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Saudade

In English you don't have this word, and there's no accurate translation of it. Is it nostalgia? Or yearning for the absent one? Or the love that remains after the beloved has gone? All of this could be *saudade*. Have you not seen your Christ on the cross? And why does the Protestant deny the image where the knowledge can be felt.

—Micheline Aharonian Marcom, *A Brief History of Yes*

When I was a child, I once dreamt of a city engulfed in flames, a wooden, misshapen staircase leading to a clear blue, cloudless sky, and my family below me, looking away as I reached for them, wanting to return to the burning houses.

No, I remember them waving goodbye to me. I remember their faces held no emotion, and I called to them with no voice.

I woke crying, always the sensitive-too-sad child, but that one night, I came to seeing my sister across from me on the bed, crawling on the wall of our shared bedroom, reaching for something above her that was not there. She too asleep and in need of escaping. Do you remember the sounds of your childhood? Here are mine: the karaoke machine blasting a lovelorn kundiman my father sang, my father switching to laughing, to yelling, to offering his belt and his authority while swaying to “Dancing Queen,” him turning red over a game of poker, him losing money, him stealing money, him always losing money; my sister holding her pet rats our uncle who lived in the garage gifted her, my sister singing too—she had an angel's voice—and her, yearning for my father's touch; my grandmother beating her chest, my grandmother selling her wedding ring and pearl necklaces, my grandmother gifting me fake ones on my birthday, because it was in April and my stone was the most precious and expensive of all; and me, this little sensitive-too-sad child, zipping up a Mickey Mouse backpack with Filipino salty crackers and a flashlight, in case I got lost after running away from home, me, this little sensitive-too-sad child, hiding in her grandmother's shoe closet for hours until no one

found me and I crawled between and over her shoes, still wanting.

I read a book once about memory and trauma. *Repetition is the language of the abused child*, it reads. Richard Rhodes. I've forgotten everything until age eleven. No, I'm lying. Everything is a fragmentary remembrance. Revise that: I've forgotten everything that has ever hurt. Instead, I know what it feels like, I imagine my dreams as real. I imagine what it must have felt like to be above buildings aflame, to feel the heat as I stood on a staircase that led me away but was also wobbling and broken, I touch the clouds and I revise it again: there are no clouds, there are clouds. I see my sister's naked body in the darkness, her palms against the dirty, plastered white walls.

I want to tell you that I had a good childhood. That my father and I laughed a lot. That my sister and I made up games like closing our fists into balls and pointing the thumb and pinky out, we called them Goolie monsters, they talked in high-pitched voices and traversed back to their homeland, a magical world made only for Goolies, whenever we enclosed their small bodies with our free hands and poofed them away. They were our friends. They asked us: *Do you want to come home with us, to the land made for Goolies?* We nodded our heads: yes, Goolie, yes—take us home with you! They said: *You're human, but that's okay. Come home with us—we know how hard it is to just want to go back home when there was no home to begin with.*

I want to tell you about my grandmother, who survived a war and was captured by the Japanese, who worried about if food was on the table, and if we could afford the kitchen table at the neighboring consignment store she loved. How she would take me everywhere, to Ann's Linens, on the bus, to the American grocery store, to Tambuli Market, to many, many furniture stores like the one on Grace and Carson Street, that one I thought had a small storefront but was a labyrinth inside. It was filled with a thousand knick-knacks, wooden chests, wooden doors, wooden beds, wooden beds with drawers on the sides, all these wooden hiding places I could hide in and disappear forever. I don't remember why I was running away. I don't remember what I was running away from. I don't know if it was my father and his drugs. I don't remember if he ever touched me; no, revise that. I don't remember if his legs wrapped around my small frame as he held me from behind; no, revise that. I don't remember; I do remember; I pushed him away with such force, and his voice shouts in my

mind: *I am your father*. His authority, his belt, his body pressed against my back, I don't remember, I do, *are you making this up?* My memory fades to black, I reach in my mind, I pull out flowers.

Los Angeles is a city of heat. If I could, I would put a staircase right smack in the middle of it, facing west toward the sea and the sky. I'd drive down the 405 at 100 miles per hour and climb the staircase with no clothes on. My body burnt, skin no longer the color of my father's porcelain, bleached skin, my face free of make-up. I'd wave goodbye to all the burning houses, all the people who stand in the fires unscathed. They'd tell me I'm making it up, and I'll answer: that's okay. They'll keep asking: Where are you going, where are you going? I won't answer. Their faces will shift to my family's. Where? I'll answer: to a warm, well-lighted place. I'll throw Hemingway at their feet and they'll throw it back, hit the wooden stairs, try to knock it down. I'll keep running up and up. The sensitive-too-sad girl I was will meet me at the top. She'll ask me: Where? When I run to her, swoop her small frame into my arms, cut off my father's legs, I'd revise it all again, and no longer will Los Angeles burn. Far away from here, I'd tell her. Away from the fires, away from shoe closets. A voice will climb up my throat, in the shape of my sister, in the shape of the Goolie monsters we loved. Why not here? it'll ask me. Let's make a home here, in this body, where there is heat, and a carved image of Los Angeles on the heart. The city will look so small from here. Everything will, the memories of singing karaoke with your father, your sister's tiny punches, your grandmother's warm palms holding your child-like face, the tiny fragments you can pick up, put together, recall as your childhood, all of it will be smaller, easier to handle—even the expanse of the sky.

My Lola, the River

My lola always begins with this: *I remember the sky.*

The sky is red, orange, an expanse of blood. Purple gradient entangled in twilight and the moment between night and day, when the sun is at the edge of the horizon. A dash of hope. No, revise that: a dash of everything. It holds their screams. It holds the horizon. It is still. It stops everything. It burns.

Everything is always burning in her memories.

She tells me of the time she stood on white shores an ocean away from here and saw the sky become red:

My lola is in a white dress. Her sisters stand behind her. Her skin is olive and scarred by the wind, her legs sinking in the sand beneath her. Her small frame and long black hair glimmers against the sea. How old is she? She is twenty, twenty-one, unmarried, a dalaga, the age she eloped somewhere in the mountainside, the same age I eloped halfway across the world. Roars flare above her. Engines afire. Burning. There are gushes of wind, hot air spit from war jets, the sky erupting in sound. The sky is eating. There are bullets piercing the sky. There are dogfights. The Americans versus the Japanese. The Filipinos versus the Japanese. Devouring each other's metal flesh. The Filipino planes are falling, swallowed by the sea. They're weak, they're hand-me-downs, she sees a silver plane soaring above the jungle, the rough foliage, and it rides the air just at the waves' surface. It swoops up, it evades the white plane with the red sun painted on its side; it twirls, flips, somersaults. The American planes keep shooting. The Japanese planes keep shooting. I don't know if my grandma cried, but she tells me her sisters yell at the top of their lungs, their arms lifted, their voices shrill as the wings of the bat, they scream and scream and scream: *kill them, kill them, kill them, save us!* They throw their bodies on the wet sand, press their backs against the wet earth. *Save us!* They spread their arms, their legs, open their blouses, hands clenching their chests: *save us.* The silver plane evades an American plane and the white, red sun plane chases it like a wild boar hunting its prey and the American plane guns down the whole area, the machine guns dance, the air rumbles it spits it shrills

it devours everything its belly expanding collapsing the sound explodes against the surface of the bluest water until my grandmother and her sisters cover their blood-soaked, ruptured ears. They see the white, red sun plane burst aflame. They see the silver plane evade the ball of fire. The American planes keep shooting. They're always shooting, she tells me. The silver plane encircles the flames until it gets caught by another round of gunfire and down it soars to the pit of the ocean, erupting the sky in the most beautiful of colors. The sisters roar. The sisters scream. My grandmother says: *This is when he died.*

Who? I ask. I am unsure.

Anak, did you know I loved someone before your lolo? He was my first fiancé.

This is how my memory replays this moment: she glances toward the sea. We stand near the seagulls burying their heads in the sand. We're facing the Pacific, but it's thousands of miles across from the dogfight of her memories. I grab for her hand, she pulls away, walks toward the horizon, the end of the world. Behind us is the Redondo Beach Pier, loud and happy. Her palms are spread apart, open, like she is expecting the sun. It is sunset. The seagulls cry out. They fly above us and they soar, white birds calling us home. I follow her in her daster dress, so colorful like the gradients of flowers. Her tsinelas begin to burrow in the sand. She falls to the ground, on her knees, unable to speak, and there are no tears but the fractures of her youth engulfing her.

I must have been six or seven or I don't remember, maybe I am eight. My own memories are blurred, burnt. My youth was a pit of fractures. I pretend to reach my hands into my skull to pull them out. Instead I pull out white birds with the reddest eyes. They float above my palms like clouds. I am awash in the waves of their cries: *Save us! Save us!* It is my grandmother who pulls me away from the black cavern, this endless grave, this fractured repository. Erasure is violent, it's a perpetual burning. My grandmother now clasps my hands, brings me close against her body, her chest, her beating heart. I am on my knees, now I am laying my head on her lap. The seagulls still beck and call to us. I look up and I see the happy pier in the distance. I hear the mariachi band play a melody, a melody that sinks into the sky, flutters our ears, fills us like water. We are humming along with our Mexican friends, and then suddenly, Mama Pacita lifts my chin and tells me her first confession of the life I was not part of, that I do not understand,

that cements her as unknowable, that proves her life was always only hers:

I was supposed to marry a pilot, child, she says. Did you know that? Oh, he was so handsome. Just like your lolo.

I want to understand but I don't—I am a still a child. I just listen.

He was from the Philippine Military Academy, just like my grandfather Diego. But unlike him, he was from a well-known family. A rich Chinese mestizo from the distant side of Dulay—he was my grandmother's cousin, and someone my great-grandfather approved of. Lolo Isidro was the mayor of Aringay, a small barrio at the western edge of Ilocos Sur, and, as my lola says, *your great-lolo had a reputation to protect*. Her first love graduated as a cadet from the academy; he was so popular, dashing, not at all her type. I ask her why. She sighs: *When the war came, I was not afraid, child. I escaped to the mountains and eloped with Diego instead. Because I wanted to. Because I could. I don't know what it was about your lolo—it wasn't his long love letters, I thought they were too semantic. It wasn't his stubbornness*. I laugh at this. She continues: *No one is more stubborn than ako, child. Than me*. She lifts her daster dress, the one with all the violet flower imprinted on her chest to her legs: *Maybe it was his gusto, he could never take no for an answer. No, that is not it, anak. No, no. He was an orphaned mestizo, a child born into the worst circumstances. Dead parents, an elder sister the whole village knew about. It was his thirst—endless, hollow like the husk inside the coconut—thirst not just for me, but for life. He wasn't boring, my daughter. He was against my father's wishes*.

She continues: *But even now, I am sad. I see that silver plane drowning. I can't see my cousin's face. But I imagine it. At night, I always can see it*.

What does he look like? I ask her.

There, you see the sun? It is like the sun. Ablaze, a deep cavity, eyes of black pits. I can even smell his flesh sometimes at night, only when it is especially dark.

I look around us. The seagulls approach us, crowding our bodies in a circle, their wings flapping, their chirps screeching. I wonder if she cried then, as we sat on the beach thousands of miles away from Aringay, looking at the same ocean which faces that burnt, war-torn, awash shore. She carries me, all the way to the sidewalk, up the hill toward the pier, and in my memories, I am the one crying, I am the one filled with sorrow, I am the one shrieking like the birds. Don't abandon me, I say between my childish sobs: Don't leave, please. Not like my mother. Lola, lola, Mama Pacing, hear me, see me, please.

My lola had just finished her disappearing act on the beach, had just stopped beating her chest, her ritual chant: *Diyos ko, dear Father, art in heaven, take me now, take me now.*

She looks at me quietly: *Anak, child. Sometimes, the only thing I've ever wanted in this life was to die.*

Saudade, II

I imagine my grandmother accosts me at night, in her playful, joking way: *Come sleep with me! I have missed you.*

She is a small, gray-haired woman, her eyes colored like clouds pregnant with rain. Her hair is muted but combed with aplomb, her make-up impeccable, her eyebrows tatted with precision, and like always, she glows in the night—she is the moon, the sun. Her skin is dried up, an exposed apple, her hands affixed to a piano where she plays Monti's *Csárdás* by memory, the first accompaniment she learned in the province years ago. I am every age I ever was with her. She tells me she loves me, and I believe her. She holds my hand. She moves toward my hair and says: *It's short again, you've always liked it short.* Now she lies on the bed; she can't move; she sits still and looks out the window. No pots or pans are thrown, no more yelling, no hand raised against my cheek to warn me: *Please, anak, act like a lady.* She does not look at me when she confesses: *You left me.* No, she does look at me, her eyes not a fire but a sea, and there we stand, at her bedside in the tiny apartment organized impeccably, just like her. She does not frown. The apartment is dark, the blinds are shut, the television is blasting Channel 40, her favorite Christian network. She copies the old white ladies' hairstyles and clothes. She relents, tells me she is happy I am back in Los Angeles, and then turns to my husband: *You took her away from me!* She laughs and does not stop until he laughs too. She says to him: *When will you give me children?* He wants to answer: soon. She says: *Do you even know how to make a child?* He laughs again: Yes, of course I do. She continues: *Do you want me to show you?* We are laughing nonstop until she pats down my dress, brushes my dark black hair, cups my face and tells me: *Dalaga, what a lady you've become.* My husband disappears. He is here and he is gone again. *Is he at sea?* She asks me. I answer: It's the navy; it takes him away, just like the army took grandpa away. She shakes her head and there the disdain, the frown, the sadness grows: *No, anak, not good. This is not good.*

I am nine again. She dresses me in long pajamas that cover my arms, legs, neck, and she carries my small body across the yellow kitchen into the living room, dancing to the karaoke machine, begs me to dance too. Then I

am eleven, she buys me a black gown for the funeral of my grandfather, and we fly half-away across the world to Manila, to walk miles on hills she once grew up on, to bury the lover who abandoned her—no, let me rewrite that: the lover she chose to abandon for America. I am swallowed in black from head-to-toe. *You look so beautiful*, she says. She always elongates the *full*. *You look so beau-ti-fulllllll*. She is eighty and then ninety, she is twenty again, and she is dashing with long, black hair that reaches her hips and she commands the air with just a tone, a voice, her white zoot suit, her red, disarming smile. She has just arrived in California; she's a rock star singing for the band Priscilla Lee and the Filipino Rockets. But she leaves L.A. and returns to Manila for the war hero she loves, and there she gives birth to too many children; she's sixty now, she's back in the States traveling down Pacific Coast Highway with her sister who married into the military too; she's a cannery worker for StarKist Tuna and her back is hunched for hours till the morning fog of San Pedro crowds her lungs. She turns to me and accosts me again, grabs my arms and asks: *Where are you going? Are you a ghost?* I answer: I am leaving for college, Mama, I am leaving because I eloped with a sailor in the navy—just like you, like your sisters, wasn't the military our salvation?—I am moving across the country for a man, I am leaving because we have always been poor but you taught me how to survive, even if it is with my body. She kisses me in affirmation, tells me she has been waiting for so very long. She is no longer wrapped in her orange butterfly dress; she sings songs with a melody played in the darkness—the piano banging, the tune a stomping ground. It freezes, it becomes silent and roars again, and finally, it stops and she whispers: *Anak, finally, the world has stopped spinning*. She prays to her God, she does the sign of the cross, prays Hail Mary, and admonishes it all—says she speaks in tongues instead. She stops moving and glides toward the window, opens the blinds to the view of the apartment's dirty pool and barbeque grills and says: *Heaven will become earth again soon*. She tells me this and points to the sun, the sea, and we walk along a beach with nowhere to return to.

I am missing her, like the rain or the ocean that curls back into itself.

I am, I want to be, the rain, I want to be the ocean, just so I could say back to her: I am home now.

I want to yell: I have never left you.

But she laughs and looks at me with such doubt.

Where did you go?

Where did I go, I say in return.

She does not touch or weep: *You left me*. She clasps her hands on her chest. She does not beat it. She does not cry out for God. She lays her head on my shoulder. We do not say a word.

Now I am twenty again, moving to a university near downtown L.A., the first one in my familia to do so. She waves on the doorstep despite the fact I am still packing. I walk back and forth from the blue house on Neptune Avenue to the car. She stands on the porch, watching me. She keeps waving. Her hand becomes a blur, her arm unstoppable like a piano metronome. I keep walking back and forth, carrying box after box. She never stops waving. She once said: *I am always saying goodbye to you. I knew you would leave*. I don't want to leave. I leave. I return. I rarely return.

But at night, when I walk home alone on darkened streets, I feel a soul behind me. I turn and there is only more darkness. I keep walking. I keep walking. I hear her voice: *I am near you*. I return home, in cities I am only passing through. *I am near you*, she says. I keep walking. I pass by a lonely lamp-post. I enter my apartment. I open the door, open it to emptiness. I place my bags down and sit on the bed. I say: *Hello, I am home now*. And I can hear her voice reply back: *Sleep now, anak. Sleep beside me, sleep with your old lola, I am here now. Unlike your birth mother, I won't leave you*. I enter the darkness, enter the realm of sleep, enter and am no longer alone. In my dreams, I walk to her grave, on the green hills facing single-family homes, these cliffs by the sea. I play a song by The Kinks, I sing—*Where are you going to I don't mind, if I live too long I'm afraid I'll die. So I will follow you wherever you go, if your offered hand is still open to me. Strangers on this road we are on, we are not two we are one*. I cry, I hold my face, I answer the sky, I become the grass, I fall deep beneath the dirt, and lie besides my grandmother's bones. It is here, in the coolness of the earth, that she holds me back. It is here, in this moment where I am alone and not, where I am left with only what is left of her—the smell of burnt earth, her white barong dress, her pearls, her golden rings—that I find myself again. I repeat to myself: *I am no longer alone*. She answers back: *Oo, yes, child*. Her eyes hollow but no longer searching, no longer reaching for home.