

SPRING 2010

KARTIKA REVIEW

EXPORT QUALITY

MICHAEL S. JANAIRO

One of my earliest memories: My mother slick-combs my red hair and her dress rustles as she bends down to clasp my long black stockings to my gray flannel knickers. She smells of White Linen and tells my older brothers, sister and me to remember to say "thank you," "your welcome" and "please" because Uncle Ed had been kind enough to invite us to brunch at the Philippine Embassy.

The starched clothes make me stiff. The rules make me uncomfortable. Not knowing what "Philippine" or "Embassy" means makes me nervous. But our parents pile us in the car and we go.

Inside the building in Washington, D.C., there's a long, curved stairwell with plush red carpeting and heavy wooden doors. One leads to a chandeliered dining room with high-backed chairs; another to a chilly basement with a pool table, a wet bar and all the Coke we can drink.

Other kids are down there. They wear creased chinos, white shirts and silk ties. Rich kids. They run around and shout, free and loose. I stay close to my brothers, especially Max, who is a year older and also dressed like me. These kids, I've been told, are cousins. They all have black hair and tan skin. My brothers, sister and my mother all have auburn hair and pale skin. Except for my brother Ed. He has black hair. Like Uncle Ed. Maybe that's why he has the same name? But Uncle Ed isn't really an uncle. He isn't my mother's or father's brother. He's the ambassador. But I don't know if "ambassador" is a type of relation or not. So who are all these people? I don't know. And they speak in a language that makes no sense. I'm confused.

Perhaps that's why I let my older brothers shove me into the dumb waiter to send me upstairs to the kitchen, where my pale, freckled face surprises the kitchen staff. I hop onto the floor, hurry out a door and dash between the adult legs in the dining room to the entranceway, where I find the door that takes me back to the basement, where my brothers and cousins are laughing.



Sunday brunches at the Philippine Embassy in the early 1970s -- when my Lola's older brother was the ambassador to the U.S. -- were a long table laden with soft beds of scrambled eggs, fluffy pancakes, seasoned potatoes, stir-fried vegetables and rice, steamed white rice, juicy sausage patties and crispy strips of bacon.

My brother Ed, three years older than me, always piled his plate with a mountain of bacon. I never ate as much. I always felt nervous. One day, though, I sipped Coke, chewed a dry, crusty piece of toast and felt safe enough to whisper to my three older brothers, "What is the Philippines?"

In the embassy's basement, perhaps my oldest brother Anthony, four years older, said: "It's a totally different country. Like the United States is a country, but it's far away."

Maybe I nodded. I knew I understood "far." I had seen Grover on "Sesame Street" running back and forth shouting, "Near!" and "Far!"

Ed nodded as if he had something to add, but all he did was open his mouth wide to show saliva-slick bits of chewed bacon to try to make me sick.

So I didn't ask another question, though I had more. Anthony's reply was a code that turned "the Philippines" into a another mystery, a "country," and that didn't even get close to answering why we were there. I thought it was my own tough luck if I couldn't understand it. If I wanted to know more, I'd have to find out for myself.



When I think of my trip to the Philippines in 1994, I think of a photograph taken on a bright, early April afternoon from a sizzling blacktop road in the district of Binakayan, the village of Kawit, the province of Cavite: a large nipa hut stands in the dust, its leafy walls browned and sturdy; chickens peck the dirt in the shade of drooping palm trees; a stone wall retains an algae-filled lagoon

The hut was the birthplace of Maximiano Saqui Janairo, my Lolo. He was the first immigrant of the family, the first American and, eventually, the silent patriarch. When he was born in 1905, the hut was on the waterfront with a view that stretched beyond Manila Bay out to the South China Sea. No stonewall. No lagoon No paved road. But that's where I stood when I took the photo.

I knew my Lolo had seen his hut from the water. During World War Two, he had survived the Bataan Death March and escaped from Camp O'Donnell, so when Japanese patrols neared Binakayan, he'd float in the waves in a small *banca*, or dugout canoe, and wait for the signal -- a white sheet hanging to dry -- so that he could return. I thought he'd get a kick out my photo.

My Lolo, though, was 90 by then. He usually spent all his hours in bed. His sharp face had become soft and round. But now he was sitting at the kitchen table, his head shaking and his clear eyes scanning every bit of the photograph I had taken. Then he shook his head and handed it to my Lola.

She was 83 and thin from recent hip surgery and taking care of Lolo. She spoke loudly. She said, "It's Binakayan. It was photographed by Michael." My name, in her Filipina accent, rang throughout the kitchen like a bell, a slight trill in the final "l," *My-kell*.

Lolo looked up at me, shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Then he looked back at his wife, pursing his lips, the fleshed pinched around his nose. He looked away. His head continued to shake.

Lola handed the photograph back to me and shrugged her shoulders. "He doesn't recognize it," she said. "But it's a good picture. An important picture."



When the Philippines were America's colony, my Lolo was a student called Mianong. The son of a manager of 200 hectares of rice paddies and 12 fishing boats with a crew of 30 in a province outside Manila, he knew that to get ahead he had to succeed in the new system of public education introduced by the American colonial masters.

He was a good student, at least good enough to be accepted into the University High School in Manila, where he graduated seventh in his class. After his acceptance into the University of the Philippines, an institution that was founded three years after he was born, he enrolled in the pre-med course. He wanted to be a doctor. He once said, "My older sister, the eldest, was studying to be a pharmaceutical chemist. I was the second child. I wanted to become a doctor. I would write the prescriptions, and she would fill them."

Pride made him attempt the annual West Point entrance examination. A friend had teased, "The only reason you don't want to take the test is because you're afraid to fail."

He didn't fail. He placed third, and the first two candidates failed the physical. Mianong understood that he had earned a free education and the guarantee of a job upon completion, but Governor General Leonard Wood, the ruler of the Philippines, told him that West Point would change his life.

Two months later, after sailing from Manila to Nagasaki to Honolulu to San Francisco, then through the Panama Canal and, finally, landing in Brooklyn, he made his way by train north along the Hudson to the ferry that would cross the river to the Military Academy at West Point.

He expected to find a university like the University of the Philippines -- serious students, wise professors, books and libraries. America in 1926 was a booming country full of promise and economic progress. It was the success of the Western world. What better place to study than West Point?

But even before he stepped off the ferry, upperclassmen rushed on to meet the plebes. They ordered them to stretch their hats down over their eyes -- and every man in those days wore a hat. They shouted: "March! Double time!"

Blind, he ran onto America, up from the river to the main campus. As he ran -- a suitcase in one hand, the brim of his hat covering his eyes, his nostrils filling with the musk of sweat -- he thought he had made the biggest mistake of his life. This wasn't like the University of the Philippines. He wanted to go home, to go to a college where he wouldn't be forced to march blind on unknown territory by men who were taller and stronger and who spoke with such a rough command of the language, as if they owned that, too.



I flew into Manila on the night of March 23, 1994, on an Egypt Air flight from Tokyo that was filled with students returning home for Easter. They were not shy about gasping and shouting in terror when the plane hit turbulence and the electronic consoles above our heads flopped open to expose tangled, colored wires.

Beside me sat a young man with a thick mop of black hair. He wasn't very talkative, but he did tell me that he was studying mechanical engineering at Tokyo University. When we hit turbulence, he white-knuckled the armrests.

I poured water from liter bottles into plastic cups for the passengers around me. Earlier, I had, politely I thought, asked for some water, and had been given a couple bottles and a stack of plastic cups from a haggard, unshaven attendant who said, "Others may want to drink!"

The student next to me didn't want any water. His eyes looked sad and bewildered. He asked, "Aren't you afraid?"



I carried four letters. One was from my Uncle Toto, telling me he'd meet me at the airport. One was from Uncle Ed, who looked forward to seeing me. One was from Ted Nierras, Uncle Ed's grandson, whom I would meet later on the southern island of Mindanao. One was from "pretend" Uncle Ed, a man who survived the Bataan Death march with my Lolo and had attained honorary family status. I had met all of them at least once before in the blur of my early childhood.

Despite these connections, I still felt a vague sense of Filipino-ness, and that vagueness felt foolish and self-centered. But that feeling was (and is) always there whenever I meet someone new who has a reaction to my name.

These are the three reactions:

1. "That's such a beautiful name!"
2. "You don't look Filipino?"
3. Uncomfortable silence.

These reactions send me back to some primary point of who I am. But that point has never felt solid. After all, "points" are imaginary. Sometimes, when I say the name is Filipino, I feel it's a lie. What are the Philippines, anyway?



On the verge of 13, near the end of junior high, I spent a month scribbling on note cards for a 20-page joint History-English paper. My topic: the Spanish-American War and the Conquest of the Philippines.

I set aside a Saturday, skipped the morning cartoons and sat down in the basement at the Apple II Plus. As I wrote, my mind filled with imagined jungles, a decrepit Spanish fleet, sweat-stained US Army uniforms and loin-clothed, *bolo* wielding natives. I wrote and wrote and wrote. Occasionally the de-humidifier would hum. But I was lost in the heroic story of Colonel Funston, an American who was so courageous and clever that he let a group of tribesmen, who didn't like having anti-colonial rebels hiding in their mountains, take the weapons from him and his troops and march them four days to the rebels' jungle headquarters as if they were prisoners of war. Once the fake prisoners reached the rebels, the tribesmen tossed them their

weapons and, without a shot fired, the Americans captured the rebel leaders and secured the Philippines as their own.

When I finished, I walked upstairs to the light of the kitchen as my older brothers set the dinner table and my sister, the eldest, made the salad. An entire day had passed. I felt as if I hadn't been doing work, but had been deep within something my own and not my own.

I often think about that moment as a primary incident in my writing life. On the turbulent plane to Manila, when my fellow passenger asked if I was afraid, I remembered that essay and realized my sympathies weren't with the Filipino rebels -- a group that included my Lolo's lolo -- but with the Americans. Sure, that was also the point of view of the books I had used for my research, but didn't it just show how far away I was from Filipino-ness?



"The only reason why people go abroad is so they have stories to tell," my brother Max told me after his return from a summer in Europe, first working at a youth hostel in England and then busking across Germany, singing Bruce Springsteen and playing guitar.

By "stories," I think he meant the kind of tales that share a sense of awe at being alive in this world. My favorite Max-abroad story is a song he learned from German punks:

*The little frogs, they are so happy
The little frogs, they are so happy
The little frogs, they are so happy
In the night
Qua-qua-qua-quoc-a-doolie
Qua-qua-qua-quoc-a-doolie
Qua-qua-qua-quoc-a-doolie
In the night*

That was all the English they knew.



Any guidebook could tell you about the 7,000 islands, but only 1,000 inhabitable; about the 60 different languages and four major language groups; about the ruined economy that is the legacy of the Marcos dictatorship; about the destruction of Mt. Pinatubo; about the American military bases and prostitutes with AIDS; about fanatics who nail themselves to crosses during

Holy Week; about communist guerrillas and Islamic fundamentalists on Mindanao; about the terrible beauty of the impoverished archipelago.

I wanted to know something else. If we are creatures of this earth, if our identities derive from the places where we originate, then what does it mean to have an ancestry from these islands? What is an island? A metaphor for isolation, solitude, distance and peace?

And what of its boundaries? The space where the wash of the sea greets the hard reality of solid earth; each taking and giving in an infinite struggle of definition. Where does one end and the other begin? Chaos theory and the mathematics of complexity answer this question with infinite space, following the fractal realities of jutting rocks and the shifts in grains of sand. There is no definition, only movement.

No man is an Island, entire of it self; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main, wrote John Donne from the British Isles in the 17th century. Is that what I wanted: to feel myself *a part of the main*? if that main can be said to be my family, my history, my *self*.



“Fucking,” ironically, isn’t a topic the often comes up with family. At least, in my Roman Catholic family. Though it was my brother Anthony who once said, “I’ve never had an ancestor who didn’t have sex at least once.”

There is a family story, one that I had always thought of as being from the age of conquistadors, but it was from the 19th century. Perhaps my confusion stems from the fact that we don’t have words for ancestors who pre-date our grandparents. Specificity becomes cumbersome. We’re limited to three generations before, three generations after. But ancient stories linger.

I’ve always known that my Lola’s side of the family descended from a Franciscan missionary. Perhaps the word “descended” made him sound feudal. He is my great-great-great grandfather. Father Francisco Lopez came from Granada, Spain.

I can’t help but think that his arrival to the Philippines wasn’t only about preserving immortal souls for heaven and managing church-owned land -- it was also about making new souls. It was about fucking.

One saying about the Philippines’ colonial past, first with Spain, then America, is, “Four hundred years in the convent; fifty in the whorehouse.” After World

War II, with US servicemen and “sex tours” from places like Japan, the Philippines was -- and perhaps still is -- a place where men go to fuck.

Father Lopez, like many other ordained rulers, were forebears to the sex trade. He fucked, and he fucked a lot. At least enough to have eight children.

Nonetheless, my Lola often joked, “We are blessed. We come from holy stock!”



Days before I left for the Philippines, I dreamed the Philippines. I was hiking through a lush jungle, where the only path was a relatively steep, shin-deep stream of cool, quick flowing water. A woman, whose face I never saw, led me by the hand. She kept looking ahead. Her calves were taut and tan. I could sense the heat of her body. My nostrils filled with the richness of the earth, and with the salt of her sweat mixed with other richer scents from her body.

The climb was difficult with rocks and roots in the stream, and a wealth of overhanging leaves. But the landscape was bursting with life. Every rock, leaf and drop of water was infused with the unreal clarity of color that the golden light of summer’s late-afternoon sun can create after a heavy downpour.

In a clearing, far from any stream, my attention was caught by a large flower with its vibrant red petals stretching open. The petals quivered as I approached. This place was a forbidden place. The fleshy petals were slick with a film of dew. My heart beat faster. I was drawn closer and closer, beyond my own control. I wanted to reach out for the flower, to rest inside the petals.

I felt a heat burn inside me. Was my guide approaching? Everything went bright, vivid and real. I woke and my first thought was that I was no different from those conquistadors who feminized and exoticized foreign lands.



My younger brother, Matt, has, or is, Down syndrome. I never know which verb to use. Is Down syndrome a possession, a thing one can have among many things? Or is it an inescapable condition -- a primary mark of his identity like race, class and gender?

One day, Matt responded to one of the many times my mother joked that she wished to marry someone else by saying, “Sorry, Mom, you’re stuck with Brown Guy.” *Brown Guy*, of course, was my father.

When I heard that story, I asked, "Matt, but if he's your father, that also means you're a brown guy. You're not white." Legally, this is true. None of my parents' pale, freckled children are legally white.

Matt raised his white arm and studied it for a second before looking up at me like I was crazy.



Perhaps the most important aspect of my Filipino-ness is that my family left.

One warm summer afternoon, my father and I were sitting on the back patio of my Lolo and Lola's house. The patio is made of dark, gray slate stone and is surrounded by a rock garden in which cacti grow. In one corner stands a limestone statue of St. Francis that's also a bird feeder.

My father rarely talks about his past, but as a warm breeze pushed against us, he told me, "The way it is there, to get ahead, someone will do a favor for you, like get you a job. And then one day, they'll ask you to do a favor for them. Maybe they will ask you to do something that you don't think is right. But you'll have to do it. We can be more ethical in America."

My father's voice, as always, was earnest and direct, but in my mocking adolescent imagination, I couldn't help but hear Don Corleone's theme.

Still, I knew what he meant by "ethical." In the mid-1970s, we moved from Alexandria to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where my father was made the District Chief of the Corps of Engineers. One of my father's tasks was to construct a new Brady Street Bridge. The old one had been blown up. It was a media event. I even had classmates who watched the destruction live, sitting with their families on picnic blankets in the hills.

For months, commuters had faced horrendous detours and traffic jams because of the bridge. But on the day it was supposed to open, the media hounded my father: "Why isn't it ready?"

He said, "I made a mistake," and the local media praised him for being a rare, honest public servant. I often wonder if he could have been as ethical if he had stayed in the Philippines.



Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport is unfortunately named after a man who was assassinated as he walked off a plane on his return to his homeland with hopes of defeating the dictator Marcos. He was also, by the way, a schoolmate of my father's.

All the signs in the airport told me to meet my party outside. It was night, but a humid 90 degrees. Human arms, glistening with sweat in the orange glow of incandescent lights, stuck out from metal bars and waved. Lips hissed.

No one called my name. The only place for me to go was down a ramp in front of me. Painted on the ramp was a thick yellow line dividing it down the middle. The left side said, "A - M" and had an arrow pointing to the left; on the right, "N - Z," with an arrow to the right. I followed the left-pointing side of the ramp, in order to take me to my Uncle Toto Janairo.

Down the ramp, then up and around and I saw all the backs of the hissing arm wavers. They continued to hiss, hiss, hiss. Sometimes, voices would explode with someone's name and a crowd of hugging relatives would converge, ecstatic that their long-distant relative had survived Egyptian Air.

No one called my name and my body felt itchy.

I looked at bodies and faces. I had met my Uncle Toto three years before at my Lolo's and Lola's house. How much could he have changed in three years? Was that him? grayer? fatter? thinner? taller? I no longer trusted my memory. Worse yet, everyone around me looked the same.

No one called my name.

I decided that maybe a Romualdez (my Lola's maiden name) had come. Down the ramp again and up to the later half of the alphabet put me in a place where the crowd was thinner. But what if the plans had been wrong. *We thought you meant next month.*

Other passengers left in large groups.

I found a phone and called Norma "Baby" Romualdez, whom I would be staying with for my first few days in the country. She was my Lola's niece, the daughter of Uncle Ed, the former ambassador. On the phone she was all smiles and bubbles: "Your Uncle Toto is there. Yes. He's there. You don't need to take a cab. Not at all. We're all here. Waiting for you. But we already ate. If you need a cab, don't pay more than three hundred. When you tell them

where you are going, they will want more. But be firm. Three hundred is the limit!"

I liked her, I liked her dramatics. I paced. The outskirts of Manila was a dusty dim glow of small orange points of light, a scattered constellation.

A man approached me. "Uncle Toto!" I thought.

"Do you need a taxi, sir?" the man said. He was round, with a round belly and a rounded nose and a head that was small and round on top. Uncle Toto was square. "Where you go?"

"I'm going to Bel-Aire Village, but I'm waiting for my uncle."

"Bel-Aire! I'm going that way. Only five hundred."

"I'm waiting for my uncle."

"I wait with you."

We stood together looking at the slowly diminishing crowd. Again, I paced. The cabbie followed me, back and forth along the curb. When I would stop and look at him, he'd flash me a weak half-smile.

Eventually, I heard, "*My-kell! My-kell!* I was waiting for you inside!"

Uncle Toto, his hair shorter and grayer, hurried up to me with short, boxy steps beaming a wide smile on his square face. We held each other's hands. He said, "You've been waiting outside? I had a pass from my bank and so I was waiting inside. I thought, you'd be coming from Tokyo, so you'd be wearing a suit. I had my men looking out for an American man in a suit. You're not wearing a suit!"

My men? I thought. I was wearing a short sleeve shirt, jeans and hiking boots. As Uncle Toto led me away, the cabbie followed.

"Who's this man?" my uncle said.

I said, "He's a cabbie who waited with me."

My Uncle Toto said, "What is your name, good sir?"

The cabbie said, "Bobbie."

Uncle Toto shook his hand, saying, "Thank you so much for waiting with my nephew." He slipped him some bills. Then, "Come, *My-kell*, your Auntie Norma is waiting."

He led me to a small four-door sedan. A pudgy man with a mustache quickly opened the doors. "This is Jun," Toto said to me. "He is your cousin. He is also a Janairo."

Jun nodded as we shook hands. Then he got into the car and drove.

On the way to Baby's house, I stared at streets that could've been any town South East Asia -- illuminated open-air cafeterias, closed stores, paint peeling off signs, rumbling motorbikes, dust rising and clinging to buildings that looked like they'd soon crumble.

From the front seat, my Uncle Toto turned to me, his face spectral in the dashboard's light. He handed me a brochure of a villa on the island of Boracay. He said, "My daughter has arranged a trip for you if you want. Maybe read this brochure and you let me know."

He looked at me looking at the dark, strange city. Thin figures in frayed clothes hurried down dark streets. I had never seen so many people who looked so impoverished. Perhaps Uncle Toto understood what I was thinking. He spoke about the politics of the country, reminding me about the People Power Revolution that put Corazon Aquino, the wife of the man assassinated at the airport, into the presidency. Then he spoke of the newest president, Fidel Ramos, who had been in power since 1992. Uncle Toto's voice was like a slow, gentle sigh: "Not much has changed. There have been no major changes. Ramos was secretary of the Interior. He is a decisive man. If he wanted to do something, he would have done it already."

Soon after, we pulled up to the check-point entrance of Bel-Aire Village, a barbed-wire compound of wide, clean parallel and perpendicular streets named after stars and constellations. The large homes could've been anywhere upper-class U.S.A. But it wasn't and it didn't fill me with a sense of home. Instead, the armed guard and the rows of quiet mansions reminded me of Embassy Row in Washington, D.C. I swallowed hard and braced myself. We pulled up to Baby's house. *I was in the Philippines*, I told myself. I had arrived.



Michael Janairo was born in Iowa, grew up in Pittsburgh, and studied journalism at

Northwestern University and creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh. He lives with his wife, stepson and dog in upstate New York, where he works as the arts and entertainment editor for the *Times Union*, a daily newspaper in Albany.