



**The Violence of Waiting and Other Fairy Tales**

A Collection of Poems

*Miguel Alejandro A. Silan | 2020*

I wanted to get these out before I grew too old for the particular brand of millennial misery poems. Maybe later on I'll call it the lost days. And maybe even later I'll just call it by the names of the journeys it took to survive.

This series is a mixture of both Millennial Misery, biblical brimstones, and other fairy tales. Originally, I was going to write two collections: *The Violence of Waiting* and *Fairy Tales and Other Stories About Love*, but life happens. And besides, who was it that said grief, magic, joy and alchemy exist in the world at the same exact moments? All the strongest, most powerful stories are fairy tales - even then, they knew what it took to have a good apocalypse.

This is an ode to my early twenties.

**Edit September 23, 2022:** Three years ago, I said I would put this out into the world, before I became too old for it. Then again two years ago, and then again a year ago. Blink and so much life happens. Aside from my original poems, I attach here three letters from a series of postcards I've written to a close confidant. We wanted to publish an epistolary, something along the lines of "Best, : An Oral History of the Pandemic in the Philippines". So now I treat them as excerpts, as borrowings from the future. A reminder that life happens. Once, a friend told me "If I were to be a reminder, let me be a gentle one". I always told her I would steal that one from her.

This edit is an ode to life, even during apocalypses.

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## bed dust spectacle

lie in this  
quiet dust spectacle  
watch the corner  
left blue curtain

so of course  
my bed undone, unmade, unholy

so of course  
self-medicate; and so I slept for 12 hours  
and 14 hours more and laid  
like starfishes without bones, like constellation stripped of myth:  
what is left when all our stories abandon us?  
maybe rhetorical questions  
maybe the vague pain of obscure sorrows  
maybe nothing, only slow, constant ticking:  
there is no dust in dim rooms

aren't you tired of being []  
and so you promised your prayers  
as good as promises can be; drunk, alone, in some make-shift altar made of  
old bottles & flimsy conversations

lord heal me, lord make me holy, lord i'm sorry  
some nights i still pray for biblical floods  
to come sweep me away  
                                some place where the four horsemen themselves  
                                wont stop me from digging inside my chest  
                                & find my whittled heart  
                                inside ribs beside forgotten epics  
have us a sharpie; god if you lost them on the 9th day i'll draw my own  
starlight  
i just need to wake up  
just need to remember when i began being terrified of sleeping  
if we fall in our dreams it means that angels still crave to fly long  
after their wings were cut  
that is to say screaming is a proof that your heart is still beating

wake up to find no floods  
only the version of hell  
where blankets are  
too warm, too warm, too warm  
yet we remain unmoving  
praying in this  
quiet dust spectacle

## The Flood

This is what I know of forgetting  
like sluggish rain  
On mud, on palms, on spaces between fingers that have long forgotten wishes

This is the water I know  
Apré moi la deluge  
Flood is an old friend; a family  
heirloom haunting generations  
We never knew to distinguish jewels from sea monsters

Maybe waves were beautiful  
Lolo tells of an old love  
And no matter the wreckage  
wooden planks and iron  
It was an ocean song, not lullaby; not hammocks and sputtering

There are caverns under water  
there are rivers in those caves  
a kayak boat adventure  
to nowhere and mountain hearts

The storm stops for no one  
except old gods and temple cats;  
there is mud on the palms, on the scalp  
on hands used to grip wooden planks on flooded streets  
terror is an old friend

But this is what I know of forgetting

That dreams become amnesia  
and amnesia become myths  
And these prose,  
    so beloved,  
are all eventually cannibalized

**i didn't talk today except to scream**

confession: i make speeches about survival & failure to an imaginary audience  
in my mind every time I feel down

when my head is unsorted in a few different ways & trauma is a looking  
glass away

here's what you need to know of failure, i'd say  
things i wish someone told me when i faced them  
& they'd listen with rapt attention

which of course means i'd have survived  
which of course means i didn't die within now and healing

next year we'll be even older versions of ourselves  
maybe then we'll stop inadvertently dissolving along sidewalks  
or drown in small places like the 3rd 12 oz cup coffee  
for those who died so young, we dreamed so big

and between where we are & where we want to be is the harder place to be  
i am growing and i am not afraid of my skin  
a face mask can cover so much  
and sometimes fresh bedsheets & pastel highlighters are the only things that  
keep you going  
its okay, its fine; it needs to be

count our happy days  
ones where we don't fall on our feet  
count restful nights  
when we put a little more distance between hurting  
and try not to loath remembering when we started counting  
its okay, its fine; one step then another

so made my ugly part of me, made incorrigible  
made the disquiet my heartbeat, my drumming chest and war cry  
go on, go on, go on, don't inherit the status quo  
and when we get there make it a more humane more beautiful place

and i dont know if i'm the little parts of me or the noblest ones  
should i count my mistakes or only the growth afterwards?

all of this to say  
i think  
i can be forgiven  
if  
i didn't talk today except to scream

Well, have you?

Lady in the corner store asks me if  
I've heard the good news

Its turning 20 fucking 20, yes I could use  
some good news

Beneath the city's canals the president's  
security roam she said  
the celebrities who died they turn into lizard  
minotaurs

Wondered how long its been since she took  
a bath; matted hair, greasy skin  
wonder what she thinks in her lucid  
moments  
and  
were there any, how few were left

Is that the good news?

Newspapers by their duty should report the  
news, and the news by its nature should be  
true

Does the president's men know how many  
have died in pursuit of the good, the true  
and the beautiful?

Give me beautiful news then; not the true  
ones, not the good ones  
; in the smokesides they don't exist  
streets---corners---stores  
a march of singular tragedies

and the lady sings the blues so well

Well then

Have you heard of the true news? 6 farmers  
were brutally killed yesterday for defending  
their lands  
Have you heard of the good news? He will  
rise again to judge the living and the dead  
But have you heard of the beautiful news?  
Have you heard of the beauty?  
Have you heard the news?

## Untitled

All we have is our inheritance,  
this grief

We needed to do something important; so we plunged into the earth headfirst  
saw dirt and forgotten gods  
saw all the revolutions that could have been, but didnt  
what is there to weep for  
but all of this

Once there were lemons in the garden;  
once we wanted to be larger than timespace both  
and when the fishes in the pond died we held a funeral for their legacy

There are rocks, there are steps  
and if you're lucky, the pitcher beneath the papaya tree  
my mother held me once, in the duyan out the front lawn  
and once as kids we made the dried flowers fly high  
local little tornadoes, sunlight, an alchemist's breeze

Sorry, I promised to write words of happiness  
and someone once said all the world's joy and  
all the world's grief happen  
in the same exact moments  
and  
we can't be larger than both

## Along the Forest Path - A Fairy Tale

i.) The only way to find the lands of magic is to be lost. It is neither fair nor unfair, but this truth, weighed with gold, took the blood of two forgotten tribes to know.

ii.) You will see a cane, orchid-like spiral of a plant, leaves wrapped upon itself like scales. It wasn't always a messenger. It is now. Forwards is the faerie, far backwards, beyond the hills, across the path is the screaming match you've always wanted to escape from. It has always been inevitable.

iii.) If you look up you will see an island up on a tree. Indeed, several islands on several trees. The shadows are not eyes. They are not several eyes. Do not ask who lives there. You cannot climb the tree. Do not climb the tree.

iv.) If you see a fellow traveler say good day. Do not sound cheerful, do not sound somber, hunch your shoulder and tut with your walking stick. Keep walking forward.

v.) Wear a long sleeved shirt and high socks to prevent the sting of insects. Watch out for those that hiss. Keep your stance low and your steps sure-footed. In the sea of feather grass, hold your chin up.

vi.) You will arrive at the crossroads. To the right is the cliffs with the red dust, there will be nuggets of jade for the picking, scratched parchment, shreds of your mother's 3rd favorite dress.

vi.) Up forward is a trail with more trees, each leaf less green than the last until all there is are shadow dark branches. There will be a ramshackle hardwood hut. No one lives there now. No one has lived there for quite some time. Do not sleep. There is a fig in the crooked corner if you smash it with a hunting knife. If you are hungry, you can eat it. Do not sleep.

vi.)

vii.) There will be a stream; it has existed since the dawn of time. You can drink from it. It will taste like five years ago. Wash your face. The gleaming shades of the waterfalls come two weeks from now. Rest your tired feet. There will be an ocean behind a three-pronged rock. Make sure to check for tiny leeches.

viii.) Continue climbing up, this mountain was once called human dignity

ix.) In the heat you will imagine that the villages you're from are burnt, that the smoke will race the mountain, that your shame and the guilt dissolve into fear and cavernous desperation. This is not true. There are no soldiers after you. Do not lift the mudcaked boot on the pathway. Pet the mandrake bulb, it will be years before it screams. Use your walking stick to shield against the low hanging foliage.

x.) Take your time at the peak. See the majesty. See the inconsequences. Feel the kiss of the wind from the first age of the world, before the constellations hung themselves up to dry. To shine.

ix.) Go forward and down, all places eventually lead back home when you're lost



viii.) This is not the truth per se. But lola have always sacrificed two chickens every time the moon waned. Has bargained against certain deities to keep certain truths true. There are just so many ways to survive.

vii.) Hug the rocky cliffside. Do not look down. Think of how small your feet is that you can walk side ways. The wind will not blow you away. Tears were never stopped anyone from falling.

vi.) Be careful of the thornbush with hair. Step on grass to avoid mud. Sing your little song; the notes here carry far.

v.) You will see a horse with an odd spine. She sells in the local Sunday market. You will not recognize her. Do not say hi. Try not to look her in the eye, try not to notice the quivering bumps in the skin, the patchy hair, the worms.

iv.) It is only a log, cross it. You will not die if you fall, only drown, only drift, only snatch what's not essential, and then what is. You can sit and amble forward. You can splay your hands. Whatever you do, and however you do it, cross the log. Fear doesn't change the seasons, it's the sun with the human heart, the moon with her ritual blood.

iii.) Walk forward, note the thinning of the trees. Feed the stray dogs, allow the children of the forest to climb molehills, grasp grass, dance in circles. Say your daily dalliances. See a weathered cane, orchid spiral of a plant with brown withered leaves.

ii.) Close your eyes. Wear your clothes on the flipside. Click your heels against the ground, on the red, on the memories smoshed out, on inconsequences and delirium, feel the sweat, the heat, the notes that have circled back from a far far ramshackle hut, the slight twinkling wind.

i.) Open your eyes, Find yourself behind a wooden stall, move aside for the harried customer, buy your choice of meats, tsokolate, pastries. Exit the village wet market on the edge of the woods.

## 2nd Hand Cheap Beer

i dont drink

&

i intimately know the taste of 2nd hand cheap beer

passed like pillowtalk promise

from lips against lips

on cold cold nights when we needed everything to be fine

picture us in dark alleys, polaroid imperfect. you said you couldn't sleep

we fucked and pretended it was wordly

enjoying streetlights; soft yellows on just drenched urbanity only

so we can put it down on poems when all

this stops hurting

we were live wires

&

maybe the rumors about me were true

but isn't there beauty in old flames? the same ones in brilliant starlight  
from long dead stars

you'd laugh wouldn't you: fuck banality

so staunchly said above that stupid salad without dressing

well, fuck many others things, i thought. & we did

okay so we were car crash we

were broken champagne glasses were

two toy soldiers- kings of our respective hills

well this is as good place as any, i guess

blow me one last kiss baby

&

i promise i wont keep it



### An Affront to Grammar

As if formality was the same as objectivity, and objectivity the same as  
generativity  
as if constant, unchanging; as if eyes didn't -by the act of existing- change  
mountains, made oceans warmer, made skin supple, pleasant to the touch.

As if good, as if put together, as if blindness gave you the cosmos trapped  
inside the eyesockets.

As if loneliness - frustration bubbled, but also outward  
As if always; this.

And so what and even if, and what now. And the world revolves, and the stars  
gather and dance, and the existences exist.

Fade into the night but gracefully. But and also. Rage, rage, the world is  
not done with you yet.

and still, but still, and sometimes

there is no healing here,  
but  
pride is not the worst of sins

im still searching for good poetry on bad days  
for  
beauty in  
the deep uncertainty  
of an honest pain of the common struggle

## Creation Story

This is my creation story

How god made mud  
How god cooked earth, and the people within it  
How god washed the pot, and the water from the first day came flooding

And he sent witches to plant guava seeds  
snake skins hung above tree branches  
Let paradise be jungle, be nakedness  
be a hollow brain and a flaming sword

And in the third day god tossed the pale man, and god crushed the dusky woman  
and on forth rose malakas and maganda and they were  
just right

On the seventh day everyone rested, even the bamboos didn't bow  
the deluge had long since dried up; the arc anchored high on the sister  
mountains

Lola says those were the hungry days  
That they didn't even have the energy to mourn as they butchered  
the colorful starving bird that came from eight oceans away  
There was nothing original about the sin; put it on the list  
ink it on our pockmarked faces  
drumbeat, warcry, hunt for whatever needs hunting

So I died, & I ascended, & I came back to life again  
Or we died or we ascended or or or  
Dinner plates are just like cave boulders  
and we've long since stopped waiting for the miracles inside of it  
The only begotten son was the prodigal one  
& we still free his spot every honoring season, just in case

They say  
below the earth there is no god of paper, no god of boys or boiled water  
They say this island was  
made of giantess  
her veins became these rivers  
her breasts these hills, her cells the ash on our firstborn daughters

On the ninth day god lost starlight  
and the witches noticed the moon go dim  
So tidal surge; so midnight floods; so a thousand, four-hundred and fifty-  
three dead  
and the giant goldfish in the river stayed very very still

There is a passage beneath old pages, even beneath decaying barks:  
They say you only need two knives  
one to crack the ribs open

and the other  
to spear and severe

Take the heart of a star  
whisper a blessing to the wild thing  
dip in the cold ocean moon

Then when everything hangs still, hangs right  
take the silent prayer, let loose the tribal cry  
and as the dawn breaks, let there be light

And there was light

## FRAGMENTS

- i. At the end of days, we count our dinner plates  
both broken & not; dig little holes & fill it with mud  
This is all there is to saving: brimstone, salt, a laundry list of judgment
- ii. That is to ask: what is the weight of a poem with no words?  
A poet describes the world exactly as it is not  
& a photographer does not capture things as they are  
but as one state in a thousand of unmeasured others  
& the act of measuring is the act of giving birth  
Some things exist for no other reason than immortality having never been true
- iii. Tonight I saw a giant jelly fish 25 lightyears long  
Odd, how many lifetimes it needed to take  
to get this cosmic rupture prettily framed  
in glossy science pages beneath blanket forts, star-eyed wonder.  
Wanted to stare longer  
& it felt like a long, long time to wake up
- iv. Some metaphors meander, some just curl up and die
- v. A friend drove me to a necropolis, city of the dead  
which, as tradition, was under the shadow of the valley  
They stared at us, old lady gatekeepers who kept their strength in their wrinkles,  
while we looked on at the burst of color, each coffin-house a different hue.  
Underneath a labyrinth, and in it the book of disquiet  
proclaiming  
the dead is saved, long live the dead
- vi. I had a dream yesterday, a prof who I didn't even have  
ragged barnyard room  
"are you worth the bed you burn on?"
- vii. There was a cove, a place fairytales go to be lost.  
Wanted to get away, so swam as far as I was able  
& the sea swallowed me whole  
Taught me how to properly drown: once then in measured doses
- viii. I have been unkind. but today I dreamed a good dream after a week of nightmares
- ix. I can't imagine what I'm waiting for, maybe judgment  
the crumpled earth, the halo,  
a long running scroll  
I plead only from first to fifth  
only to pride, & nothing more
- x. A hound runs to bite you,  
it comes in 3 days & a half,  
or 12 or 21  
Nothing to do but scream until it does  
Are we allowed this? to be terrified, when the void is vast & the morning trickles in at  
the most inconvenient times
- xi. No need to lecture me on how to survive the storm

**xii.** There is nothing holy about waiting for judgment  
only the long summer of uncertainty; screams of rational anxiety

I hold the dinner plate fragments in my hand; at the end of days there is the saved  
there is what comes after

we all die once on our way to salvation



## East of Eden

Just east of eden

()

just south of where we wanted to be  
just here and now and nowhere else

There is no age of innocence

We were there

west of east of eden  
god's directions in large billboard signs  
flashing lights, snakeskin

Empires fall as fast as they are able

We screamed each other out of paradise

no flaming sword, no snake  
just dinghy walls we swore we'd leave 3 years and 7 months ago  
the rug we christened with a baby's name

We were happy here, we made believe here, we made love exist out of rubble

this is the first miracle: to exist  
the third was to make something out of it  
Job & Solomon & Noah & on & on failed, so why shouldn't we

Just east of eden

a taxi ride, perfect streetlights  
some spare change

A koan:

If icarus falls, who falls with him?

## altar

and we have buried our promises  
in the maya tree on the abandoned churchyard  
broken wings sticking out of the loose  
soil

make the altar of bone,  
ribs of my mother, skull of the first pet i've cried for  
say 'hello', say 'how are you', say 'i dont know where to start its been too  
long but please dont hate me'

god  
loves us  
and in his wisdom  
buried us  
beneath the biblical floods

the bricks we made to look at the moon have crumpled  
the hut we made for ourselves unused  
the cicadas dance with unlaughing fireflies in the dark endless nights

our heart is a ship that once sailed the seven seas and we called it balangay  
rowed towards a promise; north star, until the waves of existence  
crashed us back to the flooded dirty streets  
in pieces of driftwood, cheap aluminium, hoarded dignity  
it is not enough to sputter. it is not enough to scream.

lolo tells of an old love  
and we have heard this tale a hundred times over  
we sigh but still  
we listen  
sometimes there's nothing left to do except take tradition and  
wrap it round our ribs hope  
the resulting hollowness resembles the butterfly who once landed at the  
tip of my brother's shoulder in the backyard beneath the papaya tree

our tongues have kept on wagging; and sometimes we even pray.

## green house miracle

Wanted the butterflies to land on me; so  
locked myself in the glass garden dome; so  
waited for a miracle even when i promised  
not to

Maybe the world collapsed around us and we  
didn't know; or  
maybe our knuckles bruised our eyes shut; so it  
wouldn't really matter where the apocalypse is

We burned the moon and called it sacrifice; we  
burned ourselves and called it love  
beyond redemption  
the secret is: a world ablaze still keeps on turning

It follows that any one body will keep on dancing; that  
the moon is the violence of waiting; that  
a butterfly will land on some small part of me; and  
when miracles finally run out we'll call it world's end

I wanted to make it out of here alive  
the sky was violet, the mountain a beautiful green; and  
we thought 'yes  
*this is a good place to run away from'*

## Three Different Letters – Snipped

### I.

It's not a wow! Haha it should be, by many accounts, a heartbreak - but I'm free!

Hunkering down and doing my (hopefully good) work, and calling what I know of alchemy to turn all these gnashing into gold, or whatever passes for gold

It was a Nat Geo photographer who once said to focus on the light and capture it. The shadows will take care of themselves

I think I will,

coffee when you're free!

...

### II.

Z.,

It's odd, it's not that I travel, it sometimes honestly feels like travel happens to me. I was asleep, I woke up and suddenly there was Singapore – in its wide Makati glory. The day before I flew out, a whole 12 hours' worth of flights was cancelled due to the storm, and I thought we too were going to get stranded. Well, a storm went and passed, and there I was in Singapore.

I told you I think, of the mini-spiral I had, looking at the map in the inn where we were staying. "You are here" it said. Where? Where was I supposed to be? Where I am, in the untarnished unglamorous look at life - [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Why does where we are depend so much on where we're going? Or at least how to feel about it. I am here apparently.

Maybe the Buddhists had it right – about the here and the now and the detachment from, well, the currents of attachment and desire for outcomes. Of all the different faiths' temples, the Buddhist ones I love most. Giant Buddhas. Gold leaves. Incense, and intricacy and chanting that seem to say *come, come, sit a while*. The national library was carpeted. As if being somehow in another temple. Peoples eyes lowered, hunched. Looking for something. Finding something.

In the trip, I think the happiest I've been was when I got honest for goodness lost in the neighborhood. Not himuot, not pleasurable, but happy. It's the kind of lost, that you shout out: "I AM LOST. THANK GOD". And so unlike the other losts in life – life directions, certainty of decision, the small quivering lostness in a dark drowning world. This was another species.

Trying to get lost again, I snuck out of a family itinerary (in Sentosa), schemed with my cousin who needed to go to the bank – and there I was, train-side, then street-side, then up all ways to the glass library. It's only later that I would think maybe what drew me to go to the National Library was I wanted, somehow, to look for wisdom. In the end the city didn't give me wisdom, but it did give me knowledge, I think trusting me to know what to do with it.

Was about to add more, about happiness, about alchemy, about love, light and community. Things I want to write more about. But this letter is a week too late, and a good addition would be too long to write. Note also, of how words encode a very specific instance of experience – how this letter made no mention of all those little things I trust you know I enjoyed, and need no further letters to validate – of Kopi C's and the wide, cool trains, and the hawker stalls and and and

Yours in the spirit of good coffee,

M.

### III.

p.s. don't let the letter fool you, I am sending this from a place of zen. The kind of zen you cultivate knowing you are growing up

living parts xi. & xii.

we have always us found beauty, found light, fairydust, decay of bloom  
we built here sunlight, flowered vines, comfort  
on towered peaks - near where eagles roost.  
we made home high above the crumbling ruins  
moss covered crypts, dust sprinkled secrets

the little horned monster kept the most bottom door and entrance  
kept us safe, even in dark moonlit nights  
one spent with bones and sleep's silence  
only to turn human each morning light

rapunzel, half-sister of the cousin of my grandma  
says i have everything i need up here  
and  
i am going down

--

(we made home of the lair under the foot of the mountain  
dug, dug deeper, painted to counter the damp, huddled in thick skins when the  
fog had seeped in the dawn, died in our sleeps

faced storms, let the dog who was wolf who was moon bark under the starlight.  
made fire when there was none. made rivers when the two great ones didn't  
suffice

rose, lived, recovered with the sun  
smiled, played melodies against the harsh mountain silence, made drinks from  
leaves and beans

we have always us found beauty, or and despite  
we have always us created home)

## Pandemic Postcard – Davao

An Excerpt from “Best, :An Oral History of the Pandemic in the Philippines”

Hello! I am writing this from Davao

Did you know airports can be empty but still chaotic? Well it can. I know we liken everything to movies these days, but you should have seen the military men inside the airport checking boarding passes! Or heard one man shouting, in the midst of a breakdown, I think because his negative RT-PCR test hasn't been released yet or he was somehow forced to buy another flight? But can't listen to the chicka! The military man is urging us on - 15 minutes to boarding! Davao! Davao!

So it was Ninoy Aquino Internal Airport, then Davao International Airport, then a quick breakfast in my tita's home, then a Zoom meeting, then my body crashing only to be woken up by a full blown karaoke with all my titas (have you ever karaoked so hard you sweat? Well, you can) and tight, tight hugs, then shrimps and crabs, then a literal floorful of what must have been one hundred ukay coats - each of my titas insisting I get one more for France. Then another Zoom meeting. Over the course of my weekend here in Davao we would have eaten three flavors of icecream, three flavors of cake (crème brûlée cake is to die for), 7 flavors of coffee and all flavors of chickahan. And grilled panga that I have been craving for months.

When out of survival mode, when forced to account for what the pandemic has robbed us, I always think of the rituals we couldn't do: rituals of grieving, rituals of transition, rituals of growth and celebration --- rituals of everyday living. But here in Davao, with a clan and four overgrown puppies, I can forget about the pandemic for a bit! I am happy!

You know how I said I haven't processed going to France yet? Well this little despedida of sorts is making it all real for me. One more month! The thing about imminent goodbyes is that you are forced to record every lasts: last this, last that, last hugs. I always wish these things would get better with age, but as our conversations have gone, I don't really think it does.

I am leaving tomorrow, back to Manila. And in another month, I am leaving for another timezone. But the other thing about imminent goodbyes is that it feels like an impossible reverse jenga: where and how do you stack together the excitement with the million things to prepare for an international move with the increasingly frequent, bittersweet pangs of goodbyes? How to make them co-exist without them gnawing off each other like four overgrown puppy siblings? I am happy, I'll be happy, I feel guilty, I refuse to feel guilty, I grew and made home here, I am off to a grand adventure, I am saying goodbye. A puppy licked my arm and I cradled it, and when it had its fill, I let it go.

In my next letter, I will kulit about everything else: our poverty project, my thoughts on memoirists and epistolaries, kuliting about your yoga and cebu trip preparations etc. But another airport for now - another slipseam transition.

Oh, I also forgot my wallet for the whole trip. Can you believe?

Yours, a traveler minus a wallet  
Migs

## Pandemic Postcard - November/December 2021

An Excerpt from "Best, :An Oral History of the Pandemic in the Philippines"

I'm writing this a week in [in France]!

First the end of a long procession. I joked to Hans (my PhD advisor), wouldn't it be funny if my airplane crashed? Imagine the whole drawn out whirlwind of a process for an international move only for me pass away immediately.

But there, on the car ride to the airport with my family, I fell asleep. And when I woke up, I was seeing the road signs for NAIA. I wanted time to stop then - the long procession didn't seem long enough for goodbyes I wanted to say - for everything I wanted to say. Soon enough, we were in the airport. You know what I remember most? The hugs. The way my brother said "miggy boy!" in a tone that fathers use to call out for lost sons. The way my sister cried. The hugs. So this was goodbye - so this is what you see at the end of a long procession.

I had a severe runner's knee (overuse injury) so I had to dose myself with painkillers and even then I walked with a limp. Two luggages, one leather bag, double masked skin taped to my face - and I was off.

So here is a list of misadventures,

- 1.) NAIA debated for one hour whether to let me in my flight
- 2.) So it was mission impossible, and a Turkish Airline spy had to trail me in the airport to know that I was still going to make it to boarding
- 3.) The big debate of whether to buy Turkish Delight in Istanbul airport
- 4.) The flight to Lyon, knees aching, realized the one cord I have for my phone stopped working so my two powerbanks is basically... useless. I remember feeling very guilty. I remember waking up and checking the airplane map to see I was so so far away from home
  - I remember the heartwarming warmth of well wishes and congratulations. I remember thinking of the people being happy for me, but those sad to see me go bore more weight. About the irony of that.
- 5.) Lyon airport: absolutely no where to charge my phone so bought a new cord
- 6.) The public transport system was a maze, had to circle and circle and circle (and check apps, and translate posters, and going on the wrong bus etc.) in the cold cold French November. After finally, after kilometers of circling in bad knees - I managed to find and pay for the right bus [I remember eating my ate's sandwiches while waiting in the cold, I remember thinking that love that sustains follows you across timezones, across continents]
- 7.) Fell asleep on the bus towards Grenoble, thinking - look at the pastures, it looks just like the Philippines
- 8.) Arriving in Grenoble, but my Airbnb landlord wasn't there when I showed up. I had to wait for two hours in the cold.

But then, eventually, a new home. A new home of sorts, a safe place for transition. But of course the misadventures continue

- 1.) Europe has these ugly, circular sockets that wasn't compatible with the Philippine plugs. Guess who had to coast by powerbanks for a whole weekend, and for all my electronics to die the night before going to the electronics store. Imagine me, in a new city, without a map, not speaking the local language, trying to find the right place...

- 2.) Just getting lost! Which is okay, but with a bad knee and the cold, suddenly seems like a marathon.
- 3.) 3 bank applications that rejected me
- 4.) Taking three wrong trains. Being so tired and hungry I ate my microwaved chicken bowl on the bed

Don't let the list fool you. I am adjusting nicely, all things considered. I buy pastries! And coffee! I have a fountain - my anchor for the city.

There's so much to say!

How it feels normal. How it's scary that it feels normal. No asking "why" or whether I deserve it. Just the feeling of "I am here". Which, if you made an international move as full of misadventures as this one - that feels like the parting of the red sea, or the ripping of an infant from the umbilical cord - feeling normal is an odd thing. I woke up and I was in France. I was looking at ivy coated buildings on my way to a bakery before going to work and it felt normal.

Of the people that I've met: a traveler who's been through so many countries, the director of ManyLabs Africa (and a friend), of a master's student who'll want to take up DJing after (man after my own heart) - of the many kindnesses of strangers as I navigate the community lost in translation. I feel like there's a sense of grace in this adventure.

I'm in an apartment, with a view of lush trees sloping across the mountain. Sometimes I walk around, and I get the feeling that I'm in this magic school that I was always (always always) daydreaming about. In this magic school, they would have an astronomy tower, it would overlook a lake, I would do well in my magical studies. Of course here, in the real world there's bureaucracy and miscommunication and wrong trains. And you must think me silly to romanticize this all: "oh, wait till the real world gets you!" but! for people like us who has seen so much of the ugliness of the world, who else really will romanticize our own lives? Don't worry the guilt is ever present: I am living in fairy tale town while my motherland sees the rise of the dictator's son.

I am on vacation. I buy my pastries. The list of the thousand of projects I am on is whispering to me to get back to them, but I hush them - today I am going to the Sunday's Market. The cathedral bells are ringing. Can you hear it? Resonating and clear

-----HIATUS HERE

I've been meaning to write and wrap this postcard up for several weekends now. Every weekend, in fact: I would say I would finally write it. Only! There's so much to say, so many thoughts, so many feelings - how to wrap them all up in pretty words?

I've written some on my phone notes:

- I bought a particular black coat, because a random big, burly security personnel said "magnifique" and in my great innocence, I believed him
- Sometimes, when freshly restarted, my phone would show the times sided by side:
  - 7:08 p.m.
  - 2:08 a.m. [Home]
- The traces of the past follow me here: alarm clocks with names of journeys I survived ("12:10 p.m. Take your antibiotics", "4:30 p.m., Exercise and walk"); the McDo app



urging me to buy pastillas, or brazos de mercedes. Don't they know I moved to a new country? Don't they know its a new chapter?

- I walk normally now - not bad for someone who used to dose himself with painkillers.

Also, I have a very silly confession: I still feel guilty. I still hear my kuya's tone. It's gotten better - my siblings are with my clan, in a new home of ours in Bukidnon, with family, laughter and community. You know, in a fit of melodrama, in a despedida with my high school friends - (we were all crying at one point), I said I couldn't leave them if they weren't happy. Were they happy? I won't leave if you're not. I need to know that the ones I left are happy. It's not very healthy, but that's me.

But yesterday, I giggled. I saw the majestic mountains peep out of the buildings on my way to the gym. I just giggled and giggled and giggled. I'm alive. The other day I bought coffee to go with my croissants and ate it while walking, and I thought, yes. I make fast friends these days - the other day I went to an english speaking meet up at a bar alone and left with 10 friends; and got them to party with me the next day. There's a whole wild story to this, which you should remind me to put in the next postcard. That and my ongoing cheese education

I'm rereading this postcard and my god, am I not melodramatic. So let me put some true lightness here: I love the work that I do, my advisor, the adventures, the moments I feel well and truly alive. Sometimes, sometimes, I feel like a version of me that younger me would have loved to know I became. I'm re-reading that sentence and I'm not sure if it rings very accurately, so let me try again: I feel like I am growing older well.

But now a special challenge: spending the holidays in a new country. I think I will be getting very drunk with a bunch of random people this Christmas. A holiday meant for families mean that the people without need to stick together. No matter if you know them or not. I'll also use the time these holidays to just really reflect and process everything that happened since the pandemic now that I'm nominally outside survival-mode.

I still have so much to say - but this is getting too long! And like the lifecycle of many manuscripts, you just need to say stop and push it out to the world. Ready or not.

Au revoir! I am writing this in a cafe, as I plan the days to the bar.

-M.

## Postcard – A Treatise on Happiness

An Excerpt from “Best, :An Oral History of the Pandemic in the Philippines”

Dearest ma’am C,

I hope this finds you still at the seaside, relaxed. I’ve written this postcard on a train, in a cafe, on a lakeside house, on a lunchtime walk back home, and in many other happy places. Listen, I was impulse buying a plant and I wish I could paint you a proper picture: imagine a potted plant on my arm, a paperbag with the promise of pain au chocolat, the majestic looming mountains peeking between pretty architecture, an ambling walk back to my place and all I could think was I feel alive.

You saw the pictures in my ig! My place is filled with sunlight. It overlooks the pretty heads of Grenoble’s city center buildings, it sees the Bastille fortress, and again the majestic mountains. You know that one scene in Interstellar that goes “those aren’t mountains, those are waves?” Well! It’s the flipside here: those mountains seem like giant waves, beautiful and looming, ready to crash into you if you blink the wrong way. I have my pastries and my coffee and fill myself with sunlight and gratitude.

Do you want to hear a cheesy thing? it also happens to be true. I think for the first time in my entire adult life, I have an uncomplicated relationship with happiness. And you know a secret? It takes bravery to be happy. I think growing up, people just assume that you’ll be happy or not. But! No one becomes accidentally happy. At the end of the day, you are the only one accountable for your own happiness, and for your own life’s meaning. These days I am a very active shaper of how I want my life to be. And I choose! Choose happiness, choose meaning – what projects to take on, which company I keep, and how I want to live this fickle little thing of a life. Maybe after 20 months of lockdown in Metro Manila (and the insane things we needed to do to survive), I feel like I owe it to myself somehow. I surround myself with laughter, as fiercely as I surround myself with passion when I was still in the Philippines.

And you know another character development arc? I’ve managed to decouple it from productivity. Productivity cycles up and down – and once upon a time, I would have only felt like I deserved the little happinesses I had if I were productive, and if I had done something, and could show the world something I was proud of. More insidiously (and I think this is a generation wide issue), the mentality is that one could only be happy if one reached the perfect version of one’s self. Once upon a time, I wished to exist as this saintly version of me: he would be soft-spoken, and thoughtful, and always kind and gracious. He wouldn’t even touch the floor, he would just hover around. But at the end of the day I am me. And I need to work with the ingredients I have. Isn’t that the point of alchemy? To turn the basest ingredients to something that shines? I’ve always wanted to be an alchemist. Maybe I am now, no hogwarts-letter needed. Did you know, I am seen as cool, and funny, and amiable and loved here in Grenoble? I am amused when people assume this is something I was born as. No, this version of myself is hard-fought. That took blood, and intention and purpose and years of cultivation for the things we wish existed in the world.

This isn’t superficial happiness. This happiness is hard fought. A Kalay-mate, a friend, a tireless activist and a good man, Chad Booc was murdered by the local militia a couple of months ago in Mindanao. With the grief and anger, I was thinking then – oh is this it, would I spiral now? Would I go back to my old habits that took misery as a given? But the thing is (and this took SO long to get at, years of processing and self-reflection) It’s always the case for progressives in countries such as ours that happiness is hard. There’s the ever present guilt, why do you deserve happiness and not so many others who face hunger and poverty and oppression? For an activist, every happiness must be met with guilt. its the constant humdrum of ‘do you really deserve this’ and ‘it doesn’t matter if i’m happy or not, just do what’s needed to make the world a better place’. But the thing is, the other end of the revolutionary struggle is this: life, happiness, community, love. Why deprive yourself of

those things while fighting the good fight? This is what we fight for in the first place! I don't think I can underscore that enough. It matters. This matters. Chad is dead, and the good fight lives on, and the world contains both the greatest sadness and joys at the same exact time.

I read back on our letters from my early twenties. Those were the lost days! I honor that part of the journey. Maybe as work stresses accumulate, as inevitable embarrassments and failures gets stitched, as this whole thing stops being a Big New Adventure and just Life, this relationship with happiness will change. Maybe not. Maybe I now have the tools, and maybe I have the wisdom to handle the next arcs better (I don't like the term 'better', is there a more appropriate word? with more purpose and intent?) the messy shapes of life's river.

When I was injured, in that year and a half of what was a mix between faerie and hell, on a tower with no elevator, in the middle of a pandemic, I read something that seemed to apply to me: the moment a fish is snatched out by an eagle suddenly he is out of the ocean, and sees the wide world, and for a moment, for the briefest moment he can see the wide expanse and world is filled with grace. I had this thinking then (magical thinking maybe, but who cares) that the injury saved me from something. Maybe this is what being saved looks like. I want to be a student of grace.

I eat my pastries and coffee, I do good work, hard work, work that matters, I wear these silly dashing coats, take trains to magical places, amble across cobblestones with cafe latte, call my family and clan, dance through night, surround myself with laughter, and people with great energy, I soak up sunlight and murmur my little morning gratitudes to the majestic mountains, and to the city, I chase moments when I feel well and truly alive. I am happy

Write to me the tales of the sea!

Yours always,  
M.