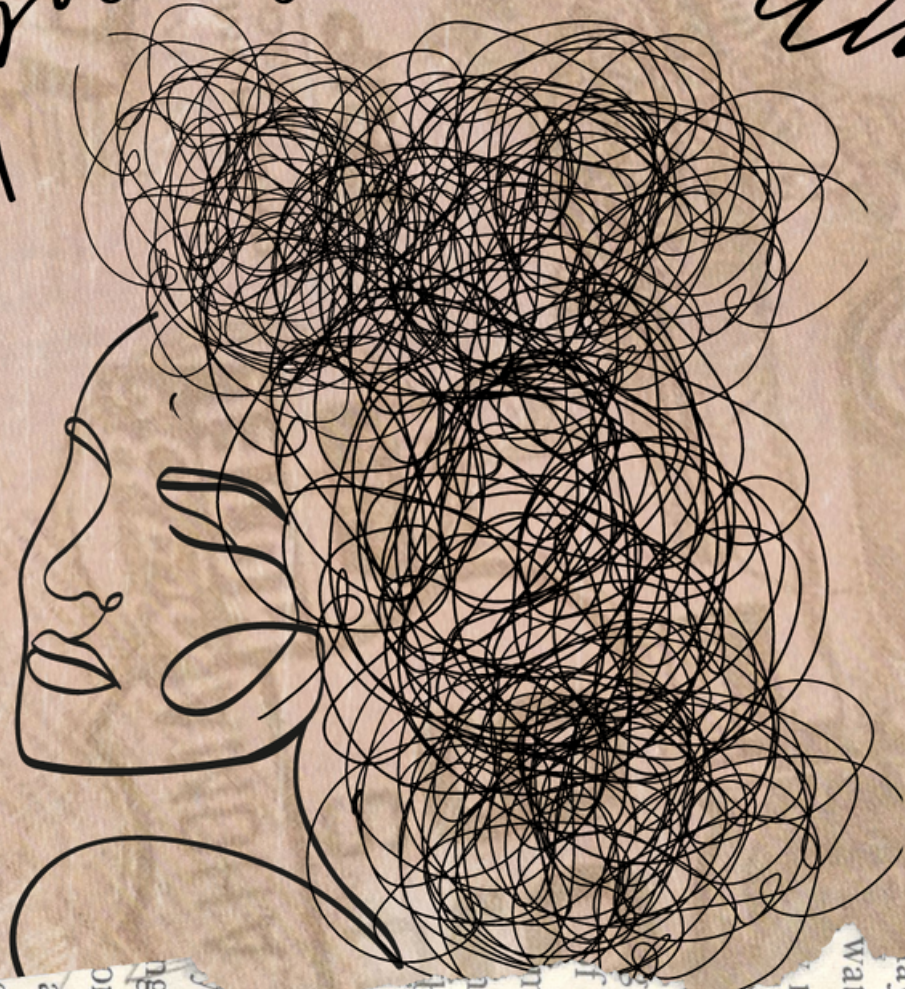


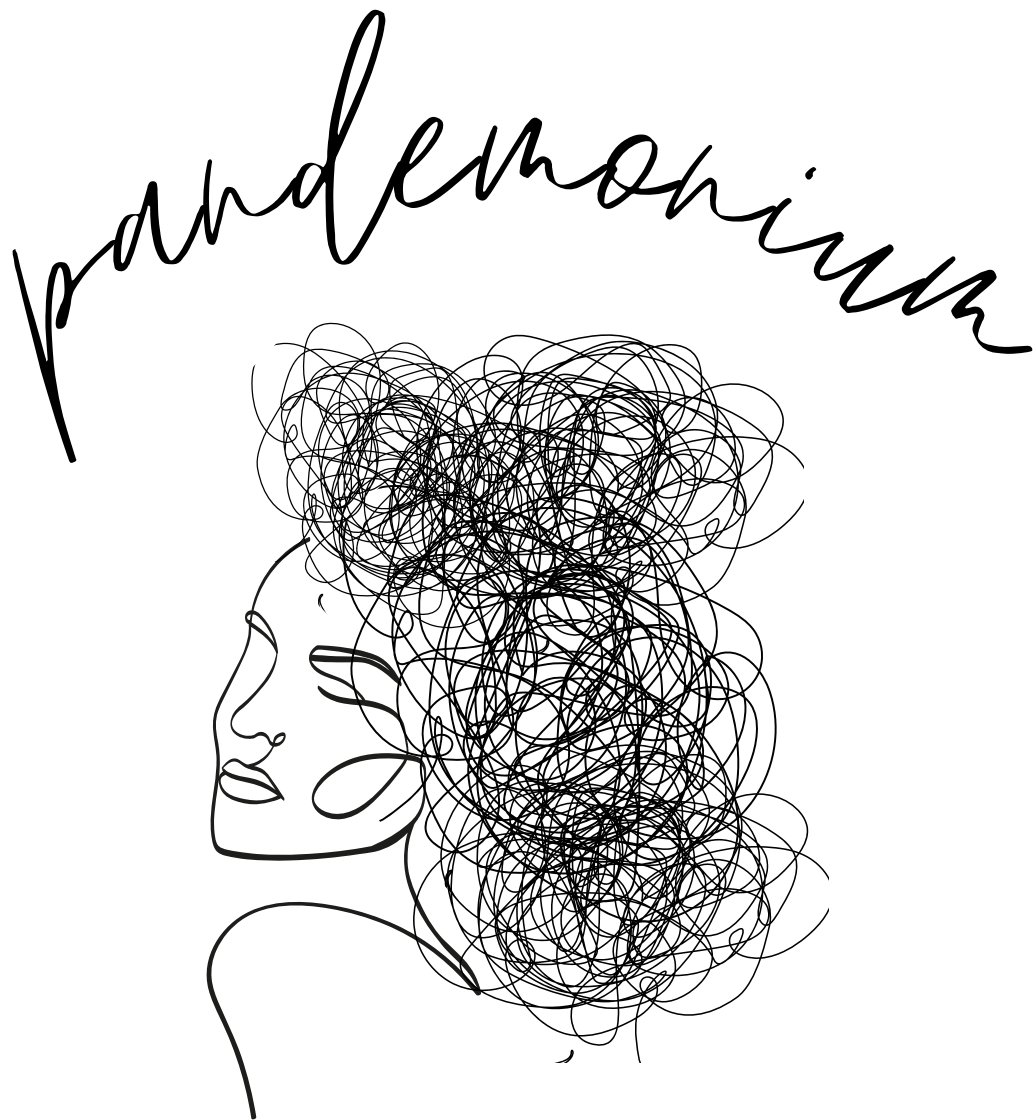
SANDS & CORAL

2022 ISSUE

pandemonium



Sands & Coral 2021-2022



Albertha Lachmi Obut
Noraine 'Patch' Puengan
Editors

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Dumaguete City



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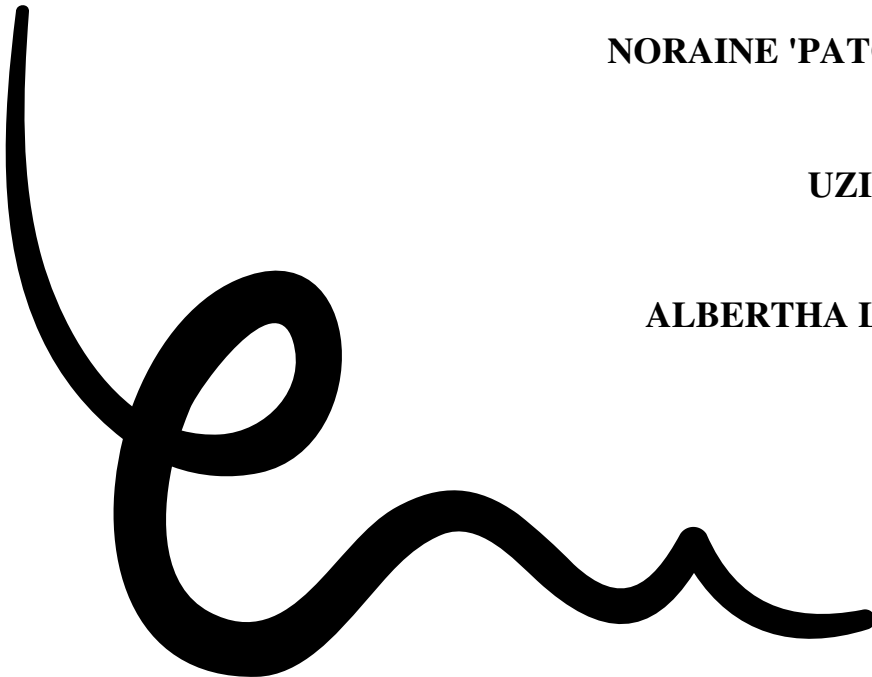
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INTRODUCTION

An unprecedented standstill hit the globe when the COVID-19 pandemic hit early in 2020. By March of 2020, lockdowns were imposed all over the world; countries closed off their borders, had strict stay-at-home rules, and mandated people to stay indoors in hopes of curbing the rapid growth of positive cases everywhere.

We were all forced to stay indoors, to keep to ourselves. For months on end, we craved for any semblance of connection, any way to fill up the void in our hearts. We turned to gardening, to cooking and baking, to arts and crafts . . . The pandemic brought us time to breathe, a reprieve from the routine that has become our everyday lives, but it also allowed us to think—about ourselves, our lives, and about the people around us. It took away more than it gave, and we have suffered for it. We have lost too much time, too many lives. Many of us lost opportunities—to grow, to learn, and to simply live. Most of us have had friends and family die from the virus, have had to watch from afar as they were buried by complete strangers.

It was because of this that we, the editors, thought it was essential that we create a platform for writers—for students—to share a piece of their truth through their stories, poems, and artwork—not only stories about darkness and pain and loss, but also of a newfound hope and strength, a shred of light in these dark and trying times. A platform where one can reflect on their own stories, and find themselves in the words of another, and know that they are not alone.

Thus, Pandemonium came to fruition.

Pandemonium, in its simplest terms, means wild and noisy disorder or confusion. We chose this theme, not only because it's a play on the word pandemic, but also because it captures the very essence of how we all felt when news of the pandemic first broke out: likely cynical, a little bit scared, confused, and perhaps a little bit lost and chaotic. But within that chaos can come beauty. In that confusion, clarity. In change, resilience. In pain, strength.

In no way is this journal trying to romanticize that pain and loss that we have suffered these past two years. Instead, what this issue hopes to achieve is simple: closure. Something that can help other people turn inward, look into themselves, and find answers to the questions they've been asking for over two years. A space to allow ourselves the time to take in the reality of the world we live in today, to see that our stories, though unique, echo across the distance and reflect each other. A place where we see that while the world will never be the same again, we still might learn and grown from that change, from that pain.

Words, we think, are tools of destruction that one can wield with such potency to maim, to hurt. But words, we think, are also the cure to many a malady. This literary journal definitely served as a platform where we can express our different experiences with the guidance of our adviser, Dr. Andrea G. Soluta. Though we cannot ever take back what we lost, it is our hope that these stories—these words—continue to inspire, to uplift, and to give life to those who come across it, and to let it be known that though it may feel that way sometimes, no one is ever alone.

Especially now.

**ALBERTHA LACHMI OBUT &
NORAINE 'PATCH' PUENGAN**

Editors

FOREWORD

Hello. This is probably not the usual way of starting a foreword. Like, what even is a foreword? Regardless, this whole literary journal is about an unusual event in human history, so why not make a foreword that reflects this out-of-the-ordinary phenomenon we are all experiencing right now?

If you are picking up this literary journal you were probably one of those people who was happy to have another excuse to stay inside your room when they announced a lockdown. First, it was only for a few weeks, then a few months, then two years have passed and here we are, still stuck in our rooms, still living on the hope of bringing back what used to be. Little did we know the extent of devastation that the lockdown signified.

The Pandemic brought the entire world to its knees, and even the pillars of the strongest nations trembled in the midst of this plague. Death, poverty, and chaos reigned, and all we could do was—*is*—survive. But we have also learned to thrive.

May it be through the help of our friends and their loving digital hugs or a kiss emoji from our lovers, or an eggplant emoji from someone on Tinder that made you realize how you've lost taste in more ways than one. The virtual hugs only leave you colder, the kiss emoji only leaves a bitterness in your mouth, and your search for love only makes you fall deeper into the pits of indifference.

Yet you go on yearning, you go on searching for that feeling—for anything.

Living in these dark moments, we are now slowly seeing the light at the end of this shithole (pardon our French). Though the world will never be the same again, we're getting closer and closer to the end of this pandemic, one day at a time.

**YEHUDI SANTILLAN III &
PIA VILLAREAL**

*Co-Presidents, Silliman University
English Society S.Y. 2021-2022*



PART ONE:
PANDEMONIUM

Uziel Marchan
Uziel Marchan
11/30/21

FB: Uziel Marchan



LABASERO

BY LAKAN UHAY ALEGRE

THE DAY Niko's Mama got COVID, City Hall announced they needed to secure BIR permits and city health certificates to maintain their fish stalls. Niko had just come back from fishing, his face mask soaked in sweat, carrying buckets of *rumpi* to their fish stall.

His Papa, Mano Boy, had already chopped portions of blue marlin, ready to be sold by the kilo. *Maya-maya* and *mangagat* which were more plush than other fish hung on hooks at the edge of the stall to attract customers. Niko and Mano Boy tried to act less conspicuously despite the many suspicious looks from their neighboring fish vendors.

"Ay, those are big *rumpi*, Niko," Mana Berta, the neighboring fish vendor remarked. "Shouldn't display all 'em at once though. Joaquina always left some to be displayed in the afternoon."

"My boy sure knows where to fish this time of season, Berta," Mano Boy replied, patting Niko by the shoulder. "Sure knows where 'em big ones swim even where there no moon."

"Niko the smartest fisherman we folks have, Boy. No doubt about it. He fish at night and always come home. Not everyone here lucky like 'em."

"Heard that son? You is the smartest fisherman," Mano Boy nodded to his son. "Go get 'em *rumpi* stored at the back just like Berta say. Your Mama shouldn't worry about us when she got chickens to tend to, right?"

Niko got his Papa's memo; he got the message. They couldn't let anyone know his Mama got COVID. It would cause a commotion. Prejudice would shadow Tacloban Wet Market, fusing with the fishy stink and pollution. It was the first time Mana Joaquina was not tending to sales ever since they got the fish stall.

Niko and Mano Boy knew that Mana Berta and the other vendors were eyeballing them. They knew if the neighboring vendors knew about Mana Joaquina's condition, it would spread immediately like wildfire. They couldn't afford to be the talk of the town, especially when they were still behind new dues and paper works imposed by the city.

"Chickens? Thought you folks were always into fishing?" Inday, Mana Berta's niece wondered.

"Well, Mama thought it would best," Niko replied, carrying some of the *rumpi* to the back of the stall. "Besides, don't we need to find new ways of making a living? These new city ordinances gonna put us in debt, you know."

"Well, what can folks like us do about it?" Mana Berta said, sprinkling a bit of water over the fish on display in her own stall.

"We just gotta live with it," Mano Boy asserted, hammering the knife to cut through the bone of a blue marlin. "We just gotta mind us business and stay away from trouble. No good come from minding them other's business."

"Well, we better be careful, Boy."

A week after, Niko and his buddies took the family motorboat and docked along San Juanico Strait, a few nautical miles off Cancabato Bay. The amihan breeze felt cool upon Niko's skin. There was no moon in sight. Niko knew the fish hid farther beneath the strait. He took out his fishing rod made from bamboo, tied more nylon string to lengthen it, and coiled some dried fat to the end of the hook

before throwing it to water.

Niko waited for his rod to jerk so he could reel it up while enjoying a cigarette. He stayed at the stern of the motorboat, his favorite spot where he could look at Tacloban City from afar, away from the noise, but close enough to examine the details of the city.

Niko's point of reference in memorizing the urban map from the sea was the Santo Niño Church. The church's towering white belfry always stood out even if it was in the middle of downtown. Astrodome, the big dome by the bay that collapsed during Yolanda, was reconstructed and a new park was built around its perimeter. Niko could easily spot it. It was his landmark, a sign he was looking south.

Niko enjoyed studying his city. His professors from EVSU always said his urban planning designs were avant-garde. One time, Prof. Borrromeo gave him a 1.0 for constructing a renewed urban plan of Tacloban Public Market. Niko examined which areas consumers visited first when doing their weekly produce. He made it his basis for minimizing traffic, solving the sanitation problem, and lessening congestion. Niko knew all the shortcuts, reroutes, and turns. How could he not? He grew up there. In high school, Mano Boy would fetch Niko from school so he would go straight to their fish stall after classes to help out. On weekends, Mano Boy would take Niko along with him in his tricycle to tour the city. Niko rode at the back of the tricycle with his Papa.

When traffic began to herald the city, Mano Boy knew which turn to take or which detour to make. Sometimes, when they had a bit of time to kill, Mano Boy took Niko with his compadres to fish. One of whom was Rey, the current Barangay Capitan of the market. Mana Joaquina never joined any of their trips, she was always busy selling their catch at the stall. Their blue marlins, *rumpi*, *mangagat*, and *maya-*

always had sold out. But even when sales were high, it was always just enough to pay for the hired help, business maintenance, and household expenses.

Time seemed long at sea when Niko had no catch. Hours had passed but he only caught one *maya-maya*. His fishing rod did not jerk for hours. Perhaps it was the time of night, Niko thought. There were no stars in the sky either. Niko remained in his laid-back position and stared blankly at the city and the sky.

“You okay there, Niks?” Buboy, his fishing buddy asked.

“Just that BIR and paper works, p’re,” Niko replied, getting up from his reclined position. “Worried ‘bout Mama too, not really sure how she’ll be good with selling poultry.” “Well, she got you and Mano Boy, p’re. Am sure your Papa’ll figure it out. Remember how he convinced that old dying grandma to lend him money some years back?” “He never paid that off, you know.”

“Why would he? The old bitch died a week after he borrowed!” Buboy laughed. “No one owe nothing to the dead, pare, no one.”

“You’re such an ass, you know,” Niko said in response, worried about his Mama’s condition.

“C’mon, cheer up a little. Think about it this way, your Mama has now gone from fish to chickens, from sea to land, pare.”

“Remind me again why we’re friends.”

“And that BIR shit?” his fishing buddy continued. “That’ll just subside in a few weeks. Remember how they wanted people out of Anibong after Yolanda? Well, look.” Buboy pointed at the light in Anibong. “They’re still there, City Hall can’t do nothing about it. City Hall can’t do nothing about us.”

“City Hall doesn’t do anything. That’s the problem, pare.”

Remember that landslide in Quarry? The one where some girl from Leyte High and her Mom died. That shit went viral.”
“Heard the Mom was a barangay official. What about it?”

“City Hall didn’t do anything about it. All they did was give money to the sister. Look at what’s happened to that site. Nothing.”

“What’s your point, pare?”

“That part of Quarry was dynamite bombed, p’re. Years ago, even before we were born.”

“Right.”

“Well, City Hall would know the land mass would be unstable at some point. So why would they still permit residences, let alone, businesses to stay in that area?” “For one, Niks, they don’t have any place to put squatters anywhere. But more than anything it’s business, pare. Business. It’s all about that. We all know, folks like us can’t do anything about it unless we become some big shots.”

“Well, I wish we could.”

Niko always thought someday he would make living conditions better for vendors like his Mama. Not only would his degree program improve the situation for poor folks like him, but it would also help their family. It was a shame he had to drop out in the middle of his college sophomore year due to the pandemic.

Many unfortunate things had happened in the past month. Aside from his secondhand laptop breaking down, the situation worsened because the family no longer had money to maintain internet expenses which EVSU required of their students. The fishing business was his hope of a better life so when Mana Joaquina was diagnosed positive, they decided not to report it to their barangay. They knew if no one tended to the fishing business, they wouldn’t be able to comply with the new requirements and pay off rent.

Ever since Niko could recall, Tacloban Public Market was free of rent. City Hall said it was their way of providing relief to the poor but when COVID hit, every vendor was asked for BIR permits and tax payment receipts. The Mayor said it was one of the ways for the city to afford vaccines and maintain economic stability, especially after Yolanda. The media had minimal publicity on the matter. The ones who attempted to publicize about it disappeared, many of whom were Niko's friends and classmates. Niko thought of many ways how to evade the requirements. If only it weren't for the newly imposed requirements, perhaps concealing his Mama's condition would have been easier. Luckily, the Barangay Capitan or Mano Rey to many, accepted their freshly caught *rumpi* that week and agreed to extend their dues. But it bothered Niko that, his Papa decided not to reveal what was really going on with his Mama, not even to Mano Rey.

Niko stared at the city, wondering why all of this had happened to him. Then he stared at the bow of the boat thinking about his Papa and wondered what he was doing at that moment. Perhaps he was tending to his Mama. Niko remembered how his Papa fooled around with Mano Rey who was standing in the same bow of the boat years ago. It was some weekend when the clouds shadowed the sun, and the sea was calm enough to signal no rain. The compadres were filling up their bellies with grilled squid they just caught and emptied bottles of Pilsen. Mano Rey was on the edge of the bow when Mano Boy was performing his fish jokes. And just as everyone from the boat was laughing, Mano Boy winked at his son and pushed Mano Rey off the boat.

Mano Boy carried Niko by his shoulder and laughed with him when Mano Rey emerged from the water. As Mano Rey struggled to get himself back into the boat, Mana Joaquina tried to lend a hand. Niko noticed the change in his Papa's laugh when he put him down. Mano Boy held out his hand to

Mano Rey so he could climb back unto the boat. Mano Boy got the towel from his wife and gave his compadre a pat on the shoulder with it.

Niko knew the Capitan ever since he could remember. His Papa and the Capitan went way back. They used to be employees at Sam's Trading in their youth. When the grocery had to let go of some of its employees, Mano Boy was among them. The Capitan remained since he had the favor of the owners. Mano Rey would always buy from the fish stall and talked with Niko ever since he was a kid. Mana Joaquina did not seem to mind whenever Mano Rey stayed near the stall just to finish a cigarette. But when Niko was about thirteen years old, Mano Rey kept his distance. Perhaps it was because of the work he had in the barangay office. The morning after, just as he was docking the family motorboat and securing the stability of the plank that he would balance on to unload his freshly caught *maya-maya*, Niko noticed his Papa loading their tricycle. He could hear the thumps and clanks of aluminum basins against plastic buckets and knives being tossed onto the cargo bed. The sound stood out to him amidst the symphonic *isdaaaa!* shouting and seafood staccato chopping from Tacloban Wet Market. "Rent, *anak*" Mano Boy said, tossing another stack of plastic buckets unto the cargo bed. "*Pota!* we didn't pay rent *daw.*"

"But didn't we give Cap our first catch last week. Didn't he delay our dues?" Niko argued.

"That wrecked Capitan must have heard about Joaquina! *Yawa!* Rey must've tipped us off."

Niko secured the knots of the motorboat and rushed to their stall with Mano Boy. When they arrived the new stall vendors were already setting up. The barangay tanods and the police took down their signage and were checking if Mano Boy left any of their equipment or tools.

“Oy *yawa*! Why are you kicking us out?” Niko shouted. “Cap said we’re due next week. And you!” Niko pointed furiously at the new vendor who had his face mask below his chin. “You’re not even from around here, how dare you people steal our stall!”

“Don’t cause a scene, boy,” asserted a policeman who placed a hand on his pistol. “Cap told us to take it down. City Hall orders.” The chief *tanod* said as he held his baston with an eagerness to give it a swing at Niko.

“Take it up to City Hall, boy. We’re just doing our job.”

“Yawa, job? When has robbing our life been a job?” Mano Boy clenched his fists, thought of the taunt from the authorities, of his wife, and just when he was about to throw a blow, Niko held him off.

“Hey Boy,” Berta signaled; her head shaking. “We care for Joaquina but we gotta think of us too.”

“It’s protocol. You might’ve tracked it too,” Inday said. “Cap already knows.”

“Wha—what you mean?” Niko asked in confusion, holding his Papa by the shoulder.

“You know,” Berta asserted.

Niko realized everyone knew about his Mama. He and Mano Boy became aware of the stares and the taunts. Niko even spotted someone with a phone from a couple of meters away who was trying to capture the scene.

“Not now, Pa. Not here.” Niko whispered adjusting his face mask. “Mama still needs us.” Niko looked at the stares, noticed the eye rolling. He held his Papa by the shoulder, calming him down until he slowly let go of his clenched fist.

“We’ll get ‘em, Pa. Promise. They’ll get theirs.”

“Rey. We need to go to Rey.”

As they walked away, Niko adjusted his face mask not only to protect himself from COVID but also, he thought, to hide

his frustrations. The loss of their fish stall registered in him. It was as if the weight of the world that morning was upon Niko's shoulders. It was as if the sun that morning did not show, but all of life was black in Niko's eyes.

Niko and Mano Boy knew their best chance at taking back their fish stall was through the Capitan. Barangay Hall was just around the corner of Tacloban Wet Market. Mano Boy instructed Niko to get a bucket of rumpi while he parked the tricycle near the Barangay Hall and secured the knives that could easily be taken out from the rear compartment. Everyone else was on lunch break at the nearby karenderya except for the Capitan who busied himself with counting blue bills. Ash scattered over the cash from the cigarette between his fingers and dirtied the money. Dirty money, perhaps from the many like his family whom the barangay decided to kick out, Niko thought.

"Pareng Boy, I expected to see you today. So sorry to hear about Joaquina's fish stall," the Capitan said taking a puff out of his cigarette and continuing the count of his blue bills. "Sayang, I can't get any more of her rumpi."

"They told us it was your instructions," Mano Boy asserted.

"Not mine old friend." the Capitan still refusing to remove his attention from the blue bills, "City Hall's."

"Well, what about the rumpi we got you last week, the freshly caught ones, Rey? Didn't you—"

"Why they're right here," The Capitan interrupted, rubbing his belly. "Joaquina sure knows fish, she sure knows how to satisfy an appetite. You got lucky with that one, Boy. Heard she wasn't in the stall these past weeks? How is she?"

"Didn't you do something to delay our dues, Cap?" Niko asked.

"You sure taught this son of yours some manners ey?" The Capitan took another puff out of his cigarette.

“I cleared this last week, you’re supposed to delay our dues, Rey.” “Boy, Boy, Boy. It’s City Hall orders. No one can’t do anything about it. Besides, did you honestly think you could bribe me with a bucket of rumpi? And what’s that ey, another bribe? Look around you. Look around this wretched public market. I can get all the food I want. In this city the only way up is through this,” the Capitan flicked a bundle of cash.

“Why do you think I got here? It was through them generous people. Unless you got cash, we can’t do nothing.”

“Look what you’ve turned into, Rey. You were just like us folks once: poor. Some sense of self-righteousness got you too good to help folks like us in need?”

“That’s a whole load of crap coming from you, old friend. Maybe the loss of your fish stall will teach you not to cover up your wife’s diagnosis. You’ve endangered the other vendors, ever thought of that? You deserve this loss.”

Niko dropped the bucket of rumpi from his grip, clenched a fist the same way his Papa did earlier that morning, thought of the authorities, the taunt, and what the Capitan said. All the things that happened in the past month culminated in Niko’s fist and just as when Niko was about to throw a blow, the blow his Papa wasn’t able to throw that morning, Mano Boy took out one of their fish knives from his pocket; lashed it through the Capitan’s throat and covered his mouth, making sure to silence him.

The agony in the Capitan’s eyes was just like the agony clear from fish eyes when they were caught: unable to breathe, gasping for air, aware life was slowly being taken from them. It was just like how his wife taught him.

Mano Boy perfected a gutting. “You’re just like ‘em police who try to rob us of our lives, Rey,” Mano Boy said, looking at the gutted neck of his old friend.

“Take the cash!” Mano Boy instructed, dragging the Capitan’s

away from sight. "Take your Mama to Jaro, you'll be safe there. Go!" Niko did just as his father instructed. His hands trembled as he steered their tricycle. He took a route entering the edge of Anibong. As he was driving past the fruit stalls and vegetable stands, Niko felt a bruise forming on his right calf, probably from the vicious kick-start. "Papa, shouldn't have done that." Niko whispered to himself. "He shouldn't have done that."

When he crossed the Anibong bridge, Niko almost lost control as he encountered a bump, luckily he steered to a steady speed just before reaching the curve of Anibong. When he stopped, Niko noticed how some passengers in a multicab covered their noses over their face masks and stared at him. Even with double face masks they could still smell the fish from his tricycle. The passenger at the end of the multicab wore EVSU P.E. pants. Niko, unbothered by squealing pigs tied to backs of PUVs and endless honking, stared at it until the multicab faded from view. Niko knew they could never understand the smell of suffering. Niko kick-started the tricycle, didn't look back and rode away, away from the market.

AMIGO

BY SHANE JAY FABUGAIS

Samtang ako naligo,
Wa ko magdahom nga ikaw moabot,
Tungod niini, amigo, ako nahimuot.

Buot 'mong gipadayag ang imong kalipay,
Kalinaw, gisaysay sa matahom 'mong dagway,
Kahasway, nilutaw ug kini nidagayday.

Apan amigo sa imong pag-abot,
Kasing-kasing niguot,
Kay ako nalabot.

Kanimo, ako, wala malipay,
Pipila na ka adlaw ang milabay,
Ug ako may dakong pagmahay.

Kung wa ni sa imong buot,
Karon akong ipaabot,
Nga ako nagalagot.

Karon usab, ako naligo,
Pero 'di na maghulat sa imong pag-abot,
Kay diri nako, Covid imong gipaabot.

BANYAGA

BY NORAINIE 'PATCH' PUENGAN

THIS IS ALL new to me. Well, not really. For the past few months, I've devoted myself to work, organization work. I've done everything I told myself not to do in college, extra-curricular activities. But you know what they say, you can never really run from who you are right?

Again, this is not really new to me. I've done a couple of online meetings, conducted online events and even organized a lot of webinars. So I really thought that online classes would be just as easy. I thought I've got this. But when it actually started...oh, was I wrong.

I am an incoming third year creative writing student, so writing could be really done online, I could just submit things through email and stuff. I've gone through online meetings and they 're not so bad, and sometimes I could actually consider them fun.

But as I've gone through an online discussion, like an in depth discussion, online setting could be pretty hard. I am not used to seeing my professors on a screen. I was so used to interacting with them in person. Actually seeing them discuss such complicated theories right in front of me and I could easily ask them questions whenever I'm having a hard time catching up, but now, in an online setting? Communication is pretty damn hard. Even though you are on the same call as the rest of you in class, on the same screen as you guys are watching, there is no guarantee that all of you are on the same page!

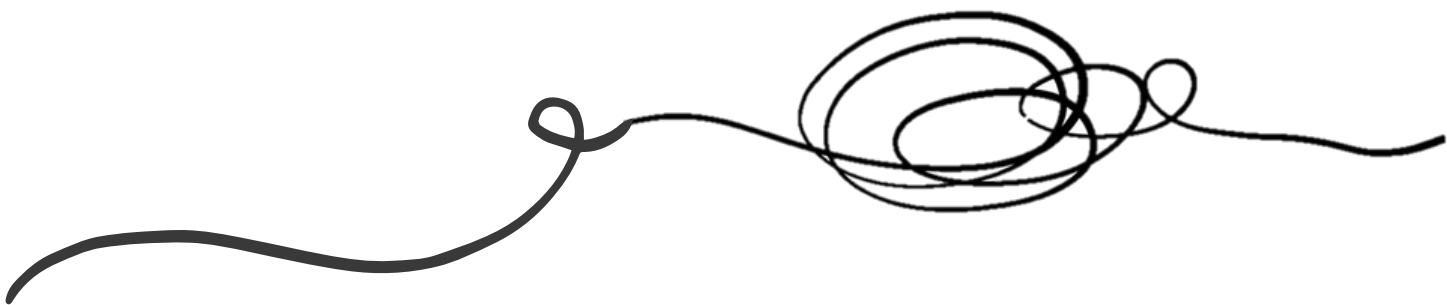
So I was incredibly wrong when I thought that this is

not new to me at all. It's crazy, when we thought we really knew something, but when we look closer, the familiarity fades away, and suddenly everything's all foreign and new? I can't wait for this to be over.

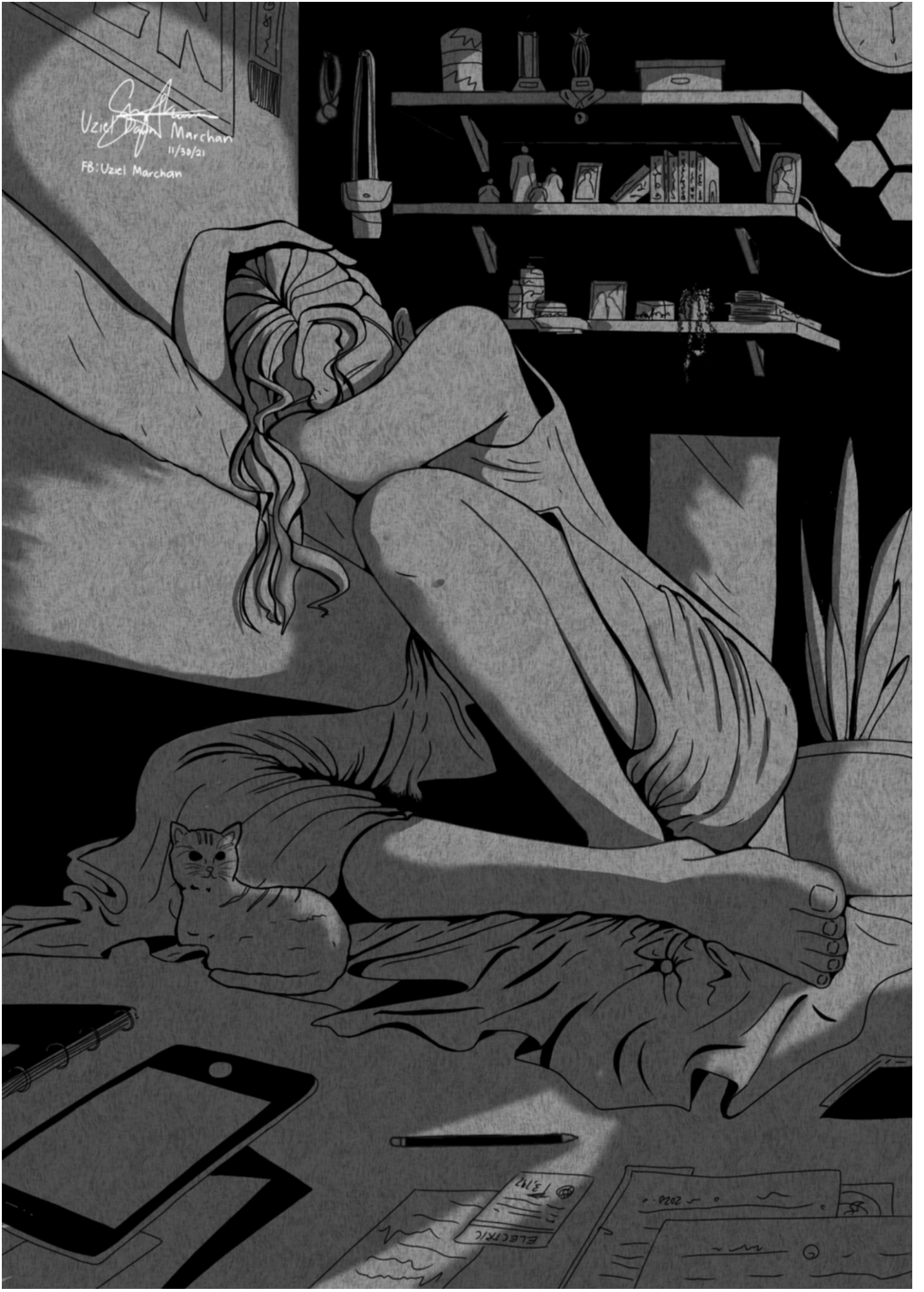
So much has changed. People have been constantly resilient to whatever is thrown for us to adapt especially in this new normal setting. We're so used to constantly adapting to change that we think being resilient is not so foreign to us, but when we actually go through a major change...we realize... we don't really know everything.

I guess the only thing that we can do about this, is to give ourselves space to reflect and process everything. Resilience is embedded into our system, we are so quick to adapt to changes in order to survive that we don't really give ourselves time to process things, to reflect. So for the first few weeks of this new online learning setting, I will give myself some time to process all this newness.

I will give myself space to not do everything perfectly, to allow myself to have bumps in the road and to give myself time to breathe before I head on and slowly embrace this new normal. And soon enough, I'll get used to these foreign things, and eventually they will become a familiarity.



Uziel Marchan
Uziel Marchan
11/30/21
FB: Uziel Marchan



THE DAY I LEFT

BY ALBERTHA LACHMI OBUT

THE METAL BENCH is cold, and it stings my thighs when I take a seat. I don't move. I wish it makes me feel something, but there is nothing but hollowness in my chest.

The last time I was here was two years ago.

It doesn't feel real—that time spent away, locked up in my house with nothing but the four corners of my bedroom to keep me company. But being here today feels more surreal than anything else.

I sit and watch the water crash against the seawall, waiting for my father and our bags. The night breeze blows softly, but it leaves goose bumps along my bare arms.

The day I left Dumaguete plays on frequently in my mind, and I see it all play out now—the panic, the stress, the heat of the afternoon sun. I had begged my dad days prior to let me go home, but he had refused, saying everyone had been overreacting. There was nothing to it, he said. “China's too far away.”

But I remember the terror in those first few days, the dread that lay in the bottom of my stomach, the constant what if she has it what if he has it what if I have it. Our teachers had stopped coming to class, had started emailing us their instructions instead. My professor had told us all to go home, but we had been stubborn. We wanted to stay and finish our work.

The school soon announced that classes were cancelled, and that the city would go into lockdown soon. My roommate's

sister had gone out and gotten us boat tickets, had braved the crowd of people clamouring to go home. I had stuffed everything I could in my duffel pack, and left with nothing but a promise to return in two weeks' time, when lockdown would be over.

That was over two years ago. *March 14, 2020.*

That was also the last time I saw him.

My father nudges my foot with his, and I look up, take some of the bags from him.

“Alright?”

I nod. “Tired.”

He gives me a grim smile, and nods to where the cabs are lined up to pick up passengers. The ride to the hotel is quiet, the trek up the stairs even more so. My father allows me a few moments alone, claiming he has to smoke. It's easy with my father, like this. He knows when to pry, when to back off. Which is why I had asked him, and not my mother, to come.

The next morning, he waits for me in the lobby, and when I descend the stairs he says, “You ready?” I give him a look. He smiles half-heartedly. “*Tala.*”

My heart pounds, even as the cab takes us to where we have to go.

The day I left Dumaguete plays on frequently in my mind: the frantic search of masks and alcohol that had sold out everywhere. The relief when a friend offered us some to use. The sting of the wind on the pier, the heaviness that settled in my chest.

There were no tears for that goodbye, but I had held on as tight as I could, and forced myself not to look back as I went through the gates.

I knew he watched me walk away, but I refused to acknowledge the possibility that I wouldn't be seeing him for a while. Promised myself I'd come right back. But days had

bled into weeks that had turned into months that became years. I'm back now. Too late. Always too late.

Now he sleeps in the earth under my feet, and the headstone in front of me tells me nothing but his name. There is nothing here of his smile, or his warmth. Just cold stone, unfeeling under my fingertips.

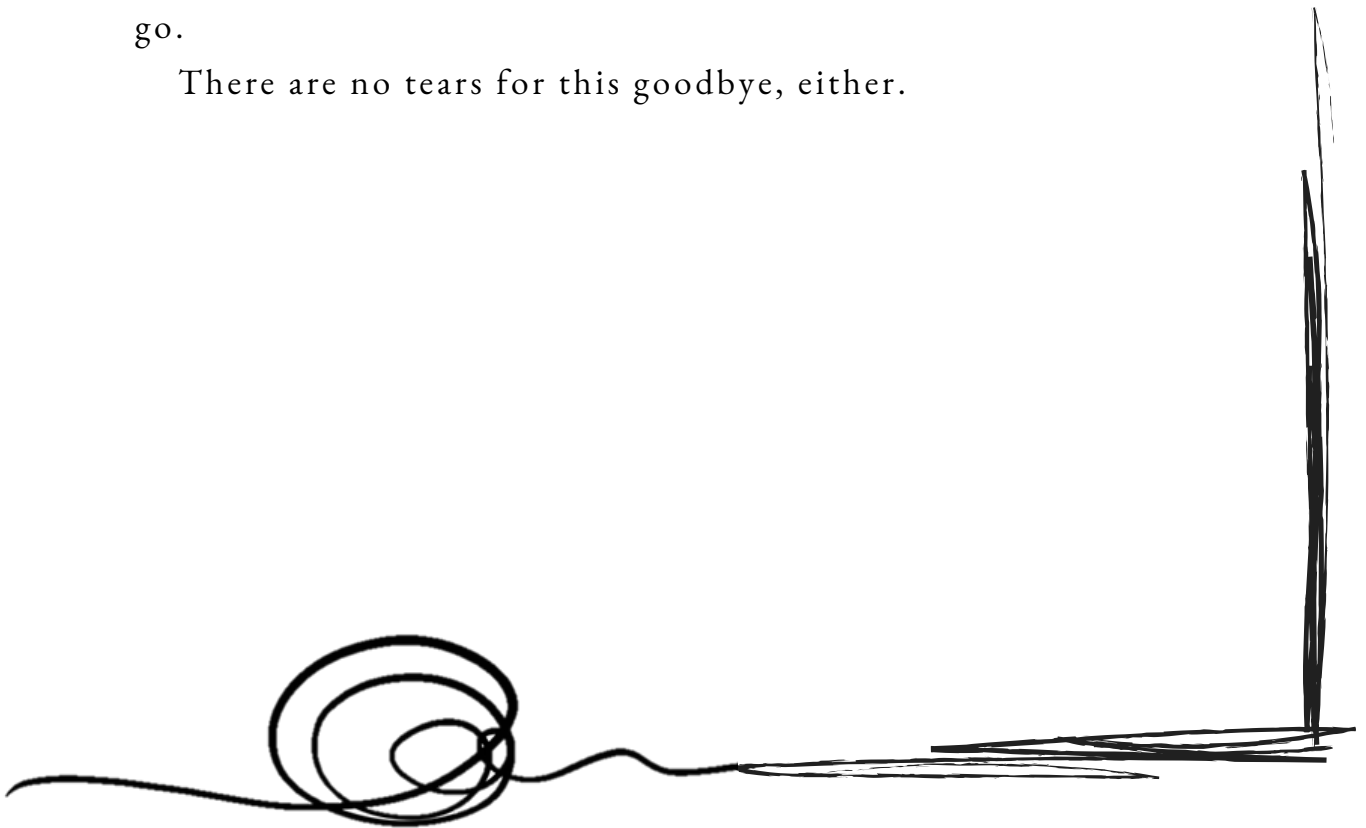
There was no wake, I was told. No one had been present for the funeral, either. Nobody was there, those last few moments. Nobody can tell me what happened, how he died, when he took his last breath. No, they were all in quarantine. They'd only managed to get the headstone carved out because a distant cousin from Sibulan had offered to see to the arrangements.

I lay the flowers by the stone, fold my legs under me. I have no words to say.

The day I left Dumaguete plays on frequently in my mind. I didn't look back. Had forced myself to look ahead. *I didn't look back.*

A hand clasps my shoulder. My father tells me it's time to go.

There are no tears for this goodbye, either.



PANLASA, PANIMHOT, ASA NA MO?

BY SHANE JAY FABUGAIS

Ako nag-atubang sa dagat
gakos ang bugnaw nga hangin.

Panan-aw sa distansya,

lalom na pag-isip.

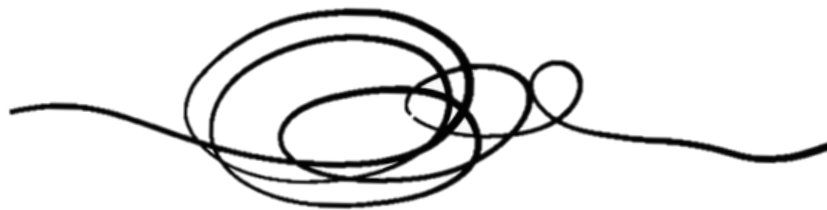
Lasa, Panimhot,

Asa na mo?

Kaloy-i

intawn

ko!



LOSS

BY MEARCK AMIEL LOPEZ

IT WASN'T THE FEVER or the chills—nor was it the four-days-in-a-row lack of sleep, or the aches my body could not seem to shake. It was the loss of smell and taste that I griped about when I tested positive for COVID-19 on the 11th of October, 2021. When my whole family tested positive.

It is morbidly funny how you look at the news and see the new cases, the total tally for the day, or the total tally since, and look at those numbers as if they do not mean anything to you at all. It might as well be the code of the Matrix—until you test positive. Now you're part of those numbers, the way a little pebble is part of the rubble. Now you're a statistic.

We knew for a fact that none of us in the household carried and spread it around. Our hands and feet are almost as white as the screen I am writing this on, and as dry as a whistle from a person who has not drunk water in 24 hours. We would not let ourselves in without scrubbing our hands at the faucet near where we do our laundry whenever we get out as much as ten meters away from the house. The water bill skyrocketed, but we all knew it was all for good measure.

Even our used clothes were constantly disinfected, especially if we've been out. We never so much as entered our own private rooms without stripping down to our underwear and taking a bath first. Then we would spray the floor we passed on and mop it until it screamed that it was already clean. Our house ran like a hospital.

It wasn't until a relative came along and neglected to mention that he was running a fever higher than a hippie. Of course, he was always frequent around the house—it being a part of a compound and all. And as always, we would let him in, just like we always did, because he was a relative. It's funny how we are always so prissy in almost screaming out the rules of social distancing at a local mall, but we hug and kiss our relatives even when we actually don't know where they came from.

It was neglectful of him. Understatement. But then again, even if we blame him (we most certainly did), it was already inside the household—like an intruding marauder waiting to upheave everything from the ground up, looking for the weakest link to latch on to.

I was it.

I survived tuberculosis almost four years ago, but it left my right lung permanently damaged and scarred. I couldn't even lift an object heavier than Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. The pulmonologist told me that my right lung was only functioning at 60% and would continue to deteriorate as I changed my calendar every year. I felt like a phone battery.

The fact that we were already fully vaccinated two months before the infection was a boon to every single one of us. Especially me. When infected with the virus, an unvaccinated person with my condition was already walking down the green mile. What we got was far less severe, and we were fortunate enough for that. But still.

Aside from the fever, the first thing one notices when infected with the virus is the loss of smell and taste. After my fever went down a couple of notches, I decided to cool myself by taking a nice bath. I could not even smell the soap, nor my favorite SunsilK Strong-and-Long shampoo. I left the bathroom and immediately went to the fridge to find the most pungent food I could test my buds with. Durian candy. Smell—no dice.

I took a bite—and I might as well have put gravel in my mouth.

The test only confirmed what every one of us already knew through frantic web searches on Google. We all had it. We had to ask an aunt to do our groceries since we were pretty much walled-off inside our house. Apples, oranges, lettuce, and a whole bunch of meat. The fridge was packed to the brim. It's funny how my mother would never have asked my aunt to buy premium cut steaks if it were not for the virus.

All those were smoke and mirrors. It all came down to when we would sit for our meals and taste nothing but coarse goop shifting down our tongues as we chewed this heap of tasteless junk. Still, my mother made an effort to cook the way she always did. But only this time, my brother and I could not compliment how her *nilagang baka* tasted like, which tasted the way every mother's cooking tasted—like home.

There was the option of lying, of course. But even she would know that we were. She could barely ascertain how it tasted and smelled like when she was cooking it herself. I never understood why she cooked it the way she did, which made no difference at all. As we sat down at the table, she jokingly told us how we should all just imagine how her cooking would taste like for the next few weeks or so. I laughed, but I hurt at the same time.

We all knew how much mother loved to cook for us, and now that our sense of taste has gone, it felt like she had lost her superpower—the one thing that made her a mother to us all—her cooking.

Eating—which was a source of joy for us—suddenly became a chore. The exciting walks to the table to see what our mother had cooked became a long and sullen one. No matter what she prepared, all we could do was feign excitement, and as we took our first spoonfuls, the barren tongues would register nothing. Sitting there, noticing how awful everything felt, I imagined—like what my mom joked about—and reminded myself, with all

the might my sick being could muster—how it felt like before. Later that night, I swore that I would never take my senses for granted if and when they came back.

Eventually, we recovered. Little by little, our senses returned. We were quiet in our observations, perhaps because we were still grasping our bearings after two weeks of tastelessness, but I could see and feel that everyone was happy it returned. Mother finally has her superpower back again, and my brother and I won't have to pretend anymore.

It is funny how we take things for granted, sometimes. Right when fate sweeps its hand and grabs something you thought you could live without, we begin to contemplate how important it was to us and how we would do anything to bring it all back again. I think about the people who lost their lives, how they can never know again what it feels like to lose what they took for granted when they were alive.

But mostly, I think about death. I could have died, my mother, or my brother. I ruefully imagined that every one of us had a severe case in some parallel universe, and that the loss of the senses became an afterthought of impending doom. I remembered how petty losing my sense of smell and taste was as compared to what the others suffered through. But then again, we have all lost something in this pandemic—though some have not returned.





PHOTO BY YEHOSHUA DRILON

CRAVINGS

BY NORAINIE 'PATCH' PUENGAN

THEY SAY THE most important meal of the day is breakfast. But for me, it's the best and most delicious meal of the entire day. I am nowhere near a morning person. I am that basic-ass millennial girl who oversleeps a lot, but that would never stop me from eating breakfast meals.

I mean, don't you just love the smell of onion and garlic? And the sizzling sound it makes as soon as their tango starts in the pan. Just the smell of it gives the house a warm embrace and makes your mouth water, even if you don't know yet the kind of dish it is being made into.

I like my scrambled eggs, not the one stuffed or squished too much by the spatula, the ones where they look like flat pizza, and how you try to slice them in triangles. My younger sister, Shane, likes her eggs well done, something she got from my older sister, Jane. But me and my mother, though always at odds with a lot of things, are on the same page about scrambled eggs.

Whenever I'm away from home, at uni, by the kiosks of the campus, amidst the ocean of famished students, I ask Nining to make some scrambled eggs for me, and just like that I am reminded of home.

It's been a while since I was away from home. Now that I am back, I made a silent promise to myself to eat all kinds of food I wasn't able to eat at Uni. I told myself I won't overdose myself with caffeine and eat greens...(let's not get ahead of ourselves, everybody knows I don't eat greens) or at

least fruits. But what I missed the most is eating fried fish.

The minute the fresh tilapia drowns itself down the edible oil, the boiling sounds it makes convinces my whole being... that I am finally back... home. I've got to be honest, for the past couple of months that I was back, I've been trying to stay positive— you know, to stay the bubbly and beamy-faced Patch.

But lately, everything has been hitting me at once, especially when reality starts to sink in. Everything has changed. Even in this place that I call home doesn't feel like home at all.

One time, my mom asked me to place my dirty clothes on the laundry and so I searched for the pink basket where we usually place our laundry but there was no sign of that pink basket. And so I asked, and she answered, they now put all the dirty clothes in the washing machine so that it will be a lot easier to wash them.

Or the time when she asked me to fold all the clothes, I had to ask Shane where they now put their clothes, because they don't put it all in the cabinet anymore, she said they just place them on the table in their room so that it'd be easier to change. And lastly, whenever my mom asks me to prepare the table. I prepare them neatly, using the green knitted placemats on our glass dinner table, carefully putting the plain white plates, beside them are the glasses to be filled with mineral water. But then she told me they don't use the green knitted placemats anymore. Instead, they use the white plastic placemats now. So I have to redo all the arrangements I made. All these changes started to overwhelm and confuse me. And it took me a while to understand that I don't live here anymore.

They went on with their lives without me. And I know that that's completely normal because I was away, but it's taking me a while to get the hang of it. It took me a while to

fit in, with all this new system and nuances that they created without me.

So much has happened...but some things never change.

My mom still makes the fried tilapia as crisp as possible. I still slice the kalamansi on the other side. She still puts tomatoes on her soy sauce where she dips the fried fish. Shane still has to be the one to buy the one-liter Coke. I still have to do dishes 'cause I still don't know how to cook up until now. We still throw shade about our loud neighbors and judge them by their taste in music.

And here...in my hometown, it still never fails to rain every afternoon. And though everything is different, it's all still the same. And just like that—I feel like this is still my home.



MEMENTO

BY ALBERTHA LACHMI OBUT

June 2021

I FOUND THE little Lakshmi figurine my grandmother had bought for me at the Hindu temple in Los Angeles. It was smaller than the size of my palm, a dark bronze in color. I found it when I was unpacking the boxes I'd received from my aunt in Dumaguete.

Here was my entire life from the town that feels too far away, packed neatly into three balikbayan boxes. Shoes, clothes, books—all mementos of a life that feels strangely un-lived.

I had been in a hurry to leave Dumaguete for fear of getting stranded amidst the chaos of the lock downs and quarantine that I had left my mess of a room with enough clothes to last a week and a promise to return to finish my final paper for Literary Research.

That was over a year ago.

As I unpacked the boxes my tita had so graciously packed for me, I could see how little she cared about the placement of my things. The most important thing for her, I suppose, was getting all of them to fit, and I did have a lot of things I'd left behind.

But I saw my books strewn haphazardly at the bottom of one of the boxes, some of my Bukowskis (which were all presents from my family) had found their way into bags filled with what knickknack she could find. I saw my sketchbooks tucked into the side of the boxes, my paint

shut away in a plastic container with its lid taped tight to keep it closed.

Shoe boxes that I had filled with little gifts from my boyfriend and my friends, letters, pictures, were piled in with the shoes, and even my handy nebulizer was thrown into the mix without much thought to it.

It got me thinking about how, if I had been the one stashing my life away in boxes, I'd have taken more care.

I would have laid a towel before I put my books in the box, would probably have piled them all so neatly, stuffed something in between crevices so they wouldn't move, and therefore wouldn't be damaged on the way here. I would have folded my clothes neatly before putting them in the box, too—this dress I'd bought for fifteen pesos at an ukay-ukay, the black ensemble I'd worn the first time I went to the Luce Auditorium, the shirt I'd worn the first day of school . . .

I would have placed my nebulizer on the top gingerly, knowing that it's been mine since I was five, and that old and bulky it may be, it still worked perfectly.

All these things were fragments of the life I'd left behind, and I suppose it made me think—sentimental as I am—about how all these things held importance for me. These were mementos I chose to keep.

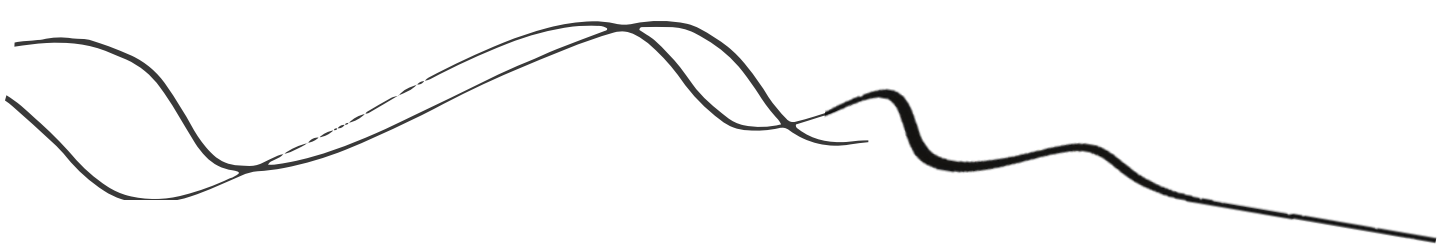
It felt surreal, having all these things here, in my room, on my desk. Permanent, somehow. I had done the job of unpacking and arranging my stuff, throwing my clothes in the wash because they'd smelled like the cabinet they'd been in for six whole months. I'd put the books on my desk, put the pictures up, too, even the painting I'd done of orange tulips on a blue field. But as pretty as all these things looked in my room, they gave me a bittersweet feeling; these things did not belong here.

Neither did I.

I had woken up early the next day to unpack the rest of the boxes, and I had found the small figurine my grandmother bought. Insignificant, really. It was probably only a few dollars' worth, but I found myself clutching the tiny woman. I looked at the box again, gigantic, compared to her. But I'd stared at her intricate details, the jewelry, the pattern on her sari, the petals of the lotus flower she'd been standing on.

Beautiful.

But I felt as little as she was.



MARSO, BUWAN NG PAGBABAGO

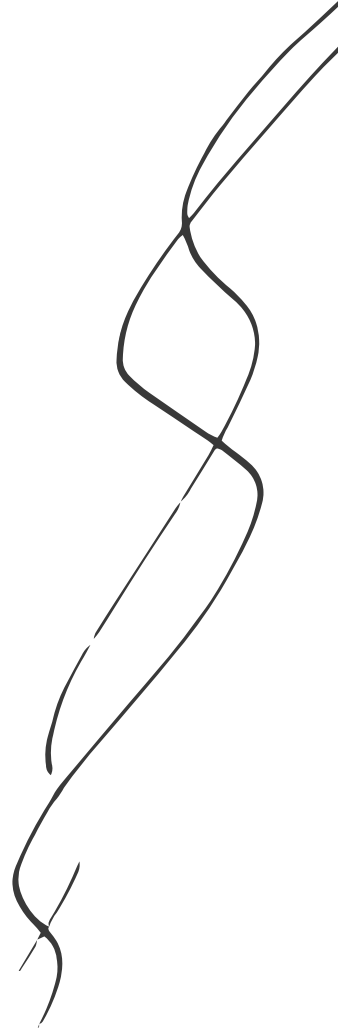
BY ANTON GABRIEL ASIGNAR

Nagbago ang mundo,
sa kasagsagan ng pandemyang ito.
Nakaapekto sa bawat tao,
lalo na sa sambayanang Pilipino.

Tiyak na pinatunayan,
ang ating lakas at katatagan.
'Laging napapatanong sa isipan,
kailan kaya ito lilisan?

Sa Poon ay nananalangin,
na sana'y tuloyang lutasin,
ang mga suliraning haharapin,
sa pagpapatuloy nitong lakarin.

Unti-unting nakasanayan,
ang pamumuhay sa gitna ng kahirapan.
Sa ilan, ito ay walang kabutihan.
Sa iba, ito'y napakikinabangan.



THE SOUND OF SUMMER

BY NORAINIE 'PATCH' PUENGAN

Summer, April 2020

THE BORDERS WERE closed. The streets were empty. All one could hear was the sound of the void left by everyone who used to live in this city. It was the end of March when the pandemic broke out and before you know it, students were fleeing back to their hometowns, establishments were closed and just like that, the entire Dumaguete City was in lockdown. My family thought of this circumstance as an opportunity for us to be closer to one another, but a huge part of me knew that it was also a way for us to forget what we've lost.

“Belinda!” I flinched when I heard my mom call me. “Kagaina raman na ning bukal! What are you doing? Palunga na na. Kaganina ra gahulat si Papay sa iyang kape!”

Mama was the youngest daughter of Papay. For as long as I could remember, she wanted to work abroad but couldn't because she needed to be here, to take care of Papay—which is pretty much why Dad had to go alone to Saudi and work as a nurse in a public hospital to support us.

Mama had always been the one who prepares Papay's meals but today was an exception as she was preparing for the guests' arrival. Some of our relatives would be moving in today due to the lockdown. They'd be staying with us, here in Papay's house, all throughout the summer.

“Papay, here’s your coffee, ‘lo,” I placed the mug on the coffee table right next to him. “Naa pakay layhan ‘lo?”

“Lang...asa si—” Papay was about to ask, but before he could continue, Mama was already calling me.

“Belinda!”

“Yes, Ma!” I answered. “Lo, muabot rato siya ha? Here’s your coffee, lo.”

Papay used to be the managing partner in his own law firm until about two years ago, he showed signs of dementia and had to stop working. It really took a toll on him, pretty much on all of us. He used to read a lot especially when he’s at home, make dad jokes during dinner parties, even play the piano, but he could no longer do that. It didn’t help when we lost one of our own.

I immediately went downstairs, to the vacant rooms, down the hall. Tita Marites and his son, Elijah were coming, as well as Tito Federico and his family. Mama’s siblings. Somehow this turned out to be a little reunion.

“Bel!”

“Yes, Ma?”

“Get me more sheets.”

“Why? I thought these were all set!”

“Because Elijah will be bringing his roommate, Jeff. He got stranded here in Negros and can’t go back to his hometown in Mindanao. So he’s staying here with us,” Mama explained.

“And you’re okay with this?” I was confused with her sudden generosity especially during these times.

“Please don’t question my decisions and just get the sheets! Pagdali kaw!” I was about to protest but we heard a honk coming from the front lawn.

“That’s probably them! Dali! Kuhaa na dayon i-set up na diri arun maka bless nakas imong mga Tita and Tito!”

I sighed in exasperation and went to Mama’s bedroom. She

She kept all of the extra comforters and sheets in her own little linen closet. I was still bothered by Mama's sudden approval. It was so unlike her to just be okay with letting practically a stranger live with us for an entire summer, without knowing this particular person's whereabouts. For heaven's sake, we had no idea if he had gone everywhere and caught the virus!

I could hear their laughter echoing downstairs as I was folding the blankets in the vacant rooms. Then I heard heavy footsteps down the hall. I immediately got out of the room to look. I saw a tall skinny young man in his dark green sweatshirt. His skin was dark, with long limbs and legs. He was looking through the picture frames hung on the walls down the hall. I stomped my foot, making noise so he would notice me watching him.

He jumped, and looked at me. "Oh, you're probably Bel. Ig agaw ni Eli, right?" he cocked his head. "Who's this in the picture? I didn't see her downstairs or around the house."

I glanced at the picture he was referring to and gave him a blank stare.

"No shoes inside the house," I told him instead. I gestured behind me. "Here's your room. Put your belongings and come downstairs. Kompleto dapat inig mangaon."

He just put his hands inside his pockets and nodded. I walked past him, but before I could walk away, I couldn't help but look at the frame. I could feel him watching me, so I quickly placed the frame the way it was originally hung before he touched it.

The next day was hectic. I woke up to Mama, Tita Marites and Tita Fiel, Tito Fredrico's wife, chopping the rikados on the dining table. The smell of onion and garlic, simmering on the pan greeted me as I entered the kitchen and into the dining hall.

"Hala dalaga najud ka, 'lang" Tita Marites commented at the

sight of me.

“Dako na kaayo si Bel jud ay! Asa gani ka gaskwela gang?” Tita Fiel asked.

“Sa USC, Tita,” I said and smiled at her.

They never really had time to ask me these things last night during dinner because they were very busy catching up with all the gossip about my other relatives.

“Ay hala! Gisugtan diay nimog skwelag layo? Weren’t you even scared if she’d get a boyfriend?” Tita Marites said.

“Ay, kay di man nako paundangon!” Mom laughed. “Her course is Adversiting Arts man gud, wala diri,” my mom simply explained.

Tita Marites was the oldest. She was a Professor at the University here in the city. She married young to a navy soldier and became a widow when he died due to a cardiac arrest at age 45. She never remarried and focused on her career instead. She had fair skin, and eyes framed with long lashes. Among the sisters, she was definitely the prettiest...also the feistiest.

Tito Federico married Tita Fiel a year after they graduated from Law School. From the stories I heard during family gatherings, they met during college. She had always been soft spoken with wisdom in her almond eyes. Tito said he first saw her, sitting alone on the benches in the university, reading a book. He never failed to call it ‘love at first sight.’ They never had children. Mama said Tita Fiel didn’t want any kids and that she was too busy with her career to raise one, anyway. They were not really the typical family portrait you have in your head, but I could tell, even now, that they loved each other deeply.

“Happy Birthday Lang,” Tita Fiel greeted me.

“Thank you, po,” I said.

I couldn’t believe I was spending my eighteenth birthday here with the rest of the family. I had always imagined

spending it in Cebu with all of my college friends. That was the thing about this global pandemic—it never failed to mess up our plans. We would be having a dinner party with just family for my eighteenth birthday. We haven't done this in a while so I hoped it wouldn't turn out disastrous and messy as it usually did in the past.

“Ma, nakatimpla nakag kape? I'll give it to Papay lang,” I offered.

“Oh, don't worry about it. Jeff already served it to Papay. They're upstairs now, with Elijah at the balcony. Somehow Papay finds it refreshing to talk to new faces,” she told me.

I was stunned. How could she just let this stranger talk to Papay? Yesterday when they arrived, Jeff didn't even go downstairs to have dinner with us, he must have slept all through the night. I thought it was rude of him. He was practically living with us, the least he could do was be considerate! Then suddenly he was hanging out with Papay like it was normal?

Dinner was served. Everyone was at the dining table, including Jeff. I was surprised he even showed up, considering he skipped dinner last night. I thought that was his thing. Mama served her specialty—adobo—and Tita Fiel also made some Filipino-style spaghetti. The birthday wouldn't be complete without the long-life noodle dish. Everyone looked so happy, even I was...content, after all that has happened to us for the past few years. And for a moment, I let myself believe that nothing had changed, that we were still one big happy family.

Right after Elijah sang the happy birthday song, Mama sliced the cake for everyone. We were all amused with Elijah's college stories, he seemed well-adjusted with his course. Elijah took up Bachelor of Arts in Foreign Affairs at Silliman. It was actually Papay who encouraged him because he used to join a lot of Model United Nation Conferences when we were kids.

Everyone in my family graduated from Silliman. Well, there would always be an exception to the rule, in this case, it was me. Then I remembered, I wasn't alone with this exception.

The night was running smoothly. Everyone was laughing, recalling embarrassing memories of their childhood. Tito Federico loved talking about their childhood—not as much as Tita Marites, though.

She always found her little brother annoying, up until now. Tito Federico was the only son of Papay. He always admired Papay, maybe it was the reason why he followed his footsteps and became a lawyer, too. Just like Papay, he was smart, sophisticated, and firm. He also got his wits and instincts. But unlike Papay, he never had the same dream of building a big family. From what I could see, his family with us and Tita Fiel was more than enough for him.

While everybody was having such a great time, my eyes found Jeff. He was also getting along with everyone and he seemed to please Papay so much. Papay always asked him questions, especially about his college life, and even though Papay kept repeating his questions, asking him over and over again...he never dismissed him. He was patient and respectful, answering him. It looked like he liked Papay's company as well.

“Shall I propose a toast?” Tito Federico announced. He usually was the one who made grand speeches during family gatherings. He stood up and picked up his wine glass. “This is a toast for our very own Bel, and for the family our Papay has built for us. Even though the outside world is falling apart, it has brought us closer and stronger together. Cheers!”

The click sound of wine glasses bumped together sent shivers down my spine for I remembered the missing piece of this gathering.

“Happy Birthday, Lang,” Tita Marites reached and squeezed my shoulder. I almost flinched with the sudden physical contact and just smiled to hide it away.

Mama stood up to slowly clean up the plates. I got up on my feet to help her. As I was picking up the glasses, Jeff suddenly spoke up.

“I was curious about something,” he said to no one in particular.

“What is it, lang?” Tita Marites asked, as she was also picking up the used spoon and forks.

“Who’s Caroline?” he asked.

Silence met his question. Then out of nowhere, a sudden shatter of glass filled the void in the room. I looked over at Mama, who had dropped the plate she was holding. I hurried and ran to her.

“How did you know about her?” Tito Federico asked.

“Oh, Caroline, when is she coming back?” Papay asked, looking around the room. “I waited for her for so long. Asa na si Carolina?”

“Oh, I heard it from Papay,” Jeff replied. “He was asking about her. Is she the one in the picture frames down the hall?”

Jeff turned to me, looking for answers. I opened my mouth but nothing came out. I was too stunned to even make a sound.

“Federico, where is Caroline?” Papay asked again. “She was supposed to come home by the 30th! Where is she?!” Papay was yelling now, demanding answers.

“Take Papay to his room,” Mama told me. I wanted to move my feet, to say something but for some reason I was frozen on my spot. “Now!”

The sound of Mama’s voice shook me to my core. I hurriedly pulled Papay’s wheelchair as he was screaming on the top of his lungs to Tito Federico. “Where is your sister?! Where is she? Federico! You are responsible for your sisters! Where is she?!”

I took him away and into his room. He was still asking me, demanding answers until we arrived at his bed.

“Papay?” I tried to console him, to calm him down.

“Where is she?! Where is she?”

I took him away and into his room. He was still asking me, demanding answers until we arrived at his bed.

“Papay?” I tried to console him, to calm him down.

“Where is she?!! Where is she?”

I took his palm and put it on my cheek. “I’m here, Papay.”

His glassy eyes cleared for a moment. “Oh, Caroline, I was so worried about you!” I could sense the relief in his voice. “Where have you been?”

“Sorry na Pay, if I made you worry. I’m here...I’m right here,” I couldn’t stop my voice from cracking. Papay wiped the tears raining down my cheeks.

“Papay is here alright? You are safe,” and just like Papay, in that moment...I let myself believe that everything was back to the way it used to be.

Soon enough, Papay calmed down, I helped him change his clothes and put him to bed.

Tita Caroline was the second daughter of Papay. She was named after my Lola Carina, who died because of childbirth to my Mama. Tita Caroline also looked so much like Lola that’s why Papay had always been fond of her. She had the same fair skin, doe eyes and tall figure.

Growing up, she had the hardest time because our family went bankrupt the minute she had to go to college so she wasn’t able to finish her education. She stopped so Mama could continue, and she took care of Papay and everyone else in the Family. Mama once told me that she and Tita Caroline shared the same dream: to work abroad, provide for the family. But Tita, just like Mama, made the same sacrifices and stayed here.

Mama was the closest to Tita Caroline. She had always told me she was grateful to Tita. While growing up, she took care of me as well. She taught me how to ride a bike, how to play the piano, and even helped me with my homework. She was always there for me, for Papay, and for our family.

“Kinsa man diay gasugo niya muabroad ha?” I could hear Tito

Federico's voice down the hall.

"Ug ngano pud dawng dili pwede siyang mu abroad? She deserved to have a life of her own!" Mama defended.

"And look what she got herself into huh?" Tita Marites asked.

"She was not supposed to leave, especially with Papay's condition!" Tito Federico said.

"And why was she the one who's supposed to take care of Papay, huh? Where were you, Fede? When Papay can't even remember his late wife? Where were you? Ikaw, Marites! Where were you when Papay couldn't walk anymore?" Mama asked, her voice cracking. She sniffed. "Stop putting blame on Caroline and for once...look at yourselves."

Then Mama walked away. So did Tito Federico.

Tita Marites and Tita Fiel helped me clean up the table and the dishes. Elijah and Jeff helped in packing the leftovers in the pyrex. Just like that, the night ended in resentment and remorse.



It was four in the morning, and I couldn't sleep. I kept moving all throughout the night on my bed, pondering on the thought that up until now...they still blamed Tita Caroline. I went outside to drink some water when I saw someone on the piano. It had been years since I saw someone touch the piano. The last person was Tita Caroline.

I went closer, to see who it was. I could just make out Jeff's silhouette in the dark. He was playing a song. He was playing her song.

I must've made some noise because he stopped and cocked his head.

"Bel? Is that you?" He stood.

"I'm sorry," I apologized for the sudden interruption.

"No, I should be the one to apologize. Did I wake you?"

“No, you didn’t. I...I honestly couldn’t sleep.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Dead silence filled the room. I didn’t want to make it more awkward than it already was so I just spoke up.

“What was your course again, Jeff?”

“Oh– I’m taking up Music Therapy in Silliman.”

“Oh, that’s why you play so well.”

He chuckled. “What about you?”

“Advertising Arts.”

He nodded. “Do you play?”

“Oh, I used to...but it was such a long time. I’m pretty sure I don’t know how to play anymore,” I answered. “Why Music Therapy?”

“Oh, when I was a kid, when my mom died, it was music that spoke to me.”

“I am so sorry.”

“Nah, it’s fine; it was such a long time ago. I don’t know– somehow music helped me get through it, you know. It’s corny as hell but...for some reason, I didn’t choose it, it chose me. It must have been rough for you.” he said.

I looked at him, puzzled.

“I mean what happened last night. I’m sorry I ruined your birthday.”

“Oh, that.” I said, coming in closer, reaching the piano. “Don’t worry about it. I’m actually grateful you brought it up.”

“What? Why?” he asked, confused.

“To know that they didn’t actually forget about...her,” I answered. “It was her death anniversary too. Same day as my birthday.”

“Oh my God! I didn’t know,” he said.

“It’s alright. Don’t worry about it,” I said. I cocked my head. “Were you playing Nocturne Opera 9 Number 2? Chopin?”

“Yeah, I just played. It’s one of my favorites,” he answered.

“Can you play it again? She used to play it a lot–when I was

younger.”

He just smiled and started playing again. And just like that... it felt like...she was here with us, playing for my birthday.

“It gets better, you know,” he suddenly said.

“I know,” I answered. “It’s great to have you here, Jeff.”



TAKE OUR LOVE TO THE GRAVE

BY PIA VILLAREAL

EVERYTHING WAS WHITE with the exception of a little black dress. Tiles, clothes, walls, coffin. Even faces were pale. Almost as dead as the face in the open casket. Almost.

She was only 24.

She barely left the house.

It didn't matter.

COVID got her during grocery shopping. Snuck up to her like a ghost ready to escort her to the land of the dead. It took two weeks for her to get better. It took one night for her health to plummet into a straight line. Complications, they said. Pneumonia maybe? Ari wasn't sure. She wasn't there when it happened. She wasn't there when her girlfriend died. She was in quarantine, facing the wall of a hotel only 5 minutes away from the hospital.

But at least she made the funeral. At least. At least. At least. Sometimes we have to lie to live with ourselves. *At least. At least. At least.*

Ari was standing by the wall, next to all the friends she never got to meet. None of them knew her face. Who knows if they ever knew her at all? As far as she knows Leah has only told three people but even then, Ari doesn't know if they even knew what she looked like.

Eight months. Was eight months long enough to truly say

you've fallen in love? Was eight months long enough to truly say you love all of a person when you may not have known all of them yet? But surely in eight months it was enough to grieve and grieve deeply. For all the time together that they were robbed of. For all the memories they never got to make.

Ari's vision blurs and like clockwork every breath she takes starts to feel like shards of glass burrowing into her heart. She feels the dampness of cotton before she feels the trail of tears running down her face. She can feel the mucus build up and drip inside the fabric of her mask. She sucks it in, pulls her mask back and wipes the snot with her hand which in turn she wipes on her dress. The only ounce of black in an ocean of white.

It was the last day. It was the last chance. They don't hold the dead for a week anymore. Not in a time like this. Two days is all they could have, and this was the last.

Either see Leah now or be forever haunted only by the pictures of her. Funny, she promised Leah that the first time they meet she would be wearing a little black dress. She didn't know how true it would be until now.

Nobody else knew her. Nobody would hold her hand. She would have to keep herself from breaking all on her own. So Ari wipes her tears and strides to the open casket before she has any chance to doubt herself. Every step made the doubts scream louder. They scream in Leah's voice.

"Don't taint our living memories with my death."

"I don't want you to see me like this."

"I never got the chance to kiss you."

But the echoes of Leah's voice quiets down when Ari is standing in front of her. Ari wasn't strong enough to stop herself from breaking. Her sobs pierce the silence in her head, and it ricochets around the room. She knows people are staring but her body wracks itself as if remembering how to fly with its angel wings so that it can reach the heaven Leah

gone to.

Leah looks so beautiful in white. Her heaven must be white too. Ari knows she doesn't belong there yet but her invisible wings try to fly anyway. Leah looks more beautiful in real life than she ever did on that little phone screen. But on that little phone screen she was alive with laughter. Now, she is incapable of anything but silence.

A hand lands, heavy and comforting, on Ari's shoulder. Through the blur of her tears, she turns to see a face similar to the face she fell in love with. Eyes that she could have mistaken for Leah's in a barely lit room. Hair, an ocean of waves similar to the one she always wanted to run her hands through. She was suddenly engulfed in a hug by arms who had no doubt held Leah countless times. Hands that raised the woman she fell in love with.

Her wings beat harder. An objection at being anchored to the reality that Leah no longer occupies. "Please..." Ari hears herself speak amidst the hiccups and hard breathing, "Let me. Let me pay... for everything." Ari pulls away to see kind, sad eyes. "I have to do something. Let me do this one thing." Ari pleads, as if asking for forgiveness.

"It's the grief speaking..." Leah's mother says. Ari shakes her head and fully breaks away from the embrace. She looks at the woman with resolution.

"Let me pay for everything. Please... I don't know what to do." Leah's mother blinks, not sure what to do either.

Ari takes a slip of paper from her purse and hands it over.

Leah's mother widens her eyes at the number written on the check. It was enough for more than everything.

"Please," Ari says again.

Leah's mother nods. "Thank you," she says because what else can be said?

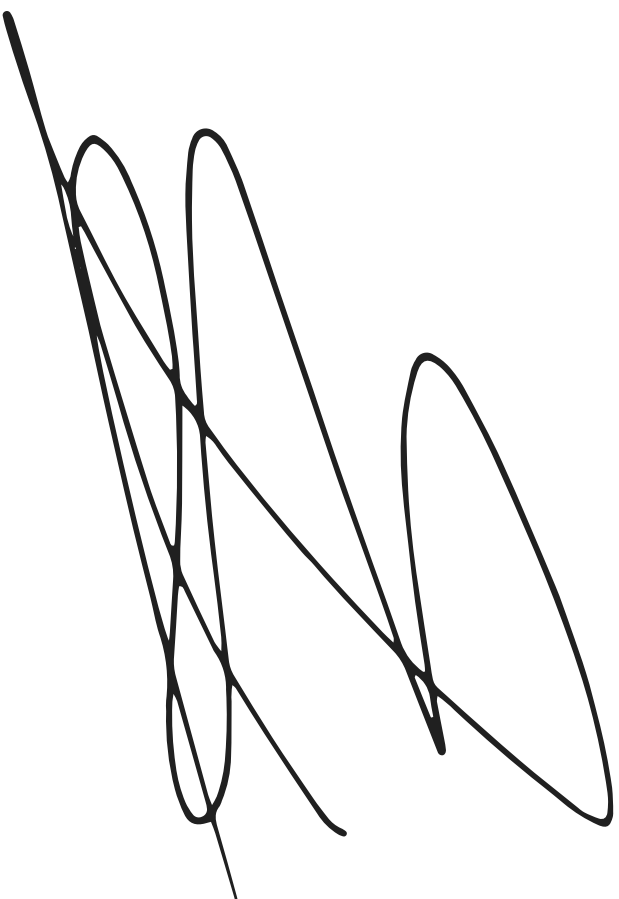
Ari nods in turn and glances at Leah one last time, burning the image into memory, before walking away. A hand on the

the wrist stops her. She looks back at the eyes of a mother who has just lost her child.

“Who are you?”

Ari opens her mouth, words naturally ready to fall from it in response to the question. Words like “girlfriend,” “lover,” “the woman who’s still in love with your dead daughter.”

Instead, what came out was, “A friend. Just a friend.” And Ari gently pries the hand anchoring her to the spot so she can walk away before her angel wings start beating again.



PART TWO:

LOVE & MELANCHOLY



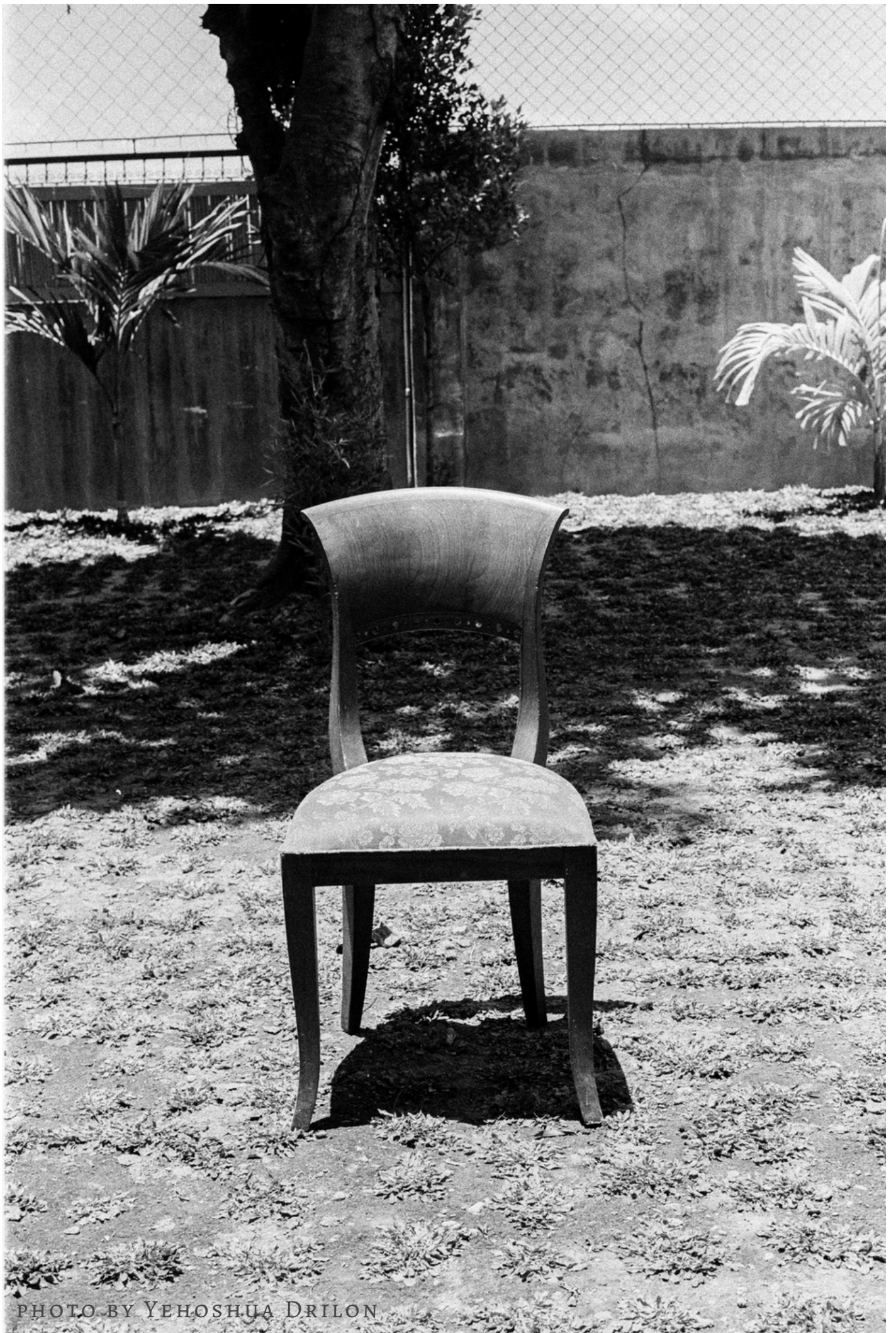


PHOTO BY YEHOŠUA DRILON

GHOSTS

BY ALYANA AGUJA

You knew the monsters in me better than I did
You were friends with them
You knew what I was bound to become
You could have let go, but you never did

You were friends with them
The ghosts I never wanted to see
You could have let go, but you never did
In the chaos, you were the only one let in


The ghosts I never wanted to see
They made me bear my pain alone
In the chaos, you were the only one let in
Like a predestined savior

They made me bear my pain alone
Always thinking of today as the last
Like a predestined savior
You always came swooping in



LUHA

BY SHANE JAY FABUGAIS



Alas sais sa takna, napalong ang suga,
Dungan niini mga mulo sa kalibutang naguba.
Senyas sa langit kini nagahulga,
Ako karon nagapangulba.
Tamaya ayaw, kining huna-huna,
Kay wala ni sa saktong hulma.

Atol mga kabanay, nibusina,
Ako usab, mobiya na.
Apan dili usa managana,
Tungod kini wa pay takna.
Isig-kakilid nako walay gana,
Mao kini ang biyaheng walay tagna.

Karon kita gisagpa,
Sa kabagsik ning dakong gaba.
Ang pag-antos kalit nibaha,
Inosente, edukado, tanan nakakuha.
Apan basin Siya, niini, madala,
Ug kita masalbar ning atong LUHA.



GRATITUDE

BY PHILIP BERNAD CALABRO

"YOU DON'T REALLY have to open the boxes now. You must be so tired from your long trip," Miguel said to his sister, who was already cutting the layers of packing tape.

"It's ok, Mike. I'm really not that tired. I slept on the plane."

"Ann, do you want some tsokwate?" asked Mama Nacha from the round dining table. Of course, the tsokwate had been arranged for weeks in anticipation of Ann's arrival. Mama Nacha had ordered special tablea from Cebu and had the special cups taken out and cleaned. "Mike can open the first box while you sit down for a drink."

"I'll have some in a minute, Ma. I just want to get some stuff I need."

The cardboard box opened to the surface layer of plastic trash bags. Miguel took the bags and handed them to the maid, who dutifully folded them and put them away nicely for reuse. Next came layers of clothes, some of them used and some new, in various sizes and styles.

"I bought this for Tita Dina. Do you think she'll like it?" Ann held up a black dress with a strange pattern of sequins and lace.

Miguel looked at it skeptically and replied, "I'm not sure if it will fit her, but if it does, she'll like it."

Ann held out a pile of three sweatshirts towards Mama Nacha. "Here Ma, for when it gets cold."

Mama Nacha cooed in delight, noting the brand and the

quality of fabric more than the thought that she would never have a reason to wear them. Some Filipinas get cold, and many more wear heavy clothes for the style. She was not one of them.

“Thank you, Ann. Send my thanks to Bobby as well. Your *tsokwate* is getting cold. Come and sit first.”

“I just need a few things, Ma.”

Next in the box were the candies. Stuffed into the open spaces were small chocolate bars in various states of melting. The sight of them reminded Miguel of when he was younger and American chocolate was hard to get.

“I know how much you like these, so I got a lot. But remember to share some with the others.” Ann was smiling broadly. Miguel took a chocolate and opened it right away, making a show of enjoying it. Of course, the rest would be given to the children or to beggars asking for food.

The maid set out a plate of *puto* and other sticky rices wrapped in banana leaves. Mama Nacha said, “Ann, come and eat first.”

After the candies came the cosmetics and vitamins. These would be divided carefully amongst the family members as the trickling life-blood from America. The vitamins would keep them healthy and the cosmetics would keep them young. A small zip-lock bag full of cosmetics had Mama Nacha’s name on it. After it was passed to her, she took a long time turning it around to see what was inside, not wanting to break the seal just yet.

Ann was always good about knowing what she liked, but that also meant that she already had one of everything in the bag.

Miguel handed the maid big bottles of vitamins. He then organized the bottles labeled for the other relatives in town and started each of them their own piles. On the piles he added chocolate bars and a few articles of clothing.

“Ma, I saw this and thought you might need some. It’s an

bottom layer of plastic bags to the maid. Miguel took the box back towards the dirty kitchen to be put with all the other used boxes. Ann finally sat down at the table.

“Where’s the tsokwate?”

“They’re still heating it. It got cold because you didn’t drink it.”

“Ma, you didn’t have to do that. I’m sure it was still ok.” Ann opened up the plastic container and poured some mixed nuts into her hand. “My doctor says I have to eat more nut proteins. So, I’ve been eating these mixed nuts all the time. Do you want some?”

Ann found a small plate with ensaymada on it. She slid the ensaymada onto another plate of snacks and poured her mixed nuts out. Then she spun the lazy Susan around to her mother. Mama Nacha took a few nuts in the tips of her fingers and tried them.

“Mmm, they’re good,” she said immediately.

“I know, right? And the great thing is they’re organic, non-GMO, keto friendly, and fair trade. I put some in all the boxes and I have some in my luggage.”

Miguel sat down to a *merienda* that was only served to honored guests. He spun by the nuts to get at the organic supplement made from beets. It’s supposed to be good for your heart.”

“Oh,” Mama Nacha looked at the bag of red powder suspiciously. “Thank you to you and Bobby.”

Ann pulled out five more bags of the same powder and set them on the table in front of Mama Nacha. Miguel and Mama Nacha looked at each other, both working out in their heads where to put all of the things coming out of the box, both keeping in mind that there was another box and two suitcases left full of the same types of things.

“Mike, see this? I got you a manual coffee grinder so you can use it even during brownouts.” Ann demonstrated the turning

of the crank a bit and then held it out to him.

“Oh, thank you.” Miguel walked over and put it next to the jar of Nescafé instant coffee.

The maid re-emerged from the dirty kitchen with a bowl of *dinuguan*. The lazy Susan at the center of the table was getting full of traditional afternoon snack foods. Just like Mama Nacha had said, the *tsokwate* was getting cold.

“Ann,” Mama Nacha called out, “I’ll have the *tsokwate* heated, ok?” She gestured to the maid, who had been briefed ahead of time on the optimal temperature to serve the *tsokwate* to their returning daughter. Mama Nacha wanted it to be even better than Ann remembered.

Without turning, Ann replied, “Ok, Ma. I’m almost done.”

Miguel split up the cans of meat among the piles for the relatives and then re-covered the piles with clothes. When the maid ran out of room on their shelves for canned corn, he told her to just put the rest in his room.

“Here it is.” Ann pulled out a large plastic container from the box. “This is what I was looking for.”

She carried the container to the table and put it down at her seat. Then she went back to unpacking.

With the last few bits taken out of the box, Ann handed the *dinuguan* and *puto*. Ann kept eating her own food.

“Ma,” said Ann with a lilt.

“Yes?”

“When are you coming back to the mainland?”

Mama Nacha squinted and leaned forward, assuming she had misheard her daughter. Miguel did the same.

“Mai...main...”

“Mainland, Ma,” replied Ann with a hint of exasperation. “When are you coming to the States?”

Mama Nacha didn’t understand what her daughter was saying. Miguel did, but had to choke down a bit of disgust at the use of the word “mainland” to describe a place on the other side of the

the world that had owned the Philippines almost a century ago. It was obvious to him that she had picked up that phrase from her American husband. At least, he hoped that it was the husband's influence, and not a sign that she had become one herself. He said, "It's such a long trip. Mama would have a hard time going there. But it's good that you can come here."

Ann twisted up her mouth a bit before saying, "Well, you could always accompany her."

Miguel went back to eating his merienda, absently replying, "I don't have a visa. Besides, I can't leave my family."

Mama Nacha watched two of her children eat their food for a quiet moment. Whatever else was being said, it was so good to have her daughter back at her table, where she belonged.

Eventually, Ann said, "So, I was talking to a woman on the plane who said there's a new restaurant in town. It was called Grill something."

"Grill Champ," said Miguel.

"Yes, that's it. Is it good? Have you tried it?"

Between spoonfulls of dinuguan, Miguel answered, "I haven't gone there. I heard it's good, but it's expensive."

Ann smiled enthusiastically and said, "Well, I want to try it. Can we go there for dinner?"

Mama Nacha hesitated. Miguel, knowing their mother was speechless, replied, "You must be tired from your trip. Plus, the maids are already cooking dinner. We can go some other time. You just got here."

Ann shrugged her shoulders as if Miguel's answer was silly and said, "Just tell them to put the food in the fridge."

Miguel looked at Mama Nacha, neither of them really knowing what to say. The tsokwate was set back on the table.

"I...uh...also told Tito Boy and Tito Nacho to come. Plus, of course, Mar-mar and the kids will be home soon. Everyone's excited to see you."

"That would be great. They can just meet us there."

Mama Nacha quietly said, "I'm feeling tired. I don't think I will go. I will just stay here."

Ann made her old pleading face and said, "Come on, Ma. It will be fun. We can try a new place together."

Miguel could not understand why the conversation was still going on.

Ann stood up suddenly and said, "Wait, I have just the thing. I'll be right back." She walked off to her guest room.

Miguel looked at the table full of food, untouched except for what he had taken, and wondered what his sister was doing.

They could hear the maids already starting the adobo in the dirty kitchen. All around the room were various goods from the States, most of them made in China and shipped there only to be put in a box and shipped back across the ocean. Mama Nacha called a maid to bring her things from the box up to her room. As the maid was gathering them up, Ann came out with a small bottle in her hand. She noticed the maid walking by with cans of corn and beans.

"You put those in your room, Ma? But that's food."

"I will just put it there first so I can organize everything. Anyway, it's in a can so there won't be ants."

"But you might forget it there. Why not just put the food in the kitchen so you will enjoy it."

Mama Nacha remained silent.

"Anyway," Ann continued, drawing the word out, "This is an energy spray. You just spray it under your tongue and it's like drinking a cup of coffee. I use it all the time at work. Here, Ma," she said, holding it out, "You can just spray this and then you'll have the energy to go with us tonight."

Miguel looked at the bottle suspiciously. "Is that safe for her to take?"

"Why wouldn't it be? I just said I take it all the time."

"Well, yes, but..."

Ann withdrew her hand and glared at her brother. "Fine. We

don't have to go. It's fine."

Mama Nacha returned to her old refrain: "Ann, the *tsokwate* is there. It's still warm. Have some." Mama Nacha was confident that if she could just get her daughter to try it, there wouldn't be any more talk of going to restaurants and GMO something.

Ann was looking down at the bottle in her hand. "I just thought it would be nice to take you out for a treat. That's all. But if you don't want to, it's fine."

Miguel tried to keep an enthusiastic tone as he said, "We can go some other time. It will be nice. I've heard it's good."

"I heard it's good too."

The maid came from Mama Nacha's room to get more things to bring up.

Mama Nacha asked, "How is Bobby?"

Ann smiled a little and replied, "He's fine. He works a lot. He sends his love and says he will try to come along next time."

Mama Nacha smiled and replied, "And when will I have some grandchildren?"

Ann rolled her eyes half-playfully and said, "You already have four, Ma."

Miguel laughed and said, "But she wants some American grandchildren."

"I don't know, Ma. I'm still young. What's the rush?"

Mama Nacha, speaking to the room in general, replied, "Thirty years old and no children. I don't know."

Looking up at her room, Ann said, "Oh, Ma, I brought you this new kind of knife I heard about. It's supposed to be really good for cutting steaks. Hold on." Ann left for her room again.

Miguel looked at Mama Nacha. "Is there a special kind of knife for steak?"

"I don't know," Mama Nacha said earnestly. "It's probably more American junk."

Ann came out with arms full of things. "Look," she said, holding the knife out in front. Miguel took it, looked at it

puzzledly, and passed it on.

Ann pushed her plate aside as she put down her things. “I got some new games for the kids and a few dolls. Also, I got you these.” She handed a shoe box to Miguel.

He opened the box to reveal dress shoes. They were very shiny and very nice. Of course, they were his size. “Thank you so much, Ann. These are so handsome.” Miguel slipped off his *tsinelas* and tried them on. They were a little narrow for him, but he could manage.

“Yeah, they’re the same brand Bobby wears all the time. He really likes them. And he says they’re good for everyday use, really comfortable.”

Miguel took them off and put them back in the box. “Tell him thank you. I look forward to wearing them.” He tried to remember the last time he had worn shoes, but he couldn’t think of it. Probably some wedding. Maybe his wedding.

Mama Nacha handed the knife to the maid along with her next load of goods for the room. She said, “Ann, the *tsokwate*.”

“Well, I guess if we’re not going out tonight, I can unpack the rest of the stuff.”

Ann got up and brandished the scissors at the next box.

Mama Nacha said, “Ann, have your *tsokwate* first.”

Ann started cutting as she answered, “Actually, Ma, I’m trying to cut back on my carbs and *tsokwate* has so much sugar in it, you know? But thanks anyway.”

Mama Nacha looked at her daughter, her American daughter, as if for the first time. She remained silent during the rest of the unpacking except to mumble her thank yous every now and again.

It was as if she were just meeting this foreign guest and was shy about the quality of her English.

From the box and the suitcases came more things, all very nice, most very strange. They were all the solutions for the problems of American life, destined to take up space on

Philippine shelves until those problems arrived. When Ann was finished unpacking all her gifts, she excused herself, said her jetlag was kicking in, and went to sleep without eating dinner or greeting anyone else.



DON'T LISTEN IN SECRET

BY ALYANA AGUJA

Everyday we drift further apart
And I feel like I needed to chase you,
Stop you from getting too far.

You run faster than I can reach you;
I know it's not as easy as they all say
But this game has drained us of love.

After time passes maybe I'll forget everything,
But I'll play the same old songs we used to
And maybe then I'd be okay singing them without you.

I hope you don't listen in secret.
Even when this song cuts you deep,
Feel the happiness it once gave us

With every remaining second of this track
I cling on to every last bit of hope
That you will return singing this song.

REALITY THAT SCARES ME

BY JOCHEBED ROLLORATA

A voice that said, there is a war
Between humanity on those who walk on shore
Were the universe holds both man and woman in dolor
Yet we continue to let our silence live within us, evermore

My heart could not imagine the reality that has fallen
The world that I once knew is now in heathen
Everything in me begins to feel alone
I am someone who used to have a home
I am someone who used to have you

You are now withered
I cannot pick up the petals that the wind has taken away
But I will hold onto your soul, forever
And confide our story to the stars
If I still can

I am now forbidden to touch the ground
As I drown into the ocean of grief
Where no one can help me heave
I realized that everything good in life now seems to bring me back
down
And every single time I run away
I am getting pulled back from the reality that scares me today

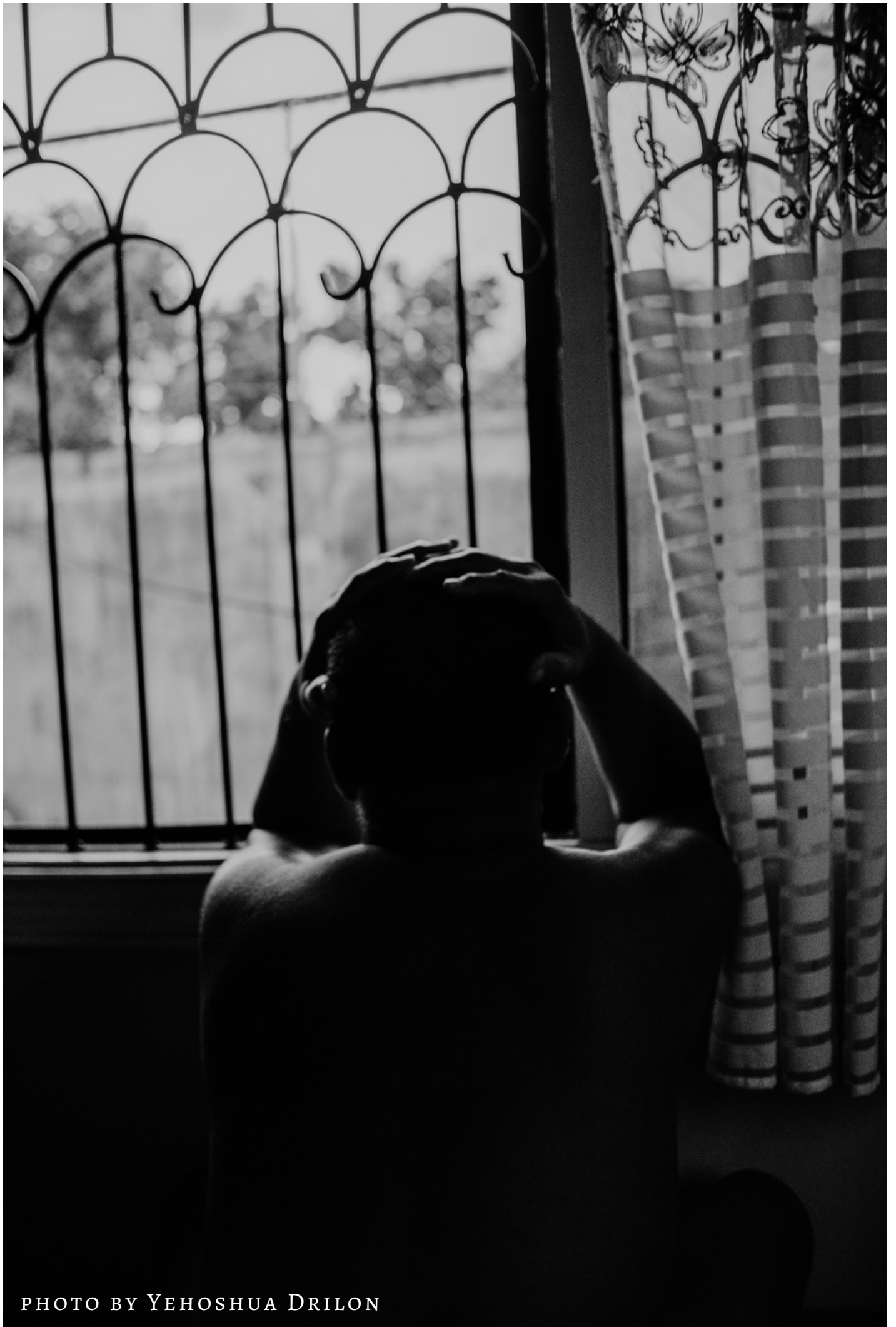


PHOTO BY YEHOASHUA DRILON

THE HAUNTING

BY YEHOSHUA DRILON

He walks amongst us
like friendly ghosts
and sits on the vacant chairs
of our deteriorating minds,
grasping tightly to prison bars
and long, lost hopes we've forgotten
over the years of exile.

We want to breathe.
To climb. To escape.
Yet we lay there like shattered
windowpanes,
Relics of a home we never
quite fit into,
of artifacts hidden behind
the empty museums of our backyard,
slowly withering away.

He tells us we're nothing,
that we've grown too familiar
with his company.

And maybe he's right.

But why listen to a dead man walking?





LET THE RAIN FALL OVER ME

BY ALBERTHA LACHMI OBUT

let the rain fall over me,
let it wash away the traces of your skin
on mine.

let the wind take away
the tears i might have shed
for this withered body.

let the earth fill up my lungs
let it smother me until i am nothing
but bone and sinew.

i have no wish to be immortal,
even through your poetry.

but if *you* wish it, love,
i would freeze hell over
so you can stay still with me
one second more

and listen to me whisper in the silence.

DOWNPOUR

BY ALYANA AGUJA

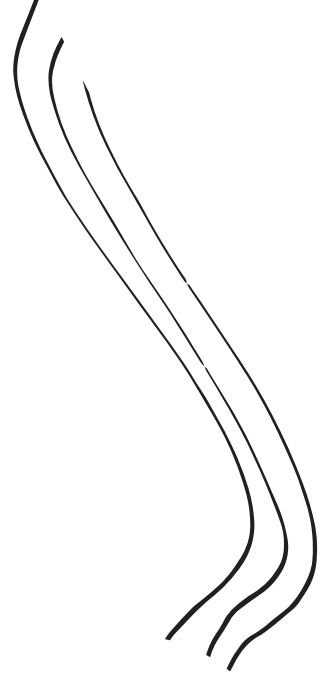
When the rain pours over my head
I get drenched, not only by it but by the memories
Please stay one minute more with me
So I can brave the sadness of the skies

I stepped out believing it was sunny
Yet now I'm afraid of the downpour
Even though the rain will stop soon
The grief of losing you hasn't been washed off

When we met I made myself a promise
That I wouldn't lose our memories to the rain
We will feel every drop that fell
And you will hold my hand through it

Now, I am alone, soaked and freezing
No strength to hold an umbrella
Let the torrent take away what it felt
To have you stand beside me once

As the cold drops finally stop falling
I feel the tears reside
Trembling at the rush of emotions
But this is just a passing storm



KABANGIS SA DAGAT

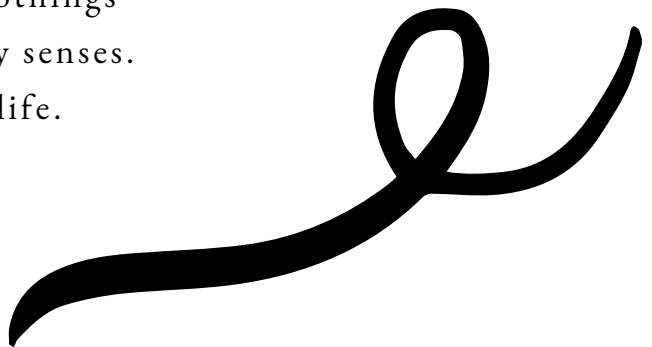
BY SHANE JAY FABUGAIS

Ka pino sa balas, sama sa kagahapong,
Wala'y kahumanang hagit sa akong pagkatawo,
Samtang ako nagaligad niini,
Ako nag-awhag sa kalangitan nga unta bahinan ko sa iyang taligsik,
Wad-on ang kangitngit ug kabugnaw niining panit,
Hambalusa ning akong lawas sa mainiton mong tubig,
Kuhaa ko ug ianod-anod nganha kanimo,
Di ko kapuyong sakyan ang imong mga sulog.
Isinggit sa hilom imong kalipay diri kanako,
Daw ako susama sa bungol
Nga nangandoy mahagap ang imong tingog,
Dad-a ko diha sa imong gingharian,
Iduyan ko sa lawod,
Ibundak sa kailaluman,
Guyura ko diha uban kanimo.
Lumsi ko sa imong ka parat,
Buhata ang tanan kini lamang mabatyagan,
Oh Dagat, andam kong ikuso-kuso sa imong mga balod,
Maluwas lang ning gibati,
Oh Dagat, dungga ako!

IF DEATH TAKES ME BEFORE MY TIME

BY ALBERTHA LACHMI OBUT

May my eternal rest
Be between the mountains
I have grown to love,
Bury me deep in the trenches of her touch,
Lay my body in the valleys
of my boyhood,
Awash in the memories of her skin
on mine.
Let my body sink in her oceans,
Let me take root in the depths.
Let me feel her beside me,
For now, and for all time—always.
Let her take my withered body in her arms,
Let her sing her sweet nothings
Let her kisses awaken my senses.
Let her lead me back to life.



A PANDEMIC READING: EDITH TIEMPO'S A BLADE OF FERN

BY TIMOTHY R. MONTES

Let me begin with a confession: *A Blade of Fern* is the only Philippine novel that made me cry. Those tears squeezed out of a 53-year-old reader has been earned out of its artistry and its philosophical depth. The word “beautiful”, if attached to a novel, would be apt for this book in the same way that beauty is attached to a painting by Van Gogh or a piece of music by Chopin.

In short, *A Blade of Fern* is a masterpiece that deserves to be enshrined in the canon of Philippine letters and also in the pantheon of world literature.

And yet I was slow to get into the groove of its artistic intentions. The first time I attempted to read it in my 20s I could not get beyond Chapter 3, finding the pace too slow and the language too elegant for my male sensibility molded by the prose of Ernest Hemingway. It was not until I picked up the book again in my 40s that I finally got to finish it and saw through its formal architectonic design. But it was not until my third reading of the book that I found myself marveling at the beauty of it and being moved to tears. This was the point when I already knew the plot such that the plot disappeared and something else took over its place: a world, not just a setting, painstakingly created through language. This was after I had encountered the work of eminent women writers like Elizabeth Bowen and Shirley Hazzard who present the world from a different kaleidoscopic lens.

A Blade of Fern is set in an obscure mining village up in the mountains of Surigao called Nibucal - -- *bukal*, in Cebuano, meaning hot spring. Nibucal is a small mining village consisting of 10-20 houses hugging the slope of a mountain, the site of a small private claim made by a man named Moises, a man obsessed with prospecting for gold.

However, the central consciousness of the book is that of Bernardo Martinez, the cousin-in-law of Moises. Bernardo used to be a college professor in Manila who comes to Surigao to escape from a failed tumultuous love affair that seems to have traumatized him and goaded him to escape to the godforsaken jungles of Mindanao. He had invested his savings in the mining venture of his brother-in law. The year is 1938. No computers yet in assaying rocks for the presence of gold. He has to go out everyday collecting rock samples for the possible presence of the much-sought-after metal.

If plot and thrilling action is all you are after, you will be disappointed. Not much happens in the novel: an epidemic of typhoid fever comes over the village, and in the end Bernardo departs from Nibucal after 6 months when Moises is forced by bankruptcy to abandon his claim on the mine. No spoiler intended here, as this is a book that does not depend on plot. That the book hinges on an epidemic of typhus made the reading of it in the middle of a Covid-19 more ominously tragic.

As I said plot is the thinnest gruel in this novel. God seems to be in the details, especially in this short novel --- the rhythm of life in rural Surigao in the 1930s is painstakingly rendered by the author, like fine brushstrokes that tries to do justice to the sights and sounds of bucolic life in the backwaters of the Philippines. The names of trees, of weeds, of birds are so rendered in their nature-bound specificity that the impatient reader might even consider this an affectation if not a fetish for naturalism. But this is the

is the intended project of Edith Tiempo in this her first novel: to make time stop and let the reader soak in a world suspended in its timelessness as Nibucal is stuck in a state of nature. For sheer density of description of rustic idyllic life lived close to nature there is nothing like this novel. The character of Angela, a girl who has stopped schooling and spends her days gathering ferns in the forest, is emblematic of this world. Before the term environmentalism became a cliché, there was this young goddess closer to myth than to social do-goodism.

But then there is a counterforce that obtrudes into this static world of nature, the second theme of the book that acts as counterpoint: the idea of *invasion*. The mine itself, the dynamite blasting the hillside to create tunnels, is an attack on the natural world. The sound of drills and explosions from the mines (there are 3 concessions operating within the vicinity) serve as contrasting elements to the call of the birds and the beautiful colors of sunrise and sunset. Moises, the owner of the mine, is constantly categorizing his prospecting tools and represents the male invasive rational mind who cannot understand the impulse of Angela, his younger sister, who uses her female intuition to get as close to nature in her daily forays into the nearby forest.

Bernardo, the young man from Manila who acts as foreman to Moises, looks at the inhabitants of Nibucal with an ethnographic eye. He observes the folk practices of uneducated mountain people in that corner of Mindanao – from people drinking tuba to the dancing of the balitaw --- as amusing quirks that slowly Bernardo takes to only because he has his own personal demons to contend with in secret. The lifeways of simple folk there, including the natural environment that sustains them --- serve as buffer to his unresolved love affair with a woman named Maura he left behind in the big city. Between the worldly sophistication of

Maura who still keeps sending him letters from Manila and the fern gathering girl goddess of nature named Angela, Bernardo's prospecting mind is caught in the tension of becoming. Bernardo's escape to this godforsaken place in Mindanao becomes a confrontation of and wrestling with his secret demons. By the end of the book, he is totally transformed in his outlook in life, thanks to this half-year sojourn in a rural village of Surigao.

There is still a third layer to my interpretation that only emerged during my third reading of the novel that caused the tears to genuinely come to me at the end of the book. This was the unworried, undeclared, unrequited love of two characters. In an early chapter, so much space is devoted to the catching of a maya bird at sunrise, a bird intended as a gift by a young man named Merto to Angela the fern gatherer. I thought this was just a boring chapter meant to exoticize the practices of rural folk, much like oldtime serenades and local gossip, but near the end of the novel when Merto and his unrequited love for Angela is retrieved, the dramatic gun goes off with Chekhovian power.

The same goes true for the girl Angela. Bernardo is too caught up in his own thoughts about the city girl Maura as he gathers rocks in the forest he does not see the innocent crush of the girl in front of him. This unarticulated love of a rural girl for a visitor from Manila, a man who lives under the same roof with her family, is one unforgettable element of this quiet tragedy.

The triumph of an American named Cutler, who takes over the mine in the final chapter of the book, a foreigner who looks at everything from a purely materialistic gaze is testament to the cold blooded realism of a book that beats with a romantic heart. By romanticism, I refer to the ideas of Wordsworth in his poems about nature and children, and Coleridge in his essays about truth and spirit. After all,

Edith Tiempo had unabashedly considered herself a romantic this way.

In one of my last conversations with her, Edith bemoaned the fact that she was better known as a poet. “You know, Tim,” she said with no hint of condescension of a teacher towards her student, “I have actually written more fiction than poetry.” And when one reads this novel I think that Edith Tiempo, the National Artist who was my teacher, is the closest thing we have to a complete writer. The elegance of her language and her prose rhythms could only have come from a poet, the diction that could deploy words like “equilibrium” and “acquiescence” in the same paragraph betrays a critic’s erudition. The long internal monologues dissecting the thoughts and feelings of characters are not a self-indulgence --- they act both as linguistic gestures for internal consciousness and formal bridges that act as musical transitions in a concerto or a symphony. At times, while reading the book orally, I was not sure of the sense of some sentences, but was compelled to ride on the music of these abstruse sentences like they were not words but musical notes washing over me with impressionistic effect.

Edith Tiempo, unlike her husband Edilberto, was not beholden to the Ernest Hemingway school of fiction. Her stylistic provenance is more properly traced to Henry James, the master who explored human consciousness, and from there the literary line can be traced to Virginia Woolf, beloved by feminists and refiner of stream of consciousness technique. But in my conversations with Edith, it seemed the writer who seems to have inspired her most was the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen.

I remembering listening to another National Artist, F. Sionil Jose, disparaging Edith Tiempo’s fiction. According to him, Edith was a darn good poet but a bad fiction writer because she did not know how to tell a good story. The

critical barbs came like missiles coming at the tail of another. Her language was too elegant to be Filipino, her characters too good to be true. And her novels were too intellectualized, with nothing happening except what was inside her characters' heads. David Genotiva, the foremost critic of Tiempo's works, was hard-pressed to defend the fiction of Edith against the loud protestations of the National Artist.

I now speak not as a former student of Edith Tiempo, but as a common reader, and in this case an audiobook reader. I think that great writers invent their own language for artistic expression, much as a musician would create her own soundscape. To enter the fictional world of Edith Tiempo is to enter a new sonic world that you have to embrace according to her own terms. This short novel which she originally wrote as her dissertation at the University of Denver, but which she kept on polishing for the next two decades until its ultimate publication by Heinemann in Hongkong in 1978, is the best short novel our country ever produced in the last century. It is like a piece of chamber music whose tightness of structure and polyphonic richness needs to be savored for its lyrical beauty.

Take for example this sentence that begins one chapter in the middle of the book which describes the heat of midday in a tropical country like the Philippines.

The heat lay like a net of fine hot wires over the valley, and on the highway round smooth stones glinted in the sun.

The simile of fine hot wires poetically evokes the heat, and the glinting of the stones dazzles the senses in a single sentence to create the scene. Edith Tiempo's precision of language is not a poetic affectation but the creation of a network of sensations to create a world, a mood, a frame of mind. The audiobook version of *A Blade of Fern* will bear out the opinion that there are many ways to tell a story, and

hers is a unique way of doing it, beautifully and movingly so.

I began with tears and now end with a sigh.

In her old age, Edith started assessing the contribution to Philippine letters of her husband Edilberto. In my informal talks with her after the death of her husband, I started enumerating the novels of her husband'. Her most positive way of recommending some of her husband's books was by saying after I had mentioned a particular title: "There's something there."

In *A Blade of Fern*, I am more than sure "there's something" here. Gold. Literally and metaphorically. In the book, this much-sought after metal is elusive. Nobody really finds it, and yet the reader mysteriously finds something else in its place, deep in the human heart as the reader finishes reading the book.

Edith was reluctant to recommend her own novel to me, for after all we were talking about the books written by her husband. When she did mention *A Blade of Fern* in our conversation it was not to endorse it with self-centered certainty of its greatness, but to quote a reaction by another National Artist, Francisco Arcellana, who told her after reading it that at the end of the book he felt like "swooning."

Swooning. I think Arcellana was just being macho about it. Instead of swooning, he should, like me, have been crying.

Had I read this book when Edith Tiempo was still my teacher, I would have been more reverent to her as a literary genius. *A Blade of Fern* is a novel where nothing seems to happen, yet by the end of it you will realize how much has happened, that there was something there going on all along, hidden under the surface of the known world.

Don't be discouraged by the inertia of the first few chapters. By the end of the book you will come out of it either swooning or unashamedly crying like me.

I hope that you will find in this novel the vein of gold we

all look for in life --- not gold hidden under the ground
needing picks and mattocks to excavate ---- but the kind that
matters beating in the human heart.

CONTRIBUTORS

ALYANA AGUJA is a creative writing sophomore in Silliman University. She dreams of becoming a screenwriter someday and to work in great production companies. She has, so far, braved through the online classes without ever having the experience of seeing the campus, and has steadily kept a steady pace record with her grades and couldn't be happier.

LAKAN UHAY ALEGRE is a member of UP Writers Club. He has performed his poems in the Philippines and New York. Some of his works have been included in Lunop, voices and narratives of typhoon Yolanda, Dagmay, the Literary Journal of the Davao Writers Guild, and Katitikan Literary Journal of the Philippine South. Currently, he is a BA Comparative Literature student majoring in Philippine English Literature and English Translation in UP Diliman, where he continues writing despite struggling with his readings.

ANTON GABRIEL P. ASIGNAR is a tenth-grade student at Silliman University. He has been into poetry for several years now, and this is his first ever attempt in submitting his works for a literary journal. He is also passionate in student leadership and has been a budding leader since his early years. He aspires to one day be a successful lawyer. He dreams of getting a poetry book published in the future.

PHILIP BERNAD CALABRO is an Italian-Filipino from the USA. He had a short career as a fiction writer in New Jersey before deciding to become a teacher. After completing a Master's degree in secondary education, he moved to Thailand, where he worked for 7 ½ years as an English teacher mostly at Silpakorn University. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Literary Studies at Silliman University. His work focuses mainly on Philippine Literature and post-colonial issues. He is also working on a collection of short fiction set in the southern Philippines. In the future, he hopes to complete his degree and find a university teaching position in the Philippines, write creatively and academically, and finally learn how to speak Binisaya.

YEHOSHUA DRILON was a Creative Writing student from Silliman University but transferred to UP Mindanao's program during the pandemic. His current works are a result of intertwining poetry with the visual representation of photography as a part of an experiment he's been crafting over the years as a lover of mixed media in art.

SHANE JAY G. FABUGAIS is a public-school teacher at the DepEd Division of Siquijor. He is currently enrolled at Silliman University under the Graduate Program with Creative Writing as a field of specialization. He was a former literary writer at The SSC's Spotlight Magazine. His burning passion in poetry rekindled at the isolation facility after testing positive for COVID-19. During quarantine period, he was able to write numerous poems, with his experiences and observations relative to pandemic as a foreground for the themes he tackles in his poetry.

AMIEL LOPEZ is a third-year Creative Writing student at Silliman University. He currently lives in Dipolog City. He is a member of the International Order of DeMolay and Amnesty International. Known for his macabre literary works of varying weirdness, he is also a film enthusiast, a musician, and a video gamer.

UZIEL DAWN MARCHAN enjoys indulging herself in various creative activities such as photography and drawing during her free time, and is heavily influenced by classical art and Japanese manga or comics. She's still trying to explore many art mediums and developing her art style, and is now exploring the world of digital art.

JOCHEBED ZOE Y. ROLLORATA is currently a grade-12 student in Silliman University. She enjoys writing poetry that helps her express her emotions through words. She has written stories and poems since she was younger. She is currently delving into photography.

PIA VILLAREAL is a third-year student majoring in Literary and Cultural Studies. She is a full-time smiling Sisyphus in the uphill climb known as life. Miraculously she finds the time to write despite being continuously sucked into her daydreams and class reports or papers. While all this is going on extracurriculars are taking up as much space in her life as actual schoolwork. Currently she is part of the CAS Executive Committee, a co-president of the Silliman English Society, and just recently landed a position as feature writer in Portal 2022. And she thanks the heavens for Genshin Impact for providing her some respite in the face of everything she's gotten herself into.

ABOUT THE EDITORS



ALBERTHA LACHMI APHRODITE OBUT is a fictionist majoring in Creative Writing in Silliman University. She was the president of the Silliman University English Society for two consecutive years, and her work has been featured on the Weekly Sillimanian and the Dumaguete MetroPost. She has also written a short play that represented the University in the theatre festival, Tanghal 13. She is now focusing on stories based on Philippine myth to bring attention to the world of untold Filipino stories.

NORAINÉ "PATCH" PUENGAN is a Creative Writing major in Silliman University. She spends most of her time worrying about what to write rather than the actual writing. She is very passionate about her advocacies, and explores different forms of storytelling, whether it's in the academe, content creation in multimedia, and creative literary pieces. She identifies as a feminist, and is eager to smash the patriarchy with wits and savage advocacy.



SANDS & CORAL

The Sands & Coral primarily accepts contributions from students currently enrolled at Silliman University. It is our belief that students are capable of producing literary pieces which can endure comparison with those of more experienced writers, thus the literary folio accepts submissions from faculty, staff, and alumni, as well as former fellows of the Silliman University National Writers Workshop. The publication aims to maintain a higher literary standard among campus writers, to stimulate genuine creative thinking, and to develop a keener appreciation of the more serious creations of Silliman writers.



"Words, we think, are tools of destruction that one can wield with such potency to maim, to hurt. But words, we think, are also the cure to many a malady."



ART DESIGN BY ALBERTHA OBUT
LAY OUT BY NORAINIE PUENGAN



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