



Abstract

More than just a story about living through and coping with the pandemic of COVID-19 disease and of bad governance, “Dream of the Ruins” bends the narrative form. Fiction is not just about capturing or reflecting reality, but about bursting through known parameters and crossing into what we aspire for in the future.

Keywords

Realism, futuristic, fantastic, pandemic fiction, narrative form

DREAM OF THE RUINS

CLARISSA V. MILITANTE

LILI IS DREAMING the ruins again. She does not know that it is something she has dreamt before.

In the morning, lingering in bed after she wakes up, it now dawns on her that the face in the dream is familiar. She is certain though that the dream is not about her childhood. She’s not that old yet to forget scenes from when she was a young girl, she assures herself. She has never visited a collapsed church because of an earthquake. The most memorable about her younger years was not even her own memory but a story told her by her parents and *lolo*. She was supposed to have been born in the tail-end of the pandemic era. Growing up, she was always told she was lucky. But the post-pandemic era seems a long time ago, too. Or maybe she feels this way because she has no memory of it. It is very rarely that someone, even in her family, has shown interest in retelling the events from that time, unlike other anecdotes that get repeated over dinners and family occasions.

She remembers having this dream, perhaps some years back, around another forthcoming birthday. The problem even then was that when she woke up, it took some time to recall what transpired. On that morning after that dream, she remembered some of the events in it but her default was to attribute the memory to childhood, only to realize that they were scenes from the previous night's vision and not from an actual episode in her younger years. In that dream, it was also just after an earthquake. The disaster itself, though, was not part of the dream. She just knew that there had been one and everything around her was in ruins. It was a big church, a landmark built way back in the time of Spanish colonization partly destroyed also because of a quake, then rebuilt again, withstanding future calamities until this recent one. How did she even know these things about the town and the church? She decided that that was the backstory in the dream—that her mind in the dream had its own memory.

In its recent version, the vision begins with a young Lili knowing all these about the church; knowing too that she is from this place where she finds herself surrounded by collapsed parts of the church. In the former version, she was a young girl—younger than her real age—wandering into the ruins. But the things that follow are the same. She cannot run because of the huge rocks from the collapsed church, and some fallen posts and trees. But she's able to go near the church's façade—the only thing left of the structure. She cannot come closer though to inspect it but, in her mind, it is a big church. She almost stumbles into the cracked face of one of the saints—it's the only surviving part of the statue together with its crown that did not get buried. Or maybe, its body got destroyed and separated from the head. She thinks it is the icon of what her mother calls the Lady or the Mother—the one with dark skin. She can only remember its face and the long, brown, curly hair, the top covered by a gold crown. The rest of the Lady in green clothing is perhaps from another memory. At first, she is frightened. Then pity quickly takes over. The dark brown, oval face etched in her young mind is a beautiful one, but this face has cracks, the nose enlarged and potholed. It doesn't look like a lady or mother anymore. It looks like a horribly ugly man. She feels sad for what has happened to the Lady's face. Then when she is about to touch it, the eyes open and the thick mouth also begins to move. Lili wakes up before she can scream. Her first realization is that the dream is incomplete. The rest has yet to come, just like before. It will take a couple of sequences

more—or maybe three—just like in a drama series, each one having the same beginning then one new scene will be added, and so on, until it is completed. She will just have to wait again for the other parts to appear in the next dreams.

Lolo has been confined in his wheelchair for a while now. His daily routine is simple, as it mostly consists of getting fed by *Manang*, who also takes care of me. I was told she used to be *lola's* patient before they became girlfriends. I must remember again to ask *Manang* what her illness was before so that my *Lola Elaine* needed to cure her—and what kind of doctor was my grandmother. When I was growing up, *Manang Nida* started living with us to take care of me—and now of *lolo* too. She stays with the family during the day and goes to her own in the evening. There is a younger male nurse aid, in his 20s is my guess, who cleans up and bathes *lolo*. When my grandfather is not well, *Diego* sometimes stays with him even at night.

For most part of the day *Lolo Emil* prefers to stay in his wheelchair—sometimes even when napping—than to be transferred to his bed. When it is not hot, he asks to be brought in the patio outside or by the window in the living room, so he can stare at the skies, or just maybe at nothingness, I think. When I was younger I would just stay by his side when I got tired of playing or my time for watching television was up. I have always been hesitant to talk to him, just anticipating hearing his hoarse voice scares me. When I was already in grade school, mom told me that *lolo* probably missed *Lola Elaine*. That when he would stare outside the window, he was just remembering her. I did not know then how to remember the way *lolo* did. I have no idea how to miss a person who is dead—no idea what death means to the one who died and the one left. I do miss my mom and dad when they go to work, but I always expect them in the late afternoon or early evening. At least I had playtime and TV time when I was young, which *Lolo Emil* does not seem to have. Lately, I am asked to do a lot of remembering, like our lessons in class; the rules in school; the do's and don'ts at home. But not people who are not with us. I often have had the urge to ask *lolo* what his remembering is like, maybe this can help me with my dreams.

I am older now, I tell myself. I can walk up to him and not be intimidated by the guttural sound of his voice. My 13th birthday is coming soon. My mom insists I am not a young lady yet, though I have had blood spots recently announcing the coming of my monthly soon. If I talk with *lolo*, will he hear me? More and more I can sense that he spends most of his time with his memories. Even when we are around him or when dad and mom would talk to him, it would be as if he does not really see us. So I decided that this afternoon, upon arriving from school, I must have enough courage to talk to him. Walking up to him and taking his right hand to do the *mano po* to announce my arrival is nothing out of the ordinary. This does not distract him. But I have a solid excuse now for starting a conversation with him.

“*Lolo*, what is your favorite flavor of cake. Last year, I asked for *ube* for my birthday. I really don’t want to blow candles for my birthday this year. But we can just eat the cake,” I talk to him as if continuing a conversation that we never had.

I get the shock of my life when he turns to look at me from whatever he has been staring at outside the window of our living room. He coughs as if to clear his throat so that words can pass through.

“Your *Lola Elaine* likes *ube*. She likes *ube-with-cheese* ice cream.” His voice is so low and coarse, probably from not speaking all that time, he is not used to doing it anymore. It’s my turn to be tongue-tied. I approached him not thinking that he will respond to me. But shifting from cake to ice cream should be easy enough.

“I like cheese-flavored ice cream, too, or *ube* but not together. I just like single flavors, one at a time.” What a stupid thing to say!

He stares at me. “You have a beautiful face. You look like your *Lola Elaine*.”

“She died during the pandemic, but not because of the virus. I had never stopped wishing it was me.”

Lili could not recover from that episode with her grandfather. She feels like the old man got the short end of it. There she was striking a conversation with him and just as he was starting to tell her something important to him, she got tongue-tied, copped out, and left. He just returned to that nothingness-view outside the window. Now, she has

been staring too at the mirror in her bathroom even after brushing her teeth. She has a beautiful face, she's been told. She has an oval face with slightly fleshy cheeks and a chin that breaks the monotony of the ovalness. She has round, sad, brown eyes but the brownness intensifies when she gets emotional—whether she's happier or sadder. She had her shoulder-length hair, with natural waves, cut in cropped style recently. *I got this face from Lola Elaine*. What will her mom say to this? She reminds herself that she must look at pictures of her grandmother. There's one in the living room on the console together with all the other pictures. That one with her grandmother, looking young, was when her mom was already pregnant with her, taken during a family gathering. Her *Lolo* Emil and *Lola* Emilia are her dad's parents.

Will I dream tonight?

It is a voice that ushers her into the dream. There is only darkness, and then there is the voice—hoarse like her *lolo*'s. She thought at first it is her grandfather talking to her. But it does not have a gentle tone to it. The voice is taunting—sinister—and it scares her. Then the potholed, rough-skinned face with the big nose appears. She is directly towering over it—the exposed face with the body buried underneath the fallen rocks. Or maybe, there's really no body at all, just this ugly face. Even when it smiles, the face's eyes narrows, so that they look menacing.

“I know your *Lola* Elaine. She was a doctor—a psychiatrist. Do you know what a psychiatrist is? The one who cures crazy people, like you!” The mouth laughs hard it seems to turn swollen. Lili does not know what's funny about what the face just said. She decides she will not be afraid anymore. She's out here, above him, and though she's just a young girl, she can easily step on the face or run away, and it cannot come after her.

But is it true—what the face said about knowing her grandmother and her being a doctor? Her being crazy? It continues to speak to Lili in Filipino, English, and some other language she cannot understand. But never in complete sentences. She fails to make sense of the incoherence. When she wakes up in the morning, she jumps out of bed and seeks her journal to write the words she can still recall.

My teacher in Math called on me earlier today to answer a question but I was so distracted I failed to catch what the question was about. It was easy for me to get mindless in that class. Fortunately, even if I had not been an above average student in Ms. Roma's class, I did get decent grades. I never got reprimanded for bad behavior either. I shouldn't feel bad with that first-time incident. It bothered me that I could not get out of my mind something I had seen on the internet in the morning before I went to school—a picture of a man who looked like the ugly face in my dream. He was babbling in a press conference. The scene triggered a memory of what the face in the dream had told me. In the past, the rock that looked like a face had never opened its mouth. In that strange episode of the dream, it even spoke!

I have been rehearsing in my mind how to talk with *lolo* again. Over lunch earlier, I think I annoyed *Manang* by nagging her about when *lolo* would wake up. Why did she give him his lunch so early today, when I sometimes shared the table with him? Here, at home, it is not accurately midday meal because I get to reach the house at one or 1:30. My mom always tells me to bring lunch to school or buy lunch and have it there before I go home. Since grade 10, I have been taking the MRT or jeep in going home. Via train, our place is just two stops from where I embark but going up and down seems sometimes a waste of time than just taking the jeep or the public vans. My dad is more comfortable with me taking the train, though. From the gate of our private village, there is a trike that takes me to our house. I always want to eat my lunch at home so I can change first into my house dress and take my time finishing my food. *Manang* also enjoys hovering around, insisting to refill my plate with the dishes she cooked and her dessert concoctions. She is not an expert in cakes or pastries, and generally desserts, but I love her *menudo* and fried chicken.

“Why couldn't you let *lolo* wait for me today, *Manang*? I know you can do that. You are in-charge of his sleeping and waking hours,” I said to her in my amused tone that tells her I am part joking and part accusing. *Manang* always wants to be specific. She is not fond of getting into things past or dish out the bigger context, but just to tell me what happened during a particular day, just like today. She said that *lolo* did not want to get out of bed early to have his breakfast so that when he finally wanted to eat, it was like brunch at past 11 a.m. After eating, he dozed off as he usually did after a meal. I made *Manang* promise to go get me in my room when *lolo* woke

up again. She looked at me with knitted brows as if what I had asked her was the oddest thing to say.

Now I am with *lolo* on the open porch where he is taking his decaf coffee. Our *patio* faces east and at this hour in the afternoon, it is without sunlight. I am not sure if he is even aware I have been sitting next to his wheelchair. I just cannot make up my mind how to start the conversation. It was easier before to blurt out about ice cream flavors—or was it about my birthday cake first before he changed the subject? But from ice cream to earthquakes—this might upset him. Especially because there was a particular strong earthquake that had happened during the time of *lolo*—when *lola* was still alive. I am not even sure I was already alive then, for what else could be the reason that I did not know about this earthquake, too. I had to learn about it in school, but when I asked dad about it, he just said yes it did happen. I wanted to talk more about it, but he immediately dismissed me when *lolo* appeared at that time. I was not as pushy back then, I guess. Ever since the dream re-visited me, I had been reading up if somebody important at that time got buried in the earthquake. If it were the man on the internet who might look like the face in my dream, obviously he could not have died. He's still here, but the news said he has been sick and confined in the presidential palace. I could not find any historic church that had collapsed either, where somebody had been buried underneath before getting rescued. Some old news about the earthquake before the pandemic came up in my google search, but it was in a far-away province, near the Pacific Ocean. I am sure that that incident could not have reached my grandparents here in the city.

“Lolo Emil, here, drink your coffee. It’s getting cold. Do you want me to get more of the *camote* fries from *Manang*? Though I am not sure she will give me more pieces for you. Only three, she said. She’s very strict!” Maybe starting with a joke like this will work, though I still doubt it with *lolo*.

I need to take a deep breath first before jumping into the earthquake conversation. “What do you think about earthquakes, huh, ‘Lo? We are studying earthquakes now.” Forgive me for lying.

He looks at me with a worried expression, then speaks up. “Yes, the earthquake. Such unfortunate thing had to happen then, followed by the sickness. She was fortunate she was gone before the sickness. Or maybe it was because of the sickness.”

What does he mean this time? Is he talking about the time-of-the-virus? My tongue and mouth get paralyzed this time. Stupid, Lili! Talk! But there are so many things to process from what *lolo* just said. And my grandfather is looking at me! I am in a dilemma—I suddenly want to ask more about the pandemic. No-one has really told me about it—as in a story, complete with description of the events or scenes. Idiot, Lili! On the other hand, knowing more about the earthquake is what is important. That’s what I came to ask about. And now the conversation revealed something about *Lola Elaine*. Maybe, this is the reason why he does not speak about it, or my dad and mom. Am I ready to receive more stories about her? I am such a bad person if I don’t want to hear about her. Why do I suddenly come up with these thoughts? As if on cue to rescue *lolo*, or maybe me, *Manang* shows up to wheel away *lolo* to his room to be given his medicine.

My 13th birthday is in two days, I should be inviting my friends now. I asked *Manang* about the guests and she only mentioned that it will be a small gathering. Aside from her, my parents and *lolo* of course, my mom’s two sisters are coming and some cousins. My dad’s brothers have been living in other countries with their own families. This is odd that it is my 13th birthday, I am now a teen-ager, a young lady, and no big celebration is happening! I must talk to my mom about this because *Manang* gives me strange responses. When I asked about my cake earlier—which must be *ube* flavor—she showed me the picture of the design of the cake. But when I saw that the dedication was for a 15th birthday and told her this must be corrected, she merely said she would discuss this with my dad and mom. Why she could not call the bakeshop about this mistake seemed odd to me. I got distracted and totally forgot about the ice cream which she should make sure to be *ube*-cheese flavor.

I have been avoiding *Lolo Emil* since that last talk about the earthquake of his time. I am afraid that his bad memories will come, my mom and dad will get wind of what I had done, and I will be scolded or punished. My birthday will really be a sad one. But I have not given up on my plan to talk to him again—next time I promise to be braver and reveal to him my dream. Perhaps after my birthday when I am not busy anymore. Come to think of it, I have not had the dream of the ruins in the past couple of nights after episode number 2.

Lili could not believe what she had overheard tonight, *Manang* talking to her parents after dinner. They thought she was in the bedroom studying, but she decided to catch *Manang* for last reminders about her birthday tomorrow before the latter went home. The woman was talking about her with her parents! She wanted to be angry, but she was more confused. *Manang* said it was happening again. That she Lili was going back to that time before she got sick; before she forgot everything after the virus made her ill. That she had been talking to *Lolo* Emil and this unsettled the old man. He had to be sedated that other afternoon after she asked him about an earthquake.

“An earthquake? Where did this come from? Can this be perhaps a new memory? Is this a positive development for Lili, huh, Benedict? But why would she suddenly remember about an earthquake?”

Lili tried to catch what her mother was saying. She often spoke fast, particularly when talking with her colleagues during her zoom meetings. Her mom hated it when she would be cut-off or distracted while finishing what she had to say on the phone or while in zoom, so Lili had to wait by the door of her mother’s home office when she had business with her. Lili tried to peep through the glass part of the door to see what was happening in the kitchen—but really to see how her father was reacting because she had heard no response from him. He looked worried, his forehead showing those creases that regularly appeared when he would be in deep thought and his eyes squinted behind his glasses.

“Ben, maybe we should also not allow her to talk to dad if it’s doing him harm.”

When *Manang* said this might confuse Lili more and may not be a good idea, Lili was pacified. But she was still both angry and dismayed at what her mother had suggested.

“*Manang*, you visited mom recently. You think it’s okay for dad to see her again after a long time?” Lili’s father finally spoke up.

Manang did not answer and just looked at Lili’s dad, who then touched the older woman’s shoulder, smiled, and nodded. Lili was getting frustrated. She could not make sense of what just happened there. She did not hear any word from *Manang* after that suggestion from her father—or maybe she was whispering—but an agreement had been reached. About what or whom, Lili told herself she had to find out.

My dream last night was strange and different. It was a dream about feeling and there was nothing to see or hear—no story about the past. I just felt like I kept on falling and I never landed. It was more frightening that way—to just fall and not know when it would end. I have read that if one jumps from a building one is already dead midway before reaching the ground. One's bones are broken while speeding downward. I am somehow comforted by this because it means one will no longer feel the pain upon hitting concrete. But in my dream, there was no ending. Now that I am awake, I still feel I am falling, and I cannot get up from bed. My brain seems to be floating too—and empty. There is vaguely any memory of the previous day. I cannot recall anymore the details of the dream of the ruins except the ugly face buried under collapsed concrete or rocks. My mind is itching to remember something important that has to do with my *Lolo* Emil. My attention is drawn to the clock with a digital calendar on my bedside table and I get more confused. It was my 13th birthday yesterday. I should have gone to sleep and into my dream with memories of the celebration. I should have awakened with a smile this morning recalling my wish when I blew the 13 candles—or was it 15, as *Manang* had said. No, it could not be. Or a scene where *lolo* was eating the ube-with-cheese ice cream while thinking of *lola*. Where have all my memories gone? Yet, why do I sense that this is a recurring experience? But this is not the dream. Whatever is left of my memory is telling me, I have been in this situation before—about a birthday with the wrong number of candles. About a celebration that I cannot recall. About getting lost after my 13th birthday.

Manang brought Lili's breakfast to the latter's room. It was as if she had anticipated that Lili would not be coming down for breakfast on this morning. The woman got a folded tray table under Lili's bed and opened it to place the food. She did not talk to Lili as she also knew that Lili had to be alone this morning. But she sat on the side where Lili lay facing. She also knew that Lili was awake. She caressed Lili's arm and hair and held her hand and kissed it.

Lilipas din ito. The girl did not expect that *Manang* would say anything. Her mind seemed to have been alerted by the woman's words and tone of her voice, which reassured Lili.

"I know what it is today! You are taking *Lolo* Emil to visit *Lola* Elaine!" The words came out so sudden Lili thought they were not from her. The words were not preceded by any reflection or thinking. Now it was also *Manang's* turn to be surprised.

Whatever *Manang's* reason was for allowing Lili to join her and the old man in their visit with her *Lola* Elaine, Lili dismissed it for the moment. She was still curious though—was it out of pity, proof of her deep affection for her, or was it the agreement with her dad during their conversation which she failed to hear? It could not be the first reason because she did not beg much and that was what was incredulous. As for the second one, Lili has always believed that her *Manang* loves her but what kind of love and how much, she has also aspired to find out. Now, the last reason seems to be the most far-fetched—or perhaps not, Lili thought. She has always felt a bond—an alliance—with her dad. What puzzled her really was that *Manang* never asked her how she knew that her *Lola* Elaine was still alive. Did her *lolo* lie to her, making her believe that her grandmother was dead? Or was it because of senility or that like her the old man also got lost in the maze of memories? Lili could not get herself to ask *Manang* when everyone has known all along that her grandmother still exists and lives in that other place they are visiting now. She did not want to complicate things and make the woman rethink her decision to have her, Lili, tag along. Maybe after the visit she can ask *Manang* about this—and other things, like what happened yesterday during her birthday. What she finally had the courage to ask the old woman was if there was any left-over *ube* cake that they could bring to her *lola*? She sensed that *Manang* hesitated before answering but eventually gave her a mysterious smile. Mysterious, because it appeared to Lili that the woman smiled to herself about something else going on in her mind and not as reaction to what Lili had said. But *Manang* eventually wrapped a slice of the cake and handed it to Lili before getting in the car.

Lili could not believe her eyes when they were finally entering the gate of the place where her grandmother had been staying all this time. She marveled at the expansive garden fronting the building before they went to the back to park. She thought then that the huge, old building was like one of those heritage structures that could be found in the pages

of an art history book. Because of the building's design—massive façade made of red bricks with overgrown plants hanging upon the wall—she felt transported to a place from another country. The architecture did not seem to belong here in the city. Or maybe they were already outside the city—that was more logical to her. She was just not familiar with the places they had passed by in coming here. During most of the trip, she was inside her mind and imagining how her *lola* will receive her. *Manang*, very unlikely of her, was quiet and did not give Lili any dos and don'ts. Lili only got distracted occasionally when *Lolo* Emil would squeeze her hand. They sat together at the back of the car and *Manang* was beside Nilo, her dad's driver from the office. Her father had his car return home supposedly for her *lolo* and *Manang* after he had been taken to his office. *Why didn't I go to school?* Her mind tricked Lili sometimes, but what was important was that she could finally see her *lola* whom she and her grandfather thought was already dead.

Beside her, it seemed to Lili that her *lolo* also got nervous ever since they entered the gate of the premises, but he too remained reticent even after the car had stopped. Just as Nilo and *Manang* were transferring the old man in his wheelchair, Lili felt the tremors. At first, the two stopped what they were doing and was about to move the wheelchair, but the shaking grew stronger. Lili quickly jumped out of the car and witnessed how some of the bricks from the top of the building started to fall. She was mesmerized by the sight of cracking walls and falling debris. She did not hear immediately *Manang's* voice calling out on her. They were pushing her *lolo* away from the palace-like structure. Before she ran to follow them, the last thing in Lili's mind was—*maybe it was not a church, maybe it was this building.*

I am 15 years old now, I am told. I only thought I was 13 again because every year since that birthday, I kept coming back to it. It was around my 13th birthday when I supposedly fell ill and was diagnosed to be infected by the virus. I spent two months in the hospital before I was finally released with some parts of my lungs and brain already damaged and needing rehabilitation. Somehow my lungs got better. The pandemic has just ended two years ago and not a long time. I have no memory of everything before and after that birthday. I just always assumed that this tragedy

happened a long time ago and not to me. Maybe this loss of memory of the painstaking recovery I had to go through, including the deaths I had witnessed in the ICU, is why everyone considers me being fortunate. This is the story I have been writing in my journal—that the pandemic happened a long time ago and I was not born yet. I write this to fill the gap. I don't even have short-term memory but flashes—or even imagined experiences. I don't even go to school, *Manang* has finally revealed to me. Only she, my *Lolo* Emil, and my mom and dad have remained constant. Sometimes, I would even go on days without talking to them. I just stay in my room. Recently, *Manang* has seen me talk to *lolo* and for her this is a good sign. I am reconnecting, that's what she thought. That was shy she agreed to take me to the trip to *Lola* Elaine's home.

The story of my grandmother is a different thing altogether. Or is it really? We seem to be both not right in the mind. She was in the mental health facility even before the pandemic. *Manang* told me *lola* used to work there. *Lolo* Emil was not imagining when he told me my grandmother was a psychiatrist. He was remembering another earthquake that had something to do with them both—that separated them. It was an earthquake from the ocean which caused a tidal wave that devoured a whole island province in another part of the country. It was a different kind of pandemic that happened as a result—a pandemic of madness. People got sick with depression because of loss of home and family. *Lola* Elaine was supposed to be part of the mental health program of the new government then to cure the people. But instead of helping the people, they were being committed to the facility, many committing suicide. *Lola* succumbed to all the pressure and depression and she herself became a patient there. We took her home today—only temporarily while the facility is being repaired. I am excited that my grandparents have reunited. Perhaps I will have my chance to sneak a conversation too with *lola*. For now, I must write all these things in my journal so when I wake up tomorrow and have forgotten everything again—if not most of what transpired today—I would have back-up memory. Or maybe this exercise is just waste of time. I have written a lot here, including about a dream, but the more I read the more they just become meaningless words to me without me knowing the circumstances in which I have written them.

Manang has just brought me my glass of warm milk to help put me to sleep. It has been an eventful day. I must have been overwhelmed, she

said. Before she left my room, she had news to tell me. I did not really know how to receive the news. It seemed not to matter to me, but I listened to her anyhow because she was all eager. With an excitement she could not seem to control, she said the presidential palace had collapsed and the president could have been buried in the palace grounds. She would be staying here at the house tonight. If I need her, she would be sleeping on the couch. She may be awake until later watching the news on TV, waiting for more updates about what happened to the president in the collapsed palace.

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