

JOURNEY BACK TO THE SOURCE

GINO DIZON

For, as far as tourism is concerned, the eruption of the volcano has not just brought calamity to the Philippines, but has provided the island state with a new attraction. The ash and sand deposited by the eruption in a wide area around Pinatubo have created a magnificent landscape.

—*Lonely Planet*

Reasons to Go

Tomorrow, Sab, Robbie, and Jet are taking the trip. They're in the car now just driving around, the kind that passes for adventure in this city, perhaps in any, but Angeles is landlocked. No high wind is about, the windows are open, to make the most out of friction of air. Inside they're laughing a wet knee-slapping laugh, you would think they were such a riot. They're laughing at things no one else remembers anymore. It's a good idea when there's no particular destination. They're in their thirties. They have nowhere else to go but older. They're two boys and a girl with a car. Everything is possible again.

Where to Stay

It's a long way up the mountain. Some set out as early as three in the morning for the dispatch point at Santa Juliana in Capas, Tarlac. But that's because they're coming from Manila. A group

of college friends has taken just this trip package. Tomorrow, at the appointed hour, a van will pick them up in Ortigas, most likely in SM Megamall. The van will deliver them straight and safely to the dispatch point, also at the appointed hour. They're all about to finish college. They're all about being goal-oriented. It's a luxury we've all had once: believing life happens at all the appointed hours.

Besides, they're Manileños. Everybody's supposed to know Manila. But who knows where Capas is, or also, Angeles?

This European family, on the other hand, looks like the amenable sort. Daddy and Mommy have done their research. The best stopover: Angeles City, home to a now defunct US air base, just 30 minutes away from the dispatch point. If you stand at its center, on a bridge over a river that no longer flows, you will see to your east the broken peak of Mt. Arayat, lone guardian of the plains, and to the west, rising against the sky, the jagged sentinels of the Central Luzon Arc, your destination. So this family is spending the night in a place they've never heard before, except possibly for its lavish cuisine, red-light district, or Holy Week spectacles. Daddy and Mommy used to be backpackers. They're used to the hazards of adventure. They're taking their five-year-old boy, their only child, to a volcano's crater.

As for the three friends, Angeles is not really a matter of choice. They were born here. They grew up here. Robbie, the one driving, is a G.I. baby. All his life he's been shuttling between Angeles and the States. He's had three changes of career. Now he's taking a break. Sab, beside Robbie, is a nurse. She's a Canadian citizen now. She and her partner of five years have just broken it off. Jet, in the backseat, laughs the loudest. Ever since his friends migrated, he's built an entire life in Manila, then one day he's not just so sure anymore. Or, anyway, something like that, so he's in between jobs. It's been years since they've seen each other. Now they're all back in Angeles. All their history happened here: childhood, a volcanic eruption, childhood's end.

What to Bring

The instructions say two knapsacks. In the second, put everything you will need *after* the climb. Mostly this is just your change of clothes. What else will you need after accomplishing the feat of climbing a mountain? Already this boy from the college group is packing his book. He might need something to read during the drive. Nothing outside the window will interest him: fields, more fields, the interminable rice fields of Central Luzon.

This second bag, you will leave in your vehicle. For the climb, bring only the first bag. It should be light, stuffed only with the most essential things: valuables, Advil, bottled water, trail food. Your camera you can just sling around your neck. When you're up against gravity, you must make an ally out of weight. The five-year-old boy knows this. He's not bringing anything. Only his parents.

But Robbie's all bulk. And flabbier on the sides now, Jet notes, but does not say. But he still has something of the jock he's always been. And Sab likes this about him. Never mind if he's not so great at living his life. Sab likes telling other people what to do with their lives. For Jet, who's the intellectual sort, Robbie is his necessary counterpoint. He used to finish Robbie's assignments for him. He and Sab used to bring Robbie's water jug at football in Clark. No one could bully Jet, or make a pass at Sab, without Robbie clenching a fist or locking that person's skull in his good grip. Those were the days.

They went to the same school. They lived in the same village. After class, Robbie would drive them around. The windows open. His license fake. This thrilled Sab beside him to no end, and kept Jet in the back on the edge of his seat. Once, on a moment's impulse, they drove from Clark to Subic. The only time they got lost, Sab insists. Robbie denies it to this day. It was the zero-visibility rain. No, Jet still believes, they had been

enchanted. It was the spirits of the abandoned roads. How else did they end up on a dead end on a hill that overlooked the lights of the port? When they got home it was past midnight. Robbie's dotting aunt was in tears. But Sab, Robbie, and Jet were trembling with their discovery. Together, they could do things.

In college, they found that making new friends was fun, but in a detached sort of way. At the back of their minds loomed the coming weekend, the holidays, or summer, when they would be driving again, La Union, Baler, Pagudpud, always to the edge of land. They saw each other's bodies grow hairs. They witnessed each other fail at love. They first discovered the use of their bodies through each other. At the end of the day, it was the three of them again, in a tent, on the sand. Or else, just in Robbie's room, their old haunt, lying in bed, burrowing into each other's side.

How they held and clung to each other then, just loafing in the delicious swamp of their togetherness. The shape and smell of each other's bodies as familiar as their own. And all that bright talk. The future that was theirs, to claim and to share. After a certain age, looking back weighs you down. Nothing, of course, went according to plan. You simply move forward. Nothing was especially meant for us to claim. Why else do we insist on making claims on each other?

But Robbie's strong, he still goes to the gym, he still lifts weights. What does he need a bag of first aid for? They never used to bother about such things. They used to just take off and get wherever they got. All this precaution is damping him down. *Used to* is the operative word, Jet notes, but does not say. And Sab insists. Two miscarriages and countless fights with her ex have domesticated her. It is only a matter of time, of age. But she says none of this. Only that she's a nurse just bearing out her training. As for Jet, well, he still likes to nag after all these years. So wear a cap, moisture wicking clothes, not to say sunscreen. Also, shoes you don't mind getting worn, maybe even torn.

Lastly, so the brochure says, you may bring your camping equipment. An overnight stay at the top is the best way to do it. The off-road drive takes two hours one way, and the trek on foot, another two. That's a total of eight, just going up and down the mountain. Which leaves you just around four to enjoy the summit. By afternoon, everyone not staying overnight must be getting back. You don't want the night catching you in your descent. Daddy has tucked his five-year-old boy in. For a moment, he just watches the boy in his sleep, his face still blameless, whether in nightmare or dream. Already Daddy's got the equipment nice and ready. Perhaps he wants his son to be able to look back someday. To be able to say that once he spent a night with his dad on one of the most violent volcanoes of the 20th century.

The Dispatch Point

Santa Juliana is a small village at the foot of the mountains. Kapampangans and Aetas live here, mostly on farmland, and its source, an adjacent river. There is a street here, the kind that progress just leaves behind, that smokes dust till the afternoon slaking. It leads straight into the river. This is not a dead end, but the starting point. Park your car here. Think no more of it. This is a safe place. Now you must transfer to your designated four-wheel drive. But first meet a representative of the local authorities. State your age, declare yourself fit, leave a name to contact in case of emergency. Sign the waiver. You are responsible for your own life. PhP 2,800.00 doesn't give you the right to make another person accountable to you. The agency is just doing its job, the mountain guide too, and for that matter, everyone else, including yourself. That is why Pinatubo trips are *for groups only*. Under no circumstances should you set out on your own. Why else are Sab, Robbie, and Jet bringing each other? They've hurt each other so many times. Now they trust each other with their lives. Meantime, the village children are just walking about, most of them on bare feet. You might

interpret this as poverty, as bucolic, etc. But there are times when bare feet, unencumbered by any human implement, are more convenient. You should try it some time. Anyway, the children here will circle you, not talking, just looking. They will look you in the eye, even study your face. Perhaps you could say they have not yet learned how to fear strangers. They're really trying to sell you poles, bamboo poles, for PhP 30.00 only. Buy one. You will need it when you scale the mountain. Animals look so at home in an uninterpreted land because they walk on all fours. In your ascent, rocks will remind you that you walk only on two, how convenient a third would have been, if only you could just walk as quadrupeds do. But, of course, this will not look nice to the human eye. Two dark children are now crouched in front of the five-year-old boy, his blonde hair luminous in the morning, his eyes a soft blue. They are eyeing him, and he is eyeing them back. No one is making a move. No one is talking yet. But already all three are on the brink of a smile.

The River

The scattered trees do not grow so tall, and put out only spare branches, for there is no need to compete for sun. Wherever you take root here as a tree, you will receive sun, and if you live long enough, perhaps even burn. The grass too is sparse, of a coarse brown, only the ruminant race is capable of extracting from it the subtleties of the cud-flavors. These are the last signs of human settlement.

In the distance, the peak of a rock, or is it a cliff, bearded with growth-fur, gilded by sun.

The 4x4 jeeps set out for this peak. For the rest of the drive, they will make a loose convoy of three. The drive is rough, you feel in your body the impact of the terrain. In the back of the third jeep, Sab is holding on to her seat, and Jet to a steel bar. Only Robbie as usual seems at ease in the most extreme of conditions, an immovable hulk still dazed by sleep, on his side of the

jeep. The road is an open desert, a predominant geography of horizontal, rugged land, mostly in browns and grays, and where the morning has struck it, shining planes of whiteness. And the jeeps make their way where they will, leaving behind them smoking trails of scar.

When you set out on the journey to the mountain, you need not pray that the road be long. The road is long, and arduous, certainly without Laestrygonians and Cyclopes, but whether full of adventures and knowledge, only you can say.

Are they near yet? Sab has been assailing the guide with variations of the same question. She's almost shouting now, as though haggling with some vendor in the market. But she has to make herself heard in all that wind and engine-roar. Are those cliffs remnants of broken mountains? For soon the previously dominant peak emerges in full view. It is just the first, and but a low point, in a sierra that rises to your right, a continuous creasing and folding of earth into successive peaks, extending as far as your sight takes you, up until the rim of the horizon. And beyond: the legend of these parts, the Central Luzon Arc.

For Sab, these are seductions of difficult passages ahead. It makes her feel young again. She's taken off her cap, sunglasses, and pullover. She likes facing her battles with the least accoutrement. You could say that where Jet might buckle under, and Robbie reduced into a state of inaction, Sab rises and shines. But this also means, for Robbie who's more attentive than he's usually given credit for, Sab is in her barest minimum of clothing, tank top and short shorts as usual, and such an ample woman. So Robbie's also watching the guide in his corner, making sure the man's not ogling Sab. Robbie's not talking just yet. As far as he's concerned, it's still too early for any kind of discourse.

Meantime Jet is taking it all in. The path in reverse; the various rock-forms; the sand blasted into dust, now billowing, becoming wind, in a country of blue sky. Jet, who can be talkative like Sab,

full of hectic energy like Sab, but also, plagued by certain dark silences. Left alone to his thoughts, even of rocks and sky, he can be helpless, a danger to himself. And Robbie and Sab left him behind. At a certain age, you face the question, but fumble for an explanation. So you simply say, *yes, things happened this way*. In these moments, only Sab can coax him back into the shores of hands and faces and words. Things we depend on do not always sustain.

Robbie, for his part, has always found this in Jet a little bit too much, and at the same time, strangely, attractive. How Jet's small, tight body is capable of such intensities: Jet doing his assignments for him, Jet tackling his bulk with those agile limbs, pulling, drawing all of him toward him, to sucking parts of him from toe to tongue, to this—Jet watching rocks and sky. Robbie flicks a stray stone. It flies, a precise projectile, and hits Jet on the temple. Jet turns with a grave furrowing of brow, and for a moment, a look of irritation so ugly it might have been hatred. Then he sees it's only Robbie, a giant boy of a man on his seat, who just doesn't know what to do with his hands.

The jeep gives a violent lurch.

But only for a moment. There is a new ruggedness of terrain in these parts, more uneven, broken by running waters. Jet watches the streams beneath the jeep, heading the opposite direction, mute cascades of glass-inflected waters, scoring the sand, ruffling over pebbles and rocks. Is this—a river? asks Jet, perhaps if only to help himself. Yes, a river, the mountain guide says. Ever since they left the village, they've been driving across the bed of a river. A kind of disappearing river.

River? Always Sab must pursue things to their end. How a river? The guide just smiles at first, the kind given only to oneself. Now he must pay for the rash glibness of his answer. And such an innocent a question. Just a river, he says. In the rainy season, a river, and impassable. And he is again sufficient to himself. For

how does one convey the life of a river? The rages of its current, the grip of its mud, in proportion to the crash of rain? Blind force that it is, sheer forward movement, sweeping everything in its path, ransacking planes of earth, and bank-life where it floods. And sometimes, too, the unsuspecting tree it snatches by the roots, and now and then, the body of an animal. But most of all, all the life it sustains: the leisurely amoeba and the excitable fish; nudities of worms; ovations of fungus; the black dog rippling the mirror with its tongue; and its friend, man, on his knees, almost in a position of worship. He's washing the afternoon off his arms.

In the dry season, the river abates. In the after-wet emerges the earth-bed. A pan full of rock-dust and caked mud, against a shelf of mountains. The road to the interior is the contested path, pact between earth and flood. Across this river-path, the three jeeps now rage, slow down, and speed up again. They are the third batch to do so this morning. Nearby, from their scattered oases of grass, cows look on at this commotion of improbable beasts. But they are unimpressed. Their bovid faces remain a rigid musculature of expressionlessness, a perfect fitting between hide and skull. They go back to browsing the grass.

The Valley

There is a change of light here, in this region of the road. The five-year-old boy is jumping. If he could chirp, he would. He too has gotten off the first jeep to join the cause of the second jeep. They have reached that part, where from either side of the path, cliffs and rocks rise up against the sky. Towering sentinels, they block the increasing morning, restricting the sun to peaks and flanks, submerging the valley in shadows. So the boy's pulling Mommy along, to the direction of the crowd, where Daddy's already helping out. Is he in a kind of Valley of the Previous Night, where dawn stands still? But with an added treat: an up-close encounter with a live accident.

The second jeep, the college group's, has stumbled upon a bog. Now its wheel is stuck in the mud. It could be the Pit of No Return, or the Disappearing Delta. The boy is holding out his hand, grabbing at the air, at the light, still a faint blue, still untainted by the oncoming gong of the sun. In this light that blunts even his bright canary colors, the boy cannot yet believe in any possible treachery of land. This region of the path could be the course of dark lunar waters carved between mountains, out of which islets of sands have arisen, frozen.

Where the river ends, and the valley begins, we can never be sure.

Crow Valley is a 68-kilometer passage of land that slopes downward from the volcano. Once a bomb-testing facility of the Americans, it is located some 20 kilometers west of Clark Airbase in Angeles City. So perhaps the name refers not to the bird of the strident cry, but to the shadows missile bombs make when launched into the sun, or the sound they make when they scrape the heights, before they accomplish their mission of destruction. "Commando Crow," the military training program conducted in this valley, included ground combat, jungle survival techniques, bombing tactics. Crow Valley is land that has been practiced upon.

Robbie knows all of this. At which point the guide mentioned *Crow Valley*, Robbie doesn't recall. But he's been here as a boy. Only then, it was not a desert, but a valley of lush forests and swirling rivers. His father, an American GI, was top honcho at Clark, in the time of Major General William Studer, before the pullout. His father took him on a helicopter. It was Robbie's first flight. They were standing on an embankment some distance from the missile. Robbie recalls, for a few seconds, the stillness of the surrounding world, the trees, the waters.

Then the sharp blast of the missile. Tremors rumbled beneath his feet. Trees swayed in a flurry of leaves. Birds darted across

the sky. His heart pounding in his head, he ran to Daddy, buried his face in his massive body. It was his first time to witness a missile-launching, a common treat permitted to G.I. families. It was also his first time to hold his father like that. And also, the last. Afterward, he and his father never spoke of the incident again.

There are things you say, and there are things you don't, when climbing a mountain. Robbie's just pushing hard now. Along with the drivers, he is the first to get down. He knows that staying in your seat or panicking in a lather of words is not the appropriate response to such forthrightness of terrain. One must use flesh against flesh. Now, with the two boys from the college group, Robbie's helping push the jeep, arms sinewy in the effort of the push, legs apart, feet firm on the sand, he could be straddling the world. Already one of the drivers and the foreigner man have tied with a rope the second jeep to the first.

Sab is just watching, but in rapt expectation, now and then pitching some words that are supposed to be helpful. She would have cheered for Robbie and the boys, except this is not football. In the morning, she's exposed the deep cleavage of her breasts. Robbie gives her the look. For a moment Sab is stunned. It's that look again. How, after all this time, it can still shock her into silence. So physical, so aggressively male, like huge hands gripping your shoulders.

Always this has been the problem between them, especially back when they were still together. It doesn't help that Sab's always been one of the boys, just as stubborn, or maybe she just likes the attention too, but then who doesn't? That look means: *cover up*. It also means: the old arguments again, the old questions, the old claims. Things you never outgrow around a certain person, unless you outgrow that person himself. So Sab looks away. Too late to stare back. Robbie has gotten back to the more important task of rescuing a vehicle from the mud.

Meantime the three college girls are standing just some distance away, throwing glances at Robbie, the bison neck, the ripple of muscles. They're posing beside a stream, one with a particularly strong current. But they're not afraid. They're sure nobody ever drowns in shallow waters. So they're sucking in their cheeks and pouting their lips, beneath spreads of hats, behind bumblebee sunglasses, all angled limbs and tilted poses. They could be a species of their own, part-human, part-twigs.

Jet has strayed from the group. He's taking photos of the landscape. Farther up ahead, the path narrows down into a neck, as towers from either side begin to close in on each other, as though protecting some secret interior. The god-domicile, Jet remembers Sab's story. These are the ramparts of the god-domicile, and at the center itself, the turtle-god of the fiery heart. And above, only sky. Now and then a procession of frayed clouds. But otherwise, it is all sky, everywhere sky, so immense, and pure, and abstract, you could not populate it with your own thoughts.

So Jet restricts his camera to the jagged cliffs. He dislikes it when someone keeps Sab and Robbie away from him, especially when it's Sab and Robbie themselves who are doing the keeping away. It's that old childish, childhood trap again, of ceasing to be the center of their attention, of losing those vital parts of him. Was this reunion, a trip, and to a volcano, a good idea? To grow apart was the idea. On their own, neither in two's nor three's, but as separate beings, which in the end are what they are. Now it's coming back, that suspicion, that helplessness. That people don't love you back enough. So you always have to catch them out.

The five-year-old boy jumps into the stream in front of Jet. Squealing, he douses himself and splashes Jet with the cold, mineral waters. The boy chirps with glee. His wings, his feathers, must feel velvet in the wet. Jet's drenched: neck, arms, and shoes. He turns a furiously crumpled face, to someone, to whoever

must be responsible for this—this blonde imp. Sab approaches, laughing. He's just a kid, she warns, taking her friend by the arm, preventing man and boy from doing each other further harm. Already Mommy's calling for her boy. It's time he went back. He's strayed far enough.

Beside this stalled convoy, across chipped gravel and loose sand, a horse is now clip-clopping in a kind of competent dance, in which agitation is a rhythmic trot. The dark rider maintains his stance, as though molded to his horse, a centaur, a centaur destined to face only one direction: forward. Still Robbie and the boys push, and the jeep groans, lurching and missing. Soon the buffalos catch up, lugging behind them their load of boys on bamboo sleds, who already may be late for work. Then at last, after so much heaving and boisterousness of engine, the jeep is released from the fecund bog. A lone figure on foot, a woman, emerges. Atop her head is a heavy basket, supported only by the strength of her neck. She joins the caravan of jeeps, buffaloes, and centaur, in the shadows of the jagged mountains, beneath a blank expanse of sky. Across water or land her steps are sure. She no longer needs the use of her arms.

The Canyon

At last, thinks Sab, they're here. Robbie offers a hand to assist her out of the jeep. Sab ignores it, and jumps out unassisted in what she thinks makes for a light spring. Of course, she touches ground with a heavy thud, accompanied by a jiggling of flesh. But she leaves her pullover behind. This time, she's not making any concessions. She walks past Robbie, who shakes his head and gives Jet a bewildered look. My friends, thinks Jet, haven't changed at all. And for a moment he's glad he's not alone.

From an angle, it looks like a great embankment of rock set against the sky. The convergence of a modest plateau and a steeper cliff. Between them is a breach, a fissure of earth, the ravine-entrance. The last leg of the trip, announces the guide.

Plateau and cliff are really pinnacles of lahar deposits, sculptured by weather and time, now a canyon in this hanging valley:

WELCOME

PINATUBO TREK

7 KMS. TO CRATER

At the entrance Jet pauses to admire the view, or else scan impending dangers. A cave, he thinks. A secret, underground tunnel, but with the sky for a roof. The gully is awash in a white light, almost powdery in its grain. The path itself is tortured by every conceivable rock-form, strewn rocks, everywhere rock, that you do not take them as individual fragments, but collectively, as a total brokenness of land. So the turtle-god has gorged out of the mountain a path, but more for the purposes of claws, rather than human feet.

In the middle of this gully flows the river, an unbroken streaming of soft crystals through all that harsh mosaic of angular rocks and polygonal boulders. Near the river, wet rocks of a soft coal black, and farther away from the live current, rocks freshly hewn in grey, beige, pockmarked blue, or faded volcanic red. Jet lingers, and for a moment is river-tempted. Water might really be his element. Except that just some distance away, there is that boy again, already plashing the waters. Jet moves away. The boy keeps playing with his river. And now and then, looks up at the canyon walls.

Towering formations of compacted mud and ash, the walls rise in steep vertical escarpments, an uprising of telluric shelves unto liquid heights of sky, which is another kind of water. The effect of this, at least to a human viewer, is a sense of diminution, not only allegorically, but literally, in physical stature. But the boy is just five and small, still unburdened by existential quandaries. So he's making splashes in his playground the river, looking up

at those walls that reduce everyone else to his size. He lets out little shrieks of joy. At which Mommy immediately shushes him down. Heed the sign:

NO SHOUTING.

NOISE CAN CAUSE SOIL EROSION.

LANDSLIDE AREA.

The first few kilometers are crucial. Also, deadly. Here every footfall is deadened to renew the clashing of rocks. Jet is just bringing up the rear, carefully negotiating sly rocks and loose sand. Now and then he lingers to take photos. So much erosion has exposed the precise make of the walls. Slabs of granite and boulder and armories of gravel near the base make up these towers' ancient foundations. But upward, from mid-section to peak, the rock-face becomes smoother, weathered by wind and rain, and loosened by the worm-work of time, as though here only the weight and fit of every grain were holding the towers.

Sab, in front of Jet, is making use of her bamboo pole to clear a path. Or else a piece of tree is waging warfare against the sandy and grit-grown rocks, the black and glass-glinting rocks, the twisted and sharp-edged rocks. In any case, this absorbs Sab so completely that soon she forgets whatever line of thought or turn of grudge she's been pursuing only a moment ago. Only the rocks, in all their generations, persist. The sedimentary rocks, already tempered by the forces. In smoothness, kin to the pebble, and of pastel hues that coax the flesh to touch. The mudstone pristine, despite its murky beginnings; the conglomerate tawny with stains of iron; the coarse powders of gritstone and siltstone; fissile shale of the dark furrows; and then this, a boulder of ochre clay, so shapely, and shapeable, Sab has to pause, to touch, and call out a name, Jet or Robbie.

In the recesses of the canyon, rocks chafe the silence. And even friends must keep their distance, for here every thought becomes audible, if not visible on the face. So Robbie's gone far up ahead, mounting his own opposition against the silence and the rocks. Any shift of mood in his friends upsets him, especially when he's made to feel that somehow he's to blame. So somehow, too, he must release motion from his hands, if only to keep in practice. Now he looks like an oversized, if slightly comical, boy carving a path from the rubble, taking it out on the poor rocks.

He marches on, heedless of even the dangerous ones, the igneous, forged by swords of fire, retaining the brutality of their origin. Robbie chucks them away, the sharp-creased volcano bombs. He stomps at the scatterbrained, rabble-rousing scoria, but dodges the agglomerative, and also gabbro, ugly blunted star. The rhyolite, he leaves alone. It is still bleeding from the past calamity. While pumice is easy, ransacked by air pores, and now in the hand, a lightweight. But obsidian, even only in bits, obsidian is always darkly moody, and precious.

Then, soon, a detour in the path. The trekkers must ford the river and take the other side. At the foot of a tower up ahead are the fresh remains of an erosion. These towers were once the volcano's discharge. The fire-born, the firstborn, which upon touching air, assumes the still but mutilated life. They grow, accumulating, sediment by sediment, unto towers, taking on the aspect of the enduring, when in the end, they are tokens not of permanence, only of weathering. Now wind and rain are accomplishing their work, chipping away and washing down the towers back into rocks. Time—only matter removed from earth—in the end, it's only a matter of time. The river will carry these rocks away, back into the depths, where they must turn metamorphic, and renew their work in fire.

About 5,500 years ago, Mount Pinatubo erupted for the fourth or fifth time and ejected voluminous pyroclastic flows. These turbulent floods of hot gases, combined with igneous shards, crystals, pumice, and ash, burned a path across the earth. The resulting deposits became the walls of this valley. Across the ages, the volcano would erupt again and again, completing a long history of tectonic readjustments, and then, most recently, in 1991. But this time, in conjunction with the typhoon Yunya. Fluvial and debris flows accompanied the usual pyroclast, depositing abundant sedimentations of ash and pumice, either coarse or finely porphyritic, including an unknown type, possibly of dacite material. What all this finally means, perhaps we can never know.

In 1991, Jet was in Angeles. In a stone-and-glass house, where the marble now groaned underfoot, he watched the downpour of ash and the rain of mud loaded with rocks. His grandmother refused to evacuate. She used to live on a farm, which Jet's father forced her to sell to save his construction company from an impending bankruptcy. So, the grandmother reasoned, if she was going to die, it would be nowhere else but in this house, where she had been transplanted late in life. When Jet and his father came back, she was barely alive in the shallows of her breath. After she died, Jet's father proceeded to systematically gamble and drink away the company that the farm had saved.

Sab was in Station 4. Her parents worked for an NGO that supervised the relocation of the Aetas. It was here that an old Aeta told her the story of the turtle-god. Sab was shaking. Don't worry now, her mother grave but kind. Soon the wrath of the turtle-god would abate. And it did. Most of the Aetas, at least those in Station 4, survived, her mother said. It was over now. Then she went to Dubai for work. Eventually her father volunteered in a refugee camp in Bataan. They left her in the care of relatives.

Robbie and his father, like all the Americans, took refuge in Subic. Everyone was quiet. Up until the last minute, they couldn't believe a volcano was erupting. Extension of the bases was imminent, they believed. But Newhall and Punongbayan's predictions were right after all. Now everyone was quiet as they faced the jets that would take them back home. Only GIs and immediate families. Also, Amerasian children without clear parentage. No papers needed. In Chicago, Robbie's father resumed a mostly uneventful, civilian life. Only Robbie kept coming back to the old house in Angeles, where an aunt-caretaker still lived, and also the portrait of a mother who died at childbirth.

Across shifting ground, they were three children left to their own devices. Before the calamity, they had met each other in the village, in playgrounds, in school. After the calamity, they met again. You would think they were three bodies pulled into the same orbit. There are things you think of, and there are things you don't, when climbing a mountain. Jet just keeps watching the rocks, taking photos. Later when he puts them together, they will reveal no human tragedy, only the brute processes of a form. Sab, for a moment, is distracted by a snake emerging from a crevice of rock. It uncoils, golden, and poised for attack. It changes its mind and returns into the dark. Robbie, for his part, has taken off his shirt, and by this gesture, has become pure flesh again, glistening with sweat. In this form at last, he has banished all thought and is at peace again.

Soon they reach the sixth kilometer. This is the point where the canyon breaks, and suddenly you come upon vast shores of ash, encircled by an atmosphere of sky and wind. Only several pinnacles of lahar still remain of the canyon here. Shriveled and drained into a gray so pure, these remaining towers have attained a kind of glacial sheen. Like the other tourists, Sab, Robbie, and Jet pause and stand in front of these towers, to make some kind of claim, even if only by way of a photograph. In the

photo, Jet is hanging onto Robbie's bare shoulders and back, while Robbie, almost squatting, red in the face, vein throbbing across the temple, is carrying Sab in his arms. It's as though he were hoisting a sack of rice, though of course he doesn't tell her this now. All three have the open and bright faces they wear in all their trips together, which have become fewer and fewer through time. What are these three about, perhaps the college girls are wondering now, mildly amused, as they wait for their turn. Three full-grown adults, unabashedly behaving like teens, as though a threesome at some game of charades, in a place outside time. What are these three about? It takes a history.

The Crater

The winds swept down from the higher domains. And there was a movement of sky, a ransacking of sky, a furor of wings. And the sea stirred, a spraying of jagged waters, a clawing of waves. Only there was nothing to claw, but another wave. In the beginning there was no rock. There was only the great dark. The sky hung upon so close to the sea. Between them there was no distance. They were emanations of the same substance. Eyes were useless here. It was the dark of the void, so absolute it permitted no accustoming of eyes. Sounds were at least more helpful: the indistinct bellowing of a bird, the distant fish-cry. Every cry was a measure of animal solitariness, surrounded by so much sky and sea, in the dark.

From this primordial matter shot up the great light. It was a flickering tongue of flame. But only at first. For as the lowing of the animal-source increased, so did the fire, now a vertical, brilliant river of boiling light. The animal-source was pouring its heart out. Its heart was magma. Waves of bright heat rolled upward, and the sky grew lighter and rose high up, till it was parted forever from the seas. Whatever remained of the sky was burnt, and burnt sky crashed into the boiling sea. Out of this substance came the first rocks.

And the animal-source crawled out of the womb-waters. Claws of black flint, scraping, searching for a foothold. In the tentative light of the first dawn emerged the head, nude and wet, of a creased and toughened hide, and slit with eyes. When at last the animal perched upon its island, it revealed the shell of its armored back. It was the turtle-god, the banisher of skies, improviser of igneous, enforcer of new earths. God of the calamitous heart. It would take to fire time and again, propagating an archipelago of rocks, erecting towers in an arc, until a summit was established. For it is good to survey a world, from the heights.

When the forest begins, you know you are near the summit. The last 20 minutes of the trek are the trickiest. The climb is narrower and steeper, and the river, leaf-strewn and root-fed, washes down your trail, crashing against rocks in mineral glinting. The growth encroaches from all sides, bent and twisted trees, elastic twigs now and then slapping at faces. Also, aerial root-hairs, sometimes straying into unwary mouths. Continents of moss underfoot, which can be slippery, especially on steep rocks. And dispensations of ferns, rubbing against arms, stroking cheeks and calves, reminding the presumptuous flesh of its nakedness. This path is one of the cliffs that form the volcano's caldera. Soon you find the path, at its steepest, ending abruptly into sheer light.

Entering the light, you find around you wind and sky, and below: the lake. From the heights, the surface looks still, but thick, like a membrane, as though in the end the turtle-god decided to build a replica of its original womb-waters. This lake is rainwater pooled in the ruins of the volcano's crater, surrounded by shielding cliffs. All the cliffs are robed in a thick and deep forest-green, in some places gashed by recent avalanches. Cradled in this circle of cliffs, the lake reflects the blue of the sky, but also, a gloaming sheen of turquoise. The descent to the lake is about a hundred steps more, down a stairs carved from the rock, but there it is now.

Sab, Robbie, and Jet behold the view, but no more than the time it takes to do so. Soon they make their descent. If they are no longer looking at each other, no longer consulting each other's faces, it is because at this point the face has receded into the skull, and now reflects only the primary thoughts. And if now and then words or syllables still come out from their mouths, these no longer issue from the intention to communicate, but out of some habit of throat. They reach the lake.

The sign says: SWIM AT YOUR OWN RISK. But between the body and the waters exists a more fundamental pull. Sab ignores the sign, as do many of the other trekkers. Before the lake, she promptly undresses. This is Jet and Robbie's signal. They follow suit. But before they dive, a hesitation. Perhaps it is all that sky, so much open space, and streaming winds, and beneath them the still unexplored depths of the lake. The three friends just pause before the lake. They still have around three hours before they go back. When the week ends, Sab goes back to Canada. Soon Robbie will go back to Chicago and attempt a fourth career. Jet might move back to Angeles. But none of them think of any of this now.

For now, they are just on the brink of a lake, near the dome of the sky. And they still have time, and between them, everything again, as though nothing has been cast in stone yet, only ripples of pure possibility. They enter the lake. Jet, whose element is really water, he's now convinced, follows Robbie and Sab dive into the depths of the lake. But, in vain. The depths lead straight into the heart of the mountain: rocks, more rock. Now they are just floating, sinking, bobbing up again, three fellow bodies released into the rites of water. And the waters are cold, and the skin is taut again, shivering from so much freedom.

On the shore, the college group sit on their spread towels, applying sunscreen. Daddy has pitched the tent. The five-year-old is ready in his trunks. He would have run and jumped to join those three bodies afloat in the middle of the lake. Except that Mommy catches him in time. No, not yet, not yet. But it is only a matter of time. One day too this boy will learn to break loose from restraining arms.

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