

Literary Section

EXCERPTS FROM *WALONG DIWATA NG PAGKAHULOG*

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English Translation by
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About the Novel

Walong Diwata ng Pagkahulog (trans. *Eight Muses of the Fall*) is on the one hand a young man's frustrated attempt to write the great Filipino novel, and on the other, his coming to terms with the futility of his search for his lost mother. Along the way, he is guided and misdirected by some muses and demons to reimagine his personal past without the burden of national history. He will be forced to accept that truth can somehow be in the deceptive, inchoate recreation of memories, without which, the fall seems inevitable.

The following chapter is part of the second half of the novel, when the protagonist Daniel tries to revise his personal history, with the help of his dreams, and his attempts at analyses of his chance encounters. In this chapter, he first meets Teresa, the prostitute who can read other people's minds, but only after dark.

About the Author

Edgar Calabia Samar is a multi-awarded poet, children's story writer, essayist, and novelist. He is the author of *Walong Diwata ng Pagkahulog* (trans. *Eight Muses of the Fall*) (Anvil, 2009), winner of 2005 NCCA Writer's Prize, and longlisted in the Man Asia Literary Prize in 2009. In 2010, he attended the 43rd International Writing Program of the University of Iowa as a writer-in-residence. He is also a professor of literature and creative writing at the Ateneo de Manila University. Recently, his second novel in Filipino, *Sa Kasunod ng 909* (trans. *One After 909*) was published by UST Publishing House.

About the Translators

Sasha Martinez was born in 1989. She studied Creative Writing and Literature in Ateneo de Manila University, and now works as a consultant for the Presidential Communications Development and Strategic Planning Office. Her fiction has received the Loyola Schools Award for the Arts, the Nick Joaquin Literary Award (Philippine Graphic), and the Philippines Free Press Literary Award. She lives in Quezon City.

Mikael de Lara Co graduated with a BS in Environmental Science from Ateneo de Manila University and was a fellow of the Ateneo, University of Santo Tomas, Iyas, and Dumaguete National Writers Workshops. He has received the Don Carlos Memorial Award—considered as one of the most prestigious literary prizes in the Philippines—and has been published in the *Philippines Free Press*, *Sunday Inquirer Magazine*, and *Aklat Likhaan*. At present, he works at the Presidential Communications Development and Strategic Planning Office.

16. Karl Kabute

SA PANAGINIP KO, ako si Karl, iyung una kong pangalan, hindi si Daniel gaya ng tawag sa akin ng halos lahat ng tao, o hindi si Ayel, na tawag sa akin ni Tito Tony noong bata pa ako, at kahit noong malaki na ako pero gusto niyang ipaalala sa akin na ako pa rin ang batang kinakandong niya noon habang tinuturuan ng kung ano-anong bagay, o ginugulo ang buhok kapag may activities sa school at si Papa dapat ang naroon, pero wala nga, at nahuhuli niya akong tumitingin sa mga kaklase ko na akay ng kani-kanilang tatay. Hindi ko siyempre naririnig na tinatawag akong Karl, lahat naman kasi, nakikita ko lang sa panaginip. Kaya ganun, sa panaginip ko, *nakikita* kong tinatawag akong Karl. O baka nasa isip ko lang iyon, na idinidikta ko sa iba. Basta't tuwing maaalala ko ang laman ng panaginip ko, ako si Karl at walang alaala ang ako na si Karl na ako rin si Daniel o si Ayel kapag gising ako.

Laging mukhang ulan, o katatapos lang ng ulan, sa panaginip ko. Kahit minsan, hindi pa umulan sa panaginip ko. At lagi, para akong may hinahanap na kung ano. Mag-iikot ako sa buong kuwarto na inuupahan ko sa Marikina. Paglabas ko, ang bakuran sa lumang bahay ni Lola Bining ang babati sa akin. Madilim ang langit. Hindi ko makilala kung katatapos lang ba ng ulan o paparating pa lang ito. Pumunta ako sa likod-bahay, habang naglalakad, saka ko maaalala na kabuti, naghahanap ako ng kabuti. Kung gayon, nakadaan na ang ulan. Nakaramdam ako ng magkasabay na katiyakan at panghihinayang. Dumaan na ang ulan at hindi ko na naman inabot. Halos kasabay nito ang pagkatagpo ko sa mga kabuti sa ibabaw ng lupang tumatabon sa poso negro namin. Pagkakitang-pagkakita ko sa kanila, saka ko mararamdaman na hindi sila ang hinahanap ko. Pero bubunutin ko pa rin sila, ibabalumbon ang dulo ng suot kong t-shirt upang sahurin doon ang mga kabuti, dahil hindi ko rin naman maisip kung ano ba talaga ang hinahanap ko. Pagtayo ko kapag naubos ko na ang kabuti na maaaring ilaga at iulam, saka ko makikita na bata pa pala ako at mga bulaklak at dahon ng gumamela na ang sahod-sahod ko sa damit. Tatawagin ako ng isang kalaro, hindi ko siya makita pero nararamdaman kong kalaro ko siya, at alam ko nang bitbit niya ang sabon na ihahalo namin kapag nadikdik na ang mga dahon at bulaklak ng gumamela. Nakakuha ka na ng tangkay ng papaya, naisip kong isinigaw ko sa kanya at hindi ko narinig ang sagot niya

pero naramdaman kong iwinawagayway na niya ito sa hangin. Napangiti ako at pagtingin ko sa direksyon niya'y nakita kong nasa loob ako ng isang pagkalakilaking bula. Maya-maya'y nakita kong palapit na ang kalaro ko, nasa loob din ng malaking bula na lumulutang sa hangin. Mukhang si Erik. Natawa raw siya sa akin dahil hindi ko raw siya nakilala agad e wala naman akong ibang kalapit na kalaro. Tawa rin ako nang tawa. Oo nga, oo nga. Saka ko naalala na nasa loob kami ng bula. Naisip kong sinigawan ko siya dahil mukhang hindi niya alam na nasa bula kami pareho at magkakabunggo na ang mga bula na kinapapalooban namin. Pero huli na ang naisip kong pagsigaw sa kaniya dahil magkasabay na pumutok ang bula namin at nahulog ako sa hangin at bumagsak ako sa aking kama.

Noon ako nagigising.

Matagal ko na itong napapanaginipan pero hindi ko ikinukuwento kahit kanino. Hindi ko naman makita ang dahilan kung bakit kailangan pang ikuwento ang panaginip sa iba. Kahit kay Tito Tony. Lalo na kay Tito Tony, dahil tiyak na aasarin lang naman ako noon. Noon. Hanggang sa makilala ko si Teresa.

NASA MARIKINA NA ako, sa isa sa mga nakasiksik na paupahan sa hindi pantay na lupa ng Barangka. Kapag hapon, bago kumagat ang dilim, lumalabas ako ng apartment, naglalakad-lakad pababa sa subdivision malapit sa Riverbanks. Hindi ko alam kung bakit walang pangalan ang subdivision namin. Mukha kasing hindi ito kasama sa plano. Mukhang nagsobra lang ang semento sa katabing subdivision kaya't dinagdagan sa gilid ng tatlo pang kalye na halos korteng Y. Nasa dulong itaas ng kanang kalye ang tinuluyan kong apartment. Ilang minuto lang ng lakad bago makababa sa Riverbanks.

Kapag Sabado ng hapon, madalas na may nagko-concert sa Station Grill. Maaaring makita kahit hindi ka pumasok sa loob. Kahit minsan, hindi ako pumasok sa loob noon. Hindi sikat na banda. O mga banda na hindi ko alam kung sisikat pa ba sa gitna ng maya't mayang paglitaw ng mga bagong grupo. Hindi ko na nga kilala ang iba. Natapos na ang pakikinig ko sa mga banda sa *Carbon Stereoxide* ng Eraserheads. Nalulungkot ako kapag naiisip ko na hindi ko na kilala ang naririnig na mga bagong banda. Ito siguro ang unang tanda ng pagtanda, hindi na updated sa mga bagong kanta. Pakonsuwelo ko sa sarili, alingawngaw na naman ng Eheads. O, nakanta na ng Eraserheads 'yan. O, mas maganda ang kanta ng Eheads tungkol d'yan. Wala pa akong inabutang banda na tumutugtog sa Station Grill na nakahikayat sa aking pumasok sa loob. O kahit tumigil man lamang nang matagal-tagal para makinig.

Madalas na bumababa ako ng hagdan sa gilid ng Station Grill upang bumaba malapit sa ilog kung nasaan ang malaking sapatos na pink. Maglalakad-lakad ako nang kaunti, hanggang sa pagpasyahang tumawid sa kabila ng ilog upang doon maghapunan sa naghilerang ihawan ng mga sariwang isda, pusit at iba lamang-tubig na siguradong hindi naman nagmula sa ilog ng Marikina. Mura ang pagkain, sulit na sulit. Madalas pang nag-uuwi ako ng hindi ko naubos para kainin sa hatinggabi

kapag nagutom akong muli sa gitna ng mga kailangang tapusin. Nakakasawa na rin ang pagkain sa caf ng iskul, o ang manok ng McDo o Jollibee o Max's o Chicken Bacolod o KFC na naghilera sa Katipunan. Kung minsan, pumapasok pa lang ako, pakiramdam ko'y pumuputak na nang pumuputak ang mga lahat ng kumakain sa loob ng alinman sa mga iyon. Mabuti kung tutubuan nga ako ng pakpak para makalipad palayo.

ISANG HAPON NGA, nakilala ko si Teresa, nakasalampak sa pinakaibabang baitang ng hagdan pababa sa gilid ng ilog. Iyon lamang. Nagkita kami, at tamang-tama, lumubog na ang araw, agaw-dilim, at nagsisimula nang buksan ang ilaw sa iba't ibang poste, sunod-sunod, gayon din ang ilaw ng mga nakahilerang tindahan at bar, at maya-maya'y hawak na niya ang kamay ko papunta sa madilim na bahagi ng mga damuhang nakaharap sa ilog. O nakatalikod, depende sa gusto mong pagtingin. Martes siguro noon, o Miyerkules, kaya't hindi gaanong marami ang tao. O masyado pa lang maaga.

“Huwag kang matakot.” Parang nababasa niya ang isip ko.

“Nababasa ko nga ang isip mo.” Napangiti ako. Pero hindi ako nakatingin sa mukha niya. Natakot akong makita sa mata niya na nagsasabi siya ng totoo. “Nagagawa ko lang ito kapag gabi.” Nakaramdam ako ng magkasabay na kilabot at pagdududa: Ayo a, mind reading kapag gabi. ESP? Sino ba ang babaeng ito?

“Teresa.” Noon ako napatingin sa kaniya at bago ko naiwasan, nagtama ang mga mata namin. “Teresa ang pangalan ko.” At mukhang nagsasabi nga siya ng totoo. Bago pa ako nakapagsalita, hinahalikan na niya ako sa bibig at gumagapang na ang kamay niya sa hita ko. “Ikaw, ano'ng pangalan mo?” sabi niya nang bahagyang humihingal. Mabango ang hininga niya, parang kaiinom lang niya ng mountain tea sa Sagada. O kahit anong tea na may lemongrass. O baka nag-Halls lang siya. Magkahalong kaba at pananabik ang naramdaman ko. Hindi pa ako naging ganoon kapangahas sa isang pampublikong lugar. Dinaan ko sa pagpikit. Pinapapaniwala ang sarili na walang nakakakita sa amin dahil wala rin akong nakikita.

“Karl.” Ibig ko sanang magsinungaling, pero bigla'y parang nablangko ang isip ko't wala akong maisip na ibang pangalan, iyong hindi akin. Mabuti't hindi ko na isinunod ang Daniel kung saan ako mas kilala ng mga tao. Nakaupo na ako noon sa damuhan, nakababa nang bahagya ang shorts at brief ko nang sumalampak siya nang upo sa harapan ko.

Bago ko pa man maisip noon ang posibilidad na makakuha ako ng sakit sa ginagawa namin, bumulong na agad siya, “Wala akong sakit, wag kang mag-alala,” bago niya dinilaan ang tenga ko. Nakaramdam ako ng koryenteng dumaloy mula sa puno ng tenga ko, hanggang sa mga tuhod ko, hanggang sa sakong. Naninigas ang dulo ng mga hinlalaki ko sa paa. Nakasubsob ang mukha ko sa dibdib ni Teresa. Ilang giling lang ng balakang niya at mabilis akong nilabasan. Iniangat ni Teresa ang mukha ko at hinalikan niya ako sa bibig. Sinipsip niya ang dila ko. Ang lemongrass

tea sa Sagada. Hinawi niya ang mahaba niyang buhok papunta sa kaniyang batok, bago siya bumulong, “magkikita pa tayo.”

Umalis siya mula sa pagkakaupo sa harapan ko. Mahina ang paghingal ko habang dahan-dahan kong iniaangat ang brief at shorts ko. Hindi ko alam kung ano’ng kailangan kong gawin. Nakaupo sa tabi ko si Teresa, nakatitig sa mga ilaw ng mga ihawan sa kabila ng ilog. Kailangan ko bang magbayad? Paano kung magalit siya? O mainsulto. Ano ba talaga ang babaeng ito?

“Kahit 200,” mahina niyang sabi. Nakatitig pa rin sa mga ilaw sa kabila ng ilog. Sigurado akong hindi siya sa ilog nakatingin kahit hindi ako tumitingin sa kaniya. Nagmamadali ko namang binunot ang wallet ko sa likod na bulsa ng shorts. Mabuti’t may barya akong tatlong daan. Iniabot ko lahat sa kaniya. Pagkakuha ng pera, tumayo siya nang madahan at madahan ding naglakad palayo nang hindi man lang tumitingin sa akin. Hindi naman ako nakagalaw sa inuupuan ko hanggang sa mawala na siya sa tanaw ko.

Kagaya ng sinabi niya, nagkita pa kami nang madalas simula noon. Subalit tuwing magtatagpo sa pinakahuling baitang ng hagdan pababa sa ilog, pumupunta na kami sa isang kuwarto ng maliit na motel sa bayan mismo ng Marikina. Hindi talaga motel iyon, parang bahay lang, lumang bahay na may maliit na sign: 24 hrs. Sumasakay kami ng dyip o fx na biyaheng San Mateo o SSS, hindi nag-uusap sa halos wala pang limang minutong biyahe, at bumababa sa may 7-11 pagkalampas ng tulay. Wala akong alam tungkol sa kaniya noon maliban sa ginagawa niya ito para kumita ng pera. At hindi nga siya mahilig magsalita. At nakababasa siya ng iniisip ng tao. Kapag gabi. Kapag gabi lang.

Kay Teresa ko lamang naikuwento ang tungkol sa panaginip ko. Nang makilala ko si Teresa, bigla’y parang gusto kong sabihin ang lahat sa kanya. Walang pagdadalawang-isip. Kahit pakiramdam ko’y alam na niya ang lahat bago ko pa man sabihin. O dahil nga siguro sa pakiramdam na alam na niya ang lahat bago ko pa man sabihin, kaya pinili kong sabihin na rin ang lahat. Sa hindi ko maipaliwanag na dahilan, dito, malayo sa Atisan, at dahil kay Teresa, kaya ako binabalikan ng mga bagay at katiyakan na naging bata nga talaga ako. Ang ilog ng Marikina, ang Sapang Ligaw. Ano nga ba ang mga pinag-uusapan namin? Hindi ukol sa kung saan patungo ang ilog. Hindi siya ganoon mag-isip. O hindi ko lang talaga alam, hindi ko talaga nalaman, kung paano siya mag-isip. *Bakit tinatawag natin itong ilog?* Akala ko’y itinanong ko iyon sa kaniya pero maaaring nakatingin lang ako sa kaniya at binigkas ko lang iyon sa isip ko. O maaaring naisip ko lang iyon sa panahon kung kailan tinitingnan ko ang ilog ng Marikina at hindi ko na siya kasama.

MALIIT ANG TENGA ko: parang tenga ng daga, parang kabuteng tengang daga. Ang sabi ng matatanda, mahaba ang buhay ng isang tao kapag malaki ang tenga niya. Gayon ang madalas kong marinig kay Lola Bining noon sa tuwing makikita si Erik noong bata-bata pa kami. Pero walang sinoman na nagbukas ng usapin ukol sa haba o ikli ng magiging buhay ng isang tao kapag nakikita nila ang ang tenga ko. Maliban

kay Teresa. Si Teresa lang ang nangahas na magsabi sa akin: “Mamamatay ka nang maaga.” Naramdaman ko ang kilabot na gumapang sa buo kong katawan. Pero sinabi rin niya na huwag akong mag-alala dahil iba ang kamatayan na mangyayari sa akin kaysa sa mga naisip ko na noon, o kumpara sa kahit na anong inaasahan ko.

Dinaan ko na lang sa biro ang nararamdaman kong takot: “Paano, mapapatakan ako ng eroplano?” Pero hindi ngumiti si Teresa. Lalo naman siyang napalapit sa loob ko noon.

Kapag may bago akong ideya para sa nobela na hindi ko maupu-upuan, pumupunta agad ako sa lugar kung saan kami unang nagkita, at laging nandoon siya, kahit wala akong pasabi, upang ibahagi sa kanya at mas upang marinig kung ano ang masasabi niya. Kaya’t ang Karl, kalauna’y naging Karl Kabute. “Dahil basta ka na lang sumusulpot,” sabi pa ni Teresa, kahit alam ko na iyon naman talaga ang dahilan. Hindi niya alam, at hindi ko na inungkat noon, kung nang tinawag ba niya akong Karl Kabute’y naaalala niya ang panaginip kong sa kanya ko lang ibinahagi. Ang panaginip ko kung saan akala ko’y naghahanap ako ng kabuti.

Nagbiro na lang ako, “mabuti’t hindi Karl Bula!” upang mahagingan kung naaalala nga ba niya ang panaginip ko.

“Puwede rin,” sabi naman niya, at muli, hindi man lang ako nagkaideya kung naalala ba niya ang panaginip ko lalo pa’t ihinabol niya nang tumatawa, “basta ka rin nawawala e, kasimbilis ng paglitaw mo.” Nakitawa na rin ako kahit may kumurot sa loob ko noon na maaaring hindi man lang pala minahalaga ni Teresa na siya lang ang nakaalam sa isa kong panaginip na hindi ko sinasabi kahit kanino. Natukso akong sabihin kay Teresa na siya lang ang may alam ng panaginip kong iyon, pero nag-alangan ako dahil wala naman sa pinag-uusapan namin noon ang panaginip, mahirap ipasok at ipilit sa pag-uusap. At maaaring nabasa na rin niya ang nasa isip kong iyon nang sandaling iyon.

WALANG KASAYSAYAN ANG *mga kabute*, sabi pa rin sa nobelang dahilan kung bakit ko napagpasyahan na magsusulat din ako ng nobela noon. Nakaramdam ako ng lungkot nang maalala ko iyon habang nakahiga sa tabi ni Teresa. Si Teresa na inakala kong maghuhugas sa akin sa maraming bagay, gaya ng ulan na nagsusupling ng mga kabute sa lupang matagal na hindi nadilig. Nakatitig ako kay Teresa, walang kamalay-malay noon na itong babaeng ito na hindi ko alam ang kasaysayan, na basta sumulpot sa buhay ko, ang siya ring bula na basta-basta maglalaho.

16. Mushroom Karl

IN MY DREAM, I was Karl, I went by my first name, not Daniel by which almost everyone called me, and not Ayel, by which Uncle Tony called me when I was young, or whenever he felt the need to remind me that I was the same child that he sat on his lap or whose hair he ruffled during school activities where he'd catch me staring at a classmate's father, school activities where my father should've been, but wasn't. Of course no one ever called me Karl in that dream, because of course in dreams I saw things from the third person, so what I really saw was myself answering to someone who called me Karl. Whenever I remembered what happened in my dream, I would be Karl, and not Daniel or Ayel, names by which I was called in my waking life.

In my dreams it always seemed as if it was about to rain, or as if it had just rained. It's never rained in the world of my dreams. And always, I was looking for something. I would be going around the room I was renting in Marikina. I would step out of the room, into the yard, into Grandma Bining's old yard in San Pablo. The skies would be dark. Had it just rained? Or was it about to rain? I would go behind the house, and I would remember, while walking, what I was looking for. Mushrooms, I was looking for mushrooms. It had just rained, after all. I was sure about it, and at the same time I felt a sense of loss. The rain had passed and I wasn't there. Immediately after this thought I would find mushrooms, growing near a mound, a patch of soil near the old pump-well. As soon as I see the mushrooms, I would feel, with certainty, that they weren't at all what I was looking for. But I would pick the mushrooms, I would roll my shirt up and put them there, because as yet I couldn't remember what I was really looking for. Only after picking all the mushrooms I could broil and eat would I notice that I was still a child, and that I had picked not mushrooms but flowers, gumamelas, leaves and flowers of the gumamelas. Do you have the papaya stalk with you, I would think of shouting to him and I wouldn't hear his answer but I would feel him waving the stalk in the air. I would smile and look at his direction and as I do this I would realize that I was inside a large bubble. After a moment I would see that he was approaching me, inside his own gigantic bubble, floating in the wind. He looked like Erik. He laughed at me, because why didn't I recognize him right away when no one but him was there. I would laugh, laugh aloud. Of course, of course. And then I would remember that we were inside our bubbles. I think I shouted at him, screamed. He didn't seem to realize that we were inside our bubbles, and we were about to collide. But I would be too late. Our bubbles would collide, explode, and I would fall, through the air, unto my bed.

I would wake then.

I've been having these dreams for a long time, but I haven't yet told anyone. I didn't see the point in narrating my dreams to anyone. Not even to Uncle Tony.

Least of all to Uncle Tony, because of course he would just tease me about it. Back then. Until I met Teresa.

I WAS ALREADY in Marikina, in one of those apartments cramped in the uneven terrain of Barangka. Afternoons, before darkness arrived, I would take a stroll through the village by the Riverbanks. I didn't know why our village, our subdivision, didn't go by any name. It looked like one of those villages that wasn't planned out. It looked as if the neighboring subdivision just had some leftover cement, and so they put in three more streets, shaped almost like a Y. My apartment was at the far end of the street on the right-hand side. I was a few minutes away from the Riverbanks.

Concerts would usually be held Saturday afternoons at the Station Grill. I could see it even if I didn't go inside the bar. Bands that hadn't yet gotten a break. Would any of those bands ever get a break, when the next big band came a week after the other? I had no idea who they were. I stopped listening to rock bands after the Eraserheads released *Carbon Stereoxide*. It made me sad, thinking about how little I knew of the band scene now. This could be the first sign of aging—not knowing which songs were popular. I tell myself, well, they're just pale echoes of the Eraserheads. Or, well, the Eraserheads sang about that in one of their songs. Or, the Eraserheads had a song just like that, and it was way better. I never felt the urge to go inside the Station Grill just to listen to the band that was playing. Or even to stop for awhile outside.

I often went down the stairs by the side of Station Grill to get to the river, to the part of its banks with that well-known landmark, that statue of a gigantic pink shoe. I would walk awhile, until I decide to cross to the other side, to have dinner at the row of food stalls, grilled fish, squid, other creatures of the sea that of course couldn't have come from the Marikina river. It was cheap fare, but good. Often I would take my leftovers home in a plastic bag and finish it off in the middle of the night, whenever I would get hungry in the middle of doing the things that needed to be done. The school's cafeteria food can get tiring, and so can the chicken I could buy from any of the fast-food chains in front of the University. The endless chatter of people who ate in those restaurants unnerved me; the noise would hit me like a wave as soon as I stepped into those glass doors. And I didn't have the wings to fly away from those places once I got in.

I MET TERESA one afternoon. She was sitting on the lowest step of the stairs that led to the river. That was that. We saw each other, and the timing was just right: the sun was setting, it was dusk, and the streetlamps were coming to life, one after the other, as were the patio lights of the rows of bars and stalls, and a few moments later she was holding my hand, leading me towards the darkness, to the patches of grass facing the river. Or with its back to the river, depending on how you look at it. It was maybe a Tuesday then, or a Wednesday, there was no weekend crowd. Or maybe it was just too early for a crowd?

“Don’t be afraid.” It was as if she could read my mind.

“I can read your mind.” I couldn’t help but smile at that. But I wasn’t looking at her face. I was afraid to see in her eyes that she was really telling the truth. “I can only do this at night.” I felt a fear and doubt, both at the same time: Wow, that’s nice, a mind-reader at night. ESP? Who the hell was this girl?

“Teresa.” It was then that I looked at her face, and we met each other’s gaze even before I could look away. “My name is Teresa.” And it looked as if she were telling the truth. Even before I could speak, her mouth was on mine and her hand was crawling over my thigh. “You? What’s your name?” she asked in a breathy voice. Her breath smelled nice, smelled as if she had just drunk mountain tea from the northern highlands of Sagada. Or whatever tea that had a tinge of lemongrass. Or she might have just taken one of those cheap lemon-flavored mints. I felt nervous, and at the same time I was excited. I had never been that bold in a public place. I closed my eyes. I tried to convince myself that, if I couldn’t see anyone, then no one could see us.

“Karl.” I wanted to lie, but it was as if my mind went blank and I couldn’t think of any other name, a name that wasn’t mine. It was a good thing that I didn’t add Daniel, by which many people knew me. I was sitting on the grass then, with my shorts and my underwear pulled down, when she sat on me.

Even before I could think that I might contract something from what we were doing, she spoke. “I don’t have anything. Don’t worry,” and then she ran her tongue over my neck. I felt a current run from the base of my ear, to my knees, to my heels. My toes tensed. My face was on her breasts. Just a few moments of grinding and I came. He held up my face and kissed me in the mouth. She sucked on my tongue. Lemongrass tea in Sagada. She pulled her long hair to her nape, and whispered, “We’ll meet again.”

She got up. I was panting softly as I pulled up my shorts and my briefs. I didn’t know what I was expected to do. Teresa was sitting beside me, staring off into the row of lights across the river. Did I have to pay her? What if she got insulted? Who the hell was this girl?

“200 will do,” she said softly. Her eyes were still on the lights across the river. I was sure she wasn’t staring at the river itself, even though I couldn’t fully see her face. I scrambled to get my wallet from my back pocket. Good thing I had 300 in change. I gave it all to her. When she got the money, she stood up slowly, walked slowly away without even looking back. I sat there, unmoving, as I watched her fade into the distance, into the crowd.

As she had told me, we met many more times after that initial encounter. But after we would meet on that last step on the stone stairway that led to the river, we would rent a small room in a motel in downtown Marikina. Well, it wasn’t really a motel; it was a house, an old house with a small sign that said: 24 hrs. We would ride a jeepney that travelled the route to San Mateo or SSS village, keep silent throughout the ride that took less than five minutes, and get off at the 7-Eleven

right after the bridge. I didn't know anything about her then, except for the fact that she did these things to earn money. And that she didn't speak a lot. And that she could read people's minds. At night. Only at night.

I never told my dream to anyone except Teresa. When I met her it was as if I wanted to tell her everything. Without any hesitation. Even if I felt that she knew everything about me even before I spoke. Or maybe it was because of this, because I felt that she knew everything about me even before I spoke, that I chose to tell her everything anyway. For some reason that I can't fully grasp, it was here, so far from Atisan, because of Teresa, that I began to remember with absolute certainty that, yes, I did go through my youth, I was a child once. The river of Marikina. Sapang Ligaw. What did we talk about, really? We didn't talk about where the river led. She didn't think that way. Or maybe I just don't know, I never got to know, how she really thought. *Why do we call a river a river?* I might have said that aloud, or I might have just thought it, said it in my mind. Or I might have thought about that question during the time I was staring at the Marikina river, alone.

I HAVE SMALL ears, like a rat's, like that mushroom called rat's ear. The old folks would say that large ears signified a long life. I would hear Grandma Bining say that whenever she saw Erik, when we were younger. But no one ever talked about how long or short a life could be whenever they saw how my ears were. Except for Teresa. Only Teresa had the guts to tell it to me straight: "You're going to die early." I felt the dread creep through my whole body. But she did say that I would die a different death, a death unlike the one I was thinking then, or unlike anything I'd expect.

I tried to lighten the mood, more for my own sake: "What, will a plane crash on me?" But Teresa didn't smile. I felt closer to her then.

Whenever I have a new idea for a novel and I couldn't find a way to work on it or to make it work, I would go to the place where we first met, and always, always I'd find her there, even without any previous agreement to meet, and she'd listen to me as I told her. That's why, later on, "Karl" evolved into "Karl Kabute," mushroom Karl. "Because you just appear out of nowhere," she said, and of course I knew that was what she meant even before she said so. I didn't know, and didn't ask, if she called me that because she remembered the dream I once told her about. That dream when I thought I was looking for mushrooms.

I tried to lighten the mood, as I always do. "Good thing it's not Bubble Karl!" I said, perhaps to find out too if she remembered the dream.

"Yeah, that could work too," and again I had no idea whether she did remember the dream, especially after she followed it up: "because you just vanish into thin air, as quickly as you appear." I laughed along, not minding the ache inside of me, which stemmed from the fear that maybe she didn't at all remember that dream, the dream that I had told no one about, no one else but her. I was tempted to tell her that no one else knew about the dream, but I hesitated because it was off the

topic, because it would've been difficult to try to force the conversation. And after all, she might've been reading my mind, anyway.

MUSHROOMS HAVE NO *history*, as that novel said, the novel that made me decide that one day I'm going to write a novel too. I felt a certain sadness remembering that sentence as Teresa lay beside me. Teresa whom I thought could cleanse me of many things, like the rain that would birth mushrooms on earth that had not tasted water for a long time. I was staring at her then, and I had no idea that this woman whose history I did not know, who appeared out of nowhere, into my life, would, just like a bubble, vanish into thin air.