

Edgar Calabia Samar
excerpt from the novel *Walong Diwata ng Pagkahulog*
and two poems

Eight Muses of the Fall

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A FEW MOMENTS before the young man pushed him off the cliff, Daniel remembered when he was five, the first time he was led astray by the tiyanak, child-trickster of the woods: Nestled between the roots of a kalamyas tree, his neck sticky with sweat, he promised himself he'd never go out to play again once the sun had set. It was almost midnight when his Uncle Tony found him, still snuggling up to the roots, dirty and grimy and with eyes wide, staring at the darkness. *It's probably almost midnight here, too*, Daniel thought to himself as the young man's hands dug unto his side, pushing him off the cliff. He considered fighting back but he had already lost his balance. It was only when he was sure that there would be no escaping the fall that Daniel felt a sense of loss, of regret. Why now, he thought, why did he have to die now, when, finally, he had a story to tell.



To: <arcangel_81@yahoo.com>
From: <delka_linar@gmail.com>
Subject: Atisan, et. al

Hey Atisan Boy! What's up? Friendster and these online social network things never fail to surprise me ha ha ha. Of course I remember you. How can I forget our storyteller? It's good to finally hear from you. I wrote you letters, man. I always thought you were just too lazy to write back. Erik and I still write to each other. He just emailed me the other day. He always talks about you. But he never talks about Atisan. Just that one time.

Man, I miss Atisan. Even though I'm not really from there. Or maybe I just miss your stories about Atisan. Would you believe that I found this monograph on the place? Couldn't believe it myself. Stumbled upon it while doing some research for one of my college papers here years ago. I was that loyal to you then; I always thought of Atisan even when I was here in Canada. You should read it. I mean, the monograph, not my paper, ha ha ha. I sent you a copy, but it looks like it never reached you. God, that was so long ago. I know Erik got a copy. I always thought that he might've shown it to you.

What's up with you and Erik? Sometimes he'd send me these weird emails. You know him; he's always been the quiet one, always wanted to be the guy with the mystique, ha ha ha. He'd tell me that you and Michael thought he'd already died. That there was even a funeral. He's always wondering why you guys don't seem to see him anymore. Whenever you go back to Atisan, Erik says that the three of you get together for a drink, but Michael and you talk as if there were only the two of you there. You don't even give him so much as a glance. Jesus, that guy's stories scare the hell out of me. I even told him that if I go back home, I'd kill him myself if he didn't stop with the stories.

But I probably won't get to go home soon. I already have a job here. And it costs so much—the plane fare, etc. And you—I heard you haven't even graduated yet. You have something against graduations? A

phobia, maybe? He he he. And oh, Dustin's growing up. Have you heard?—I have a kid now. But Marissa and I never married. I guess you don't know Marissa, either. She's the girl I live with. Dustin's turning three next month. Maybe someday I'll take him home. Bring him to Atisan. The boy speaks perfect English, I tell you, ha ha.

Would you believe that when I sent Erik the manuscript I was telling you about, he said that it was all made up. He was so angry in that email. I told him he didn't have to take it so seriously. I didn't even know who wrote that thing. There was a byline, though; I just forgot the name. It was written by a girl, man. And you know why Erik was so angry? Because—and this was the only time he mentioned the place in all the emails he sent—because, he said, there's no such place as Atisan. Would you believe that? And he meant it literally. There's no such place as Atisan!

Man, what's happening to Erik? I'm glad you wrote, that you finally found me. Erik never remembers to give me your email address. Or maybe he does it on purpose. I didn't know how to reach you, man. I was always sending you letters, cards during Christmas, but I don't think they ever got to you. Maybe there was something wrong with the address you gave me? Sometimes I get to thinking, fuck it, maybe there really is no such place as Atisan. Only sometimes, you know, because it's weird, right? I mean, why don't you get any of my letters? But I always come to my senses, because of course I've been there. I've seen Atisan. But you know what, there was this time when I looked at the map of San Pablo—I searched for it in the internet—and I couldn't find Atisan. Anyway the map was so small, and you could only see the bigger barrios. It can't possibly name the more than 80 barrios in San Pablo, right? So maybe that's why I couldn't find Atisan.

You know, sometimes I get scared: What if there really is no such place as Atisan? What if Atisan was just part of your stories, just a place you imagined? That line of thinking gives me the creeps, man, because it says something about me, too. I mean, what if even I was just someone you imagined? God, I'd go crazy if that were the case. I mean, even my fingers, typing this email, my fingers could just be doing their part in feeding your fantasy. O, Atisan boy, see—I can be a storyteller too. Ha ha ha.

But seriously man, when was the last time you went home to Atisan? Is it really still there? Hey, I meant that figuratively, don't get offended, okay? Another way of thinking about it, man: Maybe there isn't just one, single Atisan. I mean, the world's a huge place, right? It's possible that there are a lot of other Atisans. Maybe several in the Philippines alone. I don't think anyone's been able to set foot on the whole country for us to say for sure. And is that even possible? You know what I mean.

But that doesn't mean that your Atisan isn't special, man. Our Atisan. Of course it's special. But only for us. For you, for Michael, for Erik. For your grandmother and your uncle. Your Dad. For Orange. Hey, man, did you guys ever get together? Erik's never mentioned anything about it. But you get it, right? Nothing's special in itself. You know that, of course. There's always someone else, other people, who make us special. We are never special just by being who we are. Ha ha, how's that for waxing philosophical? I mean, for example, Dustin's special to me, and to Marissa, but he's not special to every person he meets on the way to wherever, or to every kid he gets to play with. Some might say, hey, that's a cute kid. But it stops there. And it's the same with a lot of people he's going to meet as he grows older. God, why am I saying this. I know you get what I mean.

I think this email's getting a bit too long. Just want you to know that I'm glad you wrote. I have this weird feeling, though, that the road somehow ends here. That's why I'm taking this as far as it can go. I mean, even friendships should end somewhere, right? You were my friend; well, you still are. But I just remember you, your name, singing that Beatles song, humming, I can even see our feet as we walked, I still carry the faint smell of our mornings in Mount Banahaw, but I'm sorry, man, I can't remember your face. I'd probably recognize you when I see you, but you know what I mean. You don't even have a picture in your Friendster profile to remind me of how you look. It would've been great to see you again, even if it were only in a picture.

I call this the Atisan syndrome. Images fading. Slowly. Exhaustively. Until I totally forget that I even knew those images, that I had a memory of them, even. You—would you recognize me if we saw each other? Weird, isn't it? How many years has it been? Five? Six? The things we forget in less than a decade. We were better at keeping

memories when we were younger, don't you think? But we are young. Blame this on the Atisan syndrome. When you leave some place, you go on living as if the place you left behind doesn't exist anymore, it's just there, static, in your past. As if it stopped existing the moment you left. So that you won't feel so guilty about leaving.

You know what? I realized that places have souls too. Like when we see something beautiful, or a beautiful place—for instance that view in Banahaw when we were at the top—isn't it that we always say, this place is so alive. So alive. So maybe it's possible too that places die. We know this, I mean, literally. So many civilizations have been lost in history. If Atisan really did exist, could it be possible that now it's dead? That Atisan doesn't exist anymore?

Hey man, don't mind me if this sounds weird to you. You know how it feels, to be miles away from home, to be confronted with all these existential questions. Who am I? Ha ha ha. What is my purpose in life? And then, in the end, we all surrender.

The day I first read your message—you see, I don't regularly open my Friendster account—I was reading a book on love. On love, man, ha ha. That's why it took me some time to finally write this letter. Yes, I still read books, write the occasional poem, get drunk to Beatles songs. If we'd only met now, here in Canada, I believe we could still be friends. That thought really helped me work on this email. I'd like to think that there's still something I forgot to say, even though this is by far the longest email I've written in my whole life. But whatever I forgot, I don't know what it is anymore. I can't think anymore. Just take care of yourself, man.

Glen

*Translated from the Tagalog
by Mikael de Lara Co & Sasha Martinez*

There Is No Fire Goddess

The first to be consumed in her were our memories.
We forgot her the way we burned things

that we wanted consigned to the past. That's why now
we could return to nothing but the grief

of other goddesses: Cacao, Makiling, Sinukuan.
We stare at the conflict and wonder

why no myth of fire resides anywhere
within our breast and consciousness.

What nymph stole Ladlao's flame,
our sun god, to fill her body

with life's warmth? We are lovers whose past
spill with emptiness yearly in the dry

and rainy seasons. Surviving our swiddens
burned out of forest, why are we frightened still by the slash

and warning from nature: wind thrashing
and floods raging in heart of city lashed by typhoon; earth

cracking in parts visited by temblors.
Our hearts are numb in the mingling

of water, earth, and wind, that's why we ask:
when will it rage, the fire in the breast?

She must have disappeared at the time when forests
were burning, and we were ashes who were left loving

her—which was forbidden because it was ordinary:
if we got just a bit closer our bodies burned.

And so we say now: there is no fire goddess,
even as we grieve over victims of conflagration

or can't sleep in Amihan's cold during the rainy season.

While Mad

To one who loves, there are moments when the mind

is not here: it is flying, unlike this body
walking the present's tightrope
of lies. There are days when to other

lands and times of fiction and history
the mind flies: There, concealed from the Emperor,

is a child from a liaison with a whore. To another one:
love came to the princeling's daughter
while sailing among waves from other seas

and it offered the mirror and comb of faith.
Their worlds would never meet

except in the imagination of poets. This is the legend
of creators: looking deep into what's passing
and insisting on picking up what's left behind—

perhaps a phrase, an accent or syllable, and meaning

even as the rivers

of old civilizations have drowned, or the months
have swallowed, what the words said,
or they're covered with dust, or killed in war.

Only the mad will be at peace in the changing
of worlds that vanish in the now, I thought.

But they are lovers who put their faith in words,
who will forgive even those who wipe out
whole races, even in so many words,

except in what was not said, which to me was the last you said.

Translated from the Tagalog by Marne L. Kilates
