

GREETINGS FROM SACRED MOUNTAIN

translation of “Pangangamusta mula sa Balaan Bukid”

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About the Author

Genevieve L. Asenjo, author of six books, writes in three major Philippine languages: Kinaray-a, Hiligaynon, and Filipino. Her first novel *Lumbay ng Dila* (C&E/DLSU, 2010) won the Juan C. Laya Prize in the National Book Award. Her latest book is a poetry collection, *Sa Gihapon, Palangga, ang Uran/Always, Beloved, the Rain* (Ateneo de Naga University Press, 2014). She teaches literature and creative writing at De La Salle University, Manila. She was a Writing Fellow in the International Writing Program (IWP) of the University of Iowa in 2012.

About the Translator

Michelle Tiu Tan took up her MA in Creative Writing (Prose) at the University of East Anglia, where she was awarded the Southeast Asian Bursary and a Dissertation Distinction. She has been published in the *Philippines Graphic* and *Philippines Free Press*. Her short story “Her Afternoon Lives” won Second Place in the 2012 Nick Joaquin Literary Awards.

**BEYOND MEANING: TRANSLATION AS NEGOTIATION OF SPACE, VOICE,
AND LANGUAGE**

Michelle Tiu Tan

Space is necessarily involved in any act of reading, writing, communication and art in general. Author, text, reader: the gaps between them can only be negotiated through processes of creation like writing and reading, which is nothing less than the creation of meaning.

Translation adds another layer. The space between the original and translated texts—or between the two voices: author and translator—creates an additional gap that must also be negotiated in reading, whether consciously or unconsciously. In the middle is the translator, who must at the same time be both reader and writer, not just drawing meaning from the text but also creating in the most concrete way possible: by putting meaning into words.

This constant engagement with space, with language, expands rather than limits the role of the translator. Word choice, verb tense, tone, register—the choices are myriad, and the decision to adopt one turn of phrase and discard another is never completely direct and simple. “Greetings from Sacred Mountain,” my first translation, presented me with challenges I had never before considered in my own writing.

But it is precisely these challenges which drew me to the project. Like any other language, Filipino of course has its own cadences and rhythms of thought, and it is the translation of these qualities, in addition to meaning, which particularly interested me. The prospect of realizing this transformation excited me, as it recalled my experience of reading authors such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Jose Saramago, whose works have been so ably translated that they sound like no other English I have encountered.

In translating this story, I grappled with these specific issues: How much reinvention is allowed when handling the work of another? Should I reorganize sentences to make them sound more natural or retain the original rhythm, no matter how awkward in English?

No single rule applies to all cases, but in translating Gen’s stories I often leaned toward the latter. It doesn’t always make for smooth reading, but I believe the point is not to make the text seem like it was written originally in English, but to make it more accessible even while leaving traces of the original language, reminders of the text’s otherness.

But how much obscurity is allowed, and at what point does it become too much? This I am unable to answer—and I suspect will never be able to answer—except by saying that I mostly rely on instinct. It is during these moments, perhaps, that translation is most like writing: simple only when dictated by instinct.

So it is with the creative processes. Rather than advancing progress, excessive deliberation often only either impedes artistic thought or, at the very least, clouds judgment. This reliance on instinct is perhaps also why translators cannot help but lend their voices to the text—in addition to and in spite of the author's voice—because ultimately translation is not just an act of navigation and negotiation, but also one that involves the creation of the new.

At least, this is what I had aimed to accomplish with “Greetings from Sacred Mountain.” It is my hope that the form I have given the text—and the voice I lent it—will help enrich the reader's experience, and simultaneously add to and complement the original.

**TRANSLATION AS SPACE OF ACTIVE LISTENING: ON MICHELLE TIU TAN'S
TRANSLATION TO ENGLISH OF MY SHORT STORY "PANGANGAMUSTA MULA SA
BALAAN BUKID" ("GREETINGS FROM SACRED MOUNTAIN")**

Genevieve L. Asenjo

The first draft of "Pangangamusta mula sa Balaan Bukid" came during my 6-month writing residency in Seoul last 2009. I had also the opportunity to participate as reactor in a translation forum at Jeju Island with the French poet, critic, and translator Claude Mouchard as main speaker. In his paper "So Many Passages Remain Hidden! Poetry in Time of Globalization," he revealed that his encounter with Korean literature in English translation moved him to translate Korean poetry into French, with the help of a Korean friend through Skype. Translation served as his window to the world of contrapuntal: the Korean War resonated with his childhood memory of World War II. He referred to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* to highlight the new grounds and possibilities that diaspora offers for/in translation, but forewarned. He cited the Korean poet Ki Hyung-do whose works evoke, similar to that of Japanese master Yasunari Kawabata, that the individual is a tragic character against the many laws of the world, and that "nobody is there."

In Mouchard's journey as translator, I saw translation as a becoming. It is a performance space for forging identities that yields tensions and contestations. I reacted that in its long and bloody travels, it should have the presence of tenderness.

Now, in Michelle Tiu Tan's translation of my short story from Filipino to English, I would like to believe that what she considers as "constant engagement with space" is her active listening. She paid attention to the domestic intimacies of the sounds of my words. The particular linguistic properties of my Filipino, in its shared aural imagery and lyricism with her Tagalog, side by side with the peculiarities of my Visayan syntax and vocabulary, among other "text's otherness," proved to be source of accord: our mutual satisfaction that we now offer to the readers.

I would like to think that what she refers as "instinct" is her act of tenderness: that decision to retain the voice of the original while making it accessible in another language characterized by the fluidity and succinctness of her own prose. Again, as attention to a different cadence, temperament, and set of tendencies, translation is thus an expansion of our understanding, and I hope, appreciation, of our multilingual identity and rich tradition of verbal arts attempted here through narrative design and framing of movement in "time and space."

Her attention and active listening added her own voice in this story, the “creation of the new.” We became the “somebody” for each other. Here, the Visayan *komposo* becomes the Tagalog *kundiman*, which could also be the Korean *arirang*, and the Arabic’s ballad. Translation encircles us in the community of readers and listeners, and it pleases me to think that it saves us from solipsism and parochialism.

PANGANGAMUSTA MULA SA BALAAAN BUKID**I.**

May ilang kwento tungkol sa kanila. Kung gayon, may ilan ding katanungan. Tulad na lang halimbawa ng “May alaala ba ang ibon?”

Simulan natin sa nakaraan.

Umaga ‘yun ng Linggo. Agosto. Sa Hyewa sa Seoul. Narito ang simbahang Katoliko na pinagmimisahan ng kapariang Pinoy. Narito ang Woori Bank. Bukas ito, espesyal para sa mga manggagawang Pinoy, na tuwing Linggo lamang nakakadalaw sa Seoul, sakay ng bus o subway, mula sa mga kompanya at pabrika sa iba’t ibang syudad ng SOKOR.

Lumalakad s’ya, ang ating bida—tawagin nating si Mark—sa daan sa gilid ng kalsada sa labas ng simbahan. Katatapos lang ng misa sa Tagalog. Nadadaan n’ya ang namumukadkad na mga bulaklak, nakakasalubong ang sari-saring mukha at boses, at nangungulila ang kanyang lalamunan sa paghigop ng mainit na sabaw ng sinigang na baboy sa timplang Ilonggo.

Papunta s’ya sa Woori Bank sa unahan sa kabila ng kalsada. Magpapadala s’ya ng 20,000.00 *won* sa Brgy. Mat-y, Miag-ao, Iloilo, Philippines. Mga 10,000.00 ang katumbas nito sa pesos. Pangrebyu ito sa civil service exam ng kanyang nakakabatang kapatid na babae. S’ya man ay nakatapos din ng kolehiyo: BS Marine sa isang kilalang unibersidad sa Iloilo. “*Te*, “*To*, nakasakay ka na?” Ito ang madalas na tanong noon sa kanya. Natutunan n’yang sumagot, “Heto, nakababa na nga,” sabay tawa.

Natatawa rin s’ya ngayon. May anghang ng sinamak at pakla ng hilaw na saging. “Crashing of paper” ang job description sa kanyang kontrata. Parang ganuon na nga ang pamumutol n’ya ng mga binding ng libro sa loob ng dalawang taon at anim na buwan sa isang maliit na kompanya na nagre-recycle ng papel sa Dunglecheon. Isang oras sakay ng subway ang layo nito sa Seoul. Dito kumakampo ang halos lahat ng mahihirap na lahi, lalo na at bagong salta: Filipino, Pakistani, Nepalese, African, Vietnamese, Indonesian. Dito rin ang ilang malalaking kampo-militar ng Amerika.

44 oras ang kailangan n’yang makumpleto sa isang linggo. Kasama na rito ang Sabado. Ito ang batas. Dahil kulang sa 20 silang trabahador. Kung 20 at higit pa, 40 oras lang. 10 minutos ang kanilang break kada oras, maliban lamang tuwing alas onse at alas kuwatro—mga oras ng pagkain.

Kumalam ang kanyang tiyan sa pag-isip ng pagkain at sa muling pagkayab nitong kanyang swerte, kasingliwanag ng langit nitong umaga ng tag-araw sa Korea. Napaigtad s'ya, sabay hikab, habang sinisiksik ang mga hakbang sa daan na ito sa gilid ng kalsada.

Sa gitna nitong simbahang-Katoliko at bangkong-Koreano, narito ang kilala sa tawag na *Filipino Market*. Sumusulpot ito tuwing Linggo ng umaga at nawawala bago pa magtanghali. Hilera ito ng mga prutas, sariwang isda tulad ng tilapia at bangus, bagoong at patis, balut, magazine at kung anu-ano pang galing sa Pilipinas sa doble o triple na presyo. Dito ka makakakain ng turon, bihon, pancit, dinuguan, adobo. Gusto mong tumawag sa Pilipinas? Narito rin ang lahat ng uri ng promo.

Ilang linggo na s'yang hindi makatulog. Bago matapos ang kanyang kontrata, kailangang makapagdesisyon na s'ya. Ano ba ang mas mabuti at saan s'ya mas magiging masaya? Ang umuwi at mamahinga sa kanilang baryo o ang magpatuloy sa pakikipagsapalaran dito sa Korea sa pamamagitan ng paglipat ng trabaho? Kung uuwi s'ya, pwede siyang mag-poultry. Kung lilipat s'ya, ngayon pa lang, kailangan na n'yang makakita ng bago. Isa ito sa kanyang napag-alaman dito sa Hyewa. Sa 2nd floor ng Woori Bank ang opisina ng FEWA (Filipino EPS Workers Association). Dadalaw s'ya rito para sa bagong balita.

Nagugutom na talaga s'ya. Ang sarap na talagang humigop ng mainit na sabaw. Kahit ano basta pagkaing Pinoy! 'Yun at nadakip ng kanyang mga mata ang isang sipi ng saging na rikondal. Malulusog at kumikinang na dilaw, nag-aanyaya ng pagtigil sa talipapa.

Humuhugot na s'ya sa pitaka ng bulsa ng pantalon nang may mga kamay na bumuhat sa isang sipi nitong saging na rikondal. Isang dalaga.

At dito nagsisimula ang ilang kuwento tungkol sa kanila.

Hindi sila naghilahan. Malamlam ang kinang ng malalalim na mga mata ng dalaga. Naalala ni Mark ang mga museo ng Korea na kanyang napuntahan. Hindi rin sila nagsagutan. Sa halip, natawa ang dalaga, na parang naaaliw, habang nakatingin sa kanya: sa pagtatagpo nitong kanilang gutom sa saging. Sinundan ito ng kilometro ng salita na parang lupok ng kanyon sa pandinig ni Mark. Nakilala n'ya itong Arabic nang nagpakilala na ang dalaga na isang Palestino.

Sa pagpapatuloy nitong kuwento tungkol sa kanilang unang engkuwentro, masasabi na ang tawa na 'yun ng dalaga, tawagin natin sa pangalang Fatima, ang matamis na bagay na nagtulak kay Mark para masabi n'ya sa sarili na, "Sige na nga, sa kanya na ang saging, tatal, akalain mo ba naman, gusto rin pala ng mga Arabo

itong saging.” Kaya mula sa talipapa ng saging, magkasama na silang tumawid ng kalsada papunta sa Woori Bank. Natural na pumasok sa bangko ‘tong ating bida, dahil ‘yun ang kanyang balak, at masasabi nating isang responsableng tao si Mark.

Ngunit bago nito, masasabi rin nating nagkapalitan na sila ni Fatima ng numero ng cellphone. Kung gaano ito katotoo, ‘tong kidlat ng sigla na lumatay sa kanilang pagitan, sa pinakapayak na Ingles na naglubid sa kanila, hindi para sa akin ang paghusga. Dahil lubos kong pinaniniwalaan na nangyari ang hapong ‘yun, sa mismong araw ng Linggo: ang pagsilbi ni Fatima ng tasa ng jasmine tea na may honey (kayo na ang bahala sa kung ano ang pinakamabuting pagbigkas nito) kay Mark, na sa araw na ito, sa ngayon, minumulto ng tawa ni Fatima at ng bango at lasa ng jasmine tea na ‘yun na may honey, sa isang Arabong restawran sa Itaewon.

Kung paano ko ito nalaman, ‘tong ilang kwento tungkol sa kanila, ikukwento ko sa inyo kung ipagtimpla n’yo ako ng tsaang saging. Maniwala kayo: magkasama kami ni Mark sa container van na ‘yon.

II.

Sige na, magpatuloy tayo; mas interesante ‘tong kuwento nila kaysa akin.

Upang lalo nating maintindihan ang ilang kwento sa pagitan nina Mark at Fatima, na pagpapatuloy din ng ilang kwento sa pagitan ng babae at lalaki, gayundin ng mga lahi at bansa, patuloy tayo sa araw na ito—ngayon—na araw din ng Linggo.

Sa bahaging ito, nakikita natin si Mark na humahawan ng mga dahon ng tigbaw na humaharang sa kanyang daanan. Sumasabay ito sa lagpok ng kanyang rubber shoes, sumusunod sa kanyang paningin na dumidiretso sa malayo, sa puno ng duhat sa itaas ng burol. Tanghaling-tapat ngayon. Kulay kahel ang paligid. Ngunit sa isipan ni Mark, kumikinang na sariwa at yabong itong mga dahon ng duhat, sa itaas nitong burol, at nais n’yang magpahinga rito.

Dahil araw ng pamamahinga ang Linggo at napapagod na s’yang maging tao. Nahilo s’ya sa ebanghelyo sa misa kanina tungkol sa leksyon ng kahoy na higera sa Mateo 24, bersikulo 32–35 na nagsasabing:

Pag-aralan ninyo ang leksyon sa kahoy na higera. Kung ang kanyang mga sanga ay nalulumbay na, malalaman ninyo na malapit na lang ang tag-araw. Sa ganuon ring bagay, kung nakikita ninyo na nangyayari na ang mga bagay na ito, malalaman ninyo na malapit na ang oras, paparating na. Alalahanin ninyo ito! Magaganap ito lahat habang hindi

pa nangamatay ang mga tao. Magugunaw ang langit at lupa, ngunit ang aking salita ay mananatili.”

Para s’yang lumilipad, sakay sa paklang ng niyog na nakawilihan n’ya noong bata sa burol na ito, ngunit ngayon, hindi na padausdos ngunit paakyat. Dahil narito s’ya, muli, sa kanilang baryo pagkatapos ng tatlong taon. Narito na nga s’ya. Dito mismo sa burol na ito sa likod ng kanilang bahay.

Nakapagdesisyon nga s’ya sa tulong ni Fatima. Tulad lang na naging damit n’ya, naging pangalawang balat ang salita ng dalaga. Kaya heto, ano itong himagsik na dumadaloy ngayon sa kanyang dugo? At amoy ng nakababad na tsaa ng jasmine sa mainit na tubig na may patak ng honey ang kanyang naaamoy sa kanyang pawis!

Na’kwento ko na ito ang inihanda sa kanya ni Fatima, noong araw ng Linggo nang dumiretso s’ya sa restwaran sa Itaewon na pinagtatrabahuhan ng dalaga. Malapit lang ito sa Hyewa. Dito sa Itaewon nakahilera ang mga “western” o “foreign” na restawran at mga shop, dahil alam n’yo na, kung nakapunta kayo sa Seoul, halos lahat nakasulat sa kanilang alpabeto, hanggang sa pagkain at damit—sa lahat na nagpapatibay ng kanilang pera, ang *won*.

‘Yun ang unang tikim ni Mark ng tsaa. Ang lakas ng tawa ni Fatima, na isang pagkaaliw kaysa pangungutya. S’yempre, ito ang paniniwala ni Mark, marahil hanggang sa araw na ito, bago at maging pagkatapos n’ya makita ang paglalagablab ng makasaysayang simbahan ng Miag-ao, ng buong bayan, ng buong mundo, sa kanyang isipan. Ngunit hindi para sa akin.

Pagmasdan mo, isipin mo si Mark na nakahawak na sa sanga ng ipil-ipil at naakyat nga ng kanyang rubber shoes ang burol. Bumagsak ang kanyang 62 kilos na bigat at 5’7 na taas sa damuhan. Sa di-kalayuan, ang puno ng duhat. Habang pinagmamasdan n’ya ito, ang malaking guab sa puno kung saan lumalabas ang mga pulang langgam na ilang beses kumagat sa kanya noong bata, parang nakikita n’ya ang kahoy na olibo. Nabasa n’ya ito sa Bibliya noong bata. May larawan pa ng ibon na kumakagat ng tangkay, o marahil dahon, ng olibo. Hindi kahoy ng higera. Ninais n’ya sanang itanong ito pagkatapos ng misa kay Monsignor, ngunit parang nalunod s’ya sa pagdumog ng mga tao sa matandang pari na para bang si Hesukristo ito.

Nainis s’ya sa sarili, sa pag-asa na ganuon lang kadali maangkin ang sagot sa pinagkaiba ng kahoy na olibo sa kahoy na higera, tulad ng akala n’ya na matawid nila ni Fatima ang distansya sa pagitan ng Jordan, Palestine at ng Iloilo, Philippines sa pag-akyat nila sa bundok na ‘yun ng Dungducheon.

“Greetings from the hills!” Ito ang sigaw ni Fatima nang marating nila ang tuktok ng bundok, kaharap ang direksyon ng North Korea. Animo’y nanginginginig ang buong katawan ng dalaga, sa lusog nito, sa kulot nitong buhok na nakalugay sa mga balik at malulungkot na mga mata kahit pa na parang bata itong naghuhumiyaw.

“Greetings from the hills.” Ito, sabi ni Fatima, ang salin sa Ingles ng sigaw na ‘yun sa Hebreo. Ito ang sinusulat, nasulat ng mga Israeli sa mga pader sa eskwelahan sa Bethlehem.10 minutos lang, kwento pa ng dalaga, ang lapit ng kanilang bahay sa Israel. Kapitbahay nila ang mga Israeli. Ngunit higit isang oras bago ito marating ng sino mang nagnanais makipagsapalaran sa mga liko at kurbada. Katulad ng nangyari sa kanyang ama. Napatay ito sa bugbog, noong panahon ng tag-ani ng olibo ng mga Palestino, na panahon din ng pagbaba mula sa burol ng mga Israeli para humarang sa kanila.

Ito, iyun, ang pangangamusta mula sa burol ng mga Israeli: ang pagsunog sa kanilang pananim na olibo. Kaya raw pinadala s’ya rito ng ina sa tiyahin na mayari ng restawran sa Itaewon, matapos s’ya maging aktibo sa pagbalay ng grupo sa pamamagitan ng internet, ang *Friends of the Homeless*. Marami raw mga Palestino ang umuwi sa mga tent sa disyerto.

Alam ba raw ni Mark ang tungkol sa Gaza? “Hindi,” sagot ng binata, at ikinuwento n’ya sa dalaga na ang totoo, noong gabi lang na iyon ng araw ng Linggo ng kanilang pagkakilala, sa kanyang paghihintay sa antok sa inuwaning naming container van habang ninanamnam pa sa dila, sa mga bibig, ang lasa ng tsa na jasmine na may honey, ‘yun lamang at dumating sa kanya na “Oo nga ano, bumaba nga pala sa lupa si Hesukristo at nagpakatao. Hindi pala sa langit ang Palestine, ang Israel: narito sila sa mundo!”

Napangisi si Mark sa pagkaaliw sa sarili habang naaalala ito ngayon (ganito rin ang kanyang ngisi nang maikwento n’ya ito sa akin). Huminga s’ya nang malalim. Nakapameywang s’yang humarap sa direksyon ng simbahan ng kanilang bayan, ang parokya ni Sto. Tomas de Villanueva. Muli s’yang napangiti, na isa ring pagkaaliw higit kaysa pangungutya, sa pag-isip na narito ang simbahan na pinagmamalaki sa buong mundo, dinadayo ng mundo. Tatlong taon sa Korea, at sa araw ng kanyang pag-uwi, sa paglibot ng dyip sa bayan, para s’yang hinihigop ng lupa sa pakiramdam na walang nagbago: ang mukha at pangalan ng mga tindahan at lugar sa paligid ng simbahan at ng buong bayan, ang daan pauwi sa kanila sa Mat-y. Habang umaalingawngaw sa kanyang pandinig ang bagsak ng mga heels ng kababaihan sa Seoul, ang pagmamadali ng lahat sa escalator, sa subway, sa mga kalye; ang halos hindi nagtatapos na pukpok ng mga obrero sa mga bilding na parang aabot na sa langit at nangangako ng iba at mas masaganang kinabukasan, wala namang pagmamadali sa kanilang bayan. Dahil ba may kinukupkop itong

sariling integridad at dangal sa itinuturing nito't pinaniniwalaang kasaysayan? Ngunit hindi sila pinapalaya sa kahirapan ng ganda ng simbahang ito, maging ng magiting na kasaysayan ng kanilang bayan.

Nauhaw s'ya. Muli, napagod s'ya maging tao, sa pag-isip at pagdamdam, na ninais n'yang sana, magkasama sila ni Fatima. "I pass by your name, Hankuk!" Sigaw muli noon ni Fatima, para muli itong mapahalakhak, para muli n'yang masaksihan ang animo'y paglindol ng buo nitong katawan. S'ya, si Mark, ang nagturo sa dalaga na Hankuk ang lumang pangalan ng Korea. Sagot ni Fatima, mga matatalino sila kaya dapat silang umuwi sa kani-kanilang bansa. Dumadaan lang sila rito sa Korea. Kaya raw babalik ito sa Jordan, lalo na dahil hindi pa rin nito magustuhan ang lasa ng *kimchi*, at lumalaki na ang kanilang grupo, ang *Friends of the Homeless*. Sa ayaw man daw o sa gusto ng kanyang ina at tiya. Wala raw ibang hangad ang bawat Palestino kundi ang maangkin muli ang kanilang bansa.

Ano ang gayuma ng kanilang pagkakaiba na naging daluyan ng kanilang kwentuhan? Kay Fatima lamang naipagtapat ni Mark na sa container van kami tumutuloy. Kay Fatima lamang n'ya nakwento ang hirap ng aming obra: ang bawat bugkos ng libro, umaabot sa mga 10–15 piraso sa bigat din na 10–15 kilos. Maghapon ito na pagbubuhat at mano-mano ang pagtataga sa makina. Sala sa init, sala sa lamig pa dahil tolda ang bubong ng aming working site. Maliban dito, nagpick-up pa kami sa mga publishing house sa Seoul dalawang beses kada linggo, gayundin sa mga katabing syudad.

Kay Fatima lamang nakipag-*date* si Mark, kung masasabi ngang *date* ang kanilang pag-akyat sa bundok na 'yun ng Dungducheon, at ang kanyang pagbalik-balik sa Itaewon. Si Mark na mapang-uyam sa mga biro ng mga nakilala naming Pinay sa Hyewa na nagpaparinig na cute s'ya at mabait.

Ang totoo, naging malapit lamang kami sa isa't isa nang magsimula na ang kanyang pagka-buang kay Fatima. Isipin mo na lang, bumalik-balik s'ya kada Linggo sa Itaewon pagkatapos ng misa sa Hyewa. Wala naman s'yang pera para kumain sa restawran. Hindi rin naman s'ya sanay sa pagkaing Arabo. Isa pa, busy si Fatima sa mga kustomer. Pero para s'yang gago na nag-istambay doon sa labas ng restawran na nakasandal sa puno ng gingko, naghihintay na masulyapan ni Fatima at kumaway sa kanya sabay sigaw ng "Mark," sunod ang pag-anyaya na pumasok s'ya, at muli, ang pagsilbi sa kanya ng jasmine tea with honey.

Kaya natakaw rin ni Fatima ang aking imahinasyon. Sumunod ako kay Mark isang Linggo. Dahil higit sa lahat, nagsimula akong mag-alala. Baka mapagkamalan s'yang magnanakaw o masamang tao habang parang pusa na nakaabang sa labas sa puno ng gingko. "Ano ka ba," sabi ko sa kanya, "hindi kesyong pareho n'yo gusto

ng saging, e, magkakasundo na kayo. Alam mo ‘yan.” Ngunit sa mga panahong ‘yun, kahit bombahin pa siguro ng North Korea ang Seoul, hindi makikinig si Mark, maliban na lamang kung mismong si Fatima ang magsabi sa kanya. “Iba s’ya,” sagot n’ya, “at ngayon ko lang naramdaman ‘to, p’re.” Noon lang din daw s’ya naging ganuon kasaya. Posible raw pala ang ganuon.

Ikaw ba naman, paano ka makikipag-debate sa isang taong in-love? Noong araw ng Linggo ng aking pagsama, unang araw din ng pag-expire ng alien card ni Mark. Regular na gawain ng pulis ang pag-random check ng alien card, lalo na sa mga hindi Puti. Maraming kwento sa Hyewa ang aking narinig, at nasaksihan mismo, na kaso ng mga Pinoy na nadakip, kaya marami ang nagtatago sa simbahan at sa embassy. Pambihira ang katulad ni Mark na pipiliing umuwi pagkatapos ng unang sojourn (Ito ang tawag sa aming pagiging manggagawang Pinoy sa Korea, ayon sa aming E-9 visa). Karamihan, hahanap ng bagong obra, katulad ng ginawa ko, o lilipat ng syudad, kung hindi man, magtatago.

Aaminin ko na kahit ako man, ano at nagayuma ng mga mata ni Fatima at ng kanyang mabilog-bilog na katawan. Higit sa lahat, ng kanyang ngiti na parang nagsasaboy ng bango, at ang kanyang halakhak na parang sariling pagbubukas ng isang prutas para malasahan mo ang hinog nitong buto. Tulad halimbawa ng mangosteen. Walang pagsisinungaling o pagmamalabis, ngunit may ganitong mahika si Fatima, ang dalaga na Palestino.

Higit na nakakabighani ang ihip ng kanyang isip. Paniniwala n’ya halimbawa na katarantaduhan ang pangarap na pagkakaisa sa pagitan ng Israel at Palestine, gayundin ang unification sa pagitan ng South Korea at North Korea. At hindi ba ito rin daw ang kaso sa pagitan ng mga Filipino na Kristiyano at Muslim? Lalo na raw kung nar’yan ang Amerika sa patuloy na pag-aasta na parang kung sinong higit na makapangyarihan sa tuktok ng bundok na nagmamando sa maraming bansa sa mundo sa kung ano ang nararapat nitong gawin para sa sarili nilang bansa, kaya ang pagbagrut ng ngipin ng China, Cuba, at maraming bansang Arabo.

“Ano ang solusyon,” tanong ni Mark. “Giyera? Walang katapusan na g’yera?”

“Hindi,” sagot ni Fatima. Wala raw sinumang may gusto ng g’yera maliban sa mga tao at mga bansa at kompanya na kumikita rito. Ang kailangan daw ay ang pagrespeto sa likas na katangian ng bawat bansa, ang pagbigay ng kalayaan sa mamamayan nito para lalong maging produktibo, katulad na kailangang maangkin ng magsasaka ang kanyang lupa at hayop. Tulong daw ang kailangan ng indibidwal mula sa kanyang pamilya, gobyerno, simbahan—hindi ang pag-angkin ng kanyang imahinasyon at isipan at katawan.

Naibigkas ito ni Fatima ng dahan-dahan, sa payak na Ingles, habang sumasawsaw sa mainit na tubig ng pakete ng jasmine tea; ang kanyang mga daliri parang nagbibilang ng paghalo dito ng tulo ng honey. At walang galit ng mga aktibista na nagra-rally ang paglipad ng kanyang mga salita. Para itong isang malungkot na kanta, na habang pinapakinggan mo at inuunawa, parang pagkapa ito ng magaspang na buhangin sa ‘yung palad, at sa kanyang pagtigil sa pagtatapos, parang dinaganan ng malaking bato ang ‘yung dibdib. Ngunit mawiwili ka, dahil ang kanyang mga mata, ang kabuuan n’yang imahe, nagpapaalala sa ‘yo ng mga insenso, mira, bulawan, at mga babae sa Bibliya. Pamilyar ngunit pambihira, lalo na dahil totoo nga pala: hindi na lamang kwento.

Naalala ko rin na nang makatalikod na sa amin si Fatima, sabi ni Mark: “Di na lang ko bibili ng flat screen tv para sa balay, ‘pre. ‘Bili ko na lang ‘to ng manok pag-uwi. Ma-poultry ‘ko, a. *Abi*, subukan din nating negosyo.”

Ngayon, sa pagpapatuloy ng ating kwento, isipin mo na umiiling-iling si Mark habang pinagmamasdan ang paglipad ng mga ibon mula sa burol. Pakiramdam n’ya, kinukutya s’ya ng kanilang kalayaan. Humakbang s’ya patungo sa puno ng duhat. Tumingala. Kakaunti ang bunga nito, papahinog pa lang. Kalagitnaan na ng Mayo. Kunsabagay, wala pa ang ulan, naisip n’ya, dahil para bang nagkampo rin sa ibang lugar ang mga ulap. Hindi tulad n’ya, na nakauwi dito sa kanila, sa ibabaw nitong burol, sa kalangitan ng Miag-ao.

Walang sumunod na hanay ng ibon, wala ring bumalik, na parang pinaalala lang s’ya at pinainggit. Parang si Fatima. Muli, sumaltik sa kanyang isipan ang ebanghelyo sa misa, ang leksyon sa kahoy na higera na nagbabadya ng katapusan ng mundo, at ang pananatili ng salita ng Diyos—ni Fatima.

“Nadaan ko ang ‘yung ngalan, Fatima,” nasigaw n’ya sa isip. “Nadaan ko ang Jordan. Narito ako ngayon sa burol sa gitna ng aming bayan sa Jordan at Bethlehem. Itong kahoy ng duhat, kahoy na higera, kahoy na olibo, kahoy na gingko. Araw ngayon ng Linggo, araw natin, araw ng pamamahinga. Pangangamusta mula sa burol, Fatima! Heto ang aking isipan at dibdib na naglalagablab sa pagsunog ng ating pagkakaiba, ng distansya at oras sa ating pagitan. Heto ang hinog na duhat na magdurugo sa aking mga bibig. Itimpla ito sa olive oil at honey at ipalaman sa ‘yung *hummus*, kasama ang isang tasa ng jasmine tea. Heto ang burol, ang buong bayan ng Miag-ao na payapa at walang pagmamadali: sinasalubong kita, isang kaibigan ng mga nawalan ng tirahan. Narito, sa simbahan ng Miag-ao, sa mga ebanghelyo at sermon ng pari sa lahat ng araw, mga lugar lamang sa Bibliya ang Israel at Palestine: wala silang pinagkaiba para sa akin. Kahit ang pinagkaiba ng South at North Korea, natawid natin sa pag-akyat ng bundok na lumalatay sa kanilang pagitan. Halika at ipahinga ang ‘yung pagod na katawan at kaluluwa kasama ko.”

Mula sa burol na ito, hindi nakikita ang bubong ng kanilang bahay sa hilera ng kabahayan sa kanilang baryo. Ngunit alam ni Mark na sa gayong oras, nakaupo ang kanilang ina sa harapan ng tv na nabili ng kanyang *won*. 66 taon na ang kanilang ina. Rason ng kanyang nakababatang kapatid, bakit ba raw ipagpaliban n'ya ang pagbili rito ng bagong tv, para makapanood ng paborito nitong mga telenobela at Koreanobela ang matanda, kung ito ang natitira nitong kasiyahan? Napaisip dito si Mark, sa kung ano naman ang kanyang sariling gusto at ligaya? "Nagmamahal lamang ako ng mga bagay na hindi tumatagal," naalala pa n'yang sabi ni Fatima. Punitin man n'ya ang kanyang dibdib ngayon at dukutin dito ang kanyang puso na naglalagablab tulad nitong tanghali, hindi magkakandarapa ang buong bayan. Mamaya-maya lang, malulunod ang kanyang panangis ng bagting ng kampana. Pumulot s'ya ng bato at inihagis ito sa kalawakan. Walang dumaang ibon. Naghagis s'ya nang naghagis ng maliliit na bato hanggang sa mapagod s'ya. Nahulog n'ya ang natira. Bumagsak ito sa lupa, sa damuhan, saan may gumagapang na langgam. Wala s'yang narinig na tunog, o reklamo.

Lumakad s'ya pababa ng burol. Nadaraan n'ya ang mga puno ng ipil-ipil at madre de cacao, ang nagtataasang tigbaw. Sa pagbagting ng kampana ng kanilang simbahan ng alas dose, nakikita n'ya sa isipan ang paglalagablab nito, ng buong bayan, at ang kalsada na nilalakaran ng kanyang rubber shoes—nahihimlayan ng mga bungo at buto.

III.

Hapon din 'yun ng Linggo, buwan ng Oktubre, pitong buwan pagkaraang umuwi s'ya sa Iloilo, at nang pagtawag n'ya sa akin sa cellphone, halos dalawang linggo na mula nang makabalik s'ya sa Korea. Nagkita kami, tulad ng dati, sa gilid ng Woori Bank. Sa Ilsan na ako nagta-trabaho noon, sa isang *hagwon*. Ito ang tawag sa maliit na pribadong paaralan ng Ingles. Pang-gabi ako, dahil mga empleyado na Koreano ang aming estudyante.

Sa oras na 'yun, sa muli naming pagkita, nalaman ko na isa na s'yang machine operator sa pabrika ng optical lenses. Siyam silang Pinoy, dalawang Tsino, puro Koreano na ang iba. "Mas magaan kumpara sa dati nating obra, pero mas mataas din ang risiko sa katawan ng kemikal," sabi niya. Mula alas nuebe sa umaga hanggang alas sais sa gabi ang trabaho niya, at 40 oras na lang ang kailangan n'yang kumpletuhin. Higit sa lahat, hindi na s'ya sa isang container van tumutuloy kundi sa isang kuwarto na talaga, na may sahig na kung tawagin ay ondol, na umiinit tuwing taglamig. Dalawang Pinoy ang kasama n'ya.

Binalita rin n'ya na volunteer s'ya sa asosasyon ng mga manggagawang Pinoy. Ang totoo, papunta s'ya sa kanilang miting. Naging abala raw s'ya simula nang pagbalik n'ya sa pakikipagkita hindi lamang sa mga kapwa Pinoy kundi gayundin sa mga Pakistani, Nepalese, Koreano at oo, mga Palestino. May malakas daw na grupo ng mga Koreano mismo at Palestino na nag-o-organisa ng pondo at nagpapalitan ng mga kwento ng buhay tungo sa pag-unawa ng sitwasyon ng mga lahi na biktima ng g'yera, gayundin ang pagsulong ng pagpapabuti ng kondisyon ng mga manggagawang dayuhan sa Korea.

Hindi man lang nabanggit ni Mark si Fatima o ang tsaa na jasmine na may honey at ang paborito ng dalaga na nakilala naming *hummus*. Ngunit nang bukambibig na n'ya ang linyang *human rights*, ano at parang may dumaang ibon sa kanilang kurbada na V sa maulap na hapon na 'yun ng aming muling pagkita. Masasabi ko na sa sandaling 'yun ko naintindihan kung bakit nainggit s'ya noon sa mga ibon sa pag-akyat n'ya sa burol na 'yun sa kanila sa Miag-ao. Dahil ang ibon, kahit pa nakatakda ring gumawa ng kanyang pugad, wala itong pangangailangan sa bubong (Gayunman, maaaring mali rin ako rito.). Gayun ko rin nakita, sa matinkad na dilaw—siguro ganuon ang kislap ng ginto—ang gahum ng mga salita ni Fatima. Depende sa paniniwala n'yo, maaaring lason o gayuma o kaya'y oo, honey na kumapit kay Mark.

Duda ako kung may nangyari sa kanila ng dalaga, tulad na lang halimbawa ng madalas nating maisip na maaaring mangyari sa pagitan ng isang babae at isang lalaki, tulad ng halik o yakap, at kung swertehin, pakikipagniig. Maaaring habang pababa-paakyat sila ng bundok, nakapaghawak-kamay sila, nakapagkiskisan ng mga siko o nakawak-alalay si Mark sa tagiliran at beywang ni Fatima. Ang klaro at higit na mahalaga, nag-ugat higit pa sa sipa sa isipan at dibdib ni Mark ang mga kwento ni Fatima.

Pasensya na kung bakit kailangan kong banggitin ito, kahit pa alam ko na alam n'yo na ang ilang kuwento tungkol sa kanila. Siguro dahil ang higit sa lahat, ang totoong kuwento na nais kong iparating sa inyo, ay ito: 'yun ang araw ng huli naming pagkikita ni Mark. Kaya marahil parang buang ako sa pagtuhog nitong kwento, dahil hindi tulad ni Mark, kulang ako sa pananalig. Hindi ako nagsisimba sa Hyewa halimbawa, dahil mga bungo at buto rin ang aking paningin sa mga nakaupo at nakatayong katawan sa mga upuan at pasilyo ng simbahan. Ang mga kanta at panalangin, panangis ng mga pinalangga na iniwan, hanggang maging halakhak nila sa pagbibilang ng perang padala, na ang pag-uwi na ngayon, ay isa na ring pagmamadali na makabalik agad, dahil hindi na nila kayang bumalik sa pag-ulam ng asin at bagoong. Kulang ako sa pananalig dahil kahit wala akong galit, pinaniniwalaan kong mapanlinlang si Fatima. Alam niyang maganda s'ya at matalino. Kaya ganuon na lamang kadali ang pagbigay niya ng numero kay Mark

pagkatapos pumayag ni Mark na sige, sa kanya na ang saging na rikondal, hindi dahil talagang may tiwala s'ya kay Mark kundi dahil mayroon s'yang malaking tiwala sa sarili mismo. Wala s'yang takot sa anumang panganib o pandaraya. Ginatungan n'ya ng kanyang politikal na gawain ang pagka-aliw at pagkahibang sa kanya ni Mark. Isang tasa ng tsaang jasmine na pinatamis ng honey at naging alipin na n'ya ang lalaki!

Naitanong ko sa sarili na ano ang masama kung naging ligaya rin naman ito ni Mark, tulad ng pagtatapat n'ya. Oo, aaminin ko, naging ligaya ko rin, lalo na nang mabanggit n'ya noon sa aming pamamaalam ang linyang “nagmamamahala lamang ako ng nawawala,” pagkatapos naming magpasalamat sa kanya sa pagbigay sa amin ng atensyon. “All jasmine,” dagdag pa ni Fatima, “all jasmine.”

All jasmine para kay Mark na namayapa. Suicide, balita ng kanyang employer, at pinagmisahan s'ya sa Hyewa. Bumuhos ang donasyon para maiwi sa Miag-ao ang kanyang bangkay.

Sino ang maniwala, ang malinlang nila? Sa klase ako nang magrehistro sa aking cellphone ang tawag ni Mark nang gabing 'yun. Naka-mute ang aking cellphone pero naka-on ang vibration mode. Tinanggap ko ang kanyang tawag. Ewan kung masasabi ko na marahil 'yun ang aking trahedya: ang pananalig sa aking kutob at pagganap ng aking papel bilang kaibigan n'ya't kababayan. May pagmamadali sa kanyang boses. May pagmamalaki rin. Na nariyan s'ya, naroon, sa malaking rally na 'yun sa Gwanghamun kontra sa human rights violation ng gobyerno ng SOKOR at kasama nila ang mga kilalang aktibistang Koreano at marami pang lahi. Tulad lang na talagang aktibista s'ya at isa itong dangal. Kung anuman daw, ako na ang bahala sa pagbabalita sa kanyang pamilya.

Kahit pa may lamig na sumuhot sa akin, winaslik ko 'yun tulad ng lungkot at pangungulila sa maraming pagkakataon. Ang totoo, natatawa ako kay Mark, may pangungutya, tulad noong una kong malaman ang kanyang pagkabuang kay Fatima. Hanggang mabalita ang madugong dispersal ng polisya sa rally na 'yun at numero na ng mga bangkay ang mga headline.

Linti! Mura ko. Hamakin mo na lang, wala pa nga s'yang nagawa, kung totoo ngang aktibista na s'ya, heto at patay na.

Ano'ng swerte, ano'ng lungkot, at ano'ng lagablab sa aking isipan ng pangangailangang ikamusta ito kay Fatima! “Tingnan mo Fatima, tingnan mo ang ginawa mo kay Mark!” Ngunit narinig ko rin kaagad ang sagot, sa kalawakan ng pandinig ko mismo: “I pass by your name.” Ang totoo, isa itong sikat na kanta ng Arabong mang-aawit na si Marcel Khalife. Si Fatima mismo ang nagsabi nito, sabay

dugtong na pakinggan namin sa YouTube. Gayun at ganuon nga ang ginawa namin ni Mark. Para kaming mga batang gutom at uhaw sa lahat ng bagay na Arabo na ipinakilala sa amin ni Fatima.

Ayaw kong makutya ni Fatima, maisip na isa ring buang tulad ni Mark. Baka akalain n'yang ganuon ang lahat ng binatang Pinoy, dahil hindi ko nga ba nakita, nabasa mismo mula sa mga kwento ni Mark ng pangitain n'ya ng paglalagablab ng simbahan ng Miag-ao, ang pagsali n'ya sa rally na 'yun na naghatid sa kanya sa isang uri ng kaluwalhatian? Naririnig ko maging ang pang-uudyok ni Fatima, na bakit ako ba, hindi tulad ni Mark, ay kuntento na lamang sa pagiging obrero? Hindi tulad n'ya, nilang mga Palestino, na kahit pa kaaway na maituring ang kapitbahay, bumabalik at nananatili sa kanilang bansa?

Hindi ko kilala ang bulaklak na jasmine. May nakapagsabi na para itong sampaguita natin, o marahil ito nga mismo ang ating sampaguita. Ano man ang totoo, nasaan na ngayon ang mga sampaguita natin? Sabihin mo sa akin para mapuntahan ko: mamitas ako o mamili para madala ko sa pagbisita sa burol ni Mark sa Miag-ao. Hindi ko naipagtapat kaagad, taga Guimaras ako. Taga-Jordan, Guimaras, sa rehiyon ng Panay sa Pilipinas.

Kauwi ko lang. At narito ako ngayon sa ibabaw nitong Bukid Bala-an kung tawagin. Holy Mountain, Sacred Mountain. Ito ang nakikita n'yo mula Iloilo, lalo na kung nariyan na kayo sa pier sa Ortiz. Inaakyat ito, isang prusisyon, tuwing Semana Santa.

Inakyat ko ito ngayon, araw din ng Linggo, pagkatapos sumama sa aking ina sa pagsimba. Marami rin akong tanong tungkol sa Diyos at Bibliya. At marahil dahil gusto ko ring ipahinga ang isipan. Habang pinagmamasdan ko halimbawa ang nagliliparang ibon, naitanong ko kung may alaala nga rin ba sila? Pinagtatakhan ko kung tulad nina Buddha, Hesukristo, Mark, Fatima, makikita ko rin kaya ang sarili kong punongkahoy?

Umiikot ang mundo sa islang ito. Ako ang sentro, at ang langit payapa sa kanyang linaw, gayundin ang dagat. Hinahayaw ko ngayon ang aking mga kamay. Narito ako, nagpapagamot sa asin nitong tubig-isla sa ating bansa. Patawarin n'yo ako kung wala pa akong pangangamusta na maipadala para sa mundo.

Nalathala ang unang bersyon sa *Transfiksyon: Mga Kathang In-Transit*. Rolando Tolentino & Rommel Rodriguez, mga editor. Diliman, Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2014. pp. 33–45.

GREETINGS FROM SACRED MOUNTAIN

I.

There are some stories about them. So it follows that there are also questions. For example, “Do birds possess memory?”

Let us begin with the past.

It is Sunday morning. August. In Hyewa, Seoul. Here is the Catholic church where Filipino priests celebrate mass. Here is Woori Bank. It is open, a special arrangement for Filipino workers, who are only able to visit Seoul on Sundays, via bus or subway, from companies and factories located in the different cities of SOKOR.

He is walking, our hero—let us call him Mark—along the edge of a road outside the church. The mass in Tagalog has just finished. He is walking through blossoming flowers, passing through various faces and voices, his throat longing for a sip of hot soup, *sinigang na baboy* of the Ilonggo flavor.

He is heading to Woori Bank on the other side of the road. He is to send 20,000 won to Barangay Mat-y, Miag-ao, Iloilo, Philippines. According to the current exchange rate, the amount is equivalent to about 10,000 in pesos. It is for his younger sister’s review for the civil service exam. He himself is a college graduate: BS Marine from a known university in Iloilo. “So, *To*, have you gone aboard yet?” This was the usual question they asked him. Soon he learned to answer, “See, I have already returned,” with a laugh.

Even now he feels like laughing. He can taste the spice of *sinamak* and the sourness of raw bananas in the air. His contract lists “crashing of paper” as his job description. It’s somewhat like that, his two-and-a-half-year work of cutting book bindings for a small paper recycling company in Dungducheon. A one-hour subway ride from Seoul, this is where almost all the poor reside, particularly the newcomers: Filipino, Pakistani, Nepalese, African, Vietnamese, Indonesian. This is also where a few large American military camps are stationed. Each week, he needs to complete forty-four hours. This includes Saturday. The law dictates this, because they are fewer than twenty workers. Had they been twenty or more, only forty hours would be required. They get a ten-minute break every hour, except for one o’clock and four o’clock—meal hours.

His stomach rumbles at the thought of food and at this reflection on his luck, which descends to him as bright as the sky on this summer morning in Korea. He flinches, yawns, and forces his steps on this path by the road's edge.

Between this Catholic church and this Korean bank lies what they call the Filipino Market. It emerges on Sunday mornings and vanishes before noon. It is a row of fruits, fresh fish like *tilapia* and *bangus*, *bagoong* and *patis*, *balut*, magazines, and other things from the Philippines at twice or thrice the price. Here is where you can eat *turon*, *bihon*, *pancit*, *dinuguan*, *adobo*. Want to place a call to the Philippines? Here is also where you can find promos.

It has been weeks since he last slept well. He needs to make a decision before his contract ends. Which is better? Where can he be happier? Should he go home and rest in their barrio or continue his struggle in Korea by switching jobs? If he goes home, he can do poultry. If he chooses to transfer employment, he will need to find a new job immediately. This is one of the things he found out in Hyewa. The second floor of Woori Bank houses the office of FEWA (Filipino EPS Workers Association). He will drop by to check for news.

He is getting really hungry at this point and feels the urgency to sip hot soup. Or any Filipino food for that matter! At that, a bunch of *rikondal* bananas catch his eye. Bright yellow and robust; inviting him to make a stop.

He is already drawing his wallet from the pocket of his pants when a pair of hands brings up the *rikondal* bananas. A girl.

And this is where their stories begin.

They do not quarrel. The girl's deep eyes flicker with melancholy. Mark remembers the Korean museums he has visited. They do not argue. Instead, the girl laughs, as if amused, looking at him: at the meeting of their hunger in this bunch of bananas. This is followed by a kilometer of words that sound like a cannon shot to Mark's ears. He recognizes it as Arabic when the girl introduces herself as a Palestinian.

In continuing this story of their first encounter, we can say that the girl's laughter—let us call her Fatima—is such a sweet thing, that it leads Mark to say to himself, “Fine, she can have them; after all, would you believe, Arabs like bananas too.” And so from the banana stall, they cross the road together toward Woori Bank. It is inevitable that Mark enters the bank, as he is the type to do just as he planned.

But before this, we can also say that he and Fatima have already exchanged cellphone numbers. How much of this is true, this bolt of thrill between them, in the simplest English roping them together, is not for me to judge. Because I fully

believe in the events of that afternoon, on that precise Sunday: Fatima serving a cup of jasmine tea with honey (you decide on the pronunciation) for Mark, who to this day, now, remains haunted by her laughter and the smell and taste of that jasmine tea with honey, at an Arab restaurant in Itaewon.

How I found all these out, these stories about them, I will tell you if you make me a cup of banana tea. Believe me: I was with Mark in that container van.

II.

But let us continue; their story is more interesting than mine.

For us to further understand the stories between Mark and Fatima, which are also a continuation of the stories between women and men, likewise of races and countries, let us continue with this day—today—a Sunday as well.

In this scene, we see Mark parting the blades of *tigbaw* grass blocking his way. This goes in rhythm with the stamping of his rubber shoes, following his faraway gaze toward the plum tree on top of the hill. It is noon. Everything is orange. But in Mark's mind, the leaves of that plum tree seem fresh, bright and verdant, at the top of this hill where he wants to rest.

Because Sunday is a day of rest and he is tired of being human. He remains confused by the gospel from the mass earlier, on the lesson of the fig tree in Matthew 24, verses 32–35: “Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”

He feels like he is flying, on board that dry coconut branch he had played with on this hill during his childhood, but now with the sensation of climbing instead of skidding. Because he is here again in their barrio, after three years. He is here, now. Right on this hill behind their house!

He was able to decide with Fatima's help. Like clothing, her words became to him like a second layer of skin. And now, what is this rebellion rising in his blood? And the scent of jasmine immersed in hot water with a drop of honey—this is what he smells in his sweat!

I have already mentioned that this was what Fatima served him, that Sunday he headed over to that restaurant in Itaewon where she worked. It is near Hyewa. Here in Itaewon lies a row of western or foreign restaurants and shops, because as you know, if you have been to Seoul, almost everything is written in their alphabet, from their food to their clothes—in everything that strengthens their currency, the won.

That was Mark's first taste of tea. Imagine Fatima's laughter: loud, out of amusement rather than ridicule. Of course, this is what Mark believes, probably until this day, before and even after he imagined the burning of the historic Miag-ao church, of the whole town, of the whole world, in his mind. But not me.

Look, think of Mark holding that *ipil-ipil* branch, his rubber shoes having already climbed the hill. His body of 62 kilos and 5'7" frame falls on the grass. Not far from him, the plum tree. While staring at it, at this deep hollow in the tree from where the red ants that bit him many times in his childhood are coming out, he thinks he sees an olive tree. He had read about it in the Bible as a child. There was a picture of a bird with a twig from an olive tree, or perhaps a leaf, in its beak. Not a fig tree. He wanted to ask Monsignor about it after the mass, but he felt drowned by the crowds surging toward the priest, as if the old man was Christ himself.

He feels irritated at himself, for hoping it would be that easy to find the answer to the difference between an olive tree and a fig tree, like how he thought that he and Fatima would be able to cross the distance between Jordan, Palestine and Iloilo, Philippines by climbing that mountain in Dungducheon.

"Greetings from the hills!" This was what Fatima had shouted when they reached the top of the mountain, facing the direction of North Korea. It seemed like her whole body was shaking with life, from her curly hair reaching down to her shoulders to her eyes, which remained sad even as she squealed like a child.

"Greetings from the hills." This, Fatima said, is the English translation of that shout in Hebrew. This is what Israelis write on the walls of schools in Bethlehem. Ten minutes, continued the girl, spanned the distance between her house and Israel. She was practically neighbors with the Israelis. But it would take more than an hour for anyone who wanted to challenge those turns and corners. Like what happened to her father. He was killed in a beating during the Palestinian season for olive harvest, which is also when the Israelis come down from the hills to barricade them.

This is how the Israelis greet them from the hills: by burning their olive trees. This was why Fatima's mother sent her to an aunt who owned a restaurant in Itaewon,

after she became active in the organization of a group through the internet, the Friends of the Homeless. She said many Palestinians go home to tents in the desert.

Did Mark know about Gaza? “No,” answered the young man, and he confessed the truth to the girl, that it was only on that Sunday night of their first encounter, while waiting for sleep in the container van we went home to, still savoring on his tongue, on his lips, the taste of jasmine tea with honey—only then did he realize that “It’s true, Christ did come down to earth and became human. Palestine and Israel, they do not belong to Heaven: they exist here in the world!”

Remembering this now, Mark smiles, amused at himself (he gave me the same smile when he told me this). He breathes deeply. One hand on his hip, he turns to face the direction of the town church, the parish of Sto. Tomas de Villanueva. He smiles again, out of amusement rather than ridicule, thinking that this, here, is the church boasted of to the whole world, visited by the world. Three years in Korea, and on the day of his return, as the jeepney circled the town, he felt like being swallowed by the earth in the feeling that nothing has changed: the faces and names of stores and places around the church and the whole town, the road home to Mat-y. While his ears echo with the clunking of women’s heels in Seoul, the communal rush on escalators, in the subway, on the roads; the almost never-ending pounding of workers on buildings that seem to reach the sky and that promise a different and more abundant tomorrow, there is no rushing in his town. Is it because it cherishes integrity and honor in what it considers and believes to be history? But the beauty of this church does not free them from poverty, and neither does the valiant history of their nation.

He grows thirsty. Again he feels tired of being human, of thinking and feeling, and he wishes that he were with Fatima. “I pass by your name, Hankuk!” Fatima had shouted, to make herself laugh again, to make him witness once more the quaking of her whole body. He, Mark, had taught the girl that Hankuk was the old name of Korea. They are smart people so they should return to their own countries, answered Fatima. They are merely passing through Korea. So she said she would return to Jordan, all the more because she still had not learned to like the taste of *kimchi*, and their group is growing larger, the Friends of the Homeless. Whether her mother or her aunt allows her or not, she did not care. She said Palestinians have no other ambition but to reclaim their country.

What lure does the difference between them hold, that it became the passage for their exchange of stories? Only to Fatima, Mark confessed that we went home to a container van. Only to Fatima, he related the difficulty of our work: each bundle of books, around 10–15 pieces weighing around 10–15 kilos. This constituted an entire afternoon of lifting and manual cutting on the machine. Enduring heat,

enduring even cold because only a tent roofed our working site. On top of this, we also picked up material twice a week from publishing houses in Seoul, as well as from neighboring cities.

Mark had dates only with Fatima, if you could call their climb up that mountain in Dungducheon a date, plus his repeated returns to Itaewon. Mark, who reacted with derision to the jokes of our Filipina friends in Hyewa, who dropped hints about him being cute and kind.

The truth is, we only became close to each other around the time his craziness for Fatima started. Just think, he would return to Itaewon every Sunday after the mass in Hyewa. As if he had money to eat in the restaurant. He wasn't even used to eating Arabic food. Also, Fatima was busy with customers. But still he would wait outside the restaurant like a fool, leaning against a gingko tree, waiting for Fatima to catch a glimpse of him and wave, shouting "Mark," after which she would invite him to enter, and again, serve him jasmine tea with honey.

So Fatima captured my imagination as well. I followed Mark one Sunday. Because more than anything else, I started to worry. He might be mistaken for a thief or a felon while he waited outside like a cat beside the gingko tree. "Come on," I told him. "Just because you both like bananas doesn't mean you'll get along well. You know that." But during those times, probably even if North Korea were to bomb Seoul, Mark would not listen, unless it was Fatima herself who told him. "She's different," he said. "And this is the first time I've felt this way." He told me he had never felt as happy before. He had not known it was possible.

How do you argue with a person in love? That Sunday I went with him, that was also the first day after Mark's alien card expired. It is common for police to check alien cards, especially for those who are not white. I have heard many stories in Hyewa, and even witnessed some cases, of Filipinos being apprehended, so many hide in churches or at the embassy. It is rare to find people like Mark who would choose to return home after their first sojourn (this is how you call our being Filipino workers in Korea, according to our E-9 visa). Most find another job, like what I did, or transfer cities; if not, hide.

I will admit that even I was taken by Fatima's eyes and her shapely body. Above all, by her smile that sprayed fragrance, and her laughter that made me imagine a fruit opening itself for you to taste its ripe seed. Like mangosteen for instance. No lie or exaggeration, but Fatima had this sort of magic, the girl from Palestine.

Yet what carried more allure was the way her mind worked. She believed, for example, that it was senseless to hope for the union of Israel and Palestine, as well

as of South Korea and North Korea. And wasn't this also the case for Christian and Muslim Filipinos? All the more with America there, she argued, continuing to act like some god atop a mountain, dictating to many countries what they should do for themselves, which is why China, Cuba, and several Arab nations grind their teeth.

"What is the solution?" asked Mark. "War? Never-ending war?"

"No," answered Fatima. No one wanted war, besides the people and countries and companies that earn from it. What was needed was respect for the inherent strength of each country, the granting of freedom to citizens to increase production, like how farmers should own their land and animals. Help was what the individual needed from his family, government, and church—not the owning of his body and mind and soul.

Fatima was able to pronounce these things slowly, in simple English, while dipping a packet of jasmine tea in hot water, her fingers seemingly counting drops of honey. No anger from rallying activists accompanied the flight of her words. It was like a sad song that, as you listened to and understood, began to feel like rough sand on your palm, and as she finished at the end, as if a heavy stone had rested on your chest. But you would remain interested, because her eyes, the entirety of her image, reminded you of incense, myrrh, gold, and women in the Bible. Familiar yet peculiar, all the more because it has become true: no longer merely a story.

I remember that when Fatima turned her back to us, Mark said, "I won't be buying a flat screen TV anymore. I'll just use this to buy hens when I get home. I'll do poultry. Let me try my hand at business."

Now, as we continue our story, think of Mark shaking his head as he gazes at some birds flying away from the hill. He feels taunted by their freedom. He takes a step toward the plum tree and glances upward. Its fruits are few, still ripening. It is already midway through May. Well, the rains have not yet come, he thinks, because it seems like the clouds have also camped elsewhere. Not like him, who has returned home, here on top of this hill, under the sky of Miag-ao.

No flock of birds follow, and none return, as if they had only come to make him remember and feel envious. Like Fatima. Again, the gospel from the mass crosses his mind, the lesson of the fig tree heralding the end of the world, and the persistence of the Word of God—of Fatima.

"I pass by your name, Fatima," he shouts in his mind. "I pass through Jordan. Here I am on a hill in the middle of our town in Jordan and Bethlehem. This plum tree,

fig tree, olive tree, ginkgo tree. Today is Sunday, our day, a day of rest. Greetings from the hills, Fatima! Here is my mind and my heart aflame with the burning of our difference, the distance and time between us. Here is the ripe plum that will bleed between my lips. Mix it with olive oil and honey and use it as filling for your hummus, with a cup of jasmine tea. Here is the hill, the whole town of Miag-ao that is peaceful and without hurry: I welcome you, a friend of the homeless. Here in the church of Miag-ao, in the gospels and sermons of the priests, every day, Israel and Palestine remain merely places in the Bible: there is no difference between them for me. Even the difference between South and North Korea, we were able to bridge by climbing that mountain between them. Come here and rest your tired body and soul with me.”

From atop this hill, one cannot see the roof of their house among the row of houses in their barrio. But Mark knows that at this time, his mother is sitting in front of the TV his won had bought. His mother is sixty-six years old. Reasoned his younger sibling, why should he postpone buying a new TV, for the old woman to watch her favorite telenovelas and Koreanovelas, if these were her only remaining happiness? This made Mark wonder what his own wants and happiness were. “I love only those things which do not last,” he remembers Fatima saying. Even if he tears his chest now and pulls out his heart that is blazing like this afternoon, the whole town will not panic. Just a bit later, his sorrow will drown in the clanging of the church bell. He picks up a stone and throws it into the horizon. No birds pass by. Again and again he throws small stones until he becomes exhausted. He drops the remaining ones. They fall to the soil, among the grass, where ants are crawling. He does not hear a sound, or any complaint.

He walks down the hill. He passes by the trees of *ipil-ipil* and *madre de cacao*, the lengthening blades of *tigbaw*. At the ringing of the church bell at noon, he sees in his mind the burning of the bell tower, of the whole town, and the road traversed by his rubber shoes, layered with skulls and bones.

III.

That was also a Sunday afternoon, the month of October, seven months after he went home to Iloilo, when he called my cellphone, almost two weeks since he returned to Korea. We met, like before, beside Woori Bank. I was already working in Ilsan then, at a *hagwon*. This is what they call a small private school for English. I worked the night shift, because our students were Korean employees.

That time, when we met again, I found out that he had become a machine operator in a factory for optical lenses. They were nine Filipinos, two Chinese, the rest Korean. “Much lighter compared to our work before, but the chemical risk to our bodies is also higher,” he said. He worked from nine in the morning until six in the evening, and he only needed to complete forty hours. Above all, he no longer went home to a container van but to a proper room, with a floor they call *ondol*, which heats up during winter. He roomed with two Filipinos.

He also told me that he was now a volunteer for the association of Filipino workers. Actually, he was on his way to their meeting. Since his return, he had become busy meeting not only with other Filipinos but also with Pakistanis, Nepalese, Koreans, and yes, Palestinians. He said that there was a strong group of Koreans and Palestinians who organized funds and exchanged stories seeking to understand the situation of races that have become victims of war, along with the aim of improving the living condition of overseas workers in Korea.

Mark did not even mention Fatima or that cup of jasmine tea with honey and the girl’s favorite, which we had come to know as hummus. But when the line “human rights” came out of his mouth, it seemed like a flock of birds passed by in a V formation that cloudy afternoon of our meeting. At that moment, I could say I understood why he had envied them as he climbed that hill in Miag-ao. Because birds, although fated to eventually nest, do not need roofs over their heads (then again, I might be mistaken). That was also how I saw, in bright yellow—perhaps like the glint of gold—the power in Fatima’s words. Depending on what you believe, it might be poison or charm, or yes, honey that clung to Mark.

I doubt whether anything happened between him and the girl, like what we usually think may happen between a woman and a man, for example a kiss or an embrace, or with luck, lovemaking. Perhaps while climbing up and down that mountain, they held hands, brushed elbows, or perhaps Mark held Fatima’s side and waist for support. What was clear and far more important, Fatima’s stories took root firmly in Mark’s mind and heart.

I apologize for having to mention this, even if I already know that you know the stories between them. Maybe because more than anything else, the real story I want to tell you is this: that was the last day I saw Mark. Maybe that is why I feel like an idiot for weaving this story, because unlike Mark, I am lacking in faith. I do not go to church in Hyewa, for example, because I only see skulls and bones in those sitting and standing bodies along the pews and aisles of the church. The songs and prayers sound to me like the lamentations of those loved ones left behind, until they become laughter during the counting of money sent by those to come home, which is now also a rushing to return quickly, because they cannot go back to eating salt

and shrimp paste. I lack faith because even though I harbor no anger, I believe that Fatima is deceitful. She knows that she is beautiful and intelligent. That was why it was so easy for her to give Mark her number after he agreed that fine, she can keep the *rikondal* bananas, not because she really trusted Mark but because she had great confidence in herself. She did not fear danger or deception. She planted her political agenda in Mark's mind, adding it to his enchantment and craziness for her. A cup of jasmine tea sweetened with honey, and the man became her slave!

I have already asked myself what was wrong if it also became Mark's happiness, like what he confessed, and yes, I will admit it also became my happiness, especially when she mentioned during our farewell that line "I love only what does not last," after we thanked her for her attention. "All jasmine," Fatima added, "all jasmine."

All jasmine for Mark who has since died. Suicide, said his employer, and they gave a mass for him in Hyewa. Donations poured in for his body to be returned to Miag-ao.

Who will believe, who will be duped by them? I was in class when my cellphone registered Mark's call that night. I had muted my cellphone but the vibration mode was on. I answered his call. I don't know if I can say that was my tragedy: believing in my gut feel and fulfilling my role as his friend and countryman. There was urgency in his voice. Also pride. That he was there, at a big rally in Gwanghamun against the human rights violation of the SOKOR government, and they were with known Korean activists as well as others from other races; just like he was a true activist and this was an honor. Whatever happens, he said, I should take care of informing his family.

I felt a chill inside me, but I ignored it like I had done with longing and loneliness so many times. The truth was, I felt like laughing at Mark, wanting to mock him, like when I first found out about his craziness for Fatima. Until the news reported the bloody dispersal of that rally and the corpses racked up to a number in the headlines.

Linti! I cursed. Damn! Just imagine, he hadn't even done anything yet; even if he were a real activist, here he was now dead. What luck, what grief, what burning in my mind from the need to relate this to Fatima! "See Fatima, see what you did to Mark!" But I promptly heard the answer, on the horizon of my hearing: "I pass by your name." In truth, this was a famous song by the Arabic singer Marcel Khalife. Fatima herself told us this, along with a suggestion for us to listen to it on YouTube. So Mark and I did exactly that. We were like children, hungry and thirsting for all the Arabic things Fatima introduced to us. I did not want to be mocked by Fatima, did not want her to think that I was a fool like Mark. She might think that about all

Filipino men, because hadn't I seen, hadn't I read from Mark's stories the omen of the burning of the church in Miag-ao, and of his joining that rally that would take him to a kind of deliverance? I heard even the prompting of Fatima, asking whether I was, unlike Mark, content with being a worker? Not like her, like the Palestinians who, even if they considered their neighbors as enemies, still return and stay in their country?

I do not know that flower, the jasmine. Some have said that it is like our *sampaguita*, or perhaps it is precisely our *sampaguita*. Whichever is true, where are our *sampaguitas* now? Tell me so I can go: to pick or buy some so I can bring them when I visit Mark's grave in Miag-ao. I was not able to confess, I am from Guimaras. From Jordan, Guimaras, in the Panay region of the Philippines.

I have just returned home. And I am here on top of what they call *Bukid Bala-an*. Holy Mountain, Sacred Mountain in English. This is what you see from Iloilo, particularly if you are already at the pier in Ortiz. The procession climbs it during Holy Week. I climbed it today, a Sunday, after accompanying my mother to church. I also have a lot of questions about God and the Bible. And perhaps I also wish to rest my mind. While gazing at these birds in flight, for example, I ask if they possess memory as well? I wonder if, like Buddha, Christ, Mark, Fatima, I will be able to find my own tree? The world revolves around this island. I am the center, and the sky is peaceful in its radiance, so is the sea. I raise my hands in a wave. Here I am, healing myself with salt from the island-water of our country. Forgive me, if for now I have no greetings to send out to the world.

Translated from Filipino by Michelle Tiu Tan