

THE OLD MAN AND HIS FALSE TEETH

Hammed Bolotaolo

When the old man woke up one rainy day, it wasn't because his cat was pawing at his face as it usually did to intimate its need to be fed. A dream about a woman handing him a set of broken false teeth made him bolt upright in bed with a painful erection and a sudden twitch of his head like he was on a puppet string. He knew he had wept in his dream with that shameful sob of despair children have, and was convinced that the woman in the dream was someone he knew, but couldn't remember her face or pinpoint where and when they had met.

For a moment his eyes oscillated between his dream and consciousness. His feet sought his slippers on the floor as his cold hands groped for his glasses. Although his vision was shrouded in white, almost as if he were tired of finding the things he sought, he glimpsed a glint that looked like an ember fighting its fated death. He put the glasses on and peered at the false teeth with a golden tooth beaming at him. His eyes then turned to a faded photo of a woman in a frame made of pearls, illuminated by a fluorescent lamp.

He found his cat curled up next to his pillow stuffed with pigeon feathers on which he laid his feet to help him sleep. He looked up and saw the same constellations of cobwebs swinging from the ceiling. A wave of relief washed through him. Nothing had changed after all. He was still alone.

At the center of the room was a credenza inlaid with cobalt flowers and helices outlined in gold, its feet resembling a lion's and its drawer handle a cock's plumage. It was the sole piece of furniture of value in the old man's shack. Every day he would shine it to perfection, as he would polish his false teeth to make them whiter. It contained his umbrella and his wife's clothes and shawls. On top of it stood the frame with his wife's photo, a statue of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, and a half-filled glass of solution with the false teeth in it. The bed was set in front so that the credenza was the headboard. Next to the bed, a box fan whirred in the perfumed air. The *sampaguita* garland draped on the *santo* and the roses in old shoes and tin can containers had

turned brown, but their sweetness, even in decay, lingered. In front of the bed was a round table with two wooden chairs as ancient and worn out as the old man, and a miserable ottoman for the cat. Behind the credenza was a dusty sewing machine with a hydrant-shaped body adorned with pink paintwork. This reminded the old man of one scorching day when his wife declared she wanted to sew with a machine, as if its mechanical nature, unlike the sentimentality of knitting, reflected her true feelings.

It took the old man some time to notice that he had forgotten to turn off the radio before he went to sleep. As he listened to the rain tapping on the tin roof, he caught a familiar song he could not identify, something about forgetting to remember. He rose and took the false teeth from the glass, and before he placed them on an embroidered towel bearing his name, he held them to his face, as one would do a hand puppet:

Why do you always bleach me? ... Because you are special ... But you never use me to eat ... Because you are precious.

Although it had suffered cracks and accumulated mold over the years, the terrazzo sink that the old man had given his wife many years ago was still gleaming. As he poured the denture solution down the sink, a black spider with eight legs crawled out, its jelly eyes shining with recognition. The old man tried to flush the spider down the drain, pouring water on it, but its legs curled up suddenly announcing its death. When he stopped, however, the spider to his delight moved and made a break for the wall, trying to climb up to its web but failing to do so. The old man let the spider live, for it had gained his respect.

As the sharp smell of bleach mingled with the fragrance of the dead flowers, wistful and harsh, and the stale smell of his cat, and the rain, the old man felt something clutch at his heart. He remembered the day his wife gave him the false teeth a few years before she died, although he couldn't remember what occasion it was. They were a surprise gift. Alas, they were not a perfect fit: they were bought from a store that sold second-hand dentures, from a place where the Black Nazarene was worshipped by thousands of devotees. Noticing that they were quite unusual, the old man asked her why she chose the false teeth with a golden tooth, as they might have cost her more than what was needed. They were a substitute, she said, for their wedding rings that he pawned when despair paid her a visit. The old man failed to repossess the rings, for they had already been auctioned off by the time he got the money to claim them. He also never quite understood why she didn't just buy new rings instead of the false teeth.

Looking through the window pane drenched with silver drops and waiting for sunrise, the old man realized that it was the longest rain since he and his wife had sailed into oblivion. He opened the window and shuddered from the cold as the raw wind rushed in, brushing his face with the salty fragrance of the sea. He looked out at the drifting clouds and the blue light of dawn and thought the rain that had turned into a steady drizzle would soon stop. He saw a sailor-boy rowing a *banca* made from a large block of styrofoam held together with packaging tape. The whole neighborhood had been inundated for months by the chocolate water from the Manila Bay which drove the rats up from the sewers, forcing them to settle with the illegal city-dwellers. In his house made of old plywood and corrugated iron sheets, the slivers of tamarind-shaped rat droppings were strewn across the linoleum floor, but there was no stink, or if there was, it was barely discernible.

After a while the old man gargled with lukewarm water and rock salt. Except for the sailor-boy calling for passengers, there was silence, intermittent and blunt like the rain, so that the old man could hear his own thoughts. On the neighbor's roof, despite the drizzle, there were boys flying kites made of silk that looked like giant moths blotting the chiaroscuro from the sky. Amid the flood were floating dogs, refuse, and debris from the outskirts of the public market, all circling in silence before making their way to the nearby bay. The flood had become too deep for anybody to walk through it or play in, and no fish dared swim in it. The first floors of the shanties were emptied, except for families who had found a way to live with water. People had built more shacks higher up, it seemed, to reach for the clouds where light was more generous. The shacks, struggling on top of one another and making the alleys narrower, were covered with open mussel shells so that they appeared opalescent from his window.

The old man turned the faucet on and gently held the false teeth under the cold running water which pricked him like needles. He imagined the lack of sunshine for a long time might have frozen the pipes. He filled the glass until it was half-full with water and mixed in it three tablespoons of bleach. He smelled the solution as he was stirring it, stinging his eyes so that they turned watery and burning his nose. He then placed the false teeth back in the glass with the new solution and remembered his wife telling him to be careful all the time.

I don't want you dirtying them. We can't afford to buy another.

He set the glass back on the credenza, and gazing at a canine tooth in the lower denture, the golden tooth, its luminous flickering undiminished by the solution, he wondered whether his wife was happy where she was.

Humming the familiar tune from the radio about forgetting, the old man opened a can of sardines and reheated yesterday's rice. Roused by the smell of food they always shared, the cat approached him and circled around his feet, its face rubbing against his ankles. He knelt down and massaged its tortoiseshell fur. Yes, it's coming. The cat looped its tail around his leg and purred with understanding, its whiskers twitching and its blank coral eyes staring at him. After setting aside his own share, he emptied out the can onto a finger clam bowl on the floor and placed half of the rice in it. The cat began to eat the food in the bowl with great composure, its tail high in the air. He then set two plates, two cups, and two spoons on the table which was covered with a white crocheted cloth. He smiled at the photo of his wife, for he was certain that it would upset her if he didn't pay her any attention.

Don't forget to shave. You look like an ailing ermitanyo.

I almost forgot today is my first day at work, the old man said. I'll take the train again after a long time. Remember the day we took it when we got back from the sea? We were lost fools! With a golden key which he carried close to his heart, fastened by a safety pin to his tee shirt, he opened the credenza's drawer and took out his umbrella and hung it behind the chair on which he sat down to eat. You know how difficult it was for me to get a job, he continued. Took me months. They said I'm too old. But I told the circus master he has nothing to lose, and he's lucky to have me. I can play ermitanyo or any of his monsters inside that horror house to amuse children.

After finishing his food, the old man put a copper kettle on the gas burner. When only the soft slurping of the cat and the song of forgetting filled the room, he noticed his reflection in the kettle and didn't like what he saw. He made himself a cup of coffee and took yesterday's paper from the door. He then began his routine of reading the paper to his wife.

Nothing to cheer you up these days, he said after reading the front page to her. You only get scandals, as if they matter to the world, and deaths, lots of deaths, mostly of ordinary people, unknown people. Is death that important? Why, we celebrate it with guitars and cards and alcohol. I'm sorry I did the same thing to you. You know I had no choice.

The cat strode toward the old man for more food, but he had nothing more to give so he fondled its head. Ignoring him, the cat hopped onto the ottoman and licked its paws.

Woman gets burned and becomes a blossoming tree, he read, flicking through the pages. Man flies off building and breaks his wings. Young boy turns into fish and drowns in the bay. The old man looked at her. You must be sick of hearing about them every day. Same stories over and over again. He put

down the paper, musing on how events were mere recycling of the past and how men were unable to depart from history. I won't bother you anymore. He stood up and took the glass with the false teeth from the credenza, while the cat leaped over the table and licked the plates.

On the wall, next to the window, hung a broken mirror which made the old man drift into longing every time he looked into its icy fragments, as he saw, for all his younger self flitting through his mind like a mirage shimmering on the horizon. Though battered by the sun all his life, the old man's face was gentle. The waves of memory stretched in all directions, and his face, upon closer inspection, resembled bark waiting to be shed. His eyes, despite their malady, gleamed like fish scales illuminating hues upon contact with the sunlight. And his wrinkled mouth, it seemed, only longed for laughter.

Be very careful. They are not as strong as your old teeth. They break rather easily.

The old man placed a towel on the bottom of the sink to protect the false teeth should they slip through his fingers. Cleaning them was a serious business. Although he never used them to eat, he brushed them with baking soda as lightly as if he were petting his cat, stroking the upper section with a circular and short back-and-forth motion. And with the same gentle motion, he brushed the lower section and then the ridge that connected the golden tooth with the gum. He examined them to ensure that he had brushed them thoroughly, and that no plaque, tartar, or stain had materialized. He repeated the slow brushing, sweeping, and rolling, and when he was satisfied, he rinsed them under running water and patted them dry. Then, as was his usual habit, he held them to his face:

Why do you always clean me? ... Because you are special ... I don't like to be bleached ... I want you to be bright always ... Why? ... Because you are precious.

With his thumb and forefinger he held the sides of his upper teeth and jiggled them in his mouth. With the never-ending song of forgetting still playing, the old man smiled at the broken mirror, and the golden tooth glittered at him.



Don't forget to put a towel on your back. Rain and sweat will make you sick.

Although the rain had abated to a drizzle, the sun was still hidden behind clouds when the old man looked out of the door and called for the sailor-boy who had been a companion to him since the whole place had been inundated by the rain and become a lake of melancholia. On their journeys to San

Andres Market, or to Hobbit House where he used to work with the dwarves, or to a half-buried Church whose choir loft windows were now the main entrance, the old man would tell the sailor-boy stories, like the legend of the sea, the epic of the rajahs, and other tales of the city. But mostly he told stories about dead people.

The sailor-boy saw a flicker of light from the old man's shack and recognized that it was coming from the old man's golden tooth. His face broke into a broad smile, and he quickly paddled along the alley to fetch him.

Take me to the train station, the old man said, extending his umbrella to the sailor-boy to help him get in the watercraft. The banca wobbled upon his step and the old man almost fell, but the sailor-boy held on to him. He opened his umbrella and adjusted the towel on his back, while raindrops made little ripples on the water that was once the paved street.

Where are you going?

The old man seemed lost and not sure of what to do, the sailor-boy noticed. I'm going to work, did I not tell you? said the old man. The sailor-boy stopped rowing. Does it mean you will not tell me stories anymore? On the contrary. The old man took his glasses off and wiped them with a handkerchief, the same color as his eyes, embroidered with his name. When the sailor-boy didn't respond, the old man pointed his finger to the eastern sky. Take me to the closest station, little devil, he said, putting on his glasses.

The sailor-boy, notwithstanding the little drops on his head and the occasional splashing of water from the flooded street, rowed with a gigantic wooden spoon that he had carved from a fallen weeping fig. The old man, like a child, paddled in the water with his fingers.

From the third alley, where the old man lived, the banca passed through to the first street, where the perfumed ladies peeked from behind their curtains singing songs of regret. Before the old man began his story, the sailor-boy confessed that he had fallen in love, beguiled by the fragrance of the perfumed ladies. The old man's bronze face was wreathed in smiles as he said, I was once young like you, foolish and impassioned, and I thought I want to be so again today. You're a lucky boy because your heart has found the beloved. He ruffled the young boy's wet hair. The unfortunate ones never find theirs.

The sailor-boy was pleased with the old man's words, but in his young mind the girl he was in love with was only meant to be looked at. Besides she was not like him: she lived in a big house where walls were high, dogs were caged, and the wind of yearning was barred from entering.

No fence is too high for a fearless man, my son, the old man said. If you have patience everything that your heart desires will come true, and all that has gone away will come back. Trust me, he said, closing his eyes as he listened to the songs in the wind.

Sleep with your feet on the pillow, so you will have a good dream.

The wind of nostalgia brushed the old man's face, and a soggy mass of pigeon feathers tickled his nose so much that he began to sneeze. I shall tell you a story, my son, he said, adjusting his false teeth, something that I have never told anyone before.

And so, amid his sneezing, the old man narrated how he had taken his beloved from the evil house and brought her with him as he sailed back to the sea.



It began one Sunday morning when he caught a glimpse of her in the Church which looked out on the sunset. He had taken a long journey from the sea, at the far end of the world, where the sun and the horizon met to mourn.

She was wearing an ivory dress of raw silk as fine and light as spider webs, singing hymns to Remedios, Our Lady of Remedies, with a haunting voice that lulled the heart to dream. She was not looking at him, although he knew from the fluttering of her lashes that she was aware of his presence. He marveled at how gentle she was, thinking she could glide in the air just by sighing. And her face shone like a revelation which left him breathless. His teeth began to chatter, for that was the effect she had on him.

Every Sunday he visited the Church to see her. And no sooner had the wind brought him from the sea by fate, when he, for all his failings, captured her heart.

She came from a family with a name, a name written in the books. When her father had found out about their romance, he at once decided she should leave for the mountains before the school year ended, where she would finish her studies and marry a man from a good family. A man of land, of timber, of gold. Never a man of the sea. For the few months she had left to stay in the city, she was forbidden to leave the house alone. She was not allowed to sing in the Church, nor to go to the movie house, nor to talk to her friends. She was not to see him ever again. Struck with an unbearable sadness in her heart, she cried herself to sleep every night, her tears drying into translucent silk-

like threads that she later used for sewing by the window and embroidering fabrics with his name.

To eclipse his grief, he slept without waking for many days with the weight of the stars hanging over him until he dreamed of a great flood. By now the chattering of his teeth had become convulsions and his gums started bleeding. Fresh from a long dream that revealed the next day would be the day of the deluge, he tore a page from an old calendar and wrote down a promise of eternal happiness and a means for their escape.

As soon as his frenzied thoughts had been translated into words, he folded the top two corners of the paper into the center and folded the top half down. He then folded down the new top corners and folded up the triangle at the bottom. He folded the paper lengthwise and finally folded the edges up on both sides to make wings.

Before dawn he cooed to her from the wicked gate and launched the paper plane toward her barred window. The plane flew upside down, then flipped over, and glided over the high fence and barreled along with the wind until it gently reached its goal.



The old man's sneezing continued. They had not gone far before they reached the second street where the water was cleaner. They saw more bancas of different kinds and sizes crisscrossing the narrow stretch of water. Some were made of bamboo and rusty steel, and others fashioned from old furniture. Despite the drizzle men and women were exchanging merchandise and gossip. Some women were pulling each other's hair and bellowing recriminations. There were soup vendors with slanted eyes and dark-skinned snake charmers and sellers of golden pocket watches baying at the poor patrons like hungry dogs. Amid this commotion, a swarm of tiny frogs leaped over the waters, soaring like birds and falling like a stones.

With feverish impatience the sailor-boy waited for the old man to continue.

I was once a man of the sea, I told you that many times. Sailing is a noble thing to do, my son, for one is never as entirely free as when one is on the water. We spent the first days of our existence in a water sac in our mother's womb, he said, his sad eyes steady upon the young boy, his jaws becoming stiff. Water is the most noble of all elements. He looked at the chocolate water, then at the long row of street lamps, their heads bowed in

despondence. It's as if it was just yesterday when my fate was driven only by wind and tide. Ah, the smell of the sea, there's nothing like it.

The sailor-boy interrupted the old man's loud musings: What happened to the girl? Did she become your wife?



The old man resumed his tale. That night, after her father had gone to sleep, she waited for the man of the sea. Her frantic heart pounding like a piston so that she didn't immediately hear his cooing below her window. The plan seemed sound, but she was scared of her father's dog.

As in his dream, a torrential downpour began. It was what history books would later declare the strongest rain that had ever plagued the city. The young man climbed up the wall in no time and waited for her at their door, trembling in the rain that was beating on his face, soaked with chills of both joy and trepidation.

As she had feared, the dog in the house had smelled him and howled like a wolf. The pounding of the rain, however, overwhelmed its fury, so that its master stayed motionless, grunting like a boar.

She tiptoed out of her cage into her father's room and grasped the key from a credenza with lions' feet, watching the dog barking in mute rage. As she dashed down to the main door, lightning hit the house. Her father woke up with a start, the sound of the explosion drumming in his ears, and saw the dog going berserk. He hurtled toward her room like a madman. But she wasn't there. Grabbing the dog's leash he flew to the staircase and to his horror saw her opening the door. He screamed her name at the same time her lover's face appeared. He unleashed the dog and snatched from a terracotta jar a pewter cane with a snake head and a brass cleat foot. The young man brawled with the dog using his bare hands, suffering bites and losing a tooth when his head hit the door. As the water continued to rise, he seized the dog's head and slammed it on the forbidding wall. The father shrieked with fury when he saw his dog's broken neck floating in the water. He sprinted toward the young man, and with his heavy cane, pummeled his face, knocking out half the young man's upper teeth. His daughter watched helplessly from the gate, crying and shivering, as she treaded the water that threatened to engulf her.

As the father was about to smite the young man again with his cane, another thunderbolt struck the house, like a projectile hurled from a trebuchet. The house was split open in the middle. Despite the rain and the flood, fire began to spread and consume the second floor, and flames shoved

their way up to the roof. The young man swam away from the burning house. The cement ceiling caved in on the father, and before he was engulfed in flames, his mouth foamed and his tongue hung out, and he cursed to the heavens that she would never carry a child in her womb.

Barely staying afloat the young man kept swimming while pulling the only thing that survived the fire, the credenza, which they used to sail on the sea. Dragging it along with him, he came to the girl's rescue before she could be devoured by the water. Just as the whole place was swamped a shaft of light appeared. They sailed away to the horizon at the break of dawn. And then they kissed, and did not know how long the kiss lasted.



The sailor-boy rowed with newfound zeal, looking at the old man with greater admiration. He believed every story the old man told him, and the story of the flood was by far his favorite. He wanted to ask the old man about his teeth, but they were now on their way to the last street where neon-lit bars twinkled constantly like fireflies in the dark. Here the water had a luminous quality coming from their reflections, like submerged lights of forgotten houses of desire. The old man, remembering his wife on her deathbed, whispered to himself in a song her last words:

Don't forget to remember me.

The sky had become darker when they reached the station that breathed out the smell of dead rats and flowers for the dead. The old man had stopped sneezing and with the sailor-boy's help he alighted from the banca.

Good-bye, my little devil, the old man said, tapping the boy's shoulder. Don't forget what I told you. Go home now, for I fear another storm is coming.

The sailor-boy watched the small lonely figure walk away. Remembering all the stories the old man had told him, he went back to his banca and stood there for a long time amid the flying frogs.

In the light of the dim street lamps and the unforgiving sky, the sailor-boy saw clouds whirling like leaves in the heavy eddies of the wind. He continued to sail, promising himself solemnly that he would live to retell the old man's tales.



Worried that he might be late for work, the old man went up to the station in a hurry, using the umbrella as his walking stick. With each step,

his body quivered with weariness from the cold. On the stairs he found a woman suckling a child in a sling made of dried leaves. Flowers for the dead, sir, she said, handing him a bouquet of dry flowers. Her inflamed breasts were busy feeding two mouths, each alternating between buds. Without taking the bouquet, he delved for coins in his pocket and gave them to her, only to realize that a few steps up, there were more mothers and children with two heads asking for alms and selling flowers. Thinking he had few coins left, he continued to go up like the rest of the people ascending in procession, paying no heed to the silent cry of the desperate.

The station depot seemed to loom out of the dark. He turned to look at a mass of black clouds gathering on the horizon. The sky opened up filling the city with a subdued glow, and for an instant, he saw himself and his wife sailing into the light. But the shroud of darkness came back as fast as it had opened up. The rain, which had turned to ice pellets, engulfed the city once more in a deafening cataract.

To the old man's astonishment, there was a multitude of silent commuters queuing for tickets. Waiting in line his eyes turned to an empty newsstand that looked like a wire rooster coop: "NewsFlash: All yesterday's news you read in a flash." His eyes wandered around the station, lingering on faces and objects of the world he now felt alienated from. It was as if he were trying to reconnect to people and reaccustom himself to the place, searching for himself among the anonymous faces. He stared at the Ticket Issuing Machine which was blinking with green lights: "Exact Fare and In Service." He then peered through his glasses trying to make sense of it: "I only accept one transaction at a time. Should you opt to change your desired destination or terminate your transaction, please turn the cancel knob counterclockwise. In case of any problem, please approach our courteous Stationmaster for assistance."

When it was his turn, the old man moved hesitantly toward the blinking lights, for he had a strong sense of distrust of machines. He pressed a button, the light rail's terminus. Covering a few kilometers of elevated tracks, the transit line ran above an avenue built by the colonizers along grade-separated granite viaducts. It wouldn't take long, he thought, before he reached his destination.

As he was about to insert the exact amount into the coin slot, the old man realized that he needed a round-trip ticket, so he turned the cancel knob and selected this time the round-trip option. He still had enough money after all. The loud clack startled him when the machine ejected the ticket. He took the magnetic plastic card and inched toward the entrance.

Following the people ahead of him, he inserted the ticket into the fare gate which allowed him to pass through the turnstile. He then retrieved it on the other side, knowing he would need it to exit at his destination.

Although the station had a transparent roof to allow the passage of light, dark clouds hovered over it like outspread wings. As the old man entered the main platform, however, a white light from the fluorescent lamps washed over him so that for a moment he couldn't see.

Hanging from the ceiling at the center of the train station was a double-sided brass clock with iron plates and wheels and a golden bracket attached to it. It had no hands and its surface, eroded in concentric circles, appeared lacquered with copper paint.

The first three lanes of the platform were condoned off for the use of women, the handicapped, and the elderly. At the security station, located after the first three lanes, was a warning: "If you don't want to fall onto the tracks, stay away from the edge of the platform."

The old man went to his designated area. As he was waiting for the train, looking at the people with no names, he heard a familiar song from the loudspeaker. The wind of nostalgia skimmed across his face, carrying with it the fragrance of his wife's garlands and images of her singing in the Church and sewing at home. He clutched his heart to stop the painful rush of memories, and his face scrunched up with anguish. His eyes and nose became watery. Just when he thought he was having a heart attack, he sneezed like a mighty gale. At the same time lightning hit the transparent roof, drawing a collective gasp from the passengers and causing a momentary blackout. The blind men and women next to him moved to another lane.

The old man wiped his nose with his handkerchief and felt his heart pounding like the rain on the roof, although he was not certain whether it was his heart or the rain that he was hearing. He choked with terror when he realized that his false teeth were missing. The lights came back on and the air became stifling around him. The platform trembled beneath his feet. He then heard a faint screeching in the distance like the raging in his heart and felt a growing vibration. To his great relief, he saw a glint coming from the rail tracks. As he was about to climb down from the platform, the throbbing cadence grew louder and stronger and all at once a whistle shrieked in panic right in front of him. He looked up like he was ready to meet someone he had been longing to see, but there was only the dazzling light, and he let it envelop him.

You are not allowed to go down, the security guard yelled, rushing up to the old man. Don't you know it's dangerous? Feeling lost, the old man uttered

in brokenly, my ... false teeth. What? My false teeth, the old man repeated, and looking down at the railway tracks, he laughed, exposing his swollen gums. Just then he saw something flash in the dark. There they are, he cried, pointing at them.

The guard looked disturbed as he explained to the old man that he couldn't go down to the tracks. We can't shut down the operation just to pick up your false teeth, he said. Can I not just go down there myself and get them, asked the old man, before the next train arrives? You cannot. The guard advised him to go to the other side of the station where the office of the stationmaster was. The Station Control room, he called it. And because the station had side platforms with no overpass between them, there was no other way to get there but to go down, take a banca, and climb up to the other side.

To his misfortune, not a single banca was to be found when he went down. Using his umbrella to clear floating rubble, he decided to swim across, like an octopus darting through the water.

When he reached the other side, he found the Station Control room closed, with a sign on the window: "Tomorrow or today?" The old man looked at the clock with no hands, wondering what time it was and whether he was late for work. He dried himself with his towel, for he was very wet and his clothes had turned brown. While waiting he noticed that there were not as many people as there had been earlier, and that the depot and the platform where he was mirrored the depot and the platform where he had been. Everything was familiar all over again.

The wired window opened a little, revealing a man silhouetted against the light in the room. The old man went right to it and without seeing the stationmaster's face explained to him what had happened. The stationmaster told him to wait, and his silhouette dissolved into the chamber's shadows, leaving the old man to his musings.

The stationmaster returned and gave the old man some papers, instructing him to fill out the forms. The old man looked at him bewildered. You have to fill out these forms to report your missing false teeth, the stationmaster said. But they are not missing; they are right there! The old man pointed at the railway tracks on the other side, making sure that he could still see the tiny wink in the dark.

Like the security guard, the stationmaster told him that they couldn't stop the train for anyone, and that in this place that sent people to their desired destinations, there were certain rules to follow or everyone would be stuck. The old man took the papers with reluctance, not fully understanding

what the stationmaster meant, for his mind had gone somewhere else, in the same way the mind wandered to a void to forget about disappointments or heartaches.

The old man examined the papers and felt a whirling sensation in his head. Too many words and too much information needed for no reason, he thought. It took him a long time to fill out the forms. After a while he passed the papers through the window slot and noticed the stationmaster's discomfort. He realized to his embarrassment that his mouth was open. Like a shy boy he covered his mouth with his hand. He heard the familiar tune again and recognized at last that it was the same song he was listening to in his home.

The stationmaster took the forms and briefly looked at them. There is a mistake, he said. You have to do this again. The old man stared at him in disbelief, but got no response. Finding neither strength nor will to argue, he obeyed like a child. When he had finished, he returned the forms. The stationmaster stamped the papers with a thump that startled the old man and directed him to go to the other side of the station where the guard who would assist him was waiting.

The old man rushed down, his legs shaking, and, using the last bit of his strength, swam back to the other side. It wasn't difficult this time, for the rain had stopped and the frogs had leaped to some other place and the breathing of the water, which had earlier been a symphony of ire, had turned into a gentle sigh.

He noticed that there was no trace of the women with two-headed children, except for the flowers for the dead. And when he came into the station, there was no one there either. No one was waiting for him. The familiar song was still being played like a lost track of time, the sad guitar slowly vanishing in softest lilt.

He stood upon the platform, his umbrella in his hand, gazing down into the railway tracks. But he couldn't see his false teeth. All there was was a bright light. For a moment he didn't know what to do. There was no one he could ask for help. He was about to leave to go back to the stationmaster when the figure of a woman emerged and began walking toward him. The old man couldn't see her well, for his glasses, he realized, had been broken. The figure slowly formed into an image and made herself known. And the pain that accompanied his recognition of her was such that his mouth moved in a spasm. With unspeakable joy the old man wept, wavering and falling to his knees and staring at the familiar face of the woman handing him a set of

broken false teeth. It was then that it occurred to him, with certainty, that he was not alone anymore.



Nobody knew what happened to the old man after the deluge. Tales about him abounded in the city. Some claimed to have seen him drowning in the flood. Children avowed that they saw him lingering on with the cat in his house. Women believed that every time it rained in Malate, it was the old man weeping. And others said he had gone back to the sea to forget about his beloved wife, who, despite years of singing to Remedios, had not been blessed with a child. She had devoted her last years to sewing and had later died of sadness.

Many years passed, and the many stories about the old man faded away. It was after the great flood that I started to keep a journal and to write down the tales the old man had told me. I started to write so that I wouldn't forget. Or maybe because I needed to believe.

I don't know where he went after I brought him to the station on that day. At times it makes me sad, the old man being gone. Sometimes on cold windy nights when time is forgotten and I remember myself as a young boy listening to his stories, I also imagine the old man sailing back to where he had come from, between oblivion and nowhere, drifting and smiling and no longer waiting for the aching sunrise.