

Apocalypse

Alvin Yapan, translated by Christian Benitez

Department of Filipino, Ateneo de Manila University

Abstract

Alvin Yapan's "Apocalypse" (Filipino: "Apokalipsis"¹) renders the end of the world as the simultaneous transgression of presupposed boundaries between the individual and collective, the human and non-human, and the rational and irrational. By locating the narrative in an unnamed corner of the Philippine metropolis that is altogether too familiar in the present,² and through interweaving the folkloric and popular, the text proposes a timely urban legend that articulates anxieties of a particular tropical consciousness grappling with modernism. The tale is a counternarrative that acknowledges contemporary overlaps – in the same vein as articulated by Senf (2014, p.31) who values the Gothic as "a counterbalance produced by writers and thinkers who felt limited by such a confident worldview and recognized that the power of the past, the irrational, and the violent continue to hold sway in the world." The present text becomes a rehearsal of the story's proposed apocalypse through the transgression offered by the act of translation which opens this particular tropical articulation to a wider field of discourse on the modern.

Keywords: Tropical, Gothic, Apocalypse, Philippines, literature, translation

¹ Alvin Yapan's "Apokalipsis" won the first prize for Futuristic Fiction in Filipino at the 52nd Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, 2002. It was first printed in his collection *Sangkatauhan Sangkahayupan* (2016, pp.150-166), published by Ateneo de Manila University Press.

² In regard to the Futuristic Fiction category, for which "Apokalipsis" won first prize, Ocampo (2014) noted that "Future [sic] Fiction involved stories that the Palanca Awards committee said 'looked beyond into the future to transcend the boundaries of the present.'" This context underscores an irony in the text in its locution of the notion of "futuristic" as contemporary.

Apocalypse

Every city has that little corner that leads to a compound forgotten and left behind in time. These are the first places to feel the aging of the city, like strands of grey hair to be dyed or plucked – only to grow anew. Except no one knows whether the strands will grow back black or grey. In fact, no one knows for certain whether they will grow back at all, or simply die without anyone noticing.

One night, in a corner such as this, three women were heard screaming. But since they all screamed at the same time, beginning and ending at the same moment, their voices in the same pitch and volume, they all mistook one another's voices for echoes of their own. And so they didn't bother to try saving each other.

There were only three of them living in two apartment buildings facing each other. Two apartment buildings separated by a mere seven meters which lead to a narrow corner. Both two-storey apartment buildings had four rooms on each floor. Martha and Isabel lived in the same building. Martha lived on the second floor, while Isabel, who was often visited by her husband, lived on the first. In the other building, Maria lived alone on the first floor. Isabel just didn't know behind which of the four doors. She only knew that someone lived there because she would hear cooking every night and would sometimes see a light on. Yet, each morning, she just couldn't remember which door it was, even though their apartments were the only three occupied in the two buildings, while the rest remained empty.

The three women each lived their own lives. They didn't know one another. They didn't have much to do with one another, although they occasionally met, for instance when the electric bill or the water bill arrived. During such encounters, they would only nod at one another, rarely daring to smile. It was enough for them to know they all lived there, that they were all alive. None of them condoned meddling.

Every month Isabel would try to confirm which door Maria entered; but each month, she would be certain that Maria would come out of a different door. Eventually Isabel grew tired of trying to find out whether Maria lived behind the second door or the third. She simply settled for knowing that Maria was alone in her building, unlike herself. She shared her building with another person whose apartment, among the four upstairs, she was likewise yet to confirm.

Isabel was worried about this. The owner of the two buildings hadn't come by to collect the rent in a long time. She didn't know if he had died, or simply lost interest. She thought that if the owner had left the two buildings to the three of them, Maria would appear to be the luckiest. She could claim her entire building for herself; Isabel, on the

other hand, would have to share her building. She once read in a newspaper how tenants could claim ownership over apartments abandoned by their owners. Whether she read it in a newspaper, or heard it from another passenger in a jeepney, she wasn't sure — but she knew it was possible.

Isabel planned to remodel the entire building when the time came. She would replace the walls made of wood and paint them another color. She would polish the cemented floor and remove the jalousies decaying from the countless storms and summers. She would sweep away the Chippy wrappers already yellow from whirling between the two apartment buildings whenever the wind blew in their corner. She could finally reach for the rags stuck to the rusting hangers left in the window rails on the second floor. The only problem was that she would have to talk to the other woman who occupied her building. According to what she had read – or heard – they both had a claim over it. She didn't even know the name of her would-be fellow owner.

Even the storeowner at the corner's threshold didn't know her name — the storeowner who could have heard the screams of the three women, since any sound from the compound built up before it reached the narrow corner. But since the storeowner was dreaming of a mountain-high pile of unsold sanitary napkins when she heard the simultaneous screams, she mistook them for the echoes of her own screams in her dream. When nothing else followed, she decided it was only her imagination and went back to sleep, remembering that meddling with other people's lives could get complicated.

This storeowner could have also figured out the reason for their screams. All three women bought their sanitary napkins from her. Their periods arrived consecutively. But she didn't notice that they hadn't bought any napkins from her for several months. Usually, as early as the first week of the month, Maria would already buy her pads. Brand: *Those Days*. The first time Maria bought them from the store, the owner could supply her need. In compounds like this, people would always look for cheap brands, and the storeowner, being a businesswoman, knew this. When someone came to the store a week later and asked for *Whisper*, she was surprised. She tried offering the woman *Those Days*, but in response the customer chided her for not having *Whisper* in stock, calling her store cheap. Not that the customer could do anything more, since she already had her period and was on her way to her night-shift job. She agreed to buy *Those Days* napkins, as long as the storeowner would stock *Whisper* in her cheap store next time. This woman was Martha. When another woman, Isabel, came to buy from the store, the owner told her about the nasty woman who apparently lived in the same building. She told Isabel right up front that she only had *Those Days*, that she didn't have *Whisper*, and that her store was cheap.

"Just *Those Days*, ho,"³ Isabel said. The storeowner thought Isabel was kind. Before leaving, she asked her what napkin brand she used.

"*Modess*, ho! I don't act as if I'm rich, ho. I just want a reliable napkin, ho."

So when the storeowner went to buy stock, she bought *Modess* for her kind customer and *Whisper* for her grumpy customer, and added them to the stock of *Those Days* from her panic buy last year. In hindsight, the storeowner couldn't understand herself: when the world was said to end at the turn of the millennium because of the millennium bug, she went on a panic buying spree, and although she couldn't think of any connection, she had bought an excessive quantity of *Those Days* napkins.

Although the three women regularly bought napkins from her, the storeowner didn't notice a pattern. It was difficult in those times to notice habits amid the fast changing of things like cellphones, fashion trends, and haircuts; the only habit was selling, and buying the things being sold. And so the storeowner didn't notice that the *Modess* and *Whisper* napkins she had been buying started to pile up too, that there would soon be as many as the *Those Days* napkins she had hoarded. One day she just realized that the three women hadn't had their periods. Yet she wasn't able to connect the dots so she could cry out in epiphany that they were all pregnant.

The three women were all pregnant at the same time!

But the storeowner didn't understand this, and even less so the simultaneous screams of the three women after not getting their periods for three months — screams she could have realized were not part of her dream. The three women wouldn't be heard screaming again, for they were consumed by fear, or shame, as they each gave birth — even though only three months had passed.

Only a single scream came out of Maria's mouth. She had a heart attack as soon as she saw a child, or an animal — she couldn't quite make out what was coming out of her womb. When it was finally out, instead of crying, the creature purred. Maria probably died somewhat happy because she learned something new: what she had read about only fat people having heart attacks was wrong.

On the second floor, only a single scream likewise came from Martha's mouth, as she suddenly gave birth not to one, but five milkfish. Because she was in the bathtub which her parents had bought and installed in her apartment, she thought at first that she was only peeing, when in fact, her water had broken. Five milkfish came out of her

³ *Ho* is a variant of *po*, a Filipino adverb used to denote respect for an elder in conversation. Colloquially, *ho* is preferably used in conversation among people with narrower age differences.

womb. She hurriedly ran out of her apartment naked. On her way out of the building she slipped and rolled down the stairs, falling and hitting her head on the door.

In the other building, Isabel was overwhelmed with confusion. What she found after her water broke was the seed of a plant that she couldn't identify. She didn't know whether to feel afraid or to laugh; she thought that she was going crazy. She was so confused that she wasn't able to scream again. Instead she just picked up the black seed and remembered the storybook her husband had bought for her before he died. The story of Thumbelina. He told her to read it to their firstborn when they finally had children. She had been waiting to have a child for quite some time now, like the woman in the storybook, which she hurriedly took out and started reading: *Once upon a time... there lived a woman who had no children. She dreamed of having a little girl, but time went by, and her dream never came true. She then went to visit a witch, who gave her a magic grain of barley.*

But no witch gave Isabel a seed. She didn't even know how the seed was planted in her womb. She dug deep in her memory for a reason until she remembered swallowing the seed of the cotton fruit while reading the name of her husband in the tabloid *Abante*. Dead. Died on an airplane.

She couldn't believe that her husband was a drug pusher. He was said to have slit his own thigh, hidden a few packets of shabu in it, and stitched the wound before boarding. He bled out on the airplane. When all the passengers had come out and he remained in his seat, a puzzled steward approached him. They said her husband was already pale; blood was already seeping through his pants. She couldn't believe it. She couldn't believe Diego had yet another secret that he kept from her, aside from having another wife in the province. Provincial assignment was always Diego's excuse whenever he would come home to his real wife. Isabel wasn't surprised when she learned about this. Diego was still her husband, and she was still his wife. She didn't see herself as a mistress or a lover. She easily came to terms with being Diego's second wife. He provided her with shelter in that rented place. She just couldn't believe that the money he spent for her came from his racket as a drug pusher.

In her surprise, she swallowed the cotton fruit seed she was playing with in her mouth. She and Diego had made love before he left. They did it in the living room. They rolled around. He even had her suck his cock. It was then she pieced the details together. Maybe she was pregnant and having cravings the morning after she and Diego made love. That's why her mouth was watering for cotton fruit. Diego's sperm cell has already met her egg cell. She saw this once on the Discovery Channel when they had cable television installed, and they stopped using condoms and contraceptives

because they were ready to have children, especially now that her husband was promoted at work.

So Isabel couldn't blame herself. It was her husband's fault. She was shocked by the news of his death on the airplane. It was because of him that she accidentally swallowed the smooth cotton fruit seed she was playing with in her mouth. That perhaps combined with her egg cell and Diego's sperm cell, even though she knew all too well that the stomach was different from the womb. Maybe the seed got confused and entered her womb, she reasoned to herself. She was even confused as to why she was crying that morning: was it because she almost choked on the sizable seed sliding down her throat, or because of her husband's sudden death? She didn't attend Diego's wake. She wanted to avoid getting herself involved in his drug case. She might be recognized by his first wife.

Isabel couldn't blame herself — unlike Maria whose conscience, as she writhed in chest pain, was mangled with memories of her disobedience to everything she had been taught. As her heartbeat slowly weakened, only one question echoed in her head: why did she choose to be so fond of cats as to make her firstborn look like one?⁴

Everything began at a workshop for them as salesladies. An "enrichment" for them, they were told. She was a saleslady for *Avon* in a department store. Sometimes, they would be required to go to workshops so they could improve their marketing and social skills. One of the exercises in the workshop was to discover what kind of animal they saw themselves as. Each person, so they say, resembles an animal. When it was her turn to answer, she said, "Cat."

Later that night after the workshop, she couldn't get the answer out of her head. She did look like a cat, they all agreed. When she looked at her photos, she saw that it was actually true. There was a part of her forehead she couldn't quite figure out: how her eyebrows met and how her eyes looked and how her forehead connected down to the base of her nose; how her eyebrows, nose, and forehead met at that part that made her look like a cat. She smiled.

She flicked through the cheap magazines she bought. She turned the television on and waited for her favorite celebrities to appear. Even before Christina Aguilera's video played on MTV she was already sure that she looked better than Britney Spears,

⁴ This phenomenon translates as *paglililihi*, "a protracted period of conceiving" (Tan, 2004, p.162) where the pregnant woman experiences cravings for particular food. It is believed that the food the pregnant woman craves will affect the physical attributes of her child; for instance, eating black plums (*duhat*) would render the child to be dark skinned. However, *paglililihi* can also be after inedible things, and it is possible to experience *paglililihi* as an extreme fondness (or, in some instances, disdain) of particular things. In the above text, it can be inferred that Maria was experiencing *paglililihi* for cats.

because her idol looked like a cat. She remembered the actress Michelle Pfeiffer who played Catwoman in *Batman*. She remembered Uma Thurman, Shania Twain, and Scary Spice. She realized now why people went crazy in department stores, buying clothes with lion and tiger prints, and why contact lenses designed like cats' eyes were in demand. She then decided that the father of her would-be child should look like a cat so that their child would be just as beautiful; a man who looked like a cat or a lion, or a tiger, like her favorite celebrities Harrison Ford, Brad Pitt, Ralph Fiennes, Russell Crowe, and many others. She realized that a lot of people from Hollywood looked like cats.

But Maria had a hard time finding a man who looked like a cat. She became afraid that she would become an old maid without a child. So when she once walked into a guy who looked like a cat, she invited him right away to a motel. Maria believed that she was a liberal woman. She was only after a child. Nothing was wrong with that. And because Maria was a pretty woman, the man she invited didn't have to think twice. In a motel, they enacted the unruly lovemaking of cats.

When she stopped getting her period, Maria filled her room with felines — posters of cats, cat figurines, cat-designed clocks, cat-shaped pillows, Hello Kitty items — just so she could make sure her child would look just like one. And so, when the child she gave birth to purred, she thought that all the cats in her room purred with it. It was then she learned that even a person who wasn't fat could still have a heart attack.

Isabel likewise had a heart attack after her seed child sprouted. But that was three days after both Martha and Maria died. So there were two women who died from heart attack not knowing who to blame for what had become of their offspring, and then there was Martha who died in her attempt to run away so she wouldn't have to blame herself.

Martha worked night-shift. The workplace she went to changed from time to time, because there was a risk that the police might follow her. Sometimes it was inside the cinema. Sometimes inside restrooms. Sometimes in restaurants. Sometimes in hotel lobbies. She didn't like the infamous Quezon Avenue or Quezon Memorial Circle. It wasn't just a job for her. She didn't just give pleasure. She herself also took pleasure from it. Like basketball players, she once thought: getting paid while enjoying their game.

Martha's family was rich. Her parents paid the rent for her rotten apartment. She didn't want to move to an expensive one because they might just intrude. Someone might recognize her. It was an embarrassment for her to be identified as a nympho; she would rather be recognized as a whore. If she were to stay in a posh apartment, she

would be known as a nympho. She might even be pitied as if sick. And so, to avoid this, she moved into a rotten apartment where she would be mistaken for a whore. There's a different liberty in being mistaken for a whore. As if she was free to do anything.

So she got it on with random men. She didn't even notice if there were similarities among those she got involved with. If she had favorites. If she still chose. She took payments so her encounters with men remained transactions. Just one-night stands. No second times. Once, a man was so satisfied with their encounter that he gave her an additional five hundred pesos. But she gave it back.

"Thanks anyway."

"You really are different," he told her.

She smiled at the thought of her actually helping to improve the image of whores. Even just in the eyes of that one man, not all whores were greedy.

She tried them all. Those who still had soft hair. Those who already had thick hair. Those who already shaved. Those who were yet to shave. Those who were already wrinkling. Those who were white. Black. The dirty ones. Straight ones. Curved. All ages. All social classes. Circumcised. Uncircumcised. Middle class. Upper class. Lower class. Middle middle class. Every smell. Every girth and length. Every position in the X-rated Tetris she would play on the computer each time she went home. Those who were still perfectly stiff. Those who could no longer be stiff. Then she tried it with women. Fresh flowers. Dried flowers. White groins. Those whitened by thick make-up. Those as smooth as ironed clothes. Those worse than unironed clothes. All ages. All social classes. Every smell. Every color, from red hibiscus to pale Malay apples.

Those who moan. Groan. She even chased after homosexuals. Until one day, as she came out of their compound, she bumped into an old man peddling milkfish.

"Buy now, Miss! They're still fresh! Newly caught!"

The milkfish were still flailing. She bought a kilo.

"How many milkfish are there in a kilo?"

She hurried back to her apartment with the plastic bag. She filled a pail of water. She poured it onto the milkfish. And before they died, she lifted each of the them and made love to each of them. She put them inside her vagina while they flailed, until they died.

She didn't expect to be impregnated by milkfish. She couldn't believe it; it was the kind of news from the sidewalks she would laugh off. She gave birth to not one but five milkfish. The five milkfish came out of her womb one after another. She didn't know which of the milkfish was the father of her five children. She couldn't remember how many milkfish she used. *How many milkfish were in a kilo?* Martha sprang from the lukewarm water of the bathtub. She couldn't believe it. When she parted the soap bubbles and saw the five swimming milkfish, she screamed and ran downstairs. The only thing that mattered to her was to escape that place. She even took abortion pills. That was why they didn't work — the father of her children was a milkfish. She opened the door naked. She still had soap on her body. Unable to see the first step down the stairs in the dark, she slipped. She gasped for breath as she slipped, before her body crashed down, her head hitting the shut door downstairs. Her body laid there lifeless.

Martha was already dead when her five children learned that they could breathe out of water. She was already dead when they learned that the bones of their fins were hard enough for them to crawl on the cemented floor. They followed their mother. They all peered out the doorway. They all saw the lifeless body of their mother. They all let out their small voices too, to call for their mother, because the children of Isabel, Maria, and Martha, as it turned out, had the ability to speak. But Martha and Maria didn't get to learn about this. Only Isabel got to hear the voice of her child, and it was because of this that she died.

After Isabel planted her only child in a pot, she watered it, according to what she read in the story of Thumbelina. *She planted it in a flower pot.* She watered it once in the morning, and another at night before she slept. She placed the pot on a window sill.

In the mornings, after she watered her plant, she would play the radio and talk to it. It was good for plants, she had once read. She was expecting that the plant growing from the seed she had given birth to would bloom. *And the very next day, the grain had turned into a lovely flower, rather like a tulip.* She was expecting that in the blossoming of the flower, she would find her and Diego's child there sleeping. Like Thumbelina. *The woman softly kissed its half-shut petals. And as though by magic, the flower opened in full blossom. Inside sat a tiny girl, no bigger than a thumb. The woman called her Thumbelina.* So small. Just as big as a flower. As big as finger or a toe.

When Isabel woke up on the third day, she went straight to the pot, carrying a dipper of water and the radio. She watered the soil where she buried her seed child, then talked to it. She was about to play the radio when she noticed the soil moving. As though there were fingers trying to dig their way up and through. It was then that Isabel first felt fear. She thought it was her husband's finger that would emerge and that she

would see. She held her breath, until she saw two tiny leaves sprouting from the soil. When the attached two halves of the seed fell, Isabel saw something red sticking out from the center of the leaves.

"Mommy!" the plant called to her.

It was only then Isabel understood that it was a tongue. It was also then she understood that not all children's stories had happy endings. It was then that she had a heart attack, three days after Maria had hers. Three days after Martha fell down the stairs. Three days after they all screamed at the same time in the middle of the night—the screams that the storeowner mistook to be part of her dream.

No one discovered the bodies of the three women. Even as they started to reek, no one ever wondered, not even those who delivered their water and electric bills. They just kept inserting bills under the women's doors. After all, in corners like this, rats die and rot without anyone noticing. When the three women didn't pay, the collectors thought their bills were simply placed at the wrong doors. But they had already delivered their bills to every door, and still no one came out to pay. Eventually, they just grew tired and cut off the electricity and water in the two apartment buildings. They didn't want to force the doors open, afraid as they were to be accused of attempting to rob the three women.

The storeowner, meanwhile, wasn't really troubled. She even felt insulted that the three women didn't even bother to say goodbye. There were now too many sanitary napkins stacked in her shop. But since it was really hard to build a habit in such times, after another dream, the storeowner forgot even her resentment towards the women. Just like the contained smell in the compound that was wafting to their corner, was forgotten by passersby after cussing about it. After all, each city has a corner like this, each as easily forgotten.

Yet, if anyone were to remember this corner like strands of grey hair to be dyed or plucked, one could find each night, whether the moon is round or not, surrounding the gathered corpses of Isabel, Martha and Maria in one of the rooms in the two apartment buildings the five milkfish, the cat, and the plant all devoutly touching each part of the rotting bodies of their mothers. Even after finally decaying down to their bones, they all still touch them devoutly while saying, as if uttering a prayer for each other, that these were their feet, these were their thighs, their sexes, their stomachs, their breasts, hands, and heads: that these were their bodies.

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