



Fill
in
the
Blanks

Rocky
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translated by
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*For my younger self who lived through it all in
Payatas alongside many others who did the same,
and for us who are trying to do justice to all that
came after.*

1. Full Name

_____.

2. Sex: ___ Male ___ Female

3. Permanent Address¹

~~Payatas, Quezon City, Philippines~~_____.

Tarlac, Philippines_____.

¹ I used to hate telling people that I was from Payatas.

I hated it when people asked if I lived by the dumpsite. I hated having to explain that it was no longer as bad as it once smelled. How do I even start telling these people why the dumpsite closed just recently? Whenever somebody touched on the topic of hometowns, I would hold back saying that a landslide of garbage in Payatas struck our community and got shown on TV.

It pissed me off how easy it was for people to make Payatas a metaphor for something so filthy and revolting. Mala-Payatas. Payatas-esque. “Smells like Payatas, looks like Payatas.” I did not want to answer questions about how far the dumpsite was from our home, or whether I needed to ride a jeepney or walk to the infamous mountain of garbage.

Going home to my maternal grandparents’ house in the province of Tarlac was repulsive to me. There are sixteen cities in the Philippines’ national capital region, but my relatives knew exactly what and where Payatas was. A cousin the same age as mine asked me one day, “does your place stink? You guys live under Tullahan Bridge, no? Your place must be near Smokey Mountain, then.” The places he mentioned are kilometers apart from each other, but they all had one thing in common: they were all inhabited by informal settlers, like us.

I knew for a fact that mama was also embarrassed to tell people that, yes, her husband bought a house in the city, but that house happened to be in Payatas. A small pocket of land equivalent to nothing more than fool’s gold. Whenever I had to answer a legal form, my mother taught me to write Tarlac as our permanent address. Payatas, my mother taught me, was just something transient.

4. Present Address²

Payatas, Quezon City, Philippines

² On July 10, 2000, hundreds of houses in Payatas, Quezon City, were crushed in a landslide of garbage. Briefly after the tragedy, our family of three moved into our new home in Payatas—the only place in Metro Manila which my newlywed parents, hailing from Cebu and Tarlac, could afford.

My parents' meager savings as former Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) in Saudi Arabia allowed them to build a small bungalow made of concrete, a small consolation. A quick step inside, however, revealed the flooring made out of shattered tiles my father received from my cousins. The tiles made our floor look like an enormous puzzle whose pieces didn't quite fit together. My cousins, who worked as scavengers for a living, obtained the tiles from hotels for free. Rejects from these establishments, most likely, which viewed even the smallest imperfection as worthy of being discarded.

"This used to be a forest, you know," my father used to tell me and my mother, in an attempt to cheer us up. That's not a wild idea, I guess, considering the number of animals that entered our house.

My Uncle Nong-nong once killed a ball python and a green tree python in our home. The pesky snakes entered through a hole in our bathroom. My parents never bothered fixing that hole; they were too cheap for that, which came back to nearly bite us all in the ass when, while in the middle of showering, I saw the slimy serpents wriggle into the bathroom.

In retrospect, I shouldn't be too surprised. Across our street, a six-foot tall concrete wall, stretching for about six kilometers, is the only thing separating Payatas from the La Mesa Dam—a 27 square-kilometer reservoir, from which 12 million Filipinos in Metro Manila got their drinking water.

I haven't been back in Payatas for more than eight years after I moved out. Recently, I looked up the history of our place on the internet, and the Ombudsman website confirmed my family's hunch: Payatas was once a forest. The Bureau of Forestry once called Payatas an "unclassified forest." It was only in the 1970's when Payatas was classified as a dumpsite by the national government. In the next twenty years, as hundreds of tonnes of garbage made its way into Payatas every day, my childhood home would cement itself as the national symbol for poor sanitation and waste management crisis.

Ironically, the land where the Payatas dumpsite was once located is called "Lupang Pangako," or "promised land." When former President Fidel Ramos ordered the closure of Smokey Mountain in Tondo, Manila after a violent demolition in 1993, the country's garbage can was transferred to Payatas. In a report by KADAMAY, an alliance of urban poor communities in Metro Manila, the residents of Payatas were able to get a glimpse of the House of Congress from their houses before the mountain of garbage replaced their view. The truth is, our so-called "Lupang Pangako" is anything but.

a. Postcode³

³ In 1875, the Integrated Corporate Reporting System declared Manila as the postal services capital of Asia. But fast forward to the 21st century, and our mailman would have had to go feral first before he manages to find our house and deliver our letters to us. Google Maps wasn't a thing yet at the time.

Payatas was cut up into three: A, B, and C. We lived in the second one where, along with a portion of Payatas C, the hectares-wide dumpsite was located. The houses were so tightly packed in the compounds and we lived so close to each other, we could have swapped faces in the morning.

We moved to our house at a time when there weren't even street signages or house markers yet on most of the barangay. And when they did put them up, some residents stole the metal signages to sell to a junk shop. The nearest one was ate M's, right in front of our house. The people brought her metal posts or copper wires stolen from the electric posts to buy. We couldn't stand the smell of burning copper. Our house had only one window, through which the smoke penetrated and invaded our house. But there was nothing we could really do, and we really couldn't blame our neighbors for wanting some extra cash. In the end, we had to paint our front doors with our assigned house numbers, hoping a kindred neighbor would point the mailman to the right house.

When Mama went abroad to work again so I could continue with school, I was the one left to fill out forms. Every time I did, I would skip the postcode line. I don't think even our neighbors knew what our postcode was!

5. Date of Birth⁴ (Month, Day, Year)

⁴ How old are you, asked the University Registrar lady, whose deadpan face looked harder than a cement wall. I laughed and told her, Gen Z pa lang ako ma'am, and then I gave her my birthdate.

In the year I was born, Malacanang ordered the Payatas dumpsite to be closed. But like all of the government's promises, Payatas continued to operate. The mountain of garbage continued to operate, grow, despite the resident's protests.

When we moved, the tragedy was fairly recent. But we stayed, along with thousands of residents who called the area their home. We managed to stay there for almost two decades. With the absurd rent and land prices in Manila, our house was the cheapest and most decent we could find for its price.

Aside from my address, I avoided telling people my age. Why did you stop, they asked. How come you work in a call center? Where are your parents? Did you get pregnant? You've tried shabu already, haven't you? What happened?

After seeing my permanent and current address in forms, once people take a look at my age, applying for admission to a university, they don't need the whole story. "Kaya pala."

While the lady was inputting my information into a computer, I asked, "Do I still need to submit my Form 137?" The list said I didn't have to, but I wanted to be completely sure. I didn't want to be plagued by worries of returning to school. After all, I'd been gone for almost two years.

I didn't want to look stupid, just filling out a form.

She raised her eyebrow and raised her voice, too loudly, like she'd swallowed a speaker, when she said, "Why are you even asking? You're too old already!"

6. Citizenship⁵

- a. ____ Filipino
- b. ____ Foreigner

⁵ Sometimes, in our tiny house, during our bouts of lunacy, Mama would ask me, out of the blue: “Do you want to live in America?” And every time I would tease her, and exclaim, “I can finally meet Mickey Mouse?!”

Some of my relatives became US citizens, a result of what we called TNT—“tago nang tago”—or hiding from the officers of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Years back, the US government granted amnesty to some of the illegal immigrants who made their way to the States. When the Immigration Reform and Control Act was enacted in 1986, my great grandmother was one of the beneficiaries.

When I was growing up, I found out that “Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals” (DACA) are what they called kids who tagged along with the TNT’s. I would have become a citizen too, if ever.

When Mama was hired again to work in Saudi, she took the job, even if it meant she’d earn less than if she had worked in America. She was a legal employee, and she got to see her family every year. She chose us, even if I knew there was a sliver of regret in her, especially seeing some of our relatives who’ve made it in America.

One relative we had was different. With the promise of amnesty, she applied for a tourist visa in order to stay in the US for six months. Six months turned into a year. A year turned into five, became ten, and now she’s going on twenty years. She’d seen Trump as president, then Biden, then Trump again. She still can’t go home to the Philippines. The grass may be greener on the other side, but the green card she’s been hoping for all these years, is still nowhere to be seen.

When I was a kid, I would get so jealous of our relatives in the States. Now I’ve realized, all we really dream of is a proper home.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Highschool⁶

Vocational⁷

College⁸

⁶ Plastered in the hallways of the private high school I went to were the words “English only, please.”

My tongue is more accustomed to Tagalog, and I relished the crisp *putang ina*’s I would utter when there were no teachers around. Do my rich social-climbing classmates like to say *motherfucker*? I didn’t want to get fined. In my old elementary school, we got fined one peso for every Tagalog. My problem this time was, did they charge you more at a private school?

I was angry at my mom then. Instead of spending the money she earned in Saudi for something more worthwhile, or for herself, she chose to use it for goddamn private school.

I was afraid people would find out I was a low-income *jologs*. I was afraid they’d find out we didn’t have cable TV, and that every noontime, I would tune in to *Eat Bulaga*. I was afraid they’d find out that my elementary school didn’t have a library, and the only books I’d read were the thick textbooks from Rex Bookstore. I was afraid that my classmates—kids getting picked up in their Fortuners, members of the varsity volleyball team, with their own personal maids, bedrooms, and with segregated trash cans inside their mansions—would sniff out my stinky little secret.

⁷ For my relatives in Payatas, graduating a vocational course was considered the highest academic achievement.

Each family member had their own gig to help out in the house, so it’s hard to think they’d choose school over work if it meant not making any money at all. I understand now why my uncles swarmed to courses in Shielded Metal Arc Welding NC I & NC II provided by the government before going to Saudi to look for jobs. It turns out the government actually pays you with a modest allowance while you’re finishing the courses. The idea of a four-year scholarship program or tuition waiver was simply not enough, especially if you have mouths to feed.

⁸ Getting into a university was a tremendous Hail Mary for me, let alone a well-known university famous with the neighbors for its volleyball team and cheerleading troupe that the dancers, pageant queens, and varsity players in our barangay tuned in to on their TV’s. My sixteen year-old me thought, finally, the gap between me and my neighbors was widening. I was coming out ahead.

The fact remains however: I still didn’t have any generational wealth. Our house still didn’t have a deed. We still lived in Payatas, and we were still trying hard to reach the top of the food chain, like the in-denial social climbers we were. The truth was this: I had more in common with the neighbors I was always being snooty to than with anyone else. The gap wasn’t that big after all.

Long story short, I didn’t get to finish college. In most job application forms, college undergraduate didn’t count as a degree.

AWARDS⁹

⁹ Blank. When I was a job-hunting teenage college dropout, the last award I'd won was when I graduated valedictorian in my elementary school. There were only six of us in the graduating batch of a Born Again elementary school, and I swear all of us got some kind of award. The school was just a stone's throw away from the collapsed dumpsite.

There were only a handful of us enrolled in the private-but-not-really-private schools in our barangay. We'd shell out a small amount every year, smaller compared to actual private schools, but it was still a luxury for most. My mom insisted I go here, if only to escape the curse of the Payatas name which was plastered in giant letters in front of the much cheaper public school in our barangay. Maybe Mama wanted to think we could afford a nice private school, even if said school was a real dump.

It was an open secret that my teachers never passed the teachers' licensure exam. Many of them were bright enough, but most of them didn't make the cut. We had one teacher who taught five subjects at once, so most of the time, the industrious Teacher K would use her classes as free periods for her to catch up on some sleep. She was a brilliant teacher, but I knew she was exhausted from juggling different classes she wasn't supposed to handle in the first place.

In high school, I never received another medal. In college, I didn't get to finish my degree, so I didn't get any awards or even a diploma. At that point, Teacher K was the last person to give me an award, the last person to believe I was brilliant enough to be valedictorian. How do I even write that the last time I got an award was in Grade 6?

PARENT INFORMATION SHEET

Mother`s Maiden Name:

Occupation¹⁰

Telephone no.¹¹

Mobile No. ¹²

¹⁰I remember writing “plain housewife” in the forms asking for my mom’s job. Sometimes, I wrote “retired nurse,” even if I didn’t understand what “retired” meant, and I never saw my mom in scrubs or giving someone pills even once, aside from the neighbors whose blood pressure she used to take.

¹¹We had a landline phone, but we had no landline. It was my old toy growing up. I didn’t understand the concept of owning a phone without a dial tone or anyone answering on the other line. “Did you want to talk to someone?” my parents said, when I asked why I couldn’t use our phone to, you know, phone someone. Even our own neighbors didn’t have their own phones.

¹²Circa 2005, Mama bought her own cellphone. Nokia 3210. Blue.

I remember her old cellphone vividly, because it lasted us years before Mama had to go abroad to work when I was in Grade 4. We used her phone to sell load credits in our small sari-sari store. I used it sometimes to play that old snake game. I got bored soon enough, but I didn’t have any other choice, especially if there was nothing to do in the house, or if I was waiting in line with Mama at POEA.

Now that I think about it, if my mom didn’t have enough money to buy her Nokia, she wouldn’t have had the chance to apply for jobs. This was in 2005, and there was no other way to contact our relatives short of sending letters to the mailman.

Father`s Name

Occupation¹³

Tel. No.

Mobile No.

¹³If my mom was a plain housewife, was there such a thing as a plain househusband? Evidently not. So what am I supposed to put down? Unemployed, said the man my mom married. But he didn't seem enthusiastic about it.

Minekaniko ni Moniko ang makina ni Monica, so goes the famous Filipino tongue twister. My father was no Moniko, but he was a mechanic, or so he says. Sometimes he said he was an electrician. In school, I would hear him call himself an engineer. He was the one who fixed, played around, and arranged a house's wiring and electricity system. As far as I knew, electrician and engineer meant the same thing. When I heard some kid say their dad was an engineer, I would answer, so was my dad. When my teacher asked, what kind of engineer? I'd answer, electrical engineer. I mean, that's what he'd say all the time. Electrician.

CHARACTER REFERENCE

Name	Title/Relationship with the Applicant	Company Name & Location
14		
15		
16		

¹⁴ Ate Baby was one of the few people I could count on during my teenage years. She was a famous manicurist—famous to us anyway—and my aunt. I hung out at their house all the time when I was a kid. Every afternoon, she’d sit on her little stool and patiently pick lice from my hair. She was meticulous with her work. Whenever there was an occasion, she’d sit on the same stool and give me a full mani-pedi. Sometimes her kids would get upset with me for spending too much time with their mom, she’d tell them, “don’t fight with your big sister. She doesn’t have her Mama to take care of her.”

With the small money she earned with her husband the scavenger, I still felt like they were swimming in money. She’d always tell me to come inside, eat with us, whenever she saw me lingering in their doorway. The truth is, I don’t really know who I can put down as a character reference when I became a college dropout looking for a job for the first time. If there was one person who knew me the most, it was her.

¹⁵ What if I put down my favorite teacher in high school? But I really didn’t want HR to bother her with a million questions and let her know I was applying to some run-down dingy company. Never mind.

The chaos of a call center application process truly is something else. Most of the time, they hire a third-party company to contact the character references you list down. No texting beforehand, no emails. They just flat out call your references out of the blue, during some random day. Background check, they said. When my then boyfriend met up with some of our friends, one of them said, laughing, “did you know they called me while in the middle of finals?”

These companies have no concept of courtesy to their would-be employees. There was no dignity or respect in the whole application process, especially for us who don’t get to have a lot of opportunities in life.

¹⁶ Wouldn’t it be a good idea if I write down Mathay? Or any one of these politicians I can be in kahoots with. With the billions they earn from the humungous garbage dump that’s left thousands like us poor and downtrodden, what’s the harm in asking them this one small favor?

If only.

I hereby certify that the above information is true and correct¹⁷ to the best of my knowledge and belief. I also understand that any misinterpretation will be considered a reason for withdrawal of an offer or subsequent dismissal if employed.

Certified by:

Signature

Print Name

¹⁷The truth of the matter is, for the longest time, I never enjoyed baring myself open while answering forms. I felt like a soiled diaper, my shit out in the open for everyone to see.

The most important truth of all however, it's not our fault the city discarded us in Payatas like the garbage we lived next door to. It's not our fault that in 2000, a landslide of garbage buried hundreds of houses in Payatas, becoming a nationally recognized tragedy. The tons and tons of trash in our barangay did not come from us. We were mere collateral damage, disposable, to the assholes responsible for running the dumpsite like a goddamn billion-peso business, which unfortunately for us, it was.

Almost two decades after the tragedy, as Payatas was becoming more and more like a literal wasteland, Acting Presiding Judge Marilou Runes-Tamang of Branch 97 declared the Quezon City government where Payatas was located, under former Mayor Ismael Mathay Jr., as solely responsible for the casualties of the Payatas landslide.

After the judge's ruling, I found out that the residents of Payatas can finally, legally, call the land on which their houses have been standing for generations home. Almost 1,500 families were finally given their own land. When my parents split up during the pandemic, my mom and I had moved to Tarlac. Still, it's nice to hear that my old neighbors and classmates can finally call Payatas their own.

Me? I've filled out tons and tons of forms since we lived in Payatas, and talked to many people behind many counters. And I can finally say, I don't mind filling out forms that say I used to live in a landfill.

I'm sure, everyone I've ever met or talked to or lived next to in Payatas, deserves to have their name filled in everywhere they can, to take up space, to leave nothing blank.



In the photo: Our house, its floor covered in tiles that resemble an enormous puzzle with pieces that don't quite fit.

Rocky Bernido (aka Rochel Ellen Bernido) is a Filipina bilingual and experimental essayist. Among the hundreds of entries submitted worldwide, she was hailed as a finalist by the Iceland Writers Retreat 2026 Alumni Award for demonstrating distinction in writing. In 2025, she became the sole recipient of the creative nonfiction fellowship at the IYAS La Salle National Writers Workshop, selected from a pool of over a hundred applicants. The same piece she submitted for the workshop later bested 400 entries and was chosen as one of the 25 outstanding contributions to the 19th issue of *Likhaan: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature*.

For her creative nonfiction, she received multiple awards from the Normal Awards for Gender-inclusive Literature, the University of the Philippines' LIKHAAN: Institute of Creative Writing, and San Beda's Red Chronicles.

She grew up in Payatas—the site of the infamous landslide of garbage in the Philippines, which crushed hundreds of houses in the early 2000s. Having spent nearly two decades of her life there, and being at the receiving end of the negligence of various local government units, her writing is greatly informed by ecocriticism and intersectional feminism. In her experimental essays, she sees legal forms (e.g., curriculum vitae, ID, etc.) and transforms them into formats that can be used as effective mediums to engage readers and narrate her story.

Fill in the Blanks

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