang talinghaga.

Kung inilarawan ang bansang sarili
at bawat himagsik sa dilim ng gabi.

Gusto kong umalpas sa daloy ng buhay
kahit na alam kong marupok ang tangkay.

Dahil naniwala sa pakikilaban
alpasan ang bawat dustang kalagayan.

Isulong ang layon, pader ay buwagin
laging humahadlang sa laya't mithiin.

12 Enero 2012

Bui Doi in the City of Angels

John Jack G. Wigley

Growing up in Angeles City with an American father whom you have never seen is no joke. For one, you become the butt of jokes from kids who have no better things to do than bully miserable kids like yourself. They assault you with so many names: G.I. Baby, *mestisong bangus*, Victory Baby, *singawng Kano*, Daddy Joe Mommy Ago-go. These were some of the common expressions hurled against me.

I had an Amerasian friend who suffered even graver blows because he was dark and had an African-American father who had also left his mother. All the issues of race, color and gender were flung against him. *Ita, negrito, ulikba, kampon ng kadiliman, barkada ni Dark Vader*, as if the color of the skin had to do with good and evil. Oftentimes, I would see him crying in one corner, hurt and helpless. Never mind them, I told him. We are different. They're still getting used to us.

It was not always a sad case to be different though. It had its benefits too. When I was about to enter kindergarten, Mother brought me to the Pearl S. Buck Foundation, Inc. This foundation is a non-profit organization through which rich American individuals or childless couples support Amerasian children (children with American fathers and Asian mothers) by sending them money. The medical, dental and educational needs are provided for by sponsors who donate to the organization. Each child gets a sponsor who writes to him regularly and the child must write back. The child receives a monthly stipend of thirty pesos.

The only requirement is you have to be a son or daughter of an American serviceman. I remember one mother saying that the reason the foundation has a branch in the Philippines is that the military servicemen, who fathered all these illegitimate children, never atoned for their sins, and that other American civilians had to cover for them. Amerasians from war-torn Cambodia and Vietnam instantly get American citizenship but Amerasians from ally countries like the Philippines never enjoyed the same benefit.

At that time, I didn't know what the organization was, much less who Pearl S. Buck is. I thought she was just a good-natured lady who once visited the Philippines and took pity on children who never knew their American fathers. I thought that she might have been filthy rich because her first name was a gem and her last name meant money. Maybe she had had illegitimate children who didn't know their fathers like the rest of the women who frequently peopled the office.

As case members (that's how we were called), we were asked to report to our respective case workers once a month, and write to our dear sponsors, updating them on our daily activities in school, at home, or in church. The case worker would warn us not to ask for money and never to indicate our address in the letters we wrote. Later, I would learn that the case workers never sent the original letters we wrote. The office secretary would type them out and have them sent to the main office in Manila. Neither the child nor the sponsor knew each other's address or how much money the sponsor sent or the child received. I figured that the office kept some of the money and that this was how they got money to pay for the salaries of the case workers, the secretary, the guards and other personnel and for the general upkeep of the foundation.

Better this than no support at all, my mom would say. "See, it's a good thing that your father is an American! We'll never have this kind of support if I had opted for a Filipino partner. Look at the dirty helpless children on the streets. Pity them! Because their mothers didn't know better, they have no support. *Iba talaga ang Kano!*"

Right! As if my father had everything to do with this, I thought. He wasn't even the one sending the support.

The best time I had with the organization was shortly before Christmas in 1978 when I was about to turn ten. I was so thankful because my sponsor had sent me money. Mrs. Carrera, the stern case worker looked

at me with curious eyes and sternly inquired what I would do with the money.

“Umm... I will buy rice and canned goods for the family.”

“Not too many canned goods. Your sponsor might think you have a very large family and you eat voraciously. Sponsors don’t like gluttonous and greedy children. We don’t want to discourage her from supporting you, right? What else?” She arched her eyebrows as she reached for a pen at the far end of the desk.

“What else? Umm...” I suddenly felt pressured to think of something.

“Perhaps you don’t need anything. I might just as well send the money back to your sponsor, *no?*” She started flipping the pen as she squinted at me.

“Ay, ma’am. I... I... have something to... buy. A school project *po*,” I nervously uttered.

“Are you sure?” she interrogated, leaning her face forward to me.

“*Opo*, ma’am.” I felt that the office had turned into a *barangay* outpost. I was a petty thief and the rotund lady investigating me across the table was a *kapitana*. “I need to buy coconut shell pieces, some strings and a bottle of Elmer’s Glue ma’am, for our school project in Practical Arts.”

“You are telling the truth, *no?*” The voice from the other side of the table was shrill and imperious.

I felt my neck stiffen. I cleared my throat but only managed to nod my head.

“You have a check here amounting to 295 pesos. I think your dear sponsor was happy that you were the top of your class during the first grading period. Your last letter to her was deeply touching. Well, that’s according to her. I couldn’t give the letter to you because it has her address.” She sounded like an impromptu speaker at a demonstration rally in our school. “So write her a moving letter thanking her for all the help she extended.” She ripped the check from the checkbook.

“*Ahh*... ma’am, I need to buy a white polo uniform *po*...” I nervously added, “And a shirt to wear for our Christmas party, if it’s ok...”

“The uniform is good but you don’t need a new shirt. Especially if it’s gonna be used for a senseless party. NO!” The last word was a thundering

assault to the very core of my being. I simply looked down at my trembling hands. I had never noticed them to be as sweaty as they were now.

“You have to come back here after you have bought all the needed items because I have to check and compute whether you used the money wisely. We need to take a picture of you with all the items you bought. Your dear sponsor will surely be happy to see your photo. In the picture, don’t just smile. Wear a large grin!” She flapped the check near my nose. I anxiously took it.

“And write the most beautiful thank you letter you can. Don’t forget to include my name. Tell her I’m so kind to you, *ha?*”

I just shyly turned away.

Outside the office, I saw my mom clutching her bag to her chest. There were several parents with wailing children crowding the area. “So how much did you get?” she asked me.

“Almost 300 pes...” I stopped speaking because my mother suddenly raised her hands in jubilation. The mothers sitting on the bench with her were looking at her either with envy or with scorn. One guardian remarked that we were lucky because his protégée only had 89 pesos as a Christmas gift. The others had even less than that, or worse, nothing at all.

“Well, my boy is brilliant. He really knows how to write to his dear sponsor. He’s at the top of his class. Sponsors like intelligent children, you know.”

“Ma...” I started pulling at her skirt, embarrassed.

Outside the gate, my mother was happily tapping my shoulder. *Buti na lang, Kano ang tataymo! Kung Pinoy ang hinanap ko, malamang tirik na ang mata natin sa gutom. Hah! Iba talaga ang ‘Kano!* She was beaming with pride and humming a tune on the way to the bank. I felt that she would brandish the check in front of everybody we met like a victorious soldier parading on Independence Day.

We spent the whole two hours buying this and that. In between the buying, I was warning Mother about what Mrs. Carrera told me—to only buy things that are needed and necessary. I cautioned her that we needed to go back to the office for the picture taking.

We had to hire a public jeepney to take us back to the foundation. The driver helped us unload all the things we had bought. We took them to the small corner with a chair wrapped in a yellow cloth. The skinny pho-

tographer motioned my mom to go back to the waiting area. “Parents are not allowed beyond this point,” he said offhandedly.

Tse! Mother flipped her plastic fan and walked away.

The photographer instructed me to empty all the shopping bags and place their contents on the yellow cloth. Cans of sardines, toothpaste, soap, white polo shirt—one by one I put them on the chair. I saw a number of mothers and children peering through the window screen. “Shall I include the rice?”

“All the things you bought,” he boomed, without looking at me. He was busy setting up the camera and the tripod.

With small and feeble hands, I cupped the grains of rice and piled them on the chair. They spilled to the floor.

“Idiot!” he cried. “Just place the whole bag of rice on the table so your sponsor can see them in the picture.”

I had to return the rice back little by little with my bare hands on the bag.

After the picture taking, I went straight to the mini library to compose a letter for my dear sponsor.

“My dear sponsor: thank you for sending me 295 pesos...”

I crossed out the amount. I remembered that we should never declare how much we had received.

“With the money you sent, I was able to buy rice, canned goods, a school uniform and materials for my projects. Because of you, my family and I will be happy this Christmas. May God bless you. I hope to see you when I get older so I can thank you in person. I will never forget you. Love,” I inscribed the last word and signed the pink sheet.

Mrs. Carrera read the letter and made marks here and there. She nodded her head and motioned me to leave. “I hope you bought all the things you needed. Merry Christmas and send my best regards to your mom.” She flashed a wide-toothed grin and winked.

Outside the office, I saw my mom packing all the goods that we bought. I was luckier than most children because I had a generous sponsor.

I was luckier than most children because my father was an American. But I did not know him.

The Two Trees

Ferdinand M. Lopez

Two enormous elm trees are on each side of the house. They bend their trailing branches down over the roof. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a crushing, jealous absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts and hands and hair on its roof, and when it rains their tears trickle down monotonously and rot on the shingles.

Eugene O'Neill, **Desire Under the Elms**

There were two enormous acacia trees standing sideways, separated by a stone-paved esplanade that seemed to forcibly separate them. Yet as though by sheer ingenuity, their branches stretched laterally in the air, reaching out to touch and caress each other. The edge of their clasp locked like the hands of two old sisters holding each other tightly, plodding patiently towards an unknown destination.

In our folk consciousness, the tree spirits protected the land and its inhabitants long before the conquistadores set foot on the archipelago. Our people believed that enormous trees—with trunks the circumference of three people locked hand-in-hand like in Matisse's "The Dance"—were portals to another world. Thus, they were revered and worshipped long ago, by our ancestors who knew that they were indwelt by the great anima. Every tree therefore, was a witness in time, each one having a distinct story to tell.

These were the two trees of my student days in this University—long before the España campus had a major facelift to welcome the institution's

four hundred founding anniversary; long before the idea of earth-balling entered the vocabulary of the nation; and definitely, long before the two rival divas of literature sang their swan songs. I have always thought of them as eternal—the two acacia trees and the two divas-outliving the best and the rest of us.

I grew up hearing stories at the Faculty of Arts and Letters when I was still a young and impressionable student—and that was more than three decades ago—of how the literary universe at Santo Tomas was divided like Philippine *showbizlandia* in the '70s between Nora Aunor and Vilma Santos. The great divide, in this case, was more academic personalities, yet the intrigues surrounding Ophelia Dimalanta and Milagros Tanlayco, oftentimes perpetrated by their warring fans, escalated to a scale which eventually polarized the literary community in the University, with each member of one camp regarded as a “usual suspect” by the prying eyes of the rival group. Writers and their sympathizers congregate around Ophelia while those of us who were most likely to become teachers, walk under the shadow of Milagros.

I had the chance to work with both of them. Like a bat that exhibits qualities of a bird because of it has wings while the rest of its body resembles a rodent, I, too was very careful in conducting myself when I was around either of them lest I reveal my true nature and offend them who were my mentors in the undergraduate years and in the Graduate School.

Both became my immediate superiors when I started a teaching career at the University in the early '90s. Back then, Dr. Tanlayco was the chair of the Department of Languages while Dr. Dimalanta was the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Letters. When I was taken in as an Instructor in 1992, Dr. Tanlayco said that she and Ophelia seldom agree on sundry matters, but in my case, both of them acquiesced to my teaching at the Royal and Pontifical University.

In one awkward meeting at the narrow but well-lighted corridor of the old Graduate School, Dr. Tanlayco and I accidentally came across Dean Dimalanta, after I had just submitted my application letter, together with my curriculum vitae, to the department chair. Dr. Tanlayco then, introduced me to the Dean.

Dr. Tanlayco, said, “This is the renowned Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Letters, Dr. Ophelia Dimalanta, and Dean Dimalanta, may I present

to you the newest member of our Faculty whom I recruited to teach in AB...”

And even before Dr. Tanlayco could finish her next statement, Dr. Dimalanta told Ma’am Mila, “Of course, Mila, I know him. He was my student in the Graduate School and I invited him to teach here.”

As the biblical saying goes, no servant can serve two masters at the same time. You will love one and hate the other. As a matter of course, it happened that sometimes I hated Ophelia and loved Milagros; other times I resented Milagros and adored Ophelia. But there were sunshine days when being with either of them enabled me to experienced moments of intense joy.

Because what was at stake was loyalty or love, one would most likely become a pendulum swinging from end to end in dizzying ways, trying to win the approval or affection of both sides. But something had to give. True enough, it did not take me very long to finally create two alters, who had to separately deal with this schizophrenic predicament that I was in. As the British psychoanalyst Ronald Laing, said, this is how we cope with the challenges and demands of the modern times.

For all their different personalities within and beyond the four walls of the institution, both Tanlayco and Dimalanta exuded admirable poise and confidence amidst pressures and difficulties; both exhibited different styles of nurturing, loving, and caring; and lastly, both were two strong women who had their own unique ways of teaching and managing their turfs.

Dr. Tanlayco was the harder taskmaster. Like Pharaoh’s governor charged with the enormous task of building monumental structures, Dr. Tanlayco’s whip was her tongue which was as strong and hard-hitting as the tail of a stingray lashing violently at her prey. Her herculean duty included overseeing a Department composed of more than a hundred faculty members teaching English. Literature, Filipino, Spanish, and Art Appreciation, making sure that all efficiently and effectively did the work put square on their shoulders. This was no mean feat inasmuch as these faculty members come from different colleges, with their loyalties to their respective deans and their own personal interests. Dr. Tanlayco authoritatively steered the Department toward new heights: rebuilding the confidence of the young by equipping them with the knowledge they ought to possess as teachers

of their respective disciplines through in-house trainings and off-campus seminars; and, more importantly, instilling in the faculty, young and old alike, the value of discipline, loyalty, and dedication. In her wise estimate, there were the strong foundations of a long and lasting teaching career in the University. Dr. Tanlayco did not mince her words. She belonged to the school of hard-knocks. Everyone within the ambit of her displeasure—late-comers, moonlighters and liars—became easy targets of her rant and rage. A colleague in the Department aptly described our communal impression and collective reaction regarding Dr. Tanlayco's draconian administration, when she said that, "Next to the fear of God, is the fear of Tanlayco."

Dr. Dimalanta on the other hand, was more liberal, allowing you to do your work, your own way. She gave each person enough latitude and space for maneuvering, particularly, if she believed in the individual. Students and faculty alike had their experience of liberalism when she was the Dean, which brought out the best and the worst in them. Students were allowed to think on their own with their leaders as their most vocal mouthpieces on issues like tuition fee increase, quality instruction, and the school uniform. Teachers who were products of the old dispensation found her management skills wanting, while others tested the limits of their academic freedom to embarrassing extremes. Her horror roll, a spoof of the outstanding teacher registry, was condemned as vindictively disparaging especially by those who made to the list. The acerbic comments and snide remarks articulated by her fully-defined blood-red lips, though passionately poetic, impale her victims, condemning them to their messy metaphorical deaths. She had her favourites, no doubt about it, and she did not blush when showing her preference in the public. For this matter, she was loved by many and hated by the rest. And Ophelia could hurt deeply those whom she loved and those who loved and these who loved her. This was her version of love, a bloodbath of passion, and carnage of elemental desire. This *cariño* brutal, I suppose, stemmed from an abandonment issue which is the a nuanced undertone in her poems "Finder Loser," "Stowaway Love," "Loser Keeper," "This One Legacy," and "Waiting Game."

The administrative control of a Tanlayco was tempered by the tolerance of a Dimalanta. It would have been unimaginable to survive had the two been equally exacting in their ways and in their means. Whether they were two sides of the coin or were polar opposites, they complemented and supplemented each other in and out of the offices they

occupied, the classrooms they presided over, and in their respective dominions where they reigned supreme as queens. Dr. Tanlayco once confessed that there was a division of labour in the literary education at UST: while she established the foundations, Dr. Dimalanta built upon it a magnificent edifice.

In the classroom, both were fierce gatekeepers of knowledge. They would not allow intellectual poachers in their territories, nor would charlatans go unpunished the moment their forking paths crossed. They performed to the best of their abilities the courses which they handled with much ease and facility. Ma'am Mila, was legendary for calling her students "creatures," wearing lace gloves and using coloured chalk, while Ma'am Ophie was famous for her short skirts which revealed a well-sculpted pair of shapely sexy legs. Tanlayco's booming voice was matched by Dimalanta's well-modulated expressions. Yet their command of the language was as impeccable as their style of dressing—classic, age-appropriate, and dignified. Ma'am Mila was more traditional in her choice of clothes as well as her values, while Ma'am Ophie breathed in every facet of her being, an air of modernity.

There was a time when some younger faculty members saw the overwhelming canopy of these two great trees as an obstacle to their professional growth. To them, the towering stature of a Tanlayco and a Dimalanta prevented the sunlight of opportunities from reaching any upstart below, so that they could gloriously bask in their own share of the golden rays of fame and popularity. These saplings did not understand that they needed protection against the harmful elements in their environment, such as the scorching heat and air-borne pests that would plague their existence. These two literary matriarchs shielded us from all sorts of power trippers, and megalomaniacs mushrooming in our midst, the kind who feed on the innocence of the young and the vulnerability of the inexperienced. Dr. Tanlayco and Dr. Dimalanta nurtured and nourished us, supervising and facilitating our growth and development as persons and as professionals; but most importantly they defended us—fearlessly fighting tooth and nail any predator—and protected us, against any mean-spirited individuals who undermined our integrity and trampled upon our dignity.

The year 2010 was a bad one for us literature teachers in the University. We lost Inang (dearest mother, as I so fondly call Dr. Tanlayco) in the

heat of the May elections, while Opalyn's (the precious gem of Thomasian Literature, an epithet for Dr. Dimalanta) "one final say" happened in November, in the year of the metal tiger.

In Amy Tan's "Joy Luck Club" An Mei Hsu remembers how one night, her wayward mother, who had been disowned by her family, came back to perform the unimaginable: she rolled up her sleeves to cut her flesh, mixed it with a bowl of soup and feed it to her dying mother. I recalled her saying that only the most dutiful of daughters would do such a painful thing to honour her mother. In one supreme moment of gratitude, I, who have had this tremendous fear of coffins and corpses, did the inconceivable. Since I would never allow my two dearest divas to look dreadful for their last show, I had to personally supervise their make-over and styling, even touching their cold, lifeless bodies like some little match girl, who finally embraced the cruel winter of human indifference.

Ma'am Mila looked very regal in her violet mestiza gown made of heavily embroidered Spanish lace, complete with butterfly sleeves. Her hair coiffed in the style of the 60's—well sculpted, side-swept bangs ending in a French twist at the back. She wore an elegant amethyst pendant with a gold chain and matching dangling earrings. Her magenta-colored lipstick complemented the back and purple shades of her eyelids. Meanwhile, Ma'am Ophie appeared stunning in her classic black silk dress with a crimson, corded lace blouse accented with a black and silver lame scarf. Her pearl earrings set in platinum matched her designer's watch set in silver, studded with rows and rows of rhinestones. Her short bouffant hair, teased at the crown to achieve volume and height went well with her well-contoured dark brows and ruby red lips.

Dr. Tanlayco and Dr. Dimalanta had a lot of things in common in life and in death: both were born on the year of the monkey; both graduated from the University of Santo Tomas; both had an unparalleled passion for Literature; both became top administrators of UST; both were given a brief furlough from teaching just before their deaths; both passed on to the next life because of a heart attack in the year of the metal tiger; and lastly, their mortal remains were reduced to ashes in the incinerator of the La Loma Cemetery Crematorium.

The changing of the guard came too soon, with none among us in the University able to fill the gargantuan shoes they left behind in their

rush to pass on to the next life. Like Dickinson's birds that stay, we each had to mature overnight just to continue, in our own small way, the vision and the legacy of our highly esteemed literary forebears.

I do not see these two old acacia trees anymore in the campus. I think that they were the first to go when the entire campus underwent extreme renovation in preparation for the University's Quadricentenary. Like these two beloved literary icons of teaching and writing in the University, who did not live to witness the pomp and pageantry of this once-in-a-lifetime event, so were these two ancient pillars unable to experience bathing breathlessly under the neon blooms and brilliant showers of this University's unending grace.

Roche's Limit

Dawn Marie Nicole L. Marfil

Valentine's Day Eve

I counted one, two, three test papers from the recently concluded AY 2011-2012 prelim exams that I finished checking. My eyes darted to the laptop screen for a second and went back to resume checking and counting the fourth test paper.

"What is the name of the closest star to the planet Earth right after the Sun?" Lawrence, a former student of mine, was quizzing Ralph, his teammate.

"Proxima Centauri!" Ralph smiled triumphantly. He knew he got the correct answer.

Their fast-paced question-answer-question-answer rhythm kept me company while I worked, or pretended to work. I was squatting in the conference room with the Pautakan Team of my college. They were preparing for the inter-college quiz bee in two weeks' time and they needed a place where they could review and study in peace. Their faculty adviser threw them inside the conference room, my favorite place to hide in, away from the prying eyes of other faculty members. I wasn't making noise anyway, except for the tip tap of my fingertips over the keyboard every time I replied to Xavier's message over the Yahoo Messenger. My last message was sent over 7 minutes ago. I had given him a list of all the movies and TV series I planned on pirating via Torrent. I wondered what was taking him so long to respond. I don't know how it happened but his messages over YM had quickly become the highlight of my days.

“What is the minimal distance at which a satellite is able to orbit a planet without being destroyed by tidal forces?” Lawrence’s voice droned on. Ralph was surprisingly quiet after that question.

I moved to my fifth test paper and was in the middle of drawing a circle around the final score when my small square box with a smiley face blinked yellow at the bottom of my screen. I quickly dropped the pen and clicked open his message. It read: “So is THAT how you’re going to spend your Valentine’s Day?! Downloading TV series and movies?! HAHAHA-HA!”

I checked the calendar in a panic and true enough, tomorrow was Valentine’s Day and I had completely forgotten it. Well, it wasn’t as if it mattered anyway.

I quickly typed in my reply, “Why? Do YOU have plans?!” because I knew he had none — it was barely a month after his break-up.

“Teka alam ko iyan ...” Ralph was furiously scratching the curly mop of a mess on top of his head for the answer. I watched him absently as he fumbled for the answer in his brain while I waited for Xavier’s reply.

The smiley face Xavier sent me was annoying. Infuriating, even.

“DO YOU HAVE PLANS FOR VALENTINE’S DAY?!?” I typed in, my fingertips hitting the keys with more fervor than usual, my mind racing with the possibilities, and my chest tightening with every scenario that played out in my head. *“Hindi ba may word na ‘limit’ un dulo?”* Ralph’s voice drifted in the background, the information he was searching for was inconsequential when compared to the answer from Xavier that was taking much too long to arrive.

Who was he meeting? A man or a woman? A blind date? A friend from college, with history behind them? A friend from high school, with an even longer history behind them? An ex-girlfriend? A friend with designs on him because he had just gotten out of a relationship? A just-friend friend with a huge possibility of becoming more, especially with the Valentine’s Day crap going around?

I wanted to ask him outright who he was meeting up with. But then I realized it didn’t matter. It could be anyone and if he was meant to find someone to love tomorrow, on Valentine’s Day, I really had no control over it.

Unless...

“What is the minimal distance at which a satellite is able to orbit a planet without being destroyed by tidal forces?” Lawrence read the question again.

“Don’t go. Please?” I typed the message in the smallest font size possible and quickly hit the Send button before I lost my nerve. Then I held my breath and waited for his reply.

“What is the minimal distance at which a satellite is able to orbit a planet without being destroyed by tidal forces?” Lawrence repeated the question for Ralph, as if it could help jog his memory of a limit that prevented the destruction of a moon.

In my suspended state, my ears perked up at the interesting notion that a planet had the power to destroy its moon if ever the moon went a little too close to it.

“Ronald? Roa? Roche? Roche!!! Roche’s Limit!” Ralph jumped in his seat excitedly, finally getting the answer.

Lawrence nodded in affirmation.

Chad’s Apartment:

18, 479 kilometers

After months of dreaming about it, I finally got one from Xavier.

A kiss.

Granted, it was because of a game of dare that Louie had instigated on that half-warm, half-cold August night last year. But even in my semi-inebriated state, I distinctly heard him say he wanted to kiss me. Half chance, half choice.

And as he leaned over to give me that kiss, all I wanted was the chance to take it all back. Out of all the times I had ever fantasized about kissing him, never did I imagine that my mouth would taste like beer and vomit when it happened. I wanted my lips to taste like the strawberry flavored chapstick I keep putting on.

But there he was, leaning over me while I lay flat on my back because I was too tipsy to stay upright.

Soft pressure, a kiss like a close whisper. And then, a sudden descent

of need had his whole mouth covering mine where not even a sliver of moonshine could slip through.

Velvet tongue.

Nip.

Cotton lips.

Bite.

Good little hurts.

Then he pulled back, and something must have shifted within him because when he went back for more, this time, he took everything I had and devoured it with relish. Then he coaxed, captured and drew me in deeper, deeper into the heat of his mouth until it felt like my whole body was kissing him and all I could do was curl my hand on his shirt, grip the fabric so tightly so that I wouldn't drown in his kiss.

But it was wrong. I should have let myself drown in his kiss. Not be so afraid of it. Because then I'd have my hands free to roam his chest, his shoulders, up to his neck where my hands would crawl up to the back of his neck and play with the curled ends of his hair before tunneling my fingers through the strands. I wanted that and so much more. But I was too busy being afraid of his kiss that was slowly erasing memories of all the kisses I've had before his.

Sadly, his lips were incredibly, incredibly busy that night.

I somehow forgot for a while that we were playing a drinking game and I had to watch him kiss someone else. Someone else whose hands weren't busy clutching his shirt in fear. Someone else whose hands ran all over his body the way I wanted mine to. Someone else who had more right to be with him than me.

And it hurt — not the knowledge that he probably generated more heat with someone else who isn't me. But what hurt more was the knowledge that even though I had his lips, teeth and tongue already... I wanted more. Just, more.

But it's not like I could get it out of a drinking game. And sadly, he's not as generous with his heart as he is with his lips. And it hurt to want it, still.

O Bar, Ortigas:

18, 477 kilometers

“Dawn, think of this as an immersion!” Chad yelled at me over the boom of the music as he took my arm and dragged me through the Saturday night swarm of people inside O Bar. It was July and we were all trying to extend our summer vacation that had been rudely interrupted by the beginning of the first semester. With his light, sinewy, tall frame, Chad easily navigated the trail that Xavier, Mark, Louie and I followed across the room, toward the bar to get our beers. Three beers free for the price of the 300-peso entrance fee — the deal wasn’t that bad. I took one look around the bar and I didn’t have to wonder what Chad meant by “immersion.” There were about 4 girls there, including myself. The rest were men.

I was inside a gay bar with friends who were mostly gay. The man in drag performing Katy Perry’s “Teenage Dream” on a small stage should’ve been a dead giveaway. Or perhaps the more obvious clues were the two small ledges where half naked men in tight jeans and even tighter abs gyrated to the music, their well-oiled torsos glistening like the mesmerizing disco ball above the dancing crowd. But Xavier had his hand wrapped around my wrist, careful not to lose me while we squeezed through humping, sliding, swaying bodies, and for the life of me, I couldn’t focus on anything else except the feel of his hand tightening around my wrist and sometimes, nearly sliding into my hand but never quite getting there. All in an effort not to lose me in the crowd, of course.

I lost his hand when we got our beers, safe in the pocket of space near the back of the bar and no longer in danger of losing each other. Xavier and I were now content with our hands wrapped around cold bottles of beer while the slam, soar and swirl of the club’s music took our bodies to different directions for the rest of the night. Mark and Chad’s eyes wandered throughout the bar, even if they danced with us in a tight little circle. Sometime after midnight when everyone was done with their beers and I was still hanging on to my last bottle, Mark and Chad tried to leave Xavier and me alone so they could rove around the bar. In a panic, I seized hold of Chad’s arm and asked him why.

Chad looked at me as if he couldn’t believe a dumber person than me could exist. With his mouthing hanging slightly open he said, “Dawn,

must you ask?!”

I let go of his arm, embarrassed. Chad shook his head at me and left, diving into the sea of strangers around us. Xavier smirked at me, amused by my bewilderment. I wanted to ask him if it was true that men could go there, look for someone to hook up with for a night and forget about it when the morning came. I knew about it, knew it was possible. I just never really saw it happening in front of me, and all around me.

“That’s Chad for you.” Xavier told me, his amused eyes still stuck on Chad’s glistening face under the whirl of green, pink, blue and purple lights rotating above us. He held out his hand and I immediately handed him my beer bottle. I needed a little time to absorb the reality of it all. A few hours ago, while yelling out Katy Perry and Spice Girls songs with Chad and Mark, the club had been a fun wonderland of drag queens, disco balls and gyrating, hard, oiled, male bodies. Now it just struck me how merciless it was groping in the dark for the heated touch of another body without wanting the love that gave that touch its heat. Had Chad and Mark given up completely on love because it was messy and hard to find and in doing so, had they settled for lust and heat because, though they were as messy, they were easier to find?

Xavier handed me back my beer bottle. I took a swig, knowing full well that he had still left some of it for me. I wanted to ask Xavier if it was an exclusively heterosexual fantasy — of love and lust existing in only one body. But before I could, something happened.

It was something like out of a movie.

Haunting notes plucked by a slow, lonely hand from a guitar filled the cavernous club. A hush fell over the crowd of roving individuals who were like a hundred versions of Chad and Mark. They all went still. There was a small, short silent breath after the last note was coaxed out of the guitar. I took advantage of the moment to ask Xavier, as I handed back the beer bottle, what the song was.

“It’s California King Bed.” Xavier said, sounding like he was expecting me to recognize the song instantly. I didn’t. But when the song started up again and this tender, tentative voice with its little note of pent-up despair came on, singing about the sadness of being skin to skin with someone but never getting to what’s beneath the surface, I recognized the singer.

“Is that Rihanna?” I asked Xavier and he grinned at me, glad that I finally recognized it.

“Yeah, it’s her. I love how she comes out with a completely different song every time she releases a single,” he said.

I nodded in agreement, still swayed and enthralled by the song and how the crowd had suddenly compressed in upon itself so that it no longer looked like a hundred individuals were swirling around in lost circles. As the song progressed, the notes became more plaintive. The song moved towards the fragile border of asking for hearts where only bodies existed. While watching the crowd move in unison to the dips and swells of the song, I realized that the hundreds of roving individuals like Chad and Mark hadn’t really given up on love. They hungered for it, just as much as I did, probably even more so. Just because they could sever love from lust didn’t mean that one or the other did not exist anymore.

“Do you like it?” Xavier asked me.

I looked at him while the song approached a crescendo, filled with a furiously twisting guitar solo and topped by the insistent pressing on guitar strings to make a note stay longer than it could. Paying attention to him for the first time since the song and the crowd stole my attention, I watched as Xavier tipped the small mouth of the bottle to his lips to take a sip from my beer.

Xavier had an arresting pair of lips. For someone who had been smoking as long as he had, his lips were a soft pink that darkened to a deep red whenever he got extremely drunk. The mouth of my beer bottle pressed against his lips which curled around it. The liquid slid down his throat and I followed the bob of his Adam’s apple up and down the line of his neck. Then it stopped moving. He was done drinking. A little bead of moisture clung to his bottom lip. He didn’t seem to notice.

“Yes,” I answered his question, my eyes quickly darting up to his eyes. I was surprised to hear my voice, still steady after what seemed like an eternity of staring at the bead of moisture on his bottom lip. Rihanna’s song was still playing in the background and even as I kept my eyes on Xavier’s eyes while we talked of Rihanna and whatever other topic we could find, the memory of that small drop of moisture clinging to his bottom lip burned itself behind my eyes.

I wondered for the first time that night if Chad and Mark had the bet-

ter idea. Could I separate the wish for someone's heart from the wish for, say, the touch of someone's lips?

Benguet:

18, 472 kilometers

I watched Xavier fall off the mountain and my heart seized up and threatened to squeeze itself out of my throat. He fell in that slow, languid manner that only drunk people at 3 in the morning can manage. For a bunch of gays, they were all such boys. Mark, Louie, Jay, Chad and Xavier had all lined up on the side of the street that dropped into a steep ravine to pee away the gallons of beer we had ingested at Nevada Square that night. Xavier, being the drunkest one, lost his footing and tumbled headfirst into the darkness beyond the bushes by the roadside. I, being the only girl and the least drunk one, was left with the task of paying the cab driver. I hurriedly handed him our pooled money of 20's and 50's and a few 10 peso coins without bothering to count them or to wait for the change. I rushed to the gap left in the bushes by Xavier's fall screaming his name.

Chad, Xavier's beloved, was laughing. But he was already there, grabbing and pulling up Xavier with his longer, stronger arms. A tree stump had broken Xavier's fall but my heart was still in my throat. What if the tree stump hadn't been there? What if Chad had reached out too late?

But it was all pointless now. Xavier was there, getting to his unsteady feet and the only thing I could do was to offer him my hand as he tried to right himself as best as any drunken guy who had nearly rolled to his death could. I asked him repeatedly if he was okay. He nodded several times, but the left arm that was stretched out toward me had its hand tightly closed into a fist.

"Can you open your hand?" I croaked at him.

He didn't budge. I hit his fist with my open hand, hard. "Open it!" I screamed at him, glad that he was still there, really there, for me to scream at. He opened his hand and I saw that he had a small gash across his palm. It was nothing big, nothing too serious; but I kept running my fingers around the small wound, careful not to touch it but needing to touch him.

From the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Chad the beloved, running his hands all over his favorite black trench coat. With his eyebrows drawn together in consternation, Chad brushed away bits of green, hairy beans that clung to his shoulders and arms. He probably got them when he pulled Xavier out of the bushes earlier. By the time I had finished checking Xavier for other injuries Chad was still furiously brushing away the dirt that clung to the sleeves of his favorite black trench coat. Mark, Louie, and Jay had long gone up to their sleeping areas in the house we had rented for that weekend Christmas vacation in Baguio. Only the three of us were left on the road at past three in the morning on the freezing Benguet mountainside, fussing over different things we thought were important at that time.

Me with Xavier. Xavier with the gash on his hand. Chad with his trenchcoat.

I told Xavier to go up and put his hand under running water to clean the wound while I went to look for a band-aid I carried with me in a small medicine kit. Chad shrugged out of his trench coat, draped it carefully over his arm and went up to the house with Xavier.

When I reached the open door of the second floor bathroom, adjacent to the room Xavier shared with Chad, I found Xavier with his hand still under cold running water. He was alone. I threw a reproachful look at the room next to the bathroom before telling Xavier to dry his hand. The idiot wiped his left hand on his jeans, which were probably filled with dirt after his roll on the ground. Sighing, I decided not to nag him for his stupidity. It wouldn't sink in anyway, as drunk as he was.

I squeezed inside the narrow bathroom next to Xavier and took his hand, wiped an alcohol-dampened cotton ball over his wound, then pressed a dry piece of cotton on it to stop the bleeding. I threw the used cotton in the trashcan under the sink, unwrapped the band aid, laid the medicine-soaked square patch over his wound and sealed the adhesive laden parts over his palm. I smoothed it over, made sure there weren't any air bubbles that could dislodge it while he slept. I tried my hardest not to let my hands linger too long.

His head was bent, eyes probably following how my two hands moved in busy circles over his steady left hand. I watched his bent head, the riot of his wavy hair shiny under the bathroom light's yellow glow, and I had

the strongest urge to run my hand through his hair and curl my palm over his neck, touch his forehead to mine and apologize for not being enough to fill the gaping absence of the one person who should have been in my place, helping Xavier with his wounded hand. I would never be enough.

So I held myself still. I had done too much already by simply being there.

It was Xavier who moved. He leaned towards me, rested his raspy chin over the bare skin of my right shoulder, pressed his warm head against my neck, squeezed me with his arms loosely looped around me in a circle that never quite managed to become whole because his hands could barely find each other, and draped himself against me and all over me in a drunken embrace.

“Dawn,” he said as quietly as he could somewhere between my neck and my earlobe, his lips moving in search for a hidden place where he could whisper a secret and keep it there forever. He found that place in the shell of my ear. “Thank you. Thanks, love you,” he said softly.

My heart seized up and threatened to squeeze itself out of my throat because I had the strangest urge to throw myself off the mountain. Because when that drunken embrace ended, Xavier would still go to the room he shared with Chad and I would still be the same girl who was left to tend his wound but went to sleep alone and lick her own wounds.

Baguio City:

0 kilometers

It was like going back a few decades when I was 10 and all I wanted to do was stare at a boy endlessly. But I was now 29 and I had grown a bit more bashful since then. Instead, I stared at Xavier’s hands.

It was May and we were in Baguio City for a conference and the only thing I could think of was how much I wanted to wrap my hand around his, instead of where it currently was — the arm of my chair which was stuck so close to his in the tiny conference room of the hotel we stayed at. I wanted to feel how much bigger, wider, his hand was. I wanted to feel the rounded edges of his fingernails and see if they were ragged and cracked or smooth. I wanted to touch the tips of my fingers all over the back of his hand and

stop at his wrist. Then I imagined he would turn his hand over so I could run just the tip of my index finger down the middle of his palm. And then I'd spread my hand over his and he would twist it and insinuate his fingers in the spaces between mine. And then there would be heat

But I didn't. We had only known each other for about five days, after all. Sure it was five days of literary and art theory in the morning and general drunken happy conversations over beer, gin, or wine at night. But still. It was five days.

So I had to settle for running my fingertips over my armchair's plastic strands woven over and under each other to make it look like basket-weave, wishing our fingers and hands could be woven just as tightly. Sometimes I imagined that he would be staring intently at my hand, watching it move over the chair's arm over and over again. There were other times I would steal a few glances at our hands, resting and still, right beside each other, never touching but still so very near because of our chairs pushed tightly against each other. More times than I could remember, I wished he would end my misery and just reach over and cover my hand with his.

But he didn't.

So I had to content myself with our little moments together, always on the verge of something but never really getting there.

The first time I saw Xavier he was occupying the pair of seats behind me on the bus on our way to Baguio for a conference. He was with Chad, the proverbial other in this hazy relationship. I automatically pegged them both as gay partners, both unavailable, so I never thought too much about Xavier. Not even when he avidly talked to me about his fascination with the Yamamba, a mythical Japanese mountain witch, and psychoanalyzed her hut to be her vagina right after my paper presentation on Japanese mythical figures. Not even when he laughed at me because I kept eating candy and the last one I opened popped up onto the table, bounced again, landed on the floor and I still picked it up and ate it. Not even when he and Chad kept talking to me during our first drinking session after the first day of the conference even though we were in one big group while we drank. I kind of just assumed, since I sat next to him and Chad, that he didn't want to make too much of an effort to talk to people who were sitting far away from him. Not even when our eyes would meet over papers and pens in the morning and bottles of beer at night during the course of the entire work-

shop because we somehow managed to silently agree about something that someone had said. I had a lot of gay and lesbian friends after all, so it wasn't such a stretch that Xavier and I would get along well.

Then somebody made the mistake of telling me that I had assumed wrongly. They were best friends and while Chad was unquestionably gay, Xavier was straight. Everything spiraled out of control from there. The difference in perspective threw me off and suddenly, all our little moments together just sent me into orbit. After taking a seven-year hiatus when it splintered into space dust after the last time it became romantically involved, my heart was suddenly a little ball of spinning fluff, gathering what was once space dust in its wake and solidifying into something that was finally alive inside my chest, and it was all Xavier's fault.

The first time I recall missing a heartbeat was when he stood up, smiled down at me and whispered something that sounded suspiciously like a secret — even if it was as mundane as candy. Lilia, another participant in the conference, had approached Xavier to commend him for not eating candy for the entire session. He ate them compulsively, always opening one right before he finished the one that was already in his mouth. I never teased him about it because I was the same. So when Xavier and I both ran out of candy, I stole most of the candy in front of Chad because he never touched a single piece. I placed my new pile of candies in front of me and somehow, Xavier understood that the candy stash was for him as well. He continued to eat them but he always left the empty packets on my side of the table. And when Lilia made that comment about not eating candy, he turned to me with his dancing dark eyes and his dimpled, kooky, toothy smile that went well with his offhand, scruffy manner of dressing in plain t-shirts and plaids. Then he said, “*Hindi. Meron kaya kami dito. Right, Dawn?*”

All I could do in response was to look up at him with a half frozen smile and nod my head hesitantly, entranced by the sight of his haloed face eclipsing the early morning sun escaping through the slats of the slightly open windows behind him and lulled by the sound of his voice.

In one of our happy drunken conversations during the conference, Xavier had brought up the subject of students getting crushes on us because most of the participants in the conference were teachers. Mark and Louie denied having any student admirers and maintained that they would rather be oblivious if there were. I agreed with them. I usually dismissed

them as a need for a sister or mother figure. I was uncomfortable with anything other than that. Chad scoffed at Xavier then, rolled his eyes heavenward and said something about his students not being attractive enough for him to pay attention to them and they being too scared of him to harbor any tender feelings towards him. I laughed at Chad's blatant and unapologetic arrogance and teased him about it.

Xavier refused to believe any of us. He trained his suspicious eyes on me, fixed his gaze upon my face with an intensity that made it impossible for me to doubt him and said, "You sure? Because I can totally see one of your students falling in love with you." There. There it was — my breath hanging upon the space between my heart and my mouth.

"And you," Xavier turned to Chad, "you're beautiful. Your students must be crazy about you."

The words 'love' and 'beautiful' became even more loving and beautiful when Xavier said them. It wasn't the controlled release of a word with air like one would do with a whisper. It was the breathless, convulsive expulsion of a word with air chasing after it because the word came out too early, as if Xavier's mouth couldn't help but say it, couldn't wait for the next puff of air before releasing the word. That's how Xavier speaks, sometimes.

I didn't care that he was just talking about candy. It was just that the way he said it and ended it with my name made me feel like we had our own secret. With the last of the cherry-flavored candy melting in my mouth, I began to wish that I was special enough to him for us to really have our own secret.

My Apartment:

18,471 kilometers

I watched Xavier unraveling suddenly, the jerky movements of his legs punctuated with the tinker and clatter of empty beer bottles against each other and on the floor of my apartment. It was 10 in the evening, a few weeks past the New Year, and he sat on the edge of my bed, his legs stretched out towards the floor while his torso reclined on the pile of pillows at one end of my bed. He was in the middle of telling me about the most perfect memory of his life.

He had smoked weed with a girl he knew from high school while sitting on one of the stone benches behind the Quezon Hall of UP Diliman. He couldn't remember what they talked about anymore but he knew it was a great conversation. But whatever they talked about paled in comparison to the way the late afternoon sun hit the wide, open grounds before them. The sun doused out all the colors of the world and turned everything golden, like tiny little suns exploding every few seconds wherever he turned his head. A slow, rickety old grass-cutting tractor passed in front of them, spewing bits of grass behind it but never disturbing the golden glow of the sun. Even its shadow and the spray of green grass were golden under the sun's light. The head of the man driving the tractor turned to look at Xavier and at his companion, never straying from their weed-high faces even as the tractor slowly and steadily moved forward. And the sun glowed on.

After that, Xavier said it became his favorite part of the day — when the sun turned everything into gold.

I told Xavier that I hated it, the stillness of that time of the day. No matter how frozen in gold everything is at that time, it didn't mean that the sunset isn't going to come at the end of those golden hours. Xavier looked pissed when I pointed that out, like I just threw an eclipse at his perfect memory of the sun.

But he wasn't there to talk about the sun. He was there to talk about Chad.

Chad was a beautiful, beautiful man with a face whose planes, dips and angles were perfect no matter which way he turned his head. His soft hair stayed in soft, pliable waves on his head and to atone for all that gentleness, his straight, dark, eyebrows were two thick, unforgiving lines above his piercing burnt-gold brown eyes lined with thick lashes. His strong nose drew your gaze down to his full mouth, usually shaped into a sneer or a pout.

Personally, I like his face better when it exploded into a wide evil laugh that showed his even white teeth whenever he found something funny — like me pulling out a stuffed baby tiger from my backpack when we went up to Baguio last December. It was the closest his face could come to a smile.

But for months now, Chad had lost all ability to smile those rare smiles, or even flash his signature sneer and pout. Chad had spent the last

few months sliding back into pining for a lost love even if he was already with Xavier. They had been best friends for years before Xavier finally tapped into that part of him which had longed for Chad in ways more than a best friend should. Xavier knew about the other man, the one person that Chad said he would love for the rest of his life. He knew it wasn't him. But Xavier somehow forgot it, thinking that their sparkling new love, born out of an old friendship, could cast a shadow so golden that nothing could mar it, not even an old love.

But it couldn't.

That's why Xavier was here. He asked me what he should do. Was it right to keep on loving someone even if you knew he was in love with someone else?

I don't know. I stared at him. Was it?

He asked me if it was right to let go of a person you loved so he could be free to love someone else.

I don't know. I stared at him. Blinked once. Was it?

I asked him what he wanted to do, regardless of whether it was wrong or right. Xavier closed his eyes and laid back against the pillows stuffed at the head of my bed. His arm went up to cover his face while his other arm reached for me and gathered me close to his side. I let him. Then he lifted the arm over his face, stretched it over our bodies and claimed my hand to slide it beneath his shirt and pressed it close to his heart.

Rihanna's music thumped in the background through my open laptop. The song was "California King Bed."

"Tignan mo Dawn, sumasabay sa beat ng song yung heartbeat ko." He said, his fingers tightening over mine. With the alcohol in my blood dulling my senses, I could barely feel his heartbeat. I inched closer to him, pressed my hand a little bit harder.

"I'm going to talk to Chad soon. Give him The Talk."

Then the pulse of his heart leapt, suddenly palpable beneath my palm and just as swiftly, it faded back into a slow, faint song beneath his chest. It was how his heart broke — quickly, quietly.

He removed the hand that was pressing mine onto his heart to search for my own heartbeat over the open collar of my shirt. My heart throbbed erratically beneath his warm hand, following the slowly swelling guitar

riffs of Rihanna's song of wishes that were too big in the background. I wondered if he knew that he was catching the last spasms and sputters of my heart that had been steadily dying with every story and each word that came out of his mouth that night; especially after he apologized for coming to me with his broken heart despite knowing where my heart lay. He knew it was at his feet, where I laid it down months ago on a typhoon ravaged night.

But I never got to tell him about my favorite part of the day. I like dawns; not the sky at the first appearance of light in the morning in particular, but the feel of dawn approaching. It's the feeling you get when you're slipping away from the fabric of a dream, like maybe a dream of sleeping with your beloved's hand above your heart, and then slowly sliding into wakefulness which still feels like a half dream because you can still feel the heat of the hand you dreamed of over your heart. It's the feeling you get when the only part of the world you can see is the world beneath the haze of your quivering eyelashes that refuse to rise with the sun.

What I hate about dawns is that they it never last as long as Xavier's golden hours. Dawn breaks too quickly into morning, violently throwing you back into your life with concrete things you encounter once you blink and your eyes open — like waking up to the sight of the naked back of a man whose hand held your heart so gently in a dream you had last night, a dream where he doesn't break your heart a few weeks after New Year, a few days before your birthday.

My Apartment:

18, 473 kilometers

On the day I decided to tell Xavier I loved him, there was a typhoon named Pedring. I spent the whole day sitting outside my apartment, smoking cigarettes (23 sticks, I counted), watching the typhoon unfurl itself over the ravaged gardens along the street while trying to justify what I was about to do. I talked myself in and out of the plan several times while I waited for him.

While I was on my 16th cigarette, I noticed two little birds flying against the wind. Their tiny black figures rose and dipped like drunken bats against the sky, never really going forward despite tipping headfirst

and sometimes, wingtips first, into the angry grey sky. I wondered what idiocy possessed them to fight a typhoon whose wind was so strong it was almost visible, tangible. Why couldn't they be just like the leaves I had been watching before them? Torn from their branches and with death imminent, they lay flat on the ground and simply waited for the typhoon's rough hands to drag them around in ragged little cyclones. It was less painful to watch — the leaves dancing in the air as opposed to watching two birds flapping their wings against the violence, a true exercise in futility.

But then, I wondered, which of them was more pathetic? Was it the two birds reckless in their stupidity, fighting a losing game? Or was it the leaves, wise in their acceptance of defeat but without the dignity of one last fight?

On my 23rd cigarette, I arrived at an answer. Neither of the two was more pathetic than the person who sat around all day smoking cigarettes while pondering about the lives of birds and leaves. At least the birds and the leaves, in flight or in cyclones, were moving. Not stuck, frozen in place for fear of the fight or in dread of defeat.

So, as the butt of the 23rd cigarette hit the ground, I finally decided to tell Xavier I loved him, even if I knew he was with someone else. Pining away for unrequited love was only pretty in movies and in literature, or when one was sixteen years old and trapped in the throes of teenage drama. I was a grown woman and I was sure I would eventually outgrow this, just like everything else in my life. Probably by December, I would have forgotten about this. Months after this, I would probably look back and laugh at the absurdity of it all and at my propensity for drama — a confession in the middle of a typhoon.

By the time he arrived. I had the whole speech prepared, with planned pauses for effect and emphasis. But because of the short walk from the main road to my street, the early evening's drizzle shone on his hair under the glow of the yellow streetlamp. Tiny droplets of rain clung to the strands of his dark hair, now cropped shorter than I'd like, and to his thick eyelashes that splashed mini raindrops onto his cheeks that puffed out slightly when he smiled for a "Hello!" It was like that small bead of moisture clinging to his bottom lip on that July night in O Bar, magnified a million times over.

My tongue tripped over itself in a rush to get the practiced words out of my mouth before they completely disappeared.

“I like it — you getting tongue-tied.” Xavier said with a smile after I finished laying my heart at his feet.

His voice took on that breathless quality that I loved and hated because when he spoke like that, my eyes would always, always gravitate towards his lips and a wish would bloom beneath my chest; a wish for his lips to close the distance between his and mine.

“You’re usually so... articulate.” Xavier’s voice had changed. This time, instead of stealing my breath, he stole everything else around the room until what was left was just the two of us, breathing.

And then he proceeded to untie my tongue around the words stumbling past my lips with his own lips, teeth and tongue. I let him. I would rather have my tongue and the rest of me tangled up and tied around him than around words meant for him. There was no alcohol to blame this time, no dare to follow except that brazen little flame beneath our proper banter as friends that sometimes whispered, “What if?”

What would come out of this kind of kiss, the kind that lasted for hours and lingered long after his lips no longer touched mine? We chose to answer that and every other unspoken question between us with lips that clung and clutched like heated trembling hands, and hands that roamed and kissed like lips.

But lips and hands rarely find answers. At least, not the proper ones. Most especially when I forget to even ask questions. Because when this man talks to me, he steals my breath away. But when he kisses me, he robs me of everything else.

Roche’s Limit

I asked Lawrence to show me the book he held tightly against his chest. I wanted to see if I understood the scientific concept correctly. My eyes went through the words over and over again, not quite believing that such a thing existed, or that someone found it and gave it a name.

A planet’s gravity could hold a moon and have it orbit around it forever but it’s also gravity that can destroy the moon if it ventures further

than what is allowed. For example, with respect to the Earth's center, our planet's Roche's Limit is at 18, 470 km. If our moon danced closer than this, say at 18, 469 km, it would be pulled apart, obliterated completely, by tidal forces. It amazed me, the exactitude of science and how almost everything seems to be aimed towards self-preservation. We can't have our moon destroyed. Who knows what catastrophe would befall the Earth?

But Roche's Limit has an answer to that. Whatever moon is destroyed eventually becomes the ring around a planet. For a moment, I tried to imagine what Earth would look like with a ring around it. Would I like it — a blue planet spinning on its axis with a ring almost as pretty as the rings of Saturn? But in order for a ring of dust to surround the Earth in an ethereal, eternal embrace, the moon has to splinter and scatter into fragments. Would I risk the necessary violence for a chance to gaze at beauty at a closer distance?

The small square box with a smiley face blinked yellow at the bottom of my laptop. Xavier finally replied.

"Why?" he asked. "Give me a valid reason why I shouldn't go."

I tried to imagine the Earth with a ring around it, again.

I typed my response as quickly as possible, "Never mind! =) Enjoy your Valentine's date tomorrow!" and hit the Send button just as quickly before I changed my mind. Then I logged out of Yahoo Messenger. I could always pretend that I got disconnected and couldn't get back online. It happened often enough to be believable. Xavier would understand. Besides, I'm pretty sure he could survive online without me for a couple of hours, or maybe days, weeks even. I wouldn't even be missed.

An Earth with a ring around it must look beautiful, like a sapphire set in a circle of diamonds. But there will be no shattering and no splintering for a moon tonight. Not tonight.

True Lies: An Essay on Writing Fiction

Francezca C. Kwe

I've always felt keenly the responsibility of fiction to spin a good yarn. I believe that the short story allows the writer some invisible movement in humankind's obsessive chronicling of its history and ways. The writer of nonfiction takes life, random and contrary, as her subject, and attempts to find order or purpose from it, while still rendering it as faithful to true events as possible. She is "at the mercy of a thousand anecdotes." (Updike 188) The short story writer, on the other hand, is not bound by the confines of individual perceptions and circumstances — one can assume so many personas, take from so many lives, and with permission or not, leap across so many histories. The writer of fiction, as Stephen King observes, operates from "a far-seeing place." (103) She is a sly traveler in time and space. And as the short story is defined by fictional time and space, in the story the fictional realm becomes as substantial as the reality from which it is distilled. Thus we are given a complete universe governed by its own laws, where randomness gives way to purpose.

As a writer (and student) of fiction, I have to come to terms with my own tendencies and fears, like coming closer to a mirror on the wall, or descending into the cellar of my mind. I should think that any writer's mind is horrifying — it's not the absolute darkness of the cellar that's so terrible but the shapes that solidify as the eye gathers light. Enough to make one turn and run back up the stairs. However über-American the metaphor

may be, the cover image alone of Stephen King's book *"On Writing"* makes a powerful statement: underneath a lighted window of a sweet, little house are the unlocked doors to the basement.

I think that the short story writer, compared to the writer of nonfiction, is closer to escape. But what is truly comforting is that the short story writer never has to examine herself in depth. Instead, she can let the subconscious take over and bleed through in fiction. The short story writer's patient is the fictional persona. A great convenience for writers like me, and also for schizophrenics.

Thus starts my introduction of myself as a writer. If it is painful to finally look into the mirror and see nothing but one's own reflection, this essay may perhaps trace the source of that strange discomfort.

Origins

I can't really recall a flashing moment, a great realization that I wanted to become a writer. I suspect that the outcome was inevitable, yet it came about through a quiet, ordinary process. Books led me to writing, as they have many other writers. I can't recall the first book I ever read; only that for a child, I was an unnaturally fast reader. I went to a school run by nuns, and sometime in my early childhood, in between the monotony of schoolwork, the sheer inanity of Catholic rituals and the burden of making friends, I found my way to the small school library.

What I do remember markedly that even as a small child, I had difficulty performing socially — I was withdrawn and sensitive, suspicious of adults and other children. Like the protagonist in my story "Hunger" I felt keenly my "simple, child's dignity," which many parents debase unawares by shoving their children into a social spotlight too early, having them sing and dance or display other talents; or programming into them a politeness or affection that in me, succeeded in cementing an imprisoning and often debilitating sense of social propriety.

As a child, I had to be polite without understanding why, had to kiss or take to my forehead the hands of unfamiliar adults who took measure of me, had to keep playing in a group of other children when all I wanted was to be alone. The result of this was a resentment of social codes that exploded to the surface in my adulthood, suppressed all through the years by a nagging obligation to be polite *all the time*. I believe that this social ab-

horrence of society would somehow later cause me to be more forthright in my stories than I was in real life. As a result, or maybe in spite of this, I became wary of adults and even warier of other children, large groups of which populated my world. To whom then could I turn?

“You just never know when you’ll want an escape hatch,” Stephen King says. “Books are a uniquely portable magic.” (104) Books allowed me to make acquaintances at my own pace, and to understand their character and motives better than those of the ones who directed my life in real time. It comes to me as ironic now that at about the time I knew nothing of the “real world” that affected my little life, determined my parents’ fortunes, and my family’s decisions, I also knew it intimately, as the kind of world that foiled true happiness as in *Anna Karenina* and forged strong character and courage as in *Treasure Island*.

Because of a year in a crummy kindergarten where reading meant memorizing whole books, I learned how to read in the Prep level, at six years old (the last in my class) and decided to practice to catch up with my classmates. The best reader in class was a girl named Joan, who also sang and danced well, and would continue to receive top honors all throughout our grade school years. I cared little for exhibition, but was determined to overcome my initial clumsiness at a skill I considered short of magical — because how could glancing at symbols on paper give Joan the power to tell awesome stories or explain bewildering photos on the textbooks? At the same time, this magic seemed accessible to anyone. Even my brother, who had difficulty in school, pored through the comics page snickering after reading each sentence aloud.

And so the fever took hold. A little cataloguing: I started reading age-appropriate books at the library — the Ladybug books of stories, Adarna House books, the huge Disney storybooks. I found that I read much faster than other children — it seemed the more I read, the faster I got at it. Within a few months I could read a standard children storybook from cover to cover in ten minutes. I started reading detective and mystery stories — Encyclopedia Brown, Nancy Drew, The Hardy Boys, The Bobbsey Twins. At eight I was reading the unabridged classics: *Frankenstein*, *Little Women*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and my perennial favorite, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. I discovered a cache of Eyewitness science and history books in the nonfiction section of the library, and devoured volumes

about Vikings, dinosaurs, Ancient Egypt, European Gothic churches, miniature ponies. At ten my favorite book was Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, parts of which I could quote from memory. At twelve, I was consuming a steady diet of the Michael Crichton and John Grisham novels in the teachers' section of the library, which the school librarians, impressed with my reading rage, had given me complete access to.

I read three books a day — I would borrow one in the morning as soon as I got to school, read it under my desk during class, and throughout recess. By lunch I had finished with it and would return it to borrow two more books to take home, read overnight and return the next morning. The only award I received in elementary was the Best Borrower Award, which seemed senseless and irrelevant next to the academic awards much coveted by other students and parents.

Still, my mother went to school to pin a small medal on my uniform — my mother who, anxious over my addiction to books, periodically locked my library card in her cabinet. In retaliation, I would pinch five pesos from her purse to buy a new borrower's card. "You're so fond of reading, why don't you hit the textbooks?" she would always ask me. After a while she started to view books as a bad influence, like a strange friend who soaks up all your attention so much that you don't hear your name being called until someone finally shakes you by the shoulders.

I can understand why this made me unpopular with other children. I was the girl whose face was constantly in a book, who got hit on the head by volleyballs because of a strange deafness that afflicted her only when she was reading. Always, I seemed to be in a trance, a healthy companion for no one, surely.

That period of superhuman concentration is forever lost to me; it remains in my childhood, no matter how hard I try to resurrect it. Now, I read between increasing distractions. I no longer seem able to construct the impenetrable wall I surrounded myself with as a young reader.

In his stunning memoirs, Gabriel García Márquez reveals that while writing his first novel, he began reading "not only for pleasure, but out of an insatiable curiosity to discover how books by wise people were written." (404) He tells us how to read *as a writer*: "...read them forward first and then backward, and subject(ed) them to a kind of surgical disemboweling." He believes that once one becomes a writer, one stops being purely

a reader. I agree with him, as now I read mainly to sharpen my teeth. The kind of books that I read for enjoyment at that time in my life — my book porn, as I call it — were not, surprisingly, considered literary: the original Nancy Drew mystery stories, and scientific studies about the mind and the afterlife.

But as a child, considered strange by my peers, I wasn't lost to the point of not caring. I lamented the fact that I didn't have any friends. It did hurt me. I felt acutely the pain of not belonging to anything but my books. I remember an instance when my mother asked me why I didn't want to go to school at all, and I responded melodramatically. "They all treat me like dirt," were my exact words, no doubt something I had absorbed from my books. I was nine years old. In a household where only Tagalog and Ilonggo were spoken, this statement was startling. My mother must've been so dumbstruck by the unfamiliar idiom that she supposed it to be absolutely true: the very next day she called up my teacher and five of my classmates to inquire about what she supposed was a mighty trauma.

But if I had hit the books and studied the conventional way, I don't know what my future would have been. I am bad at numbers, slovenly in manner, and lazy as a cat, so that would have eliminated careers in the popular fields: medicine, law, engineering, nursing. Without the ability to write, and having gone the route of classmate Joan, who burned the midnight oil black, I would now probably be an utterly miserable call center agent.

Instead I am an utterly miserable writer, who has never had stellar grades but doesn't get bad ones either. As mentioned, I read under the teacher's sweeping radar, an exercise I soon perfected after having been caught once or twice and getting my book confiscated. I mention this, and the books I read and at what age I read them, merely because I feel these were important in shaping the kind of perception I have now. It has been said that reading gives children the ability to empathize, or put themselves in another's shoes, another's world.

But I've always also believed that reading sharpens an uncommon kind of understanding, one that goes beyond mere empathy. I would venture to say that it's a keen sensitivity to what is implied. This kind of "intuition" serves me well in dealing with touchy family members, in the journalistic work I have done, where I have had to read other people's gestures,

faces and voices; in the workplace or larger community — everywhere where I have had to practice discretion, diplomacy, or plain and simple insight. When I became a fictionist I could use it to analyze characters, real and imagined, deduce the motives of people around me, grasp immediately the mood surrounding an event or anticipate its consequences.

Perhaps, it's because of this that I managed to survive school without ever seriously studying. I failed math and the sciences regularly, and constantly made a fool of myself at supermarket counters when being handed my change, panicked that I might be cheated because I can't do sums fast enough.

In adolescence, I had very little clue about what a writer was. All I knew about the actual writer's life centered on the naïve notion that the college course to take to become a writer was called journalism, and so I followed that shining term as if it were the star of Bethlehem. I would find out later that it had nothing to do with the kind of writing I wanted to do except as a means to keep body and soul together for the creative writer.

Until high school I had no idea how I would become one of those writers I loved to read — to most people, even “journalist” sounded strange from the lips of a child being asked what she wanted to be when she grew up. I wrote throughout my childhood in my journal. I wrote so-called “poetry” I would give to friends as little tokens. My parents would tell people that one of their daughters “liked to write,” as in, had a hobby which was arranging words.

I look back at this with sadness, because I realize that we have virtually no notion of the culture of writing outside the canon. Schoolchildren are well aware of foreign literature, of the “classics,” or of Paulo Coelho, but of their own writers and these writers' works and processes, they know next to nothing. Their knowledge stops short of Nick Joaquin, and most don't even get that far along the timeline. Only when they get to college — provided they attend a university with a decent Philippine Literature course — do they get a belated introduction, but then most of the time it's knowledge given too late to inspire or be of any use.

I was one of them. I hadn't the foggiest notion that there were actually writers in the Philippines aside from Rizal and Balagtas. The only other Filipino writer I had read, more current than these two by half a century, was Magdalena Jalandoni, who I gravitated to because she was the

long-dead, mysterious owner of the strange house next to ours in Jaro. Her house, an elegant pre-war mansion, is now a museum, but in my childhood it was closed to the public. Furthermore, it had a reputation as a haunted house, full of elementals and dwarves that gave counsel to its dwellers but also punished them for their sins. The old woman had amassed a quirky collection of dolls, clocks and other odds and ends that were rumored to come alive at night. She died in the '70s but my father had vivid memories of her shouting curses from the balcony whenever he and his brothers filched fruits from the tree that grew above the cement wall dividing the houses. His stories revved my imagination, and as a child I used to peer through the gate into the house next door, waiting for the empty rocking chair on the balcony to move, as they said it sometimes did. The house and the figure of the old recluse stayed in my mind, and later, suffused the world of Lola Concha in the story, "A Ghost Story."

By this time, Jalandoni had become a town legend, but not for her writing. No one in my father's family can recall a work of their writer-neighbor. In high school, I dug up some of her stories from the municipal library and wondered if I would also end up shut off from the world, in an enchanted house.

Imagine my surprise and delight in college upon finding out that there was a long and current tradition of Philippine writing in all the languages, and that there was actually a community of writers I could be part of.

In college, a strange twist of fate led me to a campus writers group called the Thomasian Writers Guild, a bunch of campus writers who talked, lived and ate writing, high-art style. The qualifying exam I took to become part of the group contained some pretentious questions like "Which National Artist for Literature do you most read? Discuss his/her books at length," an amusing tidbit now, but to the eighteen year-old struggling with the desire to become a writer, it was nothing short of humbling, for I had not read the works of a single National Artist. I assembled an answer out of the recollection of a news article I had read in the student paper, about F. Sionil Jose, who had been conferred the award the year before. The article had mentioned some of his books, specifically the Rosales Saga, and I groped around in my memory for the descriptions the news writer had used.

My discombobulated summary of Jose's work apparently missed the mark by a mile, but on the strength of an accidental allusion of mine ("dust drifts dreamlike into the day") in one of the poetry exercises in the exam, I was accepted into the TWG. Thus began my "re-education" on what poetry really was and why short stories were more than neat little tales. With a great hunger I started learning about the heritage I wanted to acquire — the Philippine literary tradition as they call it, who the writers were and what they wrote. I knew then that I had abandoned writing as a hobby. Instead I wanted to pursue it for the rest of my life, to the ends of the earth and wherever it would lead me.

I did, but it was far from easy. Anne Lammott speaks for me when she describes part of her journey as a writer:

...There was a moment during my junior year in high school when I began to believe that I could do what other writers were doing. I came to believe that I might be able to put a pencil in my hand and make something magical happen.

Then I wrote some terrible, terrible stories. (xx)

The Art of Lying

Not all readers eventually become writers. In the same way, not all writers come from a good reading background.

I know some writers of my generation who were induced to write by their love for comic books or movies. Coming into writing via English classics can be considered old-fashioned in this Age of Facebook. But I think that's how primarily I became a writer.

After devouring all the books in the grade school library and finding nothing more to read, sooner or later, I must have started wondering about the world on the other side of the stories that I had read, the figure behind the page: the writer.

As a reader, I thought of the writer and the writing process as a kind of inverse universe of the writing. These stories I loved had a source; they could have not sprung from nothing. The story held nothing back from

me, but how it came to be seemed a mysterious thing. I don't know if many young readers care to peer behind the story, but I think that once you have, there can be no going back.

I think that's how I became aware of the process of writing. When Kevin Brockmeier, an American fictionist, says that "I write out of gratitude for all the books I have loved," (*Powell's Books*). I think he is also talking about the urge to continue the creative act that is first discovered when a reader transitions to a writer.

One may begin to write out of the desire to imitate. But what will ultimately hold the writer to the craft is the need to continuously act upon a powerful creative impulse, which leads her to embark upon a cycle. One begins with nothing but this intense need or urge. Philip Roth, one of the most prolific of his generation of writers describes it as "a kind of provocation, a particular urgency." (212)

This beginning of things, which to me manifests physically as sleepless nights, a tension in the jaw or sometimes an unholy restlessness in what is otherwise a quiet life. This impulse to me seems almost primal. In my life as a married, urban twenty-something, with a house to buy, bank account to fill, pantry shelves to stock, parents to reassure, I've often mulled over the possibility of just giving up writing, and becoming a corporate or call center drone, but every time this seems almost achievable, I read a good book or an interview of a writer deep into a work-in-progress, and my insides quake — so basic is the impulse to keep on writing, once one has decided to commit to this painstaking, never-ending ritual, writing being "the country where one has decided to spend one's life." (Saramago, 2009).

At the end of the cycle may be a story or a novel, but the finished work is always in the future, never in the present, because to be a writer means always coming back, manuscript after manuscript, to the beginning.

However magical and irresistible this beginning is, the rest of writing is a voluntary act, a conscious and deliberate effort to complete the cycle. The toil sustains the magic, and allows the transformation of "the personal emergency" into "a public act." (Roth 212). If there's any comfort at all to be had in my darkest moments as a writer, it's the fact that everyone, even the writers I most admire, had to grapple with the blank page.

But why write fiction? As a campus writer, I had entertained notions of becoming a poet. I only gave up that fantasy when I realized how much I

despised the poets I was hanging out with. Most of them were young men and took to verse-making as a way of impressing girls. Not that they were the kind of men that on their own, without the help of poetry, were attractive to females at all. The poetry making I was exposed to was charged with testosterone, with the sole intent of making girls swoon. In addition, poetry readings bored me.

The first short story I ever wrote was my entry to my first writers' workshop. That story, "Birthday," explored a theme that was to manifest in my later stories: the difficult mother-daughter relationship, the chasm between generations of women and their values and the complicity and heartbreak that result from trying to bridge it. The same theme is explored in the story "Hunger," a piece commissioned by *Rogue Magazine*.

I thought long and hard about whether I to include "Birthday" in my M.A. thesis. It is the only story in the collection written in the third-person point-of-view, certainly the one with the most dialogue, two devices that I now struggle with so much that I wonder how I could ever have used them so easily in that story. I believe I wrote the story in half a day, heady with a lyrical style then newly absorbed from reading Lakambini Sitoy's collection *Mens Rea and Other Stories* in one sitting.

I decided to include it as a relic of how I used to write. Since then, my style has changed and my difficulty with writing fiction has increased. Now it takes me at least a week to a month to finish a short story. Dialogue, when I do use it, is close to primitive and I balk at writing in the third person. But still I find myself returning to the same theme, perhaps in an effort to understand it myself.

I also write fiction because I feel the incredibly intense impulse to lie. I take my material from life, and lying is a way of transfiguring and cheating memory. The unreliable becomes reliable, and more importantly, it becomes true.

I agree wholeheartedly with Borges when he says:

... In my stories ... there are true circumstances, but somehow I have felt that those circumstances should always be told with a certain amount of untruth. There is no satisfaction in telling a story as it actually happened. (116)

Borges goes on to say, “When I write something, I think of it not as being factually true (near fact is a web of circumstances and accidents), but as being true to something deeper.” (113-114)

Roth’s take on it is edgier, more cocky. He stresses that lying, in the case of creating literature, is performative.

Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life is my life... To pass oneself off as what one is not. *To pretend*... You distort it, caricature it, parody it, you torture and subvert it, you exploit it — all to give the biography that dimension that will excite your verbal life. (Roth, 211)

I feel that what is important are the truths behind the fabrication, and that fiction arrives at these truths through multiple layers that only serve to make them all the more clear.

Toni Morrison makes an interesting observation about the difference between facts and truth, and why the fictionist is better off maintaining her fidelity to the latter. “... facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot.” (93)

Lying, for me, is a kind of defiance, against memory and against time. In writing, it is an aspiration to freedom. In no other realm but the page can we escape the slavery of time. In fiction, the writer and the reader both time travel, skipping minutes, hours, and days, messing around with the meticulous order of past, present, and future. In the space of one paragraph, the character is brought from point A to point B, the past interrupts via flashbacks, the character grows white hair, loses a tooth, becomes a child again.

It is also defiance against the mundane. Margot Livesey points out the transformative power of fiction — and of all art in general — on the “unpromising material of the everyday.” (83) For example, “In the hands of Flaubert, the relationship between a poorly educated serving woman and her parrot becomes a subject of resonance and beauty.” She then goes on to say that like Machiavelli’s Prince, writers should become great liars. (83)

I use “lying” and “fiction” as interchangeable terms because to me fiction is lying in the service of truth, creating a way toward it instead of

obscuring it. In this way, truth is made more powerful than if it were merely pronounced.

Everyone in my family thinks I am a fantastic liar. In sixth grade, during one of those humdrum “retreats” where one was encouraged to “share” one’s most secret feelings to a group of judgmental twelve year-olds, I told the story of my life: my mother suffered from frequent depression and the delusion that I was not her child, switched with her real daughter in the hospital. I also volunteered the information that my father was a drunk who relentlessly beat me up, much like the father figure in my story, “Days of Rain.” The sob story was so detailed and intense that it did move my classmates to tears.

The teacher took the next PTA meeting as an opportunity to speak to my mother about my supposedly violent father. I remember playing jackstones in the canteen one minute and being yanked away from my playmates by my livid mother the next. At home, I got a severe dressing down for the hideous portrait I had painted publicly of my family. My mild-mannered father and my too-sane mother could not comprehend what had made a child — for whose happiness they gave their all, they emphasized — spin such incredible lies. I was sincerely sorry, but I knew that that memorable episode wasn’t born out of the need for attention, but out of the wonder of assuming a different life, becoming a different person, through a story. My grandfather, bless his soul, understood this, and his response to the incident was to advise me that it was okay to lie, but that if I happened to be caught, I should never, ever give any evidence that would confirm I was indeed lying. “Let them suspect, but never confirm it,” he said with a wink.

Later, my skill at lying would serve me well. Being a writer in the conservative, traditional family I was born to requires one to lead a double life. To my parents I was the ideal daughter, possessing all the Catholic virtues they expected me to have. They did not need to know that, since becoming a writer, I had become more intrepid and adventurous — like and with other writers, I drank, smoked pot, swore and cussed, railed against the establishment and entertained notions that God didn’t exist. I began to discover my sexuality, at odd hours and places. But officially, all drinking binges and romantic rendezvous, were, to my parents at least, “school projects.” When at 23, I snagged a six-month writing grant in Korea, I con-

vinced my parents that all the other fellows were female and married, because in fact, they were all male, and that would count heavily against my going.

At home however, I was still expected to cover my eyes when a movie scene switched to kissing, leave the room if it progressed to more. For my submission to my first-ever writers' workshop, I had to produce copies of my stories in triplicate, and I requested my mother to photocopy the stories at her office. Among the stories was the story "Birthday," with its mild sex scene, and it came to pass that my mother read the story, and all her excitement over my writing career promptly vanished. At home, she grilled me thoroughly, asking which parts of the story were true, did I think she was such a bad mother and was I no longer a virgin. It was a harrowing experience.

From that, I learned that my intended audience for my fiction was not my family, if I wanted to keep the peace. I believe writers should be allowed to keep their secrets. My parents and my family are proud of what I've accomplished as a writer, but I know better than to let them read my stories. As John Berger, writing of his mother, put so beautifully: "Most of my books she didn't read... Why suffer surprise from something which, left unopened, gives you pleasure? My being a writer was unqualified for her by what I wrote." (494)

I have tried to explain the strong urge of wanting to lie, but in essence it is an impulse because, like all impulses, it leads to a keen pleasure. Which, come to think of it, is the same as the sweet stab of satisfaction I feel when, having arrived at the last sentence of a beautiful story I am reading, the pieces of the puzzle fall into place.

Things that go bump in the night

I'm reminded that even before I learned to read, I was already spell-bound by stories, told orally. My father's family is from Iloilo. Of five siblings, he was the only one who chose to send his children to schools in Manila. The rest of the family formed a dense network that stretched from Iloilo City to Roxas City, and strung along its lines was family lore that was complex, sumptuous and boggling enough to turn into the Great Filipino Novel. These histories were steeped in the grand gothic Visayan tradition, where men and women's temperaments, fortunes, and passions had some-

thing of the supernatural in them, an underlying primeval darkness. In an essay I wrote for a fiction workshop class, I attempted to illustrate the sheer wealth of the material:

My mythical Iloilo keeps its ancient cathedrals, crumbling ancestral houses, forlorn war veterans, its miraculous image of the Virgin of the Candles, its enigmatic Teniente Guimo, the legendary *aswang* overlord. It is a place with families besieged by madness and incurable maladies, lust for money and refinements at a period when ships docked at a bustling harbor laden with sacks and sacks of silver coins the world offered for fine *piña* and *sinamay*, rocks of brown sugar from subservient, neighboring Negros. And where one family in every town — sometimes the richest and most powerful — kept the faith of their fathers, sustaining the black *aswang* blood that would give their children wings.

My own family's tales were not so different: tales of half-human mythical creatures, dwarves, and body snatchers, woven into countless births, harvests, and deaths. Even as a child I was intoxicated by the wealth of lore that was my only inheritance from this family. Given this, how could I not become a writer?

I suppose that many children of my generation first encountered the idea of an unseen world through bedtime tales of ghosts and monsters. For Visayan children, the creature that reigned supreme in the imagination was the *aswang*, the most powerful beast in Philippine mythology. Through my *yaya* and my aunts, I became familiar with this fearsome but tragic figure — oftentimes the reluctant heir of a curse that turned them into doomed flesh-eaters. It amused the storytellers when at the end of the story, the young listener professed sympathy for the *aswang*, instead of whimpering in fear. But even as a child I saw the *aswang* as the classic outsider who attempts to fill a void through violence and destruction.

The “human” elements perhaps make folklore so attractive as material for the writer. Behind the strangest of inventions, there is still the familiar which even a child can identify with. In the stories of the *aswang*,

the children who were spirited away by the *encantos*, the ghostly women mourning over lost love, were issues significant to my life then and now: regret, belonging, longing.

When I first started exploring folklore as material for my short stories, the effort was well received by my peers and mentors. But honestly I was flustered by the expectation that I would be a “magic realist” writer, and then later on after producing two or three stories in the same vein, a speculative fiction writer. I believe in having a theme, and that any writer must have the freedom to be true to it. Whether or not my fiction satisfies the definition of what speculative fiction is beyond my concern. I was not apologetic about presenting as my thesis a collection that contained specific, realist fiction, flash fiction. Whether it is readable or not is another question.

I count myself out of the arguments on fictional subgenres. I have been asked to defend my collection as not being children’s literature or young adults’ literature, despite the fact that most of the stories feature protagonists who are either young in the telling, or adults looking back at childhood. I don’t particularly declare that my stories are intended for young audiences. I was elbow-deep into constructing my defense when I realized that lumping them into specific genres is something I don’t concern myself with.

I joke to friends that the collection should be titled “Stories of Suffering Women,” since in every story, there seems to be a woman — usually a mother — aspiring to martyrdom. These secondary characters seem unbelievable in this day and time, when there is more to write about being a woman than being a dishrag of a housewife, or a wife that has long suffered her husband’s macho proclivities. Yet why have I constructed characters such as Clara’s MA-degree-holder, public-accountant mother who nonetheless endures her husband’s “itch” in “Fires of the Sun in a Crystalline Sky,” or the resentful, unhappy mother in “Hunger” (another victim of her husband’s unfaithfulness), or the tight-lipped mother in “Closed Doors,” who is powerless when her husband leaves her and her child for a past flame? I have no personal attachment to these characters — I’ve been voted “least likely to become *martir*,” many times and I enjoy a very egalitarian marriage. I don’t especially feel that being a woman limits my capabilities and the exercise of my rights the way they were limited in my mother’s generation.

My mother, however, is a woman who would identify with my suffering women because she belongs to the generation of these fictional sufferers. Perhaps in fiction, I am still trying to deal with my mother, creating warped mother figures for her, and for myself, struggling, pained daughters. Telling stories may be my way of talking to her.

Another influence that I return to again and again in my fiction is the Second World War. I suspect that my fascination with this period in history may be a residue from my past life as a guerilla or, more plausibly, stemming from the influence of the best storytellers I have ever known: my paternal grandmother's four brothers who were all veterans of the war.

These four old men religiously attended the wakes and funerals of their comrades. Their informal veterans' club convened every time death claimed one of their number — an occurrence that increased sharply in the 90s, when I was growing up, so that I saw more of my three grandfathers (technically grand-uncles) than I did the cousins who were my age. From the wide windows of my second-floor room in my grandparents' house in Jaro, I would see Lolo Mongo walking slowly down the street, a cigarette smoldering on his lip, and I would immediately put away my *Tintin* comics, fly down the stairs and yell to my grandmother that I was off to see the dead. Only two years before, at age 6, had I been introduced to death, not through the death of a beloved pet, as some children might experience, but through the passing at 78, from respiratory infection, of Captain Jose Maria Daglit, of the 62nd Combat Team.

My grandparents had taken me and my siblings along to the wake, since our *yaya* had quit the week before and our parents were in Manila working. I stood on tiptoe before the coffin, curious to see what the object of so much festivity and sadness was. I was suddenly lifted up, and in the arms of my Lolo Mongo, I gazed down at the bony form of the captain lying on a bed of silk.

Wise to the guiles of spirits and fairies, I asked my granduncle if the shrunken figure in the coffin was a banana stalk.

He let out a rumbling laugh. "No, my dear. That's an old man, quite like me. But now death has finally caught up with him." He added that most of them had cheated death, but with the captain, it had finally gotten even.

This made such an impression on me that, for a long time, the image I had of death was a small hound or pig, racing furiously after people and

grumbling with resentment at having been cheated. The image became the word, and the word the image. Encountering the phrase “a brush with death” in my books, I imagined the runner momentarily losing ground and feeling the stiff hairs on Death’s snout grazing his ankles. This was probably my first brush with metaphor, and certainly my first creation of metaphor. Long before I came to understand it as a literary device, I was acquainted with the power of metaphor to evoke and bring dimension to an abstract idea.

Lolo Mongo was the eldest of the brothers and certainly the gruffest of them. After the war, he had gone into the police force and later retired as Chief of Police in Leganes. He was spare with words, and spoke in a growl, put to maximum effect when he had to put someone in his place, or end a conversation with definite finality. The silences between his sentences would last as long as it took him to smoke a cigarette clear to the ends, for which he kept the record for the longest time. This served to make him a fearsome figure in the family, one whom many considered almost cold. But to me (then and now socially impaired), he was the perfect companion; with him I didn’t have to worry if my conversation was interesting, or if I should say anything at all. My affection for senior citizens perhaps lies in this fact that in their company, dead air isn’t so terrible; they’ve seen and heard it all tenfold and have no expectations to be entertained or impressed.

Lolo Mongo was legendary among his comrades for his ferocity. He is well-remembered for mowing down ten Japanese soldiers singlehandedly. The best story about him is a grisly one. One day, he and his scouting party came across a handful of Japs in the hills, separated from their unit after a skirmish. After shooting all of them, Lolo Mongo slashed open their clothes and cut off their balls. The party returned to camp with the organs dangling from their ears.

Next to Lolo Mongo was soulful Lolo Ramon, whose nickname was “Priest” because he had been deep in his studies in the seminary before he joined the Resistance, and came out of the war still prayerful and solemn. In the unit, he was in radio operations and intelligence, and had often gone on long journeys across Panay with radio parts and documents concealed in his clothes, gambling with the risk of capture or detection.

The youngest of the brothers was Lolo Tawi, the stand-up comic with the megawatt smile. He never took anything seriously, and was rumored to be in high spirits even during the war. “Life is too uncertain, *hija*, to be serious all the time,” he always said, making a face at his brothers. But among the brothers, Lolo Tawi had gone through the worst: he had been singled out by Makapili, and tortured for days, at the end of which he and other suspected guerillas were lined up to be shot. It was he who owed Death the most; as the rifles were aimed, he broke into an adrenaline-pumped run, straight up the eight-feet-high cement wall that ran around the barracks. Beyond was a cornfield, and he ran for his life, hearing the bullet zipping past his ears. He ran all the way to the hills, where he lay under the bushes and remained immobile for a full day until he felt safe enough to venture out and look for his unit. I imagined the hound of death shaking with indignation as Lolo Tawi bucked away, gleefully keeping his ankles out of biting range.

My registration in this club of old guerillas was fifty years late, but I was taken into the fold without reservations — a surprising recruit to their decreasing membership, and more importantly, a new pair of ears that could appreciate the old, worn stories of the war that everyone else by now had forgotten. I was an attentive listener, and before long could be counted on to helpfully fill in the gaps in the stories that gaped during their senior moments.

And it wasn’t long before I knew all the stories by heart. They involved Japs, guerillas and bandits, glory and despair, violence, kindness, and always, death’s relentless pursuit. Their protagonists counted on God or sheer, dumb luck. Even after the amount of fiction I have read thus far, they still remain the best stories I have ever heard.

Death has long overtaken my three grandfathers, but every time I write of the war, (“The Fires of the Sun in A Crystalline Sky,” “A Ghost Story”) or inject a bit of it in my stories as a defining period for one or all of my characters, (as in “Days of Rain” and “Hunger”) their voices ring in my ear. In a way, when my writing ventures to the topic we all shared and loved, they become my ideal readers; I try to depict the period or style the stories in ways they would have approved of, and would have enjoyed listening to. Certainly, the stories aspire to be as good and engaging as theirs were, worthy of ten minutes in their company.

Writing for a particular reader is “a natural human thing to do,” according to Kurt Vonnegut, “whether or not it could make a story better.” (10)

I am also interested in locating the point where relationships between parent and child break down, when familiar figures become irreversibly alien. I think I come closest to this point in the stories “Hunger” and “Comfort” both concerning mother figures who, despite the protagonists’ best intentions, become monstrous figures in their eyes. Children are programmed by evolution and society to perceive their parents as the best of people, inculpable and devoid of the frailties of humankind. But what happens at the point when we see our parents simply for who they are, measure for measure? I have not written the story I want to write on this, which I imagine to be about a young girl who finally submits to the realization that all along, the parents she so idolizes are in reality, unbearably stupid people.

Difficulties with language

To my eyes, my thesis was a strange, disjointed thing, a stitched-together circus freak that implores me to recognize it as my own and give it my name. This is perhaps because the stories in the collection were written in the span of seven years, with long intervals between each birthing. Some of them I can place in the timeline because they are so heavily influenced by the short story writer(s) I was reading at the time.

“Closed Doors” came on the heels of “Birthday” and it was written still with Bing Sitoy, and the short storywriters of the 90s — Clinton Palanca, Andrea Pasion and Romina Gonzales — whispering in my ear. I wrote “Lovelore” under the influence of Gabriel García Márquez’s brand of the fantastic. The twist in the story’s ending was inspired by the ending in César Ruiz Aquino’s “Kalisud a la Dante Varona” which he in turn has confessed to styling after Donald Barthelme’s “The Balloon,” Coincidentally, the same twist was employed by Rosario Cruz Lucero in “Doreen’s Story,” to which “Lovelore” has often been compared (although I had not yet read Lucero’s story while I was writing it.)

I wrote “The Fires of the Sun in A Crystalline Sky” fondly reminiscing about my love affair with García Márquez. The title is taken from a story by Gregorio Brillantes. I had intended to write an homage of sorts

to Brillantes, but the story ignored my wishes and took off in the direction of a tri-generational narrative. “Days of Rain” came to be years after I was wowed by Eric Gamalinda’s cult novel “Planet Waves,” and I had hoped to capture his tone in the novel, lyrical and tender despite the grittiness of the subject. “Virgins in the Window” is aspiring to be as funny as the Woody Allen stories I love best.

“Suddenly” and “Truth be Told” have the sparest language in the entire collection, because at that time I was into Raymond Carver, and wanted to demonstrate the lessons of restraint that I had learned from his stories of broken down relationships. Similarly, in “Comfort” and “A Memory of My Father” I wanted to be less melodramatic than in the earlier stories, and for this I looked to Sherwood Anderson, who has the ability to deliver a punch in the gut in the simplest of words.

In 2003, when I had made the irrevocable decision to become a fictionist, letting go of the yearnings of wanting to be poet or a playwright, I read back into the body of Philippine short fiction in English. On one of the regular excursions in Manila that I along with the young UST writers who considered themselves serious about writing, I found a ten-peso copy of the 1964 PEN Anthology of short stories, a perfect launch-pad for a Phil. Lit. ignoramus. The book gave me names to latch onto, whose books I could then track down and read. Naturally, this led to a brick road I could follow, traveling down the literary timeline to the present, to more contemporary writers like Eric Gamalinda, Bing Sitoy, Luis Katigbak and Sarge Lacuesta.

In our circle of young dreamers, we dropped names as if it were a sport. Have you read Butch Dalisay’s fiction? What do you think of Jessica Zafra’s? Don’t tell me you haven’t read Alfred Yuson’s new novel? Hungrily lapping up literary tidbits like Juaniyo Arcellana is the son of Franz Arcellana. Marra Lanot is married to Pete Lacaba and they have a writer son named Kris Lacaba. Have you read him?

So many names and their books, but I doubt that any of us read more than what was in the dusty shelves of the UST library or new titles our meager student allowances could afford. But I guess, literati idolatry is much how any young writer in the Philippines could begin, until one finds oneself soon bouncing off the edges of a very small community. Anyhow, it made choosing books in the “Filipiniana section” of the bookstores easier,

as we could distinguish the truly literary from say, a member of the religious or a terminally-ill child purporting to be a poet.

The inheritance of those days and my succeeding writerly experiences — the national writers' workshops I attended, at which many of our established writers sit as panelists — put perhaps, fortunately or unfortunately, a heavy premium on the quality of language.

The kind of English the older writers had used in fiction, from Paz Latorena, Joaquin, Brillantes, Ruiz Aquino to Lakambini Sitoy was marvelously lyrical, full of brillantine words and long sentences that accomplished the evocative job with a studied tenderness. I was enamored of this heavy lyrical style and consciously tried to mirror its lilt, more so when I saw that in the workshops, "beautiful" language was counted a primary strength of the fictionist and praised.

Now, writing fiction, I'm as finicky about my language as a poet. I have to confess that no matter how solid the idea for the story is in my head, no matter how much I have mapped it out in detail, I cannot complete the first sentence if the rhythm of the language trickling out on to the page is out of sync with the rhythm I imagine for it. I quote with embarrassment Maya Angelou, describing her agonies with getting the language to sound right.

Of course, there are those critics... who say, Well, Maya Angelou has a new book out and of course it's good but then she's a natural writer. Those are the ones I want to grab to the throat and wrestle to the floor because it takes me forever to get it to sing. I *work* at the language... When I would end up writing after four hours or five hours in my room, it might sound like, It was a rat that sat on a mat... but I would continue to play with it and pull at it and say, I love you. Come to me. (240)

I have no patience with Maya Angelou's writing, and I've never crooned jazzily to my own writing like she does, but I am comforted by the thought that even experienced writers take some time to perfect a particular language style for each and every work. I also agree with her when she says that, apart from the end, the best part of writing is when the language

lends itself to you. (257) In my case, unless this happens, I tend to write in fits and starts.

It's a relief when I can compose on paper the abstract rhythm I hear in my head, and I can lose myself in writing the story, which is what happened when I was writing the story "Lovelore." For this story, I tried to develop a similar melody to the language (or the English translation) of Anna Blandiana, in her short story, "The Floating Church," which was part of my readings for a fiction writing class.

Many of my stories were begun this way, because it's very rare that I sit at my desk and am immediately swept away by words coming in almost perfect order. As Angelou has pointed out, this occurs even to native English speakers, so it isn't because I am not American or British that my first attempts at beginning a story begin, by default, like this: "The dog is big and black and hairy."

It's helpful to describe language as music. When I can't write, I imagine it's like being in a soundless room — the silence is heavy and oppressive and hurts your ears. I go to my bookshelf and pick out a book to read. I read it until I get fidgety, and feel the words stirring. The music of the language I am reading comes on, and whatever it is, it carries me into a certain beat, giving me an impression of the rich possibilities of variations, the lure of many notes. Then I can walk out of the room buoyed up by this insistent beat or a rhythm of my own composition.

However, finding the language that sounds good to my ears is far from effortless. I am continually defeated by the fact that as I get older, instead of getting closer to finding my own voice, it becomes more difficult for me to find as it were, the perfect pitch. Perhaps it is because of the pressure precisely to rise above the tendency to echo other writers' language style.

In the darkest, loneliest moments of the writing, I warm myself with the memory of the rare, perfect writing day: a cup of coffee very early in the morning, several hours chasing thoughts on my computer, sometimes extending into the night with only the cat for company. Near dawn, trembling, I put down the last period and, too excited to sleep, make myself a huge and filling breakfast. Then I think of what to write next.

It takes courage to write, not only because as a career it is a thankless one, but also because it demands so much from oneself. All my life I have structured everything — the kinds of jobs I take, and when I take them — around the conviction that I will not stop writing and that I will die a writer.

Perhaps I do the great writers I love justice in saying that it takes unbelievable courage to get past the terror of the blank page. It takes courage to lie, imitate, distort, change the name of a person or a place for reasons known only to the writer, and then swear on one's name that all the characters are purely fictional.

It also takes courage to write about the things that matter more than the things that don't. A writer needs insight to discern the truth from life's random events but it takes courage to write it down.

On good days, I am courageous. If I can have one good day in a month, I reckon that's a good ratio.

Now perhaps I should count the lies in this essay, and perhaps not.

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Sto. Niño sa Tondo

Rebecca T. Añonuevo

Tila may katapat na imahen ng Sto. Niño ang bawat bata sa parada kapag pista sa Tondo. Nakasakay silang magkakaumpok sa owner, sa pedicab, sa firetruck, sa kariton ng fishball, sa baby-stroller: kung walo ang Sto. Niño sa ibabaw ay ganoon din karami ang nakasiksik at nagkakasyang mga bata sa loob ng sasakyan. Iba't iba ang suot, kulay, at anyo ng Sto. Niño: May pulis, may basketbolista, may nakatoga, may ala-geisha na nakapayong na berde, may naka-Russian winter coat na pula, may naka-powder pink, may naka-fuchsia, may naka-glittering silver, at hanggang tuhod na may takong na bota. May Sto. Nino na nilagyan ng asul na pakpak ng fairy, may itim na itim, may mukhang Chuckie doll sa horror movie, may naka-headdress na tila nagmula sa tribu ng Aztec o Alaska. May life-size na Sto. Nino, may isang dangkal na Sto. Niño. May nakasandong Sto. Nino, may nakalamping Sto. Niño, may naka-Hawaiian shirt.

Kalong sila o yakap-yakap ng mga deboto, maya-maya'y isinasayaw at itinataas habang tumutugtog ang mga banda ng delegasyong may pangalang tulad ng Palibhasa Lalake na puro babae, at mga Batang Hamog, na tinitilian ng mga babae at baklang nanonood, inaabutan ng basong tubig, itutulak ang isang kabarkada sa braso ng nagsasayaw, at lalong magtitilian. Walang nagmamartsa sa parada; ang maliliit na bata, mga kabataan, mga nanay at ang buong pamilya ay nagsasayaw, walang patumpik-tumpik ay gumigiling, nakataas ang mga kamay, nakaharap at nakatalikod sa isa't isa, sumasalampak sa kalsada, niyuyugyog ang balikat at puwit. May malalak-

ing tambol, tatluhan, na hinihila ng isang paslit, may maliliit na tambol na nakasukbit sa baywang at leeg, may mga tambol na ginawa sa mahahabang PVC orange pipe at ang ipinantatambol ay raketa ng pingpong. Sisipol at sesenyas at sisipol muli ang dalawang lalaking nasa unahan kung kailan hi-hinto at uusad ang isang grupo; hindi maaaring magrambulan ang tugtog, *Paruparong Bukid* man o *Noypi*.

Pagdaan ng Sto. Niño sa karosa, ang tradisyonal na imahen ng Sto. Niño, ang batang Hesus na tangan ang mundo sa isang palad, at sa isang palad ay ang setro na simbolo ng paghahari sa sanlibutan, may magsisindi ng fountain sa kal-sada, may makukulay na con-fetti na isasaboy mula sa bin-tana ng isang bahay, ang mga manonood at kasama sa parada ay magpapalakpakan at sisigaw, *Viva, Viva, El Señor Santo Niño!* Samantala'y magkakatinginan ang sumasayaw na lalaking walang saplot pang-itaas, at ang isang nanonood, na mag-aabot sa kaniya ng kapisang papel. Itinuwad ng lalaki sa prusisyon ang Sto. Niño, at sa pansalalay na kahoy ay isinulat ang numero ng kaniyang telepono. Libre ang hipo at kurot sa pulutong ng mga matipunong bisig at balik at ng mga kalalaki-hang inaabangan ng lahat ang paggiling. Nagpapasahan sila ng pantulak na beer na nakaplastik at straw.



Limang oras ang haba ng prusisyon, at naroon kaming mga nakipamistang limang oras ding nanonood sa ikalawang palapag ng bahay, nakatanghod sa lahat ng dumaraan. Patikim pa lamang iyon ng bisperas ng pista; pagdating ng alas-kuwatro ng umaga ng Linggo ay sisimulan muli ang isa pang mahabang parada, at uulitin pa pagdating ng alas-singko ng hapon. Sa buong isang linggong iyon ay nagkakasiyahan na ang mga magkakabarangay—may mga beauty pageant, may pakontes na sayawan at kantahan, may kani-kaniyang inuman, dibdiban ang choreography na matagumpay namang naipalabas sa oras mismo ng prusisyon. Bongga noong taong na-

nood kami, sabi ng aming kaibigan, dahil panahon ng eleksiyon, at ang mga politiko ay nag-uunahan sa pangangampanya ng boto. Ang pangalan ng isponsor na politiko ay nakatatak sa t-shirt o sombrero ng ilang delegasyon, at sila man ay kakaway at ngingiti pati sa aming hindi tagaroon.

Pero huwag mong sasabihing binayaran ang mga tao na sumama sa prusisyon—panata nila iyon, at ng kani-kanilang mga pamilya. Noong panahon ng Martial Law ay may nagtangkang magnakaw sa Sto. Niño sa



simbahan ng parokya. Tatlong buwan na walang tigil ang ulan sabi ng aming kaibigan, at ang pinakamalang lugar na nasalanta ay ang Pam-panga na pinanggalingan diumano ng magnanakaw. Nang maisauli ang Sto. Niño sa simbahan, biglang tigil ang malakas na ulan, at muli’y sumikat ang banayad na araw.

Sa araw mismo ng pista ay ilang misa ang dadagsain ng mga deboto dala ang kanilang mga Sto.

Niño na pabebendisyanan. Nani-niwala sila sa mabiyayang buhay na kaloob ng batang Hesus. Kalutasan sa anumang problema. Gamot sa anumang sakit. Malalaki’t mumunting milagro ng buhay.

Ang totoo’y wala akong karapatan na isulat ang ngayon ko lang naksisihan bagamat inaabangang mapanood taon-taon. Hindi ako nabigo sa ipinangako ng mga kaibigan. Maliit ang imahen ng Tondo na unang nakintal sa isipan. *Canal de la Reina* sa nobela ni Liwayway Arceo at ang bunggerang sakim na donya na inabutan ng baha, ang batang maton na lumuha sa kuwento ni Pedro Dandan at mga gang na naggigiryan, ang pitong prusisyon ng mga patay na sumalubong sa aming dinaraan at ang mai-tim na biro namin ay, di kaya mga miyembro sila ng OXO, *nasa Tondo na nga tayo!*, ang Smokey Mountain na minsang napuntahan dahil kailangang mag-interbyu ng pari at ilang mga pamilya na ang mga anak ay mamumulat sa pagbubungkal ng basura, ang malansang amoy ng palengke at bundok ng basura na walang ipinagkaiba, si Gat Andres Bonifacio na namuno sa Kati-punan at pinagkasya ng rehimen ni Marcos sa limampisong papel na berde

na nawala na sa sirkulasyon. Naalala ko rin nang minsan ay may nakilalang maganda't masiglang dalagang nakikipagbuno sa kanser. Kalbo na si Alex nang datnan namin sa bahay, nagpapahinga o nagpapalakas bagamat wala siyang pinansiyal na kakayahan na magpagamot, pero hayun at buong pagmamalaki pa ring ipinakita ang mga retrato noong nasa kolehiyo at kasama pa siya sa mountaineering club. Tondo ang pook ng mga pelikulang indie ni Jim Libiran: sa *Tribu*, ang maligalig at madilim at marahas na kapaligiran ng nagpapatayang mga gang ng mga kabataan, at sa *Happy Land*, na nagmula sa isang Waray na salita na ang ibig sabihin ay tambakan ng basura, at pinagmulan ng mga manlalarong kabataan na nahimok ng futbol bago pa ang kasikatan ng kinahuhumalingang mga Azkals sa kasalukuyan.

Kasama na sa mga larawang ito ang prusisyon ng mga Sto. Nino at mga taga-Tondo (Tundo – mabilis ang bigkas, sabi ng mga tubo roon). Kung noong mas bata-bata ko napanood ang prusisyon, siguradong umuusok na ang ilong at tenga ko sa ngitngit at kahihiyan, at madulas kong bibitawan sa bibig na napakasalaula ng mga taong ito, kaya hindi umunlad-unlad sa kabuhayan. Pero marunong talaga ang mga musmos, at tila hinintay ako maging ng Sto. Niño na umunlad rin sa karunungan, kung ganoon mang maituturing. Hindi man karapat-dapat ay nais kong maalala ang araw na ito na tila di mauubos ang enerhiya sa bawat kanto, at inaalog ang lupa ng tapang ng apog ng pananampalatayang walang panyapak, walang sinasanto: Umiikot at humihiwa sa sikmura ang pira-pirasong salamin ng kapuwa ko't kababayang nakatindig sa kanilang dinaraan, kubkob ng paraisong nag-iisa sa lahat ng ipaghihiwalay ng edad, kasarian, tabas ng mukha, at iba pang mapanguwenta't pabigat na mga prehuwisyo sa mundo. Anuman ang hirap ng araw-araw na pasanin sa buhay na tumatawid mula karnabal hanggang nilalantakang telenobela, alam nila ang pagbubuhusan ng oras at pagod, at manaka-nakang usal ng panalangin at pag-asa. Sa halo-halong amoy at pawis at hininga ng mga deboto, doon sa aming tinatanawan, humahampas ang hangin sa pisngi, parang sariwang hangin na nagmumula sa tabing-dagat, at ang mga mangingisda'y kahahango lamang ng mayamang ani, sapupo ng lambat. Nawawalang-bisa ang lansa, nahahalinhan ng tamis ang dumadaiti sa balat.

(Para kay Ferdie Lopez)

Binhi

Victor Emmanuel Carmelo D. Nadera Jr.

YUGTO 1

TAUHAN:

KORO/KASAMA

PARATIKANG

PALAY

PANAHON:

NGAYON

POOK:

VISAYAS

I. PAGSABOD

Papasok ang mga manonood sa tanghalan na aabutan ng KORO/KASAMA ng binhing ihahasik.

Isasalaysay ang lahat ng KORO/KASAMA na umaawit at sumasayaw:

*“Kailangan ang paghahasik ng punla ay maaga,
Bago dumating ang Araw ng mga Kaluluwa,
Dahil kung hindi ang mga binhi ay matutuyo na
At maaaring salakayin ng peste at iba pa.”*

Mapapanood ang mga magsasakang nagtatanim na naglalagay ng isang suklay, isang karayom, at isang tabog sa gitna ng punlaan:

*"Dapat itong gawin sa una o ikatlong araw ng buwan.
Dapat may suklay para tumubong tuwid ang uhay.
Dapat may karayom ay para magi siyang matibay.
Dapat may tabog ay upang sa ibon may tagabugaw!"*

Habang ang KORO/KASAMA ay naghahalo ng ilang palay sa banal na palay mula pa sa pagbabasbas niya noong Mahal na Araw, sila ay umaawit:

*"Madilim noon ang buhay na panay gulay
At walang ibang butil na iniaalay
Sa lupa at langit na walang kulay
Hanggang biglang dumating si Palay.*

*Sariwa sa matang namumuti sa gutom,
Sa taingang nakakarinig ng ugong,
Sa ilog na matagal nang di makaamoy —
Siyang galing Tsinang nagturo ng paglusong."*

Ang iba ay maghahasik ng abo sa lahat ng panig sa saliw ng awitan naalitan:

*"Kahit mahirap magbunot ng damo
O magdilig sa iyo nang walang poso —
Kami ay napilitan at nagpumilit matutong
Umimbento ng kung tawagin ay araro.*

*Nariyang kami ay gumawa ng pilapil
O ng patubig na dadaan sa mga bangin;
Pagpuputikin namin maging ang buhangin
Basta ikaw lamang ay maihain at makain."*

Ang ilan ay magsusunog ng damu-damo at ikakalat ang abo sa lupa, habang kumakantang nagpapastol ng mga kalabaw sa bukid upang maging pataba ang kanilang dumi:

*"Hayop na hayop sinikap naming umamo
Upang makatulong sa iyong pagtubo;
Upang makatulong sa aming pagtubo
Hayop na hayop sinikap kaming umamo.*

*Dahil sa iyo, walang naging imposible
Bulok na bayabas ay nagkaroon ng silbi;
Kaming Juan at Mariang Tamad dati
Ay naging Hari at Reynang marumi."*

II. PAGTATANOM

Makikita ang mga KORO/KASAMA na tinititigan ang mga mata ng alagang pusa at saka aawit:

*"Ang malaking mata ng pusa
Ang mata ng bagyong darating kaya
Dapat ang pagtatanim natin ay saka
Na lang muna
Sa halip na magsaka tayo ay magwala
Upang mawala ang banta
Ng namumuong sigwa
Sa tulong ng gitara at iba pang lilikha
Ng tunog at tinig ng araw na payapa."*

Magsisimula ng ritwal ang PARATIKANG. Tahimik siyang pupunta sa gitna ng entablado nang may hawak na tanglad, magkukurus, at mananalanging tangan ang kanyang dasalan at dakot ng palay sa kaliwa't kanang kamay:

1. isang Ama Namin,
2. isang Aba Ginoong Maria,
3. isang Gloria sa ngalan ng Birheng Maria;
4. isa pang Ama Namin para kay San Isidro;
5. isa pa uling Ama Namin para sa patron ng simbahan.

Magdadasal siya nang tahimik at pagkuwan ay magtatanim ng mga halamang kanya ring hawak bilang alay. Kukuha siya ng isang bungkos ng binhi mula sa punlaan:

“Thahagis ko ito papalayo sa Diyos.

Ihahagis ko ito para sa mga diablos.

Ihahagis ko ito sa lupang pagod

Upang ito ay lumakas muli ang loob.”

Sasaliwan ito ng pagpapaputok ng labentador kada bungkos. Maaaring sumayaw sa tugtog rondalla ang mga magsasaka na yumuyuko mulang baywang nang paulit-ulit na hindi itinitiklop ang tuhod, hawak ang mga punla sa kaliwang kamay, sa gawing tuhod, ikinakampay ang kanang kamay para kunin nang isa hanggang tatlong uhay sa posisyong patatsulok (hinlalaki, hintuturo, at hinlalato) sa bandang ugat nito, at ibabaon sa putik. Mabilis at maayos ang tono ng musikang maaaring lagyan ng titik ng mga tsismis.

Aawitin ng KORO/KASAMA ang paghahati ng bungkos sa pito:

“Para sa pitong galak at hapis ng Diyos

Para sa Birheng Mariang may pitong saya at lungkot.

Para kaligayahan at tagumpay ay maging lubos

Para ang pag-ani nating hindi na matatapos!”

Pagkatanim, ang PARATIKANG ay tatalon nang ilang metro habang sumisigaw ng “Ah!”

Ipapaliwanag ng KORO/KASAMA nang paawit ang kanilang gagawin:

*“Ito ay upang makiusap sa Poong mahabagin
Na ang mga susunod sa kanya sa pagtatanim
Ay sa kanilang paghihirap ay magiging matulin
Sapagkat habambuhay silang pagpapalain.”*

Magtatanim muli ang PARATIKANG nang tatlong hanay paatras at tatlong hanay pasulong.

Ito ang wakas ng ritwal bago silang lahat kumain ng isang masaganang almusal.

Aawitin ng KORO/KASAMA ang awit ng mga magsasaka:

*“Tumingala ka sa buwan sa itaas;
Sa ngiti at simangot ng panahon umindak;
Dahil ipinagkatiwala ng Faraon sa iyo
Ang mga binti ni San Isidro.”*

Tutula ang PARATIKANG ng kanyang balak:

*“Balak kong mapasaakin itong ari-ariang naisangla.
Balak kong itirik dito ang aking munting dampang.
Balak kong dito ang mag-anak ko ay magsimula.
Balak ko pala ay di balak ng panginoong may yuta.”*

Walang ano-ano, magpuputukang baril at magsasabugang bomba sa di-kalayuan, magkukumpulan ang mga tauhan sa isang sulok sa gawing itaas ng entablado, at, sa paghupa ng kaguluhan sa labas, saka magkukuwento ang PARATIKANG ng Alamat ng Palay.

Habang siya ay nagsasalaysay nang may saliw ng musika, sa gawing ibaba ng entablado mapapanood ang pagbibigay-buhay sa kanyang mga salita habang umaambon.

Sa gitna ng pag-ulan ng bala at banlik, masusunod sa susunod na yugto ni Palay hanggang maging si Bigas.

YUGTO 2

TAUHAN:

KORO/KASAMA
PARATIKANG/MUMBAKI
PALAY/BIGAS

PANAHON:

KAHAPON

POOK:

LUZON

I. PAGSILANG

Magbubukas ang tanghalang malamlam ang ilaw.

Makikitang naninigas ang KORO/KASAMA sa lamig.

Pipilitin pa ring kumilos ng PARATIKANG magiging isang MUMBAKI:

Kanyang kakantahin ang epikong huuwa ukol kay Bigas:

*“Kanila nang isinalin sa baso ang alak at ininom;
Pagkaraan, sila ay nanalangin at bumulong
Sa kanilang mga ninuno sa magkabilang panig
Upang ang kanilang alamat ng palay ay marinig.*

*Tapos na silang manawagan at inilabas na ang manok,
Kanila nang binasbasan ang mga binhing iuugsok;
Laslas na ang lalamunan ng inahin at wakwak na,
Labas na ang loob para makita ang apdo kung maganda.”*

Habang ito ay inaawit, makikita sa gitna ng entablado ang isang bagong silang na Puting Uod na hindi mapakali sa pagparoo’t parito upang maging isang butil ng bigas. (Maaaring gamitan ito ng papet o laro sa anino.)

Gagalaw ang uod ayon sa kuwento ng MUMBAKI ukol sa 12 Ritwal ng Palay ng mga Ifugao sa Banaue.

Sa kabila nito, bilang juxtaposition, maaaring awitin ng KORO/KASAMA ang tatlong sanhi ng pagkasira nito:

*“May taas mang na 5,000 talampakan
May irigasyon mang sa grabidad lumalaban,
Mulang sapa hanggang lupa man ang hatid
Ng ipinandidilig na dalisay na tubig.*

*Balewala, balewala, balewala,
Kung tayo ay magpapabaya.*

*May taas mang na 5,000 talampakan
May irigasyon mang sa grabidad lumalaban,
Mulang sapa hanggang lupa man ang hatid
Ng ipinandidilig na dalisay na tubig.*

*Walang kuwenta, walang kuwenta, walang kuwenta
Kung ang kaunlaran ay walang kuwento na.*

*May taas mang na 5,000 talampakan
May irigasyon mang sa grabidad lumalaban,
Mulang sapa hanggang lupa man ang hatid
Ng ipinandidilig na dalisay na tubig.*

*Sayang, sayang, sayang
Kung maaui sa pagguho lamang."*

Sa punto ito, maaaring gawing kontrapunto ito ng kanta ng MUMBAKI:

*"Nakapanghihinayang si Bigas
Na bigay ng nasa Itaas.*

*Nakapanghihinayang na ang banal
Ay bawal nang igalang.*

*Nakapanghihinayang pagkat kaluluwa't
Katawan natin at ng palay ay iisa."*

Magsasanib ang lakas ng tinig ng KORO/KASAMA at ng MUMBAKI sa pag-awit ng kaganapan ni Bigas:

*"Kung ikaw para sa mga Kachin
ay sa gitna ng daigdig nanggaling...
bakit dito para kang patakbuhan?*

*Kung ang Emperador, sa ganang-Shinto,
ay anak ng diyos mong si Ninigo-no-mikoto...
bakit dito para kang sinisino-sino?*

*Kung sa India, nag-utos sina Vishnu at Indra
kung papaano palikihin ka...
bakit dito tila walang pakialam sila?*

*Kung ginagamas kang paiza-isa sa Bali
dahil ito ang gusto ng diyos na si Dewi Sri...
bakit dito sinasabunutan ka pag inaani?*

*Sa buong Asya, babae ka kung igalang —
nagbubuntis, nanganganak, namamatay —
bakit dito puting uod ang iyong pinagmulan?*

*Bakit ka namin gusto at kailangan
samantalang mayroon namang tinapay
at sa ulam puede na kaming mabuhay?*

*Ano at hindi kita masisisi
at paano hindi mo rin ako masisisi
kung hinahanap-hanap kita araw-gabi?*

*Saan ka nga ba nag-umpisa, sa Tsina
o sa basag na palayok sa Non Nok Tha
o espiritu kong naghahanap ng kuweba?*

*Kailan mo nasilayan ang liwanag sa mundo
para sa gutom na diwa at damdamin ko
ikaw ang tanglaw mula doon hanggang dito?*

*Sino ka nga ba talaga, O. Glaberrimang giliw,
O. Sativang liyang, O. Rufipogong akin,
O Indica o Japonica o Sinicang isinaing?”*

II. PAGPANAW

Matatahimik ang lahat.

Matatanto nilang wala naman silang pagkaing pagsasaluhan.

Matitiyak nilang sila ay nananaginip lamang nang gising.

Isa-isang matutumba sila nang pasayaw.

Dito isasagawa ng di-magkandaugagang MUMBAKI na dala-dalang munting aklat at bigas sa kaliwa’t kanang kamay — ang ritwal ng paggagamot. At paglilibing.

YUGTO 3

TAUHAN:

KORO/KASAMA

PARATIKANG/MUMBAKI/ALKEMISTA

PALAY/BIGAS/KANIN

PANAHON:

BUKAS

POOK:

MINDANAO

I. PAG-AANI

Magbubukas nang madilim ang tanghalan nang walang laman.

Walang pananim at pagtatamnan.

Matatanglawan ang MUMBAKI na aawit nang malungkot na himig na walang titik.

Sasaluhin ng KORO/KASAMA ang kanyang awiting papalakas nang papalakas.

Di-kaginsa-ginsa, uusbong ang isang bagay mula sa tambakan ng bangkay.

Sa paglakas ng mahina at mabagal na punebre, unti-unting mayagalaw na Puting Uod na hindi mapakali sa pagparoo't parito upang maging isang butil ng bigas. (Maaaring gamitan muli ito ng papet o laro sa anino.)

Magiging palayan ang dating libingan.

II. PAHIMAKAS

Sa pagbabaliktanaw ng aawit na KORO/KASAMA na matatangay ng napakalakas na hangin at buhangin makaraang awitin ito nang umaatungal at ulit nang ulit hanggang sila ay lumabas sa entablado:

*“Sa loob at labas ng bayan kong sawa
Sa mga ugat na naaagnas at basa;
Sukdang pati tae ng tao ay naging pataba
Sa tigang sa pagmamahal na lupa.”*

Habang nakapikit sa kanyang meditasyon, sa mata ng unos, unti-unti si MUMBAKI ay magmimistulang ALKEMISTA.

Taimtim pa rin siyang magdarasal hanggang lamunin ng nakabubulag na liwanag.

Isisigaw niya sa itaas ang kanyang mantrang nakasulat sa kanyang bitbit ng librito at kanin sa kaliwa’t kanang kamay:

*“Los Banos, tungro, Beachell & Khush, hanip, 1 ½ ektarya,
kulisap, 170 araw, Green Revolution, 9,500 milyong tonelada,
troso, El Nino, Ku, Frankenstein, 1986, mestizo, Nueva Ecija,
Austronesian, IR36, kaingin, Peng, mandirigma, milagrosa.”*

Sa pagbanggit ng huling salita, magiging nakabibingi ang katahimikan.

Marahang madidinig ang papalapit na prusisyong parang parada sa pag-aagawan ng mga tao ng iba’t ibang arangya at aning nakasabit sa mga bahay na daraanan.

Ito ay kabibilangan ng lahat ng tauhang nakita sa simula hanggang wakas sa ngalan ng pista ni San Isidro Labrador.

KANIN na si BIGAS na ginawang kiping.

TELON

Literature and Religion

Ophelia A. Dimalanta

I start with the idea that all literature, and I mean, authentic literature, literature that matters, literature worthy of its name... is essentially related to religion. It is finally a quest for the meaning and justification of life and is always an attempt to see things in a different light. It ultimately raises objective reality to a higher level, a higher order of life. This attempt is the very source of the writer's faith sustaining his being, his art.

This brings as to the word transcendence. Transcendence is in fact a romantic strain in poetry, in Filipino poetry, an oriental yearning for the unseen world. The Filipino romantic, albeit no mystic, operates as some kind of mystic where supreme realities dawn upon the poet briefly, in moments of "heightened consciousness" or "intersections, of the temporal and the eternal."

A Scottish poet Kenneth White describes nature poems as communication between man and the cosmos. And so, whatever its programmes, its preoccupations, proclivities, immediate concerns, the best poetry relates the outer world to the inner world which moves all realities into a beautiful schema. The Filipino poet does not write outright religious poetry but studying his *entire* work, one recognizes a significant measure of spirituality which motivates the more urgent ultimacies of his art – best expressed by Yves Bonnefoy's "the subject matter of poetry begins with a flea and ends with God."

I repeat, this faith sustains the art of all poets.

This faith endows the writer with values, the right values, and this inevitably leads us to the issue of morality in literature, morality being an issue we cannot separate from religion, and for that matter, literature.

Any statement on literature must be in a way axiological since it involves ethics even in the most indirect way. Axiology after all is value theory centrally shared by both ethics and aesthetics. Even while morality is not literature and literature has its own autonomous standards, it is never totally unrelated to morality or ethics.

This does not mean that literature, poetry particularly, is meant to preach morality; otherwise it ends up being didactic, pietistic, proselytizing — pejorative terms in literature. Literature, in the noblest sense, most significantly upholds basic truths about the individual and about life, a humanistic belief in the person as rational and basically as feeling, and as spiritual being.

Dipping into one's spiritual life does not mean turning away from the real world. It simply means opening up to a fuller experience of the world and profiting from both the pleasure and the pain. Literature's focusing inward does not mean indulging the pain but rather seeking out something like sanity, a moment's serenity recalling forgotten courage. Creativity and contemplation are germane to literature, and creative contemplation nudges us into making this inner dip into our vaunted spirituality.

Any person working under the pressure of a modern organization, corporate world, academe, is making his way through the world, a world that seems to be having less room for spirituality. Spirituality, I repeat, is the person's inner core. It is made of the stuff from which flow the motivations, inspirations, and commitments that make him live and decide in a particular way. Our artistic materials are derived from these experiences and options in life, as well as our own experience of God, which is allowed to act in us even in a simple poem. Every literary piece is a celebration of life with all its pains (better pain than paralysis) and no matter how seemingly pessimistic, it expresses all the dynamic contortions of living, an impalement of a given moment, a part of life's scheme in the Divine Blueprint — a recognition of kinship with that tree, that flower, that bird, that stream, all of God's creations. The very release of creative energy and new insights is a gesture of refocusing old and staid definitions of spirituality lest they be fixed only in one direction, parochial, sanctimonious.

Spirituality can even lead to, yes (hold your breath now) eroticism, or is it the other way round?

Perhaps, one may argue, modern writers have oftentimes given the readers a sense of chaos rather than order, guilt, rather than well-being. And these are admittedly quite valid realistic portrayals of the darker but not less real aspects of life. Where, then, is the spirituality here?

This tendency of contemporary writers may be traced to the growth of the questioning spirit resulting from a confusion of values and ideologies: a wavering of faith, corrosion of old idealisms, preoccupation with man's littleness in a world gone askew.

Yet, somehow, looking closely, we discover that even the most despondent writers have wrenched from a seemingly hostile universe some sense, some abiding dream, even courage that outlives death simply because he took time out to write about this despondency and simply because he writes about man, and man is essentially a hoping, aspiring creature deep inside.

Whatever this vague or elusive thing writers pin their hopes on, the very act of writing attests to the existence of something in life which points obliquely or otherwise to some greater good, making of life something more than mere bleak prelude to death.

A superficial theology may confine the concept of God to the thunder, the mountains, the heavenly bodies, nature, but a deeper theology finds God right in the core of human needs.

Literature may itself be religion allowed to drift along without resorting to dogmas, religion without metaphysical illusion, precisely what this troublous world needs where even illusions disillusion. Without recourse to sentimental religiosities, literature has given us a sense of the will liberated, and if frustrated, eventually fulfilled through a kind of enlightenment at the end, a device which is aesthetic and literary as well. In literature, theology is not explicated or explained. It is rendered!

You have to be a good literary writer to express this intense faith in man, one of the highest manifestations of spirituality. Anton Chekhov said: "there is no such thing as a bad person, only an unhappy one and deserving our sympathy."

So much profound spirituality may in fact be found in the works of the Russian masters, particularly Dostoevsky who plumbed the depths of

the soul with such fire and intensity.

Religion in literature, explicit or implied, is in essence a search for authenticity in a world of phoney, alienation of all kinds, personal, social, and cosmic. Salinger for instance in *Catcher in the Rye* gives us a peek into adolescent psychology, focusing on modern day youth confused by different modern fads, readings, movies which encourage private manias, chimeras mistaken for realities.

Modern youth has started to ask questions and even distrust abstract dogmatisms, empty theological theorizings. The young are bound to ask, "Tell us why, for all the prayers mouthed, dogmas memorized, there remain this intense fever in our groins, this appalling need in our souls, this heaviness in our hearts? Literature must attempt to offer even temporary solutions. The abstractions in Theology must be supported by the concrete rendering of reality that will try to answer disturbing questions. The German poet Rilke said quite aptly: "It is not the answers that show us the way but the sad questions!"

Not even Literature can give the answers. Literature's access to life is deeper than what reason alone can offer, for life is rendered understandable through its objectifications, in the realm of objects seen, sensed, felt, expressed through the magic of words, and relationships are grasped in the presentness of lived experience.

What about evil made attractive in Literature? A world steeped in evil is a realistic Christian concept. The wisening process that is a result of actual active participation in evil is specifically tragic in the sense not so much of falling but of rising every time one falls! In classical tragedies, the connection between the drama and religion is more pronounced. Every dramatic oeuvre was a religious ritual, specially manifested in the spiritual upliftment which was part of the tragic pleasure gained at the end. The very portrayal of evil gives a literary work a metaphysical and universal slant.

How about the writings of Existentialists like Albert Camus and his despairing cry against the plague that plagues mankind? Again and again, in Camus, we read about the healing powers of love, compassion, brotherhood.

If despair prompts writing, then fraternity is established. Love is born. A Literature of Despair according to Camus is a contradiction in

terms. Camus like all the rest of the Existentialists may well be called an unavowed Christian writer.

In the writer's portrayal of evil, he consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly hankers for a better world, and is drawn towards an invisible order of things, a supernaturalism implied or explicit in Literature but inevitably there. Closer to home, Nick Joaquin portrays sinners and sin quite compellingly, considering the power of his language. Like Mauriac and Graham Greene, he believes that there are times one has to go to hell to find God. Mauriac himself said: the more a person consorts with the devil, the more he is made more interesting to the writer's purpose, the more dramatic the enactment of his fall and subsequent redemption.

We tend to distinguish among literature that is openly religious, literature indirectly religious and literature that is obviously irreligious. These distinctions disappear in the light of common efforts to dramatize the dilemma of modern man, and of course the faith that sustains him, whether he admits it or not.

In poetry and in fiction, the writer usually alludes to epiphanies or moments of illumination which interrupt and make significant the everyday flow of time. Here, one enters a privileged moment where he intuitively grasps a deeper, more essential reality hidden in things or persons. This is what you find in all literary pieces of great importance. The "epiphany" or appearance which speaks of the arrival of Christ, occupies a vital place in the New Testament.

How about eroticism in poetry? Quoting the great Nobel Prize winner, poet Czeslaw Milosz: "Eros is sexual love but not only such, because it is an intermediary between gods and human beings." In the best sense then, this kind of love is a true motoric desire or force of creativity in art and even science. It may even be applied to the relationship between a poet and generations of readers to come, and becomes the motivation to perfect one's art without hope of being rewarded by contemporaries, the magnanimity of offering a gift to posterity. And this could take the form of all kinds of love poems and all kinds of love, sensuous or outrightly spiritual.

In conclusion, the writer knows better than to take the stance of a mystic. He does not lull the readers by ignoring injustice, violence, suf-

fering, for by doing so, he does not cure, but forget or ignore and thus, condone.

And despite the seeming incoherences and unorthodoxies of some contemporary writers, literature and life, as well as literature and religion are inevitably intimately bound.

Touching man, touching life, the writer ultimately, significantly touches God.

MAGALING DATAPOUA: Ang Dating at Galing sa Estetika ng Ating Panitikan

Bienvenido Lumbera

May kuwento tungkol sa prayleng Espanyol na si Padre Francisco Blancas de San Jose, na binansagang “Demosthenes ng Wikang Tagalog” ng mga kapuwa niya Espanyol bilang pagkilala sa kadalubhasaan niya sa pag-aaral at paggamit ng Tagalog. Nagsulat siya ng mga tulang Tagalog na kanyang iniayon sa mga batas ng pagtula sa kanyang sariling wika. Sa pag-aakala marahil na hahangaan at tutularan ang kanyang katha, ipinabasa niya ito sa isang katutubo. Matapos basahin ang tula ng misyonero, magalang na sinabi ng katutubo, “Magaling datapoua hindi tola.”

Ang sinabi ng katutubo ay siya na marahil pinakaunang napatalang halimbawa ng panunuring pampanitikan sa Filipinas. Marahil ay sinundan pa ang pangungusap ng pagpapaliwanag, pero sa kasamaang-palad ang pinakaunang kritiko ay hindi nagsulat, kaya’t ang mga dahilan kung bakit hindi niya kinilalang tula ang ipinabasa sa kanya ni Padre San Jose ay hindi na natin matatalos. Ang tanging magagawa natin sa ating panahon ay hakain kung bakit ganoon ang naging reaksiyon ng di-kilalang “kritiko” sa unang kaso ng relasyong pampanitikan sa pagitan ng Espanya at ng Filipinas.

“Hindi tula” ang akda ni Padre San Jose dahil, sa palagay ko, hindi umalinsunod sa tradisyonal na pagtula ng mga Tagalog. Unang dekada noon ng Siglo 17 at ang kinagisnang mga tula ng di-kilalang “kritiko” ay maiikling berso na madalas ay may sukat na pipituhin at nagsasalaysay o naglalarawan ng buhay-buhay ng komunidad at karanasan sa karagatan o

kagubatan. Tuwing may dakilang pagtitipon ng lipi, may mahaba namang tula tungkol sa mga bayani at diyos ng lipi, na hinihimig ayon sa mga tonong mula pa sa panahong kauna-unahan. Samakatwid, bago pa dumating ang mga misyonerong kagaya ni Padre San Jose, mayroon nang kinikilalang nilalaman at anyo ang tulang Tagalog. Ang mga akdang binibigkas sa pang-araw-araw na buhay at sa mga dakilang okasyon ay mayroon nang tiyak na anyo at mga alituntuning sinusunod sa paglikha. Noon pa man ay mayroon nang identidad ang tulang Tagalog, mayroon itong sariling estetika.

Madalas maharap ang guro at ang kritiko sa pangangailangang magbitiw ng hatol o opinyon tungkol sa isang akda. Sa ganyang pagkakataon, ang hatol o opinyon ay hinuhugot sa kamalayang tinigib ng mga kaalaman tungkol sa malikhaing pag-akda ng unibersidad na pinanggalingan ng guro o kritiko. Pinag-aralan niya ang panitikan, nagpakadalubhasa marahil sa gradwadong paaralan, at sa loob ng panahong pinagtitiyay niya ang kanyang pagiging eksperto sa panitikan, ang mga babasahing kanyang sinangguni ay kadalasa'y galing sa Kanluran. Hindi kataka-taka samakatwid na ang mga pamantayang sumapi sa kanyang kamalayan ay mga pamantayang hinalaw sa ortodoksiya ng akademya sa Kanluran. At hindi rin kataka-taka na ang maraming akdang lokal na pinaraan sa nasabing mga pamantayan ay hindi nakapasa at nasadlak sa katayuang “segunda klase” o “medyo kulang.”

Sa harap ng tambak ng mga akdang hindi nabasbasan bilang “primera klase,” lumilitaw ang pag-aalinlangan sa sukatang ginagamit ng mga kritiko. Baka kaya hindi angkop ang sukatan sa mga akdang sinusukat? Baka ang estetikang ginawang urian ay walang kinalaman sa kasaysayan at kulturang humubog sa akda?

Kailangan nating tuklasin ang isang estetikang may nasyonalidad, isang estetikang mababansagang “estetika ng panitikang Filipino.” Sa isang panayam na nauna ko nang binasa sa isang porum sa U.S.T ganito ang akting sinabi:

Kailangan ang isang estetikang may nasyonalidad upang mabigyan ng timbang na pagpapahalaga ang mga likhang-sining ng ating mga kababayang manlilikha, na kadalasa'y nasasantabi dahil inuuri ayon sa mga pamantayang hindi nagsasaalang-alang na ang mga iyon ay bunga ng isang partikular na kasaysayan at kultura. “Estetika ng panitikang

Filipino,” dahil gusto nating basahin ng mga edukadong mambabasa ang mga akda ng mga manunulat na Filipino bilang mga tula, kuwento, dula at nobelang nasulat sa loob ng lipunang may sariling kasaysayan at kultura, hindi bilang mga akdang iniayon sa mga pamantayang “unibersal” ng mga taga-Kanluran. Binibinyagang “Filipino” ang mga likha upang itanim sa isipan ng madla na ang mga ito ay ginawa ng kanilang kababayang humihinging pansinin ng kapwa Filipino. Hanggang kalian uulit-ulitin ang pagbibinyag? Hanggang hindi pa lumilitaw ang henerasyon ng kabataan na hindi na kailangang paalalahanan na ang likhang nasa kanilang harapan ay likhang sa Filipinas nilikha at likhang iniukol sa mga Filipino. (“Balik-Muni sa Dating: Panibagong Dulog sa Estetika,” U.S.T.)

Ano ang nagbunsod sa di-kilalang kritiko ni Padre San Jose na magsabing hindi tula ang ipinabasa sa kanya ng misyonero? Mahihinuha natin na ang paksain ng nasabing tula ay kaiba sa paksain ng mga tulang kilala na ng katutubo. Hindi kilala ng katutubo ang anyong *romance* na noon pa lamang ginamit sa isang tulang isinulat sa Tagalog. Hinango ni Padre Jose ang paksain at mga tema mula sa relihiyong kanyang ituturo sa mga bagong binyagan. Hindi tula ang akda ni Padre San Jose dahil hindi ito ang tulang Tagalog ng mga Tagalog.

Linawin nga natin ang mga konsepto ng dating at galing upang mau-nawaan ang kaugnayan ng mga ito sa pagpapanukala ng isang estetika ng panitikan ng Filipinas. Ating suriin ang isang tulang kilala na ng marami at itinuturing nang bahagi ng kanon ng ating panitikan. Nasulat ito mahigit nang 70 taon ang nakararaan at may dalawa nang yugto ng pagkabuhay ang pinagdaanan ng tula sa kasaysayan ng panitikang Filipino. Ito ay ang “Kung Tuyo Na ang Luha Mo, Aking Bayan” ni Amado V. Hernandez. Nalathala ang tula noong 1930, malamang sa kolum na “Sa Sariling Hardin” sa diaryong *Pagkakaisa*. Wala pang nagagawang pananaliksik sa unang yugto ng buhay ng tula kaya’t ang tangi pa lamang na masasabi tungkol dito ay hindi itinuring ng makata na karapat-dapat itong mapasama sa koleksiyon ng mga tulang isinali niya sa Commonwealth Literary Award ng 1940, ang *Kayumanggi at Ibang Tula*. Ang ikalawang yugto ng buhay ng “Kung

Tuyo Na ang Luha Mo, Aking Bayan” ay nagsimula noong 1961 nang ito ay lumabas sa koleksiyonng *Isang Dipang Langit* sa pangkat ng mga tulang nakapailalim sa seksiyong “Kalayaan”. Sa panahong ito, tanyag na si Hernandez bilang bilangong politikal na kinulong batay sa paratang na “rebellion complexed with other crimes” at pinalaya ng Korte Suprema matapos ng mahabang mga taon ng pagkabimbin sa Muntinlupa. Hindi naging sagabal ang kanyang naging kaso sa muling paghanay niya sa mga “usual suspects” na sinusubaybayan ng militar. Hinikayat siya ng mga kabataang aktibista na dumalo sa mga simposium at, sa kalaunan, sa mga martsa at demonstrasyon. Sa mga huling taon ng Dekada 60, nakalkal ng mga manggagawang pangkultura ang “Kung Tuyo Na ang Luha Mo, Aking Bayan.” Madaling napasok ang tula sa repertoryo ng mga grupong pangtanghalan. Sa mga rally at demonstrasyon, binuhay ang tula sa tradisyong oral.

Noong mga taong 1920, mainit na usapin ang isyu ng independensiya. Ang nakararaming mamamayan, gaya ng pinatutunayan ng eleksiyong 1922, ay matibay ang suporta sa mga politikong naninindigan para sa kalayaan. Ang mga lider naman ay hati sa pangkat na para sa kagyat na paglaya (“independencia inmediata”) at pangkat para sa pagpapalipas ng panahon ng transisyon sa ilalim ng pangangalaga ng Estados Unidos (“autonomia”). Sa kabilang dako, may mga kongresistang Amerikano na kumikilos upang wakasan na ang pananakop dahil nakasasama ang patuloy na pag-aalaga ng E.U. sa kolonya sa ekonomikong interes ng sektor ng agrikultura. Sa larangan ng politika sa ilalim ng pamahalaang kolonyal, ang pagsusugo ng mga “independence mission” na nakikipagnegosasyon sa mga opisyal at mambabatas sa Washington, ay nakasandal sa pag-asang sa malao’t madali ay ipagkakaloob ng E.U. and independensiya.

Peryodista si Amado V. Hernandez na nagsusulat para sa diyaryong *Pagkakaisa* kung saan may patulang kolum siyang pinamagatang “Sa Sari-ling Hardin.” Isang araw hinamon siya ng kaibigang Jose Corazon de Jesus na may patulang kolum ding pinamagatan namang “Mga Lagot na Bagting ng Kudyapi” sa diaryong *Taliba*. Pagtalunan daw nila sa kanya-kanyang kolum ang isyu ng independensiya. Kaibang balagtasang ang ibubunga ng hamon ni de Jesus — sa halip na balagtasang magkaharap sa entablado ang dalawang makatang nagtatalo, ang balagtasang iminungkahi ni de Jesus ay nakalimbag, paghaharap ng dalawang makata na nasa magkaibang publikasyon. Ibig sabihin, kailangan ng magkabilang panig ng pag-iingat sa

pagbibitiw ng mga argumento at sa paghahabi ng kanilang tula.

Sa paunang tula ni de Jesus, tinawag niyang taksil ang lahat ng nanawagan para sa kalayaan na “kukunin sa mapayapa ang pag-ibig sa kalayaan.”

Lahat tayo rito’y taksil, lahat-lahat, oo, lahat,
Sapagkat sa gintong mana ng dakilang Balintawak,
Ngayo’y utay-utay nating ang paglaya’y tinutuklas
At gumagapang ang api’t nagpapalimos ang duwag.

Dahil siya ang hinamon, nalagay si Hernandez sa posisyong nagtatanggol sa panig ng awtonomiya.

Ang pangkating politikong nakaupo’y hindi taksil,
Kanila ring sinasakit na magwagi sa usapin:
Kung sila ma’y walang tabak, may panulat at may papel,
Ang di nakuha sa lakas, sa katwiran daraanin.

Tumagal ang balagtasang nang siyam na sagutan mula 15 Pebrero hanggang 21 Marso. Bahagi ng tradisyon sa balagtasang ang palitan ng maaanghang na tudyo, at kadalasan ang pag-uuyam ay may layong makasugat sa katalo. Sa ikaapat na sagot ni de Jesus, tinawag niya si Hernandez na “makata ng Amerika, at manunula ng pamahalaan.” May halong biro man ang ganyang pagbabansag ni de Jesus, ngunit tila may sugat na naiwan kay Hernandez ang sinabi ng kaibigang makata. May mga palatandaan sa loob ng tula, na ang anti-kolonyal na “Kung Tuyo Na ang Luha Mo, Aking Bayan,” ay isinulat ni Hernandez nang sumunod na taon (1930) bilang pagtatanggol sa sarili laban sa paratang na siya’y “makata ng Amerika”

Ano kaya ang naging dating ng tula ni Hernandez sa mga mambabasa ng kanyang kolum? Dahil sariwa pa sa alaala ng mga mambabasa ng *Pagkakaisa* ang balagtasang de Jesus-Hernandez, mahihinuha natin na ang mga pumapanig sa awtonomiya ay nalungkot at ang mga panig naman sa kagyat na kalayaan ay nagdiwang. Ang “Kung Tuyo Na...” ay kabaligtaran ng paninindigang ipinagtanggol ni Hernandez sa balagtasang. Doon sa

balagtasang ay ipinagmatuwid niya ang isang panahon ng pagpapailalim sa kolonyal na pangangalaga ng Estados Unidos. Dito ay inilarawan niya ang marawal na kalagayan ng kolonya at nag-iwan ng pagbabanta ng marahas na pag-aalsa pagdating ng panahong ubos na ang pagtitiis ng bayan sa kanyang kaapihan. Dito sa maikling tulang ito, pinatunayan ni Hernandez na tiyak na hindi siya “makata ng Amerika.”

Para sa mambabasang hindi nakasubaybay sa balagtasang, ang epekto ng tula ay nakalangkap sa mga alaala ng mga naunang tula tungkol sa bayan. Halimbawa ang magkatuwang na tula nina Hermenegildo Flores at Marcelo H. del Pilar sa panahon ng Propaganda, ang “Hibik ng Filipinas sa Inang Espanya” at ang “Sagot ng Espanya sa Hibik ng Filipinas.” Sa dalawang tula, ang tauhang “Filipinas” ay tumatayong Inang Bayan ng mga mamamayang nakapailalim sa Espanya. Sa tula ni del Pilar, ang mga huling saknong ay may taglay na pangaral sa inang humihingi ng tulong sa Espanya.

Sa pinakaunang tula na ang bayan ay inilarawan bilang ina, ipinataw sa mga anak ng Inang Filipinas ang tungkuling humanap ng mailulunas sa paghihirap nito. Sa tula ni Hernandez, nakasentro ang larawan ng inang nananangis.

Subalit ang tulang “Pag-ibig sa Tinubuang Lupa” ni Andres Bonifacio ang tuwirang inuugnayan ng pamagat at nilalaman ng “Kung Tuyo Na...” Nagsisimula ang tula sa retorikal na tanong: “Aling pag-ibig pa ang hihi-guit kaya/ sa pagkadalisay at pagkadakila/ Gaya ng pag-ibig sa tinubuang lupa?” Makaraan ang ilang saknong, ang “tinubuang lupa” ay tatawagin nang Inang Bayan: “Ay! Ito’y ang Inang Bayang tinubuan...”

Isang madamdaming panawagan ang tula sa lahat ng anak ng bayan — mga mamamayang nabigo ang pag-asang makatikim ng ginhawa sa buhay, ang nawalan na ng pag-asa para sa pagbabago, ang inulila ng mga mahal sa buhay, ang tahasang biniktima ng malalakas, ang lahat ng dukha na naghahangad makaahon sa dustang kalagayan.

Ipaghandog-handog ang buong pag-ibig,
Hanggang sa may dugo’y ubusing itigis,
Kung sa pagtatanggol, buhay ay mapatid
Ito’y kapalaran at tunay na langit.

Sa dulang “Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas” ni Aurelio Tolentino, ibang larawan ng Inang Bayan ang ginagampanan ng tauhang Ynangbayan. Hindi biktimang nananangis at humihingi ng saklolo, isa siyang inang matapang at makilos. Sa Unang Bahagi pa lamang ay ipinakilala na siya bilang ba-baeng palaban, walang takot sa kontrabidang Asalhayop. Buong kapangahasan niyang sinugod ang piging ni Asalhayop upang ilantad ang ginawang pagtataksil nito sa kanyang mga kababayan. Siya ang Inang Bayang kapag naubusan na ng luha ay “sisigaw (nang) buong giting sa liyab ng libong sulo” at lagot sa pamamagitan ng punlo sa tanikalang gapos sa kanya.

Para sa mga mambabasang hindi marunong bumasa o walang pagkakataong magbasa o manood ng teatro, ang tula ni Hernandez ay tagapagmulat sa mga mamamayan ng kasalukuyan hinggil sa nagaganap na Amerikanisasyon ng pamumuhay at kabuhayan ng mga Filipino. Ipinagugunita ang pagsakop sa “lupain mong kawawa” na ang ibinunga ay “ang bandilang sagisag mo’y lukob ng dayong bandila,/ pati wikang minana mo’y busabos ng dayong wika.” Kinipil sa dalawang taludtod ang politikal at kultural na pagkasupil ng mga Filipino: hindi timbang ang lakas ng dalawang bayang nagtunggali, isang bansang “maliit” laban sa bansang “malaki.” Inungkat din ang eksploytasyong ekonomiko na nagpapayaman sa mananakop at nagpapahirap sa nasasakupan: “Ang lahat mong kayamana’y kamal-kamal na naubos/ Ang lahat mong kalayaa’y sabay-sabay na natapos.” At upang lalo pang maipamalay ang pagkapiit ng bayang sinakop: “Masdan mo ang iyong lupa, dayong hukbo’y nakatanod,/ Masdan mo ang iyong dagat, dayong bapor, nasa laot!” Ang kalagayang inilarawan ay dapat lamang tangisan ng bayan. Kung ang mga anak ng bayan ay walang gagawin upang baguhin ang kalagayan ng Filipinas “lumuha ka nang lumuha’t ang laya mo’y nakaburol.” Subalit may natatanaw pa ring pag-asa ang inaapi. Hindi mananatili sa pagtitiis ang bayan — habang lumalaon ang pang-aapi at pagsasamantala, nauubos din ang luha, at sa kalauna’y magiging punlo itong lalagot sa “lumang tanikala.” Sa tahasang turing, ang pighati ay nagiging tapang na dumudulo sa paghihimagsik.

Sa ikalawang pagkabuhay ng “Kung Tuyo Na ang Luha Mo, Aking Bayan,” ang tula ay tigib ng mga alaala ng mapupusok na araw ng pagmamartsa at pagtutol noong babagong lumalaganap ang ideolohiya ng pambansang demokrasya sa Dekada 70: Noon ang tula ay binibigkas

ng mga indibidwal na aktibista, sabayang isinisigaw ng mga aktor sa pagtatanghal nila sa kalye at plasa, binibigkas bilang pagsaliw sa sayaw na nilikha batay sa mga ideyang laman ng tula. Hindi ito itinuring na tulang galing sa isang partikular na panahon ng kasaysayan ng Filipinas. Ang Filipinas na inilalarawan ay ang Filipinas pa rin nang unang malathala ang tula. Para sa mga aktibista sa mga grupong pantanghalan, kontemporaryong akda ito na ang nilalama'y ugmang-ugma sa anti-imperyalistang linya ng kilusan. Ang Dekada 70 ay panahon ng pananawagan sa mga mamamayan na idilat ang kanilang mata at buksan ang kanilang isipan upang maunawaan nila ang pangangailangan para sa radikal na pagbabago ng lipunang Filipino. Na ang tula ay nagsisimula sa pagkalukob ng Filipinas at ang mga kondisyong nilikha ng kolonyal na pananakop ay paglalarawan na rin sa kalagayan ng lipunang Filipino bago dumaluyong ang Unang Sigwa — lupig at pasibo ang mga mamamayan kaya't kailangang pukawin ng mga kabataan upang ipaglaban nila ang kanilang “lupaing kawawa.” Masasabi natin samakatwid na sa ikalawang pagkabuhay ng tula ni Hernandez, dahil ang sumalo sa tula at nagdala nito sa gitna ng sambayanan ay isang kilusan, tumalab nang husto ang tula, hindi na sa mga indibidwal na mambabasa lamang, kundi sa kalipunan ng mga taong binigkis ng paniniwala na ang inilalarawan ng tula ay ang kanila mismong kalagayan.

Matingkad ang ambag ng kultura at kasaysayan sa lakas ng dating ng tula ni Hernandez. Subalit dapat ding kilalanin na mayroon ding internal na pinagmulan ang nasabing lakas. Matibay ang ugat ng sining sa pagtula ni Hernandez sa tradisyong pabigkas. Isa siyang kilalang mambabalagtas ng kanyang panahon, kaya't gamay na gamay niya ang mga epektos na maipapasok niya sa pagbubuo ng tulang kapag binigkas sa pampublikong okasyon ay pakikinggan at hahayaang tumalab sa kalooban ng mga tagapakinig. Taal na Tagalog si Hernandez, at sa kanyang karanasan bilang mambabalagtas alam niyang ang angkop na sukat ng mga taludtod at ang pihikang pamimili ng tugma sa dulo ng taludtod, kapag matagumpay na napagtagpo ng makata, ay nagdudulot sa likha makata ng indayog at tunog na nag-uudyok sa nasisiyahang mga tagapakinig na pumapalakpak.

Pansinin kung paano sinisilo ng makata ang atensiyon ng tagapakinig sa pagbubukas ng tula na pinaglalaruan ang tunog at indayog:

Lumuha ka, aking Bayan: buong lungkot mong iluha
Ang kawawang kapalaran ng lupain mong kawawa
Ang bandilang sagisag mo'y lukob ng dayong bandila
Pati wikang minana mo'y busabos ng ibang wika.

Ang sukat ng mga taludtod ay lalabing-animin, may mariing paghinto pagkatapos ng ikawalong pantig, at may magaang paghinto pagkatapos ng ikaapat na pantig. Mahahaba ang mga taludtod kaya't malubay ang ritmo, nagpapahiwatig ng pagkapagod at lumbay. Subalit pansinin na sa pamamagitan ng pag-uulit ng mga pariralang magkakahawig ang konstruksiyon ("Katulad mo ay si Huli," "Katulad mo ay si Sisa;" "ang lahat mong kayamana'y," "ang lahat mong kalayaa'y") at ng pagpapares-pares ng mga pangungusap ("Kung ang araw sa langit mo ay lagi nang dapithapon," "Kung ang alon sa dagat mo ay ayaw nang magdaluyong"), may umuukilkil na ritmo ng alon-along pagdagsa ng mga taong nagmamartsa. Isinasadsad tayo sa kagilagilalas na huling saknong na sadyang sinira ang regular na ritmo: ang ikalawang taludtod ay humulagpos, dumausdos sa ikatlo, at doo'y may bahagyang pagkauntol sa ikaapat na pantig (nilagyan ng kuwit), at sa ikawalo (kuwit uli), at nabuo ang diwa ng pangungusap sa dulo na lamang ng taludtod. Hinigit ng ganyang pagsira sa regular na ritmo ang pansin natin sa transpormasyon ng talinghaga: ang luha ay naging apoy, ang apoy ay naging dugo, ang dugo ay naging asero, ang asero ay naging punlo. Mula sa pananangis, iniba ang timpla ng tula ng pagsira ng ritmo, at naunawaan natin na ang pighati ay nagiging pakikitunggali.

Sa wikang Tagalog, ang salitang madalas gamitin kapag pinupuri ang isang likhang-sining ay "maganda." Ang konsepto ng galing at dating ay isang pagtatangkang palamnan ang palasak na salita ng teoryang umaarok sa tinatawag na estetika ng panitikang Filipino. Sa pagbasang ginawa sa "Kung Tuyo Na ang Luha Mo, Aking Bayan," hinanap ang mga kaisipan at karanasang sinasapantaha na nagkabisa sa kamalayan at kalooban ng mga nakabasa o nakarinig sa tula. Upang matuklasan ang mga kaisipan at karanasang iyon, binalikan ang kasaysayan ng akda at ang naging ugnay nito sa mga pangyayari sa lipunan at sa awtor at hinaka ang naging bisa ng akda sa mambabasa. Tinangka ring alamin kung ano ang ginawa ng awtor sa kanyang materyal at nangyaring tumalab and akda sa kamalayan at kalooban. Ang mga pamamaraang kanyang minana, hiniram, at inimbento

upang ang kanyang materyal ay bigyan ng kabuluhang mapanghahawakan ng mambabasa ay siyang nagpapakilala sa galing ng manunulat. Hindi aktuwal na napaghihiwalay ang dating at galing ng karaniwang mambabasa, at hindi iyon mahalaga para sa kanya. Ang mahalaga ay may naramdaman, may naranasan siya, at kung paano iyon nagawa ng awtor ay hindi niya kailangang alamin, maliban na lamang kung siya ay isa ring manlilikha tulad ng awtor na nagdulot sa kanya ng kasiyahan at kabuluhan.

Marahil nang sabihin ng di-kilalang kritiko ng tula ni Padre San Jose na “Magaling datapoua hindi tola” ang akda ng prayle ay hindi na niya kailangang magpaliwanag pa. At dahil hindi naman siya isang akademiko, hindi niya obligasyon na ipagmatuwid ang kanyang opinyon. Magaling ang akda dahil halata namang may mga alintuntuning sinunod sa pag-akda kaya nabuo ang akda. Pero para sa di-kilalang kritiko, mayroon siyang hinahanap na hindi niya natagpuan. “Magaling datapuwa walang sinasabi sa akin.” “Magaling datapuwa walang dating.” Iyan marahil ang tunay na sinasabi ng katutubo.

KUNG TUYO NA ANG LUHA MO, AKING BAYAN

Lumuha ka, aking Bayan; buong lungkot mong iluha
Ang kawawang kapalaran ng lupain mong kawawa:
Ang bandilang sagisag mo’y lukob ng dayong bandila,
Pati wikang minana mo’y busabos ng ibang wika:
Ganito ring araw noon nang agawan ka ng laya,
Labintatlo ng Agosto nang saklutan ang Maynila.

Lumuha ka, habang sila ay palalong nagdiriwang,
Sa libingan ng maliit, ang malaki’y may libangan;
Katulad mo ay si Huli, naaliping bayad-utang,
Katulad mo ay si Sisa, binaliw ng kahirapan;
Walang lakas na magtanggol, walang tapang na lumban,
Tumataghoy kung paslangin; tumatangis kung nakawan!

Iluha mo ang sambuntong kasawiang nagtalakop
Na sa iyo'y pampahirap, sa banyaga'y pampalusog:
Ang lahat mong kayamana'y kamal-kamal na naubos;
Ang lahat mong kalayaa'y sabay-sabay na natapos;
Masdan mo ang iyong lupa, dayong hukbo'y nakatanod,
Masdan mo ang iyong dagat, dayong bapor, nasa laot!

Lumuha ka kung sa puso ay nagmaliw na ang layon,
Kung ang araw sa langit mo ay lagi nang dapithapon,
Kung ang alon sa dagat mo ay ayaw nang magdaluyong,
Kung ang bulkan sa dibdib mo ay hindi man umuungol,
Kung wala nang maglalamay sa gabi ng pagbabangon,
Lumuha ka nang lumuha't ang laya mo'y nakaburol.

May araw ding ang luha mo'y masasaid, matutuyo,
May araw ding di na luha sa mata mong namumugto
Ang dadaloy, kundi apoy, at apoy na kulay dugo,
Samantalang ang dugo mo ay aserong kumukulo;
Sisigaw kang buong giting sa liyab ng libong sulo
At ang lumang tanikala'y lalagutin mo ng punlo!

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