

## WATER MEMORY

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### About the Author

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## PREFACE

The creation of this project was made possible by the demolition of a one-kilometer row of houses occupied by informal settlers. The demolished area was then salvaged into a one-kilometer river dike in Barra Opol, Misamis Oriental.

Wala gabaha diri sa Cagayan de Oro, my father used to say when the TV and radios started blaring about an incoming level two flood back in 2011— a sentiment that was easily dismantled as a row of informal settlements collapsed before our eyes across our home and were carried away by the river amidst Typhoon Sendong, rendering our home muddied, flooded, and vulnerable around the bounds.



The author is in search of an image. Never mind that the attempt here is towards the imperceptible: the words scrawled, the letters strewn in favor of a new one, a better one, one that deems more fitting in the search of this image. She's writing the river as if she is propelled by borrowed mouths. Suppose everything has been written already. Suppose nothing new were to come out of writing this lyric. The river cannot stop itself from desiring. It prefers to write something new, perhaps in an attempt to rewrite itself anew, perhaps to find a better way for you to read it as it has let itself be known so far.

There was a time when no one feared these storms. With Cagayan de Oro situated on the northern-most part of Mindanao, our city was already populated by bodies of water swarming over bodies of land. If you look a little far ahead, you can see the mountains from where these bodies of water come from. We relied on the sturdy trees from Bukidnon to hold the soil of the city intact.



The author is grappling with a plethora of violent images. For one, there was a girl. She was 13, the same age as the author at the time of the flood. Her lungs were smothered with mud. She died choking on earth. It doesn't warrant a photograph yet her eyes stared back from the photograph, mute. A filmmaker once proclaimed that to photograph is to hunt. In *Si J'Avais Quatre Dromadaires* (1966), Chris Marker points his camera at a frail man in tattered clothes and makes him immortal. 'You aim, you fire, and click!' On an afternoon walk on the river dike across her house, the author aims her camera

Our town's inhabitants that used to possess a lax disposition to floods became frantic every time another announcement of an incoming flood would go on the news. We wouldn't just prepare for the blackouts or the flood; we would immediately swarm to the higher parts of the city, always geared towards survival with the mere mention of a possible flood. In the midst of a storm, the rest of us who have nowhere else to go would flock to the river dike and calculate the time for when the waters start to overflow. Some of us would simply cling onto rosary beads.



at a pile of clothes, hung on the rails to dry, and wonder what she has made immortal in taking these kinds of photographs. A photograph freezes a moment. A photograph stands for itself. It evades accountability: unashamed and unyielding. To look at a photograph is to accept the ticking hours of one's imminent death. The photograph's final realm, to paraphrase Barthes, is time—the intractable

Kung naa’y Chocolate Hills sa Bohol, naa’y Chocolate River sa Cagayan de Oro—a sentiment often uttered in jest by its inhabitants. Naa’y panahon na tin-aw pa ang suba sa atbang sa among balay. In my search for the image of the once pristine river, I always refer to my father’s stories—a man born and raised in this city since the 1950s. Matod pa niya, nagsugod ang pagkahugaw sa suba adtong 1990s, kung kanus’a nagsugod ang illegal mining sa Bukidnon para makakita og makakuha ug bulawan, gravel, o sand.



‘that-has-been.’ When the time runs out, they will continue to live inside a frame. The author hung onto photographs while the pages hid their bodies. The photograph asks, until when are you going to hold onto something invisible and elusive? To which the author responds, how can I stop form from wrestling you out of your context? What remains of your body when it is stripped of its pretenses?

The history of Cagayan de Oro River's murkiness can be traced back to two events—the onset of hydraulic mining for gold in the 1990s and the increasingly massive deforestation in Bukidnon since the 1930s. Bukidnon serves as the “headwater province” in Mindanao (Raluto 497). The Cagayan de Oro River comes from Talakag, Bukidnon and trickles down to Cagayan de Oro in Misamis Oriental (498). As people living in the low-lying areas of Misamis Oriental, whatever happens to Bukidnon is bound to have consequences to those its body touches on. We become stakeholders of the activities from a faraway place, simply because we live in a place where its body touches upon ours (499).



What else can be seen if we were to cast away the signifier from the signified? When we are pointing, what are we pointing at? As in a dream, like Barthes, I know it is she, but I do not see her features; I dream about her, I do not dream her. To be held as witnesses, one must refuse to look away from the terror

The Cagayan River, whose limb is the Iponan River across our home, used to bear the name “Kalambaguasasahan,” a term coined due to the influx of Limbago trees by its riverside. This name was eventually changed into “Cagayan de Oro River” during the Spanish occupation, a name that literally translates to “River of Gold” (Mack). Where there’s gold, there’s a conquest. Perhaps one can say that this city and its “river of gold” is rivetted by a curse. In this city whose bodies of water were made murky from these pillages for gold, sediment, and gravel, the gold has become a curse that left these once pristine waters brown. Within it dwells a disease swarming its neighboring bodies.



before them. In coming close to speech, tongues burn. In coming to writing, papers rise in flames. In making present the absent, one is haunted by its ghosts. In Claude Lanzmann’s refusal to defer to archival footages of the Holocaust in *Shoah* (1985), the absent becomes palpably present as the ghosts

There's another entrance to this story: we can begin with the imposition of the Regalian Doctrine during the American Occupation in the 1900s which states that "all agricultural timber, and mineral lands of the public domain, waters, minerals, coal, petroleum, and other mineral oils, all forces of potential energy and other natural resources of the Philippines belong to the State, and their disposition, exploitation, development, or utilization shall be limited to citizens of the Philippines" (Raluto 499).



were allowed to roam. Even songs are haunted by ghosts. In Shoah, a child's life was spared for his talent in singing. Nothing sets him apart from the bodies that were thrown in the burial site as he sung for the ones burying the bodies; his life becomes contingent with his talent to quell the murderers' boredom. He hums a tune to pass the time while his brethren lie naked, dead, and contorted to contain

The Regalian Doctrine paved the way for a systematized deforestation brought about by the Timber License Agreement (TLAs) between private entities and individuals who own huge acres of land— a contract which binds them for 25 years which can then be renewed for another 25 years after the contract has ended (Raluto 500). We can see the apex of these deforestations during the martial law regime, with Ferdinand Marcos Sr. placing 90% of the Philippines’s forest lands under TLAs (500).



the trench. Can a disaster be spared with a lyric? Decades after the tragedy, the child-turned-adult hums the tune again. The trenches were already overgrown by greeneries (his brethren stood on the peripheries of the frame, mute). He continues humming. The leaves and overgrown grasses flutter in the wind. ‘Here’ is a place that continues to be haunted by the past. You can see their flesh in the blooming forest, audible in the river’s swerves. ‘Here’ is where we began. ‘Here’ is where we are

Deforestation leaves us with two kinds of aftermaths: on the hills, the lands erode; on low-lying provinces, we are devoured by floods (Raluto 504). With increasing severity, deforestation will also degrade our watersheds. Lush forests make for efficient watersheds. If we were to take this away, this murkiness, becoming, is what we're left to live with.



headed. 'Here' is what we leave behind. The everyday is an aftermath of this place called 'here'—the everydayness of everyday— this place where your feet are firmly planted, where your eyes can only drift, where your hands are rested as you read these words. Every movement is both arrival and departure to and from 'here.' And when one dies, an epitaph: 'Here lies \_\_\_\_.' Even in death, one cannot leave the unrelenting presence of 'here.' Your flesh will rot and decay and become fertilizer for the lush trees and greeneries in the cemetery. You fatten the worms with your body and remnants of

In the year 2000, it is declared that no single major river in the Philippines is considered safe—one cannot drink from it, seek food from it, nor wade safely through it (Raluto 514). Dead rivers, or rivers whose biotic resources in its ecosystem have died, were estimated to afflict 50 rivers in the Philippines, one of them being the river across our home. They were either killed by heavy chemical pollution or siltation (514). In a city populated by rivers, chances are unlikely that you will find a clean river here. Murkiness dwells in the bodies of water of this city.



you will spread across the Earth. Trees are cut to serve as paper and papers are written to tell stories that couldn't be uttered. And sometimes, these utterances might reach someone in the faraway 'here,' finding solace in these words, affirming that in this monotonous, grueling, day-to-day battle with the 'here,' someone has lived to tell this story. In looking at the aftermath, the photograph, one can affirm:

You cannot fight fire with fire, but the waters here can ravage its own body, can turn against itself. Hydraulic mining—this is how you mine in this city of gold. By using high-pressure jets of water, you can break apart the land to rid it of the dirt and sediment from its precious ores (Alave). With increased vigor, the dirt and sediments become part of the river bed; a resting place made murkier and murkier every day.



they have existed. In the cracks of the dike's pavement, the overgrown weeds and shrubberies, they are here. God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. Content, he names his creations 'beautiful' and scampers away. There are horrors better left behind from the realm of aesthetics. Amidst a flood, survivors scamper to words, images, videos, and sound recordings to show you the cruel reality of what has been done to them. In an archived sound recording somewhere on

Attempts have been made to stop the illegal mining in Cagayan de Oro after the deluge of the flood in 2011. In the process, two people were murdered—Higaonon tribe leader Datu Sandigan Fausto Orasan and fellow anti-mining advocate Danilo Linsagan (Lagsa). They were both former miners who turned their backs against their old practices, choosing instead to honor their ancestral lands. Even in salvation lies death and even in death lies a potential for salvation.



the Internet, a ghost shrieks for visibility. The author admits: I named your horror ‘beautiful’ because I cannot live without you unless I put you in a frame. When you leave, I fumble with syntax. I fumble with context. On the Mindanawan mythology of the Cagayan de Oro River the world is doomed to end when the giant golden fish finally surfaces from the gold-ridden cave it guards. What will remain of this myth once it is divested of its beauty? Will my corrugated language still reach you? Terror

Cases have been filed, miners have been arrested, and expensive equipment have been confiscated (Lagsa). For a few months, the river was slowly regaining its former beauty. Yet after a few more months, the efforts have seemingly dwindled and the river was once again murky to its depths. Up to this day, the river ebbs and flows with silt perceptibly floating on the surface. Perhaps we are condemned to search for beauty in this murkiness. Perhaps a form of beauty can be salvaged from these ruins.



arrests, abounding paralysis. This lyric is a cocoon of a voice made hollow by its empty proclamations. In Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983), a strip of film was burned to show his image of happiness— if they don't see happiness in the picture, at least they'll see the black. Will his words suffice for the author to see you in the dark? Can you see her looking at what she cannot see? How powerful can an author be? In

A decade ago, government officials have declared that the river's murkiness will all be safely tucked behind the pages of history. Petitions have been made for the imposition of the Temporary Environmental Protection Order (TEPO) in 2013 (Sunstar). Arrests have been made to several Chinese miners who were working without a permit (Sunstar). Will a piece of paper suffice to clear the river of its murkiness? Years after the first disaster, a one kilometer-row of houses occupied by informal settlers were demolished, reduced to ruins, and were replaced by a one-kilometer river dike.



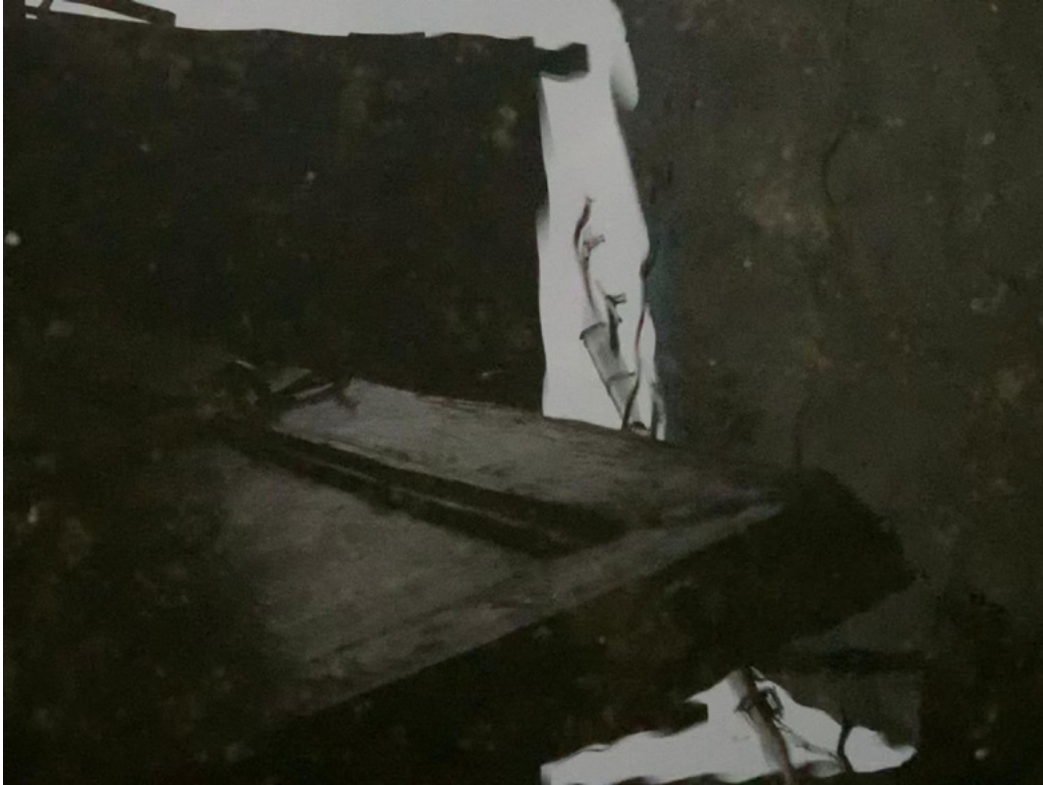
Wisława Szymborska's Photograph from September 11, she refuses to add a last line to give life to the falling man from the building. In *24 Frames* (2017), Abbas Kiarostami animates the static, the dead—the photograph—by vesting them with limbs—images made to move, to record a moment that hasn't transpired. Fiction blurs the reality of the dead— by animating the dead, they are bestowed with a

Where do these muddied waters figure in the scheme of our histories? Before the beginning there was blue. “Water is what we make it”; it is how we imagine it (Neimanis 157). Suppose the river were to speak: in your mind I am there yet placeless. I am there but not here. History is a body located in place and time as should be water. Yet what does one do with a river made murky and muddied through decades of pillages? Will the ones who pass papers into laws figure dirt into our histories? Even before the lyric, an impending repetition. Despite of the lyric, an impending ravishing.



body. Somewhere in the world, there is a window; somewhere in the world, the dead play with life. The camera alienates the author from the world, to echo Sontag. She peers through the lens of what the river cannot otherwise look at, safe and calm in its seeming unreality. Before her is not a calamity but a series of potential photographs. She takes an image as the ghosts applaud on the peripheries.

“We rewrite memory much as history is rewritten.” In the end, this is still a story made by hands. An image of the pristine river under the scorching heat, feet wading on slippery rocks, the sun glistening on the water’s folds. This is my image of happiness. In this lyric, an unmooring of imaginaries. In the future, a continuous unmooring, even as the lyric ends.



Perhaps these words will be enough to stand for the unknown lives that were stolen from her. Here are the images she caught and it's up to you to handle the shards. In writing these pages the author has bestowed the calamity with a body. I'm sorry that I cannot do anything with the cracks, she says. A porous yet bounded body must suffice. Now look at my eyes and show me what you're hiding. Tell me that this attempt can restore me. Lend me your hand and tell me we won't jump again into a repetition of this disaster. Now step into the water. My camera is ready.

## Notes

1. All images in this essay were taken either on the river dike or on the aftermath of a storm in Barra Opol, Misamis Oriental.
2. The anecdote about Korean and Chinese illegal miners were fact-checked in Bobby Lagsa's news article in *Inquirer.net*, titled "3 foreign firms sued for illegal mines," accessible at <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/314285/3-foreign-firms-sued-for-illegal-mines>.
3. The quotation "We rewrite memory..." was lifted from Chris Marker's film *Sans Soleil* (1983).

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