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The Journal of the
UST Center for Creative Writing
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Contents

<i>Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo</i> TOWARD PRIDE OF PLACE FOR LITERATURE AND THE ARTS IN ACADEME	~ vii
--	-------

<i>John Jack G. Wigley</i> INTRODUCTION	~ xv
---	------

ENGLISH

<i>Robin Hemley</i> THE TRAVEL WRITER IN THE 21ST CENTURY	~ 3
---	-----

<i>Jose Dalisay Jr.</i> LETTERS FROM ANOTHER LIFE	~ 14
---	------

<i>Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo</i> “LITERARY INFLUENCES” AND THE LIKE	~ 22
--	------

<i>Ned Parfan</i> ANTARCTICA	~ 43
--	------

<i>J. Neil C. Garcia</i> WORDS. FOR FRANZ.	~ 47
--	------

<i>Susan S. Lara</i> REMEMBERING FRANZ ARCELLANA	54
<i>Larissa Mae Suarez</i> UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT	57
<i>Sooey Valencia</i> A CHAPTER FROM WRITTEN IN THESE SCARS: A MEMOIR	82
<i>Cecilia Manguerra Brainard</i> THE PIANO LESSONS	91
<i>Alfred A. Yuson</i> EVOLVING GENRES OF THE WRITTEN WORD: “FAKE NEWS FICTION” & THE LIKE(S)	96
F I L I P I N O	
<i>Mayette Bayuga</i> HATINGGABI SA KUMBENTO	115
<i>Kristian Sendon Cordero</i> ANG MAHAL NA BIRHEN NG MGA BAGYO	125
<i>Eugene Evasco</i> MGA PAGSASANAY SA PAGGALUGAD SA SIYUDAD: LAKBAY-SANAYSAY NG ISANG MANUNULAT PARA SA BATA	141
<i>Ferdinand Pisigan Jarin</i> PAPA	157

<i>Rhea B. Gulin</i> EN ROUTE	❧	164
<i>Mark Anthony S. Salvador</i> IKAANIM NA BAHAY	❧	173
<i>Allan Popa</i> SA TUKTOK NG PUNO ANG NAIS KO	❧	191
<i>Rolando B. Tolentino</i> A.	❧	196
THE CONTRIBUTORS	❧	213
THE EDITORS	❧	219

**TOWARD PRIDE OF PLACE
FOR LITERATURE AND THE
ARTS IN ACADEME**

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

This year, the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies celebrates the fifth anniversary of its revival after a hiatus of four years. To mark the event, the Center is releasing five issues of its peer-reviewed literary journal, *Tomás*, within the third quarter of the year, one issue for each of the major literary genres (fiction, poetry, nonfiction, drama, and literary criticism). Each volume has a different Issue Editor and Managing Editor but all are Resident Fellows of the Center.

I thought this might also be a good opportunity to rethink the question which we writers are repeatedly called upon to confront: why does the study of literature and creative writing matter? In fact, in academe these days, it isn't only the study of literature that requires defending, but the concept of General Education. The recent dramatic shift in the University of the Philippines' GE policy, which now allows colleges to require a minimum of only 21 GE units (instead of 45 units) is uncomfortably close to home. In that face-off, we were told, it was the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) faculty who argued for the reduction of GE units, and the HUMSS (Humanities, Social Sciences) faculty who argued for the retention of the original number. This is hardly a surprise.

I am reminded of something John Meacham said in an essay published in the October 7, 2013 issue of *Time* magazine. (Meacham is Ran-

dom House's executive editor and EVP. He is a former editor-in-chief of *Newsweek*, a contributing editor to *Time*, editor-at-large of WNET, and a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for the Autobiography/Biography.) In that essay on the Core Curriculum issue, or "the conflict between knowledge and know-how," he wrote: "What is heartening to those who believe in the value of a passing acquaintance with Homer and the Declaration of Independence and Jane Austen and Toni Morrison, as well as basic scientific literacy, is that there is little argument over the human and economic utility of a mind trained to make connections between seemingly disparate elements of reality. The college graduate who can think creatively is going to stand the greatest chance of not only doing well, but doing some good too. As long as the liberal-arts tradition remains a foundation of the curriculum in even the most elective of collegiate systems, there is hope that graduates will be able to discuss the Gettysburg Address—in a job interview at Google."

So that's the *practical argument* for retaining a liberal arts education: it makes the graduate more—not *less*—competitive in the global job market.

Maybe we could pause for a minute here and revisit one phrase in that passage—*Doing some good*. How exactly does a study of literature and the arts help students to do that?

"In recent years all the more oversimplified political viewpoints have failed, and our awareness of the complexity of the society we live in has grown, even if no one can claim to have a solution in his pocket. The situation in Italy today is on the one hand a state of deterioration and corruption in our institutional framework, and on the other of a growing collective maturity and search for ways of governing ourselves. What is the place of literature in such a situation?"

The quotation is from an essay titled "Right and Wrong Political Uses of Literature" by Italo Calvino, and he was referring to Italy in the 70s. But, he might have been talking about the Philippines today.

In fact, last February, that very question was raised by a member of the audience during the "Bookstop Tour" organized by the National Book Development Board (NBDB) as part of the celebrations of National Literature Month. Marne Kilates, Chuckberry Pascual and I were the writers invited by the UST Publishing House to be its featured authors when the

book tour stopped at its new bookstore in the UST Main Building. “What are you doing about our current political situation?” this woman asked pointedly. The three of us hesitated before replying.

In the Italy that Calvino was describing, society demanded “that the writer raise his voice if he wants to be heard, propose ideas that will have an impact on the public, push all his instinctive reactions to extremes. But even the most sensational and explosive statements pass over the heads of readers. All is as nothing, like the sound of the wind.”

Did we hesitate because we felt, as Calvino did, that nothing the writers say will be of any consequence to most Filipinos? Or did we hesitate because in *this* society no one actually makes such demands of writers because the writers are themselves of no consequence to most Filipinos?

I believe that, whether one fears the first or the second, as writers, we need to answer the question, for ourselves first, and then for the rest of society. Because, from the very beginnings of history, literature has been, not just a means of self-expression, but a means of self-awareness.

Calvino’s concern in that essay (as it was, I feel, the concern of the woman who put the question to us in UST) was with literature’s political uses, and he mentioned two: to give voice to whatever is without a voice, to give a name to what has yet no name, “especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude;” and “to impose patterns of language, of vision, of imagination, of mental effort, of the correlation of facts, and in short, the creation... of a model of values that is at the same time aesthetic and ethical, essential to any plan of action...” (1986, 98-99)

But in 1988, in the posthumously published *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, he focused on the larger scene. He noted that the millennium about to end was “the millennium of the book, in that it has seen the object we call a book take on the form now familiar to us. Perhaps it is a sign of our millennium’s end that we frequently wonder what will happen to literature and books in the so-called postindustrial era of technology.”

His own attitude was completely optimistic. “My confidence in literature consists in the knowledge that there are things that only literature can give us, by means specific to it.” (1993, 1) Literature, he said, has an existential function: the search for lightness as a response to the unbearable burden or weight of living. The example he offered was Milan

Kundera's novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which "is in reality a bitter confirmation of the Ineluctible Weight of Living, not only in the situation of his hapless country, but in the human condition common to us all, no matter how infinitely more comfortable we may be." (7) The novel, said Calvino, "shows us how everything we choose and value in life for its lightness soon reveals its true, unbearable weight. Perhaps only the liveliness and mobility of the intelligence escape this sentence—the very qualities with which this novel is written, and which belong to a world quite different from the one we live in." (7)

He stressed that he was not referring to a literature of escape. Rather, he meant that "in the boundless universe of literature, there are always new avenues to be explored, both very recent and very ancient, styles and forms that can change our image of the world. (7-8)

(Of course, Calvino added that he also looked to science—and to computer science—to nourish his "visions in which all heaviness disappears.")

Calvino is not alone in believing that at the heart of great literature are moral issues. This does not mean that the writer offers pat "moral lessons." Rather, in the words of another writer, Susan Sontag: "... A fiction writer whose adherence is to literature is necessarily someone who thinks about moral problems: about what is just and unjust, what is better and worse, what is repulsive and admirable, what is lamentable and what inspires joy and approbation... Serious fiction writers think about problems *practically*. They tell stories. They narrate. They evoke our common humanity in narratives which we can identify, even though the lives may be remote from our own. They stimulate our imagination. The stories enlarge and complicate—and therefore, improve—our sympathies. They educate our capacity for moral judgment."

So that, then, is the *higher or nobler reason* for retaining a liberal arts education, where literature and the humanities have pride of place.

Which brings me back to the situation in our own country, a country constantly beleaguered by crises, both natural and man-made, and at this moment confronted by the possibility of martial law being imposed on the entire country yet again, while still trying to come to terms with an administration not averse to erasing the distinction between real news and "fake news," or of depriving some of its own citizens—such as persons suspected

of being drug users—from basic human rights. I would suggest—as I have done more than once before—that during dark days, perhaps the place to seek solace, strength and salvation, is literature.

I feel the need to add that I refer here to “serious literature,” but with a further qualification: by “serious literature” is not meant literature that is solemn or super-cerebral, i.e. boring or incomprehensible. The literature I refer to might be light, funny, even whimsical in style and tone. It may be in print or on line. It is, simply, literature produced by serious artists, i.e., men and women who are serious about what they do, who produce work in which the stakes are high, for both themselves and for their readers. In short, it is literature produced by writers who risk much, by putting into their work what they truly care about, what they consider important. In so doing, they hope that readers will accept the challenge, and be engaged or disturbed or uplifted... perhaps, sometimes, all three.

All that is well and good. On the other hand, there’s the reality. And the reality is that, even in academic institutions, we in the arts feel the need to constantly assert that the work we do is at least *as important* as, and deserves to be *valued as much as*, the work being done by the people in science and technology. But if the arts must struggle for a place even in academe, how dismal must be their chances in the larger society?

I have been asked: how exactly are literature and creative writing to thrive in the academe? My reply is to describe an imagined scenario where they already *are* thriving. I speak of a healthy literary community, consisting of students who like books, who actually buy books, and read them, who belong to book clubs or literary societies, mentored by members of the faculty who are themselves lovers of the written word. Both students and faculty participate in, or at least attend, literary readings, book launchings, literature conferences and the like, not because they are herded into them, but because they are actually interested in these activities and derive pleasure from them. They subscribe and/or contribute to, or produce literary journals. Support for these activities is accompanied by incentives for the faculty to produce both creative and critical work—literary grants and literary awards, literary journals, a creative writing center, a publishing house that publishes literary titles along with scholarly titles. And, most importantly, writers and the literary scholars in the faculty feel that their outputs are valued as highly as those of the scientists, or of the faculty of the professional colleges, who bring in the money.

I must say that UST has not been remiss in this. Many of these mechanisms are already in place. Members of the University's different Research Centers (which now include the Center for Creative Writing) are honored by the Office of the Vice Rector for Research and Innovation with the Silver Series and Gold series award; and the Faculty Union grants the *Dangal ng UST* Award to both scholars and creative writers. The UST Publishing House which is largely subsidized by the University, was named Publisher of the Year, a few years ago, by the Manila Critics Circle and the National Book Development Board (NBDB), mainly because its literary titles won a large number of awards. The Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies was revived by the University, and is now manned by a corps of writers who are full-time faculty members, selected on the basis of their literary credentials, and who run its programs and projects, (all of them funded by the University) with the collaboration of the Faculty of Arts & Letters' Literature Department, and the Graduate School, as well as the student organization UST Literary Society (or UST LitSoc). There is an active Thomasian Writers' Guild, a student organization which draws its members from several colleges. All of these initiatives are geared toward revitalizing a literary culture on campus, but many of the activities are open to the public. *Tomas*, our literary journal accepts contributions, not just from Thomasian writers and scholars, but from distinguished national and even international writers. And it welcomes, as well, promising young writers.

Perhaps the tallest dream is for the University to put in place an Arts Development Program, which would coordinate all the university's artistic initiatives, and a Cultural Center, with first-class facilities for all the arts, headed by a top caliber arts manager, reporting directly to the Rector himself. I think that this is eminently do-able in UST, with its long tradition of excellence in music, the visual arts, architecture and literature, and its world-class museum and library. What is missing is a theater company. (In my time, there was the Aquinas Dramatic Guild, much respected both inside and outside the campus.)

The rationale for such a program and such a center would go beyond university rankings and accreditations. The rationale would be that the University's top administrators wish to establish and sustain a dynamic artistic culture in the university, because they believe in the importance of culture and the arts for national development.

Again, UST is admirably placed to play a leading role in such an artistic renaissance. One need only recall her most famous son—a renaissance man if ever there was one—Dr. Jose Rizal, who pioneered in practically all the literary genres (including children’s literature and comic books), but was also a man of science; and offered his abundant gifts in the service of his country.

And now I see that I have hit upon what could well be the strongest argument yet for giving literature—and the writers who produce it—a place of honor in academe.

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Introduction

John Jack G. Wigley

When I learned in one of our planning sessions that *Tomas*, the official literary journal of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies (CCWLS), would simultaneously come out with five issues for its fifth year of revival (one for fiction, one for poetry, one for drama, one for criticism, and one for creative nonfiction), and that I would be the editor of the issue on nonfiction, I knew in my heart that this was going to be a daunting task, albeit a special one.

This special issue features works by international writers Robin Hemley and Cecilia Manguerra Brainard. In it also are the works of some of the country's best writers of any genre (nonfiction included): Jose "Butch" Dalisay, Jr., Alfred "Krip" Yuson, Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, Rolando Tolentino, J. Neil Garcia, Eugene Evasco, Kristian Cordero, Allan Popa, Susan Lara, Ferdinand Jarin, and Mayette Bayuga. Moreover, it features literary outputs of the emerging voices in Philippine literature: Ned Parfan, Soeey Valencia, Larissa Mae Suarez, Rhea Gulin, and Mark Anthony Salvador. This issue certainly showcases the exciting blend of expressions of both established and emergent authors. Some of them are known to have been writing in the nonfiction genre for quite a while. Others are writing in nonfiction for the first time. Nevertheless, this has been a bountiful harvest.

This issue begins with works written in English. It starts with Robin Hemley's "The Travel Writer in the 21st Century," an essay that takes on travel writing in an era of diminishing borders where people like Mohammed

Ali could be a “citizen of several countries without ever moving once.” For Hemley, a self-declared “polygamist of place,” travel writing is ultimately tied up with the idea of national identity. It is not merely writing about the “best hotels in Maldives.” He asks the travel writer to think about “what is the nation from which we travel and what is the nation to which we travel?” He asks who are the travelers of the 21st century and how will they write about their travels. Much of the writing he seeks moves inward as much as the body moves outward. It is a form of mediation for Hemley, a way for him to “confront the complexities” that surround his identity. He begins the confrontation with a narrative of himself—an American, married to a Filipina, rushing through an airport in Hong Kong after leaving Russia, on his way to work in Singapore, and sitting next to a man who asked him, “You patriot?” This leads him to the “contradictory spaces of the world”—the place where he travels to and from.

In “Letters from Another Life,” Butch Dalisay unearths two letters “written in WordPerfect 5.0—but not emailed...printed out by dot matrix, then signed and stuffed into an envelope for mailing”—the ancient art of the snail mail. One, addressed to Gina Apostol, talks of weddings, US debuts, Ph.D. life, submitting manuscripts in floppy disks, and expresses wonder at his computer that was “IBM-compatible, which has enough memory (30 megabytes) to store 15,000 pages of text.” The second, addressed to Ramon Bautista (the writer, not the comedian), was a response to his comments on a story that Dalisay had sent. It is also a discussion of their opposing positions as writers with their own resistances, Dalisay to “exoticism” and Bautista to “Americanization,” without the tactless wailing and trolling that ends the “unfriending” that plagues much of friendships today. Both Apostol and Bautista are Dalisay’s friends and his letters to them are important records of a bygone era that show how people maintained connections “to real, pre-Facebook friends.”

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo ponders on the question of literary influences—something she rarely encounters in “‘Literary Influences’ and the Like.” She suggests that they should “not be limited to writers or works of literature. More interesting might be other people or particular circumstances or forces that led the writer to the literary life.” She lists her mother, her Tita Pacita, teachers, and friends from St. Paul College, Q.C., and UST, and the “little band of women” from the UST faculty as

the people who eventually inspired her to be the writer that she is today. However, it doesn't just stop there. Her writing continues to evolve over the years, until the onset of Facebook—an avenue that gives her direct access to her readers, fulfilling her idea of writing as a conversation. Hidalgo also offers a glimpse into her life as a writer of fiction and nonfiction and how her writing had to find spaces in between her lives as a woman, daughter, wife, mother, and academic.

In “Antarctica,” Ned Parfan gives a glimpse of himself as a child fascinated with *Childcraft Encyclopedia* despite not knowing how to read yet. He tells of the stories his father made up from the pictures in the encyclopedia before moving on to the atlases and globes that lead him to make up his own stories. The vast empty spaces tempered by borders fascinated him. He says he “became bewitched by them, following the blue line of the Yangtze down to the sea, tracing the rugged white lines of northern Canada.” But out of all the shapes in the map, it was Antarctica—the “shapeshifter”—that remained beyond his reach. So he decides to make his own Antarcticas on scratch papers. These Antarcticas later expanded into whole worlds which he populated with people and their stories—a habit he never grew out of.

Two writers pay tribute to one of the bastions of Philippine Literature, National Artist Francisco Arcellana: poet and critic J. Neil Garcia and fictionist and workshop director Susan Lara. These were written and read during the centennial celebration of the celebrated writer in 2016.

J. Neil Garcia writes two poems in memory of Arcellana's words. The first poem was born from an unexpected encounter with Arcellana. Garcia narrates how, after he had delivered a discourse on gender performativity in drag shows and the melancholia that besets all gender as they are “haunted by a consecutive loss: what it might have otherwise been... all other possibilities it could have identified as, as well as loved,” Arcellana told him, “It's a greater thing to love than be loved.” Thus, “For Franz” was written. The second poem was Garcia's response to a quote from Arcellana—“Words are not necessary to love”—a truth Garcia found himself uncomfortable with. So he writes “With Words,” a poem that staunchly defends that “writers, poets, can and do love earnestly if not especially, with their words.” Both poems are a fitting tribute to a man whose words begat other words.

In “Remembering Franz Arcellana,” Susan Lara speaks of her memories of Arcellana as her first teacher in creative writing and as her panelist for the UP National Writers’ Workshop. His kindness, even in the face of what Lara admits was an “unremarkable” story she had submitted, remains with her until today. She narrates how she had gone to him, discouraged and dejected as a writer, and how he had responded with such intensity as he asked her, “What if you die tomorrow?” This became his gift to her—the idea of writing as a duty, “the duty to honor a gift.”

In a chapter from her recently defended thesis, “Written in These Scars,” Sooy Valencia, who suffers from mild cerebral palsy, speaks of the time she hopped on the train she thought was the last. At age twenty-two, she dreaded that her body was “dying down, dwindling” and the pain it came with is something Valencia describes as “musical—the thudding flat feet, the snap and pop of tight joints, the sudden spasms of overlapping toes, the vibrating ache of weakening muscles, the unbearable weight of burdened knees.” This told her it was time to begin therapy again, shedding off the younger version of herself who skipped therapy in the hopes of wanting to be “a normal child.” This time, she was ready. Subjected to the scrutiny of the doctor poking and prodding her legs to determine if therapy wasn’t too late, Valencia hears the doctor declare that there is still some strength left in her muscle. It is with this strength that she latches on to her last hope, “the last train and I am getting on board.”

Palanca Awardee for fiction Larissa Mae Suarez ventures into writing nonfiction for the first time. In “Uneven Development,” she narrates her journey as a writer and coming to terms with the art she has been gifted with. From hiding books in the gaps between the shelves of the library of St. Paul, to a scared new student at the Philippine High School for the Arts, Suarez recalls her early days as she grappled with creative writing—the least populated major in PSHA. Surrounded by classmates who were singers, musicians, dancers and actors, she “began, vaguely, to feel like an impostor. Writing simply did not evoke the sense of awe and grandeur that the other art fields did.” Finding a waterfall, a hidden one, cured her of that feeling and eventually led her to life as an editor in UP’s student publication, *Philippine Collegian*.

In “The Piano Lessons,” fictionist Cecilia Manguerra Brainard recalls a time of peace, love, and music in her early life. It begins with a

patio swing, a mother who plays the piano, a father who plays the guitar, and the end of World War II. As a way to put the horrors of 1945 behind them, Brainard's parents decided it was time that she and her sister learn how to play the piano. Long drives with her father in the afternoon in downtown Cebu for the lessons, practices, recitals, and home concerts pepper Brainard's memories—all happy ones. She decides to keep them there, in the period which she calls "Before-my-father-died." She doesn't speak much of the After period, but instead goes back to the beginning of the romance between her father and her mother. With this, she sets her memories in a loop, like a music box that plays only the best part of a song, leaving the rest to hang in heavy silence.

Creative nonfiction in English closes with Alfred "Krip" Yuson's "Evolving Genres of the Written Word." In this work, Yuson states that in a "world that's said to have gone upside down, the primary victim is the primary virtue that is truth." With the proliferation of fake news, alternative facts, false binaries, and creative interpretation in Philippine media, fiction comes under fire when Sass Sasot likens it to fake news. Yuson takes a step back and observes that the narrative techniques of filmmakers like Quentin Tarantino, Akira Kurosawa, and a novelist, Julio Cortazar, are not far off from those used by "disruptive presidents." But Yuson draws the line between them by saying that "You can spin but not tell a lie," with the difference between the two only visible to the educated. It is unfortunate then that the Philippines currently suffers from anti-intellectualism and smart-shaming. And this is perhaps because "truth has a stronger affinity with intelligence. That may be why it has increasingly come under siege."

Nonfiction written in Filipino has also been munificent. Palanca Awardee Mayette Bayuga weaves a narrative titled "*Hatinggabi sa Kumbento*," a poignant account about her early experiences as a young novice who had to witness, as part of the religious' initiation and immersion projects, the squalor and grime of poverty in a faraway village in the south. This story provides an interesting facet in the persona of the writer who most people know as a writer of erotica and daring stories. When she begins the narrative with "*Kasama ako sa mga lumabas, sa mga umalis na hindi na maaaring bumalik*," the reader is captured and held in the clutches of the story, never to go back again.

The memory of place becomes a mnemonic device for nonfiction

writers to metaphorically search for and piece together their past and transform it into narratives. This is akin to what Cirilo Bautista said about how the works of writers are predetermined by their environment, “We are where we are.” Kristian Sendon Cordero, poet and critic, and one of the emerging voices of regional literature, uses this literary trope in his narrative, *“Ang Mahal na Birhen ng mga Bagyo.”* This story uses the backdrop of Bicol to recreate the memory of a boy growing up in a locale besieged by typhoons, old superstitions, and religious devotion to the Lady of Peñafrancia. The boy, in the story, learns punishment for the first time in the games that he plays.

Allan Popa, who has recently published a collection of poems in English, tries his hand at nonfiction in Filipino with *“Sa Tuktok ng Puno ang Nais Ko.”* This is a moving narrative structured around the author’s memory of a sickly child who loves to climb his favorite *duhat* tree because it gives him a sense of purpose, and poignant memories about the untimely death of a childhood friend. Death and coming-of-age are two significant themes of memoirs and Popa offers up both in his memoir.

A fresh voice in the Philippine literary scene is Rhea Gulin, a former fellow of the UST National Writers Workshop. Her personal narrative, aptly titled “En Route.” When she was younger, she used trees as a device to measure distances. Later, she measured fractured and disparate reminiscences by remembering transportation fares, miles, even the capacity of the mind to recollect as well as forget. One reviewer comments that *“May nagsasanib na rubdob at restraint ang pagsasalaysay ng espasyo at pagitan mula sa iba’t ibang baul ng alaala, samantalang may malay sa mga realidad na panlipunan tulad ng pangingibang-bayan, sistema ng paggawa at edukasyon, at gamit ng teknolohiya at social media, samantalang may pinong paghawak sa salimuot ng damdamin ng pagkatiwalag at lungkot.”*

“Ikaanim na Bahay” by Mark Anthony Salvador, another new voice, is an absorbing memoir about the pains and pangs of living in and moving out of many houses. This piece depicts the emotional and psychological effects on a young boy as he grapples both with the sting of physical dislocations and the pain of emotional maturity. Reminiscent of V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr. Biswas*, one reviewer praised it thus: *“nailunan ng sanaysay sa personal na karanasan ng pagpapalipat-lipat ng bahay ang kondisyong ekonomiko ng buhay, ang pagbabago ng panahon, ang pananatili ng kahirapan.”*

Palanca and National Book Award recipient Ferdinand Pisigan Jarin's *"Papa"* is a rhapsodic memoir of a boy who grew up fatherless but ultimately finds comfort in the men in his extended family who act on behalf of his unknown father. In this funny but heartbreaking narrative piece, Jarin attempts to recreate the landmarks of his early boyhood. The void that the unknown father left has become the persona's site for moving forward.

An award-winning writer of children's stories, Eugene Evasco writes a memorable travel essay titled *"Mga Pagsasanay sa Paggalugad sa Siyudad: Lakbay-Sanaysay ng Isang Manunulat para sa Bata,"* which highlights the writer's sojourn in different places in the world as well as places of the heart. As a review notes: *"Nakapagbahagi ang manunulat ng mga karanasan niya sa ibang bansa tulad ng Singapore, UK, at (pahapyaw sa) France, España, at Italy, samantalang isinasangkot ang panitikang pambata."* This is a welcome contribution to the Philippine literary landscape which has only recently given literature for children the attention it deserves.

This issue closes with distinguished critic and academic administrator Roland Tolentino whose off-beat nonfiction narrative simply titled *"A,"* is about an unlikely connubial relationship between a man and a fancy dancer. It takes the reader into the liminal regions and spaces of forbidden and transitory love. Told in a non-linear fashion, Tolentino writes, *"Pinatuloy ko siya sa panahong walang gustong tumuloy at panandalian lamang mamalagi."* He also defines love and courtship, the homosexual kind, in terms of power play. He adds, *"Ito ay isang laro na kailangang kalkulado mo ang iyong sarili, kontrolado mo ang laro, pati na ang iyong pinipintuho."*

Joyce Carol Oates once said that "there are two primary influences in a writer's life: those influences that come so early in childhood, they seem to soak into the very marrow of our bones and to condition our interpretation of the universe thereafter; and those that come a little later, when we are old enough to exercise some control of our environment and our response to it, and have begun to be aware not only of the emotional power but the strategies of art." In the genre of nonfiction, both influences are on display. And *Tomas* special creative nonfiction issue is a testament to this.

And now, to indulge in the abundant harvest.

The background features a complex, layered design of overlapping, semi-transparent leaf-like shapes in various shades of gray. Fine, white, curved lines flow across the composition, creating a sense of movement and depth. Small, dark dots are scattered throughout the design, adding texture and visual interest.

English

The Travel Writer in the 21st Century

Robin Hemley

In light of the rise of nationalism in my country and around the world, I've been mulling the role of the travel writer in the 21st century. And by travel writing, I don't mean the kind of writing one reads on a plane about the most unusual hotels in the Maldives. Even if the world is going to hell, perhaps especially then, we will still want to know what the best hotels in the Maldives are. But that's not what concerns me here. My approach to travel writing is perhaps the same as my approach to national identity, to what it means to belong to a nation, and what it means to go outside of the borders of that nation. My approach to travel writing is to ask questions, but to sometimes answer those questions with silence. My approach to travel writing is to start with a travel narrative:

The plane from St. Petersburg was in a holding pattern over Moscow, reducing my already short connection time. I could *not* afford to miss my flight to Hong Kong because my Russian visa expired at midnight and it was already past seven in the evening. I'd read horror stories of travelers who'd overstayed their Russian visas by only a couple of hours, and who wound up not only greatly inconvenienced but in trouble. My plane to Hong Kong was due to depart at 8:15 and, in my state of panic and exasperation at 7:30 when the plane finally landed, I took every further delay as a personal affront on the part of Aeroflot and whatever bureaucratic under-demon in hell handles the flight itineraries of mortals such as myself. Another fifteen minutes passed as we filed in slow motion out of the plane and onto

waiting buses to take us to the terminal. From there, I ran through a hallway that seemed to have been styled after a pneumatic tube, but with none of a pneumatic tube's advantages of propulsion. Huffing along with a fellow passenger to the third floor and passport control – 8 pm by this time – he remarked as we stepped on the elevator, “This always happens to me.” And I had thought it only happened to me.

After passport control, another mile from terminal “D” to “F” through another human-scale pneumatic tube and acreage of duty free shops and restaurants. By the time I reached my gate, it was 8:20, my mouth parched, my heart racing, my clothes soaked in perspiration.

The door to my gate was closed, a woman on a phone chatting away as though all was right with the world. If one can *forlornly brandish*, then that's how I showed her my ticket. She shrugged and pointed to her left. Behold, an open door and attendants taking such tickets, brandished by my fellow passengers in anything but a forlorn manner. The first attendant who greeted me as I stumbled aboard looked at me as though I were the last survivor of a desert caravan that had been caught in a windstorm, and brought me a glass of water.

I collapsed in my seat and thought that my leave-taking of Russia felt under the circumstances more like an escape. Coincidentally, as I was making my way to Hong Kong and then to my new home of Singapore, where I'd recently accepted a new job that would take me away from my homeland, Edward Snowden was heading to Moscow from Hong Kong. Perhaps we'd pass within miles of one another in the air. Snowden, the infamous/celebrated former NSA employee who had embarrassed the U.S. with allegations of mass spying by the U.S. on millions of Americans as well as allied world leaders, was truly escaping the U.S.. He'd spent the last several weeks hiding out in Hong Kong, trying to find a country to take him in while the U.S. pressured China and Hong Kong to hand him over. Public sentiment in China strongly favored Snowden and so he made good his escape.

Well, Snowden had his life to live and I had mine. We were headed in opposite directions, but we were both turning our backs on our country, though he more dramatically than myself. Putin didn't really want him, and kept him holed up in a waiting area of the Moscow airport for weeks before finally welcoming him with folded arms.

The man seated beside me on the plane to Hong Kong, muscular and compactly built, noticed my passport, which I had placed for a moment on my food tray.

“You American?” he asked. “You patriot?”

This is a question that no one has ever asked me before, and I was taken aback. He saw my hesitation and answered first.

“Me, no, not patriot of Ukraine. Bad presidents, bad police, bad schools. People good. Scenery good. You patriot?” he asked again.

Truthfully and in hindsight, I don’t know the answer to that question. I’m not un-American, but I’m not Jingoistic by a long shot. I’m not even sure what “American” means anymore. It seemed to me that America and I were both undergoing prolonged identity crises, and now I was moving away, and America, too seemed to be drifting.

“I guess,” I said.

“Passport please,” he said as though he were a border guard.

I gave him my passport and asked for his Ukrainian passport. I liked its bright red cover.

“Not so interesting,” he said as he handed it over. “Your passport, interesting. As he flipped through my passport, he started to hum “The Star-Spangled Banner,” soon rising to a crescendo and looking up with glee from my passport, waving his finger conductor style. “DA DA DA DA DA THAT OUR FLAG DA DA DA.”

I introduced myself in a gambit to curtail further singing, if possible. He stopped and introduced himself as Alex from Kiev. Soon, I learned more than I cared to know, in the way that you sometimes do on planes. He loved Ahmadinejad, the Iranian president who insisted the Holocaust never happened, and he disliked Obama because he was “African, not American.” He liked Putin.¹

Happily, after our initial conversation, my Ukrainian friend Alex lost interest in me after he discovered that his favorite movie, *Once Upon a Time in America*, could be viewed on his personal screen. While he watched the movie, I thought about Alex’s question. I loved other countries just as much, sometimes a bit more than the U.S. Did that make me a traitor,

1 I wonder if he likes Putin so much after Russia invaded Ukraine and took back the Crimea. I wonder if now he considers himself a patriot.

an ingrate or simply someone baffled by traditional notions of patriotism? When it comes to national identity, I'm an outlier. I'm married to someone from the Philippines. My daughters are Third Culture Kids. I was about to move to the relatively new nation of Singapore (a mere 50 years old), but I also still owned a house in the American heartland of Iowa. I didn't want to cut my ties to America in Snowden fashion. My allegiances were complicated. My sense of belonging to a national narrative that values, above all, a clear sense of shared identity, fluctuated constantly. I didn't see myself as disloyal so much as missing the loyalty gene.

#

On March 11th, 1882, French philosopher, Ernest Renan, delivered to a conference at the Sorbonne an essay titled, "What is a nation?" In some ways, it seems like a simple question, but it's a question that has perplexed and intrigued people since Renan asked it. Just shy of a century later, Hugh Seton-Watson, the British historian and political scientist wrote, "I am driven to the conclusion that no 'scientific definition' of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists." If we look at a world map of 1882 we see how different the nations of today look from the days of Renan. In 1882, Germany was eleven years old, Italy twenty-one years old and India was a compilation of over 600 princely states. Australia wouldn't be an independent nation for another nineteen years. Simply put, Renan saw himself ultimately as part of a larger community. "We must not abandon this fundamental principle," he wrote, "that man is a reasonable and moral being before he is penned up in this or that language, a member of this or that race, or a participant in this or that culture. Before French, German, or Italian culture is the culture of mankind."

Given that nations, as we know them today, are something rather new in history, my questions are "What is the nation from which we travel and what is the nation to which we travel? Who are the 21st century travelers and how will they record their travels? Some of them are as well-heeled as any traveler in the past, but some of them are refugees. With a shocking resurgence of nationalism the world over, are the citizens of the world, particularly the dispossessed, the responsibility of the traveler? Or are merely the lands and crumbling monuments they left behind important as

something to be viewed, collected, purchased, ticked off on a bucket list?

If our identities are wrapped up in our sense of belonging to a nation, then how fragile these identities are. A single lifetime is long enough to have multiple national identities. Mohammed Ali, 79 years old in 2015, has been a citizen of several countries without ever moving once. He was born in British India, and then in 1947 when India and Pakistan went their separate ways, he became a citizen of East Pakistan, an “exclave” (or extra-territorial part of a country cut off from its mainland by another country) of Pakistan, and then in 1971, he became a citizen of Bangladesh after East Pakistan fought a war of independence against Pakistan. But for many years, he lived in a Bangladeshi exclave within India. On June 15th, 2015, he was given the rare choice of what nationality he wanted to be, along with thousands of other exclave residents on both sides of the Indian/Bangladesh border. Did he want to be Indian or Bangladeshi? June 15th was the date that the two countries swapped their holdings within the countries of the other, simplifying after many decades what had been the most complicated border in the world. At age 79, Mohammed Ali, a resident of the former Bangladeshi exclave of Bhatrigachh chose Indian citizenship. “I was born in British India, grew up in East Pakistan and Bangladesh and will spend my old age in India,” he said.

Mr. Ali is the rarest of travelers of the 21st century, a visitor to several countries without moving once. These fickle nations. These identity problems. They’re not simply for the lowly born, like Mohammed Ali, but for monarchs, too.

King Peter the Second of Yugoslavia and his wife Alexandra of Greece faced a dilemma in the summer of 1945 as they awaited the birth of their child, the heir to the throne of Yugoslavia. As with many royals, World War Two had scattered them and the Yugoslavian king and his family had taken up residence in Suite 212 of the Claridge Hotel in London. The problem, besides living in exile: the rules of succession stipulated that the heir to the throne had to be born on Yugoslavian soil.

This was at a time when the British Empire, even diminished and fraying at the seams, could draw a border or create a nation out of almost nothing. Two years later, Britain would send Sir Cyril Radcliffe to India, a place he had never been, and require that he draw a border between India and Pakistan in little over a month.

I imagine Churchill barely blinking, perhaps pausing for a puff on his cigar, before declaring that the problem of the Yugoslavian succession was an easy one. Simply declare Suite 212 of the Claridge Hotel temporary Yugoslavian territory on the day of the birth.

When it comes to countries and borders and sovereignty, little is ever that easy. Already in 1945, the communist partisans of Josip Tito had defeated the Nazis and the royalists for control of the country. Less than a month after Crown Prince Alexander's birth, the name of Yugoslavia was changed to Democratic Federal Yugoslavia. By November, the country had changed again, and by 1947, Prince Alexander and virtually his entire family were stripped of their Yugoslavian citizenship, their property confiscated. From the time of his birth until 1991 as Yugoslavia was once again breaking apart and he was finally allowed to visit the country he might have ruled in different circumstances, the only time he ever touched Yugoslavian "soil" was upon his birth, in suite 212 of the Claridge Hotel, an exclave of Yugoslavia for one brief royal moment.

Personally, I like the way the Acadians think of national identity. The Acadians are the descendants of the French settlers in Canada who were ethnically cleansed by the British in the 1700s, the forbearers of today's Louisiana Cajuns. I met an Acadian author, Francoise Enguehard, on Bastille Day on the island of St. Pierre in the North Atlantic, France's last possession in North America. The Acadians no longer have a homeland, but they have everything else that goes with nationality. Enguehard explained to me that "Acady is an imaginary country that you make up in your heart every day. Not a nationhood of geography and frontiers but of genealogy and common purpose. By being that way, you understand everything that's wrong with nationalism. We have a flag. We have a national anthem. We sing it and we're happy as clams. We have rallied around the symbols of nationhood but we don't have a territory to fight over. It's wonderful. It's freeing. People without a state have something to offer, the higher sense of who we are without all the bullshit."

The real "bullshit" that Enguehard refers to is perhaps the notion that any modern state is more than something imagined every day by its inhabitants, whether in their hearts, their minds, or their land holdings. In 1982, a century after Renan, Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*, wrote about the ways in which nations pretend to be ancient,

looking towards antiquity for their *raison d'être*, while actually being quite recent inventions. Nations are imagined and reimagined everyday.

To me, the complexity of the relationship of the citizen to his or her own nation is the travel essay of the 21st century. Where do we travel simply by consenting to be citizens of the places of our birth? And how do these countries travel beyond us, writing their own travel narratives that bring us along or leave us behind, with or without our consent? Certainly, the United States that I was born in is no longer the United States I know. It is a country to which I travel warily now, unsure of its consent of me, and unsure of my consent of it.

I enjoy celebrating other people's national holidays more than my own, in part because I'm put off by the myopia of so many in my country who use patriotism and American Exceptionalism as smokescreens for a woeful ignorance of the rest of the world. Give me Australia Day or Bastille Day or India's Republic Day, though I will never be a citizen of any of them.

#

Immanuel Kant, in his Treatise, "Towards Perpetual Peace, A Philosophical Project," attempted to convince the world of the late eighteenth century that we should replace classical law with "cosmopolitan law," and consider ourselves citizens of the world. Kant loved travel books, but he loathed change, he rarely traveled himself. Even at that time, his notions seemed a tad unrealistic, and none of his friends thought he would get far, but some admired his bravery for trying. Among other far-fetched notions, Kant proposed "universal hospitality," the right to move freely between states.

Consent is important here. The consent of one country to receive the traveler, the consent of the traveler to return home, and the consent of his home country to allow him to return. For Renan, the members of a nation, in a metaphorical sense have a daily plebiscite in which they reaffirm belonging to the nation.

Renan, too, knew he was being idealistic, when he suggested that land disputes be settled by the inhabitants of those disputed areas. Still, I'm attracted naively to this notion of a citizenry's consent. Is consent something the travel writer should consider writing about? How freely

she moves between borders? How difficult it is for the people to whose country she visits to travel in the other direction?

The travel writer in the 21st century needs only to observe the swirl of history and geographies around her, needs only to consider the instability of identity to write a travel essay, like Pico Iyer staked out at the International exit of Los Angeles International Airport, observing the homecomings and first visits to the United States of the travelers pouring out the doors, in this way, traveling alongside them, if only for an instant. Granted, Pico Iyer wrote this essay before the 21st century, and perhaps the travelers he'd glimpse now would be different, more furtive, wavier, more exhausted, or perhaps that's just me projecting my own furtiveness on these hypothetical 21st century travelers.

So what is the travel writer's role in this? As travelers, we see surfaces first. It's easy to exoticize, to misinterpret, nearly impossible to see something except through our own lenses. Anthropologists often throw away the first three months of their notes, but first impressions can be useful, if only as a way to begin to understand the ways in which we move from certainty to uncertainty from generalization to the particular. The travel writer can observe vulnerably, perhaps *should* observe vulnerably, to act as a lens through which the reader can begin to understand and begin to challenge her own stereotypes and assumptions.

The travel writer still has a role in the 21st century, but a role that recognizes the travel writer's subjectivity, that questions his or her own biases and prejudices, whether conscious or not, that seeks to demystify rather than exoticize, that accepts that sight is always out of focus, but clearer at least than eyes closed tightly shut. The travel writer in the 21st century might also be someone from within a culture rather than an outsider, someone who travels without moving an inch, like that wonderful French writer of the 18th century, Xavier de Maistre, who under house arrest decided to pass the time by writing a travel narrative from within his confinement, a minor classic still in print titled, *Journey Around My Room*.

I know, of course, that traveling is a privilege of the elite, that I must leave a heavy carbon footprint in my travels, but it seems to me that people who are accustomed to self-interrogation, meditative writers asking difficult questions of themselves and of the world can offer as much as they take, or at least make the effort to do so. What the travel writer meditates

on is his or her business, but in my case, it's nationalism, patriotism, and the lack of comprehension that comes from mutual myopia.

My own myopia is as bad as anyone's, but I battle against it as mindfully as I can. I confronted my own myopia a couple of years ago in China when I along with several other writers and academics were the guests of a billionaire in Guangdong. This billionaire lived in a mansion set incongruously in his ancestral village, a place of shacks and modest houses. But his home had the look of a national treasury, its windows gleaming gold. Or a palazzo crossed with the Reichstag as imagined by a 1960s Mafioso in Vegas. Its vast grounds were filled with Italianate statues crafted out of jade, marble, granite, and other stone. Roman soldiers on horseback reared with spears from the rooftop while maidens in togas poured liquid from jugs. A statue of an American soldier, AK-47 in hand, guarded the side gate to the grounds along with a more traditional Chinese demon and a statue of a pudgy American cop.

Most of my colleagues were amused by this palace and impressed by its owner's hospitality, but, my American sense of righteous indignation was too easily triggered by his excesses, as I saw them: five enormous Paduak tree trunks, each twenty to thirty feet high, strung up behind his palace. Shellacked and gleaming, inscribed with Chinese ideograms, they looked like giant slabs of beef jerky, and they dated, according to the owner, 2000 years earlier, from the era of the script he had carved into the side of the largest, which proclaimed in Qin Dynasty script, "The King of the Paduak." He admitted that there was almost no way to preserve the forest because China wants wood from around the world and if he didn't buy it, someone else would. As he saw it, the trees had already been cut down, so he might as well buy them as a kind of aftermarket act of preservation.

My friend Dai Fan, who teaches at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou and who introduced me to this man, is fond of saying that if you spend a day in China you can write a book. If you spend a month, you can write an article. If you spend a year, you can't write anything. The same can probably be said for America. I've lived most of my life there, but it baffles me more than ever the older I get. The people with the least experience of a country tend to have the most opinions. The same is true of individuals we don't know. The richer or more famous, the less we know

them. “Fame is a form, perhaps the worst form, of incomprehension,” Jorge Luis Borges once wrote.

My sense of incomprehension drove me to return to the billionaire’s palace because I knew that my first impressions could not be correct, that there had to be more to him.

The unavoidable comparison, clichéd as it might seem, is that this billionaire resembled in many ways *Citizen Kane* and that his spectacular climb to wealth best fit *The Aspiration Formerly Known As The American Dream*. His palace, tacky as it might seem to a Westerner, was no more embarrassing than the incongruous homes of the nouveau riche in America, whether in Southampton, Atlanta, Beverly Hills, or Salt Lake City. Or the assorted Orientalist fantasies that inspired Western movie theatres in the early part of the 20th century. So why not turn the tables? That this billionaire was fabulously wealthy and had kitschy taste was not in itself remarkable. What made him remarkable was that he wasn’t the Jed Clampitt who moved to Beverly Hills, but the Jed Clampitt who returned home. He didn’t have to do this. He could have gone to Shanghai or Beijing. He could have gone anywhere in the world. But he thought Europe was strange and he didn’t like America. He could have purchased a foreign passport and moved to Australia or Canada as many others have done. A friend of his asked him to buy an Australian island with him a decade ago for development as a tourist site, but he didn’t want to go to Australia. His friend bought the island and made a fortune. My billionaire host’s island was his palace, floating over the toil of his ancestors.

My initial assumption, that he was simply another greedy *tuhao*, the Mandarin name for the Nouveau Riche, had started to erode slightly by the end of my first day. He didn’t have the coarseness I associated with Tuhao’s, whether from Southern China or South Carolina. And while he was constantly receiving visitors and was at the center of many projects, there was a tranquility about him that my friend Dai Fan remarked on several times. “The cloud is thin and the wind is light,” is how she termed it.

In the end, I could come to no conclusions about him except that he was perhaps a patriot in a way that I was not, someone who chose not to travel, the wind so light it kept him in one place. His country was older than mine but in a sense newer, too. Renewed at least, in certain ways. But

I still thought it was worth writing his portrait and checking it against the impressions of my friend who introduced me to him.

I wonder if it's conclusions we should be after, or if uncertainty is its own valid position. My editor wanted me to come to conclusions, but how could I do so? I'd spent a few days with him and there were certainly things he'd never tell me and things that I'd never know because we didn't have a language in common.

Dai Fan was horrified at the thought of my editor asking for conclusions. She thought it was just right that I hadn't come to any, that I presented him and his surroundings as accurately as possible given the circumstances. Surfaces, yes, but surfaces that reflect, and distort as little as possible, and which might trigger questions about ourselves in relation to this place, this person, so that we might appreciate our differences better.

We can't avoid seeing through our cultural lenses, our biases and prejudices, but must we see the world through the lens of the nations to which we belong? How is the traveler bent to the political will of politicians? Perhaps the better question is how is she not bent to the will of politicians with their aims of solidifying borders rather than permeating them?

As a virtue, loyalty to a country or any institution seems overrated and in some cases dangerous. If anything, I'm a polygamist of place. The more I travel, the more I have identity questions, starting with, *How American am I? Do we carry our identities around with us, like our passports, or are our identities more mutable than that? Am I a representative of America? Is every citizen traveling abroad a representative?* Almost all of my friends, from many countries, would consider themselves cosmopolitans. We do care about our national identities when we're together – it is indeed a small world, though not the kind of small world Disney envisions. If the Small World exhibit at Disneyworld had armed animatronic figures menacing one another, then maybe the song wouldn't seem so hollow. Still, a small minority of the small world would prefer to operate outside of the confines of geopolitical squabbles and national borders. As I grow older, notions of nationalism and patriotism make less and less sense to me. Travel is my form of meditation, completed when I write about my travels, when I confront the complexities of my own identity that create instability and paradoxically, a certain peace nested within that instability. This is where I travel to and from, the contradictory spaces of the world.

Letters From Another Life

Jose Dalisay Jr.

I keep letters on my computer from as far back as 1989—composed, I can now recall, on WordPerfect 5.0—but not emailed, which was still a couple of years down the road for me, even in the United States where I did my graduate studies at the University of Michigan (MFA, 1988) and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (PhD, 1991). My letters were encoded, printed out by dot matrix, then signed and stuffed into an envelope for mailing to the world at large. Those letters and perhaps even some of those addressees may be long gone, but thankfully my files remain, and I've plundered them for these glimpses into another life. The first is a letter to Gina Apostol, who had done her MA in Writing at Johns Hopkins and had just gotten married to Arne Tangherlini, and I sent the second to Ramon Bautista (the Mindoro-born writer, not the comedian), who was doing his MFA in Wichita, Kansas and who had responded to a copy of my newest story, later published as "Under the Dinosaurs." Here they are, basically unedited—today, creative nonfiction, but back then, just letters to real, pre-Facebook friends.

5 Feb 89

Dear Gina,

This is sooo late, but CONGRATULATIONS and BEST WISHES, missus—for your wedding, and for your US debut (and thanks too for the copy—what company you keep, Ms. Apostol—or Mrs. -?) Before you read any further, let me warn you that this is another of those form letters I'm sending to a select few, and only the closest, friends, each of whom I should thank or say hello to for some unique and special reason. *Walanghiya, ano?* At least, *iba ang intro mo* (“Oy, kumusta na?” is the standard opening.)

How's the new year coming along for you? How much longer will you be staying at your seaside resort? It's freezing here in Milwaukee—it was 4 degrees yesterday, and when you walk outside with the wind ripping your face off you feel like basking under coconuts for the rest of your life. *Wala na akong ginawa dito kundi mag-aral at kumain*; I haven't been able to write anything creative for almost a year; *puro* academic papers (e.g., “Catharsis and Closure in D.M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*; “Irony and the Gods in *Troilus and Cressida*”, etc. etc.)

It's really fun to study in a good (not the best, but adequate) university like UWM (Wisconsin-Milwaukee), where people seem to know what they're doing, even though it's exhausting (tonight I'll have to read Bellow's *Seize the Day* and Dryden). *Ewan ko ba kung bakit napasubo ako dito sa pagpi-Ph.D. kuno; masarap lang pakinggan (at maganda ang toga)*. I still have to take my Qualifying Exams this May—an oral exam based on 50 texts from *Beowulf* to the present—30 texts from a given list, 20 of your own choosing. Because I have a fellowship, I got off from having to teach this year; but I will have to teach 2 sections (Composition and Creative Writing) next year, and this year I've been taking full loads (12 units/sem); *ang totoo nito, malapit na akong matapos sa course work ko—27 units lang* (beyond the MA—may 36 na ako sa Michigan) *ang* minimum dito *para sa Ph.D.*, aside from the dissertation (creative *pa 'yon*); but if I don't get a “high pass” on the qualifying exam, I'll have to take more core courses. *Kaya magre-review ako*; if you want a good reference book for English lit, *the* book to get is

Albert Baugh's *A Literary History of England*, which is quite old (1948, *pero may mas bagong edition na*)—a mammoth volume with excellent essays on all the periods; this, along with the Norton, is my reviewer.

Ito lang ang maganda dito—ang daming libro! There's a 4-story building here crammed full of used books, in downtown Milwaukee; I've started a personal project of getting hold of all the books on the Philippines or by Filipinos that I can afford, especially colonial literature; there are many turn-of-the-century books to be found here on the Philippines (e.g., *Our Islands and Their People*); I also came across and bought (for \$10—pretty expensive, by rummage-sale standards) a 16 mm newsreel of Manila during the “liberation”; old *National Geographics*, a copy of the 1936 *Story* magazine featuring Sinai Hamada's “Tanabata's Wife”, old novels set in the Philippines, etc.

(N.B. Depending on who you are, some of this will be old news—B.) I have to walk about 25 minutes to school, under about six layers of clothing, but it's not only sweaters that I'm buried under—*baon din ako sa utang!* *Itong mga lintek na credit card—*Visa, American Express—*napakasarap gamitin.* After 10 tries, I finally got a Citibank Visa by giving the magic answer on the application form (“Are you a US citizen?” “YES!”—*ayan, Amerikano na rin ako, sa ka-u-utang.*) It's such a convenience, however.

Isa pang dahilan ng pagkabaon ko (hulugan, \$46/mo. for 24 mos.): this computer I'm typing this letter on—a Leading Edge Model D, an IBM-compatible, which has enough memory (30 megabytes) to store 15,000 pages of text. It makes writing so much easier (so where's the novel?); there are even these software programs that can put in, arrange and alphabetize, say, footnotes or endnotes for you; *wala nang silip-silip kung may espasyo pa sa ibaba, wala nang Touch-and-Go*; the ridiculous extreme of it, of course, is that they now have poetry-writing programs (which will supply you with a menu of rhyming options, for example). If you should ever buy or get access to an IBM-compatible (or a Macintosh for that matter), tell me and I'll send you free software, especially the more expensive start-up ones—MS-DOS, BASIC, WordPerfect, Wordstar, MacWrite (word processing programs), etc. I can copy disks and mail them to you; in some

publishing houses and magazines, *ganiyan na ang sistema*—you submit your “manuscript” on a floppy disk.

*O, sigé, tama na muna ito. Balitaan mo naman ako; call me collect, if you want. Huwag kang madadala sa katamaran kong magsulat. At ang totoo nito, hindi naman talaga ito form letter; I just sent Isabel an “international” version (e.g., 4 degrees F = -15C) and Judy a “welcome back” edition. You should call Judy for the latest *chismis*; among other things, Maria’s left the department (*napuno na rin*); Krip, by the way, was here in the US (Houston and New Orleans) last week; Ricky wrote me from St. Louis; I think he’s trying to stay on for another year at least; do you have any news about people we know? And the old question: does anyone know where Fidelito is? Are you going to stay here for good? *Ako, gusto ko nang umuwi!* How wifey do you feel?*

And do send me copies of your new writing; I enjoy your prose, as ever.

Walkin’ in a winter wonderland,

Butch

12 January 91

Dear Mon:

Thanks for your prompt and generous response. I’ll take your comments into account when I sit down to a more thorough rewrite of the story—probably in a month or so (I always wait a while before I revise, to allow the story and the responses to it to sink in). About the only further explanation I can make at this point is that (and you don’t have to believe this if you’d rather not) I deliberately left a lot of things unclear or off-the-point, because (especially from a first-person POV) I think it’s more reflective of the actual textures of our thinking and memory. In other words, statements

and images may make a *cumulative* point or impression, without in themselves making immediate sense. You're very right when you observe that my characters' thoughts are always somewhere else (although I have to watch that it doesn't become too much of a mannerism); when people can't deal directly with their problems they talk about the silliest things, and my characters (probably like me) are largely ineffectual, even confused (personally and culturally); so that Norman Reilly may fancy himself to have been a savior, once, but deep in him he knows that he really didn't do anything, and in fact can't bear the responsibility of doing something. But enough of that.

I enjoyed reading your story and your poem, and after I write this letter I'll do a more detailed marginal or textual commentary if I can. I find it very interesting and reassuring (for both of us) that we seem to represent two different approaches to writing about the same country from this distance—which is the way it should be, the more approaches the better, because our national experience is ultimately too complex for any one sensibility to encompass (social realism, magic realism, minimalism, whatever). It's particularly interesting that we seem to be (consciously or otherwise) *resisting* opposite factors or influences: you resist (for want of a better word) “Americanization”, while I resist “exoticism”—and the *really* surprising thing is that both of us are failing, because it's in the nature of the thing—your island is being taken over by batteries and bulldozers, and my cross-cultural wishy-washies keep coming back to the island.

Of course this is based on skimpy evidence; I'm sure you've written “non-native” stuff, and much of the material I've written here actually goes back to (and stays in) the Philippines. Maybe we're going through phases or poses (sometimes we need to, to go on); whatever. The thing is, none of this can really be exclusive. Again, all for the better; note the differences (and inevitable similarities) between Garcia Marquez and Borges, both of whom I (and I'm sure you do, too) admire. Even our perceptions of what Americans will say and how they think must differ here and there; maybe *this* country is that complex, too (or our experiences of it). One of these years, I hope we can share notes over a beer; meanwhile, we can write more fiction, which is clearer than all polemics. I know it's tough to have

to deal with alienation, to study, to teach, to make \$4.25/hr., and to write at the same time (and deal with a mess of personal problems as well)—but we would neither be the first nor the last ones; cold comfort, but so it goes. I do wish I could lighten up—I certainly hope I will! In good time, things will fall into place... This is just pre-emptive anxiety, so that when I go home, I can be blithely indifferent to all the carping I'm bound to hear (*I'll* have to deal with that; you don't—not yet, not until you come back).

Seriously, I do feel obligated, and not only in the legal sense, to return and teach there; I don't feel messianic, but what else did I get this Ph.D. for? I went to the MLA in Chicago—and met 3,500 other Ph.D.'s or would-be Ph.D.'s, many of them looking for non-existent jobs; and you know as well as I do that in this country, if you want to teach any place other than the Northwest Chattahoochee Community College—and unless you've won the Nobel Prize in Literature and published 6 books—it's very difficult to get a real teaching job without a Ph.D. So staying here is no sure thing, either; but hey, I'll gladly teach at Chattahoochee if I have to, and one of these days I just might—but I have to go through this process first of giving home (and myself at home) a chance.

America will become clearer to me only when I'm back home (and vice-versa, as your fiction is doing for you now). Again, you obviously think differently, and that's your right and privilege, and I'm not going to insist on knowing what's keeping you in this place (aside from its obvious material advantages, which I appreciate as well) unless and until you feel like saying something. My own life here turned at one point into a huge, huge mess, and that's all I have to say about it; so everyone has all kinds of reasons, and you and I can tell the others, "What the hell do *you* know about living here?"

Good luck to both of us.... Gina is living in Baltimore with her American husband; she's writing (very well) in between part-time jobs at a bookstore and a publishing house (I think). I think she's happy here, and I'm so glad she is here; from what she tells me of the reception she got from people back home (UP, relatives) during her last visit there, I think she deserves better. Of course, I hope that at one point, when we Filipinos wake up to

the fact that there are *really* some things you can *also* learn out here if you put your mind to it (maybe no big deal, but if I could have learned as much in Diliman I'll eat my shoe—Ramas, Abad, Arcellana and a few others excluded), people like you and Gina can return to spice things up. We don't *need* to (I think Philippine literature can get along very well without us—I have tremendous respect for the work, and the attitude, of people like Krip Yuson, Fidel Rillo, and Boy Noriega), but it would be, well, fun.

I'll make some brief notes on the story and the poem, but here's another quick impression: the more I think about it, the more I prefer the poem to the story. The language and imagery in both pieces are very rich and highly textured, but I enjoyed the almost-wistfulness of the outhouse poem, in contrast to the insistent and sometimes formulaic (i.e., foundlings invariably mean mystery and trouble) mythologizing of the story. (There, I'm beginning to sound like one of these fucking critics I hate.) I think what I see in the story is a version of the age-old fertility or harvest-sacrifice myth; to fertilize the land (and, by extension, the barren woman here), something of value has to be given up—in this case, the unexpected blessing of the foundling.

So this is what happens, and to the extent that myths are, well, retold and therefore predictable, the story derives its freshness from the details and the effects (especially for foreign readers); what *I* liked most in this respect was your inclusion of modern and seemingly incongruous details—the plastic guns, battery-operated phone, etc.—which is of course part of the subtext, perhaps the *real*, implied story, the real source of the barrenness (the encroachment of capitalism—the Chinese middleman, etc.). Nice move! (Now I'm seeing more things in it.)

But I feel somehow more rewarded by the ironic humor of the poem, which builds up suspensefully, keeps the magic well within control (as the father in the poem ruefully experiences), and really plays with and upon its own (again) “exoticism”—Chinese gold, eh?

I can also sense from these two pieces that you've asked yourself here and there if you should use the native term, or its nearest English equivalent,

or explain a term on the spot (or in a glossary). My feeling about this is, unless it's absolutely unclear and necessary to explain, let the context bear the meaning out. *Bayaan mo sila*. We have to sort through quaint British, French and Russian terms when we read their stories in English; I don't think we should bend over backwards to explain our terms and cultural peculiarities, simply because they're not familiar with us. If the story is interesting enough, they'll find a way of understanding it more fully; let them work (as you did to establish, contextually, that Leinenkugel was a beer). This is probably why, when you come across, say, Singaporean or Malaysian fiction in English, you get the sense that there's nothing more to the language because it's all out in the open; it's one-dimensional.

O, tama na muna ito. Think about my comments (as I do yours) but don't take them too seriously, if you find them a hindrance to writing. There's nothing like production—and I better get cracking on a few more stories myself (my next one will be something called "Picnic"—what happens when rival Filipino-American organizations get together for a big social event—*nakakatawa, nakakadismaya*, as you well know!) Meanwhile, here's an older short short story (from three years ago), which I got published in *Indiana Review*.

Have fun.

Cheers,
Butch

“Literary Influences” and the Like

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

In the jargon of academic discourse, they’re called “literary influences.” When interviewing writers, reporters refer to them as “the writers who have affected your writing.”

As a writer myself, I don’t think I’ve come across any study of my work that has troubled itself unduly with possible literary influences. And it’s not a question I’ve frequently had to answer during interviews. It doesn’t seem to be something that interests too many Filipinos, literary scholars included.

But a few months back, a reporter for a student paper put the question to me. And I realized that I’ve never really given the matter much thought either.

Doing so now, in preparation for writing this essay, it occurs to me that “literary influences” should not be limited to writers or works of literature. More interesting might be other people or particular circumstances or forces that led the writer to the literary life.

For instance, I think the person who first pointed me in the right direction by surrounding me with heaps of books from earliest childhood was my mother. The second one was her unmarried younger sister, who lived with us, and took care of me until I was maybe nine years old, and was my chief confidante for many more years. As a child I had poor appetite and an aversion for sleeping. Tita Pacita discovered that the most effective

way to convince me to eat a little more, and agree to lie down for a nap in the afternoon, was to tell me marvelous stories, stories that she had read, or had invented herself.

So I would say that my mother and aunt were the first literary influences in my life.

Next to them would be the authors of the story books and fairy tales that I never tired of looking through even before I could read; and, later, the authors of the childhood novels that became my most treasured possessions—Louisa May Alcott (*Little Women*), Lucy Mary Montgomery (*Anne of Green Gables*), Kate Douglas Wiggin (*Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*), Gene Stratton-Porter (*Girl of the Limberlost*), Jean Webster (*Daddy Long-Legs*), Eleanor Porter (*Pollyanna*), among many others. Most of the heroines of these books dreamt of becoming writers, except Elnora Comstock of the *Limberlost*, who wanted to be a violinist. And there was Anne Frank and her diary.

The effect of these books on me was that at the age of 9, I began keeping a diary—a small, hard bound, gilt-edged book, with a lock and a tiny golden key—not surprisingly, a gift from my mother too. All my heroines kept journals or wrote voluminous letters. I also produced a family newspaper, using ruled pad paper, on which I drew vertical lines to make columns, and writing all the articles myself. But my most ambitious project was a “novel,” written in longhand on a spiral notebook, and illustrated by myself with pencils and crayons (singularly bad illustrations, for I had no talent in this area). I titled this “novel” the title “The Life and Letters of Elizabeth Farrier,” gave my heroine blonde hair and blue eyes, constructed a story which simply copied the plots of the books I had been reading, and wrote in a style deliberately modelled on Wiggins, Montgomery and Alcott.

Mama was pleased by my literary ambitions and encouraged them by presenting me with even more books, careful to select those she deemed appropriate for my age. Behind her back, I raided her own bookshelves, which contained more interesting stuff. Some years later, I discovered an old wooden trunk where she kept others—I particularly recall Alberto Moravia’s *Woman of Rome* and Françoise Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse*. Sagan’s struck me chiefly because of its title, which I found so poetic, when I discovered what it meant. Of course most of these books were way above

my head. It didn't matter. I had fallen under the spell of words. I was fascinated by what words could do, what magic they could create.

When I was a bit older, like most of my other classmates, I fell under the thrall of the Nancy Drew books by Carolyn Keene. Two classmates who had the largest collections of these books—Olga Cruz and Helen Samson—were objects of great envy. But when I began reading the Beverly Gray series by Clair Blank, I quickly shifted loyalties. Beverly Gray was not just a kind of amateur sleuth like Nancy Drew, but a journalism student, and later an actual journalist. It is arguable who the stronger influence in my life was at that point—Beverly Gray or Brenda Starr, the comic strip character who was a reporter for a Chicago newspaper called *The Flash*. Brenda Starr had red hair, starry eyes, and a mysterious lover called Basil St. John, who wore a black eye patch and required a serum drawn from a rare black orchid to live. What intrigued me about Brenda Starr was, not just her profession, but her being what I thought a modern woman was: career-oriented, independent, adventurous. In the 50s, which was when this comic strip was at its height, the “ideal woman” was still the person described by Betty Friedan as “the Happy Housewife Heroine” in her classic *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

In retrospect, I believe it may have been similar qualities which drew me to the young girl heroines created by Alcott, Wiggins, Montgomery et al. They stood out because they were different from other girls, by temperament and by aspiration, qualities which often got them into trouble, but which their authors obviously held out as something to be valued and admired.

In those days we were not producing our own literature for children, so the myths I absorbed—even about writers and writing—were all western.

My upbringing was quite conventional. I went to a private school for girls run by nuns—St. Paul College in Quezon City—until I graduated from high school. And then I got an undergraduate degree in Philosophy and an M.A. in English Literature from the country's oldest university, also, incidentally, a Catholic university, the University of Santo Tomas. While this education certainly had its limitations, it ensured that the process begun by my mother would continue. I had access to the best books; I was taught by some wonderful teachers; developed friendships with my contemporaries

who would become major figures in literature and journalism. Even while still an undergraduate, and working for my university's student paper, I was offered a regular column in a major daily newspaper, and began editing the youth section of a weekly magazine. Then as now, editors—many of whom also had connections with academe—were always on the lookout for promising new writers, and did some of their recruiting in their own classrooms. By the time I got my degree, I had two jobs waiting for me.

An obviously undeniable shaping factor in my life was being born into a middle-class family in the capital city. It made things easier for a would-be writer.

There were no creative writing subjects taught in high schools then, or creative writing degree programs in college. Nor were there creative writing centers such as now exist in the major Philippine universities. My writing style, or what passed for it, I had arrived at through my reading, which, by the time I reached high school included my two favorite magazines, *Seventeen* and *Ingenuue*. These magazines also planted a seed in my mind, the seed which became the dream of someday going to university in America.

My friends and I had outgrown Keene and Blank, by then, and had turned to the romance books of Emily Loring and Grace Livingston Hill, whom the nuns did not approve of. The reason for this disapproval remains a mystery to me, since those romances were quite wholesome, a far cry from the Mills and Boon series of the later decades. In any case, neither of those authors inspired me to imitation. I was not tempted to write romance novels. I was slowly coming under the spell of the writers I was studying.

Our high school English classes combined English Grammar and Composition with Literature in English. I no longer recall the titles of my literature textbooks. But I see them clearly in my mind's eye—large, thick books, handsomely illustrated with both photographs and art works, in full color. I recall reading, in freshman and sophomore years, “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” by Washington Irving, a couple of Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, “Desiree’s Baby” by Kate Chopin, “The Cask of the Amontillado” and “The Masque of the Red Death” by Edgar Allan Poe, as well as his poems, “Annabelle Lee” and “The Raven” (both of which we had to commit to memory, along with “Sea Fever” by John Masefield). There were also Robert Frost’s “Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy

Evening” and some poems by William Wordsworth and Robert Byron and Elizabeth Barrett. There was also Henry W. Longfellow’s *Evangeline*, whose “Prelude” we had to memorize. And my memory, which has become such a poor thing of late, is mysteriously able to recollect the opening lines of that “Prelude” without any trouble.

*This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic,
Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.
Loud from its rocky caverns, the deep-voiced neighboring ocean
Speaks, and in accents disconsolate answers the wail of the forest.*

I loved these works, first, because they told stories different from everything I had read before; and, second, because they used words so differently. It helped that Miss Ofelia Maniquis, our English teacher for Years 1 and 2, was like the older sister many of us wished we had, a slim, petite woman, no longer young, but clearly in sympathy with us, willing to laugh at our jokes and listen to our gushing about our schoolgirl crushes and “autograph books.” And her own enchantment with the works she taught us was so contagious that even those of us who really preferred math or geography began to consider English our favorite subject.

In any case, my imagination and taste had been shaped entirely by American and British books. It would take a few more years, and exposure to the best work of our best writers, to begin to effect a change.

When the time came for me to prepare for college, my mother felt I should go to UST, and take up Journalism, since I had always wanted to be a writer. My choice was the University of the Philippines, where my best friends—Victoria Zablan, Aurora Achacoso and Tess Achacoso—were going. But my mother would not hear of it. The Sisters had been carrying on a campaign against UP chiefly because of the dominant presence there of a philosophy professor named Pascual, who was an atheist, and probably a Communist as well. This argument was buttressed by a Catholic newspaper called *The Sentinel*, which was required reading for our school and many—if not all—other Catholic schools.

I thought this was particularly unfair since both my parents were UP alumni. But my mother wouldn't budge. She declared that she was certain that UST was just as good a university since she had once taught there, and still knew some people in the faculty, including several Dominican priests. It would be the far better choice for me, she said, and my father was willing to let her have her way about this, though I could see it was with some reluctance.

Before enrollment, Mama took me to meet the Dean of Women, who was personally known to her, to consult her about degree options, even if I had already made up my mind to take Journalism. This lady's opinion was that, since I was already writing for the papers, there would be no point in studying how to write for the papers. She suggested Philosophy instead of Journalism. It would provide my writing with more "substance," she said. I don't think I had a clear idea of what one studied if one was majoring in "Philosophy. But I was willing to give it a try. And an aunt, who was much respected by the clan because she had PhD from Fordham University and was a dean in Centro Escolar University said that "Philets," as it was called by people in the know, had a very good reputation, and offered both Journalism and Philosophy. I could always take Journalism electives, she added.

I know how pathetic this must seem to today's millennials—accepting, with such docility, suggestions and decisions which would have a lasting effect on my life. But I was not yet sixteen, and my upbringing had not been conducive to rebellion. I wonder whether I would have been as complacent had Mama or the Dean of Women tried to make me take up Commerce or Pharmacy or Nursing. I'd like to think not, but who knows? One thing I am certain of: I would have been a total failure at anything that wasn't in the field of the humanities. Perhaps I would have had such poor grades that I would have been allowed to transfer to the program of my choice.

Being deprived of life as a UP co-ed rankled for a while. But it turned out to be a fortunate choice. Philets was one of the oldest colleges in the university. It was also the smallest, and apparently there were advantages to being a small college in a huge university. It fell below the Dean of Discipline's radar. We had only two sections per year level—one in the afternoon for regular students and one in the evening for the irregular students, most of whom were working students. This meant that men and

women could not be segregated by gender, as they were in the rest of the university. It helped that the Dean, a philosopher of great intelligence, erudition, and wit, was a bit of a bohemian himself, and more concerned with metaphysical issues than trying to keep young men and women from spending time with each other.

There were only two majors offered: Philosophy and Journalism. (Literature was lumped together with English in the College of Liberal Arts.) This meant that students hoping to become teachers of philosophy, students dreaming of becoming writers of fiction and poetry and drama, and students who were already reporters or planning to become reporters, all took their classes together and had very similar syllabi, so everyone met everyone else in the college.

The classrooms and corridors in our third of the third floor of the Education Building (what is now the A.B. Building in UST) were permeated by a vaguely bohemian air. Everyone smoked and had their heads buried in paperbacks most of the time. Some of the guys were already inebriated by mid afternoon, but read to spouting witty repartee on demand. After classes, they hung out in a tiny place off Dapitan called Aling Mameng's, and consumed huge quantities of beer while discussing Sartre and Camus and Jack Kerouac. We girls understood that going to Aling Mameng's was not an option for us, so we drank gallons of coke or black coffee and discussed Sartre and Camus and T.S. Eliot and Carson McCullers in Eugene's along España or in Wilfranor's in Dapitan.

Like the rest of the university, our college had a uniform, but while there was some agreement about the pleated navy blue skirt of the girls' uniform, no one seemed to know the exact design of the white blouse that was supposed to accompany it. So, we all wore white short-sleeved blouses, but we touched them up with a bit of lace, or some embroidery on the sleeves, or a Peter Pan collar, or buttons colored pale green and sky blue and pearl grey, as suited our individual tastes. And most of the boys didn't even know that they were supposed to wear uniforms.

Meeting young people whose life experience—and even education—was totally different from mine was mind blowing. And the things they wrote made me realize how fluffy and immature my own writing had been. The big fish in the small pond had been tossed into the big pond, and was finding it most exhilarating.

However, as is the way of the world, I gravitated toward my own kind, and soon belonged to a group of other *ex-colegialas*. Together we would stroll under the pine trees, and across the football field, to the university chapel, its stained glass windows gleaming like jewels, constructed in 1932 and the original home of the Our Lady of La Naval de Manila, until her transfer in solemn procession to the Santo Domingo Church. And, farther, to the little stone structure at the far corner of the campus, which housed the UST Press, oldest printing press in the country (founded in 1593, eighteen years before the University itself). We learned that the Main Building, was built in the 1920s, not in 1611 as we had ignorantly assumed (but this hardly mattered since it looked like it was built in 1611 anyhow); that the sculptures mounted on pedestals in its roof garden were saints, philosophers, historians and writers; that inside its walls were the oldest museum in the country, a library with a rich collection of old books as well as stacks and stacks of contemporary literature, elevators which had grilled doors, that one had to manually slide to open and close, like those in some of the buildings in the old Escolta, and a radio station. We discovered that in the middle of the Pharmacy Garden was an old wishing well, and that just outside the Gov. Forbes gate we could get some dirty ice cream from a sidewalk vendor. And one evening, just as we had passed under the Arch of Centuries (the only structure in the campus that had made the trip from the old campus in Intramuros to España), we heard the chapel bells pealing musically, and everything came to a standstill as people stopped to pray the Angelus. And when we looked up, there was the blue cross lit up against the evening sky.

The Philosophy curriculum allowed us to take quite a number of electives, so I decided to take 3 Journalism courses—News Writing 1, Advertising 1, and Public Relations 1. The rest of my electives were literature courses. Our college offered only one course in Philippine Literature in English. And it was in that class that I discovered the works of many of the writers, who would become my idols, my teachers, my editors, my publishers. Some of them would actually become my friends and colleagues in academe and media. Nick Joaquin, NVM Gonzalez, Bienvenido Santos, Francisco Arcellana, Jose Garcia Villa, Wilfredo Ma. Guerrero, Edilberto and Edith Tiempo, Kerima Polotan, Ophelia Dimalanta, Rolando Tinio... all of them gone now. But there are those who are still very much around, and still providing inspiration, if not actual guidance... Frankie Sionil Jose,

Bienvenido Lumbera, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, Gilda Cordero Fernando, Virginia Moreno...

I had literature professors who were both gifted and dedicated. My particular favorite was Erlinda Francia-Rustia, who handled two semesters of what was then called “World Literature” (today it’s usually called “Great Masterpieces”), Oriental Literature (a quick survey of the works of some Indian, Chinese and Japanese writers), and Introduction to Aesthetics. She had fair skin, an angular body, an unusually sensuous laugh, a sharp sense of humor and a flair for the dramatic. She wore jewelry to match the color of her dresses—ruby red, sapphire blue, emerald green, amethyst—and made literature sound like a romantic adventure.

One time, after an impassioned lecture on Petrarch’s sonnets for Laura and Dante’s for Beatrice, Prof. Rustia paused and sighed. “Ah, compared to those men of the Renaissance, you young men today, professing love for your girlfriends with phone calls, and letters sometimes riddled by grammatical errors, are so tedious and insipid!”

And another time, talking about modern ballet, she described the legendary Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev, who were lovers in real life, dancing in *Romeo and Juliet*. She rose to her feet, and gesturing with one arm, as though the luminous couple in their finery stood before us in their costumes, she said, “And as they returned to the stage for the curtain calls, they were met by thunderous applause which went on and on. Then Nureyev fell on his knees before her and raised his face to her with an adoring look. And she plucked one long-stemmed ruby-red rose from the bouquet in her arm, and presented it to him with a smile.” And we, her students, burst into applause for *her* own performance.

There was also Josephine Bass-Serrano, a large, motherly lady, who taught the Romantics and the Victorians, as well as Literary Criticism, and succeeding in making both courses equally enthralling. And Ophelia Alcantara-Dimalanta, who, even then, was already goddess to our campus poets, taught Contemporary British and American Lit.

I remember summer afternoons, seated tailor-fashion on Rita’s her four-poster bed, in her little attic room in her grandmother’s lovely old white mansion, on what was then called Sampaloc Avenue (now Tomas Morato, a much less romantic name, and reading our favorite passages to each other... Yeats’ “*But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,/And loved the*

sorrows of your changing face..." and Thomas' "Oh, as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,/ Time held me green and dying/ though I sang in my chains like the sea..." and Lowell's *I shall go/Up and down,/ In my gown./ Gorgeously arrayed,/ Boned and stayed./And the softness of my body will be guarded from embrace/ By each button, hook, and lace...*

Those classes made Rita bend over the old, drop-leaf desk in her little attic room to write a new poem by lamplight. They made Linda de Bosch look more kindly on Leo and Pet, who had been courting her hopelessly for years. And they made me despair, for I was never going to be able to write poetry.

Among our professors was also Piedad Guinto-Rosales, who taught Modern Drama, a small, pert, bundle of energy, who ceaselessly urged us to attend the performances of the Aquinas Dramatic Guild, or, better still, to try out whenever there was an announcement of auditions. "You don't really understand drama unless you've had an actual experience of *theater!*" she would say.

Later, in Graduate School, there would be the erudite Carolina Garcia, who never lectured from written notes, but just off the top of her head, fanning herself with a Spanish *abanico*, pausing in her lecturing and her fanning only to toss a question which we struggled to answer in a manner which would gain a nod of approval, and instead of a gentle "Well... not exactly." And there was Clemencia Colayco, a small, frail, wisp of a lady with grey hair and a soft, almost whispery voice, who taught "Modern Catholic Writers," and stunned us with the passion with which she discussed the poetry of Gerald Manley Hopkins, Francis Thompson and Alice Meynell.

*I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears...*

It was that little band of women who influenced me as an aspiring writer, more than the writers they taught, who seemed so many worlds above me. So even if I never gave up the dream of being a writer, I think it was they who unconsciously influenced my decision, years later, into thinking that I might also be a teacher.

Anyway, there is no doubt in my mind about the role played by my college—and the University itself—in the kind of writer I was to become, and yes, that goes for my failings as well as my strengths.

I had begun my writing career as a journalist, and intermittently returned to it throughout my life. While still an undergraduate, I wrote feature articles for the *Manila Chronicle* and a weekly column for the youth section of the same paper, and I became Youth Section Editor for *Graphic* magazine, and later Assistant Women's Editor. When already married, I wrote a regular film review column for *Variety* magazine, Sunday Supplement of the *Manila Times*. Tony and I also published a short-lived small political/literary paper called *Revision*, with many of our writer-friends as contributors. In Bangkok, I worked as Assistant Editor for *Living Magazine*, a glossy lifestyle magazine. In Seoul, I wrote a weekly column for the *Korea Times* called "Passages," which dealt with women's issues, Asian women in particular. During all those years that we lived overseas, I was a regular contributor to *Female* magazine in Singapore, *Celebrity* magazine and *Gloss* magazine in Manila, and in New York, I had a regular column in *The Inquirer Magazine*, called "Traveller's Tales."

This training and experience as a journalist has been invaluable. To this day, I am able to produce, regardless of private biases and personal tragedies, an article or story with the required word count and submit it on time. Nick Joaquin once said it was indispensable for all creative writers to have some experience as journalists. He knew whereof he spoke.

When Tony and I decided to get married, we discussed the matter of jobs for me, and came to an agreement that academe was preferable to journalism for a married woman. I could always continue to do free lance writing. And since then, this is what I've been. For a time—in Seoul and New York City—I worked as an editor. But, for most of my life, I have been a full-time academic and a part time writer.

Is there a writer I can point to as a major influence on my essays, articles and columns? I wish I could say Oriana Fallaci, who antedated CNN's Amanpour by many decades, and whom I greatly admired. But this would not be true. I was never assigned to the "hard news." And being a war correspondent was never an ambition of mine, despite our having lived in Beirut, which remained a "battle zone," for all that its protracted civil war was officially ended; and my having been evacuated from Rangoon, with

Carmen, our youngest daughter, when the Burmese version of “People Power” resulted in the slaughter of unarmed students by the military. (The two older girls were studying in Manila by then.)

There is a *New York Times* columnist whose writing I always enjoyed reading, and whose work I have studied and taught—Mary Cantwell. But since I only began reading her column “Close to Home” when we were living in New York City in 1989 and 1990, she can’t have influenced my earlier writing. I think it was really Kerima Polotan’s essays in the *Philippines Free Press* and the *Asia Philippines Leader*, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil’s column *In My Humble Opinion* in the *Manila Chronicle*, and Gilda Cordero Fernando’s column “Tempest in a Teapot” in the *Sunday Chronicle Magazine* that must be given credit. Along with these women were Nick Joaquin and Gregorio Brillantes. These writers set the bar.

It is in my nonfiction where I think I tend to be most consistent in tone and style. My persona is my alter ego, with my biases and my enthusiasms; and I make no attempt to disguise her or pretend that she is other than what I am. The largest part of my work has been in nonfiction. I have written ten books of nonfiction and contributed to countless others. But I have written of this in another essay, which is included in this book, so I shall not go into that here.

The point I was leading up to is simply that all that time that I was writing essays and articles, I still desperately wanted to be was a writer of fiction, like my friend, Norma Miraflor, who, at 18, had already been published by the *Philippines Free Press*.

When I began to write this piece, I had to hunt down an earlier work which I know I presented as a lecture at the Philippine-British Literature Conference in the late 90s. I had prepared for that paper by going through my early journals. The journals were lost in the fire the gutted UP’s Faculty Center in 2016. But I found the essay, “The Story of My Stories” in my book, *Coming Home* (Anvil, 1007).

It reminded me that when, in 1969, I finally summoned the nerve to submit a story to Ninotchka Rosca, then the literary editor of the *Graphic* magazine, and it was accepted, I felt the same elation that I experienced when I read Alfredo Salanga’s review of my first essay collection, *Sojourns* (New Day, 1984). The story was titled “Ghost Day,” and it was about a young woman working as an instructor in a university during that turbulent

time of student rallies and demonstrations and graffiti on walls, and theatre of the streets. One of her students is an activist, who always leaves her classroom to join the marching students, coming from UP Diliman, on their way to Plaza Miranda, via España and what was beginning to be referred to as “University Belt.” This sets off a memory of another young man who had loved her, and whom she had loved, but had rejected, because he was a rebel, and in her eyes, dangerous.

I had forgotten that “Ghost Day” was among my stories that didn’t make the final cut when I chose six for my first collection. And it was only when I read “The Story of My Stories” that I recalled that “Ghost Day” was an early version of the story that I considered the best in the collection: “Ballad of a Lost Season.”

Writing fiction did not come easily to me. I labored over my stories as my students bent over their exams, or while I waited for Tony to come home to fetch me for the movie we had decided to catch after work. I wrote whenever there was a lull in the office, typing on newsprint, using the office manual typewriter; or scribbling in longhand on a notebook while waiting for my daughters to come out of their classrooms; in between washing machine cycles; and between ten P.M. (which was when the rest of the family retired), and twelve P.M., which was when I gave baby Carmen her last feeding). And when I put together my first collection of short stories, it included only six stories—six stories produced over a period of ten years. Obviously I did not consider the other stories I had written good enough. This was *Ballad of a Lost Season and Other Stories* (New Day, 1987).

Again, it was only when I reread my old essay that I recalled that all these stories “were influenced by the dominant aesthetics of that time in the Philippines: literature as politically engaged or socially relevant,” even if three of the stories were actually written overseas, and none was written in the social realist manner. The period of student activism and political turmoil which culminated in the First Quarter Storm, and eventually led to the declaration of martial law by Ferdinand Marcos in 1972, had a strong effect on literary writing. Mao Tse Tung’s *Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art* (1942) was preached by the militant Left as the ultimate word on poetics. And many writers and academics were drawn to it in reaction to the abuses of the Marcos dictatorship, as they were to Jean Paul Sartre’s introduction to *Les Tempes Modernes* (1945) and its emphasis on *littérature engagée*.

But, though this bias affected my choice of subject and theme, it did not alter my writing style. In those days, I was enamored with Henry James, Herman Hesse, Albert Camus, Rainer Maria Rilke, Lawrence Durrell. And the stories I wished to fashion my own work after, were the works of Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield, Elizabeth Bowen, and Edith Wharton, who were once derisively referred to by a male critic as “daughters of Henry James.” I know that my fiction bears shades of their work, as well as of Henry James’. However, when I reread those stories, I hear echoes of Kerima Polotan and Gilda Cordero Fernando yet again.

I was much older when I began writing the tales that went into *Tales for a Rainy Night* (DLSU, 1993). Perhaps the many years of living among people of different cultures and different faiths had made me more aware of the mystery of things. I turned to the modern tale in an attempt to capture the strangeness, the elusiveness, the magic. This book is my favorite child. Writing it was a different experience in ways I cannot adequately explain. Sometimes I suspect that it was a magic wrought by the place in which I did much of my writing. For some years we had a house in San Miguel, Bulacan, an old enchanting house sheltered by coconut trees, its windows open to sunlight and birdsong and the wind blowing in across the rice fields. I seem to have tapped into a secret lode, from which I was drawing an intense kind of energy.

By then, I had discovered A.S. Byatt, Doris Lessing, and other modern spinners of tales. I had also begun to read the writers of the great Latin American “Boom,” and was blown away by them, and the strategies they devised to capture life as lived in their part of the world with their “marvelous realism.” Our world was much closer to theirs than to America or Great Britain. But I didn’t want to sound like them. I felt my temperament was too different. I was drawn again to the tales of Gilda Cordero Fernando, many of whose stories, I now realized, were not realist stories, but tales. And I was drawn to Nick Joaquin, my true master, who was, I think, the first major Filipino writer in English to write non-realist fiction.

I think perhaps that into that magic brew was also mixed the effect of the two weeks I spent as part of the teaching panel of the the UP National Writers’ Workshop for the first time. This was the summer of 1992. It was the last of the writing workshops to be held in Diliman, before it moved

to Baguio. The workshop fellows were an extraordinary group, which included Sarge Lacuesta, Vicente Groyon, Auraeus Solito, Dean Alfar, Neil Garcia, Paolo Manalo, Chris Martinez, Michael Coroza, Ruel de Vera, Rebecca Añonuevo, who were all to make waves in the literary scene soon after that workshop. There was an energy that filled the room when they were deep in discussion of the manuscripts, and enveloped them when they were sitting under the stars after the sessions, singing and clowning around, with bottles of San Miguel beer smuggled into the campus, under the stars. They had brought guitars. Sarge sang lead for a rock band. Mike had a wide repertory of *kundiman* and would begin each song with a brief history of its composer, the movie for which it was composed, the singers who first sung it. Auraeus, Dean, and Chris were theatre students, and greeted each day as though it were a scene in a play that they were acting in or directing. These young people would talk to me about their lives, the things that tormented them, the things that drove them.

Actually this was the life I had imagined for myself when, as a high school student, I wondered what college would be like.

Because I had no idea whether my tales were any good, I showed the first one, with much trepidation, to Gilda Cordero Fernando, who by then had become my friend. This was “The Most Beautiful Woman in the Island.” She received it warmly, and gave me a few suggestions about the conventions of the tale, which I immediately followed when I rewrote this tale and wrote the succeeding ones.

When I had completed six stories, I mentioned them to my old pal, Isagani Cruz, who was head of the De La Salle University Press. Without seeing them, he said he would publish them. We thought the book would be better with some illustrations, so I asked Manny Baldemor, a contemporary of mine at UST, and he agreed to do it for me, *gratis*. I returned to Gilda with the request that she do me the honor of writing an introduction. She read the entire manuscript in a day, and then phoned to tell me she thought they were beautiful. “*Ang ganda ganda!*” she said. “But I can’t do an introduction. *Matagal na akong hindi nagsusulat ng fiction*. I’m afraid I won’t do the stories justice.” No amount of pleading from me made her change her mind. Because I had not published any of these tales before, I was quite insecure about their worth. It seemed to me that they needed the benefit of a senior writer’s approval. At Gilda’s suggestion, I went to Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, then the director of the UP Creative Writing

Center, and she obliged.

My third collection, *Where Only the Moon Rages* (Anvil, 1994), though also a collection of modern tales, is different in tone and texture from *Tales for a Rainy Night*. At the heart of each tale is an idea, rather than an image or a character. I re-read Isak Dinesen's work, and became aware that she had left traces in my own stories. I felt more confident now. It seemed I had found a new voice. And Ophie Dimalanta, who had become a close friend, wrote a wonderful introduction for it.

With my fourth collection, *Catch a Falling Star* (Anvil, 1999) I returned to realism, but I tried to pare down the language, to bare it to the bone. Again, I was thinking of Isak Dinesen's tales, their distillation of experience into its essence, their limpid simplicity, their luminosity. But I also wanted my stories to be funny. And I don't know who or what was my model for this. Maybe Mary McCarthy's memoir, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*? Some of the plots are drawn from the diary that I had continued to keep since age 9. It was the first time that I had tried to write a story sequence, i.e., stories centered around a single character. And the voice I used was very similar to the one I used in my nonfiction.

My novels are a different matter. I have written only two. Someone once asked me if they were similar to each other. The only similarity between them is, perhaps, their fragmented structure.

Recuerdo (1996) is a family saga written in epistolary form. The version that was finally published took a whole year to write. But the idea or ideas for a novel had been with me for much longer than that. And when, for some reason, in 1994, I decided that it was time to write that novel, I found in my old folders many fragments which I realized would all fit into the project I had in mind. I knew *who* I wanted my novel to be about, but I wasn't sure *what* I wanted to say about her. In my journal, an entry dated July 13, 1994 reads: "What is the story I really want to tell? They (the fragments) seem so banal, so *burgis*. Yet another story about yet another alienated middle-class woman..."

A few days later, I wrote: "Something pushes me toward history. Maybe it's a historical novel I wish to write? Not really. More like a 'tales my mother told me' kind of thing. But as a novel. A kind of novel. Maybe I can't write a realist novel. Maybe I can't write a novel. Maybe I can write something like Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*..."

The main character, Amanda, tells her daughter Risa the stories that her own mother has told her about 5 generations of their family, through letters that she sends via email. These emails contain the tales Amanda's mother, Isabel, recounted to her about the family's ancestors, drawn from her own memoirs that she began to write when she turned 80. There are many gaps in the narrative, due as much to the remoteness in time, as to the family's natural reticence about matters both dangerous and unpleasant. So Amanda tries to fill in the gaps by doing research in the history shelves of the UP Library, and with her own imaginings. The family drama unfolds against the backdrop of the nation's tumultuous history.

In that essay I mentioned earlier, "The Story of My Stories," I describe the process—how characters would emerge, and drop away, how the structure would change and change again, how the focus would shift. "Just before Christmas, I wrote the last word or the last chapter of Draft #6, printed it out two copies and gave one to Neil Garcia to read. But while he was reading, Draft #6 turned into Draft #7. And this time, it involved doing the whole thing over."

The thing is, even as my Amanda went "sleuthing in the archives" for clues that would help her fill the gaps in her mother's tales, I was doing the same thing in real life. And even as she uncovered what she was looking for, I was stumbling on the missing links in the stories Mama had told me.

In February 1995, there's this entry: "The writing of this novel is very strange. I am living what I write, writing what I live. My discoveries are my heroine's. I am digging into the old books to give my heroine a past. But in the process, I am finding mine..."

I would be hard pressed to name novels that might have influenced the writing of this novel. I don't recall ever reading any epistolary novel which particularly struck me. I do know that I very consciously wanted to make this a "woman's story," and of course there is a long tradition of epistolary writing by women, including the letters exchanged by those doomed lovers who lived in 12th century France, Heloise and Abelard. But these letters, which began as impassioned love letters, and later morphed into brilliant philosophical and theological explorations, was hardly a model for my novel. There is also much travel literature by women in epistolary form, with Lady Mary Montagu as perhaps the most famous. She was wife to a British diplomat, who lived in the 17th-18th centuries, and her letters covered the

time when her husband was assigned to Turkey in 1715.

And there are the six volumes of Virginia Woolf's letters, edited by Nigel Nicholson and Joanne Trautmann, and *Letters from Africa, 1914-1931* by Isak Dinesen. I had read all of these works by the time I wrote *Recuerdo*. In fact, they were among the most treasured in my small collection. But none of these are works of fiction. I suppose that Woolf's diaries and letters and Dinesen's letters—along with Kingston's memoirs—must have had some effect on my novel, since their authors were writers I particularly admired. To these, I would add Elizabeth Bowen's memoirs, Katherine Mansfield's journals, the diaries of Anais Nin (which turned out to be largely fictional). And—I almost forgot this one, which I first came across when I was still an undergraduate, and which I wished I had written, *The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*, and those other court ladies of 11th Century Japan.

The novel, then, has a frame structure: the frame is Amanda writing to her daughter and trying to come to a decision about what to do with her life when she returns to Manila from her present job in Bangkok. Within the frame are the tales that Amanda's mother, Isabel, told her. These follow a roughly chronological order, but there are many time jumps, backward and forward, and always a reverting to the narrative present in which Amanda and Risa exist. The idea of using the epistolary structure came to me after many false starts, using the conventional narrative style with flashbacks, and alternating chapters with a shifting point of view. My own heroine, Amanda, describes this in her letter to her historian friend, Rafael, which is the final chapter in the book, and reveals that what this text has been all along is a novel.

“... The strategy seemed to work for me. It enabled me to put together all the stray bits and pieces, the elusive fragments which are all really part of the larger story, which in my mind now seems like a kind of tapestry, with different scenes woven in, using many strands of many shades, which somehow fit into the intricate pattern...”

When I decided on the epistolary structure, I also decided that I needed to use email. I meant for the whole story within one year. So, to tell all the tales she needed to tell, Amanda would have to be writing more than just one letter a month. And while the letters from Amanda's daughter, Risa, are not part of the novel, it is assumed that she does write them. Given the pace of snail mail, only email would do. But the Net was not yet

as familiar—to me, at any rate—at the time of the novel’s writing. So I did not employ such features as hyperlinks, hypertext, hyper media, cutting and pasting pdf piles on to word files, etc. I didn’t even use emoticons and emojis or stickers. But maybe this is just as well. The resulting story might have been different, from the story I wanted to tell, had I written it differently.

My second novel *A Book of Dreams* (2006) was difficult to write, and I know it is not an easy novel to read. Tony told me this when I gave it to him to read. I know it is not an easy novel to teach either. Isabelita Reyes, who had been my student, became my colleague, and is now one of my closest friends, told me she and Paolo Manalo actually discussed how they might teach it, but they kind of gave up. (She recently told me that she has taught it, after all, and that I would be pleased by her students’ reactions.)

I guess one might say it is the most experimental of my works. It follows its six characters’ search for faith through dreams interwoven with straight narration, and pages from the notebook of one of the characters, which consist of tales, sketches, fragments of poetry, etc. Each of the six characters has his or her own narratives, each is struggling to find answers and solution, each has dreams which perhaps bring them closer to those answers. They intersect in real life, and sometimes in their dreams. The character with the notebook is Angela. And she is a writing a novel, so the entries in her notebooks are notes toward that novel, which, may or may never get written. Dreams and actual narratives are two strands of the novel, and weaving in and out of these braided strands are the notes from Angela’s notebook.

I was quite conscious that I was trying to walk in the footsteps of Jorge Luis Borges, Italo Calvino, Eduardo Galeano (but it is doubtful that any reader will perceive this). One critic called the book “postmodern.” Another critic (Ophie Dimalanta, if I’m not mistaken), said it wasn’t so much a postmodern novel as it was an anti-novel. I think I wasn’t aiming for postmodernist pastiche, but for modernist collage.

I was hoping to create something both evanescent and haunting, something lyrical, something romantic, which at some level might also be called realist, something that captures the quality of magic and dreams, but is grounded in contemporary Philippine reality. To this day, I have no idea whether I succeeded. Perhaps it was too ambitious a plan. Perhaps it can’t be done—one either aims for one effect or the other.

Perhaps all this is about is just that I was at a different stage in my life when I wrote each book, and so I wrote differently. It has occurred to me that my career trajectory might be different if I were a writer with a huge following, and had to keep in mind my readers' expectations each time I started on a new project. As, indeed, novelists whose work used to be serialized in magazines or newspapers, had to pay attention to letters to the editor; and as today, writers of scripts for TV serials have to keep their eye on ratings.

This raises an issue which I think may be affecting the way I write. One cannot be in the profession of writing for as many years as I have, and not confront the reality of the pitifully small readership for titles of the sort that win literary awards.

Filipino writers have been wracking their brains and breaking their hearts over this one since the Commonwealth—including Francisco Arcellana and NVM Gonzalez, National Artist for Literature both—particularly if they spend some time in the publishing industry.

Between 2002 and 2005, I was director of the UP Press, and between June 2010 and June 2012, director of the UST Publishing House. Academic publishing houses don't have to worry about profits to the extent that commercial publishers do. Nonetheless, they must generate enough sales to be able to keep their outfits feasible. Thus I became more conscious about this dilemma. But something else made me confront it more directly. This was Tony's setting up of his little publishing company in the late 90s—Milflores Publishing—and later his decision to return to fiction-writing. Tony had always believed that literature had the responsibility to educate, to influence thinking on large issues, in order to bring about social or political change. When he first began studying the market for literary works, he was appalled. He quickly realized that the reason for the dismal state of affairs was the inaccessibility of much "literary" writing for most potential readers. So when he put up Milflores, he was determined to publish work that would be accessible to larger groups of people, instead of limiting himself to trying to reach only other literary writers, literary critics, and students of literature. To this principle he remained true, including in his own writing, even going so far as to translate his books into Filipino, which he firmly believed had a better chances of reaching a large audience than English. When he passed away in 2011, Tony had succeeded in his

objective to the extent that his business was providing him with at least half of his income. How he did it is another story.

Today, I think Facebook has made possible another type of experiment. One can write something—poem or essay or story—post it in one’s blog, as a Facebook Note or even as a status report, and get immediate feedback on how many people like it or hate it. Is this another one of those “forces” I referred to, at the beginning of this essay, as deserving attention as a “literary influence” on one’s writing? I would say that this should be quite obvious.

When I first started posting short essays as Facebook Notes, my purpose was, not so much to get feedback, as to slip back into the habit of writing regularly again, which happened whenever I was writing a regular column for a newspaper or magazine. I was astonished at the number of “reactions” and “comments” these Notes would receive. (Although it was obvious that such posts did not get as many reactions as did good pictures, or striking one-liner status reports). The responses ranged, from a single word (“Wow!”), or even a non-word (“OMG”), to mini-essays of their own (maybe we might call them “flash nonfiction?”). I was even more surprised—and pleased—when I discovered that these “comments” sometimes actually helped me in the work of revision, because they provided useful suggestions, links, and other types of information, that led to exchanges, not just between the person and myself, but among the people posting comments.

I like to think of my writing as a kind of conversation with readers. But before social media, this conversation was largely imaginary. I imagined I was addressing an ideal reader—basically like myself, maybe slightly younger, or slightly older—who would read attentively, and react intelligently. In Facebook the “conversation” has become literally true, for all that it is virtual.

Has the effect of this dynamic relationship been good or bad for my writing? It goes without saying that I can’t be the judge of that. All I’m certain of is that Facebook (I don’t use Instagram or Twitter) has had—is having—an effect on my writing. And I’m immensely curious about where this will lead. It feels almost as though I were standing on the brink... about to explore a new world.

11 March 2017

Antarctica

Ned Parfan

I was four years old when the encyclopedia peddlers came to our house. They carried boxes of books into our living room, led by a lady with short hair and glasses. I remember these details about her because one, only old people were supposed to wear glasses or so I thought, and two, not many women around me wore their hair short.

As for the day she came, I remember it because they had a book that came with a special pencil, the most magical thing I had ever seen. The book had a big drawing on top of every page, and underneath every drawing were two words in big letters. When I pressed the tip of the pencil on the correct word, like “Duck” under the picture of the fluffy yellow thing, its eraser part would glow red. My mother tried to pry the book away from my fingers and so I ran off into the next room to play with the magical pencil a little longer.

I thought the book with the magic pencil was mine. My mother laughed when I refused to give it back to the guests, as she did not intend to buy it. The grown-ups talked for a long time—it was afternoon when they started talking, it was night when they took the book from me. What was left was everything else—the Childcraft Encyclopedia for us kids, and the World Book Encyclopedia for when we would grow up.

The problem was, at four, I didn’t know how to read. But the books were colorful. I would take them one at a time to the store—the part of the

bakery facing the street—and ask my father to read the stories to me. I was under the impression that they were all story books. Every single one of them. I specifically recall a picture with tiny people trying to sew a giant's trousers, and my father made up a story wherein the little fellows were attempting to fight off the giant, using their needles as weapons.

The story would end with me running back into the bakery, then past the garage, and back into the house through the kitchen door, my imagination pudgy and burping, the Childcraft pressed to my chest. By the time I entered kindergarten, I had figured my father was just fooling around with me, and there really were no stories to tell from, say, *Mathemagic* or *The Green Kingdom*, and I started moving on to the bigger books on the shelves.

Among them were the atlases. The one from the Childcraft collection had a terracotta-colored cover, a picture atlas for kids with all kinds of trivia and flags arranged by region. The other, heftier one from the World Book series was a dark garnet giant full of satellite images and had a lot more kinds of maps—from the topographical to the political, with many others coloring the world according to crops, or religion, or some other kind of demographic sorting. For some strange reason, I became bewitched by them, following the blue line of the Yangtze down to the sea, tracing the rugged white lines of northern Canada, pinching the forested isthmus of Panama between my fingers. What was the use of words when your mind could go island-hopping on the Marianas? What were stories in pictures compared to the thrill of looking down at Madagascar, pretending to be an angel floating in from space? But soon enough, there were stories in my maps, too.

Lying face down on the floor, my elbows sore against the cold tiles, I would spend hours just staring at them. The continents were masterpieces that demanded attention: North America shaped like a genie stretching its massive torso, tethered to the lamp that is South America (which, by the way, also looks like a crunchy fried chicken leg), Europe a scraggly and feisty little cloud with an Iberian head, a Scandinavian squirrel tail, and one dangling Italian boot, Africa a beast with its massive head of sand and a dangerous horn, Asia the overstretched, mountainous dough on the baking table, and Australia the big fish in the ocean trying to eat Tasmania.

The one continent whose real shape I could not make out was Antarctica. It was presented as a snake-like white shadow lurking underneath every single map of the world, but in some maps it was a round white swirl in the ocean—a shapeshifter—this land of ghost ships and blizzards and endless nights, made even weirder by the fact that the only people photographed in this place were scientists (understand that, at this point, the only “scientists” I knew were the evil ones on television, and that, as far I was concerned, their one job was to find and electrocute me).

When I encountered a globe for the first time in the elementary school library, I finally understood what Antarctica was supposed to be—a brain with a tail, a jellyfish in the sapphire sea, punctured by a southern screw that held the globe in place. Obsessed with this new perspective, I started drawing Antarctica. But as hard as it was to keep track of where the lines should go, it was harder to squat down just so I could look up from under the globe. It was like trying to peek inside the school principal’s veil from the back. No matter how much I turned the world, the jellyfish couldn’t wiggle itself from its impalement.

I gave up and drew my own version instead, on the cover of my pencil case. It was in the classroom of Grade One—St. Peregrine. My seatmate, who was most probably Michael at that time, thought it was a wilted flower. But to me it was an enchanted island. It was my first experience of drawing a map, and I’ve been doing it ever since, providing a home for the stories in my head.

One particular map, for example, is that of a kingdom which expanded from the delta in the middle, annexing lands left and right until they had conquered pretty much the entire bond paper. At one point a sibling rivalry between two princesses tore the kingdom apart into east and west, divided by the main river, with the metropolitan delta in the middle as a perennial point of contention. Decades later a tsunami forced the two sides to reunite. I made up all of these while watching an episode of the apocalyptic show *The Walking Dead* last year. Sometimes I populate my world with “normal” people, with faces stolen from celebrities or classmates. Sometimes these characters find their way into my poems.

For several summers in elementary and high school, I drew maps that expanded way beyond the 8.5 x 11 space of the paper—a feat I accomplished by taping papers together until the canvas became bigger

than the windows in the bedroom. I would use crayons to identify the extent of every district/region/province, and I would copy the atlases' use of legends like little white squares or big black dots to identify major towns from cities. Most of them had their own version of Antarctica—a desolate place mostly untouched by civilization, hiding within its borders the possibilities of discovery and further expeditions. And always beyond the canvas, of course, were uncharted territories.

Those vacations would end with my maps neatly folded and hidden within one of the cabinets under the bookshelves. I would forget about them and unfold them again when Christmas break came or during the next long summer vacation, adding islands, shading allied kingdoms in the same pattern, drawing additional islands in archipelagic chains, dotting new towns or cities, marking new boundaries for newly declared, breakaway provinces.

Coming home one weekend from college, I discovered that my mother had thrown away all the “scratch papers” under the bookshelf to make room for more stuff, and I never saw those old maps again. Sometimes I would find myself retracing the old shapes, the familiar curve at the end of a peninsula, the smooth coast of a teardrop island. And whenever another map completes itself as I absentmindedly doodle in between writing, or while watching *iflix* shows on my laptop, the old stories of the kingdoms retake shape in my head, and I am a child again, lost in a continent where no one can follow.

*Words. For Franz.*¹

J. Neil C. Garcia

Gender, like the identity it names, is a cultural accomplishment, a performance enacted repetitively and in that sense unthinkingly from moment to moment, that materializes the self it supposedly merely describes. If it must be either only this or that—man or woman, masculine or feminine, hetero or homo—it must forever be sad, for it arrives, it is achieved only at the cost of forsaking all the other possibilities it could have become, all the other possibilities it could have identified as, as well as loved.

All gender is melancholic, therefore, because it is haunted by a constitutive loss: what it might have otherwise been. For most of us, this is a loss that we cannot actually mourn (in private and in public, both), lest our gender's ritualized "nature"—which is to say, our very identity—come spectacularly undone.

As many of us may have intuited, among the more remarkable and courageous exceptions to this socially enforced rule are the drag queens—and drag kings—whose hyperbolic theatricalization of the genders they both are and aspire to be serves to unmask all gender for the regulative and performative fiction that it is.

Torch-singing drag queens are particularly poignant, because the unrequited love they croon about and lament isn't finally the object of their erotic desires, but rather the object of their desirous identifications: the woman that their culturally constructed anatomy as men tragically, officially, and in and through their obvious—and therefore doomed—impersonations at once all too visibly references and forswears.

Thus was I able to write this poem for Franz, who walked up to me unexpectedly at the end of my longish and highly theoretical disquisition on the gender performativity of drag shows (at our department's faculty lecture series, that took place a couple of months before he passed away), and told me, quizzically, that it's a greater thing to love than be loved.

I never got the chance to show this poem to him, as we never got the chance to take that ancestry-seeking trip to Vigan together—something we wishfully said we would do, when we saw each other for the last time at the ICW office in what would later be the ill-fated Faculty Center. I first read this poem at his wake in Delaney Hall. Today, as we celebrate the centennial of his birth, I am grateful for the opportunity to read it for him again.

For Franz²

Everyone is born naked and after that, everything is drag.

- Ru Paul

You sit to listen to me talk
about men transfigured into women:
we are what we wear, they seem to say,
pointing their cherrylipsticked mouth,
kicking their stilettoed heels,
and twirling in their lace and sequined gowns
before the tired and witless gaze.
Refusing to accept their bodies' verdict,
they awe us who are sadly trapped in ours.
They tuck inside what should be hidden,
thrust into view what must be seen:
these are girls, buxom and brave,
and how they take our breath away!
Later you pull me aside, announcing,
To be able to love is the noble virtue,
to be loved is a lesser thing.

You leave me wordless, precious friend:
how keenly you have struck, just now,
my pain's raw nerve. Sheer luck.
I know these days your lucent thoughts
bubble up as language without warning.
This time, it happens it's me right here,
gratefully receiving them. Dear old man:
I know this noble fate you speak—
I've loved, and not been loved,
and wouldn't wish the same on friends.
But let me say, I understand your point.
There is, in this, sweet vindication:
queens ablaze with rhinestone tiaras,
in darling makeup and gorgeous pumps,
walk the platform like rutting cats—
and know it well: to desire is to change,
nothing more. Denied the Other's body,
don't we all, in grief, turn to our own?
We must keep on loving and desiring, then,
if only for that strange, resplendent gift:
the Self destroyed by longing,
the Self transformed.

Franz was of course an entirely effective aphorist. His poems, stories, and essays abound in so many of these arresting and wise passages that possess the incantatory power of proverbs. Easily I will direct anybody wishing to find a gracefully phrased, moving, and pithy epigraph to a story, poem, or book to any of Franz's works, among whose foremost virtues is a refined and finicky care for language as well as the thinking—and the thought—from which it is finally indistinguishable.

I wrote a poem occasioned by one such memorable quote from Franz: "Words are not necessary to love." This is a truism that writers and artists can readily recognize and accede to, remembering all the people they know (and love) who are not like them, and yet precisely for this reason exceed and surpass them—morally or otherwise.

And yet, challenged by this uncomfortable truth, I find that in this poem I must throw in my lot with the sonnet-writing, boy-besotted, and immortality-bestowing Shakespeare (“So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,/ So long lives this and this gives life to thee”), and register a specific demurrer against its message, too. Addressing a fellow writer, bestest friend, and foodie, whose successive “Beloveds” she has decided to write (and write about) almost always to the point of personal annihilation, I maintain in this poem that writers, poets, can and do love earnestly if not especially, with their words.

While considered less valuable in our grievously instrumental world, the love of artists—we simply must believe, invoking perhaps the evidence of our own ardent lives—continues to be a true, and rare, and precious thing.

With Words³

For Ricci

The mistake,
so we are told,
is to think our words
can make them love us.

Words are not
necessary to love,
as they are not
necessary

to any of life's
everyday motions:
to crave, to fear, to die.
And yet, we are certain

to our every feeling,
words do offer
something gracious
and sunny, after all:

folded into the eggs
along with the shallots
and diced paprika,
a hummed name

that means to say grace,
even as our tears,
shed for its owner's
indifferent sake,

drop more than adequate
seasoning to taste.
Words then become
the dark-eyed familiars

raving upon the forked tips
of our tongues,
become the bronze sunset,
the slick-skinned puddle,

the cup of weak tea
held like a heart
inside the other's
beautifully brutal hands—

anything, anything that winks
at our spurned affection
from within our naked
need's half-lit rooms,

turns the notched length
of its body
full into our aching arms,
and keeps us company

despite our being empty
and cavernously alone.
There, past our words'
outstretched shadows,

in the scheme
of ordinary things,
again and again
we are fled away from—

a sad beast floundering
inside poetry's
water-tight maze.
Dearest fellow-

lover, one thing is clear:
this world does not care
to hold us close at all.
It feels language

as a weight that wrecks
and pins down.
And yet, we understand:
poured and painstakingly

spoken
into the poem's
shapely glass,
words are nothing

if not at once the loving
and the being loved.

(Endnotes)

1 Read at “To Open all Closed Things: A Centennial Celebration of the Life and Works of National Artist for Literature, Francisco Arcellana,” Pavilion 1, Palma Hall, University of the Philippines Diliman, September 9, 2016.

2 J. Neil C. Garcia, *The Sorrows of Water* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2000), 30-31.

3 J. Neil C. Garcia, *Misterios and Other Poems* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2005), 196-98.

Remembering Franz Arcellana

Susan S. Lara

Many years ago, in one literary event attended by some foreign delegates at the University of the Philippines Executive House, the luminaries were asked to introduce themselves to the rest of the guests. Each of them gave their name and the country and institution they represented. The last to speak, a tall, stern-looking man with a booming voice, simply said, “If you do not know who I am, you have no business being here!” That brought the house down, because of course, everyone knew who he was. And everyone was relieved to know that they had a right to be there.

That man was Francisco Arcellana, and I don’t know anyone else who could have pulled that off with such flair.

Franz was my first teacher in fiction writing. It was an elective, because my area of concentration was comparative literature, not creative writing — it was called “imaginative writing” then.

He seldom gave prescriptive advice. Most of the time he told stories, stories that held nuggets of wisdom. One of the first things he told us was to read, and read, and read some more. He shared the story of a writer he knew who refused to read other authors because he didn’t want his writing to be influenced by them. He wanted to be original. But far from being original, he kept churning out stories that had already been told, in better ways, by other authors. And so his stories kept getting rejected, until he had enough rejection slips to wallpaper his room.

He believed that “nothing written may not be rewritten.” He couldn’t stress enough the importance of rewriting or revising, and often told the story of Dylan Thomas, who, in his last moments, could not let go of a poem, and kept saying “there is something bloody wrong with this line!”

By the time I attended the U.P. National Writers Workshop, I had already known Franz for several years. It was the time when fellows heard comments that made them cringe and weep, and sometimes give up writing altogether; comments like “Just go home and plant *kamote*” or “*Ibasura mo na ‘to.*” And at every session, a box of Kleenex tissues would be on every table, ready to stanch the flow of tears.

Franz, however, remained one of the kindest panelists. He spoke with authority, he was demanding, he had a stentorian voice that could make a young writer quake with fear. But he knew the power of words — how they could inspire or dishearten, fire up dreams or douse them with disparagement. And he always chose to inspire and fire up dreams. The closest he got to admonishing was when he told young poets, with eyes blazing, the importance of “prosody!” Or exhort them to give their writing everything they’d got: “Blow! Blow as hard as you can!” And of course, his most famous line, “Get real!”

I learned the most important lesson from him after the first story I submitted to him was taken up in class. The story was about a family constrained by middle class values, and had an epigraph — a line from T. S. Eliot, if I remember correctly. I didn’t know then what I know now, that, as Heather Bowlan points out, “Once an epigraph is there in italics, looking important, it casts a shadow over everything that follows,” especially, may I add, if the story itself is not remarkable to begin with. Predictably, my story was ripped to shreds, almost literally, by the class. And Franz, who was the soul of gentleness, said that the epigraph was well-chosen. I felt sorry for myself, but felt more sorry for Franz, as I watched him struggle to find something else to praise, aside from the portion that was not even mine.

Later that day, I made the first of many visits to Room 1074 at the Faculty Center. I confessed that I felt dejected, discouraged, and wondered if it was worth it for me to persist. “Look,” he said, “you have a story. Only you know that story. Only you can write it the way you do. What if you die tomorrow? Then the world will forever be ignorant of what you know, and you will forever be responsible for that ignorance!” It turned out that he

had said that to many of his students, and every one of them remembered the fire and intensity in his eyes when he said it.

Thus, the concept of stewardship of one's talent was instilled in me before I was even sure I had the talent to steward. So while I started to write because I had to complete my electives, I have continued writing because I must. That word, "must," has to be taken in both senses: in its sense as compulsion, because I just can't imagine myself *not* writing, and in its sense as duty, the duty to honor a gift.

Writing is a lonely undertaking, and the temptation to give up is irresistible, especially when you're young, and you have many other options. Having a teacher, who not only teaches the craft of writing but also persuades you that your writing is important and meaningful to others, is a real gem. I am among the lucky ones who found this precious gem, Francisco Arcellana, and I will forever be grateful.

Uneven Development

Larissa Mae Suarez

1. Legends (Makiling, 2002)

I was thirteen. I was with three other girls, all asleep, so I was basically alone. I was crying as only newly minted teenagers can cry, snuffling pathetically in the darkness, but trying to stay quiet, because thirteen was too old to be crying.

I was in a small cottage on the slopes of Makiling, in a narrow room with two double-bunk beds lined up against the wall. My mattress was covered in a bedsheet from home. I had a stack of crime and romance pocketbooks stashed by my pillow to occupy me. But the crickets outside chirped louder than I had ever thought possible, and I couldn't bring myself to turn off my night lamp. I lay on the top bunk, blowing my nose on my blanket, wondering if this was the night when I would be able to get to sleep without—

No. Not tonight. So, as I had been doing every evening for the past couple of weeks, I climbed down, careful not to rattle the bed frame so I wouldn't wake my roommate. I clutched my cell phone tightly in my hand. Barefoot, I padded out of the room, and the sudden shift from the warm wooden floor to the cool stone of the cottage verandah brought goosebumps to my arms. The wind blew through my thin shirt. It was always windy in Makiling. Carefully, I dialled the only number I knew by heart: my mother's.

She answered on the first ring, like she had been expecting it. "You still can't sleep?"

“No,” I said, an accusation. “I don’t like it here. I told you already. I want to go home.”

“One semester,” said Mama calmly. “You promised you would try for one semester.”

“Well, I can’t *survive* an entire semester!”

“If you need us, if you really need us, your father and I will get in the car right now and drive there and come get you—”

“I don’t want you to come right *now*, but I want you to come get me when it’s morning.”

“—but first you have to try. I think you’ll love it there if you try.”

And so it went. We talked in circles; I whined, but my mother was firm.

I was in a boarding school in Los Banos, Laguna. The Philippine High School for the Arts (PHSA) is visible when one is driving on SLEX, the long highway that connects the capital, Metro Manila, to the southern provinces. From a distance, the mountain’s peaks and valleys formed the outline of a woman with long hair lying in repose; Maria Makiling herself, or so the legends said. And on its slopes, on her bounteous curves, PHSA perched: not a single large edifice, but a network of small structures connected by long bridges and winding roads. The tiled roofs of the cottages were scattered like red drops on the green canvas of the forest. The lovely architecture of the school was the work of National Artist Leandro Locsin, but in those days, my first year as a PHSA student, I was in no mood to appreciate such details.

I was focused on a sense of injustice. I had just wanted to leave the private, all-girls Catholic school where I had spent my elementary years. I hadn’t bargained on living away from home for the next four years.

When I was in seventh grade, I wrote a short story and a poem for a class. The poem was about a balloon. I can’t even remember what the story was about. We had a printer in our house, but it was broken, so I asked my mother to print it out in her office for me.

The way my mother tells it, a colleague came by while she was printing out my assignment on an office computer. She explained that it was her kid’s schoolwork. And her colleague said, “Your daughter seems like a good writer. Why don’t you enrol her in that arts school?” It was the

first time my mother had heard of any such school. She did some research, and decided to let me take the entrance exam.

PHSA students get free tuition, free lodging, free meals, and a small monthly stipend. Only thirty to forty students are accepted every year. The entrance exam is divided into a standard academic test and a “talent portion,” depending on your chosen major — I chose Creative Writing. I think there were only ten of us taking that test.

Over three hours, we had to write a poem, a short story, and a play. First, the proctor brought out an empty birdcage and a rosary with large beads, arranging them on top of a table. We stared in mingled consternation and fascination at the strange items. Task: write a poem. We bent over our desks. An hour later, the proctor collected our feeble attempts at poetry, then wrote “Takipsilim na...” in clear chalk lines on the board. Task: write a short story beginning with those words.

While we were writing, the silence was punctured by the sound of someone screaming. We looked up from our papers and stared fixedly at the door. The proctor noticed our curiosity and went outside. Upon his return he explained that the talent test for theater arts majors was ongoing in a nearby room. The would-be actors and actresses had been asked to pretend that a bullet had been fired into their eyes. Another drawn-out scream rent the air, and the other test-takers and I grinned at each other. (Only two of us in that room would pass the exam.)

When I was accepted into PHSA, I was ecstatic. My entire family, including my sisters and grandparents, escorted me to Makiling. They helped me unpack the clothes, bedsheets, books, junk food, and toiletries I had carted from home. My grandmother reminded me that she could give me extra blankets if it got too cold. When they left, I watched them drive away, waving until they were out of sight.

It didn't sink in until I was alone in my bed that night. High school loomed in front of me, unknown and uncharted, and I was afraid. I lay alone in my bed as long as I could stand it, then got up and went outside. That was when I first called my astonished mother. “Send me to a public high school in Quezon City,” I demanded. I wanted to be back in our house in Cubao. For my entire life I had slept on a bed I shared with my sisters, and I missed the soothing, familiar comfort of other people beside me.

How stupid, I thought to myself, how moronic, that I was being defeated by an inability to sleep alone. In the U.S.-based sitcoms I watched, in the Western-set books I read, children always had their own rooms. It had seemed so easy.

So I started phoning home. During these nightly calls I inevitably started crying again at some point. Eventually my father would take his turn on the phone with me. My mother spoke in affectionate-yet-unshakeable imperatives, but Papa's style was distraction. He would ask me about my day, about my roommates, about my classes, until I stopped crying and told stories.

That evening, I had a good one. "The fourth-years scared us," I complained. I waited for sympathy, but instead he laughed. "What happened?"

There were only thirty-seven of us in my batch, and only around a hundred and twenty students in the whole school. The older ones regarded it as their duty to mother, mentor, torment, and otherwise introduce the first-years to PHSA life. Earlier that evening there had been a "bonding session" between the first and fourth-years, and the seniors had taken us to the ballet studio. It was a long, wide room with high ceilings that just happened to be walled by mirrors on all four sides.

In the grand tradition, the lights went off. Some screamed, some clung, and one of my batch-mates (who shall go unnamed) immediately started hiccupping with fright. Brownout, the seniors announced cheerfully, and they proceeded to tell horror stories for the next few hours, until someone very obviously stood up to turn the lights back on, indicating that the "brownout" was over.

When I got back to the dorm room I shared with two juniors and a senior named *ate* Bigol, I was subdued. I got directly into my bed without brushing my teeth (one of the stories had involved someone's reflection in the bathroom mirror doing monstrous things). *Ate* Bigol climbed up into my bed with me and said she was sorry if I had gotten scared.

"The TAs can really get into the spirit of things," she admitted. She was referring to the theater artists (TAs) who had used flashlights on their own faces to spectacular effect, reducing one of my classmates to hysterics. They'd had to escort him outside to calm him down. "But it's all in fun. Are you okay?"

I thought about it. “Yes,” I said, honestly. Some of the stories had frightened me, but the “brownout” itself had not.

“If you want you can sleep in my bed with me,” offered one of my other roommates, *ate* Ia, from the bed below. “I couldn’t sleep alone for a week after the fourth-years did that to us.”

Politely I declined the offer, thinking that I did have my pride.

But later, past two in the morning, I was getting cold standing outside, my phone would run out of batteries soon, and I needed to get some sleep. I was also getting scared again. One of the stories had been about the presence of Maria Makiling in our school — doors swinging closed, things getting lost, a sudden chill in the air; all her, all Makiling, making herself felt. I stood on the empty verandah and glanced nervously around me. I was enclosed by night.

In the end I kept the line open while I went back inside and clambered into the bottom bunk with kind *ate* Ia, who sleepily made room for me on her bed. I instructed my parents in a whisper to keep talking. I ordered them not to break the connection until they asked me something and I didn’t answer, indicating that, some seventy kilometres away, I had fallen asleep.

They agreed without any discernible hint of exasperation. And I listened as their voices, low and soothing, issued from the cell phone I had tucked beside my ear.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the pale lavender rectangle of our window. It was dawn. I had to heat water for my bath, because it was very cold in the mornings.

And I didn’t get over my fears the next night, or even the next week. But eventually the calls dwindled to once every few days, then stopped.

My parents enjoyed being so indisputably right. Since then they have been telling and retelling the story. “She called and she begged but we stood firm,” they’d brag to aunts and uncles. “And you know what? She ended up loving it there!”

The listeners would nod sagely and say things like, “Good parenting,” while my parents beamed, and I rolled my eyes.

For the next four years, until I graduated from PHSA, I faithfully texted my parents “good night” every night, before I went to sleep, but I

didn't call anymore. I learned to sleep alone. But sometimes, there would be a freshie in the bed with me, shyly attempting to take up as little space as possible. Sometimes one of them would confide that she wanted to go home. A few of them did. As for me — I stayed. And I did love it.

2. Mr. Bookworm and Mrs. Strawberry (St. Paul, Pasig, 1992-2002)

As an avid reader of young adult fiction — Sweet Valley, Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, Babysitters' Club, Famous Five, Secret Seven — I was familiar with a variety of clichés, like “My heart pounded.” But until that moment, I had not ever actually felt my heart *pounding*.

“Did you hide these books?” the librarian demanded.

I nodded. I didn't even consider lying. I was a hundred percent guilty.

The library of St. Paul was vast, air-conditioned, and quiet. It was divided into several rooms, and at the far end of the main room, in the bookshelves near the wall, there were rows and rows of arts and crafts books. I used to drop by the library when I had free time, and my habit was to take an armload of art books to the preschool section, which was luxurious compared to the rest of the library. Instead of wooden seats, it had beanbags and carpeting.

I read a lot of books about people forming clubs and going on dates and having adventures, but I always identified with the artsy characters. Before everything, before the creative writing and journalism and English instruction that would mark the later stages of my life, I imagined myself becoming a painter. The possession I guarded most jealously from my sisters and cousins was an art set an aunt gave me for my eighth (or ninth?) birthday, complete with markers, colored pencils, crayons, and watercolors. I specialized in landscapes (a straight brown line across a sheet of paper, with trees on top and a lake on the bottom) and abstracts (random blotches and squiggles of color). I looked at art books for inspiration. I loved flipping through clear, vividly colored photographs that broke down artworks into basic steps. “How to paint a sunset: first, wet the paper with water. Add broad strokes of yellow. Then add strokes of orange...”

One time, however, when I made a beeline as usual for the arts section, the book I was reading was gone. I frantically scanned the shelves.

Nothing. I paced up and down the shelves for awhile, mustering my meager reserves of courage, before I finally worked up the nerve to go to the librarian's desk. I hated talking to adults.

They told me someone had borrowed the book.

Well! I developed a cunning strategy: when I was done for the afternoon, instead of returning the books to their proper places in the shelves, I would hide them in the gaps between shelves. The bookshelves were stacked back to back, and there was a hollow between each row of books, which I utilized as a hiding space. I hid five or six books at a time. Then no one else could see my current selections, and I could read them at my leisure.

And that was how I ended up being lectured by the head librarian. She caught me red-handed. She marched me to the library desk, and proceeded to deliver a strongly whispered lecture on respecting library property, on getting librarians in trouble for missing books, and on the importance of being honest and honorable, since by hiding the books I had selfishly deprived others of the chance to read them. I hung my head throughout the sermon.

She ended on a note of doom. "I'm going to have to tell your parents about this."

In hindsight, the obvious strategy would have been to get ahead of the situation. Upon going home that afternoon, I should have gone straight to my parents and explained my side, insofar as I had a "side." Instead, I spent the next few days with my heart pounding every time I thought about what my punishment would be.

When my mother finally called me, with that warning note in her voice (that sharp downward inflection which my sisters and I recognize as the first sign of trouble), it was almost a relief. At least the worrying and waiting were over.

"I got a call from the school," my mother said. "You hid books?"

I confessed everything.

There was no punishment. My mother didn't even seem angry, just bewildered. "Why not just borrow them?" she wondered. I was shocked. Why hadn't I thought of that? To this day I have no answer to that question. My father thought it was funny. He offered to buy me an arts and crafts

book of my very own. I still have that book. I used it to make a paper doll, dyed eggs, and small pillows. It was a good thing I had it, because after that I didn't go to the library unless I had absolutely no other choice. I was afraid of the stern eyes of the librarian who had caught me.

My sisters and I were sent to an all-girls Catholic institution from preschool to elementary school. I can sum up that part of that decade of my life in three words: I hated it. I hated the closed black shoes “with heels one inch high, or lower,” and I hated the socks “above the ankle but below the knee,” and I hated that we could not wear anything in our hair except accessories “colored black, blue, or brown.”

I hated the “keep right” rule, which meant that nuns admonished us when, God forbid, we strayed while walking towards the left side of the corridor. I hated that we had to fall in line at seven in the morning and march outside for a 30-minute ritual that included Bayang Magiliw, Panatang Makabayan, a prayer of thanksgiving, a bible reading, and daily announcements. At least once a month, standing for half an hour in the sun got to be too much, and someone fainted. On one humiliating occasion, that person was myself. I had not had breakfast, I had slept late, and I stood in a direct patch of sunlight. Sweat trickled under my ironed white uniform. Black spots appeared in my vision. I turned my head, but the spots stayed front and center. With academic fascination I watched the black spots grow larger and larger, until they obliterated everything. By the time the black field over my vision lifted, I was in the clinic, being force-fed glasses of water.

I hated the “English Only” policy which required us to speak English inside and outside the classroom, except during Filipino and Hekasi (Heograpiya, Kasaysayan, Sibika) subjects. The teachers assigned beadle who kept a logbook of infractions. The beadle usually let friends off the hook, but I was never lucky enough to be part of a beadle's circle. For years, if I spoke a word of Tagalog (even *po* or *opo*), I was entered into the book. I had to pay the penalty: one tab per word. The “tab” came from that metal part you pry off to open softdrink cans, and the nuns said the tabs would be melted down into a wheelchair for *Tahanang Walang Hagdanan*, a home for the disabled. Outside every room were large jars full of tabs, which were emptied every few months. During those years, every time our parents or some relative drank a can in our vicinity, my sisters and I argued over who would get the tab.

I hated the regular confessions which became part of our routine after third grade, upon receiving Holy Communion. Pity the poor priest who sat in his vestibule listening to hundreds of schoolgirl confessions. Our school chapel was actually a soothing space. It was air-conditioned, the pews were of dark, gleaming wood, and the crucifix in front seemed to glow from the pale blue light bulb concealed behind the arms of the cross. A small garden beckoned through the sliding doors that lined one side of the chapel. I spent a lot of time staring at that garden while waiting for my turn to confess. Small purple flowers dotted low shrubs, and fish the color of sunset undulated inside a koi pond. When my turn came, I opened the sheet of paper on which, as instructed by our homeroom advisor, I had written out my sins. “I didn’t obey my grandmother when she told me not to climb onto the roof,” I confessed. “I was rude to my mother. I stole a pack of gum from my sister’s personal stash of junk food that she bought with her own allowance.”

I did like one thing about my elementary school — one corner of every classroom was turned into a mini-library, and all students had to loan at least one book to the enterprise. I carefully chose a book I could afford to lose, as pilfering and miscellaneous damage were common. I think it was a book from the “Secret Seven” series by Enid Blyton. Every day, thirty minutes before dismissal time, the PA system chimed gently, and a musical voice said, “Dear Time!” Dear is “read” spelled backwards, which struck me then (and still does now) as unaccountably funny. Clearly I was starved for wit. At any rate, Dear Time was the signal for us to spend the rest of the day reading. The book I remember most clearly was an illustrated, abridged version of Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. For months I imagined a stranger walking into our house to announce that I had received a large sum of money from an anonymous benefactor, and (shades of Miss Havisham) I looked upon wedding dresses as emblematic more of horror than romance.

It was through Dear Time that I formed the friendships that would last me throughout elementary school. Most of the students just picked out the first books they could get, and spent the rest of the allotted time pretending to read while exchanging gossip in whispers. The few of us who actually read books caught each other’s attention.

I liked reading and writing. One of my classmates, Alex, liked reading and drawing. We instantly bonded. For the next couple of years we collaborated in a series of comics featuring the adventures of Mr. Bookworm and Mrs. Strawberry.

After that whole library fiasco, I began turning my attention to acquiring and reading books of my own. The Sweet Valley pocketbooks soon bored me, and I started looking for other material. My father, also a great reader of books, took me and my sisters to the nearest Booksale at least once a month. Reading became essential to me. I read while eating, while in the bathroom, while tuning out duller lessons. I read the Bible. I read textbooks. During Mass I smuggled thin paperbacks into the church, concealed by the pages of a prayer book. English was divided into two classes in my school, Language and Reading Comprehension — I did poorly in the former, but I did extremely well in the latter. Fortunately, writing dialogue for Mr. Bookworm and Mrs. Strawberry required no in-depth grasp of the technicalities of grammar, and we invented stories set in outer space, stories about falling chastely in love, stories involving rescues from mortal peril.

The first milestone of my nascent writing career dates back to that period: I wrote what I fancied to be a tearjerking, moving paean of gratitude to the Lord which was selected as the school's Prayer of the Month. It was read over the PA system once a week for an entire month. I was suitably modest with my friends, but trembled with secret glee every time words I had written (in the Paulinian script I never did master, on one whole sheet of pad paper) echoed out from the speakers. But my bubble was somewhat burst by my lack of success in any other writing endeavour. Most notable was a string of failed attempts to join the official school paper. I took and failed the test four times in a row.

However, no amount of minor triumphs could compensate for the fact that I was deeply unhappy in that school. Elementary schoolgirls can be brutal. I was among the Unpopulars — lacking in the beauty, talent, intelligence, or wealth that set some of the girls above the rest. While my classmates always moved in packs, I walked alone, or with some other outcast I befriended (or more accurately, befriended me). It didn't help that I was short, with hair that managed to be simultaneously lank and frizzy, extremely shy and with a habit of falling dead silent when people

talked unexpectedly to me. Every year we were reshuffled, some 300 plus students in every grade level divided into eight rooms with around 40 students each. Every year was a chance to reinvent myself, and every year, when some well-meaning classmate tried to chat me up, I shut up. It was an embarrassing habit.

I attracted bullies. How could I not? As I said, I was a singularly unattractive and skinny child, as any photo from that period would reveal. I looked like a wimp and I had never dared to talk voluntarily to a teacher in my life. That made me fair game for other students. For example: I rode the school bus with my older sister, and in her shadow I had some degree of protection; but if I made the mistake of getting onto the bus before her, or if she was absent, students would literally pull my hair or poke me in the side, trying to provoke me into responding. I never did. More evidence: I had an allowance of P10 a day that rose to P20 a day by the time I reached seventh grade, and once, having spent a fortune (P10) on a cup of iced Milo, a Popular Girl walked over to me, took the cup, and drained it. She handed me back the empty cup and told me to throw it away for her, then returned to her friends, who burst into laughter. True story.

Loath to use Mr. Bookworm and Mrs. Strawberry as stand-ins for myself in a morality tale about bullying — but needing to find expression for my unhappiness at being in a milieu wherein, I felt, I didn't belong — I ended up writing one of my first attempts at a story. I never showed that story to Alex, or to anyone. It was about a girl who killed herself, and after she died everyone was suitably regretful about how they had treated her while she was alive. Not one of my finer (or subtler) efforts.

Mr. Bookworm and Mrs. Strawberry stand out as one of the few bright spots of my time in St. Paul. The worm had glasses, and (somewhat redundantly) arms and legs. The strawberry had limbs, too. Mr. Bookworm was kind, bookish, and always extricating Mrs. Strawberry from tight spots, as she was adventurous, friendly, and impetuous. Alex and I would plot out the story together, and she drew in the panels, leaving empty speech and thought bubbles where I carefully inked in the words of the first original characters I ever created. Where are those comics now? I want them back.

3. The Boar in the Floor and Other Stories (Makiling, 2002-2006)

In every classroom in PHSA, there is a piano. Before or between lessons, waiting for the teacher to arrive, the musicians practice. Some non-musicians make an attempt to play, too. My older sister had taken piano lessons for several years, and although I hadn't, I had learned to laboriously decipher the notes of minor melodies, which I made the mistake of mentioning to one of the pianists.

"Play something," she urged me.

I considered my limited repertoire, and played a few bars of "Chopsticks."

She laughed. She made me hold up my hands, and we pressed our palms together. She admired the length of my fingers, which were as long as hers, except that she was about six inches shorter than me. I had never realized that she had such large hands before. Or was I the one with small hands? I wondered if it would be rude to ask if she had become a pianist because she had long fingers, or if her fingers had gotten longer because she kept playing the piano.

"I can teach you some songs, if you want," she offered. "We have the same reach. I think you can play easy songs."

This became our routine. About once a week, we would sit next to each other on the bench, me on her right side, and I tried to imitate the graceful movements of her hands. To this day I still know how to play the intros to Rivermaya's *241*, Augustana's *Boston*, Cat Powers' *I Found a Reason*, and Evanescence's *My Immortal*, among other such eclectic gems.

There are six majors in PHSA: creative writing, visual arts, ballet, folk dance, music (voice or instrument), and theater arts. We spent our mornings with general education subjects like math and science, but the afternoons and evenings were devoted to our majors. Creative Writing was the least populous of the majors; there were only three of us in my batch and no creative writers at all in some batches.

I began, vaguely, to feel like an impostor. Writing simply did not evoke the sense of awe and grandeur that the other art fields did. Once, sharing a cottage with voice majors, I woke up to the sound of someone's vibrant soprano echoing from the tiled walls of the bathroom. I was deeply

impressed. The singer later told me it wasn't even a real song, just some vocal exercises. "Sorry, it got a little pitchy," she said. "I'm exploring my range."

That led to a personal vow that I would never let any of them hear my singing voice. "A little pitchy" would be an understatement. At some point, my vigilance lapsed, and a voice major heard me singing a pop song. She asked sincerely, "Are you singing second voice?"

Another time, I tripped over someone's face on the classroom floor. I picked it up. It was my classmate's face, solemnly and majestically rendered, in dark, rich brown. "Wow," I said. "What is this?" Wood shavings mixed with glue and paint, then covered with lacquer, the visual arts major told me. "But it's all wrong, I look stupid. I'm going to redo the casting. This is just a reject," he said, tapping the gorgeous mask dismissively. I thought about asking if I could have it, but in high school, that might just be interpreted as a sign that I had a crush on him. To prevent that disastrous outcome, I let the moment pass.

In class presentations, acting out skits of historical events, I was relieved to get non-speaking roles, as the theatre art majors quickly and correctly observed that I had absolutely no acting ability. They tried giving me a speaking part once, and I choked; I definitely knew my lines, but that knowledge deserted me when I looked out at the audience. I just stood there for what seemed like eternity, before my partner began improvising her own lines and all but pushed me off the stage.

So I just wrote skits. The theater artists regularly ordered me to write scenes that would require them to cry or throw fits of rage, which they enacted with great aplomb. "Give me someone mad to play; someone like Sisa," one of them requested. For our group production of *Ramayana* — so elaborate that our teacher had us restage it in front of the whole school — I was in exactly one zero-dialogue scene, and still I managed to drop my elaborate headdress (created by visual arts majors out of wire, Japanese paper, and beads) onstage.

At any rate, as with all other high schools, there are cliques, and it was the lot of creative writers to be considered the "smart" ones. I soon realized that simply excelling at academics was considered by my peers to be an achievement on par with their own creative skills. Many of my classmates found regular school a dull distraction from their art. For me,

the combination of the academic and the artistic parts of our curriculum formed my first exposure to the rigors of daily, disciplined writing. Every morning, I walked from the dormitory to the school grounds, and every afternoon, I walked to a small computer room on the edge of the campus ballet studio. Everywhere, I wrote. I had to. I wrote scenes, verses, descriptions, stories. I wrote in a journal. I got into the school paper (to my enormous satisfaction), and I wrote news, editorials, feature articles. I wrote submissions for English classes. In other subjects like Social Studies and Biology, I wrote group assignments and lab reports and unabashedly long reaction papers.

Our creative writing classes were usually held in a small room with only the barest requisites: five to six desktop computers, a white board, a bulletin board, and a conference table. The terminal I preferred was by the window. Our teacher liked to take us outside for various activities, but every week we returned to this small room to write and discuss each other's works. A door connected the creative writing room to the ballet studio. When the dancers were rehearsing, the floor vibrated, and classical music pulsed through the walls.

Sometimes, when I needed a break, I would crack open the door connecting the studio to the computer room, and watch the dancers. One time I opened the door and saw that the ballet dancers had formed a line. They were taking turns weighing themselves on a scale, while their teacher entered their weight on a chart. "Bring your weight down to 100 by the end of the month, or I can't use you in the next recital," she'd say. Or, "Excellent, your diet is working."

More often, I saw them dancing. They looked like birds poised for flight, standing on their toes, their arms curved, their knees bent. The clear evidence of their strength and grace always reminded me of the inadequacies of my own body, and I would rub my aching lower back, only then realizing that I had been hunched over a keyboard for hours.

My only physical efforts arose from activities outside the computer room. Some of them were sanctioned, but some were definitely not. School officials banned students from climbing the roof, exploring the forest, and taking shortcuts that passed through grass, trees, and soil instead of the long roads that curved along the shape of the mountain. But of course we did all that. And now it can be told — one day in our sophomore year,

like lunatics, I set off with two friends for a rumored nearby waterfall, without any knowledge of geography and terrain, or any idea of the risks involved. Expectedly, we got lost. I still smile at the memory of us standing in the forest, shushing each other so we could listen for the sound of running water, and follow it to our destination: Dampalit, a small waterfall located about a twenty-minute hike from our dorm area. Going there was absolutely banned unless accompanied by an adult, which was why there were always some students who dared the journey. It was a badge of honor. In our case, when we finally stumbled across Dampalit, my friends and I stripped down to our underwear before swimming so that we wouldn't be caught sneaking back into our rooms with wet clothes. We managed to find our way back via a series of "flags" we had left to mark our path: a belt hanging from a tree, a handkerchief knotted around a branch. I was so excited when we returned, flushed with triumph at our escapade, that I stayed up until dawn writing a short scene based on the experience. Our creative writing teacher nodded approvingly when I read the passage aloud the next day. "Very vivid," she said. A rare compliment.

The story of our Dampalit adventure reached the piano majors, and they were interested. "We've never been there before," they admitted. So I also told them about the boar living in the abandoned library, burned down by a fire several years ago. Our creative writing teacher had taken us to visit the site as part of an exercise in "sensory impressions." The boar prowled the basement of the library, visible through holes in the ground floor. I stood on the edge of a hole, gripping a pillar for support, watching the immense, dark beast as it moved with a heavy but curious grace through the debris from the fire.

I told them about a swing someone built in a hidden clearing, a swing that was more exciting than any theme-park roller coaster I had ever ridden, because half of the swing's arc brought it over an abyss. It was perched on the edge of a steeply sloping cliff, and we had each dared to take only a few swings before jumping off in fright, our hands sweaty from our death grip on the two thick ropes that bound the wooden seat to the frame.

"We mostly spend our time in the practice rooms," said the musicians. And in the classrooms, and in the studios, and in the theater, said the other majors. Some mornings, they would literally sit around me before class began, asking me if I had a story.

I always did. A wall we tried to climb, a shortcut we tried to invent, a trip to the city, and more. Maybe, just maybe, being a writer wasn't so bad after all.

4. Missing Mang Romy (Vinzons Hall and Veterans Memorial Medical Center, 2008)

"How old are you?" the nurse asked.

The man said, confidently, "Forty years old."

The nurses and the doctor exchanged glances. He was clearly a senior citizen. He had clearly been a senior citizen for a long time. He was very thin, the kind of thinness that leaves bones visible through skin, and he was almost exaggeratedly stooped, his shoulders and upper back curved permanently inward. His scalp was visible through the white wisps of his hair, and his skin was spotted and wrinkled. His eyes were rheumy, darting around, observing his surroundings.

"He's not forty, is he?" another nurse asked me.

"He's forty," I said staunchly, and my companion, Rosa, nodded. We backed away from the hospital bed. They all turned towards us. We beckoned them forward. When we were out of earshot, I said to them, "Of course he's not forty. He might be eighty. I have no idea. But he's very touchy about his age."

"What do you mean?"

"He's been convinced he's forty for years," said Rosa. Like me, she was a student at U.P. Diliman.

I said, "Once, he told us it was his birthday, so I joked, 'Hey, does that mean you're forty-one now?' And he shouted that he was forty, and he went around the office telling people I was a bad person. He was angry at me for days."

The subject of our discussion was scratching himself on the bed, but without energy. He had been sick for the past few weeks. A few days ago, I had brought him to the UP Infirmary, where they told me that he probably had prostate cancer. They told me he had only a few months to live. The diagnosis exasperated me to no end — not for nothing is the infirmary of the University of the Philippines known to students as "infirmatay." I spent

the next few days calling in every favor I could, until I found someone who had a relative who was a doctor at Veterans Memorial Medical Center. He agreed to see a patient pro bono.

Now, the doctor went back to the bed. He must have been sufficiently reassuring regarding the matter of age, because there were no outbursts. After a routine examination, the doctor said, “He has UTI. It’s nothing a temporary catheter won’t fix.”

“So he’s not dying?”

“Certainly not. We will put in a catheter. We will remove it in a few weeks, when he’s cured.”

The patient’s name — at least according to his suspiciously new barangay certificate — was *Illuminado Campos*. “You mean,” one skeptic said, “*Light plus campus*. Like, light of the campus?” Other suggested interpretations: “light on the campus,” “lighting up the campus,” and “Oh, because ‘Diliman’ means darkness?”

All right. So he had a fake name and barangay certificate. At any rate, around Vinzons Hall, he was known as Mang Romy. He had been at Vinzons for at least two decades. He had lorded over generations of student leaders in the offices of the university student council (USC) and the official school publication, the *Philippine Collegian*, known around campus as *Kulê*. He was also familiar to the student activists who were ever present in the Vinzons lobby, painting placards or holding educational discussions.

At the time, I was the editor-in-chief (EIC) of *Kulê*, and Rosa was my managing editor, which was why Mang Romy was our problem. According to the administrators and staff who had been at Vinzons Hall for decades, Mang Romy had been there when they arrived. Some said he used to be a janitor of the building. Others said he had just arrived one day. There survived, among the stacks of documents and old issues that cluttered the *Collegian* office, a single sepia photograph of Mang Romy when he was younger, leaning against a van in the Vinzons parking lot.

He lived in the *Kulê* office. He slept on a couch by the bathroom, and ate with the staff, or asked us for money to buy food. His catchphrase was “*Meron ba tayo diyay?*” There is no direct English translation of that phrase, but in Mang Romy’s case it basically meant, “Give me money.” Most of the members of *Collegian* were generous with him, and the right

side of his baggy brown pants always sagged with the weight of coins in his pocket. He liked to go down and sleep on the couch in the USC office, as well, but his reception there was uncertain. The members of the USC changed every year. Some years, the elected student officials enjoyed having him around, and let him snore on the couch; but other terms barred him absolutely from entering, and sent up envoys to our office to fetch him back. (Once, a Collegian staffer sent down Mang Romy on purpose, in the hopes that a cute USC councilor would be forced to escort him back up.) In Kulê, however begrudgingly, Mang Romy was accepted as a fixture.

The main source of contention between Mang Romy and the Kulê staff was his hygiene. He had a habit of spending an hour at a time in the bathroom, and when he emerged, he left behind a thick stench that took another hour to air out. When people got irritated with him, all they had to do was malign the character of Manalo, a leading figure of Iglesia ni Cristo. Mang Romy was an avid devotee of INC. The only thing that made him angrier than jibes about Manalo were jokes about his real age. You could tell when Mang Romy had made a mess in the bathroom, because the ones who had to pee would vent their frustrations by saying things like “Manalo is corrupt, everyone knows that.”

Yet Mang Romy had his moments, too. He had a proprietary air towards the office, and he used to help clean, when he was in the right mood. Sometimes, he even offered to pay back the money we gave him. He would call me over and try to hand me a few coins, which I magnanimously waved away. He had a sheepish smile on occasions like that — like he knew and I knew that he would end up keeping the coins, but it was an important gesture to make.

I had never imagined that responsibility for the continued health of Mang Romy would fall on my head. But then, I had not planned on becoming the editor-in-chief of the Collegian. I took the entrance exam only because the features editor told me that when she graduated, she wanted me to take over as the next features editor, and the entrance exam would be good training for that venture.

How well I remember the day of the editorial exams. When it was over, those of us who took the exam killed time in various spots inside and outside Vinzons. Some smoked, some drank juice, and others read books,

or eagerly rehashed the exam questions. We had been asked to write a 500-600 word editorial on “the implications of an Obama presidency on the Philippines.” One of the examinees had already left, because, she said, she knew for a fact that she had lost. “I literally do not know who Obama is,” she told us. “I had no idea what to write.”

I did. I had been following the U.S. primaries with the same devotion others reserve for basketball or football. At the time, March 2008, Barack Obama had not yet defeated Hillary Clinton to become the official Democratic nominee. When I was in college, I spent a good portion of each day reading news from local and international outlets, and I liked scrolling through the website of the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal*. Indeed, one of the reasons I had joined Kulê was because I imagined myself becoming a journalist someday. I loved the sheer vigor of journalism. I loved the frenetic pace of activity and the blunt expression of ideas, and the idealistic, noble core of the profession, drummed into our heads at the College of Mass Communication: journalism is for the people. Journalists must serve the public good. The media are the voice with which citizens speak to those in power.

Vinzons Hall is one of the oldest buildings in UP. The lobby, though open, had a musty atmosphere. The ATM machines bore the marks of age, and the pay phones on one wall seemed like the quaint relics of another age. At the time, the USC office was on the second floor, and the Collegian office was Room 401, on the top floor. Both offices were dilapidated, with discolored walls and broken furniture. Despite its age, Vinzons Hall was lovely during the late afternoon. One side of the building is walled with carved stone, and when sunlight slants directly into the building, long and intricate shadows decorate the worn tiles of the floors. I remember holding up one hand, and admiring the pattern of shadows on my skin. Rosa (who also took the test) said, “The sun will set soon. I hope the results come out soon because I don’t want to sit here until night comes.”

Finally someone arrived to pin up the results on the bulletin board in the lobby. We crowded around the sheet of paper. The names were arranged in alphabetical order, but that didn’t register immediately; I thought the name on top had won, and turned to congratulate the victor.

But someone congratulated me. I was confused. I re-examined the paper, this time focusing on the scores on the right-hand side of the page.

It still sounds ridiculous, but really, no one was more surprised than me. I was a second-year student, at the Collegian for less than a year, and suddenly I was expected to become the EIC. I muddled through as best as I could, but nothing had prepared me for the burden of being an editor-in-chief: the daily presswork, the marathon overnight sessions, the furious text messages from school officials who felt themselves maligned, the disgruntled e-mails from sources who felt themselves misquoted. Not to mention the quarrels between staffers, some arising from serious conflicts about content, others arising from things like love triangles and failing to flush the toilet bowl. From managing the budget to bringing the paper to the printers, I was responsible. Every single week we had to release 15,000 copies of a 12-page paper, and any mistakes in it were mine.

Fortunately I had an excellent editorial board, or else I would have simply drowned under the load. Everyone kept reminding me that running a newspaper was a collective endeavor, not an individual one, and they were right. It was just that the position assigned to me meant that I had to take the lion's share of the responsibility, credit, and blame for everything.

In fact, it would become a running joke among my friends in college that I never even had the time to bathe (no thanks to Mang Romy's unpredictable bathroom habits). Sometimes I showed up at school wearing the same thing I had worn the day before, hollow-eyed from overnight presswork.

The evening the results were released, while everyone else was working on the next issue of the paper in Room 401, I snuck into the stairwell on the other side of the building so I could panic in peace. How could I have known, then, that I was about to shoulder not only eighty years of Kulê tradition, but also the care of Mang Romy? I was determined that he would not die under my watch.

So in the hospital, after they inserted the catheter, Rosa and I took Mang Romy to the cafeteria. He kept complaining about the catheter. He said it hurt. He said he wanted to pull it out. We begged him not to, and he stopped scratching himself. Evidently misunderstanding the source of our concern, he magnanimously assured us that he could wait until he was alone before pulling out the tube.

Through a notebook and a pen (and some extremely graphic drawings), Rosa and I succeeded in explaining to Mang Romy what would

happen if he pulled out the catheter. He grumbled, but he understood. The catheter stayed in until we took him back to the hospital, a few weeks later, to have it removed.

And as for me? I had feared that I would be such a terrible EIC that I would run the newspaper into the ground. Fortunately, I was not that bad. To this day, both Mang Romy and Kulè remain alive. I heard recently, however, that Mang Romy has been kicked out for good by the building administrators. Although it has been years since I was a part of the Collegian, I still miss him. On the rare occasions when I return, to give a lecture on opinion writing or some other topic, I keep looking around for him. The office has been renovated since I left, so his couch is gone, but I still expect him to emerge from the bathroom, buttoning up his pants, holding out a hand for coins — saying, with the cheerful and certain expectancy of a child, “*Meron ba tayo dyan?*”

7. **There is a Light That Never Goes Out*** (2008-2009, Vinzons Hall)

“What are you ordering?”

“Chicken fillet meal,” I muttered, without looking up from my laptop. I was busy editing a draft.

“Jollibee, not McDo this time.”

“Burger steak meal,” I said, and listened absentmindedly to the sound of the chalk grating across our old, pockmarked, worn-down blackboard.

The routine of ordering food for everyone in the Philippine Collegian office during overnight presswork required that someone take the time to write out orders on the blackboard. Otherwise, it was difficult to keep track of the dozen meals that had to be ordered and sorted out upon delivery. The person who ended up taking charge was usually whoever couldn’t bear the hunger any longer. I never had to order. I could outwait everyone. The process began by choosing which fast food joint would be our poison for the evening.

We used to walk to the line of small, budget-friendly *carinderias* behind Vinzons Hall, along Old Balara, to eat dinner. We had the extremely useful skill of being able to stretch, oh, maybe a hundred pesos to feed four to five people — five cups of rice, two or three viands, and limitless

broth. Unfortunately, that practice stopped when the gate nearest to the Collegian offices, at Shuster St., closed down. There were still other gates left open at night, but further away. The walk that used to take five minutes now took at least twenty.

We started ordering food in. We quickly discovered and memorized the cheapest items on the menu of Jollibee, McDo, and KFC. (The delivery boys confessed that they hated climbing alone up the dark staircase of Vinzons Hall. We hated it, too. The shadowed corridors were straight out of horror movies.) We rejected Burger King and Wendys for being too expensive. Some of us began hoarding canned food and packets of Lucky Me in the office.

The duty of running one of the few weekly student publications in the Philippines is daunting. It requires a full-time commitment from a group of people willing to sideline their own family, love life, grades, and other organizations, in order to work on the newspaper for at least a few hours every day. Including – *especially* – weekends. Unhealthy food is the least of it.

On Thursdays, without fail, we would have our “genmeet,” or General Meeting, where we checked on how the current issue was going, and laid out plans for the next one. One of my editors used to say that missing too many genmeets was the single best indicator of how long a person would last at Kulê. Even when there were no classes, or when there were typhoons, the genmeet pressed on.

The rest of the week, we produced, edited, revised, and laid out content. The main job of the editors – and it still shocked me, at times, that I had become an editor – was to look at the drafts the writers produced. The section editors (news, features, kultura, opinion) corrected grammar, made suggestions about content, and sent back the edited drafts to the writers, who would input the changes, and send the revised version back. This went on until the editor was satisfied. “Final *na* draft *mo* (Your draft is final)” were the four sweetest words anyone could hear. It signalled freedom: the writer could go home at last, and the editor could move on to the next task.

Several duties kept the average Kulê member busy at any given time. The office was never empty. People left for their classes, and returned. People dropped by to deliver or pick up items. As evening fell outside and

the campus quieted down, the lights flickered on in the Collegian office, and stayed on for the rest of the night. There was always someone staying up late (or not sleeping at all) to finish something or another.

Editing was tedious, and I took a break. I stood, stretched, and checked out the board.

“ISSUE #X,” was scribbled in chalk, above a list of articles per section. The average entry in that list, under the News section, for instance, would go something like this: “Budget delibs → Mila → 2nd draft → photo c/o Chris.” That meant that a writer named Mila was on her second draft of an article about deliberations over the U.P. budget for the coming academic year, and the article would be accompanied by a photograph taken by Chris.

When I finished editing the draft, I went into the inner room, which was dominated almost entirely by mattresses spread out across the floor. I took off my slippers and stepped over sleeping (and snoring) bodies to get to my target.

“Mila,” I whispered, crouching beside her. “Your draft is done. Take a look.”

“All right,” she said, sitting up. “What time is it?”

“2 am.”

Then, before my uncomprehending gaze, she simply lay back down and closed her eyes again. I stared at her for a moment, and left the room. “These young writers,” I told myself, feeling mature and battle-hardened at the ripe old age of 20. “No respect at all. Why, when I was a staff writer, all an editor had to do was touch me and I’d be awake and working.” I began eating my Jollibee burger steak. When I was done eating, I’d wake her up again, I decided.

To this day Mila remains my friend. The bonds forged in the crucible of Kulè are quite durable. But she still denies any memory of that incident. “I’m sure it happened if you say it happened, but I don’t remember it!” she told me later. “Are you sure I really even woke up?”

“You did!” I said. “You sat up, looked me in the eyes, then went back to sleep while I was right in front of you.”

Mila’s in medical school in Cuba now. Sleep habits aside, she was actually one of the better writers, one of those who would last. Many who

joined Kulê simply quit after a couple of months. I have seen drafts crossed out (no comments, just a large X over the front page) and taped to the blackboard, for everyone to see. I have seen an editor hold the corner of a draft to the flickering flame of a lighter, leaving the edges of the page charred. I have seen writers staring with dead eyes into computer screens, working on their twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth draft. And it wasn't just the writers. Illustrators also had to submit initial studies, which got marked with comments and suggestions. They made changes to the study (usually rough pencil drawings), and only when the editor was satisfied did they begin inking in the final version of the illustration. Photographers and layout artists went through similarly gruelling processes.

Of course, these outputs were always the product of legwork. Everyone had to go out into the field to get material. Water cannons at a U.S. embassy mob, walking down the street alone at night in Davao City, sleeping in a hut by a river in Montalban, eating ensaymada with the U.P. President, staring at a stabbed man on a gurney in the Philippine General Hospital, poring over the logbook of a college security guard, talking to residents of a soon-to-be-demolished urban poor community — all that was par for the course for a member of Kulê.

The office itself was the site of memories which we still love to talk about, me and my friends from Kulê, on the occasions we meet up. I remember, during the record-setting floods of Ondoy, how we watched the Sunken Garden turning into a lake, surrounded by the fallen branches of the acacias lining the academic oval. The photographers climbed onto the roof to get better shots of the destruction, accompanied by writers who held umbrellas over their heads, to keep the cameras from getting wet. Our office had somehow managed to become flooded, even though we were on the fourth floor — there was a leak in the roof. We immediately took over all available raised surfaces. I commandeered a table for myself, spreading out my bag and papers to discourage sharing, and there I slept for the next few days, until the floods waned and I could go home.

That night, having exercised my dubious authority over writers who did not even fear me enough to stay awake while talking to me, I went to work on the next draft. I heated water and made myself a cup of 3-in-1 coffee. I sat in my preferred spot near the blackboard, where I could watch the chalk lines changing from “1st draft” to “5th draft” and finally to

“FINAL ☺.” I looked outside the window, at the darkened campus, lit at intervals by the soft orange glow of streetlamps. Every now and then there were solitary joggers or cyclists, couples emerging from the shadows, and guards patrolling the campus. I wondered what their own problems were, their own concerns. What kept them up at night? What consumed their thoughts? What did they think, when they looked up, and saw the lights still on in Room 401?

**From a song by The Smiths, a band first introduced to me by a fellow Collegian writer.*

A Chapter from *Written In These Scars: A Memoir*

Soeey Valencia

Summer—the second day of April

Walking toward the university hospital, my shoes are the only thing I take notice of: a pair of flat, black Mary Janes with a thick elastic band holding two ends together, covering brown, root-like scars. The shoes are scratched like all the other pairs I've worn. They have narrow openings and their closed design gives my toes an uncomfortable, cramped feeling. Another step and my left knee gives out a small clicking noise as though something in my knee had burst or a bone had snapped out of place. Endless falling has caused my knee to click, and click, and click. My shadow limps, a reminder to keep the upper half of my body straight, stop swinging, keep my steps silent and gentle. My arms stiffen, my fingers follow. My heartbeat quickens and my breath comes in a series of labored puffs. I have only been walking a short while.

The dread that my body is dying down, dwindling, at the age of twenty-two comes to me in different forms of pain, pain that is musical—the thudding of flat feet, the snap and pop of tight joints, the sudden spasms of overlapping toes, the vibrating ache of weakening muscles, the unbearable weight of burdened knees. It's the kind of pain that pushes me to give in.

The admission comes slowly, almost like defeat. "I've been thinking...that maybe I should go back to doing therapy," I tell my

mother, sitting by her bedside one night after dinner. She is half-asleep, her right arm over closed eyes. When she hears this, one eye peeps open in surprise. “Really?” she replies, propping herself up from the bed before continuing. “Funny, I have been thinking the same thing lately.” There is a pause. “*Oo, para lumakas din yung legs mo*, and then you can go anywhere, do anything. I think it’s about time.” She rises and moves toward the sink. The sound of water running from the tap, the clinking of plates. My eyes follow her.

“Me too, I mean—” I will not tell her, I decide, about the real reason for this sudden desire to return—something about the fear of one day realizing I’ve missed the last train home or that I am not where I am supposed to be because my legs got too weak to go anywhere. “I am not doing much of anything this summer so I figured I might as well go back,” I finish, thinking of trains.

There is a long queue of patients in the waiting area when I arrive at the rehabilitation center with my brother the next day. My mother will follow later. When I hand her my information sheet, the secretary informs me I am ninth in line and have to wait since none of the doctors have arrived, I motion to my brother and we pick the only vacant seats in the room. The blue plastic chair that I sit in creaks under my weight. My feet remain suspended in the air, not touching the ground as I settle, the tips of my fingers hanging on to the black metal railing that connect the blue chairs and hold them up. My brother yawns and settles into his chair, slouching and thumbing at his phone.

My entire body becomes restless and I fidget. My hands begin to sweat and I crack my knuckles. I clap my shoes together and try to wiggle my rigid toes. I feel the big toe throbbing as it pushes up against the shoe’s edge. I squeeze my thin calf muscle, feeling a bit of bone under flaccid flesh. It feels like squeezing lightly at a balloon inflated only half-way. “They’re still strong,” I try to convince myself. “They’ve still got some fight in them. It’s not too late.”

I breathe in. The air in this part of the hospital is thin, a subtle chill. The dizzying stench of antiseptic from the outside does not continue its trail into this part of the hospital. Instead, there is the faint smell of freshly mopped floors. My eyes settle on the small table serving as a makeshift altar on the far side of the waiting area. An ornate statue of the Virgin Mary, two

unlit candles on either side, watches over the slow come-and-go of patients, unnoticed. Time creeps by and everyone in the waiting area seems steeped in an unshakable sleepiness. The crowd is a mixture of young and old: the sick and their companions, the broken, unbroken, and the breaking. “We are all chipped china,” I observe.

Next to my seat a young man stands, his body hunched over his grandmother’s wheelchair while she is being interviewed by a young doctor who bends down, placing his ear to her mouth as she answers. Two seats down, an old man with pallid eyes clutches wearily at his walking stick, wriggling his foot while looking down at the floor as though in search of something. At the waiting area’s mouth, a heavy-set woman enters, talking to her wheelchaired companion, a woman with a blue cast holding her injured foot in place. She embraces her crutches with one arm and holds a crumpled x-ray envelope in the other. “When will it heal?” she asks the young doctor approaching them, her voice cracking.

The young people seem less damaged. They sit in groups, one bandaged knee after another, save for the teenage girl supported by crutches, standing against a wall, one foot planted on the ground, the other in a cast. The girls giggle with their companions who are dressed in school uniforms until they realize they are late for class and give their injured friends quick kisses on the cheek before rushing off. Most of the boys are dressed in basketball jerseys, and, unlike the girls, sit alone. I begin to wonder what I look like to them with my unbandaged knee, scars etched into my atrophied legs.

One of the doctors arrives. The first name is called and no one rises to go into the doctor’s office. A few seconds pass and the name is called again, this time with the word “patient” before it—what I was going to become once again: another name to be called, another information sheet filed away, another body to be watched and studied. An old man with bent knees grips his walker and stands up slowly, painfully. His companion holds on to his pants, pulling him up. They take small, struggling steps toward the doctor’s office and the resident half-smiles before she closes the door.

“I hope this doctor doesn’t tell us that it’s too late or that I need another operation,” I tell Billy, who has fallen asleep. “What if that’s the case? What if they need to operate on my knees this time?”

“Don’t worry, Curl,” Billy reassures me, yawning. “That won’t happen.”

“But what if it does though?” I insist, drumming my fingers on the chair.

“It won’t, okay? Just relax,” Billy breathes deeply and closes his eyes.

The doctor arrives at half-past eleven, but it is past lunch when we are called into her office and hunger has made both my brother and me weak and dizzy. I begin to worry that this will affect her initial diagnosis and make a mental note to eat breakfast the next time I pay her a visit.

“Hello,” the doctor greets us in her thick, sing-song voice as we enter. The young Chinese-looking resident holding a chart closes the door and follows us in.

As I take the seat next to her table, I can tell right away that this doctor has something different about her. For one, she is wearing a dress and sandals instead of the usual white coat. Her face is motherly and framed by curly chestnut-brown hair that flows down to her shoulders. “How are you?” she asks, her smile warm.

“I am fine, doctor. Thank you.” I try to sound calm. Cold air passes through my teeth and I feel my hands clenching into fists. I unclench my left hand and place it on top of her table. I press my fingers against the glass hard enough to leave prints.

“What can I help you with today?” She picks up a pen as the resident hands her my information sheet. I feel my toes grip the ground as her eyes glaze over it. “Your name is Zandy Victoria Sue,” she reads. “Long name! You’re twenty-two years old?”

“Yes, yes ma’am—doctor,” the change comes quickly. I stammer. “Um, I’d like to start doing physical therapy.” The declaration comes out like a jolt, fast and breathless. “I have mild cerebral palsy. But it’s the kind that only affects my lower limbs, my legs. My muscles are weak and spastic.” All the facts I have gathered about my condition over the years pour out of me. The words put themselves together. The sentences come out like pre-solved jigsaw puzzles. “But the rest of me is fine. My brain is fine.” The last bit comes out rather defensively. “I must prove to her that I can still do it,” I tell myself.

“Ah, I see,” the doctor says, looking rather amused that I know so much. “Spastic diplegia,” she tells the resident. He writes this down mechanically. “Have you done therapy before?”

“Yes. Yes *po*. Um—” This time I grope for the puzzle pieces. “When I was young—*younger*. In fact, my first therapy sessions were done here. I was three when I was diagnosed. But the therapy was on and off because—” *Because it was too painful. Because I wanted to be a normal child, to feel normal.* I don’t admit any of these things, looking instead in Billy’s direction for support.

“Uh, yes ma’am,” he starts groping, “She’s done therapy before but it was on and off because she was busy with school and we moved around a lot.”

“And why do you think you want to start again now?” The doctor looks at me, smiles, and raises her eyebrows waiting for me to answer.

For a while, I am thinking again of leaving trains. The thought passes in my mind like a scene from a film: a train chugging forward at full speed, me running after it, waving frantically, as I disappear in the smoke that it leaves in its wake.

“Because I think it’s about time, doctor. I think I am ready now.”

This time, I mean it.

Everyone exits the room and I am left alone with the hospital gown I am tasked to put on. I unbutton my heavy denim shorts and peel them off of my skin. When they touch the ground, I hold on to the chair and shift my weight to one foot and raise the other out of its leg. As soon as I bend the knee of the raised foot, it stomps itself unto the ground and straightens, shifting the weight abruptly unto the other. It bends and I press down on the chair. Using the strength of my hands I shimmy the foot out of the leg hole and shake the pant leg off. I am naked, save for my underwear, from the waist down.

It is this nakedness that will be looked upon. In a few minutes my body will be cut in half. I will only be where the eyes land, an illustration in the anatomy of bones and muscles. I will be the vibration of thighs, the curvature of knees, the tension of calves, the absence of a heel strike, the dragging of feet. My smallness will be replaced by words with numerous

syllables, old words that I have heard before, that have appeared before, will reappear, sounding new. I will become something out of a medical encyclopedia—a study in deterioration: what can be saved and what is dead.

I take the hospital gown and search for its arm holes. I drape one side over one arm and fumble with the other. I reach for the untied strings at the back and struggle to tie them together. The gown floats, touching my skin, then moving away from it. It refuses to take my body's shape, and finally comes undone. There is a knock at the door and I scramble to cover at least a portion of my body. "Wait. Not yet done," I mumble as the doorknob turns and my brother enters, my mother behind him. Eyes wide from shock and embarrassment, I ask him to tie the strings and he manages to do a decent job before the doctor and the resident return.

"Sorry for making you do this, *ha?* I just really have to see how you walk. Can you walk for me?" the doctor requests, pulling her desk chair outward to face me before she sits. "From the door to the end of the room. One straight line."

I oblige and walk to the door as straight as I can. I can feel all the eyes in the room watching me. I pretend I am a dancer, that I am doing an audition. My way of walking, the only dance I can do. I am the only dancer who can do it. The steps unfold in my mind:

I put one foot forward and barely keep my balance. The straight line I try to keep my feet in is a tightrope. I mumble under my breath for my feet to follow before I feel myself falling. In an instant I put my arms to my sides saving myself from the fall.

An interlude—

"Just walk normally," the doctor encourages. "Don't be nervous."

I put my arms down and begin again, breathing deeply, shaking my fingers and arms loose.

I take the first step, attempting to strike my heel because I know that is how I am expected to walk. When my heel touches the ground, I steady myself to take another step. But this is my dance, the dance my mind has known for the longest time and instead of pushing off, my right foot drags. There is friction between foot and the tiles. This is not how it is supposed to be

done, but this is my dance. I lift my right foot from the floor and it makes an uncontrolled landing—

“Don’t stop moving or you will fall—” my body lunges forward a little.

“No heel strike,” the doctor says in the resident’s direction. “Relax,” the doctor says to me. She tells me to take off my shoes and walk for her again.

Without my shoes on, I feel my toes curling inward, cold and perpetually trying to grip the ground. My left foot’s big toe is tucked under the one beside it. I push it from underneath until it separates itself for a short while. I walk: right arm forward when left foot steps. Left arm forward when right foot steps. A pendulum. The sound of bare feet slapping the floor with each step.

“Relax,” I tell myself. “You aren’t a robot.”

“Not bad *pero* flat-footed *tayo*,” the doctor tells me as it ends and I walk back. “Okay lie down here for me so I can examine you.” She pats the foam-like mattress covered in a thin blue sheet.

This is the beginning of a new dance:

I push my body unto the mattress using my hands to brush my right foot over the back of my left shoe until it hangs and falls off. I do the same for the right shoe and swing both feet up. I lie down.

“Hamstrings.” She caps one hand over my right knee and presses down hard before she lifts my left leg and puts it on her shoulder. A sharp pain pulsates at the back of my knee and intensifies as she lifts it higher.

My right knee jerks to life and starts following the rise of the left. My left knee deforms and goes inward, looking like a droopy tomato or onion.

The doctor’s hand presses down before she releases and relieves the tension. “Tight,” she says. She does the same with my right leg and confirms that it, too, is tight. “*Nagcocompensate yung muscle natin kaya nadedeform yung knee*,” she explains to my mother and brother

“Gastrocnemials,” she moves on. She eyes my overlapping toes with concern. “We’ll have to do something about this,” she says before she puts her hand and part of an arm behind my foot and pulls forcefully.

“The joints down there are fused,” my mother explains so suddenly it comes like an afterthought. “The doctors who did her operation put screws so that she wouldn’t walk on tiptoe anymore and her feet wouldn’t face inward. They’ve taken them out though.”

The tiptoe dance, the one that is just a vague memory, something that feels like being lifted in the air by two people walking on either side.

The doctor’s face lights up. “Oh, so that’s why you had no heel strike when I asked you to walk for me.” She pulls the muscle, and, almost mechanically, declares, “Tight, but we can’t do much about that *kasi nga* fused *yung* joint. I will probably need an x-ray of this the next time I see you.” She is saying this more to the resident than to me.

I am a constellation of fused joints.

“Hip adductors *naman*,” she announces, taking my left foot and stretching it outward, as far as it can go. The sharp pain transfers now to the inner part of my thigh. It is a pain I welcome, a pain that feels strangely good.

We are drawing maps of pain.

“*Hindi masyadong tight*,” she says. “The other one,” she pushes my right foot against the wall and reaches the same verdict. “*Hindi masyadong tight ang adductors natin*,” she beams. “Quads, *dapa tayo*.”

I lie on my stomach. Both my legs are taken and folded until the soles of my feet touch my buttocks, my toes pointing upward. My buttocks rises from the bed a little and the front of my thighs bulge with pain.

She says the word again, “Tight. *Medyo tumataas ang butt natin*. *Medyo* weak. Lie on your back again. Test *natin ang* muscle strength.”

I raise my left foot—

She stops it midway, pressing it downward with her hand. “Fight it,” she challenges.

My muscles tense up and I grit my teeth as I try to oppose the weight.

She does the same to all the muscles and afterwards tells me to do a sit up.

A sit up: Sweat breaks on my brow. I put both my hands behind my head and raise my head from the pillow.

“*Mahina ang core*,” she tells the resident. “One last thing. *Dapa ka ulit* and with your elbows try to push your body up from the bed and hold it

there for a few seconds. Try not to raise your butt.

I point my elbows upward and push against the mattress. My stomach muscles harden. The weight of the doctor's hand pushes my butt down. I hear a voice counting. I shut my eyes and the counting becomes a blur, becomes slower. Until—crash! The weight and heat of my entire body collapses onto the bed. My eyes open.

The doctor looks pleased and motions to me to sit by her desk. The examination is over. The dance ends.

“So what can we do, doctor?” my mother asks.

“It's not bad. There is still some strength in her muscles,” the doctor reports, the ever-encouraging smile still plastered on her face. “They're weak...but we can wake them up.” She takes out her prescription pad and begins to write. “We'll start with therapy three times a week to strengthen and loosen the muscles and improve things like balance and walking.” She turns to me. “You will use all the machines in the therapeutic gym and the ultrasound to soften the tissue in your hamstrings. Then, after three weeks, you will come and see me and we will evaluate your progress. All right?” She nods vigorously as though she is more excited than I am. Out of breath and unable to speak, I nod back, grateful.

In disbelief, my mother asks again. “So, there's still hope, doctor? It's not too late? Even after all these years? She'll really try her hardest this time.”

The doctor looks at the three of us, a glimmer of light in her eyes. “Of course,” she says. “There's always hope.”

This is the last train. This is the last train and I am getting on board.

The Piano Lessons

Cecilia Manguerra Brainard

Imagine my parents sitting on the porch swing, catching the late afternoon breeze while the gardener swept the lawn. My sister and I played on the teeter totter, tipping back and forth, bickering and giggling, still in our blue and white school uniforms. I was six; she was ten. Our two older siblings are not in this picture; they were off with their friends or in their rooms. My father's mind was probably on the construction of our house that he was completing. My mother could have been thinking of the new piano situated in the room at the foot of the stairs, adjacent to the living room. Mama had been a music major at the University of the Philippines where she met my father, an engineering professor who played the violin.

"I think Nene and Baby should take piano lessons," Mama said.

My father, startled from his thoughts of cement and gravel, railings and posts, glanced at us and remembered when he and his older brother were younger than us and already studying the violin. "Where can they take lessons?" he asked.

Mama, who had already considered the matter before this conversation, said, "Bokoy will be good to start with."

"Why not enroll them with Pilar at Battig?"

"Pilar's expensive. The children need the basics. I could teach them myself but I'm too busy. Besides, it's difficult to teach your own children."

And with that, the decision was made that my sister (Nene) and I

would study piano with a man named Bokoy. I no longer remember with clarity those piano days. Perhaps we went three times a week, after school and on Saturdays. Perhaps I studied for a year or two. This period of my life – three years before my father died – was chaotic, and in my mind events blur or run together. Emotionally however, I feel the demarcation between the periods of Before-my-father-died and After-my-father-died. Before-my-father-died was a happy, fanciful time of my life. After-my-father-died was a dark and grim period. It took some time before I got over the sad stage and learned to be happy and productive.

Before-my-father-died, Papa drove us downtown for our piano lessons. He owned a red jeep and a Buick, and even though we had a driver, my father enjoyed driving us to and from school and other places. He favored the red jeep and so I imagine my sister and I sitting in the back of it, as my father pulled away from our Spanish-style house, away from the foothills, toward the sea where the downtown area was. It was the early 1950s. At the age of six I looked at the houses in ruin, at the rubble, at the pockmarked roads, without really understanding that Cebu was still rebuilding, still recovering from the Second World War that had sent my parents and my older siblings to the hinterlands of Mindanao where my father had joined the guerrilla movement. Downtown Cebu in particular had been bombed during Liberation when the Americans took back Cebu from the Japanese. Historic houses and buildings were destroyed, turning the area into a blight. But these images of destruction were part of my geography, which I accepted as normal.

After leaving the Capitol area, driving down Jones Avenue and through narrow winding streets, my father brought us to the house of our teacher, a slender gangly man, in his late twenties or early thirties. We had lessons on an upright piano in the living room of his family home. I have no recollection if our piano teacher was strict or kind. What I recall vividly was walking into his living room one day and finding him reclining on the sofa with his feet over the piano, and his toes ran over the keys, playing music. I had a difficult time training my fingers to stretch and strike the keys in the right way, and here was a man who could use his toes to play the piano – it was quite a memorable sight.

Bokoy taught us how to read notes and how to play simple tunes. Since I was a fairly diligent student, I am sure I practiced on our upright.

On this same piano, my mother used to play classical music with such vigor as to shake the overhead chandelier so the crystal prisms quivered and sparkled.

Some evenings my parents played together: she on the piano, he on the violin. We four children sat in the living room to watch and listen. My father would tune his violin and warm up. He would make the violin skip in a happy bouncy way; sometimes he would make it sound mournful. My mother needed little warming up. She was like that in real life; my mother rarely hesitated, she was always ready to go. My mother's music was much louder, much more energetic, sometimes drowning out my father's sweeter and calmer sounds. Those were wonderful times, those home concerts – nights full of magic, brimming with sweet family ties.

Bokoy organized a piano recital for his students. He rented an auditorium that was filled with proud parents and relatives. I wore a blue dress with puffed sleeves and smocking on the bodice. There were around a dozen students, and I waited my turn in the back stage. When my name was called I walked out and scrambled up on the piano stool, my feet dangling and not touching the floor. I don't recall any mishap as I played "Skating on the Lake" and "Volga Boat Song." When I finished, I hopped off the stool, faced the audience and curtsied. They clapped and I walked off stage to give way to another student. The recital was altogether uneventful.

There was only one piano recital. I suspect my sister and I became lazy about going to piano practices. "The girls are not that interested in piano," my mother may have confessed to my father. "It's getting harder to get them to go to Bokoy."

Remembering the uninspired music we did on the piano, my father may have said, "They're busy with homework. The Belgian nuns are strict."

And my mother, realizing the hard work involved to get anywhere with music – work she had done, and look where she found herself in – a housewife with four children, dabbling with a buy-and-sell business, said, "All right then." And they let the matter go.

In fact, my sister and I were not completely devoid of any musical gifts. Not too long after the piano lessons, my older sister took singing, which didn't last either. In high school and college, I played the guitar, not magnificently, but I could strum a few folksongs. My sister took classical

guitar when she was in Spain and she taught me a few pieces. But the piano was thrust aside. In fact our piano became silent after my father died. It turned into a piece of furniture displaying on its top a couple of framed sepia-colored photos of my mother and father.

A few years before my mother died – and this was decades after the piano lessons – the same piano we had downstairs was moved to her room upstairs. By this time, Mama’s hands had become stiff. Once during a terrible typhoon, she had tried to close a window and the wind had slammed it shut over her hand, leaving two of her fingers with a permanent kink, a deformation that made playing the piano difficult. But in her old age, Mama could still play a few pieces, and she loved to talk of her past. She started studying the piano at the age of three, she said, missing precious playtime or the luxury of sleeping in because of piano practices and lessons. This was at St. Catherine’s in Carcar, Cebu. “I was just a little girl,” she said, with a coy expression; and if she were sitting on her bed, she would kick her feet back and forth, like a child.

When she later attended St. Scholastica’s College in Manila because of its famed music program, it was the same thing – practice, practice, and practice. My mother added that the German nuns there were very strict; for instance, they insisted she eat all the (dreaded) potatoes from her plate. Not a scrap of food could be left. She was not fond of their meals and looked forward to her father’s visit. “He would bring Jacob’s crackers and English candies,” she said, her eyes lighting up from the memory.

From St. Scholastica’s, Mama went on to the University of the Philippines to major in Music. There she met my father, a professor in Engineering, a widower thirteen years her senior. My mother used to play basketball at the university, and the story goes that one day she fell and my father helped her. I imagine her in baggy bloomers sprawled on the gym floor, her companions in a dither, and the engineering professor walking over and taking charge. That was the beginning of their love story, one that included a dramatic elopement on an airplane because my grandfather disapproved of my father. The fact was that my grandfather turned away all his daughters’ suitors, so much so that my oldest aunt had to finally put her foot down and marry off her younger sisters against the wishes of their father. In my mother’s case, my father picked her up

in Cebu and brought her by plane to another island where the wedding party was waiting.

Referring to her early morning piano practices, Mama in her old age reminisced: “For the first time I could sleep in when I was married.” She added, with a giggle, “I was really lazy.”

My parents settled in Manila where my father taught. Their two children were born before World War II broke out in 1941 and they had to flee Manila for guerrilla life in Mindanao. Between 1941 until the end of the war in 1945, they did not play the piano nor violin. For several years after the war, there was no time for music either. The afternoon they sat out on the patio swing and discussed piano lessons may have signaled the time to put the War behind. It was time to fill their lives with music again.

Evolving Genres of the Written Word: “Fake News Fiction” & the Like(s)

Alfred A. Yuson

In a world that's said to have gone upside down, the primary victim is the primary virtue that is truth.

What is truth? It comes in many faces. It has a range of identities, definitions and synonyms, such as verity, or simply, fact, as in scientific data. As well does it enjoy a multiplicity of antonyms: untruth, lie (from white to barefaced), deceit, duplicity, fiction, and these days, alternative facts.

The verbiage related to politics and the verdure of imagination that is literature appear to have coalesced, or are now running parallel. The usual error of conflation is also eager to mistake one for the other.

The year just passed has been recognized as the starting point of a timeframe for this head-shaking development, much as hindsight now identifies the brave new words of long ago that have apparently proven prescient. The popularity of the book *1984* by George Orwell has been revived, and demand for copies has risen so surprisingly that retailers soon found themselves out of stock.

Another title, *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, is also now being championed by literary critics and political observers alike as having even more of forecasting relevance to what has been happening worldwide: in brief the rise of populism with its fearful tendency to slide to authoritarianism, let alone fascism and tyranny.

But it seems that popular leaders have in common the facility to utilize the popular lie, the untruth that becomes an article of faith among

fanatics. Emotions are wildly at play when rationality takes a backseat, inclusive of its invaluable aspect that is skepticism, or the need to question the validity of anything before blind acceptance.

With the resurgence of Putin's Russia, the calamitous meltdown in Syria that has propelled millions of refugees towards Europe and elsewhere, the continuing bizarre behavior of North Korea's kingpin, the historical fiction advanced by the People's Republic of China with regards entitlement to the South China Sea, the shocker that was Brexit, which first gave distinct voice to the rise of populism, as eventually affirmed with the election of a Rodrigo Duterte in our country and a Donald Trump in the United States of America, with more rightwing populists waiting in the wings in other countries — all these political developments have become alarming, not only for progressives or liberals, or democrats (in lower case), but learned observers, journalists and historians who have enjoyed the privilege of casting a long view on global shifts that concern paradigms.

Fake news started with electoral or political campaigns, and proliferated upon the questionable success of such exercises. To convince voters of the supposedly positive effects of having the United Kingdom withdraw from the European Union, its proponents shielded the electorate from the notion of possibly deleterious economic consequences, and focused instead on the supposed cleansing of the national workforce. It rallied the emotional demographic sector behind the false ideal of a cessation of employment being taken over by migrants.

For a specifically personal case — personal to me, that is, as well as other lovers of whisky — no thinking went into the repercussions of having to establish new trade relations for the distribution and sale of single malt whisky and blended whisky traditionally manufactured with excellence in Scotland, which happens to be part of the United Kingdom.

Concerned ambassadors with knowledge of trade diplomacy have raised the same concern as when Scotland attempted to seek independence only recently. Had the move succeeded, an independent Scotland would have had to establish diplomatic relations with all the countries that the U.K. already enjoyed trade relations with. Some measure of disaster could have befallen Scotland with regards its distribution of whisky. The delays

and new arrangements would have translated into much higher prices for good ol' Scotch.

Thankfully, for myself and several friends with whom I've engaged in many hours of elbow-bending at a bar, that didn't happen. But now, with Brexit, which still has to come into gradual and full shape, the same concern has been revived. Well, it probably won't affect many Filipinos who still think nothing of the perils of gout while manifesting their nationalism with continued intake of San Miguel beer. But for those who have "moved on" and learned of the greater healing powers of "uisge beatha" or the "water of life," we can only say that the gods of spirits remain just, since Japanese and Taiwanese whisky now provide alternatives to our idolatry of the Scottish genius with regards both water and life.

In the US, the false news also started during the long-drawn contest that involved primaries for the selection of Barack Obama's successor. In a way, it may be said to have been similar to searching for a Nikka or Suntory replacement for Lagavulin single malt, that is, if a great whisky can be compared to a great president.

And here in our own proverbial neck of the woods, similarly, the black propaganda unleashed on and from all sides during the presidential election campaign of 2016 became easily converted into both defensive and offensive (in more ways than one) battlecries, even with or maybe because of the euphoria of victory as what turned so-called "retards" extra-giddy.

"Bias" became one of the first bywords. Never mind that its popular, populist's use as an adjective only displayed a severely limited level of literacy. In so-called trolls' hearts and minds (if a troll can be said to have a heart and a mind), all reportage and reckoning of their idol's triumph and initial conduct in office that was less than idolatrous merited that single word of dismissal, even if unhappily truncated in violation of proper use. "Bias." It embodied the simplistic notion of unquestionable supremacy.

We have also heard of the upturn in proffering false binaries or dichotomies, again a staple populist's tack. Everyone who raised an eyebrow or two, much less criticized the actuations and promouncements of the unconventional president, was said to be "*Dilawan*" or of the so-called "Yellow Army."

Much like what happened in winning the vote for Brexit, and much like what would happen with Donald Trump's unlikely but apparently inexorable triumph (ironically despite his losing in the "popular" vote count), it was the promise of a departure from what was perceived as the faulty facets of a predecessor that invested faith in the wildest of prospects. Not only wildest, but the actual diametrical opposite of the predecessor.

Ah, disente, kanyo? O, eto, mamamatay-tao, na mumurahin pa kayo!
In place of what was adjudged as utter display of apathy, here then was the stark, raw empathy involving a purveyor of crude language and street justice.

With regards our former colonizer, in place of expertise in foreign affairs, there was the brazen allure of a demagogue that said what the disgruntled and displaced wanted to hear: protectionism against all imagined threats, terroristic, economic, and social, that went with porous borders and the nagging defiance against stereotyping the faithful of other, different religions as well as expanded gender sets.

When reason is cast to the wayside in favor of panaceas, so are the hallmarks of truth, whether they're of the motherhood character of the text in Goodwill greeting cards or of more detailed and forceful substance. Such is the present dilemma in the United States of America: how does one convince the other half that climate change is indeed a scientifically proven threat, at least more so than the possibility that a Muslim from countries that had no record of terrorist attacks in the U.S. may now be importing terror together with her or his luggage upon landing at the John F. Kennedy airport, his passport and visa details be damned?

Falsehood has a certain lure, as if of a siren song, of what we want to hear, and the promises the tune entails. One could well imagine that the literarily inclined among Americans, especially if they were brought up cuddling classic books, say, even foreign vintage epics, that if there had to be a new Captain America to lead the country back to safety, that leader would, like Ulysses, command his men to lash himself into the mast, so that he would be powerless to give in to the temptations sung by Circe and her minions. But alas, not only does the current version of Captain America forego that wise recourse; he himself flings the siren songs to a

people becoming even more divided, owing to different interpretations of the truth.

He insists that the crowd at his inauguration as President was the largest ever, despite substantial camera evidence to the contrary. And his own minions suggest, indeed as the now infamous Ms. Kellyanne Conway had, that there is such a thing as “alternative facts.”

To that fanciful statement, the response was just as devastating as they were incredulous. “They’re falsehoods,” intoned television journalist Chuck Todd. Lies, plain and simple: that was the common verdict, except perhaps from among some Republicans and members of the extended Trump family.

Yet it seemed to be all of a piece with what had presaged the fantastic utterance. The world going upside down had also entered a dimension defined as post-truth — wherein falsity has crept up to attain a deadlock with veracity, and all systems go when it came to a coin toss between the two.

In Malacañang, the otherwise gently avuncular and articulate spokesperson Ernesto Abella came up with his appeal for both “creative imagination” and “creative interpretation” in reference to the often confounding pronouncements of the Bossman himself.

If the consequences of all this verbal shell game weren’t or can’t be tragic, why, of course we can all grin and bear it, maybe even accede that we’ve just been thrust into comedy hour.

And yet what we are experiencing now is actually part of an apparent global pivot to a curiously novel inclusion among the genres of writing, inclusive of verbal articulation — which is written down and reported, and which draws adverse reactions, all on paper or on reading screens of all sizes, from television monitors to desktops and laptops to tablets and cellphones.

In terms of reportage and commentary per se, while it started with a fringe kind of journalism — blogs and trolling on social media — the initially questionable purveyance of fake or false news has seeped into established tri-media, with prominent personalities, mostly related to politics, spewing mind-toggling conundrums or seemingly oxymoronic terms such as that by-now infamous classic: “alternative facts.”

A popular blogger in the service of Duterte as infallible icon in turn compares the writing of fake news with that of fiction, and identifies them as the same banana. I will submit that she may have a point there, however possibly tenuous, or yet to be established through the process of correct discourse.

It may not matter that her master often prefers to rely on a lodestone of invective. Or should it? He is evidently not of the province of recognition that to curse is to give up on discourse, to cease and desist from being discursive. *Nawalan nang diskurso, kaya't magmumura na lang, at/o magpapatawa ng paka-krudo.*

What about claims that appear to be plucked out of thin air? Four million Filipinos are drug addicts. That's one in 25. Over a million surrenderees, thus acknowledging their addiction. Where are they now, when a supposed rehabilitation center funded by a generous Chinese fellow, one that can house over 10,000 poor but salvageable folks, is presently only rendering service to not even a few hundred?

Reputable national and international news organizations have decried what they contest as “dubious claims ... used to justify (the) bloody anti-narcotics campaign, (per) review of official government data and interviews with the president’s top anti-drug officials, (who) say that data on the total number of drug users, the number of users needing treatment, the types of drugs being consumed and the prevalence of drug-related crime is exaggerated, flawed or non-existent.”

Why does he say that he will take his policemen’s accounts as Gospel truth, no matter if it all flies in the face of CCTV evidence and official investigative reports, then eventually backtrack, without seeming so, when he freezes the same policemen’s conduct of the all-out war on drugs, not because the number of over 7,000 Filipinos slain has been breached, but more because one South Korean businessman was strangled to death right inside a police camp?

The same creative spokesperson recently contended, in the wake of a former president’s niggling observations, that President Rodrigo Duterte’s leadership style is “transformational” and “more visionary.” More visionary than that of the former president, or even of all his predecessors, we suppose he means.

We cannot dispute this claim, as yet, and brand it as falsehood. It is but a claim. And who knows, the first part of the claim may be true, in a manner of speaking. That is, that the burgeoning kill list had indeed caused this strange divergent development — of many Filipinos being transformed into a community characterized by general apathy, while many others were in turn being transformed back into the old “days of disquiet and nights of rage” — as Jose “Pete” Lacaba described the season before the imposition of Martial Law.

Let me digress a bit at this point to offer an anecdote: a personal recollection of a memorable conversation I had with a friend, if a more senior colleague in the profession, that took place sometime in the late 1970s or early-to-mid 1980s. I must apologize that my memory — that fallible repository of private truths as well as acts of deceit — cannot presently pinpoint the exact year of this occurrence: a late-night meal downed with Irish whiskey at the original Café Adriatico off Remedios Circle in Malate.

I also can’t remember what brought us together: just the two of us, as the song says. We must have come from some concert or cultural activity around the area. In any case, I found myself being treated to this midnight repast and drink, by virtue of his being the senior colleague, by Mr. Adrian E. Cristobal, the fellow we honor with this lecture series.

After exchanging perverse notes on the comely ladies we must have ogled in the activity we had attended, and maybe comforting ourselves with prevarications on why we wound up at Café Adriatico by ourselves alone, the chat went on to literary matters, very briefly. And eventually, to my surprise, to politics.

I can’t for the life of me establish exactly when this conversation took place, whether it was in the early 1980s when Martial Law had already supposedly ceased, or maybe even after post-EDSA People Power I, when Marcos had already flown off and Adrian had relegated himself into an opinion columnist of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

I had never been in his league, merely in his employ at some point or other, or as a beneficiary of his patronage at the height of Marcos’ Martial Law.

What surprised me most was when Adrian volunteered to share with me, not upon any solicitation on my part, what he thought had been

Marcos' gravest offense against the Filipino people. And that was the fact, as he said, that as someone who ruled for 20 years as president and despot, Marcos had stonewalled a generation of the best and brightest Filipino leaders from ever taking over the reins of government. Not just Aquino, Benigno Jr., he said, but the likes of Lorenzo Tañada, Jovito Salonga, Jose Wright Diokno... I'm not sure now if he added other names. But that, in a nutshell, was Adrian's bit of a post-mortem on what turned out to be ruinous political rule.

Well, I'm sure that he had other, varied post-Marcos insights that he shared with other friends and intimates, or may have put down in yet private notes. But it was a memorable night for me, since I had been allowed entry into one small room of verity, if of the Monday armchair theorist variety at worst. I had felt secure however that even given his reputation as a man of letters, a fictionist and dramatist, a Palace rationalizer himself (but never an apologist, as far as I knew), a strategic spinmeister, and a sophisticated raconteur of wit and antic humor, what he told me was a personal tidbit of truth.

Adrian expressed an opinion, a studied opinion. Given his experience as part of history, and his appreciation of that history, then this studied opinion may be said to be closer to fact than to conjecture.

We are all said to be arbiters of our authenticity of experience, and this is what ordains us to function on whichever side of the fence may seem attractive or fortuitous for the moment.

Here, now, many of us find ourselves at a crossroads, as always. From the oral tradition to generational, genre-saturated literature, from journalism in all its forms to the crafting of academic papers, advertising briefs, legislative proposals and judicial discourses, indeed, even or especially of history, we know or we should know that we have all been part of a floating era of baloney, balderdash and bullshit.

Post-truth. Default narrative. Creative interpretation. These are now the syndromic symptoms that stupefy us who are worshipful of the word, written or expressed any which way.

But are Cervantes' windmills also a lie created in his famous character's mind, in the guise of geriatric lunacy, except that it amuses and entertains us? And is Borges' phantom in the circular ruins a fictive hero as

fantastic, thus unreal, as Smeagol/Gollum or Gotham's Batman, and Gabo Marquez' butterflies emerging from a dying man's mouth as winsome, windblown and yet wacky as a flying Peter Pan?

In real life, there is the individual that is said to be a pathological liar. In fiction, there is the unreliable narrator: the young boy whose narrative is riddled with whimsicality, or the mentally deficient who mistakes paranoia or fantasy for realism.

"True Lies" was the title of a film. "Gaslighting" has become a trendy term sourced to another film, where the manipulation of a victim is carried out by dimming the light from a gas lamp to achieve effects of gradual reality distortion. In fiction, effective magic realism is attained by first creating stepping stones as a gradual passage to further suspension of disbelief. One does not stun a reader with a major miracle, unless one were writing in another genre that is not disguised as partly realistic, such as the fable, or outright fantasy.

Julio Cortazar's novel *Hopscotch* employs exactly that game's modus operandi in terms of structural formatting. One can best go through the sequences, as suggested by the author himself, by jumping from one chapter to another, the way filmmaker Quentin Tarantino eschews straight narrative structure, or how Akira Kurosawa repeats a sequence with retold versions of what really happened.

Not a far cry, I say, from techniques now being employed by disruptive presidents.

When I taught the Short Story at the Ateneo, I would tell the class, on the very first day, how we actually apply fiction nearly every day of our lives, with regards the most commonplace things, or at the very least during special moments. As when, say, as young students, they have been given the privilege of driving a car to school and back. And on a particular afternoon, they get into an accident. And when Papa comes home that evening, how they must break the bad news.

Options galore. Pa, guess what? I got an A in our Philo exam. Also in Theology. Oh, by the way, I got into an accident today. Option 2: Wow, Pa, there I was, driving along Katipunan, when a lovely rainbow materialized over Marikina after a thunderstorm, and I couldn't help but marvel at God's wonders, when this container truck just came out of the blue and ...

Option 3: Papa, I know you'll have to sanction me for this, but it really wasn't my fault. Or, I mean, I couldn't help getting emo when my new girlfriend Maria suddenly told me, while we were in the middle of tight traffic, that she's transferring to De La Salle after the sem. So, well, the car's a total wreck.

These options are among the various ways one can mount a fictional attack, or simply, tack. One chooses what one may deem as the most effective way to tell a story. And one's decision would depend on one's knowledge of the audience, in this case one's father. Is he the gullible, merciful type, or very macho if somewhat romantic? One selects the mode with which to engage what one thinks is the level of the listener's credulity.

And one tells such varied stories in one's entire life. How best to explain the birds and the bees to a child? How to tell the spouse when one is fired from a job? How to tell one's in-laws of the need to downsize, or migrate to America, without them?

We go through life and we learn, through a continuum of conundrums.

You can spin but not tell a lie. You should always or only rely on verified data. Remember the boy who cried wolf. Matroshka dolls are layered truths. Smoke and mirrors are the key to M.C. Escher's drawings. Bach's canons are auditory palindromes that sound exactly the same going forward and backward; they are mathematical in their effusive precision.

Jazz improvisation, characterized by inventiveness of spirit and artistry of innovation, plies the sublime "truth" of music, hops, skips and jumps over its restrictions, or undermines it in a subversive yet empowering new way.

Ah, religion: the age-old narrative of adoration and faith, however much it continues to distance itself from humanism, that is, the cognizance of woman's and man's own powers of healing and magic, of transubstantiation of hate to happiness, of gaining haloes owing to human heroism. But there is the power of prayer to convince the prayerful of the strength of their hopes.

Goebbels tells a lie that grows in credibility on a daily basis. It is different from the parlor game that is Chinese Whispers, where the original truth undergoes a procession of embroidery or misinterpretation until it arrives at the end of the line as an entirely different truth. For

its part (let me repeat), China's claim of a nine-dash line is still simply historical fiction.

The hackjob is a tabloid or online clickbait away. Trolls and bots feed on information access, algorithms, data charge, selective justice and happy endings.

We hear of "alt-fact" from the world of "alt-reality."

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less." "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."

We collect quotes referring to this brave new upside-down cake of a world and its reverse-parallel, concave-convex universe.

The writer-editor Dean Francis Alfar observes: "Alternate facts, fake news, creative interpretation, post-post-truth. Welcome to the world of speculative fiction! Except it isn't speculative anymore."

Peter Yu of Hong Kong comments on an FB thread: "Chinese have a saying for this, 'pointing at a deer, and calling it a horse.' It's a common tactic of the failing ruling class."

Emma Grey Ellis of *Wired* opines: "We don't live in the age of post-truth. We live in the age of internet-enabled bullshit."

The scholar-author Vince Rafael in Seattle informs us: "A new and timely course, 'Calling Bullshit', soon to be offered by my colleagues at UW, Carl T. Bergstrom (School of Information) and Jevin West (Biology). Here's the syllabus..."

Trump's press secretary Sean Spicer laments: "The default narrative is always negative, and it's demoralizing, And I think that it's just unbelievably frustrating when you're continually told it's not big enough, it's not good enough, you can't win."

From Northwest Portland, the celebrated author Ursula K. Le Guin weighs in:

"A recent letter in *The Oregonian* compares a politician's claim to tell 'alternative facts' to the inventions of science fiction. The comparison won't work. We fiction writers make up stuff. Some of it clearly impossible,

some of it realistic, but none of it real — all invented, imagined — and we call it fiction because it isn't fact. We may call some of it 'alternative history' or 'an alternate universe,' but make absolutely no pretense that our fictions are 'alternative facts.'

“Facts aren't all that easy to come by. Honest scientists and journalists, among others, spend a lot of time trying to make sure of them. The test of a fact is that it simply is so — it has no 'alternative.' The sun rises in the east. To pretend the sun can rise in the west is a fiction, to claim that it does so as fact (or 'alternative fact') is a lie.

“A lie is a non-fact deliberately told as fact. Lies are told in order to reassure oneself, or to fool, or scare, or manipulate others. Santa Claus is a fiction. He's harmless. Lies are seldom completely harmless, and often very dangerous. In most times, most places, by most people, liars are considered contemptible.”

And our own distinguished poet-fictionist-editor Gémino H. Abad often reminds us: “What is imagined is most real.”

To be virtual is to be virtuous, that is, in possession of the virtue of an imagined world, where the good cop and the bad cop can be a chiaroscuro of simplification.

Why, we might claim that even poetry is facsimile. Metaphors be with you, we now say as if wishing one a phosphorescent moral force.

Meanwhile, from Duterte: “*Istorya lang yan*. But be careful, sometimes it merges...” Typical of the mayor from Davao, he climaxes with ellipses, and thus divides us among those who think he is a brilliant strategist who deliberately confounds, and those who believe he is simply inarticulate, especially in terms of rendering finality.

Now trolls and mainstream media are at war, a war of bloggers' choosing, as they see themselves as the initial underdogs that have upped the ante with the privilege of Internet manipulation.

Sass Rogando Sasot, the same reputed Filipina scholar in the Netherlands who has come home to meet with her icon, and who had identified the writing of fake news as equal to writing fiction, posted the following on the Internet on January 30:

“Ito dapat ang final question:

“If you were the VP of a country and a typhoon is predicted to ravage your hometown at the same time as your family reunion in New York which you planned a year in advance, which one would you cancel? The typhoon or the family reunion?”

More or less, the reactions from the alleged *dilawan* may be capsulized as: *“Pwede na pala ma-cancel ang bagyo. (Ang sakit sa bangs.)”*

Others abandoned reason for the quick gratification of *ad hominem* cut-and-thrust as well as good ol’ false binaries.

From John Genuino: “If you were the president of a country, would you kill your own citizens?” That would be a better question.”

The pejorative, the caustic, the sarcastic, the satiric, the parodic are all employed in this raging war of words and worlds gone zany if not mad — where the enhancements of photoshopping are debated *vis-à-vis* professional pure-ism, and the claim of no filter is a championing of the naked truth. No lies! No enhancements! No bias!

Opinions and commentary in today’s social media — wayward spawn of masterworks in letters — entail obligations as measurable as those that challenged predecessors in communication.

Where does the snake oil salesman stand among annals of fakery? Perhaps a distinction may be attributed to the quality of the imaginative presentation. Maybe there simply is inherent privilege in literature of gravitas. Or is it that the morality of truth only rears its butt-end whenever the writing deals with actual human beings, the very (real) bumblers in a world of deceit?

Let us listen to a few disparate individuals who speak with the same sentiment if not the exact same tenor of voice.

The first is a basketball player, an NBA All-Star who can sink three-pointers and yet recall and invoke a great statesman from the past. After a Cleveland Cavaliers win over the Washington Wizards, when asked about a report that his teammate LeBron James favors trading him for Carmelo Anthony of the New York Knicks (which BTW James vehemently referred to as trash from a writer who was himself trash), Kevin Love posted this quote on his Instagram account: “A lie gets halfway around the world

before truth gets a chance to put its pants on.” The quote is from Winston Churchill.

From a report in the *International Business Times* last February 11, we read of how “Apple chief executive Tim Cook is calling on governments and technology firms to step up in the battle against fake news and misinformation online, dubbing it “one of today’s chief problems.”

“Cook urged governments to launch a public information campaign to curb the spread of false news stories, hoaxes and misinformation that are ‘killing people’s minds, in a way.’

More from Cook: “We are going through this period of time right here where unfortunately some of the people that are winning are the people that spend their time trying to get the most clicks, not tell the most truth.”

Even more recently, Mark Zuckerberg, the genius behind Facebook, added his voice to this growing condemnation of false news.

And finally, from a fellow Filipino, someone whom I don’t know personally, have never met, and only found on my Facebook News Feed. His name is Don Kusuanco. He seems to be based in California, but has apparently been here in relation to medical missions. His intelligence and convictions are evident, and his words of spirited engagement resonate with me.

On February 6, he posted a piece with the title, “Dutertism and the Legacy of Anti-Intellectualism.” He begins by recounting how he had been so fortunate way back in June 1991 when he managed to meet astronomer Carl Sagan, through his boss and mentor at the time at a UCLA research center, Prof. Richard Turco who was Sagan’s co-writer for the book *Nuclear Winter and the End of the Arms Race*.

He recalls, though admits to paraphrasing from faulty memory, what Sagan said at that time.

“It is our responsibility to safeguard knowledge, never to suppress knowledge even if it is knowledge that makes us uncomfortable, that challenges what we already know, and most importantly even if it bothers those who are in power because in the end, we know which parts of this knowledge are permissible and which ones are not.”

That was Sagan speaking. Now, 26 years later, Mr. or Dr. Kusuanco says those words have proven prophetic, “as scientific knowledge is being

ambushed in the halls of power.” He argues the point in the following excerpts:

“On the eve of Trump’s inauguration, scientists, hackers, librarians and archivists banded together to save climate change data and other scientific data from being deleted, altered or removed from public domain.

“Everywhere, I see signs of anti-intellectual elitism, as science, arts and humanities are being discredited, critical thinking relegated to insignificance, and replaced by celebrity entertainment, willful ignorance, lack of intellectual curiosity, a soundbite and video culture, and the irrational appeal of conspiracy theorists, flat-earthers and creationists.

“Here in the Philippines, a popular culture phenomenon called smart-shaming has been described. A social commentator once asked why people seem proud of the fact that they’re dumb. I notice how social media trolls, when confronted by facts and statistics that debunk their arguments, would say sarcastically: ‘*Sobrang talino mo.*’ or ‘Whoa stop, you’re giving me a nose-bleed’ or ‘Please be patient because I’m not as smart as you are.’

“The word ‘intellectual’ has become a dirty word, a code for elitism or someone divorced from the *masa*, a characteristic we no longer look for in our political leaders. In December, Duterte, while talking about hypocrisy, dismissed then US president Obama as an ‘intellectual’ who had no business being in politics. ‘*Alam mo kasi the reality ng mga bright... you read so many theories... Magkagulo ‘yan and you come up with something that really abominal.*’ (He meant abominable, jeje). This is coming from a man who cannot even finish his sentence coherently.

“It is our lack of education, our ignorance and our poverty that so-called populist politicians like Duterte and Trump exploit to perpetuate themselves in power and their corrupt ways. Instead of the Filipino people setting their agenda, we have become these politicians’ puppets and pawns in their political chess game.

“For those of us who can still distinguish between falsehood and truth, who still embrace the ideals of equality and liberty, who still subscribe to what is right and what is good, it is our responsibility not to permit our country to slide back into tyranny, superstition and darkness. We must argue for a level playing field for everybody so Filipino children will have access to education and move ahead in life.”

Indeed, education has always been key. To learning all about numbers and how they add up truthfully, or myths and legends and how they are told effectively, dwelling as they may on the un-real, as well as other stories that have to hew to the truth to gain real power.

While on the subject of education, allow me to mention an item of minor relevance with regards a particular form of learning — as what lawyers (often deliberately mispronounced as “liars”) need to go through. Somewhat like a basketball game that is prone to point-shaving, there is such a training regimen that hones a master of reason in the craft of point-splitting.

Jesuitic, we say of such an exercise, when one can argue, through the refinements of sophistry, a point either or both ways, and be convincing at least halfway if not entirely. Davao-based Jesuit Fr. Joel Tabora issued a rather belated acknowledgment of an initially misplaced trust in the Davao-mayor-turned-president’s efficacy of governance, when he finally had to find a stance somewhat compatible with or at least not exactly contrary to the prevailing thinking (even as we speak) among the poobahs of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines. We now find such comments that snort in this wise:

“Jesuits as ‘masters of casuistry’ bending the naked truth as it suits your politics...” Yes, much like lawyers, or blind men feeling up an elephant in the room and describing the animal of contention.

It is not our objective here and now to render judgment on who prevaricates and who speaks the truth. It should not be in our purview of discourse whether to side with whoever tells the truth more than the lie, or vice versa. It is enough for us to identify the tricks of the trade, and indicate what may be gained or lost in that endless commerce between truth and falsehood. And we are simply saying here that this engagement has reached new grounds in more ways than one.

What we may stress is that it is education that filters most of the muddy trappings of emotional resonance, and strips bare both the compelling logic and the trusted instinct that place us on one side of a question.

Somehow, truth has a stronger affinity with intelligence. That may be why it has increasingly come under siege. If you have the worldview of a bemused joker, why, it would seem like much fun — this smart-shaming

and truth-pooh-pooh-ing — no matter how damaging it may be to the rest of the values we trust ourselves to embrace. If you are alarmed however by the advent of such concepts as “fake news fiction” and alternative facts, then there is the path of the better dream to follow. Or we can always respond with humor.

The imaginative may recast the recollection of what was termed Benevolent Assimilation, well over a century ago, as a fake contraption much like an umbilical cord foisted upon a much younger country. And now the toddler and pop arrive at a karmic situation of mirroring one another’s versions of absurd siege — by untruth.

On one hand, the Trump travel ban involving seven countries now appears to have ground into a halt. On the other, the figure of over 7,000 extra-judicial killings appears to have marked a pause for contemplation. (Either that or one Korean life did it.) Now, it’ll be myth-making if it’s claimed that the number 7 always figures as zenith before a fall.

When we here stood on the side of truth in 1986 against a dictator who was fond of that number, our truth went viral the world over, maybe because truth almost always goes with freedom — freedom from living a life of deceit.

In the 2015 film *Youth* by Italian director Paolo Sorrentino, one of the ageing characters, a scriptwriter, delivers the wonderful line: “I have to believe in everything in order to make things up.”

Can truth be boring? Or should the question be: Is truth so boring that we have to come up with alternative figments of the imagination?

This question is posed to everyone. I hope that I have pirouetted enough around the pivot that circumscribes humanist causes, inclusive of both entertainment and enlightenment.

Thank you.

(NOTE: A longer version of this lecture was read at the Asian Institute of Management on February 20, 2017, as the 7th Adrian E. Cristobal Annual Lecture.)



Filipino

Hatinggabi sa Kumbento

Mayette Bayuga

Kasama ako sa mga lumabas, sa mga umalis na hindi na maaaring bumalik. Kami ang mga tinutukoy ng isang lumang kasabihan patungkol sa mga Relihiyosong Kongregasyon, kung saan itinakdang “Maraming tatawagin, ngunit ilan lang ang pipiliin.” Dahil diyan, maaaring sabihing kami ang mga pinagpilian.

May ibinigay na pananda sa aklat-dasalan ang naging matalik kong kaibigan sa kumbento bago ako tuluyang nagpaalam. Sariling disenyo at dibuho niya iyon, at nakasulat ang mga salitang ito (isinalin ko mula sa Ingles, kapwa namin hindi alam kung kaninong kaisipan): “Sa Kalbaryo, may isang lalaking matapang na hinarap ang kamatayan, at may isang babaeng matapang na ipinagpatuloy ang buhay. Para malaman natin na ang buhay at kamatayan ay nangangailangan ng iisang sangkap ng katapangan.” Katapangan. Doon ako nagkulang, alam ko. Hungkag na hungkag. Noon, at sana nga hindi na sa ngayon.

Kasisikat pa lang ng araw ay binabaybay na namin ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes ang mga kabahayan sa paligid ng aming kumbento sa Pasil. Tig-isa kami ng bitbit na malaking bag na butiktik ng mga donasyong pandesal, instant noodles, at de-lata. Sinasalubong kami ng mga batang nagkalat sa daan. Malalaki ang tiyan, nagkukulay-ginto ang buhok, at tapak ang marami sa kanila. Kung hindi lumang-luma’t kupas ay nanggigitata ang suot nilang t-shirt at shorts. Ang ilan sa kanila’y tumutulo ang sipon o kaya’y ang laway. Pero lahat sila’y maamo ang mukha, may kislap sa mga mata, at nakangiti

habang nakalahad ang mga palad na inaasam ang ipinamumudmod naming pandesal. Pasil, isang panahon noong dekada otsenta.

Sadyang itinayo sa mga mahihirap na komunidad o tinatawag na depressed areas ang mga kumbento ng Kongregasyong Relihiyosong pinasukan ko. “Buong pusong paglilingkod sa pinakamahirap sa tanang mahihirap” ang isa sa mga relihiyosong panata o religious vows ng Kongregasyon, maliban pa sa mga panata ng kadalisayan, kahirapan, at pagkamasunurin, na mga saligan ng buhay-relihiyoso.

Payak, walang mataas na bakod, at bukas sa lahat ang kumbento. Isa sa mga pangunahing gampanin ng mga madre ang pakikipamahay sa mga tao sa komunidad. Dinadalaw ng mga madre ang mga kabahayan pagkatapos ng unang misa tuwing Linggo. Pares-pares silang lumalakad, lahat ay may takdang rutang dapat galugarin at mga taong dapat abutin.

“Sister, datu ka o pobre?” Iyon ang naulinigan kong sabi niya sa mahinang boses. Hinawakan ng lilimahing taong gulang na batang babae ang mga palad ko, saka tumingala at tinitigan ang mukha ko. Hindi ko siya naintindihan. Magta-tatlong-araw pa lang ako sa Cebu. Mga dasal na Cebuano pa lang ang kinakabisa ko. Ang kumbento sa Pasil ang nagsisilbing Formation House ng mga gaya kong bagong pasok sa Kongregasyon. Iyon ang unang pagkakataong kasama ako sa pagdalaw sa mga kabayanan. Katatapos naman ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes ng Final Vows, takda ng pagiging isang ganap na madre, at ilang linggo pa lang siyang nakabalik galing sa Maynila.

“Tinatanong niya kung datu ka o pobre, kung mayaman ka o mahirap,” sabi ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes.

“Pobre! Pobre ako!” malakas kong sagot.

Ngumiti ang bata at kapit-kamay naming pinasok ang isang eskinita kung saan dikit-dikit ang mga bahay. Nagulat ako sa biglang pagsungaw ng ulo ng isang biik na nakatali sa pinto ng isa sa mga bahay. Nakahambalang sa makipot na daan ang mga gamit - balde, palanggana, lumang kalan, kaldero, at kung ano-ano pa. Nagpuputik dahil naglalaba ang isang babae sa isang tabi at doon mismo sa paligid niya isinasaboy ang tubig. Nakatalaytay ang mga sinampay. May isang lalaking biglang sumigaw at kahit hindi ko maintindihan, pakiwari ko ay may minumura. Pumalahaw ang isang bata. Manaka-nakang tumatahol ang isang aso. Kinukutkot ng mga pusa ang tambak ng mga nakaplastik na basura sa isang sulok.

“Maayo!” sigaw namin ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes habang sinisilip ang bawat bukas na bintana’t pinto. Binitawan ng bata ang kamay ko at tumakbo papunta sa isa sa mga bahay. Lumingon siya sa akin bago pumasok sa pinto, titig na titig pa rin sa akin, para bang may pinag-aaralan sa mukha ko.

“Maayong buntag,” may mangilan-ngilang sumasagot sa aming pagbati.

Nagpatuloy kami sa pag-abot ng pandesal sa mga lumalapit sa amin, bata man o matanda. Hanggang makaliko kami papunta sa isang hanay ng mga kabahayan. Maluwang ang bahaging iyon at may mga bakanteng lupa. Nanlaki ang mga mata ko sa mga nakalatag na mala-pating na isda sa ilang panulukan. Tinitilad daw at dinadaing ang mga iyon at ibinibenta sa merkado, sabi ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes. Pangingsda ang isa sa mga pangunahing pinagkakakitaan ng komunidad, na naliligiran ng dagat. Dagat iyong kulay burak, umaalingasaw sa basura, at pinanlalagkit ng krudo. Laging may paroo’t parito at may nakapondong mga bangka. Abot-tanaw kung may parating na barko at kung may barkong nakadaong sa dako pa roon.

Nang malaman ang balak kong pagpasok sa Kongregasyon, ilang kakilala ang pumigil sa akin. Hindi ko raw kakayanin ang buhay sa squatters’ area. May nagsabi pang ang alam niya ay kasama sa sakripisyo ng mga madre ng Kongregasyon ang paglalakad ng tapak. Baka raw mapako ako at matetano. Bakit hindi na lang daw sa Kongregasyon ng mga madre kung saan ako nag-aral noong High School, na isa sa mga pinakamatandang Kongregasyon sa Pilipinas, ako pumasok. “Hindi ko maaaring piliin kung saan ako tatawagin,” sagot ko sa lahat. Pero paulit-ulit na ibinubulong ko sa sarili ko, hindi ninyo ako totoong kilala.

Sumigaw ng maayo si Sr. Ma. Lourdes sa tapat ng isang bahay na yari sa kahoy at kawayan. “Saka kamo, Sister,” sigaw din ng isang babae mula sa likod-bahay. Tumuloy na kami sa loob.

Tumbok ng pinto, nakaratay sa papag na may gulanit na banig ang isang matandang lalaki. Nanunuot ang panghi at ang amoy ng suka. Maputlang-maputla ang matandang lubog ang mga pisngi at yayat ang katawan. Halos hindi na ito makakilos, pero kahit paano ay tumango at bumuka-buka ang bibig nang kausapin ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes at yayaing magdasal. Pautal-utal man, sinabayan ko sila.

“Amahan namo, nga anaa sa mga langit ... Pagdaygon ang Imong Ngalan. Moabot kanamo ang Imong gingharian ...”

Paglabas namin ng bahay na iyon, naabutan naming binabaligtad ng isang babae ang mga isdang nakabilad sa yero sa di kalayuan. May malaki't maliit na mga isda, may bilugan, may haba. Napansin ko ang ilang danggit at pusit, at hindi ko alam ang tawag sa iba pa. Nakakula naman sa kabilang bahagi ng yero ang mga puting kamison, bra, at salawal.

Nilapitan namin ang babae. Halatang sanay na itong dinadalaw ng mga madre ang bahay nila. Sinabi ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes na kailangan nang dalhin sa Tahanan ang tatay nito. May isa pang kumbento ang Kongregasyon doon din sa Cebu, kung saan inaalagaan sa isang Tahanan ang matatandang may malubhang sakit o inabandona na ng sariling pamilya.

Sinabi ng babaeng pumunta na rin sa kaniya ang kasamahan naming madre. Pero ayaw daw niyang mahiwalay sa kaniya ang kaniyang tatay. Kalooy si Tatay, sabi ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes. Magiging maayo raw ang butang nito sa Tahanan. Mariing umiling ang babae, sabay tulo ng luha. Ipinagpatuloy nito ang pagbabaliktad sa dinadaing na mga isdang bilugan, haba, maliit, malaki, danggit, pusit, pati kamison, bra, at salawal.

Tahimik kami habang lumalakad palayo sa bahay. Maaari kaming makiusap. Pero hindi kami maaaring mamilit. Ang mahalaga sa lahat, maaari kaming magdasal nang walang humpay. Unlimited, kung baga. Iyon ang isa sa mga una kong naintindihan sa katuturan ng aming aktibo-kontemplatibong Kongregasyon.

Bukang-liwayway pa lang, abala na ang mga madre sa paggawa ng mga tungkulin para sa komunidad ng kumbento. Kinakalap mula sa kalye ang mga taong-grasa at pulubing wala nang mauuwian pa; inaasikaso ang mga inabandonang bata't matanda sa Tahanan; at kinakatok ang bahay ng mga may matinding pangangailangan. Pero may mga oras na nakatakda para sa taimtim na pagdarasal. Mahaba ang mga dasal mula sa mga makakapal na libreta. Matagal na panahon ang ginugugol sa pagluhod. Dasal ang tunay at tanging lakas.

Minsan, inaabot ako ng labis na antok habang nagdarasal. Minsan naman, ng matinding pagkabagot.

Masakit na sa balat ang araw, nasa kalye pa rin kami ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes. Kailangan naming masunson ang lawak ng aming ruta habang tahimik na nagrososyos. Nadaanan namin ang isang babaeng nagkukula ng mga puting kumot sa kanilang bakuran. Agad siyang kumaway. Lumapit kami at sa mabilis na pananalita ay ipinakiusap niyang dalawin namin ang

kapitbahay nilang si Osing. Kauwi lang daw nito galing sa Maynila, kung saan ito nagtrabaho ng ilang buwan. Bugbog-sarado raw ito ng amo at walang kapera-pera. Kaya lang, nakakandado ang bahay nina Osing. Mga estudyante niya sa katesismo sina Alice at Osing noong postulant pa lang siya, sabi ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes.

“Sr. Lily...” Hindi pa kami nakalalayo nang tuwang-tuwang mahigpit na yumakap kay Sr. Ma. Lourdes ang isang babae. May kasama itong dalagitang buntis.

“Sr. Ma. Lourdes na, Nay Milag,” sagot ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes. Pinapalitan ng pangalang hango sa mga pangalan at katawagan ng Mahal na Birhen o ng mga santa ang pangalan ng madre kapag naisagawa na ang kaniyang Final Vows.

Ibinaling ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes ang atensiyon sa dalagitang buntis. “Minyo ka na, Doris?” tanong niya rito. Alanganin ang ngiting tumango ang dalagita. Sixteen pa lang ang kaniyang anak, buntong-hininga ni Nay Milag. Estudyante rin ito ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes dati sa katesismo.

Buto’t balat ang biik na nakatali sa poste ng bahay na kasunod naming dinalaw. Mataas ang bahay na may kawayang hagdan. “Maayong buntag,” tawag ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes.

Mugto ang mga mata ng babaeng sumungaw sa bintana. “Saka kamo, Sister,” impit ang kaniyang boses.

Nabungaran naming nakabulagta sa sahig ang isang lalaking malaki ang katawan. Nangangamoy-alak ito at patay-tulog sa kalasingan. Okupado na nito ang halos kalahati ng kubo. Sumalampak sa tabi ng lalaki sa sahig na yari sa silat-silat na kawayan ang babae. Naupo kami sa tabi niya. Maputla siya, puno ng mumunting gatla sa noo, at bagsak na bagsak ang katawan. Nanatili siyang nakatungo nang kausapin ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes, kinakalikot ang kaniyang butuhang mga daliri. Ni isang salita ay wala siyang sinabi. Noong una, akala ko ay nanay siya ng lalaki, na halatang bata pa.

“Mangadye ka sa Guinoo, Ebeng,” sabi ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes. Biglang gumalaw ang paa ng lalaki at saka ito umungol. Napatayo ako sa takot. Akala ko ay babangon ito. Pero nagsimula itong humilik. “May awa ang Guinoo,” dugtungo ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes.

“Gusto ko nang mamatay, Sister,” humikbi-hikbi si Ebeng. Mahaba ang naging sagot ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes, kaya lang ay sa Cebuano. Inabutan ko

si Ebeng ng instant noodles, de-lata, at pandesal. Agad niyang isinubo ang pandesal.

“Huwag ka nang umiyak,” sabi ko. Pinahid niya ang kaniyang luha at suminghot. Nang paalis na kami, hinagisan ko rin ng pandesal ang biik na nakatali sa poste. Bagong kasal pa lang daw si Ebeng noong panahong aspirant si Sr. Ma. Lourdes. Noon pa man daw, ganoon na ang buhay nito.

Marahil isa ang kuwento ni Ebeng sa maraming dahilan kaya ako tumakas. Sa katahimikan ng mga hatinggabi sa kumbento, hindi ko kinakaya ang bigat ng mga kuwentong gaya ng kaniya nababalutihan man ako ng mga dasal. Ano nga ba ang totoong maibibigay ko kay Ebeng, saang libreta nga ba ng mga dasal ako huhugot ng maituturo ko sa kaniya, paano ko nga ba siyang matutulungan? Iyon ang mga walang katapusan kong tanong. Maaari namang ginamit ko lang dahilan ang bigat ng kuwento niya at ng iba pang nakilala ko sa bawat araw ng Linggo ng pagdalaw ko sa mga kabahayan, para kumbinsihin ang sarili kong hindi talaga ako karapat-dapat sa kumbento.

At maraming hatinggabi nga maraming taon pa ang lumipas, nagliwanag sa aking hindi naman talaga ang hirap at sakit ng buhay sa Pasil ang tinakasan ko. Dahil mas marami pang buhay na higit ang rubdob at pait kaysa sa mga nakita ko roon. At sa mga sumunod na panahon saan man ako naroon, tinakasan ko rin hindi lang ang mga hirap at sakit, rubdob at pait, kundi ang napakaraming pagkakataon - mas maalwang trabaho, mas maginhawa sanang buhay, at oo, sa totoo lang, pati pag-ibig.

Paulit-ulit kong tinakasan ang lahat, laging hinahabol ng hindi ko maipaliwanag na lungkot, ng dilim, at ng takot. Lalo't higit ng takot. Natakot ako sa responsibilidad...natakot akong magtiis...natakot akong makisangkot...natakot akong lumundag...natakot akong maging masaya ...natakot akong magmahal. Sa bawat hatinggabi, nagtatago ako sa hiwaga ng mga salita, isinasalaysay ang hibik, kiliti, siphayo, halakhak, kilig, salamisim, hinaing, kulay, at saysay ng mga buhay na hindi kahit kailan man magiging akin.

Tahimik naming tinalunton ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes ang daan patungo sa may dagat. Huminto kami sa tapat ng isang bahay na higit pang mataas kaysa sa bahay nina Ebeng. Sala-salabat ang mga lambat na nakasabit sa paligid nito. “Maayo,” kapwa kaming sumigaw, nakatingala sa bahay na

bukas ang pinto at nasisilip ang mga nakabiting palamuting panay gawa sa capiz shells.

“Sister,” mula sa isang natatabingang bahagi ng silong sumigaw ang babae. Nagtatagpi ito ng lambat. “Nakabalik na pala kayo, Sister,” sabi nito kay Sr. Ma. Lourdes, saka tumingin sa akin. “Bagong nobisyada ka, Sister?” tanong nito. “Aspirant pa lang,” sagot ko. “Ako si Jean,” pakilala niya. Binati namin ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes ang mga likhang capiz sa bahay nila. Sinabi niyang ipinakisabit lang ang mga iyon sa kanilang dingding dahil bakante naman. Gawa ang mga iyon ng kanilang kapitbahay.

“Mama ...,” humahangos ang isang batang nagdadalagita. Tinanong ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes kung si Baby daw ba ito. Dalaga na raw pala.

“Ang ganda-ganda niya,” sabi ko.

Ibinaba ni Jean ang punit na lambat at niyakap ang anak. “Bata pa itong anak ko, Sister. Bata pa siya, di ba?” parang nagmamakaawang tanong niya sa akin. Parang gusto niyang sabihin kong hindi pa nga dalaga ang maganda niyang anak, bata pa ito, bata pa, bata paaa

Pinasamahan kami ni Jean kay Baby sa kanilang kapitbahay. Halos ay sa dagat na nakatirik ang bahay. Tuwing umaalon ay nababasa ang silong kung saan nagkalat ang capiz shells, na ang ilan ay durog-durog na. Nang marinig namin ang “saka” ay agad na kaming umakyat. Mula bubong hanggang dingding at sahig ay puno ng mga obrang yari sa capiz shells - aranya, salamin, lampara, plorera, kuwadro, kalendaryo, relo, at kung ano-ano pa. Abalang kinukutikot ng isang ale ang isang hugis-palakang dekorasyon, nakadukmo sa pagkakasalampak sa sahig. “Maayong buntag, Sisters,” sabi niyang ni hindi tumitingala. Tinanong ko kung gawa niya ang lahat ng nakadispley sa sala. “Layblihod,” sagot niya.

“Babay, Sisters,” paalam ni Baby sa amin.

“Sige Baby, salamat, umuwi ka na,” panabay naming sagot ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes. Tumakbong palayo si Baby, pero hindi para umuwi kundi para pumunta sa nakahintong karo ng isang lalaking nagtitinda ng iba’t ibang klaseng pagkain. Sinipat nito ang mga nakabiting puso o kaning nakabalot sa hinabing dahon ng niyog, tinapik ang mga botelya ng sahog ng haluhalo, at inamoy-amoy ang fishballs. Bata pa nga siya, gaya ng sabi ni Jean. At sana nga, buntong-hininga ko, magtagal pa siyang batang botelya ng haluhalo, fishballs, at nakabiting puso lang ang pinag-iinteres. Abalang-abala pa rin si Jean nang bumalik kami sa kanila. Kailangan daw niyang tapusin ang

sinusulsihang lambat. Habang si Baby ay sarap na sarap sa nginunguyang bagong sawsaw na fishballs sa tamis-anhang sauce... tusok... sawsaw... nguya.

Ubos na ang pandesal. Katanghalian na. May mga batang humahabol sa amin. “Palihug, sisters ... pandesal ... pandesal!” sigaw nila. Gutom na sila. Kaya lang wala nang laman ang mga bitbit naming bag. Ipinagpag ko ang mga iyon at umiling. Nagtakbuhan silang palayo.

Akala ko abandonado ang bahay na sunod naming hinintuan. Nagkalat ang basurang pinagpipiyestahan ng ipis at bangaw sa labas. Sarado ang dalawang bintana. Nakaawang ang pinto pero walang kaingay-ingay mula sa loob. Sumilip ako sa siwang ng pinto. “Maayong buntag,” tawag ko. Madilim ang loob ng bahay at naghalo ang iba’t-ibang amoy.

“Sister ...,” biglang sumungaw sa pinto ang isang babae, at halatang hiyang-hiyang pinatuloy kami.

Bahagyang lumiwanag nang buksan ang pinto. May dalawang batang nakaupo sa isang malaking kama, tumutulo ang sipon at walang salawal. May tumpok ng tae ng tao sa isang sulok. Nakatambak sa ibabaw ng mesa ang orinola, mga baso’t pinggan, trapo, curlers, suklay, pulbos, walang takip na lipstick, at kung ano-ano pa. Tinabig ng babae at paika-ikang lumabas ang isang asong naknak ang mga sugat. “Pasensiya na, Sister,” sabi ng babae, “may sakit ang manghod ko.”

Pinagsabihan ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes ang babae. Magkakasakit daw talaga ang kapatid nito kasi ang dumi-dumi ng paligid. Buksan daw ang mga bintana. Turuan daw ang mga bata na magkalibang sa kubeta. Bigla akong nakaramdam ng matinding pagod, kaya nagpauna na akong lumabas. Hindi na rin nagtagal sa pangangaral si Sr. Ma. Lourdes.

Pinagpapawisan na ako at kumakalam na ang sikmura. Kahit wala akong relo, alam kong malapit nang dumupikal ang kampana ng Orasyon. Kailangan na naming makabalik sa kumbento. Ang tugtog ng kampana ay tinig ng Diyos. Iyon ang turo sa amin. Tawag iyon para itigil ang ano mang ginagawa at magdasal. Sama-sama kaming lahat ng mga madreng mag-oorasyon sa kapilya bago kumain ng pananghalian.

Abot-tanaw na ang tarangkahan ng kumbento nang madaanan namin ang ilang lalaki. Nakapalibot sila sa isang lamesita kung saan may mga bote ng alak at may inihaw na isdang nasa dahon ng saging. Panay ang hitit ng sigarilyo ng ilan samantalang ang iba naman ay sinisimsim ang laman ng

kanilang mga baso.

“Sisters nga guapa ...,” sabi ng isa pagtapat namin. Napahawak ako sa kamay ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes, sabay usal ng Memorare ng Mahal na Birhen. Tinantiya ko kung ilang malalaking hakbang-takbo mula sa kinatatayuan namin papunta sa tarangkahan ng kumbento.

“Huwag kang matakot. Mababait ang mga iyan. Tumutulong sila pag may mga kailangan tayo at pag may mga gagawin sa community. Hindi naman sila nambabastos, nagsasabi lang ng totoo na magaganda tayo,” pampakalma ni Sr. Ma. Lourdes. Tinanguan niya ang mga lalaki.

Tama si Sr. Ma. Lourdes. Sa gitna ng mga duguang tinitilad na naglalakihang isda at dinadaing na danggit at pusit; baboy o biik na nakatali sa magkabi-kabilang poste; tambak ng basura; galising aso; nakabuyangyang na sinampay; karo ng haluhalo, fishballs, at nakabiting puso; yakap ng dagat na kulay burak sa ilalim ng katanghaliang tapat na araw sa sulok na iyon ng Pasil - nananatiling puting-puti ang aming mga suot, malinis at makinis... makinis at malinis.... nagmamaganda.

Nakaluhod na sa kapilya ang mga madre, nobisyada, postulant, at mga kasama kong aspirant pagdating namin. Galing din sila sa iba’t ibang gampanin sa araw na iyon ng Linggo. Ang araw na iyon ang unang pagkakataon kong harapin ang isa sa mga pangunahing gampanin ng Kongregasyon. Alam ko, marami pang Linggo ng pakikiisa sa hinagpis at hayahay ng Pasil ang darating. Asam ko, pang-habambuhay ko nang maging buhay ang gayon. Akala ko’y handang-handa ako.

Klang! Klang! Klang!

Dati’y sa mangilan-ngilang pinakamalapit na kaibigan o sa ilang may katulad ding karanasan ng pag-iwan sa bokasyon ko lang naibubukas ang kuwentong ito. Masakit kasi harapin ang panghuhusga kung ano na nga bang nangyari sa akin at kung ano ang mga ginawa ko at ang mga hindi ko ginawa matapos ang yugtong ito.

Saan ako pupulot ng lakas para amining minsan kong pinangarap maging madre sa mga taong ang pagkakakilala sa akin ay nuknukan ng kasungitan, katarayan, kalandian, o pak na pak na kamalditahan? Paano ko nga ba namang sasabihing minsan akong pumasok sa kumbento sa mga taong nakaalam na nagsusulat ako ng erotika (porn, sabi ng ilan), na siguradong ikasusuka hindi lang ng mga kalinis-linisan at nagmamalinis, kundi maging ng mga nagsasabing malawak ang kanilang isip? Anong

mukha ang ihaharap ko sa nagtatanong kung bakit sa mahabang panahon iniwan ko ang simbahang Katoliko at ngayon naman ay kasabay na sinasamba ang mga Diyos sa ibang anyo't pangalan, pati na ang mga diyos-diyosan at mga diyosa ng kawalan? At bakit nga ba naging karapat-dapat sa kumbento ang isang minsan ding naging kasapi ng kapisanan ng mga makabagong mambabarang?

Mas mabuti pa nga sanang itinago ko na lang. Kaya lang, sa panahong hindi ka na bata, iyong alam mong iilang hakbang na lang tungo sa huling kahahantungan, wala nang panahon sa takot. Huli man, baka sakaling mayroon pa akong maiaalay, kahit limot ko na ang mga dasal. Dahil halos tatlong dekada mula noong talikuran ko ang tawag at takasan ang aking bokasyon, gusto kong sabihing kahit paano nahanap ko na sa kaloob-looban ng aking loob ang sangkap na minsang pinanghawakan din noon sa Kalbaryo ng isang lalaking buong tapang na namatay at ng isang babaeng buong tapang na nagpatuloy mabuhay.

Ang Mahal na Birhen ng Mga Bagyo

Kristian Sendon Cordero

I.

SA PAGLALARO KO unang natutunan ang ibig sabihin ng parusa. Hindi ang mga parusang bahagi ng pagkatalo, halimbawa ang pingutin ang tenga o ang magsisigaw ng *siato* hanggang sa maubos ang boses mo o ang maging taya mismo. Taya ka dahil kailangang mong ipusta ang lakas at bilis sa paghahabol sa ibang kalaro o usisain at magpasya kung sino sa mga kababata ang nasa langit o impiyerno o ang kailangang saksakin ang puso, at tumulo ang dugo, sa pamamagitan lamang ng isang pagsaling. Taya ka dahil ang mga paglalarong iyon ay parang sugal. Ngunit may mga larong walang kailangang taya ngunit may mariing pagbabawal, may signos na nakalambong. May nagbabadyang mga parusa. May parusa dahil bawal ang mga nasabing laro ayon na rin sa mga nakatatanda sa amin. May nagbabadyang panganib na nababasa ang mga gurang sa tuwing may mga gagawin kaming ganoong mga laro.

Halimbawa kapag nagsipaglabasan ang mga “kadang-kadang” nangangahulugang itong may pagbabahang mangyayari dahil na rin sa gumagamit ng magkaparis na kawayan ang nasabing laro. Tumatayo ang bawat kalahok at nag-uunahan habang nakasakay sila sa kadang-kadang. Nang mauso ang trumpo sinabing may mangyayaring malakas na paglindol at pagsabog ng bulkan dahil hinahambalos daw namin ang lupa ng matulis na pako sa trumpo. Kapag saranggola naman ang pinalipad, nagbabadya

daw ito ng ipu-ipo o kaya'y sakit na maaaring makuha sa hangin at alikabok.

Hindi lamang ang mga signos ng sakuna ang binabasa sa mga laro ng bata. Bawal din ang maglaro kapag nagsimula na ang pag-awit ng tuko sa puno ng kaymito dahil ito na ang oras ng mga tawong-lipod, ang mga nilalang na hindi namin nakikita na may kapangyarihang magdulot ng sakit sa sinumang gagambala sa kanilang espasyo na espasyo rin ng mga mortal. Bawal ding maglaro sa may malapit na ilog dahil may nangunguhang kapwabata rito na nalunod o ginamit daw ang dugo upang ihalo sa sementong ginamit sa tulay na pinatayo pa noong panahon ng mga Kastila. Kamanghamanghang kapangyarihan ng alaala sapagkat marami tayong hindi alam o wala sa ating gunita *noong panahon ng mga Kastila* ngunit naririto pa rin ang mga kuwentong katatakutan na katulad nito. Nakakamangha rin kung paanong laging may pugot na ulo ng paring pinatay noong panahon ng Hapon, o ginahasang babae ngunit walang mga Amerikanong nagmumulto sa amin. Sa deskripsyon ng prayleng si Melendreras, ang mga tawong lipod ay mapuputi kaya't hindi nakikita.

Lumaki akong maraming bawal bago ko pa matutunan ang unang dasal. Maraming bawal dahil maraming nakapaligid na mga matatanda dahil tatlo kaming pamilyang sabay-sabay na nanirahan sa matandang bahay ni Nanay, ang lola ko sa ina.

Nasa Grade 1 ako noon nang ipinagbawal at ipinahinto na sa akin ng mga gurang ang paglalaro ng trumpo dahil ito nga raw ang dahilan ng madalas na paglilindol at kung hindi kami titigil ay maaaring sumabog ang mga bulkan. Nagagalit kasi ang lupa sa tuwing tatamaan ito ng matalim na pako. Gaganti raw ang lupa kapag hindi ko tinigilan ang mga paghampas ng trumpo. Wala akong pamato sa ganoong panakot.

At may punto nga naman ang mga matatanda, hinahampas ko ang lupa, sa parehong paraan na dumudura sila sa lupa ng kanilang pulang laway mula sa pag-nganganga. Abono daw ang pulang laway na iyon para agad at malusog na tumubo ang mga butong nakatanim sa ilalim. Gamot din ang likidong mula sa kanilang bibig para sa mga ginawa kong mga sugat sa lupa. Hindi nila ako sinagot nang tinanong ko kung sinusugatan din ba ng isa naming kapitbahay ang lupa kapag inaarado niya ito. Hindi raw laro ang pagbubungkal ng lupa. Trabaho raw ito at hindi laro.

Sa kabila ng mga pagbabawal na ito ng mga matatanda, nanaig pa rin ang halina ng paglalaro ng trumpo. Ang trumpo ang mundo. Naaalala ko

kung paano ko pinagmamasdan ang pag-ikut-ikot nito sa lupa, ang talim ng pakong pumapailalim, at kung paano ko ito sinisidok at pinapaikot sa aking mga kamay nang hindi nasusugatan. Ay! Ang tahimik na paghinog ng trumpo hanggang sa ang kahoy ay maging isang ganap na kagandahan, pinung-pino. Ganoon daw kabilis ang pag-ikot at pag-inog ng mundo sabi ng Science teacher namin. Tinanggap ko ang kaniyang paliwanag kahit hindi naman kami nahihilo sa ganoong kabilis na pag-ikot. Kinalaunan ko na lamang siguro sinabi at tinanggap sa sarili na hindi ko naman kailangang tanggapin at paniwalaan ang lahat ng sagot at itanong ang lahat ng tanong. Mananahan na lamang siguro ako sa pagkamangha katulad ng una kong paglalaro ng trumpo.

Hindi lamang trumpo ang may kaakibat na sumpa. Maging ang mga sunod pang mga laro kung saan nakibagay na rin ako sa iba pang mga kababata ay may nakaabang ding mga banta. Katulad ng bahay-bahayan na madalas din naming laruing magkakapatid at magpipinsan. Sa umpisa hinayaan lamang kami subalit nang mapansin ng mga gurang na nagkakapalit-palitan na kami ng kumot, may nawawala nang mga punda at kubyertos dahil ginagamit namin ang mga ito, muling nagbanta ang mga gurang. Ang sabi uli ng mga matatanda, itigil na ang ganitong laro dahil malalaki na raw kami at kailangan pang maghanda para sa eskwelahan na maliban sa pag-aaral ay magiging sityo rin ng marami pang paglalaro. Ngunit ang talagang nakakatakot o ipinangtakot, ng mga gurang sa palibot namin: ‘Pumundo na kamo ta ‘baad magbagyo!’ (Itigil na ninyo ‘yan dahil baka bumagyo!) Bumabagyo raw sa tuwing naglalaro ng bahay-bahayan ang mga bata.

Napakaraming kuwentong nagkakabuhol-buhol ang bumubuo sa alaala ko sa tuwing sasagi ang mga paglalaro namin ng bawal na bahay-bahayan. Lalo na kung paano namin noon binabago ang mundo, ang mga bagay sa mundo, sa panahon man ito ng bagyo o sa kawalang-bagyo.

Sapin-saping panahong katulad ng mga kakulay na sapin-saping kumot na dinala ng aking pinsan at ginamit naming bubong para sa aming laro. Kakulay ng mga bahaghari ang mga kumot na simbolo na hindi na muling magugunaw ang mundo sa pamamagitan ng tubig. At dahil sumusunod ang kabataan o ang alaala sa panahon ng kabataan sa batas ng tubig, ang lahat ay nagiging maaari, isang imbakan ng posibilidad ng mga pagturing, pagsasabuhay, pagsasa-akto katulad kung paano ang mga unan

ay naging mesa at upuan, ang tasa na naging kawali, at higit sa lahat ang mga katawang nagiging lahat: tumatayong tatay, nanay, kapatid, pinsan, pari, katulong, kumpare. Mga katawan na handa pang maging kahit ano sa paglalaro, sa anong pagsanib at pagsisibasib matugunan lamang ang mga sariling kaligayahan na maaaring nanggagaling din sa ligayang ibinibigay ng aming pagsuway sa mga gurang.

Sa paglalaro ng bahay-bahayan, gumawa kaming magpipinsan ng mga bahay sa loob ng bahay. Natuwa kami sa mga bagong natuklasan tungkol sa limitadong buhay ng pag-aasawa at pagpapamilya. Halimbawa, dahil kailangang kumain ng pamilya, kailangan ang pagluluto at dahil bawal ang maglaro ng apoy, kinukuntento na namin ang aming mga sarili sa mga pinaghalo-halong tsit-tsirya na inilagay sa Tupperware kung saan “niluluto” namin ito sa pamamagitan ng pagtatakip lamang nito. Parang pagbuburo ng talangka ang ganoong pagluluto, ang paboritong putahe ng tatay kong Kapampangan. Hindi lahat ay pinapadaan sa apoy, hindi lahat ay nilalaga, dahil maaaring lutuin din ang ilang karne at laman sa asin o suka at matiyagang paghihintay. Katulad ng tatay na palagiang nagbuburo ng talangka.

Naaalala ko kung paano niya pinipili at inihihawalay ang mga babaeng talangka sa mga lalaking talangka. Titingnan niya lamang ang likod nito at malalaman niya kung babae o lalaki ang mga ito. Mas mataba, ibig sabihin, maaligi, ang babaeng talangka kung kaya ito ang higit na mainam na buruhin. Minsan may sinasabi siyang mga alanganing talangka. Alanganin daw ang lasa nito.

Pagkatapos na ilagay sa garapon ang mga buhay pang talangka bubuhusan niya na ito ng isang dakot na asin at saka tatakpan. Kinakailangang walang hangin na makapasok para ganap na mangyari ang nais na luto. Sa loob ng garapon, sabayang mamamatay ang mga babaeng talangka sa kawalan ng hangin at bagsik ng asin. Ang asin ang magluluto sa mga talangka na kapag kinain na ng Tatay ay kinakailangan naming lumayo sa kaniya samantalang sarap-sarap naman siya: alaala ng dila, ito ang probinsya ng sidhi at gunita. Iisa-isahin niya ang pagbubukas ng talangka, parang maliliit itong fortune cookies na kinakailangan niyang mabasa ang kapalarang nakapaloob. Kulay manilaw-nilaw na dalandan ang taba ng talangka, parang keso, parang lasang itlog daw ito o kaya’y caviar na hinahalo niya sa milagrosang kanin.

Sa pagbuburo ni Tatay natutunan ko kung paano maaaring kainin ang mga putaheng di dinilaan ng apoy. Hindi lahat kinakailangang purgahin sa init para makain. Kaya ito rin ang ginawa kong suhestiyon para gawin ang pagluluto sa aming paglalaro ng bahay-bahayan, ang paghalu-haluin ang mga biniling tsit-tsirya sa loob ng isang malaking Tupperware at takpan ito. Sa halip na isahang pagkain sa mga ito, natuto kaming patagalin ang pag-ubos nito para patuloy kaming maglaro. May tumayong controller siyempre at sila ang mga tumatayong magulang. Masaya ang unang karanasan ng ganitong sistema, nalalasan mo ang lahat ng tsit-tsirya at may panibagong mga lasang natutuklasan ang aming mga dila. Bigas ang korniks at ulam naman ang Baltik, Ober da Bakod (isang sikat na TV program na pinagbibidahan nina Don Robert at Aling Lukring), Aiza (ipinangalan kay Aiza Seguerra), Eat Bulaga at kung anu-anupang mabibili sa tindahan ni Manay Ibik. Nang tumayo akong pari, kinakailangan kong magpabili ng Marie para gawing ostiya at ang Coke bilang alak. Siyempre, dahil ako ang pari, ako lang naman ang umiinom ng sagradong likido.

Katulad ng isang pamilya, dumating din ang mga away at tampuhan sa pagitan naming mga manlalaro ng bahay-bahayan. Nagsuntukan ang isa kong pinsan at ang aking bunsong kapatid dahil kinailangan nilang patunayan sa isa't isa na hindi na sila parehong umihi sa banig. Sinundan pa ito ng pagtatalo ng tumatayong mga magulang namin. Ang isyu, dahil may bagsak na subjects ang tumatayong tatay na pinsan ko at nagbanta ang tumatayong nanay na anak ng kapitbahay namin na hindi niya raw sasabihin sa tatay ng pinsan ko, kung manlilibre ang pinsan ko ng Pop-C at turon pagkatapos ng aming bahay-bahayan. Napikon at nag-alsa balutan ang pinsan ko at naulila na ang mga tumayong magkakapatid: ang dalawang kambal na anak ng tiyo kong seaman at ang adopted ng tiya kong nag-asawa pa lang noon ng isang balo mula sa Ragay.

Umiyak ang bunso kong kapatid dahil napatunayan na siya ang umihi dahil sinabi naman ng kapatid kong babae. Hindi ko alam kung saan nagsimula ang mga ganoong usapan, basta ang natatandaan ko, unti-unting gumuho ang aming bahay-bahayan, napigtas ang bubong na kumot, nabasag ang tasa, natapon ang ilang pagkain, nawakwak pa nga ang unan at may nauntog sa mesa.

Ito yata 'yong huling pagsali ko sa bahay-bahayan kung saan ako na ang tumayong pari, na wala na rin akong role pagkatapos ng kasal,

pagkatapos kung tumulong sa paggawa ng bahay ay esta-puwera na ako. Hindi ko pa alam noon na maaari namang magbahay-bahay ang mga pari sa kaniyang parokyano. Ito rin, sa gunita ko, ang patunay sa banta ng mga matatanda tungkol sa pagdating ng bagyo na dumating sa amin isang araw, habang sa labas ng aming bahay, nanghahalina ang matandang mangga na itinanim daw ng isang sundalong Hapon. Tahimik na gumagalaw ang mga dahon, parang mga maliliit na along sumasayaw sa banayad na ihip ng hangin, o marahil dahil pinagagalaw ito ng mga multo at engkantong nakakulong dito. Walang tao sa lilim nito, tanging ang malagong anino ng mga dahon ang nakalatag sa lupang naghihilom na marahil sa mga ukang ginawa ng aking nawawalang trumpo.

II.

Dawat, Bikolnon na tataramon, salita para sa incest, na mariing ipinagbabawal sa sinaunang panahon ng mga Bikolnon, bago pa man dumating ang mga kolonyalista at ang kanilang Hudiyo-Kristiyanong diskurso ng moralidad. Pinaniniwalaan na kapag may nangyaring paginiig sa pagitan ng magkakapatid o ng magulang sa anak ay nagkakaroon ng mahabang panahon ng pag-ulan upang linisin ang pamayanan sa 'maraot na gibong' nangyari sa loob ng pamayanan. Ito ang paraan ng paglilinis ni Gugurang. Katulad ng kung paano nagkaroon ng delubyo sa panahon ni Noe ng lumang tipan. Pagbibinyag sa mundo sa kasalanan nito. Ito ang paglilinis ng tubig dahil lumapot na ang dugo. Pinaniniwalaan na malapot ang dugo ng mga taong bunga ng *dawat* kung kaya hindi rin ang mga ito nagtatagal, o kaya nama'y kung anu-anong karamdaman ang dumarapo sa kanila.

Mangyaring ito rin ang sumpa ng paglalaro ng bahay-bahayan kung saan maaaring tumayong mag-asawa ang dalawang kapatid, katulad ng dalawa kong pinsan. At bilang tumatayong mag-asawa, kinakailangan nilang gumawa ng sariling silid mula sa ginawa naming bahay-bahayan. Kinakailangan nilang gawin ang ilang bagay katulad ng ordinaryong pag-aasawa. Ito ang laro. At upang maipagpatuloy ang laro, kinakailangang may sumunod sa mga alintuntunin. Hanggang saan gagampanan ang paggagagad at paghuhuwad? Hanggang saan ang abot ng *lukso ng dugo*?

Marahil ito ang dahilan ng pagbabawal sa amin upang ipagpatuloy ang aming bahay-bahayan. O baka may mga laro pa kaming kailangang

matuklasan maliban sa mga pangagagaya sa mga matatanda.

Alam kong walang lohikal o sistematikong pagpapaliwanag sa mga sinasabi ng mga matatanda, ito ang mga pamahiin nilang tumatayo ring parabula, pabula o kaya'y ariwaga. Mahiwagang mga katagang kailangang pakinggan at sundin. May mga pagpapasubali subalit, may higit na puwersang namamayani, maaaring lukso ng dugo o ang di matawarang utang-na-loob. Namamatanda tayo sa mga sinasabi ng mga matatanda, katulad sa kung paano aksidenteng nakita ng kaniyang anak ang hubad na katawan ni Noe o katulad ni Handyong sa harapan ng ulo ng napatay niyang si Rabot.

Pagkatulala, ang sandaling muli tayong bumabalik sa pagkamanhid dahil labis-labis ang pagpapakita ng mundo katulad kung paano ko unang ganap na nasaksihan ang mundo pagkatapos ng bagyong Monang. Nakita ko kung paano naging isang malaking lawa ang palayan sa harapan namin.

May dalang kakaibang lamig ang panahon na kahit dalawang araw akong hindi naligo ay maputi pa rin ang mga paa ko. Hindi kami pinayagang maglaro noon sa labas ngunit nang matapos ang bagyo, agad naman kaming lumabas upang tingnan ang bakas ng pinsala na noon ay hindi ko iniintindi.

Nabuwal ang mga saging sa paligid, inaasahan na ang ganitong eksena dahil ang daming saging noon sa amin. Kusa itong tumutubo pagkatapos ng bagyo. Iba't ibang uri ng saging, ngunit pinakamarami ang saba. Mga bulig ng saging ang pumuno sa silid para sa bigas. Pinaghati-hatian ito ng mga matatanda at alam naming sa darating na mga araw ito ang magiging pagkain namin araw-gabi. Gusto ko ang *pinakro*, kung paano ginagataan ang mga manibalang na saging at nilalagyan ng *lukadon* (niyog). Naglalaway din ako sa sardinas na inilagagay sa mga saging na ito, may gata at ginagawang ulam. Maliban dito, inaasahan na sa mga susunod na araw pagkatapos ng bagyo ay bibilog na muli ang buwan, tiyak na matitipon kami sa harapan ng isang *alo* at *dudukdukan*, kung saan ginagawa ang *linubak*, saging o kaya kamoteng kahoy na nilalagyan ng margarina, asukal, at *lukadon* at hinahalu-halo ito sa loob ng *dudukdukan*. Pinipisa ang mga lamang-ugat at sa panahong ito, nagsisimulang magkuwento ang mga matatanda ng kung anu-ano, katulad ng kung paano natuklasan na maaaring kainin ng tao ang kamoteng kahoy noong panahon ng Hapon, dahil bago raw ang digmaan, pagkaing baboy lamang ang mga ito. Ang mga gerilya raw ang unang sumubok nito sa bukid.

Pagkatapos ng bagyo, putol din ang mga kawad ng kuryente, at dalawang linggo ang hihintayin bago maayos ito ng Casureco. Dito ako unang nagsulat ng mga berso sa isip, naghanap ng mga mababasa sa paligid ng gasera. Dito ko unang ipinakita ang aking madyik, ang pagtawid ng hintuturo sa gasera nang hindi napapaso.

Marami ang nangyayari pagkatapos ng bagyo. Parang buhay na buhay ang paligid kahit na halos walang kuryente sa loob ng isang buwan o mahigit pa. Bawi naman siyempre dahil nagiging malikhain din ang mga tao sa maraming paraan, maitawid lamang ang daloy ng bawat oras hanggang sa bumalik ang inaalalang kaayusan—kaayusang napapaloob sa tahimik na mata ng bagyo, sa lilim ng mga nakahilerang bulkan.

Maraming kuwento tungkol sa bagyo na kung pinag-uusapan ng mga matatanda hanggang sa ngayon ay parang mga totoong tao silang bumisita sa amin. *Sineng, Monang, Reming, Senyang*, mga pangalang lumilikha ng alaala sa pagkakataong masasambitan sila na parang litanya. Mga babae. Mga pangalang walang katawan. Ngayon na lamang nagkaroon ng mga pagbabago sa pagpapangalan sa mga bagyo, ngunit sa kabataan ko, dumating silang mga babae, na parang mga pangalang “amoy-lupa,” na parang mga babaeng nahuli at naiwan sa biyahe, mga matimtimang birheng ng santong paspasan!

Natatandaan ko ang mga kapitbahay namin na nakatira sa gitna ng palayan na laging inaanod o winawasak ng tubig-baha ang kanilang bahay. Kung kaya, inaasahan na sa tuwing babagyo ay lilikas sila patungo sa eskwelahan o kaya sa malaking bahay ng mga Fernandez. Pagkatapos ng bagyo, nagiging isang malaking lawa ang palayan kung kaya pamilyar na eksena sa akin ang mga balsa mula sa mga barani (katawan) ng nabuwal na saging na ginagawa ng mga kapitbahay namin. Tinutuhog nila ang mga ito at nagsisimulang magpalutang sa kulay tsokolateng lawa. Aabutin ng isang linggo bago humupa ang tubig. Kinukuha nila ang ilang mga gamit na inanod—ang maaaring pang mailigtas. Pagkatapos ay muli na naman nilang itatayo ang kanilang mga bahay sa gitna ng palayan. Likas sa kanilang lumikas tuwing bagyo. Likas sa kanilang bumalik sa kanilang tirahan pagkatapos ng unos.

Dahil hindi ako bihasang lumangoy, hindi ako pinayagan upang maglayag kasama ang iba pang mga bata na nagpapaligsahan sa kulay tsokolateng lawa gamit ang kanilang mga balsa. Kung anu-ano ang sinabi

sa akin upang madismaya at kumbinsihin na marumi ang tubig sa palayan, na maaari akong magkasakit sa balat—*buni, kurikong, balos*, litanya ng mga pananakot. Ngunit nagagawa ko pa ring lumusot at makipagsabayan sa paglalaro sa tubig. Gusto ko sanang sabihin sa mga gurang, na hindi ako maghihintay sa sunod pang bagyo, upang makaranas lamang ng balsang saging. Marami akong pangambang ganun na hindi ko magagawa ito dahil ang bilis-bilis ng takbo ng panahon at hindi ko lahat ito mapagsasabay-sabay.

Kung dyahe ang mga matatanda sa trumpo at bahay-bahayan, marami naman akong napupulot sa kanila sa mga panahon noon na natitipon kami sa isang de-bateryang radyo upang subaybayan ang balita sa paparating o papalabas na bagyo. Naaliw ako sa kung paanong tinukoy ng isa kong tiyo ang direksyon ng hangin tuwing bumabagyo. Pinakinggan ko ang mga kuwento ng mga gurang tungkol sa iba pang bagyong nagdaan, kung paano nila naalala ang mga muhon sa kanilang panahon, halimbawa ang malaking kahoy na binuwal ng bagyong Sineng, na sinabayan pa raw ng eklipse at konting lindol, ang pag-apaw ng mga lawa at kung paano nakuha ang isang mamahaling singsing sa loob ng isang tilapya matapos ang flash flood sa bayan ng Bato. Umapaw kasi ang lawa at nakarating ang baha sa pampublikong sementeryo. May mga tilapyang nakuha sa loob ng mga nitso.

III.

Nang mapalitan ang radyo sa bahay ng telebisyon, dumalang ang aming paglalaro sa labas. Dumating ang telebisyon at doon na nababad ang aming mga mata. Doon na nagsimula ang lehitimasyon ng reyalidad sa pamamagitan ng kung ano ang ipinapakita ng telebisyon at hindi na ng kung ano ang aming nakikita. May kakaibang kapangyarihang bumibighani mula sa loob ng telebisyon at dito rin higit kong nakita ang mundo at ang marami nitong anino. Isang bintana ang telebisyon, na sa tuwing may bagyo ay tila nagsasara rin dahil walang kuryente. Kaya tahimik lamang ang telebisyon sa salang may mga planggana at pitsel para sa tumutulong bubong. Habang patay ang telebisyon tila naghihikaos naman sa paghinga ang lumang radyong kulay itim at may anim na bateryang kasinglaki ng mga saging na saba. Ito ang nagdadala ng balita ng kalagayan ng panahon, kung anong signal at saan na ang direksyon ng bagyo.

Kulay pula ang case at black and white ang una naming telebisyon. Hanggang labing dalawa lamang ang mga bilang na kinakailangang pihitin upang makuha mo ang hinahangad na istasyon, hanggang sa maging colored ito, na may kasama nang remote, at pagdating ng cable system, umabot sa mahigit dalawampung channels na ang maaaring mapanood.

Kung noon, sa tuwing may paparating na bagyo, kailangang isilid ang antenang ginagamitan ng mataas na kawayan, nagbago ang lahat sa panahon ng cable system. Maliban sa antena, may isang biro, na una pa raw na isinisilid ng mga Bikolnon ang kanilang tanim na sili bago tingnan ang kalagayan ng kanilang mga bubong at dingding sa tuwing may parating na bagyo.

Sa pagdating ng telebisyon may malaking pangyayaring naganap sa aming mga buhay at sa loob ng bahay. Higit na naging madali ang pagkalap ng impormasyon at mga balita. Noon na rin nagsimulang dumalang ang aming paglalaro, lalo pa itong naging madalang nang bawat pamilya'y nagkaroon na rin ng sarili nilang mga telebisyon.

Ang telebisyon ang naging bagong ahensya ng lehitimasyon ng karanasan. Totoo ang nakikita sa telebisyon, totoo ang ipinapakita ng telebisyon. At sa akin, parang maliban sa mga pangkaraniwang sulat mula sa koreo, ang telebisyon ang naging paraan upang makibalita kami sa aming ina na nasa abroad. Nakakatakot na balita ang naaalala ko noon tungkol sa mga kinasapitan ng mga katulad ng nanay ko. Tumatak sa akin ang kuwento nina Flor Contemplacion at Delia Maga, na ginawa pang pelikula kinalaunan na pinanood naman namin dahil tagahanga ako ng kababayan kong si Nora Aunor mula't sapol pa. May karisma ang kanyang mata, tahimik ngunit laging nagbabadya, parang mata ng bagyo. Marami pang mga malulupit na kinasapitan ng mga domestic helpers ang lumabas sa telebisyon na tila kailangan din naming abangan ang magiging kapalaran ng aming ina sa dramang ipinapakita sa amin ng telebisyon.

Ngunit hindi lamang ito ang mga balitang ipinapakita sa telebisyon, maliban sa ganitong mga karimarimarim na kinasapitan ng marami sa ating mga kababayang nangibang-bayan, madalas ding lumabas ang isyu ng *dawat*, ang pangghasa ng ama sa sariling anak, kasama pa ang ibang kahindik-hindik na krimen kasabay ng pagpapakita ng Birheng Maria o ng mukha ni Kristo sa isang sahig sa Negros, isang puno ng akasya sa Candaba, at ang pagsayaw ng araw sa Agoo.

Sa telebisyon ko rin napansin noon na lumalabas lamang ang Bikol o nagiging sentro lamang ng mapang ipinapakita ni Ernie Baron, kung may paparating na bagyo, na para bagang pumapasok lamang ang Bikol sa kamalayan ng Filipinas kung mayroong parating na trahedya sa rehiyong ito. Kapag normal ang panahon, wala ang Bikol. Kung walang bagyo, o di sumabog ang Mayon o kaya’y may nangyaring trahedya sa Peñafrancia. Na madalas na pag-ugnayin din, katulad ng paniniwalang kapag may nakasakay na babae sa pagoda ng birhen ay may kamalasang darating sa Bikol, at madalas bagyo ito kung dumating, o kaya nama’y may kinalaman sa apoy, halimbawa ang pagsabog ng bulkan o kaya’y ang sunod-sunod na pagkasunog ng palengke sa Naga na may kinalaman pa rin sa poot ng sinasaulang birhen. Si *Ina*.

IV.

Laging kaugnay ng debosyon sa Mahal na Ina ang pagdating ng mga bagyo. Pamilyar na ang tunog ng Resuene Vibrante sa mga radyo at telebisyon na maririnig tuwing Setyembre, at may parating na bagyo o kung anumang pinapangambahang panganib o pananalanta na makakarating sa rehiyon ng mga oragon. May sinabi sa akin ang isang pari na maging ang ilang Katolikong sundalo sa kampo na sakop ng kaniyang parokya ay mga deboto rin ng Peñafrancia at maririnig na sumisipol ang mga kawal sa tuwing darating ang mga ito sakay sa kanilang mga trak na ginagamit sa paglusob sa ilang lugar na pinamumugaran pa rin di umano ng mga rebeldeng komunista.

Hindi Resuene Vibarante ang pamagat ng kanta sa Ina. Katulad ng Bayang Magiliw na madalas napagkakamalang pamagat ng pambansang awit ng bansa, ang Resuene Vibrante ang unang dalawang salita sa Himno de la Virgen de Peñafrancia, na naging opisyal na awit noong 1924 nang putungan ng korona ang imahen at kilalanin ng Santa Sede ang Birhen ng Peñafrancia bilang Patrona del Bicol, Gran Madre de Dios.

Sa buong selebrasyon, tampok ang *Traslacion* o ang paglilipat ng imahen ng birhen mula sa kanyang opisyal na tahanan ang Basilika Minore patungo sa katedral ng arsobispo ng Caceres at ang *Sakay*, ang prusisyon sa ilog ng Naga, kung saan muling ibinabalik ang imahen sa kaniyang lagakan. Ang paglilipat at pagbabalik ng imahen sa dalawang simbahan ay pinapangasiwaan ng simbahan at ng mga boyadores. Nitong mga nakaraang

taon, kinailangan na ng interbensyon ng militar upang panatilihin ang “kaayusan” sa dalawang prusisyong halos tumatagal ng ilang oras.

Sa pagdating ng Setyembre, may malawakang pakiramdam na nagbabagong bihis ang dating tahimik na lungsod ng Naga dahil ito ang buwan ng sagradong panahon. Panahon ito kung saan muling maglalakbay ang mga deboto patungo sa puso ng rehiyon. At dahil ito’y sagrado, hindi maiiwasang ito rin ang panahon kung saan nagkakaroon ng lehitimasyon ang iba’t ibang mobilisasyon ng katawan ng tao simula sa mga manunuod at sumasali sa mga beauty pageants, ang paligsahan sa pagmartsa sa military at civic parades na salungat naman sa kawalan ng kaayusan ng mga boyadores sa tuwing idadaos ang dalawang tampok na prusisyon at ilang mga pagbabasag-ulo sa mga rock concerts at iba pang street parties, o kahit ang unti-unting naluluma nang karnabal na dumudulog at tumutugon sa pangangailangan ng katawan na magpakasarap, mamahinga sa panahon ng piyesta.

Samantalang sa isang banda, ang kaluluwa naman ang tinatangiang linisin o idinudulog ng pagpapala mula sa birhen sa kabila ng mga panata at dasal na tumutukoy o nauwi pa rin sa pangangailangang katawan ng tao. Halimbawa, ang lunas sa karamdaman, ang pagkakaroon ng hanapbuhay sa ibang bansa, ang pumasa sa board exams at marami pang ibang mga himalang ipinaniniwala sa bisa ng birhen na katulad ng maraming baryasyon ng popular na debosyon sa ating mga Katolikong pamayanan ay nakasentro sa imahe: ang grabedad na humahatak sa mga mortal na katawan upang salatin, upang madama, makadantay na pinaniniwalaang magiging bukal ng mga biyaya o ang pagsasakatuparan ng isang panata na magsisilbing kondisyon sa pananatili o pagpapalaki ng inaakalang pagpapala mula sa langit.

Ang ganitong pamilyar na eksena ng pagsalat sa mga itinuturing na sagradong imahe ay makikita rin sa Nazareno sa Quiapo, na katulad ng Peñafrancia sa Naga ay kakikitaan ng kakaibang uri ng daloy, lakas at dahas, na kalimitang makikita sa nasabing mga pagtatanghal. Tatawagin kong pagtatanghal ang selebrasyon ng kapiyestahan, partikular ang dalawang pinakatampok na prusisyon dahil ito ay pagtatanghal sa kaakuhan o identidad na nais itaguyod ng mga Bikolnon na naniniwala sa pagpapala ng Peñafrancia na hindi na lamang isang imaheng nakasentro sa relihiyoso nitong kahulugan kundi isa na itong “cultural religious icon” na dinadala na

rin ng marami sa mga Katolikong Bikolnon saan mang sulok sila ng mundo. Nagkakaroon na rin ng mga fluvial processions ang mga Bikol communities sa Vancouver, Canada, San Francisco, US at Vienna, Austria o kahit sa mga malilit na parokya sa Bikol kung saan marami rin ang hindi nakakapunta ng Naga, kung kaya dinadala na lamang ang isang imahe ng Peñafrancia sa mga malalayong pook na ito, upang maging sila rin ay makapagpahayag ng kanilang kaisahan sa birhen, makapagtanghal ng kanilang identidad. Sa isang parokya sa amin, dahil wala namang malapit na ilog, napagpasyahan na gawin ang *sakay* sa irrigation, samantalang ang isa namang coastal parish ay ginawa ito sa dagat. Sa ganitong mga inobasyon ng ritwal, malinaw na ang lumalabas na elementong nagpapakagalaw sa simbolohikal na kahulugan ng pagtatanghal ay ang tubig, kung saan itinataguyod nito ang buhay ng tao at ang daloy ng pamayanan, anuman ang anyo ng tubig. Ang tubig ang dugo ng mundo.

Taong 1981-1982, nang nakawin at muling makabalik ang birhen sa Naga, sinasabing bumabagyo noon, ngunit nag-abang pa rin ang mga tao sa daan, at sa ganap na pagpasok niya sa lungsod, nagsimulang patugtugin ang kampana ng katedral para sa grand homecoming na iyon, at habang papasok na siya sa simbahan at laksa-laksang tao na ang nag-abang at inalintana ang sungit ng panahon, dahan-dahan diumanong tumila ang ulan, tumigil ang malakas na hangin at nagliwanag ang buong paligid. Ang mga ganitong partikular na engkuwentro ang lagi't laging inuulit-ulit sa mga salaysay tungkol sa Mahal na Birhen ng mga bagyo sa Bikol. Siyang aming *ina*, na tinatatanggap kaming maglaro ng aming kaniya-kaniyang bahay-bahayan, lumapot man ang dugo, lumabnaw man ang tubig, sa Naga pa rin ang tungo tuwing Setyembre, may bagyo ma't may rilim, upang sabayan ang ritwal ng kaniyang pagbabalik at sa loob ng siyam na araw na debosyon, muli't muling iniluluwal ang identidad na ito ng mga Bikolnong pinapanday ng mga ganitong pagdalaw ng mga bagyo't birhen.

Bata pa ako noon nang una kong masaksihan ang prusisyon sa ilog. Maaga pa lamang ay lumisan na kami sa aming bahay, upang maglakbay ng isang oras patungo sa Naga. Sakay kami ng inupahang dyip, kaming magkakamag-anak at ilan pang mga kinumbidang kapitbahay. Tamang-tama ang dating namin, nagsisimula pa lamang ang misa at may garahe pa kaming nakuha sa loob ng seminaryong malapit sa katedral. Mula sa katedral, kahit hindi pa naigagawad ang huling basbas ng pari ay nagsimula

na kaming bagtasin ang daan patungo sa malapit na tulay, sa may Colgante, kung saan nangyari ang malagim na trahedya noong 1972, ilang araw bago tuluyang ideklara ang Batas Militar. Ilang oras ang ginawa naming paghihintay sa pagdaan ng pagoda ni Ina. Habang naghihintay, nang-aakit naman ang mga kalembang ng mga sorbetero sa paligid habang sa isang booth ng Pepsi may napakalaking megaphone kung saan lumalabas ang mga dasal: ang mga misteryo ng santo rosaryo. May mga lobong napakawalan kung kaya't paminsan-minsan may umiiyak na bata at may nagmumurang matanda. May naglalako ng panyo, pamaypay at may mga naka-unipormeng nagroronda sa Colgante, samantalang nakahanda naman ang isang ambulansya. Matapos ang ilang oras na paghihintay sa ilalim ng araw ay nagsimula nang magsigawan ang mga tao na parang may parating na artista, parang dumalaw si Nora Aunor, paglalarawan ng isa kong tiya.

Inilabas ng mga taong naghihintay sa tulay ang kanilang mga puting panyo. Iwinagayway, parang akto ng pagsuko. Habang nag-ayos ng kanilang puwesto ang mga nasa tulay at ang mga nasa pampang ng ilog. Naglabas ng mga sagradong bagay na pinaniniwaalang magkakaroon ng pagbasbas sa pagdaan ng birhen. Sa may pampang at sa tulay, nakahilera ang mga pula at puting kandilang may sindi, paminsan-minsan, sa isang nagmamadaling sandali, maaninag ang kanilang mga liyab sa rabaw ng malabnaw na tubig ng ilog. Nakapuwesto ako noon sa isang bahagi ng tulay kung saan tila binigyan ako ng pagkakataong makita at marinig ang lahat sa aking paligid. Ilang minuto pa'y mas lalong lumakas ang hiyaw, iba't ibang tinig subalit tila iisa ang isinisigaw, *Viva La Virgen! Viva sa patrona kan Kabikolan!* Pagbubunyi sa birheng ina na napapalibutan pa rin ng mga boyadores at saserdotes sa kanyang pagodang hila-hila ng mga bangkeros. Kinakanta ang himno opisyal—ang Resuene Vibrante, sa Kastila ang koro samantalang ang mga berso ay sa Bikol. Lumakas nang lumakas ang hiyaw habang papalapit na ang birhen sa aming kinalalagyan. Sa pagdaan ng pagoda, isang pambihirang eksena ang kumintal sa aking alaala: Nakita ko na may mga batang inilublob ng mga matatanda sa ilog habang ang iba namang di-hamak na marunong nang lumangoy ay lumukso din sa tubig. Tila pagbibinyag, isang inisasyon upang kamtin muli ang identidad, sariwain ang kaakuhan, gunitain ang mga pangyayari katulad nito, ang pagbabalik na muli sa sinapupunan ng buhay—ang tubig. Ngayon ko nauunawan kung bakit kahit na marumi na rin ang agwa bendita sa mga simbahan, kahit na pinamumugaran na ito ng mga kiti-kiti ay nagagawa pa ring isawsaw ang

hintuturo at mag-antada, katulad ng kung paano nakikipagsapalaran ang buong katawan sa maruming tubig ng ilog kapalit ng ginhawa o lunas na inihahandog ng patrona.

Pagkatapos na makadaan ng pagoda, dahan-dahan naming tinahak kasabay ng marami pang daluyong ng tao ang daan patungong Basilika kung saan tuwinang ginaganap ang misang pamumunuan ng mga obispo ng Bikol. Patuloy ang paglakas ng mga sigaw ng pagbubunyi samantalang tila bumagsak ang mga bituin sa kalupaan sa dami ng mga kandilang nakapalibot sa harapan ng altar. Umaawit ang koro at nag-aamoy insenso ang paligid.

Matapos ang misa sa Basilika, bumalik uli kami sa aming dyip at bumiyahe pauwi ng Iriga. Tila hinihele ng buong kalangitan ang dyip namin, pinapatulog ang lahat sa loob—mga hapong peregrino.

Napakalinaw ng kadilimang bumabalot ng langit, walang mga bituin o ang buwan, na tila napakapanatag na mukha at wala ni kahit isang taghiyawat o butlig. Walang banta ng kahit anumang bagyo.

At kasundo namin ang mga matatanda, ang mga gurang na tulad din nami’y anak din sila ng Birhen. Ngunit alam kong may kaniya-kaniyang kuwentong nakalaang pag-uusapan sa mga darating na araw: mga alaala ng pagbisita sa Naga. May mga tiyak na nakurot dahil sa kakulitan ng ilang mga kababata kong pinsan. May isa pa ngang nakaapak ng tae ng aso. Ngunit nalinis naman kaagad ito bago pumasok sa arkiladong sasakyan.

May mga inaasahang sagot sa mga dasal marahil ang mga matatanda, mga lumang dasal na nangangailangan ng panibagong artikulasyon at kasagutan. At dahil ito ang piyesta ng mga bagsak-presyo, may mga bagong nabiling gamit ang ilang kapit-bahay namin habang may dalang mga kinulayang sisiw ang dalawa kong pinsan.

Samantalang ako naman ay ibinili ng Nanay ng isang larawan ni Ina, sa larawang ito nakasulat:

*“Siisay ini na nagbabanaag siring sa kaagahan?
Magayon siring sa bulan, maliwanag siring sa saldang
asin mangirhat siring sa hukbo na andam sa pakilaban?”*

*Sino siyang paparating na tulad ng buwang-liwayway?
Kasing ganda ng buwan, kasing liwanag ng araw
at tulad ng nakakapangilabot na hukbo na handa
sa anumang pakikidigma? (Salin sa Filipino)*

Tinangka kong basahin ang mga nakasulat at marahang sinalat ang larawan ng Peñafrancia, ni Ina, nagdasal yata ako noon, o ikinatuwa ang tunog ng mga salita, bago ko ito isinilid sa aking bulsang puno ng nananahimik na mga barya.

Mga Pagsasanay sa Paggalugad sa Siyudad: Lakbay-Sanaysay ng Isang Manunulat para sa Bata

Eugene Evasco

Ayokong paniwalaan ang payo na huwag mag-uulit ng bansang pupuntahan. Narinig ko ito sa isang kuwentuhan habang sinasariwa ang mga paglalakbay. Nakadalawang balik na ako sa Bangkok at tatlong ulit sa Hong Kong. Nitong Mayo 2011, nasama ang Singapore sa bansang muli kong binalikan.

Hindi ako pupunta ng Singapore bilang turista. Pumunta ako rito para sa isang kumperensiya sa mga aklat pambata. “Matutuwa ka’t makakasama mo ang mga kapwa manunulat,” sabi sa akin ng aking tagapaglathala na nagtaguyod sa aking paglalakbay. Isang buong araw lang ang libre upang makagala at matagal kong pinag-isipan kung saan pupunta—sa Botanic Garden ba, sa museo, o sa Little India upang makakain ng autentikong pagkaing may curry. Ang nalalabing tatlong araw kasi ay para makinig ng mga lektura, maghanda sa paglulunsad ng bersiyong app ng aking aklat, at makipagtalastasan sa kapwa manunulat. Hindi ako dapat magsayang ng oras. Nagtanong-tanong ako. May nagsabing puntahan ko raw ang Bugis para magshopping. May nagpayo sa Universal Studios, Sentosa, Night Safari. Sa mga kakilalang iskolar, hinikayat nila ako sa Singapore Art Museum at sa Asian Civilizations Museum. Ang hirap mamili, lalo’t gusto kong siksikin sa isang araw lahat.

Kalahati lamang ang laman ng aking maleta paalis ng bansa. Misyong punuin ito ng mga libro, paboritong pabango, at kung papalarin ay mga damit at sapatos na hindi ko mahahanap sa Pilipinas. Hindi na ako nagdala pa ng laptop. Wi-fi ang buong siyudad ng Singapore at mapapakinabangan

ko ang iPad. Salamat sa isang kaibigan na nagpahiram sa akin ng kaniyang user account sa wi-fi.

Sa pagsilip mula eroplano habang lumalapag sa Changi, ramdam kong patungo ako sa moderno at sistematikong siyudad. Masasabing matagumpay ang urban planning sa Singapore, malayo sa estado ng kanilang lipunan noong dekada 60s. Sa airport, tila ako'y nasa mall o lobby ng hotel. Isa lang ang problema: paglabas ng paliparan, daig ko pa ang pumasok sa sauna o steam bath sa alinsangan. Nagmamadali kaming sumakay ng van na sumundo sa amin patungong Elizabeth Hotel, na nakatindig sa isang burol malapit sa Orchard Road.

Marso ng 2009 nang una kong makilala ang Orchard. Narito ang Ngee Ann City na katatagpuan ng Kinokuniya, isang bookstore na magdudulot ng ADHD sa sinumang bibliophile. Matatagpuan din dito ang kanilang foodcourt na murang nagbebenta ng kanilang Hainanese Chicken Rice. Sa isip ko, dalawa lang talaga ang pakay ko sa unang araw: mga libro at pagkain. Food trip ito, tukso ko sa sarili. R.I.P., diyeta.

Halos wala pang tulog, nilakad namin ang pababa ng burol patungong Orchard. Natural na takot magtaxi ang mga kararating sa bagong lugar. Lagi akong nagko-convert sa isip. "Wala kang mabibili kapag ganyan!" tukso ng mga kapwa-scholar noong nasa France ako at nanghihinayang sa ilalabas na euro. Sa katitipid, inulan kami sa paglalakad. Ulang maligamgam. Maalinsangan, walang malamig na simoy ng hangin. Sa lagkit ko, latik na lang ang kulang at biko na ako.

Pagkaraan ng pagkain ng lamang-tiyang Indonesian food (na agad kong binawi sa pagbili ng iced tea tarik), dumiretso kami sa estasyon ng MRT. Nagtalo pa kami kung kukuha ng tourist pass o hindi. Sa matagal na pagdedesiyon, nagpasya na kaming kumuha upang malaya naming magalugad ang siyudad. Unang destinasyon ang Funan DigitalLife Mall, kilala sa mga elektronikong kasangkapan. Limang palapag na ang aming sinuyod at mailap pa sa tutubing kalabaw ang iPad 2. Sumabog daw kasi ang pagawaan nito sa Tsina.

Nagtungo kami sa The Arts House, isang dating lumang gusali ng Parliament House. Naisip ko, malaki ang pagpapahalaga ng Singapore sa kanilang kolonyal na arkitektura. Sa Pilipinas, ang gusaling Art Deco tulad ng Jai Alai ay tinibag noong pamahalaang lungsod ng Maynila. Ang Mehan Garden ay naging carpark, nakatiwangwang lamang ang historikal na

Metropolitan Theater. Ang Intramuros ay pinagsulputan na ng Starbucks at iba pang fastfood na kainan. Muli na namang namulaklak ang mga “sana” sa aking bibig.

Hindi pa nagsisimula ang kumperensiya pero nakahanda na ang exhibit ng mga ilustrasyon. Sinilip ko ang Earshot na pagdadausan ng paglulunsad ng aking aklat. Pagkaraan, nilibot ko ang pasilyo at nakilala ko ang mga guhit ni Yusof Gajah, isang dakilang ilustrador para sa bata mula sa Malaysia. Pumukaw sa aking pansin ang guhit niya ng makukulay na daan at ang bus na naglalaman ng siyam na elepante. Naakit ako sa tila bata niyang pagguhit. Kinalaunan, napag-alaman kong naive art pala ang tawag sa estilong iyon.

Umakyat ako ng ikalawang palapag at nasumpungan ang pagsisimula ng paglulunsad ng mga aklat pambata sa wikang Tamil, isa sa opisyal na wika sa Singapore. Interesado akong dumalo ngunit may hinahabol kaming itinerary—ang Asian Civilizations Museum at ang pagbabalik sa Orchard Road para sa Kinokuniya. Nadaanan ko ang MediaMart na magbebenta na ng mga aklat pambata ng Tulika Books sa India. Napakayaman ng kanilang produksiyon at may sariling tatak ang mga ilustrasyon na nakaugat sa kanilang tradisyon. Medyo malayo pa ang dapat isagawa sa mga aklat pambata sa Pilipinas na mahigpit ang kapit sa Kanluraning impluwensiya.

Napagod na ba kami sa kakatunghay ng mga sining? Pagdating namin sa katabing museo, halos maupo na lang kami sa may sulok. Nakapanghihina ang alinsangan kaya paraiso ang airconditioned na lugar. Ito’y isang tikim ng langit. Hindi na kami nagpasyang pumasok pa sa loob (dahil sa pagtitipid) at natuwa na lang sa libreng exhibit ng kasaysayan ng Singapore River at ng kontemporaryong sining Islamiko. Nakakuha ako ng ideya na magtipon ng mga tula papuri sa Ilog Pasig habang nakikinig sa audio presentation ng mga makatang dumarakila sa ilog Singapore.

Paglabas, napagmasdan namin ang maalamat na Singapore River. Malayong-malayo ito sa mga lumang larawan ng ilog. Ngayon, ligid na ito ng mga matatayog at modernong mga hotel. Makisig pa rin ang braso ng Cavenagh Bridge, ang kaisa-isang suspension bridge at isa sa pinakaluma nilang tulay. Pagtawid, kita namin ang eskultura ng mga batang masayang tatalon sa ilog. Nilikha ito noong 2000 at pinamagatang “The First Generation.” Pakiramdam ko, tumawid ako ng panahon at nagkabuhay ang mga tansong bata. Halos marinig ko ang kanilang halakhakan sa pagsisid at

paglutang sa ilog. Ginulat na lamang ako ng Fullerton Hotel sa harap at ang mala-duriang Esplanade sa di-kalayuan upang sabihing nasa kasalukuyang panahon ako.

Sakay ng bus, nagbalik kami sa Orchard. Dumiretso kami sa Ngee Ann City upang lusubin ang Kinokuniya. Lima hanggang anim na beses ang laki nito kaysa karaniwang bookstore sa Pilipinas at hindi sila nagbebenta ng mga gamit pang-eskuwela, na siyang bumubuhay sa National Bookstore. Dalawang oras ang ginugol ko sa paghahanap at pagbabasa. Pagkaraan, bumaba kami sa may Food Village ng Takashimaya. Dito ko muling natikman ang autentikong chicken rice, ang pambansang pagkain nila na maitutumbas sa adobo ng Pilipinas. Tila ito tinola na ang ipinansaing sa bigas ay sabaw ng manok. May hiniwang pipino sa tabi nito at may oyster, chili, at ginger sauce na pampalasa.

Mga cellphone na empty batt kami pagkaraang kumain. Masarap mamasyal sa Singapore ngunit mauubos ang lakas sa paglalakad at alinsangan. Gusto pa sana naming magwindow-shopping sa kahabaan ng Orchard pero naghihimutok na ang mga binti at talampakan.

Isang bentahe ng paghohotel sa Singapore ay ang kanilang breakfast buffet. Sa Hong Kong, kailangan pang pumunta sa kabilang fastfood restaurant para mag-almusal ng tinapay at itlog. Piyesta ang agahang Singapore. Pansin kong may mga agahang tutugma sa panlasa ng kanilang suking parokyano—may pang-Indian, may pang-Muslim, at may pang-Indonesian/Malaysian. May chicken sausage na halal, may roti prata at sarsang curry, at bibihira ang karneng baboy.

Naging makabuluhan ang dalawang araw na kumperensiya ng Asian Festival of Children's Content. Umuunlad ang panitikang pambata ng Singapore dahil sa tangkilik ng kanilang gobyerno. Hindi nakabatay sa komersiyo ang paglalathala ng karamihan sa kanilang mga aklat. Pinondohan ang kumperensiya ng kanilang National Book Development Council at nakuha nilang mag-imbata ng mga ekspertong reviewer, editor, at manlilikha ng aklat mula sa Amerika at Australia gaya nina Liz Rosenberg, Neal Porter, Christopher Cheng, at Dianne Wolfer. Napakabuhay ng sining sa bansang inakala kong nakatuon lamang sa pinansiya, turismo, at teknolohiya.

Kinagabihan, nagpasya kaming makipagkita sa dati kong estudyante. Dito na siya naghahanap-buhay dahil mas malaki ang sahod. Karamihan

sa kanila’y nagsimula bilang turista at pagkaraan ng isang linggo’y may trabaho na. Singapore na raw ang bagong Amerika para sa mga propesyonal na Pilipino. Malapit nang pumantay ang Singaporean dollar sa US dollar. Isa pa’y mas malapit sa bansa ang Singapore kaya mas convenient itong dayuhin upang magtrabaho.

Nagpasya kaming kumain sa Makansutra, ang tinatawag na Gluttons Bay, sa likod ng Esplanade. Kung sa Pilipinas, tila ito Dampa sa Libis o ang Paluto sa may Ortigas. Umorder kami ng dalawang bandehadong Yang Chow, dalawang platong pansit na maanghang, lumpia, tahong na may sarsa, dalawang uri ng omelette (oyster at onion), at dalawang order ng Bonchon-style fried chicken. Naparami ang order namin dahil mga gutom kami (o takaw-mata?). Isa pa, naglakad kami mula The Arts House patungo sa Makansutra. Malayo-layong lakad din iyan, mapapatawad na ang katakawan. Tiniis ko ang anghang dahil hindi libre ang tubig at mahal ang iced tea na delata. Ipinagpapasalamat ko ang libreng ice-cold na tubig sa Pilipinas.

Pagkaraan ng nakabubundat na hapunan at kumustahan, naglakad kami sa paligid ng Marina Bay. Paraiso para sa sinumang potograpo ang anino ng mga maiilaw na gusali sa itim na balat ng dagat. Tila ba gusto kong bumalik sa Funan upang bumili ng digital SLR. Mula sa malayo, tila lumapag ang spaceship sa tatlong magkakatabing hotel ng Marina Bay Sands. Wari namang sumabog na dambuhalang golf ball ang Singapore Art Science Museum. Ito ang gabi ng mga photo op upang mabusog ang mga camera at Facebook.

Tulad ng nakaraang gabi, umuwi kami ng hotel na bundat pero empty batt. Pagkaraang maligo (kailangang maligo dahil para na akong fly trap sa lagkit ng balat), tuloy-tuloy na ang aking malalim na pagtulog. Mabuti na lang at hindi gaanong mamahalin ang hotel na aming pinili. Nagiging tulugan lang kasi ito at paliguan ng abalang bisita.

Huling araw na ng kumperensiya. Walang tigil ang palitan ng mga calling card at pagmamalaki sa produksiyon ng mga aklat. Nakinig ako sa estado ng paglalathala sa Malaysia, Vietnam, at India. Natuwa ako’t magkakaugnay ang tradisyong pampanitikan ng mga bansa sa Asya—nakaugat sa panitikang-bayan (folklore) ang ating mga panitikang pambata. May pagsusumikap ding itanghal ang kaluluwang silangan (eastern soul) sa pamamagitan ng mga kuwento at tulang pambata. At laging ikinalulungkot

ang banta ng mga Kanluraning aklat sa mga pambansang panitikan.

Matagumpay namang naitanghal ang aking aklat sa paglulunsad. Namangha ang mga panauhin dahil kauna-unahan ang Pilipinas sa Timog Silangang Asya sa produksiyon ng apps ng aklat pambata para sa Android at iPad. Sa buong kumperensiya, usap-usapan kung papatayin ba ng mga tablet at e-book reader ang mga aklat. Sa huli, napagtanto na hindi mamamatay ang mga aklat kung mananaig ang nilalaman at kasiningan ng pagkakasulat.

Biyernes, huling gabi ko na sa siyudad na ito. Nagpasya akong humiwalay sa mga kasamahang artist, editor, at tagapaglathala. Ito ang gabing akin. Mula Orchard Station, nagtungo ako sa Chinatown. Nakita kong muli ang shophouse dito na kakulay ng mga pambatang birthday cake. Tradisyunal itong mga bahay na magkakadikit ng mga negosyanteng Tsino. Tindahan, kapihan, o kainan ang unang palapag. Ang taas na bahagi'y tahanan nila.

Mula paglilibot ng Chinatown na para bang Divisoria, bumalik muli ako sa estasyon ng MRT. Ako lang ba ang natutuwa sa pagsakay ng tren sa ibang bansa? Pakiramdam ko kasi'y hindi na ako turista dahil kasama ko ang mga karaniwang tao sa karaniwang lugar. Pinaunlakan ko ang paanyaya ng kaibigang naninirahan sa Eunos. Ito ang distritong pantahanan ng lungsod. Pagbaba, tanaw ko ang mga nagtataasang condominium sa paligid. Para itong pinagpatung-patong na kahon ng posporo mula sa kalayuan.

Malapit sa estasyon, nag-iced tea tarik ako sa kanilang hawker center, na para bang karinderya sa kanto sa 'tin. Inunti-unti ko ang paghigop nito upang mapahaba rin ang kuwentuhan ng bagong kakilala. Siya'y editor ng mga akdang isinulat ng mga batang Singaporean. Sa kanya ko nalaman na hindi lahat ng Singaporean ay may maalwang buhay. Mataas nga ang suweldo pero mamahalin ang mga bilihin. May mga naghahirap ding pamilya. Ang mga retiradong mamamayan ay kailangan pa muling magtrabaho upang suportahan ang sarili. Hindi sila mabubuhay sa retirement fund lamang. Nabakas ko sa kaniyang mga kuwento ang pangungulila sa iniwang pamilya at sa binitiwang propesyon bilang guro. Mabuti na lang, may internet at webcam na. Gabi-gabi na niyang nakukumusta ang kanyang anak at maybahay.

Pagkaraan ng dalawang oras, maghahating-gabi, tinext ako ng aking mga kasamahan. Nasa Clark Quay raw sila at nagpapakasaya sa huling

gabi namin. Pikit-mata akong sumunod at nagtaxi (sarado na ang MRT). Pagdating sa Señor Santos, umorder ako ng serbesa, iced tea, at Bailey's shake. Nagtataka ako hanggang ngayon kung bakit di nagrebolusyon ang sikmura ko dahil sa iba't ibang inumin. Para akong nasa Malate batay sa pagmamasid sa mga tao sa paligid. Ito ang tambayan ng mga kabataang turista at lokal. Ito ang kanilang gimikan. Masarap balikan ang nalimot na kabataan sa pagbisita rito. Naglakad kami upang maghanap ng taxi. Medyo nahihilo ako, parang lumulutang. Di ko alam kung alkohol, antok, o lungkot sa pamamaalam sa lungsod. Nakabibitin. Di bale, may susunod pa namang pagkakataon upang muling dalawin ito. Marahil sa susunod, purong paglilibot lamang gaya ng ordinaryong turista na nakasuwerte sa murang pamasaha.

Kinaumagahan, pagkaraan ng buffet, dumiretso na kami sa airport. Napaaga kami at takot yatang maiwan ng eroplano. Para akong nasa Orchard sa paliparan ng Changi. Tila mall ito na tabi-tabi ang tindahan ng pabango, damit, pasalubong, at mga kagamitang elektroniko. Convenient nga para sa huling bugso ng pagwawaldas ng mga manlalakbay. May mga restaurant din. Busog ako sa buffet kaya di na kumain pa.

Naalala kong marami pa pala akong dolyar. Nagtungo ako sa tindahan ng pabango at binili ang pabangong gamit ko, limang taon na ang nakalipas. Dumalayong ang mga alaala sa muli kong paglanghap ng pamilyar na matamis-asim na pabango. May kumiliti sa aking imahinasyon.

Tinawag ako ni Kiko, ang kasamang artist. Tuwang-tuwa siyang ipinakita sa akin ang kanyang tuklas: libreng powerfoot massage. Unlimited. Sa Pilipinas, 20 pesos ito sa loob ng limang minuto. Habang hinihintay ang boarding, sinulit namin ang paglamutak ng aparato sa aming binti at talampakan. Kailangan nito ng masinsin at marubdob na masahe sa mahababang nilakad, kailangan nito ang muling pagkokondisyon sa susunod pang tutuklasing siyudad.

Isa sa pangarap ko ang mabisita ang bansang pinag-ugatan ng modernong panitikang pambata sa daigdig—ang United Kingdom. May mayamang tradisyon ang kahariang ito ng mga fairy tales, nursery rhymes, fantasy, kuwentong domestiko at pampamilya, at iba pang genre fiction.

Ang bansa ring ito ang may pinakamaunlad na ani ng akademiko at seryosong pag-aaral sa panitikang pambata. Ngayong Kapaskuhan, mapalad akong makapagbakasyon sa lungsod ng London upang bisitahin ang mga bookstore, sundan ang yapak ng mga dakilang manunulat, magpaligaw sa mga museo't aklatan, at manood ng mga dula.

Isa sa aking pinanood ay ang adaptasyon ng nobelang pambatang *Matilda* ni Roald Dahl. Ang musical ay isinulat para sa tanghalan ni Dennis Kelly at may mga titik at musika naman ni Tim Minchin. Nabasa ko na ang aklat na ito at napanood nang ilang ulit ang bersiyong pelikula, kaya interesado ako kung ano ang bagong maipapamalas ng dulang ito. Nagsimula ang pagtatanghal nito noong 2010 sa Stratford-upon-Avon at patuloy ang palabas sa Cambridge Theatre ng West End.

Ayon sa BBC, isa si Roald Dahl sa pinakamahusay na manunulat pambata sa ika-20 siglo sa UK. Nakapagbenta ng 200 milyong kopya ang kaniyang mga aklat at naisalin sa 59 na wika. Wala pang salin sa Filipino ang kaniyang mga nobela at lubos akong matutuwa kung mabibigyan ako ng pagkakataon na maisalin ang isa sa mga aklat pambata niya gaya ng *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Witches*, *BFG*, at *James and the Giant Peach*. Bukod sa pagiging matagumpay ng kaniyang panulat, naging dahilan ang mga aklat ni Dahl sa paghubog ng mga bata bilang mambabasa gaya ng naisagawa ng naunang popular ding manunulat na si Enid Blyton.

Sa pagpasok sa tanghalan, bumungad sa akin ang entabladong ligid ng mga bloke ng titik. Sa gitna, mapapansin ang mga higanteng eskaparate na puno ng mga aklat. Ang disenyong ito ang nagpapahiwatig sa mga pinakadiwa ng aklat—(1) ang kapangyarihan ng aklat upang mapagbigyan ng kamulatan ng batang api sa tahanan ang paaralan, (2) ang aklatan bilang santuwaryo ng nagdurusing kaluluwa, at (3) ang bisa ng pagsasalaysay upang mapaghilom ang sugatang damdamin. Walang duda, ang aklat at ang mga dulang ito ay may basbas ng mga guro at magulang upang ipatangkilik sa mga bata, kahit na subersibo, di kombensiyonal, at pasaway ang mga batang tauhan, lalo na si Matilda Wormwood.

Tapat sa orihinal na aklat ang nasabing dula. Narito pa rin ang mga eksenang slapstick na marka ng humor ni Dahl tulad ng paglalagay ni Matilda ng hydrogen peroxide sa pampakintab ng buhok ng kaniyang ama. Napuno ng halakhak ng mga bata ang teatro sa eksenang ito hindi dahil sa

pagpapalaganap ng karahasan kundi sa pakiramdam na may kapangyarihan ang isang munti o musmos na gumanti sa pagpapabaya't panghahamak ng sariling magulang. Hinubog ng mga eksenang ito ang bida bilang batang sumusuway sa awtoridad at di laging sumusunod sa mga walang-basehang utos. Maaalala rin ang paglalagay ni Matilda ng glue sa sombrero ng ama na nagkadagdag sa higit pang pagkakasira sa buhok ng magulang. Pinakamainam na gamit ng marahas na humor ang paglalagay ni Lavender, ang matalik na kaibigan ng bida, ng newt sa inumin ni Miss Trunchbull, ang principal ng paaralan.

Para sa mga Pilipino, kabigla-bigla ang mararahas na eksena laban sa mga matatanda ngunit isa ito sa mga katangian at salik sa tagumpay ng panulat ni Dahl. Nangahas si Dahl na ipakita ang kasamaan ng tao na maiuugat sa tradisyon ng mga fairy tales at kuwentong-bayan sa Europa. Napamahal ang mga batang mambabasa sa kaniya dahil sa walang takot na paglaban at paghihiganti sa masasamang matanda. Hindi naman nagkulang si Dahl sa paghahandog ng mapagkalingang matanda gaya ng librarian na si Mrs. Phelps at siyempre, ang tunay na representasyon ng guro bilang kahalili ng magulang, si Miss Honey.

Maituturing nang walang kamatayan at hindi maluluma ang akdang ito ni Dahl. Bukod pa sa mga nabanggit, matutukoy ang paggawad ng kapangyarihan sa bata bilang susi sa tagumpay ng panitikang pambata. May kapangyarihang telekinesis si Matilda bukod pa sa kaniyang namumukod na katalinuhan sa matematika at pagbabasa. May ibang uri ng lugod nang isinadula ang kakayahan ni Matilda sa pagbabasa ng mga klasikong literatura at pagkuwenta ng mga numero. Isa siyang henyo na malayong-malayo sa katangian ng kaniyang pamilya na baduy, mababaw, walang kultura, at laging nakatutok sa mga basurang palabas sa telebisyon. Lantad sa aklat at dula ang paniniwala ni Dahl na mapanganib sa kamalayan ng bata ang hungkag na aliw na hatid ng telebisyon. Lumitaw din ang ganitong sentimiyo sa aklat niyang *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

Kitang-kita ang kasamaan sa mga antagonistang ni Dahl. Nakatulong ang kasuotan at ang pagganap upang paunlarin ang karakterisasyon ng masasamang matanda. Gayong litaw ang kasamaan, sa huli'y mananaig ang kabutihan. Pormula na ito sa mga pinakadakilang akdang pambata sa Ingles gaya ng *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Dark Materials Trilogy*, at ang serye ng *Harry Potter*.

Lumabas ako sa tanghalang nakangiti, gaya ng mga kasamang batang manonood. Mapalad ako ngayong Kapaskuhan na masaksihan ang pagtatanghal na ito—isang pagsasadula sa kapangyarihan ng mga aklat, ng bata, at ng kabutihan.

* * *

Pangalawa ang London sa mga lungsod na nabisita ko na naghahandog ng libreng pagpasok sa mga museo. Una’y ang Nice sa France nang ipinadala ako doon bilang visiting professor sa University of Nice Sophia Antipolis. Dito ko unang nakilala ang mga obra maestra nina Mark Chagall at Henri Matisse, mga pintor na narahuyo sa katangitanging liwanag at asul ng Timog Europa o ang tinatawag nilang Cote d’Azur. Pagkaraan ng ilang taon, pinalad akong mabisita ang bansa ng mga dakilang manunulat sa Ingles. Sabi ng ilang kaibigan, dapat kong mabisita ang British Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum, National Gallery, at ang Tate Modern dahil alam nilang mahilig akong magmuseo. Inilista ko ang mga ito para mailahok sa aking itinerary. Ngunit ang hindi nila nasabi, nasa London ang pinakatanyag na museo na ang tuon ay mga artifact ng pagkabata (childhood) tulad ng gamit, laruan, damit, at mga sining-biswal. Sa buong UK, ito ang may pinakamayamang koleksiyon na may kaugnayan sa pagkabata.

Naitatag ito bilang Bethnal Green Museum noong 1872 ngunit noong dekada 1920 lamang ito nagsimulang magserbisyo para sa mga batang bisita. Ibig sabihin, ang mga koleksiyon ng museo ay maaaring makita ng bata nang hindi kinakarga o kailangan pang tumingala (eye level). Taong 1974 naman nang nagsimula itong maging museo ng mga bagay na may kinalaman sa pagkabata ng Europa at ng daigdig.

Malapit na akong umuwi sa Pilipinas nang binisita ko ang museong ito. Kakaiba sa museong nagtatampok ng kasaysayan at sining-biswal ng daigdig, kakaunti ang turistang napapadpad sa Museum of Childhood dahil sa may kalayuan ito sa sentro ng lungsod. Walang siksikan sa entrada ng museo. Walang masyadong tindahan ng mga souvenir at restawran sa labas. Sa isip ko, mainam itong lugar upang magpahinga naman ako at magmuni sa pahapyaw na pagsipat sa kultura ng mga British.

Pagpasok sa museo, nabighani ako sa kakaibang disenyo ng gusali. Tila ba luma itong estasyon ng tren na ginawang museo. Maaliwalas ang

mga pasilyo. Nadatnan ko sa loob ang mga batang mag-aaral na pauwi na mula sa kanilang field trip. Bumungad sa akin ang dalawang palapag ng mga koleksiyon. Hindi tulad ng British Museum, hindi ako nalunod sa dami ng koleksiyon. Sa loob-loob ko, kaya kong namnamin ang mga bagay sa loob ng tatlong oras nang hindi nagmamadali o may pakiramdam na baka may makaligtaan akong highlight ng museo na kailangan ko pang balikan.

Nang kumirod ang aking binti sa kalalakad, pansamantala akong naupo sa isang sulok upang magbasa ang mga aklat pambata na pag-aari ng museo.

Tila ako nagbalik sa pagkabata habang ginagalugad ang loob. Nakita ko ang kanilang espesyal na exhibit ng mga saranggolang papel mula sa Kabul, Afghanistan na nilikha ng mga bata mula sa Murad Khani, ang lumang bahagi ng lungsod. Tradisyon sa nasabing bansa ang pagpapalipad ng makukulay na saranggola bilang salubong sa tagsibol. Naalala ko ang aking pagkabata na nauuso ang saranggola at boka-boka kapag nalalapit na ang tag-araw. Naalala ko ang minsang napabili ako ng saranggola yari sa plastik na sinamahan ako ng aking ama na magpalipad nito.

Sa paglilibot, nakita ko ang mga laruang hindi ko naging laruan. Ito ang mga laruang pinangarap kong maangkin ngunit hindi naibigay sa akin ng aking magulang o ng aking ninong (wala akong ninang). Masuwerte ang mga pamangkin at inaanak ko at mga anak ng aking kaibigan na halos isang bundok ang mga laruan sa pagdating ng kanilang kaarawan o Pasko. Dito ko nakita ang mga laruang tren, ang iba't ibang uri ng manyika at teddy bear, kabayong kahoy, mga papet mula sa Indonesia, laruang makinang pantahi, at ang pambatang upuan (*animeubles*) na hitsurang pusa na likha ng Pranses na si Gerard Rigot. Kilala si Rigot sa paglikha ng mga muwebles na may mga anyong hayop noong dekada otsenta sa France. Nais niyang sa kaniyang mga likha, “makakapangarap ang sinuman, makakapaghiraya, at madala sa saanmang dako.”

May espesyal ding exhibit ang museo sa isang bahagi ng ikalawang palapag. Pinamagatan itong *On Their Own*, ang kauna-unahang pangunahing exhibition sa Britain na nagsasalaysay sa kuwento ng mga batang migrante at kung paano ito nakaapekto sa kanilang buhay. Malungkot na bahagi ito ng kanilang kasaysayan. Gayong maunlad na bansa ang United Kingdom, may mga pamilyang mahihirap sa bansang ito at mga batang napapabayaan, naulila, o naaabandona. Mula 1869 hanggang 1970, mahigit 100,000 batang

British ang ipinadala sa Canada, Australia, at iba pang Commonwealth na bansa. Ipinaampon sila sa mga may-kayang pamilya upang doon mapangalagaan at mabigyan ng bagong pag-asa sa buhay. Hindi lahat ng mga batang ito ay nakaranas ng mabuting buhay sa kanilang pagtanda. Ilan sa pumukaw ng aking atensiyon ang itim na manyikang pagmamay-ari ni Helen Tachell. Ito ang kaniyang tanging dalang bagay nang ipinadala siya sa Kanlurang Australia noong 1839. Gayundin ang larawan ng batang si Stewart Lee kasama ang kaniyang ina. Ibinigay ito sa kaniya ng ina nang ipinadala siya sa New South Wales noong 1955 at apat na taong gulang pa lamang siya. Napakabigat ng kuwentong taglay ng mga artifact na ito.

Sa permanent exhibit naman, limang artifact ang pinakatumatak sa aking alaala at nais kong ibahagi. Una ay ang paddle doll o manyikang palupalo. Mula ito sa mga Ehipto at nagawa noong 1300 BK na yari sa kahoy. Ito ang pinakamatandang bagay sa koleksiyon ng museo. Ang mga manyika sa Egypt ay hindi talaga laruan o gamit pambata kundi sumisimbolo ng fertilidad at inililibing kasama ng bangkay upang “masiguro ang muling pagkabuhay sa kabilang-buhay.”

Ikalawa ay ang mutton bone doll (1890-1920). Ang mutton ay isang katawagan sa tupa. Binili ni Edward Lovett ang laruang ito mula sa isang bata mula sa Bethnal Green, ang dating hikahos na bahagi ng London. Kayhirap hanapin ng laruang ito sa museo. Inabot ako ng kalahating oras sa paghahanap nito at maging ang mga staff ng museo ay hindi batid kung saan ito eksaktong matatagpuan. Nasa ilalim kasi ito ng salaming estante at napakaliit kasi yari lang sa maliit na buto ng hayop. Ginuhitan ng mata, kilay, at bibig ang buto. Nilagyan ng itim na tela bilang buhok at binalutan ng retaso bilang damit. Ipinapakita nito na hindi hadlang ang kahirapan upang makalikha ang bata ng kanilang mga laruan. At ang mga bata sa London ay gumagawa ng mga laruan mula sa bagay na nakakalat sa kanilang paligid.

Kaugnay nito ang mga laruan mula sa South Africa, Sudan at Madagascar (1980-2000) na trak, kotse, at helicopter na yari sa lumang lata at alambre.

Naalala ko ang aming pagkabata noon. Hindi kami mayaman at hindi nag-uumapaw ng mga laruan ang aming tahanan. Kaming magpipinsan ay masaya na sa lumang latang kahon ng biskwit. Hindi pa uso noon ang family computer at video games. Dito namin itinatago ang

aming mga “kayamanan”—mga kakaibang butones at binhi, mga sigay, mga makukulay na balat ng tsokolate at kendi, pamburang amoy tsokolate, mga lumang larawan buhat sa magazine, at mga tiket ng bus. Gaya ng mga bata sa Bethnal Green, gumawa rin ako ng manyika yari sa patpat at ang buhok ay mga dahon ng ipil-ipil. Muntik na akong habulin ng kapitbahay nang makita niyang pinipitas ko ang tanim nilang ipil-ipil na nagsisilbing kanilang bakuran. Naalala ko rin ang mga laruang telepono namin na yari sa lumang lata ng gatas. Maging ang ginawang laruang telebisyon sa akin ng aking ama na yari sa kahong kahoy na may nakarolyong pinagdikit-dikit na papel at ginuhitan upang makapagkuwento.

Ikatlo ay ang laruang Noah’s Ark (1825) mula sa Germany na yari na kahoy. Talagang napatitig ako sa mga laruang daong ni Noe na ligid ng maliliit na hayop na nais mailigtas sa paparating na baha. Napag-alaman ko na ang laruang ito ang tanging katanggap-tanggap na laruan ng mga bata sa Europa kapag Linggo. Kasangkapan ito sa pagtuturo ng kuwento buhat sa Lumang Tipan at sa pagtuturo ng iba’t ibang hayop na hindi kilala ng mga batang Europeo gaya ng mga leon at elepante.

Ikaapat, katabi ng ikonikong laruang Rubik’s Cube na nilikha ng Hungariang si Erno Rubik noong 1977, halos napalundag ako nang makita ang laruang sungka na may mga sigay mula sa Pilipinas. Sabi sa paliwanag ng museo, “the wooden playing board is from the Philippines.” Kulang sa paliwanag na ang sungka ay laganap na laruan sa Timog Silangang Asya at ang sungkang nakadispley ay maaari pang palitan ng mas mainam na uri ng sungka na makikita mula sa Mindanao.

Huling laruang umagaw-pansin sa akin ay ang koleksiyon ng manyikang Barbie ng Mattel noong 1962. Una itong nailunsad noong 1959 sa New York Toy Fair. Hudyat ng panahon ang pagkakalikha sa mga Barbie dahil sa pagusbong ng konsepto ng teenager sa Amerika. Ito rin ang pinakakontrobersiyal na manyika sa daigdig dahil sa pagpapalaganap ng di-realistikong anyo ng kababaihan para sa mga batang babae. Magandang balita naman ayon sa artikulong “Barbie’s Got a New Body” (*Time Magazine*, Feb. 28, 2016) na sa huling bahagi ng 2016, pagkaraan ng 57 taon, maglalabas na ang Mattel ng mga bagong anyo ng kanilang manyika—may iba’t ibang hugis ng katawan, iba’t ibang kulay ng balat at buhok, at maliit (petite). Ito ay upang maipakita ang iba’t ibang anyo ng kababaihan sa ika-21 siglo hindi lang sa US kundi sa mundo.

Umalis ako ng museong nagagalak ang bata sa aking sarili. Sumakay ako ng tren papauwi sa aming hotel sa may Russell Square na nangangarap at nag-iisip, “Kung magkakaroon sa Pilipinas ng sariling museo ng pagkabata, ano-ano kaya ang lalamanin nito?”

* * *

“Kabayan!” sigaw niyang parang nanalo sa bingo. Nagkita kami sa isang Chinese fastfood sa pinakaplaza ng Nice. Ipinagpatuloy namin ang huntahan, tila nagkitang magkaibigan, sa Massena habang nagsasanib ang Dagat Mediterranean at ang anghit ng mga Pranses sa pagtatapos ng kanilang tag-araw. Itinuro niya sa akin kung saan ang talipapa, murang grocery, at rotisserie na parang Andok’s.

“Saan ba ang raket mo?” tanong niya.

“Nag-aaral ako rito. Scholar ng Erasmus Mundus.”

“Nag-aaral ka dito? Di ka nga marunong mag-French.” Ipinagmalaki niyang fluent na siya sa loob ng isang dekadang paglilinis ng mga yate sa Cannes. Alam kong baliko ang Pranses niya at malakas ang puntong Ilokano.

“Magsimba ka sa Sainte-Reparate. Maraming Pinoy doon. Hahanapan ka nila ng raket.”

Isang Linggo, sa tulong ng mapa, nahanap ko rin ang lumang simbahan. Hindi naman raket ang hanap ko. Gusto ko lang magtanong kung saan makabibili ng toyo, suka, laurel, at bigas sa Cote d’Azur. Gusto kong mag-adobo at magsaing. Sawa na ako sa matigas nilang tinapay.

“Psst!” bati sa akin ng nasa likod na manang na day-off na day-off ang suot pero naka-Prada. Matalim ang titig niya sa aking pekeng LV na nabili ko sa bangketa sa Ventimiglia.

Lumapit ako kay manang habang nagsisimula ang misa.

“Ikaw ang kilala ni Marlon, ‘no?’”

Nag-atubili akong ngumiti.

“Marami akong raket sa iyo.”

“Tutor po ba?” pagtataka ko. “Puwede din ako sa clerical jobs.”

“Raket nga e. Maglilinis. Ang daming mansiyong lilinisin sa Monaco. Para naman may maipadala ka sa inyo.”

Napatitig ako sa retablo.

“Ano, kelan ka magsisimula? Akin na ang number mo,” pangungulit niya.

Binati ng pari ang mga dumalo sa misa. Napalinga ako sa mga antigong santo at nagtaka kung naintindihan pa nila ang panalangin kong Tagalog.

* * *

“Bumalik ka dito bukas,” nakangiti niyang sabi, “ipaglaluto kita ng request mo.” Hindi ko batid kung ang ngiting iyon ay dahil sa iniwan kong tip o ang pagkakataong mailuluto ang kaniyang specialty na wala sa menu.

“Susubukan ko po,” sagot kong nagmamadali patungong Barceloneta. “Hapon pa naman ang flight ko bukas pauwi.”

Nakakailang linggo na ako sa España. Natunton ko ang mga lugar na napuntahan ni Rizal. Gamit kong giya ang mga liham niya sa mga kaibigan na nagdedetalye ng paglalakbay sa lupain ng mananakop. Naglakad-lakad ako sa parke na kaniyang tinulaan na “Mi Retiro.” Hinanap ko ang Palacio de Cristal na nagsilbing hawla ng mga katutubong pinagpistahan ng mga Kastila.

Kanin at ulam na ang hinahanap-hanap ko nang dumating ako sa bayan ni Gaudi. Mas mahalaga ang sikmura kaysa arkitektura. Sa pagtatanong-tanong, natuklasan ko ang munting restawrang Pinoy, ilang hakbang mula sa makasaysayang café na tambayan ng mga patnugot ng *La Solidaridad*.

Hila-hila ang aking namumutok na bagahe, nagbalik ako kay Aling Celia. Sa bungad pa lamang, amoy ko na ang bagong-lutong nilaga. Batid kong may mais ito at saba. Hindi tinipid sa paminta at repolyo. Bagong luto din ang sinaing. May patis sa mesa at mga hiwa ng lemon. “Mahirap makahanap ng kalamansi dito.” Tila humihingi siya ng paumanhin.

Hindi na ako nahiya pa. Nakatatlong extra rice ako. Nakatitig sa akin si Aling Celia at nagbirong unli-rice daw ang order ko. Binibilang yata niya kung ilan ang nguya sa bawat pagsubo ko.

Ayokong mag-eat and run kaya napaorder ako ng espresso bago magtungo sa airport. Para matunawan naman, kahit papaano. Pagkaraan ng

kalahating oras, ako’y nagpaalam na. Iiwan ko na sana ang natitirang euro bilang tip. Kababayan naman si Aling Celia. Pero tumanggi siya.

“Huwag na, minsan ka lang naman napadalaw,” nakangiti niyang sabi ngunit may mga guhit ng lungkot ang mukha. “Ipinagluto talaga kita. Paborito rin iyan ng panganay ko. Alam mo, pareho kayong maganang kumain.”

At agad niyang pinahid ang masaganang luhan agad lumapat sa kaniyang labi.

* * *

Pintura na ang dugong dumadaloy sa aking mga ugat. Ilang minuto na lang, tutulo na ang oleo mula sa aking ilong at tainga. Maghapon kong tinitigan ang mga obrang Renaissance sa Uffizi. Ang mga pintura ni Botticelli na sa textbook ko lang nakikita, kaharap ko na. Magsusuka na talaga ako kapag nakakita pa ako ng mga dibuho ng Annunciation at Resurrection.

Paglabas ng museo, sumilip sa akin ang tore ng Palazzo Vecchio. Kaunting hakbang pa, lalantad ang engrangeng Duomo na saksi sa pagusbong ng Firenze bilang Republika at ngayo’y destinasyon ng mga turista. Bukas ko na ito babalikan. Sarado na ang simbahan.

Nagpasya akong magkape sa kalapit na Astor Café. Hinding-hindi ako hihiling ng cappuccino dahil sabi ng mga Italiano, pang-agahang inumin ito. Habang pinalalamig ang aking latte, natanaw ko ang isang kababayang pauwi. Alam kong Pinoy siya sa ilog ng mga Puti at Koreano. Lumitaw siya sa isang masikip na eskinita ng kasaysayang hindi namin kilala. Ordinaryo ang suot, hindi panturista. Nasa pusod siya ng Firenze ngunit walang ningning, walang pagkamangha sa kaniyang mga mata. Matamlay ang katawan niyang hinaharana ng titik ng mga digital camera.

Sinikap kong hulihin ang mga mata niya. Mailap. May inililihim. May work permit kaya siya? TNT ba siya sa Italia? Takot ba siyang baka magsumbong ako? Ilan taon na kaya siyang di nakauwi? Ilan ang kaniyang pinag-aaral?

Walang panahon ang kababayang iyon upang masdan at titigan ang mga obra maestra. Siya kasi ang obra maestra.

Papa

Ferdinand Pisigan Jarin

Sa tuwing mapapalo ako noon ni Mama o ni Nanay dala ng kalikutan at kakulitan, sa pagitan ng pag-atungal na parang baka sa kaiiyak habang hinahaplos ang binti na nalatayan, bukambibig ko ang “Papaaaa! Papa ko!” bilang pagsusumbong sa aking ama. Pero hindi siya dumarating para aluin ako. Para patahanin ako. Kami ni Michael. Kahit kailan, di siya dumating. Dahil kahit kailan, di na siya nagpakita.

Nang magtanong ako kay Mama noon kung bakit wala kaming ninong at ninang sa Quinabuangan, gustong-gusto ko ring itanong kung bakit hindi namin kasama ang aking ama doon. Maraming araw pa ang lilipas nang maglakas-loob akong itanong ito sa kaniya. Sasagutin niya ito sa pagsasabing “Sundalo kasi ang Papa n’yo at sa iba’t ibang lugar nadedestino kaya di natin kasama dito.” Nag-anak pa ng maraming tanong sa isip ko ang naging sagot ng aking ina. Wala bang bakasyon sa trabaho sila Papa para di niya kami mabisita o masamahan kaya kahit ilang araw lang bago muling bumalik sa lugar kung saan man siya nakadestino? Di ba niya kami naiisip? Di ba niya kami nami-miss?

Madalas akong paiyakin noon ng aking mga Tiyuhin lalo na sina Tito Genie at Jun. Sasabihin nila na ang ama ko raw ay sumama na sa ibang babae. Na iniwan na kami. Na hindi na babalik. Na hiwalay na raw sila ng aking ina. Siyempre di ako naniniwala sa kanila. Mas maniniwala ako sa naging sagot ng aking ina. Na ginagawa lang nila ‘yon para paiyakin ako dahil alam nilang bata pa lang, pikunin na ako. E, talagang masarap

magpaiyak ng mga batang-pikunin e. Malalaman ko ito nang ako na ang gumagawa nito nang tumanda.

Pero di lang pala talaga nila ako basta pinapaiyak lang. Sinasabi pala nila talaga ang totoong kuwento.

Palatanong akong bata at alam ito ng pamilya. Pero nang magtanong ako tungkol sa aking ama, naisip marahil ng aking ina na hindi na ito katulad ng mga dati kong tanong sa kaniya tungkol sa “kung bakit ang ingay ng mga kuliglig sa gabing matutulog na kami” o “sa likod ba talaga ng bundok lumulubog ang araw.” Kaya’t isang araw ay aaminin na rin sa akin ni Mama na kaya kami napadpad sa bahay ng aking Lola at Lolo sa Quinabuangan at iniwan ang Cembo ay dahil naghiwalay na sila ng aking ama. Biglang sumariwa sa batang-isipan ko noon ang eksena ng mga kahol ng aso, maulan, umiiyak si Mama at pinaalis kami sa isang paupahang-bahay sa Cembo. Kasunod nito ang malabong larawan ng itsura ng aking ama sa limang-taong gulang kong alaala. Mabuti pa ako at may malabong imahen ng kaniyang mukha. Pati ang ilang eksena ng pagpasyal naming mag-ama sakay ng kaniyang dilaw na kotse at pagbibigay niya sa akin ng Piso para huwag ko silang guluhin ni Mama habang malungkot at seryoso silang nag-uusap sa isang parke ay babalik sa aking alaala. At ang huling eksenang maaalala ko, hawak-hawak ako ni Mama at halos makaladkad niya ako dahil nagmamadali ang kaniyang lakad para maghanap at magtanong sa mga nahanap na kakilala, na nasa likod ng mga salaming bintana o di kaya’y nasalubong sa pasilyo, sa di ko matiyak kung saan mang opisina o gusali, kung nalalaman ba nila ang kinaroroonan ng aking ama. Darating ang araw na malalaman kong kaya namin ginawa ang huli ay dahil sa dumating ang mga araw na hindi na umuuwi sa aming inuupahang-bahay ang aking ama.

Bago pa dumating ang araw nang hindi na pag-uwi ng aking ama, darating daw muna ang mga araw na may estrangherong biglang susulpot sa inuupahang-bahay namin noon sa kalye ng Ipil sa Cembo at magpapakilala kay Mama bilang kapatid o pamangkin ni Papa habang ang aking ama ay nasa loob ng kampo nila sa Fort Bonifacio at nakaduty o di kaya’y tumutugtog sa kung saan mang lugar na may okasyong pang-militar. Kabilang siya sa banda ng Army bilang Trombonista. Malugod naman silang tatanggapin ni Mama dahil hindi pa niya alam noon na ang nagpakilalang pamangkin ay anak pala talaga ni Papa sa legal

nitong asawa. Dahil nagpakilala ang aking ama noon sa aking ina na isang binata. At ang nagpakilalang kapatid ay kamag-anak pala ng asawa ng aking ama. Marahil, ginawa nila ito sa aking ina upang mapatunayan kung talagang may ibang kinakasama si Leopoldo Jarin, na naririnig nila bilang kuwento-kuwento sa bayan ng Imus sa probinsiya ng Cavite kung saan nagmula ang aking ama at siyang lugar na tinitirahan ng kanyang orihinal na pamilya. Nang mapatunayang totoo nga ang mga kuwento, isang araw ay bubulagain si Mama ng legal na asawa ni Papa at mag-eeskandalo ito sa Cembo (at sunod-sunod din ang pagkakataong susugurin nito ang aking ama sa kampo) para ipaglaban ang kanyang karapatan bilang legal na asawa at ang karapatan ng kanilang apat na lehitimong anak. Nang ipinanganak ako, nasa elementarya na ang bunso sa apat na anak ni Papa sa kaniyang asawa. Nang ipanganak si Michael, nagsisimula nang mamuo ang mga delubyong ito sa pagsasama ng aking ina't ama.

At mabigat, sobrang bigat ang lahat ng ito sa dalagang probinsiyana na si Melinda na napaibig ng isang sundalong nagpanggap na binata samantalang ang una niya lang nais ay makapagtapos ng pag-aaral sa kolehiyo sa Maynila habang namamasukan sa tindahan ng isang Tiyahin sa loob ng kampo-militar. Wala siyang gagawin kundi umiyak nang umiyak nang dumating na ang mga eksena at rebelasyong ito. Pero maghihintay pa rin siya ng paliwanag mula sa aking ama. Umasa pa rin siyang magliliwanag ang lahat. Pero hindi na pumayag si Tatay, ang aking Lolo, na masaktan pa nang paulit-ulit ang kaniyang anak. Inutusan niya ang aking ina na hiwalayan na ang “hayop na lalaki” at umuwi na sa probinsiya at dalhin ang kaniyang mga apo. At isang araw nga noon, matapos ang pakikipag-away ni Mama dahil sa pagpapaalis sa amin sa inuupahang-bahay, at nang tuluyan nang hindi mahanap ang hindi na umuwing asawa,” nagdesisyon si Mama na sundin na ang kaniyang ama.

Kung may kapiranggot akong naalala tungkol sa aking ama, walang alaala ang aking kapatid kay Papa. Ni hindi niya nakita ang mukha nito dahil isang taon pa lang siya noon nang mangyari ang hiwalayan, o mas tamang sabihing pag-iwan sa amin ng aming ama. Kaya't nang mag-aral siya, hindig-hindi niya gagamitin ang apelyido nito sa elementarya dala ng kaniyang galit sa aming ama. Mapipilitan na lang siyang gamitin ito pagtuntong ng hayskul para maisaayos ang kaniyang mga legal na dokumento sa pagaaral.

Pero nang magsimula na kaming magkapatid na hanapin ang pisikal na presensya ni Papa at malaman din agad na “suntok sa buwan” na mangyayari ito, matatagpuan naman namin ito sa mas marami.

Kay Tito Genie, bunsong kapatid ni Mama, matututunan ko na di dapat iniyyakan ang mga hindi ko magawa-gawang bagay dahil wala akong matatapos kung lagi na lang mahina ang loob ko. Nang nag-aaral na ako sa elementarya at dumarating ang mga panahong may mga proyekto sa eskuwelahan, kay Tito Genie ako tumatakbo para magpaturo at magpatulong para magawa ang mga ito. Kalimitan ay handicrafts. Bunot, salaan, at picture frame ang ilan sa mga natatandaan ko. Madalas sa kanya ko itatanong kung paano o kung saang lugar ako makakakuha ng materyales para sa mga ito. Aakyat niya ang kaisa-isa naming puno ng niyog sa bakuran para tanggalin ang isang matandang niyog sa tuktok na gagawin kong bunot. Ituturo niya ang tamang sukat ng hati sa niyog lalo kung paano maglagari para mahati ito. Gayundin sa tamang sukat ng mga hiwa ng kawayan at lalim nang pagpapa-arko sa mga hiwang ito para maging tama ang lalim ng salaan. Maging ang eksaktong pagdadaiti ng mga hiniwang talahib sa baga para di ito masunog at makuha ang tamang kulay ng picture frame. Isang araw ay mapupuntahan ko ang masukal na parte ng gilid ng ilog sa Quinabuangan para mamutol ng “Bayog,” o iyong mas makapal na uri ng kawayan at makararating din ako sa Kabatwan, isang malawak at mabatong batis sa malayong baranggay ng Lauis, para mamutol ng mga talahib dahil sasabihin niya na dito makakakuha ng magandang materyales para sa mga proyekto ko at dapat kong puntahang mag-isa para matuto raw akong magpagod lalo na ang lumakas ang loob. Tuturuan niya ako pero ako raw ang dapat gumawa. At habang gumagawa hindi raw dapat mahina ang loob ko dahil wala akong ginawa kundi umiyak lalo’t hindi ko makuha-kuha ang tamang sukat, porma, at disenyo na itinuro n’ya. Nangyari kasing tatlong beses ibinalik ng aking guro sa Industrial Arts ang ginawa kong salaan, habang halos lahat ng mga kaklase ko ay nabigyan na ng grado sa kanilang mga natapos na salaan, dahil hindi ko makuha-kuha ang tamang lalim nito. Hindi ko mai-arko ng mabuti at husto ang mga hiwa ng kawayan. Pagka-uwing pagka-uwi ng bahay ay ibinato ko ang ikatlong salaan na ibinalik sa akin at biglang umatungal ng iyak sa sama ng loob. Galit na pupulutin ni Tito Genie ang salaan sa lupa at uutusan akong lumapit sa kanya. Pinatingin niya ako ng todo sa gagawin niya. Binaklas niya ang salaan hanggang matira na lamang ang

mga makakapal na hiwa ng kawayan na magsisilbing buto ng salaan at ini-arko ang mga ito sa pinakamalalim na kurbang kayang abutin. Isa-isa niyang pinulot ang mas maninipis pang hiwa ng kawayan na magsisilbi namang balat ng salaan at hinabi ito nang mabilis at sigurado sa pagitan ng nakaarkong mga hiwa. Matigas ang kaniyang mukha at nanginginig sa tigas ang kaniyang mga kamay nang ginagawa niya ito habang salitang tumitingin sa ginagawa at sa aking mukha. Halos sa isang iglap ay buo na muli ang mas malalim na ngayong salaan. Nang matapos, pabigla niya itong iniabot sa akin na halos maduldol sa luhaan kong mukha at sinabihan ako ng: “Pirmi kang ampanangi (Lagi ka na lang umiiyak) kaya wala kang matatapos!” Bigla siyang tumayo at iniwan ako na biglang natigil sa pag-iyak, hawak ang salaan na natutuluan ng aking uhog na di napunasan dahil sa gulat.

Ang ikatlong lalaki sa mga kapatid ni Mama na si Tito Jun ang magtuturo naman sa akin na matutong maghintay. May mga pagkakataong isinasama niya ako sa ilog para manghuli ng isda at manguha ng Lukan, malaking bersyon ng Halaan. Minsa’y gagamit kami ng maliit na lambat para sa mga may kalakihang isda pero madalas ay kamay para dakmain ang mga maliliit na isda na kadalasa’y lumalangoy lamang sa mas mababaw na parte ng ilog. Gagamitin din namin ang mga kamay bilang panghukay sa mga bahay ng lukan na parang maliliit na bulkan na magkakasunod na nakatumpok sa gilid-gilid ng ilog para makuha ang lukan sa ilalim nito. Sa una’y may gana pa akong sundan ang bawat langoy ng mga isda pero lilitaw din ang pagiging mainipin ko. Manggigigil akong dakmain nang dakmain ang isda na magreresulta ng paglabo ng tubig dahil sa pag-angat ng lupang nagulo ng walang-tiyaga kong mga kamay hanggang di ko na makita ang isda. Hindi rin masinsin ang pagpasok ng kamay ko sa butas ng bahay ng mga lukan. Madalas kong masira ang mga ito at laging nadadamay kahit ang mga maliliit pa na di pa pwedeng pakinabangan. Halos mapuno na ang basket ni Tito Jun at ng aking mga pinsan ng mga isda at lukan, sa akin wala pang laman. Dahil dito’y madalas akong singhalan ni Tito Jun at sabihang di ko dapat minamadali ang mga ito. Wala rin daw akong magiging silbi sa mga ganitong lakad namin sa ilog. Kalauna’y hindi na niya ako yayayaing sumama. Nang sa wakas ipangako ko kay Tito Jun na di na ako magiging mainipin, saka lang niya ako muling isasama. Mula noon, uuwi kami sa bahay mula sa ilog na palagi nang may laman ang basket na nakasukbit sa aking bewang.

May isang kabanda noon ang aking lolo na nagngangalang Aloy. Tio Aloy ang tawag namin sa kanya. May mga araw na kahit walang kontrata ang banda, dadaan siya sa bahay at makikipagkuwentuhan kina Tatay at Nanay. Pero mas madalas hahanapin niya kaming magkapatid para tanungin kung di ba kami nagiging pasaway kay Mama. Lagi niya kaming inaabutan ng piso pambili ng kendi. Nang dumating ang panahong nag-aaral na kami, walang sawa niyang kinukumusta ang situwasyon ng pag-aaral namin. Sasabihin pa niya minsan kina Tatay at Nanay na tiyak matalino raw ako paglaki dahil andami ko raw tanong. Ipinaramdam niya sa amin na ang mga anak ay dapat laging kinukumusta, binibilinan, inaalala.

May isa pang Jun, si Manong Jun. Di namin tiyuhin. Asawa ni Tia Upeng. Malapit kaming magkapatid sa mag-asawa lalo na sa kanilang mga anak na babae na itinuring naming mga ate. Sina Betty, Yolly at Yeya. Sila ang pinakamalapit naming kapitbahay. Kaibigan din ni Mama ang panganay nilang babae na si Ate Amy. Si Manong Jun ang magtitiyagang magturo sa amin ng tamang pagkapa at maingat na paghukay sa mas malaking ugat ng kamote na madalas ihawin at gawing meryenda ng mga bata sa Quinabuangan. Noong una kasi, payat, maliliit at di pa ubrang ihawing kamote ang madalas kong mahukay. Kaya sagana ako sa kantiyaw mula sa aking mga kalaro. Naturingan pa naman daw na nasa bakuran namin ang maraming kamote na tanim ni Nanay. Bukod kasi sa iba pang dahon-dahon tulad ng talinum at saluyot, nilagang talbos ng kamote ang isa sa “bestseller” na inihahain ng aking lola kapag walang-wala. Partner ito sa ginisang bagoong-isda. Pero nang maturuan na ako ni Manong Jun, nangunguna na ako sa palakihan ng kamote na nahuhukay. Ituturo din sa akin ni Manong Jun ang pagiging dapat na masaya sa harap ng pagkain. Isang gabi ay iimbitahan n’ya akong makisalo sa hapunan ng kaniyang pamilya. Sa pagitan ng kanilang pagnguya, nakangiti silang nakatingin sa alinlangan kong pagtatangka sa unang pagsubo. Hindi alinlangan ang unang pagsubo ko nang gabing ‘yon dahil nahihya akong makikain sa ibang bahay. Noon ko lang kasi nalaman na puwede palang i-ulam ang asin sa tinubigang kanin. Pero sa mga sumunod na subo, malalaman ko na mas malasa pala ang pagkain nila dahil pinasarap ng mga nakangiti nilang paghahapunan. Ginanahan akong kumain.

Marami pa silang gumabay sa aming magkapatid. Bukod kay Tatay na aming lolo, nariyan din ang mga lalaking kapitbahay at kaibigan ng

pamilya. Lahat sila ay may naitanim na aral sa batang-puso at isipan namin, sa magkakaibang panahon at sitwasyon. Mula sa simpleng pag-akyat sa puno, pagtakbo nang mabilis, mahusay na paglalaro at pagiging kalaro hanggang sa paggalang at pagsunod sa utos ng mga mas nakatatanda. Ilan sa kanila ay sina Tio Dante, Elpie, Cezar, Adol, Jimmy at Ikiw.

Noong aminin na ni Mama ang totoong kuwento kung bakit di namin kasama si Papa sa Quinabuangan, masasaksak sa isip ko na lahat ng sumbong ko sa kaniya sa tuwing napapalo, at ang lahat ng tanong ko sa isip na umiikot sa ideya ng “kung naiisip pa kaya n’ya kami?,” ay pulos natangay lang pala ng hangin. Buti na lang, hindi ako nasama. Dahil napunan ng mga tiyuhin, Tio, Manong at Lolo ang espasyong inalisin ni Papa sa kalooban ng pagkatao ko bilang isang anak. Maraming tamang-asal at pagpapahalaga ang ipapakilala nila sa akin na maitatanim ko naman sa kaloob-looban ng aking batang utak at puso. Hindi nila pinayagang malunod kaming magkapatid sa lungkot na kakambal ng karanasang maiwan, at sa inggit kapag nakikita ang mga kalarong kasama ang kani-kanilang Tatay o Itay. Noong mawalan pala kaming magkapatid ng Papa, naglagay naman ito ng malawak na pintuan para pasukin ang aming buhay ng maraming ama.

Pero mas malaki at malalim ang espasyong nalikha sa kalooban ni Mama na iniwan ng itinuring na asawa.

En Route

Rhea B. Gulin

Sinusukat ko raw ang haba ng mga biyahe ko noon gamit ang mga puno. Walong puno mula Sapang Palay hanggang Tungkong Mangga. Labingwalo mula Sampol hanggang palengke ng Sta. Maria. Sabi ni Mommy, dahil sa bagal kong magbilang noon at sa dalas kong makatulog sa biyahe, siguradong mahaba na ang biyahe kung aabot ng dalawampung puno ang mabibilang ko. At dahil sa mga puno nga nakabase ang pagsusukat ko ng layo ng isang lugar, ang tanong ko raw lagi sa tuwing may aalis sa amin noon “Mga ilang puno ang madaraan mo?”

Ilang taon mula noong huling beses akong nagbilang ng puno para masukat ang haba ng mga byahe ko, matututuhan kong gumamit ng iba’t ibang panukat ng layo. Pero noon, kahit sa puno lang nakadepende ang pagtatala ko ng mga pag-alis, lagi naman kaming nakakabalik.

35 pesos na pamasaha sa FX mula Maynila hanggang Fairview. Sa isang mahabang Facebook post ipinahayag ng matalik kong kaibigan noong high school ang kaniyang kalungkutan sa aking di-umano’y tuluyang paglimot:

*second most painful break up : breaking up with your best friend.
#thefeels.*

Mukhang binura na raw ng Maynila ang lahat ng pinagsamahan namin noon. Kung paanong sabay kami kumain tuwing recess kahit magkaiba kami ng section. Kung paanong lagi ko siyang binibisita sa kanilang klasrum na madalas ay nagiging dahilan ng pagka-cutting classes ko. Kung paanong sinugod ko noon ang lalaking nanloko sa kanya. Kung paanong alam ko ang lahat. Kung paanong akala niya ay alam din niya ang lahat.

Sinubukan raw niyang tiisin ang paghihintay sa akin, pinatawad ang halos apat na taong hindi pagpaparamdam. Naghihintay ng kahit isang text o simpleng Facebook message man lang na magpapakita ni kudlit ng pag-alala. Inakala raw niyang pagkatapos ng internship ko ay magkakaroon na ako ng oras para kumustahin man lang ang pag-aaral niya ngayon o tanungin man lang kung ano na ang nangyayari sa ka-long distance relationship niya. Pero natapos na raw ako sa pag-aaral, nakahanap ng trabaho, at tila unti-unti nang tinutupad ang pangarap bilang isang manunulat, ay wala pa rin daw kahit isang maliit na tangka ng pagpaparamdam.

Halos pumalo ng 68 likes ang post na iyon. Sa pagkakatanda ko, may limang taong hindi ko kilala ang nag-comment ng kanilang simpatiya kasama na rin ang pagpapaalala na naroon sila para damayan siya anumang oras niya kailanganin. Isang comment na puno ng umiiyak na smiley at broken heart na emoji. At ang guro namin noon, sinabi na kumapit lang daw siya at 'wag na 'wag akong susukuan.

Pinilit ko ang sarili kong makaramdam ng lungkot. Alam kong mahal ko ang matalik kong kaibigan na iyon, na isa siya sa mga pinakamahalagang taong naging bahagi ng buhay ko. Alam kong isang malaking pagkakamali ang pananakit sa kanya sa anyo ng paglimot. Pero habang binabasa ko nang paulit-ulit ang Facebook post na iyon, ang tanging nararamdaman ko ay pagkabalisa. Pagkabalisa sa katotohanang kung babalik man ako sa kanya, na gusto ko namang talagang gawin dati pa, hindi na ako ang taong naging matalik na kaibigan niya. Hindi na ako ang taong gusto niyang muling makaalala.

Limang kilometro mula sa dating tinutuluyan kong dormitoryo sa Padre Faura hanggang sa Quiricada kung saan nakatira ang pinakamalapit

kong kaibigan noong unang taon ko sa Philippine Normal University. Isang buong taon kaming nagsama sa isang block section bago nagkahiwalay patungo sa mga piniling konsentrasyon. Isa siya sa mga nakasama ko sa mga eksena ng pagkaligaw sa mga kalye ng Maynila, pero isa rin siya sa mga nagbigay ng payo kung paano ko mahahanap ang sarili ko noong nababagabag ako kung magpapakadalubhasa ba sa Biology, English, o Literature. At noong pinili ko ang Literature sa halip na English sa kabila ng mas nakabababang pagkakakilanlan nito sa PNU, walang kahit anong uri ng panghuhusga akong narinig mula sa kanya.

Pinanghawakan ko ang dahilang marami akong ginagawa kaya hindi ako nakakasama sa mga reunion namin, o iyong pasaglit-saglit lamang na pag-uusap tungkol sa iba't ibang konsentrasyon namin noong nag-aaral pa kami. Marami naman talaga akong ginagawa noong mga panahong 'yon, pero marami rin naman ang mga pagkakataong mag-isa lang akong nakikinig ng iba't ibang kanta sa internet habang umiinom ng ilang tasang kape. Kinumusta ko man lang sana ang negosyo nilang pagtitinda ng baka sa palengke.

Ang naiisip ko noon, siguradong marami rin siyang ginagawa, at siyempre, ayokong makaabala. At aanhin nga naman niya ang isang oras ng walang saysay kong pagkukuwento tungkol sa kung anu-anong mga bagay kung maaari naman niyang gamitin iyon para saglit na makapagpahinga man lang mula sa gabundok na mga gawain?

Dalawampung minutong paglalakad mula Padre Faura patungong San Marcelino kung nasaan ang lumang dormitoryo ko at ang boarding house na tinutuluyan ko sa kasalukuyan. Tinuldukan ng simpleng babay sa mga ka-dormmate ang paglagi ko roon nang halos apat na taon. Walang iniwang numero o kung anuman. Maliban sa mga alikabok sa ilalim ng aking kama noon na kailanman ay hindi ko nagawang linisin.

Sampung oras at labintalong minuto mula Pilipinas patungong Saudi Arabia sakay ng eroplano. Nagsimula ang serye ng paglisan sa pamilya namin noong wala pa ako sa mundo. Sa pamamagitan ng mga retratong nakakalat sa bahay namin, nalaman ko na minsang iniwan ni Papa si Mommy. Sa unang larawan, nakita ko si Papa na tila isang sikat na matinee idol, mestisuhin, nakaputing polo shirt, bagong maong at itinatago ang mga mata sa likod ng isang mamahaling shades. Nakakapit ang kanyang kanang kamay sa isang itim na maleta habang naglalakad papasok sa airport. Sa kanyang pagkakangiti sa kamera, naisip kong mukhang sobrang saya niya sa pag-iwan kay Mommy.

Masaya rin si Mommy sa pag-iwan sa kanya ni Papa, batay na rin sa estilo ng pagkakakuha ng larawan na iyon. Sa laki ng pagkakangiti ni Papa sa kamera, paniguradong nakangiti rin sa kanya ang kumukuha ng retrato.

Ikalawang larawan, nakahubad na si Papa. Kupas at butas-butabas na ang bagong maong na suot niya sa naunang retrato at wala nang shades na nagkukubli sa kanyang mga mata. Sa itsura ng retrato ay halatang hindi alam ni Papa na kinukuhanan siya, kaya hindi niya naisuot ang puting polo shirt at ang ngiting dala-dala papuntang Saudi upang maging trabahador sa isang construction site.

Magkasama na sina Papa at Mommy sa ikatlong larawan. Yapos-yapos nilang dalawa si Ate noong tatlong taong gulang pa lang siya. Bagaman nakakauwi si Papa ng isa hanggang dalawang linggo taun-taon, makikita sa larawan na ilag pa rin si Ate sa kanya. Pero halata na namana ni Ate ang pagkamestiso ni Papa, kung noon ay pwedeng makipagsabayan sa mga matinee idol si Papa, si Ate naman ay pwedeng-pwede nang maging isang child star. Ngunit hindi na maipakita ng naturang larawan ang mga pagkakatulad nila dahil noong kinuhanan sila ng retrato ay sunog na sunog na ang balat ni Papa mula sa pagtatrabaho sa ilalim ng tirik na tirik na araw.

Bukod sa kulay ng balat, makikita rin sa mga larawan ang unti-unting pagpayat ni Papa. Malamang ay dahil sa pagsisimula niyang manigarilyo o sa matinding pagtitipid para mabili ang organ na regalo niya sa amin ni Ate. Halos hindi na siya iyong matinee idol na umalis patungong Saudi; bumalik siya bilang isang malakas na lalaking hindi natibag ng mga taon ng pag-iisa. Lahat para sa pamilya.

Hindi ko alam kung sinadya ba ng tadhana pero ipinanganak akong payat ang pangangatawan, at kung tumaba man ay payat pa rin sa mata ng

nakararami. Ako ang pinakapayat sa amin. Ang kaputian din ng balat ko, hindi kasing sigla katulad ng kay ate at sa nakababata kong kapatid. Puting-putlain daw sabi nila. Parang nahulma rin ako sa bagong anyo ni Papa.

11,138 km mula Pilipinas hanggang Canada. Inakala ko noon na ang mga naglalakihang electric posts at naghahabaang electric wires ang nagkokonekta sa Pilipinas at iba pang bansa tulad ng Canada. Ang pagdating ko sa mundo ay ang siyang pagbalik naman ni Papa kay Mommy; pero hindi nagtagal, sina Lolo at Lola naman ang umalis. Ang naaalala ko na lang ay pumunta kami ni Mommy sa Pizza Hut na malapit sa bahay namin at kahit naubos ko na ang isang buong pizza ay nanatili pa rin kami sa restaurant na iyon. Pagbalik ko ng bahay ay ipinaliwanag sa akin ni Mommy na umalis na sina Lolo at Lola para magtrabaho sa Canada.

Akala ko, direktang nakakonekta ang Pilipinas sa Canada kaya ganoon na lang kabilis nakaalis sina Lolo at Lola nang hindi ko nalalaman. Noong nakakita ako ng mga malalaking electric post na may mahahabang electric wires, inisip kong ang mga iyon ang nagdurugtong sa Pilipinas at Canada. Tuwing may nadadaan kami ni Mommy na mga electric post ay kumakaway ako sa pag-aakalang makikita ako nina Lolo at Lola. Isang beses, napansin na ni Mommy ang ginagawa ko kaya ipinaliwanag niya na sa akin na malayo ang Canada sa Pilipinas at hindi ang mga electric wire ang nagkokonekta sa kanilang dalawa. Aniya'y hindi sila naglakad sa mga electric wire na iyon at lalung-lalong hindi sila pumasok sa loob ng mga electric post para makapunta ng Canada. Sumakay sila ng eroplano at lumipad sa langit.

Sinunod ko si Mommy, tinigilan ko na ang pagkaway sa mga electric post. Kaya sa tuwing may dumaraan na eroplano ay isinisigaw ko ang mga gusto kong sabihin kina Lolo at Lola, lalung-lalo na ang mga gusto kong pasalubong sa pag-uwi nila.

Unang beses kong makilala ang globo at mapa nung Grade 2 ako. Ipinaturo ko agad kung nasaan ang Pilipinas at nasaan ang Canada. Dahil halos isang dangkal ko lang naman ang distansiya ng Pilipinas at Canada sa globo at mapa, naisip kong tama naman pala ako, magkalapit lang naman

silahit walang direktang pagkakakonekta. Lalo akong nabagabag kung bakit hindi magawa-gawang bumisita man lang nina Lolo at Lola tuwing kaarawan ko. Dumating sa punto na naisip ko nang baka ayaw na nila sa akin dahil sa sobrang kulit ko. Kumpara kasi kay Ate, hindi hamak na mas matigas ang ulo ko at mas marami akong ginagawang kalokohan. Mas malimit din akong sumasagot at nangangatuwiran tuwing sinasabi nilang mali o hindi pwedeng gawin ang isang bagay. Nasa ikatlong baitang na ako sa elementarya noong naunawaan ko ang layo ng Canada at Pilipinas. Malayo naman pala talaga sila sa akin, bahagya akong napanatag na hindi naman pala talaga sila galit sa akin.

Napagtanto ko, sa pagpasok ko sa high school, na matagal-tagal pang hindi makakabalik sina Lolo at Lola. Doon ko lubos na napag-aralan ang mga naglalakihang karagatan na naglalayo sa akin at sa kanila. Hanggang sa panahon na iyon ay tumitingala pa rin ako sa langit sa pag-asang baka ang dumaraang eroplanong iyon ay sakay-sakay silang dalawa, pauwi na, at sosorpresahin ako sa aking pagtatapos ng high school nang may ilang karangalan. Pero hindi ko na sinisigaw ang mga gusto kong sabihin sa kanila, dahil wala na. Hindi ko na gusto ng kahit anong pasalubong noon. Ang gusto ko na lang, bumalik sila kahit paano.

Nakuntento na ako sa pagtawag-tawag nila linggu-linggo at sa paggamit ng Skype tuwing may mahalagang okasyon noong nagkolehiyo ako. Hindi ko na pinapansin ang mga electric post na inakala ko noong tanging nagkokonekta sa akin at kina Lolo at Lola.

Sampung oras at labintatlong minuto mula sa Pilipinas patungong Saudi Arabia sakay ng eroplano. Sa muling pagkakataon. Hindi pa man din nakakabalik sina Lolo at Lola mula sa Canada ay may isa na namang umalis kasabay naman ng paglaki ng nakababata kong kapatid. Maglilimang taon nang nagtatrabaho si Ate bilang isang medical transcriptionist dito sa Pilipinas at kahit kailan ay hindi pa niya naramdaman ang ginhawang inakala niyang makukuha niya sabay ng pagtatapos sa kolehiyo. Kinailangan niyang magtrabaho sa Maynila dahil hindi sapat ang provincial rate para mapag-aral ako sa kolehiyo at para matustusan din ang pagpasok ng bunso namin sa paaralan, lalo

na't naipatupad na ang K-12 na lalong magpapahaba at magpapamahala ng pag-aaral niya. At dahil sa tingin niya ay mas mapapamahala siya kung mamamalagi siya sa Maynila dahil sa pamumuhay sa siyudad, pinili niyang mag-uwian. Bukod sa wala siyang sapat na panggastos upang mapagbigyan ang sarili niya kahit paano sa mga kakarampot niyang luho ay wala rin siyang oras para sa sarili dahil kaliwa't-kanan ang pag-overtime niya para madagdagan kahit paano ang maliit niyang suweldo. Hindi na siya nakatiis at noong may oportunidad siyang nakita para maging isang medical transcriptionist sa Saudi ay agad niya itong kinuha nang walang kaabog-abog.

Hindi tulad ng mga nakaraang serye ng paglisan ay may direkta akong alaala sa pag-alis ni Ate. Hindi ko nalaman ang pangyayaring ito sa pamamagitan ng mga retrato at hindi rin ako inilayo patungo kung saan para hindi masaksihan ang pag-alis niya. Bagaman hindi ako nakasama sa paghatid sa kanya, nakatago pa rin hanggang ngayon ang mga huling text niya sa akin habang nasa Pilipinas pa lang siya; bago siya sumakay ng eroplano at pumanaog din papalayo tulad nina Papa, Lolo at Lola.

Napalabnaw ng teknolohiya kahit paano ang pagkakalayo namin ni Ate dahil sa regular naming pag-uusap sa Facebook at iba pang mga social networking site. Sa mga oras na ito, pinaguusapan namin kung paanong ngayon ay marunong na siyang magluto at ako naman ay mahusay nang maglaba. Dalawa sa maraming mga bagay na hindi namin nagagawa noong hindi pa kami umaalis sa poder nina Mommy at Papa.

Apatnapu't limang kanta ng Up Dharma Down, Ang Bandang Shirley, Eraserheads, Paramita at Imago ang madalas kong kasama sa mahabang byahe mula Maynila patungong Bulacan. Halos kada tatlong linggo na lang ako kung umuwi. Habang nagkukuwentuhan kami nina Mommy at Papa tungkol sa plano naming magbakasyon sa Baler, Aurora, nagulat ako nang marinig ko ang pagtawa ng kapatid ko sa kanyang pinapanood na cartoons. Sanay na ako sa malakas niyang paghalakhak, iyon ang minsang gumigising sa akin sa umaga tuwing bakasyon, ang ikinabigla ko ay kung gaano na kalalim at kabuo ang boses niya. Pinuntahan ko siya at sinabihan na ikuwento sa akin ang pinapanuod niya, tumayo siya sa harap ko at doon

ko lang napagtanto na halos magkasingtangkad na pala kami.

Ang pagtangkad ng bunso kong kapatid ay siya ring pagsulpot ng mga naglalakihang gusali, iba't ibang modernong pamilihan, at isang damakmak na subdivision sa Sapang Palay. Unti-unti namang lumiliit ang porsyento ng mga lugar na magpasahanggang ngayon ay nababalot pa rin ng mga nagtataasang puno. Hindi na ganoon kapresko ang hangin, kaya tila ilog na kung umagos ang pawis sa aking katawan.

Dalawampu't walong milya sa pagitan ng Bulacan at Maynila. Hindi ko man lang ma-text ng “Kumusta ka na?” ang mga dati kong kamag-aral noong high school. Hindi sa hindi ko kaya, ngunit hindi ko lang masagot ang tanong na “Bakit pa?”

Malamang ay hindi ko na rin mababalikan ang matalik kong kaibigan noong high school. Base pa rin sa kanyang Facebook account na paminsan-minsan ay binibisita ko, magkaiba na ang galaw ng mga buhay namin. Gising siya sa gabi at tulog sa umaga, naging isa sa libo-libong Filipinong tila ginawang bampira ng iba't ibang international call center companies dito sa Pilipinas. Tulad nina Lolo, Lola, at Ate na nasa ibang bansa, hindi na magkatagpo ng mga oras namin kahit nasa iisang bansa lang naman kami.

70 pesos na pamasaha sa bus mula Maynila patungong Bulacan. Napansin kong tila lalong lumalakas ang pakikinig ni Papa ng TV. Pinapagalitan ko siya at sinasabing baka mabingi na rin ang nakababata kong kapatid dahil lagi silang sabay manuod. Sa bawat pag-uwi ko rin ay agad na sinasabi ni Mommy na buksan ko ang hotspot ng cellphone ko dahil makiki-internet siya. Isa na siya sa mga laging nauunang mag-like at mag-comment sa mga post ko sa Facebook gayong halos noong nakaraang taon ay hindi niya mabuksan ang regalo sa kanyang tablet ni Papa dahil sa sobrang pagkalito. Pero kung anong bilis niya sa pag-like ng bago kong selfie ay siyang bagal niyang nakalakad palabas ng bahay noong tinawag ko siya para silipin ang bangkay ng nasagasaan naming asong si Hotdog.

Dalawampu't limang hakbang mula sa bahay namin patungo sa bahay ng mga pinsan ko. Kasama kong naglakad sina Mommy at Papa papunta sa lamay ng Uncle ko. Tanggap na naming lahat na mangyayari iyon, matanda na rin naman talaga siya at makailang beses nang na-stroke, kaya ang dapat na malungkot na pakikiramay ay naging masayang reunion naming magkakamag-anak. Ayos lang naman din sabi ng pamilya niya, iyon naman daw talaga ang gustong mangyari ni Uncle.

Marami na talagang nagbago sa buong pamilya namin. Kaming dating mga batang pinapasayaw tuwing Pasko at bagong taon, ngayon ay may mga trabaho na. Sina Papa at iba ko pang mga tito na dati ay parang mga dragon kung manigarilyo habang nag-iinuman, ngayon ay mga stick-o na lang ang ipinapasak sa bibig habang nagkakape. Hindi na raw kaya ng katawan nilang lahat ang mga bisyo. Sina Mommy at iba ko pang mga tita, medyo pili na ang mga pinag-uusapan dahil sa maraming bagay na nangyari dati.

Pero ang napansin ko talaga, iyong pamangkin ko sa isa kong pinsan, ang pinakabata sa aming magkakamag-anak. Kilala ko siya, pero siguro ay hindi niya ako kilala dahil madalang naman akong umuwi. Malamang ay naaalala lang niya ang mukha ko sa paminsan-minsang pagkakasalubong sa daan o sa malimit na pagkakasabay sa tindahan, pero hindi kung sino ako.

Maingay na bata ang pamangkin kong iyon. Kanta nang kanta. Sayaw nang sayaw. Nanghihimasok sa usapan ng mga matatanda. Kumportable siya kahit kanino, kahit nga sa akin ay hindi siya nahihiya kahit hindi niya ako masyadong kilala. Halos lumaki kasi siya sa puder ng lahat ng mga tita at tito ko. Naghahalinhingan kung sino ang pwede mag-alaga sa kanya, hanggang noong nakaraang taon ay napagpasiyahan na ng isa kong tita ang maging “official and honorary” yaya niya. Ang mama niya kasi, kasalukuyang nasa Abu Dhabi, nagtatrabaho para sa kanilang dalawa.

Napansin ng isa kong tita ang pagkakatitig ko sa pamangkin ko. “Para siyang ikaw, ‘Day. Ganyan ka rin non ‘e. Ganyang-ganyan.”

Ikaanim na Bahay

Mark Anthony S. Salvador

May mga pagkakataong naninibago pa rin ako sa apartment na tinitirhan namin. Kung takipsilim at pauwi ako, naninibago ako 'pag sinasalubong ako ng makapal na talahiban at ng huni ng mga bibe at itik. Kung gabi naman na nakaupo sa terasa at nagbabasa, naninibago ako sa kadawagan ng iba't ibang puno at sa yakap ng malamig na hangin. Pakiramdam ko, wala ako sa NCR, at nasa probinsiya ako.

Disyembre 9, 2013 nang lumipat kami rito. Isa iyong araw na kakaiba sa amin, ngunit pangkaraniwan. Pangkaraniwan dahil panglima na namin iyong lipat-bahay. Sanay na kami sa emosyon ng paglisan at muling pagsisimula. Kakaiba dahil ngayon na lang ulit namin ito nadama, makalipas ang walong taon, at naiba ang pakiramdam na ito kumpara sa ibang paglipat. Dahil bukod sa wala naman talagang parehas na parehas na pakiramdam, ay malayo ang aming nilipatan. Ito ang unang beses na nalipat kami sa ibang barangay. Hindi na kami mamamayan ng kinalakhan naming barangay.

Ang una naming tinirhan ay sa Kaypandan Street, sa Canumay. Taong 1989 nang tumira roon sina Mama at Papa para makapagsimula. Beyntekuwatro anyos lang sila nang magpakasal. Guro sa Karuhatan Elementary School si Mama at operator naman ng makina sa pabrika ng tubo si Papa.

Noong una, P450 lang ang upa nila sa bahay. Kaunti pa lang daw ang apartment noon at puro kawayan pa ang dulo ng apartment. Taong 1996, nagtaas sa P600 ang upa.

Ako ang panganay nilang anak, at dahil walang makuhang yaya, pinaalagaan nila ako sa aking lolo at lola sa Nueva Ecija, mga magulang ni Mama. Taong 1990 iyon. Maghahayskul na ako nang kuhanin nina Mama at Papa para mapatuloy ng pag-aaral sa Valenzuela. Tuwing bakasyon ay kinukuha ako nina Mama at Papa para magbakasyon at bilhan ng mga gamit. Sa aking gunita, buhay na buhay pa rin ang unang apartment na aming tinirhan. O puwede kong sabihing, kanilang tinirhan.

Masikip lang ang apartment na iyon, lalo para sa akin na laki sa malaking bahay sa probinsiya. Sa bahay na tatlo ang kuwarto, may terasa at garahe. Sa pinto pa lang ng apartment ay kita na ang kusina, at kadikit na halos ng lababo ang pinto ng banyo. Maski sa mahihirap na pamilya sa baryo namin sa Nueva Ecija, wala akong nakitang bahay na gayon kaliit. Parang isang may kalakihang kuwarto lang ang luwang. Lima ang apartment doon, una ang aming inupahan, dingding lang ang pagitan sa pangalawang komedor ng bahay ng may-ari. Sa harap ng limang apartment ay ang hindi kataasang pader, na kung babalikan ko sa aking alaala ay isang mataas na pader, dahil nga bata pa ako noon. Makipot lang ang pagitan ng pader at ng mga bahay, na siyang nagsisilbing daan. Lalo iyong sumikip dahil nilagyan ng upuan at ng dram ng tubig ng mga nakatira, at sumisikip pa kung may mga naglalalag ng batya para maglaba. May pagtingin akong espesyal ang sa amin, dahil sa tapat niyon ay may isang matandang puno ng santol na ikinulong sa pabilog na harang na semento. Natatandaan ko pang noon, pagkagising namin, doon kami umiiling magkakapatid. At ang tubig doon ay rasyon lang, tuwing ikalawang araw.

Naging malapit sa amin ang pamilya ng may-ari ng bahay. Naging ninong ni Ricky ang panganay nilang anak. At pati si John, bunso namin, ay nakiki-'ninong.' Kaya 'pag Pasko, kasama siya sa binibigyan ng aginaldo at laruan. Parang dalawa silang inaanak. Inang at Tatang din ang tawag sa kanila nina Mama at Papa, lolo at lola naman ang naging tawag naming magkakapatid. Madalas din sila sa amin sa Nueva Ecija, kung pista ng baryo, kung may handaan tulad ng kaarawan, o kung makatuwaan lang. Kasama namin sila sa paliligo sa ilog at sa panunuod ng mga palabas sa bisita kung pista. Meron silang mga sasakyan, kaya naisasabay rin kami sa pag-uwi. Kung uuwi sina Mama, may pasalubong sila pagbalik tulad ng tinapa, burong kanin at mga gulay. Ganoon din naman sila sa amin kung

may uuuwi sa kanila sa Cebu. Sa madaling sabi, naging parang kamag-anak na namin sila.

Kaya ganoon na lang ang pagkagulat namin sa Nueva Ecija nang ‘palayasin’ doon sina Mama. Tanda kong nasa grade 5 ako noon. Hindi makapaniwala sina Nanay at ang malalapit pa naming kamag-anak sa nangyari. Hanggang sa umuwi sina Mama para maikuwento nang buo ang nangyari.

Hindi na raw sila pinapansin ng may-ari ng bahay, at naging kay lamig ng pakikitungo sa kanila. Hindi naman nila alam kung bakit. Kinausap daw nila ay napagtaasan pa sila ng boses ng isang anak nito. Sa bigat ng kalooban ng mga magulang ko ay nagpaalam na lang silang aalis na lamang sila. Hindi naman tumutol ang mga may-ari. Panglabing-dalawang taon na nila roon at P800 na ang upa kada buwan. Napag-ugnay-ugnay nila, kalaunan, na ipapaayos ang bahay at tataasan ang upa. Na siya ngang nangyari.

Sa salaysay ni Mama, panay ang iyak ng aking mga kapatid. Grade 3 noon si Ricky at grade 1 naman si John. Kung titingnan ko sa perspektiba ng mga magulang ko, nakapanghihinayang ang pagsasama, sa pagitan nila at ng mga kapitbahay, sa pagitan nila at ng pamilya nina Lola. Kung sa perspektiba ng dalawa kong kapatid, ang nandoon ay takot. Takot sa bagong lugar at sa pagkawala ng mga kaibigan. Hindi ko nadama ang alinman sa mga iyon. Iba ang mundong aking ginalawan, iba ang aking naging sensibilidad. Naaalala kong panay pa ang tanong ko sa kanila noon kung saan na sila mag-aaral. Niyon pala, sa paaralang iyon pa rin. Sa dami ng tao sa lungsod, akala ko, bawat street ay may sariling paaralan.

Nalipat kami sa Doneso, dulong street ng Canumay. Mula ito sa pangalan ng isa sa mga naunang lahi sa Canumay. Nang minsang tumawag si Mama, 3210 pa ng Nokia ang cellphone noon, sinabi niyang sumama ako pagluwas nina Tatay. Nang makita ko raw ang kanilang nilipatan. Napag-usapan na kasing pagkatapos ko ng elementarya ay sa Valenzuela na ako mag-aaral. Nang makita ko ang titirhan ko, ibig sabihin. Kaya nang lumuwas nga sina Tatay nang naka-trak para mag-uwi ng mga gamit mula sa kanyang kapatid na taga-Quezon City, at nagpuntang Valenzuela para dumaan kina Mama, ay kasama ako.

Hatinggabi nang dumating kami. Kaya hindi ko gaanong namasdan ang bahay. Bagama’t masasabi kong parang kasingliit din ito ng sa una, ngunit mas mainam dahil may espasyo sa harap at walang harang na pader.

Naging malaking bagay iyon sa amin, kalaunan. Lalo na sa akin. Malayang nakapaglalagos ang liwanag at hangin, at ang aming diwa.

Mas maliit ang pangalawang bahay kumpara sa una. Ngunit mas malaki kung isasama ang espasyo sa harap. P1,200 ang upa kada buwan. Dito, nakapagtindahan si Mama. Hindi gaya sa Kaypandan na mga tina, chlorox at maliliit na bagay lang ang kanyang tinda. Sa loob pa ng bahay. Inayos ni Papa ang labas ng bahay, naglagay ng mga rehas para sa tindahan. Maganda ang puwesto ng bahay dahil nasa bungad ito ng kanto, pangalawa sa hanay ng limang apartment. Bilyaran ang tapat nito, at ilang hakbang mula sa pangunahing kalsada.

Ang mga nagbibilyar at ang mga miron ang naging pangunahing mamimili sa tindahan, gayundin ang mga nagtatrabaho sa katabing pabrika, iyong sa tapat ng bibig kanto. Kinukuha naming magkakapatid ang mga bote sa bilyaran. Nagkakatambakan na roon ang mga bote ng Pop, Coke, Cheers, Pepsi. Ang mga ito at sigarilyo ang madalas bilhin ng mga nagbibilyar. Ang makita naming bote ay iniuwi namin sa amin. Hindi hamak na mas marami rin doong bata. Kaya mabiling-mabili ang mga tsitsirya at kendi.

Isa pang bagay, nakapag-alaga kami roon ng aso dahil hindi mahigpit ang may-ari. Anak ng Dalmatian at askal ang tutang iniuwi ni Papa, galing sa pabrika. Pinangalanan naming Tagpi.

Nagkaroon doon ng bagong mga kakilala at kaibigan ang mga magulang ko at kapatid. Sa kaso ko, halos bago ang lahat. Lalo na ang kultura.

Dati, si Mama lang ang sumusundo sa dalawa kong kapatid sa eskuwela dahil saglit na lakad lang iyon mula sa dating bahay. Sa aming nalipatan, sakay na ni Papa si Mama sa traysikel sa pagsundo sa kanila dahil malayo na kami sa paaralan. Maging si Mama ay napalayo sa palengke.

Sa mga lugar sa Canumay, ang Donesa ang pinakamababa, habang isa naman ang Kaypandan sa pinakamatataas. Minsang malakas ang ulan, sinuspinde ang klase namin sa hayskul. Natatandaan ko pa noon na halos sumampa na ang tubig sa sidecar ng traysikel na nasakyan namin, paglusong nito sa Donesa. Ito ang sinasabi nina Mama at Papa na dahilan kung bakit kami umalis sa Donesa. Pero hindi man nila sabihin, alam ko dahil nasa wastong gulang na ako noon, na bukod doon ay malaki rin ang kinalaman ng aming tindahan.

Natalo sa pagkakonsehal ng barangay ang may-ari ng bilyaran at ng malaking bahay na nasa likod niyon, kaya sa tabi ng bilyaran ay nagpatayo sila ng tindahan. Walang laban ang tindahan namin sa tindahan nila. Mas malaki ang kapital nila kaya hindi hamak na mas malusog ang kanilang tindahan, sa itsura ng mismong tindahan at sa mga panindang laman. Mas malapit din sila sa bungad ng kanto, lalo na sa bilyaran. At mahihiya siyempre ang mga nagbibilyar, lalo kung nakakautang sa bilyaran, na sa amin pa bumili. Idagdag pang Doneso sila, sa kanila bibili ang mga kamag-anak nila.

Nakahumigit-kumulang isang taon lang sila sa bahay na iyon. Ako, wala pang isang taon. Inalis ang mga bakal na rehas. At nabalik kami sa Kaypandan, kung saan nandoon ang nakitang apartment. Naging mas maluwig ang paglilipat dahil nakabili na kami ng owner type jeep nang nasa Doneso pa kami. Sa paglilipat, halatang ayaw magpaiwan ni Tagpi. Hindi nagpahuli sa pagsakay sa traysikel.

Kumpara sa dalawang nauna, hindi hamak na mas maluwig ang ikatlong apartment, ang kaisa-isang may partisyon ng kuwarto. Hindi naka-tiles ang banyo nito. May terasa ngunit hindi nakataas, kapantay lang ng kalsada. May espasyo pa sa harap na sinementuhan namin para mapagparadahan ng mumunti naming mga sasakyan. Masasabing sulit na ang mga ito para sa P2,000 renta kada buwan. Nakalulungkot nga lang na rasyon pa rin ang tubig.

Naging kapitbahay namin ang pinsan namin, si Ate Irene na pamangkin ni Papa. Dalawa ang kanyang anak, parehas nasa elementarya. Nang nasa Doneso pa kami, sa kanila ako nagpupunta kung may PE kami. Doon ako dinadalhan ni Mama ng baon at damit. Para hindi na ako uuwi. Sa tapat naman nila ay ang malayo naming kamag-anak sa panig ni Papa, at kababaryo namin sa Nueva Ecija. Malaki ang iginaan ng aking loob, lalo na marahil ng aking mga magulang, ang katotohanang may mga kapalagayan na agad kami sa aming nalipatan.

Pagkalipat na pagkalipat namin doon ay nilagnat ako. Hindi ko alam kung bakit. Higit isang linggo yata akong absent sa eskuwelahan. Ngayon, 'pag nagugunita ko ito, naiisip kong marahil bunga iyon ng lungkot sa paglipat ng bahay. At ng paninibago.

Sa kuwarto, habang nakahiga, madalas kong kutkutin ang naiwa't natuyong rugby sa dingding. May mga idinikit marahil sa dingding na

iyon ang pamilyang sinundan namin. Inalis ang mga nakadikit nang aalis na sila, at hindi na nagawang linisin ang mga naiwang marka. Parang glue iyon na naiwan sa palad. Kukutkutin ko iyon, at pag tungkab na ang dulo ay saka babatakin. O kung minsan, hinihilod kong parang libag. Naging parang libangan ko iyon at naging paraan para unti-unting mawala ang pagkapanibago sa bahay. Ngunit higit sa mga ito, isang bagay ang naiisip ko habang tinutungkab ko ang mga markang iyon. Na ganoon ang sa apartment lang nakatira. May dungis ang iyong daratnan, dungis na hindi naman ikaw ang may gawa. At lahat kayo ay mag-iiwan ng peklat sa apartment na inyong titirhan.

Sa bahay na iyon, nakapag-alaga ako ng tatlong kalapati. Ikinadena rin namin doon si Tagpi. Kalaunan, nabuntis siya at nanganak.

Mura lang ang kuryente namin doon. P300 lang kada buwan. Hindi namin iyon maipaliwanag kung bakit, ni ng mga kapitbahay. Lalo't nang lumipat kami roon ay hindi naman iyon ganoon kababa. Nagbiro nga si Ate Irene na sa amin daw siya makikipamlantsa. Ngunit sa kabila nito, nagtataka si Mama kung bakit hindi kami makaluwag-luwag sa pera. Naranasan namin ang halos walang-wala, ni pamalit sa mga sira naming tsinelas. Kay Mama, may mga bahay na kapag nandoon ka ay hindi ka giginhawa sa pera.

Malapit lang ang apartment na iyon sa una naming tinirhan, ngunit magkaiba ang nagrasyon ng tubig. Sa pagrasyon ay nakatuwaan naming magsasama, hanggang sa naging kaibigan namin ang nagrasyon, si Kuya Jon-jon.

Ang isang dram namin ay nasa labas, sa tabi ng gate, habang ang isa naman ay nasa loob, sa tapat ng pinto ng banyo. Para malagyan itong huli, pumapasok pa sa bahay ang katulong ni Kuya Jon-jon. Nababasa ang aming sahi at nailalantad ang kalinisan o karumihan ng aming bahay.

Bukod sa problemang pinansiyal, naging problema rin namin doon ang tsismisan ng mga kapitbahay. Sa kagipitan namin sa pera ay kinausap na kami ng tagapamahala ng bahay, at sinabing kung hindi raw mababayaran ang renta ay iwan na lang namin. Nag-usap noon sina Mama at Papa. Sinabi ni Papa na kung aalis kami ay bakit magbabayad pa kami. Sinabi naman ni Mama na iyon ang unang beses na aalis kami nang dahil hindi makabayad. Nakikita ko sa kanya ang hiya at awa sa sarili. Hanggang sa nagbayad nga kami ng isang buwang utang, bago lumipat. Ngunit pinagtsimisan pa rin kami ng mga kapitbahay. Umalis daw kami

dahil hindi na kami makabayad.

Tanda ko pa na noong papasok kami sa eskuwela ay itinuro sa akin ni John ang aming lilipatan. “Do’n tayo lilipat, Kuya, o.” Ang nakasarang pinto lang ang nakita ko. At naisip kong liit-liit naman.

Ang aming nalipatan ay nasa pagitan ng una at ikatlo naming tinirhan, ngunit nasa kabilang kalsada. Disyembre nang lumipat kami roon, nasa ikaapat na taon ako sa hayskul. Dahil malapit lang, paisa-isa, inilipat naming magkakapatid ang aming mga gamit. Iyong mga kaya naming buhatin. Tinulungan kami ng mga kalaro namin. Natutulog na rin kami roon kahit na hindi pa naililipat ang lahat ng gamit. Nang ang mga muwebles na ang ililipat, ang mga silya, aparador, TV, tumulong na ang mga lalaking kapitbahay. Isinusunod naman namin ang mga naiiwan sa bahay o ang mga nalalaglag mula sa kasangkapang binubuhat.

Noon, iniuwi na namin sa Nueva Ecija si Tagpi, gayundin ang owner na kalaunan ay naibenta sa aking tiyahin, kay Tita Ye.

Pito ang bahay sa compound na iyon. Magkaharap ang apat at may dalawa sa gitna. Ang sa amin ay pangatlo sa dalawang nasa kaliwa. Noong una nga, akala ko, iisa lang ang may-ari ng mga apartment. Dahil nasa iisang compound nga at pare-parehas pa ng disenyo. Ilang taon na kami roon nang malaman kong ang tatlong bahay lang palang magkakahanay, kasama ang sa amin, ang pagmamay-ari ng midwife na landlady. Sa kamag-anak nito ang sa natirang apat.

Magkapatid ang lalaki sa una at ikalawang apartment. Ang nasa una ang nakatatanda. Magsisingkuwenta anyos na ito at ang kanyang asawa, ngunit wala silang anak.

Sa paglipat namin, natuklasan kong may bahagi sa aking gunita ang compound na iyon. Sa isa sa mga apartment na iyon tumira ang tito ko, si Kuya Ulay, kapatid ni Mama, sumunod sa kanya. Tumira siya roon nang nasa unang bahay pa kami. Natatandaan kong nagpunta pa kami roon dati at pinainom ng juice. 2010, nasa ikaapat na apartment na kami, nang ma-stroke si Kuya Ulay, at sumakabilang buhay.

Mas maliit roon kaysa sa ikatlo naming tinirhan. Hindi rin tiles ang banyo, habang ang lababo ay para nang jig-saw puzzle. Isa-isa nang natatanggal ang maliliit na tile. Kaya maaaring sabihing ironya ang mas malaking renta. P2,300 kada buwan. At tulad ng sa mga nauna, rasyon pa rin ang tubig. Nang unang linggo nga, si Kuya Jon-jon pa ang nagrasyon

sa amin ng tubig. Hindi na pinabayaran. Parang simpleng paraan ng pagsasabing “Paalam, mag-iingat kayo.”

Sa compound na iyon, ang nalipatan namin ang pinakamalaki. May terasa ang limang bahay, ang dalawang nasa gitna lang ang wala. Ngunit sa limang bahay, ang sa amin lang ang may dagdag pang espasyo sa harap ng terasa. Puwedeng labahan o lutuan. Idagdag pang ang terasa rito ay terasa talaga, dahil may baitang at nakataas nang kaunti.

Noong una, planong sa terasa ilagay ang refrigerator. Pero sabi ni Mama, “Baka mam’ya, bumubula na’ng bibig mo kung d’yan mo ilalagay ‘yan.” Bukas na bukas kasi ang terasa, wala man lamang rehas. Meron ding bukas na bahagi ang pader papunta sa kabilang compound. Nagbibigay iyon sa amin ng liwanag at siya ring daanan ng malamig ng hangin. Ngunit hindi lang pala hangin ang dumadaan doon. Sa kuwento sa amin, may dumaan na raw dati roon. Magnanakaw ng manok sa kabilang compound. Dahil sa mga iyon, nilagyan ni Papa ng yero ang bahaging iyon. Dumilim tuloy at umalinsangan sa bahay. Lumakas ang konsumo namin sa ilaw at bentilador.

Kaming magkakapatid na ang pinakamatanda sa mga bata sa compound na iyon. Nang dumating kami roon ay dalawa lang sa mga kapitbahay ang may anak, at hindi pa nag-aaral ang isa. Kaya nga madalas sabihin ni Mama, “Gabi na, tayo na lang ang gising dito. Ang iingay n’yo.” Kung hapon at siesta, tahimik na tahimik sa compound. Naiisip ni Mama na hindi dapat malingat. Madaling makapasok ang magnanakaw.

Sa tulong ng lalaking nasa unang apartment, na isa palang karpintero, nalagyan ng rehas na kahoy ang tatlong bahay, matapos itong ikonsulta at pahintulutan ng landlady. Nilagyan din ng plastik na screen ang mga rehas, para sa higit na seguridad. Kaya dumilim lalo at uminit. Ngunit umaliwalas namin ang aming pakiramdam, lalo sa pagtulog kung gabi. Alam naming hindi kami malolooban ng magnanakaw. Ang gate naman ng compound ay isinasara, at hindi gayon kadalang mailabas ang aming traysikel.

Nakitira sa amin ang pinsan kong babae, si Jean, panganay ni Tita Ye. Nag-aral siya ng HRM sa University of Manila. Mama Ate ang tawag niya kay Mama, at Papa Tony kay Papa. Tumira siya sa amin nang nasa huling taon na ako sa kolehiyo sa PUP. Isang bagay ang madalas niyang sabihin, pabiro ang tono ngunit seryoso ang diwa. “Hala, Mama Ate, gagradweyt

na 'ko, aalis na 'ko rito 'pag nagtrabaho ako, hindi ko pa nae-experience maglipat ng bahay.” At matatawa kami. Maggagalit-galitan naman si Mama. “Akala mo ba’y gano’n lang kasimple’ng maglipat?”

Makalipas lang ang ilang taon, marami nang bata sa compound na iyon. Dalawang mag-asawa ang nagkaroon na ng anak, at ang dalawa pang bata ay nagkaroon na ng kapatid. Magulo na kapag hapon. May mga naghahabulan na at nag-iiyakan. Nakakatakot nga lang ang dalawa sa mga batang iyon, kay lulutong magmura. Hanggang sa ang bata sa kaharap nilang bahay, na pinsan din nila, ay parang chicharon na rin ang mga mura. Kay liit ng mundo sa lungsod, kay daling mahawa sa ugali ng mga kapitbahay.

Pangalawang taon namin sa bahay na iyon nang makapagpakabit kami ng linya ng tubig. Dalawang linya dahil dalawa ang may-ari. Isang linya ang sa amin na tatlong bahay. Ang nasa gitnang bahay ang humahawak ng pera, at ang kompyutasyon ay batay sa kung ilan ang nakatira sa bawat bahay. Pinakamarami ang sa amin, anim. Nalungkot nga lang si Mama dahil kahit ilang araw kaming wala at nasa Nueva Ecija ay ganoon pa rin ang singil sa amin, at ang nasa gitnang bahay ay kay lakas pa sa tubig. Araw-araw kung maglaba. Kaya sinabi naming magsasarili na kami ng metro, submeter. Pinalabas na lang na nahihiya kami sa dahilang napapalakas na kami ng gamit sa tubig.

'Pag papasok sa eskuwela, o sa trabaho, kalaunan, nag-aabang lang kami ng traysikel sa labas ng compound. Ngunit dahil madalas na hindi kami masakay, naglalakad pa kami hanggang sa kabilang kalye kung saan mas maraming traysikel na dumaraan. Kung minsan, naisasakay ako ni Lolo, iyong may-ari ng unang apartment na tinirhan namin. Nagtatraysikel na pala siya. Ang narinig ko lang kasi dati ay na nagigipit na sila sa pera. Ayokong nasasakay sa kanya, dahil hindi niya ako pinagbabayad. Pilit na isinasauli ang bayad ko. Hanggang minsan, natanong ko ang sarili ko. Paraan niya kaya iyon ng paghingi sa amin ng tawad, o pag-iwas sa usig ng konsensiya?

Higit limang taon na kami roon nang maging problema namin ang banyo. Malapit na itong maging barado. May mga pagkakataong pumupugak ito, at may kung anong duming lumalabas sa inodoro. Minsan, kung may dumurumi sa amin, saktong pupugak ito at tatalsik ang tubig. Biruan nga na dahil daw doon, umuurong ang tae ng kung sino mang tatae. Napagplanuhang ipasipsip iyon, sisingilin na lang sa may-ari ang

magagastos. Naisip ko naman na sa araw na iyon, kailangang wala ako sa bahay. Ayokong maamoy ang aalingasaw na baho. Gusto ko ring magtago sa kahihyan na ang amoy na iyon ay mula sa aming mga bituka.

Sa pang-anim na taon namin doon, naglabas ng motorsiklo si Ricky. Sa narerehasang espasyo iginagarahe. Doon din namin ipinalagay ang isang gripo nang magkalinya kami ng tubig. Nagpalagay rin kami roon ng lababo. Doon na lang kami naghuhugas ng pinggan dahil nagagalit ang mga tagakabilang compound. Sa kanila raw tumatambak ang aming mga mumo.

Nang mag-barangay election at nang lumabas ang resulta niyon, kinausap si Mama ng aming landlady. Sino raw ba ang ibinoto niyang kapitan? Nang malaman na hindi ang dala niyang kapitan ang ibinoto namin, maging ng nasa unang dalawang bahay, lahat kami ay pinaalis. Ano ba naman ang ilang boto, na hindi naman sanhi sa pagkatalo ng kanyang manok? Tandang-tanda ko pa ang sabi ni Papa. “Napakahirap mangupahan. Papaalisin ka kahit kelan nila gusto.” Naipayo kong ilapit namin iyon sa nakatataas ngunit sabi ni Papa, wala rin daw mangyayari. Pangangatawanan lang nito ang pagpapaayos sa nagbabarang banyo para maging dahilan.

Masama ang loob namin, at ng nasa unang dalawang bahay, nang magsilikas kami sa compound na iyon. Iyon ngang nasa unang apartment ay may iba pang himutok. Sila pa pala ang nagbayad ng kuryente ng sinundan nilang tumira roon. Hindi na raw binayaran sa kanila ng landlady. (Ang kuryente naman sa ikatlong apartment na aming tinirhan ay bigla raw nagmahal. Parang binabawi ang pagkamura nito sa kung ilang taon. Ang natiyempuhang nakatira roon ang sinisingil ng problema.)

Sina Mama at Papa ang naghanap ng aming malilipatan. Nang makakita na ay pinuntahan naming anim nang nakatraysikel. Sinuri namin ang loob at labas ng bahay, ang presyo at ang maliliit pang bagay na nakaugnay rito. Pumasok ako sa loob. Naluwangan ako. Pero naisip ko rin na sa sandaling mailatag namin doon ang lahat ng aming gamit, sisikip din iyon. Magmumukha muling apartment.

Bago kami lumipat doon ay pinabasbasan muna iyon. Nagtulog ng mga kandila at naglagay ng mga barya sa ilang sulok. Nagpunta si Dikong Omel, tito ko na nagpaplanong maging pastor, binasbasan ang aming lilipatan. Parang pagtitiwala sa bahay ng aming mga pangarap at buhay.

Gabi nang maglipat kami roon. Tumulong sa paglilipat ang mga tambay at ang ilang kapitbahay. Noon ko higit na nadama ang bigat ng

paglipat ng bahay. Hindi ako naging bahagi ng pag-alis sa unang bahay at wala namang gaanong emosyon ang sa ikalawa dahil isang taon lang kami roon. Habang ang sa dalawang sumunod ay magkalapit lamang. Ngunit iba ang sa sumunod. Walong taon kami sa ikaapat naming tinirhan. Saksi iyon sa pagtatapos ko sa hayskul, sa pagtungtong ko at pagtatapos sa kolehiyo, sa pagsisimulang magtrabaho at sa pag-alis sa ilang paaralan. Saksi iyon sa pag-abot ko sa maliliit na pangarap at sa paghabi sa higit na maraming pangarap. Batid ng bahay na iyon kung papaano ko natuklasan sa aking sarili kung ano ba talaga ang aking mga pangarap. Gaya ng pagiging guro at pagiging manunulat.

Pinakamahal ang naging upa namin sa ikalimang bahay. P3,000. Sabi nga ng matandang babaeng may-ari, “Pa’no ‘yan, mapapamahal kayo?” Pero sa amin, ayos lang. Ito naman ang pinakamaganda sa lahat. At marahil, tumataas din talaga ang renta sa mga bahay. Tulad ng pagtaas ng presyo ng lahat ng bilihin at ng hirap ng pagkakaroon ng sariling bahay.

Walo ang bahay sa aming nalipatan. Bakante ang sa pampito at pangwalo. Ang pangwalo dapat ang kukuhanin namin, dahil maganda ang puwesto. Walang gaanong maaabalang kapitbahay. Meron pang maliit na lote sa pagitan nito at ng pader ng katabing pabrika. Maaaring pahingahan o pag-ihawahan. Ngunit naitango na raw iyon sa iba. Nakatira na kami sa pampitong apartment nang mabalitaan naming hindi nagtuloy ang kukuha sana sa pangwalong apartment.

Magkakaiba ang laki ng walong apartment. Anim lang iyon noong una, ihinabol ang huling dalawa, na kaparehas ng ayos, ngunit higit na malaki. Kaya mas mahal ang upa. Kami ang unang tumira sa pampitong apartment, una sa karanasan namin sa pangungupahan. Malinis na malinis ang mga dingding na kulay krema na nagmukha nang puti dahil walang kabakas-bakas ng alikabok o kahit pa anong mantsa. Bago rin sa amin ang pagkakaroon ng inodoro na may toilet cover, at ng likod na bahagi ng bahay.

May terasa ang bahay, na mahirap muling matawag na terasa. Kalahating dipa ang lapad ng espasyong iyon. Katapat na katapat ng gate niyon ang pinto. Walang partisyon sa loob ngunit maganda ang istante at mga kabinet sa ilalim ng lababo. Sa tabi ng banyo ay may pinto papunta sa labas, na siyang nagsisilbing labahan. Mula roon ay maaaring makalipat papunta sa ibang mga apartment. Kalaunan, dito daraan ang kapitbahay

namin sa katabing apartment sa pag-aabot ng handa nilang pansit o spaghetti kung may okasyon.

Mababang pader ang nasa likod-bahay. Sa kabila niyon ay ibang lupa na, hindi mga apartment, kundi maliliit na bahay na kapapatayo pa lamang. Sa tapat ng likod-bahay namin ay wala pang nakatira, kaya pinakamaliwanag sa walong apartment. At pinakasariwa ang hangin. Sa harap ay malawak na bakanteng loteng kinatitindigan ng iba't ibang puno. May bayabas, katuray, mangga, saging, buko, kasoy at malunggay. Ang landlady rin ng apartment ang may-ari ng lupang iyon. At maaari raw kaming magtanim sa kanya-kanya naming tapat. Katunayan, may mga tanim na nga ang nasa mga unang bahay, may ilan pang may alagang itik. Sili, kamote at patola ang itinanim ni Papa. Magiliw niya iyong inaasikaso pagdating sa bahay. Alam kong tuwang-tuwa siya dahil bukod sa nalilibang at makatitipid kami, iyon ang unang tinirhan namin na makapagtanim kami ng gayon. Kay sarap isiping may mga taong hindi madamot, hindi mukhang-apartment.

Nang mamulaklak ang patola ay tuwang-tuwa kami. Kay ganda ng pagkadilaw ng mga ito na nagpapakitang-gilas kung hapon, lalo pa't iisipin na bunga ng tiyaga namin ang mga iyon. At nang maluto ang mga bunga nito ay gayon na lang ang galak namin. Iba ang linamnam ng gulay na bagong pitas, manamis-namis. Ng gulay na dinilig ng mga kamay mo ang nag-alaga.

Malaki ang naitipid namin sa kuryente dahil sa mga bakanteng lote. Tipid sa ilaw at bentilador. Iyon nga lang, labis na inalikabok ang aking mga aklat. Hindi naman makabili ng bagong salansanan, iyong may salamin, dahil wala nang magpalalagyan.

Ang pangunahing naging problema lang namin dito ay ang kawalan ng linya ng tubig. Balik sa dating sistema na de-rasyon. Katunayan, noong nakakailang araw pa nga lang kami ay naririnig ko na agad na maghahanap raw kami ng iba. Nahihirapan kami dahil nasanay na sa de-gripo. Nainis ako. Kalilipat lang ay lilipat na naman. Hindi naman madaling humanap ng malilipatan, ni maghakot ng gamit. Lalong hindi madaling mapanatag kapag nakalipat na. Ngunit naisip ko rin na napapamahal nga kami. Sa tubig pa lang ay umaabot na kami ng higit isang libo kada buwan. Kinausap nina Mama ang may-ari. Kinulit-kulit. Napag-usapan naman na iyon kahit noong hindi pa kami lumilipat. Na magpapakabit kami ng linya ng tubig, at kami muna ang magbabayad. Gaya ng sa inalisan namin. Hanggang

makalipas ang apat na buwan ay nagkalinya rin kami. Naging P300 na lang ang bayad namin sa tubig kada buwan.

Batid naming marami sa mga kapitbahay namin ang nainggit sa amin. Marami ang nagtanong kung maaari silang maki-submeter. Nalaman iyon ng may-ari at pinakiusapan kaming huwag pumayag. Ang anak niya ang nagrasyon ng tubig sa mga apartment. Pinayagan nga lang daw kami dahil may nauna nang usapan. Kaya binibigyan lang namin ng tubig ang mga kapitbahay kung hindi sila narasyunan. At kailangan din naming tanggapin ang pabeynte-beynte pesos nilang bayad. Batid kong dahil dito, sinasadya ng kung sino man, ang biglang pagkamatay ng tubig namin kung minsan. Pinipihit ang pihitan sa metro sa nasa gilid ng unang bahay.

Madalas din naming maisip na madali kaming manakawan, dahil nga sa ayos ng likod-bahay. Kaya kung gabi, sinisigurado naming naka-lock ang seradura sa pinto sa likod. At kung aalis naman at isasarado ang bahay, ang mahahalagang bagay gaya ng laptop ay itinatago pa namin sa loob ng mga aparador.

Bagama't maliit na bagay lang, perhuwisyo rin sa amin ang dulot ng katabing pabrika. Mababa lang ang parang sigarilyo nito na nagbubuga ng itim na itim at kay bahong usok. Bumababa ang usok na iyon at kumakapit sa mga damit na nakasampay sa labas. Nagkakaroon ng parang iwinisik na tinta ang mga puting sando at brief. Ilang ulit na raw iyong inireklamo, pero walang nangyayari.

Pag-alis namin sa apartment ng midwife na landlady ay kinuha naming mga nangupahan sa tatlong bahay ang mga kahoy na inilagay gamit. At ang sabi raw ng landlady, binaboy ang bahay niya.

Nang mag-birthday ang bunsong anak ng nasa gitnang bahay ay imbitado kami. Gabi kami pumunta, at nakita namin ang bago nilang tirahan. Katabi nila ang dating nasa unang bahay. Hindi kanila ang bahay, pero hindi sila nangungupahan. Isang lupa na pagmamay-ari ng kapitang dinala nila at natalo nga, ipinagamit muna sa kanila. Pumayag na patayuan nila ng bahay. Sa salu-salong iyon, napagkuwentuhan ang midwife. Lahat pala sila ay iniawasan nito tuwing nakakasalubong nila. Hiyang-hiya sa inasal.

Pumasok ako sa bahay ng dati ay nasa unang bahay. Naroon ang retrato nila sa kasal. Nakatutuwa ang tamis ng kanilang pag-iibigan. Kahit hindi sila nabiyayaan ng anak.

Masaya kami sa munting salu-salong iyon. Nakakatuwa na maski papaano, nananatili rin ang magandang samahan, paglayuin man ng distansiya at salimuot ng pangungupahan.

Nagpapasalamat ako na hindi pinatayuan ng apartment ang bakanteng lote sa harapan namin. Maaliwalas sa amin at nayayakap kami ng sariwang hangin. Minsan nga, kung gabi, may nakikita pa akong paisa-isang alitaptap sa kadawagan ng mga dahon. Nakalulungkot nga lang na mapapatayuan na ang nasa likod-bahay. Didilim na sa aming likuran at wala nang madaraan ang hangin. Unti-unti ko nang mararamdamang nasa lungsod nga ako, at wala sa probinsiya na gaya ng madalas kong pretensiyon.

Napakasikip na sa NCR, sa sobrang dami ng tao. Paliwanag ni Papa, hindi raw kasi makapagbigay ng trabaho sa probinsiya ang gobyerno, kaya nagsisiksikan sa NCR ang mga tao. Pero sa sikip nito, hindi hamak na mas masikip pa rin sa lugar ng mga nangungupahan.

Madalas maging problema ni Papa at ni Ricky ang paggagarahe sa traysikel at motorsiklo. Hindi sila makaraan dahil sa walang pakialam na mga kapitbahay. Hindi man lang maisip na gumilid-gilid man lang sa mga gabing nag-iinuman sila. May mga umaga namang sina Mama at Jean ang namumroblema. Naglaba kasi ang kapitbahay, at inangkin ang lahat ng sampayan. May isang gabi namang may narinig akong kaluskos sa kusina. Binuksan ko ang kabinet sa ilalim ng lababo, sa pag-aakalang may daga. Ilang saglit lang, narinig kong muli ang kaluskos. At napagtanto kong galing pala iyon sa kabilang bahay. Nalimutan kong sa mga nangungupahan nga pala, ang salitang “kapitbahay” ay literal na kapitbahay. Parang mga kuwarta sa motel.

Nang mga unang buwan namin sa ikalimang apartment, napapatingin pa rin ako ‘pag nasa traysikelan ako at sasabihin ng dispatser na, “Kaypandan, o. Kaypandan.” Pagkatapos, may kung anong hiwaga akong madarama sa isiping hindi na nga pala kami roon nakatira. At kung madaraan ang kantong iyon, napapalingon ako. May kurot akong nadarama habang nakatingin sa eskinitang ilang taon kong dinaraan at pinaghihintayan ng traysikel.

Minsan, 'pag nag-iiba ng ruta ang nasakyan kong traysikel o kung kay Papa ako nakasakay at sa Kaypandan ang ihahatid niyang mga pasahero, nakikita ko ang dati naming tirahan. Nagulat ako nang muli ko itong makita. Iba na ang kulay ng dingding nito. Kulay lila na, parang mga bulaklak sa hardin. Nakatatawa, pero naisip kong nagbago ang bihis ng bahay na iyon nang hindi man lang kami inabisuhan. Sa tagal ng pagtira namin doon, nagkaroon na ako ng pakiramdam na amin iyon. Na dapat, hihingin ang pahintulot namin sa anumang gagawing pagbabago.

Pero kahit pala matagal ka nang wala sa isang lugar, may mga pagkakataong sariwang-sariwa pa rin ang mga gunita. Na parang noong isang linggo lang naganap ang lahat. Gayon ang nararamdaman ko kung minsan, 'pag nakikita ko ang apat na bahay na aming tinirhan. Parang noong isang linggo lang, doon pa kami nanananghalian, naghahapunan, gumigising, nangangarap.

Dalawang pamilya ang nakatira sa likod-bahay nina Nanay, ang kay Tita Ye, at ang kay Dikong Omel. Naitatanong nga ng ilan, bakit daw si Mama na panganay ang siya pang walang nakuhang lupa sa likod-bahay. Sa salaysay ni Mama, akala raw niya ay maliit lang ang lupang kinatitirikan ng bahay ni Dikong Omel. Kaya hindi niya kinuha. Naisip ko naman na mas mainam din naman ang kinahinatnan namin. Mura lang naman ang lupa sa Nueva Ecija, at hindi hamak na mas maginhawa ang sinapit nina Mama at Papa sa pagpapaaral sa aming tatlo sa mga pampublikong pamantasan sa Maynila. Dahil mas malapit at mas mababa ang matrikula.

Ilang dating kaklase noong hayskul ang nakatira malapit sa ikalima naming tirahan. Nang una ko silang makita, umiwas agad ako. Ayokong matanong nila kung bakit nandoon ako, at ayokong malaman nila na doon na kami nakatira. Kakambal noon ang tanong na nakabili ba kami ng lupa roon. Kasunod naman niyon ang pagkatuklas sa katotohanang nangungupahan lang kami. Maging kapag nasa traysikelan, mahina lang ang banggit ko sa Hercules, sa kalyeng pinagbabaaan ko. Ayokong malaman ng kaklaseng nakasabay roon na nasa ibang barangay na kami.

Ngunit lalo akong nalulungkot pag nakakasabay ko sa traysikelan ang mga dating kapitbahay, at sasabihin nila sa dispatser na “Phase 2” o “Phase 1.” Sa lugar na iyon nakapagpatayo ng bahay ang maraming taga-

Lingunan at Canumay. Naiinggit ako na sila na mga dating nangungupahan lang ay may sarili ng bahay. Naiinggit ako kahit pa alam kong hinuhulugan pa rin naman iyon. Ngunit pinapatay ko ang inggit na iyon, ginagawang pampalakas ng loob. Kung nagawa nila ay bakit hindi namin magagawa?

Isang pagkakataon noong bata pa ako ang madalas kong magunita. Nasa dyip kami noon, ipinagyabang kong tatlo ang bahay namin. Ang nasa Valenzuela, ang sa mga magulang ni Papa sa Gapan, at iyon ngang kina Nanay at Tatay, sa Peñaranda, Nueva Ecija. Sumagot si Tatay na siyang tsuper ng dyip. “E wala nga kayong bahay.” At nakaramdam ako ng pagkapahiya.

Marahil, kung ngayon ako masasabihan ng gayon, o ng halos gayong pahayag, higit na pagkapahiya ang mararamdaman ko. Madalas ko ngang marinig sa isip ko ang sinabi sa akin ni Jean. Ilang taon na raw ako, at ilang taon nang nasa Valenzuela sina Mama at Papa, pero hanggang ngayon, wala pa rin silang bahay. Hindi nangungutya ang tono ni Jean, kundi nagmamalasakit. Sabi niya, dapat daw, matulungan kong magkabahay sina Mama at Papa. Madalas ko ngang maisip na hindi na ako bata, na ilang taon na lang, magkakaroon na ako ng sarili kong pamilya. Maaaring sa apartment ko rin itira ang mapapangasawa ko. Mahirap man iyong tanggapin ay matatanggap ko pa rin. Ngunit hindi ang pag-alis sa tinitirhan namin at pag-iwan sa aking mga magulang na sa apartment pa rin nakatira. Pagpapalakas-loob nga nila sa amin at sa kanilang sarili, nang lumipat kami sa ikalimang apartment, “Pag-alis natin dito, ‘yung susunod nating titirhan, bahay na talaga natin ‘yon.”

Napapalakpak kami. Lumakas ang loob ko. Ngunit muling humina, parang apoy sa kandila na dinuraan, matapos kong marinig ang halaga ng mga lupa at ng pagtatayo ng bahay, at tuwing naririnig ko sa mga balita sa TV ang buwan-buwang pagtataas ng presyo ng halos lahat na yata ng produkto.

Ayokong nagpi-fill out ng form, dahil wala akong mailagay sa patlang sa “permanent address.” Nalulungkot din ako kapag nakikita ko sa luma kong mga ID na iba ang address dito sa kasalukuyan naming address. Sa ilang taon ko sa lungsod at sa pagpunta sa bahay ng ilang mga katrabaho, kaklase at mga naging estudyante, labis ang inggit ko pag napupunta ako sa bahay na sila ang may-ari.

Ilang araw naming napag-usapan ang muling pagbili ng owner. Si Papa ang mapilit. Panay naman ang pilit namin ni Ricky na kotse na lang, nang iba sa dati at may aircon. At ang sagot ni Mama, “Magkokotse kayo, e nag-a-apartment nga lang tayo.” Nakuha ko. Ironya nga naman na may sasakyan kami ngunit walang sariling bahay. Naging sukatan ko ng estado sa lipunan ang pagkakaroon ng sariling bahay. Pangarap kong magkaroon ng sariling kuwarto at ng silid-aklatan kung saan ko ilalagay ang aking mga aklat at kung saan ako makapagsusulat at makapag-aaral, pero ni maliit na bahay na sariling amin, wala kami. Ito marahil ang dahilan kung bakit pag nalalaman ng iba na nangungupahan lang kami ay idinurugtong ko, “Nasa Nueva ‘yung bahay namin.”

Nang nasa Doneso pa kami, may naging kaibigan ang dalawa kong kapatid. Kaedad lang din nila halos. At tulad namin, nangungupahan lang din sila. Naging kalaro nila ito sa basketbol, bang-sak, bilyar at habulan. Minsan, nabanggit ni John, noong matagal na kami sa ikaapat na apartment, na nakita niya ang batang iyon, na binatilyo na nga. Parang hindi na raw siya kilala.

Hindi lang sa trabaho, o sa buhay bilang kabuuan, makikita ang kasabihang dumarating at umaalis ang mga tao. Literal itong nangyayari sa mga nangungupahan. Nakaiinggit ang mga may sariling bahay. Nakikita nila ang pagbabago sa kapaligiran ng kanilang tinitirhan. Ang pagbabago ng kalsada, pagdalang ng mga puno, pagdami ng mga bahay. At mas manipis ang hibla ng lungkot na darapo sa kanila, dahil hindi sila nang-iiwan, maaari lang silang iwan.

Pero higit kong ikinaiinggit sa mga may sariling bahay ang katotohanang nakapag-ipon sila ng mga alaala kasama ang bahay nila. May mga retrato sila roon. Habang ang sa amin ay sa iba’t ibang bahay. Nakita nila ang pagbabago ng itsura ng kanilang bahay, mula sa renobasyon hanggang sa pagkaluma ng mga dingding at bubong. Naidokumento nila iyon sa mga retrato at sa kanilang gunita. Maisasalaysay nila sa mga bisita na hindi ganoon ang dating itsura ng kanilang kusina, o kuwarto, o sala. Na dati ay hindi dalawang palapag ang bahay nila. Pero kami, wala. Ni wala kaming karapatan sa renobasyon ng aming tinitirhan. May tahanan sila. Ang sa amin ay bahay lang. Maipagmamalaki rin nila sa kanilang mga magiging anak na ang silid-tulugan ng mga ito ang dati nilang kuwarto. Ang sa amin, sa gunita lang naiiwan ang lahat. Kasama ng naipong mga sugat.

Nang magbeynte kuwatro anyos ako, nang higit kong mapagtanto ang kadamutan ng lipunan, dumalas ang mga pag-uusap namin ni Papa tungkol sa pagbili ng lupa at pagkakaroon ng sariling bahay. Nabanggit ko sa kanya ang kagustuhan kong sa suburb na lang bumili ng lupa, sa mga lugar na nasa labas ng NCR, gaya ng Meycauayan at Sta. Maria, Bulacan. Hindi hamak na mas mura ang lupa roon. P7,000 na ang kada square meter sa Valenzuela, P1,500 lang ang sa Sta. Maria. Kailangang malapit lang sa trabaho ang aming tirahan. Ang mga lupa rin doon ang magmamahal, kalaunan. Dahil nga hindi na magkasya sa NCR ang mga tao. Palaki nang palaki ang bilog na kanilang ginagalawan. Ang pangarap naman ni Papa ay makabili ng kahit na maliit na lupa lang, at makapagpatayo ng munting bahay. Basta iyong matitirhan. Nang hindi na kami nagbabayad buwan-buwan, liban sa aming balanse. At siyempre, hindi na niya kailangang sabihin, nang makapagsimula na kami sa pag-iipon ng mga alaala.

Marso 2015, nakapagtapos na ng kolehiyo si John. Wala nang pinag-aalar sina Mama at Papa. Higit na ang kislap sa kanilang mga mata. At alam ko, hindi man kami mag-usap-usap, naniniwala kaming higit nang malaki ang posibilidad na magkaroon kami ng sariling bahay.

Hindi nga siguro maliit na trabaho ang pagkakaroon ng sariling bahay, lalo't wala naman kaming pera sa bangko o malalaking ari-arian na maibebenta. Pero hindi rin naman simple ang pinagdaanan namin sa higit dalawang dekadang pangungupahan. Nagawa namin doong magtulong-tulong, magagawa ulit namin ngayon. Naniniwala akong magkakaroon na kami ng sariling lupa at bahay. Magkakaroon na ng munting tindahan si Mama. At makakapagsabit na kami sa dingding sa sala ng aming diploma, ng mga retrato namin noong magsipagtapos kami sa kolehiyo at ng mga retrato namin na magsisilbing dokumento sa unti-unting pag-iiba ng ayos ng aming tahanan. Kahit saka na ang ikalawang palapag ng bahay, ang mga kuwarta at ang pangarap kong silid-aklatan. Makipaghihintay ang mga iyon. Ang mahalaga ay ang katiyakan na nagsisimula na kami sa pag-iipon ng mga gunita, na hindi namin iiwan para muling mag-iipon ng bago. Mga gunita na lumipas man ang ilang taon ay nasa amin pa rin. Kapiling ang tahanan na dokumento ng matatag naming pamilya.

Sa Tuktok ng Puno ang Nais Ko

Allan Popa

Ang pag-akyat ng punongkahoy ang isa sa pinakamatingkad kong alaala ng tag-init. Kahit na ako ang pinakapayat sa aming magkakalaro noon, napilitan akong makipagsabayan sa kanila sa pagsampa sa puno at paghanap ng maaapakang uka o makakapitang umbok upang maiangat ang sarili ng mahihinang bisig at binti. Sa simula, ako lagi ang naiiwan sa ibaba dahil sa takot kong mahulog. Umasa lamang ako sa kanilang limos o naging tagasalo ng prutas na hindi na nila kayang ubusin habang nasa itaas. Sadyang nakababagot ang maghintay at tumingala sa kanila habang nag-uunahan sila sa pagpitas ng bunga ng aratiles, santol, duhat at manggang hilaw. Minsan, nananadya pa silang magtagal. Para akong taya na nakababad sa base habang nagpapahangin sila o umiidlip sa malalaking sanga pagkatapos kumain.

Kaya naman isang araw, nagpasya akong aralin na rin ang pag-akyat ng puno kahit kabado talaga ako sa matataas na lugar. Kung hindi ko ito sinubukan, marami sana akong ligayang napalampas. Tulad halimbawa ng pagkakatagpo ng pugad ng ibon o di kaya ang magdikit ng patibong sa matataas na sanga upang makahuli ng ibon. Iba nga naman ang tanawin kung nasa ibabaw ka ng lahat lalo pa't nangangawit ang leeg ng bata sa pagtingala sa mga nakatatanda. Kahit pa karaniwan akong napagsasabihan ng aking Nanay dahil umuuwi akong madagta ang damit o umiiyak dahil may bagong sugat sa tuhod, masasabi kong nalubos ko ang bawat sandali ng panahong kinasabikan.

Karaniwang naiuugnay ang masasayang alaala ng kabataan sa tag-init. Hinahatak ng bawat mag-aaral ang mga araw upang mapabilis ang pagdating ng mahabang bakasyon. Bukod sa pamamahinga sa aralin, panahon ito ng paglalakbay, pamumulaklak, pamumunga, anihan, at pagdiriwang. Kaya naman balat-kalabaw lamang siguro ang kayang magbulag-bulagan sa kasaganaan at kulay na hatid nito sa ating pandama.

Ngunit paglaon, habang inilalayo ako ng edad sa paglalaro, wari bang iisang puno lamang ang nalabi sa isip ko. Wari bang sa lahat ng tag-init, iisa lamang ang inakyat ko. Marahil iisa ang kaligayahang nadama sa mga bakasyong iyon kaya't sapat nang maiwan sa alaala ang iisang puno ng duhat sa tapat ng aming bahay upang kumatawan sa magkakatulad na karanasan. Sa tuktok noon, ginaya namin ang mala-unggoy na paglalambitin ni Jojo. Doon kami nagbatuhan ng mga buto ng duhat. Doon kami nagkuta nina Jonatahan at Pepen habang nag-uusap kung ano ang susunod na pagkakaabalahan sa mga hapon ng tag-init na parang walang katapusan. Doon, waring nababalutan ng ginintuang liwanag ang larawan habang umiihip ang sariwang hangin. Waring hindi totoo. Doon, kung saan nagtali ng duyan si Aldrin.

Lagi't laging may kasalungat na timbang ang larawan ng punong ito sa isipan ko, isang alaala na sagana sa anino na para bang nananatili pa rin ako sa ibaba at tumitingala sa pagitan ng mga sanga at luntian kung ano nga ba nagaganap sa itaas habang nagtatawanan ang aking mga kaibigan. Nang una kong mabasa ang tulang "First Death in Nova Scotia" ni Elizabeth Bishop, nanariwa sa akin ang unang pagkakataong nawari ko ang katotohanan ng kamatayan: aralin sa tag-init na nananatiling matingkad. Katulad ng batang persona sa tulang iyon na tumutunghay sa kabaong ng munti niyang pinsang si Arthur, alam kong maraming katanungan ang namuo sa isip ko noon.

Sa pagkakaala ko, may kaputian si Oliver, bilugan ang mukha at malusog. Kasunod ko siya lagi sa pila noong nasa Kinder kami dahil magkasunod ang aming mga apelyido sa bandang dulo ng listahan ng mga mag-aaral. Katabi ko siya ng upuan dahil isa siya sa mga una kong naging kaibigan sa eskuwela. Tuwing tatawagin kami ng aming guro upang magkuwento sa harapan ng klase, sabay naming kukunin ang aming mga upuang unan. Magkatabi rin ang aming kabinet na nilalagyan ng baso at sipilyo. Kapag reses, magkasunod kami muling pumila sa bintana ng

tindahan ni Tiya Luding at nakatiyad na iaabot ang baryang baong pambili ng delimon, karne-karne, Cheese Curls, o Baltik. Kung uwian na, habang kumakaway at sabayang kinakanta ng klase ang “Paalam na sa iyo/ paalam na sa iyo/ Bukas babalik...” sabay kaming unti-unting naglalakad papunta sa pinto at sa naghihintay na laro.

Teks. Holen. Goma. Siyato. Piko. Patintero. Taguan. Agawan-base. Langit, Lupa, Impiyerno. Hindi ko alam kung paano nagpapalit ang mga usong laro sa buong taon, kung may sinusundan bang kalendaryo o kung may nagpapauso ba sa pana-panahon. Alam ko lamang na kalaro ko siya lagi dahil kapuwa kami hindi makasabay sa mas malalakas at aktibo naming mga kaklase. Kalaro ko siya hanggang sunduin siya ng tatay niya at iaangkas sa harapan ng motorsiklo. Bagamat wala akong matandaang pinag-usapan alam kong malapit siya sa akin noon. Marahil, nakakatulong ang mga unang kaibigang tulad niya sa paghahanda mula sa kaligtasan ng tahanan patungo sa kalakhan ng mundo.

Tulad ng ordinaryong bata, nakikinig ako minsan sa pabulong na usapan ng aking mga magulang bago bumangon o habang nagkakape sa madaling-araw. Bilang bunso, natutulog pa ako noon sa pagitan ng aking nanay at tatay. Tag-init noon, matapos ang aming graduation sa Senior Kinder. Tandang-tanda kong nabanggit nila ang pagkamatay ni Oliver. Bronchitis. Napuno raw ng plema ang baga at hindi ito nakahinga.

Sakitin akong bata noon kaya’t madalas lumiban sa klase. Alam ko ang pasakit ng pagkakasakit. Alam ko ang tigatlong oras na paggising sa akin ng nanay ko upang kumain nang kaunti, lugaw o tinapay, bago pilinging uminom ng gamot na napakapait. Alam ko kung paano mawalan ng panlasa. Alam ko kung paano manginig sa ilalim ng sapin-saping kumot upang pagpawisan. Alam ko ang pakiramdam ng thermometer sa mainit na kili-kili. Alam ko ang pagbabanyos ng katawan sa maligamgam na tubig. Alam ko ang takot sa harap ng albuaryong hihilot sa aking bali. Ang pagsusulat ng reseta ng doktor. Ang tusok ng karayom. Alam ko ang pagdedeliryo. Alam ko ang hirap ng paghahabol ng hininga kapag may ubo’t sipon. Ang hirap ng paghahabol sa mga napalampas na aralin. Alam ko kung paano ang maghabol. Ngunit hindi ko alam kung paano ba ang mamatay. Bago ang araw na iyon, wala rin akong matandaang malapit na tao o alaga man na namatay.

Dinala ako kinagabihan ng aking nanay sa burol ni Oliver. Naroon ang ilan sa aking mga kaklase. Mahina kung mag-usap ang matatanda, waring may mga bagay na ayaw nilang iparinig sa amin. Napakaseryoso ng lahat. Napakakulimlim ng mga ilaw. Gustuhin man naming maglaro upang makalabas sa silid na iyon, waring walang gustong gumambala sa taimtim na paligid, waring nag-iba ang dilim sa labas. Hindi ko siya tinunghayan sa loob ng puting kabaong ngunit alam kong naroon siya. Nakapatong sa ibabaw nito ang kayang larawan, nakangiti. Hindi mailalarawan ang nanghihinang pagtangis ng kanyang ina. Waring walang makalalapit sa katahimikan ng kanyang ama.

Naroon kaming lahat na magkakaklase sa araw ng kanyang libing. Natatandaan kong nakaputi kaming lahat at nakapin sa aming dibdib ang itim na mga laso. Walang nais magtuksuhan. Walang biruan. Walang larong napasisimulan. Walang nagtatakbuhan. Wala rin sa aming umiyak, sa pagkakatanda ko, maging ako. Paano itatangis ang hindi mo pa maunawaan? Ngunit noon ko nakita ang katotohanan ng sakit na iniwan ng kanyang kamatayan sa mga kapamilyang buong katawan ang nagdadalamahati. Masunurin kaming humanay sa likod ng kanyang karosa.

Lumipas ang tag-init na iyon at sa unang araw ng pasukan sa unang baitang, hindi na siya tinawag ng aming guro. Wala na siya sa aming mesa. Wala na rin siya sa likuran ko sa tuwing pinapapapila. Hindi ko na siya kasama sa pagpunta sa tindahan ni Tiya Luding. Hindi ko na siya makalaro sa anumang napapanahong laro. Nais ko siyang lingunin bagamat alam kong puwang na lamang ang sumusunod sa akin saan man ako magpunta.

Isang hapon, sa aming silid-aralan, may puting panyo na natagpuan ang pinakapilyo sa aming magkakaklase, si Michael. Sabi niya sa amin, kay Oliver daw ito. Natakot kaming lahat at nagtakbuhan. Walang nais na madampian ng sedang tela habang ibinabato ni Michael paikot sa amin. Walang nais dumampot. Kabado kaming lahat. Ngunit pagkaraan naging laro ito na nagpatawa sa aming lahat. Pinagpasa-pasahan namin ang panyo. Waring may naipong pagkabalisa na noon lamang napakawalan. Waring ito ang naging paraan namin upang punan ang kawalan, upang sagutin ang mga nakabiting tanong.

Sayaw ng Puting Panyo

Alinsunod sa *Before Summer Rain* ni Rainer Maria Rilke

Bigla, mula kung saan, nahablot
ang puting-puting panyo at nabasag
ng tili ang katahimikan. Nasimulan
ang larong pasahan sa nakabiting

alinsangan ng paghihintay ng ulan.
Unang araw ng pasukan sa unang
baytang. Pagtatapos ng mahabang
tag-init ng pagsasaksi sa unang

kaibigang inihatid sa hukay. Waring
batid ng lahat ang kawalang pinupunan,
habang tila mariposang dumadapo't

lumilipad sa mumunting mga palad
ang pamahid-luhang takot dampian,
isang hapong kabado ang tawanan.

Malapit ang nitso ni Oliver sa mga libingan ng aking kamag-anak kaya't tuwing Undas nakikita ko ang kanyang dalawang kapatid na babae, lumalaki at nagkakagulang habang nililinis ang kanyang pangalan sa lapida, naghahatid ng mga bulaklak at nagtitirik ng kandila sa munting nitso ni Oliver. Hindi ko sila kailanman nakausap tungkol sa aking kaibigan. Tahimik lamang akong nagbilang ng mga luha ng kandila sa aking palad, palipat-lipat sa mga nitso ng aking kamag-anak na isa-isa ko nang nasaksihang namatay. Mula sa aking mahal na lola, hanggang sa mga tiyo at tiya. Alam ko na kung bakit kailangang umiyak sa pagkamatay ng mahal sa buhay. Napakaliwanag ng sementeryo tuwing Araw ng mga Patay. Ginintuan ang liwanag na bumabalot. Waring hindi totoo ang alaala nito.

A.

Rolando B. Tolentino

para kay JM

26 Oktubre 1998, Hardin ng Rosas

Tahimik siyang dumating sa buhay, tulad ng di inaasahang regalo. Tahimik din kaya siyang aalis, na sa aking pagpikit at muling pagdilal, tanging imahen ng kanyang maamong mukha ang unti-unting naglalaho. Pinapasok niya ako sa kanyang buhay, isang bahagi man lang nito gayong sa akin, buong-buo ko siyang pinatuloy. Sana'y maalimpungatan ang panahon at makalimutan ang oras ng pag-alis. Pero sadyang ganito ang mga tahimik na pagdating. Di naalimpungatang narito't nag-aantay na. Ayaw kong magwakas ang katahimikan at kasiyahang dulot nito, na sa unang pagkakataon ay sabayang dumating. Sabayan ding aalis nang walang pamamaalam.

Pinatuloy ko siya sa panahong walang gustong tumuloy at panandalian lamang mamalagi. Sadyang mailap ang mga bisita, lalo na kapag umaasang may dumating. May maririnig na mga yapak, may katok sa pinto, may kaskas ng sapatos na pinupunas sa basahan, may ngiting bitbit sa bukana ng pagkakataon. Mailap din pala ang pagnanasang manatili ang isang pinapasok – pinagkape't miryenda, pinaghahanda ng hapunang maaring hindi naman makasalo. Kahit anong sandali, maaring mamaalam. Hindi mapipigilan, hindi mapapakiusapang maglaan pa ng sandali. Nararamdaman niya ang ganitong pagnanasa, at lalong napapabilis ang kanyang pagnanais makaalis at maglaho. Siya'y tila isang lumalabong nilalang, tila maglalaho anumang saglit. Mabigat mamaalam, lalo na't walang katiyakan ang pagbabalik.

Pinapasok ko siya sa panahong gusto kong magpatuloy sa aking buhay, sa yugtong gusto kong muling mabuhay. Akala ko'y alam ko na ang lahat na dapat matutunan para mabuhay. Ito ba ang buhay? Ang magkaroon ng natatanging lakas sa pangungulila para sa isang iglap na nilalang? Bakit nangungulila gayong naririto naman siya? Bakit tiyak ang iyong paglisan? Nangungulila ako sa iyong tiyak na paglisan. Nangungulila ako sa napipinto kong muli na namang pag-iisa. Nangungulila ako sa aking pangungulila.

Clubs. One hanggang nine, three by three ang mga hanay. Instruksyon: Gawing suma total ang 15 sa tatlo-tatlong cards—pahalang, pababa, palihis, pataas. Dalhin ang mga numero sa isang tiyak na antas. At kami'y walang kapagurang isinakatuparan ang kahilingan. Sa pagitan ng pagsasaayos ng bilang, may naisip ako. Bakit ako, tila walang katiyakan pa rin itong sinasambit na katiyakan? Matapos ng mahabang pagpupursigi, kahit ayaw namin ng ganitong bonding, ay inialay namin ang kasagutan.

Bigla-bigla'y may bagong kahilingan. Tulad ng unang batas, ang mga sumunod na hugis ang pinahulaan, may mga tiyak na kasagutan. Wala ang mga sagot sa aking utak, nakatutok sa pagresolba ng mga paulit-ulit na mga numero. Hanggang sa lamunin kami ng numero't hugis, hanggang sa dumating ang oras na mamaalam na. Pero pinagbigyan mo kami, mamamaalam lamang matapos ang isang maagang almusalan ng sopas. Palipas-gutom, palipas-lamig sa parating na bagyo.

Umibis ka ng sasakyan, nagpasalamatán tayo sa oras na nagtagpo't nagkasama. At nagsimula ang pangungulilang tanging ako lamang ang umuunawa. Ang regalong dumating at hindi inaasahan ay bigla ring aalis nang hindi inaasahan. Bubuntong-hininga ako nang malalim. Ang regalong hindi inaasahang dumating ay kaagad na namang naglaho. Magpapasalamat sa pagkakataon na makadaupampalad. Magpapasalamat sa mga hugis at numero. At nagsimula nang mapang-abot sa akin ang pangungulila, tiyak ang kawalan-katiyakan.

1 Nobyembre 1998, Quezon Memorial Circle

Narinig ko sa radyo, habang papunta sa bahay ng kapatid ko sa Welcome Rotonda dahil wala naman iba pang imbitasyong dumating. Gayong may nangakong tatawag para mag-inuman. Naalaala ko kaninang

madaling-araw, habang sapilitan kitang inihahatid sa Philcoa, para kang bata sa pagbigkas ng kung ano-ano: “Magdra-drive ako hanggang...” “Para tayong nasa buwan sa pag-ikot dito.” “Ano kaya ang hitsura natin mula sa space habang umiikot tayo sa Circle?”

Ngayong hapon, sa pagtungo ko sa Welcome, narinig ko ang ilang salita mula sa isang kanta: “All that shimmers in this world is sure to fade.”

2 Nobyembre 1998, Hardin ng Rosas

Sa aking panaginip, madadatnan kitang nakatungo ang iyong ulo sa hita’t nag-aantay, sa loob ng tatlong oras sa baitang ng hagdang pinakamalapit sa pintuan ng bahay; mapupungay ang iyong mga mata’t maamong ipapadantay ang iyong buhok at mukha sa aking kamay na kanina’y may bitbit na bag ng groseriya; hindi ka iimik, nakapikit na sinasalat ng iyong mukha ang aking palad.

Sa aking panaginip, darating ka habang lumalamig ang bagong lutong walnut brownies; magkakape tayo’t magkukwentuhan tungkol sa kung anu-ano – mga palaisipan, mga biro, mga pasaling at patama; magkukwentuhan tayo tungkol sa kung anu-ano maliban sa dapat sigurong pag-usapan; at lilipas ang oras na parang namalikhata lamang tayo; lilipas ang oras at hindi ka magmamadaling magpapaalam.

Sa aking panaginip, yayayain mo akong tumabi’t dumantay sa iyong hapon katawan; yayakapin kita’t hahalikan na parang sanggol na nangangailangan ng pagmamahal; hahayaan mong mabasa ko ang iyong mga panaginip, mapakinggan ang alingangaw sa tibok ng iyong puso; ako ang magmamatyag habang ikaw ay nahihimbing; iduduyan ka ng yapos at dampi ko sa bilog na buwan at maririkit na bituin, ng mga alon at kabibe, ng pagliliwanag matapos ang matagal at malungkot na kadiliman.

Sa aking panaginip, hahablutin mo ang aking siko para matapat ang aking labi sa iyo; hahalikan mo ako na parang wala nang bukas; sasamsamin mo ang aking likido, at ako rin naman sa iyo; hahayaan mong gabayan ng iyong dila ang lahat ng bahagi ng aking bibig, papasok sa aking kaluluwa; kikilalanin mo ako bilang ako, at ako naman, ikaw bilang ikaw – walang labis at walang kulang; maghahalikan tayo hanggang sa mamanas ang ating mga labi.

Sa aking panaginip, gigisingin mo ako isang madaling-araw; hindi ko matiyak ang iyong paanyaya, mapapangiti ako bagamat may bakas ng agam-agam ang iyong maamong mukha; aayain mo akong kumain sa ating paboritong 24-hour restaurant; ikaw ang oorder ng ating paboritong almusal; magkukwento ka ng kung anu-ano, maliban sa talagang dapat pag-usapan; matapos ay aayain mo ako sa Sunken Garden; habang magkatapat na nakahiga sa damo, aantayin natin ang unang sinag ng araw; isang patak ng luha mo, matapos ay ang tiyak na huling pamamaalam.

Sa aking panaginip, maayos, marangal at may pagmamahal ka pa rin sa paggayak at pagbigkas ng katiyakan.

Sa aking panaginip.

Payo ng Mga Ateng

2 Nobyembre 1998, Hardin ng Rosas

Ang Buwan: Kung kailan ka pa tumanda, saka ka pa nalulong sa ganyan. Kami naman ay dumaaan diyan noong twenties pa.

Late-bloomer ako. Fourth-year college na nang malaman kong gusto kong magsulat, 25 na nang malaman kong gusto kong magturo.

Ang Buwan: Maging maligaya ka na lang sa kaya niyang ialok.

Bakit umaasa pa rin ako kahit na tanggap kong wala nang sex?

Ang Buwan: Dahil may gusto ka pa ring mangyari, at iyon ay hindi niya kayang ibigay. Alam mo 'yun. Ayan, na-LSR ka tuloy. Di ba nawindang sa iyo ito noong bata-bata pa kayo? Pero alam niyang nasa kanya ang problema.

Ano ba ang pwede kong gawin, kung gusto kong ipagpatuloy ito?

Si Ligaia: May tatlo kang pwedeng gawin. Una, pwede kang mag-Pygmalion mode. Dalhin mo siya sa iyong mental at physical reality. Pa-enrolin mo sa certificate program sa Malikhaing Pagsulat o Theater Arts.

Interesado siya sa Human Kinetics.

Si Ligaia: Pwede rin yon. Basta, kailangang mahablot mo siya sa iyong realidad. Sabi nga ng isang practitioner nito, “para siyang kumakain

sa aking mga palad.” Ikalawa, pwede kang mag-Jaime Zobel mode. Dalhin mo siya sa realidad na gusto niyang tumungo. Magbakasyon kayo sa Boracay, kumain kayo sa mamahaling restaurant, mag-tripping kayo sa lugar na hindi niya mapupuntahang mag-isa. At ikatlo, mag-Joi Barrios mode ka. Padalhan mo ng home-made oats-raisin cookies, home-made bread; tulaan mo; bilhan mo ng vitamins at anis-anis na kailangan sa kanyang trabaho.

Pero hindi naman ako tweetums.

Ginoong Padded Shoulders: Wala kang aasahan.

Nagkita kami sa labas ng trabaho, kahit madalang.

Ginoong Padded Shoulders: Extension of the workplace lang yon.

Gagawin niya akong ninong.

Ginoong Padded Shoulders: Dahil ikaw ay *good* customer na.

Ang lupit mo.

Ginoong Padded Shoulders: Dahil ako’y tunay mong kaibigan. Bakit ka ba hirap na hirap na makausap siya sa labas ng trabaho? Dahil wala naman kayong mapapag-usapan, wala ka sa mindset niya maliban sa loob ng trabaho. Mainam pa dati, talagang sexual lang ang pagpunta mo sa A. Ngayon, umaasa kang mas malalim ang inyong pinagsasamahan. Lumilikha ka ng fantasyang alam mo naman na hindi darating.

Mr. Tsines Arreneow: Magbate ka na lang, mas maliligayahan ka pa.

Ang Multo

30 Oktubre 1998, A.

Halloween Contest. Hindi kita gustong pansinin. Hindi ka na naman tumawag. Buong araw akong nag-antay, tulad ni Godot, sa wala. Hindi sana ako mapapadpad, kung hindi lang kinondisyon ang kasama ng kaklase sa college. Siya naman ang nag-aya. Ang Consultant ay nasa Zamboanga, namumukadkad sa Queen City of Flowers. Ako naman. Naririto.

Halloween Contest. Sumayaw ang tikbalang, nakabalot ng itim na brief ang kanyang higitang tabako. Lumabas ang mga demonyo, sutlang pula ang mga kapa. At ikaw naman ay nagtulad ng “The Crow.” Pinintahan ng puti ang mukha, itim ang pinid ng mata’t labi, tulad ng harlequin. Nahihya ka, sa di ko mawaring dahilan. Kaya mabilis na umakyat at baba ka ng entablado. Hinampas mo ang dingding sabay sigaw.

Bigla kang tumabi dahil ninais ko, suot-suot pa rin ang make-up at costume. Biglang nagpaliwanag. Biglang nagbago ang ihip ng hangin at ako’y nanatiling nakapinid sa upuan.

Pumunta ako sa bahay ng kapatid ko sa Welcome, pinanood ang pelikula ng figura mo. Isang multong naghihiganti sa di-makatarungang pagkamatay nilang mag-irog. Anino sa dilim.

Sa pagitan ng iyong paghubad ng shorts at sando, at pag-area, pagtayo’t pagbabalik sa upuan; sa pagitan ng aking pag-iwas sa iyong mabigat na pagdantay, paglipat sa katapat na upuan, umalis na ang aking kaklase; sa pagitan ng mga putol-putol na kwentuhan at pag-alaala, ninais kong titigan ka, ang multo sa aking buhay.

Happy Halloween, wika nga ng isa mong kasamahang madalas kong hindi rin pansinin.

Q & A

19 Oktubre 1998, Bahay ng Consultant

Sa di-inaasahang pagsasama-sama natin, kabilang ang iyong mga katrabaho, nagkakwentuhan tayo tungkol sa susunod na Mr. A. contest sa Disyembre. Kapiling natin, ang kasalukuyang Mr. A., nagbibigay ng ginintuang payo. “Kailangang charming ang sagot sa question-and-answer portion.”

“Ano ba ang tinanong sa iyo?” usisa mo.

“Ano, sa tingin mo, ang pinakamagandang bahagi ng iyong katawan, at bakit?”

Kumunot ang iyong noo. Tumingin ka sa akin. “Paano mo sasagutin ito?”

Sumikat na ang araw, hindi pa rin gising ang utak ko dahil hindi pa nga nakakatulog. Itinuro ko ang aking utak. “Hindi, paano mo sasagutin ito para sa akin?”

Nagpatuloy si Mr. A. “Higit sa lahat,” ika niya, “kumuha ng guests na magju-judge.”

Nauna ang Consultant, “ang kilay mo. Dahil maraming napapa-oo.”

Singit ko, “ang ngiti mo. Dahil habang lalong ipinagkakait, lalong pinagnanasaan.”

Kumunot muli ang iyong noo. At, sa isip ko, kahit pa nakatakip ang iyong buhok sa mata, muli kang nagnanak ng tingin sa akin. Tulad din ng madalas kong gawin sa iyo.

Karaoke Lesson 1

10 Oktubre 1998, Bahay ng Payaso sa Bulacan

Minsan ay inihatid ka namin ng Consultant sa inyong bahay sa Bulacan. Inaya mo kaming bumaba muna, akala ko’y magpapa-Coke ka. May kinalikot ka sa TV at maya-maya pa’y tumugtog na ang music mula sa karaoke machine, lumabas ang mga titik sa screen. Para tayong nasa Sesame Street, sinusundan ang mga letra’t salita na nagiging blue sa tamang kumpas ng musika.

May boses ka pala, isip ko sabay alaala sa mga pagsabay mo sa mga kanta sa A. habang tine-table kita. Tila malulusaw ako, maligamgam ang iyong tinig. “Faithfully” na iniisip ko’y inaalay mo para sa akin. Tinitigan kita at para akong may nasilip na bago sa iyo. Marami pa talaga akong hindi alam sa iyo.

Tila malulusaw ako, dahil ganito rin ang libangan ng aking unrequited love sa US. At ganito rin ang pakiramdam ko, dahil alam kong pipilitin mo rin akong kumanta. At kahit sabihin kong wala talaga akong boses, sasabihin mong katuwaan lang naman. Tayu-tayo lang naman. Natitiyak ko, pagkatapos kong kumanta, hindi na muli akong maiimbitahan.

Tumanggi ako nang ilang ulit pero mapilit ka at ang Consultant, na walang takot dahil libangan ang karaoke sa Zamboanga. Tumanggi ako dahil talagang kapag pumayag ako’y tunay na ang pagmamaliit ko

sa aking sarili. Hindi naman ito hahantong sa eksena na mas magiging endearing ako sa iyo, tulad ng pagkanta ni Cameron Diaz sa *My Best Friend's Wedding*.

Dumaan ang apat na oras at ilan pang pagtatangkang malagay sa tono. Matapos ng tatlo kong pagkanta, kahit pa ako gabayan ng Consultant, wala na ngang nagtangkang alukin pa akong muli. Lumabas ako at naupo sa balkonahe, hanggang ngayon ay napakalayo pa rin sa akin ng aking boses. Parati pa rin itong estranghero sa akin, lalo't kapag tinatangka kong kumanta, lalo pa para sa iyo. Pakiramdam ko'y namamatay sa ere na paroparo, gumegewang-gewang na babagsak sa lupa ang nasa loob kong anghel.

Karaoke Lesson 3

2 Nobyembre 1998, Karaoke Cubicle sa Shoemart

“Huwag kang mahiya. Mag-enjoy ka,” payo ni Jovita, ang co-teacher ko na kasama sa isang chorale sa university. Inaya ko siyang magkaraoke at tulungan ang aking boses na magkaroon ng porma. Pumayag naman siya pero hindi pagkatapos tanungin kung bakit. May nakilala kasi ako, sabi ko. Mahilig siyang magkaraoke at nahiihiya naman ako dahil alam mo naman ang kultura ng karaoke, participatory.

“Manggagaling ang power ng boses mo sa tiyan, dibdib at noo,” banggit mo, kasama ng module na inihanda mo para sa akin. “Basta, kanta ka lang nang kanta. Pagkatapos ay rerepasuhin natin ang isang gusto mo.”

“Kailangan talagang ensayado ka. Lahat ng kumakanta sa karaoke, alam na ang kanilang kakantahin. Performance level na lang.”

“Ngayon naman, huwag mo lang basahin ang mga salita. Mag-emote ka, kausapin mo. Teacher tayo, kaya parang nagkukuwento tayo sa harap ng klase. Isipin mong nandiyan siya sa harap mo, paano mo ngayon sasabihin sa kanya ang lyrics?”

Pinakagusto ko itong huli niyang payo, magandang motivation para kumanta ng nakapag-ngunguyngoy na awitin. Sabi pa naman ni Jovita, magsimula ako sa ballads. At lahat ng ballads na alam ko'y tila pinipilas ang aking puso.

Karaoke Lesson 2.5

Oktubre 1998

Madalas mo akong biruin. Ikinuwento mo sa isang kasamahang tineybol ng Consultant ang pagtambay namin sa inyong bahay, ang pag-jamming sa karaoke. Sabi mo’y nahihiya at tumatanggi pa nga ako ng una, pero sumabak na rin. Sabi ko’y wala talaga akong boses, napilitan lang. Pero pinuri mo ako, “Magaling ka ngang kumanta.” Tinama kita, “Wala akong tono.” Lumapit ka sa akin, para kang may ibubulong. Nakangiting inulit mo ang iyong sinabi sabay rolyo ng iyong dila sa isang pisngi. Nahalayan ako. Sabi ko’y “Hindi ka nga tinigasan noong prinayveyt show kita.” At ikaw naman ang nahalayan.

Putting Maskara

21 Oktubre 1998, Pabalik sa University

Sumakay ka ng kotse, hindi pa nagsusuot ng pantaas. Sabi mo’y pinatutuyo mo pa ang puting maskarang nakapinta sa mukha mo. Kanina, pareho kayo ni James Dean na nagkaraoke na nakasuot ng facial mask. Galing ng Japan, maganda ito, sabi mo. At nahibang ako dahil napakanatural ng inyong pagkilos kahit na pintado ang inyong mga mukha.

Para kang si Zorro, ano kayang kabutihan ang idudulot mo ngayong gabi?

Sinundo natin ang Consultant. Pinagyabang ko sa kanya na nagpakadakila ka naman kaninang hapon. Dumantay ang iyong kamay sa aking balikat, ang unang kusang loob mong pagsalat sa akin. Ibang-iba sa ipinayo kong pagdantay ng iyong kamay sa aking hita kapag tine-table kita. Kahit pulpol ang aking boses ay may nasasabi rin palang makakapag-command ng ibang sentido. Buti na lang at kahit pulpol ang aking boses ay matalas naman ang aking sentido ng pagsalat.

Ang Imahen sa Salamin

21 Oktubre 1998, Bahay ng Payaso sa Bulacan

Tapos na ang ikalawang sesyon ng karaoke sa inyong bahay. Pinatay mo na ang TV. Kinuha mo ang barbell na hiniram mo sa Consultant. Wala kang pantaas, nagsimula kang buhatin ito patagilid. Nagtatanong ka sa iyong kuya kung tama ba ang iyong ginagawa. Nanonood din si James Dean na kanina pa paulit-ulit na nagsasabing payat ang kanyang katawan. Nakaharap ka sa salamin, nakatabi ako sa salamin. Salamin, salamin, sino ang pinakamagandang lalake sa balat ng lupa?

Nakikita ko ang iyong katawan, ang kabuuan nito. Nakikita ko ang mga hugis ng iyong kalamnan. Nakikita ko ang seryoso mong mukha, maamo pa rin. Para akong nahiya, napatitig ako sa patay at blangkong screen ng TV.

Sinapian

8 Nobyembre 1998, sa A.

Inaya ko ang Consultant na mag-tequila sa bahay ni Ligaia, bago pumunta sa A. Tamang-tama at dumaaan kami sa groseriya't bumili ng lemon. Sa tea cups kami nagbuhos. Masama pa rin ang loob ko, dahil kagabi lang sa A. ay may tensyon na naganap sa pagitan ko at ni Payaso. Bumuka ang kanyang bibig, ninenerbyos na may ipinapakiusap sa akin. Dalawang beses kong ipinaulit sa kanya, hindi ko siya maintindihan. Pagkatapos ng pangatlong pagpapaliwanag ay tumango ako. Namalayan ko na lang na umupo na siya sa tabi ng isa pang guest. Nagulat ang kasama kong Consultant pati si Taurus, ang mama-san sa A. Pinabalik ni Taurus si Payaso, tinanggihan ko ito nang papaupo na. Inutusan ulit ni Taurus, pero tinanggihan kong muli. Pumasok sa aquarium si Payaso.

Ipinaliwanag ko kanina sa Consultant, nakahanap lang ako ng butas para hindi na maging guest ni Payaso. Wala akong laban—hindi na nga ako umubra bilang kaibigan, hindi rin ako uubra bilang kliyente. Tama si Mr. Padded Shoulders. Hindi ko kayang tapatan ang lahat nang gustong mag-private show kay Payaso. Hindi ako nasaktan, hindi rin ako

galit. Napapagod lang ako, wala akong kalaban-laban. Hindi ko na kayang pasanin ito. Nakakahapo ng damdamin, parati na lang akong waiting for Godot. Hindi ako makatulog nang maayos.

Naintindihan ko siya, hanap-buhay para sa kanyang baby, si M. Pero kailangan kong mag-sungit dahil pilay na pilay na ako sa lahat nang naganap na ito. Bugbog-sarado na ako, hindi ko na makakayanan kung ipagpapatuloy pa.

Nangalahati ang bote, at hindi ito dahil sumasabay sa akin ang Consultant. May tumawag sa akin, ang kaibigan ko sa college na kasama ko sa Halloween Party sa A. Nagsimula na akong masapiang nang kinumusta niya ako.

Kinabukasan, tumawag sa akin ang Consultant. Nanghingi ako sa kanya ng alaala dahil lubos ang pagkakasapi sa akin. Iilan ang natira sa akin—ang madalas kong pagpunta sa banyo kahit hindi ako naihi, ang pagdantay ko sa dingding ng urinal, ang pag-iwas sa akin ng upo ni Taurus, ang pagsabi sa Payaso na “OK lang sa akin,” ang pagsabi sa akin ni Payaso na “malapit ka na palang maging birthday boy.” Naalala ko rin ang pag-aya ng Consultant na umuwi na, dahil ang Playboy ay uumagahin na naman sa kanyang regular na guest. Naalala ko ang sinabi ko na antayin na natin at nang makasabay mag-almusal, pero tumanggi ang consultant. Hindi ko naalala ang pag-uwi, ang pagmaneho sa kotse sa daan papunta sa housing.

Binigyan ako ng Consultant ng alaala. Pagsakay pa lang ng kotse’y umiiyak na ako, na para akong dadalhin sa kinatatakutang doktor. Nabura ang aking make-up at mascara, tukso ng Consultant. Sa A. ay inakala ng lahat na bad trip ako, na totoo naman. Pero inisip daw ng mga tao na nagtsongki ako. Natakot sa akin si Taurus kaya tumabi sa Consultant. Matapos ng isang oras ay ipinatawag ko kay Taurus si Payaso. Gusto ko siyang kausapin nang seryoso pero ang nasabi ko lang ay “OK lang sa akin.” Patulog-gising ako sa aking upuan hanggang sa kuhanin ni Consultant ang bill at mag-ayang umuwi, hanggang sa kuhanin ni Taurus si Payaso para mag-private show. OK lang sa akin, isip-isip ko bago umalis ng A.

Paggising ko’y maaliwalas ang kapaligiran kahit pa may hang-over. Paggising ko’y magaan ang aking pakiramdam kahit walang alaala sa naganap. Sinapiang na ako ng aking sarili.

Bula at Tutubi

10 Nobyembre 1998, Hardin ng Rosas

Noong bata pa ako, madalas maging libangan ang paggawa ng bula. Sa isang tabo, pipitpitin ang buko ng gumamela, lalagyan ng tide at tubig, at hahaluin. Mula sa tingting ng dahon ng buko, gagawa ng panilo. Isasawsaw ang tingting sa tabo, iwawagayway sa ere, at maglilipana at magliliparan ang mga bula. Maliliit, malalaki, magkakasalikop, mag-iisa. Bawat isa’y may balat ng bahaghari, bawat isa’y tumatanaw sa mundong kanilang pinapailanlangan, kahit sandali lamang. Bawat isa’y salamin ng munting mundong nagaganap sa ibaba—mag-isang bata na nakatingala sa mga pumapailanlang na bula. Sa isang iglap, isa-isang maglalaho ang mga bula. May sasayad sa lupa, may matitinik sa bogambilya, may dadantay sa puno’t alambre. At muli’t muling isasawsaw ang tingting sa tabo, iwawagayway sa ere, at maglilipana at magliliparan muli’t muli ang mga bula.

Noong bata pa ako, na hindi ko na nakikita ngayon sa Maynila, madalas maglipana ang mga kawan ng tutubi tuwing tila bago umulan. Papasok ako sa gitna ng kawan, iaangat ang mga kamay, ikakampay. Pero wala ni isa ang dadapo sa akin. Patuloy ang paroon at parito ng mga gintong tutubi, walang kapaguran. Tatangkain kong manghuli ng tutubi. At sa bawat makulong sa aking mga palad, isasawsaw ko ang mga pakpak sa lata ng tubig. Gagapang ang tutubi hanggang sa matuyo ang pakpak, muling sasabay sa kahiluhan ng kawan. Kahit pa tila magulo ang paroon at parito, walang nagkakabanggaan. Tiyak ang direksyon ng bawat isa; gayunpaman, tiyak din ang kaisahan sa loob ng kawan. Hanggang sa ako ang magsawa o tuluyan nang bumuhos ang ulan, saka lamang maglalaho ang mga tutubi. Gumagapang kaya sila sa lupa sa pagkabasa ng kanilang mga pakpak?

Ngayong matanda na ako, wala na ang mga bulang tumatanaw sa akin, lalo pa sa kalungkutan ng pag-iisa. Ako na ang basang-basang tutubing nakasayad sa lupa.

Pilay at Bugbog

10 Nobyembre 1998, Hardin ng Rosas

Minsan ako'y nagising mula sa mga linggo't gabing di magkandaugapay ang aking katawan at kaluluwa sa ritwal ng araw-araw na pamumuhay na magaan-gaan, kahit papaano, ang pakiramdam. Matagal akong nabugbog ng aking sarili at ng imahen ng Payaso. Marami akong nararamdamang pasa sa aking katawan, kulay pula, asul at itim pa nga kahit di ko nakikita. Namamalayan kong naghilihina ako, mabigat ang pakiramdam, hindi makaurong, hindi makasulong. Nararamdaman kong nawawala na ang aking sarili sa bawat paglatay ng di mapapantayang pag-aasam-asam sa isang lubhang napakailap na imahen. Ewan ko kung bakit ko hinahayaang bugbugin ako ng imahen. Ang pagdantay ng kanyang kamay sa balikat? Bakit nagiging sapat na itong una't huling pagsalat sa aking mga pasa?

Para akong gagambang kulang-kulang ang mga paa, o ang mga pilay na namamalimos sa tabi ng simbahan. Hindi ko man lamang maiangat ang aking sarili, hindi ko rin ganap na maigalaw ang aking mga paa't kamay. Tila ako pinapako sa aking pagkapilay. Malapit na akong maging paralisado. Sa ikalawang pagkakataon sa tanang buhay ko, hinahayaan ko ang aking sarili na maging paralisado. Mas malubha ito, dahil sa unang pagkakataon ay may fasinasyon pa sa bagong karanasan ng kawalan ng kontrol sa sarili. Ngayon ay lubhang mabigat ang pasaning iniatang sa akin ng imahen ng Payaso. Ako na lumikha ng imahen ng Payaso ay siya ring lumikha nitong mabigat na pasaning imahen sa sarili. Narito ang kapangyarihan at kawalan ng kapangyarihan. Narito ang kalungkutang nakakapilay para sa hindi tiyak na pagdating ng pangako ng kaligayahan, puro panilip at palimos lamang.

Tila ako ang bolitas sa may ulo ng kanyang titi, hindi naman ako ang hinihimas ay ginawa ko namang misyon na paligayahin siya. Na sa buong katawan niya'y mayroong isang dayong bagay, mula sa labas na hinayaan din niyang makapasok sa kanya.

Karaoke Lesson 4

10 Nobyembre 1998, Family KTV

Gusto ni Playboy ang kulungang ito. Sabi niya, maari kang magwala nang walang pakialam ang mundo. At tulad ng siyam sa sampung Filipino, maganda at hasa ang boses ni Playboy para sa karaoke.

Umorder si Playboy ng Wengweng para sa kanyang sarili, ako'y nag-beer. Pareho kaming pinatikim ni Playboy ng kanyang inumin, "Lasang cough syrup, di ba? Cherry flavored." At naalaala ko ang biro sa kanya sa A. noong nagsisimula pa lamang siya at nalulong sa cough syrup.

Ginamit ko ang natutunan kay Jovita, inisip si Payaso kapag nahuhuli ko na ang aking sarili na binibigkas na lamang ang mga salita. Kay talas ng aking pagsabi ng r at l. Sa kauna-unahang pagkakataon, hindi naging mahalaga si Payaso. Hindi para sa kanya ang kinakanta ko gayong, sa aking sarili pa marahil. Nakikita ko ang aking sarili na nag-a-alay ng kanta sa kanya, kabahagi na ako ng imahen ni Payaso.

May quorum na naman. Tatlo kami. Bagamat nagtangka ang Consultant na magsama pa ng dalawa, ang Payaso at si Minotaur, na sa huling sandali ng tagpuan ay hindi nagpakita. Pumasok ang dalawa sa A. habang nagtagpo ang Consultant at Playboy sa Jollibee Philcoa. Si Payaso pa naman ang nangumbinsi kay Playboy na sumama at sorpresahin ako sa bisperas ng aking birthday.

Unang Panaginip

9 Nobyembre 1998, Hardin ng Rosas

Sa kauna-unahang pagkakataon ay napanaginipan kita. Tila nasa loob tayo ng isang pelikula ni Fellini, magulo at sobra ang lahat. Hindi ikaw ang unang imahen sa aking panaginip. May shooting ng pelikula, si Gardo Verzosa'y nakahubad, nakabraid ang kanyang bulbol, parang gothikong mukha ng demonyo. Gayon din ang kanyang costume, may pulang sungay at kapa. Tulad ng mga nagsayaw sa A. noong Halloween. Mula sa bukana ng isang bahay ay pumasok sila, gayon din ako. Umupo ako sa bilog na mesa, tulad ng mesa ni Ligaia sa kanyang bahay sa Hardin ng Rosas, kasama

ang kapatid mo, si X-Man. Kinakausap niya ako, hindi ko naiintindihan ang kanyang sinasabi. Bigla kang pumasok, susuray-suray, parang lasing. Suot mo ang iyong itim na skimpy at silk dancing costume, yung mesh ang likuran at nakikita ang mapuputing pisngi at hiwa ng puwet mo. Bigla kang umupo sa tabi ko, kukurap-kurap na humarap mula sa pagkatungo. Bagsak ang buhok mo sa harapan. Pero sa kauna-unahang pagkakataon ay nakita ko ang imahen na nilikha ko – ikaw na may pinakamaamong mga mata’t labi, ikaw na may pinakamagandang mukha, para sa akin. Ganito pala kita nilikha, ganito kita aalaahanin sa tago kong alaala, sa pagitan ng pag-aalumpihit sa pagkakatulog at pagkakagising.

Payo ng Isa Pang Ateng

15 Nobyembre 1998, e-mail

Georgie Girl: if the man is a jerk and doesn't share your feelings, shit, drop the fucker. you may not believe this but you are NOT small potatoes. you're handsome (well, when you dress up; not the tibak look you sometimes revert, too.), smart and successful in your academic career. don't settle for anything less. it isn't love when there is no respect, no affection. end of sermon.

Payo ni Ateng

17 Nobyembre 1998, Chocolate Kiss

Matapos ang talakayan hinggil sa iyong planong gawing disertasyon tungkol sa improbisasyon sa kasaysayang pan-teatro, partikular sa panahon ng seditious plays ng 1900s at ng protestang dulaan noong martial law...

Ateng: Humanda kang magsugal, manalo't matalo.

Ang suyuan at pag-iibigan ay power play, isang laro na kailangang kalkulado mo ang iyong sarili, kontrolado mo ang laro, pati na ang iyong pinipintuho.

Kung ano lang ang kaya, maging masaya ka na doon. Dahil kung hindi, talunan ka na.

Paano?

Parang isang binibitag na ibon. Akala ng ibon ay siya ang nakatuklas ng mga nakahilerang butong iyong inilagay sa kanyang direksyon, hindi niya namamalayan kung saan ito patungo. Tanging ikaw lamang.

Kung бага, sinusuyo ka sa paraang gusto mong suyuin ka na tila siya ang sumusuyo, pero hindi.

Gusto ko pang magsugal.

Maging generous ka sa sarili mo. Huwag kang tuluyang palusaw sa kanya. Ipasok mo ang sarili mong pinanggagalingan sa inyong talakayan. Huwag lamang kung ano ang gusto niya. Isama mo ang sarili mo sa larawang ninanasaan.

Bigyan mo ng motivation kung bakit gagawin niya ang mga bagay na gusto mo. Lagyan mo ng surprises. Alukin mong ipapakita sa kanya ang iyong koleksyon pagbisita niya sa bahay mo. Ano ba ang hilig niya?

(Patlang.) Hindi ko alam. (Matatawa.)

Pinakamadali ang hiwalayan siya. Mababaliw ka lang ng dalawang linggo, isang buwan, tapos na.

Suyuin mo, i-explore mo kung saan ka dadalhin nitong relasyon.

Magpasuyo ka rin. Windangin mo rin. Laging walang katiyakan sa kanya. Panghawakan mo ang mga alas mo.

Kahit kayo na, kung sakali man, magligawan pa rin kayo. Ipagtapat mo sa kanya ang iyong fasinasyon sa ibang tao para on-his-toes din siya. Kapag siya naman ang magsasabi ng ganito, ipamukha mo sa kanya ang mawawala sa kanya kung sakali.

Kung sakali.

Kahit pa siya ay may ka-live-in. Huwag mong isarado ang posibilidad. Huwag mong tanggalin ang sex sa larawan. Bakit ka pa naglalaro?

Kwento kay Ateng

17 Nobyembre 1998, Chocolate Kiss

Gusto ko lamang, pagkatapos ng lahat ng ito, na masabi niya sa akin na naging mahalagang tao ako sa buhay niya. Kahit sa isang panahon lang.

Kaya gusto ko pang magsugal. Handa akong lumubog pa para sa pangako ng pagdating ng isang panahon ng katubusan.

At handa ka rin dapat tumigil kapag alam mong patalunan ka pa lamang.

Pagninilaynilay, Habang Nagsusungit
13 Nobyembre 1998, A.

Sa pagteybol ng Consultant sa Payaso, sa panahong hindi ako handang makipag-interaksyon sa kanya, pagninilay-nilay habang nagsusungit.

Pulang ilaw. Patay-bukas ang pulang ilaw sa bawat nagsasayaw sa entablado. Gaya ng mga isdang iniilawan ng pulang bumbilya sa palengke, nagmumukhang sariwa—hindi bilasa—ang mga mukha't katawan ng mga lalake sa entablado. Pati ang kanilang sayaw, kahit paulit-ulit na naming nakita, ay pamaya't maya'y nagmumukhang bago. Patay-bukas ang pulang ilaw, inihahanda ang pipiliing karne.

Pulang ilaw. Patay-bukas ang pulang ilaw sa labas ng private rooms. Tila magpapasko ang kapaligiran, kapag nagsabay-sabay. Nagkakandarapa ang mga mama-san sa pag-ilaw sa pulang ilaw, pagkatapos, sa mukha ng mga waiter. Nagkakandarapa ang mga waiter sa pag-alam kung bakit. Tila boses ng diyos, hindi maitatatwa. Sa ayaw at gusto, napapasunod ang mga pagod, maysakit at masama ang pakiramdam. Sa ngalan ng kataas-taasan at kagalang-galangang pulang ilaw, sa ngalan ng kita.

The Contributors

Si **Mayette Bayuga** ay may dalawang koleksiyon ng maikling kuwento, *Babae, Sa Balumbalonan ni Hakob at iba pang kuwento* (UST Publishing House, 2015) at *Virgintarian at iba pang akda* (UP Press, 2002). Ang kaniyang nobelang *Sa Amin, sa Dagat-dagatang Apoy* (UP Press, 2015) ay nagwagi ng Writer's Prize noong 2009 mula sa National Commission for Culture and the Arts at ng Gintong Aklat Award for Literature in Filipino noong 2016. Dalawa sa kaniyang mga kuwento ang nanalo sa Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature ("Rosali," 1st Prize 1993 at "Ang Baliw," 2nd Prize 1997). Ilan sa kaniyang mga kuwento ang naisama sa iba't ibang antolohiya. Inilathala ng *Tapat* journal noong 2011 ang kaniyang mga nobeletang erotikang *Sa Templo ni Tamilah* at *Halinghing sa Hatinggabi*. Taong 1994 nang isulat niya ang isang koleksiyon ng sanaysay sa Tagalog, ang "Babalyan Man, Babae Rin," sa tulong ng Literature Grant mula sa Cultural Center of the Philippines. Mula noon ay naging salalayan ng kaniyang panulat ang katuturan ng pagiging babalyan/babaylan.

Cecilia Manguerra Brainard is the award-winning Filipino-American author of nine books, including the internationally-acclaimed novel, *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept, Magdalena, Vigan and Other Stories, Acapulco at Sunset and Other Stories, Philippine Woman in America, Woman with Horns and Other Stories*, and *Cecilia's Diary 1962-1968*. She has also edited four books and co-authored a novel with four other women titled, *Angelica's Daughters, a Dugtungan Novel*. Brainard has received numerous awards and fellowships, both national and international. Her new novel *The Newspaper Widow* and the Philippine edition of *Magdalena* are both published by the UST Publishing House.

Si **Kristian Sendon Cordero** ay makata, tagasalin, kuwentista at direktor pampelikula. Nakapaglimbag na siya ng limang koleksiyon ng mga tula sa Rinconada, Bikol, at Filipino. Ang huling dalawang libro niya na *Canticos; Apat Na Boses* (UST Publishing House, 2013) at *Labi* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2013) ay parehong nagwagi ng National Book Awards

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Jose Dalisay Jr. has published more than thirty books of fiction and nonfiction; his second novel, *Soledad's Sister*, was shortlisted for the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize in 2007. Dalisay is a professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of the Philippines, where he has also chaired the English department and served as director of the UP Institute of Creative Writing. He now serves as Vice President for Public Affairs. He has held Fulbright, Rockefeller, Hawthornden, David TK Wong, and Civitella Ranieri fellowships. He has a BA (English, *cum laude*) from the University of the Philippines, an MFA (Creative Writing) from the University of Michigan and a PhD (English) from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

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J. Neil C. Garcia is presently the Director of the UP Press. He is also currently teaching Creative Writing and Comparative Literature at UP Diliman, where he also serves as an associate for poetry in the Institute of Creative Writing. He is the author of numerous poetry collections and works in literary and cultural criticism, including *Our Lady of the Carnival* (1996), *The Sorrows of Water* (2000), *Kaluluwa* (2001), *Philippine Gay Culture: The Last Thirty Years* (1996), *Slip/pages: Essays in Philippine Gay Criticism* (1998), *Performing the Self: Occasional Prose* (2003), *The Garden of Wordlessness* (2005), and *Misterios and Other Poems* (2005). His critical work, *Postcolonialism and Filipino Poetics: Essays and Critiques*, is a revised version of his PhD dissertation in English Studies: Creative Writing, which he completed in 2003.

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Robin Hemley graduated from Indiana University in Comparative Literature in 1980 and from the University of Iowa with an MFA in Fiction in 1982. He has received a Guggenheim Fellowship as well as fellowships from the Illinois Arts Council, the North Carolina Arts Council, the

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The Editors

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