



ASH ON THE HIGHWAY

by: SHAREE D. JASMIN and DWIGHT GNARL A. REVILLA

The road was still called EDSA, but no one agreed anymore on where it began or ended.

Some said it began in memory, in the static of old radios crackling with the voices of nuns clutching rosaries, soldiers whispering defections, and students reciting names of the disappeared like prayers. Others said it began where the river flooded last week, swallowing the flyover, the tricycle terminal, and the billboard of a smiling politician whose teeth gleamed whiter than the relief goods that never reached the evacuation centers, whose slogan promised hope in fonts larger than the truth. Still others claimed it had ended long ago, somewhere between a condo tower funded by ghosts, unpaid farmers, vanished activists, looted classrooms, and a courtroom in The Hague where a former president now awaited judgment under fluorescent light, surrounded by files thicker than conscience and a silence heavier than any verdict.

For Lina, EDSA began the morning her Lola died.

Her grandmother had lived long enough to march once on that road in 1986, barefoot, carrying rosary beads and a thermos of coffee for strangers. She had lived long enough to watch four presidents come and go, to see a dictator's son return like a rumor that refused to stay buried, to survive pandemics and typhoons and the slow privatization of hope. When Lina was a child, her Lola told her, "We stood there because we thought the future was listening."

Now the future was all algorithms and evacuations.

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Lina was twenty-three, a literature student in Manila whose university had been flooded twice in one semester, once by rain, once by online misinformation. Her thesis proposal had been titled "The Filipino Self in Post-EDSA Narratives," but she kept rewriting it because the self felt increasingly plural, fractured, and rehearsed for disaster.

On the day of her Lola's burial, a storm was approaching. Not a named typhoon yet, just an unnamed, violent gathering over warm seas, moving with patience and menace, as if it had been waiting for this exact moment. Lina stood beside the grave in Navotas, watching the tide inch toward the tombstones, carrying with it debris, driftwood, and memories of those who had been forgotten. The cemetery, like the country, had been built too close to water and too far from accountability, rows of graves leaning toward the sea, monuments sinking into mud, names eroding faster than anyone cared to remember. Saltwater seeped into the earth, mingling with soil and ash, as if the ocean itself were trying to wash away the neglect, leaving only questions behind.

Her mother whispered, "It's like Yolanda all over again."

Lina watched the water creep higher along the street, swallowing doorsteps the way memory swallows dates, names, and promises. "No," she replied softly. "It's like we never left."

"Left what?" her mother asked, her voice brittle with exhaustion, the kind that settles not just in the body but in belief.

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"The emergency," Lina said. "We just learned how to survive inside it, how to make coffee during blackouts, how to joke about evacuation, and how to pretend this is normal. You know."

Her mother closed her eyes. "We keep rebuilding the same house on the same fault line."

"Because we're told the ground will change," Lina said. "That the next election, the next project, the next promise will fix it."

"But the ground remembers," her mother finished, opening her eyes.

Lina nodded. "And so do our bodies. Every flood leaves a bruise, even if the water recedes."

"Then what are we really rebuilding?" her mother asked.

"Not houses," Lina said. "Habits. And hope—thin, stubborn hope."

Her mother gave a tired smile. "Hope feels like a debt we keep paying forward."

"Maybe," Lina said, "but it's also the only currency that hasn't been stolen yet."

Silence fell between them, thick as the humidity, broken only by the sound of rain against tin roofs and the distant wail of sirens.

That night, Lina dreamed of EDSA, of a road that stretched not through the city, but through time, flooded at one end and burning at the other, crowded with ghosts who refused to go home and children who had never known what home was before disaster. But it was not the EDSA of textbooks or documentaries. The road stretched endlessly, cracked and flooded, lined not with tanks but with evacuation tents, food lines, and data centers humming

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like mechanical bees. People walked not with rosaries but with power banks, solar panels strapped to their backs, their phones glowing with contradictory truths. In her dream, a voice—her Lola’s voice—said, “This is yonder.”

“What do you mean, yonder?” Lina asked.

The voice replied, “Yonder is the place beyond the present collapse. It is where we walk when history can no longer carry us.”

When Lina woke up, she knew she had to go back to EDSA.

The bus was half-empty, half-submerged. Floodwater sloshed at ankle level inside the vehicle, and the conductor had learned to count fares by feel. The digital billboard along the highway flickered between advertisements for luxury condos and government slogans about resilience.

Resilience, Lina thought, had become the national religion, a theology of endurance without justice.

At Quezon Avenue, she got off and walked.

EDSA smelled of wet concrete, gasoline, and something older—like rusted iron, floodwater, and promises that had been made too many times to be believed anymore. The air carried both rain and resignation. On one side, a mall rose like a glowing sanctuary, air-conditioned and bright, where people escaping heat, hunger, and blackouts drifted through escalators and food courts, lingering among mannequins dressed for winters and summers that no longer came on time. It felt less like shopping and more like shelter. On the other side, an evacuation center overflowed with families displaced by Kanlaon’s latest eruption.

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Mothers fanned sleeping children with cardboard, fathers stared at phones that had no signal, and grandparents whispered prayers into a noise too loud for God to hear easily. Children slept on flattened boxes stamped with the logos of international aid agencies, their small bodies curled around sacks of rice and bottled water, their dreams sponsored by institutions that always arrived with banners and left before the water receded, before the ash settled, before the questions began.

Lina sat on the curb and opened her notebook.

She had been trying to write a story about EDSA for weeks, but every sentence felt like a lie. Not because the facts were wrong, but because the truth had become theatrical. Dictators' sons returning to power. Drug war architects on trial abroad. Billions of pesos were hidden in penthouses while farmers waded through floodwater to reach voting precincts.

Reality itself had begun to parody fiction, staging events so absurd and cruel that imagination felt obsolete. The headlines read like satire, but the consequences bruised real bodies.

She wrote:

EDSA is not a road. It is a scar that keeps reopening.

Then she crossed it out, uneasy with how passive the wound sounded.

EDSA is not a scar. It is a mirror that keeps shattering.

She crossed that out too, because mirrors still suggested reflection, and reflection implied recognition, something the country seemed to avoid. She stared at the page, the ink smudged where her hand had paused too long. Finally, she sighed, not in defeat, but in the

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weary way of someone who knows the truth is larger than any sentence and yet still must be written anyway.

A man sat beside her. He was elderly and thin, his shoulders slightly stooped, as if history itself had been resting on them for too long. A faded yellow ribbon was tied around his wrist, its color no longer bright but still stubborn, like a memory that refused to disappear. He held a placard, but the rain had erased its message, leaving only damp cardboard and fraying string, an empty sign that somehow said more than words ever could.

"You look like someone waiting for a revolution," he said.

"I think I'm waiting for a sentence," Lina replied.

He chuckled. "That's harder."

"Were you here in 1986?" she asked.

He nodded. "I stood right here. Not this exact spot, maybe, but the same air. Same fear. Same hope."

"Was it worth it?" she asked, not accusing, just tired.

He paused. "Yes. And no."

"That doesn't sound encouraging."

He gestured at the flooded road, the displaced families, the towers of wealth rising beside evacuation tents. "We won the moment. But we forgot to protect the future."

Lina wrote that down.

We won the moment but forgot to protect the future.

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"Do you think literature still matters?" she asked. "When everything feels like a meltdown?"

The man smiled sadly. "Especially then. When the system collapses, stories become shelters."

"Shelters?"

"Places where meaning can still breathe."

Lina looked around. "But what if language itself has been hijacked? What if words mean nothing anymore?"

"Then writers must make them mean again," he said. "Not by pretending things are fine, but by naming the fracture."

He stood up slowly, his knees creaking like old doors. "Remember, hija: EDSA was never just about a dictator. It was about refusing to accept that the world must always be this way."

Then he walked into the crowd, blending into the city like a sentence swallowed by a paragraph.

That evening, Lina returned home to their apartment, which had lost electricity again, not as an emergency, but as routine. Her mother lit candles from a drawer that had long stopped being for special occasions, and they ate canned sardines and rice in the soft, flickering light. Outside, the rain intensified, drumming against the windows like impatient fingers, as if the storm itself were knocking to be let into their already crowded lives.

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On the news, a commentator dissected the latest corruption scandal, billions in infrastructure funds siphoned into offshore accounts, luxury condos, and shell companies registered in places no flood could reach. Charts flashed on the screen, numbers too large to imagine, yet painfully easy to feel in every broken road, every classroom without books, every hospital corridor without nurses. The faces of politicians appeared one after another, some rehearsing apologies with the fluency of actors, others offering no apology at all, only explanations, deflections, and smiles carefully measured not to look like guilt. They spoke of investigations, committees, and patience, as if time itself were not another resource they had already stolen.

"Do you think anything will change?" her mother asked, her voice hovering between hope and resignation, as if the question itself had become a ritual, repeated not because it still promised answers but because silence felt heavier.

Lina thought of her Lola's thermos, passed from trembling hands to strangers in the heat of 1986; of her dream of yonder, that distant place always just beyond collapse; of the man on EDSA holding a sign whose words had been washed away but not his reason for standing. She thought, too, of floods that kept returning, of leaders who kept returning, of promises that kept changing shape but not outcome.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "But I think we have to keep telling the story as if it could. Because the moment we stop imagining change, we begin rehearsing surrender."

Her mother looked at her. "Stories won't stop the floods."

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"No," Lina said. "But they might stop us from forgetting who caused them, or who refused to prevent them."

"And if nothing changes anyway?" her mother asked.

Lina met her gaze. "Then at least we will have left behind a record that we knew this was wrong. That we did not mistake suffering for fate, or endurance for justice."

Her mother exhaled, long and tired. "So, stories are a kind of protest."

"And a kind of inheritance," Lina said. "If we can't give the next generation dry ground, we can at least give them the truth about why it's wet."

That night, Lina began writing.

She did not write about heroes or villains, because the country had grown tired of simple masks. She wrote about a nation like a house built on a fault line, trembling not only from tectonic shifts but from political betrayals, ecological collapse, and moral compromise layered one upon another like poorly patched walls. Every election felt like a renovation; every disaster, a structural failure long ignored. She wrote about rivers that carried not just floodwater but also memory, the names of the drowned, whispers of the displaced, and fragments of prayers murmured during evacuations. The rivers knew which communities had been abandoned, which bridges had been built cheaply, which warnings had been silenced. She wrote about volcanoes that mirrored the nation's suppressed anger—quiet for years, issuing only faint tremors, until suddenly they erupted—unavoidable, devastating, and then quickly framed as "natural," as if rage, too, had no politics. She wrote about malls as mausoleums of misplaced desire, glittering tombs where people sought refuge from heat,

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hunger, and loneliness, walking among glass and light as if inside a shrine to a prosperity that had been promised to everyone but delivered to the few. Inside, time felt suspended, but outside, history kept collapsing.

She wrote about EDSA not as a triumphant ending but as a hinge, a door that opened briefly and then creaked shut, leaving the wind of possibility still blowing through the cracks. She wrote about yonder as the place Filipinos keep pointing to but rarely reach: the future, the justice, the wholeness always just beyond the horizon of crisis.

In her story, EDSA became a bridge between what was and what could have been. Yonder became the far shore that receded every time the people stopped rowing.

Weeks later, Lina shared her draft in her literature seminar.

Some classmates said it was too bleak, as if suffering should always arrive with soft lighting. Others said it was too hopeful, as if realism required the extinction of desire. The room wavered between comfort and confrontation, between wanting a story that soothed and one that unsettled.

Her professor, an aging poet who had once been jailed during Martial Law, whose wrists still bore faint scars from plastic handcuffs, whose voice softened whenever he spoke of memory, said quietly, "This is not a story of despair. It is a story of responsibility."

"Responsibility to whom?" Lina asked.

"To the dead," he said. "To the living. And to those who will inherit what we refuse to fix."

"What do you mean?" she pressed.

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"You are saying that history does not end," he continued. "It accumulates. Every injustice leaves residue. Every act of forgetting becomes another layer of damage. And so does accountability. It does not vanish just because power changes hands or faces."

A student near the back raised his hand. "But what about AI, misinformation, post-truth?" he asked. "How can literature compete with something that can generate ten lies for every one sentence we write?"

The professor smiled, not with confidence but with care. "Literature does not compete with lies," he said. "It exposes their loneliness."

"Loneliness?" another student echoed.

"Yes," he said. "Lies do not want company. They do not want witnesses. They do not want memory. They want speed, repetition, and disappearance. Literature, on the other hand, insists on staying. It insists on names. On faces. On consequence."

"But people believe lies," a student said. "Sometimes more than stories."

"Because lies offer escape," the professor replied. "Literature offers responsibility. Lies say, 'None of this is your fault.' Literature says, 'None of this is only yours, but none of it is none of yours either.'"

A silence settled over the room, not empty but heavy, like air before rain.

Finally, someone asked, "So what is the writer's job now?"

The professor looked at Lina. "To remember when forgetting is convenient. To imagine when imagination is dismissed as naive. To tell the truth, not as spectacle, but as care."

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Lina felt something shift, not relief, not certainty, but something steadier: the weight of being needed, and the strange privilege of being able to answer.

One afternoon, Lina visited her Lola's old house in Batangas, now abandoned after too many evacuations from Taal's eruptions to still be called temporary. The walls were cracked like tired skin, the roof partially collapsed, its rusted sheets sagging under the weight of ash and rain. Windows were broken; their glass scattered like small, dangerous memories across the floor. Ash still coated everything like gray snow, on the table where her Lola once folded laundry, on the chair where she used to sit with her rosary at dusk, on the calendar that still marked a year no one lived in anymore. The house smelled of sulfur, mold, and old wood, the scent of time standing still in a place the future had abandoned. As Lina walked through the rooms, her footsteps stirred the ash into small clouds, as if the house itself were breathing out what it had been forced to inhale. Every object felt like a relic of a life interrupted, not ended, plates still stacked, slippers still by the door, a jacket still hanging on a nail, waiting for a body that had learned not to return.

In her lola's old cabinet, warped by heat and time, Lina found a box of notebooks tied together with a fraying ribbon. The covers were soft with age, their pages yellowed, their edges brittle, as if they had been waiting too long to be opened again.

Inside were handwritten entries from 1986, the ink slightly faded but still urgent, still alive.

February 24, 1986: We walked today. We did not know if we would live. But we knew we could not live the same way anymore.

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February 25, 1986: The dictator is gone. People are crying in the streets. But I keep wondering—what do we do tomorrow?

Lina sat on the dusty floor, ash smudging her jeans, the smell of sulfur clinging to her hair, and whispered, “We are still answering that question, Lola.”

Outside, the volcano loomed, silent but restless.

She realized then that Filipino history was volcanic, not a straight line of progress, but a restless cycle of eruption and dormancy, hope and ash, uprising and quiet endurance. There were moments when the ground split open, and truth burst through in fire—revolutions, protests, awakenings—followed by long seasons of apparent calm, when power settled again, when memory cooled, when injustice hardened into something that looked like normal. Rebuilding always followed, but forgetting often followed faster. Houses rose where lava had once flowed, cities grew over fault lines, and narratives were rewritten over buried names. Each generation was told the eruption was over, that the danger had passed, that the ground was safe again, until it wasn’t.

And so, each generation inherited not only land, language, and debt, but unresolved magma: unacknowledged violence, unfinished justice, ungrieved losses, unlearned lessons. The heat remained beneath the surface, invisible but constant, waiting for pressure to build again. What erupted, she understood, was not chaos—it was memory demanding to be felt.

On February 24, 2026, the fortieth anniversary of EDSA, Lina returned to the road.

There was no grand parade, no single crowd moving as one body. Instead, there were pockets of people scattered along the road, climate activists with sunburned faces and

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handwritten banners, labor unions carrying drums and worn megaphones, students holding cardboard signs cut from old boxes, church groups praying softly under umbrellas, indigenous communities wearing woven cloth and carrying ancestral flags, and migrants' families watching through livestreams from cramped apartments across oceans and time zones. Some held placards. Some held seedlings wrapped in damp newspaper, small green futures in fragile hands. Some held only their phones, recording every chant, every face, every moment, documenting not for fame, but in case history tried to delete them again, in case forgetting returned faster than justice.

Lina stood near the spot where she had met the elderly man weeks before. She held a small sign she had written by hand:

EDSA is not over. It is unfinished.

A young boy approached her, no more than ten years old, holding a cardboard sign that read:

What is yonder?

She knelt beside him. "What do you think it is?"

He shrugged. "My teacher says it means 'far away.'"

"Do you want to go there?" Lina asked.

"Yes," he said. "But my mom says we can't even leave the evacuation center yet."

Lina looked at the tents sagging under rainwater, at the families lining up for meals cooked in giant aluminum pots, at the volunteers whose hands moved faster than the system ever had. She thought of the billions hidden in mansions and basements, buried not just in

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concrete but in silence; of trials abroad that sought justice oceans away from where the wounds were inflicted; of endless investigations that produced reports but rarely consequences, names but rarely accountability. She thought of the storms that did not wait for policy reforms, the floods that did not pause for hearings, the heat that did not negotiate with budgets. Disaster moved faster than democracy, and suffering moved faster than reform.

She said gently, "Maybe yonder isn't a place. Maybe it's something we build."

The boy frowned. "Build what?"

"A country," she said. "Again. And again."

That evening, Lina uploaded her story online, not expecting much, just another file released into the endless scroll, another voice competing with noise. She almost closed her laptop immediately, unsure if she had said anything that mattered, unsure if words still had a place in a world that seemed to move only when it was breaking.

But the story traveled, not fast, not explosively, but steadily, quietly, the way grief and truth often do. It went modestly viral, not because it was sensational, but because it was recognizable. People did not share it with exclamation points. They shared it with silence, with sighs, with long pauses before typing.

The comments appeared one by one:

This is my family's story.

This is my fear.

This is my hope.

This is what I've been trying to say but couldn't find the words for.

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A journalist messaged her, asking to publish it in a special issue on Filipino literature in the age of meltdowns. Lina agreed, not because it felt like an achievement, but because it felt like an obligation, to let the story keep walking, to let it reach places she could not.

Later that night, she received an email from a Filipino nurse in Italy. The message was simple, almost shy:

"I left the Philippines because I could not see a future there. Your story reminded me that leaving does not mean forgetting. Thank you for carrying the country with you in words."

Lina stared at the screen for a long time. She felt something loosen in her chest, not triumph, not pride, but recognition. She cried, not because she felt successful, but because she felt less alone. Because someone, somewhere across the world, had read her words and felt less alone, too. Because in a time of collapse, connection had quietly survived.

The following night, she dreamed again, not the restless, anxious kind of dream that evaporates by morning, but the kind that lingers, that feels like it has been waiting for her to fall asleep so it could finally speak.

She was walking on EDSA, but this time the road was dry. Not pristine—still cracked, still uneven, still bearing the scars of neglect—but walkable, passable, human. The air felt lighter, not because disaster had ended, but because people had stopped pretending it didn't exist. On both sides, people were planting trees where billboards once stood, replacing slogans with shade, faces of politicians with leaves, and consumption with care. Former parking lots had become gardens. Empty lots had become classrooms. The malls had been transformed into evacuation centers, libraries, and housing cooperatives, places not of escape, but of

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return. Where people once wandered to forget, they now gathered to remember, to learn, to rebuild together. The river was still dangerous, still capable of flooding, still a reminder of limits. But now there were early warning systems, community patrols, evacuation plans practiced like rituals of survival, and neighbors who checked on each other before the water reached their doors, not just prayers after it was too late.

Her Lola walked beside her, steady and quiet, the weight of years moving like a shadow alongside hers.

"Is this yonder?" Lina asked, her voice tentative, as if speaking too loudly might shatter the fragile sense of hope she felt.

Her Lola smiled, a slow, knowing smile that carried both mischief and wisdom. "No. This is just a better present. Safer, maybe, but still built from what we've learned in the ruins."

"Then where is yonder?" Lina pressed, curiosity mixed with longing.

Her lola pointed ahead. The road stretched beyond the horizon, not into darkness, but into mist, a soft gray veil that hinted at possibility without revealing it.

"Yonder," she said, "is the promise that we do not stop walking. It is not a place you can reach. It is the journey we refuse to abandon, the responsibility we carry, the hope we nurture even when storms return. Every step forward—even the smallest—is an act of answering the question history keeps asking."

Lina felt the words settle inside her like ash that had cooled but not lost its warmth. For the first time, she understood that yonder was not about arrival, but about endurance, care, and the courage to keep moving, even when the path is uncertain.

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Lina woke up before dawn.

Outside, the city stirred. Jeepneys coughed to life, their engines coughing smoke into the gray dawn. Vendors unfolded tarps and set up carts, calling out produce and trinkets with voices roughened by years of early mornings. News feeds scrolled endlessly on glowing screens, each headline a fresh scandal, a fresh storm, a fresh reminder that the world had not been saved overnight or perhaps would never be.

But Lina sat at her desk and wrote again.

She wrote not because she believed literature could fix everything, not because words could stop corruption, calm floods, or halt eruptions. She wrote because she believed it could hold everything—grief, rage, memory, responsibility, and possibility—within one fragile, stubborn, human form. She wrote because facts alone were no longer enough. Because statistics could not cry. Because spreadsheets could not mourn. Because data, however precise, could not recognize absence or injustice. Because truth, when stripped of story, became weightless and invisible.

She wrote because EDSA was not a monument carved in stone, nor a memory to be revered safely in textbooks. EDSA was a question, still reverberating through streets, rivers, and hearts. And yonder was not a destination, not a place to arrive, but a direction—a reminder that movement, effort, and vigilance mattered as much as victory.

In the age of meltdowns—climatic, political, moral—literature did not promise salvation. It did not erect walls against disaster, nor conjure heroes, nor absolve responsibility. Literature promised attention—the kind of attention that notices what others ignore, that

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names what others try to erase, that witnesses what others try to forget. It gathered the fragments of lives displaced by storms, the whispers of those silenced by power, the memories of those left behind when history moved too fast. It held the weight of grief, the ache of injustice, the stubborn pulse of hope, all at once. And in that quiet act of bearing witness, literature became more than words: it became a covenant with the living and the dead, a promise that even in collapse, someone is listening, remembering, and refusing to let truth vanish into ash.

And sometimes, Lina realized, attention was the first act of love: a small, defiant resistance against indifference, a refusal to let suffering be invisible, a commitment to keep walking even when the road was broken, to keep seeing even when the world turned away, to keep telling the story no one else could tell, and in doing so, to honor the lives, the memories, and the futures that might otherwise be forgotten.

And in that quiet act of bearing witness, she understood: to write was to keep the world alive, one fragile truth at a time.

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