

## Strange Progressions

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*Jose Martin V. Singh*

There used to be roosters in our neighborhood. Our lanky neighbor Mang Jose had countless on the other side of the crisscross fence at my grandmother's yard. He would walk across his lot, as if a beardless Moses parting a sea of flapping feathered plumps, when he brought bottles of soft drinks, packs of candies, or bags of chips we had ordered from his sari-sari store.

My cousins and I sometimes tried peeing on the chickens when Mang Jose was busy tending to customers along the sidewalk or just resting in his house. At times, those chickens flew over the top barbed wires and clucked with heads bobbing around my grandmother's lot. On days when we felt a kick, we would play Parokya ni Edgar's "Mang Jose" on speakers and growl the lyrics out loud, anticipating the moment when the solemn man would finally snap. But he never did.

That was until we grew up and a construction company bought Mang Jose's tree-lavished property to expand their equipment storage facility in the vicinity. Whereas we used to hear a brood of cuckolding creatures cluck and crow, today we hear clashes of steel with concrete and trailer trucks humming on the round in a residential area. Most of the time their presence is a nuisance to an otherwise peaceful neighborhood. Imagine having to go to school and being blocked by a trailer truck left on your driveway for an hour or so. My aunt, a Court of Appeals Justice, said their presence was illegal from the start. Well, despite the initial clamors, it now seems otherwise because they're still there.

Our barangay was, at various points, a lush cow fields, a carcass dumping lot, and a forest. My dad kept telling us how it was always ice cold during the -ber months back then. They'd walk around the barangay, cold smoke rising from their mouth, as if in a fairy tale set in a forest with a few houses. Sometimes they'd scare each other with stories of headless soldiers walking outside of the gates. Now the barangay has become more and more concrete and, despite being along a fault line, has a high rise and an occasional commercial edifice bulging out. But it's still one of the greenest areas in the city with a generous number of trees, sidewalks, and parks.

Long way after Mang Jose moved to who-knows-where after selling his property to the construction company and his wife's death, another neighbor had a rooster perched on a wooden parapet across my room's window. I think the rooster's crow helped me realize that a new day was coming as much as it, with its disciplinary instinct, anticipated the sun's rising. I think that neighbor took care of the rooster to throw in a cockpit for money every now and then. For whatever reason, and my not noticing it, the morning lurker never crowed again and was never replaced.

### **Waking up to dream for nine days**

With a still erratic sleeping routine, I wake up at around 2:00 a.m. The opening of my eyes along with the rush of blood to my limbs is almost too natural to be believed. A street lamp's white light spills through the living area where I lay in the half dark on a beige couch.

My mom asked me over dinner if I'd join her catch dawn masses on our television. I told her that, if I woke up, I'd walk to the nearby parish instead. If I had the chance to catch an actual mass, I'd do so. My mom can't go to the parish because she's more vulnerable to catching Covid, recovering from breast cancer. Yet she seems healthier than I am. For one, she has managed to maintain a solid sleeping and exercise routine whereas mine is more spontaneous.

I was aware that it is a privilege to be Catholic and practicing my faith during a pandemic that restricts many people from sustaining livelihoods. But I was also hankering to get out and see more than the walls and furniture I'd become all-to-willing to throw out due to their insistent mundaneness.

I roll on the couch and think about my mom's late mother. She always completed the Misa de Gallo at the poblacion of Pila, Laguna. My mom, on the other hand, was the first to bring me to such masses at our parish in Marikina when I was in grade five. Once or twice, my mom and I ran late and literally ran just to complete the masses. In 2019 I was reluctant to even attend half of the dawn masses. When I was younger, I'd bite my parents' grand toy incentives for Christmas by completing the nine days. Since the pandemic began, I haven't attended masses as regularly. When I do attend mass online, I would end up spacing out, feeling as if everything in the world were worthless. My spirit has often been in a state of utter moral ambiguity due to the suspension of many sacraments.

Dawn masses in the Philippines were once characterized by cock crows in rural areas. Their storied beginnings in Spain were usually related to the gallo. Thus, misa de gallo. Roosters, I should say, stand on a parapet in Filipino Catholic heritage—e.g. San Pedro's denial of Christ thrice and the presence of dawn masses. They're close to being adjudicators of morality, come to think of it. They crow in the morning when the sun has not yet asserted its warm rays. The biblical book of Ecclesiastes says that the sun symbolizes a natural coherence with the dignity of human work. The sun can also be salutary, we read in biology textbooks.

I stare at our living area, at the old magazines and random books on a glass coffee table, clutter piled on two violet chairs, potted plants, the family's life-size San Pedro (joined in the Holy Week procession without a rooster), and an artificial pine-cone tree with sparkling LED lights and glittery décor. Then I grab my cellphone and check the Facebook page of our parish. There were two time slots for the misa de gallo: 4:00 a.m. and 5:30 a.m. I sit up and scroll through the feed a little, seeing friends post about their resolve to complete the nine days despite the hassle. I saw them online but never talked to them in the past months, thinking that my words were an injustice to their inquiries about my wellbeing.

Feeling as if I had a full night's rest, I walk up to my room, search for Bukas Palad's "Emmanuel" on Youtube and click the first thumbnail, place my phone on top of the toilet, step into the shower, and take a cold bath. The lyrics of a coming child Messiah crawl across the wall. What an odd excitement to jolt me despite nerves sapped by backlogs waiting, in a laptop sleeping on the dining table, to be attended. In years past, the university semester would have been over by now. Yet I was still plodding through work I should have already done but couldn't find the reasons to finish.

There's something about 4:00 a.m. that's pleasant. It is in between the so called demonic hour (3:00 a.m.) and the hour before the sun rises (5:00 a.m.). It would be as if I were asleep the whole time and dreaming of a distant reality pouched in between clockwork. I rarely dream these days and this might be my way of compensating. These dawn masses, the pandemic restrictions notwithstanding, deviate from regular masses in the Catholic liturgical sense as they are votive in nature. With the pandemic restrictions, it feels almost exclusive to be attending masses early in the morning. One might imagine an Akira Kurosawa dream crossbred with a mystical apparition within an ancient religious order's cloisters. I'd actively pursue a delight for many Filipinos hankering for any outdoor activity these days.

And it would appear like that once I, at half past three, stepped out of our house's gate in my polo shirt and khaki jeans. Dressing up gave me a sense of vague discipline amid days of lazing out like an earthworm unable to wriggle through mounds of earth. My glasses get misted after a few warm exhales seeping through the top of my face mask. It's irritating because I also wore a face shield haphazardly required by the IATF. I had a mini alcohol spray bottle in my pocket.

The air was still, none of its chill blowing anywhere. A few steps on the pink sidewalk feels alien, almost abnormal with the anxiety of passing by someone on an empty street. Something about the Philippines' prolonged lockdown tells me I'm wrong to desire the act of walking on a sidewalk, as if the essence of our longing for a modicum of normality is flawed just because.

The houses I pass by seem empty despite the certainty that people live there. By the time I reach the block's corner, I feel my lungs expand. I cross the

street and turn left. I pass by town houses and reach a portion lit like a mini amusement park out of nowhere—a carwash announcing its existence. It looks like a theater stage with tarpaulin banners standing in for aisle curtains. I half expect someone, in whatever form, to come running out. I'd probably get a heart attack. I wonder why they kept the lights on at such an unholy hour. It's bright and seems to flaunt a surplus of energy. But it somehow keeps me from the ominous notion of getting shot without due reason, to be forgotten forever as another murder statistic.

I approach a shadow cast corner and walk past a gated compound full of seemingly exotic plants. I emerge under a street lamp's light and climb the ascending slope of concrete flanked by residential fences.

After filling up the contact tracing sheet by the parish entrance, I move past the glass door and look for a seat near the middle aisle. I genuflect, take my place, then bring out my rosary. At home, I would have only brought it out if urged by my family to do so. When going out, I make it a point to put one in my pocket. I learned to do so in my grade school. Often, I can't even bring myself to pray the rosary with all the ambivalent comforts I have at home. I pull out the string of blue beads and kneel down.

When the commentator tells us to prepare for the priest's entrance, I stop at the third Glorious Mystery, The Descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Thirty minutes is too long to even finish a regular rosary and I hadn't finished one. The average time is around fifteen minutes plus the litany. I kept spacing out and reverting to some thought I related to the series of Hail Mary. It didn't matter so much anymore. I promised to finish it later in the day.

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I would wake up in a similar manner, oscillating between 2:30 a.m. and 3:30 a.m., over the next few days. On most waking hours, I find the extra enthusiasm to take a bath and put on some music to get my head in the right place. On some, I just wash my face at the sink and brush my teeth before dressing up.

During the latter part of the nine days, I found myself struggling to get up despite the bicker of my phone's alarm and the prospects of soothing music, a cold shower, and walks, seemingly out of a crime thriller—only that I had a flat-line plot. I thought my chest was overexerted whenever I got home after walking. I loved the fact that I get blood flowing but the difference was quite disorienting. It's easy to have fears of catching the virus with the slightest sense of discomfort in the body. Not that I was catching symptoms of the virus, but I felt something in my system change. I've gone out a couple of times already, to drive my mom to the hospital early in the pandemic and to run some errands elsewhere occasionally. But nine straight days outside seemed both intimidating and impractical.

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Five long-haired men, wearing vests over long sleeves, each holding a large drum, a thick guitar, a bamboo flute, a bongo, and a ukulele. This flashed on my phone every morning after arriving home from mass, during and after baths. Illapu, the group's called. A name derived from an Incan belief in the agricultural deity for rain, Apu Illapu. I kept watching and listening to this Chilean group's songs every morning, sometimes even throughout the day, when I'm eating or trying to attain some insight from my remaining school work.

I didn't care so much that my musical fancy was unchanging for a time. The repetition was absorbing. The lyrics rang in my head as if an anthem. I particularly like "Sobreviviendo" and their rendition of Roberto Terner's "Candombe para Jose." I also listened to Los Calchakis's "Misa Criolla" and "Los Reyes Magos" to expose my taste to other songs in time for Christmas. When I got bored with one song, either I watched another song performance by the same group or listened to another singer/group's version. That, I thought, was range.

The drum beats, bongo bops, guitar strums, maraca shakes, and flute whistles ran through my blood stream as if caught amidst Andean wind, trees, and birds. I also tried memorizing the songs and singing to them whenever they played on my phone.

Out of curiosity, I researched Illapu's background. Quite a story they had. They were exiled in 1980 by the Chilean government because their music was supposedly subversive. The video I kept watching was of their 1978 performance in an RTVE show and 2018 performance for Festival de Viña del Mar. Before beginning with "Candombe" in the 2018 festival, the lead vocalist explains how the song is relevant in times of struggle and how the subject, Negro Jose, is our companion on the journey to freedom.

On days when I felt down, I watched the RTVE performance because they were, well, young and stomped, all over the stage. Their music was enough to make my blood jump. Not only did their music illumine a clouded longing of the soul, the lyrics made complete sense in terms of dealing with one's place in society. They spoke of the damage war brought upon humanity, demanding justice for atrocities like the conflict in Palestine and the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima.

Their music, I might offer, revolves around the idea of survival in defiance of atrocities committed by people hungry for power. I think their music was subversive because it made you feel a little more alive. *Sobreviviendo* indeed.

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I arrive at the parish as I did on the first day. I rub the soles of my brown shoes on the disinfecting rug and place my palm over a sensor thermometer. The red lights said 34.6. Part of me asks why my temperature did not increase until I realize it is at par everyone else's when they place their wrists over the sensor. Something must be up with the thermometer when there likely is something up with each one of us. But that's just me, thinking I am different from human beings like me, stuck to stagnate on most days in their homes. That's me, thinking why the heck did we all act as if it worked and would end the damn pandemic?

I jot down my relevant details on the contact tracing sheet. A heavy vehicle arrives at the parish grounds. "Hala, andyan na sila ..." the girl behind the desk says to her friend handling another sheet by the table. She goes on to talk about how the soldiers interviewed the volunteers the other day. For

what, I will never know. The thought of men in camo fatigues gives me the shivers. I am unsure whether to be disgusted or awed.

Towards the end of the mass, the priest thanks the military men guarding the church. "Palakpakan po natin sila," he says. A smattering of applause ensues after in a string of perfunctory acknowledgements. That's all right, I think, as long as I keep my hands in my brown jacket's pockets.

Someone I once interviewed for a student publication article on the ROTC told me of the relief efforts of soldiers during disasters. They were one of the first to respond and bring people sustenance, he said. He wasn't snarky or anything. I was convinced that their work was commendable. I remember this whenever I exit the church. But, knowing how the entire pandemic was militarized by the Duterte regime, I am even more disgusted at the sight of the men in fatigues.

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I'd walk a few blocks, attend the mass, and go home, craving for some breakfast. It would be either a Sausage McMuffin with egg or homemade curry sauce over any meat, including corned beef. I always look forward to breakfasts at the extremes of either salty blandness or creamy spice. I only truly knew what a bad idea putting curry sauce over corned beef was when I'd finished a bowl of it. Curry, of course is an improper breakfast. But I'd indulged myself, mulling over whether breakfast was even the right term for what has become a scattered eating regimen.

I began reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "The Autumn of the Patriarch" when I, having enough blood circulating through my limbs, couldn't figure out what to do after taking a bath. As I waited for my mom to finish cooking the chicken curry I'd craved that morning, I lay on my bed with an ambivalent excitement, the rays of sunlight blocked partially by the blinds.

I downloaded a PDF and the novel became part of my phone's expanding library. I read and stopped, perhaps thinking that the kilometer opening added to the trouble of kilometer insincerities high ranking officials had been spewing at us. I could only take one at a time. So I dropped the novel



and decided to return to it soon. But, really, I couldn't take any more dizzying prolongations.

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On the second to the last day, I wake up at 4:20 a.m. then sleep for thirty more minutes before yielding to my alarm. I feel fatigue like never before. Though it also came with a clear resolve to wake up, unlike most days when all I have to face is a laptop ridiculing my unproductivity.

It begins to rain. So, I bring a car and umbrella. I would be late if I still walked. I started bringing a car the other day and, after mass, drove around the barangay that, when seen from a map, looks like a circular maze.

We are a day closer to Christmas and we have been waiting for a sense of joy. Yet the closer I am to this awaited year-end celebration of Christ's birth, I realize how heavy my expectations have become.

Father G, let's call him, is the presider for the 5:30 a.m. mass on the second to the last day. I like his lightheartedness and calm approach in delivering homilies. But this day is an exception. He talks about how we should see the positive in everything, including the pandemic. I shake my head vigorously, as if waiting for him to notice my disapproval far away from where he stands.

No qualms about the premise of his exhortation. But to cite decreasing pollution and traffic, which, by the way, isn't true? Boy, he must have been kidding! And to shift our attention to the bright side without due recognition of what brought about the dark side anyway? I understand that they usually have to do it on the go, juggle reflection with everything else they're doing. I've been thinking about it in the course of attending online masses. Some homilies tend to disfigure our experiences by implying we should ignore what distresses we may feel. Maybe homilists should avoid infecting our souls with false hopes. Maybe they should tell us to recognize our pains and embrace them so that we can overcome them. I was happy to have heard one priest say that on screen.

I thought Father G was so detached from reality that it became easy to hand out such statements. But, this only led me to reconsider how much I, like many others, have become out of touch with realities which are otherwise graspable without the pandemic restrictions we continue to experience. I knew I was also inclined to use broad strokes out of spite.

After the mass, I see a girl I knew from a soiree in sixth grade. She has already graduated with honors from the same university I'm still in. By my cynical standards, she is, in all fairness, beautiful. When we are lined up by middle aged ladies on the aisle, she heads back inside the church from the restrooms. She wears white. She stops and looks down, to perhaps make me go ahead. I begin mulling about memory—in a not-so-nostalgic way. I cut off most ties from that soiree lest I end up like most of my classmates, mad. Okay, naïve. Okay, I'm being condescending. Whatever. I don't want to think like the machistas some of them continue to be. Did she, and everyone else I used to be acquainted with, remember me from the rare correspondences we had? I don't know. But I do remember her, even if silences and time has separated my knowledge of her and the world that was and the people I used to always see. I walk out of the church and see her with someone whom I assumed was her boyfriend.

By the time I park the car at the garage, an odd preoccupation swims to my conscious. I get an urge to dress up right, not that I didn't already, the next day and finish what I started, complete the dawn masses with much more enthusiasm. This is an absurd epiphany, but it should do.

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On the mornings I arrive extra early at church, I start a rosary. But I never finish offering the Blessed Mother Mary the roses due her later in the day as promised.

On the morning of Christmas Eve in 2019, I went to the parish, drunk as a skunk, with my friends from my university org. I hopped out of my friend's car and approached Father G. We knew each other, of course, because I and my dad were involved in parish activities. He just finished saying mass and this lightheaded buffoon (me), used to not socializing casually, barged

through Father G's talking circle and, pulling his hand to my forehead, asked him where he was going. He was on his way to a car's back seat. I couldn't recall much about that early morning, save for it was nakakahiya, if ever anybody, my friends included, recalled. I'm pretty sure Father G thought about that in our succeeding encounters but was polite enough not to remind me. Yet I remember. I remember that when we waited for the second mass in the car, a crowd built up around the car to see a scuffle emerge out of a building—a Christmas party mishap. I remember that a friend, sober by then, held my shoulders when I knelt alone on a pew and asked me if I wanted to sit with them on one of the outer rows. I nodded and followed her to where our other friends sat.

It is the last day of dawn masses during a pandemic. The weight of flaking on my duties as a head of a committee in my org and not being able to follow through with class deadlines suddenly feels heavier.

My body wills itself to a public space yet it remains private with its nagging sense of displacement. People surround me. I can see them from a distance, through a plastic screen over my face. I am standing under warm orange lights fighting with the darkness slowly turning into blue. The priest tells us to give each other signs of peace. I move my body around counterclockwise and smile beneath my face mask. I bow to others, who promptly return the gesture. I am aware that I am alone. It's Christmas Eve already and I just missed, despite pushing my hardest, another extended deadline for class.

I am sitting on a monobloc chair outside. The priest asks who among us have completed the dawn masses. Raise your hands, he says. Hands shoot up in rows, as if flowers fanned to one side. I completed the dawn masses but find that raising my hand would be an exercise in futility, a conformity to what is clearly something meant to evoke some sense of fulfilment. Not that expressions of fulfilment deserved aversion. But fulfilment has become a questionable ideal, given our reality bound by the deliberate, if not enforced, lack of it.

There is an inexplicable tightness around my head, as if a grey cloud wrapped itself around me. The sun's rays now kiss my forehead and I think of driving to the city's river. I haven't seen it up close since a walk with friends on a

Simbang Gabi evening in 2018. I think of the recent typhoon Ulysses and how easily the river crashed through people's homes. I picture myself, parking the car and sitting down, contemplating a little on the life that has been. Then I would walk to the banks and slide to the muddy water, hold my breath a while then yield and let the water enter my throat and lungs, and pass on without my family knowing until someone chances upon my corpse floating. It would have been a slow, cinematic, perhaps even poetic, ending.

Despite the maddening urge, I never drove past the outskirts of the barangay because of a force strong enough to drag me back to my center of gravity, home. It could have also been plain laziness. I'm somehow convinced that the longer I stayed outside, the stranger my thoughts would become. Yet even my home never made me immune from any strangeness of thought. It's almost as if, at times, I fail to recognize myself. For nine days, my mom waited for me at home, attending a live streamed mass and, if I'm lucky, cooking delightful curry.

### **For whom the gallo crows**

These days seem to head nowhere and spell an obscure need to change. Days slide and meld with each other, as if a blob of an existence meant to be dubious fodder for every survivor's future reminiscence.

Mang Jose has moved. Maybe, it was inevitable because of his circumstances. I'm probably wrong to assume these things. Mang Jose was a quiet man, like the foster father of Jesus, San Jose. But he spoke on occasion.

I've been wondering how the pandemic will end. With the articles I've read on the matter, there is a consensus that it will only come when we're ready and it will be as natural as waking up. Yet sometimes we never will be ready without even the slightest resolve.

I'm brought back to those nine days, walking out of my home to do the same things. Everyday, I sat in different places, heard different readings, psalms, gospels, and homilies, and saw different yet recognizable people. We recited the same prayers yet also had countless others burning inside of us. Some of

the people I knew, but not quite. I took different steps—sometimes slow, sometimes fast. I ate similar breakfasts. I listened to the same music with different yet catchy progressions. I strove with little to no reason to keep doing so. I approached the ninth day, in a not-so-Dante-perfect way, trusting what could still be.

There used to be roosters in our neighborhood, but I shouldn't so much as count on them to know when to wake up. As much as roosters crow to usher in a day, I have an inner clock that tells me when to rise. I embrace being a night owl on most days. When the sun presents itself as a friend to embrace, I go out and bask in its warmth.

I'm trying to understand a drop of the proverbial ocean. Maybe there is no end to anything, only a temporizing and cycling of what was. When we think of ends, we step on every passing moment that we once thought of as ends. But, always, the end vanishes with every step forward.