

The art of 'hugot' in our republic of 'sawi'

I.

Dateless and loveless, I tried to avoid this year's Valentine's Day by boarding a plane to Tacloban and backpacking in Eastern Visayas until the craze subsided. In what turned out to be a roadtrip with my Tacloban-based friends, we ended up climbing three mountains - Mt. Kali overlooking the San Juanico Bridge; Mt. Pangasugan in the wilderness east of Baybay City; and, on February 14 itself, Cabalian Volcano in Anahawan, Southern Leyte. With no cellphone signal and roads so rough that it tested the limits of our pick-up truck before the trail itself would test our legs, it was the farthest place I could ever hope to be: deep in communion with nature; lost in its verdant beauty. But if I had expected that it would make me forget about the 'Day of Hearts', I was gravely mistaken, for the crater lake at the end of the trail was shaped like a heart.

I would later find out in social media that I wasn't alone in being reminded of my lovelessness. In fact, there was as much noise on Facebook about being single as there was about being with someone. And the viral videos and posts that people were talking about were not so much about professions of love accompanied by chocolates and flowers; rather, they were about sorrow and tears. It was *tablea*, not Toblerone; roses with thorns, not just petals.

One of videos, "Crush", was a story of unrequited love: The protagonist has had many years of sweet moments with his beloved, but in the latter's wedding, he turns out to be a guest, not the groom - the proverbial best friend who would have preferred to be the boyfriend. Another video, "Vow," was that of love lost to the unexpected but inevitable finitude of life itself. Dying

of terminal illness, the protagonist-husband nonetheless manages to live on in a most bittersweet way: by carefully choreographing his wife's first Valentine's Day without him.

All those videos, and all my friends' posts about how alone (but not necessarily lonely) they are, hint at a different kind of love being celebrated in Valentine's: one that grows - not diminishes - in the face of obstacles both surmountable and insurmountable. Recently in my hometown of Los Baños, Laguna, people were intrigued by the mystery guy who put up pink tarpaulins everywhere that read: "Will you marry me again, Ms. Janeth?"; my friends marveled at the "sweetness" and *diskarte* of the guy despite the anticipated futility of his efforts.

Shakespeare, of course, touched on the theme of uncertain love ("For never was a story of more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo."); so did Miguel de Cervantes (hence poor Don Quixote) and, for good measure, J.R.R. Tolkien, whose great hero Aragorn spurned the love of Eowyn, shield-maiden of Rohan. In Yukio Mishima's "Spring Snow", the beautiful Satoko foretells the doom of her relationship with her sweetheart Kiyooki:

The path we're taking is not a road, Kiyooki, it's a pier, and it ends someplace where the sea begins.¹

But while it is also true for other cultures, I suspect that the trope of uncertain love has particular resonance in the Philippines. Our very first novel, Pedro Paterno's "Ninay" (1885), involved not one, but two tales of ill-fated love. Jose Rizal, who wrote of the failed romance between Crisostomo Ibarra and Maria Clara, himself experienced what loss of love felt like

¹ Yukio Mishima. "Spring Snow". (Pocket Books, 1972), 246.

when he and his childhood sweetheart Leonor Rivera were prohibited from seeing each other by their families, effectively dooming their relationship.

Then there's our original genre of love songs - the *kundiman* - said to derive from "kung hindi man" (if it's not meant to be): both a reference and tribute to the uncertainty of love. The lyrics of some of the most famous *kundimans* are revelatory of this inclination to delve in the sorrowful and the tearful. For instance, in Nicanor Abelardo "Nasaan ka Irog?" (1923), the singer searches in vain for his beloved, who seems to have abandoned him. But even so, he pledges undying affection²:

Tandaan mo irog / Irog ko'y tandaan

(remember, my beloved)

Kung ako man ay iyong ngayo'y siniphayo,

Even if today you have given me pain

Manga sumpa't lambing pinaram mong buo

And have banished our promises and care

Ang lahat sa buhay ko ay hindi maglalaho't

All shall not vanish from my life and

Magsisilbing bakas ng nadgdaang tang
pagsuyo

Shall remain footprints of our foregone love

Many years later, in a more upbeat tempo, Eraserheads would echo the same sentiments of loss and longing. "Magasin" (1994) is a reminiscence of a love affair with a girl who later becomes a famous model. Although she is already beyond his reach, the singer tries to relive their relationship, even joking - quite poignantly - that she was "still a bit ugly back then". The band's most iconic song, "Ang Huling El Bimbo" is likewise of a love that is not realized. In

² Lyrics and translation taken from R.P. Santos, "Tunugan: Four Essays on Filipino Music" (UP Press, 2005), 24.

that song, the protagonist relives the past as a way of preempting the future, and the 'huling El Bimbo' - the last dance - is the one that plays forever in the protagonist's head.

Today our popular culture remains full of references and tributes to uncertain love. A few years ago, egged on by a romantic comedy starring Jennylyn Mercado and Jericho Rosales, everyone began debating about the existence of a love that is "forever". The debate rages on today, but many seem firmly on the side of "*walang* forever": a phrase that I see even in jeepney art- a decent barometer of the times.

Then there's the recent emergence of "hugot lines": sentimental expressions 'pulled' from our deep reservoir of emotions that use everyday experiences as metaphors for one's ill-fated romance. This genre, whose genealogy can be traced not just to the *kundiman*, but also to the *bugtong*, has been embraced by people from all walks of life - a testament to its wide appeal. Here are a couple of examples:

Sana ang tao parang cellphone, namamatay nang kusa kapag nagloloko. (I wish people were like cellphones, they automatically die when they go crazy)

Ampalaya: minsan gulay, minsan ako. (Bitter gourd, sometimes a vegetable, sometimes myself)

The witticism of *hugot* draws from its *double entendres*, the invocation of words that are both emotional and physical attributes (i.e. 'bitter' and 'sweet') - else, human and non-human (a

cellphone that 'goes crazy' is one that 'hangs'; a person who 'goes crazy' doesn't necessarily hang himself).

It takes some talent to come up with a successful 'hugot line'; it works best if it flows seamlessly from everyday conversations and draws from people's shared experiences. After a magnitude-5.4 quake shook parts of Luzon, I checked my Twitter account to confirm whether what I felt was indeed an earthquake, and here's the first thing I saw:

Buti pa yung lindol, naramdaman mo, ako hindi. (I envy the earthquake, at least you felt it - unlike me.)

As a hiker, I have witnessed how these 'hugot lines' have become everyday fare in the trails - not just in Mt. Sawi in Gabaldon, Nueva Ecija - a recently-opened hiking destination whose christening was not spared from the zeitgeist of the times. As we were trekking in that volcano in Southern Leyte, our guide warned us to take care, lest we be pricked by the rattan thorns. Trying my hand in *hugot*-speak, I ventured:

"Okay lang sa akin ang ma-tinik. Sanay naman ako na masaktan." (Getting pricked is fine with me. I'm used to getting hurt.)

Part of it is of course just for show: Filipino humor has always involved a certain degree of self-deprecation. But there is oftentimes a grain of truth to one's 'hugot lines'; one's own love life is recruited as a subtext that makes them all the more funny and meaningful. *Hugot*,

indeed, allows us not just to pay tribute to the importance of love in our lives, but also to romanticize our states of lovelessness.

II.

Why is it that the state of being *sawi* (literally ‘ill-fated’ or ‘doomed’, but nowadays more commonly referring to ‘ill-fated in love’) resonates with many Filipinos? I have a feeling that our collective *hugot* runs deeper than our personal experiences and draws from something larger than ourselves.

Our very nation, for instance, can be seen as *sawi* in the sense of the ill-fated loves we’ve had for the people who led or ruled over us. Viewed in this lens, our first love was Spain, which, from the very beginning of our colonial relationship, we looked up to, if not politically or ecclesiastically, then culturally and aesthetically. The *ladino* Tomas Pinpin reports that as early as the 16th century, Filipinos were copying Spanish ways:

No doubt you like and imitate the ways and appearance of the Spaniards in matters of clothing and the bearing of arms and even of gait, and you do not hesitate to spend a great deal so that you may resemble the Spaniard.³

Many years later, Donya Victorina, the wig-wearing, powder-applying social climber in *El Filibusterismo*, would serve to personify this enduring aspiration. Not surprisingly, her ambition was to have a European husband:

³ In Vicente Rafael, “Contracting Colonialism. Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule” (Ithaca, 1988), 58.

All she really wanted was to “Europeanize” herself...thanks to a few finaglings she had gradually succeeded in transforming herself so much that by now even Quatrefages and Virchow together would not know where to classify her among the known races.⁴

The Filipino regard for Spain, however, was not requited; in exchange for our admiration of their ways, we received heavy taxation and bondage; we called Spain ‘mother’, but she never really thought of us as her beloved child. Thus we were drawn to Jose Rizal, and later, the *indios bravos* of the Philippine Revolution. But alas, all of them would fail us - or fall into the hands of the enemy. Rizal, who inspired an entire generation to take up arms, was felled by the Spanish in the park that now bears his name. Only a few years after Filipinos got introduced to him and his extraordinary life, the man who represented so much of our aspirations was dead, leaving us with his final love letter:

*My idolized Country, for whom I most gravely pine,
Dear Philippines, to my last goodbye, oh, harken
There I leave all: my parents, loves of mine...⁵*

Andres Bonifacio, the “Father of the Revolution” who idolized Rizal, was himself ignominiously executed by his fellow revolutionaries in a mountain in Cavite, with not even a grave to mark his remains. And who can forget the “Boy General”, Gregorio del Pilar, dead at 24? His

⁴ Jose Rizal, Harold Augenbraum (tr.) *El Filibusterismo* (Penguin, 2011), 4.

⁵ Jose Rizal, “Mi Ultimo Adios”. In “Rizal’s Life, Works & Writings” (Goodwill Bookstore, 1977), 259.

farewell note, written in a cave in Tirad Pass on the eve of his death, may not be as literary as Rizal's, nor his death as glorious, but it is equally haunting:

*The General has given me a Platoon of available men and has ordered me to defend this Pass. I am aware what a difficult task has been given me. Nevertheless, I feel that this is the most glorious moment of my life. I am doing everything for my beloved country. There is no greater sacrifice.*⁶

They were, as ill-fated lovers, too young to die.

From the heartache of the Philippine Revolution and the ensuing loss of so many of our best and brightest men, we tried to move on, and it was during this time that America seduced us with promises of prosperity and modernization. And like a lover who will sacrifice even her own identity for her beloved, we embraced America's ways, adopted its customs and language: we were afflicted with what historian Vicente Rafael calls "white love".

It was an unequal, and in many ways unrequited, love to begin with (they patronizingly called us 'little brown brothers'), but we still pressed on in our adulation of Uncle Sam, with some going as far as to campaign for the Philippines' inclusion as a state among the 'United States of America'. Though far away from snow, we dreamt of White Christmas; though far away from apple orchards we allowed an apple to stand for the first letter in our alphabet, ignoring the more common (and more delicious) *atis*. In her moments of lucidity, my late grandaunt - who was incidentally a case of *sawi* because she refused to elope with her lover to her eternal

⁶ In Kalaw, T.M., "An Acceptable Holocaust: Life and Death of a Boy-general" (National Historical Commission of the Philippines, 1974), 61.

regret - would sing the 'Star-Spangled Banner', the anthem they used to sing in flag ceremonies, with no small nostalgia.

The Japanese were too violent, their occupation too short, to be considered a love - theirs were a lust for territory and power. Consequently, our response was resistance, not romance. It was only many years later, when they came in the form of emotional and loveable *anime* characters, and when we had learned to love *sushi*, *ramen* and of late, *matcha*, that we were able to embrace the land of cherry blossoms. The face of that new Japan was not Musashi, master of combat, but Murakami, master of prose - and himself a master of *hugot*. World War II, indeed, remained a chapter in our love affair in our America: the most trying and yet the most noble. No longer "little brown brothers", we were made to feel that we were true comrade-at-arms fighting side by side with the Americans.

After the war, we were free at last from foreign rule. But the ones who took their place - our own leaders - likewise failed us, either by choice or tragic circumstance. Ramon Magsaysay, our best hope, was doomed by a plane crash in Cebu. The word "sayang" defies translation, and is the only fitting word to describe moments that are characterized, all at once, by loss, regret, disappointment, and sorrow; it was what the people must have felt when they mourned their "guy" in Malacañang.

Ferdinand Marcos was another bright hope who orated in his inaugural speech that "this nation can be great again". At first many believed him, but he was ultimately corrupted not so much by *lupus* but by his lust for power. And so we were once again *sawi* in our hopes, a

state made all the more bitter by our being overtaken, one by one, by our neighbors: first Singapore, then Malaysia and Thailand, and now, even Vietnam.

Indeed, the leaders that we were enamored of failed us, but even so, our capacity for faith and love has remained boundless. In our refusal to give up, we render ourselves vulnerable to false love, but at the same time, open to the true one. Will somebody come to rightfully deserve our affection? Some say that he has already come in the form of the current president, but for many others, the search continues.

III.

Of course, politics alone cannot explain our feeling of being *sawi*; I also think that it has something to do with many Filipinos' circumstances.

In the first place, inequity - i.e. the differences between the rich and the poor - is so wide that many lovers must have to first and foremost bridge the socio-economic gulf between them and their families. Abelardo's "Nasaan Ka Irog" and the same-titled film that grew out of it are based on the true story of thwarted love affair between an impoverished maiden and a rich heir - Abelardo's friend. This trope of wealth differences between lovers: housemaid and haciendero's son, houseboy and rich heiress, has been carried on by various actors and actresses, from Nora Aunor to Nadine Lustre.

The primacy of family in Philippine society is also why our love affairs are often beyond our control, and hence, prone to failure. The now-defunct practice of *pagtatanan* was a sanctioned form of defiance that gave space for lovers to override the dictates of their

parents, but it is ultimately successful only after their eventual sanction. That our national hero himself, Jose Rizal, failed to overcome the wishes of Leonor Rivera's parents speaks of the paramount importance of family. Years after his heartbreak, he would plead for his sisters to accept his beloved Josephine Bracken.

Then there is also the diaspora that displaces lovers, husbands and wives, parents and children, the Filipino and motherland; a diaspora that drove Joma Sison to write of his longing for mangoes - and the Pinoys of Winnipeg to brave a frigid winter day for the opening of a Jolibee store. In our Internet age, virtual connections sometimes suffice to take the place of physical togetherness: Once, someone posted an endearing photo on Facebook of a man gazing intently at his iPad, his face betraying the joy of talking with someone he loves.

But just as frequently, physical separation leads to an emotional one: as I have experienced the hard way, willingness to travel from Manila to New York can water down to a point that traveling from one end of Manhattan to the other is too much of an inconvenience. Indeed, feelings are like sand: you can build them into a fairy-tale castle but they can wash away as soon as the ramparts take their final form.

Finally, our country's being beset with calamity further adds to the uncertainty of our loves and our futures. Yolanda, alas, has been politicized beyond recognition, but to the people of Tacloban, it remains raw - and is populated not by politicians that marred the relief efforts but loved ones that they lost - or lived through the situation with. Indeed, what they remember the most is not the foul stench of corruption, but that of dead bodies lying on the streets for several weeks. After we arrived in Tacloban from that volcano with a heart-shaped crater, my

hosts recounted tales of heartbreak, like that of a young man who couldn't hold on to his wife's hand as the fierce waves swept away their house and overwhelmed them. Hours later, after having lost consciousness, the man wakes up and finds his wife lifeless. He cries an anguished farewell:

I should have been the one swept away by the waves! I wish I were the one who perished because I can't live without you.

Because the Filipino condition is so fraught - difficult, diasporic, disaster-prone - love has always been a risky proposition. Our loves, like our lives, are full of uncertainty, and while for some of us, love endures, for many others, it succumbs to the exigencies of fate. Remarkably, however, we are able to say "*Bahala na si Batman!*" with a sigh and keep going. "It was fun, too," my friend said of Yolanda as we drank *tuba* in their house in Tacloban. "We were huddled together in one room, our entire barangay. We had nothing to eat and had to scour the warehouses and desperately wait for the relief goods, just like everybody else. *But it was also fun.*" she narrated, managing to laugh even as she fought the tears.

Diskarte - the art of 'making do' with whatever resources are available - plays a big role in dealing with these struggles, which range from the existential to the romantic. Coming home from Tacloban to Los Baños, I was surprised to see that alongside the pink tarpaulins for Ms. Janeth, another set of tarpaulins had cropped up in response: "Mr. Rodel, *Yes na yes!* I will marry you again!" Against all odds, it seemed that love has won.

Can my own sense of *diskarte* redeem me from my own state of lovelessness? When I think of Yolanda and its enormous human toll - as well as the profound heartaches of people all around me - I realize that my struggles are nothing, but at the same time, their life stories give me hope that the heart-shaped lake at the end of the trail is not the end of my journey. Surely, I too can overcome the obstacles that lie ahead.

And when all else fails, I guess there's always *hugot*, which may not be a way to find love, but can help find a way out of it - and perhaps back again.

IV.

The state of being *sawi* does not diminish a person's worth; if anything, it only enhances his stature in the eyes of others. Our heroes, thus, could easily be the guys who failed to realize their loves - not just the victors. Similarly, the underdog-ness of the Filipino makes his achievements all the more remarkable, like the security guard who becomes a *cum laude* graduate in the very school where he goes on duty; the tricycle driver's son who tops the medical board exams, or the lover who manages to win over beloved not because of his wealth or physical superiority - but because of his love itself: its passion, its ingenuity, and its capacity to transcend even its perceived limits.

I would like to think that the same is true with our nation. We carry on: a people full of hope, made richer - not poorer - by the tragedies and disappointments we have faced and the handicaps we've had to deal with. Through *kundiman* lyrics past and 'hugot lines' present, our emotions have been transmuted into humor and sublimated to art. Undeterred by our failings, we continue; unencumbered by the weight of our feelings, we press on. But even as we move

on, we keep holding on to the memory of a past that may yet return in the future - and to the hope of a future that we can almost experience, even as it never seems to arrive.

For the Filipino, indeed, possibility can just be as real as certainty, and memory can just be as palpable as the here and the now. In tapping into this view, the person who does *hugot* reveals the depth of his emotions and in the process shows his heart intact: an open invitation to those who are willing and able to fill it. Similarly, for all our nation's hurts and pains, we remain ready to hope, ready to believe, and ready to love.

And therein, I suppose, lies the strength of our republic of *sawi*.