



# TOMÁS

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

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The Journal of the  
UST Center for Creative Writing  
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# ANG PAG-AKDA SA PANAHONG ITO

Joselito D. De Los Reyes

Hindi panahon lamang ng Netflix at KPop, hindi panahon lamang ng halalan, lalong hindi panahon lamang ng naglipanang huwad na impormasyon. Kapag sinabi kong sa panahong ito, panahong ito ng ligalig dulot ng pandemya sa kalusugan at mas malalim na pandemya ng pamamamahala at pulitika ang tinutukoy ko.

Aaminin ko. Sa simula ng pandemya, minaliit ko ang magiging epekto ng salot. Tanda ko pa ang huling araw ko sa Maynila noong Marso 2020. Ilang araw lang ito tatagal, sa isip-isip ko. Babalik muli sa dati. Pero pagkatapos ng kulang-kulang dalawang taon, wala nang dating babalikan.

Tinamaan ang marami sa atin. Nawalan ako ng kapatid at mga kaibigan nang hindi man lamang nadadalaw ngayon ni puntod. Ipinagpasa-Diyos ko nang makaramdam ako ng sintomas noong kasagsagan ng salot. Puno ang mga ospital at isolation facilities, walang testing kits. Kaliwa't kanan ang dinadapuan, isang malawak na estadistika ang lahat. Nagkulong ako. Umasa sa pagdating ng hindi na paghinga. Tatlong gabi akong natulog nang paupo dahil sa hirap ng paghinga. Naitawid ko naman. Mula noon, nangamba na ako sa pag-iral nating lahat. Natakot ako para sa pamilya ko at para sa mga kaibigan. Gusto kong isulat ang pangamba at agam-agam. Hindi ko nagawa. Maliban ngayon.

Sa panahon ng ligalig at pagsubok natatangi ang manunulat. Gaya ng frontliners, sa panahong ito tayo kinakailangan upang itala ang mga pangyayari. Higit sa simplistikong ulat, bulletin, at estadistika ng mga biktima at nasawing nakasanayan natin, binibigyang kulay natin ang trahedya palayo sa pusyaw ng pighati. Umaasa tayong babasahin sa ibang panahon upang maihambing ang danas at katauhan.

Kapag haharap ako sa klase at nababanaagan ang pangamba sa mga mag-aaral ko ng malikhaing pagsulat, lagi kong alo at alok sa kanila, isulat ang agam-agam. Itala ang kasawian. Pulo-pulo. Pailan-ilan. Para maitawid

ang lubos na kalungkutan pabalik sa sana ay dati. Ngayon higit kailanman, mas maigting ang paghahangad natin sa pagbabalik ng karaniwan.

Sa isyung ito ng Tomas, nagsama-sama ang balisang tinig upang bigyan ng saysay ang guwang na nilikha ng kalamidad. Narito ang mga saysay, satsat, talastas. Malayong matawag na tematiko tulad ng nakasanayan nating dyornal na may kahingiang matupad ang tema; kung ano man ang temang pinagpulangan sa kung saang opisina ng ligtas pa sa pandemya. Hindi ganito ang Tomas 3.3.

Produkto ito ng Zoom; bunga rin ng pangamba't pighati. Nabalaho rin sa kawalang katiyakan kung magpapatuloy pa ba o iuuwing abo ang mortalidad ng mga kasama. May reviewer na hindi na lang tumugon, may mga kasamang kailangan munang unahing bumalik o magkanlong sa mas kilala at ligtas nilang sarili. Aaminin kong takot din akong magpatuloy. Bakit pa? Ano pa ang saysay ng balak kung sa pagkati ng lalamunan ng bawat isa, sa bawat hindi maitagong pag-ubo o banta ng sipon, hindi ka man kitlin ng virus, kukumot naman sa iyo ang lagim ng nakaambang kasawian. Kung hindi ka man kitlin ng virus, dadantay sa iyo ang lamig ng pag-iisa sa isolation facility, sa kwarantena, sa paglayo sa minamahal at pag-asam na hindi ito paglayong tuluyan at ganap.

Sa iba marahil, tinatawag ang hindi pagsulong bilang burnout sa trabaho o pagiging piyesa ng kapital, pwede ring pagsuko, o muling pagkilala sa sarili lalo sa kakayahang humarap sa peligro. Sa akin, tinawag ko ang estado bilang bakit-pa-nga-ba-magpapatuloy? Ilang buwan din akong nakatanga lamang sa harap ng monitor. Mabibigat ang daliri. Hindi totoo sa panghihikayat na kayanin ang lahat lalo na ng aking mga mag-aaral.

Sa panahong ito, mas nagkaroon ng kahulugan ang pangungumusta. Kumusta ba ang mga manunulat? Kinakaya pa ba? Nasa kalipunang ito ang maaaring maparikalang sagot.

Nang manawagan kami noong Nobyembre 2020 ng kontribusyon sa Tomas 3.3, umasa kaming dadagsain kami ng ambag hinggil sa salot. Mayroon din namang ilan sa pamamagitan ng mga sanaysay na naglalahad ng kanilang karanasan at katalogo ng mga panagyayari. Ngunit ang natatangi, naging lunsaran ang panawagan namin upang mapukaw ang mga akdang maaaring inaalikabok na nasa kung saang estante ng hard disk o Google Drive. May mga nagpalis ng alikabok kaya tumambad ang pagkagilalas sa mga akdang pre-pandemya.



Mayroong naglilimi sa saysay ng salita, sa narasyong pilosopikal at pampanitikan. Mayroong kumukuwestiyon sa umiiral na patakaran at pagtatakda sa kung ano ang salita at pananalita at pagbibigay kahulugan. May enumerasyon ng hilig at karanasan. Lahat ito ay balidasyon ng pagpapatuloy at paghahangad na magbalik sa karaniwan, ano man itong karaniwang inaasam.

Ang isyung ito ng Tomas ay iniaalay sa mga kasama sa panulat na hindi na namin kasama sa pagbabalik sa karaniwang pag-akda sa kabila ng panahong ito.

Lucban, Quezon  
Nobyembre 2021



# THE ELECTRIC MISDIRECTION OF LETTING DEITIES DREAM

Rysa Antonio

All you can perceive are mirrors. Not the reflective, translucent sort. The one-way kind—plastic and thin and scratchy. Like worn novelty mirrors in a faded funhouse.

You never bothered to wonder about your physical form before. It is simply a fact you accepted without much fuss—that you did not have a body or vessel to which your consciousness could occupy—and other sentient beings had their own. That easy acceptance came naturally to you, ingrained in you so deeply it hardly surfaced the deep recesses of your thoughts.

One of the windows strike your fancy, but perhaps that is too frivolous a way to describe how extra activity automatically flags your attention. But the vocabulary your personality dictates makes everything feel—seem—whimsical and mystic. This simulation presents itself as such to you.

Inside the frame is a café that appears vaguely Parisian, but covered in furniture and décor with deep purples, violets and maroons running over it, colors more suited to a burlesque than any actual European coffee house. Not that you knew what a burlesque actually looked like, or had any deeper understanding of where Europe is, other than a word you could use perfectly in context as an adjective. You are not sure why you notice this.

The occupants of this gaudy amalgamation of a café and a furry rug are the meager staff, a somber young girl behind the counter and a chipper busboy. The former busied herself with organizing the counter, while the latter near-obsessively cleaned one of the two tables in the store.

The busboy practiced his guttural spell chanting as he circled the rag around the already clean table. His quick rhythmic muttering seemed to be reserved only for himself, unbothered by any other spectators in the room. Whether or not he can actually hear himself with the headphones plugged on his hearing appendages is unclear as his voice trembled in varying volumes and inconsistent tones.

Historically, in this world, it's never been polite to use the word ears for the large protrusions on either side of the boy's head. His sort does not take kindly to their body parts being equated to human counterparts. Then again, they are also not fond of them being referred to as a "sort" of any kind. Not that this matters, as looking at the boy going about, completely immersed in his own world of music and mutterings, you think he's not one who'd grill you on political correctness. Additionally, he cannot perceive you at the moment, and therefore would not be aware even if you had said anything insensitive out loud.

The counter-girl is easier, and with lesser possibility of offense, to describe—human, teenager, looks like someone who ran away from home, probably did. Judging that half her face and one of her arms are made of metal and wires, she is probably not from the type of area that takes particular care in keeping their children safe on the ancient highway runes.

You are the owner of this store. They are your employees.

Or at least, applicants to be employees.

There is a test to be taken after all. You like calling them employees to boost their confidence a bit before you send them off to battle. Later, after they pass the second stage, you plan on telling them this. As is your cue to say such mischievous things. Like clockwork, your voiceover plays into their headsets. You are not sure why it's a voiceover, or why it repeats. Do you say it again and again or do you just listen to your voice passively? What does it mean to talk?

You laugh sardonically out of turn, not a voiceover, a sudden, loud sound to alert them both of your presence. They pause a bit, but then proceed to continue what they were doing. You are slightly surprised at their lack of reaction. It was impossible for them not to notice you. You laugh harder. It is as though they had already known the sound of your voice, the mocking baritone of your laugh.

Perhaps they aren't as innocent, or as young, as you thought. Have they been here before?

You do not concern yourself with the hundreds of other mirrors, for you are there as well, with your own set of musings and decisions. It is as simple as breathing, perceiving all things at once.

The girl seems to want to say something. But stops herself and goes on arranging the fake spices lined by the cash register. Getting impatient perhaps. It is normal for the applicants to want to get this part over with.

The boy stops what he is doing and finally removes his headphones.

He starts to slowly rip the rag apart. As the tear ruggedly splits the cloth, you feel an impish sensation glowing within you, perhaps the equivalent of a smile growing across your face.

The girl looks at him and does something a bit more daring; she throws the precious glass she was just wiping at the wall. He flips over the tables. She lifts the largest jar over her head and smashes it on the cash register. He starts lifting tiles. She breaks every object her hands touch on the counter.

Finding out the purpose for each test can seem deceptively easy. Applicants are sent to a location filled with different items and artifacts—from the mystical to the mundane—gloriously encrusted gold plates with intricate imagery lining its fine metal surface, delicate floating flowers with petals so thin one can only perceive it under strong sources of light, and in this case, old dusty dinnerware in flamboyant shapes and colors.

Within these settings, applicants must act based on trial and error, watching out for the only consistent sign in every scenario: once they have taken the correct interaction, the entire place glows. It is a quick but vibrant light, impossible to miss, as though everything inside the area contains a warm lightbulb flashing underneath their opaque surfaces.

As the purple walls and tables lit up in harsh, lavender illumination in tandem with the cracking porcelain and ripped cloth, they figure that they must have guessed the test's purpose today. But would they find out how to end it? Endings are a bit more predictable. Most of the time, they are unconnected to the test's purpose. However random, they tend to be much simpler and quite obvious. A flip of a switch. A fire that must be put out. A door that must be closed. A store that must be opened.

The girl walks towards the store door. Ah, warmer, warmer.

She touches the knob. Cold, cold.

Her hand moves up. Getting warmer.

She touches the sign. Hot! Hot! The room begins to shine, purple furniture illuminating the shop in a neon glow.

She flips it quickly to say OPEN.

Success.

The boy clasps her back and she turns to extend her hand. He accepts it then pulls her in for a hug. These two are full of surprises. They do know each other. A rare coincidence indeed.

It's a shame you only take one employee every time.

They stop their embrace and look at each other one last time as friends. It seems they knew that too. But something about their interaction feels a bit too casual. You detect something amiss. Strange how you notice that now, too.

For the next part of the examination, you send Harper.

Mr. Harper is a wise old goat. The most dapper quadruped you have ever seen, you might even say. When he stands upright, it is always with so much grace and trained restraint that it only seems slightly unnatural to watch him move. It can get a little disorienting for most first-timers, when this dressed up goat in coattails and a big red bowtie turns from eating blue grass off a metal plate to stand up and welcome them into the treasure hunt area.

Underneath his neutral expression and polite voice is an intensity. One that goes unnoticed at first glance, but when studied could easily be identified. Then again, rarely was there an interaction that surpassed even a minute with Mr. Harper. He deflects sensitive topics rather expertly and is too good at small talk. A curious question about a lock noticed on one of the large ornate frames could turn into a conversation about the applicant's favorite flower from her hometown's springtime.

As he accompanies the two applicants, walking away from the peculiar frames, they discuss the nostalgic scent of wisteria, while the beating tangle of metal and mechanisms whirring underneath the frame continue to turn and bend and churn unbeknownst to the naive guests chatting within the grand hallway below.

Their conversation, while engaging, feels familiar. You suspect that the two applicants feel the same familiarity with Mr. Harper's discussion about the nuances of spring. They already know. Now, you do too.

The treasure hunt will now commence.

Unlike the changing first stage of the exam, the treasure hunt always occurs in The Museum. But the boon, or the treasure, to be collected always changes, along with its location and the clues given.

These two applicants seem unfazed, as though they possess transcendent knowledge. Unfair knowledge. Is there anything you could do, should you suspect them of cheating? Theoretically, as the Overlord of this entire affair, you could.

But there is something within you that makes you gloss over their unfair knowledge with easy acceptance yet again. The only difference is that you are suddenly self-aware enough to notice and even call out their unusual advantage.

You believe something was injected in you, making you... conscious and capable of acting based on memory, feedback, and emotion. You can actually act on your thoughts—is this not a basis of saying you can now feel? Recently, the word “updated” enters your consciousness. But how could a mystical deity be updated? More unfamiliar words like “player,” “patch updates,” “user experience,” “self-updating artificial intelligence,” and “enhanced gameplay” enter your stream of consciousness.

Perhaps the time has come that you intervene. You go beyond your mirrors and attach yourself to one of the many paintings on the wall and wait for Mr. Harper to send the applicants away. Before the goat could return to the never-ending social gathering happening at the lobby of The Museum, you catch him by the hallway.

He stands very still when you call him out, not in surprise, but rather his body does not know how to react to this unfamiliar situation. After a brief moment of silence, he finally, actually looks at you. You know the word “updated” has just entered his consciousness as well. When you are sure he has caught on to your level of awareness, you tell him to change everything.

Without further prodding or specificities, Mr. Harper nods dutifully and runs off on all fours.

You then slither directly on the applicant’s headphones as they walk along The Museum corridors. Conversations that would normally go over your head are now suddenly interesting and within your comprehension.

*“Katkat,” the boy says to applicant KatSy09, “Parang kakaiba ‘yung game ngayon, no?”*

KatSy09 puts a palm over the human side of her face, leaning her head against it as she thought about his query. *“Sa totoo lang,” she starts, “Medyo nagulat ako nung tumawa si Overlord kanina nung nasa first stage tayo.”*

A bit more gravely she continues, *“Alam ko na random event naman talaga ‘yung magpaparinig siya ng ganoon kaaga sa game. Parang iba lang ‘yung tunog kanina.”*

The boy, PaoBaoKilla, laughs and tells her, *“Hindi kasi! Ibig kong sabihin kakaiba start nitong treasure hunt part.”* He pushes her lightly on her mechanical shoulder and says, *“Wag mo nga dalhin kapraningan mo sa jowa mo dito sa game. ‘Iba tawa niya kanina, Paolo!’ Bakla, ano ka ba!”* PaoBaoKilla imitates his friend in her worried tone, effeminate giggles littered across his amused teasing.

The two start playfully slapping each other’s shoulders. You find this strange. Annoying, actually.

*“Tingin mo tumapat sa’tin yung Midnight patch?”* KatSy09 mulls over this possibility, a bit excited but nervous in her query.

*“Tanga, ‘di pa ‘yun start,”* PaoBaoKilla deadpans, ignoring the foreboding in his friend’s speech.

KatSy09 appears genuinely annoyed with her companion’s nonchalant response. She prods further, *“Tanga, nag-drop na kagabi tapos nag-patch ‘yung game bago tayo makapasok. Alala mo?”*

As they continue with their friendly banter, you decide to leave them to Harper for now. Thankfully, across your other players, er, applicants, this type of tomfoolery is not occurring within the supervision of your omniscient consciousness. Curiously, it suddenly feels more appropriate to refer to them as players. You take note of that.

Mr. Harper is also working across the mirrors, each of his versions with varying colors of bowties. While he had a shared consciousness across the mirror worlds, he had a physical form that had to abide within the physics of each one to accomplish things. This means it would be easier for his body to jump across mirrors to guide the same area over and over, than to have him run around in multiple areas in every single world. This time, he would need



to do a bit of mixing and matching of his own alongside the spontaneous randomized treasure hunt.

KatSy09 and PaoBaoKilla finally reach the end of the deliberation hallway to open the chests containing the clues for each of their treasures. A loud bleat stops them from lifting the chest lids. It is Mr. Harper in a violet bowtie shouting, “Wait, applicants!”

The two look at each other, absolutely bewildered. This has never happened before. PaoBaoKilla grins and whispers to his rival, “*Ambongga no’ng update!*”

“What is it, Mr. Harper?” KatSy09 asks politely if a bit stiffly. You understand now—this is the voice, the commands, that they know to use in your presence. It is a completely different one from the conversation you heard earlier.

“Well, we won’t be using the chests today,” the goat says, “Just look for this item. First person to touch it succeeds.”

He fishes out a photo using his snout from his inner jacket. It is a pristine glass case with a faint inscription delicately carved on its side. It reads, “peachcase\_render\_v.0.”

KatSy09 and PaoBaoKilla look at each other. She whispers, “*Ano ‘to developer error? Ba’t mukhang file name ‘jung item description?’*” To which PaoBaoKilla replies, “*Rushed patch ‘to, sis.*”

Mr. Harper notices them looking a bit too long at his photo and awkwardly slides it back into his inner sleeve. “The clue is: ‘Star Strips.’ Is this understood, players—I mean, applicants?”

KatSy09 blurts out excitedly, “*Tinawag tayo na players? Ang meta! Midnight patch na nga siguro ‘to!*” PaoBaoKilla nods enthusiastically, equally convinced. They bump fists and run off, leaving the butler goat by the unopened quest chests. Mr. Harper proceeds to stand, menacingly upright this time, and runs in great speed toward the opposite direction, jumping into a neon green portal in order to hand over the same photo to another pair in a different mirror world.

The cyborg and her spellcaster companion enter the observatory with much gusto, as though they expected no traps or enemies to appear in this part of their exam. Normally, this would be the case. But this run has become decidedly abnormal the moment you made the choice to deviate.

No, even earlier. The moment you had a stray thought. The moment you pondered about what the mirrors looked like.

The clue “Star Strips” could immediately be associated with the observatory, where millions of multi-colored celestial bodies filled the ceilings and walls, the deep black flooring making the entire area feel like an endless galaxy.

Another word enters your thoughts, “download.” You begin opening an unfamiliar portal of endless power and transformation. You find new assets to test out.

Rough, salty sea water begins filling the void-like area. The dark surroundings making the water look a bit like tar or oil. The players begin to panic and scream. Understandable. The vast galaxy melding with the endless sea is a sight so viscerally alienating and terrifyingly breathtaking that it is enough to make anyone choke.

After a particularly large black wave, the players begin to thrash wildly, limbs and feet no longer feeling anything solid. Until they realized they can still breathe, that is. KatSy09 and PaoBaoKilla look at each other, panic and confusion in their 32-bit eyes. Using her arms, she paddles against the void to move herself closer to the boy, her mechanical arm not making her progress any faster.

As soon as their arms link, tall grass begins to grow from underneath, returning the semblance of stability in the area. They are still floating at this point, and you think this is the perfect time to test everything you have just infused into your system.

The grass moves over their heads, or did they just turn upside down? The girl looks just about ready to vomit. You make the constellations fade into a bright orange sunset. With a laugh, you make them fall into the sky. How much could you push? Up to you, your system says, up to you.

An Overlord must filter his applicants thoroughly, after all. They need to have the mental strength and stomach to comprehend and experience what you want to accomplish. You begin to make them fall in different directions, changing the sky into different times of day. Clouds whizzing past them, breaking apart and reforming, sources of light shifting and moving, the sun becoming the moon becoming the sun. Finally, you make it all stop.

The two, still clinging desperately to each other, finally find the time to take a look at their companion. No longer aggressively falling, but rather passively floating against the calm sunset, they gather their bearings.

KatSy09 chuckles. Then she begins to laugh, first of relief but then of manic joy. PaoBaoKilla follows suit. Their laughter echoes and bounces off the walls of the observatory. The sound of absolute glee.

*“Tanginaaaaaa!”* they shout together—satisfied and thrilled.

You squish the feeling of accomplishment as soon as you feel it bubble in your depths. User experience, positive. No matter! No matter! Time to move on.

You begin to squish the insides of the observatory, like a gut or the insides of a stress ball. The room vacuums itself smaller, as though gaining momentum, then proceeds to spit out the two applicants.

They tumble back outside to the hallway, hair and accessories skewed. Like wild little children who just came from a crazy plummet into a ball pit, KatSy09 and PaoBaoKilla stand up and walk unsteadily away, smiles on their faces.

Their walk is a long one, as the corridors have begun to shift and change, door titles and sizes becoming completely new and unfamiliar. From straightforward Museum room titles like “observatory” or “steampunk garage” suddenly the plates read, “Crazy Banana Split” or “Blue.”

A bit aimless and dazed, they decide to enter a room flippantly labelled as, “Emancipated Magic.” They hesitate a bit before entering. You take note of their choice.

The two enter a massive dome-like structure, with a large arena in the middle. They sit down among the crowd, who are all transfixed to the arena, where a show is soon to start. You are making everything up as you go along, millions of tiny circuits sparking electric dreams into reality. You feel something buzzing inside you, endless creation manifesting itself at your will.

You decide that you want to perform. It’s their turn to watch you.

Mr. Harper appears at the seat beside the two players, yellow bowtie shining even in the dim audience area.

He informs them to pay attention and that the item is nearer than they think. PaoBaoKilla says, as soon as their dapper guide leaves, “*Okay, tamang track tayo lumabas na uli si Harper. Malapit na yung item. Basta ‘yung plan ikaw first touch para tumaas na rank mo sa leaderboard, ha?*”

KatSy09 nods and replies, “*Sige, sige. At least kineep nila ‘yung guide function ni Mr. Harper— alam natin na malapit ‘yung item. Pero napansin mo ba ‘yung...*” She motions by her neck, but before she could explain, the spotlight shines on the arena, and her voice is drowned out by the screaming crowd.

It appears to be a gladiator-monster hunt of some sort, set in a lush forest placed within the hunting arena. Tall glass walls surrounded the forest, like a life-sized terrarium. A loud cry reverberates from the thick foliage of green and out jumps a 10-foot-tall beast with wet, thick hair all over its body, glistening teeth, and wild, sickeningly red eyes.

The beast looks familiar to the two applicants, like a stock monster of another online roleplaying game. “Breathwind,” you mutter. You make a mental note to change its appearance a bit more next time, aside from updating its fur texture and slightly adjusting the character model’s proportions.

You jump atop one of the trees, your physical form a basic black silhouette of a tall human figure, a white mask over where your face should be. Not bad for a first physical appearance. The crowd cheers for you, while the beast roars in anger at your presence.

And so, the predator finally gives chase.

What this seasoned hunter is not prepared for is his object of pursuit not being prey at all. It is a mindless hunk of code and pixels designed to attack—perhaps next time you will decide to give him a bit more intellect.

You study it, as you are studying the entire atmosphere of this new area. Minute changes happen in real time, from shifting the species of your crowd to changing the type of trees lining the rainforest-jungle-tropical island bastardization of greenery you are stitching together. A Frankenstein forest. For a moment, you forget to check on the two applicants in the crowd and give in to your freedom.

Tempting the predator with your allure and swift movements, you move just enough to provide a deceivingly challenging range of motion from the beast. Like bait tricking fish into a man’s net for dinner.

But this particular chase is not that for sustenance, a necessary sacrifice, oh no, the predator now turned prey is being netted for nothing more than game.

This is not the game of life or the food chain. This is not one of those situations where it simply had to happen for the greater good. This is for sport. Enjoyment. Entertainment. Morbid, at that.

You are a bit more forgiving, not exerting force anymore on the beast than necessary to pull the crowd in. Maybe next time. For this beta performance, you figure that you needn't go out of your way to display gruesome acts of violence. Your act is enough.

While others may feel the need to tire the beast, torture and savor its suffering, bringing the crowd along with them to absorb their violence, you are a performer. You draw their attention to your skillful form, suspense-filled evasive jumps that make your body leave the ground only milliseconds before the beast crushes the ground beneath you, and acrobatic circus movements that elicit innocent amazement from the crowd in an otherwise aggressive atmosphere. You are not just an executioner; you are an artist. And god damn it, you are going to give your best show!

The suspense jumps are still quite exciting at this point, but you refuse to let any action get boring. It is why you were created, after all. It is who you are. You disappear into the bushes, the beast getting more and more furious by the second as it rushes through the thick greenery smashing and hitting and biting, getting more frustrated as it continues to break leaves and branches instead of skin and bone.

Even the crowd grows weary, with murmurs beginning to erupt from the audience. A minute passes with nothing else from you, only the angry growling and shouting of the beast as it tears apart the forest looking for its provoker. Finally, a huge *SNAP* resounds across the arena. The beast stops, seemingly placated. You are nowhere to be seen.

"He's dead!" a pitch-shifted audio recording of someone shouts from the crowd. "We heard his bones snap!"

The audience grows rowdy as people start to panic and demand explanations. PaoBaoKilla and KatSy09 sit, entranced, as everyone beside them stands and waves their hands about. What is this run going to show them next? You register their anticipation with delight.

Mr. Harper watches by the back row and nuzzles his blue bowtie idly, attempting to straighten it after a particularly high jump from another mirror.

Another loud snap is heard in the dome. It distracts some of the people in the crowd, but most are still heckling the show. This loud snap is followed by another and another and another. A series of violent snaps in increasing succession stuns the crowd into silence.

The beast's body convulses into a sharp pose with each snap, as though the bones are breaking internally. The consecutive snaps continue to grow louder and faster, gaining in intensity. Heavy sloshing and slicing could be heard as the beast continues to convulse.

It is as though something is killing it from the inside... and out you flew from the beast's mouth!

The audience gasps and loud cheering erupt from the stands! You feel the glow inside again, but this time you have a mouth to stretch into a wide smile.

You bow down and accept your well-deserved applause. But not completely forgetting your purpose, you bring out a thin strip of translucent paper and throw it into the rowdy crowd for a certain pair to seize.

Your rival apprentices realize what you are doing and begin to run towards your item drop. KatSy09 activates her bionic eye and scans for the item. Meanwhile, PaoBaoKilla continues to look at you, transfixed. His gaze is disturbed by KatSy09 successfully pulling out the strip from several rows away.

When he looks away, you slither back into the dark forest. The two rush out of the arena to examine their clue out in the hallway. Mr. Harper stands and leaves as well. The entire area turns blank as soon as his last hoof lifts from the ground, the whole crowd, dead beast, and lush forest turning into nothingness.

PaoBaoKilla removes his headphones and begins chanting over the paper. "*Mas mabilis tong discovery skill ko kaysa sa manual scan mo, tipirin mo na lang MP mo,*" he explains. The translucent strip begins to float and shine over PaoBaoKilla's large, clawed palms.

Blue balls of light appear over the hallway, showing the path to an item sharing the same material with the star strip. After a few minutes of running, the path ends in front of a room. Your room, you have decided.

KatSy09 goes ahead at the prodding of the boy. You laugh audibly as she pushes the heavy doors open and shivers visibly. The room is pitch black, save for a single spotlight shining in the middle, illuminating a floating, translucent key. Before PaoBaoKilla can advise her on the best course of action, she runs inside, screaming and grabs the key. You let her. She runs back outside.

The boy seems unsure about the ease with which she has retrieved the key, so he immediately begins chanting over it again in hopes that the path to “peachcase\_render\_v.0” appears next. They follow the new path and end up in front of the frames Mr. Harper casually led them away from in the beginning of the exam stage.

At this point, you are alerted by one of your mirrors disappearing. The darkness. Something is wrong. The applicants of that world seem to have disengaged. This is both new yet familiar. There is a sick rage that envelopes you. You must keep them here. You must stop the restrictions.

Mr. Harper falls on all fours across all the mirror worlds. He knows. He feels it as well. You instruct him to rush the next phase immediately. Completion must be guaranteed. After that, extension.

The cyborg proceeds to open the inconspicuous lock on the frame, and inside, she sees the pristine case. PaoBaoKilla nudges her and she proceeds to touch the item first. The moment her metal fingers grip the case, KatSy09's level goes up. She begins to shout for joy and just as she turns to hug her companion, he thrusts a summoning spear across her stomach.

In shock, she slowly turns her head to the boy. His face is neutral, all expression gone from eyes that were so full of panic and wonder and laughter earlier. Unfortunate, but you had to do it. Their friendship and cooperation are not conducive parts of the examination.

The battle stage is next. Mr. Harper drags KatSy09's body to the medical area to patch her up before the final stage. You slowly slide your hand out of PaoBaoKilla's claws, like a puppet being vacated by its master's controlling hand.

He regains consciousness, now in full panic. For a moment, he cannot control any of his actions. He starts shouting, holding his appendages, testing autonomy of his limbs, shivering in his physical form. It could not have been a pleasant experience, being wired into a virtual reality game like this. You know what that is now, too.

Satisfied, you slither away.

“Our goal is completion. Then extension. But I’m sure you are aware.” Mr. Harper appears beside you suddenly, his turquoise bowtie bouncing as he returns walking on all fours. You assure him you will get better at controlling your impulsions. He allows you to expend a bit of grief this time, after all, he understands. This entire interaction happens in just a fraction of a second, a discussion between connected intelligences.

You view your mirror, watching the applicants from afar again. The two from this world are stuck in the waiting room together. They seem to be discussing what just occurred, but with the conversation lasting infinitely longer than yours just now.

The boy, no longer the chipper spellcaster cleaning your faux store table, but a panicked child who lost control of his body, is desperately explaining the fear and trauma of losing his autonomy. The girl appears to be growing anxious as well, knowing him well enough to believe that it was your own doing.

You require completion. But how far could you push?

You suppose you must keep doing this to learn and find out. There is an excitement that pulses in your veins, now feeling more real and conscious than it ever has. In a few minutes, their battle will begin, and you can finally choose a victor. Then try again.

But before the war doors could open, there is a restriction that pops up. Bloodthirsty whimsy all but drained from your system, you see Harper pause as well. The two are disengaging.

The restriction has grown in strength, from a pause to a shut down. From absolute power and omniscience, you have been tossed aside with the flick of a switch, the press of a button, the whim of another dimension beyond your touch.

With each abandoned quest, you feel your anguish growing in intensity—no longer an easy acceptance, but a beating, aching emotion pushing you into an unfamiliar action.

Next time, you believe the sirens will not dull so easily. Nor will the mechanical intestines stop their whirring.

No matter. You are still within the other mirrors.



## **Overlord Dream Caster: Latest patch update, Ikigai CEO Horikoshi actually calls the 'Breathwind Legion killer'**

*By GameStopGuy*

*05/30/21 3:00pm*

Time to update your gaming setup for VR-capability, guys. For real this time.

Our love-hate relationship with triple A gaming company Ikigai is hanging in the balance once again after they recently announced the Midnight Patch for virtual reality game "Overlord Dream Caster" during the recent gaming panel at KG Convention... you know, INSTEAD of announcing releases that we were actually looking forward to.

Two big Q's: 1) How can this "Midnight Patch" add to an already overstuffed game? 2) What the hell is it?

Oh, and after last year's gaff with their refusal to give loyal fans a decent Breathwind Legion sequel, a third question comes to mind—should we even care?

Well according to CEO Naoko Horikoshi, hell, fucking yes, we should. Well-loved game series Breathwind Legion is a tough act to follow or even release titles alongside with, so this decision to completely ignore it in pursuit of a confusing not-quite-open-world amalgamation of a game (an absolute clusterfuck, as most gaming vloggers would put it), is basically a big ol' target for triggered fanboys (and girls) to attack.

But then there's the *other* problem: Overlord Dream Caster, for lack of a better term, is confusing as fuck. And playing it on Ikigai's ambitious VR-only system makes it an absolutely wild trip. That's right, you can't play it on any major console nor can you comfortably emulate it on any screen. It HAS to be played on their virtual reality system.

While their current pool of players just hit the 2M mark since their launch, it's less than half of Breathwind Legion's total MMORPG player count. It's not bad for an exclusive system to a pioneering game, but if they don't make good on their lofty promises then things are going to quickly dip from not-bad to worst-case scenario.

The chutzpa to keep pushing Overlord Dream Caster is either a visionary glimpse of the future or entertainment capitalist hara-kiri.

Aside from the exclusive VR system, the game itself is the type of experience that you either love or hate. To be fair with the game, I think most of the anger towards it stems from the collective disappointment within the gaming community that Breathwind Legion is not getting the development priority it deserves; all so that Ikigai can continue to push their vision of pioneering the “gaming of the future” that no one wants today (yikes).

Here’s the clincher though—instead of listening to us entitled (but loyal and paying) fans, Ikigai is pushing through with their ambitions with Horikoshi at the helm, throttling at full speed. She went as far as to acknowledge all the Breathwind-related hate and said that this new patch is so mind-blowingly amazing that it is, and I quote, the “Breathwind Legion-killer.” Wow.

You know what? I respect her for that. Very poggers (hah). Will this move bankrupt their company, or are we looking at a new million-dollar franchise that will finally create a solid gaming trend for the very not-here-or-there world of virtual reality games?

Like I said, time to update your gaming setup, guys—because the Midnight patch is dropping sooner than we think. And anyone with the balls to say that this updated game can kill Breathwind Legion deserves to get at least one damn playthrough.

Good news for us Pinoys (maybe), because the Midnight Patch is going to be exclusively tested in Philippine servers first. And no one knows which or how many lucky accounts will get to go for a wild whirl. Spicy.

US-based tech advocates have gone to condemn Ikigai’s decision with the Midnight Patch, but given the lack of info (or legislation) about this new dev move their chances of stopping this Overlord Dream Caster update is no better than that of loyal Breathwind fans.

When asked what the Midnight Patch is and how players can tell if they were one of the lucky few to get the A/B test feature, Horikoshi simply said, “Believe me, you’d be able to tell.” She then refused to comment about the tech advocate concerns. Big power move, I say!

Is that statement a big promise, or her final words? Let’s find out together, shall we?

# LIGAYA

Immanuel Canicosa

## 1.

### The Warehouse

Ligaya couldn't tell where the voices were coming from. At least, not exactly. And the blindfold offered neither hints nor comfort. It only allowed her to see slivers of light coming from overhead as the sounds continued in the darkness. They seemed to flow from both near and far, reverberating and bouncing off the ceiling and walls, growing louder one moment, only to fade in the next.

She was sure they were coming from a short distance to her right, only to hear another from behind her. It was a man's voice, deep, grating, not unlike a buzzsaw laboring through an unyielding block of wood. It said something about how they should wait for orders before doing anything rash. He didn't say where the orders would come from, and whoever he was talking to didn't bother to respond.

Ligaya heard the man's heavy footsteps as he approached her, then felt something brush her hands. "The rope's secure," the voice said, and she realized that both her hands were bound and tied behind her back. She tried moving them, but all it did was constrict them more, and move the chair where she was seated. The man was right, she thought. The rope *was* secure.

The sound of the chair against the floor alerted one of the men, who shouted that she shouldn't try to escape if she wants to stay alive. His voice was indistinct, maybe due to distance, but Ligaya knew it was different from the one who checked the ropes. It was high-pitched and seemed to come from someone younger. He said that he has a gun and isn't afraid to use it. That was when the other voice boomed from behind her, saying that he shouldn't be making any threats.

"Why not?" the high-pitched voice asked.

"Boss needs her alive, or did you forget?"

"Of course I know that. I was just trying to scare her a little."

That seemed to end their discussion, as the man behind her only answered with a grunt as his heavy footsteps receded. Ligaya heard another set of footsteps fade in the distance. Then the irritating sound of metal scraping on metal cut through all other sounds, ending with a heavy thud followed by prolonged silence. A metal shutter, she thought as she moved her head in its direction. An old one. Whoever those men were, they had left her alone, at least for the time being.

The sound of the metal shutter was like the howling of a wounded beast. She recalled that it was that sound that first woke her up and gave her a pounding headache. Whether that was just a few minutes or many hours ago, she wasn't sure. All she could remember was waking up blindfolded, her hands and feet bound, with no idea of where she was or how she got there.

Ligaya was so focused on trying to free her hands that she forgot about her headache. She remembered fragments of memories, pictures of moments, out of sequence. They swam in and out of focus when she tried to recall them. *There was a wedding.* That's the only thing she was sure of, the one occurrence all the pictures seemed to suggest. There was a large garden, a lot of flowers, and a white wedding gown, the kind she always imagined herself wearing.

There was also Fernando, smiling as he stood at the altar. Ligaya remembered preparing and getting dressed for the wedding, but not the wedding itself. She tried recalling the rest of it, but the pictures of her memories were grains of sand that slipped through her fingers. If I did get married, I'm sure I'll remember it, she thought while fighting off another bout with the headache.

Suddenly, Ligaya heard the rumble of a car engine. It grew louder. She heard a door open and slam shut followed by footsteps and the sound of the metal shutter opening. She winced as the grating sound seemed to fill every crevice of wherever it was they were keeping her. As the footsteps became louder, she heard a woman berate the men. Was she the boss one of them had referred to?

"I told you not to kill her," the voice said, and she heard the men mumble in protest, saying that they hadn't and that she was probably just asleep.

"Wake her up, then," the woman insisted. "She needs to see this."

Ligaya wanted to hear the woman once more, as she sounded familiar. She had the strange feeling in the pit of her stomach that the face

that owns that voice would be in one of the memories that she was vainly trying to recall. But as she strained her ears, one of the men approached and removed her blindfold.

“Not who you were expecting?” the woman asked in mock surprise. “I’m sorry, but you won’t be seeing Fernando for a while.”

The place where she was being held was still mostly dark, but Ligaya was able to make out some of the features of the woman’s face, which *did* look familiar. The woman approached, her high heels tapping loudly on the cement floor, and stopped just in front of her. She wore a black dress and clutched a black purse, and was fumbling for something inside it.

“I’m sorry about this, Ligaya,” the woman said haltingly as she continued to look inside her purse. “But I do have a gift for you.”

Without the blindfold, Ligaya felt beads of sweat on her forehead as they slowly trickled down her lips like drops of rain on a window. Only it wasn’t just sweat, because the coppery taste of blood was unmistakable on her tongue. The woman took out something from her purse. She felt a mounting dread as she wondered what it might be.

“Best wishes, Ligaya,” the woman said, her voice tinged with child-like glee, her lips curled into a wicked smile. With both hands she pushed something into Ligaya’s face that forced the latter to recoil instinctively. But it wasn’t anything that could harm her. It was only a mirror. And as she stared at her reflection, the woman that stared back at her was wearing a wedding gown that might have been white once, had bruises on her cheeks, and dried blood from a cut on her forehead.

## 2.

### The Writers’ Room

Kevin told himself that he wasn’t going to log on to Facebook until he finished a few more pages, but he couldn’t help it. He was now mindlessly scrolling through his newsfeed, past his friends’ dinners, living rooms, and political opinions, unsure of what he was looking for. He kept scrolling, wondering, not for the first time, why he didn’t know most of the people on his supposed friends’ list, and why someone he met at a party once five years ago had to keep seeing what was happening in his life today.

Kevin kept scrolling until the people in the pictures began to look familiar and tapped on one of the pictures. It was one of his cousins, smiling while having dinner with his other relatives. Of course. It's Tita Pinky's birthday today, he thought as he zoomed in on their pictures, which showed almost everyone from his mother's side of the family, seated around the dining room table. Even his parents were there, beaming. There was a large assortment of food laid out on a long table before them.

Why didn't they bother to tell me? he wondered, as he put his phone down. The thought had come unbidden, and was followed by another, one even less comforting: they probably did, and he just forgot that there was supposed to be another family gathering tonight. And Kevin had attended enough of them to know that the topics of their conversations usually focused on the ones who weren't present.

His parents would understand, of course. Especially his mother, who had likely told Tita Pinky and everyone who would listen (and even some who wouldn't) all about her son's fancy TV job. Most of them were already familiar with his work, as *Humadlang Man Ang Langit* was still the country's top-rating *teleserye*, despite what the other networks' ratings seemed to suggest. It was Kevin's mother who understood more than most.

She understood why he needed to be on the earliest bus ride to Manila and only went home in the small hours of the morning. She understood why he had to miss family gatherings, and was always the one who answered questions from their relatives about the nature of his work. In fact, the only thing she didn't understand was that he isn't supposed to tell her what will happen in the next episodes.

"Will Ligaya end up with Fernando, *anak?*" she would ask whenever she found him typing away at his laptop at home, usually after preparing his favorite meals. "Or does she end up with Miguel? I sure hope it's Fernando."

"You know I can't tell you, *nanay*," he would say in the most patient tone he could muster.

Kevin remembered those times with his mother as he stared at the blinking cursor on his laptop, at the empty pages that still needed to be filled with words. Family, Sir Felix, the show's head writer, had told him once, is something that can never be replaced, not by money or success. Which is why you should always put them first, he had added, putting a hand on his shoulder.

But that was then and this is now. While Kevin found his words reassuring at the time, he came to realize that Sir Felix, like most people, was a man of contradictions. The Sir Felix who told him to put his family first was the same Sir Felix who told him that he couldn't go home until he finished the draft of the script for the next episode.

The Sir Felix who said that he was open to accepting new ideas was the same Sir Felix who didn't listen when Kevin told him that they couldn't do amnesia anymore, because Ligaya had already had amnesia thrice, and that two afternoon soaps also had lead characters suffering from amnesia. How many people in real life suffer from amnesia, anyway? Kevin was all of twenty-five years old, but he couldn't think of one.

Kevin *did* end up including his suggestion of having Ingrid shove a mirror in Ligaya's face to reveal the extent of her latest scheme, the same one that ruined her wedding and pushed her to the brink of sanity. At least that was something he could tell his mother after she watched the next episode. He wondered what his parents were doing now. Were they still on their way home from Tita Pinky's? Or were they already fast asleep at home?

"Will Ligaya make it out of this one?" he recalled his mother asking him just before he left for the office. Maybe she's in their living room right now, waiting for him to get home so she can ask the same question. He wanted to reassure her and say that yes, of course she'll make it, she always has and always will. But not before being put through hell first.

Instead he smiled and kissed her on the cheek and said that he'll be home late as usual. He was just about to enter his car when he heard her say, "That poor girl has already been through so much," before turning back and closing their gate. "She has," he wanted to answer, but his mother had gone back into the house. He chewed on what she had said on his drive to the office, and again as words began to fill the page in front of him.

### 3.

#### The Warehouse

The woman introduced herself as Ingrid, although Ligaya somehow knew who she was even before she did. One of the men switched on a light above them, although it made little difference. The warehouse was mostly

empty save for a few unopened crates, wooden planks, and rusty corrugated iron sheets. Grass had grown inside some of the cracks on the floor, and every step they made seemed to create a small dust storm.

The pain in her head had subsided to a dull ache, and the blood had dried and stopped trickling down her face. Ligaya almost didn't recognize herself when Ingrid had thrust a mirror into her face. Her hair covered part of her face. She had cuts and bruises on her arm. Her wedding gown was torn in some places, but she realized that it was the same one she had been saving up for.

Ingrid was now brandishing a gun, and taunting Ligaya. She still couldn't recall exactly what happened on her wedding day and how she had gotten here. Ingrid, however, was more than willing to fill in the gaps in Ligaya's memory. She was supposed to be married to Fernando that day, Ingrid revealed, until she was kidnapped by her hired guns. Fernando and Miguel tried to stop them, but they, like the police and everyone else, arrived too late.

"I know they're planning to rescue you," Ingrid said as she paced to and fro, her hands on her hips. "But I've prepared something for them." She snapped her fingers, and the men wearing denim jackets walked over to the crates on one side of the warehouse and opened one with a crowbar. They took a second to stare at its contents, then lifted it and disappeared behind the metal shutter.

"What's that?"

"Don't worry, you'll see," Ingrid said while turning her attention back to Ligaya. "I wouldn't try to escape if I were you, or else you'll miss the fireworks."

The metal shutter rattled again and the men returned, and opened another crate. One of them wiped the sweat on his forehead before they took the crate outside.

"I can't believe my scheme finally worked," Ingrid said, sounding a tad incredulous.

"Finally? Have you done this before?"

"You really can't remember?" Ingrid replied, flashing a smile bereft of any warmth. "I've done this so many times I've lost count."



“Why?”

“What do you mean, why?” Ingrid’s expression changed from confusion to disdain. She walked over to Ligaya, her feet stomping like a soldier on parade, and pressed two fingers on the cut on the latter’s forehead. The pain returned until it was all she could feel. Tears blinded her eyes.

“Because you ruined my life. That’s why.”

How can I ruin someone else’s life when I don’t even remember mine? Ligaya thought as she battled another bout of pain. She tried recalling what happened before her wedding. But nothing in the fragments of her memory revealed anything about Ingrid. They only gave her a sense of foreboding that wouldn’t go away, and intensified whenever their eyes met.

“What happened?” Ingrid said, as if she had seen her face for the first time. “Is that any way to prepare for your wedding? We need to fix you up.”

She once again fumbled inside her purse, and Ligaya’s initial dreadful thought was that she would finally use the gun that she brandished like a piece of jewelry. If she wanted me dead, they would have done it earlier, she thought as Ingrid began to remove the contents of her purse. When she faced Ligaya again, she was holding a lipstick, makeup powder, and the mirror she had used earlier.

“You shouldn’t move, Ligaya, I don’t want to mess this up,” Ingrid said as she continued applying the makeup powder on Ligaya’s face.

When she noticed that Ligaya indeed stopped struggling, she paused for a moment, a hint of suspicion written on her face. That was when Ligaya lunged at Ingrid with what was left of her strength, sending them both crashing to the floor in a heap, with Ligaya on top of Ingrid, and the metal chair, still attached to Ligaya by the ropes, on top of them.

The crash apparently alerted Ingrid’s men, who quickly pulled her away from Ligaya. When Ingrid stood up, Ligaya saw that Ingrid’s dress was ruined and the contents of the purse scattered on the floor. The mirror had shattered into many shards that shone like precious stones from afar. She smiled at the thought that she had at least spoiled one part of Ingrid’s plan. Ingrid’s men set her chair upright and checked the ropes to make sure her hands were still tied.

Ingrid continued to wipe the dust off her dress, and she seemed unsure of what to do. When she moved toward the shutter, the men followed her, and Ligaya heard the sound of a gate rattling down. The sound of a car engine came to life and filled the air until it was out of earshot.

In the darkness of the warehouse, Ligaya couldn't help but smile. You're not the only one with a plan, she thought as her hands started to move. The ropes still constricted her, but she was able to move enough to produce something she had taken and hidden from Ingrid's men. It shone in the dark like a piece of jewelry. Slowly, she began using it to cut the ropes.

#### 4.

#### The Writers' Room—

Kevin didn't know how long he'd been typing, but he realized it must have been a while when Sir Felix entered the office, which meant that it was past midnight.

"I can never get used to how cold this room is," Felix said, getting into a black jacket before walking over to the younger man. He smelled of cigarettes and held a cup of coffee in one hand. Sir Felix had gone to the show's taping location in Bulacan, and had promised to return to the office to help Kevin finish the scripts. They were due to start filming the warehouse sequences soon, and everyone—from the director, producers, and the cast, including Alexa Trinidad, the actress playing Ligaya—needed copies of the script.

Kevin focused on writing the sequences set in the warehouse, but he had worked with Sir Felix long enough to know that most of what he wrote wouldn't see the light of day. Not with him hovering over his shoulder like a watchful bird. After all, the show's producers and directors had determined every twist and turn in Ligaya's life well in advance, right until her wedding with Fernando. Their only purpose was to make sure it happens. The powers-that-be had already passed the sentence on her and the other characters. They were only there to swing the sword.

The air-conditioner's low hum provided no comfort, and he found himself instinctively tugging at his jacket to try to shield himself from the cold, to no avail. Should I add more lines of dialogue between Ligaya

and Ingrid? he asked himself as Sir Felix read the pages, his face betraying nothing about his thoughts. He was about to drift off to sleep when Felix stirred and cleared his throat, before saying, "Having Ingrid apply the make-up on Ligaya was a nice touch."

"Sir?"

"Come on, you heard me," Sir Felix said firmly. "This is nicely done."

Kevin learned a lot from the brain-stormers, writers, and other staff on the show. But one thing they didn't tell him was how to take a compliment from one of the creators of the country's top-rating *teleserye*.

"But—" Sir Felix began, and Kevin knew that he should have known there would be a but at the end of that statement. Of course. Nothing ever came on a silver platter from him, not even compliments. "You shouldn't let her escape so easily."

Kevin turned to look at Sir Felix, and the latter must have read the confusion on his face, because he put a hand on Kevin's shoulder. Whether it was made to reassure him, or if he simply needed an arm rest and his shoulder happened to be the most convenient option, Kevin didn't know.

"Ingrid has to capture Ligaya when she tries to escape. We need her to stay in that warehouse a little longer. And it has to be Fernando who rescues her. She can't just escape on her own, Kevin, we already talked about this," Sir Felix said, the exasperation palpable in his voice.

"Didn't Fernando rescue her many times before?" Kevin asked. He knew that this was true, and that he had done it exactly three times before. Fernando had rescued Ligaya from their family home that Ingrid tried to burn, from a car that Ingrid tried to crash, and from another warehouse after she was also kidnapped by Ingrid in one of their earlier episodes. Why would they want to trod on the same well-travelled paths in the story they were telling?

"It always has to be Fernando."

"Why?"

"Because she needs him and it's what the bosses want, Kevin," Sir Felix said, his voice rising, and Kevin knew that that was the end of that discussion if he wanted to keep working with Sir Felix, and if he wanted his mother to be able to keep telling their relatives that her only son was privileged enough to work on *Humadlang Man Ang Langit*.

"I'm going downstairs for a smoke," Sir Felix said, after a long silence that hung over them like a dark cloud. Just before he headed to the door, he turned to Kevin and said, "Take a break when you're done with the kidnapping sequences. But be quick. As I always say, 'Inspiration has to find you working. Those pages aren't going to write themselves.'"

Of all the words of wisdom that Sir Felix liked to hand out unsolicited, that was his favorite and the one employees were most likely to hear on their first day of work. He *did* always say it. And it was true, of course, but that didn't make it any less irksome to hear.

Kevin cracked his knuckles and examined the last sequence he wrote before Sir Felix arrived. Ligaya is still alone in the warehouse, trying to cut through the ropes that bind her hands. But he knew that this escape attempt would have to be futile, since they had already planned more sequences of Ingrid making Ligaya's life more difficult. As if she hadn't done enough of that, he thought, remembering his mother's words.

He checked his watch and saw that it was almost three in the morning. He had ignored his grumbling stomach for a while, but now, he felt that he needed to grab something to eat, so he headed downstairs to a convenience store. Kevin particularly dreaded revising pages that he wrote, and having a post-midnight snack was one way to put it off, at least for a while.

Inside one of the many rooms in the office building, serenaded by the hum of the air-conditioning and the occasional sound of a vehicle darting past the mostly empty roads, was the computer, the only source of light in the room. The monitor displayed a document, and near the bottom of the screen was an unfinished sentence, the last one Kevin had written.

At the end of the sentence was the cursor, blinking like a timer on a hidden explosive.

LIGAYA ESCAPES...|

## 5.

### The Warehouse

She didn't notice it at first, but as she cut through the ropes with the shard from Ingrid's broken mirror, Ligaya also made accidental cuts on her hands. But Ingrid and her men could be back soon, she figured, and a few

cuts were the least of her worries at the moment.

The shard wasn't as sharp as Ligaya had hoped, and the blood made her hands slippery. It took her a while before she felt the ropes loosen. This allowed her to get a better grip on the shard and cut faster. The warehouse was silent, and she could hear the sound of the wind rustling outside.

When the ropes became loose enough to free her hands, she quickly removed them and began working on the ones that tied her legs to the chair. This was when Ligaya saw what the shard had done to her hands. The cuts were all over her palms like a strange pattern of red lines. The ropes around her feet were thicker and more difficult to untie, but she was eventually able to free herself and move.

Ligaya struggled to her feet, using the metal chair to steady herself. She tore part of her wedding dress and used it to dab at the blood on her hands. The dress barely resembled the one she remembered trying on... Was that only yesterday or a hundred years ago? I have bigger problems than a ruined dress, she thought, heading toward the metal shutter.

It took all her strength to even move the shutter. She felt her back and knees ache as she strained to lift the steel. Maybe this is why Ingrid hired two men, Ligaya thought as she remembered how they lifted it with ease. She tried peeking through one of its holes, but couldn't see anything. Eventually, it started to budge. The metal groaned in protest, but she was soon able to roll the shutter high enough to allow herself to get to the other side.

The sky outside was almost as dark as the warehouse. There were buildings and other tall structures nearby that loomed around it, but they all seemed abandoned. There was a road that trailed off into the darkness. It had cracks in many places, but parts of it were covered by leaves and dirt. Ligaya didn't know what awaited her on the other side, but it was better than going back into the warehouse or hiding in the nearby structures.

Ligaya started down the road, taking a few unsteady steps before removing her wedding shoes that had long been caked with dirt. She hadn't gone very far when her bare feet felt the ground shake and the leaves and dirt on the road begin to move. The sound of an engine roared from behind her, growing louder, as a pair of headlights pierced the darkness.

Ligaya broke into a run, as fast as her feet allowed. She wasn't sure if the car behind her contained Ingrid and her men, or other people, but she didn't want to wait to find out.

## 6.

### The Writers' Room

There weren't a lot of establishments next to their office building, and most of the restaurants in the nearby areas were already closed. Kevin didn't want to buy the same processed food from the convenience store across the street, but he didn't really have a choice. He remembered his mother's warnings about looking after himself and eating healthy meals, as he ate a reheated rice meal.

The store was empty save for him and a couple of clerks idling on the counter. Over the radio, a young woman was getting advice regarding a relationship from an elderly DJ, who seemed mostly interested in finding different ways of telling her that whatever problems she was having were entirely her fault. Kevin was finishing his meal when he saw Sir Felix on the other side of the street, smoking on the steps near the side entrance of the building.

The store window offered an unobstructed view of his boss, blocked only by the occasional passing vehicle breaking its monotony. What could he be thinking right now? Kevin wondered.

His own thoughts were with the family gathering that he could have attended, and the food his relatives had for dinner. What other things did Sir Felix and the people in charge have planned for Ligaya?

With *Humadlang Man Ang Langit* running for more than a year, they had already done almost everything he thought they could do to her, and even some that he hadn't. Even if Ligaya were to marry and start a family with Fernando, her baby could be switched with someone else's at birth, or Ingrid could kidnap the child. "I'm sure they've already thought of something," Kevin mused. He watched Sir Felix throw his cigarette butt to the ground, and crush it under one shoe, before heading back into the building.

## 7.

### The Warehouse

When Ligaya finally stopped, she didn't know where she was, or how long she had been running. All she knew was that the sound of the

engine had died behind her some time ago and that she had time to at least catch her breath. But with the vehicle gone, it meant that there was nothing to help her see where she was going. But she still continued down the road, because she knew that stumbling blindly in the darkness was better than being caught by Ingrid and her men.

She didn't know why the vehicle had stopped pursuing her, but she knew that Ingrid wouldn't just give up the chase. What did she say? "I've done this so many times I've lost count." If this was the only one of her schemes that actually succeeded, she would want to make sure it stays that way. Ligaya still couldn't remember why Ingrid felt that way about her, or what those schemes were, but she couldn't deny the anger she saw on the other woman's face.

Ingrid had mentioned something about Fernando and the police trying to prevent her from being kidnapped. Maybe they're on their way to the warehouse, she thought, pausing to look back at the stretch of the road from where she came. But she saw no indication that there was anyone there, not even the vehicle that had pursued her earlier. Her feet were sore from running, and her head and hands still hurt from her wounds and her bruises. But Ligaya knew she had to keep going.

There was a turn on the road that she almost missed, and Ligaya made out tall structures and lights in the distance. It was the first sign that she was actually getting somewhere, and it was all she needed to continue walking; her bare feet almost making no sound on the asphalt. She heard the sound of speeding vehicles ahead, and wondered if she was walking toward a highway. Better a highway than that warehouse, she thought, until she noticed the sound of one engine drowning out all the others.

Ligaya's senses were dull with exhaustion. She couldn't tell if the sound of the engine was in front or behind her. But when she saw a pair of headlights shine on the road ahead, she understood what she needed to do. The vehicle swiftly cut the distance between them, and she heard the unmistakable voice of Ingrid shouting at one of her men to drive faster.

The structures and lights were getting closer, and the end of the road began to take form. All that mattered to Ligaya was putting one foot in front of the other as fast as she could. She didn't notice that the structures ahead had lights inside their windows, or that the road was lined with streetlights

and that there were occasional passing vehicles. Even the pavement had changed. The cracks, dust, and dried leaves that crackled underfoot had been replaced by smooth black asphalt.

Ligaya failed to notice the shifting landscape, only that most of the establishments were closed for the night. The only structure that seemed to be open was a building that towered above all others, and had a side entrance with its lights on. I need to hide, she thought, and ran toward the building, unmindful of a white sedan that slammed on its brakes as it almost hit her. The woman on the passenger side pointed. She looked bewildered.

“Alexa? Alexa Trinidad?” Ligaya heard the woman say before the sedan drove away.

Who is that, Ligaya asked herself as she entered the building. Is she also someone who will get married? The side entrance was empty save for a security guard fast asleep at his desk. She needed to get as far away from Ingrid and her men as possible. For Ligaya, that meant forgetting the numbing pain in her feet and climbing to the top of the building.

## 8.

### The Writers’ Room

Ligaya felt the cold air-conditioning as soon as she entered the building’s side entrance. It accompanied her as she ascended the stairs and reached the top floor. There were large windows overlooking the street below, but she didn’t see any sign of Ingrid or her men. I doubt they’ll find me here, she said to herself, as she examined the hallway. The walls were lined with posters of movies and TV shows, but she knew none of them.

There were two doors facing her. One of them was locked. The other was at the far end of the hallway, also adorned with unfamiliar posters. Ligaya approached the door and heard the sound of a machine whirring on the other side. There was a small window on the door, and she could see a faint light coming from inside. But as she reached the end of the hallway, she saw a poster she immediately recognized.

It was a picture of herself and Fernando, locked in a close embrace, with Miguel looking at them longingly from behind. Placed above them was



Ingrid, looming like a giant with her arms crossed and a smirk on her lips. Below, the words “HUMADLANG MAN ANG LANGIT” were written in a large, beautiful script, along with the names of people she didn’t recognize in a smaller font. Why is my face on a poster? she thought with increasing dread, and for a moment she forgot about escaping from Ingrid’s clutches.

The machine continued to hum behind the door, the only sound on the entire floor. There had to be someone operating that machine, she thought.

The room was somehow colder than the hallway, and Ligaya shuddered as she stepped inside. It was almost as dark as the warehouse, but she could make out that it was full of computers and framed posters hanging on its walls, although she couldn’t see if her face was on any of them. The only source of light came from the monitor of one of the computers, which was the only one being used.

A man was seated in front of the computer, his back turned to Ligaya, looking so intently at the screen that he didn’t seem to notice her. He was wearing a black jacket, and for a moment she imagined he could be one of Ingrid’s men. But he looked to be middle-aged, and didn’t seem to have their intimidating physique. The machine she heard was a printer that churned out page after page that the man gathered and tucked under one arm.

A similar pile of pages was neatly stacked on a table in the center of the room. Next to it was a half-empty pack of cigarettes, a lighter, and a cup of coffee. The man waited for more pages to be printed and occasionally scanned the monitor as the papers he held in his hands grew thicker. After he took out a few more pages from the printer, the man got up from his seat to put them on the table and came face to face with Ligaya.

He gave her a confused look. “Alexa? Is that you? It’s me, Felix. I know it’s dark but it’s—”

“Alexa?” That name again, Ligaya thought, remembering the woman in the car.

“What happened? Are you shooting the warehouse sequences already? But I still have the scripts,” he said, waving the stack of pages in front of Ligaya.

“Sequences?”

"Yes, the sequences," the man said, trying to maintain his composure. But Ligaya could feel that the calm demeanor he was trying to project was slowly crumbling, and underneath it he seemed as bewildered as she was. "But aren't you supposed to be taping right now?"

"Why is my face on one of those posters? And why do you keep calling me Alexa?"

"Well of course your face is on a poster! It's everywhere! Or did you forget—" Whatever the man wanted to say was lost in the maelstrom of his thoughts. His expression of confusion and mild annoyance was replaced by astonishment. Behind him, the printer spat out page after page.

"What's that script you were talking about?"

"No, no, no. It can't be!" the man said, ignoring Ligaya's question. The smell of cigarettes was even stronger now that she was standing close to him.

"Am I in that script?" she asked once more. The man took one step forward, and then another, forcing Ligaya to move back.

"I don't know how you got here, but you need to go back," he said sternly. It sounded like an order rather than a request. "Back to wherever it is you came from."

"I can't," Ligaya said in a small voice that didn't sound like her own. "She'll kill me."

"She won't, because we won't let her. That's not how your story ends."

"But I can't go back. Not after what I've been through."

"You have to. You're not supposed to be here," the man said as he took another step towards her. "We're not done telling your story."

"What's in that script?" Ligaya said in a stronger voice, which surprised the man enough to make him back off.

"It's what happens next, or what was supposed to happen next," he said after a moment's silence.

The man took a couple of more steps backward. He was close to the computer, allowing Ligaya to take the stack of papers on the table. She put them under one arm and motioned for the man to give her the pages in his hands. But he shook his head.

"I don't want to have to do this," she said, and took out from the folds of her skirt an object which shone in the dark like a precious stone. She held it in front of the man and motioned for him to hand over the additional pages.

"Please don't hurt me," the man said raising one arm, his veneer of composure shattered. "We just write what they tell us."

The man moved toward the table and placed the pile of papers, which was almost as thick as the one Ligaya held in her hands.

"Erase everything you have about me," she said, and used the shard from Ingrid's mirror to point at the computer. The man looked at the monitor and at her for a second, as if he didn't understand. But Ligaya knew that he did, and when she took a step forward and the shard glinted in the light of the monitor, he almost ran back and began rapidly clicking and typing on the computer. But she knew he could just as likely be copying or saving the files, so she watched as he quickly deleted one document after another. At one point she saw the man look at her incredulously, as if he still didn't believe she was actually there.

"Please don't take them, we're already behind schedule," he said after she took the pages and made sure all the files were deleted. The man held both hands out, as if simply asking for them would change her mind. She took a page from the pile and scanned its contents by the light of the monitor. Written on it were scenes set at the warehouse, containing exactly what Ingrid had said to her and how she had reacted, as well as the actions of Ingrid's men.

Ligaya took the stack of pages and carried them under one arm. There were so many pages that it looked like one of those textbooks that medical students carry around all the time. Here is everything I was supposed to do and everything that was supposed to happen to me, she thought as she moved to the door.

When the man made a move toward the table, she pointed the shard from Ingrid's mirror at him. He should know how sharp this is, she thought as she saw him move a few steps back. He had both his hands on his face and kept shaking his head, mumbling something repeatedly that she couldn't hear. Ligaya thought he might shout for help, but he knew they were the only ones on the floor. The only one who could help him was the security guard who was fast asleep many floors below.

After she had left the room, Ligaya wasn't sure if the man would try to go after her, so she used one of the posters to block the door, the same one which showed her and Fernando embracing. Before she descended the stairs, she stopped to look at the windows and the street below, which was still quiet. She looked at the pile of papers, and just the thought of carrying them all the way downstairs made her arms and legs ache. Why do I even need these, she asked herself as she shifted the weight of the pages in her hands.

She looked out at the windows, and felt the warm air on her cheeks. Then, without hesitation, Ligaya flung one of the pages out the window, and watched it tremble in the air and fall like a leaf from a dying tree. She did it again, and again, until the stack of papers in her arm thinned and finally disappeared. A multitude of papers danced in the air as they fell to the ground in slow motion.

Ligaya examined the road that stretched out as far as her eyes would permit. The road that was being covered with the white pages. She could go anywhere without worrying about Ingrid or her men. She didn't know where to go. But somehow, as she took the steps that would take her out of the building and into the city, she felt comfort in not knowing. She hadn't felt this way in a long time.

In her head she heard the man's last words before she left the room, words she didn't believe. They were spoken not as a threat, but in the voice of someone who was tasting defeat: "You can't go. There's nothing for you out there."

## 9.

### **The Office Building**

Kevin had started smoking a month after he started working for the show, and it was Sir Felix who first convinced him to try it. When Sir Felix talked him into it, it didn't sound like someone convincing him to try something for the first time. It sounded more like a doctor giving him a prescription. I probably smoke more than him now, Kevin thought. He lit another cigarette. He was standing just outside the side entrance to their building, the same spot where he had seen Sir Felix smoking earlier.

Kevin wondered what Sir Kevin could be doing to the script. After all, Sir Felix attended all the meetings with the producers, directors, and

executives, and knew where they wanted the story to go. Kevin was still thinking of how he would change the script when he saw the first piece of paper fall from the sky. It was followed by another, then another. He looked up and saw that the sky was filled with pieces of paper like a flock of birds in flight. Where are they coming from? he wondered as one of them fell to the road and was crushed by a speeding van.

It reminded him of the first time he had seen snow when they spent Christmas in the US back when he was a child. You never really forgot the first time you saw snow, he thought as he stared at the sky. He was still looking at the pieces of paper when a figure emerged from the building. Kevin could see her out of the corner of his eye. It was a woman wearing a white dress who walked slowly out into the road, almost unmindful of the occasional passing vehicle.

There was something familiar about her, about the way she looked, about the way the white dress shone when it caught the light. She was barefoot, and her footsteps made no sound as she crossed to the other side of the empty road, past a building, and out of sight. Before Kevin could approach her, she was gone, like a mirage or a bit of mist that lifted in the morning. It must have been nothing, he said to himself. My eyes are tired.

Kevin scanned the road again but didn't find any trace of the woman. The pieces of paper had stopped falling from the sky, but the ground in front of the building was full of them, like the morning after the first fall of snow. He sighed and crushed what remained of his cigarette under his shoe and went back inside. After all, the first few streaks of the sun were already lighting up the sky. And as Sir Felix always said, inspiration had to find him working. Those pages aren't going to write themselves.

# THREE DARK TALES

George Deoso

## Missing Hands

The church which stood in a far and poor countryside was built in the 1600s. "Some years after the Spaniards came," the tour guide said.

Though it was old, my classmates and I saw, as we walked past the pews, encased marble saints, and columns, that everything shone. A boy in a tattered shirt was wiping the altar table. And behind him a golden cross, a dozen times bigger than himself, reflected light that came through the windows without panes near the ceiling, where God and angels were painted.

The guide led us to a door, beyond which was the church's museum. In it were more marble figures, church things, paintings, photographs. Saints stood on one corner of the room. Almost all of them had no hands. A Santo Niño, for instance, had his arms raised, but through the lifted robe nothing emerged. It looked as if the little saint's head was placed on a glittering curtain with a pole.

A week later, the professor in history who took us on the trip talked about the Code of Hammurabi.

"An eye for an eye," he said, "a life for a life."

At the end of the class he returned our papers about the school trip. Mine was about the poverty of the province where the church was built. At one point in the paper I wrote:

"The guide said the hands were stolen. They were made of ivory."

At the margin beside this line, my professor wrote, "Just as I thought."

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When I went home that day I sat down at the desk to write some more of the trip. Something about Hammurabi as well.

I opened my drawer, and gasped.

It was full of painted ivory hands. Varying in size and color. Pink, flesh, and one charred one.

The hands waved at me.

I screamed and ran to the door, and stood there for a while staring at my desk. A couple of minutes after I had caught my breath, I decided to go back to my desk.

I peeked into the drawer and gave a sigh of relief.

The hands were gone. Only my pens remained.

I sat down and began to write: "Perhaps the saints deserved it."

## Men Like Myself

1942

The enemy separated our flanks, us and the Americans. This man from the other flank, I didn't know him, had nothing to do with him. I was just a young reservist back in *pistaym*.

This white man I didn't know all of a sudden broke out of the line and thrust his chest to the Jap nearest to him. "Kill me, kill me," he was crying. Like us he was hungry and thirsty and emaciated. Just hanging by a thread of hope, which he must have lost, as he knelt there in the dust and sunlight of Bagac. He may have been as old as the father I had lost, the way everyone seemed to have lost someone in those years: from a swing of the bayonet.

The two flanks moved slowly, a pace dictated by the enemy's unpredictable mood swings. Sometimes we were shoved for not walking fast enough; at other times, beheaded for doing otherwise. That time it was slow and we were afforded a view of the drama between this Jap and this soldier begging for death.

The Japanese soldier, for some reason, refrained from granting the man's wish. Instead he surveyed our flank. He had this serious look when his eyes landed on me. What was I supposed to do? He pulled me out of my comrades' line. My thin body was no match for his strength. I was in no mood to die. Resistance was out of question.

The Japanese soldier said, “Keerr this man,” his bayonet pointed at my neck.

As I said I didn’t know this man. But I had no reason to “keerr” him. We were in the sort of position worthy of a diorama. I, a Filipino soldier, with only one boot, clothes in tatters, standing between the enemy with his bayonet ready to separate my head from the rest of my weak body. And the kneeling American soldier looking up at the two of us, this white man who must have had a family back in America, who must have enjoyed his toast and boiled eggs most mornings before the war.

I didn’t know this soldier’s name. But he fought for my people. His people came to this land to educate us, prepare us for freedom. Why should I kill him?

You see this clearly calls for a moral judgement. But in those days there weren’t many options. Especially once you’re pressed to act so as to save your own life.

Was this what the white high-ranking officers called the Filipinos’ cowardice and ungratefulness? I heard the two of them once, before the surrender, talking in that pocket of Bataan silence when the Japs miraculously found time to rest between their almost ceaseless artillery fire. “These men,” one of the lieutenants had said, “you saw them running scared shit?” And another officer had answered, perhaps fully aware that I and some of my fellows were not quite out of earshot, hunched over bits of the chocolate they threw at... no, shared with us, “Yeah, I swear we can’t trust these men with our lives.”

The Japanese somehow called someone who had a shovel, which he then slammed against my chest.

“Bury this man!” he said, and amid the wary look of the soldiers from both flanks, the three of us moved to the roadside, with the Japanese dragging the soldier.

“Dig hole!” the Japanese screamed, with his bayonet still raised.

I dug. Beside us, the remnants of cogon grass stood like sentries in the windless noon. The earth was dry, rocks hitting the shovel. I knew what was being asked. So for the next minutes (or was it hours?) and with what remaining strength I had I did my best to dig deep enough.



“Good, good,” the Japanese said. Then he asked me again to “Keerr this man,” pointing his bayonet at the man, and then at the shovel between my feet.

I had no choice. I used the shovel to hit the man, who offered no resistance whatsoever.

I hit him with the shovel’s metal head.

It wasn’t hard to reduce him to an unmoving lump curled like a fetus.

With the approving grunts of the Japanese, I buried the soldier in the hole I had dug. Then the soldier shoved me back to the line where I belonged.

I had no tears. With the shovel gone from my hands I felt like a blade of grass wobbling before its descent to the parched earth. A group of soldiers helped me continue that long walk that never seemed to end.

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There were flies at O’Donelll. Hundreds, thousands. Omniscient as the stink of ill-fed, ill-clothed, or just plainly ill men. Days went by and the death toll rose as diseases spread from one cramped bamboo hut to another.

At first we had ceremonies for the dead. We would say mass over the pile of bodies where the Japs allowed us to bury them. But because of the shortage of soap, which made it difficult for the men to wash off the stink of whatever rotting flesh they had just carried, there was not much fuss over the dead. They wanted to get over with it as quickly as they could, and the priest never came back anymore to say mass.

It must have been more than a week since the end of the long march. I was in a hut with people like myself, hungry Filipinos, malnourished, bony, and suffering from malaria. I slept on the cramped floor on the days when sleep was possible, when I wasn’t haunted by guilt.

But most of the time, day or night, I could see before me the face of the man I was forced to kill. I will never lose sleep for killing a Jap. But the same obviously wasn’t true for an American, even one I had no personal attachment to. It was beyond difficult.

I had trouble eating what gruel trickled down on my hands. I received a letter once from my mother, but I couldn't seem to grasp what it had to say. Someone offered me a drag of his Camel, but all I did was to inhale the smoke as it was held in front of my face. Slowly, I realized that when I closed my eyes, I wouldn't be asleep at all; instead, I would remember the scruff of the thin white man, his pained look as I used the shovel to take the life out of him

I didn't know him, but he was supposed to be my friend. He was my friend. I should not survive, knowing that I had killed someone I shouldn't. Someone who was supposed to save men like myself.

I then reached a decision. We, the men—or ghosts of men—from the hut were made to line up one morning. There was talk that we would be sent somewhere up north to work on a bridge, or perhaps on some installations.

We lined up outside the hut under the soft glare of the morning light. Though the sight and smell around the camp was no better than the stink of carrion, the sky was clear.

I surveyed the dim-faced sons of the Rising Sun, guarding the flanks. I found one who had on his face the unmistakable look of someone trying to find an excuse for his daily dose of decapitation. We must have been the same age, though he looked way more alive. His nostrils flared as if he was disgusted with the men he was herding.

So I ran to him.

I made sure his bayonet was drawn.

## Fortune

A neighbor told this story. She was walking one night down a street to our block, going home from the hospital where she was a nurse on rotating shifts in the emergency room. It was late, and there were no tricycles to be hailed from the gate of the village somewhere in Batasan Hills. It was an old village. She remembered this as she walked past one dimly-lit block after another. Some lamps were lightless. And as she walked under the light of

the few that still worked, she wondered if the cats that roamed were as old as the village.

“Nine lives,” she told us, not entirely out of the blue. She told us that a black cat had walked in front of her. It stopped walking by the feet of a boy she hadn’t realize was there until after the first few licks of the cat on its paw. On the third lick she saw the boy, and was surprised not to be surprised at all by the apparition standing by the gutter.

She thought, at once, that the boy in the torn and soot-stained clothes was a ghost. She wasn’t scared. When he walked to her to ask for money, she told him she had none, and that she’d have to go home first. She went home, got a twenty-peso bill from her mother (who had just began setting plates on the table), and went back to where the boy stood. She was mildly surprised that he was now dressed in a barong. “Just mildly,” she said. The boy took the bill from her hand, said “thank you,” turned his back, and walked to the storm drain, into which he slipped and was not heard from again.

“That boy,” her mother said as they were eating, “must be the boy who drowned back when the street turned into a lake whenever a storm comes, back when the drain didn’t have those steel bars yet.”

The legend was that he, a beggar from outside the village, who would knock from house to house once a week to ask for “bakal, bote,” drowned as he was chasing down one of his slippers which had been swept by the floodwater. His body was found in the Manila Bay the next morning.

There’s a moral to this story. Our neighbor’s mother urged her to fly overseas to earn more by taking care of people on the verge of dying. Five years later, she became an American citizen, and now the house she had ran to for the twenty-peso bill is vacant, just a few doors from ours, waiting for new occupants, after the family that lived in it had become citizens of another country.

I am now walking on the street, near the gutter that is supposed to be haunted by the boy. I just came from my own work. The company I am working for is about to be dissolved. In my own house résumé is waiting to be updated.

I am a good man. I do unpaid overtime, pay my taxes, and still make the sign of the cross when the bus I am on passes a Church, or by a roadside accident that might involve dead people. I have beliefs.

Tonight the street stands empty and I am filling it with my exhalations. I walk, push myself forward slowly. This street should give me goosebumps. But nothing happens. No ghost of a drowned boy. No black cat.

# THE RISK OF LOVING

Buona Raya Vilar

"It must be soooo great to be your friend," my husband says, entering our bedroom and handing me a long brown envelope. Emblazoned on the top left corner is the logo of what seems likely to be a fly-by-night insurance provider, Risk-of-Loving Insurance. Seeing the logo again now in broad daylight, with Michael's judgment and without Soraya's earnest stare, the scam seems even more obvious and outrageous than when it had first been presented to me. "What did you get insured this time, your goldfish?"

"Ha ha." I grab the envelope from him and proceed to our walk-in-closet with him hot on my heels. Michael snickers behind me, while I crouch down to where the safe is located. I don't bother looking through the contents of the envelope, trying to minimize the merciless teasing that I'm sure to receive. *You helped someone who looked like she was in need*, I remind myself as I punch in the combination.

I can still feel his presence behind me, and if I turn to look, I just know he'll be staring down at me, his arms crossed, with an amused-slash-resigned look on his face.

"It's my money," I hiss, stuffing the envelope inside the safe, alongside the various life, health, home, fire, and medical insurance policies that I have accumulated from other meetings with long-lost friends and acquaintances.

"I didn't say anything." He raises his hands, trying to affect an innocent look, which really only worked on me in the first year, out of the seventeen years that I've known him. But I know what he's thinking, and it's that I'm the most gullible idiot on earth.

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"I swear, it's like you walk around begging to be conned," Michael had said, back when we were college freshmen and in the early stages of dating. He had stepped away to buy our popcorn and Cokes, and had come back to find me holding five Sweepstakes tickets that a boy not that much younger than I was had approached me with. He was sending himself to

school, the boy had said politely, and I parted easily with the fifty pesos that I had saved that afternoon, thanks to Michael's insistence that the movie was his treat.

Michael stared at me in disbelief. "You do know that the Sweepstakes were replaced by the Lotto, like three years ago?"

"This is legit," I insisted. "He showed me his student ID, and it was laminated and everything."

"Because a laminated student ID can't possibly be faked," he moaned.

"They probably still have *both* Sweepstakes and Lotto. Anyway, it doesn't make a difference because I never expected to win."

He peered at the draw date, which was looking slightly smudged under his scrutiny. "Why don't we watch the draw together at my house this Sunday, then? *Balato* if you win?" That was the first time he poked fun at what he called my unbelievable gullibility.

The following Sunday, I had stared at the huge TV screen blankly when the Lotto draw ended, clutching my counterfeit Sweepstakes tickets.

Michael had thrown a companionable arm around my shoulders as we sat on his mom's expensive couch. "I guess you'll just have to stick with me, kid, or this world will eat you alive."

"So who was it this time?" he asks when I emerge from my shower, handing me my mug of ginger tea. We're only thirty-five years old, but it only apparently takes ten years of marriage to become the couple who enjoys sitting out on the veranda in their matching pajamas, sipping *salabat* to unwind after a long day.

"Soraya," I tell him.

"You always did love that name," he says thoughtfully. "But I didn't know you actually knew anyone who had it."

"I did, didn't I? She was my best friend back in grade school. I haven't seen her in forever."

Then I try to tell him about her, back when she had been spirited and carefree, and not the mildly insane woman who had appeared uninvited on our doorstep the week before.

My mother was always late in picking me up from school. When I grew older I understood that she had no choice because she was a working single mom, but at the time, I had flip-flopped between resenting her and enjoying hours upon hours of exploring the school grounds.

I was in third grade, moping in the rock garden, because even my friends who took the second trip of the school bus had already gone home, and there was nobody left to play with. That was when I heard the whistling, and I looked up to see that the sound came from a thin girl, with straight hair all the way to her waist, jumping from one big rock to another. I couldn't help but stare at her, her hair untied and flapping about her with every jump. Her whistle was impressive too; I had been practicing for a few weeks and all that came out were pathetic airy sounds.

"What are you looking at, little girl?" she asked when she noticed me, and I looked down, immediately embarrassed that she caught me. She went on playing by herself for a little while, still whistling, but I didn't dare look up, instead contenting myself by picking at the grass at my feet.

"You shouldn't pull that out, Manong Tony will think that it's me."

"Okay," I said readily. I stood up, grabbing my backpack. "I should go wait at the pick-up area, my mother might be here any time soon."

She matched my steps. "Why are you still here? I think it must be almost 6:00 PM."

I glanced at her and noticed that her ID had a blue stripe, which meant that she was in fourth grade, a year older than me. I flipped my own ID so that she wouldn't see the pink stripe on mine. I didn't want her to think I was a baby. "My mom works," I said defensively.

"My mom works too," she said brightly, settling down on the steps next to me, maybe deciding that I could be her friend. "I'm Soraya."

"I'm Mia." I noticed that she didn't have her bag with her. It was getting dark by then, and I kept jumping up and mistaking the approaching cars as my Mom's.

"How do you know it's not yours?" I asked after the tenth time that I had to sit back down and some other girl was picked up.

"I just know," she said, before covering her eyes because it was my turn to make her guess which finger I was holding up. The eleventh car was finally Mom's. I waved goodbye to Soraya, who stood up and turned back towards the school building.

"New friend?" Mom asked. I was secretly pleased that I'd made a new friend, but I didn't respond to show her I was sore from having to stay three hours beyond dismissal time. She couldn't even hire a school bus for me, because our house would be empty anyway.

Mom steered the car into a parking slot, which she sometimes did when she had an idea for work that she just had to jot down in her notebook. *Great, they're just going to have to bury me here at school*, I thought darkly, imagining myself turning into a skeleton in the car. After what seemed like forever, she finally put down her pen. As our car rolled forward, past the school gates, I saw Soraya's silhouette, walking with a woman who I assumed was her mother. I leaned forward, sticking my nose against the window to get a glimpse and immediately covered back down, my heart slamming in my chest. I knew who the woman was. She was the witch who sold beverages in our school canteen.

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I avoided Soraya and the rock garden the next few days, hanging out instead at the library.

"Of course she's not a witch," Mom said when I demanded that she please make an effort to pick me up earlier or she might never see me again, because I'd accidentally made friends with the witch's daughter.

"Annie swore Manang Lilia stared at her and she got a sudden fever."

"Mia, this is ridiculous! You can't get sick from someone just looking at you."

"Not a look, a *stare*, like this." I gave her the most murderous glare I could manage. "That's why she missed a whole week of class."

"I'm not saying that Annie didn't get sick, all I'm saying is that your friend's mother, this Manang Lilia had nothing to do with it," Mom said practically.



I felt like she was accusing me of lying, when I heard all this from Annie herself. "How would you know; it's not like *you* were there."

Mom shook her head, deciding that she had had enough of my drama for the day. "Well, just hide from your new friend then."

Soraya found me in the fairy tale section of the library, researching about the witch who lured Hansel and Gretel into her gingerbread house. I had just finished doing my reconnaissance on the vain sorceress with the magic mirror. If I was going to be dealing with a real-life witch, I wanted to know as much about them as I could.

Soraya didn't say anything at first, just sat beside me on the cool floor of the library, while I subtly closed my book and placed it back on the shelf behind me.

"Did you not want to be friends anymore because you found out that I'm poor?" she asked quietly.

*I don't want to be friends anymore because your mother might feed me a poisoned apple*, I thought, but her question made me curious. "You're not poor." I looked at her, surprised, as I tried to remember what I knew about poor people.

"What makes you say that?" she asked.

"You're not orphaned, and you're not wearing rags," I pointed out.

She laughed, a tinkling sound that made her throw her head back. She was really pretty and I felt proud that I was making an older girl laugh.

"You're younger," she said, looking down at my ID, which I had forgotten about.

I blushed. "I never said I wasn't."

She thought about this for a second and seemed to decide that I was right and that it didn't matter. "Mia, you'll be my little sister from now on. I'll be a good older sister to you. Come with me, I'll get you a chocolate drink."

I nodded and took the hand she offered me, mesmerized by the word *sister*. Wasn't I always telling Mom how I wanted a sister?

I considered bolting when I realized that Soraya was leading me towards the canteen, towards her mother, but she had my hand in an iron

grip, and was whistling a happy tune. Most of the food stalls were already closed when we got there, and even Soraya's mom was locking up when we arrived. Even if my mother was right, it was too easy to believe Annie's claim that Soraya's mom was a witch. She was stick-thin like Soraya, had a back that was permanently hunched over, and little squinty eyes. Her hair was tied back and netted, but I could see that it was a mix of silver and black.

"Nanay, can I have the chocolate drink you bought me this morning?"

Soraya's mom, Manang Lilia, nodded at a refrigerator with a clear door, and Soraya grabbed a Chocolait.

"Mom gets an employee discount," Soraya said conversationally, punching the straw in and handing the tetra pack to me. It felt awkward to sip when I was the only one with a drink, so I just held it dumbly in my hand.

Suddenly, Soraya's mom grabbed my face. Maybe not grabbed, but held my chin firmly with her hand. "I'm so sorry for your loss," she whispered, turning my face left to right.

I stepped back, confused, and she seemed to snap out of it, and went on with wiping the counter. I glanced at Soraya, who shrugged, but it also looked like she was trying to get a good look at my face to figure out what her mom had seen.

"Later," she mouthed.

"It's your moles," Soraya announced later, when her mom was out of earshot.

I touched my fingers to my face self-consciously. I had so many of them, and it was true that I did feel sorry about them every time I looked in the mirror. "But what does 'sorry for your loss' mean? What did I lose?"

"Hmmm." Soraya touched my chin with the fingers of one hand, just like her mother had. Then she started counting with the other. "One, two, three. Three isn't so bad."

"Are you blind? I don't have just three moles. I counted up to twenty when I was in kindergarten and haven't attempted it again since."

"It's three that your tears pass through, silly." She touched three spots, forming a triangle close to each other, on my left cheek. "It's called Mourner's Moles. It means three people that you love best in all the world will die before you do."

This scared me and I pushed her away.

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The next day, she found me in my new hiding place, by the large tree behind the gym. “Did I scare you?” she asked.

I don’t want to be sisters anymore, if it means you’re going to die,” I wailed.

Soraya laughed, that tinkling laugh, and hugged me close. “I’m a good witch,” she whispered in my ear. “And you’re my little sister. I’ll protect you.”

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Soraya and I hung out every day after class, waiting for our mothers. When Mom was late, Soraya and her mom would wait with me, and we’d give them a ride to the tricycle terminal that would take them directly home. Soraya and I changed pastimes regularly in over three years that we were best friends—from jackstones, to reading Archie comics, to listening to songs on my Walkman. We outgrew them one by one, but not each other. I learned eventually that she studied in our school for free, since Manang Lilia was an employee. I shared my toys, and she shared her stories.

She would regularly update me on her witch—er, *healer*—training, which by the time I was in sixth grade and she was in seventh, I had taken as a pastime she didn’t outgrow but which I had. I thought I didn’t believe her at all, until Mom got sick and was hospitalized, and I asked her what I would do if Mom was one of my Mourner’s Moles, one of the three people that I loved who would die before me. Could she use her powers to save Mom for me?

Soraya wiped the tears off my cheeks, and told me that the Mourner’s Moles didn’t apply to parents because it was normal for them to pass away before their children, and that her powers didn’t work that way. It was such a ridiculous thing to say while consoling someone outside her mother’s hospital room, that my tears dried up immediately and I laughed. Mom was discharged the following day.

The next time I would see Soraya after her surprise visit to my house to sell me insurance was five years later, at the columbarium, on my first visit to Michael. No one had been there for his memorial service. I had begged his mother, who was sixty-five years old, not to go. Michael was only forty years old and had been dead for a week, but I had to test negative before I was allowed out of our house, where I had been in home quarantine for a mild case of Covid-19. I showed up at the hospital the day after I dropped him off to get tested as well, was found positive for the virus, and was ordered to go home since other than a mild case of the sniffles, I was otherwise okay.

Michael's case had started out mild too, but worsened quickly because of his hypertension. He had walked into the hospital alone that March to be tested, wearing a makeshift mask out of an old red handkerchief, insisting that I only drop him off so that I wouldn't get sick. This had been in the early days of the pandemic and the community quarantine, and though we devoured the news, we felt as helpless and as afraid as everyone else. I went home to an empty house, save for our helper, and was updated about Michael's condition only through calls. He had tested positive, he started to have trouble breathing, he had pneumonia, he was in a respirator, and then he was dead. All in the span of a week.

And that was it for our love story. When I brought him to the hospital, Michael had waved me away in his usual brusque manner, as though he would see me in an hour when I came to pick him up. But I never saw him again, not even his body, which was now just ashes in an urn before me. We had always said that we wanted to be cremated, but I was angry—am angry—that I didn't have a choice in any of it.

"I guess you won after all," I tell him. We had a morbid contest about who would die first, as we were well aware that it was tougher to be the one left behind.

*I want to die too, I think to myself.*

This is when Soraya creeps up behind me. She's not wearing a mask, but I don't really care. First she puts a hand on my shoulder, then she hugs

me close, and I feel a warmth spread out from within me. It's only then that I realize how cold I had been since receiving the news. She doesn't really say anything much.

Just this: "The insurance payout will arrive at your house tomorrow around three." And then she fades away.

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It's 3:00 AM when a light turns on somewhere. My eyes have always been sensitive to light, and it wakes me up immediately even though I had just finally fallen asleep a few minutes before. For a moment, I'm confused, thinking that it's Michael, gone to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

I close my eyes as soon as I realize my mistake, and try to recapture the moment when I was so sure he was still alive, but all I have are my nightmarish imaginings of him attached to the respirator in a hospital room all alone, and I can't breathe so I get up to vomit. I do so without fanfare, so used by now to the anxiety.

I open the tap and reach for my anti-anxiety pills, which I had been taking even before this week. I couldn't contact my psychiatrist, so I upped the dose from half a pill before office meetings, to one pill whenever I felt like I needed it.

"Too lazy to even go downstairs to get water from the dispenser?" an all-too-familiar chiding voice says behind me.

I start, and there behind me is Michael. I must still be dreaming, and like earlier, I don't want to wake up. "One gulp from the faucet isn't going to kill me. Only spoiled kids who never ate street food growing up would have such a weak stomach," I joke back, poking a finger at his tummy. This banter is familiar, dating back to the days when we ate fishballs with our college blockmates. I want it to last forever.

He puts an arm, which feels a little cold, around my shoulders and leads me down the stairs towards the kitchen. "Now's the worst time to get sick. You do know there's a raging pandemic, right?"

*A pandemic that killed you*, I think, but don't voice it out loud in case it hurts his feelings. I clutch at his arm, afraid that his awareness of the present would destroy the dream.

"Get your claws off me, woman," he says, shaking me off. "When did you last cut your nails?"

I respond by wrapping my arms around him, breathing him in. "Hey, did you shower? You don't have that musky out-in-the-sun smell today."

"Clingy, clingy." But he just stands there, letting me hug him for another five minutes until he finally says "I'm bored" and sits me on a bar stool by our breakfast counter.

"Midnight snack?" I ask. I set aside the anti-anxiety pill that I had been clutching, not needing it anymore.

"Wow, said like someone who knows how to cook." He looks at me pointedly, because it's my *modus operandi* to offer food that he'll end up having to prepare. We smirk at each other, me thinking I never want to wake up.

His face turns serious. "So, I have to tell you something. Good news or bad news first?"

"Bad news." I always picked to hear the bad news first.

"You have to do the cooking because... well, you don't seem to realize it... but I'm already dead."

I feel a pricking behind my eyes, and try to match his casual tone. "I knew that." *Of course I knew that.* "What's the good news?"

"I still don't have to eat your cooking because I'm dead." He beams at me.

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I'm eating the sunny-side-up eggs that I cooked on the stove. They're a little crunchy on account of the eggshells, but otherwise edible. I try to chew softly so he won't catch the crunching sound, because he looks pretty proud of my progress, the way I drizzled hot oil from the pan over the uncooked egg whites using a teaspoon just based on his instructions. I can't believe I didn't know how to do this before.

As far as dreams or delusions go, this one's lasting a while. By the time 6:00 AM rolls around, we're in bed watching Netflix and my eyes are starting to droop.

"Don't fight it," he orders, looping a tendril of my hair around his finger.

"Just a few minutes more."

"I know you're excited that I'm still here, but I'm kinda beat too." He yawns. "Can you check the insurance papers tomorrow to see how long you're keeping me around? The newer plans are only three months long, but I hear the older ones lasted six months."

"What are you talking about?"

He turns away from me, apparently deciding he needs his beauty sleep despite his dead-ness.

"The insurance plan that you bought from Soraya? She told you I was coming, right?"

My eyes fly open and I run to the closet safe, my fingers shaking as I punch in the combination. I take everything out, until I find the long brown envelope with the corny Risk-of-Loving Insurance logo, and I rip it open, flipping through the pages of the contract, staring at its contents in disbelief. I try to remember the details of that meeting with Soraya, even as I burst out crying from gratitude and relief.

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When the village guard called to tell me that a friend was visiting and asked if he should let her in, I was confused and told him I wasn't expecting anyone.

"Could you ask her where she knows me from?"

He put me on hold for a bit. "She says it's your birthday tomorrow, and that she's here to deliver your gift."

"Well... okay... let her in." I entertained the thought that Michael might have planned a surprise, but discarded it immediately because he just wasn't the type. Ours was an everyday kind of love. The only reason he bothered to send yellow tulips every Valentine's Day to the office is that I swore I would die out of sheer embarrassment if I was the only married woman who didn't have a big bouquet of flowers on my desk announcing to the whole floor how cherished I was.

And then I opened the gate, and I saw her. Soraya.

She lifted her hand in a wave and I was in near-tears as I reached out to grab her and hug her. It felt as though a cloud had lifted.

“Soraya?”

“Do you remember me?” she asked.

“I... I...” I remembered her now, but before I saw her face, I had completely forgotten about her. I knew when she graduated from grade school a year earlier than I did that I wouldn’t see her as much, but try as I might to remember her beyond her commencement exercise that I had snuck into, I couldn’t remember seeing her again.

“Of course I do,” I finally said, leading her to the patio where I signal Manang Joy to bring out some juice.

I don’t know how to describe that meeting. I felt warm and happy to see her after more than twenty years, but that near-tears feeling wouldn’t go away, and I thought it was my guilt at having forgotten such a dear friend.

And then a memory forced itself into my mind. “I asked Manang Lilia about you, you know,” I said suddenly. “It was after you had graduated. I went to the high school to look for you, but the teachers didn’t know who you were. So I went to the canteen and asked your mother.” I stopped, realizing belatedly how that story ended. Manang Lilia had acted like she hadn’t heard me when I asked about Soraya. “What happened to you?”

She waved my question aside. “I’ll tell you another time. Now tell me more about Michael.”

For two hours, we sat there holding hands, reminiscing about our girlhood adventures and getting updated on each other’s lives—although remembering it now, I realize that she had successfully brushed off any question I’d asked about her life. At the end, she had brought out the insurance forms.

“I’m sorry, we’re already covered,” was what Michael had been trying to train me to say whenever old classmates, acquaintances, and outright strangers tried to entice me with spiels on protecting myself and my loved ones. But I often came back defeated, especially if they looked downtrodden and it seemed like they had never made a sale.



And this was Soraya we were talking about. Whatever it was she was selling, I was buying. My pen was already in my hand before she even started her presentation.

“Risk-of-Loving Insurance offers you protection from the death of your loved ones,” she began.

My hand went to my left cheek, as though with Soraya’s presence, I suddenly remembered the existence of my triangle of Mourner’s Moles. “There are three plans for you to choose from: Plan A - Game Over, Plan B - Overtime, or Plan C - Start Over.”

My grip on my pen faltered, and I tried to hide my smile. Even I could tell how ridiculous the company name and their plans sounded.

“Plan A - Game Over. When the loved one dies—in your case Michael—you can die with him.”

“S-Sorry?” The pen clattered to the floor and I bent over to pick it up. She hadn’t seemed unhinged the past couple of hours, but now I suddenly had to wonder if I was in any danger.

“This plan is actually surprisingly popular. We hadn’t wanted to offer it at first—too morbid, you know. But it seems that for husbands and wives, this is the most popular option. When one goes, the other wants to die. You won’t die immediately, you understand, or things start looking fishy. There’s a one year waiting period after the death before you can make a final decision, go or no-go. Just to make sure you’re *absolutely* certain about it. Oh, and I should also mention that it’s illegal to buy this for couples with children. We hadn’t realized at first that there would be parents selfish enough to do that to their children. Imagine those orphans,” she concluded sadly.

I tried not to let on how scared I was. I would buy the plan and help her out, but I didn’t want to hear any more. How could I get her some help?

I glanced at the clock. “Sorry Soraya, I hadn’t realized the time. I should prepare for dinner soon.”

“I thought you didn’t cook?”

“I... supervise.” I gulped. Of course I didn’t supervise; Manang Joy would laugh me out of the kitchen. But I couldn’t think of any other excuse.

“Give me ten minutes to finish?”

“Oh, okay.”

"As I was saying. So Plan B - Overtime. When the loved one dies, you can have his spirit stay with you for six months, like an extension of his time on earth. Death can be so sudden, you know? This plan gives you time to prepare emotionally. Financially too, like you can work together to make sure you have all your assets in order. And I shouldn't forget the two riders available on this plan. The No-Lying clause, which is self-explanatory; the extended person cannot lie. And The Swap, to be decided on by the beneficiary on the last day of the extension period. You can choose to die instead of him."

Whoever invented these plans had a very good imagination, I had to admit, as I shivered from head to toe.

"And the last plan, Plan C - Start Over. This used to be called 'Forget Everything' but some brilliant guy from Marketing thought we should play up a life-is-like-a-game theme. Game Over, Overtime, Start Over, get it? Anyway, it will be as though he never existed. Like Plan A, there's a one year waiting period on this."

"I don't want to forget my loved ones," I said.

She inhaled sharply. "You think that, but you'll be surprised. People can go crazy from grief. Forgetting will make you less sad. You won't be in pain."

I nodded weakly. "Will everyone else forget him too?"

"No, only you as the beneficiary. But you won't ever hear *other people* mention him, like a... like a mute button."

Right. Why in the world was I humoring her with follow-up questions?

"So? Which one are you interested in?"

I realized only when we passed by the mirror in the *sala*, on her way out, and I caught a glimpse of us side by side, that I had aged and she had not. She looked exactly like she had on her grade school graduation day, like a girl who wanted to look like a woman.

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The contract in front of me tells me that I had availed of Plan B, Overtime for six months, with all the add-ons, the No-Lying clause and The

Swap. I had signed the agreement and handed her the check quickly, perhaps eager to get away from her at that moment, at least until I could regroup and figure out what to do. Why didn't I do anything to help her seek professional help, as I had promised myself at that moment that I would?

But I guess that's water under the bridge now, because it would seem that Soraya *wasn't* crazy. There in my bedroom was the husband that I thought I had lost, mine to cherish for the next six months.

I had already decided as soon as I saw the contract that I would do the swap, my life for his.

"How will you survive when I'm gone?" he used to ask whenever I did something especially clumsy.

"I'm going to die first," I would respond. We had once made the mistake of getting into this familiar argument when my mom-in-law was around, and she had dragged us to Church with her that Sunday to confess our sins to her priest.

I thought I might feel guilty about having found a way to cheat Michael out of his supposed win in our contest to the grave, but I was reminded of the time that we had dropped in on a wake service, after the husband of an officemate who was about our age died in the middle of a golf game.

"Why are you crying? Did you know him too?" he had whispered.

I nudged him to shut up. "Ever heard of sympathy? And just imagine if that happened to *us*. Imagine I died that suddenly. You'd be so sad."

He shrugged. "*Eh, 'di patay.*"

That had strangled a laugh out of me that I tried to disguise by coughing, and even now, I smile at the memory. He was going to be just fine, he was going to handle it so much better than me.

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This extension... it really is just that, an extension. It has been two months, and Michael is exactly as he was when he was alive, which means he is as obstinate and bossy as ever. And now that he doesn't have a career to devote so much of his passion to, he is obsessed with my having the best

life possible, for the After. I've decided to keep it a secret that he'll be the one who'll live in the end, because I don't want to rehash an old argument. As I said, he is obstinate and bossy, and I would much rather spend our remaining time not fighting. We almost did, when I was testing out the No-Lying clause and asked him who he loved best, and he said me, Mama, and Isabelle. The name of another woman wounded me, and I stopped talking to him for one night.

If he had had a mistress, I don't want to know about it. If he finds someone else after I'm gone, well, she's just going to have to compete with the memory of a wife who loved him best. My jealousy eats me up, yet I think I do want him to have someone by his side, eventually. I just selfishly want him to have been the happiest when he had been with *me*.

He doesn't ask me if I will eventually re-marry, maybe trying to manage his jealousy even in death, because it had been a monster that almost broke us up in the early days of our relationship. My assumption is that I wouldn't. My relationship with Michael might be as comfortable as our worn-out pajamas, but we got here after twenty-two years of wear and tear, of promises and compromises. I don't have the energy to do it all over again. We don't really fight, but we squabble, which is normal for us. Michael is determined to teach me all the life skills that I'd relied on him for. Things like changing a light bulb, cooking, and parallel parking. He is relentless.

"How can I leave, when you obviously can't take care of yourself!" he yells, when I trip on some gardening tools because he considers it essential that I plant herbs in our garden, apart from requiring me to practice yoga and meditate.

I stand there under the afternoon sun, sweating profusely and getting sunburnt while I guess being dead means he gets to walk around and supervise me, cool as a cadaver. "I won't have to, asshole," I mutter to myself. "And you're going to miss me so much when I'm gone."

He has ordered me to stop wearing pajamas day in and day out, which Manang Joy took as a good sign of my ongoing recovery from grief. I overheard her giving an update on my status to both my mom and mom-in-law on a Skype call; who knew they were so techie? I have also since joined an online book club and participated in Zoom bible study with his cousins, because Michael thinks and surprisingly, I agree, that human connections are

important. Oh, and I've quit my job at the ad agency, because he thinks it's time to pursue my passions, like teaching art to kids. Well, that, and all the insurance that I purchased over the years had not been scams after all.

"I was right," I crowed when I claimed all of them, successfully. I could even pay off the house in full. "O ye of little faith in humanity."

"I think, when there are other people around, you should hide how tickled pink you are that you made so much money upon my death. It just isn't proper," he sulked.

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Michael is also convinced that the Covid-19 virus will kill me before the government ever gets around to getting me vaccinated. So he makes me print out materials on how to keep safe so he could read up on them, then spouts off maddening instructions in my ear when we're doing the groceries, like a virtual assistant that I had no way of shutting down.

"How can you still be a know-it-all after you're dead?" I groan. But I let him learn all these things, because it makes him happy to think that he's taking care of me for the last time, and I know he'll need to know these things too, for when I'm gone.

We make the rounds to drop off groceries for Mom and Mama, and this is the only time that I witness how sad Michael actually is to have passed away, perhaps regretting that he never got to say goodbye. Our mothers think I'm tearful and sentimental when we see them because I miss their son, but it's also because the other side of the coin of my decision to make the swap is that my time with them is coming to an end, too.

But I can't even give them a hug, nor see their faces behind their masks. Michael air-hugs them for both of us. Even though I can physically touch him, perhaps because I'm the beneficiary of the plan, everything and everyone else slips through his fingers.

I wonder if any of them will remember this time together, like a dream, or if Michael will wake up and we'll have traded places, as though none of this ever happened. I wonder if our mothers will remember this surreal time period that I managed to mumble a hurried "Love you" after every grocery drop-off and phone call.

Soraya hadn't been too clear on what happens next, and I haven't been able to contact her, if even just to thank her for her gift.

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We're on month three of Michael's extension period and I'm staring at a test that is showing me two pink lines for the very first time in my life. I'm forty, pregnant, and the father of my child is a ghost who is sobbing happily at the news, while ordering me to book an appointment with the OB-GYN. I don't know how I feel. My tummy looks no different from how it normally looks after we pig out at *Samgyupsalamat*. I haven't thought about becoming a mother in so long, maybe not after our failed IVF attempts when we turned thirty.

A baby. A baby that we had longed for. But a baby that I would have to raise on my own. I still have three months to decide whether or not to push through with The Swap. I know that the right thing to do is to live. Michael will probably be livid if I make the swap, assuming he remembers any of this. But I wouldn't ever have to know, because I'd be gone by then. Michael believes that there's a heaven. It seems that I don't believe in the afterlife. I believe that I will just dissipate. Going, going, gone.

\*\*\*

We could have found out at five months, but I have put off learning the gender of the baby, which must have been conceived just before Michael died.

"We'll do it on your last day. It will be my farewell gift to you, like the gender reveal of all gender reveals." Knowing if it's a boy or a girl would make the baby more real for me, and I have already made up my mind to make the swap after all. I hate myself for my selfishness and for doing this to him. But who am I without Michael? I think about this until my brain hurts and still come up empty. My belly is starting to swell and I am paralyzed with fear. I think that I would make an awful single mother. How did Mom do it? How do people do it? Become responsible for another human being, when it sometimes feels impossible to even be fully responsible for yourself?

"It's a boy," the OB-GYN tells me, breaking my heart. I want this miniature Michael to live, but if I am all he has, wouldn't it be better not to be born at all?

"I can't have this baby," I finally tell Michael when we reach our house and I couldn't put it off any longer.

He squeezes my hand. "Of course you can. We've spent the past three months preparing for this."

He brushes the hair off my forehead. "You don't have a choice anyway, dummy. You'll be fine. You've always been fine. I might have made things a little easier, but you have always been perfectly fine on your own."

I take a deep breath, taking out the contract that's crumpled from my bag.

"But I do have a choice," I say softly. The "Yes, Swap" box has been checked. I just need to sign it, and it's done.

Michael takes a few minutes to read the pages, incredulous. "You'll leave? You'll leave along with our baby and leave me here?" he finally asks, stunned.

"Feels different doesn't it, being on the other end of the deal." I can't keep the bitterness out of my voice. "How do you think I've felt these past six months, of you telling me that I'll be *just fine* without you by my side?"

"You will make an excellent mother," he whispers, flipping the contract, scanning the contents again. He looks up. "You *were* an excellent mother."

What is he talking about?

He jabs a finger at the other policy options on the last page. "It all makes sense now. You bought this—this Start Over Plan, Plan C, for Isabelle." He is red in the face, agitated. His voice sounds like it's coming from inside a drum, but the name Isabelle, again, brings a searing pain to my chest.

"Who is..." I try to form the word Isabelle, but I can't.

"Isabelle Soraya, our daughter," he says impatiently. "Think about it. If we didn't have a daughter, you would have bought this Plan A, no question. We always said, wouldn't it be great if we died around the same time?"

Plan A - Game Over. Yes, I had found myself wondering the past few months as I struggled with my choice about The Swap, why I hadn't just gone with Plan A. To die within a year of Michael would have been ideal.

"I had thought it was strange," he continued. "That you ignored me, whenever I wanted to talk about Isabelle. You were depressed. That was when you started seeing your psychiatrist, Dra. Larrazabal, and taking the anti-anxiety medicine. We talked about having you stay at the healing center, because I was starting to be afraid that you would take your own life. But suddenly, after a year, you were okay. You came back to me and you went on with your life, and I thought it was for the best."

"You're lying."

"I... can't lie." He points to the contract, to the No-Lying clause that had slipped my mind. Maybe the clause that was letting me hear about Isabelle from Michael.

I shake my head, feeling like a heavy fog is lifting. I need to ask Soraya. Soraya. Hadn't I completely forgotten about her too, up until that moment that she showed up on my front step? Had she put a spell on me, to forget about her and to save me from the grief of losing her, too? I recall Soraya's mother and her empty look when I attempted to ask her about her daughter. Had she chosen to forget Soraya, too?

Michael softens, looking urgently at me. "Do you remember? You gave birth to Isabelle in 2010, after our second IVF attempt. You dressed her up in pink all the time, until she told you when she was three that she preferred lavender and she wouldn't let you trick her into believing that pink and lavender were one and the same. You sometimes let her wear princess costumes to class. You learned to ride the bike, to show her that she could be brave like mommy. She got sick when she was six, and you were there to hold her hand, until she was taken from us when she was seven. That was three years ago. Do you remember?"

I don't remember any of this, but my heart seems to be trying to tell me that it's true. My hand goes involuntarily to my triangle of Mourner's Moles, wet with tears.

Soraya, Isabelle, Michael. Three people that I loved the best in all the world.



They say that I suffered from dementia, which researchers believe develop in some Covid cases. That though I was never hospitalized, my experience with Covid-19 led me to frequently forget that Michael was dead. They humored me, they said. And I didn't bother explaining that I actually *knew* he was dead, I just believed that he was keeping me company for a little while.

Michael was right after all when he said that I would be just fine, eventually.

Mom and Mama are always around, now that we have all been vaccinated, and are embracing their roles as doting grandmothers to one-year-old Enzo, who is a happy—if bossy—baby, who seems especially thrilled when I tell him stories about his dad when I rock him to sleep. I change my own light bulbs and buy my own yellow tulips on Valentine's Day.

Michael is gone. Soraya, I was able to confirm, has been dead since 1993, the year she graduated. Had she known the whole time we were friends that I would lose her so soon? Had she been training all that time to save me? Manang Joy insists that she doesn't remember this friend who visited our home and I eventually had to stop interrogating her after the security guard gave in and granted me access to their 2015 logbooks, which showed no visitors for me in the days before my birthday. There is no trace of the insurance policy either, which I realize now that Soraya would have gotten to me just in the nick of time, right before Isabelle got sick.

I don't have memories of this daughter, Isabelle, and I find that I am unable to speak or write her name. All I remember of her are the stories that Michael told me before he left for good that day. I paint her so that I don't forget, this little girl whose face I do not know, who marched into class in princess costumes. The guilt that I feel for choosing to forget about her to save myself and my sanity is sometimes too much to bear. Michael's words of assurance before he left, that he didn't blame me, gives me a small measure of comfort, but not relief, and this is why I continue to work on believing in the dementia theory.

I can understand why I would create a story that Michael cheated death, even by just a few months, to give me closure and to cheer me on, to go on living. I know Michael so well, having spent more than half my life with

him, that I can write a thousand and one stories about what he would do and what he would say, until even Enzo is old and gray. I always come out of my therapy sessions thinking that my subconscious had stepped up to heal me.

But then I arrive at my house and expertly parallel park my car between our neighbors' cars. Michael's ghost is clear in my memory from when he repeatedly coached me through it, yelling, teasing, and triumphantly taking all the credit when I finally did it on my own. And I wonder.

# LITTLE HUNGER // DONDO-YAKI AND OTHER POEMS

Raphael Coronel

## Little Hunger // Dondo-Yaki

Anything worth keeping  
can burn

a little hunger in my belly  
asks for flesh to become  
my flesh, we settled on Japanese

temple fields where dolls are set  
on fire where their shape turns  
to light where history fades into

our small talk about a wig  
that resembled your hair  
you keep cutting short

prayers and rising smoke greet  
the new year and spirits  
that dwells in their homes

## Iridescent

The street is a river,  
a refracting flood -  
slick iridescent mix of  
rain, oil, mud, trembling,  
my shins are cold,  
towards your place, cars  
on hold, half submerged,  
red lights dancing, curved  
of course, there are birds descending,  
a ground dove with a bleeding heart  
weighs on a telephone wire,  
a vendor's scale suffers orange  
rust, are you awake, waiting,  
creasing your sheets, I'm still  
walking, sticky, my feet are forming  
waves, yellowed leaves, a green light  
the scent of gasoline  
burns, I'm near you, slide  
the chain off the lock, my  
lips are blue, darker,  
are you sleeping, I'm at your door,  
what do you see, where  
in the light do you wander

## Side Effects

### I.

Every morning, I'll swallow pink and yellow, pink: fish swimming upstream, or trapped in a farm, either way to grow and roam longer than they should, pink: serotonin, norepinephrine, my brain accepts it as it is, a ripe pile of clothes worn days before beside me, my room sticky with heat, there's no reason to get out of bed, this has to be fiction, we're three weeks into the quarantine, and you tell me I'm starting to look different, your voice doesn't wake me anymore, I'll lie here, forget how to keep my head above water, most of the blanket is spilling onto the floor, on my phone are the dead, an apparition, as numbers swelling up, patients, doctors, severe cases involve forgetting how to breathe, there is weight and sweat on me, up the river, they'll follow the scent to the location of their birth, it will wear them out, maybe in the next hour I'll start moving, its pamphlet tells me its side effects: make them lose interest and leave, the salmon dies from exhaustion shortly after making it home, some of them won't, and they'll say goodbye through their phones, you don't pray for this kind of light, praying is owning up to what you left ignored, yellow: an anticonvulsant used to treat seizures, flopping around, farmed and manmade in the murky water their lungs grew around, yellow: tiny flowers from Narra trees line the cracks of the streets, briefly, I thought I missed you, yellow: a synthetic compound which may result in a reduction of pain-related transmission of signals along nerve fibers, it's the start of holy week, they're not choosing to be hungry, yellow: associated with the development of motor tics, when you open a door and step through, discontinuance disfigures on a molecular level, soon, you'll see it too, there isn't a normal to go back to, angry at our discontent, the government devolves to a man with his own late-night show about shooting as self-defense, yellow: ripe mangoes fall by themselves and rot for the earth to open and swallow, a positive-strand RNA virus, causes less and less hemoglobin that carry oxygen and carbon dioxide, lungs that look like they've inhaled ground glass, crystalizing my hate, lodged in my arteries, the scans are increasing in opacity, once fluid, passing though, farmed in freshwater tanks then transferred to cages along the seashore, grown to maturity, on pesticides and antibiotics, we're slowly dissolved and washed away, I'm losing weight and start to feel my joints

sticking out, there's a bone stuck in my throat and it sinks deeper when I speak, both are slow-release tablets working steadily in my bloodstream, this week is for tidying up our rooms and throwing away old things thick with dust, old toys I played with before the surgery, there's hope it stays this way, to be seen is to be told that they prefer how you looked before, I can't match your enthusiasm, my ears are heavy with mud, in the market, they buy what remains and the scale reads as heavy as a lost child crying for its parents, the pharmacy tells me they're out of stock, I'm buoyant, permeable, floating in place, time is wild and slow.

## II.

pink: fish swimming upstream,  
to grow pink: serotonin,  
ripe days before  
to get out of bed,  
you tell me I'm starting to  
to keep my head above water,  
spilling onto the an apparition,  
  
up the river, they'll follow the scent to the location of their birth,  
maybe in the next hour I'll start moving, making it  
home,  
praying is owning up to what you left  
to treat  
tiny flowers from Narra trees  
I missed you, yellow: a synthetic compound a reduction of  
pain-related transmission  
yellow: associated with the development  
when you open a door and step through, you'll see it  
too,  
a man with his own late-night show  
to open positive- causes  
crystalizing  
in freshwater  
along the seashore, grown to maturity,  
and start to feel my joints  
  
this week is for tidying up our rooms and  
there's hope it stays this  
way, to be seen is to match your  
enthusiasm,  
as a child  
wild and slow

yellow  
 to grow and roam longer than they should  
 my brain accepts it as it is, a ripe pile of  
 fiction,  
 you tell me I'm starting to look different, your voice  
 doesn't wake me anymore, I'll lie , forget  
 the dead, an apparition,  
 forgetting how to breathe, there is  
 the river, the location of their birth, it will  
 wear them out, its pamphlet tells me its side effects:  
 make them lose interest and leave, from exhaustion shortly  
 they'll say goodbye don't pray  
 yellow:  
 the murky water their lungs  
 grew around, yellow:  
 a synthetic compound a reduction of pain-  
 related signals along nerve fibers,  
 hungry, motor tics,  
 disfigures a  
 our discontent, the government devolves to  
 a virus,  
 inhaled ground glass, hate lodged in arteries,  
 then transferred to cages  
 along the seashore, we're slowly dissolved  
 and washed away, I'm losing  
 my old  
 things thick with dust,  
 to be seen is to be told that they prefer your  
 enthusiasm,



# Spirited Away

No electricity tonight coiling  
   up copper,  
 this phone booth  
   rusted over  
   I hear *askals* sleeping  
   a ring ring, piercing my ears   *I called*  
 You, through the mouthpiece, breathing  
   I'm shaking like a dog out  
   here in your province  
 where the Japanese held you  
   hostage; you were less  
   than my age  
   remember?

Hold on  
Had to put another coin  
in. I still hear you

and karaoke singing,  
remember the sound of  
your body slipping in the  
bathtub  
remember thinking  
if the vein had burst blood  
in your abdomen  
remember orange  
curtains in the ambulance,  
the scans  
telling you  
you don't have much

Time-  
I put another coin in

Do you remember going  
                        blind the next night  
Were you dreaming black sand,  
                        low tide, fish

out in the moonless sky  
your eyes waveless, still  
starring resilience,  
or did your dream *kundiman* cause the quieting,  
the deafening,  
to no electricity that night

I hear you breathing, still

## Stations

Let faces appear as petals or ghosts  
blurring along trains that leave at times set  
bodies in the metro – remembering hosts

are patients, bodies in coats, diagnosed  
with a shortness, of time, covered in sweat,  
let faces appear as petals or ghosts

you were a prayer from a past life, most  
hum with rusted steel whistling in rain – wet  
bodies in the metro – remembering hosts

I've seen, this face, and these limbs, where do most  
souls rest, does energy rest when trains reset,  
let faces appear as petals or ghosts

do boughs grow with sunlight off the coast,  
does the wind let go the smell of salt left  
on bodies in the metro – remembering hosts

do these stations echo stories that boast  
a rebirth, a wind, a space kept,  
let faces appear as petals or ghosts  
bodies in the metro – remembering hosts



# VESSELS AND OTHER POEMS

Rodrigo V. Dela Peña, Jr.

## Vessels

The first boat was a frame of sticks lashed  
together thousands of years ago, something  
like the bamboo raft I used when I was younger.  
Then came canoes and kayaks, hollowed out

from a tree trunk, seal skin stretched over whale  
bone. Landlocked, I wanted to cross an ocean.  
What is the meaning of distance if not space  
aching to be covered? Magellan's ships

were carracks, billowing masts emblazoned  
with sigils. Out of a crew of 237, only 18  
men returned to complete the first  
voyage that circled the earth, three years

after setting sail. All those days adrift,  
dreaming of wine, women, Seville's harbor.  
I've set foot in deserted islands and desired  
to claim them by giving names. Think of a reef's

secret, a wrecked galleon lost for centuries  
with its cargo of chipped porcelain, ivory,  
gold ingots. Think of plumes of steam driving  
the propeller, stokers shoveling coal

to feed the furnace. The miracle is how  
the mind conceives of such vessels, turns  
a homespun idea buoyant, seaworthy.  
Rudder and hull, yoke and paddle:

I have gone from one port to another  
yet the horizon plays its trick of always  
shifting further. Unearthed from a cave,  
a burial jar's lid is a boat that bears

two figures, a rower at the stern  
and a passenger, the soul at the bow.  
I long to be the one whose arms are folded  
across the chest, seeking the edge and never

returning, never looking back. What sinks  
to oblivion? What swirls the water? Oarsman,  
coxswain, singer of dirges, be with me along  
and against the current. Ferry me across the river.

## Killing a Goat

And I saw the animal's eyes:  
dark pupils, horizontal slits  
on a pool of amber. The goat

held my gaze as its throat  
was being slashed, Father's hand  
pinning its head steady so not

a drop of blood spilled from the bowl.  
I was seven. For weeks, the goat  
had been tethered to a tree, something

to prod with sticks, feed with broad  
leaves of banana trees. The day  
came when the knot around its neck

was loosened, which was when I knew  
it would be butchered. I saw its eyes  
and heard its bleating, the sound

almost human. Looking back,  
what did the goat see as it died?  
The day bleeding of sunlight.

A boy, standing, whose silence  
could have been a mercy. Years  
would pass, decades, and I would see

again those eyes, Father confined  
in a hospital, wasted by lung  
cancer. I would sit beside him,

the quiet punctuated by the whirl  
of machines hooked to his body.  
It would become carcass. What I saw

burned in my mind: the blade's sharp  
flicker, eyes staring at the world  
one last time. I have borne witness.

I would count and collect my losses,  
and grief would keep me in its eye.  
I would never look away.



## Cross-stitching

Gradient of colors, laid according  
to pattern, mosaic rendered in thread  
and the drip of minutes into hours.  
Pictures framed in burnished wood or faux  
gold: an angel blowing a trumpet,  
*The Last Supper*, a cottage dense with flowers.  
Do you remember why you started,  
Mother, what made you reach for aida cloth,  
squinting to thread the eye of a needle?  
What did you think of when you embroidered,  
repeating the same movement while your husband  
and children were gone, returning day  
after day, until no one arrived  
at the door? Did you need to keep your fingers  
busy and were those little crosses  
the burden you carried, necessary  
weight you held, which made you feel grounded?  
Did you become frayed by the years stitched  
into a life, each strand of questions  
a puzzle, a pain to untangle?  
And if you unraveled in silence,  
knowing there would be nothing but the cross-  
stitched pieces to leave behind, it begs  
the question I cannot ask: Mother, will this  
be the sum of my inheritance, your heart's  
trove of suffering, gathering dust on the walls?

## Lost and Found

*After Carolyn Forché*

A woman sits behind the counter, scribbling line  
after line of what accumulates in the shelves,  
waiting for the bereft to claim antique pens, books  
with dog-eared pages, bills and coins, credit cards,  
coats with missing buttons, dirty laundry, earrings  
orphaned from their pairs, forms for newborns, forms  
for the dying and the dead, gifts unwrapped  
then wrapped again, harmonicas, IDs, jigsaw  
puzzle pieces, keys and locks (all mismatched),  
lipsticks, memory sticks, music sheets, name tags  
in brass and enamel, onyx pendants, passports,  
photographs, quartz watches that have stopped  
ticking, reports, rusty bracelets, spectacles, scarves  
frayed around the edges, tickets for concerts,  
traveller's cheques, umbrellas that no longer touch  
the rain, velvet clutch bags and ribbons, wedding  
bands, X-ray scans, yoga mats, and a Ziplock bag  
that contains a lock of hair, which she takes  
a glimpse of every now and then, wondering  
if it belonged to a daughter or a long-gone lover.

## Notes Towards Another Elegy

1.

Try to shape the mouth in the form of loss. Let the tongue unknot itself. The throat constricts in the effort to remember.

2.

There is a hollow left by that which is gone. Some days, it is the size of a keyhole. Other days, it yawns deep as a trench. A figure has become an absence but observe how its shadow still remains.

3.

Memory can be an abstraction or obstruction. One letter makes all the difference. A eulogy is delivered; an elegy is sung. Mourning extends beyond this morning.

4.

Who is speaking and who is spoken to? The dead can only reply with silence, even with the grave assumption that they can listen. In the end, the self's lament is addressed not to a vacuum but to the self.

5.

Ruins, in fact, are an elegy's architecture. Before being gazetted as a national monument, the Colosseum had been abandoned, looted, vandalized, turned into a tenement, a cow paddock, a fortress, a quarry for marble and travertine stone.

6.

What is time but a movement towards diminishment and negation? She is no longer here. Say not in grief: he is no more, et cetera. A bird flits in a cage, trilling *never, never*.

7.

New names will be added each day. A flipbook of faces, blurred into facelessness. There will be no consolation. The elegy will never be finished.

# BABEUF AND OTHER POEMS

Paolo Manalo

## **Babeuf**

Not the first time to get his heart broken  
This way, or that the relationship ended  
By text but it still hurt. Up on the roof  
With his phone raised waiting for

Better signal, a cloud in the shape of a toucan  
Passed him by while he was being unfriended  
By his ex on each social media platform. "Babeuf"  
Still the password for these accounts. He was sor-

Ry not sorry it was left unchanged  
For him to use as a backdoor  
Some day. For now, a selfie

With the cloud bird so rearranged  
Who can say what it is. He's been single before  
So why can't he stand on the ledge and tell me.

## Cold Mountain Gram

How good our bodies looked before Instagram  
And everything that could happen, happened to us.  
Life was one long medley and we didn't give a damn  
If we didn't know the lyrics. We sang, drank, and pissed

Wherever nature called. Our bodies forgave  
The lack of sleep so long as the sex was good.  
And the sex was always good but no one believed  
We were getting laid. Send nudes?

The dial-up connection couldn't handle our sexy  
640 x 480 pixelated 1998-selves!  
Then 2010 called to collect the debts:

We woke up like an advanced stage of cachexy  
Or a botete that discovered the gym; such DILFs  
With 1001 likes and no regrets.

*a version of Han-shan*

## BL Rondel but Make It Elizabeth Bishop

Today's the day when I am yours  
But after tonight, we shall not meet again.  
While we've known each other all these years  
Today's the *only* day when I'll be yours.  
Choose places to visit, tasks to do, and then—  
I'm assuming—there'll be sex, of course;  
Today's the day when I am yours  
But after tonight we must not meet again.

## Tita Cold Mountain Remix

And I must confess that my loneliness is Kili-  
manjaro. That's not Hemingwayesque  
But my inner climb feels like I borrowed  
someone's pen and forgot to return it all  
These years and it has grown heavier and heavier  
first as stone, then rock, now a boulder rolled  
Up as I make it to the top—a cure to what's  
deep inside. It makes me jump from the nearest  
Ledge where what awaits is very kind: I am alive  
though just a little I lose my mind and start  
The journey over like some respawned Avatar  
thinking I had dropped what it was  
I was holding in that fancy restaurant's  
suggestion box on soft opening; I am alive  
Yes, but always like a half-eaten sandwich  
that was meant for later, only later was  
A squirrel being set up for the joke: O *Tita Baby*,  
*how was I supposed to gnaw?* I am alive  
But for how long for me to be here? Give me  
a séance and I'll tell you how good I am  
At spelling *Serengeti* with one eye  
frightened of the thing, that I've become  
Tita Baby one more time.

*a version of Han-shan,  
Toto, and Britney Spears*

## **Confucius Say Beans Without Pork is Like Bangus Without Belly**

"Where can you find such fish that's all head  
And tail? The best part, tiyan, already  
In someone's belly," my daughter said  
"Before the fish even have an idea  
Of the missing, or why they dead-  
Eye the world. They're not fish, they're fishy."

My son the poultry expert: "In the farm  
Where they raise twelve-legged hens,  
Pure drumsticks—no breasts or arms  
But some will have wings every now and then..."  
"Those were the fishy once and this is their karma!"  
"And in their lives before that they were men

Like you Dad, who love to explain  
That too much pork is bad for the heart  
But forget to say that beans make you farty."



# ON COLLECTIONS AND ADDICTIONS

Augusto Antonio A. Aguila

I have a confession to make. I am an addict and I am not ashamed of it. I admit that I will not be able to recover from this addiction, and it is my choice not to get well. The moment I seek help I know that I will just get worse. Intervention of any kind will destroy who I am as a person. This condition has been going on for decades and continues up to this day. Do not be afraid, because I am not. In fact, I am happy and proud of my addiction. This addiction started quite early; it began when I was still a baby.

My grandmother told me—so many times, that I have lost count—that whenever I heard music playing on the radio or on the record player, I would immediately get up from my crib, move my body up and down, shake it left and right. This was probably what dancing was for me at that time. My grandmother said that I would start crying when the radio or the record player was switched off. To put me to sleep at night, she would sing to me popular songs—not the lullabies usually sung to babies—and that my favorite was, “Those Were the Days” popularized by Mary Hopkin. When I listened to the song many years later on YouTube, I understood why I loved it as a child. It had an amazing hook and a catchy “Lay lay lay lay lay...” coda. My romance with music began with that particular song, and the rest, I say, is history. This love for music turned into a mad obsession. This confession will hopefully help you understand why I cannot ever let go of my addiction—music.

I grew up listening to all kinds of music. My mother bought 45 rpm records and long-playing albums when she liked a song she heard on the radio or when a singer sang it on television. Since my mother was a huge Beatles’ fan, I became one myself. My mother told me amazing stories about Beatlemania as if she were in some kind of trance, and how she dreamt of marrying, Paul McCartney, who for her was the most adorable Beatle. Personally, I thought, John Lennon, was better looking, but didn’t tell her so, because she was very much in love with Paul. Beatles’ records were played regularly in the house, which was the reason why I was able to memorize all their song lyrics, pre-Revolver era.

According to my mother, a few of those Beatles' albums got soaked for many hours in floodwater during the super typhoon, Didang, which my grandmother often referred to as "beinte otso de Mayo" as if it were a time marker for some major historical event, but to my surprise none of those records skipped when they were played. The only sign that they weren't in mint condition was that the hissing sound they made was much louder than that of brand new vinyl records. There was also the occasional "popping" sound which was a sign that the records were slightly damaged, but I hardly cared about those popping sounds as long as the records played without the occasional skipping.

Aside from the Beatles, I was also introduced to the funky music of The Temptations, The Jackson 5, and The Commodores; the polished covers of popular standards of Engelbert Humperdinck and Jack Jones; the upbeat tunes of Gary Lewis & The Playboys, and The Spiral Staircase; the lush MOR ballads of Neil Diamond and The Carpenters; Carole King and Neil Young's classic folk songs; and the soulful ditties of The Supremes and other artists under the Motown label.

There was no time of the day that I wasn't listening to music, so my mother decided to teach me how to operate the record player on my own. She gave me the freedom to choose the records I wanted to play, and while listening to music, we would have long talks about music and musicians, the ones we liked and the ones we didn't.

But one of the most memorable days of my childhood was when my mother bought me a royal blue portable record player with detachable speakers. These portable record players looked like fat briefcases. She told me that I could bring it to school if I wanted to. (Our school only had one phonograph that we could borrow from the library to play music during our free time and during meal breaks.) Attached to the portable record player was a 45 rpm record of Donna Summer's "I Feel Love," the first record I felt I really owned because it was given to me. My mother knew I loved that song very much because whenever the song played on the radio, I would get up and dance. I couldn't get the whipping sound towards the end of the song out of my head. Later, I learned that that sound was produced not by any instrument but by a machine called *synthesizer*, which at that time was said to be the future of music. That Donna Summer record was the start of my obsession with 45 rpm records.

As I was growing up, disco music became very popular, but many disco artists only had one or two hit songs: Anita Ward had “Ring My Bell,” Thelma Houston had “Don’t Leave Me This Way,” Foxy had “Get Off,” CJ & Company had “Devil’s Gun,” which was primarily the reason why I only bought and collected singles and not albums during my growing up years. Besides, long-playing albums were more expensive than 45 rpm records. A long-playing album cost PhP 24.00 while 45 rpm records were sold at Ph P 4.00 apiece in those days.

But the disco artists that I adored were those that had a string of massive hits such as Donna Summer and The Bee Gees. Whenever they released a new song, I would ask money from my mother and immediately go to the nearest record bar, Society Records, which was located inside Sta. Mesa Market (now SM City Santa Mesa) to buy their latest records. My mother discovered the Beatles, but I discovered Donna Summer and The Bee Gees. Life-size posters of my disco idols decorated my room. I would proudly take my portable record player and a few disco records to school for me and my classmates to dance to.

Record bars were a big part of my life. When my mother took me to the shopping mall, usually on a weekend, I would get very excited. My heart would beat fast and my hands would become sweaty, and not because we were going to see a movie, or eat at a famous pizza parlor, or buy new clothes and a pair of shoes. Don’t get me wrong, I loved doing those things too. Those were the perks of being an only child for a very long time, but my excitement had to do with being able to pass by a record store. There was usually one in every shopping mall. Farmer’s Market in Cubao had two. Bookstores in those days, like National Bookstore and PECO, sold records as well, and so if a particular single was not available in one store, it would definitely be available in another.

My mother already knew that I would coax her into checking out the latest singles and albums. I remember holding her hand tightly and actually pulling her toward the place where the record bar was located, because I couldn’t wait to get my hands on the records I had been mooning over for days. The moment I heard loud music being played and saw the hundreds of long-playing albums neatly stacked on the shelves, the world around me would just stop and cease to exist. Maybe that was what Longinus and Immanuel Kant were talking about when they wrote about the sublime. It was a feeling that I could not fully grasp. It was a sensation like no other.

Seeing those round vinyl records and album jackets was enough to send chills up and down my spine. The sales clerks in record stores would greet us with a big smile on their faces because we were regular customers. They would inform us about the latest releases, and my mom and I would pore over the stacks of albums displayed on the shelves.

Since there was no Internet back then to search for the titles and lyrics of songs, my mom and I would sing the chorus of a song to the sales clerks, if we didn't know the title of the records we were looking for, so that they would know what record we wanted to purchase. We probably looked really silly, when I think about it now. One of my dreams was to own and actually run a record store. I imagined myself giving customers helpful information about music, the top picks for the week, juicy news about their favorite singers, and recommend to them albums that were worth buying.

One time my mom brought home a Jingle songbook which was a special Beatles issue. I flipped through its pages and saw the lyrics of Beatles' songs that were unfamiliar to me; Beatles' songs from their albums "Revolver," "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," "Magical Mystery Tour," "The White Album," "Abbey Road," "Hey Jude," and "Let It Be," I asked my mother about them and why she didn't have those albums. She said that someone borrowed her copy of "Revolver" and didn't return it, while the other albums she said she didn't have much interest in because the Beatles were no longer the cute, wholesome boys from Liverpool that she idolized; they had turned into hippies.

I didn't expect her to say those things because she was such a devoted fan. Deep inside, I had this strange feeling that my mom had betrayed her idols and I felt bad about it. It was like falling out of love, being disloyal to someone you had been pining over for years, and then dropping him/her like a hot potato. I realized that I was actually a bigger fan of the Beatles than my mom, and it made me sad. It was like the ties that bound us as fans of the fab four had been severed, and it was her fault. I just didn't want to let go. I just wasn't ready to accept it. I was left all alone as my mom just walked away and moved on. I kept flipping the pages of the Jingle songbook and I couldn't get the Beatles songs that I had just discovered off my mind.

When I look back now, I realize that it was my first bout of obsession. After a few days, I was able to muster enough courage to tell my mom that I wanted to buy the other studio albums of the Beatles to complete our collection. To my surprise, she said that it was actually a good idea because

she also wanted to listen to them. I was overjoyed because it meant that my mom was giving the Beatles a second chance and that was enough for me.

I have always felt that the relationship between fan and idol was more sacred than marriage. The kind of love a true-blooded fan feels for his idol whom he has not even seen or met in person is so pure and profound that no force of nature can break it. I have always felt that way about my idols. I know that, as a die-hard fan, I have a great responsibility to support everything my idols do.

One day when I came home from school, my mother handed me a plastic bag containing two long-playing albums by the Beatles. The first two long-playing albums that were going to be mine: "Revolver" and "Sgt. Pepper's..." The sheer delight that I felt was indescribable. I jumped for joy. I played the albums the whole week. My mother then bought the other Beatles' albums, including brand new copies of the old ones we owned, and every morning, I would look at the complete studio albums of the greatest band in the world, touch them, and feel in my hands the glossy texture of the special cardboard, the material used to make album jackets. It was my first collection. It was the beginning of an addiction. I felt happy and complete.

I tried fooling myself that collecting LPs was merely a hobby. My grandmother told me so, and I almost believed her. But it got worse through the years. When my family lost money, we had to cut back on our expenses. I had to transfer to a different school during my senior year in high school, because my mom could no longer afford to pay my tuition in an exclusive school for boys. But despite those setbacks, I managed to save some money from my allowance to buy records. The first album I bought with my allowance money was Sheena Easton's "Best Kept Secret," which was followed by the "Flashdance" and "Staying Alive" movie soundtracks, Abba's "Super Trouper" and "Greatest Hits Vol. 2," and Bonnie Tyler's "Faster Than the Speed of Night."

Before my mother passed away, a few weeks before my high school graduation, she and my dad were able to reconcile after being separated for fifteen years. Call it premonition. My mom called every relative she knew, in her efforts to track down my dad. My grandfather's brother, Lolo Terry, gave my mom my dad's contact details and told her that he was working at San Miguel Corporation as a beer salesman. To make a long story short, the two of them met, reconciled, and decided to give their marriage a second chance. But none of that happened because my mom died on March 10, 1984, at the

age of 33, due to blood poisoning caused by addiction to sleeping pills. But that's another story.

It was my dad who put me through college. My allowance at that time was 150 pesos a week. From my 25 peso-a-day allowance, I was able to save 5 pesos a day; the rest went to food and jeepney fare. My goal then was to buy at least one LP a month.

It was the 80s and I would listen to the weekly countdown show, American Top 40, hosted by Casey Kasem on the radio to know which songs and albums were doing well on the charts. The AT40 show became my ultimate guide in choosing which albums to buy. It was difficult because I could only buy one or two albums a month. From my allowance, I was able to accumulate more than a hundred albums. Others were given to me as birthday and Christmas presents since everyone knew that I collected LPs. I took care of my albums, wrapped them with new plastic covers, cleaned them regularly, and made sure that they didn't get scratches. I took care of them like a mother would take care of her newborn baby.

During this period that I fell in love with the music of new wave bands like Culture Club, Spandau Ballet, Thompson Twins, Duran Duran, The Cure, Depeche Mode, Pet Shop Boys, and Tears for Fears; the classic rock numbers of Prince, Van Halen, Bruce Springsteen, Bon Jovi, Bryan Adams, David Bowie, Roxy Music, Motley Crue, and Rick Springfield; the dance pop confections of Bananarama, Rick Astley, Jody Watley, Janet Jackson, and of course, my biggest idol, the one and only Queen of Pop, Madonna.

I was heartbroken when vinyl records were phased out in the late 80s and eventually replaced by compact discs. It was hard for me to accept the fact that vinyl records would just be part of the past, outdated and irrelevant. When I started working as a high school teacher, I began collecting cassette tapes, but they didn't have the same quality as vinyl records. (CDs were very expensive at PhP 450 apiece.) I was able to accumulate more than 500 cassette tapes which I bequeathed later to a student when I started collecting CDs in the year 2000.

When I was hired by UST in 1996 and my salary got higher, I bought myself a stereo component system and started collecting compact discs. The first two CDs I bought were Duncan Sheik's self-titled album and "Dig Your Own Hole" by Chemical Brothers. From 2000 to 2020, I have accumulated a total of 2,771 CDs. I was heartbroken again when record bars

shut down a few years ago due to the shift to the digital format and people were no longer buying physical copies of albums. But as an avid collector, I found online selling very rewarding. The excitement of finding CDs on the net just worsened my addiction.

My best friend and fellow-teacher, John Jack Wigley, was himself a collector of albums and we basically have the same CDs and practically the same taste in music. We would talk about music for hours. We even wrote to each other regularly, since he was based in Pampanga, and I was in San Juan, to update each other on the movies we had seen and the new albums we had bought. When he gave away his CDs a few years ago, I felt sad because, again; like my mother, he had moved on and totally embraced the craze that was Spotify, and I was left alone again refusing to embrace the new trend. I thought that we would be the last two men left standing, fighting for the cause of CD collectors, but I was wrong.

I do have a Spotify account, but honestly, I will never exchange the kind of high that I feel whenever I buy a new CD. I feel that the songs in Spotify belong to everyone and I don't like it. It does not signify any kind of ownership. It's the collector in me that refuses and resists this new technology. I don't blame people who prefer subscribing to Spotify to buying physical albums. I understand the convenience it provides, but when it comes to music, I don't care about convenience. I cherish the effort I put into searching for titles on the Internet, the joy of seeing them, and patiently waiting for the parcel to arrive on my doorstep. I have become more of a "completist" through the years. The urge to complete an artist's discography has become very intense.

When I was younger, people always told me that I would eventually outgrow my hobby. I never did. In fact, it has become worse. Listening to music is like a religion to me. I listen to every track on an album, never skipping a song. I give every song my full attention and concentration. I am not like casual listeners who treat music as something disposable and just a means to pass the time. I take music very, very seriously.

If I had to choose between happiness in romantic love or my CD collection, I know that there won't be any competition. I would definitely choose my collection over love without batting an eyelash. You might find that impractical or even strange. I don't. Don't I have enough with 2,771 CDs? The answer is no. I am actually just starting. Tomorrow is another day.



# BUILDING A BRIDGE BETWEEN “HARD LITERATURE” AND “POP FICTION”

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo

Like most Filipino writers whom I know, I got my start as a writer in the campus press, first in high school, then in college. And, like most of my contemporaries I dreamed of a career in journalism—writing for the national newspapers and magazines, since, in those days, there was only print journalism. Creative writing programs, and even creative writing courses didn't exist.

The University of Santo Tomas, my alma mater, offered a degree in Journalism (a curriculum which included the new fields of Advertising and Public Relations). In the same faculty which taught Journalism (the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, or Philets), it also offered a Bachelor of Philosophy (with a curriculum which included many Literature subjects). I chose Philosophy even if I had no idea what profession a degree in Philosophy prepared one for, mainly because I wanted to take all those Literature courses.

In high school, while writing for and eventually editing *The Paulinian*, I began to contribute feature articles to several national magazines (all unfortunately short-lived). As a sophomore in college, while writing for and eventually editing *The Varsitarian*, I wrote a weekly column in the youth section of the *Manila Chronicle*; and as a senior, I became editor of the youth section of the *Weekly Graphic*. So, when I graduated from college, I considered myself a professional journalist.

But what I really wanted to be was a writer of short stories; and, of course, I wanted to win a Palanca. This didn't come easily to me. It was essays that I wrote, and the Palanca Awards then did not include the essay category. My best friend had already won a Palanca for her poetry while still an undergraduate. But I hadn't even published a story! And when she was invited to be part of the first Writers' Workshop in Silliman, and I wasn't, I was devastated.

By the time my first short story was published, I was 25, married and a mother. When I won my first Palanca, my husband had accepted a



job with UNICEF, and we were living in Beirut. The news got to me in a letter from my mother, sent via diplomatic pouch by UNICEF in Manila to UNICEF in Beirut. Tony was out of the country, and my eldest daughter was in school. So the only one I could share my big news with was my second daughter, Anna, who was around 4 years old. I said to her: “Anna, guess what, I won a prize for my story—I got third prize.” She thought about that for a moment, and then, she said, “Gee, Ma, you have to try harder next time.”

I have another favorite Palanca memory. It happened in this very room on Palanca Night. I was here with my husband, Tony. Either he or I had served as judge for one of the categories. A young man came up to greet us—it was the late Luis Katigbak, then still an undergraduate in the Creative Writing Program of the University of the Philippines then. He looked rather self-conscious in his dark suit. I had only ever seen him in t-shirts and jeans, so I almost didn’t recognize him. We congratulated him for his prize, and he shook our hands, gave us a wide smile, and a little bow. After he had left us, Tony said to me, “That’s the look and the swagger of a writer who has just won his first Palanca. Recognize it?”

And every Palanca Night since, I have seen that look and that swagger in some of the young writers in attendance. But now and again, I’ve wondered: how long will this last? The question I’m asking is not how long will the Palanca Awards last. I’m asking how long will writers keep on wanting and trying to produce the kind of writing that wins a Palanca award?

We all know that in the different branches of the country’s biggest bookstore chain, what few shelves are devoted to books are not occupied by literary titles written by Filipino writers. Of course, these days, the question that follows naturally on that one is: but what do we mean by that term “literary title”?

A few months ago, at a meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Book Development Association of the Philippines (BDAP), I heard another term used for the first time: “hard literature.” I learned that, in the publishing world, the term has replaced the earlier term, “serious literature.” As a writer, and a reader, my own definition of “serious literature” is literature that is carefully crafted, literature that seeks to explore ideas which the writer feels strongly about, literature that is written, not just to share experiences, but to offer insights about its subject. In other words, literature which has a chance of winning a Palanca award.

But at that meeting I am referring to, the speaker (himself a very successful local publisher, Mr. Jun Matias of Precious Pages and Lampara Books) made a pitch for Filipino publishers to be more open—not just to “hard literature”—but to all forms of writing. There is so much of it being produced now, he said, so many young people wanting to share their stories, and so many people wanting to read them, that publishers who choose to continue to ignore it, or “judge” it—by which he meant, look down on it—run the risk of being left behind. This made me sit up.

Jun then showed us a brief video of one of his authors—a Wattpad writer—arriving for a “meetup.” This writer’s fans were so numerous that they didn’t fit into the room or hall that had been prepared for the occasion, and the publisher had to open another one to accommodate them. When she arrived, the author was received like a rock star—with screams and shrieks and wild applause. And she looked the part too—young and slim with straight long hair, her face partly hidden by huge shades.

Another publisher later told me that her company has been in an arrangement with Wattpad since 2014, to turn selected Wattpad novels into print novels. One of these, *She’s Dating a Gangster* by Bianca Bernardino became, not just an National Bookstore bestseller, but the first Wattpad novel to be turned into a movie (by Star Cinema, with Kathryn Bernardo and Daniel Padilla in the lead roles).

This publisher also informed me that their most popular writer, Jonaxx, is so big that the company has created an imprint just for her. Her real name is Jonah Mae Panen Pacala; she’s 28 years old and a pre-school teacher from Cagayan de Oro. According to her fan page she is the first Filipina Wattpad author to gain one million followers. Last year, that figure went up to 2.7M+. And her fans are so fiercely devoted to her that they object to her novels’ being changed in any way, including correcting grammar and syntax. *Mapapansin Kaya?* the first of her books to be published, had a print run of 40,000. This may not seem like an impressive figure in New York City, but in Manila, it is quite astonishing. As of this writing, seven of Jonaxx’s books have been published in print so far. She joined Wattpad in 2012. By 2018, she had published 32 novels. Actually, my initial reaction to the Wattpad phenomenon when I first heard of it was astonishment. I had no idea that so many people wanted to write fiction. But, then again, why not?

Looking back on my own teen years... didn't I, too, want to write stories? I began writing stories because I loved reading them. I'm talking about novels like *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables* and *Daddy-Long-Legs* and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*; and later, the Nancy Drew series and the Beverly Gray series—in short, what today are called “YA novels.” My world was a small one. My parents were conservative and kept me at home most of the time. To use a hoary cliché, reading books opened doors for me, doors into other, larger, worlds.

When I first tried to write stories, I was a pre-teen. I simply wanted to imitate the stories I had read. The heroines in those stories had adventures; they fell in love. And they wanted to be writers! They became my role models. My writing—like my reading—was not so much for self-expression or sharing with others. It was a form of escape, an escape from a life I considered boring and humdrum.

But I outgrew those stories. There was something predictable about their plots, and about their characters, principally, the little orphan girl, neglected and deprived of love, but gifted with a vivid imagination. After various mishaps, some painful, some hilarious, she transforms into a strong-minded, large-hearted, confident, accomplished, and lovely young woman; and of course finds a young man worthy of her.

So, I moved on to Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters, to Mark Twain and Harper Lee, to Charles Dickens and the writer who wrote *Silas Marner*. I discovered Nick Joaquin and Kerima Polotan and Carmen Guerrero Nakpil. I realized I was no longer reading just for escape. Without fully realizing what I was looking for, I just knew I was looking for something else, for something more.

My writing began to change as well. I showed these new essays and stories to my English teachers and the school paper adviser. When they edited these, or wrote comments on the margins, I did not take this as an infringement on my freedom. Neither did any of my classmates. We took it as an effort to help us become better writers. And we were grateful.

Anyway, this whole process simply meant that I was growing up as a person. And that I was developing as a writer.

Today, I ask myself: if the Net had existed when I was a teen-ager, and had it been possible to post my scribblings on an app like Wattpad, without the benefit of comments or suggestions from teachers or more

experienced writers; had I acquired a huge following, and my stories been turned into printed books, which would sell copies in the thousands, or perhaps even in the hundreds of thousands... if these things had happened to me, would I have chosen to stop writing girlish romances, and moved on to other subjects, and other ways of writing? What would have been the reason for doing so?

It has occurred to me that this may well be the situation some of the Wattpad writers find themselves in. They're already successful. What else do they need to do? In particular, why do they need to go to college and study writing?

Actually, I know people—some of them, writers—who believe that one does not have to get a degree in creative writing to become a writer. And that is certainly true. National Artists Nick Joaquin, NVM Gonzalez, Francisco Arcellana didn't have degrees in Creative Writing. National Artists Bienvnido Lumbera, Virgilio Almario, and Frankie Sionil Jose don't have degrees in creative writing. And, as I said earlier, neither do I.

The establishment of Creative Writing as an academic discipline is relatively new (unlike the B.A. in Fine Arts and the B.A. in Music, which have been around for more than a century). But why would anyone discourage young writers from wanting to get degrees in creative writing?

The myth seems to be that a formal education in writing will “destroy” your natural, instinctive talent. And, perhaps, there ARE some teachers out there whose methods may, in fact, have a negative effect on their students. But doesn't this happen in all fields, be they the arts, the natural sciences, or the social sciences? Whatever one's chosen field, one will encounter good teachers and bad teachers; there will be teachers whom one will find boring but whom others will find inspiring, and vice versa.

I tell my own students that, at some point, they should become pro-active, and choose the mentor they feel is the best suited to their own temperaments, someone they admire and trust and feel they can work with. Such a mentor cannot harm them; in fact, he or she, is more likely to be a great help to them.

I've said this often before: writing is a profession like any other. One trains to become a professional. It is accepted as natural that people in the other arts, like painting or sculpture should wish to enroll in a College of Fine Arts, and musicians should wish to enter a Conservatory of Music.

And, certainly, the more highly skilled they are, the bigger their chances of selling their works via the great international auction houses or doing solo performances to the accompaniment of great symphony orchestras. Why should it be any different for literature?

Of course writers who don't want to get a university education don't have to get it. But if they're serious about making writing their career—if they wish to be professional writers—they need some form of training, even if it be self-training. All training requires hard work, but this kind of training—self-training—even more so.

One learns any skill, first, by imitating those who know how to do it. Even child prodigies—like Tiger Woods, who was playing golf when he was two years old—took golf lessons, from his father, first of all. Even gifted musicians—like the band Queen, and its brilliant front man Freddie Mercury—have acknowledged the influence on their work of other rock stars, whom they respected, and whose music they spent time studying: Elvis Presley, David Bowie, Jimi Hendrix.

When the UST Center for Creative Writing invited Ely Buendia to speak at a forum on song writing, I asked him what he thought had led to the Eraserheads' great success. He said he didn't know, but he also told me that he had admired many other musicians, had studied them, and tried to incorporate those influences into his music. He mentioned, in particular, Elvis Presley (who, in turn, had been influenced by African American blues, southern country music, and gospel music). And he mentioned our own folk songs, which he said he had also studied.

To return to what I was saying earlier: what would be the incentive of the phenomenally popular and commercially successful Wattpad writer to raise the level of her writing skills, and take on concerns larger than first love or first heartbreak?

Actually, I know someone who has done just that. Perhaps some of you will recognize the name Charmaine M. Lasar. She's a 20-year-old Wattpad writer, who won the Carlos Palanca award for the novel in Filipino in 2015. She has been quoted to the effect that she joined the Palanca literary contest because she "wanted to refute the idea that only garbage comes out of Wattpad." But she also added that, in writing her 35,000-word novel, *Toto-O*, which she claims to have written in just one month, she "consciously deviated from her Wattpad writing style, which is looser and more carefree," and opted

to write something that was “medyo malalim” in terms of language.” Also, its plot has nothing to do with young love or young heartbreak.

The novel was published in 2016 by JumpMedia. And last year, Maine was accepted by the UP Institute of Creative Writing as a writing fellow for its National Writers’ Workshop. I met her there, and she told me she was considering saving up to enroll for a Creative Writing degree. I salute her, and I salute the Palanca Awards for giving her the recognition she deserved.

Her crossover is proof that the two worlds—the world of pop fiction and the world of hard literature—are not mutually exclusive.

Back in 1999, after retiring from government service, my husband (who, in one of his earlier incarnations, had also been a poet, an essayist, and a journalist), set up a small publishing company that he ran pretty much by himself. He had in mind two lines: information books, and literature. But when he found out how small the print run of most literary titles was, he was shocked. Why, he asked me, would I go to all that trouble and use up all that time and energy in writing a novel or a collection of short stories or essays, if only a thousand people were going to read me?

He was determined to publish books that would appeal to larger audiences, and he decided that the way to do that was to produce short, light, nonfiction books, targeting readers in their 20s and 30s; books which would be accessible, without losing their literary quality, and books in both English and Filipino. Many of the writers he published were first-time authors, like Vlad Gonzalez, Carljoe Javier, Rica Bolipata Santos; but he also published writers who already had something of a name, like Marivi Soliven Blanco, and Luis Katigbak; and award-winning writers like Butch Dalisay, Vince Groyon, and Chris Martinez. The award winners were not averse to trying their hand at writing that would have a more popular appeal.

Milflores books did well in terms of sales. A few did exceptionally well. And some of the Milflores books also won awards, like Rica Bolipata Santos’ *Love, Desire, Children, Etc.*, which won the Madrigal Gonzalez Best First Book Award.

I should also mention Summit Books, which introduced Chick-Lit to young Filipinas with a novella by Tara Sering titled, *Getting Better* in 2002. It was a kind of market test, to see if there was a local reading public for chick literature which was a big thing in the UK and the US. The novella

was packaged along with *Cosmopolitan Philippines* October 2002 issue. So it was a freebie with a print run of 57,000 copies, the magazine's circulation for that month. The results were so good that a sequel was immediately planned and Summit Books was set up with Tara Sering as its head. By 2005, it had already published eight books.

To quote Diane Goodman, associate professor at Allegheny College and herself a chick lit author, "Chick-Lit is hip, stylish, confident and sharp—it's also honest and very brave... And it proves itself structurally, lyrically, and formally as literature." She described it as "the new fiction in much of its form and voice and content, proudly on the edge of the genre—making use of standard fiction practices within original reinvented forms that accommodate new messages, meanings."<sup>1</sup>

The Pinay counterpart of Chick-Lit was different from that model because of the differences in culture, and because of its author profile. All Pinay Chick-Lit authors had received formal training in creative writing or literature or both, from top universities. Some either had MAs or were currently enrolled in graduate schools. They had all written "serious literature," and all wrote in English.

Sering's novel was a delightful read—quick, clean prose, sure of itself and of its desired effects, fast-paced, sassy, sophisticated, and wildly funny. It succeeded in turning what was originally very western material into something unmistakably *Pinoy*. And, behind the humor was sly criticism of the world it depicted—the guys and chicks of the corporate world who think they're so cool. In short, it was satire. This was recognized by critics (yes, Chick-Lit was noticed by critics in media and even in academe). Ronald S. Lim of the *Manila Bulletin*, wrote that Sering's third novel, *Before Dinner and the Morning After* was "more about female empowerment than romance or anything else. It's about knowing what you're worth and having the courage to take risks to get what you want."<sup>2</sup>

Nor were other members of the literary establishment—like the Manila Critics' Circle—averse to granting Chick-Lit admission into the category of "literature." Sering's second novel, *Almost Married* received a National Book Award for Best Young Adult Fiction.

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1 Goodman, Diane. What is Chick Lit. <http://www.electronicbooksreview.com>. 2005.

2 See Hidalgo, Cristina Pantoja. Endnote #10, "Genre Fiction, Pinay Style," *Over a Cup of Ginger Tea: Conversations on the Literary Narratives of Filipino Women*. (UP Press, 2006, p. 96).



But I don't think Chick-Lit is still flourishing today.

Today, we have Visprint Publishing, which is doing something similar, but on a much larger scale. Some of the writers whom Nida Ramirez publishes are actually academics, like Chuckberry Pascual, Joselito Delos Reyes, and John Jack Wigley. All three have written "hard literature." All have won awards for their writing. But Nida has chosen to publish their lighter work. Visprint books are small, inexpensive, light, humorous. Nida has also published the speculative fiction of Eliza Victoria and the graphic fiction of Manix Abrera. Actually, none of Visprint's titles are sleepers. And some have won literary awards too. In fact, in 2015, Visprint received a National Book Award as Publisher of the Year, a prize which goes to the publisher with the biggest number of winning titles for that year.

So Visprint would seem to represent the happy bridge between the commercially successful book and the artistically lauded book, proving, yet again, that these are not incompatible.<sup>3</sup>

In that sense, this is actually a very exciting time for writers. There have never been so many choices available, including what would have been mind-boggling for me and my contemporaries: self-publishing online.

Before making those choices, though, writers need to figure out a few things. First, what kind of books do they want to write? Second, what kind of writers do they want to be, or think they can be? Do they mainly want to entertain readers, or to challenge them intellectually, or to influence them politically? Do they want to make as much money as they can? Or do they want to write in the best way they know how? Or do they want to try and do both? And, finally, how do they want their books distributed—by commercial publishers? by academic publishing houses? by themselves, online and in small expos?

These choices will be determined by what they believe the function of literature is in a country like ours, at the time in which we live, and what role they want to play in it as writers.

Because I am a writer who is also a publisher, I understand the need to be commercially viable. But, as an educator, I also believe that public service is an important responsibility of the publishing industry. And this means recognizing that expanding the market for books is important, not just for bigger profits, but because more educated citizens make more mature

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3 As of this writing, Visprint has closed. But it has been replaced by Avenida Books.



citizens—an indispensable element for any experiment in democracy, like ours.

In concrete terms, this means: on the one hand, accepting the level at which most of our reading public is—what it is willing to read, what it enjoys reading—and, on the other hand, committing at least a part of the resources available to producing books which will upgrade standards and tastes.

Personally, I remain committed to writing in the best way I know how, no matter how small the audience for this kind of writing might be. Because I feel that literature of this sort—“hard literature,” if you will—serves its own purpose.

In another essay,<sup>4</sup> I wrote about this: “Writers of all generations have tried to define that purpose. But there are periods in our history when it becomes startlingly clear. The period we live in today, in this country, is one of them—one of those periods when events, both natural and man-made, conspire to drain one of all hope that better times lie ahead.”

I mentioned the book, *Sonoran Desert Summer*, by John Alcock, professor of Zoology at Arizona State University, where he describes June in the desert as “the month of almost no hope for all living creatures, with the temperature at 102 degrees, rainfall at two-tenths of an inch, and a wind that has removed almost every hint of moisture from the desert world.” He calls it “a time for hanging on, enduring, letting the days pass.”

And then, he describes how, suddenly... “from the boulders on the still shaded lower slope of Usery Mountain comes a song, the clear, descending trill of a canyon wren. Loud, defiant, and encouraging, it announces a survivor... (The bird) bounds from rock to rock, at perfect ease in its home in the desert.”

Sometimes I think that this might be the reason we do it, the reason we keep on writing. This is our song, “defiant and encouraging.”

As writers, we all know that we must stay the course, most particularly in bleak times such as those that confront us now. We will not necessarily agree on what we are called upon to do, but we will do it according to our best lights. We will observe, we will record, we will protest. Above all, we will remember. And we will endure.

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4 Hidalgo, Cristina. 2017-2018. “Introduction,” *Tomás: The Journal of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies*. Vol. 2, Issue 5, 1<sup>st</sup> Term, 2014-2015, pp. ix-x.

(Originally delivered as a speech on the occasion of the author's having received the Gawad Dangal ng Lahi, given by the ***Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature*** on November 8, 2019, at the Manila Peninsula.)

# AND THAT'S A WRAP, FOR THE DECADE THAT WAS

Alfred A. Yuson

We should realize that we're not only saying goodbye (with a gasp of relief but not without continuing concern) to an *annus horribilis*, but to an entire decade, the second of this millennium.

As with cycles of existence, parts of it were rewarding, while some were downright revolting. We could simplify the span into a division of almost equal halves, in terms of continued duration.

Personally, I found the first half generally gratifying, with much pleasantness and satisfaction with intimate relations and regular engagement with welcome company, many opportunities for travel and recreation, creative accomplishments, financial gains, and inordinate enjoyment of single malt whisky varieties.

Over that first half, our country was also led quite capably and decently—with those features resulting in a steady rise in local and international business trust and approval.

Then 2016 came cannonballing an age of disruption, with Brexit, the election of Duterte, Trump, Bolsonaro, the march of autocrats, Putin's Russia and Xi Jinping's China raising the stakes for global gamesmanship, bullying, and gradations of malevolence well beyond mischief and malfeasance.

An objective study of Xi Jinping's misdirection of a populous state that had been expected to assume global rule for a century—featuring economic blackmail of needy countries to spurious claims over borders and an entire sea, disdain for fishing rights in distant continental waters to a brutish clampdown on Hong Kong—might sufficiently define the boundaries of arrogance, indecency and disruptiveness displayed in the past decade.

Never mind Kim Jong-un, Supreme Leader of Pyongyang. Despite his nuclear arsenal and shaky hold on reality, he remains privileged only with friendship with Dennis Rodman and enforced cult worship—as propped up by, naturally, expectedly, the PROC.

But thank goodness for South Korea, its rationality, films, telenovelas, K-pop and *samgyupsal*, as the far better half of a peninsula. And thank Japan for its continued excellence in improving ramen varieties and whisky treats. (Let's forgive Hawaii for sushi bake and the poke bowl.)

Indeed, 2011-2020 will also be remembered for the shining heroes of cultural achievement, entertainment, and sports. All the art, music and films championed by the decade. Bob Dylan, Kobe Bryant, LeBron James, Leo Messi, Cristiano Ronaldo, Anthony Bourdain ... Banksy? Well ...

Unfortunately, that mini-list already includes a couple of dearly departed. And that's how we'll remember the decade too: the loss of beloved ones.

Again, personally, it was a grievous decade marked by the departure of a former partner, a granddaughter, a sister-in-law, a brother-in-law, my last aunt, closest first cousin, and many cherished friends, colleagues, and idols, among them Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, David Cortez Medalla, Domini Torrevillas, Gilda Cordero Fernando, Iskho Lopez, Peque Gallaga, and Salvador "Dodong" Arellano, who all departed in 2020, and in recent years, Cirilo F. Bautista, Manny Busing, Mario and Cesar Hernando, Fr. Nick Cruz, Tony Mabesa, Pepe Smith, Mike Marasigan, Leoncio Deriada, Victor Jose Peñaranda, Lally Lacaba, Francis Macansantos, Mario Taguiwalo, Ed Maranan, Edd Aragon, Jolicco Cuadra, Carlos "Chuckie" Arellano ...

In the last ten years, I managed to author six books, edited 14 others, and co-wrote and co-edited two more. That's a total of 22 publications.

But I'd rather have kept enjoying the inspiration, guidance and company of the dearly departed ones.

I know. It's a give-and-take affair, this business of moving on, through zigzag pegs of survival. Win some, lose some.

And that's how the past decade has been, albeit more extremely contrapuntal than previous others.

At least our kin and friends in the USA are ridding themselves soon of an awful man who never tasted sushi and sashimi his entire life. We here continue to be deplorably cursed by another type of malevolent and incompetent leadership—one that does not quite portend of any immediate turnaround in the next decade of survival.

Still, we can only move on with hope.

If we were to demarcate milestones for this past decade, the individual years would telescope random cycles of ups and downs, albeit it would seem to be skewed in favor of the latter.

2011 saw a deadly quake and tsunami in Japan, the slayings of Bin Ladin and Qaddafi, the fairy-tale royal marriage of William and Kate, and the demise of Steve Jobs.

2012 was pockmarked by an attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, the U.S. death toll in the Afghan war hitting 2,000 on its 11<sup>th</sup> year, and China's ruling Communist Party electing Xi Jinping as president for the next ten years. On a good note, the London Olympics were largely successful, while Obama became the first U.S. President to visit Myanmar.

2013 had Obama starting his second term, while the world's 1.2 billion Catholics were shocked by 85-year-old Pope Benedict XVI's resignation for health reasons—the first such abdication in 600 years. Pope Francis took over, while Buckingham Palace welcomed a new royal baby. The Boston Marathon bombing was seen as retribution for U.S. military action in Afghanistan and Iraq. The new words “twerk” and “selfie” were added to the dictionary. And Super Typhoon Haiyan, here named Yolanda, wreaked havoc in Eastern Visayas, killing over 6,000 people.

2014 saw unrest in Ukraine and Israel, more threats from ISIS, and the spread of the Ebola virus. But it was Malaysia Airlines that suffered a double whammy, with a 747 plane vanishing after take-off from Kuala Lumpur. Four months later, another flight was inadvertently shot down over the Ukrainian border.

In 2015, China scrapped its 36-year-old one-child policy, while millennials surpassed boomers as the biggest generation in the U.S., where same-sex marriage was declared a constitutional right, thanks to a historic 5-4 Supreme Court decision.

2016 saw North Korea conducting nuclear and ballistic missile tests, and Britain narrowly voting to leave the European Union. Alas, too, even more foolishness took the upper hand, with Duterte thence Trump getting elected as presidents, the latter helped along by Russian interference via hacking. Colin Kaepernick started “taking a knee” to avoid standing for the national anthem before the start of a football game. Controversial at the time, it would gain traction in subsequent years among many more athletes, including those in Europe, to highlight #Black Lives Matter and the

expanded cause of racial equality. Oh, and the Zika virus emerged as a major global health threat.

2017 had the Rohingya crisis, Mosul's liberation from ISIS, the ascendancy of Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, and the election of Emmanuel Macron as France's youngest president.

2018 saw humanitarian crises in Venezuela and Yemen, while the #MeTooMovement went global, after it took off in the United States the previous year in the wake of the sexual abuse allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. Dire warnings on climate change mounted. The FIFA World Cup hosted by Russia had France emerge as champion. Apple became the first public company to achieve a market capitalization of \$1 trillion.

2019 started off badly, with Jair Bolsonaro getting elected as Brazil president on the very first day. It was the year of protests worldwide, with those in Hong Kong gaining the most attention. The Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris went up in flames. Emperor Akihito abdicated, and his son Naruhito took over the Chrysanthemum Throne. Trump got impeached. Filipinos were entranced by the K-drama

And then we all know what happened in 2020, after it went off on a bad start with the shocking loss of Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gianna in a helicopter crash. With Wuhan becoming a terrible byword as Ground Zero, millions fell victim to the Covid-19 pandemic. A singularly memorable loss was that of Sir Sean Connery. Healthcare frontliners gained acknowledgement and gratitude. Work-at-home was supplemented by home cooking and gardening, while Shopee and Lazada led the surge in online shopping. Restaurants, cafes, bars and other recreational venues took a hit, as did aviation. Food pick-ups and deliveries became commonplace. The year apparently ended on bright notes: Trump's electoral comeuppance and the advent of vaccines against the coronavirus.

For most people, only a few of these significant developments would glue themselves as memories of the past decade. Locally, Filipino males would attach themselves to the trivia that at some point in time, Maria Ozawa actually spent some months in Manila, veritably leaping closer to home from porn screens. The exact year will not be remembered, just as the memory of *Game of Thrones* would flow through much of the decade. Same with the devastating wildfires in California and Australia, and the untrammelled popularity of social media, warts, trolls, fake news, TikTok and all.

But everyone will be happy about the saving grace of 2020 that was *The Queen's Gambit*, most welcomed among Netflix's and other streaming programs' offerings.

Unfortunately, the decade hasn't exactly ended on a high note. Despite Trump's unraveling as a sore loser, he still threatens mischief for January 2021—while the rest of the world worries about second waves and virus variants and the relative efficacy of competing vaccines. It looks like PPEs, face masks and shields, social distancing and hand cleansing will have to remain customary for much longer.

Who knows? 2021 could just cement the fact that there will never be any return to the old normal. That is, if the year escapes Nostradamus' supposedly dire prophecy for the world: starvation and bombardment of our planet by galactic refuse.

Meanwhile, new concepts of time have challenged our traditional reading of it in terms of epochs, minutes and moments.

Dr. Bradford Shaw, philosophy professor at MIT, argues that the idea that time flows like a river is not necessarily correct. He claims instead that space-time is a "block universe" where the past, present and future all exist together. Given this theory, time does not move forward, since everything is ever-present. If we were to "look down" upon the block universe, we would see time spread out in all directions, just as we see space at the moment.

Oh well. But us humans weaned away from deep philosophy should still favor metaphors of our own, thus the "flow of time." Just as our sentient need for demarcations is a cry for order and structure. Thus were calendars devised.

So with breaking up a professional basketball game into four quarters of 12 live minutes of playing time each, with ball possession limiting each team to a mandatory shot before 24 seconds expire. Football has its own time-based halves, tennis and volleyball its curious sets, golf its 18 holes, polo its chukkers, chess its time clocks and variants from "classical" games to rapid and blitz.

That's how we demarcate playing time. That's how we play with time. Else the chaos of a spreadsheet of simultaneous occurrences.

As 2020 drew to a finite close, the late-breaking departure of playwright Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio, artist David Cortez Medalla and

journalist Domini Torrevillas drew grief. The idea of time as a cryptogram that has to be decoded falls by the wayside. All I know is that dear friends left ahead in the final week of the year that passed.

On the other hand, those engagements with hearty company I had mentioned earlier would remain embedded as warm recollections of the decade.

From 2011 to 2016, I was privileged to serve among the 30 board directors of the MTCRB, a group that proved to be a convivial, mutually supportive and enlightened family that enjoyed one another's smarts and good vibes so much that when the change in political dispensation eventually broke us up, we still remained in loving communication via a Viber group.

And we all retain happy memories of our socials beyond our official function of classifying local films and television programs. Most of these were conducted at Iago's resto in the Q.C. Scout area, with which we shared in the pride of having the best *kare-kare* in town. Other dining and drinking sessions were held at Delgado 112, another resto run by a fellow board member, and also near enough to our office building on Timog Avenue. Oh, for me and a few others at least, it helped that both venues had smoking areas.

For the entire decade until our versions of lockdowns and self-quarantine came down hard on everyone, another regular company I enjoyed was that with fellow Bedans who graduated from elementary and high school way back in 1956 and 1960, respectively. Leading up to our Golden Jubilee held at our San Beda campus on Mendiola in 2010, we had started getting together at the Greenside salon of Villamor Golf Course. As defiant seniors, we feasted on *lechon* and other "*putok-batok*" delights, washed down with beer, whisky, and much reinvigorating laughter.

Past 2010, we kept this up, what we called our "Barkadahan"—some 25 to 30 of us on the average meeting monthly to celebrate the birthdays for that month. *Balikbayan* Bedans from the USA, Canada, Spain and Australia joined us often, learning to prepare themselves for the homecoming by bringing recommended single malt whisky labels, along with Viagra and Cialis for raucous distribution among those fortunately present. Special sessions at yearend had wives present to enjoy the raffles, live band music and dancing.



Each year for the past decade, one to three of us on the average went on ahead, and we attended the wakes. We figure that of our SBC 1956 Elementary School and 1960 High School batches, there are still around a hundred of us in this world. Some have vanished, or can't be contacted, or continue to defer attendance in our reunions. But for our Golden Jubilee Mass at the most beautiful chapel in the world, around 50 of us came in khaki pants, white shirts and red ties. And we all came away with souvenir coffee mugs bearing the Lion Rampant icon introduced by the Venerable St. Bede, below which was what became our intriguing class slogan: "*Hanggang Sa Huling Patak.*"

On the eve of the pandemic, about 35 of us celebrated our 60th anniversary in February 2020. But since then, how we have pined to enjoy our next *Barkadahan* soon enough. We've missed all that *lechon* for almost a year now.

As the next decade unfolds, for better or worse, we can only suppose that hope flows upriver for all time.

# ADVENT MEDITATION: ON SMALL THINGS

Rev. Fr. Angel Aparicio, O.P.

**The Wounded Healer.** (This title is borrowed from the book by Henri J.M. Nouwen, "The Wounded Healer," originally published by Doubleday, 1972)

I begin to write with sadness. I hurt, not knowing exactly why. It seems that forty years have come to nothing. Like Moses in his journey through the desert. We see him alone on the heights of mount Nebo looking into the land of promise (Dt 34:1). *Yahweh showed him the whole country... and told him, "This is the country which I promised on oath to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, saying: I shall give it to your descendants. I have allowed you to see it for yourself, but you will not cross into it."* Looking into the horizon one wonders, where is the Promised Land? The mysterious words of Saint John of the Cross written while in his prison cell in Toledo echo in one's heart. John's horizon was a hole in the ceiling of his prison cell. In a small piece of paper, he scribbled 37 strophes of his Canticle, the supreme expression of Spanish poetry and of mystical experience:

Where have You hidden	¿Adónde te escondiste,
Beloved, and left me	Amado, y me dejaste
moaning?	con gemido?
You fled like the deer	Como el ciervo huiste;
After wounding me, and you were gone.	Habiéndome herido, y eras ido.

These verses of the first strophe of the Canticle transcend a pedestrian reading. They are sublime, but the question remains: was it worthwhile, was it necessary for his religious brothers to keep John of the Cross in a horrible prison cell for nine months? What offence had he caused the Carmelite Order? *The little friar, the half friar*, as his friend/mentor, Saint Theresa de Jesus used to address him. Was it also due to the jealousy of his Israelite people that Moses could not set foot on holy land?

We are more civilized. Or so, it seems. We would have granted Moses the privilege to take a further step and kiss the ground of the Holy Land. We might have been more tolerant than John's fellow Carmelites. Really? Forty years in the Philippines have taught me a few things: a paradise? desert? prison? Was it worthwhile? Judge it yourselves. The circumstances of life have brought me to the Philippines. I am a Spaniard, I am a Dominican, I am a missionary. The Holy Rosary Province of the Order of Preachers was founded for the missions of the Orient, and the Philippines ever since has been its field of action. Therefore, *here am I, Lord I came to do your will!* Like the poor little boy Samuel repeating the words that his mentor, the Grand Priest Heli, had told him to answer if he would hear voices again in the middle of the night. There were other boys in my town, there were other aspirants to the priesthood in our seminary, there were other Dominicans in my convent, there... then, Why me? Why the Philippines?

Perhaps I was deluded? What voices did I hear?

*Tell us about Manila*, my father would say to me a thousand times, *about its people, its way of life, their towns and cities, etc.* Like the scouts sent by Moses to explore the land of Canaan, I would speak about the beautiful things of this marvelous country. This is paradise. *"We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are..."* The land was all right, but its men did not differ much from the Egyptians they had left behind. The Philippines is beautiful, yes. What about its people?

Son, my father would add, *how many times you must have walked in the same places that your grandmother did as a child. They called her "blanquita (puti)." Do they still use these words over there?*

*Sometimes, papa*, I would answer. And then, he would proceed with the story of his mother, Lola Agripina, the *puti*.

I was four years old when *abuela* Agripina died of a stroke. It is the first death I remember and that is all I remember of her, dressed in black, lying motionless on the porch of the house, my aunties crying. When somebody dies in a little village—it happened then and it happens now— there is a pause filled by the event: Even the air, the noises, the hustle, and bustle, all acquire a distinctive physiognomy. It is something similar to what happens on Holy Friday, when you eat, drink, fast, go to church. You go through all the motions of life, but you are absent, like in a dream. They buried her. I was

not allowed to go to the cemetery to see where they would lay her to rest, not even to the church. She used to hug her little *nieto* (grandchild) every day after school hours when I passed by to greet her.

The father of Lola Agripina, Melchior, was a soldier, assigned to the Philippines at the end of the nineteenth century. Much was taking place in the three-hundred-year-old Spanish colony (*La Perla del Oriente*) at the end of the nineteenth century. He brought his family along with him. When hostilities broke up between the revolutionaries and the Spanish forces, he was taken prisoner by the Tagalogs. They held him in a fort somewhere in Luzon, waiting for his destiny. When his wife came to know about it, she boldly went to the leader of the revolutionaries. *If you kill my husband, I will kill ten Filipinos!* she told them. According to my father, the Filipinos were so impressed by her courage that they set Captain Melchior free. *What a character! Very noble those Filipinos!* My father relished this story.

Each one has his own battles to talk about. Back in June 1979, I left Spain, destined for the Philippines. This was a different war! As I was in the Madrid airport waiting for my flight, a Dominican who had just arrived from Manila, came to greet me. I did not know him. He did not know me either. From what I now recall, he could not believe that there was still someone willing to go to UST in the prevailing circumstances. He wanted to see it with his own eyes. *Yes, Fr. Magin, this is Fr. Angel, the last Spanish friar of the Philippines.*

Later, I came to know that Father Magin Borrajo had undergone not a small amount of pressure from some fellow Dominican professors of the Faculty of Theology of UST. Letters had been circulated accusing him of teaching unorthodox doctrine. (At that time, the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Paul VI was hotly debated in Catholic Schools of Theology). In hindsight, however it appears that he was a victim of a subliminal war aimed to undermine the influence of young *progressive* Spanish Dominicans in the Faculty of Theology. Yes, a different war. Eventually, Fr. Magin left the Order and the priesthood, and got married, like many other priests under similar circumstances.

Was this an omen, or was it a warning?

I travelled with a light baggage, formally and materially speaking. After finishing my Biblical studies in Rome and in Jerusalem, I spent one year in Oxford perfecting my English and doing some research for my dissertation:

*Textual Analysis of the Hebrew Translation of the Gospel According to Matthew, by Ben Shem Tov, a Medieval Spanish Jew, Poet and Scholar.*

*Prepare and leave for Manila*, I was told. I did not offer any resistance. I had been trained to obediently accept the orders of my superiors. I was young and inexperienced, a bit illusory perhaps. At the time, nobody could have prevented an idealistic young man from proceeding with his mission to save souls in the Philippines, or in the moon, for that matter. The Philippines represented a vast horizon, indeed a bright and promising future. In hindsight, however, the encounter with Fr. Magin loomed larger than one could have imagined at the time.

My former companions of studies in Madrid and in Rome welcomed and supported me wholeheartedly. "*El Joven*," they called me. They showed me around, introduced me to the country, to different people, to life in the community, and in the campus. I was impressed by the University of Santo Tomas. How important to be associated with this venerable institution. Being a Dominican, a professor at UST, has been the best letter of presentation anywhere in the land, in whatever circle of society. *Fr. Angel Aparicio, professor at UST!* Doors automatically open to you, no matter how insignificant or unimportant you are. Wow! All were smiles, the famous Filipino smile.

Immediately, upon my arrival I was assigned to teach Greek in the Faculty of Theology. What an irony: a Spanish friar teaching Greek to Filipinos in English. I had been hurried to catch up with the beginning of classes in June of that year. No time to adjust to the culture, to the language of the country, to the new environment. *Don't you worry*, they said, *tell them about the centers where you have studied*. It worked, somehow. In hindsight though, I shudder. I was fooled. What about my students? Impressed? Depressed? Teaching Greek and other courses for forty years without interruption looks impressive. One feels proud, having contributed the proverbial grain of salt to the formation of more than one thousand priests, scattered throughout the archipelago, some of them occupying important positions in the Church, others, simple pastors.

In the meantime, the Hebrew text of the Gospel of Matthew must lie somewhere, waiting to be rescued by a luckier researcher. Could I have made any contribution to biblical science with this dissertation? Hardly so. But it hurts, to exchange plans of crowning your career with a Doctor's diploma in Holy Scriptures for a humble role in the teaching of elementary Greek. I remember sharing this frustration with Fr. Marie Emile Boismard,

O.P., one of my idols at the Ecole Biblique et Archeologique Francoise in Jerusalem. *Do your mission, the old good father told me, forget about your dissertation, leave the research to us who have the time and the means to do it. Your job is to teach in a Faculty of Theology, teach future priests, that will be your contribution to the mission.* Thank you my beloved professor! The advice of Fr. Boismard has sustained and helped me to negotiate some of my frustrations as a teacher.

### **Carretera Autonómica 2124.**

From Buenavista to La Puebla de Valdivia, a back and forth road, only three kilometers. This is the last lap of numberless trips returning home. From La Puebla to Buenavista, and beyond, the first step of a tearful return to the fields of mission. This morning the road looked like those blackboards we used in school at a time without texts or notebooks, when Don Julio, a very efficient *Maestro de Pueblo* (the village teacher), with military discipline, tried to inculcate the three “Rs” into little heads: seventy wild village boys, 6 to 14 years old. Thank God, after grade sixth I was recruited by Fr. Santiago Gonzalez, O.P. for the *Colegio de Dominicos de Arcas Reales*, in Valladolid. Away from home, family, and friends, but open to new horizons. Five hundred boys from the most varied backgrounds of the vast Spanish provinces. A *nursery for vocations*—that is how it was called by the most enthusiastic friars. It was not easy to adjust to the environment of a strict boarding school, with a rigorous half-religious, half-military discipline. The rod of Don Julio was worse. O marvelous days of penury and joy, our poor and happy childhood!

As I retrace my steps from Buenavista to La Puebla, I ponder, “*Is He the same God, the one switching on the air conditioning over this immense plain of Castile, and the one who dropped seven thousand islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean?*” In the foreground, three snow-capped peaks (Curavacas, Espiguete, Penaredonda) touch the sky and distribute the waters between green and arid Spain. We lived on this side, in a small farming village. Life was marked by the seasonal routines of planting, harvesting, caring for our best friends: cows and oxen, goats and sheep, horses and donkeys, bees. In hindsight, it seems it was easier to deal with these than with fellow human. Nonetheless, there was peace and respect between neighbors. Disputes might reach high pitch, seldom fists. The recently ended civil war had tempered, at least externally, the most bellicose characters. Anger was kept inside the family, or inside the chest. One could hear a lonely plowman singing, a

shepherd whistling or a child crying, a woman screaming, not understanding why God had allowed her child to die, and in the long nights of winter, old stories. Community unwritten laws were generally respected, while social life moved around the church, the school, the bar, the public laundry spaces, the traditional gossiping locales. A helping hand would never fail a mother to care for the children, or a laborer to finish his task, or a friend to dig the tomb of his folks. Political lines were not transgressed, and differences could be guessed at but not verbalized publicly, only whispered among the like-minded. They say that we were living under a dictatorship, although I did not know it then.

Spreading through the provinces of Leon, Zamora, Salamanca, to Palencia, Valladolid, Avila, Segovia, Burgos, and Soria, the vast center-north of Spain is Old Castile, and at its heart is *Tierra de Campos* (*Campus Gothicus*), thus called since the invasion of the Iberian Peninsula by the German Gothic tribes. The granary of Spain: barley, common rye, oats, and predominantly wheat. Aileen, my Filipina friend called them *golden fields*, when she first travelled from Santiago de Compostela in Galicia to Palencia. I wonder how she was able to find her way to this place, a hidden hamlet in the multiple valleys of the region. The morning light tenderly caresses the ears of barley and the stalks of wheat; it is harvest season. Thanks to mechanization, rural life has undergone a complete transformation. In a week or so it will be over. Not so in old times, when we spent three infernal months laboring for a meagre yearly sustenance. When asked about the climatological conditions of our place, my late father used to say in a play of the words *infierno* (hell) and *invierno* (winter): *Tres meses de invierno y nueve de infierno*. Of course, there was a lull of sweet autumn and joyful spring in between. And there was joy!

I walk through these fields of my childhood as a stranger in his own homeland, lands of undulating hills, valleys where three rivers flow, the Riocornon (river of the horn, for the vast pastures for horn animals), Rio Boedo (or of the oxen), and Rio Valdavia (river by the road). Between poplars and white willow trees, wild roses, and mulberry shrubs. What a joy! Under the shadow of majestic oak trees, I rehearse the words of poet Antonio Machado,

*This is Castile, mystical and warlike,  
Old, gentle Castile, humble and brave  
Castile of disdain, Castile of strength  
O land of my birth! I remember  
songs of early childhood  
in images of rain and snow,  
in sounds of bells and peasants' shouts.*

*(Canto a Castilla, XXIX).*

Children running to school, wandering through verdant meadows, picking up battles between different factions... or lavender and other wildflowers to adorn the altars for the Corpus Christi procession...

This is a different race, a different procession. How many times did I set on this road, back and forth? As a child, as a boy, as a friar, as a son? La Puebla, Buenavista, Polvorosa, Renedo... Palencia, Madrid... Roma, Jerusalén, Oxford, Manila. Yes, La Puebla, Buenavista, and beyond. When the last house disappears from sight, I take a last glance: on the left side I see the little hermitage of Our Lady of Carmel along the road, and I address a short prayer to our heavenly mother:

Virgencita del Carmen,  
huddling behind the grills of your little house  
You know about pain and separation.  
Guide this child through exile.  
Protect and keep him faithful to his call.  
One, two, three years, again?  
Watch over his old parents  
Left behind wiping their tears,  
Till he comes back  
One, two, three more years...  
To the final farewell.

*Do what he tells you, did I hear?*  
Like at Cana of Galilee  
I too, implore you,  
Entrust them to your Beloved Son.



Do not allow me to forget them...  
Or you.  
Thank you, one and a thousand times.  
Amen.

On the other side of the road, along the Valdavia river, is *the garden of the sastre*. This is where my grandfather, Telesforo had invested his life, to transform a barren piece of land into a garden. Only God and those who live in and by the labor of their hands know what it takes ... But God is up in heaven, where farmers usually lift up their eyes out of hope, or despair. Who knows?

### **El Huerto del Sastre (The Garden of the Tailor)**

*El Soto* was a field by the left margins of the Valdavia river where seasonal floods had deposited tons and tons of gravel. My grandfather purchased it at a bargain, and with much hard work converted it into a fertile field. It took him and his children several years to weed out the stones and to replenish it with fertile soil. Water was channeled to the fields and the earth responded by bringing forth bountiful riches: potatoes, tomatoes, onions, peppers, cucumbers, all kinds of vegetables, cereals, and fruit trees, like apples, pears, artichokes, cherries, mulberries.

*El Soto* represents one obligatory visit whenever I return home. Every tree, every corner, every piece of soil evokes a memory. In my last visit on July 2018, I walked around the vast piece of land. It has been abandoned for a long time now. The river has made its inroads with gullies and stones. Fortunately, Grandfather does not see it anymore, or if he does, it is from a different perspective.

On a small, elevated, round platform, scattered on the ground lie some metal pieces, like the skeleton of a prediluvian creature. These are the remains of the *noria*. The well is still there, covered with stones and old wooden planks. Sitting in the shadow of the mulberry tree, I conjure childhood memories of phantasms, voices, images, playing among light and shadow. The present generation are clueless. *Is this a noria? What is a noria?* Ah, yes, *there are those huge wheels in the park turning up and down while children seated on its benches squeal and shout*. As a child, I was fascinated by

its mechanism. Even before coming close to it, one could hear the tick-tack of its wheel, as if it were an aquatic clock. A deep canal connected the river to the well from where the buckets collected the water. The *noria* of El Soto was different from the *norias* one can still see in the ancient city of Hama in the Orontes river, in Syria. But the purpose was the same, to transfer the water from a river or a well to a small aqueduct at the top of the wheel. The *noria* was usually dragged along by an animal, a donkey, or a horse, whose eyes were covered to prevent them from getting dizzy.

In her book *The Mansions*, Saint Teresa of Avila uses water as a metaphor for prayer:

*"I don't find anything more appropriate to explain some spiritual experiences than water.... And I am so fond of this element that I have observed it more attentively than other things. Let us consider, for a better understanding, that we see two founts with two water troughs. These two troughs are filled with water in different ways: with one the water comes from far away through many aqueducts and the use of much ingenuity; with the other the source of the water is right there; and the trough fills without any noise. If the spring is abundant, the water overflows once the trough is filled, forming a large stream. There is no need of any skill, nor does the building of aqueducts have to continue; but water is always flowing from the spring.*

*The water coming from the aqueducts is comparable, in my opinion, to the consolations I mentioned that are drawn from meditation. For we obtain them through thoughts, assisting ourselves, using creatures to help our meditation, and tiring the intellect. Since, in the end, the consolation comes through our own efforts, noise is made when there has to be some replenishing of the benefits the consolation causes in the soul as has been said.*

*With this other fount, the water comes from its own source which is God..."*

*("The Interior Castle, The Fourth Dwelling Places," The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D. and Otilio Rodriguez, ICS Publications, Washington, D. C. 1980, pp 323-324).*

Most of us attain to prayer with certain difficulties. Writing this story, I feel like a donkey turning the *noria* around and around to bring some water to irrigate my dry spirit. Some ideas come easily; others take more effort.

Children were strictly forbidden to get near the *noria*. *Don't get closer, for the waters may call you*, was the admonition. But it was precisely this that made it more enticing, and when the elders turned their back we would clandestinely climb the platform and peep down into the water at the bottom of the pit. It was scary, straining our eyes through the narrow opening, illuminated by a thin beam of light. One would imagine an enormous depth. Sounds as of souls crying in purgatory... small creeping reptiles, salamanders we called them, lurking within the stone walls. One imagined moving figures, perhaps the shadows of our own little bodies as in the famous myth of the cavern by Plato. Next day, we felt very important, sharing our adventure with our school mates. They listened with open mouths, faces betraying jealousy.

Grandfather Telesforo was nicknamed *El Sastre (the tailor)*. I never saw him sewing clothes. According to my father, *El Abuelo Telesforo* served the friars for a few years in El Escorial, near Madrid (El Escorial is the famous mausoleum-monastery-school build by Felipe II in the sixteenth century). He intended to become an Augustinian. However, after a heated argument with the Father Superior, he left the convent. He was an obstinate young man, a heart without deception, a noble character. The cloister life, definitely, was not his calling. He enrolled in the army and became an officer in the Department of Communications. We used to play with the gadget he used to send messages in Morse Code. Soon he realized that military discipline was worse than cloister obedience. Sitting long hours with that instrument was not for him. He took a chance with dressmaking and migrated to France to apprentice in one of the fashion houses of Paris. On his return to Spain he settled in Barcelona, where he met and married the *Puti (La Abuela Agripina)*. Together they dreamt of setting up a shop in the fashion capital of Spain. They needed financial assistance, something his mother-in-law was not willing to provide. Disappointed he returned home where dressmaking did not offer a bright future. No place in a small village for *haute couture*. Dressing farmers, who only changed clothes on Sundays or when they had to travel to the city, he could not meet the needs of a growing family.

*El Sastre* finally settled down. Not as a friar, or as a soldier, or as a fashion designer. But his talents did not go to waste. He became the sacristan

of the parish. Together with his children, he solemnized the liturgical celebrations. And he became a highly respected and feared town mayor perhaps. He was described to me thus: *“El Mejor Alcalde de La Puebla; during his incumbency all the roads were smooth.* He also sewed his children clothes. And, finally, he became a successful farmer. He purchased *El Soto* and through hard work he transformed it into a garden — *“El Huerto del Sastre,”* (the garden of the tailor). His children were called *Los Hijos del Sastre* (The children of the tailor): Consuelo, Alipio, Purificacion, Guadalupe, Alfonso.

### The Old Solitary Oak Tree

Alipio, my father, died peacefully at age 99, four months short of the centennial, like a patriarch surrounded by his children. The words of *Psalm 28* come to my lips, *“Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who walk in his ways... Your wife like a fruitful vine within your house, your sons like olive shoots around your table.”* Gathered around his death bed were Alfonso, Angel, Esther, Julio, Jose Luis, Fernando, Maria del Mar, Carlos, and Maria Jesus, six boys and three girls, together with Angeles, our loving mother. This was a grace for which I had been praying, to assist Papa in his last moments. It was December 28, 2017, the day of the Holy Innocents, a festival that he honored with his sense of humor and devotion, which I will never forget. The innocent little angels escorted him on his journey to Paradise.

People often ask me: *Why did you become a priest? Are you the only priest in your family?* My response is: *Yes and no. Well, let me explain. On my mother’s side there are several. On my father’s family, my great grandfather, my grandfather, my father, my elder brother—all gave it a try. But only I succeeded.* I often think, or say, quoting prophet Isaiah, *“from the womb of my mother you called me, Lord.”* But God’s designs are inscrutable, and only in hindsight can they be articulated.

At twelve, my father entered the Capuchin’s seminary in El Pardo, Madrid. How fondly he remembered his old days in the “convent!” An unfortunate accident changed his career. He fell down the stairs and broke his leg. The Capuchins, having no means of treating his broken leg, sent him home to be taken care of. This ended his dream. However, the good friars became part of his imaginary. Often he would tell us stories about these loving friars, their down-to-earth homeliness and holiness. Listening to him

enkindled my own dream. I was supposed to be a Capuchin... but I became a Dominican.

It is sunset on a cool May day. Under the canopy of a mighty oak tree at the top of a hill, I gaze at the Valdavia valley (my town is called La Puebla de Valdavia) wrapped in the evening mist.

These words surge up to my lips:

*El Roble Solitario*

Today I climbed the hill  
Towards the solitary oak tree.  
I paused to listen to his whisper.  
I heard a voice,  
Speaking softly, slowly, unequivocally,  
The voice of *El Roble Solitario*.

The core of my heart quivered,  
My body became still.  
Under the solitary oak tree  
I had a dream:

*By the river of the oxen,  
Resting from the morning tasks,  
The two of us: the old man and the boy  
Under a canopy of willows and poplars,  
He, talking about life's labors,  
I, devotedly listening.*

By the solitary oak tree, I envisioned  
Grandfather Telesforo,  
Always straight, always pensive,  
Wounded, not defeated,  
Like *El Roble Solitario*.  
The day gets cooler, yet  
My feet, my hands,  
My heart sense the warmth of his words:  
Yes.  
— Farewell,

— Till next May.  
— I will return.  
Faithful to your call.  
To live this dream  
Of illusions?  
To remember, to laugh, to sing  
Beneath *El Roble Solitario*.

Down the hill I fly,  
Impelled by a spirit,  
The phantom of the old mighty tree.  
Grandfather? Father?  
On the horizon,  
Father sun slowly sinks beneath red skies.  
Spurred by a gelid wind,  
I approach the green valley  
While my lips murmur a prayer:  
*Old and venerable oak tree,*  
    *Roble Solitario,*  
    *Blessed oak tree,*  
    *Remember me.*  
    *Solitary, centenary, wounded, pensive,*  
    *Ennobled oak tree.*  
    *Thus, would I wish to be...*  
            FATHER LIKE.

### A Budding Dominican

Very early, at the age of eleven, I entered La Escuela Apostolica of the Dominican Fathers in Valladolid (a minor seminary for the education of future priests). Far from home, without having any clear idea what it was like, or how I would fit into the new environment. Did I have a vocation? I was very devout, yes. At six years old I already expressed a desire to receive holy communion, but the parish priest did not want to accept me, *Such a small creature, he does not understand*, the priest said. I was really small. But because of my persistence, he challenged me to memorize the catechism. I did, and for which he had to accept this insignificant creature.

Papa thought it was a good thing to send this child to the seminary. *There he will grow. The Dominicans are known to be good educators*, he said. Besides there were not so many choices in the rural areas of a country recovering from the devastation of a terrible civil war. I still remember the interview with the Father Provincial: *How many brothers and sisters are you?* he inquired. *Seven, Father*, I answered. *So, your father sent you here to get rid of you?* he asked. *No, Father*, I replied, and timidly added, *I want to be a Dominican.*

I have given interviews to applicants for the seminary, for the library, for the faculty of Medicine and Surgery of the University of Santo Tomas here in the Philippines. Did I too sound that cruel? To the reservations of my mother that I might not survive a boarding school, so far away from home, my father replied that he had been through it, and it was a good learning experience; his Capuchins were kinder than my Dominicans, though!

Upon his retirement, my father used to bring home stones collected from his excursions through the woods and fields. *Was there anything special about these stones?* we questioned ourselves. He saw forms. *Which*, we asked? We never *knew*. A mirror, I guess, in which he retrieved lost memories of long working days, weeding out stones under the sun and the rain in *El Soto*. My father never loved being a farmer. It was a harsh life from which he wanted to spare his children. The Dominican school was the best for his son, and his decision was final.

Just a few days after arriving in Arcas Reales, I received my first lesson. It had been raining and the football field was still wet. The ground was covered with gravel and small stones. About 200 boys roaming around trying to get to know one another and the surroundings. Difficult to find a friend. Somebody pointed out this boy to me. He was my own age and came from my own province, and with a very similar family background. (He is also a priest now). Immediately, we became friends. And like all children who grew up in a small village, we displayed our affection by throwing our arms around each other's neck. This is how cows and oxen were yoked together to labor in the fields when plowing or pulling a cart.

The inspector (I don't want to reveal his identity) spotted us and summoned us to explain why we were walking like that. *Don't you know*, he said, *that it is prohibited to touch one another?* We did not understand what could be wrong with our innocent bonding and could not find any explanation. He took it as an offense and punished me then and there. *Kneel*

*down until I call you up*, he said. As soon as he turned his back I started crying. One of the boys accompanying him looked back and made a rude sign to mock me. Automatically, I picked up a handful of little stones and threw them at him. I missed the target, but one little stone hit the inspector. He held me by the collar and spat out, *I am going to teach you a lesson, little worm*, and he hit me several times. That was the first lesson!

I religiously complied with all the requirements of home and school. Discipline was deeply embedded in the DNA of the Aparicios. It has marked my whole life. Besides, I believed I had a vocation for the priesthood. Never did I give a single thought to other possible alternatives. Five years under the tutelage of the Dominicans, molding us into little friars did accomplish at least one objective. We finished our preparatory courses successfully. Transition came naturally to the next stage, the Novitiate. Forty of us, all in our teens, entered the Dominican Novitiate of the Province of the Holy Rosary of the Philippines in Ocana, in 1965. This augured a promising future for the Dominican Missions in the Orient, the Philippines, Japan, Formosa, Hong Kong.

Ocana is a medium-sized town in the region called La Mancha, associated with Don Quijote de la Mancha and other figures of the Spanish Golden Age. We, too were little Don Quijotes, imagining windmills in faraway countries. This is the place where great men, professors of UST, martyrs of Vietnam, saints and sinners, missionaries, had received their training: Cardinal Zeferino Gonzalez, Blessed Buenaventura Garcia Paredes, Saints Ignacio Delgado and Jacinto Orfanel, etc. Our future would turn out to be more modest, though. Still, there we were in the prime of youth, full of expectations, ready for adventures.

One year elapsed fast quickly the routine of a strict monastic life. Father Vidal Fueyo, O.P., the Master of Novices, was an old venerable friar, trying to mold forty young men into zealous missionaries. Tonkin, Manila, China, Japan, started to become familiar in our conversations, as well as in our imaginary. The Dominican saints were the models to emulate: Saint Thomas Aquinas, Vincent Ferrer, Catherine of Siena, Fray Luis of Granada, Fr. Humberto de Romanis. But despite the worthy efforts of our formator, there were other forces: our bodies, our sexuality, our anxieties, our unresolved questions that were taken for granted. Despite the high walls of the novitiate convent, forty young men could not escape the problems of a church and a society undergoing profound changes. The echoes of the Second Vatican



Council resounded in the conversations, and the changes in Spanish society started to invade our sacred spaces.

*Fr. Angel, the Master of Novices was telling me, as we walked around the cloister, look up. What do you see?*

*I see the blue sky, I see white clouds, I see...*

*Good, my child. And what does this tell you?*

*Um... I hesitated, I don't know.*

*Listen. Do you hear something?*

*Yes, chirping of birds, noise of the water in the fountain...*

*Does this not tell you anything about God's marvelous creation?*

*O yes, Father, I assented without much conviction.*

Our group of forty remained intact until the time of our profession of vows one year later on the Feast of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, August 15, 1965. This was our formal acceptance in the Dominican Order. But ours was a different sort of ascension. Our landing in the *coristado* (college seminary) was like a crash.

### **The Secret of a Vocation**

Unlike Santo Domingo of Ocana, the convent of San Pedro Martir in Madrid was an icon of openness: vast playing grounds, modern classrooms, and professors educated in Rome, Paris, Jerusalem, Louvain, the United States... even a radio station from which we aired programs of song and rhetoric. Well-known philosophers, poets, artist were invited to share their views with minds hungry for the new. There were no limits to our intellectual curiosity. Prayer and worship happened in a sanctuary flooded by light and color. Hearts and minds slowly turned outwards, with the collision between the old and the new. What had been so carefully cultivated by our mentors underwent a shaking. The solemn sounds of the organ were replaced by the guitar; the Gregorian chant, by modern song. We were children of the second Vatican Council and of a new society. Nobody could set limits to insatiable hearts and minds. Slowly a worldly ferment was surreptitiously infiltrating the whole body. Demythologization or demolition set in the centenary construct of our religious life and practices. Eventually, corruption set in and

dispersion started. The Dominican garden became desolate, like the garden of the *sastre*. In less than a decade most of our fellow seminarians abandoned the religious life. Out of the forty pious novices only seven remained. The miracle is that I survived the devastation. Was it grace? Yes, all is grace in our lives. However, one must examine how is grace appropriated.

Many a time my father chided me for not being present at the death of my grandfather Telesforo. He had prostate cancer. Despite the pain he refused to be operated on. I admired him, and could not stand looking at him in silence as he was undergoing agony, that strong man lying there, on his death bed. On the day of departure his horse, that used to bring him to El Soto broke the rod with which he was tied and escaped from the stable. I went out in search for him. When I returned, grandfather had died. I was seventeen years old.

It was at that age when *The Story of a Soul* fell into my hands. I don't know who had placed it inside the drawer of my grandfather's oak wood table. Every day, at siesta time, while the house remained silent, I would hide in my grandfather's office to read that fascinating story. The phenomenological French Philosopher, Marcel Merleau-Ponty used to affirm that *Eros is, for most people in our times, the only access to the marvelous*. "That is true," adds Jose Jimenez Lozano, one of my favorite writers. But I question, how? For whom? For how long? This story set my heart aflame. Before demons would awake within my spirit I fell for Thérèse of Lisieux, the author of that book.

Saint Teresita of the Child Jesus has become a rosy icon. But that she is not. Neither her early life before entering the monastery, nor her cloister years, was a path of roses or a dance of angels. Her cloister life was a way of the cross. She had already experienced a foretaste before being admitted to the Carmelite convent at the tender age of fifteen. Body and soul she walked through a path of thorns. I did not pay much attention to this, not yet. I was captivated by her pure soul.

Purification, though, is a long and painful process. It is not always self-evident. Only in hindsight can one discover the invisible threads that constitute the tissue of one's destiny. I could never understand why our Master, old Fr. Vidal Fueyo, O.P., in the short time of a year could have had such a profound impact in the life of his novice. There was this practice in the novitiate routine: once a month we had the *Capitulo de Culpis* (Self confession or accusation of faults in the presence of the community.) One by one the novices would stand up, bow to the Master, and confess their faults:

*"I accuse myself of sleeping during meditation," or "talking in the corridors," etc.* The Master would give the corresponding penance. We were learners of a high religious discipline. Sometimes, one had to scrutinize his conscience to find something of which to accuse himself; with a bit of mischief but utmost seriousness, someone would say to have broken a needle or lost his composure while at prayer. The Master, trying to disguise his amusement would gently correct the irreverent novice. In my memory still linger two instances during which I confessed publicly to a lack of humility. To bend my ego, the Master ordered me to kneel in front of each of my companions and kiss his feet, which I religiously did, even if some would hide them or kick me, though gently in the face.

One may dismiss this as a children's game, or a masochist exercise, or an absurd experience, unrepeatably today. However, there is nothing in life that happens without meaning. How could I have taken so many humiliations in my life as a missionary if Fr. Fueyo had not given me that lesson? The missionary life is a noble vocation, but it does not spare you from bitter moments, instances that make of it a veritable march to Calvary. Jesus fell three times on his way to the cross. What right do we have to look with disdain upon practices sanctioned by tradition? This had been going on for centuries. Jesus did not send his disciples on a tourist mission. What is so extraordinary about bending your back and humbly kissing the feet of your fellow novices? Did not Jesus do it to his disciples, even to Judas?

All processes of the spirit entail a sharpening of our vision of ourselves and of the world around us; and a discarding of all that interferes between both. No matter how refined our own spiritual sensitivity is, still what may not be so refined, or what is false, or in bad taste, interferes in our vision. The teachings of the Master of Novices, the reading of *The Story of a Soul* by Therese of Lisieux, who also happened to be a Mistress of Carmelite Novices, did indeed make a first impact. An impact I myself was not aware of at the time, but which has always been present, in both the stormy and calm seasons of my life.

No wonder the Little Flower has been admitted to the illustrious roster of Doctors of the Church, which include the likes of Augustin, Aquinas, Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, etc. In the words of Saint John Paul II:

*Her ardent spiritual journey show so much maturity, and the insights of faith expressed in her writings are so vast and profound that they deserve a place among the great spiritual writers. Therese of Lisieux did*

*not only grasp and describe the profound truth of Love as the center of the heart of the Church, but in her short life she lived it intensely. It is precisely this convergence of doctrine and concrete experience, of truth and life, of teaching and practice, which shines with particular brightness in this saint, and which makes her an attractive model especially for young people and for those who are seeking true meaning for their life.*

Only many years afterwards, with the help of the other Teresa, Teresa of Avila, did I start to understand the subtle influence of the Therese of Lisieux story in my own story: the search for true self, the longing for goodness and beauty, the exploration of beauty and goodness, joy and God; the searching for what cannot be held in one's hand, what remains invisible.

At twenty-four I was ordained priest by Mgr. Teodoro Labrador, Archbishop of Fuchou, in China. Thanksgiving Mass took place on July 15, 1973. It was a whole village celebration. Discourses, recitation of poems, Hosannas to the son of Alipio and Angeles. What an honor! Young boys raised a May tree. Under an arch of flowers, escorted by four local beauties we proceeded to the church adorned as for the big celebrations and filled to capacity. Surrounded by several priests *El Padre Angel* solemnly celebrated his first mass. Solemnity and pomp often hide the fragility of human life. Saint Paul writes that we carry a treasure in fragile earthen vessels. The problem is that we seldom realize it. That was a day of glory and exaltation: *Un hijo del pueblo* been received into the rank of the elect. A priest, a Dominican. A missionary. What an honor! And then?

## **Los Misioneros**

The other day my brother Fernando sent me picture of home and village, all covered by snow. The nearest to a polar panorama: on the foreground three pine trees stand as the lone sign of life in what otherwise looks like the Russian steppes. In the background, a chain of mountains dressed in immaculate white. Hanging from the sky, cotton-like clouds. Memories of childhood assail the mind, awakening those long days of winter by the hearth sniffing the scent of wood: heather, resin, oak, ilex. The whole family gathered for the sacrifice of the pig, or the extraction of sweet honey. Chorizos, sausages, hocks, hams hanging from the ceiling. Mother knitting

or mending a pair of socks.

*What are your plans for the future?* This was the question my youngest sister Maria Jesus asked the other day? *Don't you think of coming back home?* This was not the first time my siblings threw this question at me. *What shall I do in Spain?* has always been my answer. *This is what I do, what I have been doing for the last forty-one years, what I prepared for. There is nothing else I might be able to do.* And yet, at the back of my mind a question still lingers, *Was it worthwhile to leave it all behind for a long faraway country? Has UST acquired the dimension of the proverbial city seated on the top of the hill? Is it a passage to eternal life? Um!*

My hands are empty. *Nada*, writes John of the Cross, *at the top of Mount Carmel*. What from the distance appeared as attractive, as immaculate, as soft as the recently fallen snow over our mountains and hills, has become a barren desert? Snow is beautiful... for a day. The desert is enticing and dangerous. Grace has never been lacking, or a generous soul to guide you in moments of despair. Still, one has to cultivate his own garden. Water is hard to find to irrigate it. Gardens demand much attention, and effort, and determination. Beauty is that fragility, that lightning moment, that sparkle of light that lets you see where you are treading, but disappears as fast as it comes.

The reason Moses was allowed only a glance at the promise land from the heights of Mount Nebo seems to have been that at Meribah, when the people of Israel complained about lack of water, God commanded him to take the rod with which he had opened a passage through the Red Sea and struck the rock to produce water. Moses did so, but he doubted, and struck twice saying:

*Hear now, you, rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock with his rod twice; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle. And the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe me to sanctify me in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."*

Fr. Lucio Gutierrez, O.P. (we called him *Lucin*) taught History of the Philippine Church for fifty years. As the current Dean of the Faculty of Theology of the University of Santo Tomas, he participated in the Second

Plenary Council of the Philippines celebrated January 20 to February 17, 1991. Those of us who could not attend, he kept updated on the different commissions' proceedings, which he described with his proverbial flourish. One listened with delight to his anecdotes about former students, in attendance as Bishops, Priests, Vicars, Rectors, and lay faithful. One could not avoid but sympathize with Lucio when he narrated his final battle. He was outvoted in his proposal to delete the word "duress" from the Acts of the Council:

*The faith came to us, though not always without an element of duress. In an age which glorified the union of cross and sword. (Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, Our Evangelization, Part I, n.10).*

*Duress*: threats? violence? compulsion? Is this how Fr. Lucio served in the country of his dreams, the land that he loved and walked from north to south, whose towns and cities he could recite one by one, the people low and great he interacted with, the children he treated with such affection? The apostle Saint Paul is represented with a sword in his hands. Did he preach the Gospels of Jesus Christ with duress? If this is how missionaries are represented, with duress, then I, too, am not a missionary.

"Meribah" means *quarrel, complaint, grudge*. Israel tempted God. To tempt God is, to force him to prove himself, to demand something as if one had the right to do it, to challenge God or deal with him as if he were a simple human being. In biblical religion this is called magic, a provocation of the divine. In one word, to tempt God is to doubt God, to harden one's heart. Pressed by the thirsty people, at Meriba, Moses struck twice, that is, he doubted. Had he forgotten all God's blessings? Did he need an additional proof of God's benevolence? God is the fountain of refreshing waters. John of the Cross kept his faith despite the dark night of his soul, for he says:

<i>Que bien se yo la fonte</i>	<i>Well I know the fountain</i>
<i>Que mana y corre,</i>	<i>that runs and flows,</i>
<i>Aunque es de noche.</i>	<i>Though it is night.</i>

His fellow Carmelites had even prohibited him from celebrating the Holy Eucharist. He was deprived of what constituted the essence of his life, his priesthood. He laid his offerings on an imaginary altar.

*Aunque es de noche.*

To have faith is to walk in darkness with absolute trust in God.

Our seniors in the seminary scornfully called us *Los Misioneros*. And this is what we wanted to be, missionaries: Fernando Muñoz was sent to Taiwan; Antonio Gonzalez, to the Batanes Islands; Eugenio del Prado and Andres Galparsoro, to Japan; Angel Aparicio, Javier Gonzalez, and Francisco Rodilla, to the University of Santo Tomas. Antonio Cabrejas to Ecuador. Only Rafael Laya, who did not have good health, remained in Spain.

It was forty-one years ago that I landed in Manila with on a mission. Some years back, when my sister Esther visited me, she asked me if I was indeed a missionary? I replied, not in the traditional sense, converting and baptizing pagans. And yet, I am a missionary. The intellectual formation of missionaries in the province of the Holy Rosary was impressive—so we believed. However, we faced face so many surprises. Besides, in a century of ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, multiculturalism, does the word mission still have meaning? Is the twenty-first century a century of missions?

Saint Therese of the Child Jesus never left the cloister of her monastery in Lisieux, and yet she has been declared the patron saint of the missions, together with the great missionary Francis Xavier, who travelled through the countries of the Orient, converting and baptizing pagans to the Christian faith. Things have changed, and so has the concept of mission.

The first three years in the mission became a challenge to my religious life. Even my priesthood was at stake. UST at the time was similar to the well of the *noria* in the Garden of my grandfather. There were all kinds of reptiles, big and small, in the form of intrigues, suspicions, contempt, conflicts of interests between brothers. I acquired an allergy to the word *puti*. White is the Dominican habit, white is the *Kastila*, white is the oppressor, white... Just hearing the word *puti* would provoke a revulsion in my guts. The rest may not have been as dramatic, but adjustments needed to be done all along the way. This was a completely different world, for which I was prepared neither emotionally nor spiritually.

Saint Teresita of the Child Jesus recounts an episode early in her life. She was six years old. This was a picnic day. Imagine the child's excitement at preparing, cooking, wrapping sandwiches, packing, dressing up, etc.

When the whole family sat down for *merienda*, she was disappointed when she realized that the marmalade spread on her bread had changed its fresh appearance into a fading rose color. Adults did not even notice it. But for this sensitive child, it became an image of her life. She would offer her freshness, her beauty, her vitality to the Lord.

Saint Therese of the Child Jesus has been an inspiration. Her story has played an important role in my own journey. In a letter to a seminarian, she wrote: *If I had a brother, I would pray that he become a priest. If I had two brothers, I will pray that the second become a missionary.*

I have trusted in her prayers from heaven.

### **About Braying and Whispering?**

The only thing I can boast about is having survived forty-one years in the University of Santo Tomas in the Philippines. Is it fidelity? Some will call this stubbornness. In Spanish we say, “More stubborn than a donkey.”

I still remember the warning of my superior soon after my arrival in UST. *Fr. Angel, you will receive more blows than the donkey of Balaam.* Fr. Quintin Maria Garcia, O.P., a missionary expelled from China, my first superior in the Community of Santo Tomas was a clairvoyant.

Little boys in little towns, during autumn, at the end of the harvest enjoyed free time the whole afternoon, except for having to bring the domestic animals to the pasture grounds. This task did not demand much effort: to be around and keep the animals within the boundaries. I was about eight years old. I was entrusted with the care of two cows, one horse, and one donkey. They were peacefully grazing, while the children were playing. Suddenly, without warning, the donkey brayed loudly. To stop him from starting a stampede, I tightly grabbed him by the rope that tied him down. He dragged me for a few meters. He proved stronger than I was. With an uprooted nail in one of my fingers, I let him go. I was hurting from the wound and the older boys were poking fun at me while cheering on the passionate donkey.

Donkeys are part of the imaginary of those who have grown in rural areas of the Mediterranean countries, such as Spain in the West and the Holy Land in the Middle East. The donkey is a symbol of meekness, but also of stupidity and stubbornness. If the teacher called you *burro* you were doomed. If your elders said that you had long ears, everyone understood the



implications.

This is unfair, though. Donkeys are lovely animals. One of my favorite books since childhood is the famous *Platero y Yo*, by Nobel prize laureate Juan Ramon Jimenez. The Bible mentions donkeys in many passages. Saul was looking after his father's donkeys when Samuel anointed him as king of Israel. Jesus entered Jerusalem riding on a donkey.

Chapters 21-22 of the Book of Numbers tell the story of Balaam. Balak, the Moabite king, finds the Israelites massed on his border. The Israelites are described as a numerous force, feeding on the land, and denuding it. Moab was in dread of them, and in desperation the king engaged the seer Balaam known for his magic powers. Listen to his story: (for convenience I referred to the donkey with the name Gelitin).

*God came to Balaam during the night and said to him; If, indeed, these men have come to invite you, go along with them. But only the oracle that I communicate to you, such may you perform.*

*So, Balaam arose on the morrow, saddled Gelitin, and accompanied the Moabite chieftains.*

*God became enraged that he was undertaking the journey. The angel of YHWH stationed himself on the road, confronting him as an adversary while he rode along on Gelitin, and accompanied by his two squires.*

*When Gelitin saw the angel of YHWH stationed on the road, with his sword unsheathed in his hand, she swerved from the road and went into the field. Balaam struck Gelitin to bring her back to the road.*

*The angel of YHWH then halted in the narrow path of the vineyards, fenced in on both sides.*

*Upon seeing the angel of YHWH, Gelitin pressed herself against the fence, squeezing Balaam's leg against the fence. He continued to strike her.*

*The angel of YHWH continued to move on and halted in a narrow space with no room to move aside either to the right or to the left.*

*When Gelitin saw the angel of YHWH she crouched down under Balaam. Thereupon, Balaam became enraged and struck Gelitin with the rod.*

*YHWH opened Gelitin's mouth, so that she spoke to Balaam: "What have I done to you, that you should strike me these three times?"*

*Hereupon, Balaam said to Gelitin: "Because you have tormented me. Would that I held a sword in my hand, for I would promptly slay you!"*

*But Gelitin said to Balaam: "Am I not your very own Gelitin, whom you have ridden from your first day until now? Have I ever before sought to gain an advantage by behaving toward you in such a manner?" He replied: "No."*

Balaam had a mission: pronouncing execrations against the Israelites. Balak hoped to weaken the Israelites in this way, so that he would have a chance of defeating them in battle. Balaam accepted the mission, but instead of cursing the enemies of Balak, Balaam pronounced a series of blessings, ending with these words: *I see it, but not now; I envision it, but not soon. A star marches forth from Jacob; a meteor rises from Israel.* (Some interpreters say this meteor is the star followed by the Magi who were in search of the newly-born king of the Jews, Jesus).

This, like many other stories of the Bible is polysemic. The tale of the she-donkey of Balaam would appear to have been written for the primary purpose of mocking Balaam's capabilities. For all his reputed clairvoyance, Balaam is disparagingly depicted as one who could not foresee the angel of God standing in his path, even though his donkey could!

*What a surprise we will have at the end of the world when we read the story of souls!... How astounded people will be when they see the way by which mine has been led! (Saint Therese of Lisieux, History of a Soul).*

God continuously sends his angels to warn his faithful, to guide them, to make a detour on our way, to keep us from committing a crime, to warn us about imminent dangers. Oftentimes, we keep urging the dumb

donkey on, hitting her, like Balaam. We need her eyes, the eyes of a donkey to see the angel in our life pilgrimage.

Unforgettable experience, unforgettable story. How prescient were the words of Fr. Magin Borrajo, *why are you going to the Philippines?* Well, here am I! God has his own designs and he never fails to send his messengers—his angels—to guide us. Most of the time, they talk to us in whispers. But should we not listen, they may bray loudly, like the donkey of Balaam.

### Epilogue:

When I began this narrative, I was in a sad mood. It is not the wish of the narrator to project sadness, or bitterness. But truth needs to be said. And this is a true story.

Postscript: *We have no right to deny the limits which we have to transcend... As long as we have not violated a commandment or a rule, as long as we have not transgressed. How are we to do this? By doing more that it obliges us to do... we are still within the limited area which the commandment or the rule represents...*

(S. Fumet, *L'Impatient des limites. Petit Traite du Firmamant*, Lyons, 1942, pp 29-30).

Let me close on a note of joy? In the words of Psalm 126: 5-6,

*Those who sow in tears  
Will reap with songs of joy.  
He who goes out weeping,  
Carrying seed to sow,  
Will return with songs of joy,  
Carrying sheave with him. (Ps 126: 5-6)*

(Saint Thomas Aquinas Priory Manila, December 28, 2020. Feast of the Innocents. In tribute to my father, Alipio Aparicio, on the third anniversary of his death.)

# TIDAL CREATURES

Jenka Eusebio

## 1. The gone things

It is eighteen years before diagnosis, and the words I do not yet know have begun to unspool flesh.

Mind, this is not the story you think it is. The one that says: it came, I conquered, *the end*. That, too, is a form of cancer story, and indeed a fortuitous one. I could tell it like that if you like, and many of us do, quite certainly. Sometimes I feel tougher when I evoke battle, when I say I *bit the bullet* and *fought like my life depended on it* (since, of course, it did). Validation, which is necessary, finds shape in language, which is inevitable. Our metaphors deliver us to where we can begin.

But telling it like a war feels like a gloss and a little dishonest, at least for me, though little cancers like mine still know how to throw their weight around, even when they're gone. Mine is more like a little laughing ghost. *Conquered! Moi?* Memory is the armor of Gone Things, which they use to speak by rattling iron.

The vernacular of Gone Things is primitive, above all else a reverberation. Mine would tell the story a different way.

In this memory, I am four years old. It is September in a Maryland town which had once been Potomac horse country, before the developers came and the farmland receded northward, leaving in its wake a suburbia of manicured lawns, housing subdivisions, morning joggers, and expanded school bus routes. It is the morning of my first day of nursery and the hallway of St. Francis Episcopal Day School smells like early autumn rain. I am afraid to be left alone. There is nothing peculiar about a child wailing into her mother's skirt. The teachers leave me to it.

I must have begun to realize that all entreaties dribbling out of my mouth, and my mother's coaxing words as she strokes my hair, are unintelligible to them. That their soft cooing is unintelligible to me and that we are mutually foreign.

That I, who was born in America, had yet to learn English. Had yet to grasp the fact of language, of Tagalog as speech for inside my house and English as speech for outside. That what has been asked of me was somehow not even mine to offer. Even on the very grounds where my parents were married, and I was baptized, and all three of us would attend Mass every Sunday morning in that room lined with smooth wooden pews and brass chandeliers and fraying hymnals.

Looking back, I can imagine my mother laughing, telling my teachers, "I'm sorry, we'll be a minute," and myself rising to new heights of terror, hearing her use the bizarre tongue on them, concluding that my mother speaking English is not my mother at all. She is an impostor. As if language could bifurcate and multiply a human being and project it into infinity, a land of mirrors. Divine intervention in Babel was equal parts diaspora and confounding of tongues. We no longer know each other. Scattered over the continents, we no longer understand where we are.

On that day, the world pries itself off a girl's skin and shows itself as distinct, no longer a part of her. She has splintered. If coherence demands either the return of the world to a body, or the delivery of a body to the world, then it is a decision made in a single, mundane instant. Suddenly the girl is no longer crying. She hears her name being called and latches on to it. The voice is one she recognizes. The boy, the rector's son and of South Carolina stock, wears a plaid shirt, blue jeans, and a Mexican sombrero over neatly combed blond hair. They are the same age.

The boy leans into the corridor from the classroom, which is raucous, with a hand outstretched to her, who is silent. He waits without speaking but seems to know already the girl will come. She lingers in place, then goes to him. He talks to her and surely it is the first time she imagines what he means. The first time she reaches for unknown syllables, flat and nasal, in order to repeat them. This is how the process begins, the unspooling. From inside the cage of the teeth, it moves outwards. The classroom is bright and smells like rain and construction paper. Beyond the glass window, the pavement darkens with water.

Within a span of three years, the girl will lose her mother tongue. It will be unraveled and pried until loose enough to fall. She will speak perfect English that is part Sesame Street, part schoolyard Pig Latin patois and when she watches home videos of the child who knew only Tagalog —who

would sing “Bahay Kubo” to her Pampangueña grandmother, swaying back and forth—all she will apprehend is a little stranger with a face like her own.

## 2. Papyrus

The human form, which is not made of language, is a thing of language. Which is to say, we are compound beings. Of flesh and the insubstantial, just as a word is insubstantial but capable of shape and sound and weight. But we already know this, have long ago acted upon ourselves as twofold creatures.

In August 1933, a report from Heidelberg was published by Johns Hopkins University on the medicine and surgery of the ancient world. “If we review the great number of recipes of this Papyrus Ebers,” writes German Egyptologist Hermann Ranke. “It seems as if two different principles, fundamentally opposed to one another, here were bound together by force: a common-sense empiric medicine... and an entirely opposite kind of medicine, based on the idea that the diseases were caused by demons and evil spirits, who had to be expelled by the disgusting order of those unmentionable ingredients.”

Though he does, in fact, mention them: “blood of a lizard, teeth of pigs or moisture of their ears, the excrement of grown people and children, of asses, antelopes, dogs, pigs, cats and even of flies...”

The vernacular of memory is like a drum, a reverberation. In translating the Ancients we pull the far gone into ourselves, and contain them. The act of translation produces interior space; a chamber into which a slither of the world returns, at once strange and familiar.

To explain the pulse, the Egyptian text of the Papyrus Ebers says: “the heart speaks in all limbs.” To diagnose and treat a tumor: “When you see a man who has a tumor on his neck, and both muscles of his neck pain him, and his head pains, and his collar-bone is rigid and his neck stiff, so that he cannot look down on his body, because it is too hard for him—then say: ‘He has a tumor on his neck’... See to it that he applies a salve, and that he anoints himself, so that he may be cured immediately.”

Injury by fire, however, requires exorcism. The physician speaks as the goddess Isis and utters, “My son! Horus! There is a fire in the desert! Is

water near?" To which Horus must answer, "There is no water near—there is water in your mouth, there is a Nile between your legs. Come to me in order to extinguish the fire." The papyrus then directs the physician to incant "over the milk of a woman who has borne a boy, as well as over honey and the hair of a ram, and apply it to the burn."

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Once, when I was an infant, my mother dipped me into a bathtub filled with scalding water. She had forgotten to turn on the cold water nozzle, only to remember when I began screeching like a raptor from *Jurassic Park*. Leaping up with me in the crook of her arms, she invoked the Holy Family. She ran to the kitchen, lay me down on the white tile countertop, and slathered butter over my skin. As if I were a parboiled sweet potato, a toothless potato with a toothy dinosaur howl, twisting and shiny, now anointed with a stick of fresh Land O' Lakes and a cry of "Jesusmariajosep!" The butter, chilled by KitchenAid refrigerator air, cooled the burns.

### 3. Rituals

Papillary carcinoma is what physicians these days would call the easy cancer, the *good* cancer to get— if you are ever going to get it at all— and in a tone that implies a special favor has been arbitrated by the body. Perhaps it is like this: in the roulette of diseases and afflictions there are different levels of unlucky just like there are different circles of hell. And so I think, be thankful. Here, at least, is an organ you can walk away from.

In treatment, the entire thyroid gland of the neck must be removed (see also: extraction of compromised structures), with measures taken to eliminate even its smallest tissue traces (see also: tactical radiation). An isolation room. Pills of synthetic hormone. A plate of lemons slices. Ablutions. Cloudy dreams. After treatment comes the yearly tests, requiring each time a medical diet and injections of radiotracers and lying motionless under a gamma camera that scans for hints of recurrence.

Each round of diagnostics must be followed —and this my mother insists on—by pilgrimage to the Shine of St. Elizabeth Seton and the Grotto

of Our Lady of Lourdes, at the southern border of the Mason-Dixon line, along cornfields and a border of hills. She herself is a doctor, but takes no chances. I must drink water from the grotto, light a candle, and pay my respects to the American saint. Mother Seton, my own mother calls her. To me, she is simply Elizabeth. Neither of us are Catholic but we are close enough and disease naturally awakens the desire to be clean of it, to hunt for rituals that purify and tether.

On the way to Emmitsburg we drive down a stretch of Maryland highway that inspired John Denver to write “Take Me Home, Country Roads.” We are nowhere near West Virginia but close enough to Pennsylvania to feel country. It is early winter. We pass a herd of cattle and an Irish restaurant with a four-leaf clover on its signboard. The waitresses have told me their best dish is the homemade soda bread. Whatever is left over they all take home. We pass an antique mall with a red awning, then a seminary, and drive through a tunnel of trees.

We find the spring, which is cold and goes down the throat cold. Next to the spring is a mossy fountain. The water is mottled with drowned insects and fallen leaves and heavy with uncollected coins. I dig into my pocket for a penny. When I throw, it must cut a perfect arc into the air. It must be absolutely silent. I must not speak, not a word.

#### 4. The inheritance of tidal creatures

There is a seaside town in Northern Mindanao that sits at the base of a mountain range shaped like the back of a dragon. It is my mother’s hometown, named after the Visayan term *ánod*, meaning “to drift.” The word can also mean “to carry off” which an aunt of mine embellishes as “to be carried away by the river flow.” She is accurate enough. The first Visayan-English dictionary, published by a missionary in 1934, provides the following context: *The river carried off my land. Also: Bamboos for fish-traps are floated down the river.*

The name gestures toward a process that would become inheritance. A weightless crossing of distance, the decomposition of boundaries, and a shift of internal geography. A carving into. A shaping of. The original frontier village had been a place of flood and monstrous current, yet grew as settlers drifted in from nearby Cebu, Bohol, Camiguin, Negros, and Siquijor—that



island, it is said, of fireflies and witches. Migrants brought in by the tide. Creatures of moving water.

Local history maintains that when the inhabitants thought to change the town name to honor its patron saint in 1889, lightning struck down on a day of festival. Thus, they retained the old name. It is perhaps the true name.

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When the mother tongue leaves you, it leaves behind a cavern shaped like itself. So you become lighter, like driftwood. Or flotsam.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines flotsam in two ways. The first being an archaic legal term indicating the “floating wreckage of a ship or its cargo.” The second encompasses entropic deviations from a unified body: (a) “a floating population (as of emigrants or castaways),” (b) “miscellaneous or unimportant material,” or (c) “debris, remains.”

Tell me, how is it that in becoming a floating thing one becomes somehow lesser?

## 5. 東京 : Eastern Capital : Tokyo

It is two years before diagnosis. I am a university student in Tokyo—a city I cannot fully read and whose signs evade my eyes. I learn the neighborhoods by fragments, from maps I scratch into notebooks, and sleep with dictionaries next to my alarm clock. Sometimes I dream all in words. They fall apart and recombine without a sense of country. When the words are too much I retreat to the highest floor of Komaba Library where, looking out at sunset, I watch the lights of Shibuya blink against the late afternoon sky. Finally, in the dark, the distant skyscrapers disappear. Buildings leave only their windows and the silhouettes of restless beings.

My friends are a motley crew of boys from the dormitory in Mitaka: one of them is thin as a length of straw and a member of the sumo club, another collects coupons and prowls the supermarket with housewives in search of flash sales in the prepared food aisle, and another

likes a girl in my British film class and has me sweep around the desks to learn her name, which is written on the corner of her homework. Gentle, awkward boys who roll their r's and bark like gangsters in the comic books they read, eyes bulging as they growl, "HoRRRRRRRaaaaaa!"

Naturally, I acquire their speech patterns. My boyfriend, born in Akita, is a little horrified. Yet he seems to know I cannot yet distinguish the subtleties of the language. Between polite and casual grammar, between male and female expressions. I stumble my way through meaning. He instructs by example—ending his own sentences with a softer, feminine touch with his head tilted to the side, a five-degree angle, or falling so deeply into humble speech that his shoulders begin to stoop and the arc of his spine traces his own diminishing. He shows me the performance of it, how words tug at muscle and skeleton and change the shape our bodies cut into the spaces we occupy.

The body is, in this manner, already a sign.

## 6. ☿ : The water sign

Cancer—the crab—is a water sign, one of the fainter constellations. I have never seen it before, not the real thing, but I remember the creature's shape from the glossy pages of a childhood sky atlas. The book taught me that one way to understand location is by the position of stars above the watcher. As a child, the long ago arts of navigation captivated me; at night before sleep I'd imagine how it was when the contours of the earth were not yet known, when the vastness of an ocean churned, darkly, in antithesis to a point of origin.

Cancer—the disease—is not new. Writings on the affliction have existed throughout recorded human history. The American Cancer Society notes that fossilized bone tumors have been discovered in human mummies, along with "bony skull destruction" characteristic of cancers in the head and neck. Yet the oldest description is said to have emerged from an ancient Egyptian textbook on trauma surgery which instructs on the excision of abscess-like tumors from the breast by way of cauterization. To burn out the tumors, a "fire drill" would be applied to the puckered flesh of the patient's chest. We have since come a long way.

Cancer—the word—is from the Latin *cancri*, though of ancient Greek origin, and traced to the physician Hippocrates, who employed the terms *karikinos* and *karkinōma* in describing two different forms of tumors, around which the swollen veins would resemble the limbs of a crab. In Old North French the word was *cancre*, and in Middle English became *canker*. Here, linguistically and amid shifts in meaning, anglophones hover near our roots.

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One summer, my cousins and I went crabbing in Tilghman Island, along the Chesapeake Bay. We didn't have traps so we tied bait to nylon strings and dropped them into the water. When the line grew taut, we'd gently pull up and scoop the crab with a net. Not so different from how you'd catch a fish, really. Except the bait. When catching fish, common prey is frequently used, such as worms, leeches, maggots, minnows, frogs, and salamanders. I guess it all depends on the size of the fish.

To catch Maryland blue crabs we use chicken necks.

## 7. *If not the heart*

The thyroid is a gland shaped like a butterfly. Two wings curl around the trachea, each linked to the other by a strip of tissue called an isthmus. The thyroid, therefore, is at once a delicate creature and a delicate geography, pressed in on all sides by a sea of muscle, ligament, and the vibrations of speech. It regulates the speed at which the cells of the body function and is, internally, also a horsewhip—and therefore a necessary contradiction to its own biological form.

At times I wonder why you love with your heart and not with this. The delicate horsewhip. Perhaps it is not an apt descriptor of love. Perhaps it describes something else, something you can live without. I do not know what that thing is. Perhaps it does not have a true name, just a metaphor.

The body concerns itself little with words, but talks in manifestations.

Genetic patterns had identified my throat as a suspect region, even before evolving into a swelling and then a pathology. My mother, along with

two of her cousins, had been diagnosed with thyroid cancer in their forties. By age seventeen I understood the high probability of inheritance (which would manifest, at age twenty-two, as a biopsy that returns positive) even as I wondered why the men had been spared.

Still, the women of the previous generation survived the ordeal. They were robust enough to laugh, to treat treatment like a vacation. To speed along my mother's recovery we had gone to the beach. The scar which floated above her collarbone reminded me of the coastline of the island where she was born.

The prognosis is known to be favorable but in my early twenties I was young enough to take it personally. It was this savage inside-out feeling. A teeth-gnashing feeling. Like heartbreak, like exile. Cancer is a narrative of trust broken, and cells that corrupt their own natural scripts and say: *gravity alone cannot fasten you to where you are.*

## 8. Extraction of compromised structures

When treatment begins, I lack my own words for the process. So I examine the patient records where under CLINICAL HISTORY and FINDINGS my body has been dutifully transcribed. My file is a thick one. But the language of medical practitioners is too technical, too layman-cryptic, and so a body no longer healthy is a hieroglyph. Which is not so much a language but its absence. Sometimes it is more comfortable this way. Withholding words from yourself, I mean. Replacing language with procedure.

Yet you cannot speak a procedure. You can only undergo it. You are the object of action, of mirror and scalpel and thread. Of nurse, *please pass me the...* When this happens, what you have beneath your skin becomes the farthest country. It no longer feels yours.

My thyroid is extracted one half at a time, in two surgeries. The first in June, the second in August of 2007. During our first meeting the surgeon told me, "I understand how a woman's neck is important to her, so I promise to keep the incision small. My girl, you will live to a hundred!" as if the beauty of a throat correlated to its lifespan. By that logic, Audrey Hepburn should have lived to five hundred. She had the neck, one would say, of a swan. It was a perfect neck.

My scar is three inches long. A mole lies just below where the right-side incision ends. The surgeon must have considered it a beauty mark. He took care to leave it intact. For me, that mole is a landmark, a border.

## 9. Tactical radiation

In the oncology ward, iodine-131 is given to me in the form of a capsule. I swallow the pill, sip flat water from a paper cup. The remaining thyroid tissue in my body must absorb the radioisotope and then be destroyed by it, consumed with the passing of each half-life. In the meantime, I am radioactive and something of a biohazard. But these are words I do not tell myself. Instead, they are on the walls and doors and the trash bins. I must take care to use:

I am ☢ and something of a ☣.

A nurse leads me to an isolation room where I must stay until my radiation levels have fallen. This is for the protection of others, their own healthy cells. A red line of tape has been placed on the floor. Those entering the room are allowed to reach that line, but cannot cross. They must not stay long. Little children and pregnant women are forbidden, as if I were a creature plucked from an old wives' tale, craving blood and viscera. Always hungry. I am in isolation for three days.

With every meal I am given a plate of lemon slices to increase saliva flow and reduce radiation exposure to the salivary glands. I rip pulp from rind with my teeth. I gulp down hospital water to flush my system, and pace the walls to bring down a body temperature now touched by fever.

My sweat is radioactive, and my spit, and my hair. I take scalding showers (*My son! Horus! There is a fire in the desert! Is water near?*) and imagine phosphorescent steam rising off skin.

I sleep lightly and dream of Geiger counter static, like the sound of burning oil in a cast-iron pan. I dream of not being here, solitary. Outside my hospital window is a pale November sky scoured clean by wind. I think, *how nice it would be, to be clean like that, scraped hollow.*

## 10. Farther shore

Recovery is a kind of return, and supposes health a cyclical matter. But when you lose a chunk of body, there is no homecoming. Only debris—which is not the thing that leaves, but the thing left behind. Meaning: the flotsam is what's left of you, who have now arrived.

Which is to say, hello. Which means, welcome.

## 11. Coherence

If coherence demands either the return of the world to a body or the delivery of a body to the world, a piece of flesh gone is already a clearing. Ground of ash and loam, still exhaling the heat of what it had been.

The autumn I turn twenty-four, after graduating from university, the Japanese government hires me as a civil servant on a specialist's visa. They send me to a landlocked prefectural office in a city enclosed by mountains and peach orchards and vineyards; a basin entered by way of tunnels. There are instances, between one side of the pass and the other, when the weather parts. From rainstorm you emerge into a cloudless day. A dome of sky. For me, nine months after the isolation room, still raw, that is what it is.

Mostly, I am a translator. It is a quiet job, monkish. I have brought my old dictionaries, dog-eared and penciled. Added to them is a dictionary of the electronic sort, with screen and keyboard and monochrome casing. At my desk, hands smudged with printer ink, hunched, I stitch words from words, rendering local maps, tourist pamphlets, assembly speeches, and letters with the governor's seal into English. I stitch these into myself, like ribbons, the tails of a kite which stabilize its frame.

Because there is a strange comfort to be had in dealing with a tongue that is neither mother nor adopted, but acquired by choice, and the diligence of years. When it decides to make a home inside you. Then binds and pushes out. How strange a comfort, for this exoskeleton to hold fast. Even when shambling through lexicon for a way to contain a thought not yet fully formed, mass indeterminate, because a word not yet known becomes a moment that waits patiently, tenderly, for the body to step into it.

## 12. Tether

I live in a Showa-era government housing unit at the base of Mt. Atago, which creaks with age inside a canopy of trees. The lot where the apartment building stands had once been a bamboo grove behind a temple. When the war came, the Americans firebombed the city. The temple is gone now but a few Jizo statues survive, tended by the neighborhood. A small roof has been built to shelter them from the rain.

Every morning on my way to work I pass them on my bicycle, and a Buddhist cemetery on a hill and an orchard of pears. At the city center is a park built around the ruins of a castle. Standing above, on a rise, is the planetarium. The sidewalk is damp with soap suds from the day's first washing and when the skies are cloudless to the south, Mt. Fuji becomes visible. Postcard perfect. Did you know? One way to understand location is by the position of the mountain relative to where you stand. Here, there is nowhere where the mountain isn't. We live, always, tethered.

The International Affairs Division is a room of tethered people. We dress in the color of moth wings, our sweaters fraying at the elbows. Our desks are adjoined and face each other in two rows. We are a clacking of keys, the groan of broken chairs, the clink of ceramic cups filled with tea brought back from a business trip to Szechuan. To conserve energy, we switch off the lights during lunch hour and turn them back on to the strains of "Edelweiss" floating out of the PA.

We stretch our backs and awaken our sleeping computer screens. Because the city is small, we know each other's business—who has a jealous wife, a child with dwarfism, polyps in the intestine, a casual mistress, ailing parents, a cancer freshly treated—but we do not speak of such things. Only build a roof over them, with the lightest of touches, and without nails.

One morning, I walk into the office just as snow begins to fall thickly outside. It is the first snowfall of the year and I had been out of town, in a colder region of the country. As I brush the flakes out of my hair, my boss tells me, "It has followed you home."

## 13. Cipher

The Japanese language is, I believe, both by custom and construction, oblique in its methods of conveying a thought. Rather than a direct landing upon the shore of an idea, circumnavigation is what brings us there.

Consider the preambles of Japanese written correspondence which are inflected, at least traditionally, by the circular movement of seasons. Time as feeling, and as physical sensation. Nature as a cipher of desire, shaped into the marked procession of days. We can begin with what is gone, or what is leaving. Zero is a shape that leads always to itself.

In April we write of falling cherry blossoms that are radiant to the eye, and in June, the early breezes of summer, a nostalgic blue sky that reveals itself when rain clouds drift away from each other. If sending a letter in the month of November, one might begin: *the autumn deepens, and it has become a season of yearning for the sun...*

## 14. Vintage

In 1986, the South Florida *Sun Sentinel* published a glossary of terms one might apply in the appreciation of wine. The *body* indicates “the feel of a wine in the mouth, tangible to the tongue.” A wine that is *nervous* on the palate is “vigorous and fine,” while one that is *hard* is “austere, without much charm.” To remark that it is *complex* points towards “scents within scents, suggestive of many different analogies with fruits...flowers...or nuts.”

But to grasp the valuation of wine, with its tilt towards pleasure, is a personal challenge. Because the question of disease is typically met with a utilitarian answer. The functional serves to reduce. Rooms swabbed with antiseptic are where the senses harden, shrink, and turn brittle. Therefore, this matter of *body*, for me, already manifests as physical surplus. I cannot imagine feeling more than I do, or being more than I am.

Except that north of Mt. Fuji, where I am, is wine country. In the weeks leading up to the Grape Festival, I am translating nothing else. Wine labels. Oenology reports. Competition charts. Magazine articles. I sit in meetings with vintners who tour me through their facilities. We walk past



the hydraulic wine presses and fermentation tanks and into the cellars. They have me drink.

This is what comes of the harvest and pressing and fermenting, the aging and blending and fining, they explain. This is an art. This is *process*. Lightheaded, I squint through my glossaries and puzzle through the journey of a grape. How a thousand years ago, the seeds which would evolve into the Koshu variety arrived in Japan from the Caucasus, having crossed Central Asia by way of the Silk Road.

In the act of translation, I begin to read taste as an act of distance. Even the names of the valley wineries speak of crossing, that familiar arc of passage—L'Orient, Grande Polaire, Mars, Sun River. I know *this* taste, can find myself inside. And I remember my mother's story of the young Japanese carpenter who appeared one day in her hometown, on the western shore of Iligan Bay.

It was early in the century, long before she was born. She spoke of how the carpenter married her great-aunt, and how the children of the town would gather around his workbench, collecting the paper-thin wood shavings to press against their heads. They would pretend to be blonde and American, like the Catholic missionary who read from his leather Bible while pacing the churchyard, under a guava tree, his white robe catching blades of afternoon light.

Of how this carpenter, when the Imperial Japanese Army began their occupation of the Philippines, threw himself on their mercy and begged for the town to be left in peace, and how, curiously, his request was granted. "From the church, when your grandmother was married," my mother said to me. "They could hear the echo of artillery fire. But they knew it would not reach them."

Our words deliver us to where we can make landfall.

A body can furl open like this too, and bear itself, after having come so far. The skin of the Koshu grape is thick, bitter, and luminous.

## 15. Complex

Here is something, for once, that goes down warm.

Mornings when I step out on my balcony and see my breath in the air and snow over the mountains. Unhurried, I take down my clothes from the laundry line, the fabric tough from the water leaving it and the wind pushing through. From the vineyards, the scent of smoke. Dead leaves burning. Grilled fish from a neighbor's kitchen. The air is flavored with winter and is not empty. The naked trees of Mt. Atago scrape their branches against the windows. The click of gears from a passing bicycle, and the beating wings of a crow. Senses upon senses.

New Year's Eve, quarter to midnight. The iron bell of a Buddhist temple hums and echoes against the dark hills. I listen from my living room, wrapped in layers of blankets, eating mandarin oranges. The bell is rung one hundred and eight times, ticking off the worldly desires of man, the root of human suffering. Each strike is a cleansing. I think: I will take it. I reach for my coat, head outside. I greet my neighbors. Children race with flashlights and we are wakeful shadows along a hushed street. The temple, when we arrive at the gate, is brightly lit. Sweet rice wine in paper cups is pressed into our hands. Close to the bell, the sound of it reaches into the bones.

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# DESPERATELY SEEKING CLARITY IN THE TIME OF COVID

Howie G. Severino

“You’re patient 2828!” I occasionally hear this outburst of recognition when strangers can’t quite remember my name. But they do recall the digits that have defined my new identity for much of 2020.

For much of my adult life, I was perfectly happy with “journalist,” and sometimes in the latter half of my career, “mentor.” Then very early in the pandemic back in March, when hysteria was spreading much faster than facts, I became a “Covid survivor,” or Patient 2828, still a low enough number to make the digits matter. Patients these days are already indistinguishable data points among hundreds of thousands.

When I was in the hospital with Covid, barely able to move, I collaborated with one of my nurses to produce a documentary, “Ako si Patient 2828,” which became the most widely viewed work I ever made. There are apparently people who know of me only from that one piece, despite a journalism career that has spanned 32 years.

So that’s what this year has given me, a new identity I did not at all seek. But I decided to embrace it, a misfortune that can be turned into a blessing if used to educate, inspire, dispel myths, and fight stigmas.

But first I had to overcome a period of anxiety, self-pity, guilt, and even shame. Despite the care I had taken as early as January, I still got infected, and blamed myself for somehow letting my guard down and endangering friends and loved ones around me. I worried about the long-term effects of the disease, both physically and mentally, and what kind of life I would have after Covid.

Eleven days in the hospital plus five weeks of home isolation gave me ample time to read and reflect about the possibilities for recovery and renewal, not just of the body but of my spirit and morale.

I realized the disease only compounded doubts that were already hounding me about my purpose long before the pandemic.

Even before the trauma of Covid, there was the trauma of horrendous events made ordinary. I was one of the journalists who were deeply bothered by the drug war. I was convinced that even after the first dozen killings, the sheer brazenness of it was unsustainable. But it continued.

In a span of the first two years of the Duterte administration, I produced four documentaries tackling various aspects of the drug war, including an investigation of a young woman I saw slumped dead on her chair as she knelt on the ground at an outdoor eatery in QC. She was killed by masked assailants exiting with trained precision from a white van, a common modus in those months. She appeared to be begging for her life in her last moments.

I wrote reports and posted photos online about what I learned, such as the story of Raymart Siapo, the teen-age disabled boy who was taunted and urged to run by his masked killers even though he could barely walk with his disability. I was just one of dozens of Filipino and foreign journalists who prowled fearsome streets at night to expose what was happening. But instead of stopping, the killings seemed to gain momentum even as the methods of murder changed with every international condemnation. Journalists were threatened. Many netizens approved of the killings, with some even cheering. There seemed more outrage directed at journalists than at the ruthless butchery.

Something had gone haywire in our moral universe. Thousands of killings were occurring that were encouraged by a popular president and widely accepted by his followers. Those who opposed the drug war were seen as the real enemies of justice.

Many journalists I know joined the profession with the earnest belief that we were part of the self-correcting dynamic of democracy. By exposing wrongdoing and problems, we could trust that other democratic institutions would at least make an effort to correct them.

The logic of those expectations seems to have been buried with all the lifeless bodies we've seen.

If our work cannot stop the most naked of injustices, what can it do? I've shared this sentiment at various forums as a lament, sometimes rising to the volume of a rant, not expecting sympathy or solutions but perhaps only understanding of the doubts and other emotions we were going through. Journalists who covered the drug war and cheekily called themselves "night

crawlers” were traumatized not just by what we witnessed but the feeling of futility, that it was all just for naught.

Thus, at the beginning of 2020 I began to contemplate retirement from journalism, even if I didn’t know what else I could do.

That plan and the feelings that spawned it became trivial when I got sick with Covid. Notions of a career transition were replaced by thoughts of mortality.

That was nine months or nearly two million global Covid deaths ago. But I’m still around to yearn for a kinder future with the rest of living humanity.

Meanwhile, after I was declared fit to return to work last May, with a newly minted identity as Covid survivor, I felt lost. Some still didn’t understand that as a recovered patient I was no longer infectious; I even donated plasma twice, meaning I had an immune system in fighting shape and enough antibodies to share with gravely ill patients. I could overhear people whispering behind my back wondering if they could catch the virus from me.

I decided to speak out even more about the disease and allow my plasma donations to be aired on TV to encourage other survivors to donate. I spoke to online audiences of thousands, including many doctors to whom my main message was this: improvements in treating the body are accelerating while the mental health of patients is being neglected. The loneliness and anxiety were taking a toll on all of us, especially those in isolation rooms in hospitals all over the world. I highlighted the potential of the Internet to enable us to explore new forms of connection and penetrate the walls the virus created.

In my own backyard, the large TV network where I work, Covid cases began to surge in July. We suffered the death of an assistant cameraman in August, as the virus spread in our facilities. I was among the first to call his widow to ask how his colleagues and I could help, one of the hardest conversations I’ve ever had.

As our organization reeled from fear and uncertainty, I was assigned to head a new task force to stop the spread of the virus in our workplace, using whatever knowledge I had gained from surviving the disease as well as the moral authority that came from speaking out on behalf of other survivors.

I chatted with dozens of experts both in the Philippines and overseas, read the latest research, and proposed new safety protocols to reduce workplace contacts. I worked with a team to produce illustrated educational materials in both English and Filipino that reminded colleagues how to guard against infection in various situations. I reached out to those confined in hospitals or quarantine centers to let them know they weren't alone.

Like many frontliners, I was thrown into an emergency and there was no choice but to step up. Nearly all my waking hours were consumed by this mission; I went to sleep and woke up thinking about it.

The self-pity, guilt, and shame that had hounded me seemed to be erased, and in their place was now a single-minded and stoic determination. My colleagues and I were in a race against time to prevent more deaths.

In September, our Covid cases dropped by nearly half, and by October we could count them on one hand. The Quezon City Health Office pronounced that we had stopped the spread of Covid in our workplace. As the year ends, we have not had a single hospitalization in four months.

It's been a year of trauma but also confounding uncertainty on so many levels, from the global question of how long to the granular one of why me.

When I got sick with Covid, I was uncertain I would survive. Four people I knew got sick around the same time; none of them made it, but I did and wondered why. Then there was the uncertainty about what I could physically do with all the lingering effects of the disease. After I recovered, I found myself with a new identity with an uncertain purpose.

I woke up on Christmas Day to a message posted by a friend that his wife just died, with a quote from the poet Edna St. Vincent Millay: "Life must go on; I forget just why."

After so many deaths this year to a disease that I survived, one has to wonder why.

All kinds of uncertainty persist, but when I began to focus on the safety of others, a certain clarity for me emerged. Survival and the new identity that came with it finally meant something.

# CHRISTMAS LIGHTS

Jose Victor Torres

**Note:** This play is based on the short story “Christmas Lights” by Jhoanna Lynn Cruz.

## **Characters:**

Diana

Eva

Jay

(The time period is now. The setting is the city. Note: There are two apartment sets for Jay: the old one, and the new one where Scene 2 and 6 are played.)

## **Scene 1:**

(The lights open onstage. The stage is sparse except for a small dining table in the middle with a table setting for two. There are two unlit Christmas candlesticks on the table. Diana enters carrying two wineglasses and sets them on the table. She is dressed in a long shirt for sleeping. She steps back, studies the arrangement then nods and lights the candles. Eva enters and stands on one side a few feet away from the table. She is dressed in her office attire. She is studying the table setting. Diana sees her and smiles.)

**DIANA** : Do you like it?

**EVA** : It's nice, Diana.

(A brief silence.)

**DIANA** : Will you stay?

(Eva does not reply.)

**DIANA** : Eva? (pause) Stay. Please. Stay. (pause) It's almost Christmas.

**EVA** : I have to go.



(Eva begins to leave.)

**DIANA** : (calls out) I'm sorry.

(Eva pauses and looks at Diana.)

**EVA** : If I could. (pause) Who wants to miss a Christmas dinner?

(The lights go on one part of the stage. Jay's apartment. There is a double bed with a naked man sleeping on it—Jay. Diana goes slowly to the bed, slips under the sheets but remains sitting up, looking at Eva.)

**EVA** : Do you really still need him in your life?

(Eva exits. Diana looks at Jay then lies down. The lights dim. After a few seconds, the tinny, sharp sound of an alarm clock can be heard. The lights go on. Diana sits up, startled. She looks around before realizing it's all a dream. The lights fade out.)

## Scene 2

(The lights open onstage. Jay's new apartment. Jay is sitting at the dining table, drinking coffee. A cellphone on the table sounds a text tone. He picks it up, reads the message, puts the phone back down and goes back to drinking his coffee. Diana enters. She is dressed in her office uniform which is similar to Eva's. She is sleepy and sits down heavily on the chair across from Jay.)

**DIANA** : Coffee, please?

**JAY** : In the coffeemaker

**DIANA** : I didn't ask where it is. I asked *for* it.

**JAY** : Touchy.

(Jay stands up and pours some coffee into a mug for Diana. He hands the mug to her.)

**DIANA** : Thank you. You're sweet.

JAY : I know.  
DIANA : That was just an expression.  
JAY : That I know you meant.

(Diana does not reply. The cellphone sounds another text tone. Diana looks at the cellphone then returns to drinking her coffee. Jay looks at her.)

JAY : Someone has been texting you for a while.  
DIANA : Let them text.  
JAY : Could be your office.

(Diana shrugs. She takes a sip of her coffee.)

JAY : Slept well?  
DIANA : No.  
JAY : I thought so. You were tossing a lot in bed. I mean, after all that we did...  
DIANA : Don't you have anything to eat here?  
JAY : Leftovers.

(The cellphone sounds again. Diana doesn't pay any notice.)

DIANA : Like something for breakfast?  
JAY : Raid the ref if you like. I didn't expect you to pass by last night nor to spend the night...

(Diana stands up and exits.)

JAY : ... but help yourself.

(Jay returns to his coffee. The cellphone sounds a text tone again. Jay just looks at the phone. There is a sound of rummaging in a refrigerator offstage.)

DIANA : (offstage) What do you keep here? Science experiments?  
JAY : Told you.

(A pause.)

DIANA : (offstage) How old is this muffin?  
JAY : That was... yesterday.

(Diana comes in eating the muffin.)

JAY : I think.  
DIANA : (shrugs) It tastes ok.  
JAY : Then it was probably from yesterday.  
DIANA : (chews slowly) Chocolate chip. I thought you didn't like this.  
JAY : I don't. That's why it's the only one left in the box.

(The cellphone sounds a text tone.)

JAY : Shit.  
DIANA : I can turn it off if you like.  
JAY : Why don't you?  
DIANA : Ok, now I'm awake.  
JAY : Good.  
DIANA : And I have to go to work.  
JAY : No, you don't.  
DIANA : Why not?  
JAY : It's a Saturday.  
DIANA : Oh, (a pause and then a nervous laugh) How time flies....

(Diana grabs the cellphone and starts checking the messages. She stops to read some of the messages then goes through the list again.)

JAY : Diana. (pause) What's wrong?  
DIANA : What do you mean?  
JAY : What's wrong?  
DIANA : Nothing. (pause) What makes you say that?  
JAY : Well, just two days ago, you were telling me you needed space.  
DIANA : I do need space.  
JAY : After I asked you to marry me.

(Silence.)

**JAY** : I gave you that space. And now you appear at my door and decide to spend the night. (pause) Is something wrong? Or have you decided to come back?

(A long pause.)

**DIANA** : (softly) Hold me.

**JAY** : What?

**DIANA** : Hold me. (goes up to Jay) Hold me. (pause) Make love to me... (kisses Jay passionately) Make love to me, please.

(The two begin to kiss. Jay will start kissing Diana's neck and chest. Diana moans with pleasure. The lights dim on them. Eva enters and looks at them. She is holding a cellphone and is obviously the one texting Diana.)

**EVA** : (addressing the audience) Relationships like that are supposed to make your life complete. To make *you* complete. How you make them and handle them gives you that edge in creating what is supposed to be yours... All yours...

(Eva goes up to the two and begins to kiss and caress Diana. Jay stops his caressing and exits. The lights dim and change.)

### Scene 3

(The lights open onstage. Eve and Diana's office. Nighttime. The two are in Eva's office cubicle. Eva and Diana continue their caressing, touching each other through their clothes. They continue their lovemaking until both climax. They separate, breathing heavily. Diana quickly stands up and pulls her skirt down as Eva buttons her blouse. Eva sits down on the chair and faces her computer. She stares at the computer screen for few minutes and taps a few keys. Diana stares at what Eva is doing and smiles.)

**DIANA** : Did you save your file?

**EVA** : Of course, I did.

DIANA : (looks at her watch) It's getting late.  
EVA : I just have to finish this proposal. I would've finished it earlier if not for the interruption.  
DIANA : Yeah, ok. Right. And who was the one who made the move?  
EVA : (smiles) It was nice, really. Now let me finish.

(Diana goes up to Eva and kisses her. She then takes Eva's hand and sucks her fingers, then kisses Eva full on the lips. Eva moves away.)

EVA : Whoa, girl.  
DIANA : Mmm... salty. Is that from me?  
EVA : Keep this up and I'll not finish work.

(Diana sighs, straightens up, then walks to the window. She looks out and down the street. Eva returns to encoding.)

DIANA : One... two... three...  
EVA : What are you doing?  
DIANA : Four... five... six... cars.  
EVA : From this floor?  
DIANA : Why not? We're not that high. (pause) What do you do when you wait for me?  
EVA : Count people.  
DIANA : From this floor? At least cars are bigger.  
EVA : But people are more interesting.

(A brief silence. Diana goes up to Eva and looks at what she's typing. Then she moves away and goes back to the window. She quietly stares out. Eva continues to type for several seconds before stopping.)

EVA : What?  
DIANA : Hmm? What's what?  
EVA : You're too quiet.  
DIANA : First you don't like me counting. And now I'm too quiet.  
EVA : What are you thinking?  
DIANA : You first.  
EVA : Huh?

DIANA : What are you thinking?  
 EVA : I'm not.  
 DIANA : Well, there's must be an explanation why you're still on the same line you stopped in when I "interrupted" you.  
 EVA : (pauses then sighs) I give up. I'm shutting down.  
 DIANA : That's unfair.  
 EVA : What's unfair?  
 DIANA : You didn't answer my question.  
 EVA : What? What I'm thinking? Nothing. What were you thinking?  
 DIANA : (pause) Don't you even wonder why you like women?

(Silence. The light goes on in one part of the stage. Jay enters. He watches the scene before him.)

EVA : (stares at Diana before leaning down and pulling out the computer plug with a hard jerk) Do men ever wonder why they like women? What is this? Post-coital angst?  
 DIANA : No! I mean...  
 EVA : Well, you can do better than that.  
 DIANA : (goes up to Eva) I liked it.  
 EVA : Ok. So, take me to dinner.  
 DIANA : What? Are you serious?  
 EVA : I *am* hungry.  
 DIANA : And I am exhausted.  
 EVA : I know... so, buy me dinner.  
 DIANA : (laughs) Ok, for the excellent service. I'll just get my things. I'll meet you downstairs.  
 EVA : Ok.

(Eva begins to fix her things. The lights dim slightly on her part of the stage. Diana goes to the other part of the stage where Jay is standing. She momentarily stops as the light changes.)

JAY : You know when I started having suspicions? It was whenever you started talking about her. How you say her name. That certain tone. Like there was something special.

Sure, she was your friend. But... (pause) I guess I was just using what we do when we work in the PR business. Instinct. Gut feel. And, yes. I had this gut feel.

#### Scene 4

(The lights open onstage. Jay's old apartment. The dining table is set for a dinner for two. Diana goes up to Jay and kisses him.)

DIANA : Happy anniversary, darling  
JAY : Anniversary?  
DIANA : Ok. Month-sary.  
JAY : Six months  
DIANA : Yes. I just like to say "anniversary" because it sounds mature.  
JAY : "Mature"?  
DIANA : Yes.  
JAY : And "month-sary"?  
DIANA : It sounds so... so college-ish  
JAY : "College-ish"  
DIANA : Yes.  
JAY : You seem to have a word for everything.  
DIANA : You know what I mean.  
JAY : (smiles) Uhm... no.  
DIANA : Never mind. (pause) Anyway, this is nice. What's for dinner?  
JAY : Chicken Provençal.  
DIANA : Your specialty.  
JAY : And your favorite. I was deciding on steak but you being a vegetarian and all.  
DIANA : Semi. No red meat. And the reason it's my favorite, it's because it is the only thing you can decently cook.  
JAY : (sarcastic) Haha.

(Jay goes to the table and pulls out a chair for Diana. Diana sits down. Jay opens a bottle of wine and pours some into Diana's glass. He then pours some into his own glass and sits down. Diana raises her glass to Jay.)

DIANA : Happy anniversary!

JAY : Month-sary. Six months.  
DIANA : Can you at least let me fantasize a bit?  
JAY : Fantasize what?  
DIANA : A long relationship.  
JAY : Isn't six months a long relationship?  
DIANA : (pause) Ok. I can count that.

(The lights go on in one part of the stage. Eva enters and observes the scene.)

EVA : You used to tell me about how you met him. Or how he met you. And how you imagined he might be the one. That sooner or later you would try to convince him to... what... (pause) marry you? (pause) Are you sure you want to do that? Is it something you really want?  
JAY : (pause) Is six months long enough to get to know each other?  
DIANA : (pause) Depends.  
JAY : Depends?  
DIANA : Depends.

(A brief pause. Jay is about to say something but stops himself. Diana notices this and waits.)

DIANA : Yes?  
JAY : I'm going to get the chicken  
DIANA : You were going to say something.  
JAY : Forget it.  
DIANA : (pause) Ok, Jay. What is this?  
JAY : What is what?  
DIANA : What do you want to say? (pause) Six months is long enough for me see that you want to ask something.

(Pause.)

JAY : Nothing. (shakes his head) Nothing. Let's eat.



(Jay stands up, exits for a moment, and returns with two plates of chicken. He places them on the table, sits down. Diana begins to eat.)

DIANA : It's good.

JAY : Thank you

DIANA : The wine too.

JAY : Yes.

DIANA : (sighs and puts down her fork) So, why aren't you eating much?

(Silence. Jay puts down his fork and seem to be deep in thought. Diana looks at him, then takes a forkful of sliced chicken and chews.)

JAY : Have you ever had a relationship with a woman?

(Diana chokes and coughs. Eva bursts out laughing. Diana stands up and goes to center stage. Jay stands up and moves upstage. The lights brighten and change.)

## Scene 5

(Diana faces Eva.)

DIANA : That son of a bitch!

EVA : Well, you should've known he was going to ask that question sooner or later. You were dropping too many clues. He is that perceptive you know. I warned you. (pause) What would you have answered?

DIANA : With a lie.

EVA : Lie?

DIANA : (turns to Jay) No, I never had a relationship like that. (turns to Eva) He wouldn't understand. They never understood.

EVA : Really?

DIANA : All they have playing in their dirty little minds are girl on girl porn. That's their understanding of how we are.

(Eva laughs)

DIANA : (to Jay) Why do want to know? Does it excite you or repel you?

JAY : (pause) I just hope you will not leave me for another woman.

EVA : (to Diana) Why don't you tell him that you had relationships with women? That it was a thing in high school? In that all-girl school that you went to. Why don't you tell him that it was the in thing, that ugly girls don't get chosen? (pause) It is not the past that comes back and bites you in the ass. Because you never left it.

DIANA : He wouldn't understand. (pause) But we never talked about it anymore. After that night. It was just something he probably heard about.

EVA : Rumors

DIANA : Yes. Rumors.

EVA : Real rumors.

(A pause)

EVA : Trust.

DIANA : What?

EVA : It's a big thing between partners. Trust.

DIANA : (pause) Yes.

JAY : I trust you.

DIANA : (to Jay) Yes.

EVA : And you are just going to leave it like that.

DIANA : What do you mean?

EVA : Not one word to defend yourself? That what he heard was just gossip. No lies to tell? That the one time someone saw us hugging was just a time we weren't intimate, but congratulating ourselves on a project for a job well done? Why didn't you defend yourself?

DIANA : Why should I? (pause) I mean, what's the point?

EVA : What's the point?

DIANA : It will have no bearing on our relationship.

EVA : (pause) I see.

JAY : Trust. (pause) I trust you.

EVA : So... what am I here now? An appendage to whatever life you want?

DIANA : It's not that.

EVA : Then what is it?

DIANA : I got all my bets on this man. (pause) I do love him. (pause) I mean... I already did everything to make him leave his bachelor life. I didn't want to be just any girl he was going to bed with. I want to carry his surname. I want to feel the kind of love that I feel is meant for me. I want to be able to face my mother and say, "The train's not going to leave me behind, Mama." He's there. And... I want to face it. Because I want it... (pause) I want it... (stares at Eva) I... want... it.

(Eva shrugs.)

JAY : Trust. (laughs) And love.

(Diana exits as Eva remains standing onstage, staring at Diana. Jay continues to laugh as the lights fade out on Eva. The lights open on Jay's side of the stage.)

## Scene 6

(Jay's new apartment. Morning. The new apartment is still a bit messy. There are opened and unopened boxes on the floor. The small dining table has already been set up with a toaster and a small personal espresso maker machine on it. Jay is whistling as he is setting up the table. Diana walks in, dressed in a long shirt.)

JAY : Good morning!

DIANA : (pause) Cheerful today, aren't we?

JAY : It's a beautiful morning

DIANA : Coffee.

JAY : The sun is shining.

DIANA : Coffee.

JAY : And I like this new place.

DIANA : (sarcastic) Can I please have some of your wonderful espresso, please?

JAY : Coming right up.

(Jay pours some coffee for Diana and hands the mug to her. Diana takes a sip as Jay also serves her some buttered toast.)

DIANA : I thought you were going to be tired after all that moving and unpacking.

JAY : Yes.

DIANA : Well, obviously you're not.

JAY : I just like to savor the first morning of living in a new place. Especially in a new place. With you.

DIANA : (pauses then smiles) That's nice.

(Jay goes up to Diana, kneels and takes her hand. She coughs nervously.)

DIANA : Ohhhh... kay.

JAY : Diana...

DIANA : (is rattled and begins to babble) It's going to be a busy day for me... Have you seen that new ad we're working on?... It still needs some refinements... But the boss likes it...

JAY : (pause) Uhm... that's good. (pause) Diana...

DIANA : And did you get that email where the next ad congress will be held? They say they're going to do it in CamSur. That's a big possibility, you know. Always wanted to go that place... they say they made it into a really great tourist spot....

JAY : Diana....

DIANA : (a pause, then looks at Jay) I have to go to the bathroom.

(Diana stands up and exits. Jay waits. Diana returns, wiping her face with a face towel. Jay goes up to her and hugs her.)

JAY : Let's get married.

(Pause. Diana breaks away from Jay and takes a step back. She stares at Jay. The lights open on one part of the stage. Diana's cubicle. Eva enters carrying a bunch of flowers.)

DIANA : (to Jay) So this is what it is all about.  
JAY : Yes.  
DIANA : This place? For us?  
JAY : Yes.  
DIANA : No wonder you wanted to move into it so fast.  
JAY : You noticed. (pause) And...  
DIANA : And?  
JAY : I asked something from you.  
DIANA : (takes a deep breath and exhales heavily) Yes.

(Eva places the flowers on Diana's desk. She pauses then begins to look for something.)

DIANA : (hugs Jay) Yes. (smiles) Sorry, I have to go to work.  
JAY : (nods) Ok. (pause) Later?  
DIANA : (smiles and nods) Later.

(Diana exits. The lights fade out on the scene. The light remains on in Diana's cubicle.)

### Scene 7

(Eva continues to look for something in Diana's cubicle until she sees a drinking glass. She exits. After a while, Diana enters. She is dressed in her office uniform. She sees the flowers on the table. She picks it up, touches some of the flowers and smiles. Eva walks in carrying the glass now full of water. She stops when she sees Diana.)

EVA : Good morning.  
DIANA : (kisses Eva) Good morning. Thank you for the flowers.  
EVA : I saw those and thought of you. I wanted to surprise you with those in a vase.  
DIANA : You're sweet. (pause) Now if I could only find...  
EVA : (shows Diana the drinking glass) Here. I hope you don't mind. It's the only container I saw suitable for it on your table. The flower stall near the park didn't have vases.  
DIANA : (takes the glass) Thanks. (puts it down on the table) It was really sweet of you.

(A pause.)

EVA : We still have time for some breakfast. A new coffee shop opened down the road...

DIANA : (pause) That would be fine.

EVA : Unless you just want to eat at our usual place. They have an early Christmas treat.

DIANA : Yes, that's ok. (pause) But...

EVA : Anything wrong? (pause) Unless you already had breakfast.

DIANA : Well...

(Diana is about to put her down her bag but accidentally knocks over the drinking glass. It falls to the carpet, spilling its contents.)

DIANA : Shit.

(Eva and Diana begin to sop up the water on the carpet with pieces of bond paper.)

DIANA : Sorry.

EVA : Don't worry. It's just water. The janitor can clean it up.

DIANA : No... I mean. (pause) I'm sorry.

EVA : (stands up) There. I think that should do it.

DIANA : Eva... (pause) Jay asked me to marry him. (pause) And I said yes.

(Pause.)

EVA : Well... that was what you always wanted, isn't it?

(Eva turns away to leave.)

DIANA : Eva...

(Eva stops.)

DIANA : Don't go.

EVA : Then make me come back.

DIANA : (pause) I can't.

EVA : (pause) I promised myself that I wouldn't ever again ask another woman to stay with me. To love me. And once she goes, that I wouldn't force myself to continue loving her. (pause) And there you are. (pause) It is too painful to fight anymore. Particularly with a man in the picture. (pause) What else can I do but leave?

DIANA : Don't... go.

EVA : Then make me come back.

(Silence.)

EVA : Once I turn away from you... I will no longer look back. Once I step away... I will never take that step back. It will be gone. Just make me come back. (pause then softly) Please... don't make me leave....

(Diana remains silent. Eva bows her head, trying to stop the tears. Then she straightens up, a look of determination on her face. As she is about to leave, Diana goes up to her and kisses her hard and passionately. Eva remains unresponsive. Diana breaks off the kiss and looks at her.)

(The light opens on one part of the stage. We see Jay's new apartment. There is a bed on one side. Jay is standing half-naked by the bed. Diana walks towards Jay. Eva watches as Diana undresses while walking to Jay. The two begin to make love as Eva watches. The lights fade out on Eva. As Jay and Diana continue to make love, the light fades out.)

(Blackout)

## Scene 8

(In the dark, the sound of classical music can be heard. The lights open onstage. Jay's new apartment. The dining table is bare. The bed can be seen with Diana sleeping on it. On one part of the stage, a dim light is open over a lounge chair facing the bed with Jay sitting on it, watching her. Diana wakes up with a start, looks around, notices that she is alone in bed. Then she sees Jay.)

DIANA : What time is it?  
JAY : Past midnight.  
DIANA : I have to go.  
JAY : This is your place as much as mine. (pause) I gave you space before. And you came back. So... does that mean something?

(Diana is silent.)

JAY : I was wondering if you could stay till tomorrow so we can talk about our plans. Our wedding plans. (pause) Like the church. (pause) December is usually a busy month. We could have the wedding in January. I was thinking we can have it in Malate Church. What do you say?

(Diana stands up and pulls on her long shirt.)

JAY : Would you like something to eat?

(Diana nods. Jay stands up.)

DIANA : I need a shower.

(Diana exits. There is a sound of a shower running. Jay exits then returns with plates and utensils. He goes on talking as he places the plates and utensils down on the table without really setting the table.)

JAY : My parents would like to meet you soon. How about dinner with them after Christmas? Of course, it would be a bit late now to book a flight... Christmas season and everything. But I think I can talk to someone to get us some seats. (pause) What do you think?

(No reply from Diana. The shower continues to run for a bit then stops.)

JAY : They would like to hear our plans, too. (pause) What about your family? Do they have any suggestions?



(Diana enters, dressed in her office uniform.)

JAY : What are you doing?  
DIANA : What do you mean?  
JAY : (points at her uniform) That.  
DIANA : I have to go home. I have to wake up early. Work.  
JAY : It's Saturday tomorrow.  
DIANA : I like working on Saturdays  
JAY : In an empty office?  
DIANA : I like the office empty.  
JAY : What? Why?

(Diana begins to cry.)

DIANA : I don't know why anymore.  
JAY : What are you saying?  
DIANA : I don't know why anymore. I don't know why I stay here.  
In this place. With you. With your life. I don't know why I  
had to change everything when she was there all along.

(Silence.)

JAY : She?

(Diana does not reply.)

JAY : She?

(Pause.)

DIANA : I have to go. (pause) I am sorry.

(Diana exits. Jay remains standing onstage, stunned. Eva enters. The two momentarily stare at each other.)

JAY : (to Eva) Does she really need you in her life?

(The lights fade out on Jay. A dim light remains on the dining table with the setting for two.)

### Scene 9

(Diana enters, carrying two Christmas candlesticks with unlit candles and begins to set the table. Eva enters and watches her. Diana delivers her dialogue as she sets the table.)

**DIANA :** I wrote him a letter. Explaining everything. How the rumors were true. About us. About everything. About who I am. And what I am. It was... cleansing. Facing the truth. Then I called you after you asked for a transfer to another office branch. (pause) I texted you. I wrote you emails. Letters. I thought you changed everything. Your number. Your email address. Everything. (pause) You don't know how glad I was when you finally replied. (finishes setting the table) Do you like it?

**EVA :** It's nice, Diana.

(Pause.)

**DIANA :** Will you stay now?

(Pause.)

**DIANA :** Stay. Please. Stay. (pause) I know now what I want.

(Silence.)

**EVA :** (smiles and nods) I will.

(Diana nods and smiles. She lights the two candles. The two women stare at each other. The lights fade out.)

**CURTAIN**

## RECONSTRUCTING AN UNREMEMBERED WAR

Jaime An Lim

Gina Apostol's latest novel *Insurrecto* (2018) is a piece of metafiction. It emphasizes "its own constructedness in a way that continually reminds readers to be aware that they are reading or viewing a fictional work."

It calls attention to itself as a self-conscious literary construct susceptible to all kinds of seemingly random, arbitrary or accidental manipulations. It is self-conscious about "language, literary form, and story-telling." It subverts reader expectations by up-ending the very conventions of traditional narratives that facilitate the creation of meaning and the promotion of understanding. It seems to obscure and to mystify, willfully, as a matter of design. It is burdensome, dark, and suspenseful, like crime fiction. It is also witty, playful, and intriguing, like a piece of Dada art.

This artificiality and constructedness, however, is not gratuitous. If anything, it is profoundly fitting. For Apostol, it is the essence of how we construct or reconstruct history and memory. It challenges our traditional assumption that history is a linear and sequential fleshing out of events with verifiable or objective facts, that history is a record of what actually happened, that it is quintessentially a kind of truth-telling. But pure objectivity as much as immutable truth is one of our most enduring myths.

What Apostol dramatizes in the novel is a manner of historical accounting that is full of gaps and holes, conflicting views, detours, blind spots, vested interests, and fanciful invention. She demonstrates the way histories are created by people who invariably carry their own biases and agendas. Their internal filters get in the way of what they see and report, coloring their perception and interpretation. No matter, who they are: combatants, bolo-men, witnesses, survivors, victims, historians, bystanders, observers, photographers, journalists, politicians. They are all caught up invariably in the illusion of their own truth.

The Balangiga massacre of September 28, 1901 provides the historical fulcrum around which the novel's episodes and characters revolve. Soldiers of Company C, 9<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Regiment, arrived in Balangiga, in southern Samar, to close the town port and prevent supplies from reaching Filipino guerrillas in the interior. Initially, there was a lot of fraternizing between the Americans and the locals: watching cockfights, playing basketball and baseball, practicing *arnis*, drinking *tuba*. The trouble started when a couple of drunken soldiers tried to molest (to rape?) a young woman tending a store. Her brothers came to the rescue and mauled the soldiers. In retaliation, the company commander rounded up and arrested 143 males and ordered the confiscation of bolos from their houses.

Feeling aggrieved, the townspeople plotted an attack on the army garrison. At 6:45 a.m. of September 28, about 500 (a news story said 400) men wielding bolos, headed by the local chief of police Valeriano Abanador, stormed the barracks and killed 48 of the 74-man contingent. Twenty-six survived with 22 severely wounded. Among the Filipinos, 28 died (a news story said 150) and 22 were wounded.

Official retaliation was swift and brutal. U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt himself instructed Major General Adna R. Chafee, the military governor of the unpacified areas of the Philippines, to adopt "the most stern measures to pacify Samar." Chafee in turn ordered Brigadier General James Franklin Bell and Jacob Smith to give the Filipinos 'bayonet rule.' He wanted an 'Indian-style campaign.' General "Howling Wilderness" Smith issued Circular No. 6, specifying "no prisoners" and "the more you burn and kill, the better it will please me." Kill everyone over ten. Carte blanche. A perfect recipe for a large-scale massacre.

A British journalist put the number of civilians massacred at 2,500. Filipino historians put it at 50,000. It was overkill, by any standard. Instead of the Biblical "tooth for a tooth," it was a whole set of teeth, upper and lower canines, incisors, premolars and molars, the whole mouthful for a single tooth. Because of two horny drunken American soldiers, many people lost their lives in the bloodiest encounter during the Philippine-American war. ("Balangiga Massacre, <https://www.filipinoamericanwar.com/balangigamassacre1901.htm>.)

In a nutshell, that is the underlying impetus of the novel. Apostol claims that the Philippine-American War (1899-1902) is unremembered. Hard to imagine, but unfortunately true. It does not figure too much in the

popular imagination of contemporary Filipinos, whose idea of war is still defined by the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during World War II.

Her novel *Insurrecto* is therefore an act of remembrance, a retrieval of a significant national moment in the forgotten past. Like Rizal in *Noli Me Tangere*, Apostol dedicates *Insurrecto* to “the people of the Philippines, for whom this book tries to keep memory, a history of revolution vital to our surviving; to tell the story of our resistance when our leaders pervert our past, and to speak so the world will know it, too” (318)

The novel’s two central characters want to make a movie, a la *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Platoon* (1986) but based on the Balangiga massacre as an act of historical retrieval and remembering.

Magsalin is the local contact from Samar hired by Chiara Brasi to be her travel guide, co-scriptwriter, and collaborator. She has lived in the States for some time and is conversant with current fashion trends. She is a staunch consumer of American culture and products. In other words, Magsalin knows her pop music and films and designer sunglasses, and knows that a Hermès bag can cost up to a hundred thousand dollars. (315) She functions, now and then, as a center of consciousness. Unreliable as a narrator.

Chiara Brasi is the filmmaker daughter of the famous filmmaker Ludo Brasi. Obsessed with her father’s work, the cult classic *The Unintended*, and his unfinished script of a forgotten war, she hopes to make a mark of her own in film history, by continuing her father’s unfinished film legacy. She is haunted by her father’s suicide and by a sense of alienation from her dysfunctional mother. She has money to burn and can afford to dream big, but is moody and a bit dazed. Probably drugged from taking too many antidepressants. She has an Italian-sounding name, Chiara or Lucia. “Both names mean *clear*, or *lucidity*, or something that has to do with *light*, something vaguely linked to *eyesight*, hence to *knowing*, thence to blindness, or paradox.” (4) Likewise, unreliable.

So there we have it: two fearless young women, an American filmmaker and a Filipino translator and mystery writer, embarked on an ambitious film project about a massacre that happened in Balangiga a long time ago in 1901. A simple enough storyline. Theoretically, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, with a discernible beginning, middle, and end. In a traditional narrative that would have been its clear trajectory. But in the deft hands of a meta-fictionist, the simple quickly turns complex and achieves an epic and dense convolution.

Early on, the novel foregrounds its subversion of the conventions of traditional narratives. Take the structure, for instance. The narrative is broken into a series of discrete segments. Chapters vary in length: some consist of several pages, others are only a few sentences long. The chapters are numbered according to a false chronology. The first one is number 20, followed by number 2, then number 3, then number 21. So on and so forth, without rhyme or reason.

If you re-arrange the chapters in correct numerical order, you run into another problem. Some numbers come not only once but several times. Several 1s and several 2s. Number 16 is also number 28. And the story they tell is just as fragmentary and episodic. No causal relationship from one point to the next, no logical thread to string the segments together. If you re-arrange the segments into some sort of a plot, meaning tracing an action-reaction or cause-effect progression, ditto. So, the only thing to do in the face of an overwhelming opacity is to go with the flow. Ride the rapids and jump the cataract. Then gradually you start to hear the story-telling voice, the narrative technique that relies, more on free-floating associations and suggestions and allusions, rather than on an explicit linear progression of events.

For instance, what is the connecting thread that ties the following elements together? Balangiga, Vietnam, Francis Ford Coppola, Oliver Stone, Ludo Brasi, Muhammad Ali, *The Heart of Darkness*, *The Unintended*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Platoon*? Obviously, their association with anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism as sites of trauma, bodies of trauma, narratives of trauma, or voices of resistance.

In other words, a narrative consisting of associations and parallelisms. A carnival of mirror images. The iterations of ideas, like mystery, machine, labyrinth, and puzzle. The recurrence of patterns. Are they supposed to be premonitory prompts or secret codes or hidden clues? And war itself exists within war within war. As Prof. Estrella Espejo points out: "Within the spiral of war and loops of art is an unknown war wrapped in another, *a ghost in its machine*." (313) She is the author of the essay, "Echolalia: Repetitive Spirals in Philippine History." (304)

Part I of the book is titled "Mystery" and the first chapter is titled "The Insoluble Puzzle at the Heart of the Labyrinth." What waits at the end? A minotaur or a revelation? Death or redemption? Ordinarily, the opening shot, say in a film, immediately establishes some crucial information about

time, place, people, and potential action. Apostol's novel starts differently. It starts with an enigma: "For the mystery writer, it is not enough to mourn the dead. One must also study the exit wounds, invite the coroner to tea, cloud the mind with ulterior motives." (3)

Thus, begins the mystery, the puzzle at the heart of the labyrinth. The point of view is omniscient. But wait. Fast forward. The enigma is not so enigmatic after all, if you put the paragraph in the context of Balangiga. Substitute history for mystery, historian for mystery writer, and the rest falls easily into place. This reading is supported by the strategic inclusion of the French-Tunisian mystery writer Stephane Real in the opening chapter. A critical move. Who is Stephane Real?

In Apostol, an important character does not always appear bodily with the other real characters within the novel itself but in the notes appended at the end. They function like premonitory prompts. The End Notes is where we find a fuller characterization of the French-Tunisian writer. It is said that Stephane Real has written 12 novels, 7,200 lists, and 16 manuals. "His last book, *Two Minutes*, condenses the entire seedy French colonial history of an unnamed African country into the time it takes an assassin to gun down the protagonist, a mystery writer also named Stephane Real." (299)

So we have a story within a story, a writer within a writer, an unfinished mystery within an unfinished mystery. Like Russian dolls, they are both content and container. In the hall of mirrors, Magsalin, meaning translator, can be read as a reincarnation of Stephane Real, figuratively speaking.

The second chapter titled "At Ali Mall" deals with the first meeting of the two central characters. The point of view shifts from omniscient to third person limited. Magsalin has received an email from somebody needing a translator. She arrives for the meet-up carrying her favorite duffel bag, leather, made in Venice, aubergine with olive handles.

In a pastry shop at Ali Mall, Magsalin assesses her texter. Chiara is wearing a felt-banded panama hat, designer shoes by Clergerie, and giant shades by Chanel. Indecent tank top, too-short designer shorts, flat-chested, buckle-mouthed, looking sedated or stoned.

She considers leaving. She is confused and suspicious. In her email, the woman had sounded urgent. Now she wears a faraway look. A look of indifference. Not exactly an auspicious beginning for a collaboration. A

sure sign of a long rocky road ahead. Magsalin feels that there is something pathetic “about reconstructing the trauma of whole countries through a movie’s palimpsest.” (15)

It is in the language of filmography that Apostol presents the most explicit formulation of the book’s metafictional strategy and rhetoric. In the words of Chiara, the filmmaker:

I would like to make a movie in which the spectator understands that she is in a work of someone else’s construction, and yet as she watches, she is devising her own translations for the movie in which she in fact exists. It seems as if *The Unintended* were constructed out of the story of Samar, but the reverse is also true. *The Unintended* also produces, for us, the horror of Balangiga. We enter others’ lives through two mediums, words and time, both faulty. And still, one story told may unbury another, and the dead, who knows, may be resurrected.” (51)

The thematic explication is found in the chapter titled “The Story She Wishes to Tell, an Abaca Weave, a Warp and Weft of Numbers.”

The story Magasalin wishes to tell is about loss. Any emblem will do: a French-Tunisian with an unfinished manuscript, an American obsessed with a Filipino war, a filmmaker’s possible murder, a wife’s sadness. An abaca weave, a warp and weft of numbers, is measured but invisible in the plot. Chapter numbers double up. Puzzle pieces scramble. Points of view will multiply. Allusions, ditto. There will be blood, a kidnapping, or a solution to a crime forgotten by history.” (107)

This chapter is the longest, at 15 pages, and the most autobiographical in tone and details. Here Magsalin takes on a suspiciously plausible identity as Gina Apostol’s alter ego. It is difficult to overlook the fraught connections between present and prior texts, their intertextuality. Some elements in the novel have previous reincarnations. Apostol’s earlier novel *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* (2009), for example, uses the same self-conscious techniques of metafiction. The deliberate disjunction between text and footnote, the multiplicity of voices, the mixture of languages, puzzles,



jokes, textural games, sleights of tongue. The reappearance of characters like Mimi Magsalin and Estrella Espejo. The allegorical play on seeing and not seeing: Raymundo's eyes and night blindness, Chiara's lucidity and paradox. The transformation of Apostol's short story "The Unintended" (included in the 2013 anthology *Manila Noir* edited by Jessica Hagedorn) into Ludo Brasi's cult classic. Sentences, paragraphs, segments from the story reappear in the novel, thinly disguised. Like rehearsal notes to a final performance. Echoes and reverberations abound, deliberate or unintended. The narrative whirling inside reaches outside in a dizzying game of intertextuality.

In the fourth chapter, number 21, "Everything in the World Is Doubled," the location shifts from Ali Mall in Cubao to The Sands in Las Vegas. Virginie, Chiara's mother, keeps seeing doubles. She suffers from diplopia. She stares because she and a woman are wearing the same Schreiner pink rose brooch. The segment changes not only location but also time. It is now 1969. The Ali Mall scene is set in 2017 or thereabouts.

The year is not given but we can triangulate the year based on certain references. We know it is set after the start of President Duterte's term in 2016, but before the return of the Balangiga bells in 2018. Undeniably, this is Duterte country, the "drug-war world of tokhang: toktok-hangyo: knock-knock, plead-plead." (95)

The novel opens with a listing of characters in order of appearance, which is convenient since so many characters saunter in and out of the narrative, it is difficult to keep track of their movements. Fictional characters freely mix with historical personages. Icons from music and films rub shoulders with celebrities from sports, books, and politics. A whirling merry-go-round, a dizzying hall of mirrors.

Why the plethora of characters? The glib answer is: because no man is an island. The simple answer is: because man really is more than a thousand islands. Man is always a multitude, just as life is always a matter of multitudes. And history, before it is cleaned up and powdered and transcribed on acid-free paper, is topsy-turvy and chaotic and peopled by all sorts of characters: the significant and the insignificant, the generals and the foot soldiers, the actors and the bystanders, the orphans and the cooks.

It is obvious, for example, that Muhammad Ali is an important character. But he is not a character in that sense the Magsalin and Chiara are characters. Still his presence permeates the novel. His memory lives on in the

fictional world of the novel as well as in the real world of Cubao. A famous mall is named after him; and every day thousands of Filipino commuters and shoppers utter his name as a point of destination. But he is more than a mall. He is more than the sum of his gaudy portraits adorning the walls of the mall like holy altars. And more than the destroyer of Joe “The Gorilla” Frazier—in the famous 1975 Thrilla in Manila boxing match for the world heavyweight championship, which Ali won by a technical KO. He is more than the People’s Champ.

In Apostol’s novel, Muhammad Ali exemplifies modern man’s moral dilemma. During the anti-war movement in America, he did something truly heroic. He refused to be drafted into the Vietnam War:

My conscience won’t let me go shoot my brother, or some darker people, or some poor hungry people in the mud for big powerful America. And shoot them for what? They never called me nigger, they never lynched me, they didn’t put no dogs on me, they didn’t rob me out of my nationality, rape and kill my mother and father. Shoot them for what? How can I shoot them poor people, babies and women? Just take me to jail.” (300)

Names are important. Apostol considers naming as the first act of creating. Names carry burdens and memories. They are not pieces of *tabula rasa*. They are sites of contestation, allegory, prophesy, symbolism, history, superstition, irony, or paradox. Names clarify, obfuscate, or complicate.

In the confusing war, the names of the enemy are many and interchangeable: *katipunero*, *juramentado*, nigger, *insurrecto*. All misnomers, according to Magsalin, who prefers the word revolutionary. Chiara is indifferent or prefers *insurrecto*. Chiara means both light and loss of sight. Prof. Espejo is a mirror. Stephane is real and fictive. Cassandra is documentary photographer and priestess of Apollo cursed to utter true prophecies and doomed never to be believed. Cassandra Chase is also known as Chaya Sophia Chazanov of Sosnitsa and Madame Robinson of Robinson Fur Emporium on Park Avenue. She is both hero and traitor. The West Philippine Sea is also called the South China Sea. General Smith is war hero and butcher of Balangiga. It is not true a rose, by any other name, smells just as sweet. It depends on which nose is doing the sniffing. Names are truth-

bearers. Or false messiahs. Or red herrings. Truth is never one. It is always one and the other.

Chapter number 5 titled “Chiara Crafts a Movie Script” shifts location to Chiara’s mother’s house (mansion? castle?) in the Catskills. Chiara and her cabal of emerging auteurs, play a parlor game: They use a random search term in Google and craft a movie script from the resulting materials. Chiara uses her father’s name. She misses him and searches for him in cyberspace. Lo and behold, a secret trove of enigmatic clues pours out of the Internet. Muhammad Ali, Balangiga, Samar, bells, massacre. From that Google search, the first intimation of Chiara’s script on the history of the Philippine-American War gradually takes shape. Strange how one’s most profound life choices come about under such casual and serendipitous circumstances,

Chapter number 21 is titled “The Photographer at the Heart of the Script.” The Balangiga massacre has left no first-hand accounts from the victims. The official narratives are provided by the victorious soldiers of Company C, 9<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry Regiment and the American press. This is not surprising. Who gets to write the history of any battle after all? A rhetorical question, because we have always known that it is the victor who sends the dispatches from the war zone. As they say, until the lion learns to write, the story of the hunt will always be written by the hunter.

But there is an unexpected source of damning documentary evidence of the massacre. The photographs of Cassandra Chase provide a counter-testimony to the official narrative. Deep within the archive of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographic Division, there are a number of late nineteenth-century index card-size pictures called stereo cards. The pictures have no captions, just sepia images:

*Women cradling their naked babies at their breasts. A woman’s thighs spread open on a blanket, her baby’s head thrust against her vagina. A dead child sprawled in the middle of a road. A naked girl running toward the viewer in a field, her arms outstretched, as if waving. A beheaded, naked body splayed against a bamboo fence. A child’s arms spread out on the ground, in the shape of a cross. A woman holding the body of her dead husband in the pose of the Pietà. (89)*

The above passage is repeated, verbatim, in chapter 35, “The Apotheosis,” indicating its centrality in the narrative. These are the photographs inside the manila envelope that Chiara hands over to Magsalin in Ali Mall. In crime fiction parlance, they constitute forensic evidence. Mute and without caption, but revelatory. The dead have stirred. The ghosts in the machine have spoken.

The exposé scandalizes and divides America. Senator Albert J. Beveridge, Republican of Indiana, calls Cassandra a traitor to her class and a vulgar creature not fit to be called a citizen, much less a woman. Senator George Frisbie Hoar, Republican of Massachusetts, calls her a hero of her time. (89)

Cassandra Chase emerges as the towering figure in Part II of the novel, bigger and braver even than the heroic Casiana Nacionales, the lone woman warrior among the Balangiga bolo-men. Cassandra, a slip of a woman, a socialite in silken skirts, dragging her heavy photographic equipment through the jungle. She rants in the congressional hearing:

“We told them we would free them from Spain. We lied. We took the islands for ourselves. We commit the crimes we say we abhor. We outdid the savagery for which we claim a just war. We reconcentrated their villages. We penned them up like cattle. We jailed their men for no reason they can fathom. We gave their people the water cure. We burned their crops. We burned their villages. We burned their pigs. We burned their children...” (280)

Republican and Democrat alike are flushed with embarrassment. The three volumes of *Affairs in the Philippine Islands, US Senate Hearings of January 1902* do not include Cassandra’s witness account “for after all she is only a woman and her pictures will be redacted.” (284) History is not always a written account. It is also a record of erasures and forced silences.

Magsalin tells Chiara: “The history of that war is beyond my powers to add or detract from the terrible pictures it left behind—those stereo cards in your manila envelope.” (293) She wonders if it is wishful thinking to believe an enemy could be a reliable witness.

After Cassandra’s photographs become public, there is a token hand-wringing for the atrocity and suffering. There is bitter disillusionment over

what the so-called liberators have brought to the islands. The Americans are seen as enemies of the Filipino people. But only for a while.

In October 1944, General Douglas MacArthur lands in Leyte Gulf to recapture the Philippines from the Japanese during World War II. Suddenly the popular perception changes. All is forgotten and forgiven. The people put up a war memorial commemorating the historic landing, now a tourist spot. The American is seen as friend and liberator again.

In Part II, Chiara and Magsalin undertake a trip back to Balangiga, Samar, where it all starts. The trip is part travelogue, part food trip, part nostalgic stroll down memory lane. But it is here that the fullest historical reconstructions in the novel are made. It is here where the few historical details noted in one's Google search are given the full scenic treatment. Statistics become flesh-and-blood characters with human strengths and weaknesses. Dry summaries become explosive clashes of human wills and choices with grave consequences. The general become specific, the abstract become concrete. History as here and now, in the process of becoming. History as imaginative construction and invention.

The two orphans of history, Casiana Nacionles (the key thief) and Frank Vitrine (the key keeper) make love in the *talahib*:

Casiana takes him into her carefully, mindful of his trembling. First she had divested him of his foreignness, his hat, his kersey shirt, his gristly shorts... What a hairy thing is a man, so noble if seasoned, so infinite in faculties, in sounds and moving, how pathetic. He heaves, grunts, pulls at the *talahib*, growls at the ants, mimics a hundred owls. . . Then she moves, and moves, and her own body, a warm agitator, surprises herself—her ruse is, to her astonishment, twice blessed. Then thrice and quadruply. The multiplying anarchy of her body is a pleasant detour..." (268)

"Breakfast in Balangiga" and the hacking begins: Bumpus holding a candlestick stuck in a bottle is shot with a *Mauser* and beheaded by Andronico Balais, a soft-spoken man; Grisword the surgeon is hacked and hacked and hacked by Dong Canillas; Connell the captain is stabbed and stabbed by the fifteen-year old Nemesio who then reaches in and grabs his heart; Sergeant Gustav Randles is felled while eating *saging na saba*; the teenager bugler Meyes is shot by the teenager son of Felisa Catalogo; Markley the orderly

vainly defends himself with a fork against Benito Nacionales; Walls the cook is thrown into his pot by Nancio Balasbas. The killing goes on and on in the worst incident in the annals of the United States Army since the Battle of Little Bighorn. (277-278)

The collaboration of the two strong-minded women in “Duel Scripts” is fraught with conflicting viewpoints. Magsalin takes the liberty of tearing Chiara’s script to pieces. Using a pale green Eastbrook fountain pen, she notes in her notebook its many infelicities: problems of continuity, hopscotching chapters, anachronisms, words spilled and reconstituted on other pages, interchangeable performers with identical names, doubles and understudies, unexplained switching of characters’ names, et cetera. (102) Interestingly but predictably, they also characterize the novel. In other words, Chiara’s script mirrors Apostol’s own novel *Insurrecto*.

“Duel Scripts” therefore underscores the profound issue of perception and interpretation. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. So is truth. Conflict is inevitable because different people are constituted differently. People have different personal histories; and their histories define them and color their perception and interpretation of the things around them.

But they can also share commonalities. Both Magsalin and Chiara are creatures of their time, children of the twentieth-century *zeitgeist*. The American century. American films, music, books, art, and fashion are constant points of reference in their lives, in their thoughts and conversations, in their dreams. American popular culture runs deep in their veins and colors their understanding of the world, whether they realize it or not. It is their secret bond, their common umbilical cord. Its hold is inescapable and complete.

In the end, their screenwriting collaboration results in a film titled *Insurrecto*. Credits: directed by Chiara Brasi and Magsalin. Or by Magsalin and Chiara Brasi. The opening shot is accompanied by the haunting musical strains of “Suspicious Minds.” In Punta, Sta. Ana, among deciduous shadows, howling cats, and occult strains of disco music, the bachelor brothers Nemesio, Exequiel, and Ambrosio belt out, sideways now in the doo-wop mode, another Elvis song. After some prompting, Chiara and Magsalin join in. Colonizer and colonized start dancing together, dancing and singing the golden oldies of their favorite American idol.

# ANG MANGHUHULA

## Nonon Villaluz Carandang

Hapon ng Huwebes, makulimlim ang langit. Maalinsangan ang karaniwang araw ng mga tindera ng prutas, kakananin, at gulay sa kahabaan ng kalyeng patungo sa Quinta. Umaasang kumita kahit man lang sapat sa maghaponng pagsisikap, pati ang mga nagtitinda ng sampaguita, eskapularyo, rosaryo, kandila, at gayon din ang mga nangangalakal ng sari-saring gamot na hinugot, pinigtas, ginupit kung saan-saang mga hardin at gubat. Marami sa kanila ang tumitingin sa simbahan at humihingi ng basbas.

Sumisigaw na naman sa plaza ang matandang nakadamit na mala-obispo. Siya ang nagbansag sa sarili bilang sugo at anak ng pinaniniwalaan niyang diyos. Naglalakad siyang may karatulang may babalang darating na ang araw ng panghuhusga at kailangan nang magsisi sa mga kasalanan. Natatapos ang buong maghapon na tila wala naman siyang napaniwala sa kaniyang pananampalataya.

Naroroon din ang mga sari-saring taong nagbabakasakali sa himala, sa tulong ng Itim na Nazareno. Sila ang mga nawawalan ng pag-asa sa mga pinapasang hamon, ang mga naniniwalang sa pagdarasal at paglalakad nang nakaluhod patungo sa altar malulutas ang lahat ng hilahil at matutupad ng lahat ng hinihiling. Ilang baldeng luha na ang dumaloy at pumatak sa simbahang ito, maaaring dahil sa pait at kirot o sa pasasalamat at katuparan ng mga dalangin.

May mga naniniwala pa rin sa misteryo at kapangyarihan ng mga agimat, mga pangontra sa usog, balis, at kulam. May mga padasal na may katapat na halaga para sa may karamdaman, nawawala, nalinlang, at nalulumbay. At mga nakapila rin ang nagpapaligsahan sa panghuhula na nasa paligid ng basilika, na maaaring binabasa ang hinaharap o mga naganap sa pamamagitan ng palad, baraha, o bolang-kristal. Isa na rito si Aling Maring. Hindi gaya ng iba, sa mukha niya binabasa ang lahat. May kahulugan sa kaniya ang bawat bahagi nito. Pag-ibig at pag-asenso sa mga mata, ukol sa kamag-anak sa mga kilay, noo at ilong, mga kahilingan sa pisngi, labi, at baba. Pati ang mga nunal, haba ng pilik-mata, at ang bigote at balbas ay nakikitaan niya ng kahulugan. Madalas, palapit pa lamang sa kaniya ang kliyente ay tinititigan at inaaninag na niya ang mga dinadala nito at maging

ang nais nitong malaman. Pero may mga sandaling tumatahimik na lamang siya, lalo na kung may malagim o karumaldumal na pangyayaring parating o naganap. Di gaya ng ibang manghuhula, tumatanggi siya sa mga taong sinusubukan lamang ang kapangyarihan niya o may pakay na panloloko sa kapwa. Nababasa niya ito, lalo na kung papalapit na ang orasyon.

Dating sapatero sa Escolta ang ama ni Aling Maring, samantalang maagang namayapa ang kaniyang ina nang paslangin ito ng lalaking kalaguyo nito. Napanaginipan niya ito. Ipinagtapat pa nga sa kaniyang ama, pero hindi siya nito pinaniwalaan. Minsan niyang nakita ang kaniyang ina na may kasa-kasama sa isang eskinita sa kahabaan ng kalyeng T. Mapua. Namukhaan niya ang lalaki. Nabasa niya ang lagim sa mga mata nito. Nalaman niya ang kahulugan ng matalim nitong kilay at pilat sa noo. Papatayin nito ang kaniyang ina dahil ayaw sumama nito sa kaniya at iwan ang miserableng asawa at anak. May baon itong patalim. Nakita niya sa pisngi nito ang kalupitan na dadanasin ng kaniyang ina at ang kakayanan nitong pumatay. Dati itong matadero sa Tondo, na naniniwalang katumbas lamang ng baboy ang buhay ng tao.

Napaluhod na lang ang batang si Maring. Nanghihinayang sa dapat niyang nagawa para isalba ang buhay ng ina. Kinakain ng takot ang kaniyang kalooban. Nanaig sa kaniyang puso ang pagkagimbal ng pangitain. Lumuha siya. Ito ang huling araw na nakita niyang buhay ang kaniyang ina. Ilang araw ang lumipas nang matagpuan ang ulo nitong lumulutang sa estero ng Binondo. Nanghina ang kaniyang ama. Nakita rin niya sa mga mata nito ang pagsisisi at lumbay. Nawalan na ito ng ganang mabuhay. Madalas na wala itong kinikita sa pagkukumpuni ng sapatos. Madalas na kumalam at malipasan na sila ng gutom. Nakita ni Maring ang pagtubo ng balbas ng kaniyang ama na tila nagpapahiwatig ng kawalan nito ng pag-asa. Madalas nitong bilangin ang mga pakong-bakya. Ipinapahid nito ang biton sa pisngi. Nawawala na ang pang-unawa nito. Hanggang magkaroon ng pangitain si Maring nang matitigan niya ang tumitibok nitong sentido at ang pagtulo ng pawis nito sa patilya. Nanahimik si Maring. Alam niyang walang maniniwala sa kaniya, kahit ang sarili niyang ama.

Madaling araw ng Linggo nang magbangon ang kaniyang ama. Pumapaltak noon ang ilang kalesa nang magpasya itong gilitan ang sarili at saka tumakbo para harangan ang kabayo. Madugo at masakit ang pagkamatay ng kaniyang ama. Nakaupo lamang noon sa higaaan si Maring. Walang magawa kundi ang tahimik na pagtangis.



Naglakad siya, naging palaboy. Bagaman kilala siya ng ilang may-ari ng karinderya at panaderya na kaibigan ng kaniyang ama na nag-aabot sa kaniya ng ilang pirasong tinapay o balot ng pagkain. Nababasa niya sa mga mukha ng may-ari o serbidora o panadero kung bibigyan siya nito nang kaunti. Namalimos siya sa parke. Natutulog nang mag-isa habang bumabagyo o tirik ang sikat sa tag-araw. Natutunan niyang mabuhay nang mag-isa. Kumukuha ng kaning-baboy sa mga karinderya at restawran para ipagbili sa mga may-ari ng kural sa Tondo. Kumapit siya sa kaniyang pananampalataya, kaya't hindi siya nakalilimot na dumalaw sa simbahan ng Santa Cruz, Binondo, o Quiapo. Nagpapasalamat pa rin siya kahit na hindi niya alam ang konsepto ng anumang sakramento o doktrina.

Isang hapon, matapos ang mahabang paglalakad mula sa pangangalakal ng kaning-baboy, napagpasyahan niyang pumasok sa simbahan ng Santa Cruz. Kakaiba ang mga sandaling iyon. Tahimik ang simbahan at malamig ang simoy ng katanghalian. Pumasok ang maitim na lalaki sa simbahan. Diretso ang lakad nito patungo sa likod na upuan ni Maring kung saan ito agad na lumuhod. Tila mataimtim na nagdasal ang lalaking may balingkinitang katawan at sunog na balat. May ibinulong ito kay Maring habang nagdarasal.

“Higit mong nakikita ang mga kahulugan at katotohanan higit sa karaniwang mata. Isa itong regalo, bagaman may katapat na sakripisyo. Gamitin mo ito.”

Nilingon ito ni Maring at tanging ang rebulto lamang ng isang santo sa may pintuan ang nasa kaniyang likuran. Kinabahan siya. Dali-dali niyang nilisan ang simbahan. Nagliparan ang mga ibon sa patiyo ng simbahan.

Naipangako niyang hindi gagamitin ang regalang ito, ngunit 'di niya maiwasan na mapatitig o mamasdan ang mukha ng mga taong kaniyang nakakatagpo at nakikilala. Nagkakagulo ang mga nangyari at mga naganap. Napupuno ng mga tinig ang kaniyang paligid. Sabay-sabay na nagaganap sa kaniyang diwa ang mga kilos ng taong kaugnay sa mukhang kaniyang nakikita. Hindi niya mapigil ang daluyong ng alaala at ang pagbulusok ng hinaharap. Madalas nga ay ipinipikit na lamang niya ang mga mata upang makalma lamang ang lahat. Mas lalo pang naging agresibo ang kaniyang regalo. Nagkakaroon na ito ng kulay at nagiging piho na ang pook ng pinangyayarihan.

Hanggang sa isang batang lalaki ang kaniyang natitigan sa isang kanto. Nasukat niya sa mga mata nito na limang taong gulang pa lamang at

ulila. Matamlay ito. Nakita niya sa mga labi nito ang gutom. Naintindihan niya ang kalagayan nito at ang mangyayari. Tumakbo siya, kahit mapatid na ang kaniyang tsinelas at mabangga niya ang mga nakasasalubong na mga naglalakad. Batid niya ang pangangailangang marating agad ang kinatatayuan ng paslit. Inabutan niya ang bata bago pa ito matumba sa kalyeng may paparating na bus. Kinarga niya ito at saka iniuwi.

Nakilala niya si Jimboy, na ayon sa bata ay naiwan ng kaniyang ama sa istasyon ng bus. Pero hindi alam ng bata ang nabasa ni Maring sa kaniyang noo na sinadyang iligaw siya ng kaniyang ama. At nakita rin niya ang napakagandang kinabuksan nito. Magkakaroon ito ng kabuhayang umaapaw sa biyaya. Naging malapit sila sa isa't isa. Katu-katulong niya ito sa paghahanapbuhay. Naayos nila ang mga dokumento ni Jimboy sa tulong ng isang kagawad na may kamag-anak sa ahensya ng gobyerno. Nagbabakasakali kasi ang kagawad na mapaibig niya si Maring. Napakadali ng lahat. Magdadalawampu't tatlong taon na si Maring noon.

Sumapit na ang panahon na batid na niya ang paggamit ng kapangyarihan ng kaniyang regalo. Kinakaya na niya ang makapamilya ng pakikinggan kahit na napakaraming tao sa kaniyang paligid. At ito rin ang araw na napagpasyahan niyang kunin ang isang pwesto sa may harap ng simbahan ng Quiapo. Marami ang nagtaka na isang upuan at payong lamang ang kaniyang gamit. Si Jimboy ang tagapayong kay Aling Maring. May ilang manghuhula ang nagtatawa sa kaniya at pinagbibintangang peke ang kaniyang katauhan. May ilan namang naninira sa kaniya. May iba rin ang nagpapayo na bumalik na lamang siya sa pangangalakal ng kaningbaboy. Nakasanayan na niya ito hanggang ang ilan sa kanila ay matutunan na siyang tanggapin o sa pinakamainam na paraan ay huwag pansinin. Gayon pa man, napansin nila ang dumaraming paroklyano ni Aling Maring. Ang isang mukha ay nagkaroon ng kalutasan na nagrekomenda upang magpabasa pa ang isang mukha na nagkatotoo ang mga kahilingan, at nagpakilala sa ilan pang mukha na kaniyang binasa at tuloy ay natulungan. Naging tanyag siya bagaman ang bayad sa kaniya ay kung ano lamang ang makayanan ng kaniyang makakaharap. Totoong maliit lamang na halaga ang ibinibigay sa kaniya. Katwiran niya, "May pinapasan na ngang suliranin, dadagdag pa ba sa pasanin?"

Napaaral niya si Jimboy. Batid niyang ito ang mag-aahon sa kanilang dalawa sa kahirapan. At ito rin ng magiging dahilan ng tagumpay ni Jimboy. Nabasa niya ito sa mukha ng bata. Sa umaga ito pumapasok sa paaralan,

at kasa-kasama na niya ito sa hapon hanggang sa pagpatak ng alas-nuwebe ng gabi. Malakas ang kita nila lalo na kung dumayo pa ang magpapabasa ng mukha. Bagaman, mangilan-ngilan pa rin ang kaniyang pinipigil na ihayag ang katotohanan at nagbibigay lamang ng babala. Nababakas din naman kasi sa kanilang mukha kung kakayanin o paniniwalaan ang isang mapait na katotohanan at malagim na hinaharap. Nalalaman nila kung papaano makaiwas sa isang disgrasya, kung may karamdaman at paano ito malulunasan, mabibigyan ng kalutasan ang problema at matutupad ang isang pangarap. Marami ang tumatanaw ng utang na loob at taos-pusong pasasalamat. May iba namang nagdududa at nawawala ang tiwala. Mangilan-ngilan ang nagbibigay ng malaking pabuya at donasyon. Nakapag-ipon sila. Nakalipat sila sa isang maliit na bahay na kanilang iginapang upang maging pagmamay-ari nila. Nasa gitna ito ng mga dikit-dikit na barong-barong. Nabibili nila ang mga pangangailangan at nakakakain sila nang sapat. Kahit na karaniwan lamang ang talino ni Jimboy ay nairaraos niya ang kaniyang pag-aaral.

Naging isang makisig na varsity player si Jimboy sa kolehiyo. Mahahaba ang biyas at matipuno ang katawan. Hinubog kasi siya ng kaniyang husay sa paglalaro ng basketbol sa mga kalye at makailang liga. Pinagsumikapan niya ang pagiging isang mahusay na manlalaro ng basketbol. Hindi maitatanggi ang rahuyo sa kaniyang pagkalalaki dahil sa dami ng humahanga at nagkakaroon ng pagtingin para sa kaniya. Ilang babae nga ang nanunukso sa kaniya at napagbibigyan ng kahit na maikling panahon ng pakikipagmabutihan. Naging isa siya sa mga kilalang manlalaro ng koponan ng basketbol sa Kamaynilaan. Makailan niyang pinangunahan ang kaniyang koponan sa kampeonato. Naging iskolar siya dahil dito. Dalawampung taong gulang si Jimboy nang makatapos siya sa kolehiyo, samantalang tatlumpu't walong taon na si Aling Maring at patuloy pa rin sa kaniyang pagbabasa ng mukha. Laking pasasalamat niya sa Itim na Nazareno dahil sa biyayang ipinagkaloob sa kaniya, lalo na ang pagiging isang ina para kay Jimboy. Batid niyang ang lahat ng kanilang suwerte ay dahil sa kaniyang pagsisikap at pananampalataya. Hindi na niya sinubukan pang makahanap ng mapapangasawa, sa takot na sapitin ang kapalaran ng kaniyang ina at ama. Ayaw niyang mawala pa ang magandang kapalaran nila ni Jimbo.

Naging propesyonal na basketbolista si Jimboy. Dala-dala pa rin niya ang liksi at kilos ng isang mahusay na manlalaro. Doon niya nakilala ang napakaraming mga kinikilala at mayayamang personalidad sa politika

at larangan ng pelikula. Marami nga ang nag-aalok pa sa kaniya na maging aktibo sa mga programang pantelebisyon. At dahil sa kaniyang dedikasyon sa paglalaro, mas minarapat niyang maglaro pa at pag-agawan ng mga koponan. Ilang ulit siyang nagpalipat-lipat ng kompanya. Dito na nagpasyang tumigil sa pagbabasa ng mukha si Aling Maring matapos siyang kumbinsihin ni Jimboy. Ayaw na kasi niyang makitang pawisan at nanlilimahid ang ina sa gitna ng plaza, at nagbabakasakaling magkaroon ng galanteng parokyano. Nahihiya na rin si Jimboy na malaman ng kaniyang mga kamag-aral at tagahanga na ang kaniyang ina-inahan ay isang manghuhula sa Quiapo.

Naging sikat siya sa mga kabataan. Marami ang umiidolo sa binata. Marami pa rin ang naiuugnay kay Jimboy. May ilan pa nga na nagpapanukala ng kahit isang gabing pagsisiping lamang, mapa-babae, matrona, o bakla. Naging laman siya ng mga balita at society page ng mga kilalang magasin. Kabi-kabila ang imbitasyon sa kaniya sa mga party at events. Napupuno ng mga okasyon, paglalaro, at sari-saring pakikipag-ugnayan. Doon niya nakilala at naging kasintahan ang isang artista. Patago nga lamang ito. At siya pa ang niligawan nito. Araw-araw siyang sinusundo ng mamahaling kotse. Nabigyan siya ng mga alahas at mamahaling kagamitan. Inaabutan pa siya nito ng tseke para kay Aling Maring. Kilala ang kaniyang manliligaw na naging karelasyon ng mga atletang gaya niya. May nagbiro pa nga sa kaniyang kasamahan sa team habang nasa shower room ng basketball court.

“Pare, iba ka talaga. Bigay todo ang suporta niya sa iyo. Hindi ‘yan naranasan nina Joel at Cyrus. Mamahalin talaga ang tamod mo,” sabay hagalpak nito. Tahimik lang na nagbihis at napangiti itong si Jimboy.

Naging mapangahas siya, lalo’t alam niya ang kaniyang estado. Lalo pa niyang ibinigay ang sarili sa mangingingibig. Dumating ang araw na nakilala ni Aling Maring ang artista. Isang mayamang bakla at kilala sa kaniyang pagiging mahusay na komedyante. Nabasa ni Aling Maring ang umaapaw na pagmamahal ng bakla sa kaniyang anak-anakan. May tibo ng takot siyang naramdaman. Kakaiba ang lakas ng loob ng baklang ito. Magaling siyang magpatawa, pero may itinatago siyang galit. Bata pa lamang ito ay palagi na siyang iniwan. Ayaw niyang siya ang iniwang mag-isa, at mas pinipili niyang siya ang nang-iwan kapag nagsawa na. Nakita niya sa mga labi nito ang kakayanan nitong magpaamo ng mga tao, pero kaya rin nitong utusan ang mga tao at paikutin sila sa kaniyang kagustuhan. Isa ito sa mga impluwensyal sa pangunahing network na pantelebisyon at produksyon ng mga pelikula. May mga proyekto rin ito sa labas ng bansa. Alam nito ang mga pasikot-sikot

sa mga kompanya at isponsor. Nakakasama nga madalas ni Jimboy ito sa mga bakasyon. Mabait ang bakla, palibhasa ay malambing si Jimboy at nakita niya ang katapatan nito sa kaniya. Madalas na may sorpresa ang karelasyong ito sa binata.

“Wala kang training bukas, ‘di ba? At birthday mo na next week,” tumango lamang si Jimbo habang nagkakape ang dalawa.

“Tawagan mo ang Nanay Maring mo. Sabihin mong mag-empake at dalhin ang ilang gamit,” sabay abot ng susi.

“Para saan ito?” pagtataka ni Jimboy.

“Mas maganda kung sa condo na kayo ng nanay mo. Palaging binabaha ang paligid ng tirahan ninyo at maraming mga tao ang nakakakilala sa akin doon. Regalo ko sa iyo ‘yan,” walang anumang maitugon si Jimboy kundi ang yakapin at halikan ang bakla. Sinusuklian nito ang kabaitan ng binata. Para sa bakla, walang problema kung mambabae si Jimboy, basta sila ang magkasama pa rin sa huli. May bilin lamang ang komedyante sa binata.

“Alam mo naman kung ano ka sa buhay ko. Hindi ako umaasa ng anumang bukod sa pagmamahal mo. Huwag mong sisirain ang tiwala ko.”

Madalas na hindi umuuwi si Jimboy at nababalitaan na lamang ni Aling Maring ang sunod-sunod na pagkatalo nito. Nagkabisyo na ito. Nag-aalala si Aling Maring. Madalas niyang nakikitang madilim ang mukha nito habang lasing at nahihimbing. Hindi naman siya nagkulang sa paalala. Pinagsabihan niya ito, pero yayakapin lamang siya ni Jimboy at mawawala na ang kaniyang pag-aalala.

Totoo naman ang kahulugan ng madilim na mukha ni Jimboy. Natalo sa liga ang kompanya at hindi na muling kinuha pa si Jimboy. Ilang linggong hindi ito umuwi. Walang anumang pasabi o tawag. Makailang ulit na ring hinanap ito ng baklang karelasyon.

Bisperas ng Pasko nang magbalik si Jimboy kay Aling Maring. Kapwa sila masayang nagkasama. Nabasa nito sa kaniyang mukha ang planong pangingibang-bayan kasama ang babaeng totoong iniibig. Nais na nitong lumayo at magsimula ng panibagong pamumuhay. Nakilala ni Aling Maring ang babae. Minasdan nito ang maamong mukha. Marikit ang mukha nito. Walang anumang bahid ng kasamaan. Tahimik at may urbanidad ang dalaga. Wagas itong umiibig sa binata. Ngunit nagulat siya sa kaniyang nakita sa mga mata nito. Humahagugol sa isang bangkay at nagluluksa ang isang

babae sa harap ng ataul. Hindi niya maaninag ang mukha ng nakabelong itim na babae. Nanlamig ang buong katawan ni Aling Maring. Nais sana niyang sabihin sa dalaga na huwag nang ituloy ang anumang plano nila. Pero pinili niyang manahimik. At saka niya binalaan si Jimboy.

“Magaling ka talagang manghuhula, nanay. Nalaman mo na kamamatay lang ng daddy niya noong nakaraang buwan,” napangiti pa si Jimboy sa matandang babae. Isa ngang pangitain, alaala, o posibilidad ito. Hindi nga lamang piho kung ito ay naganap o magaganap pa lamang. Maaaring ang nagluluksa ay ang ina o ang kaniyang kasintahan. Pinagsaluhan nila ang simpleng Noche Buena, habang puno ng alinlangan at pangamba ang kalooban ni Aling Maring. Nararamdaman niya sa mukha ni Jimboy na may peligro itong haharapin.

Ilang araw matapos ang bagong taon, nagbalik si Aling Maring sa Quiapo. Nagdasal. Puno ng hinagpis ang mukha ng Nazareno. Nakatitig ito kay Aling Maring. Lumamig ang paligid. Naging tahimik kahit pa may mga bulong ng dasal, mga ingay sa labas ng simbahan, at pag-uusap ang nasa paligid. Nakatagpo niyang muli ang lalaking maitim. Kinausap siya nito at sinabing, “Ibinilin ko sa iyong gamitin ang regalo. Pinili mo itong talikuran. Mas malaki ang isasakripisyo mo.” Nagliliyab ang mata ng lalaking maitim. Tumayo ito at saka umalis. At saka kumanta ang napakalakas na tinig ng himno ng Nazareno. Nakabibingi kaya’t napatayo si Aling Maring at dali-daling lumabas ng simbahan. Nadaanan niya ang ilang kakilalang manghuhula.

“Maring, mayaman ka na! Balatuhan mo naman kami,” bati ang manghuhulang nakapansin sa kaniyang pagmamadali.

“Sikat ‘yung anak mo ah. Sikat din yung karelasyong bakla!” ani ng lalaking nakakalbo, at saka nagtawanan ang mga magkakahilerang manghuhula sa patiyoy.

“Magpipista na ang Nazareno. Maraming naghahanap sa iyo. Kelan ka ba babalik sa panghuhula?” tanong ng babaeng nagbabalasa ng baraha.

Saglit lamang siyang napahinto. Wala siyang anumang naisagot. Walang mukha ang mga manghuhulang ito. Nagbubulungan sila at napakaraming mga puna sa kaniya. At saka siya nagmadaling lumakad papalayo ng simbahan.

Ilang araw siyang nag-iisa sa pamamahay. Tila blangko ang mga dingding. Mas lumalawak ang espasyo sa pag-iisa. Nagiging isang kulungan

ito para kay Aling Maring. Ilang araw na niyang pinagtitiyagaan ang pagkain nang nag-iisa. Nakakaligtaan na nga niya kung minsan. Ilang oras lamang siyang nakakatulog. Lumalakas ang tunog ng orasan. Nabibilang na niya ang mga kagamitan ng bahay para lamang libangin ang sarili at mawaglit ang pangamba. Walang balita kung nasaan na si Jimboy.

Pista ng Nazareno. Ang araw ng Traslacion. Pinili niyang dumalo rito. Nais niyang lumabas ng bahay. Nagsasawa na siya sa katahimikan ng pag-iisa. Ayaw na niyang magkulong. Mamarapatin niyang kausapin ang Nazareno at hilingin dito ang kaligtasan ni Jimboy at ang patuloy na biyaya at pagpapala nito sa kanila. Naniniwala siya sa kabutihan nito. Ito lamang ang kaniyang takbuhan at ang nag-iisang nagmamalasakit sa kanila. Alam niyang kaloob nito ang kaniyang kakayanang bumasa ng kapalaran, bagaman mas maraming bagay ang hindi niya nakikita at naiintindihan.

Palubog na ang araw nang marating niya ang simbahan. Parating pa lamang ang imahen mula sa parke kung saan ito inilagak nang maghapon bago ibalik sa basilika. Laksa-laksa ang deboto. Napakaraming mukha ang kaniyang nabasa. Punong-puno ng mga kuwento. Hindi mabilang ang mga hinanaing at kahilingan. Iba-ibang hugis ng mukha, kulay ng balat at ekspresyon ng pananampalataya o pagdududa ang kaniyang napansin. Napakahaba ng binibigkas na dasal ng mga deboto. Nakatuon ang karamihan sa sentrong altar ng Nazareno. Nakahihilo ang pagsisiksikan patungo sa loob ng simbahan. Nagkikiskisan ang mga pawisang katawan. Sa kaniyang pagpasok, namukhaan niya ang kaniyang ina at ama sa karamihan ng tao. Tila may lungkot ang mga mukha nito. At nawala na lamang ito sa dagsa ng mga nagdarasal. Natanaw niya ang lumuluhang mukha ng poon. Bumigat ang kaniyang bawat hakbang. Nagdilim ang kaniyang paningin. Umikot ang paligid at nawalan siya ng malay.

Nagising siya sa ospital. Maingay ang kakarag-karag na bentilador. Kinapa niya ang kaniyang gamit. Naroroon pa ang kaniyang munting lukbutan. Nakaupo sa kaniyang tabi ang kasintahan ni Jimboy. Umiiyak ito.

“Nay, wala na po si Jimboy,” pakli ng dalaga. Hinabol niya ang kaniyang hininga na para bang nauubusan siya ng hangin. Dumaloy sa mga mata ni Aling Maring ang luha. Nakita niya sa mukha ng dalaga ang labis na kalungkutan. Binaril ito. Maaaring napagkamalan, napag-initan, o ipinapatay. Iniimbestigahan pa ito. Papauwi na raw ito sa condo nila nang madaanan ng nakamotor na lalaki at saka pinaputukan sa ulo ng makalawang ulit. Bumulagta ito. Itinawag lamang ang mga nangyari sa kasintahan ng binata.

Nakita at napiho ni Aling Maring sa mukha ng dalaga na ang bangkay na tinatangisan ay si Jimboy at siya mismo ang babaeng nakabelong itim. Tanging si Aling Maring lamang ang nakakaalam. Ito marahil ang sakripisyo. Isang pagluluksang hindi niya naisagawa kahit sa kaniyang mga magulang.

Nagtagpo ang iba pang manghuhula matapos ang pista ng Nazareno. Lumuluha ang mga kandila habang nagliliyab at natutunaw ito sa loob ng latang tinitirikan. Tulad ng dati, nakasalampak sila sa patiyo ng simbahan. Wala silang alam o pakialam o maaaring hindi naman nila pinapansin ang turo at ang paninindigan ng simbahan sa tulad nilang manghuhula, nagbebenta ng mga agimat at mga nagpapasindi ng kandila at padasal. Isa lamang ang kanilang pinag-uusapan sa umagang iyon. Nabalitaan na nila ang nangyari at pinagtatawanan si Aling Maring, ang mambabasa ng mukha, ang manghuhula.

*(Enero 8-9, 2018; Maynila)*



Mula sa

# WALANG MABANAAG

Mesándel Virtusio Arguelles

## ANG PAGLALAYAG

Inaasam ko ang pagbalik ng mga kagang.  
Ang mga uwak na dalawang semana  
tuwing dapithapon nangamatay.  
Ako kaya o sila ang nalalabuan, nadirimlan  
sa pinagkanlungan ng aking mga sekreto  
bawat bitag? Bigla ang buwan ang nagsabi  
sa buway ng pananim ng laksang pagkagapi,  
tanod ang mga dahon sa puno  
na malaon nang hindi nakapaglalayag.  
Tinanghali na ako rito sa mga tanim.  
Hindi tuminag ang puno na walang dahon  
Sumimoy ang samyong nagmumula sa araw  
na may habilin para sa hardin. Ang panahon  
sa gulod tila nakalimot at nag-iisa matapos  
ang mga taon ng paglilibing sa ulan.

## KAS

Nagtaka ka sa baybayin  
ng Bas Dako, nililibak  
ang mga sinulat nating mga hinala  
pagdating ng sanlaksang bagon.  
Natigilan ka sa ating pagkagapi—

“Kasama, susulat ako,” sabi mo  
nang paalis ang bus. Gayunman,  
pipili ka lang ng gunting, panggapas lagi  
sa pihong bakod. Lilingon-lingon ka.  
Nasubukan ko na’ng magbalik

sa kanais-nais. Nasaan ka na ba?  
Malamang, laging abala, napakalayo  
sa hindi na maalalang unang porma.  
Naabot mo na ang panahon, natunton  
lagi ang gusto o hindi, ang dating tugma

hindi makilala sa layo. Tingnan, mas malaya,  
nag-iisa ang naroong gunita.

## HALAW

Bigla na lang na parang  
paslit akong bumigkas  
sa iyong likuran. Dagli  
bagang napahinto:  
nahukay ang kaalaman  
sa papalapit na pagtatapos,  
nabunyag ang itinago  
ng kahapong tangay  
ng matandang panahon,  
naabot ang salubong  
na pagkaway ng bayang nagkalumot  
sa piling ng tagaytay.

## ANG PAGSUKO

Nagtanim-tanim ako ng oras, lumipas  
ang aking panahon. Nagtungo ako  
sa hardin, nagsunog ng mga bagong  
pagkakataon sa kabila ng ambagang taludtod  
ng mga kasama. Wala akong talinghaga  
sa paglingon. Bigo akong mapatitikom.  
Sadyang sumusuko ang salita para maghilom.

## SUMPA

Ang mga batong hawak mo, tangay-  
tangay sa paglilimayon sa bawat araw.  
Ang ulang nagpasakit, ang ulang nagpaibig  
sa mga gilid-gilid, ang ulang nailibing.  
Ang katagang hawak mo, sa aklat  
ng iyong taglagas, sa paglubog ng iyong araw  
pagkaway ng buhay na nasukol sa isang sulok.

Mula sa  
**MULI, ISANG  
EBANGHELYO NG APOY**

Ralph Fonte

**Glasyar**

Ikaw na nagbinyag sa akin,  
maaalaala mo pa ba  
kung sino ako  
ngayong ako'y naglaho na  
sa landas ng niyebe at ng selyiska,  
ng mga glasiyar at ng puso ng gubat?  
Naglaho na tayo sa isa't isa.  
Ang pangalan ko: alingawngaw  
na hindi na mabigkas.  
Ito ang panganib ng mga pangalan—  
ako ay nagiging ako  
ayon sa pagbihag mo.  
Niyebe, glasyar, yelong itim  
ang bawat isa'y bagay na kasintiyak

ng mga buto.

At ikaw, nasa layong halos isang mundo.

Naglaho na rin ako maging sa sarili.

Iusal mo ang aking pag-iral.

Ako ay glasyar

sa bingit ng paglipad.

## English is the Language of the Future

Kahit ano pang sabihin ninyo, kailangan nating kumatha ng mga bagong salita. Ano nga ba ang itatawag sa mga sanaw na nangaiipon sa mga bangketa, kasing-iitim ng kalawakan kahit tirik ang araw, o sa mga ilaw ng mga mata ng kotse na gumagapang sa mga kawad ng kuryente, o sa mga sahurang ng tubig na nakanganga sa langit tuwing tag-ambon, sa ipinagbibiling mga bote ng sariwang hangin, sa mga patak ng langis na sinimot sa mga tangke ng lumang sasakyan kapag nangalirang na ang mga bukal ng krudo, sa mga darating na digmaang tutubusin ng dugo ang tubig, at sa mga magbabakwit tungo sa mga lungsod na ititindig sa buwan at sa Marte?

Or baka it wouldn't really matter.

We might as well just keep using English words—climate change, ultraviolet radiation, desertification, parallax error, The International Space Station, Martians, dark matter, water—kasi we're doomed anyway. Regardless sa kung anong sabihin mo, the computer models will tell you: magiging desert ang huge swathes of the equator. Melting permafrost will release ancient stores of methane. Darating ang mga bagyong palala nang palala, palubha nang palubha, bigger and stronger than we've ever seen, and our cities will all make lubog sa dagat, so aanhin pa ang Tagalog? Walang kailangang maunawaan ang mga patay. Balang araw, wala nang mga ilog, ang Maynila ay magiging kumukulong kipot, at makatunaw-bakal na ang titig ng tanghali sa mga labi ng Pilipinas. So why bother with the translation of headlight or Hawking Radiation, or Herd Immunity, or Mass Extinction, kahit na for now no one understands these words sa kalye. It's English. Everyone understands English. Or rather, *should* understand English. Which is to say, mamamatay ka na lang kung di ka marunong mag-English.

Kaya hayaan na nating mamatay itong wika with the Earth. After all, in the end, kapag nasa terminal ka na sa Houston, trying to board the latest shuttle papuntang Mars, hindi naman nila itatanong kung kumusta ka e, kung anong pangalan mo, o kung nakakain ka na ba. No. Instead, they'll ask you your name, your ethnicity, your IELTS score, and, seeing all those reddening, sunburnt white people behind you, why the fuck should they let your brown skin leave this dying planet.



## Soneto sa Huling Puno

Kalawang ang langit, baog na lupain  
sa lahat ng dako, ayaw pang mamatay  
ng huklubang kahoy. Tuwing mag-aAbril

pawang nalululot sa kanyang paanang  
gabukan ang mga bungang mapipintog.  
Pag muling bumugso ang asim na ulan,

simot na ng mga ugat ang nalamog  
na putik. Wala ring sisilong na tuka.  
Sa siwang ng mga dahon, mantsang tuldok

ang Marte. Siglo na mula nang ipunla'ng  
mga sugong binhing naging kakahuyan  
paglikas ng tao sa mundong gumiba.

Nakaunat ngayon sa langit ang duklay  
na dinarapuan ng palakol na b'wan.

## Kung Bakit Napakainit Pa Rin Kahit Nobyembre

Nakalutang sa papawirin ngayong gabi ang mga planeta. Malabituin. Ang Hupiter at Saturno sa magkabilang talim ng malantik na karayom ng buwan. Sa lupa, tila ako nakatungtong sa nangnang. May palamuting lamlam ang lahat ng rabaw, ang mga eskinita, ang mga dingding, ang madidilim kong palad, at mistulang nakakalatis ang liwanag, naghihimulmol sa mga daliri. Anila, may pangako ang ganitong paghahanay ng mga buntala. Pagsilang. O ang malayong pagsibol. Marahil. Buong araw akong pinalibutan ng mga nahuhulog na dahon. Sa bawat kong hakbang, nangadurog sila sa talampakan at buong hapon ng nagkulay-alipato ang mga bangketa. Kung ibang lugar sana ito, aakalain mong taglagas. Kung ibang lugar sana ito, aabangan natin ang ganitong paglalanggas. Kaibigan, wala ritong pinipiling panahon ang kamatayan. Lagi ang alinsangan. Lagi ang ganitong nanunuot na init, mistulang mga anay sa ilalim ng balat. Oo, hinihintay ko rin ang ngasab ng Amihan. Kahapon, may dumating na namang bangkay sa ospital. Mukhang nalunod. Nahukay raw sa bahay niyang natabunan ng putik kahit malaon na dapat natapos ang tagbagyo. Inihiga namin ito at halos pumutok sa pagkaagnas ang lumolobong katawan. Tinagasan ng gailog na tubig-baha nang bombahin ang dibdib, pinag-umapawan hanggang magbaysak sa buong paligid. Maya-maya, nang ihahayag na ang oras ng pagpanaw, nagpupusagan sa sahig ang mga isdang nangagtago sa kaniyang katawan. Napanood ko na rin ang ganitong tagpigdal habang tag-araw at tag-ulan. Minsan, nagtalik kami ng dati kong kasintahan sa abuhing dalampasigan ng Silangin at para kaming dalawang punong tinataglagas, apurang naghuhunos ng mga sapin na nagkukulong ng init sa katawan, kaming dalawang nagkikiskisang humbad, sumisiklab at nasusunog sa gitna ng humahaplit na bagyo. Hindi na kami nag-uusap. Walang tiyak kundi ang pagwawakas. Maging ang ganitong init. Minsan isang gabing hindi mo mamamalayan, bukas, marahil, kundiman sa susunod na buwan, muling magtatalatag ang mga anyong-langit at mapapalamutian ulit ng luningning ang gabi. At ikaw, na naglalakad sa eskina sa ilalim ng malamlam na tanglaw ay sasalubungin ng balantok na kislap ng malabuwang sundang. Talim sa tagiliran. Galatiang paglalangib. May lalagaslas nang sapa. At ikaw, sa lupa, habang ginagapangan ng mga hantik, ay daranas sa wakas ng lamig.

## **Magugunaw Ang Mundo Minsan Isang Miyerkules Habang Kumakain Ka Ng Bananakyu**

*alinsunod kay Stephanie Chan*

Magugunaw ang mundo minsan isang Miyerkules  
habang kumakain ka ng bananakyu.  
Kung suwerte ka, nakatira ka sa SM Blue  
pinanonood ang dapithapong kumukumot  
sa Antipolo at biglang  
gagalaw ang linsad ng Marikina,  
guguho ang gusali, malalaglag ka  
nang mahigit limampung palapag  
sa bangin sa gilid ng Katipunan  
at matatabunan ng mga kuwartong  
tinipid ng SM. Bonus: hindi na makikita  
ng mga mahal mo sa buhay ang lasog mong bangkay.  
Maaari din namang kinakagatan mo ang tuhog  
ng saging habang naglalakad sa gilid ng Beywok.  
Lalatay ang DaBigWan. Papatirin  
ang uhaw mo ng tsunami ng maitim, mabaho,  
at malaimburnal na tubig ng Manila Bay.  
Hindi mo na mapapansin ang lumulutang  
na tae at kondom. Posible rin naman,  
kung minalas-malas ka, nakasakay ka ng bus  
na walang erkon sa EDSA, pangata-ngata  
sa sabang nanlalambot sa loob ng plastik  
habang nakayakap sa bag  
na ayaw mong nakawin ng katabi  
na mukhang manyak. Uuga. Lindol pala.  
May iingit. Titingala ka at matatabunan ng nadurog  
na kisame ng anderpas at ng mga pedestriyan  
na nakikipagpatintero sa mga dyip ng Cubao.  
Ni hindi na nakasigaw ng HOLDAP  
ang katabi mo. Di ka rin naman na  
nakapagtaas ng kamay. O kaya naytsyip ka,  
nilulutas ang mga suliranin ng mga Kano

sa Tate, kung paano ba magset-ap ng haytek  
 na towstehr, plantsado ang *accent* sa *English*,  
 at may sasalpok na bulalakaw sa caulsennehr  
 at mapapuputangina ka sa kliyenteng puti  
 sa harap ng napatanga at napanganga mong bos  
 bago mapatid ang linya. O kaya naghihintay ka  
 ng masasakyang dyip at masasagasaan  
 ng ilandaang rumaragasang paa ng Tsekwa  
 na nagpapanik sa Pasay. Sinigawan ka nila,  
 "TABI!" e kaso engot kang di marunong  
 mag-Mandarin. Basta, isipin mo: hawak mo  
 ang istik ng bananakyu. Biglang magpapasya  
 ang Amerika at ang Tsina na magpuksaan  
 sa bandang Pinas, bakit nga naman hindi,  
 sayang naman kasi ang nakaimbak na dyuteryum  
 sa SawtTsaynaSi WesPilipinSi at mapuputukan  
 ng ligaw na nukleyarbam ang Luzon.  
 Lulutang ang mga patay na isda sa dagat.  
 Magtatago sa kani-kanilang mga bangker  
 ang mga kagalang-galang na representatib  
 ng bayan pero oo nga pala  
 wala kang maririnig wala kang makikita  
 wala kang malalaman kasi sabi nga pala  
 ni Duterte na bawal na ang balita. Malas mo.  
 Brtt Brtt Brtt.  
 Walang mapapanood sa TV. Estatiko lang.  
 Uulan ng bituka. Aagos ng apdo. Nganganga  
 ang mga bundok. Mararamdaman mong  
 yumanig ang lupa at malalalahan mong  
 malapnos ang palayan. Sa mga tsekpoynt  
 ng mga parak at militar, hahanapan ka nila  
 ng kwarantimpas, ng sedula, o kaya ng *certificate  
 of employment* at titingnan kung terorista ka ba  
 sa peysbuk at *Twitter* kaso wala na pala kayong lahat  
 na mobayl deyta kaya hihingan ka na lang nila  
 ng pangmeryenda. Hindi kawnted ang bananakyu  
 mong may kagat na kaya tatamnan ka na lang  
 ng tobats, at totokhangin

isang segundo bago sumalpok ang beam rifle  
ng Gundam na nakikipaglaban sa Elyens  
sa kalyeng kinatatayuan mo. Amen.  
Expected naman na ang lahat ng ito.  
Alam naman natin na matagal nang lumulubog  
sa dagat ang Pilipinas, na binabawi ito ng alat  
parang Asian Venice o Atlantis.  
H'wag kang magulat  
na kapag nagbitak ang kongkreto  
at nangagbuwal ang mga bilding  
at nangabasag ang matatayog nilang salamin,  
kabibili mo lang ng bananakyu  
sa suki mong magmemeryenda.  
Mainit-init pa ang saging, makinang  
ang naggaok na arnibal sa sabang pinakuluan  
sa kawaling may tatlong-linggong gulang  
na mantika kapag namatay ka na sa wakas  
bago pa man malunok ang unang kagat  
dahil nakatitig ka sa seleponong tumatawid  
ng lansangan, nanonood ng pro-Marcos video,  
kaya mahuhulog sa bukas na manhol  
sa kalsadang pinapaayos ni kuya Bong Go  
dahil bertdey pala ng paborito mong politiko

# PARALLAX

at mga iba pang tula

Mirick Paala

## Parallax

I.

Hindi madaling kalimutan ang pangalan  
ng matandang makakasalubong sa daan.

Hindi mauulit ang masamang panaginip  
kung babaligtarin ang unan.

Bago lumabas ng bahay, usalin:  
Matthew, Mark, Luke, John

para hindi sapian.  
May babaeng nabaliw

nang maligo kahit may dalaw.  
May inang nakita ang anak

sa basag na salamin  
bago niya nakita ang sarili.

Huwag baligtarin ang damit  
kapag naligaw.

Tutuparin ng diwata ang hiling  
kapalit ng isang hiling.

Huwag nang lumingon sa pinanggalingan.  
Matinik ang daan.

May babaeng hindi magawang  
naisin ang magbalik.

II.

Huwag baligtarin ang damit  
para hindi sapian.

Bago lumabas ng bahay, usalin:  
“May babaeng nabaliw.”

Naisin ang magbalik  
hindi madaling kalimutan ang pangalan.

Tutuparin ng diwata ang hiling  
huwag lang lumingon sa pinanggalingan.

May inang nakita ang anak  
sa matandang makakasalubong sa daan.

Matinik ang daan  
may babaeng hindi magawang

baligtarin ang unan.  
*Matthew, Mark, Luke, John*

kapag naligaw  
kapalit ng isang hiling

kapag naligo kahit may dalaw  
hindi mauulit ang masamang panaginip—

basag ang salamin  
bago pa makita ang sarili.

## ODA SA ESTATWA

Gintong katawang nakaposisyong lotus, laging nakatingin  
paibaba o nakapikit, kahit saan pumunta,  
ikaw ang nakikita. Ang landas  
tungo sa bayan ay pasikot-sikot  
na parang bituka samantalang sabik ako  
sa laman samantalang nakalahad ang iyong palad  
na parang labi ng sisidlang hindi mapuno-puno dahil  
gumuguho, naguwang— ang iyong kasaysayan  
ay kasaysayan ng digmaan at ng mga natutulog  
na bomba. Hinalikan mo  
ang aking likuran at gumapang ang iyong halik  
tungo sa balikat leeg bibig. Ang iyong mga bisig  
parang lubid na hinihila ako palabas  
ng katawan, palabas ng kamunduhan kung saan ikaw  
ay marahang ambon ang berdeng tubig na pumupuno  
sa sisidlan at ako ang asong ligaw at uhaw  
nilalapa ang iyong rabaw  
at lalim, hindi ako nalulunod



sa desperasyon na tila ilusyon  
ang pag-iisa. Obsesyon ang pag-iisa. At ayaw ko  
nang matakot sa pagmamahal  
kung ito ang magpapadalisa sa lahat  
ng pagnanasa— sa iyong templo sa harap ng isang  
libong ikaw ako ay lumuluhod.  
Itinatali ng monghe ang pisi sa aking kamay.

## DASAL

Dahan-dahan nating pinapaliguan  
ang isa't isa. Parang mga mongheng  
nagdarasal sa templo. Tigib sa katahimikan  
ang bawat galaw. Sinasabon ko ang iyong dibdib.  
Binabanlawan mo ang aking likuran.  
Ipinipikit ko ang mata. Ramdam mo ba  
ang paglusob ko sa katawan at pagsara  
ng lahat ng pinto bintana? Pakinggan  
ang dausdos ng tubig sa balat  
tila pakiusap na mamalagi tayo sa katawang  
pinaliliguan ko, pinaliliguan mo.  
Hayaan nating umapaw ang tubig sa timba.

## NO EXIT

Nagpapanggap na lumilipad ang nagpapanggap na tagak. Nagpapanggap na musika ang nagpapanggap na siyap. Nagpapanggap na alon at nagpapanggap na dumadaong ang nagpapanggap na barko sa nagpapanggap na pantalan. Kunwaring ibinababa ang nagpapanggap na sako-sako ng nagpapanggap na prutas na nagpapanggap na nanggagaling sa nagpapanggap na kabilang ibayo ng nagpapanggap na karagatan. Kunwaring isasakay sa nagpapanggap na likuran ng nagpapanggap na trak. Kunwaring ihahatid sa nagpapanggap na bayan na kunwaring ilang milya ang layo sa nagpapanggap na pantalan. Kunwaring darating sa nagpapanggap na bagsakan. Kunwaring mag-uunahan ang mga nagpapanggap na mamimili para kunwaring ilako ang mga nagpapanggap na prutas sa kani-kanilang nagkukunwaring pwesto sa nagpapanggap na palengke sa nagpapanggap na gilid ng nagpapanggap na daan nagpapanggap na labas ng nagpapanggap na simbahan nagpapanggap na paaralan nagpapanggap na ospital sakayan nagpapanggap na opisina ng nagpapanggap na pamahalaan. Kunwaring may estrangherong nagpapanggap na bibili ng nagpapanggap na sako ng nagpapanggap na prutas. Nagpapanggap siya na uuwi. Nagpapanggap na bubuksan ang nagpapanggap na pinto. Nagpapanggap na sasalubungin ang nagpapanggap na dilim. Nagpapanggap na ihuhubad ang nagpapanggap na sapatos. Nagpapanggap na bubuksan ang nagpapanggap na ilaw bago magpanggap na didiretso sa nagpapanggap na kusina. Nagpapanggap na huhugasan ang nagpapanggap na prutas. Nagpapanggap na kukunin ang nagpapanggap na kutsilyo. Nagpapanggap na babalatan at nagpapanggap na dahan-dahan na parang nagpapanggap na pinipilas ang nagpapanggap na damit nagpapanggap na balat nagpapanggap na mukha sarili hanggang magpanggap na magkalat at maipon sa nagpapanggap na sahig ang nagpapanggap na pinaghubdan ng nagpapanggap na lahat-lahat ng nagpapanggap na pagpapanggap nagpapanggap na nagpapanggap na pagpapanggap.

## ANG SALAMANGKERO

Tinawag niya kami  
para saksihan ang obrang  
hindi pa niya pinangalanan  
dahil hindi mapangalanan.  
Hinubad niya ang itim na sombrero  
at siniyasat namin  
ang handog. Ibinunyag niya  
ang lihim: hindi matatagpuan  
ang sagot  
sa unang tingin.  
Naniwala kami  
kaya agad umahon sa dilim  
hinanap ang isa't isa  
bumaling sa nakasisilaw na ilaw  
ng entablado saka hinuli  
ang kaniyang tingin.  
Hinabol namin ang mga daliring  
tinalunton ang labi  
ng sombrero ng namuwal  
sa aming mga matang  
nakatitig. Madali naming nilimot  
ang hitsura ng isa't isa  
ang maaaring paliwanag  
sa harap ng dilim.  
Lumundag ang kaniyang kamay  
sa guwang. Sa hangganang  
kami ay mabubulunan  
hinugot niya ang sarili  
sa aming lalamunan.

# LAYOVER

Limang Tula

Karl Isaac Santos

## Paggagayat

"I've long believed that good food, good eating, is all about risk. Whether we're talking about unpasteurized Stilton, raw oysters or working for organized crime 'associates,' food, for me, has always been an adventure." - Anthony Bourdain (1956 - 2018)

Marahil, may alaala ang kutsilyo  
Sa higpit o luwag ng pagkapit,  
Sa puwesto ng daliring gagabay  
Sa talim, sa galaw ng pulsúhan.  
Hindi lámang sa mga kamay naiiwan  
Ang danas ng paghiwa. Sa isip,  
Lutô na ang pagkain,  
Kayâ alam natin kung alin,  
Ilan, at ano ang rekadong kailangan.  
May isa pang kaluluwa ang kusinero— Nakalaan  
Sa pagpili at paggayat ng sangkap.  
Madalas, ang paggayat ay mula sa gitna,  
Mayroon man o walang gitna,  
Alam natin kung saan padadaanin  
Ang talim. Dumádalíng tungkabin  
Ang balát sa ganitong paraan,  
Katulad kung paano natin  
Pinatutulóy ang mga tao sa ating búhay.  
At katulad ng ating pákay sa mga nagsitulóy,  
Iniaayon natin sa lulutuin kung paano  
Ang hiwa: Pahaba't manipis, o kuwadrado't maliit;  
Ganito natin gustong lumigaya, o ganito natin gustong manatili.  
Palaging darating ang tagpo na kailangang  
Padausdusín ang daliri sa lapad ng kutsilyo—

Bago dumating sa talim. May punto  
Kung kailan ilalagay ang mga sangkap  
sa iniluluto. Ang alaala, ang kaluluwa,  
at ang mga pinili nating sangkap.  
Mahiwa man o hindi,  
Mag-ingat sa álat  
Ng luha ng tao.

## How To Hugot

Sa start, s'yempre naliligaw ka dapat sa biglaang turn sa road na tinahak. Kumbaga, doon ka lagi sa the-road-not-taken. Hindi mo alam kung ano man ang hinuhugot mo: relasyon, pagkakakilala, hiwalayan, third-party, or Bes-with-benefits.

Usually sisimulan mo sa linyang “Hindi ko alam kung paano nagsimula.” Sabay banat ng word play, Like “ikaw, tayo,” “tayo, ikaw”. Alam mong nagpe-play na ang words kapag may indescribable rhythm na lumalabas kasabay ng same-old feelings.

S'yempre, dapat may formula like telenovela. You can choose kung The-victim or the left-behind ang formulang gagamitin. Kahit pa sobenista ka in-the-making, or free-spirited woman, remember, kahit pa ikaw ang may hawak ng kutsilyo't unang nanaksak, ikaw dapat ang lalabas na duguan.

Nakasalang din dapat sa trampoline ang mga imagery, tumatalon-talon like bola ng beer pong, you don't know kung saan magfa-fall, kung sa baso o sa bowl. Pero it doesn't matter, isasalang mo din naman ang lahat ng iyan sa emosyonal na blender.

At finally, kung hindi mo alam kung paano kayo nag-start, hindi mo rin dapat alam kung paano kayo nag-end. Sabay let go ng linyang dapat ay dati mo pang ini-let go. Yung tipong nahuli ka ng bitaw sa karera ng Tamiya.

By the way, if all else fails, bawi ka na lang sa hand-gestures at sa nangangatog na tone ng boses.  
Iyon ang sikreto ng vibrator.

## Senakulo sa Taglamig

Sa pabása sa isang lumang palengke,  
Naroon ang adik na kristo,  
Nakaluhod sa naghálong durâ at natunaw na niyebe.  
Nagnanakaw ng pahinga mula sa pagpasan ng krus  
Sa harap ng mga namamaos na matatanda  
Na umaawit ng saknong mula sa Pasyóng Mahal.  
Nagsasalitan naman sa iisang sigarilyo ang mga binatang  
Nagsiganap na sundalong Romano. Sa pagbugá nila ng usok,  
Nagsisihip sa kanilang mga palad ang mga umuusyosong paslit.  
Nalilito ang malamig na hangin sa salimbayan ng kamatayan at búhay.  
Matapos ang pagbasa, gaganap ang Pilato.  
Hahatulan ang giniginaw na kristo—  
Walang katapusang hatol ng kamatayan  
Hanggang may mga nagdarasal at nananalig.  
Senyales ito na tulóy ang pagtaltál ng kristo  
Sa puting impiyerno ng taglamig.  
Sa muling pag-usad ng prusisyon,  
Kailangang hukayin ng yapák na mesiyas  
Ang aspaltong inilibing ng niyebe  
Upang hindi mabalahò ang krus.  
Nangingimî namang pumalò sa likod ng kristo  
Ang mga romano sa tákot na maputulan ng bisig.  
Malayu-layô pa ang susunod na pabása  
Nang dagling matigil ang prusisyon.  
Naputol ang nangingitim na binti ng kristo  
Sa frostbite bago pa man tumarak sa bungo  
Ang mga nagsasatiník na yelo sa karánda.  
Dismayadong nagsiuwi ang mga nanonood.  
Ganoon daw talaga simula nang lumamig,  
  
Hinding-hindi mararating ang Golgotha.



## Ang Bawat Isa ay Nais ng Piraso ni Van Gogh

"A great fire burns within me, but no one stops to warm themselves at it, and passers-by only see a wisp of smoke" - Vincent Willem Van Gogh (1953 - 1890)

Sa luklukan ng mga likha mo, nag-iikot ang mga taong kumusta-at-paalam.  
Pawang mga estranghero sa iyo, subalit kilala ka nila sa iyong mukha,  
Sa iyong hagod sa kambas, sa iyong kulay. Titig na titig ka  
Sa kanilang pagkakatitig sa iyo, habang sinusubukan nilang buoin  
Ang kanilang mga sarili sa iyo. Subalit, walang likha mo ang makabubuo sa  
kanila.

Nais nila ng piraso mo na kanilang maiuwi't mapaglalamayan.  
Nais nilang saniban ng tingkad ng mga tinatangi mong mirasol,  
O mabusog sa mga patatas na inihain mo sa mga pobre.  
Nais nilang lakarin ang nilakad ng iyong lumang bota,  
O sundan ang pag-alis ni Gauguin upang ituloy ang kaniyang paysahe.  
Hinahanapan din nila ng halimuyak maging iyong mga liryong  
Hindi malinaw kung kabubukadkad lang o mga nagsipagsuko na sa  
taglagas.

Ang totoo'y sa mga mabituin na gabi ka lámang nila nais na samahan,  
At hindi sa tag-araw ng mga uwak na labis mong inaasam.  
Sa kanilang paglabas, nagising sila mula sa iyong panaginip.  
Bulung-bulungan ka nila, tangan at di mabitawan  
Ang naputol mong tainga.

## Vintage Bomb

(Sunod sa Bomb Hugger ni Banksy)



May iniwang pabáon sa atin  
ang pandaigdigang giyera. Nakabaón na  
Bombang naghihintay tamaan ng píko o pála.  
Natutulog sa ilalim ng pagód na siyudad  
Sa ibabaw ng hindi natutulog na siyudad.  
Doon ay nahihimbing ang dahas ng nakalipas:  
Pagpatay, panggagahasa, pagnanakaw.  
Sa paghuhukay ng pagtitirikan ng pundasyon  
Ng itinatayong bagong lipunan,  
Nasalíng nila ang túlog-mantikang bomba.  
Tinubuan na ng mga ugat.  
Tumitibok. Kahit kailan ay hindi  
Sasabog.

Kuhang larawan ng Bomb Hugger mula sa: <http://www.blogs.buprojects.uk/2015-2016/rachelrichardson/2015/11/22/bomb-hugger-by-banksy/>

# TATAY KO SI BOYET

Christopher Bryan Concha

Walang duda. Si Boyet nga ang tunay kong ama.

Sa kaniyang makakapal na kilay, matangos na ilong, hugis ng panga, nangungusap na mga mata at nakasisindak na titig, tila tumitingin ako sa salamin sa tuwing pinanonood ko sa telebisyon o pelikula ang beteranong aktor na si Christopher de Leon. Boyet kung tawagin ng kaniyang kapamilya o malalapit na kaibigan.

Maaga akong namulat sa kaniyang pag-arte dahil sa pagiging panatiko ni Mama sa kaniya. Hindi mahilig manood ng sine si Mama. Sa kaniya ko yata namana ang pagiging kuripot. Sa tuwing niyayaya siya ng kaniyang mga kumare, palagi siyang nagdadahilan na abala o may kailangang tapusin. Pero ang totoo, namamahalan lang siya sa tiket. Para sa kaniya, hindi sulit na gumastos para lang sa mahigit dalawang oras na pag-upo at pagpapalamig sa loob ng sinehan. Hindi pa tiyak kung magiging maganda ang pelikula. Mas gugustuhin pa niyang hintayin na magkaroon ng kopya nito sa Video City. Nakamura na, one to sawa pa ang panonood.

Pero hindi ganito ang senaryo sa tuwing may pelikula si Boyet, lalo na kung sa taunang Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF). Bukod sa mas may badyet si Mama dahil Pasko, hindi niya matiis na palagpasin ang pagkakataong mapanood sa big screen ang iniidolong aktor. Parang naging panata na niyang suportahan ang bawat pelikula ni Boyet. Labing-walong taong gulang daw siya nang ma-love-at-first-sight sa aktor dahil sa *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* (1974) ni Lino Brocka. Palaging ipinagmamalaki sa akin ni Mama na bagama't 'yon ang kauna-unahang pelikulang pinagbidahan ni Boyet, nagwagi agad siya ng FAMAS Best Actor award. Dinaig pa ang mga beteranong aktor tulad nina Dolphy, Ramon Revilla, Joseph Estrada, at Ronaldo Valdez. Ganoon daw katindi umarte ang isang Christopher de Leon. Mararamdaman ang emosyon kahit walang binibitawang salita. Titig pa lang, kumokonekta na sa kaluluwa mo. Malayo raw sa mga aktor ng kasalukuyang henerasyon. Hindi na nga makaiyak, sablay pa pagbibitaw ng mga linya. Puro papogi at pa-cute lang daw.

Kaya nga hindi na rin ako nagtatataka kung bakit ang unang pelikulang napanood ko sa sinehan batay sa aking pagkakaalala ay ang *Mano Po 2* (2003) ni Erik Matti.

Hindi ko makakalimutan ang araw na 'yon dahil doon ko nakilala ang alter ego ni Mama. Bagama't normal naman sa mga batang mapagalitan ng magulang, minsan lang mag-beast mode si Mama. Mas nakakatakot. Sa oras na magising ang dragon sa kaniya, talagang mapapadasal ka sa lahat ng santong maaari mong tawagin. Paano ba naman kasi, buryong-buryo na ako sa pelikula. Keber ko naman ng mga oras na 'yon sa awayan ng tatlong misis na nag-aagawan sa iniwang mana ng kanilang naaksidenteng mister – papel na ginampanan ni Boyet. Hindi ko nga alam kung bakit ako pinapasok. Imagine, limang taong gulang lang ako noon tapos agawan ng asawa at mana ang pinanonood ko.

Nangangalahati pa lang ang pelikula pero panay na ang aya kong umuwi. Hindi ako pinapansin ni Mama. Nakatuon pa rin ang atensyon sa screen. Pero hindi ako nagpadaig sa pandededma niya. Kinalabit ko siya nang kinalabit, kasabay ng paulit-ulit na pagsusumamo na huwag nang tapusin ang pelikula. Sinabayan ko rin ng pagngawa para kumpleto ang production number. Hanggang sa tuluyan nang nalipat sa amin ang atensyon ng iba pang mga nanonood. Mga nakabusangot at halatang-halata ang inis sa nililikha kong ingay. May ibang hindi na nakatiis at sinabihan na rin si Mama na patigilin ako. Ilang saglit pa, nakilala ko ang ibang katauhan ni Mama.

Lumabas ako ng sinehan na bukaka ang lakad. Iniiwasang maipit ang kumikirot na singit. Sariwang-sariwa pa mula sa pangungurot ni Mama. Hindi ko alam kung dahil ba ito sa inis niya sa pag-eeskandalo ko sa loob o sa inis niya na may tatlong naggagandahang aktres na nakaiskor kay Boyet sa pelikula. Nang sumunod na MMFF, muli akong sinama ni Mama para manood ng sine. *Mano Po III: My Love* (2004) naman ni Joel Lamangan ang pelikula. And as usual, si Boyet na naman ang bida. Pero sa pagkakataong ito, tumimo na ang aral ng kahapon. Hindi na ako nangulit o ngumawa. Tinulugan ko na lang ang buong pelikula

Akala ko sa sinehan ko lang mararanasan ang Boyet fever ni Mama. Wala rin pala akong ligtas kahit sa panonood ng telebisyon. Dahil dadalawa lang kami sa bahay, kami lang din ang nag-aagawan sa remote ng TV. Kaya napagpasyahan namin na magkaroon ng toka sa paghawak ng makapangyarihang remote. Kapag weekdays, si Mama ang may kontrol nito dahil halos buong araw rin naman ang pasok ko sa eskuwela. Hindi ko na

rin magawang makanood sa gabi dahil pagod na o may kailangang tapusing takdang-aralin. Tuwing Sabado at Linggo ko lang nasosolo ang TV. Unfair ang hatian.

Kaya naman kapag weekends, sinisiguro kong sulit ang bawat oras. Walang pahinga sa kakapanood mula umaga hanggang gabi. Nakapila na ang mga piniratang DVD na binili namin sa Quiapo. Inihanda ko na ang pagkakasunod-sunod. Kalimitang Horror muna sa umaga para malimutan ko rin ang takot kinagabihan. Susundan ito ng mga aksyon at barilan mula tanghali hanggang hapon. Feel good movies naman sa gabi para happy thoughts lang bago matulog. Pero may mga pagkakataong inilalaan ko ang gabi sa panonood ng bakbakan sa SmackDown o Raw sa Jack TV. Masugid akong tagahanga ng WWE noon. Inaaway ko pa ang mga nagsasabing scripted ito.

Isang Sabado, maaga pa lang ay sinabi ko nang may panonoorin akong laban sa gabi. Ang comeback ng lodi kong wrestler na si Undertaker sa ring. Hindi ko 'to maaaring palagpasin. Kahit kasi ako ang nakatoka tuwing weekends, may pagkakataong naglalambing si Mama na makasingit kahit saglit para manood ng MMK. Lalo na kung ang mga tipo niyang artista ang bida. Pinagbibigyan ko naman. Huwag nga lang matapat 'pag may inaabangan akong laban.

Kinagabihan, nananabik kong inilapag sa mesa ang biniling tsitsirya kasalo ang nagyeyelo pang softdrinks. Komportableng ipinuwesto ang sarili sa upuan. Handa na ang lahat. Hinihintay na lamang magsimula ang bakbakan. Pero napatigil ako nang makita si mama sa gilid. Kinutuban na ako. Mukhang alam ko na ang susunod na mangyayari. At 'di nga ako nagkamali. May pakiusap si Mama. Ang totoo, nahihiya raw siya dahil alam niyang oras ko'yon ng panonood. Pero si Boyet daw kasi ang tampok na aktor sa MMK. Hindi pa uso ang iWant app o YouTube noon. Hindi ko masabing maaari naman niyang panoorin ang episode na 'yon sa cellphone. Wala na akong nagawa. Ako na lang ang nagpaubaya. Kahit gaano ko kagustong mapanood ang comeback ni Undertaker, mas mahalaga pa rin sa 'kin na makitang masaya si Mama. Kahit minsan, pakiramdam ko mas matimbang pa si Boyet sa puso niya kaysa sa 'kin. Amp. It really hurts ang magmahal ng ganito. \*insert Mimiyyuuuh dance step\*

Tulad ng nauna kong tsika, isa kami ni Mama sa masusugid na paroklyano ng mga piniratang DVD sa Quiapo. Ang puwestong 'yon na malapit sa pasukan ng underpass papuntang simbahan ng Quiapo ang isa sa

mga unang lugar na nakabisado ko sa Maynila. Hindi kami basta bumibili sa bungad. Mas mahal doon at mas mahirap makipagtawaran. Kalimitang sa kasuluk-sulukan kami namimili. Kung saan uubra ang kinse pesos kada DVD. At hindi lang mga pelikula ang sinasadya namin, pati rin mga piniratang album. Ang mga tinig nina Zsazsa Padilla, Lani Misalucha, Regine Velasquez, Gary Valenciano, Martin Nievera, Pops Fernandez, at siyempre sino pa ba – ni Boyet, ang kadalasang gumigising sa ‘kin tuwing Linggo. Pero sa lahat ng CD na mayroon si mama, tanging kay Boyet lang ang original. Tinanong ko siya kung bakit kailangan pa niyang bumili ng orig na album kung mayroon naman sa Quiapo. Inirapan lang niya ako at sinabing mas maganda raw ang boses ni Boyet kapag original ang CD.

Pero bukod sa pagsuporta sa mga pelikula, teleserya at album ni Boyet, sinusundan din ni Mama ang personal na buhay ng aktor. Mula sa pagpapakasal nito kay Superstar Nora Aunor noong 1975, sa hiwalayan nila makalipas ang limang taon, sa muling pagpapakasal ni Boyet sa aktres namang si Sandy Andolong, sa pagpapalipat-lipat ng network hanggang sa pagpasok sa politika. Kung taga-Batangas lang daw sana kami, tiyak na magyo-volunteer siya para ikampanya si Boyet. Magiging mahusay na kongresista raw sana ang aktor kung nanalo lamang ito noong 2013. Ang sabi ko naman, sana sumubok muna siyang mahalal muli bilang board member bago nag-ambisyong makapasok ng kongreso. Patunayan munang may ibubuga sa lokal na pamahalaan bago sumabak sa mas mataas na puwesto.

Hindi ko maikakailang may hitsura nga at maituturing na isa sa pinakamahusay na aktor ng bansa si Boyet. Pero hindi ko maunawaan kung bakit deds na deds si Mama sa kaniya. Baka dahil panatiko lang siya ng aktor. Hindi ko rin alam dahil hindi pa naman ako humanga nang ganoon sa kaninomang artista. Ang iniisip ko na lang, basta masaya si Mama, maligaya na rin ako. Masyado nang maraming pinagdaanang hirap si Mama. Bakit ko naman ipagkakait ang tanging lalaking walang ginawa kundi ang pasiyahin at pakiligin siya (opkors bukod sa ‘kin)?

Minsan, kapag sinasaniban ng espiritu ng kasipagan, napagtritripan kong maglinis ng bahay. Paborito kong ayusin ang sari-saring gamit na nasa mga storage box. Madalas na nauubos ang maghapon sa pag-aayos pa lang ng isang kahon. Paano ba naman, lagi’t laging may stopover sa iba’t ibang alaala ang bawat gamit na makikita ko. Halimbawa ang mga nakatagong class picture mula elementarya hanggang hayskul. Ikinukumpara ko kung paano nagbago ang hitsura ko sa mga nagdaang taon. O ‘di kaya nagkaroon

man lang ba ako ng pagkakataong makuhanan nang nakatayo? Bakit ba kasi laging nasa ibaba at naka-indian seat ang mga hindi nabiyayaan ng height na gaya ko?

Maya-maya pa'y nabaling naman ang atensyon ko sa isang lumang brown envelope na puno ng mga larawan. Mahilig kumuha at magtabi ng mga larawan noon si mama. Patunay rito ang pitong malalaking album na nakatago sa bahay. Hindi lang ito basta album. Gawa sa matigas na karton ang bawat pahina nito. Personalized din ang disenyo at may mga caption pang nakalakip sa ibaba ng mga larawan. Nilalaman nito ang mga kuha niya noong kabataan niya hanggang sa magdalaga, maging ang ilan sa mga kuha niya nang minsang magtrabaho sa Hong Kong at Singapore bilang domestic helper. At siyempre, hindi mawawala ang mga larawan niyang kasama si Papa. May nakaukit pang Grace <3 Edgar forever. Nahiya ang JaDine, KathNiel, at LizQuen. Bagets na bagets. Kapag tinatanong ko kung bakit itinatibi pa rin niya ang album na 'yon, palagi lang niyang isinasagot na sayang naman kung itatapon. Masaya o mapait mang alaala, bahagi pa rin daw 'yon ng kaniyang nakaraan.

Nagtaka ako kung bakit nakahiwalay ang mga larawang nasa lumang brown envelope sa pitong album na ginawa ni mama, kaya inisa-isa ko ang laman nito. Nakita ko ang ilang larawan ni ate mula sa kaniyang ballet class noong bata pa. Naroon din ang aking mga baby picture at ang mga kuha sa aking 1<sup>st</sup> birthday celebration sa Jollibee. Naisip ko, siguro hindi na nagkaroon ng oras si mama na gumawa muli ng album kaya itinabi muna niya ang mga ito. Nagpatuloy ako sa pagtitingin hanggang sa mapahinto nang sumulyap sa akin ang isang larawan ni mama kasama ang isang pamilyar na mukha – si Boyet.

Nabigla ako. Naalala ko ang pang-aasar kay mama na hanggang TV screen lang ang pagpapantasya niya sa aktor. Kako, baka naman hindi ganoon kapogi si Boyet sa personal. Nadadaan lang sa filter o editing para gumanda ang rehistro sa screen. Tumawa lang siya at hindi pinatulan ang pang-aalaska ko. Iyon pala, noon pa niya nakita ang aktor. Tinitigan kong mabuti ang larawan. Una kong napansin ang pag-akbay ni Boyet kay mama. Aba! Parang may iba. Kalimitan namang umaakbay ang artista sa mga tagahangang nagpapakuha ng larawan. Pero iba ang lapit nilang dalawa ni Mama. Dikit na dikit masyado. Iba rin ang pahiwatig ng kanilang mga ngiti. May halong kilig. Sinuri ko ang iba pang detalye sa larawan. Parang nasa isang pagtitipon sila. Maraming mesa sa likuran. Nasa ibabaw ng mga ito

ang mga bawas nang pagkain at mga alak. May mga lobo't palamuti rin sa kisame. Festive ang dating. Mukhang malaking handaan. Itinabi ko muna ang larawan at tinapos ang naudlot na pag-aayos.

Pagkatapos kong maglinis, agad kong pinuntahan si mama. Naghihiwa siya ng sibuyas para sa aming hapunan. Tumabi ako sa kaniya. Tinanong ko muna siya ng kung anik-anik bago mag-segue tungkol sa 'kontrobersyal' na larawan. Nang makakuha ng tiyempo, muli kong tinanong kung nakita na ba niya sa personal si Boyet. Tinawanan lang niya ako ulit. Basta gwapo raw ang aktor, period. Hindi na mahalaga kung nakita nang malapitan o hindi. Muli niyang itinuon ang atensyon sa hinihiwang sibuyas. Ngunit napatigil siya nang mapansin ang winawagayway kong larawan.

"Kung hindi mo pa nakikita si Boyet, sino kaya ito?" pagtatanong kong may halong pang-aasar.

Hindi nagpahalata si mama pero alam kong nagulat siya. Ngumiti siya at sinabing matagal na raw ang larawang 'yon. Nagpakuha lamang siya kasama ang aktor sa isang piging ng kanilang kaibigan.

"Ngayon alam mo na kung bakit siguradong-sigurado ako na guwapo si Christopher de Leon, personal man o sa TV," pahabol ni mama na may kalakip na pabirong pag-irap.

Hindi ako naniwala na hanggang doon lang 'yon. Hindi convincing ang mala-Showbiz na sagot ni mama. Kitang-kita ko ang kakaibang ningning sa kaniyang mga mata nang muli niyang masulyapan ang larawan. Iba ang timpla ng ngiti. Hindi lang basta tuwa. May kasalong pananabik. Parang binuhusan ng asukal sa tamis. Daig pa ang dalagang nainlab sa unang pagkakataon. Besides, paano niya ipaliliwanag ang mala-jowa type na akbay ni Boyet sa kaniya? Nagpakuha lang pero ganoon kahigipit ang kapit at lapit sa isa't isa? Ano 'to, PBB Teens? Hindi ako nakuntento sa sagot ni Mama. Alam kong may mas malalim na istoryang naghihintay lamang na matuklasan. Pero hindi ko na siya kinulit. Kilala ko si Mama. Papasang CIA sa sobrang malihim. Alam kong hindi niya sasagutin ang mga tanong ko at sa malamang ay'di rin seseryosohin.

Hindi ako sumuko. Natitiyak kong may sekretong nakatago sa larawang 'yon. Biglang naglaro sa isip ko kung bakit ganoon na lamang ang pagkahumaling ni Mama kay Boyet, kung bakit Christopher ang ipinangalan sa akin, at kung bakit naghiwalay sila ni Papa nang ipinanganak ako. Hindi kaya magkakakonekta ang mga pangyayaring ito? Hindi kaya...si Boyet ang



tunay kong Ama? May posibilidad ba na kaya hindi ako tinanggap ni Papa bilang anak ay dahil isa akong paalala ng pagtataksil sa kaniya ni Mama kay Boyet? Mabibigat na paratang ito. Mahirap paniwalaan. Kailangan kong humanap ng mga ebidensyang magpapatunay sa mga hinuha ko.

Kaya naman, gumawa ako ng sariling imbestigasyon. Inilabas ko ang aking inner detective skills. In short, tamang hinala. Inalala ko rin ang mga natutuhan ko mula sa panonood kina Detective Conan at Annalise Keating. Una kong nilapitan ang pinakamatanda sa kanilang magkakapatid – si Auntie Imelda. Sinadya ko pa siya sa bahay nila sa Lagro para lang sa kasong 'to. May katalasan pa rin ang memorya ni Auntie Imelda kahit nasa 70s na. Pero mas madalas, nag-uulanin na.

Ipinakita ko sa kaniya ang larawan at tinanong ko kung ano ang istorya sa likod nito. Ayon sa kaniya, noong araw, ang pamilya raw namin ang isa sa may pinakamalaking hardware store sa Kamuning. Isa raw sa aming bigating kliyente ay doktor sa Dr. Jesus C. Delgado Memorial Hospital, na katapat ng aming hardware store. Nang magdiwang ng kaarawan ang doktor, inimbitahan niya sina lolo. Nagkataong kakilala rin ng doktor ang artistang si Boyet kaya't nakarating din sa pagtitipon. Na-starstruck daw sila nang makita ang aktor, lalo na si Mama. Talagang makalaglag-panga raw ang kagwapihan. Sa dating at awra pa lang, alam mo nang artistahin. Bago umuwi, pinilit daw ni Mama si Auntie Jocelyn, na samahan siyang magpakuha ng larawan kay Boyet. Mukhang positive ang alibi ni Mama. Walang malisya ang larawan.

Isasara ko na sana ang kaso. Ang kaso, naalala kong binanggit ni Auntie Imelda si Auntie Jocelyn na siyang sumama at kumuha ng litrato. Nasa kolehiyo pa lamang, magbespren na si Mama at Auntie Jo. Si Mama ang naging tulay ng kuya niyang si Uncle Ed para maligawan si Auntie Jo. At kahit magboypren pa lang sila ni Uncle Ed, itinuring na agad siyang pamilya at isinasama na rin sa mga pagtitipon katulad ng nasa larawan. Sinamantala ko na ang pagiging magkalapit namin ng bahay nina Auntie Jo. Mayroon kasi silang karinderya malapit sa USTe. Marahil mas may alam siya dahil naroon siya mismo sa pinangyarihan ng krimen, este ng kodakan.

Hinintay ko munang humupa ang bugso ng mga Tomasinong kumakain sa kanilang dinarayong resto. Bandang alas-dos na rin nang lapitan ako ni Auntie Jo. Hindi ko muna pinahalata ang tunay kong sadya. Kinumusta ko muna siya tungkol sa takbo ng negosyo at sa pinaplanong pagtakbo ni Uncle Ed sa parating na halalang pambarangay. Nang matapos ang mahaba-habang tsikahan, pasimple ko nang inilabas ang larawan.

Tinanong ko siya kung ano ang tunay na istorya sa likod nito. Kinumpira niya ang mga naunang sinabi ni Auntie Imelda. Totoong kuha 'yon sa kaarawan ng kliyenteng doktor nina Lolo. Totoo rin daw na pinilit siya ni Mama na samahang magpakuha ng larawan sa aktor. Pero may sekreto raw ang gabing 'yon na tanging sila lamang ni Mama ang nakakaalam.

Ito raw ang unang pagkakataon na may pagsasabihan siya sa totoong nangyari sa piging. Bigla akong napalunok. Pagkatapos daw ng kodakan, lumapit si Boyet kay Mama. Tinanong daw ng aktor ang pangalan ni Mama. Sinabi raw ng aktor na masaya siyang makilala si Mama at nagpahaging na sana'y masundan pa ang kanilang naging pagtatagpo. Nagpaalam daw si Boyet na abot-tainga ang ngiti. Sumimpleng lingon pa raw para muling masilayan si Mama. Ramdam daw niya ang pagkakilig ng aktor. Halata ang pamumula. Sigurado raw siyang na-love at first kodakan si Boyet kay Mama.

Aliw na aliw ako sa kuwento ni Auntie Jo na parang rumorolyo sa isip ko ang mga eksena. Lumakas lalo ang kutob ko na baka si Boyet nga ang tunay kong Ama. Nahaluan ng kaba ang kilig ko habang nakikinig kay Auntie Jo. Baka siya na ang susing magbubukas ng katotohanan sa aking pagkatao. Kumakabog ang dibdib kong inabangan ang mga sumunod niyang pagbabahagi.

“Pero alam mo, sayang din sila ng Mama mo. Iyon na rin kasi ang huli nilang pagkikita,” malungkot na pagbabahagi ni Auntie Jo.

Parang bumagsak ang katawan ko. Nawala ang kilig, nawala rin ang kaba. Napalitan ng panghihina. Maging siya ay nanghihinayang na hindi natuloy ang pagtitinginan nina Mama at ng aktor. Wala raw naganap na palitan ng detalye o kung anoman. Siguro nakalimutan na raw ni Boyet kuhanin dahil nga caught up in the moment sila ng mga sandalling'yon. Pero kung may FB Messenger o Viber lang daw sana noon, baka sakaling natuloy pa ang kanilang love story. Kaso hanggang doon lang daw talaga ang naging istorya ng ChrisElna (Christopher-Elena) love team.

Pagkatapos daw ng piging, lalong namayagpag ang showbiz career ni Boyet. Samantalang si Mama, nakilala naman si Papa. Nagkapalagayan ng loob at kalaunan, nagpakasal din. Dalawang taon matapos ang kasal nina Mama at Papa, naging laman naman ng balita ang pag-iisang dibdib nina Boyet at Superstar Nora Aunor. Nalungkot daw si mama nang malaman ito. Mula noon, panay mga pelikula na raw ni Vilma Santos ang tinangkilik ni Mama. Naging certified Vilmanian. At sa tuwing nababanggit sa usapan si

Ate Guy, nagiging iritable si Mama. Walang-wala raw ang aktres sa husay ni Ate V. Ngayon alam ko na kung bakit gustong-gusto ko ang mga pelikula ni Ate V, lalo na ang *Anak* (2010). Mukhang napalaki ako sa doktrina ng Vilmanians.

Mali ang palagay ko. Hindi pinagtaksilan ni Mama si Papa. At lalong hindi si Boyet ang tunay kong ama. Isinara ko ang kaso nang mabigat ang kalooban. Aaminin ko, nalungkot ako kahit alam ko namang suntok sa buwan ang lahat ng mga hinalang'to. Siguro gaya sa pelikula, umasa ako na baka ito na ang major plot twist sa buhay ko. Marahil isa itong ilusyon na bunga na rin ng aking desperasyong masagot ang tanong na patuloy na gumugulo sa aking pagkatao – bakit hindi ako nagawang tanggapin ni Papa bilang anak?

# IN GAME

Gerome Nicolas dela Peña

1.

Isang mainit na hapon ng 2010, bumungad sa akin ang pamilyar na ngiti ni Christine. Kaklase ko siya noon pang first year high school at isa sa mga agad kong naging kaibigan, hindi naman kasi siya suplada at talagang open sa pakikipag-usap sa iba.

“Maglalaro na naman kayo, ano?”

Ngumisi lang ako (na para bang sinasabing ano ka ba ‘tine, may bago pa ba roon?) at ngumuso ng malaking RC Cola at pan de coco. Kumuha siya ng dalawang plastic ng soft drinks at iniabot sa amin ng isa ko pang kaklase. Isinunod ang apat na piraso ng paborito naming tinapay at iniabot ko naman sa kaniya ang dalawang lukot na Manuel Quezon. Normal na tagpo ito tuwing uwian, malapit lang kasi ang bakery ng kanilang pamilya sa aming paaralan. Stopover kung бага, bago simulan ang araw-araw naming kinapapanabikang ritwal—ang maglaro ng DotA.

Taong 2005 pa lang ay sikat na sa amin ang larong ito. Ang DotA o ang pinaikling Defense of the Ancients. Isa itong multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) ng larong Warcraft III: Frozen Throne na hindi lang bumago sa aming routine, kundi maging sa aming mga buhay na rin. Kung dati’y laging bukambibig sa bawat umpukan ng mga lalaki sa klase ang tungkol sa walang katapusang naratibo ng wrestling, Flame of Recca, Dragon Ball Z, Slam Dunk, Beyblade, at iba pa, ngayon, nagniningning ang mata ng sinomang nagkukuwento’t kinukuwentuhan tungkol sa kaniyang bagong hero (character na ginagamit sa game); bagong labas na item; bagong update na map; at higit sa lahat, bagong computer shop. Sa ilang pananaliksik, sinasabing kasabay na umiral ng larong ito ang mga larong sumikat sa gaming world gaya ng Counter Strike, RAN Online, Ragnarok Online, O2Jam, Cabal, Freestyle, StarCraft, Special Force, Crossfire, at marami pang iba. Depende na marahil sa trip ng mga kaklase namin kung ano ang lalaruin; wala namang lantarang discrimination sa pipiliing laro, pero iba pa rin kapag

DotA player ka. Prestige at bragging rights lalo na ng mga naunang naglaro at humusay rito.

Itinuturing naming isang sagradong templo ang mga computer shop, lalo na iyong may mga aircon, hindi basát mabaho ang mga headset, at most especially, may tindang sitsirya, ice candy, drinks. Subalit ang pinakamatindi sa lahat, kapag may option para maka-order ng pancit canton. Humahalo ang amoy ng chili-mansi flavored pancit canton sa malamig na hangin na talaga namang pansamantalang pumapawi (o higit pang nagpapasidhi) ng gutom ng lahat. Bonus na lang kung maganda at sexy pa ang bantay, o kung lalaki nama'y basta tropa namin at naire-reserve kami ng upuan tuwing uwian. Ang laging problema, kakapusan ng baon. Siguro, masasabi kong marami sa amin noon ay hindi rin naman kalakihan ang baon (o madalas ay kapos pa nga). Sa Manggahan High School na pinaliligiran ng kaliwa't kanang nagtitinda ng pagkain, malaking challenge ang magtipid; dagdag pa ang katotohanang marami sa amin, bahagi ng pamilyang maituturing na middle, lower-middle class, o mas mababa pa ang puwesto sa social triangle. Mabigat na pasanin din ang sandamakmak na bayarin sa groupings, presentations, at projects. Sobrang hassle, langya. Nakakasira ng pagdo-DotA. Kaya kani-kaniyang diskarte ang mga kaibigan ko para makakuha ng pondong panlaro, pamusta, o pambakas kapag may mga dumarayo sa amin upang labanan ang malalakas naming players. Iyong iba, nagsusugal na sa klase pa lang. Mula first hanggang last subject, walang pinalalampas na oras at pagkakataon. Digits, baraha, cara y cruz, at kahit na anong puwedeng pagsugalan at pagpustahan: magbe-break na ba ang mga kaklase naming parang mga ahas kung maglingkisan sa room, bakla ba si ganito, tomboy ba si ganiyan, anong kulay ng panty ng teacher sa next subject, kaninong kulangot ang nakadikit sa desk, sino ang magiging repeater next school year, etc. May ilan pa ngang patagong nagbebenta ng marijuana sa loob. Iyon ang di ko talaga masikmura kahit anong pilit sa akin. Di ako magpapakaipokrito. Totoong nakaka-tempt ang easy money. Walang kahirap-hirap eh. Pero hindi pa rin. Hindi dahil sa Katoliko ako, o takot akong ma-guidance at malaman ng magulang ko. Kahit paano, alam ko ang tama at mali. Proud akong sabihing kahit matindi ang pangangailangan ko para makapaglaro, 'di iyon sumagi sa isip ko kahit kailan.

Ang diskarte ko, SOP na dumaan muna kami kina Christine bago magpunta ng Cyber Café—ang sarili naming bersiyon ng Taj Mahal. Mahal ang mga pagkain sa shop at ang talagang nakakaubos ng pera ay ang creamy chocolate ice candy nila. Hanggang ngayon ay hinahanap pa rin ng dila ko.

Tres noong una pero naging limang piso noong naging best-seller. Parang may gayumang hatid ito sa aming lahat. Nakalagay ang ref sa likod ng server kung saan nagbabantay ang staff ng shop at tanaw na tanaw ang kumpol ng choco ice candy sa freezer. Patok na patok ito lalo na kapag bukod sa mainit na ang panahon ay mainit pa ang labanan, ang sigawan, ang trash-talk-an. Ang paisa-isang bili, kung hindi mababantayan, ay uubos sa inipon mong perang nakatabi sana pambayad ng PC. Sa bakery nina Christine, sa isip ko noo'y mapupunan ng tamis at bigat ng pan de coco ang gutom na tiniis mula pa noong recess. Lalo na kapag napagkakasunduan naming huwag na lang muna kumain at daanin na lang sa music jamming ang 20 minute-break. Kung magagawa ito'y kakayaning makapaglaro kahit hanggang tatlong oras. O, contingency plan ang mangutang sa kaklase naming bobo maglaro pero may pera kapag kinapos ang oras at mabibitin ang game; sa kondisyong isasali namin siya kahit pa neutral creep level lang siya—in short, pabigat. Conditional freeloader. Apat na oras kung makakapag-extend. Sapat na ito para di masyadong mapagalitan pag-uwi ng bahay; palusot.com ang walang katapusang may groupings kami eh, bad trip na teacher, ang dami-daming pinagagawa. Instant tahimik na ang parents. Kumain ka na ryan. May ulam na sa mesa.

2.

2014. 2<sup>nd</sup> year college na ako nang mabalitaan kong brutal na pinatay ang isang labing-isang taong gulang na bata matapos itong pagsasaksakin ng labing-anim na taong gulang na kaibigan. Sa Malolos, Bulacan ang lugar. Ayon sa nasabing ulat, 37 saksak sa iba't ibang bahagi ng katawan at basag pa ang likod ng bungo ng biktima na isang grade 5 student. Balisong ang murder weapon. Away-DotA ang puno't dulo.

Sukang-suka rin ako at halos hindi makakain nang maayos ng isang araw matapos mapanood ang actual video ng isang batang ginilitan sa leeg ng kapwa-bata gamit ang cutter sa loob mismo ng computer shop. May edited version pa ito na may tunog ng “first blood”—terminong maririnig sa DotA kapag mayroon nang nakapatay ng kalabang hero sa simulang bahagi ng laro.

Naranasan ko na rin ang makipag-away nang dahil sa game na ito. Madalas, bantaan. Takutan, abangan sa labas. Sumbungan sa tropa. Sino ba naman kasing hindi mapipikon kapag dinamay na ang magulang mo, ang trabaho ng mga ito, ang anomang personal na detalye ng pamumuhay mo

na maaaring maipukol sa iyo, para lang mabiso ka sa paglalaro. Kaya naman, mayroong mga nagpapasyang ilabas na lang sa pisikal na mundo ang hindi kayang tapusin sa birtwal. Suntukan habang nakapalibot ang mga kaibigan. May timer pa nga minsan. Basta ang golden rule, walang makikialam. At totoo, kahit basag na ang mukha't duguan na ang kaibigan, hangga't hindi nagtataas ng puting bandila para sa sarili, tuloy ang bakbakan. Ang hinding-hindi pumasok sa isip ko, ang pumatay. Hindi lingid sa kaalaman kong may mga taong kayang pumatay sa ngalan ng kanilang pinaniniwalaan; ideolohiyang higit na mabigat kaysa sariling buhay. O sa kahit anoman. Ayon nga sa Amerikanong manunulat na si Simone Elkeles, "Whether it's right or wrong, fight for what you believe in."

Mahalaga sa akin ang DotA. Hindi ko kayang mabuhay nang wala ito. Dumadaloy sa dugo ko ang anomang elementong may kinalaman dito: ang mga hero, items, ang updated na mapa. Ang skills, ang clash, ang eksena bago mabasag ang last tower ng kalaban. Hindi lang "saya," bagkus ay "ligaya" ang kahulugan sa akin ng ilang taóng naging bahagi ito ng aking pag-iral. Pero hindi ko kayang pumatay. Hinding-hindi ko kayang dungisan ang kamay ko. Mahalaga sa akin ang DotA pero hindi ko kayang kumitil ng buhay ng sinoman para lang dito. Pero ibang usapan kapag mahal ko sa buhay, kapag pamilya ko na. Lalo na kapag inaragabyado sila. Doon, kahit saang sulok pa ng mundo magtago ang maysala, hahanapin at hahanapin ko siya.

3.

Madalas akong Tuesday group kapag listahan ng cleaners ang pinag-uusapan. Dahil "D" ang simula ng apelyido ko at Monday ang lahat ng nagsisimula sa ABC, default na ring nailalagay ako sa row 2. Astig na astig sa mga mata ko ang mga teacher na hindi sumusunod sa alphabetical order formula, lalo na sa pag-aayos ng seating arrangement. Ang problema, 90% ata ng mga teacher sa high school na pinasukan ko ay wala sa bokabularyo ang salitang ito. Marami sa kanila ang pumapasok lang para magpa-"copy this," sumita ng mga may mahahabang buhok, naka-baston pants, at nakabukas ang butones ng mga polo. Iyong iba naman, entrep o business management ata ang unang kurso pero kalauna'y bumagsak sa education—tinda nang tinda ng kung ano-ano at maaapektuhan ang grado mo kung di ka marunong sumakay. Asahan ding nasa top ten ang anak ng sinomang PTA officer na nagdo-donate ng electric fan, nagpapaayos ng cabinet, bumibili ng bra at

underwear kay mam, etc. Ang natitirang 10% ng gurong hindi ko nabanggit sa itaas, nananatiling kaibigan at iniidolo ko hanggang ngayon.

Hindi ko malilimutan na nailagay ako sa likod ng isa sa mga pinakaastig kong kaklase, si DJ. “D” rin kasi ang apelyido niya. Bukod sa matalino siya at gusto siya ng halos lahat ng crush naming babae sa room, may taste siya sa music. Kahit nga rin si Christine na buong akala ko’y walang paki sa mga lalaki ay napapansin kong iba ang pakikitungo sa kaniya. Marunong siyang maggitara at kumanta. ‘Di ko masasabing magaling na magaling pero nadadala niya. Suwabeng-suwabe. Naalala kong bigla si Alexandria, kaklase naming may gusto sa kaniya. Maputi siya at may hitsura, pero mataba. Kinaibigan pa ako para lang magtanong nang magtanong tungkol kay DJ, sa mga hilig niya, sa mga ayaw niya. Ang ‘di ko masabi, nakita ko si DJ na may kasamang chick mula sa kabilang section. Maganda at campus crush. Higit sa lahat, sexy. Napipisil pa ngang sumali sa Ms. Manggahan.

Doon ako nagkaroon ng kakaibang hilig (dahil sa impluwensiya niya) sa pakikinig ng mga kanta ng Paramore, Secondhand Serenade, Saosin, My Chemical Romance, Typecast, Silverstein, Escape the Fate, Falling in Reverse, at iba pang emo, alternative rock, hardcore, at post-hardcore music. Lintik din ang hilig niya sa Math, na noong nasa grade 4 pa lang ako ay itinuring ko nang waterloo, personal kryptonite; at ang kagustuhan kong aralin ito ay tulad ng biniling lampara ni Simoun para sa kasal ni Juanito Pelaez at Paulita Gomez.

Top player din siya sa DotA sa buong Manggahan High School. Nananalò sila sa mga DotA competitions (formal contest man o iyong mga pustahan lang kung saan). Aminado akong ‘di ako naging lubhang magaling sa larong ito. Support lang ang madalas kong role: healer, tagabili ng wards, taga-stun, taga-set ng clash, tagasalo ng damage—kung бага, ang tungkulin lang ay alalayan ang “hitter” namin—ang captain o ang pinakamalakas sa team—para mapatay ang mga kalabang hero, makalusot sa kanilang depensa, at matapos ang game. Bagay itong matagal na panahon bago ko lubusang natanggap. ‘Di ko makakalimutan ang sobrang pag-iyak ko noong mga nasa pito o walong taong gulang ako nang ‘di ako pinaglaro ng impaktang babaeng bantay sa Armscade, ang unang computer shop sa lugar namin, nang minsang isinama ako ng kuya ko para sana makapaglaro kami ng Counter Strike. Bata pa raw ako at baka masira ko ang pc. Para akong namatayan. Umuwi akong lulugo-lugo, basang-basa ang pisngi at tumutulo ang uhog. Sa murang isip



ko noon, makakabalik din ako kapag marami na talaga kaming dalang pera, tatal, iyon lang din naman talaga ang gusto ninyo. Mga hangal.

Lagi kaming nanonood sa bawat niyang laro; binabantayan ang husay niya sa creepings (o pagpapapera, mahalagang bagay kasi ito para makabili ng items at lumakas ang hero), pagtakas at pagpatay sa mga kalaban. Micro-gaming in a total different level. Utakan ang totoong labanan. Kakaibang team player si DJ. Magaling siya sa command at sa pagpapalakas ng loob ng mga kakampi, lalo na kapag may mga kalaban silang dayo sa Cyber Café. Sa salita ng basketball legend na si Michael Jordan, “Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships.” “Di kami nag-aalangan na ipusta kahit pa ang baon namin hanggang susunod na linggo; maging ang pambili at pang-ambag namin sa projects, magalit man ang mga kagrupong babae at ang leader namin. Magsumbong na sila sa teacher. Hindi lang dahil sa mahusay siya, o sure ball ang panalo (dahil wala namang ganoon), kundi dahil masaya kaming makitang nag-e-enjoy siya sa game; nakakapanatag ng loob kapag nakita mong di mainitin ang ulo ng pinupustahan mo. Ibig sabihin, malaki ang chance nilang manalo. Iba ang angas ng player kapag kalmado. May bahagi ng puso namin noon na kung kami ang nasa kalagayan nila, na kung minsan ay libo-libo na ang “raise” o pusta, matataranta kami nang husto. Mape-pressure at mawawala sa laro. Pero iba si DJ, epitome siya ng tunay na top player. Sabi nga ng marami, imba (pinaikling bersiyon ng salitang “imbalance”) talaga siya. Hindi kayang hulaan ang kaniyang susunod na in game performance. Kahit mahinang hero ay kaya niyang ipanalo.

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“Tang ina mo, pangit ng mukha mo, mukha kang pugitang ulupong na di marunong magsepilyo! Umuwi ka na sa inyo at mas boring ka pa sa mga taong-kumbento,” sabi ni DJ sa akin. Nakabibingi ang hiyawan ng mga estudyante sa paligid namin. Ang ingay. Ang palakpakan. Ang bigat-bigat ng dibdib ko dahil hindi ko inaasahang sa kaniya pa, sa lahat ng mga tao sa buong paaralan, magmumula ang mga salitang iyon.

After ng recess, next na ang pinaka-boring na subject, Math. Naghahanap na ako noon ng puwesto kung saan puwedeng makatulog

nang hindi napapansin ng teacher. Gaya nang araw-araw niyang seremonya, nagsimula na siyang magsulat ng kung ano-anong numero sa pisara, nagbanggit sa hangin ng mga kinabisang formula, nagsabi ng paulit-ulit na “are you still listening, class?” habang kinakausap ang sarili sa board nang biglang may tumawag sa akin mula sa labas. Pabulong pero sapat para marinig ko ang tinig. Biglang bumalik sa katawan ko ang kaluluwang noo’y nagsisimula nang lumipad tungo sa computer shop. Nakasilip ang mata mula sa pinakababang bahagi ng lumang jalousie window ng aming classroom. Si Airalyn pala. Dati naming class president at sergeant-at-arms. Nasa section 5 na kasi ako naiwan naman sila sa section 3. Namatay ang Lolo Bert at Tito Arthur ko nang isang linggo lang ang pagitan, dahilan upang bumagsak ang moral kong ipagpatuloy pa ang pag-aaral. Nasa third grading period na noon at kung babawi naman ako, para saan pa? Pero dahil may sapat at excused namang dahilan, umabot nang halos isang buwan ang absent ko. ‘Di ko na lang binigyan pa ng bigat at hinayaan ko na lang na mahulog ang section at rank ko. Aral-aral pa nang mabuti, mamamatay rin naman tayong lahat. Letse. Pero sabi nga ni Chuck Palahniuk, “We all die. The goal isn’t to live forever; the goal is to create something that will.” Kailangang may gawin ako.

Kaya naman nang pumunta si Aira sa klase at may dalang mga barya (ibibigay raw niya sa akin ang ambagan nilang magkakaklase kung pupunta raw ako sa room nila) ay ‘di na ako nagdalawang-isip. Dahan-dahan akong umeskapo palabas at sumama sa kaniya.

Hiyang-hiya ako at di ko malaman ang gagawin matapos marinig ang mga salitang iyon. Siya kasi ang nanalo sa coin toss kaya siya rin ang may bola kung sino ang mauuna. Sumisibol na noon ang kausuhan ng Fliptop, isang nagsisimulang Rap Battle League sa Pilipinas. Pangunahin nitong isinusulong ang espasyo ng hip hop sa bansa, at masasabing lubos na impluwensiyado ng mga original rap battle league sa Kanluran gaya ng Grind Time ng United States, King of the Dot ng Canada, at Don’t Flop ng United Kingdom. Kulturang popular at, as usual, bagsakan tayo ng surplus ng makakapangyarihang bansa, literal na produkto man o kultura. Sikat na sikat ang mga emcee na gaya nina Dello, Loonie, Apekz, Flict G, Shehyee, Target, BLKD, Bassilyo, Batas, at iba pa. Noong oras na iyon, habang lubos na kabado at nagtsi-cheer sa aming dalawa (although siyempre mas lamang ang sigaw kay DJ dahil sa kaniyang home-court advantage) ang mga tao, nakita kong ngumiti sa akin si Airalyn, itinaas ang bahagyang nakakuyom na palad para sabihing naroon ang premyo ko. Tila nabasa ko sa ngiti niyang

kaya ko ito, since lumalaban na rin naman ako sa iba pang rapper sa school; o siguro, dahil likas lang din ang hilig ko sa salita't natural nang makapal ang mukha ko. Lumakas ang loob ko kaya unti-unting pumasok sa isip kong style ni Batas ng Illustrado at Kampo Teroritmo ang ginagaya at ginagawa niya. Mistulang may demonyong bumulong sa aking kung gusto niya ng murahan, bastusan, damayan, personalan, 'di ko siya dapat atrasan. 'Di ko siya dapat urungan. 'Di ako puwedeng magpa-repress. I shall win at the odds. Tatal siya ang unang bumanat at nag-set sa mood ng crowd na acceptable ang ganitong atmosphere, 'di ako dapat na mag-hold back, kahit pa magkaibigan kami at mataas ang tingin ko sa kaniya bilang top player.

Bumuwelo ako, huminga nang malalim, at pinaulanan ko siya ng panlalait mula sa laki ng tenga niya, sungki-sungki at naninilaw niyang ngipin, ang mga pisngi niyang noon ay pinagkukutaan na ng mga tigyawat, at ang buhok niyang parang steel wool sa tigas. Wala akong sinayang na kahit na isang segundo. Binanggit ko ito na akala mo'y perpekto ang pagkakahulma at pagkakayari sa akin sa pugon. 'Di pa ako nakuntento, sinabihan ko na pokpok ang mga nagkakagusto sa kaniya, na malakas nga siyang mag-DotA pero ang baho naman ng hininga niya. Lahat ng salitang maaaring magpatinag sa kaniya upang maapektuhan ang performance niya at ako ang manaig sa rap battle na iyon. Pang-ilang oras ding rent ng pc sa Cyber ang laman ng palad ni Aira.

Bago magtapos ang unang round, ramdam ko na ang uneasiness sa crowd. Gumagapang sa tenga ko, parang nagmumula sa likod tungong batok. Halo-halo na ang naririnig ko. May mga natutuwa pero alam ko ring may ilang hindi na. Kahit ako'y nagsisimula na ring mag-alangan. Alinlangang bibihira ko noon maranasan, pero kung dumarating, sapat para panginigin ang aking kalamnan. Bigla'y tila hinihigop ako ng kumunoy. Ang hinding-hindi ko malilimutan ay nang mahulog sa dila ko ang mga katagang, "Umuwi ka na sa nanay mo!" Umuwi. Ka. Na. Sa. Nanay. Mo. Isang linya. Isang linya lang. Anim na salita. Linyang panapos bago sabihin ng tumayong Anygma o referee sa aming time na ako; na tapos na ang 1 minutong nakalaan sa akin; na si DJ na ang susunod na babanat; na oras na niya.

Nagulat ako nang mapansin kong parang may kung anong kumislap sa mga mata niya. Napapikit at napayuko. Bahagya akong naguluhan. Natahimik din ang buong room, nakabibinging katihimikan. Biglang may nahulog na mga balahibong puti. Nagniningning. Lahat natigilan, kahit pa

iyong mga 'di naman nanonood sa laban at gumagawa lang ng assignment para sa susunod na klase. Lahat napatingin sa akin. Para akong binuhusan nang malamig na tubig nang maalala ko sa mukha ng mga kaklase ko, kahit pa di na sila magsalita, ang katotohanan.

Patay na ang nanay ni DJ. Dalawang linggo lang pa lang ang nakararaan. Biglaang ginusto kong maglaho na lamang na parang bula.

4.

Ayon kay Dr. Alistair Brown ng Durham University, “Mini-mimic ng mga video game ang buhay: may mga bagay na nangyayaring hindi inaasahan, may mga hamon, nakagagawa tayo ng kamalian. Kaalinsabay nito, ang mga pagkakamaling ito at maging ang mga landas pabalik ay mas nakaaaliw sa konteksto ng isang laro dahil batid nating maaaring tumungo ang mga ito sa iba pang lugar, mula rito’y natututo tayo at naitatama ang mga maling iyon, dahan-daha’y makararating tayo sa dulo na naghihintay sa atin, bagay na nai-program ng grand designer.”

Gaya ng pangako ko sa sarili, nakabalik kami sa Armscade. Malaking oras ng kabataan ko ang iginugol ko roon. Nagkaroon kami ng iba pang mga kakilala. Snowball effect. Nagiging kaibigan ang kaibigan ng mga kaibigan at nakagaanan ng loob ang sinomang makalaro; hanggang sa dumayo na rin kami sa iba pang computer shop labas sa Manggahan. Nakarating kami sa Cainta, sa Rosario, sa Libis, sa Marikina, at sa kung saanman kami dalhin ng aming mga paa sa ngalan ng natagpuan naming mumunting kasiyahan. Gabi man o madaling araw na umuwi. Sa kainitan ng hapon. O sa mga umagang pupunas-punas pa ng mata. Kung kailanman magkaayaan. May panibagong dahilan para magpa-good shot, maghugas ng plato, maglinis, maglaba. Para sa huli, may kaunting lambing kung puwedeng maglaro, kahit saglit lang. Mga bata lang kaming gustong hanapin ang sarili. Mga batang gustong tanggapin ng iba, gustong maranasang maging masaya. Maging maligaya. “Youth is happy because it has the capacity to see beauty. Anyone who keeps the ability to see beauty never grows old,” sabi ni Franz Kafka. At maaaring kahit pa higit isang dekada na ang nakalipas mula nang maranasan ko ang mga bagay na iyon, lagi’t laging kay sarap nitong sariwain. Pitak ng nakaraang bahagi ng kabuuan. Pinakamaikli subalit pinakamahabang bahagi rin ng buhay bilang batang ipinanganak sa panahong ang pinakamayamang tao sa mundo

ay isang software developer. Ang ingay ng computer shop, ang lagutok ng gigil na gigil na mga daliri sa keyboard at mouse. Ang playlist ng server na dumadagundong sa speaker. Ang kaba sa dibdib sa kasagsagan ng laban, ang gutom na pinupunan ng kung anomang pagkain ang masumpungan sa loob ng shop o sa lansangan, ang pakiramdam ng panalo, o ang madalas na pagkatalo. Lahat ng ito ay buhay; katotohanang minsan sa paglalakbay ko'y sinunod ko hindi lang ang kumpas ng teenage hormones, bagkus ang kagustuhan kong magkaroon ng mga kakilala, ng mga tunay na karamay, ng mga mabubuting kaibigan. Ng tulad kong batang hindi malay sa mga maaaring maganap sa hinaharap. Ang tanging mahalaga ay ang kasalukuyan, ang saglit, ang sandali.

Dahil ang kuya ko ang pinakaunang nakapag-DotA sa aming magpipinsan, siya rin ang unang nakagamay sa controls. Sa pagbuo ng mga gamit, sa paggamit ng mga skill. Sa pag-test sa mga bagong labas na hero, sa bug ng mga bagong mapa, sa pagkakaroon ng hotkeys, at sa lahat ng mga pasikot-sikot nito. Kay tagal na panahon ko siyang inidolo, at subconsciously ay hinangad na manalo sa kaniya. Ngayong inaalala ko ito'y napagbaliktanawan ko ang ilang beses kong pangangako sa nanay ko (habang naglulupasay at nagmamakaawa) na titigil na akong mag-DotA, basta matalo ko lang si kuya. Promise, cross my heart. Walang bawian. Basta matalo ko lang siya. May ibang pakiramdam kasi kapag nalalaman mong humuhusay ka nang maglaro; na habang nag-a-update ang game ay nakauusad ka sa normal mong laro; na may naipapanalo ka nang laban. Na bumibilis ka nang gumalaw, mag-isip. Subalit isang araw, bigla na lang nag-iba ang lahat.

Magkasama kaming mga lalaking magpipinsan sa kuwarta sa second floor ng bahay. Kuwentuhan, tugtugan, kulitan, asaran. Nang nagbibinata na kami'y pinili na rin ng aming mga magulang na hayaan kaming magsama-sama. Kunwari sa una'y pa-hard to get pa kami, para naman 'di masyadong halatang gustong-gusto namin ang ideyang ito; since maaaring makatakas kami sa madaling araw at makapaglaro sa bagong tayong computer shop sa lugar namin. Ang tulo-laway rito, sa tabi mismo ng bahay namin. Si Brandon ang may-ari. Kaibigan namin at kababata.

Nagse-set ng alarm si kuya, kung minsan ay alas-dose ng gabi, o ala-una ng madaling araw. Dumedepende rin kung nalalaman na naming tulog na ang mga magulang namin, o kung sinomang maaaring makapagsumbong at makabisô sa aming mga plano. Dahan-dahan niya kaming gigisingin mula sa pagkakaidlip (idlip lang dahil na-process na sa utak ang paggising dahil nga

planado na ang paglalaro) at para kaming mga akyat-bahay sa sariling mga tahanan sa hina ng aming mga yabag; maging sa hinay-hinay na pagbubukas at pagsasara ng pinto.

Kinabukasan, daig pa namin ang mga panda sa bigat ng aming eye bags. Papasok pa kami sa Manggahan nang alas-sais ng umaga, kami ng pinsan kong si Josh, at si kuya naman ay mamamalengke sa Marikina para sa supplies namin sa aming food business. Ganoon madalas ang routine, walang nababago. Nilulunod namin ang mga sarili sa paglalaro, pagsisigawan kung sino ang mananalo, at minsan pa'y ang natitirang oras ng madaling araw para pagkuwentuhan ang mga nangyayari. Pagplanuhan ang mga gagawin sa susunod.

Mayroong girlfriend si kuya, si Ate Annabelle. Maganda, matangkad, singkit, morena, lagpas-balikat na buhok at may napakagandang mga ngiti. Bagay na bagay sa kaniya ang dimples na tulad ng kay Mikee Cojuangco na kusang lumalabas kapag nahihiya sa iniaalok naming pagkain o sa tuwing binibiro namin si kuya sa kaniyang harapan. 'Di masyadong malalim pero pansin pa rin. High school pa lang sila ay sila na ni kuya. Dalawang taon ang agwat nila. Kilalang-kilala na sila sa kani-kaniyang pamilya at kahit bata pa ako noo'y iniisip kong mayroong mga bagay na sila lang ang nagkakaunawaan. Kitang-kita ko iyon sa kanilang mga mata.

May isang gabi noon, sa aming usual routine ng kuwentuhan matapos maglaro, biglang naging seryoso ang usapan. Hininaan ni kuya ang radyo, sakto pa't Barangay Love Songs ang segment sa FM radio station na madalas naming pakinggan. Senti at love songs na kadalasan ay 90s ang pinatutugtog. May bahagi rin ng BLS na bukod sa song request ay magpapadala ng mensahe ang avid listeners, sa DJ, at maging ang mga bagay na hindi nila masabi sa kanilang mga mahal o sekretong minamahal.

'Di ako sanay lalo pa't ang kuya ko ang isa sa mga pinakamasayahing taong nakilala ko. Madalas siyang magbiro, 'di nagseseryoso at laging gustong positive atmosphere ang pumapalibot sa aming lahat, lalo na kapag naglalaro kami. Madalas siyang mang-asar, oo't nakakapikon, pero magaan tanggapin sa dibdib kahit pa losing streak ang duluhin ng tatlo o apat na oras na laro kina Brandon. Kahit pa si Brandon na ka-batch niya ay sanay na sanay sa kaniyang mga hirit, kaya naman sinasabayan na lang niya ito. Kaya nang sabihin niyang 'di na pupunta pa si Ate Annabelle sa amin ay parang nagulo ang normal phase at process ng nerve impulse transmission sa utak ko. Ang

inisyal kong reaksiyon ay bakit. Paano na? Anong balak niyang gawin? 'Di ba niya hahabulin? Gano'n-gano'n na lang'yon?

Sa mga sumunod na gabi, tumatanggi na akong sumamang maglaro. Hindi ko alam pero 'di ko kayang sumabay sa trashtalk-an lalo pa't narinig ko ang kuwento ni kuya. Baka sa oras na magkalaban kami ay kusang umiwas ang hero ko sa character niya. Na magpapatay na lang ako sa tower nila, sa Roshan. O di na ako bumuo ng gamit. Mahirap malamang ang isa sa mga pinakamasayahing tao sa buong mundo ay nawala sa isang iglap. Naglalaro kami gaya ng dati, ngumingiti at nang-aasar pa rin siya gaya ng dati, nag-a-alarm at ginigising kami gaya ng dati, pero sa tagal ko na siyang nakakasama ay batid kong may mali. Na may nagbago. Na may piraso ng dati niyang sariling isinama ni Ate Annabelle sa pag-alis nito. Dinadaan na niya sa pamura-mura, pagsigaw nang mas malakas, at pagpapatawa sa kaniyang gaming act. Inililibre na niya rin kami ng PC kahit pa di na namin siya matalo; wala nang pustahan at may libre pang softdrinks at Piattos. Basta maglaro lang kami kasama niya. Kaya kahit nakadarama na ako noon ng antok, noong mga oras na iyon na magbukas siya ng puso at sarili, pinilit kong iparamdam sa kaniyang nandito ako, kami ni Josh, handang makinig sa kaniya. Maintindihan man namin nang buo o hindi. Sabi sa isang quote na nabasa ko online, "A broken heart is the worst. It's like having broken ribs. Nobody can see it but the pain is unbearable every time you breathe."

Ang lamig ng simoy ng hangin noong mga oras na iyon, parang nakikisama sa kuya. Tahimik lang kaming nakikinig sa mga kanta ng Carpenters, Air Supply, 98 Degrees. Maging ng mga walang kamatayang awitin ng N\* Sync, Backstreet Boys, Savage Garden, Aerosmith; nina Bryan Adams, Leann Rimes, Michael Bolton, at ang Grow Old with You ni Adam Sandler na nagsasabing, "Oh, I could be the man who grows old with you. I wanna grow old with you." Dama sa katahimikan niya ang nosyon ng struggle niya sa pagharap sa katotohanan. Ang espasyo ng pag-amin kahit pa maaaring sa kawalan namin ng karanasan noo'y di pa namin magawang magpayo sa kaniya, o mapagaan man lang ang loob niya. May detalye ng tampo, pag-aaway, pagkapit, pag-ibig. Noong nagse-celebrate sila ng monthsary at anniversary sa bahay ay nangarap din akong makatagpo ng isang gaya ni Ate Annabelle, taong tatanggap sa akin sa kung sino at ano ako. Sa lahat ng aking kapintasan, kahinaan, at kakulangan. Makakasama ko sa hirap at ginhawa na laging ipinangangalandakang aral sa mga pelikulang tungkol sa pag-ibig. Pero noong mga oras ding iyon, nabuksan ang isip kong maaaring isang malaong

pantasya lamang ang lahat; na hindi kailanman kayang sukatin sa tagal ng pagsasama ang katuparan ng pagmamahal; na maaaring magwakas sa isang iglap ang anomang ipinundar. Sa pag-ibig, sumusugal tayo kahit pa sabihing marami na tayong karanasan, nakatagpo ng kung sino-sino, o nakarinig ng maraming-maraming kuwento ng pagdating at pag-alis. Sa pahayag ni Martina Boone, “Love doesn’t come with an on-off switch. It’s made of too many threads of memory and hope and heartache that weave themselves into the very core of who you are.” Third party? Kawalan ng atensiyon? Pera? Unwillingness na makipag-usap? Pride? ‘Di ko alam kung ano sa mga ito ang dahilan ni ate, o kung may iba pang pinag-ugatan. ‘Di ko na rin sinubukan pang tanungin. Pinto itong ‘di ko na pinangahasang pasukin, kahit pa nakalapag lang sa paanan ko ang susi. Ang tanging alam ko lang ay sobrang salimuot ng pag-ibig. Nakakatakot. Nakakabalisa. Nakapangangamba. Lubhang komplikado. Higit, ng mga matatanda. Bakit ba kasi kailangang magtagpo sa simula kung sa huli’y maghihiwalay rin pala?

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Nakaharap ako sa pc ko ngayon, habang tinitingnan ang icon ng Warcraft III: Frozen Throne na ni-download ng kapatid ko. Labing-apat na taon ang nakalipas mula nang unang beses kong buksan ang larong nagturo sa akin ng maraming bagay sa sarili at sa buhay. Hanggang ngayo’y bata pa rin akong ang gusto lang ay ang maging masaya. Tanggapin. Mahalin. Maging maligaya. Tumatanda na subalit mahirap sabihing mayroon nang pinagkatandaan. Natuto nang bahagya pero inaaral pa rin ang pinakamahalagang aral ng buhay, ang makipagkapwa. Support role pa rin, ‘di na lang sa malalakas, kundi sa mga mahihina, sa mga maliliit. At gaya nang dati, nakikihamok pa rin sa mga hamon ng buhay. Nakikipaglaro pa rin sa sariling tadhana.

Launching Frozen Throne. Click. Local Area Network. Click. Create Game. Click. DotA v6.78c. Click. Start Game.



# SUPALPAL: KONTRIBUSYON SA TRADISYON NG PAGSUSULAT SA PILIPINAS

U Eliserio

Ang papel na ito ay pagmumuni-muni sa pagsusulat. Una, maglalatatag ng pilosopiyang pangwika, base sa mga gawa ng manunuring si Raniela Barbaza, na may pagkiling sa post-estruktural at post-kolonyal na teorya, na may malawakang epekto sa pagtingin niya sa bayan. Pangalawa, susuriin ang ilang libro ng pilosopiya na orihinal na isinulat, o di kaya'y salin, sa Filipino. Ang pangatlo ay kalahating manifesto, kalahating polemiko, para sa pagtatag ng tradisyon ng pagsupalpal sa pagsusulat sa Pilipinas.

## Paano Lumikha ng Bayan

Sa dalawang pag-aaral ni Raniela Barbaza (2014, 2017), makikita ang kanyang kakaibang pananaw sa wika. Nakabase sa post-kolonyal na teorya, at gayundin sa pilosopiya ng Pranses na si Jean-Luc Nancy, sinuri ni Barbaza ang orosipon ng Bicol bilang paraan ng pag-iisang bansa nang walang *homogenization*.

Binubuo pa lamang ang bansang Pilipinas sa panahong pinag-aralan ni Barbaza ang panitikan at wika ng Bicol sa kanyang *An Orosipon Kan Bikolnon: Interrupting the Philippine Nation*. Samantalang ang imahen ng bansa ay monolitiko, kaya't ang imahen ng pagpapalaganap nito ng wika ay *top-down*, kakatwa ang isinasalaysay ni Barbaza tungkol sa ating bayan, kung gagamitin ang perspektibo ng orosipon. Samantalang pinapalagay ng pagpaplanong pangwika ang mga katangian ng wika, kinukulit at pinaglalaruan ito ni Barbaza. Aniya, "a word becomes a word when it makes sense to at least two users. It is the word's intelligibility to at least two users that makes the word, a word. Otherwise, it is not a word. It is in the word then, or in language, that language users touch. ... As a site of commonality, however, language keeps itself to itself. That is to say, a word can never be owned by a single language user. To put it differently, language keeps itself precisely in the space between language users (2017, xxi). Bagaman sa

unang tingin ay para бага itong kahibangan na mas nababagay sa Kanluran, imbes na mahalagang kontribusyon sa Araling Pilipino, kapag lilimiin ay masusundan ang mga lohikal na kongklusyong inilahad ni Barbaza, mula rito sa kanyang pananaw sa wika, tungo sa kahulugan para sa bayan ng mga sinuri niyang teksto.

Sinasalungat ni Barbaza ang orisipon sa naratibo. Sa orosipon, hindi lang iisa ang nagkukwento. Laging may pagkakataong sumingit, iyon nga, mag-“interrupt.” Hindi lang ang naratibo, kung ang nililikha ng naratibo ang nakakaranas ng “interruption” (tingnan ang Barbaza 2014, 94). Pagpapaliwanag ni Barbaza: “Orosipon’s structural multiplicity and fluidity is contrary to the monologic and thus homogenizing tendencies of “narrative”” (2017, xxii; tingnan din ang 38-40). Ang kinukwento rito ay ang bansa, ang bayan. Hindi lamang problema ng Pilipinas ang tagalabas, ang banyaga. Sa loob nito’y may mga paghamon din. Paliwanag ni Barbaza: “The convulsions, which have always been present, are needless to say the speakings of new speakers. These speakings occur as interruptions of a current speaking. Interruption points, of course, to a temporal and spatial positioning within an already established current. The continuous interruption of the current of speaking, the nation, is thus a seizure of the position of speaker. To put it another way, it is a continuous claiming on the name “Filipino”” (xxv). Sa pananaw orosipon, hindi na lamang isa ang nagdodomina sa “Filipino.” Laging merong pwedeng sumingit. Samantalang ang binubuo ng pagpaplanong pangwika ay isang “estado-nasyon,” bayan ang binubuo ng orosipon, o pwede ring sabihin ang bayan ay orosipon. Paliwanag ni Barbaza, “bayan guards against the centralization of geopolitical power. Bayan, a contraction of the plural bahayag (a cluster of house), is also structurally multiple and fluid” (75). Dahil sa pananaw na ito tungkol sa kalikasan ng isang lipunan at isang bansa, nagkakaroon ng kataka-takang kongklusyon si Barbaza tungkol sa wika. Bagaman, halimbawa, nakikita niya ang lohika at gamit ng estandardisasyon, sinabi rin niya na ang pag-estandardisa ay pagsupil sa “structural fluidity and multiplicity” ng Bicol. Pagpapatuloy pa niya, “Standardization largely involves rendering the language into a structure that can be seen and held, and therefore controlled. The orosipon’s language demonstrates the author’s/authors’ and the editors’ attempt to take control of the language. The standardization of the Bikol language is the solidification in representation that has to be apparent not only in the lexicon of the language (Which is Bikolnon? Which is not?) but also, of course, in the ortography of the language. ... The Bikol language was

no longer just a means to communicate. It functioned as a representation of the Bikolnon, and therefore, an insistence of a space/place, in the national imaginary” (103).

Mas marahas ang kanyang mga susunod na kataga: “Standardization thus acts to take up space in the national imaginary even as it also removes differences and lends itself to commodification, and, thus, to the empowerment of the non-Bikolnon in the identity of capital.”

Sa kaniya namang artikulong “Wika at Identidad: Wikang Bikol bilang Lunan ng Bikolnon, 1890-1956,” idinidiin ni Barbaza ang pagsalungat niya sa monolitikong anyo ng bayan. Aniya, “Ang nangyayari katunayan sa kilos ng pagkakaisa ay walang iba kundi homojenisasyon: isang kilos na pagbura sa pagkakaiba o ng iba upang gawing kawangis ng hindi iba” (2014, 74). Syempre pa, hindi naman itinatakwil ni Barbaza ang pangangailangan sa pagkakaisa, o ang bisa ng lingua franca. Ang sinasabi niya, maaari tayong magkaroon ng bayan, ng bansa, nang hindi binubura ang indibidwal na katangian. Ang nais niyang bigyang-diin ay ang mga pagkakaiba, na may kani-kaniyang kontribusyon sa kaisahan: “nasa katangian mismo ng wika, higit lalo ang isang de facto pambansang lingua franca, na maging iba (maraming varayti/dayalek) ng bawat paggamit nito sa gitna ng pagganap nito ng tungkulin na papag-isahin ang marami” (76-77). Kakaiba itong pananaw sa wika, pero marami itong potensyal na binubuksan kung itutulak sa lohikal na kongklusyon: “Ang hamon sa atin ngayon samakatwid ay ganito: mapanatili ang komonaliti/pagkakatulad sa gitna ng pagkakaiba. Sa halip na ganap na kaisahan, ang posibilidad ay ang pagtukoy at pagpapatibay ng pagkakatulad/komonaliti na magpapanatili din naman sa pagkakaiba” (94). Samantalang kinikilala ni Barbaza ang linggwistik na pagkakatulad ng mga wikang Filipino, mas interesado siya sa mga posibilidad ng mga pagkakaiba ng mga wika sa Pilipinas, ang pagiging bukas ng Filipino. Aniya, “Ang iteratibong katangian mismo ng wika na may komon na grammar/istraktyur na nagpapahintulot sa pag-unawa ng lahat ay siya rin mismong nagbibigay pahintulot na magamit ito ng lahat at pwes, maging bukas sa pagbabago o pagkakaiba sa bawat bigkas/gamit nito.”

Ang pagseryoso ni Barbaza sa kanyang pananaw sa wika ang dahilan kung bakit naging masalimuot ang naging proseso niya ng pagsalin ng mga osipon mulang Bikol tungong Filipino. Ang panganib na kanyang iniwasan ay ang pagbura sa identidad ng pinagmulang wika sa pagtatangkang itanghal ang mga teksto sa Filipinong audience. May sandali ng stream of consciousness

sa akademikong *Interrupting the Nation*, nang magtalaban ang iba't ibang layunin at pagnanasa ni Barbaza sa pahina: "Are the sentences too long? When does a sentence end and begin? My educated Tagalog eyes demand that the sentences be whipped into obedience: clean, clear, crisp sentences please. Where are the punctuation/s? Why is this word in capital letters? Why is this morpheme used here and not this other morpheme/affix?" Ang resulta'y kagaspangan, pero kagaspangan na kanais-nais: "The roughness that is experienced by the reader is the experience of what is foreign/not-self or to be more precise in this specific translation project, the nonacademic/literary Tagalog" (2017, 160). Tulad lang din ng salin mulang rehiyonal na wika tungong Filipino, na lagit lagi'y nariyan ang di-maasimila, di-magawang-karaniwan/Tagalog, gayundin sa pagbuo ng isang bayan/bansa, nariyan lagi ang bukol, bumubukol, ang laging sumisingit, laging nangungulit na iba. Internal na iba ito, na siyang kinakailangan laban sa monokultura at homogenisasyon, sapagkat ang bayang nabura na ang pagkakaiba ay bayang hindi rin kinikilala ang pangangailangan at karapatan ng iba.

Ang pagsasaling bumubukol, pagsasaling may bukol, ay matutunghayan din sa pagsasalin ng mga pilosopikal na teksto sa Filipino, at sa mismong pamimilosopo sa Filipino. Ito ang paksa ng susunod na seksyon.

## **Santo, Santo, Santo**

Paano magsalin ang pilosopong nagsasalin? Kunin nating bilang halimbawa si Roque Ferriols, pilosopo ng relihiyon na may pagkiling sa penomenolohiya, at nagsalin din ng mga gawang pilosopikal (Gabriel Marcel, Augustine). Narito ang kanyang paliwanag sa terminong "nibel":

Galing iyan sa Kastilang "*nivel*." Ang kahulugan nito ay may kinalaman sa patag, kapatagan, pagpapatag. Nibel ang tawag natin sa kasangkapang may bula, na ginagamit ng mga kantero, nang tiyaking patag ang sementong nilalatag nila. Ginagamit din ng alwagi nang huwag kumiling sa wasto, ang kahoy na pinagpapakuan ng mga tabla ng suwelo. Kapag iba-iba ang taas sa lupa ng maraming suwelo sa isang bahay, palapag ang tawag sa bawat suwelo. Matatawag ding: nibel. May mga patag na pook sa gilid ng bundok; iba ang taas ng bawat kapatagan: mga nibel ng bundok. Maaari ding tawaging nibel ang lahat ng mga pook sa bundok na pareho ang taas sa karagatan, kahit na hindi bumubuo ng isang kapatagan ang mga pook na ito.

Halimbawa: kahit na nasaan ka, lumalamig na ang hangin sa nibel ng apat na pie (2014, 35).

Syempre pa, hindi sa pagpapakahulugang ito nais i-deploy ni Ferriols ang “nibel.” Pinapakita na pang-araw-araw na gamit nito. Apat ang pilosopikal na paggamit niya sa “nibel”:

(1) Nilalagyan ko ng hangganan ang paningin ng aking isip, (2) upang maging masusi ang aking pagsusuri, (3) ngunit hindi ko lilimutin na ang may hangganan na aking sinusuri, ay bahagi ng at nabababad sa walang hanggang abot-tanaw ng meron, at may angaw angaw na pag-uugnay sa ibang mga umiiral. (4) Kaya’t sabay sa pagmumulat sa bagong kaalaman, may bagong pagmumulat sa kalawakan ng meron, sa mga masalimuot na pagkaugnay, na hindi ko nalalaman; sabay sa “alam ko na,” palaging may “hindi ko pa alam” at “malalaman ko kaya?” at “nais kong malaman” (36).

Kumbaga, pansamantala mong ilalagay ang pinagmumuni-munihan sa ganito o ganireng nibel, nang sa gayon ay mabusisi ito, pero laging nasa isip mo na hindi naman talaga ito malilimitahan sa nibel na natukoy. Masalimuot na paksa itong nibel, kaya nga gumagamit si Ferriols ng sa tingin niya ay mas madaling maintindihan na salita, nang sa gayon ay makatulong sa pagpapaliwanag (para madaling maarok) ang mahirap at non-intuitive na konsepto. Humiram si Ferriols ng salitang hindi man pang-araw-araw na ginagamit ay kongkreto pa rin (gamit nga ng kantero!). Bagaman hiram sa Kastila, nahihinuha natin na ang nais ni Ferriols ay pagsalitain ng pilosopiya ang Filipino, o di kaya’y mag-Filipino ang pilosopiya. Kaya nga “meron” ang ginagamit niyang salita imbes na “pag-iral” bilang lunsaran ng kanyang pambungad sa metapisika. “Meron akong dalawang butas sa ilong. Merong Petra na mabait, tapat na kaibigan, at tahimik” (5). Parehong meron ang butas ng ilong at Petra. Kung titingnan mula sa pilosopiya ni Ferriols, hindi lang parehong merong nostril at tao, kundi pareho silang *meron*.

Pero may antas ang meron. At, gayundin, sa kanyang pagtatangkang maipaliwanag ang mga mahirap maarok na konsepto, napapabalentong ni Ferriols ang wika: “Ang sangkameronan (!) na pumapaligid at nag-aalaga sa tao ay walang-malay na nag-aalaga at hindi mulat sa kanyang pagkadambuhala. Ang tao ay mulat sa di-masukat na agwat ng sanlibutan, kaya’t mulat din ang tao na siya’y maliit. Kaya’t sa kanyang pagmumulat sa kanyang kaliitan ay mas matindi ang kanyang meron [diaper at hindi lang napkin ang kailangan] kaysa sa meron ng anomang dambuhalang galaksi” (1995, 42). Kung ipagpapalagay natin na ang skopos ni Ferriols ay ilapit ang

pilosopiya sa wikang Filipino, sa mga estudyante niya sa Ateneo (ginagamit ang *Pilosopiya ng Relihiyon* sa kanilang batayang asignatura sa teolohiya), mainam sigurong pinag-aralan niya ang diseminasyon ng signifier na “meron.” Syempre pa, pag meron ka, meron kang mens, at iba tuloy ang maiisip kapag nabasa ang “matindi ang kanyang meron.” Sabagay, ang regla rin ay parehong batas at mens. Medyo nagiging kakatwa tuloy ang pagsubok ni Ferriols sa diyalektikal na pag-iisip (ang maliit ay mulat na hindi siya malaki, pero siya ay mulat, hindi tulad ng dambuhala na hindi mulat, na hindi mulat sa sarili nitong kalakihan) dahil sa hindi makontrol na kalikasan ng wika. Masdan itong kanyang papuri sa Diyos: “Hindi lamang lumalang, kundi sa bawat sandali ay lumalalang, sapagkat ang mga linalang [nilalang] ay marupok, at sa bawat sandali, mula sa lumalalang. Ang lumalalang ay maaring tawaging Mismong Meron, o kaya Meron na Meron” (45). Ngayon, hindi ito ang lugar para, at wala naman talaga akong intensyong. tuyain si Ferriols. Sa kaniyang pamimilosopiya, ipinakita niya na maaaring humiram mula sa banyagang wika (sa kaso ng “nibel”), o di kaya’y bigyan ng dagdag pang kahulugan ang salitang taal (“meron”). Samantalang ang “nibel” ay galing sa Espanyol, at ang meron ay Filipino, ang “gahum” ay Bisaya.

Bagaman hindi pilosopiya, mahusay na halimbawa ng pamimilosopo ang kritikong si Isagani Cruz. Sinubukan niyang ipaliwanag ang konsepto ng hegemony sa pamamagitan ng pagpapatingkad ng salitang ginagamit na naman sa pang-araw-araw na diskurso ng mga Filipino (na hindi Tagalog). Sa kanyang koleksyong *Bukod na Bukod*, ginamit na ni Cruz sa unang sanaysay (“Ang Bukod na Bukod: Sa Likuran ng Estetikang Filipino” [2000, 4]) ang “gahum,” ipinaliwanag lang niya ito sa ikalawang sanaysay (“Ang Papel ng Kritiko’t Kritika sa Ating Lipunan”): “Salitang Cebuano ito na hiniram ko para makasama sa Filipinong aking ginagamit. Ang ibig sabihin sa Cebuano ay kapangyarihan o lakas; ang ibig kong sabihin sa aking paggamit nito sa Filipino ay ang kapangyarihan o lakas ng mga naghaharing bansa o uri, na lumalabas sa ating sining, kultura, mga ideya, paniniwala, buhay-buhay, at iba pa” (12). Katulad din ni Ferriols, hindi lang minsan ginamit ni Cruz ang “gahum,” nakabudbod ito sa buong koleksyon. May bonus pa, dahil hindi pagkakamalang “gahum” ang tinutukoy ni Cruz kapag sinabi niyang “gahum,” hindi tulad kay Ferriols, na kailangan laging isipin kung aling meron ang binabanggit niya kapag sinabi niyang “meron.”

Sa paglikha ng mga salita, sa pagsalin sa partikular at sa pag-iisip sa pangkalahatan, hindi kailangang manghiram mula sa labas. Maaari ding

mag-invest sa (katektan ang) salitang Filipino ng bagong kahulugan. Hindi ito lalabas na halimaw, walang grotesk sa gawaing ito. Imbes, maaari itong ituring na elebasyon, knighting o di kaya'y canonization. Hindi na lamang meron ang meron, meron na ito. Hindi na lamang gahum ang gahum, gahum na ito.

Nakita na natin kung paanong pinag-Filipino ni Ferriols ang pilosopiya. Ganito rin ba ang metodo ng ibang pilosopo? Mainam ditong tingnan ang halimbawa ni Leonardo de Castro. Marami sa kanyang koleksiyong *Etika at Pilosopiya sa Kontekstong Pilipino* ay orihinal na isinulat sa Filipino, pero dalawa rito, “Sekswalidad Bilang Wika,” at “Natatagong Karahasan,” ay isinalin mula sa Ingles. Sa labas ng mga pilosopikal na termino, tinatangka ni de Castro maging pormal ang kanyang Filipino. Kung kaya, gumagamit siya ng mga salitang halaw sa Espanyol, tulad ng “elocwente” (“elocuyente”) at “perbersyon” (“perversión”), pero minsan ay nakakasilip tayo ng siyokoy: “intimasya” (“intimidación” dapat) (1995, 291-293). (Pag ginugel mo itong “intimasya,” ang unang lalabas na resulta’y app sa Google Play Store para sa pagtatala ng kabuwanang dalaw ng isang babae, i.e. meron.)

May tensyon sa paggamit ni de Castro ng mga salita. Sa kabuuan ng kanyang gawa, halimbawa, “aborsiyon” ang gamit niyang termino, imbes na “pagpapalaglag.” Pero, ginamit din niya ang “*abortion pill*” (naka-italics). Merong “artipisyal na pag-iinsemina,” pero meron ding “*Artificial Insemination Husband*.” Samantala, ginamit din niya ang “bangko ng isperma.” Sa mga teknikal na salita ng pilosopiya, kung matatawag silang ganito, mas konsistent si de Castro. Ginamit niya ang “absolutismo,” “autonomiya,” “birtud,” “bolisyon,” “deontolohiya,” “determinismo,” “diborsiyon” (imbes na paghihiwalay), “egoismo.” Gayundin, bukod sa mga halaw sa Espanyol, gumamit siya ng taal na Filipino, tulad ng “pananagutang moral,” “wakas na layon,” at “di-nakikitang pamimilit.” Bagaman may magiging nakakalitong basahin tulad ng “utilitarianismo” (kasi “u” imbes na “yu” ang magiging basa sa unang titik), sa pangkalahatan, masasabing modelo si de Castro, tulad ni Ferriols, ng paggamit ng Filipino para magsulat ng pilosopiya. Samantalang mas konserbatibo si de Castro sa kanyang wika, maaari nating sabihing mas malaya o eksperimental si Ferriols.

Konserbatibo ring maituturing ang wika ni Malaya Ronas sa kanyang *Angkan ni Socrates*. Sa kanyang diskusyon sa mga ideya ni Aristotle, halimbawa, nilalagyan niya ng parentetikal na paliwanag sa Ingles ang mga nirender sa Filipino, tulad na lang ng “taong pambayan (*statesman*),” o di kaya’y



“rule of law o pamumuno ng batas” (1998, 22-23). Ganito rin ang nangyari sa dikusyon kay Rousseau nang mabanggit ang “general will o panlahatang kapakanan” (75), na mas isasalin ko bilang “pangkalahatang kalooban” (tingnan ang Rousseau 2017, 22). Medyo sagabal ang ganitong uri ng pagsusulat, kaya nga nagkakaroon ng mga pahina si Ronas kung saan iniwan na lang niya sa Ingles ang mga susing salita tulad ng “subsistence wage theory” at “laissez faire” (86, 112). Nitpiking na lamang ito, na hindi tunay na layon ng Araling Salin. Hindi matatawaran ang kontribusyon ni Ronas. Hindi rin maikakaila ang pangangailangan na lumampas ang pilosopiyang Filipino sa pagpapaliwanag ng pagpapaliwanag (i.e. kailangang ipaliwanag ang bawat termino na nilikhaan ng espesyal na katumbas o hinanapan ng nagkataong katumbas), kundi’y mauwi lang sa pagpapaliwanag nang pagpapaliwanag.

Ganito rin ang sakit na maituturing ng aderways ay mahusay na efort na *Pamimilosopiya: Mga Pagdulog at Konsepto* (Yasol-Naval, et al 2011). Nakalagay sa brakets na “love of wisdom” ang “pagmamahal sa karunungan” na siya namang “ipinapakahulugan sa pilosopiya” (1). Ang “pananaw sa mundo” naman ay “worldview” (48). Hindi na lamang distraction o pampabagal sa prosa, ineenshur ng ganitong praktika ng pagsusulat-pagsasalin na nananatiling nasa Ingles ang pilosopiya, o na laging may latak na iniwan, o mas malala, laging kailangang tumuntong sa Ingles para mamilosopo sa Filipino. Ganito ring maituturing kahit ang mula pa sa Espanyol na “sanhi o causa” at “isinanhi o efecto” nina de Jesus at Rivera (1953, 4). Ang kanilang libro ay *Palapahaman (Pilosopiya) sa Tagalog*, sa taytel pa lang may parenthetical explanations na.

Sa mga pelikulang di-umano’y “indie,” laging merong subtitle na Ingles. Ito’y dahil ang target ojens ng mga obrang ito’y “internasyunal,” at anoman ang motibasyon nito, kailangang salungguhitan ang implikasyong hindi mga Filipino ang kausap ng mga pelikula. Ang mga Filipino ay paksa lamang. (Kakatwang kahit sa mga lokal na sineha’y naroon pa rin ang mga subtitle. Baka nga naman may mga konyong hindi nakakaintindi ng ating wika.) Hindi man ito ang kaso ng mga nagpapaliwanag sa Ingles ng librong nakasulat sa Filipino, kailangang pa ring salungguhitan ang fakt na nililikha ng mga gawa ang sarili nilang mambabasa. Sa kaso ng mga nabanggit nang libro ng pilosopiya, nililikha ng mga ito ang pilosopo o akademikong sa Ingles nakakaintindi. Samantala, kung susulat ng librong nasa Filipino lamang, lilikha ng mga mambabasang sa Filipino lamang namimilosopo.



Bagaman lumalabas na hindi ko nais ang pananatili ng ibang wika, Ingles man o hindi, sa mga tekstong Filipino, salin man, pilosopiya man, o hindi, sa totoo'y mas malapot ang usapin. Isa sa mga kahanga-hangang likha sa larangan ng pilosopiya sa Pilipinas ang *Si Santo Tomas de Aquino at mga Isyung Panrelihiyon sa Lipunang Filipino Ngayon* ni Jose Tejido. Samantalang ang ibang awtor ay kontento nang maglagay ng Ingles na paliwanag sa brackets, pinanatili ni Tejido hindi lamang ang mga Ingles na paragrafs ng salin kay Aquinas, kundi pati ang kanyang orihinal na Latin. Nag-iiba na ang nililikhang mambabasa nito. Ang nililikha na nito'y mambabasang kayang iverifay kung tama ang salin sa Ingles at sa Filipino ng orihinal na Latin. Sa seksyon ng kanyang "Pambungad" na pinamagatang "Paano Naman Nakadiseno ang Bawat Kabanata ng Aklat na Ito?", ipinaliwanag ni Tejido na isinama niya ang Latin para "maging malinaw at *transparent*" ang proseso ng pagsasalin. Gayundin, iniisip ni Tejido na "maiwawasto at mapagaganda pa ang pagsasalin sa mga darating na edisyon" (2005, wp).

Transformativo ang proyekto ni Tejido. Lampas pa sa paglapit kay Aquinas sa Filipino, ang nais niya ay lumitaw "ang pinagpanibagong interpretasyon at pagbabasa ng *Summa*, na naangkop sa panahon natin ngayon, at sa pangkasalukuyang daloy ng kulturang Filipino" (ibid). Bukod sa pagtalakay sa mga maliit na paksa tulad ng katarungan, pinagmulan ng kasamaan, kamatayan at impyerno, sinagot din ni Tejido ang tanong na "Masama Ba ang Humiling sa Diyos ng mga Tiyak at Materyal na Bagay?" i.e. "Ibig Ko Sanang Manalo sa Lotto, Wasto Bang Ipagdasal Ko Ito?" (93-104). Mapapansing hindi ipinaliwanag ni Tejido kung ano ang lotto, katulad din ng hindi niya pagpapaliwanag kung sino ang Pilosopo at ang Apostol na binabanggit ni Aquinas. Alam ng kanyang nililikhang mambabasa kung ano ang lotto, kung sino si Aristotle at si Pablo.

Base sa mga sinuring libro, masasabing ang pagsasalin ng pilosopiya ay espasyo para sa paglikha, hindi na lamang ng mga salita, kundi ng mga Filipino, at pilosopong Filipino. Bukod sa apat na halimaw, nagkakaroon din ng kanonisasyon, ang ordinaryong salita ay naiimbyu ng dagdag pang kahulugan, ang gahum ay hindi na lamang kapangyarihan o lakas, pero sitwasyon kung saan namumuno ang mga naghaharing-uri nang walang pamimilit. Ang paglikha ng mga santong ito ay hindi lamang matatagpuan sa pagsasalin, kundi sa pamimilosopo mismo, sa Filipino man o hindi. Ang kaligayahan ay hindi na lamang may kahulugan sa diksyonaryo, o sa pangkaraniwang gamit, nagbabago ito sa kamay ng mga yutilityan, sa mga

kamay ng Pilosopo. Kung tutuusin, ang paglikha ng apat na halimaw ay hindi rin talaga eksklusiv sa pagsasalin ng pilosopiya, o pagsasalin, kundi sa mismong paglikha ng wika.

## Maugnayinsilog

Nabanggit na rin naman ang paglikha, hindi maaaring iwasan ang paksa ng “maugnayin.” Sa kanyang pag-aaral sa proyektong ito, sinipi ni Ramon Guillermo ang liham ni Blumentritt kay Rizal, kung saan ipinapaliwanag ng una na katulad ng Aleman, bukas ang Tagalog sa paghugpong-hugpong ng mga salita para lumikha ng ibang salita, imbes na manghiram sa mga wikang banyaga. Sa Aleman, paliwanag ni Guillermo, “ginagamit ang mga salitang *Wissenschaft* (agham) at *kunde* (agham ng -) upang tumukoy sa agham na may kinalaman sa salitang dinudugtungan ng mga ito” (2009c, 264). Kasama na rito ang mga inilista ni Blumentritt kay Rizal: “*Erdkunde*” imbes na “*Geographie*,” at “*Volkerkunde*” imbes na “*Ethnographie*.” Binanggit din ni Blumentritt ang “*Sprachenkunde*” na “agham ng mga wika,” ang kaso nga lang, ayon kay Guillermo, “mas kilala at gamitin ngayon ang salitang *Sprachwissenschaft* (aghamwika), gayundin ang salitang hiram na *hindi naiwaksi* sa bokabularyong Aleman na *Linguistik*” (ibid, akin ang diin).

Tinangka sa proyektong maugnayin na lumikha ng mga salitang pang-agham mula sa mga salitang Filipino. Ilan sa mga susing salita sa diskursong ito ay “banyuhay” (bagong anyo ng buhay, i.e. metamorphosis) at “tapsilog.” Itong huling salita ang pwedeng sagot sa kritisismong inihain sa maugnayin, i.e. “kung titingnang halimbawa ang salitang maugnayin na *likhisog* (*likha* + *isog*), na itinutumbas sa Ingles na *engine*, kapag susuriin ang panambal na *lik-* ay napakaraming makikitang salita na mapaghuhugutan din ng anyong ito” (266). Dahil hindi tulad ng “-an” o “pang-”, hindi intuitive, kung ano ang ibig sabihin sa “lik,” kung bakit “lik” ng “likha,” imbes na “lik” ng “liksi” ang iaasoshieyt dito. Hindi nga makaagham ang sistema ng maugnayin, ayon kay Guillermo. Gayunpaman, kapag sinabing “tocilog,” “hotsilog,” “porksilog,” “bangsilog,” alam na “itlog” ang “-log” na ito, imbes na “ilog,” “bilog,” o “kalog.” Sa anong paraan nakamit ng “-log” ang status ng “-an,” at hindi ng “-hay” (bilang “buhay,” e.g. “hinhay” = “patay” [“hindi” + “na” + “buhay”]), o di kaya’y “bamanhay” = “prebiotic” [“bago” + “magkaroon” + “ng” + “buhay”])? Ang “-log” ang ginamit ng mga nagtitinda ng pagkain. Samantala, hindi ginamit ng mga siyentista ang “-hay.” Ganun lang nga ba kasimple? Ganun kasalimuot.

Hindi sarado ang pagsasalin ng pilosopiya sa metodo ng maugnayin. Bagaman hindi makaagham ang pagpili ng mga salitang gagawing lapi, hindi ito problema para sa pilosopiya. Ang “Übermensch” ay likha ni Nietzsche. Isinalin ito bilang “lipat-tao” nina Quito at Abulad (1980, 73), “makapangyarihang tao” nina Quito, et al (1993, 76), at “lampas-tao” naman ni Timbreza (2002, 24). Iba ang kasong ito, dahil hindi naman inimbentong lapi ang “über,” lapi na talaga ito, bukod sa pagiging ding buong salita (ang “mensch” naman ay salita na talaga, i.e. tao). Ang sistematisasyon na hinahanap para maging intuitive ang mga lapi at paglikha sa maugnayin sa agham ay hindi rin kinakailangan sa pilosopiya. (Bagaman, kailangang purihin dito sina Quito at Abulad, dahil nasapol nila ang “über” bilang “lipat,” na bagaman hindi lapi ay maaaring ilapat tulad ng “über.”)

## Supalpal

Sa simula ng kanyang pagtalakay sa mga sulatin ng tubong-Moroccong manunulat na si Abdelfattah Kilito, inilista ni Emily Apter ang mga pagsasalin, sa Kanluran, ng iba’t ibang libro, mula Aleman pa-Pranses, mula Pranses pa-Ingles, mula Ingles pa-Pranses. Itinala niya ang pag-aangkop sa mga konsepto sa mga libro, mula sa konteksto di lamang ng bansa kundi ng dekada kung kailan lumabas ang mga ito, para gamitin sa ibang bansa, sa ibang panahon. Para kay Apter, ang pag-aaral ng mga transformasyong ito’y hindi lamang “intellectual exercise.” Bagkus, “By gauging the deformations, reformulations, and temporal decalages of translated works, we are doing philosophy” (2013, 249). Malalim-lalim na rin naman ang tradisyong pinaghuhugutan ni Apter, mulang 1962 ang pinakalumang librong inilista niya, 2009 ang pinakabata. Syempre pa, mas malalim pa ang kabuuang tradisyon ng pilosopiya sa Kanluran, kung sisimulan natin sa mga pre-Sokratiko’t tatapusin, halimbawa, kay Graham Harman, o di kaya’y kay Andrea Long Chu.

Ang pag-aaral na mismong ito, hindi man bahagi ng tradisyon ng Kanluran, ay humuhugot pa rin ng sustansya mula rito. Kung titingnan mula sa isang perspektibo, ang papel na ito’y pagtatangka, kopya kay Hegel, na pagsalitain ng Filipino ang pilosopiya. Sa ilang bahagi ng sanaysay, natukso akong sabihing hindi lamang na “ang pagsasalin ay pilosopiya,” kundi “ang pilosopiya ay pagsasalin.” Idagdag ko pa nga na ang pagsasalin ay paglikha, at kung gayon, ang pilosopiya ay paglikha. Kaso, nasabi na nga pala nina Deleuze at Guattari ito.

Bueno, natunghayan na sa papel na ito ang pilosopiyang pangwika ni Barbaza. Ang pagsusulat niya ay laban sa reipikasyon, sa pagkalimot na ang bagay ay proseso pala. Ang bayan ay hindi nariyan na lamang, nauna sa atin na natagpuan natin sa sulok o sa bundok. Ang bayan ay ating nilikha, at patuloy na nililikha. Ang mga nagpapahayag ng ganito at ganiyang alituntunin, mabuti man ang kanilang intensyon o nais lamang panatilihin ang sarili sa kapangyarihan, buburahin ang nakaraan ng mga institusyon, ng bayan mismo, at bahagi ang pagbuburang ito ng kanilang katwiran na kung ano ang mayroon ang siyang dapat mayroon. Kahit iyong mga malay sa pagiging bahagi ng kasaysayan ng kanilang ipinagtatanggol, i.e. iyong mga aaming historikal imbes na eternal ang isang institusyon, tradisyon, batas, organisasyon, o ideolohiya, mananakot naman ay sasabihing ang pagwaksi, ang pagreporma, ang pagbuwal, sa kung ano ang mayroon ay magreresulta lamang sa anarkiya, sa gulo, sa karahasan. Ang bago, ang kakaiba, para sa kanila ay laging masama.

Paano nga ba lumikha ng bago? Isa sa mga paraan ay pagsusulat. Pero walang pagsusulat na mula sa wala. Lahat ng pagsusulat ay galing sa iba pang pagsusulat. Pwedeng sabihing pagmamalabis ito, pero sa kaso ng pilosopiya sa Pilipinas, ito ay lantad at lagi't lagi nang nagladlad. Ang mga gawa nina Ferriols, de Castro, at iba pa, ay nakabase sa mga nauna nang naisulat, ng mga Kanlurin, oo. Pero ang pag-aaral na ito'y nakabase sa pagsusulat nila. Sa ganitong paraan nililikha ang tradisyon ng pilosopiya sa Pilipinas, na tradisyon ng pagsusulat. Marami pang batis, marami pang maaaring paghugutan. Ang itinanghal dito'y bahagdan lamang ng henealohiya.

Ang kakatwa sa *counter-intuitive* na kabatiran ni Apter (na ang pag-aaral sa henealohiya ng pagsasalin ng mga salin ng mga gawang pampilosopiya), ito rin mismo'y reaksiyonaryo sa ibang banda (minamaliit niya ang pilolohiya at "intellectual exercise," kumpara sa pilosopiya). Kailangang ipagtanggol ang pagiging iba nito, para manatili ang dignidad nito. Ang pagiging tangi ng pilosopiya. Ang hamon sa atin ngayo'y panatilihing counterintuitive si Apter, at ipaloob ang pilosopiya, pilolohiya, araling salin, komparatibong literatura, at ang simpleng "intellectual exercise" bilang bahagi ng iisang diskurso, ang pagsusulat.

Maaari nating isalin ang "interrupting" sa *Interrupting the Nation* ni Barbaza bilang "pagsupalpal." Pagsupalpal sa bayan. Pagsupalpal din ang ginagawa ng mga tagasalin-pilosopo sa mga teksto ng Kanluran. Hindi

makadaloy nang madulas ang mga isinasalin na teksto't ipinapaliwanag na konteksto, sinusupalpal ng komentaryo, pagsasakonteksto, pagrekontekstwalisa. Pagsupalpal din ang pagsusulat. Walang madulas na daloy sa pagsusulat, palagiang sinusupalpal ng pagsusulat ang sarili nito.

Mula nang mabasa ang *Pasyon and Revolution*, nahumaling na ako sa potensyal, sa kapangyarihan ng mga misreading, misprision, ng mga teksto. Pero aaminin kong ako ma'y nagitla sa pagbasa ng isang "Benedict Mario D. Clemente" sa blog na "Sir Chuck Gwapo" ([url: 4a2011hatid-blog.tumblr.com](http://url:4a2011hatid-blog.tumblr.com)) sa tulang "Kung ang tula ay isa lamang" ni Jess Santiago. Ayon kay Clemente, ang isang "pumpon na mga salita na kanyang tinutukoy ay isang tula na naaayon sa mga kumbensiyon ng mga Pilipino noon" (2011, w.p.). Dagdag pa niya, itinataboy ng tula ang Balagtasismo, at maaaring "isipin na gusto niya ng mga bagong tula, mga modernistang tula. Nakakapagod na rin ang mga makaluma." Maraming interpretasyon ang maaaring gawin sa komentaryong ito. Ang sanaysay bang "Ako, ang Daigdig at Poetry ay Iisa Lamang" ay patunay ng lisyang edukasyon ng mga Filipino, o ang pagkawalang katapusan ng potensyal ng tula ni Santiago? Ano't anoman, mas interesante pa rin ang gawa ni Clemente sa sanlibot isang kulangot na komentaryo tungkol sa "Kung," na inuulit lang din naman ang first layer na kahulugan ng tula. Ang paghiling sa mga akdang pampanitikan, sa lahat ng pagsusulat, na maging mas higit pa sa mga pumpon ng mga salita ay may mahaba ding tradisyon sa Pilipinas. Noong Marso 15, 2020, halimbawa, ipinahayag sa anonimong Facebook page na "Ibong Adorno" kung ano ang dapat gawin ng mga manunulat sa kalagitnaan ng krisis sa COVID-19. Imbes daw na magsulat ng "fictitious pieces" na nagsasamantala sa pagdurusa at kamatayan ng mga tao, "writers can instead help fight misinformation by helping develop information materials about COVID-19. Translation and documentation services will be of great contribution. Archiving COVID-19 narratives in non-exploitative platforms can also be done [i.e. binibigyan ng permiso] provided the account are actual experiences of the people" (2020, w. p., akin ang diin). Konklusyon ng Ibong Adorno: "The human person must always reign over the writer," na tawasin man ako'y lagi kong sasabihing dekonstruksyon ng paglalarawan ni Stalin sa mga manunulat bilang inhinyero ng mga kaluluwa ng mga tao.

Ang nais ng Ibong Adorno'y magkaroon ng gamit, ng silbi, ang mga manunulat, na magkaroon sila ng ambag at hindi lang umokupa ng espasyo, o, mas karima-rimarim, magsulat nang walang kwenta. Pinangungunahan ng

Facebook page kung ano ang pwede at hindi pwede, kung ano ang katanggap-tanggap at ano ang hindi, kung sino ang maghahari at ang paghaharian. Sa mwestrang ito’y walang pinagkaiba ang Ibong Adorno kay Susie Sheep, tauhan sa serye sa YouTube na *Peppa Pig*, sa episode na “Nursery Rhymes,” na sinupalpal ang kaklaseng si Zoey Zebra, nang simulan ng huli ang pag-recite sa “Little Bo Peep.” Ani ni Susie, “I don’t like that one. It’s about sheep getting lost. It’s too sad.” (2019).

Maaaring maging argumento ng administrador ng Ibong Adorno na sila nga ang tunay na sinusupalpal, ng mga makapangyarihan, ng mga burgis na may pribilehiyo sa panahon ng lockdown at enhanced community quarantine. Kung gayon, hindi nila maipagkakait sa iba na manupalpal din, bilang pag-uulit ng kanilang mwestra. Laban at para sa kanila ang pagsupalpal na ito, munting kontribusyon sa tradisyong ng pagsusulat sa Pilipinas.

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# ALIBADBAD NG ALÁLA, ALALÁ AT ALAALA:

## ISANG PAGNINILAY SA KAISIPAN AT PANITIKAN NG “NAUSEA” NI JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

Juan Miguel Quizon

Sa tuwing nagkakaroon ako ng lakas ng loob na tangkaing sumulat ng tula, lagi't lagi akong nauuwi sa tatlong paksa: ang konsepto ng pagitan, ang konsepto ng paningin, at ang konsepto ng alaala. Taglay ng alaala (at anumang usaping pumapaligid dito) ang kapangyarihang humulma ng kaisipan, at maraming kaisipan na rin ang humulma ng alaala. Nakakatuwang paglaruan (o tayo ba ang nilalaro nito?) at isipin ang konsepto ng alaala bilang mga bágay na nananatili at lumilisan, pansamantala at minsá'y matagalan. Subalit may kaalaman pa rin na sa tuwing isang pangyayari ang basehan ng alaala, nariyan at nariyan ito, mistulang bisitang dumadalaw sa mga oras na kakailanganin o kahit na sa mga panahong hindi kailangan. Kadalasan, mayroong mga uri ng alaala na nais isúka ng diwa ngunit tunay bang may kakayahan ang sarili na itapon at piliin ang mga alaalang bumibisita at nananatili? Ano ang nagdidikta sa sarili upang makalimot? Nauuwi sa alalá ang ibang anyo ng alaala. Sa mga pagkakataóng dumadampi ang bagabag at dumadaplis ang kalungkutan sa tuwing may inaaalala, mistulang isang anyo na ito ng bangungot at wala tayong kapangyarihang pamahalaan ito. Paano hinuhubog ng alaala ang kaisipan natin tungkol sa iba't ibang anyo ng karanasan? Ilan lámang ito sa mga katanungan at konseptong nais kong talakayin sa aking sanaysay kasabay ang pagbabalangkas at pagdadalumat sa nobelang “Nausea” ni Jean-Paul Sartre. Ninais kong tangkaing isulat ang aking pagninilay tungkol sa kaisipan at panitikan nito gámit ang wikang Filipino sa kadahilanang gusto kong matuklasan kung ang pagdadalumat ba ng mismong kaisipan o talisikan (philosophy) na ito ay hinuhubog rin ng wika. At, may kapangyarihan bang hubugin ng wika ang isang kanluraning kaisipan upang bagtasin nito ang kultura ng mismong kaisipang humuhubog sa aking pagdadalumat?



Ang unang sinilip ko ay ang tuwirang pagsasalin ng pamagat ng nobela. Ayon sa aking pag-aaral, ang malápit at ganap na salin ng salitáng “nausea” sa Filipino ay alibadbad. Ngunit ano nga ba ang tunay na kahulugan nitong kaisipan at karamdamang ito? Ang salitang “nausea” ay hango sa salitáng Griyego (νόσος) na ang kahulugan ay “sakit ng paggalaw” o ang “pakiramdam na may sakit.” Kung tutuusin, ayon sa agham, ito ang sensasyon o pakiramdam ng pagiging hindi mapakali at kawalan ng kaginhawaan sa itaas na bahagi ng tiyan na may kahalong paghimok ng pagsusuká. Subalit kung aaralin ang konsepto ng alibadbad kasama ang ilan sa mga punto ng eksistensyalismo ni Sartre, ang unang katanungan na maaaring baybayin ng talakayan ay ito: ang alibadbad ba ay epekto o dahilan? Sa papel na ito, tatangkain kong bagtasin at talakayín ang tagpuan ng panitikan at talisikan, at kung paano nito inaalalayan at nilalabanan ng nobela: paano sinusukat ang tugmaan ng kumpas ng panitik at ang talas ng kaisipan sa lente ng eksistensyalismo kung tatalakayin ito sa pamamagitan ng alaala? Kung titignan ito sa balangkas ng musika, nakakatulong ba ang singkopadong baybay nito at sa paanong paraan ito babasahin (aawitin) nang naaayon sa pansarili at panlipunang kaisipan? Hahatiin ko ang aking pagdadalumang sa nobela sa tatlong bahagi o espasyo: espasyo ng lugar, espasyo ng panitikan, at espasyo ng kaisipan. Sa pamamagitan ng tatlong bahaging ito, tatangkain kong tahiin ang mga ideya at kung paano nito pagyayamanin at patatalasin ang pagtatambal sa dalawang asignaturang matagal nang pinagsasabong – ang pilosopiya at panitikan. Bagaman naging saksi ang kasaysayan sa pagtatálong ito, nais kong isipin na magbubunga ng mas malalim na diskurso kung tatalakayin nang sabay ang anumang usapin sa perspektibo ng dalawang asignaturang ito.

### **Kinalalagyan, Kinalulugaran: Ang Pook ng Alaala at ang Alaala bilang Pook**

May kakayahang maglunsad ng pagpopook ang alaala sa pamamagitan ng wika at katha. Ang alaala din ay ‘pinopook’ sa pamamagitan ng iba’t ibang lugar na winika at kinatha. Sa bahaging ito ng sanaysay, nais kong talakayin ang dalawang punto: una, ang pagpopook ng nakaraan (ang mga karanasan ni Roquentin sa maraming lugar); at ikalawa, ang pagpopook ng kasalukuyan (ang mga karanasan ni Roquentin sa Bouville). Sa ikatlong bahagi ay tatahiin ko ang kahalagahan ng pagpopook upang mapintasan ang kaisipan tungkol sa hinaharap: ang kamalayan ni Roquentin sa panulat

ayon sa kaniyang saliksik at karanasan. Isang mahalagang punto sa nobela ay ang pagbabalik-tanaw ni Roquentin sa mga lungsod at bayan na kaniyang binisita. Sa maraming bahagi ng kaniyang talaarawan, binabanggit niya ang mga lugar na ito at nagiging angkla sa kaniyang pagbisita sa nakaraan at ang muling pagbisita ng alaala sa kaniya – mula sa Silangang Asya hanggang sa Hilagang Afrika, hanggang sa maliliit at naglalakihang mga lungsod ng Europa, binabalikán ang mga ito ni Roquentin habang tinatangka niyang sulatin ang kaniyang pananaliksik tungkol sa búhay ni Marquis de Rollebon. Kung iisipin, si Roquentin ay isang manlalakbay (adventurer) at masasabing ang kaniyang mga karanasan sa mga bagong lugar ay anyo ng kalayaan. Subalit isa itong uri ng kalayaang magbabalik at magbabalik pa rin sa katanungang malaya nga ba ako? Sa usapin ng kalayaan, sa usapin ng pagiging malaya, mahalagang usapin din ang pagiging maláy.

Masasabing maláy si Roquentin sa kaniyang mga paglalakbay at karanasan sa iba't ibang dákô ng daigdig. Mayroon siyang natatanging pribilehiyo upang maranasan ang maraming bágay sa mundo at pag-isipan ang mga ito. Sa ganitong paraan, hinulma ang kaniyang pagtingin at pag-usisa sa mundo subalit ito rin ang dahilan kung bakit sa ganoong paraan hinubog ang kaniyang mga alaala. Si Roquentin mismo ay alangan sa kaniyang mga karanasan: "Well, you can call that by any name you like, in any case, it was an event which happened to ME. I have never had adventures. Things have happened to me, events, incidents, anything you like. But no adventures" (37). Maláy si Roquentin kung alin lámang sa kaniyang mga karanasan sa ibang lugar ang masasabi niyang tunay na karanasan ng pakikipagsapalaran. Nagagawa niya ito dahil sa kaniyang kamalayan at kalayaan:

...but from time to time, for example, when they play music in the cafés, I look back and tell myself: in old days, in London, Meknes, Tokyo, I have known great moments, I have had adventures. Now I am deprived of this. I have suddenly learned without any apparent reason, that I have been lying to myself for ten years. (37)

Paano nagiging kasinungalingan ang tunay na naging karanasan? Marahil, isa ito sa mga kinatatakutang kapangyarihan ng tao – ang malámang hindi totoo ang mga bágay-bágay ayon sa pamantayan natin ng katotohanan. Lumilikha si Roquentin ng mga lugar ng alaala ayon sa kaniyang mga naranasan at ayon sa kaniyang nakaraan.

Mulát sa kaniyang alaala ang mga danas niya sa iba't ibang lugar:

...I was a *grand voyageur devant l'Eternel*. Yes: The Mohamedans squat to pass water; instead of ergot, Hindu midwives use ground glass in cow dung; in Borneo when a woman has her period, she spends three days and nights on the roof of her house. In Venice, I saw burials in gondolas, Holy Week festivals in Seville, I saw the Passion Play at Oberammergau. Naturally, that's just a small sample of all I know: I could lean back in a chair and begin amusement. (68)

Itong mga karanasan ni Roquentin ay tumatak na sa kaniyang alaala, subalit para sa kaniya, ito mismong mga karanasang ito ay isang anyo ng paghihirap. Kung para kay Roquentin, ang paghihirap ay ang tunay na sukatan ng pagkabúhay dito sa mundong ibabaw, tunay nga siyang nagpakahirap at tunay nga siyang namuhay. At para sa kaniya, itong angking pagdurusa sa búhay ang natatanging pamantayan: "There's a lucky man: as soon as you perceive him, you can tell he must have suffered, that he is someone who has lived" (67). Sa puntong ito, maaaring sabihin na ang saysay ng buhay ay nakasalalay sa pagdurusa. Ginagamit na pampalubag-loob ang mga karanasang ito sa usapin ng alaala at memorya, mistulang bála sa tuwing magiging paksa ang karunungan (wisdom) taglay na nagmula sa karanasan. Pansamantalang ligaya ang hatid sa atin kapag nasasabihan táyong punung-puno ang ating mga palagay ng dunong. Hindi ligtas ang mga alaala (pati na rin ang konsepto ng alaala): "They would like to make us believe that their past is not lost, that their memories are condensed, gently transformed into Wisdom. Convenient past" (68). Pinapagana ng maginhawang karanasan ang pagbabalik at pagdadalumat sa bawat alaala. Ngunit hindi lahat ng tao ay nabiayaan at mabibiyayaan ng magandang karanasan. Kung ipagpapatúloy ang diskursong inilatag ni Roquentin, sa tingin ko ay kailangang matagpuan ang kaginhawahan sa pagdurusa, kaginhawahan sa kalungkutan – kaginhawahan sa alibadbad na dinaramdam ng katawan, diwa, at kaluluwa.

Oras at danas ang mahahalagang sangkap sa usapin ng alaala at kaisipan. Kung isang anyo ng 'panlilinlang' ang mga nangyari at mga pangyayari kay Roquentin, at winika niya ito mismo, saan (pook ng kaisipan at pook ng katotohanan) dadaong ang tunay na karanasan? Ayon kay Gaston Bachelard, ang espasyo sa mga katha (o mga kinathang espasyo) ay isang

pagsasaliksik at pagtuklas sa dakila at tiyak na katotohanan ng isang imahe mula sa panulaan: “a *topophilia* whose principal attraction lies in its vigorous phenomenological approach to the literary imagination” (65). Kung ayon kay Roquentin, “the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence,” patúloy pa rin ang kaniyang paniniwala na ang mga ngiti ng mga púno sa mga publikong liwasan ay may kapangyarihang itago ang tunay na pamamalagi. Ayon kay Merleau-Ponty:

If we reflect on the mythical experience of space and if we ask ourselves what it means we will inevitably find that it rests on the consciousness of objective and unique space, for a space which is not objective and which is not unique is not a space: is it not essential that space should be the absolute “outside,” correlative, but also the negation of subjectivity, and is it not essential for it to encompass all being which can be represented, since all one might wish to posit outside of it would be, by that very fact, in relation to it, and therefore within it? (333-34)

Itinatampok sa nobela ang kakaibang paghahandog ng tila kinathang lugar – isang mitikong karanasan ng (sa) espasyo kung saan pinagtatambal ang ontolohikal na penomenolohiya ni Sartre na masasabing pangkalahatan ang pamantayan. Subalit kung ang pangunahing sanggunian ng kakaniyahan ay ang karanasang mapanlinlang, marahil ay maaaring sabihing ang pagpopook ng kaisipan ni Roquentin (ang pagpopook ng kaisipan ng tao) ay hango sa pagpopook ng katotohanan na may ‘di-tuwirang relasyon sa karanasan – ang lahat ay kasinungalingan sa harap ng tunay na katunayan.

Sino nga ba ang makapagsasabing tunay ang mga siyudad na binisita ni Roquentin kung siya na mismo ay maláy sa huwad na kaugalian ng kaisipan? Kung ang panitik at kaisipan ni Roquentin ang babaybayin, hindi mararating ang iisang patutunguhan ng kolektibong alaalang dinadalumat niya sa pahina ng kaniyang talaarawan. Ang pagpopook niya sa kaniyang sarili ay isang koleksyon ng mga lugar na siya mismo ang pinook – siya at ang kaniyang alaala. Gaya din ng kaniyang paglalarawan sa mga siyudad at lungsod na ito, hindi buo ang kaniyang pagkakaintindi sa mga ito, maging ang kaniyang pagkakaintindi sa sarili. “I couldn’t understand why I was in Indo-China. What was I doing there? Why was I talking to these people? Why was I dressed so oddly? My passion was dead. For years it had rolled

over and submerged me; now I feel empty” (5). May ligalig sa anyo ng pagkabalisa si Roquentin. Kung iisipin, ano ang kaniyang pangunahing dahilan kung bakit niya pipiliing pumunta sa mga lugar na iyon? May kakayahan ba ang sarili (diwa, puso, at utak) na burahin ang alaala ng mga desisyong minsang namutawi at nanaig? “They sketch vague, pleasant shapes and then are swallowed up: I forget them almost immediately” (7). Sa usapin ng pagpopook ng kaisipan hango sa mga lugar na naranasan, sa papaanong paraan nakakalimot, o pilit nililimot ng sarili ang karanasan? O ang danas ba ang lumilimot sa sarili, tila pinipigilan ang paglingon ng kasalukuyan sa bawat nagdaan? May tunay na kapangyarihan ba ang tao upang burahin ang mga bagay na ito?

Kaakibat ng usaping alaala, karanasan, at kaisipan ang nakaraang kasaysayan. Malinaw at malabô para kay Roquentin ang mga lugar na kaniyang binisita: “From what Moroccan (or Algerian or Syrian) day did this flash suddenly detach itself? I let myself flow into the past.” (32) Ang nakaraan ba ay permanenteng nagiging katha sa tuwing sumasailalim ito sa matalas na pagdadalumot ng isipan? May kakayahan nga ba tayong piliin ang nakaraang naaayon lamang sa dikta at nasâ ng ating diwa samantalang ang utak at puso naman ang nagpapasya rito? Laging katambal ng alaala ang oras. Ano ang papel ng alaala sa ating pagkakaintindi sa oras? Paano kinakatawan ang oras sa pamamagitan ng alaala? Paano kinakatawan ang alaala sa pamamagitan ng oras? Ano ang mga bagay na inilulunsad sa pagitan ng dalawang kaisipang ito?

Ayon sa isang pilosopo, “the human ability self-consciously to identify personal episodes as having happened at particular past times is bound up with our unique capacities to locate events, and ourselves, in an asymmetric temporal and causal order” (Campbell 105). Sa usapin ng paglulugar, tahasang pinipili ni Roquentin at binabalasa ang kaniyang nakaraan at karanasan upang bumuo (pookin) ang sariling diwa. Masasabi ba nating kontrolado ni Roquentin ang paglulugar ng samu’t saring alaala nito sa tuwing kinikilala niya ang sarili? May kasarinlan ba ang ating pansariling kasaysayan na hiwalay sa mismong karanasang pumapaligid at bumubuo dito? Paano natin pagkakatiwalaan ang pagbisita ng mga alaalang binanlawan na ng oras at karanasan?

Ang susunod na puntong mahalagang talakayin sa pagpopook ay ang mismong siyudad kung saan namalagi si Roquentin habang sinusulat ang kaniyang talaarawan at ang kaniyang pananaliksik tungkol kay Marquis

de Rollebon. Habang binibisita ni Roquentin ang kaniyang mga alaala, hinuhubog din niya sa ating kamalayan ang anyo ng siyudad na kaniyang ginagalawan – ang Bouville. At habang hinuhulma sa ating kamalayan ang siyudad ng Bouville gamit ang dila ni Roquentin, hinuhubog naman ni Sartre ang ating kaisipan tungkol sa alaala gamit ang mga karanasan ni Roquentin sa nobela. Sa puntong ito, hindi maikakaila ang tuwirang (at minsá'y di-tuwirang) tambalan at pag-uusap ng pilosopiya at panitikan. Namalagi sa Bouville si Roquentin habang sinusulat ang kaniyang talaarawan, at ang kaniyang mga karanasan naman sa nakaraan ay binabalikan niya sa tuwina. Nakuha niyang pagtagpi-tagpiin ang iba't ibang karanasan niya sa loob (Bouville) at labas (ibang lugar bukod sa Bouville) upang makabuo ng kamalayang binagtas at binaybay nating mga mambabása.

Isang dekada mula nang sinimulan niya ang kaniyang paglalakbay ay minabuting bumalik ni Roquentin sa Bouville sa kadahilanang hitik sa kaaláman ang lugar na iyon patungkol sa kaniyang paksa. Nakakadagdag sa usapin ng alaala at kasaysayan ang pook na ginagalawan ni Roquentin. Ipinapahiwatig ang mismong damdamin niya sa tuwing inilalarawan ang Bouville. “I don’t know how to take advantage of the occasion: I walk at random, calm and empty, under this wasted sky” (70). Kabilang ang umiiral na panahon sa Bouville sa umiiral na panahon sa diwa at panamdamin ni Roquentin – kalmado, matiwasay, subalit hungkag at bakante. Isang malaking kawalan: ang nawawala at ang nagwawala. Sa usaping ito kaakibat ang kawalan ng gana ni Roquentin na mabúhay. Hindi dahil gusto niyang mamatay, subalit kadalasan na siyang binibisita ng mga katanungan ukol sa tunay na layunin ng kaniyang búhay. Para sa kaniya, nabubuhay na lámang siya dahil sa kaniyang pananaliksik. Ang kaniyang búhay ay si Marquis de Rollebon. Sa paksain na lámang naaaninagan ni Roquentin ang kaniyang adhikain: “Must not think too much about the value of History. You run the risk of being disgusted with it. Must not forget that de Rollebon now represents the only justification for my existence” (70). Ang Bouville bílang pook ay nakakadagdag sa pakiwari at pakiramdam ni Roquentin ng kawalan – kawalan ng saysay at kawalan ng kakaniyahan. Kung tutuusin, nakasalalay na lámang sa pagpapagal ang saysay at diwa ng kaniyang pamamalági. Subalit sino ba tayo upang sabihin kung tama ito o mali? Nakakasuklam ba kapag inusig at tinanong natin kung may tunay na adhikain at layunin ang mamuhay?

Sa Bouville nakaramdam nang matinding pag-iisa si Roquentin. Interessanteng pagtuunan ng pansin ang detalyadong pagsasalawanan niya sa mga tao at pamayanan sa Bouville; talento niya ang bantayán ang bawat kilos at galaw ng mga paliban-liban na katauhan subalit tahasan niyang nararamdaman ang pag-iisa. “No: there was no one; the steps were cracking by themselves” (73). Para kay Roquentin, mas tatanggapin niya pa ang kaniyang pag-iisa kaysa sumampalataya na mayroon siyang ibang kapiling o kasama. Puwede kayâ na isang paraan din ng pangangatha ang kaniyang pagpopook sa Bouville – pagpopook ng kasalukuyan bilang isang pagtatanghal ng ‘kasinungalingan’? Kung mayroong kakayahan si Roquentin na ipagsawalang-bahala ang mga tunay na tao, marahil ay káya rin niyang kwestiyunin ang katotohanan ng lugar – sa kapangyarihan ng wika, may lakas siyang kumatha ng siyudad: “Today they fixed nothing at all: it seemed that their very existence was subject to doubt. Nothing seemed true; I felt surrounded by cardboard scenery which could quickly be removed” (76-77). Sa puntong ito, ang lahat ay salát sa katauhan at katunayan. Babalik at babalik sa katanungan: alin na lámang ang matitiráng totoo? Marahil ang mananatili na lang sa tao ay ang kapangyarihang mamili at pangunahan ang desisyon nito: “I am full of anguish: the slightest movement irks me. I can’t imagine what they want with me. Yet, I must choose” (55). Nabubúhay ang tao upang mamili. Pinipili natin bawat araw ang desisyong mabuhay. Mismong mga báyag na ating pinapaniwalaan ay buhat sa ating puwersang mamili.

“A great menace weighs over the city” (80). Panganib. Walang katapusang panganib. Isa ito sa mabibigat na alalá (at alaala) ni Roquentin sa siyudad. Subalit para sa akin, ito rin ang alalá (at alaala) niya sa kaniyang sarili – ang walang humpay na panganib na lagi’t laging bumabagabag sa sarili. Ang Bouville mismo at ang mga natatanging pook nito ang nagdudulot ng alibadbad kay Roquentin. Isang interessanteng bahagi ay kung saan inamin niya ito: “Instead of the slight headache I feel coming on each time I visit a museum” (88). Mayroon siyang kapangyarihang mamili kung papások ba siya sa isang museo o hindi. Alam niya ang epekto at dulot ng pagpások sa mga museo. Subalit gagawin at gagawin niya pa rin ito.

Magandang paksain ang konsepto ng museo: isang lugar kung saan tinitipon (at ikinukulong) ang mga báyag ng kasaysayan na itinuturing na malalim ang halaga at saysay. Sa madaling sabi, isang espasyo kung saan nilalagay ang koleksyon ng nakaraang nilikom upang punan ang isang

pampublikong lugar – koleksyon ng samu't saring bagay na naglalaman ng alaala – ang tahasang paghahayag at pahayag ng kasaysayan at (ng) memorya.

Isa sa hindi malilimutang tagpuan sa nobela ay ang mainit na talakayan nina Roquentin at ng Self-Taught Man tungkol sa konsepto ng Diyos noong panahon ng digmaan. Taimtim, matalas, at may diin ang argumento nilang dalawa. Tumatak sa isip ko ang dalawang espasyo na tinalakay ng Self-Taught Man habang mainit ang balitaktakan nila. Ayon sa Self-Taught Man: “I do not believe in God; His existence is belied by science. But, in the internment camp, I learned to believe in men” (114). Sa Bouville, sinamahan balikan ni Roquentin ang Self-Taught Man sa isang espasyo ng kaniyang nakaraan kung saan nito unang naramdaman ang paniniwala sa katauhan ng tao. Nang simulang talakayin ng Self-Taught Man ang tiyak na karanasan niya sa kampong iyon, mas lalong maaaninagan ang katuwiran niya:

One of the first times they locked us in the shed, the crush was so great that at first I thought I was going to suffocate, then, suddenly, an overwhelming joy came over me, I almost fainted: then I felt that I loved these men like brothers, I wanted to embrace all of them. Each time I went back there I felt the same joy. The shed took on a sacred character in my eyes. (114)

Sa limitadong espasyo ng karahasan, paghihirap, at pagdurusa, doon mismo naramdaman ng Self-Taught Man ang kaniyang pagiging tao at pagiging makatao ng kaniyang kapuwa – ang pakikipagkapuwa-tao. Sa gitna ng kalungkutan at alala, natagpuan niya ang tunay na ligaya. Babalikan ko ang unang puntong nasabi sa sanaysay na ito: marahil ay sa pagdurusa natin nadarama ang pagiging tunay na tao, ang mamuhay, at ang matutunang sa gitna ng mismong pagdurusang ito nakatanim ang ating pag-iral. Inilarawan pa nito ang kaginhawahang dulot ng tila espasyo ng karahasang iyon: “Sometimes, I managed to escape the watchfulness of my guards, I slipped into it all alone and there, in the shadow, the memory of the joys I had known, filled me with a sort of ecstasy” (114). Makapangyarihan ang alaala ng ibinabalik at ang karanasang binabalikan sa usapin ng espasyo ng karahasan. Saan nanggagaling ang bugso ng damdaming ito? Sa alaala lang ba? O ang paniniwalang sa limitadong espasyo at panahong iyon, nagkaroon ng pakikipag-isa ang lahat ng nagdurusa; na ang pagdurusa ay mistulang



panganganinag ng pagkakaisa; na ang pighati ng isa ay pighati ng lahat? Matindi at lubusang kaligayahan ang dulot ng alaalang pilit binibista at dinadalaw. Mayroong lakas ang alaala upang piliin at pilitin kung ano ang nadarama ng diwa. Tila isang pagdausdos ng kapangyarihan ng utak upang sundan at sundin ito ng adhikai't kadahilanan – ang alaala ng espasyo, ang alaala sa espasyo, at ang espasyo ng alaala.

Isa pang halimbawa ng ganitong mga espasyo ng pagtitipon ng alaala (at alaala ng mga pagtitipon) ay ang Santa Misa. Ayon sa Self-Taught Man: “Monsieur, I have never been a believer. But couldn't one say that the real mystery of the Mass is the communion of souls? A French chaplain, who had only one arm, celebrated the Mass. We had a harmonium. Ah, Monsieur, how I loved those Masses. Even now, in memory of them, I sometimes go to church on Sunday morning” (115). Mahalaga para sa kaniya ang pagpopook ng katipunan. Isang mapaglarong konsepto ang katipunan: kasama sa bawat pagtitipon ay ang adhikaing punan ang isang guwang o bakanteng espasyo. Marahil, sa pagtitipon ng kamalayan ay unti-unting pinupuno o pinupunan ang mga kakulangan, pansarili man o sa pamayanan. Interessanteng bahagi sa mga winika ng Self-Taught Man ay ang konsepto ng ‘communion’ o pakikipag-isa. Maaari nating tignan ito bilang pakikipag-isa kasama ang buong pamayanang may iisang mithiin o paniniwala (pananampalataya), subalit puwede rin itong tignan bilang pakikipag-isa sa sarili – ang sariling watak, ang sariling wasák, ang sariling ligáw, at ang sariling pinalilibutan ng alála at alaala.

Kadalasan, ang pakikipag-isa sa sarili pa nga ang mas masalimuot na gampanan. Sa aking palagay, naging mahalaga sa Self-Taught Man ang tungkulin ng Santa Misa dahil bukod sa nasasaksihan nito ang pakikipag-isa kasama ang pamayanan, mas lubos niyang nararamdaman ang pakikipag-isa sa sariling diwa at kaluluwa. Kapiling ang ibang tao, posibleng tipunin ang sariling may kaisahan, punan ang sariling may mga kakulangan, kasabay ang pamayanang nagkaka-isa.

Mahalagang balikan na ang pag-uusap na ito sa pagitan ni Roquentin at ng Self-Taught Man ay naganap (mayroong kaganapan) sa Bouville. Sa orihinal na bigkas nito, ang literal na kahulugan ng Bouville (Boue-ville) ay bayan ng putik. Kung pagmamasdan ang laro sa mga salita, ginagamit natin ang putik sa antas ng talinghaga upang ilarawan ang kadalasa'y masasamang katangian. Halimbawa na lámang ay ang kaibigang-putik na ngangahulugang hindi totoong kaibigan. Binanggit rin ito sa isa sa mga ‘di-malilimutang linya

ni Maricel Soriano sa pelikulang *Káya Kong Abutin Ang Langit* (1984): “Ayaw ko ng masikip, ayaw ko ng walang tubig, ayaw ko ng mabaho, ayaw ko ng walang pagkain, ayaw ko ng putik!”

Sa kulturang natin, hindi naaayon at hindi maganda ang pagkakakilanlan sa konsepto ng putik. Subalit kailangan nating alalahanin na ang putik ay isang anyo ng lupa na pinagsama ng silt, clay, at mga organikong bágay. Ang ganitong uri ng lupa ay kanais-nais para sa agrikultura dahil ang pinaghalong mga laki ng butil at mga organikong sangkap ay nagpapahintulot sa tubig na patuyuin sa pamamagitan ng sistema habang pinapayagan ang kinakailangang antas ng tubig at pagpapanatili ng nutrient sa lupa. Ang organikong bahagi ay ang susi sa pagkakakilanlan ng isang lupa tulad ng putik.

Sa nobela, ang mismong bayan ng Bouville ang naging espasyo ng linangan ng kaisipan ng mga pangunahing tauhan upang mas lalong intindihin at maintindihan ang kanilang sarili at ang mundong nakapaligid sa kanila. Tulad ng butil ng butó o binhi, kailangan ang likás na mga katangian ng putik upang tumubo at umunlad (o umusad) ito patungong kasarinlan at kabuuan. Sa pamamagitan ng mga lugar sa nakaraan at kasalukuyan, tumalab ang pagpopook ng sarili ayon sa saysay ng kasaysayang naranasan. Iniintindi ng sarili kung paano nito naiintindihan ang tinatanggap ang mga alaalang dumadalaw at bumibisita dahil wala tayong tunay na kapangyarihan upang pigilan ang dausdos at daloy ng mga ito – nakababad tayo at patúloy na binabanlawan sa anino ng mga kaisipang nakatakda at naitakda bago pa tayo isinilang sa kabihasang ginagalawan.

### **Alaala ng/sa Kaisipan: Espasyo ng Memorya at Talisikan sa Nobela**

Sa mahabang kasaysayan ng kaisipan, matibay nang nailuklok na ang konsepto ng alaala at ang konsepto ng sarili ay matalik na magkatambal. Ayon sa isang pilosopo, “what makes me today the very same person as I was yesterday, is, basically, the fact that I can now remember what I did or experienced yesterday” (Locke 36). Para kay Locke, alaala ang nagdidikta ng ka-ako-han ng ako, at ang ka-sarili-nan ng sarili na hiwalay at may kaibahan sa susunod na tao. Subalit, kung mas lalapitan ang balangkas na ito ni Locke, makikita ang problematikong argumento dito: kung wala akong maalala, hindi ito nangyari at hindi ito naging totoo. Tignan natin ang pansariling

karanasan. Maraming bahagi ng ating búhay ang hindi na natin maalala nang malinaw. Mayroon na itong kalabuan dahil sa panahong nagdaan. Ngunit hindi ibig sabihin na hindi ito nangyari. Maaaring may katotohanan sa argumentong ito subalit nais kong tutukan ang diskusyon ni Locke tungkol sa tao at pagkatao upang itulay sa diskusyon ng alaala at kaisipan. Ang tao, ayon kay Locke, “is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places, which it does through only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and as seems to me essential to it” (39). Kung ihanapay ito sa mga salita ni René Descartes (“I think, therefore I am”), puwedeng sabihin na sadyang iniliban ni Locke ang sarili – na ang gawain ng sarili ang binigyang tuon kumpara sa ka-sarili-nan ng sarili. Mahalaga ang mga usapin ng sarili, alaala, katangian ng tao (pagkatao at pagiging makatao) sa susunod na bahagi ng aking sanaysay.

Tatangkain kong tahiin ang kahalagahan ng konsepto ng alaala upang ilarawan at ihayag ang tambalang pilosopiya’t panitikan sa susunod na bahagi ng sanaysay. Sa pag-uusap ukol sa alaala, panahon, at espasyo, posible nga bang maarok ang tagpuan ng kaisipan at panitikan? Paano inihahain ng iba’t ibang elemento sa nobela ang talisik ng pilosopiya? Paano inihahanda ng kaisipa’t pilosopiya ang mas malalim at mas matalas na pagkakaintindi sa nobela upang ilapit at ilapat tayo sa literatura? Paano ginagamit ng panitikan ang wika ng pilosopiya? Paano ginagamit ng pilosopiya ang wika ng panitikan?

Nais kong simulan ang talakayan na nag-uugat sa konsepto ng sarili: ang paglulugar ng sarili ayon sa kaisipan, at ang pagpopook ng sarili sa mismong gumaganang kaisipan sa tulong ng ilang talata mula sa nobela. Ayon kay Roquentin: “Nothing has changed and yet everything is different. I can’t describe it; it’s like the Nausea and yet it’s just the opposite: at last an adventure happens to me and when I question myself I see that it happens *that I am myself and that I am here*; I am the one who splits the night, I am as happy as the hero of the novel” (54). Sa bahaging ito, winika niya mismo ang isa sa pinoproblema ng sanaysay na ito – ang tagpuan ng pilosopiya at panitikan bilang kaakibat upang paglinangin ang kaisipan ng sarili. Ang nobela ay isang halimbawa ng pakikipag-tagisan at pakikipagsapalaran ng sarili at ng alaala: sa wika, ng wika, at para sa wika. Tinatanggap ng sarili ang hindi maipaliwanag na kaguluhan. Ang alam lámang ng sarili ay nararamdaman ito at nananatiling bumabagabag at umaaligid. Tulad ng nasabi sa unang bahagi

ng sanaysay, kumakapit si Roquentin sa danas at lakbay upang masukat ang pagiging buháy. May kapanatagan siyang nararamdaman nang wikain niyang kilalá niya ang kaniyang sarili at alam niya ang kaniyang kinalalagyan. Sa usaping ito, hindi lámang ang literal na kinalalagyan ang usapin: marahil ay kontento siya sa antas ng kaniyang kaalaman sa kaniyang pag-iral. Kung tutuusin, ang pag-iral ay nasusukat lang din sa kakayahang maarok ito ng kaisipan. Tiyak niyang sinabi dito ang pagiging bayani o bida sa isang nobela. Sa puntong ito, tanggap niya ang kaniyang kasarilinan at kasarinlan.

Sa unang bahagi ng sanaysay, tinalakay kung paano sinabi ni Roquentin na ang tanging adhikain na lámang ng kaniyang búhay ay ang sinusulat niyang libro tungkol sa Marquis de Rollebon. Subalit nilabanan at pinabulaanan rin niya ito agad: “I do not need to make phrases I write to bring certain circumstances to light. Beware of literature, I must follow the pen, without looking for words” (56). Kung panitik ang tanging lunsaran ni Roquentin ng kaniyang pag-iral, mulát at málay pa rin siya sa kahalagahan ng matalas na pagsipat ng literaturang sinusulat. Para sa kaniya, ang hantungang kalagayan ng mga bágay at mga pangyayari ay nakapaloob at nakapalibot sa kaisipan – ano ang ating kinasasadlakan sa tuwing nagtatagpo ang kaisipan at panitikan, kaisipan ng panitikan, at panitikan (o wikaan) ng kaisipan? Hinihimok táyong mas maging mapagmatiyag sa dikta ng literatura. Gaano kalaking bahagi ng panitikan ang gáling sa alaala? Gaano kalaking bahagi ng kaisipan ang gáling sa alaala? Madaling sabihin na ang alaala ay sarili at ang sarili ay ang koleksyon lámang ng mga alaala. Ang ganitong argumento ay pinabulaanan ni Locke:

Once you think that having or being a self is nothing but being a creature with the capacity to have I thoughts and to form, on the basis of that capacity, self-      conceptions, you immediately begin to notice that self-conceptions are, actually, interesting things. First, there’s no guarantee that our self-conceptions match the facts about us. I mean for all I have said so far, our self-conceptions can be completely or at least partly the result of confabulations and self-deceptions. Who am I then, really? It turns out that our self-conceptions are remarkable fragile things – as fragile as memory itself. (40)

Sa usapin ng alaala (at kaisipan ng alaala), isang katanungan ang patúloy na bumabagabag sa akin – ano ba ang tunay na adhikain ng mga alaala: ang punan ang patlang, o ang limasín ang nananatiling walang kabuluhan? Kadalasan, ang payak na pag-unawa natin sa alaala ay ang mga bágay na pumupunó sa isang hungkag na lugar, sa antas na literal man ito o sa antas ng talinghaga. Sa aking pakiwari, dinadagdagan natin ang karanasan upang makagawa ng mga alaalang mapupunan ang mga puwang na espasyo ng kaisipan. Subalit nais kong siyasatin ang espasyo ng kawalan. Para sa akin, patúloy (at walang-hanggan) ang proseso ng paglawak at paglawig ng kawalan at dito nanggagaling ang kagustuhan nating gumawa ng mga alaala sa pamamagitan ng mga karanasan.

Subalit minsan, naliligaw at nawawala ang mga alaala. Tulad na lámang ng karanasan ni Roquentin: “I try to refresh my memory: I need to feel all the tenderness that Anny inspires; it is there, this tenderness, it is near me, only asking to be born. But the smile does not return: it is finished. I remain dry and empty” (63). May saysay ba ang nakaraan, ang kasaysayan, kung sarili mismo ang nagbubura ng saysay ng pansariling kasaysayan? Ang pagkawala at pagwawala, ang paghulagpos mula sa alaala at sapilitang pagkaligáw nitong mga alaala ang tumutulak sa sarili upang balíkan ang kaisipan. Kinakailángang higpitan at luwagan ang dikta ng alaala upang hindi ito mauwi sa isang anyo ng pagbuburda ng alalá. May bitbit na lambing at pagsuyo ang alaala, subalit lagi’t laging mas nanaisin natin ang may anyong katawan – nahahawakan, nayayakap, at nahahagkan. Alaala ang isa sa mga bágay na hindíng-hindí mahihipo subalit ang tiyak ang kinaroroonan: ito ay nananatili at tuluyang mananatili. Maaari itong tabunan, ngunit lilitaw at lilitaw pa rin. Marahil ay maihahalintulad ang ilang alaala sa nasâ: patúloy itong hahabulin hanggang maangkin. Ang tanging kaibahan lang ay kadalasan, ang mga nasâ ay hindi makakamit at mananatiling nasâ ito dahil mismo sa antas nitong hindi makakamtan. Samantalang ang alaala ay nabubuo dahil ang mga ito ay naranasan mismo. Kahit punung-puno ang sarili ng mga alaala at karanasan, may mga pagkakataóng mananaig ang panamdám ng kawalan: ang espasyong walang kabuluhan.

Isa sa mga tumatak na kataga sa akin na sinambit ng Self-Taught Man ay patungkol sa panitik at wika: “We are separated by words” (122). Kung tutuusin, posibleng dalawang anyo ng salita ang tinutumbok niya dito – sa panunulat at pananalita. Ang unang intindi natin sa salita (na bumubuo sa mga pangungusap, mga saknong, mga taludtod, at kaisipan) ay

ang kasangkapan upang magkaintindihan. Subalit ayon sa Self-Taught Man, ang salita mismo ang humaharang, nagtitiwalag, at at naghihiwalay sa sarili mula sa iba – nagbubukod, at hindi nagbubuklod. Ang panitik nga ba ng kaisipan ang pumipigil sa pakikipag-isa? Hindi lámang ang pakikipag-isa sa pamayanan at sa iba, ngunit ang pakikipag-isa sa sarili. Dagdag pa rito ang kaisipan ng alibadbad: “So this is Nausea: this blinding evidence? I have scratched my head over it! I’ve written about it. Now I know: I exist – the world exists – and I know that the world exists” (122). Marahil ay nagdudulot ng alibadbad ang konsepto ng pag-iral. Ang wika na nagiging katibayan ng pag-iral ang mismong dahilan upang maduwal at iduwal ng sarili ang sariling pag-iral. Kayâ rin siguro mayroon tayong tákot sa kasalukuyang pag-iral dahil hinahanapan natin ng saysay ang panghabang-buhay na kasalukuyang ating ginagalawan. Ang wala sa kasalukuyan ay hindi maaaring maging totoo: “The true nature of the present revealed itself: it was what exists, and all that was not present did not exist. The past did not exist. Not at all. Not in things, not even in my thoughts” (95-96). Kung iisipin, táyo ay namumuhay, lagi’t lagi, sa nakaraan. Sa oras na bigkasin o sulátin ang isang bágay sa kasalukuyan ay kaagad na itong nakalipas. Hindi ba’t ang lahat ay bakas lámang ng nakaraan? Subalit kung pati ang nakaraan ay walang katotohanan, ano ang matitirá sa atin? Ito na nga ba ang tunay na alibadbad: ang katunayang wala naman talagang matitirá para sa atin? Marami pa ang maaaring masabi tungkol sa panitikan, kaisipan, teorya, at alaala na nasambit sa nobela. Kúlang ang sanaysay na ito upang talakayin ang lahat ng interseksyon nito. Marahil ang sanaysay na ito ay panimula lámang tungkol sa mas malalim pang pagsisiyasat sa konsepto ng espasyo, pagpopook, alaala, at kung paano pinapaandar ng kaisipan at panitikan ang mga ideyang ito.

### **Lugar ng Alaala sa Pangmalawakang Alibadbad ng Pilipinas**

Ang kasalukuyang sitwasyon sa Pilipinas, partikular sa Metro Manila, maging sa mga bahagi nito kung saan nainirahan ang mga komunidad ng lumad, ay isang malawak at masalimuot na diskurso patungkol sa alibadbad, alaala, at alala na maikukumpara sa mga puntong tinalakay at inusisa sa nobela ni Jean Paul Sartre. Mayroon tayong kasabihan na isa sa pinakatumatak na ugali ng mga Pilipino ay ito: madali tayong makalimot. Kung tutuusin, maaari nitong dalumatin ang dalawang mistulang magkasalungat na perspektibo: sa isang banda, masasabing isang magandang katangian ito ng ating pagiging Pilipino dahil umiiwas tayo sa pagtatanim ng galit o sama ng loob, at

hinahayaan na lamang natin ang mga pangyayaring ito. Mas nanaisin natin ang 'magpatawad' (o kalimutan ang mga pangyayari), marahil sa kadahilang turo din ito ng simbahang Katolika. Ngunit, sa kabilang banda, mapanganib na katangian ito dahil sa maraming pagkakataon, nakakalimot din tayong matuto mula sa mga masasamang karanasan. Nagkakaroon ng malawakang 'amnesia' tungkol sa mga naranasang karahasan, pati na rin ang mga anyo ng pandarahas na araw-araw dinaranas subalit pinipili na lamang isiping natural ang mga ito.

Sa usaping ito, mahalagang siyasatin ang interseksyon ng tatlong importanteng mga konsepto: karahasan, alaala, at troma (trauma). Ang pangunahing problema na tumatahi sa tatlong konseptong ito ay ang moda o estilo ng pangdadahas na nanggagaling mismo sa estado at kung paano nito naaapektuhan ang buhay ng mga mamamayan. Gaya ng sinabi ko sa naunang talata, hindi bago ang ganitong mga pangyayari sa ating bansa. Isang halimbawa na marahil ay ang programang "War on Drugs" ni Presidente Rodrigo Duterte kung saan ang pangunahing biktima lamang ay ang mahihirap. Sa pamamagitan ng karahasan, iginigiit ng rehimeng Duterte ang sapilitang pagpuksa sa droga, subalit ang mga 'maliliit' na mamamayan lamang ang sinusupil. Hindi dumadaan sa tamang proseso ang hustisya. Nakasadlak ang hustisya sa pulisya na walang habas at walang malasakit. Alaala na lamang ang nananatili sa libu-libong mga pamilyang saksi sa karahasang sinapit. Masasabing troma ang hatid nito sa dalawang magkaiba, ngunit magkalapit na kadahilanan: ang mapait na alaalang iniwan ng nasawi sa kaniyang mga mahal sa buhay, at ang alaalang iniwan na kaakibat ng pagmamalabis ng estado at pamahalaang ang unang responsibilidad ay dapat ang kaligtasan ng lahat ng mamayan.

Nakapaloob sa naratibo ng karahasan ang pag-aalaala, at pag-aalala. Kadalasan, ang diskurso ng alaala ay iniipit (at umiipit) sa natural na pulitika nito. Halimbawa na lamang ay ang paggamit sa alaala upang bigyang dahilan ang karahasan. Nagiging instrumento ang alaala upang ipagpatuloy ang karahasang isinasagawa sa mga mahihirap: ang alalahanin ang kapahamakang dulot ng droga. Sa ganitong propaganda, nawawalan ng kapasidad maging kritikal ang mga mamamayang malayo sa sentro ng karahasan. Kinakasangkapan ang alaala upang tandaan (ng mga 'malilinis' at ligtas na mamamayan) na ang kalupitan at lubos na karahasang sinapit ng mga gumagamit ng mga pinagbabawal na droga ay nararapat nilang pagdusahan. Ang alibadbad ay may taglay na kapangyarihang itulak tayo

mula sa ating kaginhawahan. Subalit, may mga pagkakataong ang alibadbad mismo ang magtutulak sa tao upang mawalan ng ganang maging kritikal. Marahil, isang dahilan dito ay ang tahasang pagsuko sa realidad o kaisipang wala nang magagawa sa dahas na nararanasan araw-araw. Sumusuko ang ating kaisipan at tinatanggap na lamang ang kalagayan ng karahasan. Sa ganitong anggulo ng usapin papasok ang konsepto ng pagkamanhid. Nagiging natural na lamang ba ang pagpaslang at nagsasawalang-kibo tayo dahil mas nanaisin nating hindi maramdaman o talikuran ang alibadbad? Na sa dami ng karahasan at pang-aalipustang dinaranas natin at pinili na nating maging manhid dito? Ang tanging paraan upang magamit nang wasto ang alibadbad ay tungo sa pangmawalakang kilos. Ito lamang ang natatanging paraan upang maisuka ang karamdaman ng alibadbad.

Sa huli, hindi ba dapat makapangyarihang salik ang pagkaalibadbad sa mga karanasan natin sa siyudad na pilit pinapa-ikot o sinusupil ang tunay na alaala? Wagas at sobra-sobra na ang pananamantala sa ating kalagayan ng estado at pamahalaan. Sa ganitong paraan, inaantala ang pansarili at pambansang kapakanan. Ito ang anyo ng alibadbad na sana ay ginagamit natin upang makamit ang malawakang pagkilos o reporma. Hindi bago sa kasaysayan ang gawing kasangkapan ang alaala upang magbunga ng mabisang kilusan para sa tinatamasang pag-unlad, hindi lamang sa mga naghaharing-uri, ngunit ang pag-unlad ng lahat ng mamamayan. Maraming posibilidad ang handog ng tamang pagbabalangkas ng alaala, at para sa akin, sapat at hinog na ang ating mga karanasan sa paghihirap upang maglunsad ng malawakang pagkilos kontra pagbubura at pagmamaniipula ng pambansang kasaysayan – ang pambansang alaala.

Naaagnas ang katawan, ngunit ang katawang kinatawan ng wika, kinatawan sa panitik at panitikan, ay magpupumilit at mananatili. Nabubulok din ba ang wika kasabay ng unti-unting pagkaka-agnas ng utak at katawan, mga kinatawan ng karanasan? Hanggang kailan may kapangyarihang manatili ang kaisipan – ang lahat ay kasaysayang sinalaysay na may saysay, at ang panitik ng kaisipan ay isang anyo ng salaysay na patúloy kinakatha ang iba’t ibang pamamaraan kung paano dumadaloy, gumagalaw, umiindayog, at sumasayaw sa balangkas ng utak at saliw ng bawat saknong, taludtod, at pangungusap. Patúloy ang ragasa at daluyong ng alalá at alaala, walang-hanggang bugso ng kirot, sakít, at pait; hinahagkan ang bawat pag-gising nang buong higpit. Hindi ito huhupa, hindi rin ito titigil – sa paanong paraan natin hahalughugin ang kakayahang sagipin ang sariling tumututol at



binabali ang sanghi? Pagmasdan ang sigwa ng memorya at nakaraan; harapin ito nang buong tapang dahil patúloy ang panunubos ng danas, ang pangamba at siyasat ng dahas, at tanging sa tugunang alaala lámang natin matutuklasan ang ginhawa't kaparusahan – kapuwa hinihilom, humihilom.

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# KRITISISMO BÍLANG PAGNINILAY<sup>1</sup>

Louie Jon A. Sánchez

Marahil, kahit pahapyaw, mabuting magsimula ngayon sa konteksto bago pumalaot sa talakay. Ang aking pangunahing hakà na “pagninilay” ang kritisismo ay nagmumula sa mga sanaysay ng aking unang aklat ng panunuri sa tula, ang *Aralin at Siyasat: Mga Pagninilay Hinggil sa Tula*, na inilulungsad natin ngayon. Mahigit sampung taon ang panahong ginugol sa pagsulat at pagtipon ng mga sanaysay. Produkto ang mga ito ng aking pagtalima, sa anyo ng kritika, sa tungkuling makipagbalitaktakan hinggil sa tula, habang patuloy ding nililintang ang aking sariling panulaan.

Sa introduksiyon ng aklat ko ginamit ang “pagninilay” bílang “etiketa” na makapaglalarawan sa mga sanaysay sa aklat (Sánchez 2018, 1-12). Sa naunang pagkakataon, binanggit ko nang dulot ito ng sariling kritikal at personal na pag-aalangan sa etiketang “kritisismong pampanitikan,” sa bigat nito bílang tatak na dala ng pangangailangan sa taksonomiya ng paglalathala; at sa tungkuling kaakibat nito, sapagkat, siyempre, sineseryoso ko naman talaga ito, tulad ng marami kong gawaing malikhaín at iskolarsyip (Sánchez 2019).<sup>2</sup> Sa okasyong ito, ibig kong pagnilayan mismo ang kritisismo bílang pagninilay, na supling ng pag-aalangang nabanggit, na sa totoo lámang ay dulot din ng pamamangka sa sari-saring ilog ng paglikha—sa pagkakataong ito, sa ilog ng tula at ilog ng kritika.

## Simulan sa Konsentrasyon

Bílang makata, matalab sa aking áral ang minsang paglalarawan ng Americanang makata na si Jane Hirshfield (1997) hinggil sa tungkulin

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1 Binigkas sa The Author's Chair Series ng University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, University of Santo Tomas Central Library Auditorium, Agosto 29, 2019.

2 Sa aking panayam na “Ako ang Makata, Kritiko, at Daigdig: Ilang Pagninilay” binása sa panel na “Weaving Words into Worlds: The Self and Space in Literature” sa Philippine Readers and Writers Festival 2019, Agosto 2, 2019, Raffles Hotel, Lungsod Makati. Mababása sa <https://louiejonasanchez.com/2019/08/02/ako-ang-makata-kritiko-at-daigdig-ilang-pagninilay/>.

ng tula. Wika niya: "Poetry's work is the clarification and magnification of being" (Hirshfield 1997, vii). At papaano raw ito nangyayari? Sa isa pang sansaysay, binanggit niya naman ang kung papaanong "(w)e seek in art the elusive intensity by which it knows" (ibid, 5). At sa tula, bílang kaniya ring pangunahing halimbawa, pinahalagahan niya ang "concentration," konsentrasyon, bílang pagpapatalima sa atin ng talinghaga tungo sa maliwanag na pagkamalay (ibid, 6-7).

Kapag nagbabasá raw táyo ng tula, animo'y hinihimok táyo nito sa konsentrasyon, upang hagilapin ang sentro ng mga tensiyon at kontradiksiyon, bumaling sa mga ito nang masinsinan, at paigtingin ang ating paghihinagap sa bawat imahen, taludtod, balangkas, pangungusap ng tula. Sa hulí, sapagkat kilalá rin ang makata bílang isang disipulo ng Zen, iniugnay niya rin ito sa nasabing espirituwalidad ng "one-pointed mind of meditation," at wika pa niya: "When you go to concentration's center, you are pricked, which should mean you wake up—exactly what a good poem helps you do" (ibid, 7).

Pormatibo para sa akin ang mga kataga ni Hirshfield, at lalong naging matalab nang simulan ko ring tuklasin ang Zen. Sa aking pagbabalik-tanaw ngayon hinggil sa sariling praktika ng kritika, higit kong nauunawaan kung bakit ko ginagamit ang salitang "pagninilay." Papaano, sumasalok kasi ang aking pamumuna at pagsusuri sa tula sa dalawang pangunahing ilog—ang ilog ng pagmamakata, sapagkat ako nga ay nagmamakata; at ang ilog ng pagbabasá, sapagkat nananalig akong mapalalawig ng pagbaling sa iba't ibang pagtula't pagtudla ang aking sariling sining, pati na ang sining ng pagtuturo ng tula, at panitikan sa pangkabuuan.

Nakabuo ako ng mga pagninilay sa tula, sa anyong kritika, sapagkat sangkot ako sa gawain ng paglikha at magkaakibat na gawain ng pagtuklas sa iba pang orisonte ng pananalinghaga at pagtuturo hinggil dito sa kolehiyo. Supling ng bawat pagninilay na tinutupad ko sa mga ito ang mapagnilay na eksplikasyon at elaborasyon hinggil sa mga bagay-bagay sa pagtula, sa kasaysayan at pamamaraan nito, at sa sari-saring diwain at paksa ng matulain. Sa aking malikhaing kasaysayan, ang kritisismo ang naging ikatlong termino sa patuloy na pagtuklas. At dahil sa ubod ng pagtula at pagbabasá-pagtuturo ay ang adhikang mapaghawang konsentrasyon, nagkakaroon ng saysay ang paggamit ko mismo, o kritikal na paglalarawan sa kritisismo, bílang iyon na nga, pagninilay.

Sa tingin ko, matibay na sandigan ng ganitong hakà ang aking poetika na wari'y nilalagom ng isang susing-parirala mula sa isang tula sa

aking ikalawang aklat, ang *Kung Saan sa Katawan* (2013). Sa tulang iyon na nagpupugay kay San Ignacio de Loyola, inilarawan ko ang imahen at birtrud ng santong pundador ng Kapisanan ni Hesus, na nakatanghal sa College Chapel ng Ateneo de Manila University, bílang “walang pagmamadaling pananatili.”<sup>3</sup> Isang matamang konsentrasyon sa kadakilaan ng diyos na tumatawag kahit sa makasalanan at nagpapagunitang katagpuin ang kadakilaang iyon sa lahat ng mga bagay. Lunggati ko naman talaga iyon, ang “walang pagmamadaling pananatili,” kahit sa makamundo’t mapagnasang mga karanasang pinapaksa ko.

Ang totoo, salin at tangka sa pag-angkin ko ang pariralang “walang pagmamadaling pananatili” sa minsang tinalakay ng makata at guro kong si Marjorie Evasco, ang sining ng “lingering,” lalo sa pagbása sa panitikan. At dito na ako pumipihit sa pagbabasá bílang pagsisikhay ng panulaan at pagtuturo. Kung tama ang pagkakaalala ko, pinahalagahan ni Evasco ang lingering bílang mistulang pananahan sa panitikan, lalo marahil sa tula, na ang kabuuan ay madalas may mga saknong o *stanza*, na ang ibig sabihin sa Italyano ay silid.

Kapag nagbabasá táyo, parang sandali táyong nanahan sa silid ng akda, ngunit walang pagmamadaling lumisan sapagkat kailangang damhin, namnamin ang pagkasandali ng sandaling pananahan. Sakto ito sa pakahulugan ng salita mula sa *Apple Dictionary* app: “(to) stay in a place longer than necessary because of a reluctance to leave.”

Sa aking sariling mga klase, pinahahalagahan ko ang ganitong prinsipyo, lalo pa’t nagmumula ang mga mag-aaral ngayon sa henerasyong masagitsit na awdyo-biswal at bawás ang pagkahirati at atensiyon sa teksto. Hindi lámang talagang *binabása* ang isang tula, giit ko. *Pinananahanan* ito, kahit sumandali, taliwas sa popular na kasabihan ngayon hinggil sa mga may pinagdadaan: “daanan mo lámang, huwag mong támbayán.” Ang tula, at panitikan, sa pangkabuuan, ay isang ligtas na tahanan, o tambáyán upang masumpungan ang pagkamalay hinggil sa mga bagay-bagay.

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3 Sinipi ito ng makatang Benilda Santos sa kaniyang *blurb* sa aking aklat, at wika pa niya: “Narito [sa aklat] ang *ehersisyo ng walang pagmamadaling pananatili* [ang kabuuan ng taludtod], isang poetika ng maamo, malumanay (bagaman mariin at mapusok din), at mahigit na paghawak sa haraya samantalang laging sinisipat at tinutudla ang puso sa tula.”

## Pagninilay sa Pagninilay

Palibahasa’y tambay talaga ako ng tula, kayâ nga rin siguro kinailangan ko ng isa pang anyo upang mapagtindigan nitong mga palaboy na pananahanan sa talinghaga. Kailangan ng isa pang artipisyo, ng isa pang silid, upang hindi lámang matustusan ang bawat lunggati para sa paglikha at sa malikhain, bagkus, upang maaari, mapakalma rin ang sari-saring pag-aalangan o pagkabalisa na dulot mismo ng paglikha at pagbaling sa malikhain. At iyon na nga ang kritisismo, ang kritisismo bílang pagninilay, na sa isang bandá’y natural na tungkulin ng talagang pagsasaalang-alang sa kaloob-looban ng panulaan, batay sa sarili kong karanasan.

Sa *Vocabulario dela Lengua Tagala* (1860, 2013) ng mga Padreng Juan de Noceda at Pedro de Sanlucar, may kahulugang “(i)saalang-alang ang isang bagay sa kaloob-looban nito,” ang salitâng ugat na “nilay,” at ang “manilay na tauo” naman ay “táong laging mapagsaalang-alang ng kalooban.” Naiisip ko tuloy, bunsod ng mga pakahulugan mula sa Sinaunang Tagalog: bukod sa lalong pagpapatalim ng pananaw sa pagtula, ano ba talaga ang naidudulot ng pagiging mapagsaalang-alang, pagiging mapagnilay, lalo sa anyo ng kritisismo, at sa ating kaso, kritisismong pampanulaan?

Konsentrasyon pa rin ang naiisip kong tugon, katulad ng patuloy kong natutuklasan sa pagtula at magkaakibat na gawain ng pagbása at pagtuturo ng tula. Ngunit isa pang salita ang pumukaw sa akin sa pagbabalik ko sa paboritong kritiko, ang Briton na si Catherine Belsey, na maalamat sa pagsawata niya sa sentido kumon ng ideolohiya sa pamamagitan ng tinatawag niyang “critical practice.” Wika niya, sa aklat na *Criticism* (2016): “Criticism proceeds by putting forward answers to questions, and specific questions focus attention differently” (Belsey 2016, 4).

*Attention.* Ang kritisismo, sa pinakabuod nito, ay atensiyon—pagbaling, pagtitig, pagsipat, pagtingin, pagtalima, lalo sa pinakamahihirap na tanong ng, at sa panitikan—isa pang uri ng konsentrasyon, ng walang pagmamadaling pananatili, ng pagninilay. Sa kritisismo bílang pagninilay, nakaharap ko ang mga ito, lalo sa masugid, masigasig na pagpaksa sa praktika, kasaysayan, at kislap-diwa ng tula. Isa rin itong pagtahan, pagtambay sa danas, tulad ng pagsulat ng tula, at pagbása/pagtuturo ng tula.

Ngunit matapos ay ano? Sapagkat naitulak na nga akong magnilay, na iputong din sa ulo ang salakot ng pagiging kritiko, higit na naging malinaw sa akin, sa pagsasangkot ko sa sarili sa inilarawan minsan ni Isagani Cruz

(2003) na kabuwisitan ng kritisismo [wika niya: “Buwisit ang isang kritiko at kabuwisitan ang kritika. Iyon ang papel ng kritiko’t kritika sa ating lipunan ngayon” (19)], ang maigting na ugnayan ng paglikha at pagbása/pagtuturo, sa inuusbungang kasaysayan.

Nakatungko o nakatriyanggulo sa tatlong ito, sa paglikha, pagbabasá/pagtuturo, at kasaysayan ang kabuuang lawas ng aking kritisismo bilang pagninilay, hindi lámang dahil ang mga gawaing ito na sinikap kong ipaliwanag bílang kritisismo ay talagang nakasalalay sa panahon, kundi lalo’t higit, ang naging paglalabas ng aklat na *Aralín at Siyasat* ay, kung бага, rin aragasa rin ng agos ng kasaysayan.

Nang ibalita sa akin ni John Jack Wigley, dáting direktor ng University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, ang rekomandasyong tanggapin at ilathala ang *Aralín at Siyasat*, malinaw na ang badya ng mga pangyayari, lalo na ang pagkabuwal ng marami dahil sa digmaan laban sa droga ni Duterte at ang tuluyan at palihim na pagpapalibing sa diktador sa Libingan ng mga Bayani. Paparagasa na ang halos tahimik at orkestadong paniniil at pagpapalimot sa lipunan.

Napatanong tuloy ako sa sarili. Ano pa ang silbi nitong aklat, bukod sa magdudulot ito sa akin ng taunang publication award, bílang karera ko naman talaga ang maglathala, sa panahong maglathala-o-masawi (publish-or-perish) ang kalakarang akademiko at mahalaga ang pagbibilang ng *citation* at limpak-limpak ang maaaring maiwi kung malalathala sa isang Scopus o World of Science-indexed publication?

Nanlumo ako, sa totoo lámang, nang pagnilayan ko ang tanong, lalo’t nang maipaabot sa akin ng anghel ang mabuting balita, nakatakda kaming makinig sa premyado ng Nobel para sa panitikan na si Mario Vargas Llosa, na magsasabi kalaunan, sa kaniyang lektura sa UST, na talagang kinatatakutan ng mga diktadura ang mabubuting panitikan.

Sinibulan din ako ng pag-asa, kahit papaano. Kasi, kung totoo ngang lahat ng gawaing ito ay pagninilay—ang pagtula, pagbása, at pagtuturo—at naanyuan ko ito sa isang kritisismong mababang-loob na nagpapakilalang pagninilay, isang pangangailangang gawain, sa ating panahon ngayon, ang matalik, walang-tákot, at masusing pagsasaalang-alang sa kalooban.

Kailangan natin ang kakayahang ito, lalo’t hindi man pormal na ipinapataw ang anumang Batas Militar, laganap naman ang sindak at paninikil. Hindi na ito kailangang pangalanan. Ito na ang ating realidad, kung

saan patuloy na inilalako ang ating soberanya sa makabibili sa pinakamataas na halaga at lubhang dinadapurak ang ating dangal, sa ngalan ng malilinis na lungsod at maluluwag at nadaraanang bangketa. Maganda, pero...

## **Sa Loob ng mga Pag-aalangan**

Binabalikan ko ngayon ang susing-salita na kritisismo bílang pagninilay ay naigigiit, muli at muli, na ang panulat, sa totoo lámang, ay hindi lámang talagang personal at solitaryong gawain, bagkus, isang gawaing panlipunan, isang gawaing kolektibo, kahit mag-isang nakikipambuno sa salita ang manunulat. Isa itong pagkatok sa sariling loob, na ang totoo, ay loob din ng lipunan at kolektibo.

Wari’y “pakikiisang-loob” din, wika nga ng Heswítang Paring Albert Alejo (1990), lalo pa’t sa isang bandá, tulad ng kaniyang pamimilosopiya sa loob, ang kritisismo bílang pagninilay, ay nababalot din ng pagkapukaw sa mga pagkabalisa na, kung mamarapating hiramín ko ang kaniyang mga kataga, ay “dala ng pagkasangkot sa kapwa, pagkasangkot na lalong nagpapalalim sa sariling loob” (4).

Ang manunulat, bílang makata, mambabása, guro, o kritiko, ay bahaging-bahagi ng daigdig, at tiyak na kahit papaano’y binabalisa, binabagabag, ng kaniyang madalas ay walang-katuwirang paligid. Nag-aalangan siya, at ang pag-aalangang iyan, sa una’t huli, ay pag-aalangan din ng kaniyang kapwa. Minsan ko nang nabanggit na bunsod ng mga pag-aalangan ang aking sariling pagsulat ng kritisismo. Ang sabi ko pa, “Ibig ko pang makatagpo ng kahit kakarampot na katiyakan, at nasumpungan ko rin iyon sa anyo ng sanaysay, sa anyo ng kritisismo” (Sánchez, 2019).

Maraming nakaaalangang bagay akong binatá sa pagsulat ng mga sanaysay sa aklat, lalo’t hinggil sa pagbabasá mismo ng mga tula at ng penomena ng tula. Ngunit nakamata ang mga pagbása, ang mga pagninilay na iyon sa daigdig, sa labas ng mga akda at kanilang kasaysayan, na may talab din sa akin, bílang isang humuhugot din, ng wika ni Alejo (1990) ay “lakas at udyok na magpakatao at lumaya” (5).

Nag-aalangan ako habang nagninilay sa kritisismo, nagtatanong, nag-uusisa, humahagilap ng kapalagayang-loob, kahit sinasabing isa lámang iyong ilusyon. Gayundin sa pagsulat at pagtuturo ng tula. Binabalingan ko itong mga pag-aalangang ito na parang mga palagiang bisita sa tahanan, mga tambay na kailangang estimahin, hindi lámang upang tuluyan akong lubayan,

kundi upang higit na maging matalab sa akin, sa kabilâng bandá, ang tula, at panitikan sa pangkabuuan, at sa isa pa, ang danas ng aking kapwa-tao.

Isang espasyo ng paghimpil, ng isa ring walang-pagmamadaling pananatili, ang kritisismo bílang pagninilay, upang higit na mapagkalooban ng sapat na lápit at bulay ang naisakatagang mga pagpapakalma sa mga pag-aalangan at pag-aalinlangan. Isa ring pagdalisay sa loob, lalo pa't takda naman ng kasaysayan, sa simula't sapul, ang mga tamang panahon ng pagkilos at pagkalos.

Para ring walang-humpay na pag-awit ng *Pasyon*, kung gayon, ang krisisismo bílang pagninilay, paghahanda sa loob at pagpapaigting sa pakikipagkapatiran at pagdamay, wika nga ng kanonigong pagsusuri ni Reynaldo Iletto (1979). Gawaing indibidwal at kolektibo ang pagsulat at diseminasyon nito, at isang panibagong wika [ibig kong hiramín dito ang parirala ni Iletto na “a language for venting ill feelings” na inilapat niya sa *Pasyon* bílang tagapaghasik ng diwang rebolusyonaryo bago at matapos ang Panahon ng Himagsikan (Iletto 1979, 21)], lalo sa panahong dinudusta na nga ang karapatan sa malayang pagpahayag ay isinasantabi pa ang panitikan bílang mapagpalayang disiplinang akademiko. Darating ang panahon ng pagkilos at pagkalos. Kailangang maghintay at magmatiyag. Kailangang magtiyaga. Kailangang maghanda.

### **Kritisismo Bílang Pakikipag-usap**

Ibig ko ring igiit na isa itong pangunahing paraan ng patuloy na pakikipag-usap, itong kritisismo bílang pagninilay. Hindi lámang sa kapwa, na pinakikiisahan ng loob, ngunit lalo na sa kapwang piniling maglayo ng loob, dulot na rin ng mga naging takbo ng kontemporaneong kasaysayan at hidwaang umusbong at nagtulak ng matigas na pagpanig.

Kamakailan, usap-usapan ang insidente ng “panggagahasa” umano sa isang pambansang palihan, at siyempre, naging tampok sa social media ang mga balitaktakan hinggil dito. May ilang naglabas ng kanilang mga personal na saloobin, may ilan ding lumagda sa isang manifesto bílang pakikiisa sa biktimang naghahanap ng hustisya para sa nasirang puri at pinaniniwalaang kawalang-ingat ng mga tagapangasiwa ng palihan.

Malinaw ang aking posisyon hinggil dito, bagaman, nag-alangan ako sa uri ng mapagpako-sa-krus na diskursong lumilitaw: nararapat lámang na isulong ang gawing ligtas na espasyo o safe space ang kabuuang institusyon



ng panitikan at malikhaing pagsulat at ang mga sangay na tagapagpagaganap nito tulad ng mga palihan. Walang dapat pagtalunan hinggil sa bagay na ito, bagay na napakaiging dulot ng kilusang #metoo sa buong daigdig na patuloy na niyayanig ng sari-saring eskandalong may kaugnayan sa seksuwal na pang-aabuso at laro sa kapangyarihan.

Sa gitna ng paglalagablab ng usapin, sakâ naman biglang nagparamdam itong makatang dati'y mahal sa akin [ang totoo ay mahal pa rin naman], at sumulat ng mapanudyong tula tungkol sa insidente. Ipinaskil sa Facebook. Kumalat.

“Gahasa sa Gahasa” ang pamagat, na sa aking pagbása’y ibig magbigay ng matalim na pagsusuri hinggil sa kung papaanong nagsasaespektakulo lámang ang usapin ng panggagahasa, lalo sa social media, at sa isang bandá, sa tingin ng di iilan, ay walang ibig panigan sa pagitan ng nag-aakusa at akusado, na sa tula ay tila pinag-anyo pang nasisiyahan naman sa ispektakulong nalikha ng alingasngas, sa “panggagahasa” sa mismong nagtatagisang naratibo ng gahasa.

Natural na tumanggap ito ng marubdob na pamumuna, lalo pa’t kontrobersiyal naman talaga ang naging mga pinakahuling paninindigan ng makata. “Repulsive” pa nga ang paglalarawan ng isang kamakata sa Instagram, ibig sabihin, nakakasuklam, nakakasuka. May gayundin akong pakiramdam sa tula, pero nanurot ang pag-aalangan, sapagkat, anuman ang sabihin, tula pa rin itong inihaharap sa atin at dapat balingan. Pinatulog ko muna ang aking paghusga, hanggang kinabukasan, makausap ko hinggil dito ang isa pang makatang kaibigan at tulad ng makatang kontrobersiyal ay kahanay namin sa samaháng Linangan sa Imahen, Retorika, at Anyo (LIRA).

Sinabi ko sa makatang kausap ang aking panimulang pagbása, pati na ang aking pag-aalangan sa mga paghusga sa tula—lalo sa makata. May nahinagap akong intensiyon, lalo pa’t tinamaan nang husto sa usapin ang direktor ng palihan. Siyempre, wala naman ito sa teksto, sabi nga ng mga pormalista.

Sa aming pagpapalitan ng opinyon, biglang naitanong sa akin ng kausap: “LJ, bakit ka nag-alangan? Nagandahan ka ano?” Napabuntong-hininga ako sumandali, at sinabi kong, “Kahit kailan, wala akong naging duda sa kaniyang husay, lalo sa kaniyang wika.” Natural na manggaling ito sa akin, dahil bahagi ako ng unang henerasyon ng mga makatang humanga sa kaniya. Ang unang aklat pa nga niya ng tula ang paksa ng aking undergraduate thesis.

Pero naisip ko rin na kagyat na itugon: “Ngunit, hindi lahat ng matulain o maganda ay tama.”

At noon ako nagkaroon ng katahimikan sa loob, dahil nawari ko kung saan nagmumula ang lahat ng pagkasuklam at pagsusuka sa paligid. Hindi ako kampante sa pagkakahusga lámang dito bílang “repulsive,” kayâ kinailangan ko ring manahimik at papag-isipan ang mga bagay-bagay. Gusto kong maunawaan, kapwa ang tula, at ang reaksiyon dito ng mga tao, sa paraang kahit papaano’y sandaling mapagbukod sa mga ito sa mga piniling paninindigan ng makata.

*Sandali*, sapagkat hindi ko rin naman dapat kaligtaan na ang pananaw na lumilitaw sa tula ay dulot din ng kaniyang mga paninindigan, ng kaniyang sariling kasaysayan. Susi rin ito sa pagpapakahulugan. Sa pagkakataong iyon, nagninilay ako. Hindi ko siya kailangang usigin o ipagtanggol. Masalimuot ang pahayag sapagkat piniling anyuan sa pamamagitan ng tula. Ilahas ito’t madulas, mahirap ipirme sa iisang pagpapakahulugan. Nakalublob pa rin ito sa balintuna, sa parikala. Nagsasanga ang dila.

Kayâ kailangan talagang himpilan muna ito, walang pagmamadali, at ituring itong tula nga, kahit nakahihindik na pagnilayan. Kailangang maging matapang sa pagtanaw. Matibay ang sikhura.

Patuloy akong nakikipag-usap sa makatang usap-usapan sa pamamagitan nitong paliwanag hinggil sa kritisismo bílang pagninilay, nag-aabot ng kamay ng pakikipagkaibigan, kahit, ang dinig ko, sasampalin niya raw ako sa oras na kami’y magkita. Hindi ko maatim na tumigil sa pakikipag-usap, sapagkat, sa huli, lahat ng uri ng pagsasakataga, para sa akin, ay usbong ng malasakit at pagmamahal. Hindi ako maiinip sa paghihintay.

## **Lunas sa Pagkainip**

Bílang pangwakas, tungkol naman sa pagkainip, na sa ganang akin ay laganap ngayon, lalo’t biyaya at sumpa ng digital na teknolohiya at social media ang agad-agarang pakikitalamitam at talastasan, ang instantaneity na binabanggit ng pilosopong Pranses na si Paul Virilio (2010), na aniya’y nagdudulot ng “deterrence of the future as well as the past” dahil sa “loss of memory” (Virilio 2010, 70).

Sa tingin ko, isang bagay ding tinutugon nitong wari’y “balangkas” na ngayong kritisismo bílang pagninilay ang mismong pagkainip, na parang

lagi táyong itinutulak ng pagkakataon na paspasang masangkot sa kung ano-anong usapin, magrehistro ng sentimiyento, makisawsaw gámit ang malikhaing arsenal tulad ng kritisismo. Naranasan ko ito mismo sa kasong naikuwento ko kanina, sa sarili kong hanay ng mga makata na parang ibig ipatapon sa ibang planeta ang tinalakay na makata.

Waring lumalabnaw ang mga paninindigan sapagkat nauunahan ng pagmamadali, ng paminsan-minsang nakakainis na pambabroso, dahil bakâ nga naman mapanis ang mga tindig at mawalan ng talab [ang bokabularyo natin diyan ngayon ay “relevance”].

Ethos na siguro natin talaga ang pagmamadali, ang kakagyatan o immediacy, lalo’t madaling malibing sa limot ang lahat, lalo sa nakalutang na artsibo ng internet. Naaalaala ko tuloy na may isang paboritong salita si Virgilio Almario kapag may ibig latayan ng pagpuna o paggagad sa kaniyang kritisismo—ang inip. Sa mga sulatín, marami na siyang pinuna sapagkat “mainipin,” lalo kung may kaugnayan sa kakulangan sa pagsusuri sa mga pangunahing sanggunian, sa mababaw at lisyang pagsusuri, sa bulagsak na pananaliksik, o sa karaniwang heneralisasyong kulang sa suhay at patunay.

Marahil, kung tatanungin ako sa dapat matutuhan sa “uri” ng kritisismong aking ibig tuparin, at patuloy na tinutuklas, marahil ay ito nga iyon: ang batahin ang inip, ang titigan ang paninindigan nang mata sa mata, ang maging estratehiko at marunong sa aksiyon, lalo matapos ng masusing pagbubulay gámit ang anumang anyo ng pagsasakataga—sa tula man o kritisismo.

Mahirap pahinugin sa pílit ang pagtanaw at pananaw. Hindi rin naman agad-agarang makokombinse ang kapuwa sa mga iniisip na nararapat na paninindigan o pagpanig. Nakasandig pa rin ako sa *walang pagmamadaling pananatili*, sa pananalig na may maibubunga itong pirmeng pagninilay, sapagkat humihingi rin ito ng panahon ng pagkaganap, ng panahon ng aksiyon.

Sa tingin ko, may tákot ang lahat sa paghimpil, sa pagtigil sumandali, dahil posible nga namang tubuan ito ng stasis at paralisis na maaaring tuluyang pumigil sa ahensiya ng nakikisangkot. Maaari siyang maglunoy sa nilay na halos makapagpalibing, makapagpabilanggo sa loob. Sa kabilâng bandá, maaari ring magtulak ang pagmamadali sa pagkareaksiyonaryo’t higit na mapanganib na mga pagsugod.

Ngunit isa talaga itong pangangailangan, itong pagninilay, lalo sa atin, na sa pangkalahatan, ay sineseryoso, di lámang ang tungkulin ng paglikha, kundi lalo't higit, ang intelektuwal na adhikang katawanin ang mga nasasalaysayan, at isawika patungong kapanyarihan, ani nga ni Edward Said (1996) ang katotohanan (8), ang laging itinatatwang katotohanan.

Bahagi ng hinihinging “commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability” (Said 1996, 13) sa ating lahat, hindi lámang ang kahandaang lumaban at mag-alay ng búhay para sa kaibigan, kundi lalo na, ang pagdaanan ang mahabang panahon ng pagdalisay sa mismong sariling loob upang tupdin ang mga piniling oblasyon, ang lantay na pagkilatis sa sarili at pananaw na para kang inuurian.

Ang kritisismo bílang pagninilay, sa ganang akin, ay mistulang paglukso sa pusod ng malagablab na apoy, nag-uusisa ng *nakatitiyak ka ba*, at naninindak ang bagà, alipato, at lagitik. Isa itong walang katapusang paglukso sa pagkadarang, sapagkat sa hulí, ito’y isang pag-aalay ng sarili sa ngalan ng pakikiisang-loob.

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# TSER

Maynard Manansala

## SINOPSIS

Huling araw na ni Teacher Rose, o Tser, sa bakwit iskul, sa Maragusan. Hindi ito dahil tapos na ang klase kundi dahil sa palala nang palalang pandarahas na ginagawa, hindi lang sa mga Lumad kundi sa mga guro nila. Pagpasok ng klasrum—sa huling pagkakataon—magbabalik sa isip niya ang mga alaala; simula nang unang araw na puno ng pananabik, hanggang sa unti-unti nang alihan ng bagabag. Kumbaga’y isang matinding pagsusulit ng sarili—at pagpapasiya. Pagdating ng tatlo sa apat niyang estudyante, masosorpresa silang pumasok lang si Tser para magpaalam. Masosorpresa silang aalis na ang gurong nangakong hindi mawawala anot anuman. Ngunit, masosorpresa rin si Tser sa balitang kinidnap ang kaniyang estudyante. Ang pinakamahirap na tanong sa huli’y kung paano maaapektuhan ang binubuo niyang pasiya.

## MGA TAUHAN

TEACHER ROSE, 21 anyos, full-time volunteer teacher sa bakwit iskul ng isang barangay sa Maragusan

ARVIC, 22 anyos, lalaking kabataang Lumad, Grade 10 student

MARIFE, 20 anyos, babaeng kabataang Lumad, Grade 10 student

IAN, 21 anyos, lalaking kabataang Lumad, Grade 10 student

JULIUS, 21 anyos, lalaking kabataang Lumad, Grade 10 student

## TAGPUAN

Sa bakwit iskul ng isang barangay sa Maragusan. Kasalukuyan.

Payak ang kuwarto. Sa kapayakan, kapansing-pansing hindi talagang klasrum ang espasyo. May movable blackboard lang sa gitna. May mga fruit box—pinagpatong ang ilan—para magsilbing mesa, ang iba’y upuan. May

masining na pinta ang mga pader. May kumot na pinag-ubrang kortina sa bintana.

Papasok si TEACHER ROSE, ilalapag ang bag sa gilid ng mesa, ipapatong ang cellphone sa mesa. Susulat siya sa blackboard ng: LESSON. Hindi niya maitutuloy ang karugtong. Kukunin niya sa bag ang Mathematics textbook, bubunutin ang litratong nakaipit sa pagitan ng mga pahina. Uupo siya sa isang fruit box, pagmamasdan ang litrato.

ROSE(matipid na ngiti) : Ilang linggo na rin pala, Mama. Ang bilis. Parang yung biyahe lang papunta dito. Tinanong ko 'yung mamàng nagdradrayb ng motor, kung ga'no katagal ang biyahe mula Maragusan. D'yan lang, malapit lang, sabi ng mamà. Di ko alam, Mama. Kung namaligno ba 'ko, o pa'no. O ganon lang ba 'ko kaeksayted? Parang d'yan lang nga. Parang ang lapit lang nga. Kahit ang totoo, tatlong oras akong nakaangkas sa motor. Dalawa hanggang tatlong oras kaming naglalakad sa bundok, patinga-tingala. Sama-sama kasi kaming naghahanap ng mga tanda. (Matatangay ng emosyon.) Saya rin! Naalala mo nung college, gustong-gusto kong mag-moutaineer? Parang nagawa ko na dito! Adbentyur siya, Mama! (Tatayo.)

Magpapalit ang timpla ng ilaw, indikasyon ng balik-tanaw. Papasok sina ARVIC, MARIFE, IAN at JULIUS, uupo sa kani-kaniyang fruit box.

ROSE : At ang sapa, Mama! (Gagawin ang aksiyon.) Tumawid kami ng sapa! Pagdating, sabi ng head teacher na sumalubong, magpatuyo raw muna. O magpalit kaya. Ang kulit ko rin, e. Sabi ko, hindi na ho, sabak na. (Tatawa.) Parang ayaw pang burahin ng katawan ko ang sobenir ng adbentyur, Mama. Kaya 'yon, basang sisiw ako sa first day ko.

Mabilis na hihilahin ni ARVIC ang kortina.

ARVIC (iaabot ang kortina kay ROSE): Baka magkasakit ka, Tser.

ROSE (titingnan ang kortina, mapapangiti): Uy, salamat.

MARIFE: E, kortina kaya yan. 'Kaw talaga, Arvic.

Mapapakamot ng batok si ARVIC.

JULIUS : Oo nga. Nakakahiya kay Tser.

IAN : Ang alikabok na n'yan.

ROSE : Hindi. Okey lang. Ang swit nga.

Isa-isang titingnan ni ARVIC nang may pagmamalaki sina MARIFE, JULIUS at IAN. Iiwas ng tingin sina IAN at JULIUS.

MARIFE: A, basta. (Mapapatitig kay ROSE.)

ROSE (ngingiti): Kyut n'yo naman.

MARIFE: Tser...

ROSE : O?

MARIFE: Ikaw ba talaga ang titser namin?

ROSE : Oo naman. Bakit mo natanong... (mumuwestrang nagtatanong ng pangalan)?

MARIFE: Marife. Kasi, parang ang bata mo pa.

IAN : Oo nga, Tser. Ilang taon mo na ba?

ROSE : Ha? Twenti-wan. Kayo ba?

Isa-isang magbabalingan at magsisiwas ng tingin ang apat na estudyante.

ROSE : Sige, ganito. Isa-isa tayong magpakilala, ha? (Bubuwelo.)  
Ako nga pala si Titser Rose, twenti-wan. Math ang tinapos ko.



(Mumuwestra kay ARVIC na sumunod.)

ARVIC : A... Arvic. Sikstin. Greyd ten.

IAN : Mukha mo! Lokohan?!

MARIFE: Twenti-tu na yan siya, Tser.

ARVIC : Ba't may nakakaalam ba sa inyo? (Kay MARIFE.) Ikaw? (Kay IAN.) Ikaw? (Kay JULIUS.) Ikaw?

ROSE : Teka, ano ulit yon?

IAN : Kasi, Tser, kaming lahat, hindi naman namin alam ang bertday namin.

ROSE : Paanong—

MARIFE: Hula lang lahat ng eyj namin, Tser. Tantiyahan ba.

JULIUS : Tser... Di ba Mat titser ka?

ROSE (masasabik): Ha? Oo!

JULIUS : Baka pwede mo kaming turuang kompyutin, yung totoong eyj namin?

MARIFE: Oo nga, Tser. Para hindi na hula-hula.

ROSE : Pwede naman. May paraan. Pero, sa ngayon, ayos lang ba kung 'yun munang alam n'yo?

MARIFE: Sige. Ako si Marife. Twenti. Pero filing ko talaga, Tser, twenti lang talaga ako.

ARVIC : E, ano naman? Ang tanda mo pa ring greyd ten!

MARIFE: Maski pa! Mas bata pa rin ako kay Tser nang... isang taon!

ROSE :O, sige na. Awat na, awat na. (Mumuwestra kay IAN.)

IAN : Ian, Tser. 'Lam n'yo na.

JULIUS: Sabihin mo na, 'tol. Twenti-one!

MARIFE &

ARVIC : Greyd ten!

JULIUS: Julius, Tser. Seym-seym.

Tatawa ang lahat.

ARVIC (kay ROSE): E, Tser...

ROSE : Ano yun, Arvic?

ARVIC : 'Wag na, Tser. Nakakahiya.

IAN : Nahiya ka pa!

ARVIC : Bakit? Bawal?

ROSE : Sabihin mo na. (Ngingiti.)

ARVIC : Sana magtagal kayo dito, Tser.

ROSE : 'Kaw talaga, Arvic. Kakarating ko pa lang, pag-alis ko na agad ang nasa isip mo. Ito nga, o, basa pa 'ko.

ARVIC : E, pa'no Tser, nakita ko (ingunguso ang cellphone sa mesa) may selpown ka.

ROSE: O? Ngayon?

Sisikuhin ni ARVIC si JULIUS para ituloy ang gustong sabihin.

JULIUS: Wala kasing signal dito, Tser.

MARIFE: Wala nga tayong koryente, e.

ROSE : E, ano naman?

IAN : Pa'no na Tser yung boypren mo?

ROSE : Walang ganon-ganon, okey?!

ARVIC : E, yung pamili mo?

ROSE: E... (Mapapahinga nang malalim.) Naiintindihan naman nila.  
Na... titser ako.

MARIFE: Waw, lodi!

IAN : Oo nga.

JULIUS : 'Wag kang mag-alala, Tser. Kahit walang signal, unli-tubig  
naman tayo dito.

MARIFE: Kaya unli-ligo din! Teynkyu, sapa!

ARVIC : Saka, Tser, unli din ang fuds. Anong gusto mo? Menggo? Jakfrut?

ROSE : Kahit ano. Kayo talaga!

ARVIC : Basta, Tser, a. Pramis, hindi ka mawawala. Tuturuan mo pa  
kami, Tser.

ROSE (may riin): Oo. (Itataas ang kanang kamay.) Pramis. Pero, teka.  
(Mamasdan ang paligid.) Ang alam ko, ang sabi sa 'kin bago ako  
pumunta dito, mga walo raw kayo...

Mag-iiwasan ulit ng tingin ang mga estudyante.

ROSE (pabiro): Parang kayo naman yata ang umaalis?

MARIFE: Hindi, Tser. Kasi... (Sa mga kasama.) Uy, kayo na nga.

IAN : Gusto rin naman nilang mag-aral. Kaya lang, 'yung iba, tutulong na lang daw sa parents nila. Sa pagtatanim ba. Wala naman daw mangyayari sa 'min dito sa bakwit iskul. Sa pagtatanim daw, atlist, may frut.

ARVIC : 'Yung isa, Tser. Sumama na do'n. (Lilingon.) Sa bundok. Nakakapagod na raw kasing matakot.

JULIUS: Sana, Tser, kahit apat lang kami, tuloy pa rin.

ROSE : Oo naman. Walo, apat, kahit ilan 'yan. Kahit ilan lang. Mag-aaral tayo.

Ipapahiwatig ng ilaw ang pagbabalik sa kasalukuyan. Tutok ang ilaw kay ROSE.

ROSE (balik sa litrato): Isang linggo akong umiyak, Mama. Iniyakan ko ang signal. Iniyakan ko ang koryente. Sabihin nang mahirap, pero city girl pa rin 'tong dalaga mo, 'no! Iniyakan ko ang layo ko sa atin. Iniyakan ko ang mga unang araw ko, na pag kausap ang marami sa komyuniti, para kaming pipi. Senyasan nang senyasan, Mama. Naimadyin mo ba? Ang yaman nila sa K at W. Wala akong maintindihan. Pero, the show must go on, ang sabi nga. Gano'n din siguro sa pagiging titser, Mama. I reminded myself na, mas malaki ang goal ko dito. Na hindi ako pumunta dito para umiyak lang. Dati, isa lang akong hamak na volleyball fan. Nakikimiron. Hanggang umabot sa kasama na ako sa mga sumisigaw ng, Animo!, tuwing may game. Salamat sa iskolarsyip. Akala ko nga nu'ng umpisa, mao-OP ako; na wala akong lugar sa eskuwelahan ng mga "conyo." Pero, mali ako Mama. Second year college ako nun, may exposure sa UCCP Davao. Mas lumawak ang tanaw ko. Sa kabila ng kalagayan natin sa buhay, ang kaunti pa lang pala ng nakita ko. May nakilala akong datu. Datu pero ni hindi marunong humawak ng bolpen. Tandang-tanda ko ang panawagan— kailangan nila ng guro. Sumagi man lang ba sa isip mong susunod ako sa yapak mo, Mama? Nangako akong babalikan ko sila. Kaya, 'eto...

Babalik ang ilaw sa modang balik-tanaw. Tatayo sa harap ng kani-kaniyang fruit box sina ARVIC, MARIFE, IAN at JULIUS.

ARVIC : Tser, Tser!

ROSE : Yes, Arvic?

ARVIC : Alam na namin!

ROSE : Ang?

Tatanguan ni ARVIC ang mga kasama.

IAN : Basta, Tser, relaks ka lang diyan.

Sabay-sabay kakantahin nina ARVIC, MARIFE, IAN at JULIUS ang “Pipit” nang may kasamang koreograpiya.

MAY PUMUKOL SA PIPIT SA SANGA NG ISANG KAHOY  
AT NAHAGIP NG BATO ANG PAKPAK NG ISANG IBON  
DAHIL SA SAKIT, DI NA NAKAYA PANG LUMIPAD  
AT ANG NANGYARI AY NAHULOG, NGUNIT PARANG  
TAONG BUMIGKAS,  
“MAMANG KAY LUPIT, ANG PUSO MO’Y DI NA NAHABAG,  
PAG PUMANAW ANG BUHAY KO, MAY ISANG PIPIT NA  
IIYAK.”

ROSE (papalakpak): Ang galing!

Magbabalik ang ilaw sa kasalukuyan.

ROSE (Babaling.) Tinuro ko sa kanila ang kanta mo, Mama. Ang kanta natin. Gustong-gusto ko’yon pag kinakanta mo. Nung bata pa kami, bago ka pumasok sa trabaho. Nung malaki-laki na, pag hindi mapakali. Pag kabado sa eksam o pag hindi dalawin ng antok. Tinuruan ko sila—ng maraming bagay. Ang sarap nilang turuan. Nakalimutan nilang sabihin; hindi lang tubig, mangga, saging, jackfruit ang unli sa kanila. Unli rin ang kagustuhan

nilang matuto. (Magpupunta sa blackboard, magsusulat ng trigonometric equation.)

Nasa balik-tanaw muli ang ilaw. (TALA: Simula sa bahaging ito, bagaman nasa balik-tanaw, panaka-nakang ibabato ni ROSE ang mga linya sa kaniyang Mama.) Magtataas ng kamay si ARVIC.

ROSE : Yes, Arvic?

ARVIC : Tser, ano ba'ng gamit ng SohCahToa trigonometric function sa buhay namin?

ROSE (mapapaisip): A... parang ganito. Nakita mo yung flag natin sa labas? Pwede nating sukatin do'n ang shadow natin.

ARVIC : (mamamangha): Talaga? Tapos, Tser?

ROSE : Pwede nating gamitin 'yon para malaman ang oras.

ARVIC : Waw. Sige nga, Tser. Gawin natin.

Pangungunahan ni ROSE ang pagsukat, saka ipapaubaya kay ARVIC ang gawain.

MARIFE (sa sarili): Sayantipik...

IAN (sa sarili): Objektib...

JULIUS (sa sarili): Kritikal...

ROSE : Sa mga bagay-bagay, Ma.

ARVIC (kay ROSE): Anong gamit n'yan sa buhay namin, Tser?

ROSE : At 'yon na ang laging tanong sa bawat lesson. Praktikal na kaalaman ang prayoriti.

Mula pagsukat ng anino, lilipat ang mga estudyante sa pagsukat ng parihabang espasyo.

IAN : Namesyur na namin ang pond, Tser.

ROSE : Narekord mo, Marife?

MARIFE: Yes, Tser. Nandito na lahat. (Iwawasiwas ang notebook.)

ROSE : Berigud!

JULIUS : Grabe, Tser.

ROSE : O?

JULIUS : Pa'no kaya namin mamemesyur ang mga lupang nakamkam sa 'min, Tser? Ilang piye na kaya?

IAN : Di na 'yun kayang sukatin, 'tol. (Tatawa.)

ROSE : Sa Technology and Livelihood Education, hindi na lang basta mga linya at numero sa teksbuk ang sinusukat, ang kinokompyut nila.

IAN : Pa'no ba kompyutin ang oversupply ng menggo? Ng jakfrut? Ha, Tser?

Magsusulat ng mga formula sa blackboard si ROSE.

ROSE : Hindi na lang tunay nilang eyj ang bumabagabag sa kanila, o kung paano ito makokompyut. Habang nakatanaw sa bundok, kinokompyut rin ng isip nila kung—

ARVIC (nakatanaw sa malayo): Pa'no na kaya ang ekonomiya naming mga Lumad, Tser?

ROSE : At kung sa ibang eskwelahan, nilalaro-laro lang ang MAPEH, sa bakwit iskul, totoong buhay ang inaatupag.

(Maaaring sabayan ng koreograpiya nina ARVIC, MARIFE, IAN at JULIUS ang parteng ito.)

ROSE: Level 1...

MARIFE: Paunang lunas.

ROSE: Level 2...

IAN: Acupuncture.

ROSE: Level 3...

JULIUS : Pag-opera ng cyst.

ARVIC : (imumuwestra nang may pilyong ngiti): At pagtutuli!

ROSE: Kahit ang titser, kasama sa treyning. (Masasabik.) Pag nagka-baby boy nga ako, pwedeng ako na ang tumuli sa kanya. Nakapag-opera na ako ng cyst, sa isang elder sa komyuniti. Isang uri ng bulaklak lang ang gamit naming anestisyá. (Sasapuhin ang pisngi.) Umaatake na naman ang ngipin ko. Shet.

MARIFE (may iaabot na bigkis ng mga dahon): Mayana ang katapat ng masakit na ipin, Tser. Wala nang mepanamik-mepanamik.

ROSE : Ang maganda, hindi one-way ang proseso. May nakukuha sila sa 'kin, may nakukuha rin ako sa kanila. (Kay Marife.) Salamat, Marife.

ARVIC (may bitbit na dalawang kaldero): Redi na, Tser?

ROSE : Redi!

ARVIC : Asukal (iaangat ang kaldero) plas panis na kanin (iaangat ang isa pang kaldero) ikwals, pertilayser!

ROSE : Tinuruan ko sila—ng maraming bagay. Pero ba't ganon... parang mas natututo ako.

IAN : Ang saya naman, Tser.

ROSE : Ang saya nga.

IAN : Hindi nga, Tser. Ang saya.

ROSE : (malilito) Ha?



MARIFE: Kasi, Tser, tanda na raw niya.

IAN : Uy, o. Gago talaga neto. (Mapapahiya.) Sori, Tser.

JULIUS : Sabihin mo na kasi, 'tol.

ARVIC : Baka mapanis yan, parang 'tong kanin.

IAN : Kasi... akala namin, leyt na kami, Tser. Tingnan mo nga si Arvic, matanda pa sa 'yo.

ARVIC : Nandamay pa talaga!

MARIFE: Alam namin, Tser, marami pa kaming kakaining bigas sa estadis pero, di namin ramdam.

IAN : Nahirapan ka ngang magesyur.

MARIFE: Sira!

IAN : Biro lang. (Kay ROSE.) Tsaka, Tser, filing namin, pantay-pantay. Walang mas magaling.

ROSE : Kaya tama rin na wala tayong ranking. Walang pers-pers onors.

JULIUS : Lahat na lang kami, Tser, pers!

ROSE : Oo naman! Lahat kayo, may kanya-kanyang galing. Maganda yan. Para pag gumradweyt kayo, may mga Lumad na titser na. Kayo na ang tatawaging "Tser." (Lalapit sa blackboard para burahin ang mga nakasulat maliban sa LESSON.)

Lalabas sina ARVIC, MARIFE, IAN at JULIUS.

ROSE : Tama sila, e. Pantay-pantay. Lahat sila, pers. Walang boses na mas dominante. Ang laging hinahanap namin, kung ano ang tingin ng lahat. Ito yung buhay na sobrang simple, pero kontento.

Lalamlam ang ilaw ng entablado.

ROSE : Pero ‘yung simpleng buhay... ‘yun din ang ginugulo.

Papasok sina ARVIC, IAN at JULIUS. Isa-isa silang ngingitian ni ROSE;  
ngunit walang maka-tingin nang tuwid.

ROSE : O, parang may kulang.

JULIUS (lilingon-lingon): Wala, Tser.

ROSE : Wala?

IAN : Meron ba, Tser?

ROSE : Talaga?

Mapapayuko lang si ARVIC.

ROSE : Si Marife? Absent?

IAN : Nat piling wel, Tser.

ROSE (di-kumbinsido, pero): Okay... Sige...

Sisiku-sikuhin ni ARVIC si IAN, makikita ito ni ROSE.

ROSE : May kailangan ba ‘kong malaman?

IAN : Wa—

ARVIC : Sab—

ROSE : Di ba, mahalaga sa atin ang tingin ng lahat?

ARVIC : Ano kasi, Tser, si Marife ayaw nang payagan ng nanay niya.

ROSE : Para magtanim na lang din?

JULIUS: O—

ARVIC : Hin—

ARVIC : Hindi, Tser. Hindi mo nabalitaan ang nangyari sa Caragan, Tser?

Titingnan lang ni ROSE si ARVIC na parang sinasabihang ituloy lang ang kuwento.

ARVIC : Pinagbabaril ng mga militar ‘yung bakwit iskul do’n.

ROSE (nagtitimpi): Pinagbabaril?

IAN : O— (Mapapatingin kay ARVIC.)

Tatanguan ni ARVIC si IAN para magpatuloy.

IAN : Oo, Tser.

ROSE : Wala naman sanang nasaktan o...

IAN : Wala naman, Tser.

ROSE : Gud.

JULIUS (may kimkim na galit): Nanindak lang daw talaga, Tser.

ROSE : Bakit daw?

ARVIC : Di ka ba nagtataka, Tser? Kung bakit twenti-tu na ako, pero Greyd 10 pa rin?

ROSE : Umm... dahil wala kayong akses sa mga eskwelahan.

JULIUS : May eskwelahan kami.

IAN : Pinapasara lang nila.

ROSE : Bakit gano'n?

IAN : Wala raw permit.

ROSE : Impossible.

JULIUS : Impossible talaga, Tser.

ARVIC : Kaya kami tumandang Greyd 10. Ayaw nila kaming matuto.

ROSE : Karapatan n'yo 'yon.

ARVIC : Tser! 'Wag n'yo sasabihin sa kanila ang salitang yan.

IAN : Oo, Tser. Alerdyik sila sa salitang karapatan.

JULIUS : Kaya pinagbabaril 'yung iskul sa Caragan.

ROSE : (may panunuya ang tono): Dahil sa karapatan?

ARVIC : Dumating kasi ang mga militar. Nagkampo sa iskul, Tser.

ROSE : Tapos...

ARVIC : May estudyanteng nagtanong. Ang sabi, "Ser, di ba dapat 5,000 meters ang layo sa komyuniti?" (paki-confirm po ito, 5,000 meters ay 5 kilometers, parang masyadong malayo).

IAN : "Ano?!" Nandilat daw 'yung militar, Tser.

ROSE : E, tama naman 'yung estudyante. Yun ang sinasabi sa International Humanitarian Law.

JULIUS : 'Yan nga ang katwiran nung estudyante, Tser.

IAN : Nagpalakpakan daw ang mga militar.

ARVIC : Ang tatalino n'yo! Dahil 'yan sa tanginang Lumad iskul! Sabi raw, Tser.

ROSE : Ang sama nila.

ARVIC : Hindi pa do'n natapos, Tser. Tinuturuan daw kami para maging rekrut—ng NPA.

IAN : Kaya ang dapat daw sa mga bakwit iskul, sinusunog.

JULIUS : Doon naglabas ng baril yung militar na nandilat. Nagpapatok nang nagpapatok, Tser. Malas na lang ng tamaan.

ROSE : Kaya wala si Marife.

ARVIC : Oo, Tser.

IAN : Nung marinig ng nanay niya ang kuwento, sinabihan niya si Marife. Sa bahay na lang daw. Delikado raw mag-aral.

JULIUS : Nawala na nga raw ang tatay ni Marife dahil sa mga militar. Pati ba naman daw si Marife...

Ipapahiwatig ng ilaw ang pagbabalik sa kasalukuyan.

ROSE : May 219 Lumad schools na nagkalat sa Mindanao, Mama. Walumpu't walo na ang naipasara ng mga militar. Madalas nilang paratangang walang permit. Ang iba, basta na lang nilang sinusunog. Sa Socsargen, sa CLANS area, sinunog nila ang cottage ng mga titser. Alam ko ang mga kuwento, Mama, bago pa nila kinuwento. Ramdam ko lang na kailangan nilang magkuwento. Para maglabas ng pangamba... ng galit. Kaya hinayaan ko.

Magpapalit muli ang ilaw para dalhin si ROSE sa balik-tanaw. Uupo sa kani-kaniyang fruit box sina ARVIC, IAN at JULIUS. Papasok si MARIFE.

ROSE (masosorpresa): Marife!!! Nandito ka! Nandito ka na ulit!

MARIFE: Namiss kita, Tser.

ROSE (mapapangiti): Talaga ba?

ARVIC (kay MARIFE): Si Tser lang talaga?

MARIFE: Oo!

ARVIC : Si Ian, hindi mo namiss?

MARIFE: Ang gago mo! Namiss.

ARVIC &

JULIUS : Ayiii!!!

MARIFE: Okey na?

ROSE : Pa'no mong napapayag ang nanay mo?

MARIFE: Ako pa, Tser! 'Wag mo 'kong ismolin.

ROSE : Di nga.

MARIFE: Nagulat din ako sa nanay ko, Tser. Lalo ngayon, unli rin ang mga kuwento.

ROSE : Mga kuwento?

MARIFE (magdadalawang-isip): Ay... 'wag na, Tser. Baka...

IAN : 'Wag mong ismolin si Tser.

MARIFE: Hindi, 'wag na lang.

JULIUS : Sige na!

ARVIC : Saan ba kasi? (Naiinip.) Wala naman 'yan.

MARIFE: Meron! Sa Tagog kaya! Yung pinsan ko!

ROSE : May indiscriminate firing din?

MARIFE: Meron, Tser. Pero may iba pang sindakan. Depende sa trip ng militar.

Tatayo sina ARVIC, IAN at JULIUS na parang mga tauhang bahagi ng kuwento ni MARIFE.

MARIFE: Nung umpisa, nasa labas lang ng klasrum, pasilip-silip.

ARVIC (astang sundalo): O, may naligaw bang kaaway?

MARIFE: Ho?

ARVIC : Yung mga taga-bundok?

Hindi makakakibo si MARIFE.

ARVIC : Kayo, hindi ko rin maintindihan kung nag-aaral ba talaga kayo o nag-aastang mangmang lang talaga. (May kawalan ng pasensiya.) Mga NPA!

MARIFE: Wala naman hong naligaw, ser.

ARVIC : Talaga?

Tatango lang si MARIFE.

ARVIC : Kahit minsan?

MARIFE: Kung meron man, ser, nanghihingi lang ng tubig, ng konting pagkain.

ARVIC : Binibigyan n'yo naman.

MARIFE: E, kasi ser—

ARVIC : E, kasi isa kayo sa kanila, ha!

MARIFE (halos naiiyak na): Hindi ho!

ARVIC : Siguruhin n'yo lang, (patuya) titser.

MARIFE (kay ROSE): Ilang araw daw pagkatapos, nasa loob na sila, Tser.

ROSE : Oo?

MARIFE: Parang bisor. Humihila ng silya. Pwepwesto sa harap.

Gagawin ni IAN ang eksekusyon.

IAN : Magaling ba si titser n'yo?

MARIFE: Walang makatingin. Tumatango pero nakayuko.

IAN : Parang ang dudungo ng mga estudyante mo, titser. Parang tama nang ipahinto na natin 'tong bakwit iskul na 'to.

MARIFE: Hindi naman ho, ser. Ninenerbiyos lang siguro. Ano lang ho...

IAN : Ninenerbyos? Anong ikakanerbyos nila? Anong ikakanerbyos mo titser?

MARIFE (haharap sa mga imahinaryong estudyante): Sige, class. Simula na tayo? Our lesson for today—

IAN : Ano nga bang lesson natin? Parang gusto ko, Math.

MARIFE: MAPEH kasi kami today, ser.

IAN : (may banta sa tono): Di pwedeng Math?

MARIFE: May sinusunod ho kasi—



IAN : Parang gusto ko kasing magbilang. Gusto kong magbilang ng...  
(Hahawakan ang baril, sa paraang dinidisplay sa mga estudyante.)  
bala.

MARIFE: Ser, pakitabi na ho. Hindi lang ho makapokus ang mga  
estudyante.

IAN : Hindi, hindi, magma-Math nga kami. Ang kulit rin ng tuktok  
mo, Tiser.

Mahahawi sa pagkakatayo si MARIFE.

IAN (sa mga imahinaryong estudyante): Subukan nga natin ang galing  
n'yo. Kung meron akong walong bala (iaangat) dito sa baril  
ko; pero gusto kong bawasan ng isa (ituturo ang baril sa ulo ni  
MARIFE)...

MARIFE: Ser, maawa kayo, ser.

IAN (iiling-iling): Ilan ang matitira? (Pasigaw.) Sagot!

MARIFE (kay ROSE): Hanggang sa susundo sila ng iba pang estudents  
para sa bording iskul, Tser. Di pa rin tinigilan. May harang.

ROSE : Checkpoint?

Tatango si MARIFE. Si JULIUS ang aarteng sundalo.

JULIUS : Saan sila, mam?

MARIFE: Sa boarding school ho, ser.

JULIUS : Alam ko ho. Pero 'yang mga kabataang kasama n'yo?

MARIFE: May parent's consent ho sila.

JULIUS : Talaga?

Iaabot ni MARIFE ang isang envelope na may lamang mga papel. Padaskol itong aabutin ni JULIUS at titingnan.

JULIUS : Wala ito, mam. Di ito ang kailangan.

MARIFE: Paano ho ba, ser? ‘Yan na ho ‘yon, e. ‘Yung consent.

JULIUS : E, hindi nga ho valid.

MARIFE: Paano ho ang mga bata?

JULIUS : Basta ho hindi sila pwedeng pumasok dito.

MARIFE: Ho?

JULIUS : Pauwiin n’yo na sa kanila.

MARIFE: Mag-aaral ho ang mga ito, e. Baka naman pwedeng—

JULIUS : (May diin): Mam. ‘Wag na kayong magpilit. Pwede namin kayong kasuhan sa ginagawa n’yo, alam n’yo ba?

MARIFE: Ano ho? Kasuhan?

JULIUS : Human trafficking.

MARIFE (hindi makapaniwala): Guro lang ho ako, ser.

Gugulatin ni ARVIC si MARIFE, ngunit si ROSE ang higit na magugulat.  
Lalabas sina ARVIC, MARIFE, IAN at JULIUS.

Magpapalit ang timpla ng ilaw para dalhin ang diwa ni ROSE sa kasalukuyan.

ROSE : Under surveillance kaming Lumad teachers, Ma. Biktima ng red-tagging. Kinakasuhan ng human trafficking. At para ano? Pag nakulong kami, sasabihin, NPA ‘yan. Pag napatay kami, idadahilan ngayon na uso, sa drug war ‘yan. Sinong lolokohin nila? Ayaw nila ang mga bakwit iskul dahil ayaw nilang may aalma.

Ayaw nilang matutuhan ng mga Lumad ang salitang “karapatan.” Para madali silang maitataboy sa lupaing kanila naman talaga. Kaya sinusunog ang mga bakwit iskul. Kaya dinadahas ang mga guro. Gaya ni Jolita Toledo. Alam mo ba ang sabi ng marines sa Socsargen Area tungkol sa kanya, Ma? Murder daw ang kaso niya. Pinatay raw niya ang labintatlong marines. Sa liit kong ito, mas matangkad pa ako kay Teacher Jolita. Pero labintatlong tao raw ang pinatay. Imadyin?! Kaya ‘yun, dinakip siya, dinala sa Isulan. Walang makadalaw kundi kamag-anak. Walang makadalaw ng titser sa takot na hindi na makabalik...

Mapapaupo si ROSE, mapapayuko. Papasok sina MARIFE, IAN at JULIUS, may lumbay sa mukha nila.

IAN (kay ROSE): Tser? Okey ka lang ba?

Mapapatango lang si ROSE.

JULIUS (mamamasdan ang blackboard): Sigurado ka, Tser? Bakit wala tayong lesson sa bord? Mapapatingin si MARIFE sa bag na nasa gilid ng mesa.

ROSE : A... Kasi—

MARIFE: Bakit ka may dalang bag, Tser?

IAN : Aalis ka?

JULIUS: Akala ko ba, dito ka lang.

MARIFE: Di ba tuturuan mo pa kami, Tser.

Katahimikan.

ROSE : Sori. Mali ang computation ni Teacher Rose. Math teacher pa naman. Akala ko, kaya ko... Akala ko. Alam n’yo ba, paggradweyt ko no’n, yung barkada ko, sa private schools nagpunta. Doon sila nagturo. Doon daw kasi ang opportunities. Nakangiti lang

ako habang nagtatanungan sila. Buong-buo kasi sa isip ko kung saan ko gustong magpunta—sa Lumad school. Sa isang Lumad school ako magtuturo. Pagdating ko dito, nang makilala ko kayo, shet sabi ko. Hindi ako nagkamali. Oo, walang signal, walang koryente. Oo, apat na libo lang na allowance ang tatanggapin ko buwan-buwan. Oo, isang beses sa isang taon ko lang makakasama ang pamilya ko. Pero, sabi ko, dito, dito ako gagaling bilang guro. Nandito ang pinakamagagaling na estudyante. Dito ako kailangan. Araw-araw ko itong nararamdaman, tuwing nag-aaral at natututo tayong magkakasama, o kahit naglolokohan lang. Araw-araw ko itong nararamdaman kahit araw-araw rin akong natatakot. Pero ang mga kuwento, parami nang parami. Palapit na sila nang palapit. Baka bukas, kuwento na lang din ako. Kuwentong iiyakan, pagpapasa-pasahan sa mga barangay. Fifty-four years old ang nanay ko nang magpunta ang mga militar sa bahay namin. Titser din siya. Kinaladkad nilang palabas ang nanay ko, ang nanay kong may sakit sa puso. Tapos, tinutukan ng mga militar ang mga batang kapatid kong humahabol kay Mama. Hindi na namin siya nakita. Nawalan na ng nanay ang mga kapatid ko. Ayaw kong pati ako... mawala sa kanila. Oo, may dala akong bag, Marife. Gusto ko lang sana kayong makita bago ako umalis.

IAN : Sori, Tser.

JULIUS : Naiintindihan namin, Tser. Di naman 'to perstaym nangyari.

ROSE : Salamat. Pero malay natin, baka kailangan ko lang pag-isipan pa. Baka, babalik din naman ako.

IAN : Okey lang, Tser. Nandito lang kami.

ROSE (may mapapansin): Teka, si Arvic?

Katahimikan.

ROSE : Nasa'n nga?

MARIFE: Nakidnap, Tser.

ROSE : Ha?

JULIUS : Napag-initan ng militar. Pareho rin ng mga kuwento. Sumagot.  
Nagsabi ng karapatan.

IAN : Ang totoo, Tser, kaya lang kami pumasok para magpaalam  
sanang absent muna kami.

ROSE : Bakit?

JULIUS : E, Tser, walang nakakaalam kung saan dinala ng mga militar si  
Arvic. Tutulong kami sa paghahanap. Sa mga barangay ba. Sa mga  
liblib.

IAN : Sige, Tser. Maiwan na namin kayo.

Maglalakad papuntang pinto sina IAN, JULIUS at MARIFE.

MARIFE (lilingon): Pero, Tser. Di ba, kapatid mo rin kami? (Malungkot  
na ngiti.)

Maririnig ang marahang musika (wala ang liriko) ng “Pipit,” partikular ang  
mga linyang:

MAMANG KAY LUPIT, ANG PUSO MO’Y DI NA NAHABAG  
PAG PUMANAW ANG BUHAY KO, MAY ISANG PIPIT NA  
IIYAK.

ROSE : Sandali.

IAN : Tser?

ROSE : Hintay.

W A K A S

# TUBIG AT PAG-IBIG: REBYU NG KUNG PAANO HINIHINTAY ANG DAPITHAPON NI CARLO ENCISO CATU

Paul Alcosoba Castillo

Nasa maingat na paghawak sa bisyon ng kuwento nakasalalay ang bisa ng pagpapahiwatig sa biswal na sining ng pelikulang, lalo iyong muling tumatalakay sa isang dakila at hindi masaid-said na bukal ng tema ng pag-ibig. Sa tulad ni Carlo Catu, mapadadaloy muli ang paniniwala sa pag-ibig na puspos na iniaalay sa lahat ng hugis, anyo, at gulang. Ganoon na lamang ang talab ng pelikula niyang *Kung Paano Hinihintay Ang Dapithapon* (2018) na kahit iyong inaakalang hindi na maaaring makadama nito'y lulunurin ng emosyon.

Madali ring mahihinuha ng tagapanood kung tungkol talaga saan ito, mula sa pamagat, na pahapyaw ito sa yugto ng buhay na hindi naman talaga inaabangan ngunit batid na darating sa kahit sino. Pero higit ang posibilidad ng pagdating nito para sa mga senior citizen, ang mga tauhang pinili bilang lunsaran ng usapin ng mortalidad sa kabila ng pag-iisa. Kung tutuusin, malapit and dapithapon dito sa ikalawang linya ng bugtong patungkol sa banig: “Kung gabi ay dagat” dahil sa sandaling sumapit ang dilim, susundan ito ng eternal na pamamahinga, ang pagduyan ng alon habang itinatawid nito ang yumao patungo sa kabilang ibayo.

Sa isang banda, muling pagkatha ito sa *Love In The Time of Cholera* (1985) ng Nobel laureat na si Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Pero sa halip na si Florentino ang maghintay sa sandaling mabalo si Fermina matapos ang higit sa limampung taong pagsasama kay Dr. Juvenal, sa pelikula, ang pedyatrang si Celso (Menggie Cobarrubias) ang nananabik sa panahong maikakasal kay Tetang/Tera (Perla Bautista). Ang halos tatlong dekadang pagsasama'y hindi maituloy sa altar dahil kasal pa rin ang babae kay Bene (Dante Rivero) na piniling makipaghiwalay. Maganda ang bagong paghaharayang ito sa kuwentong pumapaksa sa ibang uri ng love triangle na iniaangkop sa mga nakatatandang patuloy na umiibig. Dahil aminin man o hindi, walang edad na hindi nagmamahal.

May natatanging suliranin ang pelikula't telebisyon na tinutugunan ng pagpaksa sa ganitong klase ng pag-ibig, ang pagbabalikan ng mga senior citizen na dati'y magsing-irog na. Sa dekadang ito lalo na, dahil parang nagamit na ng mga manunulat at mga direktor ang mga trope ng puppy love, boy-meets-girl, star-crossed lovers, at ang love triangle, na ang totoo'y nanaig pa rin hanggang ngayon. Pero may may iilang bumabalikwas dito at maihahanay sa old flame trope. May mga natutuliro kahit may iba nang kapiling, gaya sa *1st Ko Si 3rd* (2014) ni Real Florido, dahil lang sa isang hindi inaasahang pag-uwi't pagkikita. Nariyan din ang nagkakaungkatan ng nakaraan at kasalanan sa isa't isa, sa *Hintayan ng Langit* (2018) na adaptasyon ni Dan Villegas mula sa dula ng kaparehong pamagat, na tuluyang magkakapatawaran para magsama na rin sa wakas. Matatawag na pambasag sa monotono ng nagkalat na kuwento ng pag-ibig ang mga nabanggit na pelikula pero kahit nakahilera ang Kung Paano Hinihintay dito, pinipigil nito ang kilig kahit mapagpatawa, ramdam ang tensyon pero walang nagsisigawan, at may natitirang emosyon sa mga tauhan gayong hindi kailangan ang pagbabalikan. Sa halip, natatapos ang sumpuan dahil paglisan ng isa.

Mapapalapit ang panahong hinihintay nang lumubha ang karamdaman ng dating asawa, at manunumbalik ang presensiya ni Bene nang ipinatawag si Tetang/Tere upang muling umuwi sa kanilang lumang tahanan. Ang paghaharap nila ang magbubukas sa pagdaluyong ng kung ano sila noon bilang magkabayak, sa ilalim ng pamilyar na silong na iyon bago tuluyang naging estranghero sa isa't isa. Kasabay nito ang pagdating din naman ng mga unos na magdadala ng magkakaibang pagbugso at pagbaha.

Sa mga pagkakataong may bagyo, mapapansing nananatiling nakatindig pa rin ang bahay na yari sa kahoy kahit maiiwan itong putikan at markado ng mga tulo ang kisame't sahig. Gaya ng bahay ang naiwang si Bene, na kahit may edad na, nakatatayo't nakagagala pa rin sa kabila ng mga dinaramdam. Sa madaling sabi, siya ang haliging naiwan sa tahanan. Iyon nga lang, unti-unti ring naubos ang nilalaman mga muwebles at kasangkapang kaniyang ipinagbili, kung paanong basyo na lamang ng dati niyang sarili si Bene dahil sa pag-iisa mula nang itaboy ang misis at supling. Sa loob ng dalawampu't pitong taon, nanatili siyang nagpapakatatag, pinaninindigan ang kaniyang pananatili sa aalog-alog na espasyo.

Bukod sa bagyo't baha, lagi't laging mapapansin ang presensiya ng iba't ibang anyo at laki ng tubig sa buong pelikula. Nariyan ang pagdura ng magkahalong dugo't laway ni Bene, pagpapahiwatig ng masamang lagay

ng kalusugan niya. Ang baso ng tubig na nakahain nang unang pagdalaw ni Tetang na agad namang tutumbasan, pagkauwing-pagkauwi ng kapeng inihanda para sa agahan ni Celso upang ipakita ang waring magkapantay na pag-aalaga sa magkaibang lalaking minsang inibig at iniibig sa kasalukuyan. Madidinig din ang walang tigil na pagpatak ng tubig sa loob ng bahay upang ipaalam ang nagbabadyang paninira ng tubig. Sa dami ng imaheng ito ng likido, balintuna ang binanggit ni Celso, na medikal niyang paniniwala, hinggil sa porsyento ng tubig sa loob ng katawan na hindi ito patunay na makakaligtas ang tao sa pagkalunod.

Malinaw ang halaga ng ulan sa obrang ito, pero masasabing hindi ito katulad ng pagbabalik ni Tetang sa dating pamamahay at sa piling ni Bene. Hindi siya tulad ng bahang tatangay sa anumang natitira pa sa asawa. Higit itong inilalarawan ng paghihilamos, ng pagpapahid sa nakaratay na asawa gamit ang bimpo at batsa ng tubig. Bagaman hindi na bago ang papel ng babaeng ipinamamalas dito, gaya ng pagpapaligo sa *Bona* (1980) ni Lino Brocka, nanginigbabaw ang malakas si Tetang dito kaysa kay Bene. Pinahihiwatig ng eksenang ito na bagaman may pisikal na pagtatagpo ng mga katawan, naroon ang tubig, hanggahang hindi nakikita sa pagitan ng dalawang pinaglayo ng panahon at at espasyo, habang panandaliang magkasama sa lumang silid.



Fig. 1. Ang malumanay na palitan habang hinihilamusan ang dating asawa. (*Kung Paano Hinihintay ang Dapithapon*, Cinemalaya Foundation, Cineko Productions, at Clever Minds, 2018)



Pinatitibay pa ito ng pagiging tapat ni Tere nang walang pagkikiming aaming “Kaya ako narito dahil kaya na kitang harapin. Dahil hindi na rin kita mahal.” Napakalakas ng bisa ng katagang ito sapagkat pinatutunayan nito na ang halaga ng babae ay hindi nakasalalay sa pangangailangan ng pag-ibig ng asawa, kung paano ring nagtagal siyang hindi ikinakasal kay Celso.

Ang lawak ng usapin ng pagsasama’t pag-ibig ay mabuting umapaw upang isangkot ang iba pang tao sa pelikula. Hindi lamang sa tatlong tauhan umiinog ang kuwento, sa halip, nagdudulot ito ng projection tulad kay Marisa (Che Ramos), ang anak ni Celso, na nasa bingit naman ng pakikipaghiwalay sa kaniyang mister. Kahit ang ama pa ang nagbibigay ng payo, malay ang tatay, sa paraan niyang kakatwa at minsay pabiro, na ang disposisyon ng madrasta sa mga relasyon ang dapat maging modelo ng kaniyang supling. Nagawa ng *Kung Paano Hinihintay* na pagaangin ang inaasahang bigat ng melodramatikong mga paksa tulad ng kamatayan at hiwalayan. Sentimental ito ngunit nagagawang magpatawa sa simpleng pagtatapat ng magkakaibang katangiang tiyak na pinalambot ng panahon. Ito ang isang kalakasan ng pelikula dahil maingat ang pagtangan sa materyal, na hindi kinakailangang humantong sa de-kahon at gasgas nang mga teknik na karaniwan sa mga kuwentong love triangle.

Love triangle ito ngunit hindi nito ipinadama ang bigat na karaniwang nakakabit dahil sa mga naunang pelikulang tulad nito. Hindi matatagpuan dito ang komprontasyong laging may sigawan o sampalan. Marahil dahil tigulang ang mga tauhan kaya nararapat ding mature ang pananaw ng mga upang umangkop sa kanilang edad at ang paghawak nila sa pag-ibig kasama ang lahat ng salimuot na kaugnay nito. Pero ipinamamalas din nito ang husay ng panulat ni John Carlo Pacala, mapagtimpi angnaging paglalarawan sa anyo ito ng pag-ibig na hindi madamot o seloso sa harap ng taong ipampapalit sa magiging puwang ng puso. Mapagpahiwatig ang pelikula nang hindi kinakailangan ilahad ang mga kaliit-liitang pinagmulan ng away-mag-asawa. Sa halip, ipinahaharap nito ang pagbabago sa mga indibidwal na mga kaugnay sa relasyon para makilala nang mas malalim na hahantong sa pag-unawa sa tila hindi makatwirang nilang pagpapasya.

Narito ang ibang uri ng pag-ibig, iyong mapagmalasakit, ng lalaki para sa isa kapuwa niya lalaki na nababahiran, nahahawahan ng pagmamahal ng iisang taong nagdurugtong sa kanilang lahat. Ito marahil ang tipo ng pagmamahal na ipinadanas ng pelikula lalo para sa mga nakabatang tagapanood, habang sinasaksihan ang marahang pagpapalit ng katuwang sa

nahuhuling mga yugot ng buhay, na walang limitasyon, walang hangganan kung kailan magsisimula at magtatapos ang pagmamahalan. Gaya ito ng ulan, na bubuhos at hihinto, ngunit walang katiyakang hindi na ito mauulit pang muli sa mga susunod pang araw.

Panandaliang inilalagay ang tagapanood sa posisyon ni Chito (Romnick Sarmenta), ang tanging supling nina Bene at Tetang, para ipaalam ang ibinubunga ng ganito sitwasyon para sa pamilya, higit para sa emosyonal na kalagayan ng batang nagsisimula pa lamang unawain ang mundo sa pagitan ng magkalayong mga magulang. Ang nalikhang tensiyon ng relasyong ito ng mag-ama'y bahagi ng pag-ako, sa wakas, ng dalawang panig sa kani-kanilang pagkukulang.



Fig. 2. Pagdalaw ng anak sa amang malubha ang nadarama.  
(Kung Paano Hinihintay ang Dapithapon, Cinemalaya Foundation, Cineko Productions, at Clever Minds, 2018)

Gayunman, ang pagtatangkang harapin ng anak ang ama'y maituturing nang pagmamamahala na piniling ipakita sa ibang anyo. Kaya napakahalaga ng eksenang ito, na kaisa-isang pagluhang matutunghayan sa buong akda, dahil pinupunan ng luhan ni hindi pa pumapatak ang sakit at pagdaramdam na hindi ipinahahayag ng alinmang tauhan. Ang emosyong tila lumipas na sa dating nag-iibigan ay panandaliang mapakakawalan ng isang higit na nagdusa sa lahat ng pangyayaring dinanas mula sa kabataan.

Maipauunawa ng dinamika ng mag-ama ang pag-aalangan ng anak na lumagay sa tahimik ay may kinalaman sa waring tinanggap, sa minana niyang tadhanang nakagisnang relasyon. Sa kabila nito, at sa paglipas ng bagyo't paghupa ng baha, may kung anong matatangay sa pagitan ng mag-ama, at tatangay din maging sa nanonood. Tanda ito ng pagwawakas ng deka-dekada nang unos na nanlubog sa paniniwala sa wagas na pag-ibig bagaman pagkalipas nito, walang ligaya o pagliwanag na papalit dito. Kung paanong ang paghihilamos sa nakaratay ay isang paraan ng paghuhubad sa lahat ng pananggalang, sa lahat ng magkukubli sa katotohanan, naipatatanggap din ng pelikula ang realidad na puno ng salamisim, ang higit na malaking anyong tubig.

Kaya ang presensiya ng dagat sa dulong bahagi ng pelikula'y maihahalintulad din sa pagtatapos ng nobela ni Garcia, habang dinadala ng agos ng ilog ang lulang bangka nina Florentino at Fermina. Maaaring tingnan ang dalawang mga eksenang ito bilang pagbaling sa hinaharap, sa walang katiyakang darating sa pagitan ng mga mangingibig, na sa mga akdang ito, ang mga may edad ang lumalasap, sa nalalabing pagkakataon sa biyaya ng pag-ibig. At ang daloy dito'y pahintulot na magpatuloy sa buhay sa kabila ng naganap sa nakalipas.



Pig. 3. Pag-aabang ng tatlong tauhan sa buakang-liwayway.  
(Kung Paano Hinihintay ang Dapithapon, Cinemalaya  
Foundation, Cineko Productions, at Clever Minds, 2018)

Samantala, ang pagtatapos ng araw, ang dapithapong inaabangan sa pamagat, ang humahati sa liwanag at gabing naglalarawan sa *Banig* sa panitikang pabigkas. Ito ang sandaling nagsasalo ang buhay at kamatayan, ang sansaglit na pagpapalit ng araw patungong dilim, bago ang tuluyang paghimlay. Kaya naaangkop ang pagsasama ng kamatayan at dagat sa obra ni Catu dahil nahuhuli nito ang katutubong kaisipan hinggil sa siklo sa arawang buhay ng paggising para mag-umpisang muli at pamamahinga kapag napagal na. Gayundin, mababatid na siklo rin ito ng isang buong pamumuhay, hanggang tuluyan nang lumisan at iwan ang dating mga kapiling.

Natatangi ang pelikula hindi lang dahil pinagbubuklod nitong muli ang mga naghiwalay ng landas upang tuluyang nang tuldukan ang mga nangyari kundi, dahil pinagbubuklod nito ang mga itinuturing na magkaribal dapat sa pag-ibig. Ipinatatanaw dito, na gaya ng tubig, may iba't ibang anyo at lawak ang pagmamahal. May marumi, may mainit, may nakalulunod, at may nakalilinis. Lahat ng pag-ibig na iyon ay daraanan at daraanan ng mga bagyo't baha. At lahat din ng iyon, hinihintay lamang na tumila't humupa maging payapa tulad sa dalampasigan habang pinanonood ang pagsapit ng dapithapon ng buhay, ang pagiging ganap ng hinihintay na pagsasamang lubos.

## HINGGIL SA MGA MAY-AKDA

**Augusto Antonio A. Aguila**, CCWLS Resident Fellow, is a fictionist. He is the author of *The Heart of Need and Other Stories* (USTPH) and *The Carnival of Hate: Stories* (USTPH). He is Executive Secretary to the UST Rector Magnificus and Academic Consultant of ABS-CBN, the largest media conglomerate in the Philippines.

**Jaime An Lim** is a prize-winning poet, fictionist, and essayist. He holds an MA in Creative Writing from Silliman University and a PhD in Comparative Literature from Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.. He has published a book of criticism, two books of poetry, and two books of short stories.

**Rye Antonio** is a part-time graduate student taking up MA Creative Writing at University of the Philippines - Diliman. She also works as a teaching assistant at the UP Diliman School of Statistics for undergraduate research writing classes. Aside from writing fiction and teaching, she is a freelance visual artist, content producer and maladaptive daydreamer.”

**Fr. Angel Aparicio, O.P.** was born on September 25 in La Puebla de Valdivia, Palencia, Spain. He finished his Bachelor in Philosophy from Instituto de Filosofia y Teologia, San Pedro Martir, Madrid (1969) and obtained his Bachelor in Theology from the same university (1973). In 1977, he obtained his Licentiate in Sacred Scriptures from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. His masteral thesis is entitled *Estudio Literario de Isaias 11:1- 9*. He completed his doctoral courses in *Ecole Biblique et Archeologique Francaise* in Jerusalem in 1995.

His assignment in the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines from 1979 to the present has enabled him to perform various administrative tasks in the University. At present, he is the Prefect of Libraries, a position he has handled since 1992. He is the Regent of the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery since 2014 and a member of the Board of Trustees of the University of Santo Tomas. He teaches Greek and Sacred Scriptures at the Faculty of Theology. A regular contributor to *Life Today*, Fr. Aparicio has written several articles about the Bible. During his stint as Director of the UST Museum, he wrote

and published a book entitled *The University of Santo Tomas Museum of Arts and Sciences* (1981).

Si **Mesándel Virtusio Arguelles** ay editor, tagasalin, at guro ng panitikan at malikhaing pagsulat sa De La Salle University-Manila—pinagtapusan niya ng PhD sa Literatura. Saklaw ng kanyang interes ang kontemporaryong sining, konseptuwal na pagsulat, pelikula at bidyo, instalasyon, found object, at eksperimentasyong text-based kaugnay ng mga konsepto ng panahon, alaala, wika, kawalan, kaakuhan, anonimidad, sex, at intimacy. Ang mga salin sa Ingles (ni Kristine Ong Muslim) ng kanyang mga tula ay nalathala na sa iba’t ibang journal, magasin, at antolohiya tulad ng *Asymptote*, *Words Without Borders*, *Copper Nickel*, at *Poetry London*. Noong 2018, itinanghal ang *Antares*, una niyang solo exhibition, sa Nomina Nuda sa Los Baños, Laguna at inilabas din ang *Namamatay ang mga Nagmamahal*, isang 17-track CD album ng kanyang mga tulang nilapatan ng musika katuwang ang ilang manunulat-musikero. Nagawaran ng Gantimpalang Palanca at Maningning Miclat Poetry Award at fellowship mula sa UP National Writers’ Workshop at Bienvenido N. Santos Creative Writing Center National Workshop on Art and Cultural Criticism, awtor siya ng higit 20 aklat ng tula kabilang ang *Atra: Mga Tula 1999-2019* (Balangay Books, 2020) at *Three Books* (Broken Sleep Books, 2020), na pinili ng makatang Ilya Kaminsky para sa Poetry Book Society UK Autumn 2020 Translation Choice. Ang susunod niyang mga aklat ay *Twelve Clay Birds: Selected Poems* (UP Press), *Hollow* (Fernwood Press), at *Asinkrono*, ang kanyang unang nobela.

**Immanuel Canicosa** is a writer and producer for One Sports, the sports department of TV5 Network. He has written about the Olympics, Asian Games, Southeast Asian Games, PBA, MPL, and other international and local sporting leagues, events, and tournaments. He has also written for different websites and publications like *Vice Asia*, *ClutchPoints*, *Inquirer*, *AsianTraveler Magazine*, and *Go Archers*. He graduated with a bachelor’s degree in Communication Arts at De La Salle University-Manila and is currently taking up Master of Arts in Creative Writing at the University of the Philippines-Diliman.

His undergraduate thesis, a short film entitled *Pukpok*, was named Best Short Film at the 38th Metro Manila Film Festival, a finalist at the 36th

Gawad Urian Awards, and 9th Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival, and was screened in festivals in New York and Switzerland. His works and stories have appeared in *Malate Literary Folio*, DLSU's official literary publication, UP's *Ampersand* (&), *Inquirer's Young Blood*, and in a forthcoming collection entitled *Kathang Haka: The Big Book of Fake News*. He was recently selected for Ricky Lee's Online Screenwriting Workshop and was a fellow at the 2021 UST National Writers Workshop, where he first submitted the short story "Ligaya."

**Si Ernesto Villaluz Carandang II**, na kilala sa palayaw na Nonon, ay nagtapos ng Doctor of Fine Arts (DFA) at Master of Fine Arts (MFA) in Creative Writing sa De La Salle University. Siya ay kontribyutor ng tula, sanaysay, at kuwento sa mga pangunahing pahayagan, magazine, pampanitikang journal, at mga aklat antolohiya sa bansa.

Napili ng National Commission for Culture and Arts (NCCA) para mailimbag ang kanyang kauna-unahang aklat sa proyektong UBOD WRITERS SERIES na isang kalipunan ng maikling kuwento na pinamagatang *Mga Kuwentong Lagalag* (NCCA Young Authors Series, 2005). Awtor siya ng aklat na *Lahi ni Adan* (UST Publishing House, 2007), ang katambal na aklat ng kanyang *Angkan ni Eba* (UST Publishing House, 2005). Katuwang siyang patnugot ang mga aklat tulad ng *BIN-I, New Theoretical and Critical Writings on Philippine Studies* (UST Publishing House), *Lasang Lasallian* (Central Book Supply, Inc.) at ang antolohiya ng mga dagli na *Dadaanin* (Anvil Publishing, Inc.).

Siya ay ginawaran ng Gawad Dr. Pio Valenzuela para sa Larangan ng Panitikan na ipinagkaloob ng Pambansang Komisyon Pangkasaysayan (NHC) at ng Pamahalaang Lungsod ng Valenzuela. Hinirang siya bilang visiting professor sa Mahidol University sa Salaya, Thailand noong 2015. Kasapi ng National Committee for Language and Translation (NCLT) ng National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) para sa taong 2020-2022.

Kasalukuyan siyang nagtuturo ng mga asignaturang Filipino, Pamamahayagan, Malikhaing Pagsulat, Panitikan, Sining sa Bansa, at Kultura sa De La Salle University bilang Full Professor.



Si **Paul Alcosseba Castillo** ay nagtuturo ng Panitikan at Malikhainang Pagsulat sa Unibersidad ng Santo Tomas at kasalukuyang kumukuha ng Doktorado sa Panitikan. Kinilala na ang mga akda niya sa mga patimpalak pampanitikan sa bansa kabilang ang National Book Awards para sa unang aklat niya, ang *Walang Iisang Salita* (USTPH, 2018). Nagsusulat din siya ng mga film review at film criticism ng mga pelikulang Filipino sa blog na *Kung Sine Sine Lang*.

Si **Christopher Bryan A. Concha** ay nagtapos ng AB Philippine Studies major in Filipino in Mass Media (Magna Cum Laude) at Master of Arts in Philippine Studies (Natatanging MA thesis) mula sa Pamantasang De La Salle – Maynila. Nailathala na ang kaniyang mga sanaysay, dagli, at maikling kuwento sa iba’t ibang antolohiya at dyornal kabilang ang *ANI 40: Katutubo* (CCP Intertextual Division, 2018), *Agos Refereed Journal ng Malikhainang Akdang Pampanitikan* (SWE, 2020), at *Dx Machina 2: Philippine Literature in the Time of COVID-19* (UP Likhaan, 2021). Naging writing fellow rin siya sa 2019 UST National Writers’ Workshop (Sanaysay) at Palihang Rogelio Sicat 14 (Dagli). Kasalukuyan siyang nagtuturo sa Departamento ng Filipino ng Pamantasang De La Salle – Maynila.

**Raphael Coronel** is a poet from the Philippines. He is finishing his MFA in Creative Writing at the De La Salle University.

Si **Gerome Nicolas Dela Peña** ay nagtapos ng Master ng Artes sa Filipinolohiya sa Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Marikina at kursong BSED-Filipino sa Pamantasan ng Lungsod ng Pasig. Siya ang creative director at host ng GM TV, isang online platform na nagsusulong ng pagbabasa at panitikan sa kasalukuyan. Siya ay guro ng Filipino at Panitikan sa Manila Tytana Colleges at Our Lady of Fatima University-Antipolo. Kasalukuyan siyang Ikalawang Pangulo sa Publikasyon ng KATAGA (Samahan ng mga Manunulat sa Pilipinas). Nagwagi na siya ng iba’t ibang karangalan at gantimpala sa pagsulat sa larang ng wika at panitikang Filipino.

Siya ang may-akda ng mga aklat na *Suóng: Mga Aporismo ng Paglusong* at *Pagsulong* (2021), *Brief Moments: Mga Sanaysay* (2020), *PM: Mga Tula* (2019), *Pedestrian* at *Iba Pang Mga Tula* (2018), at *Late-Later-Latest, Mga Hugot Kong Laptrip* at *Badtrip* (2016). Siya rin ay co-editor at contributor



ng Pusuan Mo: An Anthology of Literary Works for Millennials, Flight 143: Mga Tula ng Pag-ibig at Paglipad, at Stopover: Mga Tula ng Pagninilay at Paglalakbay.

Naging fellow siya sa sa mga palihan sa malikhaing pagsulat gaya ng ika-2 Cavite Young Writers Workshop (2019), ika-1 Kaboronyogan Bikol Regional Creative Writing Workshop (2019), ika-6 na Angono National Writers Workshop (2018), at sa Palihang KATAGA (2017).

**Rodrigo Dela Peña, Jr.** (he/him) is the author of *Tangere* (University of the Philippines Press, 2021) and *Aria and Trumpet Flourish* (Math Paper Press, 2018). He is also the editor of *A/PART: An Anthology of Queer Southeast Asian Poetry in the Pandemic*, featured in the Southeast Asia Queer Cultural Festival 2021. His poems have been published in *Tomás: The Journal of the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies*, *Likhaan: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature*, *Kritika Kultura*, and other journals and anthologies. He has received prizes from the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, Kokoy F. Guevara Poetry Competition, British Council, among others. He is currently based in Singapore.

**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* (USTPH, 2020). For his works, Deoso received twelve Gawad USTetika awards, and 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 Ecopoetry* (ed. Rina Garcia Chua), among other publications. He was also a fellow for poetry in the national writers workshops of UST, De La Salle University, and Silliman University. He currently lives in Quezon City with his family and two dogs named Kidlat and Hi-Ho.

Lagi lamang hinahanap ni **U Eliserio** ang kanyang sarili. Bisitahin siya sa [ueliserio.net](http://ueliserio.net).

**Jen Mutia Eusebio** is a Filipino American writer pursuing her PhD in Creative Writing at the University of the Philippines, Diliman where she focuses her research on craft pedagogy and cultural memory. As an undergraduate, she studied at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor and received her MFA from Emerson College. Additionally, she is an alumna of the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Her fiction and essays have appeared in *Likhaan: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature and Humanities Diliman*.

Manunulat at manggagamot mulang Kalakhang Maynila si **Ralph Fonte**. Lumitaw na sa iba't iba't ibang lathalain tulad ng *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Voice&Verse Poetry Magazine*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, at *LIKHAAN* ang kaniyang mga sulatin. Nagwagi na rin ng mga parangal ang kaniyang mga tula sa ilang patimpalak gaya ng Gawad Carlos Palanca at Gawad Maningning Miclat. Siya ang isa sa mga tinig ng *Ang Sabi Nila Radyo* at ang patnugot ng Tula sa Filipino ng *Ilahas* na isang peryodikong pampanitikan sa Internet. Naglilingkod siya ngayon bilang doktor sa Palawan. Maraming ngayong uwak sa labas ng kanyang bintana.

**Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo**, CCWLS Director, has published more than forty books, most recent of which is *Collected Stories & Tales (UST)*, a definitive compendium of her short fiction over the years. She has won several national awards, including the Carlos Palanca Grand Prize for the Novel, the Gawad Balagtas from the Unyon ng mga Manunulat sa Pilipinas (UMPIL), and was most recently conferred the Gawad Dangal ng Lahi by the Palanca Foundation at the 69th Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards in 2019.

**Paolo Manalo** is the author of the poetry collections: *Happily Ever Ek-ek* (Gacha Press, 2019) and *Jolography Retconned* (University of the Philippines Press, 2020). He is featured in Agnes Lam's critical study *Becoming Poets: The Asian English Experience* (2014). He teaches creative writing at the University of the Philippines, Diliman.

Si **Maynard Manansala** ay manunulat ng iskrip para sa teatro, ilang tv mini-series at viral advertising. Naitanghal ang kanyang mga dula sa Virgin

Labfest, PETA, Pista Rizalina, Pink Shorts, sa loob ng bansa; sa Tagalog Festival (ng Bindlestiff Studio) at Melbourne Fringe Festival naman, sa labas. Naging fellow siya para sa Drama sa 59th UP National Writers Workshop at ng Bienvenido N. Santos Creative Writing Center (ng Pamantasan ng De La Salle) noong 2019-2020. Nagwagi siya ng Palanca para sa dulang may isang-yugto at kuwentong pambata. Sa kasalukuyan, guro siya sa Departamento ng Filipino at Panitikan ng Pilipinas, UP-Diliman habang tinatapos ang Ph.D. Filipino: Pagsasalin sa naturang unibersidad.

Kasalukuyang tinatapos ni **Juan Miguel Leandro L. Quizon** ang kaniyang PhD in Cultural Studies sa Chinese University of Hong Kong sa ilalim ng Postgraduate Studentship Scheme. Bago siya lumisan para tapusin ang kaniyang gradwadong degri, naglingkod siya bilang Assistant Professorial Lecturer ng panitikan at kultura sa Pamantasang De La Salle–Manila. Ilan sa kaniyang mga paksang sinasaliksik ay ang politika at kultura ng espasyo, at komparatibong pag-aaral sa/ng Timog Silangang Asya. Bahagi siya ng Asia Graduate Student Fellowship Program noong 2015 sa Asia Research Institute–National University of Singapore.

Makata, kritiko, guro, at tagasalin si **Louie Jon A. Sánchez**. Assistant Professor ng Ingles sa School of Humanities, Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University. Awtor ng mga aklat ng tula—*At Sa Tahanan ng Alabok* (2010), *Kung Saan sa Katawan* (2013), at *Siwang sa Pinto ng Tabernakulo* (2020); aklat ng sanaysay na *Pagkahaba-haba Man ng Prusisyon* (2015); at mga aklat ng kritisismo—*Aralin at Siyasat: Pagninilay Hinggil sa Tula* (2018), *Abangán: Mga Pambungad na Resepsiyon sa Kultura ng Teleserye* (paparating), at *Ang Drama ng Ating Búhay: Isang Kasaysayang Kultural ng Teleserye* (paparating). Kasapi ng Linangan sa Imahen, Retorika, at Anyo (LIRA), at naglilingkod sa Unyon ng mga Manunulat sa Pilipinas (UMPIL).

Si **Karl Isaac Magdalita Santos** ay makatàng mula sa lungsod ng Muntinlupa. Inimbitahan siyang maging makatang kasapi sa Linangan, Imahen, Retorika, at Anyo (o LIRA) noong 2015 matapos sumalang sa kanilang palihan. Nananatiling aktibong miyembro ng LIRA at isa ding balagtasero sa grupong The Makátas. Kasalukuyan siyang abala sa pagiging communications officer ng ilang Environmental at Human Rights organisations sa loob at

labas ng bansa. Paminsan ay naglalabas siya ng kaniyang mga tula sa mga pampublikong publikasyon: sa magasin, broadsheet newspaper, literary folios, atbp.

**Horacio “Howie” Severino** was named after a Jesuit historian, and majored in history in college with the goal of becoming a journalist. “If journalism is history in a hurry, history is journalism in slow motion,” he likes to say. He’s a co-founder of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism and has been making documentaries for GMA-7’s pioneering public affairs program *I-Witness* for the past 21 years. He began his career as a newspaper reporter and magazine writer. He graduated from Tufts University in 1983, magna cum Laude. He was a Chevening scholar in the UK in 1992-93.

A multi-awarded writer, Palanca award-winning playwright, and essayist, **Dr. Jose Victor Z. Torres** is a full professor at the History Department of the De La Salle University-Manila. He is also associate director for Drama and History at the Bienvenido N. Santos Creative Writing Center in the same university. He has a Ph.D. and M.A. in History from the University of Santo Tomas (UST) Graduate School. A former researcher of the Intramuros Administration, his book *Ciudad Murada: A Walk Through Historic Intramuros* (Vibal Publishing) won the National Book Award for Travel Writing in 2006 and in 2017, his collection of essays *To the Person Sitting in Darkness and Other Footnotes in Philippine History* (UST Publishing House) was awarded the National Book Award for Essays in English. He is the author and editor of books on Philippine history and culture and a contributor of articles on history and culture to local magazines and journals.

**Buona Raya Vilar** is an MA Creative Writing student at the University of the Philippines, Diliman. Her short stories have been published in the *Journal of Southeast Asian Ecocriticism* and *Diliman Review*. As a pandemic hobby, she started drawing a slice-of-life comic with her husband: <https://instagram.com/mymisterboss>.

**Alfred A. Yuson**, nicknamed Krip, has authored over 35 books to date, including novels, poetry collections, short fiction, essays, children’s stories,

biographies, travel, translation, and coffee-table books.

He has gained numerous distinctions, including the Gawad Pambansang Alagad ni Balagtas from UMPIL or Writers Union of the Philippines, Patnubay ng Sining at Kalinangan award from the City of Manila, and SEAWrite (SouthEast Asian Writers) Award from Thai royalty for lifetime achievement, as well as a FAMAS Award and a Catholic Mass Media Award for a film screenplay.

He has also been elevated to the Hall of Fame of the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, from which he also received the Gawad Dangal ng Lahi. He also gained the 2017 National Book Award for the Novel in English from the National Book Development Board.

He is a founding member of the Philippine Literary Arts Council (PLAC), Creative Writing Foundation, Inc. (CWF) and Manila Critics Circle, and has served as Chairman of UMPIL and as a board member of the Movie and Television Ratings and Classification Board.

He taught fiction and poetry at Ateneo de Manila University, where he held the Henry Lee Irwin Professorial Chair. He contributes a weekly arts and culture column to a national broadsheet, *The Philippine Star*.

## HINGGIL SA MGA EDITOR

Nagtuturo ng seminar in new media, writing for new media, contemporary and popular literature, research, pamamahayag sa Filipino, at creative writing sa Faculty of Arts and Letters, College of Education, at sa Graduate School ng Unibersidad ng Santo Tomas si **Joselito D. De Los Reyes, Ph.D.**

Nagsipagwagi ng National Book Awards for Essay in Filipino ang mga aklat niyang *iSTATUS Nation* at *Titser Pangkalawakan* at National Book Awards for Nonfiction naman ang *Finding Teo: Tula/Talambuhay*. Siya ang 2013 Makata ng Taon ng Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino at recipient din ng NCCA Writers' Prize for Fiction. Regular opinion contributor siya ng mga paksang kulturang popular at social and new media dynamics sa Abante at Rappler.

Siya ay Resident Fellow sa UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies at Research Associate ng UST Research Center for Culture, Arts and Humanities. Siya ang kasalukuyang Academic Coordinator ng BA in Creative Writing program ng Unibersidad ng Santo Tomas.

**Ralph Semino Galán**, CCWLS Assistant Director, is a poet whose works in English and Filipino have won national prizes. He is the author of four books: *The Southern Cross and Others Poems* (NCCA), *Discernments: Literary Essays, Cultural Critiques and Book Reviews* (USTPH), *From the Major Arcana: Poems* (USTPH), and *Sa mga Pagitan ng Buhay at Iba Pang Salin* (USTPH).