



WITHSTAND

# WITHSTAND

*Silakbo's 1<sup>st</sup> Chapbook for the Year 2018*

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## NOTES

"Invisible Weight" is a revision of the piece "A Borderline's Survival Kit", published by Monsterring Magazine in November 2017.

2. "Litany" first appeared in Plural Prose Journal Issue 6.

It was reposted on the Silakbo website in September 2017 with permission from the author. It is republished in this issue with permission from the author.

"Stop Please" was originally posted 26 November 2014 on Chino's blog *\_The Locovore\_*. It was reposted on the the Silakbo website in June 2016 with permission from the author. It is republished in this issue with permission from the author.

We cannot think of Silakbo's history without considering the world outside. In the past year, we've seen great strides in terms of mental health public awareness, discourse, and policy. 2018 has seen a major victory in the recently passed Mental Health Law. Public figures such as Kylie Verzosa and TJ Manotoc have come forward about their struggles with mental illness. Not everything was a victory, however: we lost inspiring celebrities to suicide, from Chester Bennington to Jonghyun. Off-color comments perpetuating mental health stigma have been made by public figures, as well.

In the past year, the mental health community has been bustling with activity, with each group in their own niche, and the youth at the forefront of advocacy movements. This is where we come in. I'd like to think that Silakbo, as an art and mental health publication and community by the Filipino youth, has also done substantial work at our three main goals: sharing stories and art in the context of mental health awareness, providing mental health information and education, and providing lay support projects relating to art and mental health. But beyond that, we've also built a home from the unlikely online community we've formed.

It's been a steep learning curve for us to figure each other out, but the heart of an advocacy lies in its members. Silakbo has now become a family, and while schedules and plans don't always coincide, we will always be there to support each other. The same goes for the mental health community at large: we are not only partners and collaborators but also friends and family.

Through stories and reactions, we have some idea of the impact of our advocacy. Friends and internet strangers have sought treatment because of the information and

# A Year of Silakbo

resources provided via Silakbo PH. People have reacted positively to having their art featured by us. On a personal level, I've sparked and enriched so many friendships through this, which I am endlessly thankful for.

Even writing this all down now, it's still hard to fathom that an entire year has passed doing all these mental health initiatives together; I've put so much of myself into it, but Silakbo is as much the community's as it is mine. Thank you for supporting Silakbo in all its iterations. There will always be room for improvement in the mental health sector, but even as advocates and non-professionals, we can make a difference. We will be able to keep going for as long as we call this home.

Onward and upward,

Rissa A. Coronel  
PRESIDENT AND FOUNDER



# A Tiny Window

Coping refers to how we adjust to stressful or difficult situations while still maintaining our well-being. This is simple enough to understand. What's tricky—especially for those who struggle with their mental health—is how to actually do it. This is always the trouble, isn't it? When you find yourself in a situation that cannot change itself to adapt to your needs, what do you do?

In the following pages are pieces that tackle the idea of coping, of living despite. Far from self-righteous sermons or self-help listicles to becoming the best you that you can be, what you'll find here are stories about self-harm, substance abuse, and suicidal ideation. You'll meet someone in desperate need of a friend, a dying dog, a creative that can't keep up. You'll find art about confinement and despair. You'll see the ugly ways we hurt ourselves and others in a misguided attempt to cope.

But you'll also read about finally getting it right. You'll discover two people who have allowed themselves to love in spite of their respective conditions, a girl who finally accepts her illness, and someone who finds meaning in the endless and mundane task of being alive.

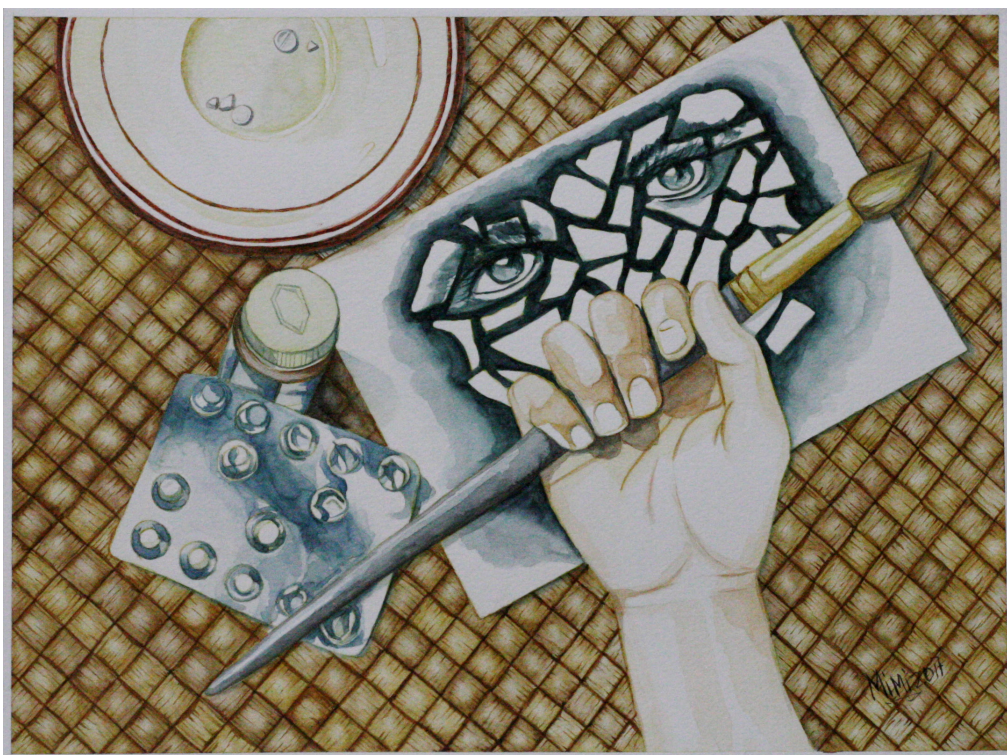


Many people have a hard time understanding what actually goes on in the minds of the mentally ill. I think this isn't only about ignorance but also how we seem to lack the capacity to empathize. We sometimes lack the imagination to think of people whose experience of the world are different from ours. I hope this chapbook, this tiny window into the minds of the people who contributed to it, lets you see the world from their eyes, even just a little bit. Even if it gets uncomfortable, try not to look away. That's how these stories and these people have been set aside. Allow yourself the discomfort. Perhaps from it will grow the empathy this world so needs.

While coping suggests one's personal task of adjusting to outside forces, let's also not forget what these outside forces are. The issue of mental health often emphasizes the internal, the emotional, the battle fought in the mind's psyche—all quite difficult to notice—that we sometimes forget that the environment we live in, our interpersonal relationships, the burden of historical and cultural formation also affect us. Far from self-evident, these forces, too, work in insidious ways. What we may believe is a given should be continuously questioned.

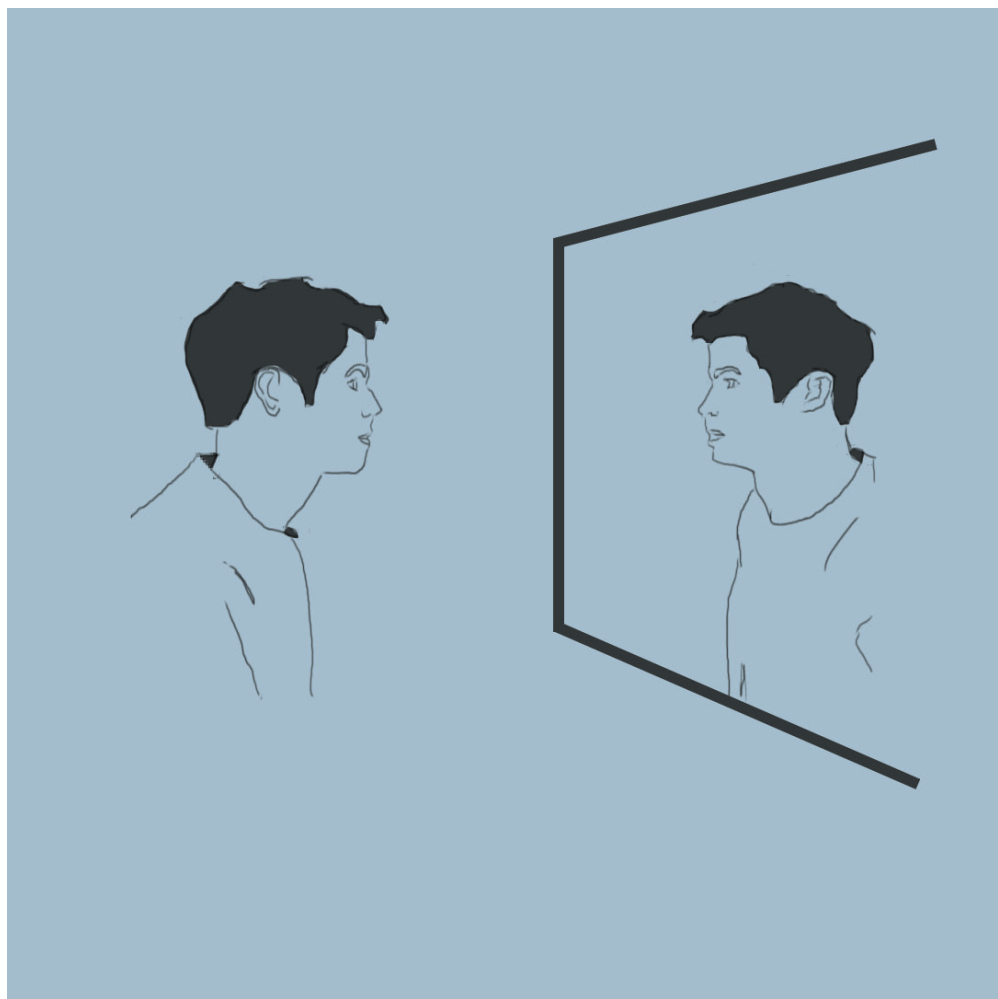
This first issue is about coping—coping with illness, coping with the needs of those we love, coping with the demands of our environment. But I would like to believe that we won't stop at simply adjusting to what I—or perhaps many—would consider an unfair, unjust, and cruel society. We'll change it. This, at least, is my hope, and the hope of the community we have formed through Silakbo.

Tracy Dela Cruz  
CONTENT EDITOR



**Banig Baliw**  
*Mary Ibisate*





**Boy in the Mirror**

# This is **not** depression

*by Ethan*

I won't call what I have as depression. Other people don't call it depression. They tell me depression isn't manageable. Mine still is. They tell me that what I'm feeling is simply part of growing up. Which I am. They tell me, "Don't make it hard for yourself," like I have full control over what I am feeling even though they don't understand the complexity of how I feel. Even I do not. However, I still want to tell you a part of my story, just to help me sort it out so I don't need to reiterate my answer to the most difficult question they have been asking: "Can you describe how you feel?" I'll explain my thoughts, with all that I can, without a word from the DSM. My condition isn't depression anyway. It's just a disordered state of mind.

When morning comes, I challenge myself to get up and go to school. I climb out of bed because I have to, not because I want to. Drinking my cup of coffee makes it all better because it tries to keep my mind active. I'm afraid that it will go blank early in the morning and conjure emotions not suitable during class hours.

I've cried in class before, and keeping the tears to myself is one of the hardest challenges I've done in school ever since. Actually, learning to smile and laugh when I'm not

okay would be on top of the list. Eventually, it became an automatic process. I manage to keep the cheerful person I am. Well, at least that's how I look like, and I guess that's enough.

The coffee finally kicks in. I get the energy to take a shower and prepare for the day.

I step out of my dorm room, feeling the anxiety creeping from my chest to my extremities. I try to brush it off. I try to suppress everything. It isn't that hard, especially since it has been my practice for years now. Nothing is new.

Everyday demands that I stay sane. Living with emotions that can drastically change in seconds, and a spirit that can die any time of the day, I've learned to construct my way through each morning and night with coffee, my earphones, and my playlist of songs from Disney and musicals. These things prevent me from falling into a downward spiral. I plug my ears with my earphones and somehow the noise is modulated. I play my first song, and then I smile. I begin

to sing. When no one is particularly near, I sing aloud with Rapunzel or Moana in my pitchy falsetto. Sometimes, I make gestures like I'm playing the drums when those intense interludes come in, like in songs from *Heathers* or *Rent*. I let the tunes rule my ears, silencing the world that isn't even talking to me. I'm trying to set up my own Neverland. Disney songs and musicals help me experience a world beyond the reality I hate by singing to me sentiments that resonate my own. It provides the sense of fantasy or a supplementary reality, without actually abandoning life itself. Sadly, I have to remove my earphones at some point and say goodbye to the dreamy imagery. Coming to class makes it impossible to retain that fairytale. Just then, it becomes another reason to hate my classes. Good thing it's cold in the classroom so I get the justification of wearing oversize hoodies.

In class, I do well, as most people tell me so. I recite. I get above average scores in most quizzes. I answer questions in detail. I help classmates who are having academic troubles. I'm an honor student. These things paint my picture as the epitome of a student others wish to be. Friends ask how can I handle academics so well and still be a laughing machine, a factory of ideas, and a shoulder to cry on. Sometimes I ask myself that, too. But at the end of each thought lies the fact that I'm struggling to keep these qualities despite the storm inside wrecking each part of me, one island of my personality at a time. I still have a few bits left, enough to keep me functional each day.



Depression literally means significant decline. I guess I'm not in that state yet. I smile. I laugh. I joke. I'm a good conversationalist. I'm polite. I'm passing my subjects. I'm not bedridden. I see this metaphor instead where I am floating over a deep crevice, but looking up to gaze at the clouds and skies. People then clamor for the divinity of levitation, ignoring the distance from the bottom of the fissure to the tip of my toes. I'm crucified over this notion, and my mind believes this lie. Sometimes, I'm grateful it does. Sometimes, I'm worried it might not.

Day ends and the best part of my 24 hours comes—the night.

At night, I get to be alone. I get to listen to my songs again. The solitude is comforting because no one is staring. No social convention of initiating conversations. No social pressure to be the happiest in the room. No demands to be my best form. No one is expecting something positive from me. At night, I can sigh heavily. Sometimes, it comes with tears. I've come to live with and recognize these emotions even without understanding how they work. Maybe I'm not experiencing sleepless nights, or drastically losing my weight, or failing all my subjects, but I know that there's something inside me which I cannot explain.

This is not depression; it's just a disorganization of the mind. It's a messy internal state with the fear of your own self. People say depression is a black slug enveloping you as each day of the two-week period unfolds. I don't get to experience that. At least, I don't consider it that way. But when I'm alone, and I can finally let all the guard down,

when I don't have to plug my ears with music, I can feel the weight sitting on my shoulders, down my back. Suddenly, all the smiles are gone, and the vibrancy of what today has brought all goes away. Exhaustion surfaces in my consciousness, and it's scary because I know what happens with that preface. I put back my earphones and play Disney at the loudest volume. I'll be fine now.

I turn to bed and I can feel something of me goes away. Ignore this and maybe after a month I will realize how much of myself I am losing. I realize that I don't write as often as I do, that I don't have the fanciest ideas to design gowns, or even to sketch a face as fine as I used to. All these just add to the frustration of how disorganized my mind could be. I'm a wilting tree losing all its leaves, but still remains a sturdy hardwood.

Yes, I'm undiagnosed. No, this is not depression. Maybe there are a thousand and one more ways to describe depression, but maybe this story doesn't fit between those anecdotes. I have a lot more to tell, especially when the frustration gets too physical. However, it doesn't matter. I'm fine, and tomorrow's going to be okay. I just don't know how long I can keep this up.



# Invisible Weight

*by Elizabeth Ruth Dayro*

Illustration by Jan Alaba

Ironically, if you want to stay alive, sometimes you have to jump off the edge.

You need something to believe in, but you're not left with many choices. When the only options are a rusting razor, a bottle of rum and three packs of cigarettes, reckless sex, and mind-altering medications that make you drug-dependent, which one do you pick?

I picked them all, just like how some people jump from one psychiatrist to another, trying as many brands of antidepressants as their bodies can take, in the hopes of finding the one that suits them best. Those were the worst five months of my life.

It started with self-harm. Non-suicidal self-injury was what mental health experts called it. When people see my right arm, a canvas of badly etched scars, they jump to the conclusion that they are from a suicide attempt, but I did not try to end my life. It was always hard to explain when they didn't want to hear the reasons in the first place. To me, self-harm served as a frail attempt to convert emotional pain into physical pain, something I know I can tolerate better. To others, self-harm



is a performance, a sad call for attention. I grew tired of explaining myself and realized that alcohol and nicotine were easier to hide. Drinking and smoking became a nightly regimen. I had to get myself drunk just to get through another night in that long stretch of depression.

Somewhere in between being sober and staying drunk, I did try to get better, but the first time I consulted a psychiatrist did not go as well as I hoped. I was misdiagnosed with major depressive disorder. The Rivotril worked for a few months or so, but then it lost effect. It was not enough to help me get through my illness. I stopped attending therapy when I decided to give up on myself. Not long after this failed attempt to get better, I slip into a long stretch of mania, drowning myself in hypersexuality, giving myself away to strangers, with no care whether I'd get infected and sick.

It was not the vices that got me hooked. It was the feeling of destroying myself slowly. Every time, right after doing the sordid things I'd soon regret, I always ended up feeling emptier than before, the temporary feeling of being visible and wanted fading too quickly. There was just something so addicting about hurting myself. It felt like the only thing I was good at.

My mother knew nothing about my self-destructive behavior other than the scars, which were too noticeable to even try to hide, but she encouraged me to see another psychiatrist. It was then that I was treated for bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder (BPD). I have been making progress, at the expense of being dependent on Lamotrigine and Quetiapine. When I miss a dose, I suffer from too many side effects: I immediately lose control of my emotions, and intrusive thoughts impair my judgment.

People ask me why I didn't just end things if I badly wanted to torture myself. The answer: I didn't want to give up on myself completely. I hurt myself whenever I felt disappointed for not being able to face my problems head-on or frustrated that I couldn't live up to my own expectations.

I hurt myself because I think I deserve it. But oftentimes, there seems to be some switch inside my head, summoning the infrequent, familiar voice of egotism, and this is what saves me: the sometimes irrational sense of self-importance that reminds me that I should be bigger than my problems, and I don't need to answer to everyone. I feel like who I am when in a manic state and who I appear to be when I get depressed are two very different people, and the truth is I do not know which of them is the more authentic one, or if I still even have a part of me I can refer to as my authentic self. The versions of me corrupted by my disorder are melting into one another, and more often than not, I let them.

I cannot stress enough how much I hate having to live with bipolar disorder and BPD. People often talk about being emotionally unstable, but my body aches with every switch of emotion. I lose control over my actions, and because of this, I lose respect for myself. There are too many bruises and regrets. My demons clawed their way out of my worldly vessel, wanting release, and I let them. I still have the scars from their escape. The scratches inside my throat sometimes still sting.

The problem with struggling with an invisible illness is that people often don't believe what they cannot see. It doesn't help that many people with BPD have mastered the art of veiling their symptoms with faux normalcy. The curse of being blessed with manipulative tendencies is

that you can manipulate people into thinking you are well when you are actually far from being so.

People only see addiction exactly as it is, nothing more. They don't bother understanding the reasons behind it. The truth is that only when you die do most people feel shame. They only pretend to care when it's too late. We, the people carrying an invisible weight on our shoulders, are called monsters for our struggle to stay sane and intact, for plunging into vices just to make one more day bearable to live, but is it truly the worst thing that we can be?

How badly do I want to stay alive? I do not feel alive, but I am breathing. In these moments, that seems more than enough.

# Ang Tawag ni Bes

*ni Ethan*

Bawat pintig ng orasan, dibdib ko'y kumakabog, dapat na bang tuluyan?

Habang pinagmamasdan ko ang kalawakan, ramdam ko ang mahinang tapik ng hangin sa aking mga balikat at sinasabing, ginawa mo na ang lahat. Habang ako'y nakatayo sa bingit ng mga huling minuto ng gabi, ramdam ko ang yakap ng dilim, at ako'y inaangkin, pinapakasalan ang matagal na niyang mithiin.

Ang makitid na hawakan ay siya na ngayo'y aking tungtungan. Ito ang huli kong pagkakataon upang aking masubukan ang muling pagbangon para sa kinatatakutang kinabukasan. Pudpod na ang hagdang aking ginagamit upang masilip ang mga nakakalat na mga bahay sa paanan ng gusaling panahanan. Nakatutuwa na masilayan, kahit sa isang angulo lamang,



ang kariktan ng mundong nagturo sakín ng kasakiman. Mga liwanag na lumilipad, kahit na mahina ang kisláp, parang mga bituin sa áking talampakan habang ako'y nakasakáy sa uláp na kinakalawang. Marahil sa ilang pagkakataon, kaya ring maipakita ng kalungkutan ang mga ganda na hindi natin masilayan sa likod ng bawat ngiti't halakhak.

Mga huling sulyap sa tahanan na áking kinalakhan bago sa dilim ako makikipagtanan. Bawat panaginip at masayang alaala'y bumabalik sa áking isipan, ngunit huli na ang lahat, sadyang huli na ang lahat. Tanging nasa isip ko na lamang—may makapapansin ba sa áking paglisan, o kaya'y pagbagsak ri'y maibabaon lamang sa kailaliman ng karagatan? May mga luha rin bang bubuhos kasabay ng pagpatak ng áking huling salita? May makararating pa kaya, kahit sa huling sandali na ako'y buhay pa?

Unti-unti'y nararamdaman ko ang lubid na naghuhulma sa amin ng kadiliman kahit tanging hangin lamang ang huling dumadampi sa balat kong pinagpapawisan.

Hinga.

Hinga.

Kaya ko ito. Kaya ko na ang áking puso'y sundin. Ngunit bakit kahit huling gawain ni 'di ko man lang kayang tapusin? Kamay ko'y nanginginig habang hawak ang gatiyo ng baril, nag-aantay na maring na lamang ang putok. Tilá inaabangan pa na ang dilim ang kumalabit sapagkat sa katahimikan ako'y nahahayok. Bakit 'di ko magawang itulak ang upuan papalayo at mahulog habang sapo ng lubid ang áking batok? Bakit kahit sa huling pagkakataon ako'y walang anuma't isang kabiguan? Titiigan ko lamang ang áking paglalagakan. Iiyakan, magsosorry, 'di ko kayang panghawakan.

Papalapit nang papalapit. Ang oras ay aking hahabulin. Tinutungo ko ang altar kung saan habambuhay kong kasama ang kadiliman. Tila ba'y belo sa aking ulo sagabal sa kung ano ang gusto.

Sana may makapansin.

Sana may pumigil.

Sana may magmahal.

Sana man lang may makaintindi.

Ngunit 'di na ako birhen sa sakit at galit na sa akin ay ipinadama—ng mundo, ng pagmamahal, ng pag-asa... ninyo.

Ako'y laspag sa pang-aapi ng sambayanan, 'di nila alam, sa loob ko rin ay may digmaan.

Ba't 'di mo magawang maging mabait?

Ba't 'di mo kayang makisama?

Ba't lagi ka nalang mahina?

Bakit 'di mo kayang sumaya?

Ano ba ang mali?

Ano ba ang kayang gawin?

At tila ba ang kadiliman na lang ang ‘di ko pa nararating, kaya siya’y nabalakang tahakin.

Ako’y bumagsak, lanta sa sahig ng aking kwarto. Ako’y nakahandusay sa lapag, humihikbi, humihingi ng tawad sa sarili, nagsusumamo. Unti-unti igagapang ang sarili sa sulok, iiyak at iiyak. Ganito na lang ba gabi-gabi? Kailan matatapos?

Kailan titigil ang luha sa pagbuhos?

Umuumaga na. Sumisilip ang araw sa may bukana. Telepono ko’y tumunog, tumatawag aking kaibigan. Nangangamusta, nagtataka.

“Ba’t ‘di mo na ko tinawagan kagabi?” aniya.

Kaunti—may kislap sa pundidong bumbilyang matagal nang hindi gumagana. Natahan ang aking pagnangis. Kahit papaano’y naibsan ang pagnanais.

Ako’y nagkamali, siguro’y nagdaang gabi, isang kabiguan uli. Ngunit nang sa pagbuntong hininga niya mga kasunod na salita’y naibsan ang dalamhati.

“Basta kung gusto mo ng may nakakausap, wag kang mag-atubili. Narito ako para sa’yo, ‘di mo na kailangang maghanap pa sa iba. Gising na, kaibigan, at pagpatuloy natin ang ating kasalukuyan.”



## **Diagnosis**

*Paolo Dumlao and Iko Salas*

1st of 5



## **Diagnosis**

*Paolo Dumlaog and Iko Salas*

2nd of 5

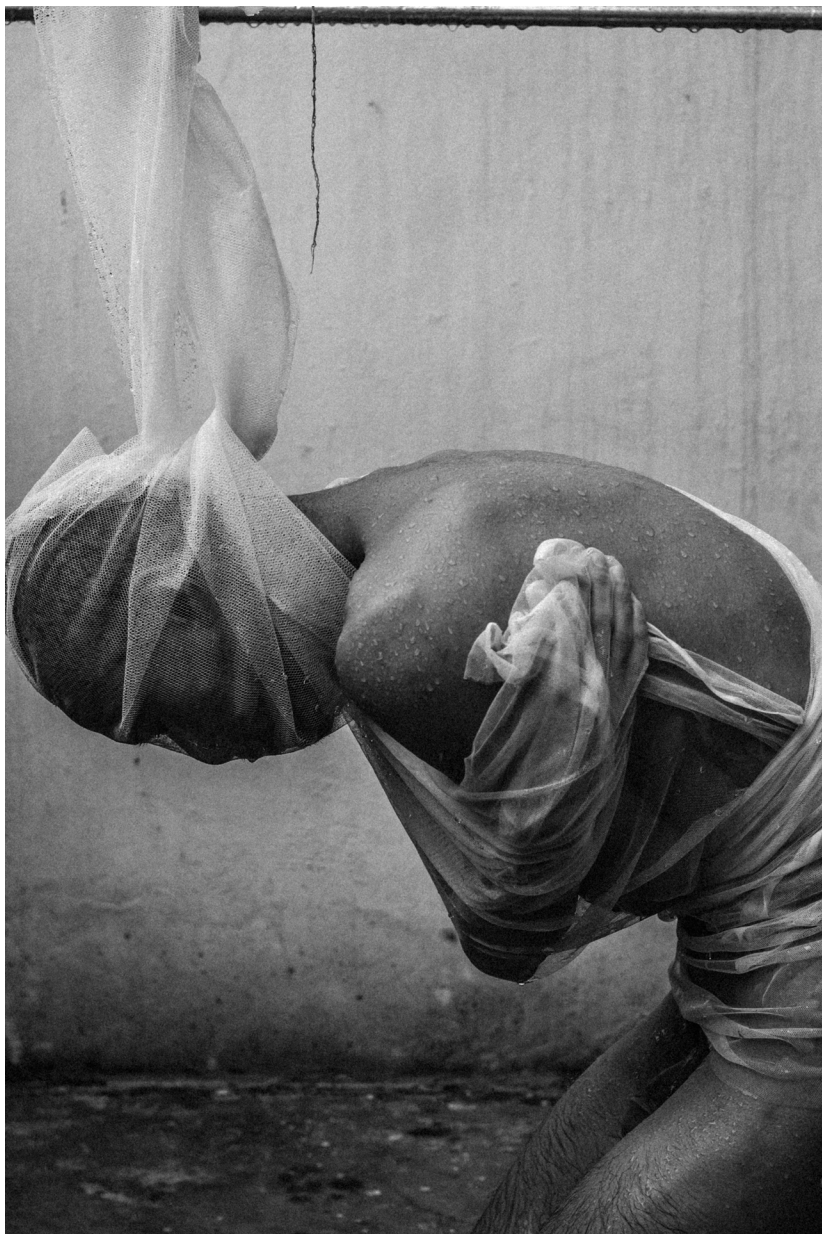




## **Diagnosis**

*Paolo Dumlao and Iko Salas*

3rd of 5



## **Diagnosis**

*Paolo Dumlao and Iko Salas*

4th of 5





## **Diagnosis**

*Paolo Dumlao and Iko Salas*

5th of 5

# Litany

by Tracey dela Cruz

Illustration by Rissa Coronel

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My neighbors have a white guard dog tied outside their house. She never goes inside. Drizzle, storm, heat, the dog stands dutifully outside its master's house to warn them of intruders. Sometimes, the owners forget and the other neighbors gather leftovers in a plastic container to feed her. She is kind and nuzzles up to anyone who touches her, almost pleading. She is never taken for walks. She whimpers at night, howls with the other dogs on our street at 11 PM. She's thin, the arch of her bones visible against her skin. When I'm smoking, I sometimes see her running towards the wall and jumping at it, skin and bones colliding against concrete. She does this, again and again, trying to break through to somewhere else. Or just bored. Trying to entertain herself. Run. Jump. Wall. Start over. She collapses into an exhausted heap on the floor. I watch.

One feels a certain affinity with the poor thing. The past eight months or so have left me feeling like I'm running in a loop. Since I've been diagnosed with clinical depression (the D as my friends and I like to call it), my mother





has been trying to get me to pray. Every time a wave of crippling sadness hits, she asks if I'd like to go to church, even though we haven't stepped inside a church together in over two years. She argues that it wouldn't hurt anyway to try. Always stubborn, I refuse, too busy running into walls.

I know she means well and that fills me with tenderness. She must be nostalgic for my six-year-old self who always felt lighter after attending Mass. For every dilemma, the solution was simple: We would go to the chapel and listen to my favorite priest, Father Ads, as he enlightened my mind, reaffirmed my faith. Perhaps it was his lightheartedness that made me love him. Some people were just like that; their faith made them seem like they were glowing, like they hovered above the ground, divine. Father Ads could make long homilies interesting and inspire so much love for God in me. I remember the feeling, that happiness that made me weightless. If someone had cut me open, I would have poured out light. To follow God was no yoke at all. All I felt was grace.

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I thought I had put this to rest long ago. It begins with a mathematical problem: A sheep is tied to a post in a field. The length of the rope is 30 feet. Moving in a circle, with the post at its center, what is the area of the field in which the sheep can graze? At a grazing speed of two square feet per day, how many days until the sheep runs out of grass?

Proclaiming myself an atheist, I fancied myself as better than the herds of religious sheep that surrounded me. They moved in circles, content only with the narrow reach of their minds. I thought that by renouncing God, I was somehow more enlightened, smarter, more rational. I thought myself kinder, because I made good choices out

of my own free will rather than acting out of hypocrisy, religious duty, bound by the moral code of Catholicism or the fear of eternal damnation.

My mother isn't religious, but she believes it necessary to trust and submit to a higher power. When I started skipping mass, she worried. When I told her that I had stopped believing in God, she asked then what do I believe in. I answered people. I believe in people.

I thought it was a pretty smart answer. The flaw was realized belatedly: People are terrible. It's something A— mentioned often, how his own faith is rendered incoherent by what he experiences with his father; his religious father who goes to church every week and is friends with the Christians in their community, who smiles at these people, invites them to dine in his home, yet reserves little love for his own son.

I can understand A—'s disappointment, the disillusionment with the flock of God and all He promises. For as long as I can remember, my grandfather has served as a speaker at the chapel on the street of my childhood. He dresses nice every Sunday, guides the people in prayer, and helps organize processions for religious feasts. I remember when we still lived at his house, he reprimanded my mother for hanging a framed painting of a Chinese woman in the living room (idolatry I believe he called it), as if it was a graver sin than the affair that he had in the past, or how he used to hit my uncles when they were younger. How difficult it is for him to forgive minor transgressions, his anger often getting the better of him (the shelf that collapsed in his room when I was in it, the swift kick that followed).

There was little to sustain my faith by way of the people around me. All I could see was their hypocrisy, and so I



doubted my own sincerity. Except perhaps for my mother, the only person who seemed to take the question of faith seriously. She's always believed—hoped—that I'll eventually find my way back to God, not because it matters to her that I be a good Christian, only that I learn what it means to surrender.

She is Catholic by virtue of having been baptized, but she practices Zen Buddhism, which believes the path to enlightenment is through the mundane daily life, to experience the world as it is, and in doing so arrive at a profound moment of clarity. I often scoff at her when she talks about karmic retribution and reincarnation, feel myself get a migraine from trying not to roll my eyes, or otherwise simply drift from conversation.

“You need to quiet your mind,” she would often tell me, and then invite me to meditate with her. I tried a couple of times, but it never worked. I get too distracted. “It just needs practice,” she said. It was time I could not give.

What exactly am I so proud about? What am I so determined to prove? If I am looking for faith devoid of false virtue, I need not look further than my mother. And still, I refuse. Always the obstinate refusal, always the knee-jerk reaction of contradicting her even when I don't always believe what I am saying, the refusal to cage myself to a single mode of understanding. She tells me about emptying yourself and realizing the world for the illusion that it is. She wants so much for me to yield, to see the world for how she sees it. But all I know of letting go is giving up.

To believe in God is a mark of weakness. To capitulate is a convenient excuse for the failures, the lonely, the lazy, those who can't bear the consequences of their actions, people who refuse to fight. It's okay, it's okay because God has a

plan. Believing in a higher power becomes an excuse not to act. Like how my mother says pray as we sit down to discuss what to do about the dog we rescued from my cousins.

The dog is named Ceejay, a two-year-old beagle who was, before we adopted her, had been tied to the spot under the stairs. Unwashed, underfed, ignored. A couple of months after we got her, we found out she had a venereal tumor that she contracted after having sex with a stray dog who was also sick. The tumor had been steadily growing for the past few months. Now it is large enough to press against her bladder, unsettling her into peeing inappropriately. Aside from the TVT, she has a malignant mammary tumor, and an enlarged heart. Her heart condition makes surgery risky because we have no idea how her body will react to the anaesthesia.

My mother says pray, but I can think of at least five different ways to handle this better. Putting the dog to sleep, no matter how painful, seems like a better idea than praying. My mother says it's not in our hands to decide that. And because she can't distinguish faith from immobility, the tumor grows larger in our dog's belly, the cancer spreads. I mop up her blood every 30 minutes. On mornings we wake up with the living room floor looking like a crime scene. And all my mother wants to do is pray.

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For a long time, I ricocheted between belief and unbelief, devotion and skepticism. Less to do with pride, perhaps it was because of my own inadequacies I struggled with religion. Sex, for example. Who's strong enough to say no to that. Youthful curiosity played a large part in the desire for the experience. Despite studying in a secular high school with a special science curriculum, we were taught



little about the body, about sex, relationships. We'd hold mass on special occasions and set aside an hour every week for lecturers outside of school to come and teach us about God and proper values.

The Christian orientation of my high school, however, never stopped us from making dirty jokes. It didn't stop us from crowding around someone's phone on long breaks to watch porn. It didn't stop me when a boy taught me how to touch myself as we hid under an oversized sweater in an audio-visual room full of people.

Trying it at home was an experiment, exploring different ways to produce the optimal pleasure: what to watch, what to touch, how hard, how fast. After the first time I made myself come, the object became how to recreate the first experience of pleasure. I'd spend hours trying to figure out my body, what it liked, how to navigate it. My then boyfriend surely didn't know how. Masturbation, though not considered a sin, is frowned upon, because it might lead to a person's isolation. Man was created in the likeness of God and is necessarily relational, hence why Adam and Eve were sexed. Indulging in a singular, personal pleasure, at the cost of human intimacy, is a sin. With this logic in mind, better to indulge in a shared passion, the lesser of two evils.

At least this is how I reason with myself. On an intellectual level, I can understand why the Catholic Church frowns upon pre-marital sex. But I am only human, plagued by deficiencies, driven by desires more often than not difficult—or in the immediacy of the moment, even impossible—to refuse. And anyway, it wasn't bad at all. On the days leading up to the first night, A— asked repeatedly if I had changed my mind, hoping I would, to remove himself of the responsibility. During, he'd stop

when I was in pain, would oblige to continue only when I asked. Afterwards, he apologized for not making me come, apologized each time thereafter for never being able to make me. I never minded, not the first night, not the next. I'm convinced if you love someone, you would never mind. Pleasure becomes derivative, giving way to something more sincere, closer to holy. Sleeping with him was the nearest thing to grace, the most approximate feeling of spilling light from my body.

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A—'s skin is marked by lines of poetry, except for the compass on his foot and the asterisk behind his ear. His tattoos were the first things I noticed about him, and I liked him instantly. Everyone did. He was the kind of person that invited interest, fascination, a character that pulled you in and grew on you until he eventually rubbed you off the wrong way. He had history with one of our co-fellows from the workshop and, months later, rather belatedly, she would warn me to be careful of him.

But at the time I met him, A— was nothing but charming. I loved his poems, and he sounded smart during the workshops even though he had the tendency to ramble, trail off, a quirk I found endearing. There was much to learn from him, his interesting takes on poetry, the beauty of his own writing. A few months later, he will ask me out, and I will agree, with all the enthusiasm of a seventeen-year-old girl hardly believing that such an amazing man could like her.

We often met at night, when work allowed him, when I managed to sneak out of the house. I was promptly returned before sunrise. Sometimes I'd come up with excuses—an all-nighter I need to pull for a group project,

a party at someone's place—to get away, to steal the few hours that I could on those rare nights that I got to see him.

One night in October, he asked me to take his picture. He had cut two holes along with a ragged smile on a white sheet. He handed me his father's camera, and, standing in the middle of the road, I took a picture of him, wearing that sheet of white with a cutout face, riding his skateboard down the road of UP Diliman. Later, in costume, he skates beside a passing car. Later, he pulls the sheet over our heads and gives me a kiss. There were moments when I thought I would die of happiness. Being pulled out of the mundane, ordinary life I've always lived, the romance of it all. The sweep-me-off-my-feet and this-is-going-to-be-forever feeling of an earth-shattering true first love. And not just with anyone, but with someone who appeared to me as larger than life itself, more than I could ever imagine I deserved to have, to keep, as if some generous deity had settled its eyes on me and deemed me worthy.

But novelty eventually wears and makes way for maturity, perhaps a dim understanding. These days, when I think of A—I think often of his remoteness, how I could never read his face, his unreasonable moods. “It could be a gradual disappearance,” he had said at the beginning of our relationship, from the onset the promise of desertion. Still, I persisted. Wanting to understand him, I spent hours scouring poetry collections, novels written by authors he loves, an exegesis to decipher his obscure revelations. I took up a Literature degree in an attempt to expand my reach, hungry for the knowledge that will allow me to divine the meaning behind the ink on his skin, his quiet, his untouchable sadness.

“I never know what to do with my hands,” I told him once, to mean my body has no reason to be beside his, no

apparent purpose. He replied, something about a poem that says something similar about hands, my possibility of admission then dropped. I have no reason to be beside you. I have nothing to offer that you could want, that could make you happy. I bring my hands together in prayer, having no other recourse than surrender. The first votive candle I ever lit was in St. Joseph's Parish when I prayed for his mother's safety on the day of her surgery. Every time I prayed thereafter, I prayed for his happiness, knowing it was something I could never provide.

Somewhere someone had written that faith reveals itself at every moment as a crisis. Living faith is a constant struggle between belief and unbelief. This push and pull is what separates sincerity from certainty. To believe, despite the overwhelming temptation not to.

This is a game I used to play: Waiting at the corner of the street for A—'s car at night, I'd guess the number of vehicles that would pass before his arrived. The anxiety that my mother would wake up and find me gone or the worry that he will cancel last minute that happens all too often, increasing with each passing minute. I often guessed wrong, but it didn't matter, the joy of the long-awaited arrival eclipses the doubts that come before. I'd stay up late every night, hoping he would ask for me, too shy to ask him myself. Always the wait, always the quiet hope that if not this night then the next. The gambit to believe they'll come through every time regardless. Until they don't.

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For years, I had been nagging my mother to get a dog but she didn't want the trouble of caring for one. The only reason she offered that we adopt Ceejay was because she thought it would help with the depression. It could be a

source of joy, she thought, something to cheer me up when the sadness got overwhelming. It has been helping: Most mornings when I can't muster the energy to get up, the only thing that gets me out of bed is having to walk the dog. She likes to nuzzle against my neck at night, to settle in for sleep. When I get home, she stands on her two legs and throws her paws on my thighs, howls with happiness. Some days it can be enough.

When we found out about her tumors and her heart, I offered that we have her put down. The resources we would need to spend for her chemotherapy and maintenance food just didn't seem worth it. When it gets difficult, I always opt for the easy way out. In the end, my mother said we should wait and pray on it, as if by virtue of time lapsing, circumstances will change for the better, the future (or God) opening itself up to reveal the proper (divine) answer, without resistance, which we will accept without question.

A symptom of depression is indecisiveness. Even the simple task of picking what shoes to wear becomes a herculean feat. The smallest problem becomes insurmountable, turns into a reason to keel over and break down. I missed class because I woke up late: cry. My friend is five minutes late to our lunch: cry. My eyes hurt from crying all afternoon: cry some more.

My studies have taught me that the only way people can exist coherently despite overwhelming uncertainty is our capacity to mentally place ourselves in the past, present, and project ourselves into a conceivable future. After a movie, my mother had asked what I want to be. I could barely get out of bed in the morning and she wanted me to think about my future. I didn't know. Not because of indecision, not because I didn't have choices; the future had simply ceased to exist for me. The present barely did.

The world was water, I was a sieve, everything just passed through me.

They say you can imagine your depression either as a black dog or a black mist. A black dog you can avoid. A black mist is inescapable. Green sneakers or red flats? Wait or leave? Seek help or work through it myself? It hardly mattered what I chose, in the end, all options were the same. When your choices cease to matter, you could just as well not exist.

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Upon listing the things I wanted to give away, I realized there was little I owned that was of any value. My laptop would go to my brother along with my tablet. My books will go to G— and E— because they were the two most prodigious readers among my friends, my clothes to K— because we had almost the same size. The instructions would be written on a paper that I would tape to the wall. I wasn't too keen on the idea of a funeral but these rituals are for the living, too, so I guess whatever wake they wanted would do. I wanted to be cremated with my ashes spread wherever they wanted. As long as I wasn't stuck in an urn, I would be fine.

Preparations would take a day. This included buying a scalpel: light, accessible, but sharp. Delete all my blogs, files, social media accounts, burn all the notebooks I had written on, return everything I had borrowed from friends.

Before Christmas, when no one's home. My brother leaves for work at 9 AM, comes home around 10 PM, my mother around 7 AM, comes home around 6 PM, leaving me with a nine hour window of time.

You draw a warm bath to dilate the veins, make blood flow easier, the process quicker. I'd leave a note, write it on the wall with a black marker. Nothing will hurt anymore. I'd step into the bath. Text the important people in my life thank you and it's not your fault. My mother always finds a way to blame herself. I'd turn off my phone and remove the battery. You cut the wrist vertically, to really open the vein. Begin with your dominant arm so that you won't mess up cutting the other arm. Wait.

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Old habits remain: I still mouth the words to prayers that have lost all meaning. I still make the sign of the cross before a meal, almost like reflex. Still feel inclined to thank God when something good happens. Sometimes I need to deliberately stop myself. I want to be consistent. I want to take a stand instead of allow myself to be buffeted here and there. Catholic or atheist, faith or unfaith?

I am reminded of how much A— loves scapulars every time I pass by St. Joseph's Parish on the way home from school. Vendors crowd outside it, selling all sorts of items: flowers, rosaries, pictures, calendars, statuettes. Every time his sister travelled, he would ask her to bring him home a new scapular, never mind that he had a dozen decorating his room. He isn't particularly religious, but he claims to be a practical man: Whosoever dies clothed in this Scapular shall not suffer eternal fire. Some things become elegant in their apparent simplicity. Here is your one-way ticket to heaven, for the low price of 15 pesos.

If it could only be so simple. To boil everything down to a question of yes or no, to render my life into the causal logic of a story or people into flat images to carry around my neck. When I wrote my plans, it felt, for the first time



in months, like purpose, a direction, a prospect to work towards. All that peace that settled after finally making a decision to let go, all that peace I imagined I would have afterwards. The candidness of such a life, deprived of any kind of future. My thoughts will finally quiet. A true moment of surrender.

Beside my grandmother's grave used to stand a massive tree, conveniently located as to provide shade when the family visits on All Saints' and death anniversaries. It was growing large enough to block the rest of the way, shade slowly turning to nuisance. People talked of cutting it down or at least trimming the branches, but, out of superstition, no one ever did.

Roots only grow deeper. Tendrils cling to flesh being eaten away. This way, the roots of the tree had cocooned the body and as it grew, it carried the remains with it. During a storm two years ago, the tree was uprooted, destroying the grave beside my grandmother's and exposing the bodies it encased. They salvaged what they could of the bones, gathered them into a pile, lit candles and arranged flowers beside it. I could see pieces of broken bones woven between tendrils of roots, thick mesh, brown dirt.

Reluctance stems from the simple question of inevitability. How do you remove something so deeply entrenched within? Tear yourself away from it? In the aftermath of the fall, where do I begin?

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A— often prayed when he was sad. On sleepless nights, he would drive his Vespa around Manila, visiting select churches and smoking cigarettes as substitute for votive candles. The typical choices: Quiapo, St. Jude, Manila

Cathedral. In the *Architecture of Happiness*, Alain de Botton writes that in medieval times, the cathedral was God's house on earth. Within its walls was resurrected the original, perfect beauty of Eden, inviting visitors to fall to their knees in humble devotion. With the intent of making man surrender his self-sufficiency, architects designed elaborate edifices. These cathedrals stood not merely as humble offerings to God the King, but also as fortresses meant to defend and distract the believer from all that is corrupt without and within. Despite A—'s shortcomings, they invited him to hope for a vision of the future, pure and true.

The only place I can remember with the same sway for me was the hospital chapel of my childhood. It was neither grand nor magnificent, it was a small, modest chapel by all accounts. But Mass every Sunday at 5:15 PM was special because Father Ads would be presiding over the Eucharist. I looked forward to his homilies and having him pat my head at the end of mass as he exited the chapel. I wrote him letters on special occasions, in fancy stationeries, enveloped and handed at the end of the mass. One letter was an apology for missing the Eucharist, throwing the blame to my mother who would sometimes be too lazy to go. Another was a request for him to forgo the mission he was about to be sent on, knowing he would be leaving this church for good.

The medieval man relied on architecture to house him away from sin, I relied on the competence of my shepherds. The priest who replaced Father Ads during the 5:15 PM Mass was not any good. His homilies were dull and he lacked the charisma of his predecessor. My mother and I tried different schedules, even different parishes, but they fell short of that prized one. Perhaps this was when I stopped coming to church, deciding I had better things to do. If anything, A— brought me closer to God. With him, I

learned to exercise patience, kindness. When we were together, I prayed often, visited churches to light votive candles. I always wept when I prayed, that swell of emotion each time. For all my cynicism, the Catholic girl in me was alive. Of course when A— left, the prayers also stopped.

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My faith is too shallow, too weak, dependent on the fallible, temporary factors of people and books. My faith is too small and so I sink. Or at least this is what my therapist meant when she said, “If you don’t believe in God, how will you ever get better?” as I sat across from her in the veranda-turned-office of her house.

She was the second therapist in four weeks. I decided to seek help when I started fantasizing of suicide on the daily: stab my chest, hang myself, jump off a building, walk into a river? Sometimes it would take a morbid, fantastical turn: imagine myself falling from the sky and being impaled on the metal rods of a construction site. When a cat scratched my arm I only felt relief in seeing three streaks of red on my skin.

I’m a Psychology major. I knew the signs. I knew what was happening. Still, it calmed me down when I wrote my plans to kill myself, down to the detail, even what I would wear. When I told my mother I wanted to see a doctor, she had asked, “Can you just get over this?” The compromise was for me to see a psychotherapist, a friend of hers. On our first and last session, she had broken a lot of rules I’ve learned in class: She couldn’t adapt to my unreceptiveness, she held my hands, she was too confrontational. I was more comfortable with the second one, until she said what she did. If you don’t believe in God, how can you get better? She didn’t bother hiding the accusation. You’ve dug this hole for yourself because you are unfaithful.

How do I argue with her? In class, we've learned that religion is important to give people a sense of personal control over their lives. It lends their experiences coherence, thereby reducing anxiety and disappointment. The belief that God controls their lives becomes interchangeable with personal control. In fact, most 12-step programs for various dependencies are spiritual in nature. When we interviewed a recovering drug addict working as a counselor at a rehabilitation center, he told us that it was impossible to recover without believing in a God.

Religion helps coordinate groups and foster cooperation, as well as establish social norms, rules, and consequent punishment. According to Sigmund Freud, religion is a neurosis, an illusion we cast onto the sensory world as a way to control the violent impulses of our id. Hence, God is based on the necessity of a father. Without a Father to enforce the Law, civilization will not be possible. Isn't this how it goes, If God did not exist, he would have to be invented.

The therapist tells me that she'll help me, that it's a process. I don't have the energy to argue. When desperate, we clutch at what we can. If not God, then a lover. If not God, then this woman. I'd like to think that I'm more enlightened than my religious peers, but always there is a stab of envy. No matter how bad their lives get, they have an absolute stronghold, a bottomless well of strength. I want to say my miracle is to swim but all I want to hear is Rise. Your faith has healed you.

My dilemma presents itself as a simple mathematical problem. Tied to a post with a leash of twenty years of knowledge, school, study, books, moving in a circle, how much of God can I know until I am unable to sustain myself? Even if I extend my arm to lengthen the reach of my knowledge, will I be able to rise to the fullness of life that I desire?

I keep running into a dead end. I keep going in circles. If I believed in God, everything would be so much simpler.

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I have since stopped seeing her. Despite such a compelling case, I'm too stubborn to let myself be converted back. After weeks lost in a daze of sadness, a trip to the mountains with my mother, and upon our return weeping in front of her saying I wanted the future back, she finally agreed to let me see a psychiatrist. The doctor was recommended by a friend who had her as a professor. She prescribed two pills: first, an antidepressant, second, an antipsychotic which acts also as a mild sedative. I have been strictly taking them, I keep track of my mood, reach out to friends when things get overwhelming, even try out the occasional exercise.

I walk Ceejay in the morning when I wake up. Feed her. Eat breakfast or have coffee, smoke a cigarette, shower, prepare for school. I attend my classes, stay at a café near school during long breaks. I have dinner with old friends, go home and walk the dog then feed her. I study. I take my pills at 10 PM, at least eight hours before the time I've set my alarm to go off. If I don't get at least eight hours of sleep, the sedative I take will make me pass out when I try to get up in the morning. On weekends I can sleep in, my meds making me go for twelve hours of uninterrupted shut-eye.

The neighbor's white dog still hurls herself against the wall. Instead of planning my suicide, I plot ways to rescue her. Perhaps one night, I will walk over there and cut her leash, drive her to a nearby beach, maybe somewhere in Batangas. She'll be alone and lost but she'll be free, perhaps she'll even be grateful. It's illegal to steal someone else's pet, but I'm sure I'll be forgiven.

# Bipolar Romance

*by Chelly Caritativo*

Loiki, my current boyfriend, was a stubborn man. We were long-time colleagues turned best friends turned lovers. By the time we were courting, he already had an idea of how our situation was going to be. He watched me lose the ability to do a lot of things most people of our age can—work a nine-to-five job, drink alcohol and eat all kinds of food, travel to multiple places in a day, among others—because of my delicate health condition. This was my main concern back then; he could be free to explore activities and more if he chose another lady. I thought I would just give him additional burden.

I asked him thrice if he could handle me and my illnesses—my bipolar type 2 disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and the rest. (The count was four then, but as of current writing, I have a total of nine chronic illnesses.) Each time I asked had a different setting and mood, but the intention was there. I was freely giving him an out.

“We will manage,” was his consistent answer.

The first time he fully encountered the symptoms of my bipolar disorder was two months after our first date. I was having flashbacks and nightmares of my past trauma

while I was in recovery after a hospital confinement for fibromyalgia. At night, I was barely sleeping in fear that my dreams would get worse. I refused to have visitors or make dinner plans. I was increasingly becoming a shut-in. But he persisted.

Loiki, the stubborn guy that he was, talked and listened to me every chance he got. Even when I wasn't answering, he found ways to communicate that he cared. He encouraged me to open up to my psychiatrist and to my family about what was happening. He understood that my depression explained a lot of my actions but did not excuse me from their consequences. He was the first person who showed me that it's okay to accept every emotion that I felt. He, along with my family, pushed me to go forward.

Days after my depressive episode ended, I asked him what made him stay through it all. He told me that he stayed because he likes and loves all of me. My illnesses are a part of me, but they are not my wholeness. Every couple in the world faces issues, and we are not different. The beauty in the struggle of swimming together through light and darkness is that our bond was getting stronger as we held on. He then repeated, "We will manage."

His sentiments echoed my doctor's when I consulted about having a relationship. She said that people with mood disorders like me should not be hindered from loving someone. Every person should recognize within him/herself that he/she is worth loving, and that he/she has the capacity to love. Relationship dynamics differ from couple to couple; frequent comparison of experiences is not healthy. What is important is the ability of each partner to grow together and to encourage each other's self-care. This happens when partners decide to be vulnerable with each other by cultivating healthy habits such as communicating openly.

Loiki asked me to officially be his girl when a cycle of hypomania was ongoing. I was blabbering non-stop and insisting we do a lot of things after we played NBA 2k17 and watched basketball. He noticed my uneasiness and restlessness, gave me space to express my emotions, and stopped me when I was about to do something drastic. When a wave of calm came over, he read some words he had prepared. He waited for me to process everything.

This year, right after our first anniversary, I entered into another depressive episode. Things are not smooth-sailing just like before, but I'd love to think we've grown a little wiser from our experiences. The commitment to keep working through each day, I believe, is the reason why we are still together.



# Ghost of a Feeling

*by Celestine Trinidad*

Illustration by Jan Alaba

“Emilio?”

The ghost of the young man had suddenly gone quiet. He closed his eyes. Cris held her breath, still unable to move. She felt the hairs on her skin stand on end, and she could not stop shaking.

When the ghost opened his eyes again, a stony, undecipherable expression had come upon his face. She suddenly felt trapped, immobile, with nowhere to run.

He was just as Cris had remembered; she sometimes still imagined him following her whenever she walked down dark hallways. She still had nightmares of him too. His face was not only pale, it was completely bloodless. His black hair was worn slightly long, strands covering his eyes, which were an angry red.

“No.” The ghost’s voice was now dangerously low and soft, just a little above a whisper. It sent chills down her spine. “I am not going to leave you.” He took a step forward, making Cris flinch. “Don’t jump.”

“Or else what?” Cris started to laugh, a hollow, hysterical one, which had always been her knee-jerk response to fear. And once she had started laughing, she could not stop. “If



I do, you'll haunt me? You can't really hurt me now at this point. I'll be dead soon—"

"Yes, that is true." The ghost's eyes did not leave hers, and she could not tear her eyes away. "But then, why are you afraid of me?"

"What?" Cris burst out. "Because you're a ghost, obviously—"

"Why are you scared? You said it yourself. You are going to die soon. Then you should not be scared of me." He took another step forward. "But you are. Why are the living afraid of the dead?"

Cris felt her throat dry up suddenly.

"Humans are afraid of ghosts," he continued, "because they are afraid that these ghosts can still kill them. And they do not want to die. You are afraid of me because you do not want me to kill you." He took another step forward. "Do you really want to die?"

"I—I do," Cris said. "Didn't you hear me? I'm going to jump because I want to—"

"Do you, really? Look down then."

She automatically did what he said, and when she saw the great distance between her and the ground, she felt a wave of terror and nausea suddenly washed over her.

"No, no," she said. "I'm not afraid—"

"I'll ask you again. Do you really want to die?" the ghost said. "Or maybe, you just want your suffering to end?"

"I . . ." Cris closed her eyes, if only to at least shield herself

from his stone-cold gaze. “But you made this decision too, a long time ago.”

She heard him sigh, a sound that seemed to come from the very depths of the Earth.

“I know,” he said. Softly. Sadly. “It’s a decision I regret, every single day.”

Cris opened her eyes, and she met his gaze again. She didn’t know why she kept talking; she was still terrified of this specter before her, but she couldn’t stop the words from flowing out of her mouth. “I’m just so tired of it all. I’m not as strong as everyone needs me to be. I’m not okay. But I can’t not be okay. It’s stupid and weak. I hate myself for being so weak.”

A sob escaped her. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be okay again.”

The ghost’s expression softened. When he spoke, it seemed he was talking to himself and not to her. “They tell you to be strong. They tell you, ‘Why are you not happy, when you are still so lucky? Count your blessings. Try harder.’ But you are still unhappy, even when you tell yourself that you should be.”

Cris stared at him, hearing him put into words everything she had been feeling the past week.

“And that is all right.” The ghost crept nearer, and he reached out a hand. It stopped inches from her face, as if he had meant to wipe her tears away but changed his mind at the last minute. “You can be sad. You can cry. And it is perfectly all right.”

He dropped his hand to his side. “I too, was tired of it all,” he said. “So I stood where you’re standing now. I jumped over the edge. But as I was falling, I was so terrified—and I

realized that I was wrong. The truth is, what I truly wanted was not to die, but to live happy.” He closed his eyes again. “I realized that all I wanted was for all that suffering and pain to end, and not to die. And now I regret doing it. Because when I decided to jump, those were not the only things that ended for me. Happiness, love—the chance of having all of those ever again also ended.” He looked at her, and Cris reached out for his face, seeing the sorrow in his eyes. He took a step back before she could reach him.

“You think that sadness is all there is for you now,” he said. “And I do not want to say that it will be all right in the end. I cannot know that. No one can. I cannot guarantee that things will get better later, because sometimes, they really don’t, at least not for a long time. Things might even get worse from here, and you may never be as happy as you hope. But I am sure of one thing: If you do decide to end it now, there really will be no chance of you ever being happy again.”

Cris was silent for several moments. A tear rolled down her left cheek, followed by another on the other cheek. And another, and another.

“But do I dare risk it?” she asked in a small voice. “What if there’s really only a small chance of me ever being happy again?”

He smiled at her, but his eyes remained sad. “At least there would still be a chance.”

She closed her eyes again. She took a long, deep breath, like it would be her last—

And she stepped down from the ledge and collapsed, sobbing, on the cold, hard ground.

Safe, for now.



# A Small World After All

*by Paolo Vergara*

Illustration by Jan Alaba

In its simplest form, meditation results in three experiences that anyone can access

There are many forms of meditation that have evolved through the centuries. A quick Google search reveals that the practice has been picked up particularly by the corporate world. Beyond just another productivity-booster, meditation is one method towards mental wellness, as revealed by both testimonials and in scientific research, specifically with regards to brain chemistry and circuitry.

The Kamakura tradition, in particular, is stripped of the mystique often associated with the practice. Nonsectarian, nonideological, and practical, the following three tenets based on the introductory lectures of the zendo's teachers can serve as a benchmark on whether one's practice is maturing. Regardless of one's chosen tradition, an individual eventually gains a clearer understanding of oneself, thus leading to more spontaneity, less reactivity, and general harmony with the changing circumstances of life.

Whether in a feudal Japanese temple or an urban, corporate setting, the quest to come to terms with reality has been an enduring endeavor of mankind. What follows are the common experiences of meditators across eras, which result from a dedicated, daily practice, often shared with a community of equally-earnest seekers.

### **Joriki (Concentration)**

The first aim is to calm the mind. This doesn't mean stopping all thoughts and emotions, but finding a point of stillness in the midst of daily life. As one continues to practice, one will notice increased concentration and focus as well as less distraction and wavering in daily activities and decision-making. This also paves the way to clearer insights and a calm disposition towards life.



Joriki is the energy and momentum gained from continued practice, manifesting in bio-psychological benefits such as a better complexion and disposition, less anxiety, and less chronic pain. With regards to the mental state, one will also notice that when practice is neglected, one tends to return to harmful emotional habits.

### **Kensho** (Awakening)

This is most aligned with the advocacy of groups like Tala Mental Wellness and Silakbo PH. As one's practice matures, one slowly opens up to a different way of perceiving experience. The practitioner becomes more conscious of one's connectedness to all life as well as the environment. Simultaneously, ego-driven fears and neuroses are lessened because of this experienced insight. Meditation culminates in a deeply personal and at once universal experience of one's true nature.

Kensho is a nonconceptual (i.e. direct) understanding of how one's life is aligned with the world "out there." In essence, this is a "point of no return" with regards to mental and emotional habits. It's like tasting good wine for the first time. More importantly, this where the community aspect of meditation factors in, specifically, the aid of people more experienced with meditation practice, like one's chosen teacher. As a person who has devoted much time to internal work, a meditation teacher's role is simply to guide each individual to reach their own self-understanding, unique to the circumstances of their life. This self-understanding is precisely what kensho, popularly called and hyped up as "enlightenment," is.

### **Mujodo no Taigen** (Embodied Insight)

One moment of awakening is not enough, however. What happens after the high dies down and one returns to the beautiful mess of the world? This third tenet is the



commitment to continue practicing in order to live out the insights gained. One may notice a change in the motivation to practice. If before the focus was inward, towards healing oneself, now, an individual at peace with him- or herself feels more equipped to engage wholesomely with situations and people, wherever one finds oneself in the world.

At this point of one's practice, gone is the perception of the world as a hostile place one has to struggle against. One realizes that the problem isn't so much that society and nature don't align to one's expectations, as it is about how one relates to the world. By rewiring one's perception, one determines the best course of action in a given context. Contrary to the idea that meditation is escapism, it's about clearing the noise within one's head to thoroughly engage in one's chosen advocacies with less burnout.

### **A path to walk**

Ancient thinkers from both Eastern and Western traditions have acknowledged the contradictions of the human psyche: our impulsive reactions often conflict with our desire to act rationally. While philosophies have expounded on this conundrum, meditation has revealed itself as one method towards a deeper understanding of human nature,

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1 Tom Ireland, "What does mindfulness meditation do to your brain?" Scientific American, June 12, 2014, accessed October 15, 2017, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/what-does-mindfulness-meditation-do-to-your-brain/>.

2 Yamada Ryoun, trans. Jerome Cusumano and Migaku Sato, "Zen is not a religion", Baguio Zen Center mountain sangha, undated, accessed October 5, 2017, <https://baguiozencenter.wordpress.com/zen-is-not-a-religion/>

3 Ireland.

4 Emma M. Seppälä Ph.D., "20 Scientific Reasons to Start Meditating Today," Feeling it, September 11, 2013, accessed October 5, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/feeling-it/201309/20-scientific-reasons-start-meditating-today>

beginning with oneself. The ego never truly leaves—to lose one’s individuality is to lose what it means to be human—but with a maturing meditation practice, one’s sense becomes integrated and in harmony with “others” and the world “out there.”

As it is with all things in life, all three meditative experiences commingle and inform each other. One needs *joriki* in order to develop the mental clarity to reach *kensho*. This in turn strengthens one’s resolve to embody the practice in daily life—*mujudo no taigen*. Thus, a continued cultivation of *joriki* until *kensho* is not just a distant memory of a heightened state of consciousness, but a lived, and perhaps default, experience. There are starting points but ultimately no hierarchy among these three.

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5 Brad Warner, “The Center of All That,” *Hardcore Zen*, September 26, 2017, accessed October 15, 2017, <http://hardcorezen.info/the-center-of-all-that/5580>.



# Stop Please

*by Chino Cruz*

Illustration by Jan Alaba

*Originally posted 26 November, 2014 on Chino's blog, The Locovore. Reposted on the Silakbo PH website on 13 June 2016 with permission from the author. Published in this issue with permission from the author.*

It sucks to be surrounded by normal people. Though I have to admit, the “normalcy” that I’ve grown accustomed to isn’t quite what most people would expect. Over the years, I’ve inadvertently surrounded myself with people who have a knack for being intelligent overachievers. If my friends aren’t busy getting ready for post-graduate studies, they’re out in the professional world filling their portfolios with superhuman amounts of brilliant work.

It’s shocking how, every time I scroll through my social media timelines, I see someone promoting an impeccably executed pet project. It runs the gamut from music videos to poetry chapbooks to editorial photo shoots. It seems that my social circle is composed of creative juggernauts that generate content as if they were just exhaling, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I also understand the amount of work that goes into making everything seem effortless. I see how much my friends dig for work and how much they push for everything to come together at the very last minute—and not without flourish. I’ve seen people share article upon article about how young people need to keep on creating to be better, that we need to churn out content ceaselessly in order to hone our respective crafts. We must outdo ourselves every day lest we have our creative spirit snuffed in an instant.

Here lies the problem. I’ve only recently come to terms with being an adult with ADHD and it has become clear that the world I stand in doesn’t want me to be what I am. That isn’t to say that I’m bullied or hurt or outwardly told not

to be anything. This exclusion is more sinister because it comes in the guise of that glorious, luminous thing known as inspiration.

One would think that the creative industry would be perfect for someone with ADHD and, in a sense, it is. It's a world that allows us to zoom in on things that we love and it lets us thrive on that. In the world of the creative, there are few schedules and obsession is considered a gift. Let us do what we want and leave us alone.

What I find problematic is how the creative space tells us to create non-stop. It's that one thing that every creative is told by their mentors: never stop thinking and creating. It sounds awfully romantic, too. Who wouldn't love to hear that the only way to become better is to keep doing what they love to do? We are told exactly that by the speakers, writers, artists, and teachers we adore and idolize. It's the gospel truth of creators everywhere, the last word in a world of constant flux.

Create or die.

I've had to struggle with that incessant pull ever since I graduated. I'm a totally capable writer and artist, so why shouldn't I dive into the ceaseless cycle of creation that all my peers have jumped into so fearlessly? What I failed to understand was that, as an adult with ADHD, I would never be able to create at such a high level. I will never be able to take more than a handful of projects at a time. I will never actively seek extra side projects because, at some point, I will find everything too overwhelming and just flake out to keep my sanity. I will never be able to rally a team for an idea because I don't understand schedules and probably never will. My focus will always come and go depending on my mood and what's on Twitter. I'll always be able to create

things on my own time, but never in the way that everyone else is expected to in order to be “successful” as a creator. Over the last few months, I’ve been struggling to cope with crippling self-doubt, thinking that my inability to constantly create makes me a failure. I was able to make things, but only when my ADHD-riddled mind allowed me to focus. No matter how much I pushed myself to create something, if my mind wasn’t in its sweet spot, I just couldn’t be bothered to even start.

I felt so much shame because I thought I was lazy and untalented, forgetting that I had an official, diagnosed mental disability. I felt terrible about myself and constantly felt that I needed to prove everyone wrong. Every time I flaked out of something or didn’t push through with an idea, I felt waves of shame come over me because I thought I wasn’t enough.

The thing with ADHD is that it disguises itself as a series of quirks, as opposed to appearing as a full-on mental disability. My incapacity to focus and organize my life seems like a character trait that can easily be fixed but my idiosyncrasies go deeper than that. It’s not as easy as training me and telling me to simply “try.”

In a conversation with my mother about my fears and my disability, she told me a story about her sister Didi, who was born with Down syndrome.

“We all loved Didi for who she was. She didn’t have to be anything else because she loved everything and everyone without even trying. I don’t know if that had anything to do with her Down syndrome, but it was who she was. The thing is, you could tell that she was different just by looking at her. That’s the nature of her disability.

“No one would have or should have expected her to act any different because you knew that she couldn’t. If someone would even stare at her, my brothers would be up in arms, ready to defend her. She didn’t have to be anyone but herself. But I remember seeing her, sometimes, just shifting in her seat in public, sitting up a bit, trying to be more like everyone else. It wasn’t natural for her, but she would try.

“No matter how much we loved her for who she was, even she could tell she was different. Maybe she felt the same shame as you do, Chino. I understand, now.”

It was that moment of clarity that opened the floodgates and cleared my mind of whatever doubts I had. The problem did not lie exclusively with me. I finally understood that I don’t need to hold myself to the same standard the creative world has set. People with disabilities should not feel shame for being unable to meet the lofty aspirations set by our well-meaning, overachieving gods and idols. No matter how hard we try, there are certain things that we just cannot do and we should be okay with that. It’s embedded in who we are.

I do acknowledge that the status quo exists for a reason. Most people are capable of overachieving and need that extra push to keep on creating. The flux of inspiration should never stop, for the sake of everyone else.

However, what needs to happen is another paradigm shift. If the first shift involved the creative universe producing its own niche and developing its own versions of success, the second should demand the demolition of any these standards. We need to accept that we exist in a world of plurality. To insist that creation and improvement are the sole standards of success risks excluding a multitude of willing creatives with conditions such as mine.

So, if you ever feel like a failure because you can't seem to keep up with everyone around you, know that it doesn't matter. Maybe you'll come up with something better tomorrow.



# Smile, Sisyphus

*by Anonymous*

Illustration by Rissa Coronel



**“But in the end, one needs more courage  
to live than to kill himself.”**

This quote comes from Camus’ book, *A Happy Death* (1971). I only started reading his works when I heard this particular sound bite in class a few years back.

From what I understand, he tackles the problem of absurdism—the conflict within a human being when faced with the stark realization that life has no meaning. I became increasingly interested in Camus’ essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus” (1955), which centers on the eternal punishment of Sisyphus: He pushes a boulder up a mountain every day, only for it to roll back down again, back to where he started.

**“Gravity is your bane and curse.”**

Camus speaks of the knowledge of the absurd as something from which there is no turning back: Once the meaninglessness of life has been acknowledged, it forever taints one’s consciousness. This hit a vein for me, particularly in terms of my experiences with depression. Albeit having certain commonalities that make depression diagnosable in the first place, it is important to mention that each experience of depression is different, but one common experience is the feeling of vacillating between indifference and seething in one’s own skin, depending on its severity. Activities that once brought a depressed person joy would feel utterly pointless.

I had very real plans to kill myself on my twentieth birthday. The suicidal urges were at their peak in the year 2013: My academics and interpersonal relationships were unraveling before my eyes and my anxiety would fire up almost every day. In my despondency, I even sent letters to a couple of my friends, cries for help. I was the toxic friend so I distanced myself. Suicide was an alluring solution to the internal turmoil and external troubles coexisting with it. It takes a warped sense of strength to go against one’s natural survival instincts, but it takes even more to hold on when life is completely hopeless. Medication and therapy don’t help right away. The former may even be

highly discouraging because of its undesirable side effects. Holding on may seem futile, even with professional help.

**“It requires revolt.”**

I’ve been reading a number of books that help keep the demons at bay. I don’t want to commit suicide anymore because I realize that there is still a “me” that exists independently of my illness—and there are ways to see that, especially if you keep the right people in your life. I rock a lot of DIY crafts and angrily write out my feelings and watch Netflix shows and do everything it takes to keep me from wanting to hurt myself again. Sometimes, I ask for help, if I need it, in the form of hugs, chat tirades, or companionship. There is no one way to see oneself outside of depression, and there is no easy way to do so. I’m not going to delude anybody by saying that it’s easy, because it sure as hell isn’t. It’s a momentous task to afford yourself compassion for feeling the way you do when all you can think about is how much of a waste of life you are.

Jewish psychiatrist and neurologist Viktor Frankl saw one’s personal search for meaning in their own life as absolutely necessary for keeping a person alive, because it is through this that “the impossibility of replacing a person is realized... [It] allows the responsibility which a man has for his existence and its continuance to appear in all its magnitude.” Frankl’s context is awe-inspiring: he was a Holocaust survivor who acted as a therapist to his fellow inmates. He used the constant pursuit of meaning, in the face of their hardships as prisoners, to bolster their resilience against committing suicide.

**“One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”**

Given my own context, the only meaning that has a fighting chance at existing outside depression is the indisputable fact

that there was a “me” before being depressed. As appealing as total isolation can be, loved ones are my support system for when I forget that I am not my depression. The meaning that I hold on to is living not for oneself but sustaining it for others, because I do not want to let them down.

One must exercise caution when opening up to others about suicidal thoughts because many people do not understand mental illness. I personally rely on a trusted, nonjudgmental, ever-patient other to remind me that there is still a “me” that exists—a “me” who could get excited about hobbies, before the all-encompassing lethargy. In my case, I’m particularly lucky to have a mother who is a doctor and a boyfriend who is a psychology graduate. I’ve never been good at optimism but my circumstances sort of necessitate it. I try, with help from my personal relationships, because in all things, it is the human element that matters. I’m happy as long as I can do well for people I care about, for others with mental health needs, in a society that criminalizes a mental health problem and makes a mockery of “crazy people” who are “rich enough to be treated for depression.”

I have engaged in non-suicidal self-harm since I was 12 and have trouble quitting it to this day. I have major depressive disorder and generalized anxiety disorder, but I consider myself a mental health advocate despite feeling like a complete impostor some days. I lobby for human rights and the faster passage of the Mental Health Act. I lobby against tyranny and the mental health stigma that permeates our hyper-conservative local context. Days can feel like pushing boulders up mountains, but all is well.

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# Weeping Portraits: A Call for Responsible Reporting on Mental Health

by Jean Robbie Pagtalunan

Illustration by Jan Alaba

Mass media is known as one of the greatest tools in influencing the general public's views and beliefs. In fact, according to Theories of Public Opinion written by Moy and Bosch (2013), the earliest example of media having "direct, powerful effects" on the public can be dated as early as 1906 when the publication of Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle*, created a ruckus in the United States. Sinclair's novel revealed the meat-packing industry's "appalling working conditions" (Constitutional Rights Foundation, 2008), prompting the American government to pass new federal acts on food safety. Aside from this, a 1938 radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds* by H.G. Wells produced mass hysteria because the listeners believed that the story being broadcasted about Martians invading the Earth reflected "real-time reality" (Cantril 1940 as cited by Moy and Bosch, 2013).

One of mass media's elements, news media, which concentrates on distributing news to the general public, is considered as one of the primary sources of information (ScienceDaily, 2017). In the Philippines, a huge amount of Filipinos relies on television, radio, newspapers, tabloids, and social media when it comes to information (Suva et al., n.d.). This means that news media can greatly contribute to people's perceptions about prominent issues in the world.

#### Mental Health and the News Media

One important issue that calls for media attention is mental health. According to the World Health Organization (2014), a person dies due to suicide every 40 seconds, which makes it "4 of the 10 leading causes of disability" (International Medical Corps, 2015, as cited by Cubillas et al., 2017). However, there is still very little media coverage of mental health and patients struggling with it. This is a problem since 5 of the 11 popular sources of information regarding mental health and mental illnesses can be seen as forms of news media, namely: TV newsmagazine shows,

newspapers, TV news, news magazines, and radio news (NMHA, 1997, as cited by Edney, 2004)

| Popular Sources of Information about Mental Illness |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------|-----|
| TV news magazine shows                              | 70% |
| Newspapers                                          | 58% |
| TV news                                             | 51% |
| News magazines                                      | 34% |
| TV talk shows                                       | 31% |
| Radio news                                          | 26% |
| Other magazines                                     | 26% |
| Internet                                            | 25% |
| Non-fiction books                                   | 25% |
| Talk shows on radio                                 | 18% |
| Women’s magazines                                   | 18% |

Thus, there is an immediate need to be mindful in disseminating information regarding mental health in order for the news media to avoid misperceptions and in turn, to create awareness on the said issue and responsibly educate the public about it.

**Negative Effects of News Media’s Misrepresentations**

Throughout the years, the news media have released a number of stories regarding mental health. While it is true that not all of the pieces of information published were misrepresentations, but misperception still exist and must be corrected.

According to a literature review headed by Francis et al. (2001), as cited by Edney (2004, p. 1), mass media often links mental health patients with violence, resulting in the promotion of “negative images and stereotypes.” Edney further explained that these notions about mental health patients being aggressive or violent only encourage the government to legislate laws aiming to “contain” and “control” these people rather than creating laws that aid them in their recovery. Additionally, news media’s tendency to highlight violent crimes committed by mental health patients--even with its infrequency--adds to the wrong notion that these people are dangerous and sustains the idea that these patients should be “feared and “discriminated” (Edney, 2004).



André Picard (2014), a health columnist, admitted in *Mindset: Reporting on Mental Health* that when journalists write a story about a mental health patient overcoming his or her illness, they do not focus on the “beneficiaries of treatment”; instead, they “treat them as objects of pity.” This, obviously, is already a mistake, since it only encourages the stigma that these people are nothing more than their illness and that treatment yields no positive outcome to one’s mental health. Also, according to the Canadian Mental Health Association (2004), “inaccurate depiction does nothing to further the public’s education. Instead, it hinders their understanding of mental illness and of people living with psychiatric diagnoses,” strengthening the need for responsible reporting.

### Responsible Reporting on Mental Health

Due to the overwhelming number of cases regarding misrepresentations of mental health patients and stories by the news media, some health journalists showed their concern at the 2012 Pacific Health Summit on the lack of responsible and quality reporting on mental health (The National Bureau of Asian Research, 2012).

Anso Thom (2012), a health reporter, explains that “mental health illnesses are hugely un-, mis-, and under-diagnosed;” some people do not realize that they have a mental health problem. This becomes a particularly difficult challenge for journalists who want to write a comprehensive and compelling story about mental illness since people are afraid of sharing their stories due to the stigma around the issue,

In spite of the said challenge, journalists from all over the world agree that they should be up for the task since they disseminate most of the news and information about the topic. In fact according to Picard (2014), “the single most influential

change that the media can (and should) make is to start treating mental illnesses the way they do physical illnesses: With curiosity, compassion and a strong dose of righteous indignation when people are mistreated or wronged.” Likewise, Mohuya Chaudhuri (as cited by Schneider and Hutchinson, 2012), said that once the media decided to ignore essential health problems, both the government and the public will not take proper action against it as these issues stay “off the radar”—emphasizing the importance of reporting mental health stories.

However, there is a huge difference between the international news industry and the local news industry. In countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Scotland, and New Zealand, the news media is bound by local guidelines in order to avoid misrepresentations about mental illnesses. For example, the American Psychiatric Association offers a detailed explanation of word usage which helps journalists in determining whether their reports are still considered appropriate (APA, 2017).

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, there are still no official guidelines on reporting mental health stories. According to a personal interview with Alya Honasan (Cubillas et al., 2017), Lifestyle Editor of The Philippine Daily Inquirer, the lack of proper guidelines call for more responsible reporting on the journalists’ side. This means that reporting stories about mental health patients should not be in any way judgmental or opinionated. She admits that some journalists “do not do their homework” resulting in misperceptions and misrepresentations, and she emphasizes that it should be an important rule to always be careful and as objective as possible. Needless to say, a comprehensive guideline should still be created and made available to local news agencies so as to ensure consistency when it comes to the approach and tone of mental health-related stories.

It is true that unlike before, there are far more conversations pertaining to the importance of mental health in the society, but this is not cause to rest or to be complacent. As long as there are weeping portraits and misunderstood stories regarding mental health, advocates, along with the government and the news media, should not stop pursuing better reportage and representation.. To quote a health columnist, André Picard: “Things are changing, in the media and elsewhere, but not quickly enough. For real, meaningful change to occur, we need to be conscious of our failings, of the shortcomings in coverage of mental health issues, and address them systematically.”

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**[No Title]**

*Rameel Lagahit*

# Hundred Islands

by Paolo Vergara

Verse: BM7, FM7

Chorus: BM7, FM7

Refrain, Outro: BM7, FM7

## *Verse 1:*

Forty days  
and forty nights  
out at sea  
Send out a dove,  
what sights does it see?

I'll clean this space  
We'll make that place  
Where  
we are safe with ourselves

## *Chorus:*

Day by day  
We'll keep on walking  
Day by day  
In bloom  
Day by day

## *Verse 2:*

For the longest time  
we've clung to this raft  
the only piece of land we've known  
out at sea  
When at shore:  
how do you let go?

## *Chorus:*

Day by day  
we'll keep on walking-  
We'll keep on working  
We'll keep on walking  
Day by day  
In bloom  
Day by day. . .

## *Refrain:*

One day we'll leave each other  
we can't be together, forever  
Well what do you know?  
We're never apart,  
we're always a part  
of The Whole.

## *Outro:*

We'll keep on working  
Day by day  
We'll keep on walking  
Day by day  
In bloom  
Well what do you know  
We're never apart  
We're always a part  
of the  
Whole.







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