A Portrait of a Young Man as a Banak

(Essay)

From time to time, almost to the point of rarity, a school of peculiar *banak* visited Panacan, the place where I grew up. They were a spectacle: if they had visited more often, the place would have been a tourist spot. Unlike the common one-footers that could be caught using *lanit*, they were roughly two feet long and swam in a group of around twenty to thirty. Nobody knew when they would visit, and when they did the place would immediately come to life: the children, barely catching a glimpse of them, would run over the wooden bridges that connected, like a web, our little coastal community; the fishermen would hastily equip themselves with harpoons, although nobody, as far as I can remember, would catch a single one of those elusive *banak*. Nobody was ever prepared for their swift, unannounced appearance.

Our community was a small purok in Panacan, a barangay in Davao City, but to this day I still wonder whether the purok was named Jasa or Jacona. When somebody asked me where I lived, I found it difficult to answer. Perhaps it is one of the usual difficulties you encounter when you live in an informal settlement, in which you develop a rather unusual sense of home. "*Sa* Trese," or at Trese, was the most convenient reply, but it was not that specific. So most of the time I would say, "*Atbang lang sa* Macondray," or just in front of Macondray.

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Over the phone Mama told me she would meet me at 7-Eleven, in front of the flyover at Agdao, Davao City. I had just arrived after a three-hour ride from General Santos City. Standing in front of Ecoland terminal, I told her I did not exactly know where our meeting place was.

"*Naunsa*. *Taga*-Davao *ka unya wala katuod?*" she said. She meant I should know where our meeting place was because I'd been born and raised in Davao.

"Ma, *dili baya ko diri nagkabuot*," I said, clarifying that I had not *matured* in Davao.

"*Pangutana dira. Tigulang na baya ka*." She said I should know how to ask people for directions because I was old enough already.

I crossed the street and went to the jeepney stop. When the jeepney came I hurriedly got in and sat in the front seat. Pretending that it was my first time in Davao and stretching the act a bit, I handed the driver a twenty-peso bill and said, "*Kuya*, *saan po ba banda ang* Agdao? *Doon lang po ako sa may* flyover *bababa*."

The driver looked at me for a second. *Patay*, I thought, *basig mahalata na Bisaya kog dagway*. I was afraid the driver had noticed that I looked and sounded Bisaya. He did not say anything. He just handed me my change.

It took only a few minutes for the jeepney to be full. The time was 6:30 PM, and Davao was filled with urban lights. In a single glance, Davao was a mixture of colors: it was a sky full of fireworks, notwithstanding the irony of the metaphor. Behind the red, blue, orange, and yellow sparks and specks, however, the black mantle remained: the night sky, the dark alleys. But like little moths, we were drawn to the light. So we went on amid and through the traffic that was already building up. While jeepneys move slowly, I thought, Davao changes very fast. I

looked outside the window and an unlit building caught my attention. It was not there the last time I had visited Davao, or at least I just had not noticed it.

The jeepney stopped near a flyover. "*Dito na*," the driver said.

"Thank you *po*," I said. Apparently my plan worked.

I searched for the 7-Eleven Mama talked about and saw it on the opposite side of the road. Across the road and under the flyover, I walked, carrying a bag that contained five sets of clothes, just enough for my five-day stay in Davao. I entered 7-Eleven, found myself a seat, and looked for Mama. She was not there.

"Ma," I called her. "*Naa na ko diri.*" I said I was already in our meeting place.

"*Paspasa ba*? *Padulong na ko.*" Mama wondered why I had gotten there so fast and said she was on her way.

"*Asa na diay ka,* Ma?" I asked her where she was exactly.

"*Duol na lagi ko*." She said she was almost there.

And Mama arrived after about thirty minutes, which made me think about her sense of time and distance. She looked significantly older and more haggard than the last time I saw her. I was quite sure I was not getting any taller, but Mama seemed like she was getting shorter all the time. Just when I was about to say it to her, she said something first, as if surprised: "*Naunsa diay ka*? *Bunguton na man lagi kaayo ka*?" She asked why I had grown a thick beard.

"Ma, *tigulang na baya ko*," I said, meaning I was old enough already.

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Several years ago I went to Sulit, Polomolok, South Cotabato, to spend my summer vacation at my grandparents'. It was supposed to be just a visit, but after some time I decided to stay there for good.

Sulit was totally different from Panacan. While Panacan had the sea, Sulit had the earth. While in Panacan I kept fish in an aquarium, in Sulit I kept fireflies in a jar. While in Panacan we shared the same wall with a neighbor, in Sulit we shared the same empty space within which we could exchange echoes with a neighbor. I may be exaggerating in the last one, but you get the point. Curiously, though, when it came to gossip, an empty space seemed to be more efficient a medium than a shared wall. In a week the people there already knew about me—and some pretty accurate details about my family.

Staying in Polomolok, of course, meant leaving Davao, where I had spent the first thirteen years of my life. It meant that I would possibly have to spend the rest of my life there too. Whether it was overfamiliarity of the known, or the desire for the yet unknown, or just plain teenage hormones triggered by a pretty girl named Angelyn that pushed me to come up with the decision, I am still quite uncertain. I am certain, however, that it was my first major decision in life.

Years later, after finishing the third and fourth year of my high school there, I moved to the nearest city, General Santos, to pursue a college degree. It is where I live now. General Santos, I think, is Davao and Polomolok combined.

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Mama said we should celebrate because it was the first day of Kadayawan. She suggested that we drink at Matina Town Square, but I told her that I did not feel like drinking. Besides, I was

still dizzy from the three-hour travel and was already starving that time. A simple family bonding would suffice, I told her, like a chat over pizza or something. (When was the last time we bonded as a family? I could not remember.) We went to Roxas to meet Justine, my younger brother, who now worked in the call center during the night and went to school during the day. He, too, looked smaller than the last time I saw him, perhaps because of lack of sleep. After that we went straight to Gaisano, or as they elegantly put it, "G-Mall."

We ate in a burger house. Waiting for our order, which seemed like forever, Mama and Justine took some selfies. Later on they invited me for some group pictures. Looking at the photos we had taken, Mama again pointed out my beard. I needed to shave, she said. I needed to eat, I said. I might have seemed distant in all of those photographs, but I was *there*, with them, my seizing the moment being not necessarily said by my frowns the camera captured.

When our order was finally served, I ate immediately. Before having their share of the gigantic burger, Mama and Justine—again—took some selfies. While eating, we talked about how we were doing, how our studies were, things like that.

Papa texted, asking me where I was. I replied I was having dinner with Justine and Mama. He said okay. I called the waiter and had a take-out order for Papa. Justine had to go first because he already had to work. Mama and I stayed and talked for a while before finally leaving.

"*Uli na ko*, Ma," I said as we went out of the mall, meaning I had to go home.

"*Dili ka muhapit kadali sa akong ginatrabahuan*?" She asked me if I wanted to go to where she worked.

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After three years in the Accountancy program, a failing mark in a major subject, and several bouts with boredom and restlessness, I decided to shift. It was my second major decision in life.

In my Philippine Literature class, which I took up in my first year in my current course, our professor once assigned us to research on the origin of the name of the place where we grew up. That time I had no recollections whatsoever of stories about Panacan. I tried to remember the times the old folks had narrated tales of yore to us children during those long, cozy afternoons, but what I could only retrieve was the story of how Barangay Tibungco got its name (Tibungco, they said, came from the word *trabungko*, a *mutya* or a jewel taken from the head of a mythical giant snake that once roamed the place). Unfortunately, I had not grown up in Tibungco, a few kilometers away from Panacan, although I have fond memories there (I had studied in F. Bustamante National High School, a school at Tibungco, for two years: first and second year high school).

But of course the information was just on the tips of my fingers. I found the etymology of *Panacan* in a site in the Internet. The site says that *Panacan* can be traced back to the Cebuano word *banakan*, an affixed form of the word *banak* (a kind of saltwater fish; "grey mullet" in English). Therefore, *Panacan* roughly means "a place teeming with grey mullets." A very long time ago, the site adds, Panacan was famous for its grey mullets; due to their abundance, fishermen from all around the area could easily catch a lot of them. But due to unmitigated fishing, perhaps, their population significantly decreased in number, and through time they became fewer and fewer.

The story almost appears to be a myth, but myths have a certain nugget of truth in them. It can be summarized thus:

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there were many *banak* swimming in the sea and those many *banak* that were swimming in the sea left the place named Panacan…

Panacan was their home. But after many years they became just visitors.

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"*Diri ko nagatrabaho, nak*," Mama said as she pressed the doorbell of a two-storied house. She said it was where she worked.

A boy opened the gate. The son of her boss, Mama said.

"Hello," the boy said. "You're tall."

"He's my son," Mama said to the boy.

As we entered their front door, we came across a foreigner, perhaps around forty to fifty years old. Mama introduced me to him. The boss, she said.

"So you're Annabelle's son?" the foreigner said. "Are you the one with the allergies?"

That moment I knew whom the foreigner meant. Justine has skin allergies. Ever since he was a child, it has been his problem. Mama, I thought, is still the same. She shares too much information. That moment, too, I was afraid she had divulged to her boss some embarrassing facts about me.

"No, no," Mama said, "he's my eldest son."

The foreigner shook my hand.

After that encounter I sat in their living room, which was bigger than our whole house. I looked at their wooden ceiling, which was very high. From it I could hear footsteps. Going down

the stairs, a woman stared at me. She turned out to be the foreigner's wife, a Filipina. I also met their other kids, who were all chubby. I tried to be nice. I glued a smile on my face.

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The built-in thesaurus of my computer lists the following words as the synonyms of *home*: *house, residence, abode, habitation, domicile, dwelling*, etc. But some nuances of words, and language in general, cannot be fully captured by a thesaurus or a dictionary. *Assassinate* and *butcher*, for instance, are synonymous, but while you can butcher and assassinate people (which is not to say you should), you can only butcher, but not assassinate, a goat (unless it's a prominent goat, which is still highly unlikely). As terribly clichéd as it may be, a house is not necessarily a home.

I once asked Papa if he thought about buying our own house. He did, he said, but his income as a glass installer was just enough for our daily expenses. A house for now was a luxury, he tried to tell me. "*Kamo na siguro bahala ni* Justine," he said, meaning it was up to Justine and me.

"*Unya asa man ka mupuyo*, Pa?" I asked him where he would live.

"*Depende*. *Mahibaw-an ra na*." It depends, he said. W would just know it soon.

"*Dili na diay ka gusto mupuyo kauban ni* Mama?" I asked him if he still wanted to live with Mama.

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As of this writing, Mama still works as a housemaid in that two-storied house. Before I left there, however, she told me about quitting her job and finding a new one. "*Kapoy kaayo, nak*," she

said, meaning she was tired of her work. "*Ako ra juy katabang diri*, all-around *pa jud*. *Luto, silhig, laba. Kapoy kaayo saka-kanaog ug manglimpyo sa ilahang balay*." She was the only maid, and she did everything from cooking, cleaning, to doing the laundry. She was so tired of cleaning their up-and-down house.

"*Isa na lang bitaw ka tuig*, Ma, *mu*-graduate *na mi ni* Justine," I said, consoling Mama that a year from now Justine and I would graduate from college. "*Makapahuway na ka puhon*." She would take the rest she deserved very soon.

It was not totally different from Mama's former job. For two years she had worked as a domestic helper in Kuwait. When she came back she had nothing to do, nowhere to go. Since she had no stable income, her savings ran out, and her few pieces of jewelry were pawned.

Mama and I once had a misunderstanding when I found out she lost her money and necklace in *tong-its*, a game she had promised not to play again. Papa said that her gambling, which I think was on the verge of being pathological, was the reason why he decided to settle for good with his new partner. He could not even remember the last time Mama cooked for him, he said.

But, as Mama would say, Papa's infidelity was the reason why she gambled.

Mama had to look for another job, which brought her there.

"*Kamo na lang jud ni Justine akong pag-asa, nak*," she said, meaning Justine and I were her only hope. "*Dili na ko muasa pa sa imong amahan. Lipay na siya didto ni Fe*." She had stopped expecting anything from Papa, because she believed that he was already happy with Fe.

"*Ingnan bitaw mangita na lang kag kano*, Ma," I told her in jest, teasing her to look for a foreigner. "*Tan-awa imong amo. Nakakitag kano, kwartahan na kaayo*." Look at your boss, I said. Married a foreigner, now rich.

Mama just laughed. She accompanied me to find a ride home. Before saying goodbye, we went back to 7-Eleven. Mama bought some chocolates for James, my youngest brother.

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Papa now lives in a house at Dose, particularly Sto. Rosario, just a kilometer away from our old place. Here are some facts: one, the house is rented; two, I refuse to call it an apartment, for it is far away from the connotations of luxury the word *apartment* has; three, it is plagued by small ants that bite into clothes, leaving tiny holes on them; and four, it is where Papa's live-in partner also lives.

It is not the first house they have moved in since the demolition of our house in Panacan. The first one was in PDRHAI Village, which was also rented. But while it had no ants that ate clothes little by little, it had no clean source of water, either. (Maslow said that water, a physiological need, must be answered first before clothes, a source of comfort. He was right.)

Sometimes Justine stays at Papa's, especially on weekends. On weekdays he stays in a boarding house, near USEP-Obrero. He spends a lot of his time in his studies and his part-time job. Until now I still wonder how he manages to do both at the same time. Perhaps he is more responsible than me. James, on the other hand, likes to stay in my aunt's at Panacan, because there he can play with our cousins. But whenever I go to Davao, James goes home.

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On the way to Papa's, I was engulfed with apprehension. Several years ago when I had gone there, I was surprised to see a woman cooking in the kitchen. The woman, as I had discovered later, was Papa's live-in partner. Papa had kept it from me—and until now he has never talked about it with me. I could not do anything about it but to accept it. Last time I had visited Davao, the woman, Mama had said, was months pregnant. I had believed it, too, for I could see her enlarged belly. It had been months since then. During the time I was away, I had never really asked anyone about it. I had not confronted Papa about it too, and something in me had waited for him to be the first one to open up. But Papa was Papa. Whether or not the woman had already given birth, I did not know.

Now was the moment of truth. I knocked on the door and Papa opened it for me. He looked at me for a while and said I looked like a hermit because of my beard. I said nothing in response and handed him the burger I had taken out for him. James, who had gone home and waited for me, was already asleep on the foam on the floor. The woman was beside him, her body covered in blanket. I was looking for someone else. I was looking for her child.

But I did not find one.

I went straight to the bedroom and changed my clothes. Taking a deep breath, I flung myself into bed. I could not sleep. Later I went out and watched the late night news. Papa was eating the burger I had bought for him. Except for the news anchor in the television, nobody was talking. Papa broke the silence when he asked me about my studies.

I said all was fine.

Now and again I looked at the woman. Later on the blanket slid off her body and I saw her tummy, still enlarged. If she was pregnant for months the last time I went here, I thought,

how could she still be pregnant? Puzzled, I turned off the television and went to the bedroom. "Pa," I said, "*matulog na ko*." I told Papa I was going to sleep.

I fished out my phone from my pocket. Lying in bed, I texted Mama: "*Abi nako buntis si* Fe, Ma?" I thought Fe was pregnant, I texted Mama. Moments later I fell asleep.

The following morning, upon waking up, I saw James sleeping beside me, holding my phone. Perhaps, I thought, he played games. I kissed his cheek and slowly pulled out my phone from his grip.

I read the text messages, one of which was from Mama: "*Naa man diay siyay* myoma, *nak*." Mama texted that Fe had myoma.

I lay in bed for a while, eyes focused on the nonfunctioning fluorescent light on the ceiling. Afterwards I heard a knock on the door. I knew what it meant. Going out of the room, I saw the woman preparing our breakfast. Papa was already at the table, taking a sip of *law-uy*, a vegetable dish, his favorite meal.

"*Kaon na,* Gong," the woman said, inviting me to eat. She called me by my nickname.

I did not say a word. I found myself a seat, trying not to look at her.

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James Joyce calls it a "voluntary exile," an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Joyce lived an itinerant life, but all of his literary works, it can be said, hark back to Dublin, Ireland, his birthplace. "If [Dublin] one day suddenly disappeared from the earth," he says, "it could be reconstructed out of my book." The book Joyce is referring to is his novel *Ulysses*, whose characters and events parallel those of the epic *Odyssey*, and those of the life of Joyce himself.

Like Ulysses, Joyce was in his own physical and spiritual odyssey, and he remembered the shores of Dublin, his Ithaca, wherever he was.

The final part of *Ulysses* is titled "The Nostos," a reference to the Greek literary theme of *nostos*, which means "returning home," or in the case of the *Odyssey*, "returning home by sea." The Greek word is also one of the origins of the word *nostalgia*. Home, perhaps, is just a reconstruction of the past, which encompasses all our staying and going, our arrivals and departures. It is created by piecing together bits of hazy images, faint scents, bland tastes, indistinct voices, and clouded emotions, which altogether constitute what we call memory. It is never fixed or certain: like water, it slips out of our hands the moment we think we have grasped it. Like the sea, it changes its form, has its own tides, and has its own waves. What we visualize when we think about home, perhaps, is just the sea in its quietude.

I am writing this in my room, in a boarding house near the university in General Santos City where I study, two weeks after my visit in Davao. I have been alone here since my two roommates left a couple of months ago: one graduated, and the other one had to find another work someplace else. The room contains two double-decked beds. I sleep in one bed, leaving the other one empty. Living alone, having a bigger space for oneself, is tricky. Most of the time it just means a lot of empty spaces to fill in.

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The place of my childhood faced a part of Davao Gulf whose blue waters stretched towards the shores of Samal. Our old house, like everybody else's, stood proudly above the waters, supported by wooden stilts that raised it considerably higher than the sea level during high tides. One time, however, the seawater was so high it reached our *tabla* floor; fortunately, it did not cause too

much damage. Several years ago it was demolished, alongside some of our neighbors' houses and some of the wooden bridges.

But a little part of the place still remained.

For the last day of my visit in Davao, I decided to see that place. In my visit I would feel that even though the majority of it had been turned into a seaport, it was still the same. There I would see some of my childhood friends and would be reminded of the things we used to do: how Ada, Alicon, and I once went boating and had the boat sink; how we were once chased by police officers when we joined a gang war of *luthang* and pellet guns; how we went caroling with friends, most of whom were Muslims, in Decembers; how they would invite me, a Christian, to partake in the food they prepared during the feast after Ramadan; and so on. There I would look at the sea and fancy that those peculiar *banak* were also on their own odyssey, still uncaptured, constantly looking for their home, but found it important to visit the place from time to time.

I got in the jeepney and sat in the front seat. I handed the driver a twenty-peso bill. "*Asa ni*?" he said, asking where he should drop me off.

"*Sa* Trese," I said. "*Atbang lang sa* Macondray." At Trese, I said, in front of Macondray.

And I knew where it exactly was.