

Where I Come From

Where I come from there is no word for *sorry* and two words for *love*. Instead of sorry, we say, *Pasensiya ka na*. As in, *Let it go*, or *Please forget*.

Where I come from one might say, *Mabal kita*, and another, *Iniibig ko ang Pilipinas*—depending on whether they're a lover or a patriot.

Where touching the hand of an elder to your forehead shows more respect than kissing their cheek.

Where I come from a grown man might piss on a wall in noonday traffic while a four-year-old girl carrying an infant on her back sells sampaguita pierced through with nylon string.

Where children huddle under some bridge sniffing glue to dull their hunger while matrons in Prada blazers roll by in tinted SUVs to hear weekday Mass.

Where I am from one can still walk to a sari-sari store to buy a cup of sugar, a day's worth of shampoo, a single menthol cigarette, a stick of gum, or cold Pepsi in a plastic bag with a straw.

Where I am from I can no longer go to my Lola's house on Sundays to eat kare-kare stewed for days, meat sliding off the bone, the aroma inhaled with stories you've breathed since birth. The uncles who laughed and clinked frosted beer bottles—despite being riddled with debt, cancer, or terrible loneliness—have gone to sleep. It's my turn to hold the simmering secrets, breathe them forward.

There is a piano where I'm from that I go to in dreams. Do the dust motes retain the shape my body made leaning into a nocturne, notes spidering over the floorboards—a plea, a recompense, an apology?

Home of my mother's chronic sadness, of my brother's blue guitar, of my sister's long silence.

Home of first kiss, of the body's first greening, plucked from the sleep

of childhood, flushed like early fruit ripening after long damp days in June.

Where books were solace, a hand waving back in the night.
Warped and sealed shut by storms and tropic heat, mold greening their pages like maps to anywhere.

Home of kaimito, guava, guyabano, tuyo, halo-halo, lumpiang prito. Where food meant you belonged, meant *forgive me*, meant *I love you*.

Home, where silence meant death, so a young man picked up a pen and purchased our freedom with his life.

Home—where there were no words for *sorry* and not enough words for *love*. Where sometimes a pair of lips pouting across a table just meant *please pass the salt*.