

GINA APOSTOL

At the Hotel Sirena

TIO NEMOR DROPPED me off in Tacloban at the Hotel Sirena, my layover, as he called it, before the airport.

I had said my goodbyes to Adino, sweet Adino, in Salogó.

He was tending his chickens.

Do you see that guy, Adino said, pointing at a resplendent bird—Nemesio, the Golden Laced Wyandotte.

Golden Nemesio was sitting pretty under a gumamela bush.

That's not where he sleeps, Adino said. Something's going on with Nemesio. His hut is over there.

Adino was very careful not to speak a word of English to me, using words like *didto an iya ginkakaturugan* instead of *hut*.

He pointed to Mariano, a stunning speckled figure, pecking under an eave.

That guy, Adino said—that guy's back is to the river. But usually he likes to run AWOL.

He almost used our childish word for the seawall.

—It *iya ayon pagdinalagan hito nga*—*pader*.

He stopped—he refused to say AWOL.

Hmm, he said—something's going on. No one is in his right place.

—*May nananabo. Waray usa nga aada ha lugar*.

And this one, Adino said—

—*Ini hi Francisco—paragmulay hiya ngada han usa. Ito hiya! Mahilig magmulay! Baga ba han hadto ha aton—an kuwan nga mulay ba—Pamiling-Pamiling!*

This one, this Francisco, he likes to play a game with that one—that one! He loves to play! Like when we were little, you know.

And Adino refused to say the name of our childhood game—*Discover-Discover*.

Kuwan, he said—an *kuwan nga mulay ba*—he hesitated—he grasped for a translation.

Because he knew it—at the tip of his tongue he had the actual English word.

But Francisco, as both Adino and I could see, was heaped under-

neath a pile of swept-up leaves, with the other Russian Orloff—Jote.

—Agi—nga mga parayaw, I said.

Adino grinned at my Waray.—Maupay ito nga bantog ha era, he said fondly—mga parayaw!

That's a good word for them, he said—

And now I have no translation for my term.

Like so many words that exist without another's measure—pastilan, huwaso.

Mga parayaw.

They lay there, a pair of gallos, each with an elaborate ruff, their parayaw feathers—a preening set, one collar more russet than the other, but the other with a spangle of imbricating spots, so that when it ruffled its feathers, the carefully mottled array disarranged into a blur, claret and gold, only to flutter back into its gorgeous, oculate design—their yellow chicken legs reaching out occasionally to scratch at the leaves.

There's something going on, Adino reflected, reaching out to pet the feathery collar, check Jote's walnut comb—mga parayaw ini hera—the roosters like to strut about, playing and catching each other. But something is happening, he said.

He stood up, and he raised his chin as if to scan the river with it, sniffing the air, his single mole, by his lip, marking the moment.

I stood there next to him, only up to his shoulders, he was now so tall, my little brother, an akon bugto, an manghod—and I stood there with my suitcase and handbag and absurdly wide straw hat.

He was silent, taking in the river's breeze.

Well, I have to get going, I said. The jeepney's here. You sure you don't want to come with me to Tacloban, to be with us before I leave for the airport?

He shook his head.

He smiled at his chickens.

—Adi la kami, he said.

I tiptoed to kiss him on both cheeks.

—Pagbuotan, I said.

—Ikaw gihap.

But you're going up to Tio Nemor's? I said—when the storm comes? Their place up in the hills, in Santa Elena—it will be safer.

He nodded.

I'm sorry about the house, I said, that they want to sell it. I hope

they don't. I think they're wrong.

—Ayos, he said.

Then his eyes widened, he was grinning.

He looked so much like our mom: Adina an guapa—the expression on his face having multiple instincts at once.

—Waray makakadara kun diri ako upod!

No one can take it without me.

Ha ha, he said, no one's taking this house without me.

I waved goodbye from the jeep.

—An bagyo ito!

He shouted at me.

His eyes were wide—a revelation—

It's the typhoon, he said.

He stood there in the yard, with his labyrinth of chickens, and the jeep revved up but stalled, waiting for him to elaborate.

Adino, sweet Adino, raised his finger up toward the heavens, the Pope amid his fowl.

They know the storm is coming, he said, and all of these guys—

—Hala! he said—

And he swept his hand over them, the spectacular creatures in their scattered places—Nemesio, Mariano, Bonifacio, Francisco, Jote—his male brood—

—Ini hera: waray sarabutan ano it era bubuhaton.

Hala! he said: these guys have no idea what to do.

AT HOTEL SIRENA, Man' Pete and Mana Floria themselves were at the welcome desk, registering their guests. At first I did not recognize Man' Pete because he was dressed, and I used to know him in his sando and drawstring shorts, taking a shower with his pig to whom we gave our kitchen slop so we could help eat it at fiesta. Man' Pete was now isputing, and he smiled as he wrote down my name, welcome, welcome, long time no see—and he whispered to me—“It's on us, ayaw kabaraka, and you can also eat everything you want—see, we have—an all-you-can-eat buffet!”

Mana Floria had a huge smile, looking so pleased to see me.

“Did you see the chandelier? Lorelei shipped it. It's from abroad. Europa.”

She still looked like the ravishing, tanned mother of Emperor Nero—with her aquiline jaw of an ancient Roman queen.

“And look what we have on the walls.”

She showed me her quartet of them.

The Four Seasons.

I couldn't speak. I stared at them—the golden flourishes and the leaves.

Man' Pete was smiling, staring at me, then looking back down, stamping dates on his logbook.

Tears welled up in Mana Floria's eyes as she saw mine.

“It was the least we could do, to buy up your mother's frames, in day, we knew it would help—when she needed—”

“Sssh,” said Man' Pete. “Man' Adina is at rest now. She's resting in peace.”

“We are sorry we could not be there—at the funeral—we were so busy with the opening—”

“I saw your wreaths,” I said. “They were gorgeous. Mahusay hin duro.”

“I told Lorelei to get the orange bouquet, the Mirinda style, or the Lem-o-Lime—you know your mom loved the bright ones, the soft-drink colors.”

“They were beautiful,” I said, “so thoughtful. The same as your hotel—it's—the best place I have seen in Tacloban!”

Mana Floria's smile was so wide, then she flicked her shoulder, in that gesture of warding off the bad luck of others' good wishes, and Man' Pete knocked on the counter's mahogany top—puwera buyag!—afuera, afuera—out out!—so many languages to cast out the demons in others' words—knock on wood.

“Man' Adina had a good idea!” said Mana Floria.

“Yes, yes, she advised—she helped us buy the land for our hotel—you know, life is what you make it!” said Man' Pete. “She helped us buy when Mana Talia died.”

“But I think Mana Talia will be happy with what we have done to her home,” said Mana Floria humbly.

Man' Pete looked glad at my surprise.

“Ah, you don't remember—this is the old home of the Quintanas! We bought!”

Mana Floria looked even prouder at the thought.

“You should see the memorial we have, in day—go show it, Pete—our little museum—to the memory of her love, Congressman Quintana.”

And I checked out the exhibit dedicated to the man who “rebealed,” the former ambassador whose scandal during the 1971 Constitutional Convention, a “Con-Con” delegate for the first district of Leyte, disturbed the nation. He had been chosen for the convention, called out from retirement by the dictator himself. Still, he revealed. I read about him all over again—about the envelopes—envelops!—adding up to eleven thousand pesos, which Eduardo Quintana, Jr., received from Ferdinand and Imelda, who was his cousin. In his book he called her Meldy. A caption mentioned the title of his unfinished memoir—*Returned to Sender*. There were pictures of his postwar ambassadorial time, and his more recent trips to Lourdes and Fatima with his prim-looking wife, Natalia Pariña viuda de Quintana, decorous and formal in her jacquard suits and Hanes pantyhose. I read the articles I had already read, when We Forum republished exposés of dictatorship after the dictator fled. There were preserved lace handkerchiefs with Mana Talia’s initials, N. Q. y P., and glass cabinets of her ternos but only one of his barongs. I wanted to check if the gowns had the tags of Elvis Oras’s shop, Young’s Fashionne House. There was a picture of the congressman’s gravesite, at his mother’s mausoleum in Salogó. Requiescat, Congressman Quintana, Mana Talia’s love—1900-1985. His memory is also enshrined, the newspaper articles reported, in the resistance heroes’ memorial, Bantayog ng mga Bayani. Born in a world of revolution, died at a time of revolt. I was proud of this exhibit put together by Man’ Pete and Mana Floria, who were only his neighbors—this evidence of pride and protest in a city that has no honor, electing year after year the same scum. Maybe one day, I thought, Congressman Quintana’s act of revelation will have its due, and someone will publish his account, *Returned to Sender*.

The four-poster bed Lorelei’s parents gave me overlooked the corner where I could see our old place on Juan Luna Street. I thought I saw a sliver of the wide-open patio, or so I imagined, with hanging orchids and red-waxed, waterlogged floors. I looked out at the city’s layers and roofs, the same middle-class ruin against old impoverished decay, and the storm walls of debtors and their usurers and gamblers and their goons, and mangrove-hacking lumber shops against the stalls of mat and binagol sellers, and chicken coops and sidewalks that doubled as sewers where as kids we played, after the typhoons.

I could see, in my mind’s eye, women with long skirts wrapped about their legs in businesslike knots.

An era gamit gihay.

And the wish-whish-whish of streetcleaning brooms—that fierce sound of women cleaning up the city after the monsoons that clarified my childhood on Juan Luna Street.

Charcoal smoke from caramel desserts steaming from the corner plywood stall—I dreamed of Mana Belen’s camote cue and banana cue sizzling in their glut of sugar: the bubbling kalamay like boiling suns. The burnt sugar smell of merienda—I felt it, a tangerine waft over me, in this mirror touch synesthesia country.

I heard the howling as I stared out the window, out at my city.

I was tucked into the sheets, under that gauzy netting, this comforting moskitero that the screened, air-conditioned room did not need, and yet I appreciated it, I appreciated the antique design touches of Lorelei’s Hotel Sirena. I heard the wind’s growling, this steady, slow whistling—a rumbling at first in the distance, by Cancabato Bay, the waters of Panalaron, over Leyte Gulf, rumbling from the Pacific, whooshing, whooping, whirring toward the fishermen’s boats by the airport, and soon the howling.

The sound of an unspeakable, swooping, remorseless keening.

Powered by ocean, wail by sea.

The ground underneath me was stirring, as if for a moment that spot of earth was its aim, and the swelling of the waters and the towering of the waves and the destruction of the city was upon us, and all I wished to do—all I did—was reach for it—

The box.

I leapt out of bed, but the box was already open, its domed lid to the winds—it was not in my hands to save them: the leaves and the pages and the news clippings and the notes—the words—whirling in the wind.

They were gone.

I clutched at air.

I grasped at wetness vanishing as the howling became a wilderness became a growling that emerged from out of its ages. The sound of a scream was of a million voices buried in the mud and the slime and the ancient sodden sweeping—the black waters of the ocean that the world’s surge unearthed.

I held nothing, nothing in my hands.

A splash, and that is all.

The screaming did not end.

EPILOGUE

LUNOP.

Inop.

The English term in the news stories—storm surge—had tricked the people of Tacloban.

Lunop it ngaran nga makaharadlok.

Lunop.

That is the word we understood, the ancient totem, the terror in our speech.

Lunop would have warned us.

Storm surge was an English affectation: a newscaster's trope.

I saw the destruction from the roof deck in Manhattan.

I was still groggy from jet-lag and the last elements of comfort from the first class cabin of Philippine Airlines. I had dragged home my suitcase and my bag and straw hat—and the box of papers, all that I had left of my mother, stolen from her desire.

Pristine, untouched.

Back in New York with the same baggage.

I was reading the last draft of my novel on my computer, and I realized with surprise—my book was done.

It sounded like a memoir—but so what if it was.

I could send it to my agent now if I wished.

And I opened up my mail, and I saw it.

The destruction of a city.

I saw it unfold online.

That howling wilderness.

Tacloban's devastation.

THE OCEAN RAKED itself, it scraped its own depths, it bore its force and age and elements upon its coast, the black mud of an ocean that is not bottomless, for its bottom has swept away all the dead.

A howling with speed and force and fury unknown in history's recorded time.

So the news reported.

Climate change, global warming, and a too-long history of human regret.

No one answered my calls.

My one thought—Adino, sweet Adino.

I got no answer.

The cables were dead.

In the first hours not even the vice-president, stuck in the city on a prelection tour of duty, could get reception on any of the government's phones.

I spent those first days on Facebook. I scanned any news videos I could find.

I stared at streets I absolutely could not recognize.

Nothing I know mirrored what I could see except perhaps the pictures of the dead in a war from another century that I have been writing about and no one remembers.

The city was not a city.

It was a wasteland of a wasteland.

Of bodies and mud and the limitations of terror—of the sights we are unable to conceive.

It's another aspect of horror to learn from news reports.

No CNN news anchor says the actual names of streets, no one bothers to note whether the wrecked building is on Burgos, corner Veteranos, or Réal, by Diorico's Bakery, or Salazar by the Kierulf Building, corner Justice, once known as Bonanza Theater, that was already a wreck anyway before the typhoon.

The specifics that map my reality do not occur to strangers, and no news report, no foreign video actually informs me.

The generalities I kept gathering were another form of injury.

For days I could get no phone connection to Mana Marga, to my uncle, to Adino, sweet Adino—who anyway has long refused to own a phone.

And I went back to scanning Facebook, that blighted Filipino forum, for all it could offer, the wash of refuse by Santo Niño church, I followed where a camera would go, if it would go by Juan Luna, the homes of childhood we have lost. Tens of thousands of people dead. I thought I heard the *campana*, the sound of the bells, by Santo Niño church, on one video, and I followed the stranger's unsteady camera, I recognized a gate, made of stone, maybe the corner of Sirit's old house, so it was not my street, and I recognized the fake-Georgian posts—it was Gomez, not Juan Luna. I watched one scene over and over, on video: elderly people towed on a mattress by tourists in their underwear pushing them toward higher ground, above a winding staircase that, it turns out, was a remnant of Hotel Sirena. I saw the lines of people on Maharlika Highway, a

path of zombies looking for their dead, an intolerable dirge, the long funeral procession of a city of weeping.

Bodies washed up by the area in San Jose, where fishermen and their children were not saved because the office of the mayor, acting stupidly and too late, evacuated them to a schoolroom, also by the ocean. The mayor's brand-new resort, La Tercera Manor Homes and Beach Resort, was underwater, an easily reconstructed impunity, I could see, and the cyclist, the mayor, brandished his heroic sorrow, clutching a fallen shingle and one disjointed tire, to show the world how he, too, was one with the people he had not thought to save.

Douglas MacArthur's statue in Palo on Red Beach remained, waiting for its final bombing.

My old teacher in New York, to whom I had given my first novel so long ago, when at the height of a rebellion I had read his essay about teaching, in *Harper's*, emailed me out of the blue—"Shocked by the dreadful news from the Philippines and hoping at least that you & yours are safe. I remember that Tacloban is your city."

It was a twist in the heart to hear someone from so long ago and who remembered.

"May your muse still be singing," he said. I quote him verbatim: "It's been difficult, of course, to read about Tacloban and other eastern towns and to see the camera reports. The situation is horrific, beyond words, but only words can help us see what we need to comprehend."

It was the sweetest thing to say because I knew, at the time, his words were also at an end. His wife wrote me a separate letter—he was folding up a life.

I tried to write her, his wife, to explain what it was like—that when I think of any name from my childhood whom I wish to ask about, after this typhoon—

I need to dig up all the names.

Elvis Oras, Lorelei, Mana Floria, Man' Pete, Queen Sirikit Alonzo, Margot, William McKinley Maceda, Benito Lupak, the museum submerged to the memory of Mana Talia's love, the rebel who *rebealed!*, Congressman Quintana.

Tio Nemor, Putt-putt, Mick-mick, Mana Marga.

They survived.

Up at Santa Elena.

They were high enough for the storm not to reach.

We found Adino, sweet Adino.

Of course, he never left Salogó.

He had refused to leave with Mana Marga, and he lied to her that he would follow.

He did only what he wanted.

He would not leave his chickens, and so the chickens saved him.

His Golden Wyandottes, his Spangled Orloffs, their imbricating spots, parayaw feathers, and ancestral names—Nemesio, Mariano, Francisco, Jote.

The storm bypassed Salogó, town of our mother, Adina an guapa. Salogó is inland, west of coastal winds, and even her house by Himanglos stands. Roofless. But not undone.