



Notes on Finding Stories in Treeless Jungles

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“The truths that we travel so far to seek are of value only when we have scraped them clean of all this fungus.”

—CLAUDE LEVI-STRAUSS, *Tristes Tropiques* (1961)

8 February 2016

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WHEN WRITING FROM EXPERIENCE, it takes more than just courage to retell a story. You face the empty page and are presented with the illusion that you can just write everything down in an essay. The temptation to give all the details—the fungus as Levi-Strauss calls them—each gesture, each sigh, how people dress, their mannerisms, and the looks on their faces. However, when the task of recreating is staring back at you, you remember that not everything should be written, not every detail deserves to be mentioned. Each page is a sacred space reserved for the most significant elements that make a piece of writing work. Hence, the importance of having a notebook.

For a project in the field, anthropologists and social scientists often use field notes to chronicle their experiences for future reference and study. These raw and unrefined notes are a source of both material and inspiration. For writers, the field is not just the distant community, or the subject of a study, it can be the empty room, the cluttered desk, the smoke-filled bar, and the crowded school halls. The field that we take stories from is the world, life itself.

When faced with the dilemma of writing my thesis, the already short list of options suffered a major loss. Fiction had already proven itself too

difficult a field. Plotting out stories and making up characters was never my strong suit. Poetry was a mountain of verses that seemed too treacherous to climb, and I would not dare try it. There was only the truth, reality itself.

Warnings regarding the hazards of truth have been brought up in past classes. It is a flame that mostly poets, with their expertise in summing up so much in so little, have mastered. It can be unwieldy, treacherous, and, at times, even dangerous. In an essay, there is the danger of mishandling the truth. When writing the personal essay, one must be leery of writing it in a way that is either too objective, which would cause a sense of detachment, or too personal that it becomes narcissistic. The “I” needed to be purged or at least contained.

12 March 2016

Cogon, Digos City, Davao del Sur

Going back home is a rare occurrence. As I looked through old papers and notes stuffed inside dust-covered boxes, my old journal’s cartoon cover peeped through the pile of ring notebooks.

In most of the entries, there are one or two sentences. Entire days have been expressed in under twenty words. There was nothing happening in the number of days that filled more than half its pages, or so my third-grade self made it appear. It seemed like there was nothing to tell.

In Joan Didion's essay titled "On Keeping a Notebook," she says that in a notebook, one does not need to write about oneself directly. It can be a dream scene, a piece of fiction, or even an overheard conversation. We hide truths from others and keep them for ourselves. Our own meanings are hidden behind the words we wrote for other people to read. A notebook is not just for remembering, it is for reflection.

I will simply open my notebook and there it will all be, a forgotten account with accumulated interest, paid passage back to the world out there: dialogue overheard in hotels and elevators and at the hatcheck counter in Pavillon . . .

Notebooks are significant in the writing life. Through them, we find the selves we have lost through time, the loves we thought would break us, the pains we thought we could never overcome. Little by little, we are shown facets of our being, written down in different times by different people. We were, at one time, all of those people.

19 May 2016

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An essay is an attempt. When writing any form of literature, one faces the question that has stopped writers in their tracks for centuries: What is this all for?

In a past writing exercise, I remember writing a reflection paper on Rosario Cruz-Lucero's opening keynote speech for the 2015 Davao Writer's Workshop. The accomplished writer had talked for several minutes about the role of the writer and the art. Literature, as she had put it, has a responsibility to the people and time it originated from. A sense of struggle that has permeated society demands to be exposed. The culture of oppression and even the crimes perpetuated by a system of inequality had to be seen in writing. This is not to emphasize the abilities of the powerful, but to shed light on the helplessness of the powerless. To write is to

criticize the wrongs within society.

A writer's task is to show the truth. But what was the story I should tell? There was nothing about me that was worthy of any essay. Other people had the stories that were worth telling. Their tales were the ones that mattered more.

When choosing to write about other people, one must consider the consequences posed by the act. One is the possibility of misinterpretation, another the "othering" from the self, the last one is that it is an act of exploitation. I had considered all of these when the first words were put to paper, before the idea of writing about the Tagakaolo—a people whom I had personal experiences with through my father—came to mind.

The strange but almost musical intonation in their accent was something that my family had found peculiar. Now, I have appreciated its music. The rhythm of the rise and fall of tone, the fast beat of the syllables, and even the undulations in the breath were a tune all on its own. This is no longer just about me, it is about them too.

These essays are about real people.

3 June 2016

Mintal, Tugbok District, Davao City

I first became acquainted with the Tagakaolo through my father's work in Santa Maria as a government agent. When I met some of them, their warm and kind disposition was an obvious characteristic. As I studied Philippine history in college, I found out that it was this very kindness and openness to accept people that had made life difficult for them and other indigenous peoples of Mindanao. There had been stories of how Lumad gave away their lands in exchange for a pack of cigarettes or a few cans of sardines, thinking that the arrangement was temporary. Migrants, through time, have exploited this and gained most of the native's territories.

In the early 1900s, the Philippine government had encouraged its citizens to build new lives in the so-called "promised land" through acts like the "Homestead Law." Migrant families were given a few hectares of land to build their farms on. One after another, clans who searched for greener pastures came and took the wide plains of

the second-largest island in the archipelago. The age of peace in Mindanao was nearly demolished by the newcomers from the north.

The surge of people that moved from the north to the south displaced many of the local indigenous populations, forcing them out of their homelands. The natives retreated to the mountains, where very few of the invaders wanted to go. There, the indigenous populations became isolated from the new settlers. Their culture was preserved by the detachment, but at a cost. In the decades that followed, a dichotomy between the settlers and natives developed. *Bienvenido Lumbera* recognized this as the polarization between *taga-bukid* and *taga-bayan*.

The natives who were stuck in their new homes in the mountains and deep within forested areas clung to their culture and their beliefs. They eventually became the subjects of ill-spirited tales spun by some of the settler populace that lived in the new towns and poblacions. Healers and priestesses eventually became the *mangkukulam*, *mambabarang*, or witches. The great spirits of the indigenous peoples were transformed into demons in the eyes of migrants. To the colonized, the natives were “the other.”

15 June 2016

Cogon, Digos City, 8:46 AM

For the project, I had sent a message to the chair of the Department of Humanities. I had asked him to sign a letter that I would bring with me to Santa Maria. All the formalities of such a task had to be met. Nothing had to be left to mere “connections” and friendships.

21 July 2016

8:46 AM

The towns of Hagonoy, Padada, Sulop, and Malalag passed by quietly. The trees and buildings that stood idle on both sides of the elevated road melted into streaks of green and brown, framed by the car window. My brother sat in the seat next to my father. I was alone in the backseat, quietly taking in the rumbling sound the tires made on

the alternating asphalt and concrete road. I don’t remember the thoughts that kept me silent, only the feeling of doing something I have never done before.

Papa drove the car up the stomach-turning road to Santa Maria. He had gotten used to the twist and turns of this highway when he worked in the municipality. Now, after spending three years in Davao with me, the road wasn’t as familiar to him. He went slower, more careful of the blind turns and steep cliffs. To me, Santa Maria appeared the way it always did—still and unmoving.

From the highway, we turned right onto a dirt road that led to Barangay Pongpong. The place was situated on a flat stretch of land through which the floodwater from the mountains passed through when the rains fell in the later parts of the years. Several months ago, rain had fallen hard on the mountains, and as a result, the floodwaters claimed the main road and half the elementary school that stood beside it. The path was left littered with boulders as the water carved a new path a few feet into the earth, leaving behind a small stream.

The road that ran up to the distant *barangay* was a rough combination of dried mud and steep, sloping bedrock. The seven streams that we had crossed were clear and shallow in spite of yesterday’s rain.

The view from the road that ran through parts of the Tagaytay or mountaintops made the green rice paddies and the hectares of coconut palms below appear bluish. The mountains in the distance, ones I recognized to be part of the mountains that surrounded my hometown of Digos, appeared like dark ghostly pinnacles in the distance. The quarry along the MacArthur Highway through Sitio Power was indiscernible, the mountains looked green again.

The night after our arrival in San Pedro, we went to the house of the Punong Barangay where I met his family and some onlookers who were called into the house to talk with me. I sat quietly in my seat, listening in to the Tagakaolo conversations happening around me. The people, who were dark-skinned because of working the fields, had eyes set deep into their faces. Some of them preferred to keep their distance, asking

about who the stranger was. The children who often tagged along were shy, looking away or hiding behind their parents when spoken to. The older people were more open to conversations. When some of them approached to shake my hand, I felt the roughness of their palms—calloused by the years they spent tilling earth.

They sometimes spoke in Cebuano, but only when they were asking me questions. When they were talking amongst themselves, I would know that they were talking about me because every now and then, I would hear my name or my father's. I was fascinated to be so clueless about what they were discussing, even when I was right there among them.

The houses that stood against a background of jagged hills and corn fields seemed to rise and fall with the slopes. This is where the significant stories are, I said. They smiled at the thought of an outsider writing about their stories, their lives. Because I was eager to learn more about the language, I sometimes asked them what certain words meant. *Madyaw* was their version of the Davaoño word *Madayaw*, which meant “good.”

“Madyaw masulem!” they taught me. This was how one was supposed to say “good morning” in their language. Replace *masulem* with *ambon* and you would have the Tagakaolo words for “good afternoon.”

22 July 2016

Sitio Inanuran, San Pedro, Santa Maria, 9:35 AM

Mornings in San Pedro were busy. Before the sun rose up from the surrounding mountains, the sound of brooms brushing against the dirt mixed with the crowing of chickens in the distance. Once the scent of burning firewood has permeated the morning fog, one knew it was the start of another day. In an hour, the sun would paint the eastern sky a subtle gold. *Bugas mais* or corn rice boiled in a pot somewhere. Hot water is poured from one mug to the other. The heat cooks the corn coffee in each one, releasing the scent of what was the start of a new day.

That morning, I woke up at 3 AM. The cold had me shivering under my sheets. The night before, when I was with the Punong Barangay's

family, my guide, Ate Amy and the others taught me the word for cold: *maniki*. The Punong Barangay arrived at around eleven in the evening. Amy and I left a few minutes later so he could sleep. *Maniki* was the only word I thought of in my head when I attempted to hug my knees under the sheets that morning.

“Maniki gyud ngari.” *It really is cold here.* The *catol* was gone and I could hear the mosquitos buzzing around my ears. Just a few more hours and the world will be warm again.

When the sun came up, Amy had already filled the water bucket in the bathroom, cooked the rice, and had a blackened kettle sing on top of the open flame. Ate Amy was in her late forties, but the strength in her stout body had managed to lift buckets of spring water from the pipe that steadily released water in the early morning. Her salt-and-pepper hair, which she often tied into a bun, fell down her back to the base of her spine. We had met only a few months earlier, and now she was a mother to me in the days I spent away from my own family.

We warmed ourselves with coffee, some crackers, and her stories of how San Pedro was like before. She told me about the story behind the *sitios*' names, some of which involved a violent event. For example, Inanuran, the *sitio* we were staying in, had a river running through it. From the word *anod* or drift, Sitio Inanuran was named after an event when a man washed up on the banks of the river after drowning in the raging torrent of floodwater upstream. A friend of ours named Jing Jing also had stories of students being swept away by a wall of brown water before they managed to cross the river on their way home from school. Inanuran was a place where the drowned ended up, and that itself sends chills up my spine. Jing Jing's eyes looked sharply at me as she told the story. She recalled the incident with a look on her face that could only be that of pity, fear, and a bit of anger. It was as if she had lost someone to the flood too. I did not ask her about it, but as I listened to her scold her children, I realized that she was just afraid for her children. She did not want to lose them the way the parents of the students lost theirs.

Another sitio, Kituroc, which was Amy's home, had an interesting story behind the

name. Amy said that the word itself, which can be roughly translated to the English word “planted,” was assigned to the place after someone was murdered there several decades earlier. The body was supposedly chopped up then planted or scattered around the *sitio*.

When I asked Amy why the places were named after such things, she looked down into her mug of coffee, gave it a stir with a cracker, and said that those events define a place. They mark it and make them distinct from every other place they knew. Since the other *sitios* were named after defining traits such as the way Sitio Magulaytom was named after the shadows brought by the fog, or how Sitio Malanglang was full of wild pigs (*Malanglang* meant “having lots of wild boars” according to Amy). I found it interesting how people aren’t really the ones who give meaning to a place—except perhaps for a *barangay* named Datu Daligasao. Nature, in a way, defines what it is, and the people just put words to it, the way their *katiguwangan* or elders did to the *sitios*.

The village is empty. The corn is drying on the concrete basketball court, the dust swirls into tiny tornadoes, and the people are nowhere to be found. More than fifty houses stood around the *barangay* site, and yet most of them were empty. Time itself appeared to be distorted by the lifeless nature of the community at this hour. The minutes are lengthened, and the hours drag on. The power went out at around 1 PM, silencing the radios that have been blaring out ’90s ballads since 10 AM.

Amy had taken me to the river earlier. We spent nearly an hour there before Amy accidentally sprained her ankle on one of the rocks. She avoided walking too much so she just told me stories. I listened to her talk about her sons in the way mothers spoke about their children.

Amy said that during noontime, communities like Sitio Inanuran are almost always empty. Nearly everyone would go to the *uma* or field to plant root crops or corn. They would all be home by sunset. As soon as they felt the sun’s rays weaken in intensity, they would leave for home before the shadows of the mountains hid the footpaths down the mountainside.

23 July 2016

Suba Lewan, Sitio Inanuran, San Pedro, 10:25 AM

Cellular coverage is next to impossible to get out here. One *kagawad* told me that the only place with a signal strong enough was a hill they called Suba Lewan. This was where a man called Manong Florentino Albaracin, a healer, and his family lived. He was also Amy’s relative. She remembered her sprained ankle, which was starting to turn red. She would have her uncle heal it for her.

From Suba Lewan, one could see the entire valley in which San Pedro was situated. The river that ran through the *barangay* resembled a string of light that disappeared into patches of trees only to resurface again, carving a path through the earth. As I stare at the trees, I remember what Manong said about how they could not see the sky before because of the trees that covered the mountains. I imagine it over and over in my head, pretending that the hills and mountains covered by corn fields were hidden by the thick canopy of trees. That was before the metal teeth of machines tore the trees from their roots.

Amy talked with Manong, and I sat beside her as they switched languages from Cebuano to Tagakaolo. The old man was taller than Amy. He was thinly built and had large hands that he often used to massage people. His eyes were yellow, and his hair was greyed by age. His hands, like most of the people from San Pedro, were calloused by the years they spent tilling the earth. Manong’s house was surrounded by stalks of corn too thick to see through. After a lengthy conversation, Amy told Manong that she hurt her ankle in the river. He was the resident healer. The old man would look at me and ask if I understood them when they were speaking in their language. I shook my head.

In my short stay, I have found all manner of stories. Today I go home to rest and prepare myself for the upcoming enrollment. The stories people shared have revealed a lot about the lives they had been living. Amy would return with me to Digos where she believed she would continue to work as a helper. Mama forgot to tell her that she would only be staying with us for a month, just until my grandparents go back to the States. I did not have the heart to see her leave afterward.

14 August 2016

UP Mindanao, Mintal, Davao City, 10:49 PM

Regional literature in English translations class became one of my favorite subjects. I had questions, a lot of them, but not the confidence to ask them in class. The things we had to read often came in twos: the original pieces were written in the languages of the regions they came from, the others were translations into English.

As I had also learned in past classes, the Philippines, an archipelago made up of a few thousand islands, is home to an estimated 110 ethnolinguistic groups. In such a linguistically and culturally diverse country, there was no shortage of traditions and stories.

Being the second largest of the islands in the country, Mindanao is home to a vast number of these peoples. In this paradise, indigenous peoples such as the Mandaya, Manobo, Teduray (Teruray), Blaan, Kalagan, Tagakaolo, and several other groups have made their home. Though some of these groups have been Islamized in the early part of the country's history, a majority still hold on to the practices and the beliefs, which revolve around reverence for all life.

Similar to the beliefs of the Teduray in Stuart Schlegel's *Wisdom From a Rainforest*, this respect for life and nature emphasized the importance of all beings in the system of the world. The precolonial Filipinos believed in the sanctity of all life, not just of humans', contrary to what the major religions often say. For these humble folk, no being is more important than another—an animal is not of greater import than a flower, a human than a tree.

This veneration of nature allowed the people to live a very communal existence. No single person owned anything since no one could. Private possessions were an alien concept. They had great respect for the land and everything that grows or flows like water. For who could own such majesty except nature itself?

As the class discussions for Regional Literature continued, I thought about the Tagakaolo, their culture, and their old ways. Since most Philippine literature is rooted in oral tradition, the threat of losing these very important intangible heritage is very real. In

a way, I wanted to help preserve it through my writing. I wondered if the Tagakaolo in San Pedro have managed to hold on to any form of oral tradition.

As I thought about the stories that I could find in San Pedro, I wondered how Amy was, if she was doing better, if she had found another job.

10 September 2016

Sitio Inanuran, San Pedro, Santa Maria, 4:30 PM

My father and mother had taken me up to San Pedro in the SUV. He had used the same vehicle to get me from the *barangay* the last time I went. The road was still uneven, muddy, and more of a clearing in the forest than an actual road. When I got there, old friends greeted me, familiar faces smiled, and hands waved at me. Amy, however, was not there. My parents had asked Amy's cousin to call her to the *barangay* site.

My parents and I stayed in Kuya Wilson's house as we waited for Amy to arrive. I stared out the window at the corn that was dried to a white color. The townspeople were clearing away the corn they had been drying in the noon sun since the clouds started to gather overhead.

Amy arrived on the back of a *habal-habal*, waving and smiling. My parents were relieved and decided to make the journey back to Digos before the night fell over the mountains. Thick clouds now stretched over the sky, and we were worried about how the road would be like if the rain fell. The streams might swell up and become raging torrents.

11 September 2016

Suba Lewan, San Pedro, Santa Maria, 11:10 AM

I have come back to Manong Florentino and Nanay Melinda's house. When Amy and I arrived, we noticed that Manong had a few visitors with them, they were drinking *tubâ* or coconut wine. The man turned out to be his brother-in-law, Nanay Melinda's youngest sibling, who lived in Bansalan. They had not seen each other in five years, and as they were talking about their past experiences, I noticed how happy Nanay Melinda was.

After talking to Manong Florentino, Nanay Melinda called us in for lunch. She had made a meal out of the sardines and misua noodles we brought them. I came back to talk to Manong after the meal. He then told me more of his fun adventures with snakes and golden treasure.

Once the conversation was over, I told Manong and Nanay that Amy and I had to go before dark. There were no lights around, and I had forgotten my flashlight at home. Tomorrow, I leave.

7 November 2016

Bangkal, Davao City, 5:25 PM

The house was silent, and I was alone. The only sounds that existed in this tiny world of mine were the clicks my keyboard made and the continuous whir of the electric fan that had been running since 8 AM. I opened my field notes—a green notebook worn away and dirty—and realized that I managed to write notes up to half of the entire pocket notebook. I tried to remember the things I forgot to put in writing, and they all come back as if the trips happened yesterday.

I could feel the aches in my back again. The feeling of the cold metal digging into my leg as I frantically tried to hold on to the skylab returns. I never imagined myself traveling for four straight hours from a faraway *barangay* in Santa Maria all the way to Davao. The world I knew seemed to change.

I remember Margaret Laurence's essay "Where the World Began" and how she describes the relativity in how we see the world vis-a-vis her experiences in her hometown in Canada's prairie lands. It is, as she calls her own, a "strange place" full of wonders, revelations, disappointments, and all manner of heavens and hells. My world used to begin and end in the oddities in my life, the strange as well as the mundane routines. Our worlds begin inside our own bedrooms, they stretching toward the edge of the fence, even to the boundaries of the subdivision. In time, we come to know that the world is not just time and space; it is also blood, the very thing in our veins. The world includes our past as much as it does our

future. Before we realize it, our worlds expand to cover entire cities, cultures, even lifetimes. Mine was Digos and the relatives and friends that were within it. But as time wears away the years, we find ourselves in bigger worlds, knowing more people, living more lives, and thus creating the paradox of the world's minuteness.

To quote Levi-Strauss, "The world we live in has found itself too small for the people who live in it." We are therefore caught in a dilemma. We cannot separate ourselves from others. That person's story is never truly different from mine or yours. Literature's ultimate task is to make the reader realize that all of us are not that different. We all have something in common. To write is to take up the challenge of making people think differently about the homes they thought they knew and the world they have yet to know about.

29 March 2017

Davao City, 5:35 PM

The act of traveling has always been a dream of mine, although I admit the ideal scene of such a journey never involved much of the struggles I encountered when I decided to leave the comforts of my home to do field work. When I think about traveling, I am a tourist. Sights are gawked at and photographed, the people spoken to are baristas, and the questions asked are often related to directions. This was the scenario I set in my head whenever the thought of exploration came to mind. I did not expect myself to go through the experience of working in the field, similar to an anthropologist. I've always wanted to study culture and history, become a true scholar.

As I sat on the metal frame of the skylab, which was slowly digging into my buttocks, I found myself smiling. Despite the brutal battering I had suffered because of the bad road, I was at peace. I found that there is a sense of serenity inherent in the state of being in transit. The impermanence of one's position in the overall makeup of things is comforting. Everything seems to be in motion, and I am a stranger. I leave no footprints in the earth under me. I am no one. Traveling is an act of losing oneself to the

ever-changing moment. The only change I prefer to think happens only in me. My soul, my mind, and my heart are shaped by the entire experience.

In Claude Levi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*, he mentions that in traveling, there is an abundance of experiences, and in those, only a handful are significant enough to put on paper. He is right. As I made my way to San Pedro, I saw a lot of things, people, and houses—they all have their own stories. But the limitations of the medium and the time I was given to write them all down have caught up with me. These are the rough and raw experiences, dried corn kernels—ones that are similar to those planted in San Pedro—that have not been crushed to become chicken feed, truths that have not been cleared of the fungus of raw experience.

In writing the essay, one needs to be very precise in the details that are put into the piece. Everything must fit in order to contribute to the flow of ideas, the rhythm, and the story. Each piece is an attempt, hence the use of the French word *essayer* as the basis for the genre's name. But what is being attempted? For me, it is to tell a story. And in these stories, all the elements have to be in harmony with one another.

14 April 2017

Cogon, Digos City, 4:00 PM

Yesterday, I went back to San Pedro. My brother, sister, and I arrived on two separate motorcycles. The road up the mountains was much worse than it had ever been on my previous trips. In some areas, landslides have covered most of the road, allowing only motorcycles, skylabs, and horses to pass through. The heavy rains last December and January had nearly brought down the mountainsides.

I looked around San Pedro. I saw Jing Jing, Kagawad Nora, and her husband Wilson, the poor man had apparently suffered from a heatstroke and could not drive again. Everywhere, it was quiet, the typical 11 AM atmosphere of Sitio Inanuran. Families were in the *uma*, tilling the earth, planting the crops.

I have started working on the final revisions of my essays. I admit that the first essay "Darrel" was the most difficult to write and revise. The truth that lay in its pages was too personal. Since it is a confessional essay, it is more than just a piece of literature for me. In the last draft, I had written the story in the second person point of view to create a psychic distance that I thought would help me write it. However, after the workshop, the panelists pointed out that the essay did not work. In the Davao Writers' Workshop, the first draft of the essay, which was then titled "Stranger," was discussed. The panelists saw the potential of the draft, written in first person, and opined that I should revert back to that form, and my adviser agreed. It began at the end, with the following scene:

He stared at our house for the last time. There was a look of sadness on his face, of regret and of anger. The last of which was an emotion that he kept only to himself.

The boy that my father had taken in as his own son sat on the back of my brother's motorcycle. The young stranger from the South, the son that I could never be was finally leaving. Now I didn't have to pretend to like boxing just to sit with the family on Sunday afternoons. Maybe my father would finally ask me how my days went. My brother would perhaps ask me to go with him to basketball games or on walks around the neighborhood. I wouldn't be the gay brother anymore. I would be the only brother.

Amy's story "Maligon" went through quite an overhaul since the panelists agreed that the organization of the piece's elements affected the way the essay itself developed.

Amelita Maligon came to our home in Digos on the back of an overheating motorcycle. The smoke from which was hardly visible in the noontime sun. The El Niño of 2016 still clung to the July heat. She rode the aging Kawasaki motorcycle for more than an hour, and when I saw her standing outside the house, her backside was either sore or numb from the rough road.

In order to improve the flow of the narrative by going with a professor's suggestion of starting the story with Bartolome's death and not my first encounter with Amy.

Amy knew her husband was close to death as the man sat back in his rusty-framed hospital bed. His skin, darkened from decades of working in the fields, was pale, almost lifeless. The calloused hands that tilled hard earth were limp. An IV tube remained taped to one of them—a last lifeline. Bartolome's eyes remained closed.

The addition of descriptions helped dramatize and build tension in the first part of the essay.

“The Man in Suba Lewan” also encountered problems with the form and the organization of certain elements. In the original draft, the essay was divided into numbered sections. I was unsure why I wrote it that way, but after my professors, and my own thesis adviser pointed out the headers' lack of significance, the obvious choice was to change it.

The revised essay was divided into sections named after parts of the body. I used this form in order to highlight Manong Florentino's ability to heal the pain in the human body. I also added more insights to highlight significant realizations while trying to weave it with the story of how I met him. In order to properly start at the most significant part, I began the essay with a description of Suba Lewan, the *mananambal's* home.

When the walls of corn give way to the sweeping view of the valley and the brushing sound of leaves that hiss in the wind disappears, the clearing on the side of the mountain feels like a welcome sight. Warm and cozy, the place induces a sense of solemnity and a peacefulness that is different from what is found only a few hundred feet down the slope. The house of aging wood and sinasa, bamboo boards stood quietly like an outpost of sorts. The old home and its inhabitants stood guard over several villages

in the distance. From there, one could see where rain had fallen and where it was headed. On that day, there was no rain and no thunder to weaken my shaking knees. The only sounds were the ones the wind made with the leaves.

Since the original fifth piece has been included in the preface, I had to write a new essay. This new piece titled “About a Family” focuses on my personal experience in my own home. It can be considered as a memoir since it is about the dynamics inside my own household and the relationships I have with the members of my family. It is perhaps the essay that I liked least in the collection, and this is evident in one of its last paragraphs.

To write about oneself is the most difficult task of all. I always have no idea what words to put into an essay. I even questioned if they deserved to be there in the first place. Instead of placing the ever narcissistic “I” into the work, I would create characters to stand in for me, make my story someone else's. I could never write about myself the way other people could. There was nothing to write, no story interesting enough to be worth wasting the sacred space on a page. I have tried to hide it behind all sorts of distractions, but these ultimately fail. No matter how hard I tried, I could not put my own story on the page.

The final addition to the collection is an essay titled “Mga Pamaagi sa Dila and Other Ways of Speaking.” The essay is a reflection. It is, however, not just about the experience I had with the Tagakaolo community, but also my overall understanding of language as a tool for communication and expression. This essay talks about how my personal use of the English language and of Sugbuanong Binisaya, my mother tongue, have shaped my own Mindanawon sensibilities. Ultimately, it is an experiment that attempts to incorporate such a complex subject into form. In a lot of ways, the experiment might prove to be a failure, but hopefully, it may succeed in other aspects.

The language barrier seemed to be lifting, I thought. I was able to socialize with people better with each fragment I had acquired. But despite all my chances at learning more words, I still faced the problem of a real and lasting communication among the people. In a way, my limited knowledge of the language had prevented me from understanding them fully.

Lisod gyod makipagstorya sa mga tawo nga lahi ang pinulongan. Busa katong bata pa ko, naningkamot ko na makakat-on kon unsaon makig uban sa laing tawo.

17 April 2017
Davao City, 2:33 AM

In writing, we write down what we can. We avoid the traps of clichés, motherhood statements, and didacticism. As writers, we try to separate the nuances from the raw experience—the fungus that kept their beauty hidden. We tend to clear away the dirt from the gold, thinking that only one thing is worthy of the page. However, as I attempt to put the final period that will end this long and arduous task, I open my notes and see more details. The fungus from experience is not mere waste at all. They are significant details reserved for other stories, ones that I have yet to write. There will come a time when I will use them, a time when I will strive to write down what I could not yet.

In the end, I am left with my experiences, my newfound friends' stories, and a responsibility to tell others about them. I am eternally thankful for their trust and eternally indebted for their friendship. I can say that what I found in San Pedro was more than just wisdom. Manong Florentino's idea of a divine responsibility to help others, Amy's strength, and the people's way of life.

I have found more than just mere stories in San Pedro. Throughout this journey, I have come to terms with the realities that different people and different cultures face. As I walked along the narrow footpaths in the hills, I became estranged from myself and from the very life I was used

to living. It was almost as if I was in a different world.

As I remembered my last trip to San Pedro, I was reminded of H. Arlo Nimmo, how anthropologists did their studies in the field. For my project, I read Nimmo's *Songs of Salanda and Other Stories of Sulu*, a book of fiction drawn from the material he had uncovered in his field work in the Sulu Archipelago in southwest of Mindanao. As a writer who knew next to nothing about creating ethnographies and doing field work, I attempted to learn as much as I could from the people I came in contact with, without really knowing what kind of work I would end up with, what stories I would tell, what lessons I might take home with me. I met people that I did not intend to meet, heard stories that made my heart ache, and realized how I have been so detached from my own homeland.

Relationships were formed almost instantly in my trips. Amy's cousins and neighbors would open up to me in the evenings when they waited for their relatives to come home from the *uma*. This made me think of Stuart Schlegel, the Episcopal priest and anthropologist who lived with the Teduray of the Dakel Teran. He came to study the Teduray's life and culture, but he ended up being forever changed by the people who came to call him "Mo-Leni" and treated him as one of their own. Family, it seems, could be found even in the most remote of places.

I grew up thinking that the world was similar to the drawings that filled the walls of my bedroom. There were no other perspectives, no other ways to look at it. The fantasies that had existed in childhood were later dispelled by the pains of reality. When I went to San Pedro, my perception widened, my mind was opened, and my heart was filled. In the end, I found love there, something that is beyond any abstract word and tired old expressions of affection. I saw it in the way Amy worked for her children and in the calloused hands of every working person in San Pedro.

Love is the act of *ginhawa*, which is also another word for "soul." And in a world that is brimming with different voices from a myriad of lives, I have managed to find a way to tell their

stories after they have bared their souls to me. They had given me the honor of letting me know them, and in return, I have written all I can about them. As a writer with these experiences, to leave them unwritten is an act of betrayal. This is for San Pedro. ■

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