Notes like Footsteps

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Every Saturday morning at exactly 9 a.m., I pull out the Selmer flute case from behind my bookshelf, flip open the steel clamps, and clean the metal instrument with all the ease and efficiency that comes from fifteen years' worth of repetition. I always start with the head joint, taking extra care in wiping the lip plate though I can barely remember the last time my lips touched the metal. I thread another piece of cloth through the eye of a cleaning rod and wrap the cloth around the rod's body. There's no moisture to be absorbed, but I've always been a creature of habit, so I slide the cloth inside the head joint anyway, and it comes out dry. I repeat the process with the body joint and the foot joint, making sure to hold the flute by the barrel lest I ruin the delicate pads under each key.

There used to be a time when Saturday mornings meant heading to the same school I've been attending since I was five years old, with a folder full of sheet music tucked under the crook of my arm and a homemade case for my music stand crafted from the extra cloth used to sew my father's work slacks slung over my shoulder. My music teacher, Sir Jonathan, would meet me in the lobby. Since there was no designated music room in my school, we usually ended up in the prep classrooms on the ground floor, which had the best acoustics and a working electric fan to combat the infamous Metro Manila heat. We'd pull two blue plastic armchairs to the front of the classroom, though it was rare that I ever actually got to sit down during a lesson.

I'd been playing for years, so the flute was a familiar weight in my hands, and my fingers could find their way around the keys easily, but the cold metal of the lip plate pressed to my bottom lip still felt oddly impersonal. It hadn't always been this way.

The first time I ever held a flute, I was with my classmates in Sir Jonathan's first grade music class. Back then, the "flute," if you could really call it that, was just a tube of bamboo with a few holes poked into it that you could buy at any mall. There was no easier instrument to play. All you needed was to place your lips on the blowhole and exhale a steady supply of air, as if one were inflating a balloon made out of notes. Perhaps it

was this ease that allowed many of us to excel in the bamboo flute, myself included, though not everyone had a grandmother in the United States that they wanted to impress like I did.

My grandmother loved music. She'd been an opera singer and was a classically trained pianist. There's a picture of her hanging in our living room from one of her performances on stage, a radiant smile lighting up her face as she stood in a beautiful white gown designed by Aureo Alonso before he became a legendary fashion designer. My mother likes to say that when Grandma sang onstage, everyone in the audience would hold their breaths as if to carry each note with her, so they could feel the music as she did.

I didn't love music with the same zest, but I did love my Grandma, and I missed her more than anything. I hadn't seen her in a few years by the time I started playing the flute, not since her arthritis got too bad for her to travel. All I had from her was a folder full of handwritten sheet music that she had left behind. I thought that if proximity couldn't connect us, then maybe music could. Three years after I first touched a bamboo flute, she sent me a new one made of metal that barely resembled the simple instrument I knew. This one came in three pieces called joints that needed to be assembled. Notes were created by pressing padded keys, and there were screws and crowns and tuning slides and tenons. There were all these things to press and release, a new way to blow into the flute, different spacing in between my fingers, but I kept playing. I kept chasing notes on the staff like footprints that could lead me closer to Grandma. Saturday mornings were no longer a time to sleep in. Instead, I dedicated them to lessons with Sir Jonathan in an empty classroom full of bright blue armchairs. Everyone complimented me on how much better my playing was getting, but somehow it never felt good enough.

Most days, we'd start with a relatively simple piece like "Pamulinawen" or "Edelweiss" to warm up, slow songs whose notes didn't vary too much on the scale. Then, Sir Jonathan would leaf through my folder and pick more complicated pieces, occasionally handing me a new music sheet to try out. I would purse my lips while pulling them into a strained version of a grin, upper lip jutting out just enough to allow me to exhale a thin stream of air.

Straighten your posture, Sir Jonathan would say. *You cut the note off too soon, deeper breaths. Chin up, stop looking at the piece. Don't think about the notes, let your fingers remember for you. Relax, you're supposed to be playing in front of a crowd, not facing a firing squad.*

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I often heard of people getting lost in the music they make, that the world disappears or fades into the background or whatever other pretty metaphor bordering on cliché that you can think of, but I never felt that way. I was painfully aware of the growing stiffness in my spine, the ache in my arms, the homework written on the blackboard, the faint smell of cigarette smoke that always accompanied Sir Jonathan. For some reason, no matter what classroom we used, the wall clock was always behind me when I played, and time has a strange way of passing so much more slowly when you can't keep track of it.

Just before each session ended, Sir Jonathan would get up from his chair and pull out his own flute. Most of the time, he'd select the last song I played and tell me to watch him play his own rendition of it. He would tell me that my technique was promising, but that I attacked each song with "*indifference*." I wasn't connecting emotionally to the music, he told me, though I suppose it would be difficult for any ten-year-old to understand the longing that went behind the piece "Kailangan Ko'y Ikaw" or the romance of a marriage in the lyric-less composition Sir Jonathan wrote for and about his wife. My idea of loss was ordering sweet and spicy Lucky Me pancit canton only to be told that that the vendors were out of my favorite flavor. My idea of romance was the teasing "*uyyyy*" from my classmates when a boy and a girl held hands during a dance number for some kind of class party.

"Watch my face. Watch as I feel the music," he said. And I would see him wiggling his eyebrows this way and that, reminding me of the time I sprinkled salt on an earthworm for a science activity in second grade. I thought it was odd for emotion to live in one's eyebrows, but if there was one thing I was good at, it was following instructions.

I would go home and watch myself play in front of a mirror, trying to mimic his movements, but I always looked more confused than anything. Emotion, I decided, didn't look good on me.

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Every summer, just before classes started, my school would hold a recital for all of the kids taking music lessons. It wasn't a fancy event, just a small set-up in the courtyard of the school for ten or so kids showing

off what they'd learned in front of their families and a few teachers who taught summer school. Most of the kids were younger than I was, all taking up some string instrument, and it was rare that I saw the same person play two summers in a row. It was even rarer to find anyone else who took lessons throughout the whole year as I did. By my seventh recital, I was a veteran and Sir Jonathan told me that I would be the star of the show. Considering my only form of competition was from a bunch of first-timers playing nursery rhyme tunes, I suppose it would have been a special talent in itself if I hadn't been the so-called star of the show.

We'd spent all summer perfecting "Katakataka," a snappy number with high, lilting notes and a tempo faster than anything I'd ever played before. When my name was called, I tugged on the hem of my dress and pushed the hair away from my face before stepping on to the makeshift stage. The spotlight hit my eyes in a way that made the audience painful to look at, so I focused my gaze on the edges of the light, that space where light seems to break up into dust before it gives way to darkness. I filled my lungs with air and exhaled.

My first note was clear as it melded into the next one and the next one. They increased in speed and range, notes jumping from the lowest part of the scale to the highest. I closed my eyes after the second repetition of the chorus and imagined reaching for the notes on the staff, round and tangible. I chased them, tried to seize them with my hands, with my breath, to grasp, to experience, to feel. I imagined catching one, only to find out that it was empty, popping like a bubble the moment I touched it. The song ended, and I had never felt smaller in my life. I was certain that everyone in the audience could see just how small I was.

Backstage, Sir Jonathan was nodding his approval. He told me that this was my best recital yet. I considered telling him about the empty notes, my smallness, how I'd practiced his bizarre eyebrow movements again the night before and still didn't understand what it meant to feel—at least not like he did. Not like Grandma did. Instead, I thanked him and promised I'd do better next year.

I didn't know it at the time, but there would be no recital the next year. Not for me, anyway.

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After each set of music lessons, my parents always asked me if I wanted to continue because they were not the type of parents who would force me to do something I didn't want to do. As far as they were aware, I loved playing the flute, but they also knew that kids changed their minds sometimes, so they always made a point of asking me. There were plenty of chances to tell them the truth that no, I did not want to continue, yet each time I chose not to.

My mother insists that I inherited my grandmother's musician's hands, but I don't think I inherited her sensibilities. I was so sick of reading about how people loved music, about the magic of playing music, and never understanding it myself. Playing music was something Grandma and every single one of her siblings loved, something that was supposed to make me feel connected to her, but instead, it just emphasized how disconnected I was from her. I was growing to hate something that she loved because no matter how much I practiced, I simply couldn't love music the way she did. I became more and more frustrated as I played the same songs over and over again, the melodies losing any meaning they might have initially had. I was never satisfied with my performances no matter how many people told me that I played beautifully. I felt every mistake in every song I played—every stutter of a fingertip, every slight shortage of breath, every half beat off. I was convinced that I couldn't love music until I practiced away every miniscule flaw I made. I kept telling myself that someday I'd pick up the flute and fall in love with it, that I'd finally understand why Grandma's smile in the picture hanging in our living room was so bright.

But months passed, those months became years, and that someday never came. I grew more and more unsatisfied each time I practiced. On my bad days, my frustration would turn into mistakes—a missed breathing cue, a mis-tapped pad, a note cut off a second too soon—and those mistakes would turn into more frustration that would turn into anger. On those days, I was tempted to swing the flute like a baseball bat against a wall and watch the metal bend just to see if I would get any satisfaction from that, but I could never destroy Grandma's gift to me. Instead, I started regularly cleaning the flute's head joint first despite Sir Jonathan telling me not to. He said that the head joint would contain the most moisture after playing, so cleaning it before the other parts would spread that moisture to the rest of the flute and damage it, but I always started with the head joint anyway. It was my own quiet rebellion against my self-imposed expectations, but I didn't stop playing. I believed so strongly that

someday I would play and feel excitement instead of dread, that maybe I'd even feel a sense of accomplishment just like everyone else who took up music in my family did, so I continued saying "yes." Yes, I would like to continue having lessons. Yes, I would like to perform in recitals. Yes, this is what I want.

Not long after my seventh recital, my younger sister, Jayme, decided that she wanted to learn to play the guitar. I thought about discouraging her. Maybe I could save her from the limbo I had found myself in, but I decided, perhaps selfishly, that it would be nice to have someone who understood what it was like to hate something you didn't know how to give up. So instead, I nodded in approval when Jayme picked out her very first guitar, a tiny thing with nylon strings. I thought it looked more like a slightly oversized ukulele than an actual guitar, though I suppose anything bigger would've been awkward in her eleven-year-old hands.

Her fingers couldn't quite hold down the strings against the frets, and it took her a while to learn enough chords to complete a song. The first song she ever played was "Happy Birthday," and if she hadn't told me what she was playing, I probably wouldn't have recognized it. My parents and I watched her play in the living room, the TV on mute, and Mama holding up a piece of paper where Jayme wrote down the chords in her crude handwriting. Jayme double-checked how to position her fingers on the fretboard before launching into the song without much preamble.

I'll never forget how she sounded—guitar out of tune, her chords slightly off, and sloppy transitions, but Jayme was smiling widely as she played. She looked at us as if to say, "Check me out! I'm doing it, I'm doing it!" like the notes didn't hurt her, like she wasn't caught up in chasing after anything. She was just there, feeling the music. When she finished the song, I told her that she needed to tune her guitar first, and she fiddled with the tuning pegs for a while, but I doubt she had any idea what she was doing. She strummed the guitar a few times afterwards and nodded like it sounded exactly the way she wanted it to.

Jayme played the song again and again, each attempt as clumsy as the last, but she was visibly proud as she made music with her fingers. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks slightly flushed, and right behind her was my grandmother's picture, that looming joy. When I realized they had the same smile, I felt as empty as the music I played. I had no idea what such happiness felt like. I saw the kind of enthusiasm in her eyes that I had been trying to find for years. She played and it was there, that fire my mother said my grandmother used to perform with, that thing I liked to joke lived in Sir Jonathan's eyebrows.

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I remember finally understanding, and I remember begrudgingly accepting. It just wasn't a matter of my youth or my inability to connect emotionally to the pieces I was playing. It had nothing to do with the slight flaws in my technique. It wasn't something I could learn through practice, no matter how many more years I poured into the effort. Talent was something that could be inherited, yes, but passion was not. I'd spent half of my life following the notes like footsteps, but this had never been my path to follow.

I finished that set of lessons. As before, my parents asked if I wanted to continue playing. I thought about all the years I'd spent learning the flute and all the resources that had gone into it. I thought about what Sir Jonathan might say, if he'd be angry or hurt. Most of all, I thought about Grandma. I wondered if I was letting her down, if she would understand that I'm not like her—that I can *never* be like her. I could already feel myself forgetting her at that point, and I felt like the flute was all I had left. I knew she would tell me that it was okay if I wanted to quit, and perhaps the only consolation that came from our inability to see each other was that I never had to find out if she was lying.

I told my parents that I didn't want to play anymore. I put my flute down for good and tucked it some place where I wouldn't see it. For the first time in years, I woke up just before 9 a.m. on a Saturday with no place to be. I stayed in bed for another 30 minutes just staring at the ceiling. I wasn't sure what was stronger, my relief that it was finally over or my disappointment in myself.

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My plan was to leave my flute in its hiding place behind my bookshelf and never touch it again. I thought I might take pleasure in letting it tarnish, in knowing how the silver sheen would turn a pallid kind of yellow, but that only lasted for a few months before I opened the case again. I didn't play the instrument, but I started cleaning it every Saturday for maintenance. I only ever made sounds with the flute, never music, but that was no more the instrument's fault than it was mine. Besides, I make my own kind of music now with words instead of notes.

Some days when I'm cleaning my flute, I look at it with the hazy fondness that nostalgia often paints the past with, and I consider picking it up again. I wonder if anything has changed, if the time apart from

the flute has taught me more about music than seven years of playing ever did. I consider it, but only for a moment. Then I place it back in the case and leave it behind the bookshelf where it will remain untouched until the next weekend.

Bionote

Sydney Paige Guerrero teaches at the University of the Philippines-Diliman and is the managing editor of an upcoming sourcebook for Philippine speculative fiction. Her work has appeared in *Daily Science Fiction, Cast of Wonders, Apex Magazine*, and other venues. She also won the Nick Joaquin Literary Award for Fiction in 2018 and 2019, and the Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio Literary Award for Creative Nonfiction in the same years. Recently, she earned her master's degree in Fantasy Literature from the University of Glasgow. You can find about more about her by visiting her website at www.sydneypaigeguerrero.wordpress.com.