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Fish-hair woman

Abstract

Lemon grass. When the river was sweet with its scent, they came for me. Half an hour after the Angelus, kang nag-aagaw su diklom buda su liwanag — when the dark was wrestling with the light, as we say — they came in a haze of the first fireflies. Tinsel on the green uniforms of the three men, bordering a sleeve here, circling a belt there, filling buttonholes, dotting an insignia, and smothering the mouth of the sergeant's M16. He of the sullen face — young Ramon, wasn't it? So like a dark angel with his halo of darting lights, harbinger of omens from the river. I'm sure it's lemon grass and, putang ina, too many fireflies, he said, swatting the light on his pouting lips. That night, the roots of my hair knew this was going to be the last time, the last time, and I heard keening in my scalp.

Merlinda Bobis

FISH-HAIR WOMAN

Lemon grass. When the river was sweet with its scent, they came for me. Half an hour after the Angelus, *kang nag-aagaw su diklom buda su liwanag* — when the dark was wrestling with the light, as we say — they came in a haze of the first fireflies. Tinsel on the green uniforms of the three men, bordering a sleeve here, circling a belt there, filling buttonholes, dotting an insignia, and smothering the mouth of the sergeant's M16. He of the sullen face — young Ramon, wasn't it? So like a dark angel with his halo of darting lights, harbinger of omens from the river. I'm sure it's lemon grass and, *putang ina*, too many fireflies, he said, swatting the light on his pouting lips. That night, the roots of my hair knew this was going to be the last time, the last time, and I heard keening in my scalp.

A river sweet with lemon grass and breathing fireflies — how could you believe such a tale? That night, neither did I wish to believe, but in our Iraya we had mastered the art of faith, because it was the only way to believe we existed, that our village was still alive somewhere in the south of Luzon during that purge by the military. So when they asked me to come with them to fish out the lemon grass scent and give them back the river, the one that is sweetened only by the hills, I believed, and believed too that, just then, every strand of my hair heard my heart break.

Hair. How was it linked with the heart? I'll tell you — it had something to do with memory. Every time I remembered anything that unsettled my heart, my hair grew one hand span. Mamay Dulce was convinced of this phenomenon when I was six years old. *Makarawon na buhok, makarawon na puso* — very tricky hair, very tricky heart, she used to whisper to me in her singsong on mornings when I woke up to even longer hair on my pillow after a night of agitated dreams. You had long dreams last night, child, with long memories, too, she would say.

But were you alive when the soldiers came, I could have affirmed our secret tall tale with more clarity. You see, Mamay, history hurts my hair, did you know that? Remembering is always a bleeding out of memory, like pulling thread from a vein in the heart, a coagulation so fine, miles of it stretching upwards to the scalp, then sprouting there into the longest strand of red hair. Some face-saving tale to explain my twelve metres of very thick black hair with its streaks of red and hide my history. I am a Filipina, tiny and dark as a coconut husk, but what red fires glint on my head! Red as the dahlia blooms on the hedge, the neighbouring kids used to whisper in awe a long time ago.

I was still as awesome that last night of my twenty-seventh year when the village believed everything, especially all the whisperings woven about me and

my hair. It was after all their salvation or the salvation of our beloved river, where much of daily life flowed, including sanity. This they believed with such insane hope, the way they trusted in undying love, in martyrdom and resurrection, and, of course, in beatific visions that made every road a possible Damascus; thus their comfort in the fireflies and lemon grass of the river even on that fatal day. Ay, the arm of conversion grows longer and more absurd on a desperate hour. Even thousands of miles away from the road where San Pablo was overpowered by the light of love, because of our own military persecution at the time, our Iraya thought that the river fireflies were shards of that old light. Perhaps, it would not strike the soldiers, but would smother them instead, their mouths, their eyes, their guns into dumbness or blindness, even into mercy. A conversion into something close to love. But, as I said, young Ramon only swatted the stray light on his forever pouting lips, then ordered me to get my hair ready for the river.

‘Fish with your hair, woman.’ Always that command which summed up my life. After the government declared its total war against the rebels, I realised the purpose of my being, why I had come to be such a freak of nature, why I was more hair than body, the span of it nearly thrice my whole frame. What incredible length and thickness and strength. Not my beauty as one would usually boast of this crowning glory, but my scourge, which made me feel and look top heavy, as if anytime I would be dragged down by whirlpools of black with red lights and there get lost, never to be found again.

Where is she? Always the question which passed from lips to lips, all pursed between a knowing smile and worry or pain, much like the way a mouth contorts after the first sip of good fish soup that had too much lemon in it. Where is she? Ay, washing her hair in the river, of course, or, drying it now, perhaps, combing it, braiding it — but where is she? With her hair, where else, the whole of our Iraya chuckled. Where is she? Eating with her hair, sleeping with her hair, taking her hair for a wander.

But they would never say, cutting it. If anyone as much as whispered this disaster, the whole village would have been at my door, a desperate stampede of hearts arguing, weeping for their river’s sake, for their lives’ sake — *buhok ni Estrella, kaheraki kami*. Hair of Estrella, have mercy on us. The only time when they would speak or even remember my name. Where is she? With her hair. Who is she? The Fish-Hair Woman. How little we know or wish to know of the history of our icons or our saints or our gods. It is enough that we invent for them a present and believe that they can save us from ourselves. But, no, I will not allow you to invent me, too, you who read this, so I will tell you everything. And if you need saving at all, understand that I had relinquished salvation after that last night by the river.

*lambat na itom na itom
pero sa dugo natumtom
samong babaying parasira*

*buhok pangsalar-pangsira
kang samong mga padaba
hale sa salog...*

very black net
but blood-soaked
our fisherwoman
hair to save-fish
all our beloved
from the river...

... from the river, Sergeant Ramon mumbled the refrain of this local song to the first Australian in our Iraya, while pointing the M16 at him. It was three months before that night of lemon grass and fireflies, on another night when the rifles were silvered by the moon, when I met Tony McIntyre. Trouble-maker-researcher-cum-crazy-nosy-tourist-cum-bullshitting-novelist-in-search-for-material-is-why-he-is-here-he-says, the sergeant babbled, a jealous quaver in his breathlessness. The Australian was caught spying on me as I unbraided my hair at the bank of the river, and there was a bit of a chase, an understatement by Tony who later told me that it felt like a scene from a 'Nam documentary. Among the limonsito and milflores, he thought he could vanish in a jungle of red berries and lilac blooms, his pink and white face hopefully blending with the tropical foliage, until he felt the cold nudge of steel on his nape — get up, you spying *Amerikano!* And Tony thought, thank god, I'm Australian, then stupidly broke into a run — but Ramon would never shoot anyone in front of me. Hello, I held out a hand to the ashen-faced stranger, and Ramon never forgave him.

But forgive me if I'm outrunning you who read this. This is how my hair remembers, always without restraint, quickly netting the past in a swirl of black with red fire. Such was the thought that occurred to me after the sullen boy-soldier ordered me to prepare for my final trek to the river.

'You're eating fireflies, Ramon.' A strange voice, sorrow creeping at the edges. I realised it was mine.

Under my hut's window, his lips shimmered with the tinsel creatures of the night. 'Quickly woman — and shut up!'

The two other men waited at the steps while their young sergeant charged up my stairs with a cloud of fireflies. 'Pests, pests,' he waved them away with the butt of his gun. 'This is what he brought with him, pestilence. Can't you see now?'

'Fireflies and lemon grass never hurt anyone.' My scalp ached so. Piled on my head, the braids of hair began to grow again. A chain of hand spans, too much remembering. Enough, enough, I wanted to scream at this phosphorescent boy whose face was contorted with jealousy.

'The river is not fit for drinking again, don't you know that? Lemon grass taste, bah! And the light from these flies, *putang ina!* They've scared all the fishes

away!’ His grip on my arm bordered on an urgent caress as he thrust his tortured face to mine. ‘All because you fucked him!’

Tony McIntyre, my lover who had come all the way from the base of the earth, the land of big rocks and waves, to gather our grief into print, so he could purge his own. My beloved mid-life-crisis Australian with the solemn green eyes, flecked with brown, and the perfect curve of brow. He who quoted Rilke and re-invented my Catholic angel by the light of the *gasera* at the foot of my mat. He gaped at my hair the first time I unbraided it for him. Hell, this is unreal, he murmured fervently, as if in a prayer, kissing the tips of my hair. ‘For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror...’

He wept, was horrified and ashamed the first time he came to see me take my hair to the river on a wet high noon. The soldiers were restless while the whole village waited, each one praying, please, let it not be him, not my husband’s body, or, *Santa Maria*, I’d rather it’s my son this time, relieve this endless wait, time to come home now, or, *Madre de Dios*, let her be found at least still whole, ay, my most foolish youngest. And all hearts marking time at the bank, nearly breaking in unison as I, hair undone like a net, descended into the dark waters to fish out another victim of our senseless war.

Desaparecidos. Our disappeared, ay, so many of them. And the lovers left behind became obsessed with doors — one day, my son, daughter, husband or wife will be framed at the doorway. Behind the beloved will be so much light, and we shall be overcome by the fulfillment of our waiting.

They will come back — or will they? They did, one by one, through the water’s door, from the darkness into the light.

And I served this homecoming. Fished out their bodies that returned from our river’s whirlpool, deep down from the navel of the water, while the soldiers looked the other way. They could not understand why each body was so heavy, it always sank and never surfaced, until I rescued it. It seemed to want to vanish forever — no, each body only wants to become part of the water for a while, to make sure we never forget the taste of its being, Pay Inyo, the old gravedigger, said.

Perhaps, he was right, for every time a new body was thrown into the river, the water always changed flavour, no longer sweetened by the hills but tasting almost like brine, raw and sharp with minerals. Like fresh blood, Pay Inyo understood this to be the dead one’s curse on memory, so we would never forget him or her who had been loved.

You’re crazy, your village is crazy, this is mad, a nightmare, why, how could you ... this is not happening, I don’t understand, I don’t know ... Tony wept on my wet, salty hair that had earlier wrapped the naked body of a sixteen year old *amazona*, a female guerrilla. She hardly had any face left. Dark blotches, the size of a fist, covered her pelvis and breasts that had lost their nipples. In my hut, Tony raved, twisting my black rope around his arms and face as if wanting to shut out

the vision. In his shock, he did not notice that my hair was growing several hand spans longer; I was remembering for the dead the contours of her lost face. Tony was inconsolable.

I had to take him into my home, because Pay Inyo said he would not have a man go mad in his house, it is bad luck, there's enough bad luck as it is. Besides, you're the one with some education, I only have crooked English, you know, the old man added. Ramon's eyes darkened when I led the sobbing Tony away from the bank where an eighty-year-old grandmother dumbly caressed the corpse's feet as if she were trying to remember something. I realised that, by then, my village had forgotten how to cry.

'Sissy Australian. *Bakla!*' Ramon spat at Tony's back.

Back. My back, most loved. The night before he disappeared, Tony marvelled at how thin I was from behind. You people are so thin. Your vertebrae jut out, you know, he said, counting the ladders to my nape, kissing each bone, christening every hillock with the name of a gem. Sapphire, lapis lazuli, jade, ruby ... often, I remembered his lips and the trail of precious stones on my back, and always my hair hurt.

But let's trade them for something more valuable than rungs of kisses, Tony, for something like fishes and loaves of bread — white or brown — like those in your country where it's easy to choose, because there are choices. The village has owned my hair, so why can't they have my bones as well?

'Time to go, Estrella, time to go...' Tony had hushed my bitter query.

After I fished out a boy's body, which nobody claimed, the cracks began to show. He must have been ten years old. The small head was thrown too far back, flopping behind him. Around his neck was a necklace of weeds and the fattest prawns. Thank god, it's not ours, but whose is it? We don't know. It must be from the next village. But it can't be one of the rebels; it's too tiny, too young. It is not 'it!' I screamed, and for the first time the village that had forgotten how to cry, saw that perhaps I was beginning to remember how, behind all sockets, there can be no real drought for the eye.

You who read this and shiver at this macabre war, may you never need to pretend that you have forgotten. And may you never know the kinship between fishing for the dead and actual killing. The first time you do either, you break. You, too, die within, thus you begin to practice the art of uncaring, teach your gut to behave for the sake of your own salvation, so that the next time and the next, it becomes easier to cross with mortality. Then you can at least breathe and thank heaven that it is not you who had fallen. But, somewhere at the tail-end of that numbed routine, you give once more. You break, and no amount of practice can put you back together again.

'I don't think I can do it again — ever,' my voice was so hollow, one could knock at it and hear one's knuckles echoing through.

'*Putang ina*, you're getting soft, big hair.' Ramon yanked at my braids. The black and red rope coiled at my feet.

‘I might know who is — down there — I can’t do it.’ Something was catching in my throat, I couldn’t breathe.

‘Why, you have e.s.p., too, woman?’ Around his Adam’s apple, the skin rippled as he laughed.

Before Tony arrived, I suspected that the sergeant had slyly desired me, maybe even worshipped me, in some grudging way, for my nerves of stone. After each dive, he would never look at what surfaced with me. He only stared at my brown body in the wet *tapis*, then at my face, always at my face, as if hoping to find some sign of breaking, for he never saw me weep over any of the corpses that I netted even when the whole riverbank howled. She has secret powers inside, Pay Inyo had said, thumping at his chest; in war, we need secret powers. No one knew that my hair stole all the grief from my face. How could anyone see the ache in my scalp, the trick of memory, the betrayal of nerves at the roots of my hair? Come to think of it, it’s not my ancestry, not my father’s Spanish blood, but the flush of blood from the heart that had cursed the red into my hair.

My hair, the anchor for the remnants of a village, for the soldiers, and, later, for Tony. The disappeared could at least be found for a decent burial. And the river would be restored to its old taste, sweetened again by the hills. Then we could fish again or wash our clothes there again, or gather the *kangkong* and *gabi* leaves at its bank again. It meant sustenance, as food from the town had been scarce. Even the soldiers depended on the river for their daily needs. So why dump the bodies there? The soldiers said it wasn’t them, they said the rain washed the bodies down to the river.

But how could you drink this, eat — my god! Tony gagged over the fish steamed in lemon grass after he witnessed the rescue of the young female guerrilla. The following day, he refused to eat or drink. His limbs went cold and locked around him, then he developed a chill, even as his sweat soaked my mat. He became incoherent for weeks. Nearly deranged by his strange ailment, he would scream about the lemon grass fish growing fat and swimming inside the belly of the dead girl. I thought he was going to die. I wrapped him with my hair each night to keep him warm, then fell in love.

Another river swells on desperate nights like this, flowing in the pelvis. Strange how, when close to death, we become more intimate with desire. One tries to hide it, but this river overflows. Each night, when I hushed his cries and calmed his shaking, my *tapis* betrayed me, re-weaving its flowers into fishes that circled my hipbone, which grew as luminous as the moon on the river, while the fishes swam to my breasts, biting behind the nipples. His cold, blue fingers reached for them, coaxing the fishes to leap out. Then, underneath my hair, he loved me over and over again, until the chill half-ebbed from his flesh, because I had shared it with mine — ay, dear reader, my scalp hurts again. I can hear the strands pushing out and stretching; it is the hum of memory, my beloved mumbling about winter love in the tropics, his breath tinged with lemon grass.

‘Was he that good?’ Ramon grabbed me by the waist, and pulled me to him. His young breath travelled my face from brow to chin and back. ‘Really good?’ he sniggered.

Yes, he was as good as any man who had come to the end of his journey, back to himself, but only to himself. I’ll take you away, Tony had promised. I’ll take you back with me, back to the light. And we will cut that hair.

Back to clean, sunny beaches where I could have long weekend breakfasts and gaze at the water that never changes flavour? Strange, lucky Aus-traayl-yuh, savoured in one lazy roll of the tongue — but not home, never home, Tony. He made ready to leave anyway, so he could arrange something for me, for us at his embassy. The sharpest pair of scissors to cut me off from my river.

As he was about to go, I unbraided my hair, which he could not bear to see loose after he had recovered. I spread it around the house, hoping he would understand. You know, Tony, all of this is destiny, I whispered as he left, but he never heard me. I saw lights in his eyes. He seemed happy, even inspired, perhaps at the thought of taking his lover home with her cropped mane. Time to go, he had said after we buried the ten-year-old’s body together. He had rocked me to sleep then, wondering why there were no tears though my voice cracked with sorrow. Later, he noticed the faint streaks of white at my nape. ‘For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror...’ and we have no need of that, Estrella.

Lemon grass and fireflies this time, strange, but how beautiful, perhaps a miracle, perhaps salvation, one never knows, shards of the holy light of Damascus, maybe, sent for the soldiers ... and the river, *aysus*, it does not taste like fresh blood, not at all ... Pay Inyo brought me the news. His bony frame, hunched at the bottom of my steps, was only a blur. But we want our river to taste only like our river, he made the point of his visit. I can’t do it, no, oh, god, no, please, but I knew that I could not escape my final appointment with the river. My hair awoke to the knowledge and my scalp ached as it had never ached before. I wanted to pull out every strand that heard my heart break then bang my head on the wall.

‘He wasn’t that good after all — ’ Ramon paused, slowing his words for effect. ‘Your pale sissy did not even know how to fight — like a man.’ He shoved his lips onto mine.

A stone sank in my womb. ‘You cur, you beast — *hayop!*’ I bit his lips and kicked him in the groin, then lashed out with my braids of black and red, screaming, cur, cur, cur!

‘*Putang ina!*’ He tried to duck the blows as he cocked his rifle and yelled out to his men. The welts were blooming on his face and arms, the curse of my red lights.

‘So you’re the better man? Oh, yes, pull the trigger, brave Ramon,’ I sneered, gripping my whip of hair, eyes blurred and stinging.

‘Ah, you cry after all, Fish-Hair Woman,’ the boy-sergeant smirked, deliberately laying down his weapon as he approached me. ‘But we’ll need nerves for this job, won’t we?’ His voice was dangerously tender.

I raised my whip once more. His men cocked their rifles. I let my hair fall.

‘In her heart, she knows she’ll do it — don’t you?’ Ramon unbraided my hair slowly, taking great pleasure in smoothing it out into a net, for, as he suspected, that was the first time someone other than Tony and the dead had touched my hair. The men watched this defilement in absurd respect, and the fireflies returned, circling their guns, drawing halos.

We went, a grim procession to the river, guarded by a host of flying lights, the soldiers holding my hair like a bridal train. Again, I remembered his lips and the precious stones on my back and the river in my pelvis and his lemon grass fish swimming into it from the belly of a dead girl now growing her face and nipples back, and her grandmother rubbing her feet as if trying to remember something, and the soft mound of earth singing the ten-year-old bones to sleep.

Thus the betrayal of memory, while the soldiers marvelled at how my hair grew and grew in their hands. They were in on the secret now. They knew that, once I dived into the waters sweet with lemon grass, I would never leave my heart on the bank again.