

Gutierrez Mangansakan II

Travelling Without Moving

*Wherever you wonder
There's no place like home.*

-Elvis Presley, 'There's No Place Like Home'

TEXAS can fit right smack in the middle of my brother's navel. It was an unusually deep terrain, a cavernous and frightening topography, a dried up trench. If he chose to be showy –which was almost all the time– he can add a dime or two and whatnots as well.

Texas was a brand of bubble gum we enjoyed in our childhood. It came in tiny pink and blue squares, wrapped in glossy wax paper. Once the flavor had been exhausted, it usually ended up in our belly buttons. We competed about who could fit more things down there. I was the perennial loser, which was not really a bad thing considering I got a lesser spanking from our grandmother whose responsibility it was to look after us. Armed with a rug moistened with cooking oil she would begin the arduous task of cleaning our belly buttons, removing stubborn traces of gum and dirt.

“Your navel is sensitive,” our grandmother warned us. “If it gets infected you might die.” I would look at my brother in the eye. We nodded silently then walked away as we looked forward to yet another ‘Texas game’ the following week.

In the anatomy lessons of my childhood, the navel got the second most important attention – next to what's between the legs. Whenever I was disobedient, my mother, in her angry tone, exposed her tummy and reminded me that I came from her. At first I was confused. Was she referring to her navel or the ugly scar of the C-section? But in a warped little way I always understood her point. We shared a connection.

Sitting alone in a small room, in a red brick house more than 8,000 miles away from home, the connection remains strong. Two nights ago in my dream my mother came to Iowa City. She was dressed in a classic *enaul* tied around her breast, with hair fixed into a neat chignon, plum-red Estee Lauder accentuated her full lips. “Eat son,” she told me, placing a plate of food on my table. I awoke to the invasion of warm, bright sunlight creeping into the slants of the venetian blinds.

I carry a weather-beaten grey backpack, a constant travel buddy, every time I visit a foreign city. Stashed inside it are bits and pieces of home. Although I have mastered the chameleon's gift to blend in a new environment –punctuating every sentence with a *La* in Kuala Lumpur, perfecting the 60-degree angle bow in Tokyo or partying with reckless abandon in New York– home always betrays me. Despite all efforts to conceal this, it always finds a way to scream for attention like a drag queen in 8-inch stilettos.

At the immigration counter, for instance, Malaysian officers would put on a wary look after inspecting my passport. Another Filipino planning to be a *TNT* (illegal migrant). Sometimes, when I think all the aces have run out, I'm forced to declare that I'm Muslim to make them, how should I put it, more welcoming. Conversely, in a post 9/11 world, I will never disclose my religious affiliation to immigration officers in the U.S. I'm thankful that my parents didn't give me a self-incriminating name like Faisal or Mahmoud (not that there's something organically wrong with it), or else I will suffer the same fate the Maliks and Abdullahs had to endure in the Detroit airport, who were interrogated for long hours by Department of Homeland Security authorities. I balk at the idea that in San Francisco a balding immigration officer, who, judging from his bone structure and last name, was himself born into an émigré family of banana plantation workers who escaped the harsh conditions in South America, had to offer unsolicited advice to foreigners, especially if you're from the Third World. "If you plan to die, die in your own country." Jetlagged I would quip, "I'm only here to buy wine."

*I heard that Cali never rains
and New York heart awaits.*

-Estelle, 'American Boy'

Like more than half of my countrymen, I have thought of migrating to another country. The U.S. always comes on top of the list because, as a citizen of its former colony, I have a familiarity with its culture and the necessity to learn another language, unless I plan to live in Kentucky or Louisiana, is nil. There are four million Filipino-Americans in this country, making them the second largest Asian immigrant group.

The idea of migrating first came to mind in 2005, when I was an artist in residence at the Asian Art Museum, in San Francisco. But I was a grandma's boy, so I returned to my country because the thought of not seeing her again filled me with guilt and dread. My grandmother died two months after I got home.

A year later, when the Philippine economy had turned from so-so to bad, and my writing career seemed to be going nowhere, not to mention the prospect of the vice-president—who I would describe as Palinesque at best—succeeding the lady in the Palace has become imminent, I told myself it was time to ship out.

"What will you do in the States?" My cousin asked me when I brought up the topic of migration.

"I want to be a published writer there," I answered, haughtily. It was not anywhere close to being a nurse or special-ed teacher, the certified Philippine export commodity nowadays. But with the inflation rate skyrocketing and the per-column-inch pay for articles not improving, I felt that I was left with little options.

"And what would you do while waiting for the big break?"

I was silent for a moment. It never crossed my mind. I thought of teaching in a community college or a university, but I didn't know if I had a competitive advantage, or the patience to teach teenagers

on the brink of emotional disaster. What else can I do? I don't have the knack for waiting tables or bartending, perhaps. I'll be drunk before my clients are.

I'm not good at housekeeping, either. It's like algebraic expressions to me, a subject that I was so poor at in college I had to take it seven times. If it's any indication, my white sneakers, muddied from the September rain, remains unwashed for weeks now. I tried Google-ing 'How to wash sneakers' a couple of times, but I'm just not up for the task. I'm so used to having servants do my bidding. I'm pretty sure that if I venture into housekeeping, I will get fired during my first hour on the job.

I'm sounding like a spoiled aristocrat, but if I really want to survive on my own as an expat, then I have to be honest about the things that I can (and cannot do). I know a lot of my hardworking countrymen have made it here. They have their own migrant success stories to tell. Like Allan Pineda (apl.de.ap of Blackeyed Peas). Or Nicole of the Pussycat Dolls. In the literary world, our best export is Jessica Hagedorn (*Dogeaters, Dream Jungle*). But then again, the circumstances of one's arrival into the U.S. make a lot of difference. Hagedorn, born and raised in Manila, migrated to the U.S. in 1963. It took her nine years for her first book to be released in 1972. Migrant writers, who come to the U.S. later in life, need to surmount an additional fortification to reach the castle.

My friend Othello migrated to the U.S. in his mid 20s. A struggling writer in the Philippines, he wanted to pursue his dreams here. He applied for an MFA in Creative Writing in different universities, including the UI. He was rejected. Not because his English was poor. A snooty professor gave him a brutal answer. "You might not understand the way how American writing is done." He finished a brilliant novel last year, and desperate for a publisher, he might consider Lulu.com.

Critics are particularly unforgiving of migrant writers. They would pronounce a book deplorable based on its inadequate grasp of a second language, which I believe should not be reflective of the writer's gift (or lack thereof) alone but also the editor's judgment. Sometimes they are also rueful of the writer's exoticist tendencies. For instance, a Filipino-American writer's exaggerated description of an eight-year-old girl's first experience of snow in Chicago; worse, the assumption that the land of their ancestry is still an emerald isle and all the local lasses are virginal and pure. Migrant writers are prone to identity crisis, caught between here and there, whether to write based on the expectations of their adopted homeland or to be faithful to the culture and literary sensibility of their origins. Tweaking the Cuban poet Rogelio Saunders words, migrant writers are like a chunk of apple, or papaya, floating in a "dense syrup of dream and nothingness."

Migration, in most cases, is not the narrative of gentle partings and dream searching. They are, for a great deal of migrant writers, a story of forced exile, of humiliation when one is reduced from being a princeling to being a servant in a foreign land.

*Speed freak, faster than a speeding bullet
Slow down, got to get down...
I know all we're doing is
Travelling without moving.*

-Jamiroquai, 'Travelling Without Moving'

For the last three years, I slip in and out of unfamiliar cities, leaving crumpled bed sheets, stained by the ecstasy of a one-night romance. Yet there is still that hesitation to settle and embrace the heat of that morning sunrise in a foreign country, knowing that the same sun will set in my homeland at the end of the day.

When I came to Iowa in August I set two goals: to finish the manuscript of a new book and to get published in the US. I finished my manuscript three weeks ago. Two magazines in the West Coast have accepted my essays. A friend of a friend is serving as a literary agent for me. A journal has promised to consider my works; another one suggested a topic that I should work on. But are these enough to justify my migration?

When I was born, my placenta was buried underneath the earth at the back of my grandfather's house. It's the custom of our people, an act that is perhaps intended to anchor us home, preventing us to become wayward travelers like balloons released into the air.

As I look back to those moments of my childhood, staring at my mother's navel, I would like to believe that although we have already been physically disconnected, somehow I still seek the nourishment from her womb. I'm still and will always be a germinating seed nurtured by the loam where I sprung.

I may take one thousand and one voyages in my lifetime, leaving invisible traces in strange territories and unfriendly streets. But I will always be connected to home, like a monarch butterfly that always finds its way back to the land of its birth.