



The Boy with the Pet Dog

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Abstract

Set at the beginning of the hot season in the Philippines, when heat starts to crawl on skin, the short fiction “The Boy with the Pet Dog” (“Ang Batang May Alagang Aso”) stages an encounter between the titular character and a young man from the province who intends to work on his family’s farm. Queerness figures in the narrative as intimately entangled with class, and becomes articulable only through a language made possible by the tropics itself, in the form of butterflies coming out of chrysalises, brown bodies glowing with sweat, and swiftlets flocking mango trees. At the heart of the story is a dog, whose unbridled elan unleashes the tempered and unnameable yearning that suffuses the narrative. With a title that seemingly alludes to Anton Chekhov’s famous short fiction, the story, in its cunning lightness, can be ultimately read as a rehearsal of tropical queer reimagination of writing desire.

Keywords: animality, tropical heat, queer coming-of-age, translation, Philippine fiction, tropical queer, queer writing desire

The Boy with the Pet Dog

The season's heat was starting to crawl on Josemarie's skin, following him even in his sleep. He woke up to the sound of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* playing in his head, softly at first then louder as he greeted the new day with eagerness. His parents had already finished their breakfast, so he was left alone to eat with Loreta. Loreta who tried several times to sit beside him, because she wanted to steal the longganisa from his plate. Loreta whom he also tried several times to shoo away. And each time, all he wanted was to hear her say, "Yes, milord," but this would never happen, not only because they weren't in Narnia, where creatures could talk; but because his companion was a complete idiot who knew nothing at all. He would've named his pet Labrador Loreta Lorelie, after Lorelei, his favorite mermaid, who often sat on rocks to seduce the passing sailors. But his Mama named her Loreta instead, after a beautiful, famous actress from the '60s who then became a faith healer. He had already seen her once, when, while watching *Morena Amor*, a movie so old it had no color, his mother excitedly pointed at the screen, "That's Loretta Marquez. That woman even built her own church."

Josemarie sliced a tiny bit of longganisa for Loreta. He threw it under the table just like how Queen Catherine the Great threw coins at people on the streets. Josemarie once saw a biopic about the royalty on Velvet Channel. *Katarin*. That's how he heard the characters pronounce the name of the regal queen. He didn't understand most of the film, but that didn't stop him from being inspired. So, he threw another bit of longganisa at his foot. He knew it was the only way for his subjects to stay in their rightful place. There, under the table. Just like Loreta. His dog.

"Finish it quick," the boy ordered the dog. "Today, we'll go to the mango orchard."

"Yes, milord," he wished the dog would say. "Shall we go bird watching this morning, milord?"

"You really know what I love to do when I have no school," Josemarie said, pleased with their talk.

"I have known you since you were a small child, your grace," the dog replied in his head. Loreta becomes Lorelie whenever she speaks in English. And then, Josemarie would begin telling the dog the same story he had already told her several times before. One morning, as he was walking toward their family's mango orchard, one of the workers greeted him. He had no shirt on. He noticed that he didn't have a shirt on because he had it on his hands, holding something in it. Smiling, he reached out to the young master. Josemarie felt scared. He wasn't sure whether to take what the man

offered him. But when he unfolded the shirt, Josemarie saw two birds that looked like zebra doves, but had red spots on their chests. These were lovers, the man said, still smiling. “How did you even know they were lovers?” Josemarie asked. “What does that mean, that they’re lovers?” The worker then began to tell his story. He captured the two birds together because he caught them making love. “And what’s making love?” It was then that the boy’s fascination with birds began. And since then, before roaming around their ten-hectare farm, he’d always wonder whether he’d see some kind of bird he hadn’t yet seen in his vast kingdom surrounded by high concrete walls.

“Let’s go watch the swiftlets by the mango trees,” the little prince told his faithful pet. It was the time of year when the trees blossom, attracting little bugs, and so the birds would also flock the trees, preying on the insects. “Let’s watch them fly around the branches, like scissors dodging each other, keeping themselves from slicing one another.”

But when they began to make their way, as the master and his servant passed by the living room, a young man greeted them, sitting alone on the sofa, as if waiting for someone. The dog barked at him. “This man wants to see your grace,” Lorelie said softly, seductively. But as Loreta, what she wanted to say was, “Hey, I saw him first!”

Because they rarely got any guests, Josemarie also sat on the sofa to keep the young man company. And well, to pry. He had already forgot about the swiftlets in the mango orchard. The dog sat beside him like a shadow. Josemarie slapped her, so she went down to the floor and laid herself by her master’s feet, waiting for the touch that she’s been longing for.

Josemarie could hear his Mama talking to someone in the terrace. So instead of waiting for her to serve their guest, the boy began sizing up the young man, playing a staring contest with him, a game which roused in Josemarie a certain kind of regret that he had never felt before.

The young man’s hair touched his shoulders, thick and straight but with flyaway ends, just like lush leaves that framed his heart-shaped face. It was a gentle face, despite the thin mustache and skin burnt everyday under the sun. A gentle and happy face which Josemarie thought wouldn’t second guess asking him to come play with him, unlike the other workers in their farm, who all work so hard that they seemed to have become mindless and heartless, mere lumps of clay. But this young man was yet to work on their farm, and so there’s still that glimmer in his eyes. It was then that the twelve-year-old felt a certain regret that was far different from all the regrets he has ever felt, because it was the kind of regret that wasn’t for himself, but for some other.

The young man stared right back at him. Josemarie couldn't take it anymore. "Who are you waiting for?" he asked the young man. *This is our house, how dare you look at me like that*, is what he really wanted to say. But he was a good boy and his parents raised him to be polite, so he would never speak that way. "Are you with someone?"

Instead of answering, the young man simply sat back on the sofa, as if to say he wasn't intimidated, that he wasn't the least bothered by the boy. That, in fact, he was more comfortable now that he had company. He even rested his arms on the side of the sofa, and let his eyes roam around, looking at the surrounding furniture. "Is this your house? Wow!" the young man said, admiring the place as if he was expecting to also stay there from that day on. Josemarie could hear a faint trace of Bisaya, that language from the south. But unlike the twang of his mother's relatives who all came to Manila to work on their farm, that twang which always sounded angry or in a hurry, the young man's accent was slight and had a certain boyish tenderness in it. He's probably been here in Manila for quite some time now, Josemarie thought.

"But who are you waiting for?"

The young man pointed his chin towards the woman talking to his Mama on the terrace. Inday Amparo, Josemarie's aunt, who was from Cebu Island in the south, and now lived in a fishing village somewhere in Navotas, a coastal city in the northwest of Manila. His Mama had once said that there were only three reasons why their relatives from Navotas would come to visit them: to borrow money, to pawn jewelry, or to convince them to hire another worker from Manila or Cebu. From where he sat, Josemarie could hear the conversation on the terrace, which was loud and only seemed to get louder as the two women munched on unripe mangoes. With the little Bisaya he knew, he could understand that his Mama was asking Tia Amparo whether this one—the young man before Josemarie—was decent enough. The last one Tia Amparo brought to their farm had eloped with their cook. Tia Amparo, in return, assured her that Jacildo—apparently that was the name of the young man—was pure at heart. She even mentioned the name of his parents' who raised him back in Cebu, whom Mama quickly remembered as her old neighbors, and so leading their conversation to who else in their hometown would want to go to Manila to try their luck. Josemarie shifted in his seat, turning an ear toward the terrace to listen to the women chatter.

"Do you have any games there in your room?" Jacildo asked him. Josemarie turned his gaze again to that heart-shaped face. He couldn't answer him right away; he hadn't expected that he would have the nerve to ask him about his room so soon. Meanwhile, a smile curved on Jacildo's face, like a butterfly coming out of its chrysalis. It was then that Josemarie realized that the hair above the young man's lip wasn't a real mustache,

unlike the kind that some of the workers on their farm had; his was like a few cat hairs that grew here and there. And if his fake mustache were to be shaved, and his longish hair cut, Josemarie could see that Jacildo was really just a boy like him—looking for *games*.

“I don’t have any *games*,” Josemarie finally answered. “I can’t have those here. Papa doesn’t like them.” But right away, the boy thought about what else he could show Jacildo instead.

“So what else do you have?”

“I’ve got two turtles upstairs. One’s Henry, and the other’s Geoffrey. Want to see them?”

“They’re both boys?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Why, how would you know if it’s a boy or a girl?”

“That’s sad...if they’re both boys.”

“They’re happy.”

“How do you know if a turtle’s happy or sad?”

“They always play together.”

“Really? How do you know when they’re playing?”

“They go on top of each other.”

Jacildo burst out laughing. And this time, what Josemarie saw wasn’t just a butterfly coming out of its chrysalis, but countless swiftlets flocking and flying around mango trees, just like how the birds would always flock at this time of year in their orchard. Loreta quickly got up, barking, her fur shaking as she jumped at the young man. It was the same bark and the same shaking the dog had done one night when she saw something in their granary. The master and his pet waited for whatever it was to come out. It turned out to be Tonito, their houseboy, and Manang Mila, their cook. Both of them with disheveled hair. That night, Josemarie felt regret, but the kind of regret that was only for himself.

The master wanted to hush his pet, but he was paralyzed on his seat. The swiftlets flocking the mango trees have already fled his mind. But Jacildo, instead of dodging the jumping dog, simply reached out an arm and opened his palm. Loreta quickly sniffed it, and whatever scent the dog smelled was enough to calm her.

“Loreta, sit down!” the young master said when he finally found his voice. But it was already too late, as Loreta was in another dimension by then, fawning on her new lord. Soon enough, Jacildo’s hand was on the dog’s neck. “I said, sit down!” The young man’s hand gently rubbed his pet’s neck, moving down to her back, to her sides. It stroked her body a few more times, combing her yellowish fur. The boy felt nervous. He knew how sensitive his pet was. It was the first time that she was touched by another hand—a hand with bony fingers and almost round tips, similar to the hands of most of their workers. For some reason, each time Josemarie would walk around the farm, his eyes would fall on them: on the arms cutting cogon and carrying baskets of mangoes, on the fists milking the cows, the arms and hands grating coconuts, the bodies glowing with sweat, brown and bare under the sun. Despite the heat, the sight would make him quiver. He knew that it wouldn’t be long until they would leave their farm, as most of them were only needed during the hot season. Come the monsoon rains, they would all go back to their provinces, back to their families.

Josemarie wanted to drag his pet dog away. He wanted to take her away from Jacildo’s hand because the only hand she was supposed to know was his. Her master’s. “Loreta! I said, sit down!” But Jacildo’s fingers have already reached Loreta’s belly, and there, Josemarie knew, the dog has completely surrendered: it was the most sensitive part of any dog that shouldn’t be touched by strangers. And, as if that wasn’t enough, the dog jumped again at their guest, and placed her two forelegs on the young man’s lap, as if telling him how pleased she was with his touch.

“How cute. What’s her name again? Lorita? Sounds like a hottie.” Loreta licked Jacildo’s other hand, as if begging the young man to place it too on her body, just like the first one that still hasn’t stopped stroking. Again and again, the hand moved from the dog’s neck, down to her back and to her sides, and then to her belly. Neck, back, sides, belly. Neck, back, sides, belly. The rhythm grew faster and heavier. Josemarie’s eyes followed Jacildo’s hand.

“Her name’s Loreta,” the master tried again. The young man just nodded, still looking at the dog. The boy didn’t know whether he really understood what he was telling him, how important it was, how sacred. She would’ve been Lorelie instead of Loreta. After his favorite mermaid. But her Mama named her Loreta, after a beautiful famous actress from the ’60s who became a faith healer and built her own church. But what’s

the point of giving one's real name to a complete stranger? What did the young master even expect to come of it?

That maybe, if this stranger would only learn something new about his pet dog, something so intimate as a name, there'd be a chance that he'd also understand whatever it was that bothered her, and this way, he could find better ways to touch his pet dog, to stroke her, to feel her.

"Jacildo," Inday Amparo called from the terrace. She was already done talking with Mama. Jacildo quickly let go of Loreta, breaking the spell of the moment. "Jacildo," Inday Amparo called again after her own pet, her voice louder this time, but a voice that already sounded far away, as if coming from a distant sea that even the season's heat wouldn't reach. The young man quickly followed the voice, practically running out of the house. Josemarie again felt a certain regret, the old kind of regret, a regret that was like from before, that was only for himself. He stood up to go after Jacildo, and Loreta would've also chased after him, but the master set a leg in front of his dog, ready to trip her, to kick her, if the animal would insist in following the young man. By the door, Josemarie met his mother coming inside the house. He wanted to talk to her, to probe her, to ask her what it was all about, but his eyes were still far away, looking outside, to Jacildo who was already beside Inday Amparo, both of them walking away, walking toward the mango trees where the swiftlets were, the swiftlets that were still eager in flight, flocking around the fruits at this time of the year, in the scorching heat, as if rushing them all to ripeness, already willing the day of their plucking to come.

Translator's Note

The source text "Ang Batang May Alagang Aso" was published in the short story collection *The Next Great Tagalog Novel at Iba pang Kuwento* (UP Press, 2019). While translating the story, I commented to the author how the title, when rendered in English, seemed to reference Chekhov's famous "The Lady with the Dog" (Дама с собачкой), published in 1899, which recounts an affair between a man and a woman in Yalta. Amused, the author said I could give the story a different title (which was, in hindsight, probably a mere test), but I insisted on being faithful to the original. After all, the story, as with the rest of the aforementioned short story collection, interrogates the very idea of storytelling—a preoccupation that runs consistently throughout the author's body of work.

Through translating the work to English and insisting on making apparent the literary reference it makes, the story then enlarges itself, from a seemingly modest coming-

of-age narrative into a cunning attempt to converse with a canonical work from 120 years ago—when the Philippine-American War has just begun, and which would eventually establish the Philippine educational system that, in time, would include Chekhov’s short story (always in translation) in its literature classes. In this sense, not only is the author’s story queer and tropical in terms of its figurations, but also in its strategy as perhaps a form of critique.

The author’s writing in the original Filipino harnesses traditional storytelling reminiscent of folk tales, and is often rendered in a spare language that critically reminds one that what matters most in a work of fiction is, of course, its narrative. Indeed, in the source text, language does not get in the way of the plot (despite being precisely the medium of such a plot) which in effect allows the reader to stay immersed in the story, regardless of the complex ideas that actually pervade it. It is in this sense that the author’s writing is generally cunning, and being so, queer. After all, who would expect this much from a story simply titled “The Boy with the Pet Dog”?

In translating this short fiction, lightness thus became a primary consideration in terms of word choice, sentence structure, and overall tone. And so, for instance, the original “pilipili,” known as the Philippine swiftlet (*Aerodramus mearnsi*), is translated here as “swiftlet,” while places such as “Cebu” and “Navotas” were briefly located, without overexplaining their connotations via footnotes or lengthy self-reflexive descriptions in the text itself. While this decision is primarily made so as to not break the singing of the translated prose and interrupt the experience of its reading, it also comes from a place of critique on global readership: that a translated work does not need to always expound on everything it says; that part of the work rests, as it must, in the hands of the reader. At the end of the day, one can easily Google who Loretta Marquez was.

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Allan N. Derain is a writer, visual artist, and teacher. He is the author of *Aswanglout* (ADMU Press, 2021; sole Filipino novel included in the LITPROM Literatures Der Welt), *Iskrabuk* (UP Press, 2005; finalist, Madrigal-Gonzales Best First Book Award), *The Next Great Tagalog Novel at Iba pang Kuwento* (UP Press, 2019; finalist, Gintong Aklat Award; winner, National Book Award), and *Ang Banal na Aklat ng mga Kumag* (Anvil, 2014; winner, National Book Award, Carlos Palanca Memorial Award Grand Prize, and Filipino Readers' Choice Award). He edited the anthology *May Tiktik sa Bubong, May Sigbin sa Silong* (ADMU Press, 2017; winner, National Book Award and Gintong Aklat Award). He currently teaches creative writing, art appreciation, and Filipino literature at Ateneo de Manila University.

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