The Assassin’s Tale
TIMOTHY R. MONTES

A shudder in the loins engender there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead,

- Leda and the Swan
William Butler Yeats

This gun is not real; these hands are shaking not because I am uncertain about my convictions but because I am not sure the man caught in the crosshair of my gun is not an illusion.

At this very moment, 10:30 a.m., 12 June 2050, I am about to make history by killing the Prime Minister of the Philippine Federal Republic. This single shot I am about to take will be the singular event that will start the Great Upheaval. I, Faisal Jamiri, am about to assassinate the first Muslim leader of the Federal Republic of the Philippines.

This is not about religion; neither is it about politics. A Muslim killing another Muslim, a Prime Minister at that, is a phenomenon prone to being hyper-analyzed by academics and cannibalized by journalists. Historians, psychoanalysts, sociologists, journalists will write more books about me than about Lee Harvey Oswald. Who was Faisal Jamiri? Had he been connected to the Taliban? Hamas? Abu Sayyaf? Why did he do it?

I will become a celebrity after my death.
To me, however, this moment is about aesthetics.

I feel the wind on my lashes. Independence Day. The flag being raised in the ceremony is waving like a distorted image of a jellyfish swimming underwater. The wind is my enemy, but the flapping flag also serves as my wind vane to help in my adjustment of the telescopic sight against the turbulence. The martial music of the national anthem is
a fitting prelude to the historical opera that will follow: the state of emergency, the civil war erupting in Mindanao, the ethnic genocides, the Great Upheaval, the invasion by the Gaia Peacekeepers, and then the reign of the historians. All these because the first Muslim leader of the Republic was assassinated by yours truly.

You don’t believe me? You think I’m a crank who is making up stories to live up to his delusions of grandeur? Listen. I will tell you some things that those scribbling deconstructionists don’t know.

There is a certain lightness to the act of killing: the precision, the merging of one’s breath with one’s brain. And yet it is also an act of faith. One can wait and wait for the perfect moment to do the killing, but it never really comes. There is always that hesitant itch, that instant when there is a dissonance in the universe. Then you hear the sound of a click, things fall into place, and the trigger finger takes that message with a certain rhythmic cue: now, now, now. You surrender to the beating of your heart. You see the explosion before your ear picks up the sound waves. The sound echoes in your brain.

Now.

Those whirling dervishes knew what it meant to dance one’s way into the navel of the universe: the body is one with the wind, the mystery lies in the oneness of everything.

I killed the Prime Minister because I wanted to stop time. I wanted to experience that moment of supreme beauty that Frida kept talking about: epiphany, still point, transcendence. Once Frida and I made love after taking marijuana: we thought we could slow down time by stretching the sensory clocks of our bodies. Frida, of course, was an anarchist painter I met at the University. She will be included later in my classified files: the great temptress who provided the ideological framework for this act. Three months ago I found her in our apartment swinging by the end of a rope, tongue sticking out at me. I did not cut her down right away; the cat in the kitchen was licking the milk from the dish. She had fed the cat before committing suicide.

Fact: I was born in Siasi, Sulu. Grandfather: 50% Chinese. We owned the only movie house on the island. The sound from the movie house was amplified to the street outside as a form of advertisement for whatever film happened to be playing. Gunshots, swelling orchestral music, the metallic voices of actors followed me in my afternoon strolls down the plaza. I grew up with the sound of filmic fantasy whirling around me.
Even as I am about to pull the trigger, I can feel that surreal echo of the discordant soundtrack of my life.

I could have been a merchant like my father and my father’s father but I read too much. Perhaps even think too much. I found school stultifying; my youthful dreams were like sweat breaking out of my skin. Unknown to my parents, I stopped attending classes in my second year of high school. I hung out with the stevedores at the pier and listened to their thrilling stories about smuggling and gunrunning. My dream was to drink deep and suck the marrow of life; I read Robert Louis Stevenson and Joseph Conrad and was lost in those sea tales of long ago. When I was fourteen I ran away from home in the company of a Tausug childhood friend named Al-Rajid.

We boarded a fishing vessel in Zamboanga. It was a motorboat a hundred feet long whose owner, a stingy Chinese man, had promised us a 70-30 deal. Over the next two weeks we struggled with seasickness as our boat lurched against the cavernous waves of Indonesian waters. Al-Rajid would turn pale and clutch at anything whenever the boat heaved abaft those waves. Tuna, blue marlin, manta rays: I can still see the gleaming bodies of those creatures we caught and packed in ice crates.

One day there was a typhoon and the sea tossed our boat into the air. Yes, the boat lifted above the surface of the water, became an aircraft for a few seconds, and when it smashed back into the sea, the outrigger tilted against the heave of another wave. We rushed to the other side of the boat to counterbalance the capsizing act of the wave; we clung to the outrigger to set the boat aright with the weight of our bodies. There we were, eight fishermen hanging onto the outrigger like crucified thieves, hoping that our puny weight would hold the boat against the sea. Al-Rajid, of course, was beside me. We looked at each other and realized we were facing the prospect of dying at the callow age of fourteen. “Faisal,” he said through chattering teeth, “if I die here, tell Arifah I regret not having asked for her hand in marriage. I could have had children with her.” Arifah was the fairest-skinned girl in the madrasah; she hid her dimples in her mukna when she smiled.

We had a good laugh over that, two fourteen year-olds hanging for dear life to the moss-covered bamboo outrigger of an unlicensed boat.

The wave rolled passed us and the boat set itself aright against the sucking trough of the wave. I remember that wave as a giant hump sweeping out from under us, a green humpbacked monster that changed
the course of our young lives.

When we got back to shore after two weeks at sea, we returned home and decided to complete our schooling. We had been away for two weeks but the school principal reinstated us following Al-Rajid’s colorful rendition of our adventures at sea. He was always a persuasive speaker, a born actor.

Al-Rajid and I never really talked about our misadventure after that. It became an unworded bond between us, that wave. It taught us a good lesson: It comes, it goes. You’re either dead or alive in its aftermath. Life is a matter of making it through a wave.

We had another shot at life after that. Al-Rajid became a lawyer and married Arifah, the girl in the madrasah who hid her dimples behind her veil.

Al-Rajid, of course, is the man in the crosshair of my gun.

What is beauty?

Is it Frida, in her underwear, painting me in bold frenetic strokes? “Shouldn’t the model be naked and the painter dressed?” I asked.

“No,” she said looking up from her palette. “Beauty is a form of inversion. What we consider beautiful should be strange.” She said she painted better when she was naked.

I had met Frida at the launching of a book by my thesis adviser, a professor of Philippine Studies. Frida was a student in her junior year at the College of Fine Arts, a notorious nonconformist in fashion and sexual mores. She could afford to be so on account of the vulgar wealth of her parents.

“Beauty,” I told her, “is a form of terror.”

Once again I saw that green wall of water rising from the surface of the sea. The sheer liquid wall blocked the horizon from my sight: the sea and sky had merged in that gigantic wave. Some part of me continued to hang there in Promethean confrontation with that amorphous sea mountain.

“Oh, you Muslims,” Frida sighed in supercilious boredom. “You are all violent terrorists.”

It did not make me angry to hear that, yet my heart skipped a beat. There was a malignant fragility to it all: the swan curve of her neck as she
dabbled pigment on the canvas made me think of the perverse pleasure of a strangler. Frida did not understand my life. She distorted the world through her paintings in her pursuit of the purely aesthetic moment. Our lovemaking, stylized and self-conscious, was an extension of that effort to experience artistic nirvana. There was an element of fakery to it all: that art should be dangerous and revolutionary when one slept in silk bed sheets with the air conditioner humming in the background.

"Tell me about your most horrible experience," she said. "Was it beautiful?"

How's this as a lurid example of terrible beauty: coming out of that world and making it to Frida's bed. Even as bombs were exploding in the market bazaars of Zamboanga, and the Abu Sayyaf was decapitating its hostages, and my good friend Al-Rajid was seeking to unify the Moro tribes for a niche in the federal republic, I tiolated away at my thesis, worried over a footnote, a comma, and dealing with the thought that I needed to buy more lubricant for another bout of lovemaking at night with Frida.

I looked at Frida's fragile beauty and tried to suppress an oncoming erection. "In our culture, Frida, we are not as obsessed with beauty. We take life for what it can give us. Sordidness, violence, is all part of it. You have to love life for all that."

It felt strange to be able to theorize with the bedsheet tickling my skin. In Mindanao, I lived my life in pure subjectivity. Now, I was taking the long view and making strange pronouncements. I was looking at a painting of myself by a beauty-obsessed woman.

"When all this violence is over," Frida said, "only art will remain. This painting of you will survive all the surface tension our country is experiencing."

The daubs of paint were coagulating into a hazy picture of my own face.

"Frida, how's this for surface tension? Once, crossing the border to a Christian federal state, a woman showed me a grenade strapped to her body. I watched her walk to the sentry post and engage the guard in conversation. When the soldier paused to light a cigarette, she removed the pin. No painting could ever capture the beauty of that explosion. I had ordered her to do it."

And yet, Frida, as I tried to make sense of it all, with your body dangling on a rope while I tried to finish a cigarette and listened to the
cat lapping milk in the kitchen, I felt that this had to happen. Something had to make sense, even to an assassin with existential pretensions. History is an incoherent story that no thesis or dissertation could ever approximate. I am no simple scholastic scribbler with a scholarship from the Al-Amanah Bank; I am the main actor in the film in my head.

Fade out softly, the violins.

Shift to the rhythmic frenzy of a kulintang, fade in to a flashback: a joyous wedding celebration.

I watched Arifah’s blushing beauty as Al-Rajid whispered something in her ear. When he spotted me, Al-Rajid motioned me to go to the back of the wedding canopy.

“It’s been a long time, Faisal.” He could not even look me in the eye.

“Here’s to the long life of the next Governor and of his bride.” My jest could not dispel the smell of dust and heat in the tent.

“I heard about it.”

“ Heard about what?”

“The incident at the border. The confederacy is threatening an economic embargo on the Muslim states because of it.”

“What makes you think it was me and not somebody else?”

He looked at me in eye and I saw the shimmering reflection of something that reminded me of the sea. The gurgling rush of the deadly waters seemed to come back to me when he said: “Don’t play around with me, Faisal. That woman with the grenade had been your mistress.”

How could you reason with a man like that? Whenever Al-Rajid looked at me, he reminded me of the wave that had almost engulfed us when we were young. We did not really owe each other anything, but something more than fate had connected us to each other on account of that experience.

“I’ll make you an offer you can’t refuse,” he said. He sounded like a man who had forgotten about his own wedding. “Because if you refuse I will personally be there to supervise your execution. I can put you in jail right now as a confirmed terrorist.”

To talk with Al-Rajid was like talking with your own shadow. He seemed to know me inside out. There could be no lies between us.

After the wave, I had drifted off into the enclaves of the Islamic fundamentalist movement. Where else was there to go for someone who spent so much of his time at the pier? Able-bodied men reduced to stevedoring, bored with their lives, unable to derive direction from the
coming and going of ships on the quay. One day a man came preaching the gospel of the Prophet in a new version, a strange man not unlike Aladdin’s Uncle coming over to the marketplace to get the fairy tale yarn on its way. For me, though, the religious veneer was secondary; I was more interested in the swashbuckling nature of it all: the promise of adventure, of release from the stasis of an actor’s unemployed status. I had to continue filming the movie of my life.

But there I was now, after so many fade-ins and fade-outs, listening to a childhood friend charting the course of a new life.

“I can wrangle a scholarship for you to the State University. I am a member of the Board of Directors of the Al-Amanah Bank. In Allah’s name, Faisal, get another life. We are not in high school anymore. This is not an adventurous prank. People are dying on account of your impetuousness.”

“And if I don’t go?”

There was a moment of hesitation before he said: “Then it were better for that wave to have taken us down into the depths of the sea.”

I listened to the sound of the gongs pounding away in the ceremonial dance. “Why, Al-Rajid, are you suddenly so concerned about me?”

“You’re wrong there. I am more concerned about our people.”

“Ah,” I sighed in enlightenment. “Still afraid of what other people might say.” That the class valedictorian once played truant with me, even ran away for two weeks to the sea in my company, was not for the books.

“Faisal, I want to level off with you. Don’t think politics. I know there are only a few of you left in your breakaway group. It is only a matter of time before your cell gets wiped out. Where would throwing a few grenades in the marketplace get you? Imperial Manila only gives you a few lines in the Federal news. We are the ones, the local officials, who worry about that. You are not hurting them. You are hurting us.”

I smiled sheepishly at him. “I thought you did not want to talk about politics.”

“Right,” he clenched his jaws. “Listen to me, Faisal. As far as I’m concerned, you are just a fourteen year-old boy in the same boat with me. Remember?”

I nodded.

“Look at Arifah over there.” The bride was laughing with another woman behind the banquet table. “Look at her.”
"What about her?" She still had the habit of hiding her smile behind her veil.

"On that boat—remember?—as we stared death in the face, I was not kidding when I expressed regrets over the fact that I had not asked for her hand in marriage. Remember?"

How could I not remember? We laughed because we knew it was true. A man about to die cannot tell lies. Somehow, we had found that funny.

"We lived and now we are here. Look," he presented himself in a boastful pose. "Today is my wedding day." His was a melodramatic pose for a portrait photograph. But there was a hysterical undercurrent to it all, as if the kulintangs in the background were insisting on violence. The bridegroom's smile was fake.

Suddenly he threw his arms around me and embraced me. Before I knew it he was sobbing and I was a boy once more holding on in consternation to another boy afraid of death. Here was the most promising politician of the state crying on the shoulders of a known terrorist.

"What's the matter? Al-Rajid, what's wrong?" I found myself shaking him.

He disentangled himself from me and uttered a few apologies. He had regained his composure and was now looking at me with such aquatic depth in his eyes:

"I could have died on that boat, my friend, and all this"—he gestured to the merry-making around him—"would not be happening. But you know what? It would not have made a difference if we had died back then. For you see, I have dedicated my life living up to my dream of marrying her. I have fulfilled that dream." His tears were gleaming in the sunlight; he did not bother to wipe them off his face.

The music around us had turned into a dissonant clangor.

"Faisal, my friend. Get another life. Take my offer. Go to the University. Become a great teacher for our people. We need people like you."

He smiled enigmatically. It was as if the ground beneath our feet was shifting. "I tell you this because you were with me at that moment when life hung on a thread."

And he turned away, leaving me alone in the middle of a Muslim carnival.
That night I received the letter that convinced me to take another road in life.

My friend, it said. Arifah is dying of leukemia. I told you to take a look at her because we don’t really see things as they really are unless we are overshadowed by a sense of our own mortality. Often I ask myself: what is all this for? I fight for our people because I am living a dream. Arifah has made me promise to continue to fight for what I think is good for our people. We have to believe in life’s illusions: that love is eternal, that our people will find peace and enjoy prosperity, that the boat will not sink. Otherwise, what would all this be for? We survived, didn’t we? And if we promised not to continue making a mess of our lives after the wave had passed us by, should it have mattered that the promise was based on an illusion? I married her, didn’t I? Sometimes I think if we had drowned in that storm at sea, you would not be around to give me such political headaches and neither would I, to live in acute awareness of my illusions. Life would have gone on without us, of course. Bombs would still be exploding, other people would be working to make a difference in their lives. Think: since we last found each other hanging on that outrigger, has life been any different for us? Have we been let down by our dreams? Do we even still believe in them? I beg of you, as a friend, as someone who understands the mysteries of the sea, get another life. It is never too late. As far as I am concerned, the dream of marrying Arifah will remain as strong in life as it was on the brink of death. I remain believing in promises and dreams. Your friend, Al-Rajid.

When Arifah died four years later, Al-Rajid was a member of the legislative house and I was toiling hard over my dissertation in Philippine Studies at the State University. I did not write to my friend. I knew his grief was beyond words. But I did something I had not done since I arrived at the University and became a self-confirmed agnostic. I took a trip to the mosque at Quiapo and said a prayer for Arifah’s soul. I felt I owed her that.

Precision, I know now, is not a static concept. A target moves (one click to the right), and another look at the telescopic lens will alter your configuration (two clicks to the left). Whose claim to life or death is more valid—Al-Rajid’s or mine? When you over-adjust the lens, the image of the target blurs. Precision, I know, is a matter of adjustment. In my case, had I over-adjusted my sights on life a bit too much. Between a pretty but vain woman whose demystified body I had seen dangling
from a rope, and a blushing Muslim bride who elicited the most romantic of dreams from a Great Man—I have been fumbling with the adjustment of my life too much. As I said, something has to make sense. Frida/Arifah, Al-Rajid/Faisal, terrorist/prime minister, fanatic/agnostic—the mysteries of life are reduced to the oscillation of a body swinging from a beam.

I know that after this act; life will go on—the cat will continue to lap up its milk in the kitchen. I don’t want to make any claims about politics and religion, nor do I want to make any statement regarding the meaning of life or the lack of it.

I just want to make the movie of my life to make sense and I think I have found a fitting closure to it.

At last I find the right magnification for the lens and I take a deep breath to go with the right click. The coda of the national anthem begins to surge with clashing cymbals as if signaling the climactic end of an old order, the death of the Philippine Republic, the last gasp of a lost Empire.

Now!

Suddenly behind me rises a glimmering green wave higher than the building I have positioned myself in, a rushing liquid emerald towering behind me. It is the tidal wave of my youth, engulfing all my dreams, my promises, my life’s convictions.

Now!

I pull the trigger. Along with the bullet I see the crumbling towers of Imperial Manila, the riots and bloodbaths in the South, and the post-apocalyptic age beyond politics and religion.

When the man in the crosshair of my gun crumples to the ground, I turn around to face the wave. And I address the spirit of my dear departed friend: “Remember when we were on that boat, Al-Rajid? I told you then I was ready to die. Remember?”

I feel the liquid cliffwall smashing over me. ☺