

HER OWN SENTIMENTAL HOUR

Charlie Samuya Veric*

Farewell, but you will be
with me, you will go within
a drop of blood circulating in my veins
or outside, a kiss that burns my face
or a belt of fire at my waist.
My sweet, accept
the great love that came out of my life
and that in you found no territory
like the explorer lost
in the isles of bread and honey.
I found you after
the storm,
the rain washed the air
and in the water
your sweet feet gleamed like fishes.

Pablo Neruda, *Letter on the Road*

*Ang pangalan niya ngayon ay Magda o Sharon,
Ang babaeng minsang lumusong sa putik
At di nakaahon.*

Rio Alma, *Ang Babaeng Minsang Lumusong sa Putik*
You say: *I am a sweet, lovely chanteuse with many names.*

*Charlie Samuya Veric is a solitary scholar. Nostalgia keeps him.

I smile. Amused, I look at you — twirling your hair around your dirty finger. From your soiled mouth grumbling erupts like waves upon knifing rocks. The bewailing, you confess, is your incantation of grief, as though a speech in tongue.

From afar, I can hear women talk about you. *"Imaw ron ro bayi nga rong damgo hay mas mataas pa sa eopad it panganod sa eangit. Sa kataas, nakaabot imaw sa Japan ag nagkanta sa mga sakong. Sa anang pag-uli, bitbit-bitbit eon lang nana hay sangkapaead nga animo."*

With clenched fist, you warn me not to listen. You spit. Your saliva lands on my foot, thick and greenish. You apologize as you recall your journey to the land of the flaming sun and wounding snow.

I listen. Listen.

You say you make Japanese hearts melt like silver as passions harden like amber. Sadly, this has been life for you: to sing for men whose faces you can barely see, for men whose names you cannot — do not — remember. Sing for wakeful people. Like me. They applaud you — foreboding visitors whose crushing presence turns into little aches as you mother solitude in a dressing room: guilty, tormented.

From across islands and seas, in the land of your familiar are official government reports. White pages filled with intractable numbers — say: over two million overseas contract workers are scattered like lonely seeds in 125 countries. Approximately, 19 million Filipinos benefit from remittances that amount to more than \$3 billion annually. But are tears also counted? Can grief be counted?

Meanwhile, Yakuza men paint kisses on your face, strange hands create clayscapes on your legs, foul breath summons monsoons at the back of your neck. These are the encumbrances you include in countless letters to your mother.

I listen.

Letters. Oh, those delicate mails where your desires are neatly kept the way old women fold clothes of forgotten years. With difficulty, you breathe words into the mouth of a wounded yearning for home. In your letters are your brown flights of fancy sealed by a tired tongue.

As Jacques Lacan declares with the arrogance of an omnipotent eminence: "The letter arrives at its destination." And who is this man who says that a letter is a bearer of dreams, a vessel of a fulfilled promise? Is the letter a grail that holds the flesh of a woman warrior in a cold country? "[A letter] mark[s] [the] exchanges and the fulfillment of promise. [M]ost of all, the letter promises. Through the letter, the promise is never compromised." (Roland Tolentino 1997: 59)

You confide that remembrance is your redemption. You recall the pain, the anguish, the grief, the loneliness. All that exile and homelessness bring, you endure by remembering.

I listen.

At first they were a fiancée's notes, then they were little messages from a secret lover, perfumed cards from a furtive sweetheart, business papers, love documents, and lastly they were the indignant letters of an abandoned wife who invented cruel illnesses. . . . One night, in a good mood, she spilled the inkwell over the finished letter and instead of tearing it up she added a postscript: "As proof of my love I send you my tears." [Gabriel Garcia Marquez 1992: 109].

"How else can a singer like you survive in a foreign country?" I ask. You pretend not to hear my question. Indeed, you are in a land peopled with slit eyes and fracturing gazes. Amid them, you become an artful object. They glare at you with so much distrust you would want to thaw faster than snowflakes in the distant mountains of Nagano.

When spring descends in Japan, you walk around the park on a day off. Fire, cherry, and peach tree bloom immaculately. But nothing arrests you the way longing does. It is strange but the solitary magnificence of these woods reminds you of the times you spend with your young children back home. You look back to summer afternoons consumed by catching fish in drying rivers, watching the old carabao of your father, staying out late in the rice field surveying the infinite stars that hang in the sky.

On and on, I listen.

[H]ome is oftentimes marked as the locus of oppression whose debilitating rules impel women to leave it and take flight. Such flight is fraught with danger however as the home creates the conditions of a woman's domesticated culture, the politics beyond the home inflicts on her the stigma of that domestication and the ideological effects accruing to it in manifold forms. (Patrick D. Flores 1996: 22)

To your many friends, and fellow sex slaves and warriors in an unfamiliar nation, you retell your stories. Always, you infinitely wish to lessen the blister of a familiar pain, the burn of an all too common ache. How cliches hurt.

When you stare at the mirror, you see sadness smiling at you. When you gaze at the azure sky, you witness sadness floating among the clouds. When you close your eyes, you find sadness dancing like a lover in the dark. You say you can feel sadness like a cold bite on your skin.

Very, I can see sadness embracing you. I think I can no longer stand listening to you.

Opampogyakyena shinoshinonkarintsi
Sadness is looking at me
opampogyakyena shinoshinonkarintsi
sadness is looking at me

ogakyena kabako shinoshinonkarintsi
sadness is looking hard at me
ogakyena kabako shinoshinonkarintsi
sadness is looking hard at me
okisabintsatana shinoshinonkarintsi
sadness troubles me very much
okisabintsatana shinoshinonkarintsi
sadness troubles me very much
amakyena tampia tampia tampia
air, wind has brought me
ogaratinganaa tampia tampia
air has borne me away
okisabintsatana shinoshinonkarintsi
sadness troubles me very much
okisabintsatana shinoshinonkarintsi
sadness troubles me very much
amaanatyomba tampia tampia
air, wind has brought me
onkisabintsatenatyo shinonka
sadness troubles me very much
shinoshinonkarintsi. . .
sadness . . .**

(Cited by Mario Vargas Llosa 1990: 85-86)

Your grief kisses me, cloaks me, loves me. Overwhelmed, I listen even if my ears refuse to receive the aural gifts of your chant.

You say it is true that home is where the heart is.

Like the fortunate young lady in *The Wizard of Oz*, oh yes, oh you can click the heels of your gaudy shoes three times and whisper, *There's no place like home. There's no place like home. There's no place like home.* Unlike her, however, you do not disappear to return to your place — your home. So what will an exile say about home? “Home has

become such a scattered, damaged various concept in our present travails. There is so much to yearn for. There are so few rainbows anymore. [A]re metaphors of homeliness comprehensible. . .? (Salman Rushdie 1995: 93).

I tell you that you pretend not to mind your exile. Doubtless, you are a great fan of that ancient band called The Platters. How you wheel your head passionately — back and forth, up and down, left and right — when you croon: “Oh yes, I’m a great pretender. Pretending that I’m doing well. My need is such I pretend too much. I’m lonely but no one can tell.”

I ask you. Is it not dread creeping into your nerves every time you hear of a friend being sent home inside a box? How many times have you seen such news on TV, scanned it in newspapers, and read it in the letters of your mother and children? Nevertheless, you still stay in a country of dead stares not for the reason that you need to endure in spite of your fear. But because you, as you always say, have long unlearned how it is to be frightened.

As a child, you were afraid of flying. Yet you confounded such disquietude because seeing your family starve is a far more flustering scenario than spewing your insides out aboard a turbulent aircraft. So you flew third class Philippine Airlines to Japan.

You remember childhood. Those times when you took great delight in floating paper boats on the silent water of the river in your barrio. That river, that waterway that runs through all the barrios in your town is where you and your friends used to swim, naked. Now your friend, Margarita is married to a public school teacher, pregnant with her eleventh child. Anita, bless her soul, was raped and beheaded by the town policeman. Lucia, meanwhile, continues performing her vocation as a nun in a mission to Mindanao.²

In your barrio, women spend their lives waiting for their men to come home. In their spare time, they gather in circles and spin tales about their woes, their sorrows. You, however, do not tell sad stories — you sing them ruefully like a *kuliglig* trapped in mango figs.

And yet, it's easier for women. Life flows in them, a great river, in them, the perpetuators, nature is sure and mysterious, in them. Once there was Great Matriarchy, the history of peoples flowed as simply as that of plants. Then the conceit of drones: a rebellion, and then we had civilization. That's what I think, but I don't believe it. (Italo Calvino 1996: 42)

Chanteuse with many names, you indeed, are sweet and lovely.

How you break foreign hearts. How your life falls apart in a cold land.

Nakamihasnan nang parang kamatayan ang pagbabalik. Ang sabi, sinuman ang umalis ay may dadalawing pook kahit man lamang sa gunita. May sandaling mangangati ang nunal sa iyong talampakan at aakayin kang silipin ang isang lunan ng panahong matagal nang iwinaksi o pinagtampuhan.

Hindi ka pugante o ibong nagtampo. Ngunit pagkatapos ng ilang panahong paglalakbay, sabik kang ilatag ang pagal na likod sa nagisnang banig sa nagisnang sahog sa nagisnang nayon. Higit itong banal sa uhaw ng pusong sinikil mo noon; higit na matimbang sa mga diwata at kaway ng layaw sa ibang pantalan at himpilang lungsod. Ibig mong bumalik. Sapagkat nais mong humimlay sa lupang hindi ka dayuhan. Sapagkat nangungulila ang lukso ng dugo, at nangangarap ka ng katutubong apat na kandila.
[Rio Alma 1984: 109)

Chanteuse par excellence, why do you not tell your true name? Say it, I am listening.³

(something moves
inside me. so i bend
my head toward my knee —
ear touching legs:
my body like a snail's.

listen: solitude is crashing.
i always lose lovers and men
who love me so much
but i don't love back

because something moves
inside me: telling me
to move away
from the stars
that make me sick
whenever i look up)

ENDNOTES

¹English translation of the Aklanon: "That's the woman whose dreams flew higher than the clouds in the sky. So high she reached Japan and then sang for Japanese men. When she came home, she carried nothing on her palms but a handful of sanity."

²What will the scribe recall, who through herself already tells of the stern destiny of all these women forever condemned to pregnancies, who, in order to foresee the day's weather and figure out what labors to take on, are expert at deciphering the prophecies of the wind, of dusk, or of the misty halo which sometimes seems to ooze out of the moon; these women who, while fighting—as much as men—to survive, made what is known as a fatherland, and whom calendars reduce to a few noisy holidays, to a vain

glory after which streets are named? (Hector Bianciotti cited in Patrick Chamoiseau 1997)

'What is a name, Chanteuse, what is in a name?

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