

nagsabing may darating sa buhay ko, isang lalaking matagal nang nasa aking puso, na nahiwalay lamang dahil sa paglalaro ng tadhana...”

“Kaya hindi ka nag-aasawa?” tanong na hindi ko dapat itanong, ngunit naitanong din.

Sa halip na sagutin ang tanong ay nagpatuloy sa kaniyang sinasabi, “Nang gamutin ko ang sugat mo sa ulo at hugasan ang iyong katawan, may nakita akong isa pang sugat...” wala sa loob na kinapa ko ang pabilog na balat sa kaliwang dibdib ko.

“Birthmark...” pagtutuwid ko, ngunit hindi rin niya pinansin ang sinabi ko. Nakatuon ang mga mata niya sa mukha ko, ngunit tila wala ako roon...

“...na nang dampian ko ng palad ay nagdugo...nagdala sa akin sa ibang panahon, sa ibang kaligiran...nagpahiwatig na kailangang iligtas kita sa kamatayan, kailangang lunasan, ibalot ng kumot, dalhin sa ligtas na kanlungan...”

May hanging pumasok sa maliit na bentanilya, hinipan ang kandila’t biglang nagdilim ang buong silid. Tinangka kong bumalikwas, ngunit naramdaman ko ang mabilis na pagtayo ni Mam Taz, ang di-nagmamadaling yabag, ang kislap na sinundan ng tunog ng pagkiskis ng posporo, ang muling pagsabog ng malamlam na liwanag. Pagkatapos maibalik ang posporo sa balsa ng kaniyang palda ay walang pagmamadaling lumapit at muling umupo sa tagiliran ko, sa kama. Hinawakan ko ang kamay niya; ramdam ko ang init na galing kung saan. Nang kabigin ko’y saglit na nagbantulot ngunit nagparaya rin, bagama’t naroon pa rin ang pag-aalangan. Ang unang tangka ko’y halikan ang malambot niyang kamay. Ngunit sa kung anong dahilan, nagbago ang isip ko. Ibinaba ko ang kumot sa dibdib hanggang tumambad sa liwanag ang mabilog kong balat. Dinadala ko ang palad niya upang muling idampi sa balat nang bigla niyang hinaltak, binawi ang kamay, nasisindak! Umiling-iling. Garalgal ang tinig nang magsalita, “Ibibigay ko ang buhay ko makabalik lamang tayong muli sa panahong iyon...ngunit muli ka na namang mawawala sa akin...” Humagulol siya.

At naalimpungatan ako...Una kong naramdaman ang malamig na batong dingding, lamig na naninigid sa buto, at ang pamimitig ng kaliwa kong paa. Bumalikwas ako’t hinagilap ang backpack, pahablot na hinugot ang dyaket at nagkukumahog na isinuot ito. Bago ko tuluyang naisara ang zipper sa harap ay naulinig ko ang pagaspas ng mga dahon, ang higing ng tila nananaghoy na tinig. Nang sulyapan ko ang punong balete ay nakita ko ang puting damit na kumakampay sa hanging Amihan, ang nagkakahugis-babaeng anino mula sa likuran ng puno, ang marahang imbay ng kamay na kumokompas sa mga paang humahakbang palapit sa akin at ang maamong mukhang naaaninag ko sa sinag ng namimilog na buwan.

Nagmamadaling hinubad ko ang dyaket, ibinukas ang harapan ng polong asul at inilantad sa liwanag ng buwan ang balat sa aking dibdib—kahit na naninigid sa buto ang lamig ng hatinggabi at nagsisimulang dumausdos sa punong balete ang dambuhalang Sawa...

~oOo~

Angelo R. Lacuesta

Jubilee



Someone told me once, I can’t tell you who, that every man needs a brother at some time or another. And though I don’t trust aphorisms much—my grandmother’s favorite: “there are no atheists in foxholes”—that thought brings to me an ancient unpleasantness, like the feeling people must get when they visit the same graves year after year, or attend the same old family rituals. These are the things, oddly enough, that never wear out.

But here it was, sticking out like a very fresh gravestone among the eternally unfamiliar, his name in large type held up to me by two curlcues—that’s what they call them, I think, when they’re without denomination of any sort, when they really mean nothing more than things to hold up the things they hold in between. As it happens, there were two dates below them, the first startlingly close to the date of my own birth. I remember now that we were both under the same water sign. The clue to that—or what it was this clue led to—was that he had turned out to be a champion swimmer as we grew up together.

He was also quite the handsome man, and I remember how each of these qualities quite powerfully enhanced the other, so that in our minds he stood head and shoulders above us.

Broad-backed and deep-dimpled, dark skinned enough to seem regularly and irrevocably tanned at those Mediterranean beaches everyone's parents took them to in the summers, Raymundo—let us call him—was a miracle man, the much awaited and much prayed-for only child of parents whose fortunes in life were, in every other way, as they had been then, and as they had turned out even now, prolific and prodigious.

Regarding the details, memory fails me. Of course. I am at the age where we cannot be relied upon to remember details. But where we curiously find ourselves lapsing into the things that even the longest, most richly-led lives could never obliterate.

We are also at an age, I confess, where we are too old to die young and too young to die without the intervention of some strange circumstance. A tragic accident, a disease left undiagnosed for too long, even a grievous crime, any of these might have had a hand.

Besides the second date below his name, startlingly quite recent, I have no clue. And though this is not the usual age for death by natural causes, I confess we—both of us, as if by silent agreement—knew he would not amount to much, not that he would ever need to. Remember that this was way before the theory of evolution was ever accepted or even discussed in school. But we didn't need to know much about genetics to know that heredity would always play a much greater role in his fate than any sort of personal endeavor. Still, the sight of his name on the obituary, written out in the formal way we had all been accustomed to in school, brought me back to those days when we knew each other at first by those names, long-winded and very necessary, stitched in blue thread on the cloth patches above our pockets, laboriously written in longhand on our papers, or called out to us by the instructors and the professors who would attach our faces to them in perpetuity.

And if I told you when and—even roughly—where these events took place, it would take mere moments for you to be able to triangulate and pinpoint with a finger. While I don't mean to be coy, I must confess I believe that the reader is ultimately more intelligent than the writer. Now I find myself relying on—and thus, distrusting—not only your sharpness, but most especially, the kind of moral wisdom that every sharp reader is inexplicably endowed with when he reads—and, in the end, must rely on in return.

"Relations come by chance, friends by choice," it's been easily said. There's another witticism that's so easily debunked. Everyone knows what the real truth is: friendships are formed by seating arrangement. Though we first shared nothing more than the first letter of our surnames, we would learn to whittle down our double- and triple-first names to single entities: soon "Raymundo" sufficed, as a challenge to a quick handball game in the hallway or a challenge to a quick pencil duel between bells.

It was in between these in-between times that we demonstrated our friendship for each other. I digressed from our game of shooting stars and drew him one of my artistic specialties, beginning with the outline of a profile, a bump for the eye, another bump for the flared nostril, a delicately drawn curling lip. I

filled in the details and the shadows, producing a well-rehearsed horse's head whose neck trailed away into an intimation of a well-formed body. In return for my masterpiece, he drew me one of his, tearing a piece of paper from a pad and reproducing on it the outline that suggested an erect penis. I smelled my favorite eraser and remarked how the fragrance reminded me of the Belgian chocolate my grandmother prepared for me from scratch over the weekends. He bit half of it off and opened his mouth to show me the pulverized bits. He snapped his mouth shut into a satisfied smile, swallowed, and proudly showed me a spotless tongue, like he was a magician showing the audience his empty hands.

My shortened single name, which is also the name of my father, my many brothers and many sons, became a shortcut, too, to Raymundo's invitations to mischief. It heralded my first cigarette, my first glance at a woman's naked body, held in a faded photograph I can still remember after all this time.

My name, said sotto voce in the middle of an exam, also became a cry for help. We had our usual bag of tricks. We wrote crucial passages on the soles of our shoes, etched them on the edges of desks. We suffered the unwieldiest of mnemonics and attempted to commit to their nonsense some semblance of logic. At our most desperate we relied on our untrained memory to retrieve famous and infamous names, scientific procedures, moral principles, writing them in our special shorthand on paper money, saved from our allowance and crumpled into pieces small enough to flick across the aisles when the Brother wasn't looking.

"Psychologize the answers," I told Raymundo one day as we were about to take a multiple choice test in literature. We'd been promising ourselves to study all night all that week, and if it weren't for the various errands the Brothers always had him performing, or the preparations we needed to undertake for the visiting international girls' school, we would have been able to memorize those lines from Dante, Baltazar and Rizal. "Answer the ones you're most sure of and randomize the rest." It turned out to be brilliant thinking, of course, but of all subjects it was mathematics where randomness didn't work.

In his anachronistically formal attire and with his stiff posture, horn-rimmed glasses, greasy moustache and thick lips, Mr. Castello—shall we christen him—lent himself just as easily to caricature. We had it down to a minimum of pencil strokes. I don't know who had started it, but soon his image adorned the flyleaves and the margins of mathematics books all throughout the school—even of those who had never had him as their teacher. Through the quick curlicues that became his glasses, the thick scribble that was his moustache, the dangling figure-eight that meant his bowtie, he became everyone's mathematics instructor. In this manner he haunted us with the power of a storybook creature, so that even his exams acquired a mythical nature.

There was no psychologizing them, first of all. Algebra took chance out of everything, and the fastest way I had learned how to get past the problems was also the most legitimate: memorize the quadratic formula, that one magic formula from which all algebra, it had seemed, could be derived, where $x = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$ and I am surprised to find that I can actually remember it now—is equal to negative b, plus or minus the square root of b squared minus the product of 4, a and c, all over 2a.

When the exam results came Raymundo seemed to have performed another miracle. I caught sight of the mark on his test paper, a figure so improbably high I remember it until now. I could not have attributed it to hard study, or even diligent cheating.

Childhood friendships, as I remember them, are marked by hidden competition and vast chasms of insecurity. They also hold shared confidences. Raymundo's scintillating performance in exam after exam was also, perhaps, the first test of our friendship. When I pressed him for his technique he kept his silence. As I saw my own marks falling right under me and my very name on my own papers I began begging him, with a certain degree of anger, and reminded him of everything that I had done for him—all those beers I had paid for and the secrets I had kept.

He turned his sharp nose and his deep eyes toward me and sighed as though he had been underwater and had just emerged to breathe.

He told me about remedial classes after swimming practice. He told me the things he had told him, words of guidance, words of soft encouragement, taken to mean this way or that. He told me it was nothing serious, nothing to be alarmed about. The man had seen that he was suffering and he would help him. After all, he had taken a liking to him.

A boy with a young man's face—I suppose it was easy. There might have been an embrace. There might have been some touching, some rubbing. It might only have been his dark moustache brushing against his tender lips or his closed eyes. Or something more—what can a boy know or remember? To him it might have brushed across him faint and forgettable as a shadow, to be recalled only as a shadow, or an outline, or as someone else's memories. We were only fourteen then. Maybe younger.

Things like these happen up to now, of course, in schools, in homes, in the most sacred of places. Even then it was almost common lore that it happened from time to time. Professors were often lonely, and students were the gentlest of creatures. Most of them, at least.

I can't be bothered to remember what I exactly wrote, but I do remember tearing out the piece of paper from my composition pad, and the childish mix of certainty and overconfidence I felt, and the matter-of-factness I employed, when I informed Mr. Castello, in the uniform penmanship of our school, that I knew what was going on and that I needed help on my exams, too. I folded my letter once, twice, and playfully marked the outer flap with a caricature of Mr. Castello, rendered flawlessly from months of imitation and practice.

When we think of information it is pieces of paper we think of, or remember—hardly ever the information that is on them. Information as material, information as evidence. The proof of Raymundo's passing was a full-page piece of newsprint, a page that might have been entirely blank except for his name, in large and small capitals, and the two dates that contained him. But like his formal name, scrawled across the top of his test papers, it would have contained everything we needed to know about him. Like I said, he had natural good looks and excelled at swimming. He poured his body soundlessly into the pool, propelled by limbs

that arced like natural waves of water, thundering by without seeming to break the surface to take a single breath, until he was done, and he was gone. I had thought, as well, that the little more that I knew about him disappeared with him, but memory is one of the things you just can't trust.

One morning, just as we were about to begin our prayerful reflection for the coming week, Mr. Castello stepped forward and cleared his throat. It was all he needed to do to bring the room to silence. He squinted at us behind his horn-rimmed glasses and his voice shook with anger as he spoke.

"Before we begin, I would like to take a few minutes of your time to announce that one of you—one of you has done something gravely disappointing and unbecoming of someone from a school such as this." As he said these words the lines deepened on his face and a bright red vein appeared on his forehead. I saw him, for the very first time, as if in close up. I noticed the hair on his temples, prematurely gray, and the loose skin under his jaw.

Mr. Castello raised his voice so that it threatened to squeak. "I will ask the young man to now step forward, identify himself, face the class, and face up to what he has done."

"Come forward!" He spread his gaze across the class, and when our eyes crossed paths I made sure he saw nothing but my resolve. I did not move, not for the many moments his command hung in the air.

He finally said, to no one in particular: "No matter. I have forgiven you."

The events of the weeks and the months that stretched out after that elude my memory now. But as far as I know, as far as I am concerned, there was no grand happening to end it all, no great revelation, no violent confrontation. Those incidents simply ceased occurring and our lives returned to their quiet academic subsistence.

As usually happens to campus athletes, Raymundo gradually lost interest in his sport. On graduation day, dressed in identical shirts, ties and togas, we said goodbye to Mr. Castello. We must have appeared like an army of men come to haunt him one final time before we—and he—disappeared.

I never saw Raymundo again, not even at the oral exams that also served as college entrance interviews. By that time I was seventeen and already in the middle of my final preparations for university abroad. My papers were in process and I was happy to put my youth behind me—after this quick academic formality.

But there he was, sitting at the far end of the faculty panel. His hair was grayer, his face longer and older, but on the card in front of him bore that name, the name I thought I would forget.

He hadn't forgotten, of course. When it was his turn to ask, Mr. Castello asked me a question I would easily have answered had they been put to me by anyone else. It was the simplest of textbook questions, really. But as he spoke I saw him the way he had always been in my mind—the glasses, the scribble of a moustache, the bowtie, the thumbnail sketch we carved on our desktops.

This is how he is in that one class photo I kept—standing without expression beside his boys, beside him. When the recess bell rang again Mr. Castello called us to the big tree for our yearly photograph.

No great consequence hung in the balance. But then it was not my future that made me nervous. The short of it: I lost my composure. I lost my bearings. The answer, and all of the answers, froze in my memory and grew stale behind my tongue.

I could not find my voice until decades later, when I visited my alma mater on a Jubilee year. Perhaps I had been asking for it, coming round again, quite out of my way. In a strange way, despite all that had happened, I was quite drawn to the old school.

Mr. Castello was a bent figure coming at me slowly in some passage or corridor when I turned from looking at photos of the old class. He had turned into an old man standing feebly in my path. How I had known him before hardly mattered. His hair had turned white and sparse, he had given up his horn-rimmed glasses for steel-wire ones, and he had lost the moustache. He was shorn of his old telltale features. I almost did not remember him, and I didn't think he would remember me, either, after all that time.

"Are you an architect now?" he asked me.

"Not quite yet," I told him.

"You failed those orals, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes I did."

"I never thought I would see the day," Mr. Castello said, with a voice so faint it was almost like a breath. Then he turned and walked away.

As for Raymundo, I could not find him at the Jubilee. I never bumped into him at any of the rare chance reunions I have had over the years. I only heard of his exploits and his failures through others, and learned of his death through the papers. He died younger than a man of his natural gifts should, but older than he ought to, considering that I can only guess what he had really gone through. Old age, for men like me, is merely wasted on the act, or should I say, the art, of pure remembering. Today's paper, today's memorial on the page, this evidence, would constitute the whole proof and the rest would be immaterial.

After all the graduation revelry, before our parents to claim us one last time, Raymundo and I made promises to schedule a rendezvous at one grand city or another. It was the first time in a long time I had really taken a good look at him, his expression worn down, his manner softened since our first days in school, his shoulders narrowed and his muscles slackened since his last days as a champion swimmer.

The next, and the very last time I saw him was as a much younger man, in the complete silence of the class photograph I discovered in the pile of old school junk I'd been promising to sift through and sort before leaving for university. The sleeves of his sweater are tied around his neck. He wears a scowl to protect his eyes from the sun. The shadows of the afternoon show his high cheekbones, his sharp nose. I have just met him here, I think, and we have just sneaked a cigarette, one of many in my youth.

~oOo~

Charlson Ong

The Vet



"You don't understand, Dr. San Diego, this is an emergency. She's feverish, her eyes are turning blue."

"It's a usual reaction to the drug, Mr. Legazpi. Google is doing fine. Bring her to the clinic in the morning."

"What if she goes blind?"

"She won't go blind."

"I had a Japanese pitch that went blind. We fed him tuna. His eyes turned blue."

"She won't turn blind, Mr. Legazpi."

"How can you be so sure? Her eyes look blue."

"I'm her doctor, Mr. Legazpi. Your dog is fine, nothing to worry about. Don't panic."

"I'm not panicking and she's not my dog. She's Luisa's dog! She's her pet! Her first! She's only ten years old, doctor."

"She's five months old, Mr. Legazpi, a difficult but manageable age."

"I'm talking about Luisa, I'm talking about my daughter."