

THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN

Trickle-down economics in a Philippine
garbage dump
By Matthew Power

The traffic in Quezon City—blaring, belching, scarcely moving—seems to be in a permanent state of rush-hour gridlock. Quezon, population 2.2 million, is the largest of the seventeen municipalities that form the megalopolis of greater Manila. Chrome-clad Jeepneys, the chopped and air-brushed descendants of WWII army jeeps pressed into public service, engage in a slow-motion chariot race with motorized tricycles, oxcarts laden with scrap metal, and passengerless bicycle rickshaws. A knot of metal and rubber binds every intersection. Ragged children dart between vehicles at lights, selling cigarettes with one hand and huffing gasoline-soaked rags with the other. The tinted windows and air-conditioning of the odd SUV create a bubble of sorts for its occupants, keeping the dusty pre-monsoon swelter and the pleas of the riffraff at bay, but do nothing at all to speed them along. The children, hair coppery with protein deficiency, paw like cats against the windows, studiously ignored by passengers a few inches away. Above it all, the chubby, smiling visage of Quezon Mayor Feliciano “Sonny” Belmonte

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beams down with paternal warmth from an enormous billboard, the base of which, strung with wash, has been converted into a tidy home by enterprising squatters.

Nearly half of all Filipinos live on less than two dollars a day, and metropolitan Manila, which in its poverty, enormity, utter squalor, and lack of services perfectly represents the catastrophic twenty-first-century vision of the megacity as most of the world's poor will experience it. I am crowded in the back of a taxi with the photographer Misty Keasler and Klaid Sabangan, our guide and translator. Our driver, a Filipino named Johnny Ramone, blasts '70s singer-songwriter standards on his radio and is not in the least dis-

mayed by the vehicular quagmire we're navigating as we wind our way toward the Payatas dump.

Like most of the outside world, I had first heard of Payatas, the fifty-acre dumpsite on Quezon City's northern boundary, when it flashed briefly across headlines in July 2000. Little else besides people dying in great numbers on a slow news day will bring notice to a place like this. After weeks of torrential rains spawned by a pair of typhoons, a hundred-foot mountain of garbage gave way and thundered

down onto a neighborhood of shanties built in its shadow. The trash, accumulated over three decades, had been piled up to a 70-degree angle, and the rain-saturated mountain had collapsed. Hundreds of people were killed, buried alive in an avalanche of waste. That most of the victims made a living scavenging from the pile itself rendered the tragedy a dark parable of the new millennium, a symptom of the thousand social and economic ills that plague the developing world. I knew that the scavengers had continued living and working at the site even after the disaster, and thinking there was some human truth to be dug from underneath the sorry facts, I wanted to see Payatas for myself.

Johnny Ramone squeaks his taxi through a gap, and we turn right down a narrow street between rows of tin-roofed shacks, alleys crowded with fruit sellers sitting by heaps of oranges and flapping roosters straining against their tethers. A row of junk shops lines the street, their proprietors living among house-high piles of bottles and sacks of aluminum cans clouded by flies. A parade of dripping garbage trucks jounces along the pot-holed street, workers clinging to the roofs and young boys chasing after them hoping something salvageable might fall off.

Coming over a rise, my first glimpse of Payatas is hallucinatory: a great smoky-gray mass that towers above the trees and shanties creeping up to its edge. On the rounded summit, almost the same color as the thunderheads that mass over the city in the afternoons, a tiny backhoe crawls along a contour, seeming to float in the sky. As we approach, shapes and colors emerge out of the gray. What at first seemed to be flocks of seagulls spiraling upward in a

hot wind reveal themselves to be cyclones of plastic bags. The huge hill itself appears to shimmer in the heat, and then its surface resolves into a moving mass of people, hundreds of them, scuttling like termites over a mound. From this distance, with the wind blowing the other way, Payatas displays a terrible beauty, inspiring an amoral wonder at the sheer scale and collective will that built it, over many years, from the accumulated detritus of millions of lives.

Behind a broad desk, Colonel Jameel Jaymalin looks pressed and combed despite the crushing heat and the bouquet of decomposing municipal waste that drifts in on the breeze. He seems happy in his position, lord of a fiefdom offered tribute by some 450 garbage trucks a day, many of which idle at the entrance gate outside his office as we speak. The colonel recites a history of the site and the government's efforts to clean things up following the disaster in 2000. Thirty years ago Pay-

atas had been a ravine surrounded by rice paddies and farming villages shaded over with the remnants of the rain-forest canopy. As Manila rebuilt in the postwar decades, a great migration from the countryside to the city ballooned the population from 1.5 million in 1950 to nearly 15 million today.

By the 1970s, low-lying Payatas, on the anarchic fringe of a massive city, began by dint of gravity and convenience to be used as a dumping ground. Truckloads of household waste gathered up by sanitation privateers from across the city were poured into the ravine. The site also became infamous as a body dump during the gang wars that raged across the city's slum districts, fought out with spears, machetes, poison arrows, and homemade guns called *sumpak*. Creeks were filled in and the topography shifted; a hill began to grow, accruing layer upon layer and combed over by a population of 10,000 scavengers, junk-shop operators, and garbage brokers who followed the metropolis's waste stream wherever-



er it led. Absent any government oversight, a city of shanties grew up around, and on, the dump. The entire local economy was built on a sort of Trash Rush. By 2000, the Payatas dump was 130 feet high, taller than anything in the surrounding landscape, a dormant and unstable volcano waiting for chance and gravity to run their course.

After the July rains and the collapse, after what bodies that could be recovered had been buried and the television crews went away, there was still enormous political pressure on the Quezon City government to do something about conditions at the site. At first the dump was closed, but the absence of an alternative meant that garbage piled up around the city. Despite the dump's dangers, the scavengers and the dumping cartels wanted Payatas reopened, and within months that is exactly what happened. By year's end the national government had passed an extraordinarily ambitious, if almost completely unenforceable, law called the Ecological Solid Waste Management Act,

which called for all open dumps in the country to be closed and replaced with sealed sanitary landfills. According to the act, Payatas was supposed to close by February 16 of this year. When I point out to the colonel that it is now March, and there are several hundred loaded garbage trucks idling outside his door, he admits that, yes, there have been some unavoidable delays in locating a new site. But he insists there have been profound changes at the dump. Payatas is a flagship project: we can go see for ourselves. "Just please don't take pictures of the children."

The colonel hands us off to Rafael Saplan, the dump's chief engineer, who shows us a series of maps and charts illustrating his master plan. Saplan tells me that except for the absence of a liner to prevent waste from contaminating the groundwater, the dump has been largely converted into a sanitary landfill. "It would take 3,000 trucks a day eleven years to cart all this garbage to a new engineered landfill," Saplan tells me. The steep face of the pile,

which had been nearly vertical before the collapse, has been recontoured to a more stable 40 degrees, and terraced steps have been cut into it to prevent slides. Toxic leachate, the heavy metal-laced liquid that percolates down through compressed garbage, is collected and pumped back into the pile. Deep-rooted vetiver grass has been planted to control erosion, and a system of I.D. cards has been created to document scavengers. No workers under fourteen are allowed.

Saplan is working on a pilot project to mine the millions of cubic feet of methane produced by the pile's decay every year, some of which is pumped into a one-megawatt gas generator. The ultimate goal is to build a generating station that could provide electricity to around two thousand local households for a decade. The government would even be able to receive emissions credits for the methane project under the Kyoto Protocol. And then the site could be turned into an eco-park, maybe even a golf course. In the





meantime, the actor Martin Sheen—who spent more than a year in the Philippines filming *Apocalypse Now*—has built a child-care center at the foot of the pile where the scavengers’ children can splash in a wading pool while their parents work above. It looks good on paper: a beneficent, progressive government doing what it can to deal with a huge, toxic, public-health headache. I mention to Klaid that the ESWMA seems like an incredibly forward-thinking piece of legislation. He laughs. “Yes, but in the Philippines the law is only a suggestion.”

With laminated passes given to us by one of the colonel’s aides, we walk through the gate and down the hill. Truck after truck rumbles by, piled high with household and commercial waste from across Quezon. In the tropical heat the smell of rot and smoke is everywhere; it seeps into the pores and clings to the back of your throat. Our clothes soak through with sweat. We cut

through a maze of narrow alleys filled with uniformed schoolkids and men playing billiards, dogs collapsed under the shade of the feltless tables. The neighborhood architecture is cobbled together out of chicken wire, cinderblocks, rusted tin. One rooftop is made entirely out of liberated street signs. Klaid leads us down a narrow trail through the jungle, which in places still edges the slum. We walk across a narrow bamboo bridge and up a steep hill, where a group of people—mothers with babies, men with arms crossed—sit in the shade of a military-style tent, in which a cooking class is under way.

At the foot of the hill lies a half-acre of vegetables: beautifully tended rows of lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, squash, corn. A few people rest under a giant star-apple tree by a small creek. A pregnant woman with a little boy works her way down a row of tomato plants, pulling weeds. Tropical butterflies flit about. It would be an utterly rural and bucolic scene if it weren’t for the rusty jumble of houses that begin at the

field’s edge, towered over by the gray hill of Payatas. The rumble of the bulldozers and the trucks circling the road up its side is a dull grind, and periodically a plastic bag caught in an updraft drifts toward us and descends, delicate as a floating dandelion seed, into the branches of the trees.

“These are all *mangangalahig*, the scavengers from the local community,” Klaid tells me. *Mangangalahig* means something like “chicken-scratcher,” after the way the scavengers pick through the trash. For the last six months, with money from the Consuelo “Chito” Madrigal Foundation, funded by one of the Philippines’ wealthiest families, Klaid has been running an organic-gardening training program to classes of twenty at a time. Each student was given a plot of land to use and basic instruction.

Klaid, goateed, pierced, with a baby face and a shaved head, looks like a cherubic interpretation of a pirate. He picked up his nickname as a teenage street break-dancer with his partner



“Bonny.” An idealist who struggled for years in his former job at the United Nations Human Settlements Program, he jumped at the chance to do community work without the bureaucratic red tape. “That’s why I left the U.N.,” he tells me. “I said, ‘For three years I’ve been hearing you talk, and set paradigms, and talk about frameworks and structures, and not one house has been built.’ What we are doing here is the very essence of what the U.N. is trying to do, but they are limited by bureaucracy and internal politics.”

When the class lets out, Klaid introduces me to one of the students, Ronald Escare, a stocky, grinning man with a ponytail tucked under a Mickey Mouse hat who goes by the nickname Bobby. Bobby has scavenged in Payatas for eight years, and he is just about to start his afternoon shift. Among the many new rules implemented by the government, the vast and chaotic population of *mangangalahig* have been divided into work groups, each with a scheduled shift

and a specific assignment of truck numbers whose contents they are allowed to pick over. We pull on knee-high gum boots and walk along a dusty path through the shanties to the dump entrance, trailed by a group of giggling children. On the street by the main gate, perhaps fifty yards from Martin Sheen’s drop-off center (the wading pool empty, the children absent), a teenage boy tends to a large pile of burning wires, poking them periodically with a stick, his T-shirt pulled up over his nose and mouth. It is a halfhearted attempt to filter out the carcinogenic smoke, laden with dioxins and furans, which are released when insulation is burned off to sell the copper wire for scrap.

Bobby turns out to be a one-man commodities board of the latest scrap prices. “Red copper, 150 pesos a kilo at junk shop,” he tells me. “I sell at factory, no junk shop. Two hundred pesos.” His derisive laugh suggests that anyone who does not cut out the middleman in these transactions is a suck-

er. He gestures at the burning tangle of wire with his *kalahig*, the tool used by all the scavengers to dig through the trash. The *kalahig* is an L-shaped steel spike, perhaps 18 inches long, with a wooden handle and a needle-sharp point. With a practiced flick of the wrist Bobby demonstrates how to spear a can on the ground and deposit it into the sack he has slung over his shoulder. When I tell Bobby that aluminum cans in the States can be redeemed for the astronomical equivalent of 2 pesos each, he gives me a look of unalloyed wonder, as if I’d announced that the streets in America are made of chocolate.

We wave the colonel’s passes at the guard, a city employee wearing a fluorescent orange T-shirt emblazoned with the word ENFORCER. On the back it bears the message: “environmentally friendly” in lower-case script. He waves us through after exacting a toll of a couple cigarettes. On a steep path up the hillside a line of dusty scavengers, finishing their daytime shifts, stumble

down with bulging plastic sacks on their heads. The smell increases as we climb, a miasma of rotting food and burning tires, but before long my sense of smell, apparently defeated, ceases to register the full force of the stench. The ground underneath our boots is spongy, and as we climb, black rivulets of leachate flow down the access road. A black puddle releases methane bubbles like a primordial swamp, and the ground itself shakes when a loaded truck rumbles by. A road cut reveals a gray cross section of oozing agglomerate, shredded plastic bags the only recognizable remnants in the hyper-compressed pile.

The colonel's dreams of a grass-covered return to nature at Payatas seem far off as we ascend through the decades-old strata of the pile. Garbage dumps are far from inert. As rainwater percolates down through the pile and organic matter decays, a continuous and unpredictable biochemical reaction occurs, leaching toxins from the various plastics, metals, and organic compounds. The "slow smokeless burning of decay" is a process of centuries: ancient Roman dumps produce leachate to this day. Newsprint can remain legible for decades. Beneath its surface, Payatas is a roiling and poisonous pressure cooker, and any plan to cover it with a green mantle will ultimately have to come to terms with what is buried there.

Trying hard not to slip back down the rancid surface of the pile, we finally clamber to the top. The highest point in the landscape, the "active face" of the Payatas dump is a broad plain of trash, extending to a false horizon so that it seems to comprise the entire world. Unlike the gray muck of the mountain's sides, the summit is a riot of torn-open, primary-colored plastic bags in festive profusion, like a Mardi Gras parade hit by a cluster bomb. A line of trucks rumbling up the road drops load upon load, which are sifted and pushed to the edges as the hill grows skyward. The quaking geology of trash beneath our feet is laid down layer by layer, and covered daily with truckloads of dirt, as Bobby explains: *lupa, basura, lupa, basura*—earth, garbage, earth, garbage—in sedimentary gradations, building an utterly man-made landscape. Could they be read, the lay-

ers at Payatas—like Mesolithic middens of oyster shells or the trash heaps of Pompeii—might unravel to a future archaeologist some mystery of the millions of vanished lives whose leavings made this mountain.

Hundreds of scavengers, brandishing *kalahigs* and sacks, faces covered with filthy T-shirts, eyes peering out like desert nomads through the neck holes, gather in clutches across the dump. Gulls and stray dogs with heavy udders prowl the margins, but the summit is a solely human domain. The impression is of pure entropy, a mass of people as disordered as the refuse itself, swarming frantically over the surface. But patterns emerge, and as trucks dump each new load with a shriek of gears and a sickening glorp of wet garbage, the scavengers surge forward, tearing open plastic bags, spearing cans and plastic bottles with a choreographed efficiency. The intense focus and stooped postures of the *mangangalahigs'* bodies recall a post-agricultural version of Millet's *Gleaners*. We stand by the side of a fresh pile and watch as it is worked over with astonishing speed. A *kalahig* slits open a bag as if it were a fish, garbage entrails spilling out, and with a series of rapid, economical movements, anything useful is speared and flicked into a sack to be sorted later. The ability to discern value at a glimpse, to sift the useful out of the rejected with as little expenditure of energy as possible, is the great talent of the scavenger.

Cleanliness is relative here. After filling a sack with slop for his pigs, melon rinds, cold spaghetti, some congealed fried chicken at the bottom of a takeout bag, Bobby plunges his greasy hands into a rotting watermelon to clean them off, and then wipes them down with a moldering orange, grinning. He points out the different grades of plastic and their market prices as he walks us around a new heap being combed over by a group of his friends. The group's leader is a striking transvestite with the given name Romeo Derillo, self-christened Camille. Hand on hip, calling out orders to her crew and twirling a *kalahig* like a majorette, she somehow manages an unassailable glamour while standing knee-deep in a freshly dumped load from one of Mani-

la's huge new shopping malls. This is premium garbage, so she has ordered all *kalahigs* sheathed, and the valuable plastic bottles are pulled out by hand. One worker collects nothing but drink straws; another, hundreds of plastic cups. Compact discs catch the sunlight like iron pyrite in a slag heap. A boy runs past, shouting with joy, holding aloft a pair of beat-up roller skates he's just salvaged. A bulldozer rumbles by, the ground quivering, trailing a bloody-looking garland of McDonald's ketchup packets from its rear axle.

Camille, like a great many of the Filipinos who find themselves working in Payatas, came here from the hinterlands of central Luzon island as a teenager. The economic choice between farming in the countryside (all fortunes the whim of the monsoon, of landowners, of the market price of rice or bananas) and mining the wealth of the metropolis's waste was not a difficult one. "In Payatas, they make a better living than they could ever hope to in the countryside," Klaid tells me. Bobby's 50 percent premium (when he cuts out the junk-shop middlemen) means he can make 150 pesos a day; about three dollars, which is 50 percent higher than the Philippine median.

The existence of "garbage slums," where the desperately poor find their economic niche wherever municipal waste is dumped, is by no means a solely Filipino phenomenon. In his terrifying, magisterial work *Planet of Slums*, Mike Davis cites Beirut's Quarantina, Khartoum's Hillat Kusha, Calcutta's Dhapa, and Mexico City's enormous Santa Cruz Meyehualco as a few of the more egregious examples of this new urban form. Only in the last decade, since it eclipsed Manila's notorious Smokey Mountain (closed by the government in 1995), has the garbage slum in Payatas reached its apogee. Household and industrial trash has become for the world's poor a more viable source of sustenance than the agriculture and husbandry that has supported civilization since the first cities sprang up in the Fertile Crescent.

Occupying a niche like the bacteria and fungi that break down organic wastes in a forest and feed them back into the energy cycle, scavengers have existed in large cities at least since the Industrial Revolution. Victorian Lon-

don, for instance, had an elaborately structured recycling system, with every subgroup filling its adapted role in the vast city's digestive tract. Night-soil men gathered human waste from privies and sold it as fertilizer. Pure finders gathered dog shit for use in the tanning of hides. Small children called mud-larks scoured the tidal flats along the Thames looking for bits of rope or lumps of coal, and bone grubbers dispatched animal skeletons to the rag-and-bone shops. The advent of plastics in modern industry has changed what the *man-galahigs* are gathering up, but it hasn't altered their key role in the ecosystem of the city.

Even within the economic bottom-feeding of Payatas there is a self-imposed hierarchy, a funhouse mirror of larger societal inequalities. Scavengers unaffiliated with organized groups are called *ramblistas*, or "ramblers." Like hyenas skulking around a pride of lions at a kill, *ramblistas* circle outside the groups working the newest piles, picking over the dregs. The *paleros*, boys who work on the trucks themselves, making collection rounds of neighborhoods, are in a better position, snatching up the choicest bits before they even reach the dump. Some of the trucks we had seen had huge bags hanging on their sides, and the *paleros* were grabbing what they could from their load and squirreling it away. Before entering the gate by the colonel's office, a truck will pull up in front of one of the junk shops, and the *paleros* heft their day's take onto a scale, dividing up the money to supplement their 50 peso wage. The jumpers, usually small boys who climb aboard moving trucks and shovel valuable items overboard, have been banned from the dump proper under the new regulations, but that has only pushed them outside the gates. I had spotted them waiting at intersections, where they climb under the tarps of unguarded and idling trucks and grab whatever they can.

Just to the side of the several-acre spot where the trucks are dropping new loads sits a cluster of shacks and lean-tos, shaded by ragged tarps. "That's the food court," says Klaid, "just like the mall." And it is just like the mall, save perhaps the oversight of health inspectors. Small cookstoves heat tea and bubbling pots of stew. For a few pesos

the scavengers can get lunch here instead of hiking down to the bottom of the hill. Klaid purchases a balut, a fertilized duck egg that has developed for two weeks before being hard-boiled. It is a Filipino delicacy, and with a gold-toothed grin he makes a show of cracking the shell, slurping the juice, and swallowing the fetal duck whole.

Wandering from pile to pile, calling out "*Piyesa! Piyesa!*" (Parts! Parts!), are brokers of electronic and computer components, a new and lucrative category of waste. I ask Bobby what's worth the most, and he replies without hesitating, "Epson." An empty refillable printer cartridge in working condition can go for as much as 350 pesos. Bobby knows the prices for all these, too: Monitor, 50 pesos. Motherboard, 30. Circuit boards for 25 a kilo, to be melted down for trace amounts of gold. Pentium chips, if the pins can be straightened, 50. A boy approaches the brokers with a scuffed-up printer cartridge, which they glance at before rejecting. It is a buyer's market, and the general sentiment among everyone I talk to is that business has been getting worse.

A year ago, say Bobby and his friends, a *ramblista* might have made 1,000 pesos a week. Now she'll be lucky to glean 600. Most of the best pickings are intercepted en route or diverted to other dumpsites. I ask Bobby what he'll do if Payatas finally closes down. He shrugs, smiles. His five-months' pregnant wife is working as a *ramblista* a few yards away. "I'll go to Montalban," he says. Klaid tells me that this is the new dumpsite even further out in the countryside. Many scavengers have already moved there. The enormous waste stream of Manila shifts like the mouth of a river, and wherever it spreads its rich alluvial fan the *man-galahigs* and *paleros* and *ramblistas* will follow.

The impulse to gamble, the faint hope that the dump might offer up a buried treasure, becomes a kind of religion to the thousands of scavengers. Payatas, which in the 2000 collapse had shown itself capable of taking everything away, can offer up extraordinary bounty. I ask Bobby what is the greatest thing he has ever heard of being found. A Rolex, 65,000 pesos in a box, gold teeth, a half-burned



hundred-dollar bill. There are dangers, too: some boys once found a hand grenade and, not realizing what it was, blew themselves up. Just last week Bobby had found a huge Styrofoam box containing a 150-pound swordfish, still frozen solid. His group had hacked it up on the spot and taken it home. He thinks the *paleros* must have grabbed it by accident from outside a restaurant. "Sometimes they don't know what they throw away," he says.

Having come here expecting to see a violent and irrational struggle for existence, I begin to find something reassuring about the efficient dignity with which the *mangangalahig* go about their work. Bobby tells me that with the new system of collectives, the scavengers share profits within their groups, which leads to more cooperation in the gleaning process, and many participate in a local savings program, from which they can draw small loans. The scavengers seem less victims than rational economic actors, skilled and highly orga-

nized laborers who actually provide a sort of public service.

The sun is sliding fast toward the horizon, and we pick our way back down the hill as the next shift's workers begin to make their way up. They will work long into the night, as long as the trucks keep coming, lighting their way with homemade miner's lamps of taped-together batteries. Walking down through the village, I notice several shrines to St. Anthony, the patron saint of poor people and seekers of lost objects, decorated with plastic bottle-ends cut into festive blossoms.

Day after day we return to Payatas, climbing around the pile to talk to people or wandering through the surrounding neighborhoods. There are actually two peaks in the topography of trash here: the newer one, where some 1,300 tons of municipal waste are dumped a day; and the older one, site of the 2000 collapse, which was graded and closed shortly thereafter.

That part of the dump now houses Saplan's methane-generation project. We pass an outflow pipe coming out of the pile's base next to a small creek. A steady flow of espresso-black leachate, the poison distillate of millions of tons of putrescent garbage, pours out, running downhill directly into the creek, which joins the flow of the toxic Pasig River as it winds through the heart of the metropolis to Manila Bay.

Below a bridge that spans the creek, a group of half-naked boys stand in the gray water up to their waists, rinsing out hundreds of plastic garbage bags, which they bundle up in great bales. Another boy stomps down a truckload of plastic cups that resembles a hay wain. The bag-washers in the river have set alight a pile of waste plastic, which flickers and pops as it sends a black plume across the shacks and frames the scene in Hadean shades. They look up at me, laughing, calling out: "Hey Joe!" "Hey Joe, you're my father!" Laughing and splashing around as they work, the boys are scarcely aware of the health



risks to which they and all the scavengers of Payatas are subjecting themselves. Tuberculosis is epidemic, made worse by air pollution and overcrowding. Tetanus, asthma, and staph infections are common. There are a few medical charities that visit, but regular care is rare. Bobby says he's lost three of his children to illness in Payatas: nine years, six years, and three months, "from the methane." He tells me this matter-of-factly, as if he were reciting the market prices of aluminum cans. Personal tragedy is a commodity worth very little in Payatas.

We wander through warrens of shacks, built on blocks to weather the monsoon. The soot-covered houses seem half destroyed, and nobody next to the dump owns the land they live on. Squatters' shacks overhang the banks of the Pasig River, which has been turned into a vast cloaca for the city's waste, and yearly rises above its banks to sweep away the most vulnerable settlements. Manila has a severe monsoon, and informal housing among the

slum population leaves tens of thousands living in flood-prone, cramped, disease-ridden squalor. Even in the worst locations, or on the periphery where the city fades away into the rice fields and swamps, there is always the threat of a more powerful economic force that can edge squatters out from whatever place they've taken as theirs. They are haunted everywhere by the bulldozers of progress.

Time and again in Manila, huge slums have been emptied to avoid the unwanted notice of the outside world. Imelda Marcos was notorious for clearing out tens of thousands of slum dwellers in the mid-1970s before the arrival of the Miss Universe pageant, the visit of President Gerald Ford, and an IMF-World Bank meeting. Not to be outdone, her nominally democratic successor Corazon Aquino reportedly evicted 600,000 squatters during her presidency. When prices rise and landowners want to clear shantytowns from their property, one of the favored methods in Manila is arson, known as

"hot demolition." A popular technique involves releasing a rat or cat soaked in kerosene and set alight into a settlement, where the terrified creature can set dozens of buildings on fire before it dies.

We cut across the narrow valley between the two hills and cross a ditch into the neighborhood that was once known as Lupang Pangako: the Promised Land. This spot, Klaid tells me, is where the hill came down. A woman named Ruth Manadong, sweeping her alley a few yards from the edge of the dump, points us to the exact spot. She and her eight-year-old nephew had escaped, climbing the slope behind their house as the saturated garbage surged down like lava. They later returned, she tells me, but were driven away from the site by restive ghosts rattling their windows, knocking pots over in the kitchen, visiting nightmares into fitful attempts at sleep. She does not look up as she tells this to Klaid. She points us down the



alleyway, where steps lead to a concrete patio and a memorial on which several hundred names are inscribed. Abalos. Villeno. George. Whole extended families were wiped out in the putrid wave of mud and plastic. No one will ever know for sure how many were swallowed up. More than 200 bodies were pulled out, but the flow had filled in the ravine 30 feet deep in places, utterly shifting the landscape and making a full recovery impossible.

Not thirty yards from the memorial, a group of mud-covered workers are digging a deep trench into the collapsed hillside. At first I think they are a work detail digging for remains, to give a proper burial to the nameless dead still buried in the site. Klaid speaks with one of them in Tagalog and then explains, "When the dump was first being piled up, the value of aluminum was so low that people didn't collect it for scrap. So they're digging out twenty-year-old cans from the site of the collapse." By the dictates of the open market the decades-old layers of trash were now a relatively rich ore, regardless of the fact that the abandoned tailings the workers now sifted through were laced with their own dead. In a sense, it is all a matter of how quickly one is buried alive in the garbage: in a few terror-filled moments, or by the slow measure of a lifetime's labor.

One Sunday Bobby meets us at a McDonald's in Quezon, where we pile into a motorcycle taxi with a sidecar and bump and rattle down pothole-covered streets into the heart of the slum. Bobby's wife is working a *ramblista* shift today, and women don't often come where we are going. Pulling up into a dusty, open courtyard, we are met by the suspicious stares of a hundred men who are gathered around a squared-off enclosure of rusted sheet metal. Sunday mornings in Quezon are for church or for cockfights, and we have come for the latter.

Men hold their prize birds under their arms, smoothing their feathers, whispering to them quietly, running their fingers down the long green tails as though through a lover's hair. The wall around the enclosure is chest-high and crowded three-deep with spectators. Bobby and I climb up on a corner post,

a boy scrambling between my legs to look over. Two scarred men with poorly rendered tattoos enter the dusty ring through a gate, their birds' heads tucked under their armpits to calm them. A hulking man with a notepad stands in the center, sweat running in rivulets down his face, and starts calling out odds in Filipino, waving a splay-fingered hand at the crowd like a magician casting a spell. Surging against the barrier, the sidelines erupt with bets being placed, peso notes held high, men showing and yelling to get closer to the edge of the ring, sizing up the competitors.

The man taking the bets is called the Cristo—the Christ—and, like an auctioneer, his skill is to build the bidding to a fever pitch. Fistfuls of pesos change hands, odds are given, supplications are made to the heavens. Cockfighting is called *sabong* in Filipino, and as many as 10 percent of Filipinos are active participants in this billion-dollar industry. In some slum economies, as much as a fifth of the average income is redistributed through gambling, and, as with state lotteries in the United States, the poorest people in the Philippines are those most likely to gamble on birds. They are also the primary consumers of *shabu*, a local variety of methamphetamine, and *rugby*, a generic term for glues and solvents with addictive fumes.

Holding the roosters feet up, a handler—Bobby tells me this is often his job—removes the leather sheath from the curved, razor-sharp, three-inch spur tied to the right leg of each bird. The men in the pit clear out a space at the center, giving a wide berth to the cocks, which have been known to kill unlucky bystanders with their spurs. The handlers draw the birds close enough to peck at each other and then back off, repeating this three times before dropping the agitated birds to the ground. The effect is instantaneous and explosive: a blur of color, a broad fan of bright green neck feathers, and a flapping of wings as the birds leap upon each other, lunging with the spurs faster than the eye can follow, seeming to become a single chaotic being. The crowd erupts in cheers, faces contorted, eyes bulging, screaming for their favorites. Bobby, utterly in his element, is swept up in the fervor, pounding against the sheet metal and yelling with

the throng. In and out of the ring is a scene of pure, animal aggression, unapologetic and unself-conscious.

As the roosters flail in the dust, the men left in the ring leap to stay out of the way of the flashing surgical steel blades. A bird flaps high into the air and brings a blade straight into the feathers of its opponent's back. Blood flies out in an arc, splattering the barrier. Another lunge and a wing is broken, splayed out on the ground as the injured cock drags itself upright, still lunging after its opponent with the working half of its body. A handler picks both up and swings them together for a last desperate round, trying to stoke whatever smoldering fury they still possess. The crowd leans in, cackling and leering, as the cocks are thrown together. One bird manages to get on top of the other and, even with a broken wing, methodically plunges its spur to the hilt three times in its opponent's throat, just beneath the green fan of neck feathers. Both birds flap weakly, kick, and lie still, breasts pulsing, eyes wide. The Cristo picks them both up, and bright blood drips steadily from a beak, turning black in the dust. The birds are drawn together once more but are too weak to be provoked. The Cristo drops the dying loser onto the blood-caked ground and holds the dying winner aloft. The crowd howls. The whole fight has lasted perhaps twenty seconds.

Around the outside of the pit, money changes hands in an exchange of gloating and recrimination at the defeated rooster. With little ceremony, a man carries the loser still breathing out of the pit, and lays it across a bloodstained log, where another man with a cleaver hacks off the spur leg with one swing. A boy unties the steel spur from the severed leg and passes it to the next contestant. The bird is plunged headfirst into a can of water boiling on a trash pile, and it flaps once in the water but within a few moments is defeathered and handed to the victor, a trophy for the soup pot on top of his winnings. The champion bird has its spur untied, and just as quickly is whisked off to the "doctor," who sits on a log near the ring. With a needle and thread and packets of powdered antibiotics, the doctor patches the bird up, probing gashes with a finger for internal bleeding be-

fore sewing them up. After a month on the mend the rooster will be back in the pit.

In the afternoon we return to the garden. Bobby, back to earth after the glories of the cockpit, sets to work on his neat rows of tomato plants, watering and pulling weeds alongside his wife, who has finished her shift on the dump. If Payatas closes down, as the colonel has promised, Bobby has no interest in finding a new career. As a scavenger he makes his own hours, he works when it pleases him, and, even with the slow-down at the dump, he earns enough to live. The gardening project is a good diversion, and he'll get food and a bit of income from what he's growing. There's a certain irony, which I point out to Klaid, in retraining migrants who have fled the countryside to be farmers again. "It's true," he replies. "There's no opportunity out there. The city is attractive. For a farmer, life on a dumpsite is comparatively easy. This is not a question of quality of life, but a question of survival."*

So what does the garden really do, I ask. "It gives them a place to be quiet, to be patient. To garden instead of gamble. I was a community organizer for ten years, and it did nothing because I tried to save the world. People would get transferred to something even worse, a place with no work and no services, beyond the edge of everything. With this project we decided that if we could reach one person at a time, on an individual level, then it is a huge step."

Whether the garden, whatever it brings to the lives of the scavengers, will even continue to exist is an open question. The property is owned by the Madrigals, but there are many who think the most valuable use of the land would be to build housing for the poor,

* A farmer from the provinces who makes his way to Payatas probably won't realize that he's part of the largest migration in human history. Sometime this year, according to the U.N., more than half of the global population will live in cities for the first time, up from 3 percent two hundred years ago. A billion will live in slums like Payatas. Every week more than 1.3 million people abandon their lives in the countryside for cities. From Guangzhou to São Paulo, they are the economic drivers of the developing world.

and that a garden is, at best, a quaint diversion. Ging Gonzales, one of the members of the foundation's board, says as much to me as we are driving through Quezon's traffic to a meeting with Sonny Belmonte, the mayor whose face graces the better part of the city's billboards. "How many children could we send to school for the money we are spending on the garden?" she asks me. "The problem is knowing what is the most efficient means of helping."

When we arrive at his office, Belmonte, as smiley in person as he is on billboards, is receiving hundreds of visitors, interest groups from across his enormous slice of the metropolis. Belmonte sits down with us for a few minutes as Klaid clicks through a slide show about the garden project. "This might be a good thing," says the mayor, in a noncommittal way. "Maybe it will give them skills to take back to the provinces with them." In his rapidly expanding city, an exodus of the poorest newcomers would relieve Belmonte of an enormous social headache. I ask him when Payatas is really going to close. "Now we are hoping for January 2007." A few days later, Belmonte and several other metropolitan Manila mayors were named in a lawsuit by environmental groups for failing to close Payatas and other dumpsites. But no amount of arguing, for or against, seems likely to change the fundamental facts on the ground: every single day, 7,000 tons of metropolitan Manila's household garbage must go somewhere. "If you think Payatas is bad," one of the mayor's aides tells me, "you should go see Pier 18."

Pier 18, on the industrial shorefront of Manila's north harbor, lies half-obscured behind a row of shanties that line a frontage road. We inch our way there, in a solid stream of truck traffic, as the cumulonimbus clouds piled over the western rim of the bay unleash a hot downpour. The low-lying road through the Navotas slum fills with knee-deep puddles in a few minutes. The squatter settlements creep right up to the edge of the road and even the five-foot-wide median has been littered with squatters' scrap-wood shacks and split-bamboo chicken coops, constant traffic within inches on either



side. Passing trucks throw up bow wakes, and waves travel along the narrow alleyways, surging right into the ground floors of the houses. Flotsam butts up against rotted walls, and children splash through the muck, lifting their soaked shirts. Several huts are roofed with the stolen signboards of political candidates, and it seems that the sheltering placards provide a far more tangible benefit to the poor than any unachievable campaign promises printed upon them.

The rain passes, and we get out of the taxi and walk past a sign that reads "Pier 18 North Harbor." Pier 18 is an enormous transfer station the size of several football fields, where hundreds of trucks from across Manila dump their daily loads to be picked over and consolidated before being shipped out to Montalban. Hundreds of scavengers, a great many of them small children, swarm over the pile, swinging *kalahigs* wildly as each new load is dumped. Trucks plow in and out through the site, and several times I see children, boots suctioned by the mud, nearly fall beneath their wheels. Jumpers scramble up onto the loads and surf the waves of trash as they slide out of the tilting truck beds. Stray dogs and pigs rove over the piles, rooting out rotting food.

I speak to an eight-year-old boy named Gerald, who has a raw gash over his right eye from the swinging trap door of a truck. I ask him where he lives, and he points across the lake of mud to a row of tarp-covered shacks right on the edge of the pier. His parents work here too, and he comes every day after school. He turns and runs as a new pile gets dropped, very nearly getting plowed under by a bulldozer, and squirms his way to the top of the pile with the adults, filling his sack with shocking speed. People follow behind the bulldozers, spearing anything of value churned up by its treads. Teenage boys burn strings of Christmas lights in an old suitcase. There are no rules, no I.D.s, no flagship social programs or green reclamation, no sense that there is anyone managing or overseeing this chaos. It is the Darwinian free market in its purest and most ruthless form. To witness this makes all the beneficence of the Madrigals and the economic development programs

of the World Bank seem like so much well-intentioned folly.

But even in this swampy hell there is a degree of remove, of levity. At the edge of the pier, under a tin roof, a karaoke machine is running, the words spooling out on a screen beneath a shot of a beautiful girl walking on a beach. A young girl in rubber boots, covered with mud, grabs the microphone and starts singing a Filipino pop song in a cracked but totally heartfelt voice. The *mangangalahig* have distilled survival, and even joy, down to an essence. That life prevails here is a testament to what can be endured; in the midst of squalor, laughter and karaoke can still be heard. Even the landscape insistently offers up signs of regeneration: when we leave the pier, there is a dim rainbow bent over the piled housing of Navotas. North of the slum, the fenced-off dumpsite of Smokey Mountain lies dormant and abandoned, after ten years its slopes already beginning to be reclaimed by grass and shrubs.

On our last day in Payatas, we accept an invitation to stay at the house of Nanay Remy, a frail, toothless woman of seventy-three, her face half-paralyzed by a stroke. She lives in a 500-square-foot compound with twenty-four family members and still works as a *ramblista* on the pile every day. Dozens of rusty box springs fence off the compound, and inside are several neat huts and a small garden, which Remy planted after her training at Madrigal. As I talk with Bobby and Klaid, Remy serves a feast of fried fish and rice and salad from her garden plots. She has lived in Payatas for fifteen years and doesn't have a clue where they'll all go if the dump closes down. She wants to stay together with her people. The family is the core of Filipino society, and population numbers are often discussed in terms of families rather than individuals. She has two of her tiny, wide-eyed grandchildren in her lap. Their mother, a *shabu* addict, has abandoned them, and Remy feeds them with her fingers as she retells the history of her life: the evacuation from the Visayas islands during the war, the years squatting in the Tondo slum, a husband lost to drink, children and grandchildren raised, the endurance of a long

life here. Her story isn't a plea for pity, and she isn't asking for anything except what the trash heap offers up.

Remy has cleared out one of her bamboo and sheet-metal huts for us. I lie on the hard floor, listening as the evening crows of a dozen roosters echo through the village, doomed some Sunday to be called to the pit by the Cristo. At the open window the equatorial darkness falls like a curtain, and across the creek the mountain of the dumpsite rears black beneath a net of stars. Against the silhouette of the garbage mountain, a faint line of lights works its way upward. They are the homemade headlamps of the night shift tracing their way up the pile. Reaching the top, they spread themselves out, shining their lights on the shifting ground to begin their search. Beneath the wide night sky those tiny human sparks split and rearrange, like a constellation fallen to earth, as if uncertain of what hopeful legend they are meant to invoke. ■

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