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Trunks and eyes

The ancestral tree clutched the dirty shore. Ancestral—so it was declared by the young government employees who 'found' it. Having looked at the evidence, they avow it is 'definitely' a century 'plus plus' old. The fresh-faced bureaucrats were thrilled to make out something so old, in a barrio so nondescript, a barrio of a town so bereft of anything antedating the day the Japanese soldiers torched nearly every single dwelling at the end of the Second World War.

I must digress right away from this narrative of the newly-recognized old tree, to remark that only three houses survived that arson. Standing improbably on their hardwood posts the diameter of ox-cart wheels, the houses seem to be the ancestral trees themselves, at least to those of the denizens who know that their town name, Batang, means 'floating tree trunk' in the language spoken in this enclave of the equatorial nation-archipelago. This is a town memorialising felled trees, therefore; trees cut down by men and storms even in that archaic time that is now impossible to conjure. Batang was to have been a mnemonic device for trunks adrift towards the sea. But, adrift, too, in the monochromatic flatness of a cancelled past, this placename has also annulled itself. Meaningless now, Batang is home to, for example, the earnest factotums who are scouring all 120 barrios of this town for signs of age. None of them has an ear for Batang's archaic register.

Still, the extraordinary monstrosity of the beach-clutching tree did alert them to the possibility of oldness along this ever-renewing coast. This tree, fortified by the rubbish that has been heaped around it for, well, perhaps a century, has produced tumours as big as basketballs all over its body, indeed as far down as the roots half-plunged into the heap of sand, compost and crushed seashells that it inhabits. The bulbous stretchings-out of the tree skin are also suspended from the heavy overhanging branches. A tree completely covered with giant, scaly, popped-out eyes. A figure quite thoroughly tortured, it ruptures the seamless living entirely in the present. It must have taken many many decades to bring such form into being. I agreed with the kids. Here, indeed, is a message from the past.

Slit, shit, and flower

And so, the first time I smelled a whiff of excrement apparently exuded by this monster—human faeces, to be accurate, and sure enough the locals confirmed the specificity of this olfactory knowledge—it seemed very much the medium of the message. My zealous companions thought, however, that the scent might be the logical trace of the territory the tree occupies. A hundred years of a barrio sweeping shit into the interstices of the cancerous globes distending the root system, why, this is certainly enough to produce a distinguishing pong. The kids were wrong this time.

Grizzly and comely barrio women had begun to offer their cackling, scepticism, and words of wisdom to the theatre we—quack archaeologists—caused to form around the old tree. They observed that the tree is in glorious bloom, and they hooted. This flowering lasts for such a short

time, a week or less, that sometimes it is only the faeces smell that reminds the neighbourhood of that time of year. They screeched and giggled. The shit scent is the flowers'. They chortled, watching us take it in. The tree helps women give birth. Slits have been incised into its trunk by them, their mothers and grandmothers and who-knows-who-else before that, to allow extraction of sap. The tea from this sap assists in the contractions during labour. Or something. The women were wary of our possible disdain, and started drifting away. Enough entertainment from curious visitors for the day.

Among the three or four who stayed, was one who said, this is why the tree is so gnarly. Each slit makes the tree react. It is definitely hurt. Soon after the incision, that part from where the sap flowed would swell. The rounded swelling will be permanent. It seems that a kind of grotesque reversal of pregnancy occurs. The tree is a painful record of births.

The sap is best when the tree flowers, when the air is subtly perfumed by human excrement.

Sap and laughter

I wrote a book soon after having learned of this tree, thriving hideously at this one barrio of my hometown with a meaningless name. Kalumpáng, the tree is called. The same name as the river at whose delta Batang grew as a town, while it fossilized the memory of drifting tree trunks. In the course of writing this book, there was another chance encounter—with one more cackling, sceptical, wise woman—occasioned by the young government surveyors who, even as I write today, are not quite done with their project of finding ghosts among the living. They met the midwife while interviewing a 102 year old woman, already old during the big fire; both women lived in a single house. A meeting with me was arranged.

In the barren interior of their clapboard home, I encouraged the midwife to haul out details about the uses of kalumpáng sap—dagtáng kalumpáng in the old language—for childbirth. She was surprised. She has hardly heard of such usage. What she knows, she said, is that dagtáng kalumpáng is the phrase for describing the 'show', the sap-like fluid that issues from a woman's vulva signalling the imminence of birth. She chuckled. She seemed to think I should be minding things more in keeping with the writer's craft. 'Culture', perhaps? Politics! That's what writers are for. As for herself, well, everyone knows what she knows, she said.

Meanwhile, her 102 year old great-great-grand aunt cackled, toothless.

Cackling

The book that displayed, in print, such words as shit and 'show' in an archaic tongue, and which was written with a surprised, although perhaps unwise spirit, was quite thoroughly rejected in my hometown.

Cackling now, I smell shit. Inhuman, fetid.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Marian Pastor Rocas.