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| WRITING |

Fecund

Rae Rival

I live in a hundred-square meter house. Beside this house is a paradise. Half of this paradise is an open garage filled with junk. Half of it is a vacant lot that we have turned into a mini *bungkalan* area. There is a long clothesline, one end is tied to a nail hammered into our firewall and the other end is tied to the gate. Along the clothesline, I hang freshly-washed blankets and pin shirts under the morning sun. The vacant lot turns into a paradise at the break of dawn and I visit it between seven and nine in the morning.

“I’m fertile,” is my way of saying *be careful*. I made it very clear to my partner that I am no longer willing to get pregnant and give birth again. I am a mother of an only child and breastfeeding while battling post-partum depression, post-surgery recovery and keeping a full-time job is not something I am willing to go through again.

The way to this paradise is through our dirty kitchen. You walk past the sink, the stove sticky with soup and sauce drippings and past the broken washing machine. A calamansi tree greets us every time we open the back gate. It never stops bearing fruits. Every morning, we open the gate to dig a pit in the paradise. This is how we bury our fruit and vegetable peels and leftover food. The *kaning-baboy* has nourished this land. The lot used to be filled with cement, rocks and dry soil. It was impossible to cultivate but over the years, the compost pits have made the soil less barren. The calamansi tree started growing, then a couple of wild banana trees. In the front yard, there is an *atis* and guava tree. But here, in this vacant lot, you can pull out turmeric, pick oregano leaves and lemon grass. There is a pomelo tree that never bears fruit, an occasional pumpkin patch that blooms with *bulaklak ng kalabasa* and dries up after.

Fertility is always associated to women’s ability to get pregnant, to carry another human being in her womb. If we, however, watch nature and its ability to be fertile without bearing fruit, new meanings can bloom.

I never saw the lot as something beyond a vacant lot. The turmeric, pomelo, banana, squash grew without anyone planting them. We hire Mang Danny, the village gardener, to cut the grass that would grow as tall as our knees. He would cut a banana tree and trim the thorny branches of the pomelo tree. The lot belonged to an aunt working overseas. One day, my son and I started uprooting the weeds. He started enjoying the morning sun in his back, clearing out a patch and the tactile activity. Every morning, we would uproot weeds with our bear hands. The early morning wind energized us. Sometimes, we used a shovel to dig out the roots, or a small rake, or a hoe. We kept uprooting day after day until no grass was left.

Soon, we installed a hammock. My son loved the rhythm of our little paradise, swinging to and fro in his *duyan* as millipedes crawled under our feet. We began digging and raking plots. We began planting seeds but only the *pechay* seeds grew. When you visit the lot at the right moment, you will know what I’m talking about. Or perhaps, I am the only one who can see it. Perhaps, I am the lot. Barren, cemented and undecided for years. A wild tree would grow from time to time but never because I cultivated it or planted it on purpose. But I continue to bear calamansi fruits even when it’s too hot or even when the typhoons won’t stop.

There is a gardener, a stranger that comes once in a while to trim unwanted grass from growing too thick. One day, I started visiting myself, seeing myself. I held the weeds, felt the moss on my feet and knew that even if I uproot them, they will continue to grow. The fertilizers that we have buried in my soil have finally turned me fecund. They used to be pungent and rotten but underneath the soil, they feed upon the earth and the earth breathes unto them. Suddenly, I saw how many turmeric plants we could harvest. The possibility of harvest.

When the *pechay* seeds started growing, I knew that the lot has changed. It has accepted me. That rays of the sun shining upon us spoke to me. Whenever I feel it on my back, the light communicates what it has been telling other mothers in the past: I could survive. I could weather. I am fecund with wild grass, turmeric fatten under my soil because the rain visits every now and then. I am the pomelo tree that bears thorns instead of fruits.