Abstract

"Echoes of War" is a creative nonfiction work that chronicles the experiences of three generations of women from a family living through war in Kauswagan, Lanao del Norte. The piece provides a personal and nuanced perspective on the impact of armed conflict on civilian populations.

The essay explores the complexities of identity, particularly the tensions between the Christian settler narrative and the ongoing struggle of the Muslim community in the region. By sharing the family's history, the essay paints a vivid picture of the realities of war and offers insights into the historical context of the armed conflict.

Initially conceived to document the narratives of war in Kauswagan and Lanao del Norte as a whole, "Echoes of War," in its little power, aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Mindanao literature and the human experience of conflict.

Keywords

Moro-Christian conflict, settler identity, war, intergeneration trauma

ECHOES OF WAR

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I WAS THE size of a bullet in Mama's belly when the all-out war of the state against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) was declared on March 21, 2000. For my mother, the world had always been cruel and full of suffering. "Kada-adlaw, pamati nako di na ko ma-ugmaan," she always said when she looked back on her life in the enduring chaos of Kauswagan, where womanhood was a mortal curse from God.

Mama was born the fourth child out of nine siblings to Nanay Lydia and Tatay Lito. In Kauswagan, poverty and illnesses were challenges one had to overcome through life. Mama's earliest memory of despair as a child took place in 1986 when finding food to eat was hard for farmers, farm animals were stolen, and young women were killed at the creek before dusk. The hardest task, however, was carrying her two-year-old sibling to the abandoned Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) church so they could hide from danger. Before twilight, Nanay Lydia would prepare dinner for her children for their despairing journey. Manang, the

oldest, was eight at the time, followed by my six-year-old mother, the four-year-old Angkol Dondon, and the two-year-old Tita Buging, who peed in the *banig* at night. Despair was a cruel thing. It made you feel less of a human being who deserved to only eat crumbs that were at times the size of dust you had to lick off the floor. Despair was painful and dehumanizing.

"Mangaon ta og sayo ha, kay didto napud mo matulog sa simbahan karong gabii," Nanay Lydia would always say after preparing dinner. Mama and her siblings had to sleep at the SDA church again tonight.

Distress was the ceaseless feeling every Kauswaganon woke up to. Every week, there would be news and rumors about insurgent groups coming down from the mountains because the municipal mayor ignored their demand for access to food and other resources. Soon, the groups learned that they could demand cash, which the local government never provided. The requests were proposed during election season when the municipality was suspected of having extra funds. When the appeals of the insurgents were ignored, crimes such as the ambush and mass killing of civilians in neighborhoods transpired, Mama said. Until today, the Kauswaganons referred to the omen of *alert-alert*, when everyone spoke quietly and walked in groups. Heeding the rumors of the insurgents' presence was better than accidentally meeting a group of armed men on the road going home.

All senses were awakened and kept alert to prevent oneself from getting in between the militants and the reserved forces that lurked around the town. Most of the time, *alert-alert* was a phrase of caution; to stop teenagers from wandering about because *alert-alert raba*. The phrase was also used as a parenting strategy, an excuse to lock your child inside the house to prevent them from staying out late with their friends. And for students, the phrase was a dramatic excuse used only when claims of a "stomachache" did not work: "Ma, di sa ko muskwela kay *alert-alert raba*. Basin mamakwit mo nga naa ko's 'skwelahan."

The "evacuation" was a daily routine for all Kauswaganons. Every six p.m., Mama and her siblings would travel in a group to seek safety at the SDA church on top of the hill across the National Highway. Among the group were the neighbor's children and the whole family of Nanay Lucia—Nanay Lydia's younger sister. The members of the large group would trot together on the road with their banig and blankets above their heads. They earned the attention and amused laughter of *sari-sari* store

owners and other residents in the area who had houses made of concrete and did not have to spend the night elsewhere.

"Naa napud ang mga mamakwitay!" the *tindera* would announce the group's presence and laugh. Mama and the others would laugh at themselves as they greeted everyone a good evening and wished for everyone's safety. Mama carried the sleeping Tita Buging in her arms, while Manang pulled the goats by the rope around their neck. The laughter slowly died into empty staccatos of pity and hopelessness for children born in this cursed town.

The SDA church was empty and dark every time they arrived. The evacuees did not dare light a single candle for fear of being found and killed in the night. The state was the supposed enemy of the insurgents, but when armed Christian militants came together to annihilate even the Muslim civilians in Mindanao, groups of Muro rebels had to retaliate and do the same to Christian homes. Mama said the Christian settlers of Kauswagan grew to fear the bullets that passed through their rattan walls at night when the Blackshirts sensed life inside a house. The Barracudas were a small militant group organized by Muro elites to counter the violence of the Ilaga on Muslim civilians in the 1960s (Muslim and Cagoco-Guiam, 13). Predominantly Ilonggo Christian migrants in Cotabato organized the Ilaga to clash with the Muslim inhabitants who did not agree with the Christian Filipinos' concept of land tenure and ownership. In the predominantly Muslim-inhabited areas of Mindanao in the 1960s, immigration caused social tension from land ownership when the "landless poor" from Luzon and Visayas migrated to Mindanao, as encouraged by the Philippine government (12). The violence persisted, and the Ilaga had one ultimate goal: to expel all Muslims in Mindanao (15). In retaliation, the Barracudas and Blackshirts, organized by Muslims in the Lanao and Cotabato regions, respectively, executed all Christian civilians in their path.

With experience, Mama and her group arranged themselves in the dark, opening their eyes so wide, as though it helped them see into the abyss. The goats they brought lay comfortably on the bed of ipil-ipil leaves and cogon grass in the corner that my mother and her siblings collected from outside. Meanwhile, the banig barely protected Mama and the others from the cold concrete. Despite the church being filled with the smell of goat feces and moldy walls, the group found comfort in finding a safe place to stay the night. The goats bleated, and the crickets chirped, but the orchestra of their heartbeats lulled them to sleep. Back home,

Nanay Lydia and Tatay Lito had to guard the pigs—their only fortune, which lay so comfortably at the *silong* of their *payag*.

I imagined Mama on the floor of the abandoned church—awake from fear and worry, tired and confused as to how the sound of their breathing at night could bring them danger. I imagined her hugging Tita Buging through the hours of darkness, seeking comfort after the easy part of retreating was done. Once in the church, they had to survive the night, where they could do nothing but hope and pray to an indifferent God. The same worry etched on Mama's face twenty-two years later while we tried to sleep on the floors of our living room amid the loud gunshots outside our walls. Me and my brother, Bryan, were in Mama's arms. Her erratic breathing and anxious sighs filled the house. She must have been thinking about the ways she could protect the three of us, in ways that were warmer than Nanay Lydia's years ago.

My grandmother did not come with Mama and her siblings to hug them while they hid in the SDA church. Before every evacuation journey, Nanay Lydia instructed Angkol Dondon to sleep with eyes and ears open to listen to footsteps and gunshots nearby. But my uncle must be too tired from lifting the banig and blankets above his head and carrying the plastic bag of toddler clothing on his back while crossing the highway to the SDA church—their evacuation camp. "Kay ikaw man ang lalaki, dapat protektahan nimo imohang mga igsuon," Nanay Lydia always said, teaching my uncle his role as a man in the family. I could not imagine the pressure and courage it took to put his life on the line for his siblings at four years old. Angkol Dondon was the bravest four-year-old I knew.

When I was four, I stuck a broken crayon inside my brother's nose because he tried to take my drawing materials away. Mama got so angry because she had to take my brother to our neighbor who happened to be a doctor. The doctor told me that my brother's nose had to be taken off to remove the crayon. But he was not sure he could put the nose back on, and I would forever be known as the older sister of my brother who did not have a nose. A horrible image of a noseless boy looking like an electric outlet with a set of eyes and a mouth came to my mind. Mama and the doctor made me promise to not put my brother's life at risk again. That night, Bryan returned home with one red nostril—his small nose still attached to his face.

When Angkol Dondon turned seven in 1989, Nanay's reminders recurred twice as much as before. In the same year, Nanay and Tatay's firstborn, Manoy, was ambushed on his way home. They said the *Muros* killed him. "Muro," from the Spanish "moro," is how Christianized Filipinos call Muslims.

Mama and her family never knew why Manoy was killed at the age of nineteen. They only assumed that he had a personal conflict with a group of Meranaw men his age. The family strongly believed this until today, as no one has taken responsibility for Manoy's death. For Angkol Dondon, the death of his brother meant that the responsibility for the family's safety was passed on to him. He must have had a hard time taking care of a big family. On the other hand, I always fought with my brother Bryan, whom Mama said I must treasure because she refused to have any more children.

Unlike Mama, Nanay Lydia had children every two years. Angkol Dondon had to tell Nanay to stop making more siblings for him to protect. He said it was too hard to be the only man in the family after Tatay Lito. For Nanay, her role in the household was to help Tatay in the *bukid* and bear children. As with other families in Kauswagan, my grandparents knew that they had a better chance of protecting each other with a larger family. But how could children protect each other without elders? Not to mention that most of Nanay and Tatay's children were girls, who they said were not meant to protect but to be protected. Other than that, the family also struggled with having too many mouths to feed—like many other families in Kauswagan.

Some families chose to put food in everyone's stomachs than stay protected—a choice that was harder for women. In 1980, the rate of women giving birth in the Philippines was 37.2 per 1,000 inhabitants, significantly higher than the 2023 birth rate of 16.0 per 1,000 inhabitants (UN, n.d.). Most of the unrecorded births in 1980 must have been from the women in Kauswagan who had to let go of their little angels to spare them from suffering. Instead, the mothers endured the pain. In Barangay Bagumbayan, a famous *aborsiyonista* never ran out of visitors from all over Kauswagan and its neighboring towns. Nanay said a group of women from her neighborhood visited the abortionist three times until they excreted painful blobs of blood. As religion was of significance in the Christianized town, the women were ostracized, not only by the church and clueless men but also by other women.

When a failed abortion became a medical complication, the doctor who had to deliver the deformed baby ridiculed the mother for killing her child. Then, the doctor removed her thinned and infected uterus. Hysterectomy not only saved mothers from future abortions but also prevented another angel from suffering in the cursed town. The church and the marketplace became perturbing places for women deciding to terminate their pregnancy. Along with God, many Kauswaganons judged

a woman by her choices, especially in her choice of saving one angel from the agony of being born in such a dismal town. To them, women cannot save but only make bad choices.

At other times, the agitation caused mothers to lose their pregnancy. In 2005, after a series of *alert-alert* in Kauswagan, Mama miscarried. Papa had just returned to Dubai after his short vacation on Christmas, and Mama was back to taking care of a mischievous toddler and a curious preschooler by herself. My little brother or sister would have turned 18 this year. But I also wondered if dying before living was better than having to suffer evacuations like Bryan and I did.

Kauswagan had curfews during *alert-alert raba* and then, more recently, during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. At other times, the people were free to roam the streets at night. About ten years ago, the nine p.m. curfews became ten p.m., before being lifted in 2018. In comparison, Kauswagan in 1989 had an eight p.m. curfew. There was an unwritten rule of not staying out too late and not going out too early, especially for women. Countless corpses were collected at the many creeks of Kauswagan. Most of the time, they were bodies of young girls who were sexually violated for staying out to do laundry or just taking a certain route on the way home. Mama said these women were killed out of fear that they would report the identities of their violators to the authorities. But many of the Kauswaganons, mostly Christians, were always certain of one thing: The crime was executed by the Muros. Hence, the people of Kauswagan, especially those who required protection, only came out of the house when the sun had illuminated the whole town. When everyone was awake, people could easily seek the help of others and not die helplessly. Dying in the hands of the Muros was the most unfortunate thing that could happen to a Christian in Kauswagan, according to Nanay.

As the town was originally occupied by native Muslims before the settlement programs in early 1918, Kauswagan was home to Meranaws and some Tausug from the Zamboanga region. Although there were Christian residents who found friendship with the Muslims, most of the settlers grew cautious of their presence, especially after suffering in the battle between the Philippine Constabulary and the Barracuda and between the Ilaga and the Blackshirts from the late 1960s until the early 1970s. Among civilians, the sight of a Meranaw woman in a black niqab and abaya kept Christians on their guard, even when the woman only came down to the *sentro* to buy food for dinner. The Christian-Muslim conflict in Mindanao

was initiated by the state's desire to conquer the "land of promise" through provocations that led to a series of retributions by both sides. Christian and Muslim civilians subsequently resorted to aggravations and crimes of their own, reinforcing the prejudices they had against each other.

Even when Kauswagan had a fair share of Christian criminals, the Christian elders took pride in their bravery against Muslim offenders. Using their sharpest *sundang* and blazing *sulo* made of dried coconut leaves, the settlers took revenge for Christian victims by executing their Muro perpetrators. Burning dead bodies was prohibited in Islam because the body of the dead must be treated with the utmost respect, but the Christians couldn't care less. Nanay said the Muslim criminals whose identities were discovered always fled town for fear of being treated like roasted pigs. Either way, the crimes undertaken by some Muros were used as justification for the Christians to alienate the Muslims in town and drive them away.

In Kauswagan, however, criminal acts were not committed by just one religious group. Most of the time, Christian criminals were worse than the people they persecuted for their religion. While everyone believed that rustling cows and carabaos was done by the Muros, Nanay said that other desperate Christians stole the animals and sold them in neighboring towns. When reporting to the local police, victims would be told to accept their fate, as the heist usually occurred during *alert alert raba*. The Muslims were not the only ones who raped Christian women either. In other evacuation camps, Christian women and even girls who had yet to menstruate were violated by the men in their group.

In such cases, the woman was forced to wed the man who violated her through an agreement between their families. The punishment was cruel to women, but it must be done; it is a sin against God to copulate with a man who is not your husband, even when the act is perpetrated with force. Many families would say, "Mas maayo na'ng ma-rape sa Christian kaysa sa Muslim." For families that could not bear to be raped or killed by anyone from any religion, their women had to take extra precautions once they stepped out of the house.

Just as many people died in the '90s, many Kauswaganons were also born. Nanay Lydia was one of the many women in town who gave birth to almost ten children in her lifetime. Mama said many families became disappointed when the child molded in the belly for nine months came out a girl. It meant the fathers had more to protect and to fear. Having more women in the family made the household vulnerable to abolition. Womanhood was a curse—a

manifestation of God's punishment for Eve and all womankind. The price for taking a bite out of a fruit of the tree of knowledge was the same price paid for being born to parents who were Christian settlers in Kauswagan.

Nanay Lydia was born and raised in Kauswagan by parents who were originally from Tabuelan and Carcar City in Cebu. After migrating from the motherland, Guillerma Macapobre, my great-grandmother, met Gavino Arellano in Kauswagan. In exchange for a piece of land in Kauswagan, Lola Guillerma sold the shoat she brought from Carcar City for a peso and bought a piece of land from a Meranaw family. However, the promised land was not enough for Christian families to escape privation. Due to poverty, Nanay Lydia barely finished fourth grade and worked at the bukid instead. Nanay Lydia and Tatay Lito were forced to marry when their parents caught them at the *bayle* downtown. Despite being Christian migrants, the settlers followed the Meranaw traditions on the physical boundaries between unmarried men and women. Tatay Lito's family were tenant to a Meranaw family's vast land. Until today, Tatay Lito and Nanay Lydia worked as farmers, sweating and bleeding on the land that promised to provide them with milk and honey and passing on their accursed fate to their children and their children's children.

Destined to suffer as a Christian settler's daughter, Mama left during her youth but did not escape the curse of disquiet. In 2000, when Mama conceived her first child, explosions—which were not intended for a celebration—penetrated Kauswagan. The ground shook as if angered that another child was to be born in the cruel land. I was still in Mama's stomach, and it was my first experience of war. At dawn on March 17, 2000, the whole terrain of Kauswagan trembled as rumors of an MILF attack circled the town. Some individuals claimed to have received the information from their Meranaw colleagues. The B40 rocket launchers would blast off today, they said. The coming attack was the insurgent group's retaliation to the government troops' offensive on the MILF's base, Camp Omar, in Maguindanao Province a month before. Instantly, the people packed their bags and children and ran to the *pantalan*. Traveling by land was impossible, as the National Highway was blocked early in the morning by armed men who had put up a checkpoint. On the coast, the boats were filled with evacuees going to Iligan City and Ozamis City by sea, arriving at the docks wet and in shock after their boat flipped upside down in the middle of the ocean. Back home, Nanay Lydia and her family had to plan for another desperate journey.

Nanay Lydia, by then left with seven children, with the youngest yet to turn three years old, wanted to evacuate to the nearby cities just like all her neighbors did. She had just recovered from the depression wrought by Manoy's death and did not want to lose any more of her flesh and blood. Nanay said there were no nights when Manoy did not appear in her dreams. I imagined the dreams to be filled with Manoy's cries for help and demands for justice, but according to Nanay, she was the one who wailed while Manoy comforted her. He always told her to be strong for his living siblings; they were Nanay's only reason to live.

Nanay Lydia's family moved to the *baybay*, near the sea—a common area occupied by mostly Christian residents who did not own land. The houses of these Christian residents stood above the sea supported by bamboo poles buried deep in the mud. The boats, some motorized, could be seen from the house's large windows, as walls were expensive to build. Nanay wanted to throw up on the scene of the many *sakayan* that raced with each other to escape, their motors roaring to the beat of her rapid pulse. She wanted to evacuate to the nearest city as well, but she was scared her children might float away to the ocean, which would make her lose her mind right there and then. Hence, the family decided to stay at the bay and hid themselves beneath the floor of an abandoned house in the neighborhood.

While Nanay tried to keep the family together in hiding, the armed men went straight to the public market and rummaged through the stores for food. On one of the tables, they opened all the canned goods from the stores and ate in peace, while the Kauswaganons ran to the pantalan with their children and swam to the rescue boats. In search of fresh clothing, the men scoured the tailoring shop in the market and collected the clothes they liked, leaving the hangers on the racks and their old muddy clothes on the floor. Like Boy Scouts, Nanay said, the men had yellow and green scarves wrapped around their necks and were dressed in normal clothing. "Murag pareho ra gud nato," she emphasized. After the men replenished themselves and changed into new clothes, they went back to work. Their rifles rested on their shoulders, scaring the civilians away and driving them out of the town—which seemed to be their intention all along.

A sea of people filled the pantalan. They ran, tripped, bled, and swam to the sea, in hopes that the sea would not kill them and their family. On the dock was a barge, prepared to protect the municipal mayor and the provincial governor since the break of dawn. First to reach the docks, the mayor waited for the governor while the frantic Kauswaganons

immediately filled the vessel, desperate to survive along with the *important* people. As soon as the governor reached the docks and parked her shiny car in the large space where many people could have settled themselves, the mayor ordered the captain to sail.

The governor was a Christian who married into one of the most established and powerful Meranaw politicians in Mindanao. The Christian-Muslim union was seen as Lanao del Norte's hope to achieve peace in the province. That love can find its way through war and religious differences. In the docks of Kauswagan, however, Madame's vehicle was more important than the many residents who could have escaped with them. Today, the family still had Lanao del Norte under their jurisdiction, taking turns in the positions of provincial governor, vice governor, and representative of the province after each maximum term.

The ship sailed and left many people on the docks, abandoning the town in ruins. Nanay said the overloaded barge nearly capsized. The best solution the mayor thought of was to expel some passengers and let them paddle their way in life boats for the rest of the journey. The shiny car of the governor still sat in peace in the large space, and the ship sailed away to Iligan City, where the sound of bombs and bullets were drowned by those of vehicles and commerce. Back in the pantalan, the MILF men fired subsequent shots toward the people near the dry land, rushing them into deportation.

At the baybay, Mama and her family ate a potful of stale rice in the dark, careful not to make any noise as they were the only ones left in the neighborhood. When the attack began, Kauswagan was filled with screams and cries of panic, a series of shots from M60 machine guns, and the overlapping sounds of pump boats in the nearby sea. In the afternoon, everything near the baybay descended into silence. Relying on fate, the family kept themselves muted and tried to make sense of the sudden silence outside the walls of the abandoned house. When night came, they heard an exchange of gunshots in the distance. At seven in the evening, six men from the Philippine Marine Corps entered Kauswagan through Iligan Bay with the mission to confirm the MILF invasion of the municipal hall. The state forces planned to drop a bomb into the building to annihilate the insurgents inside, before finding out that 294 civilians were held hostage and were planned to be killed by firing squad at the municipal plaza in exchange for the lives of the 23 MILF Mujahideen who died in the previous battle in Maguindanao. The ensuing crossfire between the MILF and the

marines, which killed forty-one insurgents and five soldiers, allowed the hostages to return home the next day. Nanay and her whole family also came back to their house across the neighborhood. Kauswagan was never the same since the 2000 incident. The prejudice the Christian settlers had against the Muslims only grew stronger as time went by.

I was not born yet when ousted-president Erap Estrada declared the all-out war against the MILF on March 21, 2000. However, I lived my early years hearing stories from my relatives over and over again, to the point that the stories have almost become my own memories. When Mama told me about how she saw the president in person when he landed on the elementary school grounds from his helicopter, I felt like I was there to see the scene as well, even when I was only more than a month old in her womb. My paternal grandfather, Lolo David, also never stopped reminiscing about how he saw Erap eating with his hands—rice and canned sardines, which, he said, proved how humble Erap was. Just like us, they said. But when they described Erap as someone who was "just like us," didn't they say the same thing about the MILF, too? The declaration of war made the Christians in Kauswagan see the president as hero and messiah, never realizing how the command would affect the non-rebel Muros in Mindanao.

I was seven going eight when a residential area and a masjid in Barangay Lapayan—only 4.8 kilometers away from our barangay, were burned to ashes in 2008. Arson was said to be the response of the MILF when the Supreme Court blocked the formal signing of the autonomy agreement of the state with the MILF that was to be issued on the fourth of August in the same year. Yet again, the government didn't keep its end of the bargain, disrespecting the Muro rebel group. As a result, it was the civilians who suffered. Kauswagan had a taste of peace for a while when the MILF called for a ceasefire during their peace negotiations with the Arroyo administration. Later on, everyone had to take flight once again—except for me and my family.

Mama must have liked staying home instead of evacuating to the nearby cities after she proved it was the better strategy in 2000. Aside from Mama, Bryan, and me, three other relatives lived with us in our new house. We could not afford to leave when we finally had a house of our own. In our new house, the bullets would not penetrate our concrete walls, but the windows with jalousies were too large and bright, exposing us to the world instead of hiding us in safety. Compared to the tight and dark underground that brought safety to Mama and her family in 2000, our large and bright house somehow felt dangerous.

We could not afford bulletproof glass windows, not even the French ones that locked from the inside. What if some man with a green scarf broke into our large windows with a weapon? If we locked ourselves inside, we might die without anyone in the neighborhood knowing. Our deaths would somewhat satisfy the insurgents' rage, letting them get back at the state that betrayed them. I told Mama of my worries, and her answer has felt like a bullet lodged in my brain until today: "Pag naa gani makasulod, kinahanglan jud nato na patyon kung siya lang usa."

Mama's voice shook, and I wondered if she feared the possibility of a man breaking in or if she was worried she would become like the soldiers and the rebels who killed in fear of being killed. Murder was not the best thing to suggest to a child who still had a long way to develop her moral values. Mama's answer, however, was necessary for our survival. As soon as Mama saw the large windows of our house after it was constructed, she went like like Tinker Bell and collected different objects to hide under the sink. Her collection included a large rock, an axe borrowed from Lolo David's tool cabinet, some large pipes, a bolo I used in my garden project at school, a *sundang* from Tatay Lito, and a wooden paddle with the logo of the local fraternity group of Manoy Julius, Papa's nephew. I knew Manoy had been looking for the paddle for months, but he would be glad to have another member of the group if we performed an initiation ceremony on any man entering our non-war-proofed windows.

Every night, when *alert-alert raba*, Mama would sit us down and tell us over and over again about what we should expect in the coming days. She said there would be a lot of running outside and that we should not be curious and peek out the windows. The jalousies must remain closed, not even our floral curtains must move a single inch. There would be explosions and gunshots, but we must think that we were only watching the movies Papa liked to binge on our old TV. There is no reason for us to panic. We are going to be alright as long as we stay together and keep our weapons nearby, Mama always said like she was trying to convince herself. We promised Mama we would not cry if we heard gunshots or when the ground shook from bombs and the famous B40. We promised Mama we would be in a deep sleep and not scream in fear, not even from our nightmares. Just like a good girl and boy, we promised not to put all of us in danger. Our survival depended on following all of Mama's orders.

If Mama were asked, she would have preferred for me and Bryan to have stayed inside her stomach while heaven and hell fought over Kauswagan—

just as I was in her belly twenty-three years ago. She said she could not imagine me and Bryan despairing for survival while the bullets chased us away. It broke her heart to think of the possibility of one of us being injured—or worse, dying. If we were safe in her stomach, she could run and hide anywhere without worrying about one of us crying or getting hurt. Looking back, I should not have cried so much over the frequent blackouts and the random explosions in neighboring barangays at night. But during all those times, Mama, with her sweaty hands and panicked face, always tried to soothe me with her warmth, even when Mama was on edge herself.

Mama and Papa were not married yet when I was conceived. Mama had a month into graduating from high school, and Papa had just graduated from a two-year vocational course in electrical technology; all the plans they had going forward ceased because of my sudden existence. Mama did not even have the chance to take a shot at her dreams of being an elementary school teacher. She was banished from Nanay's house and moved in with Papa's family, where she suffered under her in-laws and during her first pregnancy. From her birth until today, Mama endured the affliction of being a woman born in a cursed land. The punishment for eating the fruit of the tree in the garden was cruel indeed for all women to have to suffer after Eve's falling to temptation. Her mistake led to sickness, suffering, and death.

In both the Greek and Latin versions of the life of Adam and Eve outside the garden, Eve makes many mistakes other than eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge. In the Latin version, she mistakenly brings death to mankind by asking an angel for oil. In another version, Eve is reproached and left to give birth to their firstborn alone while Adam persists in praying to appease God's anger. When Eve becomes estranged from God, she suffers in an instant not only in the pain of childbirth but also in becoming her husband's subordinate—the purpose of her existence. The first woman and first wife of mankind is said to have brought suffering to all generations of women. But why isn't Adam blamed in the same way for giving into temptation as well? Shouldn't we also hold God accountable for creating pain and suffering in the world just because He wanted man to depend on Him? Similarly, will the state ever take liability for creating chaos and making false vows in the land of promise?

The agony in Eve's life begins when she leaves the Garden of Eden. In Mama's life, her suffering began when she was born in Kauswagan. She lived her life in fear of death that even the most unthreatening objects scared her. She would have a panic attack over the sound of a balloon

popping, a tire bursting along the distant national highway, or the explosions in a fireworks display. Nanay may be immune to the chaos of war, but for Mama, any blast reminded her of gunshots and bombs.

When a shot is fired, the sound travels at a constant speed of 650 miles per hour in all directions on a flat surface and open area. However, in a town with houses and large establishments, the sound bounces off the buildings and reflects toward different directions, creating an echo. In Mindanao, the shots were first fired against the Christianized state in the late 1960s when the Muslim separatist movement Mindanao Independence Movement was formed by Datu Udtong Matalam, triggered by the massacre of at least 28 young Muro military trainees in 1968 (Adriano and Parks 13). The movement was followed by the establishment of the Moro National Liberation Front and other insurgent groups, who sought for the Philippine government to hear their call to self-determination, equal access to resources, and respect for their culture and religion. With the minimal amount of effort that the state is exerting in addressing the cultural, political, and economic issues in Mindanao, Mindanawons continue to suffer in poverty, heteronomy, exploitation, and militarization. Nanay was one of the first residents of Kauswagan to experience gunshots that she desperately survived. The conflict continued to transpire in Mama's generation, with the echoes of war reflected and endured from generation to generation. The repeating soundwaves have since lingered and haunted us even until the present day, even with Kauswagan experiencing the longest ceasefire since the '70s. The echoes have made us cautious, divided us as a people, and kept us alert, waiting to see who would break the truce first.

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