

THAT MAN, THAT HERO IN OUR STORIES

He's the man who owned the spacious shoes my mother's little toes would dig deep into. The man who always left loose change before leaving the old house so that his six kids could buy dirty ice cream from the wandering street vendor keeping time with his tinkering bells. The man holding a steady gaze on me, the would-be-poet, standing on his lap—my chest encaged within his bony fingers. The man I can only turn to in wooden frames and photos tucked away in shoeboxes. That man in my mother's life, that man in my life: my mother's father, my *Lolo* Daddy.

He has always been the hero in my mother's stories. Each time we're caught up—my mother, my three sisters, my lone brother and I—in a Gordian knot of cars, my mother speeds up the time we're on the road through her stories, but also turns time back to *Noon*: to when she, the oldest—the *Ate* Jing to her siblings, Mona, Joan, Mina, Neng and Totoy—would race with the five other progenies to grab their Daddy a pair of house slippers; to when she and her Daddy, in secret, went out to buy a pair of Hush Puppies for her; to when my *Lolo* Daddy was younger and bolder; when he would always come home with chocolates and *pasalubongs* in hand; when he was a Nemar employee, a layman, an old man on his wheel chair; to when he still was. I would look out the window of our car with all these stories in mind and try to find him within the congestion of cars, in smoke and stars, in the heat and heart of Lipa City, knowing he happened here somewhere.

The poets and storytellers of literature have different ways of seeing and saying what I feel for him, as much as the stars can constellate into an archer, a belt, a ladle—whatever the eye can make out of what is there and what isn't. Conchitina Cruz in her *News of Train* says, "Once, I

saw you on the other side of the tracks. But it was too late—the train had come, erasing you in one swift motion,” like how I think of those composure of cars hiding my *Lolo* Daddy from plain sight. While Carlos Angeles sings to me with “Some sudden crickets, ambushing me near, / Discover the vowels of your whispered face / And subtly cry. I touch your absence here / Remembering the speeches of your hair,” and I know that I’m not alone when a shadow, a nape, and yes, a herd of crickets, orchestrate and remind me of a familiar face. It is in D.M. Reyes’s *Affection* do I muse over how my *Lolo* Daddy is that scar—“*What is it? / Stamped like a bright scar, / its healed signatures stays— / Violet and too proud / to disappear, / a mark I always carry / wherever I go,*” and I’m assured that he’s not really gone.

I have turned to reading prose, poems and play because they are snapshots of infinite moments in our existences. They capture what I feel and think, and what a significant number of others feel and think too. “It creeps into your bones,” says Luisa Igloria on monsoons in her essay *Looking North – To Baguio*, “and finds that place that hurts and been fractured, even the ones you thought were lost or healed or think you no longer remember.” Literature, like the cold Baguio weather, creeps, seeps, reminds us and stirs in us a hoard of happiness, grief, jealousy, bitterness, anger, misery, and much, much more. Astonishingly, a mere sequence of words, actions and images can encapsulate a person’s or even a nation’s communal emotions and experiences in a culture.

Literature can even make you as a reader slip your toes into all sorts of shoes varying in weight, material, and size—shoes you never thought you could ever walk in. When Dean Alfar dresses you into a father who lost your daughter, you yourself, not just as the ‘you’ playing the part of the father in the story, will mourn for Sam when you mouth these words: “The house feels empty. My heart insists she’s watching TV in the den, or reading a book upstairs, or brushing her teeth in the bathroom....Let her be in bed, with her feet snug and warm under the comforter. Let

her be sleeping. Or awake. Let her be.” Literature can and does transport and transform a swarm of people to different places and characters because it lets you see in another’s eye piece.

Literature, too, relieves when truths are revealed, like in Eugene Evasco’s children story, *Muling Magbabalik ang Perya (The Carnival Will Be Back Again)*. Children and adult readers alike swoon when the main character, a young boy recognizes that “... ‘*di ko kailan man sasabihin siya’y ‘nasira’. Sa aking isip, buong-buo pa rin si Lolo tulad ng bilog na bilog at pinilakang buwan*” (“In my mind, Grandfather is still completely whole, just like the perfect and silvery disk of the moon.”) Such is also the case when I read Rio Alma’s *Araw-araw na Taglagas (Autumn Dairy)*. He says, “*Kailangan may katwiran ang kamatayan. / O balewala ang buhay, balewala.*” (“There must be a reason for death. / Or life is for nothing. Nothing.”) And now I think that my *Lolo* Daddy’s crossing over lead me to writing poems for him.

I always keep this photo of my *Lolo* Daddy: his hands hold my chest, his hands that look like these thin mangroves. How these roots crisscross and reach for deeper waters in me, even if there’s nothing to reach for anymore. He’s five-feet underground, merely bone and meat, the being taken away from him, while his family is still one with the living at the other side, telling stories about him, writing about him, and why? Why do we stomach unearthing stories of him only to be reminded of this smarting gash that he is no longer of this world? Paradoxically, I’ve come to realize, we keep him alive. He endures because his roots—his memories—dig deep into me even without his body. Through his wife, his offspring, his grandchildren—through our stories that move from my head to my heart—he is survived.

Anyone could be my *Lolo* Daddy in that photo, and similarly, anyone can be me in that photo. It could be taken at any time with anyone inside that frame. Somewhere, there are daughters, sons,

mothers and fathers who are sleepless from their losses. Whatever our losses may be, literature brings us together to hope—to keep that man alive, to make the absent palpable, to keep a culture alive, to keep its people, their history, their human experiences, and what they value and believe in breathe and be through prose, poems, and conversations.

That certain charm of literature—the way it unites a people together, like how my siblings, my mother and I in the capsule of our car—roots back from our ancestors. We are a storytelling and story-devouring species even from the start. Our ancestors used rivers as gathering places for storytelling because this was where people washed their clothes, where they bathed and hunted for food, and where dialogues and stories were exchanged. Now we're thriving in the modern world, hi-tech world, but we never grow out of our primitive kind. We consume our Facebook newsfeed, we drool over our friends' *tsismis* and *chika* through text messages, we never miss our favorite *teleseryes*. We can be united as a culture not only through these Facebook posts, texts, or gossip of gadflies, but also through literature.

The bones of literature that brings a nation together are stories—stories of an author's personal experience that becomes universal since all stories are about the human condition—about struggle and success. The human life cycle is nothing but a hero's journey with occasional conflicts and minute but worthwhile satisfactions. We share the same dreams and aspirations for a better life, to be able to finish schooling, to be able to see our daughters and sons grow, to be the heroes who triumph in our own stories. Literature, if a nation lives up to as its cultural and moral constitution, can string together the Filipino people through the beads of our own archipelago's ancestry, heroes, culture, folklore and traditions, like how that man, that father, that hero in my life, binds my family and our beliefs as a whole and survives him in return.

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