

Ashfall

It began with the ground turning gray as if the light had forgotten color. The sky was burning itself to cinders. I ran outside with mouth agape and heart beating fast. Mt. Pinatubo had erupted. The ash fell like a downpour tipped over by a child cloaking everything in its snow. A puff of smoke, rock and ash ballooned into a giant cauliflower cloud overhead. It was dramatic; it was magmatic. The date was June 12, 1991, Mt. Pinatubo woke after half a century of quiet like a stranger banging at your door. To volcanologists, those who are quiet the longest are the least known. The volcano had hidden its youthful restlessness from view surrounded by thick forests, canyons of hardened sand and an eroded crater like a burst pustule. Place your hand on a canyon base rising hundreds of meters above you and you would have touched centuries. Pinatubo meant “made to grow” in English yet it crouched low on the horizon overshadowed in size by Mt. Arayat. People did not even know it was a volcano. It was where rebels and war deserters hid to escape. Only the Aetas who lived around it before the coming of the lowlanders knew its history of fire and mud as told in legends passed on about its protector, Apo Namalyari.

In stories, it is said the deity was held captive inside the volcano by lava until he could break free during an eruption. They offered Apo Namalyari gifts of a pig or a bottle of alcohol left in the crater. When Apo Namalyari became increasingly upset, they told the nuns living among them, who would then tell authorities. The vents around the mountain were huffing and puffing angry steam. It would be the Aetas who would suffer

the most when, marginalized as they already were, the volcano would change their lives taking away trees, erasing the villages and stunting the fertile land that could once easily yield rice. They would be forced to go to the lowlands to survive. I would see them huddled together in groups in Clark selling what little of the rootcrops that could grow in sandy soil.

The volcano's flickering consciousness began with little tremors like a quivering plate of Jell-O. There was a 7.8 earthquake the year before that shook its crust. In July 1990, I was 12 years old living in Angeles City and studying in Holy Family Academy. Students in blue and white uniforms knew what to do when the ground shook it was time to go under a safe place where nothing could fall on you. So under we went on wooden desks sculpted with graffiti from those who came before us. I would look up and see a carved cross with the words, "Jesus Loves You." Like Legaspi City, Angeles was slyly volcanic and devoutly Catholic. I prayed. When the moving ceased, legs moved in a flurry down the stairs except for me. Midway, I stopped and went back for my bag. What was so valuable inside for a 12-year-old she could not bear leaving it under rubble? A pink pencil case, sheets of stickers, letters, the miscellany of a young girl's life. It was a mistake to return but luck to have been able to go back safely. The school stood its ground. Baguio would not do the same. The place of my childhood summers after the earthquake would be reduced to a heap of crumpled concrete and steel.

Our house was three kilometers from Clark Air Base. They built Hensonville Homes in the 1970s as a popular place where American servicemen and their families rented bungalows to avoid the strict rules of the base. Childhood passed in years spent

knowing holidays that mixed Filipino parties with recreations of American celebrations. We marked Thanksgiving feasts in tropical heat. Blond neighbors baked whole turkeys in a land of chickens. Snacks were cookies made sweet by Tollhouse chocolate chips. Retired Americans took Filipina wives to live in retirement and cook pork barbeque during humid weekend afternoons. We were Filipinos but the base was another country we had no passport to. We could enter its world through the objects of the American life we wanted: ice cream in cartons, M&M candies, tough Pyrex glass containers, PikNik shoestring potatoes, a school table with metal legs, a television, Washington apples. I used to inhale the fresh scent of PX goods wondering why they smelled so clean not knowing that even that would end soon.

The eruption was not a surprise; there had been fair warning. Not that it mattered much because it would still be denied. The greater the disaster, the more the skepticism. Who wakes up being told that the puny volcano nearby their homes was about to explode? Who wants to be told that their lives are in danger? The Pinatubo reports were a ruse for the Americans to renegotiate the air base lease, they said in defense. They added, the volcano has never erupted in recent history. Even Cory Aquino was torn between calls for independence and wanting the United States to stay for the economy. The towns that lived beside Subic and Clark couldn't imagine the Americans leaving after almost one hundred years. Before Clark Air Base, it was Fort Stotsenberg in 1903. The lands were annexed from the city and chosen for the practical reason that it grew grass that could be eaten by cavalry horses. So it would be even when you know disaster is coming, nothing prepares you for when it happens: the end

of times, the fear of knowing there is no escape. Would the slate be wiped clean like the dinosaurs?

The ashfall would change the climate as Mt. Pinatubo blew its dust around the world; cooling temperatures and disrupting patterns for years. No plane could fly in because ash melts jet turbines and fuel nozzles. Ash, milled by pressure to be fine as powder from fragmented rock, would creep its way into telephones, electric power boxes, water and the air you breathe. It would fell trees and destroy roofs. Soft ash could absorb many times its weight in water and strike like a hammer. A curtain of ash and hale blocked sunlight turning day into night. Most of all, on that day; the day of our Independence, on the day Emilio Aguinaldo waved the flag on the anniversary of its declaration— nothing more than an insurrection scribbled American historians— from the balcony of the Pamintuan house in Angeles City was the day a volcano drove the Americans away after one hundred years. In 1899, Antonio Luna, Emilio Aguinaldo and Gregorio Del Pilar watched a parade below that same balcony hoping they would win the war and in 1991 maybe they did as the U.S. Army fled for their dear life. A volcano is borne from the sea and regurgitates the past. Our history is what happens in between explosions. But then again, I would like to think the volcano was cross at all of us. What took you so long folks? This is how it is done. There was no war, no negotiating with a volcano in gassy defiance.

This was why when an earthquake struck Pampanga on April 22, 2019, fissures in memory surfaced that tugged on 1990 and Mt. Pinatubo pulling them in together at the same moment. This time, no longer 12 years old, I was driving home, and the car

felt like it was rolling with a limp. The wheel refused to straighten instead it veered to its side. I stopped. A dense silence ensued as vehicles, bystanders, men and women in various states of undress tumbled out of their houses to wait for the shaking earth to finish. Again, there were the faces of disbelief I had seen before. For an instant it felt slow like crawling geologic time, I thought life had repeated itself. Would Mt. Pinatubo erupt again? There was the honking after, the waking up of stunned faces to call loved ones, the helplessness of receiving what they could not refuse. News of what happened to other places came fast. They said there were cracks in a new hotel, a grocery in wreck, a welcome arch collapsing, the airport was in shambles and a church's pillars deformed. I rushed home bracing for the worst instead found pencil lines branching out like a tree on a fence. We drove around Clark Air Base not knowing where to go. Clark was different now, revived with new money and promises. Where would there be food? A well-lighted place? Home was not safe again. The cars drifted as if in a Manila traffic jam. People did not want to stay home but chose rather the space of the open road than walls tumbling down around you.

There are souvenirs you inevitably keep when life, as you know it changes. Twenty-eight years after the fact, our enduring memento from Mt. Pinatubo is a white Hardwick enamel-coated oven in the small kitchen of the same house in Pampanga. Made by a company in Cleveland known for making cast-iron stoves for more than a century, it looks as old as it sounds with four burners for cooking and space for resting dishes in between while dominating the kitchen like a big kahuna. It was the type of oven you can cook a small foraging animal in; a milk pig, a turkey or cook a party for—

huge dishes that Americans like to cook family-style with their huge appetites. I wipe it clean of spills and stains with a rag and it is shiny again like a coin. This oven was free like the rest of the furniture at home which were leftovers from military families at the end of their tour of duties when it was time to go. The volcano changed everything. There was a gold rush that ensued as Americans left in a rush to leave the wealth of their tropical lives behind in the aftermath of Mt. Pinatubo. Quick money was to be made in looting abandoned cars, furniture, gadgets, doors, toilet bowls and dollars tucked away on a rainy day but when the rainy days came the only thought was to bolt. It surprised me to know many years after that my father fought for this oven during the mayhem. He wrangled it from a neighbor who was filching a house bare. An unlikely detail given he is soft-spoken; the man who lets someone take his parking space and waved off confrontation saying he was full from lunch and it would upset his stomach. Those were times of survival when even ovens needed saving.

We left Angeles to escape the cloud that loomed over us like a beacon but not before taking photos like tourists. I stood outside the black metal gate wondering if we would survive. Would we die frozen in time? I remembered the documentary on Pompei. Ash on ash on ash encased the last traces of life under a rumbling Mt. Vesuvius. Perhaps I would be immortalized for all eternity watching the cartoons from the local air base channel, sitting cross-legged on the floor clutching a doll. Curious and naïve, it disappointed me I saw nothing as cinematic as doomsday scenarios on television. It was because as a child; my parents kept me from it. The city was in ruin but I was too young to remember. At an exhibit, many years after when Clark would

finally have its own airport and things seemed to go well again, I would stand in front of familiar photos on sintra board. An American visual artist had recreated scenes from the eruption in miniature as if seen from a detached eye. No people but brown muck inundating life on film and a model of a volcano gauzy with special effects. A disaster movie of a calamity I lived through felt disconcerting even after all these years. What my young self did not see though but would know better through archives were the hundreds of people killed and loved ones swept away and gone missing. Houses and cars tossed and drowned in ash laden in water. Raging lahar caused by typhoons would destroy bridges to make passages impassable. Hundreds of people bereft. Was it because I was too young or did the brain erase the traumatic memories? Did my brother and I play with toys with our heads bowed as we inched our way out of the city? Did I look away from the outside the car as we passed by? Yet I remembered the car we rode or possibly an amalgam of a version of it based on childhood memories.

From standing outside the house, my next memory would be us sitting on my Lolo's sala on wooden seats at his office in Calumpit, Bulacan. The seats were not padded, and it hurt to stay too long. They walked around me, talked above my head of plans, on what to do and where to go. My father would try to get a job in Manila. I did not understand what was going on. We left with nothing yet the gray cloud followed us there no less ominous than when we first saw it. This time it was under my mother's hometown. The day before the explosion an aunt would paint Mt. Pinatubo's summit still at ease before vomiting scarred its tip. In colors of blue, green and red leaves, the mountain did not look inflamed. She like the others there had taken a jeep to go

becoming unlikely volcano tourists wanting to see the action happen up close. She would donate the painting to a museum; a gift of memory in color. I have no memory to afford beyond these words and the desire to make a chronology of events which when it comes down to it is really a map to a kind of topography of life.

The disaster forced my family to move to Manila while my father was to stay behind to work, devastated as the economy was, he could not find a job in the big city. It changed patterns when I should have lived my whole life in Pampanga. I saw my father only on weekends. Would I have been a different person had I stayed? Leaving it made me forget the language I grew up in. I stopped speaking Kapampangan and then became too shy to utter it in a bad accent later on. The language left me as I left the place. My parents transferred me to a new school where everyone was better and smarter than I was. It seemed though I could tell my secrets by writing about it. On the weekly papers submitted to the guidance counselor in the all-girls school in Quezon City, I wrote: I am sad. I do not want to be here. Teachers asked classmates to befriend me to make me feel welcome. We had lost our home and were living with relatives. There was no time to say goodbye to friends when it came to leave. I lost them too. For a child, even a two-hour journey across expressways through farm fields to a city seemed too far away that is why phone calls were called long distance, I thought. These memories pointed to the time when my mother was still healthy and alive. There was no growing illness to speak of, no clock to run against. She still loved eating Washington apples as I remembered her to be the mother I grew up with not withered to the bone as she was after.

My father was only a little older than my age now when the disaster struck. In his twilight years, his failing memory has a knack for recalling facts about exploding volcanos. You could find him following stories of volcano warnings in the news. He would forget about the keys but recall which volcano exploded in Japan. Mt. Pinatubo was the second largest eruption in world history. Who would have thought you'd be there? They say its next eruption will be in the next 500 years though one can never be sure. Will its caldera fill up again as fast? Be it the next 50, 60 or even 100 years, I will long dead by then. My body burned to ash; the people I love long disappeared as their names add to markers carved in stone. No one will remember me like the untended graves littered with dry leaves I pass by during All Soul's Day. My childhood home will tumble to the ground. Geology will turn its wheel in the same direction to deposit layers on layers pushing shorelines away and redrawing landscapes as it did when it brought rocks and sand to as far as Manila Bay and Lingayen Gulf. To Mt. Pinatubo, my life would be not even a faint speck if it stretched its hands out wide but to me its life would be like sitting by the window of a bullet train as outlines blurred in and out of focus. It would repeat itself like sceneries of land, water and sky. Mt. Pinatubo will wake for another pyroclastic event to link to the patterns of repetition.

Everything I know will change in deep time yet, yet I believe the oven will survive. Its thick sheets of enameled cast iron and its burner used one way or the other: as armor, as roofing, as a weapon, as a shield, as protection should another apocalypse arrive. Even to carry on as a humble piece of shard like those displayed under glass cases in a museum. A hand will reach out to save it, recognize it from the ruins as my

father did, as I do now. A part of it will remain in those years in the future because it was meant to outlive and outlast – even the ashfall.