

## Paper Boats on the River

by Roger Fantonial Garcia

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Sunday, 2 pm

Dear Chewew,

I sit on a boulder beside the river, under the bridge, here in Taguanao. I write about the day when Tatay and Mom brought us here twenty years ago to touch a river for the first time. You cried when Yaya dipped your feet in the cold water that early morning. But Melchezedich, our treasure-hunter uncle who prided himself well-versed with gold, entertained us with his story about the giant golden fish trapped under the bed of Cagayan River. Mom was spreading boiled *camote* and *cardaba* on the brown *romblon* and Tatay was wafting smoke from the *tulingan* turning golden over the coals.

I thought you understood Uncle Melchezedich's story. You were eight and could not walk, talk, read and write. I was six and didn't understand how bacteria could eat your brain when you were still a baby and paralyse you all your life. But this I already wrote about somewhere.

Uncle said that when the river was still narrow and shallow, the golden fish strayed to the river and never got out. After many years, the river became wider and deeper and the fish also grew with it trapping itself for good. It was the first thing I investigated when Mom brought us to San Agustin Cathedral near Carmen because Uncle said that was where the head of the fish was stuck. Its tail is in Macabalan, at the mouth of the river where the seaport is. Oro, as the folks baptized the fish, has scales made of gold and on its head is a *batobalani* attracting heaps of more gold.

Mom said that "the city trembles every time Oro moves."

There used to be a rumor about priests disappearing in the Cathedral—siphoned through a secret waterhole at the back of the church. Mom would use the story to warn me not to go somewhere else except the Gaston Park which was our favourite playground in the 90s. You always sat on Mom's lap and watched me play.

The secret waterhole would appear as motif in another version of the tale told by my teacher in grade school. The story is about a criminal sentenced to death long before the Spaniards came. The criminal had gills in his ears; he could breathe thru the aqua labyrinth. Perplexed by the mystery of the waterhole, the Datu of the village would grant the criminal his life only if he'd explore beyond that hole and come out alive. They waited and waited but the criminal did not come out of the hole.

Instead, he surfaced near the river's opening to the sea. He told the people what he saw: a giant golden fish.

“Why won't you get the gold from the fish once and for all?” I asked Uncle.

“The gold is not to be touched. Fool's gold! Anyone who attempts to do that dies.”

Fired with fascination, I would study all available versions of Cagayan de Oro's legend of origin hoping to reconstruct the Ur (original) for my college thesis. I would drop the myth of the old fish and take the rather realistic fifteen versions of Cagayan de Oro's legend. According to some versions, Cagayan is derived from the Bukidnon word *kagayhaan*, meaning place of shame since *gayha* means shame in Bukidnon. In a Meranao tradition, they refer to Cagayan de Oro as *kayaan*, meaning place of shame.

History and majority of the versions maintain that the ancient settlers of Kalambagohan, the former name of Cagayan de Oro, were the Bukidnon. The Meranao would raid and capture their village and drive them eight kilometres north from their first settlement—to a plateau here in Taguanao. Dr. Bula, my teacher in college suspected that the word may be a shortened version of *taguranao*: “hiding from the Meranaos.”

Here, they would train their men to recapture the village. When they were ready, an emissary was sent to inform the Meranao leader regarding the war, as was customary in ancient times. In the midst of their conversation, the emissary saw the Meranao princess whose beauty was unequalled all throughout the Mindanao Island. He reported to his Datu about the beauty that he saw. The Datu, yet to see the princess in person, readily fell in love with her and instead of waging war, proposed marriage. The Bukidnon army was put to shame and called the place *Kagayhaan*. The Meranaos called it *Kayaan*, a place where the Bukidnons were put to shame.

According to Spanish friars and linguists, Cagayan is derived from *carayan*, a proto-Austronesian word, meaning river since Cagayan de Oro is a riverine town and as is common to civilizations, people settle near bodies of water.

Chewew, I am sorry if this letter seems like a lecture. You see, your little brother now teaches in a university and has fallen into the habit of talking about peculiar things. I suppose you have heard about what the river did almost two years ago. Few days before Christmas, the river swept away thousands of lives, homes, properties, dreams. The color brown must have been how we looked from the sky for weeks. Floating in a sea of brown were logs coming down from the mountains.

The city was not prepared for such an epic flood. A flood washing away more than two thousand lives. So there came blaming: that the water's fury was unstoppable; that there were dredging facilities bought twelve years ago but were never used; that it was wrong in the first place to award parcels of land to the poor to be paid on a peso-peso basis and locate them along the

riverbank which the river would reclaim because it is its natural course; that a water magnate ordered the release of water from his dam; that there was no weather advisory; that the mayor, as rumor had it, was playing mah-jong on the night the tragedy happened, the same mayor who was awarded Doctor of Humanities by a university in the city awhile after the Huluga Caves vicinity, former settlement of ancient Cagayanons, was destroyed to build this bridge in Taguanao; that the illegal logging and small-scale mining in the mountains...

We belittled the river too much. It had to reintroduce itself in a manner we never imagined—dredging the silt out of the narrowing beds of our collective memory. Perhaps, Uncle Melchezedich's prophecy was true: we harm the river, it harms us.

When I saw my students back in January 2012, I understood that death changes us. No amount of heroism or volunteerism was celebratory enough to appease everyone's pain. To each his own. They were the generation doomed to remember a magical myth muddled with a tragic history and carry the responsibility of building their city once again.

I wonder what kind of stories we shall be telling as the story of our river evolves and flows from one generation to another. I hope it is the kind that teaches us to not to shave forests to grow houses, and build skyscrapers to touch the sky. How much past must we forget to embrace the future?

We all moved on from the tragedy. At least, tried to. Right now, the river is calm except for the laughter of three children bathing half naked under a timid sun. They glance at me occasionally probably thinking why a man must sit on a boulder, write, and stare on the other side. I wish to tell them I stare on the other side because maybe you are just there, running under the tall grass or hiding among the big rocks. Things you never did when we were kids.

Chewew, I am folding this letter into a boat—the fifteenth I have been making since that morning you didn't wake up and left us without goodbye. That was fifteen years ago. I can't promise to be here next October to write you a birthday letter. I am flowing with the current that will tide me over to places. Do not worry, I will touch every body of water I find, comforted that all waters in the world are one. In the meantime, I will watch this boat sail away. I hope it finds you before it gets tossed, soaked, and swallowed by the river.

Kindly comfort everyone there on the other side, everyone whose river of memory is always in danger of flowing to an ocean of forgetting. Assure them of one thing: your little brother remembers all.

Love,

R.