

TOMÁS

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T O M Á S

The Journal of the
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Tomás Goes Global, Celebrates Homegrown Talents

Ralph Semino Galán

In its attempt to bolster Thomasian writing inside the campus and beyond, the first two issues of the revived *Tomás*, the official literary journal of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, devoted their pages to the works of Thomasian writers who are either faculty members, graduate students or alumni of UST. The Summer Creative Writing Workshops, conducted in 2012 and 2013 by the Resident Fellows and Guest Panelists of the UST CCWLS, led by its director Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, helped the previous editors identify undiscovered or emerging writers in the campus.

For the third issue, *Tomás* opened its doors to all writers and literary scholars. As a result, contributions from all over the Philippines and abroad poured in.

The reviewers had a hard time ranking the best works of fiction, poetry, translation and creative nonfiction from a substantial harvest of previously unpublished works by both Thomasian and non-Thomasian writers.

The opening salvo for the third issue is a novel excerpt from veteran Filipino-American fictionist Cecilia Manguerra Brainard titled “Christmas Eve, 1908.” This first chapter narrates the reentry into Ubecan society of a married couple named Jose and Fernanda, after four months of mourning, wrapped in “a cocoon of darkness and dread,” their seven-year old son Danilo having drowned in what appears to be a freak accident. Jose suspects that his son’s death may not be accidental at all (Danilo being a cautious boy) and is determined to find out the truth.

Augusto Antonio Aguila's "The Whole New Nameless Thing" is a non-realist story that chronicles the sexual awakening of Keith, a gay man, who finds himself sleeping with Nina, his "best" friend. The story is interesting because it involves, not only a description of the emotional upheaval the main character undergoes the morning after the act, but also a surreal dialogue between Keith and his owl-shaped alarm clock, which gets interrupted by one of the rectangular patterns of the curtains in his bedroom.

Rogelio Braga's short story, "Mga," depicts the interrelated lives of characters residing in a city, where a sweaty, swaying pachyderm suddenly appears in the middle of EDSA, a woman starts to become invisible, one body part at a time, and where familial relationships are torn apart by forced temporary migration. Braga's fiction manages to capture the peculiarity of current Filipino society: haunted by fantasies and lingering pre-colonial beliefs, and mauled by existing transnational filiations.

Couched in contemporary Filipino and peppered with dry humor, U Z. Eliserio's "Tungkol sa Aso," is philosophical metafiction Pinoy style (the narrator talks about a certain person also called, interestingly enough, "U") who has dog ownership for its ostensible subject, but can also be about the fictionist's attempt to grapple with language, literature, romantic love, pop culture, or maybe, even the very nature of existence itself. The fictional U's life apparently depicts the increasing alienation of the postmodern subject in a Third World country greatly affected by what Fredric Jameson describes as the "cultural logic of late capitalism."

"Mga Dili Angay Hikalimtan/ Necessary Memories," Merlie M. Alunan's suite of poems in English and poems translated into English from the original Cebuano, astonishes and astounds with the way violence in its myriad forms is rendered in poetic language both lyrical and narrative. The last poem, "Stories," recounts the folk narratives circulating in Ormoc City after tropical storm Uring devastated it with heavy rainfall and flashfloods. In the light of super typhoon Yolanda that flattened and inundated Tacloban City with killer winds and storm surges, the last lines of Alunan's poem terrify with their prescience: "Tell stories, tell stories to one another,/ stories of one thing or the other,/ oh, but not the sea, never tell the sea—/ the sea never remembers."

R. Zamora Linmark's "Five from the Best Picture Series" has a cosmopolitan, upbeat rhythm, the poems delving into contemporary popular culture, in particular Hollywood films and celebrities. Linmark's signature verbal wordplay is highly evident as he deploys paranomasia with relish, the punning

most visible in “Midnight in Woody,” an abecedarian poem that seems to be a mock paean to filmmaker, producer, writer and actor Woody Allen.

Romulo P. Baquiran, Jr.’s suite, “Limang Anggulo ng Pag-ibig,” opens with a euphoric initial encounter with the beloved, then tapers off quietly, with a poetic voice that is hurting and grateful at the same time for the vagaries that romantic love proffers to the lover. Baquiran seems to suggest in “Dulo,” that the lover must always be intractable, for it is only he who has access to paradise, however fleeting. “Ikaw na tunay na mangingibig/ ang nakauunawa sa paraisong nalikha/ ng munting yugtong iyon ng kasiyahan.”

Joselito D. Delos Reyes’s suite, “Huling Tao,” which includes “Sa Madadaling Salita,” the poem that won him the 2013 Makata ng Taon award from the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino, deals with time: time spent while in transit, time that has been lost and mentally freeze-framed as projects that never came to be, and time as embodied by an aging father. To wrestle with time is a never-ending human quest, like the search for meaning. But Delos Reyes approaches the subject with that particular mixture of courage, naiveté, and wisdom, which as the poem “Alulod” suggests, can best be found in the child who bathes in the rain: “Hindi ako/ Tatahan. Hindi kailanman/ Pagsasawaan ang ulan./ Hindi alintana ang ragasa/ Ng lagnat na papasabalat,/ Ng luhanang papasamata,/ Ng ubong papasapulmo.”

The critic Harold Bloom famously proclaimed that Shakespeare invented the human. Gelacio Guillermo’s translations of selected passages from *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*, may be read as a reaction to that particularly hegemonic assertion of Western influence. In “Limang Salin mula kay Shakespeare,” Guillermo invents his own Shakespeare: a politicized bard, one whose verses are firmly grounded in the immediate, and one who is aware that there is more to existence than mere being, that real death is being passive while injustices run rampant: “Kumilos, o manahimik, ‘yan ang/ tanong:/ Ano’ng mas marangal, tiisin/ Ang mga tudla ng karumal-dumal na kapalaran,/ O lusungin ang dagat ng mga gulo,/ At sa pagbaka’y sugpuin sila?” (*Hamlet*)

Jaymee T. Siao’s “Alter/Natives: Talismanic and Healing Aspects of Tattoos in Northern Philippines” chronicles her weeklong sojourn to Buscalan in Kalinga Province, where she had herself tattooed as part of her personal (re-) search for the magical and curative qualities of traditional tattooing practices in the Cordilleras. Siao’s essay is written in a style that invites comparison with John McPhee, in its combination of solid research with imaginative evocation

of her experiences amongst the *Butbut*, the indigenous group of Buscalan.

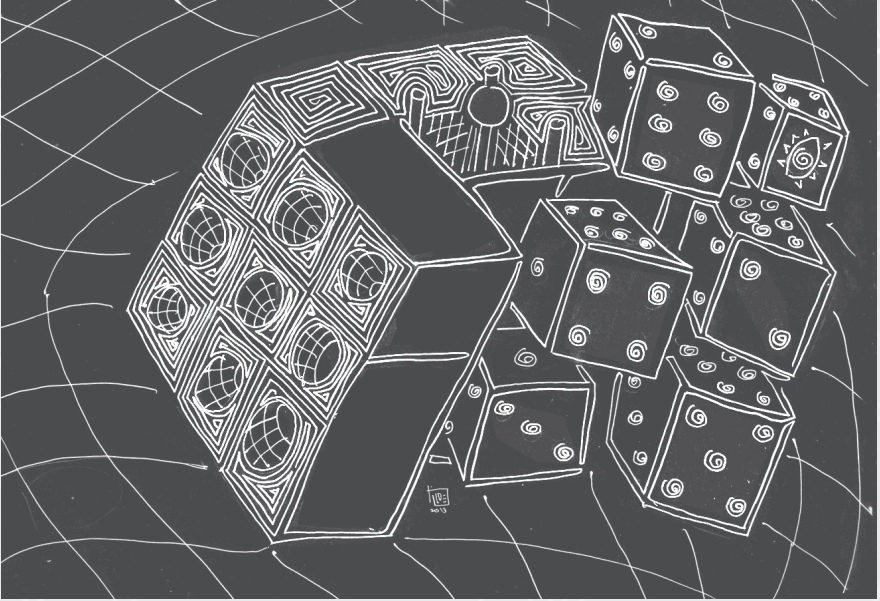
Three touching memoirs dealing with family are offered by Jenny Ortuoste, Ferdinand M. Lopez and John Jack G. Wigley. A precocious girl's vivid recollection of her troubled but enchanted childhood is rendered beautifully in Ortuoste's "Snakes in the Cane," creative nonfiction filled with telling details of the slightly eccentric relatives who adopted her in Bacolod City while her parents were on the brink of legal separation. Ortuoste's narrative rises to lyrical heights even if the events she recounts are quite quotidian, the magical and mysterious, after all, being the provenance of the very young.

The oftentimes confusing and problematic relationship between a gay son and a straight "absentee" OFW father, who is by turns silently reclusive or violently angry, is the subject of Lopez's "Daddy." This piece is both unsentimental and sympathetic, the narrator's effort to understand the motives of his male progenitor through the years successfully bridging, in the end, the yawning gender gap between them, despite the initial differences in their sensibilities and perceptions of the world.

"Mother's Passing" is Wigley's account of the circumstances leading to his beloved maternal parent's demise, after succumbing to, not one, but two degenerative diseases, an event that triggers a distant memory of happier times: his mother beaming with pride as the narrator graduates from elementary school as class valedictorian. Wigley's description of the pain and panic he and his close relatives experienced as they attempted to keep her alive, and later transported her body from a public hospital in Manila to Angeles City, is profoundly moving.

Levine Andro Hernandez Lao's "Pagbabalik sa Bukid," is a modern rendition of the often told tale of "the return of the native." But while showcasing the rural as idyllic, he does not shy away from self-reflexive critique: "[M]aingay ba para sa akin ang aming reunion? Oo, may pagkabaduy, korni, jologs, at maingay." Nonetheless, he still affirms his allegiance to his hometown, albeit with a certain ambivalence: "Maingay, pero hindi pa naman ako naiirita. Hindi ko pa sigurado. Pagbibigyan ko pa rin ang reunion na ito."

This most recent offering of *Tomás* reaffirms the importance of creative writing in UST. The healthy dialogue between Thomasian and non-Thomasian writers in the pages of this issue signals the return of the University to the forefront of literary production.



-TILDE

fiction

Christmas Eve, 1908: *A Novel Excerpt*

Cecilia Manguerra Brainard

Time had taken on a rubber quality, stretching here and there, never fixed despite the insistent tick-tocking of the Grandfather clock in their living room. Jose had lost all notion of what day or time it was, and he slept and awoke at strange hours. It was Fernanda who declared that they should “join the world.” Earlier that day she had taken out her pearl jewelry and gold hair comb and she had put on a long skirt and a crisp hand-embroidered blouse of gossamer pineapple fabric. He was surprised by this, her fixing of herself, her declaration that she was ready to relinquish her mourning. For over four months, they had shared a cocoon of darkness and dread, confining themselves to their house, avoiding people, even his parents, sending out their servant, their sole umbilical cord to the world. During that time, they said very little to each other, but they shared a bond that was to some degree like a balm.

Before they left their house on Colon Street, Fernanda threw a shawl over her shoulders. She was in black, stark as a fruit bat, and the blackness of her clothing made her skin appear chalk-white. He had always found her fair skin attractive, but this December night, it was unearthly; she could have been a fearsome enchanted being from the forest.

When they entered the church doors, the sacristans were scurrying about, lighting the candles in the tall silver candelabra on the altar. They were early but the church was almost full. The pews and benches were occupied by women and children. The mothers, grandmothers, and spinster aunts waved at friends and neighbors, kissed relatives on the cheeks, talked about food they had abandoned back home, the half-done

chicken and fish rellenos, the pastel de lengua, the piquant goat stew, and Chinese hams, which they had entrusted to their servants to finish and serve on silver platters—they worried about their Noche Buena meal after the midnight Mass. They admired the altar with its seventeenth century silver retablo that glowed silvery-gray. The children, whose skin looked raw from having been scrubbed clean, wore shiny taffetas, fine cotton, and lace. The girls looked like miniatures of their mothers, with long skirts and loose blouses, and they too wore heirloom filigree jewelry; they even had tortoise combs with gold and pearls anchored on top of their heads, like coronets. The older ones searched for their friends, arms flapping upward when they caught sight of them, and thrusting their chests out, hoped their new clothes would be noticed and admired. The young ones wriggled about near their mothers, some of them gumming homemade sweets, their attention focused on the nativity set on the right side of the altar. They stared at the manger and figurines of Mary, Joseph, the angel, the three kings with their camels, some shepherds with their sheep. It was the empty crib they studied most of all, with a hankering since they had been waiting for weeks for the Child Jesus to be placed in it. A girl with a shrill voice talked about her dream of Mary appearing with the Baby in her arms, and how Mary had handed the Baby for her to hold. There was laughter, then sudden silence.

The chattering ceased when they entered the pew; he didn't have to lift his head to know that all eyes were riveted on them. Staring at the tiled floor beneath him, he told Fernanda he would join the men outside, and without waiting for her answer he slipped away. Before leaving the church, he turned and caught sight of Fernanda talking to the girl with the shrill voice. He furrowed his brow and wondered how she could carry on as if nothing were wrong.

The men huddled under the centenarian acacia tree, smoking their cigars to ward off the night chill. They did not share the giddiness of the women and children. They had carried the brunt of the expenses for the new clothes, shoes, decorations, food, and holiday riff-raff, and they dreaded the financial consequences in mid-January. The same thing happened when Jose joined them: the men grew quiet; they paused, shifted their weight, and some coughed as if clearing their throats. Finally someone mentioned the new electric lights being put up by the Americans, what

a nuisance, he said, all the poles and lines scattered on the streets, what a mess. It was all small talk. Another brought up the ongoing legal battle between the Americans and the religious orders over the Friar Lands. It wasn't right for the priests to own all that land, the man said, the Americans are trying to get the land back for the people. Imagine, they paid the Vatican seven million dollars for the Friar Lands. Someone else mentioned the shenanigans going on with the Friar Lands, how, if you knew the right people, you could buy huge chunks of land cheaply.

Jose knew the embarrassment was all about him. They were saying: We don't know what to say to you; we're sorry you lost your only son, sorry that you didn't have to spend on clothes and toys for him; we have no idea what it feels to have a son drown and we are very sorry for you. To make them feel at ease, Jose joined their chitchat and threw in some remark about Father Zobel still fighting in court for the Augustinians' huge tracks of city land.

He was their parish priest, this Father Zobel. Jose had gotten the information about him from Fernanda who worked at the rectory as the bookkeeper. Fernanda started working there a year ago, shortly after Danilo could extend his right arm over his head and touch his left ear, proving he was six years old, and qualifying him for kindergarten. After school, Danilo walked to the rectory and waited for his mother to finish work. It was a perfect arrangement; idyllic in fact, until the body of Danilo was found on the seashore. Fernanda pulled her hair when she saw the boy's body, and Jose fainted when he found out what had happened. The story that finally emerged and which was circulated was that Fernanda had been working in the rectory office, and Danilo had been with her, but growing bored, he left to play outside. He must have been chasing a dog or cat along the seawall when he lost his balance and fell and drowned. It was a simple story, straight to the point. People hated talking about such tragedies because they had their own sons and grandsons and the idea of losing a seven-year old son exceeded their imagination. A one-year-old or two-year-old could succumb to dengue or typhus and die just like that, and mothers had learned to protect their hearts by not falling too much in love with the little ones; but a seven-year old was marked to survive. Him you could love. So beyond the official story of how Danilo died, nothing more was said.

When the church bells sounded the beginning of the High Mass, Jose returned to the side altar where Fernanda knelt. A long black lace veil covered her short hair; after the discovery of the dead child and the hair-pulling incident, a neighbor had kindly cut Fernanda's hair to make the ends even. It was very short, like the French Jeanne d'Arc haircut, new in fashion but still alien to most Filipinos.

The church had become more crowded still, but they were close to the main altar and he could see the three priests and altar boys clearly. Fernanda kept her eyes closed most of the time, and now and then, she would heave a deep sigh, and, pretending she was arranging the veil on her head, would wipe away her tears. He wished she would stop; he wished they had stayed home in the first place.

The people were praying, giving thanks perhaps for the good fortune that had come their way that year 1908—how fortunate for them—asking God for this and that for the coming year, but communicating with God in any case, something he could not do, not now. Father Zobel was one of the three priests concelebrating the Mass. He and the other priests wore vestments embroidered with silver thread—elaborate designs of flowers and scrolls. They looked imposing, Father Zobel most of all, with his aquiline nose and Hapsburg jaw that reminded Jose of Spanish conquistadores sailing on galleons; Father Zobel too had arrived in the Philippines on a galleon. He had traveled far, from Burgos, Spain; to Guanajuato, Mexico; to Manila; to Carcar; and now Ubec.

The scent of candles and incense, the rising-kneeling-sitting in church, the crush of people in that damp stone church made his nostrils constrict, made it impossible to breathe. The four months since his son died was the Calvary of his life. He tried to think of the Mass, of his surroundings, but the suffocating sensation was what was foremost in his mind. When Fernanda got up to go to the Communion Rail, he whispered, "I'll see you back home." And he waded through the crowd and left the church. He could not receive Holy Communion; he was never particularly religious but like other Ubecans he went to Mass on Sundays and Holy days of obligation. That night he did not want to be in that church; he did not want to be near a God who could take away a child just like that.

The cool wind on his face was a blessing, and he took a deep breath, grateful to be rid of the scent of incense and melted wax. Some candle

vendors rushed to him, holding out their candles, promising to dance a prayer for him; he shook his head. He walked past an old woman with a cart selling roasted chestnuts. Two men held clusters of balloons, waiting patiently for the children to be released from the church. He hurried on, toward his house on Colon Street, away from the giddy happiness. But when he approached the two-story building, which was cloaked in purgatorial darkness—not a single lantern hung on the windows—his palms became damp and his breath quickened.

Last year, he, Fernanda and Danilo had placed paper lanterns shaped like stars above every window. At night, they had lit the candles in the lanterns and people walking past Colon Street looked and smiled and knew that a happy family lived in this house. He remembered how he and Danilo had sat at the kitchen table to make the lanterns. He guided the boy's hands to show him how to hold the sticks together. He bound the sticks, formed the frame for the star, and he cut the fine Japanese paper and glued them over the frame. Together they cut the fringes for the bottom ends of the star. How amused he had been at the serious child who pressed his tongue thoughtfully against his upper lip as he used the scissors to snip four-inch strips. When the star lanterns were hanging above the windows, the boy got candles from his mother and he and Jose placed them inside the lanterns. Jose lit them, and they turned off all the other house lights, and they basked in pride at the wondrous stars hanging above every window of their house. Passersby paused to admire their work, and they waved back at them.

Three sharp sounds of a bugle startled him, and he quickly glanced at the Plaza Independencia, wondering what the Americans were up to. The American military occupied the old Spanish fort which stood at the far end of the plaza. The gas lamps were lit there and colorful star lanterns and garlands decorated the grand stand. It would be better there. He walked toward the Plaza. Last May, when the school children were on holiday, the American military band played in the evenings, rousing military songs, a bit of jazz. This memory made him feel hopeful, but then a gust of wind blew, bringing with it the tangy smell of the sea, and he remembered once more that his son had drowned in this sea.

It was impossible. He could not think of anything else. By the time he got to the seashore, Fernanda and countless people surrounded the boy who lay on the ground looking like he was asleep, except for the God-awful gash on his head. A little boy, seven years old. He struggled not to think.

He found a bench at the far end of the plaza close to the fort. The gates were closed; the place was quiet. He was away from the Christmas levity that was driving him crazy. He sat down. Here perhaps at least for a while, he could rest. He looked up at the stars and tried to find peace. The hooting of an owl startled him; owls were rare in the city. The owl continued with its mournful sounds and he felt his eyes well with tears. This surprised him because he had not cried for his son, for his loss, and now finally, he found himself weeping with abandon. It was the kind of weeping that he sometimes did as a child after his father had beaten him. His father was not cruel but he was a strict man who used the belt liberally. Sometimes the injustice of the beatings would cause the late-night crying, silently, so his parents would not hear him, although the tears were abundant.

The wild ringing of the bells announced the end of the midnight Mass and the raucous sound drove him to cover his ears. His little bit of peace had ended. He imagined people rushing out of the church, eager to go home for their family celebration—the Noche Buena meal, where they would have roasted suckling pigs on their tables, and children would quarrel over who would get the ears and tails of the pigs. Last year, Danilo had gotten the pig’s tail and he had happily paraded it around. How happy the child had been.

“Papa,” the child had said last year, “I want a bird. A black one, the kind that talks.” They had seen a man selling a hill mynah, with lustrous black feathers and someone had trained it to say, “I remember... I remember...” Danilo had wanted the bird. Jose told him he’d get him one when he was older; but now he was gone.

Jose shook his head, but the bells kept on ringing. He remembered the mournful tolling of these same bells at his son’s funeral—how small his casket had been. The horror engulfed him once more. He felt ugly and powerless. He tried to compose himself, afraid to lose himself, afraid he’d become useless once again. He had little memory of what had happened. Someone, he could not recall who, had found him in the city hall to tell him that the child’s body had been discovered. Jose could not remember the details after that. People said he fainted; people talked about the wake, the funeral, the burial, the forty days of prayers. What he remembered most was the silence when he and Fernanda were in their dark house.

He also remembered Danilo’s room, which they left exactly as it had

been the day he drowned. Neither he nor Fernanda had the courage to remove a single item from the room that had assumed an aura of sacredness. It was as if leaving the room exactly as it had been kept Danilo alive; it was as if he would still come bounding into his room for the wooden spinning top or the mechanical monkey that would play the drums and which had amused him greatly.

Hands shaking, he pulled out his handkerchief from his pocket, wiped away his tears and blew his nose. When finally the church bells stopped, he could hear the soft humming of the crickets. This was a sound that used to comfort him in his youth. The crickets would come at the end of the day, when he and his parents were all together, sitting outside in their garden, watching the gardener sweep up leaves. He would hunt for grasshoppers or beetles to play with. His parents would talk about their work or what went on in their community, because in his world everyone knew what went on. There was something comforting and at the same time hateful about being constantly scrutinized by everyone.

The crickets suddenly became silent and the silence tugged at his mind: there was something about his son's death that he couldn't grasp. Danilo knew never to go to the seawall by himself. Even though he was only seven, he was like a little grownup with a lot of common sense. He was not a risk taker, and often when father and son played, Jose had to coax the child: "Come, come try out your new bicycle, you'll be fine," or: "Come swim with me; I will hold you, you will be safe." But in the end the boy died of drowning. Or perhaps it was from hitting his head on the rocks. Nothing was clear. The vagueness stretched out like the long and implacable night.

Jose took a deep breath and rose from the bench. He never asked why the boy was playing alone at the seawall. He never asked why, shortly after Fernanda started working at the rectory, the boy became very quiet, almost like a mute. He never asked about his wife's silence too, her evasiveness. He never asked why, when they had been happy before—their only concern had been financial since Jose was starting his law practice—why, a strange feeling entered their house, like a fungus growing in the silence and quiet and dark. It was time to get answers.

A mangy dog crossed his path and bounded toward a pile of garbage. The paper star lanterns and garlands that decorated the kiosk fluttered with the breeze as he headed back home.

The Whole New Nameless Thing

Augusto Antonio Aguila

Nina was sleeping soundly with her head placed gently on Keith's chest. She seemed to be at peace with the whole world, even after the lingering memory of that dreadful accident. Keith was wide awake. He couldn't sleep. He looked at the big, orange, owl-shaped wall clock, its wings embracing its tummy like it did not want to let go of its long lost lover. It was something Keith got from last year's kris kringle. It was three in the morning. The owl was staring at him, accusing him, asking him why, telling him to stop, and not to let what happened happen again. He loathed those big eyes that mocked him. Keith felt a little guilty and he didn't like the feeling. He always knew what he was doing until last night. He attempted to avoid the owl's eyes but he could not. He looked away once a while, trying to fool himself, deciding to concentrate on the various geometric shapes on his curtains that swayed in a graceful, slightly hypnotic but repetitive dance, small triangles suffocating inside bigger triangles, desiring to escape, semi-circles resembling Pacman devouring tiny stars and squares, and a lonely, solitary rectangle that looked lost and unsettled in the cheerful design.

"Whoever made it probably got tired of it or something?" Keith thought. But no matter how hard he tried, his eyes would always revert back to the ghastly owl. "Who do you think you are, Mr. Owl? Damn pan-opticon!"

He was breathing heavily, not from his nose but from his mouth, a sign of nervousness, an admission of guilt, an indication of an inexplicable

excitement. His body was tense and felt a little bruised after the fierce love-making. It was the first time he had felt that way. Making love was the most natural thing for Keith. After the countless times he had used it for that purpose, he knew for the longest time that his body was made for it. In fact, he had lost track of the time that he had writhed, hissed, moaned, gasped, swirled in bed.

Keith could still feel Nina's tears that had dried on his neck and nipples, her ample breasts safely ensconced on his side. Her left arm, still damp and moist, was on his thigh, just below his testicles; her hand hanging with the middle and ring fingers gently but lifelessly touching the crumpled sheets. Her left leg, soft and womanly, rubbed Keith's right leg when she budged. Nina would move and twitch a little sometimes, like she had gotten tired of her position, but eventually her head would smoothly, automatically land on Keith's chest, her breasts on his side, her arm over his thigh, her fingers standing as if on tiptoe on the bed sheets, feeling secure and protected. Keith never thought that last night would happen. He had no idea that Nina harbored feelings for him.

"If she only knew?" Keith thought.

"Now you're in big trouble! Aren't you ashamed of yourself? What if Sam finds out?" Mr. Owl spoke. Keith had neither time nor the patience for this guilt trip.

"Not my fault. She was lonely. I had to be there. Besides, Sam doesn't have to know..." Keith defended himself.

"Oh really? C'mon Keith, you can do better than that. I expected more from you. Seducing your best friend... how could you? Poor Sam!" Mr. Owl was teasing him.

"I didn't seduce her. It just happened. It is finished. It ends here... now." Keith wanted to put an end to the surreal conversation he was having with his wall clock.

"The usual excuses... tsk..tsk... So now you're going to be this liar... You always taught the truth in your classes, didn't you? Are you saying that you're starting to become a fraud this time huh, Keith?"

Mr. Owl was pissing him off.

"Truth is relative baby. It depends on your interpretation... your version of it..."

“You can fool yourself Keithy baby, but you know very well that you’re walking on a tightrope. One thing will lead to another and another and another. This will happen again and again and again. And you’re still with Sam. It would be so damn shocking. Aren’t you even shocked right now, huh, Keithy baby?” Mr. Owl was spot on, hitting the mark, penetrating Keith’s very core.

“Look, I don’t need your opinion! I can handle this myself. You know me!” Keith was getting livid.

“Oooh, what a temper! C’mon give it to me Keith. Say it, say it, baby. The last time I saw you like this was when you caught Sam sleeping with someone else. When was that...eight months ago? One of those car salesmen...” Mr. Owl jeered.

“Let’s not talk about Sam. I’m in a really strange situation right now,” Keith admitted.

“Finally! I can’t believe that you’re actually admitting it so easily. Not up for a good fight, huh?”

“Okay, okay, I know what can happen, but I don’t want to think about it at the moment. She needs me, okay!” Keith knew he was losing the battle. He wished he could throw his stupid wall clock that kept on messing with his mind.

“You know what I think, Keith?” Mr. Owl asked.

“No I don’t, and I don’t care!” Keith was gaining momentum.

“You have no choice. You have to listen to me,” Mr. Owl gloated. That’s what you get when you receive a wise and glamorous owl like me on Christmas day. You know I won’t stop or just let you just get off the hook so easily, which is the reason why we owls are right up there in the hierarchical structure of Class Aves! I mean, who cares about doves? They’re mere workhorses scouting for leaves, doing all the legwork, like sending secret messages for lazy humans. And what could be worse than being demoted to the level of homing pigeon? Such a degrading name in the bird taxonomy! And what do I care about idiotic birds whose flight route depends on human handclaps? They don’t have a mind of their own. Well, with turkeys, it’s a different story. They’re much nobler. They’re meant to be slaughtered for big feasts, the pigs’ counterpart in our world. Let’s not even talk about seagulls! Ugh, the horrible sound they make! No sophistication at all. We owls rule! That’s just how it is in Birdworld! Oh

and those hopeless, generic sparrows who do nothing but whine all their lives about freedom, but die in captivity anyway, mangled and hideously dyed in many colors, like a rainbow, or a parakeet, or a poor man's peacock, immortalized in a kitschy protest song sung in rallies staged by the poor and underprivileged, eeewww... Owls are the..."

"Cut the stupid crap, you one hundred-twenty peso worth of junk!" Keith was back on track again.

"Sorry Keith, but I'm an owl, the symbol of wisdom and intelligence! Like the goddess Minerva. Her Greek name Athena is a lot better than Minerva which sounds like a name of some washed-up-hag. Ooops, I hope she doesn't hear me, haha. Sorry madame! Well, of all the birds, she chose us owls to complete her royal regalia, while you pathetic humans are nothing but the gods' playthings, a little notch higher than those chessboard pieces!"

"This is going nowhere. So now it's about you? I've been awake all night wondering about all of this and all you do is further mess up my already fucked up mind!" Keith was losing his nerve again.

"The problem with you Keith is that you have no sense of humor. Why don't you take a look at yourself, Keith? Since I am the only one who is genuinely wise here, which is not true for most owls...I might as well tell you that you shouldn't have taken advantage of Nina's loneliness, her pain, her trauma, her tragedy, her weakness..." Mr. Owl declaimed.

"Don't be overly dramatic. You are not very convincing. You sound like a second-rate orator..." Keith avoided the owl's glaring stare.

"You don't even love her Keith! You love Sam!" Mr. Owl declared with firmness and finality.

"I know, but like I've said, it just happened. I don't even know why it happened," Keith whimpered, a sure sign of defeat.

"A cliché, nothing but a cliché. You sneaky little devil, preying on a woman's...ahem. My God, your dusty room is making me cough... I mean, your best friend's grief." Mr. Owl knew he was winning.

Keith knew that the owl from limbo would have him go down on his knees to say sorry, to admit his guilt, to wallow in his sappy misery, like melodramatic actors in redundant soap operas on primetime television.

"I didn't have any idea that she has feelings for me. We are friends.

How on earth would I know? I hadn't the slightest idea...for seven years ... You can't be serious, Owly?"

"Don't call me Owly, it sounds like I'm a member of a no-name boy-band from Bulgaria, the one who cannot sing..." Mr. Owl corrected Keith. "Anyway, I can't believe I'm hearing this! I just want to scream out loud, screech my screechiest screech, let out my loudest guffaw, roll my eyes and tongue, and play dead on the floor like your Shih-Tzu, Sam's gift to you on your second-year anniversary, who, may the god of Dogdom or Dogville or Dogladeeda ladeedah, bless her soul, died eating a roach, but of course I wouldn't do that because of the hierarchy in Birdland remember? I have a reputation to maintain and besides I have to live up to my owlness," Mr. Owl added.

"Seriously, I had no idea ... It was..." Keith scratched his left nipple.

"Stop scratching that! You look like a sore porn actor who had lost his job! What do you mean you had no idea? You are only trying to convince yourself that you are not aware of her feelings for you. Try to go back, Keith, to that time when... Don't worry, I'm not gonna be your fucking psychiatrist here. Do you remember those little seemingly harmless gifts, the pies, those heavenly pecan and walnut pies she made you which you shared with your dear Sam, or giving you those cds of the artists that you like: PJ Harvey, David Bowie, Dido, D' Sound, the Vengaboys. That one was your true epic fail Keith. What were you thinking? The Vengaboys? Puhleeeeeease! You used to have such good taste Keith. I still haven't gotten over that Vengaboys episode. I almost ended up brain dead everytime you played their album, and my God, how you pathetically gyrated to that song "The Vengaboys is Coming." And what about that expensive watch she gave you on your birthday last year; or those sweet, corny "I miss you, take care, love you friend" text messages she sends you regularly; or those meaningful pecks on your cheeks; or when she fixes your wavy hair when it covers your face? Don't tell me you didn't notice all those gestures and the fact that she hasn't entertained any suitor until now. Haven't you noticed Keith, even her parents love you!" Mr. Owl delivered his litany in a single breath.

"But what can I do? Maybe I'm just plain irresistible, hehe," Keith joked, forgetting that he was having a serious discussion with his clever wall clock.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Keith! Admit it! You liked the attention she was giving you all these years. She was just waiting for you to make that move which you never made. So *she* made that big move on you last night. And you finally gave in. Only because you felt responsible, to comfort her, to temporarily take her out of her misery.” Mr. Owl was just stating the facts.

“Are you saying that I’m just using her? Whoa! You’re getting out of line here, Owly!”

“Am I, Keith? Or are you just afraid to face your true self, who you really are? You flirt with Nina. You’re with Sam. Nina doesn’t know that Sam exists. You tell Sam that Nina’s your best friend. How convenient for you, and you set it up beautifully. You’re like the devil himself, all helpful, like a breath of fresh air, giving her false hopes after a big life tragedy. And you think that nothing will change after this life-changing experience? Well at least for her it is a life-changing experience, finally making love with the man she had loved since day one. You don’t have much time, and again please stop calling me Owly. You sound like you’re pronouncing the word ‘oily’ with a fake Irish accent.”

“I don’t want to do this anymore! Shut up, Owly! I want to go to sleep!” Keith tried to close his eyes feigning sleep.

“Wow, admitting defeat this early, eh? You can’t evade me. I will always be here on the wall casting a knowing and suspicious look. You can’t escape me because I’m the voice in your head. So you better listen and listen well.” Mr. Owl was coming in for the kill.

“Mr. Owl, will you please stop bothering Mr. Keith? He’s confused right now. He’s a good man. He would know how to handle it. He needs more time. He will come up with something, wouldn’t you Mr. Keith,” said one of the lonely, solitary rectangles on the curtain.

The soft female voice interrupted the mindfuck Keith was having with his wall clock. It took a while before Keith and Mr. Owl could say anything. They were both surprised at this strange intrusion from a curtain design.

“I’ve been listening to your conversation and I felt the need to say something because you’re such a bully Mr. Owl,” the soft voice coming from the rectangle meekly said.

“And may I know, who the hell are you?” Mr. Owl asked the pink rectangle.

Keith couldn't believe that a rectangle could have a say in his present situation, but he welcomed it because she seemed to be on his side. The voice sounded like that of a girl, so maybe the rectangle was a she. Although Mr. Owl had a man's voice, Keith had a very strong feeling he was gay. His bitchiness was a dead giveaway.

"Well, as you see, I'm a rectangle. And I care for Mr. Keith here," the rectangle said.

"I know you're a rectangle! What else would you be, a trapezoid? What makes you think you have a say in this matter? You're just a product of one man's silly imagination sewed mindlessly on cheap cloth. I would rather talk to those other shapes—those cute little stars and those fidgety squares and that formidable semi-circle acting all motherly to her stars and squares, and that oh so macho triangle locking the smaller triangle in some kind of erotic embrace. But of course I couldn't do that because they are busy having a life, which obviously you don't have Ms. Rectal... I mean Rectangle. Pardon the slip, haha. Well, at least you serve as an inspiration for the millions of tables in the world, you know: work tables, dining tables, and don't forget coffins dearie!" Mr. Owl knew exactly where it would hurt.

"And money bills too, diplomas, shelves for all those wonderful books out there, and..." Ms. Rectangle expressed the significance of her shape.

"And most importantly, a lonely, solitary patch on a curtain!" Mr. Owl concluded, insultingly.

"We should give Mr. Keith a chance to sort this out on his own," Ms. Rectangle said.

"No! He should sort this out right now! Stay out of this conversation, Rectabelle! You are in no way part of it."

"I think she has a point, Owly," Keith found it amusing that he and Mr. Owl were not alone after all.

The two went on arguing with Mr. Owl pushing his arrogance a little too far, and Ms. Rectangle doing the Miss Goodie Two Shoes act. Mr. Owl could not stand the competition. Ms. Rectangle would not just give up mediating for Keith.

Keith just let the two bicker for a while. He was thinking about the events that happened before he and Nina ended up in bed together. She

had called him early in the morning two weeks ago. He had slept quite late that night because he had attended a high school get-together which was held at a batch-mate's pad. He only drank a few bottles of beer but the headache that he had when he awoke was so bad that it was cutting through his skull. When his mobile phone rang, Keith couldn't believe that someone was disturbing him in his sleep, and worse still, the incessant ringing interrupted his sexy dream of making fierce love with a faceless stranger. He was tempted to put his phone on silent mode and just answer it later, but when he saw that it was Nina calling, he changed his mind and answered it.

Keith couldn't make out what Nina was saying because her words were lost in her sniffing, sobbing and stammering. "Help me!" and "I don't know what to do," were the only words he understood. He told her to calm down and encouraged her to tell him exactly what happened, but she just kept on crying. Her voice sounded hoarse and coarse. Keith has never heard or seen Nina cry. This was all very new to him. The Nina that he knew was always happy, optimistic, and full of life. The voice on the phone seemed to him a different person. He asked her where she was and Nina told him that she was at Mary Immaculate Hospital in Mandaluyong. He was wondering why Nina was in some hospital at a very unearthly hour. He suddenly panicked. "Please, come here," Nina pleaded. He told her to wait for him and not to worry.

He put the phone down, turned off the aircon, took his night clothes off and placed them on the chair near his bed. He decided he would deal with his laundry later. "What could be wrong?" Keith thought. He was not used to rushing. Just the thought of rushing and beating deadlines and being late for an appointment kind of paralyzed him because he couldn't think straight when things happened too fast. He loved to take his time. He usually made good decisions when he took his time, but this was one occasion that required him to rush. He had no choice.

He went to the bathroom to take a quick bath. The heater wasn't working and that bothered him because the cold water felt like it was burning his skin and melting his bones. He kept on saying "shit" and "fuck" as the water touched his skin. He eventually survived the tormenting bath. He took a towel, dried himself, and wrapped it around his waist. He had to think fast. He decided to wear his favorite faded Levis' which he had bought on sale three years ago and a gray t-shirt. He loved everything gray,

which his friends, including Nina, found strange but amusing. He thought white made people look fat and black made them look thin even if they weren't, but gray always told the truth and besides it emphasized his chest, abs and biceps. Keith was proud of his gym-toned body, a product of his regular workout. He combed his wavy hair, sprayed perfume behind his ears, put his mobile phone inside his pocket, and checked his wallet to see if he still had some money. He had more than three thousand pesos, which he thought was enough.

He opened the fridge to get something to eat and found some donuts and milk. He ate a chocolate-flavored donut and drank a glass of water.

Then, he brushed his teeth and gargled bitter mouthwash. He checked himself in the mirror before leaving and he noticed that his eyes looked droopy. It was probably due to lack of sleep. He promised himself he would get some sleep later.

He went out of his condo unit and locked the door. He turned the door knob again and again just to make sure it was locked. "Damn!" Keith hated it when he wasn't sure. He thought it made him look stupid.

The elevator opened, and inside were two buffed males in their mid twenties who were both wearing gray shirts and jeans just like Keith. Keith wanted to laugh out loud because the three of them looked like they were going to perform in an amateur singing contest, but he refrained from doing so because he didn't want to offend people early in the morning.

In less than a minute, they were in the lobby. The two men left the building ahead of him. He noticed that aside from the security guard on duty, there was an old man sitting on the couch reading a thick book. Keith wanted to find out what the old man was reading because he loved books and always felt happy when he saw people reading, but he was in a hurry. He would probably ask the old man some other time. He had this habit of checking out what people were reading wherever he went and people's reading materials gave him an idea of their personality and their mental aptitude. Once in a while he would start a conversation by complimenting people on what they read even if they were reading trashy books. The classics and critical theory could mean intellectual sophistication, pretension or hubris. Inspirational books meant they were desperate to find meaning in their meaningless existence and were probably trying to convince themselves that life was actually worth living. Pulp fiction, like those corny

novels about wizards, vampires and perverse and kinky lovers, showed that they just wanted other people to think that they actually read. Reading self-help books was a clear indication that they experienced having some kind of epiphany that nobody really cared about and that people were left to their own devices in the end. Comic books suggested a limitation in terms of vocabulary and comprehension, not to mention lack of imagination. Magazines meant they were just plain dumb, period.

His mind returned to his best friend Nina. And suddenly, sick with worry about her condition. He went out of the building and hailed a taxi. He looked at his watch. It was 4 a.m. He couldn't believe he was able to do all that in an hour. It was a new experience for him.

He met Nina at the emergency room. She was beautiful even without makeup, and her tear-stained face reminded him of Sayuri's ethereal countenance in the film version of the Arthur Golden novel *Memoirs of a Geisha*. She embraced him, placed her face on his chest, wetting in the process his t-shirt with her tears, and sobbed quietly.

"They're dead Keith!" Nina said. She was referring to her parents. He gathered that they had died in a terrible car accident. They were declared dead on arrival at the hospital. Surprisingly, the driver survived the accident, but the doctors said that he would not be able to walk for the rest of his life.

He helped Nina take care of hospital matters. He talked with the doctors, who, for some reason, charged only minimal fees. He also talked with the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and requested that she approve Nina's leave of absence, which the Dean did. He settled matters with the insurance people concerning the wake, the funeral, and the plot of land where Nina's parents would be laid to rest. He was able to think clearly because he was in control and he had enough time to accomplish all the things that needed his attention. Nina thanked him profusely for all his help and told him that she would have been a total wreck without him. Keith felt it was his duty. He was her best friend.

During the wake, he made himself useful. After work, he would go to the supermarket located near the University to buy groceries: boxes of three-in-one coffee and chamomile tea, brownies, cheese cupcakes, mixed nuts, sugar biscuits, and a variety of sodas in cans. Nina would always smile at him and kiss him on his cheek whenever she saw him enter the funeral

home, which surprised her relatives but delighted their colleagues. Everyone at the University thought something was going on between Keith and Nina even if they constantly reminded their colleagues that they were just close friends. Nobody believed them. Their malicious colleagues felt there was something going on between them. Keith and Nina just laughed when people insisted that they should be together because they looked good together.

They had met eight years earlier. He was twenty-seven years old when he was hired as a Literature teacher at the University. Nina was already teaching Math courses three years before he got in. She asked him what his zodiac sign was. “Oh, you’re a Scorpio! I’m a Piscean! That means we will get along fine. You know, we’re both water signs, and that’s a good sign.” They hit it off immediately. In fact, they became instant friends after that bit of zodiac trivia.

Nina took a leave of absence for two weeks to settle some important matters. He would regularly check on her to see if she was all right. He would take her out to cheer her up. She was always delighted when she took her out, and she said she truly appreciated what he was doing for her. He never thought it would lead to something as complicated as this.

Last night, he was surprised when she found her outside of his condo ringing the doorbell, sobbing and drenched in the rain, which reminded him of the many pre-lovemaking scenes in many of the movies he had seen. Once inside his unit, she embraced him, buried her face on his chest, and told him that she didn’t know what to do anymore. He told her to sit on the black leather sofa. He got her a towel, a fresh shirt that had the words, “Hey, lucky good-looking guy!” at the back, and an old pair of shorts.

She went to the bathroom to change. When she returned, he made her a cup of chamomile tea to calm her nerves. He asked her if she was all right. Nina just nodded her head. She smiled at him and said thank you. He told her “Everything will be all right,” and other things that she probably needed to hear.

In the living room, to lighten up the mood, they watched a stupid romantic comedy on DVD about a handsome con-man who falls for a well-bred young woman. They talked about her family, the University, their

graduate studies just to pass the time and to make her forget the death of her parents for a while.

He was a little surprised when she cuddled up close to him, placed her head on his shoulder and put her arm around his waist. She told him to hold her close, which he did. He thought she just needed someone to console her.

What happened next caught him off guard. She lifted her head and kissed him deeply on his lips. He found her soft lips inviting and he responded willingly to her kisses. "Oh Keith, I love you very much..." There was no turning back.

They made love that night. He never thought that making love to her was going to be that pleasurable. It felt so natural, like making love with Sam, but the feeling totally disarmed him. He found the novel experience exhilarating, but he also felt nauseous. He never thought he had it in him, that it was actually possible. Sam would probably freak out. He loved Sam more than anyone, but this strange new feeling was opening a door he never thought was even there in the first place. He thought about how her physicality had turned him on last night. Her kisses, her breasts, her skin, her whole body turned him on. It was just plain unthinkable.

"So now Keith, what are you going to do when she wakes up? Don't mind this geomeddling dumbbo!" Mr. Owl asked Keith after a lengthy argument with Ms. Rectangle who was now starting to blubber, slowly accepting defeat.

"I was only trying to help," Ms. Rectangle sobbed.

Keith did not want to answer any of the plastic bird's questions. By now, he was tired and bored with Ms. Rectangle taking on his defense. She had good intentions but she could not articulate them well. She sounded whiny and was a weak match for the exasperating owl. He would just let Mr. Owl go on with the talking and the bitching. What he said didn't matter to him anymore.

"So you're not going to give me answers, huh? The silent treatment again. You're going to fuck this one up big time, Keith." Mr. Owl wasn't even thinking of shutting up his big mouth.

"Keith, Sam is going to freak out when he finds out. I mean, doing

it with a woman! So you now get kicks out of that! You pathetic gender bender! That is just so utterly disgusting... And you'll break Nina's heart!"

Keith just kept quiet.

"Don't you dare ignore me Keith! I will always be here to mess up your mind! Ignoring me will do you no good. I'm inside you Keith. I'm your truth. The worse is yet to come!" Mr. Owl screamed.

"You listen to me Keith!" Mr. Owl screamed louder to get Keith's attention.

Keith closed his eyes. He caressed Nina's skin. Its softness was a refreshing welcome. He thought it felt good, but he also felt an unfathomable kind of hurt when he thought about Sam because he was the love of his life. Keith listened to Nina's deep breathing which gave him a baffling kind of calm. He thought about the last time he and Sam had made love and he ached for him. And he thought about how he would try to find some answers soon, really soon.

Darating ang pagkakataon at makahahanap din ng trabaho si Lipoy. Ito ang ibinaon niyang paniniwala nang umalis siya sa bahay noong Lunes na iyon. Hindi naman nag-iisa si Lipoy sa ganoong uri ng pagpapatakbo ng isang adlaw; marami sa lungsod na sinisimulan ang adlaw nila sa pananampalataya. Ang makahanap siya ng trabaho ang paniniwala rin ni Lita, ang kanyang may-bahay, noong Lunes na iyon. Tiyak na may pagkakataon na makahahanap din ng trabaho ang kanyang bana, sa konstruksiyon halimbawa o sa isang pribadong bahay o sa kahit na sinong masasalubong ni Lipoy sa daan at may ipagagawang anumang sira sa kanilang mga buhay at ari-arian. Ganyan naman talaga ang lungsod na pinaglagakan kay Lipoy: nasa mga dakilang kamay ng pagkakataon ang lahat.

Tiyak si Lipoy nang umalis siya sa bahay na dala-dala niya ang lahat ng kakailanganin: martilyo, paet, lagare, katam, mga pako. Ngunit hindi siya tiyak sa plano kung paano susuyurin ang lungsod na ito upang mah-anap ang pinakatamang amo. Lintek, bahala na! Singhal ni Lipoy paglabas sa kanilang lugar sa Luzon Avenue, mayroon naman sigurong kahit na anong sira sa Maynila.

“Oy, bakit hindi ka na lang kasi sumama kina Maning?” pagpupumilit ni Lita sa bana bago ito umalis noong umagang iyon.

“Ano para magpa-ander ako kina Engineer Pantaleon? Kapag umalis ako—aalis ako! Putang ina nilang lahat!”

“Ikaw, iyang pride mo. Akala mo siguro madaling humanap ng trabaho ngayon? Tigilan mo nga ako ng pag-uugali mong iyan.” At ibinagsak ni Lita ang mga pinggan sa banggerahan. Nagtalsikan ang mga mumo sa sahig, ang iba’y lumusot pa sa mga pagitan ng pinagdikit-dikit na mga *coco lumber* na siyang pinakasahig ng kanilang lungga. Nagbagsakan ang mga lumusot na mumo sa tiyan ni Rosalinda na nakahiga pa sa banig at naghihintay sa pagdating ng kanyang bana na panggabi ang trabaho bilang guwardiya sa isang establisimyento sa Makati. Asawa si Rosalinda ng nabubuhay na panganay ni Lipoy, si Edgar. Sa ibaba ng lungga kasi nina Lipoy at Lita nakatira ang mag-asawa.

Siyam ang iniluwal na supling ni Lita, tatlo ang nabuhay. Dinukot ang unang anak ni Lita at Lipoy noong Martial Law at hindi na natagpuan, patay na marahil. Ang sumunod ay kambal: sina Nemo at Nema. Si Nemo, hanggang tatlong taon lamang dahil nadali ng tigdas; si Nema, ilang buwan matapos pumanaw ang kakambal sinalot ng malnutrisyon. Ayon sa kuwento, parang ibon daw itong si Nema dahil piraso ang isinusubo sa pamamagitan ng hintuturo at hinlalaki: pirasong kanin, dahon, gulay, kurot sa katawan ng sapsap. Ang ibang anak ni Lita, namatay sa kanyang panganganak dahil ang mga ito raw ay mga anak ng tikbalang: may malaking puno kasi ng akasya sa harap ng bahay noon ng mag-asawa. Ipinaputol ni Lipoy ang puno isang adlaw hindi dahil sa tikbalang na sumisiping sa kanyang asawa kundi binayaran siya ng MERALCO nang makadaan ang ilang kable ng kuryente para sa mga kapitbahay nila roon sa itaas, sa isang subdibisyon. May anak na dalaga ang mag-asawa noon na sumama sa isang pulis na nadestino sa Cotabato City. Dumating sa Luzon Avenue ang balita ng kamatayan ng pulis sa isang ambush ngunit wala nang nakarating na balita sa kahit na kpiraso ng kaluluwa ng salbaheng anak na dalaga. May anak din si Lita na nasaksak ng icepick sa traysikelan sa Balara.

May anak din si Lita na namatay dahil sa kulam. Dumalo lang sa isang sayawan ang anak na binata, may nakilalang magandang dalaga at isinayaw pagkatapos. Dahil sa naging matatamis ang mga ngiti ng dalawa habang nagsasayaw nakaaway ng binata ni Lita ang isang sumisinta nang labis sa dalaga. Isang gabi, nangingisay na lang daw ang binata ni Lita sa loob ng kulambo. Tumitirik ang mga mata at bumubula ang bibig. Tumawag ng albularyo si Lita. Nagsiga ng kamanyang sa harap ng bahay. Nilagyan ng albularyo ng mga palito ang pagitan ng mga daliri sa paa ng binata—at iyon

nga, ang binata ay ipinakulam. Isang makapangyarihang mangkukulam sa Balara ang may gawa.

“Maryosep, Apo, ano po ang gagawin natin?” Natataranta na si Lita. Wala noon si Lipoy at nasa Saudi Arabia bilang isang karpintero sa ginagawang ospital sa Jeddah.

Nagpakuha ng ilang pirasong kaning bahaw ang albularyo. Nang iabot ni Lita ang ilang piraso ng kanin sa albularyo, napansin niyang patuloy ang pagtiktik ng mga butiki sa kisame. Lumalakas daw ang kapangyarihan ng mangkukulam ng Balara, sabi ng arbularyo. Ipinatong ng albularyo ang ilang piraso ng kanin sa tiyan ng nagpupumiglas na anak. Sabay-sabay na huminto sa pag-iingay ang mga butiki. Lumabas muli ang malapot at maputing tila bula ng sabon sa bibig ng binata ni Lita. Tuluyang namahinga sa buhay ang anak; may ilang piraso ng kanin na nakapatong sa kanyang tiyan.

Noong umaga ng Lunes na iyon, sumakay si Lipoy ng bus patungong Baclaran. Sisimulan niyang maghanap ng trabaho sa Cubao at maglalakad pa-timog sa Baclaran. Susuyurin niya ang kahabaan ng EDSA sa buong maghapon. Kung sakaling marating niya ang Baclaran na walang nahanap na trabaho, tatapusin niya ang adlaw sa pagtutulos ng kandila sa Redemptorist Church at mananalangin na sana bukas, Martes, ay may mautangan pa sila ni Lita ng pamasaha niya sa paghahanap ng trabaho. Matanda na si Lipoy. Magkalayo na nga ang kanyang mga tuhod sa tuwing maglalakad na para bang may malaking bato sa pagitan ng kanyang mga hita. Umaatras na rin ang kanyang buhok sa bumbunan na tila korona na ipinutong sa naging malakas na kabataan at sa pagdaan ng panahon, sa katandaan, madalang na nating matingnan at ipagpunyagi. Nakalagay sa berdeng bag na may malakang logo na “BOYSEN” ang kanyang mga gamit. Suot niya ang kupas na maong na pasadyang pinutol sa tuhod. Suot niya rin ang t-shirt na may nakasulat na “BOYSEN” sa dibdib. Isang linggo nang naghahanap ng trabaho si Lipoy. Ngunit ang kada-adlaw na pagkabigo ay kada-adlaw na pagkabigo: nagtatapos sa hatinggabi ang kabiguan at kinabukasan, sisimulan muli ang umaga sa paghahanap ng pagkakataon: ito ang bersiyon ni Lipoy ng pag-asa.

Ang pag-asa ring ito ang gumabay kay Lipoy sa paglalakbay niya sa buhay bilang manggagawa sa konstruksiyon. Natutunan niya ang humawak ng martilyo sa paniniwalang kung ang lolo at tatay niya ay humawak ng

martilyo, hindi malayong matutunan din niyang humawak ng martilyo, hindi malayong matutunan din itong hawakan ng magiging anak niya at apo ng kanyang mga apo. At hindi nga siya nagkamali dahil ang kanyang si Edgar, natututong humawak ng martilyo nang makatapos ng *Grade Six*.

Ginugol ni Lipoy ang labindalawang taon sa animnapu't limang taong buhay niya sa pagtatrabaho sa ibang bansa; *construction worker* siya sa mga ipinatatayong kabihasnang mayayamang bansa sa Gitnang Silangan at Asya. Kung pagbabasehan ang katwiran sa uniberso ng bersiyon ni Lipoy ng pag-asa, malaki ang naitulong ng labindalawang taon sa pagsulong ng panahon, ng ating panahon kahit iyon pa ay sa ibayong dagat: napal-itadahan niya ang mga gusali nila't monumento, nalagyan ng alulod ang lahat ng kanilang mga bubong, nalinis kahit na ang pinakamatataas na salaming bintana sa kanilang mga siyudad, nakabili siya ng 21-inch COLOR TV, nakapagtapos ng *high school* ang nalalabi niyang anak na babae, nakapagpatayo siya ng maliit na kubo sa Bohol para sa bunso niyang babae na nakapag-asawa ng isang magsasaka. Sa ibayong dagat niya rin nabili ang mga kagamitan niya ngayon: ang martilyo sa Iraq, ang lagari sa Jeddah, ang katam sa Riyadh, at ang paet, sa Korea. Malawak ang karanasan ni Lipoy bilang tao sa industriya ng konstruksiyon. Sa ibayong dagat pa nahasa ang kanyang kakayahan. Ngunit ang ipinagtataka niya, sa haba ng kanyang karanasan, sa paggamit niya ng mga martilyo, lagare, katam, at paet, nahihirapan pa rin siyang humanap ng mapapasukan.

Nagsimula ang paglalakbay ni Lipoy sa pagsakay sa isang bus na babagtas sa kahabaan ng EDSA. *Ordinary bus*, ibig sabihin malaya niyang sisinghutin ang baho, usok, at alikabok ng Maynila. Pagpasok niya sa estribo ng bus, ginipit siya ng sampung mga lalaki. Ang iba sa kanila'y kunwaring palipat-lipat ng upuan, ang nalalabi'y ipinilit na idagan ang kanilang mga katawan kay Lipoy. Nasa tapat na ng mala-palasyong sambahan ng Iglesia ni Kristo ang bus sa Commonwealth Avenue. Nanatili si Lipoy sa upuan. Pinagmasdan niya sa mukha ang mga lalaki na gumigiit sa kanya. Tila tahimik silang nag-uusap sa kanilang mga mata. Pagod nang magsalita ang lahat ng tao sa lungsod na ito kaya siguro nangungusap na lamang sila gamit ang ibang mga pandama. Iniiwas nila ang kanilang mga tingin sa mga mata ni Lipoy na puno ng pagtatanong at tila humihingi ng kasagutan. Nang humimpil ang bus sa tapat ng East Avenue Medical Center, nagsibabaan ang mga lalaki. Natanaw ni Lipoy sa kanyang bintana na nakangisi ang ilang

lalaking bumaba. Nang umandar na ang bus, dumungaw ang isang pasahero sa bintana at hinabol ng mahahayap na salita ang mga kalalakihan. “Mga animal kayo! Ang lalaki ng mga katawan ninyo, hindi kayo magtrabaho, mga ulol! Mga kawatan! Kawatan!”

Nagkaroon ng kaguluhan sa loob ng bus. Tinapik si Lipoy sa balikat ng isang lalaki. “P’re, natiyempuhan ka ng mga bataan ni Mando. Ganyan talaga, suwertehan lang iyan.” Nangamba si Lipoy. Kinapa niya ang kanyang bulsa, wala na ang pitaka niya. Ibinaba niya ang mga kamay niya sa ilalim ng upuan upang kapain ang bag ng mga kagamitan niya. Wala na rin ang bag. Nanginig ang kanyang batok at namanhid ang kanyang mga kamay. Huminga siya nang malalim dahil tila may mabigat na hanging dumagan sa dibdib niya. Napahagulgol si Lipoy. Nakatingin lang sa kanya ang ibang mga pasahero. Itiniklop ni Lipoy ang kanyang mga binti at inginudngod ang mukha sa kanyang mga tuhod. Wala namang magagawa ang ibang mga pasahero kundi ang tapunan siya ng awa, may mangilan-ngilang napangiti pa habang umiiling at may ibang nakikidalamhati at nagpapasalamat na hindi sila ang natiyempuhan ng mga kawatan.

Bumagal ang daloy ng trapiko nang marating ng bus ang EDSA. Tila isang napakalaking paradahan ang EDSA. Bumaba at nagdesisyong maglakad ang ilang mga pasahero na naiinip sa paghihintay. Marami nang naglalakad sa gilid ng kalsada. Isang dalampasigan ng tao ang gilid ng kalsada at ang EDSA naman, tila isang karagatan ng mga nakahimpil, nag-iinit at umuusok na mga makina. Ang dalampasigan kung saan nagtatagpo ang buhanginan ng tao at ang karagatan ng mga sasakyan ay isang mahaba at nakababagot na paghihintay at paglalakbay.

Nanlalambot ang mga tuhod na tumayo sa upuan niya si Lipoy para bumaba ng bus. Bagaman alam ni Lipoy na mauunawaan ni Lita ang pagkawala ng pera niya at kagamitan, naroroon pa rin ang kanyang panghihinayang, ang kahihiyang mararamdaman sa harap ng kanyang asawa sa pag-aming nadukutan siya: “Ang tagal mo na sa Maynila,” iniisip niyang sasabihin ni Lita bagaman walang galit o panunuri, “nadudukutan ka pa rin.”

Lumilipad ang kanyang isip habang naglalakad sa mga pasilyo ng Cubao-Aurora Boulevard. Nabubunggo ang balikat niya ng mga tao na pasalunga ang direksiyon sa kanyang tinatahak. Tila iniiwas ng mga tao ang paningin nila sa kanyang mga mata, o inaakala niya lamang ito. Itiniklop ni Lipoy ang kanyang mga palad. Itinuon niya ang atensiyon sa kumpol ng

mga taong nag-uusisa. Ang iba ay nagtitilian habang balot ng pangamba ang mga mata. “Diyos ko! Baka maapakan tayo ng dambuhalang iyan!” singhal pa ng isa. Nakita ni Lipoy ang ibang mga pasahero ng mga nakahimpil na bus na dali-daling nagbabaan at balot din ng pangamba ang kanilang mga mukha. Napansin din ni Lipoy ang mga mukha ng mga taong nakatanaw sa mga dumaraang karwahe ng tren, nakadikit ang mga mukha nila sa bintana at nakatingin sa ibaba.

“Nabagot siguro kaya hayan nagwawala!”

“Maryosep, may mga taga-Manila Zoo na ba?”

“Ang putang ina, may sungay pa ‘ata, tingnan niyo! Baka manuwag iyan!”

“Mukhang naiinitan nga yata. Hindi siguro sana’y sa tropical country...”

“Imported?”

Isang dambuhalang elepante na may taas na halos dalawang palapag na gusali ang nagwawala sa EDSA-Cubao. Lalong nagwala ang elepante nang marating nito ang panulukan ng EDSA at Aurora Boulevard at binusinahan ito ng mga sasakyan nang barahan nito ang daloy ng trapiko sa dalawang pangunahing kalsada. Naroon ang dambuhalang halimaw. Paroo’t parito ang takbo. Sinusuwag ang lahat ng nagnanais na lumapit sa kanya. Nagugulat din ito sa pagdaan ng tren sa kanyang itaas. Mabangis ang elepanteng ito.

Sa malayo, tila isang dambuhalang bato na pagulong-gulong ang elepante. Nahimpil ang lahat sa bahaging iyon ng lungsod. Nangangagat ang init ng araw at nababalot ng usok at alikabok ang lansangan. Nagpapawis ang balat ng elepante dahil sa alinsangan. Walang nakakakita sa kanyang mga mata na humihingi ng tubig, ng kaunting lamig sa katawan, ng kasagutan kung bakit siya nasadlak sa lupaing ito na mainit, maingay, mausok, at gusgusin.

Tila naisantabi si Lipoy dahil sa kaguluhan. Tuliro pa rin ang kanyang isipan at tumatakas ang mga pangungusap sa kanyang kamalayan. Paano na ngayon? Natatanaw niya sa malayo ang dambuhalang elepante na nagwawala sa gitna ng lansangan kasama ng mga naglalakihang bus, truck at nagtatayugang mga gusali.

At naisip niya ang isang sitwasyon.

Nasa ilalim ng isang paa ng ginagawang parte ng LRT ang elepante. Patuloy pa rin ang pagpupumiglas nito at tila nais na buwagin ang anumang nakahambalang sa kanyang harapan. Tinungo ni Lipoy ang parteng iyon ng kalsada at hinarap ang elepante. Nangamba ang mga nakamasid, pati iyong mga nakadukwang sa mga bintana ng mga nakahimpil na bus. Sino itong matandang ito na nakaharap sa dambuhala? Tila may tinatanong? Tila may nais sabihin sa sitwasyon na kinasadlakan niya o nilang dalawa?

Nang magtama ang mga mata ni Lipoy at ng elepante nabahala ang madla. May dumaraang tren ng MRT at nagsisikan ang mga pasahero sa mga bintana para tanawin ang paghaharap ni Lipoy at ng elepante. Isang dalaga ang nakatanaw sa kanilang dalawa mula sa itaas. Habang tumatakbo ang karwahe ng MRT, hinahabol ng tingin ng dalaga ang paghaharap ni Lipoy at ng nagwawalang elepante. At naisip niya, ngayon lang pala ako nakakita ng elepante sa tanang buhay ko. Mabuti na lamang at nagdesisyon akong sumakay ng MRT dahil kung hindi’y baka di ko na mahabol si Alex, baka hindi na ako makakita ng elepante. Inihilig ng dalaga ang kanyang mukha sa salaming bintana. Suot niya pa rin ang makapal, madilim na *sunglasses*. Ipinikit niya ang kanyang mga mata para sa isang malagim na ekse-na na nagaganap sa ibaba. Marami nang problema ang idinulot sa kanya ng mga matang iyon.

“Diyos ko kawawa naman ang mama!”

“Labas ang utak!”

“Nakita mo ba?”

“Parang pakwan na nasagasaan ng *ten-wheeler*!”

Gumapang ang hilakbot sa katawan ni Yvonne. Naisip niya kung ano kaya ang pakiramdam ang madaganan ng matinding bigat, iyong tone-toneladang bigat. Humimpil ang tren sa Cubao Station at dagsaang pumasok ang mga pasahero. Nanatili si Yvonne sa pagkakaupo. Puting-puti ang suot niyang damit na may mga manggas na aabot sa kanyang mga kamay, puti rin ang suot niyang pambaba maging ang sapatos na balat. Ang tanging naiibang kulay na lumulutang sa kanya ay pula sa kanyang mga labi at ang itim na *sunglasses* na suot niya. Puti na rin ang kanyang buhok.

Ngayon ang adlaw na “hahabulin” niya si Alex sa restoran na madalas nilang puntahan sa Greenbelt sa Makati. Hindi naman aalis ang kasintah-an niya ngunit kailangan niyang habulin ang mga oras o may hiwalayang magaganap. Nauupos na kasi ang mga nalalabi pa niyang oras. Hindi na-

man siya mamamatay: kung kamatayan mang maituturing ang nagaganap sa kanya sa loob ng tatlong adlaw; maituturing na kasing patay ang kalahati ng kanyang katawan. Tahimik na nakamata si Yvonne sa kawalan. Lihim na tinatapunan ng tingin ng mga tao ang buhok niya dahil puting-puti na ito tulad ng kanyang damit.

“*I need to catch him* bago matapos ang lahat,” bulong niya sa sarili. Mahigpit na ang paghawak niya sa malamig na hawakang bakal ng tren. “Ito na ang huling pagkakataon.”

Tatlong adlaw na ang nakalilipas mula nang magising si Yvonne isang umaga matapos ang isang mahabang gabi na dinalaw muli siya ng isang panaginip. Maraming beses na siyang dinadalaw ng panaginip na ito tulad ng isang alaala. Anim na buwan na nga at halos gabi-gabi. Napananaginipan niya ang isang mataas bundok na balot na balot ng niyebe. Puting-puti tulad ng kanyang buhok. Nakatitig siya bundok at ang bundok naman ay nakatitig din sa kanyang kaliitan. Makisig ang bundok at tila isang lalaki na kung ibibigay mo ang iyong pag-ibig susuklian niya ng seguridad, bangis ng pagbabantay, at katapatan sa iyong katawan. Noong umagang iyon nagising siya na basa na naman ng sarili niyang katas ang pagitan ng kanyang mga hita.

Pagtindig niya sa kama at iniharap ang mukha sa salamin, napansin niya kaagad ang isang pagbabago sa kanyang mukha, sa kanyang mga mata. Wala na ang itim sa kanyang mga mata. Hindi takot ang una niyang naramdaman. Wala siyang naramdaman ngunit dagli siyang nagtanong. Bakit balintataw na ang kabuuan ng kanyang mata. Hindi naman siya bulag at malinaw na malinaw niyang nakikita ang lahat. Tumulo ang luha kanyang mga pisngi.

Mula noong umagang iyon, lumalabas na siya ng apartment na suot ang *sunglasses*. Sa katanghaliang tapat noong adlaw ding iyon, namuti na ang kanyang mukha, pababa sa leeg, hanggang sa kanyang mga suso. Maging ang kanyang mga utong, namuti na rin. Ang tanging nananatili ang kulay sa kanyang mukha ay ang kanyang mga labi. Puting-puti na buo niyang katawan maliban sa kanyang buhok.

Noong ikalawang adlaw, saka namuti ang lahat ng buhok sa katawan niya: pilik-mata, at ilang buhok sa kili-kili at binti. Ang kulot niyang buhok na hanggang balik at ay tila hilaw na pansit sotanghon na ipinutong sa kanyang ulo.

“Bakit nangyayari ito sa akin?” Hindi na niya malaman kung kanino pa itatanong ang pagbabagong nagaganap sa kanyang katawan. Dalawang adlaw na siyang lumiliban sa klase sa Unibersidad. Nais na niya sanang tawagan ang kanyang ina na *domestic helper* sa Hong Kong para ipaalam ang pangyayari. Ngunit nagdalawang-isip siya dahil ayaw niyang abalihin at pag-alalahanin pa ang kanyang ina. Wala naman siyang kaibigan sa Unibersidad. Si Alex lang ang malapit sa kanya sa kasalukuyan. Ngunit nasa opisina pa si Alex at ayaw nitong tinatawagan siya sa opisina dahil hindi alam ng mga kaopisina ni Alex ang relasyon nila. Dating kasing kaopisina ni Alex ang asawa niya sa kasalukuyan. Ayaw rin ni Alex na aabalahin siya sa trabaho.

“Alex?”

“Bakit ka tumawag? *I told you I will text you first* saka ka tatawag. *I am busy!*”

“*I know. Mabilis lang ito. I need to talk you. This is important.*”

“*Important?*”

“*Something’s happening to me!*”

“*Again?*”

“*No. This is not about me wanting a cool off.*”

“*Ano naman siya this time? I don’t want another freaky story of Mt. Everest as your recurring dream.*”

Hindi na maipagpatuloy ni Yvonne ang mga susunod na sasabihin.

“*Why are you crying, Yvonne?*”

“May nangyayari sa katawan ko. Please magkita tayo...bukas ng umaga. *Same place.*”

“*Shit! Are you pregnant?*”

“*No.*”

“*Okay. Is this cancer?*”

“*No!*”

“*Are you okay, Yvonne?*”

“*Tomorrow. 9:00 AM. Sa Café Breton.*”

Noong gabing iyon, napanaginipan niyang muli ang mataas na bundok. Nakatitig siya sa bundok at tinatanaw niya ang pinakamataas na bahagi nito. Dumarampi ang malamig at makapal na hangin sa kanyang mukha.

Sa panaginip, itim pa rin ang kanyang buhok at kayumanggi ang kanyang balat. Sa malayo, natanaw niya ang isang paparating na imahen: isang lalaki. Papalapit nang papalapit ang lalaki sa kanya. Hindi na niya hinintay na malapitan siya nito. Tinakbo niya ang lalaki nang malapitan. Pananabik ang nag-udyok sa kanyang alamin kung sino itong nilalang na papalapit sa kanya at nasa kanyang panaginip.

“Kamusta ka, Yvonne?”

“Kilala mo ako?”

“Oo naman. Marami kami roon sa tuktok ng bundok at nakatanaw sa iyo. Matagal ka na naming kinakawayan para hikayatin kang umakyat pero tila hindi mo kami nakikita.”

“May mga tao pa roon sa bundok?”

“Marami kami roon. Kay tagal ka na naming kinakawayan para umakyat ka pero lagi ka lang nandito sa kinatatayuan mo ngayon.”

“Sorry, hindi ko kayo nakikita. Makapal ang niyebe na bumabalot sa bundok.”

Tinanaw ng lalaki ang bundok at napangisi. “Kalokohan. Kitang-kita ko sila rito. Hayun, punong-puno ng tao ang bundok, o!”

Ngunit wala namang makita si Yvonne. Nalungkot siya at napatalikod. Umiyak siya nang umiyak hanggang sa naramdaman niya na niyakap na lang siya ng lalaki.

Nang magising si Yvonne noong umagang iyon, ang ikatlong adlaw, dali-dali siyang nagbihis upang makipagkita kay Alex. Sa umagang iyon din napagtanto na niya na nauubos na ang kanyang oras. Pagpasok niya kasi sa loob ng banyo, napansin niyang may butas sa kanyang puting dibdib. Butas na kasing kasing laki ng bola ng basketball. Ang butas ay tagos hanggang sa kanyang likod. Hindi naman nabutas ang kanyang katawan dahil nakakapa niya ang bahaging ito ng kanyang dibdib. Unti-unti nang kinakain ng laho ang kanyang katawan bagaman buong-buo pa rin ito sa kanyang mga pandama. Natawa siyang bigla dahil nakita niya sa salamin ang isa niyang suso; kalahati pa lamang ng kaliwa niyang suso ang nakakain ng laho.

“Kailangan kong kumilos nang mabilis. Unti-unti na akong magiging *invisible* sa lahat. Nais kong makita muna ako ni Alex bago ako tuluyang kainin ng laho. *At least*, may magbibigay ng testimonya na minsan nabuhay ako... at patuloy akong nabubuhay kahit hindi ako nadarama ng iba.”

Bumaba si Yvonne sa Ayala Station at mabilis niyang binaybay ang mga malls na daraanan bago marating ang Café Breton sa pusod ng Greenbelt. Dahil sa pagmamadali, hindi na namalayan ni Yvonne na unti-unti nang nahuhulog sa lupa ang kanyang mga damit. Nasa tapat na siya ng isang magandang *fountain* sa harap ng Café Breton nang mapagtanto niya na huli na ang lahat. Tuluyan na siyang kinain ng laho bagaman nararamdaman niya pa rin ang kanyang paghinga, nahahawakan niya ang kanyang sarili, at nakikita niya nang buong-buo ang daigdig. Napaupo siya sa gilid ng fountain sa gitna ng lunan na ito ng karangyaan. At tinanaw niyang maigi si Alex. Kung paano ito naghihintay sa kanya. Ngayon lang kasi naghintay si Alex sa kanya. Palaging siya ang naghihintay sa kanilang mga pagkikita. Madali pa lang mabagot si Alex, bulong niya sa sarili, matapos makitang umalis ang kasintahan limang minuto matapos ang takdang oras ng kanilang pagkikita.

Lingid sa kaalaman ni Yvonne, hindi lahat ng tao ay walang matang makakakita sa kanya. Mula sa kanyang kinauupuan natatanaw siya ni Edgar, ang anak na lalaki ni Lipoy. Pauwi na si Edgar mula sa kanyang *night shift* sa isang isang *bar* sa ikatlong palapag ng Greenbelt. Tanaw na tanaw niya sa kalayuan ang kahubdan ni Yvonne. Napahinto si Edgar sa kanyang paglalakad. Kinusot niya ang kanyang mga mata na baka sakaling namamalikmata lang siya dahil sa antok at pagod. Hindi, isang babaeng nakahubo't hubad ang nakaupo sa gilid ng *fountain*.

Ngunit binalot ng pagtataka si Edgar nang mapansin niyang tila hindi natitinag ang lahat ng mga dumaraan sa postura ng babaeng nakahubad. Hindi rin natitinag ang guwardiya sa harap ng Café Breton. Binalot ng takot si Edgar at naisip niya na ang babae ay isang multo. Nagpasya si Edgar na babain ang fountain kung saan niya nakita ang babaeng nakahubo't hubad.

Nang marating niya ang lugar wala na si Yvonne. Umalis na kasi si Yvonne noong bumababa si Edgar patungo sa *fountain*.

Nagdesisyon si Yvonne na magtungo na lamang sa *chapel* at magdasal. Napagpasiyahan niya kasi noong oras na iyon aakyat niya ang pinakamataas na gusali sa Makati. Sa tutok ng mataas na gusaling ito wawakasan niya ang kanyang buhay. Wala namang lilinising kalat ang mga tagalinis ng lansangan, walang maaabalang mga *pedestrian* sa mga pira-pirasong laman na nagkalat sa asfaltadong daan, walang magugulong pulis at reporter. Nagpasya siyang magpakamatay at sigurado siyang mananatiling kara-

niwan ang pamumuhay, tulad ng kada-adlaw ng *rush hour* sa mga lansangan, sa lungsod na pinaglagakan sa kanya.

“Sigurado ako, may nakita akong babaeng nakahubad sa *fountain*,” bulong ni Edgar sa sarili nang makasakay na siya bus pauwi sa kanila. Binabalot pa rin siya ng pagtataka. “Ngunit hindi naman siguro papayagan ng mga tao na makakita sila ng babaeng hubo’t hubad sa kanilang harapan? At hindi rin papayagan ng mga guwardiya?” Hindi pa rin matapus-tapos ang mga pagtatanong niya sa sarili. Nitong mga nagdaang adlaw maraming mga hindi maipaliwanag na bagay ang dumarating sa kanya at hindi niya mapagtagni-tagni ang mga nais na iparating.

Dalawang adlaw na ang nakararaan nang makita niya ang kanyang ama na walang ulo sa harap ng salamin. Parang hindi naman ito napapansin ni Lipoy dahil patuloy ang pagsusuklay nito. Nais niya sanang lapitan ang ama upang paalalahanan ngunit naisip niya kung bibigyan niya ng katuturan ang pangyayari sa pamamagitan ng pagbanggit nito sa kanyang ama, ito’y isang paraan na rin ang paggawad ng katotohanan sa kanyang nasak-sihan. Malupit ang katotohanan ngunit nasa kanya pa rin ang pagpapasya kung bibigyan niya ito ng karatayang manatili at hayaang mamuhay sa kanyang daigdig.

Naiipit sa trapiko sa panulukan ang EDSA at Ayala ang bus na kanyang sinasakyan. Malalim pa rin ang kanyang iniisip. “Sino ang babaeng nakahubad? Totoo ba siya o kathang isip ko lamang? Putang ina...” Inihilig ni Edgar ang ulo niya sa salaming bintana ng bus at pinag-masdan ang mga nagaganap sa labas. Hindi siya sumasakay ng tren pauwi sa kanila. Nakasanayan na niyang sumakay ng bus simula’t sapul na magtrabaho siya sa Makati. Sa bus, nakapagpapahinga siya, sa bus, napag-iisipan niya ang lahat-lahat na hindi niya napagtutuunan ng pansin sa ibang lugar, sa bus nakikita niya ang daigdig na nagpa-parada sa kanya tulad ng sa pista na hindi niya kailangang umalis sa kinasadlakang pananatili, sa bus, nakakausap niya ang kanyang sarili.

Sabi ng kanyang ina, “iba” siya kung ikukumpara sa kanyang mga kapatid. Hindi na niya noon tinanong ang kanyang ina kung ano ang ibig sabihin ng pagiging “iba” niya sa kanyang mga kapatid. Hindi naman ganon kalalim ang relasyon niya sa kanyang mga magulang. Walang siyang natatandaang ibinulalas na galit o anumang marubdob na damdamin sa kanyang ina.

Minsan, naulinigan niya ang pag-uusap ng kanyang mga magulang.

“Malalim palaging mag-isip ang anak mo.”

“Ewan sa iyo, Lita, tigilan mo nga ako niyan. Hindi lang palakibo ang iyong anak. Hindi ibig sabihin noon e malalim nang mag-isip.”

“Minsan hindi ko maintindihan ang anak mo. Minsan natatakot ako sa kanya ... sa kung anong sasabihin niya na baka ... baka hindi ko maintindihan o kaya’y may sabihin siyang hindi ko matanggap...”

“Ha? Ewan ko sa iyo, Lita, kung anu-ano ang iyang pinagsasabi mo.”

“Basta, natatakot ako sa anak mong iyan...”

Simula noon, lalong siyang napalayo sa ina. Hindi niya mawari kung anong dahilan na hindi niya mailapit ang sarili sa ina. Minsan, nagkakailangan na sila. Tila naging ibang tao na sa kanya si Lita. “Ganoon pala ang mangyayari kung malaman mong natatakot sa iyo ang isang tao ... nagkakaroon ng malalim at malaking guwang sa pagitan niyo...” ganoon na lamang niya tinimbang ang lahat-lahat sa pagitan nilang mag-ina.

Humimpil ang bus nang marating nito ang harap ng SM Megamall. Tinanaw ni Edgar ang naglalakihang *billboards* na nakadikit sa matataas at malalapad na gusali ng mall. “Kay gandang mga nilalang... kay gandang pagmasdan...” bulong niya sa sarili habang pinagmamasdan ang mga modelo na inimprenta sa mukha ng naglalakihang mga tarpaulin.

“Ano ba ang kagandahan?” bulalas ng mama na nasa tabi niya. May katandaan na ang mama at nakasuot siya ng magarang de-kuwelyong polo at may hawak pang maleta na pang-episina.

Hindi nakapagsalita si Edgar ngunit tila nabasa ng mama ang pagtatanong sa kanyang mukha.

“Ang sabi mo kasi, ‘Kay gandang mga nilalang at kay gandang pagmasdan’ ang mga nasa larawan na nakapaskil sa Megamall. Ngayon, tinatanong kita, ano nga ba ang kagandahan?”

Nagimbal si Edgar sa mga salitang binitiwang ng mama. “Teka, wala akong sinasabing ganoon!”

“Hindi mo nga sinasabi pero iniisip mo.”

“Nababasa mo ang isip ko?” Nais na sanang tumayo ni Edgar at lumipat ng ibang upuan. Binalot ng takot ang katawan niya. Sa paanong paraang nalalaman ng mamang ito ang kanyang iniisip?

“Huwag kang mabahala, Edgar. Hindi ako masamang tao. Isa lang akong makata.”

“Kung hindi ka masama, paanong... paanong wala na akong maitatago sa iyo?”

“Wala ka talagang maitatago sa akin. At dahil doon, hindi na ako masama. Kung masama ako may mga bagay akong hindi nalalaman sa iyo. Halimbawa ang iyong ina, ang iyong ama, at ang iyong mga naging kapatid maging ang iyong asawa.”

Napayukod si Edgar. Tumatagaktak na ang pawis niya sa sentido at tila nagiging maalinsangan na ang panahon sa lungsod na iyon na pinaglakan sa kanya.

“Ikaw ang masama, Edgar. Binibigyan mo ng mga motibo ang mga tao sa pag-iisip nila tungkol sa iyo dahil hindi mo naman binubuksan ang sarili mo sa kanila. Kaninang umaga, may ‘nasilip’ ka sa daigdig... sa kung saan ka nagtatrabaho, tama ba ako?”

“Nasilip? Hindi ko maintindihan ang sinasabi mo. Ewan.”

“Nakita mo ang kahubdan ng buhay. May isang nagpakita sa iyo ng kanyang sarili. Iyon ay isang katapangan.”

Naisip ni Edgar ang babaeng nakahubad sa tabi ng *fountain* sa Greenbelt.

“Tama. Siya nga ... siya nga ...”

Tumayo ang mama at pumara sa konduktor. Naiwang nakanganga sa pagtataka si Edgar. Ni hindi nagtapon ng lingon-likod kay Edgar ang mama. Isiniksik niya ang sarili niya sa upuan. Tinanaw niya ang mga tao sa ibaba ng bus na naghihintay sa kung ano, ang mga bahay at gusali na nadadaan. Kada-adlaw niyang tinatahak ang rutang iyon pero parang kada-adlaw na nagbibihis ang lungsod. Namamanhid ang kanang kamay niya. Hindi niya maigalaw. Ganito palagi ang nangyayari sa kanya kapag binabagabag ng matinding damdamin halimbawa ng galit, takot, maging kabiguan sa pag-ibig. Sa paanong paraan may nakababasa ng kanyang isipan? Sa paanong paraan pa itatago ang kanyang sarili sa daigdig kung may estrangherong nakakapasok sa pinakamalalim na bahagi ng kanyang pagkatao? Namalayan na lamang ni Edgar ang kanyang sarili na nakababa na pala siya ng bus at naglalakad papasok sa kanilang bahay.

“Pagod ka naman sa trabaho ha, Edgar?” salubong sa kanya ni Lita.

Huminto panandali sa Edgar at humarap sa kanyang ina. Matagal silang nagkatitigan ni Lita. Yumuko na lamang siya at pumasok sa kaniyang silid. Naiwan si Lita na nakatayo at punong-puno ng pagtatanong. Hindi na napigilan ni Lita ang tumulong mga luha at mainit na bumaybay sa kanyang mga pisngi. Hindi na niya talaga kilala ang lalaking iniluwal ng sariling katawan. Sa simula'y paghikbi lamang hanggang sa nagtuloy-tuloy siyang humagulgol.

Naririnig pa ni Edgar mula sa kanyang higaan ang ingay ng kanyang ina. Ipinikit niya ang kanyang mga mata. Naisip niya, mamaya, pagdating ng kanyang ama, sa pagdating ni Lipoy, ipaaalam na niya sa kanyang mga magulang na nais na niyang mamatay. Nais na niyang tapusin ang pag-asa sa hindi dumarating na pagkakataon.

Ngunit ang hindi alam ni Edgar, sa lungsod na iyon na pinaglagakan sa kanya, nasa kamay ng pagkakataon palagi ang lahat ng pagpapasiya.

Tungkol sa Aso

U Z. Eliserio

Kinalasan na si U ng girlfriend n'ya. Panay tuloy ang yaya n'ya sa aking lumabas. Kailangan daw n'ya ng kausap. Panay ang ngawa ni U tungkol sa girlfriend n'ya. Para lang noong sila pa.

Sa Technohub kami nagkita, sa Figaro. Kape-kape. Marami raw magandang *call center agent* sa paligid, sabi ni U. Mas bukas daw sa *sex* ang mga *call center agent*, sabi ni U. Wala pa raw s'yang nakaka-*sex* na *call center agent*, sabi ni U. Ano ba raw ang alam n'ya?

Sex daw ang naging problema nila, sabi ni U. Hindi raw sila *compatible*.

Limang taon na si U at ang girlfriend n'ya. Sila noong 2007 hanggang 2010, at 2011 hanggang unang *quarter* ng 2013. Mula Pebrero ng 2010 hanggang Enero ng 2011, nagkaroon ng ibang *boyfriend* ang girlfriend ni U. Isang linggo pa lang daw ng una nilang *break* nang magkaroon ng bago ang girlfriend ni U. *I can have another U Eliserio, matter fact he'll be here, Eliserio.* Iyon daw ang kanta ng girlfriend n'ya.

Pag umabot na ng limang taon ang magkasintahan, dapat mag-*break* na sila o magpakasal, sabi ni U. Ayaw magpakasal ni U. Wala raw s'yang kilalang mag-asawang masaya. Wala raw kasi tayong *divorce*. Dito raw, sabi ni U, *either* may asawa ka, o masaya ka.

Heartbroken daw si U noong una nilang *break*. Lalo na nang mapalitan s'ya agad. Nagsubok s'yang maghanap ng kapalit, kaso walang gustong pumatol sa kanya. Tumanda na kasi ako, sabi ni U. Ang sabi na lang n'ya,

nang makabalikan sila, kaya s'ya hindi nakahanap ng kapalit ay dahil hindi s'ya naghanap ng kapalit, kasi wala raw papalit sa *girlfriend* n'ya. Naniwala s'ya, sabi ni U, at naniwala na rin ako.

May aso si U at ang *girlfriend* n'ya. Askal, Chocolate ang pangalan. Kasi maputi, sabi ni U. Hindi lang naman daw *sex* ang problema nila ng *girlfriend* n'ya. Pati raw aso pinag-aawayan nila. Ayaw kasi ni U ang magka-roon sila ng aso. Para raw itong anak, at ayaw n'yang magkaanak. Ayaw n'ya ng responsibilidad. Sa bahay ng *girlfriend* n'ya nakatira 'yung aso. Noong una, lagi s'yang tinatahulan nito. Alam sigurong ayaw ko sa kanya, sabi ni U. Mahusay daw mag-alaga ng aso ang *girlfriend* ni U. Pag sinabi raw nitong *paw*, nakikipagkamayan 'yung aso. Hindi raw ito nanunugod 'pag may pagkain. *Sit*, sasabihin daw ng *girlfriend* ni U, at uupo ang aso. Uupo raw ito kahit nakalagay na sa planggana ang pagkain, at kakain lang 'pag sumenyas na ang *girlfriend* ni U. Isang beses nag-away sila dahil ayaw sumama ni U sa *vet* para pabukanahan 'yung aso. Isang beses naman, sa sobrang pagkahol sa kanya nito, naihi si Chocolate. Naihian ni Chocolate ang *girlfriend* ni U.

Ilang beses nang namatayan ng aso si U. Si Aktong, aso nila noong 90's. Kasama n'ya ito noong lumindol, noong 1991. Itim ito, takot sa paputok. Sa sari-sari *store* noon ng pamilya ni U natutulog si Aktong. Isang araw, nanligaw ito malapit sa may simbahan, ilang kanto ang layo mula kina U. Hindi na ito bumalik.

Si Casper ang pumalit kay Aktong. Napulot lang nila ito. Dahil maraming lasenggo sa sari-sari *store* nila U, naambunan ito ng pulutan. Maliit na aso si Casper, makapal at mahaba ang buhok. Parang trapo 'pag natutulog. Isang araw, may dumaang babae, sa kanya raw 'yung aso. Casper daw ang pangalan nito. Sabi ni U, ang galing naman daw na pareho ang pinangalan sa aso ng orihinal nitong may-ari at ng mga nakapulot dito. Hindi sila naniwala sa ale. Hindi nila pinayagang kunin nito ang aso. Nawala raw si Casper ilang araw pagkatapos, sabi ni U. Ayaw ni U magkaaso, kasi nawawala lang ang mga ito.

Takot si U magmahal. Ng aso. Takot s'yang magmahal, kahit hindi ng tao. Takot s'yang ma-*attach*, sabi ni U. Takot s'yang maging *dependent*. Takot s'yang mangailangan. Takot s'yang mangulila. Takot s'yang umasa. Takot s'yang magtiwala. Takot s'yang mag-alaga. Takot s'yang alagaan. Takot s'yang maging masaya. Takot s'yang maging malungkot, kaya s'ya malungkot.

Ubos na ang kape ko. Hindi pa ubos ang kape ni U. Hindi pa nga nababawasan. Ayaw n'yang inumin. Ayaw n'yang ubusin. Ayaw n'yang umuwi, sabi ni U. 'Pag umuwi raw s'ya, mag-i-Internet s'ya. Pag nag-Internet s'ya, pupunta s'ya ng Facebook. 'Pag nasa Facebook s'ya, makikita n'ya ang mga picture nila ng girlfriend n'ya. Ex ko, sabi ni U. Hindi ko na s'ya girlfriend, sabi ni U. Ex ko na s'ya. Kailangan na n'yang umuwi, sabi ni U. Kailangan n'yang mag-delete ng pictures sa Facebook.

Nagsimula ang pagkaagnas ni U noong 2010, nang mag-treinta s'ya. Kakatapos pa lang nilang mag-break noon, iyong una nilang pangmatalang paghihiwalay. Ang akala ni U, pwede na n'yang gastusin ang kanyang pera sa sarili n'ya, imbes na sa dates nila. Plano n'yang bumili ng iPad, ng iPod, ng iPhone. Napunta sa gamot lahat ng pera n'ya. Tinamaan s'ya ng gallstones.

Matagal na paghihirap bago s'ya nagpunta sa doktor. Tag-init kasi, at panay ang tutok n'ya ng electric fan sa kanya. Kaya siguro nananakit ang likod n'ya, sabi ni nanay ni U. Bumili ako ng aircon, sabi ni U. Para hindi nakatutok sa iisang bahagi ng kanyang katawan ang lamig. Lumamig nga. Sinipon pa nga s'ya. Pero hindi naalis ang sakit.

Naglagay s'ya ng Vicks. Naglagay s'ya ng Salonpas. Gumamit s'ya ng Efficascent Oil. Naibsan pero hindi nawala ang sakit.

Lumipas ang mga araw, sabi ni U. Lumipas ang mga linggo. Lumipas ang mga buwan. Tumindi nang tumindi ang sakit. Jessie Mae, sigaw n'ya. Jessie Mae! Hindi s'ya naiyak nang mag-break sila. Hindi n'ya sinigaw ang pangalan nito sa pangungulila. Pero dahil sa gallstones, naiyak s'ya. Dahil sa gallstones, isinigaw ni U ang pangalan ng girlfriend n'ya.

Sa wakas ay nagpunta sila sa doktor. Asawa ng pamangkin ng tatay ni U, para libre ang konsultasyon. Pinapunta s'ya sa laboratoryo, para ma-test ang kanyang dugo. Kinailangan din n'yang magpa-ultrasound. Matagal na akong hindi nakikipag-sex, sabi ni U. Paano ako mabubuntis? Pero sinunod n'ya ang doktor.

Hindi taga-St. Luke's ang doktor ni U, pero sa laboratoryo malapit dito s'ya nagpatest, sa may E. Rodriguez. Maaga silang dumating ng nanay n'ya, alas syete pa lang. Wala pang tao. Doon din sa lab na 'yon nagpa-test ang girlfriend n'ya, sabi ni U. May problema kasi ito sa mens, dysmenorrhea. Hindi ito sinamahan ni U, sabi n'ya, kasi kakailanganing gumising nang maaga. Binalikan din s'ya ng karma. Kinailangan din n'yang gumising nang

maaga para sa sarili n'ya. Pagdating nila sa laboratorya ng nanay n'ya, wala pa ang doktor na mag-u-*ultrasound*. Alas-nuwebe pala ito darating. Nagpa-*blood test* na lang muna s'ya.

Mahirap s'yang kunan ng dugo, sabi ni U. Mataba raw kasi s'ya noong 2010, sabi n'ya. Kahit ngayon, sabi ko. Pumayat na raw s'ya, sabi ni U. Pero noong 2010, mas mataba s'ya. Mahirap s'yang kunan ng dugo. Panay ang pitik ng *nurse* sa braso n'ya. Nakailang tusok ito ng *syringe*. Sampung minuto bago makunan ng dugo si U. Pero kailangan pa rin nilang hintayin ang doktor na namamahala sa *ultrasound*.

Nagpunta muna sila sa *McDo*, sabi ni U. Kumain na lang muna sila ng agahan. Alas-otso sila bumalik. Marami nang tao. Nagkapila na. Walong tao ang nauna sa kanya sa pila. Dumating ang alas-nuwebe, wala pa rin ang doktor na namamahala sa *ultrasound*. Dumating na s'ya sa unahan ng pila, wala pa rin ang doktor na namamahala sa *ultrasound*. Alas-diyes y medya dumating ang doktor na namamahala sa *ultrasound*. Nakatulog ang nanay n'ya sa sofa.

Pinainom ng tubig si U. Walang tubig sa laboratoryo. Kinailangan n'yang lumabas sa laboratoryo para bumili ng mineral water sa malapit na sari-sari. Malaki ang binili ni U, 500 ml. Inumin daw n'ya lahat, sabi ng doktor. Ininom n'ya ang *three-fourths*, sabi ni U. Pinahiga s'ya ng doktor. Pinahiran ng malamig na *jelly*. Pinaikot-ikot. Pinasadahan ng *gadget*. Mukhang *mouse* ang pang-*ultrasound*. Malamig ito. Ilang beses s'yang natawa sa pagkakaakiliti. Mabilis maproseso ang resulta ng *ultrasound*. Iyong sa *blood test*, hindi. Kailangan daw nilang balikan, alas-kwatro pa raw. Umuwi na muna kami, sabi ni U. Nanay na lang daw n'ya ang bumalik para sa *blood test results*.

Isang buwan ang ginugol ni U sa pag-inom ng gamot para sa *gallstones*. Panay ang kanta n'ya ng "Alive" ng *Pearl Jam*. Gumaling naman s'ya ng hindi kinakailangan ng operasyon. Natunaw daw ng gamot ang *gallstones* n'ya. Malamang, hindi nga sila *gallstones*. *Fats* lang daw na bilog, sabi ng doktor n'ya. Balik daw sa *junk food* at *fastfood* si U. Balik sa *softdrinks*. Pagkatapos ng isang buwan, nagkasakit naman s'ya sa panga. Namaga ang *lymph nodes* n'ya. Pumunta sila sa ibang doktor. Mataba 'yung doktor. Nakinig ito nang kaunti sa kwento n'ya, pagkatapos ay nagbigay agad ng re-seta. Wala pang limang minuto ang inabot ng konsultasyon. Inom ulit ng bagong *set* ng gamot si U. Nawala ang magang *lymph nodes* n'ya. Isang buwan ulit ang lumipas. Nagkakuliti naman s'ya.

Sanay na naman sa kuliti si U. Tampulan nga s'ya ng asar ng mga kamag-anak at ibang tambay sa kanilang sari-sari noong bata s'ya. Kasi tuwing tag-init, nagkakaroon s'ya ng kuliti. Mamboboso raw s'ya. Pero matalagal na s'yang hindi nagkakakuliti. *High school* pa ang huli, sabi ni U. Tsaka iba ang kuliting sumapi sa kanya. S'ya rin kasi ang may kasalanan. Nang sinimulang tumubo ng kuliti, nag-*eye drop* agad si U. Kaso matapang daw 'yung gamot, at imbes na mawala'y dumami ang kanyang kuliti.

Pumunta na naman sila sa ibang doktor. Kadiri ang doktor na ito. Panay ang hawak sa mga kuliti ni U. Pindot nang pindot sa kanyang mata. Dito ba raw 'yung masakit, sabi ni U, o e eto, masakit ba? Masakit! 'Yan at 'yan at 'yan pa, lahat masakit! Pagkatapos hawakan ng doktor ang mga mata n'yang may kuliti, panay daw ang tanggal nito ng muta. Walang *gloves-gloves*, sabi ni U. Niresetahan s'ya ng *eye drops*, iyong mas mild. Tsaka pina-yuhan s'yang mag-*hot compress*. Iyon daw ang magpapaputok ng mga kuliti n'ya.

Pahiya na sa mga estudyante, tiniis ni U ang kumukulung tubig sa *towelette*. Kahit magkapaso-paso na s'ya'y di n'ya inaatras ang *hot compress*. Nalapnos tuloy ang talukap ng kaliwang mata n'ya. Hindi natuyo ang nanay. Nangitim ito't sumama sa balat. Naging mala-mole, sabi ni U, bilugang langib.

Dalawang buwang binuno ni U ang kanyang mga kuliti. Ibinaba n'ya ang nibel ng init ng kanyang *hot compress*, pero hindi n'ya 'to tinigilan. Paso-paso pa rin s'ya. Tuwing nawawala ang isang kuliti, may pumapalit. Para silang nakapili sa loob ng mata ko, sabi ni U. Pero lumipas ang mga araw at unti-unti rin silang nawala. Mga natira pang mangisa-ngisa noong ikatlong buwan, pero sa huli, pati ito'y nagapi n'ya. Akala ko hindi sila mawawala, sabi ni U. Tinanggap ko nang bahagi sila ng buhay ko. Tanggap ko nang may sunog na parte ng talukap ng kaliwang mata ko, sabi ni U. Pero pati iyon, nawala. Lahat ng sakit, nalalampasan. At kung hindi malampasan, natatanggap na lang.

Tulad ng mga paltos n'ya sa paa nanunubig at nagnanana. Nagsimula ito noong magtrabaho s'ya sa UPLB. Ang sinisisi ni U, ang labanderang malapit sa *apartment* na inupahan n'ya. Doon kasi nagsimulang mangati ang singit n'ya. Noon pa rin nagsimula ang problema ni U sa paa.

Makati, makati ang mga paltos. Puti ang mga ito, hanggang sa kamutin n'ya, pagkatapos namumula, nagdudugo, nagdidilaw, nangingitim.

Paikot-ikot sa mga talampakan n'ya. Umaayat hanggang sakong, minsan hanggang binti. Sinubukan n'ya ang lahat. Mula langgas hanggang *ointment*. Pero ayaw tumigil ang siklo. Ipinapanganak ang mga paltos, lumalaki, papatayin n'ya sa kamot, natutuyo, sumisibol muli. May mga araw noon, sabi ni U, gusto ko na lang magpapatol ng paa. Hanggang ngayon may ganito pa ring problema si U. Hindi na kasinlala, pero hindi nawawala. Para lang 'tong *psoriasis* ko, sabi ni U, sabay turo sa namamalat at namumulang mga pisngi.

Buti na nga raw nag-*break* sila, sabi ni U. Magkakaroon s'ya ng mas maraming panahon para makapagbasa. Mas maraming panahon para mag-sulat. Sabi ko, wag s'yang kumanta ng "*Bluer than Blue*."

Maraming proyekto sa utak ni U. Marami s'yang pinaplanong libro. Modernista, sabi n'ya. Modista? Modernista, sabi ni U. Mga pangungusap na nangingitlog ng pangungusap, nang mag-isa. Bumubulwak, umaapaw. *Mala-Malone Dies*. *Zerg rush* ng mga salita. Ang gusto ni U, gumawa ng mga libro tulad ng mga inilarawan sa *entry* ng *experimental literature* sa *Wikipedia*.

Gusto n'yang gumawa ng libro ng *acrostic*, gawa sa iba't ibang linya mula sa iba't ibang tula. *Acronymic* na, *cento* pa, sabi ni U. Gusto n'yang gumawa ng *mesostic* gamit ang "*Talks at the Yenon Forum*" na puro mga *art for art's sake* na *slogan* ang lumalabas. Gusto n'yang gumawa ng mga *anagram base* sa mga sikat na *passages* mula sa bibliya. Gusto n'yang gayahin ang *Alphabetical Africa* ni Walter Abish. Ang anino ay alingawngaw. Gusto n'yang *i-apply* ang prinsipyo ng *antonymy* sa mga pamosong linya mula sa panitikang Filipino. Mabubuhay ako nang hindi man lang nakikita ang paglubog ng araw. Gusto n'yang gumawa ng bananagram mula sa kanyang pangalan. Gusto n'yang gumawa ng sarili n'yang wika, tapos isasalin n'ya ang lahat ng paborito n'yang libro sa wikang ito, na tatawagin n'yang Eliseri.

Sabi ni U, gagawa s'ya ng *definitional literature* base sa *Noli me Tangere*. Gusto n'yang gumawa ng nobela na nakasulat sa Ingles pero Filipino. *I was poo soy moo nah*. Gusto n'yang *i-apply* ang *constraint* ng *larding* sa "Bayang magaliw/ Perlas ng Silanganan." Gusto n'yang gumawa ng *limerick* sa Filipino. Gusto n'yang gumawa ng nobelang *lipogram*. 'Yung walang a, sabi ni U. Imposible 'yon, sabi ni U. Kaya o na lang.

Gusto n'yang gumawa ng kwento na puro hayop ang talinghaga. Binaboy nila ang aking pagkatao. Ngising aso ang tatay ko. Luha ng buwaya

lang ang napakita n'ya sa burol. Kayod kabayo ito. Ang *twist*, sabi ni U, ang mga mura puro tarantado, gago, wala *ever* na hayop ka!

Gusto n'yang gumawa ng *beautiful in-law* at *beautiful outlaw* na ang paksa'y pakikiapid ng isang misis sa kanyang bayaw. Gusto n'yang gawing tula ang "Dapat Mabatid ng mga Tagalog." Puro *eye rhyme* lang, sabi ni U, para madali.

Gusto n'yang gumawa ng parang *Choose Your Own Adventure*. Nagawa na 'yon ni Tolentino, sabi ko.

Gagawa raw s'ya ng *chimera*. Ang pangunahing texto'y *Lipunan at Rebolusyong Pilipino*. Ang mga *noun* daw ay papalitan n'ya ng mga *noun* mula sa kahit anong *romance novel*. Ang mga *verb*, mula sa mga kolum ng Xerex. Ang mga *adjective*, mula sa *Kapitan Sino*. *Heret* 'yon, sabi ni U, *Heret* ang pagbigkas, wag kang nakakahiya.

Gusto n'yang gumawa ng bersyon n'ya ng *Isang Daang Milyong Tula*. Gagawa raw s'yang epiko na *chronogram*, kulay 1984 dahil iyon ang petsa ng kanyang kapanganakan. Gagawa s'ya ng *cylinder* na nobela. Kahit saang kabanata ka magsimula, sabi ni U, pwede, kahit saang kabanata ka tumuloy, pwede. Walang hanggang libro.

Gagawa raw s'ya ng serye ng mga kasabihan gamit ang metodo ni Delma. Baba, bantot ba? Hindi ko pa sigurado, sabi ni U. Kailangan ko pa ng oras, sabi ni U. May oras na raw s'ya, ngayong *break* na sila.

Gagawa raw s'ya ng *eodermdrome*. Iyong bersyong salita, sabi ni U. Mahirap masyado 'pag titik. Hahanap daw s'ya ng kakilalang mag-aasawa tapos gagawan n'ya ng *epithalmium*. Sa totoo, sabi ni U, dapat gagawan ko kami ni Clementine. Makakahanap ka rin ng bagong *girlfriend*, sabi ko. Hindi iyon totoo.

Gagayahin daw ni U si Goldsmith. Gagawa s'ya ng nobela na *encoding* ng isang *tabloid*. Gagawa s'ya ng nobela na *transcript* ng isang araw ng *broadcast* ng *Love Radio*. Gagawa raw s'ya ng sarili n'yang *radio station*. *Axiomatic* 'Yan! Deleuze FM! Puro raw musikang gawa n'ya ang papatugtugin dito. Mala-Cage, sabi ni U. "Leron Leron Sinta" na may tatlong minutong katahimikang sa pagitan ng bawat nota. Para 'yung *jazz* na inilarawan sa isang episode ng *Parks and Recreation*. Sabay na pagpapatugtog ng lahat ng kanta ng *Eraserheads*. Gagawa raw s'ya ng *Tumblr* na *sottosalin*. Minsan nagtatagal sa pag-ibig, minsan, imbes, masakit.

Gagawa raw s'ya ng *grammatical translation* ng, ng, ng... Tanong ko, ng ano? Ewan, sabi ni U. Dapat *Florante at Laura*, kaso wala s'yang memo-ryadong linya. Tsaka may ganun ng baryasyon sa *El Bimbo* ni David, sabi ko.

Gagawa raw s'ya ng sarili n'yang bersyon ng mga kanta ng *Eraser-heads*. Di ba kasi, sabi ni U, sa "Pare Ko," puro mura. Pero pagdating sa ibang kanta, *censored* na. Tatanggalin ko ang *censorship*, sabi ni U. Sa "*Kama Supra*"! Ba't di ka na lang sumama? Sa "*Sembreak*"! Kumustang bakasyon mo? Ako heto pa rin, nababato, tumatae sa banyo. Sa "Huling El Bimbo"! Sa panaginip na lang pala kita magagalaw. *Censored* pa rin ang magagalaw, sabi ko. Tarantado raw ako, sabi ni U. S'ya na nga raw ang nawalan ng *girlfriend*, ako pa ang may ganang mang-*correct*.

Gagawa s'ya ng parodiya gamit ang algoritmo ni Matthews. Gagawa s'ya ng nobelang *palindrome*. Aba direk, kerida ba? Gagawa s'ya ng *slenderized* na gawa ni Bonifacio. Ang dapat mabati ng mga Tagalog. Gagawa s'ya ng *snowball*. Gagawa s'ya ng tula para sa mga utal. Aanhin ang hinhin sa salbaheng babae. Gagawa s'ya ng *left-handed lipogram* tungkol sa pangan-galiwa. May *lipogram* ka na, sabi ko. Puro naman galing sa *Oulipo Compendium* ang gagawin mo.

Hindi, sabi ni U. *Springboard* daw n'ya 'yun, pero marami pang iba. *Asemic writing. Cut up. N + 7. Oulipo* ulit, sabi ko. Gusto raw n'yang mag-pakalunod sa proyekto, sabi ni U. Pero hindi n'ya magawa. Bawat isulat n'ya, nagiging tungkol sa *girlfriend* n'ya.

Isalin mo na lang ang *Finnegans Wake* sa Filipino, sabi ko. Tapsilog, sabi ni U.

Madalas i-Google ni U ang sarili n'ya. Kadalasan ay mga *blog* lang n'ya ang lumalabas. Meron din iyong *family picture* nila na nasa *blog* ng hipag n'ya. Iyong may *post* kung saan nakasiliwalat ang mga sikreto n'yang pam-pamilya lang dapat. Tipong palayaw n'ya noong bata (Utotino), tipong mga detalye sa kanyang pagtutuli (*second year high school* na s'ya natabasan). Pero minsan, pag napapahukay s'ya, nakakakita s'ya ng mga post ng estudyante n'ya. Masakit, sabi ni U. May isa raw, sinabing nakikitawa lang kahit *corny* s'ya. May isa naman, panay ang kumento tungkol sa kanyang katabaan.

Madalas pag-awayan ni U at ng *girlfriend* n'ya noon ang pakikitungo n'ya sa mga estudyante. Guro rin kasi ito, at mas bukas ang lapit sa pagtu-

turo. *High school* kasi e, sabi ni U, mababait pa. Tas, syempre, *adviser* s'ya. E di mas malapit sila.

Mahilig ipagmalaki ni U na kahit hindi n'ya estudyante ay *dina-drop* n'ya. Ang nangyari kasi, nagpalit sila ng room ng isa n'yang *co-teacher*. May dumating na lalake isang araw, hindi n'ya kilala. Estudyante ko raw s'ya, sabi ni U. Dalawang linggo ka nang *absent*, sabi raw n'ya dun sa estudyante. Drop ka na! Saka lang n'ya natantong malamang sa malamang estudyante ito ng *co-teacher* n'ya. S'ya rin naman ang may kasalanan, sabi ni U, kung nag-*drop* nga s'ya. Ba't naman s'ya papayag ma-*drop* ng hindi n'ya guro?

Madalas magpunit ng papel si U. 'Pag walang *page number*. 'Pag hindi naka-*staple*. 'Pag mali ang *margin, font size, spacing*. 'Pag mali ang *spelling* ng pangalan n'ya. 'Pag ginagawang apelyido ang pangalan n'ya. 'Pag nilalagyan ng *period* ang U. 'Pag sa wikang Ingles nakasulat. Damay-damay 'pag magalit s'ya. 'Pag natapon na n'ya sa sahig ang papel ng isang estudyante, hahanapan n'ya ng mali ang susunod. Lukot ang papel. Asul ang tinta.

Madalas, 'pag nagkikita ang mga guro, puro reklamo sa estudyante ang usapan. May dalawang *co-teacher* si U, *thesis adviser* at *critic* ng isang *graduating*. Nang magsalita ang *critic* sa presentasyon ng estudyante, panay ang bara sa kanya. Sumbong ng *adviser*, noong silang dalawa na lang daw ang magkasama, tinawag na epal ng estudyante ang *critic*, na para bang hindi nito alam na magkaibigan sila! May isa pang *co-teacher* si U, may pilit na nagpa-*enlist* dahil kulang daw sa *units*. Pagkatapos ng unang *meeting*, gusto nitong lumipat ng *section*, na-estriktuhan. Pagkatapos, bumalik, pinagbawalan daw ng *registrar*. Pagkatapos, hindi na pumasok. Hindi na sila takot sa singko, hindi na sila takot na masayang ang *tuition*. Hindi na sila takot sa amin, sabi ni U.

May isang beses daw, dalawang linggo silang pasok para maisulat ng mga estudyante ang kanilang *major paper*. Pilit daw ipinapasa ng isa ang tatlong pirasong *yellow paper*. At nang pinapalabas n'ya sa kwarto, ayaw umalis. Pilit pa rin nang pilit na tanggapin n'ya ang sulat kamay nitong gawa. Hindi sa garantiya ang 20 pahinang nakaprint sa kalidad. Ang isa pa raw n'yang estudyante sa klaseng iyon, nag-*plagiarize* mula sa Internet ng pagsusuri sa sosyalismo ni Ka Amado. Pero panis pa rin daw 'yon sa estudyante n'ya noon sa UPLB. Nagko-*quote* ng 1903 na pag-aaral tungkol kay Edgar Allan Poe.

Madalas ma-*parody* si U ng kanyang mga estudyante. Sa ginagawa nilang *skit* para sa *video presentation*. Sa ginagawa nilang maikling kwento. Laging may gurong masungit na panay ang pagpapalabas sa mga estudyante. Kahit daw sampung taon na s'yang nagtuturo, nasasaktan pa rin s'ya. Pero 'yon ako e, sabi ni U. Ako 'yung kontrabida.

Hindi tao ang tingin ni U sa mga estudyante n'ya. Mga *parasite* daw ito. Mga *hoodlum*. Mga *lumpen*. Mga konyo. Mga kaaway. Mga walang karapatang umupo sa sira-sirang silya ng *College of Arts and Letters*. Mga walang karapatang masinagan ng kukurap-kurap na *flourescent lamp* ng AVR ng Departamento ng Filipino at Panitikan ng Pilipinas. May isa raw s'yang estudyante, nagsulat ng *graphic sex scene* tungkol sa dalawang trese anyos. Nang ni-*reject* n'ya ang maikling kwento nito, nagkelamo ang estudyante na panay daw ang kanyang gastos sa klase.

Mahilig mag-*stalk* ng estudyante si U. Noong bago magsara ang *Friendster*, sinubukan n'yang *i-add* lahat ng kakilala n'yang estudyante sa *Facebook*. Awa ng Diyos, may isang naging *friend* n'ya. Kaso in-*unfriend* din ako, sabi ni U. Hindi raw n'ya alam kung bakit. Nag-*like* lang naman s'ya ng *picture* nito. Nakabikini raw. Pero hindi lang daw s'ya 'yung tanging *teacher* na nag-*like*. Marami raw nag-*comment*, at isa roon ay sir din ang tawag ng estudyante.

Kahit sa mabait na estudyante, nagkakaproblema si U. Isang beses, nagkaroon s'ya ng estudyanteng ngongo. Panay daw ang *recite*. Hindi raw n'ya maintindihan madalas ang sinasabi. Panay lang ang tango n'ya. Binigyan ko ng uno, sabi ni U. Mataas naman sa *quizzes*. Sa ibang klase naman, nagtatalo sila tungkol sa aborsyon. Tanong ni U, paano kung may Down Syndrome ang *fetus*. Nabasa raw n'ya kasi kay Peter Singer ang argumengtong iyon. May naiyak na estudyante. *Special* pala 'yung kapatid. Panay ang *sorry* ko, sabi ni U. Pati raw tuloy mga *pro-choice* ang posisyon na kaklase nung umiyak, naging *pro-life*.

Sa UPLB noon, may estudyante si U na laging late. Umaga ang klase nila, at sa una'y pinagbibigyan n'ya ito. Ang kaso, naging madalas na makasalubong na kasama ang *girlfriend*. Lagi n'ya tuloy nabubulyawan. Sa dulo ng sem, punong-puno na s'ya. Sa huling araw ng klase nila, *late* ulit. E presentasyon ng *final project*, sabi ni U. So nung dumating, pinatayo ko sa sulok. Sumunod naman daw iyong estudyante. Tahimik lang, sampung minutong walang imik. Pagkatapos, nagtaas ng kamay. Hindi

n'ya muna pinansin. Pagkatapos, tinarayan n'ya. Wala akong pakialam kung sumabog ang pantog mo d'yan, sabi ni U, hindi ka pwedeng bumanyo. Nangulit. Taas nang taas nang kamay, sabi ni U, akala mo inaabot ang kisame. Pwede ba raw s'yang umupo na. Nabundol daw kasi s'ya habang papunta sa klase nila.

Niloloko ka lang nun, sabi ko. Ang *melodramatic* na nga ng binebenta, binili mo pa. Na-guilty daw kasi s'ya. Bahagi ng rason kung bakit s'ya asar na asar sa estudyanteng iyon ay dahil estudyante n'ya rin 'yung *girlfriend*, at *crush* na *crush* n'ya. Naging *crush* daw n'ya 'yung babae bago pa man n'ya maging estudyante. Anak daw kasi ito ng may-ari ng isa sa lagi n'yang kinakainang karinderya sa gilid ng LB. Serbidora. Mabilis mag-*refill* ng tubig.

Maraming *crush* na estudyante si U. Ang problema, puro bobo. Merong isa, bilang *joke*, tinanong n'ya kung bakit nag-iiba ang hitsura ng buwan. *Physics major* kasi, sabi ni U. Dahil daw sa mga ulap, sabi ng estudyante. Hindi raw nagbibiro, sabi ni U. Hindi raw talaga alam kung ano ang dahilan, at iyon ang pinakamagaling na hula.

Meron din namang mga *crush* n'ya, at medyo may utak, at palakaibigan. Kaso nga lang, kaibigan talaga ang tingin sa kanya. Panay ang kwento tungkol sa mga lalake. Mayroong isa, limang taon nang *girlfriend* pero hindi pa ipinapakilala sa pamilya. Di lang sa mga magulang, pati sa mga kapatid. Pati sa mga kaibigan. Meron namang isa, panay ang kwento tungkol sa *crush* na *prof*. Gwapo raw, sabi ni U. Matalino raw, sabi ni U. *Co-teacher* pala n'ya. Ayun, huli n'yang balita, sila na nga.

May reputasyon na si U, pero hindi bilang pumapatol sa estudyante, kundi bilang bakla. Lahat daw kasi ng kaibigan n'ya, bakla. At iyon daw ang laging tinatanong ng estudyante, kung bakla s'ya. Ayaw n'yang sagutin. Sabi raw kasi si Sedgwick, hindi raw dapat nag-a-out bilang *straight*. *Homophobic* daw 'yon, sabi ni U. O *heterocentric*? Hindi raw n'ya maintindihan. Basta raw, hindi dapat umaaming *het*. Mahilig sa teorya si U. Buong identidad n'ya bilang guro, nakabase sa teorya. Kaya raw hindi s'ya nagpapa-*exam*. Kasi hindi raw iyong tamang sukatan ng talino. Tsaka raw, kahit araw-araw s'yang nagpapagawa ng *reaction paper*, hindi n'ya tsinetsakan. Ang kailangan daw kasi, ma-*practice* ang pagsusulat ng mga estudyante, hindi ang kanyang pagbabasa. Ang kasalukuyang n'yang obsesyon, *gamification*. Kailangan daw maging parang *roleplaying game* ang klase. May *character sheets*.

May *level ups*. May *rewards*. Tanong ko, hindi ba sapat na *reward* ang mataas na *grade*?

Naiinggit si U sa mga estudyante n'ya. Kung *undergrad* lang daw s'ya ngayon, ang dali sana ng buhay. Mas maraming *mall*. Mas buhay ang *Internet*. Puro *text* ang mga tao. At mas malandi. Noon daw nasa kolehiyo s'ya, marami s'yang pagkakamali. Panay daw ang *concentrate* n'ya sa isang babae lang. Puro s'ya pag-ibig. Sabi ko, serial monogamist. Magkaiba raw iyon. Hindi kasi maka-*move on* si U mula sa pagkakabasted. Kaya kukulitin n'ya nang kukulitin ang nililigawan, kahit na ilang beses na s'ya nitong tinatanggihan. Wala rin namang bumibigay. S'ya lang din daw ang nagsasawa. Pagkatapos, maiinlab s'ya sa iba. Iyon naman daw ang kanyang pagpupursigihan. Pagsasayangan ng panahon. Wala s'yang oong natatanggap. Walang pag-ibig n'ya ang ibinabalik. Kung *undergrad* lang daw s'ya ngayon, hindi na s'ya iibig. Maglililiwaliw lang daw s'ya. Puro *chat* at *text* lang, puro kain sa labas at sine. Walang seryosohan. At walang ligawan. Para wala ring basted.

Wala ibang pantasya si U kundi ang bumata ulit. Para raw maitama n'ya lahat ng kanyang pagkakamali. Mag-aaral daw s'ya ng *European Languages*. Kailangan daw n'yang matuto ng Aleman at Pranses. At siguro Espanyol, sabi ni U. Mag-aaral daw s'yang lumangoy. Mag-aaral daw s'yang magbisikleta. Tsaka mag-*drive*, sabi ni U. Tsaka magluto. Tsaka kumain ng iba't iba. Hindi iyong puro prito. Kakain daw s'ya ng gulay. Tsaka magdi-*gym*. Magpapalaki raw s'ya ng masel. Matututo ng *boxing*. Tsaka lahat ng pwede n'yang araling *martial arts*, mula kung fu hanggang judo. Pwera lang daw taekwando, dahil iyon ang *sport* ng naging *boyfriend* ng *girlfriend* n'ya. Lagi n'yang binabanggit 'yon, sabi ni U. Kaya raw magaling 'yung lalake sa pananakal.

Gusto raw n'yang subukan lahat ng hindi n'ya pa nasusubukan. Gusto n'yang sumakay ng *roller coaster*. Gusto n'yang magdroga. Hindi lang marijuana, sabi ni U. Tipong *heroin*, ganyan. *Ecstasy*. Gusto raw n'yang mag-*disco*. *Bar*, sabi ko.

Gusto raw n'yang maging kumpleto ang kanyang buhay. Kaso hindi naman nga s'ya pwedeng maging bata muli. Kaya di kailanman n'ya mabubuo. Tanong ko, bakit hindi mo gawin ngayon 'yung mga sinasabi mo? Huli na raw, sabi ni U. Masyado na raw s'yang mahina para maging *sporty*. Ayaw na n'yang matuto. Takot na raw s'ya masyado para mag-*roller*

coaster, o mag-*heroin*. Masyado na raw s'yang matanda para sa *disco*. Ang pinakakatanggap-tanggap na lang, magpunta s'ya sa *beerhouse*.

Ang tanging *option* na lang daw, ang gawin ang mga pangarap n'ya pag matanda na s'ya. Iyong tipong wala na ang mga magulang n'ya, para walang mapapahiya. Syempre, hindi na pwede ang ilan sa kanyang listahan. Pero pwede pa rin daw s'yang mag-*ecstasy*. Tsaka mag-*roller blades*. Tsaka mag-judo. *Bucket list* bale, sabi ko. List syempre, sabi ni U, para maisa-isa.

Nahihirapan si U pag nagri-*reach out* sa kanya ang mga estudyante. Isang sem, sa huling araw ng klase, may nagdala ng *cake*. Sinundo ko si U mula sa UP noon. Inaalok s'ya ng *cake* ng mga estudyante, pero nagmamadali n'ya akong hinila paalis. Isang *summer* naman daw, may nagyaya sa kanyang mag-*swimming*. Sa Commonwealth daw, sabi ni U, pinaparentahan bale ng may-ari 'yung *pool*. Para lang daw sa Laguna. Tinanong pa s'ya ng mga estudyante n'ya kung umiinom s'ya. Ang sabi n'ya hindi. Bakit daw hindi. Nagsimula s'yang magtalumpati tungkol sa kasamaan ng alak. Ilang minuto rin ang inabot bago nagtaas ng kamay ang isang estudyante n'ya. Kahit na raw hindi s'ya uminom, sama pa rin daw s'ya. Hindi pwede, sabi ni U, masama raw tingnan. Pero sa totoo raw, kahit mabuting tingnan, hindi pa rin s'ya sasama. *Anti-social* lang talaga s'ya.

Iba pag sa klase n'ya nakakaengkwentro ang mga estudyante. Sa *classroom*, nakasuot s'ya ng maskara. S'ya 'yung apelyido ang tawag sa estudyante. S'ya 'yung naninigaw. S'ya 'yung walang argumentong nakakakumbinsi. S'ya 'yung mahilig magpatawa pero hindi tumatawa pag estudyante ang nag-*joke*. Nasasanay ka sa *role* mo, sabi ni U, parang kontrabida. Sa huli, wala ka nang ibang pwedeng gampanan.

Hindi naman talaga pinangarap ni U maging guro. Ang balak n'ya noon magtrabaho sa dyaryo, kasi iyon ang akala n'yang trabaho ng mga gustong maging manunulat. Tapos isang araw, nagreport s'ya. *College* na ito. Nagreport s'ya, at nahusayan s'ya sa sarili n'yang pagsasalita. Walang kwenta ang report ng mga kaklase n'ya. Doon n'ya unang sineryoso ang ideya na maging guro. Apat ang kanyang naging modelo. Isang matabang gurong kwento nang kwento tungkol sa iba't ibang manunulat, na puro lang *joke* at wala man lang *syllabus*. Isang baklang gurong puro tsismis. Isang babaeng gurong parating absent, at walang kaabog-abog magpahiram ng libro. At isang matandang gurong na-*torture* noong Martial Law. Iyong huli lang daw ang tradisyonal magturo. Iyong may *quizzes* at *reporting* at *lecture*.

Ito ang naging introdusyon n'ya sa mundo ng teorya, at sa teorya ng popular na kultura. Iyong tatlo, puro manunulat. Kaya siguro burara, sabi ni U. Kaya ako nagkaganito. Sila ang mga modelo ko.

Ebolusyon daw s'ya. Lohikal na konklusyon. Distilasyon. Pinakabagong iterasyon. Alam n'ya kung ano ang tingin ng mga estudyante sa mga klaseng itinuturo n'ya. Walang kwenta ang Filipino. Walang kwenta ang *general education*. Alam n'yang kaya lang s'ya pinipili ng mga ito imbes na ang kanyang mga kapwa guro ay dahil s'ya ang may reputasyon na mataas magbigay ng grado at kaunti lang ang pinapagawa. Bilang ganti, ibinibigay lang n'ya sa mga ito ang kanilang inaasahan. Reporting na hindi kailangan ng input. Edukasyon bilang memorisasyon. Alam n'ya kung ano s'ya. Turnilyo sa isang dambuhalang makina. Alam n'yang hindi s'ya magiging dakila. Alam n'yang hindi magiging dakila ang mga tinuturuan n'ya. Alam n'yang bigo s'ya, at mabibigo sila. Alam n'yang walang sinoman ang may patutunguhan. Walang makakaalala sa akin, sabi ni U. Walang makakaalala sa atin.

Dahil sa *stroke*, balbado na ang tatay ni U. S'ya ng kanyang nanay ang nag-aalaga rito. Hindi. Ang nanay n'ya ang nag-aalaga sa kanilang dalawa. Hindi kasi tumutulong sa bahay si U.

Ganito ang pang-araw-araw n'yang buhay. Gigising s'ya ng alas otso ng umaga. Papatayin n'ya ang laptop na pang-*torrent* at bubuksan ang isa pang *laptop*. Ito ang gagamitin n'yang pang-*computer* buong araw. Inom s'ya ng kanyang *fiber-rich drink* habang nag-i-*Internet*. Babanyo s'ya ng mga alas nueve. Alas-diyes na s'ya lalabas ng banyo. Pagkabihis, direktso s'ya sa kusina para sa *second breakfast*. Tinapay. Madalas tasty, o di kaya'y monay. Paminsan-minsan, pan de red. Pag pan de red lagi s'yang napapasobra. Hanggang alas-onse nasa tapat s'ya ng computer. Pag may pasok. Dahil walang pasok, hanggang alas-dose s'ya nakatutok sa *screen*. Alas-dose tawagin s'ya para magtanghalian. Kakain sila ng nanay n'ya, pagkatapos ay pupunta ito ng kwarto para pakainin ang tatay n'ya.

Taong 2010 na-*stroke* ang tatay ni U, isang buwan na halos ang una nilang mahabaang paghihiwalay ng girlfriend n'ya. Kasalanan ko, sabi ni U, nag-away kami tungkol sa aso. Fulgoso ang pangalan ng aso. Pag-aari ito ng *tenant* nila. Bawal dapat silang magkaaso, sabi ni U. Pero pumayag ang tatay n'ya. Tatlong maliit na bahay, mala-*squatter*, ang pinauupahan nila U. Katabing-katabi nila ang tenant na ayaw ni U. Kasi, pabaya ito. Kaedad

n'ya, pero may asawa't anak na. Kalahating-Briton, hindi man lang marunong mag-Filipino, at nanay ang nagbabayad para sa renta. Madalas makipagsigawan sa asawa. Madalas makipag-inuman hanggang madaling araw. Madalas mag-*park* sa tapat ng gate nila. Inggit si U sa yaman nito. Inggit si U sa ganda ng asawa nito. Inggit si U na wala itong trabaho pero nagagawa nito lahat ng pagpapakasarp na pangarap n'ya.

Bumili ito ng aso. Hindi nito inalagaan. Tatay at nanay ni U ang nag-alaga sa aso. Sila ang nagpakain. Sila ang nagpaligo. Sila ang nagpangalan. Mas kinikilala nito ang Fulgoso kaysa sa kung ano ang tawag dito ng may-ari. Sa una, hindi pinapansin ni U ang aso. Tinatahulan pa nga s'ya nito. Buti na lang maliit lang at askal, sabi ni U, kundi natakot ako. Unti-unti, napalapit na rin s'ya kay Fulgoso. Nagsimula sa pagbibigay ng kapisirong *hotdog*, nauwi sa pakikipaghabulan. Walang *girlfriend* si U noon, at dahil sa sakit at madalas nasa bahay imbes na sa mall. Isang araw natagpuan na lang n'ya ang sariling kinukutuhan si Fulgoso.

Pero kahit sila ang nag-aalaga, hindi sila ang may-ari. Sa bahay pa rin ng lasenggerong kalahating-Briton umuuwi ang aso. Hindi nila ito nababantayan mula sa alas otso ng gabi (pagkatapos itong pakainin ng hapunan) hanggang ala sais ng umaga (oras ng agahan). Dapat kasi, sabi ni U, aalis na 'yung *tenant*. Nagpaalam na ito. Kinain na 'yung *advance* sa bahay. Ang mangyayari, iiwan na sa kanila 'yung aso. Gusto sana ni U, sa bahay na nila ito matulog. Pero isang buwan na lang naman e, ano pa ang pinagkaiba? Ang pinagkaiba pala ay patay na ito.

Nasagasaan si Fulgoso. Uso sa barangay nila ang pagmomotor, at ayun, nahagip. Isang umaga, hindi na lang ito sumipot para sa agahan. Nakita ito ng isa pa nilang *tenant*, nakahandusay isang kanto ang layo mula sa bahay nila. Sinisi ni U ang tatay n'ya. Pinagbigyan kasi nito ang mga utang ng kalahating-Briton sa renta. Pinagbigyan kasi nito ang pagba-*bribe* ng kalahating-Briton sa nag-iinspeksyon para hindi putulan ng ilaw. Pinagbigyan kasi nitong magkaaso ang kalahating-Briton, pinagbigyan nitong magpabaya, pinagbigyan nitong patayin si Fulgoso. Minsan nang inatake sa puso ang tatay ni U, at madalas ginagamit ang pagiging sakitin para sa *emo blackmail*. Akala ni U pumepeke lang ito nang mangisay. Ayun, may napatid na pala sa utak.

Subukan man ni U, hindi s'ya makaramdam ng *guilt*. Pag naiisip n'yang humingi ng tawad, naiisip n'ya 'yung aso. Isa pa, wala rin naman

nang saysay pang mag-*sorry*. Hindi na rin naman s'ya maiintindihan ng tatay n'ya. Hindi na ito makapagsalita. Wala na ring indikasyong naiintidihan pa nito ang mga sinasabi nila. Ang alam na lang nito ay kumain. Hindi na nga ito marunong bumanyo. Sa puntong iyon lang may simpatya si U sa tatay n'ya. Nakasuot na ito ng *adult diapers* dahil wala nang kontrol sa kawatan. Madalas matae sa pantalon si U, mula elementarya hanggang ngayon. Paano'y naging senyales nga ng paghilom sa kanya ang pag-utot, ang pag-utot nang walang sakit. Kaya utot s'ya nang utot, at hindi iisang beses na may sumabay na tae.

Madalas ding may problema si U sa pag-ihi. Isang hapon noong *high school* pa s'ya, pauwi na s'ya nang makaramdam ng pag-iinarte ng pantog. Isang kanto na ang layo n'ya mula sa *gate* ng UPIS, kaya umihi na lang s'ya sa pantalon n'ya. Umaambon din naman, at naisip n'ya walang makakapan-sin. Ngayon namang nagtuturo na, madalas n'yang maihian ang *area* sa may *zipper*, sa pundilyo. O di kaya'y ang kanyang mga daliri. Mahina na kasi ang ihi ni U, at madalas s'yang makaramdam na may kailangan s'yang ilabas kahit na wala naman s'yang malabas.

Buti na rin na iniwan n'ya ako, sabi ni U. Naaawa s'ya sa nanay n'ya ngayon. Gusto nito ng paglalamyerdá. Gusto nitong pumunta sa iba't ibang bansa. Ang pagreretiro nito dapat ang magbibigay ng kalayaan sa kanya. Imbes, nakapako ito sa bahay nila, nag-aalaga ng isang baldado at isang batugan. Hanggang kamatayan ang sumpaang mag-asawa, at lampas pa rito ang sumpa ng pagkakaroon ng anak. Ayaw ni U ng responsibilidad, pero higit pa rito, ayaw n'yang maging responsibilidad. Limang taon na kasi kami, sabi ni U. Kailangang umusad. Kung hindi kami magbi-*break*, sabi ni U, kailangan naming magpakasal. At ayaw n'yang magpakasal. Ayaw n'yang sumumpa. Ayaw n'ya ng walang hanggan.

Mahilig mamilosopo si U tungkol sa pagmamahal. Ang pagmamahaldaw ay ang pagpapayabong ng sarili sa pamamagitan ng pagpapayabong sa iba. Halaman, sabi ko, halaman tayo. Halaman, sabi ni U, at hardinero. Sa kanyang pagpapakahulugan lang daw mayroong *consistency* ang pagmamahal. Sa depinisyong ito, sabi ni U, pwede mong mahalín ang iyong ina, ang iyong syota, ang iyong bayan, ang iyong aso, ang iyong pagsusulat. Ito ang pinakamakasariling pakikipagkapwa. Ang pinakamaganda sa kanya, sabi ni U, pwede mo s'yang gawin nang mag-isa.



-TILDE

poetry

Mga Dili Angay Hikalimtan/ Necessary Memories

Merlie M. Alunan

Habilin

Alang kang Geronima Nacionales, bayani sa Balangiga

i

kalag nga wa namo tawaga, ngano kang motangka
sa talad kan-anan, Apoy, nga kaniadto pa, amo nang
gitugyan sa kalangitan? Mokalit lag tugnaw ang sabaw,
ang bahaw mangaging sa among plato, ug manuhotsuhot
sa among ilong ang nipis nga baho sa dugo.
Mamaliktad among tiyan, unsa pa may sud-an sa panaksan,
amo na lang talikdan ang kan-anan nga gutom.

Lubos baya ang pangaliya sa imong pagpanaw—
ang siyam ka adlaw nga nobena, ang kwarenta diyas
nga pagsaulog sa imong pagkayab, ang hubkas,
tanang amo gyung giayo pagsaulog.
Ang imong escapularyo sa Madre Dolorosa,
mga balaan nga medalya, rosaryohan,
mga nobenahan, bendita sa lukay, among
gisulod sa imong lungon isip pabalon, basin
sa imong paghimata sa tiilan sa Ginoo,
Iyang mapamatud-an nga ikaw buotan

ug matinud-anong anak. Saksi baya ang tanan
dihang gibenditahan ang imong lubong
sa paring piangon, ang kataposang buhi
nga among nailhan sa mga nahilambigit
niadtong dakong sangka nga nahitabo
kaniadto sa lungsod sa Balangiga.

ii

Apoy, nganong gihisol nimo akong katulogon?
Akong mga damgo napuno na lang gyud
sa imong hunghong. Moukiok sa akong dalunggan
ang imong hagawhaw, pulos mga pangutana
nga lisod sabton ug tubagon. Nahibalo kaha ka
nga nanglipang ang katalagman ning among panahon?
Morag mga apan nga mikutkot sa kataposang udlot
sa among mga paninguha. Apoy, kinahanglan mig
pahuway, katulog, aron inigkaugma duna mi kusog
ibugwal sa napan-as nga mga bukiran, iaswat
sa mga kargamento sa pantalan, ilatas sa lain-laing
mga dalanon sa among paningkamot. Tingali kahag
wa ka makapamilinbilin og tim-os, Apoy, mao nang
magbalikbalik ka karon. Intawon kubti na lang
nang imong mga habilin, dad-a ngadto sa Ginoo,
asa man gani Siya karon, ay' na lag kabalaka namo,
ay' na lang mig samoka. Kanang kaalam o kusog
nga buot nimong isangon kanamo, palihog,
ayaw na lag hasola imong kaugalingon,
sa imong pagpahuway padayon na intawon.

Dugay na ming wa katanda sa imong lubnganan,
nagsapaw-sapaw na kaha didto ang gatos ka tuig
nga mga bukog, sukad nahitabo kadtong dugoong
panagsanka sa Balangiga. Adlaw-adlaw
tibuok nimong kinabuhi sayod ming giludhan mo
kadtong ngilngig nga panghitabo, magalakaw ka
sa imong tuhod gikan sa pultahan sa simbahan
ngadto sa altar, busa gikublan kunog baga
ang imong mga tuhod. Unsay imong giampo, Apoy?
Ang mga gipangmatay, o kadtong mga nangharos
ug kinabuhi? Ang tanan sad-an man, ang tanan, Apoy.
Way mapili. Usahay among ihapon ang nangawala,
hinganlan ang nangapildi, apan wa miy siguro—
sibo kaha ni sa panghitabo, takdo kaha sa matuod?
Nangalagiw baya ang tanan, human sa sangka,
iyahay'g panago, panagka sa bukid, panglayaw.
Pag-ugdaw sa kalayo nga maoy naglinis sa lungsod,
kinsa pa may moukay sa abo pag-ila sa nangatodas?
Gikakha ug gikahig na lang to sa mga manok ang abo,
ang kabukogan, nahisagol sa yuta
ug gianod sa ulan ngadto sa Himanglos.

Apoy, ay' na intawog hasola akong mga daman
sa imong mga bagutbot nga lugos nako masabtan.
A, sayod kong buot nimong ang tanan
mahinumdoman namo, buot nimong masaysay,
makulit sa panumdoman ang mga hinungdan
sa panghitabo, masabtan sa kalibotan og ngano,
ngano, ngano, nga sukwahi sa balaanong sugo,
ug sugo sa tawohanong tanlag ug garbo,
ang usa ka balangay kinahanglang mopatay
ug magpakamatay, aron sila magpakabuhi
nga tawohanon. Imong hagonghong kanamo,
Hinumdomi kining mga pangutana.

Dayong buga sa imong tugnawng gininhawa
sa akong tangkugo, manindog ra ba ang buhok
sa akong tingkoy. O na, hala, di man gyud ko nimo
pakatulgon, sige na, sige na, Apoy, ayaw na dihag
langas, nia na ning papel, nia nay lapis, hala kapti,
tultoli akong kamot. Magsugod ta....

Agusto 15, 2012

Last Words

For Geronima Nacionales, heroine of Balangiga

i

Unwanted ghost, why do you sit
at the table with us, old mother whom
we had resigned long ago to heaven?
The soup turns suddenly cold, the left-over rice
hardens on our plates, and in our nostrils rises
the faint smell of blood. Our stomach turns,
whatever meat there is on the platter,
we turn away from the board, hungry.

Didn't we give you full honors in death?
The nine-day prayer, forty days of mourning,
the feast of your ascension, the formal rite to end
our mourning, all of these we duly performed.
Everyone witnessed the lame priest,
sprinkling holy water on your coffin,
he, the last survivor after you of that long-ago
bloody fray in the town of Balangiga.

The Mater Dolorosa scapular,
your hoard of sacred medals, rosary beads,
novenaries, the Lenten palms, all these
we had carefully placed inside your coffin,
your going away provender, so to speak, so that
when you awaken in the next life at God's feet,
He will quickly recognize His true daughter.

Old mother, please stop troubling my sleep.
You fill my dreams with noises of your whispers.
Your mumblings pierce my ears, full of questions
I can neither answer nor understand.
The times we live now are rife with perils
as in your times, do you know that?
Fear like locusts gnawing endlessly
at the buds of our endeavors. Old mother,
we too need rest, we need sleep, that we may
regain power to till our arid lands, lift cargo
in our seaports, walk our separate roads
to find the means to thrive. Did you die
before you could say what needed
to be said, old mother, is that why you keep
haunting us today? Please, I beg you,
keep those words to yourself, or take them to God,
wherever He bides these days, don't worry
about us, don't add to the burdens we bear.
That wisdom or strength you want to lay
upon our shoulders, I beg you, lay them away
from yourself, instead, go, go away to your rest.

True, we had been neglecting your grave.
The bones of a hundred years must be
piling up there now, since that bloody day
in Balangiga. This we know, that every day
of your life you had prayed for that fatal day,
walking from church door to altar on your knees
until they grew callused. For whom were you
praying, old mother, was it for those who were killed,
or for the killers? You must know as we do,
old mother, no one is blameless, everyone sinned.
Sometimes we stop to count the dead, or call
the names of the vanquished, but never sure
whom we had missed. After the fray,
everyone fled, went into hiding,
took to the hills, or left the island.
When the fire which cleansed the town
subsided, who were left to stir the ashes
to recover all that we had lost?

Only the chickens came back to scabble
among the ashes, the bones mingled
with the earth, they drained with the rain
to the flood of Himanglos.

Old mother, I beg you, quit troubling me
with the nightmares of your grumbling
that I can barely understand. Ah, I know it,
you want everything to be remembered,
you want the whole story to be told,
etched in everyone's memory—how things
happened as they did—so the world may know
why contrary to holy writ, and driven
by will and conscience, a whole village
must kill, or be killed, that they may live
as humans. Why, why, why?
Please keep these questions in your mind,
and you breathe your cold breath
making every hair on my head rise.

All right, okay, you won't let me sleep,
go on, go on. Old mother, lay off now,
I have paper, here's a pen, now then
guide my hand. Let us begin...

August 15, 2012

Ihaw

Sa dili pa mosidlit ang adlaw guyoron na nila ang karabaw dapit sa pangpang sa Himanglos, sa may kahoy o puno sa lubi nga nagbarog diin ila kining ihigot. Usa-usa nga mangabot ang silinganan, mamungko, manikungkong sa kabatoan, maghuwat sa matansero. Isig dagkot sa ilang upos, manabako, magbalyoanay og tilad, “Diay apog, pare, diay bunga, buyo, maskada.” Magkandaiyag hikyad og istorya, damgo, kahiubos, lansis, yaga-yaga, pakatawa.

Bugnaw ang adlaw sa sayong kabuntagon ug may yamog pa ang sagbot nga gihangrab sa mananap. Wa siyay kahadlok, way kabalaka. Manabsab siya, maghulat sama sa iyang naandan, sa isangon niyang buluhaton nianang adlawa—magdaro ba, magpakaras, maghakot ug kopras, magsaog og troso. Tingali aboton siyag katingala sa kadugayan nganong gigaoran man nila ang iyang duha ka sungay og usa ka putol nga kahoy, tuyokan og pisi ug itagkos siyag hugot sa punoang lubi. Sama sa gikaandan, di siya motutol, ug matuman ang tanang pangandam. Unya

moabot ang matansero, magabitbit og bunal ug sundang talinis. Moduol sa mananap nga karon mobati nag kahangawa. Kining mga nahitabo sukwahi sa iyang naandan. Apan tungod kay wala man siyay pagduda, wa man lang gani kini moaksyon og likay pagduol sa matansero. Kalit siyang gibalbag niini, gibunalan sa alimpulo, mobuto ang iyang kalibotan, magkadurog-durog. Magpatid-patid iyang pangulhing tiil, hangtod siya malup-og.

Inigkatumba na niya, duslakon sa sundang talinis ang dapit sa tutunlan. Mosirit ang init nga dugo. Mag-aningal ang hayop gikan sa kinaunhang hagtos sa bunal hangtod kini magbuy-od sa yuta. Ang tiyabaw sa hayop madungog ngadto sa ikapitong tuktok sa Amandewing, ang iyang kasakit, kon imo gyung pamation, moguba sa pito ka tuig nimong katulogon, kay mora kinig nangutana sa mga nag-alirong, “Unsay akong sala nga inyo man kining nahimo?” Ang iyang unga magkahinay nga magkahinay. Padayon nga magbanaw ang init ug lunsayng dugo. Mangdasok ang mga tawo, mag-iyahayg salod sa nagbuhagay nga kinabuhi. Ang matigom nga dugo ila kining isagol kuno sa bag-ong hiwat nga lina, unya imnon para pabaskog. Sumala sa naandan, ang gisagol nga dugo ug tam-is nga tuba idalit sad sa mga babaying masus-an ug sa mga bata.

Moundang nag tiyabaw ang hayop.

Mao na lay madungog karon ang hagarong sa iyang hingutas nga gininhawa, hangtod mohilom na gayud. Hiwaon ang tiyan, habwaon ang gininhawaan ug dad-on sa tubig aron limpyohan. Putlon ang ulo, ang duha ka sungay. Buk-on ang bagol-bagol aron maabot ang utok nga kinaham. Anitan ang karabaw. Pikason ang lawas, ang mga pinikas tagod-tagoron aron mabahin-bahin sa mga panimalay nga mingdugok, morag mga ulmigas, pag-ambit sa karne. Ganiha ra may naghaling—sa di madugay mangalimyon ang sinugba nga atay ug tungol. Ganiha pa ming-abot ang damahan. Tagay ang tanan, pati na ang kabataan nga malipayong nagdagan-dagan, dakop-dakop, manikoy og karne nga manglasik, pira-piraso sa bukog, aron ilang iuli ug isud-an. Ang Himanglos nga maoy testigos aning tanan wa gyuy ikatug-an, padayon lang sa iyang pagdailos ngadto sa kadagatan.

Apan ikaw, ikaw karon nga ako nang gisuginlan aning akong hibatian, hinaot imo sang madungog ang tiyabaw sa gisakitan, ang agulo sa natumba ug samdan nga mananap, ang kasakit sa way dag-anan maglanog-lanog unta sa imong alimpatakan. Aron di na ko mag-inusara, duna na koy kauban, duha na ta, duha na tang magbangotan, bisan wa gud tay mahimo pagbakwi sa naandan...

Butchery

Before the sun is up, the animal is led
to the bank of the Himanglos River
where a tree or a coconut palm stands,
to which the animal is tied. The neighborhood
arrive one by one, they sit around or squat
among the rocks to wait for the butcher.
They take out their smokes, each one
lighting up his own roll, or they exchange chews,
“Some lime paste here, *pare*,” “Some betel nut?”
“Chewing tobacco, anyone?”
They dredge up stories, tell their dreams,
rehash their hurts, make jokes, make foolish talk,
to raise some laughter while waiting.

The early morning sun is cool
and the animal grazes on dew-fresh grass.
He feels no worry, no fear.
He grabs the sweet grass around him,
waiting as he is wont to do, for the day’s
work—plow the fields, harrow, pull a sled
loaded with sacks of copra, or drag lumber
down from the hills. He might have wondered
why they tie a piece of wood now to his horn
to harness him very close to the tree.
Trained to obey, he does not resist, and thus
the preparation is easily done. Then

the butcher comes, in one hand a piece of wood
and in the other a sharp-pointed knife.
He goes near the animal. Now he scents fear,
for these things that are happening are all new
and strange. Still he suspects nothing, makes no move
to evade when the butcher approaches.
Swiftly the man hits the beast one mighty blow
at the top of his head, his world explodes,
shatters into pieces. He kicks wildly with his hind legs
until he falls.

Once the beast is down he jabs
with the knife, wounding the throat. Blood spurts.
The animal screams at the first blow, the second,
the third, several blows more. The cry reaches
the seventh peak of Amandewing. If you listen well,
the cry of pain could wreck your sleep for seven years,
for it seems to be asking those around him,
“What have I done that you do this to me?”
Soon the cries grow weaker. The warm pure blood
gushes copiously. The people gather close, pushing
to get their share of the life richly pouring out.
They will mix it with fresh-tapped coconut wine
and drink it for energy and strength.
The broth will also be fed, as is customary,
to nursing women and the children.

The animal has stopped crying.
The only thing to be heard now is the growling
of his ebbing breath. Then at last, silence.
The belly is opened up, the innards are taken out
and brought down to the river to be cleaned.
The head is cut, the two horns. The skull is opened
to get to the soft brains, the choicest part.
The carabao is then skinned. The body is split,
then cut into pieces so it can be divided among
the families who had come for their share of the meat.
Someone has started a fire—very soon, the fragrance
of roasting liver and tripe will fill the air.
A demijohn of tuba had earlier arrived.
There is drink for everyone, even the children
who are happily skipping about, chasing each other,
stealing the meat flying from the butcher's knife,
pieces of bone—they'll bring it home for dinner.
The river Himanglos is witness to all these
but it just keeps flowing to the sea, and has nothing to say .

And what about you, you to whom I now tell
everything that I have heard, I pray you too,
would hear the roar of pain, the cry of the fallen,
wounded beast, I pray the agony of the oppressed
will echo deep in the caverns of your brain—
so I won't be alone, I will have you, the two of us now
to share this grief—though it's quite true, both of us,
we're powerless to change what's fixed...

August 24, 2012

Bin Laden

Ten, eleven years they hunted him. Too long a time
to keep a prize on a man's head without hunter or prey
becoming careless, giving up on the game one way
or the other. But felons have been hunted for lesser crimes—
and his, by any means, exceeds the count:
two commercial flights wrecked, their passengers killed,
national monuments demolished, two proud cities shamed,
a nation brought to mourning, the world in puzzled rage—
all on one sunlit morning of 9-11 A.D. 2001.
We sat agape all that day, not knowing what to think.
Drumbeats of war vibrated from zone to zone.
We've walked the razor's edge since then,
stalked by terror, no one spared.

Hero of the sleepless, angry, disenchanted, Osama Bin Laden.
Warrior, desert rat, bigot, fanatic, maniac, saint.
Rebel against the universal tyrannies of our age, hegemonies
of greed. Honor we begrudge him—this devotee
whose causes crumble on the threshold of our facile pieties.
Slurping our thinned teas and watery rice gruel,
we simple folks blamed him for all our ills—sun and ice,
drought and flood, surely, all these, we said, are wages
of the Christian blood wasted at his command
on that morning of 9/11. The fevers that kill our children,
train wrecks, earthquakes, tsunamis, wars and famines
—none will be assuaged until he falls, his deed avenged.

We prayed he would be found. Tracking dogs sniffed out his traces in real or virtual time. We never thought of him as mortal, and perhaps, like us, also afraid. He was proudly as a cougar, fierce, and always blood-hungry.

His fall when it came was swift and sure—only his wives, a son or two to witness. They took him out in Hyderabad, shot him down in his own room, bundled him up and flew his body to a waiting ship.

No grave on land
for such as he, they had decreed, whose name could
turn a mere rock to an altar or a monument and thus
populate the earth with more believers to sow terror
such as he had bred. The sea then, the sea for Bin Laden,
commodious graveyard that gorged him in without a trace
into its darkness and ponderous silence.

That's all that we can tell the future, all what we've been told.
Dare we ask, Has Justice been served, with blood to even the score
on both sides? Are the murders paid up at last? With him gone,
will we, at last, lie easy at night, sipping our drink,
dipping our fingers in sea salt to flavor a mess
of cold rice and mountain greens? Eternally,
the sea washes his bones. Listen:

ebb and flow
ebb and flow
ebb and flow—
we'll never know.

September 7, 2011

Stories

Ormoc lay in muck for weeks after the flood.
People rose from the muck, sorting out the debris
for what to throw away, what they might re-use,
took up shovel, hammer and nails, saw, drill, mattock,
to rebuild the city they had lost to the water and the silt.
After a while the sun came out, dried the muck
which quickly turned to dust and rose in the air,
and fell gently over all surfaces, even the trees
wore on their leaves the color of clay.
Then the stories began, many different stories.

Witness:

One day before the flood, a beggar came by,
stopped to ask for a drink at a house in Isla Verde.
A very little thing, did anyone pour him a drink,
or did he turn away dry? Dry, everyone said,
or else... such wages they paid for a good not done.
Not so, not so. It was a woman, a woman came knocking,
asking for a night's shelter, but ever suspicious
of strangers, no householder dared to let her in.
And still one more tale: No, no, not a beggar,
not a woman. A child came by asking for food,
but not a mouthful would anyone spare him
from his meagre board—

Now then, with eight thousand dead, homes,
neighborhoods, villages, perished in the Great Flood,
who is to blame among the living or the dead
for that fit of churliness or greed, a mild indifference,
granted, a minor sin, doubtless a little guilt
that brought down heaven's wrath to flood the city?

And still more stories come up. Witness:

When it is time to light the lamps, listen—
cries for help, shouts of distress, mothers calling,
children screaming, before the water surged.
I heard those voices, said one. I too, said another.
And I. And I. And I. Even those who merely came
to help, even they would say, We too, we too,
we heard them...

We may doubt these voices, heard
as from a great distance, disembodied,
mere echoes in the nerves' tympani, likely,
heard more in the head than by the listening ear,
where a village used to be, a neighborhood, homes.
Walking the dark streets some nights, some swear,
one may sense them rising from the sea,
faint wailing hovering over the water
as of angels lamenting. How the skin prickles
as one sits down to eat, or at dawn, as one
draws up the sheets against the chill—
these stories, word by mouth passing,

as the living dug their lives out of the muck
and washed off the dust abiding everywhere.

Ask me how they bore all that—the swift
emptying wrought in one fell sweep of water?
Tell stories, tell stories to one another,
stories of one thing or the other,
oh, but not to the sea, never tell the sea—
the sea never remembers.

Five from the Best Picture Series

R. Zamora Linmark

The Helpless

Perfect in-flight flick especially during turbulent trans-Oceania crossings. Imagine two-and-a-half hour hurrah for Black Mississippi maids born at the wrong there and time but they were so awe-inspiring I wanted to toast to turbulence and thank heaven for little white girls sticking out their necks when the rainbow was not enough.

Southern belle role models for sheltered Filipino girls before they get knocked up by family drivers or gardeners a.k.a. “live-in companions”—21st PC term for indentured servants in the world’s last die-hard Catholic country. Just thank god this is not a Tagalog film, or we’d all end up slitting our wrists from all the crying shouting bitch-slapping. But if the help was Filipina, no way would she go through all the hoopla

to bake her own shit. She'd rather rat-
poison her master-cum-rapist slowly, invite
burglars and meth-head sons of has-been
politicians. If she worked for Chinese or nouveau
riche, get gangs and cops to coordinate afterschool
kidnappings. Then, she'd take the first flight
to Hong Kong, Singapore, or Abu Dhabi and
repeat the cycle as a live-in nanny, cook, sex
toy, iron lady, and death row inmate.

War Whores

Keep in mind throughout the hundred and forty-six minutes of horseplaying fourteen colts were used to tackle the demanding role of Joey, galloping across endless fields of turnips and corpses as he searched for Albert who'd taught him how to plough before getting deployed to France, where an unexpected bromance with a Topthorn blossomed, a sure bet, always horsing around when they weren't pulling ambulance wagons of dead Germans, in short, inseparable, until Topthorn got existential and willed himself to die.

Grief-stricken, Joey trotted straight for the barbed wires of No Man's Land, where, by fate or bad script, he's reunited with Albert, blinded but only briefly by mustard gas, thank God, nonetheless, a tear-jerker worthy of Oscar's attention, especially Joey's final scene in which he stretched his electrifying death for what seemed like eternity.

Moneyball Huggers, or O.B.P.

Last time I saw Brad Pitt, he was aging backwards. So while most men went through a behavior modification stage called Overrated Bachelorhood Phase, Brad was busy making love to Cate Blanchett before taking off on a motorcycle, sparing her from seeing him die as an eighty-year old infant, wrinkled and unwanted as the day his father had left him on the steps of a Black-run whorehouse.

That was two, three years ago. Brad made more movies (and Brangelina babies) after that, none worth skipping Bikram or pilates for, until the Tree of Life (see future stanzas) won Cannes' Palm d'Or. It attracted five film festival buffs east of Honolulu, including me and my friend Lisa who'd snuck in just in time to catch God's name appear on the screen.

After a two-month book tour to promote poetry with a frozen shoulder, I am once again crossing the Pacific from the exit row of Delta's coach class, watching on a small screen another Brad flick where he plays an ex Major-League-player-turned-GM for Oakland Athletics. Non-conformist, he pisses off all board members by hiring a Yale Econ grad to assist him in assembling baseball's dream team that's based, not on experience, but on sabermetric-based OBP or On Base Percentage. Whatever that means but I think it means: Think theory-practice analogy.

I'm not a fan of baseball, basketball, badminton and other B-sports flicks. *Bad News Bears* and *Rocky I, II, III, IV,* and *V* remain the Only Boxing Pic on my tolerance and comprehension list. I prefer dark rooms with singing nuns and serial killers than sinking ships or Smurf-blue digital giants playing H-O-R-S-E in the heart of the Amazon.

Back to Brad so convincing as a superstitious GM convinced his team would break its winning streak if he finally stayed and watched his team play rather than work on his pecs, biceps, and hamstrings that he cured me momentarily of my ADHD even during heavy turbulence, proving once and for all that regardless of big or miniature screen, a smooth or Bette “Bumpy” Davis ride, the blonde hunk only gets better and better with acting and age, making it even more difficult now to be so OBP or Over Brad Pitt.

The Vanishing Tree of Life

Begins with five of us munching on popcorn
and The Book of Job asking us about singing stars
and our whereabouts when God made earth.
For a moment—we're hostages to darkness
slowly shaping into a bright glow as a woman
mumbles about two paths people must choose:
the way of grace or nature or the other way.

“What is this Robert Frost bullshit?” a man
at the very front row says, then storms out.
I don't know why he's complaining; he snuck
in just like the rest of us. His loss. He'll completely
miss out on Brad Pitt's bravura performance
as a bullying father to three sons in 1950s
Texas, which does not appear until after
a volcano explodes and microbes and galaxies
blossom extravagantly, giving way to an ocean's
surface choked with hammerhead sharks
and a brontosaurus tanning on the shore, waiting
for an impressionist painter or Sir Richard
Attenborough's or Oprah's voiceover narration.
They might as well be part of this voiceover-fest.

Two more walk out with one muttering “What a Born-Again propaganda,” and the other, “Pretentious poetic license.” This leaves only Lisa and myself to contend with every organism on earth, living or dead; Jurassic Age, the Milky Way, Solar System, rock-and-roll, and asteroids en route to us — all are included during this Planet Earth-like segment that pops out of nowhere twenty-minutes into the film, as if we sat down to watch Brad Pitt go abusive on us and got transcendentalism instead.

But Lisa, an atheist, is transfixed. Even her frequent anti-Born-Again remarks do not stop her from chain-popping popcorn into her mouth. Who am I to judge? The movie scandalized Cannes as much as Lars Von Trier’s anti-Semitic sentiment. It won the Palm D’Or over *Melancholia*. More prizes followed, including one from the African-American Film Critics Association. It nabbed three Academy Award nominations and received an 84% “Certified Fresh” rating in Rotten Tomatoes dot com.

Midnight in Woody

Alice In Allenland.
Autobiography Of Alice B. Toklas By Gertrude S. Allen.
Being Woody Malkovich.
Character Dialysis.
Dali's Talking Vulva.
Deconstructing Wooderrida.
Everything Woody Always Wanted To Ask Woody
(But Were Afraid To Ask Woody).
For When Woody's Bell Tolls.
French Kissinger's Woody.
Gertrude & Alice & Carol & Woody.
Husbands And Woodies.
In Conversation With Woody And Mr. Allen.
Jumba Jews.
Kim Chee Chigae By Cho Woody.
Knock On Woody.
M. Butterfly By M. Allen.
Neil Simon, Are You There? It's Me, Woody.
Old Woody And The Sea.
One Thousand Ways To Braid Picasso's Nosehairs.
Portmanteau: Woon-Yi.
Quiet On Woody's Western Front End.

Reflections Of Woody's Things To Come & Go.
Scarlett Woohansen.
Still-Life With Woody Woodpecker.
Trapped With Woody Inside Woody.
Unidentifiable Flying Woody.
Victor/Victoria, Woody/Woodyn't.
Woody When Slippery.
Xeroxing Woody.
You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Woody.
Zelda By Zelig.

Huling Tao

Joselito D. Delos Reyes

Mga Nagdaang Proyekto

Linggo-linggo itong proyektong dapat kong iniimbento:
Hinugot sa hanging tesis; hindi patuklas na saliksik;
Kunwaring aklat na bibilhi't babasahin mula sa estante ng guniguni;
Nagmamaang-maangang ulat tungkol sa paksang sinisiguro kong
Hindi mauungkat ng mga paano, hanggang kailan, tungkol saan?

Minsan, itinatanong ni Ina ang napadadalas
Na astang proyektong kailanma'y hindi niya nakita.
At itutugon kong iniawasan ang kaniyang
Matang nang-aapuhap at nag-iimbestiga:
Ganito ang magtatapos, tuwinang abala,
Lubhang mapaghanap ang mga propesor at kapangkat
ng panahon at perang dapat sana'y dagdag
Sa pangkumpuni sa buhay ko noong totoong-totoong
Niluluray ng malansang baha at gunita.

Sa bawat lumipas na Sabado ng nagpapanggap na proyekto,
Inuulat ko ang mga di-hayag na nasang natutuklasan,
Unti-unti—sinasadya kong unti-unti—sinasaliksik
Ang mga ganap na likha ng pandamang hindi mabibili,
Hindi mababasa, hindi mapangangalanan.
Hinding-hindi akademiko, lalong hindi espiritwal.
Maraming mortal na proyektong dapat matapos
Hanggang sa muling pagtatagpo sa susunod na Sabado,
Hanggang sa susunod na takdang magsinungaling
Upang maging tapat ako sa aking banal na gawaing hawanin
Ang tagpuan namin ng totoong-totoo kong anghel.

Victory Pasay

Ikaw nga pala ang huling tao.
Nakakamada na ang buhay-buhay.
Paluwas.
Hapo ka sa larawan ng paglayong
Paulit-ulit na dumarating.
Nakababalisa ang datna't panawan
Kaya pinag-aralan mong mainip,
Magpanggap na naiinip,
Mistulang umaantabay sa buhay-
Buhay na kanina pa nakakamada.
Papadyak ka't pipiksi sa talusirang
Hinintay mo mula sa wala,
At maaalala mo,
Ikaw nga pala ang huling tao.

Alulod

Hindi ako masiyahang lubos
Sa sabog na buhos,
Pantay na puyos ng haplos

Noong panahong dagat pa
Ang totoong Dagat-dagatan.
Kailangang tumakbo,

Magpagulong-gulong,
Hilingin sa Diyos
Na huwag nang tumila.

Dahil walang alulod
Ang looban ko, pupuntahan
Ang kapitbahay, gigisingin

Ang himbing na kalaro
Upang iparamdam: “Ikaw
Lamang ang hindi masaya,

Kasi tuyo ka pa.”
Kagyat siyang tatakbo sa ulan,
Iniihit ng inggit.

Pero ang totoong sadya ko
Ay ang alulod ng kalaro,
Pamilyang may pampalatero,

May buong-buong buhos
Na itututok ko sa ulo.
Muling magtatampo ang Diyos

Dahil sa aking panloloko.
Titila. Magbabanlaw ako
Ng pingot at hilod sa poso.

Mapapapikit ako sa aringking
Ng batong ikinakaskas ni nanay
Sa leeg na malurido. Hindi ako

Tatahan. Hindi kailanman
Pagsasawaan ang ulan.
Hindi alintana ang ragasa

Ng lagnat na papasabalat,
Ng luhang papasamata,
Ng ubong papasapulmo.

Saludsod

Lubhang pamilyar na kuwento ito ng paglalakbay.
Napakarami nang naipit sa ganitong sitwasyon
At nakahihiya nang matawag ka pang biktima.
Hindi na marahil biktima ang hindi makauwi,
Ang kislutin ng nagsesebong alon ng tagbaha.
Karaniwang balitang nagpakawala na ang mga dam;
Umapaw ang estero't hindi nakarating ang draga;
Hindi nasilip ng sulimpat na Doppler ng sulimpat
Na ahensiya ang ulang noong isang buwan lamang
Ay ipinanalangin nang taimtim na bumuhos.
Maiiwan kang mag-iisa kahit na sa iyong paligid
Palingon-lingon ang kapwa mo istranded.
Singkaraniwan ito ng aberya sa pag-uwi sanhi ng traffic;
Tawag sa teleponong nagbibilin: “Ipag-init mo ako ng ulam.
Iyong may sabaw na brutal na papatay sa ginaw mamaya.”

Handa ka sa pagkakataong ito kaya't magiliw ka,
Mang-aalok ng adobong mani sa kaibigang nabuksan
Gamit ang susing “Tagasaan ka?” o “Kailan ka pa dito?”
Kasalimbayan ng inip ang mga mahuhuling gawain
Kung liliban sa trabaho kinabukasan. Inasahan mo na ito.
Kaya't mag-iinat ka sa pagkakatayo sa loob ng binabahang 7-11,
Iiwas sa agos ng kapwa biktimang inaanod
Sa bambang ng papasarang gulanit na tiangge at mall.

Mata sa mata ng gabing kinulimbat ng brownout at hangin
Ang huling liwanag na dala ng nagtitipid sa bateryang cellphone.
Itutuwid mo ang iyong humahapding gulugod
Na hinukot ng pagkakahakab sa PUJ, FX, bus.

Ibabali mo ang iyong leeg kahahanap ng kakilala
Bagamat naniniwala kang matalik na kakilala mo na
Ang baha sa Obrero, sa España, sa E. Rod., sa Monumento.
Kumporme sa trabaho o topak ng amo, sisilipin mo
Kung kaya na ng iyong sapatos at dibdib ang sumaludsod,
Sumugod sa ulang dumating na tila magnanakaw.
Lagi kang matapang. Kaya susuyurin mo ng tingin
Ang mga maiiwan. “Mauuna na ako,” kompiyansa mong usal.
Matapos tingalain kung may badya ng tila—at totoong
May badya ng tila!—itatapak mo ang iyong paa sa baha.
Maaalala mo ang isang pilosopong bulagsak
Na itrinumpeta ng iyong napuksang propesor:
Hindi ka kayang puksain ng hindi mo alam.
Walang ihi ng daga, walang bubog, tae, bangkay ng hayop,
Walang eternal na butas ang imburnal,
Walang-walang kuryenteng makakakuryente.
Dalisay ang hindi nakikitang tubig na lalakaran pauwi.
Sa bawat hakbang, pinagninilayan mo ang mainit na hapunan
At hihigaang hindi makakamit ng iyong maiiwan.
May handa kang sipol kung hahantong sa isang bara
Ang baterya ng kanina pa nagpapaalalang cellphone:
Nasa kanilang signal ang iyong nalalabing mundo.

Sasalubungin ka ng mainit na “Buti nakauwi ka kaagad.”
Haharapin mo ang nanabik sa iyong instant noodles.
Sisimutin ang laman ng balitang ipinapalahaw ng transistor.
Baldado ang lahat ng kalsada. Aakbayan mo ang iyong bana.
Sisilipin ang himbing na bunsong binging-bingi na sa kulog.
Isasandig mo sa upuan ang iyong ulong nahapo kalilimi
Sa lubhang pamilyar na kuwento ng kalmanteng paglalakbay
Ng iyong mga naiwang pinagkaitan mong tawaging biktima
Ng panahong nalimutan mo ang ngalan.
O kung may ngalan.

Sa Madadaling Salita^{1*}

Hindi maihayag ni Tatay sa madadaling salita ang sanhi ng kaniyang pag-ika.

Bago magpasko nitong huling milenyo, tuon sa kaniyang pagpapatihulog sa sandaang piyeng bangin sa Alas-asin, Mariveles upang tumakas ang parehong saysay ng pag-ikang noong katatapos ang Kuwaresma ay sanhi naman ng mahimalang pagpapalaya sa munisipyo ng Guagua ng kaniyang yayat na kompanya: humambalos ang kaniyang pigi sa baldosa pag-ilag sa iniyitsang granada ng sakang na taliba.

Karabinero siyang nabaunan ng shrapnel nitong nagdaang Enero habang pinapahiran ko siya ng banal na oleo't lumilisan sa puwesto ang kaniyang ikalawang paboritong pangulo. Maestrekampo siyang naigkasan ng bareta-kabra ng litong Batanggenyo noong isang buwan (kung kailan ipinagdiwang niya ang ika-walo't kalahating dekada ng kaniyang pagbubuntong hininga) sa iba namang rehimenteng nagtulos ng pansamantalang tulay at tabriyesa sa nangungulilang Calauag.

1 * Tulang nagkamit ng Unang Gantimpala sa Talaang Ginto at nagtanghal kay Joselito D. Delos Reyes bilang 2013 Makata ng Taon ng Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino

Noong isang linggo habang nagpapaaraw, artilyero siya ng baterya sa Apalit, umika nang mauhuan ng talaksan ng muwelye ng mga kinukumpuning Willy's. Kinalakhan ko ang kuwentong siya lamang ang nagpaiwang opereytor ng radyo sa signal-iskwad ng dibisyon sa Los Baños. Nahagingan ang hugpungan ng kaniyang gulugod ng balibag-taeng bayoneta galing sa nagipit na istragler na kagyat niyang nailigpit kahit sugatan, ginilitan kahit sugatan matapos mapatumba ng minana niyang teknik na pambuno mula daw sa aming kalolo-lolohan.

Kahit sugatan.

Ito ang bersiyong taunang inuusal ko noon nang nakaingos ang ilong, kuntodo muwestra at aksiyon, sa aking mga kaklase sa elementaryang pawang nakanganga kapag inuusisa ng aking guro kung ano ang ama ko dati, at kung ano ang gusto ko paglaki: kawal. Kahit masugatan.

Ngunit kaiba kay Tatay, hindi ako mabubulag sa glaucomang diumano'y natamo sa binombang trintsera sa Mauban nang umahon ang mga Hapon sanlinggo makalipas ang pinakamalungkot na Imaculada Concepcion sa kasaysayan. Karugtong ng saysay niyang mula sa Los Baños nalipat-destino daw siya sa kakukubkob na Orani, dalawang magdamag daw siyang nanagwan para makapuga sa Binuangan ng maalinsangang Abril nang ipaubaya sa Hapon ng isang Wainwright ang mga Pilipino, peninsula at pulo kaya nabuo't isinilang ang Kuya Ermin noong 1944.

Naging gerilyero si Tatay

ni Marking sa Cabanatuan, yabang niya sa akin habang iniisa-isa ang kaniyang mga minumutyang pilat sa braso't binti matapos mamandaw ng dyakos o magpundo ng bangus, noong panahong ang kakilala at kabatian ko lamang sa digmaan ay ang ibig sabihin ng USAFFE; ang tukuyin sa mapa ang Lingayen, Bataan at Corregidor; kung ilang bituin mayroon sa balikat si Douglas MacArthur; na ang tanging kalaban natin ay German at sundalong Hapon.

Matapos ang Liberasyon, hinango si Tatay sa pag-eengkargado ng palaisdaan sa Pamarawan para maging bantay sa kapitolyo. Bigat lamang ng pistola ang tanda ko sa kaniyang retiro bilang sarhento sa kulungan ng Malolos. Hindi ko na magunitang —ayon sa anasan sa looban— inihele ako ng mga pinaamong pusakal na iniiuwi ni Tatay upang tanuran ako laban sa mga kamag-anak ng kriminal na pinaawit daw ni Tatay saliw ng water cure at sabunot-bulbol; na sanggol pa lamang ay gwardiyado na ako ng mga bilanggong nagpapaareglo, mga Bulakenyong dorobo ng baka at kalabaw sa Liciada, Batia, Siling Matanda at Cacarong Bata.

Nagretiro siyang sarhento sa marahas na kandili ni Gob noong kalakasan ng diktador. Nagpipilak na ang kaniyang mata sa istorya ng digmaan at glaucoma sa tuwing susuriin ng doktor sa Veterans ang kaniyang hindi maghilom-hilom na sugat sa paa, sa tuwing kakayurin ng optalmologo ang ulap sa mata, habang kay bilis na inaagasan ng pilak na balbas ang kaniyang mukhang lagi nang nakayukayok, tuwinang bumubulong na hindi raw siya kailanman naging duwag at palamara.

Binaldado si Tatay ng diabetes habang ako'y ikatlong taon sa hayskul sa seminario-menor na namumulagat sa nangyayaring pila ng pag-asa sa EDSA. Hindi na siya iniimik noon ni Kuya Ermin na bagong pabrikante sa San Miguel Brewery, si Kuya Ermin na maka-Cory pati na ang dalawang kapatid-ko-sa-unang pampublikong titser dahil sa pagtungayaw at panunumbat ni Tatay sa mga-walang-utang-na-loob na anak ilang araw bago ang snap election tungkol sa utang naming atip, kubakob, matrikula, at hininga kay Gob at Marcos; tungkol sa pag-iisponsor sa akin upang maging ganap ang pangarap niyang mamastol at magsutana ang bunsong anak.

Sa pagi-pagitan ng lumalabong tala ng kaniyang sariling digma,
sa pagi-pagitan ng pagpandaw sa dalawang dyakos at bungkos-
bungkos ng alaala niyang naipundar, inihahanda niya ako
sa papasukan kong hayskul sa seminario sa Guiguinto.
“Magkakaanak ako ng pari,” ibibida ni Tatay
sa ministrong laygo matapos ang lingguhang rasyon
ng Katawan ni Kristo habang sakay siya ng gamitin diling wheelchair
na ambag sa kaniyang mobilidad ng noo’y
papapusyaw na ring rehimen, tikas, at pangalan ni Gob.

Sa bawat dayo ng hunta ng kapuwa niya beterano,
nitong bagong bihis na milenyo,
umuuwing umiiling ang mga hukot na dating sarhento
at tinyente ng dapat sana’y pareho niyang digmaan:
“Suson-suson na ang memorya ni Santos,
hindi na magtama ang petsa at lugar at tao.
Ibang giyera na ang alam ng tatay mo, Hijo.
Dalas-dalasan n’yo’ng dalaw sa Veterans.”

Ilang linggo na siyang umiilhi sa salawal
hangga’t hindi ko natatagpuan at ipinaubayang “mulí”
ang inuungot niyang matapat na karbin kahit pa galing ako
sa parokya o sa pamamahagi ng sakramento.
Hindi na siya makaahon sa kuwento
ng limlim na kumakamkam sa kaniyang paningin
kung inaalala kung sino ang una niyang asawa
o napapatda—parang may sinisino sa dulo ng dila—
sa tuwing maririnig ang pangalan ng aking ina, Agatona,
na kay tagal nang nagpauna, noong hindi pa man ako diyakono,
noong ligtas pa ang silong mula sa mga naghaharutang apo.

Hindi na niya wari kung umika siya bago
o habang o matapos ang digmang iba't iba ang hugis sa bawat araw
at oras na maaalala niya ang mga pagsabog sa mga lugar
na hindi na niya matukoy, sa mga pananambang na kaniyang inililigaw,
sa mga reglamentong kinatha niya mula sa gulong
ng kaniyang wheelchair at lumalabo, nanginginig na pagpirma
sa likod ng pensiyong noong huli'y inakala niyang
mandamiento-de-aresto para sa pagtataksil ko,
ang kabong lagi niyang tatwang kasama sa digma't
marapat i-court-martial sanhi ng aking
hindi matingkalang karuwagan.

Magagalit siya sapagkat bantulot ako sa paglusob.
Nagtakip siya ng mata't nagpaigkas
ng nanghihinang suntok habang sumisigaw
ng "Lampa! Lampa! Punyeta!" sa akin
minsang madugong inahit ko ang kaniyang balbas
dahil sa dalas ng kaniyang pilig sa pag-ilag sa taga ng pang-ahit.
Kabo ako imbes na kaniyang bunsong anak,
at sinisindak ng hindi niya
aaprubahang service record ng aking namumukod tanging katangahan.
Katatagpuin daw niya akong putangina sa JAGO
habang binibihisan ko siya isang araw ng Sabado bago mangumunyon.

Minsan, habang hindi magtagpo-tagpo
ang ngalan ng kaniyang mga anak,
sinuhin ang nagsala-salabat na apo,
bigkasin ang ngalan ng dalawang ulit na pambibiyudo,
at mga katotong beterano ng habambuhay na digma,
kinausap siya ni Kuya Ermin upang itanong ang papel at estado
ng kadastral ng aming kinatitirikan, para magkumahog sagutin,
at utusan lamang ang kuya na umamot ng bala
kay Ka Luis sa Palasinan o sa Entablado,
“Hanapin mo, saan mang lupalop ito ng mga diablo!”

“Umika si Tatay nang minsang mag-Metrocom.”

Pagsisiwalat ni Kuya Ermin sa akin kanina

habang nililinisang namin ang looban,

habang hinahawan namin ang kasukalan ng buhay

bago dumating ang serbisyo ng funeraria ni Tatay.

Bago ang unang gabi ng lamay.

Umekstra si Tatay sa raid sa kabilang barangay para padrinuhan

ang kumpareng may konsignasyon, lagi daw kasing napagkakamaliang

kasapi ng KM ang supling na nahawa sa pagluwas-luwas sa PUP.

Inararo ng mobil ng Metrocom na palyado ang preno ang poste sa Poblacion

na ikinatuwa ng mga lihim at nangawalang rebelde’t aktibista ng lungsod,

tagumpay daw ng masa ang permanenteng pag-ika ni Tatay.

Mula noon, patago daw siyang kinilala bilang Patrolman Ampang.

Hindi na ako nagtaka
nang makumpirmang hindi tinamo
sa mas malaong digma ang kaniyang pag-ika.
Sa tirintas ng kaniyang danas,
tanging ang maging opereytor ng signal at maging bantay
ng palaisdaa't kulungan ang naging tiyak na destino ni Tatay.

Wala na ako
sa kaniyang mata bago siya huling pumikit.
Ni hindi niya maalalang may mga anak siyang titser,
may bunso siyang pari, may mga apong nananaginip
maging sundalo, titser, pari. Sa huling kurap marahil
naaaninag niya'y usok ng digmang sinlabo
ng sapin-saping kuwento ng tapang, agresyon,
pamamalakaya, limot na pagmamahal.
Habang ako ngayo'y nag-iisip kung paano madaling mailapit
ang malayo niyang buhay sa kanilang kasalo ko mamaya
sa piging ni Kristo, kung ako mismo'y may malayong ibayong
dapat tawirin sa unang homilyang kailangang usalin
sa hindi madadaling salita, isisiwalat sa mutyang pamanang
magtagni-tagni ng bagamundong guniguni:
sa kung ano ang kaniyang buhay,
sa kung aling digma, kung sino ba talaga si Tatay.

Limang Anggulo ng Pag-ibig

Romulo P. Baquiran, Jr.

Alindog

Nagkahiwalay tayo noon sa orihinal na paraiso
saka dumanas at nagtiis ng katakot-takot na hirap,
at ngayon, narito sa maituturing na impiyerno
pero langit na rin dahil muli tayong nagkatagpo.
Bukad ng kuwitis sa langit ang kawangis mo
nang mamukhaan kita, walang biro sinta.
Kahit sa isip ko lang naman nangyari
ang di-magkamayaw na sari-saring liwanag.
Ganoon pala ang maging anghel: magaan ng pakiramdam
kahit lumulutang sa polusyon ng Maynila.
Sanlaksang biyaya ang inihuhulog ng langit,
nagiging bago ang lahat kahit ang huklubang poste.
Ngayon, lumalakad palapit sa aking sulok:
ikaw na nagniningning, humahalimuyak
at sintang nagpapaulan ng halik.

Uod

Marahang-marahang halik,
tila paroparo sa munting bulaklak
ang labi ng mangingibig sa talukap ng sinta.
Dumadaloy, kibot sa kibot, dili sa diling
daigdig na walang bahid ng ligalig.
Matang-tubig ng pagmamahal.

Ngunit batid ng mangingibig:
itong rabaw ng isip at damdamin
ay mapupunit, magsisilang ng uod
na kikiwal sa tangkay ng bulaklak
sa kabila ng nagwawaksing tinik,
mangangatngat ang ubod.
Ganyan ang pag-ibig:
pugad ng halimuyak ng tamis
at sulasok ng di-masikmurang pait.

Paghihintay

Panoorin muna ang tagisan
ng kabataan sa malawak na kort.

Maliksi ang mga dribol ng goma
parang kinakabog na dibdib.

Bumibigat ang anino ng ulap
sa balat ngayong dapithapon.

Nalimutan ng minamahal ang usapang
nakakintal nang kay tagal sa kalendaryo?

Tumatalbog ang bawat pintig ng minuto,
bumabanat sa nagbibilang na puso.

Sumasakay ang isip sa bawat bugso
ng nauubos na liwanag.

Saan naantala ang minamahal?
sa anong dahilan?

Tumatahimik ang pinturang papawirin.
Parang atrasadong panaginip ang lahat.

Humugpong na ang balakang sa batong upuan
Ngunit wala pa rin ang minamahal.

Nag-uwian na ang mga naglalaro
dahil sa ragasa ng gabi.

Selos

Nakatupi ang abiso ng kaniyang pagnanasa
sa puting tisyu: ang iyong pagbulsa dito,
sabihin mang nilukot at nilimot
ay palatandaan ng pagkatuksong
matikman ang kandungan ng iba.
Alam kong iyang tigas mong pagtangga
ay isa sa sari-saring mukha ng pagtataksil.
Ang tunay na mangingibig ay nakaaamoy
(sasabihin mong nakakaimbento sa kaso ko)
ng masakit na tagpo ng pangangaliwa:
naantalang pagdating,
di masagot-sagot na telepono,
bahid ng lipstick sa panyo,
samyong ibang sabon sa singit,
at nabawasang rubdob ng yakap at halik.
Hindi ko matanggap ang anumang paliwanag,
lalong nagsisikip ang hininga sa mga paglalambing.
Parusa ang di-maburang pagdududa,
nagiging tampok na putahe
na pinagsasaluhan natin araw-araw.

Dulo

Hindi rin niya gustong dito magdulo ang lahat.
Ngunit ano ang gagawin kung wala nang kabuluhan
ang lahat matapos lumayo ang pinakamamahal?
Ano ang naghihintay sa kahindik-hindik na hinaharap?
Walang nang masarap na pag-ibig.
Alam niyang kabaliwan itong pasiya
at isusumpa o kaaawaan siya ng mundo.
Ngunit ito lamang ba ang mensaheng
isusulat niya sa pader ng puso ng mga taong
sa katotohana'y naging mga tunay na mangingibig
sa isang yugto ng kanilang buhay?
Ikaw na mambabasa ng tabloid
na nakasilip sa kaniyang kuwento, marahil
nangilabot o sumaludo sa kaniyang paglipad.
Isipin mong ikaw ang nasa itaas ng gusaling abot-langit:
sa sandali ng pagtalon, may saglit ng rurok;
sa paghigpit ng lubid, may hibla ng ginhawa;
sa paglagok ng lason, may guhit ng paraiso
kahit sandaling-sandali lamang.
Batid ito ng lumisang kaluluwa,
kahit sandaling-sandali lamang.
Ikaw na tunay na mangingibig
ang nakauunawa sa paraisong nalikha
ng munting yugtong iyon ng kasiyahan.

Limang Salin Mula Kay Shakespeare

Gelacio Guillermo

Mula sa HAMLET

Hamlet:

Kumilos, o manahimik, ‘yan ang

tanong:

Ano’ng mas marangal, tiisin

Ang mga tudla ng karumal-dumal na kapalaran,

O lusungin ang dagat ng mga gulo,

At sa pagbaka’y sugpuin sila? Mamatay,

matulog,

Gano’n: at sa pagtulog ay masabing ating tinatapos

Ang sakit-ng-loob at ang libong likas na

dagok

Na minana ng katawan—ito ang katuparang

pinakahahangad. Mamatay, matulog;

Matulog! Kung sakali’y managinip: ay, nar’yan ang problema;

‘Pagkat sa iyang tulog ng patay may kung anong panaginip

na dumating,

Sa oras na ang pulupot ng buhay ay ating kalagin,

Na sa ati’y nakapagpapatda: nand’yan ang pagtinging

Matinding tiisin ang napakahabang buhay;

‘Pagkat sino ang makatatagal sa latigo’t pagkutya ng panahon,
Sa in hustisya ng maykapangyarihan, sa pang-iinsulto
 ng mga matapobre,
Sa kirot ng siniphayong pag-ibig, sa pagkakupad ng batas,
Sa pagmamataas ng nakaupo sa poder, sa mga kabiguang
Isinusukli sa matiyagang pagpapagal ng maliliit,
Samantalang kaya niyang kitlin ang sariling hininga
Sa kampit sa kusina? Sino ang makatitiis ng mga pasanin,
Umatungal at magpawis sa nakakapagod na buhay,
Kundi dahil sa pagkatakot sa kung ano mayro’n pagkamatay,
Ang di-natututong bayan, mula roo’y
Walang nakakauwing manlalakbay—nakakalito sa isip,
At napipilitang tiisin ang ating mga sakit
Kaysa lumipad sa ibang hindi natin alam?
Sa ganyan lahat tayo’y ginagawang duwag ng konsiyensiya;
At sa ganyan ang angking tingkad ng pagpapasya’y
Pinakukupas ng maputlang hagod ng kaisipan
At ang mga gawaing may bigat at halaga
Ay nagkakandabuhol-buhol ang layon, dahil sa ganyan,
At nasasayang ang kaangkinan ng pagkilos.

—

(*Hamlet*, Act III, Scene i)

Hamlet:

Bigkasin ang bibigkasin, pakiusap ko, tulad ng pagbigkas ko sa iyo, magaan sa dila: pero pag ibinunganga mo, tulad ng ginagawa ng marami mong aktor, mabuti pang bungangero ang bumigkas ng aking mga taludtod. Iwasan ding sobrang iwasiwas ang iyong kamay, tulad nito; pero mahinahong gamitin: dahil sa mismong bugso, silakbo at, tulad ng maaari kong sabihin, sa ipuipo ng damdamin, kailangang angkin mo at magbunga ng hinahong nagdudulot dito ng dulas. Ay, nakapagpapagalit sa akin na marinig ang isang madakdak na mamang nakapeluka na luray-lurayin ang isang damdamin hanggang maging basahan, na bingihin ang mga tunganga na kadalasa'y pinagtitiisan ang hindi maipaliwanag na pantomina at ingay: puwedeng ipalatigo ko ang ganyang mama, aba'y mas masahol pa sa basagulero; mas Herodes kaysa Herodes: pakiusap ko, iwasan iyan.

Gayunma'y huwag namang masyadong maamo, pero hayaang ang sariling pagpapasya ang iyong guro: itugma ang kilos sa salita, ang salita sa kilos; na may ganitong pagmamatyag, na huwag lumampas sa kahinahunan ng kalikasan: pagkat ang anumang pagmamalabis ay lisyang sa layunin ng pag-arte, na sa simula at hanggang ngayon, ay salaminin ang kalikasan; ipakita sa kagitingan ang sarili niyang katangian, sa pag-aglahi ang kanyang imahen, sa yugto ng panahon ang kanyang antas ng pag-unlad at

paghihirap. Ngayon, kung sumobra o lumabnaw, kahit mapatawa ang walang alam, ito nama'y nakalulungkot para sa mga sanay mangilatis; na ang kanilang pagpapasya, na iginagalang mo, ay lubos na makapagpapalamang sa buong teatro ng iba. Ay, may napanood na akong mga aktor—at narinig ang mga papuri, na may kataasan din naman—na kay yayabang umasta't umatungal gayong, at ito'y pagsasabing walang bahid ng paglapastangan, hindi naman nila gamay ang pagsasalita ng mga Kristiyano, o ang pinag-aralang paglalakad ng mga Kristiyano, manggagantso o karaniwang tao, tuloy inisip kong may ilang pintor-kulapol ng kalikasan na nagpinta ng tao at hindi mahusay ang pagkakapinta, kasuklam-suklam na kinopya ang sangkatauhan.

Ay! Baguhin ang lahat-lahat. At huwag hayaan ang mga aktor na gumagampang komikero na magsalita nang labis sa itinakda para sa kanila: may ilan sa kanila na mismong magtatawa, para magtawa rin ang ilang bilang ng mga tangang miron: samantalang may mahahalagang usapin sa dulang dapat atupagin: iyo'y kabuhungan, at ipinakikita ang kahabag-habag na ambisyon ng lukong gumagamit niyaon. Sige, maghanda.
(*Hamlet*, Act III, Scene ii)

Mula sa KING LEAR

Lear:

Buga, hangin, sumabog man ang inyong pantog!

Magngalit! Buga!

Kayong dilubyo't bagyo, bumulwak

Hanggang matigmak ang aming mga tore, lumubog
ang tuktok!

Kayong nakasusulasok at nakapanlulumong apoy,

Tagabando ng kay talim na kulog-kidlat,

Silaban ang aking puting buhok! At ikaw, nangyayanig
na kulog,

Patagin ang pintog na kabilugan ng mundo!

Basagin ang hulma ng kalikasan, iligwak ngayon din ang lahat ng
binhing

Humuhubog sa walang utang na loob!

Dumagundong sa abot-kaya! Apoy, buga!

Ulan, pulandit!

Hindi ko mga anak ang ulan, ang hangin, ang kulog, ang apoy:

Kayong mga elemento, hindi ko sinisisi sa kawalang-awa;

Hindi ko kayo binigyan ng kaharian o tinawag na mga anak;

Wala kayong utang sa akin: kaya't lubusin

Ang inyong kahindik-hindik na katuwaan; narito akong nakatindig,
ang inyong alipin,

Isang matanda, dukha, masasakitin, mahina't hinahamak:

Kayunma'y tinatawag ko kayong tiklop-tuhod na mga sugo,

Isinasabay sa dal'wang ulupong kong mga anak
Ang inyong todo-pwersang paglusob laban sa ulong
Kaytanda na't patay tulad nito. Ay, nakasusuklam!
(*King Lear*, Act III, Scene ii)

Ang mga dakilang diyos
Na nagpapanatili nitong kasindak-sindak na ligalig sa kaitaasan,
Hayaang makita ngayon ang kanilang kaaway. Matakot, kayong
mga impakto,
Nasa loob ninyo ang hindi nabubunyag na mga krimeng
Hindi naparurusahan ng hustisya: magtago, ikaw na duguang
kamay;
Ikaw na ang patotoo'y kasinungalingan, at ikaw na nagpupusturang banal,
Nagsusupsupan: napakaimbi, madurog kayo,
Kayong sa patago't magaling na pagkukunwari'y
Nagsabwatan laban sa buhay ng tao: lingid
na pagkakasala,
Biyakin ang iyong taguan, at ituring
Na kagandahang-loob ang nakapanghihilakbot na mga
mungkahing ito. Ako'y taong
Higit na pinagkasalahan kaysa nagkasala.

Pumupurol na ang aking pag-iisip.
Halika, aking bata: kumusta, bata ko? Nagiginaw?
Mismong ako'y nagiginaw.—Nasaan ang dayaming ito, aking bata?
Nakapagtataka ang sining ng ating pangangailangan,
Ginagawang mahal ang nanggigitatang mga bagay. Pasok na,
sa iyong kubol.
Kawawang payaso't alila, may bahagi sa puso kong
Nagdaramdam para sa iyo.

Iniisip mong lubhang nanunuot sa katawan
Itong mapanggulong bagyo: gayon nga sa iyo
Pero kung saan naroon ang mas malubhang sakit,
Ang kaunting kaligkig ay halos hindi dama. Iwasan ang oso;
Pero kung ang iyong pag-atras ay patungo sa maalong dagat,
Harapin ang oso sa bunganga. 'Pag
malaya ang isip
Ang katawa'y marupok. Tinangay ng bagyo mula sa aking isip
Ang lahat ng aking damdamin
Liban sa doo'y tumitibok. Kawalan-ng-utang-na-loob!
Itong bunganga, hindi ba para niyang sasagpangin itong kamay
Dahil susubuan ng pagkain? Magpaparusa ako nang matindi:
Hindi, hindi na ako luluha. Sa ganitong gabi'y
Sukat ipagtabuyan ako! Sige, bumagyo pa: tatagal ako.
Sa ganitong gabi!
Ang inyong matandang amang mabait, ibinigay ng tapat niyang puso
ang lahat—
Ay, iyan ay kabaliwan; kailangan kong iwasan 'yan;
Lubayan na 'yan.

Hindi ako pinatitigil nitong bagyo na pag-isip-isipan
Ang mga bagay na lalong nagpapasakit sa akin.—Pero
papasok na ako.—

Pasok, bata; mauna ka.—Ikaw, karukhaang walang tirahan,
Sige, pasok. Magdarasal ako, matutulog
pagkatapos.—

Kawawang hubad na sawimpalad, saanman kayo naroroon,
Tinitii ang bigwas ng walang-habag na bagyong ito,
Paano kayo ipagsasanggalang ng inyong ulong nakalantad at yayat
na katawan,

Ng inyong basahang butas-butis at punit-punit
Sa ganitong mga panahon? Ay, hindi ko gaanong
Napagtuunan ng pansin ito! Kastiguhin ang panggagamot, ang rangya;
Danasin ninyo ang dinaramdam ng mga sawimpalad,
Nang mabahaginan sila ng umaapaw na kasaganaan
At ipakitang ang langit ay mas makatarungan.

... Ganito lang ba ang tao? Tingnan siyang mabuti. Walang
utang na seda sa uod, katad sa hayop, lana sa tupa,
pabango sa musang ... Ikaw nga mismo iyon: ang
taong wala ni anumang ay ano pa kundi isang dukha, hubad
at maruming hayop, tulad mo.

Hubaran, hubaran ako!—Dito, tanggalin ang butones dito.
(*King Lear*, Act III, Scene iv)

Mula sa MACBETH

Lady Macbeth:

Ikaw si Glamis at Cawdor, at uupong hari
Tulad nang sa iyo'y ipinangako: ngunit nababagabag ako sa iyong ugali;
Umaapaw sa gatas ng makataong kabaitang
Pumipigil sunggaban ang pinakamadaling paraan: ikaw ay magiging
dakila,
May ambisyon; kung ano ang pinahahalagahan
Iyong tutupdin nang buong taimtim, hindi
mandadaya,
Gayunma'y mananalò kahit lisa; sa kalooban mo,
dakilang Glamis,
Ay may umaatungal, *kailangan ngang
tupdin mo, kung kalooban mo:*
At iya'y itong higit mong kinatatakutang gawin
Kaysa hangaring biguin. Magmadali't
Ititili ko sa iyong tainga ang aking damdamin;
Sa bagsik ng aking dila'y kakastiguhin
Ang lahat ng humahadlang na sumaiyo
ang gintong koronang
Sa wari'y ipinuputong sa iyo
Ng tadhana't pangitain.

Halikayo, mga espiritung
Umaatupag sa mga pag-iisip ng nilalang, dito ako hubdan ng kasarian,
At lipusin ako, mula anit hanggang hinlalaki,
Ng sukdulang kalupitan! Palaputin ang aking dugo,
Busalan ang bungad at lagusan patungong pagsisisi
Nang sa gayo'y walang naninising hataw ng konsiyensiyang
Titinag sa aking malupit na layon, ni makipagtawaran
Sa layunin at ibubunga nito! Heto ang aking mga suso
At ituring na apdo ang gatas ko, kayong pumapatay na mga sugo
Saanman, kayong hindi nakikita'y naglilingkod
Sa tudyong ng kalikasan! Halika, gabing pusikit,
At magpakasasa sa pinakamaitim na usok ng impiyerno
Nang hindi mamalas ng aking patalim ang tarak nitong sugat
Ni makasilip ang langit para maghumiyaw, *Tigil, tigil!*
(*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene v)

Nalasing ba ang pag-asa
Sa iyo mismong inihanda? Naidlip siya mula
noon?
At ngayong magising, itsurang nagmamaang-maangan
Sa kanyang pagkukusang-loob? Mula ngayon
Ganyan ko tinutuos ang iyong pag-ibig. Takot ka bang
Nasa pagkatao mo kapwa ang kagitingan
At pagnanasa? Pasasaiyo ba
Yaong iyong pinahahalagahang palamuti ng buhay
At mamuhay na isang duwag sa sarili mong pagtingin,
Pinagsisilbi sa *Baka sakali ang Hindi ko pangangahasan*,
Tulad ng pusang duwag sa kasabihan?

Maglaho ka, mantsang kasuklam-suklam! Maglaho, sundin ang utos ko!

Isa, dalawa: ano pa'ng hinihintay, oras nang gawin mo 'yon—
Napakadilim sa impiyerno!

Naku naman,
aking panginoon, hay naku! Isang sundalo,
at takot? Ano ang ikakatakot natin kung may makabatid man,
walang sinumang lilitis sa ating kapangyarihan?
Pero sino'ng mag-aakalang
sagana sa dugo ang matanda?

—
Ano, hindi na ba kailanman
magiging malinis ang mga kamay na ito?

—
Naaamoy ko pa ang dugo: walang pabango
ng Arabia
ang makapagpapabango pa nitong munting kamay.

Ay, ay, ay!
(*Macbeth*, Act V, Scene i)

Ang tinutukoy na kasabihan: “Kumakain ng isda ang pusa, pero ayaw namang mga paa'y mabasa.” (*Heywood's Proverbs*)

Mula sa OTHELLO

Iago:

Ay, walang remedyo; ito ang

sumpa ng serbisyo,

Ang pag-asenso ay batay sa rekomendasyon at pagtatangi,

Hindi sa kung sino'ng nasa ikalawa

Ay siyang hahalili sa nasa una. Ngayon, ginoo, husgahan

mo mismo

Kung ako sa anumang makatarungang pagpapalagayan ay may malapit na ugnay

Para mahalín ang Muslim.

—

O, ginoo, sumasang-ayon ka:

Sinusunod ko siya para pagsilbihan ang aking oportunidad sa kanya:

Hindi puwedeng tayong lahat ay panginoon, o kaya'y hindi lahat ng panginoon

Ay pinaglilingkuran nang tapat. Mapapansin mong

Maraming alilang mapagsilbi at naninikluhod,

Haling na haling sa sariling mapanuyong pagkaalipin,

Pinalilipas ang panahon, tulad ng hangal na panginoon,

Para sa wala kundi sa pagkain; at pagtanda'y

ibinabasura:

Latiguhin para sa akin ang ganyang tapat na mga alipin. May iba,

Bihis sa porma at itsura ng tungkulin

Ay determinado namang asikasuhin ang sariling interes

At, sa pakitang-taong serbisyo sa kanilang

panginoon

Ay tumitiba sa ganitong paraan at ‘pag nakapagkamal na
ng limpak-limpak na salapi,
Tunay namang maipagpaparangal nila ang sarili. Ito ang mga taong
may kalul’wa,
At ipinahahayag kong ako’y tulad nila.
Dahil, ginoo,
Kasing-siguradong ikaw si Roderigo,
Kung ako ang Muslim, hindi ako magiging Iago:
Sa pagsunod sa kanya, sinusunod ko ang aking sarili;
Ang langit ang aking hukom, ako’y hindi para sa pagmamahal at tungkulin,
Kundi nagkukunwari lang para sa sariling layon:
Dahil kung ang aking panlabas na kilos ay nagpapakita
Ng likas na gawi at halagahan ng aking puso
Sa hayag, hindi maglalao’t
Maibubulalas ko ang pinakapersonal na damdamin o kapakanan
Para pagpulutan ng luko-luko: Hindi ako ang kung ano ako.
(*Othello*, Act I, Scene i)

...Dalawampu’t walong taon na ako sa mundo,
at sapagkat napag-iiba ko ang pakinabang sa kapahamakan,
wala pa akong nakitang tao na alam mahal in ang sarili.
Sa halip na magpalunod ako para sa pag-ibig ng isang puta,
babaguhin ko ang aking pagkatao para maging bakulaw.

Tapang! Insulto ‘yan! Nasa ating sariling kalooban kung bakit tayo’y ganito o ganoon. Hardin ang ating katawan, hardinero ang ating kagustuhan, kaya’t kung itanim nati’y matinik na halaman, o letsugas, o itanim ang halamang may asul na bulaklak at bunutin ang halamang pangrekado, o ilatag ang damong may iisang kasarian o iba-iba, na nakalilito, at baugin ang anumang itanim dahil sa katamaran o payabungin sa kasipagan; aba, ang kapangyarihan at mapagwastong autoridad nito ay ang ating kagustuhan. Kung ang timbangan ng ating buhay ay walang panig ng matwid bilang katapat ng panig ng kalibugan, dadalhin tayo ng dugo at kasamaan ng ating kalikasan sa napakahibang na eksperimento: pero meron tayong matwid para palamigin ang ating nagbabagang nasa, ang kati ng kahalayan, ang nagtutumigas na kalibugan; mula riya’y itinuturing kong isang sangang itinanim itong tinatawag mong pag-ibig.

Ito’y isa lamang libog ng dugo at pahintulot ng kagustuhan. Halika, magpakalalaki ka: lulunurin ang sarili! Mga pusa’t bulag na tuta ang lunurin mo. Ipinahayag kong ako’y kaibigan mo, at tinapat kitang pinagdugtong tayo ng isang napakatibay na kable; ngayon ang pinakakailangang panahon para mapatatag kita. Lagyan ng salapi ang iyong pitaka; nakatatanda ang pagsubaybay sa mga gera; nasisira ang pagkaguwapo sa pagpapahaba ng balbas; sabi ko, lagyan ng salapi ang iyong pitaka. Hindi puwedeng tumagal pa ang pag-ibig ni Desdemona sa Muslim—lagyan ng salapi ang iyong pitaka—o ng pag-ibig ng

Muslim sa kanya: magulo ang simula nito, at makikita mo ang katapat na paghihiwalay; lagyan lamang ng salapi ang iyong pitaka. Itong mga Muslim ay pabago-bago ng kanilang kagustuhan; punuin ang iyong pitaka ng salapi: ang pagkain niya na ngayo'y kasingsarap ng balang ay malapit nang maging kasimpait ng *coloquintida*. Kailangang sa kabataan siya bumaling: 'pag nagsawa siya sa katawan ng Muslim makikita niya ang kamalian ng kanyang pagpili: kailangan niya ng pagbabago, kailangan: samakatwid, lagyan ng salapi ang iyong pitaka. Kung kailangang sumpain mo ang sarili, gawin sa paraang mas pino kaysa sa pagpapalunod: likuming lahat ng salaping kaya mo: kung ang kabanalan at ang marupok na sumpaan sa pagitan ng nagkamaling barbaro at ng pinong-pinong taga-Venice ay hindi gaanong magiging mahirap para sa aking dunong at sa lahat ng tribu ng impyerno, siya'y mapapasaiyo; kaya't mangalap ka ng salapi; kagaguhang pagpapalunod sa sarili! Wala na 'yan: mainam pang mabitay na nagpapakana ng iyong ligaya kaysa magpalunod na wala siya.

Nakasisiguro ka sa akin: sige, mangalap ka ng salapi: madalas kong sabihin sa iyo, at paulit-ulit kong sinasabi sa iyo, kinamumuhian ko ang Muslim: ang layon ko ay puno ng tapang: gayon din kalakas ang iyong matwid. Magsama tayo sa paghihiganti: kung mapipindeho mo siya, kaligayahan

iyang sa iyo, laro naman para sa akin. Maraming pangyayari sa sinapupunan ng panahon ang iluluwal. Lakad na, sige; ihanda ang iyong salapi.

Sa ganyan nagagawa kong pitaka ang aking hangal;
Dahil lalapastanganin ko ang natipon kong kaalaman
Kung gugugol ako ng panahon para sa ganyang tanga
Na hindi para sa aking laro at pakinabang. Kinamumuhian ko ang Muslim;
At nababalita na habang ako'y nahihimbing
Ginagawa niya ang trabaho ko: hindi ko alam kung totoo;
Pwede na bilang paniniguro. Mainam ang pagtingin niya sa akin;
Mas mabisa ang talab ng layon ko sa kanya.
Karapat-dapat na tao si Cassio: makikita ko ngayon;
Mapasaakin ang kanyang katungkulan, at papagtiwalain ang aking kagustuhan
Sa dobleng pagpapaalila. Paano, paano? Tingnan natin:
Maghintay ng tiyempo para kuliliin ang tainga ni Othello
Na si Cassio'y masyadong malapit sa kanyang asawa:
May personalidad siya, at kalugod-lugod na disposisyon,
Na mapagsususpetsahan: ipakana para mapasama ang babae.
Malaya at bukas ang kalikasan ng Muslim
Na nag-aakalang tapat ang mga tao na sa totoo'y nagkukunwari lang;
At uto-uto
Tulad ng tanga.
Alam ko na—ito'y magbubunga—ang kasumpa-sumpang
Pagsilang na ito ay dadalhin ng impyerno at gabi
sa liwanag ng mundo.

(*Othello*, Act I, Scene ii)

Mula sa THE TEMPEST

Prospero:

... magsaya, ginoo:

Nagtatapos ngayon ang ating mga pagdiriwang: itong ating mga aktor,
Maaga pa'y sinabi ko sa iyo, lahat sila'y likhang-diwa, at

Naglalaho sa hangin, sa manipis na hangin:

At tulad ng walang-batayang habi ng pangitaing ito,

Ang nagtatayugang tore, ang mararangyang palasyo,

Ang mga banal na templo, mismong ang dakilang mundo,

Oo, lahat ng minana nito, ay matutunaw,

At, tulad nitong kupas na gawa-gawang palabas,

Walang iiwan kahit pasaglit na ulap. Tayo nga'y mga bagay

Tulad ng nilalaman ng mga panaginip, at ang ating munting buhay

Ay nagwawakas sa pag-idlip.

(*The Tempest*, Act IV, Scene i)



-TILDE

*creative
nonfiction*

Alter/Natives:

Talismanic and Healing Aspects of Tattoos in Northern Philippines

Jaymee T. Siao

Buscalan, Kalinga

This bed negates my body. And yet at the same time, I feel every bone, every curve, the tiniest part of my body etched on the floor. It's as if someone is drawing my body, piece by piece, on the ground, hour after every hour that I spend sleeping on this thin mat on the floor. Of all the things I have done here in Buscalan, it's sleeping on the floor that's my greatest trial.

Two in the morning and I am wide awake. Whatever happened to the exhaustion I felt earlier this evening? After a half-day's worth of bus rides, almost two more hours of yet another bus ride (this time more life-threatening than the first), a half hour of a motorcycle ride on a dirt path, with the driver ignoring every bump, as we went flying into the air and back on the seat, a few minutes' rest at the place where the road ends and the walkway begins, and over an hour's worth of trekking up the mountains, I was ready to collapse. But being in a new place with new people raised my energy and I ended up hopping around from one house to another.

Timid at first. They wouldn't talk to me, nor let me take their picture. I felt threatened most especially by the small yet imposing figures of the older women in the community. They had full-sleeve tattoos, almost never smiled, and talked in their dialect. They wouldn't even look at me, stranger that I was. "Who is this foreigner that has come to 'study' us?" I was fright-

ened of them, period. They knew so much; they had so much, and I felt so small, so ignorant.

Some had “test taps” (small lines found usually on their legs), from when they tried to test their tattooing skills, and tattoos of different, more contemporary, designs (the girls’ designs varied from butterflies to hearts for their boyfriends and break-ups, while the boys had designs varying from smiley faces to snakes).



Fig. 1 Full-sleeve tattoos of women; some details of sleeve tattoos such as names

When the rain started to pour, R and I decided to head over to Fang-Od’s place, hoping to catch her. Earlier when we arrived, she wasn’t home. “Where is this woman?” I wondered. Surely a 90-something year old woman should be at home, tending her pigs, looking after her sisters’ grandchildren (she had no family of her own). But she was out visiting someone, going to the fields to harvest, and taking care of some other business. So I had to postpone my interview with her, and my plan of getting a tattoo.

We reached her house at six in the evening and there she was, cooking her usual black beans. All of a sudden the floor turned into a dining area; plates were spread, a large one containing a heap of rice, and a bowl filled with black liquid. This was going to be our dinner. I was passed a pink plastic plate, and was urged to get some rice. After pouring water on my hands, I quickly reached over and grabbed a fistful of rice, and then poured the liquid—containing black beans—on my rice. Together, we feasted on this. I was not used to the taste, and it was the first time that I tasted black beans, but I ate with them, surrounded by the buzzing of their dialect—R, Fang-

Od and her sister, all talking. I sat there quietly, observing the place. An old woman featured by the *National Geographic* and the *Discovery Channel*, and God knows what other foreign documentaries, plus local ones. In this house of hers were a couple of old pots where she cooked her daily fare, a plastic dish holder, and a few other basic (plastic) things. She had a couple of monobloc chairs (for visitors like me, I suppose), and a stool. They all sat on the floor and I felt like a fairy tale princess, out of place in someone else's kingdom. This formidable woman who had tattooed headhunters and warriors sat beside me on the floor, and it felt wrong to be higher than her. She talked quick and fast, and R told me that she would tattoo me at "first light."

Two in the morning and I am wide awake, remembering the day's events. I feel like I have done more today than I have ever done before. Yet a few hours of sleep, and already I'm awake. After I've been musing for an hour, a rooster starts crowing, and I know soon the whole community will be up. Sure enough, at four in the morning, I can hear the children pounding rice, and the little kids shouting as they wake up to another day of playing outside. I am fascinated at their swift movements; I feel incredibly inferior as I climb my way up the steps (stones jutting out), with the little kids leaving me behind. I have a lot to learn, I tell myself.

Buscalan is a small barangay that lies in the municipality of Tinglayan in the province of Kalinga. The group of people living in Buscalan is called Butbut, and their dialect Binutbut, which is a derivation of Ilocano. Buscalan has its own rice terraces which produce some of the best rice in the country. Nestled high up in the mountains, the homes offer a spectacular view. The people's main livelihood is farming, though there are also rattan weavers and blacksmiths among them. Yet the main attraction in this small community is Fang-Od, said to be the last traditional Kalinga tattoo artist. During my stay in Buscalan, however, I was able to interview other tattoo artists, but in terms of skill, Fang-Od surpasses the others.

Everything that happens in the community can be heard. One's senses are heightened, in a place like this: the roosters' crow, the puppies' cries as they crawl outside the fence and lose sight of where they are, the children pounding rice, the blacksmiths creating their bolos and knives, while someone else creates the handle and another, the sheath.

Tattoos are badges that the warrior proudly wears. Like the modern-day soldier, the more badges/medals he has, the prouder the person is—and more importantly, the more others revere you (Scott, 1992; Wilcken, 2010; Salvador-Amores, 2013). When the colonizers came, tattooed men and women—once regarded with pride—were regarded as criminals. That the natives misused Catholicism for their own gain, and even to rebel against the colonizers, angered the Spaniards. One can show the Pulahan Movement as an example. (Arens, 1979) The Pulahanes (members of the Pulahan movement and, in Leyte, the one which came after the Dios-Dios movement) syncretized religion and animistic belief with their anting-antings, as with the babaylan. These were the mountain people in Samar, and the movement's name comes from the term “pula,” or red, because these people always wore an item with this color. They fought the American and Spanish governments and were quite successful in doing so. Many of them wore “Oracion amulets—written on paper and sewn in cloth, then worn as a necklace, called ‘reliquias.’” (Arens, 206) The magical and quasi-religious qualities of this movement helped people in making sense of their world, while at the same time reacting to the colonizers. It was both a promise to the people, and yet a lie. An example was the application for the movement. The person would be asked to pay a fee and to come back after a week. He would then be led into a room where a rigged crucifix had a string that would make Jesus nod, or His leg jerk. (219) Yet for people who had nothing to hold on to, this act became sacred.

Many have speculated on the disappearing art of tattoos. One researcher (Anacion 2008) quotes Francisco Ignacio Alzina, a Jesuit priest, in her paper which clearly shows his stand on the natives' art—the use of the terms “devil women,” side by side with the “priestesses [who] instigated it,” while speculating that there must have been a devil covered in tattoo who appeared among them—which needs no further explication. This is a priest who came and did not understand the people's culture, thereby choosing to eradicate it. It would not be a stretch to assume that most of the other colonizers/foreigners were like-minded; it would have been surprising to see a group of people “painted” (hence Pintados) from head to toe. Yet Anacion also shows the other perspective: that of

respect for having undergone such pain, at the very least. Medicine also became instituted by the colonizers, such as the Spaniards who brought in medicine to fulfill the need of taking care of their wounded soldiers in the fight for their empire, thus making medicine a mechanism of colonial rule (Anderson, 2007). This did not mean that people embraced modern, scientific medicine; in fact, it was quite the opposite. An example would be the natives trying to fight an epidemic through a procession, carrying the image of San Roque while praying that the disease would go away (Juanico, 1978, 5). This, naturally, helped spread the disease even more, as both healthy and infected people came together in close-knit groups.

That tattoos were based on animist beliefs is but one explanation as to why the Spaniards were heavily against such practices. Tattoos, apart from being a badge of honor for the men, and used for aesthetic purposes by the women, were also believed to be magical, and were therefore used as anting-antings. And what better way to keep one than to have it imprinted directly and permanently on one's body?

Fr. Richard Arens talks about the anting-anting, and the difference between talismans and amulets. He stresses the importance of such, that “no guerilla leader could gain followers if he was not known to have a powerful anting-anting.” (Arens, 1971, 122) Talismans, according to him, “bring good luck or transmit certain new qualities to their owner, but may bring harm and destruction to others.” (127) Amulets, on the other hand, “are preventive in character and therefore more negative.” For certain reasons, despite the introduction of Christianity, locals held on to this belief. Perhaps owing to the fact that Christianity came with the colonizers, or was introduced by them, there was still resistance among the locals. But to focus on the cultural aspect, one can simply say that the locals did not easily let go of their culture, and instead, integrated it with the foreign one. Arens explains that “if no clear distinction is made between the ‘magical power’ of anting-anting, and the Christian sacramentals (or blessed objects), it is due to the fact that animistic and Christian beliefs are closely interwoven because of the ignorance of the barrio people in religious matters.” (122)

Seven in the morning and we were at Fang-Od's place. Last night's feast felt like my last supper, with the stress and tension of getting a tattoo—my first one at that—from her. I saw that she had already fixed her ‘studio;’

a small open space in front of her house that consisted of two monobloc chairs and a stool. The bowl of ink was ready, and she was ushering one of her sister's grandchildren out of her house. I smiled at her, despite the tension. This is it, I told myself, feigning an air of confidence. After the tattoo, I will interview her. This is what I came here for.

I watched her prepare the stick. She cut a small bamboo stick, and beside her was a flat, open tin can filled with strings, thorns, and various other materials. She picked a pomelo thorn which would serve as the needle, and I watched her thread it into the bamboo stick. After several minutes of preparation, she led me to the open area and I sat down on one of the monobloc chairs, understanding that the other one was for me to put up my foot. I showed her where I wanted the tattoo, and told her to decide on the design. She stared at my leg for several minutes, rather intensely, and I waited patiently for whatever came to her. She then took a long piece of stick, dipped it in ink, and drew two parallel lines on my leg.

That was all she drew. Two parallel lines. And then she began the long process of tattooing. I waited for the first tap, and when she began, I tensed up and looked away. The thorn snagging on the skin gave an extra sting to the whole painful process, and I was wondering how I'd get through the whole "ordeal."

In front of me were children, mothers with babies, and men who were all watching. R saw me tense up, and started talking to me. He was filling out a survey about the community prepared by several college students, and he was asking me the questions one by one. I was getting annoyed at his questions, but I answered all of them as patiently as I could. And then R told me, "Don't fight the pain. Just take it in." And I understood. The trick was not to fight it, but to accept it. As with all healing processes (as this felt like one to me), one must take in the pain, be one with it, and transcend it. Once I had accepted that, I could watch Fang-Od work on my leg. I became fascinated with the process, taking pictures and watching the design slowly come into being. I watched as she added the details, and I chatted with R and C, the owner of the house where I was staying. In the middle of the process, a group of men from the fields came by and watched the making of the tattoo. I could feel the community slowly open up to me, as they saw me being tattooed. Strange and proud as it may sound, I felt that I was being marked as one of them.

An hour after, Fang-Od stopped and admired her handiwork. “Beautiful,” she remarked, “because you have fair skin.” I was fortunate, said many, as some people, even with the smallest design, takes up to 2-4 hours of tapping. Fang-Od won’t stop until she’s satisfied that the ink has gotten into your skin, and for each person, it varies as to how one’s skin accepts the ink. I looked at my leg and saw a centipede crawling up sideways. “For protection and safety, favored by the strongest warriors.” I had a *gayyaman* on my leg, and it would serve as my protection and companion.



Fig. 2 Fang-Od at work; adding details to the tattoo

The Shaman, and the Power of Symbols

For Levi-Strauss (2010), there are three levels of belief when it comes to shamanistic cure, and these beliefs are said to be socially-constructed and maintained. A large part of the healing process, therefore, centers on the belief that one accords to the healer. And this belief, as Levi-Strauss astutely points out, are “enhanced by the manipulation of symbols in a ritual setting. The use of symbols, like the doctor’s white coat, plays an important role in reinforcing the patient’s beliefs; these symbols can be objects or words, but they have special meaning to participants.” (124, emphasis mine) It is understood that the shaman has a particular effect on the patient together with the symbols used and rituals performed, as all these are primarily based on the belief system of the patient.

Does this discredit the healer, and what he does? In one sense, it may seem as if the patient alone holds the power, while the healer sim-

ply performs his job. In another, it is apparent that something should be understood by both sides. Does this not hold true for the modern-day doctor as well? His array of symbols (the white coat, the stethoscope, the medicines) and rituals (assessing and testing the patient) will only hold a certain value if the patient believes in it. The real process of healing begins only when the patient believes that he himself will heal. As Konner (2010, 113) maintains, “counseling and psychotherapy speed up recovery from surgery and heart attack and mitigate the suffering of patients receiving radiotherapy for cancer. Even a room with a view reduces the amount of pain medication requested by patients recovering from surgery.”

This is the same for the universal value of symbols: that they add to the belief system, and, as Arens notes in his study of the rituals and amulets in Samar and Leyte, they show people’s “motivations, hopes and fears.” (Polo, 1988, 17) Such rites and amulets are a record of both fears and aspirations and a means of coping in the face of Christianity. Faced with the unknown, the locals tend to hold on to these symbols, the way any other person would, in times of crisis. This brilliantly reveals how early Filipinos have tried to make sense of the world around them, by charging objects with sufficient meaning—something akin to concretizing the intangible.

I interviewed Fang-Od after my session with her. I asked about tattoos in general, focusing on her experiences in tattooing. She sat on her stool, answered my questions in a very composed manner, blowing away some dirt that had settled on her arm. Each time she raised her arm, I saw a different design on her full-sleeve tattoo. I was amazed at her own tattoos. Here was a formidable 93-year old woman whose whole body was a beautiful canvas of art.

She has been practicing the art since puberty. I asked her about tattoos for specific diseases, and was surprised to hear that she refused to tattoo the sick, as the disease might be transferred to her. However, she went on to explain several diseases that are exceptions. First is goiter (or *whinor* in the local dialect), complementing the observations of other anthropologists. According to her, she would tattoo small lines (around four centimeters, as she drew on my notebook), which would stop the growth (but not remove the goiter itself).



Fig. 3 Details of Fang-Od's sleeve tattoo

Vanoverbergh (1929) has often been cited on tattoos' healing aspects, despite the fact that he discusses them only in passing. In his book, *Dress and Adornment in the Mountain Province of the Philippine Islands*, he explains how the Igorot "tattoo their deformities (i.e. goiters, etc.), in which case tattooing has a curative value." (189) He, however, does not further explain the significance of this practice, simply leaving it at that. His main focus is on the different ways of dressing (tattoos are seen as a "garment" of sorts, as they are "often a cheap, permanent and beautiful means of covering their naked skin, especially in the case of women." [188]). And tattooing is either an adornment, or a badge for the warriors in their headhunting activities.

Dots and lines were shown as examples of tattoo designs (230). Vanoverbergh describes women as often having their hands/arms, as well as their thighs, tattooed.

Another example is ringworm (*uyad*), which Fang-Od would encircle with a tattoo, to somehow 'contain' it. Like goiter, this was also a persistent problem in the community.

The most frequent 'healing' tattoos she created were those for fertility. In the community, if you are married for six to seven years and still do not have a child, you will be told to separate (*ichang*), or to get a *fatok*, which was often a full-sleeve tattoo. Fang-Od enumerates three different women whom she tattooed: Whai and Chanao, who are now living in Tabuk, could not have children; and Adchamay, who gave birth five times to children who only lived for four to five days. All of them got a full-sleeve tattoo from Fang-Od, and all of them successfully had children after. It can just be one full-sleeve, and not two, as many women in the community

have. The design, according to her, is at the discretion of the tattoo artist (*mambabatok*).

Arachong was a different case. He had a lung disease which no one had diagnosed correctly. Nor could anyone cure it. His father took Arachong to Fang-Od, who read his blood, and said that she could not heal him. He eventually passed away.

There are cases when Fang-Od declines to tattoo a certain person, whether for healing or for simple adornment (such as the current influx of foreigners and locals who go to her for a “souvenir.” I learned that nowadays, she declines requests less frequently, perhaps for economic reasons. People who go to her for tattoos are charged a certain amount. Fang-Od, being the one who earns most in the community, helps her sisters’ families and other members of the community).

Traditionally, when one goes to Fang-Od for healing, one gives *ayyubo*—or red carnelian beads—as a gift. One can see these worn by many of the older women in the community, including Fang-Od herself. The typical necklace worn by Kalinga women is a necklace strung with agate, porcelain, and carnelian beads.

Another interesting practice in the community is that of tattooing one’s name on one’s arm; Fang-Od, Baydon, and Sigway, together with the other community members I talked to and observed (who had tattoos) all had their names on their arms. According to them, this was important so that when they die, especially when their heads are cut off, they will be recognized by their tattooed names, and be brought back to their community, their home.

Satisfied with my interview, I thanked Fang-Od for her beautiful design and for answering all my questions. Later, after she had fed her pigs, I knew she was going to the fields to take part in the harvest. Bloody and scarred, I went back to my room to rest a bit, and to check out my souvenir from this woman. I was limping a bit, but the pain no longer mattered to me. I knew I was fortunate enough to have been given a glimpse of this woman’s life, and her community.

With my jeans rolled up, I strolled around the community, and when the people saw my *fatok*, they all had something positive to say about it. I felt the community opening up to me, and I felt the tiniest bit of being a part of them. It was nothing, really: a small image, a bit of pain, a little

knowledge. But I felt closer to the Butbuts than I ever had with the other communities I had previously visited in all my travels and fieldwork.

Baydon, a 93-year old member of the Butbut group, was one of the tattooed folks I encountered. I was fascinated to see the small x marks on his face, so I went up to him to ask what they meant. Salvador-Amores' (2002) paper on the *batek*¹ discusses its function in rites of separation. Here, she mentions the *linga-lingaw* which, according to her, is a tattoo that provides protection from the *alan-alan*, or spirits that are dwelling in the village. (113) Especially after a successful headhunt, the spirits feared are those of the dead enemies. The small x marks scattered on their bodies and faces, are supposed to “confuse” the spirits and prevent them from recognizing the people whom they want to take revenge on. It is noted that this tattoo is given to women and children for protection, as well as to ensure good health.

For Baydon, the x marks were not for protection, but rather, commemoration. Having killed five Japanese men during the war, he decided to have those small x marks tattooed on his face as a remembrance of what he had accomplished. I made sure to ask if the small x tattoos had any protective nature, but he denied this quickly.

Showing me the tattoo on his arm, Baydon tried to carve the missing letter “B” with a small knife, to show me his full name. I became alarmed, asking him to stop, but he just laughed at me.

1 Kalinga term for tattoo. The different terms such as *fatek*, *fatok*, were all “derived from the sound of the tapping of the stick to the tattoo instrument which pierces the skin. The word *tek* (*tik*) translates into: ‘to hit slowly.’” (108) In this paper, the term *fatok* will be used, as it is closest to the Binutbut dialect.



Fig. 4 Baydon, a member of the community and his name tattooed on his arm

I was also informed that the more appropriate term for the small x marks was *linga-lingaw* (fly-like). He also had slanted lines on his cheeks, which I noticed on other community members. Some, however, especially the women, had dotted lines on their faces. These facial tattoos are called *dung-it*. All of these, according to them, were simply for adornment².

It is quite obvious that the practice of tattooing is common to all of them, and the meanings of these tattoos are also appropriated by each person. Though many writers have explained the meanings of the different Kalinga symbols, one must remember to be careful in generalizing, as the meaning may not necessarily be the same from one person to another. These symbols are appropriated individually. Moreover, one decides to have a tattoo to commemorate a certain event, so the meaning may be personal or, as is the case of some of them, for no reason at all, but simply as adornment.

I decided to visit the woman who tattooed Baydon. Sigway told me that the x marks tattooed on one's face are simply for adornment, and

2 I also asked Fang-Od about her own *dung-it*, and according to her, a woman named Sagoysoy did hers. The *linga-lingaw* and the two small slanted lines on her face were for adornment, and nothing else.

nothing else. For her, it did not hold any particular significance. This once again shows how each person appropriates the symbol, ascribing to it his or her own personal meaning. Sigway is also one of the community's tattoo artists, but she only did small tattoos with no complicated designs. I asked her if she knew of any tattoos for specific diseases, and she talked about tattoos for goiter. Living in the mountains with no bodies of water, salt was one of the commodities that these people lacked especially in the past. Hence the high percentage of community members suffering from goiter. She would put small dots or lines on the goiter, which it was believed would heal it.

Krutak (2005), who did studies on the symbols of tattoos, has pointed out that "simple markings had therapeutic value and were placed on goiters, tumors and varicose veins. Among the Kalinga particular arrangements of centipede scales were believed to ward off cholera." Jenks' (1905) own fieldwork shows how the Igorots have cross-hatched markings which are placed on goiters, varicose veins and other swellings and enlargements. Though he mentions that it is obvious that the Igorots believe in their therapeutic value, he was not able to get any statement to substantiate his opinion. (145)

This seems to be the pattern among scholars: the inability to explain how and why tattoos were used for health purposes, perhaps in part because there is no explanation behind it. There is simply the bearer's own belief in it. And there is, after all, no quantifiable way to measure one's belief in something; the potency of the tattoo as a symbol is only what becomes apparent. Also, it is of interest to note that there are often specific arrangements or practices necessary to make the tattoo effective in warding off or curing diseases. It is not just placed on the body like a bandage of sorts, as one does when one is sick.

*

When I was going around with R, who usually served as my interpreter and translator, people would shout his name as everyone there knows him and I would often see people glance at me and ask "Hapon?" R would correct them at first, telling them I was "Tagalog," from Manila, but days later, he would just agree with them whenever they asked. I got angry with him but managed to laugh after he said he was tired of correcting

them. So it was that: a lone Japanese woman doing research (a word which they had no local term for), imposing herself on their community.

That same night, I went to another house. By then I had picked up a few local customs, such as taking off one's slippers all the time, hitching up your legs over the low barrier in front of the house, and sitting down on the floor, like everyone else.

It was the house of Grace's family. Grace is one of Fang-Od's sisters' granddaughter, to whom she passed on the skill of tattooing. At age 10, Grace started tattooing, and now, a college student taking up AB English, she is perhaps the youngest tattoo artist in the country, having joined the annual *Dutdutan* festival (a day of showcasing tattoo artists' talents). I asked her if she liked what she does, and she gave me a big smile, saying yes. On the wall, I saw her medals and plaques—a mix of academic and tattooing achievements.

I sat on the floor, a bottle of gin in front of me, and several glasses. One by one, men came inside the house, chatting with us and drinking. "Shot, Ma'am!" they would tell me with a smile, before taking a swig of water (chaser) and a shot of gin. I would smile, raise my bottle of Pale Pilsen (the only other available alcoholic drink), and drink with them.

Grace is busy preparing something. She uses a long stick to blow on the fire, as she boils water. She chats with us, and I ask her what books she likes to read. We trade stories; R and I show her pictures on our phones; she plays a song by Katy Perry on hers. I stand by the window, look outside, and am greeted by a large pig strolling right outside the window. We greet each other. Grace prepares a meal of *pancit canton*. She opens four packs, readies the rice, and before I know it, plates are once again scattered on the floor, with her urging me to get some rice to eat with the noodles. I am handed a spoon, and as I struggle to eat my noodles with it, I am more than content sitting there on the floor, talking to some of the most interesting people I have ever met.

She takes a bowl of clear liquid with some chopped-up pieces inside. R pours the liquid on his rice, scoops up a piece from the bowl, and feeds it to me. I eat it and the lovely taste of mushroom hits my mouth. I smile and eat more, talk more. Someone places another bottle of beer in front of me, not clearing the empty bottles. It is open, and I have no choice but to drink it. It's warm beer as there's no ice, no refrigerator in

the community, and I take a swig of beer as someone beside me takes another shot of gin.

Past ten in the evening, I go back to the home I have grown accustomed to, not feeling the least bit sleepy. My leg continues to throb, but it's a sensation that feels like a part of me by now. I climb up the steps to my room, and see Wade sleeping outside. The family's dog has taken a liking to me; I often meet him during my rounds in the community and he walks with me for a while. At night, he sleeps outside my room. Once, at two in the morning, he growled and barked angrily outside, and I wondered who the enemy was. I like to think Wade is protective of me, and refuses to let anyone bother me, even if his barking is often the reason I am jolted awake at strange hours of the night.

That night, I think of what R told me earlier, during dinner with Grace. In the community, if you say something about someone without proof, or simply badmouth a person, that person can complain to the elders, and the latter would convene. If they know that what you said has no basis, they can punish you and ask you to pay for what you did. For instance, you will be asked to pay two pigs. Upon receiving the tribute, the whole community will then feast on the pigs. It is a celebration of sorts, and the whole community will know of what you did.

My last day in the community: I am already being greeted by the folks, and I am running together with the children. I go to Fang-Od's home again to say goodbye, and before I start my long trek back to the place where I will catch the bus to Bontoc, I hear the news that one of the community members has passed away due to dengue. Sarah was only 27 years old, and I see some of the community members arriving. In the community, whenever someone passes away, everyone (those who are away, for instance those who work in other cities) is supposed to come back to the community to mourn.

I am sitting on the steps outside Fang-Od's home, and I see a long trail of them—men, women, children and even dogs chasing them—follow one path up to the highest spot in the community. Soon, a long line of men is coming up. A couple of them are carrying the body wrapped in cloth, on top of thick bamboo poles. I ask R why the other men have bamboo poles with them, and he says they are spare poles, in case the ones holding the body break. The other men are there to take the place

of the carriers should they get tired, as the body must not touch the ground.

I remember my own trek and how exhausted I already was midway through, and once again I am filled with respect and admiration for these people. When the body passes by, every person stops what he or she is doing, as a sign of respect. Later, when everyone has gathered on top, they will begin their ritual for mourning.

I sit there, all my worries of trekking with my throbbing leg fading. I marvel at how all the people I've spoken to before coming to this community had expressed their concerns and fears. They were anxious about how a community in the mountains would live. I had read accounts of people coming up, and how they instruct you to bring a particular item, or prepare you for the worst. It is actually I who had learned from this community. They needed nothing from me; I was the one who needed them. To teach me the values we have forgotten, to explain to me what family and community mean. And to allow me to heal, in every aspect.

When they have brought Sarah up, I say one last goodbye to Fang-Od who gives me a bright smile, and thanks me in return. R and I start our long trek down. I lead the way, and I meet several men going up to the community. I say good morning to all of them in Tagalog with a slight bow and a big smile, hoping they will understand me. All of them smile and give me a quick bow. When we reach the place where we can catch a motorcycle to cut our trek, we decide to continue by foot, as it will be disrespectful to ask someone to take us down, when everyone is headed towards the community.

Upon reaching Bugnay, we wait hours for the bus—there is only one per day, coming from Tabuk—and when the bus finally arrives, R points out to me a woman, Sarah's mother. I condole with her as I try to imagine her grief at losing a child. Sarah was one of the few people in the community who had earned a college degree. She helped out whenever there were activities in the community. I want to say something, but instead, I watch her unload all her things from the bus—from vegetables to chickens to boxes of different shapes and sizes. I help carry some of the things down from the bus, and between us is a silence which I hope will somehow transmit my message of sympathy. Aside from the fact that I cannot even speak their dialect, I know that no words would suffice, so I just send her a quiet

prayer. When everyone has finally disembarked, baggage included, I climb aboard the bus feeling a deep gratitude to the people for treating me as one of them, and feeling sorry that I am leaving. I always say that the best sign of leaving is feeling regretful that you are about to go, knowing that the place has indelibly marked itself into you, literally and figuratively.

The Symbol of Tattoos

Have we lost our tattoos, because they have been criminalized? Have we lost the body's power—as a dwelling place of the soul? No longer magical, our bodies have become objectified, and we have been alienated from our own culture, from our own bodies. This journey is a step back. This is a reminder of what the body once was, and still is.

In a time where tattoos are regarded negatively, and tattooing considered a criminal act, there are people who hold on to them because of the power of symbols in our lives. The body is sacred, and what is inscribed, imprinted on it, is also deemed sacred. Such is the power of the tattoo as a symbolic text.

I have tried to trace the art of tattooing by showing its health aspects and/or curative powers, instead of simply showcasing it as a part of warrior (*mingor*) culture. This is a reflection on both traditional medicine, as well as the art itself: that in fact, the two are intertwined. As tattooing is part of culture, so is healing. It harkens back to the fundamental need of every man: the preservation of the self. Seen as such, one can understand how the healing process is an over-arching process that subsumes—or incorporates—many different cultural aspects under it. The same is true of tattoos; when the colonizers literally and figuratively “marked” the natives as rebels, based on an art form which was part of themselves, they failed to see the importance of tattooing as a cultural by-product, meaningful to the Filipinos who practiced it. In some ways, the colonizers were correct in pointing out that the locals rebelled against them; tattooing, or the symbol itself imprinted on the body, was a sign that the locals chose to hold on to their belief system, and thus (re)claim their bodies. It was not an either/or; it was simply the natives making sense of their world, and to read the imprints is to read a cultural text that the colonizers failed to alter.

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We often say “hello” as a form of greeting, but for them, the people of Buscalan, it’s “*Maayam*,” which is a question. Where you are headed to? they ask. And they answer one another, telling each other where they are going, so that later, when someone goes missing, the last person who met him or her can tell the people where that person was last headed. And that is the meaning of community. Such a beautiful way to show that one cares.

I am going to the fields. I am meeting a friend, a relative. I am headed towards a place. I am here.

I am.

In this community, I belong.

**Gratitude to Ruel Bimuyag, who accompanied me and introduced me to the community in Buscalan; Charlie Pan-oy, whose house I stayed at; and to Dr. Vicente Villan, who led me to the first step of this research.*

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Snakes in the Cane

Jenny Ortuoste

Enter Into The Cane. Free Admission.

Snakes wind their way down foot-trodden dirt paths that meander through brakes of sugar cane that grow tall, thick, and dense in the sunlight. I stand hidden in the cool greeny shadows sucking sweet nectar from the end of a cut and peeled reed. I dig the toes of my sandals into the dirt and pull my t-shirt from my body. It is hot and I am sweating and I squint against the glare, but a breeze cools my cheeks. I watch the snakes without fear, knowing they will leave me alone if I return the favor. The sugar cane juice is refreshing. I spit out the gnawed fiber and chew some more.

I am seven, Manila-born and –raised. I have been sent to live with a grand-aunt in Bacolod City while my parents work out the details of their separation.

They put me on a plane but I do not remember who went with me or what luggage they packed. I know I would not have left without my favorite books, my mother's *Nancy Drews* and *Hardy Boys* and *Bobbsey Twins*. I want to bring my baby sister, but I am told she has to stay behind.

"Be good," says my mother. "Study hard." Maybe she told me that when she took me inside the big house on the *hacienda* to meet her mother's sister.

Lola Bennett had silver hair, fair skin, a thin Spanish nose, and the attitude that goes with all that. She was a widow, *viuda de Araneta*, when she married the swarthy Ismael, he of the tobacco-scented, raisin-wrin-

kly skin. They were kind to the little stowaway planted among them in their old age.

“Sleep in our room,” they said, so on a mattress by the wall at the foot of their bed I slept, even if I was given my own bedroom where my clothes and other things were kept. *Lolo* Maeng snored and *Lola* Bennett switched on the light two or three times a night to use the toilet, pushing open white swinging doors like those to a Wild Wild West tavern that squeaked with a high pitch. Homesickness churned in my gut and I found it difficult to sleep. It wasn’t until after a couple of months that I got used to their creaking rhythms, and settled down to see what would happen to me next.

Lola Bennett’s sprawling bungalow was in Taculing, close to where the airport used to be, on an *hacienda* planted to *tubo* as far as the eye could see. This was during the late 1970s, but even by present standards that house would look fresh and contemporary. It nestled behind high walls across the road from the *tubohan*, sticking out from its surroundings like a crystal in the mud.

The house was built in the center of a large pond, slightly raised on cement pillars above the knee-high level of the water. There was a bridge one had to cross to get over the water to the front door, and for a child it was magic, like a portal to another world.

I had not seen such a house before nor have I seen one since.

Fish Keep Your Soul And It Seeps Out Through Their Gills Into The Water.

Orange-colored carp swam in the pond, decades before raising *koi* became fashionable. After dinner one night *Lola* took several slices of bread and said, “Come with me.”

I followed her out to the pond. I wondered what she wanted the bread for. I was surprised when she tore a slice to pieces and threw them into the water. The carp glided through the water, which boiled in frenzy with their activity, their tails thrashing as they fought over the bread. I was taught it was a waste to treat food in such a fashion, but then I realized it was to nourish the golden fish that darted between and around the pillars that held up the house.

“This is my daily exercise,” *Lola* Bennett said, and it was the first time I heard the word *exercise*. My parents never performed physical activity for

its own sake; at home they lay in bed and read or listened to music. My mother loved Tschaikovsky; my father, Mozart and Streisand. In bed he would hold open a book with one hand, and with the other would dip into a dish which he knew without looking my mother would have placed beside him on the bed—peanuts, banana chips. Once my mother moved the dish away, and my father's fingers groped at the sheet, his eyes still skimming over a page of Gore Vidal. We laughed, and he looked up, eyes not really seeing us, thoughts remote; he found the dish, popped peanuts into his mouth, and went on reading. *Crunch.*

I squatted and dipped my hands into the water, trying to catch the fish. They wove through the water without effort, power in each flick of tail, skirting the pillars that held up the house without crashing into them. I wondered if their presence was a spell that kept up the pillars, if without the fish the pillars and the house would crumble into the pond. I splashed a lot but they were too fast, and they darted between my splayed fingers, their scales glittering in the moonlight, until *Lola* said, "Stop that. It's time to get back into the house."

But the water was cool in the night and I smelled jasmine in the air. It was heady, an unfamiliar scent. I could not have imagined living plants exuding such fragrance. The nights in Manila were not perfumed; and I thought to myself, I like it here very much.

We Eat Peanuts Because They Are Brain Food.

Lolo Maeng and *Lola* Bennett married when they were middle-aged. They had no children of their own together, but *Lola* did, from an earlier marriage to an Araneta. I was, for a time, the child *Lolo* might have sired but never did.

Like many men of his generation from the grand old days before the war, he was stern and aloof toward children and the help, though he did make a sporadic effort to give me some attention.

On the first Saturday of each month he would take me to a clinic in the city for my growth hormone shots that a doctor in Manila prescribed because I was short for my age.

On those days he drove his snappy little red-and-cream Renault 14 himself, and we went zooming down dusty backroads with the windows rolled down and the breeze streaming through our hair, his salt-and-pep-

per hair cut military-style, mine trimmed like a boy's. (I was not allowed to grow my hair long until I was in college.)

"Do you think we're driving too fast?" *Lolo* asked.

I answered with the rictus of a grin.

He laughed and stepped on the gas even harder; I tightened my grip on the leather seat, my neck muscles rigid with fear. There were no seatbelts back then, or at least his car didn't have them. He slowed down when we reached the city where the streets were crammed with people and jeepneys. Only then did I relax.

After I got my shot at the doctor's (pants and panties bunched around my knees, buttocks bared for the sting), *Lolo* stopped by a *suki* for roasted peanuts. The vendor knew him.

"*Toto [Sir], tatlo ka baso liwat?*"

"Yes, three glasses full, the usual," *Lolo* nodded, and the hard brown spheres glistening with oil and grains of salt were scooped up and pattered into a brown paper bag that was soon soaked with grease.

After buying peanuts we would sometimes drop by Lopue's bookstore where *Lolo* allowed me to choose from the latest *Nancy Drews*. Like the *Hardy Boys* and other teen mystery series, they were all hardbound.

Back home *Lolo* Maeng would take a large metal strainer and shake out all the salt from the peanuts and refill his *garapon*, an empty jar of Nescafe coffee, that he kept in a cupboard in the "clean kitchen" of the house.

(Food was cooked by *kusineras* in an outbuilding which housed the "dirty" kitchen and maids' quarters. It was also where the ironing was done, with a weighty cast-iron *plancha* filled with glowing charcoal that I was forbidden to touch.)

I am the only person allowed to share *Lolo's* peanuts, and this made me feel special and loved. Though now, come to think of it, maybe *Lola* just didn't like peanuts.

We Do Not Play With Eggs, She Said.

Bacolod in the late '70s was a sleepy town for the most part, but energetic enough during harvest time. The economy still relied heavily on sugar although many business people knew it was the end of the sweet era

of easy money, when harvests would fill the warehouses with sacks of sugar and *hacenderos'* coffers with sacks of money.

My nanny Violeta (we called her *Nanay*), who was also my mother's nanny until she was sixteen said that "back then"—the 1950s and '60s—was a splendid time, one marked by prosperity and luxury.

"After the harvest, your grandmother, your *Lola Betty*, she'd say, would go to Manila with an attaché case stuffed full of money and spend it all there, or sometimes in Hong Kong, because it was only an airplane ride away."

Lola Betty, *Lola Bennett's* younger sister, was short, *chinita*, and stylish. Creased black-and-white photographs from the '50s and '60s show her in Hong Kong—at the tailor's, at the Peak, in a restaurant—in pedal pushers or heavily-beaded dresses, posing with one well-shod foot in front of the other and a shiny leather handbag slung low over a wrist. She did not smile in these pictures. Her hair was always teased high into a bouffant cast into a solid *ampaw* shape with hairspray.

By the time I was sent to Bacolod she was living with her son, my mother's brother, penniless in a cramped apartment in Malate, because she had gambled away her share of her inheritance from my great-grandparents. She was overly fond of playing mah-jong, addicted to the click-clack of engraved ivory tiles and shouting "Pong!" and "Chow!" and gossiping with her *kumadres* over *cha* and cakes or banana *turon*—sliced plantains wrapped like egg rolls and deep fried with sugar. I heard that sometimes the clear brown liquid in the cups was not tea.

But she was an unlucky player for the most part and lost a house, tracts of land, suitcases of cash.

She never worked a day in her life and was never married.

Nanay Violeta came with my mother to Manila when my mother married at 21, and settled with her there to take care of me and my sister. *Nanay* called me "Nini" instead of "Neni," my nickname; said "bebe owl" instead of "baby oil"; and called rubber flip-flops "smagols." We knew no other word for those slippers until I was in school and learned Tagalog. I learned much later that during the war and after, many necessities, including slippers, had to be smuggled into the country.

In Bacolod we ate a lot of chicken, regularly and to the point of nausea, because *Lola Bennett* ran a huge poultry farm, as well as the sugar

cane plantation. On a couple of visits the farm manager gave me under-sized hen's eggs that didn't pass their quality control inspections. Some were oddly shaped, waisted or conjoined like Siamese twins. I kept several of them under the bed in my room, right on the orange carpeting. Some months later, one of the maids found them. She called my *Lola*, lifted the bed skirt, and pointed to them without saying a word.

My little collection was taken away. "Eggs are not toys," I was told.

Too bad. I liked those eggs, some of them as tiny as quail eggs with pebbly surfaces of calcium carbonate in raised and ridged patterns, random as nature made them.

After that, I was never taken to visit the poultry farm again.

My nanny Mila, was scolded for not watching me carefully enough to know that I was smuggling home rejected eggs. I didn't think she was with us when we visited the poultry farms—she wasn't with me all the time, as far as I remember.

I usually saw her at bath time. In the evening, after a supper of chicken, she would take me to the white-tiled bathroom off my bedroom, switch on the shower, and try to whip up a soapy lather in the hard water which ran out of the pipes.

At first I resented her bathing me, because as I had told her I had been giving myself baths in Manila since I turned seven. She smiled and said, "Your *Lola* told me to," and we both knew there was no arguing with that.

I came to love the way she wrapped me up in thick white towels and rubbed me dry, giving me a quick hug before letting me go. I don't remember anyone else hugging me when I was a child, unless it was the occasional aunt on a courtesy visit.

Don't Cross That Bridge Before You Have To.

After the egg episode *Yayay* Mila whispered to me, "*Nugay abi ham-pang sang pagkaon.* (Don't play with food.) I know other things you can do."

One night she took me out of the house into the garden and handed me a small book, hardbound. There was no title on the cover. I opened it and found it filled with smooth creamy pages, unruled, half-filled with her notes written in flowing cursive with a black fountain pen.

She opened the book to a particular page and pointed to the title at the top: “Moon River.”

“This is a beautiful song,” she said. “Memorize the words.”

She sang it to me in a light soprano. “Moon river, wider than a mile, I’m crossing you in style, some day...”

(That song always brings her to my mind although I have forgotten her face. I buy Moleskine notebooks that remind me of hers, but though I try I cannot discern her features on the milky mirror of the paper.)

I have not been in Bacolod in several months, and I could barely remember my mother’s face, and my father’s. I knew they were both good-looking; that I had never seen my father’s parents because they had died before I was born; and that my mother looked nothing like her mother, except for the diminutive height.

Mila told me only one thing about my grandmother—that she visited the house in Taculing several times and would spend hours at a time conversing with *Lola Bennett*. That was all.

Lola Bennett had never mentioned *Lola Betty* to me. Perhaps my grandmother’s scandal-ridden life which her family had to hush up prevented them from mentioning her. Not that the Lacsons were particularly judgmental; they were a large, inbred family, a sensuous lot that scorned conventions the better to indulge their tastes.

According to one story, *Lola Betty* had a *liaison dangereuse* with her brother-in-law, “the old man Baltao,” as my father always called him, husband to *Lola Betty*’s older sister. My grandmother had a son that she named after him—Eugenio—and he had the Baltao features, the wide Caucasian eyes and the high-bridged nose.

He looked just like my mother, who *Lola Betty* said was the daughter of an army physician. My mother was not told this until she was in college. She had met him only once or twice, and she was told that he was a family friend.

She idolized him. “This is your *Lolo Ting*,” she’d say, showing us a sepia photograph of him as a young man. His hair was slicked back with pomade, cheekbones prominent, lips medium-full, a conventionally handsome Filipino of means. “I wish I knew him better. Don’t I look like him?”

No, I wanted to tell her, you look nothing like him. You look like your brother. Both of you could be halves of the same marble statue, with the thin lips, high noses, and alabaster skin. You look like the old man Baltao, and that is why your mother named you Eugenia.

But I kept my thoughts to myself and allowed my mother her fantasy father.

I wonder why my grandmother had to delude her daughter so, and why her daughter persisted in believing the lie despite the evidence she saw in the mirror. I look at *Lola Betty's* unsmiling images in photographs now and wonder what other swarming secret thoughts are hidden underneath her high bouffant.

Mila asked me to sing “Moon River” back to her. At seven I knew I did not possess a good singing voice, but I knew all she needed to know was if I had learned the words. I had. I found it easy to memorize words that I had seen on a page. Words in my mind fell into patterns that I could grasp on several cognitive levels right away. They took shapes that seemed almost three-dimensional to me. Numbers, however, wandered in my mind in an impenetrable fog, ungraspable like smoke.

She took the notebook from my hands. With reluctance I let it go. There were more words in it that I wanted to read: other songs? poetry? sayings copied down to be re-read at leisure? I wanted to see the shape of the texts because then I would see the shape of her mind. Perhaps she knew this, and this was why she did not allow me to explore the rest of her notebook. Some people only share a part of their minds and hearts; the rest they keep hidden, secret.

Bubbles May Occur In Nature.

There was the time Mila took me out into the garden bearing a basin of soapy water. “I will teach you a new way to play,” she said. I was skeptical—what kind of a game would involve soap and water? I was sure it would be dull. Maybe she would show me how to do laundry. I’d seen it done and it looked boring and tedious. I was ready to sulk, and followed her without enthusiasm.

She made for a *gumamela* bush, plucked a handful of its glossy leaves, and pounded the leaves in the soapy water with a rock. I sat up. This was new. This was different. Mila swished the mixture in the water, formed an

‘O’ with one hand, and blew bubbles at me.

We made rings with our soapy hands and blew bubbles that were strong and did not easily pop even when poked by leaves or sticks. I sent out peals of laughter, and for most of that afternoon puffed myriads of rainbow spheres into being, which glided down the garden path and up into the air to bounce in the light, while *Yayay* Mila watched, beaming.

Inside each rainbow globe was my breath, and as they floated away they exploded and released my essence into the warm Bacolod wind. I believed I would live there always, and made plans for high school and college. *Lolo* Maeng said that when I was old enough he would teach me to drive and give me the snappy red Renault for my own. I wondered how I would be able to reach the pedals when the time came, and hoped that the growth hormones would make me tall, like the green cane out in the fields.

Our Food Is Certified Genetically Unmodified.

Mila also took care of feeding me. I was fed with food that came from the farm. For breakfast it was scrambled or sunny-side up eggs on tin plates, for lunch and dinner fried chicken and rice, never any ketchup. (I missed the UFC banana ketchup we had in Manila.) I don’t remember eating vegetables at all.

We were served meals in the “clean kitchen” off the formal dining area, furnished with 1950s-style folding metal chairs with red leather seats—a set of four—and a matching table.

That kitchen was painted white and was always clean because nothing was actually cooked there. The only food kept in the cupboard there were *Lolo’s* peanuts and plastic canisters of meringue cookies (whipped egg whites and sugar, piped into rosettes and baked till dry and set) for me. That room glows in my mind now, always flooded with light, because a screen door at one end let sunshine in during the day.

Through it I could see coconut trees, ornamental plants, and the spiky Bermuda grass of *Lola’s* well-kept lawn. Green and white and brown are the colors I associate with Bacolod—the colors of sun and earth and garden and fried chicken.

Nowadays I can’t get enough ketchup.

Seafood was served only on special occasions. Platters were brought into the house heaped with juicy red crabs crammed with tasty orange *aligue* (crab fat) and white meat as firm as fish, pink *halabos nga pasayan* (steamed shrimp) as big as my hand, lightly-cooked scallops, unseasoned so that they burst on the tongue with their own sweet flavor, and grilled tuna steaks served with chopped tomatoes and onions.

We seldom had these savory treats, and I wondered why, since *Lola* also owned a fishing fleet—surely we could have been plentifully supplied with crustaceans and fish? Perhaps she was avoiding their high-cholesterol content.

She was a great believer in children's nutrition by supplement. She made me drink an entire plastic Tupperware tumbler of Milo every single night. It was brought by a kitchenmaid into her bedroom, where I slept, on a tray along with a tumbler of water. I was supposed to drink both; I was watched until I had emptied both tumblers, bottoms up. It resulted in my waking up in the wee hours, and going to the bathroom in the dark because I couldn't reach the light switch; proof, I believed, that the hormone injections were worthless.

I love the taste of chocolate and malt, it smells of nostalgia and sentiment, but to this day I can't look at a Tupperware tumbler without feeling like I have to pee.

The Milo was always served in a green plastic tumbler. I don't like green much, either.

And I am afraid of the dark and its terrors, real and imagined, even if I can reach light switches now.

The Incident Of The Ceramic Pig In The Night-time.

I didn't know why *Lola* and *Lolo* insisted I sleep in their room when I had my own room. They made me use my room only to keep my books and clothes in, and to spend time there during the day, mostly reading on the twin bed or on the orange wall-to-wall carpeting, thankfully not fuzzy shag.

At night, I lay on a mattress placed beside a wall at the foot of *Lolo* and *Lola's* bed, right on their green carpeting. Beside me was a carved wooden commode on which was placed the "over-over"—radio equipment to keep in touch with the fishing vessels at sea—and a ceramic pig.

This ceramic pig was a family heirloom. No one could remember where it was bought or where it came from to begin with, but it was meant to be used as a coin bank, because there was a slit on its back. It was about as large as a real piglet, made from white ceramic, and decorated in a diamond pattern with *faux* pearls, rhinestones, and other glittery *bijoux*. Its mouth was open in a smile; its tongue was of soft red felt and its teeth were pearl beads. I would wiggle my fingers into its mouth to touch the tongue, which was the only soft part of the pig, and run my fingers all over its encrustations.

I didn't give that pig a name; somehow it seemed beyond that, for I knew it was older than me. It first belonged to *Lola* Bennett's mother, my great-grandmother, who always wrote her name in her books in spidery copperplate with black ink: *Doña Marciana Ledesma vda. de Lacson*. Naming her pig would have been presumptuous on my part.

That pig loomed large in the family mythos. A faded color photograph from 1968 shows me, less than a year old, pink and chubby, on all fours on a blue chenille bedspread beside that pig, wearing only a toothy grin. People who see that picture comment on the resemblance.

The radio squawked in the early evenings, when the captains of the fishing boats would call in to report. I was in my pajamas lying on my mattress, dreading the arrival of the kitchenmaid with the tray of green Tupperware tumblers of Milo and water, with *Lola* speaking into the handheld microphone: "Benedicta 1, Benedicta 1. Come in, over." *Szquaawwk*. "Ofelia 1, Ofelia 1, come in. *Pila ka bañera sa inyo?* (How many crates did you catch?) Over."

And it went on for what seemed like hours, but was probably less than fifteen minutes. I would listen to their choppy conversation, lulled by the hoarse voices coming in on the speakers of the "over-over," punctuated by *Lola's* "Come in. Over."

When sleep was slow to come, I would stare with wide eyes at the ceiling—or at the pig—and *Yayay* Mila would be sent for. She would turn me onto my side, draping my legs and arms over a *tanday* (a pillow as long as my body), and pat my hip until I dozed off. It was a technique that never failed, and I would employ it decades later with success on my own babies.

Mila would also put a pillow behind my back—"to keep fairies from sleeping beside you," she whispered the first time she did it.

“What fairies, *Yayay*? Can they enter houses and touch people?”

“Yes, for they can do magic. If they sleep beside you, they can enthrall you, and then you would no longer belong to the human world.”

To this day I cannot sleep except on my side, with a *tanday* in front and pillow at my back. Though I know better, I think it would do no harm to keep that pillow behind me as a barricade against the legendary folk who might weave spells of ensnarement and tug at my legs and arms until I tumble with them into their netherworld.

Habits formed in childhood can last forever. Grown-ups are heedless: forgetting that their lightest word, tossed off in jest, or their harshest touch will alter children in unforeseeable ways. They forget that they were children themselves once, minds impressionable like damp clay.

What Is A Family And Where Can I Get One?

Some weeks after my eighth birthday I received a letter from my mother. By then, with the facile resilience of children, I'd almost forgotten I had a mother, a father, and a sister—in fact, that I had a family of my own that was not *Lolo*, *Lola*, *Yayay* Mila, and my Bacolod cousins and aunts.

My mother's letter covered several sheets of ruled school paper (“intermediate pad” with blue lines on cream), written with a blue ballpoint pen in her slanted and tailed *colegiala* handwriting, difficult to read. I had to go over it several times before I could read all the words, not that I understood all of them; for instance, the part where she said that she and my father had *separated* because he was *homosexual*.

I did not know what the words meant. From my own context I took “separation” to mean our lives wouldn't be the same as they used to be. “Homosexual,” I gathered, meant “different” and “not what fathers and husbands are supposed to be.” My sister, she said, was with her and going to a new pre-school—Malate Catholic School—and that they were living with her brother, *Tito* Eugene, and *Lola* Betty in the Adriatico area. The rest of the letter was a blur of justifications and exhortations to do well in school and not bother *Lolo* and *Lola* and to be dutiful and obedient to them.

She said they were having a difficult time and that I was better off where I was. I shrugged; she and my life in Manila seemed remote and alien to what I had become, what they had turned me into by shipping

me off to the Visayas to be brought up in what to me were luxurious and pleasant surroundings. I agreed that I was fine where I was.

I took a pad of Grade II paper from my school trolley and sharpened a Mongol pencil. “Dear _____,” I began (I couldn’t remember what I called her and my father before the separation. I had to reinvent them in my mind, because the change in our situation also altered in an irrevocable way how I perceived their roles in my life.) “Don’t worry about me. I like it here in Bacolod. I hope you and Joanne are fine. I am always good. Thank you for sending the Enid Blyton books. The one about Amelia Jane and her golliwog was funny. Love, Neni.”

The words scored graphite grooves in the paper, each serif marked in careful delineation like the nuns teach us in penmanship class. The marks were so deep that I could see a ghost of the letter when I lifted the sheet. I did not respond to the screed about the separation, about her allegations regarding my father’s sexuality and it being the cause of our family’s dissolution. I understood none of it yet. At that moment it was a reinforcement of the concept that my life from then on would never be the same, which was first borne upon me when my heels sank in Bacolod soil, clutching a worn and stuffed blue rabbit in one hand.

After Bacolod, I stopped using the word “Love” in letter closings to my parents. If I did, I no longer meant it.

But I was eight. All I cared for was my egg collection (while it lasted), and eating *Lolo’s* peanuts from his jar and reading my *Nancy Drews* and dipping my feet into the carp-filled pond under the house, hoping the fish would nibble my toes so I would have an excuse to squeal and run across the lawn of spiky-stiff Bermuda grass that tickled the soles of my feet. My days were filled with the hopes of a child—that I would get taller after my course of hormone shots, that we’d have shrimps again for dinner soon, that we wouldn’t crash into the cane fields when out with *Lolo* in the Renault.

The Three “Rs”—Reading, Writing, And Arikitik.

On weekdays I attended third grade at St. Scholastica’s Academy, where my most interesting classmate had yellow hair and blue eyes and bore the exotic name “Eileen Porter,” a name that could have come out of one of my *Nancy Drews*.

I found her fascinating because she could cuss in purest Hiligaynon. She knew words in the language that I hadn't heard before. How she and her all-American family ended up living in Bacolod, I didn't know, only that her father owned or ran a sugar *hacienda*.

At recess we'd play Chinese jackstones we had made ourselves from gaily-patterned cotton *retazos* and stuffed with *monggo*. This was where our basic sewing and embroidery classes proved useful, and we prided ourselves not only on the dexterity of our hands at play, but also on how well we had sewn our little beanbags.

A set of three beanbags about two inches square, "Chinese jackstones," require extreme dexterity on the players' part. One beanbag—the *pato*—is placed on the back of the hand, and a player has to be nimble to prevent its falling off while daintily picking up first one, then both, of the remaining two beanbags, then tossing them into the air and catching them as they fall.

We also played regular jackstones. The best kind came in a red plastic box with a clear lid through which you could see a shiny red ball and well-made gold-painted jacks that looked almost carved. The poorest kind, the kind no one wanted to play with, had a mud-colored taupe ball that did not bounce consistently; the ball would careen to one side or the other and throw your game off, while the jacks were of cheap, bendable plastic with obvious seams, and beads at the end of each spoke from where they had been torn off a larger sheet at the factory.

The jackstone set in one's pocket could speak volumes about a person's family and financial standing. That early in life, children like us were already learning how to judge one another based on things like monthly allowances, clothes (well-pressed uniform or not), shoes (shiny and new or not), and whether one's mother attended the school events, and whether she wore tasteful or vulgar clothes and how her make-up was applied. Obviously my classmates never saw my mother, so I remained something of a mystery to them, "the new girl from Manila."

Instead of the plastic identification cards schoolchildren wear nowadays, at St. Scho we wore nameplates, white plastic rectangles with pins fastened to their backs. Name and grade level were engraved on the front of the plate in blue. A classmate taught me how to rub crayons over the letters, filling in the letters with colored wax, which could easily be dug out with a

pin and cleaned with a toothbrush, to change the colors as often as desired, or whenever the Benedictine nuns decided to crack down on the practice, something they did once in a while.

I carried my things to school in a blue-wheeled trolley marked in white with the school's name and logo. I was small and the bag was heavy and unwieldy; more often than not the wheels would run over my feet and bruise my toes inside their black Gregg shoes and white ankle socks. Inside the bag were textbooks covered in plastic and school-issued notebooks with blue and white covers. I loved the smell of new books and notebooks, and would inhale deeply of their scent when we received them at enrollment.

In class we used pencils for writing, and collected scented erasers that we traded with one another. A metal sharpener was bolted to the wall, so no one could excuse herself from seatworks or exams by saying that her pencil lead was broken. We looked forward to fourth grade, when we would finally be allowed to use ballpoint pens with blue ink.

My hand cramped when using pencils; the thoughts flowed faster than my hand could write, and often the pencils snapped and broke, and it was too much bother to get up and sharpen them, so I became frustrated and did not write as much as my other classmates did. The words ran around inside my head, though, and I knew that I would need to write them down someday, and somehow leach them all out onto paper, otherwise my head would burst from keeping them all in.

Those hoarded words were my own secrets, hidden under my flat, boy-length hair.

It Is Doubtless That Furniture Can Be Your Friend.

On weekends we stayed home. *Lola* was religious, or appeared to be so—reciting the rosary every night, touching a *stampita* to her head, lips, breasts, and genitals while murmuring a prayer before bedtime, an almost pagan ritual reminiscent of the Fivefold Kiss of Goddess worship. But we never went to the village nor city church because the village priest always came to the house on Saturday afternoons to say anticipated Mass for the family and the household help.

The large narra dining table that could seat twelve served as the altar. The ornately-carved dining chairs were arranged before it, with an embroi-

dered throw pillow on the floor in front of each chair to cushion worshippers' knees. Only the family sat on the chairs; the rest of the household, called in from outside, arranged themselves respectfully on the sofas and against the walls.

After the Mass, when everyone had shuffled out and only a housemaid was left to clean up, I scooped out the melted wax from inside the red glass candle holders and molded it into yellow “ping-pong” balls. The wax was searing hot and I burned my fingers a few times before I learned to wait a bit and allow it to cool somewhat—a lesson, I later discovered, that applied to other things besides molten candles. Such as love affairs.

The dining table was heavy, dark, and shiny. A motif of grapes—fruit, vines, and leaves—adorned its edges. Its legs were also carved with scrolls of foliage. A housemaid sprayed Lemon Pledge on it each morning, rubbing the white flecks of froth into the wood surface till it gleamed like glass. If I tiptoed, I could smell the wax's citrus scent and see my face reflected on the table's surface—all big ears (an inheritance from *Lola* Marciana and my mother), thin cheeks, and buck teeth. I wondered if I would ever grow up to be as beautiful as that table.

At the end of the corridor that led off into the bedrooms, underneath a small window, was a large chest. I was short for my age and the chest was as high as my navel. It was made of brown, polished wood, carved half an inch deep with depictions of curvy clouds and bald men holding wooden staves, long tufts of hair on their chins falling almost to the ground. The lid was heavy and I was never able to lift it to learn what was kept inside. I would clamber over it and run my fingers over the images, revelling in the polished silken feel and gloss of the wood, which felt like glass. Like glass but not quite, and I found that thought fascinating in the extreme, how different materials could share similar attributes.

Lola Bennett saw me one day. “Get down from there. That's a Chinese chest. It is not a toy.”

Again, like the eggs, *not a toy*. Grownups placed many restrictions on things and I had to learn all of them. Jackstones were *toys*. But deformed eggs and furniture that I played with and derived the same enjoyment from, were *not toys*. I appreciated how inanimate objects were more consistent than people, whom I found incomprehensible at times.

And again, there was an unfamiliar word—*Chinese*. I thought the word applied only to beanbags. I thought it meant “toys made with beans.” In this context, it was confusing. Did it describe the carved bald men somehow, the way *homosexual* described my father?

Contrary To Reports, My Aunt Did Not Keep A Snake In Her House On Purpose. It Was An Accident.

I had second cousins who lived in a large house next door. The Gurreas were *Tita* Tinggay, *Lola* Bennett’s daughter and my mother’s first cousin, who taught me how to knit and crochet, and her children: *Manong* Charlie, *Manong* Raymar, and *Manang* Tina. They had a dachshund that chased me all the way from their house to ours, and since then I have been wary of dogs. I much prefer cats, who are generally too lazy to exert themselves to chase anything.

Both *manongs* were much older, in college at La Salle Bacolod; *Manang* Tina also went to St. Scho, but was several years older than me and was in high school. She was fair and pretty, a slim *mestiza* with aquiline features sprinkled with freckles, and I idolized her as younger children do their elder cousins. She taught me how to eat *tubo*, freshly-cut with a *binan-gon* (*bolo* knife) from the fields, peeling and gnawing the ends, sucking the pure sweet nectar, spitting out the stiff fibers damp with saliva.

Manong Mar had a motorcycle which he raced. He came home one day from a race and as he was telling his siblings about how he beat the others “with this!” thumping the bike handlebars with pride, I edged too close to the machine and it seared my leg. I still have the scar, a round pale spot the size of one of the old one-peso coins, the one with Jose Rizal’s head on the obverse and a shield on the reverse side.

Manong Charlie was handsome and later became a Mormon preacher. *Lola* Bennett was angry when I told her. “We are *Catolico cerrado!*” and scolded *Manong* Charlie for leaving the faith, and me for not telling her sooner and only when it was a *fait accompli*. She could have prevented it! Incensed, *Manong* Charlie ticked me off for telling on him. More secrets, and these, it turned out, were ones that I should have kept, to avoid family conflict.

But people always forgot I was only eight. What did I know of grown-ups and their need to conceal and prevaricate? They taught me not to lie,

but at the same time expected me to hide the truth when someone might get into trouble. Understanding when to do this and when to tell the truth was something I had to learn, fast, because this is not only a Filipino thing, but a universal one—things that have the power to hurt are hid, unless there is intent to wound, to inflict pain on purpose.

That family had a *sawa* enter their house once, which slithered out of a drawer their mother opened while looking for crochet needles or something, and the snake was chased out of the house by the houseboy, accompanied by high-pitched screaming from *Tita* Tinggay. Or so the story went.

Home Is Where They Tell You It Is.

I do not miss my mother or my father, and the ache for my sister grows a bit less each day I get used to life amid the cane.

It is summer and school is out. I look forward to fourth grade in June and indulge in some pleasant speculation on how many notebooks I will have, and on the blue ballpoint pens I will buy. Bic? Boring, everyone uses those. Kilometrico? They have that interesting smooth opaque barrel where other brands are transparent. Reynolds? They have a cachet of costliness. Maybe I will be allowed to get them in red and black ink too. I stand in front of the gate in the hot sun and think of going to the dirty kitchen for a slice of watermelon when I see a couple of pairs of shoes appear under the gate. A man's, black leather. A child's, plaid sneakers.

My heart races and my hands get clammy and I know, I *know* that it is my sister and I run. I fly to the gate and open it and there she is, in a pastel dress smiling at me, eyes coal black in her brown face, and I take her hand and drag her inside. My father steps through and smiles—"Hello, Neni," and I feel no love or welcome, only trepidation that my life in Bacolod is over.

My father has come to take me away. He saunters up to the house like he owns it, with the arrogant manner that only he of all the *Datu sa Kutawato's* grandsons possesses. Inside, he talks to *Lola* while I play with my sister, bursting with an unspecific happiness I didn't know I'd feel now we are together again. I take her to see the *koi* in the pond and invite her to unlace her shoes and paddle in the water. She is afraid of getting her feet wet, she says, but she dips a hand in and splashes it about.

Lola calls me into the house. She is agitated, her chest heaves. She hands me the telephone. My mother is on the other end.

“Curse your father,” she says, “taking you from the lap of luxury! But what can we do? We mustn’t stress the old people. They’ve been through enough. Go with him.”

I untwist the fabric-covered cable at the end of the black handset and replace it in its cradle. I look at my father. He sits cross-legged on the sofa on which I’ve never seen a guest, utterly comfortable. Beside him *Lola* is awkward, as if their roles have been reversed and she is the guest, he the owner of this mansion with fish swimming beneath it and holding it up with their golden carp magic.

He is a *homosexual*, runs a whisper in my mind. Does that mean “a man who changes good things into bad?” One who disrupts lives, makes old grand-aunts weep, angers distant mothers? Or does it mean, one who loves his daughter enough to seek her out where she has been exiled in a cane-covered island so he can take her home?

The answer comes much later. Years later.

Just like that, my year in the sugar bowl ends. Housemaids pack my bags in haste. Mila is in tears. I run out of the house, run across the dirt road outside the gate straight into the rows of cane, on and on till I stop, winded, surrounded by tall green plants that rustle in the breeze. I do not cry but dig my toes into the soil, wishing I would grow roots so deep and tenacious that no one will be able to pull me up.

A snake crawls over my right foot. It is green and long and skinny, like sugar cane that has come to sinuous life. It takes its own majestic time, curving its body over the hump of my foot and I let it, without fear, because it and I are one, because I want to crawl after it and hide in its cool dark holes, and stay.

2 May 2013

Daddy

Ferdinand M. Lopez

My father is seventy-six years old and he has lost at least 80% of his hearing. It has been difficult for him as it has been for us, who have had to live with his disability on a daily basis. There has been too much unnecessary shouting, and too many outbursts of emotion, especially on the part of my mother who had to stay home and put up with him practically twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. My mother, who had been so used to the idea of existing alone for more than three decades because my father had to work overseas, suddenly found herself living with a stranger. Though he was not completely an outsider, to my mom, he was like an alien.

My dad's father died during the war when he was five years old. Thus, when he became a teenager, he had to work in different construction sites in the city away from his mother in Bataan. My father was not much of a talker. His words were spare and his sentences economical. I think this was because he did not have many friends to hang out with and talk to when he was growing up, having been forced by circumstances to mature early and take on the daunting task of providing for his mother and himself. When I was a kid, I would always see a small group of his friends, not more than five of them, dutifully come to the house during important occasions like birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and fiestas.

Up to his retirement a decade ago, my dad was never remiss in providing for our needs, even if it meant working in harsh conditions away from his family. I think that being hard of hearing was the result of his

prolonged exposure to machines, big and noisy monsters, which he was to tame and subdue if he was to operate them in industrial facilities and offshore drilling stations here and abroad.

When I was a toddler, my father would come home at eight in the morning, after his night-shift duty as instrumentation electrician at the Elizalde Steel Corporation in Barrio Kapitolyo, Pasig. Tired from the back-breaking work, he would sleep the entire day in our room, on the second floor of my maternal grandmother's home in Tondo, during which time I would play with my two sisters and cousins in the lounging area just outside our bedroom. Before long, we would move downstairs and there would be a maelstrom in the living room. Our father would be rudely roused from sleep by our shrill voices as we got too excited in our children's games, by loud breaking sounds of things crashing and breaking apart, or by my siblings crying in unison if they got forsaken by our cousins and abandoned by their older playmates. Father's temper was short, his right hand swift—snatching or scooping anything that could unequivocally convey his wrathful dismay.

One time, in a fit of anger over what I can no longer remember now, he threw my mother's newly-bought dining table centerpiece: a wicker basket of tropical fruits cast in resin and painted beautifully in warm tropical colors. My sisters and I were stricken dumb. My mother, who was usually a banshee, was also stunned into silence. His muted rage was my earliest initiation to violence.

I did not have a good relationship with my father when I was growing up. He spoke a little and punished a lot. I remember always hiding underneath my grandmother's skirt, holding on tightly to that urine-drenched, long, printed saya every time he would run after me with a slipper or a belt. But, I was untouchable in my maternal grandmother's presence because I was a personal favorite. At those who challenged her, Lola lashed out, with her tongue—a double-bladed sword which cut deeply. Which was why father never crossed her path, more out of deference, I think, rather than out of fear.

My father was an absentee father during my formative years. Perhaps this was the reason why I had stronger bonds with my mother who was self-reliant, strong, and hard-working. I remember my mother would bring me, when I was four years old, to Aguinaldo Institute at Calle Azcarraga corner

Recto Avenue in Manila, where she took a course in dressmaking. I would run around the classroom enthusiastically picking up discarded pieces of Kraft pattern paper scattered on the floor with my two small hands, then raising them up like a supplicant to the goddess of fashion, a bejeweled mannequin standing majestically in front of the room, dressed in the latest student creation—a draped gown in gold chiffon with fully-beaded floral appliques on the bodice and on the edges of the heavily starched butterfly sleeves.

My father was an introvert, given to too much brooding and isolation. I very seldom heard him laugh, though sometimes, he would desperately crack jokes which pathetically never reached their proper punchlines. Always serious in demeanor, he enjoyed watching his favorite basketball games and boxing matches on television by himself. We never shared a common preference. I enjoyed watching “The Waltons,” “Paper Chase,” “Wonder Woman,” “The Bionic Woman,” and beauty contests; while his fascination had always been with action films, news programs, and sports broadcasts. In “Running Shoes,” a moving fictional account of an estranged relationship between a father and his son, written by the American gay writer Rick Barrett, the narrator underscores the distance between himself and his son based on dissimilarities in values and hobbies—the father preferring to watch contact sports on television, and enjoying numbers and computations, which his son, Todd, with his creative inclination and artistic temperament, could never completely comprehend, much less appreciate.

My dad was never enthusiastic when I would come home in the wee hours of the morning showing off my trophies from the different beauty contests I participated in. Unlike his mother, my Impo in Abucay, Bataan, who even recruited her antiquarian friends in their native kimona and saya as cheerleaders when I joined a local beauty pageant in her hometown. One time, she saw me fetching water from the neighbor’s water pump and reprimanded me because she was afraid that my biceps would become pronounced. “*Hindi bagay,*” she said, “*mukha ka pa namang babae.*” She got the two pails of water and carried them unceremoniously to the bathroom.

I never knew if my father was genuinely happy when I went to Japan to work as an entertainer. He never wrote to me when I was there and never discussed it after. As far as he was concerned, I was wasting my time with

frivolities because I did not pursue the career which my undergraduate education had adequately prepared me for. I never told him that my experience in the land of samurais, Hello Kitty, and bento boxes was crucial in my creative development as a person. My skills as a performer and entertainer were of great value when I started teaching in the late 80s, having realized the bleak future ahead of me as a showgirl.

I think that the only time my father became proud of me was when I started to teach in 1988. I got a full-time teaching job at Trinity College of Quezon City, which became my home for seven years, and where I spent some of my happiest and most fulfilling moments as a teacher of Literature. During the monsoon seasons with its heavy rains and frequent flooding, my father would carry me on his back until we reached dry land, like the reverse of Aeneas carrying his old father Anchises while fleeing the burning city of Troy.

After his retirement, my father would contemplate life and its vicissitudes far from the madding crowd—in the blue room, the farthest and most secluded part of the house, where he also went to sleep all by himself. This is his safe haven, an interior universe so unlike the hustle and bustle of the City's underside; so different from the industrial noise of power plants and drilling stations which he had known all his life; so distant from the familiar and the familial that inform him as a person. He would escape to that world he had created, very much like his mother in the province, who by deliberate choice, lived contentedly alone until the day she passed on her anting-anting to my cousin's wife so she could finally be reunited with her dead guerrilla husband, in the great beyond.

This was his strength, this ability to abscond to a parallel reality, which he created in order to accommodate his difficult existence. He endured years of working in the Middle East—Syria, Oman, Kuwait, U.A.E., and in Southeast Asia—Brunei, Malaysia, and Singapore. He endured because he had become so accustomed to the spatial and temporal distance separating himself from other people. My mother said that my father's social skills were not fully developed compared to ours, because he was never gregarious, feeling awkward and aloof in the presence of other people. My mother and I are cordial charmers, which, according to a transgender sexagenarian tarot card reader-cum-female impersonator, can allow us to tame wild beasts with our gentle words and soothing touch.

For my dad it must have been difficult raising me. Like other Filipino fathers with gay, *bakla*, or queer offspring, he must have been too afraid or too confused to find his only begotten son failing to develop according to his image and likeness. Since a son is a reflection of his father, what image of him do I behold in the mirror?

When my father sensed that I had taken over the onerous responsibility of bread winner of the family, he started building a bridge so we could finally have access to his world. He managed to talk to us more often, started going out with us on out-of-town recreation trips, and joining family reunions during homecoming visits and during holidays. He became more approachable and outgoing.

In January of this year, my Father had a stroke which impaired his movements and slurred his speech. I would see him often struggling to regain his old gait and his normal speech. He seemed so helpless, like a child who has to be assisted in walking, to be fed when hungry, and to be cared for constantly. My sisters became his legs and arms; my niece and nephew, his eyes and ears; my mom, his mouth; and I, his heart.

I believe that on days like these, when the world spins too fast, my quiet father hears every sound—listening attentively to every word and every heartbeat, spoken or not.

Mother's Passing

John Jack G. Wigley

Mother passed away on November 20, 2012, two weeks before my first book of memoirs came out. She had been bedridden for more than four years, afflicted with both Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. The night before she breathed her last, she was coughing relentlessly and I prayed to God, commending her spirit to Him. I whispered that it was okay with me if she had to go. She had suffered tremendously during those four years, and I prayed that she should go with dignity, the silent dignity that she had exuded in her eighty-four years of existence. She had been both a mother and a father to me and my three older siblings, never had a stable job, and never entertained a lover or a "volunteer" father for us.

She had been having difficulty breathing in the last two weeks, but my tight schedule did not permit me to take her to the hospital for a check-up. That afternoon, I had to first attend the two-day seminar on management planning, a requirement for all UST administrators, since it would be necessary for operational planning for the coming academic year. After all this, I thought, I would definitely have the time for her.

On the second day of the seminar, I was feeling uncomfortable as I went through the papers before me. It was a workshop and we were tasked to identify the objectives of our respective departments and relate them to our mission/vision for the next school year. I was on edge thinking about the voluminous tasks ahead of me. I couldn't concentrate. I looked at my colleagues seated at the other tables. They were busy brainstorming and

preparing their powerpoint presentations. I thought about Mother and her scheduled check-up at the hospital. I was distracted. I silently put my laptop into its bag and gathered my papers.

I looked at my watch. It was quarter past three. I stood up and whispered to the usher that I would use the rest room. Without blinking or turning around, I hailed a cab and headed home.

I was about to get off the cab when my phone rang. It was Marlon, my boy helper.

"Kuya, bilisan mo. Hindi na yata humihinga si Lola," he nervously cried.

I dashed to the lobby of our condominium and ordered the guards to hail a cab immediately. I was so shook up that I forgot to tell the cab driver who brought me home to wait for me.

The ride in the elevator was a very slow climb. My neck was perspiring so profusely that a drop or two must have dripped on the blouse of the lady beside me. She brushed it off and gave me an annoyed look. I wanted to tell her that if this was not an emergency, I would have given her a piece of my mind. But no, not today. Not at this time when Mother needed me the most.

When I opened the door, Glo, Marlon's mom, who had been Mother's chief caregiver for almost seven years, was crying interminably. *"Sabi ko naman sa iyo, 'wag ka nang papasok kasi masama na ang kalagayan ni Nanay, kagabi pa,"* she sobbed and then covered her face with her damp hankie. *"Wala na si Nanay."*

I wanted to punch her for her impertinence, but I restrained myself. I tried to wake Mother up, who was lying stiffly on her bed. *"Ma, ma, naririnig mo ba ako?"* I placed her on the wheelchair, and hollered at the guards, who were standing by the door, to help us.

When we were inside the taxi—Glo and Marlon, with my mother on their lap in the back seat, and I in front beside the driver—Glo, in between sobs and in a shrill voice, recounted what happened that afternoon. She said she had fed Mother with *sopas* and they had gone on to watch an afternoon program on TV. Moments later, Mother bowed her head. Just like that. I was not paying much attention to the details because my mind was whirling with thoughts—*Is this what it will be from now on? I am now*

a full-fledged orphan. Please God, I didn't mean what I prayed for last night. Don't take her yet. Not yet.

My thoughts were sidetracked by the driver's telling us that it would be difficult to make it to the UST Hospital because the traffic was incredible along Bonifacio Street. It was almost five in the afternoon and this was an emergency. I instructed the driver to take us to the emergency room of the Mandaluyong Medical Center instead.

With me carrying Mother, we banged open the door to the emergency room. Two nurses quickly rolled the stretcher toward us and the doctor on duty began rapidly pumping Mother's chest while asking me multiple questions. While I lamely answered her questions, I realized that we were at the center of the room and all eyes were directed toward us. Several people came closer and in whispers asked my helpers what had happened.

I scanned the room. There was deep gloom on the faces of the people. One patient was complaining about her swollen leg, and her companion, presumably her daughter, was tirelessly fixing a pillow beneath it. The daughter was good-naturedly telling her that the doctor would be coming to see her any minute now. A kid, who was sitting on a wheelchair and whose head was bleeding, was given a cold compress by one of the nurse aides. His parents were in a corner, arguing in hushed tones. Across Mother's bed, a pale, unattended, old man was clutching a rosary. Two doctors, followed by a number of interns with their notes and stethoscopes, shifted from bed to bed, the former briefing the latter on the patients' histories. I felt numb. I just stood there like a passive observer.

I learned that we were supposed to be transferred to the ICU but there was still no space, and one patient had a serious illness, so the doctor requested us to stay in the emergency room a while longer. The nurses brought the ventilator and painstakingly set it up, despite the cramped space in the emergency room. I was instructed to continue pumping the bag manually to inject air into Mother's lungs.

We stayed in the emergency room for another three hours, and, my sister *Ate* Beth and nephew Christian, who came eventually after I had called them, had to take turns at the manual pump. Afterwards, we were moved to the ICU. Since it was a public hospital, I had to buy practically all the medicines outside, especially the boosters to be injected into Mother's system. She had no pulse yet and her blood pressure was failing. I was given

a thick wad of prescriptions and was directed to specific drugstores. Eventually, the doctor informed us happily that she had a pulse. But they would still be monitoring her blood pressure through out the night. Since it was almost midnight, my sister told me to go home and get some rest while they would watch over Mother at the hospital. She said she would take care of calling our brother in the US, informing him of Mother's condition, and convincing him to book the most immediate flight back to the Philippines. No need to worry about that, she whispered.

In the jeepney, I wondered whether my last prayer to God would prove to be a powerful one. *Oh God, I'm taking it all back*, I fervently whispered. *Please, keep my mother alive. I am willing to do all I can just to have her back. Please, don't take her yet.*

Thoughts of my kindergarten graduation came to me. I was six, and I remember Mother, so excited that I was graduating valedictorian of the class, as she was fixing her hair in front of the mirror. "You are really special, Jack. I am so proud to be your mother. Even though you didn't know your American father, and he doesn't know of this, I am sure he would also be proud of you if he did. *Sayang at hindi kayo nagkakilala*," she said. I just stood there as she turned around and hugged me tightly. I wished I could've done more then. I wished I could've done more now. I fell asleep with a splitting headache.

Early the next morning, I was roused by a telephone call from *Ate* Beth. "Please come to the hospital, it's urgent."

"I hope it's nothing serious, *Ate*," I responded fretfully.

"Just come here, quick."

When I entered the ICU, I saw *Ate* Beth talking to the resident doctor. Her eyes were red and her cheeks, puffy.

"Oh, it's good that you are here," the doctor said. "Listen, your mother had a seizure a few minutes ago. And since last night, her BP hasn't gone up. I suspect that the reason she had a pulse last night was the booster medicines that we injected into her." He escorted us out of the ICU and in between pauses, he remarked, "I am really sorry to tell you this, but I am afraid you and your sister have to make a crucial decision about this now."

"What decision?" I inquired blankly.

“That we have to pull the plugs. Mother is not getting better,” *Ate* Beth sniffed.

“But our brother is coming home from San Diego,” I turned to the doctor. “Can this wait?”

“Her blood pressure is way too low. The machine is the only thing that is keeping her alive,” the doctor replied. “In fact, I had sensed this since yesterday, but I figured that you still didn’t want to give up. A patient can only survive without air for about five minutes. I saw your mother’s records and learned that she collapsed, and was only revived after almost thirty minutes. She must have been brain-dead since yesterday. I am sorry. But it is still your choice.”

Glo burst into sobs in a corner upon hearing this. The doctor went back inside the ICU. I made a tense call to my brother in the US. I explained to him that *Ate* Beth and I had to make that crucial decision of pulling the plugs off. He told me that he was about to board the airplane bound for Manila, and would love to see Mother alive, but if it was necessary, then we should go ahead with the decision. I nearly broke down hearing this, but I wanted to sound strong on the phone. Tin, my niece, arranged for the burial in Pampanga. In the hospital, the doctor said that we had to finally say goodbye to Mother.

It took about four hours for the funeral people to arrive. They came all the way from Angeles City. The hospital personnel informed us that we had to use a different exit in bringing out the body. It is hospital policy that people should not see a dead body in the common elevators and exits. So the funeral people covered Mother with a white linen blanket and brought her to the fire exit, like some kind of spoiled delivery. Despite the disapproval of the hospital personnel, I decided to accompany Mother and the men from the funeral home. In the fire exit, I snarled at the funeral personnel to be very careful, because the body was bouncing as they carelessly descended the stairs. “This is my mother,” I told them, “and not some unknown cargo.”

I thought about the difference between the treatment of the living and the dead in hospitals. When Mother was still alive, we were warmly received in the emergency room. The doors were opened for us. Stretchers, wheelchairs and seats were offered. Everybody wanted to ask questions. Forms needed to be filled out. People were sympathetic. Now that Mother

was dead, she was just considered wasted goods. No nurses and attendants escorted us out. We had to pass through a dimly lit walkway where unused hospital equipment were haphazardly stored. I realized that this was literally the back door of the hospital. There were unused wood, defective hoses, and trash bins filled with dextrose bottles and used rubber gloves crowding the area. The floor was covered with puddles of water created by the leaks in the air-conditioner drainers. Slippery moss had thrived on them which almost caused me to slip.

Outside the hospital, I tried to find a decent hearse that would take Mother to the memorial chapel in Pampanga. I saw a white *Tamaraw* delivery van with clear windows and no air-conditioner. The funeral director said that if they had opted to bring the hearse, we would be obliged to get a permit from every town that we would be passing through and pay required fees. It was necessary to use this kind of vehicle so people won't suspect that there was a dead body in the van. I did not want to hear this. I told the funeral people that my sister and I had to go home first because we still had to get burial clothes for Mother. On the way to Angeles City, nobody spoke a word inside the vehicle.

Ate Beth and I agreed to use the elegant white dress worn by Tin during her high school graduation for Mother. I initially thought about the ecru outfit with lavender-and-rose design that I had bought for Mother some months earlier, a dress that she never got to wear. But I found it too garish for her burial. The funeral people quickly arranged the room, like skilled artisans preparing for a big exhibit. Lights were immediately switched on. Pews were arranged. The first flower arrangements were placed near the area where the coffin was to be laid.

An hour later, I was summoned by the embalmer to check Mother's make-up and appearance. I saw her lying peacefully on the drainer. Although she was neatly dressed and her make-up was all right, I realized that she had no eyebrows and her hair needed to be teased. She was also wearing the wrong lipstick. She never liked red. She said it was vulgar and loud. I requested to be allowed to redo her hair, eyebrows, and lips. The embalmer simply nodded.

I started applying the dark brown eyebrow pencil. When she was alive, I used to do this for her. "Don't darken my brows too much. I don't want people to see two fat leeches above my eyes," she would always

say. When she became sick and wheelchair-bound, she would just smile whenever I would give her the mirror. “Look, you are really beautiful with those brows, Ma,” I would tease her. “*Wala na, matanda na talaga,*” she would answer softly. I shaded her lips with the rose-colored lipstick that I had brought. It was her favorite shade. Then I curled her thin hair and combed it sideways so it would not cover her face. When I took another look at her, I saw that she was beautiful again.

My mind flew back to that distant graduation day, and the announcement: “*John Jack Wigley, valedictorian!*”

I remember climbing the stage with Mother when my name was announced. I was nervous and fidgety. I saw the principal and some of my teachers looking in our direction, smiling. Mother held my moist hand and brushed the stain off my white toga before we walked across the center of the stage. She removed my cap, flicked the sweaty hair off my forehead, and placed the medal over my head. “I am so proud of you, *anak,*” she whispered, almost like a prayer. It was like a send-off for me, a benediction certifying that in a few years, I would be in charge of my life, with her guiding me along the way.

In a few minutes, relatives and condolers would be coming. I looked at Mother for the last time, as I held her hands. I was glad that, these many years later, I was able to do for her what she had once done for me.

Pagbabalik sa Bukid

Levine Andro Hernandez Lao

Ilang araw na lang, *reunion* na. Magtitipon ang mga miyembro ng angkan sa panig ng aking ina. Kayrami na, sabi ko sa sarili, habang inihahanda kanina ang mga pa-raffle—ang walang kamatayang tupperware, ang improvement na computer accessories, at mga patok na tsokolateng para lamang sana sa mga bata. Ilang hilera na ang nababalot ko. Nasa isandaa't dalawampu na subalit matagal pang maubos ang mga kahong dapat balutin. Habang nagbibilang, sumagi sa isip ko ang ilang tanong: ilan kaya sa tatanggap ng mga ito ang kapag naglao'y makaaalalang sa *reunion* galing ang napanalunan? Masasayang lang kaya ang pagod ko at ang ginastos para sa mga ito? Tila tinitimbang ko hanggang ngayon kung wala ba akong tiwala sa okasyong ito o hindi ko pa lang talaga naiintindihan ang reunion namin.

Limang henerasyon, at dumarami pa, ang saklaw ng taunang pagtitipon tuwing unang Linggo ng Enero—mula sa magulang ng mga lolo't lola ko hanggang sa mga aapuhin ko na nga kung tutuusin. Biruin ninyong may apo na ako, gayong ako'y beinte-kuwatro anyos pa lamang! Nabigla nga ako nang minsá'y may lumapit sa aking paslit. Nakaaaliw ang bulinggit na nahihiyang lumapit ngunit nang makalapit ay nagmano pa rin, sabay takbo sa likod ng binti ng kanyang ama. Hindi ako sanay. Mas malaki namang sopresa sa akin na anak iyon ng aking pamangkin. Natawa na lang ako sa pagkakataong iyon. Sa pag-usisa ko naman sa listahan ng nakaraang taon, napag-alaman kong wala pa pala sa kalahati ang kakilala ko sa mga kaanak. Nagtuos akong muli. Anim kami sa pamilya, tapos may ilang mga tita at

titong nadadalaw at dumadalaw sa amin, mga ninong at ninang na 'di na nagbibigay ng aginaldo, at ilang pinsang nakalalaro ko dati ng taguan, pintero at moro-moro sa may bukid, ng paunahan ng baby rocket at batuhan ng *pop-up* tuwing bagong taon, at saka ng basketbol kapag nagagawi naman sila sa amin. Aba, wala pang singkuwenta! Kaya sa *reunion*, bukod sa mapupudpod ang noo ko sa pagmamano, mailang din akong maki-halubilo sa mga hindi ko kakilala. Ito ang ipinag-aalala ko. Hindi naman puwedeng hindi pumunta sa okasyon. Punong-abala ang pamilya namin ngayong taon. Pero hanggang sa puntong ito, pinag-iisipan ko pa rin kung magtatagal ba ako roon o magpapakita lamang para naman di masabihang nang-iisnab ng okasyon ng mga kapamilya.

Laking pagtataka ko naman kung bakit naaaligaga ang aking ina sa paghahanda nito. Halos isang linggo na siyang maagang umaalis ng bahay para makipagtagpo sa mga kapatid at pinsan. Kung umuwi naman ay wala na ang araw. Hapong-hapo man ang katawan, may resistensiya pa rin siya para magkuwento. Sa pag-upo pa lang para maghapunan ay ibinibida na ang mga binabalak nilang programa, tulad ng mga palaro sa bata, matanda, babae, lalaki, at pati sa mga manginginom. Madalas, nauuna pa ang tawa kaysa kuwento. Hindi maitago ang saya at pananabik niya, tulad ng mga nakaraang taon din.

Noong Martes nga, bumisita sa bahay si Lola Goreng, Gregoriya ang tunay na pangalan, isa sa mga kapatid ng yumao kong lolo. Nasa sitenta'y kuwatro na siya. Oo, sa itsura'y maaaring halata ang kanyang edad, pero pagdating sa pagkilos at sigla ng pananalita, dadaigin maging ang ilang nag-ensayong mananalumpati. Kunsabagay, pambato siya sa mga balagtasana sa Bulakan, Bulakan noong kapanahunan niya, pagmamalaki ng mga kamag-anak namin. Malalim na Tagalog ang kanyang mga salita kung minsan, kaya hindi ko maintindihan nang husto. Gayumpaman, dama ko naman ang kanyang sinasabi. Tulad nang minsang ikuwento niya nang patula ang nangyari sa isang kaanak na dinakip noong kapanahunan ng Batas Militar. Tila nanariwa ang mga alaala at nawala kaming mga nasa harapan niya, saka nanginginig siyang bumitaw ng mga kataga. Pumiglas ang braso na para bang may hinahawi at maya-maya ay humahangos na't humahabol, umaabot sa isang bagay o taong hindi namin nakikita. Tumahimik siya at lumabas papuntang kusina. Palilipasin siguro ang pamumugto ng mga mata. Hindi ko alam kung ako'y matatakot o maaawa kay Lola Goreng.

Hayskul pa lang ako noon. Pero batid ko naman na ang ilang pitak ng kasaysayan sa probinsiya namin. Nakapangingilabot. Ang sinabi niya’y may koneksiyon doon sa pagbomba sa estasyon ng radyo roon sa may Malolos, iyong gusaling nasa gitna ng malawak na damuhan bago dumating sa may Fausta. Hindi araw-araw ang ganoong tagpo. Pero batid kong kapamilya si Lola Goreng, at kaakibat ng pagrespeto sa kanya ang pagrespeto sa mga karanasang ibinabahagi niya sa amin.

Malakas pa ang Lola Goreng. Hayun nga at nag-aalok pa rin ng tulong sa aking ina. Baka raw may hindi pa nagagawa. Kaya inupuan nila sa sala ang mga plano para sa *reunion*, habang ako’y pinasama para itala ang mga napag-uusapan.

Binalikan ng aking ina at lola ang listahan ng mga nabigyan ng imbitasyon at baka raw may nalimutan. Kung saan-saan na kasi nakaabot ang dugo ng angkan. Tubong Guiguinto sa Bulakan ang inang De la Cruz ng aking Lolo Hermogenes—Moneng kung tawagin ng labing-isa niyang kapatid. Habang mula naman sa Malolos ang kanyang amang Hernandez. Sa kabataan daw ng lolo, nabuhay sila sa pagsasaka sa mayamang bukid ng Pritil kung saan nag-alaga rin sila ng manok, baboy, at kambing. Kapag husto na ang gulang at timbang ay dinadala sa kabayanan ang mga alaga. Sa mag-asawang De la Cruz daw dati ang lupaing iyon, bago ipamana sa anak. Mula sa *expressway*, makikita pa rin ang parte ng luntiang kabukiran na minsang pinagsakahan ng lolo. Nagkuwento sa akin minsan. Aniya, sa bukid noon, matuto lang ng kaunting *Math*, magbungkal ng lupa, mag-alaga ng hayop, at ng maiging pakikipagkapuwa, maginhawa na ang buhay. Kay simple, isip ko.

Sa henerasyon naman ng aking ina, di tulad ng salinlahing nauna, nagnais ang kabataan na alpasan ang natanggap na libreng edukasyon sa pampublikong paaralang ngayon ay kilala bilang Marcelo del Pilar. Itinayo ng mga Amerikano sa Santa Isabel, Malolos ang paaralan ilang taon matapos ang rebolusyon. Mula sa bukid, naglalakad araw-araw nang halos limang kilometro sa pasikut-sikot na daan ang magkakapatid at magpipinsan. Ang daan nila ay sa Santa Rita, sa may Cagayan Valley Road o sa tinatawag ding Marhalika Highway, tapos ay silong ng napakahabang manggahan sa Ligas. Pahinga nang kaunti sa may patubigan ng Sapang Matanda, at saka lulusot sa Bungahan na ilang metro na lang ang layo sa Santa Isabel.

Nang magsigradweyt, ginusto ng aking ina at ilang pinsan na lumuwas sa Maynila at magtapos ng kurso. Sa salaysay ng aking Lola Nonay, mariin daw ang pagtuligsa ng kanyang mestisong biyenan sa pagtatapos ng kurso ng isang babae. Mag-aasawa lang din naman daw, bakit pa pagkaka-gastusan? Patulungin na lang daw sa gawaing bahay nang humusay. At kahit daw sabihing iskolar sa unibersidad, magastos pa rin ang buhay sa lungsod. Kakayanin daw ba ng lola na mahiwalay sa panganay? “Hindi” ang sagot ni Lola Nonay, ina ng aking ina, kaya madaling nagdesisyon ang pamilya nila na lumipat sa Lungsod ng Quezon. Sa siyudad na rin nakapagtapos ang mga kapatid ng aking ina. Paglipas ng isang henerasyon, nahaluan ng mga accountant, engineer, doktor, at guro ang angkan.

Ngayon, napag-iisip ako. Sa aming mga anak nila, maaga pa siguro para matukoy kung ano ang kahihinatnan namin. Ang tanging tiyak, hindi lang sa bukid at patubigan naglaro ang henerasyon namin.

At gayon nga, sa pag-iisa-isa ng aking ina at Lola Goreng sa mga miyembro ng pamilya, natawagan ang mga hindi pa naabot ng imbitasyon. Baka nga naman makarating ang mga nasa States tapos yaong nasa Palawan ay hindi.

Sunod namang inusisa ng dalawa ang pagdarausan ng reunion. Sa bukid ito gaganapin. Kapag sinabing “sa bukid,” sa bahay ito nila Tita Aurora sa Pritil. Ito ang bungalow na nakatindig sa dulo ng Purok 4 bago tumambad ang kaiga-igayang luntiang palayan. Ubod nang laki ang bakuran nitong maaaring lagyan ng *tent* kung sakaling umulan. Kalinya ng mabababang bakod ang mga santan.

Noon, pinagdurugtong-dugtong ko, kasama ng ilang pinsan, ang iba’t ibang kulay na bulaklak para gumawa ng bracelet para sa aking ina. Laging sa akin ang pinakapangit at madaling masira, di tulad ng sa mga pinsan na pulido at malinis tingnan. Ang sa akin kasi, parang may mga pasa. Mabigat daw kasi ang kamay ko.

Matamis daw ang tila sinulid na mahihila mula sa gitna ng bulaklak ng santan. Naroon daw ang nektar, ngunit kailanma’y ‘di ko ito nalasahan. Mas malasa pa rin ang pilit kong inaabot na mga alatires mula sa may terasa. Iyon na lamang ang puno ngayon sa loob ng bakuran nina Tita Au dahil nagpaalam ang bayabas na sa rupok ng kahoy ay bumigay nang pagtangkaang sampahan ng may mataba kong pinsan. (Sayang, di ko mismo nakita ang mga pangyayari. Pero ayos na rin, kung di sana ako

bumalik sa siyudad para mag-aral, baka ako pa nga ang nakapagpabagsak sa puno at nagdulot ng mahaba-habang tawanan sa mga pinsan. Buti't hindi ako ngayon ang tampulan ng tukso tuwing magkakakuwentuhan ang magpipinsan.)

Magkokolehiyo na ako nang malaman ang istorya ng pag-uwi ng aking pamilya sa Bulakan. Sa pagbabalik daw ng aking ina sa probinsiya, kasama na niya ang sariling pamilya: ang kanyang asawa, ang panganay na lalaki, at ako. Panahon iyon ng pagtatapos ng termino ni Presidente Cory Aquino, 1992, at muling pagbabalik sa bansa ng dating Unang Ginang Imelda Marcos, asawa ng lumisan at nasawi nang diktador, na gusto yata noong tumakbo sa pagkapangulo. Natakot ang ama ko dahil baka magkagulo. Marahil may trauma pa sila sa Batas Militar at saka sa coup d'état ng 1989 kaya napagdesisyonan na sa bayan ng Plaridel na lamang manirahan na ilang baranggay ang layo mula sa bukid.

Kung tutuusin, mas nasiyahan naman ako sa probinsiya. Dito, natuto akong umakyat ng puno, manghuli ng tutubi, maglaro sa bakuran, magbisikleta, at makipaghabulan na hindi ko naranasan sa maliit na townhouse sa Lungsod ng Quezon. Nawili ako sa pagsama sa bukid. At kaya gusto kong sumabat nang imungkahi ni Lola Goreng na ipalagay agad ang malaking tent para daw hindi na kami maabala kung sakali mang umulan. Gusto kong sabihin, “Hindi uulan. Walang bagyo. Mahaharangan ang puno ng alatires. Hindi makararaan ang simoy galing sa palayan.” Buti na lang, narinig yata ng aking ina ang nasa isip ko.

Ayos na ang mga imbitasyon, pati ang pagdarausan. Kinilates naman nila ang pinakaimportanteng bahagi ng pagdiriwang: ang pagkain.

Paalala lagi ng ina sa aming magkakapatid, magtipid, pero huwag sa pagkain. Ganoon din pala ang panuntunan niya sa ganitong okasyon. Sabi niya kay Lola Goreng, hindi raw dapat maubos ang nakahain. Tiniyak naman ng kausap na walang dapat ipag-alala. Kahit walang *catering*, walang magiging problema, aniya. Isang beses lang yata sumubok na magpa-*cater* para sa *reunion* at hindi na ito naulit. Nagkaubusan kasi! Kunsabagay, ilan nga bang *catering service* ang may kayang pakainin ang lampas dalawang daang katao, mula pananghalian hanggang hapunan?

Saka iba rin talaga ang pakiramdam kapag ‘di *commercial* ang pagluluto. Ang uso kasi sa *reunion* namin ay ang pagdadala ng kani-kanyang putaha at panghimagas. Para bang bago pa man ang mga nagsisikatang *cooking*

show ay may paligsahan na sa pagluluto sa *reunion*. Ang may dala ng putaheng unang mauubos ang panalo.

Ilan sa mga laging nakahanda ay menudo, asado, fried chicken, embutido, inihaw na tilapia at bangus, na itinatambal sa balisungsong na kanin, yaong nakabalot sa dahon ng saging. Panghimagas naman ang *sherbet*, buko salad, sorbetes, at mga prutas—kadalasan ay mga pakwang kay pula ng laman at mga hinog sa punong mangga.

Ngayong taon, magdadala raw ang Nana Celia ng sumang marwekos, na gustong-gusto ko. Ito yaong matamis na sumang may latik. Balak din daw mag-litson ng baboy ni Tito Topeng sa mismong araw ng *reunion* pero ‘di pumayag ang aking ina. Baka raw may madisgrasya. Baka mapabayaang lang daw kapag napaupo na sa inuman ang tiyuhin. Magpadala na lang daw ng luto na. Sa inumin naman, sagot na ito ni Lolo Rudy. Siya ang may hawak ng mga produkto ng kompanya ng softdrink sa Guiguinto. Sagot na rin niya ang serbesa. Pihadong may mahaba-habang inuman na naman ang *reunion*.

Dinalaw naman ako ng lumbay sa pag-uusap ng ina at ng Lola Goreng. Naalala ko kasi ang yumaong Lola Nonay at Lolo Moneng. Dati, asahan na, kapag umuwi sila para sa handaan, puno ang likod ng kanilang *pickup* ng mga timba ng buhay na alimango at ng naglalakihang sugpong pang-rebosado at sinigang. Mayroon ding ilang piraso ng morcon. Dala rin nila ang ilang liyanera ng paborito kong leche flan at mga kakanin. Ito ata ang minana ng aking ina sa mga lolo’t lola—ang pagiging maluwag lalo na’t pagdating sa pagkain.

Hulingpinag-usapan ang programa. Siyempre, buong pagmamalaking ibinahagi ng aking ina ang mga palarong naisip nilang magkakapatid at magpipinsan. Titipunin daw ang maliliit na bata at pasasayawin sa saliw ng “*Chacha Dabarkads*” at “*Oppa Gangnam Style*.” Laging may ganito. Kung ano ang usong tugtugin, iyon ang sasayawin. Walang konsepto ng jologs o baduy. Walang hiya-hiya. Kunsabagay, pribado ang pagtitipon dahil kami-kami lang naman ito sa angkan.

Ang mga palaro naman: mayroong *Going-to-Market* para sa mga bruskong manginginom. May *longest line* din daw, *Pinoy Henyo*, at marami pang iba. Kung iisipin, ordinaryo lang ang mga palaro sa simula. Pero ilang beses na akong naging saksi at biktima ng kalokohan ng magugulong tiyuhin. Binibigyan nila ng kulay ang mga palaro.

Tulad ng *Going-to-Market*. Walang patumpik-tumpik nilang hihiyain ang sarili. Sa tama ng beer, hindi daster ang gusto nilang isuot. Bikini. *Two-piece*. Dapat daw kasi, ganoon ang suot ng mga dalagang namamalengke para sipagin din silang mamalengke. Minsan, sa *Trip to Jerusalem*, magkaka-pareha ang ipinilit nilang isinali. Pareho ng alituntunin. Likot sa mga upuan at kailangang mag-unahan ang mga kalahok sa isang bagay para hindi sila matanggal sa laro. Ang ginawa ng mga tiyuhin, pinatayo nila sa upuan ang mga lalaki at inipitan ng talong sa hita, basta roon sa taas ng tuhod malapit sa ano. Dapat naman daw mag-unahan sa pagdakma ng talong pagtigil ng kanta ang mga umiikot na kababaihan. Hiyawan at tawanan ang pumalibot sa mga nahihiyang kalahok. Pero para sa kasiyahan at pakikisama, tuloy lang ang laro.

Patok din ang mga palaro-kuno sa mga mag-asawa. Naku! Di ito palagpasin lalo't alam na may mga tampuhan ang pareha. Pihado, pagsasayawin nila ang pares tulad ng pagsasayaw ng bagong kasal habang sinasabitang beinte, singkuwenta, sandaan, limang daan, at kung matindi-tindi ang away ay isang libo mula sa matatanda. Kikilig naman ang lahat dahil sa pagtatapos ng kanta ay tatambad ang *lips-to-lips* ng mag-asawa. Akalain mo nga namang may ganoon pa kahit wala talaga sa programa.

Tapos na ako sa mga pa-raffle nang maalala ang pagmamano ko kay Lola Goreng bago siya magpaalam noong isang araw. Ang balik niya ay ang laging inuusal ng matatanda sa tuwing magmamano kami—"Kaawaan ka ng Diyos"—na sinundan niya ng "O, pa'no, magkikita na lang tayo sa Linggo?" Opo, ang isinagot ko bilang paggalang.

Sa totoo lang, tiyak man akong pupunta ako sa *reunion*, pinaglilimian ko pa rin ang dahilan sa aking pagdalo. Mababaw kung sasabihin kong dahil sa pag-oo kay Lola Goreng. Kaylalim naman ng pinaghuhugutan ko kung dahil ito sa nakaraang nilagi ko sa bukid, sa mga alaala, sa pag-akyat sa mga puno't pagpitas ng alatires. Hindi lang 'ata malalim 'yon, kundi korni pa. Ngunit kung mapagtatanto ko namang napipilitan lang ako dahil sa pamilya, 'di ko maikakailang malulungkot ako. O, baka kaya kaisa ako sa mga pilyong tiyuhin na *trip-trip* lang ang mga dahilan pagdating sa usapin ng *reunion*?

Tinitimbang ko rin naman kung bakit may bahagi akong nag-aalangang bumalik sa bukid: Natatakot kaya ako na hindi ako bagay sa okasyong iyon, na baka manliit lang ako sanhi ng 'di kasing yamang

karanasan ng mga naunang henerasyon? O, ‘di kaya ay hindi pa sapat ang aking nararating na mga pook para maging makabuluhan ang gunita ko sa pagbabalik? Dahilan din marahil ang pangungulila ko sa yumaong Lola Nonay at Lolo Moneng. Baka rin naasiwa lang ako sa *reunion* dahil sa mga hindi malamang dahilan.

Aba, hindi kaya ito sintomas ng sinasabing pagkahumaling sa mga ideolohiya sa henerasyong kinabibilangan ko? Uso kaya lalo na sa mga unibersidad ngayon ang indibidwalismo, yaong palagiang rason ng mga tinatawag na *misunderstood* o kaya ay weird na kung ano-anong kulay ang buhok, may *shades* sa gabi, naka-*leather jacket* sa kalagitnaan ng *summer*, at iba pa. Ang pangangatwirang “walang basagan ng *trip*.” Patok na panuntunan ito lalo’t higit sa kasikatan ng mga *social networking site*, kung saan kahit sino ay maaaring magsabi ng kahit ano. Walang tama. Walang mali. Walang mabuti. Walang masama. Tanging gusto at ‘di gusto lang. *I-like* mo kung gusto mo at huwag naman kung hindi.

Wala sanang kaso sa akin ang indibidwalismong iyan kung hindi ko lang sana naaalala ang minsang pangungutya ng ilan kong kaibigan. May panahong ginamit nilang pang-asar ang salitang “magsasaka.” Ibig sabihin daw noon ay mahirap o kaya ay “hindi maka-*afford*.” Hanggang sa *Facebook*, umabot ang pang-asar nilang iyon. Tumigil lang nang makialam ang nanay ng isa sa kanilang kinukutya. Nag-*comment* kasi ang magulang at pinagsabihan ang mga loko na wala “kailanman” sa kanilang angkan ang naging magsasaka. Doon nagtapos ang tuksuhan.

Hindi ako sang-ayon kung paano tinuldukan ang kantiyawan pero sabi nga, walang tama, walang mali sa ganoong espasyo sa bagong panahon. Ang tanging tama sa pagkakataong iyon ay ang tama sa pagkatao ko dahil napapabilang ako sa angkan ng mga minsang nagsaka.

Nakapakinig din ako minsan sa radyo ng diskusyon tungkol sa indibiswalismo. Ang pagkausong raw ng *earphones* at *headset* ay senyales ng kagustuhan ng mga bagong taong manatili sa kani-kanilang mundo na sila mismo ang nagbubuo. Isang mundong walang baduy, walang jologs, walang korni. Wala ang mga nakasasawang tugtugin mula sa telebisyon at radyo. Tanging ako at ang gusto ko lamang. ‘Di ko maikakailang posible at kapani-paniwala ito dahil maging ako’y naghe-*headset* kapag sobrang naiingayan ako sa paligid.

Ngunit, kung iuugnay ko ang paliwanag sa radyo, maingay ba para sa akin ang aming *reunion*? Oo, may pagkabaduy, korni, jologs, at maingay. Maingay, pero hindi pa naman ako naiirita. Hindi ko pa sigurado. Pagbibigyan ko pa rin ang *reunion* na ito.

Aabangan ko na lang at huhulihin ang bulong na magsasabi sa akin kung dapat ko nang tigilan ito—o kaya’y kung tutulad ba ako sa aking inang nauubusan ng mapagsidlan ng tuwa tuwing darating ang unang Linggo ng Enero, o sa lolang sinasariwa ang mga alaala sa pagtula, o sa mga pilyong tiyuhin na nagkukulay ng kakulitan sa programa ng reunion, o sa mga batang nagsasayaw sa mga kantang sinasabayan ng indak ng mga tutubi at mabangong simoy na nagmumula sa luntiang kabukiran.

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