



All These

Reil Benedict Obinque

ALL THESE BABY CLOTHES

WHEN SHE HAD ultimately accepted the stillbirth of her supposedly first child, a charming boy, she imagined, she buried all his baby clothes in their backyard near the dying cotton tree. Why it was more painful than burying the flesh, she did not understand. Each night she used to raise the baby bodysuits against the light like how she imagined lifting her infant by the armpits, or she'd smooth the baby socks and beanie hats against the cushion of the crib as if caressing tender skin. As she dumped soil to the fabric, she realized it was no different from his baby boy. It was as lifeless. A potential, and that was all. Barefoot, she stomped on the mound until her ankle hurt and soil clung to her toenails, the dying cotton tree looking down at her and shedding its last brown brittle leaves unto her as she, too, shed her tears. She asked her husband to chop off the stupid tree, for everything around her was dying and she was sick of it. But the morning her husband went to the backyard—axe ready, rope coiled around his arm—the once balding cotton tree was very much alive. The first thing he noticed was its jade trunk now as sturdy as it was years ago, free from the ugly fungi that once had inhabited it. Then he examined its tiny leaves now green and so immense he did not instantly make out what they hid behind the fullness of barks. It was only when he drew closer that he almost lost grip of the axe





he was holding. He saw that fabrics were growing from the tree's branches. He stood right under its shade to discover they were not just fabrics: the fruits opened to let down not silk cotton seeds but white baby clothes. He stared at the tree, processing the spectacle: baby socks and bodysuits hanging from a tree, more than a dozen of them. He rushed to his wife hoping she'd help him bring back his sanity, to tell him hallucinations were side effects of mourning. But she, too, was equally in awe, and she began crying as she stared at the clothes that resembled what she had buried. From that point on, they began collecting what the cotton tree now bore, harvesting them like fruits if not waiting for them to fall. She would fold them neatly and pile them up in the crib, not exactly knowing why, not exactly ascertaining for whom. She folded them and piled them as though someone would come to pick them up or they would sooner or later be put into use. But they were never put into use. As the tree continued to produce baby clothes, the couple continued collecting them and piling them up until the crib could not hold all of them anymore. They placed some on the floor, hung some in a closet, rolled some and tucked them into cabinet drawers until their house was eventually filled with baby clothes the tree ceaselessly gave them. From time to time, she would run her fingers on the clothes' hem, sniff them up, or press them against her chest. All these baby clothes, she would mourn, all these baby clothes yet there was no one to wear them. And that was how they spent the rest of their lives as a couple—collecting baby clothes from a cotton tree that never died.

ALL THESE UNFORGIVING PLANTS

After dumping us into our own soil like garbage, his men drove away, leaving almost no trace of the massacre. If one looks closely at the vast expanse of grasses, he'd notice tiny specks. These are our vans, doors still opened, from where they dragged us—grips tight, the cold mouths of their rifles etching rings on our temples. The long stretch of hills—that's where they'll recover our bodies. They'll bring backhoes to dig us up. An arm, elbow folding, picking us up with its strong claw-like leftovers. They'll cover us with banana leaves and no matter how they swat away the hovering flies, they'd fail. They'll retrieve us, alright, but our blood has seeped through the soil it refuses to disturb. And from this same soil the flowers will sprout, when the rest of the world is in deep sleep, avoiding a dream. They'll never see the first pair of leaves parting, revealing themselves to the darkness, never see the vines crawling throughout the ground now made bald by their digging, never see the blooming white petals swayed quietly by the wind. With every heaving of the murderer's chest, the vines will inch outward as if they, too, are alive, quicker with every minute like sleek, slender serpents seeking their unknowing prey, enveloping the space where the



grasses once were. Witness will be the stars with how fast the hills are suffocated by all these unforgiving plants that crawl and coil and curl, reaching even the recesses of the silent forest, first through the broken doors of media cars, over the stained cushioned seats, around the steering wheel that can no longer steer, through gaps between the cogs of the machinery. Then, leaving no branch uncovered, around the trees that hold testimonies of our murders, each node choked by the stretching tendrils. They'll grow across the land without discipline, as if each leaf is in disagreement, only to reach the highway now abandoned by the covering press. These vines will traverse the winding road, unpaved, in search of the murderer's hideout, they have to get there even before the arrest is made. Side by side the leaves will sway, past the river, past the gathering of small, tin-roofed houses, past the flattened lands, until they slowly slither through the metal gates of the murderer – his towering house covered in pink – attacking the garden, coiling around the pillars in the balcony, slithering through the slit between the tiled floor and the door, reaching every furniture and exploring each without hesitation, before finally finding the murderer's room where the murderer sleeps, trying to avoid a dream. The vines will curl around the pistol he puts atop a drawer close to him and seal its cold mouth before touching the tip of the murderer's finger. This will not wake him up. What will wake him up are the vines crawling tightly around his arm. By the time he opens his eyes and thinks it's a dream, the vines shall have reached his neck. By the time he finally wakes up to realize it isn't a dream, the vines shall have reached his mouth after curling around his neck and choking him like how we want to collectively choke him to death. By the time he realizes he needs to scream, he will not be able to, for the vines shall have reached his throat, stealing his breath. A bloodless death. And day after day after day, his family, everyone—the country—will wake up witnessing how the land has turned into a garden. A reminder. It will take them years and years to completely destroy what they themselves have created.

ALL THESE FIGHTING COCKS

Her husband insisted he would never stop, that they would have to tie him to make him stop going to cockfights, so his wife took out the rope with which he tied his fighting cocks and in his sleep, secured one end of it around a beam on the ceiling and the other end around the ankle of his left foot. She had been mostly patient. When he had consistently arrived very late at night, she had stayed quiet. When he'd stolen from their savings and came back losing, she had tried to understand. When his fighting cocks had filled the backyard with their foul shit, she had ignored the smell. She had taken care of their three children while he spent most of his time making





sure the cocks were fed well, their food way more expensive than the kids'. But when the fighting cocks had started pecking at the anthuriums in her garden, tearing their red leaves into pieces, and when they'd started stepping onto the crawling cadena de amor that surrounded her garden, crushing their small pink petals, she'd lost it immensely. Well, they're just flowers, her husband had said. So, one morning, she had repeatedly pierced the claws of his fighting cocks with a tiny needle until they started limping, blood spurting from the congregation of infinitesimal holes every time they moved. Well, they're just cocks, she'd said when her husband slapped her after discovering the torture. But this did not stop him from frequenting the cockfights. Neither did this stop his cocks from pecking her flowers harshly. This was when she decided to finally tie one end of the rope around a beam on the ceiling while the other was tied around the ankle of his left foot. No matter how he wanted to punch her, he could not, for the knot was so tight it was impossible to escape. She asked her children to feed their father with leftovers, instructing them to place the plate one inch away from his reach, so that he would have to strain his arm before feeding himself. She told them should his *kumpare* happen to pass by and ask where he was, they must tell him he was out there looking for a decent job and that he was tired of going to all those stupid cockfights. Never, she instructed her kids, never give their father any sharp objects to cut the rope with. She took no pity, never listening to his endless complaining. Because the fighting cocks were now of no use, she decided to cook them into delicacies her children had never tried: tinolang manok, adobong manok, pritong manok, ginataang manok. Her husband was in such great distress that he ran a fever so high it burnt his pillow. She came to the room with a bucket of ice cubes and placed them in her husband's armpits, between her husband's groins, and over her husband's forehead to break the fever, then she continued her gardening, without any fighting cock to peck at her anthurium or step on her cadena de amor. When one day her husband awoke her with his crowing—the same cry that used to annoy her every morning—she threatened to make tinolang manok out of him. Those were the first signs. Eventually, he did not only squawk, he also grew a crown on his balding head—a lesion that ultimately developed into a fleshy lump. The day he totally lost his voice was the same day his lips had stretched into a beak, his hands had shrunk into half, and his toes had turned all bony. His wife and his children, chin resting on their folded knees, surrounded him as he walked back and forth, squawking and flailing his hands, rope still tied around a beam on the ceiling and around the missing ankle of his left foot. She had to strip off his shirt, for it was useless now. He was covered with goosebumps all over his skin which they once thought were just acne. Soon enough he would grow feathers and a saddle. Did you





know that the chicken came from dinosaurs? one of her kids asked as she massaged her father's back. I didn't know that, she answered. Do you want tinola for dinner?, she asked. The kids all cheered. There were no more chickens in their backyard. She sighed. She looked at her husband whom she no longer recognized. She untied the rope and let him go. He scampered around the room looking for a door, his scaled toes having a hard time navigating the waxed floor. Hand me the knife, she told one of her children. She cracked a smile as she stared at her escaping husband.

ALL THESE GUAVA SEEDS

His mother always told him not to eat the guava seeds, but because those were his favorite and his mother had also told him not to waste food, he finished off every guava fruit he ate, all their seeds included. His mother wouldn't have known if he did not awake one evening complaining of stomach cramps. All she needed to do was squeeze his abdomen to feel the lump that was developing inside of him. They're growing, his mother declared. His mother tried all she could to take out whatever was inside of him, slathering efficascent oil all over his abdomen, making him drink *tsaang gubat* after every meal, sending him to an *albularyo* who spat on his navel with the promise of his healing. But night after night, he rolled on his *banig* wanting the pain to end, his stomach bloating as days passed. When he defecated one day, he discovered shit covered with mud where worms thrived like tendrils of a familiar vine. His mother ordered him to avoid drinking water and going out under the sun, for these could only allow their growth. But this only made his cheeks shrink and his eyes sink deeper into their sockets, everything about him wilting inside and out. He only got his health back when he consumed all the water he could and when he went exposing himself under the morning heat—these were his new sources of pleasure. Before his sleep one night, he picked a bud sitting in his navel only to pull out a long stretch of stem which, the day after, coiled around his stomach. He tried to remove them, but through every opening, there uncontrollably came out buds of the growing guava seedling so that he could no longer hear through his ears, breathe through his nose, speak through his mouth, or excrete through his anus. I told you, I told you, his mother scolded him, slapping his butt as she cried both in anger and despair. Her son had become a walking plant. One day, she would wake up to the sight of her son torn into pieces by the roots that wanted to escape from inside him. She would bury him in their backyard as a tree, but by this time, she would no longer cry. She would tend him and see him grow, his arms reaching the sky, some of them trying to reach the windows that she would one day leave open forever. One day, she would harvest her grandchildren. But now, some bits of him were still human. Now, he still had skin.





He still had flesh. He still had a heartbeat. Every night, he still called his mother to ask for an embrace. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, he whispered constantly. I'm sorry, Ma. But he could no longer weep.

ALL THESE GRILLED FISH

Of course, you know about Manuela's Grill. At least once you have dined there, enjoyed their tuna *panga* or pork barbeque along with us PUJ drivers, the poultry workers, teachers from the high school nearby, construction workers of the dam they are now starting to build. If you've been there more than once, you're already familiar with the owner Manuela herself. So accommodating, isn't she? Never fails to smile. And that iconic Sponge Bob apron. Everyone moves so fast, as if all the staff already knew your order even before you tell them. "You Would Kill to Dine at Manuela's Grill." Only minus the cramped space. If you're a regular like me, there are a couple of perks. Like an extra barbeque or a saucer of *chicharong* tilapia for free. Dine there almost every day and you'll discover delicacies not written on their menu. Delicacies we ask through small, implied gestures—a message passed in secrecy—from few select servers. This, only a very few of us know. This, we keep among ourselves. They serve it only once a week, during Wednesdays at lunch when there aren't too many customers, and for quite an expensive price. Strictly one serving per person. You don't know this, do you? You don't. I haven't seen you eat one. I would like to talk about how it tastes, but I could never describe it. Looks like how every fish tail would look like but tastes entirely different. Promise to God: you would hear angelic voices as soon as your lip comes in contact with its juices. As soon as you know where they get the meat, you'll understand. You know about that dam they have recently started constructing at Sitio San Roque, don't you? Quite controversial, so you should know about it. This is important so let me digress a bit. Were you there during the dispersal? Because I was there even before the dispersal, even before the series of protests. I was there when the company consulted us residents about the dam they intended to build. They were so convincing. Talk about water crisis, talk about making use of God's creation for the common good, talk about development. And the barangay council—the barangay council was nodding the whole time (You know how much rebate the Council would get? Hundreds of thousands.) We were hesitant at first, you know. Mothers who used to do their laundry by the river, children who used to swim there. The elders' contentions revolved around the well-being of the river mermaids who find shelter there. Ours was the river and the river owned us, one elder said. We had no reasons more logical and practical than the company's, but, I don't know, something about building a dam on the river made





us feel uncomfortable. It just did not feel right. Just disappointing we couldn't put our finger on why it did not feel right. The company just said the river offered more potential than being the residents' washing machine or swimming pool. The day they acquired the permit was the day some residents protested, hanging in placards by the hanging bridge. Surely you've seen that, right? Come their large trucks and back hoes. You should have seen the alarm on the residents' faces. I'm not kidding if I say they were face to face with the army's rifles in an attempt to block the operation. If you've dined in Manuela's Grill, you'd hear a lot of speculation about the dam construction, but don't believe them when they say there were no arms involved. I don't need to convince you to believe that the company was not that friendly, and the residents were never accommodating. Rightfully so. Perhaps you've heard of residents abducting equipment lookouts at night and drowning them in the river? That's partly true. Whoever was stationed to look after the company's trucks would never see the light of tomorrow. They would be found lying dead and bloated on the rocks beside the river, slits on their necks. Scratches on their backs sometimes. At Manuela's Grill, you'd hear they were the angry residents' doing. But this was not the residents' doing. They were too powerless to strangle a caretaker. You believe in mermaids? No, not sea mermaids. They're too beautiful. River mermaids. Tails all scaleless, eel-looking, eyes all black and teeth all sharp like a piranha's. Surely you know about them. They have been there at the river for God-knows-when. Elders said they were tasked to keep the river flowing, moving rocks after every large storm just so to keep the river in its right form. They were builders. The river was theirs and the river owned them. So I reckon—actually *we* reckon—the construction of the dam got them really mad. They had to keep the river in its right form, correct? Besides, building the dam would mean driving them away. Now I think you know where I am getting at. The mermaids abducted every caretaker at night, slit his throat, scratched his back, drowned him. They were *that* strong. And *that* angry. But the company noticed this, right? The killings had to stop, right? And no mermaid could prevent the operation of the greedy. So the company hired skillful men to hunt them at night with their baits and their large nets. All of them. Not a single one left. Remember that stink we smelled one morning we thought came from the piggery nearby? The smell still lingers at the recesses of the Sitio. It wasn't from the piggery. The stench was from the mermaids' dead bodies they had dumped in a large truck, old tarpaulins draped over them like they were some garbage. They did kill all of them. Not a single one left. But they ran into a problem: the disposal. And Manuela. Old, smart Manuela. Why dispose of them, right? Manuela did not even have to convince them. One night they sliced the tails off of the mermaids' body and placed them in





SHORT STORY

Manuela's old L300 van. They burnt the bodies batch by batch. Manuela drove away and placed the tails in a freezer. No one from the Sitio had tasted mermaids then, but she did, and she knew its unusual, exotic taste—a taste you could not understand though you would keep on wanting it in the hopes of understanding it. “You Would Kill to Dine at Manuela’s Grill.” Every week, I come back to Manuela’s Grill with my desire to taste the secret delicacy despite knowing what it is made of. But, you know, I want to get further than that. There are a very few PUJ drivers I know who know something I do not. It’s like they have their hushed conversations about something. About another delicacy. We know the company did not kill only mermaids, right? Admit it. The protests, the resistance continued even after the mermaids’ deaths, even during the construction. We know who’s responsible for the disappearance of some people’s group leaders. God knows how, but we know, if the company could do it to mermaids, then.... I want to know what this other secret delicacy is. I want to know how it tastes like. I’ll tell you once I have.