

Renon-San

by Edgar Calabia Samar

Translated from Filipino by Glenn Diaz

I met Renon-san one night in May when I got lost on my way back from Minoo Falls after failing to see some fireflies. The entire trail from the falls to the park was dark; the light posts were shut off in anticipation of the same fireflies that people came to see. I could make out no more than a few people from afar. I sat down on one of the benches along the way. I was checking Google Maps to see where I was...when a shadow of some animal flitted past me. When I looked, it was a man, tall, around 5'10". He mutely sat down next to me. I knew he was Japanese from the way he settled on the bench. I could see his face half-covered by a mask. It caught me by surprise; the Japanese wouldn't normally take a seat next to strangers. On my usual bus ride to Kita Senri, boarding passengers would rather stand than sit next to sitting passengers, unless it was rush hour. If I were in the Philippines and it was that dark and I was alone and someone sat next to me, I would probably be scared. But here, it didn't cross my mind that someone could... I stopped myself from falling down a hole of comparing my life here to how things were in the Philippines. No system was perfect, no system was perfect, I told myself again and again. Is it true, though? I returned to checking my phone to see how much farther to where I parked my bike. It was then that he spoke up. "Kumusta?"

I could feel my heart race in my chest. I threw him a glance. Pinoy? It can't be. "Sumimasen," he went on, and I knew for sure he was Japanese from the way he said the word. "I know how to speak Tagalog. A little."

I found myself giving him a small nod, at which point he said that he had seen me before, maybe a year ago while in line at the *kaitenzushi* at Onoharahigashi. I tried to remember his face under the moonlight. Probably younger than me by four or five years, in his mid-20s. He had taken off his mask before I could say he didn't have to. There was a hint of uncertainty in his smile, the kind of hesitant smile that wanted to avoid hurting anyone. I couldn't recognize him. Who would remember someone they had seen at some random place more than a year ago? I couldn't even remember anyone from yesterday's bus ride.

He said he remembered me because he remembered every Pinoy he saw. And that he knew if someone was Pinoy. "*Chokkan desu,*" he said. It's intuition. At first, he didn't know that he could do it, until he dared to address a woman ahead of him going up the escalator at Umeda Station. That was a long time ago, he said, around

three years even before the pandemic. “Hello po,” he apparently said. Shocked, the woman turned to him and cracked a smile, unsure what to say. “Sorry po,” he added before asking, “*Firipinjin?*” The woman merely nodded and asked how he could speak Tagalog. “My father is Filipino,” he told her, to which she nodded, smiling, before entering the ticket gate of the station. He never saw her again.

That was what he told me as well. *My father is Filipino*. The same line he gave every Pinoy he had suddenly approached and addressed. Sixty-two as of his last count. I was the 63rd. And not once did he make a mistake. He didn’t approach me that time at the kaitenzushi because I was with other Japanese folks, but in his mind he had already introduced himself to me. I was probably with my *senseis* from the lab. They were the only ones I went out with, anyway. More often than not, I ate by myself.

He walked with me to my bike. His bike was there, too, apparently. While walking, he asked if I had seen a firefly. I told him, no, no luck with fireflies whenever I’d go alone, I think. I must have seen fireflies only once in this park, the first time I went my first year here in Japan, and Asai-sensei had gone with me. The few times I went back, alone, I saw nothing. As we talked, I realized his Tagalog was better than my Japanese. I thought he had been to the Philippines and was surprised when he said it was all self-taught. He’d practice talking to himself every day—and watch YouTube. He was determined to learn Tagalog, he said. When we got to our bikes, he asked if I wanted to grab some coffee or go to an izakaya. It was only around nine. How about coffee, I said, since I had to report to the lab the next day. Is Hiro OK? he asked. Anywhere’s fine, I said. After biking for around 20 minutes, we found the coffee shop still open. They were back to closing at 11 o’clock after the state of emergency. We decided on a table outside even though neither of us smoked. Our orders arrived right away, a Brazilian *chapadao* for him and an *inagawa* blend for me.

When we both took off our masks, I confirmed that he was younger than I had thought. Only then were we able to exchange *hajimemashite*’s, and we both chuckled—we didn’t even know each other’s names yet. I introduced myself, told him that for five years now I’d been working at the lab of the Suita campus of Handai (Osaka University) doing research on transgenic zebrafish, which came to be repeatedly extended because of the pandemic. I wasn’t sure if he was familiar with zebrafish, but he seemed interested enough in what I was saying. Then he said that his name was Renon, that he was named after John Lennon by his father, who used to be part of a band in Shinjuku. But the Beatles wasn’t really his favorite, so don’t ask him about that. He didn’t even know his father. His mother raised him in Iga, in

Mie, before they moved to Osaka, to Ibaraki, when he was starting senior high school. He had been planning to go to the Philippines for so long, but it kept getting postponed because his *okaasan* would get sick. Then the pandemic hit. I asked how his mother was. I instantly regretted asking. From looking at his face alone, I knew that his mother was gone. Sorry, I said. He only gave a slight nod. I didn't get to ask anymore, if she had siblings or was an only child like myself.

He asked if I had been to Calamba. I said, yes, at Rizal's house, testing him then to see if he knew Rizal. Of course, I was the one embarrassed when he said something about the time Rizal stopped by Japan on his way to Europe and met Filipinos in Hibiya. Members of an orchestra who had just played some Strauss. I couldn't remember anything from my Rizal course in college other than that he had a fling with someone here. Whose name I couldn't remember. First to come to mind was Yoko Ono. "Seiko-san," Renon-san said. Wow, I thought, from the time of Rizal there were already Pinoys who'd come to Japan to play. But I didn't tell him this. What I asked him was if his father was from Calamba. He didn't know, he said. He just wanted to try out the hot springs there, see how different they were from the *onsen* here in Japan. Good luck, was my mind's automatic response, which I instantly felt guilty about thinking. Then I thought I had nothing to feel guilty about. Then I felt guilty about thinking I had nothing to feel guilty about.

Then, out of nowhere, he asked if it was hard to live on your own. A loud *ha?* escaped my mouth. When a Japanese talked to me in Tagalog this way, I was always trying to discern if they were saying what they wanted to say. Or if I understood them. But he smiled in a way that wanted to avoid hurting anyone. "It's OK," I said. "Used to it."

"Do you know how to say *zetsubou* in Tagalog?" he asked next. I let out another *ha*, but softer. I didn't know how to say it in English, either. I tried the app on my phone. *Despair, hopelessness*. How wonderful.

Then he said that what he liked best about studying Tagalog was the times when he had to pause and think if a Japanese word that came to mind had a counterpart in Tagalog. It was like constructing a bridge in his head that he would then happily cross to and fro. Didn't matter if this seemed dumb, to build a bridge over a chasm he created himself. I didn't point out how he said "tanga" for dumb, which I had not heard in nearly two years. I just answered his question about translating *zetsubou*. That what was often used now was its adjective form in Filipino, as in *desperado*. From the Spanish, he said, very matter-of-factly, without judgment, but I felt as if he had stabbed something in me.

When things are hopeless, I added. Meaning, the absence of hope is zetsubou itself. He smiled. "Is it possible that the Tagalogs have no concept of the absence of hope?" he asked. "The absence of the absence of hope. Lovely, right?" he asked, like a child who had stumbled upon a wondrous thing. Like when I chanced upon the fireflies in Minoo Falls then. I nodded, yes, it is lovely. *The absence of the absence of hope*. Until the Spanish introduced us to desperation, I thought, until we called each other desperate about the things that we yearned for and never reached. Perhaps with the introduction of these words came our appetite, *ours*, appetite for things that we never should've yearned for from the start. It was easier to think that violence didn't miss anything. It caught every space it could brutalize. If only we could go back to the time before that, ano? Before the desperation. The absence of the absence of hope. Maybe the real grief was not this fleeing from time, the drifting away from the past, but how things would simply repeat in the same place, or the repetitive waiting for something you didn't even know. I took the last gulp of coffee to wrench me back from the meandering corners of my mind where my desperation had taken me.

What do you want from me?—I wanted to ask him. He couldn't have approached me for zetsubou, could he? But before I could ask, he stood up and said he was going to the toilet. I nodded, wondering what time I would sleep and what time I would wake up tomorrow to go to work. I wondered when I could go home. Not to where I was staying. The real homecoming. I wondered why I wanted desperately to believe that I could be sadder, that I could be happier back in the Philippines. That it was possible to simultaneously feel such grief while still being happy about life in general. Nearly every day, I'd get a message from my auntie about an acquaintance or a family member that had died. The world was ending, and I was still here. I was only here.

I was approached by the waiter, probably a student working part-time. Last order, he said. That was when I realized Renon-san had been in the toilet for far too long. I couldn't see the door to the toilet from outside. Fifteen minutes hence, and still no sign of him. From inside the shop, the patrons had started to trickle out. It was eleven o'clock. A few times I caught the young waiters throwing me a glance, wondering when I'd finally get up and leave. Did something happen in the toilet? I stood up and went inside. I asked one of the waiters where the toilet was. When I got there, the door was not locked. I knocked. No answer. I turned the knob and pushed it open. And he wasn't there. There was nothing there except the wall-to-wall mirrors, and heaps of my reflection gazing at my many solitudes.

Asian Literature Project "YOMU" ©Japan Foundation