JONEIL ADRIANO

CONSTELLATIONS

My grandfather passed away on Easter weekend. I found out just as I had finished watching *Postcards from America*, the film loosely based on the autobiographical writings of David Wojnarowicz. One of the scenes near the end of the film depicts David watching his lover dying of AIDS in a hospital room. David thinks about how hearing is the last of the senses to go before death. In those moments when the two of them—David and his lover—were left alone by the nurses, David would whisper into his lover's ear, instructing him that should he see a light, or feel something warm, he should move towards it. If, on the other hand, there was nothing but cold darkness, David told his lover to imagine a state of total calm, like that point in the horizon when sea and sky, time and space meet.

When my dad called to give me the news of Lolo's death, at three in the morning, I didn't pick up the phone on purpose. Instead, I curled up in bed and pulled the covers tight around me. I watched *Postcards* rewinding in my VCR and listened to my dad's voice fill the empty living room through my answering machine. He called again two minutes later, but this time, he didn't leave a message. When my dad called a third time, I finally got the courage to pick up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Pablo."

Dad's voice was still calm and composed. But if you were listening carefully, you would have sensed an unmistakable tone of uneasiness, one that was less pronounced two days earlier, when he called to tell me that Lolo was drifting in and out of consciousness, that Lolo was having difficulty remembering the names of those around him, that Lolo's prognosis was not good.

Dad spoke to me like I was my answering machine, using almost exactly the same words from his message just minutes earlier. There was that same initial hesitation before each sentence, the same monotone recitation, the same unsteady inflections at the same words. I knew him well enough to know that he rehearsed what he had said. We were both compulsive that way. He had probably left the same message to everyone he could think of. He probably even believed, deep down, that if he said those words enough times that they might form a wall, abstracting the horrific events unfolding half a world away until they could no longer make him feel vulnerable.

"Your mom can't stop crying," he told me. He asked me to call her and gave me her number in the Philippines, twice. Then he asked me to repeat the number back to

him. When I couldn't get past a busy signal on the other end, he became anxious. He told me to keep trying because he was really worried about her. The truth was: I knew that Mom had all the support she needed from our extended family. My bigger concern was my father, who was all alone in our house in California, hundreds of miles away from his children. Surrounded by darkness and neighbors he hardly knew, he couldn't be near my mother in her time of need, and he was forced to communicate to people in far-flung corners of the globe through wiring and plastic. The world must have felt incredibly immense, and his presence so tragically singular. Dad would never have let on that he also needed someone to help him at that moment.

My younger sister Emmalline was convinced that Lolo must have felt the same way as he lay on that hospital bed: alone. He, too, must have felt so small and incredibly insignificant. After all, he had been devastated when our family left him behind in the Philippines. A few years later, Lola Rosa (his wife) died. During the twilight of his life, Lolo only saw my mother in those hazy days after a stroke. Sometimes he woke up in the hospital convinced he was in someone else's house. He flew into a white rage when the nurses tried to stop him from going home. The hospital always felt hostile and alienating that way: the tubes and machines frightened him. He refused medication and treatment, even when it was to help him cope with the pain. I can only speculate about the extent of abandonment he must have felt in his death bed. I wonder what I would have whispered into his ear if I had been the one at his side shortly before he died.

Emmalline was much closer to Lolo than I was. She was the one upon whom he lavishly flung his affections. Naturally, she took his death hardest. When she was younger, she always said a prayer for him before she went to bed. And then one day she stopped inexplicably. She doesn't even remember the day she stopped; she only remembers a before and an after. When Lolo first became ill, she tortured herself for having stopped praying at all. This last time around, Mom asked her to pray for Lolo, but in my sister's hectic routine of school and work and exams she forgot to do so. Emmalline won't admit it, but the fact that she brought it up with me at all, suggests she must have felt that she had failed Lolo somehow, or worse, that she was responsible for his death.

The night Lolo died, dad also spent a considerable amount of time tracking Emmalline down. When my dad finally found Emmalline at a friend's house, she hurried back to her apartment to be alone. This was two, maybe three in the morning. Less than a mile away from her apartment, a large black object—she thinks a raven, maybe a bat—was flying straight for her windshield. When it was about thirty feet away, the thing suddenly veered to the right and flashed her its chest and belly. By then the object was glowing white. She lost track of it as it disappeared among the trees. Shivering, she felt a very fulfilling sense of internal calm.

I'm in a plane, headed for the Philippines. If you have a good sense of geography—and chances are, because you're an American you don't—you would know that we are flying west over the Pacific Ocean. From this high, the sweeping curve of the earth is still only a suggestion. The blue canvas stretched out for what seemed like forever, where it eventually met the sky. If you looked up high enough, you could see star light fighting through the last vestige of day. Emmalline and my dad are directly to my left, sleeping.

All three of us have been on this flight before, but seventeen years earlier, heading in the opposite direction, to California. Back then, I asked my dad if the vast expanse of white clouds below us was snow. Too proud to admit to his son that he didn't have knowledge of the world in its entirety, my dad nodded yes.

In a few hours, the white and blue would turn into lush, green terraced landscape, segmented into small plots for cultivating rice. Mother will be composed. She will be at the airport waiting with Jeffrey. Dad and I will be bearing greetings, letters, cards, messages of hope scripted hastily by relatives scattered throughout America.

By the time Lolo died, I would already know Jeffrey for nearly a year, several weeks having passed since our last break-up. In such a short amount of time, Jeffrey and I had built a complex relationship of dependency and repulsion, complicated by my need to prepare for a looming dissertation. He was both my best friend and a lover, but never both at the same time. His expansive empathy was absolutely intimidating.

Mom and Dad, on the other hand, knew very little about Jeffrey, even less of our history together. The picture they have of him is colored by the phone calls I made to them only when the fights Jeffrey and I had were especially exasperating. To their credit, they held back their surprise when I told them Jeffrey wanted to be supportive in my time of need, even if it meant having to take a different flight arriving two hours earlier.

At the airport, waiting for the arrival of the plane with Dad, Emmalline, and me on board, Mom had very little trouble spotting Jeffrey, who at 6'3" and with fiery red hair shaved close to the scalp, towered like a light house above the sea of black-haired Filipinos crowding the doors outside customs.

Jeffrey was unchaining his bicycle when I first saw him. I was on my rollerblades, drunk, and waiting for the light on Greenwich Avenue to turn green so I could cross Sixth

Avenue. My head was giddy with excitement. The eye contact was innocent at first, and so were the initial hesitant smiles. At one point, I even thought he might have been laughing at me. But he kept stealing glances and smiling, and he just looked so goofy. None of his clothes matched. He didn't seem to be in any hurry to undo the bike chain, so when the light finally turned green, I took off down Eighth Street thinking that I would never see him.

But Jeffrey was on his bike following me. He was actually following me! It would be one of those fateful moments in his life, I later learned, when he chose to confront, rather than avoid.

The closer Jeffrey got, the more I started to panic. I didn't know what I was going to say, so I started rehearsing pick-up lines and thought about all the possibilities: Is he really following me? Should I be the first to say something? What will I say if he asks me to go over to his apartment?

In the end, our first interaction was nondescript. He turned at a stop light, I decided to follow. He saw me following and turned around to meet me. We exchanged greetings, pleasantries, names, then phone numbers. Just before we parted, he told me that he loved the way I smiled. He called me that night and left a really long, rambling message on my answering machine that I played over and over and over again. For days. The sound of Jeffrey's voice reverberating against the walls was very soothing. When I closed my eyes, I pretended he was sitting on the couch next to me.

On our first date, Jeffrey said he was fifteen years older than I. I found this shocking at first, not because our ages were so disparate, but because he didn't look even close to being 39. I thought he was 32 at most, and on his bike, wearing a white and brown Hawaiian shirt and a fluorescent orange fisherman's hat, he looked even younger. As the night progressed, I found that the age difference gave us a lot to talk about, and share. There was a distance we had to traverse, something for us to do.

We ended the night under the string of lights lining the Williamsburg Bridge. Watched by a partly cloudy sky and serenaded by the East River, our arms and shirts and lips and jeans disappeared into a mass of knots, until a group of teenagers chased us apart by hurling unopened soda cans.

This is how I choose to remember Lolo. I was probably six years old at the time. He woke me up at some ungodly hour, dragged me out of bed and dressed me. We walked out the back door. Everyone else was still sleeping, and for the next hour or so, we walked down a gravel path—he barefoot and I in flip-flops. We reached the rice paddies before dawn, making sure to be as noisy as possible in order to scare away the snakes. As we sat on

raised earth above the flooded pits, Lolo showed me various constellations in the sky: The Three Kings, the Three Sisters, the Bag of Charms. He didn't know what a "Big Dipper" was. I also remember the stars, bright and vivid as if they had dropped out of a dream.

Then we sat there and watched meteorites streak across the sky. He told me that those flashing lines of light were stars dying and falling to earth. Sometimes, he told me, the stars burned up completely before they reached the ground. At other times, he said, the stars would hit the ground still glowing like massive embers able to destroy entire houses.

"Really?" I asked incredulously.

For the rest of the day, I pondered, in a way only six-year-olds do, what it must have been like to discover an immense five-pointed star—like what they put on top of the tree in Rockefeller Center, only hundreds of times bigger—still luminous and lodged in front of someone's house. I imagined a tall, dignified woman with long grey hair, much like Lola Rosa, scratching her head as lots of young kids milled about excitedly. After the initial shock of finding such a gaudy, over-sized Christmas ornament buried in her front yard, I also imaged that she must have felt incredibly thankful for being miraculously spared. Or maybe she felt distraught enough to curse God for playing such a tacky but vicious joke on her.

Jeffrey is looking at pictures from Lolo's funeral service. He is sitting on the swing-bench Lolo built decades ago. It's been three days since Lolo was buried. Inside the house, Mom and Dad are haggling with the neighbors over how to divide up the land. They're being very loud, but they aren't angry with each other yet.

The pictures of the funeral are not very attractive, both because their quality was not remarkable, and because the intrusive camera had captured the mourners in private moments that were embarrassing to look at.

Lolo's face, however, seemed expressionless from every angle. His eyes sunken, skin draped around high cheekbones like old, ratty blankets. Liver spots formed a broken purple line across his forehead. And he was so thin. He had lost so much weight. His shirt collar was way too large, gesturing back to the Lolo that filled out his clothes handsomely. That Lolo is not in any of the photographs Jeffrey now holds in his hands.

Dressed in his sheriff's uniform, that other Lolo once posed proudly next to his bicycle for Lola Rosa's camera. He never talked about those days, but Lola Rosa used to say that Lolo was so striking then. She wasn't exaggerating, because even in his old age, Lolo was still very good looking. He built his own house, spent most of his life tending to his rice paddies, and his body showed it. Age and years of chain-smoking did very lit-

tle to diminish the awe he commanded from those around him. He was probably the first man I had a crush on.

He must have been good with the ladies. That much I figured out on my own, once I began connecting the dots and realizing that all those other grandmothers were really his mistresses, and the uncles and aunts, bastard children. Lola Rosa, it turned out, never gave birth to my mom or her sister. And it explained why he felt so threatened by my aunt's lesbianism that he cut her off completely for four years, and why I was never fully honest with him.

Looking at his picture, his disarming smile slowly dissolves into a smirk of arrogance belonging to someone who knew the elastic limits of people who were too often forgiving.

And so this man, who lived through American and Japanese colonial regimes, who saw the promises of Quezon left unfulfilled by Marcos, who as a young man shadowed the Bataan Death March, darting between trees to shower American G.I.'s with cigarettes and bags of rice, was still the target of my resentment even in death. The love was still there, of course. It is just much easier for me to resent someone I love, than to love someone I resent.

"He looks like he died of AIDS," Jeffrey tells me.

"He had a stroke," I reply. But Lolo did look a lot like someone who might have died of AIDS. In a few years, as more and more people around me began to die, I began to realize that all dead people look remarkably the same regardless of the cause of their demise: they were always thinner, hollow, missing something. I wonder whether I would be haunted by those final images of Lolo when it's Jeffrey's turn to be buried.

"He looks like so many people I know," Jeffrey says as he fans out the pictures in his hand. He stares at me like we're playing poker.

"This place is so different now," I tell Jeffrey. "Everything feels smaller." The wood creaks as we swing back and forth. I point down the road, "That's where a drunk driver ran into a parked jeepney with my sisters inside. And down there used to live an old man with no legs."

The man had little stumps attached to his hips, and he dressed in tattered clothes he never washed. Every morning I used to sit on Lolo's swing bench and watch the man with no legs roll to the market two miles up the road, on something that resembled a skateboard. He would lie down on his stomach and push himself with black, calloused hands. Then, in the evening, I would see him rolling back.

I remember my mom passing along news of the legless man's death like so many