Abstract

"Red Hibiscus" recounts a young girl's childhood in Butuan City, revealing her sensory and carnal experiences to create a memoir of the body, of her own despair and rage growing up in a household of complex familial love and domestic violence. It charts the narrator's many griefs, starting from her loss of innocence as a child to her father's untimely death many years later, to show the ways that we come to terms with our own personal tragedies in order to live again.

Keywords

Grief, fatherhood, family, Butuan, death

RED HIBISCUS

ZEA ASIS

WHEN I WAS twenty, ten years after my father left our home in Barangay Libertad, Butuan, he was shot to death by ten armed and bonneted men. Their identities remain unknown to my family and the local authorities, who have been investigating the incident since 2018.

He was driving on a crisp and placid Easter Sunday morning to his twenty-three-year-old mistress and their three-month-old baby boy when the men fired bullets on his white Suzuki mini pickup, which I can still imagine myself riding even to this day: the engine's dull respiration, the sharp smell of car cleaner, me onboard as he picked me up from elementary school.

One witness said the men wore fatigue uniforms. My father was fifty-seven years old, six feet tall, hands calloused from manual work as a gunsmith. It was his brief stint in the firing range and Sundays out bird-hunting with friends that encouraged him to pursue this line of work. He had men from Cebu walk him through the technology before he opened his business, Metal Legacy, at the back of our house. Large drums

of chemicals would be stored in a shed; heavy, compact tools in shades of red, blue, and yellow would be assembled on a long table. And then at fifty-four, he became a farmer and had a small house by the farm in Purok 10, Barangay Bit-os. They say he grew mango trees.

I would imagine his white pickup truck settled under the shade of an old molave tree in the mountains where his farm was, tended now by some distant relative. Maybe my father rose before dawn, reclined on a wooden chair, and smoked a cigarette. Taking care of mango trees required deep attention, and perhaps he divided his time between collecting fresh mango pits, slitting the hard husks, and planting them above the soil surface. He pruned the leaves of fully grown trees to remove weak stems and encourage the mangoes to bear fruit in the hot season. When it came to farming, he understood the fragile balance between brute force and tenderness.

Recovered from the crime scene were:

six (6) .45 caliber fired cartridge cases
two (2) .40 caliber fired cartridge cases
three (3) pieces deformed slugs
one (1) piece .30 caliber fired cartridge case

These are rote facts, written concisely in the report by the police senior inspector on the case at the time, but the image that burns in my head is the one that I heard from my Uncle Jojo, my father's brother. Not my father's bloodshot eyes. Not his crooked teeth. Not his thinning white hair. What I remember now, which was not written in the report, is that his lifeless body was discovered on a hill, a stone's throw away from his farmhouse, five gunshot wounds to his chest, rough hands clutching the Bermuda grass, him biting his tongue. "Gi agwanta gyud siguro niya ang sakit kay nakakumot ang iyang kamot"—his hands were clenched in pain, rigid like rocks. These were the same hands that, on some nights, brushed knotted strands of my wet hair into neat black strings.

Uncle Jojo said that to us—that is, to me and my cousins—when we were gathered in my Lola Mila's shack during a brief respite from the mortuary, sitting near her Chinese cotton duster dresses neatly lined in one row condensed with the odor of Tiger balm red ointment—wooden vanity crowded with memorabilia. She cried during the service, calling his name over and over: "Junjunjunjunjunjunjunjun"

between sharp intakes of breath, among a picture of him above his closed coffin, the minister, and wreaths of white lilies. She died a few months after we had lain my father's casket to the ground and flown back to Manila.

The violence was not new to me—the violence I learned to comprehend only years after I left Butuan. But the kind of pain that robbed him of his life—the image of him frozen in that grotesque tableau—is what continues to haunt me in silent moments in the city when I try to remember his face, his last few moments. I know now that there will be things about my father that will continue to evade my understanding, no matter the stories that were told to me by my *titos*, *titas*, cousins, and cousins' husbands who were with him during his last years.

Everything—the sharp analgesic smell, the pained diction of remembering, those words—remains fixed. But I have slipped away and am still slipping away from the life I woke up to every single day as a young girl. When I moved to Manila, I remember how my body was stripped of its metaphysical weight, heady over the sensations brought by its new levity and exposure, dressing old wounds and soaking up the temperament of a new city and its people. And yet, these old wounds would reopen over and over, despite the resolve to bury them deep — puny, inconsequential deaths — and would take on a life of their own and tarry by way of memories.

I remembered.

In my girlhood, there were some nights that I would wake to the sound of my father banging on the screen door at the back of our house that led directly to the kitchen. Intoxicated, he'd call on my mother a few times, uttering each syllable of her name with a thick, grim drawl.

Precy!

My mother would have me transfer to the empty room before letting my father in. I'd hear the click of the bedroom lock before she slid next to me under the blankets, and only then would I allow my drifting mind to go under again. She'd keep me close to her. I didn't mind that they slept on separate beds.

My father possessed a coldness that not even she could protect me from. The very sound of his footsteps seemed tyrannical, the set of his mouth arrogant and mean, his broad, hard body a border—quite consciously, a cruel indulgence in its masculine authority—built between

me and whatever joy or lightness was supposed to be native to a child my age.

Once, I was doing English homework on the living room floor when I ran into a word the meaning of which I didn't know. The actual word doesn't matter anymore; it could have been *prairie, warmth, chestnuts*—foreign words I didn't learn growing up unlike the names of our garden flowers. I had a purple *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary for Kids* that my mother had picked out for me at a bookstore in Cagayan de Oro years ago. With hesitance and a turbid sense of fear, I carried the thick book and approached him, "Papa, could I get some help using the dictionary, please?"

His gaze shifted from the table and burned me with its glaring display of mockery. "Di ka kabalo mu gamit ug diksiyonaryo? Ka bulok na ba nimo?"

I surrendered. The feeling of thick card stock in my hands mingled with another feeling in my memory. The matter-of-fact whip of that word, *bulok, bulok, bulok*—I was, in fact, stupid. To him, I lacked the intelligence my friends from elementary school possessed. He made sure I knew it. But even then, there were many moments I strived to get his approval. *The daughter possesses an unconscious desire to replace her mother*, a psychology professor would say years later in one of my classes in Manila. I was a slight, apprehensive sophomore psychology student who would go to the Cinemalaya Festival at the theater along Roxas Boulevard with some friends and buy secondhand leather shoes and blazers at Makati Cinema Square. I was, in fact, trying to make sense of myself through a Freudian lens.

Then, with not much warning, he would be a good father to me, cracking a joke or cooking a thoughtful meal. I would feel the sweetness of his Earth, Wind & Fire CDs playing in the stereo at night, often wondering, when I looked outside our bedroom window, about his thoughts sitting alone on a wooden chair by the potted plants in our backyard at dawn. I learned how the forms of love might be maintained with the people that hurt and scared you, a love that was in fact measured and disciplined because you had to survive.

When I read in the police report that he managed to run six hundred meters before the assassins caught up with him, that was what I expected. After he died, whenever I told people about my father, I always stressed his strength, his self-sufficiency. He worked with guns all day, watered

the garden at sunrise, and watched every show on Discovery Channel until sleep took over. He carried a pocketknife and could tell you about the different endemic game birds in Mount Mayapay.

There was a time I believed my parents to be in love. There were moments when I woke up in the middle of the night to whispers of sex—my mother's underwear and my father's cotton shirt littered on the tiled floor—when the three of us still slept in the same bed. But these moments of fervid secrecy, what I began to perceive as a young girl as the wicked rhythms of my own life, eventually gave way to explosions of violence. It reminded me of the red gumamela flowers that bloomed for a day or two in our lawn, disconcerting as I played alongside them in the grass, the way their stigmas protruded in the wind, the petals like ruptured tissue.

We made a whole enterprise of contorting our bodies during the summer, my friends and I: doing cartwheels, handstands, splits, and backbends. Perfecting our gymnastics seemed like a worthy endeavor. My friends Chi-Chi and Cho-Cho and I explored the many limitations of our bodies, unwary of the corresponding hazards that would befall us much to our chagrin the day after; sometimes we'd fall face first on the grass, bruise our delicate limbs.

When we weren't in my backyard, we slipped in and out of each other's houses in Emily Homes until our rubber slippers became crusted with dirt. Our subdivision straddled the end of Barangays Libertad and Bancasi, where you had to get through the disorder of jeepney and pedicab stations and a cluster of family-owned grocery stores and vegetable and fruit vendors who set up their stalls by the side of the road. The one who lived next door to me was Cho-Cho and the Garcias and Mendozas, the mother's side of her family, while a few ways down the intersection were the Bautistas, Chi-Chi's family.

There is a photo of the three of us on my seventh birthday. Perhaps it was one of those summers that come so vividly to me even now. We were all dressed in variations of denim skirts: Mine was pink, sewn with embroidered floral appliqué; Chi-Chi had on a darker shade, with diagonal streaks of acid-wash; and Cho-Cho was in a tight light-washed mini. What's startling to me is how identical we looked, Tres Marias wearing ankle-high boots, with silky shoulder-length black hair that shone in the afternoon May light. There was nothing obvious that set us apart.

The three of us loitered the unpaved roads, made necklaces out of the red santan flowers we pulled from shrubs that bordered the narrow canals

along our houses. Some other days, we pretended to be market vendors preparing stews from the overgrowth. We chased darting damselflies and built terrariums out of Nature's Spring water bottles. The ecosystem of shrubs, weeds, and moss intrigued our young minds endlessly.

On most days, I remember, during warmer days in the summer, that I would wake up early in the morning, get dressed, and leave my house to go straight to Chi-Chi's house. Her mother, Tita Josefina, was a home economics teacher for the barangay elementary school, who often baked a compendium of tarts and cakes in the kitchen for hours while wearing her white apron. Wafts of butter and sugar tranquilized me. Chi-Chi's father was a seafarer who covered the fixture in their rooms with a veneer of palpable absence. There were framed photos of him on an ornate narra credenza in the living room, and his maritime school diploma hung above the headboard in the master bedroom. Once, I had asked, "Kanus-a mo balik imong papa, Chi?" and she burst out crying, ending our play abruptly. I had to go back to my own home, sullen and confused. Her burst of emotion seemed uncalled for. I felt a sharp disgust. In my world, children sometimes had access to resentment concerning adults. The long limbs, the towering gaze, the bloated power. By rights, children like us should have sprung up free, to live a new, superior kind of life, and not be caught in the snares of miserable grown-ups.

We attended Flores de Mayo catechism classes every Saturday afternoon in the parish church and brought flowers that we plucked from the bushes at the side of the road. The volunteer, a motherly gray-haired woman in her fifties who liked to wear floral dresses hemmed with lace, introduced us to Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, who bore the task of conceiving him because she was born free from the original sin committed by Adam and Eve. I thought a lot about what sin was at that time. I memorized the Ten Commandments but felt the world of sin beyond me as a child. I felt a strong sense that sin was entirely the territory of our mothers and fathers—their secret lives, their absence.

Our flowers were offered before a statue of the Virgin Mary. After praying the Hail Mary, we linked arms and skipped home chanting the Mysteries of the Rosary.

"Joyful! Luminous! Sorrowful! Glorious!"
"Joyful! Luminous! Sorrowful! Glorious!"
"Joyful! Luminous! Sorrowful! Glorious!"

Cho-Cho was the oldest among us, three years ahead. Accompanying many changes that adolescence brought, she put her body readily on display for the boys in the neighborhood to see—or that's what we figured she did at the time. The three of us liked to wear shorts when we played, but Cho-Cho's body was already straining against her clothes to suggest convexity.

It seemed despicable to us, considering what everyone said about her family, that Cho-Cho's mother was a *japayuki*. *Igat na kaayo ka*, we used to say, and confronted her out of spite by saying, "You're becoming just like your mother," or, "It's not very Mother Mary of you." I don't think I really said all this. Perhaps I heard Tita Joan, who owned the *tindahan* across the street, say this on some afternoons as Chi-Chi and I sipped Coke from plastic bags while waiting for Cho-Cho. Hearing her say those words, I must have assumed them as my own. I don't think I came to act and say all those because I had an inherent sense of right and wrong, nor were my thoughts the mingling of parish teachings. I had only feared what I knew was Cho-Cho's eventual growing away from us, relinquishing her loyalties to the Tres Marias for the blossoming awareness of her own adolescence. She seemed unbothered by our scathing remarks. Determined to make her feel guilty for the natural developments of her body, Chi-Chi and I decided to break the friendship first, telling her she could no longer be part of our group. We didn't see her for weeks after that.

I could sense that my own nature was growing like a prickly pineapple—but slowly and secretly, acerbity and fear overlapping, to make something hateful even to myself.

My parents got married on a September day in 1985. There is a photo of them on their wedding day, just as they were about to leave the Holy Redeemer Church in their red Toyota Corolla with red seat cushions. My mother wore a ruffled knee-length cotton dress, while my father had on a sheer long-sleeved button-down, like a *barong* without the delicate embroidery, and gray slacks. My mother's face in particular struck me because of its graceful tension, like that of a fallow doe. Her eyes looked like delicate marbles, roofed in by long lashes, framing an elongated nose that rounded out perfectly at the tip.

They were both looking at something, not directly at the camera, but perhaps at my grandmother making last-minute reminders before the reception. Did my mother then have her doubts? Was she already gazing at the camera, and out at the world, like a hunted mammal in a clearing?

And was it inevitable, what happened to her on that wrteched Sunday morning?

The red splatter that covered every inch of the room; the sharp cry that hardened and persisted until my mother was taken to the hospital; the room that our housemaids and I were left to clean; the metallic odor that stuck to the walls even weeks after it happened. How could this happen—on a day when all the children in the neighborhood went to church with their mothers and fathers? When I had just gone to buy hot *pandesal* from the house by the end of the street? When I had offered flowers every day in May?

Mama!

I was overcome with so much anger that I wanted my father dead at that moment. There was a final moment when their voices were raised, and then silence. The bay between violence and pain. The heeled leather boot, the one that my father had used to strike my mother's head, that until then was just part of my mother's uniform. After what happened, it transformed to show malice, leering with its treachery.

After she was finally asleep, sedated with painkillers, Cho-Cho rattled the cans connected by a thread that ran over the wall between our houses. I remember this most of all, the events that preceded a blur. We spoke like this on some days. It was a starless night, the grass damp from light rain.

Gi dala daw imong mama sa hospital? Her soft voice made its way down and alighted in my ears. I realized that like them, I also had a reason to cry. And so I let out a faint muffled sob in the empty garden.

Weeks after that Sunday, my older sister came back from Manila. It could have been her semestral break, or she could have taken an emergency leave after hearing about what happened to my mother, but either way, she was suddenly there. Her presence was a relief because it suggested order, a respite from nights of fury. She brought some sense and dignity into a household full of malaise and scarring hearts. One day—when my mother was asleep, as I usually was too in the afternoon, and regaining health—I woke up to the sound of my sister and father having a faint conversation in the backyard. Her back was turned against me, and in front of her was our father's hunched shoulders, face out of sight.

Days after, my father drove away in his white Suzuki pickup truck to live with his mother, Lola Mila. I put two and two together, concluding my sister played a hand in his departure. His closet was emptied out;

the backyard turned bare except for the potted plants he did not think to bring along with him.

Once in college, my sister spoke to me about that particular time in our lives. She presented our father with a choice, but I also think now that my sister might have pleaded for him to leave. He resigned himself to the consequences of his actions in a form of self-exile. Whether it was a selfish choice or because he understood himself to have none, I want to believe that in his final years, he tried to love us in the way we would let him.

When new friends learn of my father's death, they say sorry. I forget how we come to the subject, but we do, while looking at exhibit pieces at a small gallery or walking to get coffee at a nearby café. I wasn't that close to him anyway, I tell them. In 2016, I started coming back to Butuan for Christmas. My mother always suggested I see him for dinner, but I never did. Instead, he passed by without a fuss, leaving a few bills for me on the kitchen countertop, sometimes a basket of bright-yellow mangoes. If then I thought nothing of it, now I think of that gesture over and over again, and I let something like grief take me back, if only for a moment.