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Abstract

Three soldiers, two killed by their own guns, the third by asphyxiation. Under the berries ripening in haste: a crimson chest, a shattered groin, a snapped neck. And no moon, not even a firefly now to light the men's frozen stare, this attempt to memorise the final tableau so they can take it to the other side. It was stingy dark in the coffee grove, a no-face night. One went by feel alone.

Listen to that night when the soldiers came to take me to the river, and how the coffee grove detained us. Tony, I want you to hear my history. I want you to know my village beyond your brief, foreign idyll into war. To know the heart of terror and grief, of love—not yours but theirs. I want to wrap you in my hair, these strands that would not stop growing into story after story, into all that I remember of my village in 1987 and the years before. Stories that can save, that can kill.

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Chapter 46

From the novel *Fish-Hair Woman*

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Picture this: I freed the soldier's neck from my hair. I kept pulling back the strands, but not to save a body this time. Yes, this is my dead, I had killed him and I could not stop weeping.

Paghaya. Deep weeping. *Pag-haaaa-ya*. The wail is in the middle syllable. For some, a stifled exhalation; for others, a near-scream, but always the breath travels the full distance from the groin to the gut, welling up to the throat. It is a weeping that is not about this or that moment. It has a history as long as the distance covered by that breath.

Pay Inyo told me not to forget this lesson of weeping: 'You have to weep not from the throat but from lower down, just as in singing, so you don't grow hoarse, because it takes forever to get to the last note. Remember, weeping is like singing and vice versa, so everyone can sing, truly-truly, so let's hear you, Eya, take it from lower down, a lot of breath in there, and it does not run out, go on, sing!' our Holarawnd Man urged us in his strange logic.

In an earlier time of peace and hopeful heart, we were Pay Inyo's accomplices in his courtship of our mother. He was going to serenade her with her own children! I remember how our mouths were pampered by every delight from his glass jars and wooed to break into song. He trained us for weeks before the big night. 'Come now, breathe from down there, Pilar, and you too, Bolodoy, go on, everyone can breathe from down there.'

If only the final tableau that our dead memorise and take to the other side were about trusting that infinite breath, then dying would be kinder. None of the agonising finality, no last breath. Death would simply mean breathing at the other side, where the dead would be soothed by the thought that those who mourn them at home would not also expire, because there's a lot of breath down there, an inexhaustible well in the groin, and it does not run out. Weeping is like singing.

We were of the water octave, Pay Inyo said. Our voices were too low, strange for children, and none could surface towards a high note. ‘It’s because of all that daily swimming in the river—hoy, look up too, watch how birds take off and soar. Each bird is a note that you must catch, understand? You dive to the groin for breath then surface and fly, because singing is not about wallowing in the depth, that kind of singing is lazy.’

Listen, my love: Grief is not about wallowing in the depth. It is not lazy. Years later this logic would see me through each dive into the river, as I worked my limbs and hair, as I heaved with the weight of mangled corpses. I made myself believe each of them was my own breath that I needed to save so I could surface again. Because I knew I could never fly.

My hair was too heavy with history, even if in the water it feigned lightness, intimating the undulations of flight as I reeled each body back to the bank. But not in dry land, where memory insisted that its ponderous weight must be acknowledged, always.

Dry, heavy and still warm, that nameless soldier was swaddled in my hair. I wept, drawing breath after breath from deep down, feeling the air rise but hearing only the unmusical rasping in my lungs and throat. Pay Inyo was wrong; our kind could not sing.

‘Everyone can sing,’ he once said. ‘Look, that’s the wing of the note, watch it flap about, now snare it with that air from your throat, go on!’

‘And what’s in it for us?’ At thirteen, Pilar did not want to catch flying birds. She had the lowest voice among us and was feeling very much scolded. ‘Serenade my own mother? Ay, how ridiculous. Why don’t you do it alone? You’re Mister Holarawnd after all—well, you can win this one too, can’t you?’

‘If I marry your mother, you’ll have a daily food fiesta in my store, you’ll eat to your heart’s content and I’ll help in your sweet potato farm and I will love your mother forever and ever. These are what’s in it for all of you, truly-truly—so you’ll help me turn her heart around?’

The bridge in a love affair argues the case of the lover to the beloved, spans the river of desire. For Pay Inyo, we were his indispensable bridge. ‘Aysus, what can be a more trusty bridge than those who are already joined in blood to the opposite bank?’

‘But what if she says “no” again?’ I was seven and so afraid for Pay Inyo. ‘Then I might die,’ he said, clutching his chest and winking at me.

‘How many times have you died?’ Pilar scoffed and Bolodoy tried not to smile as he sucked a sugar-coated *dilimon*. ‘You die each time Mamay fights with you anyway,’ she continued. Master of the art of contrariness, Pilar insisted that all this wooing was a waste of time—love bridges are cursed to break.

Like my hair, a bridge for our dead, so I thought sometimes. But after each haul I saw no case to argue in the eyes of the bereaved, none to woo. For all my ferrying the dead to land, I knew they went to the other side alone.

‘From dust to dust, not from dust to water,’ Pay Inyo blessed them at each funeral. He was convinced that each rescue of a corpse from the water was a retrieval of Iraya’s peace. ‘When this river remains completely clean for a year or even half a year, we shall be able to sleep

without care, truly-truly. Then we can wake to the time when the greatest tragedy in our lives would be only an unanswered serenade or a sudden falling from trees.'

Mister Holarawnd Man with his all-around hope had taught me about faith. After I came back to life and began to grow hair, he believed that nothing in this world was beyond saving. He whooped with joy each time he saw another black root pushing out of my scalp. He lit votive candles for Saints Jude and Rita, trusted collaborators in that miracle against baldness. He turned the minds of Iraya from my mother's aberrant history towards this heavenly blessing, declaring my head capable of wonderful things, then suggested that I probably had some secret powers inside.

Thus the mythmaking began. Some remnants of my first trim found their way into his herb concoction for headaches. The rest was laid on a banana stalk, which Mamay sent sailing down the river to ensure a good-natured disposition when I grew up. Meanwhile, secretly, Pilar prayed novenas to Maria Magdalena then shampooed my hair with aloe vera, lime leaves and flowers. Bolodoy wove grass hats to protect my head from the sun and checked it religiously for fresh growth, tending my scalp like a plot of newly planted sweet potatoes. And as the old folks advised, Mamay trimmed my hair once a year, on the eve of the feast of Saint John the Baptist, to make sure that my scalp was twice blessed. Then she added her own inspiration to this repertoire of magical intentions. She made me stand on the overturned mortar for my yearly trim, believing that this wooden receptacle, where rice was pounded, would inspire more prosperity for my miraculous scalp. Finally she made sure that I never went to bed with my hair wet or else I would go mad, for this was a common belief in Iraya.

But I did go mad on nights when my hair was just beginning to grow. I dreamt of falling while singing the Alleluia, of angels descending upside down with hands folded in prayer, akin to the attitude of divers, and of coffins hanging from the dita trees along the river, like ripe fruit about to be plucked. In the morning I found that my hair had grown a handspan and Mamay Dulce was whispering in her singsong, 'You were tossing in your sleep, child. I had to hold you tight, *Dios mio*, you had long dreams again. Ay, what goes on under that little head, that very tricky hair, very tricky heart?' And she crossed herself, more out of habit than belief.

'Cross his eyes too, and close them, gently, gently.' In the coffee grove I remembered Pay Inyo's advice about the dead. The soldier's lids were smooth and curved like *kamya* buds, slightly damp and cool, with the odd fragrance of departure. 'Whatever their lives had been, all the dead must be handled kindly, because it is this moment that they'll take to the other side, so a going away tenderness if you please,' Pay Inyo had said. 'Gently shut the senses, like flowers.' But I could not close the mouth of the man I had killed. It was still screaming silently, cursing me, making the coffee berries shiver as their crimson deepened with all our doomed intentions.

'Sing is the word, not scream! So take it not from the throat, children, but from lower down. And don't eat while you sing,' Pay Inyo scolded us when we failed to catch his conjured winged note while munching some vinegar-dipped chicharon, its porky crackle punctuating our song like a greasy percussion. But the louder percussion of his breaking heart soon drowned our futile serenade. Mamay Dulce said 'no' to his sixth proposal of marriage.

There was a full moon that night and the closed window was a bluish white. The earnest man was also as ghostly, dappled with the shadows of the fart-fart leaves. Poised in his fiesta

clothes, with an arm extended and a hand on his heart, the lover craned his neck to catch every flapping note as he sang the only English song he knew—‘Oh, my love, my darling’ ... and the three of us gathered behind him in the same entreating pose, trying to echo his plaintive outpouring of ‘Unchained Melody’. But we never caught the elusive birds that flew too high for us, for Pay Inyo was a tenor. Ay, we breathed from deep down indeed and found ourselves managing only the desperate refrain about needing ‘your love’, but on a different key.

The house remained silent for too long, so Pilar went back inside and opened the window. She sang not a love song, which should have been Mamay’s response, but a teasing ditty. And at the top of her voice, which of course brought our mother out of the bedroom—

*‘Mapula-pula pisngi ni Dulsora
Tugtog mambo-jambo
Kabit ni Pay inyo!’*
Very red, the cheeks of Dulsora
The music is mambo-jambo
She’s dancing with Pay Inyo!

Then Pilar rushed back to our chorus line as Pay Inyo, seeing the beloved apparition at the window, began a more ardent rendition of his special English song. How we sang and implored our Mamay to accept Iraya’s all-around man. I heard myself sing with the most desperation, fearing for the life of our friend who had wooed us as much as this woman leaning out of the window, her smiling face bluish white and as round as the moon.

The serenade went on for too long and too desperately. We nearly outgrew the old man’s stratagems in the art of village courtship. *Turutalinga, dilimon, labyu, tira-tira, balikucha* and all delights available in his glass jars were the palate-sweeteners for us children. Flowered housedress, tortoiseshell comb, rosy lipstick or sequined velvet sandals from the city were the heart-implorers for dear Mamay Dulce. These were the gifts that he brought on his regular courting hour, three to four on a Saturday afternoon. He never visited without presents. Mamay Dulce protested against his spoiling us and, more strongly, against ‘the tarty trivia’ laid before her feet! ‘You want me to become your red woman?’ But once the scolding settled down, she fed him boiled sweet potatoes and freshly grated coconut, and the perennial rice-coffee laced with condensed milk, the latter reserved only for special guests. I saw this as proof that Mamay cared for Iraya’s all-around man, even as she turned him away and patiently explained, time and again, that she will marry no one. ‘Because of the kids, Pay Inyo, they’re my only beloved and they’re irreplaceable.’ He argued, of course, but she hushed him with her stubborn logic. ‘I’m afraid the heart has very little room.’

How much can the heart accommodate? Death and love, an enemy and a sweetheart, war and an impassioned serenade, and more. Only four chambers, but with infinite space like memory, where there is room even for those whom we do not love. Even sight is as expansive. So dear reader, when your eyes pass over these stories, consider your capacity to gather all of them, even the gaps in between, those that I dare not tell or do not know of yet or perhaps would never even imagine, but which might be utterly clear to you. Why my memories weave in and out of death and love or why I wept over the enemy as my hair grew, its red and black strands shooting from all ventricles up to the scalp, to declare that the

heartspace is not just the size of a fist, because each encounter threads a million others. The capillaries of love and war flow into each other, into a handspan of hair.

‘For me?’

‘Who’s that?’ I touched the lips of the dead soldier, but they were still and cold. I looked around for the others but nothing was visible. The night jealously guarded its facelessness.

‘The Fish-Hair Woman weeps for me,’ the voice sighed.

‘Ramon?’ I backed off, but a hand grabbed my ankle.

The sergeant tightened his grip and pulled me down. ‘For me ... ’

‘You’re alive?’

‘The white man didn’t come for you.’

‘What?’

‘He left ... away, away.’

‘You mean—Tony? He’s not in that river then—he’s not dead?’

‘Lemon grass and fireflies ...’ A chuckle sank an octave deeper, burrowing among the roots of coffee shrubs. ‘The heroine loves ... the white man.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Yet she weeps ... for me.’ The chest heaved and was still, then it heaved again, straining for the next breath. I drew closer and heard none but a distant serenade, measure after measure of dying.

‘For me.’

It was an incantation, full of sad amazement.

—Bobis, Merlinda, *Fish-Hair Woman*. North Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2012. 137-42.