

Gutierrez MANGANSAKAN II

Salam! Motherland

*To whom do we tell what happened on the Earth,
For whom do we place everywhere huge mirrors
in the hope that they will be filled up and will stay so?*

-Czeslaw Milosz

It was an endless summer, my grandmother would tell me, with perpetual red afternoon skies made more ominous by steel dragonflies cutting through the humid air, dropping balls of fire that left trails of smoky ruins of what had once been homes of people forced into a senseless doom. The evening atmosphere was pregnant with news of more soldiers being deployed into the heart of Moroland and, report about fallen rebels or comrades—depending on which side you were on—adding to an already long list of *sabeeds*¹.

The year was 1976. It was the peak of a war between the Philippine government and the Moro National Liberation Front, a movement which was fighting for an independent Muslim state in Mindanao. A revolutionary wrote that the war was so massive and bloody “practically the whole of Mindanao and Sulu was a virtual inferno” as though careless hands had punctured the sun unleashing its scourge upon the land.

My mother was carrying me for eight months when I raged inside her womb. She was already thirty-five then, an age considered late and dangerous for child bearing, so the doctor decided to deliver me through caesarian section. According to my father, I was the size of an eight-ounce bottle of Coca-Cola when I was born. A lamp hanged above me in my crib to incubate me like the yellow chicks which would dot the provincial landscape of my childhood. Perhaps this premature arrival into the world would explain a prominent mark in my character: I was impatient. Cursed with a restless imagination, I wanted to try things as soon as they came to mind, sometimes oblivious of the consequences.

I grew up in a red house in my mother's native town of Pagalungan, in Maguindanao Province. It was an imposing structure not only due to its size but because it seemed out of place in an agricultural town that had witnessed armed conflicts for decades. Built by my grandfather, Datu Udtog, in the late 1960s, it was a two-storey building with an arched roof protruding gracefully from its four sides, shaped like the heads of herons. Fruit trees lined each side of the house that blossomed in summer except for a date palm whose infertility (a result of its growth in foreign soil rather than a flaw in its nature) limited its purpose to welcoming visitors into the front

¹ *Sabeed* (Arabic) Martyr

porch. It was a house a child could easily lose himself in. It had enough nooks to hide during a game of hide-and-seek except in that one room on the second floor housing my grandmother's *oulan*² which she forbid us to enter. At the back of the house was a small pond that held a pair of turtles.

Sometimes, I would accompany my cousins to a variety store across the road for an afternoon treat of banana-cue. In jest, we called it banana-*kyab*. *Kyab* is a Maguindanaon word which means 'to fan,' an action required to keep the charcoal in the grill burning. I was told that a movie house once stood in the area occupied by the store. It was called Dipatuan Theatre. It fell in ruins during the early part of the war in the 1970s. All that was left of the movie house was a white wall, standing defiant like the seventeenth century Maguindanaon ruler and hero Sultan Dipatuan Muhammad Kudarat in whose honor the cinema was named, refusing to bow down to the march of time.

When I asked people to tell me the details how the cinema was destroyed, nobody could give me a straight answer. It was many years ago, they would all say. Was it so painful that they have erased this part of their past from memory? I remember a scene from Giuseppe Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso* where everybody gathered to see the movie house for the last time before it was torn down. In my people's case, was it a collective forgetting? I am curious what became of the bulky projector, or the prints of movies that once flickered on the screen. Like the character Alfredo in the film, I know the projectionist has his own account. But that's another story.

Let's go back to the red house. It was not built purposely as a family residence. It was intended as a bank, one of many red structures my grandfather had envisioned for the provincial capitol of the Cotabato Empire when he was governor from 1946 to 1949, and from 1955 to 1968. To this day, everybody refers to it as '*Bangko*' in deference to a lofty dream.

I remember a hotel on the northern side of the house. Bordered by palm trees, it had a large patio where we used to spin tops fashioned out of unripe star apple and a nail. During harvest time, the air was filled with the heavy smell of tobacco emanating from the ground floor of the building which served as my grandmother's storage room for tobacco leaves and other farm produce. Still vivid in my mind was a visit of my paternal grandfather, Datu Bitol, a mystic, who lived in the nearby town of Pikit. He became distressed as soon as he entered the building. When asked what the matter was, he said he could hear a big snake. Was it a mere hiss or an intelligible message passed telepathically to him? I did not dare ask the old man. He stood up and asked everybody to leave the area. Armed with a stick, he began searching the ground floor for the creature. Moments later, he found a python, just as he had assumed, nestling on the tobacco leaves.

Farther down the dirt road west of the hotel was the municipal hall where my mother held office as mayor. I scarcely remember anything about it except its red paint and the floor was

² *Oulan* (Maguindanaon) Loom

elevated as if it was standing on stilts. I was told that a hospital stood next to the building but it was destroyed before I was born. It was one of the earliest casualties of the war.

At the age of six, I began my formal education in Davao, a city some five hours away by bus. It was the first of a series of disconnections from home. It was a gradual cutting of the umbilical cord that tied me to my mother town.

I would return to Pagalungan during the summer break. Together with my cousins, I was taught the rudiments of the Arabic language in a *madrasah*³ located in the town's central district. I must admit that I learned little beyond the recitation of the alphabet. I would doze off fifteen minutes into the lessons. There were times when I sneaked out of classes to buy rubber bands, marbles, and candies from a row of stores connecting the madrasah to the market. I was often reprimanded by the *ustadz*⁴. He warned that when I die, Arabic was the only language understood in heaven. If I failed to speak correctly, I would be sent me to the eternal fire. It was such a terrible thought that it caused me sleepless nights.

In 1982, my grandfather suffered a stroke that paralyzed his entire body. He was in the hospital in Davao for some time before the family decided to transfer him initially to his house in the city, then months later, to the red house, where a room was converted into a medical facility. As it was the middle of a school year, I would come home every other weekend to visit him.

That same year, my mother started to build a house of her own. It was located east of the red house, in an area populated by more trees and gigantic rocks. It had large windows overlooking a lotus-filled lake. On certain occasions, my brother Anwar and I would catch silver and golden *tumaginting*⁵ from its clear waters. The lake had since dried up, giving way to a cornfield that settlers, most of them refugees who fled armed conflicts, cultivate to earn a livelihood.

I could imagine myself now standing before the lake, just as it was on those sunny mornings, excited about the promise of fish in shimmering colors only to realize that fishing is a difficult task. I have to keep my hand still while trying not to make the slightest sound lest I scare the fish away. In the same manner, the experience of writing these memories, unventilated all these years, floods me with so many emotions. It unravels not just one episode of the past but a whole string of memories. It is like collecting an important piece of heirloom from the bottom of your grandmother's ornate chest, concealed by heavy quilts that have become musty from years of disuse, and in desperate need of airing. But I remind myself that piecing together the disjointed and seemingly incoherent events of my past would not make one singular memory out of them. The landscape of my childhood would always evoke distinct, sometimes opposing sentiments.

I became aware of the traditions of my noble Maguindanaon ancestry in the red house. My

³ Madrasah (Arabic) School; in the Philippines, it refers to Muslim schools

⁴ Ustadz (Arabic) teacher

⁵ Tumaginting (Maguindanaon) A type of fish

grandmother introduced me to the ways of the spirits. She said that it was important for me to get acquainted with its rituals because I was born with a *duping*, a benevolent spirit twin. I was bound to this spirit which would act as a guide throughout my life. In times of need, I could ask the spirit for favors by performing necessary rituals. I remember the vibrant details of the *ipat* ritual: the rhythm of the *tagunggo*⁶ as it summons the spirits; the carefully prepared offerings consisting of grilled chicken (unsalted and flavored mildly with turmeric, just as the spirits like it), mounds of cooked rice topped with boiled eggs in the shape of crocodile, and coconut water; and the graceful movements of the shaman as the permeating smell of incense finally induces a trance that is at once beautiful and horrifying. To seal my affinity with unseen entities, I was made to wear yellow and red strings around my wrist. This was long before Hollywood's obsession with Kabala and its signature \$25 red string bracelet became en vogue.

A few years ago, my cousin Tarhata informed me that our grandfather founded the Muslim Independence Movement on May 1, 1968 in the house. It was his reaction after sixty-four Muslim trainees were killed on Corregidor Island, in what is now popularly known as the Jabidah Massacre. The victims were reportedly part of a team undergoing secret training to invade neighboring Sabah, Malaysia, which to this day the Philippines claims to be part of its territory. The Movement might not have sustained its momentum but it paved the way for the founding of other Moro liberation groups.

One could conjure up images of what transpired in the house from that historic May Day onwards that sparked the Moro people's revolution spanning almost forty years now.

My mother's house was a different case. I discovered worlds beyond what my limited imagination could probably conceive at that time. I believe the reason for this was literature. My mother devoted an important section of the house to a library. Dr. Seuss shared the bookshelves with Nabokov, Tagore, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Lewis, Hemingway, Dickens, and a complete set of encyclopedia. Mao would have loved to see the collection of Marxist literature blending well with books on soil analysis, cereal crops, plant diseases, history of agriculture --realizing peasant dreams! My father accumulated most of the books, together with peacock feathers left by the birds roosting on the roof of his apartment while studying in India.

The grounds around the house became a vast movie studio which we children transformed into the icy wasteland of Narnia, a carnival in Verona, or the Emerald City of Oz.

One December evening in 1982, after a long day staging another one of our grandiose literary adaptations, an emissary arrived in the house to announce that my grandfather had passed away. It was my first experience of a person dying. I do not remember anyone dying before. I did not know what to expect when we walked to the red house that night. A strange silence enveloped us. There was no need for words. Looking at everyone in the eye, we understood a truth so final that it could never be undone.

⁶ Tagunggo (Maguindanaon) A musical piece used in rituals

Some would say they heard a loud thunder, while others would add that they felt a tremor the moment my grandfather passed away. I was not familiar with these events until some years later. Auntie Bai, my mother's eldest sister, told me that an invisible rope is cut when a person dies. This rope is a link between the person and a divine source. This cutting produces a popping sound. Depending on the significance of the person, it could sound like a bursting bubble or a thunder.

"Your grandfather was a very important and powerful figure. The earth shook when it bowed its head to bid him goodbye," she said.

At dawn the next day, a mix of people had gathered in the house. Members of the family who lived in the cities soon arrived. Images of that frenetic day come to me now in fragments. The only thing clear to my mind was a luminous whiteness. Everybody wore white. The women had white veils on. The men tied white scarves around their heads. The red house was covered in white cloth. White flags fluttered along the stretch of the highway. It was like seeing the clouds draping the earth. I imagined that heaven was mourning, too.

A huge crowd came for the funeral procession, which brought my grandfather's body to its final resting place near the entrance of the family mosque.

A series of *kanduli*⁷ lasting seven days was held following the death of my grandfather. The grounds became a big kitchen. In a corner, the smell of turmeric saturated the air from the sumptuous *pinamilit a manok*⁸. From a distance, you could hear somebody shouting orders because the simmering *sinina a sapi*⁹ needed more firewood. Batter was carefully mixed to make sure it had the right sweetness for the crunchy *tinagtag*¹⁰. Food was prepared in heavy pots endlessly. There was always something cooking even in the middle of the night.

After the last *kanduli* on the seventh day, we rewarded ourselves—the adults for their hard work and the children for their good behavior-- by taking a dip in the river located at the back of the family mosque. We rode a boat to an islet in the middle of the river where cousins, uncles, aunts, and other relatives had already gathered. I remember staring intently at the river. It filled me with ecstasy. Despite its brown color, I could see my reflection on it. It was a dazzling liquid mirror.

A year later, I continued my education in Cotabato, which was nearer to home compared to Davao. What followed was an absence of more than twelve years, punctuated by short visits to vote during elections, bury a dead relative, or see my grandmother. In the course of my absence, the hotel and municipal hall buildings were demolished. The red house became the residence of

⁷ *Kanduli* (Maguindanaon) Ritual feast

⁸ *Pinamilit a manok* (Maguindanaon) Chicken stewed in coconut and turmeric

⁹ *Sinina a sapi* (Maguindanaon) Beef stew with ginger and peppers

¹⁰ *Tinagtag* (Maguindanaon) A crunchy delicacy made of rice flour and sugar that resembles fried noodles

Uncle Jun, my mother's youngest brother. A few years later, he abandoned it and moved to Davao.

My mother's house became the repository of things we no longer use in the city, from old furniture to clothes we outgrew. The collection of books also increased with textbooks, yearbooks, airline magazines, recipe books, and paperbacks, making their journey into the library almost every year.

In 2000, I returned to Pagalungan hoping to find much needed inspiration in my mother town. I was a journalist who wanted material for a documentary. I studied filmmaking in Manila three years earlier. While my classmates had successfully ventured into commercial moviemaking, I was still entertaining my existentialist ruminations, searching for myself in the sea of dreams.

Driving home, the fire trees along the highway greeted me with a warm, burning glow. It was a beautiful profusion of colors. The flowers were the red flames of my longing to reunite with my mother town, scarlet as the banner of the mighty Bantugan against the sky. It was a welcome full of portent and poetry.

I barely slept during my first night back home. Maybe it was the smell of mildew that has become unusual to me in my absence, or the eerie silence of the evening which was interrupted only by the orchestra of cicadas, frogs, geckos, and mosquitoes. When I forced myself to sleep, everything came alive as if the walls were speaking to me, revealing deep secrets like silent witnesses of a distant but still familiar past.

I sprinted out of bed as soon as I felt the sun caress my skin the next day. I set out to see the Pagalungan that I used to know, and perhaps, find out if there were any changes.

The red house was waiting quietly as though it has exhausted its need for words all these years. Once a symbol of prestige, time has been diminished in so many ways. The color seemed more pink than red. The jalousies were missing. So were the doors, made of the best timber. If the house could speak to me that morning, what transgressions would it confide to me?

The roads were still unpaved. I was lucky to have arrived in town way before the rainy season because thick mud would have clung to my shoes adding inches to my already tall frame. Remind me to make *kadang-kadang*¹¹ when rain arrives, I joked to the townspeople I met as I walked the limestone road, knowing fully well that money had long been disbursed by the national treasury but has somehow missed its journey and, instead, took a detour into the personal bank accounts of our local leaders. Anyway, I could not put names to the faces of the townsfolk but I knew them from childhood despite the invasion of wrinkles, silver-gray hair and gout in their once indestructible bodies. They were the living monuments of a glorious and, oftentimes, bitter history my mother town had endured.

¹¹ Kadang-Kadang (Maguindanaon) Wooden stilts, a popular contraption among children

My grandmother was seated in her red lounge chair when I arrived at her house. Ever since my grandfather died, she moved to a house adjacent to his grave. *I am one hundred years old*, she would tell me repeatedly in the first five minutes of our conversation, her hand motioned with authority as ever, but this time with a great deal of urgency as though my life depended on it, reminded me not to forget where I came from. I was barely a quarter of her age. Hearing words from the single most important witness to the history of Pagalungan, the bearer of important traditions of my noble ancestry, I realized that I was indeed back home.

Barely a month since my arrival, the President declared an 'all-out war' against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. None in the long history of the Moro people's revolution could surpass the destructive effects of that single war when about a million people were forced to leave their homes. Aside from bullets and bombs, they also had to contend with the threats of disease and famine in over-crowded evacuation centers.

To help in the crisis, the family decided to welcome refugees into the red house. In less than a day, the number of refugees swelled to tens of thousands. As the house could not accommodate the great number of people, makeshift tents sprouted on the surrounding areas like mushrooms after a thunderstorm.

Armed with a borrowed video camera, I took footage of the daily lives of the refugees, preserving the digital images as memory. But the long hours of shooting everyday left me stricken with grief. To console myself, I would retreat to my mother's house. Stepping into the library, I ran my fingers through the books and smiled as memories of green ham and eggs, the conversation between the fox and the Little Prince, and Paul Bunyan came alive again.

There are times when I tell myself that I have become a stranger in my mother town. There are things that I am still beginning to discover and understand. Still I seek comfort in my memory of the two houses. After all these years, they are the only things I have of home. These memories are always fertile with ideas for works that transcend the personal, acquiring a universal resonance. More than that, remembering means bearing witness, keeping a sense of rootedness that continues to shape me into becoming my own person.

After the war, I collaborated with a poet on a loose script, and before the year was over, I made my first film, *House Under the Crescent Moon*. It was a personal reflection on the war using the red house as metaphor. I juxtaposed my childhood memories with refugee narratives to weave a lyrical tale of our collective longing for peace.

In the last sequence of the film, there is a tracking shot of the highway leading to the red house, tracing the same journey of self-discovery that I made. The voice over narrates, "I have finally found myself back home. The house of my grandfather has become a house of memory and a house of history. Its open doors and windows mirror our deepest hopes, our most vivid dreams."

Children of the jihad

they were playing marbles
digging holes in the ground
when they were gathered, told
to leave behind kids' stuff
and follow the long trail
to the veiled oasis
at the foot of *badr*

dragging their reed thin legs
seven-year-olds set out
in a great caravan
moving across barren
fields, traversing marshlands
and treacherous mountains
choked by the choruses
of a mad prophet's chants

returning home at dusk
their mothers would receive
dog weary sons who now
believe the world burns like
coal in the *houris'* eyes.
with their hallowed visions
they've acquired the sense of
bold letters and numbers
inscribed in cold black steal
names of the mighty gods:

RPG, M-16
Howitzer, 105
AK-47.

The Tempest

I.

hush child
the thunder might hear
your voice
bury your face in the pit
of my arms

don't let the lightning
recognize itself
in the black of your eyes.

recite *al-fatihah**
hold tight,

the storm will soon be
over.

II.

mother
my back is strong now.
have faith.
please don't let go of your grip.
i won't.

we leave to safety.
shed no more than a tear
memory betrays.

can you hear the sound of
their march?

the village will soon be
empty.

Al-Fatihah, or Opening Prayer, is the first chapter of the Qur'an.