

INGAT, SIS

1.

A linguist and activist once told me that the word “ingat”—*take care*—was truly etched into our tongues because of marital law during the first Marcos dictatorship. All those *desparacidos*, people who were ‘disappeared’. Absences punctuated by ransoms and threats, reports of detainment or death, or maybe worst, with no word at all. As if casting spells of safety through sheer will of words, people started hawking out the word like a talisman. A way to ward off the extrajudicial tortures, rapes, and massacres that wracked the country. Yet like so many atrocities with sterile names and long shadows, the genesis of “ingat” has become part of our collective amnesia. As the manufactured forgetting set in, “ingat” became a throwaway phrase. A hidden ritual embedded in cultural psyche, without us knowing why. Over 6,000 kilometres away, more than 43 years since the end of Martial Law—and I utter ingat like daily prayer.

I offer it to my family and friends, of varying linguistic cultures and backgrounds. A rite to close cute hangs, phone calls, DMs and texts. Here, “ingat” is loaded with contradiction for people who occupy space as both dispossessor and dispossessed, part of the colonising process as colonised peoples ourselves. Here, the need for care comes with the need to navigate white-settler capitalist colonial patriarchy when you are unavoidably racialised, and relentlessly gendered. Brown Asian, monolithic Asian, jungle Asian, mixed Asian, just plain ol’ *exotic*. The quintessential Maria Clara or else crazy, mail-ordered, hypersexualised and cheapened. Sidekicks and fall-guys for a white ‘feminist’ imaginary, with the double-edged knife in the back as sites of fetishisation for white male conquest. Here, we are ogled, made spectacle or simply ignored. We are belittled in our skills and expertise, which others are only too happy to exploit. We suffice for labour and entertainment: disposable nurses, nannies, community workers, care workers, sex workers, maintenance workers—all of this noble work treated ignobly. Our grief is minimalised and made comedy. Our bodies distorted and projected upon. Turned token, backdrop, antagonist, porn category, plot device. Here, we are looked at yet unseen. Here, we are women pummelled into decorative shapes. Ghost stars rendered invisible.

2.

The first time I met Liliosa Hilao, she was haunting me in the mirror on my altar, her eyes peering back where mine should have been. I mused at my naked reflection, at my face, features glimmering and shifting in the candlelight. I reached up with my fingertips but it was on her cheek that they lingered. I smiled and observed *her* mouth's tilt.

It was a full moon and the night was warm, scented with early jasmine budding on my falling-down fence. The Pleiades were just in frame in the window by my bed. A treasured constellation. Known as the Seven Sisters, this nebulous cluster holds deep significance to many ancient cultures, including my ancestors and the ancestors of this country, who know its location in their skies marks seasons of harvest and metaphysical change. During pre-colonial times in the archipelago of 'the Philippines', the appearance of these seven stars, collectively named Mapúlon, Mulo-pulo, or Muró-púro (among others), signalled the start of a new year on the lunar calendar. The same held true for our Māori neighbours, who named the constellation Matariki. On the other side of my ancestral heritage, it is known as 昴 'mauuu5' in Cantonese, and its heliacal position indicated the beginnings and ends of agricultural cycles. Pleiades is an eponym of the Greek ocean nymph, Pleione, a mother of seven beautiful daughters. It's said that Pleione's daughters were left unprotected after their father, the Titan Atlas, was condemned to hold up the sky for all eternity. This state of 'fatherlessness' apparently made them fair game for the tyrannical hunter, Orion, who decided he wanted to rape them. To prevent this, Zeus transformed the sisters into stars. Why he couldn't have just had A Talk with his nephew, only the gods can tell.

First Nations lore in Australia predates the Greek with a Star Dreaming songline that spans various communities and language groups. In the Warlpiri version of the tale, the seven stars are seven Napaljarri sisters trying to avoid the unwanted advances of a man from a different skin group. According to the story, the sisters escape by hurling themselves into the sky.

Some say the lecherous young men in the constellation of Orion (or Orion himself) continue their pursuit of the sisters. So the seven stars rise night after night, fleeing. But only six are visible to the naked eye. In rose-coloured versions of the tale, it's said that one sister fell in love with a mortal and so, shines less brightly. Other versions tell how she was captured, deceived and inevitably brutalised. And that is why she lost her light.

The Seven Sisters is a constellation tied to the plight of women and our necessary moves for survival. It makes sense then that Liliosa would emerge with these blue-hued sister-stars. In 1973, Liliosa was murdered. The first death in detention in the fourteen-year

martial law. Lilia's brother had been 'red-tagged'—a practice where government dissenters, union organisers, and student activists are labelled as communist terrorists. On this flimsy basis, men from the Constabulary Anti-Narcotics Unit were dispatched to the Hilao home. When they failed to find her brother, but they took Lilia instead. Later, her sister Josefina was also taken to Camp Crame, the national police headquarters. Josefina saw Lilia in the compound, her face bloodied, beaten and bruised—but the two were forbidden from speaking to each other. It would be the last time Josefina would see her sister alive.

Lilia was a unknown to me the night she emerged in my reflection. But there was something in her gaze that was familiar somehow. Maybe I'd seen her before in the annals of my historical re-education. *Heroes of the revolution*, as the articles I would soon read say. I wonder how she would feel about this martyrdom. Martyrs rarely get the choice.

In my bones that night was a roiling feeling. Strong and lingering. Freshly tilled soil, ripe, scattered with the vengeful dead. I was scared, but also, I wasn't. Maybe the woman in my mirror was in danger. Maybe she was in pain. As I settle deeper into my versions of womanhood, I become intimate with my understanding of fear as a symptom, a spectre of care.

3.

In so-called Australia, Filipino women are six times likelier to experience homicidal violence than non-Filipino women. First Nations women are eight times likelier. Along with women from other countries in Southeast Asia and the Pasifikas, we are vulnerable here not because of *who* we are, but because of the mythologies that surround us. It's easy to draw connections between imperialism and the racialised and sexualised constructions of Filipinas. How they compound to make us vulnerable to violence. These statistics come from *Gender, race and international relations: violence against Filipino women in Australia*, published in 1997 by researchers Chris Cunneen and Julie Stubbs. It's now twenty-odd years since it came out, and I haven't found much information to update these figures with.

That same year of 1997, I moved to 'Australia'. The same year Hong Kong ceased to be a British colony, *Titanic* had its US premiere, Jeff Buckley drowned in the Mississippi River and Princess Diana was pursued to her death by the press. It was also the year Pauline Hanson founded One Nation on a racist platform of anti-immigration and attempts to abolish Native Title. It was a time of renewed overt racism in Australia. As though it ever went away.

The Race Discrimination Commissioner at the time, Zita Antonias, would report a doubling of formal complaints of racism within the year, among them, a ten-year old boy kicked in the stomach by a grown man ‘for being Asian’. Hanson’s blatant anti-Asian rhetoric rang nascent in my limited understanding of how my world had suddenly completely changed. I was seven at the time.

4.

I was twelve when the neighbours called the cops. There was something anticlimactic about it. The bored cops showed no real care for us, and talked to my dad like he didn’t speak near-perfect Queen’s English. They would tell Ma to file for an A.V.O. and she’d be assigned a recent graduate from Legal Aid pro-bono. My father would hire a barrister to represent him. Nothing would come from this intervention but strained years between us which would fall on me to mitigate. I’d accompany Ma to the women’s centre down the road where nice white women would give us Black & Gold-brand Anzac biscuits and smile their nice white women smiles at us like we lacked complex cognition. Ma wouldn’t go back there. I’d never ask why.

5.

After finishing my undergrad and doing odd jobs for a few years, I eventually started work in the domestic violence sector. The office was in a roughly preserved, repurposed old worker’s cottage with white flaking paint. By the front door was a potted jade plant on the otherwise bare front porch. I’d move into a case worker role a few months before COVID hit and reported cases of domestic violence would soar. The local community would be subjected to racialised profiling and inadequate supports for areas packed with migrant essential workers. Meanwhile, affluent Eastern and beachside suburbs would be unpoliced hotspots for virus outbreaks. I was working in the shelter then, supporting the women there, most of them around my age. I’d coordinate their paperwork, follow up appointments, help with Centrelink reports and visits to the GP. I’d sit with them to give statements to the courts and police, go with them for walks down the street for fresh air, read them translations of Rumi’s poetry, and inane quotes about ‘owning your story’ that seemed to help. I gave space for their worries when it all got too heavy. Everything Ma and I didn’t get.

I'd find myself telling these women to take care, like a compulsion. I'd say it when they arrived at the shelter, when I was wrapping up meetings, or saying goodbye when they left to move on with their lives. Was I shifting the onus of responsibility onto them by saying this? I hope not. That responsibility lies with the perpetrator, the oppressor.

Yet the onus of care seemingly always falls back on women, marginalised women. Women who track each other across the globe, splashed and scattered across borders and maps, converging wherever the world hurts us. We offer what salves and balms we can, in whatever forms we can alchemise from the reach of our palms. Sometimes we orbit each other for a long time, sometimes just a while.

6.

It's humid after a month of showers—not unusual for March but today the rain holds off. A lingering wet heat coddles the air turning sidewalks, station platforms, and underwear uncomfortably sticky. My skin is clammy as I push apologetically through the throng, past the idlers, intertwined lovers, aggressive striders. There are train delays on every line, but people have already started to gather around the Town Hall steps. It's 11.17, so I'm not late but later than intended. In recent years, this assemblage of chipped marble has become synonymous with protest to me. A site of opposition to Black deaths in custody and the genocidal occupation of Palestine. We had even organised smaller protests against state-sanctioned killings in the so-called Philippines, during the incongruously named 'War on Drugs' (it was a war on the urban poor). Later on, I'd realise that this flight of steps has been the setting for many demonstrations historically—the 1938 silent Day of Mourning, gender pay gap protests by women in metal trades in the 1940s, anti-Vietnam war rallies in the 1960s, and much more than I'm aware of.

Today, tealight candles are arranged around the sandstone balustrades, unlit for the time being. People hold signs and placards:

Justice for Mhelody.

Struggle against imperialism and patriarchy.

Trans lives matter.

Stop killing our women.

Rest in power, Mhelody Bruno.

The rest of Anakbayan Sydney are there, the fledging local chapter of a Filipino student activist organisation. Tita Jane is there in her signature purple. Tita Lina, too, clearly exhausted from chemotherapy and the weight of fighting too many things. Tito Botong stands with them both, his eyes crinkled in their perpetual half-smile. They're the OGs from the People Power era, consecutive days of mass civic disobedience enacted by over two million people that finally brought the Marcos dictatorship to its knees. Do they begrudge their hours of organising and standing in the streets?

“Start na tayo. Okay ka ba, Carie?” Ate Jen checks in, checks her watch. I nod, grip the microphone. Try to hold it steady. It's my first time as a speaker at an action and I'm second-guessing if I'm the person to do this. *Tonight, we hold vigil for Mhelody—to honour her life and condemn the shameful injustice of her death. These issues are difficult to talk about, but it's vital we come together to hold this collective grief and fury and make our demands for change...* The rest comes out in bursts, shakily.

Pride in Protest condemns the violence faced daily by trans women of colour, especially as Trans Day of Remembrance approaches. Migrante condemns the Philippine Government for downplaying Mhelody's murder. Tita Jane speaks of deep-rooted homophobia and racism within the investigating forces and state military forces. She roars at the hypocrisy of a justice system that offers no justice. Ayah condemns the system's failure to protect yet another woman of colour, in life and in death. Tash hones it. “We want more justice for Mhelody than the system can ever offer her.”

Every dazzling, feverish speaker adds their voice to the furore. Part of the melody in a long song calling for some real reckoning.

The last speaker, Kilia, takes the mic, channelling Bhenji who's taken a break from been campaigning tirelessly, comforting Mhelody's family, speaking with legal experts and press. Kilia steps forward. Her breath crackles long and slow through the lone amp. She raises her arms slowly, a gesture of welcoming, holding. And she does. She holds space for us, for the conflicting torrents of our anger. And for the tenderness we feel that moves us to action, to care. She's performing, but it's nothing to do with falseness. It's a ritual. To envelop us in something innately within her—an ability to hold, to carry out expansiveness and trust us to reciprocate.

She says her name. *Mhelody. Mhelody Bruno.*

Kilia stands at the bottom of those worn Town Hall steps, owning them, orating a poem, a prayer. And I am reminded of the power of women of colour, sisters, girlies, gays, and theys, who show up for each other. I think about Kilia taking space on those steps, speaking words by Bhenji for Mhelody. I think of so many women who take space, calling for justice beyond the colonial state's offering or imagination. Women like Assala Sayara, Leetona Dungay and Lina Cabaero, who refuse to stay silent or do nothing. In their capable hands, rage and fear are fertile. Transmutable. When things feel futile, they constellate the sky like guides. These women make an art of resistance, show us how ugly it is, how beautiful, how needed.

I picture their words shaking the marble, deepening the cracks.

7.

Liliosa Hilao was a student activist and associate editor of her university paper, *Hasik* – 'to sow'. Due to chronic illness, Liliosa was unable to attend the pro-Democracy protests flowering across the country. Instead, she wrote. She wrote essays lamenting human rights abuses and government corruption. Her words were her mode of resistance, her methodology of care. Yet it was her body they came for. When drunk soldiers led by Lt. Arturo Castillo barged drunkenly into the Hilao family home looking to detain her brother, Liliosa demanded they produce a search warrant. Castillo and his men knocked her head against a wall, beat her, and kept her in Camp Crame. Three days after her detainment, Liliosa's corpse would be found showing signs of torture and aggravated sexual assault. There were bruises and cigarette burns all over her body. Her face was disfigured. She had puncture tracks on her left arm and forearm and an open wound at her throat.

Now under another Marcos government, the state is trying to conveniently erase Martial Law, and the People's Power movement that brought it down, from memory. The historical significance of 'ingat' can't be lost to the forced forgetting taking place again, as history repeats with a rebrand. Through those who protest today, Liliosa refuses to be silenced again.

Sometimes, when I look in the mirror, I see the faces of people like Liliosa, Mhelody, my mother, my grandmothers, countless unnamed others. Hunted like the Pleiades. Diminished, demeaned, pursued, exploited, or brutalised. Invisibilised. I also see how we persist. How we

hold each other up. How we reflect each other. How we shine despite, because of, in spite of. How we endure. And goddess, it's tiring.

When we organise or show up to protests and vigils, link arms in front of mounted police lines—when we take time to be sad or send each other unhinged memes just to say 'hey girl, I've been thinking of you'—we embody care as a two-pronged thing. Fear and love, coexisting.

We reflect each other's anxieties and hopes, multifaceted echoes of each other in cacophony. We create constellations of care. Fear and love. Carrying both in equal measures. Girls haunt girls. It's the truest, simplest thing. And no one else sees it.

Filipino activists have a chant: Ang tao, ang bayan, ngayon ay lumalaban. The people, the nation. Now we fight back.

Bhenji got us singing a new version:

Ang BEKI, ang bayan, ngayon ay lumalaban.

Ang BRUJA, any bayan, ngyaon ay lumalaban.

Dolls, girls, gays, theys. Now we fight back.

Witches and bitches. Now we fight back.

So, take heart.

And ingat, ingat, ingat, sis.