Abstract

This essay tackles the importance of words, the nuances of labels, and the divinity or spirituality we can find in meaning—especially in literature. From Rene Magritte to existentialism, from a precolonial tigmu to the stories Gregorio Brillantes, from the Bagobo tale of Tuglibong to the Biblical story of Jacob wrestling with the angel, we limn the importance of "words" in truth-telling and truth-seeking.

Keywords

Words, labels, meaning, existentialism, Philippine literature

THE WORDS WE BELIEVE IN

IAN ROSALES CASOCOT

I.

DO WORDS MATTER?

Every semester, I begin one of my literature classes at the university with a brief tour through semiotics—the study of signs, their immediate and simple denotations, their powerful connotations—and I always start off with a painting called *The Treachery of Images* by the Belgian painter Rene Magritte, a masterpiece of surrealism awash in earth-brown tones. In its center, occupying a large part of the canvas, there is a very large depiction of an old-fashioned pipe. Part of the painting, immediately below the pipe, is a cursive caption in French that reads: *"Ceci n'est pas une pipe."* Translated, the caption reads: "This is not a pipe."

I was an exchange student in Japan, sometime in the late 1990s, when I first came across Magritte and also came to know of the infamous pipe that was not a pipe. It came to me as a bright projected image from a slide show in a class on the history of contemporary arts, inside a room in

the Honkan, which that day was cut off from the outside world by heavy curtains shielding the tall windows. It was very dark inside that classroom, the glow of the slideshow the only illumination for us. The classroom was toasty with radiator heat even as Tokyo's winter was surging outside, the snow falling for the first time that season.

While the American professor blathered on and my Japanese classmates scribbled away in their notebooks, I found myself leaning forward to feast on the image. *What intrigued me about it?* Certainly not the representation of the smoking device, which was only serviceable enough. It was perhaps the conceit. It was perhaps the seeming daring of an artist who privileged message over aesthetics, the philosophical provocation foregrounded above all else. What did Magritte say about the painting afterwards? "The famous pipe! How people reproached me for it!" he once declared. "And yet, could you stuff my pipe? No, it's just a representation, is it not? So if I had written on my picture 'This is a pipe', I'd have been lying!"

He was thirty years old when he painted the work between 1928 and 1929, which is currently on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. What he was trying to explain was a profundity as ancient as Plato's cave but still no less revolutionary now, especially in a world that is constantly privileging a worship of "things" that are not what we think they are in the first place. *We traffic in representation*, he says. *We often mistake the shadow of a thing for the thing itself*, he says. He is simply saying the painting itself is not a pipe; it is merely an image of a pipe, hence, the description: "This is not a pipe." Still, it must have been a point difficult to convey to many people, because he elaborated on the same exact theme of pipes in his 1966 painting, *Les Deux Mystères*.

In retrospect, what perhaps really intrigued me about the painting is that it became a mirror to my alienated self in the bustle of Tokyo of 1998. I was twenty-one. It was my first time to live away from the Philippines, away from home for an extended period of time—and I was still in a flux in my negotiations with homesickness, and embedded deep in a culture that remained perpetually strange, in a society whose language remained fascinating gibberish to me, and in a period of my life when all that I could be was the elusive, unformed answer to the question, "Who am I?"

In a time when I sought definition for my self, here was a piece of art that was telling me that definition was unstable and elusive. The Polish scholar Alfred Korzybski, in an echo of Magritte, once famously said, "The word is not the thing," and also, "The map is not the territory." Both are right, of course, in the scheme of things where we need to understand

the politics of metaphors—which is why I teach semiotics. It is to remind my students that we live in a world awash in signs—in advertising, in entertainment, in religion, in government, in language—and that signs are powerful, and that signs are capable of moving us, but are also capable of enslaving us, if we are not careful. Signs are why we smoke in the name of Marlboro Man's cowboy virility. Or why we buy diamond rings to make official an engagement to be married. Or why we hate Comic Sans, and prefer to litter our vast typographic landscape with Helvetica.

The word is not the thing.

An echo from the past comes to me: Mother had just turned Protestant and was hammering to oblivion the gold-coated plaster figures of The Last Supper she used to display, as the good Catholic she was before, above our front door. I had scooped up the debris from the floor, and my seven-year-old innocence wanted to know: "What happened to Jesus, Ma?"

Fiercely, she turned to me: "That thing—that thing made of plaster—is *not* Jesus, remember that."

II.

And yet, and yet.

And yet I have also found, now that I am approaching middle age, that while words, definitions, and labels are ephemeral and unstable, they are also essential, they can even be anchors in a postmodern world where meaning is a flux we can drown in.

In my youth, I too subscribed to the notion that labels were invented to contain me—and of course my youthfulness, arrogant and naïve, demanded that I could *not* be put in a box. When I was in college, for example, I made it a point to date both men and women, even decrying the label "bisexual" in the process, and mouthing off what had seemed so original a sentiment at that time of my young, stupid life: "I don't believe in labels, I only believe in love."

What wonderful comedy that was, what fierce nonsense even—but I admit it's not an easy argument to tread, even now.

There can be no denying we are all born into labels. Our names, our gender, our nationality. And sometimes later on these are the labels which we strive to re-label. My mother was named Ceferina at birth, and in her youth, she had it changed to Fennie, to embrace a promise of a modern life free from the strictures of her small town childhood. I was born male and ostensibly heterosexual in a heteronormative world—cars for toys, blue

for the color of my bedroom walls, blue as a strange label for masculinity, for male heterosexuality. Bruce Jenner was Bruce, until she wasn't. And what did Jessica Zafra once say about the Filipino condition? "The greatest Filipino dream," the writer once opined, "is to become an American."

Labels can be important. It can be used by people to take a stand in issues, to choose a side—and to fight for the ideals of that side. Labels can also be dangerous because they can be used by other people to stereotype you, and to easily demean you.

We cherish labels, we squabble over them.

In 2006, the International Astronomical Union or the IAU, the body that is responsible for naming and classifying objects in the cosmos, convened and took a look at Pluto, our solar system's last frontier, purposely reconsidered its status as a planet and then reclassified it as a "dwarf planet"—much to the chagrin of everyone else. The IAU, in a statement, recognized Pluto as "an important prototype of a new class of Trans-Neptunian Objects," and gave it a new denomination: "plutoids."

In 2015, Coca-Cola released an infamous television commercial where subjects were led to a pitch-black room where they proceeded to have dinner and conversation with people they couldn't see. Stripped of visible markers—a Sikh's turban, the color of everyone's skin, the facial conformity to beauty standards—they were forced to consider only the depth of the person they were blindly encountering *by* the life they were narrating about. They all bonded, realizing quickly the commonality of human lives. When the lights were turned on, all of them were surprised by how much labels could restrict simple human engagement—and they were soon reminded that, too often, we went about our world labeling other people, and disengaging with them readily because they were not of the label we cared to pal around with.

Subsequently, out of this social experiment, Coca-Cola came out with a batch of Coke cans without labels—save for the red swirl to still identify it as Coke, *essentially still a label*. Because apparently you couldn't just sell something without some label on it. *Or else people might think it was Pepsi*.

I remember a line once from a Netflix series I used to follow, which stuck with me: "How can you hope to arrive at a truth when you can't find your own? Trust me. Find your label."

Because it is that which we eventually try to uncover in this journey of living: *truth*. Can labels be truth's gateway? I do know that labels are quite a scientific essential—one of the main works of biologists, among other scientists, is to explore the natural world and label them and give them scientific names.

Labels, too, are quite Biblical. In the creation story that we glean from the Book of Genesis, we realize that the first thing Adam ever did was to name every living creature in Eden; the first grand act of man was essentially to render labels. Later on, in the New Testament, the Book of John recasts the whole creation story with this godly claim on labeling as the very essence of everything: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

The word.

The word preceded all things, and it was divine.

To label, to speak, and to create by "storifying" is perhaps how we are created in the very image of God.

From Philippine mythology, I think of the Bagobo story of Tuglibong, and how it echoes the very same refrain of story-making as the precursor to creation. According to the Bagobo, the world came into being with the cosmos in chaos. All the heavenly bodies—the sun, the moon, the stars—were in such close contact with the earth that the world proved inhabitable: it was scorching, and the mythic beings that came before men had no choice but to scatter into the shadows of the earth's caves and crevices to cool themselves from the steady broiling.

One day, Tuglibong, the female leader of this band of mythic beings, went out of her abode to pound rice with her mortar and pestle. And while she went deep into the rhythm of her pounding, Tuglibong looked up and began to scold, in a sing-song, the nearby sky and the clinging heavenly bodies. She chided them in chant and called them names—and in response, perhaps to get away from Tuglibong's tirade, the sky (the sun, the moon, and the stars with it) began to rise higher and higher, up into the appropriate distance where they could still give light without making briling out of everyone in that ancient world.

If one thinks about it, Tuglibong's angry song—oral literature of the highest order—put stability and harmony to the universe, and gave her people a sense of habitable home, a world that can finally live and breathe.

The world essentially began because of Tuglibong's fierce words set in a chiding song.

III.

For me, to read and to behold words in order to create worlds imagined from the pages of books is always a kind of religious experience.

Later on, in my days of deep questioning, it was God I strove to find in literature as well, beyond the Good Book, of course.

However, there was also this: the sense of the religious that *must* pervade Philippine literature, from a country that calls itself staunchly Christian, remained uncharted territory—which was quite surprising.

I have always wondered whether such a "Christian" literary aesthetics existed, and the questions that often arise in my considerations include these: Does the religious exist as a consciousness in Filipino writings? If so, how—and in what ways? What are its characteristics? And what are the major works in Philippine literature that may be said to contain such a religious consciousness?

The difficulty lies in the fact that there are no serious critical inquiries by any literary (or even religious) scholars that talk about this issue, although one may be able to find bits and pieces in some journals or graduate dissertations.

My professor and mentor Timothy Montes used to teach a course on religious themes in literature—but he took an unexpected route, Existentialism, which provided us a way of viewing the Sacred in a completely different light. He began his course by illustrating the state of the world after the devastations of World War II. The War had destroyed most of the sacred beliefs people held—including the fact of human fellowship, and the fact of God. In one sweeping generalization made by Nietszche, the philosopher decreed, "God is dead." The uninformed usually takes this as a sacrilegious and unabashed declaration of war against God when in actuality Nietzche's pronouncement is basically a dramatic rendition of the Existentialist credo, that in a postmodern world where Great Beliefs had been laid to waste after the grand devastations of war and pestilence, man's destiny has shifted from being in control of an Almighty who may not exist at all ("for how could a God exist, and permit such horrors be unleashed on the world?"), to being in the control of every individual. Paraphrasing Sartre, Existentialism decrees that each man, *not God*, is now responsible for his own fate.

The metaphorical paradigm our class with Montes used in grappling with the religious question in the modern age was the Old Testament picture of Jacob wrestling with God in the Book of Genesis, Chapter 32. To "wrestle," to be a good Christian was to weigh everything, especially the spiritual significance of the utterances of "prophets"—because there were too many false ones. Postmodern literature then with all its questions and blurred boundaries is a grand illustration of that "wrestling." What immediately occurred after that

shift was a sudden schism in the way people viewed the postmodern world—no longer believing in the spiritual, focusing instead on the secular.

One profound effect of this new worldview is *alienation*. And literature since then delved into this new condition, some calling it "angst-ridden literature." In this realm, you have the works of Sherwood Anderson; James Baldwin (especially *Another Country* and *Giovanni's Room*); Douglas Coupland (author of *Generation X: Tales from an Accelerated Culture*, the book that popularized the very word in the title); Bret Easton Ellis (especially his *Less Than Zero* and *The Rules of Attraction*); Alex Garland (*The Beach*); David Leavitt and his gay-themed self-explorations; Jay McInerney (especially *Bright Lights, Big City*); J. D. Salinger and his angry *The Catcher in the Rye*; John Updike and his Rabbit books; John Steinbeck; D. H. Lawrence; Ignazio Silone; and Franz Kafka.

In these books, almost all of us are caught up with the subject of our existence (and the questions of its meaning, or lack thereof)—all because we are challenged by the notion that, as Sartre put it, "man is nothing else but what he makes for himself." This is an ambiguous notion, uplifting if also scary.

The glut of literature devoted to examining Existentialism's many facets and questions shows that isolation, estrangement, and alienation have become the common spiritual themes (spiritual in the Paul Tillich sense that they seek answers to age-old philosophical questions) in our age. Who hasn't, but the basest of human beings, embarked on internal journeys exploring and questioning the metaphysical absurdities of life, the death of ideals, or the unshakable thought that, like ants, we are insignificant dots in the eyes of the universe? Reading these books is like traveling on a road to self. They magnify our questions, and sometimes our fears and insecurities—and through their insights, we may understand ourselves so much more.

Why is this so?

Because our age is defined and has been shaped by "wars and rumors of wars," by demonic hierarchies of power and wickedness in high places (Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Marcos, George W. Bush, and Duterte have made us jaded), and by a disintegration of traditional faiths. I would think that the latter matters most in our age where "the center doesn't hold"—a phrase I borrow from W. H. Auden.

In Philippine literature, I know of several literary texts that do demonstrate some of these literary "wrestlings." You have Carlos Ojeda Aureus's short story collection, *Nagueños*, for example, whose primary

story, "Chinita," is a confessional about a priest grasping with carnal desires. The whole collection is very Catholic in nature—including such themes as temptation, guilt, damnation, and salvation. (Aureus was a frustrated seminarian.) Cirilo Bautista's story "Resurrection" is a metaphor about the Fall. Edith L. Tiempo's poem "Bonsai" is a religious awakening about understanding the paradoxical nature of things: that the only way we can understand big things—like God—is through small things, like the variety of his creations. And then there is Gregorio Brillantes, who is in a league of his own as he plumbs the depths of our search for a Creator who comforts, who is not distant, and who transcends our limited understanding of faith, love, and time.

But is there more beside these? That's the challenge, to be able to sift through all of our literature and unearth the desire, the wanting to understand something bigger than ourselves.

IV.

When I want to ponder the nature of God, I often cannot help but recall the stories of Gregorio Brillantes. Most of his stories are about seeking answers to questions regarding our place in the universe, regarding our search for an Almighty that will define our lives for us. For him, the search is often futile and ripe with existential angst—but I find that sort of narrative voice as a kind of comfort, perhaps because I am naturally suspicious of cut-and-dried, dogmatic spirituality. The best spirituality for me is one fraught with struggles and gray areas. I immediately thought that Biblical image of Jacob wrestling with the Angel and remembered what Montes once told me as the perfect metaphor to describe Christian living of the highest order: "To know God is to struggle *in* the pursuit of knowing."

Born in Tarlac in 1932, Brillantes has written three collections of stories—*The Distance to Andromeda* in 1960, *The Apollo Centennial: Nostalgias, Predicaments, and Celebrations* in 1981, and *On a Clear Day in November, Shortly Before the Millennium: Stories for a Quarter Century* in 2000. Note the very images that run through those titles: space and an expanse of nothingness and distance, and the reach for some divine yet far away goal.

One story which I think reflects his religious themes well is "Faith, Love, Time, and Dr. Lazaro," a classic I revisit often because it constantly provides me with new meanings and gives fresh insight about my own faith. In this story, Brillantes confronts the most important questions or mysteries of

our lives as Christians: *Does God exist? If so, what is the nature of God?* The story is story because it never preaches or subverts; instead it allows the reader to experience, rather than solve, the problem of God's presence (or absence).

In the story, an aging doctor and his young son are summoned in the middle of the night to minister to a poor family, whose newborn baby has a terminal case of tetanus. The subsequent ride toward the family's home takes on a different level when it also becomes a spiritual journey, most especially for Dr. Lazaro, whose beliefs and disbelief about God, faith, love, and time seem to haunt him with a pressurized intensity. And all because he sees a wide chasm between him and Ben, his son, in terms of how they see life: he has lost so much faith in God and life, while Ben—intent on becoming a priest—seems so infuriatingly fresh and positive.

It is especially interesting to note how we are introduced, in the beginning of the story, to the character of Dr. Lazaro. Brillantes writes: "From the upstairs veranda, Dr. Lazaro had a view of stars, the country darkness, the lights on the distant highway at the edge of town. The phonograph in the sala played Chopin—like a vast sorrow controlled, made familiar, he had been wont to think. But **as he sat there**, his lean frame in the **habitual slack repose** he took after supper, and stared at the plains of night that had evoked gentle images and even a kind of peace (**in the end, sweet invincible oblivion**), Dr. Lazaro **remembered nothing**, **his mind lay untouched by any conscious thought**, he was **scarcely aware** of the April heat; the pattern of music **fell around him and dissolved swiftly, uncomprehended**. It was as though indifference were an infection that had entered his blood; it was everywhere in his body. In the scattered light from the sala **his angular face had a dusty, wasted quality**; **only his eyes contained life**. He could have remained there all evening, **unmoving, and buried**, as it were, in a strange half-sleep, had his wife not come to tell him he was wanted on the phone."

The emphases are mine. From that description alone, we get the sense that this man is, for a lack of a more apt term, a virtual "zombie." But why has Dr. Lazaro become like this? Well, he has lost faith in God. How so? Because of unfulfilled dreams and the growing humdrumness of his life. Once a doctor of promise, he has instead "wasted" a life in a far-flung town, tending to common people who cannot even pay him, except in kind (like farm chicken, or bananas).

But he has also lost his faith because he has been a witness to countless, seemingly random deaths: there is a patient with cancer, whose racking pain even morphine can't assuage anymore; there is the baby who is now

dying from tetanus; but most of all, there *was* his eldest son who, we later learn, committed suicide. From the latter, the Lazaro family "died" to each other as well: it made the doctor focus mechanically on his job, just to forget the pain, and his wife became more immersed in religion than in family.

For Dr. Lazaro, what kind of God would allow pain? What kind of God would kill a baby? What kind of God would take away a son? Is there really a God?

These questions are compounded by the images and symbols that are replete throughout the story—that of loss, distance, emptiness, and dark ominousness: "a view of the stars," "the country darkness," "the lights on the distant highway at the edge of town," a "humming of wires, as though darkness had added to the distance between the house in town and the station beyond the summer fields," "the long journey to Nambalan," "the sleeping town, the desolate streets, the plaza empty in the moonlight."

There is one realization that Dr. Lazaro represents a kind of "living dead." Besides the zombie-characteristic invoked in the first paragraph, his name easily evokes the Biblical "dead man brought to life": Lazarus. There is also the parallels of the baby and Dr. Lazaro—that while the baby has *actual* tetanus, Dr. Lazarus, on the other hand, has *tetanus of the soul*: "It was as though indifference were an infection that had entered his blood; it was everywhere in his body." He needs new life, we soon realize, and he needs to be resurrected from the dead. In a sense, his journey to Nambalan with his son becomes a journey in a quest for redemption: he has to save the body, to save an idea of himself and his place in the world.

But there is also that other metaphor: of God as a futile God. As a doctor, Dr. Lazaro "heals," which is very God-like. In one scene, Esteban, the baby's bewildered father, calls the doctor over the phone—like the prayer of a desperate man to God. The distance between Esteban and Dr. Lazaro, through the humming of the phone wires and the resulting bad connection, is a good metaphor for the distance between God and man. *Can we call God? What if there is a busy signal?* the story seems to say. But finally, Dr. Lazaro cannot heal the sick baby, who eventually dies—and we are left with this unsettling question: what does this say about the Great Healer?

But by story's end, it is spirituality that saves. As the defeated Dr. Lazaro leaves the dead baby on the mat, he sees his son Ben—the hopeful priest-to-be—go to the baby's side, to give it the final sacrament of Extreme Unction. And he finally sees his darkness, and his son's saving light. Dr. Lazaro's

epiphany also becomes ours, but his quickly ends with abortive fear. In what is one of the most famous endings in Philippine literature, we read: "As he slid the door open on the vault of darkness, the familiar depths of the house, it came to Dr. Lazaro faintly in the late night that for certain things, like love, there was only so much time. But the glimmer was lost instantly, buried in the mist of indifference and sleep rising now in his brain."

Which may be the saddest of all epiphanies. That given the chance to have resurrection, to see the salvation's light, so many of us—like Dr. Lazaro—quickly turn away, strangely "comfortable" in the sad, wallowing darkness of disbelief.

V.

This is how I read poetry.

Every so often, I'll take on a small task of tidying up—which soon snowballs into general house-cleaning. Once, for example, I was washing dishes. Which led me to clean the counter top. Which led me to clean the windows, then the chairs, then the floor—the whole enchilada. It is monumental for me because it takes me about eight hours to finish everything. But I usually don't mind. I love cleaning the house, especially at night. It is not at all unusual that my cleaning habits would take me to nighttime, almost always around midnight. There is something comfortable about cleaning the house when the rest of the world is asleep. The action of sweeping, dusting, and scrubbing the floors under the shadow of night takes on, for me, a symbolic meaning.

Which leads me to poetry.

Because all this reminds me of a favorite *tigmu*—or *bugtong* for the Tagalogs, and "riddle" for the rest of the English-speaking world:

> *After a sleepless night covered with a blanket,*
> *It rears up laughing.*

This is an ancient Philippine gnomic verse, a riddle whose answer is "flower," although many others would also venture on answering the "butterfly," even "a chick coming out of its egg shell." *All true*, of course, but I like the idea of a flower better.

Granted, one can readily see the literal meaning of that riddle: that under the cover of night, a flower blooms.

But it is its metaphorical and metaphysical levels of that tigmu

which fascinate me. Why? Because the small verse paints perfectly the underlying process of nature, and to a considerable extent, the process of much of our lives, which extends even to the divine.

After a sleepless night covered with a blanket.

Consider the flower. In the evening, it is an inconsequential bud, all closed up, its final beauty lost to us in its being hidden. During the night, botany tells us that the flower virtually "sleeps"—but such sleep is one that is actually full of silent processes—

It rears up laughing.

—all of its biology working to produce the bloom by early morning's light.

Or consider the butterfly, if you must: it starts out as an ugly, wriggly caterpillar, which must soon go to "sleep" encased in a cocoon, and triggers a process that would soon produce one of Nature's greatest metamorphoses.

The riddle thus tells us that everything evolves (or revolves) under a process of dark quiet; that when the proper time comes, we can then burst out into the world, laughing. It is a metaphor for how the natural world works, but it also gives us an entreaty to the human condition.

Because isn't life all about enduring the growing pains and stresses of being within the "blankets" or the cocoons of living, patiently and earnestly developing until we are ready "to burst out laughing"? Consider the baby in the womb, the months becoming markers of becoming human, until the ninth, where it must break free and give its first cry and take its first breath of air. Consider the lows and angst of childhood and adolescence, all that bodily and mental changes a virtual cocoon before we finally settle to the prime of adult life. Consider the demands of college education, all those midnight candles to burn, until one is ready to break through, toga and diploma in hand.

What interests me most, however, is the tigmu's message that for one to be ushered into a new life, the old self must be discarded, must be broken through, must be burned away. A flower cannot bloom without breaking the cusps of its bud. A chicken cannot be a chicken unless the shell of the egg that holds it is shattered. A plant cannot grow unless the seed where it springs from rots away and dies.

And what of the human being? First Corinthians 13:11 provides us a helpful answer: "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me."

It astonishes me sometimes that literature can have such universality—a precolonial Philippine tigmu echoing Biblical truths.

Here, with this particular riddle, we get the literal truth that a flower must break its folds in order to bloom, leading us to the metaphysical truth: that for one to live, one must be ready to die. In the Book of John 12:24, we encounter Jesus who says: "Very truly I tell you: unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it will produce even more fruit."

But how is this even related to house-cleaning?

I like the process of preparing for another day, and another week, sweeping everything clean. Clutter and dust diffuse the possibility for change, or for welcoming the new.

As I write this line, it is Sunday. Thus I begin on a note of Resurrection.

It is so much easier to face that, all clean, all ready.

But, of course, I will take *whatever* it is that makes me smile today: genuine, unforced smiling—something that keeps from within—is something rare, and it is very much welcome. Then again, I have always liked the symbolic significance of holidays and red-letter days—Christmas, New Year's, Valentines, or Easter in particular, or even The First Day of School. They give a kind of emotional deadline to finishing things. And I have so many things to finish: for the first time in so many weeks, these responsibilities have now acquired a patina of possibility.

VI.

One night some years before, I made Mother read an incisive article entitled "Gods, Goddesses, and Bibles: The Canonization of Misogyny" by William R. Harwood, which, when it was published years ago in an American magazine, caused much stir in the way people perceived patriarchy and the place of women in society and religion.

Mother is a very faithful woman (as opposed to "religious"—a term which she happens to abhor with passion: "Religion is too … man-made," she would attempt to explain to me, "a set of organized rituals which I find alienating. Faith and being faithful, I think, are much better terms"). The Bible to her is Truth unvarnished and unquestioned. She would take to each day with a prayer, rousing the household help to lead them in early morning meditations—often waking me up with their out-of-tune renditions of tried-and-true hymns—"God is soooo good, hallelujah …!"—interspersed with their readings of *Our Daily Bread*, in Binisaya.

Each Sunday, just right after church and lunch, she would disappear for three hours in the afternoon, going about her "hospital ministry," counseling the sick and praying for their well-being. I would call her, in loving jest, as the Mother Teresa of Dumaguete; she would just smile and remind me that it was Sunday and that "an hour or two in a week for God is all that He asks for."

Telling her to read Harwood was one of those things I would constantly do to make her a woman of some critical enlightenment: "Be like Jacob wrestling with an angel. You *must* question everything," I'd tell her, "since almost everything in this life—things your preacher tells you or your president tells you—are not necessarily the truth, but may be versions of a truth." She would consider me with amused eyes, taking my books with an almost resigned air, and half-promising to read them through before going to bed, "but not after I've read my devotionals," she'd say.

Once I had gotten her to read Sidney Sheldon—which I thought would make her more secular, more a woman of the world: the intrigues, the gossipy narratives dripping with unimagined wealth, passion, and scandal should entice the romance novel-reading woman out of her. (That, or forcing her to sit beside me while we watch Oprah together.) She had taken the bait, but stopped when she commiserated over leaving the washing machine on while transfixed in reading *The Other Side of Midnight*, which had flooded the kitchen and the laundry room with a flood of suds. Her accident landed her in physical therapy, and she swore never to read Sidney Sheldon ever again.

For the most part, my mission was aimed at her undying devotion to things of faith (she was very upset for more than a week when my brother Edwin jokingly compared her "fanatical" devotion to the maniacal religiosity of the Taliban).

But I had an axe to grind: religion, with its unquestioned tenets and less-than-faith-affirming people of the cloth, became an institution I thought was more enslaving (and often murderous) than enlightening. I would run through a haphazard list in my mind to affirm this: September 11, Beirut, Ireland, the Taliban, Bosnia, The Indian-Pakistani skirmish over Kashmir, the Mindanao question, The Hundred Years War, the Crusades, the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, the Salem Witch hunt, the Catholic Inquisition, etc. It always amazed me to find people willing to die, blindly, for something they barely understood save for promises of Nirvana.

"Question your faith, question your preacher," I'd goad mother. "That's the only way to lead an *active* Christian life. To just sit in church and nod

and nod and nod do not make you a good Christian. It just makes you an excellent nodder."

Of course, my metaphorical paradigm was the Old Testament picture of Jacob wrestling with the angel. To wrestle, to consider carefully each tenet, to be a good Christian was to weigh everything, especially the spiritual significance of the utterances of "prophets"—because there are too many false ones. For a long time, I went with mother to her church whose preacher would talk long and hard over … absolutely nothing; it left me frustrated because I wanted to learn something, which might have accounted for those years when I suddenly just stopped going and watched TV instead. Early Sunday morning cartoons, especially *The Simpsons*, became the new religion. Last year, a friend invited me to a new church, which had a medical doctor for a preacher, and found that the spiritual was often more compelling when it also courted the cerebral. And yet, one time, it invited a guest speaker who proceeded to slam the Modern Woman for going out of the kitchen: in the middle of his holy tirade, I stood up and walked out.

Now Mother was not someone who thought too deeply of anything. She was not simple-minded, but she preferred some certainties in a life that was otherwise bewildering. She had gone through many things; had been rich and had been very poor; had once gone door-to-door to sell homemade peanut butter just to feed us, her six kids. When I would see her now, she would always have that certain dignified quiet, although she had not always been like that.

Once she asked me, "What's misogynist?" To answer, I gave her a pocket dictionary. (Oh, cruelty.)

She read Harwood's article late into the night, and I thought my mission accomplished the next morning: she would have read about how the earliest God was actually a Goddess, and how women once dominated the early civilizations—with archaeological evidence to show for it—because they were considered earthly deities: by being able to give birth, they were considered as people who were able to give life. It took a long time for the men in those early societies to stumble on the so-called Big Discovery: that, actually, they, too, had a major part in the process of creating new life (it took a long time for them to connect the sexual act and the birthing process nine long months later). In time, because of the Big Discovery, women were toppled from their station as heads of society and were soon relegated to the status of mere "incubator" for the male

seed. In time, matriarchy gave way to patriarchy, and soon misogyny was born, reinforced by culture and cultural texts, foremost among these being the Bible.

This morning, I asked Mother what she thought of Harwood's argument.

Like Tuglibong cutting through me, Mother said, "These words confuse me. Well, I don't like being confused. I suppose this is true, and I don't know much about archaeology and ancient civilizations … But this is what I *do* know: I used to be a woman who did not have any redeeming qualities—I was vicious, I was loud, I was greedy, I was not a good mother. And then God showed me this new life—and I read the Bible—and I would like to think that it had changed my life: it made me want to become a better person."

And she was, and has always been.

What are words, and what do we believe in?

For once, I—the intellectual, the know-it-all, the reader who learned to question everything—had nothing to say. I found quickly that I was Dr. Lazaro, and Mother was my Ben. And words abandoned me. And then all of the brutal world that is often without meaning suddenly quieted down in the full magnificence of Mother's truth, her own.

I am still Jacob wrestling with angels, but at that moment, I knew I was a flower bud waiting for laughter to begin.