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Devotion

Wilfredo O. Pascual Jr.

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Devotion

WILFREDO O. PASCUAL JR.

1.

In March 2003, I met a Noranian in Caloocan City who had enshrined a pair of Nora Aunor's worn, green Via Venetto shoes in an empty aquarium. Upon closer inspection, I saw a couple of decorative miniature mushrooms right next to the shoes, accentuating Nora's dwarfish three-and-a-half shoe size. It was midnight when I saw the pair of shoes, making the fairy tale association easier: the ball gown and the horse-drawn carriages would revert to its origins as cinder rags, squash and rodents but the glass slippers would remain irreversible. In a poor country where the fantastical and the real are transposable, I suppose you need a pair of shoes to inspire faith. The once-upon-a-time bare-foot, dark-skinned girl, selling drinking water in the train stations of Iriga, in a peninsula south of Manila, would survive the journey of transformation and transcend even the impediments of the happily ever after.

My pilgrimage began in Bangkok at the turn of the century when Patrick Flores, head, Department of Art Studies at the University of the Philippines, showed me a copy of his doctoral dissertation entitled, *Makulay na Daigdig: Nora Aunor and the Aesthetics of Sufferance*. I remember being enthralled by its critical discourse on iconography and pop culture. As an expatriate, I perpetually grapple with memory and imagination to ground my displacement in solid footing, and it is this constant grappling that made me receptive to the dissertation's urgent interrogation and reconfiguration of Nora Aunor's celluloid sufferance. In a refreshing substantiation of Noranians, Patrick also wrote about the Grand Alliance of Nora Aunor Philippines (GANAP) where

applicants are required to pass a written test about their general knowledge, not of Nora Aunor, but of the Philippines, about their civic-oriented activities and the values they uphold. When finally the dissertation focused on one individual, Mandy Diaz, I was gripped. My grappling with memory converged with Mandy's devotion to transfigure the banished part of our lives into images of living color.

Patrick graciously arranged for me to meet Mandy Diaz in person. In Interior Caloocan, on that enchanted night, the tricycle dropped us off in a basketball court where a crowd from a wake spilled and kept vigil. The funereal bulbs burned along with the nocturnal hearth of the *sakla*. Under bulbs hanging on extension wires, we spotted former Mayor Asistio, surrounded by darkened faces that disappeared in the shadowed fringes of the politico's light. Straight from a Brocka film, the setting reminded me of a scene in *Bona*. After abandoning her family to serve her idol, Nora, unwanted, returns home to attend her father's wake, only to be rebuked by a brother enraged by a sibling's ingratitude.

Through a dark alley of packed dwellings, we reached the home of Mandy Diaz. Campaign posters and stickers of Nora's failed bid to be her hometown's politician marked the location of Mandy's one room, low-ceiling living space. Inside, we met his nephew, a Chemical Engineering graduate who had applied as a factory worker in Taiwan and was crashing in for a few hours before leaving for an early queue at the Department of Foreign Affairs to get his passport. Mandy was not home but we figured he would be back soon if he had just gone out for his usual movie theater rounds in Caloocan, carrying Nora's vinyl records, cassettes, and CDs, for his friends in the projection room to play during intermissions. Romy, Mandy's roommate, informed us that Mandy had gone to the studio of a late night radio talk show. While waiting for Mandy, we tuned in to the program and listened to the host interviewing actors over the phone. During breaks, it played Nora's old songs and a recorded station plug of the Superstar herself—our listening briefly interrupted by a young man at the door, selling his Perry Ellis perfume for three hundred pesos to pay for the gambling money he owed at the *saklaan* vigil.

The front window that opened up to the alley and the outside world had been shut and in its place, a corner had been converted into a reliquary of images and objects. In this small hallowed space, I saw Nora Aunor's pair of shoes inside an empty aquarium. On top of the

aquarium stood a small statue of Jesus Christ with His flaming sacred heart. Behind the statue was a mock-up of a star encrusted in red glitters. Above it, mounted on the wall were framed old *Liwayway* centerfolds of the young Nora, her long hair tied with bows and ribbons. The sanctum centerpiece was a rare, black and white, enlarged, close-up photo of Nora at the age of five. The child's face, famously marked by a mole on her cheek, dominated the shrine. Her haunting dark eyes and smile held secrets. "Like a young peasant fated to witness apparitions," Patrick hushed.

The humble home of Mandy Diaz, walled by posters of Nora's films, plays, and concerts in the Philippines and abroad, had been graced with a personal visit of the Superstar herself. A framed photo of Nora and Mandy together documents the historic occasion, taken during Mandy's birthday party. The entire neighborhood waited that day, and it was not until three in the morning the following day that an entire *barangay* was roused from their sleep to witness what must have seemed like, well, an apparition. On Mandy's wall was a framed rare 45 rpm vinyl record of Nora's first recording under Alpha, "I Only Came to Say Goodbye."

There were two wooden cabinets in the receiving area. The smaller cabinet had a locked sliding glass where Mandy kept a treasury of Nora's old albums in CDs and VHS tapes of her films. The bigger cabinet divided the receiving area and the sleeping quarter. Mandy's bed occupied the cramped space between the cabinet and the toilet wall; his pillowcase was printed with a recent photo of Nora as Laura in her TV soap opera, *Bituin* (Star). Hanging from the ceiling were dozens of huge, plastic shopping bags filled with glass bottles, which Mandy uses in his healing rituals.

The big cabinet which served as a divider holds Mandy's priceless librarium. Shelves were lined with valuable volumes of clippings bound in faux leather, catalogued chronologically with the year engraved on its spine. Dating back to 1969, Mandy's archival homage in print to a legendary artist's life and works includes: clippings of Nora's It's The Real Thing Coke ad and another, years later, for the rival softdrink's Have a Pepsi Day campaign; *all* her movie ads, including the original *Banaue* movie poster in color, the composed scenes not photographed but hand-drawn; an article on Nora's first meeting with Imelda Marcos in Malacañang, the visit allegedly instigated to please Doña Josefa Edralin Marcos; and volumes more documenting in print a life and a career

whose trajectories plummet periodically. Mandy clipped them all including those that fed Nora to the dogs. It was a stubborn devotion to the persistent defiance of the downtrodden against gravity, to outlast every detractor, every magazine and text itself, until what endures is the image of Nora Aunor alone, constant in history as power changed seats, surviving even the lacerations of her most embattled ground—herself. One of the GANAP photo albums filed photos of an occasion when Nora, her career on a nosedive, was honored by Noranians with a life-sized statue of herself painted in gold. It was carved in Paete, a southern Tagalog town famous for its woodcarvings of saints. It was not the first. Mandy had clipped an earlier photo of Nora with a bust carving of herself, the size of a sofa. Exhilarated, I turned the pages of Mandy's scrapbook and charted the unmapped country of memory and resilience.

In the 1980 volume, I instantly recognized a reprint of an article published in Cannes. It featured a close-up of Nora as Bona, betrayed by her idol, madness darkly brewing. Without reading, I immediately recalled its caption in a flash. I know this, I told Patrick: it underlined the fans' fears that Nora would not return home. I checked and my heart jumped, thrilled by the sharpness of my sudden recollection. I tried to understand why the image had burned and etched itself in the tablet of my memory. I was thirteen years old when I read that article in 1980, the same year my family lost the political power we had held over our town for more than half a century. As the Marcos dictatorship reared its ugly head, my adolescent rite of passage was marked by the downfall of authoritarian figures, my maturity sealed by the fall of personal heroes. It was the Great Crack-Up and Bona, the fan betrayed by her idol, was the emblem of the age. The Cannes screening itself was a tale of disillusionment. I remembered how movie magazines fanned the flames of my imagination, sparked by the publicists' write-ups of a possible Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Film—only for my delirium to be doused back to reality, when NV Films submitted the film late, the print haphazardly spliced with masking tape, disqualifying it from the competition.

In retrospect, it was the image of a vengeful Bona scalding her idol with boiling water that offered deeper and richer metaphors. Nora Aunor swam effortlessly back and forth between the elements of water in her life and on the screen: selling drinking water in train stations at an early age to fetching water in the slums to bathe her idol. The

element flowed freely from poverty to servitude to retribution. The name of her hometown Iriga originated from the Nabua dialect, "I raga," meaning "There is land," alluding to the higher grounds where the pioneers settled to escape the wrath of the great floods. Nora's pair of shoes were enshrined in an empty aquarium and the thought of sedimentary remains came to mind. Resting on pebbles, the pair of shoes might as well have found its place on a dry riverbed, with Norman Maclean's famous last words in his memoir, "A River Runs Through It," carved on the rocks: "I am haunted by waters."

Mandy Diaz arrived at around two in the morning. He was delighted to meet us, even as his first business was to neatly realign his disarrayed *libros canonicos*. "Alam ko pag may gumalaw nito. Kape? Kape kayo?" Mandy turned to Romy and asked him if there was hot water. Romy scratched his head. They ran out of coffee. Mandy gave him a hundred pesos, his attention darting like a bird from one branch to another. To his nephew: "Kumpleto na ba ang papeles mo? Ibigay mo na lang sa akin. Ako na ang maglalakad bukas." Like an extension of the vigil outside, a sudden surge of energy electrified the room with six of us populating Mandy's cramped world, our knees bumping each other's occasionally.

Explaining my visit, I briefly summarized the manuscript in progress I submitted at New York University's Creative Nonfiction Program, which I attended last year. It has now expanded to include a chapter on memory and Nora Aunor. Tickled, Mandy teased me, "Alam ko na. Noong napanood mo iyong *Bulaklak ng City Jail*, naalala mo noong nanganak ka!" The joke actually hit it right on the mark: epiphanies borne in the Bastille of remembering and forgetting.

We browsed Mandy's notebooks. Among other things, his encyclopedic notes filled an updated score sheet tallying the best actress awards of Nora and Vilma; a long list of Nora's business ventures from NV Taxi to NV Garments; an even longer list of her home addresses; handwritten pages of the definitive Nora trivia; the lyrics of Nora Aunor's songs; and a list of Nora's names in the roles she played in the movies. Mandy pulled out an old plastic shopping bag containing Nora's white strapless gown with pale lilac and yellow floral prints. We spread it on our laps, the stiff ruffles cascading from one shoulder down to the hems. He also passed around Nora's white-laced, strapless, cup A Triumph bra, our fingers tracing the hidden U-wire support. Finally, Mandy retrieved a pair of Nora's worn black stiletto pumps. In

both shoes, I noticed half-inch stitches on the toe sides. I wondered whether they were custom-made; and if not, did it hurt to wear them that Nora had to break them in? I supposed they did and if Mandy's depository was suppose to evoke nostalgia, then it made perfect sense. The word "nostalgia" came from two Greek words, *nostos* (return) and *algos* (suffering). If showbiz was Oz, Nora could simply click her heels to return to Kansas. But this is real life. She must ache to survive the journey of transformation.

Later, I told a friend about Mandy Diaz spending the last fifty pesos in his wallet to attend a libel case filed by Nora Aunor. My friend's astonished reaction was, "That guy needs to get a life!" I was floored. Didn't John Irving, the novelist, admonish us, "to get obsessed and stay obsessed . . . to keep passing the open windows." Was raging passion not enough to constitute a life? I had to recall the other life of another author, Vladimir Nabokov, to remind myself that like him, it is possible that Mandy had actually transcended the lure of escapism in his work. The Russian-American author of *Lolita* was obsessed with butterflies. He had hunted butterflies "as a pretty boy in knickerbockers and sailor cap; as a lanky cosmopolitan expatriate in flannel bags and beret; as a fat hairless old man in shorts," his astounding lepidoptora collection eventually earning him the respect of scientists and enthusiasts. "The labour involved has been immense;" he wrote, "the number of my index cards exceeds a thousand references for half a dozen (very polytypic) species; I have dissected and drawn the genitalia of 360 specimens and unraveled taxonomic adventures that read like a novel." Like Nabokov, Mandy had gone far beyond compulsions and fixations in his cramped Caloocan museum and archive. Much more than mere tabulators or categorizers, both offer us legacies of a metaphysical, even mystical approach to butterflies and movie stars that seeks to understand a sense of design that underlies the physical world. Mandy has lovingly devoted a life to the metamorphosis of the moth, the different incarnations of Nora Aunor. If we're lucky and if we're grateful enough, we could, in the future, acknowledge the way Mandy had rubbed off Nora's powdered wings to frame the transparency of our lives and the movies, our memories richly dusted with the colors of the *Gamu-gamo*'s gorgeous earthy patterns. Because as stars, it is elemental that celebrities fix themselves at a distance, the remoteness necessary to perpetuate the myths surrounding the reliquary of our collected objects and images. But in Nora's case, the idealization becomes more complex.

Noraniens apotheosize their own memories and her movies into personal gospels. Romancing the real and the reel, they demand that Nora sail both the near and the far, all her life back and forth, to satisfy the never-ending odyssey of our longings.

2.

In the late sixties, Nora's first public appearance after winning the *Tawag ng Tanghalan* Grand Finals was in a big show at the Araneta Coliseum that topbilled sensational 1960s pop singer Timi Yuro. During one of the intermission numbers, Timi asked Nora if she would like to try her luck in the United States. "I'm very sure you'll make it there," Timi said. "Your voice is terrific." Timi was so sure Nora could easily clinch a contract with Mercury Records where her own royalties extended up to twenty years. Timi was so insistent that she had her promoter offer the Aunors US\$1,500 for every performance plus free housing, transportation, and a chaperon. It was a tempting offer. America was Nora's dreamland. She wanted to go to Disneyland. However, Nora refused the offer. She could not bear to be away from her family and besides, "Gusto ko pa ring maging isang artista." Still, America dogged her. Well, at least in the movies.

In 1971, Nora Aunor flew to the United States for the first time to shoot *Lollipops and Roses*. It was an unforgettable experience for Nora: Hollywood Boulevard, Sunset Strip, Mass at Saint Basil's Church, McArthur Park, Sunset Boulevard, Sea World, Las Vegas. She was thrilled. She walked through Disneyland's Main Street and was dwarfed in awe by a gigantic Christmas tree. Adventureland with its jungle river cruise and Swiss family treehouse brought her closer to home. "Puro sagingan, ilog, at wild trees lang. Parang mga bakasyunan sa Pilipinas. . . . Mas gusto ko pa rin sa atin." How could she betray her loyalty to her homeland when she was getting fifty fan mails a day?

In 1974, Nora returned to California to shoot a follow-up on the commercial success of *Lollipops and Roses*. She was pregnant at that time. She terribly missed her young husband so much that eighteen-year-old Christopher de Leon flew to the United States for the first time. Because of a miscommunication, he arrived at the airport with nobody to pick him up. Determined, he took a bus on his own, a taxi, and got lost. He walked for hours. When finally Boyet reached the address and Nora saw him at the door, the two hugged each other and cried so hard, you'd swear the theme song of the movie, sung by folk singer

Florante, was composed for that scene alone: “Dapat ka bang mangibang bayan? Dito ba’y wala kang paglagyan?” With a husband left behind and heavy with their child in a foreign land, the pull to return was strong. Even in the film, she could not let go of her homeland. Her character managed to sneak in the strong-smelling *burong talangka* or fermented crablets, fondly known as the native caviar. On the plane, the fermented crablets were strategically concealed inside her blouse, to hide at the same time her very pregnant condition. She brought with her our ancestors’ home-grown way of preserving the raw, unnecessary in a land where cold storage was readily available. Rooted by love, pregnancy, and indigenous biotechnology—clearly, the America of *Lollipop and Roses* and *Burong Talangka* was no longer a Disneyland tour. Her role as a Filipina caretaker who became a murder suspect abroad portended in her succeeding films the more sober and hard-hitting truths behind our imported dreams.

From *Burong Talangka* onwards, the plot in Nora’s films on America turned into a grim, steady exploration on the price most Filipinos have to pay in making the Great American Dream a reality. In 1976, she was a nurse whose plan was to avail of a green card after a one-year stint in a U.S. hospital. But on the eve of her travel, tragedy struck. An American soldier shot and killed her younger brother who was scavenging metal scraps around the U.S. military base. The enduring impact of *Minsa’y Isang Gamu-Gamu* (Once There was a Moth) as an anti-imperialist film is made even more remarkable with Nora playing the lead, the same actress, who ironically, in 1971, wore garlands and charmed us with “Pearly Shells” in the musical *My Blue Hawaii*.

Death in the family was followed by madness as Nora, in 1978, essayed the title role of Bakekang, a feisty woman born with grotesque features, determined to get an American GI to bed so she could have his Amerasian child. She got her wish and revealed that her grotesqueness was also deep-seated. A miserable soul deranged by ambition, she ruthlessly enslaved her blonde daughter, with tragic consequences. In the end, she unravels, wandering aimlessly along the streets of Manila. In the widely popular komiks novel, on which the film was based, the last frame showed Bakekang cradling a worn-out blonde doll she found in a garbage can. The most striking feature of Noraland is the strange resonance between the plotlines of her movies and the oftentimes bizarre turn of events in her real life. We know that in real life, Nora Aunor adopted and raised four Amerasian children

and that at the height of Noramania in the early 1970s, the feverish fans worshipped a blonde doll owned by Nora Aunor, a second chance for her doll-deprived childhood when she was fated instead to run after trains hugging bottles of water to sell. Christened by the fans as Maria Leonora Theresa, people wrote to the doll and sent her hand-made cards. And as if that breathed life to the doll, Maria Leonora Theresa wrote back and eased the people's worries. They pierced her ear and made her wear earrings. They lavished her with jewelries and expensive clothes. And when the death toll of the deadly typhoons rose, the most photographed doll in Philippine history went to church and wept. In the editorials she wrote for magazines, the doll inspired the Noranians to mobilize truckloads of fans to help the victims by donating food and clothes, to preach the doll's message of love and charity. Could it be that we have to go backwards in time to fully understand everything? In 1521, the Spanish friar Pedro de Valderrama met the queen of Cebu who was moved to tears when the secular priest showed her an image of the miraculous Holy Child, carved in Flanders and sporting the flamboyance of the baroque; its kingly emblems—the crown, the scepter, and the orb—signifying dominion. The queen acquiesced and asked for it to be kept in place of her idols. She was baptized and renamed after the Spanish queen mother, the unfortunate Juana La Loca, the progenitor of Bakekang.

After seven years, Nora Aunor, the nurse of *Minsa'y Isang Gamu-Gamu* (1976), made it to *'Merika* (1983). The arc of her celluloid journey from the Philippines to the United States came full circle in a quiet, critically acclaimed performance as an immigrant nurse in New York longing for her homeland. Nora stands in a crowded subway and the message is clear on her face: her life has no meaning; it is a pointless ride from one station to another. Only Nora could portray displacement because she knew what it meant not to belong. She is a spirit that cannot be contained and will forever be homeless. When toward the end of the movie, she makes a long-distance call to the Philippines and rested her timer, an hourglass, on its side—she broke our heart. "Wala dito ang hinahanap ko. Uuwi na ako." We felt sorry for her. We feared for her. We were perplexed. We understood. We were proud.

Perhaps a body of work becomes complete and its metaphors worthy of study when, like a good story, its elements smoothly follow a clean, narrative arc. Nora Aunor's celluloid journey has a clear departure (*Lollipop and Roses*) and return (*'Merika*). In between we find local

culture in a foreign land (*Burong Talangka*), antiimperialism (*Minsa'y Isang Gamu-Gamu*), and the sometimes, steep price paid by those of us who were left behind (*Bakekang*). That the nurses coincidentally have similar surnames, Corazon de la Cruz in *Gamu-Gamu* and Milagros Cruz in *'Merika*, only symbolize the nature and requirement of this journey to Calvary—a cross we have to carry on the road to perdition or redemption. With the iconic images of Disneyland, Pearly Shells, U.S. military base, Maria Leonora Theresa, Amerasians, and the New York subway, we are grateful to Nora Aunor for culturally enriching our great journeys, our departures and returns, both imagined and real.

3.

In 1979, I passed around a piece of paper in my sixth grade class. It was divided into two columns, one for Nora and the other for Vilma, my very own celebrity poll at the age of twelve. Nobody challenged me to do it. Some of the boys even made fun of me but I did not care. I just knew it felt good. I enjoyed it so much, making the rounds and campaigning for Nora, that I failed to notice our class was about to start. Mr. Salvador Mangacat, the advisory teacher of Grade Six Dahlia, caught me red-handed, tallying the votes. He confiscated my poll results and scolded me in front of the class. “Pinag-aaksayahan mo ng panahon,” Mr. Mangacat said with disgust. “Bakit? Kilala ka ba niyan?”

The most beautiful and terrible thing that can be said about this sort of public humiliation is how incredibly the passing years fuel its combustible memory. As you grow older, the humiliation ignites inside you in your most unguarded moments. Mostly, we block the memory. But sometimes we fan the flames and let it rage—if only to remind ourselves of our inert capabilities, of a burning time when we were bolder in breaking rules, braver in making a stand, fearless in taking the plunge, and heroic in our sacrifices.

Seven months after I visited Mandy Diaz, I went back to the Philippines. On the night of 29 November 2003, an unusual gathering of old women waited along the driveway that led to the entrance of Casino Filipino. There were probably only twenty of them but they came in their best Sunday dresses. I overheard one of them saying, “Ang usapan walang magpapantalon, eto namang isa nakapantalon!” The oldest in the group was mumbling in Ilocano, my hometown dialect. Her waiting is calm, her patience and resilience humbling. I sat beside

her and was awed by her dolorous, dark-skinned, lined face. Her hopeful eyes pooled a calm assurance that the night would be blessed with grace, like a starlit lake. We both held our concert tickets. In my broken Ilocano I asked her where she came from. She said they traveled all the way from Tarlac. I told her that I too had come from far away. Ten years after I left the Philippines, I have returned to my homeland to meet for the first time the woman whose art and life have inspired me.

Around midnight after the concert, I was on my way to San Juan and inside the taxi I was straightening the wrinkled bows of my gifts to Nora Aunor. In a few minutes, the gift would end its long journey. From Bangkok, I had brought them with me to Casino Filipino, hoping it would pass through security check. But the officer wanted to see what was inside and I refused to let him unwrap the gift. The gift, I desperately wanted to tell him, was bought last minute before my flight. It had cruised through Bangkok's rush hour traffic and train trips to two malls, fifteen minutes before shopping hours closed. At the gift-wrapping section, I nearly drove the ribbon lady crazy because I could not decide between lace or crepe paper for the bow. I had day-dreamed of the moment when Nora Aunor herself would open the gift in front of me and there was no way I could let the casino security officer spoil it. How do you personally give a gift to Nora Aunor? How do you keep your soul still in her presence so that it would not leave your body? This was my burning bush moment. I was one hundred percent sure: I would lose my sight and my hair would turn white.

I calmed myself as I entered the second floor San Juan office of ACE Entertainment. Norie Sayo, Nora's manager, and Vonnell Mirandilla, the Philippine moderator of the International Circle of Online Noranians (ICON), Nora's global e-group, who arranged the meeting, welcomed me. The General, as Norie was fondly called, ordered late dinner from the ground floor restaurant. Without warning, the General called on Nora.

I did not even have time to brace myself. No klieg lights, no spotlights, no make-up, Nora Aunor appeared in a black jacket over a *daster* (house dress) and greeted me. She stood across the table from where I sat, her hair wet. A scene in her latest film *Naglalayag* (Sailing) shot earlier in the day required that the film crew drench her in a constant downpour. Nora asked if I liked *sisig*. I nodded. It suddenly

occurred to me that I have not uttered a single word. I felt awkward. I must have looked stupid with my dumb smile. You'd think I was star-struck. But it was not a hypnotized state. Far from it, I was fully conscious of my thoughts commanding me to see and remember the face, the woman who stood in front of me, the moment. And before I could freeze it in a mental snapshot, I realized that I needed to place her first in the real world. All my life, I have etched her in my imaginings. I have burned her print, broadcast, and celluloid image in the tablet of my consciousness and finally, here was the moment of reckoning. It required a giant leap. From imagination to reality, I needed to frame her first in the textured surroundings of the moment—the furniture, the plants, the breathing people around us. I remember my conscious effort to take in the color of her skin, her height. But in retrospect, what confounds me is why my memory seems strangely clouded now, as if my consciousness resists the imprint of seeing Nora upclose. Is this a stronger desire for the object of our obsession to remain elusive? Nora acknowledging my presence, smiling, asking me if I liked sisig—why is it all so dark now?

I had to say something to Nora. “Sampung taon na po akong nangungulila sa inyo mula noong umalis ako.” Almost instantly, the melodramatic language, straight from the fifties, made me cringe. But she smiled, knowing that my longing was heartfelt. I asked her if she was tired. She said she felt a little cold. Nora wrapped her arm around my waist, I put mine around her shoulder, and we smiled as the General captured the moment in her digital camera. Moments later, Nora herself gave me the printed copy. I gave her my gift.

I knew it would take considerable effort to unwrap the thick carton box wrapped in pastel green rice paper. Invisible adhesive was applied over it and wrapped with a woven sheet of Christmas green abaca and synthetic silver threads. A wide length of deep red, velvet ribbon, crusted with metallic gold prints tied the box in a simple bow finish. Nora and Norie were delighted by it but I knew I'd better hurry and find a scissor. It would be impossible to tear it open with their hands. It seemed obvious as somebody quickly handed them a pair of scissors. To my relief, the General just cut and tore through the glued layers of abaca thread. But not Nora Aunor. She took time to carefully untie the bow, fold it and set it aside. Using her fingers, she meticulously picked on each glued abaca thread one by one. The rest of the group carried on with their conversation and I was left

mesmerized, watching Nora's unnerving concentration in unwrapping my gift. With sheer tenacity, she managed to pull out the entire abaca sheet in one piece. The only time she used the scissor was when she cut through the thick gummy wads of transparent adhesive to make sure she could keep the rice paper in one piece as well. Let me correct that. She did not cut through. She snipped with gentle determination. Snip. Snip. Snip. Like she was snipping nail cuticles. With bated breath, I watched her peel the last adhesive tape that glued the rice paper to the carton box. Finally, she folded the velvet bow, the sheet of abaca wrapping, and the rice paper. She held on to it as she carefully opened the box. The malicious would judge it as miserly. I saw something else. I saw pure, fierce concentration, a moment that reveals what Nora Aunor was, and is capable of. I saw how mutual benevolence sustains the reciprocal relationship between adulating fan and worshipped icon, the life-sustaining water wheel of eternal longing and desire. The gift box contained Thai handmade, scented candles. Weeks before, Vonnell told me that Nora of late had taken up the craft of handmade candles as a hobby. The candle I bought for the General was the size of a Campbell soup can, gradient-toned in green tea and bronze shades. Nora's had the same color, except that it had the wider diameter of an old 45 rpm vinyl record and was delicately carved with intricate holes similar to narrow maze tracks inside an anthill. "Hindi ko ito sisindihan," Nora said and kept the candle without removing the bubble-wrap. I tried to hide my disappointment. I wanted her to light it, to let it burn through the night until the wick's last flickering flame is extinguished in a pool of melted wax. But I guess this only reflects the true nature of our longing for Nora: it is insatiable and thus, it is eternal.

At two in the morning, it was time to leave. Vonnell checked on Nora behind the divider. He was smiling mischievously when he motioned us to quietly check out what he saw. Behind the divider, the computer was still on. On its screen was Nora's favorite word game. Right next to it, we saw Nora on a recliner, sleeping on her side, her back turned to us. We stood there and watched her, covering our mouths, quietly stifling our giggles like schoolgirls. Gradually, the moment subsided to sublime silence. Still, we remained standing. We watched over Nora Aunor, our adoration blessed by a private, peaceful encounter with the divine.

4.

At the Quezon City Wildlife Park the following night, the shooting crew unloaded additional power cables from two trucks of generator and shooting equipment. From the car park, I followed the cable trail that slithered across a dark grove of trees, empty picnic tables, and benches haunted by the absence of lovers. The cable path sloped down to a swampy lake and extended along a bridge that reached an island in the middle of the lake, its murky waters and surrounding trees lit by floodlights and beam lights. Midway, the bridge was completely blocked by a giant luminous standing canvas. Its whiteness floated in the dark and drew me like a moth. I moved quietly toward this cinematic hearth and passed by some members of the insomniac crew, all silent and still, their shadowed expressions drained, their blood sold to everything illuminated. I heard muffled voices behind the canvas but I could not see what was behind its otherworldly light. Carefully balancing myself at one side of the bridge, I held on to its metal frame and peeked. I saw Nora Aunor and her leading man, Yul Servo, sitting at the end of the bridge, their backs turned toward me. Nora wore a single pearl strand over an elegant gray blouse and pants. Yul wore a taxi driver's yellow uniform over a white undershirt and a pair of black jeans.

"Cut!" somebody hollered and the stillness snapped into animated relief and urgent shouts: blocking, camera placements, lighting positions, make-up—the instructions jolting everybody back to life, back to the sweltering mechanical world of tripods, tracks, lenses, boom microphones, light bulbs, and all the other tools used to manufacture our myths, our dreams, and other altered realities. The crew dismantled the white screen. Yul ran to the edge of the lake and peed. Nora disappeared in the sudden commotion.

When I saw Nora and Yul again, they were again sitting at the edge of the bridge. The camera had moved closer to them. Yul was distraught. Murmuring, he memorized his lines. A crew stretched a measuring tape from the camera lens to Nora's face and shouted the measurements. Another placed a light meter on her face. More shouts. Nora was oblivious; her eyes skimmed the lake, her internal preparation was a mysterious moment of masking and unmasking. A thin, transparent sheet divided the real life pain and the iconic celluloid sorrow. In that rare mute moment before the take, one witnessed a great anxious

rip. It pulled me. I stood up and began to walk toward her. I moved carefully to avoid distracting her but it was too late. As if the idol could sense every moment of adulation that fed and drained her, Nora slowly turned toward my direction. She looked at me. Her character's beleaguered expression suddenly changed. She recognized me. Her face lit. I could not move. I kept mouthing "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." But she stood up and, like a thrilled child, motioned me to come over. Unfortunately, I was not meant to cross to the other side. Before I could take another step, somebody suddenly hollered, ". . . roooolling! Action!" I froze.

What is so remarkable about what I had witnessed was not so much how, in a snap of a finger, Nora could skillfully shift emotional gears to be back in character again—but more importantly, what it could reveal about the august source of her sublime sorrow. Before she had turned and recognized me, her concentration seemed posed to fathom the dark depths of the lake. Now I wonder whether the source of her sufferance was truly abysmal. The lake is already too murky to plumb and pump a fresh reservoir of clear sorrow. Perhaps of late, she has instead resorted to skimming the surface of the lake to convey darker emotions. She gathers everything in all their nocturnal buoyancy—the water-walking insects and their larvae, the tangled aquatic plants and everything dead and inanimate that floats and refuses to sink, the plastic cups, the junk food wrappers, the cigarette butts. She claims them all with her ravaged face, her soul a ghostly ship still decked out with torn lilac bunting.

As the crew took apart and folded the giant white canvas, I found myself alone with Nora Aunor, standing right next to her at the end of the bridge, facing the dark lake. Again, I was tense. The woman standing beside me is still, after all, a stranger. A stranger as I am to her. My grade school teacher's scolding echoed: "Kilala ka ba niyan?" You would think that because I had flown thousands of miles for this moment, we should at least be facing each other, giddy with excitement. But no. I could not even look at her. We stared silently at the lake, a reminder of the ocean and the expanse of everything mysterious that separates and binds us. There was a lump in my throat when I told her that I had rebooked my flight departure. It was irritating and uncontrollable, the way my sentences were suddenly extravagant with *po's* and *opo's*. I wasn't sure whether I was being sincerely polite or whether it had to do with my proximity with this irresistible force that

was making me imbibe her mannerisms. "Mabuti naman," Nora said. "Para magkasama pa tayo."

5.

At the end of her Casino Filipino concert, Nora sang her farewell song while her fans rushed to the stage and offered her flowers. Critic Patrick Flores, who came with me, walked over to Director Mario O'Hara. "Parang kulto na, ano?" Patrick said. "Sarap gawan ng pelikula!" Mario replied. Patrick later wrote about how Nora's following, likened to a cult, "shares a secret language, responds to certain gestures, and undertakes a pilgrimage to reach a shrine of profound consolation." He observed how the concert's venue, "set in a dull shell of a hall, a sorry excuse for an auditorium, a cavernous cement structure, for all intents and purposes unfinished, with steel trusses sticking out and the walls unpainted," in itself resembled a "grotto."

After the concert, Vonnel led me to the backstage where the faithful lined up in front of Nora's private room, its closed door marked by Nora's name, cut out in styrofoam and encrusted with red glitters. Vonnel cut through the line and motioned to the shrine's sentinel to let me squeeze through. Inside it was chaotic. The adoring devotees crowded over their idol, still in the three-piece black suit and pants she wore at the concert's finale number. I immediately heard something strange, a barely perceptible hum, like the whirring of an electric fan or an airconditioner. But I wasn't sure. It felt warm inside. People fanned themselves with rolled posters and magazines. Vonnel pulled me up close to Nora Aunor and introduced me to her. With all the feverish commotion whirling around us, I was not sure if my introduction registered at all. This was the eye of the storm. The raised bouquets and the frantic queue of photos and magazines that needed to be signed overwhelmed me. Like birds, some fans trilled and cooed in delight. Mostly, they murmured in eerie reverence. I suddenly realized that this was where the strange sound was coming from. It came from a hunger so desperate and powerful, it shot a surge of electric current in the air. I leaned over to Nora and congratulated her. Nora murmured something but I was distracted by something I observed watching her upclose. On one arm, she cradled the rising pile of bouquet offerings while her other hand held her pack of cigarettes, her lighter, and a cigarette waiting to be lit. She stood still as other people's faces pressed against hers with adoring kisses. Hands reached out to touch her, some

with handkerchiefs to wipe her perspiration. Devotion rubbed off her make-up and dusted her black lapel. I looked at her face and saw pained exhaustion. She was not looking at me as she murmured. She was not looking at anybody. I'm sure she had said something nice although she wasn't smiling. She was tired. She just wanted to smoke. But even that had to wait. Meanwhile, she had to submit, to give up what was left of her to quench our soul-draining devotion. She stood there and I wondered whether her spirit was still there. I looked at her dolorous eyes. It was eerie and surreal as if the person that stood in front of us was merely a venerated image in a grotto, the painted robe cracked and peeling, the tracks of dried dust and dirt stained her weathered cheeks like tears, as if blind sufferance had rubbed her eyes out and replaced it with glass that mirrors her multitude's history of longings.

6.

But the small woman who stood right next to me at the Wildlife Park was as real as the midnight chill rising from the lake. I told her that it was not the first time that I had flown to watch her concert. I told her how, a few years ago, my mother and I flew in from the United States and was met at the airport by my godmothers who drove all the way from Nueva Ecija. From the airport, we all drove straight to Cubao to watch Nora's last Araneta concert. Nora smiled and shook her head. I told her how she has made us happy all these years. "Kayo na nga lang ang nagpapalakas ng loob ko," Nora said. She asked me where I was staying. In a hotel, I said, but I had checked out and was already staying for the night at the guesthouse of our Manila office. She invited me to sleep over at her house in Balete Drive but I had to say no. I was thankful for the offer but I had to leave early the following day.

Shooting packed up and we all boarded the van. Norie sat behind the driver while Nora and I sat in the backseat with Vonnell between us. We drove for a while. I had no idea where we were going. Later, Norie asked where they could drop me off. Before I could answer, Nora said, "Thatid na natin siya." Norie asked me where I was staying. I said Diliman. Norie said we had already driven far in the opposite direction. I apologized. The streets were too dark and I was having a hard time identifying the area. The markers I was familiar with more

than ten years ago have considerably changed. I said it was okay. They could drop me off anywhere.

"Thatid na natin siya," Nora insisted.

"Malayo na tayo," Norie said. "Babalik pa tayo."

"Okay lang po," I said. "Diyan na lang po ako."

But Nora was not listening. Her persistent tone rose. "Thatid na natin siya!" This went on for a while (Thatid na natin siya—Malayo na tayo—Okay lang po—Thatid na natin siya . . .) and I was already feeling guilty for having caused this ruffle. Finally, Nora, unyielding, began to say, "Puwede namang—" But Norie cut her off firmly with a more resolute tone. "Pagod ka na. Kailangan mo nang magpahinga."

Nora sulked. She sighed helplessly and looked out at the window. A brief, awkward silence followed. I leaned across Vonnel and reached out to Nora and hushed her. Worried, Nora held my hand and asked me whether I would be okay.

I stood alone in the dark and I did not know where I was. There were no lights in the buildings lining both sides of the road except for a pub lit by colored light bulbs that framed its painted signboard. In a street corner, cigarette and *balut* vendors and other shadowy figures moved about under the weak light of a lamppost. Outside their circle of light, the energy of darkness pulled me toward everything that is fearful, unconscious, silent, chaotic, and mysterious. The road was empty. I checked my wallet and felt the passport in my pocket. I have returned to my homeland and the night reminded me that no, this is no longer home, I was just visiting. And Nora Aunor wanted to take me home. Longing for Nora Aunor in other lands is like this night. The most enduring star of Philippine cinema wanted to guide me, to bring me home. But could she? Well, in a way, she did. Because for those of us who love her and have left the country, home is to stand on a dark street, waiting for a ride. In the dark, you lose yourself in faces and lives that are not yours. Just like in a foreign country. Just like in the movies.

And so I waited for a ride, alerted each time a vehicle's light would appear, the light turning from a bend on the road like the beams of a projector's light that hovered above me inside a theater. The projected images on the screen were that of incredible physical pain and suffering: Nora Aunor being fed with spoiled food, slapped on the face, tied like a squealing pig, pushed down the stairs, raped, kicked while she was

pregnant, water-tortured, electrocuted, forced to sit bare-assed on ice, whipped, disfigured with acid, crucified. She plunged to her death on a ravine. Hanged twice. Gunned down three times—shot in the heart, in the head, her entire body riddled with bullets. Like the Stations of the Cross, it goes on and on, this incredible montage of Nora's pain, sufferance her body of work, enough to put Mel Gibson's *Passion* to shame. And how does it end? It ends with a twelve-year-old boy being humiliated by his teacher in front of the class because of Nora Aunor. "Pinag-aaksayahan mo ng panahon! Bakit? Kilala ka ba niyan?"

Except that in the movie in my mind, the boy has found the voice to answer back. Maybe, the boy bravely replies. Or maybe Nora Aunor will get to know me and then maybe she will just forget about me. But that hardly matters. I will still watch her movies and I will remember every pain she has gone through and will go through. She will help me endure, knowing that I will not suffer alone. She will be with me until I have left this town, this land, and she will be inside me when I return. I remembered Mandy Diaz in Caloocan and asked myself, really, where is home for the star-struck? The last lines of the futuristic film *Gattaca* came to mind, a voice-over of Ethan Hawke playing a young man who must overcome a world of genetic discrimination to pursue his dream of traveling into space. Finally succeeding in making his first great journey to the stars, he muses, "For someone who was never meant for this world, I must confess I am suddenly having a hard time leaving it. Of course they say every atom in our body was once a part of the stars. Maybe I'm not leaving. Maybe I'm going home."