



# TOMÁS

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FOR CREATIVE WRITING AND LITERARY STUDIES



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## TOMÁS

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

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# INTRODUCTION

Dawn Laurente Marfil & Paul Alcoseba Castillo

It wasn't a year for metaphors. When the world began to burn in January of 2020, the blaze that spread across the Amazon and Australia was literal fire. As the world struggled to put it out, it seemed to have sunk deeper into the earth, rumbled beneath our feet and finally erupted in the form of ash, gas, and lava from the crater of a little volcano island that had been peacefully placid in the middle of Taal Lake since 1977. It was only January 12.

Then a different kind of fire had begun to spread—the kind that burns the lungs and takes away all taste, all smell, and everything else it wants to take. A woman who had arrived from Wuhan, China was the Philippines' first case of the coronavirus. It was announced a day short from the end of the first month of the year.

A few days into February, the Philippines reported the first coronavirus death outside of Wuhan, China; and by March, we had retreated into our homes as our country went into lockdown. We were used to hunkering down for a day or two, because we are a typhoon-battered country, and maybe we thought, well, this might last only a week or two, so we should be okay. But the weeks stretched into months, and even though the lockdowns changed names—from “enhanced community quarantine” to “general community quarantine,” and modified versions of the two, our realities had begun to break down.

Work and school, if we still had them, had invaded our homes; and we were left feeling as if we were being driven out of our own houses, and minds—but we couldn't go out. We also couldn't lose our minds, despite being in danger of losing everything else, as our country and the rest of the world stood still. Because even standing still has its costs—closed borders,

bankrupt businesses, empty grocery shelves, cancelled plans, human emotion reduced to a digital screen, and for many, daily life reduced to a gamble between the loss of livelihood and the loss of life. By July, a total number of 2,022 Filipinos had lost this gamble, succumbing to the coronavirus.

At some point between the 2 positive cases in January and the 491,258 thousand in December, we all had reached our existential thresholds and had asked ourselves, “what is the point?” 2020 had worn us down to the bare necessities of life, and we had asked ourselves what the point was of everything that had nothing to do with food, shelter, or face masks. Finding no answer, some of us slipped into either ennui, or... escape.

But most of us chose to plod on, and navigate the new near-apocalyptic world we now live in. Which is why this issue of *Tomas* exists. A journal for literature and literary commentary will not save us from a global pandemic; but now, more than ever, we need stories that will remind us about how to be human.

We begin our issue with literary commentary/literary criticism, specifically, with an essay, first delivered as a speech by National Artist for Literature, Virgilio S. Almario, at the 2019 Philippine PEN International Congress. In “Indigenous Languages: Literary Freedom and the Opportunity to Exist,” he brings to light the plight of our indigenous languages and literatures; and argues for the pressing need for more opportunities for publication and translation since they are part of our “intangible cultural heritage.”

The spotlight remains on language in Gemino H. Abad’s *A Poetics of the Literary Work*. Here, Abad speaks of the role of language as the place where the imagined “ideals of love, beauty, and goodness,” come into being. With imagination, language, and the literary work in a perfect triumvirate, Gemino Abad says, the poet is in a position to enrich, or even transform, the destiny of his country.

In keeping with the idea of the transformative power of literature, Ruth Clare G. Torres embarks on an interesting study that demonstrates how Filipino writers have defied popular, mostly Western, standards of detective fiction/crime fiction. Her focus is how Filipino writers of detective fiction have characterized the Filipino detective, using F.H. Batacan’s *Smaller and Smaller Circles*, Charlson Ong’s *Blue Angel*, *White Shadow*, Nick Joaquin’s *Cave and Shadows*, and Maria Fres-Felix’s *Crimetime*. Her analysis reveals how the traditional and modern conventions have been deconstructed , in order to

carve out a uniquely Filipino version of detective fiction, and in the process, describe a uniquely Filipino take on crime solving . This piece is probably the first study of its kind, detective fiction in English being a relatively new genre in the country. It is to be hoped that Torres will expand this essay into a full-length book, to include, for instance, Mabek Kawsek's *Good Dog*, which was launched in 2019 to glowing reviews.

We come next to poetry.

Ralph Fonte, with his suite of poems: "Under *Terra Incognita*, takes the reader to different landforms across the globe, as he investigates the crevices and spaces between earth and heaven, beliefs and people. For the persona, getting lost in the forest or city, real or imagined, is actually a way to find and understand love, peace, or even God. It does not matter if it be Manila or Spain. What matters for the persona is how the geography of the land, and of the mind, changes with time.

Joey A. Tabula's short collection of poems, "Confidential: HIV/ AIDS" focuses on the intimate relation between an attending doctor and his/her patient, and how the dynamics between them plays with the secret of the latter's illness. Like, how it must be kept even from the dutiful mother, or how it was transmitted by a lover who will not be named during their conversations. And how, even after the passing of the patient, what was impersonal becomes personal, and then had to return to being impersonal.

The travel poems in John Iremil Teodoro's "Limang Tulang Cambodia" contain, not only descriptions of famous landmarks, but also the images of flowers from the Indochina peninsula. Here the persona addresses a faraway beloved by imbuing his longing and despair with the beauty of nature. But, unlike the magnificence of the structures that the persona has seen, and the temporal nature of flowers, the collection holds on to the belief that "may mga bagay na panghabangpanahon," whether these be love or the memory of it.

Ralph Semino Galan's suite of poems, "Of Love and Other Attritions: Five Contemporary Mindanao Poems in Translation," might be read as a response to Virgilio Almario's call for greater attention paid to indigenous languages . Galan's translations are a study on presence and absence where love can exist even without memory, and poverty can house beauty and peace in the same space as horror, hunger, and injustice.

Eugene Gloria's collection of poems reimagines the Philippines's national hero, Jose Rizal, as a man within and out of his time in *Rizal Walks Along the Foxgloves*. Gloria places Jose Rizal among flowers, as he struggles with loneliness and distrust, and then transports him elsewhere, to a different plane of existence, where both he and his ghost are scrutinized. Gloria rounds up his vision of Jose Rizal in the suite's last piece, as a man whose "art cannot be slowed down even at the threat of a bullet aimed at his heart."

In *Reversing the Foolish Man and Other Poems*, Joel H. Vega explores the direction of the movement of forces beyond our control. Regret and despair move in reverse when children become collateral damage in a man's war on drugs. Meanwhile, love, anger, and death are locked in a spiral dance, that stretches both northward and southward. Vega ends his collection with an image of affection and desire as a wary dance between the sun and earth while other celestial forces bear witness.

Danton Remoto's "Suite of Five Poems" tethers memory to places. He turns the colors of Boracay at sunset and nightfall into unhealable wounds, and the remembered intensity of past lovers. Remoto makes death and mourning seep into both the silence of an island of white sand and the din of a city traffic jam; and plants the idea of home in bright red fire trees, recalled at the edge of winter in a foreign land.

Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr.'s "From Tangere" works both in and out of the universe of Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*, as a meditation on sounds and images. The morning symphony of birds in a garden masks a sinister quietness. A gunshot rings out as a life is negotiated, then celebrated. Dawn descends into sunset on the day of the hero's execution. Dela Peña's words thrill the senses, most especially in *The Chase on the Lake*, where their appearance on the page reflect the persona chasing one image after another, and in the "Epilogue," where the light of a few words casts a long shadow of lines.

Mark Anthony Cayanan's "Poems from Ecstasy Facsimile" teases the reader with fragmentary glimpses of a kind of euphoria that doesn't feel quite right. It is found in the young body and how it suffered for someone else's brief ecstasy. It is also found in images of domestic bliss and satisfied hungers, where validation and absolution are held for ransom, and devotion and gratitude are weighed against the gift of a body that does not feel much like the persona's own.

This issue's creative nonfiction section is an interesting assortment of essays and memoirs.

Mina Deocareza's essay, '*Nak ng PI*', offers an insider's view on what it was like to be raised by a private investigator. "*Nak ng PI*" is a fresh take on the dynamics between a mother and a daughter. The author reveals how she felt when her security and privacy were willfully violated, under the guise of protectiveness, by the very person whom she respected and admired so much her own mother.

Chuckberry J. Pascual's *Buhok* is a meditation on a person's "crowning glory," and the other purposes it serves, aside from facial aesthetics, something that the persona learned at an early age. It also touches on the difference between a salon and a barber shop , and how hair can be used as a tool to discriminate against certain people. But Pascual brings the CNF piece to a more personal level when he relates the matter of his own hair growth, or the lack thereof, to his experience of loss. He debunks the idea that hair is just hair, be it a buzz cut, long, or unkempt. and will never be a fitting measure for losing someone. Pascual's tone is stealthily sad, i.e., the sadness is subtly hidden beneath his humor and candor.

Joselito D. Delos Reyes' essay, *Kuwadro Kara: Apat Na Mukhang Muntik Ko Nang Hindi Mamukhaan*, is an engaging take on the people he met, during four different instances. Whether it's a relative at a family gathering or a cobbler sought for his skills, each presents an image of what it is like to be living in these times. Delos Reyes narrates how even a small object, taken for granted on a daily basis, can cause ripples which impact on our socio-economic standing as individuals, and our geo-political standing as a community.

In "Pumayat, Yumaman, Umibig: Hindi Ako Relihiyoso Pero Espiritwal Akong Tao," U.Z. Elisrio offers a guide to living a better life—in terms of health, wealth, and spirituality. Drawing on his personal experience – the pleasure of eating rice and meat, wearing the same dilapidated shoes, creating new routines – the persona reflects on a life well-lived. Or perhaps, on a life worth living as a writer still in search of a way to make his mark, that might perhaps earn him immortality?

Jenny Ortoste's chronicle of the Manila Jockey Club's history in "Down the Stretch: Memories of San Lazaro Hippodrome" is set against the backdrop of the waning days of the Spanish Occupation and the arrival of the Americans, right down to the Second World War. Stories of famous racehorses and their jockeys, descriptions of the rich architectural detail of

the hippodrome, tales of old-timers about how to cheat at the races and what snacks were available then, etc bring on a longing for the revival of this vintage pastime, even as it moves farther and further down the southern parts of Metro Manila, and away from the consciousness of city-dwellers who were once its lifeblood.

“An Edge Between” by Popi Laudico is an unusual memoir, which begins with her baby mouth and a tooth, and how they lead to a childhood filled with quietness. This quietness pervades the essay, even as it takes us to bazaars, introduces us to yellow Labradors, to love for a much younger man, and to dancing the tango with a Columbian in Japan. Laudico takes us deeper into her psyche as her narratives grow longer. Her memoir ends with a magical dive in Donsol, with a majestic creature of the deep, and later, the drive back to Manila, to the Chainsmokers and Coldplay’s “Something Just Like This” on repeat.

Anna Felicia C. Sanchez’ “An Unreliable Guide to Climbing Mountains (Or, It’s All Uphill From Here)” is a second-person-point-of-view narrative of a mother coaching herself through motherhood—a difficult enough experience, made even more challenging with a daughter who has special needs. Sanchez bravely peels off the trite image of a martyred mother and bares a more human woman--unprepared, exhausted, and even sometimes selfish. She finds the right kindof love, her own kind of love, in mistakes made, whether they be as big as the choice of therapists, or as small as the correct footwear for climbing mountains.

R. Benedito Ferrão’s instructive and interesting “Everyday: The Exquisite Intricate” is adapted from a talk he delivered at the 25th Iligan National Writers Workshop in 2018. In it, Ferrão lauds the strengths of the genre of creative nonfiction, focusing on its power to harness the simplicity of everyday life and its ability to elevate it to a universally recognized kind of beauty. He also tackles the line between fiction and nonfiction, imagination and fact, and their relationship to the overarching demand of truth.

Our fiction section opens with Marren Adan’s flash fiction pieces: “Ortigas Excursions”. This little collection includes the realistic, the fantastic, and the pseudo-historical, all of which unfold in one business district, the Ortigas area, where BPOs remain ubiquitous. The experiences contained in these excursions can be an intimidating and frightening new look on what it is like to be a person between jobs, taking a quick lunch before running back to his/her cubicle in a call center, or just passing by the nearby mall

before heading home. In fact, one could say that these stories border on the Kafkaesque.

Stefani Alvarez' "Mumunting Alipato Ang Mga Bituin Sa Langit" revolves around taking risks, not only in terms of gambling away money in some small town lottery, but in bridging gaps between strangers stuck in a public hospital ward. The friendship formed may be considered unlikely in such a place, where no one can be trusted yet everything is in the open. These include wounds, illnesses, and even private lives, something that we may have heard about or witnessed, first-hand. But the pay-off in Alvarez' story may all be worth it, for the characters involved.

In *Nang Walang Nakakarinig*, George Deoso tackles how music and sports can possibly complement or contradict each other. Told from the secondperson point of view, this narrative about learning to play the violin is paralleled by a revelation of the persona's reluctance to watch a friend's basketball games. It is storytelling as confession. And what it reveals is the point of the story. In a way, it could be described as a preparation for the performance that is required by the bond between two people.

The short story section is capped by Maria Amparo Warren's *The Walker*, a chilling tale of two rambunctious and competitive brothers who live near an abandoned, haunted house on a mountainside. The ghosts of World War II that hound the boys and their grandfather, a former Japanese soldier, allow the narrator to explore themes of war and peace, love and forgiveness.. .

We come finally to the drama.

In the first of the two plays in this issue, Rolin Cadallo Obina's "Mga Bata sa Selda 43", two siblings regain consciousness but do not seem to know where they are, or what they have done to deserve being placed inside this "room." The play and its theme do not coincide with the news surrounding the current administration's reputation, in the last 4 years of involving minors in the war on drugs. But they reflect the turmoil of Martial Law, by identifying the similarities that political prisoners of the late dictator share with today's unwilling victims.

Told from the perspective of three women, Jose Socrates Delos Reyes' one-act play, *Ang Mga Naiwan*, is a series of interviews conducted by student reporters, which reveal the coping mechanisms of two mothers and a wife after losing their children and husband. Soc's work is clearly born of the current regime, and a commentary on the effects of extrajudicial killings on the Filipino family.

We end this issue with Ma. Ailil B. Alvarez' review titled "An Archipelago of Desire a review of Alfred Yuson's *Islands of Words & Other Poems*. Alvarez discusses Yuson's remarkable handling of "the myriad forms of exodus... of differences in language as the lifeblood of a culture... and conflicts between convention and innovation." She extols the lyricism of Yuson's poetry, likening it to "a modernist, abstract painting because of the visual as well as acoustic appeal of his verses." Further, she hails Yuson as a connoisseur of sound, a "master of alliteration, of sibilance, of assonance," while at the same time, pointing out how his images take concrete form in the way his words themselves appear on the page.

This tribute is fit ending for this issue of our journal, which has been put together as our way of expressing solidarity with fellow writers, and with the rest of the country, during this cruel time. Through it we assert the necessity of literature and the other arts, and the importance of the role they play in our lives, in allowing us to keep on creating beauty as a hedge against hopelessness and despair.

# INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES:

## Literary Freedom and the Opportunity to Exist

Virgilio S. Almario

Philippine PEN International Congress

4 October 2019 | 9:00 am

We come together on a common subject in this Congress, which is language. With the conference theme, “Speaking in Tongues: Literary Freedom and the Indigenous Languages,” which is, of course, made to coincide with the United Nations’ declaration of 2019 as the “International Year of Indigenous Languages,” we come face to face with the many issues that confront our common indigenous and intangible cultural heritage, more specifically, our indigenous language.

At around this time last year, the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (KWF), or the Commission of the National Language, which I head, was preparing for one of its international conferences. The three-day conference was on Language Endangerment, which was also in anticipation of this year’s UN Year of Indigenous Languages. It was held in October 2018 at the National Museum of the Philippines under the theme, “Sustaining Languages, Sustaining the World.” Language and linguistic scholars from several parts of the world took part in the conference.

Paraphrasing Abraham Lincoln, all languages may have been created equal. But in our world today, a few languages are regarded as more superior than other languages. A few are dominant while more than 90% are dominated. That is why language endangerment or even language death is a reality facing many cultures and languages in the world today. As late as six years ago, the UNESCO reported that 43% of the world’s 6,000 languages were at the risk of extinction. The threat can come in many forms—from contact with other languages to language shift to dwindling speaker populations. As one axiom of language endangerment goes, “The language dies when the last speaker dies.

As part of my personal advocacy as concurrent chairman of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, I have initiated its redirection and refocusing towards intangible cultural heritage, beyond reinforcing the NCCA's existing programs as the functioning council for the arts of the country. As defined by UNESCO, intangible cultural heritage covers, among other things, language and literature, and literature includes indigenous oral and unwritten tradition. The Philippines has, as a matter of fact, more than 50 folk epics that await documentation, transcription, as well as serious study by our literary scholars and anthropologists.

Now, come to think of it, all languages are indigenous, including English. If we take indigenous to mean simply "native." But not all languages are created equal, despite Geoffrey Chaucer. Renowned as the greatest poet of all time, Chaucer is said to have had no regard for the superiority of any language. That is how he got into the frontline, so to speak, of "developing" the English language. His *Canterbury Tales*, as we know it now—and a little bit later, Shakespeare and his verse drama and sonnets—extricated early English from being the tongue of the poor and lowly, to becoming a formal and written language of poetry, narrative and theater. Thus, English came to be spoken and read by the British royalty and elite, who used to scoff at it and only knew Latin or French.

Surely it would be hard to imagine what language we'd be using now in this conference if there were neither *Troilus and Cressida* nor the 24 stories of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Which again leads me back to a nagging question under our theme. What threatens indigenous languages, and as a corollary, what limits their literary freedom? My immediate response would be as mundane as the lack of opportunity to be read as well as to get published.

That languages may have been created equal may be true in an Edenic setting. But we all know that the contemporary world is a practical Tower of Babel where languages compete for dominance or superiority, or even basic recognition and respectability. Indigenous languages and their presumed literary freedom are restricted, not only by a foreign language-dominated literary industry but by the mere fact that they are "born" with an already dwindling number of speakers.

The "language shirt" we referred to earlier means that the indigenous speakers are compelled to learn and speak the most immediate dominant language in order to survive in the geographic setting of that language. That is,

to survive in the economic setup and context, not even to speak of the literary context. For example, many of our Agta populations always assume that they must learn the language of the nearest dominant population area in order to live and survive among them. In Tarlac, that is either Tagalog or Ilocano. In Bikol, that is Legazpi or Naga Bikol.

On this basis, all indigenous languages which are used by their bearers are only threatened or endangered by the more dominant language spoken by the bigger number of users.

Only about three percent (3%) of international languages, such as English, French, Chinese, Russian and Spanish or Italian dominate world communications. Thus, all other languages are deprived of the chance to fully develop, even as they constantly lose native speakers to those languages. This means that the native speakers would rather write or speak in the dominant languages of the world.

Indigenous languages always have limited audiences as well as limited opportunities for translation. In our own country, when academics study indigenous languages and their literature, they invariably prefer to use English for their scholarship. Foreigners, therefore, benefit first, before the local and Filipino audiences. This is because our scholars either have never exerted the effort to learn and write in the native languages they study, or they just prefer using English.

Again, indigenous languages have limited opportunities to be known or recognized internationally. In using English as the language of scholarship, our scholars use mainly the norms and standards from the West, or those invented and formulated by Western literary criticism or anthropology and the other social sciences. All the culture, history, experiences and knowledge in the local or indigenous languages, and all the native symbolic and metaphorical systems are examined through the lenses of the West.

For example I always have taken issue with how the native themes and motifs in our folk tales are treated. These are invariably compared to, or studied with reference to, models from the West. They are never recognized as authentic or original, but are simply categorized or set aside as “variants” of Western models such as those of the Grimm brothers or Aesop.

Also on this basis, there is a built-in limitation and difficulty in publishing indigenous literature by the native writer. Thus, any writer would think twice about writing or publishing his own work in Tuwali or Isneg.

Still, we are currently and gradually witnessing works being published in Kinaray-a. And there is a resurgence of Cebuano and Bisaya writing; while the Bikolanos have experienced quite recently a renaissance in writing and publishing even bilingually and trilingually. We are also aware of the literary prizes that serve to encourage Bikol writing, such as the Arejola Literary Contest and the Premyo Valledor for the Bikol novel.

But these examples are exceptions rather than the rule. The prevailing condition of disincentive for indigenous languages remains: a lack of opportunity for publication, coupled with the lack of translators, or if there are translators, these are focused on translating in the international language.

As an advocate of Filipino and our native languages and from my vantage point as head of the sole government agency for the development of the national language, my first view of literary freedom and the indigenous languages in the country is immediately related to the opportunity to exist.

We must come to the realization that a systematic reversal of our use and study of our indigenous languages and literatures must start first with ourselves, and on through our educational setup and structure, and our very own recognition of the existence of our collective soul.

Thank you.

# A POETICS OF THE LITERARY WORK

Gémino H. Abad

Let me begin with a general perspective on the mind, language, and the literary work, and end on our country's literature.

## Mind

1. The human person is the only being on earth that seeks truth in knowledge. *Truth-seeking* then is our *essence or nature as human*. Only the truth satisfies and fulfills our nature; every person has sole responsibility for, and answers to, his being. Only the truth underwrites humanity's destiny.

What we call "reality" is only our human reality. We have no ready access to the consciousness of other beings in the world. A cat's perception of reality is its own: the living of it. All our knowing then in the sciences and humanities is a quest for truth in our experience of the world.

The quest for *meaning* in one's own experience is the personal aspect of the quest for the *truth* of things in nature and in human affairs. But what meaning dwells in our experience is only its interpretation as its truth. One's meaning isn't always truth: e.g., a court's interpretation of a law or an empirical observation in a scientific inquiry. Even in science, a theory has a certain life-span. Thus, what we call the "universal plane" isn't the realm of eternal verities, but rather, the site of everlasting quest. Where there are no questions, the quest ceases.

2. Mind and imagination are one. Without imagination, there is no thinking nor intuition beyond concept. "Concepts without intuition are empty," says Immanuel Kant; "intuitions without concept are blind."<sup>1</sup>

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1 From Kant's Critique of Pure Reason.

It is the imagination makes real to the mind what the mind abstracts from our experience, what it perceives or intuits in the world. Thus, *what is most imagined is what is most real*. All great thinkers and scholars, scientists, artists, inventors have a lively imagination.

From our own experience, from other lives lived, we draw our world-view, moral compass, ideals, faiths – all abstract, but alive in our mind's imagination. Our truth is where love, goodness, beauty are one. These words – “love, beauty, goodness” – are all abstract, but their meaning lights up in our imagination, and thence, in our speech and deed. In the end, the genius or tutelary spirit in Imagination shall save our Earth and humanity.

### Language

1. Language is the finest invention of the human imagination and thus, language and imagination are one. By Language, I mean all the world's languages; in that light, Language is everyone's Mother Tongue, the metaphor “tongue” implying that we would savor our living of Life. In the beginning is the word, because without language, we would have no memory, no history, no culture, no civilization. All languages evolve over time, drawing from each other for meaningfulness of expression in a given culture through its history. I would never use the word “vernacular” for any of our Philippine languages, for vernacular in Latin means “a slave born in his master's house.”

Language speaks our being or nature *as human*. As Eduardo Galeano wondrously puts it: “If the grape is made of wine, then perhaps we are the words that tell who we are.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, too, how we imagine ourselves is how our future dreams us.

2. Language is commonly understood as lexical: words to read; its *being* or nature is *truth-saying* as it speaks. In any language, “honor” is honor, and “tokhang” is tokhang. No equivocation: all our words speak true. The word in its own context evokes an image; the image lights up its meaning. It is only the individual who abuses language to lie and deceive himself and others. *Ab-use* is from Latin *abusus, abuti*, “to misuse, waste” – thus, when one scoffs at “human rights,” he lies! and wastes his *being*, degrades his human nature.

3. Every art work – not just the literary work but also painting, sculpture, etc. – has its own respective language as medium or mode of

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<sup>2</sup> Galeano, The Book of Embraces, tr. Cedric Belfrage with Mark Schafer (W.W. Norton, 1992): 18.

expression to represent an aspect or feature of our reality: in music, for instance, its medium is sound and silence; in drama, film, and dance, the medium is theatre as performance. If then the nature or essence of Language is *truth-saying*, it follows that the being or nature of all the arts is as *bearer of meaning*: that is, the meaning of our humanity, its nightshade and its sunrise. Even in the natural and social sciences where words, numbers, and symbols are their medium, Language is the Muse and Imagination the spirit-guide.

Since the Imagination opens up infinite possibilities of expression, there are various kinds of creative work in all the arts, and each kind over time secretes its own criteria of excellence. Consequently, there are many theories and approaches to creativity.

Robert Frost says: “The greatest adventure of man is science, the adventure of penetrating into *matter*, into the material universe...[That] adventure us our property, *a human property* [that is, our imaginative construct of the material universe, ...But] the best description of us is the humanities.”<sup>3</sup> [all brackets & italics mine]

### The Literary Work

Let me focus on the poem, the generic term for literary work, as exemplary of all the other arts (where *poet* is the figure for all artists).

1. Language as a conceptual, evocative, labile system of representation is our only means to translate into an apprehensible form our thoughts and feelings about our world *in our time and culture*. The meanings of our words do not arise from themselves, or from their differential play, so much as from *lives lived* in a given historical time and culture. Since the poem is a representation (*mimesis*) of an experience *as lived or as imagined*, its *being* or essence is its meaningfulness or *diwa* (spirit, soul). That meaningfulness bears the poet's intuition (insight or inscape): a luminance of thought that no idea expresses, a radiance of feeling that no thought apprehends.

2. The poem isn't *written* in any given historical language like English or Tagalog so much as *wrought from* it toward the meaning or *saysay* of the experience it stimulates. The poet forges his own path through the lexical wilderness where the words contend for their own image and meaning, and echo their provenance, and the poet makes his own clearing where no words

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3 From Richard Poirier's interview of Robert Frost in Writers at Work/ The Paris Review, Second Series (Viking Press, 1963; Penguin Books, 1977): 23.

break. Over time, the poet discovers his own way with language, his distinctive style which Albert Camus defines as “the simultaneous existence of reality and the mind that gives that reality its form.”<sup>4</sup> *The care for words is care of light.*

The poet seeks the light of the living experience itself. To write then is to get real, to breathe life into language. And thus, finally, the poem isn’t its language, it is *the living become word. The poem is to live.*

3. The poem is already a reading or interpretation of the poet’s experience, as lived or as imagined. It bears its meaningfulness reader to reader. Thus, the poem has a life of its own over the course of time. As we read, and imagine, drawing from our own experience of living, we are also read. Through our own reflection and introspection, the literary work communicates with and affirms our *being* or *nature*. This is how the poem humanizes us: enriches and deepens our nature as human. “Every great work,” says Albert Camus, “makes the human face more admirable and richer, and this is its whole secret.”<sup>5</sup>

## Country

I end on our country today.

I think of Philippine literature as one archipelago of letters wrought from many languages, including English and Spanish, both of which have been assimilated over time into our various indigenous languages like Tagalog, Sugbuhanon, Iloko, Bikol, etc. – all as much *Filipino* as that evolving Tagalog-based *Pilipino* that eventually, through great writing *from* it, will become truly our national language.

1. It bears stressing that any language can express anything at all that the mind seeks to grasp because writing is a *discipline* of what the words are made to do such that what is *wrought* can, through the evocative power of imagination (on both the writer’s and the reader’s part), transcend the inherent inadequacies of any language to probe and encompass all of Reality. As Ezra Pound says, the writer’s job of work is “to keep the language efficient.”<sup>6</sup> The *sense for language* is the basic *poetic* sense, our most intimate sense of our reality. It needs to be cultivated and nurtured through reading and education.

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4 Camus, *The Rebel: an Essay on Man in Revolt* (N.Y.:Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1951): 271.

5 [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albert\\_Camus](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Albert_Camus). Camus, “Create Dangerously,” in *Resistance, Rebellion, Death*, op. cit.:269.

6 Pound, *The ABC of Reading* (1934), chap. 3: “Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear.”

It isn't language that deteriorates as it evolves, but rather, the sense for it.

The poet deals in daily life with his own native tongue and with English which is still the medium of instruction in our school system. That very fact may even be a distinct advantage: that is, if he is sensitive and observant, he might become more familiar with that *space between languages* where precisely he must struggle for clearer expression of his insights through his language of choice. The writer *works* the language as the farmer works the soil to bear his crop. The ground of language which he has imbibed from childhood and has shaped his own consciousness is his own community's world-view and culture; thus, he is already *spoken for*, and yet, he may *countersay* it to express his own perception or intuition as regards his community's way of looking and feeling.

2. Since the meanings of our words arise mainly from lives lived through a people's history and culture, the poem's inmost seal is the poet's country. Our country is how we imagine her, as when say, "Inang Bayan." If so, our country is what our people's imagination owes its allegiance to. Our literature by our writers is what creates our sense of country, which ultimately is forged by our sense for language. As National Artist Nick Joaquin says: "To remember and to sing: that is my vocation."<sup>7</sup> Memory is Imagination's heartland. "Recordar", says Eduardo Galeano, "To remember; from the Latin *re-cordis*, to pass back through the heart."<sup>8</sup>

To stress our point. "Nation" is a legal fiction enshrined in our 1987 Constitution as our people's dream or vision of an ideal democratic homeland where people are sovereign and their leaders are their *public servants*. One with imagination does not have to be a lawyer to grasp the abstract ideal of a just and humane society. It is in our imagination where the words come alive and speak true.

3. Our country today is in crisis. The word "crisis" is from Greek *krinein*, meaning "to divide or discriminate and judge." A time of crisis then is a time of division and judgment. The Greek word *krinein* also gives the English words "criticism" and "criterion." Our leaders must listen well, not play deaf, and be sensitive to, and not resent, criticism; and there are criteria for a right judgment which presupposes integrity of character and a sound, discerning mind.

7 Nick Joaquin, *Prose and Poems*; intro. by Teodoro M. Locsin (Manila: Graphic House, 1952): 322. Reprint by Bookmark, Inc., 1991: 475.

8 Galeano's own epigraph to his *The Book of Embraces*, tr. Cedric Belfrage with Mark Schorer (N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 1992): 18.

Our troubled times over the whole world pose a severe challenge to our humanity, to our mind's power of abstraction and critical thinking in quest of truth at the very heart of freedom and democracy. When we speak today of "human rights", what meaning or vision, what truth about humanity, dwells in that phrase? *Ubuntu*, says Nelson Mandela: "I am because we are." What Mandela says is at the core of human dignity. We need imagination to grasp the spirit of what he says.

4. Is there much to be desired about our sense of country from our day-to-day experience among our own people? It cannot be said that our writers since Balagtas, Rizal and *La Solidaridad* were ever mute. Without the writer, the poor and oppressed among us have no voice else. Writers – and most certainly, other artists and scholars – read us and interpret us to ourselves upon our own ground, that is, our culture and our history. They sharpen our sense of country because they strengthen our power of abstraction and imagination. In short, our literature *wrought from* whatever language, in whatever genre, is our people's memory. *A country is only as strong as her people's memory!*

The writer stands upon his own ground, his own native clearing: the way his fellow-countrymen think and feel about their world, and so live from sun to sun. There, in that clearing, he forges language in the smithy of his mind and heart and grasps his own authentic self. There, in the poetry as wrought, if one reads close and imagines well, the poet (and certainly, other artists and scholars) may well be his own country's best critic and interpreter, and thereby, he might refresh or enrich a current vision of his country's destiny or renew a lost heritage or even transform it.

27 Oct., 12, 21 Nov. 2018

# THE DETECTIVE IN PHILIPPINE DETECTIVE FICTION: A Defiance of Popular Convention

Ruth Clare G. Torres

When one talks about detective fiction the writers that immediately come to mind are: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Allan Poe, Agatha Christie, and Dashiell Hammett, to name a few; with stories of the mindboggling investigations of characters like, Sherlock Holmes, Inspector Dupin, Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot, and Sam Spade, how they always solve their cases and bring to justice those responsible. It is these writers and so many more that have set the standard for what detective fiction ought to be. With these early works, conventions were established on how to write detective stories, how lead investigators were supposed to appear, behave, and operate in these stories, and how all the supporting characters, such as sidekicks, witnesses, and suspects were supposed to act. Soon after the publication of Conan Doyle's *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and Allan Poe's *Murder in the Rue Morgue* the term "Holmes—Dupin" model was coined to describe the character of a detective.

According to Stanton O. Berg in his article "Sherlock Holmes: Father of Scientific Crime and Detection," which was published in 1971 in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Sherlock Holmes is a "master detective" who employs pure logic and deduction in solving cases. (Berg, 1971). For a while this was the common convention until events occurred that would have an effect on the conventions of detective fiction. According to David Geherin in his book *The American Private Eye: The image in Fiction*, the Holmesian method or the Holmes—Dupin method only works in a society where *peace is the norm and crime is an anomaly*. This was no longer the case after Prohibition, the Great Depression and World War II. Society now needed a detective who was willing to rely on "gut instinct" and willing to employ violence when needed. (Geherin, 1985)

For Geherin, the modern detective should be someone who is willing to “shoot first, ask questions later,” because for him, crime has become commonplace in society and therefore there is no more room for the logic driven investigator.

### *The Character of the Detective in Philippine Detective fiction defies these conventions*

Western detective fiction tells us that a protagonist detective can either be Holmesian or modern, a man of logic or a tough guy who relies on instinct, gut feeling and field work. However, the Philippine detective protagonist is capable of being both *at the same time*, even the logical detective utilizes gut feel or instinct and at times intuition.

An example of this is in F.H. Batacan’s *Smaller and Smaller Circles*, a novel that deals with the deaths of children in Payatas, and the investigation, which utilized intelligence, logic and patient gathering of evidence in solving the cases. But the value of instinct and field work were still present. Both priests used these in assessing what they were being told by witnesses.

The Protagonist investigator in the novel, Father Gus Saenz, is a priest who also works as a Forensic Anthropologist. With the help of his colleague and fellow priest Father Jerome Lucero, he utilizes the logic involved in profiling and evidence analysis, choosing to dig deeper, instead of simply accepting the evidence that is in front of him. However, because he is a priest, he also has intuition which he uses when interviewing witnesses. He can sense when people are hiding something and he uses his empathy to find out what he needs.

Another example is Charlson Ong’s *Blue Angel, White Shadow*, which relies more on instinct and fieldwork. But there are also points in the story where we see the protagonist detective Cyrus Ledesma using his logic to identify suspects.

Ong’s novel, follows the investigation into the suspicious death of Laurice Saldiaga, singer at the Blue Angel bar at the heart of the Filipino-Chinese community. It is discovered that Laurice had many important figures of the community obsessed with her and the case takes a complicated turn when these figures take steps to conceal their involvement with the victim.

The protagonist detective in the novel, Cyrus Ledesma, is a police officer with a checkered past, which includes a history of murder. While his

profession requires logic and analysis in investigating a case, Cyrus Ledesma was chosen to take the case because of his familiarity with the community and his friendship with the people involved in the case. His use of logic is secondary in his investigations and he relies primarily on his relationships and instinct to solve the crime.

Nick Joaquin's *Cave and Shadows*, combines the idea of the traditional detective novel with Philippine legends and folklore, in a novel that centers around the investigation into the mysterious death of Nenita Coogan. She is a girl with a history of troubled behavior, as well as an obsession with the local Pre-Christian movement, which believes that her (Nenita Coogan's) soul was simply called by their goddess the Ginoong Ina.

Jack Henson applies induction and deduction while conducting the investigation. However because he was afraid of divulging too much information to friends as his evidence would implicate them, he also had to use his instincts and intuition. In the end, he chooses to rely on his logic especially when his intuition tells him to consider the possibility of supernatural intervention to be the cause of Nenita's death.

There is also Maria Fres-Felix's *Crimetime*, a series of short stories focusing on the investigations of SJ Tuason into various murders happening in her precinct. This short story collection focuses not only on the analysis that goes into an investigation, but also reveals the difficulty that police officers face, such as the issues of transportation.

There was always a scramble for police cars with enough gasoline because of the difficulty of getting reimbursement for gasoline expenses. Unfortunately for Tuason and Joshua, they seldom had access to such rarity. (Fres – Felix, 33)

The Short story collection also shows the problems of being a female working in a male dominated profession.

She suspected that Big Mac was just covering his ass. He did not want to be put on the spot and say the wrong things, or be misquoted. She was the convenient scapegoat if things unraveled. But she knew she had to follow orders. This time. As one of only two token females in the force in Lakeview, she could not afford to mess up. (Fres - Felix, 21)

*Crimetime* for the most part, also focuses on logic and deduction. However, her protagonist detective SJ Tuason also has a sense of intuition

which is shown in her trust in her “bullshit meter”, which she is able to feel in her ears.

Another convention of detective fiction that Filipino writers defy is the convention of emotional non-involvement. In both literary works and popular media, detectives are discouraged from showing any form of emotion in the course of the investigation. Filipino detectives, are more human; they are capable of showing their emotions. They are not as dispassionate as some Western detectives tend to be—focused entirely on the job and wanting only to finish the investigation and move on to the next one. The Philippine detective protagonist shows emotion; in fact expressing their emotions becomes beneficial to them as investigators. It is Father Gus Saenz’s empathy towards the victims and their families that encourages people to cooperate in the investigation. SJ Tuason, feels the need to express her emotions through her hobbies, in order to ensure that she can go back to the job without her personal conflicts getting in the way. These hobbies include wood carving and kickboxing. In Ong’s novel, Cyrus Ledesma’s emotional attachment to Rosemarie Misa keeps him from committing senseless murder, thereby redeeming himself as a police officer. Throughout the case Jack Henson in Nick Joaquin’s novel has been a mess of conflicting emotions, torn between revealing the evidence to the proper officials and protecting his friends, between his duty and perhaps his lingering love for his ex-wife and his feelings for Chedeng. Henson also ends up feeling torn between the evidence implicating Alex Manzano, and the feeling that this solution is too obvious.

For the Philippine protagonist detective expressing emotion is not a hindrance to the investigation. In fact, when the detective allows his emotions some room, he becomes a better detective. When the protagonist detective is sympathetic like Father Saenz, he gets the people to cooperate. For a flawed detective like Cyrus Ledesma, allowing his emotional attachments to take control creates the path towards his redemption as a police officer. SJ Tuason releases her emotions through her hobbies and then goes back to the investigation with fresh eyes, usually leading her to the path of the killer. Whereas when she holds back her emotions regarding her family, she becomes confrontational with a suspect in the interrogation room. Jack Henson’s feelings for Chedeng and his hesitation about publicly implicating her husband lead him to look into other possibilities, which eventually bring him to Pocholo Gatmaitan.

Another convention that makes the Philippine detective protagonist different is that he always has a redeeming quality. Based on the three novels and short story collection that have been used in this analysis, Philippine detective fiction presents an unvarnished, unbiased picture of how crime is investigated in the Philippines. In American and English detective fiction, all crimes are treated as equal in importance, where the investigators are concerned, and detectives work hard to solve the case, never giving up until the case is solved.

Philippine detective fiction accepts the fact that there are some investigators who are like Ben Arcinas from F.H. Batacan's *Smaller and Smaller Circles*. They only investigate crimes if there is incentive to do so. Arcinas chose only to look into crimes that would bring him fame. Big Mac in Maria Fres-Felix's *Crimetime* makes SJ Tuason take care of the statements to the press, so as not to be blamed if anything goes wrong in the investigation.

But Philippine detective fiction seems to seek some form of redemption within the system. This is where the protagonist detectives come in. In a country where some crimes are only given the minimum attention, due to the victims' low financial status or lack of political connection, there are people who are committed to making a difference, like Father Saenz and Jerome Lucero.

These people have to work within a system that is extremely flawed. Given the fact that people do not trust the police due to their reputation for being corrupt, police are actually corrupt, investigating a crime is a near impossible task. This is what Philippine detective fiction tries to change. Philippine detective fiction shows that it is possible for crimes to be solved regardless of the victim's financial status and political connection, because of the character of the detective.

Philippine detective fiction is not all focused only on the crime and the victims. It also reveals the many difficulties that law enforcement officers face when investigating crimes. Fres-Felix's *Crimetime* shows how SJ Tuason and her partner often have to take her personal vehicle to get to crime scenes and to interview witnesses and suspects, because it is difficult to find police cars with gas.

There was always a scramble for police cars with enough gasoline because of the difficulty of getting reimbursement for gasoline expenses. Unfortunately for Tuason and Joshua, they seldom had access to such rarity. (Fres – Felix, 33)

In F.H. Batacan's *Smaller and Smaller Circles*, the investigators who actually want to help solve the crime like Director Lastimosa and his assistant Jake Valdes have difficulties with witnesses. In Charlson Ong's *Blue Angel, White Shadow* most of the suspects and witnesses refuse to cooperate because each of them is hiding secrets of their own.

Philippine detective fiction first reveals, in no uncertain terms, the flaws in the system and the problems that law enforcement officer's face when trying to solve crimes. Then, it tries to find something positive within that flawed system—someone who actually empathizes with the victims or even someone who just does his/her job thoroughly rather than just the bare minimum in the investigation.

One unique characteristic of the Philippine detective protagonist is that he or she is easy to relate to.

Based on the three novels and the short story collection analyzed here, the Philippine detective protagonist always possesses a characteristic that makes him relatable to readers. Despite their many flaws, and the fact that people rarely trust policemen and detectives, these protagonist "detectives" come across as relatable to the people that they are talking to for a variety of reasons. Cyrus Ledesma was not chosen to investigate the death of Laurice Saldiaga because of his expertise in the field. In fact, with his corrupt past he should not have been leading an investigation at all. He was chosen because of his ties to the community. Laurice Saldiaga died in a predominantly Chinese - Filipino community and Cyrus was chosen to lead the investigation because he spoke Chinese and had close ties with people in the area.

As chauvinistic as this may seem, SJ Tuason, despite being a straight-laced police officer, is relatable because she is a woman and people tend to see a woman as being a sympathetic person. When people are faced with the prospect of being interviewed by SJ or her partner Joshua they would much rather talk to SJ. Fr. Gus Saenz is the epitome of the relatable character because while he is a forensic anthropologist, he is also a priest, and people do not feel intimidated by men of the cloth. In fact, since Saenz is a priest people feel comfortable talking to him. Jack Henson is relatable simply because most of the people he needed to talk to throughout the course of his investigation into Nenita Coogan's death are people he has known since his school days. The fact that he also seems detached and objective makes people want to talk to him because they feel they will not be judged.

It was written for the West who created conventions of detective

fiction and protagonist detective. Filipino writers decided to defy these conventions especially where the characters of their protagonist detectives were concerned. As shown in the three novels and short story collection cited in this essay, the Philippine detective protagonist defies both traditional and modern conventions. He or she is uniquely Filipino.

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# TERRA INCOGNITA

Ralph Fonte

## Alhambra

Nang igapos ako ng mga sinulid  
ng takot at isinumpa  
sa paanan ng Alhambra,  
pumapanaog siya: matandang babae  
na uugod-ugod, kulay-batis na naglumot  
ang mga mata at bungi-bunging kahoy  
ang mga ngipin. Naglaho ang mga tao  
pagngiti niya. Lumagitik ang hangin.

Iniabot niya sa akin ang isang pilas  
ng sanga ng pino, mga karayom  
na tumutusok sa daliri ang mga dahon.  
Sinapo niya ang kamay ko, at binagtas  
ng hintuturo ang mga uka ng kapalaran.  
Marahang-marahan niyang iniusal ang hula —  
*Eres afortunado. Tu madre, contenta.*  
*Tu corazón, muy fuerte. Y tendrás dos hijos*  
*algun dia.*

Sa wikang katutubo ng mga bato  
ng Alhambra, humabi siya ng lambat  
ng hikmat. Kay papayak ng salita  
ngunit nagpipintig ang bawat pantig  
ng kapangyarihan: mga hibla ng hiwaga  
na nagbigkis sa aking mga kamay,  
bumusul sa bibig, at gumapos sa buong katawan.  
Tumitig siya sa mata ko — *por la quiromancia*,  
*por favor* — at nagsahod ng palad, habang lumalalim  
ang batis niyang mga matang kinakawkaw ng anino  
ng uwak. At biglang tila bumubulong ang lawiswis  
ng mga dahong hindi humahapay, *no lo sabes*,  
*que la salamanca siempre tiene un costo?* — hindi mo ba alam  
na laging may kapalit ang hiwaga?

Noon ko nabatid sa itim na ibong nakadapo  
sa kaniyang balintataw na namamaos ang tinig  
ng dalangin kapag itinitik sa malayong lupain.  
Wala akong maiimik sa harap ng kaniyang salamangka  
sumpa man o dasal, ni gayuma, ni barang.  
Hinablot niya ang aking bisig, at mga kuko  
ng ibong mandaragit ang bumaon sa balat.  
At natagpuan kong humahapay ako sa himig  
ng kaniyang kulam, dumudulog sa ipinag-utos,  
nag-aabot ng salapi  
muli't muli  
hanggang marinig ang pagaspas ng pakpak  
at huning pagak ng kanyang paglisan.

Nang bitiwan niya ako, bumalik  
ang tunog ng daigdig – aliw-iw ng paagusang  
dumadaloy pababa ng burol, ugong ng usapan,  
ang pagtatama ng lupa at talampakan.  
Naglaho na ang bruja.  
Pinagmamasdan ko ang mga leong nagluluwa  
ng tubig nang matalos na wala siyang kapangyarihan.  
Maaari bang mamutawi ang kasinungalingan  
sa mga labing mahimala? Nakaukit daw sa palad  
na matatag itong puso. Umaagos ang tubig pababa  
ng matandang moog, itim na pakpak ang anino  
sa paa, at tumatakbo ako paakyat ng Alhambra  
nang di hinahabol ang naglaho kong pera  
nang di man lamang nag-uusal  
ng sariling kulam o sumpa o ni isang malutong  
na putanginamoka.

## Maynila

Ibig kita

na ihanap ng nilad. Malamang, wala akong mahahanap  
sa pampang ng patay ng ilog. Hindi ko na kailangang  
tingnan ang itim nitong rabaw o langhapin ang sangsang  
ng tubig upang mabatid na binabakbak dito ang kasaysayan.  
Masdan: mga bahay na binulag ang durungawan,  
mga lansangang may nagnakaw ng pangalan,  
mga nilumpong rebulto sa tabindagat.  
Tuwing mag-isa akong naglalakad sa lungsod,  
napapansin kong natutuklap ang kulay ng paligid,  
kumukupas ang graffiti sa mga pader,  
nangalalagas ang mga dahon ng mga puno.  
O marahil, lalong naaagnas itong lungsod dahil ika'y malayo?

Gusaling salamin ang mga mukha sa tren  
pag-ingit ng preno. Biglang uulan  
habang naglalakad sa kalawanging daangbakal.  
Wala akong payong.

Ganitong saklap na lamang ang namumulaklak na nilad sa Maynila.  
Ibig kitang sundan sa lupalop sa Timog –  
ikaw kaya ang kayamanang hahantungan  
ng mga santelmo sa buntot ng mga sasakyang?  
Gaya mo, hindi ko ikalulungkot iwanan  
ang mga pusaling nagsasanaw sa bangketa ng Taft,  
o ang pagtigil ng panahon sa EDSA at Skyway,  
o ang malumbay ritong lambong ng usok at pangungulila.

Ngunit may umuugit na kulirong kirot sa puso  
tuwing maririnig ang babala  
na ang Maynila ay lulunurin ng dagat at lalamuin ng lupa.  
Sa walang-ilaw na riles, matatalisod ako sa iyong alaala:  
hindi ba dito kita unang nakilala?  
May umagang kinaon kita sa opisina,  
dapithapong sinamahan kang magpatingin ng ngipin,  
gabing nahumaling sa timyas ng iyong tinig.  
Magapok man ang lahat ng gunita nitong kalunsuran,  
mananatili ang mga bakas ng ating kasaysayan:  
ang pitlag ng dagitab sa dulo ng nagdikit nating mga daliri,  
ang alingawngaw ng harana sa Cubao,  
ang pagdarampi ng ating mga labi sa Alabang.  
H'wag mong ipagtaka ang kakatwa kong pagpapahalaga  
sa bayang itong walang alaala –  
may matitibay ritong tahanan,  
mga lansangang hindi nakaukit sa gunita  
ang pangalan, mga bantayog  
sa dalisay na pagsisintahan.

Mahal,  
dito kita inibig noong una pa man.

## Terra Incognita

Ibinubulong mo sa akin ang iyong pagnanasa,  
nanghihinayang — alam ko bang wala nang  
Terra Incognita?

Gumagaralgal ang mga sasakyang iminamapa  
ang mga lansangan ng inip at init ng ulo.

Kakaltak ka, maalaala

ang sikip na sumasakop sa mga taluktok ng Machu Picchu,  
ang mga turistang dinadasalan sa Angkor,  
ang pila sa harap ng Louvre na mahaba pa,  
animo, sa tayog ng mga Pirámide ng Giza.

Naghahanap ka ng sapalarang wagas  
bagkus wala nang kailang lunan.

Masusundan ng daliring lagalag ang bawat kulubot  
ng mundo. Sa sipat ng satélite,  
kasintiyak ang latag ng daigdig  
ng impuntong paglisa't pagdating ng Shinkansen.

Inaakay mo ako tungo sa mga lunang lumuluma  
sa mga mapa —

sa nangaglalakbay na buhangin ng Sahara,  
sa nangalulubog na pulo ng Oceania,  
sa nangalulusaw na glasyar ng Antartika.

Sa walang-galawang ngayon, ibig kong  
hawakan ang malalambot mong kamay  
na nakahaplos na sa gaspang ng Stone Henge  
at ng Uluru upang magtanong — paano  
ang sumasambulat na sarikulay sa gasang ng Tubbataha,  
ang mga pilapil na iniukit sa pisngi ng Ifugaw,  
ang nangakausling butong itim ng daigdig sa Batanes?

Nagsabantayog na ang mga sasakyen.  
Kaya iwan natin itong mundong himpil sa pagmamadali,  
hayaang dalhin kita sa lupaing ni hindi mo pinangarap,  
akayin ka, paglakarin ang mga paang bumagtas na sa Camino de Santiago  
patungo sa masukal na pusod ng lungsod,  
lampas sa masisikip na paraan, malalamlam na pailaw,  
tambak ng basura, at latak ng araw  
hanggang marating natin ang mundo sa likod ng lagim —  
ito ang Terra Incognita:  
ang mga kulubot ng matandang lupain,  
dalampasigang asó at abó ang buhangin,  
gubat na hinahaplos ng hamog at ulap,  
nilalatang parang ng pagmulat ng andap.  
Dito, sa malayong Silangan, hayaang magtatambol  
ang puso sa kumpas ng bagong tinutuklas:  
aliw-iw ng sapa, lawiswis ng kawayan,  
lagunos ng lagaslasan, hilik ng himbing na bulkan.  
Makinig ka sa kakaibang tinig ng lupa,  
umaawit sa alikabok sa iyong talampakan:  
mapagkandili, kahit kakatwa,  
mapagkalinga kahit ikaw rito'y kasimbanyaga  
ng tiririt ng maya sa kabilang pisngi ng buwan.

# **CONFIDENTIAL: HIV/AIDS**

Joey A. Tabula

## **Confidential: HIV/AIDS**

Isang supot ng dalanghita ang pasasalamat  
Ng nanay mo. Dumadalang na raw kasi  
Ang pagtatae mo. Akalain mong tatlong buwan  
Mong ininda ang pabalik-balik sa kubeta.  
Kung hindi ka pa isinugod sa ER ng nanay mo  
Ay mas napaaga pa ang buhay mong maikli.

Huwag kang mag-alala. Taga sa bato  
Ang isang kabilin-bilinan mo sa akin.  
Hindi ako mapaaamin ng isang tumpok  
Ng prutas mula sa nanay mo o ng Chickenjoy  
O tsokolate o kaya sambilao ng sapin-sapin.  
Ngunit nang ttlumpung minuto ka nang  
Flat line at sinisikap ibalik sa piling namin  
Ay karayom sa puso ko ang hagulhol  
Ng nanay mo, ano daw ang ikinamatay mo,  
Bakit daw kaybilis, e di ba't pagaling ka na nga,  
Ay parang gusto ko nang ipako ang pangako  
Ko sa iyo, hindi pa naman ako naniniwala sa multo't  
Maiibsan kahit kaunti ang pighati ng nanay mo.  
Feeling ko tuloy nakasapi ka sa akin ngayon,  
Gustong-gusto kong yakapin  
Ang nanay mo. Kaya ayun, niyakap ko siya  
Gaya ng pagyakap ko sa propesyon ko.

Ibulong mo sana sa dulo ng istetoskop  
Na binabawi mo na ang kasunduan natin,  
Isang sakong dalanghita kasi ang bigat  
Sa dibdib ko ang dalamhati ng nanay mo.  
Anong klaseng anak tayo sa ating ina?

Mahirap ang pinili mong pamamaalam, ha?  
Parang di ko kayang tikman ang tirang piraso  
Ng pasasalamat ng nanay mo. Pero kumakalam  
Ang tiyan ko ngayon kaya agad kong biniyak  
Iyong tirang dalanghita. Alam mo bang iyon  
Ang pinakamatamis na dalanghitang  
Natikman ko ngayong taon kahit di pa panahon?

## **Intern on Duty sa Medical Ward**

Kada apat na oras ang ating pagniniig  
Para sukatin ko ang presyon, pintig ng pulso,  
Ritmo ng paghinga, at temperatura mo.  
Minsan gusto kong makipaghuntahan  
Sa iyo kung paanong umabot ka sa ganito,  
Pinamayat ng TB at HIV/AIDS ang buong katawan,  
Kung paanong hinayaan mong magmintis ka  
Ng antiviral meds at madalang na pagsulpot-  
Sulpot sa klinika ng iyong doktor. Nahihiya  
Akong magtanong kasi hinang-hina ka  
Sa pagkadilaw pagkat hindi hiyang sa atay mo  
Ang mga pildura laban sa tuberkulosis.  
Saktong hawak ko ang iyong kaliwang bisig  
At napatitig ako sa PAOLO na nakatato  
Sa ibaba ng peklat sa iyong bakunahan,  
Naalimpungan ka't nahuli mo ang titig ko.  
*A, iyan ba? Boyfriend ko iyan. Hiwalay na kami.*  
Bulong mo at bumalik ka sa iyong pagkaidlip.  
Gusto ko pang makipagkuwentuhan sa iyo  
Dahil halos magkaedad lamang tayo at ang danaς  
Ng mundo ay namugad na sa iyong mga mata,  
Kung paanong nauwi sa hiwalayan ang pagsasama,  
Kung sinong inmortal sa balat mo ang iyong iniibig  
At kung bakit marami akong hindi alam sa pag-ibig.  
Ngunit mahaba pa ang listahan ng mga pasyenteng  
Imo-monitor ko sa ward ngayong duty ko buong gabi.  
Baka bukas, habang wala akong ibang gawain,  
Maglakas-loob akong ituring kang kaibigan  
At limutin ko muna saglit ang lahat ng pinag-aranlan.  
Baka bukas, sundin ang lukso ng dugo at pakinggan  
Ang panawagan ng kumakalam kong tiyan.

## Sa HIV Clinic

Isinulat ko *pag-ibig, pag-ibig, pag-ibig*  
Sa reseta at mabilis niyang tugon  
*Mayroon na ako niyan, Dok. Sa kaniya*  
*Nga ako nahawa. Napahiya ako.*  
Kumikilos ang kamay ko nang taliwas  
Sa isip ko. Tinitigan ko ang pasyente,  
Ang kaniyang nakaraan, mga gamutan,  
Ang tumataas na CD4 level, ang di na  
Ma-detect na viral load, ang kumakapal  
Niyang chart—gusto ko siyang yakapin,  
Ilapat sa aking dibdib nang matagal,  
Halikan ang matigas niyang folder bago  
Ibalik sa mundo ng mga code name.  
Kumikilos ang kamay ko nang taliwas  
Sa isip ko. Tinitigan ko siyang may *pag-ibig*,  
*Binabati kita. Gumagaling kang gaya ng*  
*Iyong iniibig.* At nagdaop ang aming palad.

## Sa Harap ng Negatoskop

Dibdib sa dibdib kami ng pasyente kong  
May HIV/AIDS at *P. jirovecii* pneumonia.  
Umuusli ang mga tadyang niya sa yayat  
At walang umuuwi ni mumunting alon  
Ng pirlag ng puso niya sa mga utong ko.  
Isinugod siyang habol-habol ang huli  
Niyang hininga't tinangka kong habulin  
Ang itinatakbo ng kaniyang panalangin.  
Paroon at parito ang mga tao sa ER at  
Paroon at parito ang aming pananatili  
Sa mga pagtusok-hugot ng mga aparato  
Sa kaniyang katawan. Namalikmata ko  
Ang nasira kong pag-ibig: bente singko,  
Kayumanggi, matangkad, kulot ang buhok,  
Maangas ang dating. Gusto kong yakapin  
Siya habang hinehele sa duyan ng sedatib.  
Dinalaw akong muli ng init ng pag-ibig—  
Minamahal ko siyang kahit hindi na umiibig,  
Niyayapos ko siyang mahigpit, itim  
Na plaka ng X-ray sa naninikip kong dibdib.

## Medical Audit

Ikalawang buhay niya ito.

Magsisimula muli sila sa una nilang pagkikita.

Pero wala siya sa harap ng doktor.

Itatanong ng doktor ang mga sintomas niya.

Pero wala ang kuwento niya para baguhin ang nakasulat na.

Lalabas ang resulta ng test niya, positibo pa rin sa HIV.

Pero wala siya dito para maulit ang hagulhol niya.

Inisa-isa ng doktor ang mga gamot niya.

Pero wala siya dito para pakinggan ang paliwanag ng doktor.

Heto na ang parte na kailangan niyang ma-admit sa ospital.

Pero wala na siya dito para haplusin ng doktor.

Ilang araw na siyang inaalagan, binabantayan, sinusuweruhan.

Pero wala siya dito para maging tao ulit.

Walang kapintasan ang gamutan, bati ng matandang doktor.

Wala nang mas mainam pang gawin, dagdag ng isa pa.

Binuhay lamang siya para mamatay muli.

# LIMANG TULANG CAMBODIA

John Iremil Teodoro

## Pagdating sa Phnom Penh

Sinalubong ng mga pula at puting  
bulaklak ng lotus, Palangga,  
ang antok kong kaluluwa.

Kahit kasi nabawasan ng isang oras  
ang buhay ko paglapag  
ng sinasakyang eroplano,  
ramdam na ramdam pa rin  
ng katawan ko na hatinggabi na.

Kulay narangha ang tarangkahan  
ng hotel. May malit na tulay  
na kahoy sa gitna ng lotus pond  
papunta sa lobby.

At doon sa front desk  
may isang tray at plorera  
ng mga bulaklak ng lotus  
na bumati sa akin  
ng maligayang pagdating!

Nahiga akong nakikita  
sa mapusyaw na tabing  
ng aking isipan  
ang iyong ngiti at boses  
sa gitna ng lumulutang  
na mga pula at puting lotus.

(Setyembre 1, 2019 Linggo  
9:20 n.u. Phnom Penh)

## Mukha Linga

Sa National Museum Phnom Penh,  
may koleksyon ng mga batong  
hugis titi. Tayong-tayo sila, Palangga,  
pero kailangan kong hugasan  
ng tubig mula sa lotus pond  
ang aking isipan sapagkat walang  
kabastusan sa mga eskulturang ito.

Ang linga ay sumisimbolo sa  
pagkakaisa ng tatlong diyos:  
Brahma, Visnu, at Siva.

Kayâ naupo na lamang ako dito  
sa hardin sa gitna ng museo  
at ibinabad sa luntiang mga dahon  
ang aking sarili. Naiisip pa rin kita,  
subalit masaya na at dalisay  
ang aking damdamin na sumasabay  
sa paglipad ng mga kalapating  
nananahan sa mga sumasayaw  
na sungay ng tisang mga bubong  
nitong museo ng mga buddha.

(Setyembre 1, 2019 Linggo  
3:06 n.h. Phnom Penh)

## Mga Lotus Sa Tabing-Kalsada

May tatlong palanggana na yari  
sa putik na punô ng mga bulaklak  
ng lotus sa tabi ng kalsada  
sa may pintuan ng isang hotel.  
Paalala ito na manlalakbay tayong lahat.  
Naglalakad man tayo o tumatakbo  
kailangan nating maging lotus—  
tumutubo sa banlik ngunit busilak  
ang pagkaluntian ng mga malapad  
na dahon at ang bulaklak ay banal  
na kinaluluguran ng liwanag.

(Setyembre 2, 2019 Lunes  
5:48 n.u. Phnom Penh)

## Ta Prohm

Kumapit tayo, Palangga, sa mga bagay  
na di gawa ng tao kundi sa kaaram  
at pagmamahal ng kalikasan.

Pagmasdan mo ang templong itong  
inialay sa ina ng lahat ng Buddha,  
ang kaganapan ng karunungan,  
na si Prajnaparamita noong  
labindalawang siglo.

Animnapung ektarya ang lawak nito!  
Tinitirhan ng libo-libong mga pari  
at monghe. Pinagsisilbihan ng mahigit  
pitumpong libong katao ang mga  
pangangailangan ng Ta Prohm.

Dito nakatago ang limandaang kilo  
ng ginto, tatlong dakot ng diyamante,  
isang basket ng perlas, apat na baso  
ng mamahaling mga bato  
at kung ano-ano pang kayamanan  
ng Silangan.

Ngayon, pagmasdan ang karunungang  
itinuturo sa atin ni Prajnaparamita:

Natutumbang mga pader,  
napupudpod na mga lilok sa  
mga batong poste at dingding,  
mga pasilyong nabagsakan  
ng mga bloke ng bato,  
mga altar na walang imahan,  
mga tore at bubong  
na niyayakap ng malalaking ugat  
ng mga dambuhalang puno,  
isang engrandeng templo  
na binawi ng kagubatan  
sa yabang nating mga tao.

Ngunit naniniwala ako, Palangga  
na may mga bagay na panghabangpanahon.  
Katulad na lamang ng mga sandali  
na tahimik tayong naglalakad sa tabi  
ng Roxas Boulevard o di kayâ sa Intramuros  
na magkahawak ang ating kamay  
at tanggap sa ating kasingkasing  
na kung anuman ang saya at sarap  
at banal na pinagsasaluhan natin ngayon  
ay walang pangalan at di mapangalanan  
sapagkat hindi naman talaga sapat  
ang mga salita na gawa rin lang  
nating mga tao.

(Setyembre 4, 2019 Miyerkoles  
6:30 n.u. Siem Reap)

## Angkor Wat

Ganito dapat kalawak at kaganda  
ang mga monumento ng pag-ibig.  
Sisirain man ng init at ulan sa loob  
ng maraming siglo, may maiiwang  
mga batong hagdan at altar.

Sa paglipas ng mahabang panahon  
libo-libo ang papasyal araw-araw  
at mamamangha sa angkin nitong  
kadakilaan. Dito ang tunay na dakila  
ay isang handurawan na lamang.

Ang paghawak natin sa kamay  
ng isa't isa ay laging may katapusang.  
Ang panalangin ng pasasalamat  
sa Poong Maykapal ay aalingawngaw  
sa templo ng walanghanggan.

Sa bawat pagtatalik natin, Palangga,  
dapat magkiskisan ang ating kaluluwa!

(Setyembre 5, 2019 Huwebes  
6:57 n.u. Siem Reap)

# OF LOVE AND OTHER ATTRITIONS: Five Contemporary Mindanao Poems in Translation

Ralph Semino Galán

## Bago Aplaya

Don Pagusara

Ang look  
Usa ka pikas nga panaksan,  
Miawas ang sabawng parat.

Matag adlaw  
Kutsarahon sa gagmayng bugsay  
Ang mga bula  
Nanglutaw  
Sa mga awit sa  
Gagmayng mananagat.

Sa gabii  
Ang buwan gamayng buho  
Li-lianan sa mga bathala  
Ug sa silong

Gikutay nagkidlapkidlap  
Dalandalang bulawan  
Lahos sa inablihag-dako nga  
Payag sa mananagat.

## Bago Beach

The bay  
Is half of a bowl,  
The salty soup overflows.

Everyday  
Small oars spoon  
The bubbles  
Floating  
On the songs of  
Small fishermen.

At night  
The moon is an aperture  
Peeping-hole for the gods,  
And below

It links a glistening  
Silver path  
To the wide open  
Shack of the fisherman.

## Sa Higayong Ako Angoangohon

Paul Randy P. Gumanao

Kon pananglit abton kog angoango  
ayaw paila sa imong tinuod nga ngalan,  
ayawg gakos ug labawng ayawg hilak.  
Tugoti ko nga matag adlaw bunyagan  
ko ikaw og lain-laing mga ngalan.  
Ayawg halok. Timan-i nga utok  
ug dili ang kasingkasing ang may  
panumdoman. Ayaw na paghago  
og pakli og bulak kay tingalig dili  
nako dawaton, ug tungod giputol  
lisod na isumpayg balik sa punoan.  
Hulata nga angoangohon sab ka  
aron patas tang wa makaila sa usag-usa.  
Matag adlaw mag-ilhanay pag-usab.  
Ug hinaot nga sa usa ka higayon  
magkuyog tang duha sa baybayon  
magdula-dula og balas, magtuon-tuon  
sa pagtabon-tabon sa lawas.

## On the Occasion I Become Senile

In case I reach the state of senility  
do not reveal your real name, do not  
embrace me and above all do not cry.

Allow me to christen you everyday  
with different names.

Do not kiss me. Remember that  
the mind and not the heart  
has memory. Do not bother to pluck  
flowers for I may not accept them,  
and once broken it would be hard  
to connect them again to their stems.

Wait until you become senile too  
so both of us would not know each other.  
We would get acquainted again everyday.  
And hopefully we would have the chance  
to be together by the coastline  
playing with the sands, learning  
how to conceal our bodies.

## Unsaon Pagpatay sa Ok-ok

Errol Merquita

Pag-andam og tsinelas,  
kanang baga, kanang malaparo.  
Pag-andam og tirongan,  
kanang talinis, kanang taas.  
Pag-andam og silhig ug sako,  
kanang dako, kanang lapad.

Tuktoka sa iyang panimalay.  
Kon makit-an nimong  
gakamang-kamang ang mga ok-ok  
sa Boulevard, hinay-hinayag duol.  
Unya kalit walupa  
sa baga nga tsinelas.

Ug makaikyas unya musukol  
ang inahak, kuhaa ang tirongan.  
Tusoka sa lungag kay tingali  
misuksok sa Brgy. 23-C.  
Tusoka gyud hangtod madunggan  
nimong napislat ang iyang lawas.  
Unya kuha dayon kag silhig.  
Hiposa, tapoka, isulod sa sako  
panaghoy murag daw sawaay.

Inig kadlawon ilabay sa kasagbotan  
Ug aron mahimangnoan ang tanan  
butangi og pasidaan,  
ok-ok ako huwag ninyong tularan.

Sayon ra patyon  
ang mga gagmayng ok-ok.  
Perog kung dinagko  
na Insekto na gani,  
ayaw sa patya,  
kay istudyohan pa.

## How to Kill a Cockroach

Prepare a slipper  
that is thick, that can be used to thwack.  
Prepare a bamboo skewer  
that is sharp, that is long.  
Prepare a broom and a sack  
that is big, that is wide.

Knock on its household.  
If you see cockroaches  
crawling along the Boulevard,  
slowly approach them.  
Then wallop them suddenly  
with the thick slipper.

And if the bastard escapes  
then fights back, get the skewer.  
Pierce the hole since maybe  
it has sneaked into Brgy. 23-C.  
Pierce fiercely until you hear  
its body crushed.  
Then immediately get a broom.  
Clean up, gather, put it inside a sack,  
whistle as if there were nothing.

At dawn, throw it among the weeds.  
And to remind everyone  
put up a warning,  
“I am a cockroach, do not imitate me.”

It is easy to slaughter  
the small cockroaches.  
But if the Insect  
is quite big-time,  
do not kill it yet,  
we still have to study it.

## Mga Hunahuna Dihang Miabaot ang Mga Pulis sa Ilang Taming ug Batuta Atubangan sa City Hall

Gil Nambatac

Midahunog ang mga tunob sa mga pulis nga nagdagan.  
Nagdagan padulong sa among posisyon  
Posisyong mitindog ug mipanalipod  
Mipanalipod sa ugma sa katawhang Iliganon.  
Iliganon nga dili motugot sa kahiwiang tataw  
Tataw nga pagpangilad sa mga kabus kong kaigsoonan  
Kaigsoonang ang gusto lamang bugas sa matag lamesa  
Lamesang huklaran sa pagkaon sa pang-adlaw-adlaw.

## Thoughts When Cops Arrive with Their Shields and Truncheons in Front of City Hall

The thunderous footsteps of cops running.  
Running towards our position  
Position that stands for and shields  
Shields the future of Iliganons.  
Iliganons who won't allow the crookedly clear  
Clear deception against my poor brethren  
Brethren who simply want rice on their tables  
Tables where food would be spread day by day.

## **Isloy, dili mohawot ang tuba**

(sumala sa kinaulahiang panghitabo sa sugilanong  
“Santelmo” ni Hannah A. Leceña)

M.J. Cagumbay Tumamac

susama sa dugo, pula  
nga isog ug makahubog o tam-is  
nga puti. Gatutok ka lamang  
sa namala nang dugo nga wala  
nakit-ang nag-agas  
dihang gidunggab ka sa kangitngit  
kagabii. Wala nayabo  
ang galon sa tuba nga iuli  
unta sa ginikanan. Sumala kanila,  
dagkotan ka'g mga kandila  
o sunogon ang lawas aron dili  
mahimong dili-ingon nato,  
susama sa santelmo. Isloy,  
dili baya susama ang tuba  
sa tuno, mohawot madugay  
sa kainit sa kalayo.

## **Isloy, coconut wine would not turn viscid**

(after the last episode in the short story  
“Santelmo” by Hannah A. Leceña)

similar to blood, vivid red  
and intoxicating or saccharine  
white. You just stared  
at the dried blood you did not  
see gushing when you were  
stabbed in the dark last night.  
It did not spill, the gallon  
of coconut wine you had intended  
to bring home to your parents.  
They said, they would burn candles  
for you or cremate your body,  
so you would not turn into “not one  
of us” like fool’s fire. Isloy,  
coconut wine is not like coconut  
milk that would turn viscid at last  
in the heat of the flames.

# RIZAL WALKS ALONG THE FOXGLOVES

Eugene Gloria

## Rizal Walks Along The Foxgloves

I looked at the foxgloves  
and told myself what I needed.  
Walk with me I say

to the foxgloves  
and let my lonely leak through my pores  
like sweat from my brow.

O bruised sky, O anvil waves—.  
The waves hammering in the distance  
are composing their own melody. A doe  
stares me down as if I'd grown wings.

Angel I nothing am, blooming beside  
the spiraea bush. Poets?  
My poets, I confess to my graceful interrogator,  
measure their breaths and caesuras with the bend

and pulse of their hands. // I follow  
the foxgloves toward the beach. A mother,  
I keep my careful watch of them—her boy  
pretending to be a plank of pine on the water.

Her daughter beside her building a tall  
sand castle until a wave comes and claims it all back.  
She wanted to swear, but I don't think she knew how.

How old were you when you first learned how to swear?  
Did you learn how to curse from your mother?  
If not from your mother, then who else can you trust?

## Exit Interview With A Once And Future Ghost [Part 1]

*What was the first word you remember?*

Egalitarian

*What was your favorite gift?*

Two black stones that reached far

*Where are you?*

Here with you in Fort Santiago

*State your full name for the record?*

José Protasio Rizal Mercado y Alonso Realonda

*Whom do you see in the mirror?*

My one bad self aboard a train

*What is your favorite flavor?*

Bitter

*Really?*

Did you expect me to say “sweet”

*What is your go-to karaoke song?*

[no response]

*How did your travels shape your perception?*

In signs and symbols, but mostly in colors I mistook  
for silences, silences that turned to humming

*Which earth-friendly practice matters to you most?*

Being minimal and using only high performance  
beauty products

*What were you doing when the twin towers fell?*

[no response]

*Who was the president when you were born?*

Ulugh Beg

*He was a genius, so he couldn't have been a president.*

Why don't you ask me another question

*At what age did you start developing your messiah complex?*

[no response]

*How is silence a fond farewell?*

[no response]

*What is your favorite memory?*

When You said to Mary Magdalene *Noli me tangere*

*What is your name?*

Nobody

*Why did you write "The Devil is God in Exile"?*

That was the painter Manuel Ocampo. It was a title  
of his painting hanging in Carré Sainte-Anne

## The Outskirts

### [A Micro Essay On Time]

The outskirts are disguised as death and death is time disguised as an asterisk. Robert Penn Warren said that Time is the subject of every story. "Tell me a story...a story of great distance and starlight." Time is a thing we invented to give our stories a beginning, middle, and refrain. José Rizal's journey departs and arrives like an asterisk sailing across a vast ocean of time. Time beating loudly inside his frock coat until time leaps into an unruly little empire where a man enters a room unsure of his footing. His story is a series of overlapping transparencies. It starts with him negotiating a world of mutations and transformations tempered with tolerance, irresolution, and patience. A world yet to be discovered, a world in constant search of a hiding place from time. Rizal meanders, failing at moving in a straight line. A man in a frock coat and bowler hat revising his story boards a ship and sails across the water. "Time makes beautiful everything life distorts." Robert Penn Warren, I'm almost certain, did not say that. Art cannot be hurried, just as a man making art cannot be slowed down even at the threat of a bullet aimed at his heart.

# REVERSING THE FOOLISH MAN

## and Other Poems

Joel H. Vega

### Reversing the Foolish Man

Let us reverse the foolishness of the man who orders the death of the toe-slipped boy,  
the death of the soon-to-fall body, the just awakened, collaterally damaged girl standing  
at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Let us reverse the trajectory of the palace-fired bullet, the bullet returning to carbon powder,  
the powder receding to ash.

Let us reverse the ash to dust  
and the dust back to elemental stone  
that will fill up the dry creek back to brimming river.

Let the river slide back to a bucket of clear water, the same water that will rinse the mountain  
of its heavy cloak of dust, rinse the green canopied trees down to their bark.

Let us reverse the bark to the naked pulp  
and the pulp to the crease-free paper, the paper unrolled and unfolded  
to bear each pen scratch, each ink-filled letter.

Let each word slide back to the heft  
of the alphabet, each dash each dot reversing  
to the blackened pool  
of molten ink.

Let each molten ink  
reverse to the droplet of  
blood,  
the blood to  
the coagulated  
bruise.

## Last Dance

Soon love will exhaust itself  
like a spigot turned from north  
to south, the water restrained  
brought to the sharp heft  
of the heart.

For what is exhaustible will not  
spill over, will not run over  
just as the dance would click

its leathered heels and say  
with finality—  
“That last note is for the homeward road.”

Love dressed in feathers is love ready to  
make your acquaintance. It says,  
‘Dance  
with me as long as the sun is up,  
as long as the air is wild  
with whipped-out music,

as long as the lovers are heady,  
filled to the brim with nectar,  
creasing the air  
with hope  
and expectations.’

So if death comes with wide  
open arms, love comes  
with twice as much, making its widest  
entrance, doubling the stakes,  
gambling  
away  
the last pile of coins,  
its last bag of fortune.

'Come,' said love to anger,  
'Bring me to that heavy laden table.'

And anger, losing its momentum,  
complies, follows what love  
demands, brings all the food  
and wine, all what that wide  
plate of desire can hold.

For the dancer stays close  
to the dance—but the good one?

Oh, the good one! He whirls  
and turns and takes the wind  
out of his lungs.

He dances the dance  
to its sharpest, until it gives up,  
gives way and fractures to bits,  
the breath running out,  
shadows spilling out,

the air troubling  
and troubled,  
from the farthest north

to the farthest south.

## Solstice

for Paul

*Ssshh* let me warn you our work is not finished here  
though the sun erases the solstices of our skin

grand your breastbone grander your clavicle

tower & dune loom above the Schier magnetic  
the ebb tide the ocean's spill

our stories are elliptical our stories are empirical  
we rely on the quackery of foreign tongues

once we eloped our bodies covered with moth wings  
our cheeks bright with spilled mercury & moon dust

fragrant our toes in giveaway light fractured our knuckles  
“affection is coincidence & bruised attentiveness” you said

but we venture into the deep oh yes the deep

widely we revolve wary of each other widely  
we circumnavigate tails of comets curling to ashes

# SUITE OF FIVE POEMS

Danton Remoto

## Boracay Sunset

I stand on the sand  
Finer than any grain  
I have ever seen,

Inhaling the blueness  
Of the sea.  
At the stroke of six,

The sun begins to tint  
The sky  
The mountain and the sea:

First with a wash  
Of yellow followed—  
In seconds that seem like eons—

By a hint of purple  
Spreading in the canvas  
Of the sky

Like watercolor,  
And then a burst  
Of red

Brilliant as blood,  
Reminding me of wounds  
That have seemingly healed.

## Boracay Night

I turn away  
From the sight  
Of green and blue lights  
Seemingly carved  
Into the thighs  
Of coconut trees

To the sound  
Of the sea heaving  
At night—  
The sibilant voices  
That rise and fall  
With my breathing,

To the sight  
Of boats moored  
In the dark night—  
Pale as ghosts—  
Looking at me intently  
Like the eyes of lovers  
That now open  
And now close.

## For Grandmother Onda

You plied me with dried fish  
And native chocolate steaming  
In noisy tin cups  
That summer many years ago.  
Outside, Mayon Volcano  
Was still sleeping beneath  
Its soft blanket of clouds.

In the mornings, I now fork  
Hotdogs and drink brewed coffee  
Slowly, relaxed in my seat,  
Preparing for the crawl of traffic,  
When they told me you died  
Last night. Suddenly, the morning  
Leaves no taste in my tongue.

## Badjao Graveyard On Sta. Cruz Island, Zamboanga

(*For Annie Feleo and Thelma San Juan*)

We lie here  
On this island of white sand,  
Whiteness mixed with pink coral  
Fine as the grains of sugar.

Our sentinels  
Are wood carved into the shape  
Of people, wood shaped  
As billowing sail, as boats.

The blue sky  
Is our wide and curving roof.  
Blue also is the sea  
That is our womb.

In silence we gaze  
At the infinite sea—  
Giving us fish and sea weed,  
Rocking us gently in our journeys—

As the wind freely  
Turns into waves around us.  
Death is only  
One kind of journey.

## Firetrees

(*For Ada*)

*Comme la vie est lente*  
Et comme l'Esperance est violente  
(How slow life is,  
How violent is hope).  
- Apollinaire

Here, in Stirling, the leaves  
Are just beginning to spring  
From the dead twigs.

The skin of snow  
On the loch is slowly  
Moulted.

And the wind from Scandinavia  
Is only now resting  
From her long journey.

But in my far country,  
The leaves of the firetrees  
Are already tongues of flames:

They're talking about the wilderness of summer,  
The hot whirlwinds of April and May.  
They're gossiping about the people passing by—

Who themselves gaze amazed at the firetrees—  
Like lovers' breath aflame—  
And for a moment thought

About the violence of hope.

# FROM TANGERE

Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr.

## IL BUON DI SI CONOSCE DA MATTINA

Let the morning come  
with the birds' sing-song  
gossip, the rustle  
of wings skittery

among the leaves. Let  
the light ripen  
to honey, spangled

with dust and pollen,  
the hive awhir  
in its glistening  
et cetera.

So much preamble  
when you only want  
to eavesdrop. To hear  
the subterranean  
pulse, how the smallest  
tremors can sever  
a leaf from a branch.  
A mouth can go on

and on, and it does.  
What else is there to do  
but listen? You press  
an ear against the wall,  
wondering what silence  
would say if only  
it had a tongue.

## THE CATASTROPHE

When a gun, finally,  
is fired, it is not  
a surprise. A gun

fulfills its purpose  
to launch a bullet.  
And a world might change;

the world might not  
change. The gun itself  
is indifferent

as a mirror, clear-  
eyed in its gaze.  
Meanwhile, eight o'

clock, the rattling  
of plates. Meanwhile,  
a tectonic shift.

A house is burning  
while you read this line.  
Another chapter

unfurls yet again.  
O reader, O hand  
tracing the outline

of the barrel  
and muzzle, what  
constitutes a life?

There is friction.  
The texture of it  
and how you remember

as the texture of it.  
When a gun fires  
and you are singled

out for ruin, take  
heart in the beauty  
of ash. How it feels

like your body  
is scorched, your smoldering  
bones ground up.

## THE CHASE ON THE LAKE

Here is the world and here, if you zoom in,  
is the human condition, a pursuit  
    of something or someone, the heart's familiar  
refrain in the back and forth of asking  
    and answering, the story sliding from one  
sentence to another, a punishment  
    borne by the mind, its singular affliction,  
attention as a river meandering  
    through a forest dense with the scent of mud  
and wilting flowers, the mouth again busy  
    with conjuring atmosphere, details inked  
on skin and every surface, *horror*  
    *vacui*, the body in motion burdened  
by itself, the weight of its wants, its voice  
    pleading for yet another line, hook  
caught in the throat, language a lure one keeps  
    chasing, the syllables slippery as quick-  
silver, rushing headlong into the brambles  
    of history, how far the words have come  
from their source, how much it has cost to know  
    or not to know what they mean, always a price  
for each hunger, however small and quiet,  
    insistent as rain needling the lake,  
the sky's incantation to return water  
    to the earth, no end to be found when all  
the hand does is to spin and spin a tale if only  
    to undo the weave, thread snagged, fraying,  
until a poem, a day, a string breaks.

## CHRISTMAS EVE

The day comes when the landscape bleaches to gradations  
of bone: off-white, mother-of-pearl, the many names of snow.

Tropical gothic rendered post-apocalyptic, ode  
to a fractal world being made and unmade, the heart

clenching, unclenching, no other choice except to stop.  
Description of weather, disclosure of portents

to cloud the setting. Page after page, the calendar  
reaching its end, the arc of the story thrown into high

relief. A man dies without seeing the dawn but not  
before saying something epigrammatic, inscription

for a hero. A woman runs and runs on her way  
to her last breath. What a year it has been, and almost

it is over. It is not over. There is still the tongue  
indexing each pain of the smallest bone and muscle.

There is still the wind that changes everything it touches.

## EPILOGUE

I admit light  
is only an excuse to see a shadow.  
How much

more interesting: a still  
life edged  
with the rippling  
dark.

A story cross-hatched with Victorian  
pathos, each bruise  
an ampersand

that links one  
episode to the next. And thus  
this poem,

this chapter an arc  
bending as wish

fulfilment.

Anti-climax: a priest dying  
of apoplectic  
stroke. Of *bangungot*: sleep

paralysis, the mouth held  
mid-breath, mid-scream,  
a nightmare

that only deepens  
and deepens

into a submarine  
shade of black.

Another man

succumbs to opium,  
his name forgotten in the fullness  
of time. Someone

else dies of dysentery.

*We should gladly*

*kill all of them*—or we should let others  
live so that they can suffer.

What does it matter

if they die  
or do not die?

Every life is touched  
by hunger, rain, salt-  
flecked wind, dust. And dust  
and dust. Let me start

again with light.

Let me start again with shadow.

## Poems from Ecstasy Facsimile

Mark Anthony Cayanan

When you turned off the engine, the late birds gossiped  
in a sinister tongue, and the nausea scurried up his throat:  
should someone have rescued the teenaged boy riding shotgun.

I trusted because no one had taught me otherwise; god,  
however, rewards those whose beauty makes stories matter.  
I wasn't saved. I meant you, the vocations I've carved out of you.

What sloshed all over my cheeks made me a stranger,  
and when they found the stranger they saw he wasn't a freak  
he was just another school kid who scratched his bravado,

his briefs a gloopy mess, his repurposed body a catalogue  
of second-hand fantasies, chief of which was to be what tourists  
pay good money for. He couldn't suffer because nobody knew

he was being punished. Suffering became shame, which I nursed  
in earnest into fury, and every swivel of his hip divulged you.

6

Before I became holy I'd wake to you expecting my prayer of gratitude.  
Cock-like, I gave it to you in time for sunrise. You knew of my basic need to seek  
approval: I puttered around the house fixing messes I made so I could earn it.

How could you have turned away from ease? I've transformed my life into  
a pamphlet of instructions, so take your hands off my eyes. Now

I no longer need to feel guilt for the evil I do because evil only happens  
when life happens. I knot up the curtain, let sunlight in, and from inside

my belly my soul squirms free, completely without stage fright. She gives me a bullshit story when heading out, chooses a name with lots of silent letters and discloses it, never to me, for a ride to the beach. But she lets me go

down on her, caresses my bald spot as I do, and later spasms repeatedly at my squished face. My ecstatic face—This isn't a body worrying another in a car,

the thirst isn't there to make the void interesting, I'm no cautionary tale. This is a hagiography. I taste the word and give it the mighty shrug it deserves.

## δ

That you've proved yourself able to manhandle my will, your presence the overgraced state I ask absolution for, the nonchalance with which you receive my voice as it grows strident to compete with your reticence: it exists as is, as the limestone of the cave redemption has echoed around in—I prise my soul off your thigh and apologize for its stubbornness, how it launches into ecstasy as if it were something special—as the boulder that preserves the dark, as glass my face presses against just so the world happens,  
just so we're nothing less than the nothing around which we gather, after

which we assemble a prayer to drive it away; here's a blanket for any body. And we're never the fact I'd hoped for us to have, the afternoons we idle into admonition, the pinpricks of sweat that hunger dissolves out of, the lies we disappear as, the times we finish in time for each other: we for each other are the degree of evil we were warned about, and you've become the gnawing fear that overcomes its source. When you are sin. As often I am the first stone.

## δ

Why give us our bodies, beautiful and always about to fail?  
Why have our souls harbor a different species of appetite?

We learn remorse and know blood on the backs of penitents.  
We've readied names to pinpoint various tears: teres major,  
thoracolumbar fascia, trapezius. Do you in your wisdom see  
to the truths beyond vows driven through your children's palms?

And those who huddle to witness, assembled in your image,  
accustomed to your reticence, some more troubled than others,  
what from us will you take when, with a trust that's the birthright  
of the powerless, we show our love enough? The force of the soul

striking the body. From this fire, the hope that we be spared:  
we build ourselves an ocean out of it, stealthy lives in its depths,  
trenches mirroring a pure dark and swallowing the water down,  
we can build exits out of dreams if we're only told whose to follow.

## δ

Have you traveled past the news  
of the weather, there where it ceases

to be concrete, would you rather be  
admitted back to the flat song of

this one life. The anthem of your  
life: do you think there's a need for you.

You won't scoop earth off your own  
prone figure and remake yourself.

Rest now, errant one, you have  
wanted. Rest now, be remembered

as you should've been for yourself  
as a torn free limb or its shattered window

as the gift of a tiring hour.  
And tell me where you will come to.

# ‘NAK NG PI

Mina Deocareza

Madalas magtaka ang mga kaibigan ko noong noon. Bakit daw ba parang hindi ako mapalagay nang husto sa tuwing lalabas kami at magliliwaliw? Kahit legal naman sa magulang ang lakad, tila kalkulado pa rin ang kada hakbang at kilos ko na para bang inabutuan ng tawag ng kalikasan sa maling lugar at panahon. Simple lang naman ang dahilan: Dating nagtrabaho bilang private investigator o PI ang nanay ko.

Matalas ang paningin ni Mama. Gabi man o umaga, alam kong di basta-basta ang kayang abutin at tagusin ng kaniyang mga mata. Hindi siya matatakasan. Sa katunayan, malayo pa lang, kita niya na ako lalo kung kami'y magkakasalubong sa mga kalsada ng Antipolo noon. Wala akong ligtas, kahit makapal ang tao sa bayan; tiyak na mamamataan niya ako at agad mamumukhaan, saka siya sisigaw ng, “Anak!” Ayun, wala nang urungan.

Ang totoo, kahit ibang mga kakilala niya'y walang kawala. Hindi uso ang mga klasikong paraan ng pag-iwas sa kaniya, kaya iyong mga may atraso sa kaniya'y ni hindi makapagtago. Isa pa, kung subukan man nila, tiyak na matutunton at matutunton pa rin naman sila ng nanay ko.

Maging ang kaniyang pandinig at pang-amoy ay matindi rin. Kahit may sarili na akong cellphone noong high school, at kahit pa nauso ang tawagan lalo noong may unlimited calls na, hinding-hindi ako tumatanggap ng tawag maliban na lang kung importante ito. Pakiramdam ko kasi, kahit nasa ibang kuwarto ako sa bahay namin, maririnig at maririnig niya ang usapan. Kahit mga kuwentuhan naming magkakapatid, kalkulado rin dala ng takot na baka may masabi kaming kung ano't ikainis niya pa. Ramdam pa naman naming madali siyang makarinig ng kung ano-ano sa bahay.

"Ano iyo'ng pinag-uusapan niyo?" Ganito parati ang tanong nya sa amin. Parang walang laman kung ito'y iiispin, pero minsan, ang dating nito sa akin ay para bang sinusubok nya lang kami kung iba ang isasagot namin kumpara sa mismong paksang narinig nya.

Noong sa bahay pa niya ako nakatira, parati ring tumitigil ang tibok ng puso ko sa tuwing iniinspeksyon nya ang mga hinubad kong damit bago pa man sila labhan. Hindi ako mapakali habang marahan niyang inaaalis sa pagkakabutones ang mga uniporme at dinudukot ang mga bulsa ng mga blusa't palda para siguraduhing walang anumang bagay ang naiwan sa mga ito. Mas lalong tumitindi ang kaba sa tuwing inaanmoy-amoy nya ang mga singit-singit ng mga damit. Alam kong inaalaman nya lang ang tindi ng dumi sa mga damit, pero dahil sa dati niyang trabaho, hindi talaga ako makalma. Pakiramdam ko, kahit wala akong kasalanan, may kung ano siyang mapupuna at sasaalalim na lang ako bigla sa isang interogasyon. Baka nga isalang pa ako sa lie detector test!

\*

Marami na akong narinig na kuwento ni Mama tungkol sa dati niyang trabaho, lalo pa't ilan sa mga kasamahan nya noon ay mga ninong at ninang ko. Nakilala ko na rin sa personal ang iba pa nilang mga kasamahan. Dahil sa mga binahagi nilang istorya sa akin, nalaman ko kung gaano katindi ang kanilang preparasyon para sa mga misyon. Kahit si Mama na kilala bilang matangkad na siga noon pa man, hindi nagpapahuli pagdating sa damitan sa tuwing may undercover missions sila noon. Siyempre, kailangan din nila ang acting skills.

Madalas ko ring mapakinggan ang mga kuwento tungkol sa pakikipagtaguan at habulan nila sa kanilang mga sinusundan o subject. Karamihan sa mga ito ay mga lalaking pinasusundan ng kanilang mga misis para makumpirma kung nambababae nga ba talaga. Kung totoo man, pakukunan sila ng litrato o anumang ebidensiya para may pruweba silang maaaring dalhin sa korte, sakaling maisipang magsampa ng kaso.

Sa motel ang karaniwang assignment ni Mama. Madalas pa, may kasama siyang katrabahong lalaki para kunwari ay magse-sexy time lang din at hindi paghinalaan ng sinusundan. Sa loob ng kuwartong karaniwa'y katabi lang ng kinaroroongan ng subject, tumatambay sila at sinusubukang pakinggan

ang usapan ng subject at ng kasama nito. Kung gaano man sila katagal sa loob, dapat antayin sila ni Mama at kung sinumang kasama niya. Maging ang pag-alis nila, kailangang abangan. Hindi puwedeng makatakas ang subject kaya kung kinakailangan, handa sila Mama na makipaghabulan.

Kung minsan naman, doon sila tumatambay sa loob lang ng kotseng nakaparada malapit sa kinaroroongan ng tinitikitikan nila. Stake out ang tawag dito, at karaniwang inaabot sila ng madaling araw o umaga sa paghihintay. Kaya na lang, kung minsan ay tumatagal nang husto ang ganitong mga lakad. Hindi naman sila puwedeng masyadong mawili sa kuwentuhan at iba pang gawain dahil bawal malingat. Baka matakasan sila ng sinusundan. Kailangan, matindi pa rin ang pokus sa trabaho. Kailangang labanan ang pagkabagot at antok. Dapat din, alisto para kung biglang may takbuhan, makahabol pa rin sila.

Ang paborito kong kuwento ng nanay ko ay iyong isang beses na muntikan na siyang mabuking sa misyon. Kailangan niyang makumpirma kung totoong ibinahay na ng subject ang kabit niya at ang tanging paraan lang para magawa ito ay ang pasukin ang bahay na kaniyang kinaroroongan. Bago pa lang daw si Mama sa trabaho noon, kaya kabado pa. Pero ano pa nga ba ang magagawa niya? Wala nang atrasan!

“Tao po!” Sigaw ni Mama habang kumakatok sa pinto, medyo manginig-nginig ang boses. Grabe ang kabog ng puso niya, pero hindi niya puwedeng ipahalata. Di katagalan, binuksan ng hinihinalang kabit ng subject ang pinto.

“Ano ‘yun? Sino ka?” Busisi ng babae sa kaniya.

“Ah, survey lang po. Puwede po bang pumasok? Mainit po kasi.”

“Teka, teka.”

Dali-daling pumunta sa may pintuan ang kanilang subject, mukhang nakatunog na may nag-uusisa sa kanila.

“Sino ka?” Tinanong nito, parang nananakot.

“Survey lang po sa—”

“Survey? Ano’ng survey? Sinusundan mo ba kami?”

“Ay, hindi po. Survey lang po talaga ito.”

Takot na takot na siya sa mga oras na iyon, pero dapat chill lang siya. Kung hindi, mas mahahalata ng lalaking may kakaiba sa kaniya. ‘Yun nga lang,

mukhang ayaw patinag ng subject nila. Halatang hindi siya kumbinsidong walang ibang balak ang nanay ko. Nagalit pa nga siya sa kasama niyang babae roon sa bahay. Bakit daw siya basta-bastang nagbubukas ng pinto at nakikipag-usap sa hindi niya kilala. Baka raw kung mapaanong siya dahil sa kapabayaan.

Habang pinagalitan ng lalaki ang kasamang babae sa bahay, hindi maiwasan ni Mama na mas matakot pa. Mas lumakas ang kabog ng kaniyang dibdib at pakirandom niya, parang hihimatayin na siya sa anumang sandali. Buti na lang, nakaisip siya ng palusot.

“Ser, teka lang po, Ser. Nahihihilo po ako!” Biglang sabi ni Mama habang kina-career ang pag-aktong mahihimatay.

“Bakit? Anóng nangyayari?” Pagalit na tanong ng subject.

“Ser, may sakit po ako sa puso. Parang inaatake po ako.”

“Ha?” Hindi pa rin kumbinsido ang subject.

“Naku, ayan na nga ba ang sinasabi ko!” Bulyaw ng hinihinalang kabit ng subject. “Tama na muna ang daldal diyan. Tulungan natin siya. Baka kung mapaanong pa ‘yan, maging kargo de kunsensiya pa natin! Mahirap na!”

Nagmadali ang subject at tinulungan si Mama. Mula sa pinto, inalaylan niya ito papasok sa sala ng bahay, kung saan siya pinaupo sa isang sofa.

“Ayan, ayan, parang okey na po ako.”

“Talaga? Teka, tubig? Gusto mo?”

“A, opo! Sige po! Mainit din po kasi—”

“Sige, sandali lang,” sabi niya kay Mama, sabay baling sa kasamang lalaki. “Uy, please. Pakikuha naman siya ng tubig. Kawawa naman.”

Masama ang tingin ng lalaki sa kaniya, halatang may pagdududa pa rin. Iyon nga lang, wala na siyang magawa. Takot nga lang din yata siyang masisi kung mapahamak si Mama lalo na at nasa territoryo nila ito. Kaya iyon, ang ending, kumuha rin siya ng isang basong tubig at iniabot ito kay Mama.

“Ito na. Inom ka.”

“Salamat po,” sabay abot ng baso at tungga ng laman nitong tubig. “Ayan, mas okey na po ako. Salamat!”

Ang suwerte nga naman ng nanay ko. Di na nga nabuking, nakumpirma niya pang totoo ang hinala ng kanilang kliyenteng may ibang babae nang ibinabahay ang kaniyang asawa. Nakalibre pa siya ng tubig.

Bilib na bilib ako kay Mama dahil sa kuwentong ito. Parang pampelikula lang ang tagpo. Iyon nga lang, imbes na puro aksiyon gaya ng karaniwang mapapanood sa espionage at heist films, mas comedy ang dating nito. Mas nakatatawa pa dahil walang habas sa paghalakhak si Mama sa tuwing ikukuwento niya ito.

Dahil sa dami ng mga ganitong istoryang narinig ko noong maliit pa ako ay minsan ko ring naisip na maging tulad ng nanay ko. Parang ang astig lang! Isa pa, pakiramdam ko ay mas magiging proud siya sa akin kung susundan ko ang kaniyang mga yapak. Siguradong matutuwa rin ang aking mga ninong at ninang, pati na rin mga barkada ng tatay kong dati ring private investigator. Pero siyempre, naisip ko, bago ko pa man isiping gayahin ang propesyon ng aking mga magulang, kailangan ko muna ng matinding training. Para maging karapat-dapat sa kanilang mundo, dapat matuto muna ako ng mga kung tawagin ay ninja moves para malusutan ang mga dapat lusutan—gaya mismo ng nanay ko.

\*

Sa tuwing paaalalahanan ako ni Mama na huwag magsinungaling, kumakabog nang husto ang puso ko. Kada sasabihan niya ako'ng kayang-kaya niyang malaman ang eksakto kong lokasyon, kung sino ang tunay kong kasama, at kung ano ang aking ginagawa, ramdam na ramdam ko ang kaba. Di tulad ng ibang mga magulang, kayang-kaya niyang totohanin ang kaniyang mga banta. Para siyang isang camera na nakasakay sa isang drone at mayroong matinding zoom-in powers. Hindi rin puwedeng maliitin ang kakayanan niyang kumuha ng detalye, para bang may matinik siyang recording capability at malaking storage capacity. At siyempre, di rin biro ang kaya niyang marating! Kaya nga, iba na lang ang takot ko noong nagsimula akong gumawa ng kalokohan noong ako ay nasa kolehiyo—tulad na lang noong minsang hindi ako umuwi sa bahay para makipag-inuman at magpalipas ng gabi sa tirahan ng dati kong dine-date.

“Enjoy kayo ni Jed!” Sabi ng text message niya sa akin, ilang minuto lang ang nakalilipas matapos kong sabihing hindi ako makauuwi dahil may

tinatapos na papel para sa isang klase. Gaya nang dati, ginamit ko na namang dahilan ang kaibigan kong si Trisha dahil alam niyang nakatira ito sa loob ng unibersidad.

“Hala! Si Trisha po talaga ang kasama ko! Kung gusto niyo pumunta pa kayo rito, e.” Reply ko sa kaniya. Kunwari matapang, kahit na ang totoo'y hindi na ako mapakali. Malay ko ba, baka sinusundan na talaga ako.

Kinabukasan, tuloy pa rin ang pagpapanggap. Bukod sa pagsigurong walang kahina-hinalang amoy na kumapit sa akin damit at balat, naghanda rin ako ng mga imbellong kuwentong maaaring ibato kung sakali mang mangusisa siya sa kung ano ang ginawa ko sa bahay ni Trisha. At para siguradong walang butas ang naratibo, nagpadala rin ako ng text message sa kaibigan ko at sinabihan siya kung ano ang sasabihin kay Mama kung i-text man siya nito tungkol sa nagdaang gabi. Buti na lang, game lang ang kaibigan ko.

Pagdating sa bahay, kinailangan kong ikalma ang sarili nang hindi pagdudahan. Kaswal na kaswal ang bati ko kay Mama. Maingat ko ring tinantsa ang kuwento; hindi bitin para di pag-isipang may itinatago, at hindi rin naman sobra-sobra para hindi paghinalaang may pinagtatakpan. Mukhang epektibo naman.

O, talaga nga ba? Kahina-hinala kasi ang katahimikan niya noong mga oras na iyon; walang tanong-tanong kung ano ang nangyari sa akin, ni walang pag-uusisa kung kumusta na si Trisha. Samantalang noong mga nakaraan, walang pasubali kung siya ay magtanong. Kulang na nga lang, ipa-reenact niya ang lahat ng mga nangyari sa aming lakad. Hindi ko tuloy maiwasang magtaka kung talaga bang kumbinsido siya kaya't di mausisa o baka naman nananahimik dahil alam na niloloko ko siya at naghihintay na lang na aminin ko ang katotohanan.

Hindi ko alam, pero sa mga oras na iyon, malakas ang kutob kong nasundan na ako ng nanay ko. Malamang, nakita at narinig niya rin ang lahat ng mga kailangang makita at marinig.

Però dahil sadyang matigas ang ulo ko, hindi ko tinigilan ang paggawa ng kalokohan, lalo na noong nagsimula akong mag-part-time job. Dahil may sarili nang pera, mas may kalayaan na akong umalis sa bahay. Pinapayagan na rin akong umuwi nang gabi, lalo na at madalas naman talagang natatagalanan ako sa racket. Dahil mas malakas na ang loob, mas makapal na rin ang mukha ko pagdating sa paggawa ng kalokohan.

Sa mga panahong ito ko unang nasubukang pumasok sa motel. Bukod sa may taglay akong kalandian, curious din ako kung ano ba ang meron sa loob ng mga silid ng animong makasalanang mga gusaling ito na kung tawagin nila Mama noon ay “biglang liko” at “bahay na walang kusina.”

Di matawaran ang excitement ko noong unang makaapak sa isang motel. Sa SOGO pa iyon sa may Recto, kaya mas kakaiba ang thrill. Kaya lang, ang pagkasabik kong ito ay natalo ng kaba. Noon kasing pagpasok ko sa motel na iyon, una kong napansin ang dami ng mga taong naghihintay sa lobby. Hindi ko maiwasang mapaisip kung ilan sa mga iyon ang tunay na mga customer na naroon para sa sexy time. ‘Yung iba siguro, mga private investigator ding may sinusundang subject. Naku, baka mayroon pa sa kanilang mula sa ahensiyan pinagtrabahuan ni Mama. Lagot! Doon pa naman din nagsisilbi ang isa kong ninong. Paano kung nakatimbre pala ako sa mga tauhan nila?

Alam ko, OA ang pagkapranging ko sa mga oras na iyon, lalo nga at hindi naman ako ganoon ka-espesyal para laging sundan ng mga tao. Isa pa, walang oras ang mga gaya nilang magmasid ng hindi naman nila subject dahil ang pansi nila'y dapat nakatuon lang sa kung sino ang dapat sundan. Pero dahil guilty talaga ako dahil sa mga kasungalingan ko kay Mama, pati na rin sa mga kalokohang pinangako ko sa kaniyang hindi ko gagawin, kung ano-ano na lang talaga ang pumasok sa isip ko. Palakas nang palakas din ang dagundong sa puso ko.

Sa huli, tumuloy ako sa paggawa ng kalokohan at gumamit ng ibang rason kay Mama kung bakit hindi nakauwi. Hindi ko na maalala kung trabaho o kaibigan ang idinahilan ko. Basta ang mahalaga, nakalusot na naman ako. Hindi ginisa sa sangkatutak na mga tanong. Ni hindi niya ako tiningnan mula ulo hanggang paa na parang kung anong gamit na kinikilatis bago bilhin. Sobrang kalmado lang niya pag-uwi ko kinabukasan. Walang problema. O, talaga nga ba?

Siyempre, pagpasok ko sa kuwarto, hindi ko ulit maiwasang mangamba. Di ko maiwasang tanunin ang sarili. Talaga bang magaling akong magsinungaling o alam niyang niloloko ko siya? Baka naman alam niya, at hindi lang siya umiimik para pagtrip-an ako? Patay!

\*

Nasa tamang edad na ako, kaya hindi na kinakabahan sa tuwing gagawa ng kalokohan. Dahil nakabukod na at may sariling trabaho, hinahayaan

na lang ako ni Mama na gawin ang anumang nais ko. Hindi rin siya pala-text o palatawag gaya ng ibang magulang. Kadalasan, sa Facebook na lang kami nagkakabalitaan at nagkakakumustahan.

Marami sa mga kaibigan ko ngayon, lalo na iyong mga hindi nakaaalam ng dating propesyon ng nanay ko, laging pinupuri ang pagiging “chill” umano ni Mama. Buti pa raw siya, hindi praning gaya ng ibang nanay. Sila kasi, kahit matatanda na’t may sari-sarili nang mga buhay, kailangan pa ring magpaalam kung may gagawing mahalaga o may malayong lugar na pupuntahan.

Lagi kong sinasabi sa kanilang kaniya-kaniyang trip lang naman iyan pagdating sa buhay. At sa totoo lang, kung minsan, kinakabahan pa rin naman ako sa pagiging sobrang chill ng nanay ko. Oo nga’t hindi siya matanong at mausisa sa akin, pero ewan, minsan nagugulat na lang ako’t ang dami na niyang alam tungkol sa akin.

Madalas, magpaparamdam siya kung kailan may nangyayari sa akin tulad ng mga oras na may sakit ako o may pinagdaraanan sa buhay. Hindi man ako maunang magsabi, parang ang bilis niyang makatunog na kailangan ko ng payo o kahit man lang pasimpleng words of encouragement.

Pero sa mga ganitong pagkakataon din, hindi ko mapigilan ang pagbabalik ng mga duda ko—paano kung talagang pinasusundan ako ng nanay ko? O baka naman, may tracking device kayang naka-embed sa kung saan mang sulok ng katawan ko kaya naririnig niya agad at nalalaman kung ano ang nangyayari sa akin, nasaan man ako? Ang awkward naman yata kung ganoon. O, siguro, ganoon lang talaga ang mga nanay sa kanilang mga anak.

# BUHOK

Chuckberry J. Pascual

## I

Ang sabi ng nanay ko, pangit daw akong baby. Sinabi niya ito batay raw sa reaksiyon ng mga taong bumibisita noon para kumustahin ang nanay kong bagong panganak, at siyempre, para makita ang sanggol na ipinanganak niya. Sa compound kami nakatira sa Malabon, at medyo big deal ang paglabas ko. Ako ang unang apo ng mga Pascual, at bunga ng kapusukan ng aking mga magulang; kapwa wala pang beinte anyos ang mga magulang ko nang lumitaw ako bilang fetus sa sinapupunan ng nanay ko. Nag-aaral pa silang dalawa sa kolehiyo. Kilalang pasaway ang tatay ko, parang walang direksyon ang buhay. “Pogi” na ang bansag sa kanya sa barangay, bago pa lumitaw si Bong Revilla sa *Alyas Pogi*. (Hindi ko alam kung malabo lang ba ang mata ng mga tao sa amin o sadyang mabait lang ang tatay ko sa kanilang lahat o kung ipinanganak silang lahat na sinungaling.) Ang nanay ko naman, panganay sa pitong magkakapatid, seryosong dalaga, mukhang may ambisyon. Pero hayun nga, biglang naging butete. Kulay Nazareno rin ang tatay ko, at ang nanay ko? Sabihin na lang nating hanggang ngayon, nagngingitngit siya sa lahat ng taong tumatawag sa kanyang “anak-araw.” Ipinanganak kasi siyang may albinism.

Sa isip ko, hinog para sa dramatikong engkuwentro ang sitwasyon. Tipong puwedeng magkaroon ng eksena ng sumbatan na parang sa pelikula. Iyong may mga dialogue na “panagutan mo ang anak ko!” (sasabihin ng mga magulang ng nanay ko) o “mahal ko po siya, iyon ang mahalaga!” (sasabihin ng nanay ko o tatay ko, bilang katwiran sa mga pinaggagawa nila) o simpleng racist na hirit lang, “hoy, negro!” (kahit na sino ang puwedeng magsabi nito patungkol sa tatay ko, pero mas madalas ko itong marinig sa nanay ko pag

naiinis siya sa tatay.) Iyon nga lang, sadyang hindi yata kumbensiyonal ang mga kadugo ko kahit dati pa, at ikinasal nang walang aberya ang aking mga magulang. (Maraming beses ko ring tiningnan ang wedding album nila. Nagagandahan kasi ako sa empire cut na wedding gown ng nanay, kahit na alam kong hindi lang fashion ang nagdikta nito, kundi pag-iwas sa eskandalo: nakabukol na ako noon sa tiyan niya. Namamangha rin ako dahil naglalakihan ang ngiti sa mukha ng mga tao. Parang ang saya-saya nilang lahat na may ikinasal na 16 at 19 taong gulang.)

Hindi nagkaroon ng gusot, dahil may baby nang kasama sa usapan. Ako nga. Na kung iiispin, e nangangahulugang mabuti ang bunga ng unyon ng mga magulang ko, hindi ba? Pero hanggang ngayon, hindi ko alam kung nagbibiro ang nanay ko sa tuwing sinasabi niya sa aking “hindi ko naman talaga gusto y’ang hayup na ama mo!” sabay kuwento tungkol sa mga manliligaw niyang di hamak na mas mayaman, mas guwapo at mas matangkad noong panahon bago siya nabuntis. Pero dahil nga may baby, may bagong buhay, at basta may bagong buhay, may pag-asa. Sabi nga nila, kayang palambutin ng baby kahit ang pinakamatigas na puso. Ang dahilan daw nito, at isa pang sabi nga nila, ipinapanganak na maganda at nakakatuwa ang lahat ng baby.

Kaya pagkatapos kong lumitaw sa mundo nang walang anumang pagtutol, ganoon na lang ang pagtataka ng nanay ko nang walang magsabi ni isa sa mga sumilip sa akin na “ang cute naman ng baby mo!” Puro daw “aaah, iyan pala ang panganay mo” o mas malala, “kawawa naman si Toying”—patungkol sa Lola ko na ipinanganak na Virgo at mahilig magbida-bida sa compound—sabay iibahin ang usapan, nariyang mapunta sa kung sino ang pinakahuling nabuntis sa barangay, o kung sino ang huling nagbangayang magkapitbahay.

Puro daw kasi ako buhok, kaya itim na itim tingnan. Hindi rin nakatulong na nagtagataganan sa laki ang mga mata ko at mga butas ng ilong, kaya may apat na bilog na nakalutang sa bungkos ng buhok. “Mukha kang unggoy, anak,” sabi sa akin ng nanay ko. Nasa Japan kaming dalawa noon, naninigarilyo sa kusina niya. Dumalaw ako sa nanay ko habang winter break. Wala siyang ginastos sa paglipad ko sa Japan, pero siya ang bumili ng sigarilyo ko, siya ang bumili ng train ticket ko papunta at pabalik ng Osaka, siya ang nagpapakain sa akin sa buong winter break, at siya rin ang mahusay sa Nihongo. Siempre, ngumiti na lang ako.

Nag-aarial ako noon bilang exchange student sa isang unibersidad sa Shizuoka, at unang beses kong magpa-semikalbo. Mahal kasi ang gupit

doon. Discounted na ang sinisingil sa akin ng isang kaklase kong barbero, pero hinayang na hinayang pa rin ako kapag nagbabayad. Kaya dalawang beses lang akong nagpagupit sa loob ng anim na buwan. Semikalbo nga, para mas matagal humaba. Nagmumukha akong rambutan pagkatapos ng ilang linggo. Mabuti na lang, malamig ang panahon, kaya madalas akong nakasuot ng bonnet. Kapag titingnan ko nga ngayon ang mga larawan ko noon sa Shizuoka, naaawa ako sa anit ko. Kahit kasi malamig, nagpapawis pa rin ako sa ulo.

Bago pumunta sa Japan, ugali kong magpagupit tuwing dalawang linggo. Kaya noon ko lang unang nakita kung gaano pala talaga kasama ang hitsura ko kapag mahaba ang buhok. Hindi, hindi naman ako nagbalik sa pagging unggoy—nag-aahit na ako ng bigote at balbas noon—pero dahil saksakan ng tigas ang tubo, mukha akong laging may atip na yari sa buhok sa magkabilang gilid ng ulo. Saka iyon nga, rambutan.

## II

Kung paniniwalaan ang nanay ko, malambot ang buhok ko dati. Itim na itim, unat na unat, at higit sa lahat, sumusunod. Parang totoo naman, kung ibabatay sa mga picture ko noon na kuntodo naka-apple cut pa: hindi na ako mukhang unggoy na bata, mukha na lang akong Pekingese. Na may magandang buhok. Pero isang araw, napagtripan daw akong gupitan ng tito kong bading. Itinulad raw ang gupit ko sa gupit ng mga punk. Mula sa apple cut, pinaigsi ang buhok ko hanggang sa magsitayuan. May mga picture din ako na pinapatunayan ito. Hindi na ako mukhang Pekingese. Mukha na akong punk na Pekingese. Ayos naman, cute na aso naman ang Pekingese. Ang kaso, mula noon, “nagtampo” na raw ang buhok ko. Hindi na ito bumalik sa dating ganda, at sa halip, naging kapareho na ng buhok ko sa kasalukuyan: unat pa rin naman, itim pa rin naman, pero naging singtigas na ng steel wool. Sa madaling salita, nasira ang buhok ko dahil pinaglaruan ito ng bakla. Pero hindi pa rin nadala ang matatanda sa amin, dahil pagkatapos mapariwara ang buhok ko dahil sa bakla, sa mga bakla pa rin nila ipinagkatiwala ang paggupit sa akin.

Elementary na ako noon. Nagtatrabaho sa ibang bansa ang nanay ko, at lola ang nag-aalaga sa akin. Nagpasya ang lolang pagupitan ako kay Joshua. Tulad ng tito ko, bakla rin si Joshua. Pero hindi katulad ng tito ko na mataas

lagi ang boses at bargas ang bokabularyo—nagmumura siya kapag galit, masaya, malungkot, kapag nagugulat, naihi, nagugutom, kapag bagong gising, habang nagkakape, nagbabasa ng diyaryo, nanonood ng TV, nakikipaglaro sa bata, atbp—mahinahon magsalita si Joshua, at hindi palamura. Tumitili rin siya kapag nakikipagkuwentuhan, pero laging may pagpipigil. Ang dating nga sa akin, napipilitan lang siyang tumili para makisama sa mga kapwa baklang laging nagtititili. At higit sa lahat, mahilig siyang mag-English. “Yes, mother?” “Ay naku, yes, of course, mother!” ang bukambilig ni Joshua kapag kausap ang lola ko. May mangilan-ngilan pang mga parirala na pinapakawalan si Joshua tulad ng “ika-cut po natin here,” “lessen po natin ang sides,” “brush up everyday.”

Sa kung anong hindi ko mawaring dahilan, tuwang-tuwa kay Joshua ang lola ko. Sa sobrang tuwa, napapa-Ingles na rin, “Ay, yes naman, Joshua! You talaga!” Hinding-hindi ko naririnig ang mga salitang ito sa lola kapag nasa bahay kami, o kahit pa sa palengke, kapag nakikipagtawaran siya. (Galante ang lola ko. Bihirang tumawad. Kaya kapag tinanggihan ang tawad niya, halos hindi niya mapatawad ang tindera.) Nag-iibang tao siya kapag nasa parlor ni Joshua: humihinahon ang boses, natututong mag-Ingles, parang hindi napapasigaw ng “Ay, titi ng hari!” kapag nagugulat.

Sa mga araw na sarado ang parlor ni Joshua—dumadalo kasi siya sa rehearsal ng choir sa simbahan—at kailangan ko nang magpagupit dahil may haircut inspection sa paaralan, dinadala ako ng lola kay Ypee. Hanggang ngayon, hindi ko alam kung ano ang tamang bigkas sa ngalan ni Ypee dahil pabago-bago ang bigkas ng lola ko. Minsan tinatawag niya itong Epi, parang pangalan ng anak ni Dolphy. Minsan naman, Ipe, tulad ng palayaw ni Philip Salvador. At kung minsan, nagiging parang acronym, Aypi. Dahil dito, hindi ko matawag si Ypee sa pangalan. (Pumasok sa isip kong tawagin siyang Felipe, dahil ito ang alam kong tunay niyang pangalan. Pero kinutuban ako na mapapahamak ako kapag ginawa iyon, kaya hindi na ako nangahas pa.) Tumitikhim lang ako kapag may gustong sabihin sa kanya, tulad halimbawa kapag kulang ang tubig na nilagay niya sa balat ko, kaya nasasaktan ako sa ahit ng blade. “Hrrrm, masakit po,” “Hrrmm, aray, aray.”

Hindi naman ako laging nasasaktan sa blade ni Ypee, pero mas gusto ko pa rin si Joshua sa kanya. May kasungitan kasi si Ypee, at nakakatakot ang boses. Isang beses, dahil naigalaw ko ang ulo habang ginugupitan, bumalalas siya, “Sinabi nang huwag kang malikot, magugupit ko ang tainga mo, e.” Hindi ko naman sinadyang maglikot, gumalaw lang ang ulo ko dahil pilit binabasa

ang headline sa isang entertainment magazine na nakapatong sa katabing silya.

Isang araw, nagpasya akong huwag na talagang magpagupit kay Ypee. Naghihintay ako noon na maggupitan, at nagbabasa lang ng isang entertainment magazine. Hapon iyon, mga bandang alas tres. Mag-isa lang akong nagpunta dahil abala sa bahay ang lola. Apat lang kami noon sa loob ng parlor: si Ypee, ang babaeng ginugupitan niya, at ang kapatid ni Ypee. Bakla rin ang kapatid ni Ypee, at nagbibihis-babae. Tingin ako nang tingin sa kapatid ni Ypee, dahil mukha talaga itong babae. Maputi, singkit, matambok ang mga pisngi, makipot ang labi, at matangos ang maliit na ilong. Mukhang Haponesa. (Nang maglaon, nalaman kong nagtatrabaho pala ito bilang entertainer sa Japan, at nagbabakasyon lang noon.)

Napansin ng kapatid ni Ypee na panay ang sulyap ko sa kanya. Kinausap nito si Ypee sa wikang itis, iyong sinisingitan ng “itis” ang bawat pantig ng salita. Halimbawa, siitisnoitis baitis angitis baitistaitis naitis? *Sino ba ang batang ito?* Na sinagot naman ni Ypee ng “aitispoitis niitis Aitislingitis Toitisyingitis.” *Apo ni Aling Toyng.*

Nagsasalita rin nang ganito ang ilang mga pinsan ko, para hindi raw sila maintindihan ng iba. Nagpaturo ako. Naiintindihan ko naman nang kaunti, pero hindi ako makasabay. Nakakairita lang na para silang mga bubuyog kapag nagsasalita. Hindi ko masala ang mga tamang pantig sa mga nakabudbod na itis. Pero noong hapong iyon, natunungan kong ako ang pinag-uusapan ni Ypee at ng kapatid niya. Hindi ko man lubos na nagagap ang mga sinabi nila, nakuha ko pa rin na pinagkukuwentuhan nila ang buhok ko. Nahuli rin ng tainga ko ang salitang “Pekingese.” Puwedeng katunog lang ito ng lahat ng itis na pinagsasabi nila, pero nasaling na ang bata kong ego. “Hrrmm, may nakalimutan lang po ako sa bahay. Babalik na lang ako,” sabi ko, sabay labas ng parlor. Siyempre, hindi na ako bumalik. Haircut inspection kinabukasan, at napingot ako sa patilya ng adviser namin dahil hindi ako nakapagpagupit, pero okay lang. Bumalik na lang ako noong sumunod na Sabado sa parlor ni Joshua. “Why, hello there,” batì ni Joshua sa akin.

Nagkaroon ng kasarinlan ang buhok ko noong high school. Ako na lang mag-isa ang nagpapagupit, kaya ako na ang pumipili kung saan gustong pumunta. Sumubok ako sa barbero, pero pagkatapos ng dalawa o tatlong beses, hindi na ako bumalik. Nahirati ako masyado sa mga bakla sa parlor. Mabait kasi sa akin si Joshua. Kahit noong naglagay ako ng baby oil

sa buhok bago magpagupit, hindi siya nagalit sa akin. Bumuntong-hininga lang siya pagkatapos sabihing “I know what you did, ikaw talaga.” Saka niya ako shinampoo, para hindi na dumulas-dulas sa gunting ang buhok ko. Kahit masungit sa akin si Ypee at tinawag niya akong Pekingese, hindi ko naramdaman na kinukuwestiyon niya ang pagkatao ko. Komportable ako kina Joshua at Ypee, dahil alam kong pare-pareho kami.

Hindi ko iyon naramdaman sa barbero. Wala namang ginawang kahit ano ang mga barbero sa akin, mabuti naman ang naging pakikitungo nila sa akin. Pero mabuway pa ang kumpiyansa ko sa sarili, at takot pa ako sa pagiging iba. Sa tuwing papasok ako sa barberyia, takot na takot akong mabuking na bakla. Hindi rin nakakatulong na pawang barako ang naroon, mula sa mga kostumer hanggang sa mga gumugupit. Ang pangamba ko, alam nilang hindi nila ako katulad, at babastusin nila ako dahil doon. Ngayong binabalikan ko, siyempre, imposibleng hindi malaman ng kahit na sino. Sa hin hin kong kumilos noong bata pa at sa takot kong mabuko, kahit aso sa kanto, ang dinig ko sa kahol, “Bakla! Bakla!”

Sa paglipas ng mga taon, nagpapalipat-lipat ako sa parlor at barberyia. Kahit ngayon na sa barbero na talaga ako nagpupunta, pangunahin dahil sila ang marunong mag-alaga ng balbas (hindi pa rin ako barako, pero mukha na akong barako), dumadalaw pa rin ako sa parlor kapag may pagkakataon. Sinasadya kong magpagupit sa parlor, lalo na kapag eleksyon, at tumatakbo ang Ladlad partylist. Kinakampanya ko sa mga parlorista ang naturang partylist. Penitensiya na rin siguro dahil sa nararamdaman kong pag-abandona sa parlor para sa barberyia.

### III

May napanood akong pelikula noon sa telebisyon, si Nora Aunor ang bida. Mahaba ang buhok ni Nora sa pelikula, lampas-balikat. Sa isang eksena, hinahabol siya ng taumbayan, at inabutan siya ng mga ito sa simbahan. Nang mapagtanto ni Nora na nasukol na siya, dahan-dahan, naglakad siya pauring, patungo sa altar. Pinalibutan siya ng taumbayan, at saka nawala sa mata ng kamera. Lumubog siya sa dagat ng mga tao. Pagkaraan ng ilang segundo, nahati ang dagat ng taumbayan, at saka muling lunitaw si Nora. Naka-siyete na siya. Medyo maganda pa nga ang pagkakagupit, pantay sa gilid, may pagka-

layered. Bagay naman kay Nora ang gupit, pero batay sa ekspresyon ng mukha niya at sa atmosphere ng eksena, para siyang pinarusahan.

Hindi ko nabuo ang pelikula, pero tumimo ang eksenang iyon sa akin. Pagkatkat ng buhok bilang parusa, bilang pagsisisi. Umalingawngaw sa isip ko ang mga pagbabanta sa aming magpipinsan ng lola, “kakalbuhan ko kayong mga lintek kayo!” Madalas niya itong sabihin, lalo na kapag mainit ang ulo. Hindi naman niya tinotoo, pero kapag naririnig mo ang banta ng pagkakalbo habang sinasabunutan ka, matatakot ka talaga. Alam ko na noon na may mga batang lalaking kalbo, at mas maraming matandang lalaking kalbo, pero parang natatakot akong kalbuhan ng lola ko. Parang nakakapahiya. Tulad ko, hindi rin naman talaga kinalbo si Nora sa pelikula, pero napahiya siya nang gupitan nang maigsi. (At ang totoo, naka-siyete rin ang lola, parang si Nora, kaya minsan ring pumasok sa isip ko na baka may kasalanan siyang nagawa sa mga taumbayan kaya ganoon kaigsi ang kaniyang buhok.)

Halos dalawang dekada na ang lumipas nang magbalik sa akin ang eksenang ito. Sabado ng gabi noon, nasa bahay ako ng isang kaibigan. Mag-iinuman kami ng barkada. Excited ako noong Sabadong iyon, dahil madalang akong makalabas. Pinagsasabay ko kasi ang pagtuturo sa high school at pag-aaral na gradwado, kaya halos wala akong pahinga. Nasa gitna kami ng inuman nang matanggap ko ang text: “Wala na si Mommy.”

Tiyahin ko si Mommy, at kasama ng lola ko, siya ang nagpalaki sa akin. Nag-iisa siyang anak na babae ng lola, at kapatid ng tatay ko. Ilang buwan na siyang nakaratay dahil sa cancer. Nagpa-chemotherapy siya, pero dahil terminal stage na nang matuklasan ang cancer, pinayuhan na lang kami ng doktor ng pain management. Iniuwi namin siya sa bahay.

Pagkatapos basahin ang text, dahan-dahan ang pagdapo ng reyalisasyon: wala na nga ang tiyahin ko. Namalayan ko na lang na basa na ng luha ang mga pisngi. Pagkuwa'y napahawak ako sa ulo, at wala sa sariling dinaklot at hinila-hila ang buhok doon. (Hindi ko naman sinabunutan ang sarili. Hinila ko lang ang sariling buhok, dahil biglang sumakit ang ulo.) At saka ko naalala si Nora, noong kinubkob at kinatkat ng taumbayan ang buhok niya. Kinabukasan, nagpakalbo ako.

Hindi ko kasi kaya iyong pagsusuot ng itim na damit o kahit iyong itim na pin araw-araw. Masyadong mainit ang itim, at abala naman ang pagkakabit ng pin sa damit. Kaya sa buhok ko na lang idinaan ang dalamhati. Parang si Nora sa *Tatlong Taong Walang Diyos*, hangga't hindi humahaba nang tama ang buhok niya, maaalala niya at maalala ng lahat ng makakakita

sa kanya na may nagawa siyang kasalanan. Gusto ko ring makita ng lahat, at makita ko mismo, ang pagluluksa ko para sa aking tiyahin.

Ngayon, naiisip ko, baka pinaparusahan ko rin ang sarili. Parang wala kasi akong masyadong nagawa para sa tiyahin ko. Dahil noong iniuwi namin siya sa bahay, naramdaman ko ang bigat ng hangin. Nariyang nagpipigil ako ng ihi sa madaling araw, dahil umiiwas akong marinig ang iyak ng tiyahin ko habang papunta ako sa banyo. Bago ako pumasok ng trabaho, madalas kong maabutan ang lolang nakaupo sa gilid ng kama, nakasubsob ang ulo sa kutson, at hinihimas-himas ang braso ng tiyahin ko. Umiiyak nang mahina ang tiyahin ko. Dire-diretso lang ako sa paghahanda para sa trabaho. Mga alas singko y medya ng umaga iyon, at may mga traysikel na. Nagpapasalamat ako dahil kinokompetensiya na ng mga angil ng tricycle ang mga iyak ng tiyahin ko. Dumadaan lang ako sa kuwarto niya para magpaalam na aalis na, nagmamadali pa.

Isang taon ko lang sana balak manatiling kalbo. Pero dahil komportable pala na walang inaaalalang buhok sa ulo—bawas ang oras ng pag-aayos sa umaga, matapang sa pagharap sa hangin sa kalsada, tipid sa hair conditioner, presko kapag mainit ang panahon—tatlong taon akong naging kalbo. Nagpahaba lang ako noong nagsawa na sa kawalan ng buhok, at nagsawa na rin sa mga hirit ng nanay ko: “Ano ba yan, mukha kang balot.” (Sabay kuwento na ipinaglihi niya ako sa balot, at iyon daw ang posibleng dahilan kung bakit ako ipinanganak na isang bungkos ng buhok na naging baby. Sa mga mata ng nanay ko, kung hindi ako unggoy, mukha akong sisiw mula sa pinisang itlog.)

#### IV

Conscious ako dati na alisin ang lahat ng buhok sa mukha. Ang katwiran ko, makapal na nga ang buhok ko sa ulo, huwag nang paabutin pa sa nguso at pisngi. Takot na takot din akong magmukhang matanda, o mapagkamalang kontrabida. (Hindi lang iisang tao ang nagsabi sa akin na kahawig ko si Dick Israel. “Kamukha mo siya, pero noong bata pa naman siya,” sabi ng nanay ko, na para bang dapat gumaan ang loob ko. At para patunayan na alam niya ang sinasabi, babanggitin pa: “Luko-luko ang papel niya don sa isang pelikula. Hawig na hawig talaga kayo.”) Pero dahil nauuso ang unlirice at lagi akong pagod sa trabaho at pag-aaral, naging mantra ko ang

"I deserve it!" sa tuwing kumakain sa labas. Isang araw, napansin ko na lang na magkakadugtong na ang aking baba, leeg, at mga pisngi. Para akong malaki at matabang mukhang ipinatong sa mga balikat na matataba rin.

Saka ko naisip ang kapangyarihan ng pagiging mabuhok. Sa halip na magpapayat at sa gayon ay tubuan ng leeg, nagpatubo ako ng goatee. Mukha akong may patse ng itim na damo sa ilalim ng mukha. Nagkaroon na ng boundary ang mukha at leeg. Pero hindi ko pa rin masawata ang tambok ng mga pisngi. Kaya nagpahaba ako ng mga patilya, at hinayaan itong dumugtong sa buhok ko sa baba. Naging balbas ang goatee.

Nakuntento naman ako sa ganito, iyong nakakuwadro ng buhok ang mukha ko. Sumasagi sa isip ko na magpatubo ng bigote, pero natatakot akong tuluyan nang maging kambal ni Dick Israel o ni Bomber Moran. Hindi naman sa nakakahindik ang mga mukha nila, ano? Ayoko lang magmukhang...nakakatakot. Kaya nag-aahit pa rin ako ng bigote. Sa isip ko, kesehodang mapuno ng buhok ang paligid ng mukha ko, hangga't wala akong bigote, mukha akong anghel (na mukhang unggoy, na mukhang Pekingese, na mukhang balot.)

Hanggang nakilala ko si D. Si D ang unang balbas-saradong tao na naging malapit sa akin. Sa kanya ko rin napatunayang totoo nga ang iniisip ko at ng iba pang tulad kong nang-iistiryotipo sa mga balbas-sarado: mukha siyang masamang loob. Parang manghahabol ng kuwintas, magnanakaw ng kotse, manunuba ng kapwa. (Nababawasan naman ang mga kahila-hilakbot na impresyong ito kapag ngumingiti si D, dahil nagmumukha siyang Santa Claus. Iyon nga lang Santa Claus na Asyano, at mukhang nangingidnap ng bata.) Kaya sa tuwing nagpupunta kami sa mall, siya lagi ang unang kinakapkapan ng mga guwardiya. Kapag pupunta kami sa kung anong opisina, siya ang unang hinihingan ng ID. Kapag magkasama kami at may umaali-aligid na ahente, kahit isang beses, hindi siya nilalapitan. Ako lagi ang napupuntiryta. Noong umpsisa, ang akala ko, mukha kasi akong mayaman at mabait. Nang maglaon, naisip kong natatakot lang yatang lumapit kay D ang mga ahente.

Mas matanda na rin ako noong nagkakilala kami, at nagkokompetensiya kami sa bigat ng timbang at laki ng katawan. Mas matangkad ako, pero patas lang kami halos ng bigat: mukha man siyang nasa kabuwanan, ga-troso naman ang mga hita ko. Madalas nga kaming mapagkamalang magkamag-anak: magpinsan, magkapatid, kung minsan nga, kambal pa. Natatawa lang kami pareho sa tuwing may bumabanggit. Isang

araw, napansin niya ang tumutubo kong bigote. "Bakit di mo pahabain?" tanong ni D. Napasulyap ako kay D at nadama ang biglang kabog ng dibdib. Mukha talaga siyang balakyot. Kaibigan ko na siya, pero may kaba pa rin sa biglang tingin. Pero dahil sa mungkahi niya, tumigil ako sa pag-aahit ng bigote. Hanggang isang araw, pareho na kaming balbas-sarado. Hindi na rin ako nilalapitan ng mga ahente sa mall, kung minsan, ako na ang unang kinakapkapan, may mga batang nandidilat ang mata kapag nakikita ako, sabay siksik sa mga nanay nila. Sa madaling salita, ayos naman ang buhay. Siyempre, kasabay ng lahat ng ito, lalo ring dumalas ang mga pagkakataon na napagkakamalan kaming magkapatid ni D. Naging pangkaraniwan na sa amin ang mga paglingon kapag magkasama kami sa labas.

Kaya noong nililingon na ako ng mga kamag-anak ni D sa burol, ngumingiti lang ako. Makailang beses kong narinig na may kamag-anak siyang napabulalas, "Oy! Akala ko si D!" o kaya naman, "Grabe, mukha kayong kambal!" Sabay tapik sa balikat ko, kahit unang beses lang naming magkita. Iyong iba, hindi lumalapit sa akin, pero ang lakas naman ng boses. Parang mga artistang bumubulong sa entablado. Kunwari mahina, pero ipinaparinig naman sa iba. Ngumingiti lang ako sa lahat ng mga pagbati nila, dahil si D ang nakaburol. Inaliw ko na lang ang sarili sa panonood ng transisyon nila mula gulat papuntang takot papuntang pagtataka papunta sa pagbibitaw ng kung anong baryasyon ng "kamukha mo 'yung patay!"

Nalaman ko ang pagkamatay ni D isang Sabado ng gabi sa simbahan ng Quiapo. Isang kaibigan namin ang nagbalita sa akin. Sa pagkabigla, namalayan ko na lang na basa na pala ang mga pisngi ko, at umaalingawngaw ang mga palahaw ko sa loob ng simbahan. Nakatingin sa akin ang maraming tao, pero wala akong naramdam na kahit anong kahihiyian. Sige lang ako sa pag-iyak. Kaya maning-mani lang sa akin iyong mga tingin sa akin ng mga kamag-anak ni D sa burol. Naiisip ko nga, hindi na yata ako matitinag ng kahit anong pagtingin o pagtitig pagkatapos noon.

Ngayon, kahit pareho kami ng timbang, bigote, balbas, at halos pati mukha ni D, magkaiba kami ng buhok sa ulo. Nagpapagupit nga kasi ako tuwing dalawang linggo, at siya naman, kada dalawang taon lang kung magpagupit. Hanggang balikat ang buhok ni D. Noong namatay siya, naisip kong sagarin na ang pagiging magkamukha namin. Magpapahaba na rin ako ng buhok. Bahala na kung sisitahin ako sa trabaho, bahala na kung bagay sa akin. Isip ko, kung mukhang taong kuweba si D, mukha naman akong unggoy / Pekingese / balot, hindi na rin siguro masyadong malayo ang magiging

resulta. Talo-talo na. Basta tulad noong namatay ang tiyahin ko, gusto kong maalala araw-araw na nagluluksa ako.

Però hanggang dalawang buwan lang ang kinaya ko. Hiyang-hiya man sa sarili at sa malalapit na kaibigan—ipinagkalat ko kasi na magpapahaba ako ng buhok, isang paraan para masiguro kong tutuparin talaga ang plano—bumalik ako sa barbero. Sumuko kasi ako sa hitsura ko sa salamin. Mula nang matamatay si D, sinisimulan ko ang bawat araw na malungkot, at lalo lang akong nalulugmok sa tuwing nakikita ko ang sariling patuloy na humahaba ang buhok. Sumuko rin ako sa bigat. Naisip ko ito habang nasa banyo. Dahil nga alaga sa gupit, hindi ako sanay na maraming sina-shampoo. Napapalatak rin ako nang makuwenta ang nadagdag sa buwanang gastos para sa hair conditioner. (Takot kasi akong magmukhang sabukot sa paghaba ng buhok.)

Alam ko, ito naman ang gusto kong mangyari: ang magkaroon ng pisikal na manitestasyon ang pagluluksa. Na hindi ako makalimot na nagdurugo ang puso ko. Na hindi mawawaglit sa isip ko—kahit isang saglit, kahit pa ilang buwan na ang lumipas, kahit pa kaya ko nang tumawa ulit nang mataginting—na dumurugo pa rin ang puso ko sa pagkawala ni D. Pero ang napagtanto ko, hindi ko pala kayang mabuhay nang ganoon. Masyadong masakit, masyadong mabigat. Kaya nga nagpagupit rin ako. Pero alam mo, wala naman akong nadamang ginhawa o gaan pagkatapos.

# KUWADRO KARA:

## Apat Na Mukhang Muntik Ko

## Nang Hindi Mamukhaan

Joselito D. De Los Reyes

### 1. MUSIKO

Dapat kahapon ko pa ito naisulat. Pagkauwing-pagkauwi sana. Pero dahil alipin ng hilo at sakit ang bumbunan ko dulot ng nakaririnaram at nakalalasing na likido, hangover, hindi ko naisulat. Naks.

Ito 'yun. Pagkabalik galing Amerika, nagpa-reunion ang ate ko sa mga kalahi ko sa ina, ang pamilya Danal ng Obando, Bulacan. Well, hindi naman kami malaking lahi. At any given Sunday, kasya lang kami sa tatlong PUJ na siyaman na biyaheng Malanday-Bulakan. Iyon kasi ang sinakyan namin para makarating sa isang swimming pool resort sa Valenzuela. Na-miss daw kasi ng ate ko ang saya ng pamilya. May palaro, pa-swimming, videokehan, kainan, at natural, meron ding inuman.

Mabilisang family reunion. Nasumpungan. Hindi kami ang pamilyang taunan kung magkita-kita at magsama-sama. Ang sa amin ay family reunion na hindi sinasadya. Kapag may kasalan minsan, o paglalamayan at ililibing na kalahi, dumadalas. Bigla lang nagtawag ang ate ko ng family reunion noong isang linggo. Sagot daw niya. Komo ate, inobliga ako. Wala na raw akong ambag, basta pumunta lang. Kahapon nga iyon.

Sa kabilang sopistikasyon ng komunikasyon ngayon, siguro kulang sampung taon ko nang hindi nakukumusta ni nakikita nang personal ang mga tiyuhi at pinsan at pamangkin na nagkaanak na kaya hindi ko na kilala o namumukhaan ang iba. May mangilan-ngilang nakaka-like at nakaka-happy birthday, pero ang mas may edad na walang Facebook, sa mga pasabi at pakikumusta ko na lang nababalitaan. Sa instant reunion kahapon, Linggo, kung hindi pa magpakilalang anak ni ganoon at ganito, hindi ko masisino.

Sa pagitan ng mga bote ng Red Horse at Fundador na kasama sa reunion-package ng ate ko, nagkumustahan kami ng kamag-anak kong mga lalaking may edad. Nalaman kong may apat akong pamangkin sa pinsang-buo na nagsipagsundalo. Pinipilit kong alalahinan ang hitsura ng mga nagsundalo. Ipinakita pa sa akin ang mga mukha sa Facebook. Hindi ko mamukhaan. Ang pawang naaalala ko ay mga mukha ng masasaya at maiingay na paslit, mga siyam o sampung taong gulang. Ni hindi pa binatilyo. Nang matiyak kong sila nga ang mga naging kawal, hindi ko na mapagttagpo ang imahen nila bilang musmos hanggang maging matitikas na sundalo.

Napadestino raw ang iba sa sakop ng SolCom sa Lucena at WesCom sa Palawan (West Philippine Sea?). Ang isa ay nasa Fort Bonifacio. At ang isa, si Paulo, na anak ng Ate Norma at Kuya Lito, na anak naman ng Nanang Pidyang na kapatid ng nanay ko, ay nadestino sa Marawi noong isang taon. Nagtagal sa Marawi si Private Paulo mula Hunyo hanggang noong Nobyembre, sa kainitan ng bakkalan hanggang maubos ang Maute Group at matigil ang putukan. At mula sa Marawi, lingguhan nang makauwi sa Obando dahil sa Camp Aguinaldo na nakadestino.

Si Paulo lang ang nakarating sa mabilisang family reunion dahil lagi siyang nasa Obando. Tinawag mula sa umpukan ng bata-bata pang kalahi patungo sa aming matatanda. Nagmano sa akin ang sundalo. Matangkad, matikas, sunog ang balat.

Ang alam ko dati kay Paulo, isa siyang musikero. Sila ng kaniyang kapatid na si Er-er ang tumutugtog at nag-eensayo sa pag-ihip ng instrumento—trombone at saxophone—sa tuwing madadalaw ako noon sa Obando, sa papadalang nang papadalang na pagdalaw ko sa bayan ng aking ina. Halos kasinghaba ng mag-utol ang kani-kanilang instrumento.

Tumutugtog yata noon sa Magsikap Band ng pamilya Dela Cruz sa Barangay Paliwas si Paulo na kumikita kahit elementarya pa lang. Nang magtatag ng banda ng musiko ang Pamahalaang Lungsod ng Valenzuela nito lamang mga nagdaang taon, kahit pumapasok bilang high school, umiihip din daw doon si Paulo tangan ang kaniyang matapat na saxophone.

“Naging scholar ako sa UP College of Music, Tito Jowie,” masayang kuwento ng nagbabalik at bagong kapo-promote na si Corporal Paulo. Nang magtapos ng high school sa Obando National High School, mula raw sa mahigit dalawandaang nag-apply para maging scholar ng prestihiyosong kolehiyo ng premiere university, labingwalo lang daw silang nakapasok. Pambahira.

Pero hindi na raw kinaya, financially, ang araw-araw na biyahe mula Obando hanggang Diliman. Kahit pa nang magdormitoryo sa kampus. Isang semestre lang daw, tumigil siya. Pumasok sa Army para doon tumugtug. At kumita nang maayos-ayos para makatulong sa pamilya. Natanggap. Doon nanorotot. Sa Philippine Army Band.

Pero, dahil daw sa inip kaihip, napagdesisyonan daw niyang pumasok bilang Ranger kaya nag-enroll at pumailalim sa malupit na Scout Ranger training sa Camp Tecson sa San Miguel, Bulacan. Ipinagmalaki niyang kasapi siya ng batch 2011.

Mula nga noon, napalayo na siya sa kaniyang pamilya at saxophone. Nadestino siya kung saan-saan hanggang sa ma-assign sa Marawi noong Hunyo 2017, kasisimula pa lang ng terorismo ng Maute.

Masaya ang disposisyon ni Paulo. Ipinagmalaki niya sa akin ang kaniyang relo, plastik na Casio G-Shock na may disenyong jungle camouflage, na bigay daw ni Duterte bago matapos ang tour of duty niya sa Marawi, at ang powerbank na bigay naman daw ng AFP Chief of Staff.

“Hindi ka na tumutugtug?”

Sa totoo lang, hindi ako masyadong interesado sa kung anumang panganib ang sinuong ng binatang pamangkin ko sa Mindanao. Alam kong marami na siyang napagkuwentuhan nito. Mas interesado ako sa kung paano nagawang iwan ni Paulo ang kaniyang pinakamamahal na saxophone kapalit ang armalite o machine gun, ipagpalit ang melodiya sa ratatat ng baril.

“Minsan na lang po, Tito. Kapag may inuman at videoke, sinasabayay ko ng saxophone ang kanta.”

Ako pa ba ang manghihinayang sa pamangkin ko sa pinsan? Proud na proud siya sa nakamit—ranggo, medalya, relo, powerbank—bilang mandirigma ng bayan. Matikas na matikas ang kaniyang tindig. Laging nakangiti.

Nang siya na ang kakanta sa videoke sa reunion kahapon, nabigla ako. “Bagsakan” ng Parokya ni Edgar at ni Gloc-9! Walang sablay ang pagsabay niya sa kanta. Kaya niyang habulin ang bilis ng salita. Buong-buo ang matuling sambit sa liriko. Gloc-9 na Gloc-9 na, bukod sa alyas ng tanyag na rapper, tatak din ng baril.

Ganito siguro naghahalo ang tunog ng mabilis na buga ng punglo kapag may musika at pangarap na kinikitil.

## 2. IBANG DAAN PAUWI

“Dumaan na po ‘yung AH?”

“Oo, pero ‘yung sa maggugulay hindi pa.”

AH Bus Liner ang tinutukoy ko nang tanungin ang inaanak na nagluluto ng buy-one take-one burger. Biyaheng Lucena hanggang Infanta na dadaan ng Lucban ang bus. Kada oras mula alas-kuwatro ng madaling araw ang biyahe. Lumagpas na raw ang pang-alas kuwatro sa Lucena Diversion kung saan ako naroroon kanina. Time check, 4:10AM.

Galing ako sa Maynila. Na-delay nang na-delay ang planong pag-uwis sa Lucban dahil sa isang kumperensiya na pinangunahan ng samahang kinabibilangan ko. Trabaho ko sa huling araw ng kumperensiya ang asikasuhin ang international delegates, mula Intramuros hanggang MOA. Iwas sila sa budol-budol at sa gobyerno este sa panganib pala ng Maynila at bansa. He he. At samahang mag-videoke at uminom sa Ermita pagkatapos.

Mula sa planong alas-singko ng hapon, naging alas-otso, alas-onse, hanggang mag-aala-una na ako nakawala at nakarating sa terminal ng JAC Liner sa Buendia. Kung mas maaga sa alas-otso ng gabi, may colorum na van pa-Lucban na masasakyen. Masikip man—labingwaluhan!—mas mabilis naman ang biyahe pauwi. Wala nang babaan. Dadaan sa Los Baños, sa Nagcarlan, Liliw at sa vomit-inducing zigzag ng Majayjay. Para kaming mga kontorsyonistang nakakamada sa kahon. Pero hindi ito ang kapalaran ko kagabi. May ibang daan pauwi. Mas matagal. Sa bahagi ng San Pablo, Tiaong, Candelaria hanggang diversion ng Lucena.

Nagising ako bandang Sariaya. Uhaw na uhaw. At ang pait ng bunganga ko. Ganito siguro ang lasa ng nuclear reactor, naghalo-halong mikrobyo ng likido, tsibog, manti-mantika, crispy pata, beer, at kung ano-ano pa. Uminom ako ng baong tubig. Bahagyang nawala ang pait.

Mahilo-hilo pa ako nang bumaba. Amoy beer at pulutan pa rin ang hininga ko. Kadiri. Naglakad ako nang mahaba dahil sa perpetual construction ng underpass sa Diversion ng Lucena. Ang dilim (o nagdidilim lang ang paningin ko?). Tapos umuulan pa. Tapos ang bibilis pa ng mga bus na pa-Bicol. Tumatalsik ang tubig. Nagpuputik. Ramdam ko naman ang wisik ng pino pero makapal na ambon sa bumbunan ko. Naawa ako sa sarili. Naghanap na lang ako ng will and reason to live. Heto: buti na lang hindi ako nag-immaculate sneakers. Buti na lang may love life ako. Ang iba sa inyo wala.

Pumasok ako sa santuwaryo ng mga pagod at nalulumbay na manlalakbay: sa Jollibee. Nakihi. Umorder ng one-piece burger steak with rice pagkatapos. Singkuwenta pesos. Walang softdrinks. Tubig na may yelo lang. Palagay ko, 'yung tubig na may yelo lang ang binayaran ko dahil sa uhaw. Libre na lang ang burger steak at kanin. Tinira ko nang sumpung minuto ang kakarampot na combo-meal. Lumabas ako sa Jollibee at nag-abang na nga ng masasakyan, 4:10AM.

Sa pagitan ng 4-4:30AM ang daan ng magggugulay. Mga namamakyaw ang maggugulay sa Candelaria, sa agricultural trading center. Namamakyaw sila ng, well, gulay na ititinda sa Tayabas at Lucban, reinforcement sa maraming uri ng gulay na inani sa dalawang bayang ito sa pigi ng Banahaw (lungsod na talaga ang Tayabas, hindi na munisipyo, by virtue of technicalities ng lintek na Local Government Code, pero mukha pa rin talagang bayan, ni wala ngang sariling pampublikong ospital o kolehiyo). Umaarkila sila ng dyipning biyaheng Lucena-Lucban. Hindi napupuno ang loob ng dyipni kaya nagpasakay ng mga pasahero sa kalahating bahagi ng dyipning walang karga. Bawas din sa gastos sa renta.

Takbo ako nang dumaan at huminto ang hindi maikakailang dyipni ng maggugulay. Puno ang bubong ng kalakal. Puno na rin ang aisle ng iba't ibang paninda. Halos walang mahakbangan. Sa dilim ng madaling araw, isa-isang naglabasan sa kung saang sulok ang marami pa palang nag-aabang. Akala ko ako lang.

Napuno ang dyipni. Parang magkakakilala na sila, nagma- "Magandang umaga!" sa bawat isa, sabay sabi ng pangalan. May magtataho, tatlong magpuputo, may nagtitinda ng tinapa, limang container ng kung anong likido. May nakasandal sa sako-sakong hindi ko alam kung ano ang laman. Amoy palengke ang dyipni. Mas gusto ko na iyon kesa amoy ng panis na beer sa bunganga ko.

Hindi ako nakatulog sa kulang tatlumpong kilometro at kulang isang oras ng biyahe pauwi. Bababa at sasakay ang mga nagahanapbhay na hindi ko mamukhaan dahil sa dilim at naninimdim at aandap-andap na liwanag sa loob ng dyipni. Gising na gising na sila sa maagang simula ng pagtitinda ng kung ano-ano. May dalawang ale na may dalang bilaong puno ng kakanin. Naisip ko, anong oras kaya sila uuwi? Magkano kaya ang kikitain?

Wala silang sick leave tiyak. Kapag maysakit, e di walang magtitinda. Walang kikitain. Pero malay ko naman, baka may anak na hindi papasok

sa eskuwela para magtinda o tuluyan nang magtitigil sa pag-aaral para maipagpatuloy ang kalakalan. Para may kainin.

Sila'yung walang itataas na suweldo, hindi nakaranas ng buwis mula sa sweldo na babawasan dahil sa TRAIN Law, pero tiyak na magbabayad ng mahal na bilihin. Pero malay ba natin, baka paliit nang paliit ang puto, pakaunti nang pakaunti ang arnibal sa taho, o lumiliit ang dakot sa per tumpok na kalamansi o sili. Nakakangiti pa rin naman sila. Masayang nagkukumustahan sa loob ng dyipni ng maggugulay bago magnakaw ng sampu, kinse, beinte, treinta minutos na idlip. Kailangan nila ang bawat payapang sandali para sa maulang araw na naghihintay para maibenta ang mumunting kalakal.

Lahat ng ito nangyari sa isang nagsamadaling madaling araw na masarap masakit mapait na magnilay-nilay hinggil sa buhay at kabuhayan para lang makauwi.

### 3. PEDICAB

Humuhupa ang baha sa Coloong tuwing papasok na ang amihan. Kumakati ang tubig sa ilog palabas ng Manila Bay. Hindi na nagtagtagpo ang dalawang paglaki ng tubig sa ilog. Alangaang ang tawag sa pagtagtagpo ng dalawang high tide sa loob ng isang maghapon. Huwag lang muling babagyo, magtutuloy-tuloy ang pagkati ng tubig. Aatras ang baha, magha-hibernate sa Manila Bay. Kung saan itinaboy ang tubig bago pa tambakan ang Dagat-dagatan ng Camanava.

Panahon iyon ng pagbabanyos. Hihilamusan muli ang mga bahay sa Coloong. Pipinturahan upang mabura ang bakas ng tagbaha, ang peklat ng tagbaha. Isasaayos ang mga palaisdaan. Tutubuan muli ng damo at halaman ang mamasa-masang looban. Magiging berde uli dahil sa damo-damo ang mga pilapil.

Masaya kami dahil pansamantalang hindi kami siyokoy at sirena. Pansamantalang tao kami hanggang sa susunod na tagbaha.

Bumabalik sa himpilang palaisdaan ang mga bangka. Nakarenda at may tiyak na gawain: ang manghuli o mamandaw ng isda, salot na janitor fish man o tilapia at bangus, at magkumpuni ng nasira o rumupok na pilapil. Nakakapasada na ang mga tricycle. Gayunman, sa itinagal-tagal ng paghahanapbuhay ng mga nagpe-pedicab sa panahon ng tagbaha, makapit

na taliptip silang hindi na matungkab sa balat ng Polo area, ang lumang poblacion ng Valenzuela.

Ang mag-pedicab ang kanilang kabuhayan. Nanganak ang mga pedicab dahil wala naman itong restriction at hindi mahal ipundar. Sa sobrang dami, naging formidable political force. Kahit anong oras, may baha man o wala, namumulaklak sa pedicab ang bahaging kapuluan ng Valenzuela.

Kahit sino ay puwedeng mag-pedicab basta't may paa, kahit hindi pantay. Kahit anong edad na puwedeng pumadyak at humawak ng manibela at umiwas sa lubak basta't huwag makabundol ng kasalubong na sasakyang at tao. Hindi na importante kung marunong magkuwenta ng sukli. O hindi marunong magsukli.

Minsan, nang pauwi ako buhat sa trabaho ko dati sa city hall, nakita kong namamasada na ng pedicab ang nagkakatekista dati sa Coloong Elementary School, si Brother Napoleon o Brother Nap na miyembro rin ng Adoracion Nocturna sa parokya. Agwador si Brother Nap sa mga pagkakataong walang baha. Well-toned ang katawan. Hitsura ng body builder, namumutok ang mga muscle habang tulak ang kariton, habang buhat ang mga container. Pero mahinahon si Brother Nap. Kung anong lakas, siyang hina ng boses.

Dahil uso ang tagaan sa pamahehe lalo't walang tricycle kahit pa manipis o kati na ang baha, pinili ko siyempre ang pedicab na minamaneho ni Brother Nap. Sa isip-isip ko, dito na ako sa tiyak na makatao ang presyo. Isang katekista.

Kung manggagaling sa MacArthur Highway sa Malanday, karaniwang beinte pesos lamang ang pamahehe sa amin. Bahala na raw ako kung magkano ang ibabayad ko, sabi ni Brother Nap nang tanungin ko siya bago ako sumakay kung magkano ang pamahehe. E, di sumakay. Nagpahatid. Nang maihatid ako sa amin, tinanong ko uli si Brother Nap habang kinakapa ko ang pitaka ko. Huhugutin ko na sana ang sapat nang beinte.

"Kuwarenta na lang," mahinahong pagpresyo ng nagkakatekista. Yumuko pa nang kaunti na parang nagpapaawa. Kuwarenta noong panahong ang NFA rice ay beinte singko pesos. Mahal.

Hindi na ako nakipagtalo. Pero hindi ko na sinakyan ang pedicab ni Brother Nap mula noon. At hindi na rin ako sumasakay ng pedicab nang hindi muna nililinaw kung magkano ang pamahehe. Mahal ang presyo kapag "Bahala na kayo kung magkano."

Malamang, kung may tataguriang pedicab capital sa bansa, Coloong ang mangunguna sa listahan. O Polo Area. At hindi nakapagtatakan ng dinami-dami ng nagsulutang festival sa bansa, baka isang araw, magkaroon ng Pedicab Festival sa Valenzuela. Kumpleto ng parada ng pedicab na may iba't ibang disenyo ng parang karuwahe o karosa ng prusisyon depende sa theme. May karera ng pedicab, may pedicab tricks na parang extreme games: lumilipad na pedicab, nagsa-somersault na pedicab. O Guinness Record sa pinakamahabang pila at parada ng pedicab. Nagawa na ito ng isang politiko nang iparada niya ang supporter niyang mga pedicab driver. Nabalda ang traffic sa MacArthur Highway at secondary roads ng Valenzuela. Kulang sanlibong pedicab ang pumarada. Hindi na pinasama sa parada ang natitira pang halos tatlong libo. Kulang kasi ang pondong pampameryenda. Kaya voting force ang sektor ng pedicab, ang pedicab na by-product ng tagbaha. Nanalo ang politiko. At lahat ng ito ay nangyari bago pa ang patala lastas ng isang laos na politiko noon na nasa loob ng pedicab sabay sabing: "Anak, itabi mo. Lalaban tayo." Talo sa pagka-bise presidente (at bandang huli, sa pagkapresidente!) ang politiko. Plastik, e.

Hanggang sa libingan, nakikisama ang Coloong sa baha. Hindi kayang pigilan ng baha ang paglilibing. Well, hindi na nga lang nakasakay sa pedicab ang bangkay. Inihahatid na ng bangkang arkilado ng funeraria ang labi hanggang sa kung saan naghihintay ang karosa ng patay, hanggang sa kung saan maaari nang paandarin ang makina ng karosa ng patay. Nakasunod ang mga nakikipaglibing na naglalakad o kaya ay nakasakay sa nakikiramatay na pedicab.

Pero may pagkakataong kahit ang simbahan ay may baha sa loob. At sa mga pagkakataong ito, walang magagarang sasakyang nakaparada sa patio. Puro pedicab ang naglisaw, ang naghahatid sa mananampalatayang namumulaklak sa alipunga ang paa.

Kung bebendisyunan marahil ang baha, hindi na kailangan pang sumawsaw sa anghel na may bitbit na plangganita o bandehado ng agua bendita dahil babad na kami sa bendantadong baha.

At ang patay, mabuti't nauuso ang nagtatayugang apartment na libingan na dapat nang tawaging high-rise condominium sa sobrang taas. O kung hindi man, may mamahaling memorial park na pagpipilian sa Valenzuela na may pangunahing pang-anunsiyong tagline: "Guaranteed, flood-free.

#### **4. SAPATERO NGAYONG PASKO NG PAGKABUHAY**

Pero gaya ng karaniwang sapatero, nagkukumpuni rin si Gil ng sirang bag. Nakapuwesto siya sa Dapitan malapit sa kanto ng M. De La Fuente. Wala e, sabi niya hintayin ko na raw ang ipinakumpuni kong leather bag (naks, sosyal!) dahil mabilis lang naman daw. One hundred fifty lang daw para sa kinse minutos na trabaho bago umuwi.

“Kahit Linggo? Easter ngayon, Pasko ng Pagkabuhay?”

“Half day lang. May nagpapagawa pa rin ng susi, saka gan’to.”

Ang bag na ipinagagawa ko ang “gan’to.” Maya-maya, may dumating. Gustong patikumin ang isang ngumingiting itim na tigwawalang libong Nike. Bukas na raw balikan dahil pasara na siya. Ayos lang naman sa isang customer na naka-Honda Civic.

“Tingnan mo, meron pa rin,” bulong niya sa akin. Marami raw siyang suki sa UST, mga nagpapakumpuni rin ng bag at sapatos, duplicate ng susi, tahi-tahi. “Sirain ang sapatos, lalo maulan, lalo dito, binabaha.”

Suki na raw niya ang nagpagawa ng Nike. Bago bumalik sa kotse, nilinaw niya sa suki: “Tatahiin o epoxy?” Epoxy.

Mahigit sampung taon na siya sa kapiranggot na pwesto. One by three meters, tantya ko. Magkano kako ang renta sa pwesto, magkano siya nagsimula.

“Seven thousand. Dati, four lang.” Iyan ang kuwenta niya sa abstruse economic indicators ng ekonomiya sa paligid ng Dapitan. Tatlong libo ang itinaas sa sampung taon.

Kapag karaniwang araw, alas-siete siya nagsasara. Uuwi sa San Jose del Monte via Fairview.

“Ayokong magdaan sa Marilao (sa Bulacan), mahal ang pamasahé, saka ilang ilang sakay rin ako.”

Pero hindi karaniwang araw ngayon kaya hanggang alas-tres lang ang sapatero.

“Sapatero ako dati sa Sto. Niño, Meycauayan. Nagsara. Nauso ang made-in-China. Kaya, heto, lakasan lang ng loob,” ang pagbubukas ng sariling shop ang ibig niyang sabihin.

Kinokortehan niya ang pantapal na katad (leather sa Ingles, para sa mga igno). Makapal ang katad. Pero, gaya ng mga eksperto, hangang-hanga akong parang ginupit na papel lang ang lahat. Ang galing ng gunting mo, sabi ko. Knowing all too well na magaling talaga ang pihit niya sa gunting. Inilapit niya sa akin ang gunting ng katad, manipis, pangkaraniwan.

“Made-in-China,” pagmamalaki niya sa akin, “Limang taon na sa akin ‘to.”

“Taga-Bulacan ka, pero parang hindi tunog taga-Bulacan ang salita mo?” Iyong tono ang ibig kong sabihin. Wala ang taas-baba-ipit sa salitang makakaringgan ko lang sa mga taga-Bulacan, sa mga Bulakenyo.

“Masbate talaga.” Pinapalo-palo ni Gil ang rematse (rivet sa igno, oo, ako ‘yung igno kanina, lintek na rivet ‘yan) para bumaon sa pinag-sandwich na katad na tatangnan ng bag.

“Aroroy?”

“Hindi, Masbate, sa kapitolyo. Malapit sa kapitolyo. Alam mo ‘yung amin?” Hindi, kako, naghula lang ako dahil taga-Aruroy ang isang barkada ko.

Pukpok para bumaon ang rematse. May asero sa tuktok, hindi sa mismong rematse ipinapalo ang malyete.

“Hindi kayo umuwi ng pamilya mo? Mahal na Araw a.”

“Mahal.” Ang pamasahé siyempre ang tinutukoy niya, hindi ang araw.

“Ilan ba kayong uuwi sana?”

“Anim anak ko.”

“Wow! Ang saya!”

“Dadalawa pa lang napapatapos ko ng college dun.”

“Ay hanep, astig!” Ang saya. Ang baba ng loob ni Gil. Parang, oo nga, kulang pa. Dadalawa pa lang ang napagtatapos niya sa panahong itong pangkaraniwan ang hindi nagtatapos. Tapos matatapos na ang bag ko.

Tumayo si Gil. Kininis sa makina ang pinagpatong na katad para maglapat, pumantay, kuminis, gumanda, hindi mahalatang bagong kumpuni ang leather bag; hindi dapat mahalatang kinukumpuni ang leather bag, nakababawas sa dangal ng pag-iral ng matibay na bag ang masira.

Sinipat-sipat, iniabot sa akin. Isinukat ko. Swak. May ipapagawa pa koko ako. Leather ballpen cases naman. Nabili ko sa Thailand. Bukas pa raw siya mamimili ng katad sa Binondo.

Bakit kako hindi siya sa Meycuayan, sa epicenter ng tannery production sa bansang ito, siya bumili? Malayo, mahirap daw ibiyahe. Hindi naman daw nagkakalayo ang presyo ng leather sa Binondo at Meycauayan. At, oo, dun siya dati nagtratrabajo. Buti hindi ako sinagot ng "I should know."

"Ang ganda ng bag mo. Simple lang pero ang ganda. Kakaiba."

Hindi ko alam kung pinupuri niya ang lahat ng ginawa niya. "Ang ganda ng sapatos mo... ang ganda ng bag mo... ang ganda ng susi mo... ang ganda ng tsinelas mo..." Pero, siyempre maganda, not to mention maanggas, ang bag kong gagamitin bukas.

"Ano trabaho mo?"

"Titser d'yan."

"Sa'n?"

"D'yan. Sa UST."

"Propesor ka, Ser?" Biglang nagka-Ser!

"Oo, hindi lang halata." Tawa kami pareho.

"Maraming nagpapagawa sa akin d'yan. Baka kakilala mo, Ser."

"Baka hindi, marami kami." Iniabot ko ang one-fifty.

Nagliligpit na siya ng gamit. Nakangiti, pasipol-sipol. Ako naman, ibinukas-isinara ang bag na parang walang marka ng kumpuni.

Isasara na ni Gil ang ang shoe-and-bag repair shop niya na, kahit anong kuwenta ko, parang hindi half-day dahil pasado alas-tres na nagsara ngayong Linggo ng Pagkabuhay, na para kay Gil, marahil, isang karaniwang Linggo rin ng kabuhayan.

# PUMAYAT, YUMAMAN, UMIBIG: Hindi Ako Relihiyoso Pero Espiritwal Akong Tao

U Z. Eliserio

## *Adik Ako*

Adik ako. Adik ako sa kanin. Adik ako sa tsitsirya. Adik ako sa softdrinks. Adik ako sa baboy at manok. Adik ako sa alat at tamis. Adik ako sa taba.

Noong lumalaki ako lahat ng lalake sa paligid ko, nagsisigarilyo at umiinom. Iyong mga nagsisigarilyo, nakita kong nagkasakit. Ang marami sa kanila, dinaluhan ko ang burol. Iyong mga umiinom, nakita ko ring nagkasakit. Hindi lang iyon, pag nalasing, nakita ko silang nanakit. Kung hindi naninigaw, humahagulgol. Kundi man nanakit nang pisikal, nagpapasakit pa rin ng ulo ng mga tao sa paligid nila. Hindi lang kapitbahay, pati mga mahal sa buhay.

Kaya sabi ko sa sarili ko, hindi ako tutulad sa kanila. Hindi ako magiging lulong sa bisyo. Akala ko, pag umiwas ako sa alak at yosi, ayos na. Mali pala.

Pihikan ako sa pagkain. Mas gusto ko ang pritong baboy kesa gulay. Nang una akong magtrabaho, sa Laguna, sa isang sikat na unibersidad, unang beses ko ring bumukod. Hindi ako marunong magluto, kaya lagi akong sa labas kumakain. Araw-araw, kundi inihaw na baboy, lechon kawali ang pagkain ko. Pero minsan, para maiba, roast chicken. Sinigang na baboy lang ‘ata ang kinakain ko noon na merong green.

Ang malala pa, napadalas ang midnight snack ko. Nasa may gate lang kasi ng unibersidad iyong sikat na fastfood, bukas beinte-kuwatro oras. Ilang kanto lang ang layo mula sa apartment ko. Kasama iyong kapwa gurong naging kabarkada, halos gabi-gabi ang pagkain ko ng french fries at ice cream,

at pag-inom ng softdrinks. Itong softdrinks talaga ang pinaka-kinaadikan ko. Apat na taong gulang pa lang kasi ako, lulong na ako sa itim na likido. Itong softdrinks, at hindi langis, ang tunay na gintong itim. Ang dami ko na sigurong pinayamang tindero't tindera. Nitong 2016, tatlong beses isang araw ako kung uminom ng softdrinks!

Hanggang ngayon, hinahanap-hanap ko pa rin ito. Habang itina-type ko ang mga salitang ito, naglalaway ako. Adik, e. Hinahanap ko ang sitsaron na kinakain ko habang nanonood noon ng piratang DVD. Dinidilaan ko ang aking mga labi, gusto kong masalat ang balat ng manok na deep fried. Wala na yatang mas magandang tunog sa mundo kundi lagatok ng balat ng crispy pata.

Walang hanggang ang pakikipagtunggali ko sa pagnanasa ko sa kanin.

Marami ang magsasabi, e bakit si Aling Tekla, baliktad pa manigarilyo, nobenta anyos na, malakas pa. Tsaka si Mang Gulay, gulay lang kinakain, ayun nasagasaan ng trak, gulay na lang ngayon. Hayaan mo lang silang manigarilyo. Pero pag narinigarilyo sila, at umiinom, iwasan mo sila. Bisitahin mo sa ospital pag nagkakanser. Dalawin mo sa burol.

Totoo naman na puwede tayong mamamatay sa aksidente. Kaya nga tayo nagsusuot ng seatbelt, para sakaling mabangga ng trak ang sinasakyang nating taxi, hindi tayo lumusot sa windshield. Totoo rin naman na maraming hindi nagsusuot ng seatbelt ang ligtas pa ring nakakapagbiyahe araw-araw. Totoong kahit gulay lang ang kainin mo, mamamatay ka pa rin. Totoo ring kahit araw-araw ka tumungga ng softdrinks, may tsansang hindi ka magkadiabetes.

Pero totoo rin ito: adik ka.

Wala kang pinagkaiba sa mga nagsisigarilyo. Wala kang pinagkaiba sa lasenggo. Wala akong pinagkaiba sa nagsa-shabu. Wala tayong pinagkaiba sa nagra-rugby.

Iyon ang nakakainis. Iyon ang nakakahiya. Hindi na nga natin kontrolado ang mundo, pati sarili natin wala rin tayong kontrol. At ito ang nakakagalit: pinagkakakitaan tayo. Hindi lang tayo walang kontrol, kinokontrol tayo.

Adik ka pag hindi mo kontrolado ang sarili mong pagnanasa. May isa pang tawag dito: alipin. Ayoko nang maging adik. Ayoko nang maging alipin.

## *Pagbibilang ng Calories*

Ilang beses na akong nagsusubok magdiyeta. Lagi akong nabibigo. Sabi kasi ng kaibigan ko, kailangan daw kalusugan ang target, hindi pagpayat. Kundi, laging kabiguan ang mahihita. E, hindi ko naman kasi gustong pumayat. Hindi ko rin gustong lumusog. Ang gusto ko lang, tumigil ang sakit.

Isang beses lang naging matagumpay ang diyeta ko. Nagkasakit kasi ako, at kinailangan kong umiwas sa baboy, manok, softdrinks, sitsirya, at bawasan ang aking kanin. Nagawa ko, isang taong puro isda lang ang kinain ko. Pritong tanigue o gutom o sakit. Dahil super ang sakit, at ayaw ko rin namang magutom, kinain ko 'yung isda. Masarap naman. Kaso, nang gumaling ako, balik ako sa dati. Una, manok. Pagkatapos, sitsirya. Tapos, baboy. Saka softdrinks. Saka labis-labis na kanin. Hindi na ako ulit kumain ng baka.

Manok ang pinakana-miss ko, kaya iyon ang una kong binalikan. Lahat kasi ng uri ng manok, gusto ko. Basta ba prito at inihaw. Ang baboy na gusto ko, inihaw, lechon kawali, tsaka crispy pata. Pero ang masarap pala sa lahat, kanin. Hindi ko maisip kung paano ako nabuhay sa one cup rice.

Pagurin kasi ako. Tsaka nerbiyoso. Gusto ko sanang maging malakas. 'Yun bang maraming adventure. Pangarap kong mag-sky diving. Kaso, bago sumabog ang puso ko kaya sinusubukan kong magpaka-healthy. Para puwede akong tumulon mula sa tuktok ng isang gusali sa Dubai nang hindi inaatake sa puso. Nakikita ko ang aking sariling may hawak na katana, o di kaya'y nagbوبoksing. Kaso baka tatlong minuto pa lang, lupaypay na ako sa pagod.

May kaibigan ako, mataba noong kolehiyo. Pumayat lang s'ya dahil nag-tubig/Skyflakes diet s'ya. Hindi ko naman gustong pumayat. Ang ayaw ko lang, magkasakit. Tsaka, syempre, mamatay. May diabetes ang lahi namin. Higit pa dun, borderline na ang hypertension ko.

Ang ginagawa ko ngayon, pagbibilang ng calories. Kailangan daw ng 2,000 calories ng isang tao araw-araw. Ang target ko ngayon, 1,900 araw-araw. Pag kinontrol mo kasi ang calories mo, pati intake mo ng sodium, sugar, fat, at kolesterol, mababawasan na rin. Ang agahan ko ay Skyflakes, 170 calories. Ang tanghalian ko ay kanin (200) at isang pirasong manok (350). Ang hapunan ko ay kanin at isang pirasong baboy (350). Ibig sabihin, may 630 pa ako para sa meryenda!

Ang mahirap ay ang pagtanggi sa ulam. At sa kanin. Samantalang nakasulat sa pakete ng mga nabibili sa grocery at sari-sari ang calories na meron sila, iyong mga galing sa palengke, walang tala. Estima lang ang mga bilang na isinulat ko sa itaas.

Hindi ako mahusay sa matematika, pero mahilig ako sa pagbibilang. Hindi lang sa sumbatero ako, gusto ko talaga na nasusukat ang mundo. Hindi kasi nasusukat ang sarap sa pagkain e, pero ang calories, oo.

Sumasabog ang utak ko pag binabasa ko ang nutritional breakdown ng mga sitsiryang dati-rati'y nilalamon ko nang walang pag-iisip. Ang hilig ko pa naman ay iyong mas malaking lalagyan. Pakiramdam ko, pag mas malaki ang bag o tube, mas malasa. Hindi ko alam kung totoo 'yon. Ang alam ko lang, pag nagbulag-bulagan ako, mas malaki ang babayaran ko sa ospital. Ang isang maliit na bote ng pinakamasarap na inumin sa mundo, sapat na ang lamang sugar para punuan ang maximum na maaaring ikonsumo ng isang tao sa loob ng isang araw! Paalam, softdrinks! Mahal kita, pero mas mahal ko ang buhay.

Ang masaya sa pagbibilang ng calories, para itong laro. Pag nakikita ko kung ilang calorie meron ang bibilhin kong produkto, para akong nabibigyan ng piyesa sa isang malaking puzzle. Magkakasya ba ito sa itinakda kong 1,900 araw-araw? Merong mga kompanya, tinatago ang tunay na bilang ng calorie ng produkto. Akala mo, 300 lang, mababa. Iyon pala, 300 per serving! E, ang laman ng isang pakete, tatlong serving! Hindi pala 300 lang, 900 pala ang laman. Para tuloy akong detective. Naghahanap ng clue, nag-iimbestiga ng pilit na itinatago. Ang iba lang dito, imbes na maghanap ng hustisya para sa krimen, kaya kong pigilan ang krimen bago ito mangyari--ang krimen: ang pagpatay sa akin ng mga pinakamamahal kong pagkain.

### *Ang Huli Kong Sapatos*

Huling linggo ng Agosto nang masira ang paborito kong sapatos. Iyong kanang pares. Pasiyam na ng biyenan ko, kaya nagpunta kami ng asawa ko sa Shrine of the Divine Mercy para magpamisa. Kakaiba ang estruktura ng Divine. Ang two-thirds ng lote, sa kanan, naree ang simbahan. Ang one-third sa kaliwa, pababa. Naroon sindihan ng kandila, ang estasyon ng krus, at ang bilihan ng mga rosaryo at iba pang relihiyosong produkto. Sa kaliwa kami tumungo, pababa, pero sa dulo, kakanan kami para umakyat ng hagdan, paloob sa likod ng simbahan, kasi naroon ang opisina. Doon nasira

ang sapatos ko. nagmukha na itong aso sa cartoons, iyong malaki ang bibig at nakalawit ang mahabang dila.

Syempre, sarado ang opisina. May gate na nakaharang kaya kinailangan kong pa tumanaw. Wala pala sila pag Lunes.

Para akong loko-loko sa pagbaba. Dahil buka na ang swelas ng sapatos, pag inangat ko ang paa ko, mas mabigat ang dating dahil hindi kumportable. Nakakawala ng balanse. Para hindi bumuka, kailangan ko itong kaladkarin. Maingay na, at lalo pa itong nasisira.

Pagkababa ng hagdan, kinailangan naming umakyat ulit papunta sa harap ng simbahan, nagbabakasakaling may makakausap doon na puwedeng pakiusapan. Mas nasira ang sapatos ko sa aspal tong daan. Sa may gitna, binigyan ako ng asawa ko ng goma para masara ang bibig ng sapatos. Gumana naman, pansamantala. Imbes na ang inihiwasan kong pagkapigтал ng sapatos, ang nangyari'y napunta ang goma sa may gitna nito. Buka pa rin ang bibig ng sapatos, hindi na nga lang sobrang laki tulad nang nauna. Para pa rin itong asong cartoons na nakalabas ang dila.

Sa simbahan, wala kaming nakitang makakausap. Ang meron lang doon ay envelope na paglalagyan ng dasal, pero walang tao na makapagsasabi sa amin kung mapagdadasal nga ang biyenan ko sa araw na iyon. Bumaba kami ulit para magsindi na lang ng kandila. Nagsindi ako para sa biyenan ko, at para na rin sa tatay ko. Limang piso kada kandila ang suhestiyong donasyon.

May naaninag akong guard. Kinaladkad ko ang sapatos ko papunta sa kanya. Suwerte. Itinuro n'ya ang isa pang opisina sa tabi ng bentahan ng mga rosaryo. At doon nga, nakatagpo kami ng taong hindi man naipangakong maipagdadasal ang biyenan ko sa araw na iyon, nangako namang maipagdadasal s'ya sa unang misa kinabukasan. Umuwi kami ng bahay, kung saan nag-"Magandang hapon ako" sa bisitang babaeng nasa salas na hindi ko napansin ay nagrorosaryo pala para sa byenan ko. Iba ang padasal sa bahay, at iba ang sa simbahan.

Umakyat ako para magbihis. Bilib na bilib ako sa goma, kasi hindi ito napigtal. Hinayang na hinayang ako sa sapatos ko, kasi tatlong taong gulang lang ito. Pero paborito ko kasi, kaya madalas ito ang nasusuot ko. Ang una kong naisip, kailangan kong bumili ng bago. Pero mali, kasi gastos iyon. Meron pa naman akong ibang sapatos na maisusuot.

Sunod kong naisip, ipamigay na lang ang sapatos. Ayos pa naman ang kaliwa, at konting rugby lang ay sasara na ang bibig ng kanan. May mabuting pakiramdam na nakukuha mula sa pagtulong sa kapwa.

Kaso, naisip ko, ba't ko naman ipamimigay? Kung maipapaayos pa 'yung sapatos, e di pwede ko pang isuot! Maglalabas lang ako ng kaunting pera, at masusulit ko nang lubos-lubos ang sapatos ko.

Awa ng Diyos, nasa lalagyan ko pa rin ang sapatos magpasahanggang ngayon. Sira pa rin ito. Plano ko pa ring ipaayos. Plano ko pa ring ipamigay. Hindi ko alam kung aling landas ang pipiliin ko. Pero alam ko kung alin ang hindi ko pipiliin: ang pagbili ng bago. Hanggang meron pang luma na ayos pa naman, mapasapatos man ito, o bag, o cellphone, hindi ako bibili ng bago. At kung pwede pang ipaayos ang nasira, hindi ako bibili ng bago. Tapos na ang araw ng pagsasayang ng pera. Ang mga gamit ko ngayon ang huli kong gamit. Ang sapatos ko ngayon ang huli kong sapatos.

### *Papuri sa Pera*

Ang punto ng pera ay pera. O, mas mainam sabihin, mas marami pang pera. Tulad din ng mga hayop, tao, halaman, at mismong sansinukob, layunin ng pera ang mabuhay. Pangkalahatan ang utos sa Henesis: "Humayo kayo at magpakarami."

Maraming tao ang magsasabing hindi pera ang mahalaga. Hingan mo sila ng isang milyon. Hindi nila ibibigay sa 'yo. Hingan mo ng isang daang libo. Hindi nila ibibigay sa 'yo. Hingan mo ng piso. Hindi nila ibibigay sa 'yo. Dalawang uri lang ng tao ang nagsasabing hindi mahalaga ang pera. Iyong ayaw mabawasan ang pera nila (mga ipokrito), at iyong walang pera (kaso ito ng sour graping).

Hindi ko sinasabing pera ang pinakamahalaga sa lahat. Ang pinakamahalaga sa lahat ay buhay. Ang punto ng buhay ay buhay. At ang pera ang isa sa tatlong paraan para mapanatili ang iyong buhay (ang dalawa pa ay sarili at kapwa).

Binibigyan ka ng pera ng seguridad. Pag meron kang sweldo, meron kang magagastos sa pang-araw-araw na buhay. May pambili ka ng pagkain, pambayad sa renta, pambayad sa tubig, kuryente, at Internet. May pambili ka ng damit. Pag meron kang insurance at ipon sa bangko, sakaling may sakuna o aksidenteng naganap, meron kang tatakbuhan.

Ito rin ang silbi ng credit. Hindi dapat ginagamit ang credit card sa mga walang kakuwenta-kuwentang bagay, tulad ng malaking telebisyon, mamahaling sapatos, at iba pang luho. Ginagamit ang credit card para sa regular na gastusin, na kagyat namang dapat bayaran gamit ng pera mula sa sweldo. Kailangang gamitin nang regular ang credit card para lumaki ang potensyal na maaari mong utangin, nang sa gayon, pag magkaroon ng sakuna o aksidente, meron kang matatakbuhan.

Mahalaga ang pera dahil pag may sakit ang nanay mo, pera ang ipambibili mo ng gamot. Pag gutom ang anak mo, pera ang paraan para kayo magkapagkain. Hindi pa naman maipambibili ng grocery ang kagandahan.

Ang problema sa pera, dahil palagiang nag-iimprenta ang gobyerno nito, taon-taon lumiliit ang halaga nito. Magtanong ka lang sa kahit sinong matanda, at sasabihin n'ya sa 'yo kung gaano na kaliit ang halaga ng isang daang piso ngayon, samantalang noong panahon n'ya, napakarami nang mabibili ng beinte pesos. Ang tawag dito ay inflation.

Dahil laging lumiliit ang halaga ng pera, kailangan mong laging pinaparami ang pera mo. Hindi mo ito magagawa sa simpleng pag-asa sa sweldo at pag-iipon. Kailangan mo ng investments at negosyo. Ito ang paradox ng pera. Kailangang marami at parami nang parami ang iyong pera, hindi pwedeng nasa anyong pera ito. Kailangan nasa anyo itong investment at negosyo--na lagi mo dapat handang itransforma pabalik sa anyong pera.

Maaari na, isang araw, magkaroon ng lipunan kung saan hindi sentral ang pera sa buhay ng isang tao, na hindi na rito kailangang nakasalalay para magpatuloy na buhay ang buhay. Lipunan kung saan libre ang pagkain, pambahay, at medisina. Pero hanggang hindi dumarating ang araw na iyon, kailangan mo ng pera.

Pero hindi mo lang kailangan ng pera. Gusto mo ng pera. Gusto mo ng pera, kasi hindi lang seguridad ang alam mong naibibigay nito, kundi sarap. Masarap kumain. Masarap maligo. Masarap matulog. Ibibigay lahat sa 'yo ng pera ang sarap nito. Pero hindi lang 'yon. Ang mismo kita, ang mismong pagyaman, masarap.

Ito ang maganda sa pera, kumpara sa luho. Kunwari bumili ka ng bagong sapatos. Ipinagmamalaki mo ito sa lahat ng kilala mo. Tuwang-tuwa ka pag napapansin ito ng mga tao sa opisina, o kahit pag naglalakad ka sa mall. Pero pagkatapos ng ilang linggo, nawawala na ang kinang ng sapatos. Bago pa rin ito, pero hindi na kapansin-pansin. Ang pagbili lang ng sapatos

ang masarap, pero ang pag-aari sa sapatos, mabilis lang ang dulot na saya. Ang gusto mo sana, bumili ulit ng sapatos para malasap ulit ang sarap ng pagbili. Kaso--wala ka nang pera.

Ikumpara ito sa pera. Kumita ka kunwari, sumuweldo ka. Pagkatapos mabayaran ang renta, pagkatapos bumisita sa bangko para magdeposito, may natira. Iisipin mo, bibili ako ng bagong sapatos. Pero naalala mo iyong huling beses na bumili ka ng sapatos. Nakita mo ito sa sulok ng kuwarto, hindi mo na isinusuot. Imbes na gumastos sa luho, nag-invest ka. Kunwari, bumili ka ng ingredients, at nag-bake ka ng cupcake. Ibinenta mo ito. Ang sarap! Ang sarap ng cupcake, at ang sarap ng pagkita ng pera. Tulad din ng pagbili ng sapatos, panandalian ang sarap. Pero hindi tulad ng pagbili ng sapatos, dahil kumita ka, pagkatapos maubos ng sarap at saya--meron kang pera. Pera na maaari mo ulit ipambili ng ingredients. Pera na paraan para kumita ka ulit--ng mas marami pang pera.

Ang paghabol sa pera ang pinakasimpleng bagay sa mundo--wala kang ibang layunin kundi pera. Hanggang buhay ka, kailangan mo ng pera. Hanggang gusto mong mabuhay, gusto mo ng pera. Papuri sa pera! Mabuhay ang pera!

### *Ang Elise Rio Standard*

May kinukuwento ang kaibigan ko, sekretarya sa kanilang opisina. Hindi siya masisante kahit wala siyang ginagawa. May security of tenure na kasi. Kadalasan, wala sa mesa. Magpapaalam na babanyo, umuwi na pala. Ang sekretaryang ito ang isa sa pinakahinhangaan kong tao. Tawagin natin s'yang Elise Rio. Si Ate Elise. Lahat tayo, may kilalang Ate Elise.

Sa *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, sabi ni Stephen Covey, "Begin with the end in mind." Ano raw ang gusto mong sabihin ng mga tao tungkol sa 'yo pag burol mo na? Doon ka raw mag-concentrate. Ibig sabihin, kung gusto mong sabihin nila, pag wala ka na, na mabuti kang ama, ngayon pa lang, hangga't buhay ka pa, magpakabuti kang ama. Sabi naman ni Greg McKeown, kailangang disiplinado tayo sa pagpupursigi sa esensyal. Meron kasing walang kakuwenta-kuwentang marami, at merong napakahalagang kaunti. Doon dapat tayo sa napakahalagang kaunti magtuon ng panahon. Kung hindi ay kalat-kalat ang ating pagpupursigi, at sa huli, wala tayong mararating. Si Covey at McKeown, pareho lang silang sumusunod kay

Vilfredo Pareto. Narito ang pinakabulgar na paliwanag ng tinaguriang Prinsipyong Pareto (PP), base sa *The 80/20 Principle* ni Richard Koch, ang yaman, saya, pag-unlad, seguridad, lahat ng mabuting bagay na puwede mong maisip, nagmumula lang sa bente porsiyentong (20%) gawain sa iyong buhay. Ibig sabihin, nagpapagod ka sa 80%, pero wala naman iyong nadaragdag nang malaki sa kaligayahan mo.

Nang una kong nabasa, akala ko bolero lang itong si Koch, bola lang ang PP. Pero nang mabasa ko, sa isang librong walang kinalaman sa sariling-sikap (self-help), kundi sa librong *Non-Violent Resistance* ni Todd May, na ang kompanyang GE, noong 1970s, kalakhan ng kita'y mula sa dibisyon nila ng enerhiyang nukleyar, na maliit na bahagi lang ng kanilang negosyo, napatianod ako. Bigla kong sinuri ang aking buhay, at parang conspiracy theorist, o di kaya'y baliw, nakita ko ang PP sa bawat bahagi ng aking buhay. Mas madalas ko nga namang hugutin mula sa bookshelves ang ilang piling libro, na lagi kong pinakukuhanan ng masusing sipi para sa aking mga papel. Mas madalas nga naman akong pumunta sa ilang piling torrent sites, kahit ang daming puwedeng bisitahan sa Internet. Kahit sa paghiga sa kama, meron akong puwestong pinakahilig, at, di man nasasayang, di rin nagagamit, ang malaki-laking espasyo.

Kahit ang pinakamahuay kong guru, na Marxista, nakakitaan ko ng PP. Ayon sa kanya, meron ka daw dapat core na pagtutuunan ng pananaliksik. Nang sa gayon, iyon ang bibigyang-diin mo sa paggamit mo ng iyong intelektwal na lakas-paggawa.

Balik na tayo kay Ate Elise. Si Ate Elise, may apat na anak. Isang doktor, isang engineer, isang abagado, at isang accountant. Lahat ng nagrereklamo sa kaibigan ko tungkol kay Ate Elise, binabara lang n'ya sa pamamagitan ng pagpapaalala sa mga ito tungkol sa apat na anak ni Ate, ang apat na diyamante ng Pamilya Rio. Meron kasing Elise Rio Standard, o Rio Standard. Pag di ka umabot dito, di ka priority. Pag di ka pasa sa Standard, wapakels si Ate Elise sa iyo. Anong mga aktibidad ang pumapasa sa Rio Standard? Pag-aalaga ng anak, pagsiguro sa kanilang edukasyon at kinabukasan. Ano ang mga hindi pumapasa sa Rio Standard? Pagtatrabaho sa opisina, pagdalo sa mga pulong. Siguro, noong wala pang security of tenure si Ate Elise, nagpapakitang gilas pa s'ya sa boss. Ngayon, kebs na.

Ganito rin tayo dapat sa buhay. Hindi ko sinasabing magnakaw dapat tayo, o manloko ng kapwa. Ang maganda sa PP, puwede mo itong ilapat sa iyong buhay nang sumusunod pa rin sa batas, at manatiling moral

na tao. Halimbawa, sa pagkain: pag busog ka na, h'wag ka nang kumain. Kasi ang layunin naman natin sa pagkain, mabusog, di mabundat. Halimbawa, sa meetings, kung puwede namang sa email na lang ipaalam ang mga bagay-bagay, h'wag nang mag-set nang harapang pagpupulong. Sa Facebook, tingnan mo, alin ba ang pinakanila-like ng tao sa mga post mo? Ang mga katulad na lang ng pinakasikat mong post ang i-post mo, dahil kaya naman tayo nagpe-Facebook ay para makakuha ng like, hindi para manggalugad ng iba't ibang estilo ng pagpapahayag ng sarili.

Para kay Ate Elise, ang pag-unlad ng mga anak n'ya ang kanyang esensyal na 20%. Ang natitirang 80% ng kanyang buhay, hindi importante, hindi pinapahalagahan. Ang PP ay pagkilala sa limitasyon mo bilang tao. Isipin na lang ang driver na text nang text habang nagmamaneho. Mababangga s'ya. Bakit? Kasi limitado ang kanyang atensyon, pwede s'yang magmaneho nang ligtas, o mag-text. Hindi n'ya pwedeng gawin nang sabay.

Kaya ito ang gawin mo. Ilista mo ang sampung aktibidad na nagpapasaya sa iyo sa buhay. Gayundin, ilista mo ang sampung aktibidad na nagpapalungkot sa iyo. I-rate mo ang mga aktibidad sa dalawang listahan, isa hanggang 10. Sampu ang pinaka-nakakapagpasaya o pinaka-nakakapagpalungkot. Pagkatapos, i-compute mo ang average. Mula sa dalawang listahan gagawa tayo ng apat. Lahat ng mas mataas sa average rating ng mga bagay na nagpapasaya sa iyo, kasama sa listahan na tatawaging "Bokasyon." Lahat ng kasing-taas o mas mababa sa average rating ng mga bagay na nagpapasaya sa iyo, ilagay sa listahan ng "Libangan." Lahat ng mas mababa sa average rating ng mga bagay na nagpapalungkot sa iyo, isama sa listahan ng mga "Tiisin na Lang." At lahat ng kasing-taas o mas mataas sa average rating ng mga bagay na nagpapalungkot sa iyo, isama sa listahan ng "Dapat Iwaksi sa Buhay." Ituon ang iyong buhay sa pagpursigi sa mga nasa "Bokasyon" at pag-iwas sa mga nasa "Dapat Iwaksi."

Hindi lang sa limitado ang kakayahan ng isang tao, limitado rin ang kanyang panahon sa mundo. At sakaling matatay si Ate Elise, ano nga ba ang gusto n'yang marinig sa kanyang burol: "Ang galing-galing n'yang sekretarya, ano?" O: "Isa s'ya sa pinakamahusay na inang kilala ko." Ako, alam ko kung ano ang sasabihin ko sa burol ng isa sa pinakahinahangaan kong tao sa mundo.

## *May Trabaho sa Pila*

Bilang guro, madalas akong magalit noon sa mga estudyanteng nagdadaldalan habang nagle-lecture ako. Lumipas ang ilang taon, at wala nang nagdadaldalan. Lahat na lang, nakatutok sa cellphone. Gusto kong magalit, pero nagi-guilty naman ako. Ako rin naman, nakatutok sa cellphone madalas (hindi habang nagtuturo). Hindi na ako nagagalit, naaawa na ako. Paano, ang mga estudyante ko, pati ako, laging nagtrabaho nang walang bayad. Nagtrabaho sa Internet.

Madalas nating isiping libre ang kinokonsumo natin sa Internet. Pero hindi. Nanonood tayo ng ads. At kahit na may ad blocker ka, pinagsasamantalahan ka pa rin ng mga website. Pag nag-like ka sa aking anong social media platform, pinapalakas mo ang kanilang plataporma. Para itong pagkain sa restaurant, o di kaya'y pagsusuot ng damit na may logo. Ikaw ang patalastas. At pag nag-post ka naman, aba, para ka nang nagluto para do'n sa restaurant, o di kaya'y nagtahi para sa kompanya ng damit. Gumawa ka ng produkto na ikokonsumo ng ibang kustomer. At hindi lang iyon, sa tuwing gumagamit ka ng social media, naglalaan ka ng oras para dito imbes na para sa ibang bagay, tulad ng pagtulog.

Kung libre nga raw ang isang serbisyo, hindi ka kustomer--ikaw ang produkto. Sa libreng games, halimbawa, kung di ka nagbabayad, kundi ka man produkto, empleyado ka pa rin. Kasi kung di libre iyong laro, mas kaunti ang maglalaro. Paunti nang paunti, hanggang sa wala nang naglalaro. Sa isalaban-sa-isa, ang manlalarong malakas gumastos sa laro, kailangan ng kalaro--ang empleyadong walang bayad kundi ang maging kalaro ng mga malakas gumastos. Isipin na lang ang mga larong lima-laban-sa-lima, o di kaya'y isalaban-sa-siyamnapu.

Merong magsasabi, e ano naman. Di ba masayang tumingin-tingin ng picture, manood ng videos, maglaro ng games. Hindi ba't patas lang ang palitan? Atensyon at paglikha ng content, kapalit ng aliw. Pero hindi, kasi kalakhan sa yamang nililikha ay napupunta sa kompanyang may-ari ng social media. Gayundin, pag-aari nila ang nalilikha mong content. (Kung hindi naniniwala, basahin ang kanilang terms and conditions.) At panghuli, dahil nga ad-based ang pinagmumulan ng kanilang benta, itong click society ay kapatid ng consumer society. Sa huli, mawawala pa rin sa iyo ang pera mo. Ano ba naman ang ginagawa ng mga nakakapanood ng ad kundi komunsumo? At hindi kailangang produkto ng napanood mong ad! Lahat ng ad, iisa lang sa huli ang mensahe: bumili.

Kaya, sa mga klase ko, nakakaawa ang mga estudyanteng panay ang trabaho. Akala natin nakakatakwas tayo sa pagkabagot, nagtatrabaho pala tayo nang walang bayad. Ganito rin sa mga pila sa jeep, o sa mga byahe sa bus na mahaba-haba. Imbes na magpahinga ang mga mata at utak, panay pa rin tayo sa kognitibong paggawa. Kahit pagod na ang ating isip at diwa, kailangan pa ring boluntaryong pataasin ang views.

Ano ang pwedeng gawin? Pwede tayong umiwas sa social media, at sa gadgets mismo. Napakahirap iyong gawin, at sa pinakahuling sarbey ng Eliserio Surveys, ang limang pinaka-nakakaadik na bagay sa mundo ay asukal, alak, sigarilyo, caffeine, at screen. Ang mas madaling gawin ay yakapin na lang ang sistema. Imbes na magtrabaho nang libre para sa kung ano-anong multinasyonal na kompanya, makisagpang na lang sa kanilang nilalamon. Matutong i-monetize ang iyong social media profiles. Gumawa ng sarili mong video channel, nagme-makeup ka man o nambabaril ng kung sino-sino sa games. Mas nakikita mo kung ang mga estratehiya sa manipulasyon sa Internet, mas lumalakas ang resistensya mo rito. Kaya sa susunod na pumila ka, ilabas ang cellphone at simulan ang live blogging.

### *Sanayan Lang ‘Yan*

Lahat ng bagay, sanayan. Cellphone ba una mong tinitingnan pagkagising? Nasanay ka na kasi. Ito ang gawin mo, bago ka matulog, ilipat mo sa ibang kuwarto, o sa drawer, o sa ref‘yung cellphone. Kita mo paggising mo, hindi cellphone ang una mong tititingnan. A, ano ‘yon, cellphone ang huli mong tinitingnan bago matulog? Sanayan lang ‘yan.

Lahat ng ginagawa mo ngayon, resulta ng araw-araw, buwan-buwan, at taon-taong sanayan. Hindi ko na itatago sa wika ng agham ang mga pahayag ko. Maniwala ka na lang. At kung may duda ka? Sige, maglaro tayo ng “kunwari,” ibig kong sabihin, “Kunwari, totoo na sanayan lang lahat. E, ano ngayon?”

Kung totoong sanayan lang lahat, ibig sabihin, walang hindi puwedeng baguhing ugali. Paninigarilyo, alak, kahit ano. Kailangan lang sanayin mo ang sarili mong gumawa ng ibang bagay. Siyempre, napakahirap nun. At walang mahikang solusyon na bigla sa lahat ng problema mo. Taon ang inabot para masanay ka sa mga ginagawa mo ngayon. Taon din ang kakailanganin para magbago ka

Siyempre pa, hindi naman lahat ng nakasanayan natin, masama. Iyong pagmano mo na sa ina mo pag nakita mo s'ya, nagdudulot ng kasiyahan sa iyong dalawa. Ba't mo babaguhin? Pero kunwari, laging galit ang sagot mo sa lahat ng problema, maliit man o malaki. Problemang malaki 'yan. Baka mapatay ka sa trapik. O, di kaya, may masabi kang hindi mo na mababawi. Kaya kailangan, pasabugin mo. Hindi 'yung kinagalitan mo, kundi iyong nakasanayan mong gawin na magalit sa bawat harang na nakakaengkuwento. Ito ang turo nina Tony Robbins sa *Awaken the Giant Within*, gayundin ni Charles Duhigg sa kanyang *Habits*.

Paanong magpasabog? Ang ibang tao, nagbibilang hanggang isang daan. Puwede ka ring tumawa, o di kaya'y umalis muna sa lugar. Mas mainam nang magmukhang gago, kesa makipagsigawan o makipagsapakan.

Maglaro tayo ulit ng "kunwari." Kunwari, puwede ngang magbago. Kunwari, pwede kang magbago. Ang tanong: bakit? Anong motibasyon mo para magbago? Kasi kung wala ring insertivo, mahirap iabandonna ang nakasanayan na.

Hindi ako relihiyoso, pero espiritwal akong tao. Ang tingin ko sa buhay ay laro. Dalawang bagay ang ibinibigay sa atin ng pagkukunwaring ito. Una, na ang buhay ay may alituntunin. Halimbawa, sa basketbol, hindi mo wedeng sikuhin ang mukha ng may hawak ang bola. (Yata? Hindi ako marunong magbasketbol.) Ano ang mga alituntunin ng laro na siyang buhay? Merong mga batas, at may ilang batas na dapat sinusunod. Merong etika at moralidad, na puwede nating sundin depende sa trip. Meron siyempreng mga batas ang pisika na hindi puwedeng baliin. Sa madaling sabi, labas sa pagkilos nang mas mabilis sa bilis ng liwanag, at ilang batas katulad dito, madamidami din ang ating mga kalayaan.

Pangalawa, kung ang buhay ay laro, ang buhay ay may layunin.

Ano ang layunin ng buhay? Ito ang maganda, ang buhay ay parang MMO, o massively multiplayer roleplaying game. Bukas itong uri ng laro, ibig sabihin, ikaw ang magsasabi kung ikaw ay "panalo" o "talo." Sa ganitong paraan, hindi ito tulad ng basketbol. Ang nakakatakot sa ganitong uri ng laro, ikaw ang kailangang magdesisyon para sa sarili mo. O sige, puwede namang makinig ka sa payo ng iba. Pero h'wag magpapakaalipin, sa mga magulang man o sa mga politiko. Kahit nga, hindi natin mababali ang ilang batas ng pisika. Halimbawa? Kamatayan. Ang kamatayan ang hindi maaalpasang abot-tanaw ng lahat ng aktibidad ng tao. Sa ilalim nito maaari nating isaayos lahat ng paniniwala at diskurso natin.

Pero, pero, pero... laro nga lang itong lahat. At wala naman talagang kamatayan, meron lang buhay. Ganito kasi: namatay ka na. Ilang beses ka nang namatay. Pero, dahil nga laro, ni-reset mo at nabuhay ka ulit. Pwede kang pumili ng punto sa laro, sa buhay, kung kailan ka babalik. Pinili mong dito, dito mismo, sa ganitong uri ng pagkakasaayos ng buhay mo, bumalik. May ibig sabihin iyon. Itanong mo sa sarili mo, bakit ako dito bumalik?

Ngayon, kung ang buhay ay laro, bakit hindi ka na lang mayaman? Bakit hindi ka na lang pwedeng pumitik para makuha ang lahat ng gusto mo? Isa sa mga pinakapaborito kong laro noong nasa high school pa ay *Civilization II*. Hindi ito ang pinakamahusay na bersyon ng laro, pero ito ang pinakamamahal ko. Sa *Civ II*, may "toggle cheat mode." Pag pinindot mo iyon, puwede kang lumikha ng walang hanggang hukbo, o di kaya'y pumatay na lang bigla ng kaaway. Pag natatalo ako noon, pinipindot ko ang "toggle cheat mode." Pinapatay ko ang kalaban kong computer. Pero, hindi rin ako masaya. Hindi masayang manalo kung daya. Kailangang may tsansang manalo ang kalaban mo, kundi walang saysay ang iyong tagumpay. Ibig kong sabihin, sa buhay, kung hindi ka puwedeng mabigo, hindi ka talaga tunay na nagtagumpay. Kaya, kahit laro lang ang buhay, may alituntunin ito. Kaya hindi natin alam, isang daang porsiyento, na laro lang ito. Laging "kunwari, laro ang buhay..." Kinakalimutan natin sa tuwing nag-rereset tayo (i.e. namamatay). Dahil walang kamatayan kaya may kamatayan. Kasi itong buhay na ito, ito ang iisang buhay ng bersyon na ikaw. Ang bersyon na naglalaro, hindi s'ya ikaw. Ang ikaw na ikaw na totoo, ang tanging ikaw, ay ang ikaw na nagbabasa ng mga salitang ito. Magkaiba ang ikaw na inaalala at ang ikaw na umaalala, ang ikaw na naglalaro sa buhay na ito (na may kamatayan) at ang ikaw na naglalaro sa buhay sa labas (na walang kamatayan).

E, ano ngayon?

Ang mabuting balita, puwede mong itigil ang lahat ng hindi mo gustong gawin. Kasi laro lang ito lahat. Ang mas mabuti pang balita, merong kamatayan. Iisa lang ang buhay na ito, kaya ito ang pinakamasarap. Parang huling french fries. Pag marami pa, di mo binibigyang-halaga. Pag kaunti na lang, pag isa na lang, ibang usapan na iyon.

Ikaw na ngayon ang magdedesisyon. Ituon mo ang iyong buhay sa kahit anong bagay, kahit anong trip mo. Lahat ng oras mo, doon mo ibuhos. Lahat ng enerhiya, lahat ng lakas, lahat ng pag-ibig. Pag namatay ka, ire-reset lang naman ng ikaw na hindi namamatay ang laro. Puwedeng ituon ng ibang bersyon mo ang kanyang atensyon sa ibang bagay, o puwede ring sa bagay na

pinili mo. Pero hindi ka pa patay. Puwede ka pang pumili. Pag pumili ka na, wala nang atrasan. Lubos-lubosin mo. Ito ang tinatawag na mabuting buhay.

### *Dalawang Mukha, Dalawang Utak*

Kailangang laging dalawa ang mukha mo. Ang mukha mong panlabas (na hindi ko tatawaging maskara dahil mukha mo talaga ito), ang mukha mong panloob. Ang una, ito ang ipinapakita mo sa karamihan. Nagbabago-bago ito depende sa kung sino ang iyong kausap. Hindi ito panloloko. Pareho ka bang kumilos sa harap ng 'yong magulang at sa harap ng iyong mga kaibigan? Iyon nga lang kasama mo ang isang kaibigan, iba ka sa pag kasama mo ang buo n'yong barkada. Kailangan lang, gawing mas aktibo ang ganitong pagbabago ng mukha. Nang gayon, mas kontrolado mo.

Ano ang bentahe sa 'yo pag kontrolado mo ang mukha mong panlabas? Kumokonti ang iyong kaaway, una. Ang gusto kasi ng mga tao, maging tama. E di 'yon ang ibigay mo sa kanila. Sa kasaysayan ng sangkatauhan, meron bang nanghingi ng payo na humihingi talaga ng payo? Ang gusto lang talagang marinig ng karamihan sa mga tao ay ang sarili nilang pasya. E di 'yon ang ibigay mo sa kanila. Kasi pag kumontra ka, makikita ka bilang kaaway. Kundi man kaaway, hadlang. Ang gusto mo, makita bilang kaibigan. Sino naman ang ayaw sa kaibigan?

Isa pang bentahe: nakikilala mo talaga ang ibang tao. Pag mukhang panloob lang dapat ang ginamit mo bilang mukhang panlabas, ang nangyayari madalas hindi ka nakikinig. Kasi, dahil nga tao, gusto mo ikaw ang maging tama. Gusto mo igiit na ang asersyon mo ang katotohanan. Pag suot mo ang mukha mong panlabas, maiiwasan mo ito. Wala kang igiit, kaya may panahon ka para intindihin kung bakit ganito at ganire ang iginigiit ng iba. Hindi ba masarap ang luto ng byenan mo? Purihin mo pa rin. Baka di ka na paglutuan pag sinabi mo ang ayaw n'yong marinig

Ang mukha mong panloob ay para sa sarili mo lang, at siguro isa o dalawang taong malapit talaga sa iyo. Pribado ang mukha mong panloob, wag mong ipapakita sa madla. Hindi dahil pangit, kundi dahil ubod ng halaga. Parang binukot, dapat hindi basta-basta nasisilayan.

Kailangan din, dalawa ang utak mo. Ang una mong utak, iyong may alam ng gusto mo, ng mga layunin mo. Ito ang may kontrol sa mukhang panlabas mo. Ang pangalawa mong utak, iyong utak ng kausap mo. Higit

pa sa pakikinig sa kanya, kailangang pasukin mo ang kanyang utak. Ano ang kanyang mga motibasyon? Ano ang kanyang mga pagnanasa? Ano ang kanyang mga pangarap? Pag di mo ito nagawa, baka mabutas n'ya ang mukhang panlabas mo. Sayang naman, maganda pa naman.

Sa pangalawa mong utak, kailangang kalimutan ang sarili. Wag magpalimita sa mga karanasan mo, kasi iba ang buhay ng kausap mo. Baka meron s'yang pinanggagalingan o pinagdadaanan na hindi mo alam. Gamitin ang iyong imahinasyon. Wala namang nagagalit nang walang dahilan. Wala namang nagmamadali nang walang dahilan. Wala ngang umiihi sa pader nang walang dahilan.

At kung sasabihin mong ayaw mong pagtaksilan ang iyong awtentikong sarili, e di sige. Gusto mo bang mapagalitan, masapak, maputulan ng ugnayan? Sa ikauunlad ng sarili, dalawang mukha, dalawang utak ang kailangan.

### *Ang Paruparo*

Nitong nakaraang linggo, nakakita ako ng patay na paru-paro. Nagkataong dalawang mahal sa buhay (tito ko at ninong ko sa kasal) ang nasa ospital, kaya di ko mapigilang makaramdam ng ligalig.

Nitong nakaraang taon, namatay ang tatay ng kaibigan ko. Disyembre, kaya sabi sa kanya ng mga tao, "Sayang naman at malapit na'ng mag-Pasko." Nobyembre 1 naman noong 2016 namatay ang tatay ko. Pero walang nagsabi sa akin, "Saktong-sakto, Araw ng mga Patay.

Umuwi ang ninong ko galing sa ospital, hindi pinalad ang aking tito. Matagal na rin siyang may sakit, sa atay. Sabi ng pinsan ko, di daw'yon masakit. Iyon nga raw isa nilang kilala, dalawang araw bago maospital at mamatay, umiinom pa. Paano mas daw nadudurog ang atay, mas hindi nahahalata ang sakit. Kaya mas lalo mo pang ipagpapatuloy ang mga aktibidad na sanhi ng sakit mo. Suwerte na rin ang ganung klase ng sakit, iyong walang sakit. Ang tatay ko, sa baga ang problema. Malakas kasing magsigariloy. Kinailangan siyang itubo.

Ayaw kong pumupunta sa ospital, pero nakumbinsi ako ng asawa ko't kapatid na dalawin ang tito ko. Ayaw kong pumunta sa burol, pero pumunta ako sa burol niya, at pupunta din sa libing. Takot ako, sa ospital,

sa punerarya, sa sementeryo. Hindi dahil takot ako sa multo. Takot ako sa kamatayan. Kaya nga noon, naging obsesyon ko ang pagsusulat. Akala ko, maisasalba ako nito mula sa kamatayan. Di bát si Rizal, buhay pa rin ngayon? Di bát si Dostoevsky? Lagi ko pang inuulit ang patawa ni Bulgakov: imortal si Dostoevsky!

Nang matatay ang tatay ko, natuklasan ko kung gaano kahungkag ang mga salitang iyon, at ang mga salita sa pangkalahanan. Hindi si Dostoevsky ang tatay ko, pero iyon na nga ang natanto ko: kahit na si Dostoevsky siya, wala na rin siya. Oo, kung si Dostoevsky siya, may maiwan siyang salita. Pero hindi siya iyon. Mga sulatin niya iyon. At may naiwan din naman ang tatay ko e. Ang mga sumbrero niya. Ang TV naming malaki. Ang aso naming umaalulong pag dumadaan ang magtataho. Ang mga alaala. Pero kahit ang mga pinakamatamis na alaala, hindi pa rin siya. Wala na siya.

Gusto kong humirit. Gusto kong magsulat ng sobrang husay, hindi makakalimutan. Tipong, "Tunay ngang ang kamatayan ang hindi maalpasang abot-tanaw ng lahat ng gawaing-sining." Nabibigo ang mga salita.

Naiisip ko 'yung paruparo. Simbolo ng pagbabago, mulang caterpillar tungong butterfly. Namatay nga naman iyong caterpillar. Hindi na siya ang dating siya, anoman ang sabihin ng, natin tungkol sa, paruparo. Patay na 'yung caterpillar. Gayundin, patay na 'yung paruparong nakita ko sa aming garahe. Wala na rin ang tito ko. Tulad ng tatay ko.

Ang tanging pag-asa ko na lang, ang maging mali. Pag nagsusulat ka kasi, kailangang sigurado ka. Kahit na hindi ka sigurado sa ideya mo, kailangan sigurado ko sa mga titik mo. Kundi, panay tandang pananong at panipi ang maisusulat mo. Tadtad ng baka at marahil ang iyong gawa. Kaya kailangang ganito at ganire ang isulat mo, kahit na puwedeng maging hindi ganito at hindi ganire, at salungat pa nga sa ganito at ganire ang sitwasyon, ang gusto mong maging tunay na sitwasyon.

At iyon ang aking pag-asa, ang aking pusta. Na mali ako. Na magkikita kami, na magkikita tayo sa kung saan at kung kailan mang kinabukanan. Nga lang, kung aasa kang mali ka, at puwedeng maging mas mainam ang katotohanan, mabubuksan ang posibilidad na mali *at puwedeng maging malala ang katotohanan*. So, ano ka nga ba, ano nga ba ako, ano nga ba tayo. Tayo ba iyong caterpillar na malapit nang maging butterfly, o tayo 'yung buhay na paruparong malapit nang maging patay na paruparo? Baka naman may "third" "option"?

# DOWN THE STRETCH:

## Memories of San Lazaro Hippodrome

Jenny Ortuoste

The San Lazaro Hippodrome was set on a property of about 25 hectares in the heart of old Manila, and, like a living organism, it grew and expanded over the decades until every available inch of space was used for stables, grandstands, and all the other structures that support a working community.

I came upon the racing scene in 1991, intending to write feature articles for the “Sporting Life” supplement of the now-defunct Manila Chronicle. Fresh out of college, I thought that one way to make my mark as a writer was to write about the sport from the inside, to penetrate that world and fashion autoethnographic narratives. Much later, I read about Hunter Thompson and his gonzo journalism, and thought, yes, that’s what I did.

I decided that instead of interviewing student jockeys, I would become one myself. That is how I ended up as the sport’s first female apprentice jockey, and at the time it didn’t feel special. I was just one of a group of young horse-mad teenagers, and a particularly inept one at that.

My becoming part of the racing world at that time felt like entering a theater in the middle of a movie and leaving before the end: you will never know the whole story, only the part that you were there for.

After all, the Manila Jockey Club, which owned and operated the Hippodrome, was founded a century and a half ago. Many generations have come and gone in its service and patronage. As a jockey apprentice, and later as a jockey’s wife, racing writer, and manager, I was in a privileged position to not only watch but participate at that point in its existence, and the old Hippodrome had many stories to tell.

## **1. Karerahan**

*The racetrack and its facilities—clubhouse, stables, jockeys' quarters, saddling paddock, and more.*

### **The Founding Years**

The story of the Manila Jockey Club opens in 1867. It was the year La Reina Isabel Dos decreed that the Colegio de Santa Isabel be established in Naga, the year the Royal and Pontifical University of Santo Tomas was made the center of instruction, the year the Jesuits established the Manila Observatory.

Amid the flurry of educational expansion by the clergy, a group of sportsmen decided that summer to form a club to indulge their love for horses and racing. The Governor General of the Philippines, Jose de la Gandara y Navarro, and about a hundred members of prominent and affluent Spanish, Filipino, and English families agreed. The names of some of these *socio fundadores* still resound in Philippine business and society today – Ayala, Zobel, Tuason, Elizalde, Nieto, Prieto. Eduardo Boustead, the father of Nelly, Jose Rizal's love interest, was a founding member.

MJC was initially formed as a social club, and membership was highly exclusive, granted only after strict and rigorous screening by the Board of Directors. One dissenting vote was enough to bar an applicant.

Because the Club was organized purely for recreation, there was no betting at first. For a decade in the late 1860s to 1870s, members held what we would call 'fun runs', racing Philippine ponies on a quarter-mile (400 meters) straight course from San Sebastian Church to Quiapo Church.

The races were held once a year, in April or May, with tokens such as gold and silver medals, watches, or other ornaments as the prizes. Only members of the Club – the gentlemen riders – could compete in the *carreras oficiales*.

### **The Move to the Sta. Mesa Oval**

By 1880, Quiapo had become a stronghold of commerce, its streets crammed with the shops and homes of business tycoons. The Club moved its races to rural Sta. Mesa beside the Pasig River, to a rice field rented from the Tuason family. A new oval racetrack with a bamboo and *nipa* grandstand that

could accommodate 800 people was built there. It is likely that the facility gave the street its name—Calle Hippodromo

The Santa Mesa Hippodrome was located about a mile upstream from the Manila Club, founded by the British and stood on the oldest private membership club in the country. The histories of the two institutions were intertwined, with the British in the Philippines being among the regular attendees at the races.

Angus Campbell writes in “The Manila Club” (1993) about a day at the races during that era:

It was a gala country-style affair, where friends met to spend the day with the horses; the racing fans came in carriages drawn by spirited steeds. The ladies wore long skirts and pleated dresses with matching parasols. The men, young and old, sported light pants, four-buttoned coats, and black Ascot ties, lending an atmosphere of color to the hippodrome. After the races the ladies and their escorts repaired to the clubhouse [the Manila Club] where they danced to the tune of the Spanish quadrille and waltzes.

Beginning in 1881, race meetings were held twice a year for three successive days. The business community would declare a holiday, with the list of race *aficionados* headed by no less than the Governor-General and the Archbishop of Manila. Professional jockeys were now allowed to ride in two of the average eight races of the day.

Races were then run clockwise, as in Europe and Japan today; in the Philippines today, as in the United States, Australia, and Dubai UAE, races are run counter-clockwise.

## 2. Pista

*The racetrack itself, the oval upon which races are run.*

### **The Transfer to San Lazaro Hippodrome**

In 1899, a few months after the occupation of Manila by American forces, races were resumed at the Santa Mesa Hippodrome. A year later, the Club leased a 16-hectare site in Sta. Cruz, Tayuman, Manila, from the Sisters of the Monasterio de Santa Clara.

The land on which the facility stood was part of the 400-hectare Hacienda de Mayhaligue, a former friar estate. It was home to the Hospital de San Lazaro, administered by the Franciscan order since 1785. In 1912, MJC bought the property from the nuns and built a new grandstand and six-furlong (1,200 meter) track.

Social life became more democratic under the American civil government. Horseracing, once exclusive to the rich, became open to anyone interested. In 1903, legalized betting was introduced, increasing the sport's mass appeal.

Under the commercial stimulus provided by betting, two competitors opened shop, one in Cebu and the other in Pasay, known as the Pasay Country Club, with its track bounded by Harrison and Vito Cruz Streets. Both were short-lived.

MJC continued to reign as the only racing club in the country until 1937, when the Philippine Racing Club in Makati was founded by a group of Filipino and American investors. It remains a worthy competitor of MJC to this day, joined by the Metro Manila Turf Club in 2013.

In March 1937, MJC abandoned its outdated social club format and was formally incorporated as a business entity under the name Manila Jockey Club, Inc.

In the early 1940s, MJC president Don Rafael Roces introduced the "daily double" and "llave" bets which spurred racing's popularity among sports fans and raised the volume of betting. The "DD" is still a beloved option on today's betting menu and is distinctly Filipino, offered nowhere else in the world.

More improvements to the facility were undertaken, the most noteworthy of which was the demolition of the old wooden grandstand to make way for a magnificent concrete clubhouse in the Art Deco style, for decades thereafter a beautiful example of that graceful style of architecture.

Its architect was the celebrated Juan Nakpil, who also designed the University of the Philippines-Diliman's Quezon Hall, in front of which stands the Oblation statue, as well as UP's carillon tower and university library, among other famous structures. He was later to be named a National Artist.

Given the dearth of historical documents related to the building's construction, I guess it was sometime in the 1930s that it was erected; first, because of the style of architecture, and second, because it was in 1930 that

Nakpil founded his architectural firm, according to Guillermo Mendoza in “Pioneer in Philippine Architecture,” included in a 1973 book on national artists.

## The Second World War

In 1941, at the onset of the World War II, MJC shut its doors. In 1943, Japanese troops occupied the Club and used its buildings as barracks. Americans took over after Liberation in 1945 and turned it into a garrison.

According to history buff John Tewell, from information he found on an aerial photograph of the Hippodrome taken on June 4, 1945, the 49<sup>th</sup> General Hospital was also located there, with the racetrack's main building housing “wards, operating rooms, offices, and clinics. [The building and grounds also had] two large mess halls, nurses' quarters, enlisted men's quarters, and a theater,” with “two large baseball diamonds available also.”

When MJC members regained possession of the track in March 1946, everything was in a sorry, dilapidated state. Reconstruction began immediately; new equipment was purchased and installed; and after just two months, MJC was back in business.

## A Distinguished Destination

The 1945 aerial photo John Tewell found shows the Hippodrome's large oval track, in front of which was a long, three-story building capped at either end with perpendicular rectangular structures. The center of the building curves out gracefully in a bow, with side half-towers with steel-mullioned windows. It was one of the most elegant structures in Manila, constructed in the geometric Art Deco style. Balls and important events were held in its halls.

The Club was a destination of note before and after the war and as an institution was actively engaged in the social and civic life of the day. Dr. George Estrada confides in his memoir *As Flip as I Want to Be: Ruminations on the Filipino-American Experience*, that his mother, Milagros Moya, a charmer from Samar, won the 1940 Miss Luzon title and “rode proudly atop a float in a beauty pageant sponsored by the Manila Jockey Club.”

In 1951, it was where the Nacionalista Party Convention was held, and the mayoral candidate for Manila chosen. On August 5 that year, writes

Amador F. Brioso Jr. in his book *Arsenio H. Lacson of Manila*, a biography of the colorful and exuberant mayor,

The place, Manila Jockey Club, was made to look like a town fiesta. The hall was festooned with colorful bunting, large posters, and with multi-colored balloons to boot. Loud music courtesy of bands made the event all the more festive... Then the much-awaited counting [of ballots] began... By evening it was clear that Lacson was winning the race... Ecstatic over his surprising triumph [over Engracio Clemeña and Nicasio Osmeña], Lacson lost no time in proceeding back to the Manila Jockey Club where his rapturous supporters eagerly awaited him.

By the time I came along to become part of the MJC story, the ‘hipodromo’ at Felix Huertas and Tayuman Streets was a famous Manila landmark in more ways than one.

Until it was later obscured by high-rise residential and commercial buildings, its imposing clubhouse was a familiar sight that could be seen from afar, helping to spatially orient travelers who were journeying to it and nearby places—the University of Santo Tomas, the San Lazaro compound which houses the Hospital de San Lazaro, the Manila Chinese Cemetery, and the Archdiocesan Shrine of Espiritu Santo.

Not only was the racetrack a beloved landmark and location for important races, it was also an important work of Philippine architecture. Its Art Deco angles and curves were simple yet pleasing to the eye, no matter how many layers of paint covered its original surface through the decades. Although the rooms had lost their original proportions over multiple interior do-overs and remodeling, one could still appreciate the magnificent bare bones of the building.

In 1990, the building was painted white with navy blue trim, the Club’s logo colors. The layers of paint on the interior walls, applied over decades, had peeled in some places, and were as thick and pliable as the skin of a mango. I confess to vandalism, having peeled off several hands-widths of the paint at some spot or another.

Even back then the building and facilities showed their age; like a beautiful woman in her fading years, the clubhouse’s decrepitude was obvious and coats of paint, like makeup, were powerless to restore it to its past glory.

### 3. Patakbo

*To run a race, ‘patakbu hin ang karera’; to enter a horse in a race, ‘itakbo siya sa karera’; an entry in a race, ‘May panakbo ka ba riyani?’*

#### Karerang San Lazaro

The *karerahan ng San Lazaro* was also a venue for the most exciting sporting events in the country. As one of only two venues for horseracing during its lifespan, it played host to countless stakes races and racing festivals.

In the 1970s, MJC ran 18 races a day three times a week starting from 10:00 a.m. In later years, the number of races in a day became fewer, while more racing days were added to the week.

Before there were off-track betting stations and automated tickets, the place was always packed to the rafters every race day. Tellers sold tickets inside enclosures called *takilya*. With tickets in hand, racing fans would look for seats in the grandstands, built bleacher-style. It got hot there particularly in the summer.

Hungry bettors could grab Jamaican beef pies for one peso; inflation later drove the price up to P2.50 but they still always sold out. Habitues could also grab Ma Mon Luk-style siopao from Mang Jun, or balut from vendors under the rickety wooden grandstands.

I'd sit up there with my fellow-apprentices watching the races from behind a cage of cyclone wire, put up to prevent fans from approaching too close and disrupting the races. My friends would crack and peel eggs, I'd sip soda with a straw from a bottle or plastic bag, and we would pore over the *programa* (racing schedule) looking for the names of famous jockeys and horses. If a favorite lost, angry spectators hurled insults and more substantial items at the loser jockeys walking back to quarters – balled-up racing programs, softdrink bottles, coins.

Before live television coverage and TV monitors, MJC employees wrote the official results of each race in chalk on a wide board placed on a tall metal stand. Fans would cluster around, tickets in hand, and either give a leap of joy or a disgruntled toss of their tickets; by the end of day, that spot would be littered with dozens of crumpled pieces of paper.

Before the racetrack moved out of Manila, when ninety percent of bets were still placed at the *karerahan*, I'd walk through those same drifts

of paper that formed around the *takilyas*, kicking the tossed tickets aside as I went from the grandstand to the parking lot or the ladies' comfort room.

Horse-owners did not watch at the grandstand. They had their own boxes in the main building overlooking the track. The Cojuangcos—Jose (“Peping”), Pedro, and Enrique (“Henry”)—had private rooms, as did Aristeo Puyat of Paris Match Stable fame and Andrew Sanchez, owner of Triple Crown, champion Time Master and later twice chairman of the Philippine Racing Commission.

Some horse-owners who had stables beside the track wall built viewing boxes higher than the wall. The Cojuangco brothers had theirs at the 1,400 and 1,500-meter marker on the track while Puyat had his at the quarter-mile. They had a good view of the races from there, as did folks whose homes abutted that wall.

“Juan’s Evolution” commented online that he “lived three blocks away from that area, from the main front entrance [on the] right side of Felix Huertas Street...In my teens, I [had] friends living at the back of the perimeter walls of the racetrack where we enjoyed actual viewing of the races for free.”

Many fans remember being brought to the track when they were young. Some of them recorded their memories on the internet. I recall exchanging pleasantries online with blogger “Señor Enrique,” who wrote:

On late Sunday afternoons...my father would sometimes take me with him to the San Lazaro racetrack, which was walking distance from where we lived. We only stayed for a couple of races and then went home in time for supper. While my father shared racing tips with his friends, I would usually indulge in either hotdogs or hamburgers and vanilla ice cream. By the time we got home, I was too full to eat anything else. It was always a fun experience whether my father won or not.

My daughter, writer Alex Alcasid, whose father is former jockey Antonio “Oyet” Alcasid Jr., now racing manager of Santa Ana Park, recalls spending much time in the Hippodrome infield parking lot when she was a child of five or six. If it wasn’t I who took her, she went with her grandparents to wait for her father to finish his races for the day.

"While they watched the races, I would play on a big sand mound there. It had little seashells in it," she said. "It wasn't until I was older that I realized that the sand was to replenish the track. There was also a patch of cattails and I would pick them and wave them around like a fuzzy wand while the thud-thud-thud of horses ran past, wishing them to run faster and win the race."

### How to Cheat at a Horse Race

Before Clay Puett invented the starting gate in 1939, races were started by use of a rope. Jockeys would get their horses as close to it as they could, and when it was dropped, away they went. Before track lighting came good enough, there was no night racing. And before there were photo-finish cameras, jockeys tried to get away with every trick in the cheat book.

Old riders tell stories that seem impossible and hilarious now: about the substitution of horses in the middle of the race; jockeys pushing and pulling at each other, or hitting each other or the other horses with their whips; blatantly sawing at the reins to halt or slow the horse; or deliberately falling off their mounts.

A former jockey now in his early 70s, who rode in the 1960s to the 1980s, told me that jockeys back in his day were more skillful than the ones now because they knew how to handle horses so well that they could lose on purpose.

"All that pulling of mounts, I used to do that," The Elder One confessed. "You'd try to push another jockey off his horse, or you'd pull on his reins. Or his horse's tail. Or you'd hit the jockey or his horse with your riding crop. Then there was deliberately falling off, *nagpapatihulog*. There was trying to halt your horse and doing it so hard you were practically standing in the stirrups."

"The stories you've heard about changing horses?" he went on. "Those are all true. This was how we'd do it - the substitute horse would be waiting under a tree beside the track. Of course he had a jockey on top of him, *gaga*. When we passed, the groom would pull in my horse and set the other one off. There was a lot of stuff like this going on back then."

This story is hard to believe; for one, I've never seen a tree growing beside a track, let alone one big enough to hide a horse and rider. But then, who was I to argue? "You were still a child then," The Elder One said. "How

would you know?" That quite put me in my place, and reminded me he has been part of the story for far longer than I have.

### The Big Three

There were certain names breathed in respectful tones: Elias. Camba. Hipolito. Jockeys all, this was during the time when they were known only by their last names or a moniker: Jikiri, Poldo, Pol, Bebet. Nowadays, they are listed on the racing program by last name and first and middle name initials.

One of the most famous riders of all time made San Lazaro his demesne. This was Jesus 'Bong' Guce, whose prowess on a horse was such that he earned the nickname "El Maestro." He had an uncanny rapport with horses that is still spoken of to this day. He also developed the ability to time laps in his head, a great advantage in training and racing because it allowed him to pace his mount as he needed.

His most famous rival, who shone just as bright in the racing firmament, was Eduardo C. Domingo Jr. 'Boboc' was regarded as a "gentleman jockey" because he had begun a master's degree at De La Salle University and was from a prominent Negros family on his mother's side, the Coscolluelas. Where Guce was by turns serious and jocular, Domingo was unfailingly charming and amiable. Albeit rivals on the track, the two became close friends and married two sisters.

Rounding out the Big Three riders in racing then was Elpidio "Bobot" Aguila. "Eagle", as he was often called, was a workmanlike rider, careful and dependable, but capable of flashes of genius strategy. Not as flamboyant as the other two, his was a calming presence.

This triumvirate was often accosted by fans after their rides at San Lazaro, as they made their way from the jockeys' quarters to the parking lot. Some fans took pictures with them or had them autograph their *programas*. This was during a time when horseracing news was given more space in newspapers and there was a pressroom at each of the racetracks.

Boboc even became so famous as to be included in a television commercial for San Miguel Beer, "Isang Platitong Mani" with comedian Bert "Tawa" Marcelo, billiards champ Amang Parica, boxing great Gabriel "Flash" Elorde, and singer Rico J. Puno. The ad became so popular that it inspired a spin-off movie of the same title that Domingo was also cast in.

My fellow apprentices and I sometimes waited by the Tayuman MJC gate for one or the other of the Big Three to appear, slick and dapper, after their races. There must be a group photo of us somewhere; I'd give anything to have a copy of it.

Jockeys, like boxers, have to make weight for each race. Bong took diuretic pills to lose water weight. As a consequence, he developed a speech impediment over the years and I could barely understand him when he spoke. I would nod just to be safe, and later wonder what I had acquiesced to. He was acknowledged as one of the toughest jockeys, getting back up in the saddle after each fall, but years of hard riding took their toll and he is now wheelchair-bound.

Eagle was the serious type, or so I always thought. His friends remember him as being humorous and engaging. In 2008, he died after spending a year bedridden after a bad fall during a race.

I was closest to Boboc. We were both panelists on the live racing coverage of the rival track, Santa Ana Park, sometimes in the early to mid-2000s, and spent hours talking about racing and personalities. He told me a little bit about his life and the important races he'd figured in and the horses he rode, among the most famous being Toshio Abe's Sun Dancer. She won all legs of the Triple Crown in 1989, the Presidential Gold Cup in 1989 and 1990, and many other stakes races, retiring undefeated in the early '90s.

Despite Boboc's fame, after his retirement he was as humble and gracious as ever, even when he was appointed by several presidents to serve on the Philippine Racing Commission as a commissioner. Everyone got along with him. Everybody liked him. We called each other 'ga, short for *palangga*, or beloved, because our mothers were both from Bacolod City and we both spoke Hiligaynon.

In 2011 or 2012, Boboc suffered a heart attack. I was working with the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office then, and I got a message on my phone. "Ga," he said, "I'm at the hospital. Please help." With Joey Macaraig, another former jockey who was working with me at PCSO, we rushed to his bedside. Boboc had bypass surgery, but suffered another stroke while still in the ICU. His speech was slurred, and he had difficulty walking. The last I heard, he had moved to Cavite.

#### **4. Karera**

*A race; the term also refers to the industry as a whole.*

#### **The Golden Age**

For many aficionados, the 1970s and 1980s were the golden age of racing in the Philippines. Back then, MJC's tagline was "San Lazaro Hippodrome—Where Racing is at its Best."

It was in the 1970s that night racing was instituted upon the advancement of track lighting technology, and the disqualification rule was developed, along with many other rules and regulations that guide the sport today.

The '80s saw the institutionalization of the use of thoroughbreds, and the breeding of *nativo* horses for racing was slowly phased out. That decade also saw the dominance of the Thoroughbred Fair and Square (Belgrade Square x Fair Sea). Owned by the Mamon family and trained by Dr. Antonio C. Alcasid Sr., he set a record for 2,000 meters at San Lazaro with a time of 2:10.6 in the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office Presidential Gold Cup of 1981. He lost just once in his career and went on to sire other great track champions.

The '90s saw the emergence of Strong Material, Real Top, Crown Colony, and the magnificent mare Sun Dancer (Fair and Square x Katie's Dancer), who was undefeated her entire career. Sun Dancer's regular rider was Boboc Domingo, and the pair always attracted a huge crowd at the Hippodrome whenever they were entered in a race.

#### **The Gran Copa**

When you ask old-timers about the grandest race held at San Lazaro, they always say, "The Gran Copa de Manila," although the original race was never held!

It was 1898, and prominent members of MJC decided to hold a grand race as part of the celebrations for the 1897 signing of the Pact of Biak-na-Bato, which ended the conflict between Filipino revolutionaries and the Spanish military.

An ornate silver cup was commissioned from a jeweler in Hong Kong. The special race was set for May 1 at MJC's Santa Mesa racetrack.

Imagine the horse-owners, jockeys, trainers, and grooms making their arduous preparations over several months, all of them wanting to take home the spectacular cup. But they were to be denied their chance at glory when on the eve of the event, into Manila Bay hove Commodore George Dewey's fleet, the vaunted Asiatic Squadron of the U.S. Navy. The Spanish-American War had begun. The race was cancelled, and MJC closed for the duration.

The magnificent *copa* that was never awarded was sent for safekeeping to the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, where it stayed in a vault until after World War II. In 1946, MJC took the cup back and displayed it at their clubhouse in Tayuman, only for it to be destroyed by fire in 1971.

A replica was later made, and it is this that is on display at the second floor of the MJC's Turf Club at its San Lazaro Leisure Park racecourse in Carmona, Cavite, where it moved to in 2003. I've seen it, and passed it several times a day, when I worked there for a couple of years, as head of the broadcast department, and later as assistant racing manager.

The Gran Copa is a dull gray rather than shiny silver, and chased all around with figures from Western art. It looks old-fashioned, like something a museum, or your great-grandmother, would have owned, and she would have filled it with flowers to enliven it. I've always thought it a forlorn artifact, bereft of deeper meaning than that of time and circumstance.

But the cup still evokes the romance of the 19th century, of Rizal's Manila, of women dressed in *traje de mestiza* carrying silk parasols or an *abanico* to playfully tap lovers with. It brings to mind a glorious 'what could have been' and so strong was this sentiment associated with the cup that an attempt was made decades later to hold the race that never was.

It was 1980 and Manila Mayor Ramon D. Bagatsing, a noted horse-owner, had the idea to stage a grand race he would name 'Gran Copa' to drum up public enthusiasm for racing. With the support of Philippine Racing Commission chairman and Makati Mayor Nemesio Yabut, he approached MJC officials, who enthusiastically agreed to revive the event.

On Araw ng Maynila – June 24 – that year, the Gran Copa de Manila Racing Festival was held, and it was the largest, grandest, highest-grossing event in the sport until MJC shut down the Tayuman Hippodrome. San Miguel Beer was the festival's first longtime corporate sponsor, and later on, Carlsberg Beer.

Luminary won the first Gran Copa race. The event continued to be held at the Hippodrome until 2002, when Herminio S. Esguerra's champion Wind Blown won the Gran Copa Division I Classic. The race was resumed at the new San Lazaro Leisure Park in 2005, but it did not regain its former popularity.

In June 1998, I was heavily pregnant and due to go into labor at any moment. My then-husband told me, half-seriously, "Try not to give birth on Araw ng Maynila. We're busy then!" It was that important an occasion. We both thought it would be the funniest thing if I did give birth then. But I had our second daughter, Erika Rosemary, on June 23. To this day, we reminisce about how she was almost born on Gran Copa day.

### **The PCSO Presidential Gold Cup**

Another race that had its beginning with MJC was the PCSO Presidential Gold Cup. It was conceived in the early '70s by the Board of Directors, headed by chairman and general manager Nereo C. Andolong. The motivation for instituting the race was that it was in line with PCSO's mandate to support the racing industry.

The race and its hefty purses provide incentives for local horse-owners and thoroughbred breeders to produce more horses and attain excellence in the sport. Today it is the sport's most prestigious and richest race, offering four million pesos in prize money.

The first Gold Cup was held on Oct. 7, 1973, at the San Lazaro Hippodrome. The winner was Pedro Cojuangco's Sun God, trained by Bernardo Lahoz, and ridden by another legendary jockey, Elias Ordiales, who booted home many champions at that track. Sun God won virtually unopposed, capping an impressive career.

Another unforgettable Gold Cup was the one in 1994 won by Crown Colony. He was owned by the biggest horse-owner at the time, Rolando "Rolly" Rojas.

Crown Colony was ridden by my former husband, Oyet Alcasid, and when the gates sprang back they were left 20 lengths behind the leader. In terms of time, that translates into four seconds, an eon in horse racing.

Rojas, whose horse was the favorite to win, had already descended from his box to the grandstand in preparation for the awarding ceremony. He was dismayed to see how far behind Crown Colony was: dead last.

Oyet, loath to disappoint Rojas and the horse's other connections, and wanting a taste of Gold Cup glory himself, somehow scrubbed and maneuvered and whipped his way to the wire ahead of the pack, borne on a tide of resounding shouts from the grandstand. He and—a triumphant Rojas—received their trophies from the guest of honor, President Fidel V. Ramos himself.

Crown Colony (Regent Street x Irresistible) clocked 2:15 over 2,000 meters—no way close to breaking a record, but coming from 20 lengths behind and dead last was a feat worthy to land him in the racing annals.

## 5. Winner Take All

*Where the player chooses the winners of seven consecutive races; it is the betting option that has the biggest potential payoff.*

## MJC Moves to a New Home

The decades of hard wear took their toll on the once-graceful building and grounds of the Hippodrome. Also, the racing industry had greatly expanded and there was no longer room for more stables and other needed facilities. MJC management, led by lawyer Alfonso R. Reyno Jr., decided that it was time to repurpose the land upon which the racetrack stood; and move the racing operation to a 77-hectare property, shaped uncannily like a horse's head, in Carmona, Cavite.

The racing folk at the time were unused to change, particularly the massive sort encompassed by Reyno's vision. An entire community of racing workers—jockeys, trainers, grooms among them—had sprung up around the Hippodrome's environs. They, and their counterpart at Santa Ana Park, had developed their own culture and even their own language (*salitang karera*).

Over 98 years, generations were born and lived and died beside the *karerahan*. To be uprooted and move to a new place—and so far away—was unthinkable. Many balked. Stakeholders worried that racing sales would decline with the racetrack so far from their fan base in Manila. Horse-owners muttered about the cost of outfitting new stables, and whether the air of Carmona was salubrious enough for their horses' health. Employees were aghast at having to travel from Manila to Carmona on race days.

But change was inevitable, and at last it had come to racing.

As the grandstand and other common facilities were rising, horse-owners visited the new racetrack and chose the sites for their stables. Depending on the number of horses they intended to keep, and the grooms and helpers (and their families) who would live there, they built accordingly in close coordination with MJC.

Next, equipment, furniture, and other gear were slowly transferred over the months and weeks leading to the opening of the new facility. The final move came right after the last day of racing at the Hippodrome. Trailers traveled back and forth from Tayuman to Carmona over several days ferrying the horses, while the racing folk loaded their belongings in trucks and cars and said goodbye to the neighborhood that, for many of them, was the only one they had lived in all their lives.

Many wept and hugged their neighbors as they boarded their vehicles. With them went their Dividendazos and *divizas*, the *martingalas* and *martilyos*, and the huge statues of Santiago de Galicia, the community's patron saint, astride his horse with vanquished Moors lying under the flying hooves.

After a week or so at the new San Lazaro Leisure Park, folks found the wider spaces, fresher air, and greenery better for their and the horses' wellbeing than the cramped and congested conditions at the hipodromo.

Grooms and jockeys resumed their former routines—waking at four o'clock in the morning, or earlier, to exercise horses on the twin tracks, hotwalking and bathing, feeding and raking the sawdust that covered the floors of the stalls. This occupied them until ten o'clock or so, with the rest of the day filled with visits by veterinarians to check the horses' health and give treatments, farriers to do shoeing and hoof trimming, and horse-owners treating themselves to an hour or so of enjoying the company of their horses, and inspecting their stables.

If there was downtime, it was spent looking over the previous race day's *programa* or the week's *copia* (list of horse groupings), as everyone prepared for the historic first race day at the new track.

Back at the Tayuman Hippodrome, with the last of the horses and humans gone, the place settled into a dusty, silent waiting, later woken by the clamor of sledgehammers and bulldozers as the old gave way to the new. Today an SM mall sits on the site, along with condominiums and a hotel.

## The Future of Racing

As I write this, racing as a sport and a gaming activity is in decline. Sales have plummeted because of the TRAIN tax law. Millennials aren't interested. The sport's niche market is shrinking. And, in this digital age, countless other amusements abound. MJC has sold its Carmona property to Ayala Land, Inc. and plans to move its racetrack further south, perhaps to Batangas or Quezon province.

Will I see the end of the story in my lifetime? Or will the narrative of MJC spin on for decades more?

Though the old racetrack was demolished to make room for other developments, the achievements of horses and riders will always shine in racing history and in the memories of racing fans.

And even when I am old, and even if I will not know how the story ends, I will remember cracking balut against the grandstand, cheering Crown Colony on to victory as he churned dust with his speedy hooves, and raising my eyes to the blue and white turrets of the grandest lady of racing, the San Lazaro Hippodrome.

# AN EDGE BETWEEN

Popi Laudico

## From where I perch

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Into my roots and branches**

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Testing waters

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### With both hands pushing at the stress points

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

### Run Me Through

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

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

*Run me through.*

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

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

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

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

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

*Run me through.*

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

*Run me through?*

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

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

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

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

*Run me through to the finish line.*

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

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

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

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

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

“Ate, anong nangyari sa kanya?”

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

“Ate, mukhang hirap na hirap siya.”

“Oo, pero ang importante, tapos na.”

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

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

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

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

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

They had been run through.

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Tonight, walk with me

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Felipe esto esta Señorita Popi. Puedes bailar con ella?"

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

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

"Si Mama."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## And trust

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### **Marking time**

### **Ready to risk**

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

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

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

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

*I want something just like this*

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

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

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

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

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

*I want something just like this*

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

*I want something just like this*

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

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

*..."Where you wanna go?*

*How much you wanna risk?*

*I'm not looking for somebody*

*With some superhuman gifts*

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

*Some superhero*

*Some fairytale bliss*

*Just something I can turn to*

*Somebody I can kiss*

*I want something just like this"*

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

*I want something just like this*

# AN UNRELIABLE GUIDE TO CLIMBING MOUNTAINS (OR, IT'S ALL UPHILL FROM HERE)

Anna Felicia C. Sanchez

When your longtime friends suggest an overnight family trip to a nature reserve, the first thing you find yourself doing is to go online to stare at photos on the website. You do it less out of excitement, even though you *are* excited, and more out of habit, developed from necessity. You bookmark the photos on your phone to show your pre-teen daughter.

She is lying on her stomach, on the bed, and you wait for her to pause the music video she's been singing along to. You show her the photos. "We're going to Mount Purro next month, okay?" You explain that there will be no Wi-Fi. She spends a lot of her free time watching YouTube videos so it's important for her to know she won't be able to use gadgets on the scheduled trip. "No Wi-Fi," you tell her, "but there's a swimming pool."

"No Wi-Fi," she repeats. Then she sees a photo of campers' tents, a completely outdoor experience that the reserve offers but which you, your friends, and your collective chronic back pain are most definitely not considering. "Camping," she says. "Want camping! Like in Pitch Perfect 2!"

"No, we're going to sleep inside a cottage with Mama's friends. But there will be a bonfire, and we'll roast hotdogs and marshmallows."

"Like camping!" she says. You're not sure if she means "like" the verb or "like" the preposition, and one of the many downsides to her language impairment is that if you ask her what she means, you'll have to try explaining to her what "mean" even means. It's a linguistic labyrinth that requires fortitude you don't always have. You wonder, as you do at the most random of moments, if you can ever tell her stories from your childhood the way your parents told you theirs. For now, you think she understands you won't be sleeping outdoors during the weekend trip, and that is enough.

In anticipation of the trip, however, she begins to insist on camping at bedtime. To her this means sleeping on comforters laid out in your living room, where the cats like to run around after midnight. The little devils gleefully turn your daughter into a trampoline; she groans “No” to the cats and goes back to sleep. Soon you buy her a Uratex folding mattress to replace the comforters. Every night, you ask her if she wants to sleep in the “camp” or on the bed you’ve shared with her all her life. Nine out of ten times she picks the camp. The remaining one time, she declares “Mama will sleep in the camp” and then she takes the bed while you take your bad back to the Uratex.

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Lists are life.

Your daughter writes in her oversized handwriting:

CHIPS

MARSHMALLOWS

CHEESEDOGS

The two of you head to the grocery and choose a big bag of Munchies snack mix, a couple of packs of marshmallows, a pack of jumbo cheesedogs (neither of you foresee the prolonged cooking time they will require). You add: soap, insect repellent, shampoo, bottled drinking water.

You pack your clothes according to a list in your head: each of you should have your swimsuit, four pieces of underwear in case you swim twice, two shirts, a comfortable dress, a couple of shorts and leggings, slippers. Everything times two. You squeeze every non-edible item into a mountaineering backpack you bought several years ago. You ask yourself if you should bring rubber shoes—yours and hers—but none of your friends have expressed any interest in hiking, so you don’t bother with the extra weight. As such, the only shoes your daughter will be wearing are her favorite plastic hollow-out mesh flats, and you, the open-toed Parisian Comfy sandals you wear everyday.

You are of course in charge of carrying the heaviest bags—this backpack and the huge bag of groceries and water—while your daughter carries her own backpack. Inside her backpack are half a dozen Word Search

activity books, three math notebooks, and her Math textbook. She insists on bringing all those Word Search books, and you let her on the condition that no one but she will carry her backpack. You don't even know how she got started on word puzzles months ago, which means that it's your mother's doing. You leave your daughter with her whenever you're working or writing, sometimes for days at a time, and your mother has learned to steer her away from YouTube periodically, teaching your daughter to look for words in the jumbles of letters, just as she taught her to do sequences of addition in the math notebooks. Easy and systematic. Your daughter finds these tasks relaxing.

She likes having the Word Search books and math notebooks with her even if she won't be using all of them, but she does not like having the Math textbook around, which you put in her backpack anyway in case there's time to review for school. She is in third grade in a regular classroom, where the teacher gives quizzes every week. She is the biggest and oldest girl in a class of only twelve pupils. This is her first year outside of special school and the pressure to catch up is immense. The pressure on you, at least.

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The nature reserve is in Antipolo. In your friends' van, your daughter falls asleep as the van speeds on the highway and winds around the mountain. The van drives over a small, gorgeously clear river, and past several cows and carabaos. Your daughter loves rivers and bovines so you regret letting her fall asleep.

At the reserve's front desk, you hand over your daughter's Person with Disability ID so that the staff and your friends can calculate the specific amount that you're supposed to pay. You gratefully let one of your friends check the calculations; you've lost count of how many times you've had to invoke the Magna Carta for PWDs in arguments against groceries, restaurants, and hotels, of your victories and losses.

You notice, suddenly, that your daughter is no longer behind you. You feel that skip in your heartbeat, that tug in your womb—this is not the first time that you have lost track of where she is. Looking past your friends and their spouses and children gathered in a big group behind you, you see that your daughter has wandered out of the reception area. She is already up

on the rocky path that leads to the cottages and the woods. You see that the woods are everywhere, dark and deep.

You get out of your head and get to where your daughter is. There, you wait with her until all the paperwork at the reception is completed, and then begin the climb to the cottage with everyone else. You regret not wearing rubber shoes because the rock-steps that lead to your cottage are slick from the day's rain. The size and height of the steps vary, and the variation demands effort and concentration, and you laugh but secretly sympathize when you hear one of the husbands comically yell, all the way from the bottom of the hill, that nobody warned him he would be climbing up the mountain. His wife is carrying their baby while he struggles under the weight of a stand fan and an enormous baby bag.

The cottage's spacious living area has screens instead of walls, so the breeze goes in and out, and there is no musty smell despite the damp outdoors. There is only the clean fragrance of wood and bamboo. The cottage has a loft, but to get up there you'll have to climb a bamboo ladder that is innocently, unsuccessfully pretending to be a staircase. Your daughter wants to see what's up there, and so does your best friend's eight-year-old daughter. Neither you nor your best friend want to yourselves, not at your age, and not using those stairs.

Your daughter crawls up the bamboo steps first, every movement of hand and foot deliberate and precise; you think back to the first time she climbed up the ladder of a slide by herself at the age of six, how many years of physical therapy it took to get her to that point. Meanwhile, your friend's daughter, standing under yours, vibrates with anticipation. Slowly, finally, the two make their way up the stairs to the loft, and then crawl back down.

You ask them what they found. "Just beds," your best friend's daughter replies cheerfully. She tells her mother that she wants to sleep up in the loft; your daughter's face tell you she thinks it's a good idea. You and your friend exchange amused glances. *Ha-ha-ha. No.*

The day's itinerary: unpack your bags in the cottage, then swim in the pool, then drive back down to town for your best friend's family dinner, then drive back to the reserve for the community bonfire, then eat all the roasted hotdogs and marshmallows you brought. It's been raining on and off, but by the time you return for the bonfire, only the lightest drizzle is falling. You endure the baking heat of the roaring flames so that you can thoroughly cook the jumbo cheesedogs for your daughter, who, despite having looked forward

to the bonfire, has covered her ears with her hands, sitting by herself on one of the surrounding rocks, halfway from the bonfire, halfway from the gazebo where the rest of the families are, where the other children are. You feel a pang in your chest at the sight of her sitting there alone.

“Like Pitch Perfect 2,” she tells you when you approach, referring to the scene in the movie where the Barden Bellas sit around the campfire.

She eats the s’mores that your friends have made for her and the cheesedogs that have taken forever to cook through. When the food is gone, her hands flutter back up to her ears. You remember that she only stopped being terrified of candles at the age of nine, when she finally learned to enjoy blowing out the candle-flame on her birthday cake. Autism’s sensory processing difficulty is a bitch. The enormous bonfire overwhelms.

Because bonfire means humans means food scraps, a cat appears out of nowhere. It is a gray tabby and it sidles up to your daughter. You have nothing to give it but small pieces of hotdog that burn your fingertips. You blow on the meat, which the cat graciously accepts. Your daughter removes her hands from her ears and pets the cat. Her smile returns, and for a moment, the weight in your heart is lighter.

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Your daughter and your best friend’s daughter each take a mattress beside a windowsill. Windowsill is a misnomer, as there are no windows, only the screen mesh. There is literally nothing between the shrubs outside and your daughter’s mattress except a foot of air and the wire mesh. Nature is breathing in your faces. You want to tell it to take a step back, please, keep its rain to itself.

“Mama will sleep there,” your daughter tells you, gesturing toward the mattress on another sill, almost across the room.

“I’m sleeping on the floor beside you,” you inform her. You tuck her in under a blanket and she falls asleep. Now that all the children in the cottage are asleep, you and your friends chat quietly into the night. A few fireflies come out when the rain subsides.

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Your friends are all morning people but despite the powerful urge to remain under the blankets, you and your daughter manage to wake yourselves up by 7:30. Breakfast is at stake. You make your way downhill to the mess hall, where your friends and their families have already maximized the first round of the buffet. The eggs are salty and so is the corned beef. All the sodium makes you and a couple of your girlfriends antsy. Your friend's husband, a mountain-climber, suggests hiking.

The hike should only take about an hour, he says, because the trail is easy. You don't quite believe him because he said the same thing about the uphill trail to the cottage, but the corned beef has made you feel so bloated that you really want to go on a walk. Your friends with babies opt out; your best friend and her cheerful daughter have already taken a bath and no longer feel inclined to leave the cottage. That leaves you and two friends, one of whom has four children ages nine to thirteen, all raring to go. Are you taking your daughter along, too?

Do you want to? Your workload always doubles when she's with you, everything—your baggage, your worries—times two. Times five or six, if you're being honest. Don't you want to have the hour to yourself, relive the trek up Mount Banahaw from your final year in college, the long but exhilarating hike up Taal Volcano which you went on during one of those weekends when your daughter was younger, when all you wanted was to flee the house?

In the cottage, your best friend and her daughter cuddle together by a window, playing a game on an iPad. Your own daughter is sprawled out on her mattress, working on a page of Word Search. The hiking group leaves in a few minutes. Neither you nor your daughter have the proper footwear, so you are tempted to stay here, snooze on the mattress with your daughter, maybe start packing your bags, or take a nice, long shower.

But something in you is obliged to ask her, "Wanna go for a walk?"

"No" is her immediate reply. Relief floods your chest. After all, she's done so much walking under the trees and among the rocks already, getting to and from the mess hall, and yesterday, getting to and from the pool and the bonfire areas. None of it is novel anymore.

You've trained yourself over the years to always rephrase a question, to always make sure she understands your words. It has become second nature for you. But that may not be the only reason you hear yourself blurt out, "Wanna get lost in the forest?"

“Yes!” is the immediate reply. With exclamation point. Because, apparently, getting lost in the forest sounds novel.

All right, then. So you’re doing this.

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You really should have anticipated the need for proper footwear.

You were definitely the type to overprepare almost a decade and a half ago, on that Banahaw field trip. Both you and your younger brother, then a college sophomore whom you had convinced to join the trip, wore hiking sandals. For both of your sandals, the straps that attached to the rubber broke on the second day, after several hours of having safely carried you across rocks, through caves, and into rivers. You had been so prepared for the destruction of your sandals that you had actually brought a tube of Mighty Bond with you. While the UP delegation of hundreds of students were resting outside a Rizalista church, you, your brother, and a few other classmates bought some sweet *supsupin* rambutan fruit and sucked on the seeds while you waited for the miracle glue to dry inside your rubber sandals.

Maybe the success rate for preparations decreases over time when you’ve been raising a child with disabilities you couldn’t have prepared for. Years after Banahaw, on that hike up Taal Volcano, you wore comfortable running shoes that brought you past the warm, shifting volcanic sand all the way to the top, but on your way down, the sand claimed the sole on each shoe, one after the other—the volcano’s tribute, as your superstitious parents might say.

Today, you stare at your daughter’s plastic mesh shoes. There’s a chance they’ll survive a short hike over the trail of hewn rocks. You’re not so sure about the faux-leather straps of your inexpensive mall sandals.

Your group of nine—four adults, five children—is assigned two teenage guides wearing ordinary slippers. They have of course climbed the mountain hundreds of times. One of them reminds the other of the difficulty level that fits your group. “Medium *lang*,” he says.

“*Pwede bang easy?*” you chirp. The boy who hears you laughs even though no part of your question is supposed to be a joke.

One boy leads the group in front and the other takes up the rear. Your daughter is in front of you, taking the huge stone-steps one at a time. It is all uphill from here. You pass by the pool, the bonfire, the pavilions, all the other cottages, until every nipa roof has been swallowed by the intense greenery of the woods. Each of you has been lent a walking stick that makes you wonder how you ever managed without it in the first place, but your daughter hasn't figured out how to use hers. She is already too focused on planting her feet on the hewn rocks to take a third appendage into the equation. You think of a walking stick that your grandfather casually carved for you when you were younger, for the walks you used to take with your father in their old village. You wonder what your parents might say when they find out that you have taken your daughter hiking. When you told your parents that you and your daughter were spending the weekend on Mount Purro, you didn't worry them by hinting that a hike was within the realm of possibility.

Imagine the look on their faces if they knew how much sweat was trickling down your daughter's face and neck, her hand awkwardly clutching the walking stick, her legs struggling with the rock-steps, one foot in front of the other, one step at a time. Your gaze shifts from her mesh-covered feet, at the way they stubbornly locate the most even, least slippery sections of rock, to your sandal-clad ones trying to do the same. It feels like if either of you take one wrong step, the mountain will shift and swallow you both.

The soles of her flats are already worn down inward from a few months of use. All her shoes eventually end up like that, soles worn down inward, characteristic of pronated feet, yet another one of her genetic quirks. Some nights, your daughter says that a knee hurts, and asks you to massage it with oil or lotion. But that is not what concerns you today, not when your friends' kids are all clambering smoothly up the rocky trail, chatting loudly with one another.

You tell your daughter to hurry, perhaps for the fifth or sixth time in the last ten minutes. Later, your friend's husband the mountaineer, who had opted to prepare for the drive home by napping instead of joining your hike, will inform you that the protocol would have been to make sure that you and your daughter are always in the middle of the line, never at the tail-end. You will wonder if that could have even been possible, if you could have instructed your friends and their excited children to wait because your daughter is a PWD, if you could have risked either of the guides even thinking, If she's a PWD, why is she hiking?

You think of the first time you really saw your daughter navigate the steps of a staircase like a—well, like a kid her age. She was around eight years old. You were in the mall, trailing behind your mother and your daughter as they made their way down the staircase, and you were thinking, What a feat this is, what a work of God, to be able to control and coordinate neurological impulses, enough to put one foot in front of the other, to move at all! And at the same time you were thinking, What tediousness this must be for others, and for you, too, how we take movement for granted, how we all want to move at a swifter pace.

It's quiet. Tear your eyes from the hewn rocks and your daughter's feet. Realize that the children your daughter has been following are gone. There are only the boulders and towering plants surrounding the path in front of you; the trail is still there, but it seems to split into two, three, overgrown with tree and shrub. Look for flashes of color—a kid's shirt, your friend's sneaker—and find only the green of the moss, the unreachable green of the leaf canopies. *Verde, te quiero verde.* The sky is overcast but even if it were blue you would not have been able to glimpse it, so thick is the roof of the forest. Listen for the voices of your friends and the children, hear only—nothing. No voices, no birds, not even crickets, that quintessential sound of silence. It is as if you are trapped in a vaccuum. Your group has left you and your daughter behind.

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You remember the Banahaw trek so vividly because it had been organized to be a religious experience. It was, of course, mystical—the mountain has power, so they say, and the Rizalistas have built their shrines and churches all over the slope to celebrate it. You, your brother and the hundreds of PI 100 students formed very long lines, took off your shoes, and knelt on the spotless floors of the Suprema de la Iglesia del Ciudad Mistica de Dios. You gazed at the ornate murals that detailed good and evil, at the drawings of Jose Rizal the divine hero, at the Latin prayers, at the All-Seeing Eye.

You crawled down on all fours on the cool damp earth of a cave to visit a small, solitary icon—it could have been the Sto. Niño—and you waded waist-deep into a freezing pool of water to be baptized under a waterfall. You

crept along the prickly, narrow tunnels of the Judgment Cave, trusting in your guiltlessness, and in the dark your hands and feet sometimes met nothing but thin air, bottomless gulfs that you were happy you couldn't see.

Your team's guide was the only girl in the UP Mountaineer troop that day; petite and competitive, she spurred you and your classmates into a speedy hiking pace so that the team would often reach the designated stations ahead of the others. Unafraid to use hands and knees, you scrambled over slippery rocks and muddy trails over rising rivers as the rain fell, steam rising off your skin, and you had to gaze up at the luminous trees just to regain your breath.

You feel that same steam now as you sweat in the mountain air newly washed with last night's rains, but the trees are not luminous. Signaling more rain, the gray of the sky is palpable, though invisible behind the trees. The truth is you can hardly see even the trees now because you are too busy wondering where the trail is. It's a good thing your group has two guides. The one behind you senses that you've lost the others, so he takes the lead.

You glance over your shoulder, wondering where in the world did the trail back to the cottages go.

Your guide helps your daughter up on a rock that has a slightly tricky foothold. You tell the boy thanks and also sorry, she's a PWD. You're not sure if he hears you, or if he knows that PWD stands for Person with Disability, or what counts as disability, or if disability even matters to a boy in whose community things like assessments and therapies are too expensive to exist.

Why do you apologize that she's a PWD, though? Because she requires help, accommodation? Because strangers in public places have given her looks, seeing her flapping hands and hearing her broken speech? Because the two of you are always getting left behind? You can't remember how many times you've apologized for your daughter in various situations since she was a year old, when she was first diagnosed.

What your daughter might have been born with is called hypotonia, or low muscle tone, and it might have led to her global developmental delay. This means that she has always had poor muscle control, poor fine motor and gross motor coordination, poor weight balance on her flat feet, poor social skills, poor language skills, poor cognitive skills. Everything was so poor that it was inevitable to think "poor her" and "poor you," especially given that in her first year, she could not roll over, crawl, sit up, or walk. She seemed to have no

instinct to grab or climb or look for food. For years, she did not say “Mama.” Your poor wallet, too, because she had to go through months of expensive therapy to learn to do the things that other babies and toddlers discover on their own. The expenses did not lessen over a decade as physical therapy turned into occupational therapy, speech therapy, educational therapy, special school.

Getting the diagnosis of autism by the time she was four or even five years old could have given you some early relief. When one therapist casually remarked, “*Alam niyo namang may autism siya, ‘no?’*” you conferred with the doctor who evaluated her twice a year, but she didn’t want to change the diagnosis from delay to autism because your daughter had good eye contact, even though you had already described to her the meltdowns and fixations. Because the doctor was so steadfast in her belief that treatment mattered more than the specific diagnosis, you believed her, not foreseeing that your understanding of autism could have helped you psychologically and emotionally, as much as it could have improved your parenting of a neurodivergent child. You did not foresee what you would lose in time and knowledge. You believed in the doctor because she was the expert. You were young so you believed in the infallibility of experts.

Recognizing autism would have given you a better inkling of what lay ahead, and the support groups that could have guided you; with global developmental delay, no one could tell you what was actually wrong, not the therapists, not the pediatricians, not the neurologist. You were lost. You still feel lost, sometimes, often. Like you’re back in that cave on Mount Banahaw, feeling your way around in the dark, the jagged walls constricting because of your sins, of all that you’ve done and all that you’ve failed to do. *Sorry, she’s a PWD*—you should be saying this to your daughter. Apologize. The weight of your sins spills over to her, who must carry the consequences for the rest of her life. You don’t know how this punishment works, how it is just. The only thing you know is that you can’t breathe and you need to get out.

So because that’s how it had become for you, back when you couldn’t understand why your daughter could not read, or put words together, or stop her hands from flapping so hard she looked like she could fly, and because incidentally you’d also had a bad week thanks to your mother-in-law’s unexpectedly long visit to your house, and because you were also thinking of your novel-in-progress that needed verisimilitude, but mainly because you just wanted to be able to breathe again, one day in April when your daughter

was four years old, you convinced a couple of colleagues to go on a hike to Taal Volcano, superstitions be damned.

You mention none of this to the boy guiding you up Mount Purro. It doesn't even occur to you to speak of any of this to your daughter. Even though your father told you stories all the time when you used to go on walks, you can't seem to do the same with your child. After all, will she even understand? Is it even important right now? Your focus is on her feet as they move ahead yours. One foot forward on the rocks, one step at a time, her slender ankles still clean, soles slanted inward, the dirty end of the walking stick barely touching the ground and supporting her weight. You wonder if the stick is helping her at all or if you should take it away so her hand is freed. You're not sure what to do, what's best for her.

You lift your gaze from the rocks and call your daughter's name. She pauses, turns her head, and further up, the guide waits. You take a swig of water from your bottle and hand it to your daughter. She drinks and returns the bottle. Like you, she is drenched in sweat. You take a handkerchief from your purse and dab at the sweat around her eyes. Her face is set in concentration, in the sort of expression she wears when setting upon a task with a clear goal, like finding words in a word jumble, or answering arithmetic drills, or putting together puzzles, or climbing up a bamboo staircase, brain to neurological pathways to limbs to toes and fingers, all hard at work making connections.

"Sweat," she says, and I dab at the side of her face. It is the only word she has spoken since we lost the group in front. There has been no word of complaint; only that serious look.

That look of concentration is a surgeon's look. The goal is forward. There is nothing in her face that says she wants to stop and turn back.

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You miss what you felt you had on that Taal Volcano hike, that day in April all those years ago when you escaped from the chaos of your home: the luxury of setting your own pace. That was a rarity in a life with a young child who regularly had crying spells because she had no words for what she needed. To be away from her for just a day allowed you to return to your own time, to regain a bit of your old self. In reality, you and your two friends had to do everything on schedule—get to Tagaytay by past 7 in the morning,

ride a boat across the lake to the volcano island by 8, start hiking by 9 so that you could get to the summit by lunch, and then head back across the lake before the afternoon waves rose and made you say Thank God you had a life insurance policy. But nothing felt hurried. In the tricycle that wound down from Tagaytay to Talisay where you could hire a small boat, you even saw what might have been a kingfisher, gliding in front of you. You felt grateful that you could follow it, wherever it was headed.

The lake was calm that morning but when you got to the island, the shore was abuzz with tourists, mostly Korean, Indian, and Caucasian. Almost all of them rented a horse to ride up to the crater, something that just wasn't in your budget, but the three of you soon realized why the option existed. The sun scorched you from above; the ground baked you from below. The terrain felt alive, all shifting sand and dusty rock, with the wind blowing around the sand and dust so much that you could taste the chalk and grit. You shared the narrow trail with unsympathetic horses and their equally unsympathetic riders, except for one American, who threw you and your friends a compassionate hello before riding onward like a cowboy, and one Filipino rider who cast you a smile after he'd steered his horse up a crag like a *haciendero* from old Pinoy soap operas. You and your friends were free to appreciate his pose on that cliff, overlooking the lake and the rest of the volcanic island.

Every time you stopped for a water break, you turned around in what little shade you could find and were greeted by the blue sky shining above the blue lake, and there were herons and crows and kingfishers skimming the woods, and long flowing grass below, and it was the kind of beauty that made you grateful you had chosen to climb up the volcano on foot, and not got bound by the pace of the horses and their tourists. It was the kind of climb that you tended to regret getting into while you're right there fighting for a foothold in the sand and heat, but which, in addition to the moments of sheer bright blueness, you will always be grateful having gotten yourself into.

And it was a volcano, so you climbed to the crater and looked down into Crater Lake, the caldera that had formed inside the volcano. The lake within the lake. You ate your packed lunched of adobo with boiled egg, and drank expensive coconut water, and regained your strength. You watched the eerie, glassy green of the small lake, on which the cumulus cast huge moving shadows that resembled some prehistoric monster just biding its time. The rocks near the crater carved down into solid, layered streams like frozen lava,

although they probably had been lava or some other volcanic rock, and some of them were red and beautiful.

And then you looked out at the surrounding Taal Lake again and it was the kind of blue you could believe in.

But that is not the whole picture. You remember the people on the island as well, they who have learned to live off the tourist trade, like your guide up the volcano, who lived in a village without electricity. She had wanted you and your friends to rent a horse so that out of the P800, she would get P50, she said. It is not cheap to keep horses healthy. And healthy is the last thing the animals are, with their emaciated flanks and infected scrapes. You did not, and do not, weigh the cost of human life and animal life against each other. Is it ecotourism? Sustainable travel?

What about now, in this moment, with this ever-patient teenage boy guiding you and your daughter through the forest of Mount Purro, what is his story? What is the truth of the communities here, of the reserve itself?

But here's the thing: because his story is his own, it is possible that you cannot understand it any more than you can your daughter's. What is theirs remains outside your reach.

Your truth, at this very moment, is that all you can care about is yourself. That is the problem when you are mired in misery—you get tunnel vision, a survival mechanism, perhaps, one that enables you to focus only on what's in front of you so you can fight and live to tell the tale. But which fights matter, and which don't, and if somehow you begin to fear they don't, because they never end and you have no power, do you just stop struggling?

What you want is time. To figure it out, to get things done. You think of the lake ride to and from the volcano island and how grateful you were that you had life insurance, though the payout would have sufficed for only a few year's worth of therapies. You think of the application for life insurance that you had made for your daughter as well, shortly after she had turned a year old, after she had been diagnosed with global developmental delay. Despite the supervision of your aunt who was a senior agent, the application was rejected. The company did not want to bet that your daughter would live long enough for the policy to earn value.

You think of school happening the next day, of the Math homework your daughter hasn't begun, the quiz that neither of you have prepared for. You think of the children who do not go to school, of those born like your

daughter whose families have no access to doctors or therapists, children who suffer from poverty, shame, and the archaic subscription to Darwinian ideas about survival. You think of policy makers leading the ignorant pack by failing to fight for groups considered as minorities, of institutions who forget the duty to protect those who are rendered silent and unseen. Oh, there is no end to the struggle. Not for your daughter, not for your guide, not for the poor, not for the horses and animal welfare, not for yourself, not for your secret demons. You think about religion, folk and otherwise. Life and death. How easy it is to stop.

You stare at your daughter's back, at her shirt soaked with perspiration, at her feet that do not seem to slip or falter.

Stop, you almost say again, for the thousandth time. Let's turn back.

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For some reason, you don't. Up the rocks, on you go.

Your young guide holds his hand out to your daughter when she needs it, and you follow right behind, leaning heavily on your walking stick, watching your daughter figure out how to use hers, and you're wondering what the names of the tall, quiet trees are and where are the birds that would have made all the effort worthwhile. Later, much later, when you find the time to reflect on this weekend trip, you will regret that you cannot even remember the color of the boy's shirt or the state of his slippers, that you did not even think to learn his name.

You follow him and your daughter up the rocks, then you hear your friends' voices, and you turn a corner and see them above you.

What awaits at the end of this easy-level hike is by no means the summit of Mount Purro. Instead it is a shrine made of bamboo and *sawali*, sheltering a life-sized statue of the Virgin Mother Mary, all white, trimmed with gold paint. It does not occur to you to ask the guides why there is a shrine here, maybe because it feels self-explanatory. This is a story, it seems to holler. In fact, the shrine's presence feels a little too much on-the-nose at this point, a little too heavy handed, because you are here and the shrine somehow just makes sense.

The group erupts into a cheer when your trio arrives. “You disappeared! We thought you’d gone back to the cottage!”

Amid the flurry of chatter and picture-taking, your daughter stands in front of the shrine. That stiff look of concentration is still there, though it is possible she is just too exhausted to smile. You think of the week she was confined in hospital for dengue, which she had contracted after a very long walk you took her on around your barangay; of your parents’ reluctance to bring their granddaughter to destinations beyond malls; of the long walks that you used to take with your father in his hometown. You think of the stories that you and your daughter each have but do not, cannot, share with each other. You think of your own fears for her future, of how huge and beautiful and terrible the world is.

You do not foresee that in the ride home, she will already start planning to return to Mount Purro next year—perhaps in February, you will suggest, when the rocks aren’t so slippery from the rains—or that whenever you cross the overpass to one of her therapy centers in Antipolo, she will recognize the intersection your car took and exclaim “Mount Purro!”, or that whenever the two of you encounter staircases that take some effort to climb, she will say “Mount Purro” and soldier on.

One foot in front of the other, up the sides of mountains. All that either of you will have to say in the future is the name of this mountain, and the story of this weekend will unfold for you both. The sky will not fall.

Nothing in the world prepared you for your daughter, yet here you are.

The guides warn that the rains might return. As your group gets ready for the hike back down, you check both your sandals and your daughter’s flats. They look like they can survive the journey back. You and your daughter drink some water, wipe the sweat from your brows, then on you go.

# EVERYDAY: The Exquisite Intricate

R. Benedito Ferrão

(Adapted from a Talk Delivered at the  
25th Iligan National Writers Workshop, 2018)

Suppose I begin with the facts? A boy leaves his childhood home. He is to journey to a new land. A new existence is to be made in this foreign place.

There is nothing remarkable in these facts. It is an oft-told tale of immigrant life that is the stuff of everyday occurrence. So, for now, I will set this aside.

In this essay I attend to the art of relaying the factual. I explore the techniques and trends of the genre of Creative Nonfiction by relying on the best resource at hand: fellow writers who are exponents of this genre. What follows are excerpts from email conversations with my community of writer-friends, conducted in June 2018. In these exchanges, I deliberate with essayists, memoirists, and cultural critics on the subject of writing about real life – the everyday, if you will. I wanted to get a sense of how and why they write in a form that I describe as fact rendered in imaginative expression.

Stephanie Abraham, a Los Angeles-based writer who contributes to various print and online publications, in addition to serving as a cultural and film critic, shared with me the definition of CNF that she finds most useful. She relays the description of the genre by Lee Gutkind, founding editor of the magazine *Creative Nonfiction*. Gutkind says that his magazine

defines the genre simply, succinctly, and accurately as “true stories well told” ... In some ways, creative fiction is like jazz – it’s a rich mix of flavors, ideas, and techniques, some of which are newly invented and others as old as writing itself ... The word “creative” refers to the use of literary craft, the techniques fiction writers, playwrights, and poets employ to present nonfiction – factually accurate prose about real

people and events – in a compelling, vivid, dramatic manner  
... “Creative” doesn’t mean inventing what didn’t happen  
... It doesn’t mean that the writer has a license to lie. The cardinal rule is clear – and cannot be violated. This is the pledge the writer makes to the reader...

Indeed, what Gutkind lays out is the way in which a nonfictionist is held by the truth. They might take liberties with the stylistic manner in which they deliver fact, but there is no altering the truth itself.

That truth is what I refer to as the exquisite intricate – the beauty in the details. Where others might see the everyday as something that simply happens, the writer of nonfiction grasps the intricate details and re-represents them for all that is exquisite about them.

Take this moment in Stephanie Abraham’s essay “No Longer Just American,” which appears in the book *Nobody Passes* (2006):

In 2002, I went back to Detroit with my dad to visit relatives. We went to a family restaurant called Ike’s, and indulged in a spread of Arabic dishes. As I dipped my pita bread into a bowl of kibbeh naye (raw meat ground as fine as smooth peanut butter), I realized that I had been eating kibbeh naye my whole life without realizing it, but in an assimilated, passing kind of way. When I was a little girl, if my dad was hungry and wanted a quick snack he would go to the fridge, grab a hot dog, put it in pita bread, and dig in. I didn’t know anyone else who ate raw all-beef hot dogs. When my mother fixed hot dogs, she cooked them in boiling water and served them in a bun with ketchup, which I loved. My mom thought my dad’s concoction was gross. I thought it was kind of weird, but once I tried it I was hooked. He was happy to share his indulgence with another person in the house; it was our special treat. (129)

In this vignette, Abraham takes the most common of daily tasks – the eating of food – and unravels its elements, comparing how her mother prepares that very American dish of hotdogs to how her father prefers to consume this item of food. But in spelling out the performance of commensality, Abraham uses food as a metaphor for identity, where even an American dish, because of the way in which it is consumed, can become a stand-in for Arabness.

"Cultures are not static," Abraham writes (130). "They adapt and shift in order to survive. People do, too" (130). In this analysis, Abraham makes exquisite the intricate details that would otherwise go unnoticed. Where someone else may just think, "Oh, it's a man eating a raw hotdog from the fridge," Abraham not only draws a connection between this simple act and Arab culture, but also underscores the intimacy between parent and child.

Abraham's essay goes on to reveal how although she passes for being white because she is of mixed-race origins, her desire to actively reclaim her Arab identity was, for her, a political act. When I ask her about her craft, Abraham tells me,

I started writing in creative nonfiction before I knew it was a genre. Honestly, I think it's from coming of age during third wave feminism wherein multiple narratives became valued over *the Narrative* (as in the white supremacist, heteronormative patriarchy). I read lots of anthologies of personal essays. I loved and continue to love that this genre exemplifies where the personal and the political intersect, how we do not exist in bubbles as individuals, that there's nothing wrong with me or my people. Almost all the problems and challenges we have are a result of societal problems, such as systemic oppressions like racism, classism, and sexism. This genre helps me be a force in the world for positive change.

In so saying, Abraham intimates the possibilities of the genre as a tool for social and political education.

Near the end of her essay, Abraham reflects on how "[i]n spite of three generations of whitewashing, I have not forgotten my people's past and identity as Arab American ... Even if this doesn't make a difference in anyone else's life, it does in mine..." (135). Nonetheless, in recovering her own Arab Americanness, Abraham actually ends up influencing her father's sense of self. She recalls how "[her] dad recently told his brother, 'I didn't know I was Arab American until I met my daughter.' He explained that he had always thought of himself only as American" (135). There's a reversal here of that earlier moment when a young girl sought to emulate her father by eating a raw hotdog in the way he did. Now it is the father's turn to learn from his child who has come into her own as a woman and a self-aware individual.

It's been a while since I mentioned the facts I opened with. To remind you of the routine events, we had a boy leaving home to journey to new beginnings. What if I told you that this was not the first time the boy had left home? That in leaving home again, he was actually rehearsing the journeys his father had taken three decades before this moment? What if I told you that the boy's mother too, had also left the only home she had known thirty years prior? Might you wonder why the boy's grandparents too had left their homeland for other shores? What if you knew that the boy, his parents, and his grandparents, had each crossed one of three different continents? In a time before planes became commonplace, his grandparents had boarded a ship and traversed an ocean. His mother had done the same, but in the opposite direction some forty years after her parents.

But enough of this for now.

Kevin Wood, a writer from New York, asserts that

[a]s a writer of nonfiction, which is to say, I tell true stories – the term “creative nonfiction” seems a bit redundant. Its existence suggests that not all nonfiction is inherently creative. Or worse, it suggests that the reader can tack that label onto a piece of writing. But if the terms means anything at all, it’s definitively not about the reader.

And this is an important detail. What Wood emphasizes is that although the author may write something for a reading audience, what is shared is still personal – the facts are, usually, about the writer themselves.

Wood continues:

I know what people are getting at with the term “creative nonfiction” – using typically fictional and descriptive elements you may not find in, say, an academic journal. Crafting dialogue with “realistic,” conversational pacing. *Mise en scène*. Flashbacks and flash forwards. But stylistic elements do not a classification make.

In other words, Wood suggests that the writing techniques we conventionally associate with the crafting of fiction do not solely belong in that domain. Wood refers to a book by Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story* (2001) in which the author

brilliantly sketches out – in two sections, one on the essay, the other on memoir – that, simply, we all live through

many situations in life. But to tell about something in our life – our own nonfiction, if you will – requires something more. What is unique, what only the individual writer can describe, is their place in that situation. In some sense, the writer *is* the story.

In emphasizing the connection of the writer to their truth-telling, Wood reminds us that the intricacies of nonfiction require not just the art of revelation but a personal coming to terms with what is revealed.

Wood does exactly this in his article “My Boyhood Brush with Breast Cancer” from *The Good Men Project*. Wood discloses:

I was living in Texas, where being a man is non-negotiable. *How much can you bench press? How many beers can you chug?* and *How fast is your car?* were common questions. I was not the guy with impressive answers to any of these. I also wasn’t on any sports teams – never had been. I was already teetering dangerously close to the edge of not being a guy at all.

That I might have breast cancer in this hyper-masculine world was highly ironic.

... Months before my mammogram. I felt a growth above my right nipple. It slowly grew until I could see it ... I didn’t tell my parents at first ... When they finally saw and felt it, it quickly became doctor-worthy. I never thought about breast cancer.

Reflecting back on this essay, Wood shares with me the process of writing it:

When you tell the story of having breast surgery as a teenage boy to determine if a growing mass is breast cancer ... it might take you a long time to find the actual story. There were many memorable (some funny) events that took place during that time, all of which, it turned out, were just the situation.

What Wood takes stock of here is how having something happen is not enough. Certainly, since breast cancer is a rare occurrence for men, this might, on the surface, seem like an interesting tale to relate. But just providing this information does not, by itself, give shape to an essay.

Wood continues:

What I, the nonfiction writer, only came to realize in time, as I ... wrote draft after draft, was that what I was leaving out was the story. The one most important thing about that experience – finding out the post-surgery biopsy came back benign – had (and still has) escaped my memory. As I told the many aspects of that admittedly bizarre situation, I was fixated on how emasculating it felt to be a teenage boy having breast surgery, and maybe breast cancer, of all things, while living in a hyper-masculine culture. To this day, that fixation blinds me to the bigger point – that I could have had cancer before finishing high school.

If you read Wood's essay, what you will also find is that the piece is not only an exploration of masculinity because of this particular medical experience, but also how surviving it made Wood more empathetic toward women. In addition to the trauma of the disease and possible fatality, that the cancer of this body part can relate to a woman's sense of self is closely linked to the gendering of the breast. Thereupon, in his essay, Wood contrasts the commonplaceness of this affliction in woman, versus its rarity in men, to reflect on how the gendering of the body is made unquestioningly quotidian.

Wood concludes his thoughts on creative nonfiction by stating that to him,

[i]f a definition has to be given to “creative nonfiction,” it wouldn’t concern itself with the elements any reader could identify. Because it’s about the writer, and not how the finished product comes across. A qualifying question might capture it – one we could ask any writer, indeed, any artist, who creates: Did you learn something, in the process of creating? Did you grow?

If you can answer yes – then, dear nonfiction writer, you *and* your writing are “creative.”

And in so saying, Wood puts the emphasis on the act of creation in the creative process, for it is not only about creating a piece, but also ourselves through writing.

“Creative nonfiction (memoir, essay, biography) is one of my favorite genres,” Abeer Hoque declares to me. She is the author of a novel titled *The*

*Lovers and the Leavers* (2014) and the memoir *Olive Witch* (2016). Hoque notes of her affinity for CNF that it is because

[i]t's definitely one of the most natural to me, after decades of journaling. There's something so warm and intimate about it. It's like talking or listening to someone, sharing our lives, and thoughts. I'm a people person, so it makes sense that reading personal stories in whatever form resonates so much with me. I also love how the other forms (fiction, poetry) can be part of nonfiction writing. Fictive techniques (such as character development and narrative arc, and tension) and poetic elements (such as language, rhythm, form, compression) are things I often think about when I write memoir and it can make the writing and process more complex and compelling.

Like Wood, Hoque recognizes the similarities between the genres of fiction and nonfiction, and adds how intimacy is part of the process of writing CNF. In Hoque's writing, this is apparent.

Take this excerpt from her essay "The Version we Remember: On the Truth and Fiction of Photography" which appears in the March 2018 issue of *Catapult*:

By the time I get an SLR camera ... my father has started to lose his memory to Alzheimer's Disease. We have long told the doctors his memory loss is no ordinary phenomenon, not an age-related forgetting as they claim.

I soon have to abandon the project of recording my father's stories because it is too painful. He begins to repeat the same ones and the truth is inescapable now – he is forgetting who he was.

In giving us the details of her relationship with her father, Hoque crafts a narrative around memory and forgetting. The intimacy is doubled – it is in the telling of the personal and in the intimate act of committing the exquisite intricate to paper.

While Hoque's writing preserves her memory of her father even as his own deteriorates, it forces her to reckon with the inevitable: her father will never be the same. Authors of CNF negotiate the jagged terrain of vulnerability, the promise of the catharsis of writing not always given.

Yet, even as these are the stakes of Hoque's essay, it explores a much wider territory of what memory is, refusing to cast it merely as the foil to forgetting. Rather than simply take memory deterioration as the incumbent loss of aging and frailty, Hoque questions the processes by which memories are made and preserved in the first place.

Using the photograph as an example of what we accept as certain fact, she queries what these freeze-frames of time exclude. Hoque muses that

[a] photograph isn't necessarily a moment of truth, but what the photographer wants you to see. This is not just photography's problem. It is a fundamental flaw of memory. We remember only a version of the story, and we tell only a fraction of that version. And sometimes, even that sliver will fail us.

In effect, Hoque's essay draws from family history in thinking about her father's dimming recollection, pivoting to a wider meditation on the tractability of memory – the sometimes deliberate/other times oblivious choice to hold back, forget, or remake our recall. As much as a photo reveals, it also conceals.

At the conclusion of her essay, Hoque relates an episode from a family road trip where her father asks her to take a photograph of a tree. "I don't know what about the tree is beautiful to him," she ponders as she captures the image by proxy for her father (Hoque). We may see only what the photographer wants us to, but know little of why. "This is something I could ask him, ... but I don't ... Perhaps it's enough that he saw something and wanted to share it" (Hoque). Question unasked, Hoque's attempt at an answer is imparted to her readers, an unsolved mystery that exposes the intricacies of something as everyday as taking a picture of a roadside tree.

I turn now to writer Jessica Faleiro's response to my question about CNF as her choice of form. She explains, "[It] allows me to integrate literary devices to improve narrative flow and appeal to a whole different audience without moving away from the factual accuracy of events that transpired." Like Gutkind, Faleiro too stresses the importance of staying true to the facts while relying upon the elements one would generally associate with fictional storytelling. For Faleiro, this cross-pollination of fact and creativity derives, on the one hand from the personal and, on the other, from her experience as a writer of fiction. Faleiro is the author of two novels, *Afterlife: Ghost Stories from Goa* (2012) and *The Delicate Balance of Little Lives* (2018).

As an example of how Faleiro portrays the factual in creative narrative, take this passage from "Arrival: Notes from a Migrant Goan" in *Asia Literary Review*:

It is 1997 and I've landed at Heathrow airport's Terminal 3 from Goa, India, where my parents are from. The England I anticipate meeting is the clichéd version, with tweed-clad gentlemen standing by rose bushes in front of cosy thatched cottages. In my mind, the women sit daintily at tables in the back garden, smelling of Yardley talcum powder and pouring tea from their flowery tea sets. Children have picnics of ham sandwiches and fresh apples at the seaside on the clifftops, just as they do in Enid Blyton's books.

The facts are obvious: a migrant's landing on foreign soil, their baggage a set of expectations. The fictional embellishments are palpable, too, in the dashing of those presumptions: the gents in tweed suits are nowhere to be seen, nor the genteel women sipping tea, and certainly not the well-behaved children.

The essay goes on to employ another literary device – irony. Instead of finding the kinds of storybook English people she thought she would, Faleiro's fairytale image of London is shattered when she sees "eighteen-year-old British boys and girls chugging beer and then violently throwing up in the university student bar at 5 p.m. after winning a rugby game and trying to drown themselves in their body weight of beer." Despite this, Faleiro dives into life in London. She fills the reader in on how she takes the first job she can find and then "[rents] a cheap studio flat in East London which costs over half my monthly salary. After about nine months, it is broken into one Saturday while I'm out." With this, although providing us with fact, Faleiro builds dramatic tension, using yet another technique from fiction-writing.

Faleiro never fully recovers from the break-in. In fact, she never fully breaks into life in England. "I stay put, always hoping it will get easier somehow, that I'll be able to build something for myself. But I don't see signs of this happening. With every passing year, things only get harder" (Faleiro). Like Hoque, Faleiro divulges the intimate in this less than happy immigrant tale. But failure here is humanized, creating the potential for empathy rather than requiring that the narrator be pitied. Faleiro ends the essay by thinking about her own dislocation in relation to larger trends: "In a world where migration appears to be a way of life common to most, it is surprising how little one hears about the vulnerability migrants face."

Even as it springs from personal experience, the piece makes a larger point about the contemporary human condition. Faleiro's purpose, however, is not to be didactic. Her task as a writer is to narrate events – not simply as they occurred, but as she saw them after the fact. If what the reader then takes from it is some sense of the present-day world in the period of globalization which causes the movement of people from familiar circumstances to the unknown, it is because the recognition of how personal such writing is, in turn, invites introspection.

Once more, the facts.

A boy relives the journeys of his mother, his father, and his grandparents through his own displacement. When his mother made the journey with her father to their homeland, it was her first time there, but it would be her father's last. She had heard of this place but nothing she had been told matched what she saw as the ship docked on dry land. It was a beautiful sight – red hills and green palm fronds. She wished her mother had lived to accompany them. Though still young, her mother had died about a year before and the young woman's aging father knew that his own time was near. Deciding that he wanted to live out his days in the land where he was born, he had brought his youngest daughter back home with him.

The beach, not too far from where they lived, became one of her favorite spots in this new place. It was there that the man who would become her husband first set eyes on her. She wouldn't give him the time of day. When he found out that she was to begin typing school, he enrolled as well. As their secretarial skills progressed, so did their romance. She took him home one day, so her father could meet him and give them his blessing. The old man died before they married. But even before their union, there was a journey they had to take.

But more about this in a little bit.

To research his 2014 article for *The New Yorker*, Teju Cole, author of the novel *Open City* (2011), retraced James Baldwin's 1951 journey from Paris to Leukerbad. Titled "Black Body: Rereading James Baldwin's 'Strange in the Village,'" Cole's own work recounts Baldwin's essay from more than half a century ago. Cole declares of Baldwin's nonfiction that "[it] recounts the experience of being black in an all-white village." I reference this piece to reflect on its being creative nonfiction about creative nonfiction – a kind of metatextual and intertextual writing in which Cole thinks about Baldwin's expression and style. Cole interfaces with Baldwin as in this quote he presents

from the late writer: "From all available evidence no black man had ever set foot in this tiny Swiss village before I came," and then Cole adds, "But the village has grown considerably since [Baldwin's] visits, more than sixty years ago. They've seen blacks now; I wasn't a remarkable sight..."

Still, Cole brings to our attention that there are glances every once in a while, and that these are similar to ones he has received in New York, Europe, and India – the ubiquity of otherness attached to black bodies a commonplace occurrence across multiple lands. One may even characterize this uniformity as transnational surveillance. Cole analyzes:

To be a stranger is to be looked at, but to be black is to be looked at especially. Leukerbad has changed, but in which way? ... Perhaps some of the older folks I saw in the streets were once the very children who had been so surprised by the sight of Baldwin ... But now the children or grandchildren of those children are connected to the world in a different way. Maybe some xenophobia or racism are part of their lives, but part of their lives, too, are Beyoncé, Drake, and Meek Mill, the music I hear pulsing from Swiss clubs on Friday nights.

By tracking Baldwin literally – both in the sense of retracing his journey and then also through his writing – Cole uses the intricate details of the everyday to exquisite effect. A glance, kinds of music, and the names of places become markers of history and indices of the contemporary, a comparison between Baldwin's past and Cole's present. Like with Faleiro's writing, the personal here gives way to the global and the intersections between them. CNF is simultaneously his/herstory and story – creative narrative that records the minutiae of lives as the making of time.

I return to the facts I began with one last time.

When I left off, the grandfather was near death and his daughter was to marry a man she met in typing school. Together, the couple move to yet another country where they give birth to a girl and the boy who these facts are about.

That boy is me.

Twenty-five years ago, I came to the United States. My parents were married in Kuwait which was the birthplace of my sister and me. My mother was born in Kenya, British East Africa, which her mother and father came to from Portuguese Goa. When my mother journeyed to Goa with her father, she met

my dad and then moved to Kuwait with him. These are the intricate details of my family's journeys, which often find their way into my own creative nonfiction. To me, their exquisite quality is in the recalling of three generations of migrants making their way through the continents of Asia, Africa, Europe, and America.

Here is an excerpt from an essay of mine titled "The Difference between Deserts and Beaches: Sands of a Goan Childhood":

My school holidays were spent either in Kuwait, or with my grandmother in Aldona. I completed high school in Goa in 1990, joining my family who, by then, had repatriated from Kuwait. Other than when they had been on vacation, this was their first time back as fulltime residents after leaving Goa in the sixties, shortly upon the transfer of power of the enclave from Portugal to India. The discovery of oil in the Middle East, during that same period, had led to a large demand for foreign labor to transform the various emirates into modern urban oases. Goans were among those who heeded the call in large numbers. About a year after my parents returned voluntarily, the Iraq invasion of Kuwait brought several people I had grown up with "back" to Goa.

We were the lost generation: Goans our entire lives, suddenly plunged into a foreign place called home.

For some, there was no getting over the culture shock. Like many other "Gulfie Goans" of my generation, I went abroad to continue my college education. My journey to California called for a change of planes in a country I thought I would never see again. My non-Kuwaiti blood having disbarred me from being a citizen, I was only permitted to view my birthplace from the airport. There was war damage that was still being repaired. In the window, looking out onto Kuwait, I caught a reflection of the t-shirt I had decided to wear for the trip. It said GOA. (Ferrão)

Let me return to the mundane facts. A boy leaves home like his parents before him, like his grandparents before them. Let me end with the only way I know how to make the journey back across these lives, these histories, these geographies – by allowing the factual to lend itself to the creative. As much as the task is one of rendering intimacy while using storytelling and drama, it is as importantly about standing in one's own truth. The everyday is intricate, writing makes it exquisite.

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# ORTIGAS EXCURSIONS

Marren Adan

“Naglalakbay tayo, sa ilā'y panghabambuhay, upang hanapin ang  
ibang kalagayan, ibang pag-iral, ibang diwa.”

- Anaïs Nin

Saan na ba ako dinadala ng aking mga paa? Nang magpaikot-ikot sa nagsasanga-sanggang mga kalsada ng Ortigas, ibinulong sa akin ng Diyos o ng Pagod, na walang tao ang nakararanas ng pagkaligaw kundi ang hindi agad pagdating sa patutunguhan ay paalala lamang ng ating pag-iral.

## Mandirigma

Una kong narinig ang salitang “mandirigma” sa klase ni Ma'am Dionisio para ilarawan ang mga bayaning nakipaglaban sa mga mananakop na Kastila. Sa isang pambahirang pagkakataon, biglang nag-iba ang pananalita ni Ma'am sa kanyang pagle-lecture. Ewan ko ba't parang naging isang contestant siya sa isang balagtasan.

“Tayo'y makaasa sa rebolusyon para wakasan ang anumang anyo ng pananakop sa sarili nating bayan! Tularan natin ang ating mga bayani na tunay na mga mandirigmang nagbigay sa atin ng kalayaang tinatamasa natin sa kasalukuyan.”

Hindi ko alam kung nai-imagine ko lang pero parang maluha-luha pa si ma'am habang sinasabi niya iyon at halos pataas na rin ang kanyang kanang kamao. Tumingin ako sa katabi kong kaklase na naniningkit ang mga mata sa sobrang antok. Bumalik ang tingin ko kay Ma'am Dionisio, sandali itong huminto, nanahimik bago magpatuloy sa kanyang lecture.

Simula nang mag-commute ako sa pinapasukang opisina sa daang binabagtas lagi ang EDSA, nag-iba na ang kahulugan sa 'kin ng mandirigma. Mandirigma ang tawag sa mga commuter na nakikipagbuno para makasakay sa jeep, bus, o MRT. Pakikidigma ang makipagsiksikan para lang makasakay sa pampublikong sasakyen na parang itim na Nazareno na ipinaparada sa jampacked na EDSA. Mga mananampalataya kaming mga pasaherong nag-aabang at nakatanghod sa pinopoon naming PUV. Sa kabilang banda, kung pa iinalin ko naman halimbawa ang "ladies' first", hindi ko alam kung makakapasok pa ako on-time o makakauwi pa nang hindi aabutin ng pagtilaok ng tandang. Hindi ko alam kung paano iyon nagsimula pero karaniwang litanya na ng mga babaeng pasahero ang sarkastikong "Paunahan muna ang mga lalaki. Kawawa naman!" Kung hindi rin makikitakbo sa mga kapwa pasahero para salubungin ang dumaraang sasakyen ngayong araw. May strike na naman ba? Naisip kong mag-explore ng ibang ruta. Nagpalakad-lakad nang hindi iniintindi ang oras kung makakapasok nang hindi late. Nang makarating sa jeepney terminal ng mga biyaheng pa-Quiapo, may narinig akong isang mekanikal na boses:

*"Quiapo, Quiapo, dito po ang sakayan ng Quiapo!"*

Blockbuster ang jeep pa-Quiapo. Pagkahaba-haba ng pila pero wala sa sakayang ito ang nakasanayan kong pakikidigma. Pagtakbo-takbo, pakikipagsiksikan, hindi maiwasang pakikipagtulakan.

*"Quiapo, Quiapo, dito po ang sakayan ng Quiapo!"*

Bigla akong natumba nang may kumaripas na lalaki mula sa likuran ko. Lumingon pa muna bago nagpatuloy sa pagtakbo.

*"Sorry po, ser!"*

Kung iyon man ang sinabi niya, hindi ko rin sigurado, pagkalakas-lakas ng

*"Quiapo, Quiapo, dito po ang sakayan ng Quiapo!"*

Napakunot na lang ako ng noo. Nakita ko ang lalaking nagtatakbo para humanay sa pagkahaba-habang pila.

*“Quiapo, Quiapo, dito po ang sakayan ng Quiapo!”*

Parang hinihigop ng garalgal na speaker ang lahat ng ingay sa paligid. Ito lang ang maririnig mo:

*“Quiapo, Quiapo, dito po ang sakayan ng Quiapo!”*

Naisip ko pang bilangin na lang muna kung ilang beses kong narinig ang...

*“Quiapo, Quiapo, dito po ang sakayan ng Quiapo!”*

Bigla akong dinapuan ng kung anong kalituhan.

*“Quiapo, Quiapo, dito po ang sakayan ng Quiapo!”*

Kung galing ba roon sa speaker na malapit sa nakaparadang jeep ang paulit-ulit na boses o isang ingay na naririnig mula sa loob ng aking bungo, hindi ko na alam.

*“Quiapo, Quiapo, dito po ang sakayan ng Quiapo! Quiapo, Quiapo...”*

## Mga Mapa ng Gunita

Malaki na rin ang pinagbago ng buong Pasig. Lalo na itong Ortigas.

Lagi kong nilalaro sa isip ang Ortigas bilang isang lokal na nililikha ko sa panaginip. Iyong parang sa pelikulang *Inception* ni Nolan. Ako ang arkitekto ng highly-urbanized na Ortigas. Biro ko pa sa isip, nagtitigasan (hindi nagtataasan) ang mga building. Kung maglalakad-lakad ka nga sa Ortigas, malamang e may isa o dalawang beses kang makakasalubong na magtatanong.

“Kuya/Ate nasaan po ang (pangalan ng building)?”

Noong bata pa ‘ko, ewan ko ba’t madalas kong pinapangarap ang makapagtrabaho nang nakasuot ng long-sleeves, kurbata, at itim na coat. Dala na rin siguro ng mga napapanood na palabas sa TV na parang cool na cool ang mga office worker. When I joined them, the working class, siempre saka pa lang rumagasa ang iba’t ibang anyo ng disillusionment. I was a call center agent in my first job and we were required to speak in English. That fuckin’ English Only Policy. Para kaming sabay-sabay na sinasapihan sa pagsasalita ng wikang hindi natural sa ‘min kahit sa CR o sa pantry man ng opisina. Naisip ko na lang din: “Oh God, we are speaking in tongues!”

“How may I help you, mga mamser?”

Ikalawang trabaho: call center pa rin. Somewhere in Cubao. Natuto na ‘kong magyosi during breaks at pagkatapos ng shift. Para akong humihithit ng *ounces of relief* sa maliit, makinis, at maputing katawan ng yosi, saka bubuga kasama sa puting usok ang mga murang tinanggap ko mula sa mga kinginang Kano at mga pagtitimping ibinabalot sa “trabaho lang, walang personalan, recorded ang calls”.

“Bro, shot?”

Kapalit ng kape, napapadalas na rin ang beer sa umaga bago umuwi ng bahay at matulog habang tirik sa labas ang araw. One bots, two bots. Pagkatapos ay maghihiwa-hiwalay na kaming magkaka-opisina para magkita, magtrabaho ulit sa araw din na iyon.

Cubao. Isang magulo at makalat na office desk ang Cubao. Hindi mo alam kung lahat ng naroon ay totoong pangangailangan ng tao. Kung ano-anong ibinebenta, inaadlok sa mga dumaraan doon. Santambak na paper works at office supplies ang mga tindahan sa gilid-gilid ng EDSA. Mga balat at tinalupan mang naghalo-halo na ang mga nakapuwestong tindahan sa

bangketa nito, alam mo pa rin ang tiyak na puwesto kung saan makakabili ng sariwang prutas, pirated DVDs, tukneneng o kwek-kwek, at Marlboro lights. Parang laging nakikipaglaro ng tagu-taguan ang mga manininda sa mga MMDA. Kapag nagtatakbo na ang kanilang look-out na nagsisigaw ng "Andiyan na sila! Andiyan na sila!" ay dali-daling nagliligpit ang mga manininda at mabilis na lilipat sa kalapit na eskinita. Isang laro na lang sa kanila ang biglaang tagu-taguan. Maririnig mo pa ngang nagtatawanan ang ilan habang nagmamadaling nagliligpit ng mga paninda. Ang mga may kariton naman, tila nagkakarera pa.

Biglang may kumalabit sa likod ko. Naputol ang mga pagre-reminisce on past jobs.

"Kuya, alam niyo po kung saan ang (pangalan ng building)?"

"Diretsuhin mo lang ang daang 'yan, pagkaliwa mo, may makikita kang McDo. 'Yung katabing building ng McDo, 'yun ang (pangalan ng building)!"

"Tenkyu po, sir."

"Thank you for calling (name of the company). Have a great day!"

## McDonald's Balloons

"Yung one-piece chicken with rice, miss." Order ko.

"Sir, ano pong drinks?"

"Coke na lang." Sagot ko.

"Upgrade na natin 'yung size, sir? Add lang po kayo ng five pesos."

"Hindi na, miss." May kasamang ngiti.

"Any additional, sir? Baka gusto ninyong..."

"Yun lang, miss." Pinutol ko na ang sasabihin ng crew.

Habang dala-dala ang tray ng tanghalian, nagpaikot-ikot ang tingin ko sa loob ng McDo para makahanap ng mauupuan. Doon lang ang bakante sa pinakamalapit sa CR. Inilapag ko ang tray sa mesa bago ako naupo. Napatitig ako saglit sa inorder ko: isang pirasong fried chicken, rice, at softdrinks. Napangiti ako. Para silang mga laruang pagkain na ginagamit noong naglalaro pa ako ng bahay-bahayan. Ang kalaro kong nagpapanggap na misis ko ang maglalapag ng tray ng pekeng mga pagkain habang nakaupo akong naghihintay sa sahig. "Kain na, hon," ang lagi kong script bago namin kunwaring lalantakan ang isang set ng toy food. Panguya-nguya ang mga bibig namin habang hawak-hawak lang ang laruang kutsara't tinidor.

Naputol ang aking pag-aalala dahil sa tunog mula sa loob ng CR. Naulit pa ito ng isang beses. Napakalakas na pag-utot. Ibinaling ko na lang ang atensyon ko sa background music na naririnig din sa loob ng McDo. Nagmamadali kong inilabas ang kanin mula sa pagkakabalot.

Nasanay na rin ang sistema ko sa pagkain nang mabilis bilang karaniwang isang oras lamang ang nakalaan para sa lunch break. Bagaman wala akong kailangang balikang opisina ngayon bago mag ala-una, tapos na rin agad ako kumain sa loob lamang ng labinlimang minuto. Pag-angat ng tingin ko mula sa pagkakayuko sa pagkain, nakita ko ang isang matandang babaeng may kasamang bata. Para silang mga buwitreng nag-aabang ng malalantakan.

"Tapos ka na, iho?" Magalang na tanong ni lola. May dala ring tray ng pagkain.

"Dito na po kayo, maupo, 'la." Bigla akong nagmamadaling umalis sa 'king puwesto para bigyan ng mauupuan ang matanda at ang bata.

Bagaman may sarili namang order ang mag-lola, nakita kong kinuha ng matanda ang tira kong fried chicken mula sa kalapit na tray. Gusto ko

sanang awatin ang matanda. "La!" Nagsimula siyang kagat-kagatin ang tirang manok at hindi pa nagtagal ay para na 'tong asong ngumangasab-ngasab sa buto. Patuloy lang sa pagkain ang katabi nitong bata sa inorder nilang fast food habang parang mas trip ng lola ang kumain ng tira-tira. Nang kainin pati buto ng natira kong fried chicken, nagsimulang kagat-kagatin na rin ng matanda ang sarili nitong mga daliri. Nagdurugo na ang bibig nito! Lumingon ako sa mga katabing customer pero walang nakakapansin sa ginagawa ng matanda. Bumalik ang tingin ko sa batang bigla na lang lumobo ang katawan. Pagkalaki-laki na ng katawan nito kumpara sa maliit niyang ulo. Wala na ang kasama nitong matandang babae.

Nang may sumagi sa likod ko, nakita kong nagsisipag-lobo na rin ang ibang tao sa loob ng McDo! Sa sobrang pagkakalobo ng iba'y nagsisilutangan na sila. Nagpapagulang-gulang sa ere. Napaigtad pa ako sa gulat sa narinig mula sa loob ng CR. Tiyak kong hindi na iyon tunog ng pag-utot. Nagmadali akong makalabas bago pa man mangyari ang bigla kong naisip na sabay-sabay na pagputok ng mga tao sa loob ng McDo.

## Ang Piyanista sa Mall ng Galleria

Sa sobrang init, napapasok ako sa Mall ng Galleria. Walang bibilhin dahil naniniguro na ang pera'y mailalaan sa pamasahé pauwi at sa posibleng gastusin sa nilalakad na job application.

Nagpalakad-lakad passing through the shops of shoes and clothes. Hindi ito window-shopping, naisip ko. Wala akong paki sa mga nauusong porma o pa-cool na pananamit. Napatingin ako sa suot kong leather shoes. Mula pa noong college, ito na ang pares ng sapatos na gamit ko. May naramdamán akong taos na pasasalamat sa walang buhay na sapatos. *Hindi pa kita kayang palitan.*

Naghalo-halo na rin ang ingay sa loob ng mall. Mga taong nagdaldalan, nagtatawanan tapos may kanya-kanya pang music o jingle ang mga shop. Tumawag sa atensyon ko ang musikang out-of-sync sa mood ng mall. Mabagal na musika na tila sabay na nanghalalina at nanghehele. Naisip kong hanapin ang pinanggagalingan ng tunog na 'yon.

Lakad, lakad. Kumaliwa ako nang makarating sa shop ng mga rubber shoes. Lakad, lakad. Sumakay ako ng escalator papaba sa lower ground ng mall. Nadaanan ko ang tindahan ng milk tea na laging pinipilahan saan mang branch nito. "Sir!" Sumalubong ang babae sa 'kin sabay abot ng manipis na brochure ng condo. Sa bandang kaliwa, ang isa sa mga entrance ng department store. May palakad-lakad na babaeng guard. Lakad, lakad. Sa wakas, nakarating din ako doon kung saan nanggagaling ang tugtug na parang humahalik sa tainga.

Napatulala ako: isang piyanong walang piyanista. Wala ring ibang pumapansin sa pianong tumutugtug mag-isa. Busy ang mga tao sa pagtingin-tingin sa mga bag at damit habang ang karamihá'y dumaraan lang nang walang paglingon.

Nakita ko ang sarili kong nagtitipa sa piano keys. Nakangiting nagpapanggap na marunong tumugtug ng piano. Para kong inangkin ang maliit na espasyo na tinutungtungan ng piano. Wala nang ibang maririnig pa kundi ang piano music. Ako lamang ang tao sa loob ng mall.

## Dalawang Barangay Ugong

Tanaw mula sa pagkakatayo sa harap ng mataas na glass wall ng mall ang lawas ng Ortigas. Sa di kalayuan, ang barangay ng Ugong.

Lumaki ako sa barangay ng Ugong. Nang makapag-asawa, nalipat ang tirahan sa lungsod ng Valenzuela. Laking Ugong ang aking asawa. Pero, barangay Ugong ng Valenzuela. Biro namin dati, soulmates talaga kaming dalawa dahil magkapangalan ang tinitirhan naming mga barangay. Siguro, iisang barangay lang din dati ang Ugong ng Pasig at ang Ugong ng Valenzuela. Ang kuwento ko sa asawa ko: iisang malaking lupang nabiyak ang pinakamatandang barangay ng Ugong. Sa paglipas ng mga taon, umusbong na parang mga kabute ang iba pang mga barangay sa pagitan ng nabiyak na lupa na tuluyang naglayo sa dating iisang Ugong.

Isang malawak na talahiban ang Ugong noon. Ugong ng Pasig. Ang makikitid na daang nagdurugtong mula sa bahay patungo sa kalsadang magdadala sa iyo sa simbahan, sa eskuwelahan, o sa palengke ay pinatag ng mga yapak ng mga taong dumaraan sa putikang lupa kung saan walang damong maaaring mabuhay dahil sa araw-araw na pagtapak. Para sa aming mga bata dati, isang malawak na playground din ang talahiban kung saan maaaring maglaro ng tagu-taguan o manghuli ng mga insekto tulad ng tutubi. Isang araw, takot kaming nagtakbuhang magkakalaro nang may marinig kaming ingay sa di kalayuan. Ang sabi ng mas matanda kong kalaro, "Putris, putok 'yun ng baril, a." Nagmamadali kaming bumalik sa kanya-kanyang mga tahanan. Kinabukasan, narinig na lang namin sa kuwentuhan ng matatandang kapitbahay na may dalawang lalaking natagpuang patay sa gilid ng Ilog Pasig. Ang sabi ng isa naming matandang kapitbahay, "Wala na talagang makakapigil pa sa mga negosyanteng 'yan. Pera-pera lang 'yan e. Masuwerte siguro para sa kanila ang ipandilig sa mga lupang tatayuan nila ng mga nego-negosyo ang dugo ng mahihirap."

Sa paglaon ng panahon, sabay na lumalaki kaming mga magkakalaro habang naglalaho naman ang espasyo ng aming laruan at maging ang dati naming mga tahanan sa paunti-unting pag-convert ng talahiban para maging mga mall o condo. Ang dating nagtataasang mga damo'y pinalitan ng nagtataasang mga gusali. Tuluyan na rin naming nalimot ang mga nakikitang tutubi, paruparo't gamugamo, walang pag-intindi kung saang talahiban lumipat ang mga insekto.

Isang malawak na sakahan ang Ugong noon. Ugong ng Valenzuela. Ang kuwento naman ng asawa ko, nang magsimulang manirahan ang mga

negosyanteng Intsik sa Valenzuela, nagsimula ring dumami ang naitayong mga pabrika. Galing sa iba't ibang probinsya ang mga factory worker na piniling magkapamilya't manirahan sa barangay ng Ugong. Ganito rin halos ang populasyong bumubuo ngayon sa iba pang mga barangay ng Valenzuela. Tubong Sorsogon ang ina ng asawa ko habang lumaki naman sa Quezon ang kanyang ama. Sa isang pinapasukang pabrika sa Ugong sila nagkakilala at di kalauna'y bumuo ng pamilya. Ang dati namang mga naninirahang magsasaka sa Ugong ay naging mga factory worker na rin. Noong bata pa ang asawa ko, madalas pa raw siyang maisama sa mga piket ng mga manggagawa sa pabrika.

Nang minsan kaming mag-away ng asawa ko, galit kong itinanong, "Gusto mo na ba'kong bumalik sa Ugong?" Napangiti ang asawa ko at nagpigil na tuluyang matawa.

Kahit saan naman ako pumunta, parang itinadha na ang mga paa kong magpabalik-balik sa lupa ng Ugong.

## Metamorphosis\*

Hawak ang notebook na nakabukas sa pahina kung saan nakasulat ang address ng pinag-aaplyang trabaho, tumingin ako sa pinto na nasa harap ko. Dito na nga 'yun.

Bago pumasok, pinagmasdan kong maigi ang building na may dalawang palapag lamang. Katabi nito ang nagtataasang mga office building at condo. Parang naiiba ang building na 'to kumpara sa mga katabi nitong establisyemento. Luma ang disenyo ng building na parang naitayo bago pa man ang panahon ng kopong-kopong. Nag-alangan pa akong pumasok sa pagdagsa ng kung ano-anong prehuwisyso sa isip: scammer agency, haunted house, cyber... "Ding!" Biglang tumunog ang doorbell nang mag-isa. Sa garalgal na speaker sa may pinto, matinis ang boses ng nagsalita. "Pasok po kayo, sir." Bumukas nang mag-isa ang pinto.

Walang guard na nakabantay maging sa pagpasok sa bandang entrance ng opisina. Kung opisina nga ito. Sa maliit na reception area, wala ring tao. May tumawag sa pangalan ko. Hindi ko pa man nahahanap kung nasaan ang nagsasalita, magalang pa itong nagtanong.

"Have I pronounced your name right, sir?"

"Yes po. Tama. That's right!"

Pagbaba ng tingin ko, *putangina!* Isang ipis ang kausap ko. Iyong ipis-bahay. Gagalaw-galaw pa ang antena nito habang nakatingin sa 'kin. Nakatayo ang ipis na parang tao bago muli nitong gamitin ang lahat ng kanyang mga binti at nagpaikot-ikot sa papel kung saan ito nakapatong. Para itong nag-i-scan ng dokumento. Nakita kong CV ko ang papel na 'yon. Gusto kong tumakbo papalabas pero bigla akong nanigas sa kinatatayuan ko.

"Please follow me, sir."

Lalong nanindig ang balahibo ko nang simula itong lumipad. Parang may sariling buhay ang mga paa kong sumunod kung saan lumilipad ang ipis. Wala pa rin akong nakikitang ibang tao sa opisinang ito. O, baka lahat ng employado rito, ipis. Binabangungot yata ako.

Sa kalapit na espasyo, makikita ang mga cubicle na ang laki'y para sa karaniwang mga tao naman. Walang sumisilip na mga ulo ng tao sa cubicle pero maririnig mo ang mga pagtipa sa keyboard keys. Nag-landing ang ipis mula sa paglipad sa isang kalapit na office table. May kausap itong isa pang ipis pero hindi ko naririnig ang pinag-uusapan nila. Gagalaw-galaw lang ang kanilang mga antena. Nilingon ako ng nakatalikod na ipis.

“Sir. I’ll leave you with our office manager. Meet...”

Hindi ko nainitindihan ang binanggit na pangalan. Lumipad muli ang ipis kaya bigla akong napabalikwas. May narinig akong matitinis na tawanan na nanggagaling doon sa mga cubicle.

“Take your seat.” Nakatayo rin na parang tao ang ipis na kanilang office manager. Nakatayo ito sa ibabaw ng office table. May kalakihan ang katawan nito. Ngayon lang ako nakatitig nang matagal sa isang ipis. Napansin kong bali ang isa sa mga binti nito. Malumanay nitong binaggit ang pangalan ko bago nagpakilala’t nagpatuloy sa pagsasalita.

“I understand that you might be, uhm, in a state of shock at the moment? But that’s normal. We are not humans but, uhm, cockroaches! Yes, we are insects but functional just like humans haha! In fact, speaking on behalf of our company, we are one of the BPOs who currently deliver the best customer service in the entire Asia!”

Iba ang accent ng ipis na ‘to. Hindi Pilipino ang kausap ko. Bumungad agad ang office manager ng potensiyal na salary offer hindi pa man napapalalim ang pag-uusap. Malaki ang maaari kong maging suweldo sa trabahong ito kaya’t nagpaubaya ako sa kakaibang pagkakataon. Nagbiro pa ang office manager na wag akong mag-alala sa perang susuwelduhin dahil walang sariling currency ang mga ipis.

Nasanay na ako sa ganitong mga tanong sa job interview. Strengths and weaknesses, traits that you find in a leader, how do you handle stress blah blah. At karaniwang follow-up questions. Ang pinagkaiba lang ay isang ipis ang interviewer.

Sa huli’y masaya kong tinaggap ang job offer. Bahagyang nawala na rin sa isip ko kung anong kahihinatnan sa trabahong pinamumuan ng mga ipis at mga ipis bilang officemates. Mas naglaro sa isip ko ang mga mabibiling bagay ng pera. Nasabik akong makauwi agad para ibahagi sa asawa ko ang good news.

Sa kasunod na araw, isang umagang nagising ako mula sa isang masamang panaginip, natuklasan kong isa na akong kahindik-hindik na insekto.

\* inspirasyon ang nobelang *The Metamorphosis* ni Franz Kafka

# MUMUNTING ALIPATO ANG MGA BITUIN SA LANGIT

Stefani J. Alvarez

Lulan kami sa isang dyip. Nakahiga sa upuan ang aking kapatid. Duguan. Pinaunan ko siya sa aking kandungan habang umaalalay ang isa niyang kaibigan sa kaniyang kaliwang paa. Nadisgrasya siya kasama ang driver ng motorsiklo. Magre-remit sana sila ng taya sa Jai Alai sa gabing iyon. Tila kinakatay na baka ang atungal nang humarurot ang kalawanging dyipni. Nakikipagsabayan sa kabog ng aking dibdib. Parang ngangatapong kalderot' kawali ang atip sa tuwing lumulusong sa lubak-lubak na daan. Parang nawawasak. Kasama kami sa mawawasak kung sakali. Kipkip ko ang palad ng aking kapatid. Habol-hininga ang kaniyang dibdib. Pumapalahaw ang kaniyang iyak. Nangingibabaw ito sa ungel ng makina ng aming sinasakyen.

Laganap sa aming baranggay ang sugal ng larong Jai Alai o minsang tinatawag ding masiao. Mas murang tumaya kaysa lotto. Kung may piso ka, isang taya para sa 3-digit number combination. Minsan naipatawag ako sa principal kasama ang tatlo kong kaklase. Nahulihan kami ng stubs at kodigo ng Jai Alai. Ginamit na ring bookmarks ng mga kaklase ko ang flyers at tips nito na ipinamamahagi araw-araw bilang basehan o kaya pag-analisa sa mga numerong nakatala, may tila puzzle, graphs, at kalendaryo para sa tinatawag nilang *hearing* sa winning numbers. Tuwing recess at lunch break ang pangongolekta ng taya. Bilang usher o kubrador, may diyes porsyento ako sa taya. At siyempre kung may mananalo, sigurado ang aking balato. At dahil na rin maganda ang sulat-kamay ko, at malinaw akong magsulat ng mga numero, ako ang nagta-tally ng lahat ng remittances. Mula sa bawat piraso ng stubs kokopyahin ko sa isang printed out letter size paper na may columns ang presyo ng taya, ilang units, at ang sumatotal ng nakolekta bago ito dalhin sa Financier. Ang Financier ang may hawak ng lahat ng taya. Sila rin ang magkukumpirma at sila ang magbabayad sa mga mananalo.

Ngayong nadisgrasya ang kapatid ko bilang runner at taga-remit ng pasugalan, wala ni isang tumulong sa amin maliban sa kapwa namin tayador at kubrador. Walang ibang binabanggit ang aking kapatid kundi puntahan ko si Mama. Housemaid si Mama sa may-kayang pamilya sa isang exclusive subdivision, sa Cagayan de Oro. Dumating kami sa emergency room ng City Hospital. Hindi agad nabigyan ng atensiyon ang aking kapatid. Sa sulok, may bakanteng wheelchair, agad kong tinulak at pinaupo ang aking kapatid. Iginiya siya ng kaniyang kaibigan at naupo ako sa harap upang doon ipatong ang kaniyang sugatang paa. Napakaraming pasyente lalo na't pampublikong pagamutan, ni hindi na halos magkasya sa loob ng ER, parang palengke, iyong iba ay nasa hallway na nakaratay.

Pagkatapos ma-check ng doktor ang lagay ni Tonton, sinabihan akong kailangang dalhin siya sa Northern Mindanao Medical Center (NMMC), isa ring pampublikong pagamutan, ngunit mas malaking ospital, dahil walang bakante sa City Hospital at kailangang maoperahan agad ang aking pasyente.

Nilapitan ko si Tonton. Wala akong maisip na sasabihin habang pinagmamasdan ko ang tubo ng dextrose na nakakonekta sa kanyang kamay at ang benda sa kanyang kaliwang paa. Tinanong ko siya kung nagugutom ba siya o nauuhaw. May talab pa ang binigay na pampamanhid sa kanya.

“Si Mama... Adto kang Mama...” iyong ang tangi niyang sinasambit, humihiling na puntahan ko ang aming ina.

Gabling-gabi na. Iniwan ko siya saglit habang nakabantay ang kaniyang kaibigan. Sinubukan kong tawagan ang landline kung saan nagtatrabaho si Mama, ngunit walang sumasagot. Sumakay ako ng motorela papunta sa subdibisyong malapit sa Liceo de Cagayan. Pagdating ko sa main gate, hindi ako pinapasok ng security guard. Kailangan daw ng ID. Kailangan daw niya muna makontak ang unit na pupuntahan ko. Ipinaliwanag ko sa kanya. Housemaid ang Mama ko sa loob. Kailangang-kailangan kong makausap siya. Emergency. At nasa emergency room ang kapatid ko. Ngunit, umiling lang ang bantay. At tuluyan na niyang itinodo ang bolum ng kanyang transistor radio. Nakabubulahaw ang isang drama sa radyo sa kalaliman ng gabi. Tumalikod na ako. Tumawid ako sa kabilang kanto upang muling babaybayin ang kalye pabalik sa ospital. Nasa bungad ako ng gate ng Liceo de Cagayan. Tiningala ko ang lampas-tao nilang bakod, ang gawa sa bakal na gate. Nakaramdam ako ng lungkot nang maalala na malapit na ang pasukan. Magkokolehiyo na ako sa pagbubukas ng Hunyo. Napakaganda ng gusali tulad sa isang napakagarang subdibisyon. Ngunit hindi kailanman

magbubukas ng tarangkarahan. Mananatiling sarado sa tulad kong walang pambayad ng tuition fee.

Ayon sa doktor, kailangan kong puntahan ang NMMC para masigurado kong may bakante sila sa ward at mabigyan agad kami ng referral letter kaysa hintayin namin ang City Hospital pa ang magpoproseso nito. Mas madali iyon, kaysa aasa kami sa kanilang hakbang. Parang naís niyang sabihin na hindi naman ganoon kakritikal ang lagay ng kapatid mo. May mas malala pa kaming mga pasyente na kailangang iligtas, may mga nag-aagaw-buhay pa nga.

Naabutan kami ng umaga sa Emergency Room. Hanggang sa binigyan ng temporary bed si Tonton sa male ward kasama ang mga naoperahan sa bituka, atay, mga nabaril, at mga naka-recover mula sa ICU. Marumi ang loob ng ward. Magkasing-amoy ang kuwarto at CR, na laging bukas dahil sira ang pintuan. Sa bawat pihit ng pinto, umuungol na parang ginigilitan sa leeg ang bisagra. Amoy-chlorine ang hanging ibinubuga ng ceiling fan. Na tila pati ito'y nandidiri sa ilang taon nang nakamasid sa mga pasyenteng nakaratay sa hospital bed. Malamlam ang liwanag ng magkabilang fluorescent lamp parang inaantok sa mapanglaw na palibot, o marahil naghihingalo na ito. Sa dulo ng hallway, ang nag-iisang bombilyang nakabitin sa kawad. Animo'y nagpapatiwakal sa gitna ng karimlan. Nakabubulahaw ang intercom na halos segu-segundong umaalingawngaw. Magkakasunod iyon sa nakakapanindig na sirena ng ambulansiya. Parang nangabasag na salamin ang kalansingan ng mga aparato sa kabilang kuwarto, sa Emergency room, hanggang hallway, sa buong gusali, sa labas, sa palibot. Araw-gabi yatang ritwal ang papalahaw ng iyak. Orasyon ang pagdaing. Samu't saring ungol ng sakit, o magkasintunog ng pagsusumamo't dasal ang kawalang-pag-asaya at ng kahirapan.

Isang linggo kaming nanatili sa City Hospital. At masuwerteng nakumpirma na maaari na siyang ilipat sa NMMC. Malinis at mas maayos ang NMMC. Kaka-renovate lang nito, dating Provincial Hospital. Iniskedyul agad si Tonton ng x-ray. Kailangan namin ng pambayad. Hindi libre ang pagpapa-x-ray. Pinayuhan ako ng doktor na kailangan kong pumila sa DSWD para humingi ng tulong nang ipaalam ko sa kanya ang aming kalagayan. Kailangan ko ng green card para sa libreng pagpapagamot at gastos sa ospital liban sa mga gamot na kailangang bilhin sa botika sa labas. Sinabihan ko si Mama. Kailangan din niyang mag-cash advance. Halos kasabay rin naming dumating ang isa pang pasyente. Mas malala ang nakikita kong kalagayan niya. Puno ng bakal ang magkabilang paa nito. Nakasakay siya sa wheelchair. Ngunit wala

na akong nababakas na galos o sugat sa kanyang mukha o katawan. Naisip kong matagal na siyang pasyente. Ngumiti siya nang dumaan sa amin. Iginiya siya ng kanyang kasama. Nang maayos na siyang nakahiga sa kama, agad siyang nagpasilala.

“Alejandro Martil.”

“Sir? Sir...” tila di ako ng makipagkamay. Una niyang inabot ang kaniyang kanang palad. Nag-aalangan akong nais nitong makipagkilala.

Simula noon tinatawag na namin siyang Sir Martil. Ngunit karamihan sa mga bumisita sa kanya, naririnig kong tinatawag siyang ‘Engineer Martil’ o kaya ‘Bossing’. Mas pinili niyang doon sa ward dahil wala raw siya parating kasama sa private room. At isang linggong follow-up/ check-up lang ang advice ng kanyang doktor. Kumikirot raw kasi ang kaniyang paa at tila di tinatablan ng mefenamic. *Ilizarov* ang tawag sa mga bakal na tila bakod sa kanyang paa. May tatlong ring na paikot at ilang pahalang-patayo na bakal na nakahilera’t nakabaon sa kaniyang laman at tagos sa kaniyang buto. Mag-iisang taon nang nakakabit iyon. Mag-iisang taon na siyang naka-wheelchair.

Itinanong niya kung nasaan ang Tatay namin nang makitang bumisita si Mama.

Hindi ko siya sinagot sa halip ay nagbalik-tanong ako sa kanya. “Asa imong mga anak?”

Natahimik siya. Ilang saglit pa’y parang may hinahanap. Onagkunwari dahil hindi alam kung ano ang isasagot sa tanong ko. Dumako ang tingin niya sa side table. Inabot niya ang kanyang baso. Nakisuyong salinan ko ng gatas. Bago siya nagsimulang magkuwento, inalok niya si Tonton. At nilagyan ko naman agad ang baso ng aking kapatid. Nakinig kami sa pagkukuwento niya. Tatlo ang kanyang anak. Isang babae at dalawang lalaki. Nasa Provincial capitol, isang abogada ang kaniyang anak na babae. May asawa na ito, dalawa ang anak na maliliit pa at tila abala sa trabaho kaya bihira o minsan lang itong makadalaw sa kanya. Samantala, nasa Amerika naman ang panganay niyang anak na lalaki na karaniwang tumatawag tuwing umaga at kinukumusta ang kaniyang kalagayan. Ang bunso niya ay namatay sa sakit. Kasing edad ko raw. Isang karamdamang sanhi ng pagkagumon nito sa droga. Dinala raw nila sa rehab ngunit kalaunan nang magbalik na ito sa kanila, akala nila ay naka-recover na ngunit bigla na lang itong nagkasakit, humantong sa pulmonya at di na naagapan pa. Ang asawa niya ay isang guro sa public high school sa Malaybalay. Nahihirapang iwan ang trabaho. At nasa limang oras din ang

biyahe ng bus mula Malaybalay patungong Cagayan de Oro. Iyong naghahati sa kanya, pamangkin niya. Isang nurse. Iyon ang nag-aalaga sa kaniya pero sa susunod na buwan ay lilipad na rin papuntang Amerika at doon na magtatrabaho, makakasama ang kaniyang panganay na anak. Naikuwento rin niya na dahil sa kalasingan ang kanyang pagkaaksidente. May birthday party siyang dinaluhan, at kadalasan kapag may inuman, impossible raw na hindi siya uuwing lasing. Hindi na niya idinetalye pa, ngunit may bumabagabag sa nais pa niyang ikuwento. Hanggang sa ipapako niya ang kaniyang mga mata sa mga baldadong paa.

Nakaramdam ako ng katapanan kay Sir Martil. Nagkuwento na rin ako tungkol sa aming ama ni Tonton. Isang forester sa DENR si Tatay. Grade two pa lang ako nang iwan niya kami. Kabit lang si Mama. Kaya siguro ganoon. Bumalik na siya sa kanyang legal na pamilya. Magka-college na ako sa susunod na pasukan. Pumasa naman ako sa scholarship sa Mindanao Polytechnic State College. Civil Engineering ang kukunin kong curso. Kaya nagpasya si Mama na magtrabaho kahit kasambahay para may maiaabot raw siya sa akin, kahit papaano. Hindi kasi sapat ang kinikita niya bilang beautician. Hanggang pangkain lang namin sa araw-araw kasama ng dalawa ko pang kapatid.

Hapunan na. Dumating ang katulong ng kanyang anak na babae. Ito ang naghahatid ng kaniyang pagkain. Hindi raw niya alam kung bakit kailangan pa siyang may hiwalay na pagkain. Sapat na sa kanya ang rason na libreng pagkain sa ospital. Ano'ng pagkakaiba? Sabi ko, siyempre mas masarap ang lutong-bahay, o ang luto ng iyong mga mahal sa buhay. Sandali siyang tumigil sa pangguya. Parang may naalala. Parang may biglang bumara sa kaniyang lalamunan. Inabot ang baso ng tubig at tila pinilit nilunok ang isinubong pagkain. Sa loob-loob ko naman, mas mabuti at may nagdadala sa kaniya ng pagkain. Dahil ang kanyang rason ay ibinibigay niya sa akin. Habang naghahapunan, itinuloy namin ang aming kuwentuhan. Itinanong niya sa akin kung anong pinagkakaabalahan ko tuwing hapon. Ipinagtatap ko sa kanya ang pangongolekta ng taya. Nagkaroon na ako ng mga suking watcher, pati pasyente, nurss at mga PT ay tumataya na rin. Wala pa namang doktor na tumaya sa akin, biro ko. Ang piso kapag panalo ay magiging tatlong daan.

“Dili ba gibawal ang sugal diri?” Halos pabulong niyang tanong.

Tulad ng paninigarilyo, bawal po sa inyo, pero ginagawa ninyo, ang tuwiran kong sagot.

"Maayo kayo ka morason.<sup>3</sup>" Napahalakhak siya. "Tuod, nakadaog ka na?<sup>4</sup>"

Umingil ako. Pero ipinaliwanag kong may sampung porsiyento naman ako sa nakukubra kong taya. Ipon ko na rin iyong pang-enrollment namin at pambili ng gamit sa school.

Sa kalagitnaan ng aking pagkukuwento tungkol sa Jai Alai, para ko siyang nakumbinse. Inabot niya sa akin ang sandaan. Ako raw ang bahala sa numero. Nag-aalangan akong tanggapin. Sabi niya na itaya ko raw para sa akin, para sa aking kapatid. At sana buenas dahil bukas, discharged na siya. Tinanggap ko ang pera. At nagpasalamat. Nagbiro pa siyang balatuhan ko siya kapag tumama ang kaniyang taya.

Alas-diyes ng gabi, tahimik na ang Orthopedic Male ward. Bawal na ang bisita sa mga oras na iyon. Pasyente at watchers na lang ang maaaring manatili sa mga silid. Wala si Sir Martil sa kanyang higaan. Napansin ko ang Fire Exit, bahagyang nakabukas ang pinto. Hindi ako maaaring magkamali, neroon siya. At nang silipin ko, narinigarilyo. Pinaalala ko sa kanya na pinagbawalan siyang magyosi. Kaya mabagal ang healing process ng kanyang sugat dahil diabetic siya. Tila hindi siya nakinig. Doktor lang daw niya ang may sabi. Patuloy siya sa paghithit ng yosi.

"Akong Tatay kay dili biya to gapanigarilyo,<sup>5</sup>" pahayag ko sa kanya habang nakatanaw sa asul na ilaw ng signage ng Gaisano Mall sa di kalayuan.

"Wala man pud labot akong mga anak,<sup>6</sup>" pangangatwiran niya habang pinagmamasdan ang dulo ng nangangalahating sigarilyo. Tinaktak niya ang yosi nang walang pagtantiya. Hindi lang abo kundi humalo ang kislap ng alipato na malayang sumuot sa mga siwang ng bakal na hagdanan at ang iba'y kumapit sa kaniyang paa na nakabalot ng bendahe. Marahang pinagpag niya ito at tuluyang nangalaglag ito pababa mula sa ikalawang palapag na aming kinaroroonian. Inabot ko ang hawak niyang cigarette case. Bumunot ng isang stick ng Marlboro red. At nagsindi ako.

"Wala ko'y anak nga gapanigarilyo,<sup>7</sup>" at sinundan niya ang tingin ko sa gusaling katapat ng ospital. Ibinuga niya ang usok ng yosi kasabay ng kaniyang buntong-hininga. Parang maninipis na ulap iyon. At marahang tinangay ng payapang hangin papalayo.

"Wala man pud labot akong amahan,<sup>8</sup>" tugon ko.

Napangiti siya. Tulad ng unang ngiti nang magkakilala kami.

Masayang-masaya ang buong ward kinabukasan. Nagpa-pizza ang nanalong isang watcher na tumataya sa akin. Binalatuhan naman ako ng tatlong daan.

“Wala ta giswerte.<sup>9</sup>” Nanlolokong pahayag niya sa akin.

“Next time, Sir Martil,” wika kong nagpaparamdam ng pag-asa. Lingid sa kaniyang kaalama'y hindi ko naman talaga itinaya ang kaniyang isang daan. At hindi ako tumataya kahit kailan. Hindi kailanman mananalo ang hindi tumataya.

At bago siya nagpaalam sa araw na iyon, inabot niya sa akin ang kanyang cigarette case. “Ako ning ibilin nimo. Basin diay dili na ako manigarilyo.<sup>10</sup>” Ibinulsa ko ito sabay nagpasalamat.

Gabi na nang muli kong naalala ang laman ng aking bulsa, ang binigay ni Sir Martil. Saktong oras at tahimik na ang ward. Madalang na rin ang pagra-round ng mga nars. Tulog na si Tonton pagkatapos ng kanyang PT session. Mag-isa akong pumunta sa Fire Exit. Naroon pa ang monoblock chair kung saan nauupo si Sir Martil. Malinaw sa akin ang kaniyang hulagway habang nakaupo at humihitit ng sigarilyo. Malayang ibinubuga ang usok nito sa hangin. Susundan niya ng tingin ang bawat hibla ng usok. Parang pagtunghay sa isang likhang-sining. O sa isang panaginip na maglalaho pagkalipas ng ilang sandali. Iginala ko ang aking paningin sa kahabaan ng Marcos highway na nagkukurus ang landas ng Velez street at Corrales Avenue. Padalang nang padalang na ang paroo't paritong mga sasakyan, mga dyip at mga taong dumadaan. Doon madalas ipinapako ni Sir Martil ang kaniyang paningin na para bang gumagambala ang pagkukurus ng direksyon sa sangandaan. Tatangayin ko ang kaniyang pananahimik at aanyayahang pagmasdan ang mga ilaw-dagitab sa kalye, ang iba't ibang kulay at liwanag ng neon lights sa mga katapat na gusali. Ilang saglit pa at sabay kaming titingala, nakakamanghang parang nagliliparang mumunting alipato ang mga bituin sa langit.

Binuksan ko ang kaha. Hindi sigarilyo ang laman ng cigarette case. Alam kong hindi sapat sa isang munting kaha na isilid ang napakaiksing sandali ng aming pagkakakilala. Dahil iyon pa lamang ang simula ng pagtataya sa isang pagkakaibigan. Napapikit ako. Nais kong ihabol sa kanya ang isa pang pasasalamat. Isang taos-pusong pasasalamat.

## Ilang Tala

- <sup>1</sup>Nasaan ang iyong mga anak?
- <sup>2</sup>Di ba bawal ang sugal rito?
- <sup>3</sup>Ang galing mong mangatwiran!
- <sup>4</sup>S'ya nga pala, nanalo ka na ba?
- <sup>5</sup>‘Yung Tatay ko, hindi naninigarilyo.
- <sup>6</sup>Wala rin namang pakialam ang mga anak ko.
- <sup>7</sup>Wala akong anak na naninigarilyo.
- <sup>8</sup>Wala rin namang pakialam ang aking ama.
- <sup>9</sup>Hindi tayo sinuwerte.
- <sup>10</sup>Iwan ko ‘to sa’yo. At baka di na rin ako maninigarilyo.

# NANG WALANG NAKAKARINIG

George Deoso

Ang sabi mo noon, P're, madali lang matutuhan ang C scale sa biyulin. Sabi mo, basta maaral ko ito'y madali ko nang matutuhan ang iba pang key signatures. Baguhan lang ako. Bago rin sa pakiramdam ko ang mga daliri mong inaayos ang daliri ko sa mga kuwerdas.

"Dito ang Do," sabi mo, "ang C. Dito ka magsisimula."

Malamig ang daliri mo noon, dahil siguro sa aircon ng kuwarto. Tayong dalawa lang ang nandoon, bukod sa isang upright na piyano, mga music stand sa harap natin, at ilan pang gamit ng mga estudyante't guro ng music center. Ilang Sabado na ba akong pumupunta sa music center kung saan nagtuturo si Tita Alba? Ikaapat, siguro. Pero wala noon ang nanay mo—na noo'y Miss Alba pa ang tawag ko. Nang tinext niya ako na ikaw muna ang magtuturo sa akin, nag-reply lang ako ng "Noted, Miss A" pero sa totoo'y di ko alam ang dapat asahan. Minsan na kitang nakita sa music center, bago pa man ang unang beses na tinuruan mo ako. Noo'y di ko alam na anak ka ng guro ko sa biyulin. Nagtaka ako siyempre, kung sino iyong matangkad na lalaking tila walang lugar sa paaralan ng musika. Akala ko'y modelo ka noon, iyong tipong rumarampa nang panloob lamang ang suot. Iba ang pakiramdam ng nakikita ka lang dati sa reception area, ni hindi tayo nagngingitian, kumpara sa ngayong nakatayo ka na sa harap ko at parang repleksiyong nauna nang ilang segundo, inuudyok akong gayahin ang posisyon ng iyong mga daliri.

"Dito, oo, tama, ayan. Sige. One, two, three..."

Sabay nating ipinadaan ang bow sa kuwerdas ng kani-kaniyang biyulin. Tugmang tugma. Laking pasalamat ko at nakinig ako sa nanay mo, kung papaanong iwasan na matamaan ang di dapat matamaan na kuwerdas. Inudyok mo akong sabayan kang magbilang. One, two, three, four.

“Sunod na nota, Re, D. That’s an open string.”

“Dito ang sunod, at ang susunod.” E, F, G, A, B, C.

Isang oras mo akong tinuruan hanggang sa malaman ko kung saang bahagi ng mga kuwerdas ilalagay ang mga daliri sa tuwing magpapalit-nota sa C major scale.

“Akala ko, puro bowing exercises lang matutuhan ko,” sabi ko sa iyo habang ibinabalik ko na ang biyulin at bow sa case nito.

Napangiti ka. Sabi mo: “Nako, ganoon talaga si Mama. Medyo mabagal magturo, pero at least pag nag-umpisa ka nang tumugtog, maiiwasan mo na ang mga bad habit ng amateur musicians. Tingnan mo, ang dali lang para sa ‘yo”

“Hindi naman madali. Pero ikaw, saan ka madalas tumutugtog?”

“Sa school.”

“Propesor ka rin?”

“Hindi, ayoko. Kaya lang naman kita tinuruan kasi may sakit si Mama ngayon. Ayokong magturo.”

“Paanong...”

“Kumukuha ako ng Bachelor of Music sa Saint Saenz University. Major in piano, minor in violin. Exact courses ni Mama.”

Nagtaka ako. Akala ko'y graduate ka na, parang magkasing-edad lang naman tayo.

“Varsity ako sa school namin. Naaantala ang paggraduate kakalaro. Pero okey lang, mas gusto ko namang maging athlete kesa maging musikero. Rewarding din naman na bata pa lang, e tinuturuan na ako. Di na masyado mahirap magcatch-up sa school. Ikaw, may work ka na ba?”

“BPO.”

“Nako, mayaman ka na siguro.”

“Sapat lang para makabili ng mumurahing biyulin. Isang taon pa lang naman ako nagtatrabaho, last year lang nagtapos.”

“E ba’t mo naisipang mag-violin? Di sa dini-discourage kita ha— pero ilang taon ka pang mag-aaral para makatugtog nang maayos.”

“Ang babaw ng dahilan, e.”

“Which is?”

“Napanood mo na ba ‘yung pelikulang *Cinema Paradiso*?”

“Hm,” nag-isip ka saglit. “Pamilyar. Bakit?”

“Napakaganda ng love theme kasi ng pelikula.”

“Gusto mong matutuhan tugtugin?”

“Higit pa. Hindi ako puwedeng mamatay nang hindi iyon natututuhang tugtugin nang kasing galing ni Itzhak Perlman sa isa niyang performance na napanood ko sa YouTube.”

“Babaw nga. Napakababaw na pangarap, pare.”

Tawanan tayo. Gusto mong ipaalala ko sa iyo ang tono ng love theme, at agad ko namang ipinarinig sa iyo kahit pa nahihiya ako at di siguradong di ako sintonado.

“Oo,” sabi mo pagkatapos kong iparinig sa iyo ang boses ko. “Maganda nga ang piece na ‘yan. Isa sa best ni Morricone.”

Nang isasabit ko na sa balikat ang biyulin, tinanong mo ako kung kumain na ba ako. “Gusto mo, lunch muna tayo?”

Doon siguro iyon nagsimula, P’re. Sabay tayong lumabas sa kuwarto, pumunta sa reception area—kung saan kita unang nakita ilang linggo ang nakakaraan at kung saan sa oras na iyo’y nag-uusap ang isa sa mga estudyante at guro ng tselo, na susunod na gagamit ng silid.

Habang kumakain tayo sa isang fastfood sa mall kung saan naroroon din ang espasyong nirentahan ng music center, nag-usap tayo. Nalaman ko kung gaano ka kahilig sa pagbabasketball, kung papaanong wala lang sa iyo ang pagod at minsay galos. Na kaya ka kumuha ng musika sa kolehiyo dahil sa kagustuhan ng nanay mo. “Magkaiba ang saya ng pagtugtug at ang excitement ng paglalaro ng basketball.”

Nagkuwento rin ako, kaunti. Maliliit na bagay. Ang danas sa pagtatrabaho sa BPO bilang ahente. O di kaya’y ang araw na napanood ko, sa film class, ang *Cinema Paradiso*. “Hanggang ngayon,” sinabi ko sa isang punto, “hindi ko mapigilang maiyak sa pagguho ng sinehan. Alam mo yung pakiramdam na pinanonood mong winawasak ang lugar na saksi ng pagkabata at pagbibinata mo?” Sumang-ayon ka, tumango. Na parang dama mo rin ang kurot sa dibdib na kimkim ko. Na parang sabay tayong naupo noon sa klasrum at humagulgol.

Nang matapos tayong kumain, hiningi mo ang numero ng cellphone ko. "For updates," sabi mo.

Umaga nang sumunod na sabado. Dumating ako sa music center at neroon na si Miss Alba, gumaling na sa trangkas. Nasa reception area tayong tatlo.

"Pero okey lang ba sa 'yo," tanong ni Miss Alba, "Kung si David na ang magtuturo sa 'yo from now on? Para naman may silbi 'tong si David at hindi lang laro nang laro."

Nahihiya mong sinaway ang nanay mo. "Ma, you don't need to say that."

"Of course, Miss A," walang pag-aalinlangan ko namang sagot sa tanong.

Simula noo'y tuwing Sabado na tayo nagkikita. Alam mo bang masayang masaya ako sa mga araw na iyon, P're? Na kahit parang kumunoy ang Lunes hanggang Biernes ko'y wala pa ring makakadaig sa sabik na dulot ng mga Sabado, kung kailan tinuturuuan mo akong magbiyulin. Itinuro mo sa akin ang iba't ibang scales, ang ilan pang mahahalagang bagay na dapat tandaan sa teorya at pagbasa ng musika. Hindi ko pa nasasabi sa iyo, pero bilang guro, magaling ka. Hindi lang dahil marami kang alam. Napakarami mo ring ipon na pasensiya, lalo na sa tuwing nalilimutan ko ang mga bagay na naituro na.

"Watch your elbows," sabi mo minsan. "Your wrist, don't be too stiff."

Minsa'y ginagabayang ng mga kamay mo ang mga daliri ko sa mga oras na nagkakamali ako ng nota, o ang bow ko tuwing lumilihis ang aking paghila.

Lumipas ang ilang mga Sabado, ang ilang mga buwan. Unti-unti, natututo na akong mag-sight-reading, tumugtog nang dire-diretso habang nakatingin sa music sheet. Natutuhan kong tugtugin ang "Twinkle-Twinkle Little Star." Kalaunan ay ang Canon in D major, tapos ay ilang pinadaling piyesa nina Vivaldi at Bach. Lagi't lagi'y sinasabayan mo akong tumugtog. Tila pinag-iisa ang una kong mga pagtatangka sa pagtugtog ng biyulin at ang siguradong pagtahak sa mga nota ng iyong bow, o kung minsan ng tiklado ng piyano sa ilalim ng iyong mga daliri.

Niyaya mo ako minsan manood sa isa mong laro. "Kung wala kang gagawin sa susunod na Sabado, after ng session natin."

Hindi ako mahilig sa sports. Pero dahil sa puntong iyon ay itinuturing na kitang kaibigan, pumayag ako. At sa totoo lang, matagal ko nang iniisip kung ano ang hitsura mo na nakasando at shorts na jersey at tumatakborg pawisan sa court, siguro'y malayong malayo sa postura mo tuwing tinuturuan mo ako: naka-T-shirt o minsá'y jacket, nakapantalon, tuwid na tuwid ang tayo.

Isinakay mo ako at ang biyulin ko sa iyong kotse papunta sa isang court sa Espedana. Sakto pala: magtatapat sa araw na iyon ang koponan ng eskuwelahan mo, kung saan siyempre'y kabilang ka, at ang basketball team ng Omerosa State University, kung saan ako grumadweyt. Nasabi ko sa iyong magkalaban pala ang mga eskuwelahan natin.

"Oo. P're, at masasaksihan mo ngayon ang pagkatalo ng school ninyo," sabi mo na may halong biro.

Pero hindi ka nagbibiro. Unang quarter pa lang ay natambakan na kami ng iskor. Mabuti na lang ay wala naman akong pakialam kung sino ang mananalo. Ngunit aaminin ko: iba pala ang manood ng basketball, o ng anumang sports siguro, nang live. Iba ang enerhiya mula sa mga nanonood na nakapalibot sa court. Kahit wala akong pakialam ay bumibilis ang tibok ng puso ko kapag may isang manlalaro na susubukang i-shoot ang bola, o kapag nagsisimula nang sumigaw nang kani-kaniyang cheer ang mga taga-suporta ng bawat eskuwelahan.

Pansin ko rin na sa tuwing nasa iyo ang bola at papalapit sa ring ay mas malakas ang hiyaw ng kababaihan. Narinig ko pa, malapit sa bahagi kung saan din ako nakaupo, ang ilang babaeng sumisigaw: "Go! Go! Dave! Dave! We love you!"

At hayun ka't inihahanda ang sarili para sa isang three-point shot. Basa na ang buhok mo. Inangat mo ang iyong mga braso't bisig, na kumikinang din dahil sa pawis. Lumipad mula sa kamay mo ang bola at tinahak nito ang mahaba ngunit siguradong distansya ng inyong pagkapanalo. Samantalang ako'y nakaupo sa gitna ng alon ng sigawan. Magkasalikop ang mga kamay sa harap ng dibdib, gusto ring humiyaw.

Matapos ang dalawang taon ng pag-aaral sa music center, pumayag na akong maging bahagi ng taunang recital, sa kondisyon na ikaw ang magiging accompaniment ko at hindi ang nanay mo.

“Oo naman,” sabi mo nang nalaman mo ang gusto kong mangyari. Nasa bahay ninyo ako, Linggo iyon. Madalas na tayong pumunta sa bahay ng isa’t isa para tumambay, o di kaya’y tumagay paminsan-minsan. Kilala ka na ng mga magulang ko at sa puntong iyon ay Tita A na ang tawag ko sa nanay mo.

Napagkasunduan natin ang mga piyesang tutugtugin. Syempre, isa na doon ang love theme ng *Cinema Paradiso*, at ang isa naman ay ang *Humoresque No. 7 in G-flat major* ni Dvořák.

Kinabahan ako noong mismong araw ng recital. Pakiramdam ko'y hindi ko magagalaw ang kamay ko, na anumang oras ay maging sharp o flat ang mga nota.

Sa isang stage sa gitna ng mall ginanap ang recital. Maraming nanonood, hindi lang ang mga magulang at kasama ng iba pang estudyante ng music center, kundi pati na ang mga naglalakad-lakad na mamimili sa establisimyento. Nang ako na ang tutugtog, tumayo ako sa stage, at pinalitan mo naman sa harap ng piyano sa isang bahagi ng entablado si Tita A. Huminga ako nang malalim at sinimulan ang pinabagal na interpretasyon ng *Humoresque*.

Maayos naman sa umpisa. Nakakasabay ako sa iyo, malinis na mga nota na sumasabay sa pagdapo ng mga daliri mo sa piyano. Ngunit nang makarating sa kalahati ng piyesa, ilang nota ang hindi ko natamaan nang tama. Nang matapos, nanatili akong nakatayo sa gitna ng entablado, nangginginig. Hindi alam kung paano uumpisahan ang susunod na piyesa.

“Peter,” tinawag mo ako at napatingin ako sa ‘yo habang nakaupo ka sa bangkito ng piyano. “Relax. Kaya mo ‘yan.”

Napangiti ako. Hindi ako kumalma dahil sa kung ano ang sinabi mo, kundi sa kung papaano ka ngumiti sa akin. Na parang okay lang ang ginawa ko kanina, na parang buo ang tiwala mong kaya kong tumugtug na kasing galing mo, o kahit pa ni Itzhak Perlman. Tinuruan ako ng postura mo na maniwala sa sarili.

Tumayo ako muli nang diretso, inayos ang biyulin sa aking balikat, ipinatong ang bow sa kuwerdas. Hindi ko na alintana ang mga nanonood.

Dumapo muli sa tiktak ng piyano ang iyong mga daliri, at huminga ako nang malalim.

Dire-diretso akong tumugtog, halos hindi inaalis ang titig sa iyo.  
Ikaw na gumagabay sa akin kung saan man patungo ang aking musika.

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Isinama mo ako sa isang malaking laro ninyo minsan. Naka-graduate ka na noong mga panahong iyon, at kabilang ka na sa koponan na ipinangalan sa—at binabayaran ng—isang kumpanya ng gasolina. Napapanood ang mga laro ninyo sa lokal na broadcasting channel sa Isla Soledad. Madalas mo akong imbitahan sa mga laro mo, at nasanay kang sumasama ako palagi, kahit pa ilang beses ko nang sinabi na hindi ako mahilig sa sports.

Hindi ako mahilig sa sports, pero neroon ako't pinanonood ka. Ikaw at ang bola ng basketball, ikaw at ang teammates mo, ikaw at ang malalaki at malalakas mong bisig, ang balbas na sinimulan mong patubuin na nakakakilili sa leeg ko tuwing niyayakap mo kapag natatapos ang mga laro mo na panalo kayo. Yayakapin mo, kahit pawisan ka. Pagkatapos ay isasama mo ako sa kung saan magtitipon ang teammates mo para ipagdiwang ang inyong pagkapanalo. Ipinakilala mo ako at naging tropa ko na rin ang ilan sa kanila. Inuman, kainan, hindi mo ako nalilimitan isama. Malaon ay ihahatid mo ako sa bahay. Sa kuwarto ko sa mga gabi pagkahatid mo sa akin, habang nakahiga nang hindi pinapalitan ang damit na may bahid pa ng iyong tagumpay, magdamag akong nakangiting nakatulala, magdamag na naghihintay sa antok na nahihiyang dumapo.

Sa partikular na laro na iyon nahirapan ang koponan ninyong manalo. Magaling ang kalaban, na ipinangalan din sa isa pang kompanya ng gasolina. Kinailangan pa ng isang OT bago mo nakuha ang bola, nakapuwesto kung saan ika'y makaka-three points, at sa isang angat at tulak ng iyong mga kamay na gumabay sa aking pagtugtog ng biyulin, pinalipad ang bola. Swak na swak. Walang tunog na pumasok ang bola sa ring, parang hangin na dumaplis lamang sa net. Sigawan ang mga tao. At ako rin, sumisigaw sa tuwa. Nagtatatalon ang teammates mo, tinatapik ka sa likod, sa ulo. Sa isang banda'y binuhat ka pa nila habang sa paligid ay umuulan ng confetti.

Nakita mo ako at dagli kang lumapit sa akin.

“Congrats, P’re” sabi ko, habang tinatapik ang mainit mong balikat.

Ngumiti ka, at sa akin pa ring pagkagulat, niyakap mo ako. Sinabi mo: “Salamat sa pagpunta. Lucky charm na siguro kita P’re, kaya kami laging nananalo.”

Kumalag ako sa yakap at sinabi sa iyo, habang hawak ka sa mga braso: “Ulol.”

Tawanan tayo. Pero sa pagkakataong iyon ay parang gusto ko munang lumayo ka sa akin. Di ko alam noon kung bakit, P’re. Basta ang alam ko, para akong nalulunod sa halong tuwa para sa iyo at sa sensasyon ng iyong balat sa aking balat, ng iyong balbas na lalong nagpapalitaw sa mapungay mong mga mata, ng init ng iyong katawan. Mabuti na lang at nagsalita na ang announcer at hinila ka ng teammates mo pabalik sa gitna ng court. Iaanunsiyo ang MVP.

“Scoring 58 points for the team for this game alone, our Most Valuable Player for this season is...David Crisostomo!”

Sigawan. Palakpakan. Matapos niyon ay inanunsiyo na rin ang mga runner-up at kampeon sa basketball season. Nang maigawad sa team ninyo ang malaking trofeo, lumapit ka muli sa akin.

“Kakain kami sa labas. Treat ni Coach. Hindi ka puwedeng humindi.”

Ano pa bang sasabihin ko kundi: “Ok, sige. Sabi mo, e..”

Pinisil mo ako sa pisngi at, dahil sa sakit, sinuntok kita nang pabiro at sinabihang “Gago.”

“Labyu too,” sinabi mo habang humahagikgik.

Maya-maya, habang inaayos ko na ang backpack ko dahil papaalis na tayo, isang babae ang kumalabit sa iyo.

“Puweude bang magpapicture, Dave?”

Inobserbahan ko ang babae. Angkin niya ang padron ng isang babaeng masasabing may hitsura: makinis, maputi, seksi, at mukhang hindi pa nakakagawa ng kahit anong kasalanan. Bagay kayo. T-shirt at shorts ang suot niya, sa harap ng pantaas ay nakatahi ang numero ng iyong jersey.

Dahil sa tangkad mo, kinailangan mong ayusin ang pagkakatayo mo upang pumantay ka kahit papaano sa babae. Kinuhaan kayo ng litrato ng isa sa mga kaibigan kasama ng babae. Nakaakbay ka sa kaniya, halos magkalapit na ang inyong mga mukha.

Ganoon lang, P're. Hindi naman natigil ang mga pagtuturo mo sa akin ng biyulin tuwing Sabado, ngunit dumalang ang mga pagkakataong niyayaya mo akong pumunta sa mga laro mo. Ilang buwan pa lang ang lumipas, akalain mo. Pati ang pagbisita natin sa bahay ng isa't isa'y dumadalang na rin.

Isang araw, sa wakas, ay ipinakilala mo na siya sa akin.

"Si Delia, P're," sabi mo sa akin isang Sabado. Nasa reception area kayo, kapuwa nakaupo sa mesa kung saan pinapapirma ang estudyante para sa kanilang attendance nang buksan ko ang pinto ng music center. "Girlfriend ko."

Lumapit ako sa inyo at kinamayan si Delia. Hindi ko na maalala, P're, kung ano ang sinabi ko sa iyo o sa kaniya noon. Basta ang alam ko, at dama ko, na ayoko munang magpatuloy sa leksyon natin.

Tunay na maganda nga siya, at malambot sa kamay ko ang kaniyang palad. Mahinhin, mabango, at mukha talagang naliligo sa holy water.

"Number one fan ko raw siya," naikuwento mo maya-maya habang ginagawa natin ang warm-up exercises. Parehas nating hawak ng dalawang kamay ang magkabilang dulo ng kani-kaniyang bow, inaanat at ibinababa ang pupulsuhan.

Tahimik lang si Delia na, sa aking pagkadismaya, pinaupo mo sa bangko ng piyano sa loob ng kuwarto kung saan mo ako palaging tinuturuan. Tuwing nagkukuwento ka'y nakangiti lang ito, mins'a'y pumipindot-pindot sa mga tiklado ng piyano. Napakaganda ng mga daliri niya. Hindi ko alam kung bakit tuwing tumutunog ang napipindot niyang tiklado, napakabigat ng bagsak nito sa aking tainga. Nabibingi ako, kahit siguro'y walang kapuwersa-puwersa ang pagdapo ng daliri niya sa mga nota malapit sa middle C.

Sabi mo: "Palagi pala siyang pumupunta sa games ko, alam niya ang mga laro kung saan nanalo o natalo ang team ko."

Umusad tayo sa isa pang warm-up exercise. Hawak ang kani-kaniyang bow sa isang kamay, iginagalaw natin ito sa padron ng isang arko. Mula kanan, pakaliwa, mula kaliwa, pakanan. "Napakasuwerete ninyo sa isa't isa," sabi ko.

Bigla, nang igininalaw ko ang bow papunta sa kanan, dumuldas ito sa kamay ko at bumagsak sa pagkakinang-kinang na sahig. Pinulot ko ito at sinubukang magpatuloy.

Naaksidente ka sa isang laro mo minsan, nagkamali ng bagsak, nauna ang kaliwang braso. Nangyari iyong sa isang laro kung saan hindi mo ako inimbita. Nalaman ko na lang sa TV nang ipinakita sa lokal na balita ang footage ng iyong pagbagsak, kung papaano'y marahil sa kasabikan ay dumulas ang kamay mo mula sa ring kung saan ka sumabit matapos mag-dunk.

Nang puntahan kita sa ospital, isang araw matapos ang insidente, neroon siyempre si Delia. May kung anong matigas na bagay na nakapalibot sa braso mo.

"Kailangan sementuhin ang braso niya," sabi ng girlfriend mo.

Parehas kaming nakatingin sa iyo at nginitian mo naman kami na para bang walang nangyari. "P're," sabi mo. "Mukhang di muna tayo magmimmeet sa Sabado."

"Kung ganoon," sabi ko. "titigil na akong magbiyulin."

"Gago, subukan mo."

Tawanan tayo. Saglit tayong nagkuwentuhan, kasama si Delia, at maya-maya'y kasama rin si Tita A na dumating na may dalang mga prutas. Hindi ako naglagi. "May shift pa ako, P're," pagpapaalam ko sa iyo.

"O sige, see you when I see you na lang, P're."

Iniangat mo ang maayos mong braso, ang kamao nito, at ibinangga ko ang sarili kong kamao dito. Fist bump. Hanggang doon na lang, at umalis na ako sa ospital.

"Matagal ka na rito 'no?'" minsang sinabi ni Tita Alba. Sumang-ayon ako. Limang taon ko na ring ginugugol ang mga Sabado ko sa music center. "Alam mo," pagpapatuloy niya, "Kung sakali, puwede kitang kunin na assistant instructor dito, lalo na para sa mga baguhan pa lang. Mukhang mahihirapan kasi si David."

Nadama ko ang lungkot sa tono ng nanay mo. Ilang taong pag-aaral ng musika sa kolehiyo, mababalewala lamang ng isang maling bagsak. Mabuti na lang at sa paggaling ng braso mo'y kaya mo pang maglaro ng basketball. Sadya lang talagang mas mahihirapan ka sa mga mas pinong pagkilos na kailangan para sa pagtugtug ng biyulin.

Nagkusa akong pumunta sa bahay ninyo minsan. Kay tagal mo nang hindi nagagawi sa music center, mas lalo na sa bahay ko. Nakikita na lang kita sa TV at nalalaman kung kumusta ka na tuwing napapag-usapan ka namin ni Tita Alba. Hindi mo naman ugaling mag-social media kaya walang silbi na rin kung mag-sesend ako ng direct message sa iyo online.

“O, pare, long time no see!” sabi mo nang makita ako sa labas ng gate ninyo matapos mo akong labasin nang mag-doorbell ako.

“Long time no see talaga,” sabi ko.

Pinapasok mo ako sa bahay ninyo, parang dati. Tinanong mo kung gusto kong kumain, at siyempre'y sinabi kong hindi. “Tumoma na lang tayo,” sabi mo.

Mas mabuti, sabi ko. Natuwa naman akong nagkataong wala si Delia noong araw na iyon sa bahay ninyo. Nakakatuwa rin na kahit papaano'y tila walang pagbabago sa pagbisita ko, na tila linggo-linggo pa rin nating nakikita ang isa't isa kahit ang totoo'y mag-iisang taon na nang personal kitang nakausap. Hindi masyadong nagbago ang hitsura mo. Bukod siguro sa mas magandang pagkakaukit ng masel sa mga braso mo. Nakasando at shorts ka, tulad ng mga dati kong pagpunta sa bahay mo. Mas maganda na ngayon ang pagkakaayos mo sa iyong bigote. Stubble na lang: hindi masyadong makapal, at hindi rin masyadong manipis.

Kumuha ka ng rum sa kusina, inilapag ang bote sa mesa sa inyong sala, at umupo tayo sa sofa habang kaharap ang patay na TV. Naaaninag ko ang silweta nating dalawa sa iskrin nito. Nagkumustahan, nagbalitaan, at hindi nagulat na tila wala masyadong pagbabago sa kani-kaniyang mga buhay. Ako, ahente pa rin na natututong tumugtog ng biyulin, ikaw, sikat pa rin na basketbolista. May ilan din namang pagbabago. Halimbawa'y iniisip kong bumalik sa kolehiyo at kumuha ng kurso sa Musika, upang magkaroon ng credentials para maging instructor sa music school ninyo. Ikaw nama'y habang umuusad ang karera sa basketball, unti-unti mo nang nalilimot ang pagtugtug.

“Pero minsan,” sabi mo bilang paglilinaw, “nami-miss ko rin naman. Sinusubukan kong tumugtog pero hirap na talaga ako dahil sa braso ko. Lalo na't injured din kase wrist ko. Tingnan mo.”

Kinuha mo ang isa sa mga biyulin na nakaayos sa gilid ng sala. Ipinatong ito sa iyong balikat, inayos ang hawak sa bow. Sinubukan mong tugtugin, habang nakaupo, ang isang concerto, na noo'y itunuro mo sa akin

noong nag-uumpisa pa lang ako. Natatamaan mo naman ang mga nota, subalit halata na hirap ka sa shifting, sa paglilipat ng posisyon ng daliri sa iyong kaliwang kamay. Ni hindi ka makagawa ng isang malinis na vibrato.

“May paraan pa siguro,” sabi ko. Pinatayo kita mula sa sofa at ako'y tumayo rin. Inayos ko ang posisyon mo, hanggang sa nakatayo ako sa likod mo, hawak mo pa rin ang bow at nasa ilalim pa rin ng baba mo ang chin rest ng biyulin. Samantalang pinaayos ko sa gilid mo ang kaliwang kamay mo. “I-relax mo na lang ‘to P’re,” sabi ko.

Ako ang humawak sa fingerboard. Tumingkayad ako nang kaunti dahil matangkad ka, at ipinagtabi ang mga balikat natin upang maiayos ko ang mga daliri ko sa paraang tila kamay mo pa rin ang may hawak dito. Kakaiba ang anggulo at aaminin kong nahirapan ako sa pagpuwesto pa lang.

“Mukha tayong tanga, alam mo iyon?” sabi mo.

Wala akong pakialam, gusto kong sabihin. Sinabi ko na lang, “Try lang naman. Malay mo, maramdaman mo pa rin ang kasiyahan ng pagtugtog.”

Sinumulan mo ang pag-bow. Sinabayán ko ng paglipat ng mga daliri ko sa kuwerdas, ayon sa mga nota ng concerto. Sa una'y nahirapan tayo, hindi nagkakatugma, dahil magkaibang utak ang nagmamanipula sa bow at kuwerdas. Ngunit malao'y tila sumanib sa atin ang kaluluwa ng musika, at tila isang pag-uusap ang nagaganap sa kanang kamay mo at kaliwang kamay ko. Nadala tayo sa agos nito. Uminit ang sala, pero hindi natin alintana. Naamoy ko ang malinis na pawis sa buhok mo, sa maputi mong batok. Umiinit ang bisig mo sa bisig ko. Hindi tayo tumigil kahit natapos ang piyesa. Nang hindi nag-uusap, napagkasunduang ulitin ang concerto. Sa tainga ko'y perpetuo ang lahat. Siguro'y dahil madali lang ang piyesa.

Nang sa wakas ay natapos natin ang ikalawang pagtugtog, saglit tayong nanatili sa gayong posisyon. Parang gustong kumawala ng puso ko, magtungo sa malayo, kung saan walang makakahananap, kahit ako. “David...” bulong ko sa likod ng tainga mo.

Hindi ka sumagot pero alam kong nakikinig ka. Naghihintay.

Nagsalita ako.

Nagsalita ako, P’re.

Sinabi ko ang mga bagay na kay tagal ko nang gustong sabihin, mga salitang matagal nang naghihintay na kumawala sa akin.

Nang matapos ako'y kinuha ko ang biyulin sa balikat mo upang hindi ito bumagsak. Napayuko ako. "Pasensiya na," sabi ko habang nakatingin sa likod ng mga paa mo.

Humarap ka sa akin at namalas ko ang mukha mo. Ang makinis mong mukha, ang pawis sa ibabaw ng bibig mo. Nakangiti ka, na para bang nagbiro ako. Sabi mo, "Gago ka talaga, P're." At tumawa ka.

Tumawa na lang din ako, na parang biro lang ang lahat ng sinabi ko.

Ipinagpatuloy natin ang pag-inom, sa sofa, hanggang maubos natin ang isang bote ng alak.

Ilang taon na ba ang lumipas, P're? Kay tagal na nating magkaibigan. Kay rami ko nang natutuhan sa iyo. Ilang linggo ang nakakaraan, pumunta ka sa bahay ko dala ang imbitasyon para sa kasal ninyo ni Delia.

"And I'd like to ask you a favor: puwede mo bang tugtugin ang paborito mong love theme sa kasal ko? Can you be my soloist? Gusto ko sanang tugtugan din ang magiging asawa ko, kaso," inangat mo ang kaliwang braso mo, "alam mo naman."

Ano pa bang itutugon ko, David? Heto ako ngayon at nakatayo sa harap ng maliit na orchestra na binubuo ng mga kaklase mo sa kolehiyo, ang ilá'y naging kaibigan ko na rin. Tumutugtog kami ngayong sa reception ng kasal ninyo. Nasa gilid kami ng entablado, habang kayo'y naroroon sa gitna, sumasaway ng isang mabagal na sayaw.

Hawak mo siya sa baywang habang magkadikit ang mga noo ninyo, ang mga ilong. Kay ganda niya, at sa mata ko'y tila nagliliwanag ka sa tuwa.

Naalala mo kaya noong recital? Kung paano mo ako tiningnan mula sa piyano?

Alam mo kayang handa akong maging kaliwang kamay mo kung kinakailangan?

Natutuhan ko na yata ang lahat ng fundamental na leksyon sa pagtugtug ng biyulin, at masasabi kong kahit papaano'y pamilyar na ako sa mga kumplikadong teknik na magbibigay kulay sa pagtugtug ko. Kailangan ko na lang mag-ensayo. Ensayo para sa mga pagkakataong tulad nito, na ako'y tumutugtog, at ika'y sumasaway.

Natapos ang tema ng pag-ibig. Sinabi ko sa mga kaklase mo ang susunod na piyesang nais kong iparinig sa iyo, at nang magsimula kami'y

bumaling ang tingin mo sa akin. Nanghina ako. Nanginig. Ngunit hindi ako ngayon matitinag, aaralin kong di matinag.

“Kundiman” ni Bonifacio Abdon ang piyesang napili ko. Dahil itinutugtog ko na ang musika sa biyulin, hindi ko magagawang kantahin ang titik. Kakanta na lang ako sa isip. Kakantahin ko, nang walang nakakarinig:

*Sa tapat ng laging palangiting araw  
Na lumalaganap sa dagat silangan  
May Mutyang masuyo’t libid kayamanan  
Na giliw ang handog sa pusong may damdam...*

# THE WALKER

Maria Amparo Warren

THE MEMORIES ARE clear, now, of my grandfather, from our time with him in the mountain house in Lalakay. The earthy peace of Makiling appealed to him in his later years, lost as he wanted to be in a memory of Hakone, before the war called him. Mirroring Mount Fuji, past the southbound roads, Lalakay was a nest of numerous old-fashioned cottages, empty plots, hot springs, and even memorial shrines. The municipality boasted of its forest, its bus roads, and train tracks, cooled by breezes, and densely blanketed in fog.

We called my grandfather *ojii-pa*, something between “*ojii-san*” and the more familiar “*papa*,” distant as we were from what was Japanese about us, save for our names. Lola’s deftness with needle and bandage had saved him and bound the two of them closely in love, despite a number of barriers, such as language. When she died, he talked even less than before, in a monologue of Japanese and earnest efforts at Taglish. He gave more in the language of gracious silence and gesture.

He had this habit of greeting all of us, even his grandsons, by bowing low, somewhat absent-mindedly. His walk was quieter than the wind on dry days. His hands often fidgeted—on the backs of chairs, when he pulled them out as we scampered to help him, “*Ojii-pa, no, no!*”, around the old statues of the saints, feathery thread-bound manuscripts and newspaper collections, and photo frames on their shelves that, for some reason, were in constant need of rearrangement. If not fidgeting or shaking in a stiff, rheumatic manner, they were pressed hard together, and folded in some sort of itinerant prayer.

*Ojii-pa*’s slow, deliberate gentleness was the last thing anyone might associate with war. But in our childhood years seemed exciting—especially for Keiji, who not only liked the novelty of plastic robots, tanks, and soldiers,

not to mention the power of it all, and the ruthlessness. I remember that one summer, Keiji and I once played dinosaurs, pirates, and safari explorers before graduating to rougher games in our weedy backyard.

“Pretend that there’s a war going on,” Keiji said one day, at the height of the Japanese mecha craze. “You and I are in a huge nuclear war. The whole world could end after that kind of war. We’re the generals of two fighting armies...”

“What countries would we be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe... I could be Japan, just like Ojii-pa. Japan always makes the coolest machines. Like Voltes V!” And Keiji then sang, with gusto, the Voltes V theme.

“I thought we were playing soldiers, not robots,” I quipped.

“This is war! In the future, they will use all kinds of weapons. I could have robots, and fighter tanks, and submarines.”

“All right, then I could be the Philippines.”

“Why?”

“Why not? This is our country.”

“You’re the lamest,” Keiji sneered. “If you don’t want to imagine yourself as any other country, then I’d win against you for sure. What a dummy—I just thought up a million cooler things than you.”

We leapt at each other, jested with sticks and old pipes, and ran and wrestled into the dirt and the bushes, play-fighting for dominance.

And multiple times, Ojii-pa found us and said, as sternly as possible with what was left of his strength, “Eiji, Keiji—*matte!*”—and closed his eyes, and in a pained slump, added, “Enough. No fight, no more fight.” We stopped only when he promised biscuits in the straw-mat sitting room that smelled faintly of incense, though we also had to drink the cold woody tea we disliked. And some days he brought out the square paper, and we made fighter jets while he animated the kind of bird that flapped its wings when you pulled on its tail. We made peace those days Ojii-pa sought it among us, restless and rapt in his pace.

WHEN WE TURNED ten and eleven, my older brother was already several inches taller and pounds stronger than I was, and he challenged me at everything. “That’s for sissies,” he said about small, low-stakes games played in the sand, like jackstones and marbles, and “there’s no way you knew that—I bet you were cheating!” when it came to cards. When the things I excelled at grew boring, they gave way instead to sprinting and tree climbing, or ventures into the fantasy world where Keiji was always the bloodied animal predator, armed hunter, or in the case of the war games, the soldier with the wider arsenal of wood or plastic weaponry at his disposal.

From Keiji I learned my silence—that the winner, if me, should never brag; and the loser, if and especially me, should bite it all back, never cry, snitch, or call anyone out for being a bad kuya. Yet, all those victories never seemed enough when they were only between the two of us in the Makiling garden, or the space outside our house’s street. None of it was enough those years that Papa was away, save for the rare days that we didn’t fight at all. When our tired Mama was with us, she would hold us and hum odd tunes that reminded me of the country wind blowing up and down the long grass, or whistling as it bounced off stones—perhaps Ojii-pa’s songs lost in Lola’s translation—and those days were the days when it felt warm.

THE FIRST SUMMERS I remember as a child in Lalakay, there was only the light kind of cool mountain weather. My first fights with Keiji were about who could wear Papa’s old scarf and be warmed by Papa’s smell—about who between us secretly missed him more.

Then, as time passed, I felt colder, even back home, and went to sleep with a sweater under my blanket. First there were the dreams in which I’d wake up in my bed, everything seeming the same, but with some parts of my room looking clouded. I’d wake up in earnest, and know I was awake because my spine would sting just a little, as if pierced lightly in different places. Then I noted to my chagrin that in some places, my senses were heightened to the point of discomfort; and I’d want so much to chalk up each pinprick whisper in the school chapel, each faltering light bulb in a bathroom, each invisible strand of wind to nothing more than my imagination. And none of Keiji’s reassurances—that I could be lying, and was a sissy and coward, and that nothing in the tatami rooms in the Lalakay house had changed enough for me to push him or cry out for Mama at night—none of them made me feel any safer, or for anything, prepared for any darkness to come.

IT BEGAN IN earnest one night that Tita Mika laid out a happy feast for our dinner—steamed fish and rice topped with seaweed strips, with that husky tea splashed over it, but also hot *buko* pies and *uraro* cookies. My brother and I dug in despite our mother's admonishments.

"You were so noisy and we could hear you all the way from inside," she said, motioning toward Ojii-pa. "Did you say sorry already to your grandfather?"

"Yes Mama," we said. "*Gomen nasai*, Ojii-pa."

"The way your grandfather ran to you, next time he'll have a heart attack."

"It's because of all their TV, Sis," Tita Mika clucked. "The shows that kids watch right now are nothing but coarse language and violence."

"That's absolutely right. Boys, no more TV on weekdays when we get back. You should be doing other things after you study. Read books, or even the Bible. Or why don't you write letters to send to your Papa?"

I saw Keiji pause and look down at his food.

"How is Roger doing now, Sis?"

"He said everything is well. He said he's doing okay there in his new station."

"Did Papa say," I began, "Did Papa say when he's coming back?"

"Not yet, *mahal*." Mama absentmindedly stroked my hair. "Not yet, he's not sure yet. So will you boys write him nice letters?"

"We sure will, Mama!" said Keiji brightly. "The best letters. Let's also send him paper cranes, like the ones Ojii-pa makes!"

"Good boy! Do you still remember? Ask your Ojii-pa to teach you again. Maybe you can fold together tomorrow morning."

In his own seat, Ojii-pa smiled and thrummed his fingers. The mood was good—from when we finished last pie and biscuit and helped Tita Mika clear the table—up until another wave, of sharp little pins of unease, began to prick at me.

"*Mahal*, what's wrong?" Mama asked me, watching as I turned white clutching a dish. "Are you feeling sick?"

"I feel really cold again, Mama."

"You can sleep beside me tonight, and use the extra blanket later."

I barely noticed as Ojii-pa relieved me of the plate. A pang of guilt added to the pinpricks as I saw him wince and draw back, and I saw Keiji's eyebrows furrow. But I closed my eyes when Ojii-pa did as he rested his free hand on my head, and let it stay there for a few seconds.

"**LOSER HAS A consequence,**" Keiji said, only the two of us in the corridor, before we went to bed.

"What? What for?"

"You fell four times. Me, only two."

"I don't remember—"

But then I did. I remembered with much frustration that there would be some kind of price to pay yet again because I fell, because I didn't have "bombs or missiles," and because a cut on the side of my palm from falling into Ojii-pa's *santan* bush was unlike a true consequence of war.

"So, loser has a consequence today. It won't be so bad, would it? You're going to sleep beside Mama again tonight, even if you'll keep kicking me."

"I didn't mean to kick you Kuya! That was an accident."

"Brat, liar," he snarled. "Mama doesn't believe you when you say you're always 'cold.' Neither do Tita Mika and Ojii-pa. They're only being nice to you because you always want attention."

"That's not true!"

"Well then, prove it." Keiji made a fist and flashed a humorless smile. You wanna show me that you're not a little pussy-pussy-cat?"

Behind my back, I clenched my own fist. Keiji changed his stance and appeared thoughtful.

"I was thinking, even I find that place next door just a bit creepy. Is that maybe why the Orosas moved out? It's empty now, isn't it? The gate's low enough to jump over, and it's going to be really easy to break the lock with a shoelace."

"Kuya—"

"I found an emergency flashlight the other day. You should use it and go into the house next door. And you'll do it at night! Otherwise there's no

point," he added. "We'll sneak over while everyone else is sleeping. You'll break in, go to the window on the second floor, and give me a signal that you made it up there. How does that sound?"

He jabbed his finger at me. "Lame-o. Liar. Pants-on-fire. That's how you are. But if you do this, I might just take you more seriously."

I hated my brother then. I couldn't let it go.

"Fine. When am I going to do it?"

"The night after tomorrow. They say there'll be a full moon. Are you pissing your pants already?"

"No, I'm not."

"I really hate it when you suck up to Ojii-pa," Keiji said. "Like that way he went up to you and did that praying thing. Stupid. You're not fooling anyone."

SIX MONTHS BEFORE that full moon, the elderly Mr. and Mrs. Orosa did leave the eerily silent house a few yards away from ours without as much as putting up a "For Sale" sign on its rusty gate. In that short time, all remaining visible life had gone out. The weeds had given up and were brown and bent in surrender, and the concrete had peeled off and some pieces had mixed with the pebbles in the yard. The house itself was almost white with decay, including the door and the windowpanes.

The edge of the windowpanes on the second floor were equally white. But with the glass almost totally smashed, it took on the semblance of something more open like a portal, an entrance into somewhere, a place not as still as the decrepit house seemed to be.

No matter how afraid I was in the hours leading up to our excursion, I did not show it. We behaved well in front of the adults, to Mama and Tita Mika's great relief, but Ojii-pa seemed more restless at certain minutes, closing his eyes and pursing his lips, upsetting the rosaries, the wind chimes, and the mirrors.

At seven o'clock, Lalakay was already thickly curtained in fog. My brother and I had agreed to sneak out separately in the interval between ten and eleven, when the adults were surely sound asleep. He brought with him the small, rectangular LED light that had been hidden in the cabinet, and I followed shortly, bundled in my jacket. It was remarkably cold even indoors.

I quietly shut the screen door and crept down the wooden stairs leading out to the garden.

The night had eyes that seemed to follow me closely.

"Took you long enough," Keiji said when I skittered up to him where he stood, by the Orosas' gate. He held the flashlight in a tight grip; from his pocket, he pulled out a ball pen and a shoelace.

"The gate's open. I'll stay by it. Break the lock and go inside. Then, turn the light on the first setting—" here he thumbed the switch and the light duly flashed at its dimmest and weakest; "—and keep it there until you find the stairs. Go up and make your way to the window. Then turn it up all the way, and off—blink it five times. Got it?"

Something in the grass rustled nearby.

"Kuya... I don't know. What if I can't do it? What if I don't come out?"

"I thought you said you weren't scared?" Keiji's voice was oddly high-pitched. "You said that you could prove to me that—ugh! You're not making me believe anything you say until you go up there."

"Well... when I make it up there, what do I win?"

"What do you mean?"

"If the loser has a consequence, shouldn't the winner get a prize? Isn't that fair? When I make it up there, what will you give me?"

"Damn it, I don't know," he growled. "Thirty pesos. Make it fifty. The chocolate Tita Mika will give both of us on the way home—you can have all of mine."

"Maybe that," I said, and in softer breath, "but if I win... you should... shut up, forever... if I show you, make you feel what I feel..."

"What are you saying? You stupid creep. You're even kinda scaring me. Just go! We're here already! Go before... come on, just go!"

We pushed the gate open and I took the light, the pen, and the shoelace which my brother passed them to me. The housebreaking, the stepping into that white-dark portal, then began in earnest.

THE LOCK EASILY gave way when I slipped my lace noose around it through the door's edge, and pulled down hard with the pen. I heard Keiji exhale a short distance away from me as I pushed the wood forward and switched the small light on at its weakest setting—bright enough for me to take a few steps forward into that black cavern.

I walked very slowly. The sounds of the outside world seemed quick to disappear into those that were uniquely of the house. There was a soft, soft scratching on the walls that I hoped was from cats, and a dull skimming vibration on the floor that I tried tracing to my own steps.

I peered in front of me, trying to make out the stairs, but out of the corners of my eyes I noticed some things that remained in the corners of the room. The shadow of a shelf was against a wall to my right, solid straight lines against it. Not too far away from it were metal poles, like the idle pipes we used in our play gleaming faintly.

Then, another curved, fluid shadow...

I swallowed and tried to quicken my pace. The outline of a bannister indicated the presence of the wooden staircase. I perceived it at the moment that my flashlight suddenly began to flicker.

I do not know if it was the muted voice of my brother that I heard behind me, a wordless sound. Maybe I wanted to somehow believe that it was, that he was actually there.

I dropped the pen and the shoelace in my effort to steady myself by grasping the banister, while the rest of my body turned to gel. My skin and my blood had turned cold. Little needles, or pins, were pricking my body. Nearer to the second floor, I could once again hear Keiji, who was perhaps not Keiji, speaking in whispers. Or was it from the slowly curving shadows near the windowpane?

From the broken window I could make out the shape of my brother, waiting below for my signal. But I fumbled with the flashlight as a shadow began to swell at a far corner from the window, and then it took a horrid, actual shape.

My blood seemed to be draining out of my body to give the shadow life. I fought to either scream, or carry out my original mission. To blink the flashlight. Five times—count one to five. So that my brother could find me.

I felt my knuckle pop as I flicked the switch twice.

Then my body felt wrapped in small, cold thorns. I don't know how many seconds passed before I could flick the switch again, and the Keiji below me had begun to shout: "Eiji—Eiji, I can see you! ... What's wrong? Eiji...?"

By the fourth shift between light and darkness, the shadow had grown a little hair on its body—and it was like a twisted, bruised young boy's body—with white skin that gleamed out of the darkness.

Then I perceived the blood that I thought I had lost. There was blood all over the shadow, the boy-body with short hair. Over his shirt, blood spilling from multiple small wounds that looked like they had been inflicted in all sorts of ways, from blades to blunt metal.

After the fifth flick of the flashlight, the boy-body's eyes met mine.

*And I'll be Japan. I'll win. I'll show you... Shut up forever. Loser has a consequence...*

My hand was sharply wrenched open. I dropped the light, and I myself fell. There was a loud, hard scream. It didn't feel completely mine. Then, everything went black.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT was either a dream or a memory, a state in which I was awake and most things seemed real. When I woke up, I was lying below the window of the Orosa house once more. But a portal had now opened to me. I felt the otherworldly mist of the Makiling mountain. I felt it with heightened senses outside of my body.

Before me remained the full boylike form—except now, it looked not at me, but at another figure close by, coming closer to me. It was a crouching form of a spirit—the living form of my grandfather.

I saw him swat at the mist and kneel over me, then turn his head to look at the body.

*Kankeinai*, he addressed it. *Kankeinai*.

The boy-body flared, its outline turning from a semblance of red in temperature to a kind of hot yellow. Ojii-pa's fingers curled over mine.

*Kisama! Kankeinai darou!* Anger emanated from the boy-body, but also a sense of deep anguish, that in the moment, I shared. Dull needles came again to pierce me and I cried out, but whatever came for me came harder for my grandfather, who only winced.

The boy-body's eyes remained open and pierced endlessly but Ojii-pa's grip never wavered. It tightened with each shock. *Kankeinai*, he repeated, *kankeinai*.

The boy-body dispersed. But others then began to form.

Three spirits emerged, almost like negatives of photographs, and took shape in a circle around us. Two of the bodies were covered in a muddy dark green, their faces grotesque, grimacing. They materialized and scrabbled around a third, pink, less stable entity.

Their words cut deepest. *Busu, baita.*

*Stop, please stop! Officer?* A woman's disjointed voice. *Officer please, mercy...*

*Hajime. Oi, Hajime-san... Doushita?*

*Korose.* I realized to whom they spoke.

Officer? Please, for God's sake. I have a... family. Family, Officer. A baby, baby girl. Officer, for my baby—

*Hajime-san! Nani wo matteru no? Korose!*

*"Ie,"* Ojii-pa fumbled to say with his own lips. *"Urusai! Yamero!"*

*Stop please,* said a woman's voice. I was losing consciousness. *Stop, let me go. Officer, no—*

"*Kisama!*" my grandfather broke out, grasping me with otherworldly strength and to the spirits, gesturing firmly at himself. "*Washi dake wo sagashiteiru.*"

Ojii-pa—

*"Kankeinai."* Not you, but me. Leave Eiji.

Only after an aching stretch suspended time did the two mud-green bodies disappear, leaving in their wake a flood of others on the floor. They were of every shape and color. I felt gray from rounded souls that shone with something wet, like pooled rain. Faded tan souls seemed to nurse their skin and grapple to hook broken bones and joints, back together. Several shapes, like the boy-body's, were shaded different tones of harsh, or rusted, or slowly fading red.

Dizzied by all this, I felt my senses fading. The last image before my eyes closed was a muted pink shade and soft hair like a doll's, and my

grandfather's last words to it were as clear as he could make them: *Gomen nasai. Gomen. Yurushite, kudasai.*

BACK IN OUR house that night I was only bruised, but very much shaken. My grandfather had run to the old house when Keiji shouted, and without hesitation had raced up the stairs as if his youth and the urgency of the war had returned to him. When my brother, mother, and aunt found the two of us, they declared that there were no other human forms present.

If my brother doubted my account of what had happened, he said nothing. He only awkwardly came forward and said, "Eiji, I'm sorry."

I tried to laugh as I said, "It was so scary in there. Do you believe me now, Kuya? Do I win now?"

"Stupid!" My brother threw his hardest punch at me yet, and the last that I remember for a very long time, as he finally cried in earnest. "Stupid! I was so—you're so stupid!"

The ordeal had left Ojii-pa visibly weaker, but as we left the Orosa house he looked back at it and chuckled. There seemed to be an ease in his step as he leaned on Keiji's shoulders on the way home.

THE DAYS WERE quieter after that. We spent them looking after our Ojii-pa together; his walk had gradually become slower and his breath, more measured, but his hands were looser now, no longer mixing the odd artifacts or praying to the wind.

Still, my brother and I, remembering best his gentle hands brushing against our heads, are hard pressed to imagine them once around the handle of a bayonet, cradling any of those bloody bodies with regret.

That summer we graduated from war games and learned to make paper birds and flowers, and even tried to drink the tea. True to his word, Keiji gave me his share of the chocolates Tita Mika wrapped for us to take home. We had a peaceful bus ride back to Manila, and Mama fell asleep humming to us, closer to her dream of a proper family.

There were many wishes lived out after the few remaining summers that we spent in Lalakay. The small kindnesses my brother and I afforded to the family and to each other, beginning that fateful night, bonded us more firmly in our teen years. By then, he had more faith in what I was made of

and never hesitated to be rough with me at basketball or tease me when I was with girls. In most other things, however, Keiji took it upon himself to be something like my best friend and a bit like my guardian angel.

And soon, I understood and shared in that joy of caring for and protecting, when Papa came back and chose to stay in Manila with us. Our home felt full like that of Hajime and his dearest Pacita, Naomi, and Mika—when a windfall came into it, and we both became kuyas to Mariē.

I TRY TO recover these parts of Lalakay now that I have grown older and lost my sixth sense of it. For the most part, the needles and cold clouds have left, and only the smallest shocks of my childhood linger. I've tried to grasp even the things that horrified me most. I am afraid to lose those particular memories of Ojii-pa, who searched in that old house for some form of forgiveness and in those strange moments, seemed to have found it.

"What's there to forgive?" I replied, when Keiji last brought up the summer of the "haunted house." "Boys will be boys. You know the kind of games we play. Eventually it was a phase we grew out of, right?"

"You know it was different," Keiji said. "Something did change that day."

"That being?"

"True, we were just being ourselves. We got used to the games, the rough-housing, losing and winning. But I realized from your words and from how you screamed from that house... I'm so sorry I couldn't swallow my jealousy or my pride, and I didn't tell you anything before you went in. But never again would I have wanted you to get hurt—to lose you."

"Kuya, I feel the same," I said. "That's something Ojii-pa would be happy to know."

"He would have been happy to see us grow up, see Papa come home—and meet our Mariē."

The baby of our family never played at war. From an early age, our sister's sensitive and curious spirit scoured books, old news clippings, and Mama's recounting of Lola's many memories. As for the spirits of the mountain, the souls of the men, women, and children, who hid in those homes and sometimes never left them...

Mariē asked many questions that were difficult to answer: why our grandfather had stayed on after soiling his hands, why the little foreign blood in us did not burn in our veins; what the world was like inside of our grandfather, what it was that still linked his spirit so deeply to the mountain, and how it was for me when I shared this gift. I never shared this view, but Keiji asserts that what remains of it has become both a gift and an inheritance—though not as great as Marie's value for knowledge, or my brother's own kindness.

When we visited Makiling for the last time as a family, after Tita Mika's decision to sell the land, Keiji and I brought Mariē to see the Lalakay we had grown up in. We watched her smile and step on the idle train tracks, count the salbabidas and beach balls being sold outside the hot springs resorts, and trace with her eyes the greenery that surrounded our old house and the houses immediately around it.

It was after summer then, and for the first time we all saw the bloom of so many strands of wild wheat grass that blanketed the path between Ojii-pa's house and the Orosa's. The grasses were tall and seemed to touch the low-lying clouds, but what we noticed most sharply was the color of their grain—a fresh, vivid golden-white.

And that day, Marie adorned the landscape with more color. She surprised the two of us by opening her bag and drawing from it a multitude of paper cranes. She had made them from all kinds of paper. One by one we laid them at the foot of the rusting gate like grave markers. We prayed our litanies for the dead, the still-living, and whoever could find meaning while passing through.

Though Ojii-pa did not live long enough to see his third grandchild, and died from a seizure a few years after that night, it was a good enough time to go, to rest in a peace that he had earned, and which lived on through each of us.

He had known how my brother and I were bound to him, and, finally, to each other.

During our last vigil by his bed, he had murmured, "*Anshin shite*." And then his eyes focused on a faraway place in the garden and the woods behind it. "*Shite kudasai*. Peace now. For everything."

# MGA BATA SA SELDA 43

Rolin Cadallo Obina

[Unang naitanghal ang dulang Mga Bata sa Selda 43 sa Virgin Labfest 14 sa Sentrong Pangkultura ng Pilipinas noong 2018. Makalipas ang mahigit isang taon, ang nasabing dula ay itinanghal ng Bindlestiff Studio, San Francisco, California, Oktubre 2019]

## MGA TAUHAN

Philip, labing-tatlong taong gulang

Ino, siyam na taong gulang, nakababatang kapatid ni Philip

Ed, dalawampung-taong gulang

*Sa pagsisimula ng dula, isang pulang bombilya ang iilaw sa bandang likuran ng entablado kaalinsabay ng pagtunog ng isang sirena, malakas, nakabubulahaw. Sa pagbukas ng mga ilaw, makikita ang dalawang takot na takot na mga bata, si PHILIP , 13, at ang kapatid n'yang si INO , 9. Parehong kupas ang shorts nito, naka-tsinelas na luma at may karumihang t-shirt. Magyayakapan ang dalawa.*

INO: Kuya, nasaan tayo?

PHILIP: Hindi ko alam. Tsaka h'wag kang maingay.

*Puti ang pintura ng buong silid. May pintuan sa gawing kanan at isang kama sa gitna nito. Sa kaliwa naman ay isang kabinet na may salamin sa ibabaw. Lahat ng mga bagay na nakikita sa loob ay halos nakadikit sa pader. Sa pinakataas ng pader/dingding ay mga rehas, palatandaan na nasa loob sila ng isang kulungan.*

- INO: Saan na nga tayo?  
PHILIP: Hindi ko nga alam, e. Ang kulit mo.

*Makikitang hindi mapakali si Ino. Panay ang lingon nito sa kanyang likuran.*

- INO: Naku lang talaga. Malamang papaluin na naman tayo ni nanay nito.  
PHILIP: Eh di umilag.  
INO: Kuya naman, e. Malamang nag-aalala na 'yon.  
PHILIP: OK lang 'yon. (*Ituturo si Ino*) Ito. (Saglit) Di ba nga nakatakbo s'ya?

*Lilinga-linga si Philip na parang ginagalugad ang lugar habang si Ino naman ay padabog na nakabuntot sa kanyang kapatid.*

- INO: E, paano na si lola? Sila lang dalawa ni nanay. Alam mo namang sakitin 'yon, e. Naku! Kapag 'yon tumae na naman sa pondyo n'ya, mahihirapan na naman si nanay linisin 'yon.  
PHILIP: Talaga? (saglit) Oo nga, ano? Tumutulong ka pala kay nanay sa paglilinis kay lola.

*Kukutusan ni Philip ang nakababatang kapatid.*

- PHILIP (cont'd): Ugok!  
INO: Aray!  
PHILIP: Ako ang naglilinis kay lola.  
INO: Bakit? Sinabi ko bang ako?

*Hahawakan ni Ino ang parte ng kanyang ulong nakutusan.*

- INO (cont'd): Sakit ha?  
PHILIP: Talaga? (Saglit) Gusto mo isa pa?  
INO: Kuya, ano ba?

PHILIP: Hindi. Biro lang. Hindi naman malakas 'yon, e. (Saglit) Ako nga e, sinasapak mo rin naman.

INO: Hindi kaya.

PHILIP: Ano ka?!

INO: Umuwi na kasi tayo.

PHILIP: Oo. H'wag kang mag-alala. Uuwi tayo maya-maya lang.

INO: Kasi naman, e.

*Hihilahin ni Ino ang t-shirt ni Philip.*

INO: Kuya Philip?

PHILIP: Ano?

INO: Kuya, natatakot na po ako dito, e.

*Guguluhin ni Philip ang buhok ni Ino.*

PHILIP: Bakit? Wala ka bang bilib sa akin? Kasama mo ako, di ba?

*Tatango si Ino.*

PHILIP: 'Yon naman pala, e.

*Pupunta si Ino sa harapang bahagi ng silid at titingala sa taas na parang may tinitingnan.*

INO: Kuya, mamamatay na ba tayo?

PHILIP: Ano ka ba? Hindi, no? May agimat kaya ako. Sandali.

*Mamemewang si Philip. Matikas ang porma na parang isang superhero sa pelikula.*

PHILIP: Hindi mo na ba ako namumukhaan?

INO (nakakunot ang noo, nag-iisip): Si (saglit) Batman?

PHILIP: Tange! Hindi kaya ako si Batman.

- INO: Hah? Di ba sabi mo ikaw si Batman? Tsaka ako si Superman.  
PHILIP: Mas matanda kaya ako sa'yo. Dapat ako si Superman. Tapos ikaw (saglit, mag-iisip), tama, ikaw si Wonder Woman.

*Susuntukan ni Ino si Philip ng malamya.*

- INO: Hah? Ba't babaé?  
PHILIP: E, anong problema do'n? Super hero din naman 'yon. Tsaka partner si Superman at si Wonder Woman.  
INO: Magkapatid ba sila?  
PHILIP: Hindi.  
INO: Kuya naman, e. Batman ka na lang tapos ako si (saglit) Robin. Tama, tama. Para Batman at Robin.  
PHILIP: Batman? Wala namang kapangyarihan si Batman, e.  
INO: Pero mayaman naman. Diba kapag mayaman, makapangyarihan? Tsaka, bakit? Ayaw mong yumaman?  
PHILIP: Gusto.  
INO: Ayon naman pala, e. Batman ka na.  
PHILIP: O s'ya. Bahala ka na nga. Kulit mo.

*Lilingon-lingon si Philip sa paligid n'ya habang si Ino naman ay pupunta sa kama at hihiga.*

- PHILIP: Ino, ano ba?

*Babangon si Ino.*

- INO: Bakit na naman?  
PHILIP: H'wag ka ngang humiga d'yan. Baka magalit ang may-ari.  
INO: E, sa gusto ko, e. Tsaka hindi pa po talaga tayo kumakain.

*Hihiga ulit habang ang mga paa ay nakabitin.*

- PHILIP: Tigilan mo ako d'yan sa katakawan mo ha?

INO: E, sa hindi pa talaga tayo kumain eh. Bakit? Kelan pa ba tayo huling kumain?

*Hindi iimik si Philip. Pupunta ito sa harapang bahagi ng entablado. Titingin sa itaas na parang sumisilip gaya ng ginawa ni Ino kani-kanina lang.*

INO: Wala kang makikitang ulam d'yan kuya. Sinilip ko na 'yan.

PHILIP: Hindi ulam hinahanap ko.

INO: Ano?

PHILIP: Gaano kaya kataas ang pader na ito?

*Biglang tutunog ang sirena. Maririnig din ang pagbukas ng isang pintuan na parang kinakalawang sa kabilang silid. Iilaw din ng pula ang bombilya sa gawing likuran. Mapapatayo si Ino. Lalapit ito sa kapatid at magtatago sa likod. Makikitang parehong takot ang dalawa. Nang huminto ang sirena at patay na ang pulang ilaw, lalapit si Philip sa may pintuan. Sisilip sa mga giwang at butas.*

INO: Nakakatakot naman 'yang sirenang 'yan. Parang sa atin.

PHILIP: Paanong sa atin?

INO: Sa atin. Kapag may hinuhuli sa saklaan.

*Babalik si Philip sa bandang harapan upang patuloy na eestimahin kung gaano kataas ang pader.*

PHILIP: Naku! Sanay na 'yong mga tao sa atin, no?

*Uupo si Ino sa kama.*

INO: Oo nga ano? Kapag may pulis na rumoronda sa saklaan, ayon, pulasan ang mga sugarol. Naalala ko si tatay noon o. Muntik nang makasuntukan si Ka Berting.

PHILIP: Buti nga hindi s'ya nasakasak, e. Kasi naman napakadaya ng tatay mo.

- INO: Anong tatay mo? Tatay natin.
- PHILIP: Mo!
- INO: Hindi mo s'ya nami-miss, kuya?

*Babalik si Philip sa unahang bahagi at titingala na naman sa taas.*

- PHILIP: Sino? (Saglit) Oist, sandali. Gaano kataas kaya ang pader na ito?
- INO: Ewan. (Saglit) Kuya puwede?
- PHILIP: Ang alin ba?
- INO: Si tatay?
- PHILIP: Puwede ba?
- INO: Matagal na 'yon. Tsaka nagsisisi na naman s'ya, di ba?

*Pandidilatan ng mata ni Philip si Ino.*

- PHILIP: Ino!
- INO: Matagal na naman kasi 'yon tsaka nagsisi na naman s'ya eh.
- PHILIP: Sa tingin mo may pakialam ako kung magsisi s'ya o hindi? E, di mabulok s'ya sa bilangguan kung gusto n'ya.
- INO: Nagawa lang naman n'ya 'yon dahil may sakit ka. Kung hindi ka nagkasakit, eh di sana padyak drayber pa rin 'yon.
- PHILIP: Kasalanan ko pa ngayon?
- INO: Ewan.

*Maglalakad si Philip papunta sa kabinet. Uupo s'ya sa ibabaw nito.*

- PHILIP: Ang sabi n'ya, hihiram s'ya ng pera kay Tsong Selmo. E, kaso, ayon, sumama sa mga holdaper at nanloob ng pawnshop. Huli ka, balbon. Malamang. Kaya tayo, eto, lumaking walang ama. Ang masakit, ayon, ako ang tumatayong ama. "Philip, wala nang pambili ng bigas. Philip, wala tayong ulam. Philip, wala nang gamot ang lola mo. Philip. Philip. Philip." Putcha! Puro Philip.
- INO: Kawawa naman kasi si nanay, kuya, kung s'ya lang lahat.
- PHILIP: Oo! Si nanay na ikaw ang paborito.

INO: Ay hindi totoo 'yan. Ikaw kaya.

*Matatawa nang bahagya si Philip, sarkastiko.*

PHILIP: Ni minsan ba pinaghandaan ako ni nanay ng pagkain? (Saglit) Hindi. "Uy, Philip, maghanda ka na ng pagkain at nagugutom na ang kapatid mo. Uy, Philip, mag-igib ka ng tubig dahil walang panligo ang kapatid mo." Saan doon ang paborito? Paboritong utusan?

INO: Ayaw mo na ba akong maging kapatid, kuya?

PHILIP: Ewan.

INO: Alam ko, ikaw ang paborito ni nanay. Narinig ko sila ni Aling Isa na nag-uusap. Naalala mo? Noong pinabili ka ni nanay ng gamot dahil may sakit ako tapos malakas ang ulan? Sabi ni Aling Isa, "naku, swerte ng anak mo sa 'yo at hindi mo pinapabayaan," Alam mo ang sagot ni nanay?

"Hindi Aling Isa. Ako ang mas swerte dahil may Philip ako. Kung wala ang anak ko na 'yan, naku, baka hindi ko na kinaya't nabaliw na ako. Kaya paborito ko 'yan eh."

*Makikitang mamumutawis sa mga mata ni Philip ang mga luba.*

INO: Kaya alam ko, sa mga oras na 'to, hinahanap ka na ni nanay.

*Mahabang katahimikan.*

PHILIP: Tayo, Ino. Hinahanap na n'ya tayo.

INO: Ikaw kuya, kunyari nalulunod kami ni nanay, sino sasagipin mo? Si nanay o ako?

PHILIP (mag-iisip): Tingin ko si nanay. Ang kulit mo, e.

*Malulungkot si Ino. Magdadabog ito. Lalapitan n'ya si Philip.*

PHILIP: O, biro lang. S'yempre ikaw.

INO: Paano si nanay?

**PHILIP:** Kulit! Malamang ang sasabihin n'un (gagayahin ang nanay nila na parang humihingi ng tulong) "Philip, tulungan mo ang kapatid mo. Philip, tulungan mo si Ino. Ino, kumapit ka sa kuya mo."

**INO:** Galing mong umarte, kuya. Parang totoo. (Saglit) Utot mo.

*Magkikilitian ang dalawa. Ngunit biglang mapapatigil si Philip.*

**PHILIP:** Naku! Naku! Ang kama nagugusot. Baka magalit ang may-ari nito.

**INO:** Kuya?

*Aayusin ni Philip ang kama.*

**PHILIP:** Tumayo ka d'yan.

**INO:** Kuya, hindi pa talaga tayo kumakain.

**PHILIP:** Tiisin mo. Sigurado paparating na si nanay para tubusin tayo.

**INO:** Tubusin? Anong akala mo sa lugar na 'to? M. Lulyir? Ano 'to, sanglaan?

*Mapapaupo ulit si Ino.*

**INO:** Teka nga, kuya. Saan ba talaga tayo?

**PHILIP:** Hindi ko nga alam. Hindi naman 'to kulungcan.

**INO:** Anong hindi? (Ituturo ang rehas sa pintuan) Ayan o. Rehas.

**PHILIP:** Ang linis, e. Naalala mo 'yong pinuntahan natin si Tatay noon sa Manila City Jail?

**INO:** Bakit?

**PHILIP:** Di ba andumi? Ito ang linis.

**INO (takot):** Hala ka!

**PHILIP:** Bakit?

**INO:** Kuya, ito na nga 'yong napanood ko sa TV.

**PHILIP:** Hah?! Wala naman tayong TV, ah.

- INO: Ang kulit mo kuya. (Saglit) Ayon na nga. Mga bata ang kinukuha nila. Kinakatay. Kinukuha ang utak upang pag- aralan. Kuya, ito na 'yon.
- PHILIP: Anong ito na 'yon?
- INO: Alien. Alien imbeysseyon.
- PHILIP: Alien?

*Magkakatitigan ang dalawa. Takot na takot. Maghahawak kamay ito at sabay na magisisigaw. Maya-maya'y tatayo si Ino at lalapit sa pintuan.*

- INO: Saklolo! Saklolo! Kinidnap kami ng mga alien. Saklolo!

*Tatabi sa kanya si Philip.*

- PHILIP: Saklolo! Nananawagan po kami sa aming mahal na pangulo. Tulungan n'yo po kami. Kinidnap po kami ng mga alien.

*Sabay-sabay na hihangi ng saklolo ang dalawang bata ngunit makalipas ang ilang saglit, mapapansin nilang walang tumutugon sa kanilang mga sigaw at panawagan.*

- INO: Sigurado ako, kuya. Alien ang kumuha sa atin.
- PHILIP: Hindi naman totoo ang mga aliens, e.
- INO: Totoo, kuya. Maniwala ka sa akin.

*Pupunta sa harapang bahagi ulit si Ino. Titinga-tingala sa taas. Si Philip naman ay mananalamin.*

- INO: Ang sabi sa akin, dumating daw ang mga alien noong 2016. Sumanib ito sa mga tao. Kaya hindi na natin sila namumukhaan kasi nagkatawang tao na sila. Pati hitsura nila. 'Yong mga nakikita natin sa TV na ang ampapangit nila, hindi totoo 'yon. Ang sabi pa nga raw, may mga nauna na sa kanila noon, noon pa. Pero nitong huli lang talaga lumakas ang puwersa ng mga alien. Tapos dumudukot sila ng mga tao upang patayin.

*Habang nagsasalita si Ino, hindi na nito mamamalayang papalapit sa kanya si Philip.*

INO: Tapos kapag patay na, ayon –

PHILIP: Bah!

*Mapapasigaw si Ino sa takot at gulat habang hindi magkaumayaw sa pagtawa si Philip. Susuntukin ni Ino si Philip.*

PHILIP (habang tumatawa): Aray!

INO: Nakakainis ka, e.

PHILIP (tumatawa pa rin): Eh puro ka kalokohan. e.

INO: Totoo kaya 'yon.

PHILIP: Sino nagkuwento sa'yo?

*Uupo si Ino sa sahig, sa harap ng kama.*

INO: Si Nanay. Kaya nga sabi n'ya mag-ingat daw tayo lagi. Kasi hindi natin alam kung kelan sila aatake.

PHILIP: Naku! Naniwala ka naman kay Nanay.

INO: Oo naman. Bakit naman hindi?

PHILIP: Naku! Si Nanay, maraming alam 'yon. Kaso puro imbento.

INO: Hindi, a.

PHILIP: Anong hindi? (Gagayahin ang ina sa pagsasalita) Alam mo, anak, balang-araw, magiging doktor ka.

INO: O anong imbento doon?

PHILIP: Alam mo isa ka pa. Gusto mo kutusan kita ulit? (Saglit) Pagdodoktor? E, saan naman kukuha ng pera pangpaarial si nanay? Hihingi sa mga alien? Sa maliit na kita sa tingi-tinging paninda n'ya, baka kundoktor pa kamo.

INO: Pero kuya, kung sakali, siguro ikaw ang pinakamagaling na doktor sa buong mundo. Kasi matalino ka, e. Anong grade ka na ngayon kuya?

PHILIP: Grade 4.

INO: Ha? Bakit grade 4? E, di ba, trese ka na?

PHILIP: Kitams?! Eh elementary pa nga lang hindi na kayang tustusan, pagdodoktor pa. Kaya ikaw, h'wag kang masyadong nagpapaniwala kay Nanay. Imbento lagi 'yon. 'Yan ang napapala n'ya sa kababasa ng komiks kapag tumatae.

*Habang nag-uusap ang dalawa, maririnig na naman nila ang sirena, ang pag-ilaw ng pulang bombilya at pagbukas ng pintuan sa kabilang silid. Tatakbo si Ino sa gilid ng kama. Uupo ito habang tinatakpan ang mga tenga't mata ng kanyang mga kamay. Sisigaw ito sa sobrang takot. Susundan s'ya ni Philip at yayakapin. Maya-maya lang ay titigil na ang sirena at mamamatay na rin ang ilaw na pula.*

PHILIP: O tahan na. Tahan na.

*Titigil sa pagsigaw si Ino ngunit nakayuko pa rin ito.*

PHILIP: Ayan wala na. Tahan na, Ino. Nandito si Kuya o.

*Hindi pa rin iimik si Ino.*

PHILIP: Tahan na. Nandito si Batman, o, Robin, tahan na.

*Dahan-dahan itataas ni Ino ang kanyang paningin. Gagalugarin n'ya ng tingin ang kapaligiran.*

PHILIP: H'wag ka na matakot. Makakatakas tayo dito. Pangako ko 'yan sa'yo. OK?

*Tatango si Ino. Tatayo si Philip at iikutin ang buong kwarto. Ididikit nito ang kanyang tenga sa pader na para bang may pinakikinggan. Samantala, ilalabas ni Ino ang kanyang mga holen at maglalaro sa sahig.*

INO: Kuya?

*Titignan ni Philip si Ino.*

INO (cont'd): Paano kung –

PHILIP: Shhh!

*Titigil sa paglalaro si Ino. Si Philip naman ay lalong ididikit ang kanyang tenga sa pader. Makikita sa mukha nito ang biglang pagkataranta na may halong galak.*

INO: Kuya, bakit?

PHILIP: Si Nanay. Ino si Nanay. Naririnig ko si Nanay.

*Magmamadaling tatayo si Ino. Tatabi ito kay Philip.*

PHILIP (pasigaw): Nanay? Nanay?

INO: Nanay?

*Sabay na pupukpukin ng magkapatid ang pader. Ngunit makalipas ang ilang sandali, titigil din ang mga ito nang mabatid na walang tumutugon sa kanila.*

PHILIP: Si nanay 'yon. Sigurado ako. Mahina ang boses pero sigurado akong si nanay 'yon.

INO: Sigurado ka kuya? Wala naman akong narinig.

PHILIP: Oo. Sigurado ako. Narinig ko si nanay sa kabilang pader.

INO: Parang wala naman, e.

PHILIP: Ano ka ba? Hinahanap na tayo no'n. Sigurado ako. Baka umikot lang 'yon sa kabilang. Alam mo naman 'yon di ba? Baka nahirapang hanapin ang harapan.

*Tatabimik si Ino. Makikita sa mukha nito ang namumuong kalungkutan. Mapapansin ito ni Philip. Pilit n'ya itong aaliwin.*

PHILIP: H'wag kang mag-alala. Maya-maya lang ay darating na si Nanay.

*Hindi pa rin iimik si Ino. Mamamatuktot ito sa kama.*

**PHILIP** (cont'd): Alam ko na. Sumayaw tayo. Hindi ba sabi ni nanay kapag malungkot dapat sumayaw?

**INO:** E, di lalo akong nagutom?

**PHILIP:** Para nga makalimutan natin ang gutom. (Saglit) Tanungin mo ako kung taga-saan ako?

**INO:** Taga-saan ka?

**PHILIP:** Taga-Tondo.

*Sasayaw si Philip na parang macho dancer upang aliwin ang kapatid ngunit, hindi man lang ito ngingiti.*

**PHILIP:** Ayaw mo ha? (Saglit, desperado) Alam ko na. Dasal na lang tayo.

**INO:** Dasal?

*Lalapitan ni Philip si Ino.*

**PHILIP:** Oo. Dasal. Kumanta tayo ng Sam.

**INO:** May ganoon bang kanta?

**PHILIP:** Oo.

**INO:** Hindi ko alam 'yan eh.

**PHILIP:** Ituturo ko nga sa'yo eh. Tayo ka na.

**INO:** Ayoko, Kuya. Inuuto mo lang ako eh.

**PHILIP:** Hindi nga. Seryoso ito. Sige na.

*Hahatakin ni Philip si Ino. Bagama't susunod ito, makikita ang sobrang kabagalan at katamaran n'ya. Magsisimulang kakanta si Philip.*

**PHILIP:** SAMMM (saglit) SAMMM

**INO:** Ano 'yan?

**PHILIP:** Dasal nga.

**INO:** Kuya, mamaya na lang. Tinatamad ako, e.

- PHILIP:** Sige na. Ano ka? Ang sabi sa akin, kapag inis ka raw, o pikon, o problemado, o kahit may gusto kang iparating na mensahe sa isang tao, kantahin mo lang daw ang kantang ito.
- INO:** O tapos?
- PHILIP:** Pagkahintong-pagkahinto, imaginin mo lang daw ang taong gusto mong makausap sa mga sandaling 'yon at sabihin mo ang lahat nang gusto mong sabihin. Maririnig daw n'ya 'yon. Ipikit mo ang 'yong mga mata at talasan mo ang 'yong tenga dahil sasagot daw ito sa'yo. (Saglit) O, subukan natin. Sige na.
- INO:** Ayoko. Si nanay nagturo sa'yo n'yan ano?
- PHILIP:** Akala ko ba gusto mong makausap si Nanay? (Saglit) Gusto mo di ba?
- INO:** Gusto.
- PHILIP:** E, di gawin na natin 'to.
- INO:** E-to. Inuuto mo lang ako, e.
- PHILIP:** Hindi nga. Sige na. Sumunod ka na lang sa akin.

*Hahawakan ni Philip ang kamay ni Ino. Magsimula itong maglakad at kakanta. Si Ino naman ay sumasabay at pinagbibigyan lang si Philip ngunit makikita sa mukha nito na hindi siya interesado.*

- PHILIP:** SAMMM. SAMMM. SAMMM

*Hibinto si Philip. Pipikit siya habang nakatingin lang sa kanya si Ino.*

- PHILIP:** Sa ngalan ng lahat ng mga espiritung gala, tinatawagan ko ang aming nanay. Nay, sunduin mo na kami. (Saglit) Sunduin n'yo na po kami.

*Dahan-dahan ididilat ni Philip ang kanyang mga mata. Pagdilat nito, makikita n'ya si Ino na nakatingin sa kanya, nakangiwi ang mukha na parang nang-iinis pa rin.*

- INO:** Ano? Sumagot sa'yo?

PHILIP: Hindi eh. (Saglit) Subukan natin isa pa.

INO: Ano?

PHILIP: Isa pa. Sige na.

INO: Ewan ko sa'yo Kuya. Inuuto mo na talaga ako.

PHILIP: Sige na, Ino. Gusto mo namang makausap si Nanay, di ba?

INO: Kuya naman kasi, e.

PHILIP: Isa na lang.

INO: Last na ha? Sinasabi ko sa'yo, kuya. H'wag mo nang dagdagan ang gutom ko.

*Magtatabi ang dalawang magkakapati habang pinapangunahan ni Philip ang pagkanta ng Sam.*

PHILIP: SAMMM. SAMMM. OHHH SAMMM.  
PHILIP /INO: SAMMM. SAMMM.

*Kukurap ang mga ilaw. Mapapansin ito ni Ino.*

INO: Hala! Kuya, ayan na. SAMMM. SAMMM.  
PHILIP /INO: SAMMM  
PHILIP (cont'd): SAMMM-PUNG MGA DALIRI. KAMAY AT PAA.  
DALAWANG MATA. DALAWANG TENGA. ILONG NA MAGANDA.

*Papaluin ni Ino si Philip.*

INO: Sabi na nga ba eh. (Sisigaw) Kainis! Kuya, pagkain, wala talaga?  
PHILIP: Sumayaw ka ulit. 'Yon ang hilingin mo.  
INO: Hmp!

*Lalakad si Philip papunta sa kama. Hibiga ito. Si Ino naman ay dahan-dahang popormang mamalimos. Kakatukin nito ang salamin sa ibabaw ng kabinet.*

INO: Palimos po. Kuya, palimos po.

*Babangon nang bahagya si Philip. Titingnan ang kapatid tsaka babalik sa pagkakahiga.*

INO (cont'd): Palimos po. Kuya, pangkain lang po.

*Lalakad-lakad si Ino. Palipat-lipat ng kinakatok. Habang ginagawa n'ya ito ay maririnig ang mga kotseng rumaragasa at bumubusina. Lilingon-lingon si Ino habang dahan-dahan nawawala ang tunog ng mga umaandar na kotse. Mapapalitan ito ng ingay ng palengke.*

INO: Ate, akin na lang 'yang tira n'yong tinapay? Sige na, Ate. Gutom na po talaga ako, e. Ate, sige na.

*Ngunit parang hindi binibigay sa kanyang ang hinihingi. Hihinto si Ino. Mayamaya ay habablutin n'ya ang kung anuman ang nasa harap n'ya. Isang boses ng babae ang maririnig.*

BABAE (offstage): Ay! Magnanakaw. Magnanakaw. Saklolo. Magnanakaw.

*Maririnig ito ni Ino. Bigla itong matataranta. Tatakbo ito sa magtatago sa ilalim ng kama. Dahil dito, aalog ang kama at mapapatayo si Philip. Uupo ito.*

PHILIP: Ino, ano ba? (Saglit) Ino? Ino.

*Baba si Philip sa kama at sisilip ito sa ilalim.*

PHILIP: Uy, Ino. Anong ginagawa mo d'yan? (Saglit) Uy! Lumabas ka d'yan. Ino. Isa. Dalawa.

*Dahan-dahan lalabas si Ino.*

INO: Kaya ko lang naman hinablot 'yong supot ng ale kasi nagugutom na ako, e.

- PHILIP: Sinong ale? Anong supot?
- INO: 'Yong ale sa palengke.
- PHILIP: Ay potek! Ikaw 'yong sinasabi nung babaeng snatcher daw? Bakit?

*Aakyat si Ino sa kama.*

- INO: E, humingi ako ng pambili ng pagkain, ayaw akong bigyan, e.
- PHILIP: Tapos inisnatchan mo?
- INO: 'Yong tinapay lang sa supot. Itatapon na naman n'ya 'yon eh.
- PHILIP: Paano mo nalaman?
- INO: E, tira na n'ya 'yon eh. Kakakain lang n'ya. 'Yong hiningi ko sa kanya, e, tira lang naman. Ayaw pang ibigay. Andamot.
- PHILIP: E, anong pakialam mo kung madamot s'ya? Sa 'yo ba 'yon?
- INO: Hindi.

*Uupo si Philip sa sahig, sa harapang bahagi ng kama.*

- PHILIP: E, hindi pala, e. Ino, kapag hindi sa 'yo h'wag mong kuhanin.
- INO: E, bakit si Kiko?
- PHILIP: Si Kiko pinalaki ng mga magulang n'ya sa pagnanakaw. Ikaw, hindi.

*Bahagyang mapapangiti si Ino. Hihiga ito sa kama.*

- INO: Ah. (Saglit) Kuya?
- PHILIP: Bakit?
- INO: Puwede akong maging tulak?
- PHILIP: Ano? Tado ka ba?
- INO: Sandali lang naman. Di ba si Kiko magnanakaw kasi snatcher ang tatay at nanay n'ya?
- PHILIP: O tapos?
- INO: Eh di ba tulak si nanay at si tatay ng shabu?

- PHILIP:** O tapos?
- INO:** Eh di pwede akong magtulak?
- PHILIP:** Gusto mong itulak kita d'yan? Ha?
- INO:** Ito hindi na mabiro.

*Ngingiti si Ino na parang nilalambing ang kapatid.*

- PHILIP:** Biro biro ka d'yan. Nakita mo naman nangyari kay tatay, di ba?

*Magiging seryoso si Ino.*

- INO:** Biro nga lang naman, e.
- PHILIP:** Alam mo bang gusto ko talagang maging doctor paglaki? Kaso 'yon, ang tatay, nasa kulungan. (Saglit) Maliban sa pagiging tulak, holdaper pa. (Saglit) Hindi na makakalabas 'yon. Doon na 'yon mabubulok.
- INO:** Hindi ah.
- PHILIP:** Totoo 'yon. Hindi na makakalabas 'yon doon.
- INO:** Paano na po si nanay?
- PHILIP:** Ewan ko boy. Ewan ko.

*Biglang tutunog ulit ang sirena. Tatakbo si Ino sa may pintuan. Lulundag-lundag ito na parang sinisipat kung sino ang dumadaan ngunit wala itong makikita. Lalakad ito papunta sa harapan bahang si Philip naman ay sisilip-silip sa rehas ng pintuan.*

- INO:** Ano kaya itsura ng mga alien?
- PHILIP:** Ewan. Baka kamukha mo.
- INO:** Eh di pogì.
- PHILIP:** Wow!

*Biglang magugulat si Ino. May maaaninag s'ya mula sa unahan.*

**INO (takot):** Kuya?

**PHILIP** (habang patuloy na sumisilip sa may rehas): Ano na naman?

**INO** (pasigaw, takot na takot): Kuya!

**PHILIP:** Ano nga?

**INO:** May tao.

**PHILIP:** Saan?

**INO:** Ayun o.

**PHILIP:** Saan?

*Mapapaatras si Philip. Hahatakin nito si Ino. Mula sa harapang bahagi ng entablado kung nasaan ang mga manonood, isang lalaki ang papasok na parang isang zombie, si ED, 20 anyos. Dahan-dahan itong lalapit sa dalawa. Mapapatago si Ino sa likod ni Philip.*

**PHILIP:** Sino po sila?

**ED** (malalim ang boses): Bakit?

**PHILIP:** Sino po sila?

**ED:** Ang tagasundo.

*Sisilip si Ino mula sa likuran. Takot na takot. Makikita sa hitsura ni Ed na anumang oras ay lalapain n'ya ang dalawang bata.*

**PHILIP:** Tagasundo?

**ED:** At ikaw (ituturo si Ino), ikaw na makulit na bata ka, ikaw ang una kong sinusundo.

**PHILIP:** Sir (saglit) kuya (saglit, mapapalunok ng laway), baka naman po pwedeng pag-usapan na muna natin ito. H'wag naman ang kapatid ko.

**ED:** Hindi! S'ya ang uunahin ko dahil s'ya ang pinakadaldalero.

*Takot na takot na mangiyak-iyak si Ino habang hinahatak ang t-shirt ni Philip.*

**INO:** Kuya, h'wag kang pumayag, Kuya!

**PHILIP:** Tumahimik ka kasi. (Saglit) Kuya, last na. H'wag mong kunin ang kapatid ko. Sir, maawa na kayo.

**ED** (pasigaw habang nanlilisik ang mga mata nito): Hindi!

*Dahan-dahan lalapitan ni Ed sina Philip at Ino. Mag-iikutan ang tatlo. Nang makatiyempo si Ed ay susunggaban n'ya si Ino. Mahahawakan nito ang bata. Mapapasigaw ito nang malakas.*

**PHILIP** (pasigaw): Ino!

*Habang hawak ni Ed si Ino, titingnan n'ya ito mula ulo hanggang paa. Kikilatisin.*

**INO** (takot na takot): H'wag po. Tatahimik na po ako. Pramis po.

*Susungkaban ni Ed si Ino, akmang lalapain. Ngunit mahahatak ni Philip ang kapatid. Makikitang takot na takot si Ino habang hawak-hawak ang kanyang leeg habang si Ed naman ay hindi magkanda-ugaga sa kakatawa.*

**INO:** Dugo. Kuya, andaming dugo.

**PHILIP:** Anong dugo?

**INO** (ipapakita ni Ino kay Philip ang kanyang kamay): Ito o.

**PHILIP:** Wala namang dugo, a. Laway kamo.

*Aamuyin ni Ino ang laway.*

**INO:** Ang baho.

**ED:** S'yempre. Laway. Sa inyo ba, pabango ang laway?

*Magtatago pa rin si Ino sa likod ni Philip. May takot pa rin. Tatayo si Ed. Aayusin ang kumot at unan.*

**ED:** Teka lang. Bakit parang takot na takot kayo? Anong akala n'yo sa akin, aswang?

**PHILIP:** Hindi po kayo alien?

ED: Anong alien? Itong poging ito mukhang alien? Baka ikaw.  
(Maangas) Anong pangalan mo?

PHILIP: Philip po.

*Magtatago si Ino sa likuran ni Philip.*

ED: Kapatid mo?

PHILIP: Opo. Si Ino.

ED: Oist! Lumabas ka d'yan.

*Ilalabas ni Philip si Ino mula sa pagkakatago nito sa kanyang likuran.*

INO: Alien po ba kayo?

*Matatawa ulit si Ed.*

PHILIP: Pasensya na po. Makulit lang talaga itong kapatid.

INO: Alien po ba kayo?

ED: Anong alien? Adik ka ba?

*Uupo si Ed sa kama habang masusing titingnan ni Ed si Ino.*

ED: Tingin ko, adik ka.

INO: Hindi po ako! Si Nanay po, alam ko.

PHILIP: Hindi adik ang nanay. Ano ka ba?

INO: Anong hindi?! Noong isang beses nga nakita ko sila ni Lito Palito na nagpa-pot session sa bahay.

PHILIP: Hindi nga adik. Baka tumikim lang. Tulak kaya si nanay.

ED: E, di adik din.

PHILIP: Magkaiba 'yon.

INO: Alien po kayo?

ED: Ang kulit mo, ha? Hindi nga.

INO: E, ba't nandito ka? Di ba, kulungan ito ng mga dinudukot ng alien?

*Tititigan ni Ed si Ino. Bahagyang mapapangiti at iiling.*

- ED: Anong pangalan mo ulti?
- PHILIP: Philip po. Kayo po?
- ED: Eduardo ang pangalan ko. Pero tawagin n'yo na lang akong Kuya Ed. (Saglit) Kadarating n'yo lang dalawa di ba?
- PHILIP: Opo.
- ED: Nakakatuwang makalipas ang mahigit tatlumpung taon, may nakakasama na naman ako sa Selda kwarenta y tres.
- PHILIP: Selda kwarenta y tres? Paano mo nalaman?
- ED: Marunong ka namang magbasa ano? Ayun o (ituturo ang nakasabit na numero sa gilid ng kama).
- PHILIP: Ilang selda po ba meron?
- ED: Ewan. Marami. Siguro.

*Maririnig ang isang pintuang bakal na magbubukas habang iilaw ang pulang bombilya at tutunog ang sirena. Tatayo si Ed. Sisilip ito sa pintuan.*

- ED: Ayan! May dumating na naman. Mga bagong bilanggo.

*Mapapangiti si Ed.*

- INO: Bilanggo po?

*Uupo si Ed sa kama.*

- ED: Oo, bilanggo. Mga bilanggo ng hindi makaturangang sistema. Mga bilanggo ng kahirapan. Mga bilanggo dahil sa katarantaduhan ng kanilang mga magulang. Mga bilanggo ng mga mapang-abuso at naghaharing-uri.

- INO: Kayo po? Ba't kayo nabilanggo? Tingin ko magnanakaw kayo.

PHILIP (pasigaw): Ino!

*Bahagyang mapapangiti si Ed.*

- ED: Hayaan mo s'ya. (Saglit) Hindi ko alam kung ano ang tawag sa panahon ninyo ngayon pero ang tawag sa amin noon ay mga aktibista.  
INO: Aktibista? Kuya Philip, parang si Ka Berto, aktibista.

*Tatango si Philip. Magmamadaling lalapit si Ino kay Ed. Uupo ito sa kama kaharap si Ed.*

- INO: Ah. Magkano po ang sweldo n'yo?  
ED: Hindi kami sinusweldohan no?  
INO: Weee! Si Ka Berto, di ba kuya, pumupunta lang sa mga rally kasi may bayad. Kapag walang bayad, walang rally.  
ED: Ganun ba? Buhay pa s'ya?  
INO: Oo naman. Kung puwede nga lang ipatokhang 'yon ni Aleng Sedeng, e. Nakow! Ang tamad no'n. Batugan.  
ED: Mabuti pa s'ya.

*Tatayo si Philip. Makikitang parang may napapansin s'ya. Matitigil na si Ed at Ino sa kanilang pag-uusap.*

- PHILIP: Narinig n'yo?  
INO: Ang alin kuya?  
PHILIP: Si nanay. Naririnig ko si nanay.

*Lalapit si Ino kay Philip. Makikiramdam kagaya ng ginagawa ng kapatid.*

- INO: Wala naman, e. Hay naku! Epekto na 'yan kuya ng walang kain. Kung ano-ano na naririnig mo.

*Babalik si Ino sa pwesto n'ya kani-kanina lang.*

- INO: Ayun na nga Kuya Ed, si Ka Berto, naku, kapag rally, ayun, kapag nagkakagulo na, 'yon ang unang tumatakbo.
- ED: Nakakaaliw. May mga ganoong tao pa rin pala ngayon. Noong panahon namin meron din namang ganoon. Mabilis tatakbo kasi mga duwag. 'Yong iba naman, kaya lang sumasama sa amin dahil mga bayaran. Binabayaran para guluhin kami. Tawag namin sa kanila mga infiltrators.
- INO: Guluhin kayo? Eh di ba po kayo ang nanggugulo?
- ED: Hindi, a. Kami ang madalas na ginugulo. Ang tahimik na protesta ay pilit nilang ginugulo. Ang bansag sa amin ay mga taong-kalye na ang tanging hatid ay perwisyo at gulo.

*Tatayo si Ino. Mamartsa-martsa paikot kina Ed at Philip.*

INO: Makibaka. H'wag matakot. Makibaka. H'wag matakot.

*Titigil si Ino sa pagmamartsa. Lalapitan nito si Ed na nakatingin lang sa malayo. Kakalabitin n'ya ito.*

- INO: Kuya Ed, may pagkain ka?
- PHILIP: Ino kasi. (kay Ed) Naku Kuya Ed, h'wag mo nang pansiñin 'yan. Matakaw lang talaga 'yan.
- ED: Gutom ka?

*Mag-iisip si Ino.*

- INO: Hindi naman.
- ED: Akala ko gutom ka. Kasi kung nandito ka na sa loob ng selda, hindi ka na makakaramdam ng gutom, o antok, o kung anuman.
- PHILIP: Wala nang pakiramdam?
- ED: Oo, maliban sa ...

*Mapapayuko si Ed, mapapaisip, malalim.*

**ED** (cont'd): Maliban sa pangungulila. Pangungulila sa mga mahal mo sa buhay. Sa tatay mo, sa nanay mo, sa mga kapatid mo, sa mga kasama mo sa kalye.

**PHILIP:** Bakit, Kuya Ed, wala ba kayong naging kasama dito?

*Pupunta si Ino sa kama. Hihiga. Si Ed naman ay uupo sa sabig.*

**ED:** Meron din. Si Ayo at si Tala. Kakaiba din ang saltik nung dalawang'yon. Tingin ko nalunod sa may ilog sa Cavite'yon.

**PHILIP:** Paano n'yo po nalaman?

**ED:** Tant'ya ko lang. Base kasi sa kuwento nila, nagkayayaan silang magkaibigan pumunta sa ilog. Tapos ayon, noong nagkamalay sila, nandito na sila sa loob. Pero saglit lang sila dito. Nakalabas din agad.

*Tatayo si Ino.*

**INO:** E, puwede naman palang lumabas Kuya Philip, e, di lumabas na tayo. Ano, Kuya Ed? Sama ka?

*Mapapangiti si Ed.*

**ED:** Hindi ganoon kadali'yon.

*Tatayo si Ino at pupunta sa may pintuan. Sisilip ito sa itaas.*

**INO:** Kuya Ed, sa laki ng katawan mo, tingin ko, kaya mo naman sigurong sirain ang pintuang ito. Tapos tumakas na tayo.

**ED:** Hindi ganoon kadali 'yon Ino. Makakalabas ka lang dito kung matatagpuan na ang katawan mo.

*Magugulat si Philip. Titiging ito kay Ed.*

**PHILIP:** Ano po?

INO: Ay naku Kuya Philip. Hindi ka na naman nakikinig. Ang sabi ni Kuya Ed makakalabas lang tayo dito kung matagpuan na ang ating katawan. (Saglit) Eh paano tayo matatagpuan kung nandito tayo sa loob. Malamang hindi. Kulit mo rin Kuya Ed ano?

*Biglang mapapaisip si Ino.*

INO: Ano raw? Parang anlabo noon. Matatagpuan pero (saglit). Ewan.

*Magiging seryoso si Philip.*

PHILIP: Kuya Ed, ano'ng ibig mong sabihin? Matagpuan ang alin?

*Hindi pa rin iimik si Ed. Bagama't bahaya itong ngingiti, maaaninag sa mga mata nito ang kalungkutan.*

PHILIP: Kuya Ed, matagpuan ang alin?

*Hihiga si Ino sa kama.*

ED: Shhh. OK lang 'yan Philip. OK lang 'yan.

PHILIP: Kuya Ed, paano? Eh hindi naman totoo 'yan eh. Di ba? Hindi naman totoo? Di ba kinidnap lang naman tayo ng mga alien? Di ba?

*Susunggaban ni Philip si Ed sa kwelyo ng kanyang damit. Hindi sasagot si Ed. Magsimulang umiyak si Philip. Yayakapin s'ya ni Ed na parang kapatid.*

PHILIP: Kuya? Di ba? (Saglit) Paano kung walang magahanap sa atin?

ED: Ako, tingin ko, wala na. Pero kayo, baka bukas o makalawa, makakalaya na kayo dito.

*Mapapalugmok sa sahig si Philip. Tutulo ang mga luha nito.*

•  
INO: Eh Kuya Ed, kelan ka pa dito?

*Lalapit si Ed kay Ino. Uupo si kabinet.*

ED: Anong taon na ba ngayon?

INO: 2018 na po.

*Mapapangiti si Ed.*

ED: Antagal ko na pala dito. Third year college ako noon, Political Science sa UP. Mga ilang taon matapos magdeklara ng martial law si Makoy. Nagmartsa kami sa Mendiola kaso nandoon na 'yong mga konstabularyo at mga militar. Hinuhuli kami.

INO: Hah? Parang si Coco Martin sa Ang Probinsyano?

*Ngingiti nang bahagya si Ed.*

ED: Pulasan kami. Takbo ako hanggang sa makarating ng Krus na Ligas doon sa Quezon City.

*Biglang tatahimik si Ed. Makikitang mag-iisip ito.*

INO: O tapos? Bitin naman, e.

ED: Doon ako pumirme sa bahay ng kaibigan kong si Andy. Saan na kaya 'yon? Isang gabi, habang mahimbing akong natutulog, biglang may malakas ng kalabog sa may pintuan. Napaigtad ako pero huli na. Pinagsisipa na ako ng limang armadong lalaki.

INO: Talaga?! (Kay Philip) Kuya Philip, parang tayo lang. Di ba natutulog lang din tayo.

ED: Talaga?

INO: Oo. Katatapos lang naming maglaro nina Mak-mak noon. Natulog ako malapit sa may pintuan. Tapos si Kuya doon malapit sa may kusina. (Imumuwestra ni Ino kung paano nangyari)

Bigla na lang o, blag! Tumba ang pintuan. Muntik nga akong maipit eh. Sabi nung isang lalaki, alam ko pulis 'yon eh kasi nakita ko na 'yon dati noong magronda sa saklaan, "nasa kwarto, pasukin n'yo bilis, bago pa makatakas". Kaso ambilis ni nanay o. Bago pa makapasok 'yong tatlong lalaki, nakalundag na si nanay sa may bintana. Galit na galit 'yong isang lalaki. Sabi n'ya, "itong dalawang batang 'to, mga tulak din ang mga ito. Dalhin n'yo 'yan." Di ba Kuya Philip, sinipa ka pa sa tagiliran?

*Hindi iimik si Philip.*

INO: Tapos kinaladkad nila si Kuya. Tapos ako, kinalaklad din. (Saglit) Kuya, ano nga 'yong sinakyan natin?

*Hindi sasagot si Philip.*

INO (cont'd): Haba noong biyahe. Tapos biglang huminto ang sasakyan. Nakita ko si Kuya o, tinulak malapit doon sa imburnal. (Matatawa) Di ba kuya, nahulog ka pa? Tapos bumaba 'yong dalawang lalaki. Narinig ko pa si Kuya o, sabi "sir, maawa na po kayo sa akin, sir. Sir, maayo na po kayo sa amin." Pero biglang may baril na pumutok. Ang lakas. Bang. Bang. Dalawang beses o. Tapos maya-maya sumakay na 'yong dalawa. Sabi ko, nasaan ang kuya Philip ko?

*Hahawakan ni Ino ang kanyang batok na parang may naaalala.*

INO (cont'd): Umandar ulit 'yong kotse. Tapos hinampas ako ng baril sa ulo. Tama. Tama. Kuya Philip, nahulog din pala ako. (Matatawa) Gumulong pa nga ako eh. Tapos nakita ko 'yong isang mama, bumaba ng kotse tapos tinutukan ako ng baril.

*Mapapaisip si Ino.*

INO (cont'd): Sandali. Binaril ba ako. (Saglit) Ay, oo. Dito (ituturo ang kanyang noo) Dito. Tama. Binaril din ako. Nawalan pa nga pala

ako ng malay. Pagkagising ko, ayun, nandito na kami dito sa loob. Nand'yan ako (ituturo ang isang kanto, parehong kanto noong nagsimula ang dula) at si kuya, doon. (Kay Ed) Ikaw Kuya Ed, binugbog ka din?

*Tatango si Ed.*

- ED: Isinakay ako sa isang van. Mga dalawang oras na biyahe 'yon. Noong huminto kami, hindi ko na alam ang lugar, madilim, pero ang alam ko nasa isang malayong probinsya na kami. Ipinasok nila ako sa isang lumang bahay. Halos walang laman. Kinuryente, binugbog. Torture. Maya-maya nakita ko si Andy, nasa pintuan. (Makikitang magpupuyos ng galit si Ed) Si Andy na kasama ko sa mga rally, kasangga ko sa lahat ng kalokohan, at halos kapatid na ang turing ko, ayun, s'ya pala ang infiltrator.
- INO: Grabe naman 'yong Andy na 'yon

*Tatango lang si Ed.*

- INO: Masakit, kuya?
- ED: Ang matorture o ang matraydor? (Saglit) Nang magkamalay ako, nandito na ako.

*Maglalabas ng holen si Ino at lalaruin n'ya ito. Habang si Ed naman at maglalabas ng kanyang harmonica at magpapatugtug.*

- ED: Simula noon, maliban kina Tala ay Ayo, ito na lang ang naging kasa-kasama ako.
- INO: Ano po 'yan?

*Lalapit si Ino kay Ed. Uupo ito sa harap ni Ed.*

- ED: Ito ang harmonica. Halika. Tuturuan kita.

*Patutugtugin ni Ed ang harmonica sa tunog ng “Inay Nasaan ka Ngayon” na s’ya namang ikatutuwa ng bata. Habang tumutugtog ang harmonica, maririnig naman ang ilang taong mag-uusap.*

LALAKI 1 (offstage): Dito, dito.

BABAE (offstage): Sandali lang po.

*Lilinga-linga si Philip. Para itong may naririnig. Tatayo ito. Habang si Ed at Ino ay patuloy sa kanilang ginagawa na parang walang naririnig.*

LALAKI 2 (offstage): O dahan-dahan misis. Madulas ang imburnal.

LALAKI 1 (offstage): Putcha! Ambaho na.

*Dahan-dahang bubukas ang pintuan. Hindi ito mapapansin nina Ed at Ino. Tanging si Philip lang ang makakapuna nito. Sa loob ng kulungan, kung sino lang ang lalabas ang s’yang makakakita sa pagbukas nito, hudyat ng kanyang pag-aalis. Hindi pwedeng hindi lumabas dahil parang may isang pwersang hahatak sa taong natagpuan na ang katawan.*

LALAKI 2 (offstage): Tingin ko may isang linggo na rin ito. Nabubulok na eh.

BABAE (offstage): Saan po? Saan po banda?

*Dahan-dahang lalapitan ni Philip si Ino. Yayakapin n’ya ng mahigpit. Ngingiti lang si Ino habang makikitang lumuluha si Philip. Patuloy sa pagpapatugtog ng kanyang harmonica si Ed.*

LALAKI 1 (offstage): Ayun misis. Sa dulo ng imburnal.

LALAKI 2 (offstage): Pati ba naman mga bata dinadali na nila.

LALAKI 1 (offstage): Ewan. May tama sa ulo eh. Sinalvage talaga ‘yan.

*Lalabas si Philip. Nang makalabas na ito, dahan-dahang magsasara ang pintuan.*

LALAKI 2 (offstage): Ilang kabataan na rin ang nasasalvage ano?

LALAKI 1 (offstage): Naku! Di na mabilang. Kawawa naman. Walang kalaban-laban. Sa ulo talaga binaril o.

*Maya-maya'y maririnig ang malakas na iyak n'ung babae na may kasamang hiyaw. Samantala, mula sa salamin, makikita si Philip na nakatingin sa kanyang kapatid. Humihikbi. Ang salamin ay puwedeng two-way mirror na makikita kung sino ang nasa labas depende sa ilaw.*

**BABAE** (offstage): Anak?! Anak ko. Anaaaaak! Ba't mo ako iniwan? Anak ko.

*Dahan-dahan maglalaho ang tinig ng babae habang patuloy na tumutugtog si Ed ng harmonica. Si Ino naman ay patuloy sa paglalaro ng mga holen. Sa pagkamatay na ilaw sa likod, mawawala naman si Philip. Titigil si Ed sa pagtugtog. Tatayo ito at uupo sa gilid ng kama. Nangingilid ang mga luha.*

**INO** (maglalaro at hindi nakatingin kay Ed): Kuya Philip, sa tingin mo, susunduin pa tayo ni nanay? (Saglit) Ayoko na dito kuya, e. Wala akong kalaro. Sigurado ako hinahanap na ako nina Mak-mak at Len ngayon. (Saglit) Kuya, punta tayo sa Star City paglabas natin, ha? Pasok tayo doon sa gilid, sa may butas na pader.

*Hihinto ng paglalaro si Ino. Lilingon ito sa direksyon ng kapatid ngunit magugulat ito dahil wala na doon si Philip.*

**INO:** Kuya?

*Tatayo si Ino.*

**INO:** Kuya Philip?

*Tatakbo si Ino papunta sa may kama. Hahanapin n'ya ito. Sisilip sa ilalim ng kama ngunit hindi n'ya makikita ang kapatid.*

**INO:** Kuya Ed, nakita mo si Kuya Philip?

*Hindi sasagot si Ed. Tatakbo si Ino papunta sa may pintuan.*

INO (pasigaw): Kuya Philip! Kuya Philip!

*Haharangin ni Ed si Ino. Magpupumiglas ang bata. Hindi s'ya bibitawan ni Ed.*

ED: Ino, halika.

INO: Ayoko. Gusto ko ang Kuya Philip ko. Kuya Ed, nasaan si Kuya Philip?

ED: Ino, halika, turuan kitang tumugtong ng harmonica.

INO (humihikbi): Ayoko. Gusto ko kasama si Kuya Philip ko.

ED: OK lang 'yan Ino. OK lang 'yan. Tahan na. Ito. Ganito ang paghawak ng harmonica.

INO: Kinuha na ba s'ya ng mga alien?

ED: Hindi ko alam. Hindi.

*Patutugtugin ni Ed ang harmonica. Hindi iimik si Ino. Hihiga ito sa mga hita ni Ed. Habang tumutugtog si Ed, maririnig si Ino na kakanta ng "Sampung Mga Daliri." Lalamlam ang mga ilaw sa entablado. Habang kumakanta si Ino ay ipo-project naman sa pader ng entablado ang iba't-ibang mga larawan o news clips ng mga batang napatay, sadya man o nadamay lamang, dahil sa digmaan laban sa droga at ang iilang magpahanggang ngayong hindi pa rin natagpuan simula noong maideklara ang batas military, ang mga desaparasidos.*

INO (umiiyak): SAMPUNG MGA DALIRI. KAMAY AT PAA.  
DALAWANG MATA. DALAWANG TENGA. ILONG  
NA MAGANDA.

*Hihinto si Ino. Ipipikit nito ang kanyang mga mata habang patuloy ang pagtugtog ng harmonica.*

INO: Nanay, Kuya Philip, sunduin n'yo na po ako. Nanay? Kuya?

*Dahan-dahan didilim ang entablado.*

TELON.

# ANG MGA NAIWAN

Soc Delos Reyes

## MGA TAUHAN

Soledad - 61 taong gulang. Pangalan ng anak: Toneng

Analyn - 40 taong gulang. Pangalan ng anak: Buboy

Stella - 26 taong gulang. Pangalan ng asawa: Nel

Taga-panayam<sup>1</sup> - Mga estudyante mula sa isang tanyag na paaralan sa Maynila.

## TAGPUAN

Filipinas. Kasalukuyang panahon. Serye ng mga panayam.

*Pagbukas ng mga ilaw, makikitang may tatlong upuan sa entablado. Papasok sa entablado ang tatlong tauhan at tatayo sila sa likod ng kani-kanilang upuan.*

STELLA: Estrella Villanueva.

ANALYN: Analyn Ortega.

SOLEDAD: Soledad Recio.

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<sup>1</sup> Kung hindi nakatukoy sa teksto, karaniwang hindi naririnig ang mga taga-panayam at nakaposisyon sila sa pwesto ng madla. Subalit, maaaring gumanap bilang taga-panayam ang ibang aktor habang nagaganap ang monologo ng isang tauhan.

*Maririnig ang ingay ng isang cafeteria. Magbabago ang eksena, tingo kay Analyn.*

**ANALYN:** Sige na, magmerienda na kayo. Wag na kayo mahiya. Lagi namang sumusobra ang luto nila rito sa cafeteria. (*Patlang*) Wala kayong inaabala. Mangilan-ngilan lang ang dumaraan pagkatapos ng tanghalian. Siesta namin 'to—ay muntik ko nang makalimutan—gusto ninyo ng Coke? Kape? (*May sesenyasan siyang kapwa-serbidora*) Kung maka-Manang naman kayo, ate Analyn na lang. Hindi pa naman ako gano'n katanda. (*Bahagyang matatawa*) Sori, medyo kinakabahan lang. (*Aayusin ang pagkakaupo at ihaharap ang katawan tungo sa isang kamera*) Analyn Ortega. 40 taong gulang. Taga-North Fairview. Mag-iisang taon na rin siguro. Noon, halos araw-araw dumarating ang mga reporter. Kahit sa lamay, ando'n sila. Ang daming tanong, paulit-ulit! Nakakakaba pala ang mga kamera. Parang natutunaw ako sa mga ilaw. Pumutok ang pangalan ng anak ko pagkatapos mabalita e. Mga reporter din ba kayo? (*Patlang, halatang manghihinayang si Analyn sa narinig niyang sagot*) A, estudyante. Sa'n kayo nag-aaral? (*Patlang*) Maganda raw do'n. No'ng bata si Buboy, sabi niya mag-aaral daw siya ro'n. (*Patlang*) Ay, hindi. Hanggang elementari lang ang anak ako. Dumiretso sa pagtatrabajo. (*Patlang*) Kung ano-anong, kung sa'n-sa'n nagsususuot para makakuha ng pera. Pagtagal, napunta siya sa construction. Hindi malaki ang kita pero may nauuuwi kahit papa'no.

**TAGA-PANAYAM:** Totoo po bang gumamit siya ng droga?

**ANALYN:** Oo, gumamit siya. Shabu. Salot talaga 'yan dito sa 'min. Ang daming mga batang napapagamit dahil sa hirap ng buhay. (*Patlang*) Hindi ka kasi nagugutom pag gumagamit ka. Tapos 'yong pagod din parang nawawala raw talaga pero kako, isip naman ang kapalit. Salot talaga e. Alam mo naman, banatan talaga ng buto sa construction kaya lahat napapagamit, naimpluwensiyan lang si Buboy. Mali naman talaga, di ko ipagkakaila 'yon. Sabi ko nga sa kaniya, kasalanan 'yan sa Diyos. Sabi nga sa Bibliya di ba, templo ang katawan, gawa 'yan ng Diyos at dapat alagaan. Pero 'yon, napagamit pa rin si Buboy.

### *Patlang.*

Pero tumigil siya noong tumakbo si Digong. Nag-ayos ng buhay. Gabi-gabi nagdadasal, Sabado't Linggo kung magsimba—tinalo pa 'ko e—pangako. (*Patlang*) Pro-Duterte kasi kami. Naniwala nga kami sa pagbabagong pinangako. Ika nga ni Buboy, kasama raw ng pagboto niya kay Digong ang pagtigil niya sa droga. Idinaan niya sa pagtrabaho, pagkain nang maayos, pagdarasal. Pagkatapos ng eleksyon, nagpalista pa siya sa barangay. 'Yong parang watchlist ng mga dating gumagamit.

### *Patlang.*

May mga flyer na ipinakalat ang mga tanod. Libreng gamot daw, kawnseling, tapos may pa-zumba pa sa kort. Tuwang-tuwa pa si Buboy no'ng ikinukuwento niya sa 'kin. Inabangan niya 'yon e, gumigising pa siya no'n nang maaga para sabayan 'yong zumba-zumba sa Umagang Kay Ganda. Praktis daw e.

Sumunod naman si Buboy sa lahat ng pinagawa. Siya pa ngang unang nagpalista sa barangay, e. Pagkaanawns na pagkaanawns sa 'min, diretso siya sa barangay. Sinunod niya lahat. Hindi ko alam kung bakit dinamay pa siya ng pulis. (*Patlang*) Wala, walang kaaway 'yon dito. Kuya nga ang turing sa kaniya rito. Taon-taon nagko-coach nga siya sa mga paliga-liga sa barangay. Kahit droga, nililimot niya para sa mga pleyer niya. Do'n siya pinakamasaya.

*Magbabago ang eksena, tungo kay Stella.*

**STELLA** (*tungo sa anak na hindi nakikita ng madla*): Jaja! Gawin mo na muna ang homework mo, anak. Dali na. (*Mapapabuntong-hininga*) Sori, 'nak, kailangan ko muna kausapin sina ate at kuya. Hindi puwede, usapang matanda 'to. (*Bahagyang matatawa*) Oo, big girl ka na pero hindi pa puwede, okey? Diyan ka na lang muna kay lola (*tungo sa Nanay na hindi nakikita ng madla*) Nay, sori, puwede po bang samahan ninyo muna si Jaja sa kwarto—

(*Patlang*)

*Papanoorin ni Stella ang pag-alis ng dalawa.*

Pasensiya na, ha. Alam ninyo naman, bata. Kulit. (*Patlang*) Salamat. Namana niya sa ‘kin ang ganda niya. (*Bahagyang matatawa*) Magna-nine sa susunod na buwan.

*Patlang.*

Walang problema. Buti nga nakadayo kayo rito sa Laguna. Grabe talaga ang trapik ‘no? (*Patlang*) Nakita ko sa Facebook ‘yong poster ninyo tapos ... nagbakasakali lang na ano. Salamat talaga.

*Patlang. Ihaharap ni Stella ang kaniyang katawan tungo sa isang kamera.*

Estrella Villanueva. Stella. 25 years old po. Taga-Laguna. September 30 po.

*Patlang.*

Asawa ko si Nel.

*Patlang. Mapapangiti si Stella.*

5 years kaming kasal. Dapat, 5 years na. Pero naging kami no’ng hayskul pa. Nabuntis ako no’ng college, first year kami no’n. Di na kami nakapagtapos.

Akala ko nga, iiwan niya na ‘ko. Iyak ako nang iyak no’ng inamin ko. Alam ninyo kung ano sabi niya sa ‘kin? “Pakasal na tayo.” Akala ko ginagago niya ‘ko. Sabi lang niya, “Ikaw lang naman ang gusto kong pakasalan e.” Putsa, lalo tuloy akong umiyak. Bwisit ‘yon. Hindi muna kami nagpakashal agad kasi pinalaki muna

namin si Jaja. Head weyter siya sa catering para suportahan kami. May iba pa siyang pangarap, pero inuna niya kami. Kaya nagtrabaho siya, kaso minsan ginagabi na ng uwi. Siyempre, ang hirap hindi mag-alala kaya sabi ko magteks siya palagi. Kung gagabihin, habang pauwi, pag malapit na, basta magteks siya.

Sobrang late na no'n. Nakatulog na sa sofa si Jaja kakahintay kaya dinala ko siya sa kuwarto. Nagteks naman sa 'kin si Nel. Pauwi na raw siya. May pasalubong pang keyk. Pero ang tagal niya. Dati, teks siya nang teks kahit bumabiyah e. Hindi ako mapakali. In-on ko ang TV. Ang tahimik kasi. Tsek ako nang tsek sa selpon ko. Pero hindi pa rin siya nagteteks. Baka naubusan ng bateri. O kaya walang signal. Ang bigat na ng mga mata ko kaso hindi pa rin ako mapakali. Pero, nakaidlip ako. Di ko alam kung kailan. Basta nagising na lang ako— Taga-barangay daw. Tinanong kung ako ba si Stella, kung ako ba ang asawa ni Nel. Opo, asawa ko si Nel. Kasi pauwi na raw siya no'n. Tapos nando'n lang siya sa kabilang barangay. May pulis, may suspek. May suspek na hinahabol. Hindi naman daw si Nel. Pero nando'n siya, no'n hinahabol 'yong suspek. Tapos natamaan siya ng bala. Tapos tinanong ko kung okey lang ba siya, di raw niya masagot basta sumama na lang daw ako. Gusto ko kasing malaman kung okey lang ba siya. Tinanong ko kung okey lang ba siya. Okey lang ba siya?! Basta ... sumama lang daw ako. E, hindi ko maiwan si Jaja. Walang magbabantay kay Jaja.

### *Patlang.*

Di ko alam kung paano ipapaintindi sa kaniya. Ako mismo, minsan naiisip kong andito pa si Nel. May mga umaga na— alam mo 'yong medyo gising ka pa pero parang nananaginip ka pa rin? Gano'n. Minsan, pagkabangon ko, maiisip kong andito siya. Sa tabi ko. Tapos matatauhan ako.

*Magbabago ang eksena, tungo kay Soledad. Maririnig ang ingay ng lungsod.*

**SOLEDAD** (*nagbebenta ng mga tsinelas sa bangketa*): Pipti, pipti! (*makikita ang mga taga-panayam*) Kayo na naman. A, mga estudyante, ‘kala ko kasi mga reporter. Galit ako sa mga reporter. O tsinelas, pipti lang yan. Matibay ‘yan. E, ano nga ‘yong itatanong ninyo? Tungkol sa anak ko? Iyan, magandang klase ‘yan, bagay sa paa mo. E mabilis lang ba ‘to? (*Ihaharap ang kaniyang katawan tungo sa isang kamera*) E, ‘yon ba, ‘yong pula? May recording? Aksiyon na? Aksyon. Soledad Recio, 61. Balo na. Taga-Marikina. ‘Yong anak ko, tatlo. ‘Yong dalawa, nasa kulungan. Ano pa nga ba, e di droga? Matagal na, bago pa maupo si Digong. ‘Yong isa ko pang anak, pinatay no’n September. September 5, 2016? 2016.

*Patlang. Sandaling magliligpit ng mga tsinelas si Soledad habang nakikinig.*

Si Toneng. Siya kasi ang bunso sa lahat. Siyempre, sunod nang sunod sa mga kuya. Di pa alam ang gagawin niya. Asar talo lagi kasi siya ang bunso. Uwi, paiyak-iyak. Magpapabunso. Ang gagawin ko, patatahanin ko. Pero mahabang patahan. Kailangan pang kantahan, susmaryosep. Pero a’yon, tigas ng ulo, susunod pa rin sa mga kuya. Tinuruan na siya ng kung ano-ano, pati droga.

*Patlang.*

Nagtatraysikel siya noon. Maaga pa lang, aalis na ‘yon para mamasada. Pagkauwi, mag-aabot ng pera, “Nay, pangbigas. Pang-ulam.” Paboritong ulam ... adobo. Kaya ayun, puro toyo ang laman ng utak. Linggo-lingga, tuwing dadalaw kami sa mga kuya niya, papaalala niya lagi, “Nay, magluto ka ng adobo para sa mga kuya.”

*Patlang.*

Gabing-gabi no’n. Wala pa si Toneng sa bahay kasi namamasada pa. Lasing kasi no’n ng nakaraang gabi. Ayun, di nagising nang maaga. Sinubukang bumawi. Buong gabi nagtatrabaho. Sabi ng mga drayber, tulog daw siya no’n sa traysikel. Umidlip muna kasi

nga puyat. Dinampot daw bigla ng pulis. 'Yong kumpare niya, pumunta sa bahay namin no'ng madaling araw. Si Toneng daw, nasa kabilang barangay. May mga reporter tsaka pulis. Sumama ako sa kaniya. Pagkarating ko ... si Toneng nga. Nakahilata sa daan.

Nakita ko siya. Wala akong masabi. Wala akong magawa. Yinakap ko na lang siya nang mahigpit. Parang dati lang noong pinapatahan ko pa siya. Anak. Andito lang ako. Anak, tahan na, andito na si Nanay. H'wag na iyak. H'wag na mag-alala. Andito lang ako, andito ... (*Patlang*) Wala akong nagawa. Ang daming ilaw. Ang daming tao. Kinuha ng pulis ang bangkay niya. Dinumog ako ng mga reporter.

Di naman siya kailangang patayin. Sana itinambak na lang siya sa presinto kasama mga kuya niya. Para makita ko pa siya, kahit kada linggo lang.

**ANALYN:** Dapat nasa bahay lang siya no'n. Nag-iinuman sila ng barkada niya. Naglalaro ng tong-its. Tapos biglang may tumawag kay Buboy. May mga pulis daw do'n sa bahay ng isa sa mga pleyer niya. Sabi ko nga sa kaniya, "Wag ka nang magpunta ro'n, delikado." Tumawa lang siya. Wala naman daw mangyayaring masama. Kakausapin lang daw niya.

### *Patlang*

Ikinuwento na lang sa 'kin kung ano nangyari. Sinabi ko na ngang delikado e. Ba't kasi hindi siya nakinig? Nagmamakaawa raw si Buboy sa mga pulis. Susuko naman daw. H'wag daw magpapaputok kasi nga may mga bata sa loob ng bahay. H'wag daw magpa— (*Maririnig ang tunog ng pagputok ng baril. Tatlong beses. Patlang*) 'Yong una, sa pader ng bahay. Manipis pa naman 'yon. Buti na lang walang natamaan sa loob. Lumusot daw talaga'yong bala. 'Yong pangalawa at pangatlo, kay Buboy. Sinangga raw niya 'yong mga bala. Ang sabi sa 'min ng pulis, nanlaban daw. Napilitan daw silang magpaputok. Pero hindi, sinangga ni Buboy ang mga bala. Kasi nga, may mga bata sa loob ng bahay.

*Patlang.*

No'ng kukunin ko na sana si Buboy, hininggan pa nila 'ko ng twenti-payb tawsand. Punerariya, autopsy ... Diyos ko, saan ako pupulot ng twenti-payb tawsand? Isang buwan bago ko siya nakuha. Sila naman 'yong nagpaputok ng baril. Sila naman ang pumatay sa anak ko. Dapat sila ang nagbayad. Dapat nga ako 'yong binigyan nila ng twenti-payb tawsand.

**STELLA:** Pagkatapos ilibing si Nel, nakitira na kami ni Jaja dito sa Nanay ko. Para makalayo. (*Patlang*) Pero kasi ... no'ng isang linggo, umuwi si Jaja tapos ang dami niyang sugat. Umiiyak kasi pinagkaishahan daw ng mga kaklase niya. Tinawag siyang anak ng adik, paulit-ulit. Anak ng adik. Nakakagalit talaga. E umalis nga kami ng Maynila kasi pinagtitsimisan nila si Nel. Kesyo adik naman daw talaga'yong asawa ko at binubugbog daw kaming mag-inia. Tapos ngayon, kung kailan nakalayo na kami, makikita ko 'yong anak ko, binu-bully? Sinugod ko talaga ang mga magulang. Ano ba naman yan, bakit di nila pagsabihan 'yong anak nila? (*Patlang*) Oo, nag-sorry. Pero pati ba naman dito, hahabulin kami ng tsismis.

**SOLEDAD:** E 'di eto, mag-isa na lang. Siyempre, kailangan ko pa rin kumayod para sa dalawa kong anak. Linggo-lingga, bibisitahin ko't dadalhan ko ng adobo. Baka multuhin ako ni Toneng kung makalimutan ko e. (*Bahagyang mataawa*) Napakatahimik kapag mag-isa ka na lang. Lalo na no'ng Pasko at bagong taon. Naki-noche buena na lang ako sa kapitbahay. No'ng bagong taon naman, pinanood ko ang mga paputok. Tapos bumili ako ng isang roman candle. Paborito 'yon ni Toneng e. No'ng bata pa siya, nangangaroling siya para makabili ng roman candle. Masaya naman, kahit papaano.

**ANALYN:** Dalawang linggo na no'n, di ko pa rin nakukuha ang bangkay niya. Tapos nagpakita siya sa 'kin. Hindi. Hindi ako nagmamatikmata no'n, totoo talaga ang nakita ko. Nando'n siya sa tabi ng mesa, nakaupo, walang sinasabi. Pero habang tumatagal, mas lalong nabubuo 'yong itsura niya, na parang pwede ko na siyang

mahawakan. Suot niya 'yong t-shirt niya no'ng gabing binaril siya tapos unti-unti nakukulayan ng dugo ang suot niya. Umiiyak siya. Pero hindi pinapahid 'yong luha niya. Hindi kumikibo. Walang sinasabi. Gabi-gabi siyang nagpapakita sa 'kin, hanggang sa nakuha ko ang bangkay niya. Pero hanggang sa huli, wala akong nasabi sa kaniya.

*Patlang. Makikinig ang tatlo, tila pinapakinggan ang parehong tanong mula sa taga-panayam.*

STELLA: Hindi.

ANALYN: Hindi.

SOLEDAD: Hindi. Kanino naman ako pupunta? Sino kakasuhan ko? Wala raw ebidensiya. Nakita lang daw 'yong bangkay niya sa kabilang barangay. Ano pang magagawa ko?

ANALYN: Kahit ano pang sabihin ko, pareho pa rin ang sasabihin nila. Nanlaban daw.

STELLA: Sabi nila, ligaw na bala lang daw. Ayaw nilang amining napakamalan nila si Nel.

*Patlang.*

ANALYN: Ipinagdarasal ko na lang siya. Sana tinanggap ng Diyos si Buboy. Namatay naman siyang sinusubukang iligtas ang iba. Sana sapat na 'yon. (*Mapapatigil, may kukuning papel mula sa bulsa*) Hihingi sana ako ng pabor, baka pwede ninyong mahanan ng paraan na makaabot 'to kay Digong. Baka kung mabasa niya 'to, matulungan niya ako. Baka mapakulong 'yong mga pulis na pumatay sa anak ko. Pasensiya na, akala ko kasi no'ng una mga reporter kayo. Pero nag-aaral naman kayo sa magandang skul, di ba? Baka may kakilala kayo. O kaya i-post ninyo sa Facebook para mag-viral? Bakasakali lang, wala nang makikinig sa 'kin. (*Iaabot ang papel*)

SOLEDAD: Wala naman akong magagawa. Habang nabubuhay, tuloy lang ang laban. Kailangan pa ako ng dalawa kong anak. Isasa-Diyos

ko na lang ang lahat ng sama ng loob ko. Tatal, wala namang maitutulong dito ang sama ng loob.

**STELLA:** Nag-promise ako kay Nel na bubuhayin ko ang anak namin. Kaya susubukan kong h'wag mabaón sa sama ng loob. Di ako papayag na mamatay siya nang gano'n-gano'n na lang. Gusto kong malaman niyang hindi ko siya kakalimutan.

*Makakarinig ng voice-over na binibigkas ang mga pangalan ng mga biktima ng EJK. Isa-isang aalis ng entablado ang mga tauhan.*

**VOICE-OVER:** Christopher Dawal. San Juan.

Alyas "Jojo". Caloocan.

Unidentified 4 month old baby. Cebu.

Irene Dacoba. Pasig.

Unidentified casualty. Zamboanga ...

*Patuloy ang pagbigkas ng mga pangalan ng mga biktima. Unti-unti itong hihina kasabay ng paglamlam ng ilaw sa entablado, hanggang sa maglaho ang lahat. Wakas.*

# AN ARCHIPELAGO OF DESIRE:

## Alfred Yuson's Islands of Words & Other Poems

(MANILA: UST PUBLISHING HOUSE, 2015)

Ma. Ailil B. Alvarez

Only in a poet's imagination can loneliness be ferried out into the sea, where it builds on a need to be abated and its desire finds solace in an archipelago of syllables architected to depict the spectral hues of human experience. These and more are promised by Alfred A. Yuson's poems in his 2015 collection, *Islands of Words & Other Poems* (Manila: UST Publishing House).

The title clues readers in on how the book is structured: the first part is composed of poems on a variety of topics, while a long narrative poem in the guise of a poem cycle occupies the second half of the book.

In Yuson's poems, ideas always find a comfortable fit in form. In "Contours, liquid" (p. 48), for instance, the lines are short, mimicking the very movement of fluid, of every slide and drop, as well as the quick pulsating rhythms of lovemaking.

His poems can, on the other hand, also look like they are lyrical renditions of a modernist, abstract painting because of the visual as well as acoustic appeal of his verses. In the opening poems aptly titled "Conversation 1" and "Conversation 2" (pp. 3-6), the stanzas on the page visually look like black and white boxes on a checkerboard, indicating the alternating and contrasting insights of a man and a woman. Moreover, the images he chooses, when juxtaposed, create tension in the enjambments. As in the first stanza of "Self-flagellation":

A poem of over a hundred  
years ago  
speaks to us  
from a future  
illumined by progress  
of streetlamps, the dogs  
of a century still raising  
one foreleg in the cause  
of correct direction. (p. 49)

But it is clear that the poet's primary interest is in wielding language as a weapon. This is true in "Broken, gilded words" (pp. 55-6) where his discovery of Japanese terms for things "both ordinary and strange," in "our world / or in theirs" (thereby creating a locus of externality in the treatment of the connection), such as *tsundoku*, "the mania / of acquiring books only / to leave them unread in piles / all over intimate areas," and *kintsugi*, the craft of "mending / a broken ceramic piece / by rejoining the shards / with no less than gold." He leaves the reader with this insight, sonorous as it is profound: "that any piece of art becomes / even better when flawed — / with any marring effect / as a spirit line for escape."

Master of alliteration, of sibilance, of assonance: lines such as the following from "Performance Artist" prove his prowess as a craftsman of language, as someone who knows how to play with the tools he is given:

Scissors shearing her lush hair  
or disembowelling a teddy bear.

Why, it's a performance lady  
getting a rise from viewers' comforts.  
She's in a zone between zigzag and zymurgy,  
afflicting the calm and collected  
stances of staid or curious watchers.  
Woe woe to their ways of semblance  
to lives conflicted as in the stop and go,  
cum distilled pauses, of the everyday. (p. 31)

In “Random kindness, acts of,” the associative power of imagery are used to the full when words loop and connect in couplets like links on a chain:

When the letter left her fervid hand  
the poinsettia started turning red.

How distance amplified the words  
of poignance, caused colors to weep

the way bright ships turned ghostly dim  
upon sailing farther into season’s horizon. (p. 53)

The poet delights in giving his images the unexpected twist. In “Prodigy” (pp. 41-2), a chess game is used as a metaphor for what seems to be the Anxiety of Influence, of overthrowing tradition and favoring the young. A parallel father-and-son dynamic is touched on in “Ink,” where the speaker himself cringes at the sight of his son’s first foray into tattooing, asking “Why couldn’t he just have vandalized / the neighbor’s walls, rather / than break the rhythm of his skin?” and leading him to conclude,

Time ruins happy places all the time.  
Change reigns each time our wives  
grunt and give birth to the next decades  
of wasted tradition (p. 43)

The other poems reveal his varied interests: food and cooking (which, in “Blood Moon and Beef Bourguignon,” were used as metaphors for a deteriorating relationship [p. 46]), sports (in “Being One,” he focuses on “the way Nadal grunts, almost / with venom” [p. 8]), politics (“Being a Hero” and “Ready to Reply in the Proper Forum,” “What Else But Such” [pp. 16-9, 57-8, 29-30]), tributes to his friends, and significant cultural events, like Pope Francis’ Philippine visit (in “Kinds of Happiness” [pp. 27-8]). Some of his poems offer a sliver of spirituality, such as “The Long Poem to Faith” (pp. 11-3). But in all of them is the trademark Yuson style of underplaying humor, sometimes couched in subtle erotic subtexts, as his preferred mode of language play.

As to the collection’s title poem, “Islands of Words,” this is Yuson turning to the mythical, ordaining his own brand of mythopoesis. It recalls a time of tribal imagination of folkloric proportions. It imagines the customs

and lifeways of a tribe that exists in the realm of myth: it articulates their fears, depicts their battles and explorations, sings their incantations, personifies the wood made into boats. Centered around the sea, the work is suggestive of life and of truth—so much so that when the people in the poem learn there is another name for it, it shattered everything they believed in, and so forced, they bid farewell to beauty.

The poet also varies verse length and stanza forms in this poem, to depict different personae. He also writes of songs and dances and rituals and priestesses—the exotic-sounding landscape is ripe with possibilities for tension, and conflict—which, as Tim Tomlinson wrote in his introduction, is the “engine of narrative” (p. ix). What is remarkable is how Yuson, in all things, touches on the myriad forms of exodus, of the pains of leaving and starting over, of differences in language as the lifeblood of a culture, of change and conversion, and conflicts between convention and innovation—the cycle could easily be taken as an allegory of a myriad situations that touch on domains both personal and political.

The persona delights the reader in poetic descriptions of action, speech, and character—a beautiful, fluid lyricism. It is as if the long poem is interested in telling a story as much as it is invested in becoming a poem. Rich in the employment of other sound devices in English, it is clear that every line bears the stamp of the poet, where he does precisely what he does well:

Hiss. Crackle, sparkle. We dance till the dry branches  
are consumed, and the glow intermittent on our faces  
and ankles dies out with the magic, till old and young  
together we are happy in exhaustion, our feet stomping  
with reduced fury on our sacred ground, till the chief  
pounds the gong with dreamweave cloth sheathing  
his wooden fist, till the priestess points to the sparks  
and the stars, and the children pray with her for marvels. (p. 67)

Tomlinson also quotes Merlie Alunan in saying that “poetry isn’t about words, poetry is about the silence after the explosion that the words lead to.” At the end of the poem cycle, that is indeed what the reader immerses him or herself in, thinking about “heroic acts / of bitterly, happily, slaying one another” (p. 107).

## THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Gémino H. Abad** is a University Professor emeritus of literature and creative writing, is a poet, fictionist, and literary critic and historian, with various honors and awards. In 2009, he received Italy's Premio Feronia ("Foreign author category") for his poetry, later published as a bi-lingual edn., *Dove le parole non si spezzano* (Roma: Edizioni Ensemble, 2015; a cura di Gëzim Hajdari, traduzio-ne di Andrea Gazzoni). *When Bridges Are Down, Mountains Too Far* (2020) is his eleventh poetry collection, and *Past Mountain Dreaming* (2010), his ninth of critical essays; he has two collections of short stories, *Orion's Belt* (1996) and *A Makeshift Sun* (2001). He is known also for his anthology series of Filipino poetry in English from 1905 to the 1990s: *Man of Earth* (co-ed., Edna Zapanta Manlapaz; 1989), *A Native Clearing* (1993), *A Habit of Shores* (1999), and its 2-vol. sequel, *The Achieve of, the Mastery* (co-ed., Mookie Katigbak-Lacuesta, 2018); and his six-volume anthology of Filipino short stories in English from 1956 to 2008: *Upon Our Own Ground* (2008), *Underground Spirit* (2010), and *Hoard of Thunder* (2012). He obtained his Ph.D. in English at the University of Chicago in 1970, and continues to teach at U.P. where he has served as Secretary of the University, Vice-President for Academic Affairs, and Director of the U.P. Creative Writing Center (now an Institute).

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Si **Stefani J. Alvarez** ay nagkamit ng National Book Award mula sa Manila Critics' Circle para sa Best Book of Non-Fiction Prose in Filipino para sa kaniyang unang librong *Ang Autobiografia ng Ibang Lady Gaga* (Visprint, 2015). Kinilala rin sa nasabing parangal para sa Best Book of Short Fiction ang kaniyang nobelang *Kagay-an, At Isang Pag-Ibig Sa Panahon ng All-Out War* (Psicom-Literati, 2018). Nalathala ang ilan sa kaniyang mga akda sa *Liwayway* at iba pang antolohiya gayundin, isinalin sa English, Chinese, at Bahasa para sa *Afterwork Readings* ng Para Site – Hong Kong. Tagapangulo siya ng Kataga - Online, isang sangay ng grupong Kataga - Samahan ng Mga Manunulat Sa Pilipinas at Honorary Member ng NAGMAC (Nagkahiusang Magsusulat sa Cagayan de Oro). Naging fellow siya sa iba't ibang creative writing workshops. Isa siyang OFW simula pa noong 2008 at kasalukuyang naninirahan sa Al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia.

**Mark Anthony Cayanan** obtained an MFA from the University of Wisconsin in Madison and is a PhD candidate at the University of Adelaide. They are the author of *Narcissus* (Ateneo, 2011) and *Except you enthrall me* (UP, 2013); their third poetry book, *Unanimal, Counterfeit, Scurrilous*, is forthcoming from Giramondo Publishing in 2021. New work has appeared or is forthcoming in, among others, *Crab Orchard Review*, *The Margins*, *Overland*, *The Spectacle*, and *Lana Turner*. A recipient of fellowships from Civitella Ranieri in Italy and Villa Sarkia in Finland, they teach at the Ateneo de Manila University.

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**Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr.** is the author of *Aria and Trumpet Flourish* (Math Paper Press, Singapore) and the chapbooks *Requiem* and *Hymnal* (Vagabond Press, Australia). His poems have been published in *Tomas*, *Likhaan: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature*, *Kritika Kultura*, *Banwa*, and other journals and anthologies. He has received prizes from the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, Kokoy F. Guevara Poetry Competition, Sixfold, and the British Council. He has been based in Singapore since 2011.

**Si Soc Delos Reyes** ay nagtapos ng BFA Creative Writing mula sa Pamantasang Ateneo de Manila. Naging bahagi siya ng Virgin Labfest Fellowship Program, Palihang LIRA, UST National Writers' Workshop, Henry Lee Irwin SJ Chair Creative Writing Workshop, at Ricky Lee Scriptwriting Workshop. Itinanghal ang kaniyang mga dula sa Ateneo Fine Arts Festival, Virgin Labfest ng CCP, at ng Teatro Kolchiyo ng Miriam. Kasapi siya ng Linangan sa Imahen, Retorika, at Anyo (LIRA) at alumnus ng Tanghalang Ateneo. Kasalukuyan siyang nagtuturo sa High School department ng The Raya School.

**Si Mina Deocareza** ay nagtapos ng kursong BA Creative Writing sa UP Diliman. Kasalukuyang siyang kumukuha ng MA Language and Literacy Education sa UP Open University. Naging writing fellow siya sa UST National Writers' Workshop (2019). Siya ang tumatayong Editorial Director ng Sinaya Cup.

**George Deoso** finished his bachelor's degree in Literature (magna cum laude) from the University of Santo Tomas, where he is currently taking up his MA in Creative Writing. He is the author of *Revolt and Other Horrors* (UST, 2020). For his works, Deoso received twelve Gawad USTetika awards. His essays, stories, and poems have appeared in *Dapitan*, *Liwayway Magazine*, *The Sunday Times Magazine*, *Philippine Panorama*, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, and *Sustaining the Archipelago: An Anthology of Philippine*, among other publications. He was also a fellow for poetry in the national writers' workshops of UST, De La Salle University, and Silliman University.

**U Z. Eliserio** is an artist from Marilao. For his works, visit: [www.instagram.com/ueliserio](http://www.instagram.com/ueliserio).

**R. Benedito Ferrão** A writer and academic, he is currently an Assistant Professor of English and Asian & Pacific Islander American Studies at The College of William and Mary and a Fulbright-Nehru Academic and Professional Excellence Research Fellow at the Xavier Center of Historical Research, Goa. In 2017-18, he curated the art exhibition *Goa/Portugal/Mozambique: The Many Lives of Vamona Navelcar* (Fundação Oriente Gallery, Goa), and edited a book of the same title, published by Fundação Oriente

(2017), to accompany this retrospective of Navelcar's art. His scholarly writing appears in various international journals and edited books, including *Research in African Literatures* and *Places of Nature in Ecologies of Urbanism* (HKU Press 2017); his fiction and creative non-fiction can be read in *Riksha*, *The Good Men Project*, *Mizna*, *The João Roque Literary Journal*, and other publications.

Si **Ralph Fonte** ay manggagamot at manunulat mulang Kalakhang Maynila. Makailang ulit nang nagwagi sa mga patimpalak ang kaniyang mga tula. Mababasa naman sa mga lathalain gaya ng *Young STAR*, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Voice&Verse Poetry Magazine*, at *Cordite Poetry Review* ang iba niyang mga akda. Nakapagtanghal na rin siya bilang makata sa iba't ibang entablado sa Timog-Silangang Asya.

**Ralph Semino Galán**, poet, literary and cultural critic, translator and editor, is the Assistant Director of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies. He is an Associate Professor of Literature, the Humanities and Creative Writing in the UST Faculty of Arts and Letters and the UST Graduate School. He is the author of the following books: *The Southern Cross and Other Poems* (UBOD New Authors Series, NCCA, 2005), *Discernments: Literary Essays, Cultural Critiques and Book Reviews* (USTP, 2013), *From the Major Arcana [poems]* (USTPH, 2014), and *Sa mga Pagitan ng Buhay at Iba pang Pagtutulay [translations]* (USTPH, 2018).

**Eugene Gloria** is the author of four books of poems—*Sightseer in This Killing City* (Penguin-Random House, 2019), *My Favorite Warlord* (winner of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award), *Hoodlum Birds*, and *Drivers at the Short-Time Motel* (a National Poetry Series selection and recipient of the Asian American Literary Award). In 2017, Gloria served as a Senior Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila. He is the John Rabb Emison Professor of Creative and Performing Arts and Professor of English at DePauw University.

**Popi Laudico** is an Architect by profession, an Iyengar Yoga teacher, and an avid Argentine Tango enthusiast. Her book, *Shaw Boulevard*, was published by UST Publishing House (2018). She was part of the anthologies *Turning Points* (Anvil), which was a finalist at the 31st National Book Awards, *Friend Zones* (Ateneo), and *Be Hands On* (Anvil). Her work has been published in *The Philippine Free Press* and *Inquirer Red Magazine*.

**Rolin Cadallo Obina** is a Collections Director in one of the leading financial companies in the country. He is a playwright and is an active member of The Writer's Bloc, an organization of playwrights based in Manila. He is an alumnus of Ricky Lee's Scriptwriting Workshop and Rody Vera's Playwriting Class. His plays *Ang Pag-uulyanin ni Olivia Mendoza* (2019) and *Mga Bata sa Selda 43* (2018) were staged at the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) through the Virgin Labfest. He has won the Don Carlos Palanca Award for Literature (2018) for his full-length stageplay, *San Nicolas, Ang Sarsuwela*. He is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Creative Writing at the Pontifical and Royal University of Santo Tomas in Manila.

**Jenny Ortuoste** has written about horseracing many times before. Her piece on the now-defunct Santa Ana Park won a first-place Carlos Palanca Memorial Award for the essay. As an industry insider of nearly 30 years' standing, she wrote a horseracing column, "The Hoarse Whisperer" for the *Manila Standard*, where she simultaneously wrote opinion, "Pop Goes The World.". Five of her fiction stories have garnered Nick Joaquin Literary awards and have been published in Philippines Graphic and other publications, while her creative nonfiction has appeared in UST's *Tomás* and the University of the Philippines-Diliman's *Likhaan*. Her short story collection, *Fictionary*, was published by UST (2016). Some pieces from her *Salitang Makulay* series of embroidered works were exhibited at the *Chromatext Rebooted* show at the Philippines' Cultural Center in 2016. Two of her artworks have graced the covers of books – one of a UST author, the other of a Fil-American poet in Northern California. She teaches creative writing at the UST Graduate School, where she is an assistant professor. She obtained BA and PhD Communication degrees from UP-Diliman, and an MBA from the Ateneo de Manila University.

**Si Chuckberry J. Pascual** ay nagtapos sa UP Diliman. Siya ang awtor ng *Kumpisal* (UST), *Pagpasok sa Eksena* (UP Press), *Ang Nawawala* (Visprint), *Ang Tagalabas sa Panitikan* (UST), at *Hindi Ito Romansa* (Sentro ng Wikang Filipino). Nagtuturo siya sa UST at nagsisilbing Resident Fellow ng CCWLS at Faculty Researcher ng RCCAH.

**Danton Remoto** studied at the Ateneo de Manila University, Rutgers University (Fulbright Scholar), University of Stirling (British Council Scholar), and the University of the Philippines. His poems have won awards from the Cultural Center of the Philippines Literary Awards and the Philippine Literary Arts Council. In 2015, the Writers Union of the Philippines gave him the Gawad Balagtas National Achievement Award for Poetry in English. He has published three books of poetry and seven books of prose. His last book, *Riverrun, A Novel*, was published by Penguin Random House South East Asia to critical acclaim. He has worked as a publishing director, head of communications at the United Nations Development Programme, and a radio-TV talk show host. His body of work is cited in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Literature*, *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics and Poetry*, and *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Literature*.

**Anna Felicia C. Sanchez** is the author of the fiction collection *How to Pacify a Distraught Infant: Stories* (UP), which was a finalist in the 2018 National Book Awards, and the chapbook *Frog Leap & Other Stories*, published under the first NCCA Ubod New Authors Series. As Anna Ishikawa, Sanchez wrote the chick lit novellas *Odd Girl Out* and *Glamour Games* (PSICOM), as well as *Where Your Dreams Come True* (Fox Books). A number of her stories have won prizes in the Amelia Lapena-Bonifacio, Free Press, and Palanca literary awards. Her nonfiction pieces about parenting and disability have seen light in the *LIKHAAN: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature* and the anthology *Here and Now: Selected Poetics from the UP National Writers Workshop*. She finished her bachelor's and master's degrees in the Department of English and Comparative Literature of the University of the Philippines in Diliman, where she teaches literature and creative writing. She is currently an associate at the UP Institute of Creative Writing. Her second collection, *Pics or It Didn't Happen and Actual Stories* is due for publication by the UP Press.

**Joey A. Tabula** studied Medicine and Internal Medicine at the University of the Philippines. He was the editor of *From the Eyes of a Healer: An Anthology of Medical Anecdotes*, co-editor of *BULAWAN: Interviews with Filipino Medical Oncologists*, and co-author in *Painless Evidence-Based Medicine*. He is the vice president and publisher of Linangan sa Imahen, Retorika, at Anyo (LIRA), and a board member of Unyon ng mga Manunulat sa Pilipinas (UMPIL). He is currently writing his thesis for MFA in Creative Writing at the De La Salle University.

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**Ruth Clare G. Torres** She has a Master of Arts degree in Literature from the University of Santo Tomas, where she received the St. Antoninus Research Paper Presentation. Her work *Teaching Smaller and Smaller Circles as Detective Fiction* was also recently published in *Reading the Regions: Teaching Philippine Literature from Multi Perspectives* by the National Commission for Culture and The Arts. She teaches Spanish I and II to college students.

**Joel H. Vega** lives in Arnhem, The Netherlands, where he works as publications editor. His book *Drift* won the 2019 National Book Awards for Poetry in English and the Philippine Literary Arts Council for Best Poetry in English. His poems have appeared in various literary journals in the US, Philippines, The Netherlands, Germany, Austria, France, and the United Kingdom.

**Maria Amparo N. Warren** is a graduate of the University of the Philippines Diliman's Master of Arts in Creative Writing program. She is an alumna of the 12th IYAS Creative Writing Workshop, the 2nd IWP Alumni Writers' Workshop, the 13th Virgin Labfest Writing Fellowship Program, and the 1st Henry Lee Irwin SJ Chair's Creative Writing Workshop for Playwriting. Her prose has garnered prizes in UP's Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio Literary Contest and the Nick Joaquin Literary Awards. She is a three-time winner of the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, for the categories of One-Act Play and Poetry Written for Children. She was published in *Likhaan: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature, Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine, The Philippines Graphic*, and *Philippine Speculative Fiction Vol. 8*. She teaches creative writing part-time at Ateneo de Manila University.

# THE EDITORS

## Issue Editor

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## Managing Editor

**Paul Alcoseba Castillo**, CCWLS Resident Fellow, is the author of the poetry collections Pananangan (LIRA, 2016) and Walang Iisang Salita (UST, 2018), which won the National Book Award for Best Book of Filipino Poetry (2018). He won First Place for Poetry in Filipino in the 2018 Palanca Awards, and has also received honors from the Talaang Ginto: Makata ng Taon, and the Manining Midlat Poetry Awards.

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