

**Breaking the Storm Barrier with Tears**  
**by Noah Jackson, Copyright 2007.**

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During mornings, after fishing, after tricycle vendors have picked up the daily quotas of fish and bundles of uniform-wearing schoolchildren have departed, there is a certain resting. Cooking fires smolder under drying fish. A pig shuffles along the worn dirt path, unaware that intestines from a distant relative are boiling nearby. I lounge on a worn hardwood beachside bench. Junior is showering. I hear him moving the pump of water and I can see the flash of the plastic yellow Caltex container dipping into the overflow bucket. Two dogs at my feet get up, lazily, and growl at another pig that stops to munch on a root or food scrap. Up the beach path, the sound of brooms made of dried pandanus leaves scratch on the sand. The lyrics 'Welcome to the Jungle' from a Guns and Roses song trickles from a static-infested battery-powered radio somewhere down the beach.

Boys wearing swim goggles bob up and down in the ocean. I track their progress with bubbles and the metal glint of fish spears. These boys are out-of-school youth. Their parents cannot afford the school fees. Their days are spent fishing, playing basketball, and working jobs for labor. Many of them leave the island, migrate to cities to search for work elsewhere.

Nestor, is one of my friends who finished school through third grade and then stopped because his parents did not have the money for school uniforms, books, and supplies. Since he was ten, he has divided his time fishing, hunting, farming, and harvesting coconut wine. I look up from watching the pig root around to see his large frame approaching. One muscled arm swings comfortably at his side and the other arm balances two carved wooden paddles over his shoulder. A dog follows. Every thirty paces or so Nestor stops and cries out. Young beach kids and other out of school youth make their way from the line of bamboo, cement block houses, and vegetation to point and laugh. The call over the wind finally reaches me.

“Pawiiikaaan.... Pawikaanaanaana.”

Beach kids echo the call and laugh, dance, and point. As Nestor approaches the beach kid procession grows, with dozens of out-of-sync voices trailing into one another. As the trail grows, beach kids gather props from the surf line. A waving coconut frond makes a conductor's baton to lead the procession; a red Petrol container makes a drum; a colored plastic bag an impromptu flag.

My dog's head bobs in time as he skirts the surf line. A woman's head from a nipa and bamboo hut from down the beach pokes into the air and scans the sea. Although my dog has become a familiar site on the beach and she can often be seen following Nestor or another friend around, most people do not know that her name is Pawikan. In Kinaray-a, the local dialect, this translates to sea turtle. Across the beach expanse, a smile spreads across the woman's face as

she refocuses attention from the sea to the procession, my dog, Nestor, and the sundry objects of beach debris in tow. Women hanging laundry down the beach farther down the beach see this connection and cackle. It travels down the beach in waves of voices like so many messages travel along the coasts and fields in the Philippines.

I call this the ricefield effect. This phenomenon can communicate greetings or scare egrets across kilometers of rice fields in the same way that hunters far off in the forest call birds from other parts of the forest and communicate the movement of wild pigs to one another. The ricefield effect is part movement, part hidden language which travels from across oceans of the landscape.

Nestor's face lines crack as he approaches me. The cracks break into a smile. Pawikan wags and seems to grin too.

Gusto magagto sa dagat? *Do you want to go to the ocean?*

I accept Nestor's offer to go fishing and pull myself upright by grasping his muscled, tanned forearm and an oar of dense hardwood gone soft by decades of paddling. My dog follows and we proceed down the beach. The parade with the beach kids and one lone pig continues until we reach the outskirts of the mangroves. Nestor's mud-colored dugout boat rests in the branches a few feet above the high tide line. We duck under the bamboo outriggers, grasp the ancient Nara hardwood and untangle it from the hair-like tangle of mangrove branches. Unlike some of the newer balsa boats, this boat is not painted in bright sunset reds or tropical blues. My dog jumps into the hollow of the carved out tree. I wade into the murky water. Tiny fish nibble at my itching ankles as I climb into the boat. Nestor avoids this problem by balancing on the knuckle of a mangrove root. His eyes focus on the sunflecks marking the roots in the dark green light. With one bare foot he pushes off and we float through the maze of the mangroves. Sounds of chopping wood and ricefield woops are muffled. Weaving through the trees, the world is dark and silent except for flecks of sun shining from above adding depth to the dark world. We paddle silently. Nestor steers. Rounding a bend, light forces a squint and the sound of the tide surge travels across the ocean. Coral appears, the boat totters, then levels and then we are pushed in the surge of outgoing tide.

We paddle twenty kilometers in twenty minutes to a patch of calm water offshore. The coral underworld below bobs and we put down our paddles. Nestor hands me his spare spear fishing gun. We dawn our goggles, mine plastic and synthetic, Nestor's handmade with leather straps. We move to opposing sides of the boat, starboard and portside, rest one hand on the bamboo runners and ease into the ocean. The ocean bottom is blue green. Sea grass beckons. Pawikan's head bobs down inquisitively. Next to me, a small sea turtle swims. I tuck into a dive and head for the first group of fish, letting my feet do the work as I descend upon a mass of orange groupers who look like large guppies. I aim the spear gun towards the school of fish a few meters below me. Rubber purchased from the local market springs, the short yellow line from the spear flashes and the metal stabs into an iridescent orange fish. I pull the fish back on the spear, re-cock, and aim again. Metal flashes against coral. A miss, I swim down deeper to untangle the

spread from seagrass. Nestor swims by with a small octopus in hand. We head towards the surface.

It is easy to lose track of time while spear fishing. I'm always too short on air, the surface is always a bit further away than I calculated or remembered so I surface, gasping. Nestor breathes deep and we hang on to the bamboo. He pulls half a dozen fish off his spear and we dump our catch in a plastic, dog-proof container we've learned to bring along. We dive a few more times, but by the fifth or sixth lap from the coral to the surface I'm exhausted. My head pounds as I'm exploring a section of broken coral. The water hums with a bass-like resonance and I emerge to see a diesel-powered trawler a couple of kilometers away. Men and small kids from another island or another country work the lines, feed netting and toss dead fish, rocks, and coral from the deck. They are close to us, but worlds apart.

In the evenings when I walk my section of the beach, I sometimes row out to these boats. Although none of these trawlers are from other countries, they seem foreign. I'm greeted and encouraged to climb on atop the long work decks. Although I can usually comprehend bits of Filipino from the men and evening card games, I cannot communicate with the kids. Many of these young unpaid workers speak a dialect from islands elsewhere. If I could speak these dialects I could confirm my suspicions that children are sold to work on these boats, sometimes for months, other times for years.

I know some of these boats and the men who work on these boats. Nestor's friends, who went to school or fathered a child and are now trying to piece their lives together by earning income for a rural family. They go out to sea for weeks at a time, their income dependent on the price of diesel, the proximity of trawlers, and ocean currents. Where I live, one man owns all the boats. The fleet is called the Lucky 7 for the seven boats that were initially constructed. Four of these boats have sunk; one is too storm battered to be sea worthy; there are only two out at sea. I wish I knew more of these stories, but in the mornings, when I am more awake and there is more time and space for conversation, the boats are gone.

The outlines of children and men who make up these lives fade and the realities of smaller scale fishing come into focus. We don't have to worry about diesel engines breaking down, but Nestor points at the tall cumulus head which has been piling up upon itself over the island mountain. We lift ourselves into the boat and Nestor unfurls our sail which is made of multi-colored rice sacks woven together, stenciled on the bags is PRODUCT OF THAILAND.

“Layag – the sail—is imported,” Nestor says through grinned teeth.

We secure the mast and lash the sail with marine rope. I kneel in the bow of the dugout and begin paddling as the wind swings the boat around. Blue ocean froths green with pieces of algae and sea grass. From over the island a shadow of rain passes. It passes the mangrove line that marks the shoreline, hovers in the space between us and then is upon us. The rain wall pounds into us, soaks the sail, the wood of the boat, the wall of our skin. We paddle hard and pick up speed.

Another wall of rain lashes us from behind. Pawikan, eyes all white and black, howls. The shoreline fades in broadening troughs off the waves. Tide and wind work together to create bowls of waves. We pitch into one and down the other, leaning bodies and paddles into the top of the crests, tipping into the next wave horizon. On the next wave, our sail catches additional wind and our boat launches off the wave crest. I hold on to the boat with one hand, in the other I feel the oar leave my hand. My feet leave the boat and for a moment I am somersaulting over a wave basin. The grey world is far below and my body seems to sail with the wind. There is only grey sky and black ocean. Then I fall and hear a crack on the boat I realize is the back of my head and feel a coldness. Ocean surface horizon rises from above. I think I see a sea snake shooting past and the legs of a dog making bubbles and sharp coral rocks. The pole of a hard paddle probes downward, I grab it and am pulled upward to the bamboo outrigger. Nestor has one hand on my lost paddle and another on the boat. I grab the side of the boat and we paddle with the tide. Thunder and lightening crackles and for a moment there is an image of fur and bodies and a far off mass that might be shoreline. The direction of the sky, of anything, is uncertain.

The wind calms and the world gradually return to color. An opening in the clouds illuminates dried blood on Nestor's forehead. Reaching standing water, we pull the waterlogged boat to the mangrove edge. We breathe.

I silently thank the fisherfolk living nearby for maintaining this last, protective mangrove forest. The remainder of the storm surge passes past the fingers of the mangroves and from our perches it looks like the entire island might be moving. Two sea turtles swim at the margins of murky mangrove swamp and ocean.

With oars, boat, fish and ourselves safe, we sigh and walk back to Nestor's payag, a small hut on the beach. We sit in silence, too exhausted to talk. Nestor lights a fire from ashes somehow sheltered from the storm and pours water into a pot. It heats up and we divide a packet of Nescafe and add some sugar. My head pounds. I clean Nestor's forehead with a salty rag.

With coffee, the landscape levels. The rainy season is a time of unexpected typhoons and storms. Daily dramas are played out on the ocean. Most of them here are unrecorded and they become oral legends that define lives. (The boys that ran out of gas and drifted for weeks. A man who sensed his son in danger out in the ocean borrowed an outboard in the middle of the night and found him stranded on a coral outcrop. )

Nestor removes his tank top, an advertisement for San Miguel, the national beer company. Scars on his body speak of other near disasters, misses, and his tenacity to live.

Over the short wave radio this evening I know I will hear of other global storms and disasters. Somewhere there will be a story about declining fish populations. Somewhere else there will be a story about some environmental disaster. But there is little in the news of the connection of the human spirit to the environment. Global rescue efforts might talk about the complexity of cash transfers, and diplomats surveying areas of damage, maps that show destruction or displacement.

There will be no talk of that here. There probably won't even be any talk of heroism, and the rescues that can be made if you've battled fear, loss, suffering, and are confident enough to understand a place.

I look at the lines in Nestor's face through the steam of my plastic cup. They move and shift as his face shifts and squints. I follow the gaze. Down the beach past where the mangroves end, red, white, and blue garments hooked to a line are fighting the wind. One by one they are letting go. The colored cotton flutters into the sky before a mountain current picks them up and plunges them into the stratosphere. A few garments flutter until a big gust shoots down the mountain and through the village and takes everything, removing bamboo stakes from the beach sand and dragging them out to sea. The ground shakes and I look over at Nestor. He is doubled over, tears streaming down his face. He points again to the last takings of the storm. I squint hard into the light — the clothes pulled out toward the ocean horizon are underwear. I realize it is mine. We watch, and tears well up and come to my own face as we laugh and shake at the final storm surge.