AUSTRALIAN ECHO: THE TOUGH CALL TO GROW UP

Luna Sicat Cleto

I will always remember this, I said to myself when I saw the expanse of the sky and the rolling hills in front of me. Could not help thinking that this field of vision must be necessary for an exploring mind. Something about the sheer expanse of land and sky, and my tongue, now inarticulately trying to define and describe my awe. A sundial clock sat on that hill. They call it *The Field of Conscious Involvement*. My sister in law mentioned that the eco-park's conceptual design had to do with invoking the awareness of the average Australian about the level of environmental degradation that is happening. Time becomes a metaphor for the brevity of opportunities and lack thereof. But exactly what are these opportunities? And what defines the lack?

I was about to find out.

From the outset Paula wanted us to experience Sydney in another context. The sisters have not seen each other since 1994. Twenty-six years ago, Paula and Mon were working at an NGO in Baguio City and the children were toddlers. Remembered snapshots of a long vacation in Benguet where my husband and I spent the first few months together, before he worked as an overseas contract worker in Sharjah, UAE. Paula took us in during those years, a generous act really, because we knew they were struggling as well with their income and migration was fast becoming a possibility. When they finally decided to migrate, the family did not even get the chance to see them off to the airport. No letters were sent. There were in between years where only postcards and holiday greetings assured

us that they were "fine." Once, Paula sent a questionnaire to assess one's eligibility for citizenship and work in New Zealand. That pamphlet was seen, filed, and forgotten in my stacks. Occasionally, Paula would send a sweater, a jacket, or a bunch of shirts. Nothing grand, but she had a way of reminding us that she was there, miles apart, but reachable.

For this trip, she took a long overdue work leave from the Royal Institute for the Deaf and Blind Children at Waverley just to tour us. We arrived late September 2019. My sisters in law brought capiz Christmas decors, a *belen*, and a Christmas tree. Paula was ecstatic while she unpacked the presents. All the lights were working, not one of the figurines was cracked, and each animal was intact, and the tree blended well with the crčme carpet and its height was just right. Eldest sister, Morrie, packed just a few sweaters and leggings because she squeezed in the fragile capiz shell decors in her luggage. Not to worry, Paula said, I have lots of warm clothes here.

As we started our trek, Paula was saying that we arrived at just the right season. In some parts of Australia, it is warm for twelve months. Had we arrived in December, we would not enjoy the outdoor weather because the heat would literally zap our energy. And if we arrived in August, that may be too cold. Baka hindi na ninyo kayanin sa mga rayuma at sakit ng buto-buto niyo, she teased. It is a land of extreme cold and heat, she said, but ironically, that characteristic does not hinder Australians from exploring the outdoors. They really love nature here, she affirmed. All of us welcomed the breath of cold wind, as we were sick of the humidity in Manila. The breeze in that landscape was stronger, the air did not have the toxic trace of carbon monoxide.

Paula said that there would be no trekking the usual urban sites here—the malls, the Sydney Opera House, the vast asphalt jungle. She decided to take us to the different urban botanical gardens and zoos in the vicinity. For the three pilgrims which included myself,

this option proved to be revelatory. It was an extended picnic route. For food, she prepared sandwiches and salads. No sodas, just fresh fruit juice. Every trek required the rigor of putting on some sun block and wearing UV proof sunglasses. I did not mind wearing a hat as it proved to be a necessity.

We managed to traverse the city through GPS guided car trips. A note about the right-left disorientation: while we struggled with the speed of Paula's driving as well as the lopsided feel of taking sudden curves and accelerated moves, she insisted that if she lowered her speed, others would call out her "slow driving" and blame her ignorance of traffic culture. Of course, my dear sister in laws from the Philippines could not reconcile the image of Paula as a young mother with Paula the fifty-five-year-old assistant principal who could crunch the roads. They were always screaming every time the car had to speed up. Are we in a rollercoaster ride? Maybe. Eventually we relaxed and got used to her driving.

Sydney's highways are not pothole ridden and are generally free from traffic. "Traffic" to the average Westie means a delay of fifteen, thirty minutes, Paula said. What, is that what you mean by "traffic"? We were incredulous at Paula's claim. Time certainly passed. She did not bear witness to the mind-bending commute in Manila's streets. While they were laughing at Paula's incredulity, I was struck by the way Time and Distance could disconnect people from the way things were and the way things are. Paula forgot about the snail's pace of Manila's streets, but she did remember the squalor. She remembered the jeepney rides, the dusty highways, even a few landmarks. She also said that if we were to leave her in the streets of Manila right then, she will not find her way home. That was familiar, I thought. I got lost twice while trying to make my way back to her house from Doonside station. Paula could not understand my relief when I saw their street, finally distinguishing it from the rest of those clean roads with similar chocolate box

houses, just as she found it incomprehensible that we now refer to Manila's traffic as carmaggedon. Repairs and infrastructures are underway, while the mind with its memory reconstructs pathways from the past into a labyrinth of "what was." Perhaps distance was beneficial. But again, and again, with and without the company of her sisters, Paula declared that she chose to forget.

But what exactly drives the need to forget? How do we unmoor ourselves from the memories of home that we once thought were permanent refuge of our bodies and souls?

Pacing through the botanical gardens of Mt. Annan, taking pictures of almost every bloom and leaf. That was me. Dressed like an out of synch English middle-aged woman with a straw hat, shades, and purply outfits. Eventually, the internal storage of my Android phone would be filled with these plant and flower images. I was indifferent to these sights before. But there must be some truth in the health benefits of this engagement. The brain literally absorbs the green like a health drink. In my case, it was not only slurping its way back into thinking about healthy habits but also being grateful for the gardens that my father used to tend. He never called it a garden, by the way. My father preferred to use the word *tumana*, a Tagalog word that describes the agricultural mode of Central Luzon's peasant families who cultivated vegetables in idle land near their huts. That tumana enabled them to eat healthy meals and sustained their bodies for the hard labor they would do in tilling, plowing, and harvesting of rice, corn, or sugarcane. Tumana is the only piece of earth that the farmers could call, ephemerally, their own.

Mon and Paula knew how to cultivate vegetables even before they migrated to Australia. Mon, who comes from an Igorot family, grew strawberries, lettuce, potatoes, and carrots in their farm in La Trinidad Benguet. Paula came from an upper middle-class family in Tarlac but had to pitch in farm work at La Trinidad. Her family's

wealth, however, did not trickle down to their unit. A tragic tale of greed and usurpation lies underneath the decline, a story that occasionally triggers memories of girlhoods in private schools run by nuns, the abundance of food and the strict surveillance of aunts and grandparents. It is the kind of family lore that is common in many clans in the Philippines, where blood ties are severed, always traumatically, because of the inevitable division of inheritance. Paula does not sugarcoat that past. She tells it like it is. My mother, she said, had the ill fate of suffering a serious illness—meningitis—that made her inarticulate. The disease affected her ability to communicate and throughout her life she became a woman of a few words. It did not seem to matter in those days. Her mother was the favorite daughter and although she did not finish her schooling since her bout with meningitis and her acquired speech defect, her future was not doomed as the family had properties and land. But she married a soldier, a marriage that was arranged by her father himself because he was struck by the charisma of the bemedaled veteran, whose courage was legendary and who earned his trust. Eventually he appointed him as the rent-collector and supervisor of the farm. The soldier had principles, he had a sharpshooter's pulse, and his short fuse was not an impediment to getting along with people. No one dared to mess with him, and this reassured the male parent that his daughter would always be protected and cared for. Thus, that family managed to live in modest prosperity for a decade or two. Hacienda culture made their lives ironic: the maternal parents were one of the wealthiest, and they had their memories of fiesta nights and election campaigns in Tarlac where live bands played, and food was overflowing. Paula had a *yaya* who went to school with her, and she could remember early mornings where the yaya would bathe and dress her and take her to school and attend to her needs while in class. Meanwhile, the men in the family could afford to swing by cabarets and gambling houses

and cockpits. One by one, the properties were disposed of and gambled away. It was an illusory bourgeoise life because when the grandparents died no one remembered and bothered to look after the welfare of the woman of a few words and her soldier husband. They suddenly found themselves lost at sea, in a rudderless boat and a storm brewing in the distance. It was also the time when the Hukbalahaps were persecuted, when smuggling was rampant, and medals of honor were a dime in a dozen. When the source of wealth died, they experienced a material drought that they had never expected.

These narratives were told while we were in traffic, while commuting in trains. Paula oriented the three of us to paying attention to timetables and destinations. My sisters in law were not exactly globetrotters; in fact, they only got the chance to see the world in their twilight years, thanks to their younger brother who provided for their airfare and accommodations. It is a strange dynamic to talk in Filipino while commuting, to freely narrate events that happened in the past. Normally, Paula told me, these conversations were not possible then. It took twenty-six years to finally speak about that period in their lives. And that length of time had nothing to do with the bonds they have had as siblings, because they are, in my eyes, most loyal to one another.

Once, I tried to coax my husband to read John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. He loved the prose, but he could not finish the book. It's too familiar, he said. *Ayaw kong nagbabasa ng ganyan*. Perhaps the text from fiction merged with the ongoing text of his life and the past narrative he is trying to bury.

I was adopted by a maternal aunt who was childless, Paula said. They never made me feel like I was an adopted child. She did not know her brothers and sisters lived two, three houses away. Little did she realize that she was related to the poor family who lived on the ground floor of the *malaking bahay*. And when she realized

that all the snippets of memories made sense. Why this aunt was mesmerized by her earrings. How she traded her real diamond earrings for imitation ones, believing the elder's narrative that she had a better pair in her jewelry box. How her maternal aunt whispered that she left something for her in a closet, only to be told that those trinkets were too precious for someone like her. Eventually Paula grew up and realized her brothers and sisters were her real family. It was 1977 when she moved into their apartment in Quezon City in Scout Rallos. The eldest was working at a car company and was the breadwinner. One brother was detained in Camp Bagong Diwa, while another brother wrote plays and was active in theatre. One sister studied History at University of the East and eventually was employed at LandBank. She typed all the scripts of PETA. The house was open to all their friends and their comrades, and my husband, who once played percussion instruments for Lutgardo Labad's musical compositions, proudly told us that their house was a vibrant place for meetings, fights, and informal unions.

We were eating Vietnamese pho while she narrated these fragments. As an afterthought, Paula told me that the aunt who took her diamond earrings and the handbag sent feelers to their other relatives—how is she? I heard she was in Australia, the aunt said. I hope to see her before I die. She spoke those words and transmitted to me how false those kind regards were. I think I smiled as I looked outside and observed the traffic of people walking in the streets of Parramatta. I was somewhere else by then as I remembered her annotation while looking at the trees somewhere in Mt. Annan. There was a section of that park that commemorates the Stolen Generation. How hundreds of aboriginal children were wrested off their families and towed to the farmhouses of the white settlers. Look here, she said. I saw a simple concrete slab engraved with the words: they took me away that night, and until now I am haunted

by my mother's scream. Paula's voice cracked. My sisters in law looked at each other and wrapped their arms around their bodies. Let's leave, they said. The air is nippy, and soon we were travelling back home.

II.

No maps were used. Mon and Paula knew each part of the itinerary. They have settled in NSW for a decade and lived in New Zealand for a few years. They did not expect to be here, but circumstances have led them to migrate. Their second son acquired hearing loss after the adverse effects of an antibiotic for his primary complex during infancy. It was hard for them, but even more challenging for their son, now in his mid-twenties and currently employed in an IT firm. Paula managed to train her son to hear, after that major decision to move out of La Trinidad Benguet. Mon's background as an agriculturist helped because he was soon employed in Wellington's hydroponic farms. Paula, who was a Journalism major in UP, had to reinvent herself as a factory worker. In the wee hours of the morning, husband and wife struggled to juggle their parenting tasks with work. Paula confided how Mon's eyesight suffered from the artificial lighting of the controlled sunlight in the hydroponic farm, not to mention the sour smell of tomato seeds that clung to his fingers and his skin. Adroit limbs and fingers are part of the labor skill, and Paula told us about the many times she almost lost a finger or a limb grading the rolling onions along the assembly line, had she succumbed to the call of sleep while at work. This reinvention of bodies was necessary for them to remain in New Zealand. This acceptance of work options for these two former Filipino citizens was humbling.

Every time Paula remembered that period in her life, she would recall the postcard quality of the house they called home. The best thing about New Zealand, she told us, was the grass and

the sky. Colors assigned to these elements took another level of vivid intensity in that country. However, the beauty of those endless pastures, craggly rocks, and landscapes was ineffectual to quell the family's need for daily sustenance. Making ends meet was so hard she was astonished at how she managed to approach the local Red Cross to ask for food. She paused for a while she was narrating the ordeal to us. No one dared to look her in the eye, perhaps fearful that if gazes were locked tears would follow. We were at the picnic table then, munching on chicken sandwiches. Another table in her memory materialized right before us. That table, perhaps made of good timber, was as empty as their bank account. Coming back to the Philippines was not an option. She blurted out these words like it was an oath. And I could understand why. Life in La Trinidad was not peachy keen: family relations were frayed in the compound, and those frictions need not be told. It is funny how difficult it was to maintain cordial despite the clannish reputation that Northern tribes from the Philippines are supposed to have. A certain romance pervades the image of the typical Igorot family: the rites they observe for the living and the dead, the feasts they have for weddings, and the lore they exchange in bonfire-lit nights. The agricultural mode of production meant each family member had to do their share of work and living in that town in the 1990s meant learning to cope with the endless rain and fog as well as the declining prices of homegrown produce. Drunken fights, muffled shouts, reconciliatory meetings. No council of elders dressed in G-strings and feather-laden headgears. Just intimate circles in a wordless dialogue. Sound of rain on tin roofs, dogs scuffling downstairs, children alternating laughing spells and scream fights.

Living in Australia meant being in and creating another space to call home. They left behind the sounds and sights of that compound and entered a vast wilderness where the

neighbors live several kilometers away. Their eldest son seemed to understand the grounds of why they left, and he soon adjusted to the new country, loving the many hours of play in the green fields. The decision to leave was triggered by their younger son's special needs. In Oz, Zack had the opportunity to have a cochlear implant. It was an early intervention, thought Paula, but even the windows of intervention had a different scale there. They were referred to a doctor from Macquarie University, and after a battery of tests were done, Zack's transition from total deafness to hearing state proceeded. It was a metamorphosis that had its own share of epiphanies and adjustments. Paula's tenacity as a mother came in handy: the medication charts that I used to see her scroll down in her everyday routine with Zack in La Trinidad Benguet was now operational: she needed to know everything about deafness that she could lay her hands on, whether it is reading books, attending seminars, or approaching people. The long nights were spent in projects designed to improve Zack's learning: handmade visual dictionaries from magazine cut-outs, taped recordings of common words. Paula was fearless in conquering the unknown world where her son's reentry into the land of the hearing could be made easier by learning Sign and sitting in blended mainstream classes. Perhaps the teachers noticed how determined she was. Perhaps they felt a common kinship when they saw her struggle to educate her deaf son. A door opened; she found another career path while she spent hours waiting outside Zack's school room. A scholarship materialized, and she was hired on the spot by the institution. Her master's in special education in Australia was a hard-earned degree and she was grateful for Mon's support as a husband. An Australian woman, a fellow teacher, helped her to fully understand her son. Mrs. T. drove miles just to see Zack's progress in adapting to his transformation. It was an informal

internship as well for Mon and Paula. However, Paula regrets that she did not train Zack well enough to use Sign. Hearing her say this made me wince. Why do mothers have that burden of not doing enough for their children when it is very much visible that they had forsaken large areas of their lives to accommodate their children's personal growth? That's just it, Luna, she said. I know I am extraordinary as a mother. Can you imagine if the situation of Zack had an even earlier intervention? I did not know any better. I thought the cochlear implant was the end of his struggle. How naďve. He suffered the usual setbacks of a non-hearing person, still.

In my head, those setbacks were all too real. They were seen in torn armholes of uniforms covered in dirt and grease, knapsacks filled with crumpled paper that when unfurled have curses and threats. Lunches eaten in a faraway place—a vacant spot in the parking lot, under the lab's table, perhaps the mop room. Jokes not understood, slurs about the echo that is unheard. No groupwork because no one wanted to bother conversing with someone who cannot hear. Imagine how difficult it was, she said. The chocolate we were eating had melted. Hazelnut had a bittersweet aftertaste, and I stopped chewing the kiwi fruit that I dipped in the fondue. In my head, I wanted to say, I know what you mean, Paula. I have a child with special needs too. Sometimes, while smoking cigarettes and pretending to write my third novel I pretend that I am a good mother who bakes and patiently listens to her child's endless prattle. Sometimes, I wish that the label of "special child" meant acceptance, not polite tolerance, or worse, patronizing statements like "it's just a label and we are more than that." The smell of urine unflushed from the toilet nearby distracted our chat. She looked at her watch and said we must catch the train back and we had to run, run from Parramatta station, and catch the 5 p.m. trip to Doonside.

The hearing aid is visible in Zack's closed cropped skull. It looks like a mini black gizmo behind his ears. I teased him that he looked like a cyborg, and he told me that is fine. Paula told me they drilled a small hole in his skull to accommodate the wirings of the hearing aid, and he must replace the batteries every year. While drinking his chocolate flavored protein shake, Zack told me it's the best model he has ever had, as the others had static or had an uneven feel to it. Without declaring it, Zack could literally cut off the conversation by unplugging that device behind his head. He could avoid arguments, confrontations, any verbal attack. Listening to him as he describes his early morning routine, I wonder how he manages conversations at work. His boss, he says, likes his professionalism, and I can see why. Zack refuses to be treated like a disabled person, and he does not take his job for granted. He can operate most software programs and is quick to learn. Every morning, at 5 a.m., Zack would dress, cook his own breakfast, and drive to work. In twenty minutes, he is at his office, and eleven hours later he comes home.

III.

Last October 2019, the raging bushfires in Australia were abetted by the season's shift. Rains and floods and hailstorms followed. Saw some pictures flashed on the BBC. The endless landscape of ash and grey. Animals dying in the once verdant pastures. Some are left to die and fend for themselves. But exactly how is this any different from the conditions of the internal migrants in any country? Some animals manage to rise and live, just as some refugees wipe off the ash on their foreheads and walk towards any shelter. It felt strange seeing those pictures and news footage. That place sounds familiar. It turns out the fruit store that we passed along the highway was now burned to crisp. A friend's father almost died when his house caught fire, and he was thankfully, out to buy some groceries. The

sky was as red as an apple peel. Hard to believe that the sky was once a cerulean blue.

Australia is not exempt from the COVID-19 pandemic, as all nations are. Prior to this disruption, they experienced wildfires that were unheard of, turning the bluest skies and the greenest fields that I saw into a terrain that I only read about in dystopic science fiction. Perhaps Paula has her share of remembering those conversations and pauses between stories, as she would perhaps sit in her kitchen and figure out what to say in her Zoom class or Zoom meeting as assistant principal in that special needs school. But just as she is concerned about the growing number of deaf people that need to be heard, I'd like to think that this essay is an attempt to speak out for the silences of those who champion other rights to be heard. For persons with disabilities, universal design poses a conundrum. What is design for anyway—what makes a perfect life? For people like Mon and Paula who decided to leave this country because they knew their departure meant an entry to another space and another life that had increased access promised by the internationalization of social services, healthcare, and technology, do I have the right to even accuse her of forgetting this land? Do I have the right to say that she is deaf to the people, nay, the country, since she opted to work here, to live there, to take root in that land? Surely, I know by now how much this country is thwarted in its growth by corruption and ineptitude. I am aware that by staying here, I am limiting the meaning of access to new markets and economic opportunities, and that is a door that could spell a difference for others like Zack, others like my own child, now a twenty-seven year old man who is studying Philippine culture.

All these memories are now written in retrospect. The prose is a little awkward, just as the flow from past to present time is unstable. As I write these words down, I struggle to decide what to bring in and what to leave out. Are real names relevant? If I use other

names that I have invented myself, will that make this witnessing more concrete? Did I revoke their right to privacy by sharing these thoughts? I would like to think that I did not. I'd like to think that somehow, this text that is an attempt to write a travelogue would find a reader, a fellow traveler perhaps, who could understand these meanderings and these hesitations at signposts of authenticity and fiction.

This was originally a journal entry and was tweaked to become a personal commentary about the current pandemic. The author had a month-long sojourn in Sydney, Australia, and it was an occasion to visit family and friends. Travelling with one's relatives was an unforgettable experience, and she is grateful for that time well spent.

Although there is hardly any comment about the state of the country under the havoc wrought by COVID-19, the author would like to reiterate the compulsion to write this piece in the face of death. Perhaps this is what Walter Benjamin refers to as the original storyteller's impulse. Names of the people mentioned here were changed to protect their privacy.