

Intimations of Mortality


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Once I was asked why I left my island home in Siasi, Sulu. In jest I invented an elaborate explanation: in one of my frequent visits to the Chinese cemetery, it dawned on me that it was getting crowded, that by the time I was to take my place among the dead, there would be no more space left for me.

The Chinese cemetery in Siasi is crowded, and there is no room for expansion. It is bounded on all sides. On the south are two smaller cemeteries for Catholics and Protestants; on the west, the PC Headquarters and barracks; on the north, a coconut plantation; and on the east, facing the lovely mountain, a depression of land that once upon a time was a rice field. Compounding the problem of limited space was a recent fashion, started by the family of the richest Chinese in town, of building temple-like mausoleums. So brilliant was this idea that every family with enough money wanted to build a mausoleum. Instead of only six feet of ground an ordinary man in an ordinary tomb would require, each mausoleum occupied a space good for four people in recumbent position. No wonder that when an uncle died the grave diggers had difficulty looking for a suitable space, and when they finally found one, the spot of ground they dug had a skull underneath.

If you visited the cemetery you shouldn't be surprised to find these mausoleums more splendid, more typhoon-proof than the houses of the living. The floor is of gray and cream marble, the posts of white cement and wash-out materials, the fence of iron grills in silver and gold paint, the roof covered with shingles of red bricks, and on the rooftop a sculptured pair of fish or dragons with simulated fire breath, or white cranes in flight. Many of these could not be found in the homes of even those who built the mausoleums, but I guess the dead deserve to be pampered in order to make up for their inimitable state of decomposition.

It seems natural, but not necessary, that one day I will have to be buried

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near one of my ancestors — three, maybe more, generations of them. I do not know their names. Nor do I know how they looked since there are no pictures. However, the tomb of one of them has impressed me deeply: of common sand, gravel and cement, the corrugated surface looks like the casual folds of a blanket.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez wrote that one doesn't belong to a place until somebody he loves is buried under its earth. In this sense I belong to the island several times over because under its sacred ground are some of the dearest people in my life.

One is a aunt whose death was foretold. An Indian fortune-teller, a family friend, was invited by my grandmother to tell the fortunes of her teenage daughters and a niece. The soothsayer looked at her and commented that she would get married all right but afterwards she would be separated from her husband. How could she be separated from her husband, my grandmother asked, when divorce is not allowed by law. He did not elaborate. Incredible as it may seem, my aunt did get married, bore two daughters, but on the third childbirth, she died.

The source of this story is my mother, who at 76, may be called a survivor of countless misfortunes. Perhaps there is something hubristic about her misfortunes. Her parents had the temerity to name her Gold Pearl, and thus unwittingly invited the attention and envy of the gods who showered upon her neither gold nor pearls but one misfortune after another. Her parents should have shielded her life from the gods by just giving her a causal, inconspicuous name like "Pigshit".

She herself was present that afternoon the fortune-teller came to my grandmother's house, and her own fortune was laid bare before her by the magus. He said that only the third try to marry her would succeed — the first two would end in disaster. When that future came, long after the magus had been gone, two men, one after the other, died just before they could marry her. One died of tuberculosis; the other was murdered by a madman.

So when the third man came around he was duly warned not to try his luck lest evil befall on him, too. He had not heard of the magus whose vision of the future was a well-kept family secret. A gambler that he was, he paid no heed to the warning of his friends, as if he knew the ancient lore of numbers, or was it simply a gambler's instinct that you could not lose thrice in a row on one number? Whatever. He dared Lady Luck to spin her wheels or deal her cards. His love was his ace of hearts. The gambit paid off and reinforced the belief that love is stronger than death. The gambler and the cursed woman produced eleven children.

One of them passed away when was three years old. I have only vague memories of her as a living person. She must have been, being then the youngest of the brood, the darling of my parents. A story was told that my

father was so overwhelmed by grief that he attempted to jump from the balcony of our two-story house. Only the alertness of my elder brother stopped him.

I remember the wild lamentations of my mother during the funeral, when the coffin was carried out of the house. She did not want to go to the cemetery herself.

Many years later she decided to have the grave moved so that my sister could be near my father. I went with the grave diggers. They could find only tiny bones and a pair of plastic shoes — all that remained of her and one faded picture of her lying in state. **Pulvis et umbra.**

Even as a boy I have looked into the open pit. There was nothing perverse, or bizarre, in that. Many times when we were boys, my friends and I used to go with grave diggers, though our purpose was not strictly funereal but nutritional. We went to the cemetery to pick fruits, mostly guavas, which grew just beyond the perimeter of the cemetery. As soon as we had stuffed our pockets with hard, green guavas, we would go back and watch the diggers. They were day laborers and longshoremen who moonlighted (though they did their digging in the morning) as diggers because digging paid three times more than what they could earn at the wharf in one afternoon. Some of these gentle grave diggers worked as day laborers for my family. Digging was always in the morning, and the funeral in the afternoon.

My friends and I would return in the afternoon, usually ahead of the funeral party, not to offer our condolences to the bereaved, as our hearts were then too innocent for grief, but to witness the final rites for the dead man, to hear the clear sound of the trumpet or bugle and drum, the taps that would extinguish forever the lights of his life, usually climaxed by a volley of gunfire, like a gun salute or farewell, even if the dead man was no soldier or hero but a mere merchant of fishing accessories. We could hold our reverence for a moment only because as soon as the guns were fired, and in the midst of lamentation, madly we would scramble on the ground for the bullet shells, which we used as whistles and sinkers for our fish lines, and sometimes as containers for a mini-fish dynamite.

In one of these funerals I looked into the open pit and was surprised and fascinated because it did not have the rich brown look of freshly-dug earth, but the clean, orderly gray of concrete. I did not know there was a new group of grave diggers in town and more professional and advanced in ideas than the one I knew. When I went home after the funeral, I told my grandmother, with whom I grew up, what I saw at the cemetery. I told her how the bottom and walls of the pit were cemented. She told me that when the time for her to die came around, she did not want the walls of her grave to be cemented. Why, I argued, when it looked very orderly and clean. Very gravely, and without a hint that she was trying to be funny, she said that it would be

too hot for comfort.

It was a long time before she herself died. One afternoon she was sewing on a hand-manipulated Singer a pair of pants and blouse. I was helping her thread the needles. I was curious why in a month she was sewing two pairs of trousers and blouses. She hardly went out to visit people or to socialize with them. She explained that the black pair she would wear on her funeral, and the dark blue pair was an extra piece she needed on her long journey after death.

My grandmother died on the day, Saturday, she predicted she would die. Quietly, of old age, and ironically for one who was fussy, without a fuss, in a house which has seen so many deaths. According to her wish, we did not cement the walls of her grave. She wore the black pair of trousers and blouse, the dress she had made herself some years before. The extra piece, the blue one, we put inside her coffin. Death is a long journey.

There was a time we thought that she, like a song, would never die. She had survived the deaths of two daughters and two sons-in-law. She had survived the death of her husband who was murdered by his friend, who in turn was beaten to death in jail by some enraged citizens. When she finally passed away, she had close to fifty grandchildren and a few great-grandchildren.

But it seems as if she isn't dead. Why, just as I was writing these sentences, Mantovani was playing "Hi-Lili, Hi-lo." It was her favorite song at one time, though she could not sing it. For a moment I seemed to have traveled down the vista of over three decades. A tall, black gramophone at the foot of a bed, and a voice is telling me to play the record. I turn the crank a few times until it is tight, put in place the 45 rpm record, and very gently lower the heavy head where the needle is onto the record, and a female voice sings "The song of love is a sad song, hi-Lili, hi-Lili, hi-lo." It is evening. I am asking her where the rain comes from. She explains, straight out of her myth-making mind, that the rainmaker is a dragon who lives in the great heavens, who swallows water from the ocean, and the rain is its holy piss.

The song and the gramophone, grandmother and the dragon — they don't seem to die in spite of death.

I would liken my familiarity with dead men to a boat inebriated of the sea's saltiness. Long before I could understand what death is, I had looked at men who died violently. One was a cattle rustler whose corpse was displayed in front of the town hall. In the middle of his forehead was a big hole made by a Garand bullet. At another time, three bloated corpses, the hands tied behind the back, floated near the wharf.

But the most dramatic death was that of a suicide. He was a tall, good-looking PC sergeant, who was always in clean uniform, a Christian who was not a native of Siasi, with a reputation for being kind and gentle. One evening,

he had gotten drunk in front of the only movie house in town, and waving his cal. 45 pistol at the passers by, which included a couple of policemen, stopped them dead in their tracks for a terrifying quarter of an hour, until a superior officer came down from the PC Headquarters to pacify him. The incident was some kind of foreshadowing in the drama of this man.

The day he died, I saw him with his pinched-face wife at **Goldminda**, a waterfront cafe that sold **halo-halo**. He was sending off his wife and two children. When the ship had left port he himself took a motor launch, a **kumpit**, which sailed for one of the nearby islands. The motor launch was just over a few hundred yards away when two gun shots were heard. It came back to Siasi. The townspeople, though used to stories of violent deaths, were nevertheless shocked to find two corpses: the soldier and a native woman who was pregnant. The story was she was his mistress and was carrying his child, but that day she was returning to her husband. After he shot her he put a bullet through his head.

To avoid scandal the corpse of the woman was brought home via the sea, but there was no way to reach the PC barracks but by land and through the **camino real**.

There is no funeral parlor in Siasi. The Tausug and the Samal do not embalm their dead. There is no funeral limousine. There is even no private car. It would seem stupid to own one in a town whose streets are not wide enough, or they are short enough that if one starts walking from the wharf and goes around the poblacion, passing by all three schools and two churches and marketplace and commercial section and the town plaza, he will be back at the wharf in no more than twenty minutes.

So the poor soldier had to be carried on an open cart, the kind used by the Chinese merchants to transport their cargo from the wharf to their stores. His bloodied head and blood-stained uniform, his arms and legs spread in the pitiless sun, the ignominy of his final moments, were for everyone to talk about for many days and remember vividly. It is terrible to go through that kind of humiliation in death. Tsk, tsk, tsk. What man can do for love! What love can do to man!

I was just finishing my high school when my grandmother died in November, and the following year, after graduation, I went to Zamboanga City to study in college. Four Novembers later, when I was finishing my undergraduate studies in a Jesuit school, my father died. After graduation the following March, I returned home to Siasi. In less than two years, a sister-in-law, who was my co-teacher in one of the local high schools, died in childbirth. That same year, I decided to become an exile. Can one heart bear so many deaths?

That decision, however, began to take shape much earlier— on the day, after my father's funeral.

There was grief, but more than grief, there was infinite solitude. It was noontime. I was half-asleep on a couch near the door leading to the balcony. A boat arrived. Its sudden shriek jolted me out of sleep. It was earlier than usual. The house being along the **camino real** and just over a hundred yards from the wharf, I could hear distinctly the rush of feet on the street, of people going to the wharf. These people were mostly porters and longshoremen and curious on-lookers. I could hear the voices of street children. All this was boringly mundane, but for the fact that I could sense there was an unusual excitement in the air. Then I remembered that a neighbor's son had gotten married in another island, and that day was bringing his bride to town. In the midst of my feeling of repulsion that people were happy at the time I was suffering from grief, the school band, which had been employed to play the funeral music the day before, struck up a short march to announce the arrival of the newlyweds, its booming drum and burning cymbals rent the noon languor as well as my incipient repulsion and grief. Then it was followed by a wedding tune—a familiar tune as I had often heard it in most weddings that took place in town, including my aunts' and cousins'. In fact I had heard it so often that at times it ceased to make any impression on me, but that noon something had turned it into a magical tune, at once both happy and sad, like an *andante*. Then the firecrackers exploded, a wedding custom, and the explosions entwined with the wedding tune and the cries of street boys who must be scrambling madly for the unexploded firecrackers, like my friends and I used to do when we were boys.

The hubbub on the street, the festive riot of sounds seemed to shake the walls of the house when the wedding party passed by. Almost simultaneously I recalled one incident in Victor E. Frankl's story of his experiences as a German prisoner in Auschwitz. On his second night a music roused him from sleep, then suddenly in silence a violin played a "desperately sad tango", and part of him wept because on that same day someone had a twenty-fourth birthday. She was in another part of the Auschwitz camp, completely out of his reach though she could only be a few hundred yards away. She was his wife.

This recollection was followed by a strange, morbid thought: what if, instead of my father, I was the one in the grave? It made me sad and afraid. If I were in my father's grave, I wouldn't be around anymore to listen to that wedding tune, to hear the firecrackers explode or hear the laughter of my friends, to taste sumptuous foods such as those served on a wedding table, to appreciate the virginal beauty, the erotic shyness of a bride. My thoughts bordered on the irreverence toward the dead. I was in mourning so I was forbidden to cut my hair, or shave my moustache, or wear any slippers. Hence, to have let my mind wander along such earthly pleasures smacked of the sacrilege.

Feeling that it was not impossible to miss these very earthly things, those that delight the flesh and blood, I suddenly lost what William Hazlitt called “that feeling of eternity in youth.” For the first time I became vulnerable. I became aware of my own mortality. This was one moment of truth, one moment of fear.

The death of my father, coming as it did shortly after my 20th birthday, marked the end of my adolescence. The “invincible summer” of my boyhood—spear fishing in Siganggang Island, diving from a moving boat and **kumpit**, playing hide and seek in the water around the jetties of the Chinese merchants, falling in love with a half-Bengali beauty—came to an end.

Yet the fear that came to me that day after my father’s funeral was the beginning, paradoxically, of a new awareness of what life means. It quickened my appreciation of all living things. It sharpened my zest for the good life, the sense to greedily seize the day, knowing that nothing lasts, Beauty and Love least of all. So in the end it is Death, described by Stephen Spender as that “Lean Executioner who stands/Ever beyond a door/With axe raised in both hands,” that gives the edge, the pungency to the ephemeral things in this life, the pulsating but perishable moments of our joy.

If there is pain in a dying man’s heart, it is perhaps the pain of envy that while he’ll be moving on to that vast desert of dust and shadow, others will be basking on the beach in the tropic sun, in the company, perhaps, of a woman as lovely as that young bride-to-be on a jeepney in Anaoan, Surigao del Norte, whose poignant, tantalizing loveliness made me bitterly wish that life were forever.