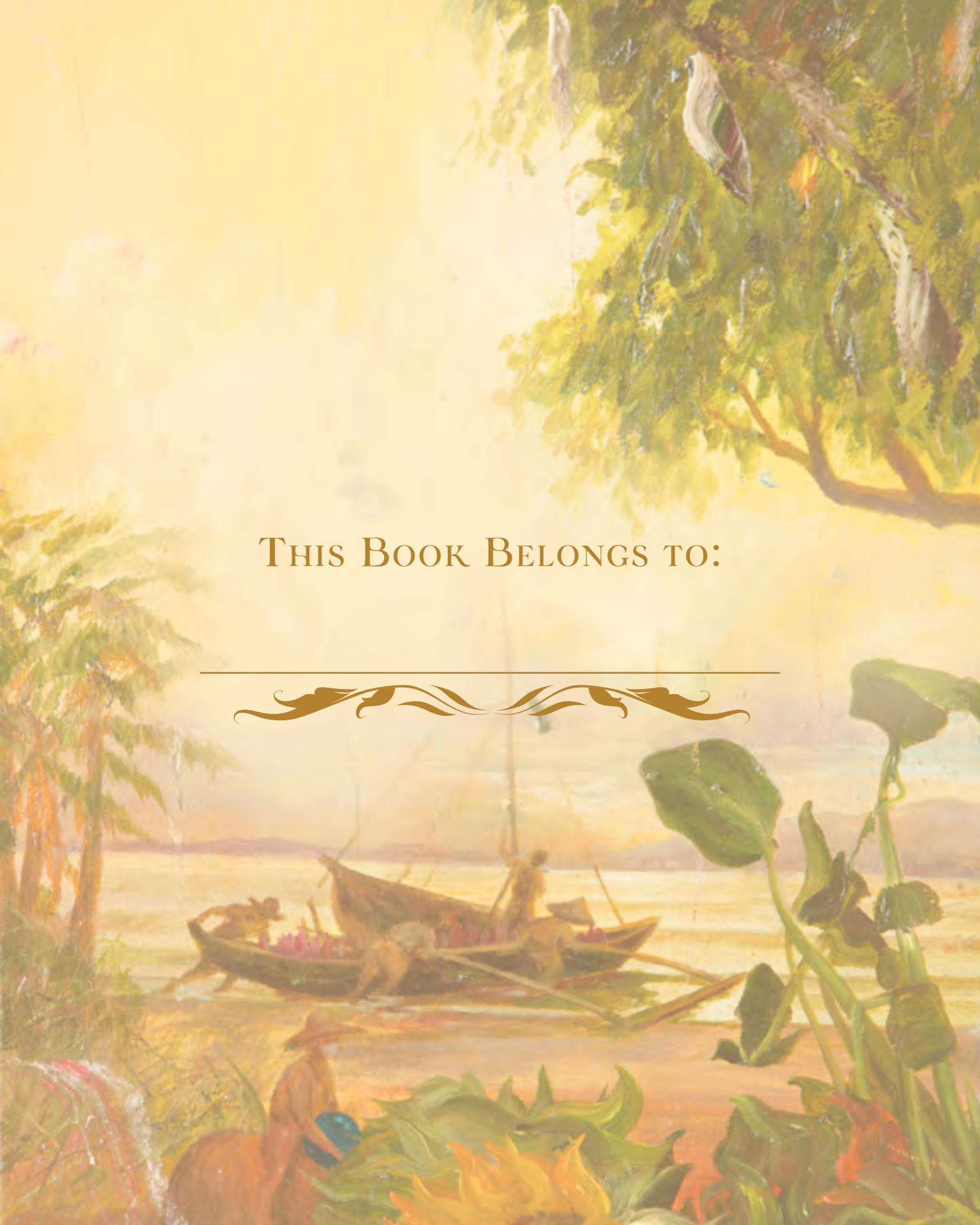


A
BRIDGE
FOR SILAY

ISINULAT NI
Agay Llanera

INILARAWAN NI
Ronson Culibrina



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Everyone in the island knew that Silay preferred listening to talking. On their island, there was plenty to hear. Birdsong. Bamboo rustling. Motorboats purring and carrying fishermen like Silay's father to catch the day's meal. Perhaps it was Silay's penchant for listening that urged the rocks to speak to her. The first time it happened, young Silay thought she was caught in a thunderstorm. The rumbling she heard had repetitive words.

*Melted by fires deep in the earth
Spewed out from its cracks as our rebirth
Cooling and hardening into land
Older than humanity, older than the island*

Over the years, Silay got used to the rocks' voices, even if they swelled without warning at random moments. And though Silay attempted conversation, the rocks paid her no mind.

Now a young woman, she gazed out to the lake peppered with bamboo poles that bordered the fish pens. Across the water, she saw the skyscrapers of the distant city.

"Dearest rocks," she cajoled. "Wouldn't it be nice if you could build a bridge I could cross to the city? What is it like to live in a place that brims with buildings, I wonder?"



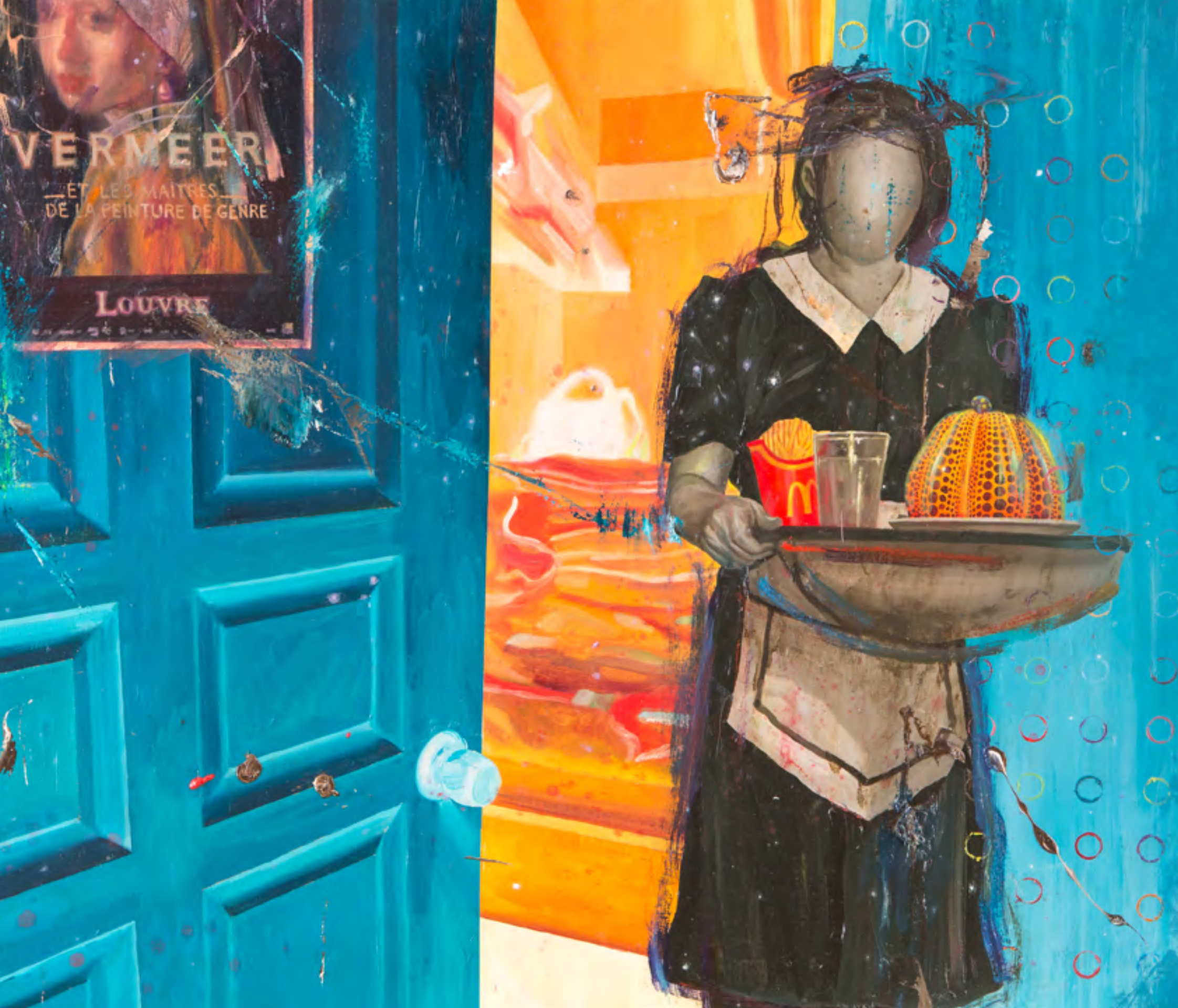


Little did Silay know that when her father was rushed to the hospital days later, she'd get to answer her own question.

Silay's father might have survived his heart attack, but still, it prevented him from working. Like other poor islanders, Silay flew to another country because there, she would earn more—from cleaning, cooking, washing, and taking care of children who spoke a language she barely understood.

It was Silay's first time to step on foreign soil—or in this case, concrete. Her new home was a cramped room in a building sixty-eight floors high, a sleek structure that looked like it could launch into space. The view outside her window was choked with buildings; the sky, a mere sliver in the horizon.





Every day, Silay worked herself to the bone while sending most of her earnings back home. On the phone, her father talked about his improving health, while her mother broke the news about their new sari-sari store. But when they asked Silay how she was, she simply replied, "I'm fine."

Five Christmases came and went with Silay dreaming of the island. Before the sixth Christmas, she was allowed to go home.

Finally, Silay found herself outside her island home. It was as small as she remembered, but looked livelier in a fresh coat of paint. Her mother's sari-sari store was unmanned; the front door that led to their empty living room was thrown open to let in the breeze. Silay listened. The sounds of birdsong and crickets and swishing branches filled her ears. She closed her eyes, smiling.

“Yes, I’m home.”





A shuffling sound made Silay open her eyes. In their living room was a strange man with skin the color of rice paper, carrying the mug she used to drink from. The man stooped because the ceiling couldn't accommodate his height, the curls on his head flattened against the beams.

He looked up, shielding his eyes against the glare of sunlight that bathed Silay, who caught her breath. The stranger had eyes the color of coffee generously mixed with milk.

He introduced himself as Carlos, rolling out the r like the purr of a motorboat. He told her he came from another country, and had fallen in love with the island. When he was looking for a place to stay, Silay's parents offered their home.

Each day since then, Carlos took her fishing, exploring trails, and watching the sun sink into the clouds. He told her about his country of warm summers and rainy winters, of its vast plains and stunted hills. He told her how they cooked their rice—in a wide, shallow pan with saffron, olive oil, and green beans. He told Silay that her smile was as bright as the sun.



One day, Carlos told her he loved her. He held her hand, wrestled out something from his pocket, and went down on one knee. “Silay, *mi sol* . . . will you marry me?” The word ‘yes’ hovered on her lips.

It was then that the rocks spoke, not their usual litany, but raw and burning words that Silay couldn’t make out. She fell silent, straining to decipher their rambling.

Carlos frowned. “What’s wrong?”

The reply rushed out of Silay’s mouth as if someone else was speaking through her. “On this island, it is tradition for a man to first fulfill a task dictated by the woman he wishes to marry. Only when the task is finished will the woman decide.”

Carlos smirked. “And the task you wish me to fulfill?” Silay’s gaze settled on the horizon melting into darkness. Across the lake, the lit buildings twinkled like stars, making the silly wish from her past pop into her head.

“A bridge,” she answered.

“A bridge of rocks that connects this island”—she pointed to the distant skyscrapers—“to the city.”



Carlos gathered the strongest among the islanders, not once cracking a smile, even as the workers released the boulders over the island's edge, laughing at the huge splashes that wet them. When they began to protest about their aching limbs, Carlos urged them to work faster, and hired more men to work at night.

“You will marry him, right, Silay?” one of the workers asked Silay one sweltering afternoon while Carlos took his siesta, “He promises to reward us handsomely when he marries you. He asks the impossible, but we do it because we hold on to his promise.”





No matter how many rocks the islanders sank into the water, not one had broken through the surface. Frustration drove the men to abandon their task, prompting Carlos to fashion a whip from sturdy vines. Silay squeezed her eyes shut whenever he cracked the whip to frighten the tired workers.

One moonlit night, when Carlos broke away from the group, Silay followed. Shadows danced on Carlos's face, making his tousled curls look like two horns curling up from his temples, the whip resting on his hip a demon's tail. She hid behind a pile of rocks as he settled beneath the bamboo.

Carlos spat on the ground. "The foolish natives don't see how rich their island is! If I lived here, I would buy land, and sell them at a huge profit. I would sell their mountains, their trees, even their precious lake. I would sleep on a bed of paper bills instead of a squeaky couch in a miserable island house!"





The anger in Silay’s chest swirled faster, breaking out into a frenzied firestorm that made her shoot up from her hiding place. Carlos balked.

“Silay! *Mi sol*, what are you doing—”
Silay lifted her burning hands to the heavens. In her mind, she saw the rocks gather from the lake’s bottom, piling on top of each other before bursting out of the water’s surface. Then the voices came. High-pitched and low, ragged and smooth. Silay heard the words she knew by heart.

*Melted by fires deep in the earth
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Fire seemed to shoot throughout Silay's being. She felt her flesh melt, her blood seeping through the cracks in the earth, her spirit cooling and hardening into bones. For one brief moment, she grasped the elusive truth: she and the island were one.

Before Silay's legs gave way, she saw Carlos flee. Then she saw no more, her world fading to black.



The next morning, Silay awoke in the center of a crowd. Did they see her hands aflame? Did they hear the rocks speak?

The rocks—something has happened to the rocks. Columns of rocks had appeared from the lake, fusing with the island's edge. The new structure looked like an unfinished bridge reaching toward the city.

Silay heard a gentle murmuring that sounded like a mother putting her child to sleep. She turned to see the bamboo, swaying in the wind, its tops splayed out like fireworks against the sky.

Stay, Silay, the bamboo whispered. *Stay with us.* Silay closed her eyes, and listened. Listened as the bamboo told her about its strength and pliability, about how its grasses can be woven into beautiful, sturdy things. *Don't leave the island,* the bamboo said. *Tell the others what I told you.*

Silay listened and listened, and with every word, she felt her heart grow wings and take flight.





About the Author

Agay Llanera is a freelance writer for television and the web. She enjoys writing romance, and stories for children and young adults.

About the Artist

Ronson Culibrina is a visual artist who works mostly in paintings, sculptures, and installations.

He likes to be playful when he presents serious things like history and politics and to show what is funny about things that are popular. Recently, inspired by his hometown, he created art that reflected on the environment. He works closely with other young Filipino artists through the group called
The Working Animals Art Projects.

About the Book



“Barangay Pila-Pila”

by Ronson Culibrina

oil, charcoal, and resin on paper



This story is based on the legend of Puente del Diablo passed on throughout the generations of families on Talim Island, the largest lake island in Laguna Bay.

Although Puente del Diablo (Devil’s Bridge) in Barangay Pila-pila in Binangonan, Rizal is not officially part of Talim Island, its proximity to the dagger-shaped island makes it a popular stopover of tourists in the area. With its rocks seemingly fashioned into blocks shooting up twenty meters into the sky and reaching out a hundred meters into the water, Puente del Diablo looks like an unfinished stone bridge.

To this day, the remains of Puente del Diablo can be seen, a testament to a maiden’s courage and her success in thwarting the devil’s plans.

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The legend of Puente del Diablo or the “devil’s bridge” of Talim Island in Binangonan, Rizal is also the story of a young woman, her village, and how they find their strength in each other.

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