Abstract

Through the act of preparing, cooking, and eating rice, a daughter of an overseas Filipino worker bridges the present to her childhood past in Dubai and Singapore. This essay explores the role rice plays as both personal and cultural sustenance, how it struggles to remain a constant presence in our lives, whether they are spent in the Philippines or outside the country.

Keywords:

rice
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childhood,
abroad,
tagalog language

LIKE WATER-FLAVORED RICE

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What would we do without rice? Those who do manual labor would go hungry midway through the gap between meals. And what would we take to go with kari-kari . . . tinapa, tuyo, tapa? Loaf bread? Only rice provides the mild, comfortable background that makes the very salty, the highly flavored, logical and palatable.

—*Savor the Word: Ten Years of the Doreen Gamboa Fernandez Food Writing Award*

BY THE SIDEWALK: bigas.

Just a few grains—off-white but bright against diesel-stained asphalt—that have spilled from the vendor's container boxes. The vendor heaps her bigas in mounds, shapes them into dunes so that when she scoops from one side, the other side remains undisturbed, keeping the structure from collapse. Of the selection she offers, not a single locally produced variety costs less than forty pesos per kilo. Most can only afford the unavailable imported type that is considerably cheaper.

Across her store, a seller of sweet-smelling turon and maruya gives an extra fritter for free to her suki. The bananas for her products are likely supplied by the retailer next to the bigas vendor, as they have them delivered wholesale by the truckful. Beside the turon seller, women cluster under the large umbrellas of fruit and vegetable stalls. One of them holds up a mango while haggling with the owner, before heading toward the carinderia lady that sells bagoong. Another travels down to browse through the frilly blouses at an ukay-ukay.

Tricycles whir past, expertly avoiding the people that stray onto their path, to park near the bigas vendor's store—the unofficial marker of their queue area. Some cross the main transit route beyond to deposit their elderly passengers at the steps of a smoke-begrimed commercial center in the city at the heart of Metro Manila. After reaching their destination, the drivers would then treat themselves with buko refreshments as a conductor directs new passengers into their vehicles.

"May gusto ka ba?" Ma asks me as the bigas vendor finishes doubling the plastic bags for our purchase. I shake my head, even as my eyes linger upon the maruya a while longer, even as I absently pick at a single piece of bigas I've snitched from a container box. My mother has already bought some pandesal, hopia, and kalihim from the nearby bakery. There is no need to be greedy.

Despite being neighbors with the market, the street leading there remains difficult to navigate, whether traveling up or down the sloping incline. Once, when returning from a previous shopping trip, Ma traced a zigzag pattern as we went up the hill.

"May teknik kasi iyan." She does it again, clutching my hand tight, tugging even though I am already following where she goes: From the bigas vendor, we walk in a straight line and take advantage of the lighter foot traffic, after which we carefully squeeze in between a line-up of tricycles to get to the other side, else we get dangerously boxed in by moving vehicles plus the gaping canal blocking our way. From there, we continue past some butcher shops before changing lanes once again, huffing and puffing even before we reached the top. The added load of the bag of bigas swaying between us contributes to our weariness from the climb.

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A paper bag filled with pastries and boxes of polvoron from our last-minute pasalubong shopping rustled in our hold as we raced to the boarding gates. When the gates opened, my mother led while I, a three-year-old child, took brave steps in her direction. Before us was an international airplane: an Emirates aircraft that my mother said felt *sosyal* even though we were only seated in economy class. We were bound for a regroup with my father, a general physician who was feeling homesick from working overseas. Ma had packed several pieces of luggage full of Filipino-brand

goods like instant pancit canton to surprise him with, while at the grocery, she steered me away from the purple-wrapped chocolate bars I was intently eyeing, citing the tight budget.

The plane took off, and for the first time for us both, we saw the full moon looking like a dinner plate hanging right outside the window, while the streetlights and the people below became no bigger than bigas—*rice*.

On the way there, Ma had advised, "Let's start to practice our English together, okay?"

As we stepped out of Dubai International Airport, a blast of hot air engulfed us, consuming our breath as we trudged toward a vehicle. The afternoon sun bore down in welcome, still scorching as ever but unfamiliarly so, for there were no clouds in sight to mitigate its heat. By the roadsides, palm trees and flowers were constantly irrigated by a low-pressure spray of water. We didn't perspire. Sweat dried up in a matter of seconds.

After loading our luggage at the back of a borrowed sedan, we sped through the wide highways of Deira. The journey was so unlike our provincial road trips in the Philippines. For instance, looking out the car window, there weren't any flooded fields where those salakot wearers waded through to grow palay—rice. By the time we'd arrived at our accommodation, I already had my fill of sand.

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INGREDIENTS:
4 cups water
3 cups long-grain bigas

PROCEDURE:
My mother commands, "Magsaing ka. Tatlong gatang." Dutifully, I follow her order, first by transferring our bigas into a dispenser. With a bit of shifting and tapping, the bigas levels out evenly. Our model has a drawer that is to be drawn out by hand, yielding around a cup of bigas with every pull and push.

Three cups of dinurado, as this variation is called, are poured into the metal bowl of a rice cooker. We used to favor Super Angelica, though these names don't matter much in the long run, as the labels of both our preferred types are simply standardized by the Department of Agriculture

as "local premium" in 2018 to differentiate from those unlimited volumes of better-supported "imported premium." Though, as I fill the bowl with tap water to soak its contents, two dead weevils float alongside the stray bits of rock and dirt that rise to the surface. In the First World, finding a single pest would have been a cause for concern and ample reason to dispose of entire batches stored in warehouses.

Here, I've come to rely on the water to take the impurities away as it runs quietly down the side of the tilted bowl. With a clean hand, I reach in to stir, never letting the flow of water stop as I sift carefully through a farmer's hard work. The bigas—which survived the trials of mortar, pestle, and bilao—brushes against my fingers, just as eager to wash calloused skin as they are to rub against each other. The water becomes cloudy, starch swirling white like disturbed sand.

In Dubai, to rid myself of sand, I would shake my clothes out. By the entryway, I would wiggle my toes to dislodge the sand stuck in between. When I became annoyed, I would wash and wash the sand from my body, but they just kept accumulating in my hair, behind my ears, on my eyelashes. Sand was everywhere, seeming to be the remaining constant in a land that was rapidly developing, rapidly progressing.

The playground near the second flat we'd moved in also had sand. It was fun when a playmate and I pushed and pulled the handles of a sandbox digger to load the bucket at the end, only to immediately dump the sand right after. Said playmate had curly hair and skin far darker than mine, her appearance novel to me, and perhaps mine to her as she reached out a curious hand to prod at my face. Unused to her method of examination, I cried, with the tears only making it easier for the sand to cling.

At the white sands of Jumeirah Beach, my family spent the evening of my fourth birthday, grilling fish over a campfire and letting the cold waves of the sea wash over our bodies. We'd begun celebrating that morning surrounded by strangers, mostly Filipina nurse flatmates. Pork wasn't commonly offered in supermarkets, so when my mother wanted to surprise me with sinigang, she was directed to private convenience stores selling contraband meat. To our delight, however, we found plenty of rice readily stocked in the grocery aisles, and this rice smelled so sweet. *Jasmine Rice* was printed in bold on sacks, alongside *From Thailand*. While these didn't follow us from the Philippines, they were close enough to home.

The blue sky itself would express rain in sand. On the day after our arrival, the heavens darkened at noon. The working hours in Dubai were

from seven in the morning until midday and would continue from four to seven in the evening. In an air-conditioned room, Ma was busy cooling down geyser-hot tap water to use for bathing. Worried for my father who was about to go back home to take an afternoon nap, she called him for reassurance. Soon came the sound of whirling wind and rain, but upon looking out, there was a distinct lack of water. Instead, sand obscured the sky and colored the scenery with rice husk brown. Dust was blown everywhere. According to my father, it was the first sandstorm of the season, the first in quite a while. Another sandstorm later stranded us in a toy store. To calm me down, my parents bought me a dollhouse with two families. The second family wasn't actually part of the set; they were made of wood, as well as the furniture that came with them. I didn't care and continued playing as if the second family was an extension of the first one. Ma decorated my dollhouse with Christmas lights and arranged the family members as though they were preparing for Noche Buena.

By the footpath, sand calling in waves would knead back and forth the concrete. When it did rain, the sewage was clogged with sand, which led to rising levels of clear floodwater. In a land where there were few people of my age to interact with, my constant companion was sand. With time, it became harder and harder to cleanse from me—inseparable, as with how starch existed as the integral component of rice. There would be sand in my shoes, on my slippers, waterfalling from my sandals. Outside our flat, there would be sand on the sidewalk that I'd sit on, from where I sometimes observed how the male Arabs passing by did beso-beso as their manner of greeting.

While our local farmers had plenty of soil to till and sow, Filipino construction workers there constantly worked with sand. When my family moved to a new residence—a unit, no bigger than a normal bedroom, which was part of a six-door compound that the Filipinos there liked to call a villa—we ended up having families of construction workers, drivers, and hotel carpenters for neighbors. These people were able to fit inside their units by building bunk beds. When the construction workers came home from work, their hands would be caked with gravel after spending the whole day shaping towers on top of dirt that the Arabs had bought and spread in the desert. Some of these towers were the impressive buildings and malls to marvel at in Dubai, which we toured whenever my father was free from auditing insurance documents for his job.

One such example was the Egyptian-themed Wafi Mall, where every pillar inside was engraved with a sarcophagus statue, while the marble

floor was inlaid with mosaic patterns. Outside were towering obelisks and even what looked like a large replica of a pharaoh's tomb. The pyramid-shaped ceiling itself was made of stained-glass images, featuring Egyptian workers picking grapes in the vineyard, building boats, laying bricks, and worshipping their deities. It wouldn't be a far-reaching assumption to think that the mall was built as homage to the soil and sand that were imported from Egypt for their construction projects. After all, it wasn't the wind-formed granules from their desert that built their emirate.

How odd that those who seem to be able to construct architectural wonders were the ones who resided in spaces that were no more than holes in the wall. Despite their exhaustion and poor accommodations, though, our Filipino neighbors found cheer in familiar little things. On one lazy day, they invited me to roll rice flour into balls for the ginataang bilo-bilo they were planning to cook.

Molding those rice balls was perhaps the first time I'd been involved in the preparation of food. The bilo-bilo I made were misshapen, inconsistent in size, and were generally just either too big or too small. Beside me was another kid, an older girl who was faring better with the rice molding. I called her Ate Abigail. She had a younger brother who was closer to my age, but since she was the only other girl there, Abigail and I tended to hang out with each other, playing games and petting a stray tabby cat that regularly visited the humble compound.

According to my father, Abigail's parents were both overseas Filipino workers who met in Dubai, lived together, and had their daughter there. Abigail's mother was separated from her first husband back home before she had even gone abroad. On the other hand, Abigail's father was not separated and was still providing for his own unsuspecting wife and children back in the Philippines.

Unfortunately, Abigail did not stay for long. With the intent to go back to their province, her mom began packing their bags. They were to leave the father behind. Presently, I wonder how Abigail experienced setting foot on the motherland—getting integrated into a culture not of sand but of rice—for the first time.

Meanwhile, I continued to chew on the language of sand. One of my paternal uncles found employment in Abu Dhabi and visited us, taking me on leisurely walks to nearby stores. He would buy me a sweet or two, tug me by the hand toward the checkout counters, and urge me excitedly, "O, you greet *with 'As-salamu alaykum,'* ha? Dali!"

"Asamalaykum," I would try to repeat but tripped over the word instead.

"As-salamu . . . alaykum . . ." he would say again, but slower.

"Asalamaykum." My tongue continued to twist in a peculiar way.

The cashier would nevertheless beam wide, lean over, and greet back with, "*Wa-alaykum-salam*!"

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Our old rice cooker would commit a sin against our sinaing every day. Time had gnawed away at its electrical wiring, rendering it unable to switch from cooking mode to warming mode, basically burning its contents if left unguarded. It took a while to be replaced as well, since my father had been very hesitant to throw it away; he argued that it would be a waste to discard something that still worked however poorly.

While the new cooker is better and more reliable, some part of me misses the old one. The lid of the old rice cooker had a smaller relief valve and got clogged easily, forcing the steam and bubbling liquid to spew mainly from the sides. It was messy and noisy, but I was fascinated with the starch residue that always appeared near the brim of the bowl after it was finished cooking. Because of the steam, the residue would dry and harden into paper-thin crisps. Admittedly, it was nothing to be excited over, but it was crunchy and tasted like white communion wafer. As a child, I entertained the idea of holy hosts being produced that way.

The thing with communion is that its concept is introduced to an audience of a very young age. A child accompanies their Catholic parents to church, sees this round white disk being presented by the priest, and smells the lingering sweetness of the host from their mother's breath. The child, not yet being in the in-group, is told that they can't receive it until they've crossed a certain threshold.

Withholding the bread just makes it more desirable. The church, family, and society build up on the joy of receiving this sacrament, and the child simultaneously becomes excited and impatient to undertake the ritual that will allow them to taste the forbidden wafer.

Being exposed to the workings of other religions is a bit like that. At my bedroom in Dubai, I would drape my blanket over my head, trying to mirror the Arab women walking around wearing headscarves. I would

gesture with my tiny hands towards the distance, pointing at onion-shaped domes, at sandstone walls embellished with spiral designs.

"Mosque," my mother would identify them for me.

I would pester her with more questions: *What's in there? Can't we go there? Is it like a mall? Why aren't we allowed to enter? Can't we pray there instead since it's nearer?*

On Sundays, we attended mass at St. Mary's Catholic Church, which was one of the nine churches in the United Arab Emirates. To get there, we had to board a bus. Buses in Dubai were driven by immigrants, and their passengers were also immigrants. My father told me that Arab people didn't ride public transport because they had their own cars and personal drivers.

Inside the church, attendees were mainly Filipinos and Indians, but occasionally, I would spot ones wearing headscarves. *Why can they join us*, I would continue to ask, *but we can't join them?* The neighboring mosque kindly sounded out the Islamic call to prayer in response.

And then there was Ramadan. Experiencing Ramadan in a Muslim-dominated country was beautiful. During the season, stores overflowed with sweet pastries at a discounted price. Mosques would be filled with worshippers chanting *Allah! Allah!* so melodiously it left me in awe. At noon of Eid'l Fitr, we would witness from our flat's terrace how there weren't too many people outside, but nearing nightfall, entire communities would be on the sandy streets partaking in large, colorful feasts. Some would even set up tents where they could joyously dance the night away.

Meanwhile, I stayed in our flat, with the rest of my family and our flatmates, unable to participate, only being able to celebrate from afar.

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My father quit his employment in 2002 because his Indian employers were palming off work on him that wasn't originally part of his contract, leading him to decide on finding a good-paying job closer to home. He was hired, along with four other Filipino doctors, at National Heart Centre Singapore. On his daily commute, he basked under the shade of broad-leafed mahogany trees, while at work, he soaked up the praise heaped high on his plate.

"Anywhere I go, I get commended for speaking good English for a Filipino," he said with a pride that we cheerfully partook in, and that

prophecy held true when it manifested again years later during his employment on a ship, through a British coworker.

Unlike in Dubai, we settled much easier in this Fine Country—the advertised cultural melting pot. There were more Filipinos there, the areas easier to navigate. It was easier to go with the flow, easier to communicate, easier to congregate in places of worship. The landscape was a fusion of lush greenery and grey concrete, and during the rainy season, brown snails with banded shells glided across the roads and grass. In the distance, there were still no rice fields in sight; only port areas with freight containers blocking the horizon.

Near one of the various residences we lived in, there was a long covered walkway that connected a row of shophouses to the nearest bus station. In the middle of this walkway, there were stone stairs leading down to a path shaded by thick foliage and carpeted with fallen leaves. Barefooted people traversed this path every Tuesday and Friday, and when they did, sandalwood incense smoke mixed with the scent of petrichor in the air. I was curious about where they were headed toward, but I could only glimpse a red platform and a walled-off section. According to locals, tucked away in the glade was a small Hindu temple frequented by devotees, an unlikely prayer site near some railroad tracks.

The word *Hinduism* tasted as curious as *Islam* and *Buddhism* on my tongue. It felt like looking at a Singaporean cuisine menu, where I would furrow my eyebrows at the unusual "braised duck feet" listed and inevitably choose "sweet and sour pork" for my meal once again, because that was one of the only safe and approved dishes for me. A dish was considered *safe* if it was within budget and the essence of the food wasn't far from something I'd already tried before. Sweet and sour pork at its core was just pork marinated in a vinegar-and-sugar mixture, which wasn't unlike some common Filipino fare. In addition, I could only eat what my parents *approved*, because even if I had the courage to try something unfamiliar, my mother would quickly suggest another dish, steering me away from freely exploring cuisines that offered an array of flavors or ingredients she couldn't comprehend. She came to the conclusion that I might not like certain dishes on the basis that even she herself would be unwilling to try some of them out.

I was reminded of when I'd constantly ask my mother about the Arab people and their religious practices, of how my questions were mostly left unexplained or unanswered in the end. The same happened in

Singapore, as inquiries about the religions practiced there were brushed aside with increasingly shorter and shorter replies. My mother's hesitation to immerse herself further in other cultures, as well as her reluctance to dip her fingers beyond what could be seen on the surface, greatly limited her access to such discoveries whenever she led me on walks around town.

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The higher floors of a mall called Lucky Plaza boasted several remittance centers, mobile services, and general stores with wares arranged sari-sari style. My family frequently visited the place just to dine in a canteen-style restaurant called Kabayan, where they generously served heaping portions of rice. Lucky Plaza was a well-known place that tried its best to cater to Filipinos.

Or so it seemed.

Lining the pavement at Orchard Road: Filipinas.

Most of them were domestic workers; they'd spill from the exits of Lucky Plaza, shooed away from sitting along the building's corridors after Singaporean guards would accuse them of blocking fire escapes and pathways. They scattered outside. Some had put up makeshift stalls at the side of the shopping complex, offering to manicure fingernails or massage back muscles in exchange for a little extra cash. Every few years or so, there would be a massive cleanup of the place, and improvised hawkers would be repeatedly banned.

But that's alright.

Filipinas were used to haggling, doomed to constantly searching and negotiating for space.

For the meantime, on Sundays, the rest of the women would procure thin fraying fabrics to spread on the sidewalk, which they lay down on to share their stories and home-cooked meals. Some of them would bring packs of economic rice from the mall, and a few arranged their packs on the ground to serve as improvised backrests. Some would lean leisurely into their backrests while listening to a friend's complaints about her demanding amo. Others would set aside their styrofoam takeout container, having just finished chowing down on *cai png*. Around them were areas cordoned off, filled with signs warning the public not to occupy the space. Even the architecture of the building, like the sloping

edges of display windowsills, seemed specifically designed to discourage people from hanging around.

So instead, the domestic workers would sit along the curb of nearby flowerbeds, the ones close to the taxi stands. Taxicabs steered toward these stands, brushing against the women's toe caps. Careless maneuvers had led to tragic accidents involving—as their local news reported—Filipino "maids."

These migrant gatherings were meant to be a fest, a recess from the stresses of continuously winning bread. It was shared time snatched for expressing culture in shaky mother tongue, for poking fun at their employers, for evoking from their circle the loudest cackle. They should've been safe, approved—

Their ability to endure reminded me of a rice cooker's tempered glass lid: resistant to heat, strong enough to withstand the bubbling beneath, unmarred of any visible scratches, and secured against the worrying, mounting pressure by letting steam escape through a vent. Outsiders put a stopper on the migrants' merrymaking, and I would be harshly reminded that a tempered glass lid was still mainly made of *glass*; a rough enough mishandling could lead it to the verge of shatter.

My mother always said that she disliked living in other lands because different countries meant different rules to play by. Singapore's police force did well indeed, protecting everything they saw except those they perceived to not belong. They trampled over each banig laid down. They sowed the barricades that Filipinas dared occupy. They seized their temporary paradise.

This mass feeling of displacement—it lingered upon the luckless ones as they descended the unlucky steps of Lucky Plaza.

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The rice cooker is plugged in.

Reflections darting about the water's rippling surface still. The type of rice must be taken into account when measuring the amount of water to add. Too little and the rice will turn out dry. Too much and it becomes mushy.

Steam curls against the tempered glass lid before it condenses into droplets, shimmering in the harsh kitchen lights like sweat on the forehead of someone worried about failing to support their family. Tiny

bubbles of air expand from the gaps in between the grains. Before long, the liquid is frothing like the sea when it meets the shore.

At its core, cooked rice tastes like slightly sweetened water. It is a logical conclusion: It is soaked in water, it absorbs water, and it should, therefore, taste like *water*. By applying the same logic, Filipinos should probably taste a lot like rice, since we eat a lot of it. I imagine Filipino bodies as rice, firm but tender and filling, with a consistency that catches the flavor of the dish it is paired with. It absorbs and absorbs the color of the sauce, the seasonings of the soup, always soaking up the flavors of the viand.

My family and I slowly integrated ourselves into the Singaporean rhythm of life. The best way to meet people and mingle was to visit recreational areas, and the fastest way to do this was to take me to the playgrounds near condominium buildings during late afternoons. It also helped with alleviating boredom, as I only had local cartoons to entertain myself with since there wasn't much space for extravagance there.

Next to the row of slippers lined up at the edge of a playground in Spottiswoode Park, I was toeing the area's rubber flooring while my hands twisted the hem of my shirt. A few meters away, smaller children were hogging the long slide. On the other side, preteens crossed the monkey bars. Many more kids were running around, but none of them looked like me. Even so, I came up to a circle of friends who were playing ball, told them my name, and asked, "*Pwede bang makipaglaro*?", to which one of the boys tapped his ear and replied, "Sorry, I don't understand."

Ma, who was sitting on a bench listening to this exchange, suddenly called me over. Her lips were pursed in a frown, the way they got whenever I misbehaved or had leftover rice on my plate. But her voice sounded strained, almost nervous, when she bent down and whispered, "You talk to them in English."

My cheeks burned. Feeling foolish, I quickly ran back and did it right the second time. "Can I please play with you?"

"Sorry, we're going home already," the boy said, laughing and shaking his head. They proceeded to play for twenty more minutes.

To this day, I wonder why I decided to communicate in a language that we didn't have in common. Back then, I treated it like a careless slip-up, an embarrassing accident. I was supposed to be accustomed to interactions

like these a long time ago. It was possible that, in that instant, I made a hopeful attempt to be understood by someone my age, but instead, their reactions made me feel unwanted for my mother tongue. What to me was an unintended plea was, to them, a bunch of meaningless chatter tumbling out of my mouth. It was a lesson quickly learned: Speaking in English brought rewards, while speaking in Filipino met suppression. At home, I practiced and practiced.

Months later, in that same playground, I encountered a girl who was about two years older than me. She seemed to be in her element as she got people to have fun with her, whether on the seesaw or the spring riders or the corkscrew climber. I went to befriend her.

"I'm Ina," she said, pronouncing it with the stress on the "I" as in "*ee*-nah." In my mind, I automatically connected the spelling of her name to the Tagalog word for mother. It resonated like a reminder.

The words resurfaced on their own as instinct drove me to ask, "*Pinoy ka ba*?"

Ina gasped. "Hi, *kumusta*!" she exclaimed. "*Akala ko* Singaporean *ka*."

On my mother's part, she hardly ran out of someone to converse with. There were always plenty of domestic workers watching over their respective charges. One day, after failing to swing across the monkey bars for the umpteenth time, I ran over to Ma to find her chatting with someone.

"*Alaga mo*?" I heard the domestic worker ask her when she saw me approach.

Ma looked at me and handed over a bottle of soda. "*Anak ko*," she corrected, smiling.

I greeted the woman in English. Wordlessly, she scanned my pale face, tilting her head as her gaze lingered on the area around my eyes, almost as if tracing their shape. The child under her care had come padding over as well, and when I waved hello I saw my own eyes staring back.

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My kindergarten homeroom adviser at Tiong Bahru introduced me by announcing, "Class, she is a Filipino. Please speak English to her."

Even then, it was still difficult to express myself to my classmates. When I asked for help with answering my Mandarin workbooks, specifically with matching meanings to Chinese characters, they would

intentionally lead me to pick the wrong answers. At one point, there was also a misunderstanding where I was accused of pinching a fellow student. The only people I could talk to were two boys of Indian and Malaysian ancestry, respectively, especially because the three of us would sometimes be excluded from certain activities, like the class rehearsals for our graduation play that involved a character pushing a wheelbarrow while waving goodbye to his family.

Seeing this, my mother persuaded my teacher to have me take the English curriculum. Ma schooled me on how to do my work, checking my answers and marking the wrong ones, while I presented the workbook to my teacher for evaluation. Perhaps Ma thought that the additional activity was an opportunity to take a break from her own monotonous routine. This system worked in improving my grades, and I was even awarded the sixth rank in academics.

When we returned to the Philippines, my private school elementary teachers always praised me for being able to talk in straight English, not knowing that I had to have been able to in order to be understood at all. I wish I could give a reliable assessment of whether my grades in Filipino subjects had taken a hit as well. Truth be told, while I *do* remember struggling to reacquaint myself with the rules of Filipino grammar, our teachers would put so much stock in encouraging us to speak English, and in punishing us by making us pay a fee—with students acting like they're in a marketplace buying *ano*s and *bakit*s in bulk—when speaking in Tagalog, that *everyone's* lowest subject was more often than not Filipino. "Speak in English! Mas makakaangat kayo kapag marunong kayo mag-Ingles," they would say as they tapped "English Only" policy signs and counted coins collected from the daily "mother tongue" violations. "You can work abroad pa. It's where all the high-paying jobs are!"

Whenever someone was caught uttering cozy akos and lacking the pesos to cover penalties, she regurgitated her Filipino and spat denials lest she risked having her ID card confiscated. Occasionally, my classmates would bring up my stay in other countries. They admired and wondered and speculated at how many foreign flavors I must've absorbed into my body. I didn't have the heart to tell them how good it felt to be back chewing local rice—*kanin*, chewing on local language without fear of choking on words and being misunderstood. In being starved of it, it became worthwhile to buy Filipino words in bulk, or until the daily allowance inevitably ran out. There was a *need* to be greedy. Better to savor

it early, especially when the motherland—in her desperation to keep food on the table—was always preparing to export her children away.

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On my plate: water-flavored rice.

My mother has ingrained in me that rice is the foremost dish that any Filipino must learn to prepare. Here, people call for palay, then bigas, then kanin rather than *unhusked rice*, *uncooked rice*, *cooked rice*. Homeward-bound means heading back to where *pounding rice* is bayo and *winnowing the grain* is tahip. The words bigas and bigat are close, for *bigas* carries the *weightiness* often sought for survival. Indeed, it is more than a staple food; it is a constant.

That said, the threats to the haven it represents are just as constant. The hope-filled "rise" that saying "rice" calls to mind continues to be difficult to attain. The television in our dining room serves news as hard-to-swallow appetizer: foreign corporations devouring agricultural lands, agencies importing some unneeded knowledge of making rice orange, or reinforced lockdowns barring workers from tending to their crops. And so, using a spoon, I keep our rice bottom center on my plate, close to me. It smells like steam.

The viands exist on the same space as the rice, but each is positioned at designated areas surrounding it, equidistantly spaced but arranged according to preference—from most favorite to least—kept separate from the rice until I'm ready to mix together.

"Simutin mo 'yong kanin," Ma encourages gently. "Mahalaga ang bawat butil."

So I dive in, emerging only when I've eaten my fill, once the rice and the viand accompanying it have cascaded down my throat and into my stomach, helped down by a huge gulp of water. I am lucky in that I've never been truly hungry before.

Yet still, there is a persistent kind of hunger that remains unsatisfied.

This rice is safe, it is *approved*, even when a certain kind of people it sustains often never seems to be.