2020

Life Writing Prize

CARLA MONTEMAYOR

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LIFE WRITING PRIZE SHORTLIST 2020

North of the River

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Everything is memory. To tell this story, I must remember others. Selves and parents, clans and nations, all are threads in the same skein.

I learned recently that skein also refers to a flock of geese in flight. Perhaps this is the more relevant meaning for a narrative about leaving and finding home.

1.

I watched my mother dying on Skype.

One day I'll be able to plug this phone into the television and see your faces as we speak, she told us long before the advent of video calls. She had three children in three countries; it was a desire more than a prediction. And she was right, although neither of us ever imagined that our final conversation would take place on what she called the Internet Computer.

In the autumn of 2011, I had been in England for seven years and not been home in four. Studies, visas, jobs, finances, marriage — my circumstances, new and precarious, deterred me from coming and going. My mother understood. All she asked for was to speak regularly with us, with video if possible.

That August she appeared more pensive than usual. She asked about the recent riots in London. I edited my account to spare her the worry. She segued into an odd, self-pitying litany.

I think I might die soon.

What? Did your doctor tell you that?

No, but…my knees are painful.

Ma, no one dies of arthritis.

If I did not think this exchange disturbing, it was because my mother had always been an incorrigible hypochondriac and a survivor of many health emergencies.

In her forties she had terrible migraines and various ailments that she salved with Vicks ointment. She self-medicated with analgesics that landed her in hospital on multiple occasions. She bound her head with my dad's handkerchiefs, headgear popular with sundry rebels in the Philippine countryside. We called her Kumander Ofelia.

For the last three decades she had coped with severe rheumatoid arthritis. Her joints swelled up during the monsoon season, although this did not keep her from socialising in her Zimmer frame in the drier months. We joked that all the steroids she had taken to manage the condition would enable her to compete in the 2012 London Olympics.

It was my brother who noticed the chain of tiny, bizarre behaviours pointing to a more serious dysfunction. He dropped in every day after work, the only one among her children to remain in the country.

First he reported that she had accused someone of reneging on a debt and hauled them to the community arbitration court. Serves the swindler right, my sister and I remarked. This was not out of character at all. My mother was combative and litigious. A frustrated lawyer, she was quick to sue when aggrieved.

Next some neighbours revealed that she had been spreading rumours about them. *What sort of rumours?,* we pressed my brother. Lurid ones, he replied. We began to worry.

I tried to pick up any troubling behaviour during our Skype sessions. There were none that I could detect. She was generally cheerful, she discussed current events cogently, complained about her aching joints as usual. Finally my sister flew in from America to help assess the situation. My mother asked her who she was when she walked in.

None of us had anticipated that her mind would fail so rapidly. We had not yet seen a force that could defeat the body that birthed us, battled

snakes and hurricanes, and resisted its own ossifying cartilage. She was 76 at this point and had survived my father's death for over seven years. We prepared ourselves for a drawn-out struggle with dementia.

We would hire carers, my brother would carry on with his daily visits, my sister had just been to visit. We devised an elaborate rota around work leaves and prices of long-haul flights to Manila. I booked my turn for November, intending to stay for two weeks. My siblings believed that if anyone could coerce her to go to hospital, it would be me, her eldest child.

On the morning of October 29th I spoke to her as my brother propped her head up. Her eyes could not seem to focus on the screen but she was coherent.

Do you have money to fly home? I can send you some.

Don't worry, I've bought my ticket.

Oh yes, I forgot that you're married now. Let your husband pay for it.

I have my own money.

Good. Do you know that I love you?

Yes. I will be there in a few days.

Remember that always.

Please don't speak like that. I'll be there soon.

I spent the afternoon trying frantically to rebook my flight. I was in bed when I received a call from my cousin's wife. I knew from her sobs that my mother had gone.

I remember little of my journey home through several time zones. My husband put me in a cab to Paddington. It was a late-night Emirates flight from Heathrow via Dubai. I stood around in the airport's fake oasis during the layover, wearing sunglasses at dawn. Airport cleaners and staff, mostly fellow Filipinos, stared. Maybe they recognised grief in my face.

A cousin collected me at the Manila end on a humid midnight just after All Souls Day. From the taxi I tracked the cityscape for changes since I last went away. Highways and uprisings merged in my head.

Here was EDSA, the long thoroughfare that connected north and south of the capital. There had been two peaceful mass protests here, the first in

1986 overthrowing Ferdinand Marcos. The second in was 2001; I had been old enough to take part in bringing down the Estrada government.

We passed Megamall, which is as massive as it sounds. Smaller ones lined the route until we got to the one fronting my old high school: SM North Edsa. There used to be a terminal across the road from where I took jeepneys to my university in the late '80s. Now there was a rival mall, a posher one, I was told. Everything was new but familiar.

Only at one point in the journey did I struggle to identify my location. Several acres of trees had vanished from a length of highway. In their place was a huge concrete block bathed in security lights. Another mall. We were in Novaliches, my cousin assured me. I grew up in this district, spent over thirty years commuting along the very same road that I now could not recognise.

Our house was just about two miles away but I insisted on going straight to the funeral home, the same one where my father's wake had been eight years earlier. We arrived at past two in the morning. I dragged my suitcase up the driveway, two weeks' worth of clothes and homecoming presents.

Wakes are all-nighters in the Philippines. The dead must never be left on their own lest their souls assume that they have been abandoned. Mourners on a break stood in the hallways, checking their mobiles and fanning themselves. They glanced at me and nodded. Everyone was accustomed to returnees arriving at all hours, summoned from the ships, deserts and hospitals of the world.

I passed posters promoting the funeral home's package called e-libing: Live-streamed funerals for the benefit of loved ones in the diaspora. Libing means burial in Tagalog, the infinitive being ilibing, phonetically identical to the electronic version. Who the hell punned about death in two languages? Onli in da Pilipins. The smell of ylang-ylang assaulted my nostrils as I opened the door to the room where my mother's body lay.

2.

I had seen two or three births before my mother's delivery. I had seen and heard the cries of pain and the contortions of the mothers' faces as they laboured to bring out a child. And I wondered why there were many children. I would tell my fellow peeping toms or tomasitas, 'See how hard it is to give birth? I will never give birth. Mark my words.'

When my mother was six years old, her closest friend died of a nameless fever. Neighbours formed a nest of arms and carried her to her friend's house, up the wooden steps, and onto the floor next to the casket. My mother sat near the doorway for hours, her swollen leg outstretched, not understanding why her friend was lying still when it was she who could barely move.

Days earlier, she and her three older brothers had been stealing fruit in the church orchard. They had planned the theft for weeks, circling the perimeter after each weekly catechism lesson with the aged Spanish priest. They decided to time their attempt for high noon, the least likely time of day for anyone to be wandering about in the brutal heat of April.

When the search for the ringleader unfolded, it emerged that my mother had planned the mission. She had also put herself forward as the best suited to climb the slender pomelo tree. She had shimmied up the trunk, eager to prove that she – the youngest bagtit and a girl at that – could pluck the fruit as large as her head.

The agreement was to divide it into four portions, hers being the largest. They would eat it in the afternoon, to fill their stomachs before the inevitable evening meal of rice, boiled camote leaves and salt.

They had not counted on the caretaker appearing with his bolo when he should have been eating his lunch under one of the acacias in the graveyard. My mother jumped right onto one of the spikes that surround the base of every pomelo tree. Running home barefoot drove it further inside, where it would remain for days.

Back home, her father prodded the sole of her foot, oblivious to her agony. He struck the back of her head with his palm, sending her sprawling onto the bamboo slats. *You brought this on yourself, you stupid girl. I'll cut your leg off myself. No one will want you for a wife.*

Her mother sat by the window, her belly bulging above the heap of shelled peanuts piled on the lap of her skirt. *You will be a big sister again soon enough*, she said, *stop being so free.* She kicked the sack of peanuts towards my mother. *Be useful.*

No one could recall when the rabid dog entered the clearing and writhed its way towards the dead girl's house. Everyone heard the warning yells before they saw the twitching, snarling animal. Dozens of feet rushed up the nearest hut and trampled my mother's gangrenous foreleg, squeezing the pomelo thorn out of her foot in a puddle of blood and pus. It is said that her screams could be heard from the next village.

3.

A dog picked me for a housemate. I never tire of recounting this to people who ask how I ended up in this corner of London where I live now.

In 2008 I moved down from Sheffield while I finished my studies. I had a part-time job at a non-profit in Angel and I was exhausted from commuting back and forth, sleeping on my friend's couch in Finsbury Park two nights a week.

Up north I must have moved homes six times in three years, in step with the rhythm of the academic calendar. I was in my early thirties and living with strangers after leaving 10 years of comfort in my Manila apartment. Some mornings I was confused by cornices and squares of light on strange ceilings.

A Japanese colleague invited me to an interview at her shared house in Stoke Newington, a short bus ride away from my office. I hopped on the 73 straight out of St Pancras, rehearsing my answers to hypothetical interview questions.

How could I convince them to share a home with me? I was tidy but not obsessive, cool but only just. I would describe myself as sociable but not nosey. All true in bits, all false in parts.

I entered the house just as a dejected applicant was leaving. Good luck, he muttered, as he walked out. I went into the lounge where four residents welcomed me.

After five minutes of awkward preliminaries, the landlady's dog strolled straight towards me, jumped on the sofa and lay on my lap. I moved in a month later with all my possessions: One large suitcase of clothes and two boxes of books and crockery.

4.

I met Andy online months after I moved to London. I decided to omit this detail when I announced to my mother that I had a new partner. What was I supposed to say? That I found him on the Internet Computer?

Two years later, Andy and I informed my mother via Skype that we were preparing for our wedding. It had been a fraught process. We received the Certificate of Approval from the Home Office weeks before, then a requirement for non-EU nationals marrying British citizens. I was 41 years old and needed permission to wed from Theresa May.

My mother considered the news and asked to speak to me alone. I dreaded her response.

Was he speaking in English?

Ma, he IS English.

Is he divorced?

No, and I don't care.

Is he Catholic?

No, neither am I.

You will always be a Catholic. He needs to convert so you can get married in church.

We're having a civil ceremony here in London.

Unimpressed, she ordered me to leave the room and send him back in. It took days of badgering to extract bits of their conversation from him.

She said you were very stubborn. Sure, it must be a heritable trait.

She said you were not normal. He chuckled at this.

She said that if I ever tired of you, I should give you back to her.

Of course. Here I was, finally about to marry, and my mother was anticipating divorce.

She said the very same thing to my brother-in-law when my sister announced their engagement in 1995. A reminder infused with a threat: Husbands were welcome but ultimately dispensable. Whereas as we, her daughters, were always hers and would never be discarded.

My father had said nothing on that occasion. No man-to-man talk with his prospective son-in-law, no congratulations. He handed the phone to my mother and sprinted upstairs. My brother and I burst out laughing. My mother shushed us and turned to me. *When you get married, your father will weep.*

I went to check on him. He was in bed, swaddled in his blanket, feigning sleep at seven in the evening. I could hear my mother downstairs, still on the phone delivering her spiel.

5.

The machine guns were positioned before us. The soldiers went around the group and kicked some men. They asked for guerrillas. No one could answer them as the barrio folk could not understand the soldiers.

Finally, a soldier asked my father, after slapping his head to knock off the hat he was wearing.

You guerrilla! Guerrilla?

No, sir, I am a farmer. Here is my family.

The soldier grunted something which seemed to mean "This one speaks English".

My mother's family were in Isabela, northeast of the Philippines, when Manila fell into Japanese hands in 1942. That her father was a Northerner himself and a government employee were enough credentials for them to be considered respectable newcomers, even when the war turned them into refugees. As Japanese troops advanced, they joined the exodus of townsfolk from the provincial capital of Ilagan into the skirts of the Sierra Madre.

The reality of the war intruded when Japanese soldiers appeared on occasional raids, searching for guerrillas and practising their marksmanship on crocodiles basking on the sandbars of the Cagayan River. Their bullets bounced off. The river was wide, the crocodiles ancient. My mother and her brothers swam in the river most days while womenfolk washed clothes in a shallow pool off its banks.

My grandfather obtained permission from the Spanish landlord to clear a bit of land for farming in Barrio Dos. What could not be grown was procured from the jungle with help from Agtas, seasoned hunters who led expeditions to trap wild boar and deer. Once a year, before the monsoons came, Agtas guided the men and older boys of the village into the jungle and out into the eastern coast. Only they knew where to bed down to avoid snakes, which stalks to slash and sip for water.

It took three days of trekking to reach the bay, another three to boil down seawater in a large cauldron and empty oil tins. They would return home with a small bag of salt to be shared among the households. Food and drink could be sweetened with crushed fruit and honey, but every crystal of salt had to be wrung from the sea.

At night the Agtas sheltered with goats and chickens under the villagers' elevated huts. Once in a while my grandfather would summon them upstairs to frighten my mother into silence during her nocturnal tantrums. This was his last resort when his beatings failed to calm his daughter.

In her old age my mother confessed her nightmares to me: Hunger, crocodiles, tiny coffins. And her father, whipping her with a dried stingray's tail until small silent people in loincloths hauled her from fitful sleep.

I grew up listening to stories from this fabled era, hers and my father's. I knew very few relatives old enough to remember what came before. I only discovered from books much later that the history of the North was also mine.

The president of the First Philippine Republic, Emilio Aguinaldo, had retreated to Isabela to evade American forces in 1899. His military strategist, Antonio Luna, had set up headquarters in the northwest, shifting to a guerrilla campaign against the new occupiers who had succeeded the Spanish.

Aguinaldo led his dwindling army east, across two mountain ranges and towards the Philippine Sea, the same coast where my uncles harvested salt with Agtas. The Tagalog general had been sheltered by the North in his flight. He was captured in Palanan, eastern Isabela, in 1901.

As for Luna, himself a Northerner, he had been hacked to death by Aguinaldo's men in Cabanatuan two years earlier. Growing up I heard vague resentments from Ilocano uncles about the duplicity of Tagalogs. No one spoke of what followed.

The subsequent American campaign to "pacify" the islands resulted in the deaths of an estimated 200,000 to a million Filipinos. The Americans did not make distinctions among the natives. Northern or Southern, they were all wild and vengeful, emboldened by a successful revolution against their Spanish masters. The first republic in Asia was thus crushed but rebellions would never cease.

No one cared that the Agtas lived in the region long before Tagalogs or Ilocanos. What they had endured and remembered, no one thought to ask. The Japanese were only the latest of violent strangers they had to put up with over the centuries, all of them intent on conquest. And now they had to share the jungle with these Filipinos whose restless children they had to pretend to abduct in the middle of the night or no one would sleep in peace.

By the time I visited Isabela in the early 1990s, much of its feral majesty had faded. The Cagayan River I encountered was a pitiful creek in the dry season and a raging torrent when rains cascaded unchecked down denuded mountain slopes.

The crocodiles were long gone, as were the Agtas. Five decades of military and logging operations had wrenched tribal peoples from the plundered jungle into nomadic destitution around the Isabela and Cagayan provinces. They emerged on market days to sell honey and handmade spears.

As with my travels through benighted corners of the Philippines, I asked myself: How did my mother escape all this? This mesh of oppressions and betrayals, both intimate and collective. How did anyone escape?

First you free yourself, she insisted during the frustrating debates we had throughout my twenties. Untouched by the brutality and deprivation that had shaped her views, I found this inwardness difficult to accept. I had grown up under a tyranny and was invested in the grand project of tearing down systems and structures, the elaborate scaffolding that holds a society up or down.

Yet while she did not possess the language of ideology, her own life was her most powerful argument. A successful teaching career pursued alone in faraway towns where she had no kin or connections. Four decades of an extraordinary marriage, more equal and modern than I have observed in that generation. Relative affluence achieved through foresight and frugality. Three children lovingly raised in defiance of her own violent upbringing.

Throughout her wake, I listened to kin, friends, neighbours and colleagues pay tribute to Nenet, Ofelia, Ofie, Fely — all the different names by which they knew my mother. All were variations on the theme of courage.

At the crematorium my aunts insisted that the coffin be opened one last time, overruling my protests. The belief is that to prevent a string of deaths, the rosary clasped in my mother's hands would have to be cut. The keening reached a crescendo in a brief display of the dung-aw, the Ilocano ritual of sung lamentation and praise for the departed.

I imagined my mother cringing at the spectacle. She had breached so many layers of tradition and history to free herself. To honour this legacy, I swallowed my sobs.

6.

When the war ended, my father received orders from Manila to open the post office in Ilagan. Our belongings were placed on a big bamboo raft, timber for our new home loaded. Rattan, for fastening them together, nipa leaves for roofing. Three men accompanied us as oarsmen. They had long bamboo poles to manoeuvre the raft when the current became stronger.

How we enjoyed the trip. The men and the boys angled for fish for our meals. In the shallow parts of the river, we would dive and splash around. To us, it was a beautiful life.

I stayed on at our family home in Novaliches for a week after the funeral. There were duties to fulfil, domestic and devotional.

I cleaned and cooked, taking note of the fading state of the home I had grown up in. Paint was peeling in big blobs, plywood curled at the edges of the ceiling.

In the afternoons I hosted the nine-day novena for the dead, recited in archaic Tagalog by the local rosary brigade. I lip-synched along, secretly proud that they had stopped inviting my mother to meetings when she threatened to call the police to arrest one of their husbands for domestic abuse.

In the early hours of the morning, I Skyped with Andy just as he returned from work to our home in Camden. "Maybe we should start looking at flats again", I suggested. I had moved in with him when we got married, now I wanted us to build a home together. We would stay north of the river, we agreed, possibly in Hackney where he grew up.

My brother and I went through old papers and possessions that my mother hoarded in elaborately carved wardrobes and cabinets. This was furniture she had commissioned from Isabela over the years, most likely sourced from the jungles of her childhood. There were presents we had given her, perfumes and handbags, all unused and saved for best. She even

hoarded make-up way past its use-by date. My mother believed in keeping things for a lifetime, even perishable stuff.

In one of the drawers I found pages and pages of ruled yellow paper filled with her imperious handwriting. Letters sloping to the right, with sharp peaks and pointed Os. Even with fingers gnarled from arthritis, she maintained a penmanship fit for archival manuscripts.

One account was about her younger sister whose birth she had witnessed during the war. Another was about her brother the physicist who was part of the pomelo raid. The more I read, the more I wondered where she was in her own narrative. Why did she consider her siblings' lives more storied than hers?

I found her in a few paragraphs in the middle of the war that forged her: Six years old, hungry and ferocious, long before she could imagine herself as a mother or a wife. Of the cruelty of her parents and the poverty of her youth, there were only casual mentions. There was no bitterness or fear, only remembering.

At the end of her life, my mother had gentle regrets. Saying goodbye to a beloved river. The song of creatures abandoning home. These sorrows repeat. These sorrows recede.

BIOGRAPHY

CARLA MONTEMAYOR has worked in communications and politics in the Philippines, Indonesia and the UK. She studied economics in a previous life and returned to university as a mature student. She has an MA in Political Communication from the University of Sheffield. She has written satire, poetry and short fiction on and off, and now aspires to do more life writing and perhaps a novel. She is an avid cook and photographer.