

National Translation Month Premiere

***The Savant* by Januar E. Yap**
Translated from the Cebuano by John Bengan



National Translation Month continues today with another premiere: for the first time we're featuring a short story translated from the Cebuano language. We are thrilled to share ***The Savant* by Januar E. Yap translated by John Bengan**. This short story is another excerpt from the groundbreaking anthology ***Ulirát: The Best Contemporary Stories in Translation from the Philippines*** published in March 2021 by ***Gaudy Boy***. A vital survey of the richness and diversity of modern Philippine short stories, *Ulirát* features fiction from Filipino, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Ilocano, Waray, Kinaray-a, and Akeanon translated into English for the first time for international audiences. Many thanks to our friends at ***Gaudy Boy*** for providing this exquisite spotlight on translation from the Philippines.

We'd love to hear from you! Follow us on Twitter [@TranslateMonth](#), share using [#TranslationMonth](#), join our mailing list, submit a translation month event, or like our [Facebook](#) page. We hope you'll join us and celebrate your favorite translations of writers from all over the world throughout September.

—*Claudia Serea and Loren Kleinman*

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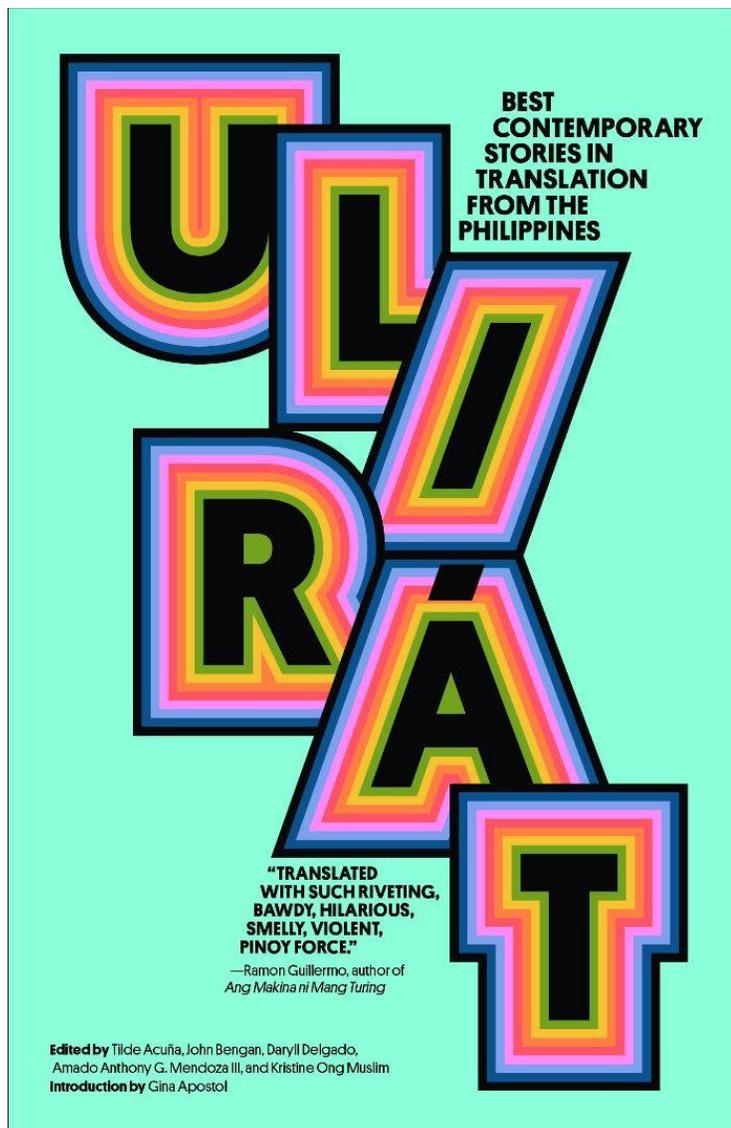
Excerpt from *Ulirát: The Best Contemporary Stories in Translation from the Philippines*

A groundbreaking survey of contemporary Philippine short fiction across seven different languages.

From the foreword by Gina Apostol.
“As a Filipino who dreams in Waray, I have waited too long for *Ulirát*.”

A man grows mushrooms from his nostrils, a town elects three mayors at the same time, a woman gives birth to a snake, and a boy wonders if his soldier father is an aswang.

Ulirát: The Best Contemporary Stories in Translation from the Philippines offers alternative visions of the islands beyond poverty and paradise. A vital survey of the richness and diversity of modern Philippine short stories, *Ulirát* features fiction from Filipino, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Ilocano, Waray, Kinaray-a, and Akeanon translated into English for the first time for international audiences. Vigorous writing from Filipino writers living in different parts of the archipelago re-animate Duterte’s Philippines, dramatizing everything from the drug wars and widespread corruption to environmental degradation in surprisingly surreal and illuminating ways. *Ulirát*, which is Tagalog for “consciousness,” champions a more expansive, nuanced conception of Filipino literature beyond the confines of English-language Filipino literature.



Praise for *Ulirát*

“This collection is a classic. . . no other anthology has given me this pleasure: the existential jolt of recognizing ways of seeing my world that I have, in fact, experienced but, despite all my years of reading, have not encountered on the page. . . Above all, these stories lay bare blunt historical, political, and economic realities that remain, on many levels, unspeakably surreal. . . as a Filipino who dreams in Waray, I have waited too long for *Ulirát*.”

—Gina Apostol, author of *Insurrecto*, from the “Foreword”

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Excerpt from *Ulirát: The Best Contemporary Stories in Translation from the Philippines*

THE SAVANT

by Januar E. Yap

Translated from Cebuano by John Bengan

At the Chong Hua Hospital nursery, twenty bedwetters got wind of martial law. The fat, cranky midwife often listened to radio dramas on DYHP that now and then the news interrupted. The stage where the Liberal Party was holding a rally collapsed after a grenade exploded on impact. My grandfather, who crossed his legs next to influential leaders running against Makoy, tumbled over. He was pulled from under torn sheets of wood that had crashed on top of him.

The nation held its breath, cries and shrieks broke out. At the dawn of September 19, my mother was bearing down at the delivery room at Chong Hua. In the few months I was inside my mother's womb, I would hear the students in the streets shouting: Ninoy! Laban! Laban! The spirit of the age blew its way into my mother's belly, the reason why my head later grew so big. Since I was also a curious child, my neck grew long from stretching (the years and movies I would see until I saw the resemblance: E.T.—squat, long neck, huge eyes).

Still smarting from the name my grandmother had given him in haste (Jose, nicknamed Pepe), my father searched for one worthy of his son. If he would base it on the most popular names at the time in radio dramas, there were two choices: Puloy and Roco (the stone child). In comic books, there was Kenkoy, and then there was Zuma. My father liked Zuma because it was unique; names with the letter *z* are hard to come by. But when the nurse broke the news to him after hours of Cesarian procedure, "It's done, Noy. What a big head! What a long neck!" Pepe nearly passed out. Maybe he and Mama had been thinking too much about Zuma. Because I weighed only six pounds, five pounds probably went to my head.

They say I was born quiet. Perhaps it was the wind the strange times had carried that filled my head to bursting. But I also grew satellite dishes for ears. So pointy and wide they put Mickey Mouse's to shame.

Spock from Star Trek would blush.

I was one of those twenty newborns at the nursery in Chong Hua while the firemen hosed down protesters in Mendiola. We were one class, Batch '72, our eyes shut as though we were asleep. (At least to the nurse who was duped!) Whenever the grumpy fatso turned and wasn't looking, we talked about our future. Baby Girl Asuy, who was right next to me, wanted to be a newscaster on TV, so whenever she delivered the news, she'd be able to reveal the truth in her face: "Meanwhile, the farmers' homes were sprayed with bullets . . ." and then her face would turn sour. Baby Boy Serafin wanted to become a priest. He would have quite a reaping during Sundays and he would know all the secrets of the women (and maybe also the men!) in his parish. Baby Girl Dolores's plan was simple, much like the way of life to which her relatives were accustomed. Her grandfather Lolo Andoy, an old Katipunero (who idolized Leon Kilat), had cracked his voice from shouting in the streets along with folks whose soles had worn a century of drought. "The drought of freedom!" according to Lolo Andoy. Baby Girl Rodriguez's mother practically lived with the people of Panas in Cordova after endless demolitions done for the construction of a reclamation project. Baby Girl Dolores wished to put up a business swapping dollars in foreign currency exchange.

§

"How did you know?" my friend Balbaks would often ask me. "Are you God? You're like a Jesuit, so swit, suwito!"

"I have a friend, a dawindi, an elf," I said. "We met at the top of Mama's cabinet. He's the one who told me. We used to live behind the Third Door, Duyan Compound . . ."

"But talking babies, man? Are you nuts?"

"Not really! Maybe we forget when we grow up. Good thing the elf told me . . ."

§

When I was ten, I became friends with an elf. I first heard about him on the radio. His name was Puloy, husband of Petra, the libidinous wife who hooked up with a serpent.

But it was through Porting, our housekeeper, that Puloy and I met. Nang Porting had told me to look out for Puloy at four in the afternoon at the top of Mama's cabinet. The one with the mirror where I'd stuck

a Spider-Man sticker. “You and Puloy are much alike. He also liked Spider-Man,” said Nang Porting.

But Puloy was hard to catch since at four the school was just about to let us out. More so when Suwang would challenge me in a game of takyan, or when I would be one of the “cleaners” assigned that day. I would forget about Puloy whenever I caught a glimpse of Aurora (a classmate who got the nickname Au-au from the goons in our class who followed her around like puppies) who waited by herself for the ride home. I would stand by the post near the school gate, watching her while chewing on taffy. If only I’d been good at English, we would have been best friends.

It was during vacation for All Souls’ Day that Puloy and I finally met. Here is what I remember:

He clung on the middle part of the crown carvings on top of Mama’s cabinet. I thought elves grew beards. Turns out they don’t.

“I’m not a famous dawindi,” said Puloy. (P)

“So only those with beards get all the attention?” I asked. (E)

P: And those with bulging stomachs.

E: Really. Maybe that’s only true for you.

P: No! It’s true for all.

E: You’re wearing something different.

P: This is what I’m supposed to wear.

E: You look like Andrés Bonifacio.

P: We only get to wear a barong during our child’s wedding.

E: Where’s your child?

P: Inside the belly of the serpent. With my wife.

E: Why?

P: Ah, they were his dinner.

E: So you won’t get to wear a barong after all?

P: Oh, that’s right.

That was our first meeting. Puloy couldn’t remember his birthday. He was there when Lapu-lapu

beat up Magellan and cut off his head. He was there on Dagohoy's last day in Bohol, when the champion's charmed amulet quickly hardened after a Castilian-looking dog had sunk its teeth on it inside a cave in Carmen. He was there when Rizal was shot on the grass by the bay. He was there when American soldiers arrived, and he witnessed the Japanese raping my grandmother's mother.

"The Japanese? Raped Lola Iyay? Nonsense!" I said as Puloy recalled to me events in our family.

P: (Got a nail clipper by the table and started to trim his fingernails) Hahaay, why are you arguing with me? You're just a kid.

E: Lola Iyay was the wife of a rich Chinese, a businessman, a landowner. They had many servants who would have helped them. What you said isn't true!

P: Don't know about you, shorty! It happened when her husband Ikong went back to China with three of their children. She was left with five, since your grandmother had eight siblings, right?

E: Why didn't they tell us then?

P: Really classy, shorty. You think it's something the old folks would be proud to talk about?

§

I learned from Puloy the stories of my family. I learned that after Ikong left for China with three of their children, he sent letters, and that he sent them through Pio, their Chinese neighbor. But the crafty Chinese, he never gave Iyay those letters. Instead, he rolled the paper with the lumboy leaves that every morning he smoked with this pipe.

Months, years came, the distance to China bewildered Iyay since her husband still had not returned home with three of their children. From then on she would look at the almanac and learn its maps. She would tell her five remaining children—Andres, Candido, Venancio, Josefa, Soledad—that their father had settled in a yellowed spot on the map. That it was difficult to get there because they would go against the surge of a winding river. Though on the way back it is easier to ride the rapids . . . (It took some years before I found a piece of paper tucked between lists of debts. Among the scribbling were Iko's name written several times, a map of China, and on the back of which, a letter:

My beloved Iko,

If you get stranded at a bend in the river on the way to your homeland, bear in mind that I am here still, willing to receive you, my only love. True, it is hard to restore what we have grown accustomed to, difficult to recover the past, seeing time's formidable surge. The story of the river stirred me. If on your way home, you swim against the current, do not be afraid. Grab hold of the vines hanging along the river's edge. If you cannot hold on, let the waves carry you; I am at the end of the river, ready to catch you. This is not to say that I am strong enough not to be swept away, that I am not afraid. I am fearful that the river is truly powerful and perhaps we will be separated. All I can say Iko is that, as long as you return with our children, I will go with you to the farthest depths. How hard it is, Iko, to think of you every day. Each night, I burn a stick of incense to breathe in your scent. When loneliness becomes unbearable, I light up a bundle all at once. I could no longer describe you, what you look like, but I can still smell your Chinese balms, as though you have never left. What did you look like when you had not yet grown a beard? How difficult to imagine, Iko, since on the many occasions we were together, my love for you grew at the same time as your beard. What else can I do, Iko? The photographs you hid in the trunk have faded after famine, floods, and the ruthless Japanese who descended on our barrio! Nothing is left, Iko. The only photograph I have of you is this (map of China). You are only a mound of earth in the middle of our garden. But, Iko, this is a letter without a destination. This too shall drift into the emptiness between us.)

. . . but what made the passage tricky was that on the other end of Asia, they would have to wait for Muslim merchants sailing toward Jolo. There was the threat of pirates, the danger of sharks. Down the river a boat waited to take them to Zamboanga. From there they would travel to the city of Oroqueta.

Over the years, La Iyay saw each of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren move to other parts of the world. One grandchild married a Japanese. A child who was a war veteran settled in America. Another grandchild worked in construction in Saudi Arabia. A grandchild managed a bikini bar in Manila. And another grandchild became a nurse in Vienna.

Until her last breath at the ICU in Chong Hua, La Iyay committed to memory every corner of the

world. She knew a city from above and below, its capital. What sea surrounded a town, how vast the fading expanse between nations.

“Paper rolled with lumboy tastes sweet, Pio told me,” said Puloy.

It was this sweetness that got Pio addicted to Ikong’s letters. In the span of years, he slowly acquired land and wealth that belonged to Ikong. Iyay was left with a garden shaped like the map of the world, where each day, she stood on top of China.

The sweetness of Ikong’s letters crystalized into sugar that gathered in the nethermost regions of Pio’s body, spreading down to his feet. One night, ants began digging into his toes. Invisible ants that came only at night. While his wealth grew, his feet shrank. And because the sugar had fused with lumboy, it brought a malevolent stench that clung to every person who came near Pio.

It was only Pio’s grandchildren who told Iko’s grandchildren about their grandfather’s sores. The affliction was brought on by a habit of smoking lumboy leaves rolled in paper from China. When La Iyay’s clan knew about this, she was already weakening, bent from her many illnesses. From Ozamis, we brought her across the sea toward Sugbu.

As the eldest great-grandchild, I stayed by her side during our trip.

La Iyay: Have you eaten?

Ener: Yes La.

La Iyay: What did you eat? I have some candy.

Ener: Thanks, La. I’m not into sweets.

L: Back when we were young, we loved sweets. Pio? He could munch on raw sugar.

E: Even today, La, the young ones love sweets. Unlike me.

L: And why is that?

E: I get fed up with sweetness, La.

L: (Looking out at the sea.) They are coming.

E: Mao . . . what do you call that piece of land facing the sea, La?

L: Opon.

E: Right.

That was my last conversation with La Iyay. She didn't last two days in Chong Hua. The dextrose needle traced a swollen vein in her arm. I pressed the vein and saw a dark stone rise along the tube attached to my great-grandmother. The doctor said it was nicotine. I didn't say a word. It was the stone that kept La Iyay strong all these years. But the crumbling of such a stone had caught up with her.

§

“Really?” said Balbaks, deep in thought.

“Yes, Baks, I feel bad for her,” I said. “Of the three children that went with Lo Ikong, one son was left. Good thing we were able to reach him with the help of one of Pio's grandchildren in Hong Kong. We heard he's loaded, even owned a department store in Hong Kong.”

“You're shitting me!” said Balbaks.

“Lagi. Problem is, the letters he sent are in Chinese. Nobody in the family knows Chinese.”

“Didn't your uncle send your cousin Hermes to school to study Chinese?”

“Don't count on it. That bum's lazy,” I said.

“So how would you understand Chinese?” he asked.

“Ask a friend who knows Chinese to translate!”

“What a hassle,” said Balbaks.

“What do you want us to do? Smoke the letters with lumboy?”

“What?” Balbaks said. “Anyway, what happened to the elf?”

“You actually believed me?” I said.

“Damn, shorty!” Balbaks scratched his head. “You can raise the dead with stories, you know?”

“Slipped you right in my pocket,” I laughed.

“But it sounded true, bay.”

“Really now, I'm telling you,” I said, “my grandmother, she kept a diary.”

“Another diary? One of your tales again, shorty?”

“Listen to me . . .” I said.

§

When I was in high school and had grown up a bit, I opened the closet where Lolo kept his old police uniforms. I tried the uniforms for size. I marched inside Lola's room, pretending to be an officer. Sometimes, I would face the mirror and gave my reflection a salute. I even wanted a beard. I imagined growing a big tummy. It was cool, man.

But I was not satisfied. I searched through Lolo's cabinet, and there I found his medals, a holster for a gun, and different shaped hats. I wore them all, and at that moment, I swore to become a policeman until I die.

A policeman's uniform is beautiful to behold.

And, Baks, about Lola's diary: One day, I found dusty sheets of paper tied with string. I found these deep inside Lolo's cabinet, under belts that used to hold bullets.

On the middle side of the papers, I read:

Yusuf Abdul, Lopez Jaena, Misamis Occidental. Spent only a few months together. We could not marry because I had been arranged to be with the son of our Chinese neighbor Uy, who owns the town's pharmacy. I thought Yusuf was ready to take responsibility for my pregnancy, but he could not be found. Today, I begin to stand on my own, until I give birth to my fatherless beloved.

One day, Baks, while my father was reading about the ambush in Ipil in the papers, I dared to ask.

"Pa, who is Yusuf Abdul?"

His eyes widened in surprise. He removed his glasses, and said, "Why do you ask?"

"Just because," I said.

"Where did you find out about that name?"

"In Lola's diary."

"Don't ever say that name in front of your grandmother."

"Why?"

§

Papa told the story of Lola Soledad and Yusuf. Yusuf was a Muslim trader who stopped by Soledad's house

every week to deliver imported soaps. He had bought the soaps from travelling merchants in Jolo, and then he would sell them in towns in Misamis.

Soledad was the youngest child, and so she was the one who came down from the house to receive the goods. Yusuf was thirty years old, and an expert when it came to the map of the world. Soledad was only seventeen, and she waited for Yusuf every week. On Fridays, she would go to her mother's garden that was shaped like the map of the world.

When Yusuf arrived, he would immediately say, "You're standing on Arabia, señorita Sol!" and Soledad would giggle.

"A few steps and you'll be in China," said Yusuf.

"But that's where I come from," Soledad said, which made Yusuf laugh. "We'll meet over there, hmmm, the Pacific? The Pacific is vast, señorita Sol."

"I'll just follow the fragrance of the soap you brought."

"With the help of Allah, hopefully you'll find me."

True enough, they met at the Pacific. It was the beginning of Yusuf and Sol's journey. Each week, they would go to different countries in the garden shaped like the world. They would talk about anything to do with the country they visited.

One afternoon, while staying in the prosperous nation of America, an incident they did not foresee took place. Their eyes met suddenly and they saw the garden map that resembled the world. It was their world, and they were its only inhabitants. A world they wanted to know, understand, discover fully. And there, they began to chart its every nook, in the middle of the garden, as the scent of Yusuf's scattered bars of soap permeated the air. "In a few weeks, we will have explored the entire world," said Yusuf.

Indeed, they circled the whole world, but they could not do it again. After some months, Soledad's mother and siblings witnessed a world forming in her belly.

"Who is the father, Soledad?" her mother asked.

"It's Yusuf, Ma!" Soledad answered firmly.

"What in the world have you done?" said Iyay, furious.

But Soledad's firm response did not reach Yusuf, because after her kin learned of her situation, not once did they ever again see the Moro trader. Every morning, on the rooftop, Sol would contemplate; she would gaze at the world she and Yusuf had explored. But after some months, she began to see that the garden map was nothing but a pile of dirt choked with clusters of weeds. Wild grass growing above a grave, as though there were life underneath.

"Good thing, a few years later, your Lolo and Lola met," said Papa. "And because your Lola was older, her decisions were respected."

"Are you Yusuf's child, Pa?"

"I saw him only once. When I was twenty-four and about to marry your mother. He sent someone to see me. By then his health was poor, he couldn't talk. So he left me a letter."

"Where's the letter now?" I asked.

"Your grandmother burned it after she found the letter in my drawer."

That was what Papa thought, Baks. But I found the letter along with Lola's diary. She didn't burn it. It was one of the short messages that, perhaps to her mind, brought the words that would forgive her for living in another world.

Here is the letter:

Pepe, my son,

No soap could wash away the emptiness that I lived through after leaving the little world your mother and I had built. I lived a coward, my son. I lived always spinning around my own fear. I am alone, my son, until the last hour of my days. I saw the entire world only once, my son, there in the eyes of your mother, and every corner I had taken in my travels, I longed always for what had been. There was not a day that I did not dream of coming home to your mother's world.

If on your journey you will meet another being whose eyes reveal the same world as yours, do not let the moment pass. Let her know what you see, without hesitation. Do not go elsewhere. The chance will come only once in your life, my son. This I know. I am witness to my own lack of will.

Forgive me, my son. Your mother is the only world I have known.

—Your father, Yusuf

§

Ten years came to pass, Baks, and if I hadn't found myself working in media, I wouldn't have known where fate had shoved you. During our last conversation, we talked about my grandmother's story. But it's all right, good thing we met again so we could continue the story when we had the chance. Wait a second, you're a doctor now, you bastard.

"Sus, I worked really hard, Ner, uy!"

"You're a specialist now, Baks?"

"Only in surgery," said Balbaks, "I fix bones. Repair the broken, treat fractures."

"What a blowhard this Balbaks!"

"If you break anything, just let me know."

"Break my mind?"

We were at La Estaminet, the new French restaurant at the topmost floor of the Twin Summits Hotel. I brought him there after we had stumbled upon each other in the lobby of a different hotel.

"I've always read about you, Baks. Is it true that you went to Yogyakarta? But of course. It would be silly if you'd just imagined it," I said to myself aloud.

"I was also in France last month."

"What were you doing there?"

"Having a vacation, with my wife."

"Good for you," I said. "I get to travel a lot, but only on my own."

"I got married very recently, Ner."

"Where did you meet your wife?"

"Hahaa! You'll be surprised. You know her."

"Huh? D-don't tell me . . ."

"Hahaa! I searched for her everywhere, bro."

“Damn!”

“Really! What can I say, I found her.”

“How is she?”

“She has a big belly now, bro. Due this December.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“It’s your fault.” He grinned.

“Let’s not talk about it, Baks.”

“How about you, when are you getting married?”

“Ha?”

Balbaks’s phone rang, and he picked up the call. “Hello, Love. Good thing you called. Ener is here with me . . . Ener, remember? You don’t know him? Impossible! Ener, the one . . . hey, how could you?! Ener, Ener! Yesss . . . shhh, he’s right here, I’ll tell on you. Sige ka! I’ll be home after an hour, okay? Bye, bye, love you . . . Ner, really sorry, bro, but I’ve gotta go,” said Balbaks. “See you after you’re done with your projects in—where is it again?”

“National Museum, but I ordered a lot of food, Baks. Wait for the food, then bring it home.”

“Nah, you can have it.”

“Who will eat all that food at my place, a gecko?”

“Haha, true, sorry, bro, gotta go.”

“Okay.”

“Take care, bro.”

When Balbaks had left, I called Bogart, a photographer friend who I could easily drag out of his cave as long as there was food. Bogart was a film connoisseur, and tonight I wanted to know what he had to say about the film *Bayaning Third World*. As expected, the bastard’s timing was excellent because he showed up just when the food arrived.

“What type of dish is this, Ner?” asked Bogart.

“Let’s start with billi bi, soup with mussels and shallots,” I said.

“What is bilibid?!”

“Now this is our pièce de résistance, chateaubriand with champignon sidings, chou-fleur, and feve di marasi.”

“Bi bi bi, if you’re such an expert, what’s the French for ‘sheep,’” asked Bogart.

“Agneau,” I said.

“Beef?”

“Boeuf!

“Beefsteak?”

“Bifteck!”

“Duck?”

“Canard!”

“Shellfish?”

“Coquillage!”

“Carpa?”

“Truite!”

“German for cookie?”

“Zweiback!”

“Italian for restaurant?”

“Ristorante!”

“Lunch in Italy?”

“Colazione!”

“Lunch in France?”

“Déjeneur!”

“Breakfast in Germany?”

“Frühstück!”

“Breakfast in the Philippines?”

“Buwad!”

“It can be pan de sal, too!”

“Haha, that’s true, man. How did you find *Bayaning Third World*?”

“Sus, just don’t, man. Go see it yourself. Rizal from different angles, man. They were short of stripping Rizal bare! Man, it was brilliant. I was in awe. When you leave the theater, you’ll want to be like Rizal too!”

“Really?”

“Whew! Should we go on? My turn?”

“Shoot!”

“Ask me, ask me, baby!” Bogart started to sing, doing a little playful dance.

“Paul Newman and Robert Redford?”

“Haha, peanuts! *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*!”

“Ingrid Bergman and Paul Henreid?”

“*Casablanca*, baby!”

“Omar Sharif and Julie Christie?”

“*Doctor Zhivago*!”

“Spencer Tracie–Katharine Hepburn?”

“Haha, how many do you want? *Adam’s Rib, Woman of the Year, Desk Set, Pat and Mike, The Sea of Grass, Keeper of the Flame*. Still wanna fight?”

“Humphrey Bogart–Lauren Bacall?”

“Pfft! *Key Largo, Dark Passage, To Have or Not to Have.*”

“Don’t make things up, *To Have and Have Not*!”

“Sorry, sir.”

“Director?”

“Shoot!”

“*Annie Hall*?”

“Woody Allen!”

“*All That Jazz?*”

“Bob Fosse!”

“*Citizen Kane?*”

“Orson Welles!”

“*Gandhi?*”

“Richard Attenborough!”

“*Last Emperor?*”

“Bernardo Bertolucci!”

“Z?”

“Z?”

“Haha! Constantin Costa-Gavras! Aaa, *Being There?*”

“Hal Ashby!”

“*Gone with the Wind?*”

“David Selznick!”

“I’ll go ahead!”

“Hey, where are you going?”

“Have the food wrapped, bring it home! It’s paid for, Gart! I’ll go ahead!”

“Hey! Dammit. Don’t leave me, I’m not dead yet. Where are you going?”

“Going after Rizal!”

“You’ve lost your mind!”

“Adios patria adorada!”

“Hala, go right ahead, adios yourself! As long as I have takeout, I’m good!”

§

I drifted out of the hotel like I was floating. I sauntered to the parking lot as though my feet didn’t touch the pavement. Tomorrow at dawn, I would go to the National Museum in Manila. But I was still not in the

mood to go home and pack. I went to a bar I usually go. I ordered five shots of vodka tonic, which I downed one after another. That was just the beginning, and afterward, my memory blurred, how I managed to get to the airplane, what was inside my bag, and where I found my ticket. At nine in the morning, I arrived at the National Museum in Manila. After speaking to the director, I went to the room where they kept one of Rizal's vestments. I was still drunk, a miracle that the old director didn't notice. Rizal's clothes looked small inside the case. I took off my clothes. I tried on Rizal's overcoat, which was too small, same with his trousers. In search of a mirror, I went to another room with an antique-looking glass. I faced the mirror and asked myself: "Who's taller, me or Rizal?"

But by then, three security guards were running toward me. I was sure it was me they were after. I ran to the stairs at the far end of the building and climbed. I went on until I got to the rooftop. I ran to the edge of the building. I threatened to jump, forcing the guards to step back. I stayed at the far end of the building for an hour, until a priest, a psychologist, a movie star, and others I didn't know came.

A crowd had gathered in the streets to watch Rizal. From where I stood they looked like ants, whispering among themselves. Suddenly, I needed to pee, so I undid the buttons of Rizal's pants. I sprinkled the people below. "Long live the Philippines!" I yelled. And when I was done the security guards grabbed and handcuffed me.

Months later, I wrote Balbaks:

Dr. Dante Balbuena

Head, Department of Orthopedics

Chong Hua Hospital

Cebu City, Philippines

My friend Baks,

Thank you for your letter. Perhaps you have heard about the news. I won't repeat it here. You know my story, the stories I have told you before. Maybe, when the news reached you, you did not find this

surprising.

I have gone to every corner of knowledge, Baks. I tried searching each of its pockets, holes, dents, graves, gutters, the mud pools of water buffalos that had long been roasted. Knowledge, it turns out, is a void in loneliness. Because knowledge is found in loneliness. It is believed that loneliness is an empty space capable of holding anything, such as knowledge. It is lonely in the midst of knowledge, Baks.

Like the kite. Crafted from the knowledge of air and weight. If knowledge is applied, your kite can withstand the clouds. The farther it gets in the sky, the lonelier it becomes.

I remember one night a long time ago, Baks. We climbed the sambag tree facing Ces's window. Her family had been living in our neighborhood for months, but not even once had she spoken to any of us. And so one night we climbed up the sambag to look at what was inside their house. We saw Ces in her bedroom, removing clothes from her closet. To our surprise she folded the clothes again and put them back in the closet. Then her father walked into the room, gesturing to her not to make a sound. He brought Ces a dress that she quietly received. She wore it. The dress was too big that its sleeves hung loose on her shoulders. While she changed, a look of bliss spread across her father's face. He kissed Ces on the cheek. He walked toward the door and switched off the light. We couldn't see them anymore. We only heard a deep sobbing that unmistakably came from Ces. We came down from the sambag, Baks, and went home in silence. A different sort of silence, a void, in which we suffered a kind of loneliness that even at our age still throbs deep within us.

Now, Baks, you ask the limits of my knowledge, and I will answer you. There was no elf. Lola did not own a diary. But I am not saying that the stories I told you were only inventions of a restless imagination. Knowledge is not about the details you can extract from a list, a book, a map, a photograph. It is a feeling that returns every now and then, at moments when it is needed. And certainly, even at instances when it is not needed. It is a sensation that changes you once, the reason why you are what you are now. Why you have something to remember, to fear, to envy, and to run from. Why you choose to go on living or die.

I was put in a cell because I wore Rizal's clothes, Baks. The judge had a hard time deciding what sentence to impose on me. The cases they could file against me were trivial: petty theft, malicious mischief,

estafa, and others. What is worse, Baks, is that the Rizalistas staged a massive protest to demand the court not to release me without first making an apology on television. So now, they are calling for a senate hearing. According to them, this should be done in aide of legislation, to determine how justice can be served should another person ridicule the honor and history of the nation.

But is it hard for me to ask for forgiveness, Baks. I may not arrive at the fundamental reason why I wore Rizal's clothes, even though I strongly believe that it is my right to do so. It is the right of each and every one of us, and therefore it is just.

However, Baks, I am alone here, and waiting. Such as the stories I had told you that are riddled with questions. Soon, we will understand all of this. The day will come.

Your friend, the savant,

Ener ♦

About the author



Januar Yap is a fictionist, poet, journalist and filmmaker. He is a professor at the University of the Philippines Cebu, College of Communication, Art and Design. His short fiction works have won the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature and have been in various anthologies. He was a recipient of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts Writer's Prize in 2019. He is also Opinion Editor and editorialist for *SunStar Cebu*.

About the translator



John Bengan's translations of the works of Elizabeth Joy Serrano-Quijano and R. Joseph Dazo have appeared in *Anomaly*, *LIT*, *Shenandoah*, *Words Without Borders*, *World Literature Today*. He lives in Davao City.

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