

Mitzi Joneelle Tan treats Manila Bay like a friend who has known her the longest, a childhood friend who went through a lot with the changing time, who seems familiar to her but different.

To the friend who has known me the longest,

Kamusta ka na? Ang dami na nating napagdaanan, no? I grew up watching sunsets with you, tapos tuwing Pasko magkasama tayo at nagtatawanan tayo. As it often happens with childhood friends, we associate each other with moments of joy and the simplicity of childhood.

Pero siyempre, nagbabago ang panahon, lumalaki tayo at nagiging mas komplikado. Naalala ko noong 2009, dumating si Ondoy tapos galit na galit ka. I didn't understand your anger then. It was all consuming. It overflowed, destroyed, and hurt the people closest to you that were only trying to protect you. Matagal bago ko naintindihan na sinasaktan ka na pala ng mga dayuhan nun kaya ka galit na galit, pero dahil malayo yung mga nananakit sayo, kami ang naging daluyan ng emosyon mo. That wasn't the only time you had an outburst and times only got harder.

For some time, di tayo nag-usap. Hindi na rin ako nakabisita. Nung nagkita ulit tayo, iba na itsura mo, iba na rin ako. Gumala tayo sa Taliptip, Cavite, at Baseco. Dun naging mas solido ang pagiging aktibista ko at kasama kita nun. Slowly, the image I had of you in my head transformed from sunset walks and perya games to boat rides visiting sunken islands, seeing mangroves cut down, and listening to the resistance of fisherfolk.

You looked familiar but different. One thing stayed the same: the children laughing and playing with you. You always gave them so much joy, pero alam ko di madali buhay mo nun. Yung mga kasama mo dati kung ano ano ginawa sayo. Ang dami naming kumausap sayo na iwanan ka pero ang higpit ng hawak nila sayo. It was five years ago in 2023 when our national leaders gave up on you. Sabi nila patay ka na raw, di na raw kaya. They tried to bury you with their greed, but we didn't allow that to happen. Hindi kami sumuko. Sama sama kami nun, lahat ng nagmamahal sayo. Your children, your parents, your siblings, your friends, the people you give life to – you united us and eventually we did it. We won. We got you back.

I know not everything is perfect now, but we're still here. Hindi ka namin iniwan noon, hindi ka pa rin namin iiwan ngayon. Ipaglalaban ka namin kasi mahal ka namin – at dahil sa 'yo, mahal na rin namin ang isa't isa. I'm excited to get to know you more, see how you grow and continue to give life to those around you in the years to come. Maraming salamat, Manila Bay.

Ang iyong kaibigan, nagmamahal,
Mitzi Joneelle Tan

