DEVOTION II

Wilfredo Pascual
Samahang Makasining, Inc.
pascualwilli@gmail.com

Abstract
In 2004, the author flew to New York to spend a few days with fans of Nora Aunor during the Philippine Superstar’s U.S. concert tour. This personal essay is a ruminative account of a wayfaring trip that began the year before, when the author flew to Manila and met the star for the first time. It’s a pilgrimage of sorts, tracking the wandering icon in Manhattan, from her hotel bedroom to Times Square all the way to the airport. It crosses time and space from aquatic Bicol and Atlantic City to the mystical Byzantine age and the tumultuous years of the Marcos dictatorship. It grapples with symbols and stories, the faith and powers at work in the act of devotion, at home or elsewhere.

Keywords
diaspora, iconography, memory, spirituality, travel

About the Author
Wilfredo Pascual is an award-winning essayist (2004 and 2007 Palanca Awards and the 2008 Philippine Free Press Literary Awards). His essays and poems have been anthologized in Philippine Studies, Si Nora Aunor sa mga Noranian, Mondo Marcos, Father Poems, and Caracoa. He has attended New York University’s Summer Intensive Program for Creative Nonfiction and was also a Breadloaf Work Study Scholar for Creative Nonfiction. Originally from San Jose City, Philippines, Pascual lived in Thailand for more than ten years before moving to San Francisco where he currently lives. He was Publications Officer of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization and later worked for the international nonprofit Room to Read, where he led a program that won the 2011 UNESCO Confucius Prize for Literacy for training local writers and artists in Asia and Africa and publishing children’s books in local languages. “Devotion II” is a sequel to “Devotion,” his 2004 Palanca-winning essay about fandom and meeting Nora Aunor for the first time in Manila. A more recent essay, “You Have Me,” won First Place for Creative Nonfiction in the 2015 Curt Johnson Prose Awards. He is currently at work on a collection of essays.
Whether or not she became wholly inanimate, she must find a place to stand in the weather before she became immobile. She visited city squares, and stood experimentally by the rims of fountains, or in the entrance of grottoes. She had read of the hidden wilderness of nineteenth-century graveyards, and it came to her than in such a place, amongst weeping angels and grieving cherubs, she might find a quiet resting-place.... Thorsteinn said that she was what he had only imagined. All my life I have made things about metamorphosis. Slow metamorphoses, in human terms. Fast, fast in terms of the earth we inhabit. You are a walking metamorphosis. Such as a man meets only in dreams. He raised his wineglass to her. I too, he said, am utterly changed by your changing. I want to make a record of it.

(A. S. Byatt, “A Stone Woman” 127)

1.

Hearts racing, the four of us ran through an empty underpass tunnel carrying Nora Aunor’s concert gowns. The sound of a car approaching sent us scampering to the side, stepping into puddles of murky water. We couldn’t fold the gowns or let it touch the ground so we turned our bodies to protect it from the car splash. We raised it in the dark, our fingers numbed by the hooks of multiple hangers. Nora’s 2004 Independence Day concert for Filipinos in America is about to start, and there we were, stuck in a tunnel as the approaching headlights lit the Nono Palmos collection, a resplendent vision in gold, mocha, and ivory.

We were in Atlantic City’s historic Boardwalk Hall, a major sports events venue where the Miss America pageant is also held and stars have performed from the Beatles to Beyonce. We’ve been circling it for half an hour unable to find the backstage entrance. We suggested walking through the main entrance but Albert Sunga, Nora’s staff, refused. Apparently, you can’t let the public see the star’s wardrobe. It’s bad luck, he explained, a common belief in the industry. Albert, a fan of Nora for as long as he could remember, just gave up his banking job of eighteen years in Manila to follow his heart. Earlier that day, he went to the hotel kitchen and asked for raw eggs. It’s for Nora, she has to slurp half a dozen egg yolks straight from the shell before going on stage. When the kitchen staff refused, Albert threatened them. “No eggs, no concert!” Nora herself taught Albert to separate the yolks from the white and as per the Superstar’s gentle instruction, “Pahamugan mo yan.” This was life for Albert in America, airing eggs outdoors, watching over them for at least an hour, making sure no dirt, not a single speck of foreign matter, lands on the Superstar’s egg yolks.
The rest of us were not part of Nora’s entourage but like Albert, we too had other lives we left behind. We’re pilgrims, “at pag naglalakbay ka, palagi meron kang iiwan,” was how critic Patrick Flores put it. I flew more than ten thousand miles from Thailand to watch the concert. The week before, I was organizing an international gathering of education officials in Bangkok, my co-workers clueless of this other life I led as a fan.

Another Filipino fan, a dental assistant from New Jersey, had led us into the underpass. As soon as the car passed, we continued running with the gowns behind our backs. Trailing us was the only woman in the group, a Filipina from Jersey City who came with her American husband to watch the concert, got separated from him and ended up following us. We reached a glass door in the middle of the tunnel that led to an empty hallway and stairs at the end. We climbed it, reached another door, pushed it open and found ourselves lost in an indoor parking lot. The concert was scheduled to start in ten minutes. We saw a staff and asked for directions. We continued to run, climbed an escalator that wasn’t working, and at the top we finally reached our destination, a huge door that led to the backstage entrance.

We pushed it open with our bodies, got in, struck by the chaos inside: a horde of fans hoping to get a glimpse of the star was being pushed back by security, a contingent of Americans, burly men and women in black, yelling at the crowd and their handheld radios. We squeezed ourselves and got stuck halfway through. We kept yelling, “Nora's gowns! Nora's gowns! We need to get Nora's gowns inside!” Security personnel saw us and asked for our pass. My heart stopped. Of course we didn’t have one, we were just fans. We relented and handed the gowns over. That was the last time I saw them, lifted above our heads, shimmering, raised high in a wave of adulation, hands touching the hems, tracing the glittering sequins, the dazzling beadwork, passed on until it reached the other side where it disappeared from view like flitting butterflies.

2.

Nora’s manager called us the following day and told us that the Superstar was not feeling well. After the concert, Nora’s right ear ached and she felt a slight fever.

A bright orange glow floated above New York City making celestial bodies invisible in the night sky. Seven of us rushed to our guiding star’s hotel room in downtown Manhattan where we found her sniffling in a white jacket, eating with her fingers in front of the dresser. In a city where immigrant taste buds crave for home, where the original recipe of Neapolitan pizza is regulated by law and ice
cream flavors include Mexican vanilla and rainforest sorbet, Nora ate the same
dish for days: takeout *sinigang* and barbecued pork from *Sinugba* in Jersey City.¹

“*Kain,*” she offered. ² She washed her hands in the bathroom, came out, lit a
cigarette, and went straight to bed. She slipped under the comforter and between
puffs urged us in a childlike tone to spend the night there.

We sat in a sofa across her bed, hushed. On our way to the hotel, Jojo Devera,
who owns an extensive collection of Nora’s films, bought antibiotics, a digital
thermometer and eardrops. He’s worried Nora wouldn’t take the meds. We gave her
the thermometer but she just put it on the bedside table. She stomped her cigarette
on the ashtray and said she’d check her temperature in a little while. “*Kasisigarilyo
to lang,*” she reasoned.

Danny Go, a Cebuano accountant from Toronto who crossed the border on a
twelve-hour bus ride to see Nora, looked like he was about to cry. He has three
brothers, all Noranians like him, and he couldn’t believe how close he got to their
idol. “This is too much,” Danny kept gushing, “meeting the greatest star of Philippine
cinema in the greatest city in the world. I love Nora Aunor! I love New York!”

Nora listened to us relive the event in Atlantic City. After the concert, security
installed rope posts in the lobby to cordon off the fans waiting to get Nora’s
autograph. These security measures relieved Albert. In San Diego the crowd got
out of control, pushed the signing table and almost pinned Nora on the wall. She
managed to climb on top of the table, her pleas for order drowned by an insatiable
longing, and had to be whisked away by security. The same thing happened in
Newark. The security staff couldn’t believe it. “Celine Dion performed here. But
nothing of this sort happened. Not like this.”

The queue in Atlantic City snaked through the entire lobby. The security
personnel complained. It was way past midnight and they had extended their
working hours. “We gave you an hour. We’re closing the building in fifteen minutes.”
But the line would not end. We were losing crowd control. We ordered fans to have
their cameras ready. I grabbed one camera after another and clicked away. Never
mind if the pictures were out of focus or I’d only framed half of Nora’s face and
the back of somebody’s head. I pushed people and yelled, “Next. Next! NEXT!!!”
until security told us, that’s it, they’re cutting off the line. When this happened in a
concert on the West Coast, fans protested and tore souvenir programs. I felt really
bad. Before the concert, I helped sell souvenir programs at the lobby and promised
buyers they would see Nora up close after the show. I walked around with a ream
in my arms, selling copies, muffling inner voices that questioned what I’d gotten
myself into. Like I’d turned into somebody else, a stranger locked inside me for
years. How could I let these voices stop me when everything around me fanned the flames of my passion? There’s Ping, for instance. I’ve known him for years since I joined the International Circle of Online Noranians (ICON), and now I see him in person with his wife and children, all of them helping us sell souvenir programs. I took a deep breath and approached an old woman. “Collectors item po. Twenty dollars. Nora will autograph copies after the concert....”

Security got everybody to leave and closed the building. But Nora wasn’t done yet. She asked the fans to join her outside where she continued signing autographs. We didn’t have cordons so some of us had to form a human chain around Nora. It broke our hearts to pull away an old woman who hugged Nora and refused to let go. “I’ve waited thirty years,” she cried. A blonde American woman who spent time in Manila in the 1970s professed to Nora, “I was a Nora-Manny fan!” Another young woman was in tears. Mario Roxas from Queens, who was part of the human chain, asked her if she was okay. The young woman forced a smile, broke down and walked away. Mario wanted to run after her but I pulled him back. You can’t break the chain, I told him. Many years ago, Mario himself wept in front of the television when the last airing of Nora’s longest-running musical variety show was broadcast. His wife consoled him that Nora would return. It hurt him that they took Nora away, the one who gave him hope when he was growing up in the Philippines. Mario wanted to run after the young woman because he knew what it was like to long for Nora in other lands. As promised by his wife, Nora did return. Not only on television but also in person. The week before, Mario, already a grandfather, welcomed her at the Newark airport with a bouquet of roses.

It was two in the morning when Nora signed the last autograph. The editor of Colors magazine wrote how easy it is “to dismiss the phenomenon of fandom as a largely adolescent and inconsequential activity.... [But] fandom is one of the defining forces of the Information Age.” Media-enabled, it powers the vast economies of our time. Not only that. Consider how “millions of people today routinely organize their lives around devotional behaviors.” Fandom drives history. In 1839, celebrated Hungarian musician Franz Liszt had women fainting in his presence and even wrestling over locks of his hair. Not only in art but political power as well. In 1558, as Queen Elizabeth walked down the aisle to be crowned, spectators cut pieces of the carpet as souvenirs. In Japan, author Pico Iyer observed how “it hardly matters what the object of your devotion is. It’s the devotion itself, the release of renegade energies, the creation of a private sanctuary, that counts.... This coffee shop on Sanjo-Dori has played only Mozart music, around the clock, for twenty years or more.... I know a Zen monk in Nagoya who furnishes his temple with a complete set of CHiPs tape from American TV.... You come, in time, to see in Japan that fandom is at once an assertion of individualism, an attempt to brand yourself as a character, and a longing to join yourself to a chanting group – in a different key....
But the Japanese seem adept at keeping both in place, with equipoise. This is who I am to the world. This is who I am to myself” (“The Land of the Rising Fan”).

In the end, it was not the eardrops but our chorus of professions that lulled Nora to sleep. It nourished and filled us with joy and tranquility that reached manic heights and depths, but always providing some meaning, some purpose. We stood up and got ready to leave. We were barely up on our feet when Nora spoke, still with her eyes closed, “Huwag kayong aalis. Dito lang kayo...” We snickered and without a word, sat down and resumed our vigil. We gazed at this woman who didn’t want to be left alone. Often criticized for not taking care of her finances, Nora expressed how people mattered more to her. “Ang hindi nila alam wala sa pera ang yaman ko. Ang yaman ko nasa tao. Sa mga minamahal ko at nagmamahal sa akin.” When I heard her say this, I realized how fiercely she believed the lyrics of “People,” the song from Funny Girl that propelled Nora to fame and fortune, how, in her mind, her deep need for others counted her as one of the luckiest.

We left the hotel at around four in the morning and walked to the nearest subway station. From time to time, a shared recollection would stir us from exhaustion. Like ICON founder Leonel Escota’s earliest memory, which goes all the way back to lullabies he heard as a toddler, all of them Nora’s early recordings. Or Rey Tatlonghari, the dental assistant who led us to the tunnel, remembering how his father berated him after he got caught recording Nora’s TV show on cassette. Albert recalled his college days in Manila. He’d save his allowance so he could go see Nora perform every night at the Rajah Sulayman Theater. Sometimes the money was just enough for the fare so he’d sit outside the walls of the open-air theater, content to hear Nora’s voice. The stories went on and on until my feet began to hurt from walking. I just wanted to go home. In New York City, where people complain of noise pollution and you can get fined for letting your dog bark for more than fifteen minutes, our stories finally gave in to silence. Inside the subway car, we stared blankly, drained, our minds elsewhere. The cold fluorescent light cast gangrene-colored circles under our eyes. We’re no longer reenacting Nora’s iconic subway scenes in ‘Merika; we were Milagros Cruz. Only it wasn’t ‘Merika that drained us, but the tolls of devotion, the required wayfaring.

3.

On a chilly evening we saw Nora dwarfed by a multitude in the middle of Times Square. There, I told myself, barely five feet tall, is the only living Filipina actress and singer honored in my country as one of our cultural heroes within the last one hundred years, surrounded by the lights of Broadway, mammoth digital ads and huge talking heads on gigantic TV screens. The Philippines felt tiny in
this corner of the world. The eddying tide of teens and tourists swallowed Nora as she looked up at the towering displays. Her legendary wistful eyes marveled at the new technologies, the rapidly changing visual language spoken by media producers, communication conglomerates and similar gods in the heart of this great city. Dazzled by the glowing lights, the streaming showbiz news, the big retail chains, the cineplexes, Nora reveled amidst the vortex of the entertainment and marketing industry that marked her destiny. This, on a planetary scale, is the industry that feeds and, occasionally, tries to destroy her; that brings out her most radiant and lusterless moments. She honors it with her artistic defiance and locks horns with its demands. This is what she endures, where she thrives; her gift, her curse. It claimed her as a child. Take it all away and I wonder, who ultimately is this woman? What if Tawag ng Tanghalan never happened? What if for some reason, she missed the strange confluence of those times? At fifty, she could have had a totally different life: a servant, a poor mother, a cashier, or with a banal job title like Clerk II at Cabusao Trial Court. From time to time she would sing songs and we’d take notice, but only momentarily, and then we’d have to go back to whatever we’re doing, dismissing her insignificance in our lives. But as fate would have it, Nora stood in Times Square, relishing her rare moment of anonymity, buying us tickets to see Little Shop of Horrors. 

Of the week I spent with Nora in New York, my most memorable moments with her occurred in the emptiest of spaces. Eerie and dreamlike: the star left alone, a playful phantom, an apparition in white, a fleeting post-apocalyptic vision. This happened twice on the same day, around noon and midnight. She broke traffic rules and crossed into forbidden areas.

It was Puerto Rican Day and she wanted to see the parade that celebrated the US’s unincorporated territory. The parade route closed the traffic from 44th to 86th Street. We could hear the celebration on Fifth Avenue but roadblocks prevented us from cutting across streets and alleys to see the parade. We had to walk far and make a turn to reach it. As we turned around a corner, Nora made a quick, bold move. She slipped through an unguarded roadblock into a deserted alley littered with parade flyers. We followed her bouncy steps. She started walking fast until she got too far ahead of us. We saw her in the middle of the alley, her feet winged. The beating of the drums grew louder. A sudden breeze lifted the papers and swirled around her. I had to freeze the cinematic moment, flyers airborne, her hair blown. She turned to us, smiled and, heeding the call of music, broke free. She ran away. For once I wanted to believe that she was, at that rare moment, genuinely and completely happy.
We ran after her but lost her as we turned around the corner. How do you find a woman of Nora's height amidst the frenzy of several hundred thousand spectators, waving and wearing the Puerto Rican flag? I squeezed and inched my way to the front row. Music blared. People of color cheered on floats and cars decked out in red, white and blue. A small hand pulled me. You do not find Nora. She finds you.

I don't know how she managed to squeeze her tiny self to reach the front row without getting crushed, but there she was next to me, waving, beaming at young Puerto Ricans on the float playing hip-hop music. She waited till the last float passed by. The crowd took over the streets and people started to dance. The police tried to clear the avenue but the crowd would not budge. The officers started yelling at people, their arms sweeping and shoving bodies indiscriminately. I looked around and saw Nora trying to cross the street. An officer blocked her and barked at her to go back. I called her but she couldn't hear me. She ignored the officer and continued to cross the street. The officer towered over her and screamed, "MOO OVVE!" The order cracked like a whip but Nora was unfazed. She casually turned around, hands in her pocket, head held high, and walked away.

That night, she took us to Splash, New York City’s hottest gay dance club in Chelsea where she arrived in an all-white outfit: cap and jacket, a loose tanktop over a ribbed tube, tight shorts and a pair of high-cut sneakers. She ordered brandy and later hit the packed dance floor while DJ Frankie Knuckles performed. We couldn’t believe we were dancing with Nora while the godfather of house music was spinning early '80s dance tracks and techno. My eyes snapped it like a camera on a continuous shooting speed: Nora in white, dancing in kinetic black light with hundreds of gay men, maternal at fifty, mercurial at night, our very own Cinderella rocking the ball.

The clock ticked. We left the club and stopped at a nearby adult shop where Nora bought a black leather mini skirt. Nora walked ahead of us, the last glitters of our fairy dust trailing her. Jojo Devera kidded that she walked like a thug. Nora heard this and gamely put on a show. She squared her shoulders, butched it up, and swaggered like a jock or some action hero until she reached a red traffic light. The streets were empty but it still alarmed us when Nora crossed it alone. Our unease turned to delight when we saw her change her male fashion walk in the middle of the street. This time her hips swayed vivaciously. From macho to femme fatale, she defies forbidden crossings and pays the price on our behalf. Again, it was the emptiness of that space that made it truly memorable. No car passed. No one crossed the street, not a single reminder of the multitude that claimed her.
4.

Leonel and I were concerned that somebody would recognize Nora inside the dollar store. We weren’t worried about her getting mobbed. It’s the malicious stories that irked us, gossip columnists having a field day. A dollar store? Was she that poor? We wondered whether this was how word gets around. But even if it were true, we’d probably just shrug it off. It was tired news anyway. Also, we were too thrilled that Nora bought us lip moisturizers at the store, flavored and glittered. She bought tiny things for herself, a fist-sized electric flat iron and miniature sewing machines. It wasn’t long before a middle-aged Filipina spotted her. She approached me and whispered, “Is that Nora Aunor?” She didn’t wait for our answer. She approached Nora and asked, “Kayo po ba si Nora Aunor?” Nora smiled. “Kamukha ko lang po.” As if she could get away with that defining mole on her cheek. The woman gasped when she heard the unmistakable voice. She started jumping and hugging Nora. “Kayo nga! Kayo si Nora Aunor!” She was hysterical, “Diyos ko si Nora nga!” Nora laughed and asked her, “Kumusta na po kayo?” But the woman had lost it. She just kept repeating Nora’s name. Eventually, she came to her senses and gave Nora some space. From aisle to aisle she continued to shadow Nora with quiet, apprehensive steps, all the way to the counter. We left the store. I last saw the woman’s face still pressed on the windowpane, neck craned, stunned, as if a camera flash had blinded her temporarily to the rest of the world. It was a frantic look, a final grasp to a lifeline being cut as Nora turned around a corner. I wondered what the woman really thought, how Nora managed this existence. Journalist Philip Gourevitch on the power of imagination and our rare and brief memories of privacy and freedom: “We are, each of us, functions of how we imagine ourselves and of how others imagine us, and looking back, there are these discreet tracks of memory; the times when our lives are most sharply defined in relation to others’ ideas of us, and the more private times when we are freer to imagine ourselves... it occurred to me that if others have so often made your life into a question, really, and made that question their business – then perhaps you will want to guard the memory of those times when you were freer to imagine yourself as the only times that are truly and inviolably your own” (71).

At the weekend flea market, Nora rummaged through antique silverware, ethnic textiles and vintage toys. I purchased a 1945 radio recording of Boris Karloff, another of *The Lone Ranger*, and an old box of “Old Faithful” yellow crayons made by a company established in 1835. The past mattered to me: its rescue from obscurity and oblivion; the opportunity to commune across time and space with others’ legacies and the generations it has marked; the never ending reconsiderations, light breaking into a spectrum of colors. To matter, to belong, to take part in humanity’s singular journey through a forgotten object – I’m drawn to this, sometimes rather embarrassingly. Last year, I bought an old milk bottle here. Did I really think I had
the power to increase its worth by imagining its former life and making it mine? Nora bought a set of vintage glassware and wine aged in a coconut shell. I also saw her contemplating on Picasso and Monet prints. What she really wanted to buy was a framed, two-feet high metal cast of a Torah writer, a bent old man scribbling on a desk, the unrolled scroll of Jewish sacred literature and oral tradition touching the floor. We discouraged her from buying it. It was too heavy, too expensive at six hundred dollars. Besides, we didn’t know much about the artist Irwin Henry. What drew her to it? Was Nora aware of the Jews’ displacement and the Torah as their eternal moral compass, their fixed repository of memory? Later, Nora saw me eyeing the framed poster of London’s West End production of Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, topbilled by Dame Judi Dench.

“*Ang ganda ano?*” Nora remarked. “*Gusto mo?*” I said yes, but it’s too big. “*Mahilig ka pala diyan,*” she said. “*Pareho kayo ni Direk [Maryo J. de los Reyes]. Iyon, pati kisame may poster.*”

I browsed through other items and when I turned to Nora she had bought the West End poster. She gave it to me. A gift, she said, a remembrance. I was surprised. I thanked her profusely. As we were about to leave I read a sign announcing that the area of the flea market on Sixth Avenue and 25th Street would soon be sold to make way for a residential tower. I had promised myself that someday I would come back to the area. I wanted to mark the place where Nora bought me a gift. But with no fixed place to commemorate, what power outlives our most unreliable memories? What’s more transcendent than the breakable worth of our own myths, the pittance of pliable lies we tell ourselves? In Ishmael Bernal’s film *Himala*, a documentary filmmaker reflected on the lies told by Elsa, the faith healer played by Nora Aunor. Perhaps, Elsa wondered, when all the bones of our lives had been picked clean, perhaps all that would be left is what the camera sees, or what we call art.

5.

My annual vacation trips to New York City always included a day at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the colossal museum that houses five thousand years of priceless art from all over the world. In 2003, I saw the special exhibitions on the art of the first cities along the Tigris and Euphrates River; and the year before that, medieval tapestries. My timing in 2004 was perfect. Rising above the grand steps was a billowing purple banner that ran vertically along the colonnade, announcing the culmination of a three-part special exhibition that began in the late 1970s. The Byzantium exhibit showcased icons of faith and power from 1261 to 1557, the last three hundred years of the age. I only had an hour to see it. I usually spend an entire
day at the museum but Nora was leaving and I had to send her off at the airport later that day. I figured I just needed to focus on a few pieces, or maybe just this one particular enigmatic icon that drew me.

The high-ceilinged lobby was packed with visitors. I passed through security, bought a ticket, clipped the Met button pin on my shirt, and wore the headset guide. My heart raced as I climbed the grand staircase. An hour wasn’t enough to view the special exhibition, more than 350 masterpieces on loan, some seen only rarely and others never shown outside the churches and monasteries that have preserved them through the ages. From the most brilliant of medieval civilizations, they included splendid icons, frescoes, mosaics, decorated manuscripts and liturgical objects, some even thought to be holy in themselves. It was a splendid public display, gathering for the first time Christendom’s most powerful religious images in history.

My strategy was to focus on the forty magnificent icons from the Holy Monastery of Saint Catherine in Mount Sinai, at 1,500 years the longest continually inhabited Christian monastery in the world whose collection is second only to the Vatican. I kept looking at my watch and the museum map as I ran up and down floors and labyrinthine halls. I had to slow down from time to time, worried that security would stop this panic-stricken Filipino tourist. Two museum personnel guarded the small entrance to the Byzantine exhibit. It was dim inside and it took a while for my eyes to adjust. Inside, I was transported back more than seven hundred years, a time borne of an age when battles of faiths raged, when pilgrims trekked across deserts and mountains to reach sacred sites, when it was possible to come face to face with the axe that Noah used in building the ark, the arm bone of Saint John the Baptist, the robe and girdle of Virgin Mary including her tears and her breast milk kept in vials, the bodies of the innocents murdered by King Herod, and the Savior’s Passion relics: the purple robe, the nails, the crown of thorns, his blood, the spear, the sponge, chunks of his true cross and part of his beard. It was this blazing mystic faith that gave birth to the icons displayed in the galleries designed to resemble the sixth-century churches where they usually hang in all their dubious pedigrees. They were created at a time when the political power of the Christian empire was declining and losing territorial ground, when waves of Crusades failed again and again to rescue the Holy Land from the infidels, a time described by historian William Dalrymple when “the flitting shadows of a hundred upstart emperors, [rose] suddenly through palace coups and disappear[ed] equally rapidly via the assassin’s dagger” (14). Bartholomew, the present Archbishop of Constantinople, explained how “During those difficult and trying hours, the fervor of faith in Christ escalated to new heights, and the pious people of the Empire, more than ever before, placed their hope in God’s assistance…. For consolation, they took refuge in the Most Holy and Comforting Mother of our Lord. In order to draw strength they
looked upon their Crucified Lord and reflected upon the anticipated Resurrection that follows the Cross. Inevitably, therefore, the art of those days was characterized by sorrow and yet by hope.... In ecclesiastical terminology we use the term ‘bright-sadness’...the strength, shelter, consolation, and spiritual reinforcement of a nation, which was in danger and later in bondage” (vii).

As I rushed from one icon to another, a specific period in Philippine history flashed before me, one that gave birth to the most enduring Filipina icon of my times. What was going on in my country from the late 1960s to the early ’70s? What yearnings possessed a nation during those years that Filipinos went to see Nora’s movies with glazed eyes? The nation saw a giant mirror on screen. The immense glass shattered. The real and imagined became one. People went home holding shards of glass. So sharp was the experience that it was no longer enough to just sit in the dark. It altered their lives, this obsession to come as close as possible to the real image, to see it, to touch it, to be convinced, to believe, to survive, to become more alive. The devotion was unprecedented. Before Nora, movie fans were merely onlookers, content to keep their fantasy of the stars on the silver screen or in their wallets with their idols’ Tropicana studio portraits. When Nora came, people kept vigil outside her house. This strange, new breed of movie fans spied on her. Where she went, they went. With whom she was, the fans knew. For the first time, reporters were allowed to enter the living room of a star at any time of the day as they pleased. The cameras flashed as soon as she woke up in her bed, while she ate in a corner, as she came out of the bathroom. They captured her every waking moment, the smiles, the tantrums, the effervescence, the hurt, the buoyancy, the fear, the beads of perspiration on her dark skin. In short, they wanted to see in her the complex reality of their everyday lives and together with it, the assurance, the promise of greater possibilities. And Nora understood them, understood first-hand their undying devotion to her.

Also in 1970, love was in the air. People were breathing its story, capturing it in cinematic living color. After all, it was all about the color of skin. Ferdinand Marcos, the dark-skinned President of the Philippines had fallen hopelessly in love with Dovie Beams, a white, thirty-six-year-old, failed Hollywood actress. They met during the President’s reelection campaign, which included an epic movie based on his fake war exploits. Dovie played the Fil-American lady guerilla whom the President had a fling with during the war. The President was played by Paul Burke, another white American actor. In 1970, the Ferdie and Dovie love affair was rocked by its own notoriety and betrayal. The year before, Dovie went to the US for a dubbing session and, unknown to Marcos, she had taken out of the country cassette-recordings of the President begging Dovie to perform oral sex, and singing Ilocano folk songs post-coitally. She kept the cassettes in a safe together with tufts
of the President’s pubic hair. Although all these would have staggering political consequences for the President, nobody knew it at that time.

And because the Ferdie-Dovie love team kept most Filipinos in the dark, what most people cared about was the other love story: Nora and Tirso’s, also known as Guy and Pip. What they wanted to know was which brand of soap the two were using. Conching Castillo of Tondo wanted to know the secret brand that lathered the union of the dark-skinned girl and the fair-skinned boy. Unlike Ferdie and Dovie, people did incredible things to make sure that no one, nothing, came between Guy and Pip. I read their letters in fan magazines. Adeline Victoria of San Andres lost her appetite. Should they part, Sol Galanta, a student from Baler, Quezon said she would quit school. Worse, Mimmie Carconcito of La Loma, Quezon City, threatened to kill herself. People got sick and at the same time people got cured. In Oriental Mindoro, Baby Sol Abacan, an eleven-year-old, bedridden, epileptic girl with a rheumatic heart claimed that she was healed because of her devotion to Nora and Tirso. She rose and went back to school with one request. She wanted Guy and Pip to sign her report card.

In the mean time, another storm raged. On the morning of 26 January 1970, a mob threw Molotov cocktails at the Palace and rammed Gate Four with a burning fire truck. As water cannons repelled them, President Marcos fled into his car in an attempt to escape 40,000 placard-wielding demonstrators. One of the demonstrators managed to get near the President. The demonstrator, quick to grab the chance, raised his paper mache crocodile and attacked the President with it before Marcos got into the car. It was The First Quarter Storm. Did that day signal a Byzantium of some sort? It was a time of disquiet in the city and bloody wars in the countryside, of feverish hope and devotion borne during desperate times. The television was the fastest-selling appliance in the world. Radiowealth in the Philippines ranked third globally among the pioneering manufacturers of color TV sets. The movies were in living Technicolor. During those times of ebbing political power, were they the equivalent of Byzantine frescoes, murals and panels? Or was the arrival of Nora Aunor, dubbed The Golden Voice, the object of fanaticism and cause of pandemonium merely a coincidence? Was it providential or was it necessary to invent the likes of her?

Imagine sitting in a small dark room illuminated by a burning lamp on an old working table. The task is to paint an icon on a golden background. Imagine Nora as the central image. How does one frame Nora? Does one follow an old practice, a type widespread in Istanbul and Athens hundreds of years ago, in which the Virgin was surrounded by scenes of her own life, her *vita*, attesting to the powers of a dolorous and miraculous life and the icon itself? Standing before the *vita* icons at the Met, I was reminded how among Noranians devotion is reaffirmed by the
recitation of specific scenes from her movies, a number of them recalled in memory of lives snuffed unfairly if not too soon. This woman has grieved over a number of deaths on screen: a younger brother shot in the US military bases, a childhood sweetheart stabbed by fellow jail inmates, a comatose daughter, a younger lover stabbed by robbers. The frames of Nora’s narrative, veiled in sorrow, go on and on, bearing witness to passion and death, underscoring a central mystery of the Christian faith: the incarnation of God through the agency of a woman who kisses and laments, who swaddles us at birth and shrouds our mortality.

I grew up with religious images in my grandfather’s house. Our upstairs bedroom had a wall-sized, built-in altar with a huge laminated icon, a familiar type of the Virgin holding the Christ Child. It had no scenery in the background, just a flat golden patina. Cast shadows were missing and the garments that draped mother and son were stiff. I didn’t like it as a child. I expected good art to be always closer to reality, to jump out at me. How could this art inspire affective devotion? But I saw the image again and again in churches, in other people’s houses, in books. It was not until I saw the original icons at the Met that I understood how it all began and how the image was passed on. A legend: the evangelist Luke was supposed to have painted the Virgin’s portrait himself, in her presence. For hundreds of years, the image was kept and passed on and depicted countless times until it became an indisputable icon of faith and power. Believed to have been miraculously instrumental in the Christian empire’s victories in times of war, it spawned a cult following. Every Tuesday in Constantinople, a hereditary confraternity of singers in scarlet robes carried the image of the Virgin holding the Christ child in a procession before the great crowd of pilgrims. The singers in red have mastered the art of supporting the panel, which by then had grown so huge. They tilted it from side to side, inclining the spectacular panel to individuals in the crowd thronging with singing venerators and vendors. Later, as the images negotiated the demands of historical change, it flourished in small scale too, as personal icons. From huge icons that received conventional forms of devotion – a bow, a kiss, a surge of contemplative recognition – personal icons engaged the devotee into a more intimate space of prayer as devotional aids, protection against evil, and repositories of hope and miraculous expectations.

Now imagine the Byzantine faithful with a power to walk unseen into the future. Imagine for a moment our world as seen through their eyes. Hundreds or a thousand years later, what would they make of our strange devotion to the evolution of the image? They’d probably recognize something familiar in the way we enter the house of images, that familiar uncertainty conjured in darkness. And yet they would not be able to comprehend, it would terrify them even, how we have captured the image through glass and transformed it into light so that it’s able to cross time and space like a star, beamed on a giant panel or a small sacred
box where the image flickers, moves, and even speaks to the illuminated devotees. Still, a number of the Byzantine pilgrims would probably discern and marvel how it has remained the same, how across the ages, we have made the truth and the lies behind the images serve us, war after war, revolution after revolution, as realities and prophecies, as half-truths and perfect lies. In short, what would they make of this thing we call cinema?

And they would also wonder: what happened to the Virgin, the tender and compassionate one who presses her cheeks on her son’s, whose eyes gaze mournfully with noble restraint into the distance as if foreseeing her child’s Passion at the cross, while the child looks sadly up at her as if recognizing her future grief? The Virgin, where did she end up? Somewhere in an archipelago in the Far East, where islanders live with the gaping wounds of their oppressed history, people kindle the image of a small woman with dolorous eyes. There are those who worship her legendary image, professing the most penetrating sorrow in her orphic eyes, those celestial gems that reflect and reserve grief for the islander’s misfortunes. They are unable to turn away from the eyes that sought to commiserate with or commemorate the days of their lives, her life, as itemized by critic Patrick Flores: “depression, triumph, abuse, corruption, wealth, capitulations, conspiracies, poverty, bad luck, blessings, bloody battles for custody and identity, strained relations with family and children, adventures with body and spirit, addiction to bad habits, apathy, ectopic pregnancies, failed marriages, separations, resounding returns, ominous visits, wayward flights.”

The Byzantine faithful would probably note how this woman’s cult was similarly born at a time of rage and disquiet in the islands, how her embattled journey negotiated faith and power from the hands of one emperor to another. Her devotees surround themselves with personal icons kept in discs, a thousand suns that beam her image in strange streaks of light. Across seas in strange lands, the pilgrims of the future are never lost, never alone. They invoke secret characters and passwords at the gates of sacred sites and all at once, souls across great distances are suddenly in spiritual communion. Imagine the ghostly Byzantine devotees holding a candle over the shoulders of these islanders that glow with a familiar faith. Imagine them holding the flame closer to the worshipped specter, inspecting the mole on her cheek. Up close, the pixilated digitized details appear like Byzantine mosaic. Imagine them mystified, whispering, “Is she, this dark woman called Nora Aunor, truly the one and only?”
6.

We listened as Nora recalled three dreams, the early divinations from her childhood. We sat in the living room area of her suite on the 26th floor of the hotel. In front of us were leftovers of our lunch packs, rice with *sinigang na baboy* and barbecued pork. We were talking about Nora’s films and I mentioned that my favorites were *Bakit Bughaw ang Langit*, *’Merika* and *Bona*. Bona did not require much work she said. She used to be a movie fan; her own life story embodied the character. “Iyong Himala. Ako rin iyon. Bata pa kasi ako, malikot na ang imahinasyon ko,” like Elsa, the faith healer who claimed to have witnessed an apparition of the Virgin. “Madalas noong bata ako, mahilig akong tumingin sa holen.” She would raise the marble to the blinding sun, peer through the glass ball’s cat’s eyes and see magical worlds. “Kung ano-ano ang nakikita ko.” Like most children who grew up in extreme poverty, imagination was a convenient refuge. She grew up in a cramped one-room wooden house, “*hinati lang para may tulugan sa kabila,*” raised on stilts to protect the family from the periodic floods of the rising river, which also served as their “public toilet.” The waters of Iriga made life difficult but she managed to stay afloat. “Madalas akong napapagalitan kasi gustong-gusto kong lumalangoy sa ilalim ng bahay.” She did not only escape its devastating wrath but also found in the waters, the means to survive, to put food on the table by selling bottles of drinking water at the train station.12


She walked barefoot. One time she bought a bag of rice from her earnings and on her way home, she fell and dropped the bag. She scooped the scattered contents down to the last grain and brought home their staple food mixed with dirt. “*Ang sama sama ng loob ko noon kasi pinagalitan pa ako. Tapos ang ulam lang namin iyong pinagluto lang mantika.*” Life was so hard that even as a child she considered ending her young life. “*Nagpunta ako sa simbahan tapos nagdasal ako at saka nagisip kung paano kaya kayangan mamatay na hindi masyadong masakit.*”14

Raised by a devout Catholic family who prayed the rosary everyday, Nora, as a child, turned to the holy figures at times when poverty also meant wrestling with the fear of being left alone. “*Pag naiiwan na akong kumain na mag-isa, ang palagi kong ini-imagine noon, kaharap ko silang kumain. Tatlo sila....*” She was referring to the Sagrada Familia. She pointed at the three of us, Albert, Leonel and me, “*Ayan. Parang kayo. Ganyan. Kahirap ko.*” The thought terrified me: a poor child eating supper alone, guarded by an imagined family in resplendent robes, haloed. “*Bihira ko ngang kinukuwento ito,*” she said. “*Baka kasi kung ano ang isipin ng ibang tao.*”15
And then she told us the story – how her constant imaginings, to escape the harsh daily grinds of life, took on a different form, like visions that spoke to her in her sleep. “Hindi ba noong bata kayo, meron iyong unang panaginip na talagang naaalala niyo at hindi niyo makalimutan? Ako meron. Tatlo. Sunod-sunod iyon.”6 In her first dream, God handed her a crown of thorns. “Iyon siguro ang mga paghihirap na daranasin ko,” she said. She remembered the second dream like a movie, a “long shot” of a tree-lined horizon where she saw herself peacefully lying on a hammock as an angel descended from the heavens. The last dream was straight Bergman. She saw herself three times, all at the same time. She stood in front of a coffin mourning her own body. Hovering above was a mysterious presence she couldn’t place. “Pero alam ko, ako iyon. Ako din iyong nakalutang.” Life, death and resurrection. These all happened before Tawag ng Tanghalan, the national singing contest that changed her life. The dreams persisted long after her phenomenal rise to fame. She dreamed of ascending verdant hills, rewarded upon reaching the top with heavenly vistas. She recalled them as if she could still see them, her eyes wide surveying a vast landscape, as if she could die right there while telling us the story. She dreamed of the Virgin Mary who spoke to her lengthily in Tagalog. Unfortunately, all she could remember was a reminder to pray the rosary. It was indescribable, she exclaimed. “Basta ang ganda-ganda-ganda!” she said of this radiant face. She could not recall her features but she remembers waking up from these dreams, unable to move and feeling an incredible lightness as if the dreams had lifted her body inches above the bed. Later, a group of Marian devotees came and asked her to lead their flock. “Kaya lang nagdalawang-isip ako. Paano na ang mga bisyo ko?” she said as the room ringed with our laughter. Sometimes the dreams were ominous. Before her father died, she saw him in her dreams, standing in front of four empty graves. She ran to the graves but her father held her back. Suddenly, a giant block of stone fell from the skies and landed on one of the empty graves. “Tatlo na ang namatay sa pamilya ko. Si Papa, si Mama at si Kuya. Apat iyong hukay. Siguro may isa pang susunod.”7

“Noong araw, maraming mga fans ang nagregalo sa akin ng Santo Niño. Lahat iyon nawala. Isa lang ang natira.”8 She was referring to the miraculous Holy Child, the one that remained as she lost possessions in her restless move from one house to another. Before her separation from ex-husband Christopher de Leon, she dreamed that the Santo Niño’s image split into two, a double image, like a visible soul floating next to the statue. Holding its first three fingers pointing up (to symbolize the Blessed Trinity) and the last two fingers folded (to symbolize the two natures of Christ, divine and human), the icon smiled and muttered to Nora in her dreams – “Orapronobis, Orapronobis, Orapronobis....”

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7. “Kaya lang nagdalawang-isip ako. Paano na ang mga bisyo ko?”

Some time ago Nora learned that a fan was writing a script for her entitled “Kulto.”

“Ang hinahanap ko nga,” Albert said, “iyong isang baranggay na nabalitaan ko na sumasamba daw kay Nora Aunor.”

“Ang tanong diyan,” Leonel wondered, “sino iyong fan na nagbigay nong Santo Niño?”

7.

I stood transfixed at the heart of the Byzantium exhibit. My tour ended in front of one icon I sought fervently, the Man of Sorrows.

Another legend: in the 6th century, while Pope Gregory the Great was saying Mass, he saw a startlingly clear vision of the postmortem Christ. It appeared as the pope knelt and raised the host facing the altar, a terrifying movie projected on the wall. Deeply moved, he decreed that devotees worship a depiction of the image while praying the Our Father and Hail Mary on their knees fifteen times. Those who did would be rewarded 14,000 years of pardon. By the 12th century the image itself had developed a strong following. Its cult grew with the wounding of Francis de Assisi whose stigmata was revered by many of the saint’s mendicant followers. Angela of Foligno couldn’t bear the sight of the postmortem Christ. “Fever possessed me and I trembled” (31). Its terrible power became so renowned that Franciscans had to hide it from her. The image, called Akra Tapeinosis or Utmost Humiliation was later known in the West as the Man of Sorrows. It was kept at the Saint Catherine Monastery in Mount Sinai until a military pilgrim took it back with him to Europe along with the finger of Saint Catherine. It was kept at the Basilica di Santa Croce in Rome where it stayed for hundreds of years. It arrived in our time from Rome to New York where the rest of the world lined up to see it for the first time – 1,500 years after the Man of Sorrows first appeared in a vision to a pope saying Mass.

I followed a long line of tourists, museum visitors, and the others who have stood before the ages – popes, emperors, devotees, soldiers, mystics, revolutionaries, pilgrims, alchemists, heretics, and scholars. It was my turn to view it up close and my time was running out. I moved my face closer to the glass case and waited for the mist of my breathing to clear. The hinged doors of the wooden case hung open, 38 x 24 inches, revealing a small 5 x 7 mosaic icon of Christ, half-body, dead but upright, the tiles chipped from colored stones, silver and gold. More
than half of the background tiles had fallen off but the tiles used to assemble the image of Christ himself were intact. The head, slumped to one side, and the thin arms were disproportionate to the immense square of the torso, an invitation to meditate on parts rather than the whole: the protruding breastbone, the thin neat arc of blood that gushed from the wounded rib cage, the wounded hands folded over the emaciated vault of the abdomen. It felt like a succession of infinite doors that kept opening one after another until you reach the dark sanctuary of a scourged heart. There was no escaping the black holes of personal shame and betrayals, the secret country of the wounded self.

Like the vision of the mystic Theresa of Avila, I was pierced with “a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated my entrails…. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one can not possibly wish it to cease…” (210). It gripped me. It made me feel small. It kept me from breaking. It was chemical, a cleansing, a conversion of elements, a burning purification. I was about to cross a thin line but my brain kept sending warning signals. If I cross that line I will be haunted by a need to validate the experience and the consequent peril of confession. One makes a choice to be the voice, a voice. Choosing – a word that translates to *haireisis* or *haireithai* in Greek, the root word for heresy.

More than a hundred tiny compartments were carved on the wooden case frame and hinged doors. Lodged in each compartment were relics of saints, individually wrapped in silk and labeled. Clumps of hair, bone fragments and shreds of clothing, all housed together with the image of the dead Christ – a shared devotion, a defiance. I imagined my own personal history of devotion lodged like a bone fragment. What stories of defiance would it tell?

“Tell me,” Nora urged as she pulled me away from the others. This was the morning after her concert in Atlantic City. We stood along the hotel driveway waiting for her car. She held me and assured me that it was okay, I could tell her. I said I couldn’t, it’s a long story. How could I even begin to explain where I was coming from, and why I took this journey to follow her? The car pulled over. She let go of my hand. And just like that, the moment passed. No stories. Nora drove away and I was left cradling the weight of a past, of stories untold that grows heavier and darker with each untelling.

8.

The car inched on a bumper-to-bumper crawl. Albert sat in front with the driver. I was in the backseat with Nora. We had a plane to catch. The last word arched. To catch. As if departure was a ball you grab mid-air, demanding sharp
skill and focus on a split-second chance, as if the same laws of physics governed
the traveler. He misses it and he’s stuck. What happens when a pilgrim fails to
return home? We were halfway to the airport when we got a call informing us that
we were going to the wrong airport. The original point of departure was Newark,
and then it was changed to JFK, and then no, sorry, it was Newark after all. It was
a miscommunication. But we were already on our way to JFK and we couldn’t turn
around because we were stuck in the rush-hour traffic. Albert made frantic calls
and sent text messages. Could we make it on time? Nora had to be in Vegas for a
show while I had to leave for Bangkok the following day. Nora was unperturbed.
She’s used to departures and arrivals. She was once a dutiful child who woke up
before dawn, who stood below a cinder sky holding bottles of boiled drinking water,
waiting for the paling of darkness, for the earth to grumble and herald a terrifying
sound and the blinding beam of light.

I tracked down Nora from the slums of Caloocan to downtown Manhattan, my
relentless pursuit strictly moving along fixed tracks. Was it mere coincidence that
my journey began in the slums where Mandy Diaz, her most devoted fan, lived – in
a piece of land owned by the Philippine National Railways? Nothing derailed me all
the way to the subways of New York City and sometimes I wonder if I would ever
get off this moving train. Nora never did. The railroad tracks simply turned into
undulations in the grooves of a phonograph record, and then later into negative
strips with sprocket holes running along film tracks. Perhaps my devotion to Nora
lies in my faith in tracks. Its ridges mark, hold and align over that which we otherwise
have no control. The promise of shining ribbons on a fixed route beckoned us to
dig deep into our emotional and spiritual wallets. We bought tickets with loose
coins of desperate faiths. Now boarding. Now showing. In 1895, moviemaking
started with a series of actualities that included the Lumiere brothers’ “The Arrival
of a Train at La Ciotat Station,” one of the first moving images on screen. The train
pulled into the station. More than one hundred years ago, people inside the theater
cried. The train seemed to move towards them. They ducked. “Everything begins
with that moment,” wrote critic Susan Sontag (118). A Filipino knew this by heart:
Nora’s train pulled away from real life before it made its cinematic transition.

“There’s an accident,” the driver said, rousing me back to the present, the sun
glaring on the windshield. It took a while to register. We all seemed to have drifted
off and were just waking up to the reality that we were still stuck in traffic. I checked
my companions. Nora squinted. The world outside gleamed with white light as if
we had just woken up into another dream. It was hard to tell whether we were
crossing a bridge or driving along the freeway. From a distance we saw it. A car had
crashed on the railing. Highway patrols were already on the site to get the traffic
moving. I couldn’t tell which direction the wrecked car was going. It seemed to
have veered off, angled against the traffic lane. Did it turn around? Did somebody die?

The traffic picked up pace past the accident site. Nora moved closer to me. I offered my right shoulder. She tilted her head and rested on it, eyes closed. I stared at the road ahead, not breathing. The intimacy caught me off-guard. The object of my devotion, my pilgrimage icon, the most enduring star of Philippine cinema was leaning on my shoulder, taking a nap. I would not move, I told myself. No, not an inch. I’d deal with the muscle ache later, the stiff shoulder. I didn’t want her to wake up. We remained in that position for a while until I gave in to the urge to turn my head a bit towards her. Looking down from the corner of my eyes, I saw her heaving chest. The intrusion bothered me, watching Nora unguarded in her sleep. At the same time I was thrilled. I could safely look at her and she would not look back at me. If this was how far my head could turn without waking her, if those rising and falling mounds were all I’d see for the rest of the trip, if I could just meditate on the breathing mysteries bosomed in between, then this contemplative journey would all be worth it. I inched my head a bit so I could gaze at her face too, the one that loomed over my life in giant screens. I looked down into this ravine and inspected the vertical undulations of her weathered landscape: the straight overhang of her coy nose, the thin lips cracked like baked earth, the skin without makeup. I didn’t turn away from the puffiness, her spectral complexion, the sepalchral sockets. I beheld the core composition of this star reduced to ashes and carbon. In the universal order of birth and death, I have defied distance to reach it, its light still traveling, reaching us thousands of years and stellar lifetimes late. She sat upright like the post-mortem Man of Sorrows, her head also tilted on one side, hands neatly folded on her lap. My gaze rappelled down her left cheek and stopped on her mole. In the film *Bakit May Kahapon Pa?* she claimed that it was Yahweh’s mark, identifying her as the chosen one. Nora’s arrival in New York the week before coincided with an astronomical event. As her flight approached the city, New Yorkers looked up in the sky and witnessed something no one alive in the world had ever seen. For the first time in 122 years, Venus made its transit between the earth and the sun. As the plane descended at JFK airport, people looked up and watched Venus crossing the sun in slow motion for six hours, “like a mole on a solar cheek,” reported the New York Times. In *Himala*, another astronomical event foreshadowed the faith healer’s penumbrous power to heal and deceive. It disrupted lives, including Orly’s, the filmmaker. What powers were at play here?

Stories. We’re all storytellers. Elsa and Orly, Nora and me. We acquiesced before the image, wove stories around them and in doing so, staked our claim on the world around us. As a child, Elsa invented stories. She told others that she played with angels so they would stop picking on her. Now we know that our stories also have the power to take on a life of its own, jolting us with stinging ironies and strange
epiphanies. They bounce back like the ultrasonic cries of bats that echolocate to help these flying mammals find their place in the world. And what about Orly? What did the filmmaker believe in the end? “Hindi siya naniniwala sa himala,” scriptwriter Ricky Lee said. “Pero naniniwala siya kay Elsa.”

“There’s no miracle in Bokino, of course, no miracle in the religious sense,” wrote Ken Kalfus in his novel *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*. “But think, son, of the genius who first came up with this deception.... Consider the entire structure of myth, superstition, and faith, and especially storytelling that makes such a deception possible. That’s genius, that’s the closest we’ll ever get to divinity” (39).

As the road signs led us closer to the airport, I focused my gaze on Nora’s hands, the dark skin, the pore patterns, the thin fingers. At the tip of her right index finger, I noticed what first appeared like a thin line, about half a centimeter long. It was a tiny cut, a small gaping wound inviting me to see the pink rawness of the flesh inside.

Outside the airport terminal, I sat alone on the sidewalk next to cart depot. Through the glass walls I could see Nora lining up at the check-in counter. Next to me on the pavement was the massive catalogue of the Byzantium exhibit and the framed posters Nora bought for me. I pulled out a handy cassette recorder from my pocket. Before we left the hotel, Nora locked herself in the bathroom and taped a message for me. I lit a cigarette, held the speaker close to my ear and pressed play.


*Mahal na mahal kita. Hindi ko makakilala yung pangarap mo ng malayo para lamang ako mapanood. At saka sana huwag mo na lang ako ituring na isang artista.*

Sana huwag ka nang malungkot. Huwag mong hahayaan ang sarili mo na bigyan ng kalungkutan ang sarili mo. Kailangan lagi tayong masaya. Mag-ingat ka sa byahe....”

I’m not sure how long I sat on the pavement. I pressed rewind and listened to Nora over and over, her voice drowning the noise of planes taking off in the night sky.
Notes

1. “Let those breathe for a while.”

2. “And when you travel, you leave something behind.”

3. Sinigang is soup with meat and vegetables, made sour from fruit, usually tamarind. Sinugba is the Cebuano word for grilled and is also the source of the name “Cebu.”


5. “I just finished smoking [a cigarette].”


7. “They don’t know that my wealth isn’t in terms of money. My wealth is in people. Those whom I love and who love me as well.”

8. Tawag ng Tanghalan originated on radio but had migrated to live television by the time Nora Aunor became a contestant (see GMA Gold). Little Shop of Horrors, the musical, is based on Roger Corman’s film The Little Shop of Horrors (1960).

9. “Kayo po ba si Nora Aunor?” is “Are you Nora Aunor?” “Kamukha ko lang po” is “I only look like her.” “Kayo nga! Kayo si Nora Aunor!” is “It’s you! You are Nora Aunor!” “Diyos ko si Nora nga!” is “My God it really is Nora!” “Kumusta na po kayo?” is “How are you?”

10. “Ang ganda ano? Gusto mo?” is “It’s beautiful, isn’t it? Do you want it?” “Mahilig ka pala diyan. Pareho kayo ni Direk. Iyon, pati kisame may poster” is “So you’re fond of those. You’re just like Direk. Even his ceiling has posters.”

11. During the controversy, her given name was spelled “Dovie”; in her only near-major Hollywood project, John Landis’s The Kentucky Fried Movie (1977), she was billed as “Dovie Boehms.”

12. “Iyong Himala. Ako rin iyon. Bata pa kasi ako, malikot na ang imahinasyon ko” is “[The character] in Himala. That was also me. When I was young, I had an unruly imagination.” “Madalas noong bata ako, mahilig akong tumingin sa holen” is “Often when I was young, I loved peering into game marbles.” “Kung ano-ano ang nakikita ko” is “I would see many [imaginary] things.” “Hinati lang para may tulugan sa kabila” is “[The room was divided so we could have a sleeping
quarter.” “Madalas akong napapagalitan kasi gustong-gusto kong lumalangoy sa ilalim ng bahay” is “I got scolded often because I enjoyed swimming under the house.”

13. “We’d pump water from an underground well. Boil it. Then pour it into empty containers. That was hard work. No time [for rest]. Whenever a train arrived, even at three in the morning, we had to be ready.”

14. “Ang sama-sama ng loob ko noon kasi pinagalitan pa ako. Tapos ulam lang namin iyong pinaglutang mantika” is “I felt really awful because [in addition to the accident] I got scolded. Then our viand consisted of leftover cooking oil.” “Nagpunta ako sa simbahan tapos nagdasal ako at saka nag-isip kung paano kayang mamatay na hindi masyadong masakit” is “I went to church and prayed and then I wondered how I could kill myself without suffering too much.”

15. “Pag naiiwan na ako na kumain na mag-isa, ang palagi kong ini-imagine noon, kaharap ko silang kumain. Tatlo sila…” is “When I was left to dine alone, I would imagine them before me. They were three…” “Ayan. Parang kayo. Ganyan. Kaharap ko” is “There. Like you. Just like that. In front of me.” “Bihiro ko ngang kinukuwento ito. Baka kasi kung ano ang isipin ng ibang tao” is “I rarely tell this [to anyone]. I don’t want other people to get the wrong impression.”

16. “Don’t we all, as children, have a dream we remember and can’t forget? I did. Three [of them]. One after the other.”

17. “Iyon siguro ang mga paghihirap na daranasin ko” is “I guess those were the sufferings I had to endure.” “Pero alam ko, ako iyong. Ako din iyong nakalutang” is “But I know, that was me. I was also the one afloat.” “Basta ang ganda-ganda-ganda!” is “She was just so very beautiful!” “Kaya lang nagdalawang-isip ako. Paano na ang mga bisyo ko?” is “But then I hesitated. How will I give up my vices?” “Tatlo na ang namatay sa pamilya ko. Si Papa, si Mama at si Kuya. Apat iyong hukay. Siguro may isa pang susunod” is “Three [people] have already died in my family. Father, Mother, and Elder Brother. There were four graves. Maybe one more will follow [them].”

18. “In the past, many fans would give me Santo Niño [statuettes] as presents. All of those were lost. Only one was left.”

19. “Erap [deposed Philippine President Joseph Estrada, a movie actor-producer who had an extra-marital affair with Aunor] saw [the statuette] crying. He ran to me. He said the Santo Niño was crying. That’s why he stopped battering me. [He got] scared.”
20. “Kulto” is “Cult.” “Ang hinahanap ko nga iyong isang baranggay na nabalitaan ko na sumasamba daw kay Nora Aunor” is “What I’m searching for is the native village [whose members] I heard would worship Nora Aunor.” “Ang tanong diyan sino iyong fan na nagbigay nong Santo Niño?” is “The real question [is] who’s the fan who gave [her] the Santo Niño?”

21. An additional footnote remarks that “We have slightly altered the English translation in Angela 1993, p. 131.”

22. “He doesn’t believe in miracles. But he believes in Elsa.”

23. “Hi Willi. You know I’m not used to doing this. Because, I know, I’m not an expert in talking. But whatever I utter right now, that comes straight from my heart.

“Remember that even if we don’t meet often my love abides. I know you feel the same for me. I hope we never allow this love between us to die. Wherever I am, all the support you provide, the love, everything, I’ll never ever forget. Rest assured that whatever I can give in return for your happiness, I’ll extend to the best of my ability.

“I hope that whatever your dream is in life we can help each other reach it. That’s why you better start whatever it was you trained for. Somehow we might be able to find a way to realize that. I’d want you to finish the story we told you to write. Let’s show everyone that that’s where your talent lies. Don’t stifle it. Don’t ignore it even when you’re alone. Whatever you have in mind go ahead and do it.

“I love you very much. I’ll never forget how you traveled great distances just to watch me. And please stop regarding me as a star. We’re family. Siblings. Helping, loving [each other]. Everyone should be able to see that in us.

“I hope you get over your loneliness. Don’t allow yourself to get you down. We should always be happy. Take care on your journey....”
Works Cited


