

Anne Lagamayo

# inventory



## *ongpin*

Things about this place my grandmother remembers for me: skirting through narrow side streets at six in the morning; going in and out of crowded corner stores to see pale pearls through frosted glass; the heady smell of incense at the temple, red candles as thick as my foot, perhaps even two feet combined; me, at six, clutching her wrist in one hand and a crusty *hopia* in another, long gone cold.

As for me, the only vivid memory is spinning on my father's office chair, feet barely reaching the floor. There is the squeak where chair meets rusted hinges, the simultaneous ringing of telephones, the air cold and metallic on my cheeks, the inventory of pipes and screws racing past the periphery.

*ortigas*

My mother often recounts the time she was asked to see my grade school Chinese teacher. I was eleven, she says sometimes, ten in other versions, and eight, once, at a family gathering. *Eight years old*, my mother laughs, *and her teacher shows me an essay about the time the entire family went to Qinghangdao to swim at the Great Lake of China.*

There are no Great Lakes, only a Wall, and sometimes I still imagine my teacher squinting at maps of China, trying to find the city that, once a year, hacks a child into small pieces to offer to the gods.

*Stop lying*, she demanded, *tell me a real story.*

I have a long inventory of invented places. Sometimes I drown my teacher in the lake; at other times, the lake eats her whole. It is, after all, home to the only living species of piranhas in Asia. The feel of small sharp teeth slicing through her corneas, ripping tufts of her wiry black hair — these must feel real enough, and unimaginary.

*vienna*

It is the only café near our hostel that is open so early in the morning. You ask me questions while you eat: *What is the man on the counter asking the waitress? When's our call time? Are we performing at St. Peter's Church today? Would you split a chocolate cake with me? Why aren't you eating?*

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Is Liza coming in today? 8:00. No, the day after tomorrow. That would be hell on my throat – but oh okay. I'm not eating because when we walked in I saw that the waitress had written *Kalbfleisch (Herz, Lungen)* on the menu board in pink and blue chalk. I would've warned you but I was curious to see how your face would look like when your teeth sink into the valves and tear off the chambers; if the walls would burst into a dozen different flavors on your tongue or if the ragout would accidentally start beating on your palate. I'm not hungry.

*rome*

*But we're short an alto, I whisper.*

*It'll be okay, you whisper back, winking. We'll wing it.*

You smile warmly at the gathering crowd and move to conduct the tenors into the first opening bars of "Pater Noster." I shiver at the chill of the piazza and close my eyes at my cue.

After the applause dies down, you walk to Eiz and tell her, groaning, *I went off key at nobis debita nostra.*

She shakes her head emphatically. *No, no, you were fine. You were fine.*

*ohio*

Aku, we're told to call him, and he drives race cars for a living. In a certain kind of lighting, at a precise angle, I see semblances of my

mother. My brother disagrees. Go-kart racing in the snow is not as dangerous as it looks like. *The secret of the turn is to stay close to the corner*, Aku tells me, winking. There must be moments when you step on the brake and see your death when you spin instead of stop, I insist later. Aku laughs, *Of course, always, nearly every day*. Later. Before that, my hands frozen inside gloves on the steering wheel, the finish line four mouthfuls of cold wind away; my brother twelve behind.

### *divisoria*

It must have been the shoes — the low-cut lavender suede boots, gold gladiator sandals, cyan blue studded slingbacks — that took me away from you. What is it about this black hole of a place that takes precious things away. When I look up the back of your head in front of me is gone. When I turn around to try and find you, my bag disappears on the counter.

You might find me later in the food court, shaping cities on a plate of crust and the insides of an apple pie. *I lost my slingbacks, my phone*, I say, *and you*. *I could replace the two, but the slingbacks were below bargain price and irreplaceable*.

### *baguio*

The last time you felt this cold, you tell me, you were in New York. I ask you what it was like. I'd never been to the States before. You make wild gestures with your hands, describing buildings with their

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frosted window panes. Sometimes, I confess, warming my hands in your jacket pockets, I almost never want to see the actual models for imagined replicas. You don't mean that, you say, laughing, just wait 'til you see Paris. You should come visit –

My brother calls me from the second floor. *What are you doing out there? We're about to open presents.*

*Coming!* I reply, looking at the place where you were and burying my fingers deeper in my sweater.

*rome*

They insist on hearing us sing at the Santa Maria Maggiore. Eiz suggests Kyrie eleison, even though we're short an alto. *You're flat*, I tell her after the applause dies down; *You're a bitch*, she replies.

*tokyo (stopover)*

Bee, above the drone of the last call for flight 5367 for Bangkok, asks, *If we never leave the airport, can I still tell my friends I've already been to Japan?*

*Of course*, I answer, *You can tell them anything. You can invent people. You can even say you stood at the main avenue of Ueno Park and felt the cherry blossoms fall on your hair.*

*Won't that be lying?* he asks, a frown creasing his smooth forehead.

Yes, my mother interjects. *Don't listen to your sister, she could win awards for lying.*

*We went at the end of March, I tell him later on the plane, fitting his small hand in mine, and they lit the trees at night. You thought at first that it was Papa who placed his hand on your head, but really it was raining blossoms and the petals were tangled in your hair.*

### *paris*

I do not know how you hear about our two-day stopover, but you call anyway to offer a tour. It's been five months. You must know the city like the back of your hand. This is where we eat for breakfast, you say, pointing to a small café. You tell me things like this, and what you study for your Middle Ages French class, this funny soda commercial about a boy, a cab, and the Louvre, the best place to view the Tour Eiffel at night, what to say to an insistent bus conductor when he comes to collect your ticket: *Désolée, j'ai le coeur du veau. Tout ce que j'entends, c'est ce battement.* (I'm sorry, I have the heart of veal. All that I hear is this beating.)

It must have been like this or else we never leave the hotel, eating tasteless *pain au chocolat* at a bakery nearby, and the most I see of you is a passing glimpse of what could be your side profile in what may or may not be your street, what may or may not be your city.