

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Tabula Rasa

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Philippine Studies vol. 53, no. 2&3 (2005): 205–214

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Tabula Rasa

GABRIELA LEE

This time, the memory she received from him was when he was five years old and he was drowning in his grandmother's swimming pool. She felt the sudden absence of sound, that shift from noise to silence, and the water that quickly filled up the spaces in his ears. She could sense the boy's panic, that thud thud thud in his chest that were like tiny explosives going off rapidly as his lungs struggled to fill his tiny body up with oxygen. She could see the bubbles surrounding him like a halo, the shimmering play of sunlight on water, the watercolor forms of the adults as they scurried around the edges of the pool in fright, in alarm. She felt the strong arms of an uncle grab him under his arms and pull him upwards, where there was light and color and noise and now he was crying noisily and gulping down air like an elixir while his mother hugged him tightly, never mind that he was soaking her best summer dress.

He moaned as the memory finished filtering through her mind, like quick jump cuts from a badly edited film. He left a trail of semen, sticky like egg whites, across the flat expanse of Sophie's belly. She gently wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of her hand, and smiled wanly as he collapsed on top of her, a log of flesh felled by their lovemaking. "Oh Lawrence," she whispered as she cradled him to her chest, her fingers raking paths through the damp wilderness of his hair.

It was only later that she realized that she was crying.

They had met through the usual channels—friends of friends of friends from the office and from college who had decided to throw a

despedida party for Ingrid, who was leaving for Canada on a postgraduate scholarship. She was Sophie's roommate from when they were still undergraduates living at the dormitory, and they had remained in contact even after graduation. Lawrence was the date of a coworker of Ingrid; the result of a blind date set up by well-meaning friends.

They first made eye contact over the pink punch bowl: he was wearing a silly party hat with the rubber garter digging into his cheeks and chin; she was holding a paper cup and scooping the dregs of the punch into it in a valiant attempt to get something non-alcoholic to drink. They left a little past midnight—Sophie had already said her goodbyes to Ingrid and wished her well, and Lawrence had already left his date in the arms of another woman, fulfilling every man's lesbian porn fantasy.

They drove around the neighborhood in search of the nearest coffee shop, and finally settled down at Kapeng Barako, a small café at the end of a street in residential Loyola Heights, where the trees outside were strung with capiz lamps and the walls were made of real pine wood. They stayed there until three in the morning, talking, and then wandered down the street hand in hand as the sun glimmered gray and gold over the rooftops of the nearby houses, and then when the world had already started to wake up, he took her home.

He couldn't even wait until the next day to call her.

After two months, Sophie invited him to stay for the night. It was raining that night: one of those freak storms that swept through Metro Manila during the most inopportune times, and she knew that the roads were flooded. As they were arguing whether he should stay or brave the storm, the kitchen lights flickered, and then suddenly Sophie's apartment was flooded in darkness.

Of course she screamed.

But later, after the candles had been lit and they were entwined on the couch, snuggling under her grandmother's woolen blanket and talking of small inanities, Lawrence bent down and kissed Sophie softly on the lips. And before they knew it, hands and lips and tongues moved at a furious dance, accompanied by the rhythm of the storm. Clothes dripped from their bodies on to the floor, and as soon as skin touched bare skin, there was that foreknowledge that there was no going back.

She didn't know how it happened, though: as she felt him come inside her, a wisp of a memory entered her mind, totally unrelated to

sex. A vision of an old man standing at the doorway of a house, an unopened umbrella in hand, rain outlining his silhouette in silver drops of water. He was holding a drenched newspaper in the other hand. His back was turned toward her, and she realized that she was standing at the edge of a window. And then she was swept away again as her body took over and she came, digging her nails into the flesh of his shoulders as she shuddered with pleasure. They slept in each others' arms underneath the woolen blanket. Sophie didn't dream.

In the morning, she remembered that Lawrence's father was kicked out of the house by his mother for sleeping with another woman. He never saw his father again.

"So, love," she asked when he came into the kitchen, "did you sleep well?"

"Never felt better," he said, coming over to the stove, where she was frying some bacon. He wrapped his arms around her waist and nuzzled her neck. "Last night was amazing, Soph," he whispered in her ear, and then gave her earlobe a tender nip.

She smiled. "That's good."

Lawrence tightened his hug. "So would you prefer that we do it here, or can you make it to the bedroom this time?"

He doesn't know. The thought echoed in her mind like a clear bell, ringing in the distance. She gently extricated herself from his grip and busied herself with serving breakfast—she carried the plates of food to the small table and beckoned for him to help himself to the food. He looked at her questioningly but took his place and piled his plate with bacon and fried rice and egg, topped with a generous dollop of tomato ketchup. She tried to lead the conversation away, but she could feel the heat as his gaze followed her every movement. Finally, she said, "Tell me a story." It was the only way Sophie knew he would start talking about himself, the only way he could remember.

Lawrence confessed over breakfast that he couldn't remember his father leaving them.

She took away the memory of his cat Lolita on the kitchen counter, and the death of his grandmother, Lola Mining of the famous cassava cake, one afternoon inside his car. He loved running his hand up and down the S-curve of her back while they walked in the mall and to whisper sugar nothings in her ear. She found him cloying, like too

much chocolate syrup over her ice cream. She was frightened at the power she held over his body. They had been together for over four months.

Finally, she got angry at him—the smallest of things, of course, the way he tracked mud all over the hardwood floor of her apartment when he came back from jogging around the Academic Oval at UP. He said it was raining and that the ground was wet—her voice sizzled like hot oil, like lightning across a darkening sky, throwing his excuses back at his face. Lawrence was surprised at her anger, at her rage, and took her into his arms and enfolded her small body against him, resting his chin on top of her head. She was sobbing now, quietly, her hands curled up into fists that beat helplessly against his chest.

She never told him why she was angry that day, and she took away the memory of his first girlfriend, a slight child of sixteen named Cindy who was the first girl he fought over with bloodied fists, that evening. Sophie was sobbing as she came, feeling his length ebb and flow inside her, knowing that he had lost a little more again.

The days started coming faster and faster. Lawrence confessed that all he could think about was her body, her glorious shape and skin and color. One evening, Sophie stood in front of the full-length mirror in her bathroom and wondered what he saw. Her fingers skimmed lightly over the flare of her hips, the slope of her thighs. Her breasts were small handfuls of flesh, rose-tipped fruits. She was small, built like a sparrow rather than a hen. Her hair hung in damp clumps around her face, framing her cheekbones and too-large eyes. Her skin was pale and tan in patches, the skin of a city girl who couldn't go to the beach as often as she wanted to. Her feet splayed on the bathroom carpet, bone and veins spreading in a delicate pattern. Her father had always said that she had boy's feet. Her hands moved all over her body, searching the valleys and mountains of flesh and bone—and blood pulsing beneath her touch—searching for the secret he saw in her. Her fingers only grasped elbows and knees, calves and thighs and shoulders. She turned around in a circle, looking at herself as she moved around and around and around like a child, arms spread wide like propellers, like flower petals. Her head swam, and she collapsed on the bathroom floor, dizzy and out of breath.

Lawrence's memories came: memories of dinners and breakfasts and lunches, of meetings and where he last placed his car keys. Child-

hood memories—his favorite stuffed panda bear that his father brought from China, walking in the parade at their hometown in Vigan, his first kiss. Sophie clutched her head; on her knees, she crawled from the bathroom to her bed, collapsing on the mattress. She felt like she wanted to throw up. The memories came faster now: his mother cooking adobo, his First Communion, his younger sisters playing *patintero* out in the garage, a turtle swimming against the ocean currents, playing basketball with his officemates, his circumcision at thirteen, his father leaving. On and on they came, a film reel spinning out of control, the tube of light and swirling dust motes that connected the screen to the reel unbreakable, unstoppable. She wanted to scream.

Lawrence found her the next day: naked, ash-white, sprawled on her bed, trembling and weeping.

Sophie thought it was sweet when he finally asked for the spare key to her apartment, and even included a Garfield keychain along with it. He had already been its keeper for a while, but the formality still sent a thrill through her. Two weeks later, she arrived that evening from the office to find Lawrence installing a deadbolt on the door. She tried not to pay attention to it—quietly, she told herself that it was nice that he cared so much for her safety; Quezon City's crime rates had increased for the past few months.

Then came the daily text messages asking her where she was—whether she was at a meeting with clients or having lunch with her girlfriends, he would be asking her the same question: “Wru? Who u with?” There wasn't even a smiley face at the end of the messages. Always the same—curt, short, worried. She could almost imagine his furrowed brow while he was sending one such message. And then Lawrence started telling her to stop wearing the sleeveless blouses that she loved so much, the ones that she thought fitted her well. And then came the requests, delivered in a quiet voice: no more late-night parties, no more dinner meetings with clients, no more movie dates with Harold, her gay best friend. He would always pick her up from work, even though she was in Makati and he was in Ortigas. She hated the cage he was putting around her, these slow erection of bars around her life, slowly but surely putting her in the center of his life. She wanted to get angry at him, but as soon as his lips touched hers . . .

She didn't know how to make it stop.

Lately, she's been noticing that he's starting to forget things—like the name of the school he went to during the year his family stayed in Bohol, or the secret ingredient to his famous *bagoong* rice. He was frustrated with his loss of memory more often than not. She remembered that Elizabeth Bishop poem once while making love, and whispered the lines into the shell of his ear afterwards while he snored softly beside her. She wanted to chalk this up to stress and sleepless nights, and she's taken to teasing him about having Alzheimer's.

They were having sex every day now. Some days, Sophie had trouble walking properly, the ache between her legs intensifying with every guilty step toward the bathroom after making love with him. Surprisingly, they never had any problems with contraception—she still had her period, arriving like a punctual appointment every month—and although he never used condoms after the first few weeks, she had started to purchase birth control pills in an effort to make sure.

She carefully broached the subject of contraception to Lawrence one evening, while they were watching *Will & Grace* after dinner. He nodded noncommittantly, and then hugged her tightly. Somehow, she didn't feel comforted. Later on, in bed, she took the memory of his last girlfriend: a girl named Shelly. She was standing at the corner of a busy intersection, waiting for a jeepney, knowing that she would never come back.

They had been together ten months now when Sophie realized that Lawrence had completely forgotten his father.

It wasn't anything in particular, really; they were in his car, driving to her parents' house in Parañaque when he said, almost as an afterthought, "I can't remember my father." She could almost see his words inflating like balloons as soon as they escaped his lips, floating around the cramped space of his Honda Civic, occasionally bumping into one another in a concerted effort to escape into the open air.

She tried to sound as nonchalant as possible. "What do you mean, you can't remember your Dad? How come I do—you've told me stories about him."

"I did? I can't even remember his name."

"Jose Bienvenido Lampara Jr."

"Wow. *Ang galing naman ng girlfriend ko.*"

She crinkled her nose. "*Gago.*"

They stopped at an intersection and he rolled down the window to give a beggar child knocking on the tinted glass some coins. Sophie watched the word balloons float out of the car rather regretfully. She could still remember the last memory he had of his father: that one morning, when the sun was just about to rise and the whole world was gold and brown and yellow and Lawrence, age seven, tiptoed down and saw his father at the kitchen table, the newspaper in front of him like a fortress wall, calmly sipping a cup of coffee. She could still feel the surge of love the boy had for his father, that respect for the quiet dignity of the man who would later betray his mother.

She felt Lawrence's hand on her lap, carefully teasing the hem of her skirt, fingers tugging at the fragile fabric in an effort to reveal the skin underneath. She turned sharply to glare at him, but he had a studied look of calm on his face, staring straight ahead at the traffic. Another beggar had come to knock on the car window for alms—a skeleton-thin blind man wearing too-large sunglasses and a faded red shirt. The old man's guide, a curly haired child, looked at them curiously, and then drifted away to another car. Lawrence's fingers were already tracing delicate lines across the skin of her thighs. She shifted slightly away from his touch, closing her legs demurely. He raised a questioning eyebrow just as the traffic lights turned green.

Oh God, she prayed silently and then paused, not knowing what to ask for.

The night before their first year anniversary, Sophie received a phone call from Lawrence's best friend, Patrick. The two men had known each other since their college years, when they sat next to each other in freshman Trigonometry class; the memory she had taken from Lawrence had Patrick still sporting a mullet and listening to Led Zepelin on his Walkman while walking around the campus. But now, the mullet had been traded for a shaved head and wire-rimmed eyeglasses, and he favored Dashboard Confessional over The Hives. He was about to get married the next month to his longtime partner, Amelia.

Earlier, Sophie was a bit surprised when she came down from the office to find an empty space on the curb where Lawrence usually parked. A bit disconcerted but nevertheless slightly relieved, she had dinner with some of her office mates, got a bit tipsy on a few margaritas but still managed to stumble into her apartment before

midnight. During the whole evening, Lawrence didn't even text her once.

When her cellphone rang, she fumbled for it for a few minutes, hands quickly digging into her bag for the slim rectangular case. "Hello?" she said, a bit breathlessly.

A few minutes later, she found herself taking the stairs to the lobby of her apartment building, two steps at a time, and cursing the taxi drivers that didn't want to take her to the East Avenue Medical Center. Finally, she slid into an old Kia Pride that rattled and wheezed as it plodded down the lamplit streets of the city. She watched the amber globes expand and then fade away as she passed them by, the reflection luminous against the glass car windows. She wondered what was wrong and then silently cursed herself for not worrying about Lawrence at all that night. The radio was pumping out Filipino pop tunes, and the driver of the cab—a plump, fortysomething man who wore dark glasses in the middle of the night—was tapping his fingers to the music on the rim of the steering wheel. The blast of the aircon made her drowsy; she gripped her cellphone in one hand and tightened her hold on her bag. *I hope he's all right*, she thought to herself, as random memories of him flowed through her mind, a quiet stream of images that didn't quite make sense but lulled her into a state between waking and dreaming.

At the hospital, she found herself walking down corridors that smelled faintly of antiseptic and vomit. She found Patrick in the waiting lounge, slumped wearily in one of the hard plastic orange chairs that were lined up against the wall. "He's in one of the private rooms," he said, giving her the number.

"What happened?"

"He had a seizure. The doctors couldn't quite make heads or tails of it. It was some sort of epilepsy, some sort of brain damage. He was calling out your name, Soph."

She could feel the blood draining from her cheeks.

Patrick looked up at her. "Something's . . . changed. I don't know, Sophie, but there's something that's not quite right with him. It's like he's fading away. Anyway, I'd better get going. Mely's going to be looking for me—she's worried that I'm out this late at the hospital." He gave her arm a comforting squeeze. "Don't worry, the doctors have sedated him. I called up his mom and sister, too, but no one was answering the phone, so I just left a message on the machine."

Sophie nodded numbly. “Thanks,” she managed to whisper.

“No problem.” Patrick stood up and shrugged into his jacket. “It’s a cold night, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

She wandered down more corridors, more blank doors and windows with the blinds drawn. She felt like she was in a bad hospital drama show. The occasional nurse passed her by, but didn’t seem to mind that she was out in the hallways past visiting hours. A couple of flights of stairs and she found herself standing in front of Lawrence’s hospital room. The doorknob was icy to the touch. Sophie could feel her body trembling, her hand shaking as she turned the knob and pushed the door open.

Only the bedside lamp illuminated the room. There was a small couch on one side, upholstered in blue, and a round table with a vase of slightly wilted flowers on top. The airconditioning hummed gently, a counterpoint to the quick beating of her heart. A television was mounted at the far corner of the room. The window looked out to the busy avenue below them—the late-night vendors and call boys and the occasional tricycle roaring down the asphalt as if it owned the street. The bed was near the window. The curtains weren’t drawn, and she could see a couple of machines beside the bed, blinking and humming like sentient creatures that were waiting patiently for her to come closer before clamping down on her flesh.

Lawrence was asleep. For a moment, Sophie was surprised to see how thin he was—all bones and flesh held together by some fragile invisible thread. He was covered in green hospital sheets, and an IV line ran from the inside of his arm to a drip that was hanging just above his bed. There were dark circles under his eyes, and his skin was the paleness of walls, of old sand, of dust. She stepped back, afraid to even breathe, frightened that he would just crumble if she touched him.

His eyes opened. Sophie could see him trying to get a sense of his bearings: the sound-proofed ceiling, the wallpaper of roses and green stripes, the coldness of the room. His eyes turned to her, focusing as he took in her figure half-hidden in the shadows of the room. She realized that she still smelled faintly of alcohol and sizzling mushrooms and garlic, and that her hair was loose from the ponytail she had hurriedly put it up in. “Hey,” he whispered, his lips barely moving. “Come over here.”

She smiled and walked closer, sitting on the edge of the bed, her hand over his. His skin felt papery, delicate as moth wings. "How are you?"

"Where am I?"

"East Avenue Medical."

"Where's that?"

She almost wanted to weep. *Ob God.*

"Come over here and kiss me."

She leaned over and pressed her lips against his, careful not to put her weight on his body. His tongue flickered out, wet and wanting, as his free hand gently encircled her waist, pulled her closer. She closed her eyes as familiar fingers ran up and down her body. The kiss deepened, and she felt her body quickly responding to his. Somehow, her clothes found their way to the floor in an untidy heap. Slipping under the blankets, she searched for skin, wanting to burrow underneath, to feel him inside her, wanting to remember the way he touched her breasts, to engrave every moment in her memory. Lawrence's fingers and lips were everywhere. They had forgotten the IV line, the machines, the room, the hospital—everything but their bodies following the intricate movements of lovemaking. She shuddered as he came inside her with the force of a tidal wave. The bed creaked rhythmically underneath their weight.

So this is what drowning feels like.

She collapsed naked, a thin sheen of sweat covering her skin, beside him. She heard him whisper in the shell of her ear, "I love you."

When she woke up, she was alone on the bed.

Sophie slowly walked out of the hospital and into the morning, her stomach growling with hunger. She couldn't remember what she was doing in the hospital in the first place; she must've passed out last night after drinking with her friends at one of the beer gardens at Kalayaan Avenue, because she honestly couldn't remember anything after her third margarita. She had a vague memory of drowning, of the waters closing over her head, as she walked out of the hospital driveway and toward East Avenue where she hailed a cab and gave the driver instructions on how to get to her apartment. But Sophie thought that it was just a memory from childhood and quietly dismissed it.