

# **BOL-ANON PRODIGAL**

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*(Panglao Island, 2022)*

either you take the drink  
or the drink takes you:

choice of tuba, san miguel beer,  
ginebra or vino kulafu—*naunsa ba ka?*  
*naglisud-lusud na ka sa pag-Binisaya!*

only the sea embraces--bluest expanse  
drowning all tongues, all thought:  
liquor brewed from a brown god's  
blood, seasoned with the salt of memory.

*bisag unsa ka layo, bisag unsa kadugay*  
*manguli ka gihapon sa lithium.*

choir voices in the froth and foam intone,  
older than bone-white remains of shells;  
snarls of seaweed; coconut husks  
littering the beach like duende skulls.

twenty paces ahead, ancient powdery  
sand welcomes her still-young German body  
covered in batik-patterned, red-black two-piece  
Lycra; stretching out in the shade, her mind

adrift on words flowing from her Kindle.

this is not, surely, the Panglao of his youth.

there's a smarting of his skin from a just  
after luncheon sun--his bedraggled sack  
of fat, bones, and skin reminding itself,  
five decades on: this is still, must be, home.

no matter how far, no matter how long  
you will still come home to love.

**ANG KANTA SA PANAKOT-TAWOTAWO\***

*A scarecrow, all alone in a wet rice field in Janlud, Batuan  
in Bohol--such an unexpectedly lonely sight.*

Everyday I walk the Fields  
Of the Lord: his grace abounds  
In sunshine and rain. That  
I cannot doubt. Still, I have no  
Shame to say, to him, his angels,  
The devil: love is so awful. Too

Much. Certainly, too much for  
A husk like myself. I've wanted to  
Tell you this: but only dry grass,  
Twigs, beetle larvae, pour from my  
Torn, re-stitched mouth. Give me a  
Heart, I pray. Even half the bones  
We all expect to prop and animate  
Ourselves. Maybe a soul? Maybe  
I have that, somewhere, drooping  
From these used clothes, a loose  
Button dangled from old thread.

So, each day I stand in the sun  
Under cloud-shadow, alone,  
Praying those birds rest on my

Shoulders. Love is too awful  
O Lord. Touch your finger  
Between my eyes, touch my  
Wound of twin lips: tell me,  
What is my name, granted by  
You under heaven? Let me speak

Your name, my Lord, which is  
Fire in the morning and dusk. Let  
Me burn as grass, as stuffing of  
Old dreads and longings, face,  
Hat, arms, cotton gloves, finally  
Ash settling in water. Let your  
Angels wing their way, alight,  
Bend and drink from me.

*(for Jupiter K.)*

\*The Song of the Scarecrow

## **BOL-ANON CHILDREN: ADMONITIONS**

headless priests,  
hungry souls,  
roamed through  
my childhood

with warnings  
from elders:

*magpatambal kas samad  
kay og dili, hala, mogawas  
ang pari nga putol ang ulo*

such useful advice for kids  
too neglectful to treat cuts  
and scrapes from play

especially when red  
merthiolate hurt  
like a bitch: give them  
something they fear more

"better treat that wound  
or else, beware, you'll see  
a headless priest come out!"

or for your child who refuses  
to eat dinner before bed  
you say:

*kung dili ka manihapon,  
matulog ka samtang gigutom,  
manna og kaldero  
imong kalag; di makabalik sa  
lawas nimo kay matakloban*

so, the child imagines its soul,  
hungry as the body sleeps,  
wandering the house,  
squeezing through a kaldero  
of adobo, or rice, getting  
trapped as the lid drops shut

as though the souls of  
children were tiny mice  
desperate for scraps

when done right: some love  
like warm milk before bed,  
a cold touch of numinous  
dread, the kids grow up fine

## **SANDBAR COOK**

*(Pungtud "Virgin" Island, North Bohol Sea)*

Grandmotherly Mernelie,  
sandbar cook, is the essence of Zen  
--feeder of hundreds, all seekers,  
boating into the Virgin Island sandbar.

Plump, dark brown, and squat  
in her green and white batik *daster*,  
like the Mother of all mariners,  
tending to her LPG-fired stove:  
the gold-brown dye on her hair  
brightens the greys, shimmering  
like a mermaid queen's crown. She  
takes G-Cash payments, we're told

Mernelie's kitchen is actually a boat,  
to my endless amazement. Laden with  
green coconuts, plantains for banana-Q,  
gas stove towards the bow; sternward  
a charcoal grill blustery with fire  
and smoke. Such a sight, it must be,  
when she sets sail--a kitchen, a queen  
mother's throne on the open sea.

Tourists mill around *banyeras*:  
some of them well-heeled,  
matronly, pristine, and milky white  
as laundered Chinese money  
--browsing sea-life delicacies they  
could well-afford in Japanese,  
Chinese fine dining digs. Here,  
points the sweet-talking fisherman,



is abalone; there, two kinds of sea  
urchin: one of them moving in the water,  
a dark star-burst stalking the undersea  
with spines of negative illumination,  
each spine two hand spans long,  
doubly fatal to the distracted touch.

This one, the fisherman said--hoping  
for the bait-and-hook verbal snare--  
pointing to a *palanggana* with *saang*,  
local name for that shelled mollusk,  
the spider conch. Tastes like squid--  
don't pay if it doesn't please you,  
he promises.

I ended up with urchin--what Japanese  
call *uni*--on a small plate; as well as  
abalone, and *saang*. Mernelie, with  
her nameless assistant--who could be  
her son--does a delicious job: uni cooked  
on coals, abalone sautéed in chilies,  
garlic; *saang* grilled in its shell then  
torn off its vulval, seven-tipped armor.

*Saang* does recall squid, but juicier  
on the sweet side--a secret I was glad  
to press my lips on. Amused at my weird  
Binisaya, the fisherman gives me a discount,  
winking, as though we shared yet another  
secret withheld from Chinese matrons  
ankle-deep in honest, uncommon clarity  
of pure seawater we all stood on.

O, Lady of the Virgin Island Sandbar, sail  
on your boat of coconuts and charcoal  
smoke--launch from that wavy strip of  
white sand, unfolding question mark,  
or come-hither-G-spot finger, marking  
crystal blue water: ferry us from our

dreams, free us from our spines  
and shells; let us burn, cook, be eaten,  
our juices dripping from the world's  
ever-hungry lips.

## **THE GARDENER**

*"That's how it happens across the Philippines. Silence continues to shield priest after priest. ..  
On the island of Bohol, the priest Joseph Skelton serves mass, more than 30 years after the then-  
seminarian was convicted of sexual misconduct with a 15-year-old boy."*

- "A US Priest, A Philippine Village, and Decades of Secrecy"

<https://International/wireStory/us-priest-philippine-village-decades-secrecy-65476900>

the temple garden  
vainglorious with vines  
thick with flowers and their  
mysterious centers, scents

and the Devil tending quiet  
growth: crumbs of earth  
on his fingers knees chin  
stubble; pours the waters  
of Babylon

the Devil might care  
yet rather not: looking up  
the sun his eyes burn  
much hotter

better turn his nose down  
close to the soil; pulse  
of humus and decay; slow  
sacrificial life, nutrients, juices

tiny yawning mouths of roots  
drinking never to their fill,  
eyeless, yet with darkness  
intimate what care they may

have for incense, sacred wafers,  
magic of the man hung on wood  
spikes crowns thorns grief: hope

the trees still give fruit, shelter  
to savior or madman flowers  
open their buds cores petals  
tongues speaking in colors

all he wanted was a garden:  
the Devil thinks, takes off his  
hat, wipes forehead and horns  
and thanks God for man's

machinations: the human tangle  
of distractions and endless want  
from this, the Devil makes his peace

crushes apple between his teeth  
drinks iced lemon water and breathes  
deeply air fresh from creation

somewhere in the temple the bells  
ring closing ritual, the red cardinal  
billows out, fat with happiness,  
borne on a cloud of beautiful boys

## **ON A SLOW BUS TO BATUAN, BOHOL**

*We are nothing if not creatures of memory. Returning to a provincial village, an old school, passing through the old neighborhood you either loved or hated, even remembering a childhood love, or a former spouse--we seldom think it's more than coincidence, that coming full circle, in that mundane way, is necessary to complete the soul's journey.*

### **1. Frog-chasers**

Sheets of rain, clinging to skin  
Scents of grass and rice field  
Rubber *tsinelas* left stuck  
In humus-rich mud.

Summer rains quicken limbs  
Of cousins: no dampening  
Our laughter; four of us  
Chasing through field

And rocks, the fat,  
Surprisingly huge  
Bullfrog we called  
"American Frog" for its  
Size, if not temperament,  
With a dash of petty revenge

After U.S. soldiers burnt  
Entire villages in Bohol

During the Filipino-American  
War. The American Frog leaps

Far and high, hides inside  
A hollow log. One cousin takes  
A branch and pokes it through  
Vigorously, hoping to scare

The bullfrog out. Of course,  
The American Frog gets away,  
As it usually does.

## **2. Outhouse adventure**

The toilet at my grandfather's  
House--as was conventional  
In our barrio--stood on stilts  
Some twenty-feet high,  
Separated from the house  
Itself. Anyone who had to go

For a number one, or number  
Two--would need to walk  
A narrow bridge of three  
Bamboo poles lashed together.

A pair of bamboo poles, left  
and right, served as handholds.  
The gap between where you  
Hold on, and where you plant  
Your feet, was huge. One  
Misstep, meant falling down  
The pigs' mud bath, or pig-sty.

The waste excreted never passed  
Through plumbing. Rather, dropped  
Right down a pile of shit and urine  
Purposely collected for fertilizer.

One has to walk some twelve feet  
To reach the outhouse itself. When  
I do that first, I am eight years old.  
Frightened more of mud, pig-shit-  
Urine below, than the fall itself.

Almost halfway on the bridge,  
I discover huge red ants,  
Teeming on the bamboo. Soon,  
They cover my arms and legs,  
Biting with fire and venom.

I call out for my mother. Choices  
Were to turn back, move forward,  
Or fall. Mother, already there  
At the outhouse waiting, never

Came out to help. Simply  
Looked at me, her face saying  
Go forward, pay pain and fear  
No Mind.

The little boy, afraid.  
Pig shit, mud twenty feet below.  
Ants biting arms and legs.  
Walking on thin poles on edge  
Of falling. Never knowing  
It was audition, rehearsal,  
Performance for a Filipino life.

### **3. Write. Something better than a Lang Leav poem.**

I went to see the love of my life  
The one who is not my life  
But who turns mysterious meaning-  
Less suffering into happy, tiny bits of  
Breathable grace.  
I went to see the love of my life  
The one who loves me less or

Less than less, or most than most  
Of all, but I'll never truly know. Love  
Being light or nameless shadow,  
Depending on her own pain that only  
She can know.

I went to see the love of my life  
The one who will leave me out of love  
Or love's disappointment. And who  
Will not forever live, or whom I will  
Leave never willingly unless she  
Leaves first. As summer grass. As  
Silence green amongst trees.

I went to see the love of my life  
But she isn't here. And I am told,  
No matter, no matter. Life goes on  
And it does all around me and all  
Around her wherever she is.

And the arms holding her now. And  
Arms holding me that are my own  
Arms inside the cold bus with my  
Painful fingers all nerve and bone.  
Love and life. My love. My life. Small  
Things that want to be everything  
And are, the only things, until the last  
Word you see:

## **LOLO EMILIO AND AMERICA**

my grandfather Emilio learned  
English from american  
schoolteachers; likely why, even  
now, many years after his death

i've yet to find a young person  
speaking English as well as  
he did. lolo Emilio studied  
English before world war two.

back then, americans held  
my country as a colony: their  
first of many forays into  
empire. his grammar, near  
flawless, though his speech

of course, heavily accented  
by native Bisaya. we only  
ever spoke, when i was a child,  
in English--our common ground



and borrowed tongue; illiterate  
as i was in his language, and he,  
in mine. we played with my  
matchbox cars, toy trains

and my cheap anime robots.  
but how could i make him know  
me? he spoke about his american  
teachers--stories i now forget.

lolo Emilio died suddenly of a  
massive stroke. i was in high  
school. we went to his wake,  
up in the hills of Batuan, Bohol  
at his old house--now long  
gone--close to the forest.

i was sad over his death  
but sadder at the sight of  
his coffin. all-white, made  
from thin wood, the sort of  
construction fit for a farmer,  
which he was all his life.

the coffin was so small,  
unbelievably, as though  
life had shrunk my lolo  
like a raisin that learned  
English from americans,

growing up a colonial  
subject, later blessed  
with some land, luckily;  
children who became my  
parents, aunts, uncles.

he never was able  
to go to america at all.  
i wonder if, as he died,

he had time to bless  
america, or if he saw  
any of his old american  
teachers' ghosts.

all i know is, he was buried  
in a small, white, plywood  
box, a Bisaya farmer's coffin  
no american could fit in.

## **BOHOL ENCHANTED**

*(Zoological and Botanical Garden in Bilar, Bohol)*

*For four dollars U.S. you can get a combo meal--three viands, one cuppa rice. For eight dollars, skip the combos, proceed to buffet area, smorgasm board till satisfied.*

*You'll see beautiful flowers, cement sculptures of diwata, manananggal, higantes, and Baylan Buwak. Baylan means shaman, while Buwak means flowers.*

*Baylan Buwak, a shaman with fertilizing magic: her urine makes flowers bloom--turning every toilet into a florist's dream haven, perhaps.*

*I suspect a greater secret, though, that my uncle Pilo and lolo Emilio knew: attractions no tourist money could buy:*

### **1. The Cave and the Stone Table**

Pilo, as a child, enjoyed wandering in the forest, observing birds, animals. Until, one day, he and another boy--whose

name has been lost in time--were out playing. They saw a very colorful, unusual bird:

Heard before seen, bird dropped onto a pile of dry vegetation--feathers long and colorful, a tuft of fluff on its head like a crown.

Strangely, bird refused to fly even after seeing two brown boys from the hills, following.

Instead, it walked. Slowly, deliberately, egging on the boys' curiosity. Pilo and the other boy followed as best they could. Suddenly the bird disappeared--reaching the same spot, both boys found a hole in the ground, big enough for each to enter, one after the other.

Inevitably, Pilo and the other boy squeezed through, ending up in a cave underground. Cold, dry stone surrounded them. Off to the right, they found stone that looked cut into steps.

Descending, the boys found a flat, low, long slab, surrounded by smaller stones. Pilo, wondered why the entire scene reminded him of a set of table and chairs; the other boy pointed: there were cups on the long slab, some upright, others tipped over. Cups that looked like stone but very thin and light.

They saw the bird again. It was on the steps, ascending. Still walking, not flying. Both boys followed, squeezing out the hole and into late afternoon light--the sun already dying in the West.

The bird had disappeared. But then both boys heard tinny, yet resonant cries. Monkeys, or birds? No matter. The other boy started imitating the cries. The animals would cry out--the boy would mimic, then laugh. Pretty soon, Pilo was doing the same thing. Feeling drunk on the noise, both boys mimicked and laughed, mimicked and laughed.

Until the animal cries stopped. Silence like a stone dome descended on the forest, until the boys couldn't even hear themselves breathe. Both their tiny hearts, stricken still.

Then a roar, a massive, invisible wave, crashed through and across the forest, shaking the trees, dead leaves, knocking over beetles and millipedes, shaking the ground and small bones of dead rodents, lizards, snakes.

Both boys fled, their feet hardly touching the ground, running, running until they reached Pilo's home, out of breath, nothing but the metal-and-rust taste of terror in their throats.

## **2. Emilio and the Diwata**

And so it was said that, Emilio having married Juaning--she was only fourteen summers old--and

after having their first child, a daughter, Rosario, that Emilio began

Sleepwalking. Night after night after night, in dreams that brought him to his feet, Emilio was being seduced by a diwata. Beautiful beyond belief, and for all intents immortal unlike Juaning, she promised him

Enchantment. Youth, strength, more gold than he could dream of, a palace with a hundred servants. Emilio said no.

Emilio woke up to the sound of a coconut crashing on the roof. Juaning had coffee boiling in a tin pot; rice bubbling in a clay vessel. Chickens crowed, and the smell of early dawn grass mixed with a hint of manure. The first day of the rest of their lives.

### **3. Emilio and the Aswang**

Always carry a lamp, or torch, and your trusty sundang at night.

Emilio knew this, as business for the farm, other duties, had him walking in darkness as he returned to Juaning.

He knew, one he noticed the path grow unfamiliar, winding, looping, circular--to take off his shirt then wear it inside out to break a mischievous, waylaying spell.

Up ahead, Emilio saw a woman walking, approaching him. In the light of the gas lamp, he saw that she had long black hair down to her ankles. As she closed in, her hair began to

Rise. Her hair, fanning out like a peacock's tail, or a dark flame, rising from her head. Her face twisted in a snarl, eyes red. Words seemed to die in her mouth; all she did was

Hiss and spit at him. Emilio recognized her despite her feral grimace and told her:

*Manang Aida??!! Manang Aida! Ayaw kog samoka! Nailhan ka nako!*

Old woman Aida??!! Old woman Aida! Don't mess with me! I know who you are!

The woman, finally realizing it was Emilio, started walking backwards, backwards until the darkness swallowed her. Emilio kept on walking, his hand on his *sundang*.

*Now that you know, my friend, wouldn't you buy tickets for such attractions?*

**MAOMAG PRINCE**

*(Philippine Tarsier Foundation in Loboc, Bohol)*

Charles, next in line  
To the throne of England,  
Held him:

Palm-sized proto-simian,  
Tiny tea saucers for eyes,  
Mouth with needle teeth,

More ancient than any  
Emperor or King.

Perhaps, because  
They both have big  
Ears, the *maomag*

Was named after its  
Illustrious visitor.

Or maybe because  
Both proto-simian  
And English royal  
Are rare; at times,  
Endangered species.

Whatever the reason,  
It was good photo-op.  
*Maomag* sitting quietly  
On Prince Charles' palm.

The caretaker  
At the Tarsier Foundation  
Warned us: most *maomag*

Detest human touch,  
Smell, or vicinity.

These are all wild, he said,  
When they get stressed

Some of them bash  
Their own heads in,  
Against tree trunks.

And we are left to imagine  
Proto-simian suicide.

That was decades ago.

Charles the *Maomag*  
No doubt has died

By its own head-banging  
Or otherwise.

The other prince, as these  
Words are writ, lives.

## **ROSARIO, THE WAKWAK, AND THE ASWANG**

*(A Bol-Anon childhood tale)*

you'd never believe.

it's all right if you never

do: but Rosario was

still there that night,

assisting Nanay Puring,  
the village midwife.

it is a difficult birth  
for Gloria. her first child.  
but she stays fine until

the black pig arrives.  
unnaturally huge, fat,  
the black pig with spiny  
bristles down its back.

in the old days,  
houses stood on stilts  
for ample space below.  
for storage of grains,  
other essentials. the  
black pig with red eyes  
is there, wet snout  
sniffing the ground.

Gloria starts bleeding.  
heavily, her blood dripping,  
pouring through the hut's  
bamboo slats. the black  
pig, waiting, licks greedily.



Nanay Puring does her best  
to staunch the bleeding.

Gloria weakens, grows pale.

none in the house dare go  
out, dare drive the black  
pig away. it keeps on licking,  
drinking birth blood  
pooling on the ground.

suddenly, the black pig  
pauses, shakes its hind  
quarters, and leaves.

immediately, Gloria's  
bleeding stops. her  
color, her strength  
return.

you'd never believe.  
it's all right if you never  
do: but Rosario was  
still there that night.

her parents Emilio  
and Juaning go to

Juaning's parents, who  
live one hill away

Rosario, 13 years old,  
is left in a neighbor's  
care: Inday Purosa, who  
is pregnant. Inday  
Purosa has a big dog, one  
of the largest Rosario  
ever saw in her life.

the dog is so big,  
fierce and strong,  
only the thickest  
chains can hold it.

Rosario and Inday  
Purosa hear  
the wawk first:  
its birdcall  
waaaak waaaak  
starts loud, a sign  
the aswang is  
still far away.

as the birdcall  
grows soft,

the aswang draws  
near. the birdcall

stops: Rosario  
and Purosa hear  
a thud on the roof,  
a scrambling,  
a scratching.

the big dog roars,  
barking endlessly,  
foaming at the mouth  
with rage, straining  
to break its chains  
to face the intruder.

Inday Purosa, touching  
her belly, feeling her  
child move inside, takes  
Rosario's hand:

they should leave, get  
help from Nanay Juaning's  
parents. Purosa lights a huge  
torch, grabs the dog by  
its massive chain, and  
walks through darkness.

Purosa and Rosario  
see nothing in the black  
night--but they hear  
huge wing-beats following.

the wings would close in,  
and the dog would turn  
to face them, barking threats.

Purosa follows the dog's  
lead, thrusting the torch  
flame out when the sound  
of wings draws closer.

an eternity of darkness  
later, Rosario and Purosa  
reach Juaning's parents.

Juaning's father and uncle  
come out, hear wing-beats,  
raise their sundangs  
and wooden sheaths.

blades and wood are rubbed  
together, as salt is thrown  
in the air. wing-beats recede.  
the wawak crows loudly.

you'd never believe.

it's all right if you never do.