GREETINGS FROM SACRED MOUNTAIN

translation of “Pangangamusta mula sa Balaan Bukid”

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

About the Translator
Michelle Tiu Tan took up her MA in Creative Writing (Prose) at the University of East Anglia, where she was awarded the Southeast Asian Bursary and a Dissertation Distinction. She has been published in the Philippines Graphic and Philippines Free Press. Her short story “Her Afternoon Lives” won Second Place in the 2012 Nick Joaquin Literary Awards.
BEYOND MEANING: TRANSLATION AS NEGOTIATION OF SPACE, VOICE, AND LANGUAGE

Michelle Tiu Tan

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

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

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

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

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

No single rule applies to all cases, but in translating Gen’s stories I often leaned toward the latter. It doesn’t always make for smooth reading, but I believe the point is not to make the text seem like it was written originally in English, but to make it more accessible even while leaving traces of the original language, reminders of the text’s otherness.
But how much obscurity is allowed, and at what point does it become too much? This I am unable to answer—and I suspect will never be able to answer—except by saying that I mostly rely on instinct. It is during these moments, perhaps, that translation is most like writing: simple only when dictated by instinct.

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

At least, this is what I had aimed to accomplish with “Greetings from Sacred Mountain.” It is my hope that the form I have given the text—and the voice I lent it—will help enrich the reader’s experience, and simultaneously add to and complement the original.
TRANSLATION AS SPACE OF ACTIVE LISTENING: ON MICHELLE TIU TAN’S TRANSLATION TO ENGLISH OF MY SHORT STORY “PANGANGAMUSTA MULA SA BALAAN BUKID” (“GREETINGS FROM SACRED MOUNTAIN”)

Genevieve L. Asenjo

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

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

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

I would like to think that what she refers as “instinct” is her act of tenderness: that decision to retain the voice of the original while making it accessible in another language characterized by the fluidity and succinctness of her own prose. Again, as attention to a different cadence, temperament, and set of tendencies, translation is thus an expansion of our understanding, and I hope, appreciation, of our multilingual identity and rich tradition of verbal arts attempted here through narrative design and framing of movement in “time and space.”
Her attention and active listening added her own voice in this story, the “creation of the new.” We became the “somebody” for each other. Here, the Visayan komposo becomes the Tagalog kundiman, which could also be the Korean arirang, and the Arabic’s ballad. Translation encircles us in the community of readers and listeners, and it pleases me to think that it saves us from solipsism and parochialism.
PANGANGAMUSTA MULA SA BALAAN BUKID

I.

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

Simulan natin sa nakaraan.


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


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


Nagugutom na talaga s’ya. Ang sarap na humigop ng mainit na sabaw. Kahit ano basta pagkaing Pinoy! ‘Yun at nadakip ng kanyang mga mata ang isang sipi ng saging na rikondal. Malulusog at kumikinang na dilaw, nag-aanyaya ng pagtatap na salita. Nagugot na s’ya sa pitaka ng bulsa ng pantalon nang may mga kamay na bumuhat sa isang sipi nitong saging na rikondal. Isang dalaga.

At dito nagsisimula ang ilang kuwento tungkol sa kanila.


Sa pagpapatuloy nitong kuwento tungkol sa kanilang unang engkuwentro, masasabi na ang tawa na ‘yun ng dalaga, tawagin natin sa pangalang Fatima, ang matamis na bagay na nagtulak kay Mark para masabi n’ya sa sarili na, “Sige na nga, sa kanya na ang saging, tutal, akalain mo ba naman, gusto rin pala ng mga Arabo
Asenjo / Greetings from Sacred Mountain


<http://kritikakultura.ateneo.net>


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

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

II.

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

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


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

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

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

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

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

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


Nainis s’ya sa sarili, sa pag-asa na ganuon lang kadali maangkin ang sagot sa pinagkaiba ng kahoy na olibo sa kahoy ng higera, tulad ng akala n’ya na matawid nila ni Fatima ang distansya sa pagitan ng Jordan, Palestine at ng Iloilo, Philippines sa pag-akyat nila sa bundok na ’yun ng Dungducheon.
“Greetings from the hills!” Ito ang sigaw ni Fatima nang marating nila ang tuktok ng bundok, kaharap ang direksyon ng North Korea. Animo’y nangginginig ang buong katawan ng dalaga, sa lusog nito, sa kulot nitong buhok na nakalugay sa mga balikat at malulungkot na mga mata kahit pa na parang bata itong naghuhumiyaw.


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

Napangisi si Mark sa pagkaaliw sa harap na habang naaalala ito ngayon (ganito rin ang kanyang ngisi nang maikwento n’ya ito sa akin). Huminga s’ya nang malalim. Nakapameywang s’ya ng humarap sa direksyon ng simbahang kanilang bayan, ang parokya ni Sto. Tomas de Villanueva. Muli s’yang napangiti, na isa ring pagkaaliw higit kay sa pangungutyan, sa pakiramdam sa lugar na malapit, sa pag-iisip na narito ang simbahang pinagmamalaki sa buong mundo, dinadayo ng mundo. Tatlong taon sa Korea, at sa araw ng kanyang pag-uwi, sa paglilibot sa bayan, para s’yang hinitigop ng lupa sa pakiramdam na walang nagbagsak: ang mukha at pangalan ng mga tinitanong at lugar na malapit, sa pag-iisip na nagbaling at ng buong bayan, ang daan pawi sa kanila sa Mat-y. Habang umaalingawngaw sa kanyang pandinig ang bagsak ng mga heels ng kababaihan sa Seoul, ang pagmamadali na langit sa escalator, sa subway, sa mga kalye; ang halos hindi nagtatapos sa burol ng mga obrero sa mga bilding na parang ari na sa langit at nangangako ng iba at mas masaganang kinabukasan, wala namang pagmamadali sa kanilang bayan. Dahil ba may kinukupkop itong
sariling integridad at dangal sa itinuturing nito't pinaniniwalaanang kasaysayan? Ngunit hindi sila pinapalaya sa kahirapan ng ganda ng simbahang ito, maging ng magiting na kasaysayan ng kanilang bayan.


Kay Fatima lamang nakipag-date si Mark, kung masasabi ngang date ang kanilang pag-akyat sa bundok na ‘yun ng Dungduceon, at ang kanyang pagbalik-balik sa Itaewon. Si Mark na mapang-uyam sa mga bilyo ng mga nakikilala naming Pinay sa Hyewa na nagpaparinig na cute s’ya at mabait.

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


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

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

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

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


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


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

III.


Sa oras na ‘yun, sa mula naming pagkita, nalaman ko na isa na s’yang machine operator sa pabrika ng optical lenses. Siyam silang Pinoy, dalawang Tsino, puro Koreano na ang iba. “Mas magaan kumpara sa dati nating obra, pero mas mataas din ang risgo sa katawan ng kemikal,“ sabi niya. Mula alas nuebe sa umaga hanggang alas sahara sa buwan ng pagtawag niya, at 40 oras na lang ang kailangan n’yang kumpletuhin. Higit sa lahat, hindi naman s’ya sa isang container van tumutuloy kundi sa isang kuwarto na talaga, na may sahig na kung tawagin ay ondol, na umuinit tuwing taglamig. Dalawang Pinoy ang kasama n’ya.
Binalita rin n’ya na volunteer s’ya sa asosasyon ng mga manggagawang Pinoy. Ang totoo, papunta s’ya sa kanilang miting. Naging abala raw s’ya simula nang pagbalik n’ya sa pakikipagkita hindi lamang sa mga kapwa Pinoy kundi gayundin sa mga Pakistani, Nepalese, Koreano at oo, mga Palestino. May malakas daw na grupo ng mga Koreano mismo at Palestino na nag-o-organisa ng pondong at naggapabalita ng mga kwento ng buhay tungo sa pag-unawa ng sitwasyon ng mga lahi na biktima ng g’yera, gayundin ang pagsulong ng pagpapabuti ng kondisyon ng mga manggagawang dayuhan sa Korea.

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

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

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

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

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

Sino ang maniwala, ang malinlang nila? Sa klase ako nang magrehistro sa aking
cellphone ang tawag ni Mark nang gabing ‘yun. Naka-mute ang aking cellphone
pero naka-on ang vibration mode. Tinanggap ko ang kanyang tawag. Ewan kung
masasabi ko na marahil ‘yun ang aking trahedya: ang pananalig sa aking kutob at
pagganap ng aking papel bilang kaibigan at kababayan. May pagmamadali sa
kanyang noses. May pagmamalaki rin. Na nariyan s'ya, naroob, sa malaking rally na
‘yun sa Gwanghamun kontra sa human rights violation ng gobyerno ng SOKOR at
kasama nila ang mga kilalang aktibistang Koreano at marami pang lahi. Tulad lang
na talagang aktibista s’ya at isa itong dangal. Kung anuman daw, ako na ang bahala
sa pagbabalita sa kanyang familya.

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

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

Ano'ng swerte, ano'ng lungkot, at ano'ng lagablab sa aking isipan ng
pangangailangang ikamusta ito kay Fatima! “Tingnan mo Fatima, tingnan mo ang
ginawa mo kay Mark!” Ngunit narinig ko rin kaagad ang sagot, sa kalawakan ng
pandinig ko mismo: “I pass by your name.” Ang totoo, isa itong sikat na kanta ng
Arabong mang-aawit na si Marcel Khalife. Si Fatima mismo ang nagsabi nito, sabay
dugtong na pakinggan namin sa YouTube. Gayun at ganuon nga ang ginawana namin ni Mark. Para kaming mga batang gutom at uhaw sa lahat ng bagay na Arabo na ipinakilala sa amin ni Fatima.

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


GREETINGS FROM SACRED MOUNTAIN

I.

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

Let us begin with the past.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And this is where their stories begin.

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

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

But before this, we can also say that he and Fatima have already exchanged cellphone numbers. How much of this is true, this bolt of thrill between them, in the simplest English roping them together, is not for me to judge. Because I fully
believe in the events of that afternoon, on that precise Sunday: Fatima serving a cup of jasmine tea with honey (you decide on the pronunciation) for Mark, who to this day, now, remains haunted by her laughter and the smell and taste of that jasmine tea with honey, at an Arab restaurant in Itaewon.

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

II.

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

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

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

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

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

He was able to decide with Fatima’s help. Like clothing, her words became to him like a second layer of skin. And now, what is this rebellion rising in his blood? And the scent of jasmine immersed in hot water with a drop of honey—this is what he smells in his sweat!
I have already mentioned that this was what Fatima served him, that Sunday he headed over to that restaurant in Itaewon where she worked. It is near Hyewa. Here in Itaewon lies a row of western or foreign restaurants and shops, because as you know, if you have been to Seoul, almost everything is written in their alphabet, from their food to their clothes—in everything that strengthens their currency, the won.

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

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

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

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

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

This is how the Israelis greet them from the hills: by burning their olive trees. This was why Fatima's mother sent her to an aunt who owned a restaurant in Itaewon,
after she became active in the organization of a group through the internet, the Friends of the Homeless. She said many Palestinians go home to tents in the desert.

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

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

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

What lure does the difference between them hold, that it became the passage for their exchange of stories? Only to Fatima, Mark confessed that we went home to a container van. Only to Fatima, he related the difficulty of our work: each bundle of books, around 10–15 pieces weighing around 10–15 kilos. This constituted an entire afternoon of lifting and manual cutting on the machine. Enduring heat,
enduring even cold because only a tent roofed our working site. On top of this, we also picked up material twice a week from publishing houses in Seoul, as well as from neighboring cities.

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

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

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

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

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

Yet what carried more allure was the way her mind worked. She believed, for example, that it was senseless to hope for the union of Israel and Palestine, as well
as of South Korea and North Korea. And wasn’t this also the case for Christian and Muslim Filipinos? All the more with America there, she argued, continuing to act like some god atop a mountain, dictating to many countries what they should do for themselves, which is why China, Cuba, and several Arab nations grind their teeth.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

III.

That was also a Sunday afternoon, the month of October, seven months after he went home to Iloilo, when he called my cellphone, almost two weeks since he returned to Korea. We met, like before, beside Woori Bank. I was already working in Ilsan then, at a hagwon. This is what they call a small private school for English. I worked the night shift, because our students were Korean employees.
That time, when we met again, I found out that he had become a machine operator in a factory for optical lenses. They were nine Filipinos, two Chinese, the rest Korean. “Much lighter compared to our work before, but the chemical risk to our bodies is also higher,” he said. He worked from nine in the morning until six in the evening, and he only needed to complete forty hours. Above all, he no longer went home to a container van but to a proper room, with a floor they call *ondol*, which heats up during winter. He roomed with two Filipinos.

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

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

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

I apologize for having to mention this, even if I already know that you know the stories between them. Maybe because more than anything else, the real story I want to tell you is this: that was the last day I saw Mark. Maybe that is why I feel like an idiot for weaving this story, because unlike Mark, I am lacking in faith. I do not go to church in Hyewa, for example, because I only see skulls and bones in those sitting and standing bodies along the pews and aisles of the church. The songs and prayers sound to me like the lamentations of those loved ones left behind, until they become laughter during the counting of money sent by those to come home, which is now also a rushing to return quickly, because they cannot go back to eating salt.
and shrimp paste. I lack faith because even though I harbor no anger, I believe that Fatima is deceitful. She knows that she is beautiful and intelligent. That was why it was so easy for her to give Mark her number after he agreed that fine, she can keep the *rikondal* bananas, not because she really trusted Mark but because she had great confidence in herself. She did not fear danger or deception. She planted her political agenda in Mark’s mind, adding it to his enchantment and craziness for her. A cup of jasmine tea sweetened with honey, and the man became her slave!

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

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

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

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

*Linti!* I cursed. Damn! Just imagine, he hadn’t even done anything yet; even if he were a real activist, here he was now dead. What luck, what grief, what burning in my mind from the need to relate this to Fatima! “See Fatima, see what you did to Mark!” But I promptly heard the answer, on the horizon of my hearing: “I pass by your name.” In truth, this was a famous song by the Arabic singer Marcel Khalife. Fatima herself told us this, along with a suggestion for us to listen to it on YouTube. So Mark and I did exactly that. We were like children, hungering and thirsting for all the Arabic things Fatima introduced to us. I did not want to be mocked by Fatima, did not want her to think that I was a fool like Mark. She might think that about all
Filipino men, because hadn’t I seen, hadn’t I read from Mark’s stories the omen of the burning of the church in Miag-ao, and of his joining that rally that would take him to a kind of deliverance? I heard even the prompting of Fatima, asking whether I was, unlike Mark, content with being a worker? Not like her, like the Palestinians who, even if they considered their neighbors as enemies, still return and stay in their country?

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

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

Translated from Filipino by Michelle Tiu Tan