

Honorarium

by: Paul R. Panganiban

1500 Philippine Pesos
Such a paltry sum in 1993
to be even called a salary.
So my boss called it an honorarium.

I was twenty-three,
two years out of college,
living on what could be made by hand—
letters ironed onto T-shirts,
a bent wheel coaxed true,
boys running drills on a dust field
until dusk rubbed them back into the barangay.

In the classifieds,
REASONABLE COMPENSATION
sat there in bold
with the confidence of a lie
that had already learned
not to blush.

The work was this:
go where the Hansenites were,
bring the MDT packs,
keep moving.

Ninety percent of the time on the road.
No hotel accommodations.
If there was a church,
I could sleep on a pew.
Eat what was offered.
For appetite beyond gratitude,
pay for it yourself.

My first patient

was a newly identified case,
a man known only as Emong,
living, the parish priest said,
just outside of town.

Just outside town
meant five rivers,
two mountain streams,
an elfin forest stippled with leeches,
and a cliffside trail
so narrow the body had to choose
between balance
and imagination.

The first river was shallow,
calm on top,
treachery underneath—
slick stones,
water talking softly over them
as if softness proved anything.

The second river required a bamboo raft.
It arrived already crowded
with swine, poultry, motorbikes,
sacks of cabbage and carrots,
the whole commerce of a day
shifting on wet poles and rope.
Water entered my hiking boots
without permission.
I prayed, not nobly,
that if I drowned
my body would find the Pacific
before the kappi and paltat found me.

We crossed.

The next three rivers

behaved like the first,
and I thought, with the idiocy of relief,
this isn't bad.

Then the forest.

A hornbill broke the air
with a loud tarictictic!
and, because I was still young enough
to confuse astonishment with understanding,
I remember thinking,
this is so authentic.

The mountain streams
were only trickles, really.
Thin silver over stone.
The heat did the real work—
stifling, muggy,
the shirt pasted to the spine,
the lungs learning that air
could also be something to push through.

By the cliffside
I practiced a discipline
I did not yet know I would need elsewhere:
to keep walking
without consulting the edge.

At the cave
a man greeted us.

Skinny, dark brown,
his skin almost leathery,
as if weather
had mistaken him for part of the hillside.
He offered us a seat
on a tree stump.

Before I sat,
I wet my index finger with my own saliva,
held it up at eye level,
turned my hand slowly
to find the coldest direction—
an old trick
to know where the wind came from,
where to place my back
while speaking with him
so the smell of me,
or his wounds,
or whatever shame either of us carried
would have one less chance
to arrive first.

He looked seventy.
He said he was fifty-six.

I took out my clipboard,
the questionnaire for history,
personal and medical.
Each answer came back the same:
madik ammu sir.
I don't know, sir.

After a while
the form itself became ridiculous—
all those little boxes
prepared for a life that had already spilled
past their borders.

So I put it away.

We spoke instead
about his children,
his work as a farmer,

how he hunted birds and lizards
in the forest
to supplement sweet potatoes
and cassava.
The practical inventory of hunger.
The exact shape of a day
when nobody is coming.

Then he spoke of loneliness.

Not dramatically.
Not like a man auditioning sorrow.
Just the fact of the cave,
and evenings,
and no voice answering back.
His brow tightened as he talked.
Even there,
through the lepromas and plaques
that had taken his eyebrows,
the frown was visible.

I brought out the MDT packs—
six months' worth—
and showed him carefully
how each one should be taken.

Routine is one form of mercy.
Blister packs, dates, instructions.
The world arranged, briefly,
into mornings and doses,
a sequence that could be trusted
even where almost nothing else could.

Then his tears came loose.

He wiped them
with arthritic fingers

and said,
Agyamanak apo. Sapay kuma agsubli ka sakbay ag-Pascua.
Iyaramidan ka ti bagsat.

I am so grateful.
I hope you could return before Christmas.
I will make you a star.

There are moments
when the body knows before the mind
how to behave.

Tears welling but held,
I bowed my head.
A hand over my heart.
Not from training.
Not from piety, exactly.
More because the cave
had become, for a second,
the most honest room I had ever entered.

Behind us
the rivers were still rivers.
The raft still took on water.
The leeches still waited
in the grammar of leaves.
My pay remained
1500 pesos,
a word polished into honor
to keep from sounding like neglect.

But all the way back
through stone and mud and late light,
I kept thinking of the star—
how a man abandoned to a cave
could still imagine giving
something made to symbolize hope

and light—
in the hands of another.

That was the first day
I understood how little money knows.