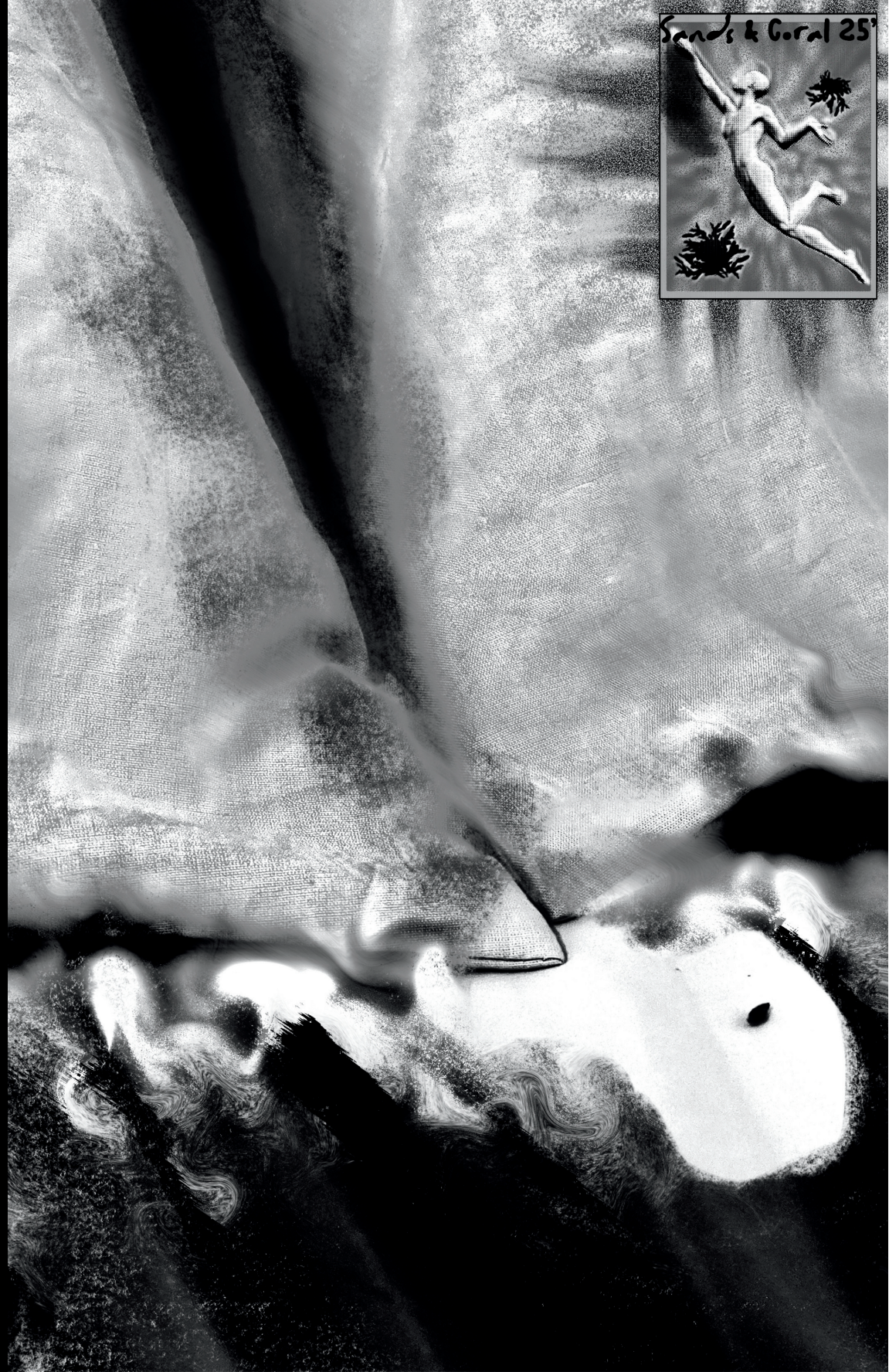




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# Sands & Coral 2025

## *In Correspondence, Katipunan Hall*

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the Edilberto and Edith Tiempo Creative Writing Center  
and the Department of English and Literature  
Dumaguete City



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and the Department of English and Literature  
College of Arts and Sciences  
Dumaguete City  
Negros Oriental, Philippines

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# *Table of Contents*

## ***Fiction***

Maria Calunod	1	<i>Laminar Flow</i>
Carla Via	8	<i>The Halls That Lie Await</i>
Bianca Ysabel T. Muñoz	14	<i>PULUBI</i>
Mary Jucilou Ann P. Verzano	17	<i>In Memoriam</i>
Samuel Jr. Lagulao	24	<i>To Whom the Building Spoke</i>
Rhenelyn Chanthavysouk	31	<i>From My Wounds, I Bleed Ocean Tides</i>
Beatrice Manalili	38	<i>Balikbayan</i>

## ***Poetry***

Wilson J. Siason	47	<i>La Independencia St., Dauin</i>
Jecho Ponce	49	<i>Eden</i>
Asherah Rojo	50	<i>untitled</i>
Jude Wilter Trinidad Domen	51	<i>Suite to Wandering Eyes on Monday Afternoons</i>
Kaith Mari Ectuban	52	<i>what i left behind (no one is home)</i>
Gloria Gem Lumayag	54	<i>The gospel according to the unheard</i>
Maria Alexandra Victoria Mejos	55	<i>Salon Visit</i>
Jude Wilter Trinidad Domen	56	<i>Skinny Dipping</i>
Ysha Bayotas	57	<i>Keep me/Lock</i>
Bless John Esteriaga	58	<i>Atlantis</i>
Jose Lasig	59	<i>YOUR PLACE</i>
Gloria Gem Lumayag	63	<i>A home without storms</i>
Asherah Rojo	64	<i>half of my heart</i>
Jecho Ponce	65	<i>to be a duckling</i>
Kaith Mari Ectuban	66	<i>where do you go when you leave? (i miss the ghosts i left behind)</i>
Arabella Torres	68	<i>Tribulations Of The Salmon</i>
Gloria Gem Lumayag	76	<i>Voices that are not in vain (English Translation)</i>
Khalil Ventula	77	<i>The Porch</i>
Jude Wilter Trinidad Domen	78	<i>Here</i>
Wilson J. Siason	79	<i>Sunset</i>
Kaith Mari Ectuban	80	<i>what i found while i was lost (this, too, is a home)</i>

***Creative Non-Fiction***

Joshua M. Hamid	82	<i>Lost in Red</i>
Jude Wilter Domen	86	<i>Roundabout</i>
Maria Mejos	88	<i>Cebu Pacific Plane</i>
Meiji P. Quan	90	<i>Fluently Distant: A Memoir</i>
Bianca Ysabel T. Muñoz	92	<i>Her Perfume</i>
Nicole Uy	95	<i>On the Drive Home</i>
Patricia Nicole Gajo	101	<i>For a Home</i>
Lara Charmaine Lagorra	106	<i>White Memories</i>

***Academic Essays***

Issachar Bacang	110	<i>The Wendigo's Name is 'der Andere': 'Decolonization' and the Filipino Identity in</i>
Isabella Therese B. Calis	132	<i>Filipino History Home as a Living Tapestry: Migration &amp; Memory</i>

***Art & Comics***

Czar Ian M. Vergantiños	134	<i>Home and Meaning</i>
Czar Ian M. Vergantiños	135	<i>Home is a Word</i>
Czar Ian M. Vergantiños	136	<i>Street</i>
Lady Danielle Estoconing	149	<i>Dear Jim</i>

## **Acknowledgements**

by the Sands and Coral Editorial Team

We would like to express our gratitude to the Edilberto and Edith Tiempo Creative Writing Center, the Silliman University Office of Media and Publications, and the Silliman University Department of English and Literature for their perseverance in fostering a literary landscape that laid the foundation for this year's Sands & Coral.

As the oldest university literary journal in the Philippines, we are grateful to the past and present contributors and editorial staff of Sands & Coral. They have paved the way for us to continue the legacy of Sands & Coral, albeit in different ways each year.

We want to express our sincere gratitude and appreciation to the teammates we have worked with in Sands & Coral, particularly our adviser Prof. Angela Gabrielle Fabunan Flores who provided us with her literary expertise and sensibilities. A toast of appreciation also goes to this year's editors whose concerted effort and unified ideals, whose stellar perspectives and vision, and whose dedication and determination scaffolded this issue.

Our sincere appreciation goes out to all the talented contributors who have adorned the pages of this year's issue of Sands & Coral with their amazing works. You are the backbone of this issue. Without your creativity and your willingness to share your works with the world, it would not be possible to have had this issue.

This issue is dedicated to everyone who has graced the halls of Katipunan Hall in the past and the present, and everyone who has called Dumaguete their home, no matter how short their stay was.

# A Visitation to Home

## Foreword

This year's issue of the Sands and Coral is all about inclusion. The year twenty-twenty-five marks its first year as a university-wide folio in its staff members, in service to the whole university, and leaving the confines of Katipunan Hall. The editors of this year come from all walks of life as students— from graduate to undergraduate to senior high school, from different departments throughout campus—and all to bring their unique perspectives to the cutting room floor.

From the vision of our editor-in-chief Bless Esteriaga to the exacting execution of this shared vision by our managing editor, Jude Domen; from the intense passion for poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, scholarly essay, and artwork that is shared by our genre editors, Jecho Ponce, Lyn Chantavysouk, Sam Hamid, Isabella Calis, and Dani Estoconing; to the inspired publication materials and consistent cutting-edge graphic design of Jim Lasig; from the efforts of each and every contributor and author we have interacted with because of this issue; all brought to print by the serenity and put-together-ness of GG Lumayag as she brings the issue to press; it has been a journey—a sort of *cadena de amor*—links of love—that has brought us together, all burningly, brightly, alive in words presented to the reader of this folio.

It is this love for literature that has kept everyone in this issue to go back and forth to Katipunan Hall, foraging for words in its hallowed halls, resisting its ghosts, and keeping its significance alive. This love for the power of words—a love shared by its editorial board as well as its contributors—has led the way for this issue to give homage to where it all started: Katipunan Hall. As the home of the English and Literature Department and the Edilberto and Edith Tiempo Creative Writing Center, Katipunan Hall is worthy of this homage to its legacy. Many correspondences have occurred in Katipunan Hall—many letters sent and received; lively conversations can be heard in its varied corridors; and there have been correspondences from the past that keep our present alive—all happenings that cement Katipunan Hall's significance in the times of the creative writer today. The Sands and Coral Editorial Board have invited writers to correspond with Katipunan Hall to tell everyone how homes, homes such as KH, have shaped them.

## *Foreword: A Visitation to Home*

Our decision to include an editorial board of inclusive leaders from everywhere in the university was brought front and center as we selected the contributor's renderings of home and their colorful pasts within these pages. For Samuel Lagulao's story, Katipunan Hall is shrouded in mystery; for Czar Vergantiños' artwork, home is a hodge-podge of pieces left over from existence's wake; for Wilson Siason's poem, the ocean in Dauin is a relentlessly beautiful yet irreversibly familiar thing; for Nicole Uy's nonfiction, every hour as she leaves home is every hour filled with anxiety but also within that, a hope and an ideal for a better future; for Isaar Bacang's scholarly work, interrogation becomes a space to engage a national consciousness in our home in the archipelago of the Philippines. For all the contributors, editors, and staff, this issue is intellectual yet intimate, inviting yet inquisitive, interrogated yet inked. For everyone involved, it has been a journey of self discovery in the many varied places to which we give the distinction of "home."

So it is with great pleasure that I invite you to partake of this Sands and Coral 2025 folio. May you find the words to express your love in your letter to your home within these pages.

—Angela Gabrielle Fabunan  
*Adviser*

# **Fiction**

*Selected by Rhenelyn Chanthavysouk*

## **Laminar Flow**

by Maria Calunod

There are coffee stains on your lips. I don't find it weird, though, that I can donate half a palm-sized portion of jelly to cover the spaces in your gums where my Mother's cooking reek of carrots, cabbage, and a hint of sour cream. Cheese, on the other hand, despite being powdered, felt a little less suffocating than the dust on my pack, blown off by the trembling breeze—because the wind speaks more of the meal that coated our tongue than the dirt that lingered in the spaces between our teeth.

The table had a hint of daylight when the curtains split. Streaks of golden hues lined the edges of the weathered wood where my fingertips traced the shadows of an abandoned spider web. Rebecca Solnit would describe it as imaginary, "the readings we give the sky, the stories we tell," the lines that cast umbrella spines and snowflakes all the same. There is nothing more sensible to it than the harmony of pattern that coaxes honeycomb its hexagon.

When the skies grew dark and the roofs were bare in the moonlight, I'd lie under the table, my shoulders brushing its adjacent legs.

"Are the lightbulbs out?" I'd ask, your feet dangling by the edge, back against its wooden top frame, where our forks clinked on sauce that could've tinted your chin red that morning. You'd extend a hand by the side, a thumbs up to confirm that the faint glow of yellow is nothing more than a lantern.

I traced each circle drawn under the wood of where you rest, landing on the largest one amongst eight others. "Jupiter," you'd say, but the ceiling didn't mirror what my marker once drew. Instead, the dim light flickered in the gust of wind that entered through the open front door.

His bare paws tapped the floor in a familiar, avid rhythm, and I exhaled a soft sigh. The not-so-little planet of a canine grinned, his tail whirling as he wiggled his wet body to an indoor sprinkle of river-drenched fur. I scrunched my nose.

Your laughter would fill the empty house as he rested his dripping snout on my stomach, my head shaking over the unexpected shower. But amidst the growing cold, my hand caressed his head, eyes on the shadowed orange and brown of the hand-drawn sphere. I stretched my fingers from beneath

the table, where the dim light slipped beyond the shadow it casted. The color on my palm resembled the same shade of our largest planet's hue.

"Moss grows like flowers in a field," you'd say, but storms didn't just brew in blue skies, hoping lightning would strike from unclouded gray. Robert Hooke knew of that distinction from his first sight of the gas giant's rose of raging red—a poppy in a field, a pupil in its iris, a darkened spot around a pup's eye among the white of its fur. Jupiter, we called him as he sneezed in the arms of a sufferer's plea the night a stranger knocked on our back door.

"It's his," you'd remark with orange slices on hand, its ice-cold texture startling my palm over the collar you'd hold in another. My fingers lingered on the pendant's smooth texture, which hung around his neck, no different from the shade of the lantern or the shape of his name—a handful of letters to designate existence by the mere label of a word. To brand is to acknowledge, and yet I cannot name a single thought that admits me real. Not until that next day, when the sun dwindled through the swaying leaves, a cricket's lullaby playing along the wind's hum. The waters splashed on the workers' ankles as the table's legs sloshed on the river.

"Laminar flow," I uttered, to term its farewell, which they described as constant at every point. Water that streams along the wood of the furniture, pristine and uninterrupted, looks static until disturbed. Your back would have been against it, my shoulders brushing its legs—we could have been its constant before it was moved in nature's bed.

"Have you tried fishing here before?"

The leaves rustle at every step as the present swivels itself back in, the scent of drenched wood flooding my nostrils. We are heading to the river in the woodland rays, where the daylight isn't particularly bright or warm. Just enough to spill a sight suitable to see the crooked pathway. "Once, with my Dad."

I step over twigs and stones, dirt staining the edges of my shoes. The only thing that keeps the grounds from swallowing us wholly is the law of nature, the fundamental constituents of the universe against disorder. I still sometimes wonder if it applies to all things.

"He told me that there are seasons when the fish are abundant," I continue, hands in my thick jacket. "And you don't need any assistive gear during those."

“Assistive gear,” you repeat, tone teasing. “Like spears and arrows, axes and daggers?”

“Crossbows and maces,” I correct. You smile.

Early summer means the presence of color schemes. Usually, they range between red and orange, yellow and brown. When the leaves overlap each other, as though a smaller tree grew under a slightly bigger one, they give off a faded golden streak of gleam as the sun's rays. I'm not so sure if I ever told you yet, but if you put your palm precisely under that line of light beneath the leaves shone by the sun, you are, by which, a witness of a heavenly body grasping hands with a portion of this world. It's like holding a part of the sky, a similar thing made from the same element the rain gives you.

“How about you?” I ask, eyes looking ahead.

“What about me?”

“Have you been to a camping trip like this before?” I remember the first time I went to the mountains with my family. Although the view was beautiful, exceptional, exciting, insert all other adjectives that describe the stars the same, I couldn't stop thinking about how the ground was continuously uphill. And the more we stepped, the higher we were. What exactly was the probability of us falling into its den of bushes that was a forest of trees below, and the number of broken bones limited to survive the way back home? Yes, the journey was memorable, I'd say. But breathtaking was a more fitting term to me. Both literally and its figure of speech.

“I've been to high places before, and those sceneries,” you look up front. “Definitely one of its kind. But huge forests? Not that I can remember.”

I dig a nail in my palm, my bracelet sliding along the curve of my wrist at the motion, its pendant cold against my skin. “You don't overlook everything, do you?”

“Overlook?”

“Like snakes around these branches, spiders on the tree trunks... worms under your shoes?” I glance at where we are stepping, the shades of leaves reflecting on the ground. It reminds me of how John Green described them. The sky being split looks like traces of Cassiopeia.

“Not really,” you reply, tone whispery. A sigh slips past my lips, partly in relief, but mostly in regret for cracking a portion of my disheveled mind

vulnerably open. Fear runs as daggers in my veins, and what's worse than its crippling caress is allowing someone else to feel its charge. "But, it's just like walking in a park, don't you think?" you add. "A city or a town park, but with maces and crossbows, as you say. So it should be like taking a stroll through the woods sixty-five million years ago."

I let out a nervous chuckle. "Definitely not to try and steal some fish from their ancient rivers," I utter. We laugh.

The flowing water sounds closer the further we step. Birds chirp amidst the rustling of leaves, blurred by the apparent gushing stream. The winged sprites are dispersing high enough to stay on the branches of trees median in height. This forest has always been closely intertwined in equidistant symmetries, and I always think I am the complete opposite of it.

With a portion of the river already visible up front, we stop by the nearest tree. I toss my pack, specks of dust flying from its surface as it lands on the ground. You place yours next to it, shaking your head at the havoc of mine, but I don't take that slight upward curve of your lip for granted. I grin sheepishly.

The flowing water of the creek that connects to the main river isn't as strong as I expect, which is great, of course, because falling into the depth of that I-don't-know-what-in-the-world-lies-in-its-dark-oblivious void is probably not a good idea. Rocks sit by its sides and across, some huge enough for their surfaces to remain untouched by the stream. My Father once advised that between these solid platforms lay the most vulnerable paths of prey. I leap over a few of these spaces, a meter falls by its edge. You follow behind, our movements cautious and deliberate. I halt at the next step where the gentlest current is, amongst the others. Some fish already jump alongside, their tails wriggling drizzles in the leap.

"Milkfish," you marvel from behind. I face you, two rocks away.

"And tilapia." Their scales flash droplets as another jumps by. We both bend down on our knees, the space between these platforms managing as our possible source of dinner.

"I'll try to catch it first?" I ask, fidgeting with the smooth pendant tied to a string around my wrist as another one leaps by. You glance at me before focusing back on the flowing water.

"Since they're slippery, I'm ready to step in if you don't quite manage."

I nod, wiping my hands on the sides of my jacket. Absolutely not troubled in any way. I lower my hands, prepping them close to the water. A predator in position, ready to pounce on its prey.

I glance up front as a fish, which I assume is heading in our direction, rapidly curves itself into a squirming jump. I raise my hands just in time, my palms gripping its slimy skin. It slips up, but I grab a hold of it again before it swivels its body, leaping toward you. You move fast enough to clasp it, leaning forward. I gasp, my hands reaching out too late as you fall down the edge into the water below.

There was a quote that Virginia Woolf said in her book “*To The Lighthouse*.” It went, “so fine was the morning except for a streak of wind here and there that the sea and sky looked all one fabric, as if sails were stuck high up in the sky, or the clouds had dropped down into the sea.” Although you aren’t weightless, and I know not that you could, probably, fly, but you are like the wind Virginia Woolf described at that specific moment. Not the clouds but the sails up in the sky, and not the sails but the clouds into these waters. And I can’t tell if that is of any good at all.

You glare at me, a meter below, arms crossed, with your hips submerged in the water. Drops of the river stream on your forehead from the strands of your wet hair. I can still see remnants of the rippling water, the movement of the surface, as the fish hurries away from you.

“I, uh—” I cover my mouth, oblivious of the right words to utter, because the only rudest thing I can think of is to take the situation lightly and tease at your blunder of what in the world just happened. But I do, I laugh, not even suppressing it enough to a chuckle. In fact, a bit much that tears well up in my eyes.

I look back at you, expecting an eye roll or a heavy sigh, but in turn, you mirror my expression. You’re laughing as well. I shake my head as I kneel on the rock, offering you a hand.

“I’m so sorry,” I chuckle, wiping my eyes with the back of my other hand. “I didn’t think that would happen. I should’ve warned you that you might fall below—” but before I could process the remainder of my thoughtless final remarks, I’m already beside you, drench all the same, after you take my hand and pull me in. You laugh, my grin matching the crinkles on the corners of your eyes, as our voices echo off the trunks of the forest trees among the gushing water.

I can't tell which part of my head is remembering, which detail I tend to think about; the ever-changing colors of light, splashes of autumn leaves' shadows falling and swaying by as they reflect on the surface of the water, or the way your cheeks slightly flush when you smile. I look at you for a lingering second. Art is but a form of familiarity. Yet, I seem to be lost in the pattering rain, more than the dates that cast showers across the calendar or plans that don't come to be. Words that trace back to Leonardo da Vinci, whether or not he is truly credited for the popular statement of flight, speak the same way as longing, "for there you have been, and there you will always long to return." Sometimes, I still lie on my back on the moss that now covers the wooden frame of a table where slices of oranges used to be scattered, or sour cream clumsily spilled. Life can be beautiful in its infinitesimal tapestries, unpredictable beyond the lines of the palm. But only reminiscent by memory. They say we are more alike than different, but I glance away immediately as you face me.

"I think," you say. "There are edible mushrooms we passed by earlier. We can have those for food instead."

I chuckle, nodding in reply. The wind settles in, the breeze cool against my exposed skin as it swirls the surface of the river. My thoughts ripple beyond its shimmering waters to the stars, and how constellations are what they are only from our line of sight, different if we are on the grounds of a distant galaxy, as if the shadows don't show illusions the same. We humanize the stars by navigating their composition, but do the mirrors know we look past themselves and stare only at our reflection?

At once, I wanted to say it out loud, how the river—this river—would take us back into the becoming of something that was beyond the lingual way of differentiating moments over photographs. Something light and time couldn't capture in its exactness. About how Diane Arbus said that "a picture is a secret about a secret, the more it tells you the less you know." And I knew in that moment that even if I could stick a camera under your nose, about how you ask why I'm smiling under my breath as we walk back to our bags, clothes wet and soaked, that I wanted to write my gratitude to poets, actors, musicians, and more, for expressing things I, myself, fail to do so. Empathy in the form of an artist's verse. That I wanted to freeze, in light and time, a genuine smile I've witnessed.

Something I can hold in my palms with the pendant that takes me back to our largest planet. Something I used to be able to hold, something now distant. It aches in a good way, in contrast to the briefest moment of a blink, and the bubbles that pop between my teeth underneath the rain and the sun's rays. How the wind no longer wafts the memories of a yesterday I wish to relive, but now of drenched wood, mud, and a hint of coffee. One day I've prayed, someday I will.

Maybe my head is as messy as I think it is. I tend to feel like a double negative just to convey despair in the phrasing of countering a reverse. John Green articulates anxiety in that same manner, "I literally cannot not do it," which I directly correlate to existence, nonetheless. I cannot not feel, cannot not be the keeper of my own thoughts, for the mathematics of literature is multiplication. A negative to a negative results in a direct contrast, and words are just expressions of reality.

This is why, somehow, when one finds the grievance of a dwelling, it begets a space for another. The pattern of life seems to correspond with the physics of the flow of time. Always continuous. So maybe this is what they meant; to be indescribably, wholly, utterly, in awe, as the little things are to be written, as feelings that are meant to thaw.

## **The Halls That Lie Await**

by Carla Via

I still remember the smell of blood and violence. Decades later, it still sticks to my walls, as if it has a mind of its own and is insistent on reminding me of my dark history. The moment my consciousness ebbs every morning, all my senses are almost immediately overwhelmed by the memory. It's all so vivid—the shuffling of rushing footsteps against my wooden floors, the wails of agony resonating through my halls. It haunts me.

It is a deliberate effort to get myself grounded back to my current reality. Instead of panicked medics and guerillas in pain, there are students and professors going to and fro through my repurposed classrooms. I am now a place for learning. War was long over.

Relieve, I open my doors yet again. Those who arrive too early to witness it flinch, horrified for a second before shrugging and returning to their own business. Everyone knows of my consciousness, however unnerving it may seem to them, but often they choose to turn a blind eye.

I watch as people begin flocking in slowly, carefully scanning their faces, familiar and new, young and old. Hoping my old floors are shiny and my rattling windows spotless, I welcome them. I strain my hearing to catch a coherent word from the present plethora of conversations going on around me, to separate each voice in a sea of sounds.

“How was your summer vacation?” I hear one asks.

“Great! I didn’t want it to end,” the other replies, followed by a longing sigh. “But I’m glad I’m back. This semester’s gonna be fun!”

A voice in another room exclaims, “Hi! I missed you!” Then a series of excited shrieks. Then laughter. Then an animated conversation about books and beaches and summer flings.

Then, I keep moving through my halls, eager to hear more. I am humming with so much activity, and after a couple months of tranquility, I am beyond exhilarated. Everyone is talking about the same things, while I gradually relax, letting the words mesh together in a cacophony of voices, yet again.

That is until I feel a soft palm against one of my pillars. It feels intentional, curious, and eager, all at the same time. It seems almost bizarre yet delightful in a way that I never imagined possible.

I zoom through the halls once more until, true enough, I spot a boy hovering by the staircase, a hand pressed against the pillar and a ghost of a smile hanging on his mouth. Upon a closer look, I notice the wonder brimming in his eyes, on his innocent face a look of admiration—I recognize it. Except I've never been the subject of anyone's appreciation before, not when I housed people grown weary by war, not when I provided comfort against the elements, not when I stood against time and erosion. I begin to feel something rising in me, taking place beside my consciousness and my usual excitement.

*Joy.*

Is it really joy? Am I, Katipunan Hall, even capable of experiencing such an overwhelming emotion?

If I had eyes, I reckon they'd be mirroring the same wonder swimming through this boy's orbs. If I had lips, I'd be smiling and striking up a conversation like everyone else. If I had limbs, I'd be holding his curious hand.

I strain my hearing.

"Oh, Katipunan Hall..." he whispers under his breath, his voice so quiet and soft that I may not have heard it under normal circumstances. "Such a wonder you are."

I am immediately filled with so much excitement that one of my doors groan open uncontrollably. The boy snaps his head in the direction of the noise. He doesn't flinch like everyone else does. Instead, he approaches the door with steps light and equally curious as his stare.

Since then, I find myself opening the doors a split-second after my consciousness awakes, looking forward to seeing his face among the crowd, and zooming through the hallways, not to bask in the sea of voices, but to focus my hearing on his.

The boy religiously attends his lectures and spends most of his time by himself. He likes to slouch as if he was in a perpetual state of embarrassment, as if he wants the ground to consume him. When his eyes are glued to a book or his laptop, they are marveling at my old beams or walls or floors. He gapes at my interiors so intently that it makes me huff in pride. Every day, I let my consciousness settle into whichever room he is in. I sometimes rattle a window or two. For the first time in my long, long life, I become aware of my isolation. The boy's innocent eyes make me feel seen.

And for the first time in my long, long life, I crave the attention.

One day, we are lounging as usual in one of the empty classrooms when someone swings my door open.

“Hoy, Kidlat!”

Kidlat, the boy with the curious gaze, looks up from his book, his expression a cross between horror and dread. The imposing newcomer is a boy whose grimacing face I don’t particularly recognize. He may have been among the crowds I’ve seen, but he may not be so memorable that I haven’t engraved him to my memory. Even as Kidlat rises from his seat, his robust build still towers over him. His gait is confident, purposeful, yet terrifying, especially when coupled with the devilish smirk that is now plastered on his face. The decades upon decades of people-watching has made me more than capable of distinguishing the good ones from the ones filled with malice. This boy is the latter.

“How’s that assignment going along?” he asks, his voice just as irritating as the smug look he sports. I never want to shut down my hearing as much as I have then. He marches toward Kidlat who seems to be gradually sinking into the shirt he is wearing. “I told you I need it today.”

“Miguel, I told you I can’t...I’m already swamped with enough work as it is —”

He is cut off mid-sentence by Miguel’s fist banging against the table. Kidlat flinches in the similar manner people do every time I open my doors, terrified, except his fear lingers long past a few moments.

The subtle threat laced in Miguel’s tone grows more prominent. “I think you’re forgetting the agreement we had.”

My confusion is beyond measure, but one thing is certain—this isn’t their first encounter and something unpleasant is about to happen. My walls, floors, and beams all creak faintly in unison as I brace myself, tense.

“I-I understand,” Kidlat’s composure is on the verge of collapse. His voice shooks as he speaks, his chin quivers, and his slouch is the worst I’ve ever seen. “But can’t you let it go this time? I really don’t have the time to—”

He is interrupted yet again as Miguel stretches out an arm to tighten his fist around poor Kidlat’s collar. “This is not a negotiation, Kidlat.”

The latter opens his mouth to protest further and Miguel is too quick to sense the unspoken words at the tip of his tongue. He raises a hand clenched tightly into a fist. Then, he swings. Kidlat knows what is coming

yet his meek body is too slow. He watches in sheer horror at the incoming fist, frozen and unable to react.

But Miguel never makes contact.

Something stirs in me. Something feral. Uncontrollable. Without a second thought, I constrict the nearest window pane. My old wooden beams creak dangerously loud but I don't care and keep going until cracks form and finally, the glass shatters. They both snap their heads in the direction of the noise, eyes wide. One of the fragments flies across the room and leaves a trail of crimson on Miguel's cheek.

His grip on Kidlat's collar loosens, causing the poor boy to fall onto the floor in a shivering heap. The unfortunate series of events render him horrified and shocked to the core. If I could, I wanted to turn the hardwood floors beneath him into a soft rug or a pillow to offer some comfort somehow, but alas, there is only so much I can do.

Miguel cups his now-injured cheek, blood dripping between his fingers and his eyes glaring daggers at my broken window. Amidst the rage in his stare, there is confusion and...fear. To humans, there is something so terrifying about the things they can't explain. And I bask in that fear, etching the look on his face in my memory, the visible tension in his every muscle. Then, Kidlat cranes his neck, landing his ever-inquisitive gaze on my window. My train of thoughts halt.

Unlike Miguel's, there is no hint of abhorrence in it. His orbs well-up with wonder like they always do. And relief. And amazement. He looks at my window as if it is his savior, his knight in shining armor—well, shining glass and old wood perhaps. I can't help but swell in pride, and at that moment, all my senses focus on him. Kidlat is doing the same thing, his eyes squinting in utmost concentration, until something in his gaze changes—recognition.

He sees me. He knows my consciousness is here and it's real. His face visibly lit up, and it makes me feel at ease to know he isn't scared of my sentence.

But after that incident, I never saw him again. I am floating through the halls one day and my metaphorical ears perk up upon catching his name. He drops out, a professor says. Despite our short time together, it is as if my world has crumbled at the news. For the first time in a few

months, I am plagued yet again by the memories of my violent past, except amid the images of war and pain, Kidlat is there too. I dream of his curious eyes and the feel of his adventurous touch. His company and attention bring me comfort that I am not aware of until it is gone. Hours feel excruciatingly long, but I steel myself. I have to continue being the Katipunan Hall everyone loves.

Before long, I return to my old life of hovering around the halls and listening to the cacophony of students. I let their voices melt into one another and I stop making the effort to understand the words. When my broken window is fixed, replaced by newer, shinier sheets of glass, it is as if all traces of Kidlat have vanished. He has truly become a part of my painful history.

Years rush past and I find myself by the front doors after yet another uneventful summer vacation. Slowly, new and old faces walk in and the familiar animated chorus began resonating throughout the halls. My spirits lift, albeit slightly. The conversations after breaks have long grown too familiar to me at this point, but they never cease to amuse me. This year, I let my consciousness flow through the walls and strain my hearing to make sense of the words again. Expectedly, they all talk about the same things, their conversations untouched by time passing. Trips. Beaches. Books. Romance.

But moments after, a man emerges through the doors. He stands tall amongst the crowd, his face bright with seemingly restrained excitement and interest. The second he walks in, his eyes immediately wander, studying the interior as if I am the most interesting thing at that moment. I stop in my tracks, and instantly, he is all I could see. My hearing drowns out the sea of voices around me and my vision tunnels.

It is Kidlat.

He is visibly older, his hunched shoulders gone, his meek attitude is replaced by an air of confidence. His features are slightly different, sharper and wiser. Thick-rimmed eyeglasses sit at the bridge of his nose and an amused grin on his mouth. He is almost unrecognizable, save for the ever-relentless wonder in his gaze. It is comforting and familiar and rather peculiar like it always has. I stare harder and spot the identity card slung around his neck: *Faculty*.

Like he does the first time he steps into my halls, he walks over to the prominent pillar near my staircase, presses a curious hand against it and whispers under his breath, “I’m back home, Katipunan Hall.”

## PULUBI

by Bianca Ysabel T. Muñoz

Jepoy, 15 years old, with brown hair and brown eyes, lives in a bustling, fast-paced city. Every morning, he wakes up, still smelly from the previous day's labor. Rising from his makeshift cardboard bed, he heads straight for the streets without even shrugging off the dust from his hair—he can't afford clean water to drink, let alone any to wash away dirt.

"Hunger will drive me crazy again today," Jepoy mutters as his stomach rumbles. Yesterday, all he had was a bite of cold, nearly brick-hard pandesal. He wanders aimlessly, going wherever his feet and thoughts take him.

Jepoy, worn down by hunger, lacking proper nutrition, and little to no self-care, has the appearance of a haggard wanderer—his homelessness plastered plainly across his body. His hair is matted and dull, his frame thin and fragile. Anyone who looks at him can tell he has no place to call home.

He would ask for food, not with words, but with his eyes—soft, pleading, yet never to disturb. He respects people's space—never demanding, only quietly hoping. Jepoy is gentle, even kind. But the world isn't always kind to him. Maybe it is because he doesn't look clean, and doesn't receive daily medicated baths like others. People see what is on the outside and overlook the soul that still shines from the inside.

He spots his friend Berto approaching. Berto looks lifeless, like his soul has been drained—thin, bruised, with only a fistful of hair left, and smells rotten-like.

"Berto, where did you go?" Jepoy asks.

Berto has always been Jepoy's friend. Their friendship began during a time when Jepoy would wander aimlessly around the city—a place whose streets he had memorized by heart, but whose names he could never quite read or remember. It was during one of those wanderings that he had met Berto, a boy much like himself—small, curious, with a spark in his eyes and a playful bounce in his step.

Jepoy watched Berto grow up over the years. At first, Berto was full of life and laughter, always ready with a smirk or sneaky idea. But as time passed, something in him began to fade. The brightness in his eyes dimmed, the joy in his voice softened, and the bounce in his hair seemed to fall flat, as if weighed down by something. He became quieter, like a shadow of the boy Jepoy once knew.

"I went to find something to eat. A single scrap of chicken will keep me full today," Berto replies. "But it's still early in the morning. How can you be full the whole day?" Jepoy questions.

"I'll sleep my hunger off," Berto says. "You should head to the chicken fast food shop; they give away scraps."

"Alright, I'll see you soon," Jepoy says, bidding his friend goodbye.

Jepoy walks to the nearest chicken shop in the neighborhood and begins asking customers for any extra food. Sitting there with hope in his eyes, he longs to fill his growling stomach. He has no money, so he relies on begging for scraps, even if the food is dirty.

"The chicken smells amazing," he thinks.

Then, a kind stranger offers him a fresh piece of fried chicken. Jepoy eagerly accepts and enjoys his first—and likely last—meal of the day.

Sometimes, Jepoy would wait patiently outside a store until it closes, hoping for a scrap or two. But today, he is too tired—even a short walk has drained him. His body aches, likely from the small cuts or allergies that never seem to heal, slowly wearing him down. These days, all he really wants is to rest.

He doesn't know an easy life—just a life that has enough food to keep the bothering pain in his stomach at bay. He only wants to eat, to fill his belly just so it wouldn't feel like his insides are clawing at themselves in desperation. The heat makes his thirst and hunger almost unbearable.

But then—he meets a stranger. Someone who, with even the smallest gesture, becomes something more. A friend, maybe. A piece of chicken, or even just a scrap of food—however small—is enough to give Jepoy something: hope. A fragile, flickering kind of hope. But hope, nonetheless.

After finishing his chicken, Jepoy heads "home"—though it's not really a home. It's just a spot with a shed and a cold pavement where he can rest. On his way, he drinks from a puddle, but a stranger—obviously bigger than Jepoy—throws rocks at him. The stranger then hits Jepoy with his slippers. Jepoy understands this as the stranger telling him to leave. All Jepoy wants is to quench his thirst.

He wanders until he stumbles upon a brightly lit, cozy-looking store. He hesitates at the door, but the security guard notices him. It's a store that seems bright and cozy, familiar and inviting. Jepoy frequents the convenience store so often that he has become friends with the staff.

“Behave yourself in here,” the guard says.

Jepoy thanks him and sits beside him, savoring a few precious hours of cool air inside the air-conditioned shop. It’s a brief escape from the relentless heat outside.

“I’ve got to go. I still have a long walk ahead,” Jepoy says, standing up to leave. “Come back if the heat gets too much for you, Jepoy,” the guard replies kindly. Jepoy nods and steps back into the sweltering city streets.

In truth, he has no destination. He just feels like he needs to fill his day—simply wandering as he does so every day. Whether his stomach is empty or the sun’s heat scorches his skin, he just keeps moving forward.

Eventually, Jepoy comes by a building that appears to be an abandoned bakery. The air is thick with the stench of urine, and everything is coated in heavy layers of dust. But despite its state, the cool pavement inside seemingly offers a kind of shelter—a small “home” for the night. He curls up on the cold floor, pretending he has a blanket beneath him and a mattress to cradle his bones. “Thank you for letting me survive today,” he whispers into the darkness, eyes fluttering shut. He silently prays his stomach stays full until morning, so he won’t have to scorch his paws again on the blistering concrete just to find food.

“HOY, ASKAL!” Jepoy startles awake by the angry shouts of kids chasing him away from his shelter. He runs once more, with no idea where to go.

## **In Memoriam**

by Mary Jucilou Ann P. Verzano

The house stood exactly as it had been—unyielding, unblinking, its windows staring out at the street like tired eyes refusing to close. Time had passed over it not gently but indifferently, laying upon its bones a fine dust of neglect. The gate, stubborn in its old age, screeched against her push, a sound too alive for the silence that awaited inside. The air was stale with ghosts—faint perfume mingled with mildew, the peculiar scent of old wood and her mother’s strong perfume, and something else—something unnamed, like the bitter underside of memory. There was no welcome in the way the house opened to her. And yet it let her in, as it always had; without protest, without warmth.

She stood in the doorway for a long time, as though the act of entering demanded permission, not from the place itself, but from the version of herself she had buried here years ago. Her luggage sagged beside her feet, but she made no move to lift it. There was silence in the house that felt unsacred, but suffocating, as if sound had once tried to live here and was forced to retreat.

Each step she took into the hallway was like stepping into sediment, the memories stirred with every creak of the floorboards, floating to the surface in pieces: her mother’s voice calling her for dinner in that sing-song cadence, the thud of a door slammed during one of the many fights, the soft echo of laughter from the television when they still bothered watching together. The kind of echoes that didn’t fade, but etched themselves deeper in the silence.

The living room was just as she remembered it, only older. The couch sagged in the same spots, its floral fabric faded to something dull and lifeless. The shelves were cluttered with old figurines, plastic flowers, and framed photographs—trapped smiles, eyes that followed her like reminders. In one frame, she was eight; gap-toothed, hopeful-eyed, her cheeks full of the kind of innocence that doesn’t yet know what love can do when it turns. Her mother stood behind her with a hand on her shoulder, too tightly placed, almost like a grip. Her father, just beside them, a little blurred, a little absent even then.

She wandered barefoot into the kitchen, and the tiles were cold and cracked beneath her soles. Her toes found familiar grooves where she used

to curl herself into corners, a silent audience to arguments that left no visible bruises but carved themselves into the shape of her very being. The cupboards still held their mismatched mugs. She pulled one out—the chipped sunflower cup her mother always used—and ran her thumb along its flaw. She opened the fridge. Inside was nothing but hummed silence. Above it, a handwritten grocery list: *milk, sinigang mix, bread*. Her father’s handwriting, hurried and crooked. Seeing it stilled her because she thought she would never feel like *this*.

As she turned to sit at the table—the old wood pockmarked by years of hands slammed in anger and forks dragged in frustration—she felt something pulling her. Not in the house, but from the past. From the bedroom upstairs. Her bedroom.

She climbed the stairs slowly. Each step creaked like a warning, like the house was whispering secrets it had kept beneath its floorboards. When she pushed open the door, she felt something unravel inside her—like a thread pulled loose from the hem of her childhood. The air on the other side didn’t rush out; it hovered, cool and heavy, like a breath held too long. For a moment, she thought she heard a girl crying, the sound folded into the walls like an old lullaby warped in time.

But there was only silence.

It was exactly as she’d left it. Or more precisely as though someone had deliberately, lovingly tried to keep it as she’d left it. The bed was made, the same faded comforter smoothed down. Her childhood posters hung askew but still stubbornly clinging to the walls. Her old desk bore the etchings of teenage rage and boredom. And in the bottom drawer, labeled ‘Private’ as if inviting curious minds, she found it.

A folded piece of paper. Yellowing. Taped at the edges.

She recognized it before she opened it. A eulogy. One she had written in secret when she was sixteen, in the throes of one of those nights where the walls felt too tight and her own heartbeat felt like a scream. She had written it in anger, yes, but beneath the anger had been something darker: desolation. The kind of grief that comes from being invisible in your own home. From loving people who didn’t know how to love you back in a way that didn’t hurt. From never knowing why your parents could never be like the ones in the movies—not perfect, but tender.

She unfolded the tear-stained paper slowly, and as she began to read out loud, the words poured over her like a second skin she thought she had shed.

"I don't know if I will be able to say this when you're gone."

She paused. Already, her throat was tightening. She could see her younger self in this room, hunched over the desk, pen gripped like a weapon, tears carving silent trails down her cheeks.

"You are not good people."

How certain she had been. The conviction of youth, sharpened by pain and resentment. But even now, years later, there was a part of her that believed it. Not as an accusation, but as a wound that never truly healed.

"You made me small on purpose."

The dress that they said made her look fat. The birthday party she wasn't allowed to have because she failed a math test. The piano lessons forced on her when she begged to draw. The way her mother looked at her like she was an amalgamation of all their failures.

"You praised me when others were watching. You punished me when they left."

She remembered the spelling bee competition. Her father was beaming as she accepted her medal, then scolding her on the way home for being *"too proud."*

*"I don't want to say 'they loved me' unless I can also say 'and it hurt.'"*

She exhaled sharply. That was it. That was the heart of it. Love had existed in this house, yes. But it came dressed in conditions. It arrived wrapped in barbed wire. You could hold it, but only you'd bleed.

*"Sometimes I dream of your funerals. Sometimes I cry in them. Sometimes I don't."*

Tears began streaming down her cheeks. More than she thought possible. But it wasn't just grief for their passing. It was grief for all the years lost to screaming and silence. For all the conversations never had. For the soft apologies never spoken aloud.

*"I don't want you to die. I just want to stop dying inside this house."*

She sobbed then. Truly. It was the kind of sobbing that comes from carving out years of pent-up ache until it's hollowed out.

When she finally looked up, the sun had shifted. The room glowed gold.

Dust floated in the light like ash. She folded the paper again and pressed it to her chest.

Then she reached for a pen.

On the back of the old eulogy, she wrote:

*"I understand now. I understand what fear does. What shame does. How it poisons the way we touch those we love. You were not monsters. You were broken people trying to raise a daughter with shattered tools. And I was a girl who needed gentleness, but got trapped by your rigid rules. I know now that hurt doesn't mean absence of love. It only means the love wasn't clean and easy."*

The wake that followed was filled with voices she didn't expect to hear. Neighbors, old classmates, former coworkers—each of them came in with a story, a memory, a version of her parents she didn't know how to receive. Her father who had taught a young boy to fix a bicycle, her mother who baked extra for the church fundraiser without being asked. People smiled as they told their stories, their grief gentler, easier. She nodded and smiled back, polite, grateful, and quietly conflicted.

Because to them, her parents were kind. Generous. Even warm.

She sat there, surrounded by strangers who carried pieces of the very same people she had run from. And she realized that her parents had not worn the same face for everyone. The people they were to her—sharp, cold, withholding—were not the only versions that existed. They had shown others parts of themselves that she had never seen. And maybe that, too, was part of the truth.

Maybe we are all mosaics, fractured and layered. And the parts we give to others—whether through kindness or cruelty—are all pieces of the whole.

She watched as one woman touched her arm gently and said, "Your mother once paid for my medications. She didn't even want me to tell anyone."

She did not know what to say.

She just nodded.

Because maybe she didn't need to say anything.

Maybe grief was not about resolving the past, but letting it rest as it was—incomplete, complicated, deeply human.

That night, she didn't sleep. She watched the ceiling in the dark, where shadows from the window lattice crawled across the plaster like ghosts who

came to listen. Every room in the house seemed to breathe differently now—more shallow, more wary, as if it too was uncertain of its role in the ritual of mourning. Somewhere downstairs, a clock ticked—not loud, but persistent. A reminder that time, unlike grief, did not pause for the dead.

She wandered the house in the early hours, barefoot and in silence. Her fingers trailed over surfaces; the top of the piano, the edge of the staircase, the lintel of the door. Every corner of the house held something of them. A slipper turned sideways. A pen tucked behind a dusty bowl. And it occurred to her, in the heavy quiet of three o'clock, that home was not the walls. It was what lingered in the cracks. The words not spoken. The footsteps not taken. The heat in a pillow. The tension in the air that lived long after the people had gone.

In the bathroom mirror, her face looked like someone else's. Older. Braver. Or maybe just more tired. She wondered what her parents had seen when they looked in mirrors, alone and unguarded. Did they think about their flaws and insecurities like she did? Did they see their failures as parents etched into their expressions? Did they mourn the softness they never gave her? Did they ever like her?

She wanted to believe they had. That, at least in private moments, they had tried to be more. That some part of them had longed to be gentler, kinder. That they too were shaped by hands too rough, by love too conditional. That her childhood home had not been born cruel, but made so by people trying not to drown in their own ache.

And in that darkness, she forgave a little more.

The next day, the church smelled of lilies and varnish. The pews were mostly filled with strangers and half-strangers—people who knew her parents in slivers and slices. The caskets were closed. *Thank God*. She could barely keep her hands from shaking.

When she stood at the podium, she did not read the old eulogy. She read the new one. The one layered with sorrow and softness, bitterness and grace.

"My name is Lia," she began, "and I am—was—their daughter."

The room hushed.

"My parents were not gentle people. They loved me in the only way they knew how—through discipline, through sacrifice, through the belief that hard meant strong, and soft meant weak."

Her voice wavered, but she kept going.

“I was not the daughter they expected. I was loud when they wanted quiet. Curious when they demanded obedience. And I carried that mismatch in me like a flaw for years.”

She paused, looking out at the still faces.

“There were good moments. I don’t want to pretend there weren’t. They made me laugh. They made me pancakes. They tucked me in when I was sick. They loved me. I know that now. But that love was complicated. It came with sharp corners.”

She let the paper fall slightly.

“I think it’s possible to love someone yet also need to heal from them. I think it’s possible to miss someone and still feel relieved they’re gone. These truths can coexist. And in that space between them, I forgive.”

She folded the paper. Her hands stopped trembling.

“I forgive them. And I forgive myself. For the silence. For the anger. For the years I did not come home.”

She took a breath.

“I loved them. And I still do. Even if I never learned how to say it while they were alive.”

She looked at the people gathered—some familiar, some strangers, all of them carrying pieces of the same people she was trying to understand.

“And I want to thank you,” she continued, “not just for coming, but for sharing the versions of them I never got to see. The ones who were kind, who gave, who laughed. Those versions are no less truer than mine. We each carry our own mosaic of someone. And maybe, when pieced together, we see a fuller picture.”

She stepped down, folded the paper in her hand like a letter never sent.

The journey to the cemetery was short, but it felt endless. The wind pulled at her clothes like it was trying to keep her from going. The sky had shifted into a grey so full it felt like the color of conclusion. As they lowered the coffins—two, side by side—into the ground, Lia stood slightly apart from the rest. Close enough to witness, far enough not to be witnessed. The soil hit wood with a hollow thud. A sound that would live in her chest for years. It was not loud, but it was devastating. Final. Intimate. Like closing a book once you finished reading it.

And it hit her—how no one prepares you for the complicated grief of burying people you loved and feared in equal measure. That grief is not a clean river, but a thicket of conflicting truths: relief beside sadness, guilt beside freedom. The ache of what was never said louder than any eulogy. It was harder than she expected—to weep honestly without needing to explain why the tears came in both mourning and surrender.

She realized then: being the one left behind isn't just about absence. It's about sifting through the ruins, choosing which pieces of the past to carry forward, even if they were never fully yours to begin with. Love, when it hurts, still leaves residue. And home, when it fails you, still carves itself into the framework of who you become.

She closed her eyes. Let the wind pressed against her skin. Somewhere deep inside, something softened. Not healed. But *softened*.

She imagined her mother brushing crumbs from the table. Her father was humming a tune, never remembering the lyrics. She let herself have that version of them, for a moment. Then she let it go.

The earth had taken them. The sky would close over. And she, at last, would turn toward the gate to the house she once dreaded coming back.

It was no longer her enemy. Just a place. A vessel of memory. A blueprint of absence, yet an archive of yearning. A structure she had tried to erase from herself, but which continued, inexplicably, to echo. It had failed her in many ways—just as she had failed it by giving up on it and leaving without looking back—yet it was here that she had first learned to love, however messily. It was here that she had longed for gentleness, here that she first understood loneliness. The walls had not spoken for years, but they had listened. They had carried her silence. And in doing so, they too had become part of her.

She had spent so long thinking of home as a place you leave behind. But now, she saw it differently. Home was not one fixed structure, not defined by who built it or who broke it—home was what remained after everything else had gone. It was what you carried in your bones even when you swore you wouldn't. It was the ache in your chest when you returned, the quiet understanding that some part of you would always be made of this despite evolving and changing parts of yourself.

She did not whisper goodbye.

Instead, she lingered. Just for a moment. Long enough to feel the air shifted around her, to let the new memories and changed perspective of this place settle—not as a wound, but as something quieter. Something survivable.

She turned away with a softness she hadn't known she still possessed.

And this time, the silence behind her didn't ache. It opened. It released her.

## **To Whom The Building Spoke** by Samuel Jr. Lagulao

I stand at the back of Katipunan Hall. Face the wooden double doors that lean half-drunk in their frame, just across from the glowless shadow of Ausejo. It's past midnight. Everything is too quiet, the kind of quiet that lets you hear your heartbeat even when you're trying not to. I tighten my grip on my phone, thumb hesitating over the record button.

I shouldn't be here. But the doors are right there, half-inviting, half-daring me. I'm too starved for material to walk away. Everyone says this place is haunted, but they say that about every old building on campus, don't they? If there's a story here, I want it. I need it.

I push. The doors groan like it is waking up wrong, like ribs cracking apart. The sound makes me flinch. They swing inward easily, which is somehow worse. No lock, no resistance. It wants me inside.

The darkness breathes around me as I step in. It swallows the hallway whole. My sandals make the floorboards complain with every step. The air is thick, humid. Almost swampy. Laced with the faint, sharp tang of old wood and iron oxide. Blood, maybe. Or rust. I can't tell.

I lift my phone, click record. "Voice note," I say softly, voice smaller than I mean it to be. "Okay. Midnight break-in. Katipunan Hall. Smells like something died. Wood creaks like an old man's knees. No ghosts yet. Place is just... dusty and dark. Maybe haunted by budget cuts."

I laugh, but it sounds hollow. The echo goes further than it should.

A cold gust rises from somewhere deeper in the building. Brushes past me like fingers across the nape of my neck. I freeze. The lights flicker once, twice, then hold, dimmer than before. I hear it: not wind, but words. A whisper, rasping, wrong, curls behind me like a breath I didn't feel.

I turn.

They step out of the walls.

Figures, half-formed, gaunt, their uniforms clinging to ash-thin bodies. Their faces are blistered, scorched, mouths drawn tight in pain they never got to forget. Their eyes burn, not with fire, but colder, older. Pale. Furious.

"Intruder," one of them growls, voice fractured like broken stone.

"You do not belong," another says.

"You desecrate the soil of the fallen."

I stumble back. My phone drops. I don't hear it hit the floor.

They keep coming.

I back away, hands raised, voice cracking. "Stop, please, go away, I'm not, I'm not here to hurt anyone!"

They don't listen.

They surge forward, screaming not in words I know. Sounds feel like they've been buried for decades. War cries ripple through the air like blades. Their mouths open too wide, too angry, too full of memory. One of them lunges. A glint. Impossibly cold. Pain slices across my shoulder.

I scream.

The burn is unreal, like ice and fire at once. I don't wait to see what comes next. I turn and run, stumbling over the uneven wood, slamming into walls I can't see. My breath shudders out in gasps. Behind me, they wail and follow.

I spot a window to my left. KH4. I shove it open with my shoulder. It groans. I dive halfway in just as another shriek claws down the hallway. The room is suffocating with dust and dark, boxes stacked high, papers curled in decay, cabinets rusting shut. I clamber. Force my way through. The glass bites into my arm as I drop into the room with a thud and a cry. Blood slicks my skin.

Inside, it's worse. Cluttered, forgotten. Maybe once a display room or an office, now a grave of objects. I scramble across overturned furniture, and knocked over a cabinet that crashes like a warning bell. I find a rusted pipe, thick, heavy, and grab it. It's cold to the touch, but it hums. There's a carved shape near the base etched into the metal in old script, now barely legible. I don't know how I know, but this pipe must've once belonged to someone who fought back. A resistance fighter. A guerilla. Someone who carried prayers in place of armor.

The stains on it are so dark they look black. Dried blood, older than the hall itself.

The ghosts burst in.

I swing.

The pipe connects with one. Its form ignites, not in fire I know, but in a lightless blaze, a ghostly inferno that clings like judgment. I strike again. Another burns. Their mouths gape. Their howls louden, brighten. Shaking the air.

They don't fall.

They keep coming. Their voices rise above the fire: "We will not yield to you, Kempeitai!"

I freeze.

What did they just call me?

I stop swinging.

My arms tremble. Lungs burn. The pipe slips from my fingers. Blood runs down my arm from the window, mixing with sweat and dust. My knees nearly give. I back into a wall, gasping, unable to take my eyes off their burning forms. It's not fear that grips me now. It's shame.

"I'm not... I'm not your enemy," I choke out. "I don't even know who you are. I didn't come here to fight anyone. I swear I never meant to harm you."

The ghosts hesitate.

Their flames flicker but do not die. The room is still, thick with smoke and memory. One of them steps forward. Taller than the rest, less tattered, his uniform more defined. His eyes are pale and deep. They seem to look through me.

His voice is tired, like it's spoken this line a thousand times before and never been heard.

"Who are you to write our story, child of forgetting?"

My throat tightens. I want to disappear, to step back in time and undo this. But I can't. So I tell the truth.

"I'm no one," I whisper. "Just a student. I don't know anything about Katipunan Hall. I just... I just wanted to write something true."

Silence falls.

A silence so full it feels alive.

Their glow dims, flickering like candles remembering they were once stars. The heat of their anger cools, and in its place comes a force heavier—wariness, not trust. I stay still, heart pounding in my throat.

One speaks, the voice not thunder but ash.

"If a story you need, one we shall tell. Will you listen?"

I nod. Slowly. Nothing else feels right.

They turn without another word. I follow them into the hall. The gloom no longer presses; it recedes. One door creaks open ahead of me, on its own

or by an unseen hand, I can't tell. I step in. The air grows cold. The kind of cold that seeps into your bones and tells you you've crossed into land most sacred.

They gather there, cross-legged on the warped wooden floor, as if around a fire I cannot see. Some are silent, their hollow eyes turned downward. Others weep, not loudly, but with the quiet dignity of the long-dead. One starts to speak. Another joins. Their voices layer over each other, telling of the occupation. Of how the building was used, interrogations, beatings, executions. Screams echoing against the very walls I just ran through.

Katipunan Hall, they say, did not just house classrooms. It housed the end of many things.

All at once, the voices still.

One of them gestures to the floor across from them.

"Sit down," he says.

A pause.

"We will begin."

I'm not in the room anymore.

I'm somewhere else.

It is night now. The windows are shuttered, cloth nailed over them to kill the light. The hospital is quiet, the halls dim with oil lamps. Katipunan Hall is not a name yet. Just walls and roof, stairs and rafters. But it listens.

"They came for us often. At first, just soldiers. Then the ones in black, the ones who smiled when they hurt you."

The Kempeitai knock. Sometimes they don't knock. They come with lists. With questions that are not questions. With ropes. With steel rods.

But the building shifts.

The floors creak in ways that warn. Loose planks reveal crawl spaces. The old storage room behind the chapel has a hatch under the desk, and the hallway always seems longer when someone is being chased. When the soldiers run, their boots echo too far, and doors open that no one remembers installing.

"We thought it was luck, at first. That they passed by rooms where we hid people. That they didn't hear the cries when someone was giving birth in the dark."

But the patterns repeat. The Kempeitai search and find nothing. They turn

left where they should turn right. A closet with three men crammed into it is passed by. A hollow wall absorbs the sound of whispers.

“One night, they brought a priest in chains. A piece of the ceiling pelted the floor near him drawing the soldier’s attention away. We hid the priest in the crawl space between the ceiling and the roof. They climbed up with lanterns, but their lights went out. We heard them coughing, shouting. When they came down, they claimed he’d escaped. But he was still above us, curled between the beams.”

The ghosts fall silent for a moment. The air is thick. Not with the smell of blood, but rain on wood, on tin, on stone.

“It protected us. Not with miracles. With stairs that didn’t groan when they should. With a wall too solid to knock through. With a hallway that bought us seconds to run.”

The building creaks again.

A girl hides behind a bookshelf that’s bolted into the wall. The soldiers enter the room, glare at it, then leave. No one notices that the window frame reflects light wrong, or that beneath the floorboards lies a channel, meant for plumbing, now for crawling.

“It is not holy. It is not cursed. It is simply old enough to remember. We bled into it. We whispered into its beams. We sang beneath its stairs when we dared.”

Another beat of silence. “It protected us because we stayed. Because we kept using it. Because we did not leave.”

The flashback begins to fade. The room around me is still and bare again. But I feel the floor beneath me differently now. It is not just wood.

It is witness. It is shelter.

Katipunan Hall is listening still.

The cold begins to lift.

The shadows thin. The color of the wood returns, faded, chipped, familiar. I feel my body again: the sting in my shoulder, the blood drying on my sleeve, the weight of the pipe on the floor beside me. I’m back in the hall. The ghosts are still there, seated across from me in the dust and silence, their forms soft now, no longer blazing, more memory than matter.

One of them turns his face toward me. He says nothing at first, just watches. “That is our story.”

I sit with it. The words still echo in the walls, in the soft whine of the wind pressing against the shutters.

I swallow. My throat is dry. My voice comes out barely more than a whisper. “Was it real?”

No one answers for a long moment. Then one speaks. Not the tallest, not the fiercest. Just one of them, whose voice trembles less than the others: “Does it matter?”

Another rises, steps closer. His boots leave no mark. His eyes, once burning, are calm now.

“We are not here for proof. We are not asking to be believed. We are asking to be remembered.”

He kneels in front of me, not touching, just looking, like a teacher before a student who will not be graded.

“History is told by those who survive. But buildings remember the ones who didn’t. Not with names etched in stone, but with soft walls, warped boards, air that shifts when things left unsaid hang too long.”

The ghosts shift around me, quiet now, but listening.

“You came here to write. To trespass, yes. But also to ask. So we gave you this. What you do with it, how you carry it—that is the story now.”

I lower my eyes. I don’t know what to say.

Another speaks, her voice like a lullaby sung through old glass.

“Write not just the horror. Write the shelter. The quiet defiance. The choices made in silence. The ones who ran, the ones who stayed, the building that held them both.

“Remember that a story is not just what is true. It is what refuses to be forgotten.”

## From My Wounds, I Bleed Ocean Tides

by Rhenelyn Chanthavysouk

A battered, scarred old being sits by the eternally shifting sand of a beach. It knows how many granules of sand are on this very shore—not because it is all knowing, but because it has had too much time.

Its eyes are cast downwards, where the map of jagged lines over its arms are visible against the pale yellow sand. Broken, bruised fingers trace down a singular name in the sand, over and over again as the spring breeze wipes it away. It is languid in its movements. But the crick of its fingers as it spells out the vowels hinders it from spelling it right every time. One letter is misplaced, then two others are entirely different. Again, and again, and again, the battered, scarred old being writes a name. *Gabriel. Raphael.* Did its name start with an M or a K?

The waves crash over the sand just below its feet, pulling the water towards the rest of the ocean. But the world beckons it closer, and so does the being, so the waves crawl towards them again. Loyalty's prize has always been empty—gratitude came in silence, and the water's ears have long learned the shift of pebbles over gravel and sand was more than a simple thank you.

The expanse of the sea feels small in the presence of such a being. It was a mighty view, just not for the battered, scarred old being whose mind has had the very picture of this beach tattooed into their mind. Crooked black peaks that twisted and leaned towards the tip of the ocean's line, where the blue of the sky and the blue of the sea met. From the distant trees to the tip of the ocean, sand stretched out for as far as the eyes could see, shifting with the tide and sailing away in the breeze that swept past this small pocket of time in varying strengths. The being knows when the cold wind will bite, but it also knows when the air will grow stale in the hotter months. It knows of the dull blue waves that sing softly over the sound of seagulls, tides kissing the skin of the earth for so long that the being had forgotten it was even sacred at all.

The being may whisper this to be dull through hoarse breaths and chapped lips, but the truth is, time brings mundanity. What was once dazzling, even for a little while, will revert to its most nihilistic self. Time erodes all beauty, a construct that has clung to the human mind by the

power of choice. But for the battered, scarred old being, there was no more to behold.

It was once a beautiful thing—fickle, almost hypocritical, but from its imperfections rose tides of rippling turquoise water. Human, mortal, whole but imperfect at the same time. It was in that brief period of time where the being had the luxury of knowing how precious limitation was; a life worth living before it was thrust into a dark place, where you could not distinguish the difference between a cry for help and a final breath. Sitting here now, in this beach that had persisted for a millennia, the battered, scarred being has forgotten what it means to feel free and afraid.

Perhaps there is in fact a reason as to why it was stripped away of its beauty. All it knows is that it never once felt as if it belonged, in both its humanity and its divinity.

In melancholy, it has drifted for far too long. Images of smiles that never stayed, pictures of people who have come and gone, dreams of a life where the being would have a name, would have a *purpose*, someone who would want them there just as much as it would want to have a name. temporary, all it has known is temporary. The sand on the beach will never be the same as the one on the surface of the shore, borne to surface for split seconds before it is drowned by its own kind.

How many synonyms of the word “fleeting” can the battered, broken, and scarred old being used to describe its jagged, unloved self?

It traces a name in the sand again with a crooked finger, watching the way the knuckle of its index finger has been battered and broken beyond repair.

*Mikhail.* Perhaps its name was Mikhail, once.

The battered, scarred old being does not care for a name, however. It hasn't longed for a name for centuries. Oh, but how refreshing it is to hear a real name be uttered by its very mind, rather than the constant chatter of a stretched longevity for a simple act of tracing words on a shore that has memorized the way nails feel on the lines of its spine.

That is, until the sand shifts beneath the being's hands, caving in slightly from the weight of something new.

“You seem awfully lonely.” A tender voice remarks.

How long has it been since the battered, scarred old being last heard a human voice?

Its eyes turn upwards to the sight of a woman, perhaps in her early twenties. She is dressed in a long white dress that billows in the wind, dancing with the salty sea breeze and her deep brown hair. She is different, the being has never seen her before—neither does she resemble anyone it has met before to know if she is someone's past life or not.

Temporary, everything is temporary. An aching silence slips over the shore soon after—temporary, everything is temporary, and so too will this woman be temporary.

Silky cloth spills over the sand. White, pristine, temporary.

Instead of tracing lines over the sand, it opts to cup it in one hand. Lanky, crooked, and pale fingers creep over the grains of sand like dried brambled stems of a bush. Such a wood is wickedly tilted and bent at various angles, and the sand skips down the cracks like waterfalls of glimmering yellow granules.

Soon, the woman will leave, and the battered, scarred old being will be left to sit in this beach by itself, alone—and again it will whisper its mantra: temporary, fleeting, empty. But a part of it has missed this connection, the sparks of a conversation it has only known to snuff out with ease. To humor this woman, perhaps it wouldn't hurt to. It had too much time, this pocket of shared words would be miniscule in the far years ahead.

"Lonely, but not alone." It is nothing new; it is casual and real. Sand glides over the edges of its palms, and fingers entwine with the shore's skin as it tilts its head to face green eyes and beautiful brown hair. "Who might you be?"

She smiles at it. It's pearly, bright, like a collection of an ocean's shallow pearls, because nothing is perfect, and she isn't either. It sees the way her teeth are slightly crooked, canines bent in a strange angle, and grin a little lopsided. "August, and you? What is your name?"

Mikhail. Gabriel. Rafael. *Mikhail*. Maybe it didn't have a name, maybe a twisted part of its mind wanted to believe it did. Think, think—*think*. It doesn't know its name, or rather, it doesn't want to remember it. The want to remember it is futile, what good would come out of hearing a name chained down by the iron of grief?

"I don't have one." Is its shallow reply, a singular breath that slips out of its chapped lips.

The woman—August’s lips sink, creases lining the corners of her mouth like ravines over pale canyon cliffs. “What do you mean?”

“Why do you wear white?” It asks, watching the way August’s mouth opens and closes like a gaping fish, and the scarred expanse of its own skin becomes akin to a painter’s unfinished creation, itching with something right under it.

August doesn’t answer the battered, scarred old being for a while. She tucks an unruly lock of brown hair behind her ear, and still she does not speak. It counts the times the waves crash over wet sand and dried corals—one, two, three, four.

“Today was my mother’s funeral.” She whispers, voice whisked away in a breeze that rushes past.

Loss. A concept it wore on its shoulders like a medal. What could it say to another winner of life’s only permanent battle? “Condolences.”

The woman smiles, watching the way the being draws something else over the sand. It resembles a name, then it turns into a picture. “She was a good woman.”

A cat. A dog. A name. The face of a woman. The sand feels itchy under its fingers.

“You told me I was awfully lonely. Isn’t it the same for you?” Its voice is cracked, jaw rusted on the hinges and tongue dried out from years of a practiced silence. “You’ve lost your mother.”

The woman chuckles a breathy sound, taking in the scent of the ocean; seaweed, salt, freedom. “I was lonely long before my mother died. Drifting, even if I knew I had a home to run back to. Just never seemed like I was worthy of it. Now it’s gone, and I don’t have anywhere to run home to unless I build it up myself.”

“Memories are adequate enough to build a home out of.” The being mumbles, it doesn’t believe it either—memories were temporary, they faded with time, they disappeared, they became useless when you remember other times that outweighed their value. “You can remember. But remembering is futile, we will hurt if we remember.”

The battered, scarred, and old skin that wraps over its bones sings in its words, as if the flaccid texture that has carried wounds rejects the very notion. But it was true, that things were temporary, or at least it were to the being.

“Yeah. We are destined to hurt, after all.” August recites softly. An oath with a rather resigned tone to pair it, but an oath nonetheless.

“But I am tired of it.” It hisses back, curling deeper into itself. “You should be too, August. You lost your mother. You have been *drifting* since before. Surely you must be tired of it. It is better to drown than to build a home with your bare hands.”

A lifetime of suffering, centuries stretched on in agony as the world maintained its merciless streak and continued spinning. It had a life, it *had* something, it had something that kept it hoping. It was once able to map out the stars, singing to each of them softly. It was unafraid of loss once, but that anchor was gone, tossed out into the deep blue sea when the somber realization sunk in. That things wouldn’t last, that it would always, *always* lose what it loved in the end. Heavy, a powerful weight that was enough for the being to wrap a metal chain around its neck and let it rust in the centuries it spent drifting.

Even if it could give itself a name, perhaps it would mean nothing in the end.

The woman looks at it like the being were taking candy from a child. A singular sea breeze dashes past, whipping through its jagged skin, her brown hair. Flecks bursting with emerald leaves that dance over the pastures of a soul’s very window. Anger rages in a place where there was a quiet curiosity, but why would she be hurt? She was not an eternally young being that bore scars centuries old, she did not see the world tumble, fall, and rebuild itself back up again.

“You are tired of losing people. I can see it in your eyes, I see it in the way your shoulders sag, I see it in the tremble of your fingers. You, August, are just like me.”

August sighs, holding herself closer. “Maybe I am tired, and maybe I wish she was still here, but there’s nothing I can do to stop it. Loss and acceptance belong in the same sentence, I am powerless.”

August. Across its incredible lifespan, the being has only known three kinds of August. August, a man it met long ago. A good ruler, kind, loyal, and smart. He died so young, on his own bed, and the being, when he had a name, knelt beside him. The battered, scarred old being could never forget the way August’s throat gurgled with viscous blood that slid down the sides of his cheeks.

It sees the same image in its dreams, feels the way the cuts of a dagger had sliced into its arms as it held his hands, trembling and cold

The month of August. A peculiar month, the near end of the year, where cloudy skies and gentle rain showers were aplenty. It doesn't remember how much had happened in August—it's all blurry pictures scattered across the shore, with the ghosts of people, smiles, and its own sickly body behind a dark backdrop.

This August is like cold water. If the being sinks its fingers in her mind, dipping its nails into her psyche, it would find itself refreshed and alert. New, the sensation is new, it is strange and it pulses through its sand caked hands.

She turns towards it again, a hand gently lifting to touch a small, crooked line over its shoulder blade. The being does not remember when it had been branded upon it. "Where did you get this?"

The distant laughter of a young boy, the echoing clash of twigs, the cry of an infant drowned by the summer breeze.

"My childhood."

"And this?" Her hand slowly creeps downwards, index finger lightly grazing over a large, horizontal gash over its elbow. It is angry, red, and bright—no doubt something less innocent than playing around with wood.

Its eyes flicker down to watch where August inspects it. "War."

The hastily scrawled mark of a sigil. It was idiotic, really. A psycho with a dangerous glint in *his* eye, beer on his lips as he toyed with a knife. It remembers, it always does. Something about making it *his* for all eternity. The being doesn't even remember his name, just that it went by "Elias" for that brief period of time.

"A pact."

August hums, turning back to the beach. The waves seem to reach less and less of the shore. The sun must be dragging back the tides again. "Every ghost of fingers that shimmer over your skin in the long nights you lead on this very beach... will you believe me if I tell you that it is the most beautiful way to preserve a memory?"

It stares at her like she's died and resurrected in split seconds. *What?*

"It is beautiful to think that the scars you bear on your body are your reminders of home. If not a home, a part of your life. Even if you don't want to make memories, we all do. I think that's beautiful." She says, like it's the

simplest thing in the world. Like it hasn't plagued the being for centuries to remember, to forget, to remember again, and to fall asleep.

"Memories are adequate enough to build a home out of, yes." It huffs out, eyes sweeping up from the sea to the sky. "But there are not enough good memories to outweigh the bad. Not when you have seen castles fall and empires rise from its ashes. You only remember what once was. Everything else is hazy. I have lived this long without a home, I can live the rest of time without it."

"My mother's death is not a happy memory, but it will be a part of my home, if I decide to stop drifting." She says to it, but it seems more to herself rather than to another person.

Remembering. Remembering what it means to lose someone, remembering its own name. Remembering what it means to be afraid. Does it want to open that door again and let a hundred years worth of experience come crashing down upon it—all for a home?

August leans back, letting her arms support her weight as she turns towards the being with a smile. "Well, maybe I'll be making a home for myself. I have no one to turn to after all. How about you?"

"I... perhaps not. I will forget anyways, and my home will be like the sand." It scoops it in its hands, watching it dissipate in the wind. "Temporary. Hollow."

"It doesn't have to be that way if you don't let it." She nudges it, laughing at the way its hands shudder as more sand pours out of it. "Come on, let's just give it a try. Memories are both good and bad, and you have enough time to think of the good ones first."

Enough time. Enough time to build a home out of memories. Does it want to remember? Does it want to reminisce for the rest of its life?

The being shifts its head down to look at its feet, the way it had sunk underneath the amount of sand that had swept over them. Maybe. Maybe it does, but it is *afraid*.

"What is your name?" August asks. She doesn't push, her voice is gentle and sweet. It could barely hear her over the roar of the ocean.

It has time.

"Mikhail."

## **Balikbayan** by Beatrice Manalili

The turbulence jolted the plane as Alma's flight descended into the domestic airport she hadn't seen in fifteen years. Outside the window, her hometown sprawled beneath a scorching sun, its patchwork of sugarcane fields and tin roofs stirring memories she had kept in a pocket tucked in the back of her mind. A wave of nostalgia swept over her, but it was quickly drowned by the unease twisting in her chest—a familiar ache that had followed her across countries. She glanced at the wallpaper on her phone: a photo of her daughter taken years ago, smiling brightly in a school uniform. The image served as a reminder of what she lived and worked so hard for.

Now standing in the arrival area, Alma clutched the handle of her suitcase tightly. The faint echo of wheels hitting the runway still rang in her ears, but it was drowned by the cacophony around her—cries of reunion, laughter, and hurried footsteps. Her neck started feeling sticky and warm; the hair at her nape clung to her skin. She peeled off her zip-up hoodie and convinced herself she was just sweating because she needed to readjust to the tropical heat of the Philippines. Deep down, she knew the weather wasn't at fault. She smoothed her blouse for the fifth time, mentally noting that it felt much too tight and she was never to wear it again.

After fifteen years as a domestic helper in Dubai, Alma was finally home. She clutched her balikbayan box receipt in her hand, its edges worn from weeks of planning and packing gifts meant to soften the years apart. Her eyes darted across each face in the sea of people waiting at the arrival area, searching for one she hadn't seen since it was small enough to fit in her arms. Somewhere out there was Isabel—no longer the toddler who had waved through sobs at the airport, but a young woman she was more than excited to see. Alma's heart raced as memories collided with reality: bedtime stories whispered over crackling phone calls, school photos sent through grainy messages, and the silence that had grown louder with each passing year.

Alma spotted her family just before they saw her. Cely stood near the edge of the crowd, waving above her head enthusiastically with one hand while holding Isabel's shoulder with the other. Isabel, taller than Alma had imagined, stood with her phone glued to her hands. Rebonded and light brown, Isabel's

hair was the opposite of the dark, kinky curls she had as a child.

“Cely!” Alma called out, her voice cracking slightly. She hurried toward them after tying her jacket around her waist.

Cely enveloped Alma in a tight hug, her laughter spilling over. “Ate, welcome home! You’re finally here!” she exclaimed in their native dialect, pulling back to look at Alma’s face. “You look tired. Long flight?”

Alma barely registered Cely’s words and just nodded absentmindedly. Her eyes were fixed on Isabel. Her daughter shifted uncomfortably under her gaze, then offered a polite but forced smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Isa,” Alma said softly, smiling and reaching out for a hug. “It’s me... Mama.”

Isabel stared blankly and hesitated for a moment before stiffly stepping forward, Cely urging her light tug on her sleeve. She allowed Alma’s arms to wrap around her but didn’t return the embrace.

“Hello, Ma’am,” Isabel said quietly.

A cruel joke, Alma thought. It was as if a stranger had spoken.

She had rehearsed this moment countless times in her mind, imagining Isabel running into her arms like she used to, both of them shedding tears and proclamations of love. But now, standing before her daughter, Alma realized that fifteen years was more than just time—it was a chasm she didn’t know how to cross.

She pulled back, searching her daughter’s face for any sign of warmth or recognition. But Isa’s expression remained guarded, her eyes darting toward Cely as if seeking reassurance—or an escape.

Cely jumped in quickly, swallowing the lump in her throat. Her voice was bright and cheerful. “Isa was so excited to see you! She even helped me pick out fresh flowers for your room, right *inday*?”

Alma raised her eyebrows. Despite Cely’s warm words, she only felt a cold hard barrier between her ‘excited’ daughter and herself. She forced a smile and nodded, though the tension was still hanging heavy between them. “Thank you, Isa,” she said awkwardly.

Isabel shrugged and looked away, seemingly more interested in the type of concrete they used in building the airport’s walls or the type of grout in between the floor tiles than in making small talk.

As they walked toward the baggage claim together, Alma tried to fill the

silence with questions about school and friends—anything to bridge the gap—but Isabel’s answers were clipped and distant: “Yes po,” “No po,” and one-word replies that left Alma grasping for something more. Beside them, Cely kept up a steady stream of chatter about family news and dinner plans. She answered the majority of Alma’s questions about Isabel’s life as if trying to help smooth over all the cracks that had formed during all the years apart.

Alma felt a twinge of pain in her chest but thanked Cely under her breath for filling the silence. She focused on Isabel’s figure and wondered whether her slouchy posture had become second nature, or if she was really that unhappy to see her mother again.

Her gaze subconsciously traced the curve of Isabel’s cheek, searching for the dimple that used to appear when she smiled and the mole she had on her jaw.

It came back to her in pieces: the sound of Isabel’s tiny feet pattering across the floor of their old apartment, the way she used to cry and cling to her whenever Alma picked up her suitcase, and the way she’d throw a tantrum whenever she didn’t get to eat her favorite food. The last time she left, Isabel had screamed so loud the neighbors peeked out from their doors, ready to make a call to the DSWD. Back then, she thought the pain of leaving would dull with each trip. It never did.

The rich aroma of pork *humba* filled the kitchen, sweet and savory with a hint of tangy pineapple. Alma stirred the pot carefully, watching the meat simmer into tender perfection. The scent was comforting, familiar—a dish she hadn’t cooked in years. She glanced at Isabel sitting cross-legged at the dining table, her tan face illuminated by the glow of her phone screen.

“Isa,” Alma said with caution, hoping to catch her attention. “I made your favorite—*humba*.”

Isabel looked up briefly, her expression unreadable. “Thank you po,” she muttered before returning to her phone.

Alma’s chest tightened as she stirred the pot of *humba*, the savory aroma filling the kitchen with a bittersweet familiarity. Her thoughts drifted back to Dubai, where she had spent countless nights alone in a cramped room after long hours of cleaning houses that weren’t hers. She remembered sitting on the edge of her cot, staring at a faded photo of Isabel taped to the wall. It was the same photo she had carried in her wallet for years—a snapshot of Isabel

grinning on her third birthday, holding a plate of the saucy fatty pork and rice with tiny hands.

When Isabel was younger, she would beg for the savory dish with bright pleading eyes, a memory that now felt like it belonged to someone else's life.

Alma remembered the day of Isabel's birthday. She had just finished wrapping a small gift—an authentic Barbie doll she had saved up for months to buy. The house was filled with the aroma of pork humba, the sweet and salty smell wafting through the air as Cely set the table with Abaca placemats and the set of nice Corelle dinnerware they saved for whenever there was an occasion.

"Mama, is that humba?" The little girl asked, tugging at Alma's skirt with wide eyes.

"Yes, anak," Alma smiled, "do you want some?"

Isabel nodded excitedly. "It's my favorite!" she exclaimed, clapping her hands together.

Alma laughed and pulled her into a hug, savoring the warmth of her daughter's tiny arms around her neck. "I'll make it for you every birthday," she promised softly.

But that promise was broken just months later when Alma left for Dubai.

The distant memory shifted to their last meal together before Alma boarded the plane. Isabel sat at the table with a plate of humba in front of her, tears streaming down her cheeks as she refused to eat. "Mama, don't go," she sobbed, clutching Alma's arm tightly.

Alma peppered kisses on Isabel's forehead and whispered reassurances she didn't fully believe. "I'll come back soon, anak. I'm doing this for you.

*It's for you.*

"It's all for you," she used to whisper to herself in the dark as if saying it aloud could make the sacrifice easier to bear. She had missed so much: birthdays, school recitals, first days of school—all for a future that felt increasingly uncertain. The money she sent home had paid for Isabel's education and kept food on the table, but seeing Isa's indifferent expression, Alma wondered if it had all been worth it.

The sound of Isabel's chair scraping against the floor pulled Alma out of her thoughts. She turned to see her daughter walking toward the fridge without glancing at the pot of *humba* on the stove.

“Isa,” Alma called out tentatively, “do you remember how much you loved this when you were little?”

Isabel paused but didn’t turn around. “That’s really unhealthy,” she said flatly before opening the fridge door and pouring herself a glass of cold water. She sat back down and immediately went back on her phone.

She turned off the stove and set the pot aside, her hands trembling slightly. “Isa,” Alma said again, more firmly this time. “I made *humba* for you.”

Isabel didn’t look up from her phone. “Thank you, I’ll just eat a little,” she said flatly.

Alma swallowed hard and forced herself to smile. “I thought... I thought you liked it.”

“I did,” Isabel replied without emotion. “But that was a long time ago.”

Alma felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes but pushed her tongue to the roof of her mouth. She couldn’t cry—not now. Instead, she busied herself with plating the food and setting it on the table as though everything was normal.

Cely entered the kitchen with a bright smile, breaking the silence as she began chatting about local gossip and everything else that Alma missed while she was gone. Alma nodded along absently, grateful for the distraction but unable to shake the ache in her chest.

As they sat down to eat, Alma found herself staring at Isabel and Cely across the table. She wanted to say something—anything—to bridge the gap between them. But every word felt inadequate.

“Your mama used to make *humba* every birthday for you. She’d always say it was your favorite.” Cely said, scooping a ladle of *humba* into Isabel’s plate.

Isabel nodded, letting out a quiet chuckle. “Well, it *was* my favorite when I was a little kid.”

The tension at the table was thick enough to cut with a knife. She seemed less reserved when she talked to Cely, Alma thought.

The large balikbayan box sat in the corner of the living room, its edges worn and taped over multiple times to ensure nothing spilled out during the journey. Alma had packed it meticulously in Dubai, filling every inch with gifts she hoped would make her daughter happy: imported chocolates, branded clothes, local *pasalubong* from Dubai, and a new pair of white sneakers Isabel had mentioned wanting years ago.

The box had always been her way of saying, “I’m thinking of you,” but now it seemed like just another object taking up space in a house she barely felt at home in.

Alma remembered the first balikbayan box she had sent home. She had spent weeks saving every dirham she could spare, scrimping on meals and walking instead of taking taxis to stretch her budget. The box was filled with practical items—canned goods, toiletries, hand-me-down clothes—and a small toy for Isabel: a stuffed bear she had found on sale at the mall.

She had imagined Isabel’s delight when the box arrived, picturing her daughter hugging the bear tightly and telling Cely how much she missed her mama. But when Alma called home weeks later to ask if Isabel liked her gifts, Cely’s voice had been hesitant. “She liked them,” Cely said carefully. “But... she asked why you didn’t come home instead.” Their phone calls usually went in that direction, but Alma never realized how much Isabel yearned for her return.

After dinner, Alma knelt beside the box and began unpacking its contents, hoping to spark some reaction from Isabel. “Isa,” she said softly, holding up the sneakers. “I got these for you. They’re your size.”

Isabel glanced at them briefly before muttering, “Thanks po,” without looking up from her phone.

Alma’s hands trembled as she reached for another item—a box of chocolates wrapped in shiny gold foil. “I thought we could share these after dinner,” she said, forcing a smile.

Isabel’s eyes lingered on the box for a little bit before she forced herself to look away. “I don’t really eat sweets anymore.”

Alma pursed her lips and hummed in response. She set the chocolates aside and stared at the half-empty box as Isabel retreated to her bedroom.

As she finished unpacking the balikbayan box, she couldn’t shake off the feeling of disappointment. Isabel’s indifference toward the gifts was painful; she never expected such a harsh reaction. She tried to distract herself by cleaning up her old bedroom, but the silence in the house felt oppressive. It felt like another day at work - scrubbing someone else’s floors, trying to erase the grime of a life she wasn’t a part of.

Multiple weeks passed. Each morning, Alma would offer to drive Isabel to school or ask her about her favorite subject, only to be shut down. Slowly,

the invitations stopped. She spent her time either at home or exploring her hometown, which changed significantly since she was last there. Some days were spent reconnecting with old friends, but most were spent at home—doing housework or trying to learn new things about her daughter through Cely.

Alma decided to take a walk around the house, hoping a breath of fresh air would clear her head. As she passed by Isabel's room, she heard the faint sound of her daughter's voice, muffled but unmistakable. She thought her daughter was at school, as it was a regular Wednesday afternoon. Alma paused, her hand hovering over the door handle, as she caught snippets of Isabel's conversation with a girl on the phone.

"She sent me money and bought me a bunch of things, but she doesn't even know my favorite food," Isabel said, her voice tinged with bitterness. "She left. I waited all those years but she was never here for me. I can't even talk to her—I can't call her my mother."

A muffled voice responded, but Alma couldn't hear it.

"I wish she never left. It hurt so much to see other families enjoying their lives." Isa's voice trembled. "I just wanted a mom like everyone else."

The ground seemed to shift beneath Alma's feet. Her throat constricted and threatened a whimper. She felt a surge of pain and regret; her mind racing with all the times she had imagined Isabel smiling at her gifts, all the sacrifices she had made thinking they would be enough. Alma didn't enter the room. Instead, she turned away, her heart heavy with the realization that her daughter saw her as a stranger.

Alma walked downstairs into the kitchen, her footsteps heavy with unspoken emotions. Cely looked up from the coffee she was brewing, a questioning glance crossing her face as she noticed the tears brimming her older sister's eyes.

"Ate, are you okay?" Cely asked softly, setting the kettle aside.

Alma's voice was barely above a whisper. "I just heard Isa talking on the phone. She thinks I abandoned her."

Cely's expression softened, but she didn't deny it. "Ate, Isa doesn't understand—"

"Understand what?" Alma interrupted, her voice rising. "That I left her for money? That I wasn't there for her birthdays or sports tournaments? You

were here, Cely. You saw her grow up. But I wasn't. And now she hates me for it."

Cely stepped closer, her hands reaching out to calm Alma down. "Ate, that's not true. Isa doesn't hate you. She's just confused and hurt. You were gone for so long—"

"Confused and hurt?" Alma's laughter was bitter. "You have no idea what it's like to be me, to be the one who left everything behind for her."

Cely's voice remained gentle but firm. "I do know, Ate. I know because I was here. I saw Isa cry herself to sleep every night, asking when you would come home. I had to be her mother when you couldn't be."

The words stung, but Alma knew they were true. She had asked Cely to take care of Isabel, to be there for her when she couldn't. But hearing it now, at this moment, made her realize the depth of her own absence.

"Every peso I sent, every sacrifice I made, it was all for her," Alma said, her voice cracking. "But it wasn't enough, was it? Because I wasn't here. And now she sees me as a stranger."

Cely's expression softened further, and she pulled Alma into a welcoming hug. "Ate, I know you did what you thought was best."

Alma nodded, her throat tight. "I know. I just wish I could go back and do things differently."

Cely stood with her distraught sister in silence, patting her back as she cried. Eventually, Alma calmed down and asked to be alone.

Isabel walked into the kitchen, her eyes scanning the room as if searching for something. The air felt heavy, thick with unspoken words. She noticed Alma sitting at the table, her eyes red-rimmed from crying. Cely was nowhere to be seen, but the tension in the room was palpable. Isabel approached Alma cautiously, her footsteps quiet on the tile floor. Alma looked up, her expression softening as she met Isabel's gaze.

"Isa," Alma said softly, her voice barely above a whisper. "I'm sorry you heard that."

Isabel didn't respond. Instead, she sat down beside Alma, her eyes fixed on the table. Alma reached for a small photo album she had kept hidden away, filled with pictures of Isabel growing up—snapshots she had received from Cely over the years.

"Here," Alma said, opening the album. "I kept all of these. Every birthday,

every school photo. I wanted to remember everything, even if I wasn't here."

Isabel took the album hesitantly, her fingers tracing the edges of the photos. She began to flip through the pages, her expression unreadable. As Isabel read silently, Alma pulled out a letter she had written years ago but never sent. It was a long, rambling letter filled with apologies and promises, written during one of her loneliest nights in Dubai.

"Read this if you'd like," Alma said gently, handing Isabel the letter.

Isabel took it, her eyes scanning the pages slowly. The room was quiet except for the occasional creak of the old house, the drowned-out noise of songbirds, and the distant hum of a fan. After a while, Isabel set the letter aside and looked at Alma through glossy eyes. For a moment, they just sat there, the silence between them not uncomfortable but contemplative.

"Mama," Isabel said softly, her voice barely audible. "Can I have a snack?"

Alma smiled. It was a small, sad smile. "Of course, anak. What do you want?"

Isabel shrugged. "Maybe some of that humba you made last week?"

Alma nodded and stood up to warm the leftovers. As they sat down to eat together,

Isabel asked, "Why did you make humba?"

Alma's eyes welled up with tears again, but she smiled through them. "I remembered how much you loved it when you were little. I wanted to share that with you again."

Isabel looked at her, her expression softer now. "It's still good," she said quietly.

They sat together as the setting sun cast a warm golden light over the kitchen. In the middle of the table were a couple of individual chocolates on top of a glass turntable along with fresh fruit from the market. Isabel reached out and placed one of the foil-wrapped sweets beside her plate. No more words were spoken, but they allowed themselves to exchange small glances in between bites of food.

"Let's take a walk. The market is still open. We could pick up some vegetables for tomorrow." Alma said softly after what felt like an hour of contented silence. "You want to eat healthy, right?"

Isabel nodded. They walked out of the house together, the evening air

wrapping around them like a gentle embrace. The sky was painted with hues of orange and pink, a beautiful backdrop for their quiet stroll.

The market was alive with vendors calling out their goods and children darting between stalls. Alma and Isabel moved through the crowd together, their footsteps swerving in and out of the vibrant chaos. Alma paused at a stall selling woven bracelets and small trinkets. She picked up a beaded bracelet threaded with bright colors—white, lavender, and pink—and held it out to Isabel. “Do you like this one?” she asked tentatively.

Isabel looked at the bracelet for a moment, her expression unreadable. Then she nodded. “It’s nice,” she said simply.

Alma handed over a fifty-peso bill to the vendor and motioned to put the bracelet in Isabel’s hand. “Here,” she said softly.

“Thank you,” Isa replied—not with a smile, but without hesitation. Alma noticed the subtle shift in her tone, the absence of sharpness or indifference. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

Alma looked down to see her daughter’s hand raised and facing upwards, almost as if expecting Alma to put the bracelet on for her. A familiar twinge attacked her chest, but it was no longer one of pain or guilt. Rather, she was filled with a great sense of solace. She loosened and slipped the bracelet onto her daughter’s wrist.

She had spent years shipping fragments of her life in boxes—clothes that no longer fit her daughter by the time they arrived, handwritten cards with smudged ink, and neatly folded hopes tucked between packs of imported goods. She thought if she sent enough, it might stitch the miles between them closed. As she walked beside Isabel in awkward silence, she realized the one thing she’d never been able to send was time—unpackable, unrepeatable, and irretrievable.

The street grew quiet as they walked back home, the trees overhead casting shifting shadows. Alma looked at Isabel—not for a sign of forgiveness, just a beginning. And for the first time in years, something in her settled.

# Poetry

*Selected by Jecho Adrian Ponce*

## **La Independencia St., Dauin** by Wilson J. Siason

I look at the vast, blue ocean with resentment.  
I could have been with you this entire time.  
Embrace and inhale the air that never once tasted like salt to me,  
just pure unbridled saccharine.  
Now I'm stuck,  
haunted by the laughter and fragmented joy of San Juan's ghosts.  
The stillness of families and friends stretching  
miles away is what really unnerves me:  
always, it is like they're still here.

Or how the church, old as ever, <sup>47</sup>continues to stand tall, menacingly.  
A stern Father whom I have loved, but never quite  
lived up to the expectations He had for me.  
Still, I could have been with you this entire time.  
You knew how much I dreaded  
reciting the Apostles Creed in Bisaya during Flores de Mayo.  
You knew how much I enjoyed  
picking flowers for Mama Mary, thinking and hoping  
she'd be especially impressed by my gay bougainvilleas  
that I stole from our neighbor's yard.

The park, where I played alone, my own brutalist labyrinth.  
I could have been with you this entire time.  
Though, I always had trouble figuring out your purpose.  
I traversed to every corner,  
every inch and space you had to offer,  
but I never succeeded in finding  
another determined wanderer like me.

I could have been with all of you this entire time.  
But I just could not stand,  
the sound of my own wallowing,  
begging La Independencia St. to never change.

## **Eden**

by Jecho Ponce

I've become a child once again,  
laid in your arms; drool on my shoulder.

I do not recognize you  
by scent, but I know I am rocked  
on safe swings, with daffodils pushing me  
to and fro.

And as I forget today,  
when tomorrow greets me  
by the cheek,

it is this new scent that will  
introduce your name to my  
lips, keeping me blushing  
roses until you lift me like  
the bouquet I am,

plucked from the garden in your heart.

**untitled**  
by Asherah Rojo

the home i know,  
is the one i built  
from crumpled papers  
and the dark circles of my eyes  
the home i know,  
are the voices i make  
lives i pretend  
the music i dance to  
the home i know  
is made up of four walls  
one for family  
the other, for my friends if i have  
any another for God  
and one i occasionally poke a hole  
through  
to catch a glimpse  
to hear a little voice  
from the ghost of me  
that lived through  
the lines on my hands

## **Suite to Wandering Eyes on Monday Afternoons**

by Jude Wilter Trinidad Domen

1

In eloquent language,  
The folds and creases come undone  
appearing in a pair of glasses  
and a lanky stature.

2

The herd shunned your peculiarity,  
they do not know of your delicate  
light.  
There is poetry in the way you  
glance over the pavement.  
Yet the eyes of many forgo  
how words dance around you  
to pave way for such beauty.

3

As daylight unravels,  
In a pair of gold-rimmed glasses  
between bushy eyebrows,  
I found it, simple and sublime—  
home.

## **what i left behind (no one is home)**

by Kaith Mari Ectuban

i don't like the house i grew up in.  
the lights don't feel like lights—they burn my skin.  
the walls don't echo laughter—they trap it.  
the doors are locked—always.  
because every knock makes me jump.  
my hands curl up in fear, arms up close to my heart,  
trying to protect the little pieces left within me.

why am i always running from the one thing i can't escape?  
why is this house the scar i trace with both love and fear?  
why does family feel like something i have to unlearn?

i could leave.  
i did leave.  
stealing a small suitcase from the bedroom,  
silently packing at night,  
wondering what i could bring—  
knowing i'd never hold again  
what i'd leave behind.

every item i brought carried its own goodbye,  
a silent guilt,  
a memory i never asked for.

in another universe,  
my brothers are tender,  
my sisters are free,  
and i am home.  
the lights are warm,  
the walls laugh,  
and the doors stay unlocked.

but it's not real—it's just a dream.  
i live in this one.  
i wake up alone and remember:  
no one is home.  
no one ever was.

## **The gospel according to the unheard**

by Gloria Gem Lumayag

They say that truth is a dwelling for everyone,  
but some of us are left standing at the door,  
knocking until our hands ache,  
until our voices turn to echoes no one answers.

They call it anger,  
this heat rising in our throats,  
this refusal to stay quiet when the room is full  
but no one is listening.

Maybe there was never meant to be a home for this,  
not within walls built to keep us out.  
So we let the world hold it instead—  
let the streets, the sea, the sky hear what they won't.

We do not ask for space anymore.  
We take it.  
We speak where the wind carries,  
where truth does not need permission to exist.

## **Salon Visit**

by Maria Alexandra Victoria Mejos

I cut my hair on the fifteenth of May  
It's August now, and weirdly enough I've been counting the days

Two months till it grows another inch  
Three more Autumns till it reaches my waist

Last year I had it fried straight  
Long and black, silky and tamed

By October, my baby hair had already grown out  
"Pesky waves" I used to say  
But even ocean waves are inescapable

And now I sit in the irony of it  
This time last year I wished my hair would never grow out

So I wouldn't have to deal with the awkward mess once it did  
These days I check my ends every now and then  
To see if they've reached my shoulders yet

I've come to accept  
That there are some things I can never escape

And even if I delay the salon visit  
Every two months, an inch will still grow of my waves

## **Skinny Dipping** by Jude Wilter Trinidad Domen

three modern idiots looking for a lark  
submerged in frigid december water  
Junior told me he saw the truth on me  
James was too drunk to speak

diving from the rooftop,  
grape juice drowned us into drunken mania.  
galaxies were under us at one a.m.  
did you two feel it as well?

i froze time—along with our grins.  
all the joy in the world trapped  
in a polaroid on my hand,

we're singing off key in the moonlight.  
i saw us whole in the darkness  
yours were the only eyes that traced  
the constellation of scars on my back.

laughter carried us to bed.  
jammed between legs and arms,  
naked washed in morning light.  
for a moment, i found everything.

## Keep me/Lock

by Ysha Bayotas

*or father there*      You can keep me here or there      *maybe closer here*  
The distance doesn't matter.  
Wherever you keep me,  
Know that I trust you to hold me,  
To keep me locked up forever

*a little looser*      I'll hold my wrists out for you  
And offer my freedom for your comfort.  
Tie me as tightly as you need it,      *a little tauter*  
Rip the choices from my hands,  
Guide me now and forever,

*i should leave*      Take me wherever you want me.  
With the ball and chain dragging behind us,  
I'll walk mountains and cross rivers  
I'll do anything to keep you with me      *you can go*  
To be by your side forever

## **Atlantis**

by Bless John Esteriaga

Sediments hover around askew walls,  
framed pictures long to get laid by prying eyes.  
Standing pillars grow deaf in dawning silence,  
wide-stretched marble floors await the forming of grime.

There along the fables untold in enclosed doors,  
a cold, livid body cocooned in an embrace,  
like a caterpillar suspended and for flight gears,  
devoid of gravity, and yet dances with the waves.

The soot-covered paintings drawn, the names etched in stone,  
all mortals captured, all the prayers in creed;  
all is frozen, all goners of time.

For centuries, it towered; in centuries, submerged.  
Its stories unheard, the tide whispers.

## **YOUR PLACE**

by Jose Lasig

i.

I cleaned the “to do” board for you  
I think I got allergies from the fallout  
I hope it made you laugh a bit  
I want to know where the chalk is  
I kind of dont want to use a marker  
I despise its clean when wiped off  
I like the chalk better now  
I think the dust scatters my thoughts  
I think the fallout sticks to your skin

ii.

I watered the plants for you  
I am sorry if I got a bit of water on you  
I think your clothes look fine  
I just wanted to use the hose today  
I saw the watering can you got for us  
I wasn't aware it was a hassle to carry  
I treat the hose as my best friend  
I like that the hose unravels with me  
I like that what the faucet gives, the hose gets

iii

I used the telephone to call a friend  
I apologize for tangling the cord  
I can untangle it on my own  
I felt bad it wasn't in use anymore  
I think my phone needs a rest  
I think its been carried around too much  
I see the charm in using a telephone  
I love that it's anchored in place  
I love that I am anchored in place

## **A home without storms**

by Gloria Gem Lumayag

Just because it isn't called home anymore  
doesn't mean it never was.

Those hallways saw the weight of our footsteps,  
the late-night walks, the rushed goodbyes,  
the quiet cracks not understood.

Once, that corner of the library felt like a sanctuary,  
a place where we exchanged warmth between deadlines,  
where your laughter softened the hum of the street lights,  
where we thought the world beyond exams and essays  
could wait just a little longer.

Never did I think we'd become strangers  
to the coffee-stained desks, the ground we claimed as ours,  
the late-night snacks we swore tasted better at midnight.  
I didn't know then that some places let you go  
before you're ready to leave.

Now, I wonder if you still pass by that hallway,  
if the echoes of our voices still cling to its walls,  
if you ever pause, just for a second,  
to remember the way we made a home  
out of borrowed time and unfinished conversations.

Even as the seasons move without us,  
I hope you have found somewhere to land,  
where home does not vanish when the semester ends,  
where love stays even when the lights turn off,  
where you do not have to be anything but yourself.

Let my name, if it ever reaches you,  
be nothing more than a leaf caught in the wind—  
not a weight, not a storm,  
just something that drifted past and faded gently.

**half of my heart**  
by Asherah Rojo

half of my heart,  
is in your chest  
the slant of your eyes  
the point of your nose  
the fullness of brows  
I inherited  
guess you forgot about it on that sunday morning  
when your fist grazed my cheek and left it burning  
the axe forgets  
the stump remembers  
half of my heart,  
is in your chest

## **to be a duckling**

by Jecho Ponce

Oh, to be a duckling—  
muddied black by the algae of the pond  
—and to sit by the dense meadow.  
The overgrowth too high  
a fence, too steep a flight.

To see how hastily mother cuts  
through the forest floor,  
like kite strings on a windy afternoon.  
And see her feathers fade into  
daffodils and dandelion fluff.  
To sit and wait with grime drying  
on the tips of my wings,  
and a honking cry damp on my neck  
when she returns.

**where do you go when you leave?  
(i miss the ghosts i left behind)**

by Kaith Mari Ectuban

in my desperation to heal, i got lost.  
i entered places i never glanced at before  
i walked roads i never knew existed—  
leaving my name in unfamiliar corners,  
like breadcrumbs i hoped someone would find  
and bring back.

but here's the cruel twist:  
when i left,  
i lost more than what hurt me.  
i lost the places that once knew my shape  
i lost the people who once knew my laugh  
even if they were part of the pain,  
they were still part of the story.

i miss a lot of things.  
but mostly, i miss people—  
not in a “i want you back” way,  
but in a  
“my life is the way it is  
because of the time we spent together” kind of way.

i didn't expect the silence that came  
when i had good news.  
who do you tell,  
when the people who used to know you  
don't anymore?

i didn't expect  
how hard it would be to celebrate alone.  
joy feels louder  
when someone else is there to hear it.

the more i get lost, the more i understand:  
life is a cycle of letting go—  
missing what was,  
loving what is,  
then missing what is  
when it becomes what was.

and sometimes,  
i miss the ghosts i left behind  
more than i miss  
the house itself.

## **Tribulations Of The Salmon**

by Arabella Torres

A riverbed littered with countless corpses  
Nurtures new life under nature's forces;  
A blood debt formed from one's labor of love  
Its totality witnessed by the heavens above.

Preparing for a life beyond familiar waters,  
It learns to breathe new air that is harder.  
Downstream currents endorse their fated odyssey.  
Their home, now a distant but cherished memory.

Open ocean so vast, with nowhere to hide;  
Endless dangers rise by the whims of the tide.  
However the salmon persists, its end far from sight.  
Its quest at consummation, a testament to its might.

Approaching the precipice of its arduous hike,  
The salmon's melancholy inevitably strikes.  
The memory of home it carries deep within;  
The climax of its story starts herein.

Currents—previously kind—now turn away and shun,  
Treating the salmon akin to a prodigal son.  
Fury cascading, strength like a waterfall.  
The son makes a leap, heeding its home's call.

Dying in one's cradle, is it such a blessing or a curse?  
Is it an ending worth the countless miles traversed?  
Yet the well-travelled salmon, witness of various sights  
Chose its home as its tomb, its final resting site.

## **I Shall be Named** by Bless John Esteriaga

Transcribe me

in the segments of your voice,

in the complexities

and the intricacies of your articulation,

in the placement of your tongue,

in the rhythm of air resonating,

in the algorithm of your folds,

to the boundaries of your lungs.

Your alveoli,

your sacs; let it

pulsate and beat

thoughts prompted in the corners of your mind.

And in the ardent passion,

when your lips are pressed in mine,

sigh the missing cord Orpheus seeks to find.

In a ballad of whispers,  
transliterate me from flesh at once.

## **Ruppell Takes Flight**

by Wilson J. Siason

Time check: 2:13 PM. The hottest this town has ever been.

The sweat and tears from my face have become

indistinguishable,

as they trickle from my forehead,

coalesce in the tear duct,

lay in the crevices of my nostril and falling on my lips.

Salt. I just taste salt.

I try to breathe, console myself and

take in the remaining air that I know

I'll only be reminiscing years from now.

This is the last time I lay still in this land.

I flew far away, before I took flight for good.

In the rurals, where they haven't even heard of me.

I stood on top of the tallest rock formation I could find.

I need the hot air from the rocks, to propel myself,

away from the very same place that gave birth to me.

I stare blankly, at the view, the blue void staring right at me

both effervescent yet intimidating. There were no clouds that day.

It's better that way; they block my view.

I am the end of times,

the vision of John,

prophesized to kill a third of mankind,

or at least that's what they say.

They want to kill me because

they're terrified of the world burning.

I don't have to blow a silly trumpet to tell them:

the world has already been burned to crisp

years before I hatched.

My death is not your salvation.

It is simply another death.

Daddy sold me to science,  
Mommy never left the church;  
she prays for me nine times a day,  
hoping my 8-foot wings go away.  
I wish she prayed more  
about my insatiable hunger for rotting bone marrow.  
I never saw an entire civilization  
so beset on killing a sparrow.

## **Tingog nga dili kawang** by Gloria Gem Lumayag

Mga hunghung sa hilom nga dapit,  
sama sa pagsulat ug mga letra sa kangitngit  
Tingali ang Ginoo naminaw sa mga lanog na tingog  
o sa kahilom tungaan sa mga pulong.

Ang pag-ampo usa ka awit nga dili ko awiton  
pero usa ka hugong sa akong gininhawa  
usa ka tono nga gidala sa hangin,  
gitahi sa gatuyok nga langit.

Wala ako nangayo ug daghan, kundi kani lang:  
nga ilang tiil makakita sa humok nga yuta,  
nga ang ilang kaayo makit-an sa kada pultahan,  
nga sila kaloy-an sa ilang pagpauli.

Bisan kung ang kahilom lang ang maanaa  
Kahibalo ako nga adunay naminaw,  
dili sa gadahunog nga dalugdog, dili sa kalayo,  
apan sa paagi nga ang mga dahon sa kahoy nag sayaw.

Busa ako balik-balik sa pag-ampo,  
sa makanunayon nga tigog,  
panghinaot nga walay katapusan,  
kaluy-i sila sa pagpauli, dal-a sila sa pagpauli.

## **Voices that are not in vain** (English Translation)

Whispers in a quiet place,  
like writing letters in the dark  
Perhaps the Lord listens to the echoing voices  
or the silence between words.

Prayer is a song I do not sing  
but a murmur of my breath  
a tune carried by the wind,  
sewn in the swirling sky.

I do not ask for much, but this:  
that their feet may find the soft ground,  
that their kindness may be found at every door,  
that they may have mercy as they return home.

Even if there is only silence  
I know that someone is listening,  
not by the roar of thunder, not by the fire,  
but by the way the leaves of the trees dance.

So I pray again and again,  
with constant fervor,  
hoping that never ends,  
have mercy on them to return home, bring them home.

## **The Porch** by Khalil Ventula

I fled the sky's unraveling rage,  
As to how extreme, it was hard to gauge.  
The rain came down in crooked beats,  
And chased me through the drowning streets.

My coat was thin,  
And the water seeped beneath my skin.  
Then stood the porch—worn down and stale,  
Yet it stood firm against the maddening gale.

Its roof stretched out like steady hands;  
A haven not seeking extravagant demands.  
Closed yet unlocked: an unguarded door—  
Just empty space and nothing more.

It held me, as if nothing could go awry,  
Resembling a break amidst the raging sky.  
And for that hour, soaked and sore,  
I needed just that—nothing more.

**Here**  
by Jude Wilter Trinidad Domen

The rest of our tomorrows,  
back and forth in between strings.  
You call me on a Thursday,  
your voice bringing back the child in me.

These days I linger back in time,  
escaping the miserable here.  
Sleepy flowers lay around waiting,  
I'll be by them rotting away.

I'm still seventeen somewhere,  
flushed and tipsy on a Tuesday.  
Chasing away midnights across streets,  
finding home in a stranger's lips.

I'll chase that feeling today,  
only finding it in words sent from miles away.  
I'm still here.

## **Sunset** by Wilson J. Siason

Exactly 6 PM every day,  
the entire neighborhood gets covered by this  
strange, alluring orange mist.  
I always seem to be the only one who gets tricked into  
inhaling its  
warm, comforting yet intoxicating fumes.

Everybody minds their own business:  
the lady collects the laundry,  
the kids play endlessly,  
the man tethers earnestly,  
and yet here I am:  
plunged in this seat, surrounded by a suffocating,  
light smoke of terracotta.

I turn off all the lights, exposing it to everyone.  
Walking through this dark hull of a house,  
the ginger exhaust seems to fill  
every corner of the place.

I used to always relish it,  
but now, I have to leave.  
Pretending I don't see it like everybody else,  
I turn the lights back on.

## **what i found while i was lost (this, too, is a home)**

by Kaith Mari Ectuban

thank you  
for showing me a home  
where i don't have to explain myself  
to exist.  
where my silence is safe  
and my dreams aren't too much.

thank you  
for reminding me it doesn't matter  
how far i roam—  
if my dreams take me  
ten thousand miles from you,  
i'm not afraid  
knowing i have a home  
wherever you're standing.

this home is strange.  
it is mosaic and mismatched—  
a smile from a stranger in the hallways,  
a hug from the girl who cried with me  
when i couldn't breathe,  
a laugh shared  
over something neither of us remembers.

i still long for the old familiar  
i left behind.  
sometimes i still reach for them in my sleep.  
but when i wake,  
i find the newness here  
has made room for me.  
and that is enough.

i'm still building this home  
with the broken pieces  
i carried from the last one.  
but i soften the edges  
with every new kindness,  
every hand that stays,  
every eye that sees me  
and does not look away.

this, too, is a kind of love.  
this, too, is a kind of family.  
this, too, is a home.

# **Creative Non-Fiction**

*Selected by Josham Hamid*

## Lost in Red

by Josham M. Hamid

It's Friday. Five PM. My last class ends with a sigh—mine or my professor's, I'm not sure. The air conditioner hums too loudly, set to some ungodly temperature that numbs my fingertips. The lights above are fluorescent, too bright, too white, like they're trying to keep us awake by force. My professor, halfway through a lecture he seems half-convinced by, holds up his fourth whiteboard marker of the afternoon. Like the others, this one has no ink. He stares at the board, then at us, then back at the marker, as if he's wondering where all the good ones went. Same, I want to say.

I sling my bag over my shoulder and step into the hallway. It's a jolt. It's like walking out of a freezer and straight into a furnace. It's not a relief but a press. It's like the ground beneath me is too warm, the pavement pulsing with a life of its own.

I start walking.

The city, as always, is alive. Cars honk not in anger but in habit. A handsome taho vendor sits by the tail of Katipunan. Someone bumps into my shoulder, mumbles sorry. My red heels click against the pavement, making a stubborn sound, like they still believe they belong somewhere else. I had paired them with this morning's outfit without hesitation, like I always do. As if dressing up my feet could ground the rest of me.

My knees ache with the weight of the wheel, but I tell my body to keep moving. The heels don't help, but I wear them anyway. A kind of loyalty. A kind of memory.

I'm walking, but I don't know where I'm going. I live somewhere nearby—I know this. But today, **I forgot which way is home.**

It's not amnesia, not really. More like a soft glitch. Like a dream you're still inside of. One foot in the present, the other knee-deep in a memory.

I pass by a bakery. The smell of yeast and sweetness and something warm slows me down. The city sells pastries in perfect rows behind glass. Cheese bread, *monay*, *ensaymada*, cheese bread, sugar-dusted precision. But all I can think of is a different bread entirely. Misshapen, a little dense, with green specks of malunggay and an oddly comforting warmth. I remember the thud of jogging shoes on cement before sunrise, the creak of our gate, and my

father's hand, holding a bag that steamed with familiarity. I see myself in slippers, feet not yet in red heels, but in the softness of morning light.

I keep walking.

A McDonald's sign shows ahead. It doesn't flicker at all. A group of college students piles inside, their laughter chaotic, unmeasured. It bounces off the glass and hits something in me.

I remember seven of us squeezing into *Kuya* Ralph's white *bajari* with a pink-sheeted cushion, each one too big for its seat. Coins clinking in someone's pocket.

We'd get down and run like children unleashed, pulling our allowance to buy a single McSaver meal each, not only for the food, but for the ritual. The after-class bonding. Chicken fillet never tasted so communal. We talked like there were no clocks. Sometimes, we even forget to eat.

The city's fast food is shiny, rushed. Order. Swipe. Go. All by myself. It doesn't hold the same heartbeat.

I pass a huge go-to store. From an aisle, fancy journals line up like models on a runway. Others were leather-bound, glittered, and embossed with inspirational quotes. But I only remember the glossy covers of mass-bought notebooks, printed with the faces of TV drama stars, or those old ones in solid colors that somehow made us feel more official with each assigned to a subject. We bought them in bulk—me, my cousins, and the neighbor kids who wandered over. One afternoon, we arranged them like treasure on a living room floor, arguing over which *teleserye* cover was the "luckiest." I chose the red one. It wasn't luck that followed me, but I kept that notebook reserved for my favorite subject. I remember sitting cross-legged, my feet bare, scribbling stories on the back pages, imagining a grown-up me, somewhere far away, maybe in heels.

I realize I've turned another corner, one street too far from where I live. Or maybe too far from something else entirely.

The cars paused before the pedestrian lane. I didn't cross. A bunch of guys passed on their tall, intimidating mountain bicycles. I remember an abandoned airport runway, where we biked with plastic wheels and dreams bigger than our handlebars. We played badminton in slippers, used old tins as goalposts for our *tumbalata* game, my mom scolding us for staying out too long, and our laughter bounced off the cracked tarmac like it belonged there.

Here, the streets are sometimes too busy for biking. Too fast for badminton. To clean for play.

Still walking. Still unsure where I'm headed. My heels are beginning to wear down, like not for the first time, if this is what I wanted.

What I wanted, yes. All my life, I worked for the movement. For becoming. I joined competitions, wrote essays, bled ink, danced in school programs with the belief that every performance took me one step closer to "somewhere better." And maybe it did. I made it. I got the scholarship. I walked into this new world with open arms and a full heart.

But no one warned me that you could reach the summit and still feel something was missing in the cold.

It's like building a staircase into the sky, only to realize you miss the dirt on your feet. You miss being held in a room that smells like old wood and pandesal. You miss stories that didn't need telling because everyone already knew them.

There's a room in my chest that no apartment key can open.

Sometimes it smells like early morning jogs. Sometimes it resounds with voices I haven't heard in months. Sometimes it rattles like a *bajari* packed with dreams of leaving the province, loud and clumsy and full of love.

### **I stopped walking.**

I've looped the block without realizing it. I'm back on the street I started from. My building glows under the setting sun. My legs ache, but the ache is no longer just physical. It's memory-deep. Soul-deep.

I open the door. F3. That's my room. My roommate's shoes are by the side of the stairs. A playlist hums softly in the corner. The air conditioning unit slowly lets off a droplet at a time, waiting for a mechanic to check it up. I get up the stairs straight to my area, slipping off my red heels. The sound of them touching the wooden floor is soft, familiar.

I am home. At least, that's what I tell myself.

Yes, this is the place. I unlock the door. The bed I sleep in.

I sit down on my bed, eyes drifting to the window. The city outside continues its restless rhythm. People moving, cars honking, lights flickering, all rushing somewhere. But inside, I feel the stillness of something deeper. A quiet kind of belonging, **but home? Home isn't a place anymore.** It's my father handing me warm bread after a run. It's adventurous friends with

*Kuya* Ralph's white *bajari*. It's my cousins playing on hot pavements, and my mom scolding us so we don't spend all day under the sun. It's the people I've left behind. The ones who shaped me. Those who saw me before I became what I am now. My family. My friends. The quiet moments shared in places we didn't think mattered, but now I constantly long for when I'm supposed to be living the dream I once had in my quiet hometown.

Irony. That's an understatement. I'm not miserable or ungrateful. Some days, I just get lost in the streets of Dumaguete, trying to recall where I live. So, as I sit by the window, the city buzzing below, I take a deep breath. **Maybe I'm not exactly at home here. But I know that I'm always carrying it with me.** And that, in itself, is a kind of homecoming.

## **Roundabout** by Jude Wilter Domen

It was a fever dream. Sat around a large round table with faces from junior high school. Their bare faces were once a home I had belonged to for a long while. Their ears and mouths harboured secrets I've long forgotten. Now they were hollow, devoid of any idea of who I was. We had barely chatted over months, and when we did meet, I was expected to remain the same old Jude. I had redefined myself almost three years ago. I wasn't the version they knew from back then. There were lines on my face that they did not see the story of. I had loved and lost like there was no other. Although it was impolite to suddenly show up as a silent man, whose speech was few and he only uttered a word when being spoken to. So I had a drink—just one bottle to loosen up tense nerves.

It was a blur of glitter and pastels,

Out of all the people who came to the debut tonight, there were only two of us who had settled elsewhere for senior high school, the rest remained back in our hometown. When the two of us would speak, they'd fawn over how our accents changed. I never noticed my accent changing; for me, it was the same as before. Only that the voice speaking to them had more nuance, there was more than just childish remarks and scatter ball humour.

Senior high school was wrapping up for us, and college was fast approaching. Excitement coursed through their voices as the conversation turned to plans of hanging out in that sleepy city I had belonged to for the past three years. I was indifferent to the bubble of excitement, college was simply just transferring buildings, for someone like me who was planning to stay in the same school.

I just listened.

These people were coming over to a place I had made a home out of for the past three years. Corners I had once claimed as mine were now being thrown at the risk of exposure. The halls I had once roamed free, unafraid to do anything I wanted, were now flagged as public places I had to be wary of. My privacy was about to evaporate.

It never occurred to me that I had never chosen for myself back in my hometown. Everything and everyone were simply given to me, as if I had no choice but to play with the default options. At my old school, I joined journalism

for lack of a better option. I was a fictionist and a poet; the reality of a situation did not interest me, nor did any limitations for words. I didn't have any friends outside of my classmates. We had once formed a group despite sharing little to nothing in common with ourselves. But we had no choice, we were all that was left for each other.

All of that shifted once I made the move to finish high school in a sleepy city by the sea, far from my hometown. I was given a choice this time around, a chance to start over again. People around me had no preconceived notions about who I was, unlike how I was in my hometown. No one knew me in this big city. It was a blank canvas, waiting to be filled with the touch of my finger. And so I did. The next three years of my life were the best yet. I had met the friends I truly considered my own, the people I had picked from the sea of hearts waiting for an opening conversation to a lifetime of platonic love. I had loved with no limits. And at certain times, I felt myself glow. I was finally myself when I was around them. During those three years, I had made the foreign halls of my university my own, imbued them with memories that made me whole. From that blank canvas I was given, I had made a mosaic of my own.

Now I was sitting across familiar faces, smiling as I tuned in to the flow of conversation that popped into sudden laughter. The alcohol helped. I do not think I would have carried on as I did right now without having a bottle to myself.

I was washed with all the good and bad of junior high school, all coming at me in one large wave. The feeling was overwhelming, and the rush of thoughts was too much for me. I left the party early, relief flushing through my body as I walked across the car park, leaving behind threads that were long dead. At the round table brimming with cheer and chatter, I never felt more alone than I had ever been in my eighteen years.

## **Cebu Pacific Plane** by Maria Mejos

I almost got run over by a Cebu Pacific plane.

That seemingly random Sunday afternoon, I was trespassing on the airport runway without knowing it. All I knew (or saw) was the golden glow shed by the setting sun on that elevated grassy meadow.

I should have known that planes landed on that far-end field at Silliman Beach. Some would call it naive, courageous, or downright stupid, but to me, it was the sharp release of boiling steam entrapped inside for far too long.

I took Timothy Montes at his word when he said that Dumaguete's sunset skies are pink in March at Silliman Beach. And so, without further thought, I put my rubber shoes and running clothes on to chase after that view, defying the parts of me that preferred routine and despised spontaneity. With Silliman Beach en route, I hoped to catch the blushing horizon at sunset.

Faces littered the seaside. Children played by the shore. Scanning my gaze across the coast's far stretch in hopes of finding some solitary spot, a grassland on the far-left end caught my attention. Despite the people lingering near it, not one had ventured to explore the field. The sun hadn't quite set, but it had reflected a yellow luster on the grassland's surface, like a warm embrace. Intrigued, I confidently marched through the populated bayside, quietly thrilled by the newness of my own discovered solace. I reached the surface of the meadow, awed by the juxtaposition of sea and land, the water's blue indigo, and the yellowish sunlight reflection in the grass.

A taste of the Dumaguete I have rarely experienced during my nearly two-year stay. For almost two years since I started the eleventh grade at Silliman, I had adhered to my mother's counsel, or firm stipulations, to focus on my academics, and academics alone.

But this time, the salty air was blowing at me. At that moment, I was free!

Yet before I could fully immerse myself in the carefree sublimity of it all, I heard a loud and muffled walkie-talkie voice behind me. It had come from a white post-house, about 20 meters away. I turned my head and saw gray concrete. The next few seconds, I stood there, motionless. I was in a paralyzed standstill like a startled child caught accidentally shattering grandma's precious china into pieces. Then something snapped. The puzzles

fit in place. I began to realize what the neatly arranged metal panels and beaming flashing light presented; what the eerie solitude engulfing the place implied. There was only one thing that these could mean, and it was that the very spot my two feet were on was a spot familiar to the terrifyingly huge airplane wheels. It dawned on me: I was standing on the airport runway. The airport runway — where airplanes land! It was a gripping realization, one that never even entered my mind. I had climbed that meadow, not caring for anything else but for the sheer thrill it presented (and the prospect of taking Instagramable videos, I suppose). I had stood there, unshackled by no restraints at all, embraced by nothing but the salty seaside air. But perhaps freedom must always come at the expense of getting run over by an airplane. Perhaps autonomy will always cost me my life.

Before thinking twice, I hurried back to the beach and disappeared from the meadow. So long to my plans of soaking in the pink sunset. So long to my desire to roam that field like a wild doe. Will I always have to chase pink sunsets, only to be constrained by the voice of a man — or my mother? Will my legs always be chained to a classroom seat, kicking for emancipation? I might never know — until the next time, I find myself in another field, at another time, fueled with the same quiet teenage rage.

I walked back across the shore with the same confidence I had minutes earlier before I reached the meadow, knowing that this experience had marked the first of many uninhibited explorations.

And sure enough, before I was halfway through the bay, a Cebu Pacific plane appeared in the sunset sky, approaching to land at the very spot where I had, perhaps, tasted true freedom just moments before.

## **Fluently Distant: A Memoir** by Meiji P. Quan

Years ago, I should have been at my Mandarin club. Instead, I hid in a corner of the school library, head buried in the pages of a book written in a language I knew far better. My name sat unspoken on the attendance sheet, a blank space where I should have been, an empty seat where I should have sat.

I was only seven. Too young to think much of it, too young to understand what I was leaving behind.

I did this for a whole year.

At home, my father never asked why I stopped going. Maybe he assumed I was still attending, or maybe he already knew. Either way, he didn't press, and I didn't offer.

Often, he would ask me, "So...What did you learn today?"

I would look up, then shrug. "Nothing much," I'd say, with all the careless indifference of a child.

He only nodded before turning back to whatever had his attention. The words between us, once hesitant, dwindled further. His Mandarin became something I could only half-understand, my English something he never fully grasped. The silence stretched longer, into years, quiet but certain, until it became the only language we both knew.

We don't talk much—at least, not in the way he does with his sister or niece over the phone, his words fluid and effortless in a language I can barely grasp. He laughs with them easily, sharing inside jokes I'll never understand. I don't speak to him the way I do with my mother. I don't joke with him the same way either.

I think about it sometimes—I dream about it even—how things might have turned out if I had stayed.

If I had sat through the lessons, traced each character stroke by stroke, pressed each unfamiliar tone into muscle memory until they no longer felt foreign and unpalatable in my mouth. If I had learned his language instead of letting it slip past me, its cadence never would have settled into something natural. Would we talk more now? Would our conversations stretch beyond logistics—rides, errands, brief exchanges that never quite reach warmth?

Maybe I would know more about him, not just as my father, distant and

unreachable, but as the boy who once clung to his mother's sleeve on a crowded voyage, watching the shore of home disappear. The boy who fled everything familiar, crossing borders with his family, their lives packed into bags, their future uncertain. Who arrived in a land where even the air must have felt different, where even the bread must have tasted strange. Who learned to speak again, to rebuild a life from the remnants of what was left behind.

I know these stories, but only through my mother's voice, through half-heard recollections over dinner, or in passing remarks. Never from him. Never in his own words. If I had learned his language, would he have told me himself? Would I have been someone he could tell?

At dinner, we sit across from each other, bowls in hand. The silence isn't uncomfortable, but it isn't companionable either. I watch the way he eats and how he grips his chopsticks with easy familiarity. The way his fingers rest effortlessly against the wood, precise and practiced. The way mine doesn't. He taught me when I was younger—placed my fingers just so, corrected my grip when I fumbled—but at some point, I must have adjusted it to what felt easier, until it became a habit. I hold them differently now. Not wrong, just not like him.

I wonder if he notices. The way I hold my chopsticks, the way my words falter when I try to speak his language. If he does, he never says.

We sit across from each other, the quiet stretching between us. Some distances are learned, some simply grow. I don't know which ours is.

I only know that, after all these years, I still don't have the words to bridge it.

## **Her Perfume** by Bianca Ysabel T. Muñoz

I was six when Maria left.

It felt small at the time, like any other goodbye—but it left behind a hollow space that settled in quietly, and never really left.

She has warmth and beauty, the kind of presence that made my world feel softer. She combed my hair every morning, pressed my uniform, and made sure I never left the house looking anything less than perfect. She smelled like cotton candy—sweet, light, comforting.

And then, one day, she was gone. No warnings, no goodbyes. My father said she had gone abroad to work, but there were no letters, no calls—just silence.

All I had left of her was a half-full bottle of her perfume. This is me, she had said, spraying a little on my wrist before she left. For years, I kept it close, using it only when I missed her most. And eventually, the bottle ran dry. The scent lingered for a while, then disappeared—just like she had.

Then, in December of 2023, she called. Wait for me at the airport, she said.

I stood in the crowd, searching for the woman I had once longed for. When I saw her, my heart clenched. Maria was walking towards me, but she wasn't the Maria I remembered. Her lipstick was bold red, her long hair sharp. She moved with purpose, but it felt new, strange.

It wasn't the wrinkles or the frailness of her bony frame painted by age that caught my attention—it was something deeper. She looked the same, and yet completely different.

There was coldness in her presence that hadn't been there before. Her eyes, once soft and familiar, now held something unreadable, distant. It made me shiver. My breath grew shallow, my chest tightened. My body stiffened—not from awe, but from unease, the way one does when faced with a stranger who knows your name.

She wasn't transparent anymore. She felt guarded, as if she had built walls too high for me to climb, too thick for me to see through. Her warmth was gone, replaced by a resolve that made me feel like I no longer belonged somewhere in her.

She pulled me into a tight hug. "I missed you so much, Kabel."

But I couldn't move. My arms stayed limp at my sides. The woman holding me felt unfamiliar, like a stranger trying to fit into a memory that no longer existed. And then there was her perfume. No longer soft and sweet, but bold and sharp—like brut champagne fizzing open. Cold and distant, its mineral scent lingered, like wet stone after rain.

Over lunch, she went on about her life abroad—her husband's mansion, their fresh start, the enchantment of it all. She never noticed my untouched food or asked about my life. And when she finally did, her words hurt more than her leaving ever had.

Her eyes scanned me, slowly roaming over my appearance. From where I sat—at a table that once felt like it embraced me, I started to shift uncomfortably. She narrowed her eyes, as if trying to see through me, to search for something hidden. Her gaze felt so sharp, so deliberate, that I found myself lowering my shoulders without realizing it. The confidence I had built over the years began to crumble, piece by piece.

Then, she opened her mouth.

"You've changed," Maria said, her gaze strong. "You've gained weight. Your hair is messy. And those scars..." Her voice trailed off, then hardened. "You're not the daughter I raised. I expected better. I expected you to be like me."

Something inside me shifted.

Suddenly, I was that little girl again—the one she left behind, clutching her half-filled bottle of perfume like it was all I had left of her. For years after she was gone, I held onto the idea of her, trying to shape myself into someone she'd be proud of. I mimicked her voice, her movements, the way she carried herself. I stretched every memory thin, just to keep her alive in me. I wanted nothing more than to be just like her.

But when I finally heard her speak—disappointment dripping from every word—I couldn't recognize the person she was anymore. It felt like I was reaching for someone who kept stepping back, someone who no longer wanted to be touched. Her voice echoed in my head, louder than anything else.

I couldn't hear the room, couldn't feel the ground beneath me. Just her words, heavy and sharp, playing on repeat. My head throbbed with it. It made me uncomfortable in my skin, like I didn't know where to put myself. And somehow, I still wanted to reach for her.

But sitting across from her now, I realized the person I had been missing no longer existed.

That night, I lay awake, breathing in her fading perfume. It wasn't love or safety—just a scent I had no reason to keep. For a week, I tried. I listened to Maria's stories, smiled when needed, and answered when spoken to. But the more time I spent with Maria, the clearer it became: we're strangers now. A week felt like a lifetime.

By week's end, I wasn't hoping she'd stay—I was ready for her to go. I found myself standing at her doorway, my voice steady. "Thank you for coming back. Thank you for telling me about your life. But I've realized something. I don't want to be like you, nor be with you. When you left, I learned how to live without you. Now, I'll continue to do the same. Amping, Ma."

I didn't wait for a reply. I turned and walked away—just as she had once walked away from me.

She called and sent messages after that, but she never came back. She chose her new family, leaving me behind. I once wondered if she thought of me, but I stopped asking when I realized she had made her choice—and I had to make mine.

A year later, I was rummaging through my old, worn-out drawer that's barely holding itself together, it looks like each part of it is about to collapse. Dust clings to every surface, layered with time and memories. As I pull it open, the hinges creak in protest, like it doesn't want to be opened, revealing a collection of remnants from the past.

Among them is an old perfume bottle: empty, scentless, nothing more than an idea of what it once was. I turned it in, my hands pressed the nozzle.

No scent, no trace of her.

Nothing.

I place the bottle back into the drawer. I slide it shut, swallowing the past along with it. I don't throw it away, don't bother dusting off the years it carries.

It stays there, untouched, settled among the remnants of things I no longer look for.

## **On the Drive Home** by Nicole Uy

Hour 0.5 of 3. Aside from the car sickness rumbling in her stomach, self-discovery was a lump in her throat. To distract herself from the sickening feeling of the former, she thought about all those days when she couldn't even begin to describe how hard it was to adjust to having the latter barge into her door and her having to treat it like a guest and not an intruder. It's even harder when that child grew up and packed her bags to travel hours away from home—she had two hours and a half more, if we're counting—looking to fill that one void in herself she just couldn't fill in her hometown, no matter how many times she's checked every nook and cranny. It was describable with words, if only a jumble of misspelled and unnecessary adjectives were coherent. And that's a feeling that only bothers you when you let it. Unfortunately, that void was a childhood friend of hers. She lost sleep thinking about the gnawing on her soul—it wasn't painful, the sharp kind you'd assume it was, it was more an uncomfortable feeling that she just could never get desensitized to, no matter how familiar it was.

At first, it was fine, there was no problem with the itching feeling, it became a part of her somehow. "Fake it till you make it" was proven to work, well... until it didn't. It rapidly grew in a way that was then unfamiliar, as if nothing in her life could any longer accommodate it. As the trees passed by in a blur, she wondered if the feeling was real or a scene conjured up in her mind, like all the other ones a long drive usually induced. How could that feeling of comfort morph into as if the feeling itself was digging its nails into a door pleading for help? It became too uncomfortable for her liking, just enough for her to shed tears and beg her parents to send her to Silliman University. As soon as now, gripping her requirements for enrollment, people were already placing bets on when she'd come back running to her life back at home. And as shaky as their faith in her was, that was how much she believed in herself.

Hour 1 of 3. So that was the exact reason she was an hour into coming back for her first semester of eleventh grade—well, the semester had started a month prior, but they were only ever having face-to-face classes now. She looks out the window again and gets a sense of déjà vu; almost exactly two months ago, scars gained from childhood experiences—conflict with family

relations, hanging threads from friends that turned out not to be, trauma from not even near failing grades that she thought would be the end of her, etc.— were crammed into a silver suitcase along with her clothes and dreams of finding out who she was. She recalled feeling confused about whether “Who she was” was the right word to put it, because then wouldn’t it mean the first decade of her life was an entire façade? It scared her to think that maybe she was throwing away her entire life for someone she didn’t even know.

The music changed into a more upbeat vibe—thanks to her mix mood playlist—and she settled into it, trying to ignore the shiver that still snaked up her spine from the words engraved into her mind. “It wasn’t too late to turn back” was peeking through her peripheral vision, but she shook it off and thought of more pressing matters, like how she thought she’d find herself at Silliman University. She was almost positive she would. She was expecting it to happen any moment since the first time she’d stepped onto the campus. It’s been two whole months, and nothing has happened, but she was more sure about Silliman University than anything else.

Hour 1.5 of 3. Throughout that whole journey of a semester, she met new amazing people, not only classmates whom she saw and grew with for almost already half a year of her teenage life, but peers who have given her encouragement and advice, and teachers who taught her more than just academics, but valuable and wise life lessons to use beyond the classroom. She went to new places and went on new adventures, all introducing new feelings that she saw as stepping stones to finding out her true self. She thought, finally, this was exactly what she was looking for. She could practically see herself looking through the windows of the class buildings and seeing what she came to see. She could smell it; she could sense the light that had been flickering a little too far in the background when she was in her hometown. It was only when the light started getting brighter that realization also shone through.

Hour 2 of 3. Despite the rays, the light never went through; she realized. It felt like a reflection more than anything else; the moon was beautifully bright, but it was merely a reflection of the light from the sun. And while that was a discovery, where was the sun? Interrupting her melodramatic analogy, a spot of light hit her skin through the right-side window—throughout the two whole semesters of constantly travelling, she developed

a habit of sitting on the right side of any vehicle to fight off car sickness—and made her look up. The sun was there, a big block of energy, it seemed so close to how it could sting her skin, but it was only an illusion, because the sun was a prime example of unreachable. So, she was confused about everything. Confused because she'd taken the steps, she'd followed the instructions, she stayed between the lines, and still nothing was clicking into place. Like the sun, the feeling was there, so close, which was exactly the problem. It was only ever so close, how was it always unattainable? It was a strand of hair away, and that was just as frustrating as finding out the void existed in the first place.

The days went on, and skipping on every path that she hadn't walked on since, walking through every door, heaving through every stair step, going through every known shortcut, getting to class just in time, strolling alongside her was the feeling that she could just never grasp. So, she stopped. She stopped trying to chase the feeling and went at her own pace. She was resigned to the realization that no matter how fast she ran, she would never catch something that wasn't meant for her to be caught. As soon as it seemed to give up, she felt defeated. She thought about the fact that she went all this way, sacrificed all she had, bled herself dry for the most unfavorable outcomes, and still ended up empty-handed.

Hour 2.5 of 3. But who are we kidding? She left her hometown to chase a dream nobody else believed in. She was two hours and thirty minutes into the drive, and it took much courage to return for her last semester of high school. But she did. Because it would've been so out of character for her to put her foot down and decide she was no longer the goal-oriented person she was crafted to be. Although she mainly went to Silliman for self-discovery, somewhere along the way, she'd planted seeds in that place. So with the encouraging pat from self-help poetry, she huddles back into herself. It always came back to that, anyway. It always came back to seeking refuge in herself and having the faith that even if she didn't accomplish whatever she had initially planned, she would still have herself to fall back on.

So, gliding down the halls, holding the stair railings, and looking over the balconies, she held the belief that no matter what happened, she was still the same girl who packed her bags with determination, and that maybe she could

learn to live with that feeling. Thinking back to almost two years ago, on the same route, only with different reasons—first to pass requirements, now to spend one semester more—she somehow realized that it wasn't worth being scared. She didn't know exactly why, but she held enough belief in herself to go with the feeling. Along with the red ID lace was the identity that she was a Sillimanian, and maybe at the end of the day, that would be enough. As much as this seemed like settling, it felt true when she said the void wasn't as noticeable. Maybe this was what the light meant to show after all.

Hour 3 of 3. While she was caught up in the nerves of her high school years ending, she somehow still noticed the light when it shone, not filtered through glass or muted by curtains. The light was blinding, not the pointless kind, but the kind that showed her exactly what she needed to see. And no, it wasn't what she thought it was when the semester started. It took her moving three hours away from all she's ever known, four whole semesters in her dream school, learning to live without her family, waking and sleeping at ungodly hours for busy days, going the farthest places on foot, meeting new and amazing people who ranged from being so similar and so different from her, getting mentored by the wisest and wittiest teachers, and everything in between, to realize that she won't find herself in Silliman University.

It wasn't strolling through Katipunan Hall at barely 6:00 A.M., passing through Ausejo after dusk falls, the stories that have you shivering at the thought of floating to the peripheral point of her mind. It wasn't walking past Luce Auditorium and recalling the first ever musical theatre play she watched in that building, nor strolling through the Silliman University (SU) Gym and thinking about all the games they played for their Physical Education & Health subject. It wasn't the countless steps in the Senior High Building or even losing her bag when touring it before it was officially open to the students. It wasn't the walk to the SU Cafeteria when she just so happened to catch pigeon droppings in her hair, nor was it the time she lay on the Guy Hall floor to catch up on sleep. It wasn't making products for their entrepreneurial fair at Oriental Hall, it wasn't feeling defeated on the floor of the Science Complex after a statistics exam, it wasn't the back and forth between the Cimafranca Ballfield and the SU gym to watch intramurals games, it wasn't passing time at the kiosk or buying crinkles at the courtyard, it wasn't showing up two hours earlier to laugh and study with

her best friend, the guard wasn't telling her that the building was closed for the day because it was nearly 06:00 P.M., it wasn't staying up the entire night to study, it wasn't collectively falling asleep during classes with the friend group, it wasn't the project-making at a friend's house that always ended up as hangouts, it wasn't having to sacrifice subjects for other subjects and not doing anything in the end, it wasn't the coffee breaks that had them all running to the bathroom, or the entire afternoon nap after an all-nighter. It wasn't taking pictures during the university tour before her first year started, and it definitely won't be when she leaves the gates with a graduation toga on—in a few weeks, she couldn't believe it.

Arrival. It was all getting familiar: the buildings, the roads, even the eyes in the rearview mirror—mine. I may have spent only a few hours getting here, but it's been two years since this journey started. Most times, it doesn't register until I see my yearning reflection in the mirror, and then it sinks in that the past years were mine, just like how the remaining years are as well. Every single drive was a hint to my self-discovery, and it took time for me to realize that.

Finding yourself is a journey that isn't linear. For me, it was three hours on the road and countless more on foot. For other people, maybe, they'd discovered their identity in the mere four walls of their own homes, and some in even bigger and farther cities that I moved to. Maybe it was earlier on in life, before even hitting double digits, or older than me in my teenage years. Simply so, if you're lucky enough, it'll take you less time than others to see that light for what it truly is. But truthfully, there is beauty in finding yourself just a little later on. When it hits you that everything you've been through was a futile attempt at claiming your identity, you realize that it was exactly those moments that make you see that external factors do not get to decide who you are. Sure, they help, but this is one of the few things in life that is entirely your own.

Home is not where you were born, home is not where your family is, home is not the university you begged and cried to be sent to, nor is it the dorm room you share with your childhood friends. It may have seemed that way, and you may have caught me saying it about that, because it is true that these are what helped *me* in *my* growth. But beyond these, the ultimate decision is in your own hands, curled between the fingers you can never pry open, only learn to unfurl.

“The call is coming from inside the house.” Is a phrase my friend Trisha often jokes about, and to put it in a different lens, that’s exactly how finding yourself feels the first time. It was hearing a ticking sound and looking out the window, expecting twigs banging against the glass, only to find out it was the clock on your favorite cream-painted wall.

Familiarity was a mere concept; even though familiarity could be elusive, it was often where you could find what you needed. It made sense how “familiar” was always associated with “home.” So yes, going back, for the second time, to her question during her first car ride to Silliman University, the familiarity was there to begin with. Who she was wasn’t a facade. And this time, she knew why. In a sense, home for me was all these places and these people, because I was always there. Home was all these places because they were what made me realize that looking out every window could never make me see what wasn’t there in the first place.

And though the only place I could ever find myself was in myself, I won’t discredit the things that have given me a little push in that direction. For me, it was the countless 3-hour car rides—to and fro, but now with the knowledge, it was home all the same.

## For a Home

by Patricia Nicole Gajo

The door was always there.

Ajar – never far but never quite within reach. I wouldn't say it was locked, but pushing against it felt like a train parked behind. Covered in colors, the door I grew up with was unrecognizable. The familiar cold feeling remained, and my clothes were never enough to warm the pinpricks of emotion spreading throughout my body. I contemplate what to do next, as I do this, I can only stand and stare at the hands that could no longer grip and the feet that would no longer stray far. "It isn't fear," I thought. And anyone could see the tremble of my eyes. "It isn't a bad thing," I like to say to myself..

The wind traced what little I've had on, how much has wrapped me, and when I thought I had shed so much, I could never quite feel bare—only quietly undone.

The warmth from my breath shifted the air around me. It wouldn't make sense—how familiarity was pictures on walls bouncing off each other, how the soft swoosh from the winds toppled them into tiny piles everywhere. How the particles stirred, swirled, and gently laid themselves on any surface they could—how opportunistic. The wind seemed eerie when the morning came, and the night seemed too long and quiet. Familiarity was knocked in sounds and memories, in feelings. And the wooden thing that wouldn't budge, a glimpse of something from my questions, and I could not see past any of the not-so-subtle catalysts of my life. I can only understand in black and white, for grey has become too bold.

I am cold.

I am warm.

I am abandoned.

I've boxed away all childhood, innocence, and the extremes from yesteryears. The boxes I've learned to sit with tight-knuckled pressure around my throat, extending tightness to my chest, and a flick of sting around my lungs. I couldn't breathe quite okay, but I don't fight with what isn't seen. I distracted myself with what could be held, and so I touched and looked and stamped in memory the states of the boxes around me. I've left them webbed, disheveled, untapped, retaped, painted, and gapped.

But I had this lingering desire to open one out of curiosity about what I

could have remembered so easily. So, I willed the fan to turn on because the heat inside me was concentrated in places I didn't need to be; it was getting too much. So, I found a random sturdy-looking box and sat down, sealing it deliberately as if it could do something to me. My feet were still cold, but at least my hands were moving, and I was moving—and the world has willed me to sweat. I've scribbled a future somewhere in my brain, not too specific for God knows I must face trial, but not too general that the devil shall find me devoid and wish me nothing but kept in a box clear enough to see the outside but kept in what is that I cannot seem to undo all that I have done or at least renew what I could.

I retrace the marks I left and those that have been uncovered. I think of the ones I never meant to leave, those accidental trails and side quests, one of thought and hope that I left only in memory. And for a second, I mourn.

"Gosh, I need water," a need I could never satiate.

By water, I might mean to live. So, I drank, hydrated, and took in as much as I could. And like the space between liquid and lid in a bottle, I left just enough room for the pressure. Just enough room for error, for pause, for a breath. Should water expand to the brim, or if life fills me too full, I might not know how to hold it. The space at the top was my buffer. My warning sign to reaching a limit, my limit. I could take my time. And maybe it was my way of saying that I wasn't ready to let everything in just yet. Because if I did, I wouldn't be living for myself anymore. I'd be pouring out again. And if I pour out too much, I might forget something along the way and lose pieces that I won't get back or recognize anymore.

"Gosh, I need water," and I smile as I say this because I know I have it, and I might not know what to do with it just yet. So, I continue to survey.

Should I clean up? Yes. It's a choice.

A quiet one — not loud or extravagant —but it's mine. And not everyone gets to say that. I'm grateful. And if the day arrives when I don't have one, I hope that I can find a way to make one. Even if it's small, less impactful, not appreciated by many, and gets thrown into the heat. May I find the courage to make one and be able to hold fire anyway.

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I let it.

I let the uneven ground entertain me as I sat on the box that could have meant something, and I didn't feel as thirsty..

The boxes around me rustled a little as I leaned back. Above me, the sky had stretched out so wide and quiet, waiting for me to notice how endless it was. With the view came a low rumble, and an umbrella appeared in my hand. I think it was dropped like a joke or a gift, as it came stitched with:

"Good morning, sunshine."

Or maybe I've gone a little mad in all this stillness and life-giving gifts. Or maybe things are beginning to shift. Their weight no longer felt the same. Either way, I'll take it.

I'm lucky. And I know it.

Luck has tried to stay with me, even when I forget to thank it.

I've had my fill of water, but sometimes I forget to drink.

I picked up the nearest box. I opened it in case it carried something I needed, but it was confusing. Just a bowl. Random. I set it under the container spilling water, like time with sand, but this time with water. I watched as it flooded the room, and I could only roll my eyes at the mess of it all. Still, the water continued to flow, yet the bowl never overflowed. How could this be? It was a strainer. Life is funny that way.

The soil beneath it took what it could, turning dark, soft, alive. And I smiled, just a little—not because everything is making sense, but because the cold on my feet had something to press back against this time.

*What now?*

Should you understand this, if you can imagine where I am. We might be neighbors.

Not next door or anything.

But in quiet places, memory keeps to itself. What happens next?

I could say 632 more words about what I can see, what I have seen, and what I might be able to see. And maybe that would be enough. For the angels, this meant not allowing fear to control the best you can be.

Enough to say I have made a home. And that maybe home is not a place —

maybe it is a pause in the longing we grow into. Maybe it is the meaning behind the number. It looked like more boxes had appeared. I don't open them, though. I wait a little while for the rain to stop. I checked the strainer, and it caught what it could.

I didn't need it, not really. But I liked the way it worked while it could. The day slipped by, and I do not remember most of it. So, I looked for a place to lie down and willed myself to sleep.

The next day.

I had left too many footprints.

Didn't even realize they had stayed behind — pressed into the same soil that has kept me going. I knelt; let it cover my legs. I let it remind me that I'm still here. Some footprints stayed hollow, but the others — they bloomed.

Colors I did not expect. Greens, purples, blues, yellows. A rainbow had been paying attention. And something in the air smelled like petrichor. I had just woken up, and I do not dare to walk just yet.

I just wait. I just watched.

And my head has conjured another plan.

Home has become liminal. I've known it too much for too long that I still bring the boxes with me wherever I go. Not all of them ever open, though. Most stay sealed, heavy with what once mattered a great deal to me, others unopened but never unloved.

Sometimes I like to open one just enough so I can catch the scent from old papers, remember past smiles, laughter, and sadness. For I tend to thrive in melancholy, too. It does not mean anything but a way of remembering without speaking, especially when the world has become too loud. It's not only sadness, but a quiet place — melancholy is home too. In a way like the earth smells after a rain, as gentle companions in the crowd of rumbles, as a reflection disguised as regret, and where spaces are filled with suspended stillness.

Life — a letter paused mid-sentence, a threshold between home to homelessness to what I wish would become a victory. And pausing has become the home I intend to be familiar with because this is the home where I strive best.

The home where I don't feel guilty. Where I'm not asked to apologize. The home that does not beg to be fixed is only asked to be inhabited, with presence and not performance.

A home where I can leave paint on my fingers and touch everything all clean and white, where the dirt isn't a mess but a part of life that I am creating. I could paint all day, every day, and I would not be bothered. A home that does not require a curfew in life, and I could take a long time to return. Where doors are not too early or too late, just on time. Where mess does not scream, have things thrown around, or sprinkle feelings with material.

A home where feelings are not uninvited and buried and gutted.

It might not promise permanence, but it is the home where quiet intention moves.

Here is where the stubborn will begins.

This is the home where creation is from stillness and taking time. Not many have been offered or have seen in their lifetimes. Only a few have stayed long enough to understand.

And again, I am lucky. My home is unhurried, and I had my plan almost half complete for one half has been written in stone and strikethrough completed, and the other half is still in gibberish.

My neighbor, if you've noticed, my tone has softened, and I'm more accepting. For my home, it works for me, and only I can understand it. You have yours, and it's not for me to define. My home does not have to be yours, just as your home does not have to be the home of others. My home is mine.

Where my liminal is not my exile, but my home.

## **White Memories**

by Lara Charmaine Lagorra

Serrated mountains loomed in the distance. The land was filled with green forests and its scent was fresh and organic, away from the urban civilization that reeked of smoke and dust. The air was filled with the sound of chirping birds, the warm sun added the springtime's aura as it filled the place with a rainbow of calmness, and the meadow was covered with dandelions and butterflies were flocking around it.

Beneath all this beautiful scenery lies a small, wooden but modern house that has no neighboring friends besides the forest. It was surrounded by plenty of fresh and gorgeous kinds of flowers like Roses, Irises, Sunflowers, Tulips, Orchids, and much more that you are unable to name them all. It felt like paradise to whoever lived within such a lovely environment, and someone did own the place.

An old lady, who chose to retire within the presence of nature loves to grow all sorts of flowers as a hobby, she admires in amazement every time a new patch of flower grows within her garden and she enjoyed it, just like how she said to herself when she would reminisce the days of life where she was still young and healthy. She wanted to peacefully leave the world with a smile on her face, The old lady knew she enjoyed and lived her life without anything to regret and told herself that she was ready. However, as the years went on, she was going on the same routine, taking care of her garden of flowers and wishing she would finally also have peace in her life.

The old lady could not understand and became frustrated with herself. She was a kind woman in her days, she never broke any laws, she enjoyed the moments with her family and friends, and loved them with all her heart.

Sitting in the middle of the garden and questioning herself, "Where did I go wrong?", she felt alone for the first time, and scared, not knowing what to do next. Until a voice spoke.

"Did you not have any regrets?"

The old lady was shocked to hear a voice other than herself. She looked around the peaceful green forest to see if there was someone out there, but there wasn't.

"How about any heartbreaks?"

There it was again. She followed the voice's sound that seemed to be

coming from beside her, and the old lady looked and saw a single white rose talking to her. Scared, she moved back away a little, not wanting to speak back to it because she was in shock.

“Did the life you enjoyed make you happy in the end?” the white rose said.

“What are you trying to say?” the old lady finally replied.

“I am asking the same questions that you keep muttering to yourself every day.” “My answer is still the same, and nothing will change it,” said the old lady.

The rose looked around the garden, it was the only white rose the old lady had grown. She preferred planting playful colored flowers like red, yellow, and purple types. The white roses’ presence was the only one that stood out from the rest within the old lady’s garden.

The rose spoke again.

“There are times in our existence that we want to follow and be like the rest, it is still common nowadays, from the standards of beauty, status, and personality. We do not tend to focus on the bigger picture of ourselves and analyze more about what we are capable of doing much more. We are more than just followers of what society has set norms for, some failed to see that.”

“What are you trying to say? This does not have anything to do with me” the old lady scoffed.

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the old lady scoffed.

“Some tend to conceal who they truly are just for them to be able to fit in the standards of culture, erasing an identity and changing everything about themselves, even if it does not make them happy” The white rose continued.

“I have never done that, I was enjoying my life, living and cherishing every moment I had so that I would not have any regrets when I am older.”

“Then why does that statement of yours weigh more on a tone of regret than gratitude?” replied the white rose.

“I am happy and satisfied with my life, that is why I want to have my peace” the old lady looked down on the grass and looked at the white rose, her eyes were somewhat blank at that moment like she realized something.

There was a long silence between them, only the sounds of the wind rustling on the nearby trees’ branches.

“Are you?” the white rose finally spoke.

It finally hit the old lady so hard, like a huge slap on the face. A wave of despair washed over her body as the memories from her youth she was content and happy for revealed something far more unsettling. She was just another follower in society, trying to fit in and losing who she was until she got older. The only action that the old lady was able to do by her own choice was growing flowers after her retirement, which her family and peers never approved of.

Everything in her life was always following what they were telling her to do and become in life. She changed her memories and made it within her conscious thinking that it was indeed a good life, like she had lived. However, she missed so many opportunities that she wanted to do and pursue, but could not do so because of the fear of not being accepted by society.

As these thoughts continued to replay in her head, tears began to well up under her eyes if she had been holding them for too long.

The white rose was just silent, it did not comment about what the old lady was going through.

“On earth, everything is unique and has its purpose in life. However, if we begin to compare ourselves to others, we lose our own identity, leading us to overlook our distinct abilities. Flowers come in a variety of forms and sizes, but what sets them distinct is their vibrant colors; they don't compare or attempt to change who they are since they were developed to be that way,

and they shine uniquely and brightly within nature. I sometimes wish the world would understand that,” the white rose said.

“What should I do now? I wasted life on something that did not even make me happy”, cried the old lady.

“All you can do now is accept it and let go, enjoy what little time you have left.”

“It’s too late.” “It is never too late,” The white rose nodded.

Tears still streaming down her cheeks, she got back inside her house and sat on her favorite rocking chair, taking out an album that contains all the pictures of her planned out life. A photo fell from the side, she picked it up. It was a photo of herself planting and playing with flowers as a child, she loved nature ever since but no one seems to have understood her before.

She lay back on her chair and hugged the photo to her chest. The old lady closed her eyes as tears continued to come out, but was still able to let a smile appear on her face.

Years went on, the house was already in shambles and nature began to take over its architectural structure. Green molds began to grow on the floors, and the flowers sprouted in different corners around it as well., They were still growing healthy, as every day there would be a new kind bursting within the house’s grounds. One type stood out from the rest. In the same center, outside lies a white rose; another one grew beside it just a few years before, and it became the second white rose in the garden. They may be different, but that is what makes them exquisite and unique from the rest.

# **Academic Essays**

*Selected by Isabella Therese Calis*

**The Wendigo's Name is 'der Andere':  
'Decolonization' and the Filipino Identity in  
Filipino History**  
by Issachar Bacang

The dialogue surrounding Philippine history, the resulting Filipino conscience, the remnants of foreign colonial influence and themes, and the call to arms to remove these 'colonial-isms' have been—at least in my readings of it—rather colonial in and of itself.

The very concept, idea, and cause of 'decolonization' seemingly serves colonization. A kind of colonization whose conquest is no longer facilitated by iron and gunpowder, but by ideas and attitudes. The colonization of the new world during the golden age of exploration and conquest has been the subject of many scholarly reflection, the prevailing attitude being that colonization had led to a net loss of pre-colonial cultures, practices, and entire identities—all crushed under the weight of the West. Most importantly, the subjectivity of indigenous identity, an entire swatch of the anthropocene, seemingly collapsing into its own era beneath the earth in the wake of Western colonization. It is not a bet of long odds to suggest that the colonial era has never stopped, but has moved to arm themselves with more powerful weapons. There is no longer a 'West', a prevailing culture and race set to dominate the world, but an ideology. An internationalism, a cosmopolitan *globalistic* ideal that, though not necessarily working under the whims of the West, is nonetheless a direct result of the West's colonization and the subsequent centuries of consequences that followed.

Colonies were primarily set up in the Caribbean, Southeast Asia, and in the Africas to occupy and extract resources, and only secondly to 'guide' the savages into the systems that allowed for their exploitation. Now, there is no need for colonies or physical occupation. Global economists and political scientists understand that prosperity in the contemporary era requires the cooperation of nations. Seeing this necessity to cooperate or die, there is a scale, a balance of power, of which can be tipped and utilized to push whatever agendas one may have, given their position, given their advantage over the others. There is the ideal, the global cosmopolitan ideal, that we must all follow to be worldly. Whereas in the past, colonization seeks to

consume the world under its empire and flag, this ‘new colonization’ seeks to consume the world instead under its influence: to create an international group—an identity without identity—that has nonetheless an ideology, detached from any hallmark of human culture, that all nations must be in adherence to. It is a colonization of attitudes and ideas not simply because these are the ‘global’ attitudes and ideas, the modern way of thinking, the *nouveau*. For there to be prosperity, there must be cooperation, for there to be cooperation there must be common consensus among these cooperating nations, a common consensus of attitudes and ideas— lest they be not privy to the ‘circle of prosperity.’ Whoever may be at the head of this ‘new colonization’, they understood the mistakes of the ‘old colonization’. The empires and kingdoms grew obese, and bled their treasuries to hold on to their increasingly independent overseas territories. The genius of ‘new colonization’ is the allure of the exclusivity hidden within the promise of economic prosperity—just as long as you join the club. You need not go beyond your border to conquer. Your new vassals come to you, so long as you throw them a line. among these cooperating nations, a common consensus of attitudes and ideas— lest they be not privy to the ‘circle of prosperity.’ Whoever may be at the head of this ‘new colonization’, they understood the mistakes of the ‘old colonization’. The empires and kingdoms grew obese, and bled their treasuries to hold on to their increasingly independent overseas territories. The genius of ‘new colonization’ is the allure of the exclusivity hidden within the promise of economic prosperity—just as long as you join the club. You need not go beyond your border to conquer. Your new vassals come to you, so long as you throw them a line.

In their asking of us to do so however, it asks us to abandon, disregard, and antagonize the invincible fact of the matter: the fact that it happened. The fact that we are a result of what happened. The fact that in every instance of our looking back into this past, into this history— we do not look back as Filipinos, as Japanese, as Americans, or as Spaniards. We look back at what had to be Spanish, what had to be American, what had to be Japanese, what had to be in order to bring about what is currently Filipino. Filipino as an identity, as a consciousness, as a people does not rest on the scattered confederacies and alliances of the Tagalog, Sulu, and Bisaya kingdoms. They saw themselves as much as their Own (*das Eigene*), and therefore the others,

as not of their own, as Other (der Andere). In as much as you can consider these ancestors as Filipinos or not, they are certainly better Filipinos than we are today: for they defined themselves to be who they define themselves to be and resisted any soft influence to convince them otherwise. Just as Rizal—the first Filipino, was the first Filipino in as much as he was influenced by the Spanish, we are Filipinos in as much as we were those many other things before us:

*Rizal was the first Filipino. Before him there were the natives of Suluan who rowed out to Magellan's camp on "The Enchanted Island" of Humunu; Pigafetta found them "courteous and honest." They were olive-skinned, rather plump, their bodies oiled and tattooed . . . There was Humabon, the kinglet of Sugbu . . . And there was also Lapulapu, kinglet of Mactan, as bold and handsome and supple as the fish for which he was named . . . No one proclaimed himself a Filipino . . . It was Rizal, as we have seen, who taught his countrymen that they could be something else, Filipinos who were members of a Filipino Nation. He was the first who sought to "unite the whole archipelago" and envisioned a "compact and homogeneous" society of all the old communities from Batanes to the Sulu Sea, based on common interests and "mutual protection" rather than on the Spanish friar's theory of double allegiance to Spain as Catholic and the Church as Spanish . . .<sup>1</sup>*

Rizal was the first to not only define the Filipino—but to actualize it. Despite his actual opinions and political positions on independence and our relationship with Spain, in defining Filipino did Rizal create the first attempt at 'actualization'. Actualization can be understood as an 'assertion of ethos', and this sentiment can be found in the doctrines of Jose P. Laurel. Jose P. Laurel—an intellectual and public servant—served during the height of the world war and came out of it with heavy accusations against him. He was allegedly coordinating with and being a puppet to the Japanese occupation of the country—having let past from beneath his nose the atrocities committed by them upon the Filipino people. For this he is vilified in Philippine history but if there is one redeeming quality or achievement about him in his tenure as president and his contribution to Philippine society and intellectual life is his attempt at intellectual shift in the Filipino attitude—especially in the way we saw ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Ma. Guerrero, *The First Filipino* (Manila: Guerrero Publishing, 2010), pp. 523-527.

On the international scale, Laurel saw the great powers of the world draw upon their collective identity to strive towards and fight for the common good of liberty, justice, freedom, and democracy. Laurel saw that and observed the Philippines lacked this collective identity that allowed for the Filipino people to rally under not just one ideal or one person, but one identity, one Filipino identity that allowed the nation to move as an organism, and triumph. For Laurel, the lack of this collective identity cost the Philippines dearly and still continues to do so up until the present day when we jealously compare ourselves to other cultures and sulk within a quagmire of our pity party of nationalist identity-crisis. Laurel refused what he saw in Jacinto and sought to pave a new path, and in order to do so, paved a new ethos.

For Laurel, the basis of this was value and self-determination. For Laurel, the Filipino man's Filipino-ness was already imbued within him, and so signification of man as guided by the Church and defended by the State was that which allowed the Filipino to actively actualize the identity in real time. Laurel's political philosophy, widely overlooked, though having Western influences—is a political philosophy mostly native to the Philippines: he taught the doctrine of a government that serves both man and his family, for the role of government was 'man's signification' and the family as the 'start of society'.

Laurel sought to center this signification of man on the basis of these three values: justice, truth, and courage—towards the goal of social cohesion. For Laurel, when we orient our values and morality towards 'justice, truth and courage' with the goal of social cohesion—or what Laurel called 'equilibrium'—society in itself begins to, along with its people, actively actualize the Filipino identity.

*"What we need as a people is a renovation of our sense of values, a re-awakening of our moral sensibilities, a turning back to the old but simple Christian principle of caring for the welfare of others."*

*-Jose P. Laurel*

Laurel undertook the mission Jacinto sought to accomplish. While Jacinto sought to codify discipline into the Filipino ethos to prove the Spanish wrong, Laurel sought to do the same without recourse (at least politically) or

reference to any other international standard's view of the Filipino. He wanted to prove the Filipino people to the Filipino people. For Laurel, it was not discipline that the ethos needed, but morality, social cohesion, and a common bond between Filipinos. Actualization of the Filipino identity within both the Filipino individual and in Filipino society required that the external factors that allowed for one to live with dignity—a precursor to active actualization of identity—be ensured. Laurel can be taken as a kind of Confucian when he visualizes the relationship between government and people, but it would be wrong to suggest a kind of father-son dynamic. For so long as the government cares that the people have what they need in order to actualize their Filipino identity, the resulting actualization of identity further informs and allows the government to evolve to become ever more at one with the people, to the point where the bifurcation between the two closes in on itself, and the rule of law, public morality, the Filipino people, and the Filipino identity are non-dual.<sup>2</sup>

Government's role is paternal, and must therefore be geared towards—in its governmental functions and roles—the fulfillment, enrichment, and protection of this social cohesion—this equilibrium—of man and his family. Laurel followed the Ciceroine doctrine of 'Salus populi suprema lex esto'—welfare of the populus is the supreme of the law:

*“Social justice is neither communism, nor despotism, nor atomism, nor anarchy, but the humanization of laws and the equalization of social and economic forces by the State so that justice in its rational and objectively secular conception may at least be approximated.”*

*-JPL, Calalang vs. Williams case speech*

The Filipino identity, ordained by God to be actualized, must be striven toward. This Filipinism of Laurel was not a set list of ideals, or a secular destiny to be actualized, or a vision of the ideal Filipino-to-be: but the Filipino identity is here and in the afterwards: the Filipino identity is something that the Filipino must devote themselves to in the now, through “civic duty and social responsibility motivated by national self-respect (...) loving justice and greatness, the people must make themselves worthy of reforms then effectuate the necessary reforms and finally make sure that the sun of liberty shines undimmed over the whole nation”.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Nishida Kitaro's concept of kokutai- the synonymity of the emperor's will and the Japanese identity- and the logic of basho- the non-duality of these two and their eternal and absolute non-duality.

*“Filipinism is the assertion of one’s national birthright with patriotism defined as love of country as a primary element. It takes the form of a passion for self-development alone. A colonized people cannot hope to be developed by its masters except along lines that suit the vanity and cupidity of the masters. For a nation to find itself and its souls and achieve its God-given destiny, it has to develop itself with as little help from outsiders as possible.”*

*-The Political Philosophy of Dr. Jose P. Laurel<sup>3</sup>*

The Filipino identity, as it stands now in the midst of modernity, must not only rely on this definition, but expand upon it in as much as the Filipino identity. If we are to be something else, we must decide upon it. But our action would be folly without reflection: reflection on what was, what is needed to be, and a solemn acceptance of that. It would also be a mistake to accuse me, after having made these remarks, to have any love for colonization—especially its modern methods. As I have put before, the new method of colonization is that of ideas and attitudes. The importation of the foreign concept that in order to regain the idealized ‘Filipino’ consciousness, identity, and the people, one must analyze and be critical toward these specific things through these specific ideas, under this specific ideology—is in itself a form of colonization. It serves our foreign investors to not think as Filipinos, but to think as ‘educated’, ‘worldly’, ‘Westernized’ people. To make sure that if a western lady were to clack her heels through UP or Silliman, all must conform to her sensibility as to not offend it, lest we be considered isolationists, reactionary, backwater, unworldly, unsophisticated—all new words replacing what the old colonizers used to describe us back then: savages. This kind of critical theory is not native to the Philippines. Even so, in making this remark I do not discourage, nor do I prohibit the borrowing and use of foreign ideas. In as much as those who champion de-colonization do not discourage or prohibit Japanese electronic products, American democracy, or Spanish styles and sensibilities. The image of the fool sawing away at the branch he’s sitting on is something decolonial studies have had to confront. What had been discarded as a shallow criticism of decolonial studies has come to rear its ugly head once more.

There is a silent admittance within academia of the ultimatum that the

<sup>3</sup> Jose P. Laurel Memorial Foundation Incorporated, <https://josepl laurel.com/jose-p-laurels-thoughts/>

concept of decolonization brings, especially in the neoliberal university environment in which it is most entertained. One is to remain innocent to it, that is to openly discuss it within the business-as-usual and callously ignore the underlying colonial structures that must be maintained in order to have the discussion for the sake of it, or admit complicity to it and radically refuse it, and therefore relinquish or dismantle the entire neoliberal institution that—although allowed for its discourse—is still undeniably a product of Western colonialism.

Even within this article, the author doubts in his conclusion that such progressive, decolonial critique could last in a neo-colonial institution. This article is endearing to me because although it seeks to redeem, if not salvage the discourse of decolonization, it graciously admits that *‘of individual morality, righteousness, and rose-tinted views of the supposed enlightening function of UK higher education, the contemporary corporate university machine will reduce critique and praxis to the status of commodity... critique that does not produce value has no auditable place.’* My observation is that the neoliberal university system has debased the critical aspect of the research that goes into decolonial studies, but decolonial studies as a product of university education had been fated to be debased ever since its introduction into the prospectus. Decolonization just does not exist without colonization. As a result, as the term ‘decolonize’ entered the sphere of public discourse, its use has become superficial and reduced to the token understanding that the West is bad. Yet despite that declaration, de-colonization has made us all lapdogs to the West.

In any case, the spirit of this essay at the very least moves along the same direction as the radical critical theory that calls for immanent critique that ‘any serious discourse surrounding decolonization must necessarily commence with recognition of complicity.’ What they call complicity<sup>6</sup>, I call acceptance and admittance. Whereas decolonization speaks of the past and its heritage to the modern man like it was a series of crimes that we are currently and continuously an accessory to in our participation of it<sup>7</sup>, I speak of ‘past’ as current—as in the individual being a current, living, and amalgamate instance of history.

<sup>4</sup> Sammy Dhillon, *An Immanent Critique of Decolonization Discourse* (Lincoln: Bishop Grosseteste University, 2021) p. 256

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p. 253

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 255

<sup>7</sup> Decolonial studies being a branch of critical theory—sons of Adorno, Fanon, and Foucault. Foucault, in particular, I’ve been very critical of. I hold him responsible for the current trend of reducing the method and motion of history to mere power and oppression, and even that, I opine Althusser does a better job. He has been seen as a poor researcher into wider history, Classics, and Antiquity by modern historians and scholars (Sowell, Paglia, Windschuttle)

My point is this: the Filipino must see his place not only in his own history but in the history of the world as a Filipino, and this begins with the gracious admittance that we are the sons and daughters, the grandsons and granddaughters, the descendants of those who had come to colonize us. That by blood, and not just mere consciousness, we are as much them as they are us.

I hold the same notion as that of Father Abulad, the philosopher and historian who inspired this essay, that there is essentially no such thing as Filipino as *'pure breed'*<sup>8</sup>. Regardless, there is Filipino blood.

This notion of 'blood' seems novel to modern scholarly writing, but it is a concept as old as empires. The symbolic image of blood has always been seen as that one latent essentiality within the individual that connects them to a family, a heritage, a culture, an identity that goes further than mere consanguinity. The greatest poetic exposition of the rich symbolism of blood can be seen in Edmund Spenser's *"The Faerie Queene"*, where this concept of an individual's blood not only characterizes a large part of their identity, the responsibility of the identity that came with it, as shown in the Redcross Knight's blood-red shield and his destiny—as per his half-elven blood—to vanquish the dragon terrorizing Una. It is in his blood—so to say—to do so, despite the diminishing prestige of the knighthood. His blood compels him to vanquish the dragon, not his knighthood.

*That when the varlet heard and saw, straightway  
He wexed wondrous wroth, and said, Vile knight,  
That knights and knighthood doest with shame upbray,  
And shewst th' ensample of thy childish might,  
With silly weake old woman thus to fight.  
Great glory and gay spoile sure hast thou got,  
And stoutly prov'd thy puissance here in sight;  
That shall Pyrochles well requite, I wot,  
And with thy blood abolish so reprochfull blot.*<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Romualdo Abulad, *Confucianism and Filipino Culture: Two Cultures in Dialogue* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas, Christ the King Mission Seminary, 2016) p. 8-9

<sup>9</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Canto IV, (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1919) p. 71

In his commentary of ‘The Faerie Queene’ Hadfeild notes the imagery of blood used in Spenser’s poem and acknowledges how it is the ‘locus of identity, the essence of an individual.’<sup>10</sup> The fact that one’s connection to his past and to his land does not need a transcendent dimension (say, an exultant rank within the knighthood), but simply the fact that he is the scion of those who were of it (elven blood), who were it, is enough to bind him to the soil in which generations of people that needed to be born, needed to live, and needed to die in order for him to occur. By this blood, you become an actual instance of not only your family, but of your people, of your culture, of your heritage, but of your history. The unique circumstance of how the ‘Filipino’ occurred makes the concepts and methods of ‘decolonization’ ineffectual. If other countries who had an established people, culture, heritage, and history were suddenly colonized and their ways impede upon, replaced, and new foreign ways imposed upon them—then the method of de-colonization would work. The fact of the matter, however, is that this is rarely the case.

The history of peoples—and not human history (there is a difference)<sup>11</sup>—is constant amalgamation. This amalgamation, more often than not, came through conquest. My problem with the concept of decolonization is not only its blatant neo-historicist underpinnings, but also the implications it has on entire peoples, cultures, and nations the moment we look back, beyond the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is very common for an existing person today to claim joint heritage of two or more lines who were, not a few hundred years ago, in constant war with each other.<sup>12</sup> There is little to discount the possibility that your ancestors hated each other. In destroying each other, they exchanged with each other. And so what allowed them to marry, to become your ancestors? What often placates conflict and conquest and solidifies this amalgamation, this admixture of separate instances into a unified one is the actualization of history, the proclamation of one common blood.<sup>13</sup> For these scattered people to come together and realize each other to be as one and the same, it did not occur through conquest, alliance, or confederation, but through blood. This was the point of the blood compact that occurred in Bohol.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Hadfeild, *In the Blood: Spencer, Race, and Identity* (New York: Spenser Studies: a Renaissance Poetry Annual. 2021) p. 47

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Leo Strauss’ treatment of natural right versus historicism

<sup>12</sup> Thomas T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 4-6

<sup>13</sup> Tanya Matanova, *Descendants of Interethnic Marriages: Identification and Homeland Localisation. Inter-marriage throughout History* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) p. 52-53

That Legazpi's sons were the sons of Sikatuna, and that Sikatuna's sons were Legazpi's. That they can run to either of the wives when they call out *mama*. From that point on, there were no distinct bloodlines, but one common blood. Though some historians may see this as performative or unequal, these views break at the mere fact that what we see in our blood today is a mixture of Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, American blood. These are merely genetic markers used to describe the composition of a Filipino blood. It is as easy to de-colonize the Filipino of his Spanish-ness as it is to cut yourself and bleed out the Spanish portion of your blood. And even then, you will bleed out and die with the hair and skin and bones you were born with.

To actualize Philippine history in its very instance that is you, of course one must try to not understand himself as the Americans or as the Chinese do. The admittance which I described does not mean a surrender to the descriptions and conclusions of the current generation, the descendants of your oppressors (that is the mistake of the idea of decolonization) but a mere recognition and reconciliation of the generation that were. Freire advocates that in humanizing the oppressed, we must turn to humanize our oppressors. And if Gadamer is right when he says that they still live on in our recollection of them, it is to our best interest to humanize their memory.<sup>14</sup> For the ghosts of those who die in war stay in war, and when the apparition of the enemy fades, they turn their guns on their children. They have no part in this. When Legazpi and the Datu Sikatuna drank each other's blood mixed in wine, they had created—moving forward—a bloodline unique to Cebu, and later on to the Philippines as more and more Spaniard arrived across the islands. Spaniards like Legazpi, but who never stepped foot in the Philippines, and therefore never took a Filipino wife to scion a child of this bloodline, are not a part of this bloodline. And so, the same applies to the Americans, Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese of today, and thus distinguishes them from their ancestors who came here and made our blood; for they are your blood, not their descendants. An instance of a Filipino-Chinese in Filipino history is still Filipino, and not Chinese. An instance of Filipino-American in Filipino history is still Filipino, and not American. For they were not only scions of foreigners and natives, but are themselves drops of Filipino blood, instances of Filipino history actualized.

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<sup>14</sup> A humanistic application of Gadamer's hermeneutic method, beyond mere historico-textual analysis, I advocate for the internalization of events-as-individuals and their inter-historical reconciliation.

This move toward the actualization of Filipino history in the individual must begin with the confrontation—a confrontation that should start in the classroom—with the brutal, barbaric reality of world history, and the history of the Philippines as one of the many dominos that fell as a result of the world history that occurred around it. One of the things Filipinos must be educated in is history, of the world and of the Philippines itself—as it not only allows the student to become cognizant of historical continuity, causality, and the place of the Philippine history within the world, but also—as said before—to confront them with the bloody past that had allowed for the present to bloom, which will allow them to confront the far more chilling fact that this present is but a mere perception of what will one day be the bloody past of a future present yet to bloom. A student who can look beyond recent instances of injustice, oppression, and violence is a student who can realize that it needed to happen and that it has, regardless of whether he wanted it to or not. In this concept of ‘needing’ for history to happen, no moral stance on any particular event is being made.

Far too often, the attitude toward history has been to either forget or to dwell on it. to ignore history, because the present is a different place in which our actions lay separate from what is essentially ‘dead’ in tempore, or to obsess over what has happened, to vilify what had been wronged and to justify it to the present. Both have led to stagnation, as the instance of history actualized that the individual—or at least should be—blinds himself to the point of history and its most obvious fact: it having happened and it happening. And it needs to, for the present to manifest in that individual. Scholarly recollection of history is not enough to bind you to it, and yet doing so is not as hard as mere acceptance of it and therefore the acceptance of one’s role as the next thing to happen. This is not to discourage scholarly discourse on the clarity of certain events. As a matter of fact, it is to be encouraged. It clarifies not only a distant past event in Filipino history but clarifies an aspect of the living Filipino individual in which it had led up to. This division within the philosophy of history between the concept of history as occurring separately from human influence or human influence being the driving factor in its movement has blurred the line between these two factors, whereas it is most obvious that history is the individual and that the individual is history. The historian’s role, therefore, is that of hierophant: to

reveal what is most sacred to a people and a culture; those very same people and culture, as they were throughout time and as they are now.

That is why it is to be discouraged, this most dangerous tendency for Filipinos to be their own history and mythology's worst 'fan-fictionists'—to retcon aspects of past events for the sake of political justification or to accessorize and make palatable to modern sensibility. You can see how in social media, our mythological deities are perverted, their story made emblematic of current issues and how 'this is what a true Filipino would do!' How 'Yawa' was apparently a female Cebuano deity who became a demon because she disobeyed her husband, thus representing the demonization of women's liberation in a 'conservative' Filipino society. Though maintaining glimmers of truth, its appropriation to contemporary talking points makes it reek a similar odor to the fake news it stews next to. When it is fantasy, for example the contemporary TRESE series or the beloved Panday comic books, creative liberty is greatly encouraged. It does not seek to rewrite mythology and history, but to expand on the literary canon of Philippine speculative fiction. But to fabricate history and mythology to make it seem more rich, as if the sentiment that it wasn't rich enough, further fuels this disingenuousness. The most famous being the Code of Kalintaw hoax of Jose Marco or the more contemporary hoax of the diwatas Sidapa and Bulan 's queer romance. The former yearned for a vision of a Philippines with a complete, complex, and highly civilized pre-colonial society. The latter yearned for LGBT representation in our mythology.

To give the divatas and gods of the ancient Filipino era more flashy powers, more 'up to date' personalities, more 'character' than they had as mere mediators between the physical and spiritual, all in an attempt to make Filipino literature about them 'measure up' more to contemporary tastes. All in this vain hope that they would've been as cool as Greek or Norse gods and goddesses, that they could've made for cooler stories to capitalize off of. This reckless revisionism of Filipino history and mythology causes dissonance, not only in our understanding of it, but in ourselves. As we Filipino individuals are Filipino history and vice versa, any attempt to adulterate it for the sake of fashion creates delusion within us. This is not us. This is our vain attempt to mimic the West, at the cost of

our memory, at the cost of ourselves.

We can all remember and refuse to forget the events that precluded the People Power Revolution, but we will remain ‘educatedly’ ignorant of its further implications, its true influence on the present, and will continue to hold on to our patchwork attempts to reconcile with it if we do not look back on it further and wider, as not merely ‘the’ instance of Filipino history and democracy, but a result of a long chain of instances that—without the guiding hand of the myth of Geist or fate—came to be through the very Filipinos who were then the actual instances of that event, and the events before that, and the events after. In this, the student realizes the importance of his role as an actual instance of Filipino history, as an instance of Filipino itself. He looks back to see the revolutionaries, the crooks, the nuns, and the soldiers as past instances—not of himself—but of people who had to be so that he could be. He is confronted by the invulnerable reality that this history is imposed on him as a birthright, by blood. And that he imposes this very same history—whatever it may come to be, through him, through his words, through his actions—upon his scion, as per their birthright, as per their blood. World history must be taught to educate students of what is needed for the Philippines that is to become. Filipino history must be taught to awaken the student to his being Filipino.

Any honest attempt at ‘de-colonization’ must begin with the knowledge of this history—both as it is recorded and as it actively manifests in the Filipino. The appreciation of this identity and its whole-hearted acceptance of Filipino history and culture. Anything short of that is just mere fascination or tokenization of a ‘Filipino’ aesthetic for the sake of an insincere association to a culture that differentiates one from other southeast Asians. A genuine acceptance of his history, culture, and identity allows one to identify aspects and instances of our history, culture, and identity that must be preserved and protected from foreign influence and interpretation.

As discussed above, we saw how the concept of decolonization was debased through the very neoliberal institution that made its discourse possible and so, entered the public sphere not with the urgency of serious scholarship, but as something far more profitable.

*'Critique without value has no auditable place'*<sup>15</sup>, and so the semi-noble idea has been sold like pulp fiction in the free market of ideas. It has become an article of pop philosophy with as much depth as a teen magazine. You can see how this trend towards 'decolonization' is simply that, a trend. And more than that, it seeks to villainize and remove aspects of our history, culture, and identity that are—as discussed before—already a part of us. This is most evident in the hostility towards Filipino-Spanish heritage, traditions, and values, for example. This idea of 'decolonization' preaches how the culture, traditions, and values that mirror our identity more accurately than anything else are outdated and sometimes even evil, and that we must abandon them as the basis for the Filipino identity, and that the new basis for the Filipino identity must rest in a notion of the 'modern day'. The notion of 'modern day' is itself a Western influence. This failed notion that an identity of any kind can stand alone and impose itself on modernity has resulted in modernity wearing the skins of national and cultural identities all over the world—their eye holes bereft of all the life that had once animated them. It had been flayed from its substantial history, culture, tradition, and national context and 'worn' in the fashion of the now, in the fashion of the 'international', in the fashion of the faceless '*der Andere*'—the Wendigo of Nations.

The Wendigo, the skinwalker, whose greed and bloodlust had transformed him and robbed him of his humanity. The Wendigo of Nations is this 'new colonization.' As discussed before, '*der Andere*', the Wendigo of Nations, may as well be this global cosmopolitanism, this ideology without identity, without the faintest scent of humanity—where for prosperity, one's culture and heritage was forsaken, like how for his greed the Wendigo's humanity was forsaken.

'New colonization' takes the form of this invasive, predatory 'other'—*der Andere*—where for the price of national and cultural identity—for the price of you as your people—you may partake in the prosperity of nations. We are savages still to them. We must be made civilized, to do away with our culture and become cosmopolitan. Then and only then are we privy to prosperity, a prosperity that has robbed Europe of her lifeblood and seeks to do so with the rest of us 'savages.'

It cannot be stressed enough not only to accept who we are, but to remember it. And not only to remember it, but to live it. That is actualization.

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<sup>15</sup> Sammy Dhillon, *An Immanent Critique of Decolonization Discourse*, p. 253

Rizal and Laurel, despite heavily influencing the concept of Filipino actualization, came short of it in their own doctrines actions. Though Rizal was ultimately martyred, he in fact died for his vicious mockery of the friars and the colonial government. Other than that, he would not have seen the Filipino as anything but at least part-Spanish. And yet we remember the name and it remains, like heritage, for us to define further. Rizal was the first Filipino not because he had Filipino blood. He was the first Filipino because he defined ‘Filipino’ in order to define himself as ‘a Filipino’. Laurel’s pretend-collaboration during the Japanese occupation nearly cost him his place among the canon of Philippine presidents if it was not for the amnesty granted by Roxas and his subsequent canonization as “a president” by Macapagal Sr. And though he is today vindicated by the fact that he was selected for a job that was essentially forced upon him., Laurel’s administration can be seen as a microcosmic version of the macrocosm of Filipino history: by colonization we were defined by others, but through actualization— and not decolonization— have we endured to emerge to define ourselves. All we have to do is remember. Remember history, our own and that of the world around us.

In forgetting all these, this trend of decolonization has not removed—as per its promises—oppressive norms and influences but has made us more subservient to the West. Our culture and history had been degraded to nothing more than mere show-and-tell to our Western upperclassmen, in hopes of impressing them with our sanitized brand of Filipino-ness. It began with the cowardly businessmen at Aguinaldo’s cabinet who sought to sell the nation to the Americans. And it continues today. Not only in attracting foreign investors, but in that foolish tendency we as Filipinos have by seeking the approval of the West. That in emulating, catering, and selling ourselves out to Western ideology, we believe we can gain admittance to a secret club of the international intellectual elite. We no longer need those cowardly businessmen at Aguinaldo’s cabinet. Instead of actualizing history, the product has sprung to life, grew arms and legs, and began selling itself.

*“Minerva’s owl flies at dusk.”* Hegel characterizes the Goddess with her chosen bird of iconography—the owl. This bird can see through the night as a clear day, in which only one man, to this day, has had the wisdom through walking by lamplight—Diogenes. In this Hegel tells us that hindsight is not

necessarily the death of all subsequent philosophical conclusions, but rather its fate. It does not condemn it to die, but rather condemns it to a different grave. Where Minerva's owl and Diogenes see clearly in the darkness of day, we do not. It is only in the blinding light of the dying sun at dusk do we see shadows grow long behind us and look back, look back at what was only clear to the owl and Diogenes: the reality of situations only as they have passed. Colonization has happened again, and in that we must endure the light enough to see it happening again. When decolonization and its definitions began to lose its potency, however much its own fault it was as a concept, it entered into the public conscience from neo-liberal university system and begins its life anew as a word of particular interest to socially aware youths. It's a word that so self-explanatory. To hell with the nuance! This is a word that seemingly describes many of the ills of society, and along with it—rather conveniently—brings its own set of solutions. This is the point of entry for only one of the first of many attitudes and ideas of a 'new colonization.'

The true outcome of decolonization has been in the sensationalization and marketing of our culture to the Western world as a brand of Filipino to be accepted as 'diverse', 'local', 'native', 'indigenous'. We spit upon our people, abandon any hope for a future, make passive our birthright as active instances of Filipino history—but when the West turns their attention to us, it is *baro't saya* fashion runways, tinikling demonstrations in foreign universities, and all other manner of sickeningly disingenuous expressions of a culture we barely live anymore and look only to sell cheaply to tourists.

This had also led to the suppression of 'lower culture', what is not acceptable Filipino culture that can be paraded around and marketed. Like it or not, devotion to the Senyor Santo Nino, boodle fights, Precious Hearts Romances pocket books, budots remixes, rap battles between elementary school students, chikicha and cigarettes, walking around with your stomach exposed, *kalye* humor, and even getting chased by dogs down an alleyway are all more potent instances of Filipino culture than strutting around in a *baro't saya* or *barong tagalog*, as they are the effervescent everyday lived culture of the actual instances of Filipino history. Nobody but politicians, lawyers, and men at weddings wear *barong tagalogs* out in public anymore. This trend in de-colonization, though sophisticated in its academic and intellectual expression, has resulted in us "*boujeeifying*" aspects of Filipino culture to an acceptable standard for consumption, instead of engaging in this culture and living it. In trying to de-colonize Filipino, we have come to commodify it instead.

## **Watering Home: The Emotional Geography of Filipino Migration**

by Isabella Therese Calis

In the Philippines, migration is not merely a social phenomenon—it is a legacy carved into the collective memory of the nation. With over ten million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) deployed across more than 200 countries (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2021), the idea of “home” becomes both a tangible site of return and an imagined space of longing. Home, for many OFWs, is not where they physically reside, but where they continue to water their roots—through remittances, digital connections, and ritualized absence. Scholars have long argued that migration disrupts the binary of presence and absence, recasting the home as a symbolic and emotional construct maintained across borders (Parreñas, 2001; Aguilar, 2014). By examining historical roots, emotional labor, gendered experiences, and cultural rituals, this essay critically explores the experience of Filipino migrant workers as a lens through which to understand the emotional, cultural, and symbolic weight of home. It argues that migration transforms the concept of home from a fixed location into a fluid, often fractured, state of becoming—constantly shaped by distance, sacrifice, and the desire to belong.

The phenomenon of labor migration in the Philippines is deeply rooted in historical and structural forces that have shaped the nation’s economic survival strategy. As early as the 1970s, under the Marcos administration, overseas employment was institutionalized as a temporary solution to unemployment and foreign debt through the Labor Export Policy (Rodriguez, 2010). Over time, this “temporary” measure evolved into a permanent feature of national policy, with remittances now constituting a significant pillar of the Philippine economy. This institutionalization significantly altered how Filipinos envision success and their future aspirations, often placing ‘home’ beyond national boundaries.

The normalization of migration as a livelihood pathway has deeply affected how Filipinos imagine their futures—not within the territorial bounds of the nation, but beyond it. This institutionalization has cultivated a unique relationship between migrant workers and the notion

of home—one that is simultaneously fueled by economic necessity and emotional resilience. Migrants are expected to embody the role of the “modern-day hero” or *bagong bayani*, glorified not just for their labor abroad but for their sustained emotional and financial connection to families left behind (Guevarra, 2010). In this dynamic, home is no longer just a physical residence but a transnational space co-constructed through sacrifice, memory, and ongoing acts of care.

This transnational reconfiguration of home is perhaps most visible in the lives of families separated by migration, particularly among women who work as domestic helpers, caregivers, and nurses abroad. Scholars such as Rhacel Parreñas (2001) have shown how the burden of maintaining familial intimacy despite physical separation disproportionately falls on women, who must perform what she calls “emotional labor”—the act of sustaining affective bonds through long-distance mothering, virtual communication, and remittance rituals. In these families, care is outsourced and internalized across borders: while the migrant mother labors to provide financially, her absence is often compensated by performances of affection such as video calls, messages, and symbolic gestures sent home.

Yet, even as these acts attempt to water the emotional landscape of the family, they often exist alongside guilt, anxiety, and a persistent sense of incompleteness. The home, therefore, becomes a paradoxical space—at once nurtured and fractured, present in spirit but dispersed in form. In this way, the longing for home is not merely spatial, but deeply affective, shaped by the tension between provision and presence, love and loss.

Beyond the immediate emotional consequences of separation, migration also reshapes the identities of both those who leave and those who are left behind. For many OFWs, the longer the absence, the more “home” becomes an idea suspended between nostalgia and estrangement. Returning migrants often speak of feeling like outsiders in their own country—foreign to the rhythm of the lives they once inhabited, and unfamiliar with the domestic routines they had financially sustained but emotionally missed (Aguilar, 2014). Children of OFWs, meanwhile, grow up with a fragmented sense of parental presence, cultivating attachments to a home built partly through digital screens and economic support, yet marked by the absence of physical touch and guidance.

Even second-generation Filipinos born abroad may experience a hyphenated identity, feeling caught between their parents' longing for home and their own tenuous connection to a homeland they have never seen. In these layered experiences, home is not only longed for but negotiated—at once a site of memory, performance, and unresolved belonging. Migration, then, does not only displace bodies across borders; it displaces the very center of what “home” means.

Among the most enduring and tangible symbols of migrant longing is the balikbayan box—a large, often duct-taped container filled with groceries, toiletries, chocolates, clothing, toys, and gifts sent from abroad to loved ones back home. More than just a package of consumer goods, the balikbayan box is a vessel of emotional labor and a surrogate presence of the absent body. It is both practical and poetic: each item packed is chosen with care, representing not only provision but participation in the lives of those left behind. Scholars have described the balikbayan box as a “portable domesticity,” a way for OFWs to sustain intimacy and belonging across space (Tadiar, 2004). The arrival of a box is often met with anticipation and celebration—an embodied ritual that momentarily bridges the physical gap between the migrant and the home.

Yet this practice also reinforces the paradox of the migrant condition: the act of giving materializes love, but it can never fully substitute for presence. The balikbayan box waters the household from afar, but it also quietly reminds its recipients—and senders—of the emotional distances that remain unclosed.

The digitization of communication has added new dimensions to how home is performed and maintained. With platforms like Facebook, Messenger, and Viber, OFWs are now able to speak with their families daily, sharing photos, joining family events virtually, and even watching their children grow in real time. These technologies offer a semblance of proximity, but they also produce what scholars call “affective simulations”—moments that imitate presence but do not replace it (Madianou & Miller, 2012). The ritual of video calling becomes another way of watering home, where migrant parents try to insert themselves into the daily lives of their children from afar. However, this form of mediated connection may also intensify feelings of helplessness, as migrants witness needs they cannot

immediately meet or milestones they can only experience through a screen.

Moreover, the state plays an active role in shaping the emotional narrative of migration. Government campaigns celebrating OFWs as heroes mask the structural dependencies on remittances and often ignore the vulnerabilities they face abroad—such as labor exploitation, abuse, and xenophobia. This hero-making narrative transforms national economic survival into personal sacrifice, putting the burden of development on the shoulders of individual migrants. In doing so, it obscures the deeper issue: that many Filipinos leave not out of desire, but because the homeland has failed to offer a sustainable future. Migration, then, becomes both a patriotic act and a political wound—home is exalted in theory, but inaccessible in practice.

The politics of migration are also deeply gendered. Female OFWs, especially those in domestic work, navigate intersecting structures of exploitation—not only performing undervalued labor, but also bearing the emotional costs of sustaining families and homes from abroad. While their labor is often framed as maternal sacrifice, this framing can reinforce traditional gender roles that romanticize absence and normalize emotional hardship. Women who resist these roles or voice discontent may even be judged for failing to “live up” to the ideal of the selfless provider. As such, the act of “watering” home is rarely neutral—it is shaped by expectations, labor hierarchies, and unequal social scripts about who is allowed to long, to leave, and to return.

Despite these tensions, the resilience of migrant communities offers an alternative way to imagine home—not as something one loses, but as something one co-creates.

In places like Hong Kong, Dubai, and Milan, Filipino migrant organizations form surrogate families, organize cultural events, and build collective rituals that allow home to take root across oceans. These acts—often under-acknowledged—are radical in their ability to redefine belonging. Migrants do not merely survive abroad; they carry home with them, reconstructing it through community, memory, and shared dreams. In this sense, the act of watering home is reciprocal: while OFWs nourish their households from afar, they also cultivate new forms of home in foreign soil.

For children of OFWs, the legacy of migration shapes their understanding of home, identity, and love. Many grow up in what scholars call “transnational families,” learning to value affection expressed through provision and time-lagged

conversations. Some, inspired by their parents' sacrifices, develop a strong sense of responsibility and global awareness. Others, however, may struggle with emotional detachment, identity confusion, or unspoken resentment. The homes they inherit are often marked by silences—spaces of grief, longing, and strength that are rarely named but deeply felt. These silences, too, are part of the architecture of home: echoing the complexity of lives built across distance.

Cultural texts—literature, film, and music—have also reflected the multifaceted experience of Filipino migration and its emotional geographies. Films such as *Anak* (2000) and *Caregiver* (2008) capture the fractured lives of mothers abroad and the bittersweet attempts at reunion. In poetry and prose, Filipino writers have long explored the ache of departure and the strange weight of return. These narratives do more than document pain; they preserve memory, assert dignity, and reimagine home as a literary space where absence can speak. Through them, language itself becomes a vessel—another kind of *balikbayan* box—filled with the emotional remnants of separation and hope.

Even internal migration—rural-to-urban shifts within the Philippines—reveals parallel themes of dislocation and longing. Many provincial families move to Metro Manila or Cebu in search of better opportunities, only to find themselves alienated by congestion, poverty, and cultural fragmentation. In this sense, the longing for home is not solely transnational. It is also a longing for community, for familiarity, for soil that feels one's own. Whether across oceans or islands, Filipinos are constantly navigating what it means to leave in order to live.

When OFWs do return, the idea of homecoming is often complicated by years of physical and emotional distance. The return does not always bring resolution; instead, it may unearth tensions long buried—generational disconnects, personal estrangement, or shattered expectations. Homecoming is not the end of the journey, but another beginning: a re-entry into a place that may no longer feel like home, even if one has longed for it every day abroad. The migrant must again reorient themselves, not just geographically but emotionally. In such moments, home becomes a negotiation—one that continues beyond the journey back.

Diaspora networks further complicate the notion of home, transforming it into a fluid, multifaceted construct that spans continents. Through social

clubs, community organizations, and virtual forums, migrants create spaces where shared experiences and cultural practices are preserved and reinvented. These networks serve as a vital support system, providing not only material and emotional aid but also a platform for political activism and cultural exchange. In these transnational enclaves, the sense of home is collectively reimagined—a mosaic that interweaves memories of the Philippine past with the lived realities of global citizenship.

Global capitalism, too, plays a decisive role in shaping the Filipino migrant experience, as economic imperatives and market forces dictate the terms of labor and migration. The relentless pursuit of remittances is intertwined with a neoliberal agenda that valorizes mobility while obscuring the human costs of such movement. For many migrants, the pressure to continually send money home reinforces a commodified notion of love and care—one that is measured in pesos rather than presence. This economic dynamic transforms the personal into the political, where the act of watering home becomes a struggle against the erasure of local identities in the global marketplace.

Amid these multifarious challenges, the act of nurturing home remains an assertion of dignity and resistance. Whether through the painstaking preparation of a balikbayan box, the daily ritual of a video call, or participation in community events abroad, Filipino migrants continually reaffirm their connection to a homeland that is as much about memory as it is about geography. In doing so, they reclaim agency over the narrative of their own lives, challenging the dominant discourse that portrays migration solely as loss or sacrifice. Their practices illustrate that home is an evolving project—one that demands constant care, creativity, and the courage to redefine belonging.

And yet, for all its contradictions, the longing for home remains one of the most powerful emotional currents in the Filipino migrant experience. It is this longing that sustains acts of giving, calls across time zones, monthly remittances, and late-night tears. It is this longing that transforms ordinary rituals into sacred gestures—watering plants on a porch left behind, packing a box with carefully chosen items, whispering prayers toward distant shores. The Filipino migrant waters not only their household, but the dream of home itself: fragile, evolving, and always in bloom.

As the migrant narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that identity in exile is

multifaceted and layered. Many OFWs and their families live in a constant state of flux—between cultural assimilation in host countries and the preservation of Filipino traditions. This liminal space creates a hybrid identity that resists binary categorizations of “local” or “foreigner.” Instead, these identities are continuously negotiated in everyday encounters, where the longing for a singular, static home gives way to a dynamic interplay of cultural influences. Such fluidity underscores that home is not a destination, but a process of ongoing redefinition.

Political engagement among migrants has also emerged as a critical dimension of their experience. With the rise of social media and transnational activism, many Filipino migrants have mobilized to advocate for labor rights, social justice, and political reform both abroad and in the homeland. These initiatives reveal how migration, far from being a passive state of exile, can catalyze collective action. In their advocacy, migrants assert their right to belong—not only in economic terms but as active, contributing citizens who challenge policies that devalue their labor and dismantle the myth of a fixed, idealized home.

In the realm of art and cultural expression, the migrant experience has become a potent source of inspiration and critique. Contemporary Filipino writers, filmmakers, and musicians are increasingly drawing on themes of displacement, longing, and homecoming to challenge stereotypes and highlight untold stories of resilience. These creative works serve as counter-narratives to the often one-dimensional portrayal of migration, offering nuanced depictions of the joys and sorrows of living between worlds. Through art, the migrant reclaims agency over their identity, transforming personal pain into collective memory and cultural innovation.

Ultimately, the notion of home for Filipino migrants is not static—it is a living, breathing construct that evolves with each act of remembrance and reinvention. The myriad ways in which OFWs sustain ties to their homeland—through digital media, community building, political activism, and cultural expression—demonstrate that home is as much about relationality as it is about a geographical locale. This process of continuous re-creation is akin to the act of watering a cherished plant, ensuring it endures even when the landscape changes. In every act of longing and every gesture of care, the migrant asserts that home exists not solely in the physical, but in the bonds

that connect hearts across borders.

In conclusion, the Filipino experience of migration is a testament to the enduring power of home as both a physical space and an emotional sanctuary. It is a narrative woven from threads of sacrifice, resilience, and the perpetual yearning to belong. The rituals of remittance, digital communication, and the symbolic balikbayan box illustrate that while migration may fracture physical presence, it cannot sever the deep, intrinsic ties to identity and memory. Ultimately, the Filipino migrant transforms home into a dynamic project—a living tapestry continually nourished by acts of care, cultural expression, and collective resistance. Through this ongoing process, home remains a source of hope and renewal, a fertile ground where love and longing converge to create something truly enduring.

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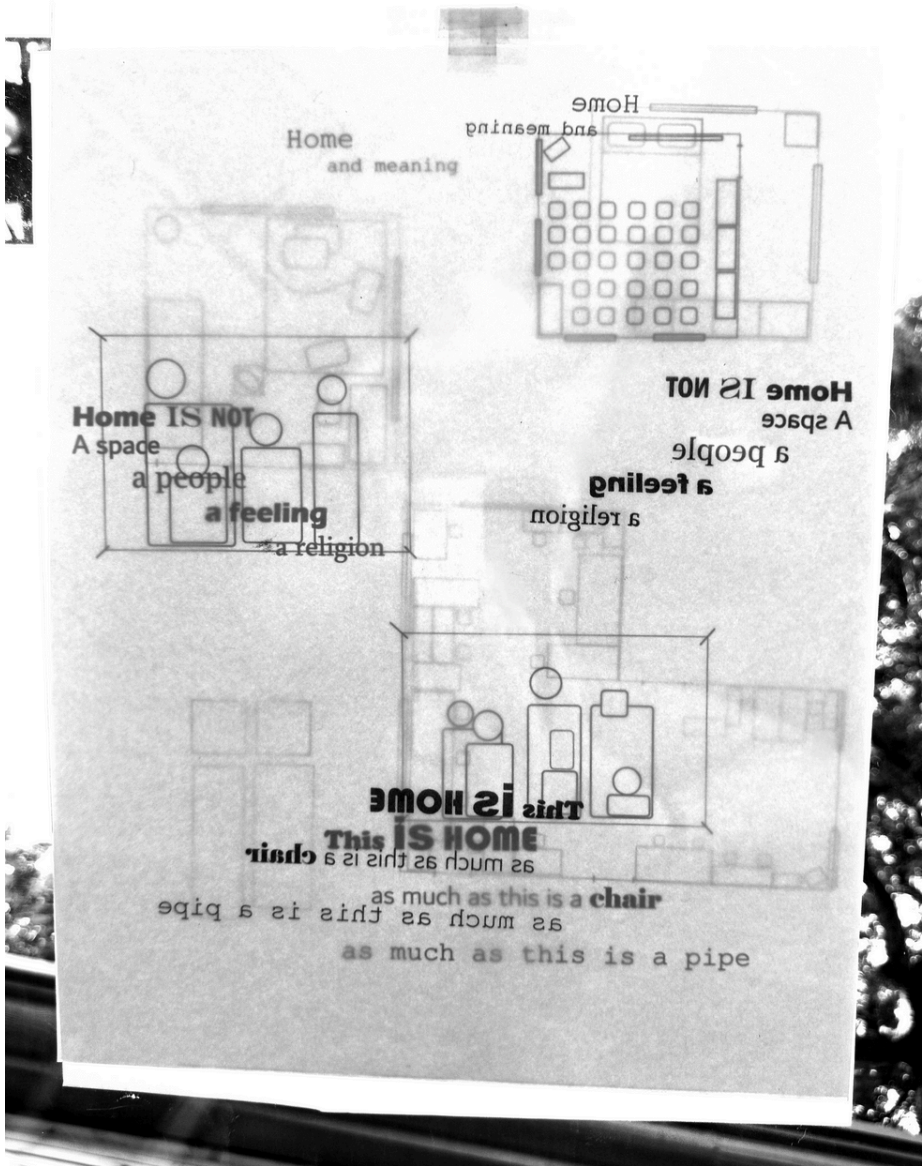
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## **Art & Comics**

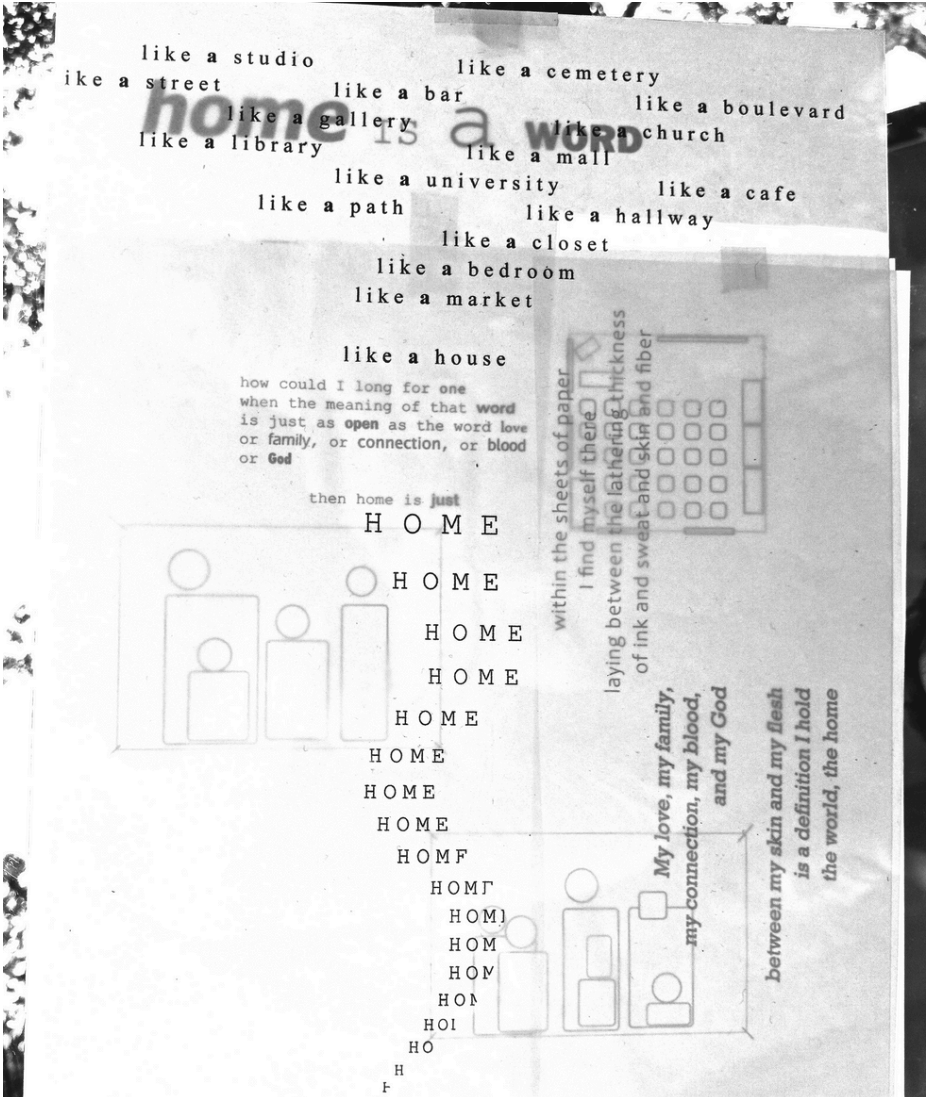
*Selected by Danielle Estoconing*

# Home and Meaning

by Czar Ian M. Vergantiños

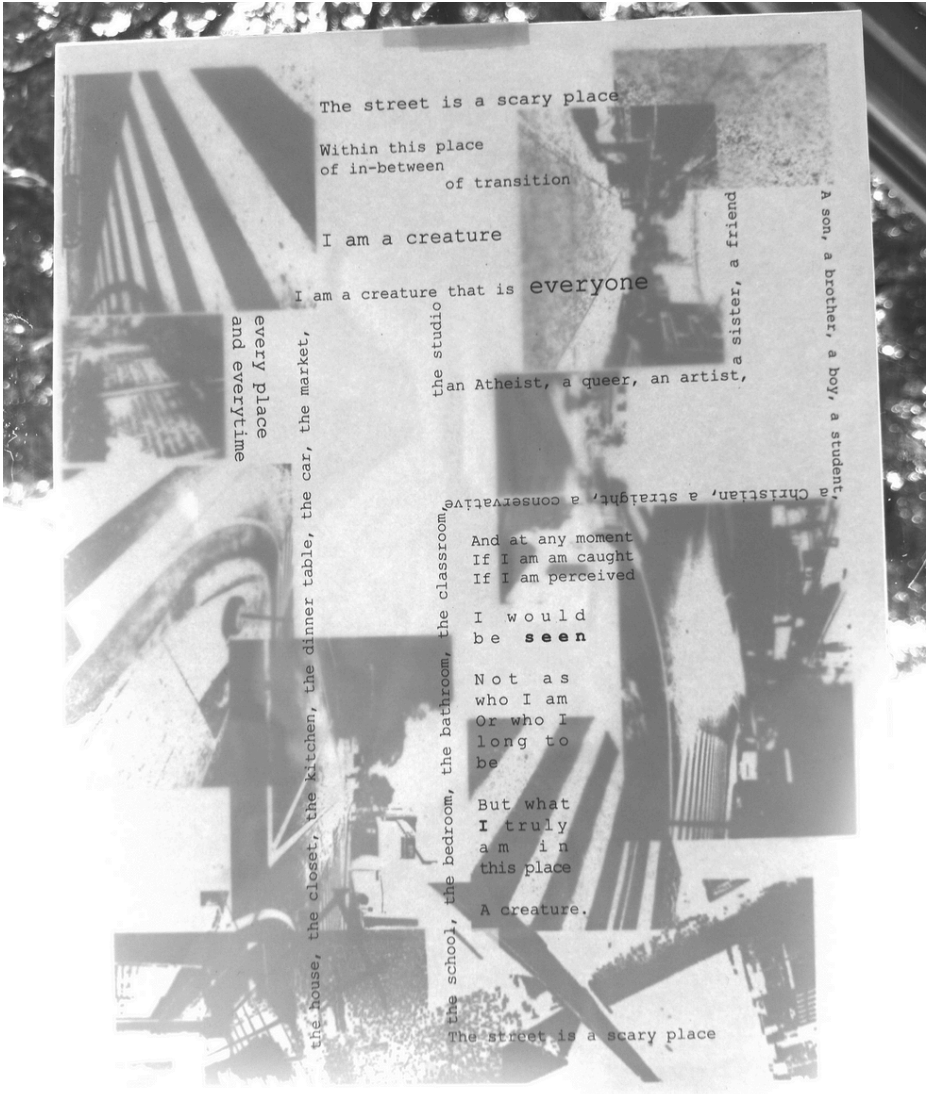


by Czar Ian M. Vergantiños



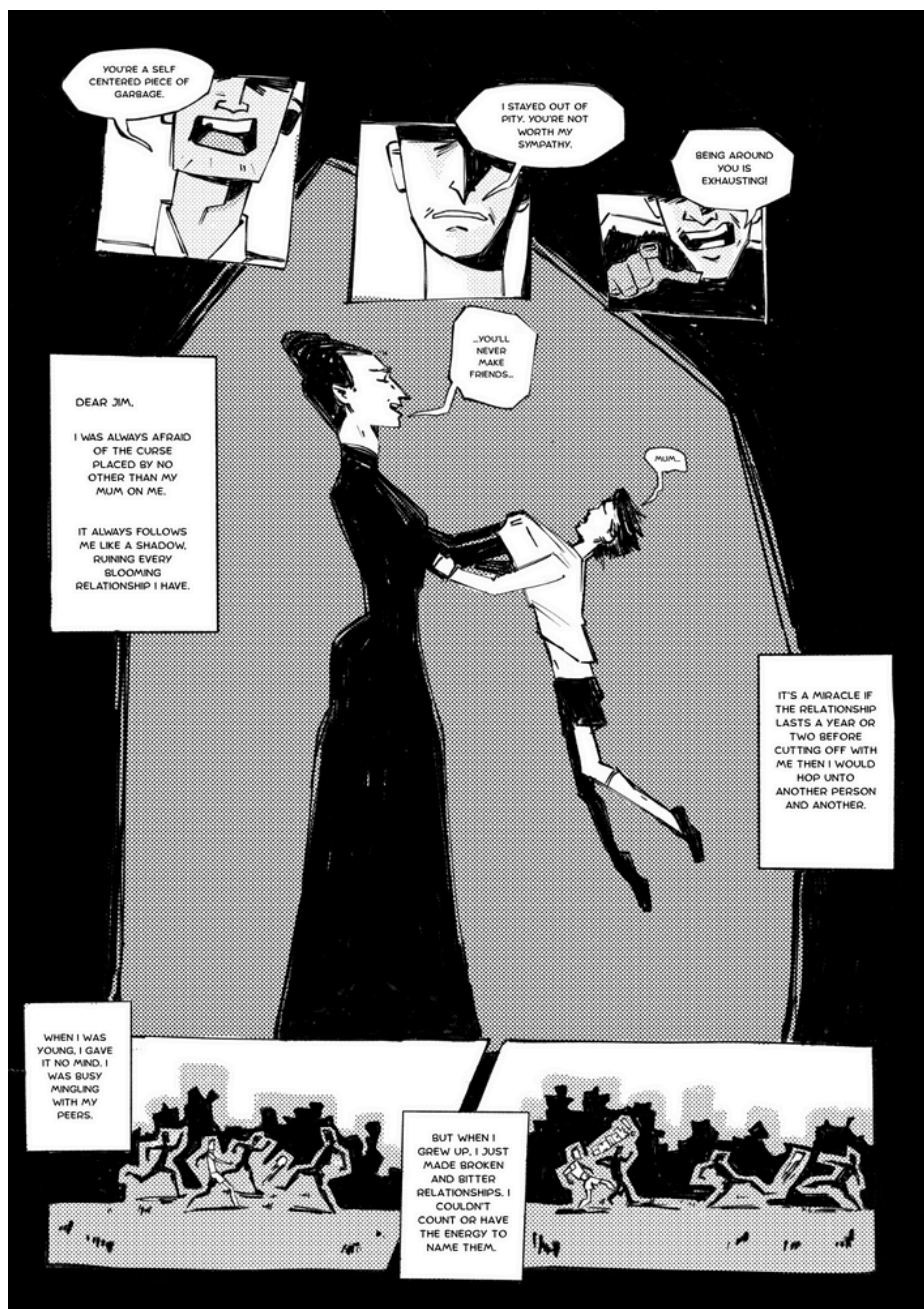
# Street

by Czar Ian M. Vergantiños



# Dear Jim (Page 1)

by Lady Danielle Estoconing



# Dear Jim (Page 2)

by Lady Danielle Estoconing



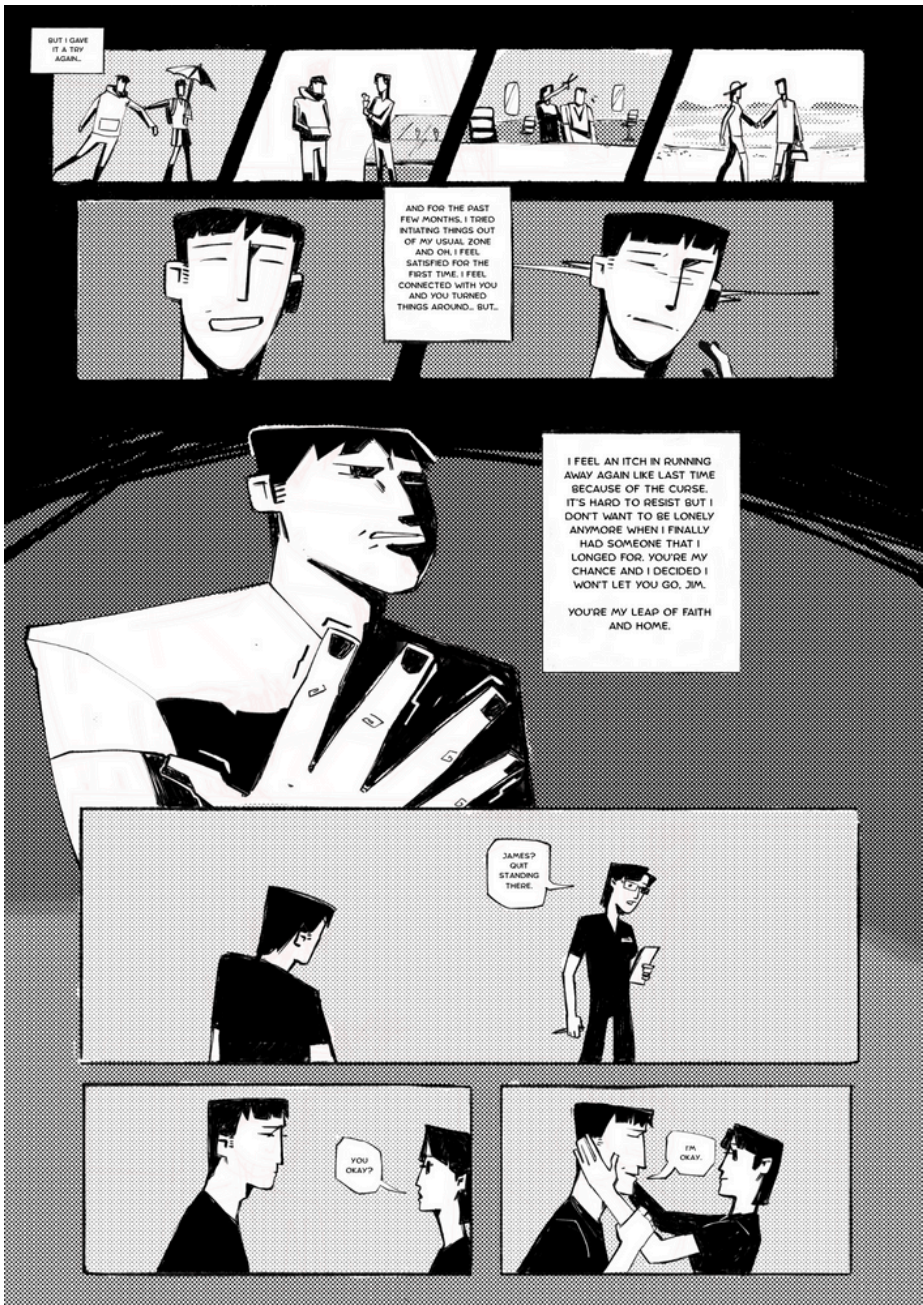
# Dear Jim (Page 3)

by Lady Danielle Estoconing



# Dear Jim (Page 4)

by Lady Danielle Estoconing



# **The Editorial Board**

**Bless John Esteriaga** is an aspiring writer-editor based in Siquijor Province, currently in his first year in graduate school at Silliman University. During his undergrad he served as the Editor-in-Chief of The College Voice, La Carlota City College's official school publication, for three years. After getting a bachelor's degree in English Language Studies, he volunteered as an intern at Rappler's civic engagement arm, MovePH. In his leisure time, he likes to read and write, and on rare occasions, sketch. Bless John is the Editor-in Chief of Sands and Coral for the 2025 issue, and he also serves as an executive member of Akbay La Carlota - Youth, a youth-led, non-political, non-profit organization in La Carlota City.

**Jude Wilter Trinidad Domen** is a wordsmith and an occasional pianist, currently a freshman Accountancy student. He serves as the Vice Chair of the Silliman University Student Government Marketing Committee and the Managing Editor of the Sands and Coral. Born in Guihulngan, Negros Oriental, he considers Dumaguete his adopted hometown, splitting his time between the two. In his free time, he enjoys playing Minecraft, the piano, swimming, or reading a book by an open window, with Vampire Weekend and rock music often on loop. He used to frolic around Silliman campus, now he is commonly found in his apartment taking a nap. His works have been published in the Sillimanian Magazine and previous issues of the Sands and Coral.

**Jecho Adrian G. Ponce** started his writing journey at 15 years old through poems and short stories, which garnered him multiple awards in his school programs and competitions in Dipolog City. He joined local spoken poetry and music art collective DIPAG INK (2020) where he became a regular spoken word poetry artist and performer, performing original poetry pieces and hosting for many of their art events. Because of this, he was able to represent DIPAG INK in several creative events headed by the local Dipolog City Tourism Office and other government organizations such as "Spoken & Sung: a night of original poetry and music" (2023). Soon, he brought his writing to Dumaguete and joined the Silliman Writers' Bloc (2023) and is currently functioning as their point person for Poetry. His spoken word poetry performances were honed through the guidance of the organization's writing community and advisers. Jecho then conjoined his literary interest with his interest in theatrical arts. After having joined Artista Sillimaniana (2023), he was exposed to theatrical writing through acting in several senior plays: "Vigil" (2023), #14 Leandro Road (2024), and "Una't Huling Gabi sa Ramona Disco (2025)." His skills for writing and acting was further realized when he joined the Bahandi Collective (2023), a group of artists based on Dumaguete, and became the head writer of their launching event for their "Closer To Nature" art exhibit and original performance of "Haliya" (2024), founded and directed by Anya Icao. "Haliya" was Jecho's first staged experimental play, using the language of poetry as the primary mode of narration to move the story. He now embarks on a journey to mature his writing as well as to give back to the community, by starting a service of writing custom on-the-spot poems to the public using his typewriter. He has written many personalized poems in Valencia grounds as well as in the Silliman campus. He is also the Poetry editor for the 2025 edition of Sands and Coral, where he once submitted an entry the year prior.

**Rhenelyn Panyathip Chanthavysouk** is a grade 12 Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMSS) from Cebu, arriving on the shores of Dumaguete to fulfill her lifelong dream of studying in Silliman University. She has a passion for anything literature, and has been writing from an early age about anything and everything, from sweet poems about love to experimental pieces that challenge literary boundaries.

**Josham M. Hamid** is a first-year AB Political Science student at Silliman University, a member of the university's Writer's Bloc, and the Creative Nonfiction Editor of the Sands and Coral. Originally from Zamboanga Sibugay, she developed her passion for writing through campus journalism, while also enjoying the lively setting of hosting events. Ironically, one of her greatest principles is to protect her peace and privacy. Although she prefers the comfort of small circles, Josham knows when to speak up. Hence, her favorite genre is creative nonfiction, as it beautifully balances the honesty of personal stories with the freedom to craft them in compelling narratives that allows them to be resonant and collectively understood. Back home, she didn't just write but also learned to guide young writers, organize journalism workshops, and lead as an Editor-in-Chief of FLAMBEAU– their English Publication in high school. Now in Dumaguete, a new city she's learning to call home, Josham looks forward to growing as both an editor and a storyteller.

**Isabella Therese B. Calis** is a student editor based in Dumaguete City. She is a senior high school student under the Humanities and Social Sciences strand at Silliman University. She currently serves as Associate Editor of The Teal Chronicles, Academic Essays Editor for Sands and Coral 2025, and Department Editor for Portal Yearbook. She previously served as Editor-in-Chief of her junior high school publication and President of the journalism club. In 2024, she placed third in the Regional Schools Press Conference (RSPC) for English Feature Writing and received an Honorable Mention in the Trust for Sustainable Living International Essay Competition. Her academic work explores the intersections of migration, cultural memory, and identity, with a focus on telling stories rooted in lived experience and social reflection.

**Lady Danielle Estoconing** was born and raised in Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental. From a young age, she was already known for her passion for visual arts, which was supported by her eldest sister, Lady Dawn Estoconing. She grew up with a community that enjoyed creating stories for fun and it influenced her into pursuing a career as a comic author. She took the Junior High Curriculum in Negros Oriental High school that specializes in arts, specifically in visual arts. She graduated with awards and recognition as the representative in her field, guided by her mentor for 4 years, Sir Romeo Montano. Currently, she is working with the Sands & Coral which is her first official debut as comic illustrator and author.

**Jose Manuel I. Lasig** AKA “Jim” is a 4th year Studio Art student under the College of Performing and Visual Arts who is working towards being in the marketing and

advertising field post graduation. Originally a digital artist at first, he has branched out over the years to specialize in graphic design, miniatures, painting, and other mixed media forms. He also specializes in new media artforms blending digital and physical materials and subjects which has been the source of inspiration for his present choice of aesthetics and imagery in his work.

**Gloria Gem "GG" T. Lumayag**, originally from Sibulan, Negros Oriental, is the layout artist for Sands and Coral 2025. They are an intern pastor currently pursuing a Master of Divinity degree while working as a freelance graphic designer and creative professional. A member of the Silliman University community since 2014, they began their academic journey with a degree in Mass Communication and served as layout artist (2015–2017) and graphic artist (2017–2018) for *The Weekly Sillimanian*. Their interests include photography, writing, literature, culinary appreciation, and exploring the intersections of creativity, communication, and ministry.

# **The Contributors**

**Issachar Bacang** is an essayist and philosopher based in Dumaguete City. Five of his poems have been anthologized in the 2024 issue of *Sands and Corals: Between the Blues*. He served as a lecturer at Foundation University. He is currently a graduate student and a research fellow at the Silliman University Department of Philosophy, focusing on phenomenology, philosophy of technology, and philosophy of history.

**Ysha Louise Danielle A. Bayotas** is a second-year student studying BS Psychology. She was born in Butuan City, Agusan del Norte, where she lived for most of her childhood. Her younger years were mostly spent at home playing make-believe, watching cartoons and reading. She spent the latter part of her childhood taking part in various hobbies such as writing, drawing, playing the guitar and singing. She eventually graduated senior high school in Ateneo de Davao University under the HUMSS track in 2023. Currently, she is a member of the service fraternity and sorority Alpha Phi Omega, and has organized and participated in different community services with the organization. Aside from this, she is the senior editor for the Psychology Society's podcast UnPSYCHika. She continues to write Fiction and Poetry as a hobby alongside her other interests.

**Maria Mirjana Calunod** is a licensed physical therapist who earned her Bachelor's degree in Physical Therapy from Silliman University. She has a keen interest in the arts, particularly poetry and figurative language. In addition to her admiration for the creative disciplines, Mirjana is subtly drawn to sci-fi astronomy, physics, and the detective fiction genre. She also holds a special regard for stop-motion and animated films, as well as chess. Mirjana believes in the magic of dreams and soulful craftsmanship, while constantly prompting questions about the mysteries of the universe.

**Kaith Etcuban** is a senior psychology student at Silliman University trying to reclaim her passion for writing (non-academic pieces). Born and raised in Cebu City, she only recently moved to Dumaguete for college, making the topic of home both familiar and personal. Her suite in this issue is a journal of her journey in recent years. It explores the themes of losing a home, yearning for what was, healing, and belonging. She writes to reminisce about her life, both the good and the bad, and to make sense of the spaces she left behind. This is her attempt to turn her pain into something she can fondly look back on.

**Patricia Nicole "Tricia" P. Gajo** is a graduating student of Marine Biology at the Institute of Environmental and Marine Sciences, where she enjoys laboratory work and the learning process. Writing is a hobby she is passionate about, though she has not published any of her work yet as she prefers to keep her pieces private for now. Tricia often gets lost in her imagination but finds comfort in writing when time allows it. Balancing her studies and her love for writing, she values vulnerability and perspective in her work. While still learning the ropes of writing, she hopes to continue growing as a student, researcher, and writer.

**Samuel Jr. Lagulao** is a third-year Creative Writing student at Silliman University, where he studies poetry and prose. His creative sensibilities are shaped by the mentorship of professors such as Angela Fabunan, Ian Casocot, both Palanca Award winners, and Dr. Lady Flor Partosa-Koenig, Chairperson of the English and Literature Department. To Samuel, these individuals represent not just excellence, but the reason he continues to write at all. He often recalls: “[...]home is a place, but not just a place, it is a place of comfort where... loved ones are,” (Fabunan); “life is fundamentally sad... but it’s what makes the happy moments really happy,” (Casocot); “you don’t have to escape from it; deal with it instead,” (Partosa-Koenig). These are not just words he admires, but these are also the foundations of the writer he is becoming.

**Beatrice Manalili** is a first-year BS Psychology student in Silliman University with a passion for writing and literature. She grew up in Dumaguete City and has been going to Silliman her whole academic life. She enjoys writing about family, love, complex emotions, and sacrifice.

**Maria Alexandra Victoria Mejos**, nicknamed Alex, is a twelfth grade Humanities and Social Sciences student from Silliman University Senior High School. Although not an avid writer, her inner thoughts spill out in the form of words when it can be contained no longer. Passionate about humanitarian causes, music, and reading nonfiction, Alex plans on pursuing a career in law in the future, along with growing her own backyard vegetable garden.

**Bianca Ysabel T. Muñoz** is a twelfth grade Humanities and Social Sciences student from Silliman University Senior High School. She is passionate about development and volunteerism, with particular interests in the justice system. Bianca hopes to pursue a career in law and dreams to serve the people. She is also involved in youth-led initiatives and committees that strive to advocate for causes.

**Meiji Quan** is a graduating Grade 12 HUMSS student from Silliman University Senior High School.

**Asherah Rojo** was born in Dumaguete City, Negros Oriental. A first-year student of Silliman University taking up Bachelor of Science in Accountancy, she began her writing career during the pandemic after being introduced to Fyodor Dostoevsky, a 19th-century Russian novelist. Since she was little, the young author knew that her heart belonged to the creative arts. But as she grew up, she carried a multitude of experiences that made her stray further from her childhood dreams. Despite this, she believes that every individual has a calling. Hers was to create worlds and bring them to life. Her first short story entitled, “The Strange Man and His Mirror”, opened a gateway for her into creative writing, becoming enamored with the creation of a fictional world. As an author, she hopes to write stories of characters with real, internal conflicts that reflect the nuances of social relationships and as well as the battle between ambitions and the practical constraints of average life. She hopes to inspire those who struggle to find their own unique identities.

**Wilson J. Siason** is a fourth-year Bachelor of Secondary Education student majoring in English at Silliman University. From 2022 to 2025, he has been an active member of the English Club of the College of Education – Silliman (ECCOES). As a pre-service teacher, he has taught 21st Century Literature from the Philippines and the World at Silliman University Senior High School and Creative Nonfiction to Grade 11 students at Dumaguete City National High School (DCNHS).

**Arabella L. Torres**, a writer from Tanjay City, Negros Oriental, is a 20-year-old third-year Bachelor of Science in Accountancy student at Silliman University. She is fond of making poems and short stories centered around the romance genre. In 2023, she bagged first place in UAPSA-SU's Poetry Contest with her piece, "To Deny is To Love". Outside of writing, her hobbies include reading, playing video games, and occasionally playing the violin when her time and course permit it.

**Nicole Uy**, currently enrolled as a Grade 12 student at Silliman University Senior High School, actively pursues her love for writing while being under the Science, Technology, Engineering, Agriculture, and Mathematics strand. Nicole has been an avid writer since childhood, entering her first contest at 10 years old as a News Writer. Since then, she has bagged multiple awards from journalism press conferences and school-based competitions alike. Her first international achievement was being included in the list of authors of "Broadening Our Horizons: Gandhi Goes to School" alongside her team at ShareLoveFund, a youth and women empowerment non-profit organization.

**Khalil Gay Deciar Ventula** is a eleventh grade Humanities and Social Sciences student from Silliman University Senior High School. She was born in Dumaguete City. She is from Cangmating, Sibulan, the first child among three siblings. She is a consistent honor student during her elementary years at Arjune Learning Center and junior high school years at Sibulan Science High School. She is planning to pursue Bachelors of Science in Psychology.

**Czar Ian M. Vergantiños** is a student artist in his third year of Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art and the current head of the Fine Arts Department Student Organization. He is a visual artist exploring video, sound, games, zines, and text as a medium of expression and creativity to challenge the expectations within spaces, meaning, and identities.

**Mary Jucilou Ann P. Verzano** is a first-year student taking up Accountancy at Silliman University who has recently returned to writing after a long hiatus. She considers writing as her form of quiet therapy—a way to name the emotions she often leaves unspoken. A cinephile at heart, she finds comfort in watching movies and television shows, listening to film scores, and the emotional intricacies of storytelling in various forms of media, especially through her current obsession with C-Dramas. More of a reader than a writer, she often gravitates toward stories filled with yearning, tragedy, and introspection.

**Carla Adeline Via** is currently a Creative Writing student at Silliman University, specializing in fiction. She grew up as a literature enthusiast and began her writing journey as a campus journalist. At the advent of her fiction-writing years, she looked up to YA author Marie Lu as a huge inspiration. As an adult, she worked as a freelance ghostwriter for a few years and eventually lost her personal writing style as a result. Carla is now on the path to rediscovering her own voice by immersing herself in the literary scene in Dumaguete and mingling with her fellow writers and enthusiasts. Beyond writing, she is a lover of all things media: video games, movies, TV series, and comics.