ESSAY

Banana Legs

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"Manananggal" by Vanesa Erjavec (illustration)

Tint Journal, no. (), www.tintjournal.com

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I think I was in fourth grade when I first read the story of Cupid and Psyche. I was nine and I resonated strongly with Cupid. When he set down the ground rules of their marriage, it made sense in my head. Asking the person you married never to look you in the face — completely reasonable. Especially for someone like me who hated the way he looked.

Till now, I always tell my friends, “I know I look decent. Passable. But take each individual body part and the faults become a *lot* clearer.” By this, I mean thinning hair, a wide forehead, a round face, eyes set too deep inside my skull, a height stuck at five foot three. There was even a time when I was made fun of because of my curly hair. “Kulot salot,” my classmates would say. Its literal translation would be “kinky-haired pest.”

Now I know better than to equate those features to something undesirable, because objectively they’re not. They’re still features of a normal human body.

But when you’re in fourth grade, kids could be *really* mean. Around the mid-2000s, there weren't a lot of self-love mantras circulating yet for kids my age to consume. I got picked on a lot. To some extent, I agreed with my bullies’ critiques.

Which was why I related so much to Cupid. I thought that, if I had that much power to tell the love of my life never to look at my face, I would use it.

Personally, I would now categorize their dynamics as toxic. Cupid was what kids these days would call a sad boy. In the story, he used his power to control Psyche’s actions. Not really someone I aspire to be at the age of twenty-four.

But when you’re 9 years old, you would tend to interpret it as an act of true love. Demanding complete trust in the person you were married to? That seemed reasonable. Cupid provided for Psyche’s needs. She lived in a beautiful home, had elemental spirits as servants, and wore amazing dresses. She should have been thankful.

So, when I read further and learned that Psyche went against Cupid’s wishes, I got frustrated at her. And when Cupid left her, which was where the story ended in our textbook, I thought, “Serves you right.” In my mind, she was the abuser. She violated Cupid’s only wish in return for his love.

Cupid surely had his reasons not to show his face. Like me, it was possible that he was ugly. It might also be true that he was a monster. Or maybe, just maybe, he was also very, very insecure. Whichever the case, he wasn’t ready to show himself. And for Psyche to violate his wish like that — that was betrayal.

It was a good story.

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Cupid and Psyche's tale made me more engrossed in mythology, urging me to read more Greek tales. I read the story of Orpheus striking a deal with Hades to have his wife back. I rooted for Demeter as she looked frantically for Persephone, the way Sisa did for her children Basilio and Crispin (characters from the Filipino revolutionary novel *Noli Me Tangere*). I pored over the stories of Daphne and Hyacinthus turning into plants, which had more drama than the plant legends from the Philippines. I gasped when Hephaestus caught his wife Aphrodite in bed with Ares, a kind of mythological scandal absent from my local lore.

I fell in love with the supernatural nature of these foreign stories. More than that, I was hooked on the drama, the scandal, the way each story of heroes and gods teemed with faults as those of humans. They were delicious.

Reading those stories felt so adult. It was as if I was allowed to join all the *usapang matatanda*. Except, the gossip was more interesting. So much more interesting because it had magic, gods, and monsters. Those who were good in one story were the villains in the next, like Athena supporting Odysseus but cursing Arachne and Aphrodite showing true love for Adonis but infidelity to Hephaestus.

But the one closest to my heart is the story of Medusa. How she was raped by Poseidon in the temple of Athena and how Athena, in turn, cursed her to become a monster. How she had to flee for her own safety, get away from the scorn of her own people and live somewhere she could find a murky semblance of peace. All while dealing with the fact that she could never take her old life back. Her hair was forever made of snakes, her blood both poison and cure, her stare petrifying, her reputation a monster. And people from different kingdoms would treat her as both a predator and a prize.

As someone who got overpowered by his own Poseidon, shunned by his mother whom he had once seen as a goddess, and whose blood was now considered poison by those around him, Medusa's story hit too close to home.

Way before I read about Cupid and Psyche, I already had some knowledge on our local mythology. But since Philippine folklore wasn't as frequently discussed in my old schools, my interest for it didn't come until much, much later. Apart from this, I used to find our local folk stories to be too dark, too vulgar, and too scary. Worse, the monsters were one-note. They were always evil in most contemporary retellings. Philippine folklore was full of gore and evil and trickery but a lot messier and frightening than Norse mythology.

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Aside from that, Philippine folklore doesn't have as much structure as the Western tales I fell in love with. Our local mythology has endless, different iterations of the same story. The gods change if you travel to a different province. So do the origin stories of things found in nature.

When you're a kid, that lack of a clear hierarchy, a clear pattern, made these stories seem too convoluted to be followed. And if I couldn't trace stories back to their origin and forward to their ends, then what was the point?

That was until I walked out of the doctor's office with the results of my HIV test in my hands. Then I thought, *What if I was turning into an aswang?* That's when I started paying more attention to our local tales.

I couldn't pinpoint when my "transformation" started. Was it when the rashes made me feel like a *yanggaw*, a human infected by an *aswang*? The month-long brush with death before I turned into a stiff-legged *amalanhig*? The constant physical transformations which made me look different in every picture I took?

For years, I tried my best to find evidence because something in my gut felt so unlike me. And it was malevolent.

Till now, I still can't trace back to the incident which sparked the idea that I'm now a kind of *aswang*. My mind is just filled with stories and memories with no clear chronology. Every time I feel like I'm close to finding the source, the beginning of this pernicious belief, I end up discovering more winding paths, which only lead deeper and deeper into the convoluted narrative of my life.

My memories branch out, loop back, and dig down into a bottomless web of stories more violent than the last. My psychiatrist says this is a byproduct of complex PTSD. I personally think it's inspired by Philippine folklore.

Because when I think about it, maybe all the twists and turns, the paths which possibly led to nothing, the lack of a clear-cut hierarchy — it's how my local mythology works! My own study about my local folklore gave me the tiniest notion of understanding of the line separating its various categories. As I treaded through the tales, I began to realize that it was innate for belief to blur with superstition, legends with news, and gods with monsters.

And despite the creation stories, the fights of gods, the accounts of *aswang* attacks — there really was no real beginning. At least, no singular one which we could categorize as the ultimate source of all narratives. Everything was just like energy, neither created nor

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destroyed. The narratives of the Philippines were just a lush rootwork of energy transformations with no discernible Point A. Chaos didn't beget Gaea and Ouranos. Chaos only gave birth to more chaos.

If you wanted to learn more about our stories, the most you could do is attempt to group them together in a way that was highly arbitrary, heavily reliant on a specific lens you wished to use.

This can only mean our folklore is rich, it's alive, and it refuses to abide by a strict, linear rule. The only way to make sense of things is to impose one's own system or choose a specific niche to focus on.

And I think that kind of defiant complexity is beautiful.

As I navigated my life as a queer child living with HIV in a Full Gospel household, my interest in god myths shifted. The more I read about Odin, Horus, and Zeus, the more these gods seemed childish.

Soon I found myself more interested in mythical monsters and witches, especially those with humanistic tragedies and origins. Medea. Circe. The Minotaur. Fenrir. Banshees. I let myself be engulfed by the darkness that surrounded their stories, always finding some sort of sympathy in me for those whom most people would consider evil.

In one of my leisure reads online about the scariest monsters in mythologies, I was surprised to find a familiar character: the *aswang*. It was a little disorienting to read about this creature outside the lens of my own culture and language. In the article, it said the word *aswang* was an umbrella term for any shape-shifting evil creature in Philippine mythology. They include any type of blood-suckers, viscera-eaters like the *manananggal*, different types of werebeasts, ghouls, and witches. They exist in the same dark world as that of the engkanto, the dwende, and the kapre, and somehow, they appealed to me more than the cosmic wars between gods, both in the Philippines and in other cultures.

Philippine god myths, in particular, felt too distant, historically and socially. And frankly, most gods in these tales acted like brats.

There are stories of how the Sky and the Sea threw rocks at each other just because a bird spread a rumor. The mudfight then formed the islands of the Philippines. There's also Bakunawa, who ate the moons because they were too beautiful but wouldn't bat their eyes at him. Bathala and Ulilang Kaluluwa killed each other because they didn't want to share their rule over the earth. Amanikable, one of the many sea gods, vowed to kill men who venture

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into his domain because his love was spurned by a beautiful human woman named Maganda.

The conflicts of the gods sounded like quarrels of privileged children who grew up with no parents.

Meanwhile, stories about lower mythology had more depth and personality. A kapre cursing a person who chopped down the tree that served as its home. Maria Makiling fleeing to the mountains after her lover died, vowing never to offer a hand to the villagers who had a hand in the murder of her beloved. The ground birthing the first bamboo after a barber dug a hole in it to whisper gossip about the growing horns in a king's head.

The common theme in tales of lower mythology was: Humans suck.

It was people who pushed these demons and spirits to retaliate. Violence, treachery, and injustice were caused by people rather than by the creatures the humans feared.

Even more so for *aswangs.*

A good example of this is "A Legend of the *Aswangs*," a Tagalog legend included in the third volume of Damiana Eugenio's *Philippine Folk Literature* series.

The Tagalog legend told the story of three beautiful maidens who were courted by men who were visiting from another town. The maidens were a sight to see, both in their local town and in all the towns the men had been to. Because of this, they wanted to get the maidens for themselves. Some would say the maidens' beauty entranced these young men. But I believe the men saw an opportunity to prey on these maidens and took it.

The maidens were carrying water in bamboo pails. As an act of "chivalry," the men offered to carry the pails for them to their home. Sketchy, I know. But the maidens obliged.

As this story happened long ago, and we Filipinos are big on hospitality, it's understandable that the maidens would invite the young men for dinner as a gesture of gratitude. Small talk would ensue and time would be eaten up.

I imagine the maidens would finally thank the young men for the help with the water but it was already night time and if the men wanted to get back to the bayan safely, they needed to get going. The men would insist on staying. "It is a long journey back," they would say, "and our energy has been depleted by the weight of the pails and the hike we took to this secluded house."

As custom would dictate, the maidens would let them stay, but, of course, in a different chamber.

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The narration in the book then said, “After ten o’clock, the latter heard the young ladies stir and go to the back part of the house. Using a bit of oil, they flew away, leaving their six lower limbs lying upon a bench.”

Now, if the maidens had already shown the men the room they’d be staying in for the night, what the hell were they doing snooping around someone else’s house at 10 p.m.? Unless they had ulterior motives.

The story then said that after the maidens, who were *manananggals*, had flown into the night, the young men switched the limbs left on the bench. When the maidens’ torsos came back home before 4 a.m., they found that their limbs had been switched. They begged the men to switch them back before the sun peeked in the sky, or else they wouldn’t be able to retain their human form anymore. The story suggested that the maidens themselves offered their hands in marriage immediately in exchange for the favor. But that honestly seems a little suspicious.

If I were one of the young men and I saw a group of women (or men, since I swing that way) sever at the torso and fly away, the idea of marrying them wouldn’t exactly be an enticing idea. Unless that was the plan all along. The way I imagine it, the women might not even have thought about offering their hands in marriage. *Aswangs* were powerful creatures but they weren’t omniscient. Either the *aswangs* had a really good grasp of nonverbal communication or the young men were the ones who gave the ultimatum and the maidens agreed. But because the story was told by a third person (a “grandfather” says the legend), it was easy to twist that little detail.

Eventually, the maidens went back to their human forms before sunrise and were wed to the young men. And then, according to the legend, one of the *aswangs* offered the men an option: If the young men wanted the women to quit being *aswangs*, the six of them could do a ritual to throw up the black chick inside the maidens. The ritual involved lemon juice, being hanged upside down and beaten with a stingray’s tail until the black chicks were expelled. Afterwards, the chicks should be cut up into little pieces.

The legend said that “the men obeyed their wives” but I’m not buying it.

In another *aswang* legend, two friends got stuck in a river after a party. One of them, an *aswang*, offered to carry the other one across without revealing his identity.

“How?” the human friend asked.

“Just trust me,” the *aswang* replied cryptically.

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Suspicious, the human picked up some *dayap*, a local variety of lime. This was believed to be an effective repellent against an *aswang*. Carrying a *dayap* in one's pocket when you're in the presence of an *aswang* would cause the creature to become weak. A smart move, definitely, against someone hostile and dangerous.

Without telling the *aswang*, the human got on his friend's back.

Then the *aswang* soared with his huge bat wings. Halfway through the river, just above its deepest part, the *aswang* felt weak.

"Did you bring some *dayap* with you?" he asked.

The human took too long to answer that they almost fell into the rushing river. Just before the *aswang* fainted and crashed into the water, the human admitted to bringing a *dayap*, then threw it away.

They both managed to cross the river and still remained friends after. But all I kept thinking after reading it was, *How many people would try to betray me, too, when they find out what I really was?*

Another legend told of a wife mysteriously disappearing every now and then to attend a festivity in her hometown. One night, her husband insisted on coming with her, to know her whereabouts.

Reluctantly, the wife agreed.

The husband had the suspicion that the gathering was that of *aswangs*, so he brought garlic and salt. When they reached the festivity, he threw the garlic and the salt onto the table of the feast, which caused the *aswangs* to flee.

The castle banquet vanished and he found himself stuck in a tree for four days and three nights. On the fourth night, the wife returned to the tree, explaining that she had asked the community of *aswangs* that her husband be pardoned for what he did.

You would think the husband would thank his wife and apologize for his behavior. But instead, he complained, berating his wife for leaving him there for that long. He said that if it hadn't been for the banquet food left on the tree, he would have died.

When they got home, he demanded that the wife give up her powers, much like in the story of the three maidens. He told her that that was the only way he would believe that she truly loved him and that she would never do him harm.

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The wife obliged, instructing him to perform a violent ritual, which involved hanging the wife upside-down under a tree and beating her with a guava branch repeatedly until she vomited a small creature. The creature varied depending on the storyteller. Sometimes it was a red lizard, sometimes a black chick, sometimes a rotten substance.

What scared me the most was that her husband was more than happy to oblige.

These legends definitely taught me something. It didn't matter whether the *aswangs* gave up their powers through force or self-will. Either way, they would go to extreme lengths to prove their love for their partners, their families, and their friends. Their expression of love was stronger and more potent than even Psyche and Cupid's, the god of love.

As I read more tales of oral traditions preserved in scholarly volumes, I realized more and more that *aswangs* were huge romantics. Contrary to popular belief, they trusted the goodness in people, even in times when these people showed explicit predatory behavior. They were ready to give up parts of themselves in order to show their devotion, or at least to make their partners feel safe. Even if those they cared for took advantage of them.

Having a newfound sense of inspiration and respect for these so-called monsters, I studied more about their habits.

As shape-shifters, they mostly kept to themselves. *Manananggals* hid the severed bottom halves of their bodies under banana trees. Witches lived by the outskirts of the village. *Mambabarangs* lived in plain sight, but did their rituals up secluded mountains. And even though they could walk under the sun, they only revealed their true selves in the darkness.

I started sympathizing with *aswangs*, mainly because I saw myself in them. I understood the need to hide parts of myself in order to survive: my sexuality, my condition, my thoughts and voice, my truth. Sometimes, we have to do these things in order to keep ourselves from hurting or being hurt by those we love. We need to put on a mask, something more acceptable, in order to belong and enjoy the benefits of having a community.

It's a sad reality, but for some of us, shape-shifting is the only way to be heard, touched, and seen.

But there are moments when I still ruminate on possibilities.

Maybe the reason why any type of *aswang* was solitary, living at the outskirts of town, was because they knew they could never be properly accepted. But still they lived close enough because they needed other people to live. Maybe the reason they hid being an *aswang* from their friends and lovers was because they knew it would cause panic in the people they

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loved. Maybe the *mananánggal* hid her legs near banana trees because she knew someone would take advantage of them while she was up in the sky.

In *aswang* tales, there was more humanity in these creatures than there was in most humans. They would give up their powers for the people they love. They would risk their secret to help out a friend. They would offer a hand to strangers, even though those people would see nothing in them but hunger and deviance, which everyone equated to evil.

Getting to know more about them birthed the magical thinking that maybe I myself was turning into one of those creatures of the night. It would explain all the changes I've gone through in the past year — first, the rashes, then the face which never stayed the same in pictures, my newfound ability to entice men, the bumps on my skin, which I now hide under oils and lotions.

Whichever the case, I knew that ever since I got diagnosed with HIV, I began changing, being more elusive but also alluring. And if the legends were right that the ability to transform into something else was evil, then maybe I really was turning into a demon, a monster, or something else entirely more sinister.

Should I be concerned?

But if humanity resided more in those with sharp claws, bat wings, and forked tongues, then I had no reason to fear that change. I just hoped that someday, I'd be able to journey with someone through the thicket of trees and, like a *mananánggal*, show them my gut exposed under a banana tree. And they wouldn't see evil. Instead, they would understand.

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